



**VOLUMES 1-5**

U.X.L. ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WORLD

# MYTHOLOGY



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# U·X·L Encyclopedia of World *Mythology*



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# U·X·L Encyclopedia of World Mythology

VOLUME 1: A–B

VOLUME 2: C–F

VOLUME 3: G–L

VOLUME 4: M–P

VOLUME 5: Q–Z

**U·X·L**

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**U-X-L Encyclopedia of World Mythology**

Product manager: Meggin Condino

Project editor: Rebecca Parks

Editorial: Jennifer Stock, Kim Hunt

Rights Acquisition and Management: Kelly A. Quin, Scott Bragg, Aja Perales

Composition: Evi Abou-El-Seoud

Manufacturing: Rita Wimberley

Imaging: Lezlie Light

Product Design: Jennifer Wahi

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## LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

U\*X\*L encyclopedia of world mythology

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4144-3030-0 (set) -- ISBN 978-1-4144-3036-2 (vol. 1) -- ISBN 978-1-4144-3037-9 (vol. 2) -- ISBN 978-1-4144-3038-6 (vol. 3) -- ISBN 978-1-4144-3039-3 (vol. 4) -- ISBN 978-1-4144-3040-9 (vol. 5)

1. Mythology—Encyclopedias, Juvenile. I. Title: UXL encyclopedia of world mythology. II. Title: Encyclopedia of world mythology.

BL303.U95 2009  
201'.303—dc22

2008012696

Gale  
27500 Drake  
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3030-0 (set)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3030-2 (set)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3036-2 (Vol. 1)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3036-1 (Vol. 1)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3037-9 (Vol. 2)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3037-X (Vol. 2)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3038-6 (Vol. 3)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3038-8 (Vol. 3)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3039-3 (Vol. 4)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3039-6 (Vol. 4)
ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3040-9 (Vol. 5)	ISBN-10: 1-4144-3040-X (Vol. 5)

This title is also available as an e-book.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3846-7 ISBN-10: 1-4144-3846-X

Contact your Gale, a part of Cengage Learning sales representative for ordering information.

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## *Reader's Guide*

The *U•X•L Encyclopedia of World Mythology* examines the major characters, stories, and themes of mythologies from cultures around the globe, from African to Zoroastrian. Arranged alphabetically in an A–Z format, each entry provides the reader with an overview of the topic as well as contextual analysis to explain the topic's importance to the culture from which it came. In addition, each entry explains the topic's influence on modern life, and prompts the reader with a discussion question or reading/writing suggestion to inspire further analysis. There are five different types of entries: Character, Deity, Myth, Theme, and Culture. The entry types are designated by icons that are shown in a legend that appears on each page starting a new letter grouping so that you can easily tell which type of entry you are reading.

### **Types of Entries Found in This Book**

*Character* entries generally focus on a single mythical character, such as a hero. In some cases, character entries deal with groups of similar or related beings—for example, Trolls or Valkyries. Deities (gods) are found in their own unique type of entry.

*Deity* entries contain information about a god or goddess. An example would be Zeus (pronounced ZOOS), the leader of the ancient Greek gods. Deities are very similar to other mythical characters, except that they often appear in many different myths; each Deity entry provides a summary of the most important myths related to that deity.

*Myth* entries focus on a specific story as opposed to a certain character. One example is the entry on the Holy Grail, which tells the legend of the vessel's origins as well as the many people who sought to

locate it. In some cases, the myth is primarily concerned with a single character; the entry on the Golden Fleece, for example, features Jason as the main character. Like the Holy Grail entry, however, this entry focuses on the legends surrounding the object in question rather than the character involved.

*Theme* entries examine how one single theme, idea, or motif is addressed in the mythologies of different cultures. An example would be the Reincarnation entry that examines different cultural depictions of this eternal cycle of death and rebirth.

*Culture* entries contain a survey of the myths and beliefs of a particular culture. Each entry also provides historical and cultural context for understanding how the culture helped to shape, or was shaped by, the beliefs of other cultures.

## Types of Rubrics Found in This Book

Each entry type is organized in specific rubrics to allow for ease of comparison across entries. The rubrics that appear in these entries are: *Character/Myth/Theme Overview*; *Core Deities and Characters*; *Major Myths*; *[Subject] in Context*; *Key Themes and Symbols*; *[Subject] in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life*; and *Read, Write, Think, Discuss*. In addition, the character, deity, and myth entries all have key facts sections in the margins that provide basic information about the entry, including the country or culture of origin, a pronunciation guide where necessary, alternate names for the character (when applicable), written or other sources in which the subject appears, and information on the character's family (when applicable).

*Character Overview* offers detailed information about the character's place within the mythology of its given culture. This may include information about the character's personality, summaries of notable feats, and relationships with other mythological characters. *Myth Overview* includes a summary of the myth being discussed. *Theme Overview* provides a brief description of the theme being discussed, as well as a rundown of the major points common when examining that theme in different mythologies.

*Core Deities and Characters* includes brief descriptions of the main deities and other characters that figure prominently in the given culture's mythology. This is not a comprehensive list of all the gods or characters mentioned in a particular culture.

*Major Myths* features a brief summary of all the most important or best-known myths related to the subject of the entry. For example, the entry on Odin (pronounced OH-din), chief god of Norse mythology, includes the tale describing how he gave up one of his eyes in order to be able to see the future.

*[Subject] in Context* provides additional cultural and historical information that helps you understand the subject by seeing through the eyes of the people who made it part of their culture. The entry on the weaver Arachne (pronounced uh-RAK-nee), for instance, includes information on the importance of weaving as a domestic duty in ancient Greece.

*Key Themes and Symbols* outlines the most important themes in the tales related to the subject. This section also includes explanations of symbols associated with the subject of the entry, or which appear in myths related to the subject. For example, this section may explain the meaning of certain objects a god is usually shown carrying.

*[Subject] in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life* includes references to the subject in well-known works of art, literature, film, and other media. This section may also mention other ways in which the subject appears in popular culture. For example, the fact that a leprechaun (pronounced LEP-ruh-kawn) appears as the mascot for Lucky Charms cereal is mentioned in this section of the Leprechauns entry.

*Read, Write, Think, Discuss* uses the material in the entry as a springboard for further discussion and learning. This section may include suggestions for further reading that are related to the subject of the entry, discussion questions regarding topics touched upon in the entry, writing prompts that explore related issues and themes, or research prompts that encourage you to delve deeper into the topics presented.

Most of the entries end with cross-references that point you to related entries in the encyclopedia. In addition, words that appear in bold within the entry are also related entries, making it easy to find additional information that will enhance your understanding of the topic.

## Other Sections in This Book

This encyclopedia also contains other sections that you may find useful when studying world mythology. One of these is a “Timeline of World Mythology,” which provides important dates from many cultures that

are important to the development of their respective mythologies. A glossary in the front matter supplements the definitions that are included within the entries. Teachers will find the section on “Research and Activity Ideas” helpful in coming up with classroom activities related to the topic of mythology to engage students further in the subject. A section titled “Where to Learn More” provides you with other sources to learn more about the topic of mythology, organized by culture. You will also encounter sidebars in many of the entries; these sections offer interesting information that is related to, but not essential to, your understanding of the subject of the entry.

### **Comments and Suggestions**

We welcome your comments on the *U•X•L Encyclopedia of World Mythology* and suggestions for other topics to consider. Please write to Editors, *U•X•L Encyclopedia of World Mythology*, Gale, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, Michigan, 48331-3535.

# *Introduction*

On the surface, myths are stories of gods, heroes, and monsters that can include fanciful tales about the creation and destruction of worlds, or awe-inspiring adventures of brave explorers in exotic or supernatural places. However, myths are not just random imaginings; they are cultivated and shaped by the cultures in which they arise. For this reason, a myth can function as a mirror for the culture that created it, reflecting the values, geographic location, natural resources, technological state, and social organization of the people who believe in it.

## **Values**

The values of a culture are often revealed through that culture's myths and legends. For example, a myth common in Micronesian culture tells of a porpoise girl who married a human and had children; after living many years as a human, she decided to return to the sea. Before she left, she warned her children against eating porpoise, since they might unknowingly eat some of their own family members by doing so. Myths such as these are often used to provide colorful reasons for taboos, or rules against certain behaviors. In this case, the myth explains a taboo among the Micronesian peoples against hunting and eating porpoises.

## **Geography**

Myths often reflect a culture's geographic circumstances. For example, the people of the Norse culture live in a region that has harsh, icy winters. It is no coincidence that, according to their myths, the being whose death led to the creation of the world was a giant made of frost. By contrast, the people of ancient Egypt lived in an dry, sunny land; their

most important gods, such as Ra, were closely associated with the sun. Geographic features are also often part of a culture's myths, or used as inspiration for mythological tales. Spider Rock, a tall peak located at Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona, is said by the Hopi people to be the home of the creation goddess Spider Woman. The Atlas mountains in northern Africa took their name from the myth that the Titan Atlas (pronounced AT-luhs) had once stood there holding up the heavens, but had been transformed to stone in order to make his task easier.

### **Natural Resources**

Myths can also reflect the natural resources available to a culture, or the resources most prized by a certain group. In Mesoamerican and American Indian myths, maize (commonly referred to as corn) often appears as a food offered directly from gods or goddesses, or grown from the body of a deity. This reflects not only the importance of maize in the diets of early North and Central American cultures, but also the ready availability of maize, which does not appear as a native plant anywhere else in the world. Similarly, the olive tree, which is native to the coastal areas along the Mediterranean Sea, is one of the most important trees in ancient Greek myth. The city of Athens, it is said, was named for the goddess Athena (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) after she gave its citizens the very first domesticated olive tree.

Sometimes, myths can reflect the importance of natural resources to an outside culture. For example, the Muisca people of what is now Colombia engaged in a ceremony in which their king covered himself in gold dust and took a raft out to the middle of a local lake; there he threw gold trinkets into the water as offerings to the gods. Gold was not commonly available, and was prized for its ceremonial significance; however, when Spanish explorers arrived in the New World and heard of this practice, they interpreted this to mean that gold must be commonplace in the area. This led to the myth of El Dorado, an entire city made of gold that many Spanish explorers believed to exist and spent decades trying to locate.

### **Technology**

A culture's state of technological development can also be reflected in its myths. The earliest ancient Greek myths of Uranus (pronounced



YOOR-uh-nuhs) state that his son Cronus (pronounced KROH-nuhs) attacked him with a sickle made of obsidian. Obsidian is a stone that can be chipped to create a sharp edge, and was used by cultures older than the ancient Greeks, who relied on metals such as bronze and steel for their weapons. This might suggest that the myth arose from an earlier age; at the very least, it reflects the idea that, from the perspective of the Greeks, the myth took place in the distant past.

## Social Order

Myths can also offer a snapshot of a culture's social organization. The Old Testament tale of the Tower of Babel offers an explanation for the many tribes found in the ancient Near East: they had once been united, and sought to build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven. In order to stop this act of self-importance, God caused the people to speak in different languages. Unable to understand each other, they abandoned the ambitious project and scattered into groups across the region.

Besides offering social order, myths can reinforce cultural views on the roles different types of individuals should assume in a society. The myth of Arachne (pronounced uh-RAK-nee) illustrates a fact known from other historical sources: weaving and fabric-making was the domestic duty of wives and daughters, and it was a skill highly prized in the homes of ancient Greece. Tales of characters such as Danaë (pronounced DAN-uh-ee), who was imprisoned in a tower by her father in order to prevent her from having a child, indicate the relative powerlessness of many women in ancient Greek society.

## Different Cultures, Different Perspectives

To see how cultures reflect their own unique characteristics through myth, one can examine how a single theme—such as fertility—is treated in a variety of different cultures. Fertility is the ability to produce life, growth, or offspring, and is therefore common in most, if not all, mythologies. For many cultures, fertility is a key element in the creation of the world. The egg, one of the most common symbols of fertility, appears in Chinese mythology as the first object to form from the disorder that previously existed in place of the world. In many cultures, including ancient Greece, the main gods are born from a single mother;

in the case of the Greeks, the mother is Gaia (pronounced GAY-uh), also known as Earth.

For cultures that relied upon agriculture, fertility was an important element of the changing seasons and the growth of crops. In these cases, fertility was seen as a gift from nature that could be revoked by cruel weather or the actions of the gods. Such is the case in the ancient Greek myth of Persephone (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee); when the goddess is taken to the underworld by Hades (pronounced HAY-deez), her mother—the fertility goddess Demeter (pronounced di-MEE-ter)—became sad, which caused all vegetation to wither and die.

For the ancient Egyptians, fertility represented not just crop growth and human birth, but also rebirth into the afterlife through death. This explains why Hathor (pronounced HATH-or), the mother goddess of fertility who supported all life, was also the maintainer of the dead. It was believed that Hathor provided food for the dead to help them make the long journey to the realm of the afterlife.

For early Semitic cultures, the notion of fertility was not always positive. In the story of Lilith, the little-known first wife of Adam (the first man), the independent-minded woman left her husband and went to live by the Red Sea, where she gave birth to many demons each day. The myth seems to suggest that fertility is a power that can be used for good or evil, and that the key to using this power positively is for wives to dutifully respect the wishes of their husbands. This same theme is found in the earlier Babylonian myth of Tiamat (pronounced TYAH-maht), who gave birth to not only the gods but also to an army of monsters that fought to defend her from her son, the hero Marduk (pronounced MAHR-dook).

These are just a few of the many ways in which different cultures can take a single idea and interpret it through their own tales. Rest assured that the myths discussed in this book are wondrous legends that capture the imagination of the reader. They are also mirrors in which we can see not only ourselves, but the reflections of cultures old and new, far and near—allowing us to celebrate their unique differences, and at the same time recognize those common elements that make these enchanting stories universally beloved and appreciated by readers and students around the world.

## *Timeline of World Mythology*

- c. **3400 BCE** Early Sumerian writing is first developed.
- c. **3100 BCE** Egyptian writing, commonly known as hieroglyphics, is first developed.
- c. **2852–2205 BCE** During this time period, China is supposedly ruled by the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors, mythical figures that may have been based on actual historical leaders.
- c. **2100 BCE** Earliest known version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is recorded in Sumerian.
- c. **1553–1536 BCE** Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten establishes official worship of Aten, a single supreme god, instead of the usual group of gods recognized by ancient Egyptians.
- c. **1250 BCE** The Trojan War supposedly occurs around this time period. Despite the war's importance to Greek and Roman mythology, modern scholars are not sure whether the war was an actual historical event or just a myth.
- c. **1100 BCE** The Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* is documented on clay tablets discovered nearly three thousand years later in the ruined library of Ashurbanipal, located in modern-day Iraq.
- c. **800 BCE** The Greek alphabet is invented, leading to a flowering of Greek literature based on myth.
- c. **750 BCE** The Greek epics known as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are written by the poet Homer. Based on the events surrounding the

- Trojan War, these two stories are the source of many myths and characters in Greek and Roman mythology.
- c. **750 BCE** The Greek poet Hesiod writes his *Theogony*, which details the origins of the Greek gods.
  - c. **563–480 BCE** According to tradition, Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, is believed to have lived in ancient India and Nepal during this time.
  - 525–456 BCE** The Greek dramatist Aeschylus writes tragedies detailing the lives of mythical characters, including *Seven Against Thebes*, *Agamemnon*, and *The Eumenides*.
  - c. **500–100 BCE** The oldest version of the *Ramayana*, the Hindu epic about the incarnation of the god Vishnu named Rama, is written.
  - c. **496–406 BCE** Ancient Greek playwright Sophocles creates classic plays such as *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*.
  - c. **450 BCE** The Book of Genesis, containing stories fundamental to early Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, is collected and organized into its modern form.
  - c. **431 BCE** Greek builders complete work on the temple of Athena known as the Parthenon, one of the few ancient Greek structures to survive to modern times.
  - c. **150–50 BCE** The Gundestrup cauldron, a silver bowl depicting various Celtic deities and rituals, is created. The bowl is later recovered from a peat bog in Denmark in 1891.
  - c. **29–19 BCE** Roman poet Virgil creates his mythical epic, the *Aeneid*, detailing the founding of Rome.
  - c. **4 BCE–33 CE** Jesus, believed by Christians to be the son of God, supposedly lives during this time period.
  - c. **8 CE** Roman poet Ovid completes his epic work *Metamorphoses*. It is one of the best existing sources for tales of ancient Greek and Roman mythology.
  - c. **100 CE** The *Mahabharata*, a massive epic recognized as one of the most important pieces of literature in Hinduism, is organized into its

modern form from source material dating back as far as the ninth century BCE.

- c. **570–632 CE** The prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, supposedly lives during this time.
- c. **800–840 CE** The oldest surviving remnants of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Near Eastern folktales and legends, are written in Syrian.
- c. **1000 CE** The Ramsund carving, a stone artifact bearing an illustration of the tale of Sigurd, is created in Sweden. The tale is documented in the *Volsunga* saga.
- c. **1010 CE** The oldest surviving manuscript of the Old English epic *Beowulf* is written. It is recognized as the first significant work of English literature.
- c. **1100** Monks at the Clonmacnoise monastery compile the *Book of the Dun Cow*, the earliest written collection of Irish myths and legends still in existence.
- c. **1138** Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* is published, featuring the first well-known tales of the legendary King Arthur.
- c. **1180–1210** The *Nibelungenlied*, a German epic based largely on earlier German and Norse legends such as the *Volsunga* saga, is written by an unknown poet.
- c. **1220** Icelandic scholar Snorri Sturluson writes the Prose Edda, a comprehensive collection of Norse myths and legends gathered from older sources.
- c. **1350** The *White Book of Rhydderch*, containing most of the Welsh myths and legends later gathered in the *Mabinogion*, first appears.
- 1485** Thomas Malory publishes *Le Morte D'Arthur*, widely considered to be the most authoritative version of the legend of King Arthur.
- c. **1489** *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*, one of the most comprehensive versions of the life of the legendary British character of Robin Hood, is published.

- c. **1550** The *Popol Vuh*, a codex containing Mayan creation myths and legends, is written. The book, written in the Quiché language but using Latin characters, was likely based on an older book written in Mayan hieroglyphics that has since been lost.
- 1835** Elias Lonnrot publishes the *Kalevala*, an epic made up of Finnish songs and oral myths gathered during years of field research.
- 1849** Archeologist Henry Layard discovers clay tablets containing the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* in Iraq. The epic, lost for centuries, is unknown to modern scholars before this discovery.
- 1880** Journalist Joel Chandler Harris publishes *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings: the Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*, a collection of myths and folktales gathered from African American slaves working in the South. Many of the tales are derived from older stories from African myth. Although the book is successful and spawns three sequels, Harris is accused by some of taking cultural myths and passing them off as his own works.

## *Words to Know*

**benevolent:** Helpful or well-meaning.

**caste:** A social level in India's complex social class system.

**cauldron:** Kettle.

**chaos:** Disorder.

**chivalry:** A moral code popularized in Europe in the Middle Ages that stressed such traits as generosity, bravery, courtesy, and respect toward women.

**constellation:** Group of stars.

**cosmogony:** The study of, or a theory about, the origin of the universe.

**deity:** God or goddess.

**demigod:** Person with one parent who was human and one parent who was a god.

**destiny:** Predetermined future.

**divination:** Predicting the future.

**dualistic:** Having two sides or a double nature.

**epic:** A long, grand-scale poem.

**fertility:** The ability to reproduce; can refer to human ability to produce children or the ability of the earth to sustain plant life.

**hierarchy:** Ranked order of importance.

**hubris:** Too much self-confidence.

**immortal:** Living forever.

**imperial:** Royal, or related to an empire.

**indigenous:** Native to a given area.

**Judeo-Christian:** Related to the religious tradition shared by Judaism and Christianity. The faiths share a holy book, many fundamental principles, and a belief in a single, all-powerful god.

**matriarchal:** Female-dominated. Often refers to societies in which a family's name and property are passed down through the mother's side of the family.

**mediator:** A go-between.

**monotheism:** The belief in a single god as opposed to many gods.

**mummification:** The drying and preserving of a body to keep it from rotting after death.

**nymph:** A female nature deity.

**omen:** A mystical sign of an event to come.

**oracle:** Person through whom the gods communicated with humans.

**pagan:** Someone who worships pre-Christian gods.

**pantheon:** The entire collection of gods recognized by a group of people.

**patriarchal:** Male-dominated. Often refers to societies in which the family name and wealth are passed through the father.

**patron:** A protector or supporter.

**pharaoh:** A king of ancient Egypt.

**polytheism:** Belief in many gods.

**primal:** Fundamental; existing since the beginning.

**prophet:** A person able to see the plans of the gods or foretell future events.

**pyre:** A large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body.

**resurrected:** Brought back to life.

**revelation:** The communication of divine truth or divine will to human beings.

**rune:** A character from an ancient and magical alphabet.

**seer:** A person who can see the future.

**shaman:** A person who uses magic to heal or look after the members of his tribe.



**sorcerer:** Wizard.

**syncretism:** The blending or fusion of different religions or belief systems.

**tradition:** A time-honored practice, or set of such practices.

**underworld:** Land of the dead.

**utopia:** A place of social, economic and political perfection.

## *Research and Activity Ideas*

Teachers wishing to enrich their students' understanding of world mythologies might try some of the following group activities. Each uses art, music, drama, speech, research, or scientific experimentation to put the students in closer contact with the cultures, myths, and figures they are studying.

### **Greek Mythology: A Pageant of Gods**

In this activity, students get to be gods and goddesses for a day during the classroom "Pageant of the Gods," an event modeled after a beauty pageant. Each student selects (with teacher approval) a deity from Greek mythology. Students then research their deity, write a 250-word description of the deity, and create costumes so they can dress as their deity. On the day of the pageant, the teacher collects the students' descriptions and reads them aloud as each student models his or her costume for the class.

#### **Materials required for the students:**

Common household materials for costume

#### **Materials required for the teacher:**

None

***Optional extension:*** The class throws a post-pageant potluck of Greek food.

## Anglo-Saxon Mythology: Old English Translation

Students are often surprised to learn that *Beowulf* is written in English. The original Old English text looks almost unrecognizable to them. In this activity (which students may work on in the classroom, in the library, or at home), the teacher begins by discussing the history of the English language and its evolution over the past one thousand years (since the writing of *Beowulf*). The teacher then models how a linguist would go about translating something written in Old English or Middle English (using an accessible text such as *The Canterbury Tales* as an example), and makes various resources for translation available to the students (see below). The class as a whole works on translating the first two lines of *Beowulf*. The teacher then assigns small groups of students a couple lines each of the opening section of *Beowulf* to translate and gloss. When each group is ready with their translations, the students assemble the modern English version of the opening of *Beowulf* and discuss what they learned about the various Old English words they studied.

### Materials required for the students:

None

### Materials required for the teacher:

Copies of an Old English version of the first part of *Beowulf* for distribution to students.

There are multiple Old English dictionaries available online, so student groups could work on this activity in the classroom if a sufficient number of computer workstations with Internet access are available. There are also many Old English dictionaries in print form. If none is available in the school library, some can be checked out from the public library.

## Egyptian Mythology: Mummify a Chicken

The ancient Egyptians believed preserving a person's body ensured their safe passage into the afterlife. The process of Egyptian mummification was a secret for many centuries until ancient Greek historian Herodotus recorded some information about the process in the fifth century BCE. Archaeologists have recently refined their understanding of Egyptian

mummification practices. In this activity, students conduct their own mummification experiment on chickens.

The teacher contextualizes the activity by showing students a video on mummies and asking them to read both Herodotus's account of mummification and more recent articles about mummification that center on the research of Egyptologist Bob Brier.

Once students understand the basics of mummification, groups of five or six students can begin their science experiment, outlined below. The teacher should preface the experiment with safety guidelines for handling raw chicken.

### Materials required for students:

Scale

One fresh chicken per group (bone-in chicken breast or leg may substitute)

Disposable plastic gloves (available at drugstores)

Carton of salt per group per week

Spice mixture (any strong powdered spices will do; powdered cloves, cinnamon, and ginger are good choices)

Extra-large (gallon size) air-tight freezer bags

Roll of gauze per group (available at drugstore)

Disposable aluminum trays for holding chickens

Cooking oil

Notebook for each group

### Materials required for the teacher:

Video on mummies. A good option is: *Mummies: Secrets of the Pharaohs* (2007), available on DVD.

Reading material on mummies, including Herodotus's account. See: <http://discovermagazine.com/2007/oct/mummification-is-back-from-the-dead>; <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/tv/mummy/>; <http://www.mummytombs.com/egypt/herodotus.htm>

Plenty of paper towels and hand soap.

### Procedure

1. All students put on plastic gloves.

2. Weigh each chicken (unnecessary if weight printed on packaging) and record the weight in a notebook. Record details of the chicken's appearance in the notebook.
3. Remove chicken organs and dispose of them. Rinse the chicken thoroughly in a sink.
4. Pat the chicken dry with paper towels. Make sure the chicken is completely dry, or the mummification process might not work.
5. Rub the spices all over the chicken, both inside and outside, then salt the entire chicken and fill the chicken cavity with salt.
6. Seal the chicken in the air-tight bag and place it in the aluminum tray.
7. Remove gloves and wash hands thoroughly with soap and water.
8. Once a week, put on plastic gloves, remove the chicken from the bag, dispose of the bag and accumulated liquid, and weigh the chicken. Record the weight in a notebook and make notes on changes in the chicken's appearance. Respice and resalt the chicken, fill the chicken cavity with salt, and seal it in a new bag. Remove gloves and wash hands. Repeat this step until no more liquid drains from the chicken.
9. When liquid no longer drains from the chicken, the mummy is done! Wipe off all the salt and rub a light coat of cooking oil on the mummy. Wrap it tightly in gauze.

**Optional extension:** Students can decorate their mummies using hieroglyphics and build shoebox sarcophagi for them.

## Near Eastern Mythology: Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest

The story of Gilgamesh's heroics against the demon Humbaba of the Cedar Forest is one of the most exciting parts of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this activity, students write, stage, and perform a three-act play based on this part of the epic. Necessary tasks will include writing, costume design, set design, and acting. The teacher can divide tasks among students as necessary.

### Materials required for the students:

- Household items for costumes
- Cardboard, paint, tape, and other materials for sets
- Copy of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

**Materials required for the teacher:**

None

**Hindu Mythology: Salute the Sun**

The practice of yoga, an ancient mental and physical discipline designed to promote spiritual perfection, is mentioned in most of the Hindu holy texts. Today, the physical aspects of yoga have become a widely popular form of exercise around the world. In this activity, the students and teacher will make yoga poses part of their own daily routine.

The teacher introduces the activity by discussing the history of yoga from ancient to modern times, by showing a video on the history of yoga, and by distributing readings from ancient Hindu texts dealing with the practice of yoga. After a class discussion on the video and texts, the teacher leads students through a basic “sun salutation” series of poses with the aid of an instructional yoga video (students may wish to bring a towel or mat from home, as some parts of the sun salutation involve getting on the floor). Students and the teacher will perform the sun salutation every day, preferably at the beginning of class, either for the duration of the semester or for another set period of time. Students will conclude the activity by writing a summary of their feelings about their yoga “experiment.”

**Materials required for the students:**

Towel or mat to put on floor during sun salutations.

**Materials required for teacher:**

A DVD on the history of yoga. Recommended: *Yoga Unveiled* (2004), an excellent documentary series on the history of yoga.

An instructional yoga video that includes the “sun salutation” sequence (many available).

Handouts of ancient Indian writings on yoga. See *The Shambhala Encyclopedia of Yoga* (2000) and *The Yoga and the Bhagavad Gita* (2007).

**African Mythology: Storytelling**

Anansi the Spider was a trickster god of West African origin who was known as a master storyteller. In this activity, students work on their

own storytelling skills while learning about the spread of Anansi stories from Africa to the Americas.

The teacher begins this activity by discussing the ways that oral traditions have helped the African American community preserve some part of their West African cultural heritage. The spread of stories about Anansi around Caribbean and American slave communities is an example, with the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris being a good demonstration of how the Anansi tales have evolved. The class then conducts a preliminary discussion about what the elements of a good spoken story might be, then watches or listens to models of storytelling. After listening to the stories, the class discusses common elements in the stories and techniques the storytellers used to keep the audience's attention and build interest.

Students then read a variety of Anansi and Uncle Remus stories on their own. With teacher approval, they select one story and prepare it for oral presentation in class (several students may select the same story). After the presentations, students can discuss their reactions to the various oral presentations, pointing out what was effective and ineffective.

**Materials required for the students:**

Optional: props for story presentation

**Materials required for the teacher:**

Background reading on West African oral traditions.

Recordings or videos of skilled storytellers. See *The American Storyteller Series* or the CD recording *Tell Me a Story: Timeless Folktales from Around the World* (which includes an Anansi story).

**Optional extension:** The teacher may arrange for students with especially strong oral presentations to share their stories at a school assembly or as visiting speakers in another classroom.

**Micronesian and Melanesian Mythology:  
Island Hopping**

The many islands that make up Micronesia and Melanesia are largely unfamiliar to most students. In this activity, students learn more about these faraway places.

The teacher introduces this activity by hanging up a large map of the South Pacific, with detail of Micronesian and Melanesian islands. The teacher explains that, during every class session, the class will learn the location of and key facts about a particular island. Each day, one student is given the name of an island. It is that student's homework assignment that night to learn the location of the island, its population, and its key industries. The student must also learn two interesting facts about the island. The next day, the student places a push pin (or other marker) on the map showing the location of his or her island. The student presents the information to the class, writes it down on an index card, and files the index card in the class "island" box. In this way, the students learn about a new Micronesian or Melanesian island every day and build a ready resource of information about the islands.

**Materials required for the students:**

None

**Materials required for the teacher:**

Large wall map with sufficient detail of Micronesia and Melanesia

Index cards

Box for island index cards

Push pins, stickers, or other markers for islands

## **Northern European Mythology: The Scroll of the Nibelungen**

The *Nibelungenlied* is an epic poem set in pre-Christian Germany. The tale contains many adventures, fights, and triumphs. In this activity, students prepare a graphic-novel version of the *Nibelungenlied*.

To introduce this activity, the teacher gives students a synopsis of the *Nibelungenlied* and describes the various interpretations of the saga (including Richard Wagner's opera and J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy). The teacher then explains that the class will create a graphic novel of the *Nibelungenlied* on a continuous scroll of paper. The teacher shows models of various graphic novels and discusses the conventions of graphic novel representations.

Students are divided into groups of three or four, and each group receives one chapter or section of the *Nibelungenlied* as its assignment.



After reading their sections, the groups meet to discuss possible graphical representations of the action in their chapters and present their ideas to the teacher for approval. After gaining approval, student groups work, one group at a time, to draw and color their chapters on the scroll. When the scroll is finished, each group makes a short presentation explaining what happens in their chapter and how they chose to represent the action. The final scroll can be displayed around the classroom walls or along a school hallway.

**Materials required by the students:**

None

**Materials required by the teacher:**

Easel paper roll (200 feet)

Markers, colored pencils, and crayons

Copies of *Nibelungenlied* chapters for students (or refer students to <http://omacl.org/Nibelungenlied/>)

**Inca Mythology: Make a Siku**

A siku is an Andean pan pipe. Pipes such as these were important in Inca culture, and remain a prominent feature in Andean music. In this activity, students will make their own sikus.

The teacher begins this activity by playing some Andean pan pipe music, showing students the Andes on a map, and discussing the ways in which Inca culture remains part of the lives of Native Americans in countries like Peru. The teacher shows a picture of a pan pipe (or, ideally, an actual pan pipe) to the students and explains they will build their own.

Students need ten drinking straws each (they can bring them from home, or the teacher can provide them) and a pair of scissors. To make the pipe:

1. Set aside two of the straws. Cut the remaining straws so that each is one-half inch shorter than the next. The first straw is uncut. The second straw is one-half inch shorter than the first. The third is one inch shorter than the first, and so on.
2. Cut the remaining straws into equal pieces. These pieces will be used as spacers between pipe pieces.

3. Arrange the straws from longest to shortest (left to right) with the tops of the straws lined up.
4. Put spacer pieces between each part of the pipe so they are an equal distance apart.
5. Tape the pipe in position, making sure the tops of the straws stay in alignment.
6. The pipe is finished. Cover in paper and decorate if desired. Blow across the tops of straws to play.

**Materials required by the students:**

Ten drinking straws  
Scissors  
Tape

**Materials required by the teacher:**

Andean pipe music  
Pictures of a pan pipe or an actual pan pipe  
Picture of the Andes on a map

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# A



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
uh-KILL-eez

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Homer's *Iliad*, tales of the Trojan War

**Lineage**  
Son of Peleus and the nymph Thetis



## Achilles

### Character Overview

Achilles (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) is one of the most important warriors in **Greek mythology**. He had strength, bravery, military skills, pride, and honor—all qualities that the ancient Greeks prized as many virtues. Yet his behavior was also shaped by anger, stubbornness, and revenge. The conflict between Achilles' larger-than-life virtues and his all-too-human weaknesses plays an important part in the heroic tragedy of the *Iliad*.

Like many mythological **heroes**, Achilles was part human and part supernatural being. His parents were Peleus (pronounced pe-LAY-uhs), a king of Thessaly in northern Greece, and a sea nymph named Thetis (pronounced THEE-tis). According to Homer, Thetis raised both Achilles and his closest friend and companion, Patroclus (pronounced pa-TROH-kluhs).

According to legend, Achilles' mother Thetis tried to make her infant son invulnerable (incapable of being wounded, injured, or harmed) by dipping him into the river Styx, which flowed through the **underworld**, or land of the dead. Afterward, no sword or arrow could pierce Achilles wherever the Styx's water had touched him. However, the water did not touch the heel by which Thetis held Achilles, so this remained the only vulnerable spot on his body. This myth is the source of the term *Achilles' heel*, which refers to a person's most notable weakness.

Achilles' strength and athletic superiority emerged early. At age six, he could run fast enough to catch deer. Some myths say that Achilles learned to run from the centaur Chiron (pronounced KYE-ron), who also taught him music, medicine, and the skills of warfare. According to some legends, Achilles was destined from birth to suffer one of two fates: a long life without glory, or a glorious death in battle.

**The Trojan War** Achilles played a central role in the Trojan War. The Trojan War was a ten-year conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans. The war began when the Trojan prince Paris kidnapped a beautiful Greek queen named **Helen**. Her husband, King Menelaus, pulled together a large army and chased Paris and Helen, tracking them to the city of Troy. The Greek army camped outside of the city walls and laid siege (engaged in a persistent attack against the city) to Troy for ten years.

When the Trojan War began, Achilles' parents tried to keep him from joining the Greek forces against the Trojans in order to prevent the prophecy regarding his death in battle from coming true. But the Greeks felt they needed Achilles to fight with them because they had received a prophecy that they could not defeat the Trojans without him. They therefore sent the Greek leader **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) to persuade Achilles to join the war. Achilles agreed to fight with them—even though he knew his choice might cost him his life—because he valued glory in battle more than a quiet existence in peace.

Achilles did indeed earn great glory in battle against the Trojans. Throughout the ten-year siege he killed many Trojans and struck fear into the hearts of the Trojan forces. The Trojans were helpless against his mighty strength and his invulnerability to weapons. He was, however, an extremely proud warrior; when he felt that he had been insulted by the leader of the Greek forces, **Agamemnon**, he refused to fight for the Greeks. He only returned to the fight when his friend Patroclus died at the hands of the great Trojan warrior **Hector**.

Achilles rushed into battle in a furious desire to avenge the death of Patroclus. He chased Hector around the walls of Troy three times before killing the Trojan prince in one-on-one combat. He then dragged the body behind his chariot for nine days, which prevented the Trojans from holding a proper funeral. The gods forced Achilles to surrender the body of Hector to his grieving father, King Priam of Troy. Soon after,

Achilles was killed on the battlefield when he was struck in his vulnerable heel by an arrow fired by Hector's brother, Paris.

## Achilles in Context

The Trojan War in which Achilles fought was a struggle between two different groups—the Greeks and the Trojans—over Helen, who was a symbol of Greek pride as the most beautiful woman in the world. Modern-day scholars do not know for sure just how much of the story of the Trojan War is fiction, but the story reflects the reality of living in a time period when the ancient Greeks were frequently in conflict with nearby regions for control of land and resources. The warrior culture of ancient times arose from the need to protect land used for farming or keeping animals. Warriors also conquered more land when poor farming conditions or conflict with other peoples made moving necessary. Young men were trained in warrior skills as well as in the warrior code of honor and glory. Under the command of Alexander the Great, the Greeks succeeded on the battlefield and spread their empire across much of what is now the Middle East and western Asia. In an oral culture such as ancient Greece, the tales of battles and heroism passed on from generation to generation highlighted the importance of heroic deeds and glory.

The glory Achilles achieves does not make him a perfect example of a Greek man, however. His pride causes him to put himself above that of the army in which he fights, and results in both heavy Greek losses in battle and the death of his own best friend Patroclus. This flaw in the character of Achilles reflects the importance of the group over that of an individual to the ancient Greeks. In ancient Greek society, life was so difficult that people relied heavily on their social relationships in order to survive; one person acting for his or her own interests rather than that of the group could bring about the downfall of everyone.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Achilles represents the ultimate warrior, seeking glory through his skills as a soldier. He chooses to die on the battlefield, knowing his heroic deeds will be remembered forever, rather than live a long, unremarkable life away from battle.

Another theme of the story of Achilles is revenge. After having an argument with Agamemnon, Achilles gets his revenge on the king by

refusing to fight. This leads to the death of Patroclus, which prompts Achilles to seek revenge against his friend's killer, Hector. After Achilles kills Hector, Paris seeks revenge against Achilles for the death of his brother.

### Achilles in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Achilles and his story have appeared in many forms over the centuries. In addition to being the main character of Homer's *Iliad*, he was the subject of several plays written by Greek dramatists Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-lus) and Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez). During the Renaissance, he was featured as a character in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and appears in modern works such as Disney's animated television series *Hercules* (1998).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Achilles is faced with a choice between two destinies: he can die young but with great glory, or he can live long but be forgotten when he is gone. Achilles chooses glory. In the modern world, some terrorists—such as suicide bombers—are willing to **sacrifice** their lives for great glory and rewards they believe they will receive in the **afterlife**. How do you think these terrorists are different from or similar to Achilles?

**SEE ALSO** Agamemnon; Greek Mythology; Heroes; *Iliad, The*; *Odyssey, The*



#### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

#### Pronunciation

AD-uhm and EEV

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Old Testament, Holy Bible

#### Lineage

Created by God

## Adam and Eve

### Character Overview

According to the monotheistic religions (those religions that believe there is only one god) of the Middle East, the first man and woman that God created were the couple named Adam and Eve. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, contains two accounts of how Adam and Eve came into being. The first version, which most likely dates from 600 to 400 BCE, says that God created all living things, including a man and woman “in his own image,” on the sixth day of creation. According to the second version,

## A Sumerian Version of Adam's Rib

The story of God making Eve out of Adam's rib may have come from an ancient legend from Mesopotamia, a region located in southwest Asia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in modern-day Iraq. After the Sumerian god Enki ate eight plants belonging to his wife, the goddess Ninhursag, she cursed him so that eight parts of his body became diseased. When he was nearly dead, the gods persuaded Ninhursag to help him, and she created eight healing goddesses. The goddess who cured Enki's rib was Ninti, whose name means "lady of the rib" and "lady of life." In Hebrew mythology, Adam names the woman created from his rib Hawwah, which means "life." The Sumerian story probably influenced the Hebrew one, which became the basis for the version of Eve's creation found in the Bible.

which is longer and probably several centuries older, God made Adam from dust and breathed "the breath of life" into his nostrils. God then created animals so that Adam would not be alone. However, God saw that Adam needed a human partner, so he put Adam to sleep, took a part of him (traditionally, his rib), and created Eve from it.

**The Garden of Eden and the Fall** Adam and Eve lived in a garden called **Eden**, from which four rivers flowed out into the world. Like other earthly paradises in mythologies of the dry Near East, Eden was a well-watered, fertile place that satisfied Adam and Eve's every need. God imposed only one rule about life in this paradise: the two were told to never eat the fruit of the "tree of knowledge."

A clever serpent in the garden persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, then Adam tasted the fruit as well. Immediately upon tasting the fruit, Adam and Eve lost their innocence. Ashamed of their nakedness, they covered themselves with leaves. God saw that they had disobeyed him and drove them from the Garden of Eden.

When Adam and Eve left Eden, human history began. The two worked long and hard to survive. Eventually, they grew old and died, but not before they had children. The first two were their sons, **Cain and Abel**. According to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition, all the people of the world are descended from the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

## Adam and Eve

*As punishment for disobeying God, Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden.* "THE EXPULSION FROM EDEN," FRES- CO BY MASACCIO, 1427, THE BRANCACCI CHAPEL OF S. MARIA DEL CARMINE, FLOR- ENCE, ITALY, PHOTOGRAPH.



## Adam and Eve in Context

The Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions each have their own versions of the story of Adam and Eve as well as their own ideas about what it means. In Christian thought and belief, three important parts of the story are the serpent, the Fall, and the idea of original sin.

Christians believe the serpent was identified with **Satan**, a rebellious fallen angel and the force behind all evil. In the Christian tradition, it was Satan's pride in thinking he could be the equal of God that caused him to be cast out of **heaven**. He then persuades Eve to commit the very same sin by telling her that she can be like God if she eats of the fruit of the tree of life. Pride, therefore, is a serious sin in the Christian tradition, for no one should think of himself as the equal of God.

The Fall refers to the expulsion, or the forcing out, of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden into the world of ordinary, imperfect human life, sometimes called the fallen world. Some people interpret the Fall to mean that in the original state of existence before the beginning of history, people lived in harmony with each other, God, and the natural world. Closely related to the idea of the Fall is the idea of original sin. This idea came from the writings of the Christian leader St. Paul, whose work appears in the New Testament of the Bible, and of later Christian thinkers whom he influenced. According to this idea, the sin that Adam and Eve committed when they ate the forbidden fruit marks every human being descended from them. As a result, no one is born completely innocent and free from sin.

Eve being made from Adam's rib is sometimes used as a way to explain why men are more important than women. In this view, the original woman was just a rib made as a companion to Adam, and therefore not of equal



status. However, this idea seems to have been based on a wrong translation of the Hebrew text. The word translated as “rib” is actually the Hebrew word for “side.” Some biblical scholars believe that Adam was androgynous—both male and female—and the story of the creation of Eve is about the separation of the female “side” of the first human from the male side. Ribs do not play any part in the story at all. The fact that Eve brings about Adam’s downfall by getting him to share the fruit has supported negative attitudes towards women as tempters of men.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Adam and Eve are typically shown as naked in the Garden of Eden, showing their innocence and purity while living in a world without sin. Once they introduce sin into the world, however, they feel they should clothe themselves with animal skins, indicating that they feel ashamed. This shame is made even worse when God orders them to leave Eden.

The importance of obedience to God is an important theme. The perfect life that Adam and Eve led in Eden is ruined by the fact that they did not listen to God when he told them not to eat the fruit of the tree of life. Even worse, their sin dooms the rest of mankind to live in an imperfect world. In both literature and art, the apple is almost always portrayed as the fruit Eve took from the tree of life, even though the Bible did not name a specific fruit.

## Adam and Eve in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

During the many centuries when European art dealt mostly with religious ideas, the story of Adam and Eve was a favorite subject. Among the famous images of the couple are the paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome by Italian artist Michelangelo. Completed in the early 1500s, they show the creation of Adam and Eve and the Fall. Another well-known painting of Adam and Eve comes from German artist Albrecht Dürer, which was done in 1504. In general, artists of all periods have used fruit and snakes as symbols of temptation and evil.

Aside from the story of creation and the Fall in the book of Genesis, the Bible contains little information about Adam and Eve. Other writings, however, have added details to their story. One such work, the *Life of Adam and Eve*, was presented in the form of a biography. Written sometime between 20 BCE and 70 CE, it provides an interesting account of the Fall and the sufferings of Adam and Eve after leaving Eden. The

most famous literary treatment of the story of Adam and Eve is the book-length poem *Paradise Lost*, written by English poet John Milton and published in 1667.

Further modern interpretations of the Adam and Eve myth have also been created, which build upon popular knowledge of the original story. *Eve's Diary* by Mark Twain, written in 1906, is a humorous retelling of the familiar events. Since the 1940s, numerous science fiction stories offered a new twist on the traditional tale, usually involving some type of disaster that wipes out the human race and a pair of survivors (sometimes actually named Adam and Eve) upon whom the fate of the species depends.

The story of Adam and Eve is the source of the common phrase “forbidden fruit”—referring to something that is tempting because one is not supposed to have it. Although there was plenty of other fruit she could have eaten in the garden, Eve chose the fruit from the tree of life specifically because God told her she could not have it.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Adam and Eve first lived in the Garden of Eden, which is described as an earthly paradise. Imagine your own idea of an earthly paradise. What would it be like? Write a detailed description of your own personal paradise. How different is it from the Garden of Eden?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Fruit in Mythology; Lilith; Semitic Mythology; Serpents and Snakes

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman



#### Pronunciation

uh-DON-is

## Adonis

#### Alternate Names

None

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology** Adonis (pronounced uh-DON-is) was an extremely handsome young man who died and was reborn. Like many other mythological figures who are resurrected, or brought back to life, Adonis became associated with the annual cycle of the seasons in which plants die in the fall and grow back again in the spring. Adonis's counterpart in Akkadian mythology was the god Tammuz (pronounced TAH-mooz).

#### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

#### Lineage

Son of Theias and Myrrha

## Beauty Lost and Regained

Many other cultures have stories similar to that of Adonis and Aphrodite, all of which seem to explain the changing of the seasons as a temporary loss of a beautiful youth. Tammuz and Astarte of Babylon and Isis and Osiris of ancient Egypt are examples. The Bible (in the book of Ezekiel) describes Babylonian women “weeping for Tammuz” as part of a ritual mourning for his loss.

## Major Myths

According to tradition, Adonis was the son of Myrrha (pronounced MER-uh) and her father, Theias (pronounced THEE-us), the king of Assyria. So attractive was the infant Adonis that the goddess **Aphrodite** fell in love with him. She hid the baby in a box and gave him to **Persephone**, goddess of the **underworld**, for safe keeping. When Persephone saw Adonis, however, she also fell in love with him and refused to return him to Aphrodite.

**Zeus**, the supreme ruler of the gods who lived on Mount Olympus, settled the argument by ordering Adonis to divide his time between the two goddesses. During spring and summer, the time of fertility and fruitfulness, Adonis stayed with Aphrodite. He spent fall and winter, the period of barrenness and death, with Persephone.

Adonis adored hunting. While out on a chase one day during his time with Aphrodite, he was killed by a wild boar. Some stories say that the boar was **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), Aphrodite’s husband, in disguise, or perhaps it was **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war and Aphrodite’s jealous lover. Both stories maintain that beautiful red flowers called anemones (pronounced uh-NEM-uh-nee-z) grew and bloomed where Adonis’s blood fell on the soil.

## Adonis in Context

In ancient Greece, as in many ancient societies, the changing of the seasons was a mystery. For this reason, seasons were often seen as evidence of the gods at work. Since Adonis was considered a god of plants and vegetation, his months-long stay in the underworld explained why flowers and other greenery failed to grow during winter. Each year in ancient Greece, Adonis worshippers, who tended to be mostly women, mourned his death by wailing and beating their breasts, and also

## Adonis

*This marble statue shows Adonis resting after a hunt. Adonis loved hunting, and was killed by a wild boar he had been chasing.* THE ART ARCHIVE/  
MUSÉE DU LOUVRE PARIS/  
GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.



celebrated his rebirth by planting “gardens of Adonis” for festivals held in his honor.

### Key Themes and Symbols

As a god of vegetation, Adonis is a symbol of fertility and growth. Because he spent half of each year in the world of the living and half in the world of the dead, he is closely identified with the seasons of the year. He is also often

identified with seasonal plants that sprout and die in a short period of time. The god has become a symbol of male beauty, and in modern times a handsome young man is sometimes called an “Adonis.”

### Adonis in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because of his famous beauty and rather tragic love affairs with goddesses, Adonis has been the subject of many works of art. He is often paired with Aphrodite, called Venus in **Roman mythology**, as in the painting *Venus and Adonis*, created around 1555 by Titian. The story of the couple is also the subject of Shakespeare’s 1593 poem “Venus and Adonis,” as well as the John Blow opera of the same name, composed in the 1680s. While use of the term “Adonis” to refer to an attractive young man is common, the mythological Adonis appears only rarely in contemporary art. Adonis was featured in an episode of the animated Disney series *Hercules* in 1998.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The poem “Adonais” (1821) by Percy Bysshe Shelley is both a reflection of the Adonis myth and a memorial to Shelley’s recently deceased friend, poet John Keats. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, find a copy of the poem and read it. How is Adonis portrayed in the poem? Do you think the poem tells the same story as the Greek myth?

SEE ALSO Aphrodite; Ares; Greek Mythology; Persephone



## Aeneas

### Character Overview

The hero Aeneas (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) appears in both Greek and **Roman mythology**. He was a defender of Troy, the city in Asia Minor that the Greeks destroyed in the Trojan War. After the war, Aeneas led the surviving Trojans to the land now called Italy. According to Roman versions of the myth, after Aeneas and his followers founded Rome, he became its first great hero and legendary father.

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
i-NEE-uhs

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*

**Lineage**  
Son of Aphrodite and Anchises

Like many legendary **heroes**, Aeneas was a demigod, meaning he had one parent who was human and one parent who was a god. His father was Anchises (pronounced an-KY-seez), a member of the royal family of Troy. One day **Aphrodite**, the Greek goddess of love (called Venus by the Romans), saw Anchises on the hills of Mount Ida near his home. The goddess was so overcome by the handsome youth that she seduced him and bore him a son, Aeneas.

Mountain **nymphs** (minor nature goddesses represented as beautiful maidens) raised Aeneas until he was five years old, when he was sent to live with his father. Aphrodite had made Anchises promise not to tell anyone that she was the boy's mother. Still, he did so and was struck by lightning. In some versions of the legend, the lightning killed Anchises; in others, it made him blind or lame. Later variations have Anchises surviving and being carried out of Troy by his son after the war.

When the Greeks invaded Troy, Aeneas did not join the conflict immediately. Some versions of the myth say that he entered the war on the side of his fellow Trojans only after the Greek hero **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) stole his cattle. Aeneas's reluctance to join the fighting partly came from the uneasy relationship he had with King Priam of Troy. Some sources say that Aeneas disliked the fact that Priam's son **Hector** was supreme commander of the Trojan forces. For his part, Priam disliked Aeneas because the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) had predicted that the descendants of Aeneas, not those of Priam, would rule the Trojans in the future. Nevertheless, during the Trojan War, Aeneas married Creusa (pronounced kree-OO-suh), one of Priam's daughters, and they had a son named Ascanius (pronounced ass-KAN-ee-us).

**The Greek Tradition** Aeneas appears as a character in the *Iliad*, the epic by the Greek poet Homer that tells the story of the Trojan War. The *Iliad* and other Greek sources provide a number of details about Aeneas's role in the war. According to Greek tradition, Aeneas was one of the Trojan leaders, their greatest warrior after Hector. An upright and moral man, Aeneas was often called "the pious" because of his respect for the gods and his obedience to their commands. In return, the gods treated Aeneas well. Some of the most powerful gods, including **Apollo**, Poseidon, and Aphrodite, Aeneas's mother, gave him their protection.

There are various accounts of the last days of the Trojan War. One story relates that Aphrodite warned Aeneas that Troy would fall, so he

left the city and took refuge on Mount Ida, where he established a new kingdom. In later years, several cities on the mountain boasted that they had been founded by Aeneas. Another version states that Aeneas fought bravely to the end of the war and either escaped from Troy with a band of followers or was allowed by the victorious Greeks—who respected his honor and religious devotion—to leave.

**The Roman Tradition** Over the centuries, a number of Roman myths developed about Aeneas. According to Roman tradition, Aeneas fought with great courage in Troy until messages from Aphrodite and Hector convinced him to leave the city. Carrying his father on his back and holding his son by the hand, Aeneas led his followers out of burning Troy. During the confusion, Aeneas's wife Creusa became separated from the fleeing Trojans. Aeneas returned to search for Creusa but could not find her.

Aeneas and his followers found safety on Mount Ida, where they settled and began building ships. After several months, they set sail to the west. Dreams and omens (mystical signs of events to come) told Aeneas that he was destined to found a new kingdom in the land of his ancestors, the country now known as Italy.

**Aeneas's Travels** After surviving many dangers, including powerful storms and fierce monsters, Aeneas and his Trojan followers landed on the coast of North Africa. Along the way, his father Anchises died. At this point in Aeneas's tale, Roman storytellers mingled the history of the hero with earlier tales of a queen named **Dido** (pronounced DYE-doh), founder of the city of Carthage in North Africa.

According to Roman legend, Dido and Aeneas fell in love soon after the hero arrived in Carthage. Aeneas stayed with the queen until Mercury, the messenger of the gods, reminded him that his destiny lay in Italy. Aeneas sadly but obediently sailed away. When he looked back, he saw smoke and flames. Lovesick and abandoned, Dido had thrown herself onto a funeral pyre, a large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body.

After stopping on the island of Sicily and leaving some of his followers to found a colony there, Aeneas sailed to Italy. Upon his arrival, he sought advice from the Sibyl (pronounced SIB-uhl), a powerful oracle, or person through which the gods communicated with humans. The Sibyl took him to the **underworld**, or land of the dead.

There Aeneas saw the ghost of Dido, but she turned away and would not speak to him. Then he saw the ghost of his father Anchises, who told him that he would found the greatest empire the world had ever known.

**Founder of an Empire** Encouraged by his father's prophecy, Aeneas went to Latium (pronounced LAY-shee-uhm) in central Italy. He became engaged to Lavinia, the daughter of the king of the Latins. Turnus, the leader of another tribe called the Rutuli, launched a war against the Trojan newcomers. Some of the Latins also fought the Trojans, but Aeneas, thrilled to have finally arrived at his destiny, refused to be defeated. First he killed Turnus and married Lavinia. Then he founded the city of Lavinium, where Latins and Trojans were united.

After Aeneas's death, his son Ascanius ruled Lavinium and founded a second city called Alba Longa, which became the capital of the Trojan-Latin people. These cities formed the basis of what came to be ancient Rome. Some legends claim that Aeneas founded the city of Rome itself. Others assign that honor to his descendant Romulus.

Roman historians later altered the story of Rome's origins to make Ascanius the son of Aeneas and Lavinia, thus a Latin by birth. Ascanius was also called Iulus, or Julius, and a clan of Romans called the Julians claimed to be his descendants. Julius Caesar and his nephew Augustus, who became the first Roman emperor, were members of that clan. In this way, the rulers of Rome traced their ancestry and their right to rule back to the demigod Aeneas.

### Aeneas in Context

In the 700s BCE, the Greeks began establishing colonies in Italy and on the island of Sicily off the Italian coast. Legends often linked Greek heroes to these colonies, whose citizens liked to think of themselves as descendants of characters Homer had described in his works. By the 300s BCE, Rome was a rising power in the Mediterranean world. As the city grew larger and more powerful, it faced a dilemma. The Romans shared many myths and legends with the Greeks and had a lot of respect for Greece's ancient culture. At the same time, however, the Romans did not want to be overshadowed by Greek culture and tradition. They wanted their own connections to the ancient world of gods and heroes. Roman writers found a perfect link to the legendary past with Aeneas,





*Aeneas was wounded while fighting the Rutuli tribe. In this wall painting from the first century, the goddess Venus watches as a doctor attends to Aeneas's wound.*

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PICTURE DESK, INC.

who was supposed to have come to Italy around the time of the founding of Rome. Furthermore, because Aeneas was a Trojan, he could give the Romans what they wanted: an ancestry that was connected to the ancient heroes yet separated from the Greeks.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Although Aeneas existed first as a character in **Greek mythology**, he later became an important part of the origin myth for Roman culture. Because of this, he is strongly identified as the ultimate mythological symbol of the Roman Empire. To the Romans, Aeneas represented heroism, as well

as the drive to create a society that would be as good as or even better than that of the Greeks.

### Aeneas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although many ancient authors wrote about Aeneas, the most complete and important version of his life and deeds is the *Aeneid*, a long poem composed around 30 to 20 BCE by the Roman writer Virgil. Using a style similar to that of the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Virgil reshaped in Latin the legends and traditions about Aeneas to fit Rome's view of its own destiny. In the poem, Virgil tells the story of Aeneas's journey from Troy to Italy.

Like other figures from Greek and Roman mythology, Aeneas appears frequently in Western literature. In *The Divine Comedy*, written in the early 1300s CE by Italian poet Dante Alighieri, Aeneas is shown in Limbo, a realm of the **afterlife** where virtuous pagans (those who worship pre-Christian gods) dwell. In British mythology, Brutus, Britain's legendary first king, is considered the great-grandson of Aeneas. Generally, Aeneas represents duty and piety, but some authors have portrayed him less favorably. In his play *Cymbeline*, for example, William Shakespeare refers to the "false Aeneas" who abandoned Dido. Shakespeare also mentions Aeneas in his plays *Troilus and Cressida* and *Julius Caesar*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "History is written by the victors." He meant that after a conflict is settled, the winners can retell it any way they like, and that retelling becomes accepted as correct. Imagine how the history of America would be told differently had the British defeated the American colonists during the American revolution. Now think of parts of the world where there is a struggle for control: Iraq, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Darfur, and other areas. Using your library, the Internet, newspapers, and other sources, find out more about the factions at war in these areas. Pick one of these factions as a "winner" and write a version of the conflict from the winner's point of view.

**SEE ALSO** *Aeneid*, *The*; Aphrodite; Dido; Greek Mythology; *Iliad*, *The*; Roman Mythology; Romulus and Remus



# Aeneid, The

## Myth Overview

In approximately 30 BCE, the Roman poet Virgil began composing the *Aeneid* (pronounced uh-NEE-id), an epic, or long, grand-scale poem, that told the story of **Aeneas** and the founding and destiny of Rome. Using myth, history, and cultural pride, the *Aeneid* summed up everything the Romans valued most about their society. At the same time, it offered tales of adventure featuring gods and goddesses, **heroes** and ghosts, warriors and doomed lovers. Virgil died before finishing the work, but it established his reputation as the foremost poet of the Romans.

**Creating a Roman Heritage** The *Aeneid* tells the story of Aeneas (pronounced i-NEE-uhs), a hero of Troy, the city in Asia Minor that the Greeks destroyed during the Trojan War. According to legend, Aeneas survived the war and led a group of Trojans on a journey to the kingdom of Latium (pronounced LAY-shee-uhm) in central Italy, where Rome was eventually built.

The story of Aeneas was much older than Rome. The hero appears as a character in the *Iliad*, an epic about the Trojan War by the Greek poet Homer. However, as Rome was emerging as the leading power in the Mediterranean world in the 200s BCE, the Romans became eager to claim Aeneas and the Trojans as their ancestors. Some Romans even visited Ilium, a Roman city in Asia Minor said to stand on the ancient site of Troy, Aeneas's home city.

Aeneas was an ideal figure to serve as the legendary founder of Rome. As the son of **Aphrodite** (called Venus in Roman mythology), the goddess of love, and Anchises (pronounced an-KY-seez), a member of the Trojan royal family, he had both divine and royal parents. In addition, the ancient tales portrayed Aeneas as dutiful, spiritual, brave, and honorable, which were virtues the Romans believed characterized their culture. Finally, Aeneas was part of the Greek heritage so admired by the Romans. As a Trojan rather than a Greek, however, he provided the Romans with a distinct identity that was not Greek but equally ancient and honorable.

A number of Roman writers contributed to the story of how Aeneas came to Italy so his descendants could build Rome. The person who assembled the parts of the legend into a great national epic, however, was

**Nationality/Culture**  
Roman

**Pronunciation**  
uh-NEE-id

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Virgil's *Aeneid*

Publius Vergilius Maro, known as Virgil. His patron (someone who provides financial support for an artist) was Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. Augustus considered himself a direct descendant of Aeneas. Virgil's *Aeneid* glorified not just Rome but also Augustus, whose reign was portrayed as the fulfillment of the grand Roman destiny that the gods had predicted long ago.

**Structure and Style** Virgil modeled the *Aeneid* on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer's much-admired epics of ancient Greece. Like the Greek poems, the *Aeneid* features the Trojan War, a hero on a long and difficult journey, and exciting descriptions of hand-to-hand combat between brave warriors. It is also similar in form to the Greek epics: the twelve books of the *Aeneid* cover two major themes, the wanderings of Aeneas after the Trojan War, and the wars in Italy between the Trojans and the Latins.

**The Story and Its Significance** In Book 1 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas and his followers arrive in Carthage in North Africa after escaping a storm sent by Juno (called **Hera** in Greek mythology), the queen of the gods. Early in the story, Virgil establishes the fact that Juno does her best to ruin Aeneas's plans because of her hatred for the Trojans, while Venus supports him. Jupiter (called **Zeus** in Greek mythology), the king of the gods, reveals that Aeneas will ultimately reach Italy and his descendants will found a great empire.

In Book 2, Aeneas tells **Dido** (pronounced DYE-doh), the queen of Carthage, how the Greeks won the Trojan War and how he escaped Troy. This story within a story continues in Book 3, as Aeneas describes to Dido the earlier attempts by the Trojan survivors to found a city. Book 4 reveals that Dido is in love with Aeneas, and the two become lovers; however, fate has other plans for the Trojan leader. Jupiter sends Mercury (called **Hermes** in Greek mythology), the messenger of the gods, to remind Aeneas that his destiny lies in Italy.

In Book 5 of the *Aeneid*, the Trojans reach Sicily, an island off the coast of Italy, and Aeneas organizes funeral games to honor the death of his father, Anchises. While the games are in progress, Juno attempts to destroy the Trojan fleet, but Jupiter saves most of the ships and the Trojans depart. In Book 6, the Trojans arrive at Cumae (pronounced KOO-may) in Italy, and Aeneas visits the shrine of the Cumaean Sibyl, a famous oracle, or person through which the gods communicated with humans. The oracle leads him on a visit to the **underworld**, where he

## Epics and Nationalism

The *Aeneid* showed that an epic poem could express a people's values and glorify its history. After 1800, Europe saw a rise in nationalism (a strong loyalty and devotion to national identity combined with commitment to furthering a nation's interests), and European writers began producing national epics based on folktales, legends, and history. Many of these writers used the *Aeneid* and the ancient Greek epics of Homer as their models. Among the most famous national epics written at this time were the Finnish *Kalevala* (1835–1836), by Elias Lönnrot; the Estonian *Kalevipoeg* (1857–1861), by F. R. Kreutzwald; the German *Nibelungenlied* (circa 1200), by an anonymous poet; and the Latvian *Lāčplēsis* (1888), by Andrejs Pumpurs.

meets the ghost of his father. Another prophecy reveals to Aeneas that Rome will achieve greatness in the future.

Books 7 through 11 tell of the Trojans' arrival in Latium (pronounced LAY-shee-uhm), the kingdom of the Latins in western Italy. The newcomers are welcomed at first, but then war breaks out between the Trojans and the Latin tribes, sparked by the meddling of Juno. Venus helps Aeneas by giving him a new set of armor and weapons bearing images of Rome's future glory. Jupiter then forbids the gods to interfere further.

The final book of the *Aeneid* recounts the mighty battle between Aeneas and the Latin hero Turnus, chief opponent of the Trojans. Aeneas wins the fight and is free to marry Lavinia, daughter of the Latin king Latinus.

## The *Aeneid* in Context

The *Aeneid* varies from Homer's epics in ways that reflect the different cultures of their respective authors. Literary scholars still do not know for sure that Homer existed. There may or may not have been an individual author who put the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into the versions in which they have been handed down. In any case, storytellers told and retold the Greek epics over a long period before they were written down. Many features of their style, such as the frequent repetition of phrases and images, reflect memorization methods used by oral storytellers. Virgil, by contrast, was an educated man writing a poem for readers, not listeners. He studied the traditional legends of Greece and Italy, determined his plot, and polished his language.

Virgil first wrote the entire *Aeneid* in prose, using normal sentence structure and format, and then turned it into verse a few lines at a time. As he lay dying, Virgil requested that the manuscript of his still-unfinished work be destroyed. Nevertheless, the emperor Augustus preserved the work and had it published soon after Virgil's death in 19 BCE. Augustus' decision was no doubt based on the unstable situation in late Republican Rome (91–30 BCE) and the need for a unifying myth that all Romans could rally behind. Rome had gone through a chaotic period during Virgil's life, including a series of civil wars, the assassination of Julius Caesar, and the fall of the Republic. Augustus, Julius Caesar's adopted great-nephew and successor, had to battle powerful rivals, including General Marc Anthony, for complete control of the newly created Roman Empire. After he solidified his power, he declared it his goal to purify Rome and restore its morality. The *Aeneid* helped proudly define Rome and unify the many groups within the empire who had squabbled for so long.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Throughout the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes many prophecies, or predictions of the future. In all these prophecies, Rome becomes a great empire. The meaning of the prophecies is clear: Rome rules the world because it is fated to do so, a fact that has the support of the gods. At the end of the epic, Aeneas is able to marry Lavinia, a Latin princess. Their marriage symbolizes the union between the Latin and Trojan peoples, and their descendants represent the birth of the Roman Empire.

In Book 4, after Aeneas and his followers leave Carthage, Dido kills herself in despair. This episode shows Aeneas's willingness to **sacrifice** his own desires to obey the will of the gods. It also creates a legendary explanation for the very real hostility between Carthage and Rome.

### The *Aeneid* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Whatever Virgil may have thought about his work while he lay on his deathbed, others quickly recognized that the *Aeneid* was a masterpiece. Romans loved the poem. It gave them an impressive cultural history and justified the proud expectation that they were destined to rule the world. Yet even after the Roman Empire fell, people continued to read and admire the *Aeneid*.

During the Middle Ages, many Europeans believed that Virgil had been a magician and the *Aeneid* had magical properties. This could be

because the story contained so many omens, or mystical signs of events to come. People would read passages from the work and search for hidden meanings or predictions about the future. So admired was Virgil that the Italian poet Dante Alighieri, who wrote during the late 1200s and early 1300s, made him a central character in his own religious epic, *The Divine Comedy*. In Dante's work, Virgil guides the narrator through **hell** and purgatory, but he is not able to enter **heaven** because he was not a Christian.

The *Aeneid* influenced English literature as well. Poets Edmund Spenser and John Milton wrote epics that reflect the work's influence. Poet John Dryden was one of many who translated the *Aeneid*, and his 1697 version is one of the best English translations. By contrast, the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron disliked Virgil's work, perhaps because it celebrates social order, religious duty, and national glory over the Romantic qualities that they favored: passion, rebellion, and self-determination.

The *Aeneid* has inspired musical composers as well as writers, and many operas have been based on Virgil's work. Among the best known are *Dido and Aeneas* (1690), by English composer Henry Purcell, and *The Trojans* (1858), by the French composer Hector Berlioz.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

It is widely accepted that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid* in an attempt to bring glory to the Roman culture in which he lived. Compare Aeneas to more recent heroes, such as Superman or Captain America, who represent and fight for ideals important to modern Americans. How are they similar? Are there ways in which Aeneas is different from these modern comic book heroes?

SEE ALSO Aeneas; Aphrodite; *Iliad*, *The*



## African Mythology

### African Mythology in Context

A vast continent, Africa is home to many cultures and a thousand or more languages. Although no single set of myths and legends unites this

diverse population, different cultural groups and regions share some common mythological elements. Like myths from other parts of the world, those of Africa reflect its people's beliefs and values. But while the mythologies of many other cultures no longer play an active role in religious beliefs, African myths and legends function as a meaningful part of everyday life. Some African myths deal with universal themes, such as the origin of the world and the fate of the individual after death. Many more spring from the continent's own environments and history.

**Roots of African Myths and Legends** The Sahara, a vast desert dividing the continent into two main regions, runs from east to west across the widest part of northern Africa. North Africa consists of the Mediterranean coast from Morocco to Egypt and includes the valley of the Nile River as far south as Ethiopia. With strong ties to the Mediterranean and Arab worlds, North Africans felt the influence of Christianity by the 300s CE. In the 700s, much of the area came under the influence of Islam.

Before the modern era, Africans south of the Sahara had relatively little contact with the rest of the world. Islam spread south past the Sahara very slowly, especially compared with its sweep across North Africa. Christian missionaries were not very active there until the 1800s. Since then, the spread of Islam and Christianity has overshadowed many indigenous (or native) religions, myths, and legends of sub-Saharan Africa. Despite this fact, the traditional beliefs have not completely disappeared. In some places they have blended with new religions from other cultures, so that an African Muslim might combine Islam with the traditional practice of ancestor worship.

Sub-Saharan myths and legends developed over thousands of years. Among the influences on their development were the mass movements of people that took place from time to time. About seven thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Khoisan people, an indigenous African group, began moving from the Sahara toward southern Africa. Five thousand years later, people who spoke Bantu languages began spreading out from Cameroon, on Africa's west coast, until they eventually inhabited much of sub-Saharan Africa. Such migrations caused myths and legends to spread from group to group and led to a mixing of cultural beliefs. The migrations also gave rise to new stories about events in the history of those peoples. For instance, as Bantu groups settled in new homelands, they developed legends to explain the origins of their ruling families and the structure of their societies.



African cultural groups did not use written language until modern times. Instead, they possessed rich and complex oral traditions, passing myths, legends, and histories from generation to generation verbally. In some cultures, professional storytellers, called griots (pronounced GREE-oo), preserved the oral tradition. Written accounts of African mythology began to appear in the early 1800s with the arrival of European explorers and colonizers, and present-day scholars work to record the continent's myths and legends before they are lost to time and cultural change.

## Core Deities and Characters

African mythologies include supernatural beings who influence human life. Some of these beings are powerful deities or gods. Others are lesser spirits, such as the spirits of ancestors.

**Deities** Most African traditional religions have multiple gods, often grouped together in family relationships. Nearly every culture recognizes a supreme god, an all-powerful creator who is usually associated with the sky. Various West African peoples refer to the highest god as Amma or **Olorun**, while some East Africans use the name Mulungu. Africans who have adopted Christianity or Islam sometimes blend the supreme deity of those faiths with the supreme deity of traditional African religion and mythology.

In most African religions, the supreme god is a distant being no longer involved in day-to-day human life. People rarely call on this deity. Instead, they address lesser gods, many of whom have distinct functions. The Yoruba people of Nigeria, for example, worship a storm god, Shango, who controls thunder and lightning.

The number of gods and goddesses varies from culture to culture. The Buganda people of east-central Africa have twenty or more deities. Many populations regard the earth, **sun**, and moon as gods. In the Congo River region, the most densely wooded part of Africa, the forest itself is a deity, or else a mysterious other world where spirits dwell.

**Spirits** African mythology is filled with spirits, invisible beings with powers for good or evil. Spirits are less grand, less powerful, and less like humans than the gods, who often have weaknesses and emotions. Many spirits are associated with geographical features, such as mountains, rivers, wells, trees, and springs. Nations, peoples, and even small communities may honor local spirits unknown beyond their borders.

All humans, animals, and plants have spirits, as do elements, such as water and **fire**. Some spirits are helpful, others harmful. People may worship spirits and may also try to control them through magical means, usually with the aid of a skilled practitioner or healer, often known as a shaman, who leads them in rituals. People thought to have evil spirits are considered dangerous witches.

**Ancestors** Many Africans believe that human spirits exist after death. According to some groups, these spirits live underground in a world much like that of the living, but upside down. The spirits sleep during the day and come out at night. Other groups place the realm of the dead in the sky. The Bushmen of southern Africa say that the dead become stars.

Still other African groups believe that the spirits of dead ancestors remain near their living descendants to help and protect them as long as these living relatives perform certain ceremonies and pay their ancestors due respect. Believing that the spirits of chieftains and other important people offer strong protection, the Zulu of South Africa hold special ceremonies to bring them into the community. In some cultures, it is said that the soul of a dead grandfather, father, or uncle can be reborn in a new baby boy. Another common belief is that dead souls, particularly those of old men, may return as snakes, which many Africans regard with respect.

Ancestor cults—or groups that worship dead relatives—play a leading role in the mythologies of some peoples, especially in East and South Africa. The honored dead—whether members of the immediate family, the larger clan or kinship group, the community, or the entire culture—become objects of worship and subjects of tales and legends. An example occurs among the Songhai people, who live along the Niger River. They honor Zoa, a wise and protective ancestor who long ago made his son chieftain.

Many groups trace their origins, or the origins of all humans, to first ancestors. The Baganda, the people of Buganda in present-day Uganda, say that the first ancestor was Kintu, who came from the land of the gods and married Nambi, daughter of the king of **heaven**. The Dinka of the Sudan speak of Garang and Abuk, the first man and woman, whom God created as tiny clay figures in a pot.

**Rulers and Heroes** Ancestral kings and **heroes** may be transformed into minor deities for communities or entire nations. The line between legend and history is often blurred. Some mythic ancestors began as real-life

personages whose deeds were exaggerated over time, while others are purely fictional. The Yoruba storm god Shango, for example, may originally have been a living mighty warrior-king.

The Shilluk, who live along the Nile in the Sudan, trace their ancestry to Nyikang, their first king. Later kings were thought to have been Nyikang reborn into new bodies, and the well-being of the nation depended on their health and vigor. The first king of the Zulu was supposed to have been a son of the supreme god. Many African peoples traditionally regarded their rulers as divine or semi-divine.

Other legends involve cultural heroes who did great things or lived their lives according to important values. The Soninke people of Ghana in West Africa have a song cycle—a group of songs performed in a particular order that relate to an underlying theme—called *Dausi*. In part of it, *Gassire's Lute*, a hero must choose between his own desires and his duty to society.

The Mandingo people built a large empire in Mali. Their griots recited tales of kings and heroes. *Sunjata*, a story of magic, warfare, kingship, and fate, is known across large portions of West Africa.

## Major Myths

The myths of people living along the Nile and on the fringes of the Sahara, as well as the Bantu around the Niger and Congo Rivers, are more generally concerned with the origins of social institutions, such as clans and kingships, than with cosmic themes, such as the creation of the world. In contrast, the non-Bantu groups of the Niger River area, especially the Dogon, Yoruba, and Bambara, have complex and lengthy tales about the origins of things found in the natural world. Fables, folklore, and legends about **tricksters** and animals are found in nearly all African cultures.

**How Things Came To Be** Many myths explain how the world came into existence. The Dogon say that twin pairs of creator spirits or gods called Nummo hatched from a cosmic egg. Other groups also speak of the universe beginning with an egg. People in both southern and northern Africa believe that the world was formed from the body of an enormous snake, sometimes said to span the sky as a rainbow.

The Fon people of Benin tell of Gu, the oldest son of the creator **twins** Mawu (moon) and Lisa (sun). Gu came to earth in the form of an iron sword and then became a blacksmith. His task was to prepare the world for

## Gods and Tricksters Cross the Sea

Between the 1500s and the 1800s, many thousands of Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves. Their myths and legends helped shape the black cultures that developed in the Caribbean islands and the United States. The Caribbean religion known as vodún or voodoo, for example, involves the worship of the *vodu*, meaning “spirit” in the West African language Fon. Enslaved blacks also told traditional stories about the spider Anansi, who was sometimes also depicted as a trickster hare. Anansi came to be called Anancy, and the hare became Brer (Brother) Rabbit, the character who appears in the Uncle Remus animal fables that were collected by Joel Chandler Harris in the late 1800s.

people. He taught humans how to make tools, which in turn enabled them to grow food and build shelters. The San Bushmen of the south say that creation was the work of a spirit named Dxui, who was alternately a man and many other things, such as a flower, a bird, or a lizard.

Myths from across Africa also tell how death came into the world. Some relate that the supreme god meant for humans to be immortal, meaning they would live forever; however, through an unlucky mistake, they received death instead of eternal life. One story tells of a god who told a cautious chameleon to carry the news of eternal life to earth. In that story, a faster lizard with news of death arrives first. The Mende people of Sierra Leone say that a toad with the message “Death has come” overtakes a dog with the message “Life has come” because the dog stops to eat along the way.

Other myths explain that death came into the world because people or animals angered the gods. The Nuer people of the Sudan blame death on a hyena who cut the rope that connected heaven and earth. Their neighbors, the Dinka, say that a greedy woman, not satisfied with the grain the high god gave her, planted more grain. She hit the god in the eye with her hoe, and he cut the connecting rope. A tale told by the Luhya people of present-day Kenya relates that a chameleon cursed people with death because a man broke the laws of hospitality by refusing to share his food with the chameleon.

**Twins** Many African peoples regard twins as special, almost sacred, beings. Twins represent the duality—the tension or balance between paired or opposing forces—that is basic to life. Some groups, such as the

non-Bantu peoples of the Niger and Congo regions, believe that twins of opposite sexes are symbols of this duality.

Twins appear in many African myths and legends. In some stories, they are brother and sister who unite in marriage. In others, they seem to be two sides of a single being. The supreme god of the Fon people of West Africa is Mawu-Lisa, usually described as brother and sister twins who became the parents of all the other gods, also born as twins.

**Trickster and Animal Fables** Many African myths feature a trickster. The trickster may be a god, an animal, or a human being. His pranks and mischief cause trouble among gods, among humans, or between gods and humans.

West Africans tell many tales of a wandering trickster spirit known as Eshu among the Yoruba and Legba among the Fon. This trickster is associated with change and with quarrels. In some accounts, he is the messenger between the human world and the supreme god.

Animal tricksters are often small, helpless creatures who manage to outwit bigger and fiercer animals. **Anansi**, the spider trickster of the Ashanti people, is known throughout West and Central Africa. Tortoises and hares also appear as tricksters. In one such tale, the hare tricks a hippopotamus and an elephant into clearing a field for him.

Other stories about animals show them helping humans. The San Bushmen say that a sacred praying mantis gave them words and fire, and the Bambara people of Mali say that an antelope taught them how to farm. A popular form of entertainment involves sharing animal fables, stories about talking animals with human characteristics. Many of these fables offer imaginative explanations for features of the natural world, such as why bats hang with their heads downward or why leopards have spots.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the more common themes throughout African mythology is the focus on ancestors. There is a reciprocal relationship between the dead ancestors and the living community. As long as the community continues to revere and respect the dead ancestor, the ancestor will protect the community. The rituals of ancestor worship assured that cultures without a written language or texts could remember their history through their ancestors and pass down that history from generation to generation.

Another theme in African mythology is the presence of animals who interact with humans. These animals may be responsible for creating the



*A shrine of Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, furnished with statues of female devotees. Yoruba, Nigeria.* WERNER FORMAN/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.

world, such as in the myth of the rainbow snake. They may also be the teachers who helped humans create societies and cultures. The praying mantis of the San people, for example, taught them how to use words and fire; and the Bambara credit the antelope with teaching them how to farm.

The references in African mythology to animals as co-creators of human societies reinforce the view of humans and nature as being interconnected.

### **African Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Although the myths of various African cultures have existed primarily in oral form, there are some notable exceptions. Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* books collect many of the modified West African tales that were shared among slaves in the early United States. Made popular in the late 1880s when they were first published, the books have been criticized in more recent years for being patronizing and racist. In 1946, the Walt Disney Company created an animated film consisting of several of the tales, titled *Song of the South*.

Children's author Gerald McDermott has also created books based on various African mythological tales, including *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti* (1972) and *Zomo the Rabbit: A Trickster Tale from West Africa* (1992). African mythology also plays a central role in the contemporary fantasy novel *Anansi Boys* (2005) by Neil Gaiman.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

African mythology is made up of many different stories taken from many different tribes and cultures across the continent. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research one of the cultures or tribes mentioned above, such as the Yoruba, the San, or the Baganda. Where do they live? What are some other important aspects of their society? Try to locate at least one myth from this culture that has not already been mentioned.

**SEE ALSO** Anansi; Animals in Mythology; Brer Rabbit; Ile-Ife; Leza; Mwindo; Olorun; Sunjata; Tricksters



## Afterlife

### **Theme Overview**

Cultures the world over recognize that every life will end in death. However, many claim that some invisible but vital part of the human

being, such as the spirit or soul, continues to exist after death. This is known as the afterlife, a state of being that people enter when they die, or a place to which they or their souls go. In some traditions, the individual possesses more than one soul, and each of these may have a separate fate.

### Major Myths

Some cultures have associated the afterlife with a geographic location. The notion of the existence of an **underworld** beneath the world of the living is common. The Babylonians, Assyrians, and other peoples of ancient Mesopotamia, for example, thought the dead lived on in a dusty, bleak underworld called the Dark Earth. Any pit, cave, or pond could be an entrance to that place. People on the islands of Melanesia in the southeastern Pacific Ocean imagine an underground world that is the mirror image of the upper world. Stories from the island of New Guinea, north of Australia, describe an underworld that lies beneath the ocean. Divers have claimed to see the souls of the dead working in undersea gardens. In Navajo mythology, the dead descend into a watery underworld. According to the Ibo of Nigeria, the underworld is ruled by the goddess Ala, who receives the dead into her womb.

Other cultures have placed the afterlife in the sky or among the stars. The Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest believe that the dead become rain clouds. Some Native Americans of the Southeast say that the souls of the dead dwell either in the heavens or in the west.

The west, where the **sun** sets each day, has often been associated with the afterlife of the spirits. Polynesian islanders, in the central and southern Pacific Ocean, locate their ancestral island in the west and believe that spirits of the dead can return there. The Celtic people from western Europe pictured an other world that was sometimes underground or under the sea, and sometimes an island in the west.

In most accounts, the Celtic other world was a magical place filled with enjoyable activities, such as feasting and, for heroic warriors, fighting. Some descriptions, though, indicate that the land of the dead had a grim and dangerous side. Annwn (pronounced AN-oon), the realm of the dead in Welsh mythology, could be fearsome. Less frightening was **Valhalla** (pronounced val-HAL-uh) of **Norse mythology**, a vast palace where warriors slain in battle spent the afterlife feasting, singing, and indulging in playful combat. Their afterlife was not eternal, however. One day Valhalla and the world would be swept away in the gods' last



battle. In addition, not all warriors went to Valhalla. **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh), goddess of love and death, took half of them to her own palace in the afterworld.

In contrast to vivid, lively, and joyous visions of the world beyond, the afterlife pictured by the peoples of the ancient Near East was dim and shadowy. The early Jews called their dismal, ghostly underworld Sheol (pronounced SHEE-ohl). The spirits who dwelled in the Assyro-Babylonian underworld felt neither pain nor pleasure but lived a pale, washed-out version of life on earth, complete with a royal court ruled by Nergal and Ereshkigal, the king and queen of the dead. The Babylonian heroic poem, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, contains a description of the afterlife in which the hero's dead friend Enkidu returns as a spirit to describe his existence in the "house of dust."

**Different Fates** Peoples of the ancient Near East, such as the Mesopotamians and the early Jews, believed that the afterlife was the same for everyone. Other cultures, however, have expected the dead to be divided into different afterworlds. The Polynesians believe that the souls of common people, victims of black magic, and sinners are destroyed by **fire**. The souls of the upper classes, by contrast, journey to a spirit world where they live among their ancestors. Some ancient Chinese people believed that the afterlife was different for good and bad people: the souls of good people rose to the court of Tien (pronounced Tyen), or **heaven**, while the souls of bad people descended into one of the eighteen levels of **hell**, depending on their crimes in the world.

The Maya people of Central America believed that the souls of the dead went to an underworld known as Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh). To escape and go to heaven, the souls had to trick the underworld gods. Among the Aztecs of Mexico, slain warriors, merchants killed during a journey, and women who died in childbirth joined the sun in the heavens. The ordinary dead spent four years traveling through the nine layers of an underworld called Mictlan (pronounced MEEKT-lahn), only to vanish when they reached the ninth level. The Aztecs believed that the rain god **Tlaloc** (pronounced TLAH-lok) was responsible for the deaths of people who died by drowning or of certain diseases such as leprosy. Tlaloc then sent these people to a happy afterlife that ordinary Aztecs did not share. Wall paintings in the ancient Mexican city of Teotihuacán (pronounced tay-uh-tee-wah-KAN) show the garden paradise that welcomed the souls of Tlaloc's dead.

In Norse mythology, warriors went to heavenly palaces, while other individuals ended up in a cold underworld called Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heym), or **Hel**. Among the Inuit (pronounced IN-yoo-it), or Eskimo, of Greenland, a happy land in the sky is the reward for the souls of people who have been generous or have suffered misfortunes in life; others go to an underworld ruled by the goddess **Sedna**. The Pima and Papago peoples of the American Southwest say that the spirits of the departed travel to a place in the east where they will be free from hunger and thirst.

Some cultures hold the view that the souls of the dead face judgment: the good are rewarded in the afterlife, while the evil are punished. The ancient Egyptians, for example, believed that a soul had to convince the gods that he or she had committed no sins in life. The dead person's heart was placed on one side of a set of scales with a feather from the headdress of Ma'at (pronounced MUH-aht), the goddess of judgment, on the other. If the two balanced, the soul was declared sinless. A monster devoured those who failed the test.

The Zoroastrians of ancient Persia believed that the afterlife held a reward for the virtuous, or those of moral excellence. Those who lived a just earthly life experienced a form of pure light that signified the presence of **Ahura Mazda**, their only god, who stands for goodness, justice, and order. The ancient Greeks imagined the afterlife as a shadowy realm, called **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez) after its ruling deity. They also spoke of a deeper pit of hell, Tartarus, to which those who had acted wrongly were sent to receive punishment. In the Shinto mythology of Japan, the dead go to a land of darkness known as Yomi, where they may be punished for their misdeeds.

After about 200 BCE, the Jewish concept of Sheol gave way to a vision of judgment after death. The good entered the presence of God, while the wicked roasted in a hell called Gehenna (pronounced geh-HEN-na). This influenced the Christian and Islamic ideas about hell as a state or place of punishment for evil. Heaven, in contrast, is the union of virtuous souls with God. According to the Roman Catholic Church, there is a state of being between heaven and hell called purgatory, in which tarnished souls are purified on the way to heaven.

**The Journey to the Afterlife** Many cultures have regarded death as the beginning of the soul's journey to the afterworld. The ancient Greeks pictured sea horses and dolphins carrying virtuous souls to the Elysian

(pronounced il-EE-shun) Fields, also known as the Islands of the Blessed. Less noble Greeks undertook a darker journey, asking a boatman named Charon (pronounced KAIR-uhn) to ferry them across the river Acheron (pronounced ACK-er-on), which marked the boundary between the world and Hades.

Many Pacific islanders viewed the journey as a leap. Every island had a *reinga*, or leaping place, from which the soul was thought to depart. For the Maori of New Zealand, that place is the northernmost point of North Island, known as Cape Reinga. A sacred tree was often associated with the reinga. The Hawaiians believed that the souls of children lingered near the tree to give directions to the newly dead. Other Pacific peoples thought souls swam to the afterlife, and those weighted with sin would sink.

In some cultures, bridges linked the living world and the afterworld, and the crossing was not always easy. The Norse bridge shook if someone not yet dead tried to cross it before his or her time. The Zoroastrians had to cross a bridge the width of a hair. The just survived the crossing; the unjust fell into hell. Both the rainbow and the Milky Way were thought by various peoples to represent the bridge to the land of the gods or spirits.

The Fiji islanders of the south Pacific spoke of a Spirit Path with many dangers, a journey so difficult that the only ones who could complete it were warriors who had died violent deaths. A Native American myth of the far north says that the dead person's shadow must walk a trail the person made during life. Along the way, the person's ghost tries to keep the shadow from reaching the heavenly afterlife.

The living sometimes attempted the journey to the afterworld in search of the secrets, wisdom, powers, or treasures associated with the realm of spirits and of the dead. Welsh **heroes** entered the realm of Annwn to steal a magic cauldron, or kettle. Greek legends tell of the journeys of **Orpheus** and **Odysseus** to the land of the dead. The Navajo believe that searching for the realm of the dead can bring death to the living.

**Return of the Dead** In his play *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare called death “The undiscovered country from whose bourn [boundary]/No traveler returns.” Yet myths and legends from around the world say the dead do interact with the world of the living in one way or another.

In some cultures, the dead are thought to linger near the living as shades, or spirits. Southeastern Native Americans believe that newly dead souls remain near their villages hoping to persuade others to join them.

In some African myths, the souls of the dead stay close to living relatives in order to help and advise them. To consult with their dead ancestors, Mayan rulers performed a bloodletting ritual known as the Vision Serpent ceremony. During the ceremony, participants experienced visions in which they communicated with the dead.

The belief that the spirits of the dead can do good or ill in the world of the living lies behind some forms of ancestor worship. Ghosts of the dead, whether malicious, helpful, or merely sad, appear in the myths and folktales of many cultures. The Chinese perform ceremonies to honor the spirits of their ancestors and ensure that they will have good feelings toward their descendants. Some Native Americans honor the ghosts of their dead with annual feasts. The Navajo, however, avoid dwelling on death and never mention the dead in their rituals.

The dead sometimes return in another way as well: the soul may be reincarnated, meaning reborn in another body. The notion of multiple rebirths through a series of lifetimes is basic to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Those who act wrongly in life may be reborn as less fortunate people or as animals or insects. Cultures in some areas of Africa also believe that souls are reborn, sometimes after a period spent in the underworld, or land of the dead.

**Preparation for the Afterlife** In many cultures, rituals associated with death were meant to help the deceased in his or her journey to the afterlife. The Greeks, for example, provided the dead with coins to pay the ferryman Charon. Although the Romans were less certain about the afterlife than the Greeks, they often followed the same custom and sometimes added treats for the dead person to offer to **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the underworld. The Tibetan *Book of the Dead* gives instructions for the soul to follow on its journey between death and rebirth.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the body had to be preserved after death in order for the spirit to survive, so they went to great lengths to prepare for the afterlife. They built tombs to protect their dead. The most elaborate are the great monuments known as the pyramids. Within the tombs, they placed grave goods, such as food, furniture, and even servants, for the dead person to use in the next life. The Egyptians also developed an elaborate form of mummification, or drying and preserving a body to keep it from decomposing after death. The full process could take as long as two hundred days and was available only to the upper classes.

The Egyptians provided their dead with written instructions, including advice on how to survive the hazardous journey after death and guidebooks to the afterworld. The afterlife took many forms but was often pictured as a comfortable existence in a luxuriant realm of rivers, fields, and islands, although the royal dead were said to join the god **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) in the heavens. Texts inscribed on the walls of royal tombs included prayers, hymns, and magical spells to protect the dead from the dangers of the soul's journey. They were included in one of the most famous collections of ancient Egyptian writings, the *Book of the Dead*, copies of which were often buried with the dead.

The Sumerians of Mesopotamia usually made no attempt to preserve the bodies of their dead or to bury them elaborately. One striking exception is a set of royal graves found in the ruins of the ancient city of Ur, located in present-day Iraq. The graves contained not only rare and precious goods but also the bodies of servants, dancing girls, charioteers, and animals, all slain to serve the dead in the afterlife. The Germanic peoples also buried grave goods with their chieftains. An early medieval burial mound at Sutton Hoo in eastern England contained an entire ship along with a quantity of gold and silver items.

The grave goods of male Bushmen of Africa consist of the dead man's weapons. People preparing the body for burial coat it with fat and red powder and bend it into a fetal position, also known as a curled sleeping position. Then they place it in a shallow grave facing in the direction of the rising sun. Other South African tribes follow a different practice. They break the bones of dead people before burial to prevent their ghosts from wandering.

## Afterlife in Context

Religions throughout the ages have included a belief in an afterlife. In some cultures, the afterlife is regarded as a place of pleasure and joy. In others, it is a gloomy shadow of earthly existence, a slow fading away, or a remote and unknowable realm. Expectations about the organization of the afterlife also differ. In some societies, everyone is thought to meet the same fate. In others, people are believed to take different paths, depending on how they conducted their earthly lives. Sometimes a judgment by a deity determines the individual's final destiny, or what will happen to them.



*These statues depict the spirits of Aztec women who died in childbirth. The Aztecs believed that the spirits of these women joined the sun in the heavens.* THE ART ARCHIVE/NATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL MUSEUM MEXICO/GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

Varying visions of the afterlife reveal much about each culture's hopes and fears for the afterlife, and often contain lessons about how people should live. Generally, religions have rules, laws, commandments, or philosophies that ordinary people must follow in order to obtain a good afterlife. Hindus and Buddhists, for example, believe in rebirth and follow the law of karma. Karma, which in the original Sanskrit language means "actions," refers to the good and bad acts an individual performs during his or her many lives, and the effects, or consequences, of those acts for future lives. Karma does not depend on the judgment of a deity, but is a rational law of nature that simply accepts that humans are

responsible for their behavior and will reap the consequences of their actions in their afterlives. The law of karma provides a positive incentive for individuals to do good acts, since they can shorten the number of rebirths they must endure and more quickly achieve *nirvana*, or liberation from rebirth and unity with the divine.

In contrast, Christianity presents a linear notion of life and death, which occur only once for each human. In this view, humans have only one chance, or lifetime, to either be rewarded or punished, and Christians must abide by the Ten Commandments in order to achieve a good afterlife. Upon death, individuals will be judged by a deity and assigned either to heaven, hell, or purgatory. Christianity emphasizes punishment and judgment, and the fear of hell is a strong motivator for many to avoid sin and its consequences.

## The Afterlife in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The idea of the afterlife is a common subject in art and literature, even in modern times. Literary views of the afterlife are not limited to religious texts. Dante's epic about Catholic afterlife, *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1320), for example, is one of the most well-known pieces of literature of all time. In it, the author offers views of three different destinations in the afterlife: purgatory, heaven, and hell. More recently, the Alice Sebold novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) offers a description of the heavenly world the main character occupies after she is murdered.

Painted depictions of the afterlife were common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. One of the most famous paintings of the afterlife is *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1504). The painting, which is made up of three panels, shows a vision of hell in its third panel.

The subject of the afterlife is a popular theme in movies and television shows as well. Movies, such as *Defending Your Life* (1991) and *What Dreams May Come* (1998), present unique visions of the afterlife, while the television show *Dead Like Me* (2003) centers on a group of undead “reapers” who have been chosen to escort the souls of the soon-to-be-dead to the next world.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many people who have had near-death experiences—injuries or traumas that cause their bodies to “die” for a short time—claim to have seen “the

afterlife.” Doctors try to explain these experiences as delusions caused by various chemicals in the brain. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, find out more about what people who have had near-death experiences report seeing and feeling, and find out more about how these sensations are explained by doctors. Then write your conclusions: are these people glimpsing the afterlife or not?

**SEE ALSO** Cerberus; Gilgamesh; Hades; Heaven; Hel; Hell; Orpheus; Osiris; Reincarnation; Underworld; Valhalla; Valkyries



## Agamemnon

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

ag-uh-MEM-non

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Son of Atreus and Aerope,  
King and Queen of  
Mycenae

### Character Overview

According to **Greek mythology**, Agamemnon (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) was the king of Mycenae (pronounced mye-SEE-nee), a kingdom of ancient Greece. The leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War, he is one of the central figures in the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem about the war. Greek writers generally portray Agamemnon as courageous but also as arrogant and overly proud, flaws that bring him misfortune and eventually lead to his death. The story of Agamemnon is often seen as a warning about the dangers of hubris, or too much self-confidence.

Agamemnon was one of two sons of Atreus (pronounced AY-tree-uhs), the king of Mycenae. While Agamemnon was still a youth, Atreus was murdered by his nephew Aegisthus (pronounced ee-JUS-thus). Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs) fled to Sparta where King Tyndareus (pronounced tin-DAIR-ee-uhs) granted them refuge and protection. The king gave his daughters to the brothers as wives. One daughter, Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), was already married, but Agamemnon killed her husband Tantalus and then married her. Menelaus took her beautiful sister **Helen** as his bride.

Agamemnon later returned to Mycenae, killed his uncle, and reclaimed his father's throne. He and Clytemnestra had four daughters, Chrysothemis (pronounced kry-so-THEEM-uhs), **Electra**, Iphianissa (pronounced if-ee-uh-NISS-uh), and Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-



NYE-uh), and a son, Orestes (pronounced ohr-ES-teez). Meanwhile, Menelaus became king of Sparta after the death of Tyndareus.

Some time later, Paris, the second son of King Priam of Troy, visited Menelaus in Sparta. The goddess **Aphrodite** had promised Paris earlier that he would have the love of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. When Paris returned to Troy, he took Helen with him. At the time of Menelaus's marriage to Helen, all the rulers of the Greek city-states had promised to come to her defense if necessary. Menelaus reminded them of their promise, and they agreed to go to war against Troy to bring Helen back. Agamemnon was chosen to lead the Greeks in battle.

Agamemnon prepared a fleet of ships to carry the Greeks to Troy. Just before the ships were ready to sail, however, he insulted the goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss) by boasting that he was a better hunter than she and by killing a sacred stag. As punishment, Artemis caused the winds to die down so that the Greek fleet could not sail.

A seer, or person who can see the future, told Agamemnon that he could please Artemis and gain favorable winds by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess. The king tricked Clytemnestra into sending Iphigenia to him by saying that she was to marry the great warrior **Achilles**. When his daughter arrived, Agamemnon killed her. Although the **sacrifice** pleased Artemis, who allowed the Greek ships to sail, his actions would later result in terrible consequences for Agamemnon.

**The Trojan War** The Greeks fought the people of Troy for nine years and seized many of their cities; however, they failed to capture the city of Troy. This is the point at which the *Iliad* begins, and Agamemnon's arrogance and pride really come into play.

After winning a battle against the Trojans, Agamemnon was given a female prisoner named Chryseis (pronounced kry-SAY-is) as part of his reward for victory. She is the daughter of Chryses (pronounced KRY-sez), a priest of the god **Apollo**. Chryses begged for the return of his daughter, but Agamemnon refused. Angered, Apollo sent a plague to devastate the Greek forces.

The hero Achilles (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) demanded that Chryseis be returned to her father. Agamemnon still refused. He finally agreed on the condition that he be given Briseis (pronounced bry-SAY-is), a Trojan captive who was part of the reward given to Achilles. Achilles became so angry that he laid down his arms and refused to fight any



*The priest Chryses presented gifts to Agamemnon in an attempt to ransom his daughter Chryseis, who was part of the spoils of war given to Agamemnon.* GILLES MERMET/ART RESOURCE, NY.

longer. This proved to be a costly mistake, because without Achilles the Greeks began to lose ground.

Achilles returned to the battle only after learning of the death of his close friend Patroclus (pronounced pa-TROH-kluhs). When he rejoined the Greek forces, the tide of battle turned. The Greeks drove off the Trojans, killed the great Trojan warrior Prince **Hector**, and went on to defeat the people of Troy and destroy their city. After the war, Agamemnon took the Trojan princess **Cassandra** back home as a prize.

**The Death of Agamemnon** While Agamemnon was away fighting the Trojans, his wife Clytemnestra took his nephew Aegisthus as her lover. As Agamemnon sailed home from Troy, Clytemnestra was plotting to kill him in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Cassandra, who had

the power to foretell the future, warned Agamemnon that his wife would kill him. However, the gods had put a curse on Cassandra: although she would make accurate predictions, no one would believe them. True to the curse, Agamemnon ignored Cassandra's warning.

When Agamemnon returned home, Clytemnestra welcomed him by preparing a bath so that he might purify himself. As the king stepped out of the bath, Clytemnestra wrapped him in a garment that bound his arms so he could not move. Aegisthus then stabbed Agamemnon to death while Clytemnestra killed Cassandra. Another version of the story says that Clytemnestra herself slew Agamemnon with an ax. Agamemnon's son Orestes eventually avenged his father's murder by killing both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the help of his sister Electra.

### Agamemnon in Context

Agamemnon was the leader of the Greek armies during the Trojan War, a nine-year battle between the Greeks and the Trojans. Although most ancient Greeks believed the Trojan War to be a historical fact, there is little remaining evidence that the war actually happened. By the 1800s CE, many scholars were convinced that the war was not a real event, and that Troy itself was probably not even a real place. However, more recent archeological finds suggest that Troy was indeed a real city, located in present-day Turkey.

The ancient Greeks, like the people of most ancient cultures in which warfare was common, valued strength and bravery, and Agamemnon had both. His mission to Troy was successful. But he does not fare as well as the clever **Odysseus** (another key Greek leader during the war) who knew better when to fight, when to persuade, and when to lie low. Agamemnon was overly proud and blindly ambitious—both qualities that lead him to destruction. Ancient Greece was made up of independent city-states that often clashed. It is clear that, to the Greeks, an effective leader must be more than a brave and capable fighter—he must be diplomatic and clever, too. Agamemnon was not.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the basic themes of Greek mythology is that all humans have a fate that cannot be escaped and limits they should not try to exceed. The Greeks believed that individuals must face their fate with pride and dignity, gaining as much fame as possible. Agamemnon believed he

could change fate by his own actions, and was therefore guilty of hubris. People guilty of hubris would eventually be punished by Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance. Agamemnon's tale also warns of the danger of pride. In ancient Greek mythology, most humans who boast that their beauty or skills surpass those of the gods are punished severely.

### Agamemnon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Agamemnon is a favorite character in many works of literature besides the *Iliad*. The ancient Greek playwrights Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-lus), Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez), and Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez) wrote a number of plays based on the life of Agamemnon. He was also a popular subject of ancient Roman authors such as Ovid and Seneca. Later writers, including William Shakespeare and French playwright Jean Racine, included Agamemnon as a character in their works. In modern times, Agamemnon has served as a model for characters in works by poet T. S. Eliot and playwright Eugene O'Neill. Agamemnon has also been portrayed in films, usually those that relate the events of the Trojan War. Actor Sean Connery appeared as Agamemnon in the 1981 time-travel comedy *Time Bandits*, directed by Terry Gilliam.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

How does Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia change the course of both the Trojan War and his own life? What choice would you have made if you were in his position? Why?

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; Aphrodite; Apollo; Cassandra; Electra; Greek Mythology; Hector; Helen of Troy; *Iliad*, *The*

#### Nationality/Culture

Persian/Zoroastrian

#### Pronunciation

AH-ri-muhn

#### Alternate Names

Druj, Angra Mainyu

#### Appears In

The Gathas, the Avesta, the Book of Arda Viraf, the Bundahishn

#### Lineage

None



## Ahriman

### Character Overview

Ahriman (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), also known as Angra Mainyu (pronounced ANG-ruh MAYN-yoo), was the spirit of evil and



*The good god Ahura Mazda fought with the evil god Ahriman for control of the world.* © BIBLIOTHEQUE DES ARTS DECORATIFS, PARIS, FRANCE/ARCHIVES CHAR-MET/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

darkness in **Persian mythology** and in Zoroastrianism, a religion that attracted a large following in Persia around 600 BCE. Often called Druj (“the Lie”), Ahriman was the force behind anger, greed, envy, and other negative and harmful emotions. He also brought chaos, or the breakdown of order and structure, into the world. In Zoroastrianism, Ahriman is contrasted with **Ahura Mazda**, the supreme creator of order and goodness. In the Islamic religion, Ahriman is identified with Iblis, the devil.

## Major Myths

The Zoroastrian history of the world was seen as a struggle between these two forces. Ahura Mazda had the backing of the *yazatas* (angels), while

Ahriman created a host of demons called *daevas* to spread his evil influence by appealing to the envy, greed, and desire for power felt by human beings.

In the beliefs of early Zoroastrianism, good and evil fought for control of the world—Ahura Mazda from the heavens and Ahriman from the **underworld**, or land of the dead. The two forces were evenly matched, and constantly struggled back and forth. Ahura Mazda represented **fire**, sunlight, and life. Ahriman was the lord of darkness and death. Zoroastrians later came to view Ahura Mazda as the supreme ruler who would one day achieve final victory over Ahriman.

### Ahriman in Context

Zoroastrianism views Ahriman and Ahura Mazda as locked in an enduring conflict. This opposition of good and evil is called dualism, and Zoroastrianism was only one among several Persian religions, including Zurvanism (the religion of the Magi) and Manichaeism, that adhered to this philosophy.

The idea of a dark, evil force pitted against a good, creative force is central to the major monotheistic religions (religions with one god) of the world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Where Zoroastrianism differs from these faiths is in the relative power of the good and evil forces. In the major monotheistic faiths, the supreme god is all-powerful, whereas in the Zoroastrian faith, the powers of good and evil are more evenly balanced, although Zoroastrians believe that the forces of good will eventually triumph.

An important aspect of the good-versus-evil struggle in Zoroastrianism is the notion of free will, or moral choice. Zoroaster believed that in the conflict between good and evil, good will ultimately triumph by choice: everything that Ahura Mazda created, including humanity, is good, so in the end, humans will choose good over evil.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Ahriman was seen as the force responsible for greed and the desire for money or other material things. Ahriman also represented darkness and death, as well as chaos. In modern terms, Ahriman was a symbol of the evil that continually battled against the goodness of Ahura Mazda.

But Ahriman does not have an absolute grasp on humanity; the themes of goodness and free will run throughout Zoroastrianism. Humans are

## Heresies

Religious scholars have long sought a satisfactory answer to the still-unanswered question: If God is all-powerful, why is there a devil? That is, how can the devil be a serious threat if God is so much stronger? This particular area of confusion has given rise over the centuries to various ideas called “heresies” (ideas that are different from accepted teachings) by the Christian church. The Manichaeans of the third century, and the Cathars and the Albigensians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, all differed from Christian teaching by adopting a view of the universe in which good and evil were equally powerful.

good because they were created by Ahura Mazda, who created only good, and they will use their free will to choose good over evil. Humans demonstrate their free will by actively upholding the order of Ahura Mazda’s creation: following laws, performing good acts, and rejecting evil. By choosing good, humans will eventually eliminate evil from existence.

## Ahriman in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although similar to **Satan**, Mammon, and many other evil characters found in mythologies and religious teachings around the world, Ahriman is not very well known to those who are unfamiliar with Zoroastrianism. Ahriman has appeared several times in the *Final Fantasy* video game series as an enemy to be fought by the player; he has appeared under the names Ahriman and Angra Mainyu, and is usually depicted as a winged monster with a single eye. Ahriman has also appeared as a demon in the DC Comics series *Wonder Woman*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea of two opposing forces at war in the universe, such as Ahriman and Ahura Mazda, is common in literature and film. Can you think of any books or movies that are based on this idea? Write down at least two examples, and explain how they handle this theme.

**SEE ALSO** Ahura Mazda; Angels; Devils and Demons; Persian Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**

Persian/Zoroastrian

**Pronunciation**

ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh

**Alternate Names**

Ohrmazd, Spenta Mainyu

**Appears In**

The Avesta, the Gathas, the Book of Arda Viraf, the Bundahishn

**Lineage**

None: in Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is an uncreated God and Creator of good

# Ahura Mazda

## Character Overview

Ahura Mazda (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh), whose name means “wise lord,” was the most important god in ancient **Persian mythology**. When the religion known as Zoroastrianism became widespread in Persia around 600 BCE, Ahura Mazda became its supreme deity or god. The Persians considered him to be the creator of earth, the heavens, and humankind, as well as the source of all goodness and happiness on earth. He was known to later Zoroastrians as Ohrmazd (pronounced OR-muzd).

## Major Myths

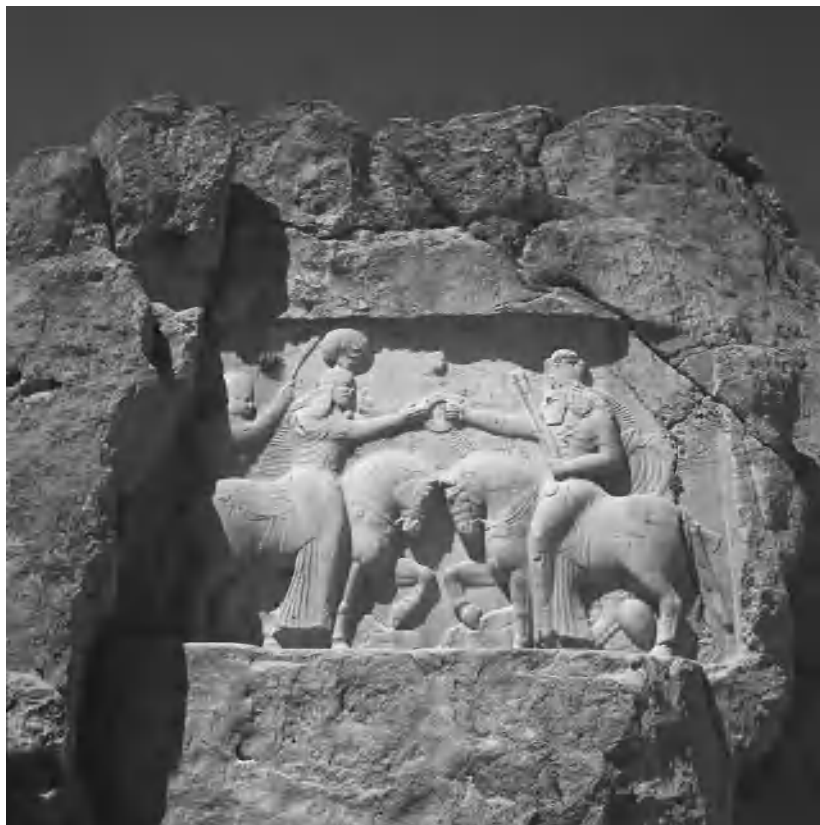
Ahura Mazda created six divine beings, or **angels**, to help him spread goodness and rule the universe. One of the most important angels was Asha Vahishta (“Excellent Order” or “Truth”), who was associated with justice. Another key angel was Vohu Manah (“Good Mind”), who symbolized love and sacred wisdom and welcomed souls to paradise.

One now-extinct branch of Zoroastrianism, known as Zurvanism, viewed Ahura Mazda and the evil spirit **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn; also known as Angra Mainyu) as two opposite-but-equal twin spirits—good and evil—battling for control of the world. The founder of Zoroastrianism, however, viewed Ahura Mazda as the transcendental deity, the “uncreated God and Creator of good” who represented creation, truth, and order. Zoroastrians thus considered Ahura Mazda to be the more powerful force who would ultimately triumph over the evil Ahriman.

## Ahura Mazda in Context

Ahura Mazda is an important figure in Zoroastrianism, a religious movement based on the philosophies of a prophet and poet named Zoroaster, who lived in Iran around 1000 BCE. Zoroastrians believe that the world was created and is ruled by a single god, Ahura Mazda, and that humans are forever being tested by the temptations of evil. Since Ahura Mazda is considered the supreme god of the Zoroastrians, he is





*A relief sculpture depicting Ahura Mazda, the chief Zoroastrian deity, giving the royal crown to Ardashir I.*  
SEF/ART RESOURCE, NY.

often compared to the main gods from other religions: ancient Greeks, for example, believed that “Ahura Mazda” was simply another name for **Zeus**. Unlike the ancient Greeks and Romans, however, Zoroastrians believed in free will. They did not think that fate or the meddling of gods determined a person’s destiny. This idea of individual free will also relates to the Zoroastrian view that good will conquer evil; because Ahura Mazda created everything good—including humanity—humans will ultimately choose good over evil through their free will.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Ahura Mazda was associated with light and **fire**, the emblems of truth, goodness, and wisdom. Zoroastrians would often pray using a flame or other source of light as the point of focus for their prayers, much like Christian churches use a crucifix as a focal point for worshippers. The symbol most commonly associated with Zoroastrianism is an image of

Ahura Mazda shown as a figure with eagle-like wings and tail. Ahura Mazda appears in Persian art and texts as a bearded man wearing a robe covered with stars. Dwelling high in **heaven**, he had the **sun** for an eye.

### Ahura Mazda in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Many stone reliefs and statues of Ahura Mazda have been found at ancient Persian sites. However, as the religion became less popular over the centuries, depictions of Ahura Mazda also became less abundant. As with many mythological figures, Ahura Mazda has been given new life in modern times as a character in comic books. Notable appearances include the long-running DC Comics series *Wonder Woman*, and the comic book series *Dawn: Lucifer's Halo* by Joseph Michael Linsner (1997).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The ancient land known as Persia now falls mostly in the country of Iran. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, locate a map that shows the extent the ancient Persian Empire. What other present-day countries did the Persian Empire include?

SEE ALSO Ahriman; Angels; Persian Mythology



## Aladdin

### Nationality/Culture

Arabic

### Pronunciation

uh-LAD-in

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

*The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*

### Lineage

Son of a poor tailor

### Character Overview

Aladdin (pronounced uh-LAD-in) appears in the collection of stories known as *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (or the *Arabian Nights*). Legends from Europe to China often contained characters like Aladdin, that is, ordinary people who came into possession of magical devices and used them to gain wealth and power. Aladdin's magical tools were a ring and a lamp that controlled supernatural beings known as **genies**.

Aladdin was the lazy, irresponsible son of a poor tailor. A sorcerer, or wizard, tricked him into entering a treasure-filled cave to seize a magical lamp. Before Aladdin went inside the cave, the sorcerer gave him a ring

that would protect him against evil. Aladdin found the lamp, but he refused to give it to the sorcerer until he was outside the cave. The sorcerer blocked the entry to the cave, imprisoning Aladdin within.

Through a series of accidents, Aladdin discovered that rubbing the ring brought forth powerful genies, or magic spirits who take human form and serve the person who calls them. The genies released him from the cave. He also discovered he could summon them by rubbing the lamp. The genies offered to fulfill Aladdin's every wish. He asked for, and received a magnificent palace and the permission to marry the sultan's, or king's, daughter.

The sorcerer, meanwhile, was determined to gain control of the magic lamp. He tricked Aladdin's wife into exchanging the lamp for a new one, and then commanded the genie of the lamp to move Aladdin's palace to Africa. In time, Aladdin and his wife defeated the sorcerer and recovered the lamp. Then they had to prevent the sorcerer's wicked younger brother from seizing it. After various adventures, the couple returned home where Aladdin became sultan and lived a long and happy life.

## Aladdin in Context

Although Aladdin's tale comes from Arabic culture, the story actually takes place in a mythical city in China. China was considered an exotic and mysterious place where unusual things could happen. People in ancient cultures often believed that such faraway lands were home to magical creatures and treasures, such as the special lamp that Aladdin finds.

The story of Aladdin has an interesting history. Recent scholarship has shown that Aladdin was not actually one of the original characters in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*. The original tales were versions of Arabic, Persian, and Indian stories that had changed over time and had been adapted by different storytellers for different audiences. The oldest mention of the text containing the tales dates to about the ninth century. The earliest existing manuscript, a Syrian version, dates to the fourteenth century—and contains no mention of Aladdin. By the sixteenth century, Egyptian versions of the text do contain an Aladdin story, but its origin is uncertain. The Western world was introduced to the tales in an early eighteenth-century French translation by Antoine Galland, who used the Syrian version as his source. Nineteenth-century editions combined stories from both the Syrian and Egyptian versions and included the Aladdin story. The



*A scene from the Disney animated film Aladdin (1992). This movie adapted the ancient Persian folktale for today's children.* THE KOBAL COLLECTION.

folklore and fairy tales of Europe were enjoying increased popularity at the time (the Mother Goose stories and fairy tales of the Grimm brothers appeared in the nineteenth century), so Aladdin and the other tales in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* were greeted enthusiastically and remain popular to this day.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The interactions between Aladdin and the sorcerer are very much like other trickster tales found in cultures around the world. The sorcerer is a trickster character, willing to deceive Aladdin and trap him in a cave in order to get the magical lamp. Aladdin himself is a trickster, however, and cleverer than the sorcerer realizes. Aladdin also represents the power of a person to determine his future through his own actions, a stark contrast to many mythical tales about the gods foretelling a person's future path in life.

## Aladdin in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Aladdin has proven to be one of the most popular Arabic tales ever told. In addition to appearing in translated form around the world as part of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, the tale is often told on its own in children's books or in staged productions. The story of Aladdin has been filmed on numerous occasions, with the 1992 Disney animated production *Aladdin* being the most well-known movie version of the tale.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

An ancient proverb warns: “Be careful what you wish for—you might get it.” Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research fairy tales and myths that show the negative consequences of a wish fulfilled. Compare these mythical situations to your own life: have you ever been “burned” by getting exactly what you wished for?

SEE ALSO Genies; Persian Mythology



# Amaterasu

## Character Overview

Amaterasu (pronounced ah-mah-te-RAH-soo), goddess of the **sun** and of fertility, is one of the most important figures in **Japanese mythology** and in the Shinto religion. Her name literally means “shining in **heaven**.” According to legend, she is the first ancestor of the imperial, or royal, family of Japan.

## Major Myths

Daughter of the creator god Izanagi (pronounced ee-zah-NAH-gee), Amaterasu taught humans to plant rice and weave cloth. In one story, her brother, Susano-ô, angered the goddess by interfering with her activities. He destroyed rice fields, spread filth in her sacred buildings, and dropped a skinned horse through the roof of the weavers' hall. Furious at Susano-ô's actions, Amaterasu went into a cave and locked the

### Nationality/Culture

Japanese/Shinto

### Pronunciation

ah-mah-te-RAH-soo

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The *Kojiki*, the *Nihon Shoki*

### Lineage

Daughter of Izanagi

entrance. Her withdrawal plunged the earth into darkness and prevented the rice from growing.

To lure the sun goddess out, the other gods gathered outside the cave with various sacred objects, including a mirror and some jewels. A young goddess began dancing, causing the others to burst into laughter. Wondering how they could make merry in her absence, Amaterasu peeked out to see what was amusing them. Those outside the cave told Amaterasu of another goddess more brilliant than she. Curious, Amaterasu looked and saw her reflection in the mirror. The image of her own brilliance so astonished her that she stepped out of the cave. One of the gods hung a rope across the cave door to prevent her from returning to it and depriving the world of her light.

### Amaterasu in Context

Amaterasu is a central figure in the Shinto religion, which was once the official religion of Japan. Although no firm dates have been established, it is possible that Shinto was developing in Japan at around the same time the ancient Romans developed their own mythology, circa 300 BCE. The first written accounts that document details of Shinto are the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, both written in the early 700s CE.

Many followers of Shinto considered Amaterasu to be the most important god of all, since the sun was critical to the growth of crops such as rice. The story of Amaterasu's retreat into the cave—followed by her return to bring light to the world—mirrors the cycle of the agricultural season, in which crops cannot grow during the winter, but return during the summer months.

Japan's earliest emperors were believed to be descended directly from Amaterasu, which supposedly supported their right to rule. The mirror that drew Amaterasu out of the cave is supposedly housed in her shrine at Ise, and is considered one of Japan's three imperial (royal) treasures—along with jewels and a sword—that are symbols of this right to rule. The presence of hundreds of bronze mirrors in tombs across Japan indicate their religious importance to the Japanese people; early peoples believed that the mirror reflected the spirit of the person who looked into it.

### Key Themes and Symbols

As a sun goddess, Amaterasu is closely associated with light and the sun. She is almost always pictured giving off rays of light. Amaterasu is also

closely associated with love and compassion. Another important symbol associated with Amaterasu, taken from the myth, is the mirror, which represents wisdom.

### Amaterasu in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As one of the central figures in the Shinto religion, Amaterasu was a popular subject in Japanese art through the first half of the twentieth century. After World War II, Shinto was no longer the official state religion, and Shinto influences were not as strong in Japanese art and literature after that time. Amaterasu sometimes appears in Japanese animated films and comics and served as the main character for the 2006 video game *Okami* by Capcom. In the game, the player controls Amaterasu, embodied as a white wolf carrying a mirror on its back, in an effort to bring light and color back to the world.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The term “sun worshipper” today usually refers to someone who enjoys tanning or spending time outdoors in sunny areas such as the beach. Overwhelming medical evidence shows that such behavior puts a person at a much greater risk of developing skin cancer. Skin cancer is currently the most commonly diagnosed form of cancer, with about one million cases reported each year in the United States.

If ancient cultures had the same medical information we do today, do you think sun gods such as Amaterasu would remain as important and well-regarded in their belief systems? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Izanagi and Izanami; Japanese Mythology



## Amazons

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the Amazons (pronounced AM-uh-zonz) were a nation of fierce female warriors, descendants of **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war. The legendary Amazons lived in an all-female

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

#### Pronunciation

AM-uh-zonz

#### Alternate Names

Antianeira, Androktones

#### Appears In

The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*

#### Lineage

Descendants of Ares

society in southern Russia or northern Asia Minor. Occasionally, the women had children with men from surrounding tribes. The Amazons kept and raised only the girls, killing or making slaves of the male children or sending them to live with their fathers.

Scholars disagree on the meaning of the name Amazon. Some say it means “breastless.” This comes from the Greek belief that the Amazons cut off the right breast of each girl so she could handle a bow and arrow more easily. Other scholars believe that the name may mean “without grain” (or bread) and may have come from the Greek word for barley, *maza*. They reason that the Amazons, as hunters, ate only meat and did not make bread. The word “Amazon” may also come from the name of an Iranian ethnic group meaning “warriors.”

The Amazons appeared frequently in Greek myth and legend. One of the twelve labors of **Heracles** (known as Hercules to the Romans) was to capture the belt of the Amazon queen Hippolyta (pronounced hi-PAHL-i-tuh). When Heracles reached the land of the Amazons, Hippolyta received him warmly and agreed to give him her belt. But **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), queen of the gods, convinced the rest of the Amazons that Heracles was kidnapping Hippolyta, so they attacked him. Believing the queen had tricked him, Heracles killed her before sailing back to Greece with the belt. In another Greek tale, the hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) attacked the Amazons and carried off their queen. The Amazons responded by going to war against Athens, but Theseus defeated them after a terrific struggle.

During the Trojan War, the Amazon queen Penthesilea brought extra troops to help the Trojans after the warrior **Hector** was killed. For this, the Greek hero **Achilles** killed her. Afterward, it is said that he fell in love with her corpse and regretted taking her life. The Amazons also appear in works by the Greek writers Herodotus and Apollodorus.

The legend of the Amazons lived on long after the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. In the 1500s, the Spanish explorer Francisco de Orellana claimed to have met a tribe of female warriors while exploring the Marañon River in South America. He supposedly renamed the river the Amazon in their honor.

### Amazons in Context

The legend of the Amazons may have come from the possibility that women in some ancient societies took part in battle. In many cases, these





*A statue of an Amazon warrior.* © NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES.

were matriarchal societies, in which a family's name, property, and wealth were passed down through the mother's side of the family. The Greeks had a patriarchal society, in which a family's name, property, and wealth were passed down through the father's side of the family. To the

## The Slavic Amazons

Powerful female warriors also appeared in the folktales of Slavic peoples from southeastern Europe. Led by the warrior Vlasta, these women lived in a castle by the Vltava River, in the modern Czech Republic. They were aggressive not only in their battles with men, but also in their pursuit of them. In one story, the female warrior Šárka fought the Slavic hero Dobrynia. She grabbed him by his hair, pulled him off his horse, and put him in her pocket. She released him only after he promised to marry her. In most of the stories, the female warriors ended up either dead or married to a hero.

Greeks, matriarchal practices seemed unnatural and barbaric. As a result, they created stories about fierce, man-hating women. In many Greek tales, the Amazons are defeated and killed by male warriors as punishment for taking a role considered wrong for females.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Amazons represent strength and skill with weapons normally associated with men. They are often portrayed in a manner similar to that of the goddess **Athena**, with a crescent shield and helmet. The Amazons are usually pictured fighting on horseback with spears, bows and arrows, and axes. Some scholars have argued that the myth of the Amazons symbolizes the unknown dangers Greeks faced when venturing out to the coasts of Asia Minor and elsewhere along the Black Sea, which was inhabited by people the Greeks generally considered savage.

## Amazons in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Amazons were a popular subject in ancient Greek art, appearing frequently on vases and in relief sculptures on buildings like the Parthenon. More recently, the DC Comics superheroine Wonder Woman (created in 1941) is based on the Amazon myth. In the comic, Wonder Woman is said to be the daughter of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons.

The term “Amazon” has developed a more general meaning over the centuries. Tall, strong, or aggressive women are often referred to as

Amazons, even in modern times. The term is also used to refer to Amazon.com, one of the world's largest Internet-based stores, though its founder, Jeff Bezos, took the name from the South American river, not the mythical tribe of female warriors.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Although the ancient Greeks wrote of these unusual female warriors over two thousand years ago, the idea of women fighting in wars is still a controversial one. Using your library, the Internet, and other resources, research the topic of women soldiers in combat. What are the arguments in favor of women fighting alongside men? What are the arguments against it? What is your opinion on the issue?

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; *Aeneid, The*; Hera; Heracles; *Iliad, The*; Theseus



# Amun

## Character Overview

At first, Amun (pronounced AH-muhn) was only one of many deities (or gods) worshipped by the Egyptians. As he became more important, he was combined with the **sun** god **Ra** to form a new deity called Amun-Ra. Egyptians honored Amun-Ra as king of the gods and creator of the universe. They also believed him to be the father of the pharaohs, or kings of ancient Egypt, and believed he would help these rulers triumph in battle. The worship of Amun-Ra remained strong throughout Egypt until almost the time of the birth of Jesus. The ancient Greeks associated Amun-Ra with **Zeus**, their own supreme god.

## Major Myths

According to an Egyptian creation myth, Amun is one of sixteen gods that, when paired off within the group, represent some different aspect of the pre-created world. The pairing of Amun and Amaunet represents “concealment.” In at least one tradition, Amun actually fathered

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

AH-muhn

### Alternate Names

Amon, Amun-Ra

### Appears In

Egyptian creation myths

### Lineage

Father of the Pharaohs

## Changing Identities of Egyptian Gods

The ancient Egyptians often combined different gods into a single deity, a process that scholars call “syncretism.” There are many reasons why the Egyptians practiced syncretism. In some cases it was a political decision meant to encourage loyalty and maintain peace—as during the reign of the Ptolemies (a Greek dynasty that ruled Egypt for three hundred years), when the Greek deities Zeus and Helios were linked with the Egyptian deities Osiris and Apis to form the Greco-Egyptian deity Serapis. In other cases, there is not any clear reason why gods were linked. In general, however, these linkages did not prevent Egyptians from continuing to worship the gods individually. The identities of Egyptian gods were not fixed or stagnant, but changed to accommodate political and social changes, so the Egyptians could worship both Serapis and Osiris at the same time.

this group of gods, and Amun’s importance can be seen in that he himself had no father. In other words, he did not need another god to create him.

Reliefs from New Kingdom temples describe a myth in which Amun falls in love with the queen of Egypt. He visits her in the form of her husband, the king, and fathers a child. When the child is born, Amun declares the child to be his and presents his son to the other gods as the future king.

## Amun in Context

For much of the history of ancient Egypt, Amun was honored as the supreme god in the Egyptian pantheon, the entire collection of gods and goddesses recognized by a group of people. But political changes in Egypt affected his popularity at different times. He was originally a local deity in Hermopolis, a city in southern Egypt, and had power over the air or wind. By 2000 BCE, Amun’s popularity had spread to the capital of Thebes, and rulers—perhaps in an effort to increase their own popularity amongst the people—began to honor him as the national god of Egypt. However, after invaders known as the Hyksos (pronounced HICK-sus) conquered northern Egypt in the 1700s BCE, only people in the south

continued to worship Amun. When the Egyptians drove out the Hyksos in the 1500s BCE, Amun's influence expanded rapidly, as did the size and splendor of his temples. Two of the largest temples of ancient Egypt, located at Luxor and Karnak, were devoted to the worship of Amun, and his followers controlled great wealth.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Amun usually appears in Egyptian art as a bearded man wearing a headdress of two ostrich feathers, a broad necklace, and a close-fitting garment. His skin is typically blue, perhaps to show his connection to the wind and the air. In one hand, he has an ankh (pronounced AHNK), the Egyptian symbol of life, and in the other, he holds a scepter, a symbol of authority. He is often portrayed sitting on a throne like a pharaoh. As Amun-Ra, the god is sometimes shown with the head of a hawk topped by a golden disk representing the sun, which is encircled by a serpent. He is also associated with the ram and the goose.

## Amun in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Amun was one of the most popular subjects of ancient Egyptian art. His image appears on ancient monuments throughout Egypt and remains a popular symbol of ancient Egyptian beliefs. It has been suggested that the Judeo-Christian use of the word “amen” at the end of a prayer is derived from the name Amun, though many scholars dispute this claim.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

What does the history of Amun indicate about ancient Egyptian religious beliefs? Do they seem to remain fixed and unchanging, or do they seem to change and evolve over time? Do you think this is also true for other religions?

**SEE ALSO** Egyptian Mythology; Ra; Zeus

*The Egyptian god Amun, holding the ankh, the symbol of life, in his right hand, and a scepter, the symbol of authority, in his left hand.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.



**Nationality/Culture**

West African

**Pronunciation**

uh-NAHN-see

**Alternate Names**

None

**Appears In**

West African trickster tales

**Lineage**Son of Nyame and  
Asase Ya

# Anansi

## Character Overview

Anansi (pronounced uh-NAHN-see), the spider, is one of the most popular animal **tricksters** from West **African mythology**. Tricksters are mischievous figures who often oppose the will of the gods, which results in some kind of misfortune for humans. Like many trickster figures, the sly Anansi can change his appearance to look like a human, a rabbit, a fox, or other animals.

West Africans originally thought Anansi to be the creator of the world. He often acted as a go-between for humans in their dealings with the sky god Nyame (pronounced N-ya-mae), and supposedly persuaded Nyame to create both night and rain. In most stories, however, Anansi is a crafty and cunning trickster who makes life more enjoyable for himself, or more difficult for others, by fooling humans, other animals, and even the gods themselves. By using his cleverness and what he knew of his victims' ways of thinking, Anansi was able to trick them to achieve his aims.

In one well-known tale, Anansi asks God for an ear of **corn** and promises to repay it with one hundred servants. He takes the corn to a village and tells the people that it is sacred. During the night, Anansi feeds the corn to the chickens. The next morning, he accuses the villagers of stealing the corn and they give him a bushel of it to make up for the lost ear.

Anansi then meets a man on the road and exchanges the corn for a chicken. He visits another village and tells the people that the chicken is sacred. That night he kills the chicken. The next morning the frightened villagers give him ten sheep to replace it. Anansi later exchanges the sheep for a corpse, which he takes to a third village and tells the people that it is the sleeping son of God. When the villagers cannot wake the corpse the next morning, Anansi says they have killed God's son. The terrified villagers offer him one hundred of their finest young men. Anansi takes them to God to fulfill his part of the bargain.

## Anansi in Context

The character of Anansi is believed to have come from the Ashanti tribe, located in the West African country of Ghana. The character became quite popular among other nearby tribes, including the Akyem and Nzema. As members of these tribes were taken west during the slave trade, the stories

of Anansi were brought to the West Indies, South America, and North America. In some parts of North America, Anansi became known as Aunt Nancy or Miss Nancy in African American folklore.

The traditional role of the trickster in many cultures is to survive challenges and dangers by using cleverness or deceit. The trickster is not usually a physically strong or intelligent individual, so he is not the heroic figure of myth and legend. But tricksters often get what they want and survive in a dangerous world by using their wits—making them especially popular among weaker segments of society. The popularity of Anansi's stories among African American slaves might be due in part to his role as a survivor.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Though the trickster can take the form of many different humans and animals, Anansi is most often depicted as a spider. The spider is an apt form for a trickster god because spiders spin webs to catch the careless—just as Anansi spins webs of deceit to achieve his goals. He is symbolic of the trickster character commonly found in mythologies around the world in that he is usually selfish, clever, and willing to cause mischief for his own amusement or benefit. He is also more understanding of the human condition than other deities.

### Anansi in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Anansi is one of the most popular characters from African mythology and is often featured in folk tales and children's stories. Anansi also plays a central role in the Neil Gaiman fantasy novel *Anansi Boys* (2005), a contemporary story about a man who discovers that his dead father was Anansi and that his brother has inherited their father's special powers.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Trickster characters are common in television shows. They are usually portrayed as schemers whose grand plans always seem to land them in trouble. Lucy Ricardo from the television show *I Love Lucy* fits the description of a trickster in many ways. Can you think of a television show or movie you enjoy that contains a trickster character? What qualities or behaviors make you think that the character is a trickster?

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Tricksters



**Nationality/Culture**  
Roman

**Pronunciation**  
AN-druh-kleez

**Alternate Names**  
Androclus

**Appears In**  
*Noctes Atticae*

**Lineage**  
Unknown

## Androcles

### Character Overview

According to legend, Androcles (pronounced AN-druh-kleez) was a Roman slave who lived in Africa in the first century CE. After escaping from his cruel master, the former slave Androcles hid in a cave. While there, a lion with a thorn stuck in its paw entered the cave. The lion showed its swollen paw to Androcles, who carefully removed the thorn and befriended the animal.

Some years later, Androcles was captured and thrown into an arena to be killed by lions. One of the lions, however, was the same animal that Androcles had helped in the cave. The lion recognized Androcles and refused to hurt him. The animal even protected Androcles from the other wild beasts. When the spectators in the arena saw what was happening, they demanded that Androcles be set free.

### Androcles in Context

In ancient Rome, slaves were common and were considered to be the lowest class of citizen in the empire. Slaves were often forced to participate in public “games” where they were made to battle each other to the death, or try to protect themselves against fierce beasts such as lions and bears. These displays were usually held in the Coliseum, a great stadium built in the first century CE, or along the outdoor racing track known as the Circus Maximus. The story of Androcles is unique in Roman culture because it humanizes slaves and offers a sympathetic view of their situation.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the story of Androcles is the power of friendship and charity. Because Androcles helps the lion, a creature that many would be too scared to help, his life is spared as a reward for his charitable act. In later centuries, some authors created new versions of the story of Androcles in which the slave was instead a Christian who was being punished by Romans for his religious beliefs. The story was seen as a lesson on charity and loyalty, important themes in Christian teachings.





*Former slave Androcles was saved from his death sentence in a Roman arena when the lion that was supposed to kill him turned out to be an animal he had helped many years before. The lion's gentle reaction to Androcles swayed the crowd to Androcles' side, and they demanded his release.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/© LOOK AND LEARN/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

## Androcles in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The legend of Androcles appeared in *Noctes Atticae* (Attica Nights), a story written by Roman author Aulus Gellius around 150 CE. According to Gellius, the original version came from the author Apion, though the text has been lost. The story of Androcles has also appeared in many collections of fables attributed to Aesop. Much later, the legend became the inspiration for the play *Androcles and the Lion*, written in 1912 by Irish author George Bernard Shaw.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Scholars have noted that the story of Androcles is about two creatures, a human and a lion, each overcoming their basic instincts or fears for the sake of the other. How is that shown in the tale? Do you think that this is a good description of friendship in general? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
an-DROM-i-duh

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
*Ovid's Metamorphoses*,  
*Hyginus's Fabulae*

**Lineage**  
Daughter of Cepheus and  
Cassiopea, King and  
Queen of Joppa

## Andromeda

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Andromeda (pronounced an-DROM-i-duh) was the beautiful daughter of King Cepheus (pronounced SEE-fee-us) and Queen Cassiopea (pronounced kas-ee-oh-PEE-uh) of Joppa in the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. Cassiopea once boasted that Andromeda was more beautiful than the Nereids (pronounced NEER-ee-idz), a group of sea **nymphs**, or female nature deities. Offended by this boast, the Nereids complained to the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), who punished Joppa by sending a flood and a sea monster to ravage the coastal kingdom.

An oracle (a person through which gods communicated with humans) told Cepheus that the only way to save his kingdom was to chain Andromeda to a rock at the foot of a cliff and let the sea monster eat her. Cepheus did so, and Andromeda awaited her fate. While passing by, the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) saw the chained Andromeda and fell in love with her. He asked Cepheus for her hand in marriage, and Cepheus agreed as long as Perseus would slay the sea monster.

As it happened, Perseus had just killed a beastly Gorgon named **Medusa**, one of three snake-haired sisters whose appearance can turn anyone who looks at her to stone. He had her head in a bag. He showed the head to the sea monster, which immediately turned to stone. Unknown to Perseus, Cepheus had already promised Andromeda to her uncle Phineus (pronounced FIN-ee-uhs). At the marriage feast for Perseus and Andromeda, Phineus showed up with a group of armed men and demanded that Andromeda be given to him. However, Perseus once again used the head of Medusa and turned Phineus and his men to stone.

Perseus and Andromeda had seven children and remained together for the rest of their lives. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (pronounced heh-ROD-uh-tuhs), the kings of Persia were descended from the couple's first son, Perses (pronounced PUHR-sees). When Andromeda and Perseus died, the goddess **Athena** placed them in the sky as constellations, along with Andromeda's parents and the sea monster.

## Andromeda in Context

The story of Andromeda includes the practice of human **sacrifice**, or the taking of a person's life in order to please the gods. This same practice is mentioned in myths of the Trojan War, where **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) must kill his daughter Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NYE-uh) in order to gain easy passage to Troy for his army. Despite being mentioned in Greek myths, there is no archeological evidence that ancient Greeks actually performed human sacrifices. Ancient Romans engaged in human sacrifice, mostly involving ritual gladiatorial combat or the offering of criminals or captured prisoners of war to the gods. By the late Republic, the practice was replaced by animal sacrifice or became merely symbolic, and it was banned by decree in 97 BCE.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The story of Andromeda focuses on sacrifice and the dangers of boastfulness. Poseidon punishes all of Joppa when Cassiopea boasts about her daughter's beauty. Cepheus and Cassiopea are told that the only way to satisfy Poseidon is by sacrificing their daughter to a sea monster. Andromeda herself represents innocence; she does nothing that would justify an awful fate. Perseus, then, acts as a force of justice, rescuing Andromeda from her unfair fate.

## Andromeda in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Andromeda was popular among the ancient Greeks. The playwrights Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez) and Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez) both wrote plays recounting her tale. In the nineteenth century, Andromeda was the subject of poems by both Gerard Manley Hopkins and Charles Kingsley.

The story of Andromeda and Perseus was a key element of the 1981 fantasy film *Clash of the Titans*, though the sea monster is referred to as the Kraken, a creature taken from Scandinavian myth. Andromeda is also the name given to a constellation, or group of stars, found in the northern portion of the night sky. Her V-shaped constellation is notable for containing a cloudy group of stars known as M31, or the Andromeda Galaxy.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Andromeda is nearly sacrificed by her father in an effort to save his kingdom. With her single death, he hopes to ensure the safety of many

other people. Is it right for an innocent person to die if it will result in saving the lives of many others? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Athena; Gorgons; Greek Mythology; Medusa; Nymphs; Perseus; Poseidon; Zeus



## Angels

### Nationality/Culture

Various

### Alternate Names

Cherubim, Seraphim, Malaikah

### Appears In

The Holy Bible, the Qur'an

### Lineage

None

### Character Overview

In many of the world's religions, angels are spiritual beings who act as intermediaries, or mediators, between God and humans. As messengers of God, angels may serve any number of purposes. Their role may be to teach, command, or inform individuals of their destiny, or future path in life. Angels may also act to protect or help people.

The word "angel" comes from the Greek word *angelos*, meaning "messenger." In Western religions, the word specifically describes a benevolent, or kind and helpful, being. However, in most other religions, the line separating "good" angels from "bad" angels is not always clear. An angel may act benevolently in one situation but with evil intent in another.

**The Nature of Angels** The world's religions hold different views about the nature of angels. Some regard angels as divine beings who deserve to be worshiped rather than just treated as messengers of God. Disagreement also exists about the bodies of angels. Some think that angels have physical bodies. Others insist that angels only appear to have such bodies. Still others believe that angels are purely spiritual beings who have the ability to assume material (touchable) bodies.

**Zoroastrianism and Judaism** The view of angels in Judaism was influenced by Zoroastrianism, a faith founded by the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster. Zoroastrian mythology describes a fight between **Ahura Mazda** (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh) and **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), which are forces of good and evil with armies of angels and devils. Like Ahura Mazda, the Old Testament



*According to Christian legend, guardian angels watch over children.* © HAYNES FINE ART AT THE BINDERY GALLERIES, BROADWAY/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

god Yahweh (pronounced YAH-way) has an army of angels. These warrior angels battle against evil forces led by **Satan**, who resembles Ahriman.

Following the Zoroastrian view, Judaism divides the universe into three parts: earth, **heaven**, and **hell**. Earth is the home of humans. Heaven is reserved for God and his angels. Hell is the dark world of Satan and his followers. Angels fulfill a similar role in the two religions, linking heaven with the world of humans and revealing God's plans and

laws to humans. Their function is to serve God and carry out his will. They reward goodness and punish wickedness and injustice. They also help people understand God's will and take the souls of righteous individuals to heaven.

**Christianity** The Christian concept of a three-part universe came from Judaic and Zoroastrian ideas, as did Christian ideas of angels and their functions. In the Christian view, angels are God's messengers. Angels proclaimed the birth of Christ and continue to play an active role in the daily lives of Christians. They bring strength to those who are weak and comfort to those who suffer and carry the prayers of faithful Christians to God. According to legend, guardian angels watch over children.

**Islam** The Islamic idea of angels is similar to Judaic and Christian views. God is in heaven, and the angels serve him and carry out his will; however, while Judaism and Christianity generally divide spiritual beings into those who are with or against God, Islam divides such beings into angels, demons, and djinni (pronounced JIN-ee), spiritual beings or **genies**. The djinni may be either good or harmful. According to Islamic folklore, they were created out of **fire**, can be visible or invisible, and can assume various human or animal shapes.

**Hierarchies of Angels** Angels in different orders, or levels, were a part of the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia, a region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers located in present-day Iraq. Later, in the fifth century CE, an anonymous Christian theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius (pronounced SOO-doh dye-o-NIH-shus) the Areopagite (pronounced ar-ee-OP-uh-jyte) described a hierarchy, or ranked order of importance, for angels. Based on his writings, angels are traditionally ranked in nine orders. The highest order of angels is the seraphim, followed by the cherubim, thrones, dominions (or dominations), virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, and angels.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius's hierarchy, the first circle of angels (the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones) devote their time to thinking about God. The second circle (the dominions, virtues, and powers) rule the universe. The third circle (principalities, archangels, and angels) carry out the orders of the superior angels.

## Fallen Angels

Fallen angels were angels who had once been close to God but “fell” to a lower position. They tried to interfere with the relationship between human beings and God by encouraging individuals to sin. Fallen angels were also believed to cause such disasters as famine, disease, war, and earthquakes.

In Christian belief, the leader of the fallen angels is Lucifer, also known as Satan. He led a rebellion against God, for which he and the other fallen angels were cast into hell.

## Angels in Context

Over the centuries, people have described the function of angels in various ways. The role of angels is developed in greatest detail in religions based on revelation, the communication of divine truth or divine will to human beings. These religions include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as Zoroastrianism.

In religions based on revelation, like Christianity, God and humans are distant from each other. Angels serve the purpose of bridging the gap between them. Angels praise God, carry out God’s will, and reveal divine word. They may also help people attain salvation or receive special favors. Furthermore, acting for God, angels may influence human affairs through such deeds as rewarding faithful believers, punishing people who do evil, and helping people in need.

Angels tend to play a lesser role in polytheistic religions, or religions that feature many gods, such as the ancient Greek pantheon. The gods themselves may carry out angelic functions, often taking human forms. In religions based on the belief that all things are sacred and that the divine and the human share one essence, angels are less important. They are not needed to bridge a gap between the gods and humankind. However, even in these religions, angel-like spiritual beings may help people relate to the divine.

## Key Themes and Symbols

At first, artists struggled with the problem of how to represent angels. Written descriptions were not very helpful. Artists tried various

approaches before arriving at the image of a young male figure. Later they added two feathery wings to the figure's upper back. The wings suggested that angels were spiritual beings elevated above humans and associated with heaven. Besides wings, angels were sometimes portrayed with halos, long hair, and flowing white robes.

Over time, artists came to depict the different orders of angels in distinct ways. For instance, seraphim sometimes were shown with six wings and holding shields. Around the seraphim, flames burned to symbolize their devotion to God. Artists often portrayed the dominions bearing swords and spears as symbols of God's power.

### **Angels in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Since a large percentage of European art during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance depicted scenes from the Bible, angels appeared in many paintings of the period. Some of the most famous depictions of angels are found in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* (c. 1440) and *Sistine Madonna* by Raphael (c. 1512). Angels often appeared as decorative sculptures on church exteriors as well.

The contemporary arts contain many depictions of angels. C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) was the first in a trilogy of books that took numerous Christian figures, including Eve, Satan, and angels, and re-imagined them in a science fiction setting. Films that portray angels include the Frank Capra classic *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Angels in the Outfield* (1951 and 1994), and the 1998 film *City of Angels*, which starred Nicolas Cage as an angel named Seth.

Several television shows have also featured angels as main characters. Examples include *Highway to Heaven* (1984–1989) starring Michael Landon and *Touched by an Angel* (1994–2003).

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

According to a 2006 poll by the Associated Press, more than half of Americans surveyed said they believe in angels. How do you think this affects the portrayal of angels in popular media such as films, art, and television?

**SEE ALSO** Ahriman; Ahura Mazda; Persian Mythology; Semitic Mythology





# Animals in Mythology

## Theme Overview

Since the beginning of human history, people have lived in close contact with animals—usually as hunters and farmers—and have developed myths and legends about them. All kinds of creatures, from fierce leopards to tiny spiders, play important roles in mythology. A myth can give special meaning or extraordinary qualities to common animals such as frogs and bears. However, other creatures found in myths, such as many-headed monsters, **dragons**, and **unicorns**, never existed in the real world.

## Major Myths

Many myths explore relationships between humans and animals. People may talk with animals, fight them, or even marry them. Sometimes animals perform services for humans, including guiding them through the **underworld** or helping them complete tasks. One large group of myths involving animals concerns transformations, or changes, between human and animal states. Other myths focus on the close connection between people and animals.

**Myths of Transformation** A princess kisses an enchanted frog and he becomes a handsome prince with whom, the fairy tale tells us, she will live “happily ever after.” Such transformations, in which people turn into animals or animals turn into people, take place in myths and legends from around the world. Transformation myths are about crossing the boundaries that set humans apart from the rest of the world.

Native American mythologies describe a time in the past when the boundaries between people and animals were less sharply drawn and beings freely changed form. This is known as shape shifting. Bears were especially close to humans, and in some Native American stories, bears appear as humans wearing coats made of bearskins. The Tsimshian (pronounced CHIM-shee-an) people of southern Alaska and the northern coast of British Columbia tell about Asdiwal, a young man who follows a white bear up a mountain to the sky. He discovers that the beast is actually a beautiful woman dressed in a bear skin, and he marries her.

The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that the gods could blur the boundaries between different classes of beings. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is a collection of Greek and Roman legends about mortals whom the gods turned into animals and plants. Both Chinese and Slavic mythologies include tales of people who, under some evil force, turn into werewolves.

The Scots have stories about selkies (pronounced SEL-keez), imaginary sea creatures that resemble seals and take on human form, marry men and women, and then return to the sea. In fact, the theme of animal wives or husbands comes up over and over again in mythology. Native Americans tell of girls marrying bears and men marrying deer. Eskimo and Chinese tales mention beautiful, seductive women who turn out to be foxes in disguise. In one Eskimo story, a woman enters the home of a hunter while he is out. She cooks for him and stays for some time, but eventually she puts on her fox skin and disappears. The well-known fable of Beauty and the Beast is a modern version of the myth of the animal husband whose beastly form cannot disguise his noble soul.

Sometimes transformations are forced on people by sorcerers, or magicians, or as punishment for offending the gods. When people voluntarily seek transformation, however, the change can be a sign of power. In many societies, individuals called shamans were thought to have supernatural abilities, including the power to communicate with animals or to transform themselves into animals. South American shamans were said to be able to change themselves into jaguars.

**Connections** Myths, legends, and folktales often highlight the close links between people and animals. West Africans and Native Americans, for example, believe that each person has a magical or spiritual connection to a particular animal that can act as a guardian, a source of wisdom, or an inspiration. Among the Plains Indians of North America, individuals had to discover their spirit animal through a mystical experience called a vision quest. Some Native American religions in Central America include *nagualism* (pronounced NA-wal-ism), the idea that each person's life is linked to an animal or object called a *nagual*. If the nagual is hurt or killed, the person suffers or dies. One myth says the naguals fought on the side of the Native Americans against invading Spaniards centuries ago.

Sometimes a family, a clan, or a whole society feels a special attachment to a certain kind of animal, usually one they consider to be an ancestor or protector. This connection, called totemism, defines social

groups and their behavior. Hunters are sometimes forbidden to kill their group's totem animal, for example. Among the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, the beaver, the eagle, the raven, and the killer whale are all associated with particular clans. People display their identity and status with totem poles, which are tall standing logs carved with images of mythical animals. Totem poles mark village entrances, burial sites of chieftains, and the entrance of each clan house.

In many societies, people believed that shamans had animal helpers who guided them through the supernatural realm. This idea is similar to the common image of a witch's "familiar"—an animal, usually a black cat, that gives the witch certain powers. Traditional African religions had secret societies that performed rituals that involved wearing leopard skins. The men in these secret societies believed they took on a leopard's strength by performing these rituals. Animals offer helpful advice to ordinary people in many legends. Generally, those who ignore the animal's advice will fail to achieve their goal.

Many cultures have legends of human children raised by animals. The Romans claimed that a wolf mother had nurtured their legendary ancestors, **Romulus and Remus**. The story of Tarzan, who was raised by African apes, is a modern version of this ancient myth created by Edgar Rice Burroughs in the early twentieth century.

**Roles in Myth and Legend** Animals fill a wide variety of roles in myths and legends. Many stories explain the part that animals played in creating the world or in bringing **fire**, tools, or farming skills to humans. Animal stories also tell how things came to be the way they are or how animals got their appearance or characteristics. A story of the Seneca Indians, for example, says that the chipmunk's stripes were originally bear scratches.

**Gods, Creators, and Heroes** In some mythological traditions, the gods take on animal form. The ancient Egyptians portrayed their gods as animals or as humans with the heads of animals. **Bast** (pronounced BAST), for example, was a cat goddess, and **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs) a hawk god. Although supernatural animals such as **Pegasus**, the winged horse of **Greek mythology**, were not gods themselves, they were often created, given power, or protected by the gods.

Some myths associate animals with the creation of the world. Asian and Native North American traditions place the earth on the back of an enormous turtle. Myths of Africa and elsewhere tell that the earth was

formed from or supported by the body of a huge serpent. Some legends say that the earth's features, such as lakes or canyons, were carved by the digging of mythic beasts.

Animals are linked to human origins as well as to the origin of the world. Many Native American clans believed they were descended from animals, and the Yao people of southern China traced their origins to a dog ancestor. Animals also helped shape human existence by acting as messengers to the gods. An African myth tells that the gods sent two animals to Earth, one with a message of eternal life, one bringing death. The messenger of death arrived first, which explains why people die. The Pima Indians of North America say that a rattlesnake brought death into the world.

Animals can play a positive role as well, bringing people the gifts of civilization. Various African myths, for example, tell of a dog, chimpanzee, wasp, and praying mantis bringing fire to people. The Bambara people of Mali believe that a sacred antelope taught people to farm long ago. Zuni and Navajo myths show animals behaving heroically on behalf of people. In Chinese legends, monkeys perform brave deeds. In Mayan myth, they possess artistic talent, particularly in writing and sculpture.

**Symbols** Animals sometimes appear in myths and legends as symbols of certain characteristics they are believed to represent. Common phrases such as “sly as a fox” or “brave as a lion” are everyday examples of the practice of using animals to represent human qualities. The dog often appears as a symbol of loyalty in myths and legends, and the tiger stands for power and vitality. In **Celtic mythology**, the boar symbolized war, and its image was carved on helmets and coins. Many cultures have stories in which animal characters representing human qualities present moral lessons.

Animals can also be symbols of the gods. People traditionally saw owls as wise; therefore, **Athena**, the Greek goddess of wisdom, was often shown with an owl. Likewise, dolphins can represent the presence of the sea god **Poseidon**.

**Tricksters** Many myths feature animal **tricksters**, mischievous and unpredictable beings who use deceit, magic, or cleverness to fool others. Although some tricksters are just playing pranks, others act in harmful ways. Occasionally, the tricksters themselves wind up being tricked or trapped. Their limited magical powers may serve to show off the greater powers of the gods.

*In Japanese legend, the kitsune are fox spirits who can take human form. Here a kitsune is betrayed when her shadow is seen to be that of a fox.*

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In **Native American mythology**, the best-known trickster is the coyote, who has the power to take on human form. One of his favorite tricks involves masquerading as a hunter in order to sleep with the hunter's wife. Many African legends feature a trickster spider, tortoise, or hare that uses cunning to outwit larger or more powerful animals.

African slaves brought tales of the trickster hare to the United States, where it eventually became popular as the character **Brer Rabbit**.

**Monsters** From the great sea beast called **Leviathan** (pronounced luh-VYE-uh-thuhn) in the Bible to the mutant lizard Godzilla of modern science fiction movies, monstrous animals appear in many kinds of myths. Monsters represent our darkest fears: chaos, or disorder, and uncontrollable destruction. A monster is more than just a large or fierce animal. It is something abnormal, something that breaks the laws of society and the natural world.

An animal may be monstrous simply due to its abnormal size. The most dreadful monsters, however, do not correspond to anything known in the real world. Often they are hybrids, mixtures of different species, which represents another kind of blurring of natural boundaries. Dragons, for example, are usually shown as a snake or reptile with bat's wings and sometimes with a head resembling that of a horse. In some traditions, dragons have multiple heads or the ability to change shape.

Other hybrid creatures include the griffin, a creature with the head, forepart, and wings of an eagle and the body, hind legs, and tail of a lion. **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), a god of Maya, Toltec, and **Aztec mythology**, is represented as a plumed serpent, a part bird, part snake hybrid. In addition, the pygmies of Central Africa tell stories about encounters with a living dinosaur, a beast the size of an elephant with a long neck and brownish-gray skin.

Some hybrids are human and animal combinations. The centaur (pronounced SEN-tawr) is half man, half horse; the Echidna (pronounced i-KID-nuh) is a snake woman; the **manticore** (pronounced MAN-ti-kor) is part human, part lion, part dragon; and the satyr (pronounced SAY-tuhr) is a man-like being with the lower body of a goat. In mythology, hybrid creatures often have qualities that are split between good and bad, much like their appearance.

**Common Animals in Mythology** Certain animals appear frequently in the myths and legends of different cultures, often with different meanings. Snakes or serpents, for example, can be helpful or harmful. The Romans regarded snake spirits as protection for their homes. The Hopi Indians, who live in a dry part of the American Southwest, have stories about a water snake that is associated with springs. Because the

snake sheds its skin as it grows, some cultures see it as a symbol of rebirth and associate it with healing.

In the Bible, however, the snake is a treacherous creature that introduces **Adam and Eve** to sin. A Japanese myth tells of a huge snake with eight heads that holds a princess prisoner. Snakes and snake-like dragons play a similar evil guardian role in many other tales.

The bull is another animal that appears in many myths. It can represent either tremendous energy and power or frightening strength. In Celtic mythology, the bull was a sign of good fortune and fertility. In several Greek legends, bulls were associated with death and destruction. At different times, the hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) killed both a wild bull that was destroying farmers' fields and the **Minotaur**, a dangerous half-man, half-bull monster. Among Native Americans who traditionally survived by hunting buffalo, myths focus on the buffalo's fertility and generosity. The buffalo is also said to control love affairs and determine how many children a woman will bear. To the Celtic people, bulls stood for strength and power. Irish mythology tells of two famous beasts, the White-Horned Bull of Connacht (pronounced KAWHN-ut) and the Brown Bull of Ulster. The rulers of Connacht and Ulster each boasted of the size of their bulls; however, some said that the gods had sent the bulls to Ireland to cause trouble. Eventually, the two bulls met in a fierce battle that raged across all of Ireland. The Brown Bull won but then died. The death of the two magical bulls brought peace between Connacht and Ulster.

Dogs almost always appear in myths and legends in a positive light. Native American stories generally portray the dog as the symbol of friendship and loyalty. In Greek and **Roman mythology**, dogs often acted as guardians. The three-headed dog **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), for example, guarded the entrance to the underworld. Many cultures associated dogs with death as well as with protection. Both the ancient Egyptians and the Aztecs of Mexico believed that dogs guided the dead on their journey through the **afterlife**. Occasionally, dogs appear in negative roles, such as the hellhound Garm in **Norse mythology** or the fighting dogs belonging to the Greek goddess **Hecate** (pronounced HEK-uh-tee).

The goat is another animal with positive and negative qualities. Male goats are negatively linked with dangerous or uncontrolled sexual lust, while female goats appear as mother figures. In Greek mythology, a she-goat nursed the god **Zeus** when he was a baby boy. Goat images in mythology are often associated with sexuality and fertility.

Foxes in mythology are usually quick, cunning, and sneaky. Japanese legends tell of fox spirits called *kitsune* (pronounced keet-SOO-neh) who can turn themselves into people, are often deceitful, and have the powers of witches. In another example of the two-sided nature of animals, **Japanese mythology** also portrays the fox as the messenger of Inari (pronounced in-AHR-ee), the god of rice. The ancient Romans regarded foxes as fire demons, perhaps because of their reddish coats. In Christian mythology, the fox is associated with the devil.

The frog appears in many transformation stories, most likely because it goes through a transformation of its own, from tadpole to frog. Another animal that undergoes a physical transformation is the butterfly, which begins life as a caterpillar, rests in a cocoon, and emerges as a butterfly to spread its wings. The Greek word for butterfly, *psyche*, is also the word for soul, and in Greek mythology the butterfly was the symbol of the soul's transformation after the death of the body.

### Mythological Animals in Context

The fact that animals play a role in the mythologies of all cultures demonstrates their universal importance to human society. Animals were and are an important source of food, labor, and even companionship to people everywhere. Domesticated animals such as one finds on a farm, in particular, were the backbone of agricultural societies, while more nomadic hunter societies relied on wild animals for food and for their skins. Although modern cultures continue to use animals for the same purposes as they did thousands of years ago, ancient cultures relied heavily on animals for survival, and lived closer to wild animals than people do today. This heavy reliance on, and physical closeness to, animals, resulted in a rich oral tradition in which animals both help and harm humans. They provide people with food, but they can also be dangerous. Animals represent the mystery and power of the natural world, which has the ability to create and destroy. Animals may serve as stand-ins for humans or human characteristics, as in the African and Native American trickster tales or the fables of the Greek storyteller Aesop. In some legends, animals perform heroic deeds or act as mediators or go-betweens for gods and humans. They may also be the source of the wisdom and power of a shaman, a person who has contact with the spiritual realm and uses magic to heal the members of his tribe.



## Mythological Animals in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mythological animals have always been a popular subject in art and literature, perhaps because they are often unlike any other creatures seen in the real world. This fascination with mythological creatures continues to this day, with modern fantasy stories such as C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955), and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (1997–2007) all containing creatures like those found in ancient myths.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Cultures typically developed myths around animals that were common to the area in which the people lived. For example, Native Americans developed myths about coyotes, deer, and bears, while Egyptians developed myths about crocodiles and cats. If you were to write a myth about an animal that represented your culture, which animal would you choose and what would the story be about?

**SEE ALSO** Anansi; Basilisk; Brer Rabbit; Centaurs; Cerberus; Dragons; George, St.; Gorgons; Griffins; Leviathan; Manticore; Minotaur; Pegasus; Sacrifice; Satyrs; Serpents and Snakes; Tricksters; Unicorns; Witches and Wizards



# Antigone

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Antigone (pronounced an-TIG-uh-nee) was the daughter of **Oedipus** (pronounced ED-uh-puhs), king of Thebes (pronounced THEEBZ), and his wife Jocasta (pronounced joh-KAS-tuh). A faithful daughter and sister, Antigone was caught between quarreling family members and was punished for her loyalty.

The story of Antigone is immortalized in the play *Antigone* by Greek playwright Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez). It tells the tragic story of this young woman. In an earlier play by Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus had unknowingly murdered his father and married his mother,

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

an-TIG-uh-nee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Sophocles' *Antigone*, Seneca the Younger's *Phoenissae*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes

Jocasta. When they discovered what they had done, Jocasta hung herself and Oedipus blinded himself. His sons, Eteocles (pronounced i-TEE-uh-kleez) and Polynices (pronounced pol-uh-NYE-seez), drove Oedipus from Thebes and took over the kingdom.

Antigone and her sister Ismene (pronounced is-MEE-nee) accompanied their blind father on his wanderings around Greece. Meanwhile, Eteocles broke his promise to share power with Polynices and drove him from the kingdom as well. Polynices led an army against Thebes to regain the throne.

Their uncle, Creon (pronounced KREE-ahn), supported Eteocles in the conflict with his brother. An oracle (or person through which the gods communicated with humans) told Creon that whoever gave shelter to Oedipus would win the battle for Thebes. Creon therefore asked Oedipus, who had taken refuge in the city of Colonus, to return. When Oedipus refused, Creon sent soldiers to seize Antigone and Ismene to force their father to come back. **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs), king of Athens, rescued Antigone and Ismene, but soon afterward Oedipus died and his daughters returned to Thebes.

Polynices attacked Thebes and in the battle that followed, the two brothers met in combat and killed each other. Creon became king. He gave Eteocles a hero's burial but refused to let anyone bury Polynices, whom he considered a traitor. Antigone, mindful of her duty to her brother, secretly crept out at night to bury Polynices. She was caught by Creon's soldiers and condemned to death for her disobedience. To avoid direct responsibility for her death, Creon ordered that Antigone be sealed alive in a cave with food and water. Creon's son Haemon (pronounced HEE-muhn), who was engaged to Antigone, pleaded unsuccessfully for her life.

A seer, or person who can see the future, then came to see Creon. He warned that the king had angered the gods by sealing up Antigone and refusing burial to Polynices. Creon immediately ordered that Polynices be buried and went to the cave to release Antigone. On opening the cave, however, he found that Antigone had hung herself. Haemon was overcome with grief. He tried to kill his father and then stabbed himself to death. When Creon's wife, **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see), learned of her son's suicide, she took her own life.

The Greek playwright Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez) tells a version of the story with a happier ending. In his play, Creon instructed Haemon to carry out Antigone's sentence. Haemon pretended to seal Antigone away as ordered but actually took her to the countryside. The

couple stayed in hiding for many years, raising a son. After the son grew up, he went to Thebes to take part in an athletic event. There he stripped off his clothes to run in a race and revealed a birthmark that was found only on members of Antigone's family. Creon recognized the mark and sentenced Haemon and Antigone to death for disobeying his orders. The god **Dionysus** (pronounced deye-uh-NEYE-suhs), or, in some versions, the hero **Heracles** (known as Hercules to the Romans), pleaded with Creon to spare their lives. Creon agreed and the lovers were formally married.

Sophocles used the story of Antigone to comment on the conflict between the laws of the state and the laws of the gods. Creon's decree against burying Polynices is shown to be unjust and against the gods' wishes. Antigone's decision to perform her religious duty to her brother wins the sympathy of the audience.

## Antigone in Context

The burial of the dead was an important practice in ancient Greece. Greeks believed that only by following proper burial procedure would the dead reach the **afterlife**. Burials were supposed to take place on the third day after death and were to be performed by a family member of the deceased. The preparation of the dead body was usually done by women, while the burial was done by men.

In the story of Antigone, Creon would normally be expected to bury his nephew Polynices. However, because Polynices is considered a traitor by Creon, the king forbids his burial. As Polynices's sister, Antigone feels a duty to perform the burial rite. When Creon punishes her for fulfilling her religious duty, he commits a double sin in Greek society: he first ignored his own duty to bury Polynices, and then he punishes someone else for trying to fulfill it. Although Greek rulers had tremendous power, they were not so powerful that they could ignore religious duty to serve their own political agendas without suffering consequences. The Greeks believed that violations of religious duty would result in destruction by angry gods, and so they believed that religious law was more important than political law.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The name "Antigone" can be translated as "opposing family" or "against ancestors." This reflects Antigone's defiance against her uncle Creon, who has become both head of the family and the leader of Thebes.

## Antigone

*After Creon became king of Thebes, he refused to allow anyone to bury Polynices. Antigone attempted to bury her brother in secret. Here she spreads dust over his body.*

MANSELL/MANSELL/TIME &  
LIFE PICTURES/GETTY  
IMAGES.



Antigone could also be considered opposite in character to her ancestors. Unlike other members of her family, Antigone remains dedicated and loyal to her true family despite their quarrels with each other. She remains with her father after he is banished from Thebes by his sons. She also tries to secure a proper burial for her brother Polynices even though he is considered a traitor for his actions.

### **Antigone in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Sophocles and Euripides were the first of many writers to create works of art based on the story of Antigone. Among those who wrote plays about her were the European playwrights Jean Cocteau, Jean Anouilh, and Bertolt Brecht. Italian translations of the Greek plays were the basis for an opera by Christoph

Gluck in 1756, called *Antigono*. More recently, German composer Carl Orff wrote a “tragic play with music” about Antigone in 1949.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Antigone breaks a law of the state in order to care for her dead brother Polynices in the way she believes she must. Because we know of Antigone’s devotion to her family, as well as the unfairness of the king’s law regarding Polynices, it is easy to side with Antigone. In your opinion, should family traditions and beliefs be followed even when they result in breaking the law? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Eurydice; Greek Mythology; Oedipus



# Anubis

## Character Overview

In the early days of ancient Egypt, Anubis (pronounced uh-NOO-bis), also known as Anpu, was the god of the dead. Later, when **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) took over this role, Anubis became the god who oversaw funerals. He was also the guardian of the **underworld**, or land of the dead, where he took the dead to the hall of judgment. Here he helped weigh each person’s heart against the feather of truth before presenting the soul to Osiris.

## Major Myths

Anubis was the son of the goddess Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this), who had tricked her brother Osiris into fathering her child. The goddess’s husband, **Set**, hated Osiris and planned to murder the child when he was born. Nephthys therefore decided to abandon the infant at birth. She hid him in the marshes by the Nile River where he was found by **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis), the wife of Osiris. Isis raised Anubis, and when he reached adulthood, he repaid her by becoming her protector.

Later, when Osiris set out to conquer the world, Anubis accompanied him. Osiris was murdered by his old enemy Set, who tore his body to pieces. Anubis helped find the pieces of Osiris’s body and embalmed

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

uh-NOO-bis

### Alternate Names

Anpu, Hermanubis

### Appears In

*The Book of the Dead*

### Lineage

Son of Nephthys and Osiris



*The jackal-headed god of the dead, Anubis, weighed the hearts of the dead against the feather of truth while Ammit the Devourer watched. If the deceased did not pass the test, Ammit ate him.* © CHARLES WALKER/TOPFOTO/THE IMAGE WORKS.

them, or preserved them so well that they never decayed. Because of his actions, Anubis is said to have performed the first Egyptian burial rites and to have introduced the practice of embalming the dead to Egyptian culture. The Greeks and the Romans also worshipped Anubis, whose name is actually the Greek form of the Egyptian name *Anpu*. Anubis was frequently merged with the similar Greek god **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) and given the name Hermanubis.

### Anubis in Context

Ancient Egyptians were experts at the practice of embalming, which involves preserving the remains of the dead so they last through the funeral or burial and beyond. The Egyptians developed an embalming

process known as *mummification* in which a dead body is wrapped in strips of cloth and dried out for preservation. Ancient Egyptians believed that a person's body was still needed after death, since it transported the soul to the **afterlife**. For this reason, Anubis played a crucial role in the way ancient Egyptians dealt with death and the dead.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Anubis is primarily associated with death and the dying. Images of Anubis depict him as a jackal, a type of wild dog, or as a man with the head of a jackal. Jackals prowled Egyptian cemeteries at night, looking for food and even eating corpses. The Egyptians believed that Anubis, in the form of a jackal, would keep real jackals away and protect the dead. In this way, Anubis represents a guardian and caretaker for Egyptians after they have died.

## Anubis in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The image of Anubis appears on many ancient Egyptian tombs. In fact, the distinctive jackal-headed figure is one of the symbols most commonly identified with ancient Egypt. More recently, Anubis has appeared as a character in the television show *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Even though Anubis is considered a god of death and the guardian of the underworld, ancient Egyptians viewed him as a protector and guide. What does this suggest about the ancient Egyptian view of death and the afterlife? How do you think this is different from, or similar to, modern views on death?

SEE ALSO Egyptian Mythology; Isis; Osiris; Set



# Aphrodite

## Character Overview

The Greek goddess Aphrodite (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), one of the twelve Olympian deities, was associated with love, beauty, and fertility.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

af-ro-DYE-tee

### Alternate Names

Venus (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*,  
Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's  
*Aeneid*

### Lineage

Born of Uranus and the  
sea

The Romans later incorporated her into their pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses, and renamed her Venus.

## Major Myths

According to one account, Aphrodite was born when the Titan **Cronus** cut off the sex organs of his father, **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), and threw them into the sea. Aphrodite emerged fully grown from the foam (her name comes from *aphros*, the Greek word for foam) that gathered on the surface of the water. A different account of her birth makes her the daughter of the ruler of the gods, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), and a minor goddess named Dione.

Aphrodite's connection with love is reflected in the numerous stories about her romantic affairs. She was married to **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of **fire** and blacksmiths. She had frequent love affairs and children with various other gods, including **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez), **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), and **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), which angered her jealous husband. Among Aphrodite's many children were Deimos (pronounced DYE-mos; Greek for "terror"); Phobos (pronounced FOH-bos; Greek for "fear"), fathered by Ares; and Eryx (pronounced ERR-iks), the son of Poseidon. She was also the mother of the Roman hero **Aeneas**, whom she had with the shepherd Anchises.

The handsome youth **Adonis** (pronounced uh-DON-is) was another of Aphrodite's great loves. **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), the goddess of the **underworld**, also developed a passion for Adonis when he entered the underworld after being killed by a boar. Adonis' death did not dull Aphrodite's affection for him, and a bitter feud between the two goddesses erupted. Zeus resolved the conflict by instructing the youth to divide his time between them.

Aphrodite's role as the goddess of beauty was one of the factors that led to the start of the Trojan War. Zeus forced the Trojan prince Paris to decide which of three goddesses—**Hera**, **Athena**, or Aphrodite—was the fairest. Each goddess tried to bribe Paris with generous gifts, but he found Aphrodite's offer—to give him the most beautiful woman in the world—the best. Paris declared Aphrodite the fairest of the goddesses, and she kept her promise by helping him gain the love of **Helen**, the wife of King Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs) of Sparta. Paris



took Helen to Troy with him, and the Greeks' attempts to reclaim her resulted in the Trojan War.

Aphrodite continued to influence events during the ten years of the war. At various stages during the conflict she assisted the Trojan soldiers, particularly Paris. Meanwhile, Hera and Athena, who were still offended by Paris's choice of Aphrodite as the fairest, came to the aid of the Greeks.

## Aphrodite in Context

The Greeks added Aphrodite to their pantheon later than the other gods. It is likely that the Greeks adopted Aphrodite from Eastern cultures with similar goddesses, such as the goddess Innana in ancient Sumer, the goddess **Ishtar** in ancient Babylonia, and the Canaanite goddess Astarte from ancient Syria. Aphrodite and Astarte both share similar myths regarding their attachment to a handsome young lover (Adonis in the Greek tradition, and Tammuz in the Canaanite tradition) who dies young but is allowed to divide his time between the underworld and the world of the living. This story connects Aphrodite as a fertility goddess with a vegetation god, whose cycle in and out of the world of the living represents the cycle of crops.

The ancient Greeks placed great importance on physical beauty because they believed the physical body to be a reflection of the mind and spirit. A beautiful person, according to the ancient Greeks, was more likely to have more desirable mental skills and personality traits. This is very different from more modern views on beauty, and shows that the ancient Greek focus of physical appearance was not quite as superficial as it appears.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Throughout the Western world, Aphrodite is recognized as the symbol of love and beauty. But there are different interpretations of Aphrodite based on two different versions of her birth: as Aphrodite Urania—born from the sky god Uranus—she is a celestial figure, a goddess of spiritual love; as Aphrodite Pandemos—born from the union of Zeus and the goddess Dione—she is a goddess of love, lust, and pure physical satisfaction. Aphrodite is often associated with seafoam and seashells because of her origins, but she is also linked with doves, roses, swans, dolphins, and sparrows.

## Aphrodite in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Aphrodite appears in the works of many ancient writers. The legend of her birth is told in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Aphrodite and her son Aeneas (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) are central to the action of Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. The Greek playwright Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez) included the story of the judgment of Paris in his play *The Trojan Women*, and the Greek poet Homer described her role in the Trojan War in the *Iliad*.

Aphrodite was the subject of the most famous work by the Greek sculptor Praxiteles (pronounced prak-SIT-uh-leez), who completed the *Aphrodite of Cnidos* in about 350 BCE. Although this statue is now lost, it is known through the many copies that were made during Roman times. Aphrodite was also the focus of one of Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli's most famous creations, *The Birth of Venus* (1482–1486).

Aphrodite and her Roman counterpart Venus continue to represent the ideals of feminine beauty in modern Western culture; the name “Venus” is even used to market a brand of razors for women. She has appeared as a character in films, such as *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1988), and on television as a character on the series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The ancient Greeks believed that physical beauty was important because it reflected an inner beauty. How do you think modern views on beauty compare to the ancient Greek perspective? In the modern world, are people who are considered beautiful also generally thought to be smart, friendly, or spiritual?

SEE ALSO Adonis; Aeneas; *Aeneid*, *The*; Ares; Cronus; Greek Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

uh-POL-oh

### Alternate Names

Phoebus, Apulu (Etruscan)

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Son of Zeus and Leto



# Apollo

## Character Overview

The most widely worshipped of the Greek gods, Apollo (pronounced uh-POL-oh) was the son of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and Leto (pronounced

LEE-toh). He was also the twin brother of **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), the goddess of the hunt. Apollo had many roles in **Greek mythology**, including god of the **sun**, god of the arts (especially music, poetry, and dance), god of medicine, protector of herdsmen and their flocks, and god of prophecy or predictions. His oracle at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye) where humans could communicate with the gods through an appointed person, was the most famous in the world, and his reputation spread far beyond Greek culture.

## Major Myths

According to legend, Apollo was born on the Greek island of Delos (pronounced DEE-loss) and grew to adulthood in just four days. To escape the island, he changed himself into a dolphin and caused a great storm on the sea. Apollo then threw himself on the deck of a ship in trouble and led it safely to shore. Having reached the mainland, Apollo set off for an important oracle of **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth goddess. A monstrous serpent named Pytho (pronounced PYE-thoh) not only guarded the place but also spoke the oracle's prophecies. Apollo killed Pytho and took the oracle for himself. The name of the site was called Delphi because Apollo had become a dolphin (*delphis* in Greek) in order to reach it. Delphi became the most famous and frequently visited oracle in the ancient world. Its location was considered to be the geographic center of the earth. The oracle's words were inspired by Apollo and delivered by a local female elder. She was called the Pythia (pronounced PITH-ee-uh) in honor of Pytho. As she spoke, priests interpreted her prophecies and wrote them down. The priests of Apollo claimed to be descended from the sailors aboard the ship that Apollo had led to safety in the storm.

Apollo's form was considered the ideal of male beauty; therefore, he had many love affairs and fathered many children. Despite his attractiveness, there are numerous stories of Apollo's failure to win the heart of a woman he desired. There are more stories of lovers being unfaithful to him.

In one story, Apollo fell in love with **Cassandra**, daughter of King Priam of Troy. In order to win her favor Apollo gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy. When she rejected him, Apollo punished her by declaring that her prophecies would be accurate but that no one would believe her. In another story, he courted the nymph (female nature god) Sinope (pronounced SEE-noh-pee), who asked him to grant her a favor before

she accepted his proposal. When Apollo agreed, she asked to remain a virgin until her death.

One of Apollo's tragic loves was Daphne (pronounced DAF-nee), daughter of the river god Peneus (pronounced puh-NEE-uhs). Apollo fell in love with Daphne, but she did not return his affection. When Apollo chased her through the woods, she became so frightened that she cried out for her father to save her. Peneus turned Daphne into a laurel tree so that she could avoid Apollo's advances. The disappointed Apollo broke off a branch of the laurel and twisted it into a wreath to wear on his head in memory of Daphne. Thereafter, the laurel tree became sacred to Apollo's cult, devoted worshippers of the god. The laurel wreath also became a mark of honor to be given to poets, victors, and winners of athletic contests.

Some of Apollo's romantic misfortunes involved animals that became associated with him. One myth explains how the crow's feathers turned from white to black. In it, Apollo asked the crow to watch over the princess Coronis who was pregnant with his son; nevertheless, the crow failed to prevent Coronis from having an affair with another man. Angry at the crow, Apollo turned its feathers from white to black. He then asked his sister Artemis to kill Coronis. When Coronis lay burning on the funeral pyre (a large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body), Apollo pulled his unborn son Asclepius (pronounced uh-SKLEE-pee-uhs) from her body. The boy later became the god of healing.

### Apollo in Context

The worship of Apollo was widespread not only in Greece but also throughout the ancient world. Shrines could be found in places from Egypt to Anatolia (now northwestern Turkey). The Romans built their first temple to Apollo in 432 BCE, and he became a favorite Roman god. The Roman emperor Augustus was a devoted worshiper because the battle of Actium, in which he gained political supremacy, was fought near a temple of Apollo.

The worship of Apollo began outside of Greece. Early cults associated with the god developed in Asia Minor and in the lands north of Greece. Several tales link him to the city of Troy. One credits him with helping the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) build the walls of Troy.

Scholars think that Apollo's original role may have been as protector of herdsmen and shepherds. He is often pictured holding a lyre, which is

*In many tales, Apollo attempts to win the heart of the woman he loves. In one story, the nymph Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's advances, as shown here. ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.*



a type of harp, and shepherds were known for playing music to pass their idle hours. Apollo's identification as god of music, archery, and medicine came after his oracle was established at Delphi. Only much later did he become the sun god.

Apollo represents “the light,” both literal (the sun) and metaphorical, as in the light of reason and the intellect. Apollo’s popularity clearly shows how important learning and the intellect were to the Greeks. They valued their soldiers, to be sure, but they also valued their thinkers. Philosophers, inventors, scientists, and artists all occupied places of honor in Greek society.

### Key Themes and Symbols

To the ancient Greeks, Apollo represented order, reason, beauty, and self-control. Apollo is typically portrayed holding a bow and arrow, symbols of his role as the god of death and disease. Apollo is also often depicted holding a harp or lyre, representing his role as god of music and the arts or of shepherds. Another common symbol of Apollo is a tripod, a three-legged stool or altar normally reserved for oracles to use while communicating with the gods and predicting the future. Apollo was also associated with the wolf, the dolphin, the raven, the serpent, and other animals.

### Apollo in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Like many important figures in myth and legend, Apollo is a favorite subject of art and literature. He first appears in Greek literature in the *Iliad*, Homer’s epic, or long, grand-scale poem about the Trojan War. In the poem, Apollo is Troy’s most consistent and enthusiastic champion against the Greeks. The *Iliad* opens with a fight between Apollo and **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), who took captive the daughter of Apollo’s Trojan priest. Despite the priest’s pleas and offers of ransom, Agamemnon refuses to return the girl. As punishment, Apollo sends a plague on the Greek army. Ultimately, Apollo kills the great Greek hero **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) by guiding the flight of an arrow shot by the Trojan warrior Paris into Achilles’ heel, the only vulnerable spot on his body.

Ancient sculptures show Apollo as a handsome youth. One of the most famous is the *Apollo Belvedere*, a marble version of an ancient bronze statue found in Rome. The great German artist Albrecht Dürer used the proportions of the statue to create his “ideal male” figure. Apollo is featured in the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Algernon Charles Swinburne. He also served as the inspiration for a ballet by Igor Stravinsky. More than twenty operas have featured Apollo as a central figure.

“Apollo” was also chosen as the name of the U.S. space program that resulted in humankind’s first successful moon landing.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The oracle at Delphi contained an important stone known as an *omphalos*. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, research the *omphalos*. What is it? What does it represent? Why was it important to the ancient Greeks?

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; Agamemnon; Cassandra; Delphi; Greek Mythology; *Iliad*, *The*; Zeus



# Arachne

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Arachne (pronounced uh-RAK-nee) was a peasant girl who became an expert spinner and weaver of cloth. No human could spin or weave as well as Arachne, or produce finer cloth. She became famous throughout Greece for her singular talent.

Arachne grew arrogant about her skill, boasting that she was better than **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), the goddess of wisdom, who invented spinning and weaving. At first, Athena laughed off Arachne’s claims. Then many people began to believe them and stayed away from Athena’s temples and from festivals held in her honor. Athena decided she had to teach the boastful girl a lesson.

Disguised as an old woman, the goddess came to earth and challenged Arachne to a weaving contest. Athena wove scenes portraying the power of the gods and the fate of humans who dared to challenge them into her cloth. Arachne’s tapestry contained scenes of the romantic misadventures of the gods, a subject which Athena felt made the gods look foolish. Arachne’s work was equal to Athena’s, and the goddess was impressed by its quality. However, Arachne could not resist boasting that her weaving surpassed that of Athena.

At that moment, the goddess revealed her true identity. She tore apart Arachne’s weaving and beat the girl with the shuttle from her

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

uh-RAK-nee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

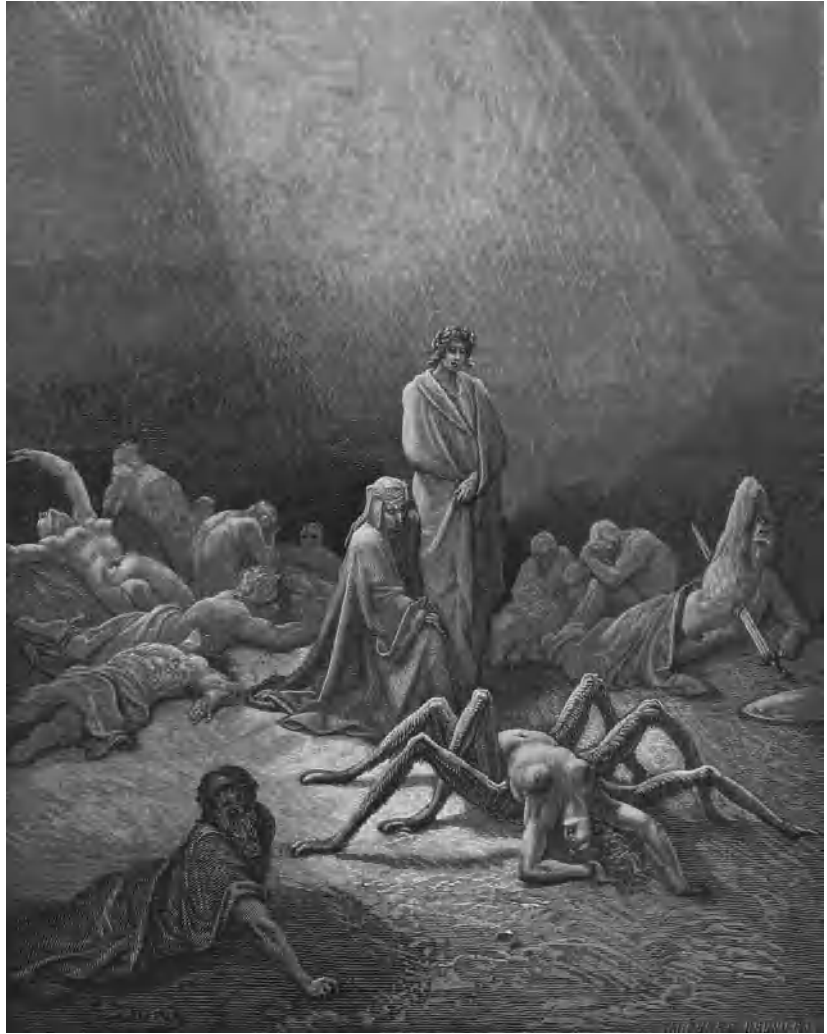
### Lineage

Daughter of Idmon

## Arachne

*Image of Arachne from Gustave Doré's engraved illustration for Dante's Divine*

**Comedy.** THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.



weaving loom. In despair, Arachne took a rope and hung herself. Out of pity, Athena changed the rope into a web and turned Arachne into a spider, an animal known for its spinning and weaving skills. Today the class of animals to which spiders belong is called Arachnida (pronounced uh-RAK-nid-uh), after the girl who could weave so well.

### Arachne in Context

In ancient Greece, all fabrics were created through handspinning and weaving. Almost every woman, regardless of social class, was expected to



know how to spin and weave. For many women, weaving was as much a part of daily life as cooking or cleaning. Greek fabrics were often woven from wool that had been sheared from sheep, cleaned, and spun into yarn.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Arachne is often associated with spiders and weaving looms because of her background. Like many Greek myths, Arachne's story can be seen as a warning against hubris, or overconfidence and arrogance about one's abilities. Although the goddess Athena was willing to admit that Arachne's work was as good as her own, Arachne insisted that her own work was better, which led to her downfall.

## Arachne in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Arachne is often depicted as part-human and part-spider. One of the most famous images of Arachne is Gustave Doré's engraved illustration for Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In the *Divine Comedy*, Arachne is mentioned as one of the residents of Purgatory as penance for her sin of pride.

More recently, the name Arachne has been used to represent a superheroine, formerly known as Spider-Woman, in several Marvel Comics series. "Arachne" is also the name given to an Internet web browser, as well as an archeological database.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Arachne was turned into a spider, a creature that shared her astounding skill at weaving. Think about your own skills and interests. Based on those, what creature do you think you most resemble? Why?

SEE ALSO Athena; Greek Mythology



# Ares

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology** Ares (pronounced AIR-eez), the son of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), waged battle as

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
AIR-eez

**Alternate Names**  
Mars (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hesiod's *Theogony*

**Lineage**  
Son of Zeus and Hera

the god of war. The Romans linked him with Mars, their war god, although the two gods were quite different in character. Ares liked to storm around the battlefields accompanied by his sister Eris (pronounced EE-ris), the goddess of discord, disagreement or lack of harmony; Enyo, a war goddess; and his twin sons Phobos (pronounced FOH-bos; Greek for “fear”) and Deimos (pronounced DYE-mos; Greek for “terror”). He represented everything that was bad about warfare, such as **fire** and bloodlust, and nothing that was good, such as the glory of victory; despite Ares’ fierce behavior, the goddess **Athena** often defeated him in battle.

The Roman version known as Mars, on the other hand, was a much more balanced representation of warfare. Mars was originally a fertility god, associated with spring and vegetation. The Romans celebrated major festivals to Mars in the spring, which also signalled the start of military campaigns. The founders of Rome, **Romulus and Remus**, were thought to be the sons of Mars.

## Major Myths

Ares was not a major figure in Greek mythology, but some stories tell of his love affairs with the goddess **Aphrodite** and with human women. His sons became kings, warriors, and in one case a bandit. In one myth, **Poseidon**’s (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) son raped one of Ares’ daughters, so Ares struck the youth dead. Poseidon insisted that the gods try Ares for murder at the place where the rape and the killing took place, on a hill outside the city of Athens. The gods found Ares not guilty. From that time on, Athenians referred to the hill outside their city as the Areopagus (pronounced ar-ee-OP-uh-guhs), or “Ares’ hill.”

## Ares in Context

Generally described as bloodthirsty, cruel, and a troublemaker, Ares was not a popular god. Yet the people of ancient Greece saw war as an unpleasant but unavoidable fact of life: they were in a near-constant state of war with various neighbors. While they valued bravery and heroism, they also saw that hate, pain, and rage were also involved in battle. Ares represents that brutal battle-lust. It is important to note that Athena often bests Ares, which demonstrates the importance the Greeks laid on cool-headedness and honor over rage.



*Statue of the god Ares.* THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSÉE DU LOUVRE PARIS/GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Although Ares is usually associated with war, the ancient Greeks often viewed Ares as the god of savage or violent warfare. In contrast, they viewed Athena, half-sister of Ares, as the goddess of strategic and heroic warfare. Vultures, who feed on the flesh of the dead on battlefields, were regarded as Ares' sacred birds. Barn owls and woodpeckers were also associated with Ares. Ares also represented **sacrifice**; aside from the

humans sacrificed in battle in Ares' name, animals were also sometimes sacrificed at his temples for good favor prior to the beginning of battle.

### Ares in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Since Ares was not often the subject of worship, he is not featured as much as other Greek gods in sculpture and other ancient art. When shown, Ares is often portrayed holding a shield and a spear, his weapon of choice. In modern times, Ares has appeared as a major villain in both DC Comics and Marvel Comics. He also appears as a motorcycle-riding tough guy in Rick Riordan's 2005 *The Lightning Thief*. In the novel the young demigod Percy Jackson must fight Ares; he wins by outwitting the angry god.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The ancient Greeks make a distinction between savage and brutal warfare, represented by Ares, and strategic and noble warfare, represented by Athena. In your opinion, can all wars be classified easily into one of these two categories? Does one of the two gods more closely match your opinion of war? If so, which one and why?

SEE ALSO Athena; Greek Mythology; Zeus



## Argonauts

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the Argonauts (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts) were a band of **heroes** who sailed with **Jason** in his quest for the **Golden Fleece**. Their journey took them on numerous adventures and required the assistance of many different gods. Among the Argonauts were the sons of kings and of gods. According to some sources, one of the Argonauts was a woman, the huntress **Atalanta** (pronounced at-uh-LAN-tuh).

**The Quest for the Fleece** Jason was the son of Aeson, the king of Iolcus (pronounced ee-AHL-kuhs). When Aeson was overthrown by his

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

#### Pronunciation

AHR-guh-nawts

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Apollonius Rhodius's  
*Argonautica*

#### Lineage

Varied

brother Pelias, he sent Jason to be raised by the wise centaur (half-man, half-horse) called Chiron (pronounced KYE-ron). Later Jason returned to Iolcus to claim the throne. Pelias agreed to give it to him if he first found and brought back the Golden Fleece from the Kingdom of Colchis, which Pelias knew to be an almost impossible task.

The Golden Fleece was the hide of a golden ram sent by the gods to save Phrixus (pronounced FRIK-suhs) and Helle (pronounced HEL-ee), two royal children of the land of Iolcus. The children's lives were endangered by their stepmother. As the ram carried them to safety, Helle fell into the sea and drowned. The area where she fell became known as Hellespont. Her brother Phrixus reached Colchis safely. There he sacrificed the ram to **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS). The fleece was hung on a tree in a grove sacred to **Ares**, guarded by a serpent that never slept.

Jason ordered a ship, the *Argo*, to be built and sent messengers throughout Greece to ask others to join him in his quest for the Golden Fleece. After assembling a group of fifty heroes, Jason set off. The Argonauts' first adventure happened on Lemnos, an island populated only by women. As a result of a dispute between husbands and wives, the women had killed all the men. The women received the Argonauts with great hospitality, and the heroes began to forget their quest; however, one of the Argonauts stood firm. This was **Heracles** (known as Hercules by the Romans), a hero known for his physical strength. Heracles persuaded the other Argonauts to return to the ship and their journey continued.

In another adventure, Heracles defended the *Argo* against six-armed **giants** who attacked the ship while the others were on land. Later, in a rowing contest, Heracles broke his oar. While cutting wood for a new oar, his squire, or male attendant, was kidnapped by a water nymph, or female nature deity. Heracles went in search of the boy and was eventually left behind by the Argonauts.

When the heroes stopped at the land of the Bebryces (pronounced be-BRYE-seez), the king, Amycus (pronounced AM-i-kuhs), challenged them, as he did all visitors, to a fight to the death. Pollux (pronounced PAHL-uhks), the son of Zeus, took up the challenge and killed Amycus.

The Argonauts then stopped to see Phineus (pronounced FIN-ee-us), the blind king of Thynia (pronounced thih-NEE-uh). Phineus was a prophet (a person able to see the plans of the gods), and the travelers needed advice on how to proceed. Phineus agreed to help them if they would rid him of the **Harpies**, fierce, part-woman, part-bird creatures who stole and spoiled his food. Jason ordered a feast to be prepared.

## Argonauts

*Model of the Argo, the ship used by Jason and the Argonauts.* SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



When the Harpies arrived to ruin the feast, two of the Argonauts, Calais (pronounced kuh-LAY-us) and Zetes (pronounced ZEE-teez; they were winged sons of Boreas, the North Wind) pursued them. Eventually, Zeus sent a message that the Harpies should be spared but that they should also leave Phineus in peace.

After reaching the entrance to the Black Sea, the Argonauts had to go through the Symplegades (pronounced sim-PLÉ-gah-deez). These were huge rocks that crashed together at random intervals, destroying any ship that tried to sail through them. Following Phineus's advice, the Argonauts released a dove and watched its course as it flew between the rocks. The dove made the passage, losing only a single tail feather when the rocks crashed together. As soon as the rocks began to part, the Argonauts pulled hard on their oars, following the path of the dove. When they had almost passed through, a great wave held them back. At that point, the goddesses **Athena** and **Hera** gave them a push and

the ship made it to safety. Forever after, the Symplegades remained separated.

After more adventures, the Argonauts finally reached Colchis. Jason and several companions went to the court of King Aeëtes (pronounced aye-EE-teez) to request the Golden Fleece. The first to see Jason was **Medea** (pronounced me-DEE-uh), the king's daughter. Hera, who sponsored Jason's quest, asked fellow Olympian **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, for her help. Aphrodite agreed and made Medea fall in love with Jason. Medea was a witch; therefore she was able to help Jason with the difficulties ahead.

Aeëtes had no intention of handing over the Golden Fleece, but he pretended to agree if Jason could pass several trials. Jason was to yoke two fire-breathing bulls to a plow, then plant a field full of dragon's teeth. As each dragon's tooth was planted, a fully armored warrior would spring up, which Jason would then have to kill. Medea gave Jason a magic ointment that he rubbed on himself to protect him from the fiery bulls. Next she told Jason to throw a boulder in the midst of the soldiers to confuse them and make them fight one another. Then he would have to fight only the survivors. Following her directions, Jason succeeded in completing the trials.

Aeëtes told Jason he would hand over the Fleece the next day, but Jason and Medea did not believe him. Promising to marry her, Jason once again asked for Medea's help. That night, she led him to the sacred grove and put the serpent to sleep with her magic. Jason easily took the Fleece and, with Medea and the Argonauts, set sail back across the Black Sea.

**The Return Home** Accounts of the Argonauts' journey home vary. According to the writer Apollonius Rhodius (pronounced ah-poh-LOH-nee-us ROW-dee-us), Medea's brother Apsyrtus (pronounced ap-SUR-tuh) blocked the mouth of the Black Sea so the Argonauts had to find a different route back to Iolcus. Several versions of the legend agree that the heroes crossed the Black Sea to the Danube River. After sailing up the Danube, they traveled along various rivers before reaching the Mediterranean Sea. Some sources say the Argonauts went north to the Baltic Sea. Others relate that they followed the Rhine River to the Atlantic Ocean, or that they reached the Adriatic Sea. At the entrance to the Adriatic, they met Apsyrtus, who tried to convince Jason to give up Medea. Jason refused and killed Apsyrtus.

## A Magic Ship

Jason's ship, the *Argo*, was made from the wood of a sacred oak and had the ability to think, to speak, and even to predict the future. The ship had one oar for each of the Argonauts, who rowed themselves to their adventures. When it was first built, the *Argo* refused to go into the sea until the musician Orpheus sang to it and played his lyre. During the quest, the ship traveled under the protection of Hera, Athena, and Apollo. Afterward, the *Argo* was dedicated to Poseidon and placed near his temple in Corinth. Eventually, the gods turned the ship into a constellation in the sky.

The Argonauts sailed up the Po River and down the Rhone. Having almost reached Greece, the *Argo* was blown off course to Libya. There a great wave stranded the crew in the desert. On the advice of the gods, the Argonauts carried the ship across the desert until the sea god Triton (pronounced TRY-tun) helped them launch it back on the Mediterranean.

As they sailed past the island of Crete, Talos (pronounced TAY-lohs), the bronze man appointed by King Minos to protect the island, threw rocks at the Argonauts. Medea responded by killing Talos with her witchcraft. The Argonauts' adventures continued. Nearing Greece, the ship was enveloped in a darkness so great they lost their way. **Apollo** sent a blazing arrow that showed them the way to an island where they could wait until the light returned.

At last, the *Argo* arrived home in Iolcus. The Argonauts were honored throughout Greece, and many noble families later claimed to be descended from them. Even though Jason presented Pelias with the Golden Fleece, he never became king.

## Argonauts in Context

Over the centuries, many scholars have attempted to trace the route of the Argonauts as described by Homer and other writers. According to the story, the Argonauts began in Greece and ended up on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, in a region now known as Georgia. Many of the other places mentioned along the way, however, are not as easily identified. Historians are divided as to whether or not the fantastical journey of the Argonauts is



meant to have occurred entirely in real places, or whether some of the locations were made up by the storytellers. Most ancient Greeks never traveled more than a handful of miles from their place of birth; the tales of the Argonauts both satisfied their desire to hear of exotic foreign lands, and cautioned them against wandering too far from what the Greeks considered civilized areas. The ancient Greeks were a sea-going people, and Jason and his crew represented for them the courage and curiosity required of sailors and explorers.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Argonauts symbolize the willingness to embrace adventure. When Jason puts out a call for heroes to join him on his quest, he gathers a variety of people who all seek excitement or glory. Each Argonaut leaves behind a safe, stable life in exchange for great dangers, the lure of riches, and the promise of new experiences.

## Argonauts in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Many writers have been inspired by the subject of the Argonauts and Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Among the ancient Greek works are Pindar's *Pythian Ode*, Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, and Euripides' play *Medea*. The Roman poet Ovid mentioned the Argonauts in the *Metamorphoses*. In the Middle Ages, Chaucer retold the story in the *Legend of Good Women*, and in the 1800s, William Morris wrote the long narrative poem *Life and Death of Jason*. Robert Graves's novel *The Golden Fleece* was published in 1944, and John Gardner's *Jason and Medeia* was published in 1973.

The story of the Argonauts has also served as the basis for many films, most notably the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts*, which featured groundbreaking visual effects by Ray Harryhausen.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The journey of the Argonauts can be described as a quest: they are searching for the location of a certain magical item that will restore Jason to his proper place as king of Iolcus. Can you think of another book, movie, or video game that also has a “quest” story structure? How is it similar to the tale of Jason and the Argonauts? How is it different?

**SEE ALSO** Atalanta; Harpies; Hera; Heracles; Jason; Medea

**Nationality/Culture**

Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**

ar-ee-AD-nee

**Alternate Names**

None

**Appears In**Hesiod's *Theogony***Lineage**

Daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë

# Ariadne

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Ariadne (pronounced ar-ee-AD-nee) was the daughter of King Minos (pronounced MYE-nuhs) and Queen Pasiphaë (pronounced pa-SIF-ah-ee) of Crete. She fell in love with the Athenian hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) when he came to Crete. Theseus was one of a group of youths and maidens who were sent from Athens to be fed to the **Minotaur**. Half bull and half man, the Minotaur was kept in a maze called the Labyrinth. Before Theseus entered it, Ariadne helped him by giving him a ball of yarn. He used the yarn to leave a trail by which he could find his way out. Theseus succeeded in killing the Minotaur and escaping the Labyrinth. Ariadne then fled with Theseus when he sailed back to Athens.

There are different versions of the rest of Ariadne's story. In one, she was abandoned by Theseus on the island of Naxos (pronounced NAK-suhs) while she slept on the shore. Another suggests that Theseus did not abandon her, but was swept out to sea by a storm. Afterward, **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs) found Ariadne on the shore and decided to make her his wife. In yet another variation, after arriving on Naxos, Ariadne was killed by **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), and then found by Dionysus, who asked **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) to make her immortal (able to live forever), so he could marry her. Dionysus and Ariadne were married on Naxos. Two festivals were held in honor of Ariadne: one celebrating her marriage and one mourning her death. The couple had three sons.

## Ariadne in Context

Ariadne's parents were the rulers of Crete, the largest of the Greek islands. The Minoan civilization of Crete flourished from approximately 2600 BCE until 1400 BCE, making it the oldest known civilization in Europe. Excavations at Knossos have revealed a large, complex building that may have served as a palace or ruling center for Minos and other leaders of Crete. In addition, archaeologists have found some human remains that support the idea that the Minoans may have performed human sacrifices like those mentioned in Ariadne's story. The Athenian



*Ariadne on the beach at Naxos.* THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.

Greeks viewed the Minoan culture as older and, in some ways, more powerful than their own. The tale of Ariadne's family and their Minotaur explained why the Minoans were able to secure tribute from Athenian Greeks.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One item often associated with Ariadne is a ball of yarn or fleece, like the one she gave to Theseus so he could find his way out of the Labyrinth. In art, Ariadne is often portrayed sleeping near the seashore, as Dionysus is said to have discovered her. She has also been associated with the Corona Borealis constellation of stars.

### Ariadne in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Ariadne was popularized in many ancient sculptures, usually with her husband Dionysus. The pair also appeared in paintings by artists such as Titian and Guido Reni. More recently, Ariadne has served as the subject

for numerous operas, including the 1912 opera *Ariadne on Naxos* by Richard Strauss. In studies of logic, the term “Ariadne’s thread” refers to a method of problem-solving that results in multiple possible solutions, such as one used to determine the correct path through a maze.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the myth of Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur, who do you think is the greater hero, Theseus or Ariadne? Think of at least two reasons that support your choice.

SEE ALSO Dionysus; Minotaur; Theseus



#### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Christian Bible, the Qur’an

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## Ark of the Covenant

### Myth Overview

The Ark of the Covenant was the gold-covered wooden box that held the tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Its lid, called the Mercy Seat, had two gold statues of cherubim, or **angels**, kneeling in prayer. The Ark was carried by placing poles through the two rings on each side.

According to the Bible, the Hebrew people lived in slavery in Egypt until they were led to freedom by Moses, whom God told to take them to the Promised Land. God promised to protect the Hebrew people on their journey, and they agreed to obey His commandments. During their years of wandering in search of the Promised Land, the Hebrews set up a tabernacle, or house of worship, for the Ark at each stopping point. This was a tent with an inner room, called the Holy of Holies, where the Ark was placed. It was believed that the spirit of God dwelled there and sat upon the Mercy Seat. The Ark eventually guided the Hebrews to Canaan (pronounced KAIN-ahn), the Promised Land.

According to the first book of Samuel in the Bible, the Philistines, or natives of ancient Philistia, captured the Ark and carried it from town to town. Wherever the Ark went, people were struck with plagues. On the advice of Philistine priests and soothsayers, the Ark was placed on a cart and sent back to Canaan.

King David of Israel had the Ark moved to Jerusalem. His son, King Solomon, ordered a great temple to be built and placed the Ark within its Holy of Holies. In the 500s BCE, the Babylonians conquered the Hebrews and took the treasures from the temple. The fate of the Ark is not explained in the Bible, but it was probably lost or destroyed.

## The Ark of the Covenant in Context

Some modern scholars and archaeologists believe that the Ark may have survived, at least partially, and have attempted to figure out its current location. Suspected locations include several sites throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Some even think that the Ark may have ended up in England. Although many possible locations have been offered, the Ark has never been located. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Axum (pronounced AK-sum), a city in northern Ethiopia, claims that it possesses the Ark of the Covenant, although church leaders refuse to display the artifact or allow experts to verify that it is genuine. Jewish and Christian followers consider the Ark of the Covenant to be important because it contains the original copy of the contract between the Hebrews and God, and it is likely the search for the Ark will continue for decades to come.

Unlike the cultures of their Canaanite enemies, the Hebrews did not believe in worshipping idols, or physical representations of their god. This is demonstrated in the Ten Commandments, which forbid making or worshipping idols, and in sections of the Hebrew Bible that refer to God in the abstract, rather than as someone in human form. The Ark of the Covenant was not a physical representation of God, but carried the actual presence of God, and was so sacred that even touching the Ark would result in immediate death. Hebrew monotheism (belief in just one god) was unique in a world where polytheism (the belief in many gods) was the norm; it was one way in which the Hebrews set themselves apart from the groups around them and preserved a unique identity. The capture of the Ark of the Covenant by their enemies was shameful to the Hebrews, not only because it signalled their military defeat but also because the capture was a sign of God's anger towards them because of their disobedience—they had turned the Ark into an idol and brought it into battle, hoping it would help them defeat their enemy. By blaming themselves, rather than their God, the Hebrews could explain how their all-powerful God was defeated by the inferior gods of their enemies.

Their God could continue to be the one true God, despite the conquest of the Hebrews by other nations.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The Ark is a symbol of the covenant, or agreement, between God and the Hebrew people. It represents protection and guidance to the Hebrews, so they treat it as a sacred artifact. It is also a constant reminder of the rules, known as the Ten Commandments, that they have agreed to follow. The Ark is a symbol of God's power, illustrated by the plagues that followed it from place to place when it was captured by the Philistines.

### **The Ark of the Covenant in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Many replicas of the Ark of the Covenant can be found in tabernacle recreations around the world. One notable full-size recreation is found near Eilat (pronounced AY-laht), Israel. The 1981 Steven Spielberg film *The Raiders of the Lost Ark* is without a doubt the most well-known appearance of the Ark in modern popular culture. In the movie, Harrison Ford plays an archaeologist in the 1930s named Indiana Jones who locates the Ark and fights to keep it out of the hands of the Nazis.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Many people continue to look for the Ark of the Covenant because they consider it a holy artifact and a symbol of Hebrew identity. Human groups have always tried to create distinct identities for themselves through the use of artifacts, origin myths, and various symbols. Think about the images that represent your nation or ethnic group. Are these images mostly religious or nonreligious? What is it about these images that instills a sense of pride or allegiance in the members of a group? Write a personal essay about an image of your group that is especially appealing to you, and trace its history as far back as you can. Note the social factors that may have caused the image to change or transform throughout history.

**SEE ALSO** Angels; Semitic Mythology



# Armageddon

## Myth Overview

In the Christian tradition, Armageddon (pronounced ahr-muh-GED-in) is the final battle that will take place between the forces of God and the forces of **Satan**. The battle, in which evil will finally be defeated, will be followed by the Day of Judgment. On that day, Christ will judge all souls and decide whether to send them to **heaven** or to **hell**. Armageddon is mentioned just once in the Bible, in the sixteenth chapter of the New Testament book of Revelation. It is believed to refer to the final battle between good and evil, as well as its location. Although Armageddon brings about the destruction of most of the world, its destruction allows for the renewing of the earth into a better creation.

## Armageddon in Context

The term *armageddon* is taken from a Hebrew phrase meaning “hill of Megiddo,” Megiddo being an ancient town in present-day northern Israel. Megiddo stood at the crossroads of military and trade routes that connected Egypt, Israel, Phoenicia, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Numerous battles were fought at Megiddo because of its strategic location. The idea of Armageddon is important to Christians because it marks the final judgment of humanity, where believers are rewarded and nonbelievers are punished. It marks a validation of Christian beliefs, even though the idea of a “final battle” that destroys evil and makes way for a new and better life for the survivors is not unique to Christianity.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Armageddon has come to symbolize an all-out war between good and evil. Over time, the word “armageddon” has been used to refer to any great or climactic battle, such as the First World War. Armageddon also represents the end of evil, since the forces of heaven will defeat the forces of hell.

## Armageddon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The subject of the end of the world has long been popular in literature, art, and films. One of the most famous artistic works on this subject is by

**Nationality/Culture**  
Christian

**Pronunciation**  
ahr-muh-GED-in

**Alternate Names**  
Har-Magedon

**Appears In**  
The New Testament



*Tel Megiddo, the hill where the ultimate battle of Armageddon will take place, as described in the Book of Revelation.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Michelangelo. His fresco in the Sistine Chapel known as *The Last Judgment* (1535–1541) depicts the final moments of humanity, where saved souls ascend to heaven and those not saved remain behind. *Armageddon* is also the name of a 1998 Michael Bay film in which Earth, and all life on it, is threatened with destruction by an approaching asteroid. Armageddon is also the subject of the popular Left Behind series by Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHaye (published between 1995 and 2005).

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The book *Armageddon Summer* by Jane Yolen and Bruce Coville (1999) tells the story of two teenagers who are part of a religious group that believes the world is about to end. In addition to focusing on belief and



the possibility of the end of the world, the book deals with family, friendship, and the developing identities of its two main characters.

SEE ALSO Satan



# Artemis

## Character Overview

The Greek goddess Artemis (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss)—one of the twelve deities, or gods who lived on Mount Olympus—was the twin sister of **Apollo**. Fond of hunting, archery, and wild animals, she was also associated with childbirth, the harvest, and the moon. Artemis was considered the guardian of maidens and small children. The Romans worshipped her as Diana.

Artemis and Apollo were the children of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and Leto (pronounced LEE-toh). When Leto was about to deliver the **twins**, Zeus's jealous wife **Hera** declared that she would not allow them to be born in any land where the **sun** shone. For this reason, Zeus led Leto to a floating island and caused a wave to shade the shore, creating a place for the birth that was above ground but hidden from the sun.

## Major Myths

Many myths about Artemis focus on her vengeful nature. She was known for punishing humans who offended or angered her. In one story, a young hunter named Actaeon (pronounced AK-tee-uhn) came upon Artemis while she was bathing in a stream. Although he knew better than to spy on a goddess, he was captivated by her beauty. Artemis caught sight of Actaeon and, not wanting him to boast of having seen her naked body, changed him into a deer. His own hounds then attacked and killed him. The nymph Callisto met a similar fate when Artemis punished her for losing her virginity by transforming her into a bear; Callisto's own son Arcas later unknowingly shot her while hunting.

**Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), the leader of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, also felt the wrath of Artemis after he killed a deer that was sacred to her. In her anger, Artemis prevented the

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

AHR-tuh-miss

### Alternate Names

Diana (Roman), Artume (Etruscan)

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Theogony*

### Lineage

Daughter of Zeus and Leto

## Artemis

*A statue of Artemis.* THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.



Greek fleet from sailing for Troy; it was only when Agamemnon promised to **sacrifice** his daughter Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NYE-uh) to the goddess that Artemis let them go.

In another myth, Artemis and Apollo defended the honor of their mother, Leto. A woman named Niobe (pronounced NYE-oh-bee), who had six sons and six daughters, boasted that her offspring outshone

Leto's two children. Outraged, Leto sent Artemis and Apollo to punish Niobe. With their arrows, the twins shot and killed all of Niobe's children.

## Artemis in Context

Like her brother Apollo, Artemis was a popular god among ancient Greeks. A fertility deity known as the "Lady of Ephesus" (pronounced EF-uh-suh-s), worshipped by the people of Ephesus in Anatolia, or modern-day Turkey, was believed to be a foreign version of Artemis. The temple at Ephesus, built to honor Artemis, was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Artemis was regarded by the ancient Greeks as the goddess of the hunt. Hunting was an important part of ancient Greek life; although they developed sophisticated agriculture and animal domestication over the centuries, their cultural roots were closely tied to the hunting of wild animals as a means to survive. Hunters offered Artemis the heads, antlers, or skins of their prey, and fishermen likewise offered parts of their catch to her. The close connection between hunting and warfare resulted in her worship as a goddess of warfare in some Greek states.

Artemis was a patroness of young girls, and herself was a virgin goddess. She differed from the other Greek virgin goddess, **Athena**, in that she was considered the goddess of girls before they married, whereas Athena's virginity was considered to be asexual (without a sexual orientation). The followers of Artemis are known as "**nymphs**," and girls old enough to be married danced and sang at festivals that honored Artemis; it was one of the few opportunities in Greek culture for unmarried men and women to mingle. When girls married, Artemis continued to watch over them—this time as they gave birth. Artemis decided whether a woman lived or died in childbirth, and the Greeks believed that her arrows caused women to die from disease.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Artemis is considered the goddess of wild things and the hunt. Because of this, she is often described as being young, wearing clothes she can run in—possibly made of animal skins—and carrying a bow and quiver of arrows. Strangely, though she is a huntress, she is also associated with protecting the forest and the creatures in it. The sister or twin of Apollo,

the god of the sun, Artemis sometimes wears a crescent moon on her forehead to symbolize her connection to the moon and lunar cycles like the tide, and women's mysteries and phases such as childbirth, puberty, and motherhood.

### Artemis in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In works of art, Artemis is often shown carrying her bow and arrows, surrounded by her hounds. She appears in many literary works including Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

More recently, Artemis has appeared as a character in comic books published by both Marvel Comics and DC Comics, and the superheroine Wonder Woman is named Diana (the Roman name for Artemis) in honor of the goddess.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In ancient Greece, most hunting was done by men. Why do you think Artemis, as a female, was considered to be the goddess of hunters?

SEE ALSO Apollo; Athena; Greek Mythology; Zeus



## Arthur, King

**Nationality/Culture**  
Romano-British/Celtic

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*

**Lineage**  
Son of Uther Pendragon and Igraine of Cornwall

### Character Overview

King Arthur was a legendary ruler of Britain whose life and deeds became the basis for a collection of tales known as the **Arthurian legends**. As the leading figure in British mythology, King Arthur is a national hero and a symbol of Britain's heroic heritage. But his appeal is not limited to Britain. The Arthurian story—with its elements of mystery, magic, love, war, adventure, betrayal, and fate—has touched the popular imagination and has become part of the world's shared mythology.

The Celts blended stories of the warrior Arthur with those of much older mythological characters, such as Gwydion (pronounced GWID-yon), a Welsh priest-king. Old Welsh tales and poems place Arthur in traditional Celtic legends, including a hunt for an enchanted wild pig

and a search for a magic cauldron, or kettle. In addition, Arthur is surrounded by a band of loyal followers who greatly resemble the disciples of **Finn**, the legendary Irish hero.

As time went on, the old Celtic elements of King Arthur's story were buried under new layers of myth. Some versions claimed that Arthur was descended from **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs), the legendary founder of Rome. This detail linked British mythology with that of ancient Greece and Rome. As Britain came under Anglo-Saxon rule, Arthur became an idealized leader, a symbol of national identity who had once united all the warring chiefdoms of the British Isles. In some accounts, he led his armies across Europe, much like Alexander the Great of the ancient world.

Christianity also played a role in the stories about Arthur. Some scholars have compared Arthur, a good man betrayed by those closest to him, to Jesus, who was betrayed by his trusted disciple Judas. In time, Arthur's story would be interpreted as a tale of Christian virtues and vices.

**Literary Development** Modern scholars can trace the changes in King Arthur's story through the works of particular medieval writers. The most important of these writers was Geoffrey of Monmouth, who lived and worked between about 1100 and 1155. His *History of the Kings of Britain* contains the most detailed account of King Arthur written up to that time. Geoffrey drew upon Welsh folklore and possibly upon earlier histories; but his Arthur, a conquering national hero, is mainly his own literary creation.

Geoffrey's work introduced King Arthur to a wide audience. Soon, English and European writers were producing their own versions of Arthur's life and adding new characters, adventures, and details. Sir Thomas Malory, an English writer, wove various strands of myth and history into a lengthy volume called *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur) that placed King Arthur firmly in the medieval world. Published in 1485, it became the best-known and most widely read account of the legendary king. Modern images of Arthur—illustrated in books, movies, comic books, and cartoons—are largely based on Malory's story.

**Arthur's Life and Deeds** Arthurian legends are filled with themes common to ancient stories shared around the globe. Although supernatural elements, such as magic, wizards, and **giants**, play key roles in the story, at

its heart is the simple drama of a man struggling to live by the highest standards in a world of human weakness. According to Malory, Arthur was the son of a king named Uther (pronounced OO-ther) Pendragon, who fell in love with Igraine (pronounced EE-grain), wife of Duke Gorlois (pronounced gor-LOW-iss) of Cornwall. With the aid of a wizard named **Merlin**, Uther disguised himself as Gorlois and conceived a child with Igraine. (Some versions say that Uther married Igraine after Gorlois died.) Their child, born at Tintagel (pronounced tin-TAJ-uhl) Castle in Cornwall, was named Arthur.

Merlin took charge of the boy's upbringing, arranging for a knight named Sir Hector to raise Arthur as his foster son. When King Uther died, he left no known heir to the throne. It was said that the person who succeeded in pulling the magical sword Excalibur from the stone that held it would be the next king. The greatest knights in the land accepted the challenge, but none managed to extract the sword. When Sir Hector brought young Arthur to London, the boy was able to withdraw the sword with ease, thus proving that he was meant to be king of England; at a later point in Arthur's story, however, Malory says that he received the sword from a mysterious figure called the **Lady of the Lake**. Either way, Arthur became king and gained possession of Excalibur. The wise magician Merlin helped him defeat the rebellious lesser kings and nobles who did not want Arthur to be king.

King Arthur was visited by Morgause (pronounced mor-GAWZ), wife of King Lot of the Orkney Islands. Morgause, a daughter of Igraine, was Arthur's half-sister. Among her children was Gawain (pronounced gah-WAYN), Arthur's nephew, who later became one of his loyal supporters. Morgause then bore a younger son, **Mordred**. In some versions of the story, Mordred was Arthur's child, the result of a relationship with his half-sister.

**The Fate of the King** Arthur fell in love with **Guinevere** (pronounced GWEN-uh-veer), daughter of King Leodegrance (pronounced lee-oh-duh-GRANTZ) of Camelard, in southern England. But Merlin said that Arthur must fight in France before he could marry. As a result, Arthur and Guinevere were married after his triumphant return from France. As a present, Guinevere's parents gave Arthur a large round table for the knights who made up his court. This Round Table became the symbol of the fellowship of the brave knights who went on quests to defeat evil, help those in danger, and keep the kingdom safe. Among

their quests was the search for the **Holy Grail**, the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper.

King Arthur made **Camelot** the seat of his court, and Merlin built a castle with a special chamber for the Round Table. After a time, though, trouble arose. Queen Guinevere and Sir **Lancelot**, Arthur's best friend and champion, became lovers. Mordred accused the queen of having an affair, an offense punishable by death. Lancelot defended her honor successfully, but the conflict destroyed the unity of the court. Some knights sided with Arthur, and others with Mordred. After several battles, Guinevere returned to Arthur.

Arthur left Mordred in charge of the kingdom while he went off to fight a military campaign. While the king was away, Mordred plotted against him, planning to marry Guinevere and become ruler of Britain. When Arthur returned and learned of the plot, he challenged Mordred to a battle.

Arthur and Mordred assembled their armies near the town of Salisbury, in southern England. While the two commanders discussed peace terms, someone saw a snake in the grass and drew his sword. In a flash, all the knights drew their weapons and started to fight. Arthur killed Mordred but suffered his own mortal wound in the process. He asked the sole survivor of the battle, Sir Bedivere, to take Excalibur and throw it into a particular lake. At first Sir Bedivere hesitated, but eventually he followed Arthur's command. As he did so, a hand rose from beneath the water, the hand of the Lady of the Lake, and caught the sword. Then a mysterious barge appeared. Sir Bedivere placed King Arthur on the barge, which carried him away to Avalon, a mythical and sacred isle in the west. There he would be cared for by Morgan Le Fay and healed of his wounds. Legend said that he would return one day when England once again needed him.

## King Arthur in Context

King Arthur was born somewhere in the misty region where history and imagination meet. The original legends may have been based on a real person, but scholars have yet to determine who that person was. Whether real or imaginary, the story of Arthur has been shaped by the ancient myths and literary creations that developed around him. The courtly medieval king who appears in the best-known versions of Arthur's story is a creation of a later time.

Almost fifteen hundred years after the first known reference to Arthur was written, scholars still debate whether or not Arthur was based on a real person. Some believe that King Arthur may be based on a Romano-British war leader, possibly named Artorius, who defended the native Celtic people of Britain against Anglo-Saxon invaders after Rome withdrew its troops from the British Isles in 410 CE. References to this hero appear in a book written around 550 by a Celtic monk named Gildas; in a work by Nennius, a Celtic historian of around 800; and in a genealogy from Wales compiled around 955 from earlier sources. According to these accounts, Artorius fought a series of battles against the Saxons sometime between 500 and 537.

A British researcher named Geoffrey Ashe proposed a different identity for Arthur. He based his theory on a letter that a Roman nobleman wrote around 460 to a British king named Riothamus. Linking this letter with medieval accounts of Arthur's deeds in France, Ashe suggested that Riothamus, who led a British army into France, was the man upon whom the Arthurian legends are based.

King Arthur has also been linked with Glastonbury in southwestern Britain. Old traditions claimed that early British Christians founded Glastonbury Abbey in the first or second century CE, with the earliest stone structure established in the seventh century. The abbey stood until a **fire** destroyed it in 1184. According to legend, Arthur and his queen, Guinevere, were buried nearby. Arthur's tomb bore these words: "Here lies Arthur, king that was, king that shall be." Some chronicles say that King Henry II ordered the tomb opened in 1150 and that it contained Arthur's skeleton and sword. Modern scholars, though, have been unable to separate fact from legend.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the King Arthur legend is the notion that "might makes right," or that strength and power can be used to enforce a moral code. This moral code was known as chivalry, and included traits such as generosity, bravery, courtesy, and respect toward women. For a time, Camelot, the seat of King Arthur's court, seemed to be a perfect realm, free from wickedness. The Round Table represented the unbroken unity of the knights and their common purpose; however, the very knights charged with maintaining a moral standard ended up failing to uphold the standard themselves.



## King Arthur in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Aside from the numerous retellings of the legend of King Arthur in classic literature, the character has remained popular in contemporary culture and art. His traditional story has been brought to newer generations by books such as T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) and John Steinbeck's *The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights* (1976), which attempted to modernize the language of the tales for contemporary audiences.

King Arthur has also proven to be a popular character in film. Several versions of his legend have been created, including the 1963 Disney animated version *The Sword in the Stone* (based on T. H. White's novel) and the more historically based 2004 film *King Arthur: Camelot* (1960) was a successful Broadway musical production that was adapted to film in 1967. *Excalibur*, a 1981 John Boorman film based on the writings of Thomas Malory, is considered by some to be the finest adaptation of the King Arthur legend.

Many other books and films are based far more loosely on the legend of King Arthur, or simply include King Arthur as a character. Examples include Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and films such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Shrek the Third* (2007).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

King Arthur and his court pledged themselves to behave in accordance with the code of chivalry. The code bound the knights to defend women from harm and treat them with honor as part of their knightly duties. Some modern feminists have criticized this attitude because it suggests that women are too weak to defend themselves and are dependent on men for help. At the same time, the modern phrase "Chivalry is dead" expresses a regret that men no longer treat women with the kind of respect that was once part of the code of chivalry. Can society have it both ways? Is it possible to treat all members of society with respect without fostering inequality? Some have argued that the death of chivalry is an unavoidable outcome of greater equality between the sexes. Do you agree? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Arthurian Legends; Camelot; Celtic Mythology; Guinevere; Holy Grail; Lady of the Lake; Lancelot; Merlin



# Arthurian Legends

## Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

## Alternate Names

None

## Appears In

Matter of Britain, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Idylls of the King*

## Myth Overview

The Arthurian legends are stories about the character of King **Arthur**. They form an important part of Britain's national mythology. Arthur may be based on a real person from history, possibly a Celtic warlord of the late 400s CE. The legends, however, have little to do with history. They blend **Celtic mythology** with medieval romance, and feature such well-known elements as the magic sword Excalibur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the search for the **Holy Grail**, the cup from which Jesus drank during the Last Supper. Arthur's court at **Camelot** has been idealized as a kind of perfect society, with a just and wise king guiding his happy people.

The Arthurian legends exist in numerous versions and can be interpreted in various ways. They include tales of adventure filled with battles and marvels, a tragic love story, an examination of what it means to be king, and an exploration of the conflict between love and duty. The legends tell the story of the mighty King Arthur who brought order to a troubled land. He might have gone on to rule the world if passion and betrayal had not disrupted his perfect realm and contributed to his death.

Like many **heroes** of myth and legend, Arthur is of royal birth; however, until he comes of age and claims his throne, he does not know the truth about who he is. Arthur must defeat many enemies before becoming king. Some of these defeated kings and noblemen are so impressed by him that they swear to remain his loyal servants.

Like **Finn**, the legendary Irish hero, Arthur is surrounded by a band of devoted followers. In early versions of the tales, these were warriors and chieftains, but once the tales were set in the Middle Ages, his followers became courtly knights. Their number varies from a dozen to more than a hundred, depending on the source. A few of the knights, especially Gawain (pronounced gah-WAYN), **Galahad**, and **Lancelot**, emerge as distinct personalities with their own strengths and weaknesses.

Not all the legends focus on King Arthur. Many deal with the Knights of the Round Table, who ride out from King Arthur's court at Camelot to do good deeds and perform brave feats. The most honorable and difficult of all their actions is the search for the Holy Grail. Of all the knights, only Galahad is pure enough to succeed in this quest.

**Magical Power and Human Weakness** Supernatural beings and events play an important part in the Arthurian legends. Before Arthur is born, his destiny is shaped by the wizard **Merlin**, who later serves as the king's adviser and helper. Another powerful magical figure is the witch Morgan Le Fay, who works for good in some versions of the legends and for evil in others. She is sometimes referred to as Arthur's half sister.

Arthur becomes king by gaining possession of the enchanted sword Excalibur. There are two versions of how Arthur gets the sword. In one, Excalibur is in a stone, and all believe that whoever can pull the sword from the stone will be the true king. Arthur pulls the sword from the stone and claims the throne. In the other version, Arthur is given the sword by the "**Lady of the Lake**" (a water spirit probably of ancient Celtic origin).

Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table battle a number of **giants** and monsters—supernatural creatures that figure often in the legends—but the tragic aspect of the legends arises not from spells cast by wicked sorcerers or the actions of vicious enemies but from the behavior of people closest to the king. **Guinevere** (pronounced GWEN-uh-veer), Arthur's queen, and Lancelot, his beloved friend and best knight, betray Arthur by becoming lovers. Like the appearance of the serpent in the Garden of **Eden**, their betrayal introduces disorder and deception into what had been a perfect world.

**Mordred**, Arthur's jealous nephew, uses Guinevere's affair to destroy the unity of the Round Table. Eventually, Mordred goes to war against Arthur. Some versions of the story make Arthur and his half sister Morgause (pronounced mor-GAWZ) Mordred's parents, placing part of the blame for the fall of Camelot on the king's youthful sin of incest.

## Arthurian Legends in Context

The earliest Arthurian legends blended Celtic history and myth. Scholars have not been able to determine if King Arthur is based on a person who really existed, even though several early histories of Britain mention him. These histories suggest he may have been a Celtic war leader who helped defend Britain against Anglo-Saxon invaders in the 400s or 500s CE.

The role of Celtic mythology in the early Arthurian legends is much more definite. Many of the characters and adventures associated with Arthur come from older myths. Arthur himself may be based on the legendary Welsh priest-king Gwydion (pronounced GWID-yon), and

## Irish Arthur

Arthurian legends are primarily rooted in the mythology of Wales, but Arthur also appears in Irish folklore and literature. In early tales, he is the son of the king of Britain. He steals dogs belonging to Finn, a legendary Irish hero drawn from the same ancient Celtic sources as Arthur himself. During the Middle Ages, Irish storytellers and writers produced their own versions of the Arthurian tales. They also used Arthurian characters in later Irish stories. In one such story from the 1400s CE, Sir Gawain helps the king of India, who has been turned into a dog, to recover his proper form.

Merlin clearly comes from Myrddin (pronounced MIRTH-in), who appears as both a prophet and a madman in Welsh and Scottish lore. Scholars believe that the Arthurian legends took shape sometime after about 500 CE, when the Celts began to attach familiar myths to new stories about a war hero named Arthur.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Round Table is a key symbol in the legends of King Arthur. It represents the unbroken bond between the knights, all of whom are dedicated to the same goals. Since the table does not have a “head,” each knight is given a position of equal importance. The idea of equality was important to the knights of Arthurian legend.

Another important theme in Arthurian legend is the idea of Arthur as an eternal, or timeless king. When Arthur finally falls in battle, he is carried away to the mythical and sacred isle of Avalon, off the west coast of Wales. Arthur’s wounds heal on Avalon and he returns to Britain to help solve a future crisis. Some scholars have seen similarities between Arthur and **sun** gods who die and sink into the west only to be reborn.

## Arthurian Legends in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Writers during the Middle Ages created new versions of the Arthurian legends. In the early 1100s, an Englishman named Geoffrey of Monmouth produced the *History of the Kings of Britain*, which presented Arthur as a national hero. New influences, such as Christianity, transformed the ancient legends. An old Celtic Arthurian tale about the search for a magic



*King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.* © ARCHIVO ICONOGRAFICO, S. A. / CORBIS.

cauldron, or kettle, for example, became a quest for the Christian Holy Grail. Another key influence was the medieval concept of chivalry, the code of conduct that inspired the courtly behavior of the Knights of the Round Table.

Numerous versions of the Arthurian legends were produced during the Middle Ages. French writer Chrétien de Troyes wrote poems on Arthurian subjects between 1155 and 1185. He focused on magic and marvels and introduced the theme of the quest for the Holy Grail. The Grail also

inspired Wolfram von Eschenbach, a German who wrote his epic poem *Parzival* around 1200. Other romances of the period developed the character of Merlin and featured the romantic entanglement of Lancelot and Guinevere.

In 1485 Sir Thomas Malory, an Englishman, wove together many strands of the Arthurian legends in a volume called *Le Morte d'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur). The best-known version of the legends, Malory's work has served as the basis of most modern interpretations. Many writers since Malory have adapted the Arthurian legends. In 1859 the English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson published the first part of *Idylls of the King*, a book-length poem about Arthur and his knights. Between 1917 and 1927, the American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson published three poems on Arthurian subjects: *Merlin*, *Lancelot*, and *Tristram*.

One of the most popular modern Arthurian novels is T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), which originally appeared in four separate volumes over the course of two decades. Other writers, such as Mary Stewart and Marion Zimmer Bradley, have retold the Arthurian story from different points of view, including those of the women in Arthur's life. The legends have also inspired the Broadway musical *Camelot* (1960), made into a film in 1967, and the films *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1949) and *Excalibur* (1981).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The three years during which President John F. Kennedy led the United States (1961–1963) are sometimes referred to as “Camelot.” Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the brief but memorable administration of President John F. Kennedy. Why do you think this administration was referred to as Camelot? What similarities or differences do you see between it and the Camelot of Arthurian legend? Are there elements, such as the fate of Arthur, that seem to be mirrored in these historical events?

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Camelot; Celtic Mythology; Finn; Galahad; Guinevere; Holy Grail; Lady of the Lake; Lancelot; Merlin

## Astarte

See **Ishtar**.



# Atalanta

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Atalanta (pronounced at-uh-LAN-tuh) was a skilled huntress and swift runner. As an infant, she was abandoned by her father, King Iasius of Arcadia, who was disappointed that she was not a boy. The goddess **Artemis** sent a female bear to nurse the child until some hunters took her in. A prophecy (or prediction learned from the gods) foretold that Atalanta would be unhappy if she married, so she decided to remain a virgin and dedicate herself to hunting. While still a girl, she used her bow and arrows to kill two **centaurs** (half-man, half-horse creatures) who tried to rape her.

Atalanta became famous in the Calydonian boar hunt. Meleager (pronounced mel-ee-EY-ger), the son of the king of Calydon (pronounced KAL-i-don), organized a great hunt to kill a huge boar. Atalanta joined the hunt, and Meleager fell in love with her. Atalanta was the first to wound the boar; Meleager was the one to kill it. Meleager gave Atalanta the beast's hide, the prize of the hunt, despite the protests of the other hunters who did not want it to be given to a woman.

Later Atalanta tried to join **Jason** on his quest for the **Golden Fleece**. Some sources say she sailed as one of the **Argonauts**, Jason's loyal band of **heroes**. Other sources state that Jason refused to accept her, fearing that a woman in the crew would create problems among the men.

When Atalanta's fame spread, her father invited her to return home. He wanted to see her properly married. She agreed to forfeit her life as a virgin and take a husband under one condition: the suitor would have to beat her in a foot race, or die if he lost. Many young men tried and died. Finally, a young man named Hippomenes (pronounced hi-POM-uh-nee-z) prayed to **Aphrodite** for help. The goddess gave him three golden apples and instructed him to throw them across Atalanta's path at different times during the race. The apples distracted her, so Hippomenes was able to pull ahead and win. He and Atalanta were married and had a son. They later angered Aphrodite, who responded by turning them into lions.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

at-uh-LAN-tuh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Daughter of Iasius and  
Clymene

## Atalanta in Context

In ancient Greece, women were generally not allowed to participate in hunting or warfare. Despite this, the goddesses Artemis and **Athena** are both often associated with hunts and battles. Other ancient cultures that existed near Greece, such as the Scythians (pronounced SI-thee-ehns), did allow women to participate in warfare and hunting. This suggests that the ancient Greeks could respect women's abilities, but they regarded female dominance or aggression as something outside their own social norms.

Aphrodite's transformation of Atalanta and Hippomenes into lions was significant to ancient Greeks. They believed that male and female lions could not mate with each other, but instead had to mate with leopards of the opposite sex. By turning Atalanta and Hippomenes into lions, Aphrodite ensured that the two would never be together again.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Atalanta stands with Artemis and Athena as a symbol of the strength and skill a woman can achieve in male-dominated areas. This theme is even more compelling with Atalanta, who—unlike Artemis and Athena—is human. The Calydonian boar is a symbol of strength and masculinity, which Atalanta conquers. The golden apples used by Hippomenes represent temptation, and lure Atalanta away from the race, helping Hippomenes to win. As is the case in many ancient Greek myths and legends, trickery and cunning help the hero achieve his goals, even in the face of a superior opponent.

## Atalanta in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In art, Atalanta is usually shown running in her famous race against Hippomenes. The composer George Frideric Handel wrote the opera *Atalanta* in 1736 in her honor. In 1903, sociologist and civil rights pioneer W. E. B. DuBois put the legend of Atalanta to use in his essay "Of the Wings of Atalanta," which was published in *The Souls of Black Folks*. He compared the black citizens of Atlanta, Georgia, to Atalanta and worried they would be tempted by material success into abandoning more important goals. In 1974, an animated television special (which has gone on to be a cult classic) titled *Free to Be You and Me* featured a retelling of the Atalanta legend in which Atalanta and Hippomenes finish



their race side by side. In the animated television series *Class of the Titans* (2005), the character of Atlanta is a descendant of Atalanta. Atalanta was also a character on the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995), starring Kevin Sorbo as Hercules.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Atalanta and the Arcadian Beast* by Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris (2003) tells the tale of young Atalanta's search for the monster that killed the hunter who raised her. *Quiver* by Stephanie Spinner (2002) is a retelling of the story of Atalanta that covers her later years, including the famous race against Hippomenes.

SEE ALSO Argonauts; Artemis



# Aten

## Character Overview

Aten (pronounced AHT-n), or Aton, was an ancient Egyptian god who was worshipped during the reign of the pharaoh, or Egyptian king, Akhenaten in the Eighteenth Dynasty or 1350s to 1330s BCE. Unlike earlier pharaohs who had worshipped many gods, Akhenaten claimed that Aten was the one supreme god. This may have been the earliest example of monotheism, or the belief in a single god as opposed to many gods, in the ancient Near East.

Aten was the **sun** disk, once an aspect of **Ra**, a much older Egyptian deity. Aten is described as the giver of all life, and as both male and female. Much of what is known about Aten worship comes from the *Great Hymn to the Aten*, a joyful poem inscribed on the walls of ancient tombs at Amarna, which is located on the east bank of the Nile River in Egypt. The hymn, whose authorship is attributed to Pharaoh Akhenaten himself, describes Aten as the only supreme being and creator. It says that Akhenaten and his wife, Queen Nefertiti, are the only people capable of understanding the god and expressing his wishes. The hymn speaks of Aten as a loving god who brings order and beauty to the world.

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

AHT-n

### Alternate Names

Aton

### Appears In

*The Tale of Sinuhe*, *Great Hymn to the Aten*

### Lineage

Creator of all living things

## Aten

*The pharaoh Akhenaten and his family worshipping Aten, represented as the sun.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Major Myths

Aten, as the sun disk, had no body, no wife, and no children. Although he was recognized as containing the elements of other gods such as Ra and **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs), he was not the direct subject of any currently known myths. This may be due to the fact that he was not

popular for long; it may also reflect the efforts of later Egyptian leaders to remove all traces of the god from the Egyptian cultural record.

## Aten in Context

Originally named Amenhotep (pronounced ah-men-HO-tep), Pharaoh Akhenaten changed his name to mean “right hand of Aten.” Akhenaten was determined to promote Aten as the only supreme god and not to honor other gods. To this end, he tried to get rid of images of other gods and to reduce the power of the priests who led the worship of other gods. He built temples to Aten and established a new capital city, called Akhetaten, or Horizon of Aten. Today that city is known as Amarna.

The worship of Aten as the sole supreme being lasted only for the years of Akhenaten’s reign. The Egyptian people could not accept the idea of one supreme god and returned to their old belief in many gods after Akhenaten died in about 1336 BCE. They destroyed the temples to Aten, and the once supreme being became a minor god among all the other gods. The rise and fall of Aten is an example of how the pharaohs controlled public practice through their powers; Akhenaten promoted his particular favored god in an effort to rally the masses to demonstrate his power, while pharaohs that followed virtually eliminated Aten as a form of protest against the previous pharaoh’s rule.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Aten was depicted as a disk representing the sun. Rays of light ending in hands extended from the disk and reached down to the king, his family, and the natural world. Unlike other Egyptian gods, Aten was never pictured in human form.

## Aten in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Aten was the most popular god during the reign of Akhenaten, his popularity all but disappeared after the pharaoh died. The Pharaoh Tutankhamun, who assumed control after Akhenaten’s death, abandoned the city built in Aten’s honor and returned to worshipping gods that were popular before Akhenaten’s reign. Many monuments and much of the art that honored Aten were destroyed, defaced, or recycled over the centuries. In modern times, the *Great Hymn to the Aten* was used as lyrics for a song in the 1984 opera *Akhnaten* by Philip Glass.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In many cultures, the sun is associated with the supreme god or creator. Why do you think the sun is recognized as such an important symbol in cultures around the world?

SEE ALSO Amun; Egyptian Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
uh-THEE-nuh

**Alternate Names**  
Athene, Pallas Athena,  
Minerva (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's  
*Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

**Lineage**  
Daughter of Zeus and  
Metis

# Athena

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Athena (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) was the goddess of wisdom, warfare, and crafts. She was the favorite child of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and one of the most powerful of the twelve Olympian gods. Although Athena was worshiped in many cities, the Athenians considered her to be their special protector and named their city after her; no other Greek god has such a specific association with a city. Many rulers sought her wisdom in both government and military matters. The Romans called her Minerva (pronounced mi-NUR-vuh).

Like **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), the goddess of the hunt, Athena was a virgin goddess. Unlike Artemis, she did not reject men. Athena took an active part in the lives of many **heroes** and enjoyed their bravery in battle. As a goddess of battle, she stood alongside warriors she favored and gave them courage in the fight; she particularly favored those warriors who were both strong and intelligent. Her main weapon was the *aegis*, a shield that inspired panic in her enemies when she raised it in battle.

Balancing her role as a goddess of warfare is her role as the goddess of the arts and domestic crafts such as sewing. In both aspects of her character, Athena represents rational organization, moderation, and intelligent preparation. She is therefore closely associated with social organization in its ideal form, and the welfare of the community was of particular interest to her.

## Major Myths

Athena was the daughter of Zeus and of the Titan Metis (pronounced MEE-tis), known for her knowledge and wisdom. Metis had tried to

avoid Zeus's advances by changing herself into different animals, but her tactic failed, and she became pregnant. Zeus learned from an oracle (or person through which the gods communicated with humans) that Metis was expecting a girl. The oracle also predicted that if Metis and Zeus had a male child, the boy would overthrow his father when he grew up, just as Zeus had overthrown his father. To protect himself from this possibility, Zeus swallowed Metis after she changed herself into a fly. Some sources say that Zeus did this mainly because he wanted to possess her wisdom.

Time passed and one day Zeus developed a terrible headache. He cried out in pain, saying he felt as if a warrior were stabbing him from inside with a spear. **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of metalworking, finally understood what was wrong and split Zeus's head open with an ax. Athena sprang out, fully grown and dressed in armor. By all accounts she was a dutiful daughter. For his part, Zeus tended to indulge Athena, which made the other gods jealous and angry.

The goddess was active in the lives of many warriors, kings, and heroes. She gave **Bellerophon** (pronounced buh-LAIR-uh-fun) the magic bridle that enabled him to ride **Pegasus** (pronounced PEG-uh-suhs), the winged horse. She showed the shipbuilder Argus how to build a magic ship for **Jason** and then protected the boat on its travels. She helped **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) kill the monster **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh). She supported **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez; also known as Hercules) through the twelve labors he was made to perform.

Athena also played a role in the Trojan War. She was one of three goddesses who took part in a beauty contest that led to the war. During the conflict, she fought on the side of the Greeks. In particular, she inspired **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) to come up with the idea of the Trojan Horse, which brought about the defeat of the Trojans. When the fighting was over, she helped Odysseus return home. Although Athena favored the Greeks, she was also important to the people of Troy. They erected a statue of her and called it the Palladium. The Greeks believed that as long as it remained in Troy, the city could not be conquered. Before they were able to win the Trojan War, the Greeks had to creep into the city to steal the statue.

To become the protector of Athens, Athena had to win a contest against **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), god of the sea. The clever

Athenians asked each god to devise a gift for the city. With his trident (a three-pronged spear), Poseidon struck the Acropolis, the hill in the middle of the city, and a saltwater spring began to flow. Athena then touched the Acropolis with her spear, and an olive tree sprang forth. The people decided that the goddess's gift was the more valuable and chose her as their protector. To avoid angering Poseidon, they promised to worship him too. In ancient times, visitors to Athens were taken to see Athena's olive tree and the rock that Poseidon had struck.

Despite her virgin status, Athena ended up raising a child. According to one myth, Hephaestus became attracted to her and tried to force his attentions on her. The powerful Athena resisted him, and Hephaestus's seed fell to the ground. From that seed was born the half-man, half-snake Erichthonius (pronounced ir-ek-THONE-ee-uhs). Athena put the baby in a box and gave him to the daughters of Cecrops (pronounced SEE-krahps), king of Athens. She told them to care for him but not to look in the box. Two of the daughters looked inside and, driven mad, jumped off the Acropolis to their deaths. Athena then took Erichthonius to her temple and raised him herself. Later he became king of Athens and honored her greatly.

**Patron of Crafts, Civilization, and Wisdom** Athena created many useful items, including the potter's wheel, vase, horse bridle, chariot, and ship, which explains why she was regarded as the goddess of handicrafts. She was the patron (meaning protector or supporter) of architects and sculptors, too, and the inventor of numbers and mathematics, which influenced many aspects of civilization. Athena took a special interest in agricultural work, giving farmers the rake, plow, and yoke, and teaching them how to use oxen to cultivate their fields. Athena also invented spinning and weaving.

Athena even tried her hand at musical instruments. She created the flute to imitate the wailing of the **Gorgons**, a trio of beastly women with snakes for hair. When the goddess saw her reflection playing this new instrument with her cheeks puffed out, she was disgusted with her appearance. She threw the flute away and put a curse on the first person to pick it up. The satyr Marsyas (pronounced mahr-SEE-uhs) picked up the flute and suffered the consequences when he dared to challenge **Apollo** to a musical contest. Some sources say that Athena threw away the flute because the other gods laughed at her for looking so ridiculous.



*The goddess Athena is considered the patron of the arts. Here she is shown teaching the art of sculpture to the people of Rhodes.*  
 RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Athena was generally a kind goddess. She promoted good government and looked after the welfare of kings who asked for her guidance. Athena was a goddess of justice tempered by mercy. Her work led Athens to adopt trial by jury.

Like the other gods, however, Athena did not tolerate lack of respect. She turned **Arachne** (pronounced uh-RAK-nee) into a spider after Arachne boasted that she could weave more skillfully than Athena. She also blinded Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-uhs) when he happened upon a stream where she was bathing and saw her nude. Because his fault was accidental, she softened his punishment by giving him the gift of prophecy, or the ability to see the future.

### Athena in Context

The Acropolis is a hill rising 500 feet above the city of Athens. On it stands the remains of some of the finest temples of ancient Greece. The largest and most famous of these temples is the Parthenon (pronounced

PAR-thuh-non), which was built to honor Athena. This magnificent white marble building is surrounded by columns. A huge statue of Athena, made of gold and ivory, used to stand inside. Athena, as the protector of Athens, was no doubt a figure whose importance was tied directly to Athens's importance as a Greek center of power. Her qualities reflect the qualities that Athenians saw in themselves, as well as the qualities that they aspired to achieve.

Several festivals, some tied to the growing season, were held in honor of Athena. Processions of priests, priestesses, and other members of society, particularly young girls, often formed part of the celebration. The goddess's most important festival was the Panathenaea (pronounced pan-ath-uh-NEE-uh). Started as a harvest festival, this annual event gradually evolved into a celebration of Athena. A great parade of people from Athens and surrounding areas brought the goddess gifts and sacrifices. Athletic competitions, poetry readings, and musical contests rounded out the festival. The Panathenaea came to rival the Olympic Games in popularity.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

Athena is one of the most well-regarded deities in Greek mythology. Although she sometimes struck down those who showed arrogance or disrespect, she was generally considered a wise and dutiful protector. She is often associated with owls, a traditional symbol of wisdom. Athena is also described as having gray eyes, which Greeks considered to be a sign of wisdom. The olive tree is another important symbol of Athena, representing her gift to the people of Athens.

### **Athena in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

In works of art, Athena is usually portrayed as a warrior. She wears a helmet and breastplate and carries a spear and a shield adorned with the head of Medusa. An owl generally sits on her shoulder or hand or hovers nearby. The Romans frequently depicted the goddess wearing a coat of armor.

Athena inspired numerous paintings and statues. The great Athenian sculptor Phidias (pronounced fi-DEE-uhs) produced several works in the fifth century BCE, including a thirty-foot bronze piece and an ivory and gold statue that was housed in the Parthenon. The statue of Athena kept in the Roman temple of the goddess Vesta was said to be the Palladium



of Troy, taken by the Trojan prince **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) when he fled the burning city.

Athena and her stories appear in many literary works as well. In Greek literature, she is a prominent character in Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and her influence is felt throughout the plays of Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-luhs), Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez), and Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez). The goddess also plays a leading role in the works of Roman writers Virgil and Ovid.

In the realm of science, one genus of owls has been classified under the name *Athene*, an alternate spelling of the goddess's name.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Bright-Eyed Athena: Stories from Ancient Greece* by Richard Woff (1999) is a collection of eight of the most popular myths associated with Athena. In addition, the book features photos of many ancient artifacts related to Athena.

**SEE ALSO** Arachne; Artemis; Bellerophon; Helen of Troy; Heracles; *Iliad*, *The*; Jason; Medusa; Odysseus; Pegasus; Perseus; Poseidon; Titans; Zeus



# Atlantis

## Myth Overview

According to the ancient Greeks, Atlantis was an island located in the Atlantic Ocean beyond the Straits of Gibraltar (pronounced jih-BRAWL-ter). It was an island paradise that sank into the sea one day. Since ancient times, many people have tried to explain the legend of Atlantis or to discover what remains of the island.

The tale of Atlantis comes from the Greek philosopher Plato (pronounced PLAY-toh), who lived from 427 to 347 BCE. In two of his written works, *Timaeus* (pronounced tih-MEE-us) and *Critias* (pronounced CRY-tee-us), Plato relates that the famous Athenian lawgiver Solon had heard the story of Atlantis when he visited Egypt. In the very distant past, according to the story, a great island as large as North Africa and the Near East put together existed in the Atlantic Ocean. The island

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

at-LAN-tis

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*

## Paradise Lost

Many cultures have stories that tell of a “golden age” in the distant past when people were happy and lived without strife. Usually the earthly paradise was lost as a result of greed. The golden age of the ancient Greeks was ruled by Cronus (pronounced KROH-nuhs, called Saturn by the Romans). When Zeus took over, the Silver, Bronze, and Iron Ages followed, each less happy and less prosperous than the one before it. Persian mythology tells how Masha and Mashyoi lost their paradise after being fooled by an evil spirit. A Mayan myth tells of perfect people, made out of cornmeal, who became too proud. Their downfall came when the gods put a mist before their eyes to weaken their understanding.

belonged to the god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), who fell in love with and married a young woman of the island named Cleito (pronounced KLAY-toh). Poseidon built a city on the island, and on a mountain in the center of the city, he built a palace for Cleito. The couple had ten children and, in time, Poseidon divided the island among them, giving each a section to rule.

Atlantis was a paradise. No one had to work hard, every type of wonderful food grew there, and animals were plentiful. Poseidon had created a stream of hot water and a stream of cold water for the island. It had a glorious culture with wonderful palaces and temples. The kings were rich in gold, silver, and other precious metals. The people of Atlantis lived in a golden age of harmony and abundance.

Then things began to change. The gods started to intermarry with humans. The Atlanteans became greedy for more than they had. They decided to conquer the lands around the Mediterranean. Angered by the Atlanteans' behavior, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) sent an earthquake, or perhaps a series of earthquakes, that caused Atlantis to sink into the sea over the course of one day and one night.

## Atlantis in Context

Scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance believed that Plato was recounting a real event. They were curious about the location of Atlantis. After the discovery of the Americas, some Europeans made a connection

between the newly found lands and Atlantis. Some thought that the Native Americans might be descendants of the people of Atlantis who fled their destroyed island. The legend of Atlantis also inspired writers and thinkers. Sir Francis Bacon, an English philosopher of the early seventeenth century, wrote a political fable called *The New Atlantis* (1626) that described an ideal world.

In the 1800s, the myth regained popularity. Scholars and popular writers both tried to use scientific evidence to support the existence of Atlantis; however, many used only the evidence that supported their ideas and conveniently ignored the rest. Although geological studies of the ocean floor revealed no sunken islands or continents at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, the legend persisted. In fact, people from lands as diverse as Scotland, the Basque region of Spain, and Scandinavia have claimed Atlanteans as their ancestors.

Since 1960, geological, meteorological, and archeological studies have supported the legend, though not in its original form. Many scientists now think that Atlantis was actually the island of Thera, located in the Mediterranean Sea near the island of Crete. Thera (part of the Santorini archipelago) was one of the colonies of the rich Minoan civilization of Crete. The Minoans built luxurious palaces and temples and traded all over the Mediterranean. Geologists and meteorologists have established that around 1600 BCE, Thera's volcano erupted and part of the island sank into the sea. Subsequent earthquakes and tsunamis destroyed life on Crete, 70 miles to the south. Archaeologists have studied Thera and have found the remains of a large Minoan town built around the volcano. The town has a palace and waterways that seem to match the general plan described by Plato.

Regardless of which culture is fascinated by it, the myth of Atlantis provides comfort in the idea that a perfect human society is possible. This offers hope that achieving such a perfect society is possible again in the future.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Atlantis represents a perfect world that is eventually destroyed by human failings. In this way, it resembles the Garden of **Eden** from biblical legend as well as King **Arthur's Camelot**. Atlantis is often used as an example of a utopia, or a place of social, economic, and political perfection. The divisions of the island may have been meant to represent the Greek city-states that shared the rule of Greece in ancient times.

## Atlantis

*Atlantis was a legendary island civilization that supposedly sank into the ocean. Some believe that Atlantis actually existed, and pinpoint its location in the Atlantic Ocean beyond the Straits of Gibraltar.*

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### Atlantis in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Atlantis is one of the most well-known mythological places. Although many writings about Atlantis were unknown or lost during the Middle

Ages, the legend resurfaced during the Renaissance. Much later, *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World* (1882), a nonfiction book written by Ignatius L. Donnelly, an author and congressman from Minnesota, helped to bring Atlantis into the imagination of Americans. Many modern fantasy writers have included Atlantis as a setting for their books, or have offered their own versions of the legend. These authors include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, J. R. R. Tolkien, H. P. Lovecraft, and Jules Verne.

Several films and television shows have focused on the Atlantis myth. Recent examples include the 2001 Disney animated film *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, as well as the 2004 science fiction series *Stargate Atlantis*, in which the real Atlantis is located on a planet in the Pegasus Galaxy.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Atlantis is often regarded as a utopia, or a perfect society. What elements do you think would be most important in a perfect society? Do you think creating such a society is possible? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Eden, Garden of; Poseidon



## Atlas

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Atlas (pronounced AT-luhs) was a Titan, a son of **Titans** Iapetus (pronounced eye-AP-uh-tus) and Clymene (pronounced KLEM-eh-nee), also known as Asia. After the Titans lost a war against the upstart younger god **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), Atlas was condemned to stand forever holding up the heavens.

Atlas belonged to an illustrious, or widely known, family. One of his brothers was **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs), god of **fire** and creator of humankind. Atlas's daughters included the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez), a group of seven stars that announce good spring weather; the Hyades (pronounced HIGH-uh-deez), the stars that announce the rainy season; and the nymph Calypso (pronounced kuh-LIP-soh). Atlas was also either the father or the grandfather of the

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

AT-luhs

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

#### Lineage

Son of Iapetus and Clymene

Hesperides (pronounced hee-SPER-uh-deez), **nymphs** who, according to Greek legend, guarded a tree bearing golden apples.

## Major Myths

Many different stories are told about Atlas. One story features **Heraclēs** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez; also known as Hercules), the great-grandson of **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs). One of the labors of Heracles was to obtain some of the golden apples that were guarded by the Hesperides. Heracles asked Atlas to help him get the apples. Seeing an opportunity to escape from the burden of holding up the heavens, Atlas asked Heracles to take over while he obtained the apples. Heracles agreed. When Atlas returned with the apples, he told Heracles that he would deliver them for him. His intention was to leave Heracles to support the heavens; however, Heracles asked Atlas to take back the heavens for just a moment so that he could adjust his burden. When Atlas did this, Heracles walked away with the apples.

Another story concerns Perseus, son of Zeus and slayer of the Gorgon **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh). Because of a prophecy, or prediction, that a son of Zeus would one day steal the golden apples of the Hesperides, Atlas refused to offer Perseus hospitality when he came to visit. Insulted, Perseus showed him the severed head of Medusa, which had the power to turn all who looked at it into stone. Atlas was therefore turned into stone. The stone became the Atlas Mountains in what is now the country of Morocco.

## Atlas in Context

A collection of maps has been called an atlas since the sixteenth century when cartographer, or mapmaker, Gerardus Mercator (pronounced muhr-KAY-tuhr) put a picture of Atlas holding up the earth, not the heavens, on the title page of his book. Because the place where Atlas stood to perform his task was the westernmost end of the world known to the ancient Greeks, the ocean near him was named the Atlantic in his honor.

For the ancient Greeks, Atlas was an attempt to explain how certain things existed the way they did. It was obvious that something thrown into the sky would eventually fall back down, so how did the heavens remain above the Earth? The answer was Atlas, a Titan who held the heavens in place with his enormous strength.



*Atlas holding up the heavens.*  
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THE BRIDGEMAN ART  
LIBRARY.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Because of the task he performs of holding up the heavens, Atlas has become a symbol of strength, power, and, most importantly, endurance. Atlas also symbolizes the unseen forces at work in the world that allow humans to exist. In the story of Atlas and Heracles, Atlas represents a cunning trickster who attempts to deceive Heracles into performing his thankless task.

## Atlas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Atlas has become a popular icon in art, and is usually depicted holding a celestial sphere or the earth upon his shoulders. Sculptures of Atlas have appeared in front of many prestigious buildings, including Rockefeller Center in New York City and the World Trade Center in Amsterdam. The comic book publishing company known as Marvel Comics was previously called Atlas Comics, and the Marvel Comics universe features a super-villain named Atlas.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Readers can find new sympathy for the difficulty of Atlas's job after reading Rick Riordan's 2007 novel *The Titan's Curse*, the third in his Percy Jackson series.

SEE ALSO Heracles; Medusa; Prometheus; Titans



# Aurora

### Nationality/Culture

Roman

### Pronunciation

aw-RAWR-uh

### Alternate Names

Eos (Greek)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony* (as Eos), Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *Odyssey* (as Eos)

### Lineage

Daughter of Hyperion and Theia

## Character Overview

Aurora (pronounced aw-RAWR-uh), according to **Roman mythology**, was the goddess of the dawn. The Greeks called her Eos, though she has come to be more commonly known by her Roman name. She was the daughter of the **Titans** Hyperion (pronounced hy-PEER-ee-on) and Theia (pronounced THEE-uh), and the sister of Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs; the **sun** god) and Selene (pronounced suh-LEE-nee; the moon goddess). Every morning, Aurora arose from the sea and rode in her horse-drawn chariot across the sky ahead of the sun, carrying a pitcher from which she sprinkled dew upon the earth.

## Major Myths

Aurora's first husband was the Titan Astraeus (pronounced ah-STRAY-uhs). They had several sons: the winds Boreas, Eurus, Notus, and Zephyrus, as well as the morning star Eosphorus and the evening star Hesperus. Aurora's beauty caused Mars, the Roman god of war, to take



an interest in her. This angered Venus, who caused Aurora to fall in love with a number of mortals. She even married one of them, Tithonus (pronounced tih-THOHN-uhs), and begged **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) to make him immortal. Zeus granted Aurora's wish, but she forgot to ask for Tithonus's eternal youth too. As a result, he continued to age until he became a shriveled old man. Aurora shut him away in his room until the gods finally took pity on him and turned him into a grasshopper.

## Aurora in Context

The terms “aurora borealis” and “aurora australis” are used to refer to bands of colored light sometimes visible in the night sky, especially near the North or South Poles. This phenomenon is also known as the “northern lights” and the “southern lights.” Although Greece and Italy are not very close to the North Pole, several ancient Greek and Roman writers documented sightings of the northern lights over the years. Although some attempted to explain these appearances using scientific principles, it is likely that many ancient Greeks and Romans considered these strange and beautiful bands of light to be the work of the goddess of dawn.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As the goddess of dawn, Aurora came to be associated with the glow in the sky seen before sunrise, as well as the early morning dew. She represents the boundary between day and night, which are her siblings. In the story of Tithonus, Aurora represents someone who is ruled more by her heart than her head.

## Aurora in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Aurora was not as popular as some other goddesses, she was the subject of paintings

*The goddess Aurora in her chariot.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.



by artists such as Guido Reni, Nicolas Poussin, Guercino, and Simon Julien. She is mentioned by name in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). The name "Aurora" has also been used by a number of fictional characters not directly related to the myth, including a Marvel Comics super-heroine and the princess who serves as the main character in the Disney animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

In ancient cultures, natural events such as the northern lights were often believed to have supernatural or divine causes. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, research a natural event such as thunder or earthquakes. Write a scientific description of the process that causes this event to happen. Can you find an example of an ancient culture that believed this event to be caused by the gods?

**SEE ALSO** Heracles; Titans



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## Australian Mythology

### **Australian Mythology in Context**

Australia, a vast land dominated by desert and semi-desert landscapes, was first inhabited by the Aborigines (pronounced ab-uh-RIJ-uh-neeZ). The mythology of Australia comes from these people and has been influenced by their very close relationship with the natural environment. Most of the myths deal with the features of the landscape, how they were created, and their importance to the Aborigines.

In Australian mythology, there are no standard versions of individual myths. Instead, a tale about a particular character varies from region to region. The reason for these variations in the mythology lies in the lifestyle of the Aborigines.

The first humans to inhabit Australia, the Aborigines, may have arrived more than fifty thousand years ago. They probably came from the islands north of the Australian continent, now known as Indonesia, or from islands in the Pacific Ocean. Some scholars believe that the earliest inhabitants traveled overland across a land bridge that once connected

Australia and southeastern Asia. Later people arrived by raft or boat after the ocean rose, covering the land route.

The early inhabitants were semi-nomads who survived by hunting wild animals, fishing, and gathering fruits and plants. Each group had a home territory where their ancestors had originally settled; however, most groups moved with the seasons as they ran out of food and fresh water. This semi-nomadic lifestyle exposed some Aborigines to new regions and brought various groups into contact with one another.

For thousands of years, the Aboriginal way of life was hardly touched by outside influences. Then, in the late 1700s and early 1800s, European colonists began to arrive in Australia. Today the Aborigines make up little more than 2 percent of Australia's population, and few of them maintain their traditional way of life. Aware that the breakdown of their semi-nomadic lifestyle and oral traditions could lead to a loss of their heritage, some Aborigines are making an effort to collect and record their myths and legends for future generations.

By participating in certain rituals, individuals are able to reenact the journeys of their ancestors. The ritual reenactment of a myth is as important as the story itself. The rituals involve singing, dancing, and painting, which, according to the Aborigines, nurtures the land, the people, and the ancestral beings. The individuals who perform the ritual call upon the ancestral beings and later sing a song to return them to their place of emergence.

Aboriginal rituals also include the creation of mythological designs, such as the body paintings, ground paintings, rock paintings, and engravings found throughout Australia. The Aborigines decorate sacred objects and weapons to represent certain myths. They chant a myth to attach it to the object being decorated. When a sacred object or place is touched, struck, or rubbed, it releases the spirit that inhabits it. Such rituals are preserved and repeated to establish ties between past, present, and future generations.

## Core Deities and Characters

The Australian Aborigines are comprised of many different tribes across Australia, and their deities vary widely from region to region. Underlying this variation, however, is the belief in the mythical era known as the **Dreamtime**, when the ancestor spirits created the world. These spirit ancestors continue to affect Aboriginal life today in the Dreaming rituals.

Song chants, dances, and art retell the stories of the Dreamtime and assure the continuity of life, cultural values, and law.

The Dreamtime ancestors were totem figures—animal or human mythological ancestors to whom the contemporary Aboriginal groups trace their ancestry. As familial ancestors, they will continue to provide for their descendents as long as the proper rituals are performed. The great Rainbow Serpent was one of the creator ancestor spirits who emerged from the ground in the Dreamtime and is an important mythological figure today. As a protector of water resources, the Rainbow Serpent constantly battles with the Sun to preserve water holes in the sometimes dry Australian landscape. If not properly respected through ritual, however, the Rainbow Serpent can inflict punishment on the people.

*An aboriginal bark painting showing the wandjina from Australian mythology.* JENNIFER STEELE/ART RESOURCE, NY.



## Major Myths

Aboriginal myths fall under different categories. Some are public and may be shared with all members of a group. Others are restricted; only people who have participated in certain special ceremonies may hear them. Some sacred stories may only be told and heard by men, while others are restricted to women or to the elder members of the community.

The Aborigines believe that the world began during a mythical period called the Dreamtime. During this time, powerful ancestral beings that slept beneath the ground emerged from the earth. They created the landscape, made people, established the laws by which people lived, and taught them how to survive. They also established the correct relationships between the many Aboriginal clan groups, between people and animals, and between people and the land. After the ancestral beings' work was done, they returned underground. The Aborigines actively recall the events of the Dreamtime through myth and ritual.

Aboriginal myths often tell of a big flood, with local variations. The Worora people in western Australia describe an enormous flood that destroyed the previous landscape. It was caused by ancestral figures called the *wandjina*, who spread throughout the land establishing a new society. Other groups say the flood was brought by a great serpent that still exists in deep pools of water or off the coast.

The Tiwi, from islands off the northern coast, tell of the old woman Mudungkala who rose up from the ground carrying three children. These children were the ancestors of all the islands' inhabitants. As Mudungkala walked across the landscape, water rose up behind her and cut the islands off from the mainland. According to some myths, the people of the land were created by two sisters and a brother called the **Djang'kawu**, who traveled throughout the land. Their journey is recalled in a cycle of more than five hundred songs.

Ayers Rock, also known as Uluru, is a huge dome-shaped rock in central Australia. According to Aboriginal myths, the gullies and holes on the south side of Ayers Rock were scars left over from a battle between snake men, or serpent beings. To the southwest of the rock are some stands of oak trees. These were said to be young warriors waiting silently to join in the battle.

Aboriginal beliefs about the origin of death vary. One tale about death refers to an argument between Crow and Crab about the best way to die. Crab crawled off into a hole, shed her shell, and waited for a new one to grow. Crow said that this took too long and that he had a better way. He rolled back his eyes and fell over dead. The Murinbata people have a ritual dance that compares the two types of death. It shows that Crow's way is the better way.

Other popular mythical figures include the Seven Sisters. According to a version of their story told in central and southern Australia, the sisters fled from central Australia to Port Augusta on the south coast to escape a man named Wati Nehru who wanted to rape the oldest sister. They traveled over hundreds of miles, and many features of Australia's current landscape are associated with their journey. For example, legend has it that a low cliff near Mount Conner is a windbreak they constructed, and a cave is a hut they built. One of the wild fig trees nearby is the oldest sister. At the end of the journey, the sisters turned into the constellation popularly known as the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez), and Wati Nehru became the constellation commonly known as **Orion**.

## Sacred Land and the Dreamtime

Australian Aborigines view the land as sacred because it was created by their ancestor spirits during the Dreamtime and continues to be inhabited by them. The Gagudju, an Aboriginal tribe in northern Australia, believe that, after the ancestors created the land, they transformed themselves into various objects, like rocks and water pools. These parts of the landscape are full of power and energy and are sacred sites to the Gagudju. If these sites are destroyed, the ancestors inhabiting them will also be destroyed, and the Gagudju will also suffer. This view of land as sacred can be found among tribal groups throughout the world.

Tales about **tricksters** who often cause trouble are believed to be among the earliest Aboriginal myths. Tricksters typically appear as characters who upset the natural order of things. They do this by stealing, or by causing humans to fight or engage in other unpleasant behavior. People of the Kimberley region in northwestern Australia say that a race of tricksters called the Wurulu-Wurulu use flowers mounted on sticks to steal honey from bees' nests. An empty nest is said to be a sign that the Wurulu-Wurulu have been there.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Australian myths deal with the creation of the world, **floods**, drought, and other natural disasters, as well as major events in the life cycle, such as birth and death. Most myths explain the origins of features of the land, including hills and valleys, water holes, and places of safety or danger. By listening to the stories, the Aborigines learn about the local geography and reinforce their bonds to their land, their group, and their heritage.

In Aboriginal culture, many types of information, including myths and legends, are transmitted orally. Storytellers rely on techniques like repetition and special expressions that always take the same form. They use songs, chants, and sand paintings to help relate their stories. Journeys, the subject of many Aboriginal stories, are described by explaining what happened at each place along the way.

## Australian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Aboriginal mythology has long been passed down from generation to generation through myth and art. Aboriginal art, often based on intricate and sophisticated motifs, includes rock paintings, body art, sculpture, wood carvings, tree bark paintings, and decorative and ritual items. These designs and motifs are also functional, as they trace land rights and relationships to the ancestral beings. Songs and stories were not written down, but spoken aloud and memorized. In recent years, thanks to interest from art collectors and tourists alike, some Aboriginal artists have been able to support themselves and their communities by creating traditional artwork that reflects their culture and belief system.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Dreamtime: Aboriginal Stories* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1994) is divided into two halves: in the first, author Noonuccal relates personal stories of growing up as an Aboriginal girl on an island just off the Queensland coast; in the second half, Noonuccal tells several of the most important Aboriginal myths of her childhood. The book also features illustrations by Bronwyn Bancroft.

SEE ALSO Animals in Mythology; Creation Stories; Djang'kawu; Dreamtime; Tricksters



# Aztec Mythology

## Aztec Mythology in Context

The mythology of the Aztec civilization, which dominated central Mexico from the 1300s through the early 1500s CE, described a universe that was both grand and dreadful. Worlds were created and destroyed in the myths, and splendid gods warred among themselves. Everyday items, like colors, numbers, directions, and days of the calendar, took on special meaning because each was associated with a deity, or god. Aztec religious life ranged from keeping small pottery statues of the gods in homes to attending elaborate public ceremonies involving human **sacrifice**.

The Aztecs migrated to central Mexico from the north in the 1200s CE. According to their legends, they came from a land called Aztlán, the source of their name. The Aztecs were not a single people but several groups, including the Culhua-Mexica, the Mexica, and the Tenocha. In the early 1300s, these groups formed an alliance and together founded a city-state called Tenochtitlán (pronounced teh-nowch-TEE-tlan) on the site of present-day Mexico City. The people of Tenochtitlán rose to power and ruled a large empire during the fifteenth century.

The Aztecs were newcomers to a region long occupied by earlier civilizations such as the Olmecs and the Toltecs, who had developed a pantheon, or worship of a collection of gods, and a body of their own myths and legends. The Aztec culture absorbed the deities, stories, and beliefs from these earlier peoples and from the Maya (pronounced MYE-ah) of southern Mexico. As a result, Aztec mythology contained religious and mythological traditions shared by many groups in Mexico and Central America. Under the Aztecs, certain aspects of the religion, notably human sacrifice, came to the forefront.

When Spanish colonists defeated the Aztecs and settled in the area, they destroyed as many Aztec documents and images as they could. They did this because they believed the Aztec religion was evil. Much of what we know about Tenochtitlán and Aztec customs comes from accounts of Spanish writers who witnessed the last days of the Aztec empire.

### Core Deities and Characters

In the Aztec view of the universe, human life was small and insignificant. An individual's fate was shaped by forces beyond his or her control. The gods created people to work and fight for them. They did not offer favors or grant direct protection, although failure to properly serve the gods could lead to doom and destruction.

Duality, or the presence of two opposing forces in one thing, was the basic element of the deity Ometecuhtli (pronounced oh-me-teh-KOO-tle). This god had a male side called Ometeotl (pronounced oh-me-TEH-oh-tl) and a female side known as Omecihuatl (pronounced o-me-SEE-wah-tl). The other gods and goddesses were their offspring. Their first four children were **Tezcatlipoca** (pronounced tehs-cah-tee-POH-cah), **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), **Huitzilopochtli** (pronounced wee-tsee-loh-POCH-tee), and **Xipe Totec** (SHE-pay TOH-tek), the creator gods of Aztec mythology.



Originally a Toltec god, Tezcatlipoca, Lord of the Smoking Mirror, was god of the night sky. The color black and the direction north were associated with him. He had a magical mirror that allowed him to see inside people's hearts. The Aztec people considered themselves his slaves. In his animal form, he appeared as a jaguar. His dual nature caused him to bring people good fortune at some times, misery at others.

Tezcatlipoca's great rival and opponent in cosmic battles, as well as his partner in acts of creation, was Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, an ancient Mexican and Central American deity absorbed into Aztec mythology. His color was white and his direction west. Some stories about Quetzalcoatl refer to him as an earthly priest-king, which suggests there may have been a Toltec king by that name whose legend became mixed with mythology.

As a god, Quetzalcoatl had many different aspects. He was the planet Venus (both a morning and an evening star), the god of **twins**, and the god of learning. The Aztecs credited him with inventing the calendar. A peaceful god, Quetzalcoatl accepted sacrifices of animals and jade, but not of human blood. When he was defeated by Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean on a raft of serpents. The legend arose that he would return over the sea from the east at the end of one of the Aztecs' fifty-two-year calendar cycles. When the white-skinned Spanish invader Hernán Cortés landed in Mexico in 1519, some Aztecs thought he was Quetzalcoatl come again, a belief Cortés encouraged.

Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird of the South, is a deity that originated with the Aztecs. He was the **sun** and war god. The souls of warriors who died in battle were said to become hummingbirds and follow him across the sky. Blue was his color and south his direction. The Aztecs claimed that an idol of Huitzilopochtli had led them south during their long migration and told them to build their capital on the site where an eagle was seen eating a snake. The worship of Huitzilopochtli was especially strong in Tenochtitlán, where he was regarded as the city's founding god.

Xipe Totec, the Flayed Lord, had a dual nature. He was a god of vegetation and life-giving spring growth. At the same time, he was a fearsome god of torture and sacrifice. His intense duality reflected the Aztec vision of a universal balance in which new life had to be paid for in blood. Xipe Totec's color was red, his direction east.

The Aztecs also incorporated the worship of **Tlaloc** (pronounced TLAH-lok), an important god of rain and fertility long known under

## Aztec Mythology

*In this depiction of an Aztec human sacrifice, a priest holds up the still-beating heart of a victim.* © PRINT COLLECTOR/HIP/THE IMAGE WORKS.



various names in Mexico and Central America. He governed a host of lesser gods called Tlaloques (pronounced TLAH-loh-kes), who made thunder and rain by smashing their water jars together. Other deities, such as Huitzilopochtli's mother, the earth goddess **Coatlicue** (pronounced koh-

aht-LEE-kway), Lady of the Serpent Skirt, probably played key parts in the religion of the common people, who were mainly farmers. Many minor deities were associated with flowers, summer, fertility, and **corn**.

## Major Myths

Many Aztec myths tell all or part of the story of the five suns. The Aztecs believed that four suns, or worlds, had existed before theirs. In each case, catastrophic events had destroyed everything, bringing the world to an end. Many stories related the Loss of the Ancients, the mythic event in which the first people disappeared from the earth. One version says that Tezcatlipoca stole the sun and Quetzalcoatl chased him and knocked him back down to earth with a stick. Tezcatlipoca then changed into a jaguar and devoured the people who lived in that world. The Aztecs combined versions of this story to explain the disappearance of people at the end of each of the four worlds that had existed before theirs. Carvings on a stone calendar found in 1790 tell how, one after another, jaguars, wind, **fire**, and flood destroyed the Ancients.

According to Aztec myth, at the beginning of this world, darkness covered the earth. The gods gathered at a sacred place and made a fire. Nanahuatl (pronounced nah-nah-WAH-tl), one of the gods, leaped into the fire and came out as the sun. However, before he could begin to move through the sky, the other gods had to give the sun their blood. This was one of several myths that described how the gods sacrificed themselves to set the world in motion. Through bloodletting and human sacrifice, people imitated the sacrifices made by the gods. The example of the deities taught the Aztec people to believe that feeding the sun with blood kept it alive.

Tezcatlipoca created the first sun, known as Nahui-Ocelotl, or Four-Jaguar. It came to an end when Quetzalcoatl struck down Tezcatlipoca, who became a jaguar and destroyed all the people. Quetzalcoatl was the ruler of the second sun, Nahui-Ehécatl, or Four-Wind. Tezcatlipoca threw Quetzalcoatl off his throne, and together the fallen god and the sun were carried off by a hurricane of wind. People turned into monkeys and fled into the forest.

The third sun, Nahuiquiahuitl (pronounced nah-wee-kee-ah-WEE-tl) or Four-Rain, belonged to the rain god Tlaloc. Quetzalcoatl destroyed it with fire that fell from the heavens. The water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue

(pronounced chal-choo-TLEE-quay) ruled the fourth sun, called Nahui-Atl (pronounced nah-wee-ATL) or Four-Water. A fifty-two-year flood destroyed that sun and the people turned into fish. Quetzalcoatl gave life to the people of the fifth sun by sprinkling his own blood over the bones of the only man and woman who had survived the flood. The gods created the world with blood and required the sacrifice of human blood to keep it intact. One day, however, the fifth sun would meet its end in a destructive earthquake.

The Aztecs lived in the world of Nahui-Ollin (pronounced nah-wee-oh-LEEN; Four-Movement), the fifth sun. They believed the earth was a flat disk divided into north, east, south, and west quarters, each associated with a color, special gods, and certain days. At the center was Huehueteotl (pronounced hway-hway-tay-OH-tul), god of fire. Above the earth were thirteen heavens. Below the earth were nine underworlds, where the dead dwelled, making nine an extremely unlucky number. A myth about Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl tells how the world was quartered. They made the earth by seizing a woman from the sky and pulling her into the shape of a cross. Her body became the earth, which, angered by their rough treatment, devoured the dead.

Another myth tells of Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl working together to raise the sky. After the flood ended the fourth sun, the sky collapsed onto the earth. The two gods became trees, pushing the sky up as they grew. Leaving the trees supporting the sky, one at each end of the earth, they climbed onto the sky and met in the Milky Way.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The idea that people were servants of the gods was a theme that ran through Aztec mythology. Humans had the responsibility of keeping the gods fed, otherwise, disaster could strike at any time. The food of the gods was a precious substance found in human blood. The need to satisfy the gods, especially the sun god, gave rise to the related theme of human sacrifice.

Priests conducted ceremonies at the temples, often with crowds in attendance. Masked performers acted out myths using song and dance, and priests offered human sacrifices. To prepare for the ceremonies, the priests performed a ritual called bloodletting, which involved pulling barbed cords across their tongues or other parts of their bodies to draw

blood. Bloodletting was similar to a Mayan ceremony known as the Vision Quest. Peoples before the Aztecs had practiced human sacrifice, but the Aztecs made it the centerpiece of their rituals. Spanish explorers reported witnessing ceremonies in which hundreds of people met their deaths on sacrificial altars. The Aztecs sacrificed prisoners, which contributed to their drive to conquer their neighbors.

Sacrifice was linked to another theme, that of death and rebirth. The Aztecs believed that the world had died and been reborn several times and that the gods had also died and been reborn. Sometimes the gods even sacrificed themselves for the good of the world. Though death loomed large in Aztec mythology, it was always balanced by fertility and the celebration of life and growth.

Another important idea in Aztec mythology was that the outcome of a person's life was already determined by the gods. The Aztec ball game, about which historians know little, may have been related to this theme. Aztec temples, like those belonging to other cultural groups throughout Mexico and Central America, had walled courts where teams of players struck a rubber ball with their hips, elbows, and knees, trying to drive it through a stone ring. Some historians believe that the game represented the human struggle to control their destiny, or future path in life. It was a religious ritual, not simply a sport, and players may have been sacrificed after the game.

The theme of fate was also reflected in the Aztecs' use of the calendar. Both the Aztecs and the Maya developed elaborate systems of recording dates. They used two calendars: a 365-day solar calendar based on the position of the sun, and a 260-day ritual calendar used for divination, or predicting the future through supernatural means. Each day of the ritual calendar was influenced by a unique combination of gods and goddesses. Divination involved interpreting the positive or negative meanings of these influences, which determined an individual's fate. Priests also used the ritual calendar to choose the most favorable days for such activities as erecting buildings, planting crops, and waging war.

The 365-day and 260-day cycles meshed, like a smaller wheel within a larger one, to create a fifty-two-year cycle called the Calendar Round. At the end of a Calendar Round, the Aztecs put out all their fires. To begin a new Calendar Round, priests oversaw a ceremony in which new fires were lit from flames burning in a sacrificial victim's chest.

A third key theme of Aztec myth was that of duality, a balance between two equal and opposing forces. Many of the Aztec gods and goddesses were dualistic, which meant they had two sides, or roles. Deities often functioned in pairs or opposites. Further, the same god could appear under multiple names or identities, perhaps because Aztec mythology drew elements from a variety of sources.

### **Aztec Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The legacy of Aztec mythology remains strong within Mexico. Aztec images and themes continue to influence the arts and public life. In the late 1800s, Mexico won independence from Spain but had yet to establish its own national identity. Civic and cultural leaders of the new country began forming a vision of their past that was linked with the proud and powerful Aztec civilization. Symbols from Aztec carvings, such as images of the god Quetzalcoatl, began to appear on murals and postage stamps. Mexico's coat of arms featured an eagle clutching a snake in its beak, the mythic emblem of the founding of the Aztec capital.

During the 1920s, Mexico's education minister invited artists to paint murals on public buildings. The three foremost artists in this group were Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. Although their paintings dealt mainly with the Mexican Revolution and the hard life of Indians and peasants, the artists also drew upon Aztec mythology for symbols and images to connect Mexico's present with its ancient past. In one mural, for example, Rivera combined the images of the earth goddess Coatlicue and a piece of factory machinery. Although early colonists tried to eliminate it, Aztec mythology has increasingly become an important part of Mexico's national identity.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

*Letters from Mexico* (2001) is a new translation of the letters written by Hernando Cortés, Spanish conqueror of the Aztecs, to the king of Spain. The letters detail Cortés's deeds (in a way that made himself look good) and provide a glimpse of the Aztec culture at the time of Spanish invasion in 1519.

**SEE ALSO** Coatlicue; Huitzilopochtli; Mayan Mythology; Quetzalcoatl; Sacrifice; Tezcatlipoca; Tlaloc

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# B



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Canaanite

## Pronunciation

BAY-uhl

## Alternate Names

Hadad, Belos

## Appears In

The Hebrew Bible, the Baal cycle

## Lineage

Son of El



## Baal

### Character Overview

Baal (pronounced BAY-uhl) was one of the most widely worshipped gods in ancient Canaan (pronounced KAY-nuhn), the early name for present-day Israel and neighboring regions. Associated with fertility and rain, Baal was the son of **El**, the supreme god of the Canaanites, and the husband and brother of Anat, the ferocious goddess of war.

*Baal* is a common Semitic word that means “lord” or “owner.” The title was given to the local god of nearly every city in Canaan. Because of the importance of rain to life in the dry lands of the Near East, these local gods were usually associated with fertility and the cycle of wet and dry seasons. Baal developed into a single, widely known god, called Lord of the Earth and Lord of the Rain and Dew. Clay tablets found at the ruins of the ancient town of Ras es-Shamrah (in present-day Syria) contain a series of stories about how Baal became the rain god and gained power over the waters of earth. These stories are known as the Baal cycle.

### Major Myths

According to the myths, Yam, the sea god, demanded that Baal be made his slave. He sent messengers to Baal, asking him to surrender, but Baal attacked the messengers and drove them away. Baal then fought with

## Baal

*Statuette of Baal.* RÉUNION  
DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART  
RESOURCE, NY.



Yam and, using two magic weapons, defeated him and seized control of the waters.

Other myths about Baal relate to fertility and the cycle of the seasons. One such story tells of the battle between Baal and Mot, the god of death and infertility. After conquering Yam, Baal complained that he had no house like the other gods did. El agreed to let the crafts god Kothar build Baal a fine house. When it was finished, Baal held a great



feast, but he did not invite Mot or send him respectful presents. Greatly insulted, Mot asked Baal to come to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, to dine. Although he was afraid, Baal could not refuse the invitation. The food served at Mot's table was mud, the food of death, and when Baal ate it, he was trapped in the underworld.

While Baal was in the underworld, famine struck the earth, and El searched for someone to replace Baal. Asherah (pronounced ASH-er-ah), a fertility goddess, convinced El to give Baal's throne to her son Ashtar. But when Ashtar, the god of irrigation, sat on the throne, his feet did not even touch the floor. Realizing he could not fill Baal's place, Ashtar gave up the throne.

Meanwhile, Baal's wife and sister, the fierce goddess Anat, traveled to the underworld. After splitting Mot with her sword, she separated his pieces with her fan, burned the pieces in a **fire**, ground them in a mill, and planted them in the ground. These actions brought Baal back to life. Mot was later restored to life, and the two gods battled each other again. In the end, the **sun** goddess Shapash separated them, Baal regained his throne, and the land became fertile again.

## Baal in Context

Worship of Baal was widespread in the ancient Near East. The clay tablets of Ras es-Shamrah, which relate the Baal cycle, date from about 1500 BCE. Baal was also popular in Egypt from about 1400 to 1075 BCE. In Mesopotamia, Baal was known to the Babylonians and Assyrians and was identified with their national gods **Marduk** and Ashur. The Greeks called the god Belos and identified him with **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS).

Like the other inhabitants of Canaan, the ancient Hebrews worshipped local gods called Baal and honored their children with names ending with *baal*, such as Ishbaal, the son of King Saul. In fact, the Hebrew god Yahweh (pronounced YAH-way) appears to have shared many of Baal's characteristics.

As the worship of Yahweh became more important, Baal fell out of favor with the Hebrews. In the 800s BCE, a queen of Israel named Jezebel introduced a cult of Baal borrowed from the Phoenicians. She set up the cult as a rival to the official worship of Yahweh. Opposition to Baal grew so strong that over the next century the name *Baal* was replaced with the

## Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies

In the New Testament of the Bible, *Beelzebub* is one of the names Jesus gave Satan. In some places, he is Satan's main assistant rather than Satan himself. The name comes from *Baalzebub*, the name of the god of the Philistine city of Ekron. *Baalzebub*, which means "lord of the flies," is probably a distorted version of *Baal*, or "lord of the house." The origin of the word is unknown.

term *boshet*, meaning shame. In later texts, the name of Saul's son was changed from Ishbaal to Ishbosheth. Later still, Christians considered *Baal* to be a name for a devil.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In the story of Yam and Baal, Yam represents the destructive nature of water, as in rivers and seas flooding the land and ruining crops. Baal represents water's positive powers, including how rain and dew provide moisture needed to make crops grow. The myth of Baal and Mot emphasizes the importance of rain to the land. Baal represents the fertility of spring rains, while Mot represents the drought of the summer months. The actions taken by Anat against Mot, such as splitting, winnowing, burning, grinding, and planting, are steps taken by farmers when they harvest wheat. They prepare it for use as food during the winter and sow it to create more crops the next year. By defeating the drought, represented by Mot, the rains, represented by Baal, renew the earth each year and allow life to flourish in the dry climate of the Near East.

## Baal in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though some ancient examples of art and sculpture depicting Baal exist, the deity fell out of favor and was seldom depicted in recent times. The later Christian view of Baal as a demon or king of **hell** has become the most enduring image of the deity. Baal is represented as a demonic character in role-playing games such as *Magic: the Gathering*, and appeared as a character in the TV series *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007). *Baal* is also the title of a 1923 play by Bertolt Brecht, though the play's

main character, also named Baal, is neither a god nor a demon but a murderous poet.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Baal was considered a very important god in the region of Canaan, in the arid Middle East. How do you think the geography and climate of this region helped to shape Baal's position and popularity?

**SEE ALSO** Devils and Demons; El; Satan; Semitic Mythology; Underworld



## Babel, Tower of

### Myth Overview

According to the monotheistic religions (religions in which the people believe in only one god) of the Middle East, arrogant people built the Tower of Babel. In turn, they were made humble by losing their common language. The story of the Tower of Babel is told in the first book of the Old Testament of the Bible. In it, some people decided to build a city on the plains of southern Mesopotamia. The city they envisioned would feature a massive tower that reached up into the heavens. Their plan was to gain recognition for themselves as a people and to be able to stay together. When God saw what they were doing, however, he concluded that they were simply trying to gain power. To make planning difficult for them, he made them speak many different languages. Unable to communicate with each other at the building site, the people gave up the project and scattered to different lands. The remains of the city became known as Babel.

### The Tower of Babel in Context

The story of the tower may have developed from the way later visitors interpreted the ruins of the old cities of the region. In Hebrew, the word *Babel* is a misinterpretation of the name *Babylon*, which meant “the gate of God.” In fact, archaeologists have found evidence of several tall ziggurats, or step-sided temples, in the ancient city of Babylon.

#### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

#### Pronunciation

TOW-ur uv BAY-buhl

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Book of Genesis in the Old Testament

## Babel, Tower of

*The builders of the Tower of Babel are distressed by their inability to communicate after God makes them speak many different languages to disrupt the building process.* THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.



### Key Themes and Symbols

The Tower of Babel is often viewed as a lesson of humility, or being modest before God. The Hebrew word *balal*, similar to “babel,” means “confusion.” Today the image of the Tower of Babel is used to indicate confusion and failure to communicate.

### The Tower of Babel in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Tower of Babel is one of the most popular myths of the Old Testament. It has been depicted in artwork by Pieter Brueghel the Elder,

Gustave Doré, and M. C. Escher, among others. Science fiction author Ted Chiang wrote a thought-provoking short story about this myth, “Tower of Babel,” which won the Nebula Award in 1990. Another science fiction writer, Douglas Adams, gave the name “Babel fish” to a creature that appears in his 1979 novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The fish-like creature can live inside the ear and instantly translate any language into any other language.

It is possible that the term “babble,” meaning to speak nonsense or say things without meaning, is related to the story of the Tower of Babel; however, etymologists, or experts in the history of words, have not been able to establish a clear link between the two.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Over half of Europeans speak two languages (or more), but only nine percent of Americans speak two languages. English is so widely spoken throughout the world that, even when traveling abroad, Americans can often get by with little knowledge of the language of the country they are visiting. Do you think the American educational system should put more stress on teaching foreign languages? Why or why not? What are the benefits of knowing more than one language? Is the rapid spread of English as a common language of business around the world desirable or undesirable?

SEE ALSO Semitic Mythology

## Bacchus

See **Dionysus**.



## Balder

### Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Balder (pronounced BAWL-der) was the son of **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), the supreme Norse deity, and of **Frigg**

#### Nationality/Culture

Norse

#### Pronunciation

BAWL-der

#### Alternate Names

Baldr, Baldur

#### Appears In

The Prose Edda, the Poetic Edda

#### Lineage

Son of Odin and Frigg

(pronounced FRIG), goddess of marriage and motherhood. Balder was the most beautiful of the gods and the one most beloved by Odin.

### Major Myths

As a youth, Balder led a happy life and eventually married Nanna. Soon, however, Balder began to suffer from terrible dreams that threatened death. Fearing for his safety, Frigg asked everything in creation, including animals, birds, stones, wood, and metal, to promise not to hurt Balder. There was only one thing she did not ask to make such a promise: the mistletoe plant. Frigg thought that the mistletoe was too young to take an oath.

After everyone and everything had taken Frigg's oath, the gods amused themselves by throwing things at Balder because they knew nothing could harm him. However, the evil god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) decided to find a way to hurt Balder. Loki transformed himself into an old woman and went to visit Frigg. The old woman asked if it was true that all things had taken an oath not to hurt Balder. Frigg admitted that she had not asked the mistletoe to take the oath. Loki then went to the place where the mistletoe grew and took a twig from it.

Next, Loki approached Balder's blind brother Höd (pronounced HAWTH) and asked why he was not throwing things at Balder like everyone else. Höd replied that he could not see Balder, and besides, he had nothing to throw. Loki then handed Höd a dart he had made from the mistletoe and offered to guide Höd's hand as he threw it. The dart struck Balder, killing him instantly. The gods were shocked and confused. Frigg begged someone to go to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and pay a ransom to bring back her son.

Hermódr, another of Odin's sons, volunteered to recover Balder. Hermódr journeyed to the underworld where he found **Hel**, the goddess of death. She told Hermódr that if everything under **heaven** shed a tear for Balder, she would allow him to return; however, if even one thing, living or dead, spoke against Balder or refused to weep for him, he would have to remain in the underworld. The gods sent messengers to every part of world to ask everything to weep for Balder. They thought they had succeeded until they found an old hag named Thökk sitting in a cave. They asked her to weep for Balder, but she refused. Most accounts



*All living things, except mistletoe, took an oath not to hurt Balder. Here Loki guides the blind god Höd to kill Balder with a branch of mistletoe.* © ROYAL LIBRARY, COPENHAGEN, DENMARK/ THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

suggest that Thökk was none other than Loki, the trickster god, in disguise. Frigg eventually recovered Balder.

### Balder in Context

The Poetic Edda, also called the Elder Edda, is a collection of ancient poems known mostly from the discovery of a single manuscript, the *Codex Regius*. Although the manuscript is believed to have been written in the thirteenth century CE, many of the poems may have existed for centuries before that.

The Prose Edda, also called the Younger Edda, was written in the thirteenth century CE by an Icelandic academic named Snorri Sturluson. The author based much of his work on the poems of the Elder Edda. The stories and poems of the two Eddas relate the most popular and important tales of Norse mythology, including stories featuring Balder. They remain the best sources of information regarding Norse myths.

The myth of Balder and the deadly mistletoe may be seen as a way of communicating the poisonous nature of mistletoe among the Norse people. Unlike the berries of many other plants, the raw berries from mistletoe are highly toxic, and can cause vomiting, seizures, and cardiac arrest.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Norse mythology, Balder is seen as a symbol of innocence, purity, and beauty. According to legend, the tears Frigg shed after Balder's death became the berries on the mistletoe plant. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe commemorates Frigg's joy upon recovering Balder from the dead, and the plant has become a symbol of love. The link between mistletoe and love gave rise to the tradition of kissing under a sprig of mistletoe during the winter holiday season.

### Balder in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In early mythological texts, Balder was often shown at or just before his moment of death by mistletoe. In more recent times, Balder is not as popular in art or literature as other Norse gods such as Odin and **Thor**. Balder has appeared as a superhero in several Marvel Comics series since 1964. The comic book character shares many traits with the Norse deity, including his vulnerability to mistletoe. The *Baldur's Gate* video game series, created by BioWare in 1998, is set in a fantasy world that references Norse mythology. In northern Europe, one species of mayweed, a flowering plant in the sunflower family, is known as Balder's brow. It is so called because its bright white flowers are said to match Balder's light complexion.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In some ways, the story of Balder is similar to the story of **Achilles** from Greek myth. Compare the two. How did each become almost invincible?



How did the other gods play a part in the downfall of Balder and Achilles? Are their personalities similar or different? How is this reflected in each myth?

SEE ALSO Frigg; Hel; Loki; Norse Mythology; Odin



## Banshees

### Character Overview

Banshee (pronounced BAN-shee) is the English spelling of *bean sídhe*, the name of a female fairy of Irish and Celtic folklore. Banshees were omens of death and let out a howl that chilled listeners to the bone. The banshee's nighttime howling warned people that a death was about to take place. When an important or holy person was about to die, several banshees would wail or sing together. According to some legends, the banshees were accompanied by a large black coach carrying a coffin and pulled by headless horses. When the coach arrived at a house, blood was thrown at the person who opened the door. On the other hand, if a banshee loved a person who was near death, she would sing a gentle song that predicted death but also comforted the dying person and family members.

### Banshees in Context

The legend of the banshee may have gotten its start in the Irish and Scottish tradition of “keening.” When a person in the community passed away, it was customary for a chosen woman, known as a keener, to sing a song of lament, or grief, at the person’s funeral. Some keeners were believed to be descended from fairies.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Banshees represent the certain approach of death, since their wail means that someone will die. For this reason, they are usually feared and seen as messengers from the land of the dead. However, they may also represent comfort and peace in the face of approaching death.

#### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

#### Pronunciation

BAN-shee

#### Alternate Names

Banshie, Bean Sídhe

#### Appears In

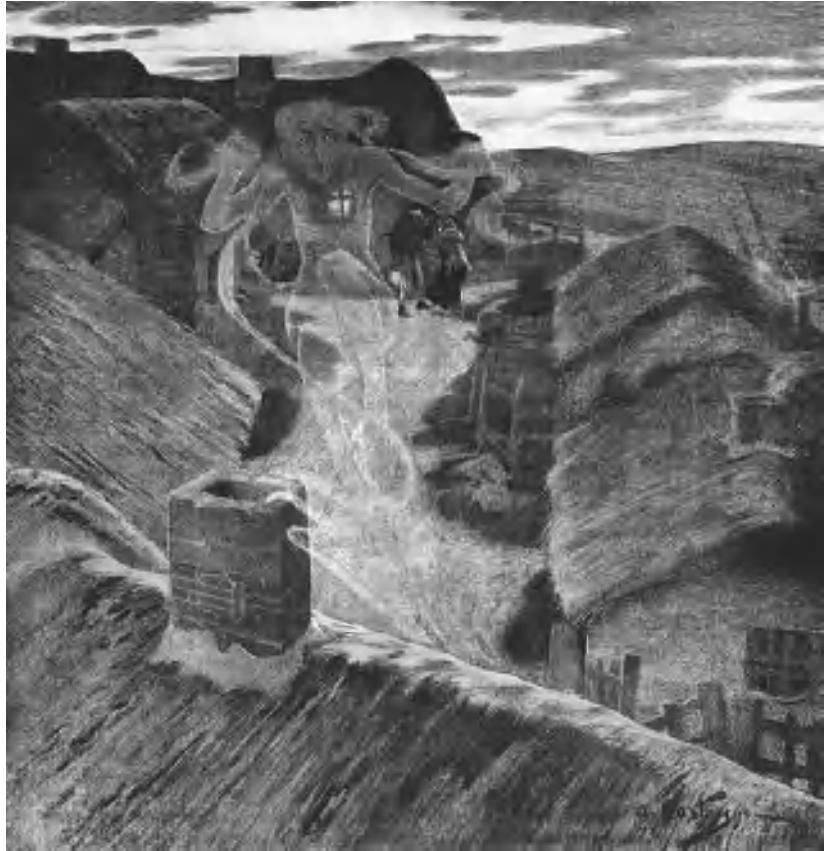
Irish and Celtic folktales

#### Lineage

None

## Banshees

*According to Irish folklore, banshees were female fairies who wailed when someone was about to die.* © NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES.



### **Banshees in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Banshees are among the best-known beings from Irish mythology, appearing in the literary works of William Butler Yeats and modern fantasy novelist Terry Pratchett. They were also featured in the Disney film *Darby O’Gill and the Little People* (1959). Banshees are represented in many fantasy role-playing games, including the *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Warcraft* series. The term “banshee” has been used in the names of many different products, from vehicles to sunglasses.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

As mentioned above, keening was a common part of Irish and Scottish funerals at one time. Using your library, the Internet, or other available sources, research “keening” as a funeral tradition in Ireland and

Scotland. What does the keener usually sing about? Is keening still performed in modern times? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Celtic Mythology



## Basilisk

### Character Overview

In European mythology, the basilisk (pronounced BAS-uh-lisk) was a small serpent that could kill any living thing with its glance or its breath. It was usually represented as a creature with a dragon's body and wings, and a serpent's head. Early myths related that weasels and roosters were enemies of the basilisk. It was believed that a basilisk would die if it heard a rooster crowing. Another way to destroy a basilisk was to hold a mirror up to its face. The creature would die immediately after seeing its reflection. Travelers often carried roosters, weasels, or mirrors for protection when they traveled to regions where basilisks were thought to live.

### The Basilisk in Context

The basilisk first appeared in legends from ancient Greece and Rome. Its name is derived from the Greek *basileus*, or "little king." The basilisk was described in detail by the author, naturalist, and philosopher Pliny the Elder in the first century CE. In the 1100s CE, St. Hildegard wrote of a serpent coming out of an egg sat upon by a toad. Early descriptions of the basilisk indicate that it was simply a small but very lethal serpent. Some historians believe that the legend may have been based on the deadly family of snakes known as cobras.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Called the king of serpents, the basilisk was often associated with the devil and symbolized the deadly sin of lust. The fact that it was a serpent born from an egg incubated by a toad was an indication of its unnatural and unholy nature.

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

BAS-uh-lisk

#### Alternate Names

Regulus (Roman)

#### Appears In

Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*

#### Lineage

Born of a serpent's egg incubated by a rooster or toad

## The Basilisk in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The basilisk appears in many European cultures across different religions and mythologies. Jesus is even depicted fighting one in medieval art. The basilisk is mentioned in literature by the English writers Geoffrey Chaucer and Edmund Spenser, and is referred to in William Shakespeare's plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*. More recently, the basilisk has appeared in several role-playing games and the 1998 novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* by J. K. Rowling. The basilisk has also lent its name to a variety of tropical lizards known for their ability to run quickly across the surface of water using only their hind legs.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The basilisk is a creature that is often described as having parts similar to a mixture of other creatures. Create your own mythical creature using parts of existing animals and write a description of it. Describe any special powers you think it should have, and be sure to name it.

SEE ALSO Devils and Demons; Serpents and Snakes



## Bast

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

BAST

### Alternate Names

Bastet, Ubasti, Pasht

### Appears In

Papyrus texts and engravings in Lower Egypt, Herodotus's *Histories*

### Lineage

Sometimes referred to as the daughter of Isis and Osiris

## Character Overview

Bast is best known as the cat-headed goddess of ancient Egypt. Evidence of Bast has been dated as early as 2600 BCE. Early myths suggest that she was the daughter of the **sun** god **Ra**, though later she was popularly known as the daughter of the goddess **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis) and the god **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris). In these later myths, she was also believed to be the sister of the god **Horus**.

Bast became closely associated with Sekhmet, a lion-headed goddess from Upper Egypt. Sekhmet was considered a warrior goddess, while Bast, being symbolized by a domesticated cat rather than a lion, was a gentler goddess who brought good fortune. Bast was the protector of cats and children, as well as the royal house of the pharaoh, or ruler of Egypt.

Because of her early association with Ra, Bast was considered a sun goddess; however, later Greek descriptions of Bast referred to her instead as a goddess of the moon.

## Major Myths

In one early myth, Bast protected Ra from his mortal enemy, a serpent named Apep. For her service, she was given the serpent of wisdom known as Uraeus (pronounced your-AY-us). Symbols of this serpent became associated with the pharaohs, and were worn as headpieces to indicate that they were protected by Bast and Ra.

## Bast in Context

The ancient Egyptians were among the first to document the domestication, or taming, of cats so they could live with humans. As far back as 4000 BCE, Egyptians used cats to keep rodent populations under control near areas of stored grain. Cats proved so important to maintaining grain supplies that they were considered sacred, or worthy of religious respect. They became common in many households, and when a family's cat died, the family went into a period of mourning. In fact, cats held a special place in the hearts of ancient Egyptians even after death: in 1888, a farmer near Beni Hasan uncovered a tomb containing tens of thousands of dead cats that had been mummified, or dried and preserved, thousands of years before.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As the protector of cats, the main symbol associated with Bast is the cat. Another important symbol is the sistrum, a handheld musical instrument containing discs of metal that make

*Statue of the Egyptian goddess*

*Bast.* THE ART ARCHIVE/  
MUSÉE DU LOUVRE PARIS/  
GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PIC-  
TURE DESK, INC.



noise when shaken. In ancient Egyptian art, Bast is often depicted with a human body and the head of a cat, holding a sistrum in one of her hands.

### Bast in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The goddess Bast was mentioned in Book 2 of *Histories* by the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. Herodotus described the annual festival held at Bubastis, the city named in honor of Bast. Icons of Bast, depicting the cat-headed goddess, remain popular in modern times as decorative symbols of ancient Egypt. Bast appeared as a character in various Marvel comic book series beginning in 1966, and was the subject of a graphic novel trilogy entitled *The Sandman Presents: Bast* (2003). The goddess is mentioned in the 2004 film *Catwoman* as the source of Catwoman's unusual powers.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In many ways, the ancient Egyptians treated cats much like modern pet owners do. Some historians claim that cats were important to Egyptians only because they controlled rodent populations. Why do you think domesticated animals such as cats and dogs remain popular in modern times? What functions, if any, do you think pets serve? Do you think we give our pets as much respect and adoration as the ancient Egyptians did?

SEE ALSO Egyptian Mythology; Horus; Isis; Osiris

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman



#### Pronunciation

BAW-sis and fi-LEE-muhn

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

#### Lineage

Unknown

## Baucis and Philemon

### Character Overview

Baucis (pronounced BAW-sis) and Philemon (pronounced fi-LEE-muhn), an old couple from the land of Phrygia (pronounced FRIJ-ee-uh), showed hospitality toward the gods and were rewarded.

According to Greek myth, the gods **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) assumed human form and visited

earth disguised as poor travelers. When they reached Phrygia, an ancient kingdom located in the west-central part of Anatolia, they looked for shelter but were turned away by everyone except Philemon and his wife, Baucis.

The old couple gladly shared their small amount of food and wine with the strangers. Baucis and Philemon realized that their guests were gods after noticing that the wine jug never ran out and their poor wine was replaced by wine of the finest quality. Once refreshed, Zeus and Hermes led the couple to a hill above Phrygia and sent a flood to destroy the land to punish the people who had turned them away. Only the old couple's house remained undamaged. Zeus made the house a temple to the gods and awarded Baucis and Philemon two wishes: to serve as priest and priestess of the temple and, when the time came, to die together. Many years later, when the moment of their deaths came, Baucis and Philemon were transformed into trees, one linden (also known as lime) and one oak, with intertwined branches.

## Baucis and Philemon in Context

Phrygia, where Baucis and Philemon lived, was a region that covered a large inland portion of present-day Turkey. Phrygian culture was distinct from Greek culture, and the Phrygian people worshipped many gods different from the Greeks. The Greeks often associated these Phrygian gods with their own. For example, the Phrygian nomadic horseman god Sabazios was usually linked to Zeus or **Dionysus**. Much of what is known about Phrygian culture is taken from existing Greek works, such as Homer's *Iliad*.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The linden, or lime, tree is considered by many European cultures to be a symbol of love and fertility. The oak tree is widely considered to be a symbol of strength and steadfastness, and was even used as a symbol of Zeus. Both trees are known to have lifespans of many centuries. The intertwining branches symbolize a bond between the two that promises to gain strength as the trees continue to grow.

In the myth, Baucis and Philemon are the only people in Phrygia to help the two gods disguised as strangers. For this reason, Baucis and Philemon also symbolize hospitality to travelers.

## Baucis and Philemon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Baucis and Philemon have very limited appearances in Greek myth, but their tale remains a popular one among later artists and writers. Ovid's original tale was translated by John Dryden in 1693, and Jonathan Swift wrote his own poetic update to the myth, setting it in England around 1709. The bestselling novel *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier (1997) uses the tale of Baucis and Philemon as a counterpoint to the Civil War-era couple that serve as his main characters.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using the library, the Internet, or other resources, find Jonathan Swift's poem "Baucis and Philemon" (1708) and read it. (The poem is freely available on Web sites that offer public domain works of literature.) How does Swift's poem differ in tone and message from the original myth? How is the ending different? Which version do you prefer and why?

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Hermes; Zeus



## Bellerophon

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

buh-LAIR-uh-fun

### Alternate Names

Bellerophontes

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Theogony*

### Lineage

Son of King Glaucus of Corinth

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Bellerophon (pronounced buh-LAIR-uh-fun) was a hero and warrior who accidentally killed his own brother. He tamed the winged horse **Pegasus** (PEG-uh-suhs) and fought a ferocious beast called the Chimaera (pronounced kye-MEER-uh).

After accidentally killing his brother and another man, Bellerophon sought protection from King **Proteus** (pronounced PRO-tee-uhs) of Tiryns (pronounced TEER-ins), who granted Bellerophon shelter. Proteus's wife, Anteia (pronounced ahn-TAY-uh), tried to seduce Bellerophon, but he resisted her. Angry at being rejected, Anteia told her husband that Bellerophon had tried to rape her. Proteus was furious but did not want to kill his guest. Instead, he sent Bellerophon to Anteia's father, King Iobates (pronounced eye-OH-buh-teez) of Lycia



*Bellerophon fighting the Chimaera.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.



(pronounced LISH-ee-uh). He also sent a note explaining what had happened and asking Iobates to kill Bellerophon.

Iobates, too, was reluctant to kill his guest, so he sent him on dangerous missions instead. First, he asked Bellerophon to kill the Chimaera, a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. With the help of the gods, Bellerophon tamed the winged horse Pegasus and then used it to fight the Chimaera. He still could not get near the beast because of its fiery breath, but the

gods helped him formulate a plan. He put a block of lead on the end of his spear and lodged it into the Chimaera's throat. The heat of its breath melted the lead, which went down the creature's throat and suffocated it. After the defeat of the Chimaera, Iobates ordered Bellerophon to defeat two armies, including the fierce **Amazons**. Bellerophon succeeded in these missions as well.

Afterward, Bellerophon told the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) that Iobates seemed ungrateful for his help. In response, Poseidon caused a great flood to strike Lycia. Iobates finally realized that Bellerophon must be innocent of the charges against him. When he discovered that his guest did not rape Anteia, Iobates gave Bellerophon one of his daughters as a bride and made him heir to the throne of Lycia.

Proud of his success, Bellerophon tried to ride Pegasus to Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), home of the gods. **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) sent a fly to bite Pegasus, who bucked and threw Bellerophon to the ground. Bellerophon survived the fall but was crippled for life. He spent the rest of his days wandering the earth as a beggar.

### Bellerophon in Context

During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, a more popular Greek hero was credited for taming Pegasus, which was one of Bellerophon's main accomplishments. The artwork of the period showed **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) taming Pegasus, which led to this version of the story becoming the one most generally accepted in modern culture.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the important themes in Bellerophon's tale is the danger of *hubris*, or excessive pride that clouds one's judgment. Bellerophon, because of his great heroism, believes that he deserves to go to Mount Olympus. The powerful Olympian gods disagree, and Zeus causes Bellerophon to fall and become crippled for life.

### Bellerophon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Bellerophon was one of the more celebrated **heroes** in ancient Greece. He was usually depicted riding Pegasus and slaying the Chimaera.

## Fratricide

Killing a brother, or fratricide, is considered an unthinkable horrible crime in many cultures. In Christian mythology, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, kills his brother Abel. God curses him and banishes him from the society of others. The story also appears in the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an.

Euripides' (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez) tragedy, *Bellerophontes*, details his story, only fragments of which still remain. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Bellerophon's role became less important as depictions of Perseus became more popular among artists and writers.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare the myth of Bellerophon with the myth of **Heracles** and his twelve labors. How are the two myths similar? How are they different? Does each one have a different theme or lesson?

SEE ALSO Amazons; Pegasus; Proteus; Zeus



# Beowulf

## Myth Overview

*Beowulf* (pronounced BAY-uh-woolf) is the earliest existing Anglo-Saxon epic, or a long, grand-scale poem. It tells the story of Beowulf, a Norse hero and warrior who fought and conquered several monsters that terrorized Denmark and Sweden.

*Beowulf* is divided into two parts. The action in the first part takes place in Denmark, where Hrothgar (pronounced ROTH-gar) is king. Beowulf, a mighty warrior from Sweden, comes to help the king destroy a monster that is terrorizing the local people. The second part, set in Sweden, provides an account of Beowulf as an old man who must rid his country of a fearsome dragon.

### Nationality/Culture

Anglo-Saxon

### Pronunciation

BAY-uh-woolf

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The epic *Beowulf*

**Grendel** As part one of the story opens, readers are introduced to King Hrothgar. He has built a great assembly hall called Heorot (pronounced HAY-oh-roht), where his warriors gather to eat, drink, and receive treasure after their victories in combat. Lurking in the dark swamps of Hrothgar's kingdom is a cruel and brutal monster named Grendel (pronounced GREN-dl). Grendel lives in a cave with his mother, also a monster, and cannot be harmed by the weapons of humans. As Grendel roams the marshes and swamps, he hears the joyful sounds of song and laughter from Heorot. They fill him with envy and hatred for Hrothgar and his warriors. One night, Grendel goes to Heorot and finds the warriors asleep after a great deal of drinking and celebration. He snatches up thirty sleeping men, kills them, and carries their bodies home to eat.

In the morning, Hrothgar sees the bloody aftermath of Grendel's attack. Loud wails and cries replace the joyful singing of the previous night. The Danes see Grendel's footprints, but do not think he will return; however, the next night Grendel comes back and kills even more warriors. The Danes gather in their temples and pray for protection from Grendel, but their prayers do not help. For twelve years Grendel continues to terrorize the warriors. Afraid to sleep at Heorot, they abandon the great hall.

Stories of Grendel's raids spread to the surrounding kingdoms, eventually reaching the land of the Geats in southern Sweden. When a mighty Geatish warrior named Beowulf—a man who has slain **giants** and sea monsters and is known for his strength, courage, and skill in battle—hears of Grendel's deeds, he decides to sail to Denmark and help Hrothgar rid his kingdom of the monster.

Beowulf prepares a ship and chooses fourteen brave warriors to accompany him. They set sail for Denmark, arriving the next day. At Heorot, the Geats are welcomed by Hrothgar, who has known Beowulf since he was a child. The king throws a feast for the Geatish warriors. At the feast, a Danish warrior named Unferth insults Beowulf by suggesting that he is too boastful and not a great enough warrior to kill Grendel. Beowulf responds by noting that he has heard no tales of Unferth's bravery. He says that if Unferth were as fierce as he believes himself to be that Grendel would not now be terrorizing the Danes. Pleased by Beowulf's defiant attitude, Hrothgar is confident that the Geatish warrior will slay Grendel and free the kingdom from the monster's evil.

## What's a Life Worth?

The story of Beowulf features a concept, common in early Germanic societies, known as *wergild* (pronounced WAIR-geld). This was the price set on a person's life based on that person's value to society. If an individual was killed, the family received wergild to compensate for the loss. In *Beowulf*, Hrothgar presents Beowulf with wergild for the Geatish warrior who was killed fighting Grendel. According to Germanic law, the system of wergild was meant as an alternative to seeking revenge for the loss of a loved one.

That night, the Geats stay at Heorot. Grendel soon appears and, before Beowulf can stop him, kills one of Beowulf's own men. Grendel then grabs Beowulf, but the mighty warrior seizes the monster's arm with his powerful grip. Beowulf and Grendel struggle until Grendel finally manages to wrench himself away, leaving his arm in Beowulf's grasp. The monster staggers back to his cave to die. The severed arm is hung in Heorot as a trophy for all to see. Hrothgar showers Beowulf with gifts and honors him with another feast. The Danes believe they will finally be able to sleep in peace at Heorot again.

**Grendel's Mother** The Danes' troubles are not over. When Grendel's mother sees her dying son, she vows revenge. She goes to Heorot at night and surprises the Danish warriors. After killing the king's most trusted adviser, she leaves with Grendel's arm. Again the Danes call upon Beowulf for help.

Beowulf and several warriors track the monster to her lair in the swamps. They find it at the base of a cliff at the bottom of a pool bubbling with blood and gore. Unferth, who has by now changed his opinion of Beowulf, lends him Hrunting, his sword. Brandishing it, Beowulf leaps into the slimy waters. Grendel's mother grabs Beowulf and pulls him into a cave where the water cannot enter. Beowulf strikes at the monster with Hrunting, but the sword does not hurt her. The two wrestle, and Grendel's mother almost kills Beowulf, but his armor saves him. Then he sees a giant sword hanging on the wall of the cave. He grabs it and, with one mighty swing, cuts off the monster's head. At the back of the cave, he sees Grendel's corpse.

Using the same sword, he cuts off Grendel's head and returns to the surface with it. He also brings the remains of the sword. Beowulf and his men return to Heorot in triumph, and Hrothgar again rewards them. Finally, the Geats go home to Sweden where Beowulf eventually becomes king.

**Beowulf and the Dragon** As the second part of the epic begins, Beowulf has ruled for fifty years, and his kingdom has prospered. A winged dragon lives in the land, protecting an ancient treasure buried hundreds of years earlier. One day, a slave who had been punished by his master runs away and finds the cave where the treasure is buried. To earn his master's forgiveness, the slave steals a golden cup and takes it to his household. When the dragon inspects the treasure, as he did every day, he quickly notices the missing cup. To punish the Geats for stealing from him, the dragon flies over the countryside breathing **fire** on the villages and setting homes ablaze.

Though he is now an old man, Beowulf decides to fight the dragon. He and eleven warriors find the dragon's cave, but Beowulf insists on fighting the dragon alone. Early in the battle, Beowulf discovers that his iron shield will not protect him against the dragon's fiery breath. Just as Beowulf is about to be killed, a warrior named Wiglaf, Beowulf's young kinsman, rushes to his aid. With Wiglaf's help, Beowulf slays the dragon. Mortally wounded in the battle, the king asks Wiglaf to bring out the treasure so that he might see it before he dies.

In accordance with Norse burial customs, Beowulf's body is burned in a great fire on a cliff overlooking the sea. The treasure is placed in the fire with Beowulf as a **sacrifice**. A large burial mound is built over the remains of the fire to serve as a reminder of the great king, and to provide a landmark for seafarers. The poem ends with a ceremony of praise for Beowulf.

### ***Beowulf* in Context**

The manuscript containing the story of Beowulf was discovered in England in the 1600s. It was written in Old English, the language of the Anglo-Saxon invaders who settled in England between 450 and 600 CE. There is some debate about when *Beowulf* was written and who wrote it. Although the manuscript dates from around 1000, the poem was composed much earlier, sometime between 700 and 950.



*As Beowulf and Grendel struggle, Beowulf rips off the monster's arm.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

Certain references in the text suggest that the author was a Christian who modeled the story after pagan (non-Judeo-Christian) tales of past Norse and German **heroes**. The writer was probably either a

monk or a poet connected to a nobleman's court in central or northern England.

*Beowulf* is set in a much earlier time than the period in which it was written, and the action takes place in Denmark and Sweden. The story shows the warrior culture of ancient Germanic peoples, where wars were so common that many men held steady jobs as fighters. The king supplied these warriors with food, shelter, land, and weapons. In return, they promised to be loyal and obedient to the king.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

*Beowulf* emphasizes values that were important to Norse warriors, such as courage, loyalty to one's king and comrades, and honor for those who fight and die bravely. The story emphasizes how fragile life and fame can be. Like any person, Beowulf must find meaning in his world while accepting the fact that he will eventually die. He meets that challenge by facing danger bravely and trusting that the story of his deeds will cause him to live on in the memories of those who hear it.

### **Beowulf in Art, Literature, and Popular Culture**

Beowulf has endured over the centuries as a prime example of a Western European hero. He is different from many Greek and Roman heroes in that even though he possesses great strength and skills, he is fully human, and his successes do not depend upon help from the gods. The story of Beowulf has been translated and adapted by many writers over the centuries. Numerous movies have also been made about the hero, such as the motion-capture computer-animated *Beowulf* (2007).

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971) is a retelling of the story of Beowulf from Grendel's point of view. Gardner calls into question the heroism of Beowulf, and offers a starkly different account of the events described in the epic poem.

Think about how point of view affects the telling of a story. What factors can cause a single set of events to be described in two vastly different ways?

**SEE ALSO** Dragons; Norse Mythology; Witches and Wizards





# Bhagavad Gita

## Myth Overview

Written more than two thousand years ago, the *Bhagavad Gita* is probably the most widely read of the Hindu scriptures and contains some of the basic ideas of Hindu culture. The poem is actually part of a larger Hindu epic (long poem) called the *Mahabharata*, which tells the story of the struggle between two closely related families, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The *Bhagavad Gita* begins just before the start of the great battle between the families. It is written in the form of a conversation between one of the warriors, Prince Arjuna, and his chariot driver, **Krishna**—actually a god in disguise.

As the poem opens, the two armies are lined up facing each other across the battlefield. Prince Arjuna questions his part in the war. He wonders whether he should follow his duty and fight, even though this would mean killing friends, relatives, and teachers in the opposing army, or whether he should throw down his arms and let himself be killed. Krishna reminds Arjuna that everyone has certain duties in society. As a member of the warrior caste (the second highest level in India's complex social class system), Arjuna's duty is to fight and protect. Yet, while he is required by duty to act, his actions must be "right" actions, meaning they must be guided by devotion and selflessness.

## The *Bhagavad Gita* in Context

The *Mahabharata* (pronounced muh-hah-BAHR-ruh-tuh), the great epic of which the *Bhagavad Gita* is a part, is one of the longest poems in the world, with over 1.5 million words and almost seventy-five thousand verses. The sage Vyasa (pronounced vee-YAH-sah), who may or may not have been a real person, is believed to be its author, but he probably just collected and compiled the many stories in the epic. Originally the *Mahabharata* was passed down through oral tradition, changing and developing from generation to generation. The *Bhagavad Gita* was probably added to the original epic sometime between the fifth and second centuries BCE. If the *Mahabharata* describes an actual historical war, scholars place it around the beginning of the ninth century BCE.

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

BAH-ga-vad GEE-ta

### Alternate Names

The Gita, The Song of God

### Appears In

The *Mahabharata*



Page from the *Bhagavad Gita*, the most widely read of the Hindu scriptures. © ART MEDIA/HIP/THE IMAGE WORKS.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Selfless devotion to duty is the major lesson in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Each caste has its own specific duty, and society as a whole benefits when all members perform their duty properly. Through the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna, the reader also learns of many ways to express religious belief, including meditation, worship, and work. The poem teaches that Krishna is a loving god who is concerned about people's welfare and who appears on earth to help during times of trouble.

## The *Bhagavad Gita* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Throughout history, religious and political leaders in India have written commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita* and translated it into many Indian languages. Mahatma Gandhi, a major figure in the Indian independence movement, referred to the *Bhagavad Gita* as his "spiritual dictionary." Since 1785, the text has also been translated into English and European languages. The *Bhagavad Gita* was the inspiration for the former Beatle George Harrison's posthumous album, *Brainwashed* (2002). Robert Redford's 2000 film *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, starring Will Smith, Matt Damon, Jack Lemmon, and Charlize Theron, was based on Steven

Pressfield's 1995 novel of the same name that takes place in the *Bhagavad Gita*. In both the film and the novel, Bagger Vance is a Krishna figure who guides the main character through difficult times.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Bhagavad Gita: A Walkthrough for Westerners* by Jack Hawley (2001) is one way to enjoy the tale with the help of an expert. This book presents the tale in a simple, easy-to-read format and explains the significance of elements to those unfamiliar with Hinduism and Indian culture.

SEE ALSO Hinduism and Mythology; Krishna; Vishnu



# Bragi

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Bragi was the god of poetry. He was the son of **Odin** (OH-din) and the husband of **Idun** (EE-thoon), the goddess of fertility. Described as an old man with a long beard, Bragi welcomed to **Valhalla** the warriors who had died in battle.

## Major Myths

Bragi condemned the trickster god **Loki** for his role in causing the death of the much-loved god **Balder**. The two exchanged threats despite the other gods' attempts to calm them down until finally Loki predicted the destruction of the gods and left them.

## Bragi in Context

Some scholars think that the figure of Bragi might have come from Bragi Boddason, a Norwegian poet of the ninth century CE. In his *Prose Edda*, author Snorri Sturluson mentions Bragi Boddason as a real historical figure who served a number of Swedish kings and was a well-known poet in his time. He could have inspired a legend that grew over the centuries because the culture of this time period placed high value on poets, who

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

BRAH-gee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Odin

were considered second only to kings in esteem. However, throughout his writings, Sturluson—who wrote about four hundred years after Bragi Boddason lived—does not indicate that the two Bragis are related.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Bragi is usually depicted with a harp, an important accompanying instrument for a poet who reads his work aloud. He is always shown with a long beard. He is sometimes described as having runes, or characters from an ancient and magical alphabet, carved on his tongue. Bragi was associated with royal funeral services, when a “cup of Bragi” was used to drink to the honor of a dead king. This cup also figured in the taking of oaths, as anyone taking an oath would do so over a cup of Bragi.

## Bragi in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Bragi does not often appear outside the classic works of Norse mythology. The most well-known images of Bragi are from the nineteenth century: an illustration by Carl Walbohm, and a painting by Nils Blommér.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Legends are sometimes based on a real historical figure. Think of someone whom you admire; it can be someone famous, or someone you know. Write a description of that person as a figure of legend. What characteristics do you think would be remembered and exaggerated? What aspects of their appearance would be emphasized? Are there any particular legends for which the person would be remembered?

SEE ALSO Idun; Odin; Valhalla

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

BRAH-muh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Puranas, the  
Brahma-Samita

### Lineage

Born from the navel of  
Vishnu



# Brahma

## Character Overview

In Hindu mythology, Brahma was the first god in the sacred Hindu trinity, or Trimurti. The other gods were **Vishnu**, the Preserver, and

**Shiva**, the Destroyer. Brahma was the creator god, but his role was not as great as that of creator gods in other mythologies. Brahma's ability to create is a skill he uses at the request of greater gods when something needs to be created; typically, he creates by thinking something into being. When Brahma comes under the influence of darkness, he creates demons; under the influence of goodness, he creates gods. He can also grant immortality, and his tendency to grant immortality to demons causes significant problems for Vishnu and Shiva, who must overcome them. Brahma is not involved in matters concerning death.

## Major Myths

There are many different accounts of the origin of Brahma. According to one story, the creator made the cosmic waters and put a seed in them. The seed turned into a golden egg. After one thousand years, the creator himself emerged from the egg as a younger Brahma. He then made the universe and all things in it. Another legend says that Brahma was born in a lotus flower that sprouted from Vishnu's navel. He went on to create the fathers of humankind, as well as all other things in the universe.

According to legend, Brahma had four faces that came into being from his desire to gaze at a beautiful goddess he created. Brahma originally had five heads, but the god Shiva destroyed one of them when Brahma spoke to him disrespectfully.

## Brahma in Context

In the early literature of Hinduism, Brahma was one of the major gods. However, he plays little part in the modern Hindu religion. Over time, Vishnu and Shiva became more important than Brahma and are more widely worshipped today. While Shiva and Vishnu are each worshipped at thousands of sites throughout India, Brahma alone is worshipped at only a handful of temples. Various legends suggest that Brahma was cursed by either Shiva or a high priest, the curse being that no person would ever worship him. Some scholars believe that Brahma's one-sided focus on the act of creation is why he is not as important as the other gods, who deal with both creation and with death; worshippers seek to follow a god who is responsible for every aspect of their lives—both life and death.

## Brahma

*Brahma is usually shown with four faces and four arms, as in this Cambodian statue.*

RÉUNION DES MUSÉES  
NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE,  
NY.



### Key Themes and Symbols

In works of art, Brahma is usually portrayed with four faces and four arms. The four faces symbolize the four Vedas, the ancient sacred texts of Hinduism. Brahma is often shown wearing white robes and holding a scepter, an alms bowl, a bow, and other items. Brahma is also associated with the swan, a bird that signifies justice and the ability to separate good from bad.

### Brahma in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because Brahma does not have nearly as many dedicated temples as other principal Hindu gods, there are fewer instances of his appearance in art.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a poem titled “Brahma” in 1856, though some academics suggest that Emerson’s poem refers not to Brahma but to the idea of “brahman,” the Hindu belief that the divine is present in all things in the universe.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the Thai god known as Phra Phrom. How is this god similar to Brahma? Are there any differences between the two?

**SEE ALSO** Hinduism and Mythology; Shiva; Vishnu



# Brer Rabbit

## Character Overview

Brer Rabbit is the main character in the Uncle Remus tales written by Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908). As a trickster—a mischievous character known for the ability to deceive—Brer Rabbit outsmarts larger and stronger animals, such as Brer Fox and Brer Bear. Many stories about Brer Rabbit originated in African folklore and were brought to America by African slaves.

Perhaps the most famous Brer Rabbit story is the one about Brer Rabbit and the tar baby. In this tale, Brer Fox makes a life-size figure out of sticky tar and places it on the road in the hopes of catching Brer Rabbit with it. Indeed, when Brer Rabbit comes along and greets the tar baby several times without getting a reply, he gets annoyed enough to hit the tar baby. His hand gets stuck in the tar and he is unable to escape.

Brer Fox pulls Brer Rabbit out of the tar, with the intent of doing him harm. He proposes several different ways of disposing of Brer Rabbit, and Brer Rabbit makes a show of accepting each option, but adding a plea each time that Brer Fox not throw him into a nearby briar patch. Thinking that the briar patch must surely be the worst fate of all if Brer Rabbit was willing to be killed in any other way, Brer Fox flung the rabbit into the briar patch. Brer Rabbit had tricked him, however, because, as he taunts Brer Fox after escaping, “I was born and raised in the briar patch.”

### Nationality/Culture

African American

### Pronunciation

brehr RAB-it

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The *Uncle Remus* series

### Lineage

None

## Brer Rabbit

*Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox.* THE  
ART ARCHIVE/JOHN MEEK/  
THE PICTURE DESK, INC.



### Brer Rabbit in Context

After originating in African-American oral tales, Brer Rabbit became one of the main characters in the Uncle Remus books, written in the 1880s and 1890s by Southern journalist Joel Chandler Harris. The books brought the stories to a whole new audience, but also generated controversy. Since the tales were taken from African-American folklore, Harris, a white man, was accused of stealing the myths and passing them



off as his own creations. Furthermore, by the mid-twentieth-century the stories' use of the dialect of the Deep South and the demeaning stereotype of the complacent Negro as seen in the character of the narrator Uncle Remus offended many people.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The stories of Brer Rabbit are generally trickster tales and involve Brer Rabbit getting himself into trouble through his own selfishness or mischievous nature. He must then use his cleverness to get himself out of trouble.

## Brer Rabbit in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Several stories of Brer Rabbit and his friends were combined and adapted into the Disney animated feature *Song of the South*, released in 1946. The characters can also be seen in the Splash Mountain attractions at both Disneyland and Walt Disney World amusement parks.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Some people feel that Joel Chandler Harris took the Brer Rabbit stories from African-American folklore and wrongly sold them as his own. Do you think it is acceptable for a person to write his or her own version of a folktale or myth, and then sell it? What about modern authors who create their own versions of fairy tales or Greek myths? In your opinion, do myths belong only to the culture that creates them?

SEE ALSO African Mythology; Anansi; Tricksters



# Brunhilde

## Character Overview

In Icelandic and German mythology, Brunhilde was a strong and beautiful princess who was cruelly deceived by her lover. Her story is told in the Edda poems of Iceland and the *Nibelungenlied*, a German poem

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

BROON-hilt

### Alternate Names

Brünhild, Brunhilda, Brynhildr

### Appears In

The Poetic Edda, the *Nibelungenlied*

### Lineage

Daughter of Budli

of the thirteenth century CE. Her name appears with many slight variations, including Brünhild, Brunhilda, or Brynhildr.

In the Icelandic version of the legend, Brunhilde was a Valkyrie—a warrior maiden of the supreme god **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). She was asked to settle an argument between two kings, and she did not support the king that Odin favored. For this, Odin punished Brunhilde by causing her to fall into an everlasting sleep surrounded by a wall of **fire**. The hero **Sigurd** (pronounced SIG-erd) crossed through the flames and woke the maiden with a kiss. They became engaged, but Sigurd left to continue his travels. Later, after receiving a magic potion that made him forget his love for Brunhilde, Sigurd married Gudrun.

Gudrun's brother Gunnar wanted Brunhilde for himself and persuaded Sigurd to help him. Gunnar was unable to reach Brunhilde because of the ring of fire that encircled the castle where she stayed. Disguising himself as Gunnar, Sigurd was able to pass through the fire and reach Brunhilde, and they married. Later Brunhilde realized she had been tricked, and arranged to have Sigurd murdered. When she learned of his death, however, she was overcome with grief and committed suicide by throwing herself on his funeral pyre, a large pile of burning wood used to cremate a dead body. In that way, she could join him in death.

In the *Nibelungenlied*, the story was slightly different. Brunhilde declared that the man she would marry must be able to outperform her in feats of strength and courage. Siegfried (Sigurd), disguised as Gunther (Gunnar), passed the test and won Brunhilde for Gunther. When she discovered the deception, she arranged for Siegfried to be killed.

### Brunhilde in Context

Many scholars believe that Brunhilde is based on Queen Brunhilda of Austrasia, who ruled regions of what is now France and Germany during the sixth and seventh centuries CE. She married a king named Sigebert. Queen Brunhilda also had an ongoing feud with her brother-in-law's wife, Fredegund, who eventually hired assassins to murder Sigebert in order to gain the upper hand in a war between the brothers. Queen Brunhilda went on to control the kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy through her son and later her grandson, but was accused of using murder and treachery to maintain power. She was eventually condemned to

*Brunhilde.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/© CHRIS BEETLES, LONDON, UK/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



death, the manner of which required her to be tied to several horses and torn apart as they each pulled in different directions.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Two of the main themes found in Brunhilde's tale are betrayal and revenge. Odin seeks revenge on Brunhilde when she does not support the argument of the king he favored. Later, Brunhilde seeks revenge

against Sigurd when she discovers that he deceived her into marrying him instead of his brother. Gunnar wants revenge against Sigurd because he believes Sigurd betrayed him by sleeping with Brunhilde, even though he did not.

### **Brunhilde in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Brunhilde has proven to be an especially popular character in European art and literature. The German composer Richard Wagner based part of his opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* on the legend of Brunhilde. Brunhilde is a main character in the 2006 film *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King* (released in the UK in 2004 as *Sword of Xanten*), a partial adaptation of the story of the rings of the Nibelung.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The legend of Brunhilde shares some similarities with the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, written in 1697 by Charles Perrault and later adapted into a Disney animated film. Find and read a version of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale, and compare it to the legend of Brunhilde. How are the stories similar? How are they different?

SEE ALSO Sigurd; Valkyries



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## Buddhism and Mythology

### **Buddhist Mythology in Context**

Buddhism, one of the major religions of the world, was founded in India in the sixth century BCE and then spread throughout Asia. Over time, many different Buddhist sects, or unique groups, have developed, each with its own variations of gods and legends. Although Buddhism has produced little mythology of its own, it has incorporated stories from mythologies of various groups that adopted the religion.

### **Core Deities and Characters**

The roots of Buddhism can be traced to one man: Siddhartha Gautama (pronounced see-DAHR-tuh GAW-tuh-muh), a prince from a small

state in northern India. Although he was a historical figure, many of the stories about him are based on legend. This has made it difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. Yet the basic elements of Siddhartha Gautama's life story—whether real or invented—are well known, as are his religious teachings.

The son of King Suddhodana (pronounced soo-doh-DAH-nah), Gautama was born around 563 BCE. According to legend, his mother, Queen Maya, had a dream in which she was expecting a child fathered by a white elephant. Local brahmins, or holy men, interpreted the dream to mean that the queen would give birth to a great man. They said that the child would become a powerful king unless he became aware of human suffering in the world. If that happened, he would become a great holy man and savior.

Some legends say that when Gautama was born the earth shook, rivers stopped flowing, flowers fell from the sky, and a lotus flower sprang from the place where he first touched the earth. Mindful of the prophecy about his son, King Suddhodana did everything possible to shield the boy from knowledge of the outside world and human suffering. He built a palace in which his son could enjoy all of life's pleasures, and he forbade any mention of death, grief, or sickness.

One day Gautama expressed a wish to see the world outside the palace. Suddhodana agreed to take his son to a nearby town, but first he had the town cleaned up and ordered that everything unpleasant be removed. During the visit, however, Gautama saw a sick man, an old man, a beggar, and a corpse. Shocked to discover that people lived in poverty, became sick, grew old, and died, the prince realized that he knew nothing about the real world. Determined to learn the truth about the world, Gautama gave up all his possessions and left his home. He became a beggar and sought truth and understanding by denying himself all pleasures.

After six years of wandering and seeking wisdom from holy men, Gautama realized that he was no nearer truth and understanding than before. He decided to look for the truth within himself and went to the town of Bodh Gaya to sit beneath the Bodhi (pronounced BOH-dee) tree and meditate, or think deeply and spiritually. While he was meditating, the evil spirit Mara tried to tempt Gautama with beautiful women. When this failed, Mara threatened him with demons and finally threw a fiery disc at him. However, the disc turned into flowers that floated down on Gautama's head.

## The Noble Eightfold Path

Buddhism describes a “noble eightfold path” to enlightenment:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right concentration

After five weeks of meditation, Gautama came to understand that the only way to avoid suffering was to free oneself from all desires. At the moment he realized this, Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, the “enlightened one” who is free from suffering. He then began to travel and teach others how to achieve spiritual happiness. Buddha gained many followers before his death around 483 BCE.

After the death of Buddha, his followers carried Buddhist teachings throughout Asia. Within a few hundred years, Buddhism was practiced in Sri Lanka, Burma (modern-day Myanmar), Thailand, Cambodia, and most of Southeast Asia. By the 600s CE, it had spread to central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Tibet.

## Major Myths

Buddhism teaches that all humans experience many lives and are constantly reincarnated—reborn after death into a different form of existence. The form each person takes in a new life depends on *karma*, which is the total of one’s good and bad deeds in previous lives. The goal of Buddhism is to escape this cycle of death and rebirth by achieving enlightenment. When that happens, a person enters a timeless state known as *nirvana* and is free of all desire.

The original form of Buddhism, recorded in texts from about 100 BCE, is called Theravada Buddhism. Its followers believed that there

would be only one Buddha in the world at any one time. Theravada Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, Burma, and much of Southeast Asia. A later form of Buddhism, called Mahayana, taught that many Buddhas might exist at the same time. It attracted followers in China, Japan, Tibet, and Korea.

As Buddhism spread, it divided into many different sects. Each sect developed its own traditions and mythology, often based on a combination of local beliefs and deities with Buddhist teaching.

**India** Early Buddhism in India was influenced by Brahmanism, an early form of the Hindu religion. Both religions shared the idea of the cycle of birth and **reincarnation**, and both included Devas, traditional Indian gods, and Asuras, powerful demons.

A principal figure in Indian Buddhism was Amitabha, who was a *bodhisattva* (pronounced boh-dee-SAT-vah)—a person who had become enlightened but chose not to enter nirvana in order to help others gain enlightenment. According to legend, Amitabha was born from a lotus flower and came to the aid of Buddhists who worshipped him and pronounced his sacred name.

**China** Arriving in China in about 65 CE, Buddhism developed into one of that country's three most important religions, alongside Taoism and Confucianism. Buddhist gods came to be worshipped in Taoist temples and vice versa, and in some temples, the three religions were practiced side by side.

The Mahayana Buddhism practiced in China was an elaborate form of the religion, with more gods and myths than Theravada Buddhism. In the 600s CE, questions arose about certain Buddhist teachings, so a monk named Xuan Zang (also called Tripitaka) went to India to obtain copies of official scriptures. An account of his legendary trip was published in the 1500s as *Journey to the West*. In the story, the monkey god Sun Wukong and the pig god Zhu Bajie joined Xuan Zang on his journey. During the fourteen-year expedition, the three travelers had to endure many ordeals and tests of their sincerity, including fighting demons and monsters with the help of a magic stick.

Chinese Buddhists established a complex hierarchy, or ranked order of importance, for gods and goddesses. One of the more important deities was Shang Di, whose main assistant, Dongyue Dadi, was known as Great Emperor of the Eastern Peak. Under him were various

departments where the souls of virtuous people worked to manage every aspect of human and animal life.

Some of the other important Buddhist gods were the Four Kings of Heaven, the Four Kings of Hell, and the kitchen god, the most important deity of the home. Another major deity was the bodhisattva Mi-Le (known in India as Maitreya), considered to be the future Buddha. Portrayed as a fat, cheerful man, Mi-Le was sometimes called the Laughing Buddha. Worshipers prayed to join him in paradise. Each district in China had its own local deity, and so did each occupation. Even the smallest details of life were controlled by various minor gods and goddesses.

In Chinese Buddhism, the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara evolved from a male figure of sympathy into Kuanyin, the goddess of mercy. Tibetans gave Avalokitesvara's wife, Tara, the title Pandaravasin, meaning "dressed in white." The Chinese translation of that title is Pai-i-Kuanyin. Chinese Buddhists apparently combined the figure of Tara with the characteristics of Avalokitesvara to create a mother goddess figure. As the one who blesses couples with children, Kuanyin appealed to the Chinese belief in ancestor worship, and she became one of the most popular and important Buddhist deities. In Japan, Avalokitesvara is worshiped in both male and female forms as the deity Kannon.

**Japan** Buddhism came to Japan in about 550 CE and spread quickly because of support from the Japanese royal family. Although supporters of Shinto, the native religion of Japan, at first opposed Buddhism, the two religions eventually became closely linked. Buddhist temples contained Shinto shrines, and Shinto gods (known collectively as *kami*) became Buddhist guardians. This mix of Shintoism and Buddhism continued until 1868, when the emperor declared Shinto a state religion and banned Buddhist priests and images from Shinto temples. Yet Buddhism remained popular and still has a larger following in Japan than does Shinto.

Although the various forms of Japanese Buddhism include religious ideas from India and China, they have their own mythologies and gods. One of the main deities is Amida (known in other Buddhist regions as Amitabha), ruler of a paradise called the Pure Land. He is worshipped by some Japanese sects as the savior of humankind. Kannon—a bodhisattva known elsewhere as Kuanyin and Avalokitesvara—is the protector of children, women in childbirth, and dead souls. Another





*This relief sculpture from a temple in Indonesia shows the temptation of Buddha by the women of Mara.* © CHARLES & JOSETTE LENARS/CORBIS.

popular deity, the bodhisattva Jizō, protects humans and rescues souls from **hell**. He is often described as a gentle monk who wanders through the land of the dead bringing light and comfort to the souls imprisoned there.

**Tibet** Buddhism reached Tibet from India in the 600s CE and gradually absorbed native religious practices, creating a unique form of Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhists worship many groups of Buddhas, gods, and bodhisattvas. They also believe in the existence of numerous demons and evil spirits.

According to Tibetan Buddhists, the world goes through an endless cycle of creation and decay, and a new Buddha appears in each world age to teach Buddhist principles. Legend says that one of these Buddhas, Amitabha, ordered a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara to

bring Buddhism to Tibet. At the time, only animals and ogres—large, fearsome creatures—lived there. Avalokitesvara produced a monkey and sent it to meditate in Tibet. The monkey was approached by a female ogre in the form of a beautiful woman, who offered to be his wife. The two had children, but they were covered with hair and had tails. Avalokitesvara sent the children to a forest to mate with other monkeys. He returned a year later and discovered many offspring. When Avalokitesvara gave these creatures food they turned into human beings, and he was then able to convert them to Buddhism.

### Key Themes and Symbols

A major theme in Buddhism is the notion of *maya*, or illusion. Humans believe that their egos and bodily forms are reality, but Buddhism teaches that they are, in fact, just an illusion. Moreover, they are what keep humans entangled in the cycle of birth and rebirth. In order to break out of that cycle and achieve true spiritual liberation, humans must see through the illusion of materiality and ego-consciousness, and embrace the true reality of the divine.

Both the Bohdi tree and the lotus flower symbolize enlightenment in Buddhism. Another prominent symbol is the dharmacakra (pronounced dar-mah-CAK-rah), the “eight-spoked wheel” which represents the “eightfold path” of Buddhism.

### Buddhist Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because Buddhism has spread across so many regions of Asia, there are countless examples of Buddhist art to be found in countries like China, Japan, and Tibet. In India, the land where Buddhism began, examples of Buddhist art are much rarer, as the country is predominantly Hindu and Muslim.

Some Buddhist concepts found their way into Western art and literature in the mid-nineteenth century as Europe and the United States increased trade with Asia. One important export from Asia, in addition to spices and tea, was the drug opium. The phrase “kicking Buddha’s gong” eventually came to be slang for using opium, which was popular in Europe and America through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over time, the West became interested in Asia for more than just opium, spices, and tea. The Buddhist philosophy interested many

## Giant Buddhas

Perhaps the greatest example of Buddhism in art was the giant Buddha sculptures of Bamyán in Afghanistan. The two sculptures, each standing over one hundred feet tall, were carved into sandstone cliff walls in the sixth century CE. Details were added using mud plaster, and the statues were originally brightly painted. Being carved from soft sandstone, the statues lost a great deal of their original detail and form due to centuries of erosion by wind and rain. In 2001, the Taliban, an extremist Islamic political party that controlled Afghanistan, destroyed much of what remained of the giant Buddha statues. The giant statues were blasted with dynamite and tank mortars for nearly a month to ensure their destruction.

*The Giant Buddhas* (2005), a documentary by Christian Frei, details the history of the Bamyán Buddhas and their destruction at the hands of the Taliban. The film was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival.

free-thinkers in the nineteenth century, including the American Transcendentalists, who sought alternatives to the dominant Western worldview. The writings of American poet Walt Whitman and social maverick Henry David Thoreau (author of *Walden*, 1854) both show the influence of Buddhism.

German author Herman Hesse introduced many Westerners to Buddhism with his 1922 novel *Siddhartha*, which was based on the spiritual journey of Siddhartha Gautama. The branch of Buddhism known as Zen Buddhism attracted the attention of the Beat generation writers of the 1950s, and featured prominently in Jack Kerouac's 1958 novel *The Dharma Bums*. Novelist J. D. Salinger's work, including *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and *Raise High the Roofbeams, Carpenters* (1963), also reveals the author's interest in Zen Buddhism.

The novel *Siddhartha* and Buddhist teachings in general became particularly popular in the United States during the countercultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when, again, Buddhism was seen as an alternative to what many perceived as a violent, consumerist Western culture. Robert M. Pirsig's 1974 book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* became one of the bestselling books of philosophy of all time.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Many prominent American celebrities have converted to Buddhism in adulthood. Examples include actors Keanu Reeves, Uma Thurman, and Mark Wahlberg, as well as singer Tina Turner. Among the general American population, however, adult conversion to Buddhism remains fairly rare. Why do you think celebrities might be more interested in Buddhism than the general population?

**SEE ALSO** Brahma; Chinese Mythology; Devils and Demons; Flowers in Mythology; Hinduism and Mythology; Japanese Mythology; Reincarnation

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# C



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

## Pronunciation

CAIN and AY-buhl

## Alternate Names

Qabil and Habil (Islamic)

## Appears In

The Holy Bible, the Torah, the Qur'an

## Lineage

Sons of Adam and Eve



## Cain and Abel

### Character Overview

According to the monotheistic religions (religions in which the people believe in only one god) of the Middle East, Cain and Abel were the sons of the first people, **Adam and Eve**. As told in the book of Genesis in the Bible, Cain and Abel were the first two sons born to Adam and Eve after their banishment from the Garden of **Eden**. Cain, the elder, became a farmer, while Abel became a shepherd. They offered sacrifices to Yahweh, or God. Cain brought fruit and grain; Abel brought lambs. When Yahweh accepted Abel's offerings but rejected those of Cain, Cain was hurt and angry. In a jealous rage, he killed his brother. As punishment, Yahweh ordered Cain to go forth and become "a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth." Then he placed a sign, known as the mark of Cain, on the murderer's forehead to protect him from further punishment.

### Cain and Abel in Context

Tradition holds that Cain's son Enoch founded the first city, and that other descendents of Cain invented music and metalworking. Cain may be a mythological representation of a Near Eastern group called the Kenites, who practiced metalworking and musicianship and who may have worn tattoos. Medieval Christians believed that Cain had a

## Cain and Abel

*In this seventeenth-century painting, Cain runs away after murdering Abel, while God looks down.* SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



yellowish beard, so artists and playwrights used yellow beards to identify murderers and traitors. Because some Christians viewed Cain as a forerunner—earlier version—of the Jews, who they believed were responsible for the death of Jesus, yellow became associated with discrimination against Jewish people. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, racists associated the “mark of Cain” with dark-colored skin and used this as proof that African Americans were descended from the wicked Cain. Abel, an innocent and godly victim, was often compared with Jesus.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Conflicts between brothers appear often in world mythology, reflecting the widespread view that conflict between good and evil is an inescapable part of human life. One interpretation of the Cain and Abel story is that it reflects the very ancient tension between the different values and ways of life of wandering herders, represented by Abel, and settled farmers, represented by Cain. Other views suggest that the story is about the death of innocence, or that it illustrates the need for self-control and the high cost of giving in to competition and jealousy.

## Cain and Abel in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Cain and Abel is one of the most well-known legends in the modern world. The characters of Cain and Abel have been tied to many other works of literature, including the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, where the monster Grendel is described as one of Cain's descendants. The tale of Cain and Abel has been retold in poems by Lord Byron and Charles Baudelaire, and they have even appeared as characters in several comic book series released by DC Comics. John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* (1952), a story set in California in the early twentieth century, is also based on the tale of Cain and Abel.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

One interpretation of the actions of Cain and Abel is that it shows how dangerous jealousy can be. Based on your own experiences or stories you have read, write your own story that illustrates the dangers of jealousy.

SEE ALSO Adam and Eve; Ahriman; Ahura Mazda; Eden, Garden of



# Camelot

## Myth Overview

Camelot was the location of King **Arthur**'s court and the site of the famous Round Table of **Arthurian legend**. The wedding of Arthur to his queen, **Guinevere**, took place in the town of Camelot, and the

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

### Pronunciation

CA-muh-lot

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

*Le Morte d'Arthur*



*Cadbury Castle, a hillfort in Somerset, England, is one of several places thought to have been the possible location of Camelot from the legends of King Arthur.* © HOMER SYKES/CORBIS.

magician **Merlin** built a castle there for the couple to live in. The castle served as headquarters for King Arthur and his knights as well. A special hall held the Round Table, where Arthur and the knights would plan their campaigns. The hall also contained lifelike statues of the twelve kings who had tried to overthrow Arthur. All had been defeated by him and were buried at Camelot. Each statue had a lighted candle. According to Merlin, the candles would stay lit until the **Holy Grail**—the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper—was found and brought to Camelot. It was from Camelot that the knights rode out to perform good deeds and to search for the Holy Grail.



## Camelot in Context

Scholars have long debated the location of Camelot, just as they have debated the identity of King Arthur. In early times, it was associated with the town of Camulodunum (now called Colchester), an important site during the days of Roman rule in Britain. Other possible sites include Caerleon in Wales and the English towns of Camelford and Cadbury. In his book *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Malory identified the city of Winchester as Camelot. England's King Henry VII had his first son baptized in Winchester Cathedral and named Arthur. In all likelihood, however, Camelot represents a mythical place, not a real one.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As the center of King Arthur's realm, Camelot represents a society in perfect harmony, also known as a utopia. Modern utopias are generally based on the idea of equality among citizens, which is symbolized by the Round Table at Camelot. The kingdom of Camelot ultimately fails due to the flaws of the humans who control it. In this way, Camelot is similar to other mythical places, such as the Garden of **Eden** and **Atlantis**.

## Camelot in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Camelot appears in some form in nearly all retellings of the King Arthur legend. The 1960 Broadway musical *Camelot*, as well as the 1967 film adaptation of the musical, emphasizes the importance of the setting as a symbol of King Arthur's reign. The mythical Camelot has even inspired the construction of a real-life theme park in Lancashire, England. The term "Camelot" is frequently used to describe the three years (from 1961 to 1963) during which President John F. Kennedy served as president of the United States. Although the United States was hardly considered a utopia during this time, many people felt that Kennedy—like King Arthur—would lead his country and people toward a brighter future.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The knights of the Round Table were renowned for their "chivalry." Using your library, the Internet, and other available resources, research the origins and history of chivalry. Where did the idea come from? Why did it take hold among the nobility of Europe? When did the

principles of chivalry fall out of favor? Write a brief paper summarizing your findings.

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends; Guinevere; Holy Grail; Merlin



## Cassandra

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

kuh-SAN-druh

### Alternate Names

Alexandra

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Daughter of Priam and Hecuba

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Cassandra was the daughter of Priam and **Hecuba**, the king and queen of Troy. Cassandra was the most beautiful of Priam's daughters, and the god **Apollo** fell in love with her. Apollo promised Cassandra the gift of prophecy—the ability to see the future—if she would agree to give herself to him. Cassandra accepted Apollo's gift but then refused his advances. Apollo was furious, but he could not take back the powers he had given her. Instead, he cursed her, proclaiming that although she would be able to tell the future accurately, no one would believe her. Before announcing her prophecies, Cassandra went into a type of trance that made her family believe she was insane.

In Homer's *Iliad*, Cassandra predicted many of the events of the Trojan War. Priam's son Paris planned a trip to Sparta. Cassandra warned against it, but her warnings were ignored. Paris traveled to Sparta, where he kidnapped **Helen**, starting the war with Greece. Cassandra later predicted Troy's defeat and warned the Trojans not to accept the Greek gift of the Trojan horse. Again she was ignored, and Greek troops hidden inside the wooden horse captured the city. During the battle, a Greek soldier known as Ajax the Lesser raped Cassandra in the temple of **Athena**. Athena later punished Ajax and his men for the deed.

After the Greek victory, Cassandra was given to the Greek leader **Agamemnon** as a prize. She bore Agamemnon two sons and later returned to Greece with him. However, she also predicted that a terrible fate awaited Agamemnon and herself. When they reached Agamemnon's home in Mycenae, they were both murdered by Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.

*Cassandra.* PUBLIC  
DOMAIN.



### Cassandra in Context

In ancient Greece, the belief that certain individuals could see the future—or were told the future by the gods—was common. Those who could see the future were believed to get this power from the god Apollo and were called oracles. Oracles were often found at temples dedicated to Apollo. The most famous ancient Greek oracle, located at **Delphi**, was at

the site of a large temple to Apollo. According to legend and historians, the oracle at Delphi, or the Delphic oracle, was always female.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In the legends of the Trojan War, Cassandra symbolizes futility, the inability to be useful. Although Cassandra can see exactly what will happen to her family and their city, she cannot do anything about it because no one believes her. In this way, Cassandra also serves as a symbol of destiny, the idea that the future has already been determined by the gods.

### Cassandra in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Cassandra plays a rather small role in the legends of the Trojan War, her unique character has endured and has appeared in numerous other works of art and literature. In modern literature, Cassandra's point of view is told in Marion Zimmer Bradley's historical novel *The Firebrand* (1987). Cassandra also appears in the futuristic tale "Cassandra" by C. J. Cherryh, which won a Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1979.

The term "Cassandra" is sometimes used in modern times to refer to someone who makes predictions that are ignored or disbelieved, but later proven accurate.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many modern stories include a character similar to Cassandra, who says things that are ignored or considered nonsense until they come true. One example is the title character in the Disney animated film *Chicken Little* (2005), in which the title character tries to warn others about an alien invasion. Try to think of a single example from a book you have read, or a movie or television show you have seen. Describe the story and the character, and explain how the character is like Cassandra. What were the reasons the character's prediction was ignored?

SEE ALSO Agamemnon; Apollo; Athena; Greek Mythology; Hecuba; Helen of Troy; *Iliad*, *The*

## Cassiopeia

See **Andromeda**.



# Castor and Pollux

## Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Castor and Pollux (known as Polydeuces to the Greeks) were twin brothers who appeared in several prominent myths. The **twins** were worshipped as gods who helped shipwrecked sailors and who brought favorable winds for those who made sacrifices to them. The Romans considered Castor and Pollux the gods who watched over horses and the Roman horsemen known as equites (pronounced EK-wi-teez).

There are many stories about the twins and numerous versions of those stories. According to the Greek poet Homer, Castor and Pollux were the sons of Tyndareus (pronounced tin-DAIR-ee-uhs) and Leda, the king and queen of Sparta. For this reason, they are sometimes called the Tyndaridae (sons of Tyndareus). Another account identifies the twins as the sons of Leda and **Zeus**, from whom they received the name *Dioscuri* (sons of Zeus). Still another legend says that Castor was the son of Leda and Tyndareus—and therefore a human—while Pollux was the son of Zeus—and therefore a god. This difference became significant later in their lives. All tales about the twins agree in portraying Castor as a skilled horse trainer and Pollux as an expert boxer. Inseparable, the brothers always acted together.

In one of the earliest myths about the twins, Castor and Pollux rescued their sister **Helen** after she had been kidnapped by **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs), king of Attica. Helen would later gain fame as the queen whose abduction by Paris, a Trojan prince, launched the Trojan War. The twins also accompanied **Jason** and the **Argonauts** on their voyage in search of the **Golden Fleece**. During that expedition, Pollux demonstrated his boxing skills by killing the king of the Bebryces. When a storm arose during the voyage, the Argonaut **Orpheus** prayed to the gods and played his harp. The storm immediately ceased and stars appeared on the heads of the twins. It is because of this myth that Castor and Pollux came to be recognized as the protectors of sailors.

Another story concerns the death of Castor. According to one account, the twins wanted to marry their cousins Phoebe and Hilaria. The women, however, were already promised to two other cousins, Idas

## Nationality/Culture

Roman

## Pronunciation

KAS-ter and POL-uhks

## Alternate Names

Castor and Polydeuces (Greek), the Dioscuri, the Tyndaridae

## Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

## Lineage

Sons of Zeus and Leda

### St. Elmo's Fire

St. Elmo's fire is a natural phenomenon that occurs during certain stormy weather conditions. It appears as a glow on the top of tall pointed objects, such as the masts of ships, and is often accompanied by a cracking noise. When stars appeared on the heads of Castor and Pollux during the voyage of the Argonauts, the twins became known as the protectors of sailors. From that time, sailors believed that St. Elmo's fire was actually Castor and Pollux coming to protect them during a storm.

and Lynceus. Castor and Pollux carried the women away to Sparta, pursued by their male cousins. In the fight that followed, the twins succeeded in killing both Idas and Lynceus, but Castor was fatally wounded.

In another version of this story, the four men conducted a cattle raid together. Idas and Lynceus then tried to cheat Castor and Pollux out of their share of the cattle. The twins decided to take the cattle themselves, but were caught as they started to sneak away. A fight broke out in which Castor, Idas, and Lynceus were all killed.

This story also has several different endings. In one, Castor's spirit went to **Hades**, the place of the dead, because he was a human. Pollux, who was a god, was so devastated at being separated from his brother that he offered to share his immortality (ability to live forever) with Castor, or to give it up so that he could join his brother in Hades. Taking pity on his son Pollux, Zeus declared that the brothers would take turns dwelling in Hades and with the gods on Mount Olympus. On one day, Castor would be with the gods and Pollux would be in Hades; on the next, the two would change places. In another ending, Castor remained in Hades, but Pollux was allowed to visit him every other day. Most versions of the myth say that Zeus placed the brothers in the heavens as part of the constellation—group of stars—known as Gemini. Today the two brightest stars in the constellation Gemini are named Castor and Pollux.

### Castor and Pollux in Context

The Romans developed a strong cult—a group that worships a specific god or gods above all others within a religion—around Castor following a military victory by the Romans over the Latins at Lake Regillus in 499

BCE. When the Roman infantry failed to hold its ground in the battle, the dictator Aulus Postumius decided to send in the cavalry (the horsemen of the military) to help. Castor's association with horsemen prompted the dictator to make a vow to build a temple to Castor in exchange for his



*The Temple of Castor and Pollux at Agrigento in Sicily.*  
MEDIO IMAGES/ROYALTY-FREE.

help, and the Romans were victorious. The Romans completed the temple in 484 BCE. Pollux joined his brother in the cult much later, but never had quite the same level of honor. The images of Castor and Pollux appear on many early Roman coins. The Romans celebrated the Theoxenia Festival each year on July 15th in their honor, with the Roman cavalry riding in a ceremonial parade.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Castor and Pollux are symbols of brotherhood and the bond that unites two people even after death. Castor and Pollux can also be seen as a symbol of inequality: though they are twins, one is immortal while the other is not. Although Castor is known as the patron of horsemen, both Castor and Pollux were known as the “riders on white steeds,” and both were thought to represent the spirits of young warriors riding into battle.

### Castor and Pollux in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Castor and Pollux were featured in the works of many ancient Greek and Roman writers. Besides appearing in Homer’s poems, the twins have a role in the play *Helen* by the Greek playwright Euripides. They also figure in Pindar’s *Nemean Odes* and in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. There is even a reference to the twins in the Bible: in the New Testament book Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul is said to sail from Malta aboard a ship bearing the sign of Castor and Pollux. The English poet Edmund Spenser included the twins in his poem *Prothalamion*. The greatest work by the French composer Jean-Phillipe Rameau, the tragic opera *Castor and Pollux*, was based on the story of the brothers.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the constellation Gemini, and in particular, the stars known as Castor and Pollux. Where in the sky does this constellation appear? Does it always appear in the same place in the sky, or does its position change throughout the year? See if you can spot Castor and Pollux in the nighttime sky.

SEE ALSO *Aeneid*, *The*; Argonauts; Helen of Troy





# Celtic Mythology

## Celtic Mythology in Context

Adventure, heroism, romance, and magic are a few of the elements that make Celtic mythology one of the most entrancing mythologies of Europe. Once a powerful people who dominated much of Europe, the Celts were reduced to a few small groups after the Roman invasions. Their mythology survived, however, thanks largely to the efforts of later Irish and Welsh monks who wrote down the stories.

The Celts were a group of people who began to spread throughout Europe in the 1000s BCE. At the peak of their power, they lived in an area extending from the British Isles in the west to what is now Turkey in the east. They conquered northern Italy and Macedonia, plundering both Rome and **Delphi** in the process. They had a reputation as fierce and courageous warriors, and the Romans respected them.

Celtic expansion reached its limit around 225 BCE, when the Celts suffered the first in a series of defeats by the armies of the Roman empire. Gradually, the Romans pushed back the Celts, and by 84 CE, most of Britain was under Roman rule. At the same time, Germanic peoples conquered the Celts living in central Europe. Just a few areas, notably Ireland and northern Britain, managed to remain free and to continue to pass on the Celtic traditions. Six groups of Celts have survived to modern times: the peoples of Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, Wales, Cornwall, and Brittany.

The ancient Celts were neither a race nor a nation. They were a varied people bound together by language, customs, and religion rather than by any central government. They lived off the land, farming and raising stock. No towns existed apart from impressive hill forts. However, by about 100 BCE, large groups of Celts had begun to gather at certain settlements to trade with one another.

Celtic society had a clearly defined structure. Highest in rank was the king, who ruled a particular tribe, or group of people. Each tribe was divided into three classes: the noble knights and warriors, the Druids (religious leaders), and the farmers and commoners. The Druids, who came from noble families, were respected and influential figures. They served not only as priests but also as judges, teachers, and advisers. In addition, it was widely believed that the Druids had magical powers.

## The Tragedy of Deirdre

The heroine of the Ulster Cycle is the beautiful Deirdre. King Conchobhar intends to marry the young woman, but she falls in love with Naoise and flees to Scotland with him. When they return, the king has Naoise killed. Forced to live with Conchobhar, the grief-stricken Deirdre never smiles and makes clear to the king how much she hates him. The story ends with Deirdre taking her own life by striking her head against a rock.

Deirdre's tragic tale served as inspiration for poetry, plays, and stories by later Irish writers, including William Butler Yeats and J. M. Synge.

## Core Deities and Characters

The Celts worshipped a variety of deities, or gods, who appeared in their tales. Most were all-powerful local deities linked to places rather than to specialized roles. Each tribe had its own god who protected and provided for the welfare of that tribe. Some of them had similar characteristics. For example, **Dagda**, the god of life and death in Ireland—known as the good god—resembled Esus, the “master” god of Gaul.

Some deities had more clearly defined roles. Among these were **Lug**, or Lugus, a **sun** god associated with the arts, war, and healing, and the horned god **Cernunnos**, who was a god of animals and fertility. The Celts also had a large number of important female deities. These included Morrigan, the “Great Queen,” who was actually three war goddesses—Morrigan, Badb (pronounced BAV), and Nemain—who appeared as ravens during battle. Another important deity was Brigit, goddess of learning, healing, and metalworking. Epona, the horse goddess, was associated with fertility, water, and death.

## Major Myths

The ancient Celts had a vibrant mythology made up of hundreds of tales. They did not, however, record their myths in writing but passed them on orally. Our knowledge of the gods, **heroes**, and villains of Celtic mythology comes mainly from Roman sources. Yet the Romans sometimes referred to Celtic gods by Roman names, so their accounts were not always reliable. Also, because the Romans and Celts were battlefield enemies, Roman descriptions of Celtic beliefs were often unfavorable.

## Major Celtic Deities

**Brigit:** goddess of learning, healing, and metalworking.

**Dagda:** god of life and death.

**Danu:** fertility goddess and mother of the Tuatha Dé Danaan.

**Epona:** goddess associated with fertility, water, and death.

**Lug:** god of the sun, war, and healing.

**Morrigan:** goddess of war and death.

Much of what is now known about Celtic mythology is based on manuscripts that were prepared by monks in the Middle Ages. Irish collections dating from the 700s CE and Welsh collections from the 1300s recount many of the myths and legends of the ancient Celts.

Many myths told of the otherworld. In this mysterious place, there was no work and no death, and the gods and spirits who lived there never got old. The Celts believed that humans could enter this enchanted place through burial mounds called *sidhe*, through caves or lakes, or after completing a perilous journey. After reaching the otherworld, they would live happily for all time.

Early Irish myths blend mythology and history by describing how Ireland was settled by different groups of Celtic deities and humans. Filled with magic and excitement, the tales tell of battles between forces of light and darkness. They describe a time when gods lived not in the heavens but on earth, using their powers to create civilization in Ireland and to bring fertility to the land.

There are four cycles, or groups, of connected stories. The Mythological Cycle focuses on the activities of the Celtic gods, describing how five races of supernatural beings battled to gain control of Ireland. The chief god was Dagda, whose magic cauldron could bring the dead back to life. The Ulster Cycle recounts the deeds of warriors and heroes, especially **Cuchulain** (pronounced koo-KUL-in), the warrior and champion of Ireland. The Historical Cycle tells of the adventures and battles of legendary Irish kings. The Fenian Cycle deals with the heroic **Finn** Mac Cumhail, or Finn Mac Cool, leader of a band of bold warriors known as the

Fianna. This cycle is filled with exciting adventures and tales of hand-to-hand combat.

Welsh mythology is found in the Mabinogion (pronounced MAB-eh-no-ghee-on), a collection of eleven tales. In the Welsh myths, as in those of Ireland, the heroes often are half-human and half-divine and may have magical powers. Many of the stories in the Mabinogion deal with **Arthurian legends**, accounts of the deeds of Britain's heroic King **Arthur** and his knights.

In fact, the popular Arthurian tales of medieval European literature are a complex blend of ancient Celtic myths, later stories, and historical events. The legends are clearly rooted in Celtic mythology, however, and references to Arthur appear in a number of ancient Welsh poems. Scholars also note that there are many similarities between the Arthur stories and the tales of the Irish Finn Mac Cumhail, suggesting a shared Celtic origin.

Another famous romantic story of Celtic origin is that of **Tristan and Isolde**. The tragic tale, probably based on an early Cornish poem, concerns the knight Tristan who falls in love with Isolde (pronounced i-SOLE-duh), a princess who is fated to marry his uncle the king. In the Middle Ages, Gottfried von Strassburg wrote a poem based on the legend that is considered a literary masterpiece.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Magic, magicians, and the supernatural played a significant role in Celtic mythology. A common theme was the magic cauldron (kettle). The cauldron of plenty was never empty and supplied great quantities of food. The cauldron of rebirth brought slain warriors to life again. Myrddin, a magician in the Welsh tales, later became **Merlin** in the Arthurian legends.

Other important themes in the myths were voyages to mysterious and dangerous lands and larger-than-life heroes. The heroes experienced all kinds of adventures and often had to perform impossible tasks before marrying their loved one. Love, romance, and mischief also figured prominently. The gods played tricks on humans and on one another. Animals changed shape at will.

### Celtic Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Celtic mythology has proven to have enduring popularity in modern art and literature. Many tales of Celtic mythology have been retold by later



*The Gundestrup Cauldron, which dates to the first century BCE, features many scenes and characters from Celtic mythology.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

authors, especially the tales of King Arthur. Other Celtic tales were collected by writers, such as Herminie T. Kavanagh and Lady Gregory. Popular films featuring Celtic mythology include *Excalibur* (1981) and *Darby O’Gill and the Little People* (1959).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Mountain of Marvels: A Celtic Tale of Magic, Retold from the Mabinogion* by Aaron Shepard (2007) offers readers a tale of the horse goddess Rhiannon, the nobleman she loves, and an evil magician. The

author has been awarded an Aesop Accolade from the American Folklore Society for his myth-based stories for children and young adults.

**SEE ALSO** Arthurian Legends; Cuchulain; Dagda; Finn; Lug; Tristan and Isolde



### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

SEN-tawrz

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Descendants of Ixion

## Centaur

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, centaurs were creatures that had the head, neck, chest, and arms of a man, and the body and legs of a horse. Most centaurs were brutal, violent creatures known for their drunkenness and lawless behavior. They lived mainly around Mount Pelion in Thessaly, a region of northeastern Greece.

According to one account, centaurs were descended from Centaurus, a son of **Apollo**. A more widely accepted account of their origin, however, is that they were descendants of Ixion, the son of **Ares** and king of the Lapiths, a people who lived in Thessaly.

Ixion fell in love with **Hera**, the wife of **Zeus**. Recklessly, Ixion arranged to meet with Hera, planning to seduce her. Zeus heard of the plan and formed a cloud in the shape of Hera. Ixion embraced the cloud form, and from this union, the race of centaurs was created.

The main myth relating to the centaurs involves their battle with the Lapiths. King Pirithous of the Lapiths, son of Ixion, invited the centaurs to his wedding. The centaurs became drunk and disorderly and pursued the Lapith women. One centaur even tried to run off with the king's bride. A fierce battle erupted. The centaurs used tree trunks and slabs of stone as weapons, but eventually the Lapiths won the fight, killing many centaurs. The centaurs were forced to leave Thessaly.

A number of tales describe conflicts between centaurs and the Greek hero **Heracles**. In one such story, Heracles came to the cave of a centaur named Pholus. Pholus served Heracles food but did not offer him any wine, though an unopened jar of wine stood in the cave. Pholus explained that the wine was a gift and was the property of all the

centaurs. Nonetheless, Heracles insisted on having some wine, and Pholus opened the jar. The smell of the wine soon brought the other centaurs to the cave and before long a fight broke out. Heracles drove off the centaurs by shooting poisoned arrows at them. Afterward, Pholus was examining one of these arrows when he accidentally dropped it. It struck his foot, and the poison killed him.

In another well-known story, a centaur named Nessus tried to rape Deianira, the wife of Heracles. Heracles caught him and shot the centaur with a poisoned arrow. As he lay dying, Nessus urged Deianira to save some of the blood from his wound. He told her that if Heracles ever stopped loving her, she could regain his love by applying the blood to a garment that Heracles would wear. Deianira did as Nessus suggested and saved some of his blood. Many years later, when Heracles had been unfaithful to her, Deianira gave him a tunic to wear, a tunic that she had smeared with the blood of Nessus. The blood was poisoned, and Heracles died. In this way, Nessus took his revenge on Heracles.

Not all centaurs were savage brutes. One exception was Chiron, a teacher of medicine, music, hunting, and archery. The son of the god **Cronus**, Chiron taught gods and **heroes**, including **Jason**, **Achilles**, Heracles, and Asclepius. Chiron was accidentally wounded by one of Heracles' poisoned arrows. As the son of a god, he would live forever and suffer from the injury forever. Chiron therefore asked Zeus to let him die. Zeus granted his request and placed him in the heavens as a star in the constellation Sagittarius, also known as the Archer.

## Centaur in Context

It is possible that the idea of half-man, half-horse creatures was born when ancient Greeks or Minoans—who did not routinely ride on the backs of horses—first encountered nomads who spent most of their time on horseback. The Lapiths—often associated with centaurs in Greek myth—were considered to be skilled horsemen, and perhaps even the inventors of horseback riding.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Centaur



*Centaurs were invited as guests to the wedding of the King of Lapith, but when they became unruly, a battle erupted between the centaurs and the men of Lapith.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

### **Centaurs in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Centaurs usually represented wild behavior in Greek literature and art. They appeared on many vases, and their fight with the Lapiths was depicted in sculptures in various temples. Because of their drunken behavior, centaurs were sometimes shown pulling the chariot of **Dionysus**, the god of wine and revelry. At other times, they were pictured being ridden by **Eros**, the god of love, because of their lustful ways. In Christian art of the Middle Ages, centaurs symbolized man's animal nature.



The Roman poet Ovid described the battle of the centaurs and the Lapiths in the *Metamorphoses*. This work, in turn, inspired the English poet Edmund Spenser to write about the battle in his most famous work, *The Faerie Queene*. Centaurs also appear in more recent literary works, such as the *Chronicles of Narnia* fantasy series by C. S. Lewis.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare centaurs to the mythical creatures known as **satyrs**. What physical and personality traits do satyrs have? How are they similar to centaurs? How are they different? What role do these creatures have in Greek and Roman myths?

SEE ALSO Heracles



# Cerberus

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Cerberus was the terrifying three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to the **underworld**. The offspring of the monsters Typhon and Echidna, Cerberus was also the brother of the serpent creature Hydra and the lion-headed beast Chimaera. He is often pictured with the tail of a snake or dragon, and with snakes sprouting from his back.

According to legend, Cerberus's appearance was so fearsome that any living person who saw him turned to stone. The saliva that fell from his mouth produced a deadly poison. Cerberus prevented spirits of the dead from leaving **Hades**, and living mortals from entering. Three humans, however, managed to overcome him: **Orpheus** charmed him with music; the Sibyl of Cumae drugged him with honeycakes to allow the Roman hero **Aeneas** access to the underworld; and **Heracles** (known as Hercules by the Romans) used his sheer strength to take Cerberus from the land of Hades to the kingdom of Mycenae and back again, the twelfth labor of Heracles.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

SUR-ber-uhs

### Alternate Names

Kerberos

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *Odyssey*

### Lineage

Offspring of Typhon and Echidna

## Cerberus

*Heracles was one of three mortals who tamed Cerberus, done as part of his Twelve Labors.* ALINARI/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Cerberus in Context

In ancient Greece and Rome, dogs were sometimes used to guard sacred places, such as temples. At Cumae, a city in southern Italy believed to be near the entrance of the underworld, a cave that housed a sibyl—a woman who, it was believed, could see the future—was discovered in the early twentieth century. At the site, excavators found a wall fixture with three large chains that appear to have been used for a trio of guard dogs.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Cerberus is usually associated with the act of guarding or keeping out. He may also symbolize fearsomeness.

## Cerberus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Cerberus is one of the most easily recognizable creatures from Greek mythology, and appears in many examples of ancient art. Cerberus has been included as a character in several literary works, most notably Dante's *Inferno* (c. 1320 CE). In modern times, Cerberus has proven especially popular in movies and video games. He appeared in the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules*, and in the Harry Potter books and film series (under the name Fluffy).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the history of dogs as human companions. How long ago were dogs domesticated (tamed) by humans? What functions have dogs served over the centuries? What breeds are believed to be the oldest? Then write a brief essay with your views on the relationship between humans and dogs.

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Hades; Heracles; Orpheus

## Ceres

See **Demeter**.



## Cernunnos

### Character Overview

Cernunnos is the horned god of **Celtic mythology**. He is represented as a bearded man with antlers sprouting from his head. He is often considered the god of hunters, as well as the lord of the animals.

#### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

#### Pronunciation

kur-NOO-nohs

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The *Mabinogion*

#### Lineage

Unknown

*Cernunnos.* © ROGER-VIOLETT/  
THE IMAGE WORKS.



Although Cernunnos is now associated primarily with the Celts and Ireland, images of Cernunnos have been found throughout Europe. Before the rise of the Roman Empire, Celtic tribes covered a large area of Europe, including parts of France, Italy, and Germany. One of the

earliest known depictions of Cernunnos was found in northern Italy and has been dated to the fourth century BCE.

A cave painting discovered in France may suggest that Cernunnos is much older than that. The painting, popularly known as “The Sorcerer,” depicts an upright figure with antlers that resembles Cernunnos. It is not known whether the painting is meant to show a horned god, or whether it simply shows a person wearing the skin of a deer. The painting has been estimated to be around fifteen thousand years old—more than twelve thousand years older than other existing images of Cernunnos.

### Major Myths

Cernunnos does not have any known connections to other Celtic gods. Because Celtic mythology was transmitted orally, or by sharing stories out loud instead of writing them down, it is possible that many tales about Cernunnos have been lost over the centuries. No tales associated with Cernunnos’s actions survive.

### Cernunnos in Context

In ancient cultures, before the rise of successful farming practices, hunting was of vital importance to a community. People relied on animal meat as a source of protein and animal skins and bones for a variety of purposes. Early hunters lacked guns and sophisticated bows and arrows. Hunting was an incredibly difficult and dangerous task undertaken by groups of men who might spend many days tracking their prey, eventually overtaking it on foot

## Cernunnos's Cousins?

The origin of the Celts is uncertain. Archaeological evidence suggests that they came originally from the area around the Black Sea and spread west. It is possible, though, that some Celts spread east, too. The god Pashupati of northern India bears a striking resemblance to Cernunnos—he is a horned hunter and represents untamed male power.

Some scholars have suggested that Cernunnos may be the source of traditional representations of the horned Christian devil. As Christianity spread into Celtic territory, Cernunnos was still a popular deity. It is possible that early Christian church leaders, unable to force the Celts to abandon Cernunnos, reinterpreted the god in a Christian context. His wildness and darkness became connected not with animals and nature but with evil.

and killing it at short range with a spear. The ability to kill a large animal and provide for the community came to be associated with male power. The kingly Cernunnos can be seen as a depiction of man as the ultimate predator.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main symbol of Cernunnos is his horns or antlers, which represent male fertility. Cernunnos is also usually depicted with torcs, or rings that signify Celtic nobility. He is almost always shown to be among animals, especially stags or deer, which indicate his importance to hunters and nature. Cernunnos is also associated with the oak tree, a symbol of wisdom and stability.

## Cernunnos in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The two most famous depictions of Cernunnos are from the Gundestrup Cauldron and the “Pillar of the Boatmen” monument. The Gundestrup Cauldron, created in the first or second century BCE, is a large silver bowl that was rediscovered in 1891 in a peat bog in Denmark. One decorative panel of the cauldron shows Cernunnos, along with deer, a snake, and other wild animals. The “Pillar of the Boatmen” was created in the first century CE by sailors as a monument to various Roman and Celtic gods. The monument originally stood in a temple in what is now Paris, on the site where Notre Dame Cathedral was later built.

Although familiar to those who study Celtic mythology, Cernunnos is not very well known in modern times. He was featured in an episode of the television show *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, and has appeared as a villain to be fought in video games such as *Folklore* for PlayStation 3. A version of Cernunnos appears in Susan Cooper's fantasy novel *The Dark Is Rising* (1973)—as Herne the Hunter, a mounted leader of the hunt with great antlers who, like Cernunnos, is associated with the oak tree (in this case, the oak tree is in Windsor Forest).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Although depictions of Cernunnos have been found across Europe, very little is known about his place in ancient Celtic mythology. Based on what you know about Cernunnos, try writing your own short myth about him. Explain where he comes from, how he became associated with deer and other animals, and what relationship he has to other Celtic gods and goddesses.

SEE ALSO Celtic Mythology



#### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/Navajo

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Navajo oral myths and songs

#### Lineage

Raised by First Man and First Woman

## Changing Woman

### Character Overview

Changing Woman, or Asdzáá Nádleehé, is the most respected goddess of the Navajo people. She represents all changes of life as well as the seasons, and is both a benevolent and a nurturing figure. All Navajo ceremonies must include at least one song dedicated to Changing Woman. She is related to goddesses found in many other Native American traditions, such as the Pawnee Moon Woman and the Apache White Painted Woman.

### Major Myths

According to legend, Changing Woman changes continuously but never dies. She grows into an old woman in winter, but by spring she becomes a young woman again. In this way, she represents the power of life, fertility, and changing seasons. In some stories she has a sister, White Shell Woman

(Yoolgai asdzáá), who symbolizes the rain clouds. Ceremonies dedicated to Changing Woman are performed to celebrate childbirth, coming of age for girls, weddings, and to bless a new home.

Changing Woman bears the children of the Sun, Jóhonaa'éeí, after he shines his rays on her. Their children are the twin **heroes**, Monster Slayer (Naayéé' neizghání) and Child of Water (Tó bájísh chíní), who cleared the earth of the monsters that once roamed it. Changing Woman lives by herself in a house floating on the western waters, where the Sun visits her every evening. One day she became lonely and decided to make some companions for herself. From pieces of her own skin, she created men and women who became the ancestors of the Navajo people. Changing Woman also created maize, an important food source for the Navajo.

## Changing Woman in Context

Changing Woman plays a major role in the Navajo Kinaaldá ceremony, a ceremony that marks a young girl's change into a woman. During the long ceremony the girl impersonates and becomes Changing Woman, and participates in activities that are important to the role of women in the Navajo tribe. For instance, part of the ceremony requires the girl and the women who help her to prepare a large **corn** cake, which is then baked overnight in a pit. The women are not allowed to sleep during this time, and the next day the girl hands out pieces of the cake to guests at the ceremony. The cake represents Mother Earth—with the cake itself coming from the earth—and the girl as Changing Woman is able to change the earth into food. Throughout the ceremony, the girl is supposed to take on the qualities of Changing Woman, including physical strength, endurance, creativity, and fruitfulness.

## Key Themes and Symbols

For the Navajo people, Changing Woman represents change—usually the change of seasons, as well as the growth of females into womanhood. She is also a symbol of the sky. She is identified with the earth, vegetation, fertility, growth, abundance, and ideal womanhood.

## Changing Woman in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As with many characters from American Indian mythology, Changing Woman was known only to a small number of people. Even within that

tribe, much of the attention dedicated to *Changing Woman* was done through song. Only recently have characters such as *Changing Woman* begun to appear in art and literature beyond members of the Navajo tribe.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Changing Woman and Her Sisters: Stories of Goddesses from Around the World* by Katrin Hyman T'chana (2006) offers ten stories of goddesses taken from different cultures. Other than *Changing Woman*, the book features stories of goddesses such as **Amaterasu** from Shinto mythology and Macha from **Celtic mythology**.

SEE ALSO Native American Mythology



# Cherubim

## Character Overview

Cherubim (or *cherub* in the singular form) are winged creatures that appear as attendants to God in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Their main duties are to praise God and to support his throne, though their roles vary from culture to culture.

Cherubim were probably introduced into ancient Hebrew culture by the Canaanites. The Hebrews expanded the role of the cherubim somewhat. For example, in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament, cherubim guard the entrance to the Garden of **Eden** after **Adam and Eve** are driven out of Paradise. Cherubim also protect the **Ark of the Covenant** (which contained the original tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed), and God is described as riding on the back of a cherub. In general, cherubim represent the power and glory of the Hebrew god, Yahweh.

In Christian mythology, the cherubim are the second highest of the nine orders of **angels**, second only to the seraphim. The cherubim excel in wisdom and continually praise God. In Islamic mythology, the cherubim (or *karibiyun*) play much the same role, dwelling in **heaven** and constantly praising Allah, the Islamic god.

Scholars disagree about the origin of the word *cherubim*. It may have come from *karabu*, an ancient Near Eastern word meaning “to pray” or

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian and Islamic

### Pronunciation

CHER-uh-bim

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Bible, the Torah

### Lineage

Attendants to God





*Two cherubs, as portrayed by famous sixteenth-century artist Raphael.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

“to bless,” or perhaps from *mu-karribim*, the guardians of the shrine of an ancient moon goddess.

### **Cherubim in Context**

Whatever the origin of the name, the cherub itself can be traced to mythologies of the Babylonians, Assyrians, and other peoples of the ancient Near East. In these cultures, cherubim were usually pictured as creatures with parts of four animals: the head of a bull, the wings of an eagle, the feet of a lion, and the tail of a serpent. The four animals represented the four seasons, the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, and west), and the four ancient elements (earth, air, **fire**, and water). These original cherubim guarded the entrances to temples and palaces.

In modern times, cherubim are thought of as the representation of pure, innocent love—God’s love particularly. But biblical depictions of cherubim are not so gentle. They guard the gates of Eden with a flaming sword to keep Adam and Eve from returning.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

Cherubim are often portrayed as human figures having four wings, and they are usually painted blue, which signifies knowledge. Sometimes they

feature the faces of other animals. In Jewish folklore of the Middle Ages, the cherubim were described as handsome young men. In Christian art, however, cherubim usually appear as children, most often as chubby, winged babies.

### **Cherubim in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Cherubim appear in many ancient illuminated manuscripts, as well as in many Renaissance paintings and sculptures. However, the images of cherubim are often confused with those of *putti*, which are winged infants that do not represent angels but instead symbolize love and innocence. These appeared often in Renaissance and later works, and have become the typical image of cherubim. In modern times, the word “cherub” is often used to describe an innocent-looking child, especially one with chubby or rosy cheeks. This type of representation was particularly popular in the decorative arts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Plump, rosy-cheeked cherubs appeared on china, lampshades, pillowcases, upholstery, and other household items.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

*CHERUB* is a series of novels written by Robert Muchamore about a group of teenage secret agents working for the British government. Like mythical cherubim, they serve as “guardian angels” for the citizens of the world, taking on terrorists and other evil forces. Their young age and seeming innocence allows them to work undetected by criminal organizations. The first volume of the series, *CHERUB: The Recruit*, was first published in the United Kingdom in 2004.

**SEE ALSO** Angels; Ark of the Covenant; Semitic Mythology



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# Chinese Mythology

## **Chinese Mythology in Context**

The people of China have a rich and complicated mythology that dates back nearly four thousand years. Throughout Chinese history, myth and reality have been intertwined. Historical figures have been worshipped as

gods, and ancient myths are sometimes treated as historical truths. In addition, three great religious traditions—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—have played a role in shaping the mythology. The result is a rich tapestry of characters and tales, both real and imagined, and a unique pantheon (collection of recognized gods and goddesses) organized very much like ancient Chinese society.

China can trace its historical roots in an unbroken line for more than four thousand years, and its mythological roots extend even farther back in time. From about 2000 to 1500 BCE, a people known as the Xia dominated the northern regions of China. The Xia worshipped the snake, a creature that appears in some of the oldest Chinese myths. Eventually, the snake changed into the dragon, which became one of the most enduring symbols of Chinese culture and mythology.

**New Religious Ideas** From about 1500 to 1066 BCE, China was ruled by the Shang dynasty. The people at this time worshipped many deities, including natural forces and elements, such as rain, clouds, rivers, mountains, the **sun**, the moon, and the earth. Their greatest deity, Shang Di, remains an important god in the Chinese pantheon.

When a new dynasty, the Zhou, came to power in China in 1066 BCE, significant changes took place in religion. People still worshipped the old gods, but ancestor worship became increasingly important. Confucianism and Taoism appeared near the end of the Zhou dynasty. These two religious traditions had an enormous influence on the development of the most basic and lasting principles of Chinese culture.

**Changing Old Beliefs** In 213 BCE, many of the original sources of Chinese mythology were lost when Emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin dynasty ordered the burning of all books on subjects other than medicine, prophecy (predictions of the future), and farming. This order was reversed in 191 BCE, and much of the literature was reconstructed. But works were rewritten to support ideas popular with the royal court at the time. These changes affected religious beliefs, producing a pantheon of deities that mirrored the political organization of the Chinese empire. Gods and spirits had different ranks and areas of responsibility, just like Chinese officials.

Shortly before 100 CE, Buddhism arrived in China from India and added another important influence to Chinese culture and mythology. Buddhist ideas gradually came to be merged with Taoism and

Confucianism in the minds of many Chinese. The three traditions often were seen as different aspects of the same religion and as having basically the same goals. Buddhists and Taoists honored each other's deities in their temples, and both incorporated principles of Confucianism, such as ancestor worship, in their beliefs.

## Core Deities and Characters

The deities and characters that make up the body of Chinese mythology originate in many different regions and from several unique belief systems. For this reason, Chinese mythology is less uniform and consistent in its legends than the mythologies of many other cultures, but offers a wide range of tales and mythological figures to appreciate.

Pan Gu was the first living creature and the creator of the world. Among his acts of creation were the separation of the earth and sky, the placement of the stars and planets in the heavens, and the shaping of the earth's surface. It is often said that his body became the world on which all things live.

For the Han people of ancient China, the supreme god was known as Shang Di. In later times, this same deity came to be known as Tian, also used as a word for **heaven** or sky. There are few details about Shang Di in Chinese mythology other than that he was male and his duties involved rewarding those who were deserving and punishing those who were not. Shang Di was not represented in art.

A similar deity is the **Jade Emperor**, also known as Yu Huang, revered by Taoists as the supreme ruler of heaven. According to legend, when Yu Huang was born as a prince the kingdom where he lived was flooded with light. As he grew, he showed a remarkable respect for all living things and devoted himself to helping the least fortunate members of the kingdom. After his father died, he ruled the region with greatness and eventually became immortal, or able to live forever. According to myth, it took Yu Huang millions of years to achieve the status of Jade Emperor, which was bestowed upon him by a group of deities.

Two groups of characters central to Chinese mythology are the Three Sovereigns and the Five Emperors. All of these figures were believed to rule ancient regions of China, and many are credited with uplifting humans to a state of advanced civilization through their leadership or their teachings. The Three Sovereigns are figures of the most ancient times. Two of the three, Fu Xi and Nuwa, were deities who

helped humankind continue in the aftermath of a great flood. Fu Xi and Nuwa were brother and sister and were the only two to survive the flood; they prayed to the Jade Emperor, who gave them permission to become a couple and repopulate the land. In many versions of their tale they also teach humans essential skills, such as hunting, fishing with nets, and cooking food. The third of the Three Sovereigns, Shennong, is said to have taught people the arts of agriculture and medicinal herbs. According to legend, Shennong went to the trouble of tasting hundreds of plants and minerals in an effort to determine which could be helpful to humans and which could be harmful (poisonous).

The Five Emperors are believed to be based on historical leaders who brought great advancements to their people. None were emperors in the traditional, later use of the term; rather, they were tribal leaders who may have also been elected to be in charge of a larger group of tribes. The first of the Five Emperors was the **Yellow Emperor**, also known as Huang-Di. The Yellow Emperor was said to be the first to institute laws among the tribes he ruled, and he also brought the first music and art to his people. He became immortal, and eventually power passed to his grandson, Zhuanxu. Zhuanxu made his own contributions to Chinese culture, expanding his kingdom and unifying religious and marriage practices for all his subjects.

The kingdom was later ruled by his son, Ku, and by Ku's son, Yao. It is believed that Ku ruled for seventy years, while his son Yao ruled for over one hundred years. Yao, according to tradition, invented the Chinese board game Go, which was considered an essential way to learn strategy and planning. The last of the Five Emperors was Shun, son-in-law to Yao and ruler for nearly fifty years. He was originally a simple farmer, but his humility and dedication to religion won him a reputation that spread all the way to Yao's throne; since Yao was dissatisfied with his own son's behavior, he allowed Shun to marry two of his daughters and become the next in line to rule. Yao and Shun are often viewed together as the perfect leaders whose behavior rose above any possible hint of misdeed and whose popularity has been unmatched since.

Other important figures from Chinese history have developed their own unique legends that expand upon their true historical accomplishments. Two of the most important of these figures are the religious and philosophical leaders Confucius and Laozi. Born in 551 BCE to a poor family of aristocratic background, Confucius began a teaching career

after working as a minor government official. For Confucius, the goal of education and learning was self-knowledge and self-improvement, which would lead one to right conduct. Although his method of education was aimed at ensuring the smooth operation of a stable and well-ordered state, his teachings became a guide to living wisely as well.

Confucius attracted many followers who spread his ideas after his death in 479 BCE. A number of legends grew up about Confucius, including one in which **dragons** guarded his mother when he was born. According to another story, a **unicorn** appeared at his birth and spit out a piece of jade with a prophecy written on it, saying that the infant would become “an uncrowned emperor.” Considering the immense impact of Confucius on Chinese culture, the prophecy came true.

Taoism, also known as Daoism, arose about the same time as Confucianism. This religious tradition had its roots in the nature worship of the earliest Chinese people. The word *tao* means “way,” and Taoist belief is based on the idea that there is a natural order or a “way of heaven” that one can come to know by living in harmony with nature. Through an understanding of natural laws, an individual can gain eternal life. The main Taoist work, the *Tao Te Ching*, was supposedly written by Laozi, a scholar at the Chinese royal court in the 500s BCE. Little is known about Laozi. The main sources of information, written hundreds of years after he lived, are legendary in nature. One of the most popular stories about Laozi concerns a voyage to the west, during which he wrote the *Tao Te Ching*. Other tales claim that Laozi met Confucius and that he lived more than two hundred years. Although the true story of Laozi will probably never be known, he is widely respected in China. Confucianists consider him a great philosopher, while Taoists regard him as the embodiment of the *tao* and honor him as a saint or god.

## Major Myths

According to Chinese mythology, at the beginning of time the universe consisted only of a giant egg. Within the egg lay a sleeping giant named Pan Gu. One day Pan Gu awoke and stretched, causing the egg to split open. After Pan Gu emerged, the light, pure parts of the egg became the sky, while the heavy parts formed the earth. This separation of the earth and sky marked the beginning of yin and yang, the two opposing forces of the universe.

*Laozi's fabled meeting with Confucius.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.



Already gigantic in size, Pan Gu grew ten feet taller each day. This went on for eighteen thousand years, and as Pan Gu became taller, he pushed the earth and sky farther apart and shaped them with his tools until they reached their present position and appearance. Exhausted by his work, Pan Gu finally fell asleep and died.

When Pan Gu died, parts of his body were transformed into different features of the world. According to some stories, his head, arms, feet, and stomach became great mountains that help to anchor the world and mark its boundaries. Other stories say that Pan Gu's breath was transformed into wind and clouds; his voice became thunder; and his eyes became the sun and moon. Pan Gu's blood formed rivers and seas; his veins turned into roads and paths; his sweat became rain and dew; his bones and teeth turned into rock and metal; his flesh changed into soil;

the hair on his head became the stars; and the hair on his body turned into vegetation.

Some myths say that humans developed from fleas and parasites that fell from Pan Gu's body and beard. Other stories, however, tell how Pan Gu created humans by shaping them from clay and leaving them in the sun to dry. When a sudden rain began to fall, Pan Gu hastily wrapped up the clay figures, damaging some in the process, which explains why some humans are crippled or disabled.

Another myth tells of the battle between two gods. Zhu Rong was the god of **fire**, while his son Gong Gong was a god of water. The ambitious young Gong Gong decided to attempt an overthrow of heaven so that he could be the ruler of all things. When Zhu Rong heard this, he battled his son for several days to stop him. The two fell down to earth during the fight, and ultimately Zhu Rong was triumphant over his son. However, Gong Gong was so upset that he smashed one of the mountains that held up the heavens. This is why the sun, the moon, and the stars travel through the sky at an angle.

Another popular myth concerns the daughter of the Jade Emperor, a princess who was responsible for weaving the clouds in the sky. She had a magic robe that allowed her to descend to the land of mortals—Earth—in order to bathe each day. On one occasion, a poor cowherd saw her bathing in a stream and fell in love with her. While she was in the water, he took her robe; this kept her from being able to return to the heavens. Trapped with the cowherd, the princess eventually came to love him, and the couple got married. Later, when the princess was feeling homesick and missing her father, she discovered the magic robe that her husband had hidden from her. She used the robe to travel back to the heavens, and her father—not wanting her to return to Earth—created an enormous river across the sky that the princess could not cross. The river is visible in the night sky as the Milky Way. Seeing how upset his daughter became, however, the Jade Emperor decided to allow the couple to meet on a bridge over the river for one day each year. (In one version of the tale, the bridge is made of magpies—birds who have taken pity on the couple.)

A famous literary work that incorporates many elements of Chinese folklore—including animals as main characters—is the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West*. The novel tells the story of a famous Buddhist monk named Xuanzang who travels west on a journey to India, where he is tasked with obtaining some sacred Buddhist scriptures. Along the way



he encounters several unique characters who join him on his quest, including Sun Wukong, the Monkey King who had been punished by Buddha centuries before when he attempted to take control of heaven. Xuanzang is able to control Sun Wukong's violent outbursts by uttering some magic words. Another companion—the half-human, half-pig Zhu Bajie—was also punished by the gods for his disrespectful behavior. Xuanzang is also joined by a demon named Sha Wujing, a former general in heaven who was punished for breaking a valuable crystal vessel. The group encounters eighty-one different disasters that they must overcome, mostly orchestrated by Buddha himself as a test for the adventurers. What begins as a search for scriptures turns out to be a quest for salvation; Xuanzang and Sun Wukong both achieve the highest level of enlightenment, while the other characters earn the ability to return to heaven.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Several common themes appear throughout much of Chinese mythology. Among the most significant are the creation of the world out of chaos or disorder, the importance of nature, and reverence for ancestors. The importance of nature is stressed in legends, such as that of the Five Sacred Mountains that represent the main points of the compass and the axis of the world. The most sacred mountain, T'ai Shan, has Shang Di, the greatest earthly power, as its deity. Mount Kunlun, home of immortals, became the focus of various cults. Many Chinese myths deal with natural disasters, especially **floods**. Others deal with heavenly bodies, such as the sun and moon. Animals, including dragons, pigs, and monkeys, are also important figures in Chinese mythology.

Reverence for ancestors is another common theme in Chinese mythology. Long life is viewed as a sign of the gods' favor, and for many centuries the Chinese have sought the secret of long life and immortality. In the past, Taoists believed that magic potions could be created that bestowed eternal life on people who drank them and that beings known as *hsien* gained immortality in this way. Age is also closely associated with wisdom and enlightenment in many myths. Both Taoism and Confucianism stress the importance of paying proper respect to elders, especially parents and grandparents, and deceased ancestors are honored with various ceremonies and rituals.

## Chinese Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mythology has been one of the richest sources for Chinese artists and writers to draw upon over the centuries. *Journey to the West* is considered to be one of the most important books in Chinese history, and traditional artwork commonly features legendary figures, such as the Five Emperors or the Eight Immortals. In modern times, even with the increasing presence of Western cultural traditions, Chinese mythology remains an integral part of life and art in China.

*Journey to the West* has appeared in many forms and remains the best-known tale of Chinese mythology to those outside China. The Japanese television series *Monkey* (1978), which also aired in a translated version for British and Australian audiences, was based on the book, and the 2008 English-language film *The Forbidden Kingdom*, starring Chinese cinema legends Jackie Chan and Jet Li, was inspired by the same legendary characters.

Other mythological characters also appear in different aspects of art and culture. Pan Gu is usually portrayed as a little person clothed in a bearskin or leaves, holding a hammer and chisel or the egg of creation. Fu Xi and Nuwa are sometimes depicted in half-human, half-snake form; the two have appeared in several video games, including the popular *Dynasty Warriors* series. In modern times, Shang Di is one name given to God among Chinese Christians. As interest in Asian culture expands throughout the Western world, characters such as these—and the tales that accompany them—will no doubt continue to grow in awareness and popularity.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Bridge of Birds: A Novel of an Ancient China that Never Was* (1984), by Barry Hughart, is a fantasy tale built largely on the myth of the princess and the cowherd, though it also weaves many other Chinese myths into its adventure. Master Li Kao and his sidekick, Number Ten Ox, venture across a mythical, seventh-century landscape in an attempt to find the Great Root of Power—the only cure for the ailing children of their small village. The book won the 1985 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, as well as the 1986 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, and

spawned two sequels: *The Story of the Stone* (1988), and *Eight Skilled Gentlemen* (1990).

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Buddhism and Mythology; Creation Stories; Dragons; Reincarnation; Xian; Yellow Emperor



## Christopher, St.

### Character Overview

In the Christian religion, St. Christopher is thought to have carried the child Jesus across a difficult stream. For this reason, he is associated with helping travelers and is, in fact, the patron (protector) saint of travelers. He is reported to have lived during the third century CE, though little historical evidence exists to support this. The best-known legend about St. Christopher states that he was a giant named Reprobus (or Offero in some versions) who wanted to serve the world's most powerful king. When he found out that Christ was the greatest king, he converted to Christianity. He then took up a post by a river that had no bridge and carried travelers across on his shoulders. One day he was carrying a small child who became so heavy that Christopher could barely make it across. The child turned out to be Christ himself, and Christopher had just carried the weight of the world's sins. He was then given the name Christopher, which translates as "bearer of Christ."

Another legend about St. Christopher suggests that, in addition to being a giant, he had the head of a dog. According to this legend, he was once a fierce cannibal who changed his ways after converting to Christianity. He was later executed for his Christian beliefs.

### St. Christopher in Context

Although Christopher has been recognized as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, there is no verifiable evidence that he ever existed. According to legend, he was executed by the Roman emperor Decius, who served as the leader of Rome from 249–251 CE. During his short reign, Decius was known for persecuting Christians, whom he saw as a threat to traditional Roman beliefs. This may explain why St. Christopher, portrayed as a loyal follower of Christ, is associated with this time period.

**Nationality/Culture**  
Christian

**Pronunciation**  
saynt KRIS-tuh-fer

**Alternate Names**  
Reprobus, Offero

**Appears In**  
Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox myths

**Lineage**  
Unknown

**Christopher, St.**

*St. Christopher carrying Christ (disguised as a child) across the river.* CAMERAPHOTO/ART RESOURCE, NY.



In 1969, the Roman Catholic Church removed St. Christopher's feast day from the universal calendar of saints, citing a lack of evidence for his existence. However, he still remains on the list of saints recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of St. Christopher is loyalty. St. Christopher's dedication to Christ is why he begins helping people across the river without a bridge. It is also this loyalty that leads to his ultimate execution. The most notable symbol associated with St. Christopher is the dog; he is said to have had a dog's head, and the dog has long been a symbol of loyalty.

## St. Christopher in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

St. Christopher was a popular figure in medieval Christian art. He was sometimes depicted with the head of a dog, and often shown carrying a young Jesus on his back. A famous example of the latter is the painting *St. Christopher Carrying the Christ Child* (1480–1490) by Hieronymus Bosch.

St. Christopher often appears in modern films, music, and literature as a symbolic protector of travelers. An image of St. Christopher is kept by a character in the classic film *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1957, based on Charles Lindbergh's real-life flight across the Atlantic Ocean). St. Christopher is also considered the patron saint of many cities, including Vilnius, Lithuania, and Havana, Cuba.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

St. Christopher may or may not have been an actual historical figure, but his description qualifies as “larger than life.” Some scholars have suggested that the man was referred to as “dog-faced” because he came from a region thought to be savage or primitive. This illustrates the problems of reading a text literally, instead of understanding the symbolic nature of some phrases or descriptions. Although people often use expressions in casual conversation—such as “I'm starving,” for example—it can be difficult to spot such expressions in ancient texts originally written in another language.

Write a brief account of a time when you or someone you know mistakenly interpreted a statement literally. If you cannot think of an example, try to come up with at least ten figures of speech that could be easily misunderstood by readers a thousand years in the future.



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
SUR-see

**Alternate Names**  
Kirke

**Appears In**  
Homer's *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Theogony*

**Lineage**  
Daughter of Helios and Perse

## Circe

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the witch Circe was the daughter of the **sun** god Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs) and the ocean nymph (female nature spirit) called Perse (pronounced PUR-see). According to legend, Circe lived on the island of Aeaea (pronounced ee-EE-uh), where she built a palace for herself and practiced spells that enabled her to turn men into animals.

The two best-known legends involving Circe concern her encounters with the fisherman Glaucus and with **Odysseus**, a Greek hero of the Trojan War.

Glaucus (pronounced GLAW-kus) was changed into a sea god one day while sorting his catch. He became half man and half fish, with long strands of seaweed for hair. Glaucus fell in love with a beautiful girl named Scylla (pronounced SIL-uh), but she was frightened of his appearance and rejected him. He went to Circe and asked for a spell to make Scylla love him. Circe offered Glaucus her love instead, but he refused to have anyone but Scylla. The jealous Circe then enchanted the water where Scylla was swimming, turning her into a horrible sea monster with six heads. Scylla fled to a cave on top of a dangerous cliff and attacked any sailors that came within her reach.

The most famous tale concerning Circe appears in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) and his crew sailed by Aeaea as they were returning from the Trojan War. Odysseus sent some men ashore, led by a warrior named Eurylochus (pronounced your-i-LOH-kus). The group came upon Circe's palace, which was surrounded by lions, bears, and wolves, which were tame and did not attack them. In fact, the beasts were men that Circe had changed into animal form. Circe then appeared and invited Odysseus's men inside to dine and drink. Everyone accepted the invitation except Eurylochus, who was suspicious. After eating Circe's enchanted food, the men all turned into pigs. Eurylochus alone returned to the ship to tell Odysseus what had happened.

Odysseus decided to go to Circe himself. Along the way, he met a young man, who was actually the god **Hermes** in disguise. Hermes tried

to discourage Odysseus from continuing on to the palace, but Odysseus was determined to get his men back. Hermes then gave Odysseus an herb that would protect him from Circe's spells. When Odysseus reached the palace, Circe invited him in and attempted to enchant him. However, the herb protected him against her spell, and he drew his sword and threatened her. The sorceress fell to her knees and pleaded for her life. Odysseus agreed to spare her if she would return his men to their normal condition and release them safely.

Circe restored the crew to human form and offered to entertain them before they returned to sea. Odysseus and his men found life on the island so pleasurable that they remained there a full year before resuming the journey home. When they finally left, Circe sent them on their way with a favorable wind and advice about how to avoid the many dangers that lay before them.

In an Italian version of this legend, Circe and Odysseus had three children: Telegonus (pronounced tuh-LEG-uh-nus), Agrius (pronounced AG-ree-us), and Latinus (pronounced LA-tin-us). Telegonus traveled to Ithaca to seek his father but then killed him by accident. He brought Odysseus's body back to Aea, accompanied by Odysseus's widow, **Penelope** (pronounced puh-NEL-uh-pee), and their son Telemachus (pronounced tuh-LEM-uh-kuhs). Circe made them all immortal (able to live forever) and married Telemachus, and Telegonus married Penelope. Circe also played a role in the legend of the **Argonauts**, ritually purifying **Jason** and **Medea** after they killed Medea's brother.

## Circe in Context

Ancient Greek women did not enjoy the same status as men. They were expected to remain at home, tend to the household, and nurture their families. The aggressive actions of the female figures in ancient Greek myths show that the Greeks were well aware, however, that women might have more than meal-planning and child-rearing on their minds. The witch, Circe, possesses qualities that would both entice and frighten men. Circe is beautiful, entertaining, generous, a wonderful hostess, and a capable healer—all things that, to the ancient Greeks, a perfect woman must be. She offers rest and restoration to Odysseus's weary men, and she helps them along in their journey—but not, of course, before turning them into pigs. Thus, Circe's two-sided female nature becomes clear. She is not only nurturing and feminine; she is dangerous, deceptive, and powerful.

## Real Magic?

Although there is no evidence that Circe is based on a real historical figure, medical experts have speculated about a possible scientific explanation for her potions and Odysseus's antidote. This assumes the effect of Circe's potion is not taken literally—in other words, victims are not actually transformed into animals.

A potion that causes hallucinations, memory loss, and confusion could be made from a group of naturally occurring substances known as anticholinergics. These substances are found in deadly nightshade and other plants found in the region associated with the Circe myth. Such a potion could result in a victim feeling as if he or she were under a magical spell. (It is important to note that deadly nightshade is one of the most poisonous plants known to humans and should never be consumed or fed to anyone.)

In addition, the plant that Homer describes as protection against Circe's potion—referred to as “moly”—matches descriptions of a plant known today as the snowdrop. The snowdrop contains a natural substance that can reduce the effects of anticholinergics, thus offering protection from such a potion.

She controls wild beasts such as lions and wolves, and has a deep connection with the ancient, dark forces of nature. This dark, mysterious connection with nature is something that was, long before the ancient Greeks, associated with women. Odysseus, a clever man, recognizes and respects Circe's power. It is only with divine help that he outmaneuvers her. The story of Circe seems to be a warning to Greek men that if they did not firmly control women, women would control them.

Circe has much in common with later conceptions of witches in Europe and North America. She knows how to use herbs to create spells and potions, which she whips up in a bubbling cauldron. She even has a stick or staff, much like a witch's wand.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Because of the details of her tale in the *Odyssey*, Circe has become associated with men in animal form, usually as swine. She is commonly shown surrounded by animals and holding a cup of her potion. Many scholars view Circe as a symbol of the luxury and unchecked desire that seduces people and causes them to ignore their duty and thus lose their



dignity. Since nearly all the victims of her wrath were male, Circe may also represent the power that a woman can have over men.

## Circe in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though Circe is hardly a major character in Greek mythology, she has endured in art and popular culture better than some Greek gods. Her story is recognized well enough that she is mentioned in passing in many works, including the Ernest Hemingway novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Nathaniel Hawthorne offered a retelling of Circe's story in his 1853 collection *Tanglewood Tales*. Literary legends as diverse as Edmund Spenser, James Joyce, and Toni Morrison included female characters based on Circe in their most popular works.

Circe has also appeared as a villain in several DC Comics series, including *Wonder Woman*, and has also appeared on the animated television series *Hercules*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Waiting for Odysseus* by Clemence McLaren (2004) offers a unique new perspective on the story of Homer's *Odyssey*: each of the four sections of the book is told in the voice of a woman from Odysseus's life. The second section of the book, "Circe's Story: A Witch Takes a Lover," tells of the sorceress and her affair with the adventurous hero. The author includes an epilogue that offers additional information about the themes of the book and the original Greek myths.

SEE ALSO Jason; Nymphs; Odysseus; *Odyssey, The*



# Coatlícuē

## Character Overview

Coatlícuē, the earth goddess of **Aztec mythology**, was the mother of the **sun**, the moon, the stars, and all the Aztec gods and goddesses. Her name means "serpent skirt." Coatlicue was the source of all life on earth and took the dead back again into her body.

### Nationality/Culture

Aztec

### Pronunciation

koh-aht-LEE-kway

### Alternate Names

Teteoinan

### Appears In

Aztec oral legends

### Lineage

Mother of Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl

## Major Myths

According to legend, Coatlicue had several hundred children. Once, she became pregnant after a ball of feathers fell from the sky and she stuffed it into her bosom. One of Coatlicue's daughters, Coyolxauhqui (pronounced koh-yohl-SHAW-kee), was outraged by this and led a group of Coatlicue's other children to destroy their mother. Just as Coatlicue was about to be killed, the god **Huitzilopochtli** (pronounced wee-tsee-loh-POCH-tee) emerged fully grown from her womb and protected her, slaying many of her rebellious children in the process.

## Coatlicue in Context

The Aztecs, like other early American tribes, engaged in human sacrifices to their gods. The victims were usually enemy soldiers or captives of war, and the method of **sacrifice** depended upon which god the Aztecs meant to please. For Huitzilopochtli, a priest would slice open the stomach and chest of the victim and pull the still-beating heart out of the victim's body. For Huehueteotl (pronounced way-way-tay-OH-tul), the god of **fire**, victims would be burned alive. The skulls of sacrificed victims were then displayed on a large rack known as a *tzompantli*. The largest tzompantli, just one of at least six located at the capital city of Tenochtitlán (pronounced teh-nowch-TEE-tlan), is estimated to have contained approximately sixty thousand skulls.

Estimates for the number of sacrifices performed by the Aztecs each year during the height of their empire range from twenty thousand to nearly a quarter of a million. Although Coatlicue was a goddess of death and is depicted wearing body parts, sacrifices made in her honor are not documented.

In many mythologies, a “mother” goddess gives birth to the cosmos and all the deities. The creation of new life was seen as a female power, for the obvious reason that women are able to produce life from their bodies. The particular ferocity and grim depiction of Coatlicue were reflections of the violence that was part of Aztec society.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main symbols of Coatlicue is the snake. Her skirt is made of entwined serpents, and her head consists of two snakes facing each other. Snakes are symbols of both death and fertility in many cultures. Her massive breasts show her as a nourishing mother, while her clawlike

*A statue of Coatlicue, the  
Aztec goddess of the earth.*

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.



fingers and toes show her as a devouring monster and a digger of graves. She wears a necklace made of the hands and hearts of her children, with a single skull in the center. This symbolizes both the giving and taking of life.

### **Coatlucue in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

As with many Aztec gods and goddesses, Coatlicue appears in relatively few existing works of art. A statue in Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology and History represents the idea of Coatlicue as creator and

destroyer, and is undoubtedly the most well-known representation of the goddess. Several illustrated Aztec calendars and tribal histories were also created at around the time Spanish colonists settled in the region in the early sixteenth century.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Spanish conquistadors viewed Aztec rituals of human sacrifice as barbaric and used this as one of their main justifications for overthrowing the Aztec empire. In modern times, the principle of freedom of religion allows people the right to worship as they wish, but does not make allowances for human or animal sacrifices. Some Aztec rituals required self-sacrifice, which involved piercing one's own skin and offering the blood to the gods.

Do you think freedom of religion should protect certain rituals such as blood or animal sacrifices? Why or why not? Do you think animal sacrifice is fundamentally different from hunting, which is largely legal and regulated by the government? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Aztec Mythology; Serpents and Snakes



## Corn

### Theme Overview

First grown in Mexico thousands of years ago, corn soon became the most important food crop in Central and North America. Throughout the region, Maya, Aztecs, and other Native Americans worshiped corn gods and developed a variety of myths about the origin, planting, growing, and harvesting of corn (also known as maize).

### Major Myths

**Corn Gods and Goddesses** The majority of corn deities (gods) are female and associated with fertility. They include the Cherokee goddess Selu; Yellow Woman and the Corn Mother goddess Iyatiku of the

Keresan people of the American Southwest; and Chicomecoatl (pronounced chee-co-meh-KWAH-tl), the goddess of maize who was worshipped by the Aztecs of Mexico. The Maya believed that humans had been fashioned out of corn, and they based their calendar on the planting of the cornfield.

Male corn gods do appear in some legends. The Aztecs had a male counterpart to Chicomecoatl, called Centeotl (pronounced sen-teh-OH-tl), to whom they offered their blood each year, as well as some minor corn gods known as the Centzon Totochtin, or “the 400 rabbits.” The Seminole figure Fas-ta-chee, a dwarf whose hair and body were made of corn, was another male corn god. He carried a bag of corn and taught the Seminoles how to grow, grind, and store corn for food. The Hurons of northeastern North America worshipped Ioskeha (pronounced i-oh-WISS-keh-ha), who made corn, gave **fire** to the Hurons, and brought good weather.

The Zuni people of the southwestern United States have a myth about eight corn maidens. The young women are invisible, but their beautiful dancing movements can be seen when they dance with the growing corn as it waves in the wind. One day the young god Paiyatemu fell in love with the maidens, and they fled from him. While they were gone, a terrible famine spread across the land. Paiyatemu begged the maidens to turn back, and they returned to the Zuni and resumed their dance. As a result, the corn started to grow again.

**Origin Myths** A large number of American Indian myths deal with the origin of corn and how it came to be grown by humans. Many of the tales center on a “Corn Mother” or other female figure who introduces corn to the people.

In one myth, told by the Creeks and other tribes of the southeastern United States, the Corn Woman is an old woman living with a family that does not know who she is. Every day she feeds the family corn dishes, but the members of the family cannot figure out where she gets the food.

One day, wanting to discover where the old woman gets the corn, the sons spy on her. Depending on the version of the story, the corn is either scabs or sores that she rubs off her body, washings from her feet, nail clippings, or even her feces. In all versions, the origin of the corn is disgusting, and once the family members know its origin, they refuse to eat it.



*This painting by George Catlin shows the Hidatsa people of the North American plains celebrating the corn harvest with the Green Corn Dance. The ceremony, held in the middle of the summer, marks the beginning of the New Year.* SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM, WASHINGTON, D.C./ART RESOURCE, NY.

The Corn Woman solves the problem in one of several ways. In one version, she tells the sons to clear a large piece of ground, kill her, and drag her body around the clearing seven times. However, the sons clear only seven small spaces, cut off her head, and drag it around the seven spots. Wherever her blood fell, corn grew. According to the story, this is why corn grows only in some places and not all over the world.

In another account, the Corn Woman tells the boys to build a corn crib and lock her inside it for four days. At the end of that time, they open the crib and find it filled with corn. The Corn Woman then shows them how to use the corn.

Other stories of the origin of corn involve goddesses who choose men to teach the uses of corn and to spread the knowledge to their people. The Seneca Indians of the Northeast tell of a beautiful woman who lived on a cliff and sang to the village below. Her song told an old

## King Corn

The 2007 documentary *King Corn* examines the way corn is grown, fertilized, harvested, and marketed by American farms. The filmmakers, Aaron Wolf and Curt Ellis, follow the many paths corn takes as it becomes everything from car fuel to livestock feed to soda sweetener. The film shows the surprising ways in which corn, considered a blessing from the gods by the Native Americans, has become a low-quality, non-nutritious ingredient present in almost every packaged food we eat.

man to climb to the top and be her husband. At first, he refused because the climb was so steep, but the villagers persuaded him to go.

When the old man reached the top, the woman asked him to make love to her. She also taught him how to care for a young plant that would grow on the spot where they made love. The old man fainted as he embraced the woman, and when he awoke, the woman was gone. Five days later, he returned to the spot to find a corn plant. He husked the corn and gave some grains to each member of the tribe. The Seneca then shared their knowledge with other tribes, spreading corn around the world.

Mayan stories give the ant—or some other small creature—credit for the discovery of corn. The ant hid the corn away in a hole in a mountain, but eventually the other animals found out about the corn and arranged for a bolt of lightning to split open the mountain so that they could have some corn too. The fox, coyote, parrot, and crow gave corn to the gods, who used it to create the first people. Although the gods' earlier attempts to create human beings out of mud or wood had failed, the corn people were perfect. However, the gods decided that their new creations were able to see too clearly, so they clouded the people's sight to prevent them from competing with their makers.

The Lakota Plains Indians say that a white she-buffalo brought their first corn. A beautiful woman appeared on the plain one day. When hunters approached her, she told them to prepare to welcome her. They built a lodge for the woman and waited for her to reappear. When she came, she gave four drops of her milk and told them to plant them, explaining that they would grow into corn. The woman then changed into a buffalo and disappeared.

According to the Penobscot Indians, the Corn Mother was also the first mother of the people. Their creation myth says that after people began to fill the earth, they became so good at hunting that they killed most of the animals. The first mother of all the people cried because she had nothing to feed her children. When her husband asked what he could do, she told him to kill her and have her sons drag her body by its silky hair until her flesh was scraped from her bones. After burying her bones, they should return in seven months, when there would be food for the people. When the sons returned, they found corn plants with tassels like silken hair. Their mother's flesh had become the tender fruit of the corn.

Another Corn Mother goddess is Iyatiku, who appears in legends of the Keresan people, a Pueblo group of the American Southwest. In the Keresan story, Iyatiku leads human beings on a journey from underground up to the earth's surface. To provide food for them, she plants bits of her heart in fields to the north, west, south, and east. Later the pieces of Iyatiku's heart grow into fields of corn.

### **Corn in Context**

Though it is now grown and consumed worldwide, corn originated in Mexico around nine thousand years ago. It was most likely developed from a wild maize native to the area; local farmers created hybrid versions that maximized its benefit as a food. By around 1500 BCE, corn was one of the main foods for many of the tribes found in Central America. However, it was unknown to the rest of the world until Spanish explorers arrived in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Today, corn is grown in places such as China, Italy, and India, and is the number one grain crop (measured by weight) in the world. The United States produces more corn by itself than the rest of the top ten corn-producing countries combined.

In the mythologies of the American Southwest, corn is often said to arise from the flesh of a woman. This reflects the woman's role as both the giver of life through childbirth, and the gatherer of food in tribes that developed stable agricultural methods. While men would provide meat from hunting, much of a tribe's dietary needs were met by the women who harvested crops and prepared the food. The growing of corn from a dead body also reflects an understanding that organic matter, such as a dead body, provides nutrients for soil that aid in plant growth.



## Corn in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Corn played an important part in the art of many ancient American cultures. The Moche of Peru, for example, immortalized corn by representing it in their works of pottery.

Today, for most people, corn is a common food item that is consumed in some form—corn flakes, corn syrup, corn oil—practically every day. Livestock are fed corn. Corn has also recently become a source of fuel; corn can be used to produce ethanol, which can be used to power automobiles. Even as more people depend upon corn for their daily needs, its status as a mythical food given by the gods has faded.

However, some groups still recognize the mythical importance of corn. American Indians of the Southeast still hold a Green Corn Dance to celebrate the New Year. This important ceremony, thanking the spirits for the harvest, takes place in July or August. None of the new corn can be eaten before the ceremony, which involves rituals of purification and forgiveness and a variety of dances. Finally, the new corn can be offered to a ceremonial fire, and a great feast follows.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Find ten multi-ingredient snacks or food items in your kitchen. Read the ingredient list on each package. How many of the items contain at least one corn-based ingredient? Keep an eye out for things like “high fructose corn syrup” and “modified corn starch.” Based on your findings, do you think corn is as important to modern society as it was to ancient Americans? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Mythology; Mayan Mythology; Native American Mythology



# Creation Stories

## Theme Overview

People have long wondered how the world came into being. They have answered the question with stories that describe the origin of the universe

or the world and usually of human life as well. Creation myths, known as cosmogonies, express people's understanding of the world and their place in it.

## Major Myths

Some methods of creation appear again and again in cosmogonies from different parts of the world. One of the most common images is a description of the beginning of the world as a birth, a kind of creation familiar to everyone. The birth may result from the mating of a pair of gods as parents. The Maori of New Zealand, for example, say that the union of **Rangi and Papa** (Father Sky and Mother Earth) produced all things.

The hatching of an egg is another familiar kind of birth. Some creation myths tell of a cosmic egg containing the seeds or possibilities of everything. The hatching of the egg lets the possibilities take form. The Hindu texts known as the Upanishads describe the creation of the world as the breaking of a cosmic egg.

Another type of cosmogony says that the actions, thoughts, or desires of a supreme being or creator god brought the world into existence. The book of Genesis in the Bible tells how God created the world and everything in it. Other accounts of creation by a supreme being can be found in many regions, from the island of Hokkaido in northern Japan to the islands of Tierra del Fuego in southern South America.

Sometimes the created order simply emerges from chaos—a state of disorder. In **Norse mythology**, the scene of creation is an emptiness of wind and mist that forms into clouds and hardens into the frost giant **Ymir** (pronounced EE-mir), from whose body the world is made. Many Native American myths tell how animals and people appeared on earth by climbing out of a chaotic or primitive underground world.

The primal chaos is often a flood or a vast expanse of water. The people of ancient Egypt—who relied on the yearly **floods** of the Nile River to support their agriculture—said that before creation there existed only Nun, a watery abyss (bottomless depth). In some flood myths, creation takes place as the waters recede or as land rises. In others, an earth diver, a bird or an animal, plunges to the bottom of the water and brings up mud that becomes the earth. Such myths, which are common among American Indians, seldom explain where the mud or the earth-

## The Omaha Big Bang

Many modern scientists think that the universe began billions of years ago with an explosion of matter and energy called the Big Bang. The Omaha people of the Great Plains have their own “big bang” account of creation. At first all living things were spirits floating through space, looking for a place to exist in bodily form. The sun was too hot. The moon was too cold. The earth was covered with water. Then a huge boulder rose out of the water and exploded with a roar and a burst of flame that dried the water. Land appeared. The spirits of plants settled on earth. Animal spirits followed. Finally the spirits of people took bodily form on earth.

diving creature came from. Many cosmogonies describe the shaping or ordering of the world rather than its creation from nothingness. They often begin with some substance, being, or active force already in existence.

In some mythologies, the creation of people occurs through emergence from the earth. American Indian groups such as the Hopi, Zuni, and Navajo say that the first people traveled through a series of lower worlds to reach their permanent home. In some stories, a flood forces the occupants of the lower worlds to climb upward until they arrive on the surface.

**Themes in Creation Myths** In explaining how creation led to the world as it now exists, cosmogonies explore several basic themes. Most creation myths illustrate one or more of these themes.

**Separation** The theme of separation deals with the forming of distinct things out of what was once a formless unity. Separation may be a physical act. In Polynesian myth, for example, the children of Mother Earth and Father Sky force their parents apart so that the world can exist between them. Cosmogonies may describe creation as taking place in stages that mark the process of differentiation. The Old Testament states that God took six days to create light and darkness, the heavens, the earth and plants, the **sun** and moon, the sea creatures and animals, and the first people.

**Imperfection** A second theme is imperfection. According to many cosmogonies, the creator planned to make a perfect world, but some-

thing went wrong. As a result, flaws such as evil, illness, and death entered the creation. The Dogon of West Africa say that the world is imperfect because one of a pair of **twins** broke out early from the cosmic egg. The Hawaiians relate that the earth goddess Papa cursed humans with death after she discovered an incestuous affair between her husband and daughter.

**Dualism** Dualism, or tension between opposing forces, is an underlying theme of many creation stories, especially those that revolve around conflict. Greek myths about the war between the **Titans** and the gods are just one example of conflict between cosmic parents and their offspring. Sometimes the conflict involves twins or brothers. Some American Indians of the northeast woodlands explain that the world is the way it is because two gods played a role in its creation. **Gluskap**, good and wise, created plants, animals, and people. His evil, selfish brother Malsum made poisonous snakes and plants.

**Sacrifice** The theme of **sacrifice** reflects the idea that life is born out of death. Someone must die, or at least shed blood, before the world and life can begin. The *Enuma Elish* tells how the god **Marduk** killed the goddess **Tiamat** and cut her body into two parts that became the heavens and the earth. Sometimes the first people are made from a god's blood, perhaps mixed with dust or clay. Creation may also involve the slaying of a primal beast or monster.

**Cycles of creation and destruction** A few cosmogonies describe cycles in which the world is created and destroyed a number of times. Hindu scriptures say that **Brahma** has remade the world many times. Four ages, or *yugas*, make a *kalpa*, or eon. When a *kalpa* ends, creation dissolves into chaos.

The Aztecs of Mexico believed that the present world was the fifth that the gods had created. It was fated to end in universal destruction by earthquakes. The four previous worlds had been destroyed by a great flood, the falling of the sky, a fire storm, and a wind storm. The Maya believed that the gods made three unsuccessful attempts to create human beings before achieving a satisfactory result. Their first creations—animals, people made of mud, and wooden people—disappointed them in various ways, and they abandoned or destroyed them. Finally, the gods made people of maize (corn) who were perfect—so perfect that their creators clouded their vision to prevent them from seeing too far.

Every region of the world has produced numerous creation stories, and some cultures and religions have more than one. A sampling of myths from various sources shows both the endless variety of cosmogonies and the similarities in their structures and themes.

**African Creation Myths** Some African creation myths feature a huge snake, often identified with the rainbow, whose coils make up the universe. In West and Central Africa the idea of creation from a cosmic egg is common.

Twins or paired, dualistic powers appear in many African creation stories. The Fon of West Africa tell of the first mother, Nana Buluku, who gave birth to the twins Mawu (moon) and Lisa (sun), the parents of all the other gods, who were also born in sets of twins. Some African cosmogonies, however, are less concerned with the creation of the physical universe and the gods than with the appearance of the first man and first woman and the ordering of human society.

The notion of a supreme creator god appears throughout Africa. The Bushongo people of the Congo region called the creator Bumba. He was the sole inhabitant of a watery universe until he vomited out the sun, which dried the water. Then he vomited out the first animals and people.

**Creation Myths of the Americas** The Incas of South America claimed that darkness covered the earth until the god Con Tiqui **Viracocha** rose out of a lake, bringing with him the first people. He made more people out of rocks, then sent them out to populate the whole world. When these inhabitants rebelled against Con Tiqui Viracocha, he punished them by stopping the rainfall. A god named Pachachamac overthrew Con Tiqui Viracocha and created a new race of people, the ancestors of humans.

Creation myths of American Indians generally explain how the world took its present form, including the origins of human culture. Some tales feature a creator god or pair of gods, such as the Sun Father and Moonlight-giving Mother of the Zuni people. Many groups, including the Cheyenne, have stories of an earth diver.

Indians of the Southwest may have developed myths of emergence because their agricultural way of life led them to think of growth as a movement upward from below the earth's surface. The Hopi of Arizona say that creation brought four worlds into existence. Life began in the bottom level or cave, which eventually grew dirty and crowded. A pair of

twin brothers carried plants from **heaven**, and the people climbed up the cane plant into the second cave. When that place became too crowded, they climbed up again into the third cave. Finally, the brother gods led the people out into this world, the fourth level of creation.

**Creation Myths of the Near East** The ancient Egyptians believed that before the world existed there was only Nun, the watery nothingness. Then a mound of land rose, giving the first deity (god) a place to live. In some accounts, the first deity took the form of a bird. Others said that a lotus flower containing a god rose from the water. Several Egyptian creator gods were worshipped by different people: **Amun** and Atum, the sun gods; Khnum, who made men and women from clay and breathed life into them; and Ptah, who created the other gods by saying their names.

Among the Semitic creation myths of western Asia is the story of how God formed the world, the Garden of **Eden**, and **Adam and Eve**, the first parents. It is the cosmogony of the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faiths.

In the dualistic Persian, or Iranian, cosmogony, the good and wise lord **Ahura Mazda** began creation by sending beams of light into an abyss where **Ahriman**, lord of evil and sin, lived. Ahura Mazda cast Ahriman into **hell** for three thousand years. This gave Ahura Mazda time to create spirits of virtue, **angels**, and the creatures of earth, including Gayomart, the first man. When Ahriman's time in hell ended, he created flies, germs, pests, and other evils. One of his wicked followers brought disease and death to Gayomart, but a plant that grew from Gayomart's remains bore fruit that became the human race.

**Asian Creation Myths** Japanese tradition, preserved in a volume of mythological history called the *Kojiki*, states that before creation there was an oily sea. Gods came into being in the High Plains of Heaven. After seven generations of deities, came the first human ancestors, whose task was to make solid land. They stirred the sea with a jeweled spear. Drops that fell from the spear formed the islands of Japan.

A Chinese creation myth tells how Pan Gu hatched from a cosmic egg. One part of the eggshell formed the heavens; the other part became the earth. For eighteen thousand years, Pan Gu stood between them, keeping them apart by growing ever taller. Finally he became weary, lay down, and died. From his eyes came the sun and moon, from his hair the stars, from his breath the wind, and from his body the earth.



*In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God created a different part of the world each day by simply speaking it into existence. This manuscript illumination shows God creating the earth (upper left), the sun and moon (upper right), the animals (lower left), and the birds (lower right). © MUSEE MARMOTTAN, PARIS, FRANCE/GIRAUDON/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.*

Indian mythology, linked to both the Hindu and the Buddhist religions, contains many creation stories. Hindus often speak of Brahma as the creator god who brought the universe into being through his thoughts. Sometimes creation involves the sacrifice of a primal being such as Purusha, from whose body all the gods were made. Other myths describe the breaking of a cosmic egg or the union of heaven and earth as cosmic parents.

**Creation Myths of Australia and the Pacific** In the mythology of Australia's native peoples, or Aborigines, the period of creation was called **Dreamtime**, or the Dreaming. During this time, ancestral beings created the landscape, made the first people, and taught them how to survive. Some Aboriginal myths tell of a great flood that destroyed the previous landscape and the former society. According to many accounts, a great serpent caused the flood when he became angry with the ancestral people.

The vast Pacific Ocean contains the Polynesian, Melanesian, and Micronesian island groups, which produced a variety of cosmogonies. Not surprisingly, many of these myths involve water.

According to some Polynesians, a creator god named Tangaloa sent a bird messenger over an endless primal sea. At last Tangaloa threw a rock into the sea so the tired bird would have a place to land. Then the god created all the islands in the same way. The bird made the first people by giving arms, legs, hearts, and souls to maggots. Other Polynesian stories describe creation as the union of two opposing qualities: Po (darkness) and Ao (light). Polynesian and Micronesian cosmogonies often include the act of separating the earth from the sky. Melanesian creation myths generally involve ancestral **heroes** who wander from place to place, forming the landscape and creating the rules of society.

**European Creation Myths** Norse creation myths tell how the giant Ymir took shape in the huge icy emptiness called Ginnungagap. Ymir's great cow licked the ice, creating the first gods, including **Odin**. The gods killed Ymir and divided his body into a series of worlds on three levels: Asgard, the realm of gods; Midgard, the realm of people, **giants**, dwarfs, and elves; and Niflheim, the realm of the dead. The gods created the first man and woman from an ash tree and an elm tree.

Greek cosmogonies, echoed by the Romans, begin with birth and end with struggle. **Gaia**, the earth mother, emerged from chaos and gave birth to **Uranus**, the sky. The union of Uranus and Gaia produced plants, animals, and children, the Titans. The Titans overthrew Uranus, only to be overthrown later by their own children, the gods. Another Greek creation myth, possibly borrowed from the ancient Near East, combines many images and themes. It tells how a primal goddess emerged from the waters of chaos. Her union with a serpent produced a cosmic egg that split to become the heaven and the earth.



## Creation Stories in Context

Throughout history, humans have pondered the question, “Where did this world I live in come from?” The world’s mythologies and religions offer an immense variety of answers to this question. Yet scholars have discovered that the cosmogonies of different cultures fall into broad categories and contain many shared themes, as discussed above. Most creation myths reflect human understanding of how creation of new material takes place on Earth—through birth or through changes in states of matter.

The creation stories of different cultures generally reflect the importance of different elements within each culture. For example, according to **Japanese mythology**, the world began with an ancient ocean; the gods created the islands of Japan to occupy it. This reflects the importance of the ocean in an island culture. By contrast, the American Plains Indians speak of humans arising from clay, indicating the importance of the earth in their culture and daily life. For Aboriginal Australians, the Rainbow Serpent creates the all-important waterholes that dot the Australian landscape and provide the people with their only reliable source of fresh water. In each example, those things that are considered most important to the people of a culture play a key part in the culture’s creation myths.

## Creation Stories in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because of their very nature, creation myths in various cultures have remained fairly stable over the centuries. Once a creation myth becomes a part of a belief system, it will likely remain a part of that belief system. This means that new creation myths tend to arise only with new belief systems or mythologies. In modern times, such new belief systems are usually considered cults.

Some creation stories, such as those of Africa and Polynesia, existed for years in spoken form, but were not written down until recently. Other cultures preserved their cosmogonies in written texts, and some of these have survived from ancient times. The Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, written thousands of years ago, tells how people in Mesopotamia explained the beginning of the world. A Mayan text called the *Popol Vuh* describes the creation of the ancestors of the Maya.

Depictions of the ancient creation myths by modern artists can be found in many cultures. However, because some of these myths provide settings or details that are hard to visualize, creation myths do not appear in art as often as other, more visually familiar myths. One example of a

modern artist depicting a creation myth is Bill Reid's sculpture *The Raven and the First Men*, which can be found in the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.

The Christian version of the beginning of the world was the inspiration for both Joseph Haydn's symphony *Creation* (1798) and Scottish composer William Wallace's piece *Creation Symphony*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Virginia Hamilton's *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World* (1988) offers an excellent sampling of creation myths from a variety of cultures. The author includes explanatory notes for each myth to help provide context for the reader, and each myth features at least one watercolor illustration by artist Barry Moser. Hamilton has won numerous awards for her books, including the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award.

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Australian Mythology; Aztec Mythology; Buddhism and Mythology; Celtic Mythology; Chinese Mythology; Dreamtime; Egyptian Mythology; *Enuma Elish*; Finnish Mythology; Floods; Gluskap; Greek Mythology; Hinduism and Mythology; Inca Mythology; Japanese Mythology; Mayan Mythology; Melanesian Mythology; Micronesian Mythology; Native American Mythology; Norse Mythology; Persian Mythology; Polynesian Mythology; Roman Mythology; Semitic Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

KROH-nuhs

### Alternate Names

Saturn (Roman), Kronos

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Son of Uranus and Gaia

## Cronos

See **Cronus**.



## Cronus

### Character Overview

Cronus was the youngest of the **Titans**, the Greek deities (gods) who ruled the world before the arrival of **Zeus** and the other Olympian gods

and goddesses. Cronus seized power from his father, the sky god **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), and was later overthrown by his own children. The Romans adopted Cronus as a member of their pantheon—or group of recognized gods—renaming him Saturn and worshipping him as a god of agriculture.

## Major Myths

According to legend, Uranus had imprisoned several of his children in the body of his wife, the earth goddess **Gaia**. To punish him, Gaia asked her son Cronus to cut off Uranus's sex organs during the night. After carrying out his mother's wishes, Cronus replaced his father as ruler. He imprisoned races of **giants** and **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-peeze), who he considered dangerous. He married his sister, Rhea, another Titan, and they began to have children. Learning that one of his offspring was fated to overcome him just as he had overcome his father, Cronus swallowed each baby as it was born. Rhea, however, managed to save their youngest child, Zeus (pronounced ZOOS), by feeding Cronus a stone wrapped in infant clothing. She then arranged for the baby to be raised in secret in a cave on the highest mountain of the island of Crete.

When Zeus was grown, he forced Cronus to vomit up the swallowed children: the deities Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh), **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), and **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun). Zeus also freed the giants and the Cyclopes who had been imprisoned by his father. Together they went to war against Cronus and the Titans and, after a violent struggle, emerged victorious. Zeus then banished the Titans to Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a place deep in the **underworld**. In another version of the myth, Cronus's rise to power ushered in a peaceful golden age, which ended when the Titans were defeated. Following the battle, Cronus was sent to rule a distant paradise known as the Islands of the Blessed.

## Cronus in Context

Even though Cronus was the father of Zeus and other Olympian gods, he did not play a major role in ancient Greek worship or daily life; he did receive worship in parts of Greece, particularly as part of a harvest festival called the "Kronia." During the festival, masters and slaves ate together,

## Cronus

*Rhea prevented her husband Cronus from eating their son Zeus by giving him a stone to eat instead.* ERICH LESSING/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



thereby “overthrowing” social rules that separated the classes, and allowing social equality—just for a day. The Romans, who worshipped Cronus as “Saturn,” held a similar festival called the “Saturnalia” in which slaves had temporary freedom to do as they please. The festival coincided with the Christian Christmas season, and involved the exchange of presents, a practice adopted by the Christians when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Although the Romans were much more active in their worship of Cronus than the Greeks were, the Romans recognized Saturn as a Greek import; when the Roman priests presented sacrifices to him, they left their heads uncovered, as was customary in Greek worship and contrary to Roman practice.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Greeks viewed Cronus as a symbol of great power and fate. Although he overthrows his father and becomes the leader of the gods, he later falls victim to his son. Although he tries to control his fate by swallowing his children, his plan fails and his destiny—a predetermined path in life—remains the same.

As a god of harvests, Cronus is sometimes shown holding a pruning hook. The similarity between the name “Cronus” and the Greek word for time *chronos* inspired his transformation into the Western figure of “Father Time,” the elderly man with a scythe who is ushered out at the end of each year by a child who represents the New Year.

## Cronus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Saturn was the source of the modern word “Saturday,” and his name was given to the sixth planet from the Sun in our solar system. Perhaps because of the Romans’ admiration of Cronus as Saturn, the god is better known and more commonly depicted as Saturn from the Renaissance through the modern age. One of the most famous images of Saturn is Francisco Goya’s grisly painting *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*, completed around 1823 as a mural on a wall in his home and never meant for public display. Another famous image of Cronus/Saturn eating one of his children was created by Peter Paul Rubens in 1636. Cronus is also the evil force at work pitting the gods against each other in the award-winning young readers book *The Lightning Thief* (2005) by Rick Riordan.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Cronus Chronicles*, written by Anne Ursu and illustrated by Eric Fortune, is a series about two modern-day kids who become caught up in a supernatural world of Greek myths. In the first volume of the series, *The Shadow Thieves* (2007), the kids—Charlotte Mielszewski and her cousin Zee—must stop Philonecron, the grandson of Poseidon, from stealing the shadows of children in order to build an army and take over the underworld.

**SEE ALSO** Cyclopes; Gaia; Giants; Greek Mythology; Oedipus; Uranus; Zeus



**Nationality/Culture**  
Irish/Celtic

**Pronunciation**  
koo-KUL-in

**Alternate Names**  
Sétanta

**Appears In**  
The Ulster Cycle

**Lineage**  
Son of Lug and Dechtire

## Cuchulain

### Character Overview

Cuchulain, one of the greatest **heroes** of Irish mythology and legend, was a warrior in the service of Conchobhar (pronounced KON-kvar), king of Ulster. Best known for his single-handed defense of Ulster, Cuchulain is said to have lived in the first century BCE, and tales about him and other heroes began to be written down in the 700s CE. Cuchulain's adventures were recorded in a series of tales known as the Ulster Cycle.

Like many Irish heroes, Cuchulain had a short, adventurous, and tragic life. He was the son of Dechtire (pronounced DEK-tir-uh), sister of King Conchobhar. She and some of her handmaidens were kidnapped on her wedding night by **Lug**, the **sun** god, who appeared to her as a fly. Dechtire swallowed the fly and later gave birth to a son whose original name was Sétanta.

From the beginning, the child possessed extraordinary powers. He could swim like a fish at birth. He had seven fingers on each hand, seven toes on each foot, and seven pupils in each eye. At the age of seven, he fought off 150 boy warriors to gain entrance to his uncle's court. When he was twelve, Sétanta accidentally killed the watchdog of the smith Cullan and offered to guard Cullan's property until another dog could be trained. It was at that time that he changed his name to Cuchulain, which means "hound of Cullan." He grew up to be a handsome, well-spoken man who was very popular with women.

**Training with Scatha** Cuchulain fell in love with a woman named Emer and asked her to marry him. Emer's father insisted that Cuchulain must first prove his valor by undergoing a series of trials and sent him to the war goddess Scatha to be trained in warfare. On his journey to Scatha, Cuchulain had to pass through the plain of Ill Luck, where sharp grasses cut travelers' feet, and through the Perilous Glen, where dangerous animals roamed. Then Cuchulain had to cross the Bridge of the Cliff, which raised itself vertically when someone tried to cross it. Cuchulain jumped to the center and slid to the opposite side.

To repay Scatha for his training, Cuchulain fought her enemy Aife (pronounced EE-va), the strongest woman in the world. After defeating Aife, he made peace with her, and she bore him a son, Connla. While



*The Irish hero Cuchulain asked to be tied to a pole so he could continue to fight even while dying.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

returning home to claim his bride, Cuchulain rescued a princess and visited the **underworld**, or land of the dead.

**The Cattle Raid of Cooley** Back home, Cuchulain achieved his greatest victory. When Queen Medb (pronounced MAVE) of Connacht (pro-

nounced KON-et) sent a great army to steal the Brown Bull of Cooley, in Ulster, Cuchulain stopped them single-handedly. He alone, of all the Ulster warriors, was unaffected by a curse that had weakened the strength of the fighting force. Unfortunately, during one of the battles, he was forced to fight and kill his good friend Ferdiad. On numerous other occasions, Cuchulain defended Ulster against the rest of Ireland and won numerous contests of bravery and trustworthiness.

But misfortune followed him. Cuchulain killed his own son, Connla, learning his identity too late. In addition, Cuchulain died as a result of trickery. After offending Morrigan, the goddess of death and battles, he was summoned to fight at a time when he was ill. On the way to battle, he saw a vision of a woman washing the body and weapons of a dead warrior, and he recognized the warrior as himself. Knowing then that his own death was unavoidable, he fought bravely. When he was too weak to stand, Cuchulain tied himself to a pillar so that he could die fighting on his feet. He was twenty-seven years old.

**Cuchulain the Warrior** Cuchulain had several magical weapons: his sword, his visor, and his barbed spear, Gae Bulga, which inflicted wounds from which nobody ever recovered. When Cuchulain went into battle, he would go into a frenzy known as a “warp spasm.” His cry alone would kill a hundred warriors, frightening them to death. His physical appearance—namely, that of a handsome man—changed completely. Cuchulain’s hair stood on end, one of his eyes bulged out while the other disappeared in his head, his legs and feet turned to face backward, his muscles swelled, and a column of blood spurted up from his head. His body became so hot that it could melt snow.

When swept away in a war frenzy, Cuchulain could not distinguish between friends and enemies. On one occasion, he was so full of the lust for battle that he needed to be stopped. A group of Ulster women marched out naked carrying vats of cold water to bring him to his senses. When Cuchulain stopped his chariot in embarrassment, he was grabbed by warriors who threw him into three vats of cold water to calm him down. The first vat burst apart, the second boiled over, but the third merely got hot.

### Cuchulain in Context

Cuchulain is often seen as a cultural hero, but exactly whose culture he represents has been a subject for debate. He has been adopted by Irish



### National Heroes

*Certain traits are common to almost all national heroes.*

Figure	Nationality	Major Deeds	Description
Aeneas	Roman	Defended Troy, founded Rome	Brave, devoted to duty, ruled capably for a long time
King Arthur	British	Established law and order in Britain, founded Camelot	Brave, just, ruled capably for a long time
Beowulf	Norse	Killed the monster Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon; ruled Geatland	Brave, selfless, ruled capably for a long time
Cuchulain	Irish	Defended the city of Ulster	Brave, handsome, smooth-talking, popular with women, extremely strong, dead at a young age (27)
Robin Hood	British	Robbed the rich to give to the poor	Brave, selfless, concerned about common people

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

nationalists as an important symbol supporting Ireland's independence from England. Cuchulain has also been used as a symbol by those supporting Ireland's union with England, since many of these supporters are based in the region of Ulster—home to the Cuchulain legend.

The Celts, like the Norse, valued their warriors and respected those with great skill in battle. Cuchulain, like the Norse hero **Beowulf**, is

nearly unbeatable. The Celts also valued beautiful speech and charm, and Irish culture in modern times is still associated with lyricism, poetry, song, and a special persuasiveness. Cuchulain was a fearsome warrior, but also a charming, handsome, smooth-talking man: the cultural ideal.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Much like **Achilles** from ancient Greek myth, Cuchulain symbolizes both legendary strength and rage that can, at times, hardly be controlled. He is a symbol of the perfect warrior and ideal protector of his people, defending Ulster even when he could no longer stand on his own.

One of the main themes of the legend of Cuchulain is that great fame and glory are often paid for with an early death. This theme is also seen in the tale of Achilles, though Cuchulain's destiny is unknown to him.

### Cuchulain in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Cuchulain is one of the most popular figures in Irish legend, and has remained an important part of Irish literature. Modern Irish author William Butler Yeats wrote several works about Cuchulain and his adventures, including plays and poetry. A famous bronze statue of Cuchulain created by Oliver Sheppard can be found in the Dublin Post Office. In addition, the highest honor awarded to adult Scouts in the Irish equivalent of the Boy Scouts is named after Cuchulain.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Cuchulain has been used as a symbol for several different groups of people, some with opposing viewpoints (such as the Irish nationalists and the Unionists). Do you think mythological figures such as Cuchulain “belong” to a specific culture, or do you think they should be free to be adopted by anyone who wishes? Should a terrorist organization be free to use a culture hero like Cuchulain as a symbol for their cause? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology; Lug

## Cupid

*See* **Eros**.



# Cybele

## Character Overview

Cybele was the fertility goddess of Phrygia, an ancient country of Asia Minor. In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Cybele personified Mother Earth and was worshipped as the Great Mother of the Gods. The Greeks associated her with some of their existing goddesses, such as Rhea and **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), and sometimes referred to her as Meter. She was also associated with forests, mountains, and nature. Although usually shown wearing a crown in the form of a city wall or carrying a drum, the goddess may also appear on a throne or in a chariot, accompanied by lions and sometimes bees.

## Major Myths

According to myth, Cybele discovered that her youthful lover—and in some versions, her son—Attis was unfaithful. In a jealous rage, she made him go mad and mutilate himself under a pine tree, where he bled to death. Regretting what she had done, Cybele mourned her loss. **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) promised her that the pine tree would remain sacred forever.

In his *Aeneid*, Virgil relates a uniquely Roman myth about Cybele. Before the Trojan War, Cybele allowed her trees to be used by the Trojans to make warships. The goddess then asked Jupiter to make the ships so they could not be destroyed; Jupiter agreed to turn the ships into sea **nymphs** (female nature deities) after they had served their purpose, so that they would never be destroyed. After **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) led his soldiers to Italy using the ships, his foes attempted to burn the ships. Since the ships had already served their purpose—to transport Aeneas and his army to Italy—the ships disappeared and became sea nymphs.

## Cybele in Context

From Asia Minor, Cybele's popularity spread to Greece, where she was associated with Demeter, the Greek goddess of fruitfulness. She was regarded as the mother of all the gods. Around 200 BCE, the worship of

### Nationality/Culture

Phrygian/Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

SIB-uh-lee

### Alternate Names

Meter

### Appears In

Virgil's *Aeneid*, Pausanias's *Description of Greece*

### Lineage

Mother of the gods



*A fountain showing the goddess Cybele in her chariot.* © PLAZA DE CIBELES, MADRID, SPAIN/KEN WELSH/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

Cybele reached Rome, and she became well known throughout the Roman world.

During the Roman empire, followers of Cybele held an annual spring festival dedicated to the goddess. The ceremonies involved cutting down a pine tree that represented the dead Attis. After wrapping the tree in bandages, the followers took it to Cybele's shrine. There they honored the tree and decorated it with violets, which they considered to have sprung from Attis's blood. As part of this religious ceremony, priests cut their arms so that their blood fell on Cybele's altar and the sacred pine tree. They also danced to the music of cymbals, drums, and flutes. During these wild ceremonies, some followers even mutilated themselves by castration, as Attis had. The idea of death and rebirth, prominent in her relationship with Attis, also reflects the changing of the seasons.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Cybele is widely regarded as a symbol of fertility and motherhood. Like many fertility gods and goddesses, she is also associated with agriculture and forests. She is sometimes depicted with tame lions, which may symbolize great power that can be easily controlled.

## Cybele in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though the Greeks imported Cybele from Phrygian mythology, she was a popular subject in both Greek and Roman art. Rome in particular was home to several temples honoring Cybele, including a shrine at the Circus Maximus. However, one of the most famous sculptures of Cybele can be found as part of a fountain built in Madrid, Spain, in the late eighteenth century. The fountain is located at a town square known as Plaza de Cibeles.

As with many ancient mythological figures, Cybele has appeared with somewhat altered characteristics as a character in the Marvel Comics universe. In the comic world, Cybele is one of the Eternals, a race of superhumans conceived by Jack Kirby that first appeared in print in 1976.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Some ancient Roman followers of Cybele became so overwhelmed while celebrating that they would mutilate themselves in her honor. Some religious traditions, even in modern times, call for ritual mutilation or alteration of some part of the subject's body. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, can you find similar modern examples of mutilation as part of a religious tradition? How does such an act compare to non-religious but culturally accepted acts of body alteration, such as ear piercing?

SEE ALSO Demeter; Zeus



# Cyclopes

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the Cyclopes were a group of **giants** who possessed only one eye set in the middle of their forehead. They were

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

sigh-KLOH-peeZ

### Alternate Names

Kyklopes

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*,  
Homer's *Odyssey*

### Lineage

Sons of Uranus and Gaia

said to be skilled workers, and the Greeks credited them with building the walls of several ancient cities. The Romans believed that the Cyclopes worked at Mount Etna with **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of **fire** and metalworking.

The Greek poet Hesiod wrote about three of the Cyclopes: Brontes (pronounced BRON-teez; thunder), Steropes (pronounced stuh-ROH-pee-z; lightning), and Arges (pronounced AR-jeez; brightness). The sons of **Uranus** (sky) and **Gaia** (earth), these Cyclopes were banished by their father to Tartarus after they were born. They eventually gave **Zeus** the gifts of thunder and lightning with which he defeated the **Titans** and became ruler of the universe. Later authors related that Zeus killed **Apollo's** son Asclepius, causing Apollo to kill the Cyclopes in revenge.

In the *Odyssey*, Homer described how **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) was captured by the cruel and barbaric Cyclops named Polyphemus (pronounced pol-uh-FEE-muhs), the son of **Poseidon**. Polyphemus ate six of Odysseus's crew members. However, Odysseus and the rest of his crew managed to escape by blinding the single eye of Polyphemus with a long, sharpened pole.

### Cyclopes in Context

The notion of Cyclopes may have originated from the practice of ancient metalworkers wearing an eye patch for protection from sparks while working. This explains the Cyclopes' close association with metalworking and the god Hephaestus.

Another theory, first suggested by paleontologist Othenio Abel in the early twentieth century, is that dwarf elephant skulls found in the region may have led to myths of Cyclopes. The skulls of these elephants—which lived in the area until about eight thousand years ago—feature a deep nasal cavity directly in the center of the skull. This cavity could easily have been mistaken for a giant eye socket, especially by people who had never seen living elephants.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The Cyclopes are usually associated with fire and lightning. They are also associated with metalworking and are commonly thought to work alongside Hephaestus. Later Cyclopes such as Polyphemus, unlike the original Cyclopes, symbolized savagery and lawlessness.



*The giant cyclops Polyphemus.* GUILIO ROMANO/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.

The story of Odysseus and Polyphemus is usually used to highlight the craftiness of Odysseus, a quality the Greeks valued. Odysseus proves that cunning can be more valuable than physical force. The lesson was not lost on ancient Greek military commanders. When an overwhelming

Persian invasion force threatened Greece, the Greek commander Themistocles (pronounced tuh-MISS-tuh-kleez) was able to decisively rout the Persian navy at the key battle of Salamis in 480 BCE largely through sheer nerve and clever trickery. Odysseus would have been proud.

### **Cyclopes in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The Cyclops is an enduring image in art and literature. Cyclopes have appeared in films such as *Krull* (1983) and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958). On the animated television show *Futurama*, one of the main characters—Leela—has only one eye in the center of her head, though she is unrelated to the Cyclopes of Greek myth. Also unrelated to Greek myth is the Marvel superhero Cyclops, a member of the X-Men who can shoot powerful optic blasts from his shielded eyes. The character Polyphemus appears in Rick Riordan's novel *Sea of Monsters* (2006), in which he must once again tangle with a clever hero, this time the young demigod Percy Jackson.

The Cyclops has also lent its name to a genus of small freshwater crustaceans. Like their mythical namesakes, each of the crustaceans has a single large eye.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Many myths around the world feature monsters that are similar to humans, but possess a characteristic or deformity that separates them from normal people. In modern times, many medical disorders have been discovered that cause similar physical traits; for example, cyclopia is a rare condition that results in the eye sockets of an embryo failing to separate into two cavities.

Do you think rare medical conditions in ancient times could have been the source for some monster myths? Explain your reasoning.

**SEE ALSO** Hephaestus; Odysseus



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# D



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

## Pronunciation

DED-uh-lus

## Alternate Names

Daidalos

## Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Virgil's *Aeneid*

## Lineage

Father of Icarus



# Daedalus

## Character Overview

The name Daedalus means “ingenious” or “clever.” Daedalus lived in Athens, where he was known for his skills as an inventor, artist, and sculptor. Indeed, it was said that the statues Daedalus made were so realistic that they had to be chained to keep them from running away.

Daedalus’s nephew Talus (also called Perdix) came to serve as an apprentice to his uncle. The boy soon showed remarkable talent, inventing the saw by copying either the jawbone of a snake or the spine of a fish. Before long, Daedalus grew jealous of Talus, believing that the boy might become as great a craftsman as he was. This idea was more than Daedalus could bear. He killed Talus by pushing him off a cliff into the sea. In some versions, **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh)—or her Roman equivalent Minerva (pronounced mi-NUR-vuh)—saved Talus by transforming him into a partridge. Because of his crime, Daedalus was forced to leave Athens. He went to Crete, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, and began working for King Minos, the Cretan ruler.

Minos had asked the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) for a sacrificial bull, and a beautiful white bull had emerged from the sea. The bull was so magnificent that Minos decided to keep it rather than **sacrifice** it to Poseidon. The angry sea god punished the king by causing his wife, Pasiphaë (pronounced pa-SIF-ah-ee), to fall helplessly in love with the bull. At the request of the queen, Daedalus built a lifelike model

of a cow in which she could conceal herself and spend time with her beloved bull. As a result of these visits, Pasiphaë gave birth to the **Minotaur**, a monstrous creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull.

**The Labyrinth** King Minos wanted to hide the Minotaur. He ordered Daedalus to construct a prison from which the monster could never escape. Daedalus designed the Labyrinth, a mazelike network of winding passages that had only one entrance. Its layout was so complex that no one who entered it could ever find a way out. King Minos kept the Minotaur imprisoned in the Labyrinth.

The Minotaur was given humans to eat. Some were provided by the city of Athens. After suffering defeat in battle with Crete, Athens had to send King Minos a yearly tribute of seven boys and seven girls. These unfortunate Athenians were sent into the Labyrinth one by one as food for the Minotaur.

One year the Greek hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) came to Crete as one of the youths. He was determined to put an end to the human sacrifice. **Ariadne** (pronounced ar-ee-AD-nee), the king's daughter, fell in love with Theseus and asked Daedalus to help her find a way of saving him. When Theseus went into the Labyrinth to slay the Minotaur, Ariadne gave him a ball of string that she had obtained from Daedalus. Theseus tied the string to the entrance of the Labyrinth and unwound it as he made his way toward the Minotaur. He killed the beast and then used the string to find his way out of the Labyrinth.

When King Minos discovered what had happened, he was furious. To punish Daedalus for his role in the escape, the king imprisoned him and his young son Icarus in the Labyrinth.

**The Winged Escape** Daedalus put his talents to work. Day after day, he collected the feathers of birds. He also gathered wax from a beehive. When he had enough feathers and wax, Daedalus set to work making two pairs of enormous wings, one pair for himself and the other for Icarus.

Daedalus carefully instructed his son on how to use the wings to fly. He warned Icarus not to fly too high or too low. If he flew too high, the **sun's** heat could melt the wax that held the wings together. If he flew too low, he risked being swept up by the sea.



*Daedalus watches helplessly as his son Icarus falls from the sky. Icarus had flown too close to the sun, which caused his wings to melt.* SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.

With that, father and son took off from Crete. The wings worked well, and Daedalus and Icarus began to fly across the sea. However, Icarus did not pay attention to his father's warning. He flew higher and higher until the sun's heat melted the wax in his wings. Icarus fell into the ocean and drowned. Daedalus managed to fly safely to Sicily.

### Daedalus in Context

Archaeologists uncovered an area of ruins on the island of Crete in the late nineteenth century. The ruins came to be known as Knossos, and are believed by some to be the remains of the palace of King Minos. The

main building was less a palace than an enormous administrative center with approximately thirteen hundred rooms. It has been suggested that the intricate and confusing layout of the building may have led to the myth of the Labyrinth.

Daedalus embodies the cleverness and ingenuity valued by the ancient Greeks. Many ancient Greeks such as Pliny the Elder credited him with inventing carpentry and basic carpenter's tools. The ancient Greeks revered their thinkers and inventors. The famous inventor and mathematician Archimedes (pronounced ar-ki-MEE-deez), for example, designed a variety of ingenious inventions to defend Syracuse against the invading Romans in 213 BCE—including a reported “death ray” that used a system of mirrors to set **fire** to Roman ships in the harbor. Apparently, the Romans valued Greek genius, too. The Romans finally won Syracuse after a two-year siege, and Archimedes was killed. The Roman commander Marcellus was greatly distressed and ordered that Archimedes be buried with honors.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The fate of Icarus has endured as an example of human folly or bravado. Icarus would not accept reasonable limits. He went too far, flying beyond the bounds that had been set. As a result, he met with disaster.

### Daedalus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Daedalus and Icarus has inspired many writers and artists. The Roman poet Ovid told the myth in his work *Metamorphoses*, and Irish novelist James Joyce named his literary hero Stephen Dedalus (he appears both in the 1916 novel *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and in the 1922 novel *Ulysses*). The Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted a landscape showing Icarus's fall.

In modern times, the myth of Daedalus is better known to most people as the story of Icarus, the son who flew too close to the sun.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the myth of Daedalus, the clever craftsman warns his son Icarus not to fly too high or too low as they escape Crete on his homemade wings. Icarus fails to listen, which leads to his demise.

It might sometimes be difficult to follow parents' advice, but sometimes—as in the case of Icarus—it proves to be very important. Write an essay recounting an instance where you followed your parents' advice and it paid off—or you did not follow your parents' advice and later regretted it.

SEE ALSO Ariadne; Minotaur; Theseus



# Dagda

## Character Overview

In **Celtic mythology**, Dagda (often referred to as “the” Dagda) was an Irish god who was head of a group of Irish gods called the Tuatha Dé Danaan (pronounced TOO-uh-huh day DAH-nuhn). He was considered the father of the gods and the lord of fertility, plenty, and knowledge. The word Dagda means “the good god.”

## Major Myths

According to legend, Dagda had several possessions associated with power and position. One was a huge cauldron, or pot, that was never empty and from which no one went away hungry. The ladle was so big that two people could lie in it. Dagda also owned an orchard of fruit trees where the fruit was always ripe, and two pigs, one of which was always cooked and ready to eat. In addition, he had a club with two ends—one for killing living people and the other for bringing the dead back to life. Dagda used his magic harp to order the seasons to change. In spite of his great power, Dagda was pictured as a fat man, plainly dressed and pulling his club on wheels. His favorite food was porridge. As the god of knowledge, he was the protector of the druids, the priests of the Celtic religious order.

When the Tuatha Dé Danaan were forced to go underground, Dagda divided the land among the gods. His son Aonghus (pronounced AHN-gus), the god of love, was absent during the division, and Dagda did not give his son a section because he wanted to keep Aonghus's palace for himself. When Aonghus returned, he tricked his father to get

### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

### Pronunciation

DAHG-duh

### Alternate Names

Eochaid Ollathair

### Appears In

*The Yellow Book of Lecan*,  
*The Book of Invasions*

### Lineage

Son of Elatha or Ethlinn

his palace back, leaving Dagda without land or power. Dagda was later fatally wounded in battle by a woman named Cethlenn.

### **Dagda in Context**

The Tuatha Dé Danaan were a group of gods founded by the goddess Danu who once ruled Ireland. They fought off many other invaders and older Irish gods to retain control, sometimes granting certain regions to other races as a way of settling a battle. The Tuatha Dé Danaan were eventually driven underground by a race known as the Milesians. However, the gods of the Tuatha Dé Danaan continued to appear in Celtic myths centuries later and appear to have taken on immortal status.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

In Celtic mythology, Dagda fulfills the role of provider. He can feed an army with his magic cauldron, his fruit trees, and his pigs. He also ensures that the seasons follow as they should by playing his harp. Harps figure prominently in Celtic and Irish mythology as powerful instruments, indicating the importance of music in Celtic culture.

### **Dagda in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The Dagda is one of the gods pictured on the Gundestrup Cauldron, perhaps the most famous Celtic artifact. The large silver bowl is decorated with panels dedicated to different Celtic gods. The Dagda may also be the subject known as the Cerne Abbas (pronounced KERN AB-bus) giant, an enormous image of a nude man with a club that was dug into a hillside near Dorset, England, centuries ago.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The Dagda is a god who can provide food in abundance from his magic cauldron. For people in many parts of the world, however, hunger is an all-too-real daily struggle. Would you expect to find myths similar to the Dagda and his cauldron in places experiencing widespread famine? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology



# Damocles, Sword of

## Myth Overview

Damocles was a member of the court of Dionysius (pronounced dye-uh-NIGH-see-us) the Younger, ruler of the Sicilian city of Syracuse during the 300s BCE.

According to a legend passed on by the Roman writer Cicero, Damocles told Dionysius how much he envied his kingly wealth, power, and happiness. In response, Dionysius invited Damocles to come to a magnificent banquet.

Damocles was seated before a marvelous feast, enjoying the benefits of a ruler, when he happened to glance up in horror. Above his head hung a sharp sword, suspended by nothing more than a single thread. Damocles was no longer able to enjoy the food, wine, or entertainment before him. In this way, Dionysius showed Damocles that a ruler's life may appear grand, but it is filled with uncertainty and danger.

## The Sword of Damocles in Context

Although Damocles appears to be a work of legend, Dionysius the Younger was an actual ruler in fourth-century Sicily. He originally ruled under the guidance of his uncle Dion and his uncle's teacher, the philosopher Plato, but Dionysius grew tired of what he viewed as their attempts to control him. He drove his uncle out of Syracuse, but after years of his unpopular rule, his uncle amassed an army and returned to take over the city. Dionysius fled, and years after his uncle died, returned to reclaim leadership of Syracuse. Still unpopular, he was driven out once again, and lived the last years of his life in Corinth, Greece.

The real-life events of Dionysius the Younger help to illustrate the message of the legend of Damocles: though he ruled Syracuse twice, it is not likely he enjoyed much peace or satisfaction as its leader. Few kings in ancient cultures did. Positions of power were often gained, maintained, or lost by force.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the key themes of the tale of Damocles is that one should not be envious of another person's position. Although they may appear to have

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

DAM-uh-kleez

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

*Cicero's Tusculan Disputations*

a perfect life, they may also bear burdens that cannot be seen. The “sword of Damocles” symbolizes a threat that can come to pass at any moment; for Dionysius, the sword represented the threat of murder or betrayal by his own followers.

## The Sword of Damocles in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The legend of Damocles has endured as a popular tale for centuries. The climax of the tale is famously depicted in Richard Westall’s 1812 painting *Sword of Damocles*. In modern usage, the phrase “sword of Damocles” is commonly used to refer to a potentially tragic threat or situation that seems inches away.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Because of their unprecedented destructive power, nuclear weapons have been described as a sword of Damocles hanging over modern civilization. Others have argued that nuclear weapons are necessary to keep some nations from attacking peaceful countries without provocation. Do you think nuclear weapons are a necessary enforcement tool or a potentially tragic threat? Can they be both? Explain your opinion.



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
DAN-uh-ee

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus’s *Fabulae*

**Lineage**  
Daughter of Acrisius and  
Eurydice

# Danaë

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Danaë was the daughter of Acrisius (pronounced uh-KREE-see-us), the king of Argos. An oracle, or person through which the gods communicated with humans, told Acrisius that Danaë’s son would someday kill him. To prevent the prediction from coming true, Acrisius had his daughter imprisoned in a bronze tower so she could not marry. There the god **Zeus**, smitten by her beauty, went to her in a shower of gold, and she became pregnant with a son, the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs). When Acrisius learned of the baby’s birth, he ordered Danaë and her son locked inside a chest and set adrift at sea.



The chest reached the island of Seriphos, where it was discovered by a fisherman named Dictys (pronounced DIK-tis), whose brother Polydectes (pronounced pol-ee-DEK-teez) was king. Dictys helped Danaë raise her son on the island. When Perseus was grown, Polydectes fell in love with Danaë, but she did not love him in return. Believing that he could pressure Danaë into marrying him if her son were absent, Polydectes sent Perseus on a quest for the head of the gorgon **Medusa**, whose gaze could turn men into stone. Some sources say that Danaë went into hiding during Perseus's absence, while others state that Polydectes locked her away. In any event, Danaë resisted Polydectes' advances.

When Perseus returned, he saved Danaë by turning Polydectes to stone with the head of Medusa. Dictys became king, and Danaë and Perseus returned to Argos. According to some writers, she went on to found the city of Ardea in Italy. The original prophecy was fulfilled when Perseus accidentally killed Acrisius with a stray discus—a heavy disc thrown for sport—during some athletic games.

## Danaë in Context

According to myth, Danaë becomes pregnant after Zeus visits her in the form of a shower of gold. However, she is just one of many women in Greek mythology reported to have had an unusual encounter with Zeus. The god transformed himself into a swan to seduce Leda (LEE-duh), the Queen of Sparta. He appeared to Antiope (an-TYE-uh-pee) in the form of a satyr, half human and half goat, in order to seduce her. Alcmena (alk-MEE-nuh), a lady of Thebes, was deceived by Zeus when he took the form of her husband and seduced her. The nymph Callisto was loved by Zeus after he appeared to her in the form of her master, the goddess **Artemis**. These many stories of Zeus's exploits with women indicate that virility, or male fertility, was respected by the ancient Greeks. Fathering many children would be considered a sign of manliness. Danaë's story points to the Greek belief in the power of fate. Despite the pains he takes to protect himself, Acrisius cannot thwart destiny.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Danaë is portrayed as a victim of fate. She is imprisoned by her father because he fears death at the hands of her future child. She becomes pregnant after a mysterious visit by Zeus over which she has no control. She is protected by her son from a dangerous king against whom she

## Danaë

*Red figure bell crater showing Danaë's encounter with Zeus as a shower of gold.* RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY.



cannot defend herself. In this way, Danaë symbolizes innocence and helplessness.

### **Danaë in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Though Danaë is not as well known as other characters of Greek mythology, several artists, including Titian, Rembrandt, and Gustav Klimt, have captured the story of Danaë in their paintings: Titian's *Danaë* (1554), Rembrandt's *Danaë* (1636), and Klimt's *Danaë* (1907). She is nearly always pictured at the moment Zeus visits her in the form of a shower of gold.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

In the myth of Danaë, she becomes impregnated by Zeus in the form of a shower of gold—a mysterious and unavoidable form of sexual reproduction.

How do you think myths such as that of Danaë reflect ancient understanding about human reproduction? Compare the myth of Danaë to modern belief in the story of the Virgin Mary. How are the stories similar?

For centuries, the biological processes involved in reproduction were not considered appropriate subjects for people to study. By contrast, modern supporters of sex education aim to inform students about sex so that it is not viewed as mysterious or beyond their understanding. Do you think that offering facts about the reproductive process is an effective way of dealing with issues like teen pregnancy and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases? Or do you think examining such topics in detail might encourage sexual behavior?

**SEE ALSO** Greek Mythology; Medusa; Perseus



## Delphi

### Myth Overview

Delphi, a town on the slopes of Mount Parnassus in Greece, was the site of the main temple of **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and of the Delphic oracle, the most famous oracle (someone who makes predictions about the future) of ancient times. Before making important decisions, Greeks and other peoples traveled to this sacred place to consult the oracle and learn the gods' wishes.

According to **Greek mythology**, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) wanted to locate the exact center of the world. To do this, he released two eagles from opposite ends of the earth. The eagles met at Delphi. Zeus marked the spot with a large, egg-shaped stone called the omphalos (pronounced AHM-fuh-lus), meaning “navel.”

Originally, Delphi was the site of an oracle of the earth goddess **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh). The site was guarded by a monstrous serpent (or dragon, in some accounts) called Pytho (pronounced PYE-thoh). Apollo killed Pytho and forced Gaia to leave Delphi. Thereafter, the temple at Delphi belonged to Apollo's oracle.

No one knows for certain how the process of consulting the Delphic oracle worked. However, over the years, a traditional account has been

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

DEL-fye

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Homeric Hymns,  
Pausanias's *Description of Greece*

widely accepted. According to this description, a visitor who wanted to submit a question to the oracle would first make an appropriate offering and **sacrifice** a goat. Then a priestess known as the Pythia (pronounced PI-thee-uh) would take the visitor's question into the inner part of Apollo's temple, which contained the omphalos and a golden statue of Apollo. Seated on a three-legged stool, the priestess would fall into a trance.

After some time, the priestess would start to writhe around and foam at the mouth. In a frenzy, she would begin to voice strange words and sounds. Priests and interpreters would listen carefully and record her words in verse or in prose. The message was then passed on to the visitor who had posed the question. Some modern scholars believe that the priestess did not become delirious but rather sat quietly as she delivered her divine message.

Many rulers consulted the oracle at Delphi about political matters, such as whether to wage a war or establish a colony. However, the oracle's answers were often vague or ambiguous, leaving interpretation to the listener. Sometimes such uncertainty had ironic results. For example, King Croesus (pronounced KREE-sus) of Lydia asked the oracle if he should attack Cyrus the Great of Persia. The oracle responded that such an attack would destroy a great empire. Croesus attacked, expecting victory. However, his own forces were overwhelmed, and it was the Lydian empire of Croesus that was destroyed.

Anyone could approach the oracle, whether king, public official, or private citizen. At first, a person could consult the oracle only once a year, but this restriction was later changed to once a month.

### Delphi in Context

The ancient Greeks believed in fate and destiny—the idea that one's path in life was already determined by the gods and could not be changed. They had complete faith in the oracle's words, even though the meaning of the message was often unclear. As the oracle's fame spread, people came from all over the Mediterranean region seeking advice. Numerous well-known figures of history and mythology visited Delphi, including the philosopher Socrates and the doomed King **Oedipus**.

Visitors would ask not only about private matters but also about affairs of state. As a result, the oracle at Delphi had great influence on

*The Oracle of Delphi.* STOCK MONTAGE/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.



political, economic, and religious events. Moreover, Delphi itself became rich from the gifts sent by many believers.

The worship of Apollo at Delphi probably dates back to the 700s BCE, although the fame of the oracle did not reach its peak until the 500s BCE. In about 590 BCE, war broke out between Delphi and the nearby town of Crisa because Crisa had been demanding that visitors to the

Delphic oracle pay taxes. The war destroyed Crisa and opened free access to Delphi. To celebrate the victory, Delphi introduced the Pythian Games, an athletic festival that took place every four years.

In early Roman times, Delphi was often plundered. For example, the Roman dictator Sulla took many of Delphi's treasures, and the emperor Nero is said to have carried off some 500 bronze statues. With Rome's conquest of Greece and the spread of Christianity, Delphi's importance declined. The oracle was finally silenced in 390 CE to discourage the spread of non-Christian beliefs.

The modern village of Kastri stood on the site of ancient Delphi until 1890. Then the Greek government moved the village to a nearby location, making the site of the ancient town available for excavation. Archaeologists have been working on the site since that time and have made many important discoveries relating to the temple of Apollo.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

For the people of ancient Greece, the oracle at Delphi came to symbolize wisdom and the voice of the gods. People journeyed from throughout the Greek empire to seek the wisdom of the oracle. Its importance as a central location was also symbolized by the omphalos located there, which was said to mark the center of the world.

### **Delphi in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The oracle at Delphi appeared in numerous ancient works, including a description of the battle of Thermopylae between the Spartans and the invading Persians in 480 BCE by Herodotus.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

To most people in the modern world, the idea of consulting an oracle for guidance may seem foolish. However, people routinely read horoscopes and consult fortune-tellers and psychics, even if only for entertainment. Do you think there is any value in astrological or psychic predictions? Are there tools or pathways people can use to get a glimpse of the future?

**SEE ALSO** Apollo; Gaia; Serpents and Snakes



# Demeter

## Character Overview

Demeter, the Greek goddess of vegetation and fruitfulness, was known to the Romans as Ceres (pronounced SEER-eez). She was the daughter of **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs) and Rhea (pronounced REE-uh), and the sister of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS). Although Demeter was not one of the twelve gods of Olympus, her origins can be traced back to very ancient times, perhaps to the Egyptian goddess **Isis**. Her name means “mother goddess” or “barley mother.” Demeter had a daughter by Zeus called **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee). The figures of Demeter and Persephone are closely related, and certain aspects of Persephone—for example, as a goddess of the **underworld**—are also associated with Demeter in different versions of the same myth.

## Major Myths

In one tale, **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), the ruler of the underworld, fell in love with Persephone and kidnapped her to make her his queen. Demeter spent nine days and nights searching for her daughter, bearing a torch. When she failed to find Persephone, she took on the form of an old woman and sat down by a well in the town of Eleusis (pronounced i-LOO-sis). The king’s daughters soon came along to draw water from the well and saw the old woman, who appeared to be crying. Taking pity on her, they asked her to return home with them to rest under their roof and take refreshment. At the palace, the queen and her servants showed so much hospitality that Demeter agreed to stay and care for the king’s son Demophon (pronounced DEM-uh-foh).

Demeter secretly planned to reward the king and queen by making their son immortal, or able to live forever. During the day, she fed the boy with ambrosia, the food of the gods. At night, she laid him in the ashes of the **fire** to burn off his mortality. However, one night one of the queen’s maids saw Demeter lay the boy in the fire and told the queen. The queen surprised Demeter and cried out for her to stop. Demeter then revealed her true identity and proclaimed that the child would not be immortal but would grow up to do great things. According to legend, Triptolemus (pronounced trip-tuh-LEE-mus), probably another name

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

di-MEE-ter

### Alternate Names

Ceres (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Daughter of Cronus and Rhea

## Demeter

*Statue of the Greek goddess  
Demeter.* SCALA/ART RE-  
SOURCE, NY.



for Demophon, later traveled around the earth introducing agriculture to all the peoples of the world. Demeter commanded the king to build a temple to her and taught him secret rituals that the people should perform in her honor.

Still grieving for Persephone, Demeter neglected the earth. As a result, all the crops withered and died, and famine spread over the world.



Zeus was alarmed because he feared that all the humans would die, leaving no one to perform sacrifices to the gods. But Demeter would not restore life to the earth unless Persephone was returned to her. Zeus persuaded Hades to release Persephone, but during her stay in the underworld, she had eaten some pomegranate seeds. Because of this, Persephone was forever tied to Hades and required to spend part of the year with him in the underworld and only part on earth with her mother. This story was used to explain the cycle of the seasons. When Demeter was without her daughter, the earth was barren. When Persephone rejoined her mother, plants could grow.

### Demeter in Context

Agriculture was without a doubt the foundation of the ancient Greek economy. Three out of every four ancient Greeks were involved in growing, preparing, or distributing food as their occupation. For this reason, Demeter—who had full control over the seasons and the crops—was an extremely important goddess to worship. The main crops grown were cereals such as barley and wheat. Olive trees, which provided rich and flavorful olive oil, were also important to Greek agriculture.

The rites held in Demeter's honor became the Eleusinian Mysteries, some of the most important ceremonies in ancient Greece. Scholars still do not know everything that took place during the secret rites. However, it is thought that the mysteries involved fasting, a procession from Athens to Eleusis, sacred dances, and a reenactment of the story of Persephone. Those who participated were promised a special future in the underworld after death.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Greek and Roman myths, Demeter represents fertility, agriculture, and motherhood. She also represents the seasons of the year. Symbols associated with Demeter include wheat stalks, barley, poppies, and the horn of plenty. She may be depicted holding a torch (as when searching for Persephone) or carrying grain, and is sometimes shown riding a chariot pulled by winged serpents.

### Demeter in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Demeter appears in many ancient works, especially hymns. However, she was not embraced by medieval or Renaissance artists the way many

### Death, Rebirth, and Fertility

*Many world myths describe nature's cycles in terms of the death of a god or goddess and that figure's subsequent rebirth or return to earth. Often, the deity's death is associated with winter on Earth, and his/her return is associated with spring or summer.*

Figure	Nationality	Myth Summary
Adonis and Aphrodite	Greek	The handsome Adonis captures the heart of both Aphrodite, goddess of love, and Persephone, queen of the underworld. Zeus orders him to divide his time between them. Half the time he spends with Aphrodite—spring and summer—and half with Persephone—fall and winter.
Ishtar and Tammuz	Near Eastern	Mother goddess Ishtar, trapped in the underworld, must offer her beloved young husband Tammuz in her place so she can return to the living. Ishtar is able to rescue her husband for part of each year—spring and summer.
Demeter and Persephone	Greek	Hades, god of the underworld, falls in love with Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, goddess of fertility and fruitfulness. He kidnaps her, and Demeter is so upset she neglects the crops and plants. Zeus persuades Hades to let Persephone spend part of each year with her mother. The time with her mother becomes spring and summer, and the time with Hades becomes winter and fall.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

other Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were. Demeter's Roman name, Ceres, lives on in the word "cereal," used to refer to all types of grain. The Spanish word for beer, *cerveza*, also comes from the name of the Roman goddess, because beer is made from grain. Ceres is also the

name given to a dwarf planet that lies in the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter in our solar system.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Gods in Winter* by Patricia Miles is a modernized retelling of the myth of Persephone, Demeter, and Hades. In the novel, the Bramble family moves to the English countryside and hires an unusual housekeeper named Mrs. Korngold. When strange events begin happening—and it seems like winter will never end—the Bramble children decide to investigate. Originally published in 1978, the book was reprinted in 2005 with an afterword by Tamora Pierce.

SEE ALSO Cybele; Hades; Isis; Persephone; Underworld



# Devi

## Character Overview

Devi is the major goddess in the Hindu pantheon, or collection of gods. Known both as Devi (which in Sanskrit means “goddess”) and Mahadevi (“great goddess”), she takes many different forms and is worshipped both as a kind goddess and as a fierce one. In all of her forms, she is the wife of the **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh), the god of destruction.

## Major Myths

In the form of Durga, Devi is a warrior goddess charged with protecting the gods and the world from powerful demons. The gods used their combined strength to create Durga when they were unable to overpower a terrible buffalo demon named Mahisha (pronounced muh-HEE-shuh). They gave Durga ten arms—so she could hold many weapons—and a tiger to carry her into battle. Durga and Mahisha fought a long, terrible, and bloody battle in which the two opponents changed shape many times. Durga finally managed to kill the demon by piercing his heart with a trident and cutting off his head.

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

DEY-vee

### Alternate Names

Mahadevi, Kali, Durga, Parvati

### Appears In

The Vedas

### Lineage

Wife of Shiva

Devi also takes gentler forms. As Sati (pronounced suh-TEE), a loyal wife to Shiva, she burned herself alive to defend his honor and prove her love. When Shiva refused to let go of Sati's burning body, the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo) had to cut her body out of his arms. Her remains were then cut into fifty pieces and scattered to different places that became shrines. As Parvati (pronounced PAR-vuh-tee), Devi is a gentle and loving wife who went through great **sacrifice** to win Shiva's love. Parvati has a softening influence on the harsh god and is often portrayed as an idealized beauty or pictured with Shiva in domestic scenes.

Another, and quite different, form of Devi is the fierce Kali (pronounced KAH-lee). Like Durga, Kali defends the world from demons, but she can go into a rage and lose control. When she blindly begins to kill innocent people, the gods have to intervene. On one occasion, Shiva threw himself among the bodies she was trampling to bring her out of her madness. Images of Kali show her with black skin, three eyes, fangs, and four arms. She wears a necklace of skulls and carries weapons and a severed head. She is usually portrayed with her tongue hanging out in recognition of her victory over the demon Raktavira (pronounced rahk-tah-VEER-uh). To make sure that Raktavira was truly dead, Kali had to suck the blood out of his body because any drop that fell to the ground would produce a duplicate of him.

There are numerous other forms of Devi. As Uma (pronounced OO-ma), she appears as the golden goddess, personifying light and beauty. As Hariti (pronounced huh-REE-tee), she is the goddess of childbirth. As Gauri (pronounced GAH-ree), she represents the harvest or fertility, and as Manasa (pronounced mah-NAH-sah), she is the goddess of snakes. When she takes the role of mother of the world, Devi is known as Jaganmata (pronounced jahg-ahn-MAH-tah).

## **Devi in Context**

It is not uncommon in Hinduism for one god or goddess to have many different forms. For example, the god Shiva is known as Rudra (pronounced ROOD-ruh) in his fierce and wild form, and Bhairava (bah-ee-RAH-vah) in one of his more destructive forms. Sankara (pronounced SAHN-kah-rah) and Sambhu (pronounced sahm-BOO) are two of the god's more helpful or beneficent representations.

In the case of Devi, the one single goddess can serve a great number of functions to those who worship her, depending upon the form of Devi



*Worshippers immerse a statue of the goddess Devi, in the form of Durga, in a river on the final day of a festival in her honor to secure her blessings.* MANPREET ROMANA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES.

they praise. This makes her one of the most important figures in the Hindu religion.

Devi and her many forms probably date back to the mother goddess worshipped in India in prehistoric times. Ancient civilizations around the world, including India, worshipped mother goddesses because in human fertility they saw a parallel to the fertility of the earth around them—the growth of plants and abundance of wild and domesticated animals they relied on for survival. While these mother goddesses eventually became secondary to male gods in much of the world, Devi has retained a place of great stature in India.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

Because Devi can be found in so many different forms, she may symbolize many different things. For example, Sati and Parvati symbolize love and

loyalty. The goddess Saraswati (pronounced sah-rah-SWAH-tee) symbolizes knowledge, art, and science. Durga and Kali both can represent strength and vengeance. In addition, Kali often symbolizes uncontrollable violence and rage. Most often, however, Devi symbolizes motherhood, fertility, and beauty.

The image of the goddess as Kali is perhaps the depiction best known to those outside the Hindu culture, and her fierce wild image can be bewildering to Western eyes, to whom she resembles a black, fanged, bloodthirsty beast. But in the Hindu faith, she represents the unformed, terrifying, true chaotic beginning of all things—the origin, the mother, but also death and destruction. Her blackness symbolizes the void, the beginning of everything, including space and time. Her nakedness represents her freedom from illusions. Her breasts represent her motherhood of all.

### **Devi in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Devi appears throughout ancient Hindu literature in her many forms. Some of these forms were once considered separate goddesses, such as Kali. Each of these different forms is depicted differently in Hindu art. For example, Kali is often depicted as having four arms, blue skin, and wearing a necklace of human heads. Saraswati is shown with yellow skin and wearing white.

Kali is also often pictured standing or trampling on Shiva, her husband, which also presents some confusion. Scholars debate the symbolic meaning of these images. Is she trampling her own husband because she wants to destroy the world? Is she just asserting her dominance? There is no single, accepted interpretation.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

In Hindu mythology, the goddess Devi has many different forms, only some of which are mentioned here. Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, find at least two other forms of the goddess Devi that have not already been mentioned. Write a description of each form, and explain why you think that form is important to Hindu mythology.

**SEE ALSO** Hinduism and Mythology; Shiva; Vishnu



# Devils and Demons

## Theme Overview

In myths, legends, and various religions, devils and demons are evil or harmful supernatural beings. Devils are generally regarded as the adversaries (enemies) of the gods, while the image of demons ranges from mischief makers to powerful destructive forces. In many religions, devils and demons stand on the opposite side of the cosmic balance from gods and **angels**. Although devils and demons have been pictured in many different ways, they are usually associated with darkness, danger, violence, and death.

Some people, including many Christian writers, have used the terms *devil* and *demon* almost interchangeably. Although devils and demons sometimes seem to be closely related or even identical, they also appear in myth and religion as two quite different creatures.

In most mythologies and religions, a devil is a leader or ruler among evil spirits, a being who acts in direct opposition to the gods. The general view is that devils are trying to destroy humans, to tempt them into sinning, or to turn them against their gods. Monotheistic religions, which recognize only a single supreme God, also often speak of one devil.

Devils and gods may be opposites, but they are also usually linked in some way. Many religious and mythological explanations say that devils are related to the gods or that they are gods of evil.

A demon (sometimes spelled *daemon*) is generally thought to be a harmful or evil spirit or supernatural being, sometimes a god or the offspring of a god. Demons may be the messengers, attendants, or servants of the Devil. They are often monstrous in appearance, combining the features of different animals or of animals and humans.

Demons were not always regarded as evil. The ancient Greeks spoke of a person's *daimon* as his or her personal spirit, guardian angel, or soul. In many cultures, demons were merely inhuman supernatural powers that could be evil or good at various times, depending on whether their actions harmed or helped people. Human witches, wizards, and sorcerers were thought to gain some of their abilities by summoning and controlling demons through magical practices.

## Major Myths

Devilish and demonic forces have taken many shapes and forms around the world. Frightening and dramatic stories and images of them have always had considerable appeal.

**Egyptian Mythology** The devil could be seen in the evil god **Set** in ancient **Egyptian mythology**. Once a helpful god who ruled the kingdom of the blessed dead, Set's place in the Egyptian pantheon—or collection of recognized gods—changed after he murdered his brother. Followers of the supreme god **Horus** conquered Set's followers, and the priests of Horus made Set the enemy of the other gods and the source of evil.

The Egyptians believed in the existence of demons. One such demon was Nehebkau (pronounced neh-HEB-kah), who appeared at times as a powerful earth spirit, a source of strength for the other gods. At other times, though, he was a menacing monster, a serpent with human arms and legs who threatened the souls of the dead. Like many demons, Nehebkau had more than one role.

**Persian Mythology** In the mythology of Persia, now known as Iran, two opposing powers struggled for control of the universe. **Ahura Mazda** (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh) was the god of goodness and order, while his twin brother, **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), was the god of evil and chaos (disorder). The Zoroastrian religion that developed in Persia pictured the world in terms of tension between opposites: God (Ahura Mazda) and the Devil (Ahriman), light and darkness, health and illness, life and death. Ahriman ruled demons called *daevas* that represented death, violence, and other negative forces.

**Judaism and Christianity** Hebrew or Jewish tradition, later adopted by Christians, calls the Devil **Satan**, which means “adversary.” Satan took on qualities of Ahriman, becoming the prince of evil, lies, and darkness. Jewish tradition also includes a female demon known as **Lilith**. Said to be the first wife of Adam, Lilith was cast out when she refused to obey her husband and was replaced by Eve.

In Christian belief, the Devil came to be seen as a fallen angel who chose to become evil rather than worship God. Satan rules the demons in **hell**, the place of punishment and despair. In the Middle Ages, some Christians believed that a separate devil—or a separate aspect of the



Devil—existed for each of the seven deadly sins. In their view, Lucifer (pronounced LOOS-i-fur) represented pride, Mammon (pronounced MAM-uhn) greed, Asmodeus (pronounced az-MOH-dee-us) lust, Satan anger, Beelzebub (pronounced bee-ELL-zuh-bub) gluttony, **Leviathan** (pronounced luh-VYE-uh-thuhn) envy, and Belphegor (pronounced BEL-feh-gore) sloth.

The common image of the Devil in Western culture is drawn from many sources. The Devil's pointed ears, wings, and sharp protruding teeth resemble those of Charu (pronounced CHAH-roo), the **underworld** demon of the Etruscans of ancient Italy. The Devil's tail, horns, and hooves are like those of **satyrs** (half-man, half-goat creatures) and other animal gods of ancient Greece, and **Cernunnos**, the ancient Celtic lord of the hunt. The trident he is often shown brandishing is similar to those carried by the Greek gods **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), god of the sea, and **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), lord of the underworld. The Hindu god **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh), who represents the powers of destruction, also carries a trident. The Devil sometimes appears in other forms, such as a winged snake or dragon.

**Islam** In the Muslim religion of Islam, which shares many elements of Jewish and Christian tradition, the Devil is called Iblis (pronounced IB-liss) or Shaitan (pronounced SHAY-tan). Like Satan, he is a fallen angel. He commands an army of ugly demons called shaitans, who tempt humans to sin. The shaitans belong to a class of supernatural beings called djinni (pronounced JEE-nee) or jinni (genies). Some djinni are helpful or neutral toward the human world, but those who do not believe in God are evil.

**Hinduism and Buddhism** In the earliest form of Hinduism in India, the gods were sometimes called Asuras (pronounced ah-SOO-rahs). But as the religion developed the Asuras came to be seen as demons who battled the gods. Another group of demons, the Rakshasas (pronounced RAHK-shah-sahs), served the demon king Ravana. Some were beautiful, but others were monstrous or hideously deformed. One demon, Hayagriva (pronounced hah-yah-GREE-vah) (meaning “horse-necked”), was a huge and powerful enemy of the gods whose troublemaking constantly threatened to overturn the cosmic order.

The Buddhist religion incorporated many elements of Hinduism, including the demon Hayagriva. It turned the Hindu demon Namuchi

## A Deal with the Devil

Christians of the Middle Ages and afterward believed that humans occasionally made bargains with the Devil, selling their souls to him in exchange for riches, power, or other benefits they would enjoy before they died. Witches were said to have made such bargains, an act that condemned them to death in the eyes of the church. An obscure German schoolmaster-turned-magician named Faust, who lived in the 1500s, gave rise to one of the most famous stories about a deal with the Devil. The legend of Dr. Faustus has been the subject of many plays, books, and operas. Two of the most famous were the 1564 play *Doctor Faustus* by British playwright Christopher Marlowe, and the 1808 play *Faust*, by German Johann von Goethe. The story was adapted as a successful Broadway musical, *Damn Yankees*, in 1955, in which a middle-aged man sells his soul to the devil to become a successful baseball player.

(pronounced nah-MOO-chee) into Mara, the Evil One who tempts people with desires and deceives them with illusions. Mara tried to tempt the Buddha. He failed—but he still tries to keep others from reaching enlightenment.

**Chinese and Japanese Mythology** Although traditional Chinese and Japanese religions did not recognize a single powerful devil, they had demons. In Chinese legends, the souls of the dead become either *shen*, good spirits who join the gods, or *gui*, malevolent ghosts or demons who wander the earth, usually because their descendants do not offer them the proper funeral ceremonies.

**Japanese mythology** includes stories about demons called Oni, generally portrayed with square, horned heads, sharp teeth and claws, and sometimes three eyes. Oni may have the size and strength of **giants**. Although these demons are cruel and mischievous, some tales tell of Oni who change their ways and become Buddhist monks.

**African Mythology** The Bushpeople of southern Africa say that Gauna, the ruler of the underworld, is the enemy of Cagn, the god who created the world. Gauna visits the earth to cause trouble in human society and

## Robert Johnson at the Crossroads

Legendary blues guitarist and song writer Robert Johnson (1911–1938) wrote several songs that mention the devil. The circumstances of his life and death are a bit hazy, and over time the myth developed (probably based on jealous gossip by his musical rivals) that Johnson got his talent from the devil, whom he met at a crossroads in Mississippi. A crossroads has particular unholy significance in several cultures. In parts of Europe, the bodies of those who could not be buried in consecrated (holy) ground (suicides and executed criminals, for example) were often buried at a crossroads. In the folklore of the southeast United States, the devil could be met at a crossroads at midnight. The crossroads symbolizes a choice between two very different paths.

to seize people to take to the realm of the dead. He also sends the souls of the dead to haunt their living family members.

## Devils and Demons in Context

The spread of religions has had an interesting effect on demons in world mythology. When one religion replaces another, the gods of the former religion may become demons in the new faith. For example, as Islam spread through West Africa, Central Asia, and Indonesia, some local deities (gods) did not disappear but were transformed into demons within a universe governed by the god of Islam. Similarly, as Christianity spread through Europe and the eastern Mediterranean area, local gods and goddesses were adapted. The ancient Celtic god of the hunt, Cernunnos (pronounced ker-NOO-nohs), for example, who had the body of a man and a great stag's head, may even have been the basis of the traditional Christian image of a devil as a man with horns.

## Devils and Demons in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Devils and demons were frequently depicted as grotesque figures in ancient and medieval art. More recently, some of the most recognizable traits of devils and demons—such as red skin, pointed tails, and horns—have been incorporated into pop-art imagery. Devils and other demonic imagery are commonly associated with certain types of music, such as

heavy metal. Devils and demons are also common in horror films and comic books, such as the Vertigo Comics series *Hellblazer*. The Dark Horse Comics character Hellboy spawned a movie, *Hellboy*, in 2004. The devil appears frequently in films as a character; both Peter Cook and Tim Curry have played the devil in movies—Cook in the 1967 comedy *Bedazzled*, and Curry in the movie *Legend* (1985).

In the realm of technology, the *daimons* of ancient Greece have given rise to *daemons* of computer programming. Like the helpful household spirits of ancient Greece, daemons are processes that run in the background of a computer operating system and perform mundane tasks for the user, such as responding to network requests. The idea of daemons as souls, not evil creatures, plays a prominent part in Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (published between 1995 and 2000), in which some characters have animal-formed daemons that live with them and cannot be separated from them without dire consequences.

*The Demonata #1: Lord Loss* by Darren Shan (2006) is the first book in the *Demonata* series of horror novels for young adults. It is about a boy whose family is killed by a demon and who narrowly escapes death himself. After he goes to live with his uncle Dervish, he discovers dark secrets about his family and the supernatural world that exists around him.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The United States was first referred to as “the Great Satan” in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic government of Iran. Since then, the term has been used by many groups and leaders throughout the Middle East to describe the United States. Why do you think so many people believe the United States deserves this label?

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Ahriman; Angels; Buddhism and Mythology; Chinese Mythology; Genies; Hell; Hinduism and Mythology; Japanese Mythology; Lilith; Persian Mythology; Satan; Set; Witches and Wizards

## Diana

See **Artemis**.



# Dido

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Dido was the founder and queen of Carthage, a city on the northern coast of Africa. She was the daughter of Belus (or Mutto), a king of Tyre in Phoenicia (pronounced fuh-NEE-shuh), and the sister of Pygmalion (pronounced pig-MAY-lee-uhn). Dido is best known for her love affair with the Trojan hero **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs).

King Belus had wanted his son and daughter to share royal power equally after his death, but Pygmalion seized the throne and murdered Dido's husband. Dido and her followers fled from Tyre, landing on the shores of North Africa. There a local ruler named Iarbas (pronounced ee-AR-bus) agreed to sell Dido as much land as the hide of a bull could cover. Dido cut a bull's hide into thin strips and used it to outline a large area of land. On that site, Dido built Carthage and became its queen.

Carthage became a prosperous city. Iarbas pursued Dido, hoping to marry her, but Dido refused. After her husband's death, she had sworn never to marry again. Iarbas continued his advances, and even threatened Carthage with war unless Dido agreed to be his wife. Seeing no other alternative, Dido killed herself by throwing herself into the flames of a funeral pyre, a large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body. In another version of the story, she mounted the pyre and stabbed herself, surrounded by her people.

The Roman poet Virgil used part of the story of Dido in his epic poem the *Aeneid*. In Virgil's account, the Trojan leader Aeneas was shipwrecked on the shore near Carthage at the time when Dido was building the new city. After welcoming Aeneas and his men, the queen fell deeply in love with him. In time, the two lived together as wife and husband, and Aeneas began to act as though he were king of Carthage. Then the god Jupiter (the Roman version of the Greek god Zeus) sent a messenger to tell Aeneas that he could not remain in Carthage. Rather, his destiny—or future path in life as determined by the gods—was to found a new city for the Trojans in Italy that would eventually become Rome.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

DYE-doh

### Alternate Names

Elissa

### Appears In

Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Heroides*

### Lineage

Daughter of King Belus of Tyre



*Aeneas tells Dido of his misfortunes at Troy.* RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Dido was devastated when she heard that Aeneas planned to leave. She had believed that the two of them would eventually marry. Aeneas insisted that he had no choice but to obey the gods, and shortly afterward, he and his men set sail for Italy. When Dido saw the ships sail out to sea, she ordered a funeral pyre to be built. She climbed onto it, cursed Aeneas, and using a sword he had given her, stabbed herself to death.

### Dido in Context

For Romans, the story of Dido and Aeneas is a convenient way of explaining the rift between the people of Carthage and the people of Rome. Before Dido killed herself, she cursed not only Aeneas but all Trojans and their descendants (the Romans). This hatred between the

two regions was seen as the cause of the Punic Wars, fought between the Romans and the Carthaginians. Unlike the Trojan War, the mythical battle mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, the Punic Wars were historical events well documented by people living at the time.

The Punic Wars took place during the second and third centuries BCE. As the Roman Empire expanded throughout the region of the Mediterranean Sea, small but prosperous kingdoms such as Carthage were subject to attack by Roman forces. The Carthaginians held off many Roman assaults; during the Second Punic War, the master military commander Hannibal even marched his forces—including a group of elephants—across the Alps into Italy, earning several victories against the Romans. In the end, however, a Roman attack on Carthage resulted in the city's complete surrender and subsequent destruction in 146 BCE.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Although the story of Dido and Aeneas may seem to represent tragic love, Romans viewed Dido as a symbol of the bad feelings between Carthage and Rome. She was not seen as a sympathetic character, but as a vengeful enemy or a woman scorned. In the myth, Aeneas—who is viewed as the hero and founder of the Roman Empire—chooses his destiny to found Rome over his love for Dido. The themes of abandonment and the importance of duty over love are central to the myth.

## Dido in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Famed English playwright Christopher Marlowe wrote a play about the legend titled *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, which was first published in 1594. In 1689, the English composer Henry Purcell wrote an opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, that was based on the story and characters from the myth. Dido also appears as a character in Dante's *Inferno*, as one of the damned souls in the second circle of **hell**.

The popular singer/songwriter Dido Armstrong, better known simply as Dido, was named after the mythical queen of Carthage.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Dido commits suicide after Aeneas leaves her behind to continue on his journey to found Rome. In modern societies, suicide is seen as a serious

problem, especially among teenagers. In the United States, suicide is the third most common cause of death for people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. Why do you think teen suicide occurs at such an alarming rate? Do failed relationships, such as the one between Dido and Aeneas, often play a role in teen suicide? Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find a list of risk factors for teen suicide and compare these to the reasons you listed.

**SEE ALSO** Aeneas; *Aeneid, The; Iliad, The*; Pygmalion and Galatea



**Nationality/Culture**

Greek

**Pronunciation**

dye-uh-NYE-suhs

**Alternate Names**

Bacchus (Roman)

**Appears In**

Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Euripides' *Bacchae*

**Lineage**

Son of Zeus and Semele

## Dionysus

### Character Overview

Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, wine, and ecstasy, was popular throughout much of the ancient world. In Rome he was known as Bacchus (pronounced BAHK-us). A complex deity, Dionysus played two very different roles in **Greek mythology**. As the god of fertility, he was closely linked with crops, the harvest, and the changing of the seasons. As the god of wine and ecstasy, he was associated with drunkenness, madness, and wild sexuality. His nature included a productive, life-giving side and an animal-like, destructive side.

### Major Myths

The most common myth about the origins of Dionysus says that he was the son of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and of Semele (pronounced SEM-uh-lee), daughter of the founder of Thebes. Zeus's jealous wife, **Hera**, wanted to know the identity of the child's father. She disguised herself as Semele's old nurse and went to see Semele. When Semele told her that Zeus was the father, Hera challenged her to prove her claim by having Zeus appear in all his glory. Semele did so. However, because Zeus was the god of lightning, his power was too much for a human to bear. Semele was turned into ashes.

Before Semele died, Zeus pulled Dionysus out of her womb. Then cutting open his thigh, Zeus placed the unborn child inside. A few months later he opened up his thigh, and Dionysus was born. The infant



was left with Semele's sister Ino, who disguised him as a girl to protect him from Hera. As punishment for helping Dionysus, Hera drove Ino and her husband insane.

Some legends say that Hera also drove Dionysus insane. Afterward, Dionysus wandered the world accompanied by his teacher, Silenus (pronounced sye-LEE-nus), bands of **satyrs** (pronounced SAY-turz, half-human, half-goat creatures), and his women followers, who were known as maenads (pronounced MEE-nads). When Dionysus traveled to Egypt, he introduced the cultivation of grapes and the art of winemaking. When he went to Libya, he established an oracle—a place where mortals could communicate with the gods—in the desert. He also journeyed to India, conquering all who opposed him and bringing laws, cities, and wine to the country. On his way back to Greece, he met his grandmother, the earth goddess **Cybele** (pronounced SIB-uh-lee). She cured him of his madness and taught him the mysteries of life and resurrection (rebirth).

In another story about his birth, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and **Demeter**, the goddess of crops and vegetation. Hera was jealous of the child and convinced the **Titans** to destroy him. Although Dionysus was disguised as a baby goat, the Titans found him, caught him, and tore him to pieces. They ate all of his body except his heart, which was rescued by **Athena**. She gave the heart to Zeus, who gave it to Semele to eat. Semele later gave birth to Dionysus again. The story represents the earth (Demeter) and sky (Zeus) giving birth to the crops (Dionysus), which die each winter and are reborn again in the spring.

Drunkenness and madness are elements that appear in many of the stories about Dionysus. In one tale, Dionysus disguised himself as a young boy and got drunk on an island near Greece. Some pirates found him and promised to take him to Naxos, which Dionysus said was his home. However, the pirates decided to sell the boy into slavery. Only one of them, Acoetes, objected to the plan. When the pirates steered their ship away from Naxos, the wind died. Suddenly, a tangle of grapevines covered the ship. The oars turned into snakes, clusters of grapes grew on Dionysus's head, and wild animals appeared and played at his feet. Driven to madness, the pirates jumped overboard. Only Acoetes was spared. He sailed the ship to Naxos, where Dionysus made him a priest of his followers. It was on Naxos that Dionysus also met the princess **Ariadne** (pronounced ar-ee-AD-nee), who became his wife.

## Dionysus

*Dionysus.* MICHELANGELO  
MERISI DA CARAVAGGIO/THE  
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/  
GETTY IMAGES.



**The Worship of Dionysus** Dionysus's influence over fertility extended beyond crops to animals and humans as well. This power made him the symbol of creative forces, the lifeblood of nature. Women flocked to his cult because of its association with the female responsibilities of child-bearing and harvesting. According to tradition, these women would abandon their families and travel to the countryside to participate in Dionysia festivals, known in Rome as Bacchanalia. They wore animal skins and carried wands called *thyrsi*, made of fennel stalks bound together with grapevines and ivy. The thyrsi were symbols of fertility and reproduction and also of intoxication.

During the Dionysia festivals the maenads would enter a trance, dancing to the beat of drums and waving thyrsi. Sometimes they would go

into a frenzy during which they gained supernatural powers. It was said that the maenads could tear apart animals—and even humans—with their bare hands.

In one myth, the worship of Dionysus has tragic consequences. Dionysus visited Thebes disguised as a young man and caused the women there to fall under his power. He led them to a mountain outside the city, where they took part in his rituals. Pentheus, the king of Thebes, was furious and imprisoned Dionysus. Miraculously, the chains fell off and the jail cell opened by itself. Dionysus then told Pentheus of the wild celebrations he would see if he disguised himself as a woman and went to the mountain. The king, dressed as a woman, hid in a tree to watch the Dionysia. However, the women saw him and, in their madness, mistook him for a mountain lion. They killed him, tearing him limb from limb.

**King Midas** One of the best-known tales about Dionysus concerns King Midas and the golden touch. Dionysus's teacher, Silenus, had a habit of getting drunk and forgetting where he was. One day after drinking, Silenus became lost while traveling in Midas's kingdom. He fell in a whirlpool and would have drowned if Midas had not saved him. As a reward, Dionysus granted Midas anything he wished. Midas asked that everything he touched turn to gold. After the wish was granted, however, Midas discovered that all his food turned to gold and he was unable to eat. Then, when he hugged his daughter, she turned to gold too. Dionysus removed Midas's golden touch after the king had learned the price of his greed.

## Dionysus in Context

Dionysus did not start out as a Greek god. His following had its roots in Thrace (north of Greece), in Phrygia (in modern Turkey), or possibly on the island of Crete. Many Greek city-states at first rejected the cult of Dionysus because of its foreign origins and its wild, drunken rituals. When the cult first arrived in Rome, worshippers held their celebrations in secret. However, in both Greece and Rome, the cult of Dionysus overcame resistance and gained many followers.

Though many cultures view drinking and drunkenness as undesirable at best and a sin at worst, for the ancient Greeks and Romans it was, within certain contexts, considered an appropriate way to honor and connect with the gods. The Greek philosopher Plato's *Symposium*, in

## Dionysus and Apollo

In his discussion of the ancient Greeks, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used the terms *Dionysian* and *Apollonian* to describe the two sides of human nature. Dionysian urges—sensual and irrational impulses—are named for Dionysus. The term *Apollonian* refers to the rational side of human behavior associated with the god Apollo. Interestingly, these two gods, with their very different natures, actually shared a shrine at Delphi. Dionysus was said to have the gift of prophecy, and the priests at Delphi honored him almost as much as they honored Apollo.

fact, records a drinking party attended by his teacher Socrates and several other notable Athenians during the festival of Dionysus. It seems clear from the text that the men present have been drinking heavily, and that the ability to do so was considered a positive trait.

While agriculture as a whole was important to ancient Romans, winemaking in particular was considered an especially critical part of Roman agriculture. Dionysus, often depicted with grapes and wine, enjoyed more popularity among ancient Romans than many other gods of agriculture because of this connection.

## Key Themes and Symbols

There are three important themes that run through the myth of Dionysus. One theme is the hostility that Dionysus and his cult face both from Hera and from the inhabitants of the places he visits. He is often viewed as the outsider or foreigner, which is a reflection of his origins outside Greece and Rome. The second is the association of Dionysus with madness. This may also symbolize the loss of control caused by drunkenness. The third is the idea of death and rebirth, an essential part of Dionysus's identity as god of the harvest and of fertility. Because crops die in winter and return in spring, Dionysus—like many other agricultural gods—was seen as a symbol of death and resurrection.

## Dionysus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because of his popularity and the colorful stories about him and his followers, Dionysus has been a favorite subject of writers and artists. He

appears in early Greek poetry such as Homer's *Iliad*, where he is pictured as a young god. He is later mentioned in works of the Greek playwright Euripides and the Roman poet Ovid. Many poems and stories by English and American writers such as John Milton, John Keats, and Ralph Waldo Emerson include descriptions of Dionysus or his rituals. Famous sculptors such as Michelangelo have carved images of him, and artists throughout history have used him as the subject for paintings. He is sometimes portrayed as old and bearded and sometimes as youthful. Often he is shown surrounded by powerful animals, such as bulls and goats.

Dionysus appears as a character in Rick Riordan's award-winning book *The Lightning Thief* (2005). The story of an attempted re-creation of a Dionysian ritual that goes horribly wrong forms the basis of Donna Tartt's 1992 novel *The Secret History*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Alcoholic beverages, especially wine, have long played an important part in Greek culture. In modern times, Greece does not have a legal drinking age for consuming alcohol in private, and for many years, was well-known for having no age restrictions on the purchase of alcohol (though this is no longer the case). However, the rate of alcoholism in Greece is generally acknowledged to be lower than in many other countries. Do you think legalized drinking for teenagers in the United States would result in increased rates of alcoholism among teens? Why or why not? Are there basic differences between Greek and American culture that would lead to different results?

**SEE ALSO** Apollo; Ariadne; Athena; Demeter; Hera; *Iliad, The*; Midas; Satyrs; Zeus



# Djang'kawu

## Character Overview

In **Australian mythology**, the Djang'kawu were three sacred beings—a brother and two sisters—who created all life on earth. The Aborigines of

**Nationality/Culture**  
Australian/Aboriginal

**Pronunciation**  
jang-kuh-WOO

**Alternate Names**  
Djanggawul

**Appears In**  
Australian Aboriginal oral mythology

**Lineage**  
Unknown

Arnhem Land in northern Australia tell the story of the three siblings in a series of five hundred songs.

## Major Myths

Arriving from **heaven** in a canoe with their companion Bralbral, the Djang'kawu set off to walk across the land carrying digging sticks called *rangga*. When the Djang'kawu sisters touched the ground with these sticks, they created the water, trees, animals, and all other features of the earth. The sisters were always pregnant, and their children populated the earth.

Originally, the sisters controlled the magic objects that created life. However, one day while they were sleeping, their brother stole these objects. In the beginning, the sisters had both male and female sex organs, but their brother cut off the male parts so that the sisters appeared like other women.

## Djang'kawu in Context

The Australian landscape is largely harsh and unforgiving. It is in fact the driest and flattest of all the continents, and consists mostly of desert. The only reliable source of water is an underground basin accessible through various springs, or small pockets where water rises up to the surface, that dot the land. Because of the importance of these springs, it makes sense that the Aboriginal people of Australia would include them in their creation myth as being made by the Djang'kawu.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The story of the Djang'kawu is a story about fertility and the creation of the living world. The sisters symbolize motherhood, as well as water, which is seen as the source of all life. The myth of the Djang'kawu is also about how, according to myth, men control the power to perform sacred rituals. This is explained by the brother taking his sisters' *rangga* sticks so that he can control the magic.

## Djang'kawu in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Aboriginal people of Australia have passed on their myths largely through oral tales and songs. Though their culture has recently started to become assimilated into Australian culture as a whole, the myths of the

Aborigines have yet to become widespread in the public consciousness. For this reason, examples of the Djang'kawu in art and literature are mostly limited to tribal songs and art.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In Australia, there has been an effort over the years to assimilate or absorb Aboriginal cultures into the mainstream. A similar effort was made with many American Indian tribes in the United States during the early twentieth century. Supporters of assimilation argue that it helps members of small, alienated communities become a successful part of the national culture, which helps create economic and emotional prosperity while bringing diversity into the mainstream. Opponents of assimilation argue that it only serves to destroy the remaining traces of Aboriginal culture and force Aboriginal people to change their ways to match everyone else.

Do you think assimilation is good or bad for native cultures such as the Aborigines? Support your opinion with reasons and examples. You can research the topic for additional information that may help you establish your position.

SEE ALSO Australian Mythology; Creation Stories



## Dragons

### Character Overview

In myths and legends, dragons are reptilian creatures with horns, huge claws, and long tails. Though they can be found in cultures across the globe, they tend to share these same basic physical features. Some dragons are capable of breathing **fire**, and many have wings. Dragons are usually described as living in a cave or underground lair.

The oldest myths involving dragons come from the ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian mythologies. The dragons in these stories are generally evil forces that disrupt the correct order of the natural world. A god typically defeats the dragon in order to protect the world. The dragon Apophis (pronounced uh-POH-fis) in **Egyptian mythology** was the

#### Nationality/Culture

Various

#### Alternate Names

Lindworm (Scandinavian),  
Wyvern (Saxon)

#### Appears In

Various myths around the world

enemy of **Ra**, the **sun** god, and is slain by the god **Set**. Babylonian creation myths describe the dragonlike monster **Tiamat** (pronounced TYAH-maht), who was associated with chaos or disorder, and who died at the hands of the god **Marduk**. Dragons also play a role in the Bible, where they are frequently identified with **Satan**; the book of Revelations in the Bible describes the defeat of a dragon at the end of the world. Later Christian legends continued the theme of the dragon as a satanic figure; in one famous legend, **St. George**, the protector saint of England, saved the daughter of a king from a dragon, symbolizing the triumph of the church over the devil. The dragon played a similar symbolic role in Christian art, representing sin that must be overcome by saints and martyrs.

In various Greek and Roman myths, dragons were thought to understand the secrets of the earth. They had both protective and fearsome qualities. For example, **Apollo** fought the dragon Pytho (pronounced PYE-thoh), which guarded the oracle at **Delphi**—a place where mortals could communicate with the gods. Dragons guarded other valuable objects in Greek myths, notably the **Golden Fleece** and the golden apples of the Hesperides; in both stories, the dragons are defeated by **heroes** seeking to obtain the treasure. Dragons served as guardians of valuable things in other cultures, as well. In **Norse mythology**, the best-known dragon is Fafnir, a dwarf who transformed himself into a dragon to guard riches on which a curse had been placed. The young hero **Sigurd** slays Fafnir. In the Anglo-Saxon story of **Beowulf**, the hero slays a dragon that guards an ancient treasure.

**Chinese mythology** is not without its dragon-slayers; the mythical emperors Yu and Chuan-hin kill dragons in order to establish order in the world. But this view of dragons as things that must be destroyed or controlled is balanced by positive aspects of dragons. For instance, Chinese mythology draws a strong connection between dragons and water. Dragons are thought to symbolize the rhythmic forces of life, and so are held in high regard. In East Asian mythology and tradition, dragons symbolize power, happiness, and fertility and are believed to bring good fortune and wealth. Statues and carvings of dragons are common, and garments are often decorated with the dragon image.

### Dragons in Context

In some mythologies, the story of a god's victory over a dragon can be interpreted as a fertility myth because the god is often a storm god, and the



dragon is threatening a natural resource. The dragon represents a chaotic force that must be destroyed in order to preserve order in the world. It has been speculated that dinosaur remains, found throughout the world, could have sparked the imagination of ancient peoples, leading them to invent dragons as the fearsome creatures that left such large bones.

The dragon's fierce and ancient power caused many cultures to adopt it as a military and political symbol. Roman soldiers of the first century CE inscribed dragons on the flags that they carried into battle. The ancient Celts also used the dragon symbol on their battle gear, and to this day, a red dragon appears on the flag of Wales.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In ancient times, dragons often represented evil, destruction, and death. In some cases, as in Norse myth, dragons represent greed. They are usually portrayed as frightening and destructive monsters. Gods and heroes must slay them in symbolic battles of good over evil. But a few cultures, notably those of China and Japan, view dragons in a positive light and use them as symbols of good fortune. This may reflect the slightly different origins of dragons in different cultures, as well as cultural views on existing animals. In Europe, for example, dragons are the mythical equivalent of serpents, which have long been viewed by Europeans with fear and associated with evil. In Asia, dragons are associated with both serpents and fish, with dragons often depicted as having fish scales as skin. In addition, the Asian attitude toward snakes is generally more favorable than that of Europeans, perhaps due to more common exposure to the animals.

### Dragons in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Dragons have been found in ancient art and literature from many cultures. They play an especially important role in Chinese and Japanese art. In modern times, dragons are one of the most readily recognized mythical creatures regardless of culture. The fantasy literature and art genres in particular use dragons frequently, and have developed many modern variations on dragon myth and legend. Notable literary works focusing on dragons include the *Dragonriders of Pern* series by Anne McCaffrey (begun in 1968) and *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien (1937). Many films have also focused on dragons, including *Dragonslayer* (1981), *Dragonheart* (1996), and *Reign of Fire* (2002).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The *Inheritance Trilogy* is a best-selling series of fantasy books written by Christopher Paolini and first published in 2002. The books focus on Eragon, a poor boy who finds a dragon's egg and trains to become a Dragon Rider in the land of Alagesia, where all existing Dragon Riders have been destroyed by a vengeful king named Galbatorix. The first two volumes of the series, *Eragon* and *Eldest*, had sold over eight million copies as of 2007.

SEE ALSO *Beowulf*, George, St.; *Nibelungenlied*, *The*; Tiamat



### Nationality/Culture

Australian Aboriginal

### Pronunciation

DREEM-time

### Alternate Names

The Dreaming, Alcheringa

### Appears In

Australian Aboriginal oral mythology

## Dreamtime

### Myth Overview

In the mythology of the Australian Aborigines, Dreamtime, or the Dreaming, is the period of creation when the world took shape and all life began. During Dreamtime, ancestral beings created the landscape, made the first people, and taught the people how to live.

The Aborigines believe that the spirits of ancestral beings that sleep beneath the ground emerged from the earth during Dreamtime. As they wandered across the land, the ancestral beings took on the forms of humans, animals, plants, stars, wind, or rain. During their epic journey, they created hills, plains, and other natural formations. Some of the beings brought forth rain. Some created the first people, and some established the laws by which people would live.

When the ancestral beings lay down upon the wet and still soft rocks, they often left impressions of themselves. The Aborigines believe that the ancestral beings continue to live in the places that bear their mark. There, deep down in the earth, they left various forces, including “child-spirits,” which take on human form through a father and a mother on earth. One of the ways in which humans trace their origin to the ancestral beings of Dreamtime is through the child-spirits.

Dreamtime did not end at the time of creation, because the ancestral beings and the child-spirits are eternal. When a life ends, the child-spirit returns to the earth and remains there until it comes back again in



*Petroglyph believed to have been made by Aboriginal ancestors during the formation of the landscape during Dreamtime, New South Wales, Australia.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

another human form. Moreover, by participating in certain rituals, individuals can reenact the journeys of their ancestors. Ancestral beings and human beings are thus closely and forever linked.

Different Aboriginal groups tell various Dreamtime stories about their ancestral beings. One group from northern Australia describes how an ancestral being in the form of a snake sent bats for humans to eat during the Dreamtime. However, the bats flew so high that the people could not capture them. The snake gave up one of his ribs to create the boomerang. Using this weapon, the people could hunt and eat the bats.

The Arrernte people of central Australia speak of a great lizard ancestor. They describe how the lizard created the first people in Dreamtime and gave them tools for survival, such as stone knives and spears. The Arrernte, who consider the lizard sacred, believe that certain waterholes and rock formations mark the places where the great lizard did his work.

### **Dreamtime in Context**

The term “Dreamtime” was coined by anthropologist Francis James Gillen in about 1896. It reflects the fact that the Northern Arrernte, one

of the first Aboriginal groups studied, use the same word to mean both “dream” and “the period of the creation of the world.” In other tribes with similar beliefs, the two words are not related. Dreamtime is not meant to refer to sleep, although dreams are considered by some tribes to be a way to access the parallel world of the Dreamtime, which is not just an event that happened long ago, but is always occurring.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The myth of Dreamtime is complex and symbolizes a way of life completely different from other cultures. Some elements that can be easily distinguished include the theme of creation, the idea of the snake as a sacred ancestor, and the theme of **reincarnation** or rebirth as illustrated by the child-spirits. The Dreamtime also represents a parallel world that is eternal and exists outside of time.

### Dreamtime in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Dreamtime is most often seen in the work of artists who have been raised in the Australian culture. The 1977 film *The Last Wave* by Australian director Peter Weir focuses mainly on the clash between Aboriginal and white cultures, and includes elements of the Dreamtime as an important part of the plot. Some artists outside Australia have also been inspired by the myth: the English band The Stranglers released a successful album titled *Dreamtime* in 1986, which also contained a song by the same name.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The importance of dreams has long been debated by philosophers, psychologists, doctors, and others. What function, if any, do you think dreams serve? Is their purpose medical, cultural, personal, spiritual, or some combination of these? Do you think it is possible that a parallel world, such as the Dreamtime, could exist and be accessed while sleeping? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Australian Mythology

## Durga

*See* **Devi**.



# Dwarfs and Elves

## Character Overview

In myths and tales, dwarfs and elves are small humanlike creatures, often endowed with magical powers. Dwarfs generally look like old men with long beards and are sometimes ugly or misshapen. Elves, known for their mischievous pranks, tend to be smaller in stature than dwarves. Though usually associated with Scandinavian mythology, dwarfs and elves appear in the myths of many cultures, along with similar creatures such as fairies, gnomes, pixies, and **leprechauns**.

In **Norse mythology**, dwarfs and elves are usually male and often live in forests, in mountains, or in out-of-the-way places. There are two kinds of elves: the **Dökkalfar** (pronounced DOH-kahl-fahr), or dark elves, and the **Ljosalfar** (pronounced YOHL-sah-fahr), or light elves. The **Dökkalfar** dwell in caves or dark woods. The **Ljosalfar** live in bright places or in the sky.

Dwarfs and elves of the mountains are highly skilled metalworkers and artisans who have supernatural powers and make special gifts for the gods, such as a magic spear for **Odin**, the king of the gods; a ship for **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh), the goddess of love and beauty; and a hammer for **Thor**, the god of thunder. But dwarfs and elves of the mines, who keep guard over underground stores of gold and precious stones, are unpredictable and spiteful. This association of dwarfs and elves with mining and precious metals exists in many legends and fairy tales.

In Germanic mythology, elves are tiny creatures who can bring disease to people and to cattle or can cause nightmares by sitting on a sleeper's chest. They also steal newborn babies and replace them with deformed elf children, called "changelings." In Central American myths, dwarfs are associated with caves, forests, and fertility. In one story, a Red Dwarf uses his ax to cause sparks that a fortune-teller interprets. The Bushpeople of South Africa tell of the Cagn-Cagn, dwarfs who killed the god Cagn with the help of ants and later restored him to life.

In North America, dwarf people appear in various Native American myths. For instance, the Awakkule are strong mountain dwarfs who act as helpful spirits in Crow mythology. The Wanagemeswak are thin,

**Nationality/Culture**  
Various

**Alternate Names**  
Ljosalfar, Dökkalfar (Norse), Cagn-Cagn (South African), Awakkule, Wanagemeswak, Djogeon (American Indian)

**Appears In**  
Various myths around the world



*Dwarfs, such as the ones from the story of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” are portrayed as both helpful and suspicious.* THE ART ARCHIVE/JOHN MEEK/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

river-dwelling dwarfs in the mythology of the Penobscot Indians. The Senecas have legends about the Djogeon, little people who live in caves, in deep ditches, or along streams. The Djogeon warn humans about dangers and sometimes bring good fortune.

## Dwarfs and Elves in Context

Dwarfs are sometimes represented as helpful creatures or wise advisors. More commonly, though, they are unpleasant, stubborn, and distrustful with an air of mystery about them. They may act in deceitful ways, or they may be openly hostile. In some stories, dwarfs steal food or carry off children and beautiful maidens.

Elves take on a variety of forms. Different cultures have identified elves as nature spirits, minor gods, imaginary beings, dream creatures, and souls of the dead. Like dwarfs, elves have both positive and negative images. In the legend of Santa Claus, they work hard in Santa's toy shop. In other stories, they are mischievous beings who play pranks on humans and animals, such as leading travelers astray.

The mythology surrounding elves and dwarfs likely has multiple roots. The earliest cultures tended to be pantheistic, believing in many gods, and people often believed that individual spirits inhabited specific ponds, trees, hills, and other natural features. These nature spirits probably evolved into the elves of later folklore. The pounding, rumbling, and shaking exhibited by volcanic mountains have often been associated with "miner" gods living beneath the ground, and this likely gave rise to legends of the dwarfs.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Regardless of the culture in which they are found, dwarfs and elves are almost always linked to nature in some way. Dwarfs are often associated with the earth, as in Norse mythology, where they are believed to live deep in the ground. Likewise, elves are often associated with trees, forests, and rivers. This connection with nature is often magical, as with the dwarfs who create many of the powerful enchanted weapons and gadgets used by Norse gods. One theme common to all myths about elves and dwarfs is the idea of a parallel, mostly hidden race of creatures that exists alongside humans, sometimes providing benefits and sometimes causing great harm. They are often organized in groups similar to humans; in Norse mythology, for example, dwarfs are craftsmen that toil away in mines and at blacksmith fires. They may even represent exaggerated versions of human artisans common in Norse society.

## Dwarfs and Elves in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Dwarfs and elves have become common fixtures in modern fantasy art, literature, and film. Although both were common in European folktales

prior to the mid-twentieth century, it was the publication of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy that earned these mythical races a permanent place in popular culture. Tolkien included several elf and dwarf characters in his books, most notably the elf Legolas and the dwarf Gimli. In the decades after Tolkien's trilogy was published, elves and dwarfs became standard in many works of fantasy. In addition to books, dwarfs and elves are also common in role-playing games and fantasy films—again, most influentially, in games and movies based on Tolkien's books. The 1937 Walt Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is also a popular story featuring dwarfs.

Elves have also remained a common part of the mythology of Santa Claus and Christmas. These elves, much different from those found in Tolkien and most works of fantasy, are found in most modern versions of the Santa Claus myth. They commonly appear in holiday films, such as the 2003 film *Elf* starring Will Ferrell and the *Santa Clause* series starring Tim Allen.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Dwarfism is a genetic disorder that results in a full-grown adult size of less than about 4 feet 10 inches in height. Dwarfism can lead to numerous health problems as well as negative treatment by others, some of whom might view those with dwarfism as “freaks.” Do you think modern mainstream depictions of mythical dwarfs—such as Gimli in the *Lord of the Rings* books and films—help or hurt the public image of those with dwarfism? Explain your answer and include reasons to support your position.

SEE ALSO Leprechauns; Norse Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Jewish

### Pronunciation

DIB-uhk

### Alternate Names

Dibbuk

### Appears In

Jewish folktales

### Lineage

Varies



# Dybbuks

## Character Overview

In Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is the spirit or soul of a dead person that enters a living body and takes possession of it. *Dybbuk* is a Hebrew word meaning “attachment.”



According to tradition, a dybbuk is a restless spirit that must wander about—because of its sinful behavior in its previous life—until it can “attach” itself to another person. The dybbuk remains within this person until driven away by a religious ceremony.

## Dybbuks in Context

Belief in possessing spirits such as dybbuks was common in eastern Europe during the 1500s and 1600s. Sometimes people who had nervous or mental disorders were assumed to be possessed by a dybbuk. Often a special rabbi was called to exorcise, or drive out, the evil spirit. Exorcisms of dybbuks still take place in modern times, though they are rare and not considered a typical part of Jewish culture.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Like ghosts in many cultures, dybbuks usually symbolize restlessness, unresolved conflict, or pain. Dybbuks are seldom identified with people who led happy, fulfilling lives. Dybbuks also serve as a reminder of the soul’s continued existence after a person dies, which reinforces a belief in the **afterlife**.

## Dybbuks in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Shloime Ansky wrote a play in Yiddish called *The Dybbuk* in 1916. It concerns a rabbinical student named Khonnon who calls upon **Satan** to help him win Leye, the woman he loves. When Khonnon dies, he becomes a dybbuk and takes possession of Leye. After she is freed of the spirit, Leye dies, and her spirit joins that of Khonnon. In 1974, composer Leonard Bernstein and choreographer Jerome Robbins created a ballet titled *Dybbuk* that was based on Ansky’s play.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Some churches still practice exorcism as a way to remove a demonic spirit from the body of someone who has been declared possessed, usually a child. Many cases of exorcism around the world have resulted in death or injury to the supposed victim of the possession. Do you think the practice of exorcism should be protected under the banner of religious freedom? Why or why not?



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# E



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Greek

## Pronunciation

EK-oh

## Alternate Names

None

## Appears In

*Ovid's Metamorphoses*

## Lineage

Unknown



## Echo

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Echo was a mountain nymph who annoyed **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), queen of the gods, by talking to her constantly. Echo's chatter distracted Hera and prevented her from discovering the love affairs of her husband, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS). As punishment, Hera took away Echo's power of speech so that she could say nothing except the last words spoken by someone else.

Other myths tell of Echo's falling in love with **Narcissus** (pronounced nar-SIS-us), the handsome son of a river god. However, Narcissus rejected Echo because she could only repeat his words. She was so upset that she faded away until only her voice was heard as an echo. Another myth states that **Pan**, god of the woods, pursued Echo but that she escaped him by running away. The angry Pan caused some shepherds to go mad and tear Echo apart, leaving nothing but her voice to echo through the mountains.

### Echo in Context

In many cultures, myths arise as a way to explain why something exists the way it does in nature. For example, a myth might explain why the giraffe has such a long neck. It is likely that the myth of Echo originated as a way to explain the reflected sounds heard by ancient Greeks;



*One myth involving the nymph Echo tells of her love for Narcissus, who did not return her love because she could only repeat what he said.* RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY.

this is supported by the fact that Echo was a mountain nymph, and mountainous areas are more likely to result in the reflected sounds we know today as echoes.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

One of the main themes of the myth of Echo is unrequited love, or love that is not felt and returned by the other person. In the myth, Echo loves Narcissus, even though she cannot tell him. Narcissus rejects Echo, and she simply fades away. The myth can also be seen as a warning of the dangers of talking too much; Echo is cursed by Hera after the goddess is distracted by Echo's constant chatter.

## Echo in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Echo's story was widely known among the ancient Greeks, it was the subject of relatively few existing works of art and literature. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the most notable telling. The myth remained well-known through the Renaissance; William Shakespeare's classic play *Romeo and Juliet* includes a passage about Echo.

In modern times, the myth of Echo lives on in the term "echo," which refers to the reflection of a sound back to a listener, usually in enclosed areas or open places with hard vertical surfaces such as cliff faces.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Echo wastes away after Narcissus refuses to love her as she loves him. This theme of unrequited love is popular in modern books and movies. Find an example of unrequited love in a book you have read or a movie you have seen, and describe how the theme is handled in the story you have selected.

SEE ALSO Hera; Narcissus; Pan



# Eden, Garden of

## Myth Overview

According to the book of Genesis in the Bible, the Garden of Eden was an earthly paradise that was home to **Adam and Eve**, the first man and woman. The Bible says that God created the garden, planting in it "every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food." Eden was a well-watered, fertile place from which four rivers flowed out into the world.

After creating Adam, God placed him in the garden so that he could take care of it. God told Adam that he could eat the fruit from any tree except one: the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God then created animals and birds and gave Adam the task of naming them. Realizing that Adam needed a companion, God caused him to fall asleep, then took one of his ribs and created Eve from it.

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

### Pronunciation

GARD-n uhv EED-n

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Old Testament, the Talmud

Shortly afterward, the serpent—the most cunning of all the animals—approached Eve and asked if God had forbidden her to eat from any of the trees. Eve replied that she and Adam were not allowed to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent told her that God knew that if they ate from the tree of knowledge they would become like gods. He persuaded Eve to eat the fruit of that tree, and Eve convinced Adam to take a bite as well. After they ate, their eyes were opened to the knowledge of good and evil. They realized they were naked and sewed together fig leaves to cover themselves.

Soon they heard God walking through the garden and, ashamed of their nakedness, they hid themselves. God called out to them, and when Adam replied that he was hiding because he was naked, God knew that he had eaten the forbidden fruit. Adam admitted that Eve had given him the fruit to eat. When God asked Eve why she had done this, she told him that the serpent had tempted her. God then expelled them from the garden and punished them by causing women to bear children in pain and forcing men to work and sweat for the food they need to live.

### **The Garden of Eden in Context**

The peoples of ancient Mesopotamia also believed in an earthly paradise named Eden, located somewhere in the east. According to some ancient sources, the four main rivers of the ancient Near East—the Tigris, Euphrates, Halys, and Araxes—flowed out of the garden. Scholars today debate the origin of the word *Eden*. Some believe it comes from a Sumerian word meaning “plain.” Others say it is from the Persian word *heden*, meaning “garden.”

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The story of the Garden of Eden is an allegory, which means the characters and events are symbolic and represent other things, usually to drive home a message or moral. The serpent in the garden symbolizes temptation, while the fruit symbolizes sin. The main theme of the myth is mankind’s fall from grace or perfection. The myth also serves as a warning to resist temptation.

### **The Garden of Eden in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The myth of the Garden of Eden has been a popular subject for artists, especially during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Depictions of the

Garden of Eden have been painted by artists such as Michelangelo, Peter Paul Rubens, Masaccio, Albrecht Dürer, and Lucas Cranach. One of the most famous depictions of the Garden of Eden is found in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* altarpiece by Hieronymus Bosch, painted around 1504.

In modern usage, the term “Garden of Eden” is often used to describe any place that appears to be a natural paradise untouched by the progress of humans—specifically, a place with lush vegetation, wildlife, and a plentiful water supply.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Garden of Eden is described as a place of unspoiled natural beauty. In our modern world, places of unspoiled natural beauty are being destroyed at an alarming rate in the name of progress. Do you think humankind would be better served by returning to a more natural environment instead of developing new industries and technologies, or by moving forward with the hope that technological progress will result in more efficient and less harmful uses for our natural resources? What sacrifices might be required to accomplish each of these goals?

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; First Man and First Woman; Serpents and Snakes




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## Egyptian Mythology

### Egyptian Mythology in Context

Bordered by deserts, Egypt’s Nile River valley was relatively isolated from other centers of civilization in the ancient Near East for thousands of years. As a result, Egyptian religion remained almost untouched by the beliefs of foreign cultures. The religion included a large and diverse pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses, and around these deities arose a rich mythology that helped explain the world.

Conquest by the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great in 332 BCE and by the Romans about three hundred years later weakened the

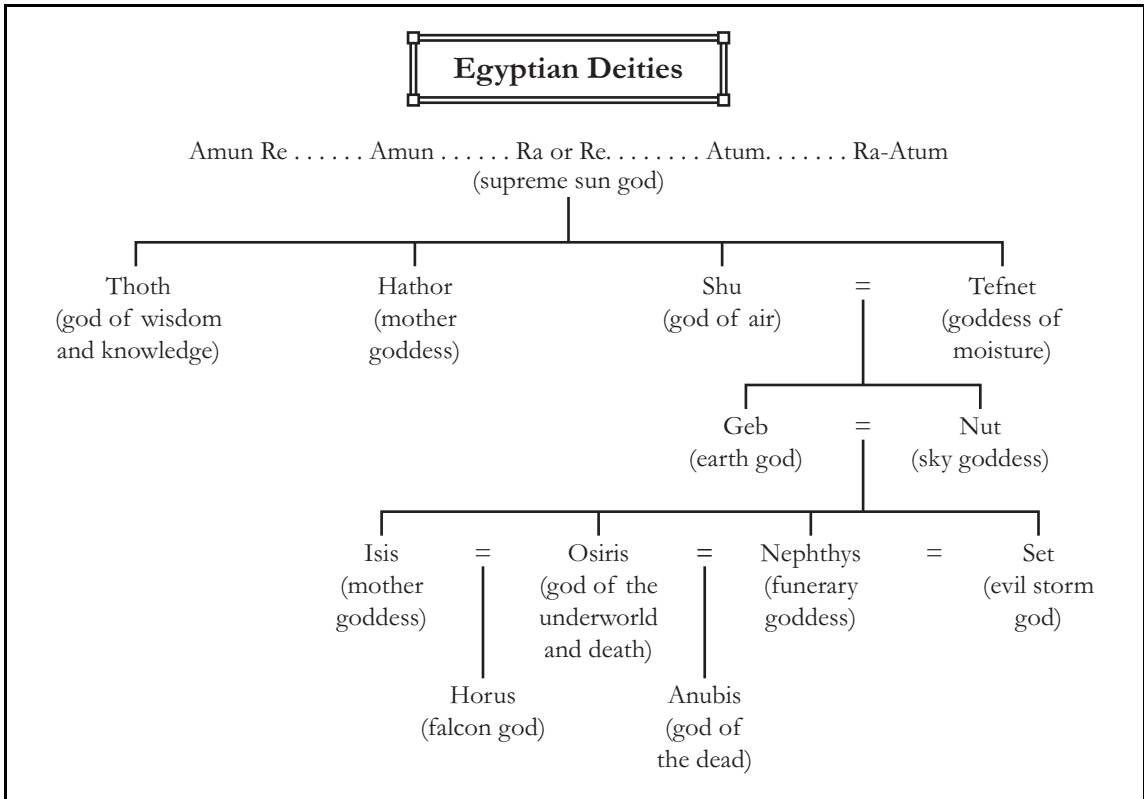


ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

Egyptian religion. By about 400 CE, Christianity had become the dominant faith of the land.

### Core Deities and Characters

Religion and religious cults (groups who worship specific gods) played a central role in all aspects of ancient Egyptian society. The king, or pharaoh, was the most important figure in religion as well as in the state. His responsibilities included ensuring the prosperity and security of the state through his relationship with the gods.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the king was a divine link between humans and the gods. As a living god, he was responsible for supporting religious cults and for building and maintaining temples to the gods. Through such activities, he helped maintain order and harmony.



Because of his critical role in promoting the welfare of Egyptian society, the pharaoh was in some ways more important than any individual god. His official names and titles reflected his special relationship to the gods, particularly to the **sun** god **Ra** and the sky god **Horus** (HOHR-uhs). Some kings sought to gain full status as gods during their lifetimes. Others achieved that position after their deaths.

Ancient Egypt had a remarkably large and diverse pantheon, with many national, regional, and local gods and goddesses. Unlike the gods of some cultures, who lived in a special place in the heavens, Egyptian deities were thought to inhabit the temples of their cults. Daily temple rituals involved caring for the gods and providing them with food, clothing, and other necessities.

Most Egyptian religious cults centered on a temple and the daily rituals performed there. Each temple contained images of the cult's god, generally kept in the innermost part of the building. Daily ceremonies involved clothing, feeding, and praising the god's image. The pharaoh had overall responsibility for all cults, but the temple priests supervised the daily rituals. Although temple rituals affected the welfare of all the people, common Egyptians rarely took part in them. They attended only special festivals, which often included processions of the god's images and reenactments of popular myths.

Egyptian gods tended to have shifting identities. Many did not have clearly defined characters, and their personalities might vary from one myth to another. Although most deities were known by certain basic associations—such as the connection of the god Ra (pronounced RAH) with the sun—these associations often overlapped with those of other gods. Some deities possessed a collection of names to go with the different sides of their personality. For example, the goddess **Hathor** (pronounced HATH-or), who helped the sun god, was also called the Eye of Ra. Sometimes the names and characters of two or more gods were combined to form one deity, such as the combination of the sky god **Amun** (pronounced AH-muhn) and Ra (sometimes Re) into Amun-Ra. The creator god Atum (pronounced AH-tuhm) merged with Ra to become Ra-Atum. Nevertheless, such deities might continue to exist separately as well as in their combined forms.

Egyptian gods also could assume different forms, often combining both human and animal features. If a deity was closely associated with a particular animal or bird, he or she might be shown in art with a human body and the head of that animal or entirely in animal form. Thus,

Horus appears with the head of a falcon, Sekhmet (pronounced SEK-met) with the head of a cat, and **Set** (pronounced SET) is portrayed as a donkey or huge dog. Sometimes a god was linked to several animals, each reflecting a different side of his character.

The gods were powerful and for the most part immortal (able to live forever), but their influence and knowledge had limits. Still, they had the ability to be in several places at the same time and could affect humans in many ways. Although generally benevolent, or helpful to humans, gods could bring misfortune and harm if humans failed to please them or care for them properly.

Egyptian deities were often grouped together in various ways. The earliest grouping was the *ennead* (pronounced EN-ee-ad), which consisted of nine gods and goddesses. The most important of these, the Great Ennead of the city of Heliopolis (pronounced hee-lee-OP-uh-luhs) in northern Egypt, contained the deities associated with creation, death, and rebirth. Another major grouping was the *ogdoad* (pronounced OGDoh-ad)—four pairs of male and female deities. Triads, found mainly in local centers, generally consisted of a god, a goddess, and a young deity (often male).

Although Egypt had thousands of gods and goddesses, only a few were regarded as major deities. The sun god Ra (sometimes Re) was a deity of immense power, considered to be one of the creators of the universe. The combined god Amun-Ra, a mysterious creator spirit, was the source of all life. Ra-Atum represented the evening sun that disappeared each night below the horizon and rose again at dawn. Another sun god, **Aten** (pronounced AHT-n), became the focus of religious reform in the 1300s BCE, when the pharaoh Akhenaten (pronounced ahk-NAHT-n) tried to make him the principal god of Egypt.

**Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris), **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis), and Horus, who made up the best-known Egyptian triad of deities, played leading roles in some of the major Egyptian myths. Osiris, the lord of the **underworld** and god of death and resurrection (rebirth), was the brother and husband of Isis, a mother goddess of Egypt. Horus was their son. Osiris and Isis were the children of the earth god Geb (pronounced GEB) and the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT). Set, another child of Geb and Nut, changed from a benevolent god to an evil one and murdered his brother Osiris.

One of the oldest goddesses of Egypt was the sky goddess Hathor, a mother goddess sometimes known as a deity of fertility, love, and beauty.



*Egyptians believed that the first god appeared as a Bennu bird, a long-legged, wading heron. WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.*

Ptah (pronounced PTAH), another ancient deity, was credited in some myths with creating the world and other gods. **Thoth** (pronounced TOHT), a god of wisdom and arts, was said to have invented hieroglyphics, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, as well as to have written the Egyptian Book of the Dead. **Anubis** (uh-NOO-bis), a god of the dead, presided over funerals and guided dead souls through the underworld or land of the dead.

In Egyptian mythology, goddesses were sometimes much more powerful than gods. When angered, they could cause warfare and destroy those who crossed them. Among the most powerful and terrifying goddesses were Neith (pronounced NEYT) and Sekhmet. Neith, associated with hunting and warfare, gave birth to the giant snake Apophis (pronounced uh-POH-fis) when she spat into the primeval waters. During

## Major Egyptian Deities

**Amun:** supreme god, combined with the sun god Ra to form a new deity called Amun-Ra, who was king of the gods and creator of the universe.

**Anubis:** god of the dead.

**Aten:** personification of the sun and later an all-powerful and creator god under the pharaoh Akhenaten.

**Atum:** god of the sun and creation.

**Geb:** god of the earth.

**Hathor:** mother goddess associated with fertility and love, goddess of the sky.

**Horus:** sun god and sky god, ruler of Egypt, identified with the pharaoh.

**Isis:** mother goddess.

**Nut:** goddess of the sky and mother goddess.

**Osiris:** god of the underworld and judge of the dead.

**Ptah:** creator god, patron of sculpting and metalworking.

**Ra (Re):** sun god, combined with the supreme god Amun to form a new deity called Amun-Ra, who was king of the gods and creator of the universe.

**Set:** god of violent and chaotic forces.

**Thoth:** god of wisdom and knowledge, patron of scribes.

the struggle between Horus and Set, she threatened to make the sky fall if the other gods did not take her advice for resolving the dispute. Sekhmet, portrayed as a terrifying lioness, was killed by rebellious humans during the early years after creation. The Egyptians sometimes sacrificed criminals to her, and it was thought that she used contagious diseases as her messengers.

Magic played an important role in Egyptian religion, often providing a way to avoid or control misfortune. Magical spells might include versions of myths. All gods had secret, divine names that carried magical powers. One spell told the story of how Isis discovered the secret name of Ra, which she then used to increase her own magical skills. Many spells were used to treat the bites of snakes and scorpions, generally regarded as symbols of the forces of chaos. The god Thoth, a patron of wisdom, was closely connected with magic.

## Major Myths

Very few actual Egyptian myths have been preserved from ancient times. Modern scholars have reconstructed stories from such sources as hymns,

ritual texts, images on temple walls, and decorations on tombs and coffins. Some myths about major deities were known and valued throughout Egypt. But many gods and the legends about them had only regional significance. Even the widespread myths often changed or adapted to new situations over the centuries, resulting in numerous variations of a particular story.

**Creation Myths** The Egyptian creation myth has many versions. According to one account, the world was originally a dark, endless chaos of primitive waters. The forces of chaos were represented by an ogdoad consisting of four pairs of deities: Nun (pronounced NOON) and Naunet, the god and goddess of the waters; Kek and Ketet, the forces of darkness; Her and Hehet, the spirits of boundlessness; and Amun and Amaunet, the invisible powers. In some versions of the myth, the god Ptah is associated with Nun and plays a central role in creation.

Within the waters of chaos, the spirit of creation waited to take form. When a mound rose above the waters, Amun (or Ra) emerged and used divine powers to establish order (*ma'at*) out of the chaos. The spirit of creation (Amun or Ra—or sometimes Ptah) then made other gods and humans to inhabit the world. Some accounts say that the gods were formed from the sweat of the creator spirit and that humans came from his tears.

Another part of the Egyptian creation myth concerned the formation of the Great Ennead of Heliopolis. The first of these nine gods was Ra-Atum, who emerged from the primeval waters and created Shu (pronounced SHOO), the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. Shu and Tefnut united to produce the earth god Geb and sky goddess Nut. Geb and Nut stayed very close together, leaving no room for anything to exist between them. Finally Shu separated the two, providing space for other creatures. Geb and Nut eventually had two pairs of male-female **twins**: Osiris and Isis, and Set and Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this). The birth of these gods and goddesses completed the ennead.

**Solar Myths** Another group of Egyptian myths involved the sun gods and the daily cycle of their movement. According to one story, the sun god was born each day at dawn and crossed the sky in a boat filled with other gods and spirits. At nightfall, he descended to the underworld, where he traveled throughout the night, only to be born again the next

day. During his passage through the sky and the underworld, the sun god faced dangers from a giant snake named Apophis and other enemies who tried to interrupt his journey.

The Egyptians celebrated the sun's cycle daily in temples and sang hymns and incantations to help ensure that the sun god would escape danger and continue his journey. They believed that the movements of the sun god made it possible for the world to be created anew each day.

**Myths of Osiris** According to Egyptian mythology, Osiris was one of the most important pharaohs. In time, his cult rivaled those of Ra and Amun, and myths about Osiris were widespread. Most of the stories involve three basic themes: the struggle between good and evil, the cycle of birth and rebirth, and the judgment of the dead.

As pharaoh, Osiris civilized the Egyptian people by introducing agriculture, establishing laws, and teaching them to worship the gods. Osiris decided to travel around in the world to bring civilization to other peoples. During his absence, he left his sister-wife, Isis, in charge.

By the time Osiris returned to Egypt, his evil brother Set had concocted a plot to kill him. Set had craft workers build a beautifully decorated box to the measurements of Osiris's body. At a lavish banquet, Set displayed the box and announced that he would give it to the person whose body fit in it exactly. When Osiris lay in the box, Set and his supporters closed the top and nailed it shut. Then they carried the box to the Nile River and threw it in the water.

When Isis heard of Set's treachery, she was overcome with grief and set out to find her husband's body. During the course of her travels, she learned that the box had floated to the shores of the land of Byblos (pronounced BIB-luhs) and had become trapped in the branches of a tree. The tree had grown to a great size, and the king of Byblos had cut it down to make a pillar for one of the rooms in his palace.

Isis went to Byblos and recovered the box. Then she brought it back to Egypt and hid it. However, Set discovered the box and cut Osiris's body into many pieces, scattering them all over Egypt. Accompanied by her son Horus and sister Nephthys, Isis gathered the pieces and used her magical powers to bring the dead Osiris back to life. Osiris then became the king of the gods and the underworld.

To avenge his father and to punish Set for his evil deeds against Osiris, Horus fought his uncle three times. Their battles represented a struggle between good and evil. Horus won each battle, and in the end,



*The pyramids built in Giza, Egypt, honored the powerful kings of Egypt and provided them with a home in the afterlife.* IMAGE COPYRIGHT FATIH KOCYILDIR, 2008. USED UNDER LICENSE FROM SHUTTER-STOCK.COM.

the gods decided that he was the rightful heir to the thrones of both Upper and Lower Egypt. Set was forced to accept this judgment. With Horus as pharaoh, Isis went to live with Osiris in the underworld, where he ruled as lord of the dead.

When the dead person's soul reached Osiris's throne room, it was placed on a scale balanced by a white feather symbolizing truth. Osiris, assisted by Horus, Anubis, and Thoth, sat in judgment. Individuals found innocent of various sins could live among the gods until their bodies were one day resurrected and reunited with the soul. Those found guilty were condemned to eternal torment.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The idea of order, or *ma'at*, was a basic concept in Egyptian belief, reflecting such notions as truth, cooperation, and justice. Egyptians imagined their world as being surrounded by chaos or disorder that constantly threatened to overwhelm *ma'at*.

Another important theme in Egyptian mythology is the **afterlife**. When humans died, their souls began a difficult journey through the underworld. Spells and incantations helped them on their way, and these eventually were collected in a group of texts known as the Book of the Dead. The importance of the afterlife can be seen in the myths of Osiris.

## Egyptian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The influence of Egyptian mythology and religion extended beyond the kingdom's borders. The ancient Greeks and Romans adopted some of Egypt's gods and myths, suitably modified to fit their cultures. Egyptian cults, particularly that of Isis, also spread to Greece and Rome. In his book *The Golden Ass*, Roman philosopher Lucius Apuleius (pronounced ap-yuh-LEE-uhs) mentions festivals of Isis, and the Roman historian Plutarch (pronounced PLOO-tahrk) wrote down one of the most complete versions of the myth of Osiris and Isis.

Egyptian mythology has inspired modern writers, artists, and composers as well. The novel *The Egyptian* (1949) by Finnish author Mika Waltari refers to the supremacy of Aten over other gods. The opera *Aida* (1869) by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi is set in ancient Egypt and mentions the god Ptah. Loosely interpreted Egyptian mythology has played a part in numerous films, including the 1994 science fiction film *Stargate*, the classic Universal horror film *The Mummy*, and its more action-oriented 1999 remake of the same name starring Brendan Fraser and Rachel Weisz.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the topic of Egyptian mummification. How did the Egyptians preserve the bodies of the dead? What was the purpose in preserving these bodies? What other items were placed in Egyptian burial chambers, and why? Did the Egyptians practice mummification on animals as well?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Amun; Animals in Mythology; Anubis; Aten; Creation Stories; Hathor; Horus; Isis; Nut; Osiris; Ra; Set; Thoth; Underworld

**Nationality/Culture**  
Canaanite

**Pronunciation**  
ELL

**Alternate Names**  
El

**Appears In**  
Ugaritic texts and inscriptions

**Lineage**  
Father of humankind



# El

### Character Overview

In the mythology of the ancient Near East, El was the supreme god of the Canaanites. He was the creator deity, the father of gods and men,



and the highest judge and authority in all divine matters and human affairs. In the Bible, the creator deity is referred to as El, Elohim (pronounced ay-LOH-heem, a form of El), or Yahweh (pronounced YAH-way).

## Major Myths

One story from Ugarit concerned Aqhat, son of King Danel. In return for the king's hospitality, the craftsman god Kothar gave Aqhat his bow and arrows. The goddess Anat wanted the bow and tried to buy it with gold and silver. When Aqhat refused, the goddess offered to give him immortality (eternal life) in exchange for the bow. Aqhat rudely rejected her offer, telling the goddess that she could not make immortal a man destined to die.

Angry about having her offer rejected, Anat asked for and received El's permission to have Aqhat killed. The young man's death brought drought and crop failure. Anat cried over his death and said she would bring him back to life so that the earth might be fertile again. Unfortunately, the tablets containing this myth are in such bad condition that the ending of the story is difficult to interpret.

## El in Context

Despite his religious significance, El did not play an active role in Canaanite mythology. Most myths were about the actions of others and involved El indirectly. The true nature of El is further confused by the fact that "El" could be used to refer to any god, and not just the supreme deity of the Canaanites. This is similar to how the word "god" can refer to any deity of any religion, but is commonly used—with a capital "G"—to refer to the supreme being in Judeo-Christian beliefs.

*The god El.* THE ART ARCHIVE/NATIONAL MUSEUM DAMASCUS SYRIA/GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.



## Key Themes and Symbols

In Canaanite mythology, El was usually represented as an elderly man with a long beard. He was believed to live on Mount Saphon, near the ancient Syrian city of Ugarit. A highly respected deity, El was all-knowing and all-powerful, wise and compassionate. He was sometimes referred to as “the Bull” and was generally shown as a seated figure wearing a crown with bull’s horns. The bull suggested El’s strength and creative force.

## El in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

El appears throughout ancient Middle Eastern religious texts and inscriptions. Over time, however, other names began to appear more frequently in references to the supreme being. These include Elohim and Yahweh. Although early Christian leaders recognized El as the first Hebrew name of God, the term is usually associated with beliefs and practices that existed in times before the Bible.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

It is widely recognized that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all arose in the same region of the world and from the same core belief in a single supreme being, with El being one of the names of this deity. However, modern followers of these three religions each typically view members of the other two religions as completely different in their beliefs. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the basic beliefs of these three religions and write down at least three common elements found in all of them.

**SEE ALSO** Semitic Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Spanish/Muisca

### Pronunciation

el doh-RAH-doh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

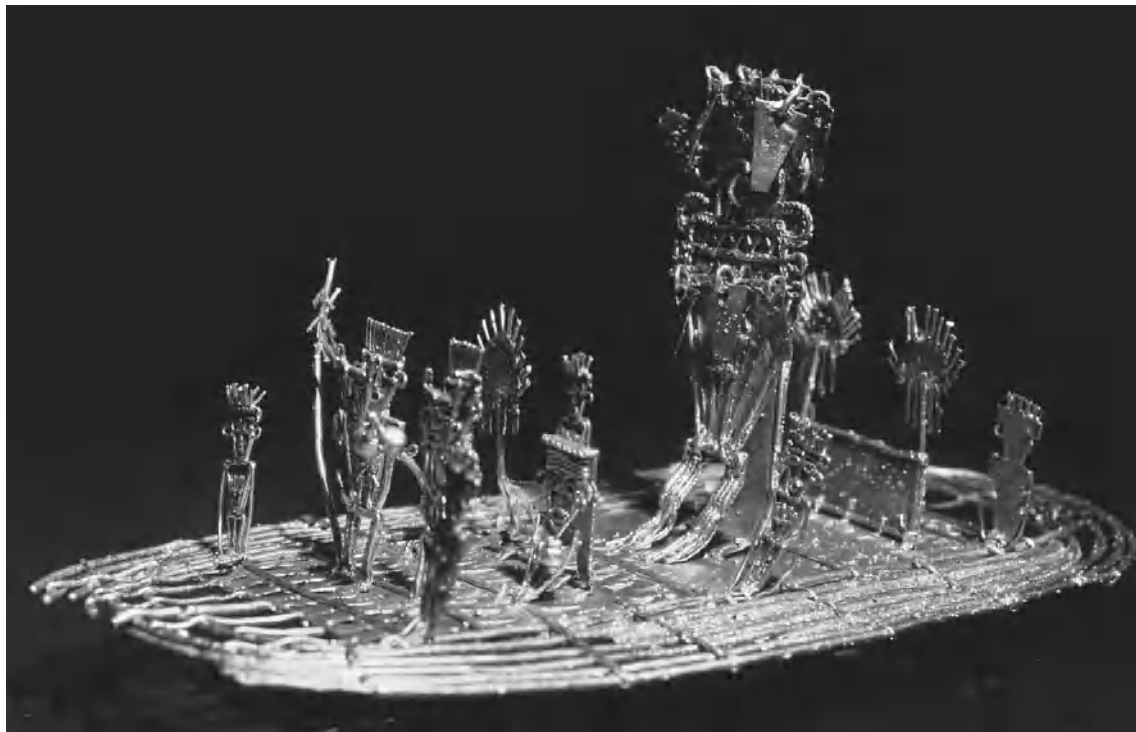
Juan Rodriguez Freyle's *El Carnero*



## El Dorado

### Myth Overview

The legend of El Dorado (pronounced el doh-RAH-doh) was about a fabulously wealthy city of gold and the king who ruled over it. The story



*This model raft made of gold symbolizes the El Dorado legend in which a wealthy South American king supposedly threw gold into a lake from a raft as an offering to the gods. The legend sparked a search for El Dorado by gold-hungry Spanish explorers to South America.* THE PICTURE DESK, INC. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

sprang up shortly after the first Spanish explorers landed in Central and South America.

Local people told tales of a rich king who plastered his body with gold dust and then dived into a sacred lake to wash it off. Afterward, he would toss gold into the lake as an offering to the gods. The Spanish called the king El Dorado—The Gilded One—because his body was gilded, or covered in gold. As the tale spread, the city he ruled came to be called El Dorado. Eventually, the meaning of the name changed to include any mythical region that contained great riches.

An early version of the El Dorado legend placed the city near Lake Guatavita, a circular lake formed in a volcanic crater not too far from modern Bogotá, Colombia. The story was based on the Muisca people who performed a ceremony similar to that in the legend. The Muisca king, covered with gold dust, boarded a raft in the lake and made

offerings to the gods. Both Spaniards and Germans searched the region in 1538 but failed to find El Dorado. They even attempted to drain the lake in an effort to locate gold; today, Lake Guatavita still bears a deep groove along its crater rim that was cut by Spanish explorers.

### **El Dorado in Context**

One of the reasons Spanish explorers aimed to conquer the Americas was to find new sources of wealth—specifically, gold. The myth of El Dorado appealed strongly to these Spanish explorers because it played into their desire to locate untold riches and claim it for their country (and themselves).

Local inhabitants usually claimed that El Dorado was somewhere far away in the hope that the Europeans would search elsewhere and leave them in peace. Men as famous as English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) spent years in South America looking for legendary golden cities such as Manoa and Omagua. Other places mentioned in stories were Paititi, a land of gold located in Paraguay, and the City of the Caesars, an invisible golden city in Chile. Several bloody expeditions were launched to find these imaginary kingdoms. One of the most tragic was led by a rebel soldier named Lope de Aguirre, a brutal madman who proclaimed himself king and was murdered by one of his followers.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The myth of El Dorado symbolized riches beyond imagining to Spanish explorers. The idea of a place where gold was so common that it could be tossed into a lake also represents the way different cultures viewed wealth, and what is considered precious. Also contained within the myth is the underlying notion that Native Americans were too uncivilized to understand or appreciate the value of their resources; this was often used as a justification for conquering native tribes throughout the Americas.

### **El Dorado in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

El Dorado was such an appealing myth to Europeans that it made its way into literature. In *Candide*, a 1759 novel by the French writer Voltaire, the main character accidentally discovers the rich city. Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Eldorado" refers to the legend, as does *Paradise Lost* by English poet John Milton. More recently, the myth of El Dorado was the basis of

the 2000 Dreamworks animated film *The Road to El Dorado*, featuring voice work by Kevin Kline and Kenneth Branagh.

Today, the term “El Dorado” is often used to refer to a mythical place of untold riches. Several cities and towns in the United States have used the name, and Cadillac has even named one of its cars the Eldorado.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Mythical places such as El Dorado usually offer something that cannot be found in the real world. For El Dorado, it is untold wealth; for the mythical Buddhist city of Shambhala (renamed Shangri-La in a 1933 British novel called *Lost Horizons*), it is perfect peace and harmony. To the Arawak Indians, the mythical land of Beemeenee offered eternal youth. If you could journey to a mythical land that offered something not available in the real world, what one thing would you like to find there? Why?



# Electra

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, there are two figures called Electra. The earlier Electra was one of seven daughters of the Titan **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs) and Pleione (pronounced PLEE-oh-nee). The seven sisters together were known as the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez) and eventually became a constellation, or group of stars, by the same name. According to the story, Electra was the mother of Dardanus (pronounced DAR-dun-us), the founder of the city of Troy. When the Greeks destroyed Troy during the Trojan War, she left her place in the constellation to avoid seeing the city’s destruction.

The second and more well-known Electra appears in plays by the Greek writers Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-luhs), Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez), and Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez). In this legend, Electra was the daughter of **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), the leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War, and his wife, Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh). While Agamemnon was

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

ee-LEK-truh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Varies

away at war, Clytemnestra took a lover named Aegisthus (pronounced ee-JIS-thuhs), and they plotted to murder Agamemnon when he returned. Clytemnestra wanted revenge on Agamemnon because he had sacrificed their daughter to the gods in return for success in the war. They also wanted to kill Orestes (pronounced aw-RES-teez), Agamemnon's young son, but his sister Electra rescued him and sent him away to live in safety.

As an adult, Orestes returned home with his cousin Pylades (pronounced PIL-uh-deez) to avenge his father's murder. Although Orestes disguised himself to enter the palace, Electra recognized him. She helped her brother and Pylades murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. It was said that Electra later married Pylades.

### Electra in Context

Matricide is the term used to refer to a person murdering his or her mother. The killing of a parent is a common theme in ancient mythology, particularly with the Greeks, even though it was considered an unthinkable act in ancient Greek society. The Greek gods themselves came to power through a chain of patricide (father-killing): the Titan **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs) killed his father **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), and **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) later killed his father Cronus and became king of the gods. There is a similar pattern of family killings in the case of Electra and her family, starting with Agamemnon's **sacrifice** of his daughter, which led to his murder by Clytemnestra, which in turn led to her murder by Electra and Orestes. Electra is motivated by a desire to avenge the death of her father rather than a quest for power, which makes an unthinkable crime justified in the eyes of the ancient Greeks. As is the case with many ancient societies, the ancient Greeks believed in an "eye for an eye" system of justice, meaning that the murder of a murderer is the right thing to do. The ancient Greeks did not view the murder Clytemnestra commits as "eye for an eye" justice because, as a woman, she should not have attacked her husband and king; her role as an avenger is further damaged because she betrayed Agamemnon by taking a lover while he was away at war.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of Electra is vengeance, or the seeking of justice for an unpunished crime. Electra and Orestes both seek vengeance for the murder of their father Agamemnon. Another



*Electra recognized her brother Orestes and his friend Pylades when they returned home in disguise to avenge the murder of their father Agamemnon. Electra helped them carry out their revenge.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

important theme is the idea that violence inevitably results in more violence. Both of these themes are emphasized even more when looking at the larger myth: Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon as an act of vengeance, because he sacrificed their daughter in order to gain favorable passage for his army during the Trojan War.

### **Electra in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Electra appears in Greek playwright Aeschylus's play the *Oresteia*, first performed in 458 BCE. Modern versions of Electra appear in the play *Mourning Becomes Electra*, written by Eugene O'Neill in 1931, and the 1909 opera *Elektra* by Richard Strauss. The Marvel comics character

## Electra Complex

In psychology, the term “Electra complex” refers to the emotional problems suffered by a woman whose unresolved love for her father harms her relationships with other men. It is based on the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), considered the “father” of modern psychiatry. It is an offshoot of Freud’s concept of the “Oedipus complex,” which theorizes that a son’s complicated feelings of attraction toward his mother lead him for a time to feel hostility toward his father. Likewise, Freud theorized, a daughter’s complicated feelings of love and attraction toward her father might cause her to feel hostility toward her mother.

Elektra, portrayed in a 2005 film of the same name by Jennifer Garner, was also loosely inspired by the mythological character.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Though few people experience a family life as violent and dysfunctional as Electra’s, many believe that children who are raised in a “broken” home—where one parent is not present or involved in the upbringing—are much more likely to have a wide range of problems later in life. Others counter that the great majority of people raised in single-parent households are as well-adjusted as those raised in homes with both parents. What do you think? Craft a persuasive argument to support your opinion; you can do research to find statistics that support your point.

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

### Pronunciation

ee-LYE-juh

### Alternate Names

Eliyahu, Elias, Ilyas (Arabic)

### Appears In

Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the Qur’an

### Lineage

Unknown

SEE ALSO Agamemnon



# Elijah

## Character Overview

In **Semitic mythology**, Elijah was one of the most important figures in the tales of early Christianity and Judaism. According to legend, he was a priest and a prophet, or a person who could communicate the word of



Yahweh (God) to humankind. He is mentioned in the Bible as one of two figures—along with Moses—who appeared and spoke to Jesus during an event called the Transfiguration, where God is said to have confirmed that Jesus was his son.

Nothing is known of Elijah's early life, but he is referred to as "the Tishbite," suggesting he came from the city of Tishbe in Gilead. According to some sources, he lived sometime during the ninth century BCE. Elijah appeared at the court of King Ahab of Israel and warned the king that his worship of the god **Baal** (pronounced BAY-uhl) would lead to a disastrous drought in his land. Elijah was then directed by Yahweh to leave Israel for two years; during that time, a drought devastated the region. Elijah then returned to Ahab and challenged him and his people to a test of the gods. An altar was built upon a mountaintop in honor of Baal, with wood and animal sacrifices placed upon it, and the followers of Baal prayed for their god to light a **fire** there. After several hours, no fire had been lit. Elijah then built a similar altar for Yahweh and doused it with water. When he offered the **sacrifice** to Yahweh, a bolt of lightning shot down from the heavens and lit the sacrifice on fire. The audience was convinced of Yahweh's power, and the drought ended.

After uniting much of Israel in its worship of Yahweh and fiercely punishing those who worshipped other gods, Elijah left the world in a most unique way. He approached the Jordan River and struck it with his cloak, which caused the waters to separate, allowing him and his companion to cross. Then a fiery chariot appeared in the sky and lifted Elijah in a whirlwind, leaving behind no trace of the man except his cloak.

## Elijah in Context

Although Elijah was a key figure in early tales of Judaism, he enjoys less popularity among Christian followers, which reflects some of the differences in belief between the two groups. One reason for this may be due to the controversy surrounding his ascension into **heaven** aboard a fiery chariot. According to some versions of the New Testament, Jesus states that no one else has ascended to heaven before him. If this statement is accepted as true, then the story of Elijah's departure from earth must be false—unless he was simply transported to a location other than heaven. It is also believed that Elijah is supposed to return to earth before the coming of the Messiah (pronounced muh-SYE-uh), or the

## Elijah

*The prophet Elijah's condemnation of Ahab's sins meant that his life was often in danger.* HIP/ART RESOURCE, NY.



savior of humankind usually believed to be the son of God. According to Jewish tradition, this has not yet happened. According to Christian tradition, which contends that Jesus was the Messiah, John the Baptist was Elijah in his returned form.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the stories of Elijah is the wrath of God—the punishment that is administered by God to those who disobey esta-

## Ascension Myths Around the World

Ascension myths are popular around the world. Many ancient cultures described death as climbing a mountain or a tree; the act of going upward, or ascending, has always been associated with death and spiritual renewal. Ancient Egyptians believed their kings would ascend into heaven after death and become reunited with the supreme deity. Korean legends and epics tell of the hero's ascension into heaven, after which he becomes divine. Christian and Jewish ascension myths adopted this worldwide motif.

Probably the earliest ascension myths revolved around the shaman's journey to other worlds through the Axis Mundi, or World Axis. This was a mythological pole running through the centers of the earth, sky, and underworld. In trance, the shaman would ascend the pole and enter the spirit world. Symbolically, ascension signifies going beyond the human condition and acquiring spiritual power.

blished religious practices and teachings. Elijah warns Ahab of God's wrath over the continued worship of Baal. This leads to a devastating drought throughout his kingdom. The power of God's wrath is also seen in the punishment of King Ahab, his wife, and their son, and in the death of soldiers that attempt to arrest Elijah after he predicts awful ends for Ahab and his family.

## Elijah in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although he is featured in the major religious books for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Elijah has been the subject of relatively little attention from later artists and writers. Elijah was depicted in a well-known sculpture by the Italian artist Lorenzetto, and his life was the basis for a grand musical work by composer Felix Mendelssohn. In some Jewish sects, Elijah is still an important presence in traditional activities. During the feast of Passover, for example, a table setting is left empty for Elijah, just in case the prophet should decide to appear. Similarly, an empty chair is provided at Jewish circumcision ceremonies so that Elijah can serve as a witness to the proceedings.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

As stated above, Elijah is also mentioned in the most important Islamic religious text, the Qur'an. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research Elijah's appearance in the Qur'an. What role does he play? How is it different from his role in the Hebrew and Christian bibles?

SEE ALSO Baal; Semitic Mythology

## Enkidu

See **Gilgamesh**.



**Nationality/Culture**  
Babylonian

**Pronunciation**  
ee-NOO-muh eh-LISH

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Ancient Babylonian  
creation mythology

## Enuma Elish

### Myth Overview

*Enuma Elish* was the creation myth of the people of Babylonia (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uh), a civilization of the ancient Near East. Written in the form of an epic poem, *Enuma Elish* gives the Babylonian account of the origin of the world. The myth is similar to the biblical story of creation in the book of Genesis.

The poem, inscribed on seven tablets, probably dates from around 1100 BCE, although earlier, unrecorded versions of it may have existed long before that time. Its title, meaning “when on high,” comes from the first line of the epic, which begins: “When on high the **heaven** had not been named/Firm ground below had not been called by name.”

*Enuma Elish* tells how the Babylonian deities were born from a goddess named **Tiamat** (pronounced TYAH-maht), a vast ocean of formless chaos or disorder, sometimes described as a dragon. **Marduk** (pronounced MAHR-dook), the protector god of the city of Babylon, defeated Tiamat and her army of monsters. He then divided her corpse into two parts, one of which became heaven and one earth. He also killed Tiamat's ally, Kingu (pronounced KIN-goo), and created human beings from Kingu's blood to serve the gods. Marduk's victory brought order to the universe.

## ***Enuma Elish* in Context**

*Enuma Elish* had political as well as religious meaning for the Babylonians. By identifying the heroic creator god as Marduk of Babylon, the myth justified the city's dominance over the region. For hundreds of years, celebrations to mark the beginning of the new year in Babylon included a recital of *Enuma Elish* in many of the city's main temples.

## **Key Themes and Symbols**

One of the main themes of *Enuma Elish* is creation. More specifically, though, the myth describes creation of the world from the body and blood of the gods. In this myth, the heavens, earth, and humans are not only created by the gods—they are created out of the material of the gods Tiamat and Kingu. This represents the presence of the divine influence in the world and its people.

Another main theme of *Enuma Elish* is conflict between two opposing forces. The creation of the world comes about due to a battle between Marduk and his supporters on one side, and Tiamat and her minions on the other side. This theme of struggle between light and darkness, good and evil, or order and disorder is common in creation myths around the world.

## ***Enuma Elish* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Although it was first written down over three thousand years ago, *Enuma Elish* was unknown to modern scholars until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was discovered on a set of tablets in the ruins of an ancient library in Iraq. Because of this, *Enuma Elish* has appeared in very few other pieces of art or literature. However, it likely inspired other similar creation myths centuries after its development.

## **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The *Enuma Elish* was discovered in Iraq, a region known for both its rich human history and its tragic conflicts. In the chaos that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, countless priceless, ancient artifacts have been looted from Iraqi museums and archaeological sites. Use library resources and the Internet to find out more about at least four major Iraqi archeological sites. Then write a paper explaining the historical

significance of the sites, their current status, and what steps, if any, should be taken to protect them.

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; Marduk; Tiamat

## Eos

See **Aurora**.



### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

AIR-ohs

### Alternate Names

Amor, Cupid (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*

### Lineage

Son of Aphrodite and Ares

## Eros

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Eros was the god of passionate or physical love. The Romans called him Amor (pronounced AY-mor) or Cupid (pronounced KYOO-pid), from the words *amor* meaning “love” and *cupido* meaning “desire.” His role in mythology changed over time, as did images of him in sculpture and other works of art. Eros became specifically identified with passionate love and fertility. The Greeks portrayed him as a handsome young man with a bow and arrow. The people he struck with his arrows were bound to fall in love. The Romans, however, had a different image of Eros, naming him “Cupid” and portraying him as a mischievous chubby winged boy or infant.

### Major Myths

Many different accounts of Eros's birth exist. One of the oldest is found in the *Theogony* (History of the Gods), written by the Greek Hesiod around 700 BCE. Hesiod claimed that Eros, like **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh) the earth goddess, was one of the offspring of the primitive emptiness called Chaos (pronounced KAY-oss). He believed Eros to be one of the first powers in the universe, representing the force of attraction and harmony that filled all of creation. The Greeks spoke of Eros as the son of **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, and **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war. In this way, the Greeks

demonstrated their view of romantic love as a force that would produce violent emotions.

In some myths, Eros makes mischief with his ability to make gods and mortals alike fall in love. His arrow forced the god **Apollo** to fall in love with Daphne, a river nymph who did not love Apollo in return. His mother Aphrodite ordered him to make a beautiful mortal woman named **Psyche** (pronounced SYE-kee) fall in love with the ugliest creature he could find because men were paying more attention to Psyche than to her. Instead, Eros himself fell in love with Psyche. The two married, but Eros kept his identity a secret from Psyche, and only visited her at night when she could not see him. Psyche's jealous sisters convinced her that her husband was actually a monster, telling her to take a lamp and a knife to bed. Psyche did so, only to learn that her husband was a beautiful god. Her mistrust caused Eros to leave her, but she eventually won him back by completing a series of difficult tasks put to her by Aphrodite.

## Eros in Context

In ancient Greece, a distinction was generally made between the types of love represented by Eros and Aphrodite. While Aphrodite was the goddess who oversaw love between men and women, Eros reigned over love between a man and a boy. To the wealthy and noble classes of the ancient Greeks, the idea of such a relationship was considered normal, healthy, and masculine. Men and boys often exercised and performed athletics in the nude together, and soldiers fighting together often formed bonds as couples. Only rarely is sexual intercourse specifically mentioned as part of the relationship, though it is sometimes suggested. The lower classes of ancient Greek society were not as involved in this practice.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Eros is an enduring symbol of romantic love. His bow and arrow symbolize how love can strike the heart of any person without warning. The blindfold he is sometimes shown to be wearing symbolizes the seeming randomness of love, sometimes resulting in the most unlikely or unexpected pairings. Eros also represents adolescence, a time when many first experience feelings of romantic love.

## Eros

*A popular image of the god Eros was as Cupid, a mischievous young boy with wings.*

RÉUNION DES MUSÉES  
NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE,  
NY.



### Eros in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Eros appears throughout literature in works such as the *Aeneid* by Virgil and the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid as well as in the poems *Endymion* and *Ode to Psyche* by the English poet John Keats (1795–1821).

In later art, the Roman conception of Cupid became the most popular depiction of Eros. He was often seen holding his bow and arrow and wearing a blindfold. Artists sometimes multiplied him into many



small winged figures. After the rise of Christianity, these little cupids became identified with baby **angels**.

In modern times, Eros—under his Roman name Cupid—has become synonymous with the Valentine’s Day holiday. The character of Cupid has appeared in many films, television shows, and commercials, including the 1998 series *Cupid* starring Jeremy Piven as a man who may or may not be the god sent to Earth in human form as punishment by **Zeus**.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Since ancient times, the onset of love has been described as something that can happen suddenly, even violently—like an arrow to the heart. Even the phrase “falling in love” carries the implication of a sudden, painful accident. Recently, scientists have begun to piece together what actually happens inside the mind and body of someone “shot by Eros.” Using the library and the Internet, find out more about the physiology of love, and write a paper summarizing what you find out.

SEE ALSO Aphrodite; Apollo; Greek Mythology; Psyche



# Eurydice

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Eurydice was a dryad, a nymph (female nature spirit) associated with trees, who became the bride of **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs), a hero legendary for his musical skills. While walking in the countryside one day not long after their wedding, Eurydice met Aristaeus (pronounced a-ris-TEE-uhs), the son of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). Aristaeus tried to seize her. Eurydice fled but was bitten by a poisonous snake and died. Overcome with grief at his wife’s death, Orpheus decided to go to the **underworld** and bring her back.

Orpheus gained entrance to the underworld by charming its guardians with his singing and playing of the lyre (a stringed instrument). The beauty of his music persuaded **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), the ruler of the underworld, to allow Eurydice to follow

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

yoo-RID-uh-see

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Pausanias's *Description of Greece*

### Lineage

Unknown

Orpheus back up to the world of the living, but Hades made one condition: Orpheus must not look back at Eurydice as they left his realm. The couple set out on the long, difficult journey back to earth. Toward the end of their trip, just as the darkness of the underworld gave way to the light of earth, Orpheus turned back to Eurydice to share his joy with her. But as he looked at her, Eurydice disappeared, returning to the underworld forever.

*Orpheus attempted to lead his dead wife Eurydice out of the underworld, but failed when he disobeyed an order not to look back at her until they were*

*back among the living.* PHOTO BY HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.



### Eurydice in Context

The myth of Eurydice and Orpheus reflects the ancient Greek emphasis on the power of music to stir the soul. Greeks used music as an integral part of their most important ceremonies, including marriages and funerals. This may explain why music is so closely associated with both love and death in Greek culture. Several musical instruments, such as the

lyre and the double-reed flute known as an *aulos*, were either invented or popularized in ancient Greece. Music was practiced by many members of the upper classes, and it accompanied events not normally associated with music, such as sports. Some groups used music as a way to worship, drawing themselves into altered states of behavior that they interpreted as closeness with the god they worshipped.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of Eurydice is the power of true love. Although Eurydice has died and passed on to the underworld, Orpheus refuses to let her go. He displays determination and cunning, but above all, he never falters in his unending love for his wife. Another important theme in this myth is the power of music. The lyre of Orpheus symbolizes this power. Orpheus uses it to gain entrance to the underworld, and his skill at playing music convinces Hades to let him take Eurydice back to the land of the living.

Another important theme in this myth is obedience to the gods. Eurydice dies when she flees from Aristaeus; though the gods do not directly cause her death, it is clear that her submission to the will of Apollo's son would have resulted in her remaining alive. Later, when Orpheus disobeys Hades by looking back at Eurydice before they reach the surface, he breaks his agreement with Hades, and Eurydice must return to the underworld.

## Eurydice in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Even though the myth of Eurydice is similar to other ancient Greek tales in which someone dies at a young age and an attempt is made to bring him or her back from the underworld, it has retained a great deal of popularity through the centuries. Renaissance painters such as Peter Paul Rubens and Titian created depictions of Eurydice and Orpheus, and several operas were written about the pair during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The most famous of these is Jacques Offenbach's 1858 burlesque operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which includes one piece known popularly as the music played during the French dance called the "Can Can."

More recently, the story of Eurydice and Orpheus was adapted for the 1959 film *Black Orpheus* by Marcel Camus. The 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules* also used elements of the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, instead having Hercules travel to the underworld in an attempt to save his love, Megara. Both Eurydice and Orpheus also appear in *The Sandman*, a comic series written by Neil Gaiman.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the myth, Eurydice dies and travels to the underworld. Orpheus later rescues her and almost succeeds in bringing her back to the land of the living. Some people who have experienced severe medical trauma claim to have visited or seen the realm of the dead before being brought back to life by doctors. These are typically known as "near-death experiences." Research the topic of near-death experiences and express your opinion on the subject. Do you think some people have actually journeyed to the **afterlife**? What evidence exists that supports this? Is there any evidence that something else might be behind these experiences?

**SEE ALSO** Greek Mythology; Hades; Orpheus; Underworld



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# F



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Greek

## Pronunciation

FAYTS

## Alternate Names

Moirae, Parcae (Roman)

## Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *Iliad*

## Lineage

Daughters of Zeus and Themis



## Fates, The

### Character Overview

The Fates were three female goddesses who shaped people's lives. In particular, they determined how long a man or woman would live. Although a number of cultures held the notion of three goddesses who influenced human destiny, the Fates were most closely identified with **Greek mythology**. The parentage of the Fates is something of a mystery. Hesiod described them as daughters of Nyx (pronounced NIKS), the goddess of night, but he also said that they were the children of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the chief of the gods, and Themis (pronounced THEEM-is), the goddess of justice.

The Greek image of the Fates developed over time. The poet Homer, credited with composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, spoke of Fate as a single force, perhaps simply the will of the gods. Another poet, Hesiod, portrayed the Fates as three old women. They were called the Keres (pronounced KARE-ays), which means “those who cut off” or the Moirai (pronounced MOY-rye), “those who allot.” They may have originated as goddesses who were present at the birth of each child to determine the course of the child's future life.

Hesiod called the Fates Clotho (pronounced KLO-thoh, “the spinner”), Lachesis (pronounced LAK-uh-sis; “the allotter”), and Atropos (pronounced AY-truh-pos; “the unavoidable”). In time, the name Clotho,



*The three Fates.* ALINARI/ART RESOURCE, NY.

with its reference to spinning thread, became the basis for images of the three Fates as controlling the thread of each person's life. Clotho spun the thread, Lachesis measured it out, and Atropos cut it with a pair of shears to end the life span. Literary and artistic works often portray the Fates performing these tasks.

The Romans called the Fates *Parcae* (pronounced PAR-see), “those who bring forth the child.” Their names were *Nona* (pronounced NOH-nuh), *Decuma* (pronounced DEK-yoo-muh), and *Morta* (pronounced MOR-tuh). *Nona* and *Decuma* were originally goddesses of childbirth, but the Romans adopted the Greek concept of the three weavers of Fate and added a third goddess to complete the triad. In addition, they sometimes referred to fate or destiny as a single goddess known as *Fortuna* (for-TOO-nuh).

## Goddesses Three

A triad of goddesses linked with human destiny appears in various forms in mythology. In addition to the Moirai, the Greeks recognized a triad of goddesses called the Horae (pronounced HOR-ee), who were associated with the goddess Aphrodite. Their names were Eunomia (pronounced yoo-NOH-mee-uh; “order”), Dike (pronounced DYE-kee; “destiny”), and Eirene (pronounced eye-REEN-ee; “peace”). The Norse called their three Fates the Norns: Urth, “the past”; Verthandi (pronounced WURT-hand-ee), “the present”; and Skuld (pronounced SKOOLD), “the future.” Sometimes the Norns were referred to as the Weird Sisters, from the Norse word *wyrd*, meaning “fate.” The Celts had a triad of war goddesses, collectively known as the Morrigan (mor-REE-gan), who determined the fate of soldiers in battle. The image of a triple goddess may be linked to very ancient worship of a moon goddess in three forms: a maiden (the new moon), a mature woman (the full moon), and a crone (the old moon).

## Major Myths

The Fates had power over Zeus and the gods, and many ancient authors, including the Roman poet Virgil, stressed that even the king of the gods had to accept the decisions of the Fates. Occasionally, however, fate could be changed through clever action. According to one myth, **Apollo** (uh-POL-oh) tricked the Fates into letting his friend Admetus (ad-MEE-tuhs) live beyond his assigned lifetime. Apollo got the Fates drunk, and they agreed to accept the death of a substitute in place of Admetus.

## The Fates in Context

The ancient Greeks believed that human lives were ruled by destiny—the idea that a person’s path in life has already been decided by the gods, and regardless of whatever action the person might take, the path will not change. Destiny can be seen as a way of explaining why things happen the way they do, despite a person’s best efforts to bring about a different outcome. The counterpoint to the concept of destiny is the idea of free will, which holds that people have the power to choose their own paths in life. Whether a person’s life is predetermined or under his own control has been the subject of debate for thousands of years.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The threads of the loom controlled by the Fates represent the lives of all mortals, and suggest the fragile nature of a person's life. The threads also symbolize how the lives of humans are interwoven.

## The Fates in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In the realm of art and literature, the Fates are somewhat overshadowed by the similar Norse goddesses known as the *Weird Sisters*. These Norse goddesses appear most notably in William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* and Richard Wagner's opera *Twilight of the Gods*. In recent years, the Fates have appeared in numerous video games and Japanese comics. A modernized version of the Fates appeared in the 1994 Stephen King novel *Insomnia*, and the Fates also appeared in the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules*. More recently, the Fates appeared in Rick Riordan's 2005 novel *The Lightning Thief*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The ancient Greeks believed in the power of the Fates to control human destiny. Many people still believe that things happen because of "fate." Others argue that if every person left their futures up to fate, no one would ever strive to accomplish anything unless they were assured to be successful. Do you think the path of humans is largely beyond their individual control, based instead on the environment and conditions in which they live? Or do you think any person is capable of achieving any goal, regardless of their circumstances? Is it possible to subscribe to both these beliefs, to a certain degree?

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

FEN-reer

### Alternate Names

Fenris, Vanargand

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Loki and Angrboda



# Fenrir

## Character Overview

Fenrir, a monstrous wolf, was one of three terrible children of the Norse trickster god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) and the giantess Angrboda (pronounced AHNG-gur-boh-duh). Their other children—Jormungand



## Wolves of Legend

Wolves feature prominently in legends from around the world. Sometimes they are seen as monsters, sometimes as nobility. Since, until recently, wolves were a very real threat to humans in Europe, there are many folktales and children's stories involving wolves, including "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." The fear of wolves also sparked a belief in werewolves—creatures that are human at times, but under certain conditions become ferocious wolves—throughout much of Europe, especially during the Middle Ages.

In Roman mythology, however, it is a wolf who makes Roman civilization possible. The twin orphan babies Romulus and Remus were, according to legend, nursed by a she-wolf. Romulus went on to found Rome.

(pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd), a giant serpent, and **Hel**, the goddess of the dead—were thrown out of Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods, by **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). But Odin felt that the gods should look after Fenrir.

In time, Fenrir grew incredibly large, and only Odin's son **Tyr** (pronounced TEER) was brave enough to approach and feed him. The gods finally decided to chain the beast, but Fenrir broke the two huge chains they made to restrain him. Asked by the gods to create something that would hold Fenrir, the dwarves produced a silky ribbon called Gleipnir (pronounced GLAYP-nir). To make it, they used the sound of a cat moving, the beard of a woman, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spit of a bird.

The gods took Fenrir to an isolated island and challenged him to prove that he was stronger than Gleipnir. Because the ribbon seemed so weak, Fenrir suspected it was magical. He allowed himself to be bound with it only after Tyr agreed to put his hand in Fenrir's mouth. When Fenrir found that he could not break Gleipnir, he bit off Tyr's hand. The gods put a sword in Fenrir's open mouth, with the tip of the blade against the roof, to quiet him. Saliva ran from his howling open mouth, and formed a river called Van Hope.

According to legend, Fenrir will be released just before **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the final battle in which the gods of

Asgard will be killed. It is written that Fenrir will swallow Odin during the battle and then be killed by Odin's son.

### **Fenrir in Context**

The Eurasian wolf is the most commonly found wolf in Scandinavia, though it is much rarer in western Europe. They are known for hunting strategically in packs and swallowing large amounts of prey, which they then regurgitate for others after returning to the den. This is similar to Fenrir swallowing the god Odin during Ragnarok. To the Norse, who relied on hunting for much of their food, wolves were respected hunters, feared predators, and fierce competitors for available resources. It makes sense that a giant wolf would be seen as one of the greatest enemies of the gods.

Wolves have long been viewed as a threat throughout Europe and Asia, and have been documented as the cause of many human deaths over the centuries. In areas such as England and Scotland wolves were completely eliminated through bounties and other programs initiated by royal leaders. Some Scandinavian governments still view wolves as a threat to human and livestock safety, even though wolf populations have dwindled and the animals are protected under the laws of the European Union.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

In **Norse mythology**, Fenrir represents savagery that ultimately cannot be controlled, even by the gods. Although they subdue Fenrir with Gleipnir, the wolf will eventually grow large enough to break his bonds and kill Odin. The wolf is widely recognized as a symbol of wild ferocity. Fenrir also represents fate, or the unfolding of events that have already been foretold. The gods attempt to prevent Fenrir's devastation by binding him, but the creature is destined to continue growing and eventually break free despite all efforts to keep him bound. Specifically, Fenrir symbolizes the fate of the Norse gods, who are destined to fall during Ragnarok.

### **Fenrir in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The image of Fenrir as a giant wolf has inspired northern European artists and writers for centuries. Fenrir has served as inspiration for many similar characters, including Fenris Ulf (also known as Maugrim) from



*The monstrous wolf Fenrir bit off the hand of Tyr when the gods tricked him into being bound with magic rope.*

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the 1950 C. S. Lewis novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The legend of Fenrir inspired the character of Fenrir Greyback in the *Harry Potter* series by novelist J. K. Rowling.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

K. A. Applegate's *Everworld* series, first published in 1999, tells of four high school students who follow a mysterious girl into a realm inhabited by mythological characters and creatures from all the legends of the

world. In the first book in the series, *The Search for Senna*, the mythical giant wolf Fenrir breaks through to our world and kidnaps Senna for his father, Loki. This sends the rest of the group on a quest through strange and dangerous lands to find and rescue her. The *Everworld* series consists of twelve volumes, and was written by the same author as the popular *Animorphs* series.

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Norse Mythology; Ragnarok; Tyr



### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

### Pronunciation

FIN

### Alternate Names

Finn MacCumhail, Finn MacCool

### Appears In

The Fenian Cycle

### Lineage

Son of Cumhail

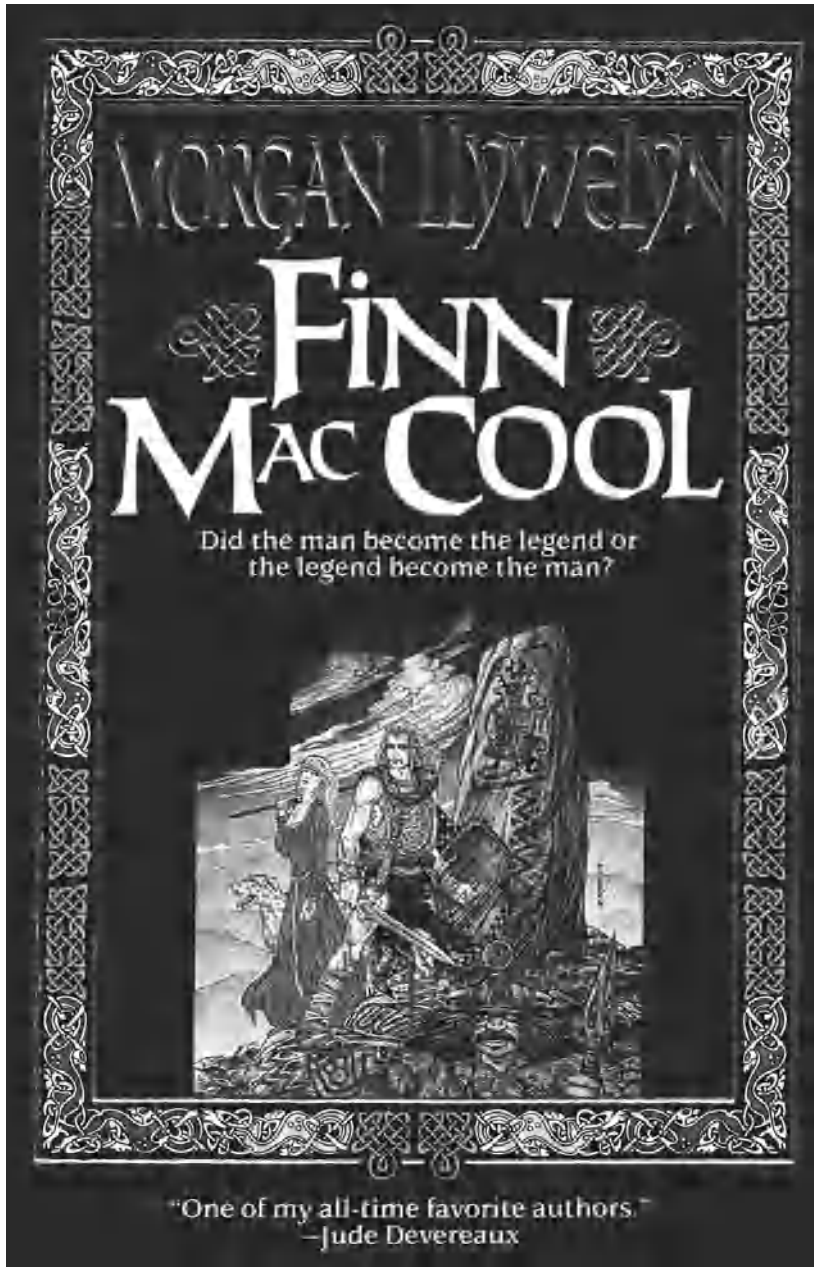
## Finn

### Character Overview

Finn, also known as Finn MacCumhail or Finn MacCool, is the hero of a series of Irish legends known as the Fionn (or Fenian) Cycle. Finn was the son of Cumhail, who led a band of warriors called the Fianna (pronounced FEE-uh-nuh). Members of this group were chosen for their bravery and strength and took an oath to fight for the king and defend Ireland from attack. In time, Finn became the leader of the Fianna and was the greatest warrior of all.

Finn was born with the name Deimne, but earned the nickname Finn (meaning “fair”) when his hair turned white at a young age. As a boy, Finn became the pupil of a druid, a Celtic priest. The druid had been told that he would gain all the world’s knowledge if he caught and ate a certain salmon. He caught the fish and instructed Finn to cook but not to eat it. While preparing the fish, Finn touched it and burned his thumb. He sucked the thumb to ease the pain and received the knowledge that was meant for the druid. Later, he found he could suck on his thumb to gain additional insight or knowledge whenever he needed it.

Finn later traveled to Tara, the court of the Irish king, Cormac MacArt. Every year a fire-breathing demon came and destroyed Tara. Finn managed to kill the demon and save the hall. As a reward, the king named Finn the leader of the Fianna. Under his leadership, the Fianna performed many amazing deeds, such as traveling to the **underworld** (land of the dead) and defeating supernatural enemies.



*The 1994 novel Finn MacCool is a modern retelling of the legend of the Irish hero Finn.* FITZPATRICK, JIM, ILLUSTRATOR. FROM A COVER OF *FINN MACCOOL* BY MORGAN LLYWELYN. TOR BOOKS, 1995. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

Always a select group, the Fianna became even more exclusive when Finn invented tests of strength and courage for all those who wanted to join.

Several legends concern Finn's death. However, some stories say he is not dead at all, but sleeping in a cave or a hollow tree, and that he will awaken when Ireland once again needs his help.

### **Finn in Context**

For the Irish people, an important element of the myth of Finn was the idea of the dormant or sleeping leader. This idea suggested that Finn was immortal, or able to live forever, which only increased his status as a hero. It also provided comfort that the Irish would have a defender to lead them in a future time of need.

Although Ireland is now a prosperous country, it was marked by grinding poverty for centuries. The Irish were also repressed, often brutally, by the British government, which controlled all of Ireland starting in the 1200s. The Irish rose up against the British many times, and at last began to achieve some success in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, an organization named the Fenian Brotherhood was created in the United States. Named after the Fianna, the organization aimed to support Irish citizens in their efforts to re-establish Ireland as an independent republic free of England's control. Legendary characters like Finn served as a unifying force for the Irish culture. The Irish were able to achieve independence for most of Ireland by 1937.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

In **Celtic mythology**, Finn represents the courage and cleverness of the Irish people. His white hair symbolizes wisdom, which he achieved at a very young age. This knowledge is also symbolized by the salmon he cooks, of which he accidentally consumes a small portion. In Celtic mythology, fish, and salmon in particular, are associated with knowledge. Finn may also represent eternal vigilance or guardianship, always ready when needed to protect Ireland.

### **Finn in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Finn appears in several literary works, especially those of Irish and Scottish writers. He appears throughout James Joyce's 1939 novel *Finnegan's Wake*, and is the subject of James MacPherson's 1761 epic poem *Fingal*, which the author claimed was based on an existing Scottish

work (though many scholars doubt this). In 1994, historical fantasy author Morgan Llewellyn (also spelled Llywelyn) created a retelling of the stories of the Fenian Cycle in her novel *Finn MacCool*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Finn is viewed by many Irish citizens as a mythical protector of Ireland. Modern comic book superheroes are often viewed the same way by the fictional cities they inhabit. Superman, for example, is viewed by the residents of Metropolis as their guardian against crime. Can you think of other examples? What are the qualities that these protectors have in common?

SEE ALSO Celtic Mythology



## Finnish Mythology

### Finnish Mythology in Context

Finnish mythology, like that of many other cultures, tells the stories of gods and legendary **heroes**. Most of the myths date from pre-Christian times and were passed from generation to generation by storytellers. A work called the *Kalevala* (pronounced kah-luh-VAH-luh), which the Finnish people consider their national epic, contains many of the legends. Compiled by Finnish scholar Elias Lönnrot in the early 1800s, the *Kalevala* is based on traditional poems and songs that Lönnrot collected over a long period of time.

The myths of the *Kalevala* reflect several unique aspects of Finnish culture. First, they suggest a long-standing conflict with a neighboring cultural group, referred to in the epic as Pohjola. Second, the tales of the *Kalevala* focus on characters who exhibit many human characteristics, as opposed to just the heroic ideals of so many other mythologies. The stories also emphasize violence and the search for love. This seems to suggest a lack of cultural unity among early groups, with the stories of the *Kalevala* perhaps documenting real conflicts between groups and even building on actual events of the ancient past. The doomed search for love may reflect the uneasy relationship between cultural groups, with

individuals attempting to marry outside their group but finding themselves blocked by conflicts between groups.

## Core Deities and Characters

The word *Kalevala*, which means “land of the descendants of Kaleva,” is an imaginary region associated with Finland. The epic’s fifty poems or songs—also known as cantos or runes—recount the stories of various legendary heroes and of gods and goddesses and describe mythical events such as the creation of the world.

Vainamoinen (pronounced vye-nuh-MOY-nen), one of the heroes in the *Kalevala*, is a wise old seer who can see the future and work magic through the songs that he sings. His mother is Ilmatar (pronounced EEL-mah-tar), the virgin spirit of air, who brought about creation. Another great hero of the epic, Lemminkainen (pronounced LEM-in-kye-nen), appears as a handsome, carefree, and romantic adventurer.

Vainamoinen and Lemminkainen have certain experiences and goals in common. In their adventures, both men meet Louhi (pronounced LOH-hee), the evil mistress of Pohjola (the Northland), and both of them seek to wed Louhi’s daughter, the beautiful Maiden of Pohjola. A third suitor for the maiden’s hand, Ilmarinen (EEL-mah-ree-nen), is a blacksmith who constructs a *sampo*, a mysterious object like a mill that can produce prosperity for its owner.

A number of other figures become involved with these leading characters. Kuura, another hero, joins Lemminkainen on his journey to Pohjola. Joukahainen (pronounced YOH-kuh-hye-nen), an evil youth, challenges Vainamoinen to a singing contest. His sister Aino (pronounced EYE-noh), who is offered in marriage to Vainamoinen, drowns herself rather than wed the aged hero. Another character, Kullervo (pronounced KOO-ler-vaw), commits suicide after unknowingly raping his own sister. Marjatta (pronounced MAR-yah-tah), the last major character introduced in the *Kalevala*, is a virgin who gives birth to a king.

## Major Myths

The *Kalevala* begins with the story of Ilmatar, who descends from the heavens to the sea, where she is tossed about for seven hundred years. During that time, a seabird lays eggs on her knee. When Ilmatar moves, the eggs break, and the pieces form the physical world and the **sun** and



the moon. She then has a son, Vainamoinen, who begins life as a wise old man.

Soon after Vainamoinen's birth, the evil Joukahainen challenges him to a singing contest after hearing that the hero is noted for his magic songs. Vainamoinen accepts the challenge and wins the contest, causing Joukahainen to sink into a swamp. Fearing that he will drown, Joukahainen offers Vainamoinen his sister Aino in exchange for his rescue.

Vainamoinen plans to marry Aino, and her parents encourage the match. But she refuses to wed the old man. When her mother tries to persuade her to change her mind, Aino goes to the sea and drowns herself. Vainamoinen follows the girl and finds her in the form of a fish. He catches the fish, but she slips back into the water and escapes.

Unhappy that he has lost Aino, Vainamoinen sets off for Pohjola, the Northland, in search of another wife. Along the way Joukahainen, still bitter over losing the singing contest, shoots at the hero but only hits his horse. Vainamoinen falls into the sea and escapes. He finally arrives at Pohjola, where the evil Louhi promises him her daughter, the Maiden of Pohjola, if he will build a magic *sampo* for her. Unable to do this by himself, Vainamoinen seeks help from Ilmarinen, the blacksmith. However, after Ilmarinen completes the *sampo*, Louhi gives her daughter to him instead of to Vainamoinen.

**The Adventures of Lemminkainen** The next section of the *Kalevala* recounts the adventures of the hero Lemminkainen, who marries Kyllikki (pronounced KYOO-luh-kee), a woman from the island of Saari. But she is unfaithful to him, and he leaves her and goes to Pohjola to find a new wife. When he reaches his destination, Louhi promises him her daughter if he can complete several tasks. While Lemminkainen is working on the last task, he is killed by a blind cattle herder whom he has insulted. The herder

*This painting, The Curse of Kullervo, by Akseli Gallén-Kallela, shows the Finnish character Kullervo reacting in anger to the discovery that the Maiden of Pohjola put a stone in his bread.* © BIBLIOTHEQUE DES ARTS DECORATIFS, PARIS, FRANCE/ARCHIVES CHARMET/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



## Gods and Spirits

Finnish mythology includes many gods and spirits not mentioned in the *Kalevala*. One of the most important gods was Ukko, the god of thunder, whose rainfall helped nourish crops. The god of the forest was Tapio (pronounced TAH-pee-oh), sometimes depicted as a fierce creature, part human and part tree. Many spirits with very changeable natures also lived in the forest. Hunters used to make offerings to these spirits and avoided making loud noises so as not to anger them.

cuts the hero's body into many pieces, but Lemminkainen's mother manages to collect the pieces and restore him to life with magic spells.

Meanwhile, Louhi gives her daughter to Ilmarinen as a bride. Angry at not being invited to the wedding, Lemminkainen storms Louhi's castle, kills her husband, and then returns home. Discovering that his house has been burned by raiders from Pohjola, Lemminkainen returns there with his companion Kuura. They try to destroy the land but are defeated.

**The Tragedy of Kullervo** The *Kalevala* next tells the tragic tale of Kullervo, who is sent by his family to the home of Ilmarinen and the Maiden of Pohjola. The Maiden takes a strong dislike to the youth, and one day she puts a stone in his bread. In revenge, Kullervo kills the Maiden and flees. After wandering for some time, he finds his family and works for them. On his way home one day, he meets a woman and rapes her. Later he finds out that the woman is his sister. When the sister discovers that she has been raped by her own brother, she throws herself into a river and drowns. Kullervo also kills himself because of what he has done.

**Battle for the Sampo** In the next section of the epic, the three heroes—Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkainen—travel together to Pohjola to steal the magic *sampo*, which has brought great riches to the evil Louhi. They succeed in stealing the mysterious object, but Louhi and her forces pursue them. A great battle takes place, during which the *sampo* is lost in the sea. Furious at the loss, Louhi tries to destroy Vainamoinen and his land. In the end, however, Vainamoinen emerges victorious.

## Major Characters of the *Kalevala*

**Aino:** Joukahainen's sister, drowns herself after being offered in marriage to Vainamoinen.

**Ilmarinen:** blacksmith, makes a magical object called a *sampo* that brings prosperity to its owner.

**Ilmatar:** virgin spirit of the air and creator goddess.

**Joukahainen:** evil youth, challenges Vainamoinen to a singing contest.

**Kuura:** hero, joins Lemminkainen on his journey to Pohjola.

**Lemminkainen:** hero, handsome adventurer.

**Louhi:** evil woman and mother of the Maiden of Pohjola.

**Maiden of Pohjola:** beautiful young woman sought in marriage by Ilmarinen, Lemminkainen, and Vainamoinen.

**Vainamoinen:** hero, wise old seer who sings magical songs.

**A Virgin Birth** The last story of the *Kalevala* deals with the virgin Marjatta and the birth of her son. As the time approaches for the boy to be baptized, Vainamoinen arrives to investigate. He decides that the boy must be put to death, but the boy scolds him severely. Later the boy is baptized and becomes king. An angry Vainamoinen leaves the land. Most of the characters and tales in the *Kalevala* reflect pre-Christian ideas, but the story of Marjatta and of Vainamoinen's flight suggests a transition from non-Christian to Christian beliefs since it is similar to the virgin birth of Jesus.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One recurring theme in the *Kalevala* is revenge. Joukahainen tries to kill Vainamoinen after losing a singing contest against him. Kullervo kills the Maiden of Pohjola after she puts a stone in his bread. Lemminkainen is killed as an act of revenge by a man he insulted, though he is later brought back to life. Later, Lemminkainen kills Louhi's husband after she fails to invite him to her daughter's wedding. Lemminkainen also seeks revenge against raiders from Pohjola after they burn down his house.

Another recurring theme in the *Kalevala* is unfortunate romantic entanglement. Vainamoinen wishes to marry Aino, but she refuses

because he appears to be an old man; she decides to drown herself rather than marry him. Lemminkainen's first wife, Kyllikki, is unfaithful to him so he leaves her. Three men—Vainamoinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkainen—all seek the hand of Louhi's daughter, and Louhi promises her to all of them. In the end, Ilmarinen claims her. And in perhaps the darkest tale, Kullervo rapes a woman who he later discovers is his own sister. Both end up committing suicide.

### **Finnish Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The *Kalevala* helped create a national identity for the Finnish people by presenting a common mythology filled with familiar heroes and gods. The work also inspired many literary and artistic works by Finns and others.

Among the most famous individuals to make use of the *Kalevala* was Finnish composer Jean Sibelius, who wrote a number of symphonies and other musical works based on its characters and tales. Another Finnish composer, Robert Kajanus, also created several pieces of music inspired by the *Kalevala*, and Finnish artist Akseli Gallén-Kallela painted many works based on its stories. The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used the rhythmic patterns of the *Kalevala* as the basis for his poem *The Song of Hiawatha*. Some of the scenes and events in the poem are modeled after the Finnish work as well.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

*The Songs of Power: A Finnish Tale of Magic, Retold from the Kalevala* by Aaron Shepard (2007) offers a retelling of the *Kalevala* aimed at young readers. Shepard is the author of several books based on mythological tales from around the world.



## **Fire**

### **Theme Overview**

In ancient times, people considered fire one of the basic elements of the universe, along with water, air, and earth. Fire can be a friendly,

comforting thing, a source of heat and light, as anyone who has ever sat by a campfire in the dark of night knows. Yet fire can also be dangerous and deadly, racing and leaping like a living thing to consume all in its path. In mythology, fire appears both as a creative, cleansing force and as a destructive, punishing one, although positive aspects of fire generally outweigh negative ones.

## Major Myths

Agni (pronounced AG-nee), the god of fire in Hindu mythology, represents the essential energy of life in the universe. He consumes things, but only so that other things can live. Fiery horses pull Agni's chariot, and he carries a flaming spear. Agni created the **sun** and the stars, and his powers are great. He can make worshippers immortal, or able to live forever, and can purify the souls of the dead from sin. One ancient myth about Agni says that he consumed so many offerings from his worshippers that he was tired. To regain his strength, he had to burn an entire forest with all its inhabitants.

**Chinese mythology** includes stories of Hui Lu (pronounced hwee-LOO), a magician and fire god who kept one hundred firebirds in a gourd. By setting them loose, he could start a fire across the whole country. There was also a hierarchy—or an ordered ranking—of gods in charge of fire. At its head was Lo Hsüan (pronounced loh-SWAHN), whose cloak, hair, and beard were red. Flames spurted from his horse's nostrils. He was not unconquerable, however. Once when he attacked a city with swords of fire, a princess appeared in the sky and quenched his flames with her cloak of mist and dew.

The bringers of fire are legendary **heroes** in many traditions. **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs) of **Greek mythology**, one of the most famous fire-bringers, stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. The gods punished him severely for his crime. Similar figures appear in the tales of other cultures.

Some American Indian tribes believed that long ago some evil being hid fire so that people could not benefit from it. A hero had to recover it and make it available to human beings. In many versions of the story, Coyote steals fire for people, but sometimes a wolf, woodpecker, or other animal does so. According to the Navajo, Coyote tricked two monsters that guarded the flames on Fire Mountain. Then he lit a bundle of sticks tied to his tail and ran down the mountain to deliver the fire to his people.

African traditions also say that animals gave fire to humans. According to the myths of the San of South Africa, Ostrich guarded fire under his wing until a praying mantis stole it. Mantis tricked Ostrich into spreading his wings and made off with the fire. The fire destroyed Mantis, but from the ashes came two new Mantises.

Indians of the Amazon River basin in Brazil say that a jaguar rescued a boy and took him to its cave. There the boy watched the jaguar cooking food over a fire. The boy stole a hot coal from the fire and took it to his people, who then learned to cook.

Legends in the Caroline Islands of the Pacific link fire to Olofat, a mythical trickster hero who was the son of the sky god and a mortal woman. As a youth, Olofat forced his way into **heaven** to see his father. Later Olofat gave fire to human beings by allowing a bird to fly down to earth with fire in its beak. The Admiralty Islanders of the Pacific Ocean have a myth in which a snake asks his human children to cook some fish. The children simply heat the fish in the sun and eat it raw, so the snake gives them fire and teaches them to use it to cook their food.

A myth from Assam, in northern India, says that after losing a battle with Water, Fire hid in a bamboo stalk. Grasshopper saw it and told Monkey, who figured out how to use Fire. But a man saw Monkey and decided that he should have Fire, so he stole it from Monkey. Like many stories, this myth portrays ownership of fire as a human right. Even partial control over such a powerful force of nature is one of the things that gives human society its identity.

## Fire in Context

People in all parts of the world tell myths and legends about fire. Numerous stories explain how people first acquired fire, either through their own daring or as a gift from an animal, god, or hero. The ability to make and control fire—which is necessary for cooking, making pottery and glass, and metalworking—sets people apart from other living things.

Because fire warms and gives off light like the sun, it often represents the sun or a sun god in mythology. In some tales, it is linked with the idea of the hearth, the center of a household. Fire can also be a symbol of new life, as in the case of the **phoenix** (pronounced FEE-niks), the mythical bird that is periodically destroyed by flames to rise reborn from its own ashes.

Fire's energy is not always a good thing. Flames can bring punishment and suffering as in the Christian image of **hell** as a place



*Women known as “Vestal Virgins” attended to the sacred fire of Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth.*

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GIRAUDON/THE BRIDGEMAN  
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of fiery torment. Some myths about the end of the world predict that the world will end in fire—but it may be a purifying, cleansing fire that will allow the birth of a fresh new world.

Because fire can be treacherous and destructive, mythical figures associated with it may be **tricksters**, not always to be trusted. The Norse god **Loki**'s (pronounced LOH-kee) shifty and malicious character may have been based on the characteristics of a forest fire. Another deity, or god, associated with fire is the Greek **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), god of metalworking, who is usually portrayed as deformed and sullen.

## Fighting Sorcery with Fire

In Europe and America, individuals accused of being witches were once burned at the stake. Many cultures have held the belief that fire destroys sorcery, or black magic. The Assyrians of ancient Mesopotamia called upon fire to undo the effects of evil witchcraft aimed at them. They used these words:

*Boil, boil, burn, burn! . . . As this goat's skin is torn asunder and cast into the fire, and as the blaze devours it . . . may the curse, the spell, the pain, the torment, the sickness, the sin, the misdeed, the crime, the suffering, that oppress my body, be torn asunder like this goat's skin! May the blaze consume them today.*

In many cultures, people practice rituals or ceremonies related to fire. These rituals are often based on myths and legends about fire or fire gods. In ancient Rome, a sacred flame associated with the goddess Vesta (pronounced VESS-tuh) represented national well-being. Women called the Vestal Virgins had the holy duty of keeping that flame alive. The Aztecs of ancient Mexico believed that the fire god Huehuetotl (pronounced hway-hway-tay-OH-tul) kept earth and heaven in place. At the end of each cycle of 52 years, they extinguished all fires, and Huehuetotl's priests lit a new flame for the people to use. In northern Europe, which has long, dark, cold winters, fire was especially honored. Pre-Christian fire festivals such as lighting bonfires on May 1 have continued into modern times in European communities.

Many cultures have practiced cremation, the burning of the dead. In cremation, fire represents purification, a clean and wholesome end to earthly life. The Pima people of the southwestern United States say that fire appeared in the world to solve the problem of how people should dispose of the dead.

## Fire in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Fire is a common element in ancient mythical art and literature. It is frequently associated with **dragons** and the **underworld**. Although fire in modern times may not be viewed with as much supernatural wonder as it once was, there are some contemporary examples of fire as a



mythological force. In the 1967 animated Disney adaptation of *The Jungle Book*, King Louie the orangutan abducts the human boy Mowgli and tries to get the boy to teach him the secret of how to make fire.

Russian composer Igor Stravinsky composed the score for a 1910 ballet called *Firebird*, which was based on a Russian legend about a magical bird of flame. Another “firebird”—a phoenix—appears as the wizard Albus Dumbledore’s companion in the Harry Potter novels written by J. K. Rowling. Prometheus, the fire-stealer, has fascinated artists and writers for centuries. Romantic poets Johann von Goethe, Lord Byron, and Percy Shelley all wrote poems about him in which Prometheus is unrepentant for his action. Prometheus appears as the subject of numerous paintings and recently became the inspiration for a groundbreaking Web-based artwork called *Prometheus Bound* by Tim Rollins and the Kids of Survival (<http://www.diacenter.org/kos/home.html>). The Web site contains readings, modern translations, and meditations on the myth of Prometheus.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Some ancient cultures believed that cremating the dead would purify their souls so they could pass on to the next world. Other cultures such as the ancient Egyptians believed that a dead person needed his or her body preserved so that it could transport the soul to the **afterlife**. In many modern cultures, burial is the most common way to handle the dead. What do you think this says about modern beliefs about the afterlife? Do modern cultures show a preference for preserving or purifying the dead? How?

SEE ALSO Floods; Hell; Hephaestus; Loki; Phoenix; Prometheus



## Firebird

### Myth Overview

The firebird is a magical bird with golden feathers and crystal eyes that appears in many Russian folk stories. Several of the tales involve young Prince Ivan, son of the tsar, or leader of Russia.

### Nationality/Culture

Russian

### Alternate Names

Zhar-ptitsa (Russian)

### Appears In

Russian folktales

In one story, the firebird stole magical golden apples from the tsar's garden. The tsar promised his kingdom to the son who could catch the firebird. The youngest son, Ivan, found a magic gray wolf, which helped him capture the bird. While Ivan and the wolf were on their journey, they met a beautiful princess and a horse with a golden mane. When Ivan's two jealous brothers saw them, they killed Ivan and took the horse and princess for themselves. The wolf found Ivan and brought him back to life just in time to stop Ivan's older brother from marrying the princess. When their father heard the full story, he imprisoned his two evil sons and allowed Ivan to marry the princess.

In another tale, Ivan captured the firebird in a castle garden but set it free in exchange for a magic feather from the firebird. Thirteen princesses came out of the castle and told Ivan that the owner was an evil magician who turned people into stone. But Ivan, who fell in love with one of the princesses, ignored the warning and decided to face the magician and his demons. The magic feather protected Ivan, and the firebird cast a spell on the demons. When the bird showed the prince an egg that contained the magician's soul, Ivan broke the egg, killing the magician and freeing the princesses.

### **The Firebird in Context**

Although the main character of many tales about the firebird is a young prince, the tales themselves also offer an appealing message to more common people. In some tales, the firebird steals from the rich—as with the golden apples from the tsar's garden—and gives those riches to the peasants. The firebird is also believed to drop pearls from its beak when passing over peasant villages, to give the poor something to trade for food and other necessities. In this way, the firebird is a folk hero for the Russian people.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

In Russian folklore, the firebird represents a treasure that is rare and difficult to possess. This is emphasized by descriptions of the bird, which often refer to its golden or glowing feathers and eyes that resemble jewels. The fact that just one of its feathers contains magic suggests the great power of the bird. The color gold is used repeatedly in the tales of the firebird to indicate not only material riches, but also magical power.

## The Firebird in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Folktales about the firebird inspired Russian composer Igor Stravinsky to write a ballet called *The Firebird* in 1910. The animated Disney film *Fantasia 2000* used a suite of Stravinsky's music from *The Firebird* as the inspiration and score for its final segment. "Firebird" has also been used as the name of a car created by Pontiac, a Marvel Comics superheroine, and a line of electric guitars made by Gibson.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In Russian mythology, the firebird is a one-of-a-kind creature that is rarely seen. In recent times, some birds have been discovered to be nearly extinct, often because humans have destroyed their natural habitats. Do you think humans should be required to protect animal species that exist only in small numbers, or do you think extinction should be allowed to happen as a natural part of the animal world? Does your opinion depend upon whether or not humans helped contribute to the disappearance of the species?

SEE ALSO Animals in Mythology



## First Man and First Woman

### Character Overview

In the mythology of the Navajo of North America, First Man and First Woman—known as Altsé hastiin and Altsé asdzáá, respectively—were beings who prepared the world for the creation of people. Created when the winds blew life into two special ears of **corn**, the couple led the creatures that would become the Navajo on a journey from a series of lower worlds up to the surface of the earth. In some stories, First Man and First Woman are joined by two other original leaders: First Boy and First Girl.

In each of the lower worlds, the followers of First Man and First Woman discovered different resources. The couple taught their followers how to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings and urged them to learn new skills, such as planting beans and corn for food. The two helped

#### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/Navajo

#### Alternate Names

Altsé hastiin and Altsé asdzáá

#### Appears In

Navajo creation myths

#### Lineage

Created by the Holy People

their people overcome various crises, including a great flood that surged over the land in powerful waves. They also had to deal with the troublesome Coyote, who quarreled and played many tricks on the people.

In one of the lower worlds, First Man and First Woman had a bitter dispute about whether men and women need each other to live. As a result of their dispute, First Man led all of the men away from the women for four years. Following this period of separation, some of the young women gave birth to terrible monsters that preyed on the people. Eventually, the men and women realized that they needed each other, and they agreed to live together again.

First Man and First Woman also raised the Navajo deity, or god, known as **Changing Woman** (Asdzáá nádleehé), whom they found as a child. They gave Changing Woman the medicine bundle of creation, a bag or collection of sacred objects that became the source of her power. Changing Woman and her sister, White Shell Woman (Yolgai asdzáá), gave birth to **twins** who became warriors and killed the monsters that threatened their people.

### First Man and First Woman in Context

Corn was one of the most important sources of food for the Navajo people. The fact that First Man and First Woman are created from ears of corn illustrates the importance of corn in the Navajo diet. Similarly, the fact that the first Navajo people were brought forth from lower worlds reflects the importance of the earth and nature in Navajo life. In the myth, First Man leads the men away to live on their own for four years. This reflects traditional Navajo beliefs about the duties of men as being separate from the duties of women.

### Key Themes and Symbols

First Man and First Woman represent fatherhood and motherhood, raising the Navajo people into their current human form. The two figures also represent both creation and destruction in Navajo myth, since the Navajo believed that both must exist together to maintain a balance in the world. The journey of the Navajo people from deep within the earth can be seen as a progression from the non-living world to the living world, or as a parallel to development from a seed, like a plant that eventually sprouts above the ground.

## First Man and First Woman in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

First Man and First Woman are depicted in traditional Navajo art forms, including rugs and sand painting. Spider Rock, a unique formation within the Canyon de Chelly National Monument, is said to be the location where First Man and First Woman learned the art of weaving from **Spider Woman**.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

First Man and First Woman reflect the Navajo belief that people should live in balance with the natural world. This contrasts with the traditional Western view that nature is a resource meant to be controlled and adapted to human needs. What do you think are the consequences of each of these views? What are the benefits of each? What are the shortcomings?

**SEE ALSO** Changing Woman; Corn; Creation Stories; Floods; Native American Mythology




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## Floods

### Theme Overview

Floods are among the most powerful and devastating of natural events. Long after the water has gone, people remember and talk about the loss and destruction. Sometimes, the scale of devastation is great enough to convince people that the flooding is the work of supernatural beings.

It is no surprise that flood myths occur in cultures around the world. One of the most common tells of a great flood that occurred in the distant past. The biblical story of **Noah** (pronounced NOH-uh) and the ark (a boat) he built to save certain people and animals from the flood is just one version of a much older myth from Mesopotamia. Similar stories appear wherever people have experienced floods.

## Major Myths

Although the details of the stories differ, flood myths from around the world have many similarities. The themes of punishment, survival, and rebirth or renewal occur frequently.

**Ancient Near East** The basic flood myth of the ancient Near East, in which the flood was sent as a divine punishment, originated among the Sumerian cities in southern Mesopotamia. Over a period of several thousand years, the Babylonians, the Hebrews, and other civilizations developed their own versions.

The Sumerian myth tells how the human race, which the gods had created to do their work, became so numerous and noisy that the god Enlil (pronounced EN-lil) sent a flood to destroy it. However, another god, Enki (pronounced EN-kee), wanted to save King Ziusudra (pronounced zee-oo-SOO-druh). Forbidden by Enlil to warn the king, Enki spoke to the king's reed house. The king overheard the warning, built a boat, and saved his family and a collection of animals.

The Babylonian version of the flood myth appears in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this account, the survivor is a man called Utnapishtim (pronounced oot-nuh-PISH-tim). Warned of the flood by a dream in which he heard a god whispering to his reed house, Utnapishtim built a boat, took aboard his family and a selection of craftspeople and animals, and rode out a terrible storm that raged for six days and six nights. Finally the boat landed on a mountaintop, the only land above the flood. Utnapishtim and his wife became immortal, or able to live forever, as a reward for following the advice of the god in the dream.

The Hebrew version of the story, told in the book of Genesis in the Bible, places greater emphasis on the sinfulness of humankind. The flood was not a cruel whim or mistake of the gods but a deliberate punishment. Like Utnapishtim, Noah was a good man who received a warning and instructions to build a boat. He and his family, and two of every sort of living thing, survived the flood and landed upon the peak of Mount Ararat.

**Egypt** The Egyptian flood myth begins with the **sun** god **Ra** (pronounced RAH), who feared that people were going to overthrow him. He sent the goddess **Hathor** (pronounced HATH-or), who was his eye, to punish the people. But she killed so many that their blood,

flowing into the Nile River and the ocean, caused a flood. Hathor greedily drank the bloody water. Feeling that things had gone too far, Ra ordered slaves to make a lake of beer, dyed red to look like blood. Hathor drank the beer, became very drunk, and failed to finish the task of wiping out humanity. The survivors of her bloodbath started the human race anew.

**Ancient Greece** The Greek flood myth says that **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), father of the gods, sent a mighty inundation to destroy the human race. Some versions say that Zeus was angry at the Titan **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs) for stealing **fire** from the gods and giving it to people. Others say that the flood was punishment for human sinfulness. Prometheus warned his son Deucalion (pronounced doo-KAY-lee-uhn) to escape the flood by building a boat. Deucalion and his wife survived, and when the flood waters retreated, they were the only humans left on earth. The couple began the race of people who inhabit the world today. The story of the flood, along with many other Greek myths, appears in the *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid.

**China** For thousands of years, the Chinese people have suffered from the flooding of the two great rivers that flow through their land, the Chang Jiang (Yangtze) and the Huang He (Yellow) Rivers. Taming the rivers was one of the chief goals of early Chinese civilization. The story of Yu, one of several Chinese flood myths, celebrates a victory in the long struggle against floods.

In the myth, a man named Gun tried for nine years to dam the destructive waters that covered the land. Because he failed, the supreme god executed him. Gun's son, Yu, took up the task of taming the waters. Instead of building a dam, he decided to drain away the floodwaters through channels. A winged dragon flew in front of him, marking with his tail where Yu should dig the channels. Yu worked for many years, too busy even to see his family. In the end, however, he tamed the rivers, making the land along them suitable for farming. As his reward, Yu became emperor of China.

The Yao people of southern China have a myth that tells how the thunder god caused a great flood. A man captured the god to stop the rains, but the god convinced the man's son and daughter to set him free, and the flooding resumed. The man built a boat and floated to

**heaven** to ask the other gods to help. They were too helpful. The water god drained the flood away so rapidly that the boat crashed to earth, killing the man. His children, meanwhile, were the only survivors of the flood. They floated on the water in a large gourd that grew from a tooth the thunder god had given them. They became the parents of a new human race.

**India** The flood legend of India begins with a creator god named **Manu** (pronounced MAN-oo) washing himself with water from a jar. A fish in the jar asked for Manu's protection and promised to save him from a great flood that would occur in the future. Manu raised the fish until it was one of the largest fish in the world, and then he released it into the sea. The fish told Manu what year the flood would come and advised him to build a ship. Manu built the ship, and when the flood came, the fish towed it to a mountaintop. Manu alone survived the flood. The fish is generally identified as one form of the god **Vishnu** (VISH-noo).

**North and Central America** In many American Indian myths, floods occur as punishment for human misdeeds. The Chiricahua Apache maintain that the Great Spirit sent a flood to drown the whole earth because people did not worship him. According to the Navajo, a series of floods forced the people to emerge from deep in the earth through several higher worlds. The final flood was caused by Water Monster, who became angry when Coyote stole his child. This flood, which drove the people to the surface of the present world, ended when Coyote returned the Water Monster's baby. The Cheyenne say that the gods use floodwaters to control people's movements.

Floods also have positive powers. In myths of the Arikara and Caddo people, floods wipe out evil **giants** and make the world safe for humans. Several Indian mythologies in Mexico and the American West tell of cycles of destruction in which one whole world creation was destroyed by flood, while others ended in fire, ice, wind, or other disasters. The Aztecs believed that the first age of creation ended in a flood. In the Mayan creation story, a flood washed away the wooden people made by the gods in an early attempt to create human beings.

**Australia** Several groups among the Aborigines, the native people of Australia, believe that a vast flood swept away a previous society. Perhaps



## The Lost Continent of Atlantis

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato mentioned in his writings a highly advanced civilization that existed around 9000 BCE that was swallowed by the sea in one disastrous day of earthquakes and flooding: it was called Atlantis. Whether or not Atlantis ever actually existed has been the subject of debate ever since, as geographers, adventurers, and historians through the centuries have proposed different possible locations of the lost civilization and different theories about how it met its end. Many cultures have similar “lost civilization” legends that describe privileged, wise people who are suddenly destroyed—often by a flood.

these myths grew out of conditions at the end of the last Ice Age, when sea levels rose, and coastal regions flooded.

One group of Aborigines says that their ancestral **heroes**, the Wandjina (pronounced wand-JIN-uh), caused the flood and then re-created society in its present form. Another version of the myth tells that a huge half-human snake called Yurlunggur (pronounced YUR-lun-gur) brought on the flood to punish two sisters for sexual misbehavior, that is, for breaking tribal rules concerning proper partners. Yurlunggur swallowed the sisters, but after the floodwaters withdrew, he spat them out and allowed them to start a new society.

## Floods in Context

Some scholars believe that memories of real disasters, such as the violent and unpredictable floods that occurred along Mesopotamia’s Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, underlie mythological accounts of catastrophic rains and floods. These stories give meaning and purpose to events in the natural world. In myths, floods become part of a cycle of destruction and rebirth.

Mythological floods are not local. They take place on a grand scale, generally covering the whole world. Though the direct cause of the rising waters may be heavy rainfall, gods or other supernatural beings are responsible. Often the flood is sent as punishment for the wrongdoings of humankind.

In some traditions, a flood reproduces the original mythological conditions of creation—the formless, empty expanse out of which the world was created. The flood not only destroys the old world but also sets the stage for a brand new one. In myths in which the flood was sent to punish people for their sins, the new world that follows the flood is purified. The religious ritual of baptism reenacts the flood myth on an individual level. The baptismal water is believed to wash away sins, allowing people to be reborn in a purified state. In India, Hindus bathe in the sacred Ganges River to purify themselves.

According to many myths about great floods, a few virtuous individuals survive the deluge, perhaps with the help or advice of a friendly deity (god). Those survivors repopulate the world, becoming the parents of the present human race. In this way, flood myths are often myths of human origins as well.

### **Floods in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Of all the floods in mythology, the flood described in the Bible has inspired more artists than any other. Images of Noah and the biblical deluge can be found throughout European and American art, with famous examples by Michelangelo, Gustave Doré, Jacopo Bassano, and Edward Hicks. Mythological floods have even appeared on film; the Disney animated film *Fantasia 2000* contains a sequence re-telling the myth of Noah with Donald Duck filling the role, while the 2007 comedy *Evan Almighty* casts Steve Carell as a modern-day version of Noah.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

When Hurricane Katrina struck the United States Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, it caused massive flooding. Hundreds were killed as the world watched in helpless horror. Soon after, dozens of religious and political leaders claimed the disaster was proof that God was punishing the United States. Some pointed the finger at the “wickedness” of the city of New Orleans, which was particularly hard-hit. Others said American policy in the Middle East had caused the divine punishment. What do you think of these ideas? Why do some people see natural disasters as a sort of divine punishment?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Gilgamesh; Manu; Noah



# Flowers in Mythology

## Theme Overview

From new life to death, from purity to passion, flowers have had many meanings in myths and legends. Swelling from tender bud to full bloom, flowers are associated with youth, beauty, and pleasure. But as they wilt and die, flowers represent fragility and the swift passage from life into death. Specific flowers such as roses and lilies have assumed symbolic significance in mythology.

## Major Myths

Many flowers from around the world appear in mythology. The anemone, carnation, hyacinth, lily, lotus, narcissus, poppy, rose, sunflower, and violet are among those that are associated with stories or customs from various cultures.

**Anemone** **Greek mythology** linked the red anemone, sometimes called the windflower, to the death of **Adonis** (pronounced uh-DON-is). This handsome young man was loved by both **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), queen of the **underworld** (land of the dead), and **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), goddess of love. Adonis enjoyed hunting, and one day when he was out hunting alone, he wounded a fierce boar, which stabbed him with its tusks. Aphrodite heard the cries of her lover and arrived to see Adonis bleeding to death. Red anemones sprang from the earth where the drops of Adonis's blood fell. In another version of the story, the anemones were white before the death of Adonis, whose blood turned them red.

Christians later adopted the symbolism of the anemone. For them its red represented the blood shed by Jesus Christ on the cross. Anemones sometimes appear in paintings of the crucifixion.

**Carnation** Composed of tightly packed, fringed petals of white, yellow, pink, or red, carnations have many different meanings. To the Indians of Mexico, they are the “flowers of the dead,” and their fragrant blooms are piled around corpses being prepared for burial. For the Koreans, three carnations placed on top of the head are a form of divination, or

predicting the future. The flower that withers first indicates which phase of the person's life will contain suffering and hardship. To the Flemish people of Europe, red carnations symbolize love, and a kind of carnation called a pink was traditionally associated with weddings.

**Hyacinth** The Greek myth of Hyacinthus (pronounced high-uh-SIN-thuhs) and **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) tells of the origin of the hyacinth, a member of the lily family. Hyacinthus, a beautiful young man of Sparta, was loved by the **sun** god Apollo. One day the two were amusing themselves throwing a discus, a heavy disc used in Greek athletic games, when the discus struck Hyacinthus and killed him. Some accounts say that Zephyrus, the god of the west wind, directed the discus out of jealousy because he also loved Hyacinthus.

While Apollo was deep in grief, mourning the loss of his companion, a splendid new flower rose out of the bloodstained earth where the young man had died. Apollo named it the hyacinth and ordered that a three-day festival, the Hyacinthia, be held in Sparta every year to honor his friend.

**Lily** To the ancient Egyptians, the trumpet-shaped lily was a symbol of Upper Egypt, the southern part of the country. In the ancient Near East, the lily was associated with **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr), also known as Astarte (pronounced a-STAR-tee), who was a goddess of creation and fertility. The Greeks and Romans linked the lily with the queen of the gods, called **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) by the Greeks and Juno (pronounced JOO-noh) by the Romans. The lily was also one of the symbols of the Roman goddess Venus.

In later times, Christians adopted the lily as the symbol of Mary, who became the mother of Jesus while still a virgin. Painters often portrayed the angel Gabriel handing Mary a lily, which became a Christian symbol of purity. Besides being linked to Mary, the lily was also associated with virgin saints and other figures of exceptional purity of body.

**Lotus** The lotus shares some associations with the lily. Lotus flowers, which bloom in water, can represent female sexual power and fertility as well as birth or rebirth. The ancient Egyptians portrayed the goddess **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis) being born from a lotus flower, and they placed lotuses in the hands of their mummified dead—dried and preserved before burial—to represent the new life into which the dead souls had entered.

## The Language of Flowers

In Europe during the late 1800s, the idea that flowers represented feelings grew into a system of communicating through flower arrangements. Code books guided those who wanted to compose or read floral messages. According to one book, the apple blossom meant “Will the glow of love finally redden your delicate cheeks?” Field clover signified “Let me know when I can see you again.” A red rose petal meant “Yes!”, a white one “No!” Spurge, a green flower, carried the message: “Your nature is so cold that one might think your heart made of stone.” Users of this elaborate language needed not only a code book but also the ability to recognize blooms.

In Asian mythology the lotus often symbolizes the female sexual organs, from which new life is born. Lotuses appear in both Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Hindus refer to the god **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh) as “lotus-born,” for he is said to have emerged from a lotus that was the navel, or center, of the universe. The lotus is also the symbol of the goddess Padma (pronounced PAD-muh), who appears on both Hindu and Buddhist monuments as a creative force.

The holiness of the flower is illustrated by the legend that when the Buddha walked on the earth he left lotuses in his trail instead of footprints. One myth about the origin of Buddha relates that he first appeared floating on a lotus. According to a Japanese legend, the mother of Nichiren (pronounced NITCH-er-en) became pregnant by dreaming of sunshine on a lotus. Nichiren founded a branch of Buddhism in the 1200s. The phrase “Om mani padme hum,” which both Hindus and Buddhists use in meditation, means “the jewel in the lotus” and can refer to the Buddha or to the mystical union of male and female energies.

**Narcissus** The Greek myth about the narcissus flower involves the gods’ punishment of human shortcomings. Like the stories of Adonis and Hyacinth, it involves the transfer of life or identity from a dying young man to a flower.

**Narcissus** (pronounced nar-SIS-us) was an exceptionally attractive young man who scorned the advances of those who fell in love with him,

including **Echo** (pronounced EK-oh), a nymph (female nature deity). His lack of sympathy for the pangs of those he rejected angered the gods, who caused him to fall in love with his own reflection as he bent over a pool of water. Caught up in self-adoration, Narcissus died—either by drowning as he tried to embrace his own image or by pining away at the edge of the pool. In the place where he had sat gazing yearningly into the water, there appeared a flower that the **nymphs** named the narcissus. It became a symbol of selfishness and coldheartedness. Today psychologists use the term “narcissist” to describe someone who directs his or her affections inward rather than toward other people.

**Poppy** A type of poppy native to the Mediterranean region yields a substance that can be turned into opium, a drug that was used in the ancient world to ease pain and bring on sleep. The Greeks associated poppies with both **Hypnos** (pronounced HIP-nohs), god of sleep, and Morpheus (pronounced MOR-fee-uhs), god of dreams. Morphine, a drug made from opium, gets its name from Morpheus.

**Rose** The rose, a sweet-smelling flower that blooms on a thorny shrub, has had many meanings in mythology. It was associated with the worship of certain goddesses and was, for the ancient Romans, a symbol of beauty and the flower of Venus, the Roman goddess of love. The Romans also saw roses as a symbol of death and rebirth, and they often planted them on graves.

When Christians adopted the rose as a symbol, it still carried connections with ancient mother goddesses. The flower became associated with Mary, the mother of Christ, who was sometimes addressed as the Mystic or Holy Rose. In time, the rose took on additional meanings in Christian symbolism. Red roses came to represent the blood shed by the martyrs who died for their faith; white ones stood for innocence and purity. One Christian legend says that roses originally had no thorns. But after the sin of **Adam and Eve**—for which they were driven out of the Garden of **Eden**—the rose grew thorns to remind people that they no longer lived in a state of perfection.

**Sunflower** Sunflowers turn their heads during the day, revolving slowly on their stalks to face the sun as it travels across the sky. The Greek myth of Clytie (pronounced KLY-tee) and Apollo, which



*The lotus flower's association with rebirth made it a prominent flower in ancient Egyptian tombs, as a way of promoting the rebirth of the dead into the afterlife. Here the wife of the Egyptian nobleman Nebamun is shown holding lotus flowers on a wallpainting in his tomb.*

WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

exists in several versions, explains this movement as the legacy of a lovesick girl.

Clytie, who was either a water nymph or a princess of the ancient city of Babylon, fell in love with Apollo, god of the sun. For a time the god returned her love, but then he tired of her. The forlorn Clytie sat, day after day, slowly turning her head to watch Apollo move across

the sky in his sun chariot. Eventually, the gods took pity on her and turned her into a flower. In some versions of the myth, she became a heliotrope or a marigold, but most accounts say that Clytie became a sunflower.

**Violet** The violet, which grows low to the ground and has small purple or white flowers, appeared in an ancient Near Eastern myth that probably inspired the Greek and Roman myth of Aphrodite (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee) and Adonis. According to this story, the great mother goddess **Cybele** (pronounced SIB-uh-lee) loved Attis, who was killed while hunting a wild boar. Where his blood fell on the ground, violets grew.

The Greeks believed that violets were sacred to the god **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez) and to Io (pronounced EE-oh), one of the many human loves of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS). Later, in Christian symbolism, the violet stood for the virtue of humility, or humble modesty, and several legends tell of violets springing up on the graves of virgins and saints. European folktales associate violets with death and mourning.

### Flowers in Context

Many plants bloom for only a few weeks, often in the spring or early summer, and the individual flowers tend to be short-lived. At their peak, flowers are delicate, colorful, and frequently sweet-scented. From these qualities emerge the symbolic meanings of flowers and, in some cultures, floral goddesses.

Many cultures connect flowers with birth, with the return of spring after winter, with life after death, and with joyful youth, beauty, and merriment. Yet because they fade quickly, flowers are also linked with death, especially the death of the young. Together the two sets of associations suggest death followed by heavenly rebirth, which may be one reason for the tradition of placing or planting flowers on graves. People also offer flowers to their gods at shrines and decorate churches with them.

In many societies, certain colors of flowers have acquired symbolic meanings. White blossoms, for example, represent both purity and death, while red ones often symbolize passion, energy, and blood. Yellow



flowers may suggest gold or the sun. In the Chinese Taoist tradition, the highest stage of enlightenment—or supreme understanding and perception of the world—was pictured as a golden flower growing from the top of the head.

The shapes of flowers also have significance. Blossoms with petals projecting outward like rays of light from the sun have been associated with the sun and with the idea of the center—of the world, the universe, or consciousness.

The Aztecs, who dominated central Mexico before the early 1500s CE, had a goddess of sexuality and fertility named Xochiquetzal (pronounced soh-chee-KATE-sahl), which means “flower standing upright.” She carried a bouquet of flowers and wore a floral wreath in her hair. Fragments of surviving poetry show that the Aztecs recognized the double symbolism of flowers as emblems of both life and death:

The flowers sprout, and bud, and grow, and glow. . . . Like a flower in the summertime, so does our heart take refreshment and bloom. Our body is like a flower that blossoms and quickly withers. . . . Perish relentlessly and bloom once more, ye flowers who tremble and fall and turn to dust.

The Greeks also had a floral goddess, Chloris (pronounced KLOR-iss), who was married to Zephyrus (pronounced ZEF-er-uhs), the god of the west wind. The Romans called her Flora (pronounced FLOR-uh) and honored her each year with a celebration known as the Floralia. She was often portrayed holding flowers or scattering them; her blossom-crowned image appeared on coins of the Roman republic.

### Flowers in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As mentioned above, ancient art and literature often associate certain gods with specific flowers.

*This Roman fresco of 79 CE shows the Roman goddess Flora gathering flowers.* ALINARI/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Additionally, gods associated with fertility and the seasons are often pictured surrounded by flowers. In more recent times, flowers were used as symbols of the impermanence of beauty, as in sixteenth-century French poet Pierre Ronsard's "Ode to Cassandra." The poet likens Cassandra to a rose that is beautiful now, but will soon wither. In the past century, flowers have mostly been depicted in realistic and natural ways, without much emphasis on myth. John McCrae's 1915 poem "In Flanders Fields," which focuses on an image of poppies growing over the graves of those killed during battle in World War I, is a rare modern example of flowers achieving a mythical significance. In the 2003 Tim Burton fantasy film *Big Fish*, adapted from a novel by Daniel Wallace, the main character somehow gathers all the daffodils (also known as narcissus) within five states and plants them in a field to impress his love.

Even in everyday life, flowers connected to certain myths often retain a special meaning. In Korea, carnations are presented as symbols of gratitude and love to one's parents on May 8, also known as Parents Day. In the United States, pink carnations have become the flower most associated with Mother's Day. In predominantly Christian regions, lilies are closely associated with the Easter holiday, and are often used as decoration during this time. The red rose is still one of the most recognized symbols of love in the world.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

As shown by the myths mentioned here, certain flowers tend to be given mythical significance in many different cultures, while some other flowers are rarely associated with gods, goddesses, or myths. What characteristics do you think help the flowers discussed above to achieve mythic status over other flowers?

**SEE ALSO** Adonis; Fruit in Mythology; Hypnos; Ishtar; Isis; Narcissus

## Frey

See **Freyr**.

## Freyja

See **Freyja**.



# Freyja

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Freyja was the goddess of love and fertility, associated with affairs of the heart. Her identification with love and passion led other gods to condemn her behavior. The trickster god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) claimed that Freyja was the lover of all of the gods and accused her of sleeping with her twin brother, **Freyr** (pronounced FRAY), the god of fertility and prosperity. Freyja, Freyr, and their father Njord (pronounced NYORD) were originally part of the group of gods known as the Vanir (pronounced VAH-nir), who battled the other gods of Norse mythology before forming an alliance with them.

In addition to being concerned with matters of love, Freyja had links with death and the world of the dead. Half of all the warriors who died in battle were given to her; the other half went to **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), ruler of the gods. According to oral tradition, Odin receives warriors who fight in lands away from their homes, while Freyja receives those who die defending their own homes or families.

## Major Myths

One story about Freyja explained how she acquired her favorite possession, the Necklace of the Brisings, made by four dwarfs. She agreed to spend a night with each of the dwarfs in exchange for the necklace. However, Loki later crept into Sessrumnir, Freyja's heavenly home, while Freyja was sleeping and stole the precious necklace. When she discovered the theft, she knew that only Loki could have stolen it, and she demanded its return. Odin agreed that the necklace should be returned to her, but only on condition that she start a war between two kings and give the slain new life so they could fight again. Freyja agreed, and got back her necklace. This myth combines two of Freyja's primary roles: her role as a goddess of love, and her association with war and the death of warriors. Another version of the myth leaves out the theft of the necklace, and has Odin condemning Freyja for paying such a price for the necklace. As her penance, he orders her to start the war between the kings.

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

FRAY-uh

### Alternate Names

Freya, Vanadis

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Daughter of Njord

## Freyja in Context

Freyja was associated with **Frigg** (pronounced FRIG), goddess of marriage. Some scholars have suggested that the two goddesses represent different aspects of the same deity, who oversaw both love and motherhood. The group of gods known as the Vanir, which included Freyja, were viewed as primitive when compared to the other Norse gods. Freyja's father is said to have married his sister, an act forbidden among the other gods (and the Scandinavian people) but allowed among the Vanir. This may have reflected Scandinavian views about previous generations or nearby cultures that were eventually overtaken by the Norse culture. The condemnation of Freyja by the other gods may also reflect societal views toward women who have relationships with more than one man.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Norse mythology, Freyja represents many things. As a symbol of fertility, she represents both the growth of crops and the creation of children. Freyja also symbolizes romantic and physical love. At the same time, Freyja is an agent of the land of the dead to some warriors.

One of the animals commonly associated with Freyja is the falcon, which symbolizes magic and the ability to travel between worlds. The boar is also sometimes associated with Freyja and can symbolize both fertility and protection for warriors. She is also associated with cats, which were said to pull her chariot.

## Freyja in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Freyja is often depicted in Scandinavian art riding in a chariot drawn by cats, or with a falcon perched on her hand. She is often shown wearing the Necklace of the Brisings. Her most famous appearance is in the Richard Wagner opera cycle known as *The Ring of the Nibelung*, first performed in its entirety in 1876. More recently, Freyja has served as the inspiration for numerous characters in Japanese comics, animation, and video games, most notably in games created by the Japanese developer Square-Enix.

Freyja continues to play a part in modern Scandinavian life. The element vanadium was named after the goddess (who is sometimes known as Vanadis), and the name Freja (a variant of Freyja) is one of the most popular female names in Denmark.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the geographic extent of the Norse culture. Which modern-day countries were part of the Norse culture? Do those areas still retain elements of their Norse heritage today?

SEE ALSO Freyr; Frigg; Loki; Norse Mythology



# Freyr

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Freyr was the god of fertility and prosperity and the twin of **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh), the goddess of love and fertility. He and his sister were the children of the sea god Njord (pronounced NYORD) and the female giant Skadi (pronounced SKAY-dee). Freyr belonged to the race of gods known as the Vanir (pronounced VAH-nir). When these gods went to war with another group of gods called the Aesir (pronounced AY-sur), Freyr was taken hostage. The Aesir eventually released Freyr, and the Norse came to consider him a member of both groups of gods.

Freyr used many magical items during his adventures. These included a horse named Blodughofi and a magnificent boar with a glowing mane, Gullinbursti, which pulled his chariot. Thus, both boars and horses were associated with Freyr. From the dwarfs, Freyr received a ship that could travel in any direction regardless of which way the wind was blowing. When Freyr was not using the ship, he could fold it up and put it in his pocket. Another magnificent treasure was a sword that could fight by itself.

## Major Myths

One of the best-known legends about Freyr explains how he fell in love with a female giant named Gerda (pronounced GAIR-duh). The moment he saw her, Freyr decided to make her his bride. He sent his servant Skirnir (pronounced SKEER-nir) to try to convince Gerda to

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

FRAY

### Alternate Names

Frey

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Njord

## Freyr

*The Norse god Freyr was associated with boars. A magnificent boar named Gullinbursti pulled his chariot. ©*

CHARLES WALKER/TOFPOTO/  
THE IMAGE WORKS.



marry him. She refused at first but later agreed. Freyr gave his magic sword to Skirnir in return for winning Gerda for him. Unfortunately, without his sword to fight with during **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok)—the final battle of the gods—Freyr is destined to die while fighting a giant named Surtr (pronounced SURT).

### Freyr in Context

Freyr gives up his magic sword in order to get Gerda as his wife. In other words, the warrior gives up his ability to fight and instead chooses love. The warrior's sword is often seen as a symbol of manhood. The ancient Scandinavians placed great importance on the ability to fight, and while they also recognized the vital role of women, sacrificing the ability to defend oneself and one's family would not have been favored. Indeed, during Ragnarok, when Freyr is once again called to fight, legend has it that he will die because he has given up his sword.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Freyr served as a symbol of fertility and growth of crops. Boars, such as Freyr's Gullinbursti, were also associated with fertility. His magical ship,

which always enjoys a favorable wind, is a symbol of Freyr's ability to control nature. Freyr is also seen as a symbol of peace and happiness to humans. Freyr is linked to Sweden and the Swedish people, especially the region of Bohuslan, which was thought to have once been ruled by elves.

## Freyr in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Like his twin sister Freyja, Freyr is an important figure in Norse art and literature. He is usually depicted with his magical sword and boar. His most famous appearance is in the Richard Wagner opera cycle known as *The Ring of the Nibelung*, first performed in its entirety in 1876. More recently, he has appeared as a character in the Marvel Comic series *Thor*. He has also appeared in the *Stargate SG-1* series (1997–2007) in a most unusual form: as an alien, a member of the advanced Asgard race based on the Norse gods.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In many modern cultures, just as in ancient Scandinavia, weapons are often seen as symbols of manhood. Guns are the most prominent weapons of the modern world. Do you think the symbolic connection between guns and manhood plays a part in people's views on issues like gun control and wildlife hunting? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Dwarfs and Elves; Freyja; Norse Mythology



# Frigg

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Frigg was the wife of **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), father of the gods. She was associated with marriage and the birth of children. In earlier Germanic mythology, Frigg was called Frija, from which the word “Friday” is derived. For many years, Germans considered Friday a lucky day to be married. Even though her main role was guardian of marriage, Frigg did not live with Odin. Instead, she made her home in a place called Fensalir and was attended by several maids.

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

FRIG

### Alternate Names

Frija, Fricka

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Daughter of Fjorgyn

## Major Myths

One of the best-known stories about Frigg concerns her attempt to make her son **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der) immortal, or able to live forever. She obtained promises from every thing under the sky, except one, not to harm him. The one thing she neglected to ask was the mistletoe plant, which she considered too small and weak to be of any danger. However, the trickster god **Loki** found this out and tricked Balder's blind brother into throwing mistletoe at Balder, which killed him. Frigg mourned her son, and attempted to get him released from the land of the dead, but without success.

## Frigg in Context

Frigg was a dutiful and supportive wife to Odin. This reflects the importance of a dutiful and loyal wife to the ancient Scandinavian people. It is important to note that Frigg was not viewed as a servant of Odin, but as an equal in many ways. In Norse myths, Frigg is the only person other than Odin permitted to sit on his throne, which allows him to watch over all the worlds. This suggests that the importance of women's duties in Scandinavian culture was recognized, even if those duties were not emphasized as much as the duties of men.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Frigg is a symbol of marriage, motherhood, and childbirth, and is often closely linked to **Freyja**, the goddess of romantic love and fertility. In some areas it was believed that the two were actually the same goddess. One of Frigg's most important functions in Norse mythology is as a strong and supportive wife to Odin, a symbol of the benefits of marriage. Frigg is also associated with fate and destiny—the idea that human actions have already been foretold—though she does not reveal her knowledge or make predictions. Objects associated with Frigg include a spinning wheel—which symbolizes domestic life and which she uses to spin the clouds—and keys, which symbolize her role as protector of the home.

## Frigg in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Frigg was often depicted at a spinning wheel or beside her husband Odin. As with many Norse gods, her most famous appearance is in the Richard Wagner opera cycle known as *The Ring of the Nibelung*, where



she is referred to as Fricka. The plant known as lady's bedstraw, which has sedative properties and was often used to calm women during childbirth, is also known as "Frigg's grass."

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Frigg attempts to protect her son Balder by making him immortal, though she fails to protect him against mistletoe. In recent years, parents—and lawmakers—have gone out of their way to keep their children from being exposed to anything that might be physically harmful: hands are sanitized to kill germs; helmets are worn while skateboarding and riding bicycles; special toddler seats are required when young children are riding in a car. Do you think these measures actually result in a safer environment for children? Or do you think "kid-proofing" an environment can keep a child from developing a sense of caution and natural defenses to threats?

SEE ALSO Balder; Loki; Odin

## Frija

See **Frigg**.



## Fruit in Mythology

### Theme Overview

Fruit appears in myths from around the world. Often it is a symbol of abundance, associated with goddesses of fertility, plenty, and the harvest. Sometimes, however, fruit represents earthly pleasures, overindulgence, and temptation. Specific kinds of fruit have acquired their own symbolic meanings in the myths and legends of different cultures.

### Major Myths

Many of the most significant fruits in world mythology, such as the apple, have different meanings to different cultures. Sometimes the same

fruit can represent different things in different myths within the same culture. This section examines each of the major fruits found in mythology and provides examples from the myths of various cultures.

**Apple** Apples are brimming with symbolic meanings and mythic associations. In China they represent peace, and apple blossoms are a symbol of women's beauty. In other traditions, they can signify wisdom, joy, fertility, and youthfulness.

Apples play an important part in several Greek myths. **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), queen of the gods, owned some precious apple trees that she had received as a wedding present from **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth mother. Tended by the Hesperides (pronounced hee-SPER-uh-deez), the Daughters of Evening, and guarded by a fierce dragon, these trees grew in a garden somewhere far in the west. Their apples were golden, tasted like honey, and had magical powers. They could heal the sick or injured, they renewed themselves as they were eaten, and if thrown, they always hit their target and then returned to the thrower's hand.

For the eleventh of his twelve great labors, the hero **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez), also known as Hercules, had to obtain some of these apples. After a long, difficult journey across North Africa, he enlisted the help of the giant **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs), who entered the garden, strangled the dragon, and obtained the fruit. Heracles took the apples to Greece, but **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) returned them to the Hesperides.

A golden apple stolen from Hera's garden caused the Trojan War, one of the key events in **Greek mythology**. Eris (pronounced EER-iss), the goddess of discord or conflict, was angry not to be included among the gods asked to attend a wedding feast. Arriving uninvited, she threw one of the apples, labeled "For the Fairest" onto a table at the feast. Hera, Athena, and **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee) each assumed that the apple was meant for her. They asked Paris (pronounced PAIR-iss), a prince of Troy, to settle the matter, and he awarded the apple to Aphrodite. In revenge, Hera and Athena supported the Greeks in the war that led to the fall of Troy. People still use the phrase "apple of discord" to refer to something that provokes an argument.

In **Norse mythology**, apples are a symbol of eternal youth. Legend says that the goddess **Idun** (pronounced EE-thoon) guarded the magical golden apples that kept the gods young. But after the trickster god **Loki**

## The Horn of Plenty

The cornucopia (pronounced korn-uh-KOH-pee-uh), a curved horn with fruits and flowers spilling from its open mouth, is a common symbol of abundance and the earth's bounty. The symbol's origin lies in Greek mythology. Legend says that Zeus (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, was raised by a foster mother named Amalthea (pronounced am-uhl-THEE-uh), who was either a goat or a goddess who tended a goat. Either way, she fed the infant god goat's milk. One day one of the goat's horns broke off. Amalthea filled the horn with fruits and flowers and gave it to Zeus, who graciously placed it in the sky, where it became a constellation.

(pronounced LOH-kee) allowed Idun to be carried off to the realm of the **giants**, the gods began to grow old and gray. They forced Loki to recapture Idun from the giants. **Celtic mythology** also mentions apples as the fruit of the gods and of immortality, or the ability to live forever.

Today the apple is often associated with an episode of temptation described in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. **Adam and Eve**, the first man and woman, lived in a garden paradise called **Eden** (pronounced EED-n). God forbade them to eat the fruit of one tree that grew in the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they gave in to temptation and tasted the fruit, God drove them out of the Garden of Eden for breaking his commandment. Many people picture the forbidden fruit as an apple because it has been portrayed that way for centuries in European artworks. However, the apple was unknown in the Near East when the Bible was written there. The biblical description of the tree in the Garden of Eden does not name a specific fruit, and in some traditions, the forbidden fruit has been imagined as a fig, a pear, or a pomegranate.

**Breadfruit** The breadfruit—a round fruit that can be baked and eaten like bread—is an important staple food in Polynesia. Myths about the origin of the breadfruit are found on several Polynesian islands. One story told in Hawaii takes place during a famine. A man named Ulu (pronounced OO-loo), who died in the famine, was buried beside a spring. During the night, his family heard the rustle of flowers and leaves drifting to the ground. Next came a thumping sound of falling fruit. In

the morning, the people found a breadfruit tree growing near the spring, and the fruit from the tree saved them from the famine.

**Peach** Peaches can symbolize immortality or fertility. One hero of Japanese folklore, Momotaro, is said to have been sent from **heaven** to Earth inside a giant peach found floating down a river by an old woman. In some versions of the myth, the old woman and her husband eat pieces of the peach and become younger. One Chinese legend tells of the goddess Xi Wang Mu (pronounced shee wang MOO), in whose garden the peaches of immortality were gathered by the gods every six thousand years. Peaches were commonly believed to extend life to those who ate them.

**Coconut** People in tropical regions consume the milk and meat of the coconut and use the oil and empty shells for various purposes. According to a legend from Tahiti, the first coconut came from the head of an eel named Tuna (pronounced TOO-nuh). When the moon goddess Hina (pronounced HEE-nuh) fell in love with the eel, her brother, **Maui** (pronounced MAH-wee), killed it and told her to plant the head in the ground. However, Hina left the head beside a stream and forgot about it. When she remembered Maui's instructions and returned to search for the head, she found that it had grown into a coconut tree.

**Fig** Native to the Mediterranean region, the fig tree appears in some images of the Garden of Eden. After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve covered their nakedness with leaves that are usually said to be from the fig tree, and Islamic tradition mentions two forbidden trees in Eden—a fig tree and an olive tree. In Greek and **Roman mythology**, figs are sometimes associated with **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), god of wine and drunkenness, and with Priapus (pronounced pry-AY-puhs), a satyr (half-man, half-goat) who symbolized sexual desire.

The fig tree has a sacred meaning for Buddhists. According to Buddhist legend, the founder of the religion, Siddhartha Gautama (pronounced see-DAHR-tuh GAW-tuh-muh), or the Buddha, achieved enlightenment one day in 528 BCE while sitting under a bo tree, a kind of fig tree. The bo or bodhi tree remains a symbol of enlightenment.

**Pear** In Greek and Roman mythology, pears are sacred to three goddesses: Hera, Aphrodite, and Pomona (pronounced puh-MOH-nuh), an Italian goddess of gardens and harvests.



*The golden apple given by Paris to the goddess Aphrodite as a prize in a beauty contest began a chain of events that eventually led to the Trojan War.* © FOGG ART MUSEUM, HARVARD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS, USA/GIFT OF META AND PAUL J. SACHS/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

The ancient Chinese believed that the pear was a symbol of immortality. (Pear trees live for a long time.) In Chinese the word *li* means both “pear” and “separation,” and for this reason, tradition says that to avoid a separation, friends and lovers should not divide pears between themselves.

**Plum** The blossom of the plum tree, even more than the fruit, has meaning in East Asia. Appearing early in the spring before the trees have leaves, the blossoms are a symbol of a young woman’s early beauty. The cover on a bridal bed is sometimes called a plum blossom blanket. The blossom has another meaning as well. Its five petals represent the five traditional Chinese gods of happiness.

**Pomegranate** For thousands of years, the pomegranate, a juicy red fruit with many seeds, has been a source of food and herbal medicines in the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. Its many seeds made it a

symbol of fertility, for out of one fruit could come many more. To the Romans, the pomegranate signified marriage, and brides wore pomegranate-twig wreaths.

Pomegranate seeds appear in the Greek myth of the goddess **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), protector of grain, crops, and the earth's bounty, and her daughter **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee). One day Persephone was picking flowers when **Hades** (HAY-deez), the king of the **underworld**, or land of the dead, seized her and carried her to his dark realm to be his bride. Grief-stricken, Demeter refused to let crops grow. All of humankind would have starved if **Zeus** had not ordered Hades to release Persephone. Hades let her go, but first he convinced her to eat some pomegranate seeds. Having once eaten the food of the underworld, Persephone could never be free of the place. She was fated to spend part of each year there. For those months, the world becomes barren, but when Persephone returns to her mother, the earth again produces flowers, fruit, and grain.

**Strawberry** Strawberries have special meaning to the Seneca of the northeastern United States. Because strawberries are the first fruit of the year to ripen, they are associated with spring and rebirth. The Seneca also say that strawberries grow along the path to the heavens and that they can bring good health.

### Mythological Fruit in Context

Although there are many different kinds of fruit found throughout the world, a large number of myths are centered on a handful of different fruits. This may be due to the fact that growing regions for these fruits overlapped the larger ancient societies that are known for documenting their beliefs, such as the Greeks. Fruits such as bananas and oranges may be just as significant to other, smaller groups whose myths have yet to receive the same level of study. This favoring of certain fruits may also represent the cultural and dietary significance of some fruits over other fruits.

### Mythological Fruit in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Many fruits have retained their mythical significance and symbolism into modern times through art and tradition. The apple is probably the most

significant fruit in mythological art and literature, but this can be at least partially explained by how the word “apple” was used in previous centuries. The word was applied as a general term for many kinds of fruit, and was often used to mean simply “fruit.”

The apple plays a significant role in the fairy tale of Snow White, especially the 1937 Disney animated adaptation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in which an evil queen disguised as an old woman tempts Snow White with a beautiful red apple that turns out to be poisoned. Apples still signify knowledge, and are a traditional gift for teachers on the first day of the school year. New York City is nicknamed “The Big Apple.” How it got its nickname is a matter of debate, but the general idea is that the apple symbolizes opportunity and plenty.

Other fruits have also made their mark on modern culture. In Asia, the word “peach” is frequently used as slang for a young woman or a bride, reflecting the fruit’s association with youth and life. Pomegranates are often broken on the ground at Greek weddings to bring good luck to the couple.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Select a fruit not already mentioned above. (Oranges, bananas, and cherries are some possible suggestions, but you can choose any fruit you want.) In what regions of the world does your chosen fruit grow? What cultures are located in those regions? Can you find any myths about your fruit in any of those cultures? Provide a brief summary of at least one myth for your fruit.

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; Atalanta; Demeter; Flowers in Mythology; Persephone



# Furies

## Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, the Furies were female spirits of justice and vengeance. They were also called the Erinyes (pronounced ee-RIN-ee-eez; angry ones). Known especially for pursuing people who had

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

FYOO-reez

### Alternate Names

Erinyes

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid*

### Lineage

Born from the blood of Uranus

murdered family members, the Furies punished their victims by driving them mad. When not punishing wrongdoers on earth, they lived in the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and tortured the damned.

According to some stories, the Furies were sisters born from the blood of **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), the ancient god of the sky, when he was wounded by his son **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs). In other stories, they were the children of Nyx (pronounced NIKS), goddess of night. In either case, their ancient origin set them apart from the other deities or gods in Greek and Roman mythology.

Most tales mention three Furies: Alecto (pronounced uh-LEK-toh; endless), Tisiphone (pronounced ti-SIF-uh-nee; punishment), and Megaera (pronounced muh-JEER-uh; jealous rage). Usually imagined as monstrous, foul-smelling hags, the sisters had bats' wings, coal-black skin, and hair entwined with serpents. They carried torches, whips, and cups of venom with which to torment wrongdoers. The Furies could also appear as storm clouds or swarms of insects.

## Major Myths

The Furies appear in many myths and ancient literary works. They have a prominent role in *Eumenides* (pronounced yoo-MEN-uh-deez), a play written by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-luhs). This play tells of the Furies' pursuit of Orestes (pronounced aw-RES-teez), who had killed his mother, Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), in revenge for her part in murdering his father, King **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) of Mycenae (pronounced mye-SEE-nee).

In *Eumenides*, Orestes' act was depicted as just, and the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) protected him in his sacred shrine at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye). But the Furies still demanded justice. Finally, the gods persuaded the Furies to allow Orestes to be tried by the Areopagus (pronounced ar-ee-OP-uh-guhs), an ancient court in the city of Athens. The goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), the protector goddess of Athens, cast the deciding ballot.

Athena then calmed the anger of the Furies, who became known afterward as the Eumenides (soothed ones) or Semnai Theai (pronounced SEM-nay THEE-eye; honorable goddesses). Now welcomed in Athens and given a home there, they helped protect the city and its citizens from harm. The Furies also had shrines dedicated to them





*The ghost of Clytemnestra summoned the Furies to avenge her murder by her children. The Furies were ugly hags who relentlessly pursued criminals to bring them to justice.* © YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART, PAUL MELLON COLLECTION, USA/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

in other parts of Greece. In some places, the Furies were linked with the three **Graces**, goddess sisters who represented beauty, charm, and goodness—qualities quite different from those usually associated with the Furies.

### The Furies in Context

The need for maintaining order among the public was important in ancient Greece and Rome. Before the rise of complex laws and codes, the Furies represented the power needed to maintain order. As these ancient societies developed their own methods of justice, the Furies became associated primarily with punishing those who broke “natural laws”: laws considered to be outside the scope of the normal justice system, such as killing a family member. Such a crime was considered so awful that no human method of punishment could be sufficient for it.

Although the Furies seemed terrifying and sought vengeance, they were not considered deliberately evil. On the contrary, they represented justice and were seen as defenders of moral and legal order. They punished the wicked and guilty without pity, but the good and innocent had little to fear from them.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Furies are symbols of the power of a guilty conscience. It is significant that they do not physically punish wrongdoers: they hound them into madness. This suggests that the Furies' power is within the mind of the guilty party.

## The Furies in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Furies appeared in many Greek dramas, especially those concerning Orestes and **Electra**. Perhaps the most famous artistic depiction of the Furies is the 1862 painting *The Remorse of Orestes* by William-Adolphe Bouguereau. The characters were the subject of a poem by Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle titled *Les Erinnyes*, written in 1872. The Furies also appeared as characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 play *The Flies*, a retelling of the myth of Electra. More recently, the trio appeared as recurring characters in the adventure television series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and in a storyline of Neil Gaiman's comic series *The Sandman*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Literature is filled with characters who are tormented by their conscience after committing a crime or wrong of some sort. Some notable examples include William Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1866 novel *Crime and Punishment*, and Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 short story "The Tell-Tale Heart." Think of some more examples of characters in books or films whose punishment for past crimes comes mainly from their own conscience. Do you think such a punishment is sufficient? Is it more or less suitable than a traditional punishment, like a jail sentence? Can you think of fictional characters who commit crimes and feel no pangs of conscience at all?

**SEE ALSO** Graces; Uranus

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# G



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Greek

## Pronunciation

GAY-uh

## Alternate Names

Terra, Tellus (Roman)

## Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

## Lineage

None



## Gaia

### Character Overview

Also called Gaea or Ge by the Greeks and Terra or Tellus by the Romans, she was a maternal figure who gave birth to many other creatures and deities. Gaia arose from Chaos (pronounced KAY-oss), the period of emptiness and disorder that came before the gods. Her body was the Earth itself. She gave birth to **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), who represented the sky; Pontus (pronounced PON-tus), the sea; and Oure (pronounced OO-ray), the mountains. Gaia was also the mother of **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), **Echo** (pronounced EK-oh), the **Furies**, and the serpent that guarded the **Golden Fleece**.

### Major Myths

Gaia appears in many myths about the early creation of the world and the gods. Her son and husband Uranus was not happy with the children she bore him, including the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-pee-z) and the **Titans**, so he forced them into the deep recesses of the Earth, which were also Gaia's bowels. Gaia convinced the youngest Titan, **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs), to overthrow Uranus and free her children from within her bowels. When Cronus had children, Gaia and Uranus warned him that one of his offspring would challenge and defeat him. Cronus therefore swallowed each child at birth to prevent their

betrayal. However, his wife, Rhea (pronounced REE-uh), managed to trick him and save the youngest one, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS). Zeus later overthrew Cronus with the help of Gaia.

### Gaia in Context

The myth of Gaia illustrates the places men and women held in ancient Greek and Roman society. Gaia, the female goddess, is the ultimate beginning to all things; this reflects the woman's place as the one who gives birth. However, after giving birth to the sky, ocean, and other gods, the male god of the sky takes control of the heavens. This reflects the fact that men ruled nearly all matters of formal society in ancient Greece and Rome. It is important to note that, despite her lack of ruling power after the time of creation, Gaia is a driving force behind the overthrow of the male gods Uranus and Cronus.

Gaia was widely worshipped at temples in Greece, including the shrine of the oracle at **Delphi**. The Greeks also took oaths in Gaia's name and believed that she would punish them if they failed to keep their word.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In **Greek mythology**, the goddess Gaia represented the earth, and she is often associated with plants and the soil. She was one of the most fundamental symbols of creation, and is sometimes pictured with a large, rounded belly symbolizing fertility. An important theme found in myths about Gaia is rebellion. Gaia convinces Cronus to rebel against Uranus in order to help her. Later, Gaia is instrumental in Zeus's rebellion against and overthrow of Cronus. In recent times, Gaia has endured as a symbol for Earth.

### Gaia in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Gaia is mentioned in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, and many other ancient works. In art, she was usually depicted as a woman half-risen from the ground. The name Gaia has been used in many science fiction works as the name of an Earth-like planet, and she has also appeared as a character in Marvel comic books. The goddess Gaia has also inspired an idea known as the Gaia hypothesis, which theorizes that all parts of the Earth, both living and nonliving, function together as if

the entire planet were a single giant organism. This idea has been embraced by many environmentalists looking to maintain a balance between nature and human development.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other resources, research the Gaia hypothesis. What are the main points of the hypothesis? What changes do supporters suggest that humans make in order to maintain balance on the planet? What elements of the ancient Greek myth of Gaia can be found in this modern view?

**SEE ALSO** *Aeneid, The*; Cyclopes; Delphi; Echo; Furies; Golden Fleece; Titans; Uranus; Zeus



# Galahad

## Character Overview

According to Arthurian legend, Galahad was the purest and noblest knight in King **Arthur**'s court at **Camelot**, and the only one ever to see the **Holy Grail**—the cup which Jesus Christ was believed to have used during the Last Supper before he was crucified. The son of **Lancelot**—another celebrated knight—and Elaine, Galahad was raised by nuns and arrived at the court as a young man.

When the knights took their seats at the Round Table, Galahad sat in a special seat known as the Siege Perilous. It was said that only the knight destined to find the Holy Grail could occupy this seat safely. All others who had sat in it had instantly perished. When Galahad remained unharmed, it became clear that he would accomplish great deeds. In some stories, the knight also proved his worth by drawing a special sword from a stone. An inscription on the stone stated that only the best knight in the land could withdraw the sword.

After Galahad's arrival at Arthur's court, the knights began their search for the Holy Grail. Galahad set off alone but later joined forces with two other knights, Perceval and Bors. Their travels took them to the

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

### Pronunciation

GAL-uh-had

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table

### Lineage

Son of Lancelot and Elaine

## Galahad

*Galahad's ability to pull an enchanted sword from a stone proved that he was the most worthy of the knights of King Arthur's Round Table.* HIP/SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



city of Sarras, where they were imprisoned by a cruel king. However, when the king was dying, he released the knights, and the people of the city chose Galahad to be their next king.

After ruling Sarras for a year, Galahad had a vision in which the Holy Grail was revealed to him. Content with having achieved his life's goal, he prayed to be allowed to die then. According to the legend, his request was granted and "a great multitude of **angels** bore his soul up to **heaven.**"

### Galahad in Context

Galahad can be seen as a symbolic recreation of Jesus Christ within Anglo-Saxon mythology. As the population of Western Europe moved

toward Christianity and away from other local mythologies during the early Middle Ages, church leaders sometimes incorporated Christian elements into existing myths as a way to preserve the traditional tales of the people while still encouraging them to accept Christian beliefs. Including elements of Christian myth, such as the Holy Grail, was also a way to personalize Christianity for the Anglo-Saxon people, most of whom were not familiar with the places mentioned throughout the Bible.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In the tales of the knights of the Round Table, Galahad represents purity of heart and spirit. This is reflected in his claim of the Siege Perilous, as well as his ability to see the Holy Grail when no one else can. An important theme of the tale of Galahad is that dedication and perseverance are necessary in order to achieve important goals.

### Galahad in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Galahad was an important part of Arthurian literature, especially the French Post-Vulgate Cycle of stories. These were used as the basis for Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the fifteenth century, considered by many to be the definitive work on Arthurian legend. While many modern tales of King Arthur ignore Galahad and his quest, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) includes the myth, as does the 1975 comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, in which Michael Palin plays the role of Galahad. In the 1989 adventure film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, archaeologist Jones (played by Harrison Ford) finds himself following in Galahad's footsteps as he sets off to find the Holy Grail.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The location of the Holy Grail has been sought by scholars and archaeologists since the early centuries following the spread of Christianity throughout the Western world. Even in modern times, archaeologists continue to search for the Holy Grail even though there is little reliable proof of its existence. Multiple books of fiction and nonfiction have been written on the topic. Richard Barber's 2005 book *The Holy Grail:*

*Imagination and Belief* is a highly acclaimed overview of the many myths and interpretations of the legend of the Holy Grail.

SEE ALSO Arthurian Legends; Holy Grail; Lancelot

## Galatea

See **Pygmalion and Galatea**.



### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

guh-NAYSH

### Alternate Names

Ganapati, Vinayaka

### Appears In

The Vedas

### Lineage

Son of Parvati and Shiva

## Ganesha

### Character Overview

Ganesha, the god of good fortune and wisdom, is one of the most popular Hindu gods. People call upon him at the beginning of any task because his blessing is believed to ensure success. Ganesha is portrayed as a short man with a pot belly, four hands, and an elephant's head with a single tusk. He is the son of **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh), the Hindu god of destruction, and his wife, Parvati (pronounced PAR-vuh-tee).

### Major Myths

Several legends tell how Ganesha came to have an elephant's head. One says that Parvati was so proud of her son that she asked all the gods to look at him, even the god Shani (pronounced SHAH-nee). Shani's gaze burned to ashes everything he saw, including Ganesha's head. **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh), the god of creation, instructed Parvati to give her son the first head she found, which turned out to be that of an elephant. According to another account, Shiva struck off Ganesha's head and later attached an elephant's head to his son's body.

Ganesha's single tusk is also the subject of various stories. In one tale, he lost his second tusk in a fight with Parasurama (pronounced pah-ruh-soo-RAH-muh), a form of the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-





*Statue of Ganesha seated on a throne.* IMAGE COPYRIGHT SEBASTIAN KNIGHT, 2008. USED UNDER LICENSE FROM SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.

noo). Another myth claims that Ganesha lost the tusk after using it to write the Hindu epic called the *Mahabharata*.

### Ganesha in Context

Elephants have long been used in areas of India as working animals prized for their intelligence and massive strength. Although they are not domesticated in the same way that horses or other draft animals are, their immense strength and power has been used for hauling loads and uprooting trees. Though wild by nature, elephants have rarely been viewed as a threat despite their size. This may explain why Hindus incorporated a god with the head of an elephant into their pantheon, or collection of recognized and worshipped gods.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Hindu mythology, Ganesha is a symbol of the arts and sciences, as well as representing the beginnings of things. Ganesha is also commonly associated with obstacles; he removes obstacles from deserving followers who are trying to accomplish a goal, while placing obstacles in the paths of those who need to learn strength or dedication. In all these roles, Ganesha functions as a teacher, mentor, or guardian. Like the elephant he resembles, Ganesha is widely regarded as a symbol of intelligence and wisdom. Ganesha is also a symbol of luck.

## Ganesha in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Ganesha is generally depicted with a human body, a large belly, four arms, and the head of an elephant. He is often shown to be dancing, and sometimes has a serpent wrapped around his neck or waist. He is sometimes shown holding a goad, which is normally used to spur an animal—such as an ox or elephant—to move forward. His distinctive appearance makes him one of the most easily recognized of the Hindu gods, and one of the most popularly depicted. His image appears on many different products in India, including food and incense. Ganesha figurines are features of millions of homes around the world. In addition to his many temples in India, Ganesha is a popular god among many Buddhists throughout Indonesia, and even decorates one denomination of Indonesian currency.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The three living species of elephants—the African bush elephant, the African forest elephant, and the Asian (Indian) elephant—are protected worldwide by laws that aim to keep their populations stable and growing. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find out the population status of elephants in Africa and Asia. Would you expect elephants to be in less danger in areas where Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is worshipped? Is this supported by the population numbers?

The 2006 story collection *The Broken Tusk: Stories of the Hindu God Ganesha* by Uma Krishnaswami offers an enjoyable introduction to the myths surrounding Ganesha.

**SEE ALSO** Hinduism and Mythology

# Geb

See **Nut**.



## Genies

### Character Overview

Genies (also called jinn or genii) are spirits in cultures of the Middle East and Africa. The term *genie* comes from the Arabic word *jinni*, which refers to an evil spirit that could take the shape of an animal or person. It could be found in every kind of nonliving thing, even air and **fire**. Jinn (the plural of jinni) were said to have magical powers.

In the Qur'an, jinn were created by Allah (pronounced ah-LAH), Islam's single supreme god, from smokeless fire. In perhaps the most well-known tale of jinn found in the Qur'an, Iblis (pronounced IB-liss), a jinni who refused to bow to Allah's creation Adam, was banished to Jahannam (pronounced JAH-hah-nahm; hell). Iblis is similar to the Christian idea of the devil.

In *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* (a collection of stories of Persian, Indian, and Arabian origin dating from the Middle Ages), two tales centered on genies are included. The first and most famous is the tale of **Aladdin**, a poor boy who was tricked by a sorcerer into taking a magic lamp from a cave. The sorcerer trapped Aladdin in the cave, but Aladdin managed to keep the lamp and escaped the cave thanks to a magic ring that contained a genie. Back home, Aladdin's mother tried to clean the lamp by rubbing it, and accidentally summoned an even more powerful genie that lived within it. The genie of the lamp granted Aladdin great wealth and a palace, and he married the daughter of the emperor. However, the sorcerer managed to find Aladdin and trick his wife into giving up the lamp. Aladdin then had to rely on the lesser genie from his magic ring to help find the sorcerer and reclaim the lamp.

The other tale of genies in *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights* concerns a fisherman who netted a jar while casting for fish. He opened the jar and released a genie that had been imprisoned for

### Nationality/Culture

Arabic/Islamic

### Pronunciation

JEE-neeZ

### Alternate Names

Jinn, Ifrit

### Appears In

The Qur'an, *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*

### Lineage

None

## Roman Genius

In ancient Rome, the term *genii*, the plural form of the Latin word *genius*, referred to the spirits that watched over every man. The genius was responsible for forming a man's character and caused all actions. Believed to be present at birth, genius came to be thought of as great inborn ability. Women had a similar spirit known as a *juno*. Some Romans also believed in a spirit, called an evil genius, that fought the good genius for control of a man's fate. In later Roman mythology, *genii* were spirits who guarded a household or community.

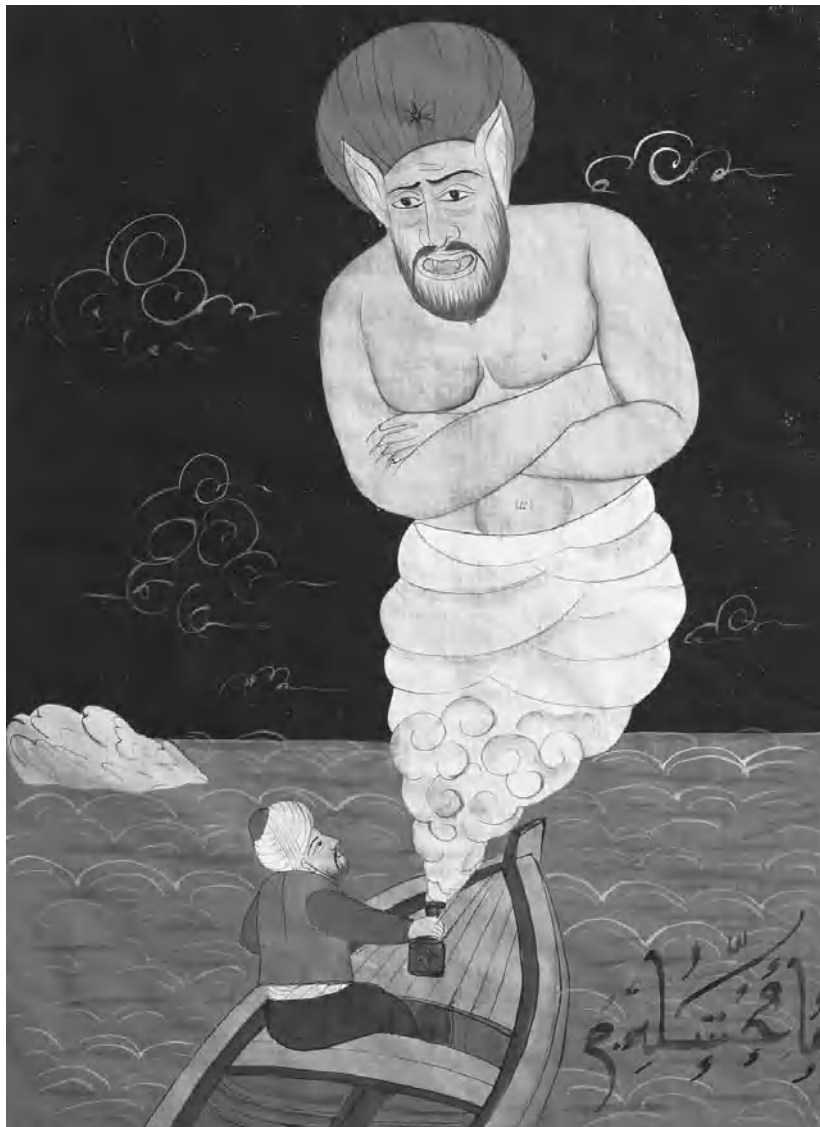
hundreds of years. The genie, angry from being trapped for centuries in the jar, did not offer to fulfill the fisherman's wishes, but instead offered him his choice of death. The fisherman tricked the genie back into the jar by saying that he did not see how the genie could have possibly fit into such a tiny jar. The fisherman resealed the jar until the genie agreed to provide a favor. After being released, the genie led the fisherman to a pond where he caught four magical fish to present to the sultan. The fisherman gave the sultan the fish, and his children became prosperous members of the sultan's court.

## Genies in Context

In early Islamic belief, jinn made up a world that existed parallel to humans: although they were invisible to humans, they existed in much the same types of communities and tribes. Just as people were defined by their relation to Islam, there were jinn that accepted Islam and jinn that did not. Jinn were essentially a reflection of the same beliefs and concerns that humans dealt with, but on a grander, more supernatural scale. They also provided an explanation for the temptations and frustrations people faced on a daily basis, which were seen as the work of unholy jinn.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Jinn often represent great power that can be devastating if not properly controlled. The vessel that contains a jinni, whether it is a ring, lamp, jar, or some other object, is usually seen as a symbol of imprisonment. One of the main themes of many stories about jinn is wish fulfillment, as shown in the tales of both Aladdin and the fisherman. In many such tales, justice



*One popular story involving genies is about a fisherman who must trick a genie into granting him a wish.* THE ART ARCHIVE/UNIVERSITY LIBRARY OF ISTANBUL/DAGLI ORTI.

also plays an important role: those who are undeserving may get their wishes granted, but these wishes often have unforeseen consequences.

### Genies in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although genies appear prominently in the Qur'an, they are most popularly known from their appearances in folk tales and *The Book of*

*One Thousand and One Nights*. This collection of tales has appeared in many translations and versions over the centuries. The story of Aladdin is especially well known, and has been used as the basis for many films—most notably *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) and the 1992 Disney animated tale *Aladdin*.

Other modern depictions of genies can be found in the novel *Declare* by Tim Powers (2001), and the *Bartimaeus Trilogy* by Jonathan Stroud (2003). Popular depictions of genies in television and film include the 1965 series *I Dream of Jeannie* starring Barbara Eden, and the 1996 Shaquille O’Neal film *Kazaam*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The *Children of the Lamp* series by P. B. Kerr is a series of fantasy novels about twelve-year-old **twins** named John and Philippa who discover they are actually descended from a line of jinn and must find a way to adjust to their new supernatural lives. The first book, *The Akhenaten Adventure* (2005), follows the pair from New York to England to Egypt in pursuit of the ghost of Akhenaten, all while being pursued by an evil jinn named Iblis.

SEE ALSO African Mythology; Roman Mythology; Semitic Mythology



## George, St.

### Nationality/Culture

Christian

### Pronunciation

saynt JORJ

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, Christian myths

### Lineage

Unknown

### Character Overview

St. George was a Christian who is said to have lived in Anatolia, the area now known as Turkey, in the third century. No historical record of the man is known to exist. Over the centuries, legendary tales about his courage and dedication to God grew in popularity, and he was granted the status of sainthood by the Catholic Church.

The most popular tale about St. George describes how he killed a terrifying dragon. The dragon was threatening the citizens of a local town. The people decided to cast lots each day to choose one person for the dragon to eat, thus sparing the rest of the population. One day the king’s daughter was selected to be the dragon’s victim. As the dragon

prepared to devour her, St. George arrived. He charged forward, made the sign of the cross, and killed the dragon. Impressed with both his faith and his strength, the people of the city decided to convert to Christianity.

Other tales concern St. George's martyrdom, or death for his Christian beliefs, which took place in Palestine. The Roman government there was punishing Christians for their beliefs, and St. George openly opposed their policies. The Romans tortured him for his resistance and beheaded him in 303 CE.

### St. George in Context

St. George was an important character in early Christianity because he offered something most Christian figures did not: he was a soldier who fought and conquered in the name of Christ. Although most early Christian figures were described as steadfast in their beliefs, very few actively fought to further those beliefs. For this reason, St. George became especially important during the Crusades, the period from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries in which European Christians were called by the pope to conquer non-Christians in order to "reclaim" the holy lands in and around Jerusalem in the Middle East.

The legends about St. George spread to Europe during the Crusades, when armies of Europeans traveled to the Middle East. In the 1300s, George became the patron, or protector, saint of England. He is often pictured in Christian art carrying a sword and shield, mounted on a white horse, and wearing armor decorated with a red cross on a white background—a look mimicked by the Crusaders, who took the red cross on a white background as their uniform. The image of St. George slaying the dragon is also shown on the official coat of arms of the city of Moscow, as well as many other locations throughout Eastern Europe.

Today, St. George's position as England's patron saint is touched by controversy. His traditional banner, the red cross on the white background, now associated with the Crusaders' invasion of the Middle East hundreds of years ago, can be seen as insulting to England's growing Muslim population. Many see England's decision to support U.S. military action in Iraq as a type of new Crusade against Islam, and St. George as a symbol of Christian aggression against non-Christians.

## A Famous Rallying Cry

William Shakespeare used St. George in one of the most famous military rallying speeches in English literature. In his historical play *Henry V*, King Henry besieges the French city of Harfleur in 1415 and meets stiff resistance. Shakespeare's Henry, nicknamed Harry, urges his soldiers onward:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;  
Or close the wall up with our English dead.  
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man  
As modest stillness and humility:  
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,  
Then imitate the action of the tiger; . . .  
For there is none of you so mean and base,  
That hath not noble lustre in your eyes.  
I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,  
Straining upon the start. The game's afoot:  
Follow your spirit, and upon this charge  
Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Christian mythology, St. George is one of the most popular symbols of bravery and religious dedication, an ideal example of a Christian for others to follow. The white horse St. George rides is seen as a symbol of purity and righteousness. The dragon of the myth is sometimes said to symbolize a non-Christian group or deity; this is emphasized by the fact that after St. George slays the beast, the townspeople all convert to Christianity. In this way, St. George represents the power of Christianity to conquer non-Christian belief systems.

## St. George in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The most notable source of information about St. George is Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a thirteenth-century collection of stories about the lives of various Catholic saints. The story of St. George and the dragon has been retold numerous times throughout the centuries, and has appeared in two famous paintings by Raphael, as well as paintings by Tintoretto, Peter Paul Rubens, and Gustave Moreau. Several elements of



the myth were used in the 1981 fantasy film *Dragonslayer*, though St. George does not appear as a character in the film.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

St. George was an important symbol to Christians in the years of the Crusades. The Crusades, like modern conflicts in the Middle East, were essentially “holy wars” fought by two groups of differing beliefs who both considered a certain region sacred to their religion. Do you think the myth of St. George promotes the idea of using violence as a way to conquer people with different beliefs? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Dragons



# Giants

## Character Overview

Giants play many different roles in myth and legend. These mythical beings, much bigger than people, usually have human form, but some are monstrous in appearance. Giants often seem to be cruel and evil, although they may be merely clumsy or stupid. In some myths and legends, however, they are friendly and helpful or at least neutral.

Many different cultures have their own unique myths about giants. The major sources of myths related to giants are **Greek mythology**, **Norse mythology**, and the various myths of the American Indian tribes, though other cultures also have examples of giants that appear in legend from time to time.

**Greek Giants** The word *giant* comes from the Greek Gigantes (meaning “earthborn”), a race of huge creatures who were the offspring of **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth, and **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), the heavens. These giants were half man, half monster, with serpents’ tails instead of legs. After Gaia became angry with **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the father of the Olympian gods, the giants and the Olympians engaged in a war to the death known as the Gigantomachy (pronounced jih-gan-TOH-muh-kee).

### Nationality/Culture

Various

### Alternate Names

Gigantes (Greek), Cyclopes (Greek), Rom (Ethiopian)

### Appears In

Various mythologies around the world

### Lineage

Varies

The gods needed the help of a human hero because the giants could not be killed by gods. Zeus therefore fathered a son, the mighty **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez), whose mother was a human. The two sides met in battle at the home of the giants, a place called Phlegra (pronounced FLEE-gruh; “Burning Lands”). The giants hurled huge rocks and mountaintops and brandished burning oak trees. The gods fought back strongly, and Heracles picked off the giants one by one with his arrows. Many Greek sculptors and artists depicted the Gigantomachy, with the gods’ victory over the giants, as the triumph of Greek civilization over barbarism, or of good over evil. The Greeks used this battle to explain features of the natural world. For example, during the struggle in which the Greek gods overcame the giants, several fallen giants became part of the landscape. As the giant Enceladus (pronounced en-SEL-uh-duhs) ran from the battlefield, the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) smashed him with the island of Sicily. Thereafter, he lay imprisoned under the island, breathing his fiery breath out through the volcano called Etna. Under Vesuvius, a volcano on the Italian mainland, lay another giant, Mimas (pronounced MYE-muhs). **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of metalsmiths, buried him there under a heap of molten metal.

Two special groups of giants, also the children of Gaia, were the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-peeze) and the hundred-armed giants. The three Cyclopes each had one eye in the middle of the forehead. The three hundred-armed giants each had fifty heads and one hundred arms. Both groups were loyal to Zeus. The hundred-armed giants were the jailors of Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), the place of punishment in the **underworld**, or land of the dead.

**Norse Giants** Giants appear in numerous myths of northern Europe. The giants’ realm was a place called Jotunheim (pronounced YAW-toon-heim), located in Midgard (pronounced MID-gard), the center of the three-tiered Norse universe. There they dwelt in a huge castle called Utgard (pronounced OOT-gard).

Norse myths, like Greek myths, say that the gods fought and conquered the race of giants. Yet the gods and the giants were not always enemies. Friendship and even marriage could occur between them. Male deities mated with female giants. The mother of the thunder god **Thor** was a giantess named Jord (pronounced YORD), for example. However, the gods violently resisted all attempts by giants to mate with goddesses.

The giant Hrungnir (pronounced HRUNG-nur) built a wall around Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods, and for payment desired the goddess **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh). But he received only a crushing blow from Thor's hammer.

Many myths concern Thor's conflict with the giants. In one tale, he journeyed to Utgard to challenge the giants. The giants beat Thor and his companions at several tests of strength but only by using trickery. In one contest, Thor lost a wrestling match to an old woman who was in fact Age, which overcomes all. Though the gods were not always good and the giants were not always bad, the struggle between the two groups constitutes one of the underlying themes of Norse mythology and often symbolizes the struggle of good against evil.

**American Indian Giants** Most giants in American Indian mythology are evil and dangerous. Some start fights among humans so that in the confusion they can steal the men's wives. Others steal children, sometimes to eat them. Many Native American giants have monstrous or inhuman features. Tall Man, a giant of the Seminole people, smells bad, while giants in Lakota stories look like oxen. In the mythology of the Native American Lakota people, Waziya (pronounced wah-ZEE-uh) is a northern giant who blows the winter wind.

The Shoshone Indians of the American West tell stories of Dzoavits (pronounced ZOH-uh-vits), an ogre or hideous giant who stole two children from Dove. Eagle helped Dove recover her children. When the angry Dzoavits chased Dove, other animals protected her. Crane made a bridge from his leg so she could cross a river. Weasel dug an escape tunnel for her, and Badger made a hole where Dove and her children could hide. After tricking Dzoavits into entering the wrong hole, Badger sealed him in with a boulder.

**Ancestral Giants** The myths of various cultures associate giants with primal, or primitive, times. Sometimes giants figure in the creation of the world. Norse mythology says that the first thing to appear out of chaos was the frost giant **Ymir** (pronounced EE-mir), father of both giants and people, who had to die so that the earth could be formed from his body. The giant Pan Gu (pronounced PAN GOO) fills a similar role in **Chinese mythology**. Aboriginal people in northwestern Australia have stories about the two Bagadjimbiri brothers, both giants and creator gods, who made the landscape and people. When they died, their bodies

## Giants

*Giants in Native American mythology—such as the one represented by this mask—are evil and often try to steal children.* WERNER FORMAN/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



became water snakes and their spirits became clouds. According to the Akamba people of Kenya, a giant hunter named Mwooka created the mountains and rivers.

Myths from many parts of the world say that in some remote time human ancestors were giants and that they have shrunk down to their present size over a very long period. Other stories tell of giants living among people at an earlier time in history. Gog and Magog (MAY-gog) are two giants of British myth. Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain, is said to have conquered them. In Jewish myth, a race of giants lived in the world along with people before the great flood that wiped out most living things. One giant, Og, survived the flood by hitching a ride on **Noah's** Ark. Later, however, he came into conflict with Noah's descendants, and the prophet Moses (pronounced MOH-ziss) had to kill him.

**Other Giants** One of the most famous giants from the Judeo-Christian tradition is Goliath (pronounced guh-LYE-uth), a huge Philistine warrior who fought the young Israelite hero David. The Philistine and Israelite armies had agreed to let their battle be decided by their two best warriors, but no one on the Israelite side wanted to fight the mighty Goliath except for David, who felt himself assured of victory despite being at a significant disadvantage in armor, weaponry, and size. In a victory of wit over brute strength, David used a stone from his slingshot to knock Goliath unconscious, and then cut off his head with his own sword. The English folktale of Jack the Giant-Killer tells a similar story as Jack kills the giant Blunderbore (pronounced BLUN-dur-bor).

Occasionally, cruel and kind giants appear in the same myth. The Mensa people of Ethiopia tell a story about a man who tries to steal cattle from one of the Rom, a tribe of giants. Enraged, the giant tries to kill the man. As the man flees, another giant befriends him and hides him in his cloak. Unfortunately, the man is crushed when the two giants come to blows.

## Giants in Context

The peoples of the ancient world both relied on and feared the natural forces of the world in which they lived. While needing the **sun** and rain to grow their crops, they were also at the mercy of storms, droughts, and other natural events beyond their control. The stories of giants in various cultures reflect both the good and the bad of the natural world as primal, uncontrollable forces that sometimes help and sometimes destroy. They appear in creation myths as necessary for life, but in other stories they are predators that eat men and cause trouble. The strength of giants prevented most humans from matching them in a physical battle, but humans often defeated giants by acting in clever ways. In the same way, ancient peoples could not hope to control the weather and climate of the natural world, but they could use their intelligence to respond to nature in a way that worked to their benefit and helped them escape harm.

Giants are sometimes described as beings that are from a more ancient time period, a time before the establishment of gods and order, which connects them more closely with an uncivilized world. Through the stories of giants, ancient peoples attempted to explain natural phenomena. Even more recent cultures used giants to explain phenomena they did not understand; the writers of European folklore thought

that construction projects from Roman times were the work of giants because they did not believe that mere men could have completed such huge works.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Giants represent both the good and bad side of powerful natural forces. In some traditions, a giant appears as a symbol of chaos or disorder, threatening to disrupt the orderly natural world or social community. Their size makes them able to cause significant damage. But there are other giants that protect humans, such as Talos, the guardian of the island of Crete. Many stories have giants as key figures in the creation of the world.

The evil giants of myth generally need to be defeated, either by humans or by supernatural beings such as gods. Their conflict with the gods, in particular, is a key theme in world mythology, representing the clash between the old world and the new, good and evil. Although immensely powerful, these creatures fall when faced with bravery and cleverness because they generally act on instinct, using brute force. Many myths describe giants as being stupid and ugly.

### Giants in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Giants have remained popular figures in art and literature even through modern times. Jonathan Swift's classic humorous novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) features a race of giants called the Brobdingnagians, and John Bunyan's well-known Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) depicts Despair as a giant. More recent books such as the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling and the *Spiderwick Chronicles* by Holly Black also feature giants as important characters.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The tall tale of Paul Bunyan and his giant blue ox is a relatively recent addition to myths about giants. Use your library and the Internet to find out more about Paul Bunyan and his place in American culture. How is his story different from the giant myths of much older cultures? How is it the same?

SEE ALSO Cyclopes



# Gilgamesh

## Character Overview

The best-known and most popular hero in the mythology of the ancient Near East, Gilgamesh (pronounced GIL-guh-mesh) was a Sumerian (pronounced soo-MER-ee-un) king who wished to live forever. Endowed with superhuman strength, courage, and power, he appeared in numerous legends and myths, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This long, grand-scale poem, written more than three thousand years ago, may be the earliest work of written literature. It is an adventure story that explores human nature, dealing with values and concerns that are still relevant today.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* begins with a brief account of Gilgamesh's ancestry, his youth, and his accomplishments as king. Although acknowledged to be a wise man and a courageous warrior, Gilgamesh is criticized as a cruel ruler who mistreats the people of Uruk (pronounced OO-rook). The nobles of the city complain bitterly of Gilgamesh's behavior. Their complaints attract the attention of the gods, who decide to do something about it.

**Enkidu** The gods create a rival for Gilgamesh—a man named Enkidu (pronounced EN-kee-doo) who is as strong as the king and who lives in the forest with the wild animals. Their plan is for Enkidu to fight Gilgamesh and teach him a lesson, leading the king to end his harsh behavior toward his people. When Gilgamesh hears about Enkidu, he sends a woman from the temple to civilize the wild man by showing him how to live among people.

After learning the ways of city life, Enkidu goes to Uruk. There he meets the king at a marketplace and challenges him to a wrestling match. The king and the wild man struggle, and Gilgamesh is so impressed by Enkidu's strength, skill, and courage that he embraces his rival, and the two men become close friends. Because of this loving friendship, Gilgamesh softens his behavior toward the people of Uruk and becomes a just and honorable ruler.

One day Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to travel to a distant cedar forest to battle the fierce giant Humbaba (pronounced hum-BAB-uh)

**Nationality/Culture**  
Sumerian

**Pronunciation**  
GIL-guh-mesh

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
The *Epic of Gilgamesh*

**Lineage**  
Son of Lugalbanda

who guards the forest. Knowing that he cannot live forever like the gods, Gilgamesh hopes that he will gain the next best thing—lasting fame—by slaying the monster. Together the two **heroes** kill Humbaba, and Enkidu cuts off the monster's head.

**The Insulted Goddess** Impressed with Gilgamesh's courage and daring, the goddess **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr) offers to marry him. He refuses, however, and insults the goddess by reminding her of her cruelty toward previous lovers. Enraged by his refusal and insults, Ishtar persuades her father, the god Anu (pronounced AH-noo), to send the sacred Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh. Anu sends the bull, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull. Enkidu further insults Ishtar by throwing a piece of the dead bull in her face.

That night, Enkidu dreams that the gods have decided that he must die for his role in killing the Bull of Heaven. His death will also be the punishment for his dear friend Gilgamesh. Enkidu falls ill and has other dreams of his death and descent to the **underworld**, or land of the dead. He grows weaker and weaker and finally dies after twelve days of suffering. Gilgamesh is overwhelmed with grief. He also fears his own death and decides that he must find a way to gain immortality, or the ability to live forever.

**Search for Utnapishtim** After Enkidu's funeral and burial, Gilgamesh sets out on a long and hazardous journey to seek a man named Utnapishtim (pronounced oot-nuh-PISH-tim). Utnapishtim had survived a great flood and was granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh travels through various strange lands and meets people who tell him to end his search and accept his fate as a mortal. Refusing to give up, Gilgamesh finally reaches the sea and persuades a boatman to take him across the waters to the home of Utnapishtim.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the Great Flood and of the boat that he constructed to save his family and various animals. He then offers the hero a challenge: if Gilgamesh can stay awake for seven days, he will be given the immortality he desperately desires. Gilgamesh accepts the challenge but soon falls asleep. When he awakes seven days later, he realizes that immortality is beyond his reach, and with sorrow, he accepts his fate. Utnapishtim tells him not to despair because the gods have granted him other great gifts, such as courage, skill in battle, and wisdom.



In appreciation of Gilgamesh's courageous efforts to find him, Utnapishtim tells the hero where to find a plant that can restore youth. Gilgamesh finds the plant and continues on his journey. Along the way, while he bathes in a pool, a snake steals the plant. This explains the snake's ability to slough off its old skin and start afresh with a new one. Disappointed and tired, but also wiser and more at peace with himself, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk to await his death.

The last part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, thought to be a later addition, tells how the spirit of Enkidu returns from the underworld and helps Gilgamesh find some lost objects he received from Ishtar. Enkidu also tells his close friend about the **afterlife** and describes the grim conditions of the underworld.

### Gilgamesh in Context

Although most tales about Gilgamesh are obviously myths, they may be based on an actual historical figure. Ancient lists of Sumerian kings identify Gilgamesh as an early ruler of the city of Uruk around 2600 BCE. These same texts, however, also say that Gilgamesh was half-man and half-god, and reigned for 126 years.

According to legendary accounts, Gilgamesh was the son of the goddess Ninsun (pronounced nin-SOON) and of either Lugalbanda, a king of Uruk, or of a high priest of the district of Kullab. Gilgamesh's greatest accomplishment as king was the construction of massive city walls around Uruk, an achievement mentioned in both myths and historical texts.

Gilgamesh first appeared in five short poems written in the Sumerian language sometime between 2000 and 1500 BCE. The poems—"Gilgamesh and Huwawa," "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven," "Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish,"

*Statue of the Assyrian hero Gilgamesh.* ERICH LESSING/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



“Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Nether World,” and “The Death of Gilgamesh”—relate various incidents and adventures in his life.

However, the most famous and complete account of Gilgamesh’s adventures is found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Originally written between 1500 and 1000 BCE, the epic weaves various tales of Gilgamesh together into a single story. Its basic theme is the king’s quest for fame, glory, and immortality through heroic deeds. One of the best-known parts of the epic is the tale of a great flood, which may have inspired the story of **Noah** (pronounced NOH-uh) and the flood in the Bible.

The epic appears on twelve clay tablets found at the site of the ancient city of Nineveh (pronounced NIN-uh-vuh). The tablets came from the library of King Ashurbanipal (pronounced ah-shoor-BAH-nee-pahl), the last great king of Assyria (pronounced uh-SEER-ee-uh), who reigned in the 600s BCE.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the key themes in the story of Gilgamesh is mortality, or the knowledge that one will eventually die. This knowledge is what drives Gilgamesh to search the world for a way to live forever. This certainty of death is emphasized when his best friend and companion, Enkidu, dies in his company. Gilgamesh’s fear of his own death is overcome when he finally realizes that all men must die, and that the gods have already given him many other great gifts.

Another important theme in the epic of Gilgamesh is the power of friendship. Enkidu is originally sent by the gods to harm Gilgamesh for his cruel ways. Instead, the two men find respect in each other’s abilities, and become great friends. This ultimately accomplishes the same goal the gods set out to do: it helps Gilgamesh learn to become a better person. When Gilgamesh loses his friend, he is devastated.

### Gilgamesh in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As the first known work of literature, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has inspired countless re-tellings and adaptations over thousands of years. These adaptations have taken the form of stage plays, operas and choral works, radio dramas, films, novels, and comic books. Some notable versions of the tale include Robert Silverberg’s 1984 novel *Gilgamesh the King*, the three-act opera *Gilgamesh* created by Rudolf Brucci in 1986, and *Never Grow Old: The Novel of Gilgamesh* (2007) by Brian Trent. Many other

works have been loosely inspired by the Gilgamesh myth, including the Japanese animated science fiction series *Gilgamesh* (2003) and the surreal 1985 Quay Brothers animated short *This Unnameable Little Broom*. Gilgamesh is also mentioned in the song “The Mesopotamians” on the 2007 album *The Else* by They Might Be Giants.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The epic of Gilgamesh is largely the story of two best friends experiencing a grand adventure together. This same formula has been used countless times in literature, television, and film; in fact, a sub-genre known as the “buddy movie” is built upon this very foundation. Can you think of a modern example of a similar tale that you have seen or read? How is it similar to the story of Gilgamesh? How is it different?

SEE ALSO Floods; Ishtar; Noah

## Gluskabe

See **Gluskap**.



## Gluskap

### Character Overview

Gluskap is a culture hero of the Algonquian-speaking people of North America, usually known as the Wabanaki (pronounced wah-buh-NAH-kee). Tabaldak, the creator god, made Gluskap and his brother Malsum from the dust that had built up on his hands. According to the mythology of several tribes in the Northeastern United States and Canada, Gluskap was responsible for making all the good things in the universe—the air, the earth, the animals, and the people—from his mother’s body. His evil brother Malsum created the mountains and valleys and all the things that are a bother to humans, such as snakes and stinging insects. Malsum is sometimes described as a wolf.

### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/  
Wabanaki

### Pronunciation

GLOOS-kahb

### Alternate Names

Gluskabe, Glooscap

### Appears In

Northeastern American  
Indian creation mythology

### Lineage

Formed out of the dust  
from Tabaldak’s hands

There are many tales about Gluskap's adventures and how he served his people, teaching them to hunt, fish, weave, and do many other useful things. In one story, a giant monster stole all the water and would not share it with anyone else. Gluskap fought the monster and turned it into a bullfrog. In another myth, Gluskap freed all the rabbits in the world, which were being held prisoner by the Great White Hare. The rabbits then became food for his people.

### Gluskap in Context

To the Wabanaki people, Gluskap reflected the importance of treating the land and nature with respect. He was often tasked with correcting imbalances in nature, such as returning water to the world or limiting a giant bird's ability to create storms with its wings. After the Wabanaki people came into contact with white settlers, their differing views on the treatment of the natural world were reflected in their myths: Gluskap, it was said, was unhappy with the way the white people acted toward the land and creatures of the earth.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes in the myths of Gluskap is the idea of protecting the order of the natural world. Gluskap is associated with order, in contrast to his brother Malsum, who is seen as an agent of disorder and difficulty. It is Malsum who disrupts the natural state of things and makes circumstances difficult for both humans and animals.

### Gluskap in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As with many characters from American Indian myth, Gluskap was given little opportunity to become part of mainstream American culture. In recent years, however, as the significance of these belief systems has been recognized, Gluskap has experienced more popularity than ever before. Statues of the hero have been erected in Parrsboro and Truro, both in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. Gluskap is the featured character of the children's book *Gluskabe and the Four Wishes* (1995) by Joseph Bruchac, and is mentioned in the Newbery Honor book *The Sign of the Beaver* (1984) by Elizabeth George Speare.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

To the Wabanaki people, Gluskap worked hard to maintain harmony between the different parts of the natural world. Some modern critics of the environmentalist movement suggest that nature itself—not humans—is the best regulator for keeping balance in the natural world. They point to examples where human interference with nature, such as the prevention of small-scale forest fires, has unintentionally led to bigger problems (massive forest fires that could have been prevented by natural, small-scale burns). Do you think human attempts to regulate nature are helpful, or do you think the unintended consequences of these actions are more damaging to nature? What about human attempts to “clean up” damage that has resulted from human activity?

SEE ALSO Animals in Mythology; Native American Mythology



# Golden Bough

## Myth Overview

In **Roman mythology**, the Golden Bough was a tree branch with golden leaves that enabled the Trojan hero **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) to travel through the **underworld**, or land of the dead, safely. The bough was said to be sacred to Proserpina (pronounced prah-sur-PEE-nuh; the Roman version of Greek goddess **Persephone**, pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), the queen of the underworld, and was associated with the goddess Diana (the Roman version of the Greek goddess **Artemis**, pronounced AHR-tuh-miss).

The story of Aeneas and the Golden Bough is found in the *Aeneid*, the epic poem by the Roman poet Virgil (pronounced VUR-juhl). According to this tale, the spirit of Anchises (pronounced an-KY-seez), Aeneas’s dead father, appears and tells Aeneas to visit the underworld, where he will learn what the future holds in store for people. First, however, Aeneas must find the oracle known as the Sibyl of Cumae (pronounced KYOO-mee), who will lead him to the land of the dead.

Aeneas locates the oracle, who informs him that he cannot pass through the underworld safely without the Golden Bough. When Aeneas

### Nationality/Culture

Roman

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Virgil’s *Aeneid*

enters the forest to look for the sacred branch, two doves lead him to an oak tree that shelters the bough of shimmering golden leaves. Aeneas gets the Golden Bough and returns to the Sibyl of Cumae.

Together Aeneas and the Sibyl enter the underworld. With the Golden Bough in his possession, the hero is able to pass safely through the various dangers and obstacles there. At the deadly and magical river Acheron (pronounced AK-uh-ron), the boatman Charon (pronounced KAIR-uhn) sees the sacred bough and takes Aeneas and the Sibyl across the water to the kingdom of **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez). There Aeneas finds the spirit of his father.

The Golden Bough also appears in other legends, particularly in connection with the goddess Diana. According to some accounts, it was a custom among worshippers of Diana for a slave to cut a branch from a sacred tree and then kill the priest responsible for guarding the tree. The slave took the priest's place and was later killed himself in the same way.

### The Golden Bough in Context

Some scholars, such as James Frazer, have suggested that the Golden Bough was actually mistletoe. Virgil describes the Golden Bough as being sheltered by an oak, much as mistletoe grows as a parasite on many trees, including oaks. In addition, mistletoe has a long history of supernatural associations in different cultures. Ancient Romans may have believed that mistletoe was dropped from the heavens and landed in the trees where it grew, which suggested that it would contain divine powers.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In the tale of Aeneas and the Golden Bough, the magic branch represents both light and life. In this way it protects Aeneas from darkness and death while in the underworld. In the legend of the priest of Diana, the Golden Bough represents the sacred duty of the order that watches over it. It also represents the endless cycle of death and rebirth, as the priest who guards it is killed and replaced by a new priest, who will eventually meet the same fate.

### The Golden Bough in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although mentioned as part of a minor story in the *Aeneid*, the Golden Bough has become especially well known among modern scholars. The

legends of the Golden Bough inspired Scottish scholar Sir James Frazer to write *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, a multivolume study of religion and mythology published in 1890. This landmark work has in turn inspired many works of both fiction and nonfiction, and is the main source of the Golden Bough myth for modern readers. *The Assassin Tree*, an opera based on the myth of the slaves and the priest guarding the Golden Bough, was created by Stuart MacRae and Simon Armitage and premiered in 2006.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Why do you think death and **sacrifice** are so often connected with fertility goddesses like Prosperina?

**SEE ALSO** Aeneas; *Aeneid*, *The*; Artemis; Balder; Persephone; Roman Mythology; Underworld



## Golden Fleece

### Myth Overview

One of the best-known stories in **Greek mythology** concerns the hero **Jason** and his quest for the Golden Fleece. The fleece, which came from a magic ram, hung in a sacred grove of trees in the distant land of Colchis (pronounced KOL-kis). Jason's adventure, however, was only one part of the story of the Golden Fleece, which began years earlier.

According to legend, King Athamas (pronounced ATH-uh-mas) of Boeotia (pronounced bee-OH-shuh) in Greece had two children by his wife Nephele (pronounced NEF-uh-lee): a son, Phrixus (pronounced FRIK-suhs), and a daughter, Helle (pronounced HEL-ee). After a time, Athamas grew tired of Nephele and took a new wife, Ino (pronounced EYE-noh), with whom he had two sons. Jealous of Phrixus and Helle, Ino plotted against them. First, she cunningly had seeds destroyed so that crops would not grow, resulting in a famine. She then arranged to have blame for the famine placed on her stepchildren and convinced Athamas that he must **sacrifice** Phrixus to

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Pindar's *Pythian Ode*,  
Apollonius Rhodius's  
*Argonautica*, Euripides'  
*Medea*

**Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, to restore the kingdom's prosperity.

Fearful for her children's lives, Nephele sought help from the god **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez), and he sent a winged ram with a fleece of gold to carry Phrixus and Helle to safety. While flying over the water on the ram, Helle fell off and drowned. But Phrixus reached the land of Colchis and was welcomed by its ruler, King Aeëtes (pronounced ye-EE-teez). Phrixus sacrificed the ram to Zeus and gave the Golden Fleece to the king, who placed it in an oak tree in a sacred grove. It was guarded by a dragon that never slept.

The story of the Golden Fleece resumes some time later when Jason and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts), a band of Greek **heroes**, set out in search of the fleece aboard a ship called the *Argo*. Jason undertook this quest in order to gain his rightful place as king of Iolcus (pronounced ee-AHL-kuhs) in Thessaly (THESS-uh-lee). The country had been ruled for a number of years by his uncle Pelias (pronounced PEEL-ee-uhs).

After many adventures, Jason and the Argonauts finally reached Colchis. However, King Aeëtes refused to give up the Golden Fleece unless Jason could harness two fire-breathing bulls to a plow, plant **dragons'** teeth in the ground, and defeat the warriors that sprang up from the teeth. Aeëtes had a daughter, **Medea** (pronounced me-DEE-uh), who was a sorceress. She fell in love with Jason and helped him accomplish these tasks. Medea also helped Jason steal the Golden Fleece by charming the serpent that guarded it and putting the creature to sleep. Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts then set sail for Iolcus with the fleece. Although Jason returned with the fleece, he did not become king and was punished by the gods for betraying Medea's love; however, Jason's son, Thessalus (pronounced THESS-uh-luhs), did eventually become king.

## The Golden Fleece in Context

The myths of the Golden Fleece center on the passing of royal power from one generation to the next. These myths pre-date government rule by elected officials, and represent an older system of rule still common in many regions during the height of the Greek empire. Historical records suggest that plots and overthrows of rulers were all too common in ancient Greece and Rome. The myths of the Golden Fleece help to encourage the traditional passing of power from a king to his son; this is



done by casting both Phrixus and Jason in sympathetic and heroic roles, prompting the audience to root for their success.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, the Golden Fleece is a symbol of that which is unattainable or cannot be possessed. Pelias only gives Jason the task because he believes it cannot be completed. Even after arriving in Colchis, the fleece seems impossible to take. And once Jason returns to Iolcus with the fleece, he is still unable to attain his rightful place as king. The Golden Fleece can also be seen as a symbol of rightful heirs to royal power, as both Phrixus and Jason possessed the fleece and both were rightful heirs to their fathers' thrones.

## The Golden Fleece in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Many writers have been inspired by the subject of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Among the ancient Greek works concerning the subject are Pindar's *Pythian Ode*, Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, and Euripides' play *Medea*. In the Middle Ages, Chaucer retold the story in the *Legend of Good Women*, and in the 1800s, William Morris wrote the long narrative poem *Life and Death of Jason* which centered on the quest. Robert Graves's novel about Jason, *The Golden Fleece*, was published in 1944, and John Gardner's *Jason and Medeia* was published in 1973. The story of the search for the Golden Fleece has also been adapted to film, most notably the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The notion of a "rightful heir" to a throne is common in modern fantasy, as it is in ancient myth. However, in most modern societies, people are not born into power but are chosen by the public to govern, and even then they may only rule for a short time instead of ruling for life. Why do you think so many modern works of fantasy focus on kings and their successive heirs instead of including types of government more common in modern times?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Argonauts; Jason; Medea

**Nationality/Culture**

Jewish

**Pronunciation**

GOH-luhmz

**Alternate Names**

None

**Appears In**

The Talmud, Jewish folk tales

**Lineage**

None

# Golems

## Character Overview

According to Jewish legend, a golem was a human-shaped object brought to life by a magic word. Usually the golem functioned like a robot and could perform simple tasks. However, in some tales, the golem became a violent monster that could not be controlled, even by its creator.

Although the idea of a golem goes back to biblical times, most legends about the creature appeared during the Middle Ages. A golem was created from mud or clay. Typically, the golem came to life when a special word such as “truth” or one of the names of God was written on a piece of paper and placed on the golem’s forehead or in its mouth. At any point, the creator of the golem might end its life by removing the paper with the sacred word. If the word *emet* (“truth”) was used to activate the golem, the golem could be made still by erasing the first letter so that it read *met* (“death”).

In a famous story from the 1500s, Rabbi Judah Low ben Bezulel of Prague created a golem from clay in order to defend the city’s Jews from attack after the Emperor ordered the Jews to leave. The Emperor, seeing the power and destruction the golem was capable of, agreed to let the Jews stay. According to legend, the deactivated golem remains in the attic of a Prague synagogue just in case the Jews need protecting again in the future. In another legend, set in Poland, a golem made by Rabbi Eliyahu of Chelm became so powerful and dangerous that the rabbi hurriedly changed it back into a lifeless heap. Unfortunately, when the golem collapsed to the ground, it crushed its creator.

## Golems in Context

The Jewish people that settled throughout Europe had a long history of being persecuted by others, especially European Christians. They were often blamed for the death of Jesus—citing an old legend surrounding the Crucifixion—and were commonly thought to be selfish and unclean. Because of this, Jewish communities in many European cities were fairly self-contained and separate from other districts. The idea of a creature that could protect the Jews from being attacked or driven out of their homes was a welcome and, in some ways, inevitable development in Jewish folklore.



*A golem was a human-shaped object brought to life by a magic word, most famously portrayed in director Paul Wegener's German-language movie **Der Golem** (*The Golem*). In the 1920 black-and-white film, a Jewish rabbi creates a golem from clay, but his assistant steals it and makes it commit several crimes, including kidnapping the rabbi's daughter. UFA/ THE KOBAL COLLECTION/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.*

## Key Themes and Symbols

Golems are symbols of pure, mindless power and strength. They are also symbols of protection for the Jewish people, though their power can prove dangerous as well. The tale of Rabbi Eliyahu is centered on the theme of hubris, or overconfidence in one's abilities. The rabbi creates a golem thinking he will be able to control it, but is eventually destroyed by his creation.

## Golems in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The idea of the golem was influential outside traditional Jewish folklore. The creature in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* bears some resemblance to the classic description of a golem, though the book makes no mention of the Jewish myth. The 1915 silent film *The Golem*, co-written and directed by Paul Wegener (who also starred as the golem),

was the first and most well-known cinematic adaptation of the traditional golem myth. Karel Capek's 1921 play *Rossum's Universal Robots*, in which the author invented the term "robot," was a science fiction version of the golem legend. A golem also features prominently in the 2000 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* by Michael Chabon.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare myths about the golem in Jewish folklore with modern myths about robots. Do the stories in movies like *The Matrix* and *The Terminator* resemble traditional tales of the golem? How are they different?

SEE ALSO Semitic Mythology



## Gorgons

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

GOR-guhnz

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Daughters of Phorcys and Ceto

### Character Overview

The Gorgons, three terrifying creatures in **Greek mythology**, were sisters named Stheno (pronounced STHEE-noh; "strength"), Euryale (pronounced yoo-RYE-uh-lee; "wide-leaping"), and **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh; "ruler" or "queen"). Daughters of the sea god Phorcys (pronounced FOR-sis) and his sister and wife, Ceto (pronounced SEE-toh), they lived in the west near the setting **sun**.

According to legend, the Gorgons were ugly monsters with huge wings, sharp fangs and claws, and bodies covered with dragonlike scales. They had horrible grins, staring eyes, and writhing snakes for hair. Their gaze was so terrifying that anyone who looked upon them immediately turned to stone. It was said that blood taken from the right side of one of the Gorgons had the power to revive the dead, while blood taken from the left would instantly kill any living thing. Two of the Gorgons, Stheno and Euryale, were immortal (able to live forever), but Medusa was not. In one of the more famous Greek myths, the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) killed and beheaded her with help from **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh). When Medusa was beheaded, the

winged horse **Pegasus** (pronounced PEG-uh-suhs) sprang from her headless neck. Athena later placed an image of Medusa's head on her armor.

The Gorgons had three sisters known as the Graeae (pronounced GREE-ee; “the gray ones”). These old women—Enyo (pronounced eh-NYE-oh), Pemphredo (pronounced pem-FREE-doh), and Deino (pronounced DAY-noh)—shared one eye and one tooth, and they took turns using them. The Graeae guarded the route that led to their sisters, the Gorgons. Perseus, however, stole their eye and tooth, forcing them to help in his quest to find and kill Medusa.

### Gorgons in Context

In ancient Greece and Rome, Gorgon images were common household decorations; their hideous faces were thought to ward off evil. They often adorned entrances to buildings as a way to protect those inside, and commonly appeared on household items like water jugs. This type of magic—where evil is kept away, usually by an unappealing word or image—is known as apotropaic (pronounced ap-uh-troh-PAY-ik) magic. Although the Gorgons are described as hideous, awful creatures, they also served as protectors against outside forces.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Gorgons, as with their sisters the Graeae, usually symbolize ugliness and solitude. They have few interactions with outsiders. The Gorgons and Graeae also represent the bonds of sisterhood, since they remain together and care for one another apart from the rest of the world.

### Gorgons in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Medusa is the most popular of the Gorgons. She has appeared in art by Rubens, Pablo Picasso, and Leonardo da Vinci (the two paintings of Medusa by da Vinci have not survived). Perhaps the most famous images of Medusa are the headless portrait painted by Caravaggio in 1597, and the 16th century bronze statue of Perseus holding Medusa's head sculpted by Benvenuto Cellini. The story of Perseus and Medusa is retold in the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans*, with Medusa depicted as a grotesque woman with the lower body of a snake. Medusa also appears in Rick Riordan's 2005 novel *The Lightning Thief*, a modern retelling of several ancient Greek myths.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The ancient Greeks often associated physical ugliness, especially in a woman, with evil and an undesirable personality. What details can you find in the myths of the Gorgons that emphasize their ugly appearance? Are your culture's ideas about ugliness similar to those of the ancient Greeks? How are unattractive people treated in your society?

**SEE ALSO** Greek Mythology; Medusa; Perseus



### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

GRAY-siz

### Alternate Names

Charites, Gratiae (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, ancient Greek hymns and odes

### Lineage

Daughters of Zeus and Eurynome

## Graces

### Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, the Graces were minor goddesses who symbolized beauty, charm, and goodness. The number of Graces varied, though most myths included three sisters: Aglaia (pronounced uh-GLAY-uh; “brightness” or “splendor”), Thalia (pronounced thuh-LYE-uh; “good cheer” or “blossoming one”), and Euphrosyne (pronounced yoo-FROS-uh-nee; “mirth” or “joyfulness”). Other Graces sometimes mentioned were Clea (pronounced KLEE-tuh; “sound”), Pasithea (pronounced puh-SITH-ee-uh; “shining”), and Peitho (pronounced PYE-tho; “persuasion”).

### Major Myths

According to most stories, the Graces were the children of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and Eurynome (pronounced yoo-RIN-uh-mee), a daughter of the **Titans** Oceanus (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nuhs) and Tethys (pronounced TEE-this). In some myths, however, the Graces' parents were Zeus and **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh). The Graces always appeared as a group rather than as separate individuals. They were also frequently linked with the **Muses** (pronounced MYOO-siz), another group of female goddesses.

The main role of the Graces was to bestow beauty, charm, and goodness on young women and to give joy to people in general. They were usually associated with **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, and appeared among the attendants of the gods **Apollo**

(pronounced uh-POL-oh), **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), and **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez). They entertained the gods by dancing to the music of Apollo's lyre, an ancient stringed musical instrument. At times, the Graces were considered the official goddesses of music, dance, and poetry.

## The Graces in Context

The Graces were meant to embody the characteristics that ancient Greeks considered attractive in young women. The ideal young woman was not only beautiful, but also a source of good cheer and brightness of spirit. Girls were expected to never show an ill mood, because it was considered an ugly quality that would repel any possible suitors.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Graces represent beauty, joy, and the arts. They also symbolize the way in which beauty and happiness were considered to be fundamentally connected by the ancient Greeks, as the Graces are always shown together and usually holding hands. They are also seen as symbols of youth, creativity, and fertility.

## The Graces in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Graces provided inspiration to artists throughout the centuries. Most works of art portray them with their hands entwined and their bodies either nude or partially draped with flowing robes. The Graces have been painted by Raphael, Rubens, and Paul Cezanne among others, and appear in a well-known sculpture by Antonio Canova. One of the most famous paintings of the Graces is *Primavera* by Sandro Botticelli, an Italian artist of the late 1400s.

*Detail of Sandro Botticelli's painting Primavera, showing the three Graces.* DAVID LEES/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.



## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In ancient Greece, the Graces functioned as role models for young women, offering an example of ideal behaviors and qualities. What qualities do you think the most popular modern role models for young women exhibit? How do they compare to the qualities of the Graces? Which do you think provides a better example to follow, and why?

SEE ALSO Apollo; Greek Mythology; Muses; Roman Mythology



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# Greek Mythology

## Greek Mythology in Context

The mythology of the ancient Greeks included a dazzling array of gods, demigods (half-human, half-god), monsters, and **heroes**. These figures inhabited a realm that stretched beyond the Greek landscape to the palaces of the gods on snow-capped Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), as well as to the dismal **underworld** or land of the dead. In time, Greek mythology became part of European culture, and many of its stories became known throughout the world.

Despite their awesome powers, the Greek gods and goddesses were much like people. Their actions stemmed from recognizable passions, such as pride, jealousy, love, and the thirst for revenge. The deities (gods) often left Mount Olympus to become involved in the affairs of mortals, interacting with men and women as protectors, enemies, and sometimes lovers. They were not above using tricks and disguises to influence events, and their schemes and plots often entangled people.

Heroes and ordinary humans in Greek myths frequently discovered that things were not what they appeared to be. The underlying moral principle, though, was that the gods rewarded honorable behavior and obedience, and people who dishonored themselves or defied the gods usually paid a high price.

Geography helped shape Greek mythology. Greece is a peninsula surrounded by sea and islands. Rugged mountains and the jagged coastline break the land into many small, separate areas. Ancient Greece never became a unified empire. Instead, it consisted of small kingdoms that after



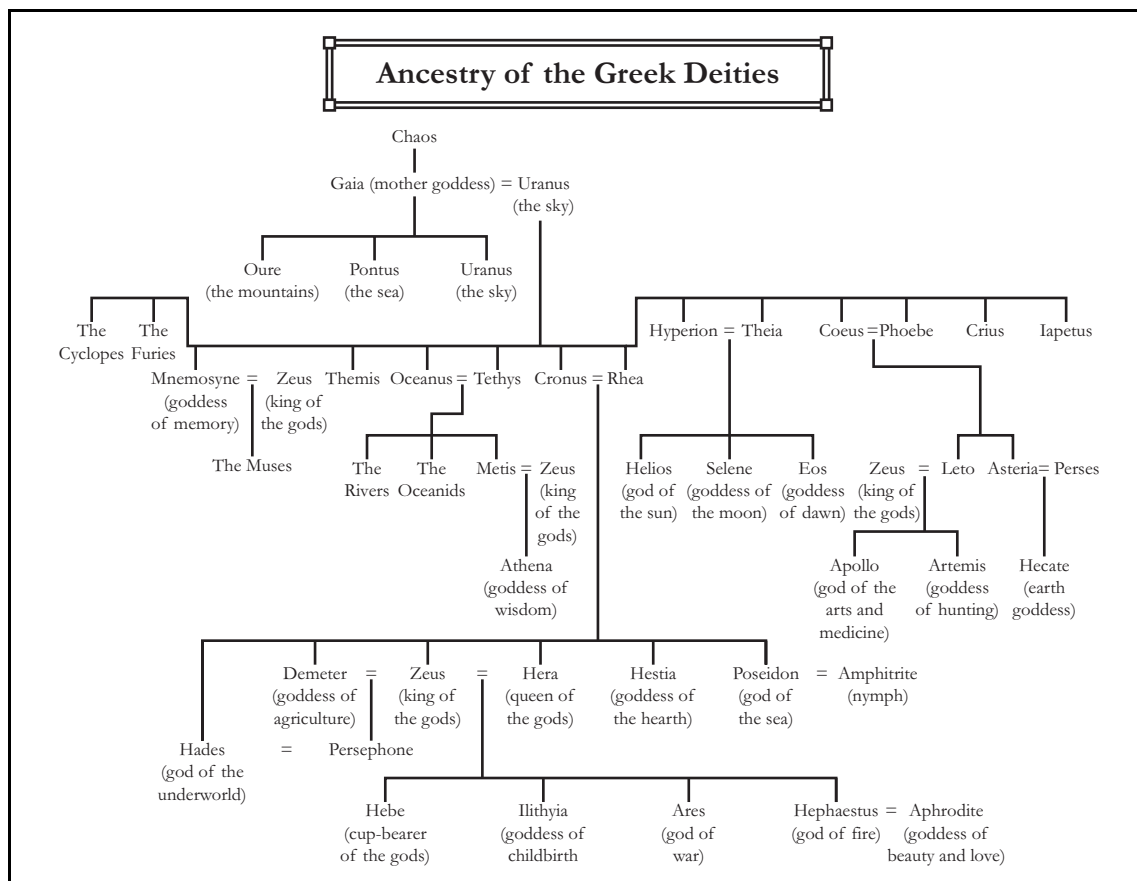


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about 800 BCE became city-states. Because travel was easier by sea than by land, the Greeks became a nation of seafarers, and they traded and established colonies all over the Mediterranean and the Near East.

Greek mythology is a patchwork of stories, some conflicting with one another. Many have been passed down from ancient times in more than one version. The roots of this mythology reach back to two civilizations that flourished before 1100 BCE: the Mycenaean (pronounced mye-suh-NEE-uhn), on the Greek mainland, and the Minoan (pronounced mi-NOH-uhn), on the nearby island of Crete (pronounced KREET). The ancient beliefs merged with legends from Greek kingdoms and city-states and myths borrowed from other peoples to form a body of lore shared by most Greeks.

For hundreds of years, these myths passed from generation to generation in spoken form. Then, around the time the classical Greek culture of the city-states arose, people began writing them down. The works of Hesiod and Homer, which date from the 700s BCE, are key sources for the mythology of ancient Greece. Hesiod's *Theogony* tells of creation and of the gods' origins and relationships. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, epic poems said to have been written by Homer, show the gods influencing human fortunes. In addition, Pindar, a poet of around 600 BCE, wrote poems called odes that contain much myth and legend.

Non-Greek sources also exist. The Romans dominated the Mediterranean world after the Greeks and adopted elements of Greek mythology. The Roman poet Ovid's poem the *Metamorphoses* retells many Greek myths.

## Core Deities and Characters

The word *pantheon*, which refers to all the gods of a particular culture, comes from the Greek *pan* (all) and *theoi* (gods). The pantheon of the ancient Greeks consisted of the Olympian gods and other major deities, along with many minor deities and demigods.

**Olympian Gods** The principal deities, six gods and six goddesses, lived on Mount Olympus, the highest peak in Greece. **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS; called Jupiter by the Romans) was the king of the gods and reigned over all the other deities and their realms. He was the protector of justice, kingship, authority, and the social order. His personal life was rather disorderly, however. Many myths tell of his love affairs with various goddesses, **Titans**, and human women—and their effects.

**Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh; Roman Juno), queen of the gods, was Zeus's sister and wife. She could cause all kinds of trouble when her husband pursued other women. Although the patron of brides, wives, and mothers in childbirth, Hera could be cruel and vengeful toward Zeus's mistresses and their children.

**Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun; Roman Neptune), Zeus's brother, was god of the sea and of earthquakes. He was married to Amphitrite (pronounced am-fi-TRY-tee), a sea nymph or female nature deity, but like Zeus, he fathered many children outside his marriage. Among his descendants were **nymphs**, sea gods, and monsters such as the Hydra (pronounced HYE-druh).

## Major Greek Deities

**Aphrodite:** (*Roman name: Venus*) goddess of love and beauty.

**Apollo:** (*Roman name: Apollo*) god of the sun, arts, and medicine; ideal of male beauty.

**Ares:** (*Roman name: Mars*) god of war.

**Artemis:** (*Roman name: Diana*) goddess of hunting and protector of wild animals.

**Athena:** (*Roman name: Minerva*) goddess of wisdom, warfare, and crafts.

**Demeter:** (*Roman name: Ceres*) goddess of grain, farming, and soil.

**Dionysus:** (*Roman name: Bacchus*) god of wine and revelry.

**Hades:** (*Roman name: Pluto*) king of the underworld.

**Hephaestus:** (*Roman name: Vulcan*) god of fire, volcanoes, and industry.

**Hera:** (*Roman name: Juno*) queen of the gods, protector of marriage and childbirth.

**Hermes:** (*Roman name: Mercury*) messenger of the gods, patron of travelers, merchants, and thieves.

**Hestia:** (*Roman name: Vesta*) goddess of the hearth.

**Persephone:** (*Roman name: Proserpina*) queen of the underworld.

**Poseidon:** (*Roman name: Neptune*) god of the sea.

**Prometheus:** giver of fire and crafts to humans.

**Zeus:** (*Roman name: Jupiter*) king of the gods, protector of justice and social order.

**Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter; Roman Ceres), a sister of Zeus, was the goddess of grain, farming, and soil. She had a daughter, **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), by Zeus. Before merging into the Olympian pantheon, Demeter and Hera were aspects of a much older deity called the Great Goddess, an earth goddess worshiped by the agricultural Greeks.

**Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee; Roman Venus), the goddess of love, beauty, and desire, greatly resembled Near Eastern goddesses such as **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr) and Astarte (a-STAR-tee). Her husband was **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs; Roman Vulcan), god of **fire**, volcanoes, and invention. The other gods mocked Hephaestus because he was lame and also because of Aphrodite's adulteries, such as her love affair with the god of war, **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez; Roman Mars).

Two Olympian goddesses were virgins who resisted sexual advances from gods and men. **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh; Roman Minerva), the daughter of Zeus and a female Titan, was the goddess of wisdom, military skill, cities, and crafts. **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss; Roman Diana) was the goddess of hunting and the protector of wild animals. She and her twin brother, the handsome young god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh), were the children of Zeus and the Titan Leto (pronounced LEE-toh). Apollo functioned as the patron (official god) of archery, music, the arts, and medicine and was associated with the **sun**, enlightenment, and prophecy or predicting the future. He also served as the ideal of male beauty.

**Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez; Roman Mercury) was the son of Zeus and yet another Titan. He served as the gods' messenger and also as the patron of markets, merchants, thieves, and storytelling. Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh; Roman Vesta), another sister of Zeus, was goddess of the hearth, and her identity included associations with stability, domestic well-being, and the ritual of naming children.

**Other Major Deities Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez; Roman Pluto), the brother of Zeus and Poseidon, was god of the underworld, where the dead could receive either punishment or a blessed **afterlife**. Hades dwelt in his underground kingdom and not on Mount Olympus. He controlled supernatural forces connected with the earth and was also associated with wealth.

**Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs; Roman Bacchus), born as a demigod, became the god of wine, drunkenness, and altered states of consciousness, such as religious frenzy. Like plants that die each winter only to return in the spring, Dionysus is said to have died and been reborn, a parallel to Cretan and Near Eastern myths about dying-and-returning gods. Dionysus eventually took Hestia's place on Mount Olympus.

## Major Myths

Stories about the gods—along with other supernatural beings, demigods, heroes, and ordinary mortals—illustrate the major themes of Greek mythology. They explain how the world came to be and offer examples of how people should and should not live. The myths provided support for the Greeks' idea of community, especially the city-state.

## Myth and History

Generations of readers have wondered whether the great Greek myths were based on true stories. One reader who decided to investigate was German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Convinced that the ancient city of Troy mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* had actually existed, he set out to find it. In the early 1870s, Schliemann began digging at a site in northwestern Turkey that matched Homer's description of Troy. He found the buried remains of a city as well as gold, silver, pottery, and household objects. Later excavations by other researchers revealed that a series of different settlements had risen on the same site over thousands of years. One of these may have been Homer's Troy.

**Origins of the Gods and Humans** The theme of younger generations overcoming their elders runs through the history of the Greek gods. Creation began with Chaos (pronounced KAY-oss), first imagined as the gap between earth and sky but later as formless confusion. The mother goddess, **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth, came into being and gave birth to **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs), the sky. Joining with Uranus, she became pregnant with six male and six female Titans. But before these children could be born, Uranus had to be separated from Gaia. **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs), the youngest Titan, cut off his father's sexual organs and threw them into the sea. Aphrodite was born from the foam where they landed.

The twelve Titans mated with each other and with nymphs. Cronus married his sister Rhea (pronounced REE-uh; Roman Cybele). Perhaps remembering what he had done to his own father, Cronus swallowed his children as they were born. When Rhea gave birth to Zeus, however, she tricked Cronus by substituting a stone wrapped in baby clothes for him to swallow. Later, when Zeus had grown up, a female Titan named Metis (pronounced MEE-tis) gave Cronus a drink that made him vomit up Zeus's brothers and sisters. They helped Zeus defeat the Titans and become the supreme deity. Zeus then married Metis. However, because of a prophecy that her children would be wise and powerful, he swallowed her so that her children could not harm him. Their daughter Athena sprang full-grown from Zeus's head.

The matings of the gods and goddesses produced the rest of the pantheon. As for human beings, one myth says that they arose out of the

soil. Another says that Zeus flooded the earth and drowned all human beings because they did not honor the gods. Deucalion (doo-KAY-lee-uhn) and Pyrrha (pronounced PEER-uh), the son and daughter-in-law of Zeus's brother **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs), survived the flood in a boat. Afterward they created the present human race from stones, which they threw onto the muddy land.

**The Ages of the World** According to the poet Hesiod, the world had seen four ages and four races of human beings before this time. The Titans created the people of the golden age, who lived in comfort and peace until they died and became good spirits. The Olympian gods created the silver race, a childish people whom Zeus destroyed for failing to honor the gods. Zeus then created the bronze race, brutal and warlike people who destroyed themselves with constant fighting.

Zeus next created a race of heroes nobler than the men of the bronze age (no metal was associated with this age). The Greeks believed that distant but semihistorical events such as the Trojan War had occurred during this fourth age, the age of heroes. Some heroes died, but Zeus took the survivors to the Isles of the Blessed, where they lived in honor. The fifth age, the age of iron, began when Zeus created the present race of humans. It is an age of toil, greed, and strife. When all honor and justice have vanished, Zeus will destroy this race like those before it.

**Heroes** Many Greek myths focus on the marvelous achievements of heroes who possessed physical strength, sharp wits, virtue, and a sense of honor. These heroes often had a god for a father and a human for a mother. One cycle of myths concerns the hero **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez; known as Hercules by the Romans)—Zeus's son by a mortal princess—renowned for his strength and for completing twelve remarkable feats. Unlike other heroes, who died and were buried, Heracles eventually became immortal (able to live forever) and was worshipped as a god by both Greeks and Romans. Other heroes include **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs), who killed the serpent-haired monster **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh) and rescued a princess from a sea monster; **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs), who defeated the man-eating **Minotaur** (pronounced MIN-uh-tawr) of Crete; **Jason**, who led a band of adventurers to capture the **Golden Fleece**; **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez), a mighty warrior of the Trojan War; and **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs), who fought at

Troy and afterward faced many challenges from gods, men, and monsters during his long journey home.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The gods were born in strife and struggle, and the theme of war as an inescapable part of existence runs through Greek mythology. Many myths recount episodes in the Olympians' conflict with the Titans. Others are connected to the Trojan War, a long conflict in which both people and deities displayed such qualities as courage, stubbornness, pride, and anger. In addition to the war itself, the travels and adventures of warriors after the war ended are subjects of myth and legend.

Many myths deal with love, especially the loves of Zeus, who sometimes disguised himself in order to enjoy sexual relations with mortal women. Other myths present examples of trust, loyalty, and eternal love—or of the pitfalls and problems of love and desire. The tragic myth of Pyramus (pronounced PEER-uh-muhs) and Thisbe (pronounced THIZ-bee) illustrates a divine reward for lovers who could not live without each other. The story of **Eros** (pronounced AIR-ohs) and **Psyche** (pronounced SYE-kee) revolves around the issue of trust. In another myth, the gods reward the elderly Baucis (pronounced BAW-sis) and Philemon (pronounced fye-LEE-muhn) for their devotion to each other and their kindheartedness toward strangers.

Another recurring theme in Greek myth is death. Characters in Greek myths sometimes enter the underworld, the kingdom of the god Hades. Heroes may go there seeking advice or prophecies from the dead. Persephone, Demeter's daughter, was carried to the underworld by Hades, who fell in love with her. Her myth explains the seasons: plants grow and bear fruit while Persephone is aboveground with her mother but wither and die during the months she spends with Hades. The tale of **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs) and **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see) explores the finality of death and the tempting possibility of a reunion with loved ones who have died.

Many Greek myths deal with themes of right and wrong behavior and the consequences of each. The myth of **Baucis and Philemon**, for example, illustrates the importance of hospitality and generosity toward all, for a humble stranger may be a deity in disguise with power to reward or punish. Another story tells how the handsome **Narcissus** (pronounced nar-SIS-us), so vain and heartless that he could love only himself,

drowned while gazing at his reflection in a stream. The myth of Icarus (pronounced IK-uh-ruhs), who gains the ability to fly but soars so close to the sun that his wings melt, points out the dangers of tempting fate and rising above one's proper place in life. Such stories often involve unexpected changes or transformations. For example, the myth of King **Midas** (pronounced MY-duhs), whose request for a golden touch turns his own daughter into a golden statue, warns of the perils of greed.

Like Icarus, those who claim godlike qualities, who defy the gods, or who perform outrageous acts suffer swift and severe punishment. **Arachne** (pronounced uh-RAK-nee) was a mortal who boasted that she could weave better cloth than the goddess Athena, inventor of weaving. The goddess turned the boastful girl into a spider weaving its web. The gods devised eternal punishments in the depths of Hades for **Sisyphus** (pronounced SIZ-ee-fuhs), who tried to cheat death, and for Tantalus (pronounced TAN-tuhl-uhs), who killed his own son and fed him to the gods. They also punished **Oedipus** (pronounced ED-uh-puhs), who killed his father and married his mother, even though he did not know their identities when he did so.

Transformation—the act of changing from one form into another—is a common theme in Greek mythology. The gods had the power to change themselves into animals, birds, or humans and often used this power to trick goddesses or women. Zeus, for example, turned himself into a bull for one romantic adventure and into a swan for another. Sometimes the gods and goddesses transformed others, either to save them or to punish them. Daphne (pronounced DAF-nee), for example, was changed into a laurel tree; Narcissus and Hyacinthus (pronounced high-uh-SIN-thuhs) became the flowers that bear their names.

### **Greek Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Greek mythology has profoundly influenced Western culture. So universally familiar are its stories that many of our common words and sayings refer to them. The myth of Narcissus, for example, produced *narcissism*, or excessive vanity, and something that causes an argument may be called an “apple of discord,” after an apple that Eris (pronounced AIR-is), the goddess of discord, used to start a dispute among Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera. Greek myths and legends span the sky in the names of constellations and planets.





*The Greek gods made their home on Mt. Olympus as illustrated in this painting by Jan van Kessel, **The Feast of the Gods.***

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Literature and drama have long drawn upon themes and stories from Greek myth. Besides the works of the ancient Greeks themselves—including the plays of Sophocles and Euripides—writers from ancient times to the present have found inspiration in Greek mythology. Roman authors Virgil (the *Aeneid*) and Ovid (the *Metamorphoses*) used Greek stories and characters in their poems. References to Greek myths appear in the works of the medieval Italian poets Petrarch and Boccaccio and in those of the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer. William Shakespeare's *A*

*Midsummer Night's Dream* contains the story of Pyramus and Thisbe as a comic play-within-a-play. Modern writers who have drawn upon Greek mythology include James Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Mary Renault (*The Bull from the Sea*).

Artists from the Renaissance to the present have depicted scenes from Greek mythology. Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c. 1480), Nicolas Poussin's *Apollo and Daphne* (c. 1630), and Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Diana* (1867) are just a few of many such paintings. The Greeks chanted songs and hymns based on myth at religious festivals, and Greek mythology has continued to inspire composers of the performing arts. Operas based on mythic stories include Claudio Monteverdi's *Ariadne*, Richard Strauss's *Elektra*, and Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Marcel Camus's film *Black Orpheus* also came from the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. *Apollo and Orpheus* by George Balanchine, *Ariadne* by Alvin Ailey, and *Clytemnestra* by Martha Graham are four modern ballets that interpret Greek myths through dance.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan (2005) is a series of books about a troubled boy named Perseus (Percy for short) who lives in New York and discovers he is the son of Poseidon. Soon he embarks on many adventures along with his best friend—who, he discovers, is actually a satyr (half-human, half-goat)—and encounters an array of characters from ancient Greek myth. In the first book, *The Lightning Thief*, Percy must find Zeus's stolen lightning bolt before the angry god destroys humankind.

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; *Iliad, The*; *Odyssey, The*; Roman Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Greek and Persian

### Pronunciation

GRIF-ins

### Alternate Names

Gryphon, Gryps

### Appears In

Herodotus's *Histories*, Persian and Scythian myths

### Lineage

None



# Griffins

## Character Overview

The griffin was a creature that appeared in the mythology of Greece and the ancient Near East. A popular figure in art, it had the body of a lion

and the head and wings of an eagle or other bird. Sometimes the griffin is shown with the tail of a serpent.

According to **Greek mythology**, griffins pulled the chariots of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, as well as his son **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). They also guarded the gold that lay near the lands of the Hyperboreans (pronounced hye-pur-BOR-ee-uhnz) and the Arimaspians (pronounced air-uh-MAS-pee-uhnz), mythical peoples of the far north, and represented Nemesis (pronounced NEM-uh-sis), the goddess of vengeance.

The griffin appears in Christian art and mythology as well. At first, it symbolized **Satan** and was thought to threaten human souls. But the griffin later became a symbol of the divine and human nature of Jesus Christ. During the Middle Ages, Christian myths often spoke of the magical powers of griffins' claws, which if made into drinking cups were said to change color when they came in contact with poison. The griffin was also thought to prey on those who mistreated Christians.

## Griffins in Context

Scythians, who lived in a large region northeast of Greece, popularized myths about griffins, and may have done so to protect their own resources against invaders. It was common legend that griffins guarded the gold that could be found in the area called the Pontic-Caspian steppe. These legends may have dissuaded people who lived in nearby regions from trying to claim this gold. Scythians may have even used dinosaur bones—also commonly found in this area—as evidence that the monstrous griffins really did exist.

## Key Themes and Symbols

With its eagle's head and lion's body, the griffin represented mastery of the sky and the earth. It became associated with strength and wisdom, with the head of the eagle—wisdom—leading the way for the strength of the lion's body. To the ancient Hebrews, the griffin symbolized Persia because the creature appeared frequently in Persian art.

## Griffins in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Griffins have become a common fixture in art and literature, especially in Europe. Griffins appear regularly on coats of arms, and are used as the

## Griffins

*A griffin was a mythological creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle.* PRIVATE COLLECTION/  
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heraldic symbol for many European cities. Griffins have appeared as characters in literary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (c. 1320) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Sir John Tenniel's illustrations of the Gryphon from Carroll's novel are perhaps the best-known images of griffins today. Griffins also appear in many other fantasy works, including J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* books.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Dark Lord of Derkholm* (1998) is a humorous fantasy novel by Diana Wynne-Jones that takes place in a magical world constantly being invaded by tourists looking for supernatural adventure. The main character, Derk, has several children who are griffins. The book won the 1999 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Children's Literature. The novel has a sequel, *Year of the Griffin* (2000), which features one of the griffins from *Dark Lord of Derkholm* as its main character.

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Greek Mythology; Persian Mythology; Semitic Mythology



# Guinevere

## Character Overview

Guinevere was the wife of King **Arthur**, the legendary ruler of Britain. She was a beautiful and noble queen, but her life took a tragic turn when she fell in love with **Lancelot**, one of Arthur's bravest and most loyal knights. The relationship between the queen and Lancelot eventually destroyed the special fellowship of the Knights of the Round Table.

Guinevere was the daughter of King Leodegrance (pronounced lee-oh-duh-GRANTZ) of Scotland. Arthur admired the king's lovely daughter and married her in spite of a warning from his adviser **Merlin** that Guinevere would be unfaithful to him. As a wedding gift, Leodegrance gave Arthur a round table that would play a central role in his court.

After the marriage, Guinevere became acquainted with Lancelot, who performed various deeds to honor and rescue her. At first, Arthur took no notice of the growing attachment between the queen and Lancelot. Later, however, the king accused his wife of being unfaithful, and had to fight her lover. Several violent battles between Arthur and Lancelot followed, with groups of knights joining in on each side. Eventually, Guinevere returned to Arthur.

Another group of legends concerning Guinevere show the queen in a more loyal role. In these tales, King Arthur left his nephew **Mordred** in charge of the kingdom during a military campaign. Mordred began to plot against Arthur, planning to marry Guinevere and take over as ruler of Britain. The queen refused to cooperate with Mordred and locked herself in the Tower of London to avoid marrying him. When Arthur returned to reclaim his throne, the two men fought. Arthur killed Mordred but was fatally wounded.

Following the death of Arthur, Guinevere entered a convent, where she spent the rest of her life praying and helping the poor. Filled with remorse for the trouble she and her lover had caused, she vowed never to see Lancelot again. When Guinevere died, she was buried beside King Arthur.

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

### Pronunciation

GWEN-uh-veer

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, tales of King Arthur

### Lineage

Daughter of King Leodegrance of Scotland

## Guinevere

*Queen Guinevere.* JOHN COLLIER/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.



### Guinevere in Context

The story of Guinevere can be seen as a reflection of medieval European beliefs about adultery. The affair between Guinevere and Lancelot is the root cause of the fall of **Camelot**, since all other events leading to

Arthur's downfall stem from this betrayal. Guinevere is typically portrayed more negatively than Lancelot, suggesting that women—especially married women—were expected to live by a higher moral standard than the men of the time.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Throughout the myths of King Arthur and his court, Guinevere represents both loyalty and betrayal. She is seen by the people of Camelot as a devoted supporter of her husband's deeds and ideas. Even after she betrays Arthur by having an affair with Lancelot, Guinevere regrets the betrayal and stays with Arthur, devoting herself to no other man even after his death.

### Guinevere in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Guinevere appears in nearly every adaptation of the legend of King Arthur, including Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and the *Avalon* series of novels by Marion Zimmer Bradley. On film, she has been played by actresses such as Ava Gardner, Vanessa Redgrave, and Keira Knightley. Guinevere has also appeared as the main character in a number of works, including the *Guinevere Trilogy* novels by Persia Woolley and the television series *Guinevere Jones* (2002).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The story of Guinevere can be viewed as a tale that illustrates the dangers of unfaithfulness in a romantic relationship. This theme has appeared many times in books, films, and television shows. Can you think of a modern tale that focuses on this same theme? Describe the story, and compare it to the message found in the myth of Guinevere and Lancelot.

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends; Camelot; Lancelot; Merlin





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# H



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Greek

## Pronunciation

HAY-deez

## Alternate Names

Pluto (Roman)

## Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*,  
Homer's *Iliad*, Greek and  
Roman creation myths

## Lineage

Son of Cronus and Rhea



# Hades

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Hades was the god of the **underworld**, the kingdom of the dead. Although the name *Hades* is often used to indicate the underworld itself, it rightfully belongs only to the god, whose kingdom was known as the land of Hades or house of Hades.

Hades was the son of **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs) and Rhea (pronounced REE-uh), two of the **Titans** who once ruled the universe. The Titans had other children as well: the gods **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) and the goddesses **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), and Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh). When Hades was born, Cronus swallowed him as he had swallowed his other children at birth. However, Zeus escaped this fate, and he tricked Cronus into taking a potion that made him vomit out Hades and his siblings.

Together, these gods and goddesses rebelled against the Titans and seized power from them. Each was given a special weapon or magic item by the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-pee-z) to help them win the battle; Hades was given a helmet that would allow him to become invisible. After gaining control of the universe, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus drew lots to divide it among themselves. Zeus gained control of the sky, Poseidon took the sea, and Hades received the underworld.

The kingdom of the dead was divided into two regions. At the very bottom lay Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a land of terrible blackness where the wicked suffered eternal torments. Among those imprisoned there were the Titans, who were guarded by **giants** with one hundred arms. The other region of the underworld, Elysium (pronounced eh-LEE-zee-um) or the Elysian Fields, was a place where the souls of good and righteous people went after death.

To reach Hades' kingdom, the dead had to cross the river Styx (pronounced STIKS). A boatman named Charon (pronounced KAIR-uhn) ferried the dead across the river, while the monstrous **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), a multiheaded dog with a serpent's tail, guarded the entrance to the underworld to prevent anyone from leaving. Four other rivers flowed through the underworld: Acheron (pronounced AK-uh-ron; river of woe), **Lethé** (pronounced LEE-thee; river of forgetfulness), Cocytus (pronounced koh-SEE-tuhs; river of wailing), and Phlegethon (pronounced FLEG-uh-thon; river of fire).

Hades supervised the judgment and punishment of the dead but did not torture them himself. That task was left to the **Furies** (pronounced FYOO-reez), the female spirits of justice and vengeance. Although portrayed as grim and unyielding, Hades was not considered evil or unjust.

### Major Myths

Hades appears in very few myths. The best known myth concerns his kidnapping of **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), daughter of Demeter, the goddess of fertility and the earth. Hades saw the beautiful Persephone while he was riding in a chariot on earth and fell in love with her. When Hades asked Zeus for permission to marry Persephone, Zeus told him that Demeter would never agree. However, Zeus did agree to help Hades seize her.

One day while picking flowers, Persephone reached for a fragrant blossom, and the earth opened up before her. Hades emerged in a chariot, grabbed Persephone, and carried her to the underworld. When Demeter discovered that her daughter was missing, her despair distracted her from her duties as a goddess of fertility and growth, and drought and devastation plagued the lands. After finally learning what had happened, she threatened to starve all mortals as punishment to Zeus and the other gods.



*The most famous myth involving Hades, the god of the underworld, was his abduction of Persephone, and her mother's efforts to get her back.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/THE STAPLETON COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

Fearing the consequences of Demeter's anger, Zeus sent word to Hades that Persephone must be returned to her mother. Before letting her go, however, Hades gave Persephone a piece of fruit to eat. Persephone ate the fruit, not realizing that anyone who ate food in the kingdom of the dead must remain there.

Zeus intervened again and arranged for Persephone to spend part of every year with her mother and part with Hades. During the growing and harvest season, she lived on earth, but during the barren winter months she had to return to Hades' kingdom and reign there as queen of the underworld.

## Hades in Context

In ancient Greece, Hades was generally feared enough that his name was not often spoken out loud. Instead, the name Pluton, meaning “giver of wealth,” was used and understood as a more positive substitute. However, fear did not translate to worship; the ancient Greeks built no known temples to honor Hades. The Greeks’ treatment of Hades reflects their attitude toward the **afterlife**: they did not view the afterlife as something glamorous, fun, or beautiful, but as something dark and frightening.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Unhappiness and isolation are often associated with Hades in ancient Greek myths. Although he is a brother to Zeus and the other Olympian gods, he cannot reside on Mount Olympus as they do. He is separated from the land of the gods and the land of the living, and has no companions other than his part-time queen Persephone.

## Hades in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient art, Hades was often depicted with his queen Persephone or accompanied by his guardian hound, Cerberus. He was usually shown holding a scepter. Although Hades was not as popular with later artists as many other gods were, depictions of the god were created by Rubens, Annibale Caracci, and the sculptor Bernini. The operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld* by composer Jacques Offenbach (1858) features Hades as a main character. Hades is also memorably voiced by James Woods in the 1997 animated Disney film *Hercules*. Hades lent his Roman name—Pluto—to the pet dog of Walt Disney’s signature cartoon character, Mickey Mouse. In the realm of astronomy, Pluto is the name given to what was once referred to as the ninth and most distant planet in our solar system. In 2006, it was reclassified as a dwarf planet.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

What do you think the myth of Hades suggests about how ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the afterlife? How does this compare with other, more modern views of the afterlife?

**SEE ALSO** Cerberus; Demeter; Furies; Greek Mythology; Lethe; Persephone; Titans; Underworld



# Harpies

## Character Overview

**Greek mythology** contains two accounts of the Harpies. In both cases, the Harpies were female creatures who caused mischief and torment wherever they went. Though most often pictured as grotesque birdlike creatures, they were originally considered to be the embodiment of storm winds.

In the older myth, the Harpies were spirits of the wind who snatched people and caused things to disappear. On one occasion, they seized the daughters of Pandareos (pronounced pan-DAHR-ee-ohs), king of the city of Miletus (pronounced mye-LEE-tuhs), and took them off to be the servants of female spirits known as the **Furies**. Sometimes considered cousins of the **Gorgons** (pronounced GOR-guhnz, female monsters with snakes for hair), the four Harpies were named Aello (pronounced EE-oh, “hurricane”), Celaeno (pronounced suh-LEE-noh, “dark one”), Ocypete (pronounced ah-si-PEE-tee, “swift”), and Podarge (pronounced poh-DAHR-jee, “racer”).

The later myth describes the Harpies as hideous birds with the faces of women. In the legend of **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts), they terrorized Phineus (pronounced FIN-ee-us), the king of Thrace, by blinding him and stealing his food. Phineus promised to tell the Argonauts their future if they would drive away the Harpies.

In Virgil’s epic poem the *Aeneid*, the Harpies torment the hero **Aeneas** (i-NEE-uhs) and his companions, making it impossible for them to eat. Celaeno tells Aeneas that he and his followers will not return home until they become hungry enough to eat their tables.

## Harpies in Context

Like the Gorgons, the Harpies of later myth reflect an ancient Greek and Roman view of what are considered the worst characteristics for a woman to display. Aside from their ugly appearance and foul smell, they prevent Phineus and Aeneas from enjoying their meals by stealing the food away. This is in direct contrast to the traditional role of

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
HAR-peeZ

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Hesiod’s *Theogony*,  
Homer’s *Odyssey*, Virgil’s  
*Aeneid*

**Lineage**  
Daughters of Thaumás  
and Electra

women as domestic providers. In addition, the Harpies are shown to be impossible to satisfy; no matter how much food is laid out, they never stop taking it before the men can eat. This is a reversal of the expected behavior of an ancient Greek woman during a meal, who is expected to eat in moderation and only after others have been served.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Harpies are often seen as a force of disruption or withholding in ancient myths. As a disruptive or destructive force, they symbolize the dangerous properties of storm winds. In later myths, they are shown to be the tormentors of those who deserve punishment for revealing too much of the gods' plans to humans, specifically Phineus.

### Harpies in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Early depictions of the Harpies show them as beautiful winged women. It was not until later that Harpies were seen as hideous-faced women with the lower bodies of birds. This grotesque portrayal of the Harpies reached its height during the Middle Ages. Harpies can be found in Dante's *Inferno*, where they torture those who have committed suicide. Harpies also appear in William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, as well as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy of novels. The term "harpy" is often used in modern times to describe a woman who is seen as nagging or controlling. The American Harpy Eagle, one of the largest living species of eagle in the world, takes its name from the mythological creatures.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Harpies appear in many video games as enemies the player must fight against. The Sony PlayStation game *Suikoden II* is one example. Find at least two more examples of Harpies appearing in different video games, and compare them. Do all three versions of Harpies have the same characteristics? Why do you think these mythical figures are so popular in this form?

**SEE ALSO** Aeneas; *Aeneid*, *The*; Argonauts; Furies; Gorgons; Greek Mythology; Jason



# Hathor

## Character Overview

Hathor was one of the most important and complex goddesses of ancient Egypt. A mother goddess who created and maintained all life on earth, Hathor was also worshipped as goddess of the sky, fertility, music, and dance and as the symbolic mother of the pharaoh, or ruler of Egypt. She was said to be the mother of **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs), the god of the sky. In some versions of the myth, Hathor is created as the daughter of **Ra**, the **sun** god.

In addition to being a goddess of the sky, Hathor was often linked with the dead. In this role, she provided food to the dead when they arrived in the **underworld**, or land of the dead. Anyone who carried her clothing would have a safe journey through the underworld. Many foreign lands around Egypt were considered to be under her protection, especially those from which the Egyptians obtained important resources, such as timber or minerals. In one inscription, she is called the “mistress of turquoise.”

Hathor has also been identified with the warrior goddess of the sun known as Sekhmet (pronounced SEK-met). In addition, she has been linked to the Eye of Horus, a symbol that reflected the mythical battle for the unification of Egypt under Horus. In some versions of the myth, the Eye of Horus was given to him by his mother in place of one of his eyes, which was damaged by his uncle **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) during their battle for control of Egypt.

## Major Myths

One myth from **Egyptian mythology**, developed much later than other writings about Hathor, concerns her violent actions as the goddess Sekhmet. Sekhmet served at the order of Ra, the sun god, and may have even been created by him. One day, while Egypt was split in two with each half worshipping a different god, Ra ordered Sekhmet to punish all humans who had rebelled against him and instead worshipped another. Sekhmet destroyed Ra’s enemies, but her blood-lust was not yet satisfied, and she continued to kill even after her mission was complete. To stop her from killing all of humanity, Ra turned the Nile River red; Sekhmet,

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

HATH-or

### Alternate Names

Mehturt

### Appears In

Ancient Egyptian creation myths

### Lineage

Mother of Horus

## Hathor

*Hathor was the symbolic mother of Egyptian pharaohs.*

*Here a bas-relief shows her with the pharaoh Seti I.*

SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



thinking the river was blood and crazed with her love of violence, drank it down hungrily. However, Ra had actually transformed the river into alcohol, and when Sekhmet drank it down, she became drunk and stopped her violent rampage.

### **Hathor in Context**

Hathor's role in Egyptian mythology was ever-changing, but she was perhaps most beloved as a goddess of joy, music, love, and happiness. Her



festivals included singing, dancing, and drunken ceremonies that undoubtedly helped to cement the popularity of the ruling pharaoh. In addition, Hathor may have emphasized the importance of women satisfying all the various roles they were expected to fulfill, which included caring for their young and loving their husbands. This multifaceted role of Hathor also reflects the ever-changing nature of Egyptian society. Although many gods existed for centuries, as political control of Egypt shifted from region to region, these gods were modified or combined with other gods. Often deities with similar traits were combined, as with Hathor and the cow-goddess Bat. However, gods did not always match up perfectly, and new myths were created to explain the new facet of a deity's nature. This explains how a single god or goddess might have what appear to have several unique personalities or backgrounds.

Hathor's status as a goddess of both birth and death may reflect another aspect of Egyptian culture as well. Egyptians held a strong belief in the **afterlife**, or a world beyond our own that a person enters after death. The Egyptians saw death in our world as birth into the afterlife. For this reason, the two events were intimately connected, and the goddess who brought life into our world was also an important part of the journey into the next world.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Egyptians associated the goddess Hathor with fertility and sexual love. The ancient Greeks identified Hathor with their own goddess of love, **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee). Hathor is also associated with water and the beginnings of life, and the rupturing of the amniotic sac just before childbirth may have been seen as a sign from the goddess. Hathor was also believed to symbolize the Milky Way as it was visible in the ancient Egyptian night sky. Hathor was seen as the ultimate caretaker, providing food for both the living and the dead. She is also associated with a sycamore tree, which the Egyptians believed was her body on earth. Egyptians made coffins out of sycamore trees in the hope that Hathor would guide them back to the womb after death.

Egyptian wall paintings typically show Hathor as a woman bearing the disk of the sun above her head, representing her role as the divine eye of the sun god Ra. Other paintings show her as a cow or a woman with a cow's head or horns. Some statues show her as a cow suckling the pharaoh with the milk of life.

## Hathor in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Throughout the history of ancient Egypt, Hathor's popularity continued to grow. She was the subject of many paintings and sculptures, and was eventually recognized as the most popular god in the entire Egyptian pantheon, with more festivals held in her honor than any other. In modern times, Hathor has appeared as a character on the science fiction television series *Stargate SG-1* (1997–2007).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Cows were an important part of ancient Egyptian agriculture and diet, which explains their association with Hathor, who was seen as a provider and nourisher. Think about the different products that humans get from cows, even today. Do you think the cow could be accurately described as the ultimate nourisher and provider in modern cultures as well? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Aphrodite; Egyptian Mythology




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# Heaven

## Theme Overview

Heaven is the general name given to an **afterlife** that is considered a place of eternal happiness and peace. It may be an actual physical place, or it may be a plane of existence separate from the known world. Heaven has often been described as a paradise of some kind, located above or beyond the limits of the ordinary world, perhaps high on a mountain peak or floating on a distant island. Over the centuries, traditional ideas have changed, and many people now think of heaven more in terms of a state of spiritual existence or salvation than as a precise though otherworldly place.

## Major Myths

**Buddhist View** A version of Buddhism based on Amida or Amitabha (pronounced uh-mee-TAH-buh), the Buddha of Boundless Light, emerged

in Japan in the 1100s. Followers of this sect believed in an eternal afterlife in a realm called the Pure Land or the Western Paradise. Anyone could enter the Pure Land through sincere spiritual devotion to Amida, who taught that the road to salvation lay in saving others from suffering. Other versions of Buddhism described the soul's ideal fate not as arriving in a heaven but as achieving nirvana (pronounced nur-VAH-nuh), a state of being in which individual desires have ceased to exist.

**Chinese View** Traditional Chinese religion and mythology included multiple concepts of heaven. Tian (pronounced tee-AHN), associated with the sky, was both heaven and a deity—or god—who was the supreme power over gods, men, and nature and the source of order in the universe. The Chinese believed that their rulers' authority came from Tian, and they called their king or emperor Tianzi, Son of Heaven.

The Taoist tradition of **Chinese mythology** spoke of Penglai (pronounced pang-LYE) Shan (Mount Penglai), a mountain with eight peaks. On each was perched the palace of one of eight beings that could live forever. Like many heavens, Penglai was described in terms of precious things: it had trees of coral that bore pearls instead of fruit. No human could enter Penglai because it was surrounded only by air.

**Pre-Christian European View** Before Christianity became the dominant religion of Europe, earlier cultures had various ideas about the dwelling places of the gods and the destinations of human souls after death. Some of these are comparable to heavens. In **Norse mythology**, for example, the gods lived in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the highest realm of existence. Like the human world below, Asgard had farms, orchards, and estates. The souls of **heroes** who had died in battle went to **Valhalla** (pronounced val-HAL-uh), the “hall of the slain,” where they spent their afterlife in joyous fighting and feasting.

Myths of the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe mentioned a paradise called Buyan (pronounced BOO-yahn), described as either a silent and peaceful underwater city or an island washed by a river of healing. The Celtic peoples had myths of an island paradise called Avalon (pronounced AV-uh-lahn). Some legends say that King **Arthur** was carried there after he fell in battle. The Greeks imagined their deities as dwelling in a palatial heaven high above the mortal world on Mount

## Heaven

*Heaven, described as a sacred place or paradise, appears in the myths and stories of cultures around the world. This silk painting shows an immortal being playing the flute in the Taoist heaven.* WERNER FOR-MAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs). The blessed dead, however, went to Elysium (pronounced eh-LEE-zee-um), or the Elysian Fields, a green garden-like afterworld.

**Jewish View** The ancient Hebrew religion featured an afterlife, but it did not include a heaven or a **hell**. By about 200 BCE, however, the influence of other cultures had introduced the ideas of reward and punishment after death. Heaven came to be seen as a place where the righteous dead would dwell with God. Certain Jewish traditions pictured heaven as a mountain with seven tiers or layers. According to some accounts, King Solomon's throne, which had six steps leading to the throne itself, provided the model for the structure of heaven.

**Christian View** The Christian idea of heaven is based on the Jewish one. Although modern Christians are more likely to interpret heaven as spiritual union with God, earlier generations of believers placed that union in a physical setting that was often described in great detail. In the early 1300s, Italian poet Dante Alighieri created a vision of heaven in the *Paradiso*, the last section of *The Divine Comedy*, a long symbolic poem about the soul's journey after death. Drawing on both Christian and pre-Christian traditions, Dante portrayed paradise as high above the earthly world. It consisted of nine heavens, one inside the other, rotating around the earth. The tenth heaven, which included all the others, was the destination of blessed souls who were ranked in order of their virtue, the more virtuous being closer to God.

Artists and writers of the Renaissance developed three visions of heaven. The first, the realm beyond the skies, was the source of images of heaven as a place of clouds and winged **angels**. The second, the garden of paradise, was the natural world raised to the level of divine perfection—an image associated with the Garden of **Eden**, the lost paradise that once existed on earth. The third vision was that of the heavenly city, a symbol of perfect organization and harmony.

**Islamic View** Building on earlier Jewish and Christian traditions, Islamic mythology also envisioned a multilayered paradise. Heaven was a pyramid, cone, or mountain rising from the lowest level to the highest. Some interpretations include eight levels, while others specify seven levels. The phrase “seventh heaven,” meaning the highest happiness, comes from this image. The Muslim heavens are garden paradises of shade trees, flowing streams, and abundant pleasure. The various levels are associated with precious substances such as gold, silver, and pearls, but the highest level is made of pure, divine light and is devoted to the ceaseless, joyous praise of God.

## Heaven and Immortality

The idea of heaven is bound up with that of eternal life. Descriptions of many heavens make a special point of mentioning immortality, whether of the gods or of human souls. In the Norse Asgard, for example, the gods guard a precious treasure—the golden apples of immortality. The apples of eternal life also grow on the Celtic island of Avalon, a name that means “apple isle.” In Penglai, one of the 108 different heavens in the Chinese Taoist tradition, the Dew of Eternal Life flows through streams and fountains, offering immortality to anyone who drinks it—but only insects, birds, and the gods can ever reach Penglai.

## Heaven in Context

Heaven, as a sacred place or a state of being, appears in the myths and legends of cultures around the world. It can be the dwelling place of the god or gods, the place where people find their reward after death, or both. It offers a group or culture the comfort of knowing that some form of existence continues after death. In many cases, heaven is seen as a reward for living according to the standards and laws of the culture. Many religions include the idea of heaven as a place where people are rewarded for living a life of virtue or goodness. Some scholars have argued that, without this incentive for living according to established laws, humans would have no reason to keep from doing anything they desired, regardless of how it affected others.

The reward of heaven is a reflection of the culture in which it arises. For the Norse, the best heaven was Valhalla, a place of feasts that was earned by dying a glorious death in battle. Indeed, the ultimate reward for those in Valhalla was to once again fight, this time alongside **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) in the final battle between the gods and the **giants**. By contrast, heaven as found in Christianity and Islam is a place of eternal peace, love, and beauty. It serves as a reward for remaining faithful on earth even when these things were not to be found. For Buddhists, heaven is not an eternal place at all, but an endless sequence of higher levels of consciousness and existence. This reflects the Buddhist ideal of constant improvement and spiritual progress.

## Heaven on Earth?

Life has been hard for most humans throughout history. War, disease, natural disasters, and the simple day-to-day struggle to get food all make for a poor quality of life. The suffering of mankind has led many philosophers through the ages to imagine a better world—not after death, but on Earth. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato wrote an influential book called *The Republic* in about 360 BCE that outlined his ideas for a truly just society. In the fifth century, Christian philosopher Saint Augustine wrote *The City of God* explaining in detail his vision for a city filled with devout Christians devoted to piety. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is, like *The Republic*, a political work. It describes a sort of communal (in which resources are shared by all) paradise in which money has no practical meaning.

The idea of communal paradise gained popularity among nineteenth-century American thinkers, some of whom tried to put the idea into practice on Brook Farm in Massachusetts. This utopian social experiment lasted from 1841 to 1847, and required all members to live and work together and share the produce of the farm. The Oneida commune, another utopian group, existed in New York from 1848 to 1881. The idea of utopian communes, now called intentional communities, experienced a surge in popularity in the 1960s during the “cultural revolution” in the United States. There are still thousands of such collectives in the United States, most devoted in one way or another to achieving, as far as is possible, a heaven on Earth.

## Heaven in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The subject of heaven has been a popular theme among artists and writers over the past several centuries. Painters such as Michelangelo and Hieronymus Bosch have painted their versions of heaven, and writers like Dante and John Milton have done the same through their poetry. More recently, Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones* (2002) featured a main character who resides in heaven. Heaven has also appeared as a place in many films, including *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *Made in Heaven* (1987), and *Down to Earth* (2001).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Do you think the idea of heaven is the main reason people follow the rules of a given culture, so that they will be rewarded after death? Why or

why not? Be sure to provide reasons and examples to support your opinion.

SEE ALSO Afterlife; Angels; Eden, Garden of; Hell; Valhalla



#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

HEK-uh-tee

#### Alternate Names

Selene

#### Appears In

Ancient myths of Asia Minor, Hesiod's *Theogony*

#### Lineage

Daughter of Perses and Asteria

## Hecate

### Character Overview

Hecate was a complex, ancient goddess known to the Greeks but originally worshipped by people of Asia Minor. She held several different roles, including earth goddess, queen of the **underworld** (land of the dead), and goddess of magic and witchcraft.

According to the Greek writer Hesiod, Hecate was the daughter of Perses (pronounced PUR-seez), a Titan, and Asteria (pronounced as-TEER-ee-uh), a nymph or female nature deity. Hesiod claimed that Hecate was a favorite of **Zeus**, who made her goddess of the earth, sea, and sky. As a triple goddess, she was also identified with the three aspects of the moon and was represented by women of three different ages. In the sky, she took the form of the old woman Selene (pronounced suh-LEE-nee), the moon. On earth, she was linked to **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), goddess of the hunt and the moon. In the underworld, she was connected with the maiden **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), wife of **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez).

Because of her association with the moon and the land of the dead, Hecate was seen as a goddess of the darkness, magic, and spells. The ancient Greeks believed magic was strongest where roads met, and the Greeks established shrines to her at crossroads, especially where three roads came together.

### Major Myths

Although not known for any major myths in which she is the main character, Hecate appears in the tale of Persephone and her abduction by Hades, the lord of the underworld. When Hades kidnapped Persephone, Hecate—who lived in a nearby cave—heard the commotion, though she did not see who took the maiden. Days later, when Persephone's mother



**Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter) passes by Hecate's cave searching for her daughter, Hecate tells her what she knows and joins in her search. After Demeter is reunited with her daughter, Persephone and Hecate become close companions.

## Hecate in Context

Hecate was not originally a part of the Greek pantheon, or collection of recognized gods. This meant that many elements with which she was connected, such as fertility and the moon, were already associated with other goddesses, especially Artemis. Her identity as a goddess of magic fulfilled a function that had not been addressed in the Greek pantheon, and assured that Hecate would not be absorbed into the already existing goddesses.

Hecate's magic was not considered evil by the ancient Greeks. To her worshippers, she could bring both good fortune and bad fortune. Later Christian tradition emphasized the negative side of her nature, portraying Hecate as queen of witches.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Hecate represented the power of magic. She also represented watchfulness, as evidenced by her ability to keep watch over all paths at a crossroads. She was usually shown holding two torches, and was often accompanied by a black she-dog or a polecat. The torches symbolized her ability to guide souls through the underworld. In her role as goddess of magic, Hecate was sometimes depicted as a three-headed figure who kept watch over the crossroads where ceremonies were performed in her honor.

## Hecate in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Hecate appears as the leader of the three witches. She

*Hecate was a triple goddess to the Greeks as goddess of the earth, sea, and sky. Statues often show her as a three-headed figure.* © MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO, VENICE, ITALY/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



appears in several artworks and poems by Romantic writer William Blake. In modern times, Hecate has appeared in the Marvel Comics universe as a powerful humanoid who earns her name when she is mistaken for the goddess Hecate by ancient people after visiting Earth long ago. She is also a character in the 2007 novel *The Alchemyst: The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel* by Michael Scott.

Hecate's popularity has surged in recent years along with the Wiccan religion—a modern attempt at recreating the nature-based religious practices of pre-Christian Europe. Among some groups of Wiccans, Hecate has again become a respected goddess.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley and Me, Elizabeth* is a novel by E. L. Konigsburg about a girl named Elizabeth who arrives in a new town with no friends. Soon she meets a strange girl named Jennifer, who claims she is a witch, and Elizabeth becomes her apprentice as they participate in odd rituals and attempt to create magic potions. Eventually, the two become close friends. This book was selected as a Newbery Honor recipient when it was first published in 1971.

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Witches and Wizards



## Hector

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Hector was the son of King Priam of Troy and his wife, **Hecuba**. A Trojan hero and warrior, he fought bravely against the Greeks in the Trojan War. In the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem about the war, Hector is portrayed as a noble and honorable leader. He was a good son, a loving husband to Andromache (pronounced an-DROM-uh-kee) and father to Astyanax (pronounced uh-STEE-uh-naks), and a trusted friend.

Honest and forthright, Hector greatly disapproved of the conduct of his brother Paris, who carried off **Helen**, the wife of the Greek ruler Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs). These actions set the stage

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

#### Pronunciation

HEK-tur

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*, other tales of the Trojan War

#### Lineage

Son of Priam and Hecuba

for the Trojan War. Despite his feelings about Paris, Hector stood ready to defend Troy when the Greeks arrived to avenge the seduction of Helen. When the first Greek warrior set foot on Trojan land, it was Hector who killed him. In the long war that followed, Hector fought valiantly and with great vigor against the Greeks. He was the Trojans' greatest champion.

During the first nine years of the war, neither the Greeks nor the Trojans gained a clear advantage. The tide of war favored first one side and then the other. Then in the tenth year of the war, a dispute arose between **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez), the greatest of the Greek warriors, and **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), the leader of the Greek forces. As a result, Achilles left the field of battle and refused to fight. His absence provided Hector and the Trojans with an opportunity to march out from Troy and attack the Greeks.

With Achilles gone, Hector's most formidable opponents were the Greek champions Diomedes (pronounced dye-uh-MEE-deez) and Ajax. When Diomedes faced Hector in battle he saw that **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war, accompanied the Trojans. The sight of Ares caused the Greeks to retreat. But then the goddesses **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) and **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), who favored the Greeks, helped Diomedes wound Ares. When the wounded god left the field of battle, the Greeks attacked and forced the Trojans to turn back.

Faced with this crisis, Hector went back to Troy to consult with his father and to ask the Trojan women to pray to the gods for help. No longer confident of victory and certain that he would soon die, Hector bid a sad farewell to his wife and son.

Returning to battle, Hector met and fought the Greek champion Ajax in one-on-one combat. The duel continued until nightfall, with neither hero gaining victory. They finally stopped and exchanged gifts as a sign of respect for each other.

When fighting between the Greeks and Trojans resumed, Hector and his forces seemed unable to be defeated. Hector killed many Greeks and succeeded in pushing them back to defenses they had built around their ships. Hector was about to burn the Greek ships when the god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) appeared, urging the Greeks to pull themselves together and fight back. At the same time, the Greek warrior Patroclus (pronounced pa-TROH-kluhs), the beloved friend of Achilles, entered the battle wearing Achilles' armor.

Believing that Achilles had returned, the Greeks rallied and caused the Trojans to retreat. But then Hector, under the protection of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh), killed Patroclus and took the armor he was wearing. Hearing of his friend's death, Achilles reentered the battle and aimed his fury at Hector.

Achilles pursued Hector around the walls of Troy three times before catching him. Aware that Hector was fated to die at Achilles' hand, Apollo abandoned him and allowed Achilles to strike a mortal blow. As he lay dying, Hector pleaded with Achilles to return his body to his father, Priam. Achilles refused. Hector predicted that Achilles, too, would die very shortly.

After Hector died, Achilles tied the warrior's body to a chariot and dragged the body around Troy before the grief-stricken eyes of the Trojans. Then he dragged the body around the tomb of his friend Patroclus. When Achilles' fury and vengeance were finally satisfied, he left Hector's body on the ground to be devoured by dogs and birds of prey.

The abuse of the dead Hector angered **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), who sent a messenger to order Achilles to release the corpse to Priam. He also sent word to Priam to offer a ransom for the body to Achilles. Priam did so and begged the Greek warrior for his son's body. Moved by Priam's grief, Achilles agreed.

Priam brought Hector's body back to Troy, and an eleven-day truce allowed the Trojans to arrange an elaborate funeral to mourn their great warrior. Hector's funeral marks the conclusion of the *Iliad*, as well as the beginning of the end for the Trojans. They later suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of the Greeks. After the fall of Troy, the Greeks killed Hector's son Astyanax, fearing that he might try to avenge his father's death. Thereafter, the surviving Trojans honored Hector as one of their greatest **heroes**.

### Hector in Context

Despite the legendary rivalry between Greece and Troy that leads to the Trojan War, Hector is a clear example of the respect with which many Trojans were regarded by the Greeks. His portrayal in tales of the Trojan War is nearly always sympathetic, and many Greeks related more to him than to the godlike Greek hero Achilles who kills him. This treatment of Hector illustrates how the Greeks understood the complex nature of war and the allegiances of soldiers.

## Key Themes and Symbols

For the most part, Hector stands as a symbol of courage and bravery. When he knows he will be killed by Achilles, he does not run away, but faces his fate. Hector also represents reason and sensibility; he warns Paris that his actions endanger all of Troy, but Paris does not listen. Hector also represents the fall of Troy, for as one of its greatest warriors, his defeat foreshadows the eventual destruction of the city.

## Hector in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Hector has long been a favorite example of courage and heroism for writers and artists. In the fourteenth century, French writer Jacques de Longuyon listed Hector in his work *Voeux du Paon* as one of the nine worthiest figures from history to display the true meaning of chivalry. He was the subject of paintings by Jacques-Louis David, Peter Paul Rubens, and Giorgio di Chirico, among others.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

When a country is at war, the enemy is often depicted negatively by the mainstream media of the time—which can include songs, oral tales, books, or in recent times, films and television shows. Do you think negative portrayals such as these should be encouraged in times of war? Do you think sympathetic portrayals of those considered enemies would be harmful? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Achilles; Agamemnon; Hecuba; Heroes; *Iliad*, *The*



# Hecuba

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Hecuba was the second wife of Priam, king of the city of Troy. She bore Priam many children, including **Hector**, Paris, Polydorus (pronounced pol-ee-DOR-uhs), and **Cassandra**. As queen of Troy, she is an important character in the tales of the Trojan War.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

HEK-yoo-buh

### Alternate Names

Hekabe

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, other tales of the Trojan War

### Lineage

Daughter of Dymas and Eunoë

While pregnant with Paris, Hecuba had a dream in which she gave birth to a fiery torch that was covered with snakes. This was considered a sign from the gods; the prophets of Troy, who were believed to be able to see the future, told her that if her child lived, he would be responsible for the fall of Troy. When Paris was born, Hecuba ordered two servants to kill the child. Unable to perform such a terrible act, the servants left Paris on a mountain to die, and he was found and raised by a shepherd.

Years later, Paris returned to Troy, and as predicted, he caused the city's destruction. He began the Trojan War by taking away **Helen**, wife of King Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs) of Sparta. All the rulers of Greece had sworn to defend Helen. To rescue her, they declared war on Troy, sacking and burning it after a long and persistent attack.

Hecuba became a slave to the Greek hero **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs). On his way back to Greece, Odysseus journeyed through Thrace, which was ruled by King Polymestor (pronounced pol-ee-MES-tor). Before the war, Hecuba had asked Polymestor to protect her son Polydorus. However, upon reaching Thrace, she found that the king had killed the boy. The enraged Hecuba tore out Polymestor's eyes and murdered both of his sons. As Odysseus was trying to control her, she turned into a dog. Her tomb was placed on a rocky outcrop located on a narrow strip of water called the Hellespont (pronounced HEL-uh-spont) between Greece and Turkey.

### Hecuba in Context

In ancient times of war, it was common for members of the losing side—particularly family members of the leaders—to be taken as slaves by the victorious soldiers. In tales of the Trojan War, the surviving women of Trojan royalty, Cassandra and Hecuba, are taken as slaves by **Agamemnon** and Odysseus, respectively. This was done as a way to gain slave labor, but, more importantly, it served as a final humiliation to the fallen men of Troy to have their women become the property of their Greek captors.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Hecuba's dream of a torch covered in snakes is a symbol of death and doom, and foreshadows the fall of Troy. An important theme in the tale of Hecuba is destiny, or the idea that future events have already been determined by the gods. Although Hecuba tries to have Paris destroyed

before he can bring about the destruction of Troy, she fails because this is Paris's destiny. Despite her attempt to have her own son killed, Hecuba also represents the fierceness with which a mother can avenge her child's death, as she does in Thrace. This ferocity is illustrated by her transformation into a dog.

## Hecuba in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Hecuba is found in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. She also appears in the plays *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women* by Euripides and is mentioned in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Her transformation into a dog is described in Dante's *Inferno*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Throughout history, the victorious side in a war traditionally has been able to take anything of value from the losing side, including land, treasures, or people. Although slaves are no longer considered appropriate spoils of war, many other treasures are often taken from countries in the wake of their defeat. Do you think a country (or group of countries) that wins a war against another country automatically has rights to claim property or land from their defeated foes? What about historical artifacts? Should victorious troops be allowed to take items from citizens of a defeated country who did not participate in battle?

SEE ALSO *Aeneid, The*; Cassandra; Greek Mythology; Hector; Helen of Troy; *Iliad, The*; Odysseus; *Odyssey, The*



# Heimdall

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, the god Heimdall stood guard over Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods. He lived near Bifrost (pronounced BIV-rost), the rainbow bridge that connected Asgard to the world of humans and from there kept watch for the approach of the

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

HIGHM-dahl

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Odin

**giants**, who were the enemies of the gods. Heimdall had incredibly sharp senses that allowed him to see great distances even at night and to hear sounds as soft as wool growing on sheep or grass growing in the field. Furthermore, he needed little sleep. He was said to be the son of **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) in some accounts, and born to nine different mothers in other accounts.

### Major Myths

According to legend, Heimdall would one day call the other gods to **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the final battle that would result in the destruction of gods and humans. When the giants drew near to Asgard, Heimdall would summon the gods by blowing his horn, Gjallarhorn (pronounced YAHL-lahr-horn), which could be heard all over creation. During the battle, Heimdall would kill the evil trickster god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) and then meet his own death.

Sometimes called Rig (meaning king), Heimdall was considered the father of all people on earth. According to legend, he traveled around the earth and stayed three nights with married couples from different social classes. First, he visited some serfs, or forced laborers, then some peasants, and finally a noble couple. Nine months after each visit, a child was born to each couple. The first was an ugly but strong boy named Thrall (pronounced THRAHL), who became the ancestor of all serfs. The second, Karl, was skilled at farmwork and became the ancestor of all peasants. Jarl (pronounced YARL), the last of the children, was intelligent and quick to learn the skills of hunting and combat. He became the ancestor of all warriors and nobles. The words *thrall*, *karl*, and *jarl* mean serf, farmer, and nobleman in the Norse language.

### Heimdall in Context

For the Norse people, hunting horns were an essential part of their way of life. These horns, literally hollowed out and carved from the horns of an animal such as a reindeer, provided communication between members of a hunting party so they could work together to capture prey. Like Heimdall, the Norse people often named their most important pieces of equipment, including weapons and other tools of the hunt.

The story of Heimdall's visit to the three couples reflects the social classes of the Norse people at the time. According to the story, the





*One of Heimdall's most important duties will be to blow his horn Gjallarhorn as a signal of the start of Ragnarok, the final battle between good and evil during which all Norse gods and humans will die.* © ARNI MAGNUS-SON INSTITUTE, REYKJAVIK, ICELAND/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

establishment of the social classes by a god indicates that those who are born into a particular class belong in that class, and it is appropriate for warriors and nobles to be superior to and live off the labor of the lower classes. In Norse society, there was little movement between social classes, with riches often handed down from one family member to the next. However, not all slaves were born as such: many were taken as war prisoners, and others fell into slavery because they owed debts. It was not uncommon for serfs to earn or buy their freedom after a period of servitude.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Heimdall is a symbol of vigilance, always watching over the entrance to Asgard and ready to warn of attacking giants. His vigilance is also illustrated by his keen sense of sight and hearing. Heimdall's horn symbolizes danger, for it is only blown in the event of an attack.

## Heimdall in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Heimdall may not be as well known as some other Norse gods, even though he holds an important place in Norse mythology. Aside from illustrations in ancient manuscripts, Heimdall has been depicted by the nineteenth-century painter Nils Blommér. Heimdall has also appeared as a superhero in the Marvel Comics universe, along with many other figures from Norse mythology.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Heimdall functioned as the vigilant sentry for Asgard. Nowadays, many homes and automobiles have their own automatic sentries: security alarms. More and more suburban communities are gated and fenced and feature private security guards at the entrance. Do you think these modern “sentries” are necessary? Are they effective? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Loki; Norse Mythology; Ragnarok



### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

HEL

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Daughter of Loki and Angrboda

# Hel

## Character Overview

Hel was the Norse goddess of the dead, daughter of the trickster god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) and the giantess Angrboda (pronounced AHNG-gur-boh-duh). She is recognized as the goddess of all the dead who do not die with glory—in other words, those who die from illness or old age. The realm she presides over is also referred to as Hel, and is a cold, cheerless place.

Shortly after her birth, Hel was cast out of Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), home of the gods, by **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). He

sent her to Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heyM), the **underworld** or land of the dead, and made her queen of all who died without glory. Warriors who fell in combat did not become her subjects but went instead to the hall called **Valhalla** to live with Odin.

Sources describe the goddess as a monster who is half flesh-colored and half bluish-black. She lived in a castle called Eljudnir (pronounced el-YOOD-neer) and ate her meals with a dish named Hunger and a knife called Famine. She was attended by two servants, Ganglati and Ganglot, who moved so slowly that they appeared to be standing still.

## Major Myths

Hel was the keeper of the soul of the god **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der) after he was killed by mistletoe through Loki's trickery. When Balder's mother **Frigg** (pronounced FRIG) asked for his soul to be returned, Hel agreed, but only if every living thing in the world cried in mourning over his death. Frigg got all living things to cry except one—a giantess that may have been Loki in disguise. Balder had to remain in the underworld.

## Hel in Context

In Norse culture, much emphasis was placed on dying with honor. The most honorable deaths were achieved on battlefields in foreign lands. Those who died in such a way were guaranteed to spend eternity with Odin in the paradise of Valhalla. Those who died defending their homes or local lands were also honored, though not as greatly. To die of old age or illness was considered to be a death without honor, and therefore those who died in this way were destined to spend eternity in the dismal underworld of Hel.

## Key Themes and Symbols

To the Norse people, Hel represented death without honor. She symbolized the denial of everything enjoyable in the world, as shown by her plate, Hunger, and her knife, Famine. Hel may also be seen as a victim of circumstance, since she is banished from Asgard simply because her father is Loki. Her refusal to release Odin's son Balder from the underworld may be seen as revenge against Odin.

## Hel in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Hel is not as well known or well regarded as many other Norse deities. When depicted, she is often shown accompanied by Garmr (pronounced GARM), her watchdog and guardian of the gates to her realm. Hel appears as a villain in the *Everworld* series of novels by K. A. Applegate, as well as the *Thor* comic series by Marvel and numerous video games. *Hell*, the English word for the underworld reserved for the damned, is taken from the name of the goddess.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea of what makes a “good death” varies from culture to culture. **Norse mythology** included several different possible fates after death, all of which depended upon the way in which one died. Dying on battlefields in foreign lands led a person to the highest level of the **afterlife**. This seems to suggest foreign conquest was very important to the Norse. By contrast, many modern Americans believe that the best way to die is of old age, in one’s bed. What cultural values does such a death represent? How are they different from the cultural values of the ancient Norse society?

SEE ALSO Loki; Norse Mythology; Odin; Underworld; Valhalla



# Helen of Troy

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

HEL-en

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, other tales of the Trojan War

### Lineage

Daughter of Zeus and Leda

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Helen of Troy was the most beautiful woman in the world. A daughter of the god **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), she is best known for the part she played in causing the Trojan War, a story told by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Some myths say that Helen’s mother was Leda, the wife of King Tyndareus (pronounced tin-DAIR-ee-uhs) of Sparta. Others name Nemesis (pronounced NEM-uh-sis), the goddess of revenge, as her mother. Helen had a sister, Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), who later became the wife of King **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) of Mycenae (pronounced mye-SEE-nee). She also had twin brothers named **Castor and Pollux** (pronounced PAHL-uhks).

Stories claiming Leda as Helen's mother tell how Zeus disguised himself as a swan and raped the Spartan queen. Leda then produced two eggs. From one came Helen and her brother Pollux. Clytemnestra and Castor emerged from the other. Other versions of the myth say that Zeus seduced Nemesis, and she laid the two eggs. A shepherd discovered them and gave them to Queen Leda, who tended the eggs until they hatched and raised the children as her own. In some variations of this legend, Helen and Pollux were the children of Zeus, but Clytemnestra and Castor were actually the children of Tyndareus.

When Helen was only twelve years old, the Greek hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) kidnapped her and planned to make her his wife. He took her to Attica (pronounced AT-i-kuh) in Greece and locked her away under the care of his mother. Helen's brothers Castor and Pollux rescued her while Theseus was away and brought her back to Sparta. According to some stories, before Helen left Attica, she had given birth to a daughter named Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NEYE-uh).

Some time after Helen returned to Sparta, King Tyndareus decided that it was time for her to marry. Suitors came from all over Greece, hoping to win the famous beauty. Many were powerful leaders. Tyndareus worried that choosing one suitor might anger the others, who could cause trouble for his kingdom.

Among those seeking to marry Helen was **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs), the king of Ithaca (ITH-uh-kuh). Odysseus advised Tyndareus to have all the suitors take an oath to accept Helen's choice and promise to support that person whenever the need should arise. The suitors agreed, and Helen chose Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs), a prince of Mycenae, to be her husband. Helen's sister Clytemnestra was already married to Menelaus's older brother, Agamemnon.

For a while, Helen and Menelaus lived happily together. They had a daughter and son, and Menelaus eventually became the king of Sparta. But their life together came to a sudden end.

Paris, a prince of Troy, traveled to Sparta on the advice of the goddess **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee). She had promised him the most beautiful woman in the world after he proclaimed her the "fairest" goddess. When Paris saw Helen, he knew that Aphrodite had kept her promise. While Menelaus was away in Crete, Paris took Helen back to Troy. Some stories say Helen went willingly, seduced by Paris's charms. Others claim that Paris kidnapped her and took her by force.

When Menelaus returned home and discovered Helen gone, he called on the leaders of Greece, who had sworn to support him if necessary. The Greeks organized a great expedition and set sail for Troy. Their arrival at Troy marked the beginning of the Trojan War. During the war, Helen's sympathies were divided. At times, she helped the Trojans by pointing out Greek leaders. At other times, however, she sympathized with the Greeks and did not betray them when opportunities to do so arose.

Helen had a number of children by Paris, but none survived infancy. Paris died in the Trojan War, and Helen married his brother Deiphobus (pronounced dee-IF-oh-buhs). After the Greeks won the war, she was reunited with Menelaus, and she helped him kill Deiphobus. Then Helen and Menelaus set sail for Sparta.

The couple arrived in Sparta after a journey of several years. Some stories say that the gods, angry at the trouble Helen had caused, sent storms to drive their ships off course to Egypt and other lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. When they finally arrived in Sparta, the couple lived happily, although by some accounts, Menelaus remained suspicious of Helen's feelings and loyalty.

Many stories say that Helen remained in Sparta until her death. But others say that she went to the island of Rhodes after Menelaus died, perhaps driven from Sparta by their son Nicostratus (pronounced nye-KOS-truh-tuhs). At first she was given refuge on Rhodes by Polyxo (pronounced puh-LIKS-oh), the widow of Tlepolemus (pronounced tlay-POL-ee-muhs), one of the Greek leaders who had died in the Trojan War. Later, however, legend has it that Polyxo had Helen hanged to avenge the death of her husband.

### **Helen of Troy in Context**

The abduction of Helen by Paris reflects the ancient idea of women as trophies that can be taken from an enemy. Victorious soldiers commonly took the women of their fallen enemies as slaves; in the myth, Paris actually provokes a war by taking Helen with him while Menelaus is away. Versions of the story differ on whether or not Helen went with Paris willingly, but this is irrelevant to Menelaus's reaction: he behaves as if Paris has stolen property from him, an attitude typical of the time period.

Helen also reflects Greek ideas about the importance of physical beauty. According to the ancient Greeks, outer beauty was a reflection of the mind and spirit. Therefore, beauty was considered to be a sign of intelligence, health, and a pure heart. Although the Greeks focused on physical beauty, it is because they did not consider beauty to be merely “skin deep.”

Although Helen was the daughter of Zeus, she is a mortal woman in the myth of the fall of Troy. Some scholars suggest that Helen was once a very ancient goddess associated with trees and birds, but whose status was reduced to a mere mortal when the Greeks stopped worshipping her.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Greek mythology, Helen is said to represent the ultimate in human beauty. Aphrodite herself identifies Helen as the most beautiful woman in the world. Helen is also seen as a victim of the advances of men; she is abducted against her will at least once, and is plagued by suitors when her father announces she is looking for a husband. Helen may also symbolize wavering loyalty, as seen when she assists both sides during the Trojan War.

### Helen of Troy in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Helen and stories about her inspired many ancient writers, including the Greek playwright Euripides and the Roman poets Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca. She also served as inspiration for later authors, including Italian poet Dante Alighieri and English playwrights William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe. It was Marlowe who famously wrote that Helen’s was “the face which launched a thousand ships.” Helen has also appeared in numerous modern

*Helen of Troy was the most beautiful woman in the world, and is best known for the role she played in starting the Trojan War between the Trojans and the Greeks.* © THE DE MORGAN CENTRE, LONDON/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



re-tellings of the Trojan War, and was even the subject of her own television miniseries in 2003.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Nobody's Princess* (2007) by Esther Friesner tells the story of the Trojan War from Helen's point of view. In this version, Helen is a fiercely independent young woman who cares more about her skills with a sword than her appearance. The book offers a new take on an age-old tale, and Friesner even includes a section on ancient Greek history and the original texts her tale draws upon.

**SEE ALSO** Agamemnon; Castor and Pollux; Greek Mythology; *Iliad, The*; Odysseus; *Odyssey, The*; Theseus



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## Hell

### Theme Overview

Hell is a place of punishment after death or, in more abstract terms, a state of spiritual damnation. In religions and mythologies that separate the dead according to their conduct in life or the purity of their souls, the evil go to hell while the good go to **heaven**.

Although the word *hell* comes from **Hel**, the Norse goddess of death, hells appear in the beliefs and mythologies of many cultures. Common features of hells include burning heat or freezing cold, darkness (symbolizing the soul's separation from light, goodness, and truth), physical agony that represents spiritual suffering, and devils or demons who torment the damned.

### Major Myths

**Hindu Mythology** Hinduism is based on the belief that each soul lives many, many lives. A soul may spend time in any of twenty-one hells to pay for wrong actions during a lifetime, but eventually that soul will be reborn in the world. In the Jain religion, which is related to Hinduism, sinners go to a hell called *bhumis*, where demons



torment them until they have paid for whatever evil they committed in life.

**Buddhist Mythology** There are numerous versions of Buddhism with various ideas of hell. The strictest form of Buddhism does not include a hell, but some Buddhists still follow the traditional belief of up to 136 hells. The hell to which a dead soul goes for punishment depends on the person's actions in life. Some Buddhist doctrines speak of the *karmavacara*, the realm of physical and sensory perceptions, as a series of hells.

**Chinese Mythology** The Chinese belief that souls are punished after death to pay for sins or errors committed during life combines some Buddhist ideas with elements of traditional Taoist **Chinese mythology**. Sinners descend to the base of the sacred mountain, Meru, to undergo a set period of punishment in one hell or in a series of hells. When they have paid for their sins and are ready for rebirth in a new life, they drink a brew that makes them forget their past lives. In some accounts, a wheel of rebirth lifts them to their next life, while in others they are thrown from a bridge of pain into a river that carries them onward.

**Pre-Christian European Mythology** Before Christianity gave its own meanings to the concepts of heaven and hell, the pre-Christian peoples of Europe imagined the dark side of the **afterlife**. The Norse pictured Hel, the corpse-like goddess of death, as queen of a grim underground realm populated by those who had died of sickness and old age. This view of hell involves a dread of death and a horror of the cold, dark, decaying grave, but it does not suggest a place of punishment.

The Greek **underworld** was divided into three regions: **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), and Elysium (pronounced eh-LEE-zee-um). Most of the dead went to the kingdom of the god Hades. In the deepest part of the underworld, a terrible dark place known as Tartarus, the very wicked suffered eternal punishment at the hands of the **Furies**. The third region, Elysium or the Elysian Fields, was where exceptionally good and righteous people went after death.

**Persian Mythology** The image of hell as a place of torment for sinners emerged fully in the **Persian mythology** based on the faith founded in

the 500s BCE by Zoroaster (pronounced ZOR-oh-as-tur). According to Zoroastrian belief, souls are judged after death at a bridge where their lives are weighed. If the outcome is good, the bridge widens and carries them to heaven. If they are judged to have been evil, the bridge narrows and pitches them down into a dreadful hell. Those whose lives were an equal mix of good and evil go to a realm called *hamestagan*, in which they experience both heat and cold.

**Jewish Mythology** The early Hebrews called their afterworld Sheol (pronounced SHEE-ohl) and pictured it as a quiet, sad place where all the dead went. By around 200 BCE, under the influence of Zoroastrianism and other belief systems, the Jews had adopted the idea of judgment for the dead. The afterworld became a heaven for the good and a hell for the wicked.

A river of **fire** known as Gehenna (pronounced geh-HEN-na) ran through hell, and sometimes the whole region was called Gehenna. Scores of demons dwelled there and so did the gods and goddesses of the Greeks, Romans, Celts, and other peoples who had also been turned into demons. Some interpretations described hell as a series of ever-smaller levels or rings, like a downward-pointing, seven-tiered mountain. Half the year the sinners being punished in hell endured the torments of fire. For the rest of the time they suffered the even worse misery of bitter cold.

**Christian Mythology** Christian belief built upon the Jewish notion of hell as a place of punishment for the wicked and the home of **Satan**, the chief devil, and all of his evil demons, or fallen **angels**. Most often hell was pictured as an inferno, a place of flames and cruel heat. Many early Christian writings emphasized the agonies that sinners suffered in hell when demons boiled them in kettles or stabbed them with pitchforks. In such interpretations of hell the punishments were often tailored to fit specific sins.

During the Middle Ages, Christians sometimes pictured hell as a fiery dragon's mouth swallowing up sinners. In *The Divine Comedy*, a poem about the soul's journey written in the early 1300s, Italian poet Dante Alighieri drew upon many mythological traditions. He portrayed hell as an inferno of punishment, descending through many levels where sinners of different categories received punishment. Dante also described another realm that Christians had devised called purgatory, a state between

hell and heaven. Christian belief included the possibility that a soul could, after punishment in purgatory and true repentance, work its way toward heaven and salvation.

**Islamic Mythology** The Muslims inherited their vision of hell, like many other elements of their faith, from the Jews and the Christians. The Islamic hell is called Jahannam (pronounced JAH-hah-nahm), or sometimes Gehenna. Jahannam can be portrayed as a devouring, fire-breathing monster or a multilayered, pitlike realm below the earth whose chief characteristic is fire. As in Persian mythology, the souls of the dead are required to cross a bridge of judgment, “sharper than a sword and finer than a hair,” that stretches over Jahannam to paradise. Sinners and unbelievers slip and fall into hell. The kind of punishment that each sinner receives matches his or her sins.

**Central American Mythology** According to the Maya, the souls of most of the dead went to an underworld known as Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh). Only individuals who died in violent circumstances went directly to one of the heavens. In the Mayan legend of the Hero Twins, told in the *Popol Vuh*, Xibalba is divided into houses filled with terrifying objects such as knives, jaguars, and bats. The **twins** undergo a series of trials in these houses and eventually defeat the lords of Xibalba. The Aztecs believed that the souls of ordinary people went to an underworld called Mictlan (pronounced MEEKT-lahn). Each soul wandered through the layers of Mictlan until it reached the deepest level.

## Hell in Context

Hell is related to the concept of the underworld. In the myths of many ancient cultures, the underworld was the mysterious and often gloomy realm of the dead. Although usually imagined as a dark underground kingdom associated with caves and holes in the earth, hell was not always a place of punishment and suffering. Later belief systems introduced the idea of an afterlife in which the wicked received punishment, and hell was where that punishment occurred.

Though a belief in some form of afterlife is found in almost every culture in the world, there are fewer examples of the afterlife as a place of punishment for those who performed evil deeds while alive. To some, it would seem to be a natural extension of a belief in heaven; if people are rewarded for their good deeds while alive, why would others not be

## No Exit

Existentialist philosopher and author Jean-Paul Sartre created an unusual version of hell in his 1944 play *No Exit*. While most people have traditionally imagined hell as a fiery place of physical torture, Sartre imagined a subtler, psychological hell specially designed to torment each particular damned soul. In his play, three people are shut in a room with no windows and only one door, which remains shut throughout most of the play. The characters realize they are in hell, and expect that their physical punishment will soon begin. It never does. Instead, they begin to “torture” each other, playing on each other’s fears and insecurities. In the end, it becomes clear that this is their hell. These three people are perfectly designed to madden each other for eternity, leading one of them to conclude, in a famous line: “Hell is other people.”

punished for their bad deeds? However, this argument only holds true for cultures that tend to view the world as being in constant struggle between opposing forces—usually referred to as good and evil.

Hell may also be viewed as a tool for enforcing traditions and rules in a culture, particularly those rules which might be difficult to enforce through other means. For example, stealing is a crime that might be easily avoided by locking up or guarding valuables. Lying and cheating, however, are much harder to combat; by suggesting that performing some negative actions—or failing to perform actions such as observing religious days—may result in a person going to hell, cultural groups can enjoy a consistent level of “moral” or accepted behavior. The notion of hell also provides an answer to those who might wonder if justice truly exists in a world where bad things often seem to happen without noticeable repercussions.

## Hell in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Hell has appeared in many works of art and literature. The most notable written work featuring hell is Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, which offers detailed descriptions of the types of punishment inflicted on the damned in each level of hell. Arguably the most famous painted image of hell is found in the *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych painted by Hieronymus

Bosch in the early sixteenth century. Versions of hell have also been shown in numerous films such as *What Dreams May Come* (1998) and television shows such as *The Simpsons*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

American author Mark Twain once quipped, “Go to heaven for the climate, hell for the company.” This statement suggests that the truly interesting souls will be in hell, and that those who lived lives pure enough to earn them a place in heaven would be boring. This attitude is a uniquely modern take on the concept of hell that is virtually absent in ancient society. Why is that so, and what does that indicate about modern ideas about hell?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Devils and Demons; Furies; Hades; Heaven; Hel; Satan; Underworld



## Hephaestus

### Character Overview

An ancient god of **fire** in **Greek mythology**, Hephaestus is the counterpart of the Roman god Vulcan (pronounced VUHL-kuhn), the god of fire and of metalwork and crafts. The tales about Vulcan, who is sometimes called Mulciber (the smelter), are all based on Greek myths about Hephaestus.

### Major Myths

The son of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh; or, in some versions, of Hera alone), Hephaestus was lame and deformed. Some stories say that Zeus threw him from Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), the mountain home of the gods, for taking Hera’s side in a quarrel with Zeus and that Hephaestus became lame as a result of the fall. Other myths say that Hephaestus was born lame and that Hera threw him from Olympus because she was ashamed of his deformity. He landed in the ocean and was rescued by sea **nymphs**—or

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

hi-FES-tuhs

#### Alternate Names

Vulcan (Roman)

#### Appears In

Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

#### Lineage

Son of Zeus and Hera

female nature deities—who raised him in a cave under the sea and taught him many skills.

Hephaestus became a master craftsman. One day he gained his revenge on Hera for throwing him off Olympus by creating for her a golden throne that contained a trap. When she sat on the throne, the trap closed and imprisoned her. The other gods begged Hephaestus to release Hera, but he would not listen. Finally, the god of wine, **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), made Hephaestus drunk and obtained the key to the trap.

As craftsman for the gods, Hephaestus built palaces and other beautiful and wondrous things that enabled the Olympians to live in great luxury. He also fashioned thunderbolts for Zeus, armor for the **heroes Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) and **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) that made them unable to be harmed, and a scepter for King **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) that gave him great power. Some legends say that Hephaestus created **Pandora** (pronounced pan-DOR-uh) so that Zeus could take revenge on **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs) for giving fire to humans. Hephaestus later made the chains that bound Prometheus to a mountain.

Hephaestus often appeared as a comic figure in myths and had little luck in love. One time he took an ax and split Zeus's skull to relieve a headache, and the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THÉE-nuh) sprang fully grown from the head. He fell in love with Athena, but she rejected him. He also courted **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), who accepted his offer of marriage but then had love affairs with others, including the god **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez). Hephaestus fashioned a fine golden net and caught his wife and Ares in it. He then called the other gods so that they could laugh at the couple, but instead they mocked Hephaestus. The gods often made fun of him because of his limp and his soot-covered face, which came from working over the fire at his craft.

### Hephaestus in Context

The Greeks believed that Hephaestus had a workshop on the volcanic island of Lemnos in the Aegean Sea. There, he taught the people the arts of metalwork, for which they became famous. The Romans thought that their god Vulcan lived and worked under Mount Etna, a volcano on the island of Sicily, and had workshops on Olympus and beneath other



*The Greek god Hephaestus at his forge.* TIME LIFE PICTURES/MANSELL/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.

volcanoes as well. In this way, the Greeks and Romans provided a supernatural explanation for the violent eruptions and quakes that occurred wherever volcanoes were found: the quakes were said to be the result of the pounding of the hammers of Hephaestus.

The fact that Hephaestus is mocked for his disability is a reflection of the emphasis the ancient Greeks place on physical perfection. Physical deformity or disability in a baby was seen as something a family should be ashamed of, or a mark of the gods' disfavor. In fact, throughout ancient Greece (and in many other ancient cultures), deformed newborns were killed. Generally, they were left to die of exposure, but the Spartans actually threw them off a cliff. Hephaestus must make up for his weak legs by developing especially strong arms and skilled hands.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes in the myths of Hephaestus is disability. He is wounded at a young age by a fall from Olympus and is routinely ridiculed and dismissed by the other gods for his physical flaws. The symbols typically associated with Hephaestus—the blacksmith’s hammer, anvil, and tongs—all illustrate his place among the gods as a working craftsman, and a symbol of all men who must work with their hands. In this way—and in his physical imperfection—he is perhaps the most human of all the gods.

## Hephaestus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although not as popular as other Greek and Roman gods, Hephaestus had his share of followers. The Greeks built a large temple to honor Hephaestus, which still stands. Each year in August, the Romans held a festival in honor of Vulcan called the Vulcanalia.

More recently, Hephaestus (under the name Vulcan) appeared as a character in the 1988 Terry Gilliam film *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, played by Oliver Reed. He also appeared briefly in a segment from the original Disney animated film *Fantasia* (1940); he is shown creating lightning bolts for Zeus.

As the steel industry emerged in the nineteenth century, Vulcan enjoyed new symbolic popularity. The name “Vulcan” was applied to various products and companies associated with steel production, and the image of Vulcan was popular in steel-producing cities. Birmingham, Alabama, for example, features a 55-foot-high cast iron statue of Vulcan. Vulcan has also found his way into other industries. The process of “vulcanization,” or curing process that strengthens rubber by chemically treating it at very high heat, is named after Vulcan. The process was invented by Charles Goodyear, who put the new rubber to use in tire manufacturing.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Hephaestus is described as being deformed and physically disabled. He is also routinely the subject of ridicule and mocking by the other gods. Compare this to the situation disabled persons face in the modern world. Are people with disabilities often made fun of in modern books, movies, or television shows? Can you also find examples of disabled persons who are respected? Which of the two types is more common in



the media, and what does this indicate about attitudes toward disability in modern culture?

SEE ALSO Achilles; Aeneas; Aphrodite; Athena; Fire; Greek Mythology; Hera; Pandora; Prometheus; Roman Mythology; Zeus



## Hera

### Character Overview

The queen of **heaven** in **Greek mythology**, Hera was the sister and wife of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods. The Greeks worshipped her as a mother goddess and considered her a protector of marriage and childbirth and a guardian of women. Many of the myths and legends about Hera concern her terrible jealousy of and revenge against Zeus's numerous lovers and children. Hera's counterpart in **Roman mythology** was the goddess Juno (pronounced JOO-noh). Juno closely resembled Hera, and myths about her were basically the same. However, there were some differences. In Roman mythology, for example, Juno's origin is sometimes associated with an Italian mother goddess closely connected to fertility. She is often linked with the moon, and the month that the Romans named in her honor—June—was considered the most favorable time of the year for weddings.

As the wife of Zeus, Hera bore him four children: **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of **fire** and crafts; **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war; Ilithyia (pronounced ee-LEE-thee-uh), the goddess of childbirth; and Hebe (pronounced HEE-bee), the cupbearer of the gods. Zeus and Hera often quarreled, and their arguments sometimes became fierce enough to shake the halls of Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), the home of the gods. Most of their arguments concerned Zeus's seduction of other women.

### Major Myths

The daughter of the **Titans Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs) and Rhea (pronounced REE-uh), Hera was swallowed after birth by Cronus. Her siblings **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), **Hades** (pronounced

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

HAIR-uh

#### Alternate Names

Juno (Roman)

#### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

#### Lineage

Daughter of Cronus and Rhea

HAY-deez), **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), and Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh) suffered the same fate. However, Rhea managed to save Zeus, the youngest brother. Later Zeus rescued his brothers and sisters by giving Cronus a potion that caused him to vomit them out. Some stories say that Hera was raised by the Titans Oceanus (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nuhs) and Tethys (pronounced TEE-this); others claim that she grew up under the care of Temenus (pronounced TEM-uh-nuhs), who ruled the region of Arcadia (pronounced ar-KAY-dee-uh) in Greece.

When Zeus and his brothers defeated the Titans and divided the universe among themselves, they gave nothing to their sisters. Hera was furious at being left out, and this anger persisted throughout her relationship with Zeus. According to some myths, Zeus seduced Hera while disguised as a cuckoo. Other tales say that he found her on an island and carried her away to a cave. Stories place their wedding at various sites: in the Garden of the Hesperides (pronounced heh-SPER-uh-deez), at the top of Mount Ida in Anatolia (present-day Turkey), or on the island of Euboea (pronounced yoo-BEE-uh) in the Aegean (pronounced i-JEE-uhn) Sea. Festivals commemorating the marriage took place throughout Greece.

Zeus wandered the world seducing beautiful women, goddesses, and **nymphs**—often while disguised as a mortal or an animal. His unfaithfulness made Hera insanely jealous. Most of her anger was directed at Zeus's lovers and their children, whom she persecuted and punished mercilessly. One of the greatest victims of Hera's anger was **Heracles**, the son of Zeus and a mortal woman named Alcmena (pronounced alk-MEE-nuh). Hera hounded and punished Heracles throughout his life. Soon after his birth, she sent two snakes to kill him, but the infant Heracles, who would become known for his tremendous strength, strangled the snakes instead. Another time, Hera drove Heracles temporarily insane, causing him to kill his own wife and children. Once, when she raised a storm against Heracles' ship, Zeus retaliated by hanging Hera from Mount Olympus by her wrists, with anvils attached to her feet.

Another of Hera's victims was Io (pronounced EE-oh), a Greek princess with whom Zeus had an affair. Hera suspected that Zeus had a new lover and went searching for him. To save Io from his wife's jealousy, Zeus turned the girl into a white calf. When Hera found Zeus, she asked to have the calf as a gift. Not daring to refuse, he agreed. Io

roamed the meadows as a calf for a long time, constantly pestered by a horsefly sent by Hera to torment her. Feeling pity for Io, Zeus often visited her in the shape of a bull. Finally, he promised Hera that he would pay no more attention to Io, and Hera agreed to transform her back into a woman.

Semele (pronounced SEM-uh-lee), a mortal woman who gave birth to Zeus's son **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), was another of Hera's victims. Hera suggested to Semele that she ask her lover to appear in his full glory. Zeus, who had promised to grant Semele any wish, sadly did so and appeared with his thunderbolts, causing Semele to burn to death immediately. Athamas (pronounced ATH-uh-mas), the king of Thebes (pronounced THEEBZ), and his wife Ino (pronounced EYE-noh), who later became a sea goddess, raised Dionysus after his mother's death. Hera punished them as well by making them go mad.

Hera's vengeful nature was directed mainly at her husband's unfaithfulness, but there were other victims too. One famous story tells of a beauty contest between Hera and the goddesses **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) and **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee). The judge of the contest, the Trojan prince Paris, chose Aphrodite as the most beautiful of the three. The angry Hera punished Paris by siding with the Greeks against the Trojans in the Trojan War and by acting as protector of the Greek hero **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez).

One of the principal Roman myths of Juno concerns Minerva (pronounced mi-NUR-vuh), the Roman counterpart of the Greek goddess Athena. According to this story, Minerva was born from the head of Jupiter (pronounced JOO-pi-tur), which angered Juno. She complained to Flora (pronounced FLOR-uh), the goddess of flowers and gardens, who touched Juno with a magic herb that caused her to give birth to the god Mars. A similar myth exists in Greek mythology, but in some versions of that story, Hera gives birth to the monster Typhon (pronounced TYE-fon), who tries to defeat Zeus and take his power. While the Greek myth illustrates Hera's vengeful nature, the Roman story emphasizes fertility and motherhood.

## Hera in Context

The worship of Hera appears to be older than the worship of Zeus, even though, as the king of the other gods, he has more power and importance than Hera. Archeological evidence suggests that the temples built in

### First Ladies

*In cultures where a male god rules over lesser gods, the wife of the leader plays an important role, and often exemplifies cultural beliefs about women and marriage.*

Figure	Nationality	Wife of	Description
Frigg	Norse	Odin	Loyal wife and mother. She does not live with Odin, but keeps her own home where she is attended by young women.
Hera	Greek	Zeus	A beautiful goddess with a short temper and plenty of power. Her husband is often unfaithful to her, and she punishes his lovers severely.
Izanami	Japanese	Izanagi	Izanami and Izanagi jointly create Japan and its gods. She is burned birthing the fire god and dies, horribly disfigured. Izanagi breaks off their marriage after unsuccessfully trying to rescue her from the underworld.
Sati/Parvati	Indian	Shiva	Sati is the first wife of Shiva. She is devoted and humble. She burns herself to death because her father fails to respect Shiva sufficiently. She is reincarnated as Parvati, another humble, devoted wife.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

Hera's honor are the oldest of any of the other Greek deities; this fact may indicate that Hera developed from a goddess of an earlier matriarchal society (a society in which women hold power) when goddesses could be more powerful than their male counterparts. In the patriarchal society (ruled by men) of the Greeks, Hera became a figure

who was powerful in her own right, but not as powerful as her husband. She could not control him, and the constant fighting between the two may reflect the conflict between the older cult worship of Hera versus the newer and more powerful cult worship of Zeus.

Hera's long-lasting bond with Zeus—despite its many problems—reflects the importance of the marriage bond in Greece, and also highlights how husbands and wives were treated differently in ancient Greece. Men spent more time away from home, where their actions could not be seen by household servants; women, being in charge of the household—and with the home being considered the safest place, particularly in times of conflict—had limited contact with men other than their husbands or servants. It seems likely that Greek husbands had more opportunity to be unfaithful than their wives did. Although divorces caused by cheating spouses were not uncommon, a wife would usually have to get the permission of her family before seeking a divorce. This meant that the divorce process was more difficult for a woman than for a man, especially since divorce often meant that her children would remain with her husband. For these reasons, wives tended to remain married even if their husbands were unfaithful. However, the myths of Hera illustrate the kinds of vengeance a wife could inflict upon her husband and his lovers; these may have served as “cautionary tales” for men engaging in affairs with other women.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Hera stood as a symbol of motherhood, as well as a symbol of loyalty to her husband Zeus. However, she also represented vengeance in many myths involving Zeus's lovers. The theme of jealousy is continuous in the myths of Hera. Indeed, her jealousy extends not just to those women who are involved with Zeus, but also to their children, as shown in the tales of Heracles.

Both the cow and the peacock were sacred animals to Hera. Like the Egyptian goddess **Hathor**, Hera was a cow-goddess, described often as “ox-eyed.” The pomegranate fruit also represents Hera as a fertility goddess.

## Hera in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As the wife of Zeus, Hera was one of the more honored gods among the Greeks. She was often depicted in statue form, numerous examples of

which have survived to modern times. Many temples were built in her honor, and one can still be seen in the Italian city of Paestum.

Although Hera is not as readily found in art and literature from the Renaissance to present day, she has still made some notable appearances. Carolyn Kizer's poem "Hera, Hung from the Sky" (1973) offers a feminist take on Zeus's legendary punishment of his wife. Hera appears in the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*, as well as the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules*; in the latter case, however, Hera's role in the myth of Hercules was greatly reduced. A somewhat more accurate portrayal of Hera's relationship with Hercules is shown in the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, in which the character of Hera appeared in two episodes.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The purpose of marriage in ancient Greece was to bear and raise children who would continue the family bloodline, so marriages often ended when this purpose could not be fulfilled for some reason—for instance, when the couple found they could not have children, or because the wife's unfaithfulness could result in her bearing another man's children. Like in the ancient Greek society, divorce is common in the United States, with half of the marriages ending in divorce. What are the primary reasons for divorce in American society? How do these reasons reflect the purposes for marriage in modern culture?

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Heracles; Roman Mythology; Zeus

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek



#### Pronunciation

HAIR-uh-kleez

#### Alternate Names

Hercules (Roman)

#### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*

#### Lineage

Son of Zeus and Alcmena

## Heracles

### Character Overview

The greatest of all **heroes** in **Greek mythology**, Heracles was the strongest man on earth. Besides tremendous physical strength, he had great self-confidence and considered himself equal to the gods. Heracles (called Hercules by the Romans) was not blessed with great intelligence, but his bravery made up for any lack of cunning. Easily angered, his sudden outbursts of rage often harmed innocent bystanders. When the

fury passed, though, Heracles was full of sorrow and guilt for what he had done and ready to accept any punishment for his misdeeds. Only supernatural forces could defeat him, and it was magic that ended his mortal life. In Greek mythology, only two figures with half-mortal, half-god parentage—Heracles and **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suh)—became fully immortal (able to live forever) and were worshipped as gods.

Heracles was the son of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and Alcmena (pronounced alk-MEE-nuh), the wife of Amphitryon (pronounced am-FI-tree-uhn), a distinguished Greek warrior and heir to the throne of Tiryns (pronounced TEER-ins). One night while Amphitryon was away, Zeus came to Alcmena disguised as her husband. The next day, the real Amphitryon returned and slept with his wife. Concerned that Amphitryon did not remember being with Alcmena on both nights, the couple consulted the blind prophet Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-uhs), who could see the workings of the gods. He told them that Zeus had slept with Alcmena the first night and predicted that she would bear a child who would become a great hero.

Alcmena bore twin boys—Heracles, the son of Zeus, and Iphicles (pronounced IF-i-kleez), the son of Amphitryon. When the goddess **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) discovered that Zeus had seduced Alcmena and fathered Heracles, she was furious. Hera was fiercely jealous of Zeus's lovers and children and pursued them mercilessly. She tried to kill the infant Heracles by having two poisonous snakes placed in his crib one night. However, the infant grabbed the snakes and strangled them. Though Hera failed to kill Heracles, she persecuted him throughout his life, causing many of the events that led to his great suffering and punishments.

**Heracles' Lesson** As a young boy, Heracles became aware of his extraordinary strength—and his temper. Like most Greek youths, he took music lessons. One day Linus (pronounced LYE-nuhs), his music master, was teaching Heracles to play the lyre. Heracles became frustrated, flew into a rage, and banged the lyre down on Linus's head. The blow killed Linus instantly. Heracles was shocked and very sorry. He had not meant to kill his teacher. He just did not know his own strength.

**Madness and the Death of Megara** While still a young man, Heracles went to fight the Minyans, a group that had been forcing the people of

Thebes to pay money to them. As a reward for conquering the Minyans, the king of Thebes gave Heracles the hand of his daughter, Megara (pronounced MEG-uh-ruh). Heracles was devoted to Megara and the three children she bore him.

One day after Heracles returned home from a journey, Hera struck him with a fit of madness during which he killed his wife and children. When he came to his senses, Heracles was horrified by what he had done. Devastated with sorrow and guilt, the hero went to the oracle at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye), where humans could communicate with the gods, to ask how he could make up for his crime. The oracle told him to go to King Eurystheus (pronounced yoo-RIS-thee-uhs) of Tiryns and submit to any punishment asked of him. The oracle also announced that if Heracles completed the tasks set before him, he would become immortal.

**The Twelve Labors** King Eurystheus gave Heracles a series of twelve difficult and dangerous tasks. Known as the Twelve Labors of Heracles, these were his most famous feats. The hero's first task was to kill the Nemean (pronounced ni-MEE-uhn) Lion, a monstrous beast that terrorized the countryside and could not be killed by any weapon. Heracles strangled the beast with his bare hands and made its skin into a cloak that made him invulnerable, or unable to be harmed.

For his second labor, the hero had to kill the Lernaean Hydra (pronounced ler-NEE-uhn HYE-druh), a creature with nine heads that lived in a swamp. One of the beast's heads was immortal, and the others grew back when cut off. With the help of his friend Iolaus, Heracles cut off the Hydra's eight heads and burned each wound, which prevented new heads from growing back. Because he could not cut off the ninth head, he buried the creature under a great rock.

The next task was to capture the Cerynean (pronounced ser-i-NEE-uhn) Hind, a golden-horned deer that was sacred to the goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss). After hunting the animal for a year, Heracles finally managed to capture it. As he was taking it to Tiryns, Artemis stopped him and demanded that he return the deer. The hero promised that the sacred animal would not be harmed, and she allowed him to continue on his journey.

The fourth labor of Heracles was to seize the Erymanthian (pronounced air-uh-MAN-thee-uhn) Boar, a monstrous animal that ravaged the lands around Mount Erymanthus. After forcing the animal





*As one of his Twelve Labors, Heracles had to drive away the Stymphalian Birds, monstrous man-eating birds with claws, beaks, and wings of iron.* © KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA, AUSTRIA/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

from its lair, Heracles chased it until it became so exhausted that he could catch it easily.

The hero's fifth task was to clean the Augean (pronounced aw-JEE-uhn) Stables in one day. King Augeas, the son of the **sun** god Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs), had great herds of cattle whose stables had not been cleaned for many years. Heracles accomplished the task by diverting rivers to run through the filthy stables and wash them clean.

The sixth task involved driving away the Stymphalian (pronounced stim-FAY-lee-uhn) Birds, a flock of birds with claws, beaks, and wings of iron that ate humans and that were terrorizing the countryside. Helped

by the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), Heracles forced the birds from their nests and shot them with his bow and arrow.

Eurystheus next ordered Heracles to seize the Cretan (pronounced KREET-n) Bull and bring it back to Tiryns alive. This savage bull had been a gift from **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) to King Minos (pronounced MYE-nuhs) of Crete. The king gave Heracles permission to catch it and take it away.

For his eighth task, Heracles was ordered to capture the Mares of Diomedes (pronounced dye-uh-MEE-deez), a herd of horses that belonged to King Diomedes of Thrace and that ate human flesh. Heracles killed Diomedes and fed him to the mares. Then the hero tamed the horses and brought them back to Eurystheus.

The ninth labor consisted of obtaining the Girdle of Hippolyta (pronounced hye-POL-i-tuh), the queen of the **Amazons**. Hippolyta greeted Heracles warmly and agreed to give him the girdle. But then Hera caused trouble, making the Amazons think that Heracles planned to kidnap their queen. They attacked, and Heracles killed Hippolyta and took the girdle.

For his tenth labor, Heracles had to capture the Cattle of Geryon (pronounced JER-ee-on), a monster with three bodies that lived in the far west on the island of Erythia (pronounced eh-RITH-ee-uh). After a difficult journey by sea and across the desert, Heracles killed Geryon, a herdsman, and an enormous guard dog. He then took the cattle and returned with them to Tiryns.

The eleventh labor involved bringing back the golden Apples of the Hesperides (pronounced heh-SPER-uh-deez), a group of **nymphs**—female nature deities—who lived in the far west. According to one account, Heracles requested help from the Hesperides' father, the giant **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs), who held up the sky. Heracles offered to take Atlas's place under the sky if he would fetch the apples from his daughters. Atlas agreed and obtained the apples, but then he refused to take back the sky. Heracles asked Atlas to hold the sky for just a moment while he got a pad to ease the burden on his shoulders. Atlas agreed. But as soon as Atlas took back the sky, Heracles grabbed the apples and fled. In another version of this story, Heracles obtained the apples by himself after killing a dragon that stood guard over the tree on which they grew.

Heracles' final task was one of the most difficult and dangerous. He had to descend to the kingdom of **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez) and capture **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), the fierce three-headed

dog that guarded the gates to the **underworld**. Hades said Heracles could take Cerberus if he used no weapons to overcome the beast. Heracles wrestled Cerberus into submission or gave him drugged food and carried him to Eurystheus.

**Other Adventures and Later Life** Heracles had many other adventures during his lifetime. He killed other beasts and monsters, engaged in numerous battles against his enemies, joined the expedition of **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts), and even fought the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). Throughout, he faced the hatred of Hera, who continued to persecute him because he was the son of Zeus.

Later in his life, Heracles married Deianira (pronounced dee-uh-NYE-ruh), a princess whose hand he had won by fighting the river god Achelous (pronounced ay-kee-LOH-uhs). Heracles also saved Deianira from a centaur—half-human, half-horse—named Nessus, who tried to harm her. As Nessus lay dying from Heracles' arrows, he urged Deianira to take some of his blood, telling her it would act as a magic potion that could secure her husband's love forever.

Some years later, fearing that Heracles had fallen in love with another woman, Deianira took the potion and smeared it on a robe for her husband. The potion was really a terrible poison, and when Heracles put on the poisoned garment, it burned his skin, causing an agonizing pain that could not be stopped. When Deianira discovered what had happened, she killed herself.

The dying Heracles ordered his son to build a funeral pyre, a large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body, and the hero lay down upon it. As the flames of the pyre grew, a great cloud appeared, a bolt of lightning struck, and the body of Heracles disappeared. Heracles, now an immortal god, had been taken to Mount Olympus to be with his father, Zeus, and the other gods. Even Hera welcomed him and allowed him to marry her daughter Hebe (pronounced HEE-bee).

## Heracles in Context

The astounding popularity of Heracles throughout the ancient world has been the source of much speculation about his appeal. Some have argued that his virtuous nature, combined with his marginal intelligence and brute strength, made him a more accessible character than even many of the gods. It has also been suggested that, since he is primarily known as a

## Superheroes, Super Strength

Echoes of Heracles can be detected in modern American heroes and superheroes. The comic book idol Superman, for instance, has nearly limitless strength and a strict code of honor, much like Heracles. Whereas other comic book heroes, such as Batman, defeat evil using cunning, Superman relies on sheer power. The Incredible Hulk also resembles Heracles. The Hulk can be driven into a destructive rage by anger, and can sometimes hurt those he cares about.

conqueror of beasts instead of men, people of all regions can appreciate his feats; this is in direct contrast to some heroes who are popular only within a local area, due to their battles against a particular group generally viewed as enemies. He was worshipped in temples as far away as Egypt, and the Greeks honored his death with a festival known as the *Herakleia*. Heracles was also popular because he was a man who overcame the cruel whims of the gods to earn his place as an immortal.

After the time of Alexander the Great, when kingdoms developed out of the lands conquered by Alexander, Heracles came to represent the model king, a man who lived his life in service to the people. Overlooking the violent aspects of the life of Heracles, the focus was on his good deeds in ridding the Greek countryside of dangerous beasts. His deeds were so great that the gods elevated him to the level of a deity, although the Greeks worshipped him more as a hero than as a god. In similar fashion, kings began to claim that the deceased founders of their realm had become gods, and then the kings claimed that they were gods, too. Roman leaders adopted the idea of worshipping dead emperors, but stopped short of claiming that living rulers were also gods. The connection between gods and rulers would develop later as the “divine right” of European kings; although they did not claim to be gods, kings claimed that God deliberately appointed them to rule over the people, which meant that their rule could not be questioned or overthrown.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Heracles is a symbol of pure physical strength. He was often pictured in artwork holding a club, usually fighting one of the many beasts he

encountered during his twelve labors. He is so strong that he can only be destroyed by trickery and magic. Heracles also demonstrates success against all odds. His twelve fabled tasks are all virtually impossible, yet he perseveres and prevails.

An important theme found in the myths of Heracles is ill-fated romantic relationships. Heracles is driven by Hera to kill his wife and children in a fit of madness; this happens because of Hera's jealousy over Zeus having a son with a human woman. In addition, Deianira accidentally poisons Heracles because she is insecure about their relationship.

### Heracles in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In modern times, Heracles—usually called by his Roman name, Hercules—is one of the most recognized figures in all of Greek mythology. He has appeared as a character in countless books, films, and television shows. He was the focus of the long-running television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, with Kevin Sorbo starring as the hero. His myth was famously retold—with some alterations—in the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Heracles was unique in Greek mythology because he was a hero who ultimately became recognized as a god. In modern times, people continue to recognize heroes as special or different from the average human. These heroes, of course, might be sports stars, political activists, or soldiers, to name a few possibilities. Can you think of a modern-day hero, living or dead, who has earned a larger-than-life status? In what way is this person treated differently than others? Is this person already the subject of any myths or legends (anything that cannot be verified historically)?

**SEE ALSO** Argonauts; Atlas; Centaurs; Cerberus; Greek Mythology; Hera; Heroes; Zeus

## Hercules

See **Heracles**.



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
HUR-meez

**Alternate Names**  
Mercury (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Homeric Hymns

**Lineage**  
Son of Zeus and Maia

# Hermes

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Hermes was the fleet-footed messenger of the gods. His parents were **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), king of the gods, and Maia (pronounced MAY-uh), one of the seven sisters known as the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez). The Romans identified Hermes with Mercury (pronounced MUR-kyoo-ree), the god of merchants and trade, and they placed his main temple near the merchants' quarter in ancient Rome.

The Greeks looked upon Hermes as a protector of travelers, merchants, and thieves, and as a bringer of good luck. Because of his reputation as a speedy messenger, the god became popular among athletes. Many ancient sports arenas had statues of the god.

## Major Myths

While still an infant, Hermes killed a tortoise and used its shell to make a stringed instrument called a lyre. Soon afterward, he stole some cattle belonging to **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and then returned to his cradle. When Apollo came looking for the animals, Hermes pretended to know nothing and told a cunning tale to prove his innocence. In the course of telling his tale, he stole Apollo's bow and arrows.

Zeus insisted that the cattle be returned, so Hermes brought Apollo to the place where they were hidden. There he took up his lyre and played so impressively that Apollo agreed to overlook the theft of the cattle if Hermes would give him the instrument. Hermes also handed back the bow and arrows he had stolen. Amused by the young god's antics, Apollo became his good friend and made Hermes the protector of herdsmen.

When Hermes grew up, he often came to the aid of other gods and mortals. He accompanied Zeus on many journeys and once helped him during a struggle with the monster Typhon (pronounced TYE-fon). Another time, Hermes rescued **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez) when the god was imprisoned in a jar. He also played a role in arranging the return of **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee) from the **underworld**, or land of the dead. As a protector of travelers, Hermes escorted the spirits



*Hermes stole cattle from Apollo, but was then made the protector of herdsmen by the god after he charmed him with his music. In this painting he returns the stolen animals to Apollo as the gods look on. ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.*

of dead mortals to the river Styx (pronounced STIKS). Among the living mortals he assisted were King Priam of Troy, **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs), and **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs).

Hermes had love affairs with a number of goddesses and mortal women. The goddess he loved the most was **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), with whom he had two children, Hermaphroditus (pronounced hur-maf-ro-DYE-tuhs) and Priapus (pronounced pry-AY-puhs). Hermes

was also the father of **Pan**, the god of shepherds and flocks who was half man and half goat.

### Hermes in Context

Athletics, an activity associated with Hermes, was very important to ancient Greek men, who valued physical perfection. Every Greek city contained at least one gymnasium, a private area designed for activities such as running, wrestling, and throwing the discus (a heavy, flat disc) or javelin (a spear). Gymnasium activities were reserved for young men, and were the main form of exercise in Greek society. Many of the activities popular in ancient gymnasia have continued into modern sports as events in the Olympic Games.

Hermes is an eloquent trickster, capable of talking himself out of most of the trouble his mischievous actions get him into. The fact that he is appreciated by the other gods reveals that the ancient Greeks valued cunning and eloquence.

### Key Themes and Symbols

As the messenger of the gods, Hermes represents both eloquence (required when speaking on behalf of the gods) and speed (required for delivering messages and relaying communication). The theme of eloquence is illustrated in the story about the theft of Apollo's cattle; young Hermes tells a tale that captivates Apollo and removes him from suspicion, and later plays his lyre so beautifully that Apollo forgives the boy.

### Hermes in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As the protector of people from many different backgrounds—from thieves to shepherds to poets—Hermes was one of the more popular gods in ancient Greek art. Over time, Hermes came to be depicted as a young man wearing winged sandals and a wide-brimmed hat with wings. He also carried a staff with two snakes known as a caduceus (pronounced kuh-DOO-see-uhs).

In modern times, Hermes appeared as a character in the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules*, voiced by musician Paul Shaffer. As the Roman Mercury, the god has lent his name to—among other things—a chemical element, a brand of automobile, and the closest planet to the **sun** in our solar system.



## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the early myths of Hermes, the infant god steals several items from Apollo. Instead of punishing the boy, Apollo is impressed by his talent. What do you think this indicates about the ancient Greek view of theft? Do you think Americans share this attitude?

SEE ALSO Apollo; Pan; Persephone; Underworld; Zeus



# Hero and Leander

## Character Overview

Hero and Leander were famous lovers in **Greek mythology**. Hero, who lived in the town of Sestos (pronounced SES-tohs), served as a priestess of the goddess **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee). Leander was a youth from the nearby town of Abydos (pronounced uh-BYE-duhs), located across a narrow strip of water called the Hellespont (pronounced HEL-uh-spont), now known as the Dardanelles.

Hero and Leander met at a festival and fell in love. However, because she was a priestess of Aphrodite, Hero had to remain a virgin and was forbidden to marry. The two lovers decided to see each other secretly. Each night Hero would leave a lamp burning in a window of the tower in which she lived, and Leander would swim across the Hellespont, using the light to guide his way. One winter night, the wind blew out the flame in the lamp, causing Leander to lose his way and drown. The next morning, when Hero saw his lifeless body washed up on the shore, she killed herself by jumping out of the tower.

## Hero and Leander in Context

The myth of Hero and Leander can be seen as a cautionary tale meant to enforce the rules of ancient Greek culture. In particular, the myth warns of the dangers of not obeying religious vows. In a more general sense, the tale cautions against sexual relationships outside the tradition of marriage. Myths were often used as a way to discourage certain behaviors, especially those that would be hard to control through government means.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

HEER-oh and lee-AN-dur

### Alternate Names

Hero and Lymander

### Appears In

Ovid's *Heroides*

### Lineage

Unknown

## A Mythic Feat

English poet Lord Byron was so inspired by Leander's swimming prowess that he undertook the swim across the Hellespont himself. After nearly drowning on his first attempt, Byron successfully followed in Leander's wake on May 3, 1810—supposedly making him the first person since Leander himself to complete the swim.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the tale of Hero and Leander is forbidden love. Hero, as a priestess of Aphrodite, was sworn to remain a virgin; therefore, a love affair was a violation of her vows and the rules of the temple. Another related theme is the wrath of the gods. Because Hero and Leander violated the rules of the gods, they were both doomed to die tragically.

In the myth, summer is a symbol of flourishing love, as shown by the fact that the lovers' affair begins in the warm summer months. By contrast, winter symbolizes the stormy fate of their doomed relationship, and a winter wind blows out the candle that guides Leander across the sea.

## Hero and Leander in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although well known in ancient Greece, Ovid preserved and popularized the tale of Hero and Leander in his *Heroides*. In 1598 the English author Christopher Marlowe used the story as the basis of his poem *Hero and Leander*. Lord Byron, John Keats, and Lord Tennyson were other well-known poets who wrote of the lovers. The tale also inspired paintings by Rubens, Turner, and Rossetti. The myth of Hero and Leander was referenced in several of William Shakespeare's plays, most notably *As You Like It* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The myth of Hero and Leander could be classified as a tale of “star-crossed lovers,” much like the tale of Romeo and Juliet. Both tales center on two young lovers who are fated to be kept apart. Find another

example of this kind of tale in literature, television, or film, and describe it. How does it differ from the myth of Hero and Leander?

SEE ALSO Aphrodite; Greek Mythology



## Heroes

### Theme Overview

At the heart of many of the world's most enduring myths and legends is a hero, a man or woman who triumphs over obstacles. Heroes are generally not all-powerful and immortal beings, able to live forever. Instead they represent the best of what it means to be human, demonstrating great strength, courage, wisdom, cleverness, or devotion. Some heroes of myth and legend are wholly fictional. Others are historical figures who have risen to the level of legendary heroes or who have been given such status by writers or by the public.

In studying myths and legends from around the world, scholars have identified a pattern that appears over and over again: the story of the universal hero. Mythology scholar Joseph Campbell has shown that these stories generally end with the hero gaining new knowledge or abilities. Often an element of miracle or mystery surrounds the birth of such heroes. Their true identity may be unknown; they may be the child of a virgin; or they may possess special powers or be demigods (half-human, half-god).

Many hero myths focus on a quest—a difficult task or journey that must be undertaken to achieve a goal or earn a reward such as the hand of a loved one. Leaving the everyday world, the hero follows a path filled with challenges and adventures, perhaps involving magic or the supernatural. A hero may even enter the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and confront death itself.

Heroes must use their strength and wits to defeat enemies, monsters, or demons, although some are aided by luck or by a protector in the form of a god or magician. Sometimes heroes have to give up something precious to move forward in the quest. In the end, the hero returns home enriched with powers, wisdom, treasure, or perhaps a mate won in the course of the quest.

The hero's quest may be seen as a symbol of the journey of self-discovery that anyone can make, the quest to overcome inner monsters and achieve self-understanding. But though quests form the basis of many myths and legends, not all heroes follow the quest pattern exactly as described. There are almost as many kinds of heroes as there are human qualities and experiences.

## Major Myths

**Questing or Journeying Heroes** The hero on a quest or journey appears in dozens of myths, epics, legends, and fairy tales. **Greek mythology** has many questing heroes, including **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs), **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs), **Jason**, and **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez; known as Hercules by the Romans). Odysseus just wants to return home after the Trojan War, but his adventure-filled voyage takes ten years. The musician Orpheus descends into the underworld in his quest to bring his beloved **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see) back from death. Jason sails to distant lands in search of the **Golden Fleece**. The trials of the mighty Heracles are organized into Twelve Labors or quests.

Questing heroes appear in the mythology of many other cultures. **Gilgamesh** (pronounced GIL-guh-mesh), the hero of an epic from ancient Mesopotamia, travels in search of immortality. The Polynesian hero Rupe changes into a bird to search for his lost sister and bring her home. In Britain's **Arthurian legends** the knight **Lancelot** and his son **Galahad** (pronounced GAL-uh-had) seek the **Holy Grail**, and in a myth of the Tewa of North America, Water Jar Boy searches for his father—a symbol of the search for identity.

**Warriors and Kings** A number of individuals rise to the level of heroes with their outstanding skills in combat. In myths about the Trojan War, the warriors Ajax (pronounced AY-jaks) and **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) fight valiantly, and the Amazon (AM-uh-zon) queen Penthesilea (pronounced pen-thess-uh-LEE-uh) leads a troop of her soldiers against the Greek forces. **Beowulf** (pronounced BAY-uh-woolf) is the monster-slaying hero of an early English epic. Chinese myths tell of Yi (pronounced YEE), an archer so skilled that he was able to shoot down extra suns in the sky. Rama (pronounced RAH-muh), hero of the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, defeats fearsome demons called Rakshasas

(pronounced RAHK-shah-sahs) in a series of duels. The Celtic hero **Finn** leads a band of warriors against animal, human, and supernatural foes. Various Native American legends feature pairs of warriors—such as the Navajo warrior **twins** and the Zuni Ahayuuta (pronounced ah-hah-YOO-tuh) brothers—who perform heroic tasks to help their people.

Some figures in mythology earned their hero status as legendary rulers. Britain's King **Arthur**, for example, may have begun as a historical figure but was transformed into a hero of great stature. Africa has a strong tradition of kingly heroes. Shaka, a leader of the Zulu people of southern Africa, gathered a huge army and established a great empire in the early 1800s. Osai Tutu (pronounced oh-SYE TOO-too), a ruler of the Ashanti people in the 1700s, succeeded in freeing the Ashanti from domination by a neighboring people with the help of a magical golden stool. Tibetans and Mongolians tell tales about the warrior-king Gesar (pronounced GAY-sahr), a god who reluctantly agreed to be born as a human in order to fight demons on earth.

**National and Culture Heroes** A national hero is a mythological—or even historical—hero who is considered to be the founder of a city or nation or the source of identity for a people. In ancient Greece, heroes became the object of religious worship, and local cults developed to show devotion to particular local heroes. The Romans made **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs) their national hero. In North America, Iroquois legends say that the hero Hiawatha (pronounced hye-uh-WOTH-uh) persuaded five tribes to come together as one group, thus giving the Iroquois greater power and a stronger identity.

Another type of ancestral hero is the culture hero who brings the gifts of civilization to a people. The Kayapo (pronounced KAH-yuh-poh) Indians of Brazil have a myth about a boy named Botoque, who stole **fire** from a jaguar and brought it to his people so they could cook food for the first time. In Greek mythology it is the Titan **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs) who steals fire for the benefit of humankind. The Daribi people of Papua New Guinea, a large island in the eastern Pacific, have myths about Souw, a wandering culture hero. Souw brought death, warfare, and black magic, but he also gave humans the first livestock and crops, allowing them to shift from hunting to agriculture.

**Clever Heroes and Tricksters** In many myths heroes accomplish great tasks by outwitting evil or more powerful enemies. In the West African

## Born Under a Hero's Star

Unusual circumstances often mark the birth of a mythic hero. The hero may be the result of a mixed union—Heracles was the son of the god Zeus (pronounced ZOOS) and of a mortal woman. Some heroes do not even need two parents. Kutoyis (pronounced koo-TOH-yis), a hero of the Native American Blackfoot people, was born as a clot of blood dropped by a buffalo. Karna, a hero of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, is born to a woman who is a virgin—a theme that occurs in many myths. The African Bantu people tell of Litulone, the child of an old woman who produced him without a man's help. Like Heracles, the Irish hero Cuchulain (pronounced koo-KUL-in), and many others, Litulone had great strength and fighting skill when barely out of infancy.

legend of **Sunjata**, the female character Nana Triban tricks the evil king Sumanguru Kante into telling her the source of his great strength. Nana Triban uses this knowledge to help her brother Sunjata triumph over Sumanguru. In Greek mythology, **Penelope** (pronounced puh-NEL-uh-pee), the wife of Odysseus, outwits the many suitors pressing to marry her during her husband's long absence. Claiming that she must weave a shroud for her father-in-law before she can remarry, she weaves by day and unravels the cloth by night. In the Persian tale *One Thousand and One Nights*, Sheherazade (pronounced shuh-HAIR-uh-zahd) prevents the sultan from carrying out a plan to kill her. Capturing his attention with fascinating stories, she withholds the endings, promising to continue the following evening.

Some culture heroes are **tricksters**—human or animal characters whose mischievous pranks and tricks can benefit humans. Raven and Coyote fill the trickster role in many American Indian myths. The Polynesians of the Pacific islands have myths about **Mauï** (pronounced MOU-ee), a trickster whose actions have bad results as often as good ones. He loses immortality for humans, for example, but acquires fire for them. Tricksters in African myth are generally small and weak creatures, such as the hare and the spider, who outwit the strong, rich, and powerful. The African trickster hare is the distant ancestor of **Brer Rabbit**, a clever hero in African American mythology.

**Folk Heroes** Some heroes are ordinary individuals who have special skills. They may take up the causes of common people against tyrants and bullies or may be blessed with remarkable good fortune. Such heroes often become known through popular songs or folk tales, but they may also appear in various forms of literature.

Folk heroes include **Robin Hood**, an English adventurer who fought and robbed the rich in order to help the poor, and John Henry, an African American laborer who performed a humble job with exceptional—and fatal—strength and determination.

**Defiant and Doomed Heroes** The hero's story does not always have a happy ending. Some heroes knowingly defy the limits placed on them by society or the gods. Even if they face destruction, they are determined to be true to their beliefs—or perhaps to perish in a blaze of glory. Others are simply the victims of their own failings or of bad luck.

Yamato-takeru (pronounced YAH-mah-toh-tah-kay-roo), a legendary warrior hero of Japan, brings about his own end when he kills two gods who have taken the form of a white deer and a white boar. **Antigone** (pronounced an-TIG-uh-nee), a Greek princess, defies the law in order to bury her brother, knowing that the penalty will be death. The most gruesomely doomed of all heroes may be Antigone's father, **Oedipus** (pronounced ED-uh-puhs), who outrages the gods by unwittingly killing his father and marrying his mother. When he discovers what he has done, he gouges out his own eyes in shame. His heroism lies not in quests, adventures, or triumphs but in facing his tragic fate.

In Aztec myths, the culture hero **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l) was tricked by his enemy **Tezcatlipoca** (pronounced tehs-cah-tee-POH-cah) into leaving his kingdom. After getting Quetzalcoatl drunk, Tezcatlipoca showed him a mirror with Tezcatlipoca's frightening image. Believing that the mirror reflected his own face, Quetzalcoatl went away to purify himself, promising to return to his people at the end of a fifty-two-year cycle.

## Heroes in Context

Through the ages cultures have produced heroes that reflect cultural values on a larger-than-life scale. The male-dominated civilization of ancient Greece, for example, admired strong warrior heroes. By contrast, in the mythology of ancient Egypt, where religion played a central role at

## Heroes

*Yamato-takeru, a legendary warrior hero of Japan, fought battles against people and gods.*

*Stories about his adventures appear in the **Kojiki** and the **Nihongi**, two books of Japanese myths and legends.* FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, UK/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



all levels of society, the heroes were often priest-magicians. In many cultures women became heroes by using their intelligence or forceful personalities to outwit a foe.

Heroes in many cultures function as a bridge between the divine gods and normal humans. This explains the presence of so many demigods as heroes, with one parent a god and the other a human. Indeed, the ancient Greek term “hero” was used by later Greeks to refer specifically to demigods or dead men believed to have influence in both the living world and the **afterlife**. Such figures were often worshipped by ancient Greeks just as the gods themselves were, and their powers were believed to be very real, if not as potent as the gods.



## Heroes in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As a group, heroes are the mythological characters that have stood the test of time over all others. For example, while many modern readers may not know the characters of **Odin** or **Athena** beyond their names, the stories of Hercules and **Aladdin** are quite familiar and popular. Their stories have been adapted and retold countless times. Successful film versions have been made of many of the heroic tales mentioned here, including tales of Aladdin (the 1992 animated film *Aladdin*, among others), Hercules (the 1997 animated film *Hercules*, among others), Jason (the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*), **Perseus** (the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans*), and Robin Hood (the 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, among many others).

The concept of humans with special abilities has also been a cornerstone of the comic book industry, with many of the most popular characters—including Spider-Man and Batman—resembling the traditional mythological role of a hero.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The word “hero” is often used to describe people in the modern world who perform important, difficult, or dangerous jobs. What occupations, if any, do you think should earn someone the label of hero? Why?

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; Aeneas; Aladdin; Antigone; Arthur, King; *Beowulf*; Brer Rabbit; Cuchulain; Finn; Galahad; George, St.; Gilgamesh; Hector; Heracles; Hunahpú and Xbalanqué; Jason; Lancelot; Maui; Odysseus; Oedipus; Orpheus; Penelope; Perseus; Prometheus; Quetzalcoatl; Robin Hood; Sigurd; Sunjata; Theseus; Tricksters



# Hinduism and Mythology

## Hindu Mythology in Context

Hinduism, which has millions of followers in India and around the world today, is one of the world’s oldest religions. For well over three thousand years, it has been accumulating the sacred stories and heroic epics that make up the mythology of Hinduism. Nothing in this

complex and colorful mythology is fixed and firm. Pulsing with creation, destruction, love, and war, it shifts and changes. Most myths occur in several different versions, and many characters have multiple roles, identities, and histories. This seeming confusion reflects the richness of a mythology that has expanded and taken on new meanings over the centuries.

Around 1700 BCE, peoples from the area to the northwest of India began migrating to India. Called Aryans or Indo-Europeans, they brought a mythic tradition that became the basis of an early form of Hinduism. Over the years, as the Aryans mingled with the peoples and cultures of the Indian subcontinent, the mythology grew increasingly complex.

Hinduism has gone through various stages, which can be linked to the most important texts surviving from each period. The earliest stage is associated with the Vedas, the oldest Indian documents. One of them, the *Rig-Veda*, is a collection of 1,028 hymns of praise and prayers to the gods with references to myths. The Vedas are based on ancient Aryan traditions that were long communicated only in oral form.

The next group of texts, the *Brahmanas*, date from 900 to 700 BCE. Though concerned mainly with the rituals of Hinduism, the *Brahmanas* contain many myths. The *Upanishads*, written around 700 BCE and after, focus on ideas communicated through myths. The two great Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, written down sometime between 300 BCE and 300 CE, contain stories about a number of major Hindu deities or gods. After that time, the chief expression of Hindu mythology and religion was in texts called *Puranas*, “stories of the old days.” Most of the stories are devoted to one god or another. The *Puranas* often retell earlier myths, sometimes in the voices of the gods themselves.

### Core Deities and Characters

Hindu mythology is populated by an enormous cast of deities, demons, demigods (half-human, half-god), humans, and animals. Some had a central role in one era but remain in the background in later periods, while others have risen from obscurity to prominence. The attributes and histories of many mythological characters have changed considerably over the many centuries that Hinduism has existed.

**Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh), the creator of life on earth, is one of the Trimurti (pronounced tri-MOOR-tee), the three gods at the

## Major Hindu Deities

**Brahma:** creator god.

**Devi:** wife of Shiva, goddess who takes many forms—both kind and fierce.

**Ganesha:** god of good fortune and wisdom.

**Indra:** god of storms and rain.

**Shiva:** avenging and destroying god.

**Varuna:** originally a creator god and ruler of the sky, later became god of water.

**Vishnu:** preserver god and protector of life.

center of the Hindu pantheon, or collection of recognized gods. In the early Vedic texts, the creator god was Prajapati (pronounced pruh-JAH-puht-ee), but over time Brahma took the older god's place in many myths about the creation of the universe.

**Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo), the second member of the Trimurti, is the preserver or protector of life. His attributes are mercy and goodness. Some Hindus regard Vishnu as the supreme being and Brahma and **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh) as aspects of him. Shiva, descended from the old Vedic storm god Rudra (pronounced ROOD-ruh), is the third member of the Trimurti. He is the avenging and destroying god, but his destruction allows new creation to begin. Sometimes Shiva is portrayed as a dancer who directs the movements of the universe.

**Devi** (pronounced DAY-vee), “the goddess,” is one of the most ancient deities of the pantheon. Under her name are grouped various female deities, who represent different aspects of Devi. Among them are Parvati (pronounced PAR-vuh-tee), the wife of Shiva; Durga (pronounced DOOR-gah), the warrior goddess and fighter of demons; and the even more ferocious Kali (pronounced KAH-lee), “the dark one,” who also fights demons but sometimes becomes intoxicated with blood and destruction.

The popular elephant-headed, four-handed god **Ganesha** (pronounced guh-NAYSH) is Parvati's son. One of the most popular gods in

Hinduism today, he is associated with good luck and wisdom. **Indra** (pronounced IN-druh), god of storm and rain, was one of the most important deities of the *Rig-Veda* and may have represented the warrior chieftains of the ancestral Aryan peoples. Vedic hymns suggest that Indra replaced Varuna (pronounced VUR-oo-nuh), the guardian of justice and order, as the king of the gods. As the mythology of Hinduism developed, however, Indra in turn moved to secondary status below the Trimurti. **Krishna** (pronounced KRISH-nuh) is one of the incarnations, or forms, of Vishnu. He appears in the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. Many stories about him focus on his prankish, playful nature and on his many love affairs.

*This sandstone stele shows Vishnu in the form of the fish Matsya carrying the first man Manu and the sacred Vedas on its back to save them from the flood.* © BRITISH MUSEUM/ART RESOURCE, NY.



**Manu** (pronounced MAN-oo), sometimes described as a son of Brahma, is both a god and the first man, ancestor of the human race. According to one myth, a small fish warns Manu that the earth will soon

be destroyed by a great flood. Manu takes care of the fish, which is really an incarnation of Vishnu, and when it is grown, it saves him from the flood so that he can repopulate the earth. The heroine Savitri, whose story is told in the *Mahabharata*, symbolizes love that defeats even death. She persuades Yama (pronounced YUHM-uh), the lord of death, to release her husband from death.

## Major Myths

Hindu mythology includes a huge number of stories. Some have proved to be especially enduring and central to an understanding of Hinduism. Among these are the tales told in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and those described below.

**Creation** Hindu mythology includes several different accounts of the beginning of things, but in each version, the act of creation is really an act of arranging, producing order from chaos. Vedic texts tell of the **sacrifice** of a primal being called Purusha (pronounced POOR-uh-shuh),

whose cut-up body becomes all the elements of the universe. Another image of creation, that of fertilization and pregnancy, occurs in myths about Prajapati, the father of all humans and animals. Sometimes **heaven** and earth are described as parents whose mating produces the gods. Myths of Tvashtar, a minor Vedic god of carpentry or architecture, explain creation as an act of building.

As Hinduism developed and the Trimurti gained importance, a complex vision of the creation, destruction, and recreation of the universe emerged. Brahma brings the universe into being through his thoughts. The world then passes through a Maha Yuga, or great age, that lasts 4,320,000 years. The Maha Yuga contains four yugas, or ages. Each is shorter and more immoral than the one before, from the Krita Yuga—Brahma's golden age—through two intermediate ages under Vishnu's protection to the Kali Yuga—Shiva's dark age.

Each dark age in turn gives way to a new golden age, and the cycle of the Maha Yuga repeats a thousand times. Then Shiva destroys all life with scorching heat and drowning flood, and the earth remains empty while Vishnu sleeps. After a thousand Maha Yugas, a lotus flower emerges from Vishnu's navel, and it becomes Brahma, ready to perform his creative act anew.

**The Forms of Vishnu** Many myths deal with Vishnu's avatars, or the incarnations of the god on earth. The most common list of the ten avatars begins with Matsya (pronounced MAHT-see-yah), the fish that protects Manu from the flood. The second avatar is Kurma (pronounced KOOR-muh), a tortoise that holds Mount Mandara on his back so that the gods can use it as a paddle to churn the ocean and produce a drink of eternal life.

Varaha (pronounced VAH-rah-hah), a boar who appears after a demon giant pulls the earth to the bottom of the ocean, is the third incarnation. Varaha defeats the demon and raises the earth on his tusks. Narasimha (pronounced nah-rah-SIM-hah), the fourth avatar, is half man and half lion. He defeats a demon who cannot be killed by man or beast. The dwarf Vamana (pronounced vuh-MAH-nah), the fifth incarnation, triumphs over Bali, a being who had gained control of the world. When Bali grants Vamana as much land as he can cover in three strides, the dwarf becomes a giant and strides over heaven and earth. The sixth avatar, ax-wielding Parasurama (pronounced pah-ruh-soo-RAH-muh), frees the priests from the domination of the warriors.

The seventh incarnation, Rama (pronounced RAH-muh), is the hero of the *Ramayana*. The eighth is the god Krishna; and the ninth is Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh). Hindus believe that Buddha came to earth to draw people away from the proper worship of the Vedas so that the world would decline and be destroyed, as the cosmic cycle demands. The tenth avatar, Kalki (pronounced KAHL-kee), will appear at the end of the world to preside over its destruction and the creation of a new, pure world.

**The Birth of Ganesha** Shiva's wife, Parvati, produced Ganesha—and did so without any help from Shiva, according to many accounts. Some say that Shiva, being immortal (able to live forever), had no desire for a son, but Parvati wanted a child and produced the boy from her own body. In other versions, Shiva gave Parvati a doll that at her touch magically came to life as a baby.

According to one story, Shiva struck off the boy's head, either because Ganesha prevented him from approaching Parvati or because Shiva believed that his son was doomed to die. Parvati's grief, however, moved him to try to replace the head, and he finally succeeded in attaching an elephant's head to the boy's body.

**Indra and the Serpent** Legends of the slaying of a serpent or dragon appear in many cultures. In Hindu mythology, one such story centers on the god Indra and the “footless and handless” demon Vritra (pronounced VRIT-ruh), described as both snake and dragon. The tale is told in the Vedas and dates from the time when Indra was king of the gods.

Using a divine thunderbolt, Indra struck Vritra between the shoulders, slicing open the mountain on which Vritra lay. The blow separated heaven from earth and land from water. The waters that Vritra had contained flowed forth to bring life. Indra's heroic victory made him the champion of all who struggled to overcome obstacles or resistance.

**Shiva and the Sacrifice** The *Mahabharata* tells how Daksha, Shiva's father-in-law, held a ceremony of horse sacrifice for the gods. All the gods except Shiva had been invited. Angry at being excluded, Shiva attacked the ceremony with his servants. They threw blood on the **fire** and ate the priests. A drop of sweat from Shiva's brow fell to earth and formed Disease, an ugly figure that terrified the gods. Brahma promised that

*Indra, the Hindu god of storms and rain, was one of the most important gods of the Rig-Veda and may have represented the warrior chieftains of the ancestors.*

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Shiva could take part in all future sacrifices, and in return Shiva turned Disease into many small ailments to trouble animals and humans.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Certain key beliefs in Hinduism form the background against which the myths unfold. One of these is the idea of **reincarnation**, sometimes called the transmigration of souls. In Hindu belief, each soul experiences many, many lives. After the death of one body, or incarnation, the soul is born again into a new living body. Even the gods can be reincarnated in human form.

Just as the individual soul is continually reborn, the universe is continually created and destroyed. Time moves in cycles of millions of years, endlessly building up and tearing down with no beginning or end.

All change and decay are part of a divinely directed cosmic dance that will eventually result in renewal. Faced with this immense pattern, each individual has the duty to follow his or her own pattern of right behavior, called the dharma (pronounced DAR-muh).

### **Hindu Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Hindu belief and mythology color every aspect of life and culture in India. They are the basis of countless works of art, from plays about Rama written in the 700s to modern Indian movies based on mythic stories. Temples and images of the deities are everywhere. Festivals—such as the ten-day autumn celebration of Rama and his wife, Sita—keep the traditional gods, **heroes**, and myths alive. Even place names have sacred associations. The city of Calcutta, for example, comes from Kalighat, the place where sacrifices to the goddess Kali once took place.

Besides inspiring generations of Indian artists and thinkers, Hindu mythology has appealed to many in the West as well. Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American writer of the 1800s, wrote *Brahma*, a poem celebrating the creator god. In the same era, English-speaking readers became familiar with the legends of Savitri through Edwin Arnold's poem *Savitri, or Love and Death*. A poem by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe called *The God and the Bayadere* (dancing girl) deals with an appearance on earth of the god Shiva.

English composer Gustav Holst wrote a chamber opera—one meant to be sung, not acted, with a small orchestra—called *Savitri*. Holst also translated many hymns from the *Rig-Veda* into English and wrote music to accompany them. These four sets of songs are grouped together under the title *Choral Hymns*. Bertram Shapleigh, an American composer, wrote *Vedic Hymn*, also based on a text from the *Rig-Veda*, and a piece of orchestral music called *Ramayana*. A 1989 film of the *Mahabharata* written by Jean-Claude Carrière and directed by Peter Brook has brought the ancient epic to modern movie audiences.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The idea of reincarnation is an important part of Hindu belief. By living a productive life as one creature, a person's soul can then progress to a higher level creature in the next life, and so on. Using just your imagination, come up with a list of five living things to include on your



own reincarnation ladder. Which is the lowest life form on your list? Why? Which is the highest, and why?

**SEE ALSO** *Bhagavad Gita*; Brahma; Buddhism and Mythology; Devi; Ganesha; Indra; Krishna; *Mahabharata, The*; Manu; Nagas; *Ramayana, The*; Reincarnation; Shiva; Vishnu



## Holy Grail

### Myth Overview

According to medieval legend, the Holy Grail was the vessel from which Jesus Christ drank at the Last Supper, his final meal with his followers before he was crucified. Many works of literature describe the search for the Grail, which was believed to have sacred and mysterious powers.

According to legend, after the Last Supper, the Grail came into the possession of Joseph of Arimathea (pronounced ar-uh-muh-THEE-uh), who caught Christ's blood in it at the crucifixion. Joseph went to prison, but the Grail kept him alive by supplying daily nourishment. Released from prison, Joseph traveled to France and then to Glastonbury, England, carrying the Holy Grail. Soon, however, the Grail disappeared from the world because people were sinful. Hidden away in a mysterious castle, it was guarded by the descendants of Joseph's sister.

One of the best-known versions of the Grail's later history is connected with **Arthur**, the legendary king of Britain. This account says that the Grail was held somewhere in a wild and lonely part of Britain in the castle of the Fisher King, a wounded king who lay between life and death. Only if the purest of knights found his way to the castle and caught a glimpse of the Grail would the Fisher King's torment end and life be restored to his ruined domain.

To the knights who sat around King Arthur's Round Table, seeing the Holy Grail was the highest and most noble goal. They roamed the nation in search of it. **Lancelot** nearly achieved the quest, but the sin of his love for **Guinevere** (pronounced GWEN-uh-veer), Arthur's queen, kept him from seeing the Grail. A knight named Perceval (pronounced

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic, Christian

### Pronunciation

hoh-lee GRAYL

### Alternate Names

Sangreal

### Appears In

Medieval Christian myths, tales of King Arthur and his knights

## Holy Grail

*The knights of King Arthur's Round Table believed that seeing the Holy Grail—the legendary cup that Christ drank from at the Last Supper—was the highest and most noble goal. Only Galahad, however, was pure enough to see it. HIP/ART RESOURCE, NY.*



PUR-suh-vuhl) saw the Grail but did not understand what it was. Only **Galahad** (pronounced GAL-uh-had), Lancelot's son, was pure enough to see it with full understanding of its meaning. He had to travel to a distant land called Sarras to do so, for the Grail had left Britain at some point. The vision of the Grail brought such profound joy that Galahad died moments later.

## The Holy Grail in Context

The Holy Grail legend fuses Christian elements with much older **Celtic mythology** and appears to be the product of storytelling over hundreds of years. The Grail itself is related to various vessels in Celtic lore, such as the drinking horn of the god Bran, which produced any food or drink the user desired. It was also associated with a magic cauldron or kettle that could restore life to any dead body placed in it.

## Key Themes and Symbols

For Christian followers, the Holy Grail symbolized Jesus Christ and his final betrayal. Because the cup was believed to have been used by Christ at his last meal, and also to have caught his blood while he was crucified, it was considered to contain some of the only known earthly remnants of Christ. For Christians, the idea of a concrete object that was used by Christ enabled them to draw an immediate connection with the stories of the Holy Bible. The different depictions of the Grail, from a jeweled chalice to a simple clay cup, reflect the different ways in which people glorified Jesus. In a more general sense, the myth of the Holy Grail represents a search for spiritual fulfillment. Those who search for the Grail are attempting to satisfy their own needs to feel a connection to God or to find meaning in their own existence.

## The Holy Grail in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The earliest known work to give a Christian significance to the magical vessel was *Perceval*, a romance of the late 1100s by the French poet Chrétien de Troyes. A few decades later, Robert de Borron wrote *Joseph of Arimathea*, which established the connection between the Grail of Perceval and the cup used by Christ and later owned by Joseph. *Parzival*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach, expanded on the mystical story of the innocent knight and the Fisher King and also introduced an order of knights charged with guarding the Grail. This version of the story became the basis for the opera *Parsifal* by the modern German composer Richard Wagner.

Over time, versions of the Grail story began to link the Holy Grail with the popular legend of King Arthur. One account made Sir Galahad the virtuous hero and the Grail a symbol of a rare and mystical union with the divine. Late in the 1400s, Sir Thomas Malory wrote *Le Morte D'Arthur* (The Death of Arthur), the version of the Arthurian legend that

was to become the best known. With it he established the story of the Grail quest by the knights of Arthur's Round Table and of Galahad's ultimate success.

In modern times, several films have been made that focus on a quest to find the Holy Grail. Among the most famous are the comedy *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1979) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). The best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) by Dan Brown centers on the Holy Grail myth, and was made into a film starring Tom Hanks in 2006. The 2005 Tony Award–winning musical *Spamalot* was based on the Monty Python version of the legend.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Parzival: The Quest of the Grail Knight* by Katherine Paterson is a 1998 novel adaptation of Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century German poem by the same name. Paterson, best known as the author of *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), recreates the myth of Perceval (also called Parzival) in modern language, and provides background information to assist readers unfamiliar with the legend.

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends; Galahad; Lancelot



## Horus

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

HOHR-uhs

### Alternate Names

Neferhor, Harsiesis

### Appears In

Ancient Egyptian writings and mythology

### Lineage

Son of Osiris and Isis

### Character Overview

Horus was one of the earliest and most important Egyptian gods. He was originally portrayed as a hawk or falcon and worshipped as a **sun** god and creator of the sky. His right eye represented the sun, and his left eye represented the moon.

The early rulers of southern Egypt were followers of Horus. When they conquered northern Egypt and reunited the two lands (around 2200 BCE), Horus became the symbol of the newly unified country, and the pharaoh, or leader of Egypt, was considered the earthly form of Horus. In time, the worship of Horus—under his various names—spread to many places.

## Major Myths

Horus became a major figure in **Egyptian mythology**. Before he was born, his father **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) died at the hand of his own brother **Set**. When Horus grew up, he swore to avenge his father's death and fought Set many times.

In one version of this story, Set blinded Horus in his left eye, but the god **Thoth** (pronounced TOHT) healed it. Horus ended up killing Set, and the gods named Horus ruler of Egypt. The restored eye, called the *udjat* or *wedjat*, became a powerful magical symbol of protection in ancient Egypt. The Egyptians used the story of Horus's wounded eye to explain the changing phases of the moon.

In another account of the conflict between Horus and Set, the two came before a council of the gods to decide who would inherit Osiris's throne. Most of the council accepted Horus's claim, but the sun god **Ra** favored Set because he was older and more capable. As a result, Horus and Set undertook a series of contests to determine who would become the ruler.

On one occasion, both gods turned themselves into hippopotamuses to see who could stay underwater longer. During the contest, Horus's mother **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis) had the chance to kill Set but chose not to do so. Horus was angry at his mother and fled into the desert. Set found him and put out his eyes, but the goddess **Hathor** (pronounced HATH-or) repaired them with the milk of a small antelope. In the end, the gods agreed that Horus should be the ruler. Horus then invited Set to join him and live in the sky as the god of storms.

## Horus in Context

In ancient Egypt, more than most other cultures, the deities being worshipped—and the qualities represented by those deities—changed frequently with the changing rulers of the land. Because of this, many gods became absorbed or merged into other gods. Horus, for example, was originally worshipped as a sky god and later assumed the roles of sun and moon god as well. For some time his identity was combined with the sun god Ra. As another example, Horus was associated with leaders of Lower Egypt, while Set was associated with leaders of Upper Egypt. When Egypt became united after violent conflicts between the two sides, Horus—the god worshipped by the victors, the Lower Egyptians—became the mythical ruler of Egypt over Set.

## Horus

*Horus, worshiped as a sun god and creator god by the ancient Egyptians, was often shown with the head of a bird.* RÉUNION DES MUSÉES NATIONAUX/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Key Themes and Symbols

Horus represents the power and importance of the sun and sky in all aspects of ancient Egyptian life. He serves as provider and protector of the Egyptian people, especially the pharaohs. One of the most important symbols associated with Horus is the Eye of Horus, a symbol meant to offer the protection of the gods. The falcon's head that he is often depicted with is a symbol of both the sky and an all-seeing presence.

## Horus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Horus was a popular figure in ancient Egyptian art, and many examples remain to this day. He was often depicted with the head of a falcon. In modern times, the Eye of Horus symbol has been identified with bands such as Sisters of Mercy and Siouxsie and the Banshees, and is a common decorative symbol for members of the gothic subculture. Horus has also appeared as a character in the Warhammer gaming universe, though the character does not bear much resemblance to the god of Egyptian mythology.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The markings of the Eye of Horus are said to be modeled after similar markings found on the peregrine falcon, a bird of prey that resides along the Nile River. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the current status of the peregrine falcon. Is the bird endangered? Can it still be found in Egypt? What efforts, if any, are being made to preserve the falcon's habitat?

**SEE ALSO** Egyptian Mythology; Hathor; Isis; Osiris; Ra; Set; Thoth

## Huang-Di

*See* **Yellow Emperor**.



## Huitzilopochtli

### Character Overview

Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war, was associated with the **sun**. In some myths, the warlike Huitzilopochtli appears in contrast to his brother, the god **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), who represented life and the gifts of civilization. Huitzilopochtli was also recognized as the founder of Tenochtitlán (pronounced teh-nowch-TEE-tlan), the capital of the Aztec empire.

### Nationality/Culture

Aztec

### Pronunciation

wee-tsee-loh-POCH-tlee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Aztec oral mythology

### Lineage

Son of Coatlicue

## Major Myths

According to legend, Huitzilopochtli's mother was the goddess **Coatlicue** (pronounced koh-aht-LEE-kway). One day she found a bunch of hummingbird feathers and stuffed them into her breast. She immediately became pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. However, some of her other children—a daughter named Coyolxauhqui (pronounced koh-yohl-SHAW-kee) and 400 sons—were jealous of the unborn child. They plotted to kill Coatlicue, but when they attacked her, Huitzilopochtli emerged from his mother's womb fully grown. He cut off the head of his sister and killed most of his brothers as well.

Another tale about Huitzilopochtli tells how he led the Aztecs to settle on the island where they built the great city of Tenochtitlán. Originally from the north of Mexico, the Aztecs followed Huitzilopochtli on a long journey south in search of a new home. The god told them to settle at a place where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus growing out of a rock. As predicted, they saw the sign described by the god and ended their journey. This story echoes some events in Aztec history. In 1345 the Aztecs were driven onto an island in the middle of a lake by a tribe called the Culhua. There they founded Tenochtitlán, which would later become the capital of the Aztec empire.

## Huitzilopochtli in Context

The name Huitzilopochtli, which means “hummingbird of the south,” came from the Aztec belief that the spirits of warriors killed in battle followed the sun through the sky for four years. After that, they were transformed into hummingbirds. In **Aztec mythology**, the south represented both the sun and paradise. Therefore, Huitzilopochtli was considered to be a warrior reborn from the paradise of the sun.

The Aztecs believed that to nourish Huitzilopochtli and keep the world in motion, they needed to feed the god human blood every day. For this reason, Aztec priests conducted human sacrifices at the Great Temple in their capital city of Tenochtitlán. During these rituals, victims were led up the steps of a pyramid, and while they were still alive, their hearts were cut out of their chests. The victims' bodies were then thrown down the steps of the pyramid onto a stone that featured a carved image of Coyolxauhqui. In this way, the sacrifices reenacted the story about the young god killing his sister.





*Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war. The Aztecs believed that the god needed to be nourished with the blood of human sacrifices every day.* BILDARCHIV PREUSSISCHER KULTURBESITZ/ART RESOURCE, NY.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Aztec mythology, Huitzilopochtli represented the power of the sun. An important theme in the myth of Huitzilopochtli is the struggle against darkness; the sun god was always fighting to prevent the fall of eternal darkness, which would mark the end of the world according to the Aztecs. Another related theme was **sacrifice**, since the Aztecs believed that Huitzilopochtli could be strengthened if he was given human blood as a sacrifice, and could therefore hold off the darkness.

## Huitzilopochtli in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Huitzilopochtli appears in works of art created during the height of the Aztec empire, as well as the many books created just after the conquest of

the Aztecs by Spanish colonists. He is usually depicted as wearing hummingbird feathers and holding a mirror. Like many Aztec gods, in modern times he is primarily found in decorative art rather than as a mythological character in literature or film.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In modern times, the idea of human sacrifice is horrifying, yet the ancient Aztecs believed it was necessary to maintain order in their world. Do you think this type of human sacrifice is fundamentally different than the use of the death penalty, which is a tool used by modern American society to maintain order? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Aztec Mythology; Coatlicue; Quetzalcoatl; Serpents and Snakes



#### Nationality/Culture

Mayan

#### Pronunciation

WAH-nuh-pwuh and shi-BAY-lan-kay

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The *Popol Vuh*

#### Lineage

Sons of Hun-Hunahpú

## Hunahpú and Xbalanqué

### Character Overview

The twin gods Hunahpú and Xbalanqué were **heroes** in the mythology of the Maya, a people of Central America. Through bravery and quick thinking, they outwitted the lords of Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh), the **underworld** or land of the dead, and destroyed them. Their story is told in the sacred Mayan text, the *Popol Vuh*.

### Major Myths

According to legend, the **twins'** father, Hun-Hunahpú, had also struggled with the gods of the underworld. The gods challenged him and his own twin brother to play a game of ball. Then they killed him and hung his head on a tree. A young woman passing by reached up to pick some fruit from the tree, and the head spat into her hand, saying "In my saliva and spittle I have given you my descendants." She soon gave birth to twin boys, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué.

When the two brothers met the lords of Xibalba, the gods sent them through a series of frightening places in the underworld. They began in

the House of Gloom and then passed into the House of Knives, where they managed to avoid being stabbed. They built a **fire** in the House of Cold to avoid freezing and then faced the House of Jaguars, where they fed bones to the animals to escape being eaten themselves. After the next trial, the House of Fire, they entered the House of Bats, where disaster struck. One of the bats cut off Hunahpú's head. The gods hung the head up in a ball court and challenged the twins to play ball with them.

Xbalanqué found a turtle to sit on Hunahpú's shoulders in place of his head, and they strode onto the ball court. During the game, the gods became distracted by a rabbit near the court. Xbalanqué seized this opportunity to steal his brother's head from the wall and put it back in place. Much to the annoyance of the gods, the twins were now strong enough to tie the game.

Hunahpú and Xbalanqué performed a series of tricks, during which they appeared to die in a stone oven and then transform themselves into traveling actors. When the lords of Xibalba asked the twins to perform for them, the two brothers refused at first. Eventually, they presented several acts, such as burning down and restoring a house and sacrificing Hunahpú and bringing him back to life. Impressed, the gods asked the twins to do the same for them. The brothers agreed, but after sacrificing the gods, they did not revive them. Having eliminated the gods of the underworld and avenged the murder of their father, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué went into the heavens, where in some versions they became the **sun** and the moon.

## Hunahpú and Xbalanqué in Context

The myth of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué illustrates two very important elements of Mayan life: the creation of male descendants and the Mesoamerican ball game. In the myth, the father of the twins impregnates a woman after he has already been killed and his head has been placed in a tree. This indicates how important the Maya considered male descendants to be. The ball game was the primary athletic activity for the Maya; it was played for entertainment by young children, while adult games often ended in the ritual **sacrifice** of the losing players.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In the myth of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, the main theme is vengeance. Before they are even born, the twin boys lose their father when he is

killed after losing a ball game against the gods of the underworld. Most of the myth focuses on their journey through the underworld in an attempt to defeat the gods who killed their father.

### **Hunahpú and Xbalanqué in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Hunahpú and Xbalanqué appear in the *Popol Vuh*, a collection of Mayan myths written in the sixteenth century. The characters, although central to Mesoamerican mythology, appear in very few works beyond this. This is likely due to the fact that **Mayan mythology** has only recently begun to receive the attention long given to the mythology of other cultures.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The Mesoamerican ball game was both sport and ritual for the Mayan people. Do you think modern sports such as football could also be viewed as cultural rituals? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Mayan Mythology; Underworld



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## Hunters in Mythology

### **Theme Overview**

Hunters appear in the mythologies of many different cultures. Hunting animals for food was an essential part of life in most cultures during their early development, and remains important in some regions even in modern times. Hunters in mythology are sometimes shown in conflicting ways, which reflects the act of hunting itself: to succeed as a hunter, one must understand and appreciate nature; at the same time, however, the end result of hunting involves destroying a piece of nature.

### **Major Myths**

Myths about hunters or hunting can be divided into two basic categories: myths about hunting as a way of obtaining food or other resources, and myths about the hunting of a specific creature—usually to destroy it.

Most myths in the second category involve very little actual hunting because the location of the creature is already known, and the “hunters” are generally **heroes** on a quest; for this reason, the myths covered below focus mainly on those who hunt as a way of life.

**Myths of Artemis and Her Companions** The Greek goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), known to the Romans as Diana, is one of the best-known deities related to hunting. She was the daughter of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and twin sister of **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh); because she was born to a woman other than Zeus’s wife **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), Artemis was raised not on Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), home of the other gods, but in the wilderness on an island Zeus called up from the sea. This led to her early exposure to wild animals and hunting, and she came to be known as an expert at archery, or hunting with a bow and arrow.

Many of the myths of Artemis center on her vengeance against humans, in some cases because they believe themselves to be better hunters than the goddess. The hunter Actaeon (pronounced AK-tee-uhn) was transformed into a deer by Artemis, either because he saw her nude while bathing or because he boasted that his hunting skills were superior to hers. As a deer, Actaeon was killed by his own hunting dogs. The handsome young man **Adonis** (pronounced uh-DON-is) was killed by a wild boar sent to attack him by Artemis; in some versions of the myth, Artemis sent the boar after Adonis bragged about his superior hunting abilities. The Greek leader **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) also boasted of his own hunting skills, though his punishment was for another hunting-related act: he killed a deer in a grove considered sacred to Artemis. Because of this, Artemis kept his Greek fleet from leaving port on its way to fight the Trojan War. In order to appease Artemis, Agamemnon had to **sacrifice** his own daughter, Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NEYE-uh).

Another myth shows Artemis using her abilities to defeat two **giants**, both of whom were zealous hunters. The giants, brothers Otus (pronounced OH-tuhs) and Ephialtes (pronounced ef-ee-AL-teez), were jealous of the gods of Olympus and decided to attack them. They captured **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war, and kept him as their prisoner. The Olympians could not destroy the giants, each of which possessed strength equaled only by the other. Artemis, knowing the giants loved to hunt, transformed herself into a doe and passed directly between them. They both grabbed their spears and threw them

at her, but she leapt out of the way and the giants were struck by each other's spears, killing them both.

Another hunter well known to Greeks was **Orion** (pronounced oh-RYE-uhn), a companion of Artemis. According to one account, Orion was out hunting with Artemis when he announced that he could hunt and kill any living thing on earth. The goddess **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), also known as Mother Earth, objected to such a boast, and sent a giant scorpion to kill him. In another version of his demise, Apollo became jealous of Orion's close relationship with his sister Artemis. One day, while Orion was swimming in the water with just a portion of his head visible, Apollo challenged his sister to hit the small moving target with an arrow. She did, and discovered afterward that she had been tricked into killing Orion. After his death, Orion was preserved in the night sky as a constellation, or group of stars.

According to myth, Artemis was also connected to the popular Greek huntress **Atalanta** (pronounced at-uh-LAN-tuh). As a baby, Atalanta was abandoned in the forest by her father. Artemis happened upon the infant and arranged for a she-bear to suckle her until a group of hunters took her in and raised her. A favorite of Artemis, Atalanta was the first member of a large hunting party to draw blood from a giant boar sent by Artemis as vengeance against a disrespectful king. Atalanta's prize, awarded against the wishes of many of the male hunters in the party, was the skin of the beast.

**The Wild Hunt** The myth of the Wild Hunt was found throughout Europe in various forms. The gods associated with it vary depending upon the region, though the Norse god **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) and the Celtic god **Cernunnos** (pronounced kur-NOO-nohs) were common. Odin, leader of the gods in **Norse mythology**, was renowned as a hunter. In **Celtic mythology**, Cernunnos was the god of hunters and master of all animals. He was usually depicted with a long beard and the horns of a deer growing from his head.

In the various myths of the Wild Hunt, several elements remained the same. A hunting party made up of gods, ghosts, or even fairies appeared in the night sky, or sometimes hovering just above the ground. Their prey was not known, but they were thought to be seen just before the occurrence of a tragic event or terrible storm. Humans who witnessed the Wild Hunt either died or were taken up by the hunters to join them. The only way to avoid such a fate was to cover one's eyes as the hunting party passed.

**Kokopelli** Among the Pueblo people of the American Southwest, Kokopelli (pronounced koh-koh-PEL-ee) is a fertility deity who is also closely associated with wild animals and hunting. He is a *kachina* (pronounced kuh-CHEE-nuh), or nature spirit. Kokopelli oversees the mating of wild animals, and ensures there will be enough for the people to hunt. He carries a most unusual hunting instrument: a flute, which he plays to attract the sheep he hunts. Some scholars believe that his flute—visible in early drawings of the character—may have originally been a similarly shaped weapon such as a spear or blowgun.

**Heimdall and the Gjallarhorn** In Norse mythology, **Heimdall** (pronounced HAYM-dahl) was the guardian of the Norse gods. Although not known specifically for myths related to hunting, one of Heimdall's most important possessions was the Gjallarhorn (pronounced YAHL-lahr-horn), a hunting horn. Hunting horns were used to call other members of a hunting party when locating prey during a hunt. For Heimdall, however, the Gjallarhorn had a different purpose. Heimdall stood—indeed, still stands—as the guardian at the entrance to Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the Norse gods. His job is to watch for the coming of the giants, a group of creatures led by **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) who are the enemies of the gods. When the giants attack Asgard, Heimdall will blow the Gjallarhorn loud and clear, a signal to all the Norse gods that their final battle is about to begin.

**Myths about the Hunting of Specific Creatures** There are many other myths from various cultures that deal with the hunting of a specific animal or monster. Most of these fall under the category of heroic feats or battles, but some actually involve tracking or hunting.

The Greek hero **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez), as punishment for accidentally killing his wife and children during a fit of madness, was tasked with performing twelve labors. The majority of these tasks were centered on capturing or killing certain mythical animals. The Cerynean (pronounced ser-i-NEE-uhn) Hind, for example, was a sacred deer that was so swift it could outrun a hunter's arrow. Heracles had to capture it but not kill it, which would bring the wrath of Artemis upon him. He tracked the animal on foot for a year, finally capturing it when it at last grew tired or when it stopped to drink. His next task involved capturing the Erymanthian (pronounced air-uh-MAN-thee-uhn) Boar, a giant beast that wandered the wilderness of Arcadia. Heracles, after

seeking the advice of a centaur (a half-man, half-horse creature) on how to capture it, drove the boar into deep snow so it could not run away. Heracles later had to hunt and kill the Stymphalian (stim-FAY-lee-uhn) Birds, vicious creatures with sharp bronze feathers that they could use to cut their enemies. The birds hid in a dark forest where Heracles could not see them; **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of blacksmiths, created for Heracles a set of *crotala*, or bronze clappers that rang out loudly when clanged together. Heracles used these clappers to scare the birds out of their roost, and he shot them down with arrows as they flew.

Another myth related to hunting a specific creature is found in the legends of King **Arthur**. The Questing Beast was described in two dramatically different ways: in one version, it was a ferocious creature with the head of a serpent, the body of a leopard, the rear legs of a lion, and the feet of a deer; in another version, it was a small white creature whose beauty contrasted with the horrid barking sound that came from within it. It was sought by the knights Perceval (pronounced PUR-suh-vuhl) and Palamedes (pronounced pal-uh-MEE-deez), as well as King Pellinore (pronounced PEL-uh-nor). According to legend, Pellinore spent much of his life searching for the beast, without success. Palamedes then took up the search, and was unsuccessful until he joined Perceval on his quest for the **Holy Grail**. The two came across the beast and were able to slay it after driving it into a lake, where it could not escape.

### Mythological Hunters in Context

Myths related to hunters and hunting can reflect a culture's views about the relationship between human beings and the natural world. The myths of the Greeks focus on the goddess Artemis (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), whose relationship with animals is marked by respect and knowledge of their sacred nature. In many myths, Artemis punishes those who kill needlessly or who kill animals considered sacred. Similarly, many American Indian cultures focus on hunting as a part of the cycle of life, performed only as necessary and always with respect for the animals killed, since they are giving up their lives to provide continued life and comfort for their hunters. In cultures where hunting is approached with reverence or respect for nature, female mythical characters such as Artemis are often present.



By contrast, in the tales of the Norse and other northern Europeans, hunts are often waged like wars; the relationship between humans and nature is less harmonious, and more like the clash of enemies. Similar tales can be found in Greek myths—such as the tales of the labors of Heracles—but the hunts in these cases are generally for unnatural beasts or monsters, creatures clearly not meant to represent a part of the natural order. In tales where the hunt is treated as a battle, male characters are usually the focus.

### Mythological Hunters in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The act of hunting as part of a quest is common in art and literature. Tales of the Questing Beast, for example, appear in many versions of Arthurian legend, including Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*. A famous painting of the Wild Hunt, titled *Asgardsreien*, was made by Norwegian artist Peter Nicolai Arbo in 1872.

Mythological hunters still make appearances in modern culture. Herne the Hunter, a specifically English version of Cernunnos, appears at the climax of the fantasy novel *The Dark Is Rising* by Susan Cooper. Artemis and Atalanta appeared as characters on the television show *Xena: Warrior Princess*, while Cernunnos appeared on *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and in the PlayStation 3 video game *Folklore*. A silhouetted image of Kokopelli has become a popular symbol of the Pueblo people and of the American Southwest as a whole, and is one of the most popular decorations on souvenir items from the region.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

For many centuries, hunting was an essential part of human survival. In modern times, however, the domestication of livestock and other animals for food has eliminated the need for hunting in many cultures. In these societies, some view hunting as an unnecessary and cruel act, of killing simply for the sake of killing. Others see it as a way of getting back to nature and connecting with the roots of their culture. Which view do you support, and why? Do you think the rise in domesticated meat animals has caused a shift in the way modern society as a whole views hunting? If so, how?

**SEE ALSO** Artemis; Atalanta; Cernunnos; Orion



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
HIP-nohs

**Alternate Names**  
Somnus (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *Iliad*

**Lineage**  
Son of Nyx

# Hypnos

## Character Overview

The ancient Greeks said that Hypnos, the god of sleep, visited people during the dark of night to ease them into a state of rest. Hypnos hid from the sunlight during the day. According to Greek myth, he was the son of Nyx (pronounced NIKS), the goddess of night, and his brother was Thanatos (pronounced THAN-uh-tohs), the god of death.

## Major Myths

Some writers claimed that Hypnos lived in the **underworld**, or land of the dead, but others said that he dwelled in a cave on the Greek island of Lemnos (pronounced LEM-nohs). **Lethe** (pronounced LEE-thee), the river of forgetfulness, rippled through his dim, foggy cave. The Dreams, some of his many sons, lived with him. The most important ones were Morpheus (pronounced MOR-fee-uhs), who caused sleepers to dream about people; Icelus (pronounced EYE-suh-luhs), also known as Phobetor (pronounced foh-BEE-tor), who delivered dreams about animals or monsters; and Phantasos (pronounced FAN-tuh-sohs), who brought dreams about lifeless objects.

In the *Iliad*, Homer tells a story about the goddess **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), the queen of the gods, requesting help from Hypnos during the Trojan War. She asked him to put the king of the gods, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), to sleep to prevent him from interfering on behalf of Troy. At first, Hypnos hesitated, fearful of Zeus's anger. However, Hera convinced him to help by promising him Pasithea (pronounced puh-SITH-ee-uh), one of the **Graces**, as his bride.

## Hypnos in Context

The ancient Greeks drew direct connections between sleep and death. Hypnos, the god of peaceful sleep, and Thanatos, the god of peaceful death, were twin brothers. Hypnos was also said to live in the underworld. The ancient Greeks clearly noticed the crude similarities between a sleeping person and a dead person, and viewed sleep itself as a product of the underworld, a sort of shadow of death.



*The winged head of Hypnos,  
the Greek god of sleep.*

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LONDON, UK/THE  
BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In **Greek mythology**, Hypnos symbolizes the peace of sleep without dreams. He is associated with both night or darkness and forgetfulness, both of which may be considered elements of sleep. He was also often associated with poppies, which were the source of the sleep-inducing drug known as opium.

## Hypnos in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient art, Hypnos was often depicted with wings growing from his head or shoulders. He was typically shown holding poppies or a container with opium, which brought on sleep. He was sometimes shown holding an upside-down torch. In modern times, Hypnos has appeared in the Japanese comic and animated series *Saint Seiya*, as well as several video games. Hypnos was featured as the villain in the 2001 film *Monkeybone*, though his appearance was drastically different than what is shown in traditional art.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Sleep is one of the most important and least understood functions of the body. It has long been believed that sleep was needed to provide physical rest for a person's body and brain; however, modern research indicates not only that dreams keep the brain very active during sleep, but also that a person burns more calories while sleeping than while watching television. What do you think is the purpose of sleep? Using your library and the Internet, find evidence that would support or disprove your idea.

**SEE ALSO** Graces; Hera; Lethe; Zeus



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



# Idun

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Idun was the goddess of spring and rebirth. She and her husband, **Bragi** (pronounced BRAH-gee), the god of music and poetry, lived in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods. Idun took care of the magic apples the gods ate to remain immortal, or able to live forever.

## Major Myths

The *Prose Edda*, a book of Norse legends written in the 1220s, contains a story about Idun and the magic apples. One day **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee), the Norse trickster god, was captured by a giant named Thiassi (pronounced THYAH-tzee). The giant refused to free Loki until he agreed to bring Idun and the apples to Thiassi's home. Loki gave his word and sped off to Asgard.

He invited Idun to bring her apples and walk into the forest, where he knew of some even more precious apples. Eager to compare her special fruit with that mentioned by Loki, Idun joined the trickster. But as soon as they reached the forest, Thiassi, in the form of an eagle, dove from the sky and seized the goddess and her apples.

Without Idun's apples, the gods in Asgard began to age. They became bent and feeble and demanded that Loki rescue Idun from Thiassi. Loki flew to the giant's home disguised as a falcon. He changed

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

EE-thoon

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Unknown



*Idun, the Norse goddess of the spring and rebirth, was the keeper of magic apples that kept the gods immortal.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

Idun into a nut and hid her in his claws. As Loki flew back to Asgard, Thiassi became an eagle again and followed him. However, as soon as Loki and Idun were inside Asgard, the gods lit a **fire** on the fortress walls. Thiassi's wings caught fire as he crossed the flames, and he dropped to the ground, where the gods killed him.

### Idun in Context

In the myth of Idun, the golden apples provide immortality to the gods. In Norse culture, apples were an important food item that was locally available and flourished in the relatively cold weather of northern Europe. Apples were one of the first trees cultivated by humans, and throughout Europe, apples remain an important crop today.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Norse mythology, Idun represented the energy of spring and the immortality of the gods. The golden apples tended by her symbolized

## Golden Apples

Golden apples appear in myths from around the world. In Greek mythology, Atalanta, famed for her refusal to marry any man who could not beat her in a foot race, was finally defeated by Hippomenes (pronounced hi-POM-uh-nee-z), who left golden apples along the side of their course to distract her. The Trojan War was sparked by a dispute over a golden apple. The Greek goddess Hera's (pronounced HAIR-uh) orchard had a grove of golden apple trees whose fruit gave eternal life to those who ate them. It was one of the twelve tasks of Greek hero Heracles (pronounced HAIR-uh-klee-z) to steal these golden apples. In European folktales, golden apples are often featured as precious or magical objects stolen from kings.

youth and life; when they were taken away, the gods became old. The gold color of the apples symbolized their magical nature.

## Idun in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although well known as the custodian of the golden apples of the gods, Idun is seldom mentioned in the tales of Norse mythology. The scene of her abduction, and the subsequent aging of the gods, is a popular one, however; it has been illustrated by many artists, including Arthur Rackham, John Bauer, and J. Doyle Penrose. A well-known image of Idun and her husband Bragi was painted in the nineteenth century by Nils Blommér.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

It is said that “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” Indeed, the Norse gods ate apples in order to live forever. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about the health benefits of apples and the various claims made for diets involving apples or apple products (such as apple cider vinegar). Write a short summary of your findings.

**SEE ALSO** Atalanta; Bragi; Fruit in Mythology; Heracles; *Iliad*, *The*; Loki; Norse Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**  
West African/Yoruba

**Pronunciation**  
EE-lay EE-fay

**Alternate Names**  
Ife or Ife-Lodun

**Appears In**  
Yoruba creation  
mythology

## Ile-Ife

### Myth Overview

According to Yoruba mythology, the world was originally a marshy, watery wasteland. In the sky above lived many gods, including the supreme god **Olorun** (pronounced oh-loh-RUN), the Owner of the Sky. These gods sometimes descended from the sky on spiderwebs and played in the marshy waters, but there was no land or human being there.

One day Olorun called Orisha Nla (pronounced or-EE-shuh nn-lah), the Great God, and told him to create solid land in the marshy waters below. He gave Orisha a pigeon, a hen, and the shell of a snail containing some loose earth. Orisha descended to the waters and threw the loose earth into a small space. He then set loose the pigeon and hen, which began to scratch the earth and move it around. Soon the birds had covered a large area of the marshy waters and created solid ground.

Orisha reported back to Olorun, who sent a chameleon to see what had been accomplished. The chameleon found that the earth was wide but not very dry. After a while, Olorun sent the creature to inspect the work again. This time the chameleon discovered a wide, dry land, which was called Ife (meaning “wide”) and Ile (meaning “house”). All other earthly dwellings later sprang from Ile-Ife, and it was revered forever after as a sacred spot. It remains the home of the *Ooni*, the spiritual leader of the Yoruba.

### Ile-Ife in Context

Ile-Ife (pronounced EE-lay EE-fay), also known as Ife or Ife-Lodun, is the holy city of the Yoruba (pronounced YAWR-uh-buh) people who live in Nigeria in West Africa. Ile-Ife appears in myths as the birthplace of creation and the location where the first humans took form.

### Key Themes and Symbols

For the Yoruba people, Ile-Ife is a symbol of creation and life. In their mythology, it is the oldest and most sacred land. The birds of the myth represent the natural forces that shaped the land.





*Copper mask of the Oni Obalufon, the spiritual leader of the Yoruba people. The Oni lives in the holy city of Ile-Ife in Nigeria because it is considered the birthplace of creation by the Yoruba.*

SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.

### **Ile-Ife in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Ile-Ife has been symbolized in art as a palm tree with sixteen branches, which represent the main families of the first Yoruba states. The creation myth of Ile-Ife is celebrated in the city during the Itapa festival. The city has traditionally been a center of art and agriculture, and remains so in modern times.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The city of Ile-Ife is believed to be over 2000 years old. In the United States, the oldest continuously settled city is less than 500 years old. Do you think that, given time, the oldest cities in the United States will develop myths similar to those found in places like Ile-Ife? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Animals in Mythology; Creation Stories; Olorun



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
IL-ee-uhd

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
The *Iliad*

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## *Iliad, The*

### Myth Overview

One of the greatest epics of ancient Greece, the *Iliad* tells of events during the final year of the Trojan War. *Iliad* means “poem of Ilios,” one of the names given to the city of Troy in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The Greek poet Homer is credited with creating the *Iliad*. Some scholars, however, doubt that Homer ever existed and suggest that the poem was woven together by generations of storytellers. In any case, the *Iliad* had a tremendous impact on Greek culture and holds an important place in world literature.

Contrary to popular belief, the *Iliad* does not tell the story of the entire Trojan War. Long before the events described in the *Iliad*, the Greeks had been drawn into a war with Troy because of the beautiful **Helen** of Troy. Helen was actually Greek, the wife of King Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs) of Sparta. She lived happily with Menelaus until Prince Paris (pronounced PAIR-iss) of Troy—promised the most beautiful woman in the world by the goddess **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee)—came to Greece in search of the famous beauty. Paris took Helen back to Troy. Honoring a pledge to Menelaus, the kings and princes of Greece joined together to rescue Helen and set sail for Troy with their armies to wage war.

**The Wrath of Achilles** As the *Iliad* opens, a dispute between two Greek leaders—the hero **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) and King

**Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) of Mycenae, commander of the Greek armies—sets in motion events that shape the course of the war. The trouble begins when Agamemnon receives a young woman, the daughter of a priest of **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh), as a prize of war. The priest appeals to Apollo, who sends a plague to the Greek camp. When the Greeks learn the cause of the sickness, they force Agamemnon to give up his prize.

To make up for his loss, Agamemnon demands the woman who was awarded to Achilles. Furious, Achilles puts down his weapons and refuses to fight any longer, thus depriving the Greeks of their most powerful warrior. Meanwhile, the sea goddess Thetis (pronounced THEE-tis), Achilles' mother, persuades the king of the gods, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), to let the Greeks suffer losses in combat to show how crucial her son is to their victory.

Without Achilles, the Greeks begin to lose ground to the Trojans. During the course of battle, Paris and Menelaus fight each other, but neither can claim victory. At one point, **Hector**, leader of the Trojan forces, leaves the battlefield and enters Troy. Telling the Trojan women to pray for help from the gods, he bids farewell to his wife, Andromache (pronounced an-DROM-uh-kee), and his young son. He knows that he will die soon and that the Greeks will destroy the city and its people.

After suffering significant losses, several Greek leaders, including **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs), go to Achilles and ask him to rejoin them. Even Agamemnon sends a number of gifts and promises to reward Achilles when the war is over. But Achilles refuses to reconsider his decision.

**The Death of Patroclus** Soon after, Achilles' beloved friend Patroclus (pronounced pa-TROH-kluhs) convinces the hero to let him wear his armor so that the Trojans will think that Achilles is fighting again. The sight of the warrior in Achilles' armor worries the Trojans, and the Greeks are able to push them back. But the god Apollo lets Hector see that another warrior is wearing Achilles' armor, and Hector kills Patroclus and takes the armor.

When Achilles learns that his beloved friend has been killed, he is overwhelmed with grief and determined to avenge his friend's death. Wearing new armor from his mother, Achilles reenters the battle and slaughters many Trojans while searching for Hector. When the two warriors finally meet, Hector flees and Achilles chases him around the walls of Troy.

The goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) tricks Hector by appearing as his younger brother and telling him to stand and fight. When Hector does so, Achilles kills him. Achilles removes his old armor from Hector's body and then drags the corpse behind his chariot.

**The Ransoming of Hector** Meanwhile the Trojans, angry because Achilles will not return Hector's corpse for proper funeral ceremonies, mourn the death of their hero. Again the gods intervene, forcing Achilles to accept a ransom of gifts from Hector's father, King Priam, and return the body of his son.

The story in the *Iliad* ends as the Trojans hold a funeral for their fallen hero. But the Trojan War continues. Tales of the deaths of Paris and Achilles, the Greeks' cunning use of the Trojan horse to get inside the city walls, and the defeat and destruction of Troy are told in other works.

### The *Iliad* in Context

The *Iliad* is more than just a story about ancient **heroes**, gods, and goddesses. For the Greeks of later centuries, the poem was a history of their ancestors that also revealed moral lessons about heroism, pride, revenge, and honor. As such, it also had great value as a bedrock of Greek culture and, by extension, Western culture in general.

Modern scholars believe that certain elements of the story in the *Iliad* may be based on historical events from more than three thousand years ago. Indeed, there is archaeological evidence of the destruction of a city believed to be Troy in about 1180 BCE. Almost certainly, the poem reflects the values and ideals of Greek society at that time. Perhaps more importantly, as a work of literature, the *Iliad* illustrates various universal themes and provides a realistic view of the human condition. Its major characters, though part of a distant past, exhibit personality flaws and strengths that are as real for people today as when the work first appeared.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The *Iliad* lays tremendous stress on the power of the gods to determine the course of events. The benefits of divine favor and the perils of divine displeasure are the major themes of the work. Honor and duty are also prominent themes. The Greeks come to Troy out of a sense of duty to Menelaus and to protect the honor of Greece. The Trojans refuse to surrender Helen because of their own sense of honor. Many of the heroes

of *Iliad*—Ajax and Hector, for example—embody the ideals of military skill and honorable conduct.

Perhaps the most interesting character in the epic is Achilles, the great warrior whose sulky absence from combat nearly costs Greece the war. Achilles symbolizes the ideal of the Greek warrior, but he is flawed by pride, a quick temper, and hunger for revenge after the death of Patroclus. He serves as a warning that even the mightiest can be undone by wrath.

### The *Iliad* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The *Iliad* is one of the best-known works of literature in the world. It has been retold in many forms, including plays, films, and comic books. William Shakespeare used the *Iliad* as inspiration for his comedy *Troilus and Cressida*, which offers a different take on the Trojan War through the eyes of two relatively minor characters. The Broadway musical *The Golden Apple* (1954) was an updated retelling of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

*Black Ships Before Troy: The Story of the Iliad* by Rosemary Sutcliff is a retelling of Homer's epic poem in modern and accessible language. The book, first published in 1993, offers a focused and powerful version of the most important elements of the *Iliad*, while also expanding the story to include the events leading up to the epic as well as the events that took place afterward.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Archaeologists continue to excavate and study the site of what is believed to be Troy in northwestern Turkey. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about the discovery of this archaeological site and the recent progress made there. Write a short summary of what you learn in which you answer the question: “Was there a real Troy as described in the *Iliad*?”

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; Agamemnon; Greek Mythology; Hector; Helen of Troy; Odysseus; *Odyssey*, *The*

## Inanna

See **Ishtar**.



# Inca Mythology

## Inca Mythology in Context

The Inca civilization flourished in the Andes mountains of South America during the 1400s and early 1500s CE. At the center of Inca religion and mythology was the worship of the **sun**, believed to be the ancestral father of the Inca people. For this reason, sun worship was closely linked to ancestor worship, and many of the myths of the Incas focus on their origins. The Incas tailored their mythology to glorify their own culture and to reinforce the idea that they were a superior people destined to rule others.

Based in the city of Cuzco (pronounced KOOZ-koh) in what is now Peru, the Incas were one of many small groups who lived in the Andes (pronounced AN-deez) mountains in the 1300s. Gradually, the Incas expanded and absorbed the surrounding peoples, peacefully at first and later by conquest. In 1438 a strong leader named Pachacuti (pronounced pah-chah-KOO-tee) became their king. He and his descendants made the Inca state into a vast empire that stretched from southern Colombia south into Chile and covered much of modern Bolivia and part of Argentina. Throughout this great empire the Incas built a network of roads as well as temples, fortresses, and other public buildings.

As the empire grew, the Incas absorbed the myths and legends of the cultures they conquered. They often reworked the old stories of others to give them a new, pro-Inca twist. Although they allowed their subjects to continue to worship their own gods, they expected everyone in the empire to participate in the state religion and to worship the Inca deities or gods. The Incas had no written language so they did not record their myths in writing. Instead, a class of professional storytellers and performers recited the official state history, which contained both fact and myth.

In 1531 the Incas came under attack by Spanish conquistadors. The following year their empire fell. The Spanish began converting the Indians to Christianity and wiping out non-Christian traditions and practices. However, some Spanish military and religious personnel recorded what they learned about Inca mythology, as did a few of the



*Machu Picchu, located high in the Andes mountains in Peru, was a holy city of the Incas. The site contains the ruins of a temple where the Incas worshiped their sun god.* JORGE PROVENZA/ART RESOURCE, NY.

newly Christianized and educated Incas. Though somewhat colored by European and Christian views and values, these accounts offer a glimpse into the mythology of the Incas' mountain empire. Much of what we know about Inca mythology comes from the writings of Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), the son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess. He learned the Inca legends from his uncles, who were members of the nobility. Moving to Spain as an adult, Garcilaso turned his early notes on Inca history and culture into *The Royal Commentaries of the Inca*.

### Core Deities and Characters

Most of the principal deities of the Inca pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses, represented forces of nature that operate in the sky. The state religion focused on the worship of a few major figures.

The creator god, **Viracocha** (pronounced vee-ruh-KOH-chuh), had many titles, such as Old Man of the Sky and Lord Instructor of the World. Viracocha was believed to have had a special bond with the Inca king Pachacuti, who dreamed that the god helped his people gain victory in a war they were fighting. After winning the war, Pachacuti built a great temple to Viracocha at Cuzco. The temple contained a large solid gold statue of the god as a bearded man. According to Inca tradition, Viracocha had white skin, which explains why some of the Indians at first thought that the bearded, pale-skinned Spanish soldiers were representatives of their creator god.

Viracocha, a rather remote and impersonal god, figured less prominently in the daily life of the Incas than did some other deities. Most important of all was Inti (pronounced IN-tee), the sun god, regarded as the ancestor of the Incas. He was associated with gold, called “the sweat of the sun,” and the Incas honored him with magnificent golden artworks. The Coricancha (pronounced koh-ree-KAHN-chuh), or Sun Temple, at Cuzco housed a golden image of Inti that looked like the sun. Facing the image stood the preserved remains of dead emperors, and the walls of the chamber were covered with gold.

Inti’s wife, the mother of the Incas, was the moon goddess Mama Kilya (pronounced mah-muh KEEL-yuh). Her shrine in the Coricancha had walls of silver, a metal that was sacred to her because it was believed to be her tears. The Incas marked the passage of time with the phases of the moon. Mama Kilya was thus the driving force of the calendar the Incas used to schedule their rituals and festivals.

Illapu (pronounced EEL-ah-poo), the god of weather who gave the rain, had an important place in a culture that depended on agriculture. The Incas saw the Milky Way, the band of stars that arc across the sky, as a heavenly river. Illapu’s sister stored the river’s water in a jug until it was needed on the earth. When Illapu struck the jug with a bolt of lightning from his slingshot, making the sound of thunder, he broke the jug and released the rain. Other deities included Cuichu (pronounced koo-EE-choo), the rainbow; Paca Mama (pronounced PAH-chuh mah-muh), the earth mother; and Mama Qoca (pronounced mah-muh KOH-chuh), the sea mother.

**Sacred Ceremonies** Inca religious life was administered by a large organized priesthood and centered on honoring ancestors—especially royal ones—as well as the gods. The bodies of dead kings and queens



## Major Incan Deities

**Cuichu:** god of the rainbow.

**Illapu:** god of weather.

**Inti:** sun god and supreme god.

**Mama Kilya:** moon goddess.

**Mama Qoca:** sea mother.

**Paca Mama:** earth mother.

**Viracocha:** creator god.

were mummified, or preserved through drying. They were dressed and cared for, and thought to have special powers. Young women called Acllas (pronounced ah-KEE-ahs), “chosen women” or Virgins of the Sun, served both Inti and the king, tending the god’s sacred fires and serving as the king’s sexual partners.

Priests relied on divination or supernatural signs to resolve all sorts of matters, from identifying illnesses to determining guilt or innocence to deciding what kind of **sacrifice** to make to which god. They had many ways of asking for supernatural guidance, including studying the movements of spiders or the patterns made by leaves. The chief method of divination, though, was the use of oracles, or places to communicate with the gods, which involved making frequent sacrifices to the gods. Inti, for example, received sacrifices of **corn** every day. Besides offering food and drink to the gods, the Incas also made animal and human sacrifices. White llamas were often used for animal sacrifices, and young children were particularly prized as human sacrifices. Often they were left to die on high mountaintops, sacred places remote from human life but close to the sky gods.

## Major Myths

Many Inca myths dealt with the origin of the Inca people. These myths helped support the idea that the gods intended the Incas to be rulers. Other myths dealt with the creation of the world and the arrival of a great flood.

**Creation** According to one myth, Viracocha's first creation was a dark world inhabited by **giants** that he had fashioned from stone. These creatures proved disobedient, however, and Viracocha destroyed them. He may have turned them back to stone, or he may have swept them away in a great flood. Once they were gone, Viracocha made a second race, this time forming people from clay. He equipped them with the clothes, languages, songs, skills, and crops of different nations. Before the people spread out and populated the world, Viracocha ordered them to sink into the earth and to reappear on the surface again from lakes, caves, and hilltops. They did so, and each group of people built a shrine at the spot where they emerged.

**Inca Civilization** According to a legend recorded by Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, long ago people were ignorant and brutal, living like wild animals, without clothes or houses. The god Inti, known as Our Father the Sun, felt sorry for them and sent one of his sons and one of his daughters to earth to teach them how to live properly. The son was **Manco Capac** (pronounced MAHN-koh kah-PAHK), whom Inti made the ruler of all the races of people around Lake Titicaca (pronounced tee-tee-KAH-kah) in Bolivia. "I want you to rule these peoples as a father rules his children," Inti told Manco Capac.

The god gave his son and daughter instructions about how to find the best place for their court. Starting at Lake Titicaca, they were to visit the villages and look for a place where they could drive a gold stake into the ground with one blow. The site became the location of Cuzco, the capital of the Inca empire.

On reaching the earth, Manco Capac and his sister-wife, Mama Ocllo (pronounced MAH-muh oh-KEE-oh), taught the people the arts of farming and weaving. Manco Capac also showed his people how to make and use weapons so that they could enlarge their kingdom. In this way, the sun god himself set the Inca empire on its road to glory. Later generations honored Manco Capac as the legendary first Inca.

The myth establishes some of the rights and customs of the Inca royal class, such as the practice of brothers marrying sisters. It also paints a picture of the ancestral Incas as superior to other people and firmly identifies them as descendants of the sun god.

**Great Flood** Like many peoples, the Incas had a story about a great flood that wiped out a race of wicked and unruly people. The flood myth says

that during ancient times people were cruel and greedy and failed to pay proper attention to the gods. Only in the highlands of the Andes mountains were the people not given over to evil. One day, two worthy shepherd brothers there noticed that their llamas were sad and acting strange. The llamas told the brothers that a great flood was coming. The brothers took their families and herds to high caves, and then rain fell for months, drowning the world below. Finally, the sun god Inti appeared again, and the warmth of his smile dried the waters. The families descended to repopulate the world. Legend says that although people now live everywhere on earth, llamas remember the flood and live only in the highlands.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

An important theme in Inca mythology is the divine right of the Inca people, or the belief that they were granted a special status by the gods. This is shown in their stories of Manco Capac, how he taught people to behave in a civilized way, and how the sun god Inti helped the Incas to expand their empire by conquering surrounding peoples. This is also shown in the belief that the Inca rulers are directly descended from the gods.

Another important theme in Inca mythology is the sky. Most Incan gods are connected to the sky in some way; the main gods are represented by the sun, the moon, and the rain, while the creator god is called the Old Man of the Sky. The sky was important to the Incas at least in part because they lived in mountainous regions at high altitudes. The Incas lived in a realm as close to the heavens, both literally and figuratively, as they possibly could.

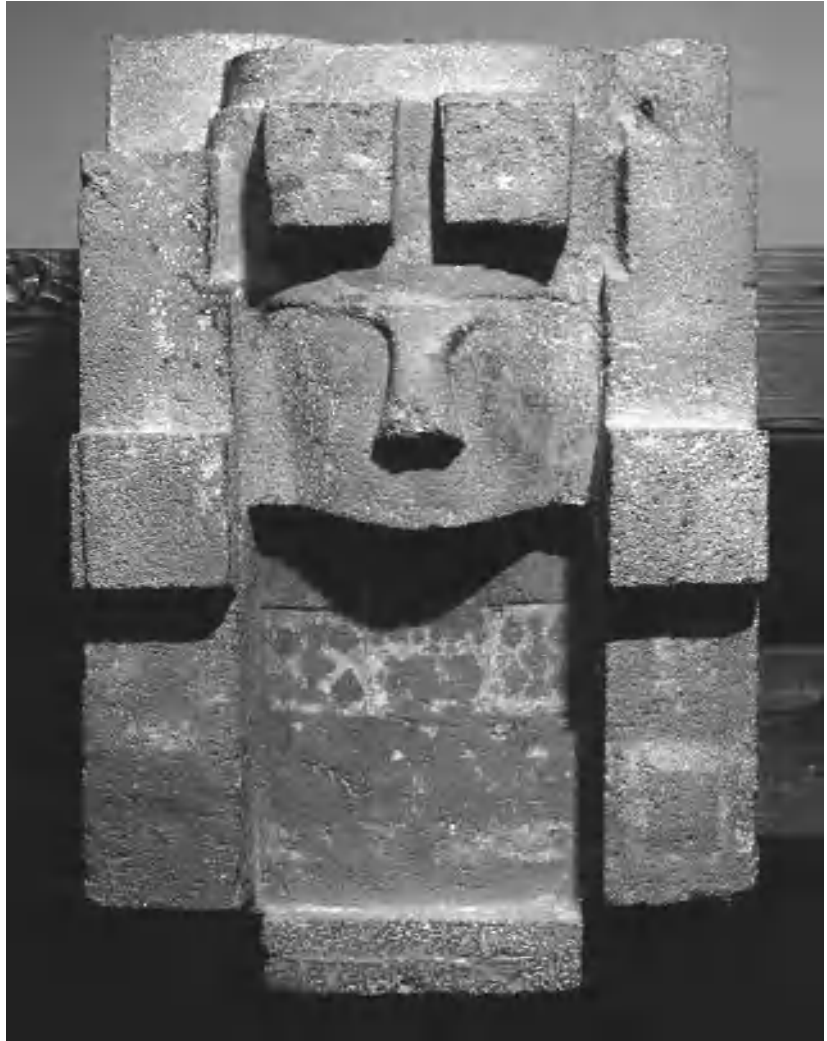
### **Inca Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Although the Spanish destroyed the Inca empire, they did not wipe out the Inca people. Their descendants live in the Andean highlands today. Many of them speak Quechua (pronounced KECH-wah), the Inca language.

Andean peoples still believe, as the Incas did, that high mountain peaks are sacred places, and they make pilgrimages to them to ensure good crops and productive herds. In the same way, people have continued the Inca practice of making offerings to local gods at shrines

## Inca Mythology

*A sculpture of Viracocha, the creator god of the Incas. Viracocha was an impersonal god who was not prominent in the daily life of the Incas.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



and holy places scattered across the land that once made up the Inca empire.

The Incas left larger monuments in stone as well. Walls from their temples can still be seen in the city of Cuzco. Elsewhere in the former empire stand forts and temples. One of the best-known Inca monuments is the mountaintop complex called Machu Picchu (pronounced MAH-choo PEEK-choo), where the Incas once worshipped their sun god. American explorer Hiram Bingham discovered the ruins of this vast temple and brought them to the notice of the

outside world in 1912. Today Machu Picchu is one of Peru's main tourist attractions.

The culture and mythology of the Incas was used as the inspiration for the 2000 Disney animated film *The Emperor's New Groove*, which featured voice acting by David Spade, John Goodman, and Patrick Warburton.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Evil Star* (2006) is the second novel in Anthony Horowitz's *Gatekeepers* series. The series centers on five young people who possess special powers that can stop an evil group known as the Old Ones from taking over the world. In *Evil Star*, fourteen-year-old Matt Freeman is sent to Peru to fight the Old Ones with a little help from some ancient Inca warriors. Horowitz is best known as the author of the popular *Alex Rider Adventure* series of novels.

SEE ALSO Manco Capac



# Indra

## Character Overview

Indra was the ruler of the gods in early Hinduism. The son of the sky and the earth, he is a warrior god who protects people and animals and provides rain to water the land. In later Hindu texts Indra loses some of his power and his warrior characteristics. Other gods, such as **Vishnu**, take his place as defender of gods and humans, while Indra continues to serve as the god of rain.

## Major Myths

Indra appears as a central figure in the *Rig-Veda*, an ancient Indian religious text, and its many stories involve Indra's fights with demons. In a famous myth, he faces a demon named Vritra (pronounced VRIT-ruh), sometimes described as a dragon or serpent. Vritra had taken all the waters of the earth and placed them in a mountain where he remained on

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

IN-druh

### Alternate Names

Sakra

### Appears In

The Vedas

### Lineage

Son of the sky and earth

guard. In the devastating drought that followed, the people suffered greatly from thirst and famine.

Indra decided to fight Vritra and rescue the waters from captivity. To prepare for battle, Indra drank a large quantity of an intoxicating beverage called soma (pronounced SOH-muh) that gave him enormous strength. Then he stormed the mountain and delivered a deadly wound to the demon with his thunderbolt. Vritra's death released the waters, which flowed down from the mountain to revive the people and the countryside. Some sources suggest that Indra's defeat of Vritra takes place again whenever strong winds and rains, such as those associated with a monsoon, arrive after a seasonal drought.

*Indra, a warrior god and the ruler of the gods in early Hindu myths, later became known as the god of storms and rain.*

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## Indra in Context

As the god of rain, Indra was considered an important force in the lives of Indian people. The subcontinent of India experiences one of the most significant rainfall seasons of any location on the planet. This season, known as the monsoon season, is critical to farmers that grow crops dependent on moisture, such as rice. However, monsoon rains also cause frequent and dangerous flooding across large areas, especially near rivers. Rain, like the god Indra, is seen as a force of great benefit, but also a force of potential destruction.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Hindu mythology, Indra is primarily associated with rain and clouds. In the tale of Vritra, he is seen as the provider of water when he slays the demon with his thunderbolt. Water symbolizes life, since it is necessary for most plants and animals to survive. Indra's thunderbolt represents the destructive power of storms. Legends about Indra describe him as riding either in a golden chariot pulled by two horses or mounted on a white elephant. In addition to rainfall, a rainbow or the sound of a gathering storm indicates that he is present.

## Indra in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Indra is the subject of more hymns than any other Hindu god, and is a popular character in *yakshagana* (pronounced yahk-shuh-GAH-nuh), an Indian performance art form similar to opera. However, Indra is seldom worshipped by modern Hindus and is now considered a minor god in Hindu mythology.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Global climate change—not Indra—is often cited as a reason for increasingly violent storms and rainy seasons in many places around the world. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research how rainfall levels have changed in India in the past century. Is India getting the same amount of rain as a hundred years ago? What impact does the rain have on the people of India? Write a paper summarizing your findings.

**SEE ALSO** Hinduism and Mythology; Vishnu



# Ishtar

## Character Overview

In the ancient Near East, Ishtar was an important and widely worshipped mother goddess for many Semitic peoples. The Sumerians called her Inanna (pronounced ee-NAH-nah), and other groups of the Near East referred to her as Astarte (pronounced a-STAR-tee).

A complex figure, Ishtar combined the characteristics—both good and evil—of many different goddesses. As a mother figure, she was considered the mother of gods and humans, as well as the creator of all earthly blessings. In this role, she grieved over human sorrows and served as a protector of marriage and motherhood. People also worshipped Ishtar as the goddess of sexual love and fertility. The more destructive side of Ishtar's nature emerged primarily in connection with war and storms. As a warrior goddess, she could make even the gods tremble in fear. As a storm goddess, she could bring rain and thunder.

### Nationality/Culture

Babylonian

### Pronunciation

ISH-tahr

### Alternate Names

Inanna, Astarte

### Appears In

Ancient Semitic myths

### Lineage

Daughter of Sin and Shamash

## Ishtar

*Ishtar was worshiped as both a good and evil goddess by the people of the ancient Near East.*

*They honored her as the protector of marriage and motherhood as well as a warrior and storm goddess.* WERNER FOR-MAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Major Myths

Some myths say that Ishtar was the daughter of the moon god Sin (pronounced SEEN) and sister of the **sun** god **Shamash** (pronounced shah-MAHSH). Others mention the sky god Anu (pronounced AH-noo), the moon god Nanna (pronounced NAH-nah), the water god Ea (pronounced AY-ah), or the god Enlil (pronounced EN-lil), lord of the earth and the air, as her father.

Ishtar appears in many myths, but two are especially important. The first, part of the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, tells how Ishtar offered to marry the hero-king **Gilgamesh** (pronounced GIL-guh-mesh) because she was impressed by his courage and exploits. According to the epic, Gilgamesh refused her offer and insulted Ishtar, reminding the goddess



## Weeping for Tammuz

The biblical book of Ezekiel mentions, with great disapproval, an ancient Near Eastern ritual associated with the death of Ishtar's husband Tammuz. As recorded in the Bible, God points Ezekiel toward a temple: "Then He brought me to the entrance of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and behold, women were sitting there weeping for Tammuz." This is described in the Bible as an "abomination"—an all-female ritual in which the priestesses mourned the death of Tammuz for forty days.

Interestingly, some historians have suggested that the Christian practice of observing Lent—a period of forty days of prayer and penitence before Easter—stems from the ancient forty-day mourning period for Tammuz. Both Lent and the mourning for Tammuz precede a resurrection.

of all the previous lovers she had harmed. Enraged, Ishtar sent the fierce Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh, but he and his friend Enkidu (pronounced EN-kee-doo) killed the beast instead.

The other well-known myth of Ishtar concerns her descent to the **underworld** (land of the dead) and the **sacrifice** of her husband Tammuz (pronounced TAH-mooz, also known as Dumuzi). In this story, Ishtar decided to visit the underworld, which was ruled by her sister Ereshkigal (pronounced ay-RESH-kee-gahl), perhaps to seize power there. Before departing, she instructed her follower Ninshubur (pronounced neen-SHOO-boor) to seek the help of the gods if she did not return.

To reach the underworld, Ishtar had to pass through seven gates and remove a symbol of her power—such as an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry—at each one. At the last gate, the goddess, naked and deprived of all her powers, met her sister Ereshkigal, who announced that Ishtar must die. She died immediately, and her corpse was hung on a stake.

Meanwhile, the god Enki (pronounced EN-kee) learned from Ninshubur that Ishtar was missing and sent two messengers who restored her to life. However, in order to leave the underworld, Ishtar had to substitute another body for her own. The goddess offered her young husband, Tammuz, to take her place. This tale of death and rebirth was associated with fertility and linked to the seasons and agricultural cycles,

much like the story of **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee) in **Greek mythology**. In another version of the story, Ishtar travels to the underworld to rescue Tammuz, who has died, and manages to bring him back—but only for part of each year. Thus the death and rebirth of Tammuz is also linked to fertility and agricultural cycles.

### Ishtar in Context

Ishtar and the myths about her provide interesting insight into ancient Near Eastern views on the roles of men and women in society. For example, Ishtar is said to have had many relationships with men, gods, and animals. During those relationships, the males are almost always said to have suffered because they were distracted or weakened by Ishtar's power over them. This suggests that ancient Babylonians respected and revered women's reproductive power. The respect given this powerful female goddess translated into respect for women in Babylonian society. Though Near Eastern rulers were usually men, women were able to hold powerful and prestigious religious and political positions. This changed as the male-dominated Judeo-Christian faiths arose in the Near East, and female-dominated rituals and practices associated with the worship of Ishtar were branded as evil. As the worship of Ishtar faded, women gradually lost their religious, political, legal, and domestic power.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Ishtar was believed to be the representation of the planet Venus, and the eight-pointed star is a symbol commonly associated with her. As an extension of her role as the goddess of sexual love, Ishtar was also the protector of prostitutes and alehouses. Prostitution was an important part of her cult, and her holy city Erech was known as the town of the sacred courtesans (prostitutes).

### Ishtar in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In modern times, Ishtar has benefited from renewed interest in ancient mythologies of the Near East. The 1987 film *Ishtar*, starring Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman and often cited as one of the biggest box-office failures in cinematic history, is not connected with the Babylonian goddess other than by name. The name Ishtar has also been used for

characters in numerous video games and Japanese comics, though most do not draw heavily from the mythology of the original goddess.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero insults Ishtar by mentioning her many loves and the sad fates they met. Do you think modern females who have a number of romantic relationships are viewed in a similarly negative way today? Do you think this same view applies to males who have several romantic relationships? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Gilgamesh; Semitic Mythology; Shamash; Underworld



# Isis

## Character Overview

The great mother goddess of ancient Egypt, Isis was the sister and wife of the god **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris). Together these two deities played a major role in many stories in **Egyptian mythology**, particularly in myths about rebirth. The worship of Isis became very popular in Egypt and eventually spread to other parts of the Mediterranean world, including ancient Greece and Rome.

According to Egyptian mythology, Isis was the daughter of the earth god Geb (pronounced GEB) and the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT). Her sister and brothers were Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this), **Set** (pronounced SET), and Osiris. These six deities—Geb, Nut, Isis, Osiris, Set, and Nephthys—belonged to an important group of nine Egyptian gods called the Great Ennead (pronounced EN-ee-ad) of Heliopolis (pronounced hee-lee-OP-uh-luhs).

## Major Myths

One famous myth about Isis tells how she discovered the secret name of the **sun** god **Ra** and increased her power. According to the story, Isis found Ra asleep one day, snoring loudly and saliva dripping from his mouth. She collected the saliva and mixed it with earth to form a

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

EYE-sis

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ancient Egyptian writings and mythology

### Lineage

Daughter of Geb and Nut

## Isis

*Statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis, holding her child Horus. Isis protected Horus during his childhood so he could grow up to avenge his father's death.*

THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART, 37.938E, THE CHARLES EDWIN WILBOUR FUND. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.



poisonous serpent. Then she placed the serpent on a path that Ra took every day.

When Ra awoke and started on his way, the serpent bit him, causing terrible pain. He called to the other gods for help, but all were helpless

except Isis, who promised to cure him if he revealed his secret name. At first Ra refused, but eventually the pain became unbearable. He told Isis the name, and she gained new powers. This story was associated with a major aspect of Isis's character: her skill in magical arts.

One of the most important myths associated with Isis was the story of Osiris's death and resurrection (rebirth). According to this tale, the god Set became jealous of his brother Osiris, who ruled as king of Egypt. One day Set tricked Osiris and sealed him inside a box. Set then placed the box adrift on the Nile River, which carried it to the distant land of Byblos (pronounced BIB-luhs).

Isis searched for and found the box and then brought it back to Egypt, where she concealed it. However, Set discovered the hiding place and cut Osiris's body into many pieces and scattered them throughout Egypt. After recovering the pieces, Isis used her magical powers to restore life to Osiris, who then went to live in the **underworld** or land of the dead.

Sometime before this happened, Osiris and Isis had had a son named **Horus**. Isis kept the child hidden from Set so that he could grow up and avenge his father's death. She protected Horus against all dangers, even restoring him to life once after he was bitten by a scorpion. When Horus became a young man, he fought his uncle Set. But Isis took pity on Set and allowed him to escape. Angry at his mother, Horus cut off her head. **Thoth** (pronounced TOHT), the god of magic and wisdom, changed the severed head into a cow's head and reattached it to Isis's body. Some ancient statues and paintings of the goddess show her with a cow's head, and she is often linked to the goddess **Hathor** (pronounced HATH-or). Eventually, Isis went to live with Osiris in the underworld.

## Isis in Context

The ancient Egyptians regarded Isis as a perfect mother, and she was worshipped as a protector goddess because of the way she sheltered Horus from danger. In the roles of mother and magician, she also cured the sick and restored the dead to life. As the mother of Horus, who took his father's place on the throne of Egypt, Isis also was thought to play a key role in the succession of Egyptian kings.

Many temples were built in honor of Isis, and her popularity extended to the ancient Greek and Roman cultures. These other cultures

are an important source of information about Isis and her myths. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Isis, like other Egyptian deities, fell out of favor with the Christians that dominated Europe.

The story of Isis and Osiris is one of many myths of death and rebirth from around the world. The Near Eastern myth of the death of Tammuz, as well as the ancient Greek myths about **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee) and **Adonis**, tell similar stories of those who dwell part of the time in the underworld and part of the time in the land of the living.

### Key Themes and Symbols

For the ancient Egyptians, Isis was a symbol of motherhood and protection. She also represented the special nature of rulers, who often believed themselves to be directly related to the goddess. The cow, an animal commonly associated with Isis, was considered to be a symbol of life since it provided milk, just like a human mother.

### Isis in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In the past century or so, renewed interest in Egyptian culture has led to a new popularity for Isis in Western culture. The television series *The Secrets of Isis* (1975) starred Joanna Cameron as an archaeologist who discovers an amulet that transforms her into the goddess and grants her supernatural powers. Isis has also appeared in comic book series from several publishers—most notably Marvel Comics, where the character remained at least somewhat similar to her Egyptian roots. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in ancient Egyptian beliefs, especially in Isis, among those seeking alternative spiritual studies and practices. The goddess even continues to be worshipped by members of the Fellowship of Isis, a modern religious group.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The *Sisters of Isis* series by Lynne Ewing is about a group of three high school girls—Sudi, Meri, and Delila—who discover that they are the descendants of ancient Egyptian pharaohs. The three girls must learn to use their magical powers to stop the evil Cult of **Anubis**, while at the same time trying to carry on normal teenage lives. The first book, *Sisters of Isis: The Summoning* (2007) focuses on Sudi's discovery of her true

identity and powers. Ewing has also written two other popular series of novels, *Daughters of the Moon* and *Sons of the Dark*.

**SEE ALSO** Adonis; Afterlife; Demeter; Egyptian Mythology; Horus; Ishtar; Osiris; Ra; Set; Underworld



## Itzamná

### Character Overview

Itzamná was one of the most important gods of **Mayan mythology**. The ruler of the heavens and of day and night, he was often shown in Mayan art as a pleasant, toothless old man with a large nose. He was also identified as the son of the creator god Hunab Ku (pronounced hoo-NAHB-koo).

Itzamná is sometimes linked with the **sun** god Kinich Ahau (pronounced kee-nich AH-wah) and the moon goddess Ixchel (pronounced eesh-CHEL). The goddess may have been Itzamná's wife or a female form of his deity. Like Itzamná, she gave people many useful skills, such as weaving. However, Ixchel had a destructive nature and could cause **floods** and other violent events, while Itzamná was always kind and protective toward humans.

### Major Myths

In various myths, Itzamná appears as a culture hero who gave the Maya the foundations of civilization. According to legend, he taught them to grow **corn**, to write, to use calendars, and to practice medicine. He also introduced a system for dividing up the land, and he established rituals for religious worship.

### Itzamná in Context

According to legend, one of Itzamná's greatest teachings to the Maya people was how to create calendars. The Maya used several different calendars, including a basic 260-day calendar, a 365-day calendar similar to the Gregorian calendar popular in the world today, and even a calendar that combined both into an enormous 52-year cycle. The Maya used calendars to determine the ideal days for performing all important

#### Nationality/Culture

Mayan

#### Pronunciation

eet-SAHM-nah

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Mayan creation myths

#### Lineage

Son of Hunab Ku

actions, from the agricultural to the religious. The most significant cultural documents produced by the Maya were calendars, which included information on daily practices as well as gods and goddesses.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Itzamná represents wisdom and the transfer of knowledge. His wisdom is symbolized by his typical depiction as an old man. Unlike many Mayan gods, Itzamná also represented happiness, illustrated by his toothless smile. One important theme that runs through the tales of Itzamná is creation and invention; the god creates processes and systems that can only be described as logical, methodical, and in some cases, scientific.

## Itzamná in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Itzamná appears in many of the Mayan documents created during and after the fall of the Mayan civilization, and also appears as a decorative figure on many Mayan structures. At the Maya archeological site of Palenque, for example, Itzamná appears on one of the existing temple platforms. Although not well known outside Mayan mythology, Itzamná remains an important part of Mayan and Mexican culture.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Captive* by Scott O'Dell (1979) is a historical novel set during the time of the Maya. The book centers on a young Spanish priest who works to end the enslavement of Central American tribes such as the Maya by Spanish explorers. O'Dell is also the author of the Newbery Medal-winning novel *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, first published in 1960.

SEE ALSO Mayan Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Japanese/Shinto

### Pronunciation

ee-zuh-NAH-gee and ee-zuh-NAH-mee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The *Kojiki*, the *Nihongi*

### Lineage

None



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# Izanagi and Izanami

## Character Overview

In Japanese Shinto mythology the two gods Izanagi (The Male Who Invites) and Izanami (The Female Who Invites) are the creators of Japan



and its other gods. Stories about Izanagi and Izanami are told in two works from the 700s CE, the *Kojiki* (pronounced koh-JEE-kee) and the *Nihongi* (pronounced nee-HOHN-gee).

## Major Myths

According to legend, the first gods ordered the divine beings Izanagi and Izanami to create the islands of Japan. The two stood on the floating bridge of **heaven** and stirred the ancient ocean with a jeweled spear. When they lifted the spear, the drops that fell back into the water formed the first solid land, an island called Onogoro (pronounced oh-NOH-goh-roh). Izanagi and Izanami descended to the island and became husband and wife. Their first child was deformed, and the other gods said it was because Izanami spoke before her husband at their marriage ceremony.

The couple performed another wedding ceremony, this time correctly. Izanami soon gave birth to eight lovely children, who became the islands of Japan. Izanagi and Izanami then created many gods and goddesses to represent the mountains, valleys, waterfalls, streams, winds, and other natural features of Japan. However, during the birth of Kagutsuchi (pronounced kah-guh-TSOO-chee), the **fire** god, Izanami was badly burned. As she lay dying, she continued to create gods and goddesses, and still other deities emerged from the tears of the grief-stricken Izanagi.

When Izanami died, she went to Yomi (pronounced YOH-mee), the **underworld** or land of the dead. Izanagi decided to go there and bring his beloved back from the land of darkness and death. Izanami greeted Izanagi from the shadows as he approached the entrance to Yomi. She warned him not to look at her and said that she would try to arrange for her release from the gods of Yomi. Full of desire for his wife, Izanagi lit a torch and looked into Yomi. Horrified to see that Izanami was a rotting corpse, Izanagi fled.

Angry that Izanagi had not respected her wishes, Izanami sent hideous female spirits, eight thunder gods, and an army of fierce warriors to chase him. Izanagi managed to escape and blocked the pass between Yomi and the land of the living with a huge boulder. Izanami met him there and, unable to get past the boulder, vowed to take revenge by strangling 1,000 people a day. Izanagi responded by saying

he would cause the birth of 1,500 people a day. They broke off their marriage.

Izanagi felt unclean because of his contact with the dead, and he took a bath to purify himself. A number of gods and goddesses, both good and evil, emerged from his discarded clothing as Izanagi bathed. As he washed his face, the **sun** goddess **Amaterasu** (pronounced ah-mah-te-RAH-soo) appeared from his left eye, the moon god Tsukiyomi (pronounced TSOO-kee-yoh-mee) appeared from his right eye, and Susano-ô (pronounced soo-sah-noh-OH) came from his nose. Proud of these three noble children, Izanagi divided his kingdom among them.

### Izanagi and Izanami in Context

The tale of Izanami's death and Izanagi's journey to the underworld offers some insight into traditional Japanese ideas about men and women. Izanami is shown to be a creature closely tied to nature and natural processes; she gives birth much like any woman would, and when she dies, her body rots just like a human body. Izanagi, on the other hand, creates children through more supernatural means: through his own tears, and through purified parts of his body while cleansing. This suggests a traditional Japanese view of women as creators of the natural or organic, and men as creators of the supernatural or cultural.

Izanami's error in speaking before her husband during their wedding ceremony was a violation of social order, and resulted in the birth of an unnatural baby. This detail suggests a belief in the ancient Japanese culture that women should defer to men, and that their failure to do so can have bad consequences.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Stories in which one-half of a romantic couple dies young and the other half attempts to retrieve the beloved from the underworld appear in several cultures. As in the case with Izanagi and Izanami, the attempt is usually either unsuccessful or only partially successful, indicating cultural beliefs regarding the impossibility of cheating death. Even love cannot conquer death. The transformation of Izanami from a creative force to a destructive one after her separation from Izanagi is an important theme, and mirrors female deities in other cultures who both give and take life.

## Izanagi and Izanami in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Izanagi and Izanami appear in both of the main works of **Japanese mythology**, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*. In art, they are usually depicted together, standing in the clouds and stirring the ancient sea with a spear.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare the story of Izanagi's journey to the underworld with the Greek myth of **Orpheus** and **Eurydice**. How are the two stories similar? How are they different? Do you think the similarities are coincidental, or could they represent themes common in many cultures?

**SEE ALSO** Amaterasu; Japanese Mythology; Underworld



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# J



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



## Jade Emperor

### Character Overview

The Jade Emperor, also known as Yu Huang, was viewed by Taoists as the ultimate ruler of **heaven**, earth, and the land of the dead. According to legend, the Jade Emperor was once a prince who looked after the needy in his kingdom. He became immortal—or able to live forever—and after over two hundred million years of existence, he was selected by a panel of sages to become the single ruler of all things.

### Major Myths

When Yu Huang was born, he gave off light that filled the kingdom where he lived. When he grew older, he retreated and went into meditation (a state of focused thought) and eventually became immortal. Yu Huang was concerned mostly with helping to improve the living conditions of people, and after spending much time working on this issue, he resumed his meditation—which involved passing mental “trials” in order to become more powerful—so that he might find even better ways to help.

When he emerged from his meditation, which had lasted many millions of years, he discovered that a demon had amassed an army of monsters and was attempting to take over control of heaven. Although Yu Huang was not a god, he traveled to heaven to see what was

#### Nationality/Culture

Chinese/Taoist

#### Alternate Names

Yu Huang, Heavenly Grandfather

#### Appears In

Early Taoist creation myths

#### Lineage

Son of the King of Pure Felicity and Majestic Heavenly Lights and Ornaments

## Jade Emperor

*Yu Huang, the Jade Emperor, was the ruler of first heaven in Taoist mythology. He was considered a part of the Taoist Triad—the founding fathers of Taoism—along with Tao Chun, ruler of second heaven, and Lao Tzu, ruler of third heaven. © PRIVATE COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.*



happening. When he found that the gods were not powerful enough to stop the demon, he stepped forward and battled the demon himself. The two beings fought not with their fists or weapons, but with the

power of their minds. In the end, Yu Huang was victorious. The gods were so grateful that they, along with other immortals and humans, chose to elect Yu Huang as their ruler and gave him the title of Jade Emperor.

## Jade Emperor in Context

For those outside Chinese culture, the reference to jade in Yu Huang's title may not seem significant. However, jade has been one of the most culturally important stones throughout the history of China. As early as 3000 BCE, jade—which is a hard stone that resists wear—was used to create some tools, but its beauty meant that it was often saved for the creation of decorative and ceremonial items. The stone was regarded in much the same way gold has been viewed in other parts of the world, and jade items were indicators of wealth or royal connections. Nobles during the Han dynasty, roughly between 200 BCE and 200 CE, were often buried in suits made of intricately sewn jade tiles; they believed the jade had special qualities that would preserve human remains.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of the myths of the Jade Emperor is the superior power of the mind over the physical realm. Yu Huang becomes immortal by meditating until he reaches a higher state of being. He continues to meditate for millions of years in order to increase his powers. When he fights the demon who is attempting to overtake heaven, the battle is waged through their minds instead of through weapons. Yu Huang's association with jade represents his connection to other Chinese rulers and to all that is sacred and beautiful in nature.

## Jade Emperor in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though he originally sprang from Taoist beliefs, the Jade Emperor has become one of the most significant mythical figures in Chinese culture as a whole. In modern times, the Jade Emperor still serves as a mythical judge of a person's good deeds; on the eve of the Chinese New Year, families burn a paper depiction of a god that relays the household activities of the past year, good and bad, to the Jade Emperor. Outside China, the Jade Emperor has appeared as a character in the Japanese

comic and animated series *Fushigi Yugi* (1992) by Yuu Watase, and in the American science fiction television series *Stargate SG-1*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Jade Emperor is unique as a leader of the deities in the Chinese pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses. Compare him to leaders of the pantheons of other cultures, such as **Zeus** (Greek) or **Odin** (Norse). How is he different from these gods? How do you think this reflects different attitudes among the people of the Chinese, ancient Greek, and Norse cultures?

SEE ALSO Chinese Mythology; Xian; Yellow Emperor

## Jagannatha

See **Juggernaut**.



## Janus

### Nationality/Culture

Roman

### Pronunciation

JAY-nuhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Fasti*

### Lineage

Unknown

### Character Overview

Janus was the Roman god of gates and doorways. Like a doorway that can be entered from two directions, Janus was usually pictured with two faces, one looking forward and one looking back. Janus was also associated with beginnings and endings, and the first month of the year is called January after him. The Romans mentioned Janus first when including a list of gods in their prayers, and they named the Janiculum (pronounced juh-NIK-yuh-luhm), one of the seven hills of Rome, in his honor.

### Major Myths

Janus appears in one myth as the defender of an important Roman gateway. When the city was under attack by a tribe known as the Sabines (pronounced SAY-bines), Janus flooded the gate with a hot spring to





*A Roman coin has the two-faced god Janus on it.* THE ART ARCHIVE/BRITISH MUSEUM/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

prevent the invaders from entering the city. In another story, Janus used his two faces while pursuing a lover. The goddess Cardea (pronounced kar-DEE-uh) was known for leading her admirers to a cave and then running away. When Janus accompanied her to the cave, he saw with the face in the back of his head that she was turning to leave and caught hold of her before she could escape.

### Janus in Context

As the god who could see both the past and the future, Janus was especially important to the Romans because of their strong beliefs in both their heritage and technological progress. These were the two driving forces of the Roman Empire. Their desire for a rich heritage led the Romans to produce many examples of great art based on classical Greek models in sculpture, literature, and architecture. Their fondness for efficiency and

technological advances led to great success in agriculture, politics, and military conquest.

## Key Themes and Symbols

For the ancient Romans, Janus represented change or transition, just as doors, gates, and hallways represent a change or transition from one place to another. Janus also symbolized transitions such as births, marriages, and other significant life events. This also explains why Janus was recognized at the beginning of the new year and why he was also seen as a symbol of time. The two faces of Janus were sometimes said to represent the **sun** and the moon, together forming a complete daily cycle.

## Janus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The temple to Janus in the Roman Forum had two sets of doors facing east and west. These doors were open during a war and closed in periods of peace. The two-faced figure of Janus was common on Roman coins, and has remained a popular image even in modern times.

The international film distributor Janus Films, responsible for bringing world cinema classics such as *Seven Samurai* and many others to the United States, uses the familiar two-faced image as its logo. Janus has also lent his name to one of Saturn's moons, as well as the month of January. In addition, those who maintain hallways—the domain of Janus—were given a special title that is still used today: janitors.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

To the ancient Romans, Janus represented change, or transition. Societies all over the world recognize social transitions, such as birth, graduation, and marriage, and celebrate them with rituals. Modern anthropologists call these rituals “rites of passage,” since they ritually mark the transition of an individual or group from one social status to another. In America, for example, your eighteenth birthday is a rite of passage that acknowledges your transition from child to legal adult. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the rites of passage in another culture. For which individuals or groups within the society are the rites meant? What transitions do the rites mark? Select one particular ceremony for more in-depth research, and write a brief essay on the “before,” and “after,” social status of the group or individual who takes part in the rite of passage.



# Japanese Mythology

## Japanese Mythology in Context

The mythology of Japan has a long history dating back more than 2,000 years. It became part of two major religious traditions: Shinto, a religion that developed in Japan, and Buddhism, which developed in India and came to Japan from China and Korea.

Japanese mythology includes a vast number of gods, goddesses, and spirits. Most of the stories concern the creation of the world, the foundation of the islands of Japan, and the activities of deities (gods), humans, animals, spirits, and magical creatures. Some myths describe characters and events associated with particular places in Japan. Others are set in legendary locations, such as the heavens or the **underworld** (the land of the dead).

For many centuries myths were transmitted orally in Japan. In 712 CE, a written version of the mythology, the *Kojiki* (pronounced koh-JEE-kee), was compiled for the court of the Emperor of Japan. The tales in the *Kojiki* tell of the creation of the world, the origin of the gods, and the ancestry of the Japanese emperors, who claimed descent from the **sun** goddess **Amaterasu** (pronounced ah-mah-te-RAH-soo).

Another early source of Japanese mythology is the *Nihongi* (pronounced nee-HOHN-gee), also known as the *Nihonshoki* (Chronicles of Japan). Completed in 720 CE, this work also includes various myths and legends, and it helps establish the genealogy of the imperial family. The *Nihongi* was greatly influenced by Chinese and Korean history and mythology. Both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi* contain elements of Taoism, a Chinese religious movement that was introduced to Japan by the 600s.

## Core Deities and Characters

In Japanese mythology, everything in nature has a *kami* (pronounced KAH-mee)—a deity or spirit. As a result, the Japanese pantheon, or collection of recognized gods, is enormous, with some sources claiming that there are millions of different spirits and deities. Throughout Japan, local myths and legends tell about the *kami* of a particular place, such as a rock, a pair of trees, or a mountain. However, several major

## Major Japanese Deities

**Amaterasu:** goddess of the sun and fertility who brings light to the world.

**Hachiman:** god of warriors, known for his military skill.

**Inari:** god associated with rice and merchants.

**Izanagi:** creator god.

**Izanami:** creator goddess.

**Kagutsuchi:** god of fire.

**Susano-ô:** violent god associated with storms and the sea, Amaterasu's brother.

**Tsuki-yomi:** moon god, Amaterasu's brother.

deities appear in significant roles in a number of stories from different regions.

The two most important creator deities are Izanagi (pronounced ee-zuh-NAH-gee) and his sister Izanami (pronounced ee-zuh-NAH-mee). According to the myths, they made the islands of Japan as well as many of the gods and goddesses. **Izanagi and Izanami** also appear in a story about a descent to Yomi (pronounced YOH-mee), a land of darkness and death associated with the underworld.

Perhaps the best-known Japanese deity is the sun goddess Amaterasu. Said to be the ancestor of the imperial family, she brings light into the world and is responsible for fertility. Her shrine at Ise (pronounced EE-say) is considered by many to be the most important shrine in Japan.

Amaterasu has two brothers: the moon god Tsuki-yomi (pronounced TSOO-kee-yoh-mee) and Susano-ô (pronounced soo-sah-noh-OH), a powerful and violent god often associated with storms. Of the two, Susano-ô plays a more important role in mythology, appearing in a number of major legends, including several with Amaterasu.

Ôkuninushi (pronounced aw-KOO-nee-NOO-shee), a descendant of Susano-ô (possibly his son), is a central character in the Izumo Cycle, a series of myths set in the Izumo (pronounced ee-ZOO-moh) region of

western Japan. Like the **heroes** in the legends of other cultures, Ōkuninushi has many adventures and undergoes various ordeals.

One of the most popular deities of Japanese mythology is Hachiman (pronounced HAH-chee-mahn), a protector of warriors. The character of Hachiman is based on the emperor Ōjin (pronounced OH-jeen), who lived in the 300s CE and was renowned for his military skills. According to tradition, after Ōjin died he became the god Hachiman. In the 700s, Hachiman became part of the Shinto pantheon.

The god Inari (pronounced ee-NAH-ree) appears in few myths, but he is important because of his association with the growing of rice, the major food crop in Japan. Thought to bring prosperity, Inari is the patron (protector) of merchants and sword makers.

Among the many spirits and creatures in Japanese mythology are the *tengu* (pronounced TEN-goo), minor deities that are part human and part bird. According to tradition, they live in trees in mountainous areas. The *tengu* enjoy playing tricks on humans but resent being tricked themselves. They are more mischievous than wicked.

The Oni (pronounced OH-nee), a more threatening group of spirits, may have originated in China and traveled to Japan with Buddhism. These horned demons, often of enormous size, can take human or animal shape. Sometimes invisible, the Oni have the ability to steal the souls of humans. They can be very cruel and are associated with various evil forces such as famine and disease.

Japanese mythology also includes other Buddhist deities. In addition to stories about the life of Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh), many tales concern Amida (pronounced AH-mee-duh), the ruler of a paradise called the Pure Land. Kannon (pronounced KAH-nohn), the protector of children and women in childbirth, and Jizō (pronounced jee-ZOH), who rescues souls from **hell**, are also important Buddhist figures.

A group of monkey-like creatures called *kappa* (pronounced KAHP-pah) displays both good and evil qualities in Japanese myth. Associated with water, they live in rivers, ponds, and lakes, and carry water in a hollow space on top of their heads. If the water spills, the kappa lose their magical powers. Kappa drink the blood of humans, horses, and cattle. But they also eat cucumbers, and families can avoid being attacked by throwing a cucumber bearing their names into the kappa's watery home. Among the kappa's good qualities is a tendency to be polite. When they meet someone, they bow, often spilling the water in their heads. They

## Japanese Mythology

*Hachiman, one of the most popular gods of Japanese mythology, was the patron of warriors.* © SAKAMOTO

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also always keep their promises. In many tales, humans outwit the kappa by forcing them to make promises.

### Major Myths

The most important stories in Japanese mythology deal with creation and the goddess Amaterasu. Deeply rooted in nature, they vividly

describe the formation of the landscape and the origin of forces such as **fire**, wind, and light.

**Creation** According to the *Kojiki*, in the beginning there was only an ancient ooze, out of which **heaven** and earth were formed. Life emerged from this mud. In heaven three deities—followed by two others—appeared. These five became the Separate Heavenly Deities. They were followed by the Seven Generations of the Age of the Gods, two single deities and five male and female couples. The two single deities came out of a reedlike substance floating in the ooze.

When the youngest pair of deities—Izanagi and Izanami—were born, the other gods ordered them to make solid land out of the material drifting in the sea. Standing on the floating bridge of heaven, Izanagi and Izanami stirred the ancient ocean with a jeweled spear. When they pulled up the spear to see if any material had gathered on it, drops of salty water dripped down into the sea and formed an island called Onogoro (pronounced oh-NOH-goh-roh). Izanagi and Izanami left heaven and went to live on the island. They married and produced eight children, who became the islands of Japan.

Izanagi and Izanami then created gods and goddesses of the trees, mountains, valleys, streams, winds, and other natural features of Japan. While giving birth to the fire god Kagutsuchi (pronounced kah-guh-TSOO-chee), Izanami was badly burned. As she lay dying, she produced more gods and goddesses. Other deities emerged from the tears of her grief-stricken husband.

When Izanami died, she went to Yomi, the land of darkness and death. Izanagi followed her there and tried to bring her back. Izanami, hidden in shadow, told him that she would try to secure her release from the gods of the underworld, but that he must wait and not attempt to see her. When she did not come back for a long while, Izanagi looked for her. He discovered her rotting corpse and fled in terror. Izanami was angry that Izanagi had seen her and sent hideous spirits to chase him. Izanagi managed to escape, and he sealed off the passage to Yomi with a huge boulder. Izanami remained there and ruled over the dead.

Feeling unclean from his contact with the dead, Izanagi decided to bathe in a stream to purify himself. As he undressed, gods and goddesses emerged from his discarded clothing. Others came forth while he washed. Susano-ô came from his nose, Tsuki-yomi emerged from his right eye, and Amaterasu appeared from his left eye. Izanagi divided the

world among these three gods. He gave Susano-ô control of the oceans, assigned Tsuki-yomi the realm of the night, and made Amaterasu the ruler of the sun and the heavens.

**Myths of Amaterasu** One famous myth tells how Susano-ô, Amaterasu's brother, was unhappy with his share of the world and caused much destruction. Banished to Yomi, he asked to go to heaven to see his sister the sun goddess one last time. Amaterasu became concerned that Susano-ô might be planning to take over her lands. The two agreed to a contest to prove their power. If Susano-ô won, he could stay in heaven forever, but if he lost, he would have to leave.

Amaterasu asked for her brother's sword, which she broke into three pieces and chewed in her mouth. When Amaterasu spit out the pieces, they turned into three goddesses. Susano-ô then took a string of five star-shaped beads that Amaterasu had given him. He put the beads in his mouth, chewed them, and spat out five gods. Susano-ô claimed victory because he had produced five gods and Amaterasu had produced only three goddesses. However, Amaterasu pointed out that he had created these gods from her possessions, which proved that her power was actually greater than his. Susano-ô refused to acknowledge defeat, and Amaterasu allowed him to remain in heaven.

While in heaven, Susano-ô began doing things that offended his sister and violated important rules. He destroyed rice fields, made loud noises, and dirtied the floors of her palace. Finally, Susano-ô killed one of the horses of heaven, skinned it, and hurled it into the hall where Amaterasu was weaving cloth. This so angered Amaterasu that she hid in a cave and refused to come out.

When the sun goddess concealed herself, the world was plunged into darkness, plants stopped growing, and all activities came to a halt. Desperate for Amaterasu's return, eight hundred gods gathered to discuss ways of getting her to leave the cave. A wise god named Omori-kane (pronounced oh-MOH-ree-KAH-nay) proposed a solution.

The gods hung a mirror on the branches of a tree outside the cave. Then they had a young goddess named Ama-no-uzume (pronounced AH-muh-noh-oo-ZOO-may) dance to music while they laughed loudly. Amaterasu heard the noise and wondered what was happening. Opening the door to the cave a little, she asked why the gods were so happy. They told her that they were celebrating because they had found a goddess superior to her.



## A Divine Emperor

According to Japanese myth, the goddess Amaterasu established the imperial family of Japan. She began by sending her grandson, Ninigi no Mikoto (pronounced nee-nee-gee-noh-mee-KOH-toh), to live on earth. Before Ninigi left heaven, the goddess gave him the mirror that drew her from the cave, as well as jewels and a sword belonging to the god Susano-ô. When Ninigi arrived on earth, he was accepted as the ruler of Japan, and the gifts he brought from Amaterasu became treasures of the imperial family. Ninigi married the goddess of Mount Fuji (pronounced FOO-jee), who bore him three sons. One of the sons was the father of Jimmu Tenno (pronounced JEEM-moo TEN-noh), the first historical emperor of Japan. By tradition, the Japanese imperial family traces its ancestry to Jimmu Tenno.

Curious at who this goddess might be, Amaterasu opened the door wider to look and saw her own image in the mirror. When she paused to gaze at her reflection, a god hiding nearby pulled her completely out of the cave. Another god then blocked the entrance with a magic rope. After Amaterasu emerged from the cave, her light shone once again, and life returned to normal. To punish Susano-ô for his actions, the gods banished him from heaven.

**The Izumo Cycle** The Izumo Cycle of myths features the god Ôkuninushi, a descendant of Susano-ô. One of the most famous stories is about Ôkuninushi and the White Rabbit.

According to this tale, Ôkuninushi had eighty brothers, each of whom wanted to marry the same beautiful princess. On a journey to see the princess, the brothers came upon a rabbit with no fur in great pain at the side of the road. They told the animal that it could get its fur back by bathing in saltwater, but this only made the pain worse. A little while later, Ôkuninushi arrived and saw the suffering rabbit. When he asked what had happened, the rabbit told him how it had lost its fur.

One day while traveling between two islands, the rabbit persuaded some crocodiles to form a bridge so it could cross the water. In return the rabbit promised to count the crocodiles to see whether they were more numerous than the creatures of the sea. As the rabbit neared the far shore, the crocodiles realized that the promise was only a trick to get the

rabbit across the water. Furious, the last crocodile seized the rabbit and tore off its skin.

After hearing this story, Ôkuninushi told the rabbit to bathe in clear water and then roll in some grass pollen on the ground. The rabbit followed this plan, and new white fur soon grew on its body. The rabbit, who was actually a god, rewarded Ôkuninushi by promising that he would marry the beautiful princess. Ôkuninushi's success angered his brothers, and a number of other myths in the Izumo Cycle tell about the struggles between them.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Japanese mythology features many of the same themes that are found in the mythologies of other cultures. The sun, as embodied in Amaterasu, is the most important figure in many of the tales, reflecting the importance of the sun in maintaining food and warmth to the Japanese people. As with some other cultures, the specific theme of the sun in hiding—which causes crops to wither and the earth to grow cold—is a prominent myth, if not the most prominent myth.

The act of creation is also a recurring theme in Japanese mythology. Aside from the tales of Izanagi and Izanami, who created the islands of Japan as well as the original gods and goddesses, later deities such as Amaterasu and Susano-ô are also described as creating additional gods and goddesses with little effort.

One of the most important symbols found in Japanese mythology is the mirror. The mirror is an important part of the myth of Amaterasu's hiding, since it lured the goddess from the cave and restores light to the world. The mirror represents honesty, since it reflects only what it is shown. A bronze mirror housed in the Ise (pronounced EE-say) Shrine is believed to be the mirror used to lure Amaterasu from the cave, and is one of the three sacred treasures that make up the Imperial Regalia of Japan.

## Japanese Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mythology plays an important role in the lives of the Japanese people today. Myths and legends are the basis of much Japanese art, drama, and literature, and people still learn and tell stories about the gods and goddesses. Traditional *kagura* (pronounced kah-GOO-rah) dances are performed to honor the deities at Shinto (the ancient religion of Japan)

shrines. Legend traces the origin of this ancient art form to the dance that drew the goddess Amaterasu from her cave.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare the Shinto concept of *kami* to the Pueblo Indian entities known as **kachinas**. How are the two similar? How are they different? Do they reflect similar views of the world?

**SEE ALSO** Amaterasu; Buddhism and Mythology; Devils and Demons; Giants; Izanagi and Izanami; Tricksters; Underworld



# Jason

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Jason was the leader of a band of adventurers who set out on a long journey to find the **Golden Fleece**. Although he succeeded in this quest, he never achieved his true goal—to become king of the land of Iolcus (pronounced ee-AHL-kuhs), to which he was the rightful heir. Jason’s story is one of violence and tragedy as well as adventure, partly because of his relationship with the enchantress and witch **Medea** (pronounced me-DEE-uh).

**Early Life** Like many Greek **heroes**, Jason was of royal blood. His father was King Aeson (pronounced EE-son) of Iolcus in northwestern Greece. The king’s half brother Pelias (pronounced PEEL-ee-uhs) wanted the throne himself and overthrew Aeson while Jason was still a boy. Jason’s mother feared for his safety. She sent him away to be guarded by Chiron (pronounced KYE-ron), a wise centaur—a creature that is half man and half horse—who took charge of the boy’s education. Chiron taught Jason hunting, warfare, music, and medicine. Some accounts say that the centaur also gave Jason his name, which means “healer,” in recognition of the boy’s skill in the medical arts.

At about the age of twenty, Jason headed back to Iolcus, determined to gain the throne that rightfully belonged to him. On the way, he helped an old woman across a flooded stream and lost one of his sandals.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

JAY-suhn

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

### Lineage

Son of King Aeson and  
Queen Alcimedede of Iolcus

Unknown to him, the old woman was the goddess **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) in disguise. She vowed to destroy Pelias, who had failed to worship her properly, and to help Jason.

An oracle, or person who could communicate with the gods, had warned Pelias to beware of a man wearing one sandal. When Jason arrived in Iolcus, the king confronted him. Jason identified himself and declared that he had come for his throne. Prevented by the laws of hospitality from attacking Jason openly, Pelias resorted to trickery. He said that if Jason could bring him the fabled Golden Fleece, he would make him his heir. Pelias believed that obtaining the heavily guarded fleece from the distant land of Colchis (pronounced KOL-kis) was a nearly impossible task.

**The Quest for the Golden Fleece** Jason assembled a band of brave adventurers—including the sons of kings and gods and some other former students of Chiron—to accompany him on his quest. They sailed in a magic ship called the *Argo* (pronounced AHR-goh) and were known as the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts). Among them were the famous musician **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs) and the hero **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez).

The Argonauts' eventful journey to Colchis, their seizure of the Golden Fleece, and their long voyage home became the subject of many tales and works of art. They might never have succeeded without the help of Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes (ay-EE-teez) of Colchis, who fell in love with Jason. Some versions of the story say that Hera persuaded **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, to inspire Medea's passion. Both a clever woman and a witch with knowledge of magic, Medea would be a useful helpmate to Jason.

When Jason arrived in Colchis, Aeëtes set harsh conditions for handing over the Golden Fleece, including the accomplishment of several seemingly impossible tasks. Jason had to hook two fire-breathing bulls to a plow, sow a field with **dragons'** teeth, and then fight the armed warriors that grew from those teeth. In all these trials, Medea used her magic powers to protect and guide Jason. Then after Jason promised to marry her, she helped him steal the fleece from the serpent that guarded it.

With the fleece on board, the *Argo* sailed away from Colchis, pursued by Medea's brother Apsyrtus (pronounced ap-SUR-tuhs). Apsyrtus caught up with the ship and spoke with Jason, promising to let him keep the Golden Fleece if he would give up Medea. However,

Medea objected to this plan. When she and Jason next met Apsyrtus, Jason killed him.

**Return to Iolcus** After a long journey home with many adventures along the way, Jason and the Argonauts finally arrived back in Iolcus. Jason delivered the Golden Fleece to Pelias. Meanwhile, Medea decided to get rid of Pelias (accounts differ on whether Jason knew of her plan). She persuaded the king's daughters that she could make their father young again, but first they would have to cut him up and put him in a pot. This procedure led only to a messy death, and the horrified people of Iolcus drove Jason and Medea away. The couple settled in Corinth, where they lived for ten years and had several children.

Their peaceful interlude ended when Creon (pronounced KREE-ahn), the king of Corinth, offered Jason his daughter in marriage. Jason accepted and divorced Medea. Enraged at this poor treatment, Medea sent the new bride a poisoned wedding gown, which killed her when she put it on and killed Creon as he tried to save her. Some versions of this myth say that, to punish Jason still further, Medea went on to kill the children she had borne him, while other accounts say that the angry Corinthians killed them. Either way, the children perished and Medea fled to Athens.

According to some accounts, Medea killed Jason at Corinth as part of her bloodbath. Much more common, though, is the story that Jason lived out his last days at Corinth, alone and broken by tragedy. One day as he sat near the *Argo*, which was rotting away, a piece of wood broke off from the ship and fell on him, killing the one-time hero of the Golden Fleece.

## Jason in Context

The story of Jason centers on the passing of royal power from one generation to the next. These myths pre-date government rule by elected officials and represent an older system of rule still common in many regions during the height of the Greek empire. Historical records suggest that plots and overthrows of rulers were all too common in ancient Greece and Rome. The story of Jason helps to encourage the tradition of passing of power from a king to his son; this is done by showing Jason to be a sympathetic hero, prompting the audience to root for his success.

The seeds of Jason's downfall are sown when he accepts help from Medea, a witch with few scruples. In the end, Jason's desire for power



*Jason was able to capture the Golden Fleece with the help of Medea. Using her magic, she put the dragon that guarded the fleece to sleep.* © NATIONAL GALLERY COLLECTION; BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON/CORBIS.

leads to the deaths of Medea's brother, Pelias, Creon, Creon's daughter, and his own children. The myth warns that not all paths to power are worth taking.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

In the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, the Golden Fleece is a symbol of that which is unattainable or cannot be gotten. Pelias only gives Jason the task because he believes it cannot be completed. Even after arriving in Colchis, the fleece seems impossible to take. And once Jason returns to Iolcus with the fleece, he is still unable to attain his rightful place as king. The Golden Fleece can also be seen as a symbol of rightful heirs to royal power, as Jason possessed the fleece and was the rightful heir to his father's throne.

Jason himself represents justice, as the heir who returns in an attempt to claim the throne that, according to tradition, rightfully belonged to him. He may also represent a method of leadership that was growing increasingly unpopular in the face of more democratic forms of government; in the end, Jason does not reclaim his kingdom for himself, and dies in a way not at all befitting a hero or rightful king.

## Jason in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Many writers have been inspired by the subject of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. Among the ancient Greek works concerning the subject are Pindar's *Pythian Ode*, Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, and Euripides' play *Medea*. In the Middle Ages, English writer Geoffrey Chaucer retold the story in the *Legend of Good Women*, and in the 1800s, William Morris wrote the long narrative poem *Life and Death of Jason* which centered on the quest. Robert Graves's novel *The Golden Fleece* was published in 1944, and John Gardner's *Jason and Medea* was published in 1973. The story of the search for the Golden Fleece has also been adapted to film, most notably the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Voyage with Jason* by Ken Catran (2000) is a re-telling of Jason's adventures during his search for the Golden Fleece. The tale focuses on Pylos, a young apprentice shipbuilder who is taken aboard the *Argo* as the only crew member who is not a hero. The novel, first published in New Zealand, was named Book of the Year at the 2001 New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards.

SEE ALSO Argonauts; Golden Fleece; Greek Mythology; Medea



# Job

## Character Overview

Job is the name of a book in the Hebrew Bible and the name of the book's main character. Many scholars consider the Book of Job to be one

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

### Pronunciation

JOHB

### Alternate Names

Ayyub (Islamic)

### Appears In

The Book of Job

### Lineage

Unknown

of the finest works of literature ever written. It focuses on the question of why the innocent suffer.

Job, a wealthy man, blessed with a loving wife and family, is known for his goodness and devotion to the will of Yahweh (pronounced YAH-way), the Hebrew god. The Bible indicates that Job's prosperity and general good fortune are a reward for his goodness and belief in Yahweh. However, in a meeting between Yahweh and his heavenly advisors, **Satan** questions Job's faith, claiming that he is faithful only because of the many blessings he enjoys. If Job were to suffer misfortune, suggests Satan, he would curse Yahweh as readily as he now praises him. Satan challenges Yahweh to test Job's faith, and Yahweh accepts the challenge.

Yahweh allows Satan to inflict a number of terrible misfortunes on Job. He kills Job's children and causes him to lose all his wealth, but Job's belief in the goodness of Yahweh remains unshaken. This show of faith does not convince Satan, however, who says that physical pain and suffering would cause Job to abandon his belief. So Yahweh allows Job to be afflicted with painful boils all over his body, and still his faith remains firm.

At this point three friends visit Job, supposedly to comfort him by explaining why Yahweh is causing him to suffer. They suggest that Job must be guilty of some sin, because Yahweh only punishes the wicked. Knowing that he is a righteous man, Job refuses to accept their arguments. Finally Job pleads with Yahweh to end his suffering and asks him to explain why he is being tormented. Yahweh appears to Job in all his glory, overwhelming him with his magnificence. He proceeds to question Job about the mysteries of the universe. When Job cannot answer, Yahweh asks him how he could possibly hope to understand the will of the almighty if he cannot explain the workings of nature. Job accepts this answer and renews his faith in Yahweh, who rewards him by restoring his health and prosperity.

## Job in Context

The tale of Job was intended to address the question of why a god would allow bad things to happen to good people. The god of the Near East referred to here as Yahweh was fundamentally different from many earlier gods; in this case, there was only one god in charge of everything, and this god was described as being an all-powerful protector and



provider. Yahweh was not prone to the very human emotions, like jealousy, shown by ancient Greek and Roman gods. This essential goodness of Yahweh was an important point in the adoption of monotheistic (meaning “one god”) religions in the Near East. This also meant that there had to be a reason why Yahweh, if he was indeed all-powerful, would not always provide for and protect his followers.

In the end, the story offers no answer to the question of why the innocent must suffer. Instead, the Book of Job delivers the message that one must believe in the goodness of Yahweh, even in the face of seemingly unjust punishment, because such issues are beyond human understanding.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The two most important themes in the tale of Job are faith and suffering. The whole point of Yahweh’s trial of Job is to test his faith, to see whether or not he is willing to accept Yahweh’s actions even when he does not understand them. He does this by causing Job to suffer in every way imaginable: by taking away his children, by taking away his riches, and even by causing boils on his skin. Still, Job remains faithful.

### Job in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The original tale of Job has proven to be one of the most popular stories of the Bible, and is known to Christians, Jews, and Muslims around the world. Events of the tale were commonly depicted in illuminated manuscripts, and artist William Blake created a famous series of illustrations for the Book of Job. More recently, the 1984 novel *Job: A Comedy of Justice* by Robert A. Heinlein offers a science fiction version of the account of Job, with a main character that is sent bouncing through parallel universes and spends time in both **heaven** and **hell**. The 2003 comedy film *Bruce Almighty*, starring Jim Carrey, includes many elements of the account of Job. In modern times, the phrase “the patience of Job” is often used to describe someone who can endure a great deal of hardship or suffering without having a negative attitude.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The account of Job suggests that suffering exists for reasons beyond the grasp of humans and should be endured to demonstrate faith in God. If

enduring difficult times is a way of showing devotion, what would be the consequences of a world without suffering? Is suffering, in some ways, good?

## Jove

*See Zeus.*



### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

JUG-er-nawt

### Alternate Names

Jagannatha

### Appears In

The Vedas

### Lineage

Unknown

## Juggernaut

### Character Overview

Juggernaut (Jagannatha) is a form of the Hindu god **Vishnu**'s (pronounced VISH-noo) incarnation, or embodiment, known as **Krishna** (pronounced KRISH-nuh). Although Juggernaut does not appear in many myths, he is an important part of one of the largest annual festivals in India.

### Major Myths

Juggernaut is worshipped at the religious city of Puri (pronounced POOR-ee) in India. A temple to Juggernaut there dates from the 1100s. According to one legend, a priest chose the site for the temple when he saw a crow dive into the nearby Bay of Bengal. Inside the temple is a wooden image of Juggernaut with a black face, large eyes, a wide smile, and no arms or legs. According to myth, Krishna was walking along and overheard a group of cow-herding girls who were talking about how much they loved him. He was so overwhelmed by their talk that his eyes grew huge, his limbs shrank, and his mouth stretched into a gaping smile.

### Juggernaut in Context

Juggernaut is a rather minor form of Krishna in Hindu mythology, with very few references or myths. It is interesting to note that the fourteenth-

century book *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* popularized the notion in Europe that Juggernaut caused such a frenzy among devotees in Puri that they threw themselves under the wheels of his festival cart as human sacrifices. The book is filled with many such dubious claims, and is now viewed largely as a work of fiction. However, this description of Juggernaut was commonly used by European Christians as a way of illustrating the supposed backwardness of Hindus who had not accepted Christianity.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Juggernaut is a symbol of happiness and mercy to those familiar with Hindu mythology, and is also associated with Krishna's homecoming to Vrindavan. To others, however, Juggernaut represents something much more sinister and destructive. It is important to note that Hindus do not view Juggernaut as a destructive deity like **Shiva**, and that this is a misinterpretation by outside observers.

## Juggernaut in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Several festivals are held at the temple in Puri each year, the most important being the Chariot Festival in midsummer. On this occasion, the image of Juggernaut is placed on an enormous cart—at least forty-five feet tall—built especially for the occasion and pulled through the town by hundreds of people. Early Western visitors reported that worshippers would throw themselves beneath the wheels of the cart to be crushed as a **sacrifice** to Juggernaut. Later anthropologists have questioned these accounts, but acknowledge that the huge, unwieldy vehicles have caused death either due to accidents or carelessness. This gave rise to the English word “juggernaut,” meaning a person or power that crushes anything in its path.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Early descriptions of Juggernaut by European writers seem largely unconnected to the true nature of the god in Hindu mythology. This often happens when an outside observer describes elements of a culture with which they are not familiar. This inevitably causes bias, or an opinion of the culture's worth based on the observer's own

## Juggernaut

beliefs. Do you think it is possible for someone to observe another culture and describe it without exhibiting some level of bias? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Hinduism and Mythology; Krishna

## Juno

*See* **Hera**.

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# K



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



## Kachinas

### Character Overview

Spirits known as kachinas are central to the religion and mythology of the Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest, in particular the Hopi who live in Arizona. These groups believe that kachinas are divine spirits present in features of the natural world such as clouds, winds, thunder, and rain. They are also ancestral spirits that help connect humans with the spirit world.

Each Pueblo tribe and village has its own distinct kachinas. There may be more than five hundred in total, and all are equally important. The Pueblos hold the kachinas sacred and look to them for help, especially in bringing rain to water, **corn**, and other crops.

The kachinas dwell in sacred mountains and other sacred places. However, they spend half of each year living near Pueblo villages. During this time, the men of kachina cults perform traditional ceremonies linked with the presence of the spirits. They wear costumes and elaborate masks and perform songs and dances associated with specific kachinas. The Pueblos say that during these rituals each dancer is temporarily transformed into the spirit being represented.

**Kokopelli** Kokopelli (pronounced koh-koh-PEL-ee) is one of the most important kachinas among the Pueblo. A complex character, he plays various roles, and is regarded as a fertility spirit, a trickster, and a hunter.

#### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/Pueblo

#### Pronunciation

kuh-CHEE-nuhz

#### Alternate Names

Qatsinas

#### Appears In

Pueblo Indian oral  
mythology

#### Lineage

Varies

The Hopi have several fertility kachinas connected with Kokopelli. In some Hopi tales, Kokopelli's bag contains gifts that he uses to attract women. In others, he carries a baby on his back and leaves it with a young woman. The Hopi also have a female kachina called Kokopell' Mana. During ceremonial dances, a performer dressed as Kokopell' Mana challenges Hopi men to race with her. If she catches her opponent, she knocks him down and pretends to mate with him.

Kokopelli is identified with various insects. Kuwaan Kokopelli, or the Robber Fly Kachina, is named after a humpbacked fly that is always mating. Like Kokopell' Mana, this kachina represents fertility. In a tale about how Kokopelli guided the Hopi to a new land, Kokopelli is either a locust or a grasshopper. When an eagle dares him to pass an arrow through his body, he cleverly slips the arrow under one of his wings.

Kokopelli's flute is similar to the flutes used in American Indian religious rituals. As a hunter, Kokopelli may play the flute to attract the mountain sheep he is hunting. The Zuni call him a rain priest and connect him and his music with the gift of rain. According to the Hopi, Kokopelli warmed the land and the winds by playing his flute as he led them to their homeland.

### **Kachinas in Context**

Kachinas reflect the unique worldview of the Pueblo people. They do not limit the presence of spirits to people and animals. Instead, they view spirits in all parts of the natural world, such as clouds and soil. This reflects a basic belief in the interconnection of every part of nature.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

To the Pueblo people, different kachinas symbolize different aspects of the natural world. In all cases, they represent a way for people to connect to the world. This is shown in Pueblo dance ceremonies where the dancers are believed to become possessed by various kachinas as they perform.

### **Kachinas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Kachinas are typically portrayed in elaborately carved wooden dolls adorned with the costumes and masks that identify them. The Hopi and other Pueblo peoples use these dolls to teach their children about the hundreds of different kachinas.



*The Hopi and other Pueblo peoples use kachina dolls to teach their children about divine and ancestral spirits. These wooden figures are often elaborately carved and adorned.* ROBERT F. SISSON/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES.

Images of Kokopelli are among the oldest that survive in ancient rock art in the Southwest. He is also a popular figure on painted pottery. Usually depicted as a humpbacked figure playing a flute, he often carries a large bag on his back and has antennae like an insect. A silhouette design of Kokopelli is popular on many modern decorative pieces from the American Southwest.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The creation of kachina dolls and other traditional Pueblo artifacts specifically for tourists to buy is an important part of the modern Pueblo economy. These objects usually differ in some way from similar objects created specifically for tribal use, so they can be easily identified as souvenirs by knowledgeable Pueblos. However, some Pueblos still

believe that selling copies of cultural artifacts should not be allowed. Do you think this type of business hurts or helps the Pueblo people? Why?

SEE ALSO Corn; Native American Mythology

## Kali

See **Devi**.



### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

KRISH-nuh

### Alternate Names

Hari, Juggernaut, Ishvara

### Appears In

The Vedas, the *Mahabharata*

### Lineage

Son of Vasudeva and Devaki

## Krishna

### Character Overview

Krishna, one of the most popular Hindu gods, is revered as a supreme deity (god) and the eighth embodiment of the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo). In Hindu mythology, Krishna came to be when Vishnu plucked two of his hairs—one black and one light. Krishna became the black hair; in fact, his name means “Dark One,” and artistic works usually show him with dark skin.

### Major Myths

According to myth, Vishnu desired to punish the wicked King Kamsa (pronounced KUHM-suh) of Mathura (pronounced MUHT-oo-ruh), and so sent Krishna to do so as the son of Vasudeva (pronounced VAH-soo-dev) and Kamsa’s sister Devaki (pronounced DEE-vuh-kee). Kamsa heard through a prophecy—or prediction—that he would be killed by the eighth child of Devaki. As a result, Kamsa vowed to kill the child. However, when Devaki gave birth to Krishna, her eighth child, the god Vishnu helped switch him with the newborn child of a cowherd and his wife. This couple raised Krishna as their own son.

After the evil Kamsa discovered that Krishna was alive, he sent demons to destroy the child. Krishna managed to overcome them all. He put an end to the ogress Putana (pronounced poo-TAH-nah) by sucking the life out of her and caused a cart to crush the monstrous flying demon named Saktasura (pronounced sahk-tuh-SOO-ruh). He also destroyed



Trinavarta (pronounced tree-nuh-VAR-tuh), a whirlwind demon, by smashing it against a rock.

Krishna grew up as a cowherd, and often amused himself by playing pranks on people. He also enjoyed teasing the daughters of the other cowherds and had many romantic adventures. A popular myth describes how he stole the clothes of cowgirls who were bathing in a river, and he refused to return them until each girl came out of the river with their hands clasped in prayer. The cowgirls liked Krishna just as much; Krishna multiplied his hands when he danced with them so each girl would be able to hold his hand. A girl named Radha was his particular favorite, although he had many lovers.

Several myths reveal the supernatural strength of Krishna. In one popular story, Krishna persuades a group of cowherds from worshipping the god **Indra** by explaining that they should instead worship the mountain that provides them and their herds with food and drink. He then declared himself to be the mountain, which angered Indra. Indra sent a week-long rainstorm as punishment, but Krishna held the mountain over his head to prevent the storm from doing any damage to the people.

Krishna became a hero renowned for ridding the area of monsters and demons, including the evil snake Kaliya. King Kamsa continued his attempts to kill Krishna by luring him and his brother Balarama (pronounced bah-luh-RAH-mah) to Mathura to a wrestling contest. As the brothers entered the city, Kamsa released a wild elephant to trample them. Krishna killed the beast. Next Kamsa sent his champion wrestlers to fight the brothers, but Krishna and Balarama defeated them all. Finally, Kamsa ordered his demons to kill Krishna's real parents, Vasudeva and Devaki. Before this could take place, however, Krishna killed Kamsa, thus fulfilling the prophecy made years before.

After killing Kamsa, Krishna led his tribe, the Yadavas (pronounced YAH-duh-vuhz), to the fortress city of Dvaraka (pronounced DWAR-kuh). He settled there and married a beautiful princess named Rukmini (pronounced ruk-MIN-ee). He later took other wives as well.

The climax of Krishna's long struggle against the forces of evil came with the great war called the Kurukshetra. The war was between two families: the noble Pandavas (pronounced PAHN-duh-vuhz) and their evil cousins the Kauravas (pronounced KOW-ruh-vuhz). Krishna served as the charioteer of Arjuna (pronounced AHR-juh-nuh), one of the Pandava leaders. Although he took no part in the fighting, Krishna gave

advice to Arjuna, and the Pandavas eventually defeated the Kauravas and rid the world of much evil. The conversations between Krishna and Arjuna are found in a section of the *Mahabharata* called the *Bhagavad Gita*.

After the war, Krishna returned to Dvaraka. One day while he sat in the forest, a hunter mistook him for a deer and shot an arrow at him. The arrow pierced Krishna's heel, his only vulnerable spot. After Krishna died, his spirit ascended to Goloka, a heavenly paradise, and his sacred city of Dvaraka sank beneath the ocean.

### Krishna in Context

Krishna was considered the greatest of the representations of the god Vishnu, and actually became more popular than Vishnu himself with Hindus. Krishna's exploits reveal his popularity over other gods. His victories over the god Indra and snake Kaliya (who represents snake gods) show that Krishna is more worthy to be worshipped than older gods. In both stories, Krishna is a figure who brings order from chaos, and creates a safe place for his worshippers. In addition to this role, he is worshipped as the figure who best represents divine love in two forms: the first as a mischievous child (family love), and the second as a lover who is both passionate and yet also unattainable. Though Krishna loved many women, he did not limit his affections to just one; even his favorite Radha was sad that she could never hold on to his love.

Some modern rituals for Krishna involve worshipping him in a series of eight daily "viewings" in which the god allows himself to be seen as an image. His worshippers may change the image's clothing, jewelry, other decorations, and food offerings during the course of the day, or sing devotional songs as they observe a ritual related to Krishna's cowherding.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the key themes of the myths of Krishna is protection. The god serves as a protector to his people, leading them to the safety of Dvaraka and helping them overcome the Kauravas. Another theme common in tales of Krishna is playfulness; he is often shown having fun, dancing, or enjoying romance. This also reflects Krishna's associations with youth and vigor. In Hindu art, Krishna is usually depicted as a young prince or a cow-herder playing a flute. The popular image of Krishna playing his flute for the cowgirls is symbolic of the divine call for humans to leave

## Hare Krishna

Krishna came to widespread Western attention in the late 1960s with the founding of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)—a group that was soon referred to as the “Hare Krishnas.” The Hare Krishnas were a prominent manifestation of the countercultural movement in the United States. Many young people at the time rejected traditional Western values and sought meaning in Eastern traditions. ISKCON based its teaching on the *Bhagavad Gita*, and tried to spread its philosophy by singing and chanting the Hare Krishna mantra (a short poem or phrase with mystical properties) in public places, such as airports and shopping centers. The Hare Krishnas recognized Krishna as the supreme deity. By the late 1970s, the group’s popularity had faded amid allegations of brainwashing and child abuse at ISKCON schools.

their everyday activities in order to worship. He is nearly always shown with blue or black skin, a color traditionally associated with divinity and the universe itself.

## Krishna in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The most important source of stories about Krishna is the *Mahabharata*, the great Hindu epic written between 400 BCE and 200 CE, and the *Bhagavatam*, written later. Krishna is shown more frequently in Indian art, dance, and music than any other god. Drama, in particular, is very important in the modern-day worship of Krishna; in some areas of India, festival seasons to honor Krishna include dramas about his life in which child actors are said to represent and even become Krishna. These plays usually begin with a ceremonial dance that represents the dances Krishna performed with the cowgirls.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Compare the story of Krishna to the ancient Greek myth of **Achilles**. How are the two stories similar? In what ways are the characters different? Do you think both characters qualify as **heroes**? Explain your answer.

**SEE ALSO** *Bhagavad Gita*; Devils and Demons; Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; *Mahabharata*, *The*; Shiva; Vishnu



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# L



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

## Alternate Names

Viviane, Nimuë

## Appears In

Tales of King Arthur

## Lineage

Unknown



# Lady of the Lake

## Character Overview

The Lady of the Lake, an enchantress also known as Viviane (pronounced VIV-ee-uhn) or Nimuë (pronounced neem-OO-ay), appears in many of the tales of King **Arthur**. She is remembered best for her relationships with the knight **Lancelot** and the magician **Merlin**.

According to legend, the Lady of the Lake lived in a castle beneath a lake surrounding the mystical island of Avalon (pronounced AV-uh-lahn). She raised Lancelot after his father died, and gave Arthur the magical sword Excalibur, which he treasured. When Arthur was near death, she saved him by taking him to Avalon to await a time when his people would once again need his leadership.

Arthur's magician Merlin fell in love with the Lady of the Lake, but she did not return his affection. However, she did persuade him to teach her some of his magic. While the two were traveling together, the Lady of the Lake used the spells she learned from Merlin to imprison him in a tower with invisible walls. (In some versions of the story she traps him in a tree or cave instead.)

The Lady of the Lake was also associated with Pelleas (pronounced peh-lay-AHS), one of the knights of the Round Table. When Pelleas was rejected by Ettard (pronounced ay-TAHR)—the woman he loved—the Lady of the Lake took care of him. She and Pelleas fell in love and were married.

## The Lady of the Lake in Context

The British Isles are soggy places surrounded by water and covered with lakes, ponds, rivers, and springs. Naturally, water featured prominently in the mythology of the early inhabitants of England and Ireland.

The Lady of the Lake, though later adopted by French authors of Arthurian legend, appears to be based on older Celtic goddesses associated with water. There are many Celtic water spirits and goddesses, most of them women. Ceridwen (pronounced kuh-RID-wen) was a Celtic goddess who possessed a magic cauldron or kettle. She made a brew with herbs and water that would grant wisdom to whoever drank it. Even more notably, Brigid (pronounced BREED) was a goddess who kept watch over a well (or many wells) from which a prospective king had to drink in order to earn his place on the throne.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main symbols of the Lady of the Lake is water. Because she lives underwater, she exists in a realm almost completely unknown to readers, which adds to her depiction as a symbol of mystery and magic. Water was also often used as a symbol of healing, which is illustrated in her treatment of Arthur after he falls on the battlefield.

## The Lady of the Lake in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Lady of the Lake, for being a rather minor character in Arthurian legend, has inspired many artists in various media over the centuries. Most notably, the 1810 poem *The Lady of the Lake* by Sir Walter Scott offered a re-telling of her myth set in a Scottish lake; this poem was the basis of a later opera by Italian composer Gioachino Rossini. The tale also loosely inspired the 1944 Raymond Chandler detective novel *The Lady in the Lake*, which was made into a film in 1947. The Lady of the Lake also makes a brief appearance in the 1981 John Boorman film *Excalibur*, as an arm that reaches up from the water to reclaim Excalibur when Arthur dies.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Viviane, the Lady of the Lake, is a main character in Marion Zimmer Bradley's 1979 fantasy novel *The Mists of Avalon*, which tells the tales of

Arthurian legend from the point of view of several female characters. The novel also explores the clash between Christian and pre-Christian beliefs in medieval England. The novel, which remains a popular title nearly thirty years after its publication, spawned an additional series of novels written by Bradley and, after her death, fantasy author Diana L. Paxson.

SEE ALSO Arthur, King; Lancelot; Merlin



## Lancelot

### Character Overview

In the medieval legends about King **Arthur** of Britain and his knights, Lancelot is the greatest knight of all. In time, however, Lancelot's love for **Guinevere** (pronounced GWEN-uh-veer), the king's wife, leads him to betray his king and sets in motion the fatal events that end Arthur's rule.

Like many **heroes** of myth and legend, Lancelot enjoyed a royal birth and an unusual upbringing. He was the son of King Ban of Benoic (BEN-uh-wik) in western France, but he was raised by a mysterious figure known as the **Lady of the Lake**, who appears in various roles in the Arthurian tales. For this reason, he is sometimes called Lancelot of the Lake.

The Lady of the Lake prepared the youth to excel in all the knightly virtues and pastimes and then presented him to King Arthur's court. There Lancelot became the foremost knight, the model of noble behavior, and the good friend of the king. However, Lancelot fell in love with Queen Guinevere—an event that would ultimately destroy Arthur's kingdom.

Some of Lancelot's knightly feats had to do with Guinevere. On one occasion, he rescued her after she had been kidnapped by a rival prince, but he had to swallow his pride and ride in a lowly cart to do so. The same prince later accused Guinevere of adultery, and Lancelot fought as her champion against the accuser. His love for Guinevere was such that he resisted the charms of a maiden called Elaine of Astolat (pronounced AS-tuh-laht), who died of love for him. Another Elaine, this one the daughter of King Pelleas (pronounced peh-lay-AHS), proved more

#### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

#### Pronunciation

LANS-uh-lot

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Tales of King Arthur

#### Lineage

Son of King Ban

enterprising. She tricked Lancelot into sleeping with her, pretending that she was Guinevere. Elaine bore Lancelot's son, **Galahad** (pronounced GAL-uh-had), who grew into a pure and sinless knight. As Christian beliefs played an increasing role in the **Arthurian legends** over time, Galahad came to replace his flawed father as the supreme knight in tales of Arthur's Round Table.

The uproar over Lancelot's affair with Guinevere tore King Arthur's court apart—as those who opposed Arthur had hoped that it would. Some of the knights followed Lancelot to France and set up another court, while others remained with Arthur. The two sides went to war until a rebellion led by Arthur's nephew **Mordred** broke out and the king had to return to Britain to suppress it. Arthur was mortally wounded fighting against the rebel army and was carried away to the island of Avalon. When Lancelot returned to Britain, Arthur's court was no more. Guinevere, in the meantime, had become a nun. Lancelot followed her example and devoted himself to religious service as a monk until he died.

### Lancelot in Context

Lancelot is generally considered to be a French contribution to the Arthurian legends. He first appears in the romances of the French writer Chrétien de Troyes in the 1100s. However, some students of mythology see Lancelot as a later version of Celtic heroes or even of older images of gods associated with lightning and fertility. The myth of Lancelot and Guinevere may have served as a cautionary tale about the dangers of adultery, especially after the rise of Christianity in western Europe. However, scholars have suggested that the tale was actually requested by a woman of French royalty as an example—and, therefore a justification—of a noblewoman taking a lover who was not her husband.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In many ways, Lancelot is a symbol of perfect knighthood: noble, just, and always willing to defend a woman's honor. However, he also symbolizes the human weaknesses of lust and envy, shown by his pursuit of an affair with Guinevere. Indeed, one of the most important themes of the tale of Lancelot is that no man, however he might appear, is perfect.





*Lancelot was the greatest knight of King Arthur's Round Table, but his relationship with Arthur's wife Guinevere led to his downfall.* TIME LIFE PICTURES/ STRINGER/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.

## Lancelot in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although it appears to be a later contribution to the myths of King Arthur, the tale of Lancelot and Guinevere is one of the best-known

stories in Arthurian legend. It has been retold countless times in many forms. T. H. White's third volume of *The Once and Future King* (1958) is a notable version of the myth. The 1960 musical *Camelot*, based on T. H. White's books, focuses on the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, as does the 1995 film *First Knight*, starring Richard Gere as Lancelot and Sean Connery as King Arthur. Outside traditional Arthurian legend, Lancelot was the subject of a 1950s British television series. He is also portrayed as a violent fighter by John Cleese in the 1975 comedy film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

According to the legend, Lancelot and Guinevere are good people who struggle against their feelings of love for each other, but, in the end, are powerless to resist their attraction. Their forbidden love eventually ruins both their lives and the reign of a good and wise king. What does this story reveal about this culture's perception of the nature of love, and do we see this same attitude in modern society?

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends; Galahad; Guinevere; Holy Grail; Lady of the Lake



## Laocoön

### Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Laocoön was a seer—a person who could foretell the future—and a priest of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) in the ancient city of Troy. He played a notable role in the last days of the Trojan War and met a violent death with his twin sons, Antiphantes (pronounced an-tuh-FAN-teez) and Thymbraeus (pronounced thim-BRAY-uhs).

Toward the end of the Trojan War, the Greeks placed a large wooden horse before the gates of Troy. Laocoön hurled a spear at it and warned the Trojans not to bring the horse into the city. He said, “I fear the Greeks even when they offer gifts.” Soon afterward, the Trojans ordered Laocoön to **sacrifice** a bull to the god **Poseidon** (pronounced

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

#### Pronunciation

lay-OK-oh-ahn

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Virgil's *Aeneid*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

#### Lineage

Son of Acoetes

poh-SYE-dun). While he was making the sacrifice near the sea, two great serpents emerged from the water and crushed Laocoön and his sons to death. The Trojans interpreted this event as a sign of the gods' disapproval of Laocoön's prediction, and they brought the horse into the city—an action that led to their downfall. Hiding inside the horse were Greek soldiers, who sneaked out of the horse and opened the gates of Troy at night, allowing the Greek army to enter and destroy the city.

Some stories say that the death of Laocoön and his sons was punishment from **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) or Poseidon for warning the Trojans against the wooden horse. This is the reason given in the *Aeneid*, an epic by the Roman poet Virgil. According to other legends, however, Apollo sent the serpents to kill Laocoön as punishment for an earlier wrong—breaking his vow to the god that he would never marry or have children.

### Laocoön in Context

In ancient Greece, many people believed in the power of **seers** and oracles, because it was believed they could communicate with the gods. The tale of Laocoön may have served as a reminder that seers and oracles should be obeyed rather than ignored. This tale also affirms the special powers of those who communicate with the gods; the other citizens of Troy, who come up with their own ideas to explain why Laocoön was killed, end up not listening to Laocoön's prediction and ultimately lose the Trojan War because of it.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The myth of Laocoön centers on the themes of misinterpretation and the vengeance of the gods. The Trojans misinterpret the intentions of the Greeks who offer them the horse; later, when Laocoön is killed by sea serpents, the Trojans misinterpret his death as a sign to ignore his warning about the Greeks. Laocoön is killed by one of the gods out of vengeance, either for revealing the Greeks' plan or for disrespecting the gods in another way. The death of Laocoön foreshadows, or hints at, the coming fall of Troy.

### Laocoön in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although a minor character in stories of the Trojan War, Laocoön and his sons were immortalized in a famous marble monument attributed to

three different sculptors from the island of Rhodes. The sculpture is currently on display in the Vatican Museums in Rome. Laocoön was also the subject of a play by Sophocles, but the play—like many other Greek works—has been lost.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

During presidential election years, opinion pollsters constantly run surveys to gauge the popularity of the various candidates. Nearly every day, the results of a new poll are released showing which candidate is ahead. These polls serve as a sort of modern prophecy of the future. But, like the prophecy of Laocoön, the polls can have unexpected consequences. Do you think opinion polls are useful to potential voters? Are they useful to candidates? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Greek Mythology; Roman Mythology; Seers; Serpents and Snakes



## Lares and Penates

### Nationality/Culture

Roman

### Pronunciation

LAIR-eez and puh-NAY-teez

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Fasti*

### Lineage

Varies

### Character Overview

In **Roman mythology**, Lares and Penates were groups of deities, or gods, who protected the family and the Roman state. Although different in origin and purpose, the Lares and Penates were often worshipped together at household shrines.

Lares were considered spirits of the dead who had become divine, and they guarded homes, crossroads, and the city. Every Roman family had its own guardian, known as the *Lar familiaris* (pronounced lar-fuh-mil-ee-YAHR-iss), to protect the household and ensure that the family line did not die out. Each morning Romans prayed and made offerings to an image of the *Lar familiaris* kept in a family shrine. Deities known as *Lares compitales* (pronounced LAIR-eez kom-puh-TAY-leez), who guarded crossroads and neighborhoods, were honored in a festival called the Compitalia. Another group of deities, the *Lares praestites* (pronounced LAIR-eez pree-STYE-teez), served as the guardians of the city of Rome.



*The Romans set up altars such as the one shown here, to the Lares. The Lares were spirits of the dead that guarded homes, crossroads, and cities.* THE ART ARCHIVE/GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

The Penates, originally honored as gods of the pantry, eventually became guardians of the entire household. They were associated with Vesta, the goddess of the hearth or household fireplace. The main function of the Penates was to ensure the family's welfare and prosperity. The public Penates, or *Penates publici*, served as guardians of the state and the object of Roman patriotism. According to legend, they were once the household gods of **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs), the mythical founder of the Roman Empire.

## Major Myths

Few myths exist about the Penates and Lares, and the ones that do exist concern their lineage. King Servius Tullius, for example, was supposedly the son of a lar living in the royal palace; he went on to found the lares cult in towns and villages, including the festival of the Compitalia. The Lares praestites, on the other hand, were the result of the rape of the nymph Lara by the god Mercury.

## Lares and Penates in Context

Lares and Penates illustrate the importance of preserving the family line in ancient Rome. Lares were believed to be dead ancestors who tried to help living members of the household preserve the family name, mostly by having children. Lares presided over major life changes, including birth, death, disease, the freeing of slaves, and a young person's passage from childhood to adulthood. The Penates, in their original form, ensured that the household contained enough food to support the family and therefore preserve its existence. As beings that participated in both the divine world and the world of humans, they served as a link between the two worlds to harmonize them.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Lares and Penates are both represented as guardians in Roman mythology. They guard members of a household and protect travelers in certain places such as at crossroads or at sea. The hearth is often associated with Lares and Penates. The Greeks pictured Lares wearing crowns and drinking wine, sometimes in the company of half-men, half-goats called **satyrs**.

## Lares and Penates in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Lares and Penates were often represented in a household by small statues kept in a special shrine. Lares statues wore short tunics and carried dishes to hold food or drink offered to them. Shrines honoring household gods have been uncovered by archaeologists in locations such as Pompeii.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*City: A Story of Roman Planning and Construction* by David Macaulay (1974) is an illustrated look at how the Romans went about constructing

cities from the ground up. In addition to technical illustrations and information about architectural structures, Macaulay also delves into household dynamics and smaller details of everyday Roman life. The author has written and illustrated several other books similar in style, including *Pyramid*, *Cathedral*, and *Ship*.

SEE ALSO Aeneas; Roman Mythology



## Lear, King

### Character Overview

King Lear, a legendary ruler of ancient Britain, is a tragic figure who loses his authority through his own foolishness. One of the primary sources of King Lear's legend is the *History of the Kings of Britain* by the medieval English writer Geoffrey of Monmouth.

According to myth, the aging king decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters and asks each of them to declare their love for him. King Lear's two oldest daughters, Regan and Goneril, flatter him with grand, but insincere, expressions of devotion. By contrast, Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia, conveys only her natural, true love for her father.

Angered by what he perceives as Cordelia's insufficient love, Lear splits the kingdom between Regan and Goneril. Their treachery, however, soon becomes clear as they strip their father of all his authority and possessions. Lear then realizes the sincerity of Cordelia's love. Fearing that she will reject him because of the way that he treated her earlier, he goes to her and finds that she welcomes him with generosity and compassion. Lear eventually regains authority over his lands after joining Cordelia and her husband, and when he dies a few years later, Cordelia inherits the throne of Britain.

### King Lear in Context

Most monarchies are inherited according to the common law right of primogeniture (pronounced pri-mo-JEN-i-chur), according to which the first-born son of the monarch inherits the crown and the entire

#### Nationality/Culture

British

#### Pronunciation

KING LEER

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

#### Lineage

Son of King Bladud

estate. Difficulties arise when there is no obvious male heir, and many wars have been fought between family members struggling to assert their claims to power. The story of King Lear can be seen as a reflection of early British attitudes about the importance of male heirs. The problem of dividing up Lear's kingdom arises only because he has no sons, and must therefore pass his kingdom on to his daughters and their husbands.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

Flattery and greed are two important themes in the myth of King Lear. The king's two oldest daughters offer insincere flattery to their father in their attempts to secure more land for themselves. Cordelia, on the other hand, symbolizes true and sincere love, which is ultimately victorious over the fake emotions of her sisters.

### **King Lear in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The legendary king is best known through William Shakespeare's play *King Lear*. In this version, Lear goes mad after he is humiliated by his two older daughters. When Cordelia learns of her father's condition, she raises an army to fight her sisters' forces. Cordelia's army is defeated, and she is imprisoned and hanged. King Lear dies soon after, heartbroken over the death of his daughter.

The story of King Lear has been retold in many forms over the centuries. Two notable modern examples are Akira Kurosawa's 1985 film *Ran*, which switches the setting to medieval Japan and changes the daughters to sons, and Jane Smiley's 1991 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Thousand Acres*, which adapts the King Lear myth to modern-day Iowa.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The story of King Lear emphasizes the importance of having a male heir in medieval Britain. Do you think modern society still places an importance on continuing family lines through male children, or do you think modern families treat males and females equally when it comes to carrying on the family legacy? Find examples that support your position.

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology





# Leprechauns

## Character Overview

A leprechaun is a tiny elf or fairy from Irish folklore who is supposed to know the whereabouts of hidden treasure—usually a pot of gold. They are always male and were believed to have been featured in Irish folklore predating the Celts. Leprechauns are cobblers and shoemakers by trade.

According to most legends, a person who catches a leprechaun and threatens him may be able to convince him to reveal the location of his treasure, sometimes said to be at the end of a rainbow. However, finding a leprechaun is not easy. The best way is to sneak up while he is mending his shoes, the only time he sits still for very long. After catching a leprechaun, a person must stay alert because leprechauns are very clever and can easily outsmart humans.

Leprechauns are great mischief makers who often play pranks on people, such as riding their sheep or dogs during the night or causing small accidents around the house. Occasionally they “adopt” a family and faithfully follow the members during their travels. However, if not treated well, a leprechaun will abandon the family after causing trouble. Some stories claim that leprechauns are the offspring of evil spirits and bad fairies. However, one legend says that the leprechaun is actually the ancient Irish god **Lug**. After the Irish people forgot the old gods, the legend goes, Lug became a fairy cobbler named Lugh Chromain, which means “little stooping Lug.”

## Leprechauns in Context

Leprechauns are just one example of the many races of ancient creatures that lived in Ireland, according to Celtic belief. For the Celts, leprechauns are a connection to the land’s ancient roots. The leprechaun’s hidden pot of gold may reflect Celtic views of the land itself as a treasure to be appreciated.

## Key Themes and Symbols

A leprechaun is traditionally pictured as an old man wearing a bright red vest, an old-fashioned cocked hat, a leather apron, and heavy leather

### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

### Pronunciation

LEP-ruh-kawnz

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Irish folklore

### Lineage

Varies

shoes with silver buckles. Only in the twentieth century did the standard image of a leprechaun come to include primarily green clothing, a color closely associated with their Irish roots. In the tales of leprechauns, the pot of gold symbolizes great wealth that can only be achieved by performing a nearly impossible feat. The rainbow's end is a symbol of an imaginary place that can never be reached. Most tales of leprechauns center on the theme of outwitting the cunning creature.

### Leprechauns in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Leprechauns have appeared in many films, television shows, and commercials. The 1959 Disney classic *Darby O'Gill and the Little People* features a leprechaun king matching wits with a wily Irish groundskeeper. The best-known leprechaun in modern times is Lucky the Leprechaun, the mascot for Lucky Charms breakfast cereal; Boston's NBA team, the Celtics, also has a leprechaun mascot, as does the college of Notre Dame, whose sports teams are known as the "Fighting Irish."

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Mythical and magical creatures are often used as mascots for products such as snack foods and breakfast cereals. Using the Internet, your own kitchen cupboards, television commercials, or any other resource you can think of, find three more product mascots that resemble creatures or beings found in myth and folklore. Why do you think advertisers use these creatures? Do you think they are effective? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology; Dwarfs and Elves; Lug

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

#### Pronunciation

LEE-thee

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Virgil's *Aeneid*



## Lethe

### Myth Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Lethe (pronounced LEE-thee) was one of five rivers in the **underworld**, or the kingdom of the dead. Drinking from Lethe (whose name means "forgetfulness") caused the souls of the dead to forget all knowledge of their previous lives.

## Lethe in Context

The ancient Greeks believed in the possibility of **reincarnation**: rebirth on Earth in a different body or form. The shades of the dead were supposed to drink from Lethe to purge themselves of past memories. Some Greek religious groups taught their members not to drink from Lethe after they died, however. They believed that it was important to remember the mistakes of one's past lives so that, when reborn, one would be wiser in the next life. Members of these sects were told to drink from a spring named Mnemosyne (pronounced nee-MOSS-uh-nee, meaning "memory") that was near Lethe.

*Dante drinks from the river Lethe in this sculpture from the Divine Comedy. Whoever drank from its waters would forget his past life.* © ALINARI ARCHIVES/THE IMAGE WORKS.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Lethe represents the peace of forgetfulness. It is generally associated with the removal of painful memories or worries as opposed to the loss of cherished memories, although both are handled the same way by the river's powerful waters.

## Lethe in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Springs called Lethe and Mnemosyne were located at a cave near the Greek town of Lebadeia. The cave was believed to be an entrance to the underworld. The river Lethe is an important part of a story about the **afterlife** told in Plato's *Republic*.

In modern times, the myth of Lethe has remained popular enough to be referenced in many works, including poems by John Keats, Lord Byron, Charles Baudelaire, and Edgar Allan Poe. Lethe has also found its way into Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and three of William Shakespeare's plays.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The saying "ignorance is bliss" can be applied to the idea of washing away old memories in



the waters of Lethe. The saying suggests that it is impossible to worry about or fear something if you do not know it exists. Do you think this is an effective way to deal with the potential risks found in the modern world? What do you think are the consequences of living a life in ignorance?

SEE ALSO Afterlife; Hades; Underworld



### Nationality/Culture

Jewish/Christian

### Pronunciation

luh-VYE-uh-thuhn

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Old Testament, the Talmud

### Lineage

None

## Leviathan

### Character Overview

The sea serpent Leviathan is mentioned several times in the Old Testament of the Bible. Legends about this immense and powerful creature were based on earlier stories about **Tiamat** (pronounced TYAH-maht), a dragon defeated by the god **Marduk** (pronounced MAHR-dook) in a Babylonian (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhn) creation myth. Later, a similar tale appeared among the ancient Canaanites (pronounced KAY-nuhn-eye-ts), who claimed that the god **Baal** (pronounced BAY-uhl) slaughtered an ancient seven-headed serpent named Lotan.

In the Bible, Leviathan roamed the sea, breathing **fire** and spewing smoke from his nostrils. The book of Psalms describes how the Hebrew god Yahweh (pronounced YAH-way) struggled with the many-headed Leviathan and killed it during a battle with the waters of chaos (disorder). Yahweh then created the universe, day and night, and the four seasons. Other versions state that Leviathan was made by Yahweh on the fifth day of creation. Scriptural references to the end of time say that the flesh of Leviathan will be part of a feast served on the Day of Judgment.

### Leviathan in Context

It is not known whether the ancient peoples of the Near East viewed Leviathan as a mythical sea monster, a real creature, or a symbol for another culture, such as Egyptian or Roman. Many translations of the Old Testament refer to Leviathan as an animal, such as a crocodile.



*The leviathan was a large fierce sea serpent described in the Old Testament of the Bible.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Considering the similarities to Babylonian myth and the relatively limited knowledge of sea life at the time, it seems likely that Leviathan was viewed as a very real and very powerful creation of Yahweh, unlike anything else in the sea.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In ancient Jewish tradition, Leviathan represents the wild disorder that ruled the heavens before Yahweh created the universe. In this way, Leviathan did not represent evil, but instead symbolized a time before gods. The flesh of Leviathan, said to be feasted upon by the righteous on

the Day of Judgment, represents a victory over godlessness. In Christian works, Leviathan is viewed more as a creature of evil.

### Leviathan in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Leviathan is generally limited to appearances in religious texts, over the centuries the term has come to mean a large beast, especially one from the sea. In 1651, Thomas Hobbes used the name Leviathan in the title of a book about political philosophy to express the idea of society as a giant body ruled by a central sovereign figure. Herman Melville used the term Leviathan in his 1851 whaling novel *Moby Dick* to refer to the great white whale.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Ancient and modern cultures have been fascinated with the sea and its mysteries, and sea monsters have been one of the most popular animals in myths and fables. Some scholars argue that these monsters were either wholly imaginary or were real sea animals that the ancients either did not recognize or deliberately portrayed as exotic to make their stories more fantastic. So the question remains: Were sea monsters real animals that became myths; mythic figures that were eventually recognized as real animals; or entirely imaginary creatures? Select five sea monsters that have a mythic past, and using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, trace their history and their stories to see which category they best fit.

**SEE ALSO** Baal; Creation Stories; Dragons; Marduk; Semitic Mythology; Serpents and Snakes; Tiamat

#### Nationality/Culture

African/Bantu

#### Pronunciation

LEE-zuh

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Bantu creation myths

#### Lineage

None



## Leza

### Character Overview

Various Bantu-speaking peoples of central and southern Africa believe in a supreme deity or god called Leza. A sky god and creator spirit, Leza is believed to have once lived on earth and is the subject of several myths.

## Major Myths

According to a story told by the Basubiya people, Leza taught humans different arts as well as the proper way to worship him. When he finished, Leza climbed up a spiderweb to his home in the sky. The people tried to follow him, but the spiderweb broke and they fell to earth.

In a legend told by the Ila people, a woman who had lost all the members of her family decided to find Leza to ask him why he made her experience such sorrow. She built a ladder to the sky, but it crashed to earth. While searching for a road to the sky, she told the sad story to people she met. They explained that all people were meant to suffer, and that she was not alone in her sorrow. The woman never found Leza, and she, too, eventually died.

In yet another story, told by the Kaonde people, Leza once gave three gourds to a honeybird and instructed it to take them to humans. He told the bird that two of the gourds contained seeds and that humans could open these. The third gourd, however, should remain closed until Leza came to earth. While carrying the gourds, the bird became curious and opened all of them. Two held seeds, but the third contained death, sickness, and dangerous animals. Leza could not capture these unpleasant things, so humans were forced to build shelters to protect themselves.

## Leza in Context

Leza is an example of how some African cultures viewed themselves as having a direct kinship with the gods. Leza is said to have once lived on earth as a human and to have been a very powerful chief. He later became the god of the sky and rain. This may indicate a legend about a specific tribal leader who died and became a subject of worship after he was gone.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Leza is identified with the sky and rain. He is also presented in various myths as a provider and teacher. He gives seeds to the people so they can grow crops, and he teaches them about art and religious ceremonies. He is also the creator of disease and death, though he tries to protect people from these. This further shows him to be a guardian and protector of his people. In the myth of the Kaonde, the honeybird that opens the gourds symbolizes curiosity—a potentially dangerous quality that can lead to much trouble.

## Leza in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Leza is a popular figure in Bantu-speaking cultures. In everyday Bantu expressions about weather he is credited as the bringer of rain. He is mentioned throughout Alice Werner's important 1933 work *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, which brought many elements of Bantu mythology to the attention of the Western world.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Real people often become legendary characters through the re-telling of tales over the course of centuries. Imagine what kind of tale might be told about you five hundred years from now. What characteristics of yours would be remembered and emphasized? What real-life experiences of yours might be exaggerated into compelling myths? Try re-creating a real event into a myth about your legendary self.

SEE ALSO African Mythology



# Lilith

### Nationality/Culture

Jewish

### Pronunciation

LIL-ith

### Alternate Names

Lilitu

### Appears In

The Talmud, *The Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, Jewish legends

### Lineage

Created by God

## Character Overview

In Jewish mythology Lilith was a female demon who killed newborn children in the night. She was associated with an ancient Babylonian (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhn) demon called Lilitu, whose name often appeared in magical spells. According to a Jewish legend that appeared around the eighth century CE, Lilith was the original wife of Adam, the first man created by God. She often quarreled with Adam and eventually left him. God sent three **angels**—Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof—to find Lilith and bring her back. They found her at the Red Sea, where she was giving birth daily to numerous demons. When Lilith refused to return to Adam, God punished her by causing one hundred of her children to die each day. He then created Eve to be Adam's companion.

Furious at her punishment, Lilith began to kill the newborn babies of others. Parents could protect their children from her attacks by placing near the child an amulet, or charmed object, bearing the names of the





*Lilith, shown in the center of this sculpture between Adam and Eve, was Adam's first wife, according to Jewish legend. Because of her disobedience, God replaced her with Eve. © NOTRE DAME, PARIS, FRANCE/© SYLVIE ALLOUCHE/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.*

three angels sent to find her. Through medieval times, Jewish people often kept amulets to ward off Lilith and her demon children, the *lilim*.

### Lilith in Context

The myth of Lilith as Adam's first wife can be viewed as a cautionary tale to disobedient wives in ancient Jewish culture. Lilith is described as arguing with her husband and leaving him after he refuses to accept her as an equal. Lilith's negative qualities led to her giving birth to demons—a violation of all that is considered natural and right. This reflects the view that women were meant to obey their husbands, not try and function as their equals.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Jewish legend, the most well-known tale of Lilith paints her as a symbol of disobedience and conflict. She represents a violation of the

### Evil, Scary Women

*Female goddesses or mythological figures are sometimes associated with magic, darkness, and mysterious knowledge; rightly or wrongly, these figures are often considered evil. Other female goddesses are so ferocious and scary it is hard to imagine their good side.*

Figure	Nationality	Description
Coatlucue	Mesoamerican	Both a mother goddess and goddess of death, Coatlicue is pictured with a face formed by two serpents; a skirt of writhing snakes; a necklace made of the hands, hearts, and skulls of her children; and sharp-clawed hands and feet for digging graves.
Hecate	Near Eastern/ Greek	Hecate is associated with the moon, the underworld, crossroads, and dark magic. She is eventually considered a goddess of witches.
Kali	Indian	Like Coatlicue, Kali is associated with both motherhood and death, and she is fearsome looking: she has four arms, with a sword in one hand and a demon's head in another. She is smeared with blood, has a skull necklace, and a skirt made of hands. Her skin is black, her tongue lolls out, and she is often pictured trampling Shiva.
Lilith	Jewish	Lilith was Adam's first wife. She quarreled with him a lot, and eventually left him. Afterwards, she gave birth to numerous demons. God ordered her to return to Adam, but she refused, so God began killing her children. In revenge, Lilith began killing newborns in the night.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

natural and proper order of things, as shown by her abandonment of her husband and her delivery of demon children.

## Lilith in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient times, Lilith was depicted as a wicked creature. In modern times, however, Lilith has become something of a symbol for feminists. Her insistence on equality with Adam, once viewed negatively, is now seen by many as a trait worthy of praise. It is in this spirit that Lilith's name has been used by an award-winning Jewish feminist magazine, as well as an annual musical fair focusing on women performers, which occurred in the late 1990s.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In recent decades, women's rights have become an important issue in many countries. It is only within the past century that American women were granted the right to vote. How do you think this relatively recent shift affects modern views of ancient mythologies? Do you think ancient myths should be adjusted for modern readers in order to offer a more balanced image of women in ancient cultures? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; Angels; Devils and Demons; Semitic Mythology




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# Lir

## Character Overview

Lir is the god of the sea in Irish and Welsh mythology. He was known during the time of the Tuatha Dé Danaan (pronounced TOO-uh-huh day DAH-nuhn), an ancient race of gods who conquered and ruled Ireland long before humans arrived. His most notable appearance is in *Children of Lir*, a tale from the Mythological Cycle of Irish legend.

## Major Myths

The Tuatha Dé Danaan were ruled by a king named Bodb Dearg (pronounced boov DEERG), who was not liked by Lir. In an attempt to

**Nationality/Culture**  
Irish/Welsh

**Pronunciation**  
LEER

**Alternate Names**  
Allod, Llyr (Welsh)

**Appears In**  
*Children of Lir*

**Lineage**  
Son of Elatha

make peace with Lir and maintain order in his kingdom, Bodb Dearg sent Lir one of his own daughters, Aoibh (pronounced EEV), to marry. Lir and Aoibh had four children, three sons and a daughter named Fionnuala (pronounced fin-NOO-lah). Unfortunately, Aoibh died, and Bodb, wanting to ease Lir's sadness, sent another one of his daughters to marry Lir and serve as the mother of his four children. This daughter, Aoife (pronounced EE-fah), was a cunning young woman well-versed in the arts of magic.

Aoife was jealous of the family bond between Lir and his children, and began plotting a way to get rid of the youngsters. After a plan to murder them failed, Aoife used her skills with magic to transform the children into swans. According to the spell, the children had to remain as swans for nine hundred years, spending three hundred years in each of three different places on or near the water. They would not change back into human form until church bells rang out in announcement of the coming of God.

When Aoife's father Bodb discovered what she had done, he turned her into a demon as punishment. The children spent three centuries at each of the required locations, and afterward were taken in at a monastery where they were chained together and protected by a monk named Mochua (pronounced MUK-oo-uh). When a local queen found out about the swans, she convinced her husband to attack the monastery and take the swans for her. After they were captured, the church bells rang out, transforming the swans back into children. Because so many centuries had passed, however, the children aged quickly and soon died. Soon after, the rest of the Tuatha Dé Danaan also died out, and a new race ruled the land.

### Lir in Context

According to Irish history and legend, the island of Ireland has been ruled by many different groups over the centuries. The legendary version of this history is documented in the *Book of Invasions*, a list of the different ruling groups since the beginning of the world, as well as the battles they undertook. Many of these legendary invasions are clearly based on actual historical events; for example, the Milesians (pronounced mi-LEE-zhuhnz)—the group who, according to tradition, ruled Ireland after the Tuatha Dé Danaan—are most

likely the Gaelic people, who invaded Ireland around the first century BCE.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The most important theme in the tale of Lir's children is the death of old traditions and beliefs, coupled with the arrival of new beliefs. This is shown when the children are cursed to remain swans until church bells announce the coming of God; pre-Christian gods are ineffective against the curse, but the arrival of Christianity puts an end to it. The children are even baptized as Christians before they die. After they die, the Tuatha Dé Danaan—symbols of the old beliefs before Christianity—also fade away.

### Lir in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though he is described as a god of the sea, Lir appears in few Irish myths. However, the story of his children is one of the more popular tales from Irish legend, and Lir may have also served as the original inspiration for the later legend of **King Lear**. A park in Dublin known as the Garden of Remembrance contains a popular sculpture depicting the children of Lir; the statue is meant to compare their nine centuries of struggle with the struggles of the Irish people to gain independence from England.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Daughter of the Forest* (2000), by Australian author Juliet Marillier, is largely a retelling of the legend of the children of Lir. In it, Sorcha is the daughter and youngest child of the warrior Lord Colum. One day her father brings home a new wife who, jealous of the children, casts a spell that turns Colum's six sons into swans. Sorcha escapes the same fate and finds that she is the only one who can save her brothers. The book is the author's first in a series of three, known collectively as the Sevenwaters Trilogy; the other two titles are *Son of the Shadows* (2001) and *Child of the Prophecy* (2002).

SEE ALSO Celtic Mythology; Dagda

## Llyr

See **Lir**.



## Nationality/Culture

Norse

## Pronunciation

LOH-kee

## Alternate Names

Sky Walker, Wizard of Lies, Loge

## Appears In

The Eddas

## Lineage

Son of giants Fárbaúti and Laufey

# Loki

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Loki was a trickster god who caused endless trouble for the gods but who also used his cunning to help them. He lived in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods, and he served as a companion to the great gods **Thor** and **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). Loki enjoyed mischief and disguise and could change his form to imitate any animal. At first the gods found him amusing but eventually they became tired of his tricks and grew to dislike him.

## Major Myths

Despite his mischievous nature, Loki helped the gods on many occasions. One time a giant, disguised as a builder, came to Asgard and offered to build a wall within a year and a half in exchange for **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh), Odin's wife. Thinking the task was impossible, the gods agreed to the deal. The giant, however, had a powerful stallion that could perform great feats of labor. When it looked as if the giant would succeed, Loki disguised himself as a mare and lured the stallion away, preventing the wall from being completed. The mare later gave birth to an eight-legged horse, called Sleipnir (pronounced SLAYP-nir), which Loki gave as a gift to Odin.

Loki had a number of wives and children. With his second wife, the giantess Angrboda (pronounced AHNG-gur-boh-duh), he had three fearsome offspring: a supernatural being named **Hel**, a serpent named Jormungand (pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd), and a wolf named **Fenrir** (pronounced FEN-reer). As these creatures grew larger and more terrifying, the gods decided to get rid of them. They cast Hel into the dismal realm called Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heym), where she became the goddess of the dead; they threw Jormungand into the sea; and they bound Fenrir with a magical ribbon and fastened him to a huge rock.

As time went on, Loki grew increasingly evil. Angry with the gods because they now disliked him, he arranged the death of Odin's son **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der). Loki discovered that Balder could be harmed only by mistletoe. One day, while the gods were tossing objects at Balder in

fun, Loki gave a piece of mistletoe to the blind god Höd and told him to throw it at Balder. The mistletoe struck Balder and killed him.

In honor of Balder the gods held a banquet, to which, naturally, Loki was not invited. But he showed up anyway, insulted the gods, and then fled again when they became angry. To escape detection, Loki disguised himself as a fish, but the gods knew his tricks by this time and caught him in a net.

To punish Loki, the gods captured two of his sons, Narfi and Vali. They turned Vali into a wolf and let him tear his brother Narfi to pieces. They then took Narfi's intestines and used them to tie Loki to rocks in a cave. A giantess named Skadi (pronounced SKAY-dee) hung a great snake over Loki's head, and when its venom dripped onto Loki's face it caused terrible pain. Loki would twist in agony, causing the whole world to shake. It is said that Loki will remain in that cave until **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the end of the world, arrives.

## Loki in Context

Loki fulfills the role of trickster in Norse mythology. As with other **tricksters**, he is often at odds with the supreme gods and is frequently viewed as an enemy. He is also seen by humans as a sometimes helpful god, as shown in a ballad that describes how Loki saved a farmer's son from a giant who was terrorizing him. Although Loki was not worshipped by the Norse people, his role in Norse mythology seems to have been an important one: he brings both entertainment and invention to the Norse gods.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Norse mythology, Loki represents many things, including wickedness, cunning, playfulness, and cowardice. He serves as an opposing force to Odin's bravery and strength. His wickedness is shown in his plot to kill Balder, while his cowardice and cunning are shown in his escapes from trouble—often through lies, promises, or a quick transformation into an animal. His playfulness is shown in his many bets with the other gods, especially Odin.

## Loki in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Loki is a popular character in Norse mythology and appears in many illustrations of Norse myths. Artists such as Jon Bauer and Arthur

## Loki

*Loki was a trickster god who caused the death of Balder by convincing the blind god Höd to shoot an arrow at him.*

PUBLIC DOMAIN.



Rackham have created some of the most famous illustrations of Loki and his associates. Loki appears under the name Loge in composer Richard Wagner's 1869 opera *Das Rheingold*. More recently, Loki has appeared as a villain in the Marvel Comics' Universe. Much of the character's history and personality is carried over from the original Norse myths.



## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok* (2004), by Sakura Kinoshita, is a Japanese comic series that features unusual updated versions of the Norse gods and goddesses. In the first volume of the series, Loki is a teenage detective who must solve mysteries and, at the same time, figure out who is trying to kill him. The comic is written to appeal to those who are already familiar with Norse mythology. *Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok* has also been adapted into a successful animated series.

**SEE ALSO** Balder; Fenrir; Freyja; Giants; Hel; Norse Mythology; Odin; Ragnarok; Thor; Tyr

## Lucifer

See **Satan**.



## Lug

### Character Overview

An important and popular deity in **Celtic mythology**, Lug (or Lugh) was a god of the **sun** and light known for his handsome appearance and skills in arts and crafts. A protector of **heroes**, Lug appears in many Irish and Welsh legends. Lug is also the father of the famous Irish hero **Cuchulain**.

### Major Myths

Lug was the son of Cian (pronounced KEE-an) and the grandson of Balor (pronounced BAH-lor), the king of the evil Fomorians (pronounced foh-MAWR-ee-uhnz), a race of violent beings who lived in darkness. Warned by a prophecy—or prediction—that he would be killed by his grandson, Balor locked his daughter, Ethlinn, in a crystal tower. In spite of his efforts, she gave birth to three children. Balor became furious and threw the infants into the ocean, but a Celtic priestess rescued one child and raised him in secret. According to some

#### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

#### Pronunciation

LOO

#### Alternate Names

Lámhfhada, Ildanach

#### Appears In

*The Book of Invasions*,  
*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*,  
other Celtic legends

#### Lineage

Son of Cian and Ethlinn

legends, Lug was raised by the blacksmith god Goibhniu (pronounced GOYV-noo), his father's brother.

When Lug reached manhood, he went to the court of Nuada (pronounced NOO-uh-duh), the ruler of the Tuatha Dé Danaan (pronounced TOO-uh-huh day DAH-nuhn), to offer his services as a warrior and master crafts worker. The Tuatha Dé Danaan, another race of supernatural beings, were the sworn enemies of the Fomorians. Lug soon became involved in the ongoing war between the two groups. Besides getting magic weapons from the craft gods Goibhniu, Luchta (pronounced LOOK-tuh), and Creidhne (pronounced KREV-nee), Lug also helped organize the military campaigns of the Tuatha Dé Danaan.

During one battle, King Nuada fell under the spell of Balor's evil eye, which had the power to destroy those who looked at it. Lug pierced the eye with a magic stone and killed Balor, thus fulfilling the prophecy and defeating the Fomorians as well. Lug became king of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, married the mortal woman Dechtire (pronounced DEK-tir-uh), and had a son named Cuchulain (pronounced koo-KUL-in), who became a great hero. In the saga *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, Lug fought alongside Cuchulain in battle and soothed and healed him when he was wounded. Eventually defeated by invaders, the Tuatha Dé Danaan retreated underground and were gradually transformed into the fairies of Celtic folklore. Meanwhile, Lug became a fairy crafts worker known as Lugh Chromain, a name that later turned into leprechaun—the tiny sprite or goblin of Irish folklore.

### Lug in Context

The legend of Lug illustrates a larger pattern of myth found in Celtic mythology that reveals much about the settlement of Ireland and surrounding areas. Celtic myths feature a recurring theme of different races battling for and gaining control over the land. This reflects a historical pattern of different waves of human settlers in Ireland. The history of Ireland is one of frequent invasion and conquest by various peoples, and it makes sense that this would be shown in the culture's mythology.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Celtic mythology Lug represents destiny and justice. After escaping from his evil grandfather's plot to kill him as an infant, Lug later joins

forces with his grandfather's sworn enemies. He kills Balor on the battlefield, an act that fulfills an old prediction and exacts revenge for Balor's treatment of Lug. Lug, as a leader of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, also represents kingship.

### **Lug in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

In Celtic art, Lug was usually depicted holding his two favorite weapons: a sling, which he used to kill Balor, and a magic spear that was powerful enough to fight on its own. Although not as popular as some other Celtic heroes, including his son Cuchulain, Lug remains an important part of Irish culture. Citizens in some areas of Ireland even claim to be descendants of Lug.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Compare the myth of Lug and Balor to the Greek story of **Cronus** and **Zeus**. How are the two tales similar? How are they different? Do you think the similarities suggest that one of the myths developed from the other, or do you think the two myths just happen to share themes that are important in many cultures?

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology; Cuchulain; Dwarfs and Elves; Leprechauns



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# M



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



## *Mahabharata, The*

### Myth Overview

The *Mahabharata* (pronounced muh-hah-BAHR-ruh-tuh) consists of a collection of legends and tales revolving around the great Bharata War between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, two branches of an ancient Indian dynasty. The stories—which involve gods and **heroes**—contain elements of myth, philosophy, and religious teachings. A section of the epic called the *Bhagavad Gita* (Song of God) is one of the most important religious texts of Hinduism.

The *Mahabharata* is set in the kingdom of Kurukshetra (pronounced khuh-rook-SHAY-truh) on the northern plains of India along the Ganges River. The opening parvans (books) explain the ancestry of the major characters and provide background for the central conflict of the work. That conflict begins when the rightful heir to the throne of Kurukshetra, a blind prince named Dhritarashtra (pronounced dree-tuh-RAHSH-truh), is passed over in favor of his younger brother Pandu (pronounced PAN-doo). Instead of taking the throne, however, Pandu goes to the Himalaya mountains to live as a hermit, leaving Dhritarashtra on the throne after all.

Before Pandu left Kurukshetra, his two wives gave birth to five sons, who became known as the Pandavas (pronounced PAHN-duh-vuhz). They lived at the royal court with their cousins, the one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra known as the Kauravas (pronounced KOW-ruh-vuhz).

#### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

#### Pronunciation

muh-hah-BAHR-ruh-tuh

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The *Mahabharata*

When the Pandavas came of age, the eldest, Yudhisthira (pronounced yoo-DIS-thuh-ruh), demanded the throne from his uncle, claiming that he was the rightful heir. A feud broke out between the two branches of the family, and the Kauravas eventually forced the Pandavas into exile in the forest.

While in exile, the Pandavas entered a tournament to win the hand of a beautiful princess named Draupadi (pronounced DROW-puh-dee). The Kauravas also entered the contest, but the Pandava brother Arjuna (pronounced AHR-juh-nuh) won the princess, who became the common wife of all five Pandavas.

After the tournament, King Dhritarashtra called the Pandavas back to his court and divided the kingdom among them and his own sons. Unhappy with this settlement, the Kauravas challenged the Pandavas to a game of dice and won back the entire kingdom by cheating. Once again, the Pandavas were forced into exile.

After many years of wandering, the Pandavas returned to reclaim the kingdom, but the Kauravas refused to give up control and both sides prepared for war. The god **Krishna** (pronounced KRISH-nuh) supported the Pandavas. Although he took no part in the fighting, he served as charioteer for the Pandava brother Arjuna and gave him advice. Their conversations prior to battle make up the section of the *Mahabharata* known as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The Pandavas and Kauravas met in a series of battles on the plains of Kurukshetra. In the end, the Pandavas emerged victorious after killing all their cousins. The Pandavas gained the kingdom, and the oldest brother, Yudhisthira, took the throne.

The Pandavas ruled peacefully, although their uncle Dhritarashtra mourned the loss of his sons and frequently quarreled with his nephews. Dhritarashtra eventually went to live in the forest and died there. Some time later, Yudhisthira gave up the throne and went with his brothers and their wife, Draupadi, to live on Mount Meru, the abode of the god **Indra** (pronounced IN-druh).

The conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas makes up only a portion of the *Mahabharata*. The work includes many other tales about deities and heroes and covers an enormous range of topics. The stories present complex philosophical ideas that form the basis of the Hindu faith—codes of conduct, social duties, and religious principles.

## The *Mahabharata* in Context

One of the major epics of India and the longest poem in the world, the *Mahabharata* is a sacred Hindu text. Although tradition holds that an ancient sage, or wise man, called Vyasa (pronounced vee-YAH-sah) authored the *Mahabharata*, it was almost certainly composed by a number of different poets and then collected into a single work sometime between 400 BCE and 200 CE. The epic reached its present form about two hundred years later. It contains nearly one hundred thousand verses and is divided into eighteen books called *parvans*. The work reflects Hindu beliefs about the historical rulers of a region of northern India, and also provides details about worship and codes of conduct in ancient Hindu culture.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of the *Mahabharata* is the idea of sacred duty. Every character in the epic is born into a particular social group, or caste, that must follow the duty prescribed to it by sacred law. The characters who perform their sacred duty are rewarded, while those who do not are punished. This is the great lesson that Lord Krishna gives Arjuna when he begins to doubt his role in the battle. Obeying one's sacred duty is a key pillar of the Hindu religion.

## The *Mahabharata* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The *Mahabharata* is immensely popular in India and throughout Southeast Asia. The work inspired many ancient works of art, such as Indian miniature paintings and the elaborate sculptures of the ancient temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom in Cambodia. Today the *Mahabharata* remains an important Hindu epic and continues to serve as the foundation for Hindu religious faith and mythology.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is married to five brothers at the same time. Many modern cultures have laws prohibiting marriage to more than one person at a time. What purpose do you think laws such as this serve? How does a society benefit from limiting marriage to a single

person? Should a woman be allowed to marry two or more men if all the participants agree? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO *Bhagavad Gita*; Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; Krishna

## Mahadevi

See **Devi**.



### Nationality/Culture

Incan

### Pronunciation

MAHN-koh kah-PAHK

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Inca creation myths

### Lineage

Son of Inti, the sun god

## Manco Capac

### Character Overview

In the mythology of the Incas, Manco Capac was the founder of the Inca nation and a culture hero who set the Incas on the road to glory. He was the son of the **sun** god Inti (pronounced IN-tee) and the supreme teacher of the ways of civilization. There are several versions of Manco Capac's story. The best-known source, *The Royal Commentaries of the Inca* by El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, relates that the sun god was distressed because the people of earth did not live in a civilized way. As he crossed the sky each day, he saw that they wore only leaves and animal skins for clothing, lived in caves, and gathered wild plants and berries for food. So the sun god decided to send his son, Manco Capac, and daughter, Mama Ocllo (pronounced MAH-muh oh-KEE-oh), to teach the people how to improve their way of life. He gave his children a golden rod and told them to push it into the ground wherever they stopped to rest. When they reached a spot where the rod sank completely into the ground with a single push, they should build a sacred city of the sun, to be named Cuzco (pronounced KOOZ-koh).

Setting out from Lake Titicaca (pronounced tee-tee-KAH-kah), Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo wandered across the land and finally came to a valley where the golden rod sank easily into the soil. There they gathered all the people from near and far and taught them how to build homes, weave cloth, make tools, and grow crops. They also taught





*Manco Capac was the son of the Incan sun god, who came to earth to teach the people how to live better.* THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSEO PEDRO DE OSMA LIMA/MIREILLE VAUTIER. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION.

the people how to use weapons so that they could defend themselves and defeat others.

Another version of the myth says that Manco Capac was one of six siblings who emerged from a cave near Cuzco. The siblings gained control over the people of the earth, and Manco Capac became the first ruler of the Incas. Still another tale says that Manco Capac deceived people into believing that he was the son of the sun god. He did this by standing on a mountain wearing gold plaques that shone in the sun and made him look like a god.

### **Manco Capac in Context**

The myth of Manco Capac reflects the Inca belief in the naturally primitive state of humans. Before Manco Capac arrives, humans live without clothing, houses, or agriculture. According to the Inca people, Manco Capac was an actual ruler who lived in the twelfth or thirteenth century. It is possible that Manco Capac was a human

ruler, or series of rulers, who oversaw the basic changes that led to a well-defined Inca society, and was later granted a godlike status for his accomplishments.

When the Spaniards came to the land of the Incas, they removed the preserved bodies of many dead Incan rulers to keep people from worshipping them. They were not able to find the body of Manco Capac, however, because his body was buried outside the city of Cuzco. The Incas believed that his body turned into a stone, and this stone became one of their holiest objects.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

One of the main themes of the myth of Manco Capac is guidance, or teaching. Manco Capac descends to earth, shows the people the best place to live, and teaches them how to do all those things necessary for civilization: build houses, grow food, make clothes, and defend their land. In this way, Manco Capac is a symbol of everything the Incas achieved as a society.

### **Manco Capac in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Manco Capac is perhaps the most important figure in **Inca mythology** but has appeared only rarely in art and literature outside the Inca culture. He is mentioned in a short story by Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*, and was a character in the 1987 *Uncle Scrooge* comic book story “The Son of the Sun,” featuring Disney’s Scrooge McDuck and his nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The Inca people believed that the natural state of humankind was uncivilized and crude. This suggests that without a strong leader a society will fall back into disorder and lawlessness. Do you think humans require guidance from a central figure in order to maintain civilized behavior? Why or why not? Similarly, do you think specific individuals, such as inventors, are mostly responsible for human progress, or do large groups of people acting together help bring about advances in human societies?

**SEE ALSO** Inca Mythology



# Manticore

## Character Overview

The manticore was a mythical animal with a human head and face, a lion's body, and a scorpion's tail. According to legend, this fast, powerful, and fierce beast attacked and devoured people. Although believed to have originated with the Persians—who said the creature lived in India—the manticore is best known from the writings of Greek historians.

First described by the Greek physician Ctesias in the late fifth or early fourth century BCE, the manticore was said to be mostly red with pale blue or gray eyes and three rows of sharp teeth stretching from ear to ear. The manticore's voice sounded like a combination of a trumpet and a reed pipe. Its tail was equipped with stinging quills that the creature could shoot like arrows. An unfortunate traveler who happened upon a manticore in the woods—its preferred habitat—would be subdued by the manticore's quills and eaten whole, bones, clothing, and all.

## The Manticore in Context

In the first century CE, the Roman writer Pliny the Elder included the manticore in his book *Natural History*, which was meant to be a document of known living creatures in the ancient world. This reflects the common opinion that manticores were real beasts; indeed, Pliny was considered such a reliable source of information that people well into the Middle Ages believed the manticore to be real.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In ancient Greek culture, the manticore represented the unknown lands of Asia, the area it was said to inhabit. In later times, the manticore was recognized by many Europeans as a symbol of the devil or of the ruthless rule of tyrants. This may have originated in the practice of using manticores as royal decorations.

## The Manticore in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

During the Middle Ages, the manticore appeared in a number of bestiaries, books containing pictures or descriptions of mythical beasts.

### Nationality/Culture

Persian/Greek

### Pronunciation

MAN-ti-kor

### Alternate Names

Martichora

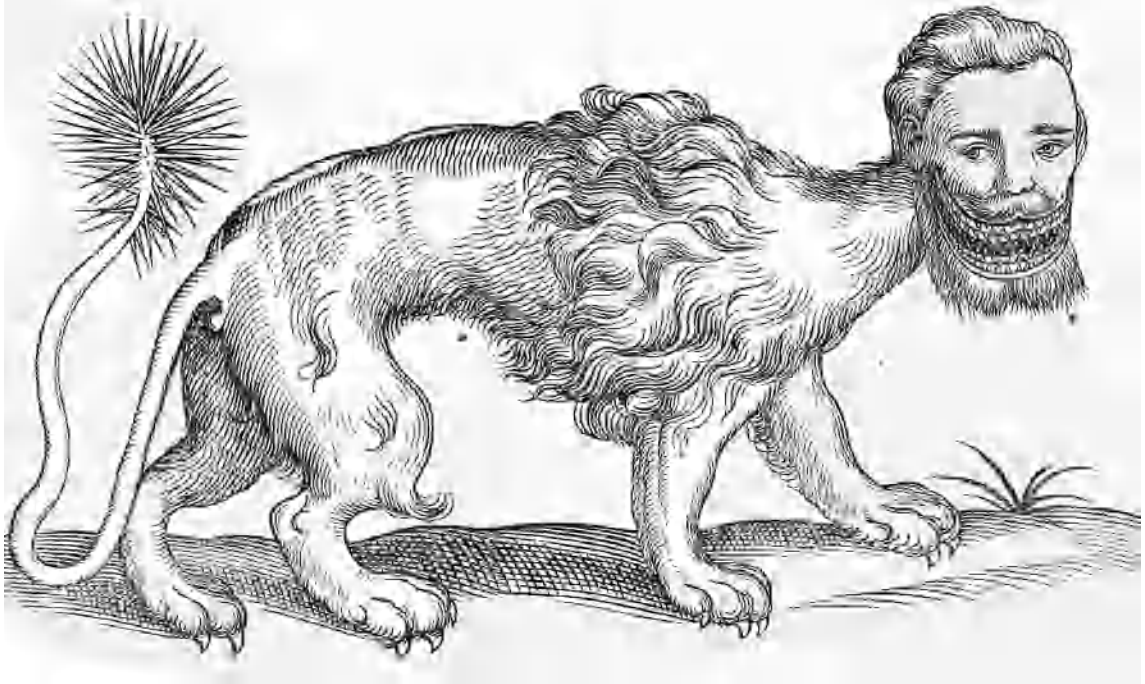
### Appears In

Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, Pausanias's *Description of Greece*

### Lineage

Unknown

## Manticore



*The manticore was a man-eating monster that had the head of a man, the body of a lion, and the tail of a scorpion.* © SCIENCE MUSEUM/SSPL/THE IMAGE WORKS.

The manticore was also featured in medieval heraldry—designs on armor, shields, and banners that indicated the group or family to which a knight belonged. Zoologists used the name *manticora* for a genus of African tiger beetles with large, fierce-looking jaws. In modern times, the creature has appeared in numerous works of fantasy, including Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. The creature also appears symbolically in the 1972 Robertson Davies novel *The Manticore*. The manticore was even the subject for a 2005 monster movie, titled *Manticore*, created for the Sci-Fi Channel.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Why do you think ancient Greek sources state that the manticore can be found in India? What does this suggest about Greek exploration of India and Asia? Why do you think that Europeans in the Middle Ages were so willing to believe that the manticore was a real creature?

SEE ALSO Animals in Mythology



# Manu

## Character Overview

In Hindu mythology, **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh) split himself in two to create Manu, the first man, and Shatarupa (pronounced shuh-TAH-roo-puh), the first woman. Manu and Shatarupa gave life to all humans. According to legend, Manu was the earth's first king and the ancestor of all the kings of India.

The most famous tale involving Manu tells of a great flood that destroyed everything on earth. One day Manu was washing his hands in a bowl of water when he saw a tiny fish there. The fish pleaded with Manu to be placed in a larger vessel of water to survive. In return, the fish promised to save Manu from a great flood that was to come and carry away all living beings. Manu put the fish in a bigger bowl, but the fish grew so rapidly that he had to transfer it to an even larger tank. The fish continued to grow until Manu eventually threw it into the sea. At that point, the fish—who was actually a form of the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo)—told Manu that he should build a great ship to save himself from the coming flood. He also instructed Manu to take into the ship two of each animal on the earth as well as seeds from every kind of plant.

When the flood came, Manu used a rope to tie his boat to a large horn growing out of the fish. Pulling the ship through the rough waters, the fish came to the Himalaya mountains. There it told Manu to tie the ship to one of the mountains and wait until the waters receded. After the flood, Manu became lonely because only he and the animals aboard the ship had survived. He offered a **sacrifice** and was rewarded with a wife, with whom he began to repopulate the earth.

## Manu in Context

As the first man, Manu is also credited as the inventor of many of the basic rules of social and religious conduct. In this way, Manu served as ultimate authority on proper behavior among ancient Hindus. The traditions credited to Manu reflect the culture in which they were written, and many are noted by modern scholars as attempts to restrict the freedom of women.

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

MAN-oo

### Alternate Names

Satyavrata

### Appears In

The *Mahabharata*

### Lineage

Created from Brahma

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of Manu is destruction and renewal. All living things on earth, with the exception of those taken aboard by Manu, are killed in the flood. Manu must then repopulate the earth with the living things he saved. In Hindu mythology, Manu represents truth, wisdom, and virtue. Manu also serves as a father figure for all humankind.

## Manu in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Manu was the father of mankind, he is not featured heavily in Hindu art, literature, or worship. He is believed to be the author of the ancient book called the *Manusmriti* (pronounced mah-noo-SMRIT-ee). This book contains basic codes of behavior for all Hindus to follow.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

One of the main themes of the myth of Manu is destruction and renewal, or death and birth. As a major concern among humans everywhere, this theme is central to most world religions. Hinduism and Christianity have very different views of life and death, and of life after death. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research how issues of life and death are depicted in Hinduism and Christianity. What are the similarities and contrasts? Do you think that what people believe about the **afterlife** influences the way they live their lives?

### Nationality/Culture

Babylonian/Mesopotamian

### Pronunciation

MAHR-dook

### Alternate Names

Bel

### Appears In

The *Enuma Elish*

### Lineage

Son of Ea and Damkina



# Marduk

## Character Overview

The chief god of the Babylonians (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhnz) and Mesopotamians (pronounced mess-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uhnz), Marduk created an ordered world out of the original state of chaos and

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; Floods; Hinduism and Mythology; Noah

disorder. He was a powerful and fierce god who punished sinners, but was also merciful toward his followers. His exploits are described in the Babylonian creation epic known as the *Enuma Elish*.

## Major Myths

Before the birth of Marduk there were two ancient gods: Apsu, god of the sweet waters; and his wife **Tiamat** (pronounced TYAH-maht), goddess of the salt waters. This pair produced children, who in turn gave birth to Marduk and other gods. In time, a great conflict arose between the young gods and the ancient gods. Tiamat created an army of demons to attack and destroy the young gods. After giving her son Kingu (pronounced KIN-goo) the tablets of destiny, which allowed him to command the gods in her service, Tiamat placed him in charge of the army. The young gods chose Marduk as their champion to do battle with Tiamat. He accepted on the condition that he be named the leader of all the gods.

Armed with a net, a bow, a mace (a type of club), and the four winds, Marduk went out to face Tiamat. She appeared in the form of a dragon. Marduk caught Tiamat in his net, but she opened her mouth to swallow him. At that point, Marduk drove fierce winds into her mouth, causing her body to blow up like a balloon. He then shot an arrow at Tiamat's heart and killed her. After splitting her body into two pieces, he set one piece in the sky to create the heavens and the other at his feet to form the earth.

Marduk took the tablets of destiny from Kingu and placed them on his own chest to proclaim his power over the gods. Then he created time by establishing the first calendar. Finally, he killed Kingu and used his blood to create humans as servants of the gods. In recognition of his power, the other gods built a great temple to Marduk in the city of Babylon, located in Mesopotamia.

## Marduk in Context

Marduk was long considered the protector god of the city of Babylon. When the city became the center of the ancient world, Marduk likewise became the center of Mesopotamian myth. Scholars suggest that the myth described in the *Enuma Elish* was written to justify Marduk's place at the head of the pantheon (collection of recognized gods), which was only fitting for a god associated with the most important city in the land.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In ancient Mesopotamian myth, Marduk represents the supreme power of the gods over humans. According to myth, he created humans for the sole purpose of doing labor for the gods, thus allowing the gods to rest and play. Marduk also represents youth and strength, which overcome the army of the older gods and Tiamat.

## Marduk in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Marduk is best known as the hero of the creation myth documented in the *Enuma Elish*. The god may have also been the source of the name Mordechai. In modern times, the name Marduk is used in many fantasy-based video games and television shows, though most have little to do with the ancient god. Marduk did appear as a character within another character's body in an episode of the animated series *Sealab 2021* (2002).

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find out where the ruins of ancient Babylon are located and what their current status is. During the recent war in Iraq, what happened to Babylon and the archeological treasures that once lay within its ruins? What is the United Nations, through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), trying to do to restore the beauty and importance of Babylon? Write a short paper on the state of “modern Babylon.”

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; *Enuma Elish*; Tiamat

### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/Acoma

### Pronunciation

mah-SEH-wee and oh-yo-YEH-wee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Acoma creation myths

### Lineage

Sons of Iatiku

## Mars

See **Ares**.



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## Masewi and Oyoyewi

### Character Overview

Masewi and Oyoyewi are twin brothers who play a prominent role in the creation myths of the Acoma people of the American Southwest. In these



stories, their mother, Iatiku (pronounced ee-ah-TEE-koo), gave birth to people, and they emerged into the light from underground at a place called Shipap. Masewi and Oyoyewi, Iatiku's warrior sons, became the leaders of the people. As **heroes**, they performed many great deeds, such as summoning rain and instructing others how to make offerings to beneficial spirits called **kachinas** (pronounced kuh-CHEE-nuhz). Like **twins** in other American Indian traditions—such as the Zuni Ahayuuta brothers and the Navajo warrior twins—Masewi and Oyoyewi sometimes indulged in irresponsible and mischievous behavior between their acts of heroism.

One Acoma story tells how Masewi and Oyoyewi were responsible for bringing rain. Each night they danced outside their mother's house to ensure that the water in her medicine bowl did not dry up. However, Iatiku grew tired of the dancing, so the twins went away to prove that they controlled the rains. After they left, the water in the bowl dried up, and Iatiku asked everyone for help in bringing rain. Desperate, she pleaded with her children to return. They finally did, but only after many years of drought had led to starvation among their people. The return of the twins brought rain, and the people realized the power of Masewi and Oyoyewi.

### Masewi and Oyoyewi in Context

For the Southwest American Indian agricultural tribes such as the Acoma, rain was a critical part of life. The desert conditions of the area mean that all life relies heavily upon rainfall to survive. As bringers of rain, Masewi and Oyoyewi held an important place in Acoma society. Similarly, the story of Iatiku becoming upset at the twins can be seen as a supernatural explanation for real droughts the Acoma faced.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Acoma mythology, Masewi and Oyoyewi are associated with the morning and evening stars, which are names given to the planet Venus as it appears at dawn and dusk. They are also closely associated with rainfall, and when they left the land, they caused a drought. As warriors, the twins symbolize courage and strength.

### Masewi and Oyoyewi in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Masewi and Oyoyewi appear as wooden carvings in Acoma and Zuni art. They are considered sacred objects and are placed in shrines to be

reclaimed slowly by the elements of nature. Some of these sacred objects have been stolen from tribal shrines and sold to collectors around the world; this practice is becoming less common thanks to stricter international laws regarding the selling of cultural artifacts.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The pueblos are one of the most fascinating features of the American Southwest. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research one of the contemporary pueblo cultures. How far back in history do they go? What are some of their myths and ceremonies related to climate, weather, and water issues? Why do you think these issues are important and are central to their religious ceremonies?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Kachinas; Native American Mythology; Twins



#### Nationality/Culture

Polynesian

#### Pronunciation

MOU-ee

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Polynesian creation myths

#### Lineage

Son of Tangaroa

## Maui

### Character Overview

In **Polynesian mythology**, Maui was a powerful trickster god best known for creating the Pacific islands. A son of the god Tangaroa (pronounced tan-guh-ROH-uh) and a woman, he performed many deeds to improve the lives of humans, such as making the sky higher and the days longer. Endowed with magical powers, this small but strong god tried to achieve immortality, or the ability to live forever.

### Major Myths

Maui created the islands while out on a fishing trip with his brothers. First he fashioned a magic fishing hook from his grandmother's jawbone. Then, as his brothers looked on, Maui cast the hook into the water and began to pull up from the ocean floor the islands on which the Polynesians now live.

On another occasion, Maui was out walking and came upon a girl who complained that the sky was so low it kept falling on her, preventing

her from doing her chores. Eager to impress the girl, Maui pushed hard and succeeded in raising the sky.

In order to give people more hours of daylight to tend their gardens, cook their food, and make cloth, Maui made the days longer. With the help of his brothers, he caught the **sun** in a net and beat it with his grandmother's magic jawbone. The sun was so bruised and bloodied by this battering that from that time on it could only limp slowly across the sky.

Maui tried to become immortal by tricking Hina, the goddess of the moon, death, and rebirth, as she lay sleeping. He crawled into her body and tried to pass through it, but the goddess was awakened by the call of a bird and promptly crushed Maui to death.

## Maui in Context

Maui fills a role common in many tribal cultures: he helps his people become social beings. Maui's story reminds the people of their distant, mythic past—before they created their society and became fully human. Maui brought to Polynesians the cultural skills they needed to live in social groups, thus differentiating themselves from animal groups. Maui provides extra light for people to complete their work, and in some myths he even shows humans how to make **fire** from the friction of two pieces of wood. Before he came, it is noted, people simply ate food raw. Also common in many tribal cultures is the hero whose divine status is uncertain; Maui is sometimes mentioned as a god, and sometimes as a human. This may indicate that the legend is based on an actual figure who ruled over one of the cultures of the Pacific Islands.

## Key Themes and Symbols

In Polynesian mythology, Maui is seen as a friend and helper of mankind. He makes the days longer and pushes the sky higher in order to make life easier for people. He can be seen as a symbol of social behavior.

Mortality is an important theme in the myths of Maui. Although he is the son of a god and possesses great strength, he knows he will die someday. This leads him in search of a way to live forever, which ultimately brings about his death. His fate indicates a belief that it is impossible for mortals to cheat death.

## Maui in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Maui is perhaps best known for lending his name to Maui, one of the Hawaiian Islands, and he sometimes appears in the artistic carvings of Pacific Islanders. His hook, which was used to pull the islands to the surface of the ocean, is also a popular object represented in Polynesian art.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Maui typifies the culture hero, a type of character found in myths throughout the world. In their own societies, culture **heroes** perform a role much like today's politicians—helping the members of their society. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research several culture heroes from different societies around the world. What characteristics or qualities do they have in common? What kinds of things do they do for their people? Now select a popular political figure in your own society and compare his or her qualities to those of the mythic figures. What does the contemporary figure do for his or her society? Does he or she live up to the traditional role of culture hero?

SEE ALSO Polynesian Mythology; Tricksters



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# Mayan Mythology

## Mayan Mythology in Context

The Mayan civilization flourished in Mesoamerica—an area roughly corresponding to Central America—from around 300 BCE until the Spanish conquest of the early 1500s CE. The mythology of the Maya had many elements in common with those of other civilizations of the region, but the Maya developed their own unique pantheon, or collection of gods and goddesses. They also created their own stories about these deities, the image of the universe, and the place of humans in it.

The earliest known images of Mesoamerican gods were created by the Olmec civilization of Mexico. Emerging sometime after 1400 BCE, the Olmecs lived along the southern coast of the Gulf of Mexico for roughly a thousand years. They built pyramids that were sacred places where the

human realm touched the realm of the gods. They also carved enormous stone heads as images of their leaders and created a long-distance trade network across Mesoamerica to obtain valued items, such as jade.

The Olmec pantheon probably included gods of rain, **corn**, and **fire**, as well as a feathered serpent god. These figures reappeared in the myths of later Mesoamerican peoples. Olmec art included images of jaguars and of creatures that were part jaguar, part human. People of the region believed that magicians could turn themselves into jaguars.

The Zapotecs, Toltecs, and Aztecs were among the Mesoamericans who inherited and built upon Olmec traditions. So did the Maya, who were concentrated in the lowlands of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and in a highland region that extends from the present-day states of Tabasco and Chiapas into Guatemala. The Maya enjoyed their greatest wealth, power, and success from around 300 to 900 CE. Historians call this the Classic period. During this time, the Maya built vast stone cities and the ceremonial centers of Tikal and Palenque. After the Classic period, Toltecs from central Mexico arrived in the Yucatán and eventually merged with the Maya. Their influence shaped late Mayan civilization at Chichén Itzá (pronounced chee-CHEN EET-suh) and Mayapán (pronounced mah-yuh-PAHN).

The Maya shared in a common Mesoamerican culture. The peoples of the region believed in the same gods and myths, built temples in the form of pyramids, and had an interest in astronomy. They also had a ball game in which teams competed to pass a ball of solid rubber through a stone ring or hoop. Only certain men and gods could play this game. Sometimes it was simple sport, sometimes a sacred ritual. Scholars do not know the full meaning of the Mesoamerican ball game, but it may have represented the movement of the heavenly bodies or a symbolic kind of warfare that ended in human **sacrifice**.

The Maya also shared the elaborate calendar system used across much of Mesoamerica. One part, called *Haab* by the Maya, was a 365-day calendar based on the **sun's** annual cycle. The other, called *Tzolkin* (pronounced zol-KEEN), was a 260-day sacred calendar. The two calendars meshed in a cycle known as the Calendar Round, which repeated every fifty-two years. The Maya used the calendar both for measuring worldly time and for sacred purposes, such as divination. Each day in the Calendar Round came under the influence of a unique combination of deities. According to the Maya, the combination that occurred on a person's date of birth would influence that person's fate.

## Mayan Deities

**Ah Puch (Yum Cimil):** god of death and destruction, brought disease and was associated with war.

**Chac:** rain god.

**Cizin (Kisin):** god of death, linked with earthquakes.

**Hun-Hunahpú (Ah Mun):** god of maize and vegetation.

**Hunahpú and Xbalanqué:** twin sons of Hun-Hunahpú, tricked the lords of the underworld.

**Itzamná:** chief god, ruler of heaven, of night and day, and of the other deities.

**Ixchel:** goddess of fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth.

**Kinich Ahau:** sun god, sometimes considered an aspect of Itzamná.

**Kukulcan (Quetzalcoatl):** Feathered Serpent, god of learning and crafts.

Like other Mesoamerican cultures, the Maya used a writing system based on symbols called glyphs that represented individual syllables. They recorded their mythology and history in volumes known as codices. Although the Spanish destroyed most Mayan documents, a few codices have survived. Other written sources of Mayan mythology include the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, and the *Chilam Balam (Secrets of the Soothsayers)*, writings by Yucatecan Maya from the 1600s and 1700s that contain much traditional lore. Accounts by Spanish explorers and missionaries—such as Diego de Landa’s description of Mayan life and religion in the Yucatán with the first key to the written language (ca. 1566)—provide useful information. Inscriptions found at archeological sites are also helpful.

Like many peoples, the Maya pictured a universe consisting of heavens above and underworlds below, with the human world sandwiched between. The heavens consisted of thirteen layers stacked above the earth, and the earth rested on the back of a turtle or reptile floating in the ocean. Four brothers called the Bacabs (pronounced bah-KAHBZ), possibly the sons of **Itzamná**, supported the heavens. Below the earth lay a realm called Xibalba, an **underworld** in nine layers. Linking the three realms was a giant tree whose roots reached into the

underworld and branches stretched to **heaven**. The gods and the souls of the dead traveled between worlds along this tree.

## Core Deities and Characters

The chief god of the Maya was Itzamná (pronounced eet-SAHM-nah)—ruler of the heaven, of day and night, and of the other deities. Itzamná was a culture hero, a figure credited with giving people basic tools of civilization, such as language and fire. Said to have been the first priest and the inventor of writing, Itzamná was also linked to healing. His wife, Ixchel (pronounced eesh-CHEL), was goddess of fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth. Women made pilgrimages to her shrines.

Ah Puch (pronounced ah-PWAH-SH), often shown with decomposing flesh and a head like a skull, was the god of death and destruction. He brought disease, was associated with war, and ruled the lowest level of the Mayan underworld, or land of the dead. The modern Maya call him Yum Cimil (lord of death). Cizin (pronounced SEE-sen), meaning “stinking one,” is another death god. He is linked in particular with earthquakes, which often strike Mesoamerica with devastating force. The ancient Maya depicted him as a dancing skeleton with dangling eyeballs. His opponent was the god of maize and vegetation, called Ah Mun or Hun-Hunahpú (pronounced wahn-WAHN-uh-pwah), often shown with an ear of maize growing from his head.

The sun god was Kinich Ahau (pronounced kee-nich AH-wah), sometimes said to be one aspect of Itzamná. He was associated with jaguars. The rain god, a major figure in all Mesoamerican mythologies, was called Chac (pronounced CHAK) by the Maya. He was often portrayed as a fisherman or as a figure with the features of a fish or reptile. Like Itzamná and other Mayan deities, Chac could appear in four forms, each associated with a particular color and compass direction. **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), the Feathered Serpent, called Kukulcan (pronounced koo-kool-KAHN) by the Maya, was also a figure of great importance throughout Mesoamerica.

## Major Myths

The Maya believed that creation was related to divination, or attempts to read the future through various signs, and they often referred to their **heroes** and creator gods as diviners. The men and women who practiced divination regarded it as a form of creation similar to the divine miracle



*The Maya played a ball game in which teams competed to pass a rubber ball through a stone ring or hoop. Although the meaning of the games is not clear, the players may have represented the struggle between light and dark, and the ball may have symbolized the movement of the stars through the heavens.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

that produced the world and humankind. Like the Aztecs and other Mesoamericans, the Maya believed that the present world is only the most recent in a series of creations. The earlier ones perished, or were destroyed one after the other, just as this world will one day come to an end also.

According to the *Popol Vuh*, creation began with the god Huracan (pronounced wah-ruh-KAHN), who blew as a great wind over the ancient ocean, causing the earth to rise from the depths. Then Xpiyacoc (pronounced shpee-YAH-kok) and Xmucane (pronounced SHMOH-kah-nay), “old man and old woman,” performed magical rituals that helped Huracan and other creator deities form plants, animals, and eventually the human race. The gods fashioned the first man out of clay, and he melted into the water. The next race of people, made of wood, were dull, spiritless, and easily destroyed by fire. For their third attempt,



the gods mixed yellow and white maize flour together and made the First Fathers, the ancestors of men, from the dough.

The First Fathers were worshipful, handsome, and wise—too wise, the gods decided. Fearing that their creations would become too powerful, the gods blew fog into the First Fathers' eyes, taking away some of their knowledge. The gods then made the First Mothers. Finally they created the sun to bring light to the world.

One section of the *Popol Vuh* tells the myth of the Hero Twins, sons of the maize god Hun-Hunahpú. The lords of death, seeing the maize god and his twin brother playing the ball game constantly, grew annoyed and summoned the two to Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh), the land of the dead. The brothers fell into a series of tricks and traps, which allowed the lords of death to sacrifice them and to hang Hun-Hunahpú's head from a tree. But the maize god's twin sons, Hunahpú (pronounced WAH-nuh-pwuh) and Xbalanqué (pronounced shi-BAY-lan-kay), grew up to be even more skilled ballplayers.

When in turn the lords of death summoned the twin sons to the underworld, **Hunahpú and Xbalanqué** had tricks of their own. They played the ball game every day, and each night they passed some test. Eventually, they decided to set a trap for the lords. In the final part of their trick, the **twins** cut themselves in pieces and then restored themselves to wholeness. The underworld gods wanted to try the same trick. However, after the twins cut up the gods, they simply left them in pieces. The twins then restored their father and their uncle to life before passing into the sky to become the sun and moon.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As with many Mesoamerican cultures, sacrifice was a key theme in Mayan mythology. They believed that humans had been put on earth to nourish the gods. Human sacrifices served this purpose. So did the ritual called bloodletting, in which priests or nobles pierced parts of their bodies and offered the blood to the gods or to ancestors in exchange for guidance. Clouds of smoke from burning blood offerings were thought to summon the Vision Serpents, images of snakes with Mayan gods and ancestors coming from their mouths. Such visions probably symbolized the renewal and rebirth made possible by sacrifice.

The cycle of death and rebirth, in fact, is another key theme in Mayan mythology. This is shown by the Mayan calendar system, which

includes many repeating cycles of various lengths, up to fifty-two years. It is also evident in Mayan creation myths, which suggest that the current world is only the latest in a series, and that the gods had made previous attempts to create humans.

The number four is also a recurring theme in Mayan mythology. Many gods have four forms in which they can appear. The four cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west—are important designations in Mayan mythology, and each one is associated with different characteristics.

### Mayan Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Striking images of the deities and myths of Mayan civilization can be found today in archeological sites. Southern Mexico and northern Central America are dotted with the remains of great stone cities and temples that are still yielding a wealth of information about the history and culture of the ancient Maya. Some of these sites have become tourist attractions and educational centers.

Other remnants are literary. Mayan texts—those recorded by both Native American and Spanish chroniclers in the years after the Spanish conquest, as well as new translations of inscriptions and codices—are available to interested readers. Some have inspired modern writers. Stories in Charles Finger's *Tales from the Silver Lands* and Miguel Angel Asturias's *Men of Maize* are based on the *Popol Vuh*.

There is a living Mayan legacy as well. The descendants of the Maya number about five million today. Proud of their heritage, they still tell old myths at festivals and funerals, although perhaps less often than they used to. Some of them remember the old gods, asking Chac for rain, thanking Hun-Hunahpú for a good harvest, and fearing that Ah Puch is prowling about, hungry for victims. In the Yucatán, a television series called *Let Us Return to Our Maya Roots* promoted traditional language and customs. The mythology that once expressed the visions and beliefs of much of Mesoamerica remains part of a culture that is still alive.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Bird Who Cleans the World: And Other Mayan Fables* by Victor Montejo (1991) offers twenty traditional tales taken from Mayan mythology. The

book, which focuses on tales of animals and lessons learned, also contains images of authentic Mayan art and artifacts.

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Mythology; Hunahpú and Xbalanqué; Itzamná; Mexican Mythology; *Popol Vuh*; Quetzalcoatl; Twins



## Medea

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Medea was an enchantress and witch who used her magic powers to help **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts) in their quest for the **Golden Fleece**. Later, after Jason betrayed her, she used her witchcraft to take revenge. The daughter of Aeëtes (pronounced aye-EE-teez), king of Colchis (pronounced KOL-kis), Medea first saw Jason when he arrived at the king's palace to request the Golden Fleece. According to some accounts, **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), queen of the gods, persuaded **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, to make Medea fall in love with the young hero.

Aeëtes had no intention of handing over the Golden Fleece but pretended that he would do so if Jason successfully performed a series of tasks. He was to yoke fire-breathing bulls to a plow, sow a field with **dragons'** teeth, and then fight the armed warriors who grew from those teeth. In return for his promise to marry her, Medea gave Jason a magic ointment to protect him from the bulls' fiery breath and told him how to confuse the warriors so they would fight among themselves. Following Medea's instructions, Jason completed the tasks he had been set.

Aeëtes promised to hand over the Golden Fleece, but Medea knew that he would not keep his word. She led Jason and the musician **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs) into the sacred grove where the fleece was kept, guarded by a vicious serpent. Orpheus sang the serpent to sleep, enabling Jason to escape with the fleece. Medea then joined Jason and the Argonauts as they set sail in the *Argo*, pursued by her brother Apsyrtus (pronounced ap-SUR-tuhs). When Apsyrtus caught up with them, he promised to let Jason keep the Golden Fleece if he would give up Medea. Jason refused and killed Apsyrtus.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

me-DEE-uh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Ovid's *Heroides*, Euripides' *Medea*

### Lineage

Daughter of King Aeëtes

Eventually the Argonauts arrived at Iolcus (pronounced ee-AHL-kuhs), which was ruled by Jason's uncle Pelias (pronounced PEEL-ee-uhs). Pelias had gained the throne by killing Jason's father, King Aeson (pronounced EE-son). Medea brought Aeson back to life by boiling his remains in a pot with magical herbs. In this way, she tricked Pelias's daughters into thinking that they could restore their father to youth by cutting him up and boiling him in a pot. Pelias died a gruesome death, and the furious inhabitants of Iolcus drove out Medea and Jason.

The couple married and settled in Corinth, where they raised several children. Their happy days ended when Creon (pronounced KREE-ahn), the king of Corinth, offered Jason his daughter Glauce (pronounced GLAW-see) in marriage. Anxious to please the king, Jason abandoned Medea and prepared to marry Glauce. Medea took her revenge by sending Glauce a poisoned wedding gown that burned her alive. By some accounts, before fleeing to Athens, she also killed the children she had borne to Jason.

Aegeus (pronounced EE-joos), the king of Athens, agreed to protect Medea if she married him and bore him children. They produced a son, Medus (pronounced MEE-duhs), who stood to inherit the throne. However, Aegeus was unaware that he already had a son, **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs), from a previous marriage. When Theseus came to Athens to claim the throne, Medea recognized him, persuaded Aegeus that Theseus planned to kill him, and prepared a cup of poisoned wine for the young man. Just as Theseus was about to drink the wine, Aegeus recognized the sword that Theseus carried, realized that Theseus was his son, and knocked the cup from the young man's hand. By some accounts, Medea then fled to a region in Asia that came to be known as Media in her honor, and whose inhabitants became known as Medes.

### Medea in Context

The myth of Medea reveals much about relationships between men and women in ancient Greece. For one, Medea's escape with Jason after he agrees to marry her was a clear violation of the tradition of family-arranged marriages. Women seldom had input into whom they married, and never did so without the knowledge of their parents. Next, while a woman was duty-bound to remain with her husband until death, a man could renounce his wife publicly for any number of reasons. When Jason fails to do even that before taking a new wife, it may have been seen as an even greater insult to Medea.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One important theme in the myth of Medea is exile. Medea leaves her home in Colchis after helping Jason, knowing that her father would view her acts as betrayal. Later, both Jason and Medea are exiled from Iolcus after she tricks Pelias's daughters into murdering him. When Jason later marries Glauce, Medea murders Glauce and flees to Athens. Finally, Medea flees from Athens after her failed attempt to kill Theseus.

Murder and magic are also themes that run throughout the tale of Medea. She provides Jason with a magic ointment of protection so he can subdue the fire-breathing bulls. Although she does not directly kill Pelias, she is responsible for his death by tricking the man's daughters into killing him as part of a magic ceremony. She is also responsible for the death of Glauce by way of a magically cursed gown, and for the attempted murder of Theseus by way of poison.

*Medea was an enchantress who fell in love with the hero Jason, but he later abandoned her.*

KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA, AUSTRIA/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

## Medea in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Medea is best known through the stage play written by the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez). Over the centuries, the story has been adapted countless times in books and on the stage. Several operas, ballets, and musicals based on the story of Medea have also been produced, most notably a ballet suite by composer Samuel Barber. A film adaptation based on the Euripides play was made for television in 1988 by Danish director Lars von Trier. The character of Medea also appears in the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In Greek myth, Medea is a witch and a murderer. However, she also helps Jason obtain the Golden Fleece and tries to help him regain his rightful throne. These seemingly contradictory aspects of Medea's character makes it difficult to categorize



her as definitively “good” or “bad.” Do you think Medea was intended to be a sympathetic character to the ancient Greeks, or was she intended as a villain? What do you think Greek writers were trying to say by making their characters so ambiguous? Select a popular figure from a contemporary Western novel and compare the way the author depicts his or her main character to the way the ancient Greeks portrayed their **heroes** and heroines.

**SEE ALSO** Argonauts; Golden Fleece; Jason; Theseus



## Medusa

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

meh-DOO-suh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Daughter of Phorcys and Ceto

### Character Overview

Medusa, one of three sisters in **Greek mythology** known as the **Gorgons** (pronounced GOR-guhnz), had a destructive effect upon humans. In many myths she appeared as a horribly ugly woman with hair made of snakes, although occasionally she was described as being beautiful. In both forms Medusa's appearance was deadly: any person who gazed directly at her would turn to stone.

Although the two other Gorgons were immortal (able to live forever), Medusa was not. One of the best-known legends about her tells how the Greek hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) killed her. Perseus and his mother, **Danaë** (pronounced DAN-uh-ee), lived on the island of Seriphos (pronounced SEHR-uh-fohs), which was ruled by King Polydectes (pronounced pol-ee-DEK-teez). The king wanted to marry Danaë but Perseus opposed the marriage. Polydectes then chose another bride and demanded that all the islanders give him horses as a wedding gift. Perseus, who had no horses, offered to give Polydectes anything else. Because no man had ever survived an encounter with the Gorgons, Polydectes challenged Perseus to bring him the head of Medusa.

With the help of the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) and a group of **nymphs** (female nature deities), Perseus obtained special equipment for his task: a sharpened sickle, or curved blade, a cap that made the wearer invisible, and a pair of winged sandals. He also polished



*Medusa, the most famous Gorgon, was beheaded by Perseus.* IMAGNO/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES.

his bronze shield so he could see Medusa's reflection in it without gazing directly at her. Wearing the magic cap and following Medusa's reflection in his shield, Perseus crept up on the Gorgons. He cut off Medusa's head in one swipe and put it in a bag. The drops of blood that fell from the head turned into Medusa's two sons—Chrysaor (pronounced kree-SAY-ohr) and **Pegasus** (pronounced PEG-uh-suhs)—by the god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun).

With the help of the magic sandals, Perseus flew off before the other Gorgons could catch him. When he reached Seriphos, he held up Medusa's head and turned Polydectes to stone. Perseus later gave the head to Athena, who mounted it on her shield.

## Medusa in Context

Medusa can be seen as a reflection of the qualities that ancient Greeks felt were unappealing in women. She lived apart from men entirely and appeared to have no use for them, which was unlike the traditional image of a woman as servant and property of a man. She was also physically hideous, which the Greeks felt reflected an undesirable personality as

well as a lack of beauty and grace. She even offered a fierce, direct gaze that may have seemed inappropriate or defiant if used by a normal woman.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Medusa can be seen as a symbol of ugliness and solitude. She lives with her sisters and has few interactions with outsiders. The Gorgons may also represent the bonds of sisterhood, since they remain together and care for one another apart from the rest of the world. Medusa herself is unique among the Gorgons as a symbol of mortality; she is the only one who cannot live forever and is indeed slain by Perseus.

### Medusa in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Medusa is the most popular of the Gorgons. She has appeared in art by Peter Paul Rubens, Pablo Picasso, and Leonardo da Vinci (though da Vinci's two paintings of Medusa have not survived). Perhaps the most famous images of Medusa are the headless portrait painted by Caravaggio in 1597, and the sixteenth century bronze statue of Perseus holding Medusa's head sculpted by Benvenuto Cellini. The story of Perseus and Medusa is retold in the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans*, in which Medusa is depicted as a grotesque woman with the lower body of a snake. The name Medusa has been borrowed for many other objects in modern life, including sea organisms, celestial bodies, ships, and even several roller coasters.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Corydon and the Island of Monsters* (2005), by Tobias Druitt, is a tale of Corydon, a goat-legged shepherd boy taken captive by pirates who run a traveling freak show. There, Corydon meets Medusa, whose gaze does not hurt him, and the two escape the freak show, free the other captives, and make their way to Medusa's island home. Soon, however, Perseus and other glory-seeking **heroes** arrive to rid the island of its "monsters." The book is the first of a trilogy; Tobias Druitt is actually a pen name for the mother and son writing team of Diane Purkiss and Michael Downing.

**SEE ALSO** Danaë; Gorgons; Greek Mythology; Nymphs; Pegasus; Perseus





# Melanesian Mythology

## Melanesian Mythology in Context

Melanesia, an area in the southwest Pacific Ocean, consists of thousands of islands and a remarkable variety of cultures. These individual cultures possess different mythologies and deities (gods and goddesses). The main island groups of the region are New Guinea, New Caledonia, Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides), New Britain, the Solomon Islands, the Admiralty Islands, the Trobriand Islands, and the Fiji Islands.

No single religion or mythology unifies Melanesia. Each island or community has its own distinct beliefs and its own collection of legends and mythological beings. Nevertheless, the mythologies of Melanesia do share certain basic elements and themes. For example, the names of the characters and the details of their stories differ from island to island, but the activities in which they are involved often have much in common.

A distinctive feature of many Melanesian cultures is the cargo cult, a religious movement created in response to European influence during colonial times. Cargo cults helped Melanesians explain the role of Europeans in the universe. When Europeans first arrived, the Melanesians were impressed by the huge amounts of material goods, or “cargo,” they brought with them. The islanders believed that the Europeans must have acquired such wealth through strong magic, and they gradually developed cargo cults in an effort to gain knowledge of this magic for themselves. Religious in nature, cargo cults also had a political side, and they stressed resistance to foreign domination of their societies.

Members of the cargo cults believed that one day an ancestral spirit, tribal god, or hero would bring cargo to the people, leading to an age of prosperity, justice, and independence from foreign powers. To prepare for this day, the cults built structures representing docks for boats, runways for planes, and shelters for storing the cargo when it arrived. Such activities disrupted traditional economic practices and caused drastic changes in some parts of Melanesian society. Colonial authorities feared such changes and tried to put an end to the cults, but with little success.

## Melanesian Mythology

*This “benta-koi” is an example of a cargo cult good luck charm, used by the islanders of the Nicobar Islands near India. The wooden charm shows a white man dressed as sea captain and surrounded by European products such as mirrors, clocks, and umbrellas; it was designed to unlock the secrets of European wealth to the bearer.*

WERNER FORMAN/ART RE-SOURCE, NY.



### Core Deities and Characters

Melanesian mythology has neither a supreme deity nor a distinct hierarchy, or ranked organization, of gods and goddesses. Instead, each cultural group possesses its own supernatural spirits, culture **heroes**, **tricksters**, and other beings that appear in local myths and stories.

**Creator Gods and Heroes** Most cultural groups have creation myths that explain or describe the origin of the world. Melanesians, however, believe that the world has always existed, so they have few stories about creation. Yet various figures do play roles in changing parts of the world and in the formation of islands and features of the landscape.

On the Banks Islands of Vanuatu, the first being in the world was Qat, a creator god and hero who fashioned islands and covered them with trees, animals, and plants. Qat also made humans by carving dolls

from wood and then dancing and singing them to life. Then he created day and night so people could work and then sleep.

In the islands of Vanuatu and New Britain, a creator god made twin brothers, To-Kabinana and To-Karvuvu, by sprinkling the ground with his own blood. To-Kabinana became a creator hero who produced many good things, while To-Karvuvu was responsible for the evil and troubles in the world. In Papua New Guinea, the sky god Kambel made people and the moon. He also created the clouds, which pushed up the sky and separated it from the earth.

**Tricksters and Other Spirits** According to the Kiwai people of New Guinea, the trickster Sido could change his skin like a snake. He was killed by a powerful magician and then wandered the world seducing women and children. After losing his human wife, Sido transformed himself into a gigantic pig. Finally, he split himself open so that the pig's backbone and sides formed the house of death, the place where people go when they die.

Another mythological figure of New Guinea is Dudugera, known as the "leg child" because he sprang from a cut in his mother's leg. The people of his village mocked and bullied Dudugera, who one day told his mother to hide under a rock because he was going to become the **sun**. Dudugera soared into the sky and shot **fire** spears, which burned vegetation and killed many living things. To stop Dudugera from destroying everything, his mother threw mud or lime juice at his face, and it turned into clouds that hid the sun.

Marawa, the spider, is a friend of Qat. When Qat created humans Marawa tried to do the same, but his wooden figures turned into rotting corpses. That is how death came into the world. Tagaro, a trickster of Vanuatu, destroyed his evil brother Meragubutto by persuading him to enter a burning house to gain more magic and thus increase his power.

The mythologies of Melanesia include many spirits associated with nature and animals. The Adaro are sun spirits, part fish and part human, who use rainbows as bridges and come to earth during sun showers. The Bariaus are shy spirits that live in old tree trunks. The Kiwai of Papua New Guinea say that they are descended from Nuga, a half-human, half-crocodile creature created long ago from a piece of wood.

## Major Myths

Throughout Melanesia some common mythological themes and characters appear. Many myths deal with two fundamental issues: where

people came from and what happens after death. Certain characters, such as snakes, monsters, and **twins**, can be found in legends from numerous islands.

**Myths of Origin** Melanesians have several basic stories about how the first humans appeared. In some places these beings descended from the sky. The Ayom people of Papua New Guinea, for example, say that Tumbrenjak climbed down to earth on a rope to hunt and fish. When he tried to return to the sky, he found the rope cut. His wife threw down fruits and vegetables, including cucumbers that became women. The offspring of Tumbrenjak and these women became the ancestors of different cultural groups.

In other places, the first beings came from the sea or emerged from underground. Among the Trobriand islanders, the ancestors of each clan emerged from a particular spot in a grove of trees, or from a piece of coral, or from a rock. The Keraki of Papua New Guinea believe that the first humans emerged from a tree, while others say that they came from clay or sand, blood, or pieces of wood.

Many Melanesian myths explain the creation of the sea, an important feature in the lives of island peoples. A myth from Dobu Island in New Guinea says that when the sea was released, all the beautiful women were swept to the Trobriand Islands and the ugly women were carried inland on Dobu. People in southern Vanuatu have a myth in which a woman became angry with her son because he disobeyed her. In her fury she knocked down a wall that surrounded the water of the sea. The water broke free, scattering people and coconuts to other islands.

**Magic** Magic is an important aspect of the mythology and religion of Melanesia. According to a myth from the Trobriand Islands, a hero named Tudava taught the people various forms of magic, such as the secret knowledge needed to make plants grow abundantly in a garden. People use magical formulas to manipulate spirits, and most sacred rituals involve magic along with prayer and **sacrifice**. During ceremonies participants wear or carry carved wooden images of spirits said to contain the spirits' power.

**Snakes, Monsters, and Twins** Snakes appear in the myths of many Melanesian peoples as a symbol of fertility and power. In some myths they are said to control rain; in others, animals and humans emerge from their slaughtered bodies. Some snake-beings wander from place to place

giving gifts to humans and teaching them how to grow crops or perform magic. The Arapesh of New Guinea believe that spirits called *marsalai* live in rocks and pools and sometimes take the form of snakes or lizards. The marsalai shaped different parts of the landscape and then became guardians of their territory.

Many Melanesian peoples believe in monstrous ogres that eat people. An ogre killer becomes a hero by slaying these monsters. Ogre killers often perform other great feats as well. According to a myth from Vanuatu, a terrible ogre killed everyone except a woman who hid under a tree. The woman gave birth to twin sons who destroyed the ogre and cut it into pieces, an act that enabled the people who had been eaten by the ogre to come to life again. The people reestablished their society and began to follow new rules of behavior. Twin brothers appear as central characters in many other Melanesian myths. These pairs often include one wise and one foolish brother, such as To-Kabinana and To-Karvuvu. Myths about twins may also represent the presence of both helpful and harmful forces in nature, such as nourishing rains and violent storms.

**Afterlife** People throughout Melanesia generally believe in an **afterlife**. Among the Kiwai of Papua New Guinea, the land of the dead is known as Adiri; in Vanuatu one of its names is Banoi. The god of the dead also has various names; in parts of New Guinea he is called Tumudurere.

In Vanuatu people say that humans have two souls—one goes to an afterlife while the other takes the form of an animal, plant, or object. The route taken by souls to the land of the dead is often well defined. The people of the Fiji Islands believe that this path is dangerous and only the greatest warriors can complete the journey. In other places, the success of the journey depends on whether the proper funeral rites have been carried out.

Souls that go to the afterlife often visit the land of the living as ghosts by taking on human or animal form. Ghosts sometimes help the living, but they can also frighten them and interfere with certain activities. Some places have special types of ghosts, such as beheaded men with wounds that glow in the dark, or the ghosts of unborn children.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Supernatural beings, including ancestral spirits and spirits of nonhuman origin, play an important role in the lives of Melanesians. The islanders

believe that ancestral spirits continue to influence the way people act in everyday life. Ancestor worship is a significant part of their religion.

Summoned through prayer and ritual, supernatural beings and forces can be controlled to a large extent by the use of magic, which is central to Melanesian religion. The presence and activities of ancestral spirits are revealed in dreams. Evidence of their effect on human society can be seen in the health, well-being, and prosperity of the people.

Music plays a key role in Melanesian religious rituals. Throughout the islands, the sounds of instruments such as drums and reed flutes are thought to be the voices of spirits and other supernatural beings. Today the use of instruments is usually restricted to men, but some myths tell how they originally belonged to women until men stole them or obtained them through trickery.

Closely related to the belief in spirits is the concept of mana, a supernatural power independent of any spirits or beings, yet linked to them. A characteristic of persons and objects as well as of spirits, mana can be either helpful or harmful. Anything uncommon or out of the ordinary—such as a weapon that has killed many animals or a great hero who defeats many foes—is said to possess mana.

### **Melanesian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

In some areas of Melanesia, mythology remains a powerful force in society, particularly where traditional religious systems and cult practices have been left relatively undisturbed. In other areas, traditional beliefs have been modified, usually as a result of modernization or the introduction of Christianity. Yet even where change has occurred, mythology continues to play an important role. It has helped Melanesians make sense of the changes in their society and in their relationship to the broader world by providing ways of understanding and interpreting events.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Cargo cults provide a unique opportunity to see mythology created as a direct result of one ethnic group's contact with an outside culture. These cults believe that, through rituals and magical thinking, they can obtain the material wealth of the outside culture and transform their lives. Compare the magical thinking of the cargo cults to modern consumer

culture, in which people are encouraged to possess material things that, through the influence of clever advertising, they believe will transform their lives. What are the similarities? What are the differences?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Animals in Mythology; Creation Stories; Micronesian Mythology; Polynesian Mythology; Twins

## Mercury

See **Hermes**.



## Merlin

### Character Overview

In the legends about King **Arthur**, the king had the help and advice of a powerful wizard named Merlin. Indeed this magician, who arranged for Arthur's birth and for many aspects of his life, can be seen as the guiding force behind the **Arthurian legends**. Many stories about Merlin circulated in medieval times.

Some early legends claimed that Merlin was the son of a demon and of a human woman. Only half human, Merlin was mysterious and unpredictable, sometimes helping the human race but sometimes changing his shape and passing long periods as a bird, a cloud, or something else. He also had many relationships with women. By the thirteenth century, however, the influence of Christianity was reshaping the Arthurian legends, and Merlin became a more respectable figure—a wise old man who supplied moral and magical guidance.

In the legend of Vortigern (pronounced VOR-tuh-gurn), a legendary king of Britain, the king was trying to build a temple on Salisbury Plain, but it kept falling down. The young Merlin told the king of a vision in which he had seen a red dragon and a white dragon fighting in a pool under the temple's foundation. From this, he predicted that the red dragon of Wales (King Vortigern) would be defeated by the white dragon of Britain (King Uther Pendragon), which later happened. The

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

### Pronunciation

MUR-lin

### Alternate Names

Myrddin

### Appears In

Nennius's *History of the Britons*, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Prophecies of Merlin* and *Life of Merlin*

### Lineage

Unknown

magician then built the temple himself, using his magic to bring standing stones from Ireland and arrange them on the plain in a single night. That, according to legend, was how Stonehenge was built.

Merlin became the ally of Uther (pronounced OO-ther) and used his magic to enable Uther to spend a night with another king's wife. The child born of that union was Arthur. Merlin predicted that he would be a great king who would one day unite all of Britain.

Entrusted with Arthur's upbringing, Merlin prepared the boy for kingship. Some accounts say that the wizard fashioned the magical sword Excalibur that proved that Arthur was the rightful king. According to other stories, Merlin also created the Round Table, around which Arthur's knights sat. Merlin was Arthur's helper and advisor in many things. Yet, even Merlin could not prevent the final crumbling of the knights' fellowship and the fall of Arthur, as recounted in every version of the Arthurian legends.

As for Merlin's own fate, accounts vary. Some say that he went mad after Arthur's defeat and wandered into the woods. Most versions of the magician's story, however, end with him being tricked by a witch named Nimuë (pronounced neem-OO-ay), also identified as the **Lady of the Lake**, with whom he had fallen in love. Nimuë did not really care for Merlin but simply wanted to learn his secrets. When she had learned enough, she trapped him in an underground cave from which he could never escape.

## Merlin in Context

The figure of Merlin seems to be based on a magician named Myrddin, who appeared in the pre-Christian mythology of the Celtic people. The writings of Nennius, a Welsh storyteller who lived around 800 CE, include tales of a young magician named Ambrosius (pronounced am-BROH-zhuhs) who became an advisor to Vortigern.

Three hundred years later, British writer Geoffrey of Monmouth told a more elaborate story about the magician in his *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). In this account, a sorcerer known as Merlin Ambrosius served as advisor to British king Uther Pendragon and, later, to his son Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth also wrote a work about Merlin that drew on old Celtic legends about a "wild man of the woods" with magical and fortune-telling powers. As Christianity spread throughout Britain, Merlin's role within the legend shifted. The re-casting of Merlin





*When King Arthur was a young boy, the powerful wizard Merlin prepared him to become Britain's ruler. In later years, Merlin became King Arthur's trusted adviser and helper.* ART RESOURCE, NY.

as a fatherly advisor may reflect the influence of Christian ideals upon existing myths.

### Key Themes and Symbols

An important theme in the myths of Merlin is prophecy, or the ability to see the future. When he meets with Vortigern, Merlin relates his vision of battling **dragons**, which suggests that Vortigern will be defeated by

Uther. Merlin later sees that Uther's son Arthur will unite Britain. Another theme found in the tales of Merlin and Arthur is the dangerous power of passion. For Arthur, **Guinevere's** affair with the knight **Lancelot** causes the unity of **Camelot** to crumble. For Merlin, his love of Nimuë blinds him to her plan to imprison him after learning his secrets.

### Merlin in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As an important character in the tales of King Arthur, Merlin has appeared in nearly every major adaptation of the Arthurian legends. This includes Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958), and films such as *King Arthur* (2004). Merlin has also appeared in many other stories outside the traditional King Arthur myth, including Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *That Hideous Strength* (1946) by C. S. Lewis. The wizard was also the subject of the Broadway musical *Merlin* that began and ended its run in 1983; the show was designed mainly as a showcase for magic tricks, and starred popular magician Doug Henning in the title role.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Lost Years of Merlin* (1996), by T. A. Barron, is a tale about Merlin's younger years. In the book, Merlin is initially known as Emrys, a seven-year-old boy who finds himself washed up on the beach at Wales with no memory at all. He eventually discovers that he has magical powers, and the story reveals how Merlin learns to use those considerable powers for good rather than evil.

**SEE ALSO** Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends

#### Nationality/Culture

Worldwide

#### Pronunciation

MUR-maydz

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Various myths of the sea

#### Lineage

Varies



## Mermaids

### Character Overview

Mermaids and mermen are imaginary beings with the upper bodies of humans and the lower bodies of fish. Often mentioned in European



*Portrayed as both lovely and dangerous, mermaids represent mankind's relationship to the sea.* THE ART ARCHIVE/PRIVATE COLLECTION/MARC CHARMET.

legends, they also occur in the folklore of seagoing peoples from other regions of the world. The idea of a deity (god) or creature in which human features are combined with the body of a fish is very ancient. Babylonian (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhn) texts mentioned a god named Oannes, who was part man and part fish and lived among humans. The Near Eastern god Dagon (pronounced DAH-gon) may have been portrayed as a merman, and the Syrian goddess Atargatis (pronounced ay-tar-GAY-tis) had the form of a mermaid. Ancient Greek and Roman sea gods and their attendants often appeared as human torsos rising from the waves with curved fish tails below. The Greeks called these beings Nereids (pronounced NEER-ee-idz) if they were female and tritons (pronounced TRY-tunz) if they were male. Japanese folklore features a mermaid called Ningyo (pronounced NEEN-gyoh), and **Polynesian mythology** includes a half-human and half-porpoise creator god called Vatea.

In European folklore, mermaids were associated with **sirens**, beautiful creatures whose singing lures sailors to their doom. Mermaids were commonly pictured as floating on top of the waves, singing, or combing their long hair while gazing into mirrors. Seeing a mermaid was considered bad luck, as mermaids often appeared before storms or other disasters and were believed to carry drowned men away to their kingdom at the bottom of the sea. Although encounters with mermaids and mermen often ended badly for humans, in some legends these sea creatures married human partners and took completely human form to live on land.

### Mermaids in Context

Many sailors over the centuries believed mermaids to be real and have reported spotting mermaids while at sea. Christopher Columbus even reported sighting three mermaids near the Dominican Republic in 1493, though he was disappointed that they were not as pretty as popular depictions suggested. In truth, what Columbus and other sailors most likely saw were sea mammals known as manatees and dugongs. In fact, the name “dugong” is taken from a Malaysian term meaning “lady of the sea.” Unlike most sea animals, these creatures have soft, rounded bodies; younger calves also have pale skin and are about the same length as a person. That these creatures were generally viewed as female is likely due to their pale skin, soft curves, and the fact that most sailors were men who did not have contact with women for weeks or months at a time.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Although mermaids are usually portrayed as being lovely, they are also associated with danger. This reflects humankind’s relationship with the sea, which can be either a beautiful and bountiful place or a realm of fear and disaster. Living in the ocean—a vast expanse barely explored by humans—mermaids also represented to sailors a whole unknown world that existed under the water. Mermaids may also represent the mysterious nature of women as viewed by men.

### Mermaids in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mermaids have appeared in many stories and other forms of art over the centuries. Perhaps the most popular story featuring a mermaid is the Hans Christian Andersen tale “The Little Mermaid” (1836), which was

also the basis for the 1989 Disney animated film of the same name. Mermaids also appear in T. S. Eliot's 1915 poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and in J. M. Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan*, later adapted into a novel and numerous films. More modern adaptations of classic mermaid stories include the 1984 film *Splash*, starring Daryl Hannah and Tom Hanks, and the 2006 film *Aquamarine*. A mermaid even appears prominently in the logo for the popular Starbucks coffee shop chain.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the sea mammals known as dugongs and manatees. In what areas of the world are they found? What do they eat? Are they endangered? What risks do these creatures face from humans?

SEE ALSO Sirens



## Mexican Mythology

### Mexican Mythology in Context

Mexico's mythology, like its population, reflects a blend of Native American and Spanish influences. Most people in modern Mexico trace their ancestry to American Indians, to the Spanish who controlled Mexico for three centuries, or to both, in a mixed-ethnic heritage called *mestizo* (pronounced mes-TEE-zoh). In the same way, Mexican religion, myths, and legends are a blend of American Indian traditions and European influences, such as Christianity. The Maya believe, for example, that the *chacs*, ancient rain spirits, are controlled by Jesus Christ and accompanied in their movement across the skies by the Virgin Mary, his mother. Mexican mythology is thus a collection of diverse older beliefs that were creatively combined over the centuries to produce entirely new myths.

Even before the Europeans arrived, Mexico was a land of varied cultures. Peoples who shared the Nahuatl (pronounced NAH-wah) family of languages dominated the north, while Mayan languages and culture

were widespread in the south. Migration, trade, and war brought the different people and cultures of Mexico into contact with one another.

These contacts led to a blending of different religions and mythologies. As the Aztecs of northern Mexico embarked on wars of conquest and built an empire in central Mexico, they absorbed the deities or gods of conquered peoples and made them a part of their own collection of recognized gods, also known as a pantheon. In turn, myths and religious practices from central Mexico filtered south to influence the Maya. The Aztec influence boosted the importance of the god **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l)—known as Kukulcan (pronounced koo-kool-KAHN) to the Maya—and of human **sacrifice** to the gods.

Spain conquered Mexico between 1519 and 1521 and governed it as a colony until 1821, when Mexico won its independence. During the three centuries of colonial rule, European beliefs strongly influenced the indigenous (native) cultures and mythologies. Spanish missionaries and priests worked to convert the native peoples to Christianity and to stamp out their previous non-Christian beliefs. At the same time, some of the missionaries collected information about native beliefs, customs, and myths. Father Bernardino de Sahagun published accounts of the Aztecs that remain valuable sources of traditional legends; Father Diego de Landa did the same for the Maya.

Roman Catholic Christianity did take hold in Mexico, and about ninety percent of Mexicans now practice it. Yet the old ways did not completely disappear. A few American Indian groups, especially the Huichol (pronounced wee-CHOHL) and the Tarahumara (pronounced tah-ruh-hoo-MAH-ruh), remained true to their older beliefs. Many others, however, combined Catholicism with surviving forms of pre-Christian beliefs and mythologies. For example, they identified Roman Catholic saints, whose feast days are scattered throughout the year, with the ancient gods, traditionally honored with agricultural festivals at specific times.

Some myths and legends of Mexico have grown out of the events of the country's history. Parts of **Aztec mythology**—such as the legend of how the ancient Aztecs founded their capital of Tenochtitlán (pronounced teh-nowch-TEE-tlan) on the site where they saw an eagle fighting a serpent—have become part of the national heritage of modern Mexico. The Spanish conquest, the fight for independence, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 have also produced legends that have helped shape Mexico's image of itself as a nation and a people.

## The Black Legend

The term “Black Legend” refers to a centuries-old view of Spain and its people as particularly cruel, prejudiced, and greedy. Some of the literature that promoted the Black Legend came from European Protestants hostile to Catholic Spain. But part of the Black Legend emerged from the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish bishop who served in Mexico and wrote a vivid account of the Spanish soldiers’ brutality to the Indians. Although modern historical research has shown that other nations were guilty of similar cruelties, traces of the Black Legend linger as negative images of the Spanish element in Latin American culture.

## Core Deities and Characters

Perhaps the most widely recognized and honored figure of Mexican religious mythology is the Virgin of Guadalupe (pronounced gwah-duh-LOO-pay). Tradition says that in 1531 the Virgin Mary appeared before a peasant named Juan Diego on Tepeyac, a hill to the north of Mexico City, and told him that she wished to have a church built there. When the bishop of Mexico asked Juan for proof of what he had seen, the Virgin appeared again to the peasant and instructed him to gather roses in his cloak and take them to the bishop. Juan unfolded the cloak before the bishop, and a miraculous image of the Virgin could be seen where the roses had been. Another tradition associated with the Virgin of Guadalupe says that a shrine to Tonántzin (pronounced toh-nawn-TSEEN), an Aztec **corn** goddess, once stood at Tepeyac and that the Virgin replaced Tonántzin as the goddess mother of the Mexican people. However, there is no clear evidence of pre-Christian worship at that site.

The Mexican people have long regarded a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a sign of divine favor. They have credited her with ending an epidemic of disease in the 1700s, and later with inspiring movements toward independence and liberation for their country. Mexicans of all regions and all ethnic backgrounds are united in their devotion to the Virgin as an emblem of both religious faith and national pride.

Among the historical figures who have acquired legendary status in Mexico are Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), the conquistador (Spanish soldier) who overthrew the Aztecs and brought Mexico under Spanish

rule. Another important figure is Malinche (pronounced mah-leen-CHAY), an American Indian woman who assisted Cortés as an interpreter of Indian languages. Malinche had a son by Cortés and later married one of his followers. In the past, Mexicans have condemned Malinche as a traitor, coining the term *malinchismo* to refer to favoring foreign things over those of one's own people or culture. In recent years, women writers and artists in Mexico have tried to create a more balanced image of Malinche.

Legends also cluster around Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla (1753–1811), a priest and leader of the independence movement who died before a firing squad; Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878–1923), a bandit turned revolutionary general; and Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919), a peasant who fought for peasants' rights in the Mexican Revolution. It is said that Zapata is not really dead but only sleeping. One day, like King **Arthur** of British legend, he will return to help his people. Some speak of hearing the hoofbeats of his horse Lightning as he rides through their villages at night.

## Major Myths

Myths and tales told in modern Mexico not only amuse and entertain but also preserve old traditions and offer lessons in good or wise behavior. Some stories reflect pre-Christian beliefs, mentioning Father Sun and Mother Moon, once regarded as deities. Legend says that eclipses—during which part or all of the **sun** or moon is hidden by shadow—are caused by evil creatures trying to devour the heavenly bodies. One version identifies the evil creatures as ants, which cover Father Sun or Mother Moon with their huge colonies.

Some Mexican myths explain features of the natural world. One story tells how the **basilisk** (pronounced BAS-uh-lisk), a type of lizard, acquired the crest on its head. The Lord of the Woods announced that he would give a special hat to the animal that won a race. Most of the animals refused to compete, protesting that Big Deer was bound to win. However, to the amusement of all, the little basilisk said that it would race on one condition: all the animals had to close their eyes at the start of the race. The Lord of the Woods agreed, and Big Deer and the basilisk took off toward the stone that was their goal. When Big Deer arrived, he slowed down, thinking that he must have passed the basilisk long before. But to his surprise, as he prepared to sit on the stone, he found the



basilisk there before him. The Lord of the Woods awarded the hat to the basilisk because he knew that the little creature had cleverly grabbed Big Deer's tail at the starting point and ridden it to the stone.

Many apparently humorous Mexican tales contain criticisms of social injustice or of bad behavior by those in power. A legend about Pancho Villa, for example, says that he became a leader of men by selling his soul to the devil, who came accompanied by many kings, popes, generals, and cardinals of the church—all of whom had made similar deals. A myth about a hungry peasant tells of a poor man driven by desperation to steal a chicken and cook it. A stranger appeared and asked for some food. The peasant refused him. The stranger revealed that he was God, upon which the peasant declared that he would definitely not share with God, who favored the rich but was unkind to the poor. Another stranger appeared, asking for food. When this second stranger revealed that he was Death, the peasant gladly shared with him, explaining that Death was fair, taking the fat and thin, young and old, rich and poor equally.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

One recurring theme in Mexican mythology is death. The ancient belief that people's personalities and needs continue unchanged after death leads to the custom of burying possessions and useful objects with the dead. A related belief is the notion that the dead can harm the living unless ceremonies are performed to keep them from doing so. This theme is also seen in the Day of the Dead celebration each year.

Another theme common in Mexican mythology is fairness or equality for all. This is seen in the tale of God and Death visiting the peasant, as well as in the hero status awarded to outlaws such as Pancho Villa and revolutionaries like Zapata. These figures were viewed as fighters for the underprivileged and poor, while the government itself was often viewed with suspicion or scorn.

### **Mexican Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Several aspects of modern Mexican culture show the importance of myths in national life. Religious fiestas, or festivals, often combine pagan traditions with the worship of Christian saints. Mourning and funeral practices are also a blend of American Indian and Christian ideas.

On November 1 and 2, the people of Mexico celebrate a national holiday called the Day of the Dead. Images of death, such as skulls and skeletons, appear everywhere on toys, candies, breads, and masks; at the same time, families prepare altars with offerings for dead relatives, who are thought to visit the world of the living at that time.

Some of the best-known art of modern Mexico includes images drawn from American Indian, Christian, and revolutionary myth. The most noted painters of the Mexican School—José Clemente Orozco (1883–1949), Diego Rivera (1886–1957), and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974)—produced murals that glorified the Mexican past, the Indians and peasants, and revolutionary ideals. Rivera's painting *The Deliverance of the Peon* illustrates his use of mythic symbols: the figure of Christ being taken from the cross represents the peasants who gave their lives in the Mexican Revolution.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

A blending of beliefs is common in regions that are conquered by people with a different cultural background from the native peoples. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research a North American Indian group whose religious beliefs and myths were transformed after contact with Europeans. How does that example compare with the situation in Mexico? What are the similarities and differences?

SEE ALSO Aztec Mythology; Basilisk; Mayan Mythology



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## Micronesian Mythology

### Micronesian Mythology in Context

Micronesia (pronounced mye-kroh-NEE-zhuh), an area in the southwest Pacific Ocean containing thousands of islands, has no single mythology. The various islands and island groups—including the Caroline Islands, Marshall Islands, Mariana Islands, and Gilbert Islands—each have their own collection of legends and mythological beings. Micronesia is part of a vast region known as Oceania (pronounced oh-shee-AN-ee-uh).

Europeans arrived in Micronesia in the 1520s and brought Christianity with them. As the new religion became established in many areas, traditional beliefs declined. In addition, the contact with European cultures led to changes in local myths and legends. Travelers and missionaries wrote down some of the original myths, but many were lost before they could be recorded. Although the myths and legends have changed over the years, reflecting developments in Micronesia, they remain an important part of the region's cultural heritage.

The Micronesian religions included spirits of dead ancestors (called Ani in the Caroline Islands) and numerous other spirits that performed specific functions and were associated with particular locations. Only certain people, such as priests, healers, and magicians, could communicate with these spirits. They usually did so through dreams and trances. Spirits might be called on for a variety of reasons, including the diagnosis and cure of illness, success in fishing, control of weather, courage in battle, and skill in navigation. To ensure the goodwill of the spirits, people often entertained them by dancing and singing. In return, the spirits provided information about the cause of individual misfortunes and prescribed cures and magical spells.

Myths were often used to teach members of a group about particular beliefs or skills. Myths about Aluluei (pronounced ah-LOO-loo-lay), a god of seafaring, included information useful for training navigators. In addition, legends told in the Marshall Islands dealt with forecasting weather and determining position at sea by observing natural phenomena. The Micronesians also had myths that expressed their beliefs about the earth and sky, the **afterlife**, and the roles of gods and culture **heroes**. The myths were passed from one generation to the next by professional storytellers.

## Core Deities and Characters

Micronesian myths feature creator gods, demigods (half human, half god), **tricksters**, heroes, and ancestral spirits. Creation stories generally dealt with the origin of particular islands or groups of people. For this reason, there were numerous creation myths and a variety of creator deities.

Nareau, the Spider Lord of the Gilbert Islands, is one of the best-known creator gods. After emerging from an ancient place—consisting of darkness, endless space, or the sea—he created **heaven** and earth and two beings, Na Atibu and Nei Teukez. From these beings sprang many

gods. One, also called Nareau and known as Young Spider, played an important part in separating the earth from the sky and in creating the stars, islands, trees, and creatures of the earth. Another creator deity was Loa, the supreme being of the Marshall Islands. From his leg emerged Wulleb and Limdunani, the first man and woman.

One of Micronesia's mythological heroes was Motikitik, famous for his fishing feats. According to one myth, Motikitik was curious to know how his mother always managed to provide large quantities of food, so he stayed at home and spied on her. He heard his mother say a magic spell and watched her dive into the sea. Changing himself into a diving bird, Motikitik followed her and saw her gathering food. By discovering her secret, however, he caused her to die. During the next three days, Motikitik fished up many baskets of food. On the fourth day, he fished up an island, where he went to live with his two brothers.

Perhaps the most important trickster and culture hero in Micronesian mythology was Olifat (also called Olofat, Olofath, and Orofat). The son of the god Lugeilan and of a human woman, the mischievous Olifat was a contradictory figure torn between two worlds. He sometimes rose to heaven on a column of smoke and other times descended to earth on a bolt of lightning. He was often associated with **fire**. While in heaven, Olifat disturbed the gods by singing and making other noises. On earth, he played tricks on humans. Some tricks had unforeseen consequences, such as giving sharks sharp teeth and putting stingers on the tails of scorpions.

The Micronesians linked particular deities, spirits, and heroes with certain functions and skills. Aluluei, the god of seafaring, had numerous eyes that became the stars of the night sky used by sailors to navigate at sea. Bue, a culture hero of the Gilbert Islands, taught Micronesians how to sing and dance, build canoes and houses, and raise winds by magic. Naniumlap, the fertility god of the Caroline Islands, helped ensure that plants and animals grew and that women had children. Finally, Nei Tituaabine, the tree goddess of the Gilbert Islands, made sure that trees grew and bore fruit.

### Major Myths

Despite the great variety of myths that existed on Micronesia's many islands, certain themes can be found throughout the region. Origin myths typically dealt with the creation of the earth and sky, gods, islands,

heroes, features of the landscape, humans, and other creatures. The main event in many creation myths was the separation of the earth from the sky. Stories about the older Nareau, for example, told how he ordered Sand and Water to mate. Two of their offspring then produced many beings, including Riiki, the eel. Riiki pushed up the sky, and Nareau created the **sun**, moon, stars, rocks, and a great tree. The ancestors of humans sprang from the branches of this ancestral tree.

Myths about travels between the sky and the earth were also quite common. Stories about the trickster Olifat often described his journeys up to heaven and his descents to earth. In addition, a mythical child named Thilefial traveled to the sky to escape mistreatment on earth and then returned to earth to take revenge.

Micronesians believed that the gods made humans mortal—subject to death—and various myths dealt with death and the afterlife. According to one myth, when gods first created humans, men and women lived separately under two different trees. The guardian spirit Na Kaa warned them not to leave their particular trees, but once during his absence, the men and women gathered under the same tree. When Na Kaa returned, he told them that they had chosen the Tree of Death. This was how humans became mortal. When humans died, their souls journeyed either to a paradise (underwater or in the sky) or to a gloomy **underworld** realm whose gates were guarded by evil spirits.

The adventures of tricksters were a common feature in Micronesian myths. The trickster Olifat annoyed the gods, made fools of men, and sometimes caused human injury or death. Many stories about him tell how he changed his form to a bird, an animal, or an object to escape detection or punishment. Despite his often harmful behavior, Olifat sometimes helped humans who sought his advice about love and other personal matters. He is also credited with introducing the art of tattooing to the people of Micronesia.

*Micronesians worshiped ancestral spirits that were associated with particular purposes and places. Priests and healers communicated with these beings through dreams and trances. This wooden ancestral figure comes from the Caroline Islands.* COPYRIGHT © 1999–2008 BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Many Micronesian myths featured animal tricksters. The stories usually revolved around three main characters, such as a rat, a crab, and either a turtle or an octopus, and recounted the pranks they played on other creatures. The myths also helped explain the relationships among various animals.

Some evil characters in Micronesian myths were cannibal spirits or ogres. Usually characterized by their strength and stupidity, these creatures could be frightened away by loud noises and were terrified of fire. A well-known mythological hero was the ogre-killing child who sometimes saved entire villages by destroying the evil creatures.

Tales about Pälülop (pronounced pay-LOO-lop), a great canoe captain, and members of his family were popular in the Caroline Islands. The stories were complex, included a bewildering array of characters, and dealt with many different subjects. One story told how Pälülop's sons Big Rong and Little Rong became jealous of their younger brother Aluluei and killed him. Pälülop brought Aluluei back in spirit form and gave him lots of eyes that shone like stars to help the boy protect himself.

Another well-known myth involved a porpoise girl, a mermaid-like creature who came to land either to steal something or to watch people dance. While she was on land, a man hid her tail, preventing her from returning to the sea. The porpoise girl married the man and had children. Many years later she found her tail and returned to the sea after telling her children never to eat porpoise. Stories of this type, in which people learn not to eat certain foods, were often used to explain the origin of certain food taboos. In some versions of the myth, the girl came from the sky and the man hid her wings.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The most common myths in Micronesian mythology are origin myths—stories that explain how things came to be. There are origin myths that explain the creation of the world, the creation of certain tribes and people, and the origins of certain practices or traditions. A common theme in eastern Micronesia was the use of a creator god's body to form the earth, sky, sun, moon, and other features. In the Gilbert Islands, the work of creation was shared by the Spider Lord, Nareau, and the younger Nareau (Young Spider). This represents the strong connection between the people, the gods, and the natural world.

The theme of an animal in human form who marries a mortal man and then leaves him to return to her home is also popular. This type of myth is not exclusive to Micronesia and can be found in stories from India dating back more than three thousand years. The presence of similar legends throughout Oceania suggests that a myth of this type may have originated in Asia and spread to the islands of the Pacific at a very early date.

## Micronesian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Micronesians include mythology in much of their art and daily life. Dance is an especially important part of most Micronesian cultures, with every member of a tribe frequently being required to show their dancing skills at ceremonies and celebrations. Music is equally important, and songs are viewed not as the creation of musicians but as gifts channeled from the gods and spirits. Many Micronesians also believe in magic and consult magicians regularly to help resolve personal or family issues.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, locate Micronesia on a map of the Pacific Ocean. Where is it in relation to Melanesia and Polynesia? Are these different regions fairly distinct in their mythologies? What are some of the mythological themes they have in common?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Animals in Mythology; Creation Stories; Melanesian Mythology; Polynesian Mythology



# Midas

## Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Midas was a king of Phrygia (pronounced FRIJ-ee-uh) fabled for having the “Midas touch”—the power to turn whatever he touched into gold.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

MY-duhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Son of King Gordias and Cybele

According to Greek and Roman mythology, Silenus (pronounced sye-LEE-nuhs), a companion of the god **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), became drunk while visiting Phrygia. Silenus was captured and brought to Midas, who ordered that he be released and returned safely to Dionysus. The god gratefully granted Midas any wish as a reward. Midas asked that everything he touched turn to gold. Knowing the wish to be dangerous, Dionysus asked the king if he was sure that was what he wanted. Midas assured him that it was, and the god granted the wish.

At first Midas was overjoyed. He gathered great wealth simply by touching things. However, when he tried to eat, each mouthful of food turned to gold as it touched his lips. When he went to hug his daughter, she turned to gold as well. Midas finally begged the god to release him from his wish. Dionysus instructed him to bathe in the River Pactolus (pronounced pak-TOH-luhs). From that day forward Midas was cured, and the sands of the river turned to gold dust.

In another tale, Midas observed a music contest between the gods **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and **Pan**. Midas, who had become a follower of Pan, protested when Apollo was awarded the victory. The angry Apollo gave Midas the ears of a donkey as punishment for his inability to hear that Apollo was the superior musician. Midas wore a hat to hide the ears and made his barber swear never to tell anyone the embarrassing secret. Unable to keep the secret, the barber dug a hole in a meadow and whispered into it, “King Midas has the ears of an ass.” Reeds later grew from the hole, and whenever a breeze blew through them, they whispered the secret to anyone who was nearby.

### Midas in Context

The Pactolus River is a real river that was important to the people of Lydia, a kingdom that covered the entire western portion of Asia Minor (a region known as Turkey in modern times). Lydia was known as a wealthy kingdom, and much of its wealth came from the abundant gold that was found in the sands along the Pactolus. In fact, in the seventh century BCE, Lydia became the first culture to mint and use coins as currency. The myth of Midas can be seen as an “origin tale” that explains why gold is found in the sands of the Pactolus. The myth allowed the ancient Lydians to link the tales of the gods to their own environment. It also reflects the importance of gold in ancient cultures, where it was used mainly to create sacred or religious objects kept by rulers.



## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of King Midas is greed. Midas wishes for great riches and believes at first that he has come up with a way to achieve that goal. However, his greed ultimately causes him to lose everything of true importance. In the story, gold at first represents wealth and the favor of the gods. In the end, especially after losing his daughter, gold symbolizes the high price Midas has paid for his greed.

## Midas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Midas has appeared in countless versions over the years. It remains especially popular in collections of children's stories. The Hand of Midas appears in the Disney animated film *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* (1995), a sequel to the 1992 hit film *Aladdin*. In the movie, the hand of Midas still possesses the ability to transform anything into gold by touch. In popular speech, saying someone has “the Midas touch” means that the person is very prosperous at any endeavor he or she attempts.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the twenty-first century, there are many figures in the business and entertainment industry such as Microsoft founder Bill Gates and talk-show host Oprah Winfrey who have made fortunes worth millions and even billions of dollars. Do you think there is such a thing as having too much money? What might be some of the effects—social, emotional, and psychological—of being able to buy practically anything in the world you want?

SEE ALSO Apollo; Dionysus; Greek Mythology; Pan; Roman Mythology



# Mimir

## Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, the giant Mimir was considered the wisest member of the group of gods known as the Aesir (pronounced AY-sur). He served

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

MEE-mir

### Alternate Names

Mim

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Unknown

as the guardian of the well of knowledge, located at the base of the world tree called **Yggdrasil** (pronounced IG-druh-sil).

### Major Myths

During the war between the Aesir and another group of gods called the Vanir (pronounced VAH-nir), the Vanir took Mimir and a companion, named Hoenir (pronounced HUH-nir), as hostages. Hoenir was treated as a chieftain by the Vanir, but without the wise Mimir he could not speak well. The Vanir felt cheated and cut off Mimir's head. They sent it back to **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), the father of the gods, who kept it alive in a shrine near the base of Yggdrasil.

The well of knowledge sprang from the spot where Mimir's head was kept. Seeking wisdom, Odin rode to the well to drink its waters. However, Mimir allowed him to do so only after Odin left one of his eyes in the well. From then on, when Odin wished to learn secrets from the well, he asked questions to Mimir's head, which gave him the answers.

### Mimir in Context

The myth of Mimir reflects Norse attitudes about drawing resources from nature and transforming them into something useful, rather than simply hoarding resources as wealth. In this case, the well of Mimir is a natural source of knowledge that serves no purpose until someone drinks from it. Odin uses this knowledge to gain insight into the fates of the gods. Mimir does serve as a guardian of the well, but only to ensure that those who do drink from the well earn their knowledge through **sacrifice**. This contrasts with Norse depictions of the Vanir and other less heroic figures, such as Fafnir, who are depicted as greedy creatures, more concerned with possessing treasures than actually using them in a positive way.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Norse mythology, Mimir represents knowledge and wisdom. This is emphasized by the fact that only his head survives after he is kidnapped by the Vanir. The head is a traditional symbol of knowledge in many cultures, and, in the myth, Odin continues to seek guidance from the head. Mimir is also portrayed as a protector because he guards the well of

knowledge and keeps the unworthy from drinking out of it. The fact that Mimir demands Odin's eye as a sacrifice before he can drink from the well indicates that there is a price to be paid to gain knowledge, but that it is worth it.

### Mimir in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mimir appears in the *Prose Edda* and the *Poetic Edda*, most notably the *Gylfaginning* and *Voluspa*. Though Norse mythology has become increasingly well known since the nineteenth century, Mimir only seldom makes appearances. He is perhaps best known from the Richard Wagner opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which combines Norse and German myths into an epic tale about the gods. "Mimir" is also the name of a class of disembodied skulls found in *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games that provide knowledge to the player, much like the mythical Mimir provided knowledge to Odin.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Sea of Trolls* (2004), by Nancy Farmer, is a fantasy novel set in the realm of Norse and Saxon myth. It tells the tale of a young apprentice bard named Jack who accidentally causes the half-troll Queen Frith to lose her hair during a performance at the royal court. She threatens to sacrifice Jack's sister unless he fixes the problem, so Jack embarks on a quest to find Mimir's well; by drinking from the well, he hopes to learn a spell that will replace the Queen's hair. Along the way, Jack has countless adventures and meets creatures that are both humorous and frightening.

SEE ALSO Giants; Norse Mythology; Odin; Yggdrasil

## Minerva

See **Athena**.

## Minos, King

See **Minotaur**.



**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
MIN-uh-tawr

**Alternate Names**  
Asterion

**Appears In**  
Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*,  
Ovid's *Heroides*, Hygi-  
nus's *Fabulae*

**Lineage**  
Son of the Cretan bull and  
Pasiphaë

# Minotaur

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the Minotaur was a monstrous creature with the head of a bull on a man's body. Like many other mythological monsters, the Minotaur had a ravenous appetite for human flesh. He was eventually slain by a worthy hero with the help of a resourceful heroine.

The Minotaur—which means “Minos's bull”—was born in the palace of King Minos (pronounced MEYE-nuhs) of Crete (pronounced KREET), a large island south of Greece. Some time earlier, the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) had sent Minos a pure-white bull to be sacrificed in his honor. When the king saw the magnificent creature, however, he refused to kill it. This angered Poseidon, who arranged for Minos's wife, Pasiphaë (pronounced pa-SIF-ah-ee), to fall in love with the bull. The offspring of their unnatural mating was the Minotaur. The king imprisoned the Minotaur in the Labyrinth (pronounced LAB-uh-rinth), a maze built by a craftsman at his court named **Daedalus** (pronounced DED-uh-lus).

In later years, after the people of the Greek city of Athens killed one of Minos's sons, the Cretan king called down a plague on their city. Only by agreeing to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete every year could the Athenians obtain relief. These youths and maidens were sent into the Cretan Labyrinth, where the Minotaur devoured them.

**Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs) of Athens was determined to end the slaughter of young people. He volunteered to go to Crete as one of the sacrificial victims, vowing to slay the Minotaur. When the ship carrying the Athenians reached Crete, **Ariadne** (pronounced ar-ee-AD-nee), daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, fell in love with Theseus. She gave him a plan of the Labyrinth that she had obtained from Daedalus, as well as a ball of string. He was to tie one end of the string to the exit as he went in and then follow the string to find his way out. Deep in the Labyrinth, Theseus met the bellowing, bloodthirsty Minotaur and killed it with a blow from his fist. He and the other Athenians then fled Crete, taking Ariadne with them.



*A monstrous creature in Greek mythology, the Minotaur had the head of a bull and the body of a man. This vase painting dating from the 500s BCE shows Theseus killing the Minotaur.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

## The Minotaur in Context

Some scholars suggest that the myth of the Minotaur arose out of ancient rituals in which a priest or king donned a bull mask before performing sacrifices. The Labyrinth may have represented the ancient palace at Knossos on Crete, which was a sprawling complex of chambers and hallways. In addition, the tale reflects ancient Greek ideas about women and infidelity. Unlike many male characters in Greek mythology, Pasiphaë does not seek to love the bull, but is forced to do so through the magic of the gods. This reflects the much lower incidence of female infidelity in ancient Greece. However, the child she bears is hideous and must be hidden from the outside world, which also reflects the enormous stigma—social disapproval—that was attached to wives who were unfaithful.

## The Minotaur, World War II, and Art

The myth of the Minotaur captured the imagination of many artists during the period of the Second World War. Henri Matisse, Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, and Victor Brauner all created artistic versions of the myth. Among writers, André Gide, Jorge Luis Borges, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound also found the myth central to their dark vision of humanity during and after the war. But it was Pablo Picasso who delved most deeply into the myth of the Minotaur in his paintings and sketches. Picasso used the beast to depict the loss of balance between the natural and human worlds. The Minotaur, once confined to a dark and secret labyrinth, has escaped in Picasso's paintings and appears lost and disoriented as he makes his way through the human world. Picasso thus expresses what many were feeling during the terrible years of the Second World War and its aftermath.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As with many Greek myths, one of the central themes of the myth of the Minotaur is vengeance. Poseidon seeks vengeance upon Minos for his failure to offer an intended **sacrifice** (the white bull); this leads to the Minotaur's birth. King Minos later seeks vengeance upon the people of Athens for killing his beloved son. This leads to the offering of Athenian sacrifices as payment, and ultimately to the Minotaur's death at the hands of Theseus.

## The Minotaur in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Minotaur is such a visually distinctive character that he has remained popular in art and culture throughout the centuries. He is nearly always depicted as having the head of a bull and the body of a man, though some sources describe him as having an ox's body and a man's head. The Minotaur has appeared in Dante's *Inferno*, as well as in works by Ted Hughes and C. S. Lewis. In the film version of the C. S. Lewis novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2005), General Otmin is a Minotaur who leads the White Witch's evil army. "The House of Asterion," a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, tells the tale of the Minotaur from his own point of view rather than from the perspective of the hero Theseus. The artist most closely associated with the Minotaur, however, is Pablo Picasso, who created many works of art centered around the mythical creature.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Minotaur is somewhat unique among mythical Greek characters because he has the head of an animal; most mythical Greek hybrids have animal body parts combined with human heads. What do you think this says about the “humanness” of the Minotaur in the eyes of the ancient Greeks? Why do you think other cultures, such as the Egyptians, have many gods and goddesses with animal heads, while the Greeks did not?

SEE ALSO Ariadne; Daedalus; Greek Mythology; Theseus



# Mithras

## Character Overview

Mithras—also called Mithra—was a god of ancient **Persian mythology** associated with the **sun**. He became a major figure in the religion known as Zoroastrianism, which originated in ancient Persia and was connected with the supreme Zoroastrian god **Ahura Mazda** (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh). In early forms of Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda created Mithras as a god of justice and light. Mentions of this incarnation of Mithras date to 1500 BCE. Later, Mithras came to be seen by some as a version of Ahura Mazda himself. A cult devoted to Mithras spread into the Mediterranean world in the first few centuries of the common era, where for a time it rivaled Christianity as the fastest-growing new religion. It is unclear whether the practices associated with the Mithras cult are connected with Zoroastrian worship of Mithras.

## Major Myths

According to earliest Zoroastrian legends, Mithras was born from the earth, emerging from a broken rock with a torch in one hand and a sword in the other. He worked for Ahura Mazda by battling demons, sorcerers, and other evildoers. He also judged the deeds of the dead and it was believed he could bring worthy humans back to life at the time of the end of the world.

Hundreds of years later, in ancient Greece and Rome, the worship of Mithras focused on his role as god of war, so soldiers in particular were

### Nationality/Culture

Persian

### Pronunciation

MITH-rahS

### Alternate Names

Mithra, Mitra, Meher

### Appears In

The Avesta; the Vedas

### Lineage

None

## Mithras

*The Greco-Roman god Mithras evolved from the Persian god Mithra. Mithras is almost always portrayed in the act of killing the great bull, the body and blood of which became the source of life on earth, according to Greek and Roman mythology.*

SCALA/ART  
RESOURCE, NY.



drawn to the Mithras cult. The legend most associated with this phase of Mithras worship tells of Mithras slaying a great bull whose body and blood became the source of all life on earth. Animal sacrifices were central to his worship, which took place in caves or cavelike buildings in honor of the god's birth from the earth. Little concrete information about the Greek and Roman form of Mithras-worship survives. Most descriptions of how the religion was practiced in Greece and Rome come from later Christian writers and date to the third and fourth centuries CE, when Mithras-worship was at its peak. It seems most likely that it was an all-male cult with various levels, or ranks, and that rising through the ranks of the cult required special training and initiation. The Roman army carried the religion to Britain, Germany, and other outposts of the Holy Roman Empire.

### Mithras in Context

The legends surrounding the Greek and Roman version of Mithras bear much in common with some elements of Christianity. For example, like Jesus Christ, Mithras was said to be born on December 25, to have performed miracles, to have the power to “save” human souls at the end



of the world, and to have eaten a last supper with twelve followers. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the 300s, worship of Mithras was suppressed, along with other pagan beliefs. It is unclear whether the Mithras cult borrowed from Christianity or vice versa as both religions were widespread in the fourth century CE.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Mithras is born with a sword and a torch. These two objects represent his roles as the god of war and the god of light. The “light” he represents is both literal and figurative: like the Greek god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh), Mithras is a sun god. Mithras represents the light of truth and justice. Mithras himself came to represent strength, bravery, and manliness, which made him an appealing god for soldiers.

## Mithras in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

At the turn of the twentieth century, an influential book on the Mithras cult was published: Franz Cumont’s *Texts and Illustrated Monuments Related to the Mysteries of Mithra*. Cumont argued that the worship of Mithras by the Romans had its origins in a similar religion practiced by the ancient Zoroastrians, although there is little evidence to support this idea. The Mithras of the Zoroastrians is hardly mentioned outside the Avesta and the Vedas, and there is no archeological evidence in modern Iran (the area that was ancient Persia) of the caves devoted to later Mithras-worship.

Hundreds of the ancient caves and cavelike structures in which the Roman Mithras cult was practiced survive today in Italy, Germany, and Britain. Three Mithras-worship caves have been excavated along Hadrian’s wall (built by Roman Emperor Hadrian) in northern Britain. One sculpture discovered there is of Mithras emerging from an egg, surrounded by the twelve signs of the zodiac.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Several writers have speculated about a connection between the Mithras cult of the first few centuries CE and another secret society that still exists today: the Freemasons. Because it is a secret society, and because it has boasted among its members some of the most famous men in Western

history, the Freemasons have been the subject of much wild speculation and rumor. Using your library and the Internet, write a report about the origins and functions of the Freemasons. Evaluate your sources carefully. Only include information that seems reliable and verifiable, and only use sources that seem trustworthy and unbiased.

SEE ALSO Ahura Mazda; Apollo



## Mordred

### Nationality/Culture

Romano-British/Celtic

### Pronunciation

MAWR-dred

### Alternate Names

Modred, Medraut (Welsh)

### Appears In

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

### Lineage

Son of King Arthur and Morgause

### Character Overview

Mordred was the illegitimate son of King **Arthur** and his half-sister Morgause (pronounced mor-GAWZ). Mordred is best remembered for his betrayal of Arthur and for launching the battle that led to Arthur's demise. He appears in even the earliest versions of Arthurian legend, though the specifics of his life vary widely.

According to legend, Morgause and Arthur shared the same mother, though they did not know it. Mordred was conceived when the two had an affair, and was raised by his mother and her husband, King Lot, along with her other children. Another of her sons, Gawain (pronounced gah-WAYN), was admired for his bravery and became a knight of King Arthur's Round Table. Mordred used the connections of his brother Gawain to secure himself a position as one of Arthur's trusted knights as well. Though Mordred developed a reputation for womanizing and treachery, Arthur—who by then knew himself to be Mordred's uncle, but not his father—left Mordred in charge of his kingdom while he ventured on a campaign against Roman forces.

Mordred immediately seized control of Arthur's kingdom and attempted to take Arthur's wife **Guinevere** (pronounced GWEN-uh-veer) as his own. Guinevere fled to the Tower of London, and Arthur immediately returned to reclaim his throne. Mordred and Arthur's armies clashed in battle at Camlann, where Arthur killed Mordred—but not before being mortally wounded by him. According to legend, Arthur did not die but was taken from the battlefield to recover on the island of Avalon, where he still remains. Arthur's battle against Mordred

marks the fall of **Camelot**, and with it the end of the Knights of the Round Table.

## Mordred in Context

Although Mordred is almost universally viewed as a villain by those familiar with basic Arthurian legend, many lesser known sources tell a different story. Considering the early references to Mordred in several Welsh texts, Mordred may have been an historical figure from Welsh nobility. In fact, he is portrayed as courteous and brave in some early writings—quite the opposite of the Mordred of legend. The first mention of his presence at the Battle of Camlann merely indicates that he fought there and does not state that he fought against Arthur. In fact, some sources suggest that the battle was brought about by a dispute between Queen Guinevere and her sister.

## Key Themes and Symbols

A central theme in the myth of Mordred is the vengeance of the illegitimate son. Though Arthur had an affair with a woman he did not know to be his sister, and later believed himself to be Mordred's uncle, the legends suggest that the final clash between the two was fated to occur. Mordred represents all of Arthur's secret flaws, unseen by most of the Knights of the Round Table, but which ultimately played an important part in the failure of his seemingly perfect kingdom.

## Mordred in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Mordred is a key figure in nearly all versions of Arthurian legend. He is present even in the earliest documented portions of the myth, found in *The Annals of Wales*, and in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. Mordred is also found in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and in newer works such as *The Once and Future King* by T. H. White and *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Winter Prince* (2003) by Elizabeth Wein offers a fresh vision of Arthurian legend from the point of view of a young Medraut (Mordred). Medraut is a gifted boy who uses his powers of healing to help his sickly younger brother, Lleu, who is destined to become the next king—

something Medraut, the illegitimate son of King Artos (Arthur), cannot do. When his cunning mother Morgause attempts to pit the boys against each other for her own wicked ends, the two brothers seem destined to either grow closer through understanding, or destroy each other through envy.

SEE ALSO Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends

## Morgan Le Fay

See Arthur, King; Arthurian Legends.



## Muses

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

MYOO-siz

### Alternate Names

Camenae (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*,  
Homer's *Iliad*

### Lineage

Daughters of Zeus and  
Mnemosyne

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, the Muses were sister goddesses of music, dance, poetry, and other artistic and intellectual pursuits. Poets and other artists often called on them for inspiration. **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, was the father of the Muses. Their mother was Mnemosyne (pronounced nee-MOSS-uh-nee), goddess of memory. In his role as god of music, poetry, and dance, **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) was sometimes said to be their leader. The Muses also figured in **Roman mythology**, although the Romans usually associated them with the four goddesses known as the Camenae (pronounced kuh-MEE-nee).

### Major Myths

The Muses lived on two sacred Greek mountain peaks, Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs) and Helicon (pronounced HEL-i-kon). Originally they were three in number—Melete (pronounced MEL-i-tee, meaning Practice), Mneme (pronounced NEE-mee, meaning Memory), and Aoede (pronounced ay-EE-dee, meaning Song)—but the Greek poet Hesiod named nine Muses in his *Theogony* (*Birth of the Gods*). Ancient

writers, particularly the Romans, often linked individual Muses with specific arts and sciences, but they did not agree on the functions of particular Muses. One widely recognized list identified Calliope (pronounced kuh-LYE-uh-pee) with heroic and epic poetry, Erato (pronounced AIR-uh-toh) with lyric and love poetry, Polyhymnia (pronounced pol-ee-HIM-nee-uh) with sacred songs and pantomime, Melpomene (pronounced mel-POM-uh-nee) with tragedy, Thalia (pronounced tuh-LYE-uh) with comedy, Euterpe (pronounced yoo-TUR-pee) with music played on instruments, Terpsichore (pronounced turp-SIK-uh-ree) with dancing, Clio (pronounced KLEE-oh) with history, and Urania (pronounced yoo-RAY-nee-uh) with astronomy.

In myths, the Muses often punished or rewarded mortals. Hesiod claimed that they gave him knowledge and inspired him. The *Odyssey* tells of Demodocus (pronounced dee-MOH-duh-kuhs), a man who was blinded and then given the gift of song by one of the Muses, who claimed that song was even more precious than sight. Although the Muses could be generous, they resented mortals who questioned their supremacy in the arts. The *Iliad* mentions Thamyris (pronounced THAH-mi-ruhs), a poet who challenged the Muses. They made him blind and took away his ability to sing. Another myth tells of the Pierides (pronounced pye-AIR-uh-deez), nine sisters who lived in Macedonia (pronounced mas-uh-DOHN-ee-uh), north of Greece. The Pierides challenged the Muses to a contest. The Muses won and then turned their challengers into chattering birds. Some of the Muses had famous offspring. Calliope, for example, was the mother of the great musician **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs), and Clio was the mother of the beautiful Hyacinthus (pronounced high-uh-SIN-thuhs).

## The Muses in Context

Poets in ancient Greece often expressed the idea that the Muses were responsible for the works that the poets had created. This may have served a specific purpose: it informed readers and listeners that the work fit within established traditional formats. At one time, for example, all traditional books—regardless of subject matter—were written with a poetic structure. Crediting the Muses as the originators of a work also reflected how ancient Greeks viewed their cultural knowledge as something that did not belong solely to the person writing it down or saying it, but to all Greeks. In addition, this may have indicated that a

## Muses

*In Greek mythology, the Muses were sister goddesses of poetry, song, comedy, tragedy, dancing, history, and astronomy. This vase from the 400s BCE shows three of the Muses.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.



work was derived from a historical source, passed down from other poets or storytellers.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The Muses represent creativity and the arts, with each one representing a different aspect of these things. One of the main themes of the stories of the Muses is divine inspiration—the idea that artists somehow receive their ideas, insights, and talents from a source greater than themselves. This is illustrated when others challenge the Muses to a contest of skills;

since the Muses are the source of all great art, they always defeat their challengers.

### **The Muses in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

The Muses appear frequently in ancient art and poetry, often in acknowledgement for helping to create the work itself. The Muses have been painted by artists such as Gustave Moreau and Johannes Vermeer. They have been called upon by writers from Homer and Virgil to William Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer. The Muses have also appeared several times in movies. The 1980 musical film *Xanadu* features Olivia Newton-John as Terpsichore, a Muse who enters the modern world and falls in love with a commercial artist, played by Michael Beck. In the 1999 Albert Brooks film *The Muse*, Sharon Stone plays a woman named Sarah who may or may not be an actual Muse from Greek mythology. Three of the Muses also appear as narrating characters in the 1997 animated Disney film *Hercules*.

The word *museum* is taken from the Muses. It means “place of the Muses” and was first used for the museum of ancient Alexandria, Egypt, a center of scholarship and learning. The word “music” is also taken from these goddesses, and means “art of the Muses.” Interestingly, the Greek word for Muse may come from an older Indo-European word meaning “to think,” and even today to “muse” over something means to think deeply about it, or to meditate upon it.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Myths of the Muses are linked to ideas about inspiration and creativity in the arts and sciences, and place great importance upon the mind and thought processes. What do the myths of the Muses tell us about the way the ancient Greeks thought about the arts and sciences? Did they divide the arts and sciences into categories, such as emotional versus rational, like many Western cultures do? Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, trace the development of one subject, such as history or astronomy, to identify its origins and learn how opinions about it have changed over the centuries. What were some of the social and cultural factors that may have influenced the changes?

**SEE ALSO** Apollo; Greek Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**  
African/Nyangan

**Pronunciation**  
MWEE-n-doh

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Nyangan oral mythology

**Lineage**  
Son of Shemwindo and  
Nyamwindo

## Mwindo

### Character Overview

In the mythology of the Nyanga people of central Africa, Mwindo was a hero with supernatural powers who had many adventures. His story is told in the epic of Mwindo. Mwindo was the son of Shemwindo (pronounced shay-MWEE-n-doh), a powerful chief who had seven wives. Shemwindo heard a prophecy, or prediction, that he would be removed from his throne by his son. To prevent this, Shemwindo decreed that his wives should bear only female children, and that he would kill any male child they produced. Six of his wives gave birth to females. Then his favorite wife, Nyamwindo (pronounced nee-ah-MWEE-n-doh), had a boy. The child emerged from her middle finger and could walk and talk immediately. His appearance was like that of a Pygmy, one of several culture groups within Africa whose average height is less than five feet tall. Nyamwindo named her child Mwindo. When Shemwindo found out about Mwindo, he tried to kill the boy with his spear. But Mwindo used magic to protect himself and to throw off his father's aim. Shemwindo then buried the child alive, but Mwindo escaped. Next the father sealed his son in a drum and threw him into a river to drown. Again, Mwindo used his magic powers to travel beneath the water.

Mwindo decided to visit his aunt Iyangura (pronounced ee-yong-GOO-rah). Iyangura's husband tried to stop him by setting traps. But with the help of animal spirits, Mwindo escaped the traps and met his aunt. A guard called upon Master Lightning to strike Mwindo down, but Mwindo's magic made the lightning bolts miss.

Later Mwindo led his uncles to his father's village, intending to punish Shemwindo. They killed all of the villagers and destroyed the village. Shemwindo fled to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, followed by Mwindo. There Mwindo met with the ruler of the underworld, Muisa, who promised to reveal Shemwindo's hiding place if Mwindo performed some tasks for him. Mwindo did so, but twice Muisa tried to kill Mwindo, and twice Mwindo used a magic scepter (a club-like staff) to save himself. Finally, Mwindo tracked down his father. Shemwindo apologized for trying to kill Mwindo and agreed to share his



kingdom with his son. Mwindo then rebuilt the village and restored all the villagers to life.

Later Mwindo killed a dragon that was a friend of Master Lightning. As punishment, Mwindo was taken up to the sky, where he had to endure blazing heat from the **sun** and terrible cold and rain. Mwindo endured this for a year, and, after he promised never to kill another living thing, the spirits of the sky let him return to earth. From then on, Mwindo ruled his kingdom in peace, instructing his people to live in harmony, to avoid jealousy and hatred, to accept every child, and to be kind to the sick.

### Mwindo in Context

The story of Mwindo reflects the attitudes of the Nyanga people toward the Pygmy people, who live in the same region. The Pygmy people are closely associated with Nyangan tribal chiefs, hunting for them and even providing them with wives. The Pygmies, however, remain an independent group outside the Nyanga tribe. It is believed that Pygmies greatly influenced the way the Nyanga people hunt, gather food, and perform religious ceremonies. The story of Mwindo can be seen as a celebration of the Pygmy people through a hero who is still considered a member of the Nyanga. This positive attitude toward a Pygmy group is rather unusual, since many Pygmy groups face prejudice and persecution in other parts of Africa.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes in the epic of Mwindo is the attempt to change fate. Shemwindo thinks he can avoid losing his throne to a son by preventing his wives from having sons. He even tries to kill his son Mwindo several times in an effort to prevent the prophecy from coming true. Ultimately, Shemwindo fails and agrees to share his throne with his son.

In the tale of Mwindo, Nyamwindo gives birth to Mwindo through her finger. This represents Mwindo's magical nature, as well as his small size. The scepter that saves Mwindo's life in the underworld represents tribal authority; scepters are usually associated with leaders, and this suggests Mwindo's rightful place as leader of the Nyanga people.

### Mwindo in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Mwindo was passed orally within the Nyanga tribe, and performances of the tale by a skilled storyteller are events that sometimes

last days. The myth was first recorded by anthropologist Daniel Biebuyck, and an English translation was published in 1969. The tale has also been retold in the children's book *The Magic Flyswatter: A Superhero Tale of Africa* (2008) by Aaron Shepard.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

There are many Pygmy groups throughout Africa, and anthropologists have written extensively about them. These groups represent a lifestyle based on hunting and gathering, which is how all of our first ancestors lived. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the hunting and gathering groups that remain. In what regions of the world do they now live? How would you describe those regions? Choose one group and trace its history to a pre-contact period (a period before it came into contact with Europeans). Contrast what the group's day-to-day life is like today with what it was like in the pre-contact period. What were some of the important changes that occurred in the group? Do you think the group is better or worse off today?

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Dragons; Heroes

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# N



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Hindu/Buddhist

## Pronunciation

NAH-gahz

## Alternate Names

Nagis, Naginis (female)

## Appears In

The Vedas, the *Mahabharata*

## Lineage

Children of Kadru and Kasyapa



# Nagas

## Character Overview

Nagas are a race of serpent creatures in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Female Nagas are called Nagis or Naginis. Usually depicted as human above the waist and snake below the waist, Nagas can also change shape to appear fully human or snake. Nagas and Nagis are known for their strength, supernatural wisdom, and good looks. When Nagis take human form, they can marry mortal men, and some Indian groups claim descent from them.

According to legend, Nagas are children of Kadru, the granddaughter of the god **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh), and her husband Kasyapa (pronounced kahsh-YUH-puh). Nagas lived on earth at first, but their numbers became so great that Brahma sent them to live under the sea. They reside in magnificent jeweled palaces and rule as kings at the bottom of rivers and lakes and in the underground realm called Patala (pronounced PAH-tuh-lah).

Like humans, Nagas show wisdom and concern for others, but also show cowardice and injustice. Nagas are immortal, or able to live forever, and are potentially dangerous. Some are demons; others seem friendly and are worshipped as gods. Nagas also serve as protectors and guardians of treasure—both material riches and spiritual wealth.

In Buddhism, one famous Naga named Mucalinda spreads his cobra hood to shelter Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh) while he meditates. When the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo) sleeps, he is protected by Shesha, king of the Nagas. Shesha is said to have many heads—as many as a thousand—that support the planets and shelter Vishnu beneath them. As servants of the god **Indra** (pronounced IN-druh), Nagas oversee the distribution of rain. Sometimes they withhold the rain until forced to release it by the eagle god Garuda (pronounced GUH-ruh-duh).

### Nagas in Context

In Hindu culture, snakes and serpents do not have the negative associations they have throughout Western culture. This may be due to the greater exposure to snakes that people in India have, with many species of snakes thriving throughout the region thanks to the tropical and sub-tropical environment and monsoon weather. The *Mahabharata* even contains a tale about snake **sacrifice** that, according to the text, will remove any fear of snakes from a listener once it has been heard.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In many respects, Nagas symbolize humankind's relationship with nature. Their attitude toward humans is directly related to how humans treat the environment in which the Nagas live, especially lakes and rivers. In relation to Vishnu and Buddha, Nagas represent protection and shelter.

### Nagas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Nagas are mentioned in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata* and are considered to be the ancestors of certain groups of Indian people. One area in northeastern India is known as Nagaland, and its many tribes are collectively known as Nagas. In Western culture, a race of serpentine beings appeared in the Warcraft video game universe and in *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games, and Marvel Comics features a snake-person villain called Naga who was introduced in the *Sub-Mariner* comic series in 1969. In the Harry Potter series of books by J. K. Rowling, Nagini is the name of the serpent servant and companion of the evil Lord Voldemort, Harry's arch-enemy.



*Nagas are semi-divine serpent creatures in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. They can take human or serpent shape, sometimes appearing as human from the waist up and snake below the waist.*

SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Nagas are often associated with a specific type of snake, usually the Indian cobra. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the Indian cobra. Why is it considered important in

Indian culture? How dangerous is it? Are Indian cobras endangered, and if so, what measures are being taken to protect the species?

**SEE ALSO** Brahma; Buddhism and Mythology; Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; Serpents and Snakes



## Nala and Damayanti

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

NAHL-ah and dah-muh-YAN-tee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The *Mahabharata*, the *Naiadhiyacarita*

### Lineage

Daughter of King Bhima (Damayanti)

### Character Overview

In Hindu mythology, Nala and Damayanti were lovers who overcame various obstacles to marry and live happily. Their story appears in the Hindu epic called the *Mahabharata*, and in the *Naiadhiyacarita*, a poem written by the poet Shriharsha.

According to legend, Nala was the young, handsome, and skillful king of Nishadha (pronounced NEE-shuh-duh) in central India. Damayanti, said to be the most beautiful girl in the world, was the daughter of King Bhima of Vidarbha (pronounced VEE-dahr-buh), a neighboring country. One day Nala captured a swan. In return for freedom, the swan flew to Vidarbha and praised the virtues of Nala to Damayanti. After hearing about him, Damayanti hoped that he would fall in love with her.

Soon after, Damayanti's father decided to find a suitable husband for his daughter and invited many princes to his palace. Several of the gods also sought Damayanti's hand in marriage. On the way to the palace, the gods met Nala and told him to serve as messenger and announce their intentions to Damayanti. When he arrived at the palace, Damayanti marveled at Nala's good looks. Nala relayed the message from the gods, but Damayanti told him that she wanted only him and vowed to wed him or die.

On the day that Damayanti was supposed to choose her future husband, the royal court was full of men. Among them were the gods, who each appeared as the handsome Nala. Unable to distinguish among them, Damayanti announced that she had pledged herself to Nala and began to pray. As she prayed, the gods assumed their own forms. Damayanti chose Nala, and the two were married.

Angered that Damayanti had married a mortal, the demon Kali (pronounced KAH-lee) vowed to take revenge and tricked Nala into gambling away the royal treasury. Having lost everything, Nala advised his wife to leave him, but she refused. Kali lured Nala away from Damayanti, and Nala wandered through the world. During his travels, a Naga (pronounced NAH-gah), or serpent god, bit Nala and changed him into a dwarf named Bahuka, the chariot driver of King Rituparna of Ayodhya (pronounced ah-YOH-dee-uh).

Uncertain whether Nala was alive, Damayanti announced that she would marry again within a day. She did this as a test to draw Nala out of hiding. Rituparna sped with Bahuka to claim her. When they arrived, Damayanti did not recognize the dwarf as Nala. Yet she suspected that the man was Nala because only he could reach her so quickly. After she questioned him, Bahuka changed back into Nala. The two lovers were reunited and lived together in Nishadha. Nala, having learned great gambling skills from Rituparna, used this talent to reclaim everything else that he had lost.

## Nala and Damayanti in Context

The tale of Nala and Damayanti reflects traditional Hindu marriage and courtship practices. The type of ceremony conducted in the myth is a traditional *swayamvara*, where several male suitors are gathered together, and the potential bride—along with her family—is able to choose a husband from the available suitors. The marriage usually happens immediately following her selection. This is an alternative to arranged marriages, in which the bride has little say over who will become her husband; in a *swayamvara*, the bride can even ask the suitors to prove themselves through a challenge. The *swayamvara* reflects the small amount of control females have during the marriage process. Although it allows for more freedom than an arranged marriage, the bride is still bound by the family's decision regarding the time for her to marry, and her choice is limited to the suitors who happen to attend.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of this tale is the enduring power of love. Damayanti never gives up her love for her husband, even after he loses everything and disappears. She is even able to recognize him when his appearance

has changed into that of a dwarf. Jealousy is also an important theme in this myth. The gods all wish to marry Damayanti, and even take the form of Nala in an attempt to trick her. The demon Kali is so jealous after the marriage that he destroys Nala's life.

### Nala and Damayanti in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The tale of Nala and Damayanti is found in the *Mahabharata*, one of the two major epics in Hindu literature. The tale is one of the few Hindu myths that can be classified as a romantic tale, and is therefore quite popular. It has been adapted to film several times for Indian cinema, including Kemparaj Urs's musical drama *Nala Damayanti* (1957). In English literature, many adaptations have appeared as part of translated texts of the *Mahabharata*, and as stand-alone retellings of the myth. In the early nineteenth century, for example, the English historian Henry Hart Milman wrote a version of the poem.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In India, the *swayamvara*—in which a potential bride chooses a husband from a group of suitors—is still held today, though some details of the event have changed. How do these differ from other modern dating practices, such as online matchmaking services and blind dates? How are they similar? Do you think one technique is more likely to result in an ideal match? If so, which technique, and why?

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

nar-SIS-us

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Pausanias's *Description of Greece*

#### Lineage

Son of Cephissus and  
Leirioppe



SEE ALSO Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; *Mahabharata*, *The*; Nagas

## Narcissus

### Character Overview

Narcissus was the son of the river god Cephissus (pronounced seh-FYE-suhs) and the nymph (female nature deity) Lirioppe (pronounced luh-RYE-uh-pee). He was a handsome Greek youth whose beauty ultimately led to his death. A prophet named Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-





*The Greek youth Narcissus was so handsome that many people fell in love with him, but he loved himself too much to love them back. According to one version of this myth, he became so obsessed with his own reflection in a pool of water that he fell in and drowned.* THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

uhs), who could see the plans of the gods, told Liriope that her son would enjoy a long life as long as he never knew himself or saw his reflection. Although Liriope did not understand the prediction at the time, its meaning eventually became clear.

Narcissus was so handsome that both women and men fell in love with him, but he rejected all of them. One of his admirers was the nymph **Echo** (pronounced EK-oh), who had been cursed by **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) to repeat only the last words spoken to her. Ameinias (pronounced uh-MYE-nee-uhs), another admirer, was so devastated when Narcissus rejected him that he killed himself. Before doing so, however, Ameinias called on the gods to punish Narcissus. They caused the beautiful youth to gaze into a pond at his reflection. He fell in love with his own image and drowned trying to touch it. In other accounts of the story, Narcissus killed himself out of sorrow and frustration. The gods then changed him into the flower that bears his name.

## Narcissus in Context

The earliest forms of the myth of Narcissus focus on his rejection of an older male admirer. It has been suggested that this myth was meant to warn young boys about the dangers of rejecting male companions. In ancient Greece, relationships between adolescent boys and older men were common among the wealthy classes, and were considered normal, healthy, and masculine. Men and boys often exercised and performed athletics in the nude together, and soldiers fighting together often formed bonds as couples. These relationships existed in addition to traditional male-female marriages.

## Key Themes and Symbols

An important theme in the myth of Narcissus is vanity. Narcissus is aware of his own beauty and rejects everyone who wishes to become his partner, considering them unsuitable. This vanity leads to a punishment that matches his personality: only a vain person could fall in love with his own reflection as Narcissus does. Narcissus can be seen as a symbol of beauty that cannot be possessed; no one is ever worthy of his love, except himself.

## Narcissus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As a symbol of beauty, Narcissus has long been a popular figure in art and literature. Some artists who have painted depictions of Narcissus include Caravaggio, Nicolas Poussin, and John William Waterhouse. Salvador Dali's painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) is a clever double-image that shows a water-gazing Narcissus becoming transformed into a hand holding a flower.

The name of Narcissus appears in contemporary life. The term "narcissist" refers to someone who is vain or overly self-absorbed, as was Narcissus. Narcissus is also the name of a genus of flowering plants known also as daffodils.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Some critics of modern society proclaim that people are becoming increasingly narcissistic, or concerned only with themselves, especially with their physical appearance. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research sites that seem to speak to people's concern

with their physical appearance. What are some of the “ideal beauty” images these sites try to project? Are these ideal images attainable by most people? What effect do you think a narcissistic attitude has on society as a whole?

SEE ALSO Echo; Greek Mythology



## Native American Mythology

### Native American Mythology in Context

The Native American peoples of North America do not share a single, unified body of mythology. The many different tribal groups each developed their own stories about the creation of the world, the appearance of the first people, the place of humans in the universe, and the lives and deeds of gods and **heroes**. Yet, despite the immense variety of Native American mythologies, certain mythic themes, characters, and stories can be found in many of the cultures. Underlying all the myths is the idea that spiritual forces can be sensed throughout the natural world—including clouds, wind, plants, and animals—which they shape and sustain. Many stories explain how the actions of gods, heroes, and ancestors gave the earth its present form.

According to the mythologies of most Native American cultures, people originated in the places where their ancestors traditionally lived. Some tales speak of ancient migrations. Native Americans are descended from hunting and gathering peoples of northeastern Asia who migrated across the Bering Sea into North America during the most recent Ice Age. During that Ice Age, which ended around 8000 BCE, the level of the oceans was much lower, and a bridge of land linked Siberia and Alaska. Some groups may also have reached Alaska from Siberia by boat or by walking on ice. Over thousands of years, the population of North America grew and diversified into the peoples and cultures that Europeans encountered when they began to colonize the continent in the 1500s CE.

Before the arrival of Europeans and the spread of European influence, most Native Americans did not use written languages. As a result, many myths and legends were passed from generation to generation in oral

form, usually by special storytellers who sometimes used objects such as stone carvings, shells, rugs, or pottery to illustrate the tales. Mythology, religion, history, and ritual were not separate things for Native American peoples. They were strands woven together in the various tales and stories that defined people's identity and gave order and meaning to their lives. The most serious of these were myths about how the gods created and ordered the universe, and about the origins of important things, such as humans, landforms, food, and death.

Certain myths could not be told lightly. They formed the basis of sacred rituals, including ceremonies in which participants acted out traditional sacred stories. Many Native Americans believed that some myths could be told only at certain times, often during winter nights. A dire fate—such as an attack by snakes—awaited those who told the stories at the wrong time. Other myths resembled folktales. They could be told for fun or to teach a lesson about proper behavior, and those who told them were free to change or add elements to the basic story. Many such tales involved **tricksters**.

### Core Deities and Characters

Native American mythology contains a great many gods, tricksters, heroes, and other mythical beings. The creator gods and heroes usually establish or restore order. Characters such as tricksters and animals can have either positive or negative qualities. Sometimes they are helpful and entertaining; at other times, they are unpredictable, deceptive, or violent. Mythic figures do not always fall into just one category. A trickster may act as a culture hero, a culture hero may be an animal, an animal may be a creator figure, and a creator may also have a capacity for destruction.

**Creators, Gods, and Spirits** Many Native American mythologies have a high deity—sometimes referred to as the Great Spirit—who is responsible for bringing the universe or the world into existence. Often, however, the Great Spirit merely begins the process of creation and then disappears or removes itself to **heaven**, leaving other gods to complete the detailed work of creation and to oversee the day-to-day running of the world. In many Native American mythologies, Father Sky and Mother Earth, or Mother Corn, are important creative forces. The high god of the Pawnee people, Tirawa (pronounced TEER-uh-wuh), gave duties and powers to the Sun and Moon, the Morning Star and Evening

Star, the Star of Death, and the four stars that support the sky. The Lakota people believe that the **sun**, sky, earth, wind, and many other elements of the natural, human, and spiritual worlds are all aspects of one supreme being, **Wakan Tanka** (pronounced WAH-kuhn TAHN-kuh). The secondary gods are often embodiments of natural forces, such as the wind. In the mythology of the Iroquois people, for example, the thunder god Hunin is a mighty warrior who shoots arrows of **fire** and is married to the rainbow goddess.

Not all creators are universally good. Napi (pronounced NAW-pee), the creator god of the Blackfoot people in the Plains region, appears as both a wise sky god in **creation stories** and as a trickster in his actions toward humans. The character Coyote is a trickster in some tales, and in others is a creator whose actions benefit humankind.

Kachinas (pronounced kuh-CHEE-nuhz), spirits of the dead who link the human and spiritual worlds, play an important role in the mythologies of the Pueblo peoples of the American Southwest, including the Zuni and Hopi. In Hopi mythology, the creator deity is a female being called **Spider Woman**. Among the Zuni, the supreme creator is Awonawilona (pronounced uh-woh-nuh-wee-LOH-nuh), the sun god. The mythology of the Navajo Indians—who live in the same area as the Hopi and Zuni but are not a Pueblo people—focuses on four female deities called **Changing Woman**, White Shell Woman, Spider Woman, and First Woman.

**Culture Heroes and Transformers** Central to many Native American myths is the culture hero who makes the world a suitable place for humans and teaches people how to live. Such a character might form the earth and sky, create people and animals, or kill monsters or turn them into stones. These figures might also release animals that evil spirits have imprisoned, establish social structures for humans, or teach people crafts, arts, and ceremonies.

In the mythologies of some Indian groups of the Northeast, the culture hero **Gluskap** (pronounced GLOOS-kahb) creates humans, returns from death to defeat evil, and protects people from natural and magical disasters. In Navajo mythology, warrior **twins** named Monster Slayer and Child of Water—sons of Sun and of Water, respectively—play a similar role. The myths of some California Indians tell of the Attajen, who teaches the first people how to make rain and how to fill the earth with plants and animals, and of Chinigchinich (pronounced chi-NICH-nich), who teaches the wise

men how to perform ceremonial dances that will summon him when they have need of help in the future.

**Tricksters** Tricksters appear in nearly all Native American mythologies, but they generally have a greater place in the folklore of hunter-gatherer peoples than of settled agricultural groups, possibly because people who lived on wild resources were more keenly aware of the uncertain nature of life. The trickster, who is almost always male, represents uncertainty. He loves to upset things and spread confusion.

Sometimes the trickster's acts are comic pranks, but they often have a cruel side as well. They might involve sexual trickery, as when the trickster disguises himself as a woman so that he can marry a man or marries his own daughters while in disguise. A trickster can also be a devilish figure who eats babies or leads other creatures to harm themselves. His behavior often stems from impatience or from uncontrollable appetites.

Occasionally, the trickster ends up being tricked himself. The Eye-Juggler story, for example, tells how the trickster saw birds tossing their own eyes into the air and then putting them back in their heads. He tried to do the same thing, but once he had taken out his eyes, he could not put them back.

The trickster appears as a culture hero when his pranks—such as stealing fire or the sun—benefit humans. Stories from the Northwest Coast region tell how a distant chief had stolen all the light, leaving the earth in darkness. The trickster Raven flew to the chief's land and turned himself into a tiny seed in water, which the chief's daughter swallowed. In time the girl gave birth to the chief's grandson, who was really Raven in disguise. The boy begged the chief to give him the stars and moon as toys, and when the chief gave them to him, the boy released them into the sky. Finally the young boy tricked the old man out of his dearest possession, the sun. He then turned back into Raven and flew away, taking the sun with him.

**Animals** Tricksters are often animals. Common trickster figures in Native American mythology include Rabbit in the Eastern regions, Coyote and Spider in the Plains and the Southwest regions, and Raven in the Pacific Northwest. Although animals appear in many myths and legends, they seldom have purely animal characteristics. They talk and interact with people and often change between human and animal form.

According to tradition, in the “myth age”—before people and animals became fixed in their present forms—animals could change their appearance whenever they wished.

Some stories tell of an Animal Wife or Animal Husband, as when a human marries a deer who is disguised as a person. Often the animal spouse is a bear. Many Native American cultures regarded bears as close relatives of people or as people wearing bear coats. A myth from the Northwest Coast region tells of Rhpisunt, a chief’s daughter who met two young men while gathering berries. She went with them to the home of the bear chief and married his son. Some time later, Rhpisunt’s brothers found their sister in the den of her bear husband and took her and her twin cubs back to their home village. Under the cubs’ bear coats were two fine boys, who lived with the people until Rhpisunt died. They then returned to bear life. However, Rhpisunt’s family never forgot their kinship with the bears, who brought them good luck in the hunt.

*Native American groups of the Northwest Coast of the United States and Canada create carved and painted logs of wood called totem poles. The animals and spirits on these poles often come from Native American myths and folktales.*

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## Major Myths

Despite the great number and variety of Native American myths and legends, certain themes and subjects occur again and again. One of the key concepts of Native American mythology is creation, the steps by which the world and everything in it took on their present forms.

**Creation** Native American creation stories fall into several broad categories. In one of the oldest and most widespread myths, found everywhere but in the Southwest and on the Arctic coast, the earth is covered by an ancient sea. A water creature—such as a duck, muskrat, or turtle—plunges to the depths of the sea and returns with a lump of mud that becomes the earth, which is often supported on the back of a turtle. This Earth Diver myth also exists in northern Europe and Asia, which suggests that the Native American versions may be survivals of ancient myths shared with distant Asian ancestors.



The creation myth of the Iroquois peoples combines elements of the Earth Diver story with the image of a creator who descends from the heavens. Creation begins when a sky goddess named Ataensic plummets through a hole in the floor of heaven. This Woman Who Fell from the Sky lands in the primeval sea. To support her and give her room to move about, the animals dive deep into the sea for bits of earth. The goddess spreads this earth on Great Turtle's back to create the land, and the daughter she bears there becomes known as Earth Woman.

The Navajo and Pueblo peoples, as well as some Plains groups, have a different image of creation, one in which life emerges from the earth like a sprouting plant rising from the soil. The Navajo emergence myth tells how insects climbed up from their First or Red World to the Second or Blue World, the realm of birds. When the Second World became too crowded, the insects and birds flew up to the Third or Yellow World, where they found animals and people. All lived together until food became scarce. Then the people, animals, birds, and insects flew up again into the Fourth or Black and White World of day and night. They found people created by the gods already living there, and these people taught the newcomers how to farm and live in their new world.

The Hopi emergence myth centers on Spider Woman, a powerful earth goddess and creator who is the mother of life. Together with Tawa, the sun god, Spider Woman sang the First Magic Song. This song brought the earth, light, and life into being. She then shaped and wove Tawa's thoughts into solid form, creating birds, fish, and other creatures. After people were created, Tawa rose into the sky, but Spider Woman moved among humans, dividing them into groups, leading them to their homelands, and teaching them how to live and worship the gods. Spider Woman then disappeared from the people's sight, drawn back down into the earth in a whirlpool of sand.

**Death** A number of Native American myths explain how death came into the world, usually to prevent the earth from becoming overcrowded. The Shoshone people say that long ago Wolf and Coyote got into an argument. Wolf said that people could be brought back to life after they died. Coyote argued that if people returned from death, there would soon be too many of them. Wolf agreed that Coyote was right, but then he arranged for Coyote's son to be the first to die. Coyote asked Wolf to



bring his son back to life. However, Wolf reminded Coyote that he had insisted on death, and so his son must remain dead.

**Pairs and Opposites** A number of Native American mythologies feature paired or opposing characters or qualities as a recurring theme. Twins or sets of brothers appear in many myths and legends. For example, in Iroquois mythology, Earth Woman gives birth to the twin brothers Good Twin and Evil Twin. Good Twin creates light, forests, and food plants, while Evil Twin creates impassable mountains, mosquitoes, and a toad that drinks all the water. After a long struggle, Good Twin finally kills Evil Twin. However, Evil Twin's soul and creations survive to make life difficult for the people that Good Twin brings into being.

The main heroes of Navajo myth are the warrior twins Monster Slayer and Child of Water. Monster Slayer is associated with bright light, and Child of Water with rain clouds. While traveling to see Sun, the warrior twins notice smoke rising from a hole in the ground. Climbing down, they find themselves in the home of Spider Woman. She warns them of dangers they will face on their travels and gives them magic feathers for protection. After many adventures, the brothers reach the house of Sun, who tests them by trying to spear them, boil them, and poison them. With the help of their magic feathers and a friendly caterpillar that provides magic stones to protect them from the poison, the twins survive these ordeals. Sun finally recognizes them as his sons and gives them weapons to use to protect the Navajo people.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Scholars have divided North America into different regions based on patterns of Native American mythology. Although each region contains many different peoples and languages, some elements of mythology are shared across the region, and some themes are particularly important in each region.

In the eastern part of the Arctic region, the myths of the Inuit or Eskimo people focus on **Sedna**, a deity known as the mistress or mother of sea animals. In the western Arctic, tales about Igaluk, the moon god, and trickster stories are common. The peoples of the subarctic region of inland Alaska and western Canada have myths about tricksters and heroes who transform the world into its present state. Such characters also play an important role in the Coast-Plateau region of the Pacific

Northwest. Stories about the origins of groups called clans, found in many regions, are widespread among peoples of the northwest coast from Puget Sound to southern Alaska.

In addition to trickster and “transformer” myths, the California region produced various myths about animals and about the deities who started the process of creation. The Great Basin region, located east of California, has a number of myths about female heroes and about gods who die and are reborn. Myths about a “dying god” also appear in the Midwest region, which stretches into central Canada. Clan and trickster myths are important in the Midwest as well.

Between the Great Basin and the Midwest is the Plains region, where legends of heroes and tricksters predominate. Such tales appear also in the Southeast region, along with stories about councils of animals. Myths from the Northeast cluster around culture heroes.

Stories about dying gods appear among peoples of the Southwest, such as the Hohokam, as well. The tales are similar to Aztec and Mayan legends from South and Central America. Myths about migrations, heroes who rid the world of monsters, and the origins of humans within the earth are also important in the Southwest.

### **Native American Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Although many early European explorers noted the beliefs of the Native Americans they met, Americans and Europeans did not begin recording and collecting Indian myths in earnest until after the 1820s. By that time, many Indian societies had already been disrupted and some of the ancient traditions lost. Between the 1880s and the 1930s, scholars made great efforts to record the words of Native Americans who still knew traditional myths, legends, and folktales. Modern scholars, both Indian and non-Indian, are still studying those texts, as well as gathering old lore and exploring new interpretations of familiar myths.

Today Native American myths and legends occupy a significant place in the study of world mythology. More importantly, they remain a living spiritual foundation for Native Americans who practice their traditional religions. The stories help explain the origins of ceremonies and customs, provide tribal and clan histories, and inspire Native American artworks, such as the sand paintings of the Navajo and the totems and other carved wooden objects of the Northwest Coast peoples.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many Native American myths are not just stories that are told aloud. They are incorporated into songs, rituals, and other aspects of daily life. Research your own culture for myths that still hold meaning for members of your group. How are these myths expressed? How are they passed on from generation to generation?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Corn; Creation Stories; Fire; Heroes; Tricksters; Twins

## Neptune

See **Poseidon**.



## *Nibelungenlied, The*

### Myth Overview

The *Nibelungenlied* is a thirteenth-century German epic poem that combines tales of chivalry with more ancient Germanic folktales. Based on old Norse legends, the *Nibelungenlied* tells the story of Siegfried, a German prince. The Nibelungs of the poem's title were originally evil dwarves who had a magical but cursed treasure of gold. The dwarfs known as the Nibelungs lived in Nibelheim, an underground land of darkness or mist. Many stories about their treasure appear in Norse and Germanic mythology. The *Nibelungenlied* combines a number of these myths with tales of legendary rulers, princes, princesses, and **heroes**. Some of these stories may have been based on events of an earlier age. In time, people who possessed the gold were also identified as Nibelungs.

The story begins in the city of Worms on the Rhine River, where Princess Kriemhild (pronounced KREEM-hilt) of Burgundy has a vision in which two eagles attack and kill a falcon. Her mother, a skilled interpreter of dreams, explains that this means that Kriemhild's future husband will be attacked. Meanwhile, in the town of Xanten farther west on the Rhine, Prince Siegfried (pronounced SIG-freed) hears of

### Nationality/Culture

German

### Pronunciation

NEE-buh-loong-uhn-leet

### Alternate Names

The Song of the Nibelungs

### Appears In

None

Kriemhild's great beauty and decides to woo her. When Siegfried arrives in Worms, he is recognized in the court as a great hero, famous for slaying a dragon and defeating two brothers, Nibelung and Schilbung, for their treasure—the Nibelungen treasure. Kriemhild notices the prince while gazing from her window and falls in love with him.

Siegfried wins the favor of Kriemhild's brother, King Gunther (pronounced GOON-tur) of Burgundy, when he helps the Burgundians defeat their enemies in Saxony and Denmark. After meeting Kriemhild at a victory tournament, Siegfried asks for her hand in marriage. Gunther agrees, on one condition. He asks Siegfried to help him win the hand of **Brunhilde** (pronounced BROON-hilt) of Iceland, a queen of outstanding strength and beauty who has vowed to marry only a man who can match her athletic skills.

Disguised as Gunther's servant, Siegfried accompanies the king on his quest. When they arrive in Iceland, Brunhilde warns Gunther that he and his men will all die if he does not match her skills. Gunther becomes fearful when he sees the spear he must hurl, a spear that can barely be lifted by twelve men. But Siegfried reassures the king, telling him to pretend to lift and throw the spear. Meanwhile, Siegfried puts on a magic cloak that makes him invisible and hurls the great spear farther than Brunhilde can. He also throws an enormous stone and bests the queen as well. Defeated, Brunhilde agrees to marry Gunther.

The adventurers return to the Rhine, where in a double wedding ceremony Gunther marries Brunhilde and Siegfried marries Kriemhild. However, Brunhilde wonders why the king's sister is marrying Siegfried, a mere vassal. Later that night, she questions Gunther about the apparent mismatch and refuses to sleep with him until he explains. When Gunther refuses to answer, she angrily picks her husband up and hangs him from a peg on the wall.

When Siegfried hears what has happened, he again uses his magic cloak to make himself invisible. The next evening, he follows Gunther and Brunhilde to their room and wrestles with Brunhilde in the dark. Believing that it is her husband who is overpowering her, Brunhilde submits to Gunther, and in doing so she loses her miraculous strength. Before leaving their room, Siegfried takes Brunhilde's belt and gold ring. These he gives to his wife after explaining what happened. Siegfried then returns to his own country with Kriemhild.

After many years, Siegfried and Kriemhild visit Gunther and Brunhilde. During a ceremonial feast, the two women quarrel. Brunhilde

ridicules Kriemhild for marrying a mere vassal, and in retaliation, Kriemhild suggests Brunhilde has been unfaithful to her husband and allowed Siegfried to sleep with her. She produces Brunhilde's belt and ring as proof. Siegfried denies the charge, but the matter is not settled. Brunhilde persuades Gunther's friend Hagen that Siegfried has wronged her, and Hagen promises to avenge her.

Siegfried had become invulnerable—unable to be harmed—after he bathed in the blood of a dragon during a previous adventure. However, Hagen discovers that one spot between the hero's shoulders is vulnerable. While out hunting one day, Hagen thrusts a spear through that spot, killing Siegfried. At her husband's funeral, Kriemhild discovers the identity of Siegfried's murderer and curses Hagen.

Kriemhild stays on in Burgundy. Three years after Siegfried's death, Hagen suggests to Gunther that Kriemhild should be persuaded to bring Siegfried's Nibelungen treasure to Burgundy. When the treasure arrives, Hagen sinks it in the Rhine, hoping to recover it for himself and Gunther one day.

In time, Kriemhild marries King Etzel of Hungary, who agrees to help her avenge Siegfried's death. After several years, Etzel invites the Burgundians to Hungary. Guided by Hagen, they reach the banks of the Danube River but find no ships to carry them across. Hagen meets three swan maidens and forces them to help him. After telling Hagen about a ferryman, they warn him that only one person from his group, a priest, will return home.

Hagen tricks the ferryman into bringing his boat ashore and then kills him. Then while ferrying the Burgundians across the river, Hagen throws the priest overboard, hoping to prove the swan maidens wrong. But when the priest swims safely to shore, Hagen knows that their prediction will come true.

When the Burgundians arrive in Hungary, Kriemhild demands her treasure, but Hagen tells her it will remain at the bottom of the Rhine. Vicious fighting later breaks out between the Hungarians and Burgundians. Hagen kills the child of Etzel and Kriemhild, and Kriemhild promises a reward to anyone who captures and brings Hagen to her.

After more fighting, Hagen and Gunther are captured and taken to Kriemhild. Once again she asks Hagen to reveal the location of the treasure. Again Hagen refuses, explaining that he promised never to reveal the secret while his lord was alive. Insane with fury, Kriemhild



*Kriemhild identified her husband Siegfried's murderer at his funeral.* KUNSTHAUS, ZURICH, SWITZERLAND/PHOTO © HELD COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

orders the execution of Gunther, her own brother, and then carries Gunther's head to Hagen as proof that his lord is dead. When Hagen still refuses to reveal the hiding place, she cuts off his head with a sword that belonged to Siegfried. In the end, a hero named Hildebrand (pronounced HIL-duh-brand), outraged at Kriemhild's actions, kills the queen.

### **The *Nibelungenlied* in Context**

The actual text of the *Nibelungenlied* probably dates to the turn of the thirteenth century, but the stories were likely recounted orally since the fifth or sixth century. Many of the elements of the *Nibelungenlied* also

appear in other Northern European folklore. Because the epic poem deals with values and events that pre-date the arrival of Christianity in Western Europe, it has attracted many readers seeking to pinpoint a “true” German collective identity. Though many scholars rate the *Nibelungenlied* as a less important work of literature than the Greek poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, it nonetheless has come to be seen as a defining national epic. Though popular throughout German history, the characters and images of the *Nibelungenlied* were infamously put to use for propaganda purposes by the Nazi Party before and during World War II, with the heroic Siegfried (symbolizing Germany) often shown stabbed in the back by his treacherous enemies.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Though based on legendary characters, the *Nibelungenlied* expresses ideals of heroism and chivalry that were very important in the period in which the work was written. Moreover, while the roots of the Nibelungen legends are found in pre-Christian Scandinavia, the *Nibelungenlied* presents a Christian view of European courtly life and traditions. The work also strongly illustrates the Germanic ideas of fate and loyalty to the chief or king.

One of the main themes of the *Nibelungenlied* is revenge. Brunhilde seeks revenge on Siegfried after she discovers he was the one to whom she submitted on the night after her wedding. After Siegfried is killed, Kriemhild seeks revenge against Hagen, the man who killed him. In the myth, treasure—specifically, the Nibelungen gold that Siegfried has acquired—represents power. Gunther and Hagen fear it, knowing that Kriemhild could use the wealth to mount an army against them; they hide it in the Rhine, hoping to claim it someday when it can no longer be used to harm them.

### The *Nibelungenlied* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The *Nibelungenlied* had a tremendous impact on later Germanic art and literature. Most notably, it provided the characters for a series of operas, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), written by German composer Richard Wagner between 1853 and 1873. Many adaptations have been made of this work and of the original poem, including two films by Fritz Lang in 1924 and a 2004 miniseries titled *Sword of Xanten*.

The story of the Nibelung was even parodied in one of the most famous animated cartoon short films of all time, “What’s Opera, Doc?” (1957) starring Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The *Nibelungenlied* was clearly one inspiration for J. R. R. Tolkien’s classic Middle-earth books, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. In these books, the ultimate treasure is a gold ring that possesses great powers. Also similar to the myth, the character of Bilbo—like Siegfried—aids in battling a dragon and takes some of its treasure. Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth features many other elements common to German and Norse myth, including elves and dwarves.

**SEE ALSO** Brunhilde; Dwarfs and Elves; Heroes; Norse Mythology; Sigurd



**Nationality/Culture**  
Christian

**Pronunciation**  
saynt NIK-uh-luhs

**Alternate Names**  
Santa Claus

**Appears In**  
Christian mythology, tales of Christmas

**Lineage**  
Unknown

## Nicholas, St.

### Character Overview

One of the most popular saints in Christianity, St. Nicholas is the patron (guardian) of children, unmarried women, sailors, and merchants, as well as the patron saint of Russia. He has long been associated with winter, and is the model for the myth of Santa Claus.

Little is known for certain about the life of St. Nicholas. According to tradition, he was born in the seaport of Patara in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) and became bishop of Myra in the fourth century CE. He was persecuted and imprisoned for his Christian faith.

After his death around 350 CE, St. Nicholas was buried in the church at Myra. In about 1087, his relics—holy artifacts associated with him, including his remains—were moved to Bari, Italy, which became a popular pilgrimage site in the Middle Ages. The church of San Nicola in Bari remains the main shrine to St. Nicholas.

St. Nicholas had a reputation for kindness and generosity, especially to the poor, and these traits became the basis for various legends. According to one story, St. Nicholas helped three poverty-stricken girls



*St. Nicholas served as the basis for the character of Santa Claus.* FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHIC LIBRARY, LONDON/ART RESOURCE, NY.



escape a life on the streets by giving them bags of gold to serve as dowries (the property and money a woman brings to her future husband). In another tale, he miraculously brought back to life three young children who had been chopped up by an evil butcher and put in a barrel to cure and be sold as ham. In yet another legend, St. Nicholas saved the lives of three drowning sailors by stopping a violent storm that threatened to overwhelm them.

## St. Nicholas in Context

During the Middle Ages, devotion to St. Nicholas spread throughout Europe, and it became customary to give gifts to children on the saint's feast day, December 6. The people of Holland called him Sinte Klaas, and when Dutch settlers came to North America, they brought the traditions associated with him to the New World.

When the English took over the Dutch colony of New Netherland, they adopted the tradition of Sinte Klaas. But to avoid celebrating the feast day of a Catholic saint, English Protestants transformed him into a non-religious figure based on both Sinte Klaas and the Germanic god **Thor**, a figure also associated with winter. In addition, they moved the feast day from December 6 to Christmas Day, December 25. The name Sinte Klaas was eventually transformed into Santa Claus, the jolly figure who brings gifts to children on Christmas Eve.

## Key Themes and Symbols

St. Nicholas is a symbol of generosity, as shown by the giving of gifts in his honor. He is also closely associated with the guardianship of children, as illustrated in the tale about him saving a group of children from being eaten. More generally, those who St. Nicholas protects can be classified as helpless. St. Nicholas is often associated with money, as in the story of the three girls without a dowry, and has been adopted as a symbol for pawnbrokers; the three bags of gold given by St. Nicholas as dowries are traditionally shown as three gold balls on pawnshop signs.

## St. Nicholas in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

St. Nicholas, in the form of Santa Claus, is one of the most recognized figures in the world. The physical appearance of Santa Claus was first described in Clement Moore's 1822 poem "The Night Before Christmas," and his image has remained the same to this day. He is usually depicted with a thick white beard, and wearing a red suit and hat.

Santa Claus appears in countless stories, songs, television shows and movies. Some notable appearances include: the C. S. Lewis fantasy novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950); the film *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947); the animated television classic *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* (1970), inspired by a 1934 Eddie Cantor song; the 1994 film *The Santa Clause* and its sequels, starring Tim Allen; and the 2004 film *The*

*Polar Express*, based on a 1985 Caldecott Medal–winning book by Chris Van Allsburg.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Santa Claus is a unique mythical character in modern society. Although very few adults believe he exists, nearly all children up to a certain age believe in his existence. What purpose does the myth of Santa Claus serve in contemporary Western societies? Do you think a belief in Santa Claus and other mythical figures is healthy and helpful for young children?

SEE ALSO Thor



# Noah

## Character Overview

In the book of Genesis in the Bible, Noah was the hero chosen by God to survive a great flood on earth. According to the monotheistic religions of the Middle East, Noah and his family survived the flood in an ark he had built by God's instruction. He also saved the earth's animals by bringing two of every kind with him onto the ark. The biblical story was probably based on similar accounts of a flood in myths from Mesopotamia (pronounced mess-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh).

According to the story in Genesis, the human race had become so wicked that God was sorry he ever created it. He decided to wash away all the creatures of the earth in a great flood. However, God saw that Noah was a righteous man, so he decided to save him. God told Noah of his plans and instructed him to build a great ark in which he could ride out the storm with his wife and children. Then he commanded Noah to find male and female specimens of every type of animal on the earth and bring them into the ark, and also to gather plants and seeds. Noah followed God's instructions and entered the ark as the rain began to fall.

It rained for forty days and forty nights, until the waters covered even the tops of the highest mountains. After the rain ended, Noah released a raven and a dove to find out whether there was any dry land on earth. Both birds returned, indicating that water still covered the planet.

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

### Pronunciation

NOH-uh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Book of Genesis

### Lineage

Son of Lamech

Seven days later, Noah sent the dove out again. This time it returned with an olive branch, which meant that dry land had finally appeared. According to later Jewish legend, the ark came to rest on the top of Mount Ararat (in what is now Turkey), and Noah and his family emerged with all the animals.

Noah built an altar and made a **sacrifice** to God. God then made a covenant, or agreement, with Noah, promising never again to destroy the earth with a flood. He placed a rainbow in the sky as a reminder of this covenant.

### Noah in Context

Since all other humans were destroyed in the flood, biblical scholars took this to mean that all living people were descended from the sons of Noah. In this sense, the myth is a second creation myth for Christians. In medieval times, it was accepted that each of Noah's three sons populated one of the known continents: Japheth in Europe, Shem in Asia, and Ham in Africa. Ham, shortly after the flood, had been cursed by Noah for his disrespect, and his sons were doomed to act as servants for the others. Since Ham's sons were thought to be the ancestors of all Africans, some Europeans used this myth as a justification for the enslavement of African people. It was even believed by some that the darker skin of Africans must have resulted from Ham's wickedness, since Noah's descendants would all otherwise have had the same skin color.

### Key Themes and Symbols

In Christian tradition, Noah is a symbol for virtue and righteousness. This explains why God warned him of the coming flood, and why God tasked him with saving all the species in the world. In later times, many viewed the Ark as a symbol of the body of Christ or the church; this corresponds to the fact that the Ark is the only protection against God's wrath. The olive branch that the dove brings back to Noah is a symbol of salvation and the restoration of peace, since it shows that the catastrophe is over. The rainbow represents harmony with nature as God's promise to never again bring a flood to destroy the earth.

### Noah in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Noah is one of the best-known characters in the book of Genesis. He has appeared in paintings by Michelangelo, Jacopo Bassano, and Giovanni

## Turkish Earthquakes and the Flood

There is geological evidence that in ancient times the Bosphorus (the strait by Istanbul, Turkey, that joins the Sea of Marmara with the Black Sea) was once blocked up. The Black Sea had a water level below that of the other nearby bodies of water—the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara. Evidence suggests that at some point many thousands of years in the past, a violent earthquake shook loose the rock and earth blocking the Bosphorus, allowing the water from the Aegean and the Sea of Marmara to inundate the communities surrounding the coast of the Black Sea. Indeed, archaeologists have found the remains of sunken cities deep in the Black Sea along the Turkish coast. This cataclysm may be the source of the story of the “great flood.”

Bellini, among others. His tale is frequently offered on its own as an example of the benefits of living a virtuous life. In modern times, the Disney animated film *Fantasia 2000* contains a sequence retelling the myth of Noah with Donald Duck filling the role, while the 2007 comedy *Evan Almighty* casts Steve Carell as a modern-day version of Noah.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The trials of Noah are remarkably similar to those of Utnapishtim from the ancient epic *Gilgamesh*. Compare the two. What events are common to both stories? In what ways are they different? Do you think this suggests that both stories come from the same source? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Floods; Gilgamesh; Semitic Mythology



## Norse Mythology

### Norse Mythology in Context

Norse mythology comes from the Scandinavian countries of the northernmost part of Europe: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The mythology of this region mirrors the weather, which is grim and

shadowed by long, sunless winters. Yet the darkness is laced with gleams of grandeur and sparks of humor. The myths depict a universe in which gods and **giants** battle among themselves in a grand-scale conflict fated to end in the destruction of the world.

Norse mythology developed from the myths and legends of northern peoples who spoke Germanic languages. It shares many features with the mythology of pre-Christian Germanic groups. When some of these groups spread into England and Scandinavia, they carried their myths with them. As they converted to Christianity, their traditional beliefs faded. But Christianity did not take hold in Scandinavia until a later date, and the Norse version of Germanic mythology remained vigorous through the Viking era, from about 750 to 1050 CE. Modern knowledge of Norse mythology stems from medieval texts, most of them written in Iceland. Descendants of Norse colonists in that country maintained a strong interest in their heritage even after becoming Christian.

A major source of information about Norse mythology is a book called the *Poetic Edda*, sometimes known as the *Elder Edda*. It consists of mythological and heroic poems, including *Voluspa*, an overview of Norse mythology from the creation to the final destructive battle of the world known as **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok). The unknown author who compiled the *Poetic Edda* in Iceland around 1270 drew on materials dating from between 800 and 1100.

Around 1222, an Icelandic poet and chieftain named Snorri Sturluson (pronounced STUR-luh-suhn) wrote the *Prose Edda*, or *Younger Edda*, which interprets traditional Icelandic poetry for the audiences of Snorri's time. Part of the *Prose Edda* describes a visit by Gylfi (pronounced GIL-fee), a Swedish king, to the home of the gods in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd). There the king questioned the gods about their history, adventures, and fate.

Norse mythology is known from other Scandinavian texts as well. Many Norse poems refer to mythic events or figures. In the early 1200s, Icelanders started writing family sagas about their ancestors and heroic sagas about their legendary **heroes**. Many of these sagas contain references to mythological subjects. Also in the 1200s, a Danish scholar named Saxo Grammaticus (pronounced gruh-MAT-i-kuhs) wrote a history of the Danish people that begins with an account of their pre-Christian gods and ancient heroes. Works by earlier Roman and medieval historians also include information about Germanic and Norse myths. In 98 CE, for example, the Roman historian Tacitus (pronounced

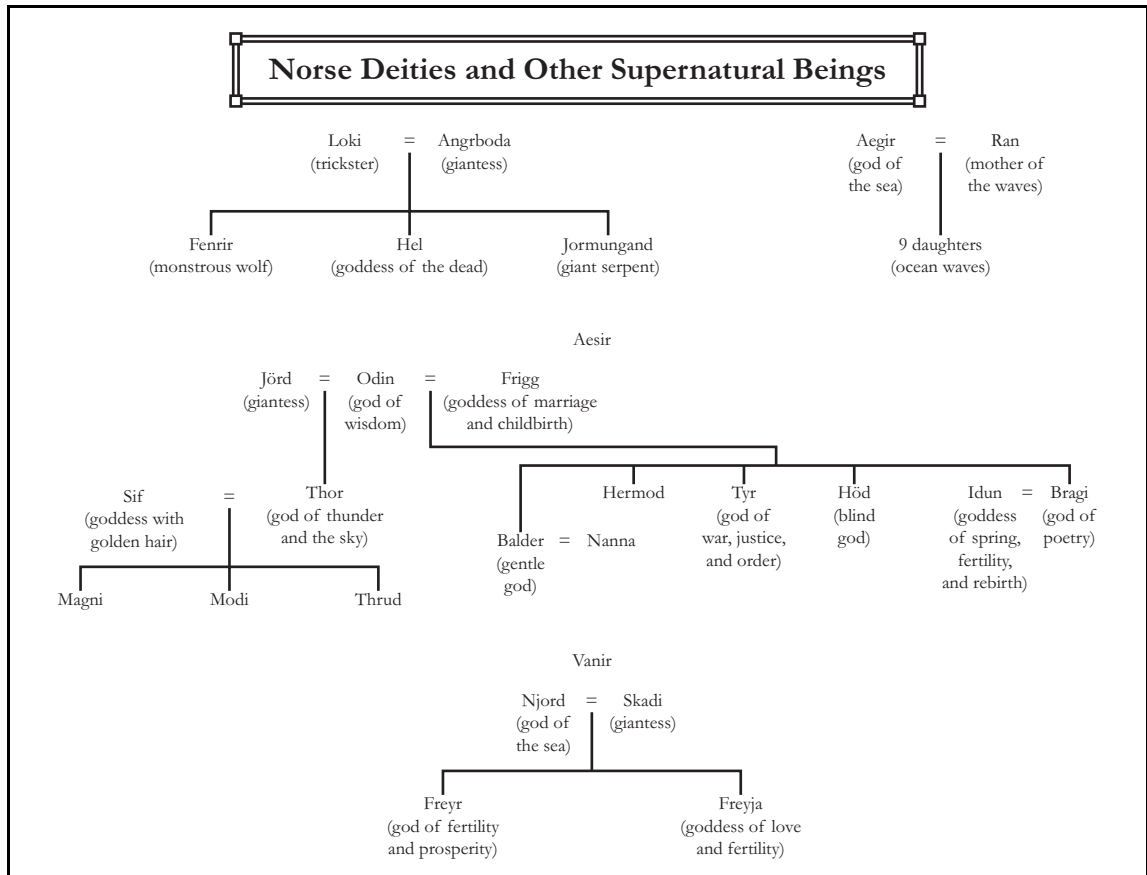


ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

TAS-i-tuhs) wrote *Germania*, a description of the Germanic tribes that mentions some of their religious beliefs and customs.

## Core Deities and Characters

Like the Greek gods, the Norse gods and goddesses have all the characteristics of larger-than-life human beings. Unlike the Greek gods, however, they seldom interact with human beings. The world of Norse mythology includes two groups of gods, the Aesir (pronounced AY-sur) and the Vanir (pronounced VAH-nir), as well as giants, **trolls**, elves, dwarves, and heroic human warriors.

**The Aesir** The Aesir were gods of war and of the sky. Chief among them was **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), god of battle, wisdom, and poetry.

The Vikings regarded him as the ruler of the deities and the creator of humans. The mighty **Thor**, warrior god of thunder, ranked as the second most important Norse deity. Tiwaz (pronounced TEE-wahz)—an early Germanic sky god who became **Tyr** (pronounced TEER) in Norse mythology—appears in some accounts as a son of Odin. **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der), also Odin's son, was a gentle, beloved god. After his murder, he descended to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, to await return after a new world had been created. **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee), a cunning trickster, sometimes helped the other gods, but more often caused trouble because of his spiteful, destructive nature. The sky goddess **Frigg** (pronounced FRIG) was Odin's wife and the goddess of marriage, children, and households.

**The Vanir** The Vanir were associated with the earth, fertility, and prosperity. In the beginning, the Aesir and Vanir waged war against each other, perhaps reflecting an actual historical conflict between two cultures, tribes, or belief systems. Realizing that neither side could win, the two groups of gods made peace and together fought their common enemy, the giants. To ensure a lasting peace, some of the Vanir came to Asgard, the home of the Aesir, as hostages. Among them was Njord (pronounced NYORD), the patron of the sea and seafaring. His twin children, **Freyr** (pronounced FRAY) and **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh), were the most important Vanir and represented love, sexuality, and fertility. The giants' desire to capture Freyja was one cause of strife between the gods and the giants.

**Other Mythological and Legendary Beings** The supernatural beings who inhabited the Norse mythic world included elves, creatures related to humans; and dwarves, skilled crafts workers who made many of the finest treasures of gods and humans. The most powerful and dreaded mythological beings were the giants, huge beings associated with ice, snow, and paralyzing cold. They were descended from **Ymir** (pronounced EE-mir), the frost giant, who was killed by Odin and his brothers. Although the giants were generally enemies of the gods, many marriages took place between deities and giants. Both the mother and the wife of Freyr, for example, were giantesses.

Although human beings appear rarely in Norse myths about the gods, Norse literature is filled with legends of heroic warriors, kings, and ancestors. The most important is the *Volsunga Saga*, written around



## Norse Deities and Other Supernatural Beings

**Balder:** Odin's son, a gentle and handsome god.

**Bragi:** god of poetry and music.

**Fenrir:** monstrous wolf, child of Loki.

**Freyja:** goddess of love and fertility, twin of Freyr.

**Freyr:** god of fertility and prosperity, twin of Freyja.

**Frigg:** wife of Odin, goddess of the sky, marriage, and childbirth.

**Heimdall:** god who guards Asgard, the home of the gods.

**Hel:** goddess of the dead, child of Loki.

**Idun:** goddess of fertility, spring, and rebirth.

**Jormungand:** giant serpent.

**Loki:** trickster figure, companion to the gods.

**Mimir:** giant who guards the well of knowledge.

**Njord:** sea god, father of Freyr and Freyja.

**Odin:** god of wisdom, battle, and poetry, and ruler of the gods.

**Thor:** god of the sky and thunder, associated with the weather, crops, and warriors.

**Tyr:** god of war, justice, and order.

**Valkyries:** female spirits, servants of Odin.

**Ymir:** frost giant whose body was used to form the world.

1300. The Norse version of the German epic known as the *Nibelungenlied* (pronounced NEE-buh-loong-uhn-leet), it tells the story of **Sigurd** (pronounced SI-gurd), a hero who slays a dragon, acquires a magical ring, and awakens a sleeping beauty named **Brunhilde** (pronounced BROON-hilt). Like **Beowulf**, another Germanic hero, Sigurd triumphs over the forces of evil by slaying a monster.

## Major Myths

**Creation** Various accounts of the creation of the world and of human beings appear in Norse mythology. All begin in Ginnungagap (pronounced GIN-oon-gah-GAHP), a deep empty space between realms of heat and ice. Frost formed and became a giant, Ymir. A cosmic cow named Audhumla (pronounced OWD-hoom-lah) also appeared. Licking the cliffs of ice, she revealed a man who had three grandsons. One of them was Odin. With his two brothers, Odin killed the frost giant Ymir and formed the earth from his body, the seas and rivers from his blood,

and the sky from his skull, which was held suspended above the earth by four strong dwarfs.

The *Voluspa* says that Odin and his brothers made the first man and first woman out of an ash tree and an elm tree. They gave the humans life, intelligence, and beauty. A poem called “The Lay of Vafthrudnir” (pronounced vahft-HROOD-nir), however, says that the first man and first woman grew out of Ymir’s armpits before he was killed.

Once they had killed Ymir, Odin and the other gods created an orderly universe in three levels. Although journeys between the different levels of the universe were possible, they were difficult and dangerous, even for the gods. The top or heavenly level contained Asgard, the home of the Aesir; Vanaheim (pronounced VAN-uh-haym), the home of the Vanir; and Alfheim (pronounced AHLF-haym), the place where the light or good elves lived. **Valhalla** (pronounced val-HAL-uh), the hall where Odin gathered the souls of warriors who had died in battle, was also located on this level.

Connected to the upper level by the rainbow bridge, Bifrost (pronounced BIV-rost) was the middle or earthly level. It contained Midgard, the world of men; Jotunheim (pronounced YAW-toon-heyhm), the land of the giants; Svartalfaheim (pronounced SVART-ahlf-haym), the land of the dark elves; and Nidavellir (pronounced NEED-uh-vel-ir), the land of the dwarfs. A huge serpent called Jormungand (pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd) encircled the middle world. The bottom level consisted of the underworld of Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heyhm), also known as **Hel** after Loki’s daughter Hel, who ruled there.

Running through this universe from bottom to top, holding it all together and linking the three worlds of **heaven**, earth, and underworld, was a great ash tree called **Yggdrasil** (pronounced IG-druh-sil). Its branches spread over the heavens, and its roots stretched into all three worlds. Springs rose from these roots. One, the Well of Urd, was guarded by the Norns, the three goddesses of fate. A serpent or dragon named Nidhogg (pronounced NEED-hawg) gnawed endlessly at the Yggdrasil’s roots, and an eagle perched on its topmost branch. Goats, deer, and other animals ate the tree’s shoots and lived in it, and a squirrel named Ratatosk (pronounced RAT-uh-tawsk) ran up and down its trunk, carrying messages and insults between the eagle and Nidhogg.

**Good Against Evil** Myths describe the gods’ interactions with one another and with the giants. One story, for example, tells how Loki helped

a frost giant kidnap **Idun** (pronounced EE-thoon), the goddess who tended the golden apples that kept the gods young. Without the magic apples the gods began to age, and they demanded that Loki rescue Idun. Donning a feathered cloak, he flew to Jotunheim, changed the goddess into a nut, and brought her back to Asgard. The giant took the form of an eagle and pursued Loki. But the gods lit a **fire** on the walls of Asgard that burned the giant's wings, causing him to drop to the ground, where the gods killed him. The giant's daughter was furious. However, Loki the jokester made her laugh, and she made peace with the gods.

Another myth tells of **Fenrir**, a wolf who was one of several monstrous children that Loki fathered. Fenrir grew up in Asgard among the gods, but he was so fierce that only Odin's son Tyr (pronounced TEER) could feed him. Fearing what Fenrir might do, the gods tried to chain him down. The wolf, however, broke every metal chain as though it were made of glass. Odin ordered the dwarfs to produce an unbreakable chain. The suspicious Fenrir would not let the gods put it around his neck until Tyr placed his hand in the wolf's mouth. Once he discovered that he could not break this new chain, the enraged Fenrir bit Tyr's hand off. The gods left Fenrir bound on a distant island, from which his howls could be heard. When the final battle of Ragnarok approached, he would break free.

**Ragnarok** The twilight of the gods and end of the earth began when Loki used trickery to kill Balder, whose death was a sign that the orderly universe was falling apart. The gods chained Loki to a rock, but eventually he would break loose and lead the giants in a last bitter battle against the gods and the greatest heroes from Valhalla. Then, the bridge Bifrost will shatter, cutting Midgard off from Asgard, and all monsters will run free. Fenrir will kill Odin, while Thor will perish in the process of slaying the serpent Jormungand. In the end, all worlds will be consumed by fire and flood. One man and one woman will survive, sheltered in the World Tree Yggdrasill, to become the parents of a new human race.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Bravery in the face of a harsh fate is one of the main themes of Norse mythology. Even the gods were ruled by an unalterable fate that doomed everything to eventual destruction. A hero who strove to accept his

## Norse Mythology

*One story from Norse mythology tells of Sigurd, a hero who used a special sword to slay the dragon Fafnir. When Sigurd roasted and ate the beast's heart, he was able to understand the language of the birds. They warned him that he was going to be killed.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



destiny with reckless courage, honor, and generosity might win lasting fame, regarded as the only true life after death.

The battle between good and evil is another important theme. The gods represented order in the universe, but their enemies, the giants, tried constantly to return to the state of formless chaos, or disorder that had existed before the creation. Although the gods sometimes displayed treachery, cowardice, or cruelty, in general they stood for virtue.

The natural world is an important theme in Norse mythology as well. Rather than focusing on magical elements unrelated to nature, many aspects of Norse myth arise directly from the environment. Cold and ice are found throughout Norse mythology, as one might expect in such a frigid

region. The ancient formlessness before creation contains fire and ice, and the creator Ymir is made completely of ice. The base of the world is a giant tree, and the bridge that connects Asgard to Midgard is a rainbow.

## Norse Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Norse mythology inspired the stirring poems and sagas that were written down during the late Middle Ages, and it has inspired more recent artists as well. German composer Richard Wagner used the legend of Sigurd as the basis for his cycle of four operas, known collectively as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*). Some modern writers of fantasy have drawn on Norse stories and creations such as elves and dwarfs in their work. The best known of these is J. R. R. Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* features many themes from Norse mythology, such as dragon slaying and enchanted rings. High-spirited and muscular Thor, the subject of many of the most popular myths, has even been the subject of a comic-book series called *The Mighty Thor*, which features many other Norse gods as heroes and villains.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the Norse culture. During what time period did it flourish? What was the greatest geographic extent of Norse culture in Europe? What is the difference between the Norse and the Vikings?

**SEE ALSO** Balder; *Beowulf*; Dwarfs and Elves; Fenrir; Freyja; Freyr; Frigg; Heimdall; Hel; Idun; Loki; Mimir; *Nibelungenlied*, *The*; Odin; Ragnarok; Sigurd; Thor; Trolls; Tyr; Valhalla; Valkyries; Yggdrasill; Ymir



# Nut

## Character Overview

In **Egyptian mythology**, Nut was the sky goddess and the mother goddess of ancient Egypt. She was the twin sister and wife of the earth

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

NOOT

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Book of the Dead

### Lineage

Daughter of Shu and Tefnut

god Geb (pronounced GEB). Nut was said to swallow the **sun** each night and give birth to it anew each morning. She was also regarded as an important deity, or god, related to the **afterlife**.

## Major Myths

Nut and Geb, children of the god Shu (pronounced SHOO, meaning “air”) and goddess Tefnut (pronounced TEF-noot, meaning “moisture”), were born locked together in a tight embrace. The sun god **Ra** ordered Shu to separate them, so Shu held his daughter high above the earth, creating room between Nut and Geb for other creatures to live. In another version of the myth, Ra climbed onto Nut’s back and asked her to lift him into the heavens. As Nut rose higher, she became dizzy, but four gods steadied her legs, and Shu held up the middle of her body. In this way, Nut’s body became the sky, and Ra attached stars to her.

Angered by the marriage of Nut and Geb, Ra decreed that Nut could not bear children during any month of the year. **Thoth** (pronounced TOHT), the god of wisdom, took pity on Nut and played a game with the moon—the regulator of time—that allowed him to create five extra days in the year. Because these days were not covered by Ra’s decree, Nut was able to give birth to five children: **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris), **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis), **Set** (pronounced SET), Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this), and **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs).

Nut’s body divided the cosmos and helped keep the forces of chaos, or disorder, from breaking through the sky and overwhelming the earth. During the day, Ra sailed along Nut’s body in a boat. When he reached her mouth, she swallowed him, bringing on the night. After traveling through Nut’s body at night, Ra emerged again at dawn and brought on the day. In some myths, Nut plays an important role in the **underworld**, or land of the dead, providing fresh air for the souls of the dead.

## Nut in Context

For ancient Egyptians, Nut served as an explanation for where the sun went at night. Although Egyptians understood the cycles of the sun, moon, and seasons, they did not know that the earth was round and that heavenly bodies traveled around each other in orbit. The idea that an enormous goddess consumed the sun at one end of the sky, and then

gave birth to it at the other, may have seemed as likely an explanation as any for how the sun got back across the sky without being seen. Astronomers have also noted that the Milky Way, the galaxy in which we live, was probably visible as a faint glowing arch in the Egyptian night sky—similar to ancient depictions of Nut as a starry woman arched across the sky from horizon to horizon.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Nut represented many things to ancient Egyptians. She was a protector and provider, often depicted as a cow—a symbol of nourishment. An important theme in the myths of Nut is death and rebirth. Every night, she consumed Ra by swallowing him, and then gave birth to him again every morning. In this way, the ancient Egyptians viewed each day as a cycle of death and rebirth. In much the same way, Nut transported Ra from death to new life, and was also regarded as an escort or vehicle for humans at death, accompanying the dead to the unknown world of the afterlife. She was sometimes symbolized as a ladder that allowed souls to ascend to the sky.

## Nut in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Egyptian artists often portrayed Nut as a woman holding a pot of water on her head, an indication of her role as the provider of rain. She was also shown as a woman arched over the earth god Geb, with her fingers and toes touching the horizon. Typically, her body was painted blue and covered with stars to resemble the night sky. Nut was often painted on the insides of coffins, since she was considered an escort and protector for the dead. Although Nut was important to the ancient Egyptians, she was seldom worshipped in the same way as many other gods and is not very well-known in modern times, except to those who study ancient Egyptian culture.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

An important theme in many non-Western myths is birth, death, and rebirth. The myths of Nut emphasize this theme in stories of Nut and Ra, which portray life as an ongoing cycle. While many non-Western cultures incorporate this notion of cycles in their understanding of life, Western societies tend to view life as linear: birth and death, rather than

birth, death, and rebirth. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find examples of societies with cyclical and linear views of life. How are their cyclical and linear views expressed through their religious beliefs and ideas about the afterlife? Can you find any historical evidence that Western societies once held cyclical views of life?

SEE ALSO Egyptian Mythology; Isis; Osiris; Ra; Thoth



### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

NIMFS

### Alternate Names

Oceanids, Nereids,  
Dryads, Naiads

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Pausanias's *Description of  
Greece*

### Lineage

Varies

## Nymphs

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, nymphs were minor female deities, or goddesses, associated with nature. Typically pictured as beautiful girls or young women, they could live for a very long time but were not immortal (able to live forever). Most nymphs were the daughters of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the leader of the gods, or of other gods. They generally had gentle natures and acted with kindness toward humans. Some stories, however, tell of nymphs who lured unsuspecting mortals to their deaths.

Different kinds of nymphs were associated with particular parts of the natural world. The Oceanids (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nidz) were sea nymphs, daughters of the sea god Oceanus (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nuhs). One of the Oceanids married the sea god Nereus (pronounced NEER-ee-uhs) and their daughters became the Nereids (pronounced NEER-ee-idz), nymphs who lived in both freshwater and saltwater. Another group of water nymphs, the Naiads, were freshwater spirits associated with fountains, streams, rivers, and other forms of running water. Forest nymphs were divided into Dryads (pronounced DRYE-adz), originally linked specifically with oak trees but later known as nymphs of woods and forests in general, and the Hamadryads (pronounced ham-uh-DRYE-adz), who dwelled inside particular trees and perished when the trees died. Other types of nymphs included the mountain nymphs known as Oreads (pronounced OR-ee-adz), the nymphs of ash trees called Meliae (pronounced MEE-lee-ee), and Limoniads (pronounced lee-MOH-nee-adz), or meadow nymphs.



Nymphs rarely had a central role in Greek myths. Usually they played supporting parts as the companions of gods and **satyrs** (creatures that are half human and half goat). The goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), for example, often had nymphs attending her when she went hunting. Nymphs also became the lovers or wives of gods or **heroes**. The Dryad **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see) married the poet and musician **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs). After Eurydice died from a snakebite, Orpheus tried to retrieve her from the **underworld**, or land of the dead, but failed to meet the conditions set for her return.

Another nymph who gained mythic status as a wife was Oenone (pronounced ee-NOH-nee). Married to Paris, prince of Troy, Oenone predicted that if Paris left on a journey to Greece, the trip would be disastrous for Troy. During that trip, Paris eloped with **Helen**, the wife of the Spartan king, setting in motion the events that led to the Trojan War and the eventual destruction of Troy. When Paris lay wounded from fighting, Oenone refused to help him, even though she had the gift of healing. Eventually she relented and rushed to Troy to save her husband, but she arrived too late. Upon discovering that Paris had died, Oenone killed herself.

## Nymphs in Context

In contrast to the most famous gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons (or collections of recognized gods), nymphs were generally associated with very specific locations. Small communities each had their own groups of nymphs that were recognized, and just as certain gods were linked with professions, these nymphs were an important part of the community's identity. For the ancient Greeks, physical beauty was extremely important; it was considered to be a reflection of a person's mind and spirit. If a community was associated with a group of beautiful goddesses, that community would surely enjoy a special reputation among travelers. This purpose had little to do with the larger body of Greek or **Roman mythology**, and because of that, myths about nymphs continued in more remote Greek communities well into the twentieth century—nearly two thousand years after most Greek mythology had fallen out of fashion.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Above all, nymphs were considered symbols of beauty and femininity. This is illustrated by the number of gods and men that fall in love with

them on sight or have love affairs with them, including **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) and Orpheus. Another theme present in the tales of nymphs is the close association of females with nature. All nymphs are said to be female and all represent different aspects of nature, such as trees, streams, mountains, and meadows. The nymphs themselves are symbolized by these objects. A hamadrya, for example, is said to live in a specific tree, and, if that tree is harmed, the nymph perishes also. In this way, it can be said that nymphs symbolize the beauty and fragile state of the natural world.

### Nymphs in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though the idea of nymphs in general has endured in art and literature, only a few specific nymphs have remained well-known. Eurydice is perhaps the most famous, appearing in paintings, operas, and even films. **Echo** was another nymph famous for her love of the vain **Narcissus** (pronounced nar-SIS-us), a myth often captured in art and literature. The **Muses** are also nymphs and are popular in their own right as the goddesses who inspire creativity. More often, however, nymphs are portrayed less specifically, with many authors and artists depicting nameless nymphs of a certain type, such as dryads or nereids. Dryads have remained the best known of the nymphs and have appeared in literary works such as C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the poems of Sylvia Plath. They have also appeared in numerous video games, including the *Warcraft*, *Dungeon Siege*, and *Castlevania* series, and are considered a race in the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering*. Nereids have also appeared as characters in many video games, and in modern times the term "nereid" is commonly used to represent all nymphs, regardless of their origins.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In ancient times, it was believed that a person who cut down a tree that housed a nymph would be punished by the gods. In modern times, some environmentalists chain themselves to trees or take up residence in long-lived trees in an effort to protect them from destruction by lumber or construction crews. Do you think the myths of tree-dwelling nymphs may have been an ancient form of environmentalism? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Echo; Eurydice



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



# Odin

## Character Overview

Odin was the ruler of the Aesir (pronounced AY-sur), a group of deities, or gods, in **Norse mythology**. Sometimes called Allfather, Odin played a central role in myths about the creation and destruction of the world. He was the god of battle and also of wisdom, magic, and poetry. His name means “fury” or “frenzy,” the quality of fierce inspiration that guided warriors and poets alike. The god probably originated in the myths of early Germanic peoples, who called him Wodanaz. Odin was married to **Frigg** (pronounced FRIG), the guardian of marriage.

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

OH-din

### Alternate Names

Wotan (German)

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Bestla and Borr

## Major Myths

Odin spanned the history of the Norse mythic world from its creation to its destruction. Before the world existed, he and his two younger brothers, Vili and Ve, killed the frost giant **Ymir** (pronounced EE-mir). They used Ymir’s bones, blood, and flesh to form the universe. Odin arranged the heavens for the gods, the middle world for humans and dwarfs, and the **underworld** for the dead. He then created the first man and woman from an ash tree and an elm tree. Among the deities said to have been Odin’s children were **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der) and **Thor**. Odin—the favorite deity of princes, nobles, and warriors—came to be seen as the supreme Norse god, the one to whom the other deities

turned for help and advice. He ruled them from his palace **Valhalla** (pronounced val-HAL-uh) in the heavenly realm called Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd). As the god of war, Odin watched over warriors who fell in battle. **Valkyries**, female deities who served Odin, carried the bravest of the warriors straight to Valhalla. There Odin feasted them and prepared them for **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the final battle in which the gods were doomed to perish.

Odin was credited with great wisdom, including knowledge of magic and the ability to see the future. He paid a high price for this gift, however, giving one of his eyes in exchange for a drink from the well of **Mimir** (pronounced MEE-mir). The waters of this well, which seeped from among the roots of the enormous tree known as **Yggdrasill** (pronounced IG-druh-sil) that supported the world, contained great wisdom. Another myth says that Odin stabbed himself with his magical spear, called Gungnir (pronounced GOONG-nir), and hung from Yggdrasill for nine days and nights in a living death. This self-**sacrifice** gave him knowledge of the runes, the Norse symbols used for writing and fortune-telling. Yet, although Odin was wise, he could also be sly and treacherous. It was not unusual, for example, for him to break his word or to turn people against each other to start conflicts.

Odin had the power to change his appearance, and this shape-shifting played a part in the myth that explains Odin's connection with poetry. The wisest being who ever lived was Kvasir (pronounced VAHS-er), whom the gods had formed from their own saliva. Dwarves killed Kvasir and mixed his blood with honey to form a potion that granted wisdom and the gift of poetry. A giant hid the potion in the middle of a mountain and set his daughter to guard it. Odin changed himself into a snake and slithered through a tiny hole in the mountain. Taking the form of a handsome giant, he charmed the daughter into letting him drink the potion. Once Odin had swallowed it, he changed into an eagle and flew to Asgard, where he vomited the potion into three sacred vats. A few drops of the potion fell to the earth during his flight and became the inspiration for human poets.

Another myth reveals Odin as both a treacherous figure and the enforcer of divine justice. He observed two young princes, Agnar and Geirrod (pronounced GEHR-rod). On Odin's advice, Geirrod sent Agnar out to sea in a boat and then reported that his brother had drowned. After Geirrod grew up and became king, he was tested when a man named Grimnir appeared in his court. Fearing that the man was a

sorcerer, Geirrodd had him tortured. The king's son, however, showed pity on Grimnir and helped him. After predicting that Geirrodd would kill himself with his own sword, Grimnir revealed that he was Odin. The king grabbed his sword to attack him but tripped and stabbed himself. Odin then set the kindly son on the throne.

Odin liked to wander the earth in the form of an old man wearing a blue cloak and a wide-brimmed hat that hid his one-eyed face. Often he was accompanied by wolves and ravens, flesh eaters that haunt battlefields. His ravens Hugin (pronounced HYOO-gin, meaning "thought") and Munin (pronounced MYOO-nin, meaning "memory") traveled around the world and the underworld each day, returning to tell their knowledge-loving master what they had seen. Odin occasionally rode an eight-legged horse named Sleipnir (pronounced SLAYP-nir), who could travel at great speed through the air and across water.

## Odin in Context

The worship of Odin flourished across much of northern Europe and gained strength in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, the age of the Vikings. These Norse warriors and raiders, especially the fearsome fighters called the Berserks, regarded Odin as their special protector. As warriors, they were drawn to his battle-scarred exterior and no-nonsense nature. The increasing popularity of Odin also reflected the increase in warlike behavior among the Norse people. The ceremonies in honor of Odin sometimes included human sacrifice, with victims dying by the spear or by **fire**. Ritual hangings were especially important in the worship of Odin, who was sometimes called the Lord of the Gallows or the Hanging God because of his own mythic hanging on the tree Yggdrasill. When the Vikings raided Nantes, a town in northwestern France, in 842, they hanged many of the inhabitants, perhaps as an offering to Odin.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes found in the myths of Odin is sacrifice. For example, Odin gives up one of his eyes in order to drink from Mimir's well of wisdom. Odin's missing eye can be viewed as a symbol of his ability to see beyond normal sight. Another theme found in the myths of Odin is the inability to escape destiny—the notion that future events have already been determined and cannot be changed. Odin gains the

## Odin

*Odin liked to wander the earth in the form of a one-eyed old man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and accompanied by his two crows Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory).* ©

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ability to see the future and knows that he and the other gods of the Aesir will die at Ragnarok, but nothing he can do will change that fate.

### **Odin in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Odin is one of the best-known gods of Norse mythology. He appeared under the name Wotan in the opera cycle known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), written by German composer Richard Wagner in the late nineteenth century. Odin has appeared more recently as a character in the Marvel Comics Universe, and as a character

in the *Sandman* series by author Neil Gaiman. The name of the fourth day of the week, Wednesday, comes from Woden's-day, the god's Old English name.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In modern times, human sacrifice is almost universally condemned as a barbaric practice that violates basic human rights. Soldiers fighting in wars, however, often end up killing enemies, much like the Vikings did, though it is not considered human sacrifice. Do you think there is a basic difference between killing an enemy in modern warfare and the sacrifice of an enemy in ancient combat? Explain your position.

**SEE ALSO** Frigg; Mimir; Norse Mythology; Ragnarok; Thor; Valhalla; Yggdrasil; Ymir



# Odysseus

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Odysseus was a celebrated hero, best known for his role in the Trojan War and for his ten-year journey home after the war. Odysseus (known as Ulysses to the Romans) appears as the central character in the *Odyssey*, an epic poem by the ancient Greek poet Homer, and he also plays a role in the *Iliad*, Homer's other major epic.

**Early Life** Odysseus was generally said to be the son of Anticlea (pronounced an-tuh-KLEE-uh) and of King Laertes (pronounced lay-UR-teez) of Ithaca (pronounced ITH-uh-kuh). However, some stories maintain that his father was **Sisyphus** (pronounced SIZ-ee-fuhs), founder of the city of Corinth and a cunning man who outwitted the god **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez). This version says that Sisyphus seduced Anticlea before her marriage to Laertes and that Odysseus inherited his cleverness from Sisyphus.

Educated by the centaur Chiron—a half-human, half-horse creature—Odysseus began to display great strength and courage at an early age. While out hunting with his uncles and his grandfather, the young hero

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
oh-DIS-ee-uhs

**Alternate Names**  
Ulysses (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Homer's *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey*

**Lineage**  
Son of Laertes and Anticlea

saved the adults by killing a wild boar. Before the creature died, however, it wounded Odysseus on the leg with its sharp tusk, leaving a permanent scar.

When Odysseus reached manhood, King Laertes stepped aside and let his son rule Ithaca. Around the same time, Odysseus began thinking of marriage. Like other young rulers and **heroes** in Greece, he desired **Helen**, the beautiful daughter of King Tyndareus (pronounced tin-DAIR-ee-uhs) of Sparta. But Ithaca was a poor kingdom, and Odysseus had little hope of winning her. Nevertheless, he went to Sparta as a suitor.

While in Sparta, Odysseus displayed some of the cunning for which he became famous. Crowds of men had come to Sparta to seek the hand of Helen, and King Tyndareus feared what might happen when he chose one of them to marry his daughter. Odysseus advised the king to make all the suitors swear an oath to protect Helen and the man she married. The suitors agreed and thus accepted Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs) when he was chosen to be Helen's husband. To show his gratitude, Tyndareus helped Odysseus win the hand of his niece **Penelope** (pronounced puh-NEL-uh-pee), with whom the young hero had fallen in love. The couple returned to Ithaca, and Penelope bore Odysseus a son named Telemachus (pronounced tuh-LEM-uh-kuhs).

**The Trojan War** When the Trojan War began, Odysseus tried to avoid participating. An oracle, or person through whom the gods communicated with humans, had told him that if he went to war, he would be away for twenty years and would return a beggar. So Odysseus pretended to be mad and sowed his fields with salt instead of seeds. When officials came to fetch him, they suspected a trick so they placed the infant Telemachus in the field. Odysseus stopped the plow to avoid killing the child, something a madman would not have done.

According to the *Iliad*, Odysseus's role in the Trojan War was mainly as an advisor and speaker rather than as a warrior. He helped discover the whereabouts of **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) and he convinced the great hero to join the war. He tricked Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), wife of **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), into sending her daughter Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NEYE-uh) to be sacrificed to the goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss) so that the Greek ships would have good winds for their voyage to Troy. When a go-between was needed to settle quarrels





*It was the idea of the cunning Odysseus to conquer the Trojans by sending them a large wooden horse as a gift, in which was hidden Greek soldiers who were able to open the city gates of Troy to the Greek army.* © HERITAGE-IMAGES/THE IMAGE WORKS.

between Agamemnon and Achilles, Odysseus stepped in. He also spied on the Trojans and discovered their plans.

Renowned for his eloquent and persuasive speaking, Odysseus was called upon many times to give advice. Although he fought bravely, he preferred strategy to heroics. When the Greeks captured the Trojan prophet Helenus, who could see the future, and asked what they must do to capture Troy, it was Odysseus who accomplished the three tasks that were set. He persuaded Neoptolemus (pronounced nee-op-TOL-uh-muhs), the son of Achilles, to join the Greeks in battle. He used trickery

to get Philoctetes (pronounced fil-uhk-TEE-teez), keeper of the bow and arrows of **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez), to join the fighting. He also used cunning to sneak into Troy and steal the Palladium (pronounced puh-LAY-dee-um), a statue of **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) believed to protect the city and bring it good fortune. Finally, Odysseus came up with the idea of pretending to sail away from Troy, leaving behind an enormous wooden horse as a gift to the Trojans—inside of which Greek soldiers were hidden. This trick enabled the Greeks to enter Troy at night and defeat the Trojans.

**The Journey Home** After the fall of Troy, Odysseus set sail for Ithaca, but his voyage took ten long years because he angered the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun). His journey and adventures, described fully in the *Odyssey*, took the hero to many wondrous and dangerous places. Along the way, he lost all his companions and the treasure he had taken from Troy. Arriving home at last after an absence of twenty years, Odysseus had to defeat rivals trying to take possession of his wife and his kingdom. Then he had to prove his identity to his wife, Penelope.

There are several different accounts of Odysseus's final years. Some stories say that he was accidentally killed by Telegonus (pronounced tuh-LEG-uh-nus), his son by the enchantress **Circe** (pronounced SUR-see). Other tales say he married Callidice (pronounced kuh-LID-uh-see), the queen of Thesprotia (pronounced thes-PROH-shuh), and ruled there for a time while Penelope was still alive. Still other versions of the story report that Odysseus was forced into exile by relatives of the rivals he killed upon his return to Ithaca.

### Odysseus in Context

One notable aspect of Odysseus in his adventures is that he has romantic relationships with many women throughout his journey. At the same time, the whole purpose of his journey is to return home to his wife, Penelope. While Odysseus enjoys the company of numerous women, Penelope is busy fending off the many suitors who wish to marry her and take over the kingdom of Ithaca. This reflects a double standard common in ancient Greek culture and myth: male characters are often shown being unfaithful to their wives, but the wives are expected to remain true. In many cases, Odysseus appears to fall victim to magical

powers of attraction or seduction, which suggests that he is not to blame for his affairs.

Another important aspect of Odysseus is how the character was treated differently by Greek and Roman writers. In the works of the ancient Greek poet Homer, he was a hero who helped defeat the Trojans through his cunning. To the Romans, who claimed that they were descended from the noble Trojans, Odysseus was deceitful and cowardly, choosing to resort to trickery instead of facing a fair fight. This reflects the Greek celebration of ingenuity, while also showing the Roman tendency to solve matters through physical might.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Odysseus has stood as an enduring symbol of cleverness and mental power over the physical: although he is shown to be strong, he very often escapes trouble through his shrewdness rather than through brute force. Two important examples of his cleverness include his invention of the Trojan horse, which ended a bloody ten-year war in a single night, and his escape from the blinded Polyphemus, where he and his men hide underneath the giant's sheep as they are put out to pasture.

Another important theme in the tales of Odysseus is endurance: although his journey takes ten years—after spending another ten years fighting against Troy—he does not lose sight of his goal to return home to his wife and kingdom. Penelope also shows endurance, fending off men who seek her hand in marriage for twenty years while her husband is away. Equally important as a theme is the danger of temptation. Odysseus is tempted by the lotus-eaters and by Circe; many of his men fall victim to both, in the latter case being turned into animals. Odysseus resists Circe's charms and saves his crew; he later resists temptation again when she asks him to remain with her, choosing instead to continue the difficult journey home. Odysseus also recognizes the dangerous temptation of the **Sirens**, and acts to protect his men from their songs—though he himself succumbs to temptation and listens to the Sirens while tied to the mast of his ship.

### Odysseus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The tale of Odysseus is best known from the epic poems the *Iliad* and, more importantly, the *Odyssey*, both by Homer. Another ancient Greek epic, the *Telegony*, was said to chronicle the later years of Odysseus's life,

but this work appears to have been lost. The *Odyssey* has been adapted countless times over the centuries, inspiring novels, poems, symphonies, and songs. A partial retelling of Odysseus's adventures even occurs in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a Roman work modeled after Homer's epics. Odysseus also appears in Dante's *Inferno* as one of the damned souls in **hell**, and has been the subject of many sequels to the original tale, including Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses* (1842), and *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1938) by Nikos Kazantzakis. The tale of Odysseus has also loosely inspired many other works, including James Joyce's landmark novel *Ulysses* (1922), and the 2000 Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Odysseus in the Serpent Maze* by Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris (2002) is an adventure tale that takes place long before the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. In this novel, Odysseus is a thirteen-year-old prince who becomes shipwrecked far from home along with his friend, Mentor. The two meet up with Helen of Troy and Odysseus's future wife Penelope. Before they can return home, they must face off against bloodthirsty pirates and a monstrous serpent with one hundred heads. Yolen and Harris base their tale on existing fragments of the early life of Odysseus, as well as an in-depth knowledge of ancient Greek culture.

**SEE ALSO** Achilles; Circe; Greek Mythology; Helen of Troy; *Iliad*, *The*; *Odyssey*, *The*; Penelope



## Odyssey, The

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

AH-dis-ee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Homer's *Odyssey*

### Myth Overview

One of the great epic poems of ancient Greece, the *Odyssey* tells the story of the struggles and triumphs of the hero **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) as he made his way home after the Trojan War. Pursued by the sea god **Poseidon**, but aided both by his own cunning and by the goddess **Athena**, Odysseus overcame countless obstacles during his long journey home. Along the way, he lost his ships, his crew, and the riches

he had gained at Troy. The *Odyssey* is believed to be the work of the Greek poet Homer, who also composed the *Iliad*.

The story actually opens in the middle of his journey, with Odysseus stranded on Ogygia (pronounced oh-GIG-ee-uh), the island home of the enchantress Calypso (pronounced kuh-LIP-soh). Almost ten years had passed since the end of the Trojan War. All the other Greek **heroes** were either dead or safely back in their homelands. Only Odysseus had yet to return home. Calypso was holding the hero captive, hoping that her beauty and offer of immortality—the ability to live forever—would make him forget his wife, **Penelope** (pronounced puh-NEL-uh-pee), and marry her instead.

Finally the gods took pity on Odysseus. The goddess Athena (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) encouraged Odysseus's son Telemachus (pronounced tuh-LEM-uh-kuhs) to go on a quest in search of his father. The young man traveled to Pylos and then to Sparta, where he met **Helen** and Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhs), the king and queen. Telemachus was proud when he learned of his father's fame. Meanwhile **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the leader of the gods, sent **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) to command Calypso to let the hero leave. She reluctantly agreed, and Odysseus sailed from the island on a raft. While the hero was at sea, the sea god Poseidon (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) sent a great storm that destroyed the raft. Saved by a sea goddess, Odysseus finally reached the land of the Phaeacians (pronounced fee-AY-shunz). The Phaeacians welcomed the stranger and treated him as an honored guest. In return, Odysseus revealed his name and told the Phaeacians about the adventures he had had since leaving Troy many years before.

**Odysseus's Tale** When the Trojan War ended, Odysseus set sail for his homeland of Ithaca (pronounced ITH-uh-kuh) with a number of companions in several ships. They first stopped in the land of the Cicones (pronounced SI-kuh-neeze). After sacking the city of Ismara, they were driven off and suffered significant losses. Next they arrived at the land of the lotus-eaters, so named because the people there ate the honey-sweet fruit from the lotus plant. This fruit acted like a drug, and when some of the Greeks ate it, they lost all desire to return home. Odysseus had to drag them to the ships and tie them down before he could set sail again.

The Greeks next arrived at the land of the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-peeze), a race of one-eyed savage **giants**. When Odysseus

and some of his men went into a large cave, the Cyclops Polyphemus (pronounced pol-uh-FEE-muhs) trapped them inside by rolling a huge stone across the entrance. Polyphemus, a son of Poseidon, proceeded to kill and eat several of Odysseus's men, and the survivors lost nearly all hope of escaping. Odysseus came up with a plan. After blinding Polyphemus with a stake, he and his men escaped the cave by clinging to the undersides of the giant's sheep as they were let out to graze. The Greeks ran to their ships and set sail. Polyphemus hurled rocks at them and called on Poseidon to take revenge against Odysseus.

The Greeks landed next on the island of Aeolus (pronounced EE-uh-luhs), the keeper of the winds. Aeolus listened eagerly to Odysseus's tales of the Trojan War and gave the hero a bag containing all the storm winds. With these winds, Odysseus would be able to sail safely and quickly to Ithaca. After setting sail, however, his men became curious about the bag. Thinking that it might contain gold and jewels, they opened it and released the winds. The winds tossed the ships about and blew them back to the island of Aeolus. Aeolus refused to help Odysseus again and ordered the ships to leave.

After sailing for some time, Odysseus came to the land of the Laestrygonians (pronounced les-tri-GOH-nee-uhnz), a race of cannibal giants. The giants destroyed all but one of his ships and ate many of his men. Barely escaping these dreadful creatures, Odysseus and his surviving companions traveled on to the island of **Circe** (pronounced SUR-see), a powerful enchantress. Circe cast a spell on some of Odysseus's men and turned them into pigs. Protected by a magical herb given to him by Hermes, Odysseus forced the enchantress to reverse her spell, and his men resumed their human form. Circe then invited Odysseus and his men to remain as her guests.

The Greeks stayed with Circe for a year. She told Odysseus that he must visit the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and consult the blind prophet Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-uhs), who could see the secrets of the gods, before returning to his homeland. Reluctantly and full of dread, Odysseus went to the kingdom of the dead. While there, he met his dead mother, Anticlea (pronounced an-tuh-KLEE-uh), and the spirits of **Agamemnon** (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non), **Achilles** (pronounced uh-KILL-eez), and other Greek heroes. Tiresias told Odysseus what to expect and do during the rest of his journey and after he returned home to Ithaca.

After leaving the underworld, Odysseus went back to Circe's island for a short stay. Before he set sail again, the enchantress warned him about some of the dangers he still faced and advised him how to survive them. The first of these dangers was the **Sirens**, sea **nymphs** who lured sailors to their deaths with their beautiful singing. Odysseus ordered his men to plug their ears with wax so they would not hear the Sirens' song. Wanting to hear their songs himself, he had his men tie him to the ship's mast so he could not be lured away.

Odysseus and his men next faced the monsters Scylla (pronounced SIL-uh) and Charybdis (pronounced kuh-RIB-dis), who guarded a narrow channel through which their ship had to pass. Odysseus barely escaped the monsters and he lost some of his men to them. The survivors reached the island of Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs) with its herds of sacred sheep and cattle. Both Tiresias and Circe had warned Odysseus not to harm any of these animals, but his men ignored the warning and killed some of them as a **sacrifice** and for food. When Helios complained to the gods, Zeus sent a storm that destroyed Odysseus's ship and drowned all his remaining companions. Alone, the hero reached the island of the enchantress Calypso, the point at which the *Odyssey* began.

**Return to Ithaca** After hearing the story of Odysseus's adventures, the Phaeacians gave him a ship, and he set sail for Ithaca. This time Poseidon put aside his anger and allowed Odysseus to reach home, but he punished the Phaeacians for helping him. In Ithaca, the goddess Athena appeared before Odysseus and reassured him that his wife, Penelope, had been faithful. She had resisted the attentions of many suitors who desired both her and his kingdom and were occupying his house. Disguised as a beggar by Athena, Odysseus stayed with a loyal swineherd while the goddess went to fetch his son Telemachus from Sparta.

When Telemachus returned, Odysseus revealed himself to his son, and together they plotted the undoing of Penelope's suitors. Still disguised as a beggar, Odysseus went to the palace and walked among the suitors. Later that night, Penelope asked to speak with the beggar, whom she did not recognize as her husband. She asked what he knew of Odysseus and told him how she had fended off the suitors. She had refused to marry until she finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father, Laertes (pronounced lay-UR-teez). She would weave the shroud by day and then unravel her work at night. This worked until her trick was discovered. While they were talking, an old nurse came in to wash

## Odyssey, The

*In The Odyssey an old nurse saw past the disguise of the hero Odysseus when he finally returned home from his long journey. He swore her to secrecy so he could surprise the men who sought his wife's hand in marriage.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.



the beggar's feet. Recognizing a scar on his leg, she knew him to be Odysseus, but he swore her to secrecy.

Penelope announced to the suitors that she would marry the man who could string the bow of Odysseus and shoot an arrow through twelve axes placed in a row. The suitors all failed. Telemachus then demanded that the beggar be allowed to try. The beggar accomplished the feat. Then throwing off his disguise, he and Telemachus fought and killed all the suitors. At first Penelope could not believe that this man was truly her long-absent husband. Only when Odysseus revealed a secret



that only they knew—that their bed was carved from a tree and remained rooted in the ground—did she acknowledge and embrace him.

On the day following this reunion, Odysseus visited his father, Laertes, and learned that the families of the dead suitors were planning to attack. When the battle was about to begin, Athena frightened the attackers away. She then assured Odysseus that his reign would be long and would bring lasting peace to Ithaca. The *Odyssey* ends with this promise of peace and happiness.

## The *Odyssey* in Context

It would be nearly impossible to overstate the importance of the *Odyssey* to Greek literature and culture—and by extension Western literature and culture in general. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both served a fundamental role in shaping their political and cultural lives. The framers of Greece's famous governmental systems (the foundation of our modern democracy) used Homer's epics as precedent and support in much the same way a lawyer today would appeal to Supreme Court rulings in trying to argue a case. The events and language of the poems permeate subsequent ancient Greek literature, from the dialogs of Socrates to the plays of Euripides, and continue to echo strongly in today's literature.

Ancient Rome gradually seized control of Greece between the second and first centuries BCE, and in the process appropriated much of what they found valuable about Greek culture. The great poems of Homer were considered chief among Greece's cultural gems. In writing his own national epic for Rome, the poet Virgil plainly admitted he was attempting to recreate the glory Homer's work. As Rome's military and political dominance spread north across Europe all the way to England, Greek culture (in Roman "packaging") spread, too, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* won more admirers. Countless artists, writers, philosophers, and politicians of the past two thousand years of Western history have acknowledged their debt to Homer, including such famous figures as the Italian artist Michelangelo, English poet John Milton, American politician Thomas Jefferson, American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, and English writer James Joyce. Eminent eighteenth-century Irish author Samuel Johnson summed up the influence of Homer's work thus: "Nation after nation, century after century, has been able to do little more than transpose Homer's incidents, new-name his characters, and paraphrase his sentiments."

## Key Themes and Symbols

A key theme in the tale of Odysseus is cleverness. Although he is shown to be strong, Odysseus very often escapes trouble through shrewdness rather than brute force, as when he devises a plan to escape from the Cyclops Polyphemus by hiding under the giant's sheep as they are put out to graze. Another important theme in the tales of Odysseus is determination: although his journey takes ten years, he does not lose sight of his goal to return home to his wife and kingdom. His wife Penelope represents faithfulness, since she never gives up hope that her husband will return. The best symbol of their love is their bed, which Odysseus describes as a final test to prove his identity. The bed represents their marriage, a living and enduring thing with roots that give it strength even though they may not be seen.

## The *Odyssey* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The *Odyssey* has been adapted in many forms since its first appearance. The Roman poet Virgil even borrowed from the *Odyssey* in his own epic, the *Aeneid*. The *Odyssey* has also inspired many modern works, including James Joyce's landmark novel *Ulysses* (1922), and the 2000 Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The term "odyssey" has even come to mean a great adventure that takes a long time and includes many different locations, such as in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Odysseus embodies a spirit of adventure and travel, and the *Odyssey* takes him to the farthest reaches of the ancient world. In modern times, the entire globe is connected through communication systems, such as telephones and the Internet. It is a simple task to see an image of Mount Fuji or the Eiffel Tower without having to travel to Japan or France. Do you think this ability to connect with faraway places leads to an increase or decrease in a person's spirit of adventure and desire to travel? Why? Similarly, do you think the *Odyssey* inspired ancient audiences to travel, or do you think the terrifying stories would have the opposite effect and cause people to prefer the safety of their homes?

**SEE ALSO** Athena; Circe; Cyclopes; Greek Mythology; *Iliad, The*; Odysseus; Penelope; Poseidon; Sirens



# Oedipus

## Character Overview

Oedipus was a tragic hero of **Greek mythology**, a king doomed to a dire fate because he unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. His story is the tale of someone who, because he did not know his true identity, followed the wrong path in life. Once he had set foot on that path, his best qualities could not save him from the results of actions that violated the laws of gods and men.

Oedipus was born to King Laius (pronounced LAY-uhs) and Queen Jocasta (pronounced joh-KAS-tuh) of Thebes (pronounced THEEBZ). The oracle at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye), who could communicate directly with the gods, told Laius and Jocasta that their child would grow up to murder Laius and marry Jocasta. Horrified, the king fastened the infant's feet together with a large pin and left him on a mountainside to die.

However, shepherds found the baby—who became known as Oedipus, or “swollen foot”—and took him to the city of Corinth. There King Polybus (pronounced POL-uh-buhs) and Queen Merope (pronounced MER-uh-pee) adopted him and raised him to think that he was their own son. When Oedipus was grown, however, someone told him that he was not the son of Polybus. Oedipus went to Delphi to ask the oracle about his parentage. The answer he received was: “You are the man fated to murder his father and marry his mother.”

Like Laius and Jocasta, Oedipus was determined to avoid the fate predicted for him. Believing that the oracle had said he was fated to kill Polybus and marry Merope, he vowed never to return to Corinth. Instead, he headed toward Thebes.

Along the way, Oedipus came to a narrow road between cliffs. There he met an older man in a chariot coming the other way. The two quarreled over who should give way, and Oedipus killed the stranger and went on to Thebes. He found the city in great distress. He learned that a monster called the **Sphinx** was terrorizing the Thebans by devouring them when they failed to answer its riddle, and that King Laius had been murdered on his way to seek help from the Delphic oracle. The riddle of the Sphinx was: “What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon,

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

ED-uh-puhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Seneca's *Oedipus*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*

### Lineage

Son of Laius and Jocasta

and three in the evening?” Oedipus gave the correct answer: “A human being, who crawls as an infant, walks erect in maturity, and leans on a staff in old age.” With this answer, Oedipus not only defeated the Sphinx, which killed itself in rage, but won the throne of the dead king and the hand in marriage of the king’s widow, Jocasta.

Oedipus and Jocasta lived happily for a time and had two sons and two daughters. Then a dreadful plague came upon Thebes. A prophet declared that the plague would not end until the Thebans drove out Laius’s murderer, who was within the city. A messenger then arrived from Corinth, announcing the death of King Polybus and asking Oedipus to return and rule the Corinthians. Oedipus told Jocasta what the oracle had predicted for him and expressed relief that the danger of his murdering Polybus was past. Jocasta told him not to fear oracles, for the oracle had said that her first husband would be killed by his own son, and instead he had been murdered by a stranger on the road to Delphi.

Suddenly Oedipus remembered that fatal encounter on the road and knew that he had met and killed his real father, Laius. At the same time, Jocasta realized that the scars on Oedipus’s feet marked him as the baby whose feet Laius had pinned together so long ago. Faced with the fact that she had married her own son and the murderer of Laius, she hanged herself. Oedipus seized a pin from her dress and blinded himself with it.

Some accounts say that Oedipus was banished at once from Thebes, while others relate that he lived a miserable existence there, despised by all, until his children grew up. Eventually he was driven into exile, accompanied by his two daughters, **Antigone** (pronounced an-TIG-uh-nee) and Ismene (pronounced is-MEE-nee). After years of lonely wandering, he arrived in Athens, where he found refuge in a grove of trees called Colonus. By this time, warring factions in Thebes wanted him to return to that city, believing that his body would bring it luck. Oedipus, however, died at Colonus, and the presence of his grave there was said to bring good fortune to Athens.

### Oedipus in Context

The tale of Oedipus reflects and reinforces ancient Greek traditions and values in more than one way. First, the myth emphasizes the importance of following traditions related to family members. The idea of killing a relative was shocking to ancient Greeks and was considered so serious that it was beyond the scope of punishment by human laws. Similarly,



*When Oedipus found out that he had killed his father and married his mother—and was therefore responsible for the plague in the city he ruled—he blinded himself. This painting by Ernest Hillemacher shows him walking blind among the victims of the plague with his daughter.* THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS ORLÉANS/ALFREDO DAGLI ORTI/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.

marrying one's own parent went against the most basic marriage traditions in Greek culture (and most other cultures). By showing how these unspeakable acts led to a tragic end for Oedipus, the myth reinforced these traditions among the ancient Greeks who knew the tale.

The myth also reflects cultural beliefs about destiny, or the idea that future events in a person's life are already determined and cannot be changed. For the ancient Greeks, who consulted with messengers of the gods regularly, this was a widely accepted notion. The abundance of such stories in Greek myth—as opposed to stories where characters successfully defy the gods and change their destinies—indicates that the ideas of

freedom and free will were much more limited in scope than they are in modern society. Stories like the myth of Oedipus would instead encourage citizens to accept their destiny, whatever it may be.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The story of Oedipus contains two enduring themes of Greek myth and drama: the flawed nature of humanity, and an individual's powerlessness against the course of destiny. Laius and Oedipus are both flawed because of their arrogance or overconfidence. Not only do they both believe they can defy the predictions of the oracles, but neither is willing to grant the other first passage when they meet on the road between the cliffs. This results in Oedipus killing Laius, therefore fulfilling the first part of the prophecy. This inability to escape destiny is also shown in Oedipus's flight from Corinth; Oedipus believes he is safe from the prediction of the oracle, even though his actions directly result in the prediction coming true. The fact that Oedipus blinds himself is symbolic of the arrogance that blinded him to the destiny he thought he could escape.

### Oedipus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The best-known account of the myth of Oedipus is preserved in *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, two dramas by the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles. Most versions of the story have followed the pattern that Sophocles set down, although an earlier version, mentioned by Homer in the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, says that after Oedipus's identity was revealed, Jocasta hanged herself. Oedipus, however, continued to rule Thebes, died in battle, and was buried with honor.

The story of Oedipus has inspired artists and thinkers since ancient times. The Roman philosopher Seneca wrote a tragedy entitled *Oedipus* that influenced writers such as England's John Dryden and Alexander Pope and France's Voltaire and Pierre Corneille. Later artistic treatments of the Oedipus story include a translation of Sophocles' work by Irish poet William Butler Yeats; a play entitled *The Infernal Machine* by Jean Cocteau of France; music by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky; and the movie *Oedipus Rex* by Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. Sigmund Freud, one of the founders of modern psychiatry, used the term *Oedipus complex* to refer to a psychological state in which a boy or man experiences hostility toward his father due to an inappropriate attraction or bond to his mother.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Oedipus commits two unspeakable acts—killing his father and marrying his mother—without knowing he has done either one. In modern law, if a person commits a crime without knowing that it was illegal, the person can still be held accountable for committing the crime. At the same time, many laws differ from state to state or even city to city, with some cities still carrying old laws that might seem silly to modern visitors (in Gainesville, Georgia, for example, it is technically illegal to eat chicken with a fork). Do you think not knowing about a law is ever a valid defense for breaking that law? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Antigone; Greek Mythology; Sphinx



# Oisín

## Character Overview

In **Celtic mythology**, Oisín (or Ossian) was a great warrior poet and the son of **Finn**, leader of a warrior band known as the Fianna (pronounced FEE-uh-nuh). Legend says that an enchanter had changed Finn's lover, the goddess Sadb (pronounced SAWV), into a deer. One day while looking for Sadb, Finn came upon Oisín. He realized the boy was his son after Oisín told him that his mother was a gentle deer. Finn raised Oisín and trained him to be a warrior, but Oisín also inherited his mother's gift of eloquent speech. He became a great poet as well as one of the fiercest warriors of the Fianna.

As a man, Oisín met Niamh (pronounced NEE-uhv), daughter of the sea god Manannan Mac **Lir** (pronounced muh-NAH-nahn mak leer). She invited him to visit her father's kingdom of Tir Na Nog, the Land of Ever Young. After what seemed like a few years, Oisín grew lonely for home and asked if he might visit Ireland. Niamh agreed and sent him back on horseback, warning him not to touch the ground or he would never be able to return to Tir Na Nog. However, Oisín slipped out of his saddle while helping some men lift a stone. When he fell to the ground, he instantly became a blind, white-haired old man. He discovered that three hundred years had passed since he left Ireland, and

### Nationality/Culture

Irish/Celtic

### Pronunciation

uh-SHEEN

### Alternate Names

Ossian

### Appears In

The Fenian Cycle

### Lineage

Son of Finn and Sadb

## Oisín

*Oisín dramatically lost his magic youth when he slipped and fell after being warned by the daughter of a sea god not to touch the ground.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.



when he touched the ground, all those years caught up with him. He never saw his beloved Niamh or Tir Na Nog again.

### Oisín in Context

The character of Oisín, despite playing an active part in several fantastic adventures, was traditionally regarded as an actual historical figure in



Irish culture. He is the narrator and alleged author of many poems and ballads. Although there is little evidence that Oisín is based on a real person, this reflects Celtic and Irish beliefs that the gods and other races of beings frequently interacted with humans. It also reflects the notion in Irish culture that the Irish people are directly descended from figures with mythical roots such as Oisín.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One theme found in the tales of Oisín is the danger of disobeying the gods. Although he does not intend to disobey Niamh, his carelessness results in his losing his eternal youth. Oisín also represents eloquence of speech and song, which he inherited from his goddess mother. Oisín, whose name actually means “little deer,” is sometimes associated with deer.

### Oisín in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Oisín is one of the most beloved and heroic figures in Irish culture. He appears in several traditional Celtic tales and was the subject of the William Butler Yeats poem *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889). In 1761, a writer named James MacPherson published what was claimed to be a translation of Oisín’s poems. Their authenticity was disproved by Samuel Johnson fourteen years later. In recent times, the name Oisín has been used by geneticist Bryan Sykes to represent a population of people who have a certain group of genetic markers in their DNA. Although members of this population can be found throughout Europe, they are most concentrated in Ireland and Wales.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

According to legend, Oisín lived for several hundred years in a land of eternal youth. In modern times, people spend billions of dollars each year in an attempt to regain their youthful appearance or energy level. The myth of Oisín seems to suggest that people in centuries past were also concerned with retaining their youth. Do you think people are more concerned now with appearing young than they were in the past? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Celtic Mythology; Finn



**Nationality/Culture**

American Indian/Blackfoot

**Alternate Names**

Napi (Old Man), Kipitaki (Old Woman)

**Appears In**

Blackfoot creation myths

**Lineage**

None

## Old Man and Old Woman

### Character Overview

Old Man, also known as Napi, is a creator god and trickster figure in the mythology of the Blackfoot Indians of North America. He is said to have created the world and all the creatures in it. His companion was Old Woman, who often argued with Old Man or altered his plans in ways that made life more difficult for people.

### Major Myths

To make humans, Old Man fashioned figures out of clay and breathed life into them. Old Man was accompanied by Old Woman as he did this, and their disagreements determined how people were formed and how they lived. For example, Old Man wished to make humans with five fingers on each hand; Old Woman said that five fingers was too many, so they settled on four fingers and one thumb.

Then it came time to decide whether people would live again after they died, or whether they would stay dead forever. To answer the question, Old Man threw a piece of buffalo manure into the river. If the manure floated, he said, humans would die and come back to life after four days. If it sank, they would die and never live again. The manure floated, but Old Woman was not satisfied. She decided to try the test herself. However, instead of a piece of manure, she threw a stone into the water. The stone sank, so Old Man decreed that death for humans would last forever. Old Woman concluded that this would be best, since it meant people would show sympathy for each other.

Another story says that after the world was filled with people, Old Man decided to experience life for himself. He lured a woman to a nest of rattlesnakes, and she mated with one of them. When her husband found out, he cut off her head. But the woman's headless body chased her two children. They saved themselves by throwing a piece of magic

moss on the ground. A river formed, and the body drowned. One of the children was Old Man, who continued to live on earth before he died and disappeared behind the mountains.

### **Old Man and Old Woman in Context**

In the myths of Old Man, Old Woman is depicted as always willing to argue and make things difficult. The myths lay the blame on women for making certain tasks—such as tanning buffalo hides—difficult to do, or for denying humans the ability to live forever. It also suggests that decision making is better left to the men, and that the difficult tasks women must perform are deserved, because they would not be difficult if Old Woman did not have her say.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The Blackfoot identify Old Man with the **sun**, which also disappears behind the mountains every evening. Like the sun returning in the morning, Old Man is also supposed to come back to earth one day. The theme of deciding humanity's fate is important in the myths of Old Man and Old Woman. Together, they decide all the basics of human life and living, sometimes with very little thought put into the details. The theme of a god longing for the human experience is also present in the stories of Old Man; although he created humans, he still wants to know what it is like to live as one.

### **Old Man and Old Woman in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Old Man and Old Woman are important figures in Blackfoot mythology, but like most American Indian mythical figures, they are not well known in mainstream American society. Stories of Old Man and Old Woman are preserved by the remaining Blackfoot descendants, mostly residing in northern Montana and southern Alberta, Canada. The mythology of the Blackfoot people was also documented by Clark Wissler and D. C. Duvall in their 1908 book *Mythology of the Blackfoot Indians*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the myth of Old Man and Old Woman, Old Woman states that not allowing people to come back to life after they die will cause them to show more sympathy for each other while they are alive. Why do you think this might be true?

SEE ALSO Native American Mythology; Tricksters



# Olorun

## Nationality/Culture

West African/Yoruba

## Pronunciation

oh-loh-RUN

## Alternate Names

Olofin-Orun, Oba-Orun,  
Olodumare

## Appears In

Yoruba creation myths

## Lineage

None

## Character Overview

In the mythology of the Yoruba people of West Africa, Olorun is the most powerful and wisest god. The all-knowing Olorun takes an active role in the affairs of both **heaven** and earth. Head of the Yoruba pantheon (or collection of recognized gods), Olorun is also known as Olofin-Orun (Lord of Heaven), Oba-Orun (King of the Sky), and Olodumare (Almighty).

## Major Myths

According to Yoruba legend, Olorun was one of two original creator gods; the other was the goddess Olokun. In the beginning, the universe consisted only of sky and a formless expanse of marshy water. Olorun ruled the sky, while Olokun ruled the vast marshy waters below. There were thousands of other gods, but none had as much knowledge or power as Olorun.

Although Olokun was content with her watery kingdom, a lesser god named Obatala had ideas about improving her kingdom. He went to Olorun and suggested the creation of solid land, with fields and forests, hills and valleys, and various living things to populate it. Olorun agreed that this would be good and gave Obatala permission to create land.

Obatala went to Orunmila, the eldest son of Olorun, and asked how he should proceed. Orunmila told Obatala to gather gold to make a chain that could be lowered from the sky to the waters below. When the chain was finished, Orunmila gave Obatala a snail's shell filled with sand,

a white hen, a black cat, and a palm nut. Obatala lowered himself on the chain and poured the sand on the waters. He then released the hen, which scratched at the sand and scattered it in all directions. Every place the sand fell became dry land. Stepping onto the land—known as Ife—Obatala built a house, grew palm trees from the palm nut, and lived with the black cat as his companion.

Obatala later became lonely and built clay figures. Olorun turned these figures into humans by breathing life into them. Many gods descended from the sky to live on earth, and Olorun told them to listen to the prayers of humans and protect them.

Not pleased by these acts of creation, the water goddess Olokun tried to flood the land to regain the area she had lost. However, Orunmila used his powers to make the waters recede. Angry that the sky god's son had defeated her, Olokun challenged Olorun to a weaving contest to see who was the more powerful. Olokun was a weaver of unequalled skill and knowledge, but every time she made a beautiful cloth, Agemo, the chameleon who carried messages for Olorun, changed the color of its skin to match her weaving. When Olokun saw that even Olorun's messenger could duplicate her finest cloths, she accepted defeat and acknowledged Olorun as the supreme god.

## Olorun in Context

For the Yoruba people, the ultimate goal of life is to live in a way that connects one to Olorun and the energy of the world. Becoming one with Olorun leads to a place in the spiritual realm after death. This involves doing things that are helpful for others and the world, and always trying to improve oneself. In this way, Olorun has a profound effect on how all Yoruba people live from day to day.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Olorun represents original creation and the father of all the earth. He is closely associated with all things white, including bones, clouds, and—according to Yoruba belief—brains. He is not usually viewed as having a specific physical form.

## Olorun in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although he is one of the most important gods in Yoruban mythology, Olorun is not often depicted in human form, and, unlike other figures in

the Yoruban pantheon, he is not the focus of an annual celebration. Perhaps because of this, Olorun is not well-known outside the Yoruba culture. However, since many elements of Yoruban culture were brought to the New World during the slave trade, some tales of Olorun have made their way throughout the Caribbean, the southern United States, and South America. Perhaps the most famous mention of Olorun occurs in the 1990 song “Rhythm of the Saints” by Paul Simon, though his variant name Olodumare is used.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many creation myths from around the world include humans originally being crafted from clay, as in the myth of Obatala and Olorun. Why do you think this theme is found in so many different cultures? Do you think the practice of burying the dead supports this notion of humans originally arising from clay? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO African Mythology; Ile-Ife

## One Thousand and One Nights

See **Aladdin**; **Sinbad**.



## Orion

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
oh-RYE-uhn

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Ovid's *Fasti*, Hyginus's *Astronomica*, Homer's *Odyssey*

**Lineage**  
Son of Poseidon

### Character Overview

Orion was a giant in **Greek mythology** who was famed as a hunter and companion of **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss). Some stories say he was the son of **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), god of the sea, and could therefore walk on water. In other tales, he is born from three fathers—**Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), Poseidon, and **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez)—as an heir for the king of Boeotia (pronounced bee-OH-shuh).

Orion went to the island of Chios (pronounced KY-ohs), where King Oenopion (pronounced ee-NOH-pee-on) asked him to drive all

the wild beasts from the land. In return, Oenopion promised Orion his daughter Merope (pronounced MEHR-oh-pee) in marriage. However, the king later refused to honor the agreement. Orion got drunk and raped Merope, and Oenopion blinded him. After recovering his vision, Orion went to Crete to live and hunt with the goddess Artemis.

There are several accounts of his death. One story says that Eos, the goddess of the dawn, fell in love with Orion and that Artemis killed him out of jealousy. According to another version, Orion and Artemis were considering marriage, but she was tricked into killing him by her brother **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). In still another myth, Orion pursued seven sisters known as the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez). To save them from Orion's attentions, Zeus, the leader of the gods, turned them into stars. Orion, too, became a constellation, which appears to chase the Pleiades through the heavens.

## Orion in Context

Even in ancient times, Orion was best known as a constellation, or group of stars visible in the night sky. The constellation known as Orion earned its name because ancient observers saw the image of a hunter in the arrangement of its stars. Although Orion the mythological character was most likely recognized before Orion the constellation, his link to the constellation undoubtedly led to new tales about him. For example, the myth of Orion and the Pleiades seems likely to have developed after observers noticed the movements of the two groups of stars in the sky. Likewise, in one myth Orion is said to have fought a giant scorpion—a story that may have its origin in the presence of a constellation, near to Orion in the sky, known as Scorpius.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Trickery and betrayal runs through the myth of Orion. First, Orion is betrayed by Oenopion, who backs out of his agreement to let Orion marry his daughter Merope. Later, Orion is betrayed by his love, Artemis, who kills him when she is tricked by her brother. The search for love is also a common theme in the tales of Orion, though none of his searches ends happily. Orion is closely associated with hunting, and a club and animal hide are often used to represent him. His dog Sirius (pronounced SEER-ee-uhs) is a constant companion, and represents loyalty.

## Orion

*Drawing of the constellation Orion.* IMAGE SELECT/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Orion in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Orion's name is easily recognized in modern society, even though existing myths about him are fairly sparse. His appearance in art and literature since the ancient Greek era has also been rather infrequent. He was the subject of a painting by Nicolas Poussin in 1658, and of two operas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. John Keats



mentions Orion in his poem *Endymion* (1818), and Richard Henry Horne wrote a successful epic based on Orion in 1843. More recently, science fiction author Ben Bova wrote a series of futuristic novels between 1984 and 1995 centered on Orion. Orion is still probably best known to most people by the constellation that bears his name.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find the constellations of Orion, Scorpius, and the Pleiades on a map of the stars. Where are they in relation to each other? Do they resemble the figures they are meant to represent? Do some further reading about the importance of astrology in ancient Greek and Roman societies. How was astrology regarded by the ancients, compared to what many modern scientists think about it?



# Orpheus

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Orpheus is a musician who sang and played so beautifully that even animals, rocks, and trees danced to his tunes. He was the son of Calliope (pronounced kuh-LYE-uh-pee), the Muse of epic poetry, and of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). It was Apollo who gave Orpheus his first lyre, the musical instrument that he always played.

Orpheus accompanied **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts) on their quest for the **Golden Fleece** and used his music several times to ease their journey. On one occasion, he calmed the sea with his playing; another time, he saved the Argonauts from the deadly **Sirens** by playing so loudly that they could not hear the Sirens' songs. Also, he stopped the Argonauts from quarreling with a song about the origins of the universe.

Orpheus fell in love with the nymph **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see). Shortly after their marriage, Eurydice was bitten by a snake and died. The grieving Orpheus refused to play or sing for a long time.

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

OR-fee-uhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Virgil's *Georgics*

### Lineage

Son of Calliope and Apollo

Finally he decided to go to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, to find Eurydice. His playing enchanted Charon (pronounced KAIR-uhn), the ferryman who carried the souls of the dead across the river Styx (pronounced STIKS) into the underworld. Charon agreed to take Orpheus across the river, even though he was not dead. Orpheus's music also tamed **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), the monstrous three-headed dog who guarded the gates of the underworld. Even **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez) and **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), king and queen of the underworld, could not resist his playing. They agreed to let him take Eurydice back to earth on one condition: he was not to look back at her until they had both reached the surface. Orpheus led his wife from the underworld, and as soon as he reached the surface, he was so overjoyed that he looked back to share the moment with Eurydice. But she had not reached the surface yet, and she immediately disappeared into the underworld.

Orpheus spent the rest of his life grieving for his lost wife. In time his grief infuriated the Maenads (pronounced MEE-nads), a group of women who worshipped the god **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs). To punish Orpheus for neglecting their attentions, they tore him to pieces. The **Muses** gathered up the pieces of his body and buried them, but the Maenads threw his head and his lyre into the river Hebrus. The head continued to sing and the lyre continued to play, and both eventually floated down to the sea, finally coming to rest on the island of Lesbos. The head became an oracle, or being that communicated messages between the gods and humans. Eventually the head of Orpheus rivaled the famous oracle of Apollo at **Delphi**. The gods placed his lyre in the heavens as a constellation.

### Orpheus in Context

Orpheus was much more than a mythological musician to many ancient Greeks. In fact, he was often viewed as a real person who had brought significant religious teachings to his followers. He was said to be the creator of the *Orphic Hymns*, a body of myth that is similar to more traditional Greek beliefs, but emphasizes the importance of certain figures, such as Dionysus and Persephone. Although very little is known about the details of the Orphic religion, its followers appear to have believed in the eternal nature of the human soul, and an **afterlife** that was designed to reward the deserving and punish the



*The musician Orpheus used his lyre to charm Hades, the god of the underworld, into letting his wife Eurydice return to the land of the living with him. But when Orpheus disobeyed orders to not look back at Eurydice, he lost her forever.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/© LOOK AND LEARN/ THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

undeserving. This was different from traditional Greek views of the underworld as a rather dismal place where nearly all dead people went, regardless of their virtue.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the myth of Orpheus is the power of true love. After Eurydice dies and passes on to the underworld, Orpheus pursues her out of love. The power of music is also a recurring theme in the stories of Orpheus. The lyre of Orpheus symbolizes this power. Orpheus uses it to drown out the Sirens so the Argonauts do not fall victim to them, and later defuses an argument between the sailors with one of his songs. While pursuing Eurydice, Orpheus uses his lyre to gain entrance to the underworld, and his skill at playing music convinces Hades to let him take Eurydice back to the land of the living. Another

important theme in this myth is obedience to the gods. When Orpheus disobeys Hades by looking back at Eurydice before they reach the surface, he breaks his agreement with Hades and Eurydice must return to the underworld.

### Orpheus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Over the centuries, the myth of Orpheus has endured as a tragic tale of love lost. Renaissance painters, such as Rubens and Titian, created depictions of Eurydice and Orpheus, and several operas were written about the pair during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The most famous of these is Jacques Offenbach's 1858 burlesque operetta *Orpheus in the Underworld*, which includes one piece known popularly as the music played during the French dance called the "Can Can."

More recently, the story of Eurydice and Orpheus was adapted for the 1959 film *Black Orpheus* by Marcel Camus. The 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules* used the plot from the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, but instead had Hercules travel to the underworld in an attempt to save his love, Megara. Eurydice and Orpheus also appear in *The Sandman*, a comic series written by Neil Gaiman.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In modern times, many schools are cutting back on music and other arts-based programs in order to focus available funds on core classes, such as science and math. Do you think music programs should be considered necessary for schools? Why or why not? Do you think music is more or less important now than it was in past cultures? Why?

SEE ALSO Argonauts; Eurydice; Muses; Underworld

#### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

#### Pronunciation

oh-SYE-ris

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Pyramid Texts

#### Lineage

Son of Nut and Geb



## Osiris

### Character Overview

One of the most important deities of ancient Egypt, Osiris was god of the **underworld** and judge of the dead. He also represented the idea of

renewal and rebirth in the **afterlife**. Osiris appears in many Egyptian myths and legends, and his popularity extended beyond Egypt.

Little is known about the origin of Osiris in **Egyptian mythology**. In very ancient times he may have been a local god of the city of Busiris in Lower Egypt. It is possible that he was originally an underworld god or fertility deity or legendary hero. By about 2400 BCE, his worship had become firmly established and began to spread throughout much of Egypt.

## Major Myths

In Egyptian mythology, Osiris was the son of the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT) and the earth god Geb (pronounced GEB). He was also the brother and husband of **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis) and the father of **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs). He supposedly served as a ruler of early Egypt, where his followers honored him as both god and man. Credited with civilizing the country, Osiris introduced agriculture and various crafts, established laws, and taught Egyptians how to worship the gods.

Osiris traveled to other parts of the world to civilize people. Upon his return to Egypt, his jealous brother **Set** plotted with others to kill him. They built a beautifully decorated box, tricked Osiris into getting into it, sealed the box, and then threw it into the Nile River. The box floated into the Mediterranean Sea to the land of Byblos (pronounced BIB-luhs) in Phoenicia (pronounced foh-NEE-shuh).

Overcome with grief at the loss of her husband, Isis searched high and low for his body. Eventually she found it. After bringing his body back to Egypt, Isis magically restored Osiris to life long enough to conceive a son, Horus. Isis then hid Osiris's body in a secluded spot. Set discovered it, cut it into pieces, and scattered them throughout Egypt. Isis gathered up the pieces, reassembled them, and restored Osiris to life once again.

Instead of staying on earth, Osiris chose to become lord of the Egyptian underworld. As king of the dead, he sat in judgment of dead souls, measuring the worth of their lives and determining their punishment or reward. The gods **Anubis** (pronounced uh-NOO-bis) and **Thoth** (pronounced TOHT) assisted him. In his role as god of the dead, Osiris became associated with the Egyptian practices of embalming and mummification, methods of preserving the dead so they could safely travel to the afterlife.

## Osiris

*Painted wooden figure of the  
Egyptian god Osiris.* HIP/ART  
RESOURCE, NY.



When Osiris became lord of the underworld, his son Horus became ruler of Egypt. The Egyptians believed that when a pharaoh (king) died he became the god Osiris. The new pharaoh represented Horus, the god of the living.

## Osiris in Context

Osiris reflects the ancient Egyptian belief that death and rebirth are intimately connected. To an ancient Egyptian, death represented a chance to become one with Osiris and be given eternal life. This explains why a god of the underworld, usually considered a bringer of death, is also associated with the sprouting of crops and the flooding of the Nile, which leads to an abundance of vegetation. Ancient Egyptians viewed each harvesting of crops as another death for Osiris, with the grain representing his body. Some even planted crop beds in the shape of the god, who would be reborn when the seeds sprouted. In the case of Osiris, lord of the Egyptian realm of the dead, “death-bringer” is a less appropriate description than “eternal life-giver.” Although Osiris’s main center of worship was at the city of Abydos (pronounced uh-BYE-duhs), the god was worshipped intensely throughout Egypt. The appeal of a god who offered the promise of life after death was so strong that worship of Osiris also spread to other parts of the ancient world, most notably Greece and Rome.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Osiris was linked to both death and rebirth for obvious reasons: he was killed twice by his jealous brother Set, and was restored to life twice by his wife and sister Isis. Osiris also represents the provider and teacher in ancient Egyptian myth. He brought knowledge of agriculture to the people and was also thought to be responsible for the growth of plants each year. An important theme in the myth of Osiris is the futility of jealousy and anger. Set kills his brother Osiris because he is jealous, but, in the end, Set still does not get to rule over Egypt—that honor passes to Osiris’s son Horus.

In ancient Egyptian art, Osiris is usually portrayed as a bearded king wrapped in cloth like a mummy. He generally wears the crown of Upper Egypt, has an amulet around his neck, and holds a crook and a flail, symbols of his powers as god of fertility and the underworld.

## Osiris in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In modern times, Osiris is seldom encountered as a character in art or literature. He is, however, sometimes mentioned in works dealing with magic and death. For instance, in the sixth season premiere of the

television series *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (2001), the title character is brought back to life using an Urn of Osiris.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Locate on a map the following places and features mentioned in the myth of Osiris: Busiris, the Nile River, the Mediterranean Sea, Phoenicia, and Abydos. Do you think that the use of real places in the myth helps people to accept it as true? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Anubis; Egyptian Mythology; Horus; Isis; Nut; Ra; Set; Thoth; Underworld



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# P



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
PAN

**Alternate Names**  
Faunus (Roman)

**Appears In**  
*Ovid's Metamorphoses*,  
*Nonnus's Dionysiaca*

**Lineage**  
Son of Hermes and a  
nymph



## Pan

### Character Overview

Pan was a Greek fertility god associated with flocks and shepherds. He resembled the mythical creatures known as **satyrs**: from his waist down, he looked like a goat, but above the waist, he had human features, except for goat's ears and horns. The son of the god **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) and a nymph (the name of the nymph differs in various versions of his life), he was abandoned by his mother at birth and raised by other **nymphs**, female nature deities that lived in streams, trees, and other objects. Pan was known for his never-ending love of women.

### Major Myths

Pan was an accomplished musician, and the pipe he played is part of a well-known myth. Always in pursuit of a female, Pan was chasing a nymph named Syrinx (pronounced SEER-eeenks), who was devoted to the goddess **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss) and not interested in romance, across the countryside. Syrinx reached an impassable stream with sandy banks. To escape from Pan, she called on her sister nymphs within the stream to transform her into a stand of reeds growing along the bank. When Pan reached the stand of reeds, he sighed in despair. The air of his sigh vibrated across the reeds, making a beautiful sound.

Pan cut down the reeds and crafted them into the first flute of its kind, thereafter known as a syrinx.

Pan's musicianship was also the subject of another myth. Pan boasted to his follower **Midas** that his songs were greater than those of anyone else, even greater than those of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh). Apollo took this as a challenge, and the two played against each other in a contest. Although Pan played well, Apollo's songs were even more masterful. All who heard the contest agreed that Apollo was the winner, except for Pan's follower Midas. When Midas protested Apollo's victory, the god transformed Midas's ears into the ears of a donkey.

Although Pan was a playful figure who enjoyed chasing nymphs, he could be very ill-tempered if his sleep was disturbed. In **Greek mythology**, Pan helped **Zeus** and the other gods of Olympus overthrow the early gods called **Titans**. He did this by blowing into a shell and making a loud roar that frightened the Titans.

### Pan in Context

Pan was unique among the Greek gods in ways that reflected the more rural culture of ancient Greece. For one, he was the only Greek god who was said to have died; all other gods were considered immortal, or able to live forever. This created an image of a god who was more like a human, and therefore easier for the average person to relate to. In addition, Pan did not live on Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs) with the other gods, but instead made his home in the Greek countryside, just like many farmers. Also, there is evidence that Pan—whose name literally means “all”—existed before most of the other Greek gods and was still worshipped after the others had fallen out of fashion. This was perhaps due to his association with nature and farmland, which appealed to small groups that were far removed from the ever-changing cultural centers and tended to retain customs and traditions through many generations.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Pan represented the lustful and freewheeling nature of man, as well as the passionate and creative side. He represented animal instincts, as illustrated by his goat-like appearance, as well as fertility. His flute, made from the reeds of Syrinx, symbolized the love he always sought but

never seemed to find. To Christians, Pan was a symbol of non-Christian belief that marked the uncivilized.

## Pan in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Because of his unusual appearance, Pan is a distinctive figure who has appeared in many works of art from ancient to modern times. He was often depicted in pursuit of women and was sometimes shown in the company of the god **Dionysus** (pronounced deye-uh-NEYE-suhs). In modern times, Pan was one of the fantastical characters played by Tony Randall in the 1964 fantasy film *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*. In addition, Pan's ability to cause irrational fear in people lives on in the word "panic."

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Read *The Great God Pan* by Donna Jo Napoli (2005), the story of Pan from his own viewpoint. In the story, Pan is a youth with an identity crisis who lives under the cloud of a curse: even though he may love, he will never be loved in return. When he falls in love with the human princess Iphigenia, his carefree world is turned upside-down. Author Napoli weaves many different Greek myths into her tale, though the work as a whole is an original work that in some ways differs from the traditional myths.

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Satyrs



# Pandora

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Pandora was the first woman, infamous for bringing evil into the world and causing humankind's downfall. She was sent to earth by **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), king of the gods, who wanted to take revenge on the Titan **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs). Prometheus had created mortals and had stolen **fire** from the gods and given it to them. Zeus ordered the divine crafts worker, **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), to form the first

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
pan-DOR-uh

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Aesop's *Fables*

**Lineage**  
Created by the gods

*In one version of the Greek myth, Pandora released evil spirits into the world when she opened the box that held them.*

PHOTO BY TIME LIFE PICTURES/MANSELL/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.



woman, Pandora, from clay. The goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) gave life to Pandora, **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee) made her beautiful, and **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) taught her to be cunning and deceitful.

Zeus sent Pandora down to earth, but Prometheus—whose name means “forethought”—would have nothing to do with her. However, his brother Epimetheus (pronounced ep-uh-MEE-thee-uhs)—whose name means “afterthought”—married Pandora, who brought with her a sealed box (or often a jar) as a gift from the gods. Some accounts say that Epimetheus opened Pandora’s box; others maintain that Pandora herself opened it. Inside the container were disease, old age, poverty, evil, war, and

all the other ills that have plagued humans ever since. They flew out into the world when the box was opened, leaving only hope at the bottom of the box to give people a scrap of comfort. A few accounts say that the box contained all the good things that Prometheus planned to give the human race, but when Pandora gave in to curiosity and opened the box, she let all the blessings escape. Pandora and Epimetheus had a daughter, Pyrrha (pronounced PEER-uh), who appears in a Greek myth about a great flood. Pyrrha and her husband, Deucalion (pronounced doo-KAY-lee-uhn), were the flood’s sole survivors and became the parents of a new human race.

### Pandora in Context

Pandora is viewed much differently today than she was in ancient times. To the ancient Greeks, Pandora was sent to earth as revenge for humans getting fire from Prometheus. The myth, especially as documented by Hesiod, is very clear in its view of women as the bringers of countless troubles to men. However, Hesiod notes that even though women are the source of many problems, a man cannot simply live trouble-free by avoiding marriage—for a man who does

not marry will never have heirs and will have no one to care for him when he is old. While no doubt exaggerated for the sake of entertainment, Hesiod's description is likely to be an accurate reflection of how many ancient Greek men viewed women: necessary and vital, but troublesome.

## Key Themes and Symbols

For many, Pandora symbolizes curiosity. This comes from her opening the box and releasing bad things into the world (though in some versions she simply brings the box as a gift from the gods). For the ancient Greeks, Pandora was more a symbol of the wiles of womanhood: a potentially dangerous figure who carried out the gods' punishment of men. As the first woman, Pandora also stands as a symbol of femininity, both beautiful and cunning in her way. The box represents the vengeance of the gods, since it contains all the bad things that eventually escape into the world and plague humans for the rest of time.

## Pandora in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Pandora has endured and transformed itself over the centuries. Most people familiar with the tale today are not aware of the box as punishment by the gods for humans possessing fire, but know instead of a version where Pandora disobeys after she is told not to open the box. Pandora has been the subject of paintings by artists such as John William Waterhouse and Dante Rossetti, and the myth loosely inspired the 1929 G. W. Pabst silent film *Pandora's Box*, starring Louise Brooks. The mythical box of Pandora is often referenced in modern art and culture, and the term "Pandora's box" is commonly used to refer to a thing or situation that can lead to a great deal of unforeseen trouble.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Pandora, as the first woman in Greek mythology, can be compared to Eve, the first woman in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Both women are directly responsible for introducing evil into the world, although they had not intended to do so. But while the Greek gods deliberately sent Pandora for that purpose as a punishment to man, Eve had been created by God to be a helper to the first man Adam, and it was only her

disobedience that unleashed evil. What does this tell us about the differences between the Greek and Judeo-Christian attitudes towards women, as well as the way the divine relates to mankind?

SEE ALSO Adam and Eve; Greek Mythology; Prometheus

## Paris

See **Helen of Troy**; *Iliad*, *The*.

## Parvati

See **Devi**.



## Patrick, St.

**Nationality/Culture**  
Christian/Irish

**Pronunciation**  
saynt PAT-trik

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
*The Annals of Ulster*

**Lineage**  
Unknown

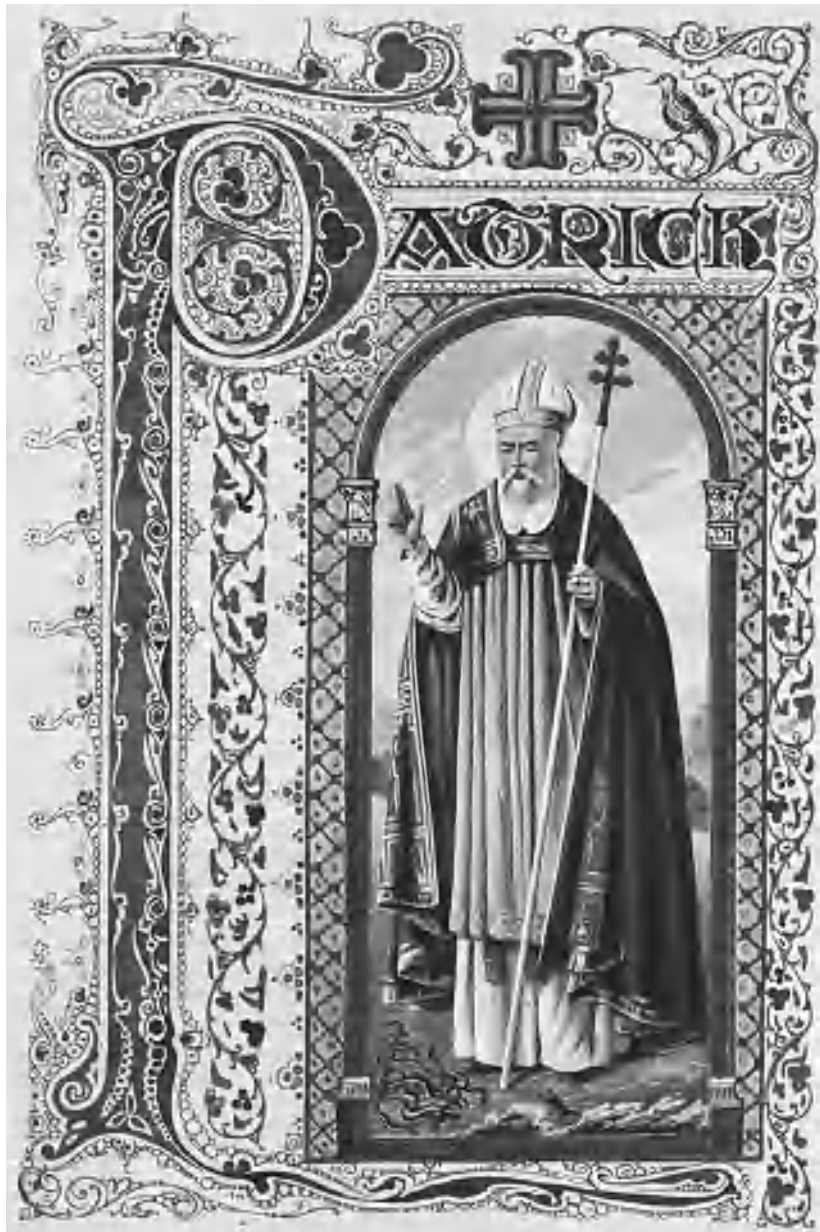
### Character Overview

In the Christian religion, St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland, and was credited with driving evil in the form of snakes out of Ireland. He was born in Britain around 389 CE. He was the son of a Roman official. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was captured by raiders from Ireland and carried back to their homeland. After working as a shepherd for six years, he had a dream in which he was told that a ship was waiting to help him escape his captivity.

The accounts of his journeys at this time differ. He either traveled back to Britain or sailed to Gaul (present-day France). In any event, it seems likely that he visited France, where he joined a monastery and was ordained a priest. According to one of Patrick's personal letters, known in Latin as the *Confessio*, he had another dream, in which the Irish asked him to return to their island. Patrick left his monastery to travel among the non-Christian Irish chieftains, converting them and their people to Christianity.

Several legends have sprung up around St. Patrick, the most famous one claiming that he drove all the snakes out of Ireland and into the sea. A

*The Catholic saint known as St. Patrick was famous for supposedly ridding Ireland of all snakes.* PHOTO BY TIME LIFE PICTURES/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES.



popular myth holds that he used the shamrock, or three-leafed clover, to explain to an Irishman the Holy Trinity, the idea that God consists of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The shamrock is now Ireland's national flower, worn by the Irish on St. Patrick's feast day, March 17.

## St. Patrick in Context

St. Patrick's status as a legendary figure reflects the importance of conversion in Christianity. Irish cultures that existed before the spread of Christianity were often described by Christians as "pagan," a term that not only described a belief in more than one god, but also suggested to other Christians an absence of true religious belief. Many Christians such as St. Patrick considered it their duty to convert members of these other belief systems to Christianity, and indeed, many were very successful. The adoption of a specific saint such as Patrick by Ireland allows the converted to retain an individual national character even as their own unique, native belief systems fade from prominence.

## Key Themes and Symbols

To most, St. Patrick serves as a symbol of Ireland and its now firmly established Christian tradition. One theme found in the myth of St. Patrick is the personalization of Christianity; Patrick uses a beloved native plant, the shamrock, to explain the Holy Trinity to the Irish people. It has been suggested that the snakes St. Patrick drove from Ireland—a country never known for having many snakes—symbolize the nature-oriented belief systems that existed before the spread of Christianity. In Christian mythology, the serpent also frequently symbolizes evil, as in the myth of the Garden of **Eden**.

## St. Patrick in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

St. Patrick has endured not only in Christian writings and art, but also in Irish works that combine older Celtic legends with more modern beliefs. The twelfth-century work *Tales of the Elders* details a meeting between St. Patrick and members of the Fianna, a band of warriors led by the mythical Irish hero **Finn**. In modern times, St. Patrick's Day is a holiday recognized in many countries, usually celebrated by the wearing of green—a color that reflects Ireland's nickname, the Emerald Isle.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Today, many people who are not Irish celebrate St. Patrick's Day, and the religious feast has taken on some secular characteristics. Throughout history, there have been examples of religious holidays transformed into secular celebrations, and secular holidays becoming religious. Using your library, the



Internet, and other available resources, research one major religious holiday. When did it begin? Under what circumstances did it originate? Who were its original practitioners? Then try to trace how it changed over the years and the reasons for those changes.



# Pegasus

## Character Overview

A winged horse in **Greek mythology**, Pegasus was born from the blood that spurted from the neck of the Gorgon **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh) when the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) cut off her head. He is sometimes said to have been fathered by **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), the god of the sea and tamer of horses. Pegasus served Perseus until his death, and afterward went to the home of the **Muses**. The water that gave the Muses their inspiration had dried up, so Pegasus stamped his hoof and created a spring.

With the help of the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) and a golden bridle she gave him, the hero **Bellerophon** (pronounced buh-LAIR-uh-fun) tamed Pegasus. He rode the horse when he slew the monster called the Chimaera (pronounced kye-MEER-uh), a fire-breathing creature with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. Later, Bellerophon tried to ride Pegasus to the top of Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs) so that he could join the Greek gods. But **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the leader of the gods, was angered by Bellerophon's arrogance. He caused a fly to bite Pegasus, and the horse threw Bellerophon to earth, crippling him for life. Pegasus continued on to Olympus and lived in Zeus's stables, where he became the steed of Eos, the goddess of dawn. At the end of his life, Pegasus was immortalized in the form of a constellation, or a group of stars in the night sky.

## Pegasus in Context

For the ancient Greeks, Pegasus must have seemed a natural extension of the human dependence on horses for transportation and labor. Just as horses served their owners dutifully, Pegasus served the various gods and

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

PEG-uh-suhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hesiod's *Theogony*

### Lineage

Born from the blood of  
Medusa

## Pegasus

*Pegasus was a horse with wings in Greek mythology.* THE ART ARCHIVE/NICLAS SAPIEHA/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.



**heroes** to whom he was pledged. His ability to fly may have reflected how people felt about travel by horseback, which was considerably faster than any other form of land travel available at the time.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One theme found in the myths of Pegasus is faithfulness, or duty. The winged horse is a faithful servant of Perseus throughout his life, perhaps as a duty to the hero who caused Pegasus to be born. Later, he serves Bellerophon fearlessly in a dangerous battle. He does not deliberately betray Bellerophon by throwing him from his back, but merely reacts to Zeus's attempts to distract him. The golden bridle is a symbol of the faithfulness of Pegasus: he approaches Bellerophon as soon as he sees the bridle and allows the hero to ride him.

### Pegasus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The image of the winged horse Pegasus can be found throughout ancient and classical art, though not all winged horses are meant to represent

Pegasus. In modern times, Pegasus appeared in the 1981 film *Clash of the Titans* as the steed of Perseus, and played a prominent part in the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules* as a companion to Hercules. Pegasus is the name of a spaceship in the updated *Battlestar Galactica* television series (2003). Pegasus is also the logo for TriStar Pictures and TriStar television, founded in the 1980s and now owned by Sony Pictures.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Airs Beneath the Moon* (2006) by Toby Bishop, is a fantasy tale about a teenage farm girl named Larkyn who happens upon an abandoned pregnant mare who dies giving birth to a colt with wings. The colt bonds with Larkyn, and they soon find themselves attending the Academy of the Air, a training center for winged steeds and their riders. As the only person at the Academy not of noble birth, Larkyn struggles to fit in, but she soon discovers that she must foil the evil plans of a newly crowned, power-hungry duke who controls the bloodlines of the steeds.

SEE ALSO Bellerophon; Medusa; Muses; Perseus



# Pele

## Character Overview

In **Polynesian mythology**, Pele is the **fire** goddess of Hawaii. A powerful and destructive deity, she is said to live in the crater of the volcano of Kilauea (pronounced kee-law-AY-uh) on the big island of Hawaii. Perhaps the best-known deity of Hawaii, Pele appears in many myths and legends.

## Major Myths

Like many figures in Polynesian mythology, Pele is a great traveler. She came to Hawaii from the island of Tahiti, but the reasons for her trip vary. Some myths say that she fled Tahiti to escape the anger of her older sister, whose husband she had stolen. In other stories, she was driven from Tahiti by her father, who did not condone her bad temper.

### Nationality/Culture

Polynesian

### Pronunciation

PAY-lay

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Polynesian oral myths

### Lineage

Daughter of Haumea and Kane Milohai

Pele's arrival in the Hawaiian Islands was accompanied by mighty volcanic eruptions. She visited various islands looking for a place to live, but the sea constantly flooded the sites she chose for a home. She finally found refuge in the volcano of Kilauea.

Once settled in Kilauea, Pele traveled to a neighboring island and fell in love with a young chief named Lohiau. After returning home, Pele sent her younger sister Hi'iaka (pronounced HEE-ee-ah-kah) to fetch the chief. She gave Hi'iaka supernatural powers, which the young woman used to overcome various obstacles during the journey.

When Hi'iaka arrived at the home of Lohiau, she found that the young chief had died of a broken heart caused by his longing for Pele. Hi'iaka caught his spirit and used her magical powers to restore him to life. Meanwhile, Pele became impatient, imagining that her sister had stolen Lohiau's love. The enraged Pele sent a stream of lava that killed Hopoe, Hi'iaka's dearest friend.

When Hi'iaka finally brought the young chief to Kilauea, she learned of the death of Hopoe. Grief stricken, she embraced Lohiau, whom she had come to love. Pele saw this and sent more lava to kill Lohiau. Protected by her magical powers, Hi'iaka later restored Lohiau to life again and went to live with him on his home island.

Many other legends deal with Pele's fiery temper and reveal how unpredictable and dangerous she could be. In some myths, she also appears as a water goddess who caused the seas to encircle the islands of Hawaii. Both Pele and Hi'iaka are considered goddesses of magic and sorcery as well as of the hula, the ancient sacred dance of Hawaii.

### **Pele in Context**

Pele reflects attempts by the Hawaiian people to humanize the volcanoes that both shaped their homeland and have often threatened their very existence. Volcanoes are unpredictable and sometimes deadly. The depiction of this lava deity as a woman indicates a Hawaiian view of females as temperamental and prone to unpredictable moods and behaviors, or as shifting in personality. However, this may also reflect how Hawaiians interpreted some of the physical results of volcano activity. For example, winds around lava flows can create masses of long, thin strands of volcanic glass that resemble a woman's hair. These are commonly called "Pele's hair." Teardrop-shaped beads of volcanic rock are also common, and are known as "Pele's tears"—and would certainly reflect the unpredictable personality of an enraged lava goddess.



*According to Polynesian stories, the powerful and destructive fire goddess Pele lives in the volcano of Kilauea on the island of Hawaii.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Pele symbolized rage, power, and unpredictability. She was the embodiment of the volcanoes that dominated the Hawaiian landscape. The volcano known as Kilauea is often considered to be a symbol of Pele. Rage is a key theme in the myths of Pele, and it plays a role in most of her actions. Her exile from Tahiti and the killing of Hopoe and Lohiau were both the result of rage caused by jealousy.

## Pele in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although Pele is one of the best-known deities in Polynesian mythology, she rarely appears in popular culture outside Hawaii. Singer and songwriter Tori Amos titled her 1996 album *Boys for Pele* in honor of the goddess, and the title characters of the 2005 film *The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl in 3-D* appear to be loosely based on Pele and her brother, who was a shark god.

Pele has also been the subject of a modern legend: in order to keep visitors from stealing rocks as souvenirs from Hawaii's volcano sites, a park ranger invented the myth that Pele would punish anyone who removed volcanic rock from Hawaii. The myth has been quite successful, resulting in many tourists sending stolen rocks back to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park in order to lift the "curse."

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many cultures view their gods and natural events in terms of human characteristics and emotions. The term for this is "anthropomorphism." An anthropomorphic view would see the violent and destructive eruption of a volcano as an expression of rage by the gods. Can you find contemporary examples of people viewing a deity or an act of nature in human terms? Do you think this is a helpful way of understanding the world around us? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Polynesian Mythology

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

puh-NEL-uh-pee

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Homer's *Odyssey*

### Lineage

Daughter of Icarus and Periboea

## Penates

See **Lares and Penates**.



## Penelope

### Character Overview

The wife of the hero **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) in **Greek mythology**, Penelope was celebrated for her faithfulness, patience, and

feminine virtue. For the twenty years that her husband was away during and after the Trojan War, Penelope remained true to him and helped prevent his kingdom from falling into other hands.

Penelope's parents were Prince Icarius (pronounced i-KAHR-ee-uhs) of Sparta and Periboea (pronounced pehr-ee-boh-EE-uh), a nymph, or female nature deity. Periboea hid her infant daughter as soon as she was born, knowing that Icarius had wanted a son. As soon as Icarius discovered the baby girl, he threw her into the sea to drown. But a family of ducks rescued her, and seeing this as an omen, or a sign from the gods, Icarius named the child Penelope (after the Greek word for "duck") and raised her as his favorite child.

When Penelope reached womanhood, Odysseus asked for her hand in marriage. Although reluctant to part with his daughter, Icarius agreed, and Penelope went with her new husband to his home on the island of Ithaca (pronounced ITH-uh-kuh). Penelope and Odysseus were deeply in love, so it was with great sorrow that Odysseus later left her and their infant son, Telemachus (pronounced tuh-LEM-uh-kuhs), to fight in the Trojan War.

The Trojan War lasted ten years, and it took Odysseus another ten years to get home to Ithaca. During that time, Penelope received the attentions of many suitors. For a while, she put them off by saying that she would consider marriage only after she finished weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes (pronounced lay-UR-teez), who was grieving over Odysseus's absence. Each day Penelope would sit weaving the cloth, but at night she would secretly unravel her work. After three years, a servant revealed Penelope's secret, and she had to finish the shroud. When her suitors became insistent again, Penelope announced that she would marry the man who could string a bow that Odysseus had left behind, and shoot an arrow through the loops on a row of twelve axe heads.

Unknown to Penelope, Odysseus had arrived home disguised as a beggar. He wanted to review the situation in his kingdom before revealing his return. The disguised Odysseus won the archery contest and then killed all the suitors with help from his son Telemachus. At first Penelope would not believe that Odysseus was her husband, for the gods had hidden his identity from her. However, Odysseus revealed his true identity by telling Penelope a secret about their marriage that only they knew—that one leg of their bed was made from a still-living olive tree—and the loving couple were finally reunited.

## Penelope

*Penelope undid her weaving each night in the hopes that her husband Odysseus would return from his journey before she finished it. Penelope had told her suitors that she would not consider remarriage until the shroud she was weaving was finished.*

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## Penelope in Context

Penelope is generally viewed as a reflection of the ancient Greek idea of the perfect wife. She is dutiful, caring for the kingdom while Odysseus is away, and she remains faithful to him despite the many suitors that gather around her. She is also clever, as illustrated by her nightly unraveling of the shroud she weaved, as well as her statement that she would marry the man who could string Odysseus's bow, since she knew no other man could perform the feat. There are passages in the *Odyssey* that indicate Penelope was occasionally torn in her devotion to Odysseus, and was even considering choosing one of the suitors.

However, as a woman who waited twenty years for her husband's return, fending off over one hundred suitors and enduring the vengeance of gods and goddesses, Penelope undoubtedly served as an example of what ancient Greek husbands hoped for in their wives.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Penelope has traditionally been viewed as a symbol of faithfulness and fidelity. The theme of fidelity is an important part of the myth of Penelope, and is shown in her refusal to entertain other suitors in the twenty years her husband is gone. It is also shown in her attempts to keep suitors at bay by unraveling her woven cloth every night, in the hope that Odysseus would return before her trick was discovered. The marriage bed of Penelope and Odysseus also symbolizes their love, with one leg rooted deep into the ground and still alive despite the years.

## Penelope in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Penelope was the subject of a 1907 opera by the same name composed by Gabriel Fauré. Penelope also appears in the 2004 novel *Waiting for Odysseus* by Clemence McLaren, part of which is





written from her point of view. In other media, the myth of Penelope was referenced in the television show *Lost*, in which a character named Penny (short for Penelope) loses her true love as he sails around the world; Penny's faithfulness and dedication in searching for her love leads her to the strange island where he has become trapped.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood (2005) offers a darkly humorous retelling of the events of the *Odyssey* from Penelope's point of view. Atwood's version of the tale is quite different from the original myth, with Penelope no longer cast in the role of the eternally faithful wife.

SEE ALSO Greek Mythology; Odysseus; *Odyssey*, *The*



# Persephone

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Persephone was the beautiful daughter of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), king of the gods, and of **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), the goddess of agriculture. Persephone became queen of the **underworld**, or land of the dead, when she married **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez). The Romans knew her as Proserpina (pronounced proh-SUR-puh-nuh).

## Major Myths

As a young girl, Persephone traveled around the world with her mother, who ruled over the earth and everything that grew from it. Hades, the god of the underworld, wanted her for his wife. He spoke to his brother Zeus, who agreed to help him. One day Zeus caused a beautiful flower to grow in a place where Persephone was walking. The girl stooped to admire the flower. At that moment, Hades rode out of the underworld on a chariot, seized Persephone, and took her back to his kingdom.

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
per-SEF-uh-nee

**Alternate Names**  
Proserpina (Roman)

**Appears In**  
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hesiod's *Theogony*

**Lineage**  
Daughter of Zeus and  
Demeter

## Persephone

*The god Hades abducted Persephone and carried her to the underworld to make her his wife.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/© LOOK AND LEARN/ THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



Unaware of these events, Demeter searched everywhere for her missing daughter. For days she wandered the earth with a flaming torch in each hand and, in her distress, caused all crops to wither and die. Famine threatened. Zeus feared that humankind would perish, leaving no one to perform sacrifices to the gods. He begged Demeter to restore life to the earth, but she refused to do so unless Persephone was returned to her.

Zeus sent Hermes (pronounced HUR-meez), messenger of the gods, to fetch Persephone from the underworld. As she was leaving, Hades gave her a sweet pomegranate, and she ate several of its seeds. Persephone did not realize that eating food from the underworld meant that she could not leave it. As a result, Zeus declared that Persephone would have to spend part of each year in the underworld with Hades and the remainder of the year on earth with her mother.

## Persephone in Context

The story of Persephone was used by ancient Greeks and Romans to explain the cycle of the seasons. For most of the year, the earth is alive and covered with growing plants. However, during the barren months when Persephone is with Hades—generally one month for every pomegranate seed she ate, though different versions mention three, four, or even five seeds—Demeter mourns her daughter’s absence, and the earth lies bare and lifeless. This use of myth to explain things in the natural world is common to all mythologies around the globe. Myths concerning the origin of the seasons are especially common in cultures centered on agriculture, as ancient Greece was. This reflects an understanding of how the seasons affect crop growth, and the importance of **sun** and rain in the plant growth cycle.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Persephone is a symbol of growth and fertility. Although Demeter is generally recognized as the source of growth and fertility, Persephone is often viewed as a younger version of Demeter. The myth of Persephone also contains the theme of innocence lost: after she is abducted by Hades, she is no longer the carefree youth she once was, even during her time away from the underworld. In the myth, the pomegranate offered by Hades represents temptation. Its sweet appearance lures Persephone into tasting some of its seeds, which binds her to the land of the dead forever.

## Persephone in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Persephone was a very popular subject in ancient art, appearing on many vases and in several surviving sculptures. Persephone was also the subject of a famous sculpture by Giovanni Bernini, as well as paintings by Dante Rossetti and Frederic Leighton, among many others. Although the mythical character of Persephone seldom appears in modern literature or other media, many characters or objects bearing her name have appeared in television series, video games, films, and songs. She has also lent her name to an asteroid, a publishing company, and even a musical instrument.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The pomegranate originally came from the Indian subcontinent, but has been cultivated throughout the Mediterranean region since ancient

time. It has deep cultural significance in many Near Eastern civilizations. Today, it is a popular ingredient in everything from health drinks to beauty creams. Using your library, the Internet, and other available sources, find out more about the cultural history of the pomegranate—that is, how it is viewed and used by different cultures—and write a paper tracing the pomegranate’s history from ancient to modern times.

SEE ALSO Demeter; Hades; Underworld



## Perseus

### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

PUR-see-uhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hesiod's *Theogony*

### Lineage

Son of Zeus and Danaë

### Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Perseus was the heroic slayer of the Gorgon **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh). His mother was **Danaë** (pronounced DAN-uh-ee), daughter of King Acrisius (pronounced uh-KRIZ-ee-uhs) of Argos. Before Perseus’s birth, an oracle—or person who could communicate with the gods—predicted that Danaë would bear a child who would one day kill his grandfather. Terrified by this prediction, Acrisius imprisoned his daughter in a tower. However, Danaë received a visit in the tower from **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, who had taken the form of a shower of gold, and she became pregnant with Zeus’s child.

After Danaë gave birth to Perseus, Acrisius had his daughter and her child locked in a box, which he threw into the sea. The box came ashore on the island of Seriphos (pronounced SEHR-uh-fohs) and was found by Dictys (pronounced DIK-tis), a fisherman. Dictys sheltered Danaë and Perseus in his home, and they remained with him for many years.

When Perseus had grown into a young man, King Polydectes (pronounced pol-ee-DEK-teez) of Seriphos fell in love with Danaë and tried to persuade her to marry him. Danaë refused, and Perseus protected his mother from the king’s unwanted advances. Hoping to rid himself of Perseus, Polydectes set him a seemingly impossible task: to obtain the head of Medusa, a monster so hideous that anyone who even glanced at her face turned to stone.

Perseus received gifts from the gods **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez) and **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) to help him in his task: a pair of winged sandals, an adamantine sword, a helmet that made the wearer invisible, and a bronze shield that was polished to shine like a mirror. Perseus then visited the Graeae (pronounced GREE-ee), three old hags who were sisters of the **Gorgons** and who shared a single eye. Seizing their eye, he demanded to know where he could find the Gorgons. When they told him, Perseus threw the eye into a lake so that the Graeae could not warn their sisters.

With the winged sandals, Perseus flew to the home of the Gorgons. When he reached their cave, he advanced toward Medusa using Athena's shield as a mirror to avoid looking directly at the monster. Then he took the sword and cut off Medusa's head, which he placed in a bag. Several drops of Medusa's blood touched the ground and changed into the winged horse **Pegasus** (pronounced PEG-uh-suh). Wearing the helmet that made him invisible, Perseus flew off on Pegasus.

On his way home, Perseus came upon the giant, **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs), who held up the sky. Atlas tried to stop Perseus, but the hero took out the head of Medusa and turned the giant to stone. Next, Perseus saw a beautiful woman chained to a rock. This was **Andromeda** (pronounced an-DROM-i-duh), left as a **sacrifice** to a sea monster after her mother, Cassiopea (pronounced kas-ee-oh-PEE-uh), had boasted of her beauty and offended the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun). Perseus killed the sea monster, rescued Andromeda, and asked her to marry him.

Arriving back on the island of Seriphos, Perseus found that his mother had taken refuge in the temple of Athena to avoid the advances of Polydectes. Furious, Perseus used Medusa's head to turn Polydectes and his soldiers to stone. Perseus returned the winged sandals, helmet, and shield to the gods and gave the head of Medusa to Athena, who placed it on her shield. He then took Andromeda to Argos, the kingdom of his grandfather Acrisius.

Hearing that Perseus had arrived, Acrisius fled to a region of Greece known as Thessaly (pronounced THESS-uh-lee), mindful of the prophecy made years before. Later, however, Perseus took part in an athletic contest there and threw a discus—a heavy disc thrown for sport—that accidentally killed Acrisius. The prophecy was fulfilled.

## Perseus

*When Perseus found out that his mother was hiding from King Polydectes, he turned the king and his soldiers to stone with the head of Medusa. ©*

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### Perseus in Context

The myth of Perseus is largely meant to warn ancient Greeks against trying to escape fate or the will of the gods. Perseus serves as an instrument of fate and the gods to carry out events in the human realm.

This reflects the ancient view that the gods were often not direct players in the affairs of humans, but acted indirectly to sway events. This helped to explain why gods were not seen interacting directly on a daily basis with humans.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The intervention of the gods in the world of humans is an important theme in the story of Perseus. Zeus first intervenes by visiting Danaë in the form of a shower of gold and conceiving Perseus. Later, when Perseus is sent on an almost impossible mission to bring back the head of Medusa, Athena and Hermes intervene by providing him with weapons and armor. The inescapable nature of fate is also an important theme in the tale of Perseus. Acrisius tries to escape his fate on many occasions: he locks his daughter in a tower so she cannot have a child; after she has a son, Acrisius seals both mother and son in a box and sends them out to sea; and much later, when Acrisius discovers that Perseus is still alive, he flees to another region of Greece. In the end, Acrisius cannot escape his fate and is accidentally killed by his grandson during an athletic event.

## Perseus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Perseus was a popular hero in ancient Greek and Roman art, appearing frequently on pottery and in murals. He has been the subject of famous sculptures by Benvenuto Cellini, Antonio Canova, and Salvador Dali, and paintings by artists such as Piero di Cosimo and Edward Burne-Jones. In modern times, the myth of Perseus was used as the main storyline for the 1981 fantasy film *Clash of the Titans*, although some elements of the myth were changed. The actor who played Perseus in the movie, Harry Hamlin, also provided the voice of Perseus—this time portrayed as a villain—in the PlayStation 2 video game *God of War II*.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Legends about **heroes** often include tales about the slaying of great monsters or beasts, such as the sea monster Perseus defeats in order to save Andromeda. Although this theme is also found in stories today, modern heroes are often depicted fighting against human enemies, such

as criminals. Why do you think older mythologies placed a strong emphasis on defeating beasts? Why do you think modern legends focus instead on human foes?

**SEE ALSO** Andromeda; Athena; Atlas; Danaë; Gorgons; Heroes; Medusa; Pegasus



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## Persian Mythology

### Persian Mythology in Context

Persian mythology developed in what is now Iran around 1500 BCE. About a thousand years later, a religion known as Zoroastrianism (pronounced zor-oh-AS-tree-uhn-iz-m) emerged in the region. It held on to many of the earlier beliefs but added new themes, gods, and myths. The result was a mythology based on a vision of grand-scale conflict between good and evil.

The roots of Persian mythology lie in the steppes—grass-covered plains—of southern Russia and Central Asia. Between 1500 and 1000 BCE, Indo-European peoples migrated south from the steppes into the regions now known as Turkey, Iran, and northern India. Those who settled in Iran became the Persians. Their mythology had much in common with that of the early Hindus and probably developed from a common source. In time, the Persians also absorbed influences from an area called Mesopotamia (pronounced mess-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh) on their western border.

A religious leader named Zoroaster (pronounced ZOR-oh-as-tur; probably born around 628 BCE), founded the faith that was most popular in Persia until the arrival of Islam in the 600s CE. The best information about Persian mythology comes from Zoroastrianism's sacred book, the *Zend-Avesta* or *Avesta*. Much of the original *Zend-Avesta* was lost after Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 334 BCE. What survives is a set of writings gathered and arranged between 200 and 600 CE. One section, the *Gathas*, consists of songs believed to have been composed by Zoroaster. Much mythological material can be found in another section containing *Yashts*, hymns addressed to **angels** and **heroes**.



## Core Deities and Characters

The driving forces of Persian mythology were two powerful gods, sometimes presented as twin brothers: **Ahura Mazda** (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh), the creator god of light, truth, and goodness; and his enemy **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), the spirit of darkness, lies, and evil who created only destructive things, such as vermin, disease, and demons. The world was their battlefield, and, although they were equally matched during this period of history, Ahura Mazda was fated to win the fight. For this reason, Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, was the most important deity or god of Persian mythology. The Zoroastrians identified him with **fire**, and tended fires on towers as part of their worship.

The ancient Persian pantheon—collection of recognized gods—also included **Mithras** (pronounced MITH-rahs), a god associated with war, the **sun**, and law and order. Anahita (pronounced ah-nuh-HEE-tuh) was a goddess of water and fertility. Bahram, a god of war and victory, appeared on earth in ten forms: as wind, a bull, a horse, a camel, a boar, a youth, a raven, a ram, a buck, and a man. Zoroaster reduced the role of these and other traditional deities and emphasized Ahura Mazda as the supreme god. Religious scholars see this move as an early step toward monotheism, or the belief in a single, powerful god. However, Ahura Mazda was said to have created seven archangels, called the Amesha Spentas, who represented truth, power, immortality (ability to live forever), and other aspects of his being. These archangels may have taken over some features of the pre-Zoroastrian gods.

Perhaps influenced by stargazing Babylonian (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhn) astronomers, the ancient Persians associated some of their deities with the stars. The star Sirius (pronounced SEER-ee-uhs) represented the rain god Tishtrya, whose main role was to battle Apausha, an evil star of drought. Tishtrya, in the form of a white stallion, and Apausha, in the form of a hideous black horse, fought for three days. Then with Ahura Mazda's help, Tishtrya defeated Apausha. Tishtrya and other star gods who protected agriculture also took charge of battling meteors, or shooting stars, which the Persians believed to be witches.

Heroes and kings also figured in Persian myth and legend. The hero Thraetaona battled Azhi Dahaka, a three-headed demon controlled by Ahriman. When Thraetaona stabbed the demon in the chest, snakes and

lizards poured from the wound. To prevent the demon from poisoning the world, Thraetaona locked him inside a mountain where he will remain until the world comes to an end. At that time Azhi Dahaka will break free, but another hero, Keresaspa, will kill him.

The legendary King Bahram Gur appeared often in poems and tales as the inventor of poetry and as a mighty hunter. The greatest hero was the warrior Rostum, whose adventures appear in the epic *Shah Namah* (*Book of Kings*), written by the poet Firdawsi around 1010 CE.

## Major Myths

Ahura Mazda made the world. Creation began when he cast a beam of his pure light into the empty void between him and Ahriman, who had attacked him. Ahura Mazda uttered a prayer that silenced Ahriman for three thousand years. Ahura Mazda created the Amesha Spentas, or archangels, and the Yazatas (pronounced yah-ZAH-tuhz), divine beings. His final creation was Gayomart, the first man. Ahriman then awoke and began his evil work, sending a female demon to make Gayomart sicken and die.

Gayomart's body became the silver and gold in the earth, and in death he fertilized the ground so that a plant grew and became a man and a woman. These two people, Masha and Mashyoi, were the parents of the human race. Ahriman deceived them into thinking that he was their creator, and when they repeated this lie, evil and suffering entered the world. Zoroastrians believed that after three thousand years, Zoroaster came into the world to break Ahriman's hold, leaving the two powers to fight into the future.

The legend of Rostum shows the part human heroes play in the great drama of good and evil. Rostum was so strong and brave that the king made him head of the army. Then the White Demon seized the king, and Rostum set out to rescue him. In the course of his travels, Rostum encountered a lion, a desert, a dragon, a demoness, and a demon army. He overcame all these obstacles with the help of his faithful horse Ruksh and a warrior named Aulad, whom he defeated in combat and who then became an ally. Rostum's adventure ended in a cave, the lair of the White Demon, where Rostum tore out the demon's heart.

Death in Persian mythology involved a journey into the **afterlife**. The soul of the dead person had to cross a bridge called Chinvat. Good

souls found the bridge to be a wide and comfortable beam leading to **heaven**. For the wicked, it was a razor-sharp blade from which they fell headlong into **hell**.

Zoroastrianism was one of the first belief systems to include a vision of the end of the world. It would be signaled by the appearance of three saviors, sons of Zoroaster. Upon the arrival of Hushedar, the first savior, the sun would stand still for ten days, and people would stop eating meat. When Hushedar-mar, the second savior, appeared, the sun would halt for twenty days, and people would stop drinking milk. Just as the world neared a state of purity, however, the evil demon Azhi Dahaka would break free from his mountain prison. Only after he had been killed would Soshyant, the third savior, arrive. People would stop eating plants and live only on water, and each soldier of good would fight and defeat a particular evil enemy. Then the world would be enveloped in fire and molten metal for three days. Everyone who has ever lived would return to life to cross the fire, but only the wicked would suffer from the heat. This final judgment would purge sin and evil from the world, leaving an innocent human race in a cleansed world to worship Ahura Mazda.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of Persian mythology was the battle between good and evil. Ahura Mazda and Ahriman were not the only ones involved. Hosts of Yazatas and good spirits (*ashavans*) fought on Ahura Mazda's side. Ahriman headed an army of evil spirits known as *dregvants*, and demons called *devas* (pronounced DAY-vuhz). Humans took part in the conflict as well. Each person had to choose whether to follow the truth or the lie. Plants, animals, and other things could be good or evil, depending on whether Ahura Mazda or Ahriman created and controlled them. This theme is also shown in the story of the hero Rostum, and in the final battle between Azhi Dahaka and the sons of Zoroaster.

Another theme found in Persian mythology is judgment in the afterlife. This is shown in the idea of the Chinvat bridge, where people are judged according to their deeds while living, and are either rewarded or punished based on those deeds. This theme also plays a critical role in the final judgment that takes place after Azhi Dahaka is defeated: only those with pure spirits would be reborn into the world, while impure souls would burn in fire.

## Persian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Persian religion and mythology had a far-reaching influence. Historians of mythology think that certain beliefs in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths probably grew out of Persian traditions. The tendency of Zoroastrianism toward monotheism—the belief in one god—may also have helped shape those faiths.

Unlike some ancient belief systems, Persian mythology remains alive outside the covers of old books. It has survived continuously for thousands of years, and isolated groups of Iranians still worship Ahura Mazda. Other Zoroastrian communities exist in India, where the descendants of immigrants from Iran are known as Parsis or Parsees, a reference to their Persian origin.

As the most important god in Persian mythology, Ahura Mazda was well-represented in ancient art, and many stone reliefs and statues of the god have been found at ancient Persian sites. But as the religion became less popular over the centuries, depictions of Ahura Mazda also became less abundant. Recently, however, Ahura Mazda has seen new life as a character in comic books. Notable appearances include the long-running DC Comics series *Wonder Woman*, and the miniseries *Dawn: Lucifer's Halo* by Joseph Michael Linsner (1999). Similarly, Ahriman has appeared several times in the *Final Fantasy* video game series as an enemy to be fought by the player. In the series, he takes the names Ahriman and Angra Mainyu, and is usually depicted as a winged monster with a single eye. Ahriman has also appeared as a demon in the DC Comics series *Wonder Woman*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Much of Persian mythology is based on the idea of a good or positive force battling an evil force for control of humankind. This theme is one of the most enduring in all of modern storytelling. List three different examples of this theme that you have encountered in books you have read or movies you have seen. They can be based on true stories or they can be fictional. Are there similarities between the way the various “good sides” are depicted? How about the “evil sides” and their depictions? Are there any important differences?

**SEE ALSO** Ahriman; Ahura Mazda; Angels



# Phoenix

## Character Overview

The phoenix is a legendary bird mentioned in Greek, Roman, and **Egyptian mythology**. According to ancient writers, the phoenix lived for five hundred years, then died and was reborn. It had brilliant golden and scarlet feathers and grew to the size of an eagle.

Just before dying, the phoenix built a nest of fragrant herbs and spices, including cinnamon and myrrh. Then it set the nest on **fire** and died in the flames. A new phoenix then arose from the ashes. According to Egyptian myth, when the young bird was strong enough, it placed the ashes of the dead phoenix in an egg made of myrrh. Then the young

### Nationality/Culture

Greek, Roman, Egyptian

### Pronunciation

FEE-niks

### Alternate Names

Bennu (Egyptian)

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Herodotus's *Histories*

### Lineage

Unknown



*The phoenix is a legendary bird that died in flames and then rose from the ashes to live again.* THE ART

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INC.

phoenix carried the egg to Heliopolis (pronounced hee-lee-OP-uh-luhs), the Egyptian city of the **sun**, and placed it on the altar of the sun god **Ra**.

### The Phoenix in Context

The myth of the phoenix may reflect ancient observations of nature, particularly in areas of fire. When many types of hardwood trees are burned to ash in a fire, they return important minerals such as potassium to the soil. This fertilizes the soil to help more trees and vegetation grow. In this way, fire destroys the existing trees, and their ashes provide a way for new trees to appear—much like the myth of the phoenix. Indeed, the creation of the fertilizing compound potash from the ashes of trees was a lucrative business in Europe for centuries, and continues even today.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The phoenix was associated with immortality—the ability to live forever—and rebirth. Early Christians saw the phoenix as a symbol of resurrection, or the act of rising from the dead. The main theme of the myth of the phoenix is the eternal or everlasting nature of the spirit, with the phoenix symbolizing that spirit. In the myth, fire represents death as the bird is consumed in flames.

### The Phoenix in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The phoenix was a popular figure in many cultures beyond Egypt. Romans used it on coins to symbolize Rome, the Eternal City. The bird also appears as a sacred figure in both Chinese and **Japanese mythology**, and was the subject of Japanese comic creator Osamu Tezuka's masterwork, a twelve-book series titled simply *Phoenix*. More than one American comic book character has gone by the identity of Phoenix, most notably several characters in the Marvel Comic Universe. Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, has a phoenix named Fawkes. The name has also been used by a number of cities and places around the world that have been "reborn" from previous settlements, most notably Phoenix, Arizona.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea of something new rising from the ashes of something older is taken from the myth of the phoenix. In modern times, this idea is often

used when referring to rebuilding in the wake of tragedies or disasters, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center or the flooding of New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. In what ways do these events function as modern versions of the myth of the phoenix? Can you think of other examples?

## Pluto

See **Hades**.



# Polynesian Mythology

## Polynesian Mythology in Context

Polynesia is a vast region of the Pacific Ocean consisting of many hundreds of widely separated, culturally and politically diverse island groups. Ranging from Midway and Hawaii in the north to New Zealand in the south, the triangular area called Polynesia also includes Tahiti, Samoa, Tonga, Tuamotu (pronounced too-ah-MOH-too), the Cook Islands, and the Pitcairn Islands. Although the mythology of Polynesia varies from one island to the next, many of the basic stories, themes, and gods are surprisingly similar throughout the region.

Scholars believe that humans first migrated to Polynesia from Southeast Asia about two thousand years ago. These people carried with them their mythological traditions about events, deities, and **heroes**. As time passed and people moved to different island groups, they adapted their mythology and religious beliefs to suit their new environments. In the process, they added new characters and events to the traditional myths and legends. Nevertheless, the basic elements of religion and myth remained relatively unchanged throughout the island groups, and a fairly distinct pantheon—group of recognized gods and goddesses—emerged.

Polynesian religion and mythology placed great emphasis on nature, particularly the ocean environment. The Polynesians became masters of navigation and other seafaring skills, and their religion and myths strongly reflected the importance of nature and the sea. Polynesians

believed that all things in nature, including humans, contained a sacred and supernatural power called mana. Mana could be good or evil, and individuals, animals, and objects contained varying amounts of mana.

Because mana was sacred, Polynesians invented complicated rules—known as *tapus*, the source of the word “taboo”—to protect it. For example, ordinary people were not allowed to touch even the shadow of a great chief, nor could they step inside sacred groves or temples. The punishment for breaking important rules was often death, while illness and misfortune were believed to be the penalties for breaking minor tapus.

The Polynesian religion included many gods, local deities as well as the great gods of their pantheon. The people felt a close personal connection to their deities and to the various heroes, demigods (half human and half god), and **tricksters** of their mythology. The most popular character was **Maui** (pronounced MOU-ee), a hero-trickster well known throughout Polynesia.

Worship of the gods involved chants and prayers, elaborate rituals or ceremonies, and sacrifices (including human sacrifice). Magic was also important among the Polynesians, who used chants, charms, and spells to summon the gods or ask for their guidance or assistance. Priests usually organized and led religious festivals and celebrations. In some places, special groups consisting of storytellers, musicians, dancers, and other performers took charge of staging ceremonial activities. Sacred ceremonies often included singing, dancing, storytelling, and dramatic performances. The Hawaiian hula dance originated as a sacred ceremonial dance.

### Core Deities and Characters

The most important gods of the Polynesian pantheon were those associated with creation myths and legends. Best known were Rangi (pronounced RANG-gee, meaning Father Sky) and Papa (Mother Earth), the two supreme creator gods of the Maori people of New Zealand. According to Maori legend, **Rangi and Papa** served as the source from which all things came.

The counterparts of Rangi and Papa in Hawaiian mythology were Ao and Po. Ao represented the male force in the universe and was associated with the sky, the day, and light. Po, the feminine force, was linked with the earth, darkness, and night. According to Hawaiian myth,



## Polynesian Deities

**Haumia:** god of wild plants and vegetables.

**Kamapua'a:** pig god.

**Kane:** god of creation and growth.

**Ku:** creator god.

**Lono:** god of the heavens.

**Maui:** trickster god and hero.

**Oro:** war god.

**Papa, Po:** supreme creator goddess, mother earth.

**Pele:** fire goddess.

**Rangi, Ao:** supreme creator god, father sky.

**Rongo:** god of cultivated plants.

**Ta'aroa, Rua-i-tupra:** supreme creator god.

**Tane:** god of the forest.

**Tangaroa, Kanaloa, Tangaloa:** god of the seas.

**Tawhiri:** god of the wind and storms.

**Tu:** god of war.

a creator god named Ku separated Ao from Po. Ku then worked with Lono, god of the heavens, and Kane, the chief god of generation and growth, to create the earth and all living things. After Kane made the first man and woman, he became angry at their bad behavior and decided that humans would be subject to death. He then left the earth and went to live in **heaven**.

In Tahitian mythology, the supreme creator deity was Ta'aroa (pronounced tah-uh-ROH-uh), also called Rua-i-tupra (source of growth). Ta'aroa emerged from an ancient egg and started the process of creation. To fill the emptiness around him, he used part of the egg to make the sky and the other part to create the earth. Satisfied with his accomplishment, he filled the world with all the creatures and things that are now found in it. The Tahitians believed that Ta'aroa sent both blessings and curses, and they tried to appease him with human sacrifices.

The Maori version of Ta'aroa was Tangaroa, a god of the sea and child of Rangi and Papa. According to legend, Tangaroa fled to the sea to escape the wrath of his brother Tawhiri (pronounced tah-FEE-ree), the storm god. Tangaroa later quarreled with another brother, the forest god Tane (pronounced TAH-nee), and forever after he enjoyed sinking

## Polynesian Mythology

*The carving on this hei tiki jade pendant is a fertility symbol in the mythology of the Maori people of New Zealand.*

*The figure represents the first man, Tiki, in the stories of other Polynesians.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



canoes made from wood from Tane's forests. In Hawaiian mythology, Tangaroa was called Kanaloa, and the Hawaiian counterpart of Tane was Kane. The Samoans and Tongans knew Tangaroa as Tangaloa.

Perhaps the best-known and most feared deity in Hawaii was the **fire** goddess **Pele** (pronounced PAY-lay), a violent figure associated with volcanoes. Renowned for her beauty but also for her ability to destroy, Pele symbolized the power of natural forces. Many Hawaiian legends deal with her unpredictable temper and dangerous nature.

Another prominent deity in Hawaiian mythology was Kamapua'a (pronounced kah-mah-poo-AH-uh), the pig god. Known both for his warlike nature and for his romantic exploits, this energetic god appeared

in many tales. The Hawaiians often sought Kamapua'a as an ally during war and used his adventures to explain various natural phenomena.

By far the most popular figure in Polynesian mythology was Maui, the trickster god and hero. Though small in stature, he displayed amazing strength and had various magical powers. The many tales about his adventures reveal a cunning and determined hero who performed many great and wondrous deeds, including creating the Pacific islands with a magical hook and providing humans with more hours of daylight by slowing the **sun's** passage across the sky. Maui also tried, but failed, to become immortal (able to live forever).

## Major Myths

The best-known myths in Polynesia deal with creation and with the origin of gods, humans, and other living things. The adventures of characters such as Pele and Maui also figure prominently. Some Polynesian myths describe creation as a process of growth or evolution from a state of disorder, nothingness, or darkness. The Hawaiian myths of Ao and Po, the male and female forces of the universe, reflect this idea. From a great watery chaos at the beginning of time, the creator god Ku separated Ao and Po, thus producing day and night and making the world possible.

Other Polynesian creation myths focus on a pre-existing creator who lives alone and forms all things from nothingness. This idea is expressed in stories from Samoa and Tonga about Tangaloa. According to legend, while Tangaloa ruled over a vast expanse of ocean, his messenger, the bird Tuli, searched endlessly for somewhere to rest. Tangaloa eventually threw some rocks into the water, and these became the islands of Samoa and Tonga.

In the Maori creation myth, two primal beings—Te Po (Night) and Te Kore (Darkness)—existed in a realm of nothingness at the beginning of time. From them sprang Rangi and Papa, the first gods of the universe. For many ages, Rangi and Papa were locked in an embrace, and their offspring, including numerous gods, were caught between them. The gods grew weary of their confinement and finally separated Rangi from Papa, thus providing room for themselves and for all things to grow and multiply.

The origin of humans and other living things is explained in various ways. According to myths about Tangaloa, after he created the islands of

## Captain Cook and the Gods

In 1778 English explorer Captain James Cook became the first European to visit the Hawaiian Islands. He arrived during a period of political turmoil, and some scholars believe that a misunderstanding about the native religion cost him his life. When Cook came ashore, the people thought that he was the god Lono. They escorted him to their temple, where he took part in their rituals, unaware that doing so confirmed their beliefs that he was Lono. The Hawaiians believed that Lono would ritually “die” and then leave them. Cook left, but soon returned, which confused the islanders. Anxious to make sure that Lono died as he was supposed to, the Hawaiians killed Cook.

the Pacific, he used a vine to cover the bare land and provide shade. The vine spread, and parts of it decayed and became full of maggots. Tangaloa took the maggots and shaped them into humans. When he gave them a heart and soul, they came to life. In Maori myth, several of the gods—especially Tane-mahuta, Tangaroa, and Rongo-ma-tane (the god of cultivated crops)—played an active role in creating lands, plants, and humans. According to some legends, all living creatures, including humans, emerged from Tangaroa’s vast body.

In another myth, the god Tane went searching for a wife. He united with several different beings and produced mountains, rivers, and other living and nonliving things. Tane longed for a partner with a human shape, however, so he formed a woman out of sand and breathed life into her. This woman’s name was Hine-hauone (Earth-formed Maiden), and she had a daughter named Hine-titama (Dawn Maiden). Tane later took the girl—who did not know he was her father—as his wife, and they had many children. When Hine-titama discovered Tane’s identity, she fled to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, dragging her children after her. The relationship between Tane and his daughter resulted in the arrival of death for humans.

A Hawaiian myth tells how Kane longed for a companion in his own image. His mother, Papatuanuku (pronounced pah-pah-too-ah-NOO-koo), told him to make a likeness of himself from clay and to embrace it. When he did as she suggested, the clay figure came to life and became the first woman.

Numerous myths explain the origin of various plant foods and other items of value. According to some stories, humans had to steal food from the gods or trick them into giving up certain foods. In other stories, the gods felt sorry for humans and generously gave food to them. A number of myths also explain that foods were the offspring of a particular god or grew from part of the body of a god.

The yam, or sweet potato, is one of the basic food crops of Polynesia. A number of myths explain the origin of this important food. One Maori (pronounced MAH-aw-ree) myth tells how the god Rongo-maui went to heaven to see his brother Wahnui (pronounced wah-NOO-ee), the guardian of the yam. Rongo-maui stole the yam, hid it in his clothing, and returned to earth. Soon after, his wife Pani became pregnant, and she later gave birth to a yam, the first on earth. Rongo-maui gave this food to humans.

Some Polynesian myths tell about characters who possessed extraordinary or supernatural powers and acted as miracle workers, mischief makers, or tricksters. The Hawaiians called these figures *kapua* (pronounced kah-POO-ah) and loved to hear about their many adventures. The kapua were often raised by grandparents who used magic to help them in their adventures. They generally grew up to be monstrous creatures who could change shape and perform great feats of strength. Among the more popular tales were those in which the kapua slayed monsters, rescued maidens, defeated rivals, and competed with the gods.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As in many cultures around the world, one of the main themes in Polynesian mythology is creation as an act of the gods. This theme occurs in origin myths about men and women, as well as plants and animals important to the region. Central to the theme of creation is the idea of overcoming nothingness or darkness in order to bring the world into being—another element common to many of the world's mythologies.

Another theme in Polynesian mythology is that of humans having to deal with uncooperative or unfriendly gods in some way. This is shown in myths about humans acquiring different types of foods by stealing them from the gods or tricking the gods into providing them. This is seen in the myth of Maui, often identified more as a hero to humans



*Captain James Cook visited the Hawaiian islands in 1778. When he came ashore, the people mistook him for one of their gods. This illustration shows the Hawaiians offering gifts to the English captain.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/THE STAPLETON COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

than as a god, who tries to trick the goddess Hina into making him immortal.

### **Polynesian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Maui is perhaps best known for lending his name to one of the Hawaiian Islands, and sometimes appears in art carvings of the Pacific Islanders. His hook, which was used to pull the islands to the surface of the ocean, is also a popular object represented in Polynesian art. With the introduction of Christianity to Polynesia in the 1700s, traditional religious beliefs began to fade. Although the Polynesian gods no longer play a major religious role in most parts of the region, the rich heritage of myths and legends remains part of the literature, folklore, and imagination of native cultures.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea that people must struggle against uncooperative gods is not unique to Polynesian mythology. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research one culture whose principal deity is friendly and protective, and one whose principal deity is stern and more likely to punish. Why do you think some cultures primarily view gods as unfriendly, while others view them mostly as protectors and providers? Does this reflect a different cultural view of the world, or the different environments in which these cultures exist?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Maui; Melanesian Mythology; Micronesian Mythology; Pele; Rangi and Papa; Tricksters



## Popol Vuh

### Myth Overview

The *Popol Vuh*, a book of myths belonging to the Quiché (pronounced kee-CHAY) Mayans of highland Guatemala, is divided into five parts. The first contains an account of the creation of the world and of the failed attempts to produce proper human beings. The second and third parts tell of the adventures of the Hero Twins, Hunahpú (pronounced WAH-nuh-pwuh) and Xbalanqué (pronounced shi-BAY-lan-kay). The last two parts deal with the issue of creating humans from **corn**, and then tell the story of the Quiché people from the days before their history began to accounts of tribal wars and records of rulers up until 1550.

**Creation of the World** At the beginning of time, the gods Huracan (pronounced wah-ruh-KAHN) and Gukumatz (pronounced gwah-kwuh-MAHTS) shaped the earth and its features and raised the sky above it. The gods then placed animals on the earth, hoping that they would sing the praises of the gods.

When the gods discovered that the animals could not speak, they tried again to make a creature that could praise its creator. Huracan and Gukumatz called on the ancestral beings Xpiyacoc (pronounced shpee-YAH-kok) and Xmucane (pronounced SHMOH-kah-nay) to help, and

#### Nationality/Culture

Mayan

#### Pronunciation

poh-POHL VOO

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

Ancient Mayan culture

together they created men of mud. But these creatures talked endlessly and dwindled away. Next the gods fashioned humans out of wood. These beings populated the earth but soon forgot about their creators. The angry gods sent **floods** and various objects to destroy them.

**The Hero Twins** In Part Two of the *Popol Vuh*, **Hunahpú and Xbalanqué** appear and take on the self-important Vucub-Caquix (pronounced voh-KOHB kah-kwish), as well as his sons, Zipacna (pronounced sip-AK-nah) and Earthquake. Using blowpipes, the **twins** knocked out Vucub-Caquix's jeweled teeth, which gave him his radiance. Vucub-Caquix accepted corn as a replacement for his teeth. But because he could not eat with his corn teeth and because they did not shine, he was defeated.

In Part Three of the *Popol Vuh*, the story goes back to an earlier time, to Hun-Hunahpú (pronounced wahn-WAHN-uh-pwah) and Vucub Hunahpú (pronounced voh-kohb WAHN-uh-pwah), the father and uncle of the Hero Twins. These two disturbed the lords of Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh)—the **underworld**, or land of the dead—with their constant ball playing. The lords commanded the brothers to come to the underworld for a contest. Tricked by the lords, the brothers lost the contest and, as a result, were sacrificed and buried in the ball court. However, the head of Hun-Hunahpú remained unburied and was placed in a tree.

A young goddess heard of a strange fruit in a tree and went to see it. The fruit was actually the head of Hun-Hunahpú, which spat in her hand and made her pregnant. She later gave birth to the Hero Twins. Hun-Hunahpú already had another set of twins, Hun Batz and Hun Chuen, who resented their baby brothers. When the Hero Twins grew old enough, they outsmarted the older twins and turned them into monkeys.

The Hero Twins became great ball players, as their father and uncle had been, and one day the lords of Xibalba summoned them to the underworld for a contest. The twins saw this as an opportunity to avenge their father's death. Challenged to a series of trials, they passed every one they were given. They survived a night in the House of Cold, escaped death in the House of Jaguars, and passed unharmed through the House of Fire. They almost met defeat in the House of Bats, when a bat cut off Hunahpú's head. The lords of Xibalba took the head to the ball court as a trophy, but Xbalanqué managed to return the head to his brother and restore him.



Knowing they were immortal, or able to live forever, the Hero Twins now allowed the lords of Xibalba to defeat and “kill” them. Five days later, the twins reappeared, disguised as wandering performers, and entertained the lords with amazing feats. In one of these feats, Xbalanqué sacrificed Hunahpú and then brought him back to life. Astounded, the lords of Xibalba begged to be sacrificed themselves. The Hero Twins agreed to the request but did not restore the lords of Xibalba to life. The twins then dug up the bodies of their father and uncle and brought them back to life.

**Creation of the Maya** The final two parts of the *Popol Vuh* tell how the gods once again tried to make humans who would praise the gods. The four men they created from maize—their skin a mix of white and yellow corn, and their limbs shaped from corn meal—became the founders of the Quiché Maya. These people praised their creators and flourished. The generations that followed them are listed in the closing section of the *Popol Vuh*.

### The *Popol Vuh* in Context

The *Popol Vuh* is the most important source of information on the mythology of the ancient Maya. A sacred book of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala, it was written down in the mid-1500s. A Spanish priest discovered the *Popol Vuh* manuscript in the early 1700s. After copying the text, he translated it into Spanish.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One important theme in the *Popol Vuh* is the creation of life from natural materials. The gods try to create humans from mud, and later from wood. These are failures, and the gods destroy them. Finally, the first successful humans are created from corn—a crucial food in the Mayan diet. In this way, corn symbolizes life to the Mayan people. Corn is also used as the substitute for Vucub-Caquix’s teeth after Hunahpú and Xbalanqué knock out his real teeth.

Another important theme found in the *Popol Vuh* is the interaction of the living with the dead. This is seen throughout the myth of Hunahpú and Xbalanqué, beginning with the head of their father talking to (and impregnating) a goddess while hanging from a tree. It is also seen when the twins journey to the underworld for a ball-playing contest;

Hunahpú loses his head in the House of Bats, but is brought back to life, and both brothers later allow themselves to be killed and brought back to life. Then, after killing the lords of the underworld, the brothers bring their father and uncle back from the dead and return with them to the land of the living.

### The *Popol Vuh* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although the Mayan civilization has dwindled greatly in the centuries following Spanish occupation, the myths recorded in the *Popol Vuh* still play an important part in the culture of the region. Stories in Charles Finger's *Tales from the Silver Lands* and Miguel Angel Asturias's *Men of Maize* are based on the *Popol Vuh*. The myths of the *Popol Vuh* also served as inspiration for Louis L'Amour's supernatural Western novel *The Haunted Mesa* (1987). The underworld of Xibalba appears in the 2006 Darren Aronofsky film *The Fountain*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Mayan civilization had largely disappeared by the time Spanish explorers arrived in the New World. Some modern historians view the fall of the Maya as an example for modern society to learn from and avoid. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the collapse of the Mayan civilization. Can you find any similarities between the fall of Mayan civilization and the current state of modern societies like the United States? How are they different? Do you think there are lessons to be learned from the Maya? If so, what are they?

#### Nationality/Culture

Greek

#### Pronunciation

poh-SYE-dun

#### Alternate Names

Neptune (Roman)

#### Appears In

Homer's *Iliad*, Hesiod's *Theogony*

#### Lineage

Son of Cronus and Rhea

**SEE ALSO** Hunahpú and Xbalanqué; Mayan Mythology; Quetzalcoatli; Twins; Underworld



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## Poseidon

### Character Overview

One of the major deities (gods) in **Greek mythology**, Poseidon was the supreme ruler of the seas. The Romans called him Neptune (pronounced

NEP-toon). An awesome, unruly, and powerful god, Poseidon was associated with storms, earthquakes, and some other violent forces of nature. When angry, he could stir the sea to a fury, but he could also calm the raging waters with just a glance. One of his titles, translated as “Earth-shaker,” reflected his ability to cause earthquakes by striking the earth and mountains with his three-pronged spear known as a trident. Another name for Poseidon was Hippios (pronounced HIP-ee-ohs), meaning lord of horses, a reference to the fact that he was believed to be the creator of the first horse.

Poseidon rode the waves in a swift chariot drawn by golden sea horses. He used his mighty trident not only to create earthquakes and stir ocean waves, but also to raise new land from beneath the sea or cause existing land to sink below the waters. Although often helpful to humans—protecting sailors at sea, guiding ships to safety, and filling nets with fish—Neptune could be a terrifying figure as well. Quick to anger, he directed his fury at anyone who acted against him or failed to show proper respect.

## Major Myths

The son of the **Titans Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs) and Rhea (pronounced REE-uh), Poseidon was swallowed at birth by his father. He was saved by his brother **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), who tricked Cronus into taking a potion that caused him to vomit up Poseidon and the other siblings—**Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), and Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh). Poseidon later joined Zeus and Hades in overthrowing Cronus, and the three brothers then divided the universe among themselves. Zeus received the sky, Hades ruled the **underworld** or land of the dead, and Poseidon became god of the seas.

Although Zeus was king of the gods, Poseidon often asserted his independence. Once he even plotted with the goddesses Hera and **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) to overthrow Zeus. Together they managed to put Zeus in chains. However, the sea goddess Thetis (pronounced THEE-tis) saved Zeus by bringing a giant from Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs)—a realm beneath the underworld—to release the king of the gods from his chains. As punishment for this rebellion, Zeus made Poseidon serve as a slave to King Laomedon (pronounced lay-OM-uh-don) of Troy for a year. During this time,

Poseidon helped build great walls around the city. When the king refused to pay for this work, Poseidon took revenge by siding with the Greeks against Troy in the Trojan War.

**Love, Life, and Children** Poseidon had a turbulent love life and fathered many children, including a number of monsters and sea creatures. With his wife, the sea nymph Amphitrite (pronounced am-fi-TRY-tee), he had three offspring. One of the children, Triton (pronounced TRY-tun), was a sea god and a merman (male version of a **mermaid**) who resembled a human above the waist and a fish from the waist down.

Poseidon had children with other partners as well. After seducing his sister Demeter while disguised as a horse, he had two children: the divine horse Arion (pronounced uh-RYE-uhn) and a daughter Despina (pronounced des-PEE-nuh). **Medusa** (pronounced meh-DOO-suh) is also sometimes mentioned as a lover of Poseidon. According to myth, Medusa was once a beautiful woman, and Poseidon seduced her inside one of the goddess Athena's temples. Athena, angered by this sign of disrespect, transformed Medusa into a hideous Gorgon. The two children of Poseidon and Medusa were born from the blood spilled when the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) cut off Medusa's head. These two children were the winged horse **Pegasus** (pronounced PEG-uh-suhs), and a son named Chrysaor (pronounced kree-SAY-ohr). Through his son Chrysaor, Poseidon became ancestor to some of the most fearsome monsters in Greek mythology, including the three-headed hound **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), the Hydra (pronounced HYE-druh), the Nemean (pronounced ni-MEE-uhn) Lion, and the **Sphinx**.

**Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth, bore Poseidon two children: Antaeus (pronounced an-TEE-uhs), a giant, and Charybdis (pronounced kuh-RIB-dis), a sea monster that almost destroyed **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) during his journey home after the Trojan War. Another giant offspring of Poseidon—the one-eyed Cyclops Polyphemus (pronounced pol-uh-FEE-muhs)—also threatened Odysseus on his voyage home. When Odysseus blinded the giant, he became a target of Poseidon's hatred.

When Poseidon tried to seduce the beautiful sea nymph Scylla (pronounced SIL-uh), his wife Amphitrite became jealous and transformed her into a horrible sea monster with six dog-heads. Like Charybdis, Scylla terrorized sailors, and she devoured several of Odysseus's companions.

*Poseidon was the god of the seas in Greek mythology. The Romans called him Neptune.*

PURESTOCK/GETTY IMAGES.



Among Poseidon's other children were the evil Cercyon (pronounced SUR-see-on) and Sciron (pronounced SKEE-ron), normal-sized offspring who threatened and killed travelers in Greece, and the giant Amycus (pronounced AM-i-kuhs), who forced people to fight with him and then killed them. Various ordinary mortals also claimed Poseidon as

their father, including the famous Greek hero **Theseus** (pronounced THEE-see-uhs).

**Poseidon's Quarrels** Poseidon had numerous quarrels with other gods. One of his most famous disputes involved the goddess Athena. Both Poseidon and Athena claimed the region of Attica (pronounced AT-i-kuh) and its capital city as their own. A contest was held to see which god could give Athens the best gift; whoever won would have the capital city named after them. Athena created an olive tree; Poseidon produced a saltwater spring (or, in some versions, the first horse). When the citizens judged Athena's gift to be superior, the angry Poseidon flooded the surrounding plain.

Poseidon also quarreled with the **sun** god Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs) over control of the Greek city of Corinth. The giant Briareus (pronounced bry-AHR-ee-uhs) settled the argument by giving the hill overlooking the city to Helios and the surrounding land to Poseidon. Satisfied with this decision, Poseidon caused no problems for the people of Corinth.

Another of Poseidon's famous quarrels was with Minos (pronounced MYE-nuhs), the king of Crete (pronounced KREET). Minos asked Poseidon to send him a bull that he could **sacrifice** to the god. Poseidon sent such a magnificent bull that the king decided to keep it for himself instead of sacrificing it. Furious, Poseidon caused Minos's wife, Pasiphaë (pronounced pa-SIF-ah-ee), to fall in love with the bull and to give birth to the **Minotaur** (pronounced MIN-uh-tawr), a monstrous beast that had the body of a man and the head of a bull.

### **Poseidon in Context**

As the god of the sea, Poseidon reflects the way ancient Greeks and Romans viewed the seas and oceans upon which they relied for trade and commerce. Poseidon is depicted as a god prone to violent outbursts that occur almost without warning. This is similar to how a calm sea can quickly give way to stormy, dangerous swells. In addition, his frequent outbursts at not receiving proper respect may have been viewed as cautionary tales: looking at the available historical evidence, some experts believe that Poseidon was among the most worshipped of all the Greek and Roman deities. This may also reflect the importance these people placed upon the sea as both a provider and a pathway to trade. But

though the Greeks worshipped and respected Poseidon, it is important to note that places of worship to Poseidon were always located outside city walls, indicating that he was too violent and unpredictable for civilized, orderly city life.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Poseidon represents the untamed and wild power of nature. While he ruled the sea and could cause the waters to become violent, he also had a strong connection to the earth, as shown in his association with earthquakes that the Greeks believed he started with his mighty trident. The trident—itsself an important symbol of Poseidon—indicates his stronger association with fishermen than sailors, since the trident is an important tool in the fishing trade.

Poseidon also had a strong connection to horses, particularly the wild and powerful aspects of horses. The Greeks would pray to him before and after a horse race, although they prayed to his sister Athena during the race, as she was responsible for the actual technique of horse-racing. Another animal associated with Poseidon is the dolphin; a sighting of a dolphin by Greek sailors was considered a good sign of a smooth trip.

## Poseidon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient art, Poseidon was often portrayed riding in a chariot pulled by horses or hippocamps—creatures with front halves similar to horses and back halves like fish. He was usually seen holding his trident. In modern times, he is perhaps best known by his Roman name, Neptune. Sculptures of Neptune are popular in city fountains and can be found in cities such as Copenhagen, Florence, Mexico City, and Virginia Beach. Neptune also makes an appearance in the animated film *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie* (2004), with actor Jeffrey Tambor providing the voice of King Neptune. Poseidon plays a key part in the 2005 novel *The Lightning Thief*, by Rick Riordan, which follows the adventures of a demigod (half god, half human) named Percy Jackson.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Poseidon made his home at the bottom of the sea, in a palace made of coral. Over two-thirds of our planet's surface is covered by water. As the

human population continues to grow, the amount of land available for people to live on will become ever smaller. Do you think that humans will someday live in communities on or under the oceans of the world? What unique problems would humans face living in the realm of Poseidon?

**SEE ALSO** Athena; Cerberus; Cyclopes; Demeter; Gaia; Hades; Hera; Medusa; Odysseus; Pegasus; Sphinx; Theseus; Zeus



## Prometheus

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
pruh-MEE-thee-uhs

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Hesiod's *Theogony*

**Lineage**  
Son of Iapetus and  
Clymene

### Character Overview

Prometheus, one of the **Titans** in **Greek mythology**, was a master craftsman and was considered the wisest of his race. He was credited with the creation of humans and with giving them **fire** and various types of skills and knowledge. His name means “forethought.”

Prometheus was the son of the Titan Iapetus (pronounced eye-AP-uh-tus) and the sea nymph Clymene (pronounced KLEM-eh-nee). **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs) and Epimetheus (pronounced ep-uh-MEE-thee-uhs, meaning “afterthought”) were his brothers and Hesione (pronounced hee-SYE-oh-nee), daughter of the Titan Oceanus (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nuhs), was his wife.

When **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, and the other Olympian gods rebelled against the Titans, Prometheus sided with the gods and thus won their favor. He held Zeus’s aching head so that **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), the god of fire and metalworking, could split it open and release the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh). To show her gratitude, Athena taught Prometheus astronomy, mathematics, architecture, navigation, metalworking, writing, and other useful skills. He later passed this knowledge on to humans.

**Friend to Humans** Prometheus created humans by shaping lumps of clay into small figures resembling the gods. Athena admired these figures and breathed on them, giving them life. Zeus disliked the creatures, but he could not uncreate them. He did, however, confine them to the earth



and denied them immortality, or the ability to live forever. Prometheus felt sorry for humans, so he gave them fire and taught them various arts and skills.

Prometheus was given the task of determining how sacrifices were to be made to the gods. He cut up a bull and divided it into two portions. One portion contained the animal's flesh and skin, but they were concealed beneath the bull's stomach, the least appetizing part of the animal. The other portion consisted of the bones, wrapped in a rich layer of fat. Prometheus then asked Zeus to choose a portion for himself, leaving the other for humans. Fooled by the outward appearance of the portions, Zeus chose the one containing the bones and fat. Prometheus thus ensured that humans got the best meat.

Angered by this trick, Zeus punished humans by withholding fire from them so they would have to live in cold and darkness and eat meat raw. Prometheus promptly went to Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), stole a spark of fire from Hephaestus, and carried it back to humans. When Zeus discovered what Prometheus had done, he swore revenge. He ordered Hephaestus to create a woman from clay, and he had the winds breathe life into her. Athena and other goddesses clothed the woman, whose name was **Pandora** (pronounced pan-DOR-uh).

Zeus sent Pandora as a gift to Prometheus's brother Epimetheus, who married her despite warnings from Prometheus not to accept any gift from Zeus. Pandora brought with her a box containing evil, disease, poverty, war, and other troubles. When Pandora opened the box, she released these sorrows into the world, and Zeus thus gained his revenge on humankind.

**Prometheus's Punishment** To punish Prometheus, Zeus chained the god to a rock on a mountain peak. Every day an eagle tore at Prometheus's body and ate his liver, and every night the liver grew back. Because Prometheus was immortal, he could not die. Instead he suffered endlessly.

Prometheus remained chained and in agony for thousands of years. The other gods begged Zeus to show mercy, but he refused. Finally, Zeus offered Prometheus freedom if he would reveal a secret that only he knew. Prometheus told Zeus that the sea nymph Thetis (pronounced THEE-tis) would bear a son who would become greater than his father. This was important information. Both Zeus and his brother **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) desired Thetis, but they arranged for her to marry a mortal so that her son would not pose a challenge to their power.

Zeus sent **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez) to shoot the eagle that tormented Prometheus and to break the chains that bound him. After his years of suffering, Prometheus was free. To reward Heracles for his help, Prometheus advised him how to obtain the golden apples of the Hesperides (pronounced hee-SPER-uh-deez), one of the twelve labors the famous hero had to accomplish.

### Prometheus in Context

The myth of Prometheus reflects an interesting change over the centuries regarding the ancient Greek gods and how followers viewed them. In the earliest versions of the myth, recorded by Hesiod in the seventh or eighth century BCE, Prometheus was portrayed as a betrayer of the gods who was rightfully punished for his wickedness. Prometheus and his trickery, it is suggested, was the reason that humans suffered in their labors instead of being able to perform their work quickly and easily. In later versions of the myth, recorded two hundred years or more after Hesiod's text, Prometheus was depicted as a hero who defied the gods in order to help humanity. This reflected a growing view among the ancient Greeks that the gods were not infallible and all-powerful, but instead displayed many of the same faults as humans.

### Key Themes and Symbols

An important theme in the myth of Prometheus is the idea of humans and gods as adversaries, or opposing groups. In the myth, Prometheus creates humans in the image of the gods. Zeus, however, does not think that people deserve to keep the best meats for themselves and becomes angry when he discovers that Prometheus has tricked him. He punishes people by keeping fire away from them so they cannot cook their meat. Ultimately, even though humans receive the power of fire, disease and other awful things are released into the world by the gods as revenge. In the myth, fire symbolizes knowledge; Prometheus represents the teacher of humankind and provider of useful information and skills.

### Prometheus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The story of Prometheus's suffering and ultimate release from his torment has inspired artists and writers for centuries. Among the most important early works dealing with the myth was a series of plays written by the Greek

*When Zeus denied humans the use of fire, Prometheus stole fire and gave it to the humans.* ERICH LESSING/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



playwright Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-luhs). Only one of these works, *Prometheus Bound*, survives. The Roman poet Ovid incorporated parts of the story in his work the *Metamorphoses*. Prometheus has also been the subject of more modern works of art, music, and literature by such

individuals as the composer Ludwig van Beethoven and the poets Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The myth also loosely inspired Mary Shelley to write the novel *Frankenstein*, the subtitle of which was *The Modern Prometheus*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

A popular modern interpretation of the myth of Prometheus is that there are some things humans are not meant to know about. This dangerous knowledge is symbolized by fire, but could represent anything—nuclear fission, cloning, tissue regeneration, or artificial intelligence, to name a few. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research a current debate about one of these issues and make a list of the pros and cons involved in the quest for new knowledge. Then write a brief essay on what you think about the issue.

**SEE ALSO** Atlas; Greek Mythology; Hephaestus; Heracles; Pandora; Titans; Zeus

## Proserpina

See **Persephone**.



### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

PRO-tee-uhs

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's  
*Georgics*

## Proteus

### Character Overview

Proteus was an ancient Greek god also known as the old man of the sea. He served as a shepherd for the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), who is sometimes named as his father. Proteus watched over Poseidon's flocks of seals, and in return, Poseidon gave Proteus the gift of prophecy, or the ability to see the future.

### Major Myths

Proteus possessed knowledge of all things—past, present, and future—but was reluctant to reveal his knowledge. He would answer questions



*Greek mosaic of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea.* © NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, ATHENS, GREECE/ANCIENT ART AND ARCHITECTURE COLLECTION LTD./THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

only if caught. The only way to catch him was to sneak up on him at noontime when he took his daily nap. However, Proteus also had the ability to change shape at will. Once he was seized, it was necessary to hold him tightly until he returned to his natural form. Then he would answer any question put to him.

According to one myth, Aristaeus (pronounced a-ris-TEE-uhs), a son of the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and a beekeeper, discovered one day that all of his bees had died from an unknown sickness. His mother suggested that he locate Proteus, who would know how to solve his bee problem. Aristaeus found Proteus and held on tight to him, despite his attempts to change shape and escape. Eventually Proteus gave up and agreed to answer whatever question Aristaeus might ask. Aristaeus asked how to get back his bees; Proteus told him to **sacrifice** twelve animals at an altar, and return to the altar after three

days. When Aristaeus returned to the altar, the corpse of one of the animals was filled with bees. Aristaeus kept these bees, and they never again fell ill.

### Proteus in Context

The idea of Proteus, a sea god, may reflect ancient Greek observations about the nature of the sea. Many observers throughout the centuries have noted the constantly changing nature of the sea, with its ever-shifting surface and ability to turn from calm to violent very quickly. Proteus may also reflect an ancient view of the gods as often being unwilling to help others, especially humans.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes found in the myth of Proteus is the reluctant seer—a being who possesses great knowledge, but is unwilling to share it except when forced. Proteus never offers his wisdom willingly, as shown in the myth of Aristaeus and the bees. Another theme is ancient wisdom: although Proteus was often referred to as the son of Poseidon, he was always pictured as an old man, and it was rumored he existed in myth long before many of the Olympian gods.

### Proteus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The legend of Proteus gave rise to the term *protean*, which means able to assume different forms. Although Proteus seldom appears as a character in art or literature after ancient times, he has been mentioned in the works of John Milton, William Shakespeare, and William Wordsworth, and the concept of Proteus as a shape-shifter has endured both literally and figuratively. Kurt Vonnegut gave the main character of his novel *Player Piano* (1952) the last name of Proteus, a reference to his shifting identity. Proteus, and shape-shifting creatures known as Proteans, appear often in role-playing games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Proteus is also the name given to a satellite of the planet Neptune.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The term “protean” is used to refer not only to beings that can change shape, but also to people who can exhibit different moods or personalities in different situations. In modern times, such people might

be classified as having a mood or personality disorder. Looking at the actions and behaviors of the other Greek gods, how do you think they would be viewed by modern people? Why? Provide examples to illustrate your point.

**SEE ALSO** Greek Mythology; Poseidon



# Psyche

## Character Overview

In Greek and **Roman mythology**, Psyche was a princess of such stunning beauty that people came from near and far to admire her. In turning their adoration toward Psyche, however, they neglected to worship the goddess **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee). Jealous that so much praise was flowing to a mortal girl, Aphrodite decided to punish Psyche.

In Psyche's myth, the goddess Aphrodite summoned her son **Eros** (pronounced AIR-ohs and also known as Cupid), the god of love, and told him to make Psyche fall in love with some ugly, mean, and unworthy creature. Eros prepared to obey his mother's wishes, but when he laid eyes on the beautiful Psyche, he fell in love with her.

Eros asked the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) to send an oracle—or messenger of the gods—to Psyche's father, telling him to prepare his daughter for marriage. He was to send her to a lonely mountain, where an ugly monster would meet her and take her for his wife. Full of sorrow for his daughter but afraid of making the gods angry, Psyche's father obeyed.

While Psyche stood on the mountain, Zephyrus (pronounced ZEF-er-uhs), the god of the west wind, sent a breeze to pick her up and carry her to a beautiful palace in a valley. When Psyche entered the palace, a friendly voice guided her around, and invisible attendants waited upon her and fulfilled her every need.

That night and on the nights that followed, Eros came to Psyche in the darkness of her bedroom. Psyche could not see Eros in the darkness, but he told her that he was her husband. He also warned Psyche not to

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek/Roman

**Pronunciation**  
SYE-kee

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Lucius Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*

**Lineage**  
Unknown

ask his identity and never to look at him. Psyche grew to love her unseen husband, but she felt very lonely.

When she asked if her sisters might visit, Eros reluctantly agreed. Her sisters admired her palace and life of luxury, but when they discovered that Psyche had never seen her husband, they told her that he must be a monster and might kill her. They convinced her to take a knife and lamp to bed with her.

When Eros fell asleep that night, Psyche lit the lamp and prepared to stab her husband. But instead of a monster, she saw the handsome god of love. Startled, she let a drop of hot oil from the lamp fall on Eros. He awoke, realized that Psyche knew his identity, and flew away. Psyche fainted. When she awoke, the palace had vanished, and she found herself alone in a strange country.

Psyche wandered the countryside searching for Eros. Finally she asked Aphrodite for help, and the goddess gave her a set of seemingly impossible tasks. With the help of other gods, however, Psyche managed to sort a roomful of grain in one night and gather golden fleeces from a flock of sheep. For the final task, Aphrodite told Psyche to go to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and bring back a sealed box from the goddess **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee). Psyche retrieved the box and on her way back, overcome by curiosity, peeked inside it. The box released a deep sleep that overpowered her.

By this time Eros could no longer bear to be without Psyche. He flew to where she lay sleeping, woke her, and took her to the home of the gods on Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs). **Zeus** commanded that the punishment of Psyche cease and gave permission for the lovers to marry. Zeus then gave Psyche a cup of ambrosia (pronounced am-BROH-zhuh), the food of the gods, which made her immortal—or able to live forever.

### Psyche in Context

The myth of Psyche can be seen as a reinforcement of male authority in marriages in ancient Greece and Rome. First, Psyche is offered up in marriage by her father without her consent and without ever meeting her husband. This was not out of the ordinary for weddings in ancient times, though in this case Psyche's father gives up control over his daughter to the gods. Psyche is treated to a beautiful palace and an army of servants to care for her, and she enjoys the company of her husband each night in





*Psyche lit a lamp to see if Eros was a monster, only to find he was a beautiful god.* RÉ-UNION DES MUSÉES NATIONALES/ART RESOURCE, NY.

darkness. However, her husband never lets her see him. It is only when Psyche, driven to fear by her jealous sisters, questions his authority that the otherwise perfect marriage is ruined. Psyche then spends the rest of the story trying to win back her husband.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes found in the myth of Psyche is disobeying the will of the gods. Psyche does this twice: first, by looking at her husband while he sleeps (though she does not know that he is a god); and second, by opening the box she retrieves from Persephone. In both cases, disobeying the will of the gods leads to tragic circumstances. Another theme is the association of beauty and love. Eros falls in love with Psyche when he gazes upon her beauty; Psyche does not truly feel love for Eros until she is finally able to see him as he sleeps.

## Psyche in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although the tale of Psyche and Eros is only marginally accepted as a genuine myth, its impact throughout the centuries has been profound. Poets such as Mary Tighe, Robert Bridges, and John Keats have all written their own versions of the tale, and artists such as William Adophe Bouguereau, Jacques-Louis David, and Edward Burne-Jones have captured the characters on canvas. The tale of Psyche and Eros is similar in many ways to the eighteenth-century French fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast,” and may have served as inspiration for it.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The 1956 fantasy novel *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* by C. S. Lewis is a new version of the myth of Eros and Psyche told from the point of view of Orual, Psyche’s sister. The book is considered a parallel novel, meaning it covers the same events as the original myth, but from a different perspective.

SEE ALSO Aphrodite; Eros; Greek Mythology



### Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

### Pronunciation

pig-MAY-lee-uhn and gal-uh-TEE-uh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

# Pygmalion and Galatea

## Myth Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Pygmalion was a king of the island of Cyprus and a sculptor who may have been a human son of the sea god **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun). He spent many years carving an ivory statue of a woman more beautiful than any living female. According to myth, Pygmalion became fascinated by his sculpture and fell in love with it. He pretended it was an actual woman. He brought it presents and treated it as if it were alive. However, the statue could not respond to his attentions, and Pygmalion became miserable. Finally, he prayed to **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee), the goddess of love, to bring him a woman like his statue. Aphrodite did even better. She brought the statue to life. Pygmalion married this woman, often called Galatea (pronounced gal-uh-TEE-uh), who gave birth to a daughter (or, in some versions, a son).

## Pygmalion and Galatea in Context

The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea reflects the ancient Greek view of the ideal wife. Pygmalion's statue is beautiful and without voice or opinion. Even after the statue comes to life, she is only described as blushing at Pygmalion's kiss and giving birth to his child. She does not perform any other actions beyond these simple duties—a reflection of the ancient Greek ideal in a society dominated by men. The myth of Pygmalion also reflects ancient Greek and Roman achievements in sculpture: at the time they were created, the works of Greek and Roman sculptors were arguably the most lifelike representations of the human form ever crafted. Without this crucial quality, it is unlikely that the myth of Pygmalion would have been as popular as it was. In fact, the myth itself can be viewed as a celebration of such artistic achievement.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of Pygmalion's myth is the artist's love of his own creation. Pygmalion becomes so infatuated with his work that he begins to treat it as if it were a real person. Another important theme, common in Greek mythology, is the equation of physical beauty with perfection. The statue's flawless physical appearance, suggests that it is the perfect woman—though there is never any evidence of Galatea's personality or character.

## Pygmalion and Galatea in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Pygmalion and his sculpture has appealed to many artists over the centuries, perhaps because the myth speaks directly to the act of artistic creation. Artist Jean-Léon Gérôme created an astounding pair of paintings, both titled *Pygmalion and Galatea*, depicting similar scenes of sculptor and sculpture from two different angles. Images of Pygmalion and his creation have also been captured by modern artists, such as Boris Vallejo.

The myth was the subject of two operas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as a humorous play by W. S. Gilbert (later of Gilbert and Sullivan fame) in 1871 titled *Pygmalion and Galatea*. The writer George Bernard Shaw took the name *Pygmalion* as the title of his play about an English professor who turns a poor girl from the streets

## Pygmalion and Galatea

*Pygmalion fell in love with a statue he had carved. Aphrodite answered his prayers by bringing the statue to life.* SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



into a fashionable society woman, which touches upon some of the same themes as the original myth. In the play, the professor “creates” a beautiful woman out of a poor wretch, just as Pygmalion creates a flawless beauty out of a chunk of ivory. Shaw’s story was the basis of the later Broadway musical and movie *My Fair Lady*. Another updated version of the myth of Pygmalion can be found in the 1987 comedy film *Mannequin*, where the object of the artist’s affection is a department store mannequin rather than a statue.

*The Fat Girl* by Marilyn Sachs (1984) is a novel that updates the myth of Galatea and Pygmalion to include modern issues that many

adolescents face. The narrator, Jeff, is a popular boy with a beautiful girlfriend. When he makes a remark about an overweight girl named Ellen in his ceramics class and she overhears, he feels bad and becomes friendly with her to make up for his cruel act. He helps her gain self-confidence and blossom into a successful young woman, though his motives may not be entirely charitable, and the result may not be what he expects.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The idea of creating the perfect companion—whether it is a friend or romantic partner—is one of most enduring elements of the myth of Pygmalion. It appears frequently in modern forms of storytelling. Think of an example of this that you have encountered in books, songs, on television, or in movies. (One example would be *Pinocchio*.) How does your example use the theme of creating the perfect companion? Are there other similarities to the tale of Pygmalion?



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# QR



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Aztec, Toltec, and Mayan

## Pronunciation

keht-sahl-koh-AHT-I

## Alternate Names

Kukulcan (Mayan)

## Appears In

Mesoamerican oral myths,  
the Florentine Codex

## Lineage

Son of Coatlicue



## Quetzalcoatl

### Character Overview

For thousands of years, Quetzalcoatl was one of the most important figures in the traditional mythologies of Mesoamerica, an area roughly corresponding to modern Central America. As a god, culture hero, or legendary ruler, Quetzalcoatl appeared in some of the region's most powerful and enduring stories. He represented life, health, and the arts and crafts of civilization, such as farming, cooking, and music.

The name *Quetzalcoatl* means “Feathered Serpent.” It brings together the magnificent green-plumed quetzal bird, symbolizing the heavens and the wind, and the snake, symbolizing the earth and fertility. Quetzalcoatl's name can also be translated as “precious twin.” In some myths, he had a twin brother named Xolotl (pronounced shoh-LOHT-l), who had a human body and the head of a dog or an ocelot, a spotted wildcat.

### Major Myths

According to some accounts, Quetzalcoatl was the son of the earth goddess **Coatlicue** (pronounced koh-aht-LEE-kway). He and three brother gods created the **sun**, the heavens, and the earth. In the Aztec creation myth, Quetzalcoatl's conflicts with the god **Tezcatlipoca** (pronounced tehs-cah-tlee-POH-cah) brought about the creation and destruction of

## Quetzalcoatl

*Quetzalcoatl as he bursts from the serpent's jaws of the earth in his form as Morning Star.*

WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



a series of four suns and earths, leading to the fifth sun and today's earth.

At first there were no people under the fifth sun. The inhabitants of the earlier worlds had died, and their bones littered Mictlan (pronounced MEEKT-lahn), the **underworld** or land of the dead. Quetzalcoatl and his twin, Xolotl, journeyed to Mictlan to find the bones, arousing the fury of the Death Lord. As he fled from the underworld, Quetzalcoatl dropped the bones, and they broke into pieces. He gathered up the pieces and took them to the earth goddess Cihuacoatl (pronounced shee-wah-koh-AHT-l), who ground them into flour. Quetzalcoatl moistened the flour with his own blood, which gave it life. Then he and Xolotl shaped the mixture into human forms and taught the new creatures how to reproduce themselves.

Besides creating humans, Quetzalcoatl also protected and helped them. Some myths say that he introduced the cultivation of maize, or



**corn**, the staple food of Mexico. He did this by disguising himself as a black ant and stealing the precious grain from the red ants. He also taught people astronomy, calendar making, and various crafts, and was the favored god of merchants.

Quetzalcoatl's departure from his people was the work of his old enemy, Tezcatlipoca, who wanted people to make bloodier sacrifices than the flowers, jade, and butterflies they offered to Quetzalcoatl. Tezcatlipoca tricked Quetzalcoatl by getting him drunk and then holding up a mirror that showed Tezcatlipoca's cruel face. Believing that he was looking at his own imperfect image, Quetzalcoatl decided to leave the world and threw himself onto a funeral pyre, a large pile of burning wood used in some cultures to cremate a dead body. As his body burned, birds flew forth from the flames, and his heart went up into the heavens to become the morning and evening star known in modern times as the planet Venus. Another version of the myth states that Quetzalcoatl sailed east into the sea on a raft of serpents. Many Aztecs believed that he would come back to his people at the end of a fifty-two-year cycle. In the early 1500s, the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés took advantage of this belief by encouraging the people of Mexico to view him as the return of the hero-god Quetzalcoatl. According to some reports, this may have allowed Cortés to more easily subdue and conquer the local people.

## Quetzalcoatl in Context

Quetzalcoatl occupied a central place in the pantheon (collection of recognized gods) of the Aztec people of central Mexico, but he dates back to a time long before the Aztecs. Images of the Feathered Serpent appear on a temple building in Teotihuacán, a Mexican archaeological site from the third century CE. These images are found together with images of rain and water, suggesting close ties between Quetzalcoatl and the god of rain and vegetation.

To the Toltecs, who flourished in the region from the 800s to the 1100s, Quetzalcoatl was the deity of the morning and evening stars and the wind. When the Aztecs rose to power in the 1400s, they brought Quetzalcoatl into their pantheon and made him a culture hero, a bringer not just of life but also of civilization. These old myths merged with legends about a priest-king named Quetzalcoatl, possibly a real historical figure. Stories about a Toltec king named Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, famed as an enlightened and good ruler, may have contributed to the image of

Quetzalcoatl as a culture hero. Later, as groups from central Mexico migrated into southern Mexico and the Yucatán peninsula and blended with the local Maya population, the Feathered Serpent took his place in the Mayan pantheon under the name Kukulcan (pronounced koo-kool-KAHN).

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the most important themes in the myth of Quetzalcoatl is the idea of a god as a friend and helper to humans. Aside from giving humans life, Quetzalcoatl taught humans all the basic skills they needed to function as a civilization, such as growing crops and learning the cycles of nature and the stars. He even stole corn from the ants so that humans could grow and eat it. Another theme common to Central American mythology is the idea of blood as life. Quetzalcoatl creates humans by mixing bone flour with his own blood, thereby giving them life. This theme is also seen in the idea of human **sacrifice**, which, according to myth, Quetzalcoatl does not condone.

### Quetzalcoatl in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Quetzalcoatl was portrayed in two ways. As the Feathered Serpent, he was a snake with wings or covered with feathers. He could also appear in human form as a warrior wearing a tall, cone-shaped crown or cap made of ocelot skin and a pendant fashioned of jade or a conch shell. The pendant, known as the “wind jewel,” symbolized one of Quetzalcoatl’s other roles, that of Ehecatl, god of wind and movement. Buildings dedicated to this god were circular or cylindrical in shape to minimize their resistance to the wind.

In modern culture, Quetzalcoatl has appeared as a character in some form on television shows, such as *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*. The god has also appeared—with varying degrees of faithfulness to the myth—in several video games, including *Final Fantasy VIII* and *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow*. The god also lent his name to a type of flying dinosaur called a pterosaur, which was officially named *Quetzalcoatlus*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Carlos Fuentes, one of modern Mexico’s leading writers, compares Quetzalcoatl with the mythic figures **Prometheus**, **Odysseus**, and Moses. All three had to leave their cultures, but obtained gifts or wisdom that

renewed those cultures. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research these important figures. What similarities do you see between them and Quetzalcoatl? What are the main differences?

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Mythology; Coatlicue; Huitzilopochtli; Mayan Mythology; Tezcatlipoca



## Ra

### Character Overview

One of the most important gods in **Egyptian mythology**, the **sun** god Ra (also known as Re) was the supreme power in the universe. The giver of life, he was often merged with the god **Amun** as Amun-Ra. Some myths present Ra as the head of the Egyptian pantheon and ruler of all the gods. Others say that he was the only god, and that all other deities were merely aspects of Ra.

In some creation myths, Ra emerged from either an ancient mound or waters as Ra-Atum, and created Tefnut (pronounced TEF-noot, meaning “moisture”) and Shu (pronounced SHOO, meaning “air”). From this first divine pair sprang the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT) and earth god Geb, who created the universe and gave birth to the gods **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris), **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis), **Set**, Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this), and **Horus** the Elder (pronounced HOHR-uhs).

### Major Myths

Ra appeared in many myths and legends. As the sun god, he rode across the sky in a golden ship, bringing light and warmth to all creatures living on earth. When the sun set in the evening, he descended to the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and brought light and air to the people who dwelled there. Each evening Ra’s servants helped him battle his eternal enemy, the mighty snake Apophis (pronounced uh-POH-fis), who tried to swallow Ra and all his creations. Some stories said that Ra sailed along the body of Nut, the sky goddess, during the day and then traveled through her body at night, being born anew each morning.

#### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

#### Pronunciation

RAH or RAY

#### Alternate Names

Re

#### Appears In

Ancient Egyptian myths and prayers

#### Lineage

None

According to one series of myths, Ra first ruled during a golden age. Everything he saw was perfect, and the sight of such wonders brought tears to his eyes. The tears fell to earth and grew into human beings. In time, however, Ra became angry with the humans because of their actions. He summoned his divine eye, the beautiful goddess **Hathor** (pronounced HATH-or), and transformed her into Sekhmet (pronounced SEK-met), a savage lioness. Ra sent the lioness to earth to kill humans, but after she had caused massive bloodshed, he decided to save the humans that remained. He played a trick on Sekhmet, getting her so drunk on beer that she forgot to continue killing. Nevertheless, death had now been introduced into the world.

In another myth, the goddess Isis wished to learn the secret name of Ra. The name contained great power, which Isis planned to use to make her magical spells stronger. By this time, Ra had become quite old. Isis collected some of the spit that drooled down his chin, mixed it with clay, and made a poisonous snake. One day as Ra was out walking, the snake bit him. Tormented by terrible pain, Ra summoned the other gods to help him. Isis promised to relieve his suffering, but only if he revealed his powerful secret name. He finally agreed, and Isis used the name in a magical spell to remove the poison and heal the sun god.

## Ra in Context

The chief center for Ra's worship in ancient Egypt was the city of Heliopolis (pronounced hee-lee-OP-uh-luhs). As worship of Ra grew, it challenged the supremacy of all other local religions and eventually became a part of them. Ra remained the principal god throughout the history of ancient Egypt, and Egyptian pharaohs, or rulers, claimed to be the sons of Ra in order to link themselves to him.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Because ancient Egyptian deities were so often combined with other gods in different regions and during different periods, Ra symbolized many different things. However, two elements of Ra's character were fairly constant. First, Ra was directly linked to the sun, which meant he also embodied light and life-giving warmth. Second, Ra was associated with the leaders of Egypt, and was seen as the symbolic leader of Egyptian culture.

## Ra in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient art, the god Ra is commonly shown with the head of a falcon wearing a shining solar disk on its head. In modern times, Ra has been referenced in many books, television shows, and films. Ra appeared as a main character in the 1994 science fiction film *Stargate*, which suggested that Ra was actually an alien who came to be worshipped by the ancient Egyptians for his advanced technological powers.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the gods known as Amun-Ra, Atum-Ra, and Ra-Horakhty. How are these gods related to Ra? Why do you think the identities of other gods became linked to Ra? Does seeing how religious beliefs change throughout history challenge the idea that religion and myth are based on eternal, unchanging truths?

**SEE ALSO** Amun; Creation Stories; Egyptian Mythology; Hathor; Isis; Nut; Osiris; Set; Thoth; Underworld



# Ragnarok

## Myth Overview

According to **Norse mythology**, the world will end at Ragnarok, a time of great destruction when the gods will wage a final battle with the **giants** and other evil forces. Ragnarok has not yet arrived, but the events leading to it have already been set in motion.

Before Ragnarok begins, the world will suffer a terrible winter lasting three years. During this period the **sun** will grow dim, evil forces will be released, and wars will rage among humans. The trickster **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) will gather the frost giants and sail to Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods. The wolf **Fenrir** (pronounced FEN-reer), the serpent Jormungand (pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd), and **Hel**, the goddess of the dead, will break free and join Loki and other evil characters in a battle against the gods.

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

RAHG-nuh-rok

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

On the morning of Ragnarok, the god **Heimdall** (pronounced HAYM-dahl) will sound his mighty horn, summoning the gods to battle. During the terrible struggle that follows, all the great gods—including **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) and **Thor**—will be killed. Loki and the monsters, giants, and other evil beings will also perish. The earth will be set on **fire**, the sun and moon will be destroyed, the sky will fall, and the world will finally sink beneath the sea and vanish.

Ragnarok will not be the end of everything, however. The World Tree **Yggdrasil** (pronounced IG-druh-sil) will survive, and two humans—Lif and Lifthrasir—and some animals will be sheltered among its branches. New land will rise from the oceans, and a fresh green earth will emerge. Lif and Lifthrasir will repopulate the world. Some of the gods—including the once-dead **Balder** (pronounced BAWL-der)—will also return and rebuild Asgard, ushering in a new golden age. Giants and other evil beings will not reappear but will fade as a distant memory.

### Ragnarok in Context

Nearly all cultures have a mythology related to the end of the world, or at least the end of humankind. The way in which the people of a culture view this end-time is a reflection of the values and beliefs found in that culture. In Norse mythology, the myth of Ragnarok reflects the cycle of death and rebirth seen in nature, but on a far grander scale.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One theme found in the myth of Ragnarok is the physical death of the gods. Nearly all the Norse gods are said to be slain during the battle at Ragnarok. All of these deaths occur in very physical ways; Odin, for example, is eaten by the giant wolf Fenrir. One of the few gods spared at Ragnarok is Balder, who has already died and is reborn after the conflict.

Another important theme is the rebellion of the natural world. This is shown in the continuous winter that lasts for three years, and in the disappearance of the sun, moon, and stars. The myth also contains references to grand-scale earthquakes and **floods**. After the great destruction, however, the idea of renewal and rebirth remains a core element of the myth of Ragnarok.



*According to Norse mythology, the world will end at Ragnarok, a time of great destruction when the gods will wage a final battle with the giants.* © NATIONALMUSEUM, STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

## Ragnarok in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Ragnarok has captured the imagination of people around the world. Most notably, the myth was used as inspiration for the fourth and final opera of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* cycle, first

## The End of the World

*Most cultures have some vision of how the world will end.*

Event	Culture	Description
Judgment Day or the Apocalypse	Christian	Though there is some disagreement over the order and duration of events, the Christian view of the end of the world involves the return of Jesus Christ to Earth, a Last Judgment in which the saved are separated from the damned, one thousand years of peace, and the loosing of Satan's forces on Earth.
Qiyamah	Islam	As in Christianity, in Islam there is a day of judgment. God rewards the good and punishes the bad, and the world is destroyed.
Ragnarok	Norse	A giant battle of the gods, giants, and forces of evil will destroy the earth.
The end of the Kali Yuga	Hindu	The Hindu belief system is cyclical, with time broken into long ages called kalpas, each consisting of four periods. We are now said to be in the Kali Yuga, the final, darkest period of the current age. At the end of the Kali Yuga, Shiva will destroy the earth in preparation for a new kalpa.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

performed in its entirety in 1876. The opera, known as *The Twilight of the Gods*—a literal translation of “Ragnarok”—differs substantially from the Norse version of the myth.

*Ragnarok* has been used as the name of a popular Korean comic series, an animated television series, and a multiplayer online role-playing game series. The world depicted in these only loosely resembles the



realms of Norse mythology, though many characters are modeled after the Norse gods and other mythical beings.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Multiple times throughout recorded history, large groups of people have become convinced that the world was about the end. Throughout Europe, people were convinced that the year 1000 would be the end. When the next millennium arrived, dire predictions of global disaster resurfaced. Using your library, the Internet, or other available sources, research failed “end of the world” predictions. Pick one, then write a paper about the social environment surrounding the predication, who made the prediction, what evidence that person used, and whether any part of the prediction came true.

**SEE ALSO** Fenrir; Giants; Heimdall; Hel; Loki; Norse Mythology; Odin; Serpents and Snakes; Thor; Yggdrasill



## Ramayana, The

### Myth Overview

One of the most famous epics in Hindu literature, the *Ramayana* tells of the life and adventures of Rama, a legendary hero who is worshipped as a god in many parts of India. Probably written in the 200s BCE, the *Ramayana* is attributed to Valmiki, a wise man who also appears as a character in the work. Based on numerous legends, the *Ramayana* also incorporates sacred material from the Vedas, a collection of ancient Hindu religious texts.

**Early Life of Rama** According to the *Ramayana*, Rama (pronounced RAH-muh) was the seventh incarnation—or bodily form—of the god **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo). Born as the eldest son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya (pronounced ah-YOH-dee-uh), he was conceived when Vishnu gave three of the king’s wives a special potion to drink. Dasaratha’s senior wife, Kausalya (pronounced kow-SAHL-yuh), gave birth to Rama. The other wives gave birth to Rama’s brothers—Bharata (pronounced

#### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

#### Pronunciation

rah-MAY-yah-nuh

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The *Ramayana*

BAH-rah-tah), and the **twins** Lakshmana (pronounced LAHK-shmah-nah) and Satrughna (pronounced shah-TROO-gnuh). Rama inherited half of Vishnu's supernatural power, while his brothers shared the rest.

The four brothers grew up as close friends, particularly Rama and Lakshmana. One day a wise man named Vishvamitra (pronounced vish-VAH-mi-truh) asked Rama and his brothers to help defeat Taraka (pronounced TAH-rah-kah), queen of a race of demons called the Rakshasas (pronounced RAHK-shah-sahs). Rama and Lakshmana agreed to help, and Rama killed Taraka. Vishvamitra then took the brothers to the court of King Janaka (pronounced JAH-nah-kah), where Rama entered a contest for the hand of Sita (pronounced SEE-tah), the king's daughter. By bending and breaking a sacred bow given to the king by the god **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh), Rama won the contest.

Soon after the marriage of Rama and Sita, King Dasaratha decided to turn over his throne to Rama. However, his wife Kaikeyi (pronounced kye-KEE-yee), the mother of Bharata, reminded Dasaratha that he had once promised to grant her two wishes. Reluctantly, the king granted Kaikeyi her wishes—to banish Rama and place Bharata on the throne.

A dutiful son, Rama accepted his banishment and went to the Dandaka (pronounced DAHN-duh-kuh) Forest with Sita and Lakshmana. King Dasaratha died of grief soon after they departed. Bharata had been away during these earlier events. When called back to take the throne, he agreed to rule only during his brother's absence and acknowledged Rama as the rightful king.

**Battling the Rakshasas** During his exile in the forest, Rama helped defend the wise men living there against the evil Rakshasas. One of these demons, the hideous giantess Surpanakha (pronounced shur-PAH-nah-kah), offered to marry both Rama and Lakshmana. When they refused, the giantess attacked Sita, but the brothers cut off Surpanakha's ears and nose and drove her away. Surpanakha sent her younger brother Khara (pronounced KAH-ruh) and an army of demons to avenge her, but Rama and Lakshmana defeated and killed them all.

Furious at this defeat, Surpanakha went to her older brother Ravana (pronounced RAH-vuh-nuh), the demon king of Sri Lanka, and plotted revenge. When the giantess told Ravana about the beautiful Sita, he went to Dandaka Forest. Disguised as a beggar, the demon king kidnapped Sita and carried her back to his kingdom. He then tried to get Sita to

marry him, but she rejected all his advances—even when he threatened to kill and eat her.

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana set off in search of Sita. Along the way they met the monkey king Sugriva (pronounced soo-GREE-vuh), son of the god **Surya** (pronounced SOOR-yuh), and formed an alliance. They helped him win back his throne from his wicked half-brother Vali (pronounced VAH-lee). In return, the brothers received help from the monkey armies. After the monkey god Hanuman (pronounced HAH-noo-mahn) discovered where Sita had been taken, the monkey armies marched to Sri Lanka and defeated the Rakshasas in a series of battles. During the fighting, Rama killed Ravana and was reunited with Sita.

**Rama and Sita** After their reunion, Rama wondered whether Sita had remained faithful while held captive by Ravana. Sita proclaimed her innocence and proved it by passing through a **fire** unharmed. The fire god Agni (pronounced AG-nee) also spoke on her behalf, and Rama accepted her innocence.

The couple returned to Ayodhya, and Rama began a long reign of peace and prosperity. But the people still questioned Sita's faithfulness. In time, Rama began to doubt her innocence as well, and he banished her. While in exile, Sita found refuge with an old wise man named Valmiki (pronounced vahl-MEE-kee), and she gave birth to Rama's twin sons, Kusa and Lava.

After many years, the two boys visited Ayodhya. When Rama saw them, he recognized them as his sons and called Sita back from exile. Sita returned, and exhausted from having to continually protest her innocence, she called on Bhumidevi, the Earth Goddess, to release her from this world. Bhumidevi granted her wish, and the earth opened up beneath Sita and swallowed her.

Grief stricken by the loss of Sita, Rama asked the gods to end his sorrow. The gods told Rama that he must either enter **heaven** or stay on earth. Rama chose to follow Sita to eternity, so he walked into the river Sarayu and drowned. Upon Rama's death, the god **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh) welcomed the hero into heaven.

## The Ramayana in Context

The *Ramayana* has been extremely influential in India and Southeast Asia since the early Middle Ages. Its stamp can be seen in visual arts,

architecture, dance, and poetry throughout the region. Like the Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Ramayana* is significant on both an artistic and cultural level, as the story of Rama has become inextricably linked to Indians' sense of national identity. The *Ramayana* presents, in allegorical form, many Hindu concepts, including the idea of *dharmā* (pronounced DAR-muh) or duty, and Indian cultural values such as loyalty and respect for the family. Despite India's rapid modernization, the *Ramayana* remains extremely popular. The Indian film and television industry frequently draws on the tale in its productions.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes in the *Ramayana* is the importance of faithfulness and keeping one's word: Dasaratha wanted to place Rama on the throne, but his wife insisted that he keep his word to her; Rama accepted and understood that Dasaratha had to fulfill his promise, and accepted his banishment without bitterness; and Sita proved over and over that she was a faithful wife.

Another theme at the core of the *Ramayana* is that of a rightful heir returning to his throne. Rama is considered by King Dasaratha to be the best choice for ruling the kingdom, but is banished due to the influence of one of the king's jealous wives. The bulk of the tale involves his banishment and ultimate claiming of the throne. The story of the monkey king Sugriva also mirrors Rama's tale: he also must win back his rightful throne from his half-brother.

### The *Ramayana* in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Not only is the *Ramayana* one of the most popular tales of India, it has also been embraced by other cultures from Tibet to the Philippines. The Chinese epic *Journey to the West* may also be inspired by the *Ramayana*. The epic was used as the basis for the wildly popular Indian television series *Ramayan* (1987), which earned over 100 million viewers and caused a virtual shutdown in businesses and public services throughout India during its time slot. The comic book series *Ramayan 3392 A.D.* (2006), conceived by doctor and author Deepak Chopra, is a futuristic retelling of the legend that aims to popularize the tale among English-speaking readers.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The predicament faced by Rama—jealousy and resentment at his status as first-born son by his father’s later wife—is not unlike some of the complicated dynamics found in modern families. Do you think Rama’s situation is similar to that of a child whose parent remarries and has additional children with the new spouse? What issues do you think are shared by both Rama and modern children from split-parent households? In what ways are the issues facing modern families different from Rama and his clan?

**SEE ALSO** Brahma; Devils and Demons; Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; Vishnu



# Rangi and Papa

## Character Overview

In **Polynesian mythology**, Rangi (Father Sky) and Papa (Mother Earth) were the two supreme creator deities (gods and goddesses). They were the source from which all things in the universe originated, including other gods, humans, and the various creatures and features of the earth. Rangi and Papa played an especially important role in the mythology of the Maori (pronounced MAH-aw-ree) people of New Zealand.

## Major Myths

According to Maori mythology, Rangi and Papa were created from two ancient beings—Te Po (night) and Te Kore (emptiness)—who existed in darkness before the creation of the universe. From the beginning, Rangi and Papa were locked together in a tight and continuing embrace. Into the darkness between their bodies sprang many offspring, including numerous gods.

Trapped between the bodies of their parents, the deities had little space to move around and no light to see. Weary of this situation, the offspring discussed how they could escape the confines of their existence. Tu, the god of war, suggested that they kill Rangi and Papa, but Tane (pronounced TAH-nee), the god of the forests, had a different solution.

### Nationality/Culture

Polynesian

### Pronunciation

RANG-gee and PAH-pah

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

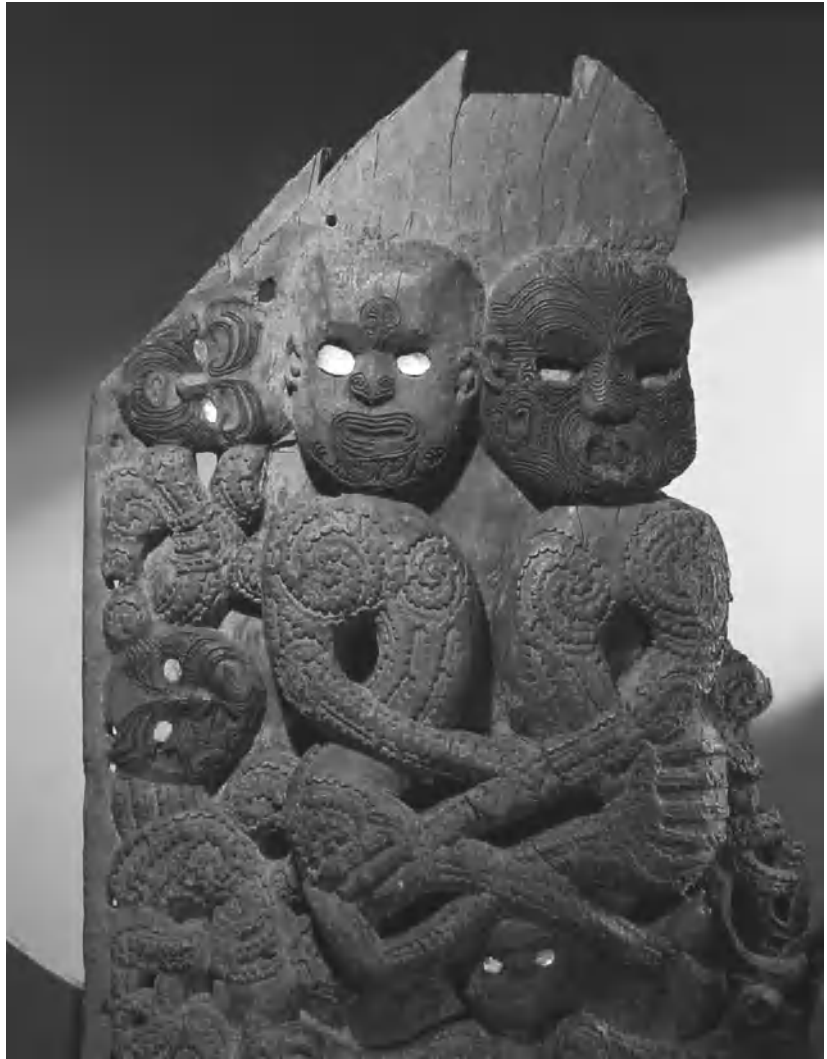
Polynesian creation myths

### Lineage

Children of Te Po and Te Kore

## Rangi and Papa

*In Polynesian mythology, Rangi and Papa were two creator deities locked in a continuous embrace. When other gods finally separated them, the gods, humans, and other creatures who had been trapped between them scattered into the world.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Tane suggested that they make space for themselves by separating their parents. The other gods agreed with this plan, except for the wind god Tawhiri (pronounced tah-WEE-ree), who roared his disapproval.

Several of the gods attempted to separate Rangi and Papa. The first to try was Rongo, the god of cultivated plants. Although he pushed with all his might, he was unable to separate the couple. Next to try was Tangaroa, the god of the sea. He also failed, as did Haumia (pronounced how-MEE-uh), the god of wild plants and vegetables, and Tu, the war god. Finally, it was time for Tane to try. The god of the forests placed his

head on his mother Papa, raised his feet in the air, and pushed upward against his father Rangi. Using all his might, Tane finally separated Rangi and Papa, pushing Rangi up into the sky and pressing Papa to the earth.

With Rangi and Papa separated, the space between them became flooded with light. The various deities, humans, and other offspring who had been trapped there scattered into the world. Freed at last, the children of Rangi and Papa began to quarrel among themselves, especially Tane and the sea god Tangaroa. Polynesians believe that the conflicts between the gods cause such things as the growth of weeds in fields, the differences between humans and animals, and the storms that threaten boats at sea.

Heartbroken at being separated from his beloved Papa, Rangi cried. His tears rained down upon the earth from the sky, causing great flooding. At the same time, the wind god Tawhiri showed his anger with his brothers by sending storms and winds to batter the earth, causing great destruction to the forests, seas, and fields. Only the war god Tu could resist his brother, but their struggle flooded the earth, leaving only the islands of Polynesia.

Over time the offspring of Rangi and Papa multiplied and filled the earth with life. But Rangi still cries from time to time when he misses Papa, and his tears fall as rain or as drops of morning dew.

## Rangi and Papa in Context

The creator gods Rangi and Papa reflect an understanding among the Maori people of the process of human reproduction, and show how the Maori view themselves as a part of the natural world. Rangi and Papa are locked in an embrace that resembles the closeness of two people making love. When they are separated, all things in the world are “born” between them. To the Maori, the human process of creation is a model for the mythical process of the creation of the world. The myth also reflects how important a mother’s nurturing care is to the Maoris: when the gods decide to separate the pair, they send their father Rangi far away into the sky, but keep their nurturing mother Papa directly beneath their feet so she can continue to provide for them.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Like many mythologies around the world, the myth of Rangi and Papa views nature as comprised of two halves: the sky and the earth. Each is a

distinct being, and both are necessary for life. The themes of unity, separation, and grief are also at the center of the myth of Rangi and Papa. When the couple is united, they create all the gods and elements of the earth. These elements, however, are trapped between Rangi and Papa and have no space or light. When Rangi and Papa separate, both good and bad things happen: all plants and animals on earth flourish, but great storms and **floods** cover most of the land. The Maori people still view rain and storms as symbols of the anger and tears of the gods.

### Rangi and Papa in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The tale of Rangi and Papa, like most Maori myths, has been passed orally from one generation to the next. Though many of these myths have been written down over the past two centuries, the oral tradition continues among the Maori. The myths of the Maori are also expressed in art, primarily through wood carvings of the mythical figures in the tales.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Maori view the sky as a father figure and the earth as a mother figure. This is a common theme in creation myths. What is it about the sky that made people associate it with a “father”? And what about the earth suggests a “mother”?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Polynesian Mythology

# Re

*See Ra.*



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# Reincarnation

## Theme Overview

Many cultures have myths and legends that tell of **heroes** or other characters who die and then come back to life. When they reappear,



though, it is not as their former selves but as other people, as animals, or even as plants. The concept of reincarnation—the reappearance of a spirit or soul in earthly form—is based on the belief that a person’s soul continues to exist after death and can be reborn in another body.

## Major Myths

Many world myths and legends feature some form of reincarnation. Ancient Norse kings were regarded as reincarnations of the god **Freyr** (pronounced FRAY). After the introduction of Christianity to Norway, some people believed the Christian saint Olaf was the reincarnation of an earlier pre-Christian king, also named Olaf.

In the Arctic regions, where animals are critical to survival, the Inuit people believe that animals as well as humans have souls that are reborn. Hunters must perform ceremonies for the creatures they kill so the animal spirits can be reborn and hunted in the future. When a person dies, part of his or her soul will be incarnated in the next baby born into the community. Giving the newborn the dead person’s name ensures that the child will have some of the ancestor’s qualities.

Buddhist tradition includes a set of tales called the *Jatakas* (pronounced JAH-tuh-kuhz) that are based on reincarnation. They tell of Gautama Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh) and his various lives, in which he grew wiser and holier as his soul moved from life to life. In one life, Buddha was a hare who sought spiritual growth through fasting. He realized that if a beggar appeared he would have no food to offer, so he decided that he would offer his own flesh. One of the gods came down from **heaven** and visited the hare in the form of a beggar. The hare willingly hurled himself into a **fire** to provide a meal for his guest, but the god then saved the hare and painted his image on the moon to honor his spirit of self-sacrifice. On his way to becoming Buddha, Gautama passed through more than five hundred lives that included incarnations as an elephant, a priest, a prince, and a hermit.

The Japanese legend of O-Tei (pronounced OH-TAY) illustrates the haunting appeal of the idea of reincarnation. O-Tei was a young girl engaged to be married. She fell ill, and as she lay dying, she promised her future husband that she would come back in a healthier body. She died, and the young man wrote a promise to marry her if she ever returned. Time passed and eventually he married another woman and had a child.

## A Very Long Journey

The Greek historian Herodotus (pronounced heh-ROD-uh-tuhs) recorded ancient Egyptian ideas about reincarnation. The Egyptians, he wrote, believed that the soul passed through a variety of species—animals, marine life, and birds—before once again becoming a human. The entire journey, from the death of a human to rebirth as a human again, took three thousand years. One ancient Egyptian source, the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, partly supports Herodotus's account. It states that the souls of important individuals can return to earth in the form of creatures, such as the heron or crocodile.

But his wife and child also died. Hoping to heal his grief, the man went on a journey. In a village he had never visited, he stayed in an inn where a girl who looked much like O-Tei waited on him. He asked her name, and speaking in the voice of his first love, she told him that her name was O-Tei. She said that she knew of his promise and had returned to him. Then she fainted. When the girl awoke, she had no memory of her former life or what she had said to the man. The two were married and lived happily together.

## Reincarnation in Context

Belief in reincarnation has been shared by a wide variety of peoples, including the ancient Egyptians and Greeks and the Aboriginal people of central Australia. The most complex and influential ideas about reincarnation are found in Asian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Cultural groups that believe in reincarnation have different ideas about the way it takes place. Some say that human souls come from a general source of life-giving energy. Others claim that particular individuals are repeatedly reborn in their descendants.

In Australia, most Aborigines believe that human souls come from spirits left behind by ancestral beings who roamed the earth during a mythical period called the **Dreamtime**. The birth of a child is caused by an ancestral spirit entering a woman's body. The spirit waits in a sacred place for the woman to pass by. After death, the person's spirit returns to the ancestral powers.

According to traditional African belief, the souls or spirits of recently dead people linger near the grave for a time, seeking other bodies—reptile, mammal, bird, or human—to inhabit. Many African traditions link reincarnation to the worship of ancestors, who may be reborn as their own descendants or as animals associated with their clans or groups. The Zulu people of southern Africa believe that a person’s soul is reborn many times in the bodies of different animals, ranging in size from tiny insects to large elephants, before being born as a human again. The Yoruba (pronounced YAWR-uh-buh) and Edo of western Africa share the widely held notion that people are the reincarnations of their ancestors. They call boys “Father Has Returned” and girls “Mother Has Returned.”

Reincarnation plays a central role in Buddhism and Hinduism. It also appears in Jainism (pronounced JYE-niz-uhm) and Sikhism (pronounced SEE-kiz-uhm), two faiths that grew out of Hinduism and are still practiced in India. Jainism shares with Hinduism a belief in many gods. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion that emphasizes the belief in only one god. It combines some elements of Islam with Hinduism.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism all began in India, where the idea of rebirth first appears in texts dating from about 700 BCE. They share a belief in *samsara*—the wheel of birth and rebirth—and *karma*—the idea that an individual’s actions in their current life will determine how they are reborn in their future life. People who have done good deeds and led moral lives are reborn into higher social classes; those who have not are doomed to return as members of the lower classes or as animals. Only by achieving the highest state of spiritual development can a person escape *samsara* altogether and enter into the state of *nirvana*, total union with the supreme spirit.

## Reincarnation in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Reincarnation is still a popular theme in art and literature. Many movies have dealt with the idea of returning to life in a different body, encompassing all genres from horror to comedy. Some notable films that use reincarnation as a central premise include *Audrey Rose* (1977), *Chances Are* (1989), and *Down to Earth* (2001). However, even in modern times, reincarnation is hardly limited to the realm of myth: according to polls conducted in Europe and the United States, about one in five people believe in reincarnation.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Few organized religions include the idea of reincarnation as an official part of recognized beliefs, and some even condemn the notion. However, belief in reincarnation is found across members of many different religious groups—even those that dismiss it as contrary to their religious teachings. Why do you think so many people believe in an idea that does not necessarily fit with the official views of their religion? What might be so appealing about reincarnation? Compare the notion of reincarnation with the belief that humans have only one life and one death. What are some of the positives and negatives of each belief?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Australian Mythology; Buddhism and Mythology; Hinduism and Mythology

## Remus

*See* **Romulus and Remus.**



### Nationality/Culture

British

### Pronunciation

ROB-in hood

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

British folk ballads, *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*

### Lineage

Unknown

## Robin Hood

### Character Overview

Robin Hood was the legendary bandit of England who stole from the rich to help the poor. The stories about Robin Hood appealed to common folk because he stood up against—and frequently outwitted—people in power. Furthermore, his life in the forest—hunting and feasting with his fellow outlaws, coming to the assistance of those in need—seemed like a great and noble adventure.

The earliest known mention of Robin Hood is in William Langland's 1377 work called *Piers Plowman*, in which a character mentions that he knows "rimes of Robin Hood." This and other references from the late 1300s suggest that Robin Hood was well established as a popular legend by that time. One source of the legend may lie in the old French custom of celebrating May Day. A character called Robin des Bois, or Robin of the Woods, was associated with this

spring festival and may have been transplanted to England—with a slight name change. May Day celebrations in England in the 1400s featured a festival “king” called Robin Hood.

*A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*, a collection of ballads, or songs, about the outlaw Robin Hood, was published in England around 1489. From it and other medieval sources, scholars know that Robin Hood was originally associated with several locations in England. One was Barnsdale, in the northern district called Yorkshire. The other was Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire, where his principal opponent was the vicious and oppressive Sheriff of Nottingham. Robin’s companions included Little John, Alan-a-Dale, Much, and Will Scarlett.

By the 1500s, more elaborate versions of the legend had begun to appear. Some of these suggested that Robin was a nobleman who had fallen into disgrace and had taken to the woods to live with other outlaws. Robin also acquired a girlfriend named Maid Marian and a new companion, a monk called Friar Tuck. His adventures were then definitely linked to Sherwood Forest.

Beginning in the 1700s, various scholars attempted to link Robin Hood with a real-life figure—either a nobleman or an outlaw—but none of their theories has stood up to close examination. Robin was most likely an imaginary character, although some of the tales may have been associated with a real outlaw. Also at about this time, Robin began to be linked with the reigns of King Richard I, “The Lionhearted,” who died in 1189, and King John, who died in 1216. The original medieval ballads, however, contain no references to these kings, or to a particular time in which Robin was supposed to have lived. Later versions of the Robin Hood legend placed more emphasis on his nobility and his romance with Marian than on the cruelty and social tensions that appear in the early ballads.

One of the medieval ballads about Robin Hood involved Sir Guy of Gisborne. Robin and his friend Little John had an argument and parted. While Little John was on his own, the Sheriff of Nottingham captured him and tied him to a tree. Robin ran into Sir Guy, who had sworn to slay the outlaw leader. When they each discovered the other’s identity, they drew their swords and fought. Robin killed Sir Guy and put on his fallen opponent’s clothes. Disguised as Sir Guy, Robin persuaded the sheriff to let him kill Little John, who was still tied to the tree. But instead of slaying Little John, Robin freed him, and the two outlaws drove away the sheriff’s men.

Another old story, known as “Robin Hood and the Monk,” also began with a quarrel between Robin and John. Robin went into Nottingham to attend church, but a monk recognized him and raised the alarm. Robin killed twelve people before he was captured. When word of his capture reached Robin’s comrades in the forest, they planned a rescue. As the monk passed them on his way to tell the king of Robin’s capture, Little John and Much seized and beheaded him. John and Much, in disguise, visited the king in London and then returned to Nottingham bearing documents sealed with the royal seal. The sheriff, not recognizing them, welcomed the two men and treated them to a feast. That night Little John and Much killed Robin’s jailer and set Robin free. By the time the sheriff realized what had happened, the three outlaws were safe in Sherwood Forest.

Robin Hood’s role as the enemy of powerful people and the protector of the poor was clearly illustrated in lines from *A Lytell Geste of Robin Hode*. Robin instructed his followers to do no harm to farmers or countrymen, but to “beat and bind” the bishops and archbishops and never to forget the chief villain, the high sheriff of Nottingham. Some ballads ended with the sheriff’s death; in others, the outlaws merely embarrassed the sheriff and stole his riches. In one ballad, the sheriff was robbed and then forced to dress in outlaw green and dine with Robin and his comrades in the forest. Over time, the image of Robin as a clever, lighthearted prankster gained strength. The tales in which he appeared as a highway robber and murderer were forgotten or rewritten.

Legend says that Robin Hood was wounded in a fight and fled to a convent. The head of the nuns was his cousin, and he begged her for help. She made a cut so that blood could flow from his vein, a common medical practice of the time. Unknown to Robin, however, she was his enemy. She left him without tying up the vein, and he lay bleeding in a locked room. Severely weakened, he sounded three faint blasts on his horn. His friends in the forest heard his cry for help and came to the convent, but they were too late to save him. He shot one last arrow, and they buried him where it landed.

### Robin Hood in Context

The Robin Hood ballads reflect the discontent of ordinary people with political conditions in medieval England. The bulk of the population was

made up of peasants, poor people who gave up much of what they earned in taxes to the rulers of the land. At the time these tales became popular, peasants were especially upset about new laws that kept them from hunting freely in forests that were now claimed as the property of kings and nobles. Social unrest and rebellion swirled throughout England, and this is reflected in the anti-noble, anti-law themes found in the Robin Hood tales. This unrest between peasants and nobles erupted in an event called the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

## Key Themes and Symbols

To audiences the original tales and ballads were aimed at, Robin Hood represents economic justice and fairness. While he is depicted as a thief, he is usually shown to be stealing something that was thought to be unfairly taken in the first place, such as tax money. Robin Hood functions much like a trickster in other mythologies: he is a friend to the downtrodden and often antagonizes or fights against those in authority—in this case, sheriffs and the clergy instead of gods. Robin Hood is usually associated with forests and the color green—known as the color of outlaws—and his ever-present bow and arrow.

## Robin Hood in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In addition to inspiring many books and poems over the centuries, Robin Hood became the subject of several operas, and in modern times, numerous movies. Some notable retellings of the legends of Robin Hood include the 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, starring Errol Flynn in the title role; the 1973 animated Disney adaptation *Robin Hood*; the 1976 film *Robin and Marian*, starring Sean Connery and Audrey Hepburn; and the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, starring Kevin Costner. The character of Robin Hood also made notable appearances in the 1819 Sir Walter Scott novel

*The character of Robin Hood, a legendary English bandit, has appeared in many movies over the years, including the 1938 movie **The Adventures of Robin Hood** in which Errol Flynn played the title character.* WARNER BROS./THE KOBAL COLLECTION/THE PICTURE DESK, INC.



*Ivanhoe*, the 1949 Bugs Bunny cartoon *Rabbit Hood*, and the 1981 Terry Gilliam film *Time Bandits*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Robin Hood was a thief, yet was considered a hero in the many ballads and stories dedicated to him. In modern books, films, and television shows, criminals—especially thieves—often appear as **heroes**, or at least as characters with which the audience is meant to sympathize. Examples of stories with criminals as heroes include the films *Ocean's Eleven* (1960, remade in 2001), *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series. Why do you think criminals are so often portrayed as heroes? What qualities do hero criminals have that real criminals do not? To which social group do hero criminals generally appeal, and why?



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## Roman Mythology

### Roman Mythology in Context

From the founding of the Roman empire to its fall in 476 CE, Rome dominated Europe and much of North Africa, the Near East, and Asia Minor. Although this sprawling empire encompassed many cultures with their own myths and legends, the mythology of the Romans themselves revolved around the founding, history, and **heroes** of the city of Rome. The Romans had developed their own pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses. After they conquered Greece, however, their deities (gods and goddesses) became increasingly associated with the figures of **Greek mythology**.

Although Rome's early history is difficult to separate from the legends that formed around it, the city appears to have begun as a community of central Italian peoples known as Latins. The Latins merged with the Etruscans, who probably came to Italy from Asia Minor before 800 BCE.

Until 510 BCE, Rome was ruled by kings. Then it became a republic governed by elected officials. The Roman republic eventually dominated most of Italy and conquered the North African coast and Greece. By 31



BCE, Rome governed all the lands around the Mediterranean Sea as well as northwest Europe.

The principal sources of information about Roman mythology appeared during the early years of the empire, between about 20 BCE and 20 CE. The poet Virgil produced Rome's national epic, the *Aeneid*, which drew on myths that linked the city's founding with Greek deities and legends. Another poet, Ovid, wrote the *Metamorphoses*, a collection of Near Eastern and Greek myths that the Romans had adopted. Ovid's *Fasti* describes Roman myths about the gods according to the festivals in their calendar. In his history of Rome, Livy portrayed legends about the city's founding as though they were historical events. These and other writers worked to create an "official" Roman mythology, one that gave Rome an ancient, distinguished, and glorious heritage.

## Core Deities and Characters

In their early years, the Romans had many deities and spirits called *numina*, or powers, that were believed to inhabit all of nature. Unlike the Greek deities, the *numina* did not have distinctive, well-defined personalities and characteristics. Few stories about them existed. They were simply the forces that oversaw the activities of daily life. Examples include **Janus** (pronounced JAY-nuhs), god of doorways and archways, and **Terminus** (pronounced TUR-muh-nuhs), god of boundaries. Many early Roman deities were associated with farming, crops, or the land. **Sylvanus** (pronounced sil-VAY-nuhs), for example, was the protector of woodcutters and plowmen. Other early deities represented virtues or qualities, such as **Concordia** (pronounced kon-KOR-dee-uh), goddess of agreement; **Fides** (pronounced FEE-des), goddess of honesty; and **Fortuna** (pronounced for-TOO-nuh), goddess of fate or luck.

Captivated by the elaborate and entertaining myths the Greeks had woven around their gods and goddesses, the Romans gradually changed some of their *numina* into Roman versions of the major Greek deities. The ancient Roman god Saturn, guardian of seeds and planting, became identified with the Titan **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs), who appeared in Greek mythology as the ancestor of the gods. **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee) became Venus, the Roman goddess of love. **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), the king and queen of the Greek gods, became the Roman Jupiter (pronounced JOO-pi-tur) and Juno (pronounced JOO-noh).

## Raising the Sun

One of Rome's most worshipped goddesses received little literary attention. According to legend, Angerona (pronounced an-juh-ROH-nuh) knew a magical spell to raise the sun in midwinter. Her festival occurred on December 21, the shortest day of the year, when she was believed to say the words that would cause the days to lengthen and spring to return. Even more important, Angerona guarded the secret name of the city of Rome. The gods knew this name, but Rome would be doomed if people ever learned it. Statues of Angerona showed her mouth covered with her hands or a gag so that the secret name could not slip out.

Mars, a Roman deity first associated with agriculture, took on the characteristics of **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the Greek god of war, which explains why the Roman version of this god is concerned with both war and farming. Diana, a traditional Roman goddess of the forests, was identified with **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), the Greek goddess of the hunt. Minerva (pronounced mi-NUR-vuh) was the Roman version of **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), Neptune of **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), Vulcan of **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs), Mercury (pronounced MUR-kyoo-ree) of **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez), Ceres (pronounced SEER-eez) of **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), and Bacchus (pronounced BAHK-us) of **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs). **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh), too, was brought into the Roman pantheon, where he was known as both Apollo and Phoebus (pronounced FEE-buhs).

The Romans gave their deities some of the characteristics and even some of the stories associated with the Greek gods and goddesses. They also imported other foreign deities, such as **Cybele** (pronounced SIB-uh-lee) from near Troy in Asia Minor, and the Persian god **Mithras** (pronounced MITH-rahhs). At the same time, in their own homes they continued to worship their traditional household gods, known as the Lares (pronounced LAIR-eez) and Penates (pronounced puh-NAY-teez).

Roman mythology also includes human heroes. Sometimes these mortals became deities. Romulus (pronounced ROM-yuh-luhs), the legendary founder of the city of Rome, was thought to have become the god Quirinus (pronounced kwi-RYE-nuhs). Many emperors were declared

gods by the Roman senate after their deaths, and people worshipped them in temples. The most honored heroes, however, were **Aeneas** (pronounced i-NEE-uhs), **Romulus and Remus**, and others from myths about Rome's beginnings and early history.

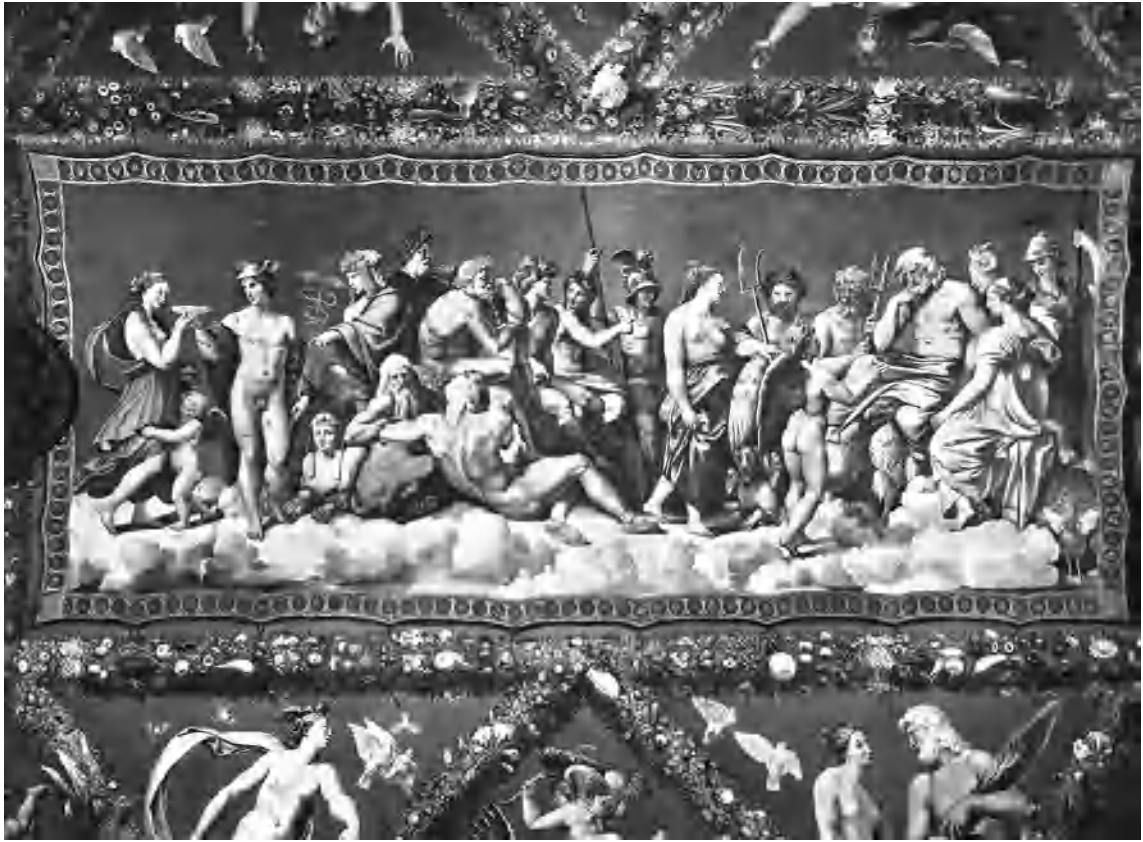
## Major Myths

Romans cherished myths about their city's founding. A myth that probably dates from around 400 BCE told of the **twins** Romulus and Remus, offspring of a Latin princess and the god Mars. Although their uncle tried to drown them, they survived under the care of a she-wolf and a woodpecker. Eventually, the twins overthrew their uncle and decided to found a new city on the spot where they had been rescued by the she-wolf. After receiving an omen—a sign from the gods—about the new city, Romulus killed Remus and became the leader as the gods had intended. Rome took its name from him.

The ditch that Romulus dug to mark the boundary of Rome was called the *pomerium* (pronounced poh-MEHR-ee-uhm). Everything within the pomerium was considered to be part of the original, authentic, sacred Rome. Throughout Rome's long history, the Romans preserved landmarks within the pomerium that they associated with the legend of Romulus and Remus. These included a cave on the Palatine Hill where the wolf was said to have nursed the twins, and a nearby hut where Romulus was said to have lived.

According to legend, Romulus made the new city a refuge for criminals, poor people, and runaway slaves to attract citizens. Because this population lacked women, Romulus invited a neighboring people called the Sabines (pronounced SAY-bines) to a religious festival, and the Romans then kidnapped the Sabine women. Titus Tatius (pronounced TAY-shuhs), king of the Sabines, brought an army to wage war on Rome. By that time, however, the Sabine women had married their Roman captors. At their urging, the men made peace, and until his death, Titus ruled at the side of Romulus.

One myth connected with the war between the Romans and the Sabines reveals that a high-ranking Roman woman named Tarpeia (pronounced tahr-PEE-uh) caught sight of Tatius and fell in love with him. Tarpeia betrayed Rome to the Sabine army, but Tatius slew her for her treachery. The myth became part of the city's geography; a rocky outcropping from which the Romans cast murderers and traitors to their



*This ceiling fresco shows a gathering of the gods of Roman mythology.* ALINARI/ART RESOURCE, NY.

deaths was called the Tarpeian Hill. Other legendary figures from Rome's early history include the virtuous wife Lucretia (pronounced loo-KREE-shuh) and the brave soldier Horatius (pronounced hoh-RAY-shuhs), both of whom appear in tales about the downfall of the monarchy and the founding of the Roman Republic.

By the late years of the Republic, Romans had adopted a powerful new myth about their state's origins. This account is most fully told in the *Aeneid*. It revolves around Aeneas, a Trojan prince who fled from his ruined homeland because the gods told him that he was fated to establish a "new Troy." After wandering around the Mediterranean, Aeneas landed in Italy with some Trojan followers. There he married the daughter of the local Latin king. Aeneas's son Ascanius (pronounced ass-KAN-ee-us) founded a settlement called Alba Longa. This version of Roman

history emphasized the idea that the gods had always meant for Rome to rule the world. Romulus and Remus were the sons of Rhea Silvia, a princess of Alba Longa, and descendants of Aeneas—a perfect example of Roman willingness and ability to piece together different myths.

Myths arose linking many deities with key events in Roman history. The twin wind gods Castor (pronounced KAS-ter) and Pollux (pronounced POL-uhks), together called the *Dioscuri* (pronounced dye-uh-SKYOO-rye), appear in both Greek and Roman mythology as inseparable brothers who form the constellation Gemini (pronounced JEM-uh-nye). In the Roman version, the Dioscuri fought on the side of the Roman army in a battle in the 490s BCE and brought word of the Roman victory back to the city.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The myths and legends about Roman history celebrate the virtues that Romans especially prized: duty, self-sacrifice, honor, bravery, and piety. Roman deities, too, tended to represent virtues, without the all-too-human weaknesses and vices of the Greek gods. A Greek historian named Dionysius of Halicarnassus recognized this difference when he wrote that the Roman deities were more moral than the Greek deities because the Romans had taken only what was good from the old stories and left out all the disgraceful parts.

## Roman Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The influence of Roman mythology extended farther and lasted longer than the Roman empire. Statues, temples, and other structures associated with Roman deities and myths can be found far from the ancient capital. An old mosaic—a picture made from small pieces of rock or tile—found in Britain shows the she-wolf feeding Romulus and Remus. It is a reminder of the days when Rome ruled Britain and a mark of how far Roman mythology spread.

The Renaissance began with a new interest in ancient Greece and Rome. The mythology of these cultures became part of the store of knowledge of well-educated Europeans. Since that time, hundreds of artists, writers, and musical composers have found inspiration in the *Aeneid* and in Rome's heavily mythologized version of its history.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Although many of the deities in Roman mythology are based on Greek gods and goddesses, they are often better known in modern times by their Roman names. For example, the goddess of love is more easily recognized by the name Venus (Roman) than by Aphrodite (Greek). Even Romanized spellings of Greek names are often more popular, such as Hercules (Roman) instead of **Heracles** (Greek). What reasons can you think of to explain this widespread acceptance of Roman names over the original Greek names?

**SEE ALSO** Aeneas; *Aeneid, The*; Aphrodite; Apollo; Ares; Artemis; Castor and Pollux; Cybele; Greek Mythology; Janus; Lares and Penates; Poseidon; Romulus and Remus



# Romulus and Remus

## Nationality/Culture

Roman

## Pronunciation

ROM-yuh-luhs and REE-muhs

## Alternate Names

None

## Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

## Lineage

Sons of Mars and Rhea Silvia

## Character Overview

In **Roman mythology**, Romulus and Remus were the twin sons of the god Mars, and were the founders of the city of Rome. Their mother, Rhea Silvia, was the only daughter of King Numitor (pronounced NOO-muh-tor) of Alba Longa. Numitor's brother Amulius (pronounced uh-MYOO-lee-uhs) seized the throne and kept Rhea Silvia from marrying, since any sons she had would be the rightful heirs to the throne. However, Mars, the god of war, made love to her, and she gave birth to Romulus and Remus.

When Amulius found out about the **twins**, he ordered that they be thrown into the Tiber River to drown. The boys floated downstream, coming ashore near a sacred fig tree. A she-wolf and a woodpecker—creatures sacred to Mars—fed the twins and kept them alive until a shepherd found them. Faustulus (pronounced FAW-stoo-luhs), the shepherd, and his wife raised the boys. They grew up to be brave and bold.

The twins became involved in local conflicts and led a group of youths on raids, including a raid on a herd of cattle that belonged to Numitor. Remus was caught and brought before Numitor. In questioning the young

man, Numitor realized that Remus was his grandson. Shortly afterward, the twins led a revolt against Amulius. They killed him and put Numitor back on the throne.

Afterward, Romulus and Remus wanted to found a city of their own, so they returned to the place where Faustulus had discovered them. A sign from the gods indicated that Romulus was to be the founder of the new city. He marked out the city boundaries and began to build a city wall. When Remus jumped over the unfinished wall, mocking his brother for thinking that it could keep anyone out of the city, Romulus killed him. Romulus became the sole leader of the new city, named Rome.

To populate Rome, Romulus invited people who had fled from nearby areas to live there. However, most of these settlers were men. The city needed women. Romulus invited the Sabine (pronounced SAY-bye-n) people, who lived in neighboring towns, to come to Rome for a great festival. While the Sabine men were enjoying themselves, the Romans seized the Sabine maidens, drove the men from the city, and married their women. The event became known as the “rape of the Sabine women.”

The Sabine men planned revenge and staged several small but unsuccessful raids. Then Titus Tatius (pronounced TAY-shuhs), the Sabine king, led an army against Rome. The Romans were losing the battle when Romulus prayed to Jupiter (pronounced JOO-pi-tur), the king of the gods, for help. At that point, the Sabine women stepped in. They pleaded with the warring men to stop, for they could not bear to see their fathers and husbands killing one another. The two sides agreed to a peace in which the Sabines and Romans formed a union, with Rome as the capital.

Romulus ruled Rome for forty years. He disappeared mysteriously while reviewing his army on the Campus Martius (Field of Mars) in a thunderstorm. Some legends indicate he ascended into the heavens, where he became the god Quirinus (pronounced kwi-RYE-nuhs) and sat alongside Jupiter, the king of the gods.

## Romulus and Remus in Context

The myth of Romulus and Remus reflects the Roman view of their empire as destined by the gods, and the Roman desire to establish a unique cultural identity based on their own origin myths. The transformation

## Romulus and Remus

*According to Roman mythology, Romulus and Remus, twin brothers and the legendary founders of Rome, were kept alive as infants by a mother wolf after their uncle ordered them to be abandoned in the wild.* THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.



of Romulus from a mortal man to a god would be repeated later in Roman history when the Romans declared other human leaders such as Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus to be gods after their deaths. This cultural transformation from “man” to “god” is known as *divination* and strengthened the Roman claims to greatness through the glorification of its leaders.

The myth was also meant to strike fear into the hearts of those who might rebel against the Romans. When Romulus kills Remus after he leaps over the wall, he states that anyone attempting to breach the walls of Rome will suffer the same fate. This is a clear message meant not only to stir up Roman pride, but to warn outsiders against ever attempting to take control of the city.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes in the myth of Romulus and Remus is the unavoidable nature of destiny. Amulius tries to keep Rhea Silvia from having sons, but the god Mars intervenes. Amulius then tries to keep Romulus and Remus away from his kingdom, but fate keeps them alive, and ultimately they lead a revolt against their wicked uncle. Later, Romulus receives a sign from the gods that he alone is to be the founder



of a new city. After his brother insults Romulus by leaping over the wall he builds, Romulus kills his brother and founds the city by himself.

Some scholars have pointed to the killing of Remus by Romulus as being similar to stories in other cultures about twins in which one twin kills the other and creates something from the body of the dead twin. Although Romulus did not actually use the body of Remus in the founding of Rome, it is significant that he killed Remus as Rome is being built, and that the killing involves the city walls. In this way, Remus becomes a sort of **sacrifice** that makes the founding of Rome possible, echoing the theme of sacrifice as being necessary for the advancement of society that is found in other cultures.

### **Romulus and Remus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Romulus and Remus were a popular subject in ancient Roman art, and were often depicted suckling from the she-wolf that raised them for a time. Another subject popular with later painters, including Peter Paul Rubens, Jacques-Louis David, and Pablo Picasso, was the abduction of the Sabine women.

In modern times, the legend of the abduction of the Sabines served as the inspiration for a short story by Stephen Vincent Benét titled “The Sobbin’ Women,” with the setting updated to rural America. This in turn inspired the successful 1954 musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Romulus appears as a mysterious enemy of the superhero Wolverine in the Marvel Comics Universe. Remus and Romulus were also the names given to two planets in the *Star Trek* universe, home to the race of aliens known as Romulans.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The myth of Romulus and Remus embraced by ancient Romans as a proud part of their founding history, is a tale of murder, kidnapping, and war. What do you think this says about ancient Roman culture that they created and embraced such a myth as a fundamental part of Roman identity?

**SEE ALSO** Roman Mythology; Sacrifice; Twins



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# S



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



## Sacrifice

### Theme Overview

Many religious ceremonies have included sacrifice, the act of giving up something of value and offering it to a deity or god. Worshippers may make a sacrifice to win the favor of the deity, to give thanks, or to maintain a good relationship with the god. Myths from around the world contain many examples of sacrifices in which animals, humans, and even gods shed blood or die. Sometimes the sacrifice is linked with creation or with the continuation of life on earth. People also make offerings of precious items, such as flowers, wine, and incense, or a portion of the fruit or grain collected during a harvest.

### Major Myths

Many creation myths involve self-sacrifice by gods or ancient beings. In an early Hindu myth, Purusha (pronounced POOR-uh-shuh) is the primal being who allows himself to be dismembered so that creation can take place. His eye becomes the **sun**, his head the sky, his breath the wind, and so on. Purusha became a symbol of the acts of sacrifice that kept the heavens stable. The mythology of the Aztecs of central Mexico told how two of the gods formed the universe by splitting a goddess in half, so that one part of her became the sky and the other part became the earth. The Aztecs performed large-scale rites of human sacrifice as a

way of repaying the goddess and the other deities for the violence and sacrifice of creation. In **Norse mythology**, **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), the chief of the gods, made a kind of self-sacrifice by hanging on the World Tree **Yggdrasill** (pronounced IG-druh-sil) for nine days to gain magical knowledge. For this reason, the Norse sometimes sacrificed war captives to Odin by hanging them, and Odin became known as the god of the hanged.

Sacrifice is often an act of worship or obedience. In the book of Genesis in the Bible, God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac to the top of a mountain and sacrifice him. Abraham builds an altar and prepares to sacrifice his son when a voice from **heaven** tells him to stop, saying, “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Turning around, Abraham notices a ram caught by its horns in a bush. He releases Isaac and sacrifices the ram instead.

Some myths present sacrifice as a way of setting right the relationship between people and gods. The Kikuyu (pronounced kee-KOO-yoo) people of Kenya in eastern Africa tell of a time when no rain fell for three years. The crops dried up, and the people asked their magician what they should do. After performing a magical ceremony, he told them to bring goats to buy a maiden named Wanjiru. The next day everyone gathered around Wanjiru, who began to sink into the ground. When her family tried to help her, those around gave them goats, so the family let her sink. As Wanjiru sank inch by inch into the ground, rain began to fall. By the time she disappeared into the ground, the rain was pouring down. Afterwards, a young warrior who loved Wanjiru went to the place where she had disappeared. Letting himself sink into the **underworld**, he found Wanjiru, brought her back to the surface, and married her.

Sacrifice may be linked to divination, or foretelling the future. The Druids of ancient Britain sacrificed both animals and humans in the belief that they could read the future in the victims’ dying movements or in the patterns of their intestines. In the story of **Sunjata** (pronounced soon-JAH-tuh), told by the Mandingo people of Mali in West Africa, a king sacrificed a bull in order to fulfill a prophecy, or prediction. A hunter predicted that if the king agreed to marry a hideous young woman, their child would become a great ruler. In Central America, the Mayan Vision Serpent ceremony—held to consult with the dead

and determine the future—including offerings of blood drawn from the king.

## Sacrifice in Context

One type of sacrifice involves the offering of blood or life. According to one theory, the practice of blood sacrifice was based on the belief that life is precious, and therefore valuable to the gods. When freed from an earthly body, it was believed, life returned to its sacred source. In ancient Rome, a person performing a sacrifice said to the god, “Be thou increased by this offering.” The idea behind this type of sacrifice was not pain, suffering, or death. Rather, life was being returned to the divine world so that the gods, in turn, would continue to give life to the human world.

Other theories provide different explanations for blood sacrifice. One suggests that it began as a form of magic. Another says that sacrifice may have been viewed as a symbolic meal that the community shared with its deity, or as a reenactment of creation myths. Still another theory claims that sacrifice may have been seen as a way of focusing and controlling aggression within the community.

Hunting peoples generally sacrificed game animals, while herding and farming peoples used domestic animals, such as sheep, goats, chickens, and cattle. Certain types of animals were regarded as the most appropriate sacrifices for particular purposes or for particular deities. Dark-colored animals, for example, might be offered to deities of the underworld (land of the dead), while an all-white animal might be seen as the best gift for a sky god.

The sacrifice of humans has occurred in many parts of the world. There is also evidence that in some communities animals were eventually substituted for human victims. The method of slaughter generally involved either blood (flowing freely or offered in a ceremonial vessel), **fire** (to carry the sacrifice to the god), or both. Sometimes, however, the person to be sacrificed was strangled, hanged, or drowned.

A special person, such as a ruler, priest, head of household, or older member of the community, usually supervised or carried out the sacrifice. The sacrifice was made in front of a group—it was too important an act to be performed privately. Special rituals, such as ceremonial bathing or fasting, often accompanied the sacrifice. The sacrificial offering might be placed on an altar or before a statue of a deity or burned in a sacred fire so that the smoke would carry its scent to the heavens.

## Sacrifice in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The theme of sacrifice is found throughout the art and literature of many cultures. The actual physical sacrifice of another living thing, however, is somewhat less common in modern art and literature. The short story “The Lottery” (1948) by Shirley Jackson is perhaps one of the best modern examples of mythic sacrifice in literature. Another example is the sacrifice of Aslan, the lion lord in the C. S. Lewis novel *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950); this was also featured in the 2005 film adaptation of the novel. Mayan sacrifice is depicted in the 2006 Darren Aronofsky film *The Fountain*, starring Hugh Jackman as a Spanish conquistador.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea of human sacrifice is based on the notion that the death of one—or a few—will result in better conditions for the rest of those living. In other words, the tragedy of the death(s) is outweighed by the greater good accomplished for society. Do you think this is a valid reason? Why or why not? What about those who willingly risk their lives for the good of society, such as police officers and soldiers?

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Mythology; Odin; Sunjata; Yggdrasil

## Santa Claus

*See* **Nicholas, St.**

### Nationality/Culture

Judeo-Christian

### Pronunciation

SAYT-n

### Alternate Names

Shaitan, Iblis (Islamic), Lucifer, Beelzebub, the Devil

### Appears In

The Old Testament

### Lineage

None



## Satan

### Character Overview

The Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religions are monotheistic faiths, which means their followers believe in the existence of only one god. That god has a powerful opponent known as Satan, or the Devil. As the three religions developed, Satan’s role changed over time. At first, he was a creature under God’s control with the task of testing people’s faith. In

time, however, Satan came to be seen as the prince of darkness, ruler of all evil spirits, enemy of both God and humankind, and source of treachery and wickedness.

Jewish and Christian traditions both offer similar explanations for the Devil's origin. Because God would not create a being of pure evil, Satan was originally an archangel, one of God's most divine or blessed creations. His name is given sometimes as Samael but more often as Lucifer (pronounced LOOS-i-fur), a bright angel called "son of the morning."

Some accounts say that God cast the archangel out of **heaven** because he would not honor Adam, the first man created by God. When the jealous archangel refused to acknowledge "a lowly thing made of dirt," God punished his pride by throwing him down into **hell**. There, as Satan, the fallen archangel ruled over a kingdom of devils, former **angels** who had followed him in his fall.

In Islamic tradition, Satan is known as Shaitan or Iblis (pronounced IB-liss). Like the Jewish and Christian Satan, he is a fallen angel who was punished for refusing to bow down before Adam. But Allah permits Iblis to tempt humans to test their faith.

Other versions of the archangel's fall say that he was thrown out of heaven because of his pride—he dared to compete with God's glory. According to a Hebrew myth, on the third day of creation, Lucifer walked in the Garden of **Eden** covered with brilliant, glittering jewels set in gold. He had become so filled with pride that he planned to rise above the heavens and become God's equal. God cast Satan down, and his glory turned to darkness and ashes.

Christian legends frequently depict Satan as a tempter who tries to lure the faithful into abandoning their faith. Stories such as the legend of Faust show people making bargains with the Devil. They generally give their souls—for which he is always hungry—in exchange for a gift, such as wealth, love, or power. Such bargains always end in terror and despair, unless God steps in to save the poor sinner's soul from Satan.

## Satan in Context

The name *Satan* comes from a Hebrew word meaning "adversary." It first appears in the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. In the book of **Job**, God allows this adversary—sometimes called Samael (pronounced SAH-mah-el) in Jewish literature—to heap misfortunes on Job (pronounced

JOHB) to see whether Job will turn against God. Judaism was influenced by earlier Persian religion, in which good and evil struggle with each other for control of the universe and for power over human hearts and minds. The Jewish Satan took on some characteristics of **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), the Persian god of evil and ruler of demons.

After about 300 BCE, Satan came to be seen as God's enemy, the source and center of all evil in the world. The serpent that tempted **Adam and Eve** in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, was identified with Satan. Since that time, artists and writers have often portrayed Satan as a snake or dragon, or as a monstrous combination of man and dragon. By the time the books of the Bible known as the New Testament were written, Satan's role as the Devil was well established among Christians.

Satan as a mythological character reflects a tendency among many cultures to view the living world as a battleground between the forces of good and the forces of evil. For cultures where belief in a single, all-powerful and loving God prevails, the character of Satan provides an explanation for the existence of death, disease, and misfortune. The idea of Satan has also been used to silence arguments against church doctrine, or accepted teachings. Those who disagree or fail to worship properly were often accused of being agents of Satan, and were punished as heretics (those who believe differently) for their betrayal of God.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As the ruler of Hell, an **underworld** kingdom of darkness and **fire** in which sinners are tormented, Satan is sometimes called the "prince of darkness." The Bible describes him as a "roaring lion" but he is also associated with several other animals, including frogs, **dragons**, and goats. Popular culture frequently portrays him as looking similar to a mythological satyr, with the lower body of a goat, and the upper body resembling that of a human, except for a pair of horns that come out of his head. The animal with which Satan is most often linked is the snake, an association that stems from the belief that Satan was the snake in the Garden of Eden that first tempted mankind to sin. The snake represents the cunning of Satan, who uses the thoughts of humans to tempt them away from serving God rather than attempt to overtake them by force.

The myth of Satan, in its various forms, usually focuses on the idea of temptation as a way to lure people from righteousness. This is





*Satan, also known as the Devil, is the powerful enemy of God in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions. His domain is hell, where he tortures the souls of the damned.* PUBLIC DOMAIN.

illustrated in the myth of the Garden of Eden when Satan, disguised as a snake, tempts Eve to violate the rules God has imposed. It can also be seen in the many myths involving a “deal with the devil,” in which a person is enticed into giving up their soul for something they desire.

### **Satan in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

One of the best-known and most influential literary portraits of Satan can be found in *Paradise Lost*, an epic by the English poet John Milton published in 1667. Satan also appears in Dante’s *Inferno* (1321), frozen in the bottom circle of Hell. Other popular depictions of Satan can be found in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (1604), the best-known version of the “make a deal with the devil” story, and the short story “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1937) by Stephen Vincent Benét.

In modern times, Satan has also appeared as a character in numerous films and television shows. Notable examples include the 1967 comedy *Bedazzled*, and its 2000 remake in which Satan is played by model-turned-actress Elizabeth Hurley. Other notable supporting appearances by Satan include the 2000 Adam Sandler comedy *Little Nicky*, in which the demon is portrayed by Harvey Keitel, and the 2007 television series *Reaper*, in which Ray Wise assumes the role of Satan as he looks to reclaim souls that have escaped from hell.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The United States was first referred to as “the Great Satan” in 1979 by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic government of Iran. Since then, the term has been used by many groups and leaders throughout the Middle East to describe the United States. Why do you think so many people believe the United States deserves this label?

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; Ahriman; Angels; Devils and Demons; Heaven; Hell; Job; Persian Mythology; Semitic Mythology; Serpents and Snakes



### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

SAY-turz

### Alternate Names

Panes, Seilenoi, Tityroi, Fauns (Roman)

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Nonnus's *Dionysiaca*

### Lineage

Sons of the Hekaterides

# Satyrs

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, satyrs were half-man, half-beast creatures that lived in forests and hills. Usually pictured as human above the waist and as horse or goat below the waist, satyrs had pointed ears or horns on their heads.

According to some sources, satyrs were the children of goats and mountain **nymphs**, or female nature deities who lived in the mountains. They were sometimes described as the sons of the Hekaterides (pronounced hek-uh-tee-RYE-deez), five nymphs associated with a dance popular in rural areas. However, the Greek poet Hesiod identifies satyrs as brothers of the nymphs, while also calling them “good-for-nothing” and “mischievous.” Followers of **Dionysus** (pronounced dye-uh-NYE-suhs), the god of wine and ecstasy, satyrs had a reputation for drunkenness and bad behavior.



*Satyrs were half-man, half-beast creatures that were symbols of fertility and known for being mischievous.*

PRIVATE COLLECTION/THE STAPLETON COLLECTION/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

There are different categories of satyrs. Panes (pronounced PAN-eez) are satyrs with the legs of goats and are usually considered to be embodiments of the god **Pan**. Though they do not differ dramatically in appearance from satyrs, they are sometimes considered to be separate from satyrs. The Seilenoi (pronounced SAY-luh-noy) are elderly satyrs with white hair and fat bellies, usually found in the company of Dionysus and skilled in the art of winemaking. The Tityroi (pronounced TI-tuh-roy) are satyrs who play a musical instrument called a

shepherd's pipe. They may have been local to the island of Crete (pronounced KREET).

### Satyrs in Context

Satyrs reflect two ideal views of life in ancient Greek tradition. The life of a satyr—with its constant drunkenness, passion, and pursuit of women—would be considered Dionysian (named after Dionysus), while a life of restraint, logic, and law would be considered Apollonian (named after Apollo). The Greeks did not view these as separate philosophies, but as equally necessary parts of a fulfilling life. A life lived solely according to one ideal and not the other was not considered successful, at least for humans.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Satyrs were considered symbols of fertility, and were frequently portrayed chasing nymphs. Just as nymphs represented the most feminine qualities of women, satyrs represented the rough-edged, crude, and boisterous aspect of men, especially those from rural areas. Their animal characteristics—horns, furry ears, hooved legs—symbolize both their closeness with nature and their basest animal desires for food and sex.

### Satyrs in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Satyrs were popular figures in ancient Greece, especially among people in rural areas. During the festival of Dionysus in ancient Athens, plays featuring a chorus of boisterous satyrs were performed along with the usual tragedies. More recently, fauns and satyrs have appeared in many works of literature and films. The character of Tumnus in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) is described as being a faun, and Grover Underwood, from the series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* by Rick Riordan, is a satyr. In film, satyrs appear in the Disney animated film *Hercules* (1997). Even today, satyrs are still remembered for their lewd antics: the medical condition defined as excessive sexual thoughts or behavior in men is known as satyriasis (pronounced say-tur-EYE-uh-sis).

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Satyrs in ancient times were associated with sex, wine, and music—the ancient equivalent of “sex, drugs, and rock and roll.” In what ways do

satyrs resemble modern “party people”? Is the other ideal in Greek society—the restrained intellectual life—also represented in contemporary society? On which ideal do you think modern society places more value?

SEE ALSO Dionysus; Pan



## Sedna

### Character Overview

The Inuit (pronounced IN-yoo-it) are the indigenous, or native, people of northern Canada, Alaska, and Greenland. In Inuit mythology, the goddess Sedna rules the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and the creatures of the sea. Myths about Sedna explain the origin of sea creatures and reflect the harsh environment of the Arctic. Because she provides the animals used for food, Sedna is the most important Inuit deity (god or goddess). Sedna is the daughter of the Inuit creator god Anguta.

### Major Myths

According to one myth, Sedna was a child with an enormous appetite who tried to eat her father Anguta’s arm while he was asleep. When he awoke, her father put Sedna in a boat and took her out to sea. He tried to throw her overboard, but she clung tightly to the side of the boat. Her father then chopped off her fingers one joint at a time. As the pieces of Sedna’s fingers fell into the water, they turned into whales, seals, and sea lions. When all her fingers were gone, she sank to the bottom of the sea, where she guards the spirits of the dead.

In another version of the story, Sedna was a young woman who refused all the suitors who sought her hand. Then, a seabird disguised as a handsome man visited her and promised that if she married him she would live in luxury for the rest of her days. Against her father’s wishes, Sedna married the bird. She soon found out, however, that the bird’s promises had been lies. She led an unhappy existence in a flimsy shelter with only raw fish to eat.

When her father came to visit, Sedna asked him to take her home. Her father killed her husband and set off in his boat with Sedna.

#### Nationality/Culture

Inuit

#### Pronunciation

SAYD-nuh

#### Alternate Names

Sea Woman

#### Appears In

Inuit oral mythology

#### Lineage

Daughter of Anguta

However, the other birds stirred up a raging storm on the water. To calm the sea, Sedna's father threw her overboard as an offering to the birds. As in the other tale, she hung on until he cut off her fingers. In some versions of the story, Sedna's father hauled her back into the boat. Angered by her father's cruelty, she had her dogs try to eat him while he slept. When her father awoke, he cursed himself, Sedna, and her dogs. The ground opened up and swallowed them all, and Sedna became goddess of the underworld.

### Sedna in Context

The stories of Sedna reflect the harsh way of life of the Inuit people. Because the Inuit live in the Arctic, an area that is nearly always covered with ice, snow, or frozen soil, they cannot grow crops. Likewise, wild vegetation is scarce, which means the Inuit rely almost entirely on fishing and hunting to provide everything they need to live, including food, clothing, heat, and material for tools or weapons. Because of this, killing animals is an everyday task for the Inuit. It makes sense that these acts would also appear as paths to creation in Inuit mythology.

The Inuit believed that Sedna caused the animals to go away as a sign of her displeasure when social rules regarding birth, death, or hunting were broken. The return of the animals required the intervention of the shaman, or religious leader of the group, who had the ability to communicate with Sedna. The connection between good hunting and good behavior ensured that social order was maintained in Inuit society.

### Key Themes and Symbols

A central theme in the myths of Sedna is disrespect for parents or elders. In the first tale, Sedna was disrespectful to her father when she tried to eat his arm to satisfy her overwhelming hunger. In the second, Sedna again showed disrespect for her father by going against his wishes and marrying the deceitful bird. The theme of **sacrifice** is also present, as when Sedna's father threw her overboard in an attempt to appease the bird-gods. Sedna can also be seen as a sacrifice for the good of the people, since her severed fingers provided the sea animals they needed for food and clothing.

### Sedna in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though Sedna plays an important part in daily Inuit life, she is not well known outside Inuit culture. She did appear in the Canadian children's

cartoon series *Inuk* (2001) as the enemy of an Inuit boy who gains the ability to talk to animals. The goddess has also lent her name to the planetoid 90377 Sedna, one of the largest objects in our solar system, found beyond the orbit of the planet Neptune.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the habitat and culture of the Inuit people. How does their culture help them to survive in their environment? How and why have their living conditions changed over the centuries? Do you think their myths reflect their history and daily life? If so, how?

SEE ALSO Native American Mythology; Underworld



## Seers

### Theme Overview

People who claimed special knowledge of the divine or supernatural realms have appeared in many myths, legends, folktales, and religious traditions. Those known as seers could see things hidden from others. They had the ability to predict the future or speak for the gods. Others with similar magical gifts have been called diviners, oracles, prophets, and shamans. They are said to have received special wisdom, power, or understanding from gods or spirits, and they have generally had a significant role in religion.

### Major Myths

Several seers mentioned in Greek myths were associated with **Apollo**. Mopsus (pronounced MOP-sus), a seer who took part in the quest for the **Golden Fleece**, was sometimes said to be a son of Apollo. The seer **Laocoön** (pronounced lay-OK-oh-ahn) was a priest of Apollo until he broke his vow by fathering children. He tried to warn the Trojans against accepting a gift—a giant wooden horse—given to them by their enemies, the Greeks, but the Trojans refused to listen to him. They brought the

horse inside the city walls, and during the night, Greek soldiers hidden inside it overtook the city. Another Trojan, the princess **Cassandra** (pronounced kuh-SAN-druh), was given the ability to see the future by Apollo, who loved her; however, when she rejected the god, she was cursed so that no one would ever believe her prophecies. Although she predicted all the tragic events of the Trojan War, her family and friends believed her to be insane.

The best-known seer of **Greek mythology** was the blind prophet Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-uhs). Several tales account for his blindness. One claims that he was struck blind as a boy when he saw the goddess **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh) bathing. Later, Athena felt sorry for Tiresias but could not restore his sight. Instead, she gave him the gift of prophecy and the ability to understand the language of the birds. In another myth, Tiresias came across two snakes mating. He killed the female snake and was transformed into a woman. Seven years later, he again saw two mating snakes; this time he killed the male snake and became a man. Because he had been both a man and a woman, **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods, and his wife **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) asked him to settle an argument: Which of the sexes enjoys love more? When Tiresias replied that man gives more pleasure than he receives, Hera struck him blind. To make up for this deed, Zeus gave Tiresias the ability to foresee the future and allowed him to live an extraordinarily long life.

The Druids, priests of an ancient Celtic religion, were said to be seers and magicians. Like the prophets of the ancient Near East, they sometimes held political power as advisers to rulers. The Druid Cathbad (pronounced KAH-bah), who advised King Conchobhar (pronounced KON-kvar) of Ulster in Ireland, foresaw the destruction of the kingdom. Druidic ceremonies of divination included human and animal **sacrifice**.

In **Norse mythology**, the seer **Mimir** (pronounced MEE-mir) guarded a sacred spring located at one of the three roots of the World Tree, **Yggdrasil** (pronounced IG-druh-sil). **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) gained magical knowledge by drinking from the spring, but he had to pay for it by giving one of his eyes to Mimir. The Norse goddess **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh) was also a seer. She introduced the gods to the type of divination called *seid*, which involved going into a trance and answering questions about the future.

The ceremonies described in Norse myths are similar to some of the rituals performed by traditional Siberian and Native American shamans.





*A shaman's rattle. Native American shamans had magical powers similar to those of seers, only shamans used their powers primarily for healing rather than for predicting the future.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Shamans were believed to have the power to communicate with or travel to the spirit world. Generally, they did so for the purpose of healing rather than for predicting the future. Sometimes spirits spoke through shamans. According to the Haida (pronounced HYE-duh) of the Pacific Northwest, the spirit known as Lagua spoke through a shaman and taught the Haida how to use iron.

Hindu mythology includes many wise and holy men called seers or sages. They possess great spiritual power as a result of living pure and simple lives. A few seers are considered demigods—half human, half god—born from the thoughts of the god **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh). Often, Hindu wise men are the teachers of kings or **heroes**. Although generally virtuous, some display pride or anger. One myth tells of Vishvamitra (pronounced vish-VAH-mi-truh), a proud seer whose standards were so high and whose demands were so great that he destroyed his king.

## Seers in Context

Seers have used various techniques of divination, or trying to foretell the future. In the ancient world, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek seers often relied on the interpretation of dreams to predict the future, believing dreams to be messages or warnings from the gods. Seers and diviners also explained the significance of events thought to be omens, or messages from the gods. Oracles, such as the famous oracle of Apollo (pronounced uh-POL-oh) at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye) in ancient Greece, were often associated with a particular temple or shrine. They asked questions of the gods on behalf of worshippers or pilgrims and then gave the gods' answers.

Some seers, claiming to be divinely inspired, spoke on a wide range of issues. In the ancient Near East, prophets and diviners frequently became involved in politics. Hebrew prophets such as Samuel, **Elijah**, and Amos did not merely foretell the future, they also criticized religious practices and social conditions they believed were wrong.

## Seers in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Seers have endured as characters in myths and stories in nearly every culture around the world. Perhaps the most well-known seer in modern times remains Nostradamus, a real-life chemist who published books filled with predictions in the sixteenth century. Seers usually appear in popular culture as fortune-tellers: In the 1985 film *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, for example, the main character embarks on a journey to find a stolen bicycle using the words of a fortune-teller as his only guide. Several self-proclaimed modern seers and psychics have gained fame by touting their abilities to speak with the dead; they claim to use this supernatural connection to gain secret information and predict future events.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Seers were popular before the rise of science. In modern societies, has science eclipsed the role of seers totally, or do you think there are still areas of the unknown that justify the role of seers? What might those areas be, and why would a seer, rather than a scientist, be able to access them?

**SEE ALSO** Cassandra; Delphi; Freyja; Laocoön; Mimir



# Semitic Mythology

## Semitic Mythology in Context

Semitic mythology arose among several cultures that flourished in the ancient Near East, a region that extended from Mesopotamia (pronounced mess-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh) in modern Iraq to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. These groups of people spoke Semitic languages, had similar religions, and worshipped related deities (gods and goddesses). Three major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—grew out of Semitic traditions. Semitic peoples shared many of the same myths and legends. Among their major gods and goddesses were those responsible for creation, fertility, death, and the **afterlife**. The names of the deities varied slightly from culture to culture.

Between about 3000 and 300 BCE, ancient Mesopotamia was home to a series of civilizations, beginning with the Sumerians, who built the first city-states. The Sumerians lived in the southern part of the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. They were followed by the Akkadians (pronounced uh-KAY-dee-uhnz), who settled to the north, the Babylonians (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhnz), and the Assyrians (pronounced uh-SEER-ee-uhnz). Later, Sumer and Akkad became known as Babylonia. The Assyrians settled even farther north along the Tigris.

The Sumerians did not speak a Semitic language. However, the Akkadians and other Semitic peoples who later rose to power in Mesopotamia adopted many parts of Sumerian culture, mythology, and religion. This Sumerian influence shaped thinking and storytelling in the region for thousands of years.

The Canaanites were Semitic peoples who occupied the lands along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Canaanite culture flourished in the city of Ugarit, on the Syrian coast, between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Their culture was continued by the Phoenicians, who settled south of Ugarit and later established a colony at Carthage, in what is now Tunisia.

The ancient Israelites were a Semitic people who settled in Canaan. In time, they established the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, where the modern nation of Israel is today. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians gained control of the kingdom of Israel. The Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE,

destroying the city of Jerusalem and removing its inhabitants to Babylon for some years. Eventually the people of Judah came to be known as Jews.

## Core Deities and Characters

Many of the gods found in Semitic mythology are known by several names. Over time, the Sumerian goddess Inanna (pronounced ee-NAH-nah) became known by her Akkadian name, **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr). Dumuzi (pronounced DOO-moo-zee), Inanna's husband, also acquired other names; the people of early Israel called him Tammuz (pronounced TAH-mooz). Although there was significant overlap with main figures such as these, different Semitic cultures also had unique gods and goddesses.

**Mesopotamian Deities** All Mesopotamian peoples honored a fertility goddess, such as Inanna or Ishtar. They also recognized three creator gods, called An, Enlil (pronounced EN-lil), and Enki (pronounced EN-kee) by the Sumerians, and Anu (pronounced AH-noo), Enlil, and Ea (pronounced AY-ah) by the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. An was the chief of the gods. Enlil was a god of wind and land who could be destructive, and Enki was usually associated with water, wisdom, and the arts of civilization. The moon god, known as Sin or Nanna, appeared in a myth in which demons tried to devour him. The powerful god **Marduk** (pronounced MAHR-dook) stopped the demons before they could finish the job. The moon god grew to his former size and repeated that growth every month, marking the passage of time.

Mythology was closely interwoven with political power in ancient Mesopotamia. Monarchs were believed to rule by the will of the gods and were responsible for maintaining good relations between the heavenly world and their kingdoms. Each of the early city-states had one of the deities of the pantheon—the collection of recognized gods and goddesses—as its patron, who was worshipped by the people and viewed as a protector. The importance of the deity rose and fell with the fortunes of its city. A main theme of *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation epic, is the rise of Marduk, the god associated with Babylon. Marduk became a leader of the gods, just as Babylon rose to power in the region.

**Canaanite Deities** The chief of the Ugaritic pantheon was **El**, the father of the gods, who was generally portrayed as a wise old man. **Baal**

(pronounced BAY-uhl), an active and powerful deity, was associated with fertility and sometimes identified with the storm god Adad. Asherah (pronounced ASH-er-ah), the mother of the gods, was the wife of El.

**Jewish Deities and Characters** Over the years the Jews produced sacred books, some of which form the Tanach (pronounced tah-NAHK), a set of documents known to Christians as the Old Testament of the Bible. These books include myths and legends about the history of the early Israelites, as well as information about their religious beliefs. Traditional Jewish stories were influenced by ancient Semitic mythology. Connections are clearly seen in such stories as the fight between **Cain and Abel** and the great flood survived by **Noah** in his ark. In the same way, the story of creation in the book of Genesis in the Old Testament contains parallels to Mesopotamian myths about how Marduk organized the universe. One major difference between Jewish tradition and earlier Semitic mythology, however, is that Judaism was and is monotheistic: instead of a pantheon of deities, it referred to a single, all-powerful deity, sometimes called Yahweh.

## Major Myths

Since so many different cultural traditions are grouped together under the banner of Semitic mythology, the various myths are best presented in groups according to their cultural origins.

**Sumerian Myths** One of the central Sumerian myths, the story of Inanna and Dumuzi, shows how part of the ancient mythology survived in later cultures. Inanna, goddess of light, life, and fertility, was ready to choose a husband. Two men wanted to marry her—Enkimdu (pronounced EHN-keem-doo), a farmer, and Dumuzi, a shepherd. Inanna leaned toward Enkimdu, but Dumuzi told her that his flocks and herds of livestock could produce more wealth than could Enkimdu's fields. The rivals competed for Inanna's hand until Enkimdu withdrew. Enkimdu then allowed Dumuzi to graze his flocks on his land, and in turn Dumuzi invited Enkimdu to attend his wedding to the goddess. The rivalry between the farmer and the herder in this myth is echoed in the Jewish story of Cain and Abel. Some historians of mythology believe that such tales grew out of ancient social tensions between settled agricultural communities and roving groups of livestock herders.

## Semitic Mythology

*Ishtar was the Akkadian name for the Sumerian goddess Inanna, a central figure in Semitic mythology.* ASSYRIAN SCHOOL/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.



One widespread story about Inanna and Dumuzi says that Inanna descended into the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and became a corpse there. The gods managed to restore her to life, but Dumuzi had to go to the underworld as her substitute. He came to be seen as a god of vegetation who had to die and be reborn each year. Many later myths about dying gods, including that of **Adonis** (pronounced uh-DON-is) in **Greek mythology**, resemble the story of Inanna and Dumuzi.

Another basic Semitic myth that came from Sumer is the story of a flood that covered the earth after humans angered the gods. Warned by

the gods (or God) to build a boat, one righteous man—such as Noah—and his family survived the flood to give humankind a new start.

**Mesopotamian Myths** The myths of the Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians depicted a world full of mysterious spiritual powers that could threaten humans. People dreaded demons and ghosts and used magical spells for protection against them. They worshipped a pantheon of a dozen or so major deities and many other minor gods.

The best-known Mesopotamian myth is the Babylonian epic of **Gilgamesh** (pronounced GIL-guh-mesh). It is the story of a hero king's search for immortality, or the ability to live forever. A bold and brave warrior, Gilgamesh performed many extraordinary feats during his journey. Although he failed to obtain his goal—the secret of eternal life—he gained greater wisdom about how to make his life meaningful.

Another legend that deals with the question of why humans die is the myth of Adapa, the first human being. The water god Ea formed Adapa out of mud. Although Adapa was mortal, Ea's touch gave him divine strength and wisdom. One day, when Adapa was fishing, the wind overturned his boat. Adapa cursed the wind. According to one version of the story, the wind was in the form of a bird, and Adapa tore off its wings. The high god Anu called Adapa to **heaven** to explain his actions. Adapa asked his father, Ea, for advice on how to act in heaven. Ea told him to wear mourning clothes, to be humble, and to refuse food and drink because they would kill him. So when Anu offered food, Adapa declined it. Unfortunately, Ea's advice had been mistaken. The food Adapa rejected was the food of immortality that would have allowed human beings to live forever. Adapa's choice meant that all men and women must die.

Marduk appears in a Babylonian myth about Zu, a bird god from the underworld. A frequent enemy of the other gods, Zu stole the tablets that gave Enlil control over the universe. When the high god Anu asked for a volunteer to attack Zu, several gods refused because of Zu's new power. Finally, Marduk took on Zu, defeated him, and recovered the tablets. This restored the universe to its proper order.

**Canaanite Myths** Baal appears in a set of Ugaritic myths called the Baal cycle. These stories describe Baal's rise to power and the challenges he faced from other deities and powerful forces. An underlying theme of the Baal cycle is the tension between the old god El and the young and

## The Invisible Queen

To the ancient Mesopotamians, light and darkness, life and death, were two halves of a whole. Inanna, the goddess of heaven, ruled the living world, and her sister Ereshkigal (pronounced ay-RESH-kee-gahl), or darkness, was queen of the dead. Neither sister could exist without the other; together they made existence complete. But while Inanna lived in the world that could be seen by humans, Ereshkigal was invisible. Mesopotamian artists never portrayed Ereshkigal directly, but they did create images of the monsters and demons that Ereshkigal sent to trouble the living.

vigorous Baal. Although El remained supreme, Baal became a king among the gods. He defeated Yam, also called **Leviathan** (pronounced luh-VYE-uh-thuhn), who represented the destructive force of nature and was associated with the sea or with **floods**. Baal also had to make peace with his sister Anat, a goddess of fertility, who conducted a bloody **sacrifice** of warriors. Finally, Baal and Anat went to the underworld to confront Mot, the god of death. El presided over the battle between Baal and Mot. Neither god won.

Other Ugaritic myths deal with legendary kings. Although these tales may have some basis in historical fact, the details are lost. One legend told the story of King Keret, who longed for a son. In a dream, El told Keret to take the princess of a neighboring kingdom as his wife. Promising to honor Anat and Ashera, the king did so, and his new wife bore seven sons and a daughter. However, Keret became ill and neglected the worship of the goddesses. Only a special ceremony to Baal could restore the king's health and the health of the kingdom. This myth illustrates the Semitic belief that the gods sent good or ill fortune to the people through the king.

**Jewish and Christian Myths** As Judaism developed over the centuries, new stories, sacred books, and commentary emerged to expand on the ancient texts. The term *midrash* refers to this large body of Jewish sacred literature, including a vast number of myths, legends, fables, and stories that date from the medieval era or earlier. These narratives are called the Haggadah (pronounced huh-GAH-duh), or “telling,” and they are cherished as both instruction and entertainment.



Sometimes the Haggadah fills in the gaps that exist in older narratives. For example, Genesis contains an account of how Cain murdered Abel. The Haggadah adds the information that no one knew what to do with Abel's body, for his was the first death that humans had witnessed. Adam, the father of Cain and Abel, saw a raven dig a hole in the ground and bury a dead bird, and he decided to bury Abel in the same way.

Jewish tradition influenced Christianity, a monotheistic faith that began as an offshoot of Judaism. The two religions share many sacred stories and texts. The Tanach, especially the books of Genesis and Exodus, contains stories that are part of Christianity—God's creation of the earth, **Adam and Eve** in the Garden of **Eden**, Noah and the flood, and Moses and the Exodus. However, the New Testament of the Bible, which deals with the life and works of Jesus, is unique to Christianity.

**Islamic Myths** Like Christianity, Islam is a monotheistic Semitic faith that developed from Jewish traditions. Islam dates from 622 CE, when an Arab named Muhammad declared himself to be the prophet of God, or Allah (pronounced ah-LAH). Islamic tradition recognizes Abraham, Noah, Moses, and other ancient figures of Judaism as earlier prophets. Muslims, followers of Islam, also believe that Jesus was a prophet.

The word of Allah as made known to Muhammad is contained in the Islamic sacred text, the Qur'an or Koran. As time passed, Muslim scholars and teachers all over the Islamic world added more information about Muhammad and his followers, as well as interpretations of Islamic law and the sayings of the prophet. They incorporated elements of Semitic, Persian, and Greek mythology or stories about Muhammad, his family, and other key figures in Islamic history.

Although such storytelling was not officially part of Islam—and was sometimes vigorously discouraged by Islamic authorities—it appealed to many Muslims. As Islam spread to new areas, local traditions and legends became mingled with the basic Islamic beliefs. In Pakistan, for example, folk tales about girls dying of love came to be seen as symbols of souls longing to be united with Allah.

Many of the legends surrounding Muhammad credit him with miraculous events. Some tales say that Muhammad cast no shadow, or that when he was about to eat poisoned meat, the food itself warned him not to taste it. According to legend, the angel Gabriel guided Muhammad, who rode a winged horse called Buraq or Borak, on a mystical journey through heaven, where he met the other prophets.

Similarly, historical figures who founded mystical Islamic brotherhoods came to be associated with stories of miracles, such as riding on lions and curing the sick. In some cases, these legends have elements of traditional myths about pre-Islamic deities or **heroes**. Romantic tales about Alexander the Great may have colored some of the tales about Khir, an Islamic mythical figure and the patron of travelers, who is said to have been a companion of Moses.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Common themes of Semitic myths include creation, great floods, and heroes who overcome challenges. The body often appears as a symbol of the divine. In the ancient Babylonian myth of **Tiamat**, the goddess's body is used to create the heavens and the earth; in some Christian traditions, the body and blood of Jesus is symbolically consumed as a way to purify oneself. The flood that appears as a recurring theme in several cultures symbolizes a cleansing of humankind, or a purging of those unworthy in the eyes of the gods. Heroes in Semitic mythology are often celebrated for their ability to be like the gods or for their drive to become like the gods. Some themes, such as the death and rebirth of fertility deities, were rooted in the agricultural way of life of these Near Eastern peoples and represented the seasons of the year.

### Semitic Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Semitic mythology survives in modern times largely through its variations in modern Christian, Jewish, and Islamic beliefs. Tales like the Garden of Eden and Noah and the flood are familiar to people in many different cultures around the world. These tales have also been the inspiration for some of the greatest works of art ever created by artists such as Michelangelo, Hieronymus Bosch, and Albrecht Dürer.

Many specific characters from Semitic mythology are also still found in modern culture, though some came to be viewed differently over the centuries. Baal, now widely known as a demonic figure, appeared in the 1978 Robert R. McCammon horror novel of the same name. Marduk appeared as a character within another character's body in an episode of the animated television series *Sealab 2021* (2002). Perhaps the most enduring character is Gilgamesh, whose tale has been retold in many forms. Some notable versions of the tale include Robert Silverberg's

1984 novel *Gilgamesh the King*, the three-act opera *Gilgamesh* created by Rudolf Brucci in 1986, and *Never Grow Old: The Novel of Gilgamesh* (2007) by Brian Trent.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many of the tales from Semitic mythology have appeared in several different religious traditions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, followers of these religions are often quick to point out their differences; indeed, wars have been fought over the distinctions between these religions. Comparing the core myths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, do you think that there are more similarities or differences between these religions? Why do you think the differences are pointed out more frequently than the similarities?

SEE ALSO Devils and Demons; Floods; Persian Mythology; Satan



## Serpents and Snakes

### Theme Overview

Serpents and snakes play a role in many of the world's myths and legends. Sometimes these mythic beasts appear as ordinary snakes. At other times, they take on magical or monstrous forms. Serpents and snakes have long been associated with good as well as evil, representing both life and death, creation and destruction.

### Major Myths

Many mythical creatures, such as **dragons**, combine snake-like qualities with features of humans or animals. In **Greek mythology**, Echidna (pronounced i-KID-nuh) was a half-woman, half-serpent monster whose offspring included several dragons. Cecrops (pronounced SEE-krahps) had a man's head and chest on a snake's body and was a hero to the Athenians. In Toltec and **Aztec mythology**, **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), the Feathered Serpent, held an important place. In medieval Europe, people told tales of the **basilisk** (pronounced BAS-

## Sea Serpents

Mysterious serpents occur not only in ancient myths but also in modern legends. For centuries, people have reported seeing huge snakes or snakelike monsters at sea or in lakes. Although many marine scientists admit that creatures yet unknown may inhabit the depths, no one has produced reliable evidence of an entirely new kind of sea serpent. Most likely the mysterious creatures seen swimming on the water's surface are masses of seaweed, floating logs, rows of porpoises leaping into the air, giant squid, or just common sharks or sea lions.

uh-lisk), a serpent with a dragon's body that could kill merely by looking at or breathing on its victims. Melusina (pronounced meh-loo-SEE-nuh), another figure in European folklore, was part woman, part fish and snake, and had to spend one day each week in water.

Myths that emphasized the frightening or evil aspects of serpents and snakes often portrayed them as the enemies of deities and humans. The Greek hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs) rescued **Andromeda** (pronounced an-DROM-i-duh), who was chained to a rock, by slaying a sea monster that threatened to eat her. In **Norse mythology**, a monster called the Midgard serpent—also known as Jormungand (pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd)—was wrapped around the earth, biting its tail. **Thor** battled the serpent, which lived in the sea, where its movements caused storms around the world. Another Norse monster, the Nidhogg (pronounced NEED-hawg), was an evil serpent coiled around one of the roots of **Yggdrasill** (pronounced IG-druh-sil), the World Tree. It was forever trying to destroy the tree by biting or squeezing it.

In the mythology of ancient Egypt, Apophis (pronounced uh-POH-fis) was a demon who appeared in the form of a serpent. Each night he attacked **Ra**, the **sun** god. But Mehen, another huge serpent, coiled himself around Ra's sun boat to protect the god from Apophis—a perfect illustration of how snakes can be symbols of both good and evil.

Mythological snakes that act as forces of good have various roles, such as creating the world, protecting it, or helping humans. Stories of the Fon people of West Africa tell of Da, a serpent whose thirty-five hundred coils support the cosmic ocean in which the earth floats. Another thirty-five hundred of its coils support the sky. Humans

occasionally catch a glimpse of many-colored Da in a rainbow, or in light reflected on the surface of water.

The Aboriginal people of northern Australia tell how the Great Rainbow Snake Julunggul shaped the world. When human blood dropped into a waterhole, Julunggul grew angry. He sent a wave of water washing across the earth, and he swallowed people, plants, and animals. Julunggul reared up toward **heaven**, but an ant spirit bit him and made him vomit up what he had swallowed. This happened again and again until Julunggul departed from the earth, leaving people, plants, and animals in all parts of it.

According to a story of the Diegueño (pronounced dee-uh-GWAY-nyoh) Indians of California, humans obtained many of the secrets of civilization from a huge serpent named Umai-hulhlya-wit. This serpent lived in the ocean until people performed a ceremony and called him onto the land. They built an enclosure for him, but it was too small to hold him. After Umai-hulhlya-wit had squeezed as much of himself as possible into the enclosure, the people set him on **fire**. Soon the serpent's body exploded, showering the earth with the knowledge, secrets, songs, and other cultural treasures he had contained.

Hindu myths contain many tales of serpents. Kaliya (pronounced KAH-lee-yuh) was a five-headed serpent king who poisoned water and land until the god **Krishna** (pronounced KRISH-nuh) defeated him in battle. Kaliya then worshipped Krishna, who spared his life. Kadru was a snake goddess who bore one thousand children. Legend says that they still live today as snakes in human form. One of Kadru's children was the world snake Shesha that the gods used to turn a mountain and stir up the ocean, just as people churn milk into butter by using a rope coiled around a stick or paddle. As the gods churned the ocean with the snake, many precious things arose from it, including the moon, a magical tree, and the Amrita (pronounced uhm-REE-tuh), or water of life.

## Serpents and Snakes in Context

In religion, mythology, and literature, serpents and snakes often stand for fertility or a creative life force—partly because the creatures can be seen as symbols of the male sex organ. They have also been associated with water and earth because many kinds of snakes live in the water or in holes in the ground. The ancient Chinese connected serpents with life-giving rain. Traditional beliefs in Australia, India, North America, and

## Serpents and Snakes

*The Hindu god Krishna defeated the five-headed serpent king Kaliya.* GIRAUDON/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Africa have linked snakes with rainbows, which in turn are often related to rain and fertility.

As snakes grow, many of them shed their skin at various times, revealing a shiny new skin underneath. For this reason snakes have become symbols of rebirth, transformation, immortality (the ability to

live forever), and healing. The ancient Greeks considered snakes sacred to Asclepius (pronounced uh-SKLEE-pee-uhs), the god of medicine. He carried a caduceus, a staff with one or two serpents wrapped around it, which has become the symbol of modern physicians.

For both the Greeks and the Egyptians, the snake represented eternity. Ouroboros (pronounced or-ROB-or-uhs), the Greek symbol of eternity, consisted of a snake curled into a circle or hoop, biting its own tail. The Ouroboros grew out of the belief that serpents eat themselves and are reborn from themselves in an endless cycle of destruction and creation.

Living on and in the ground, serpents came to be seen in some religions and mythologies as guardians of the **underworld**, or land of the dead. In this role they could represent hidden wisdom or sacred mysteries, but they also had other, more sinister meanings. The use of serpents as symbols of death, evil, or treachery may be related to the fact that some of them are poisonous and dangerous. **Satan** and other devils have frequently been portrayed as snakes, as in the biblical story of **Eden** where a sly serpent tempts Eve and Adam into disobeying God. Some Christian saints are said to have driven away snakes as a sign of miraculous powers given to them by God. According to legend, **St. Patrick** cleared Ireland of snakes.

The **Nagas** (pronounced NAH-gahz) of Hindu and Buddhist mythology show how serpents can symbolize both good and evil, hopes and fears. Although these snake gods could take any shape, including a fully human one, they often appeared as human heads on serpent bodies. The Nagas lived in underwater or underground kingdoms. They controlled rainfall and interacted with gods and humans in a variety of ways. Some were good, such as Mucalinda, the snake king who shielded Buddha from a storm. Others could be cruel and vengeful.

## Serpents and Snakes in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Even after many centuries, serpents and snakes have not lost their power to evoke a reaction in modern audiences. Though most depictions of snakes and serpents in modern art and literature do not qualify as mythical, there have been some notable examples of larger-than-life serpents, especially in films. The talking snake Kaa from Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894), as well as the 1967 Disney animated

## Serpents and Snakes

*Nagas were snake gods that could be both good and bad in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. This statue shows Buddha being protected by the Naga behind him.* ERICH LESSING/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



adaptation, has the ability to hypnotize his prey—though he is a helpful mentor to the main character in the book, and a villain in the film. The 1998 novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, by J. K. Rowling, features an enormous basilisk, as does the 2002 film of the same name. The Harry Potter books also feature a giant snake named Nagini that is the close companion of the evil wizard Lord Voldemort. The 1997



horror film *Anaconda*, starring Jennifer Lopez and Jon Voight, also contains a mythically large and deadly snake as its main antagonist.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Serpents and snakes in Western cultures have long been associated with evil. However, in some Asian cultures, serpents are accepted in a much more neutral or even positive light. Why do you think there is such a dramatic difference between how different cultures view snakes and serpents?

**SEE ALSO** Adam and Eve; Animals in Mythology; Basilisk; Dragons; Medusa; Nagas; Patrick, St.; Quetzalcoatl; Satan



# Set

## Character Overview

In **Egyptian mythology** Set (or Seth) was the evil brother of the god **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) and the goddesses **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis) and Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this). The son of the earth god Geb and the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT), Set tore himself from his mother's body before he was fully formed, and then used pieces of animals to complete his own body. Among the many animals associated with Set were the pig, donkey, scorpion, antelope, hippopotamus, and crocodile.

## Major Myths

Originally a sky and storm god, Set was highly regarded at first, and his cult—or organized body of worshippers—was one of the oldest in Egypt. Each day he rode across the sky in the **sun** ship of the great god **Ra** (pronounced RAH); each night as he traveled through the **underworld**, or land of the dead, he killed the mighty serpent Apophis (pronounced uh-POH-fis) to protect Ra. In time, however, Set became jealous of the other gods, and his treachery against them turned him into one of the chief forces of evil.

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

SET

### Alternate Names

Seth, Sutekh

### Appears In

The Book of the Dead

### Lineage

Son of Nut and Geb

Above all, Set envied his brother Osiris, who ruled as king of Egypt while Set served only as lord of the desert. Determined to destroy his brother, Set arranged a great feast to which he invited Osiris and the other gods. He had carpenters construct a large and magnificently decorated box, which he placed at the entrance hall of his palace. When Osiris arrived, Set tricked him into getting inside the box. As soon as Osiris stepped into the box, Set ordered his servants to nail down the lid, seal it with molten lead, and throw it into the Nile River. Osiris drowned.

Their sister Isis, who was also Osiris's wife, searched for her husband and eventually found the box. She brought Osiris back to life long enough to conceive a son, **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs). Set, however, found Osiris's body and cut it into pieces. Then he scattered the pieces throughout Egypt. Nephthys, Set's wife and sister, helped Isis locate the pieces and bring Osiris back to life. After that, Osiris went to rule the underworld as king of the dead.

Horus later fought Set to avenge his father's death. In a series of great battles, Horus defeated his evil uncle. Horus would have killed Set, but Isis took pity on Set and asked Horus to spare his life. Ancient Egyptians viewed the battle between Horus and Set as the ultimate struggle between good and evil.

As the cult of Osiris grew in Egypt, worship of Set declined. Eventually, Egyptian priests declared Set to be an enemy of the gods. His name and image were removed from many monuments, and he became associated with Apophis, the monstrous serpent that he had once defeated each night to protect Ra.

### Set in Context

The conflict between Set and Horus may reflect actual historical conflicts between the two regions of Egypt known as Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. The Shabaka Stone, an artifact that contains a recording of an Egyptian document dating back to at least 2000 BCE, states that Geb solved the battle between Set and Horus by giving Horus the area of Lower Egypt to rule, and giving Set Upper Egypt to rule. This does mirror the historical division between the two halves of Egypt, and the subsequent takeover of Upper Egypt by Horus may reflect the eventual unification that brought together these two halves. The people of Upper and Lower Egypt often worshipped different gods, so real-life battles



*Egyptians carved this limestone stele in order to protect against the spells of the evil god Set.* ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.

for control of the region may explain the stories of two gods fighting for power.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

The main themes of the myth of Set are envy and the lust for power. Set betrayed and killed his own brother because he was jealous of the region his brother controlled, and wished to take it as his own. Set then battled his nephew in an attempt to gain control of the lands. Earlier myths present Set as a dedicated protector of Ra, but these are not the most well-known or enduring tales associated with the god.

## Set in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient Egyptian art, Set is often pictured with the head of an unidentified animal that resembles an anteater, or possibly a jackal—both animals that lived in the area. In modern times, Robert E. Howard introduced a god named Set in his *Conan the Barbarian* series of stories, but Howard's serpent god does not resemble the traditional Egyptian Set. The Marvel Comics series *Thor* also includes a character named Seth, based more closely on traditional Egyptian mythology.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Set plans to murder his brother Osiris so that he can take over the kingdom of Egypt in addition to the desert he already controls. In this way, he resembles leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Alexander the Great, who conquered nearby lands in order to expand their own empires. Do you think conquering foreign lands and cultures to expand the size of an empire is by definition evil? Why or why not?

**SEE ALSO** Egyptian Mythology; Horus; Isis; Nut; Osiris; Ra; Serpents and Snakes

## Seth

*See Set.*

### Nationality/Culture

Assyrian/Babylonian

### Pronunciation

shah-MAHSH

### Alternate Names

Utu, Babbar, Chemosh

### Appears In

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*,  
*Great Hymn to Utu*,

### Lineage

Son of the moon god Sin



## Shamash

### Character Overview

Shamash (also known as Utu in Sumerian) was the **sun** god in the Akkadian mythology of the ancient Near East. Associated with truth and justice, he was one of the most active gods in the pantheons (collection of recognized gods and goddesses) of ancient Sumer, Babylonia (bab-uh-LOH-nee-uh), and Assyria (uh-SEER-ee-uh). Shamash was responsible for maintaining the order of the universe; Hammurabi, the Babylonian king who oversaw the first written code of laws in recorded history,

claimed that they were given to him by Shamash. Nothing could hide from his bright light, which banished darkness and revealed lies. In Babylon those who wished to know the future would call on Shamash, for it was said that his eye could see everything.

Shamash was considered the defender of the poor and the weak, and therefore the enemy of evil. Those who wished for defense against witchcraft would call on Shamash for help. Travellers prayed to him before setting out, as would armies, since Shamash himself travelled across the sky. In addition to these duties, Shamash also aided women in labor, freed captives, and healed the sick.

## Major Myths

Shamash was the son of the Akkadian moon god Sin (pronounced SEEN) and the brother of the goddess **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr). His wife Aya (meaning “youth”) bore him four sons: Giru (fire), Kittum (truth), Mesharum (justice), and Nusku (light). As god of the sun, Shamash moved across the sky during the day; according to some legends, he also moved through the **underworld**, or land of the dead, during the night. In other stories, the god and his sons crossed the sky in a chariot by day and rested in a palace on a mountain at night. In the Babylonian heroic poem *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamash offered the hero help and advice in carrying out a dangerous quest for immortality, or the ability to live forever.

## Shamash in Context

The relation of Shamash to the other gods in the Assyrian/Babylonian pantheon reflects the type of society in which he was worshipped. For most societies based upon farming and agriculture, the sun is considered to be the most important element in nature, and is therefore worshipped as the main deity. The moon is often referred to as a child or sister of the sun god. In the case of the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians, however, the sun god is considered to be a child of the moon. This suggests that Shamash may have been worshipped prior to the widespread development of agriculture-based culture, at a time when the moon was seen by these ancient people as the ultimate supernatural figure.

## Key Themes and Symbols

To the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians, Shamash represented justice. Light was considered to be the force that revealed all by banishing

## Shamash

*Shamash was a Near Eastern sun god responsible for maintaining order in the universe.*

*In this carving, he is shown dictating his laws to Hammurabi, the king of Babylon.*

© LOUVRE, PARIS, FRANCE/  
GIRAUDON/THE BRIDGEMAN  
ART LIBRARY.



shadows. The sun—the symbol of Shamash—was the revealer of secrets and bringer of truth. Shamash was also a symbol of protection from the darkness, which was thought to contain demons or evil spirits. Shamash is often shown as an old man with a long beard with sun rays rising from his shoulders, and his foot stepping on a mountain he has just cut with his saw-toothed knife. In ancient art, Shamash was usually shown as a disk or wheel, although sometimes he appeared as a king holding a staff of justice and a wheel of truth. A human-headed bull is sometimes with him, or he is attended by servants who open the gates of the dawn. His special symbol is the four-pointed star set in a disk with flames shooting out from between the star points. The winged disk was another of his symbols.

## Shamash in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Shamash enjoyed great popularity in the ancient cultures of the Near East, with temples erected to him in Babylon, Ur (pronounced OOR), and Nineveh (pronounced NIN-uh-vuh), among other places. Some scholars contend that the god was the source of the name given to the central stem of the Jewish menorah, a candle-holder that is a key symbol in Judaism.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In ancient Babylonian culture, darkness was associated with evil and dangerous forces. The same still holds true today, even though much of our modern world is kept from darkness thanks to electricity. Why do you think the association of darkness with evil and danger has held true across so many cultures, and through so many centuries?

SEE ALSO Gilgamesh; Ishtar; Semitic Mythology; Sun



# Shiva

## Character Overview

Shiva, the destroyer, is one of the three supreme gods in Hindu mythology. The other two are **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh), the creator, and **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo), the preserver. Shiva's destructive powers are terrifying, but they also have a positive side in that destruction usually leads to new forms of existence. In art, Shiva is often portrayed with four arms, five faces, and three eyes. A glance from the third eye in the center of his forehead has the power to destroy anything in creation, including humans and gods. In the Vedas, a collection of ancient sacred texts, Shiva is identified with the storm god Rudra (pronounced ROOD-ruh).

## Major Myths

According to one myth, Shiva first appeared when Brahma and Vishnu were arguing about which of them was more powerful. Their argument

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

SHEE-vuh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Vedas

### Lineage

None

## Shiva

*The Hindu god Shiva is often portrayed in art as dancing. This statue shows him dancing in a ring of fire, representing the cosmos, and squashing a dwarf, who represents ignorance. THE ART ARCHIVE/ MUSÉE GUMMET PARIS/ GIANNI DAGLI ORTI/ THE PICTURE DESK, INC.*



was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a great blazing pillar whose roots and branches extended beyond view into the earth and sky. Brahma became a goose and flew up to find the top of the pillar, while Vishnu turned into a boar and dug into the earth to look for its roots. Unsuccessful in their search, the two gods returned and saw Shiva emerge from an opening in the pillar. Recognizing Shiva's great power, they accepted him as the third ruler of the universe.



Shiva is a complex god with many roles and powers. In the natural cycle of creation and destruction, Shiva represents destruction, out of which a new creation will be born. He has many postures, from the seated ascetic (one who lives a life of self-denial) to the dancing Shiva. As ascetic, Shiva sits in a meditative pose. He has matted hair, from which flow the sacred waters of the Ganges (pronounced GAN-jeez) River, and wears a garland of snakes around his neck, symbolizing his control over physical desires. Despite his destructiveness, Shiva can be helpful to humans and other gods. He acts as a divine judge who shows no mercy to the wicked. He gains spiritual strength from periods of meditation—deep thought—in the Himalayas (pronounced him-uh-LAY-uhz), a mountain range on India's northern border. When he dances, he represents truth, and by dancing he banishes ignorance and helps relieve the suffering of his followers. According to one myth, Shiva saved the gods and the world from destruction by swallowing the poison of Vasuki (pronounced VUH-soo-kee), a serpent the gods used to produce the water of life. Drinking the poison made Shiva's neck blue, and he is often shown that way in art.

One of Shiva's greatest services to the world was to tame the sacred Ganges River, which flows from the Himalayas. At one time, the Ganges passed only through the heavens, leaving the earth dry. After a wise man changed the course of the river, it became a raging torrent and threatened to flood the earth. Shiva stood beneath the river and let its waters wind through his hair to calm its flow.

In another story, the gods were threatened by demons and asked Shiva for help. He agreed—on the condition that the gods lend him some of their own strength. After defeating the demons, however, Shiva refused to return the borrowed strength. As a result, he became the most powerful being in the universe. Shiva also has many weapons that make him unbeatable, including a club with a skull on the end, a sword and spear made from thunderbolts, and a bow made from a rainbow.

## Shiva in Context

The many forms of Shiva reflect a combination of different religious traditions throughout India that span many centuries. Rudra, for instance, is a form that pre-dates Shiva and emphasizes the god's status as a bringer of storms. Two other forms of Shiva—as the Teacher and as the Lord of Dance—both originated in southern India and continue to

## Shiva's Consorts: Parvati, Durga, and Kali

Most Hindu gods have a female consort, or wife, who complements the powers of the male god. Shiva's consort is Parvati, a benign mother goddess. But Parvati has many other forms. As Durga, she is an armed warrior goddess who rides a lion and slays Mahisha, the Buffalo Demon. As Kali, the fierce dark goddess beloved in Bengal, she comes to Durga's aid and slays Raktabija, a demon who has the ability to reproduce himself each time a drop of his blood touches the ground.

According to myth, Durga battles Raktabija but cannot kill him because each time she wounds him, another demon appears where his blood touched the earth. In need of help, Durga calls on Kali, who destroys the demon by sucking the blood from his wounded body before it can touch the ground. Kali then begins her furious dance upon the corpses of the slain demons and accidentally steps on her own husband, Shiva, lying on the ground. She stops her dance of death only when she hears Shiva's screams, which calm her.

be popular there. Shiva in the form of a lingam—or phallus, symbolizing procreation—likely originated in northern India or Pakistan, which was once part of India.

## Key Themes and Symbols

As with many Hindu deities, Shiva's various forms and myths cover a wide range of themes that reflect his varied character. In many instances, Shiva is closely associated with destruction. This is illustrated by the devastating power of his third eye, his arsenal of weapons, and the necklace of skulls he is often shown to be wearing. His association with storms also reflects the theme of destruction. However, Shiva is also linked to the theme of change, which can be positive or negative. In particular, he is associated with teaching, especially the teaching of yoga and music.

## Shiva in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Shiva is portrayed in many forms throughout Hindu art. His most recognized form is as the Lord of Dance, which shows him poised in the middle of a dance of creation and destruction, surrounded by a circle of

flames. Shiva is also often shown in meditation, a reflection of his status as the teacher of yoga and meditation. In this pose, he is shown with long matted hair wrapped in a swirl or bun, with a crescent moon on his head, holding a trident and a drum, and seated on a tiger skin. Like many other figures from mythology, Shiva has lent his name to an asteroid, and his name is also invoked in the Shiva Hypothesis, an attempt to explain the periodic mass extinctions that have been observed in the fossil record.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Shiva's Fire* (2000) by Suzanne Fisher Staples tells the tale of a girl named Parvati—the name of Shiva's wife according to myth—who discovers she has extraordinary abilities that seem to be accessed through dancing. Parvati travels from the poor, small village where she was born to attend dance school in the bustling city of Madras, beginning a journey of discovery, identity, and her connection to the Lord of Dance. Author Staples received a Newbery Honor for a previous book, *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind* (1989).

**SEE ALSO** Brahma; Hinduism and Mythology; Vishnu



## Siberian Mythology

### Siberian Mythology in Context

Siberia is a vast region in northern Asia, stretching from the Ural Mountains in the west to the Pacific Ocean in the east. To the north lies the Arctic Ocean; to the south lie Mongolia, China, and Central Asia. European Russians have been settling in Siberia for several centuries, but the region's original inhabitants were hunting, fishing, and herding peoples whose cultures were related to those of other northern groups, such as the Inuit of North America. Siberian mythology and religion reflected a world in which humans depended on and respected animals, believing that the animals had spirits and could change form.

Traditionally, Siberians viewed the world as the middle realm in a series of three, five, or seven worlds that were stacked one on top of the other. As in many belief systems, the realms above belonged to good gods and spirits, those below to evil ones. A tree connected the worlds of

Siberian myths in the same way that the World Tree **Yggdrasill** (pronounced IG-druh-sil) linked realms in **Norse mythology**. The tree's roots and branches extended into all levels.

### **Core Deities and Characters**

The devil or chief evil spirit in Siberian mythology was named Erlik. He was sometimes said to have been a human who helped in the creation of the earth but then turned against Ulgan, the creator god. Erlik ruled the dead, and his evil spirits brought him the souls of sinners.

Shamans held a central role in Siberian religion and mythology. They were believed to travel between worlds by climbing the World Tree or by flying, and they communicated with the spirit world through ceremonies and trances. The healing magic of shamans involved finding or curing the lost or damaged souls of sick people.

Many Siberian myths deal with powerful shamans. The Buriat people of the Lake Baikal region told of Morgon-Kara, who could bring the dead back to life. This angered the lord of the dead, who complained to the high god of **heaven**. The high god tested the shaman by sealing a man's soul in a bottle. Riding his magic drum into the spirit universe, Morgon-Kara found the soul in the bottle. Turning himself into a wasp, he stung the high god's forehead. The startled god released the trapped soul, and the shaman carried it down to earth.

Animals appear in many myths, sometimes as the ancestors or mates of humans. The Yukaghir people, for example, told of an ancestral hero who was the offspring of a man who spent the winter in the cave of a female bear. The Evenk people had stories of mammoths, immense animals that roamed the land long ago. They explained how these creatures had shaped the earth by moving mud with their tusks, created rivers where they walked, and formed lakes where they lay.

### **Major Myths**

Siberian mythology, which includes the beliefs and myths of a number of different peoples, has many variations on the story of creation. In one, the gods Chagan-Shukuty and Otshirvani came down from heaven to find the world covered with water. Otshirvani sat on a frog or turtle while Chagan-Shukuty dove repeatedly to the bottom, bringing up a bit of mud each time. The gods piled the mud on the back of the animal, which eventually sank into the water, leaving only the earth on the



*Shamans are an important part of Siberian mythology, and were believed to be able to heal the sick by communicating with the spirit world. In this engraving, a Siberian shaman attempts to heal a sick person by banishing evil spirits.* © BIBLIOTHEQUE DES ARTS DECORATIFS, PARIS, FRANCE/ARCHIVES CHAR-MET/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.

surface. In other stories, Otshirvani took the form of a giant bird that fought a huge, evil serpent called Losy.

Siberian tradition includes myths about a great flood and a hero who saved his family. In one version, the creator god Ulgan told a man named Nama to build a boat. Into the boat Nama brought his wife, his three sons, some other people, and some animals. The boat saved them all from the flood, and they lived on the earth after it dried out. Years later

Nama was close to death. His wife told him that if he killed all the animals and people he had saved in his boat, he would become king of the dead in the **afterlife**. Nama's son argued that the killing would be a sin, so Nama killed his wife instead and took the virtuous son to heaven, where he became a constellation of stars.

Another Siberian myth tells of a hero who followed a golden bird up the World Tree. The bird changed into many shapes, finally becoming a woman, whom the hero wished to marry. First, however, he had to destroy an extra **sun** and moon that were making the world too hot and too cold. For help, the hero turned to a sea god, who boiled the hero in an iron kettle and then shaped the fragments into a new man of iron, armed with iron weapons. The hero used these to shoot the extra sun and moon.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The struggle between good and evil colors Siberian mythology. This is shown in the myth of creation involving Ulgan and Erlik. Ulgan symbolizes the most important positive aspects of Siberian life, including food, water and warmth. Erlik is a symbol of death and sickness, but also of overconfidence and lust for power.

The idea of rebirth is also found in the myths of the Siberian people. In the tale of the man who destroys the extra sun and moon, the destruction and remaking of the hero's body may symbolize the making of a shaman, during which the person is reborn with magical powers. This theme is also seen in the myth of Morgon-Kara, who could bring the dead back to life.

### Siberian Mythology in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Siberian mythology is largely unknown in other parts of the world, perhaps due to the remote nature of Siberian cultures and peoples. Even in Russia, knowledge of Siberian mythology is limited mostly to small cultural groups. Some anthropologists, such as Marya Antonina Czaplicka, have provided information to Westerners about the nature and details of Siberian myths, but even these accounts are scarcely known to most people in the modern world. There still remain isolated groups in Siberia that continue to practice traditional beliefs, and the advent of globalization has opened the door for a future sharing of these cultural riches.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Siberia is often considered to be a harsh and difficult place to live, primarily due to its weather. What effect do you think weather and environment have on the myths and beliefs of a culture? For example, do you think a sun god would have the same importance for Siberians as he would for a culture from a tropical island? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; Floods; Yggdrasill

## Siegfried

See **Sigurd**.



## Sigurd

### Character Overview

In Norse myth and legend, the warrior Sigurd was a member of the royal family of Denmark and a descendant of the god **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). He was raised by a blacksmith named Regin (pronounced RAY-gin), who made him a special sword from pieces of a sword owned by Sigurd's father.

Sigurd used his sword to kill the dragon Fafnir (pronounced FAHV-nir) and so acquire its golden treasure. When Sigurd roasted and ate the beast's heart, he was able to understand the language of the birds around him. They warned him that Regin was going to betray him, so Sigurd beheaded the blacksmith. Sigurd took the treasure and put a ring on his finger. He was unaware that the ring bore a curse that brought misfortune to its wearer.

After slaying Fafnir, Sigurd came upon a castle where he awakened the warrior maiden **Brunhilde** (pronounced BROON-hilt), whom Odin had cast into a deep sleep. Sigurd gave his ring to Brunhilde and promised to return to marry her. But during his journey Sigurd was given a magic drink that made him forget Brunhilde, and he married the princess Gudrun (pronounced GOOD-roon) instead.

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

SI-gurd

### Alternate Names

Sivard, Siegfried (German)

### Appears In

The *Volsunga Saga*, the *Nibelungenlied*

### Lineage

Son of Sigmund and Hjordis

## Sigurd

*Sigurd is a Norse warrior who acquired the ability to understand the language of birds after he roasted and ate a dragon's heart.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Gudrun's brother Gunnar tried to win Brunhilde for himself, but Gunnar was unable to cross the wall of flames that surrounded Brunhilde's castle. Sigurd, having forgotten Brunhilde completely and wanting to help his brother-in-law, assumed Gunnar's shape and courted Brunhilde in his place. Believing that Sigurd had abandoned her, Brunhilde agreed to marry Gunnar, whom she did not love. When Brunhilde discovered that she had been tricked by Sigurd, she was both angry with Sigurd and heartbroken at the loss of his love. She had him slain and then killed herself.



## Sigurd in Context

Sigurd reflects the Norse idea of the ultimate human hero: strong, brave, clever, forthright, and willing to help others. Sigurd also reflects the human flaws that are seen in nearly all Norse characters, both god and human alike. He is susceptible to magic and deception, and falls victim to a curse about which he is not aware. This reflects Norse beliefs in fate and destiny: certain events are unavoidable no matter how hard one might struggle to prevent them.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The story of Sigurd largely deals with the themes of betrayal and vengeance. Sigurd is told that Regin, the man who raised him, is planning on betraying him for his treasure, so Sigurd cuts off Regin's head—itsself an act of betrayal against the only father he has known. Later, Sigurd, under the power of a magical potion, betrays Brunhilde by marrying Gudrun, and deceives her when he pretends to be Gunnar. Brunhilde avenges this betrayal by killing Sigurd.

## Sigurd in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Aside from being the main tale of the *Volsunga Saga*, the story of Sigurd and Brunhilde is also told in slightly different form in the German epic poem *Nibelungenlied*, where Sigurd is known by the German name Siegfried. This version of the story was central to Richard Wagner's series of operas known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), one opera of which is titled *Siegfried*. The *Volsunga Saga* was also used as the basis for the bleak and futuristic young adult novel *Bloodtide* (1999) by Melvin Burgess.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In the myth of Sigurd, the hero's downfall occurs because of a cursed ring he obtains as part of a treasure when he kills Fafnir. In modern times, certain treasures are in a sense cursed because of their origins; so-called "blood diamonds," for example, are taken from war-torn areas and may be used to finance large-scale murder. As another example, many of the priceless valuables and heirlooms taken from Jewish families before they were imprisoned during World War II were kept by those who cooperated with the Nazis. Do you think items such as these

carry with them a “curse”—even a symbolic one—for those that know their origins?

SEE ALSO Brunhilde; *Nibelungenlied, The*; Norse Mythology



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## Sinbad

### Nationality/Culture

Persian, Arabic

### Pronunciation

SIN-bad

### Alternate Names

Sindbad

### Appears In

*One Thousand and One Nights*

### Lineage

Son of a merchant

### Character Overview

Sinbad the Sailor appears in *One Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of Persian, Arab, and Indian tales written down between the 800s and the 1400s CE. A merchant from the city of Baghdad in the Near East, Sinbad made seven voyages to lands and islands around the Indian Ocean. He had great adventures, survived numerous dangers, and acquired many riches during his travels.

On Sinbad’s first voyage, he and his crew visited an island that turned out to be a huge sleeping whale. When they lit a **fire**, the whale woke up and dived underwater. Sinbad was picked up by another ship and taken home. The second voyage took Sinbad to a desert island, where he discovered an enormous egg belonging to a giant bird called a roc. When the bird appeared, Sinbad grabbed its claw and was carried away to the Valley of Diamonds. Eventually rescued by merchants, he returned to Baghdad laden with the valuable jewels.

During Sinbad’s third voyage, the hero was captured by dwarves and taken to the home of a one-eyed giant. The giant started eating members of his crew. Sinbad managed to escape but was lured to another island by a serpent that tried to swallow him. Once again, Sinbad got away and was rescued by a passing ship. Shipwrecked on his fourth voyage, Sinbad and his crew were taken prisoner by cannibals who planned to eat them. The hero escaped, arrived at a strange kingdom, and married the king’s daughter. When she died, however, Sinbad was buried alive with her. He succeeded in getting away again.

On Sinbad’s fifth voyage, his ship was destroyed by angry rocs, which dropped huge stones from the air. Washed ashore on an island, he met and killed the Old Man of the Sea. The sixth voyage saw Sinbad once again shipwrecked on an island. There he found precious stones

## World Travelers

*Several world myths focus on the fantastic adventures of seafaring travelers.*

Figure	Nationality	Myth Summary
Gilgamesh	Near Eastern	Gilgamesh undertakes dangerous quests. First, he and his friend Enkidu travel to the distant cedar forest to slay a demon. After Enkidu's death, he travels in search of Utnapishtim, who reportedly knows the secret of immortality.
Odysseus	Greek	Traveling home after many years served in the Trojan War, Odysseus hits many delays, including a nymph who falls in love with him and refuses to let him leave her island, a man-eating cyclops, and a powerful sorceress.
Sinbad	Persian and Arabian	Sinbad is a merchant from Baghdad who makes seven famous sea voyages and, after some ups and downs, ends his days fabulously wealthy. Like Odysseus, he faces a man-eating giant with one eye.

ILLUSTRATION BY ANAXOS, INC./CENGAGE LEARNING, GALE.

and visited the city of Serendib, whose king sent him home with more wealth. Sinbad returned to Serendib on his final voyage. On the way home he was attacked by pirates, who sold him into slavery. While working as an elephant hunter for the merchant who bought him, Sinbad discovered an elephant burial ground and a huge store of ivory tusks. The merchant gave Sinbad his freedom and enough ivory to make him rich. His final adventure over, Sinbad returned home to Baghdad.

### Sinbad in Context

The cultures of the ancient Middle East placed great importance on the sea as a means of travel, exploration, and trade. While countries in the

Near East such as Turkey relied upon the Mediterranean Sea for trade, Persian and Arabian cultures viewed the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean as a source of both adventure and riches. The tales of Sinbad emphasize this, as well as the egalitarian—or relatively classless and democratic—spirit of the culture. The tale of Sinbad opens with a poor soul bemoaning his impoverished existence; a wealthy man overhears this and tells the poor man how he came to be rich. The wealthy man also reveals that he was left with riches when his father died, but spent it all rashly and became poor—showing that shifts in social class can happen in both directions. The two men are both named Sinbad, and the message seems clear: for someone willing to work hard, a life on the sea can lead to adventure and riches. This is similar to later American myths of both the sea and the unexplored West, where hard-working individuals were encouraged to find their fortunes.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the tales of Sinbad is the spirit of exploration and adventure. Even after Sinbad has made his first journey and earned great wealth, he is still drawn by a desire to see other lands and cultures. Although he faces great danger, he is always rewarded—perhaps by Allah (the Islamic name for God) himself—for his boldness and risk-taking. For Sinbad, as for many in the ancient Middle East, the sea represents the excitement of the unknown: both danger and opportunity, with the potential for both disaster and riches.

### Sinbad in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The tales of Sinbad were popularly known throughout the Middle East for centuries. They finally became popular in the English-speaking world through the 1885 translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* by Sir Richard Burton. Throughout Europe, the tales captured the imaginations of readers and artists alike. Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov wrote a symphonic suite in 1888 based on the tales from *One Thousand and One Nights*, largely focusing on the adventures of Sinbad.

Sinbad has been the subject of numerous television and film adaptations, most notably three popular movies featuring stop-motion special effects by Ray Harryhausen: *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1974), and *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977). Sinbad's adventures were also featured in the animated

Dreamworks adaptation *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (2003), which features Brad Pitt as the voice of the hero.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In ancient cultures, the sea often symbolized adventure and the great unknown. In the modern world, where journeys across the ocean can take just a few hours and the Internet allows people of vastly different cultures to directly share information and experiences, the life of a sailor has lost much of its glamour. In your opinion, are there any modern occupations that offer the same level of adventure that sailors and explorers once enjoyed? If so, what are they and how are people in these occupations portrayed in mainstream culture? If not, how do you think this “loss of the unknown” has affected modern culture?

SEE ALSO Persian Mythology



# Sirens

## Character Overview

The Sirens were three female creatures from **Greek mythology** whose singing lured men to destruction. Descriptions of the Sirens vary from beautiful women to monsters with the bodies of birds and human heads.

The Sirens were the daughters of the river god Achelous (pronounced ay-kee-LOH-uhs). They lived on an island where they enchanted passing sailors with their songs. According to some sources, sailors died when their ships crashed on the rocks near the island. Others say that sailors stayed on the island and listened to the singing until they died.

Only on two occasions did the Sirens fail to enchant passing sailors. When **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts) were searching for the **Golden Fleece**, the musician **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs) sang so sweetly that none of the crew listened to the Sirens. In Homer's epic the *Odyssey*, the hero **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) made his men put wax in their ears so they could not hear the Sirens. Odysseus, wanting to hear the Sirens' song, had his crew tie him to the mast so he would not steer the ship toward the island. Some stories

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

SYE-rinz

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,  
Homer's *Odyssey*

### Lineage

Daughters of Achelous

## Endangered Mermaids

*Sirenia* is an order of plant-eating mammals that includes the manatee, found along warm coastlines of the eastern part of North and South America, and the dugong, found near Australia and New Guinea. Sailors sighting these creatures sometimes mistook them for mermaids, creatures with the torso and head of a woman and the tail of a fish. Sirens are sometimes pictured as mermaids.

Dugongs and manatees are considered endangered species. Manatees are slow-moving and curious, and so are at special risk of injury and death due to boat collisions. Dugongs were once found throughout the Indian and South Pacific oceans, but hunting and habitat loss have caused its numbers to diminish greatly.

say the Sirens were destined to live only as long as no sailor could resist their song; because Odysseus and his crew were able to sail safely past, the Sirens were transformed into rocks along the shore.

## Sirens in Context

The myth of the Sirens is a reflection of how important—and at the same time treacherous—travel by sea was to the ancient Greeks. They relied on the sea for both trade and exploration. The Sirens functioned as a warning to Greek sailors, reminding them to always be aware of nearby rocks that could potentially destroy their ships. The song of the Sirens might even be compared to the rhythmic pulse of the sea against the bow of a ship, which might lull a sailor to sleep and prevent him from properly avoiding obstacles such as rocks.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Sirens represented both the allure and the danger of beauty. The danger arose from losing sense of one's duties or surroundings while being enchanted by the Sirens. In a more general sense, the Sirens symbolized the mysterious qualities of women to sailors, who were nearly always men living without female contact for days or weeks at a time. The bird-like features of the Sirens also associated them with the beautiful singing of songbirds, and enhanced their otherworldly nature.

## Sirens in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In ancient art, the Sirens were often depicted as having human heads and the bodies of birds, or as being human women with the legs of birds. Later depictions often downplay these bird-like features and instead depict the Sirens simply as beautiful young women, or even as **mermaids** who lure sailors to a watery grave. Many adaptations of the myths of Jason and Odysseus include depictions of the Sirens. One notable appearance of the Sirens is in the 2000 Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, a retelling of the *Odyssey* set in the American South during the Great Depression.

The term “siren” lives on in modern times in two ways: first, it describes a loud, unavoidable warning signal, such as the ones used by police and other emergency vehicles; and second, it is used to describe a woman to whom men are inevitably drawn, even when it may lead to their downfall.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Secret of the Sirens* (2006) by Julia Golding is the first novel in the author's *Companions Quartet* series. The book focuses on Connie, an eleven-year-old girl sent to live with her aunt in a seaside British town.

SEE ALSO Argonauts; *Odyssey, The*; Orpheus



# Sisyphus

## Character Overview

In **Greek mythology**, Sisyphus was famous for two things: his cleverness during life and the punishment he suffered after death. Although stories about Sisyphus differ somewhat in their details, he is usually referred to as the king of Corinth. He was one of the sons of King Aeolus (pronounced EE-uh-luhs) of Thessaly (pronounced THESS-uh-lee).

One story about Sisyphus involves Autolycus (pronounced aw-TOL-i-kuhs), a clever thief. Autolycus stole cattle by changing their color

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
SIZ-ee-fuhs

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*,  
Homer's *Odyssey*

**Lineage**  
Son of King Aeolus and  
Enarete

so they could not be identified. On one occasion, he happened to steal Sisyphus's cattle; Sisyphus outwitted him, however, by placing a mark on the cattle's hooves so he could follow the hoofprints to the stolen animals.

In another myth, Sisyphus saw the god **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) kidnap a river nymph, or female nature deity, and he promised to keep the hiding place secret. He betrayed Zeus, however, when he revealed the location to the nymph's father in exchange for a spring of pure water. Furious, Zeus sent Thanatos (pronounced THAN-uh-tohs), the god of death, to take Sisyphus to **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), the ruler of the land of the dead. About to be shackled, the clever Sisyphus managed to trick Thanatos into trying out the shackles first and trapped the god in his place. Because Thanatos was shackled and could not perform his duties, for several days no one on earth died.

**Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), the god of war, went to free death and take Sisyphus to Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a gloomy pit at the bottom of the **underworld**. Sisyphus called out to his wife not to offer the customary sacrifices usually made when someone dies, and she followed his orders. While in the underworld, he persuaded **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), the goddess of the underworld, to let him go back to earth long enough to arrange a proper funeral, since his wife was clearly not following tradition. After returning to Corinth, Sisyphus stayed there until his second, and final, death.

As punishment for tricking the gods, Sisyphus was placed on a hillside in the underworld with a heavy boulder above him. To escape being crushed, he had to push the boulder uphill. The gods told him that if he rolled the stone to the other side they would release him. Each time he reached the top, however, the boulder rolled back down to the bottom, forcing Sisyphus to start over.

### Sisyphus in Context

While the myth of Sisyphus might appear to be a reflection of ancient Greek values, particularly against those who are cunning or deceitful, this is not likely to be the case. There are many other examples of ancient Greek myths where cunning and cleverness is highly rewarded—particularly in the tales of **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs), a





*The gods condemned Sisyphus to push a boulder uphill, only to have the boulder roll back down the hill each time he got near the top. It was his punishment in the underworld for tricking the gods.*

CAL. STATE CALIFORNIA HISTORY COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES.

hero who is sometimes mentioned as the possible son of Sisyphus. Indeed, in the tales of Sisyphus, Autolycus—sometimes called the king of thieves—was impressed by the man's cleverness and the two became friends.

In fact, the reason for the harsh punishment of Sisyphus is established quite clearly: he betrayed a promise to Zeus, the king of the gods. Had it not been for that betrayal, Sisyphus would never have faced the wrath of the gods. In fact, the myth even suggests that the ancient

Greeks did not consider the gods all powerful, as the cleverness of Sisyphus nearly allows him to escape punishment altogether.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

An important theme in the myth of Sisyphus is trickery. Throughout his tale, Sisyphus uses his cleverness to trick the gods and other characters. This is shown when he shackles Thanatos and when he convinces Persephone to let him go back to the world of the living. The gods also use trickery when they tell Sisyphus he can go free if he rolls the boulder over the top of the hill—an impossible task. To many, the labor of Sisyphus symbolizes futility, or the inability to ever achieve one's goals.

### **Sisyphus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Several examples of ancient pottery have been found that illustrate the myth of Sisyphus. For a myth that has survived with such popularity into modern times, however, there are relatively few examples of art featuring the clever character—a 1549 depiction by Titian being the most notable. The philosopher Albert Camus wrote an essay titled “The Myth of Sisyphus,” in which the author compares the task of Sisyphus to the human struggle to find meaning in the world. Sisyphus has been featured in an animated commercial for the energy beverage Red Bull, and the myth has been referenced in songs by artists as varied as Pink Floyd and Marilyn Manson. In modern language, the phrase “labor of Sisyphus” refers to any hopeless task that must be repeated endlessly. The name Sisyphus has also been used to signify a type of dung beetle, known for rolling up large balls of dung not unlike the boulder in the myth.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

A “Sisyphean task” is a job that seemingly never ends because the work needed to complete a given goal must often be repeated many times. Sisyphus is punished with such a task. Can you think of any jobs in modern society that might be considered “Sisyphean”? Why do you think people take on such jobs? Should they be pitied? Or should they be considered heroic for their persistence?

**SEE ALSO** Greek Mythology; Hades



# Sphinx

## Character Overview

The Sphinx was a legendary winged monster of **Greek mythology** that had the body of a lion and the head of a woman. Her siblings were **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), Hydra (pronounced HYE-druh), and the Nemean (pronounced ni-MEE-uhn) Lion. The Sphinx lived on a rock outside the city of Thebes (pronounced THEEBZ), where she terrified the local people. Some sources say **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), the wife of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), sent the Sphinx to punish the king of Thebes for carrying off one of the children of Zeus. Others claim that the god **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) sent the monster because the Thebans failed to honor him properly.

The Sphinx posed a riddle to any passerby: “I have four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening, but I am weakest when I have the most legs. What am I?” No one was able to solve the riddle, and the Sphinx killed and devoured anyone who failed to answer correctly. Finally, the Greek hero **Oedipus** (pronounced ED-uh-puhs) provided the correct answer: “A human being crawls on all fours as a baby, on two legs as an adult, and with a crutch as a third leg when he grows old.” Upon hearing Oedipus’s answer, the Sphinx killed herself.

## The Sphinx in Context

Egyptian sculpture also included a type of figure called a sphinx, which had a lion’s body and the head of the pharaoh, or ruler of Egypt, or sometimes an animal representing one of the Egyptian gods. Many of these included the likenesses of male figures, but some—just like some pharaohs—were female. Egyptian sphinxes, which guarded temples and monuments, were unrelated to the Greek Sphinx, though it is possible—likely, even—that ancient Egyptian art inspired the Greek legends. The Egyptian sculptures existed nearly two thousand years before the rise of ancient Greek culture, and were located just across the Mediterranean Sea from Greece. With many ships crossing the Mediterranean as part of established trade routes, it would make sense that these figures were known to early Greeks, and their foreign location may have inspired the

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek and Egyptian

**Pronunciation**  
SFEENKS

**Alternate Names**  
Phix

**Appears In**  
Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Seneca’s *Oedipus*

**Lineage**  
Offspring of Typhon and Echidna

## Sphinx

*The sphinx was a winged monster in Greek mythology. It is best known for its role in the tragic tale of Oedipus, in which it asked a riddle of anyone attempting to enter the city of Thebes; failure to answer the riddle correctly resulted in the sphinx devouring that person.*

*Oedipus, however, correctly answered the riddle, and the phoenix killed itself.*

THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



tale of an exotic or fantastic creature previously unknown to Greeks. In fact, the name “sphinx” is actually a Greek term, used for both the mythological character and the Egyptian sculptures because there is no indication that the Egyptians gave their figures any sort of name.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the main themes of the tale of the Sphinx is the victory of shrewdness over violence. The Sphinx destroys all those who cannot

solve her clever riddle; when Oedipus figures out the solution, she kills herself. Oedipus does not have to resort to violence to defeat her. Another theme is the vengeance of the gods, since the Sphinx is sent to terrorize Thebes at the request of one of the gods.

## The Sphinx in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The tale of Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx remains one of the best-known tales from Greek mythology. Many painters have created their own depictions of the Sphinx, including Ingres and Gustave Moreau. The figure became very popular in European decoration during the sixteenth century, rendered with the realistic face and chest of a beautiful young woman and usually referred to as a “French sphinx.” In modern times, the best-known Sphinx is undoubtedly the Great Sphinx of Giza found in Egypt, which has been featured in many films; however, this monument is not directly connected to the character found in Greek myth.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Sphinx challenges travelers with a riddle. See if you can come up with a riddle to challenge your friends. Use the riddle of the Sphinx as a model: think of a thing, and describe it in a way that would require creative thinking. Make sure your clues make sense, but do not reveal the answer too easily. Example: “I tumble over a cliff, but even when I hit the bottom, I never stop falling. What am I?” Answer: a waterfall!

SEE ALSO Oedipus



# Spider Woman

## Character Overview

Spider Woman appears in the mythology of several American Indian tribes, including the Navajo, Keresan, and Hopi. In most cases, she is associated with the emergence of life on earth. She helps humans by teaching them survival skills. Spider Woman also teaches the Navajos

### Nationality/Culture

Navajo/Hopi

### Pronunciation

SPY-dur woo-muhn

### Alternate Names

Spider Grandmother

### Appears In

Navajo and Hopi oral creation myths

### Lineage

None

the art of weaving. Before weavers sit down at the loom, they often rub their hands in spiderwebs to absorb the wisdom and skill of Spider Woman.

In the Navajo creation story, Spider Woman (called Na'ashjéiasdzáá by the Navajo) helps the warrior **twins**, Monster Slayer and Child of Water, find their father, the Sun. The Keresan say that Spider Woman gave the **corn** goddess Iyatiku a basket of seeds to plant.

According to the Hopi, at the beginning of time Spider Woman controlled the **underworld**, the home of the gods, while the **sun** god Tawa ruled the sky. Using only their thoughts, they created the earth between the two other worlds. Spider Woman molded animals from clay, but they remained lifeless. So she and Tawa spread a soft white blanket over them, said some magic words, and the creatures began to move. Spider Woman then molded people from clay. To bring them to life, she clutched them to her breast, and together with Tawa, sang a song that made them into living beings. She divided the animals and people into the groups that inhabit the earth today. She also gave men and women specific roles: women were to watch over the home, and men were to pray and make offerings to the gods.

Another Hopi myth states that Tawa created insect-like beings and placed them in the First World. Dissatisfied with these creatures, Tawa sent Spider Woman to lead them, first to the Second World and then to the Third World, where they turned into people. Spider Woman taught the people how to plant, weave, and make pottery. A hummingbird gave them **fire** to help them warm themselves and cook their food. However, when sorcerers brought evil to the Third World, Spider Woman told the people to leave for the Fourth World. They planted trees to climb up to the Fourth World, but none grew tall enough. Finally, Spider Woman told them to sing to a bamboo plant or reed so that it would grow very tall. She led the people up the hollow tube of the bamboo stalk to the Fourth World, the one in which the Hopi currently live.

### Spider Woman in Context

Spider Woman may be related to a Mexican deity known as the Great Goddess of Teotihuacán (pronounced TAY-aw-tee-wah-KAHN). She is known mainly from ancient murals, where she is shown surrounded by

or covered in spiders and spiderwebs. Many scholars speculate that this goddess is associated with vegetation, like Spider Woman, and with the underworld—much like Spider Woman led the first people through the successive layers of the underworld to reach the surface. Both goddesses reflect the importance of agriculture in these early cultures, where hunting and gathering alone could not support larger communities.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Spider Woman represented wisdom and education. She provided the first people with the skills they needed to survive, such as planting crops and weaving. The spider so closely associated with the goddess is a symbol of the ability to weave and to create something from one's own body, just as a spider makes silk.

### Spider Woman in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Spider Woman is an important part of American Indian mythologies throughout the Southwest, but is not well known outside of these cultures. Playwright Murray Mednick wrote a series of one-act plays called *The Coyote Cycles* (1993) that featured Spider Grandmother as a main character. It is worth noting that the term “Spider Woman” has been used by many other characters—ranging from the villain of a 1940s Sherlock Holmes film to a series of Marvel Comics super-heroines—that have no connection to the Spider Woman of American Indian myth.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research Spider Rock in the Canyon de Chelly National Monument. How is this formation related to Spider Woman? What does Spider Rock reveal about the significance of Spider Woman to the Navajo people?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Changing Woman; Corn; Creation Stories; Native American Mythology

## Styx

See **Underworld**.



# Sun

## Theme Overview

The largest object in the sky, the sun is the source of light, heat, and life. It can also be a symbol of destructive power. Since earliest times, people in all parts of the world have observed the position of the sun and its rising and setting throughout the year. Many cultures have created solar calendars to use for planting crops and timing religious festivals. They have also given the sun a major place in their mythologies, often as a deity, or god.

## Major Myths

Some solar myths explain the sun's daily movement across the sky from east to west and its disappearance at night. Such stories often take the form of a journey, with the sun deity traveling across the heavens in a chariot or boat. Helios (pronounced HEE-lee-ohs), a Greek solar deity later identified with **Apollo**, was a charioteer who drove his fiery vehicle through **heaven** by day. At night he floated back across the ocean in a golden bowl, only to mount his chariot again the next morning. The Navajo people of the American Southwest portray their sun god as a worker named Jóhonaa'éeí, or sun bearer. Every day Jóhonaa'éeí laboriously hauls the sun across the sky on his back. At night, he hangs the sun from a peg in the wall and rests.

The Egyptian sun god **Ra** made a similar circuit. Each day he traveled across the sky in his sun boat, and at night he passed through the **underworld**, or land of the dead, greeting the dead and facing many dangers. Ra's daily cycle was more than a journey, though—it was a daily rebirth. Dawn saw the newborn sun god rise in the sky. During the morning he was a child, at noon he was mature, and by sunset he was an old man ready for death. Each sunrise was a celebration of the god's return, a victory of life over the forces of death and darkness.

In some solar myths the sun is paired with the moon. The two may be husband and wife, brother and sister, or two brothers. In the mythology of many Native Americans, the sun god and moon god are sister and brother who also become forbidden lovers. The moon god's face is smeared with ash from the sun's fires, which accounts for the dark



## Too Many Suns

If one sun is good, are ten suns ten times better? Not according to the Chinese myth of Yi and the ten suns. Yi, a famous soldier, was an archer of great skill. At that time, ten suns lived in the Fu Sang tree beyond the eastern edge of the world. Normally the suns took turns lighting the earth, one sun at a time. The suns grew rebellious, and one day all ten of them rose into the sky at the same time. The extra light and heat pleased the people below—until their crops shriveled and their rivers began to dry up. The Lord of Heaven sent Yi, the divine archer, to handle the problem. Yi shot nine of the suns out of the sky.

patches on the moon's surface. In some accounts, the moon flees in shame when he learns that his lover is also his sister. This is why the moon leaves the sky when the sun comes near.

Many cultures have myths of monsters or evil spirits that steal or devour the sun, or stories of the sun falling from the heavens or withdrawing its light for a time. Some of these myths may explain eclipses, times when the earth's shadow temporarily blots out the sun or moon. A solar eclipse creates a period of eerie near-darkness in the middle of the day—an event that would surely cry out for a reassuring explanation. A well-known myth about the Japanese sun goddess **Amaterasu** (pronounced ah-mah-te-RAH-soo), tells how she became so angry with her brother, who was misbehaving, that she retreated into a cave. The goddess's withdrawal deprived the world of light and warmth. Finally, the other gods tricked her into emerging.

According to a traditional myth from the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan, the giant Espereg-era once stole the sun and the moon. The hero god Mandi disguised himself as a child and tricked the giant's mother into adopting him. After a time with the **giants**, Mandi rescued the sun and moon and rode off with them on a magical horse. The supreme god then hurled them into the sky to shine on the world.

## The Sun in Context

The mythologies of many cultures have included a sun deity, usually a god but occasionally a goddess. Some myths reflect the sun's vital role in

## Sun

*Throughout history, many different cultures had solar deities and myths about the sun. This head of the Mayan sun god was excavated in Chiapas, Mexico.* WERNER FORMAN/  
ART RESOURCE, NY.



supporting life: solar deities are often creators who bring people into existence. Native Americans from the Pacific Coast, for example, tell how the sun god Kodoyanpe and the trickster Coyote together created the world and set about making people to live in it.

Solar deities have also been associated with fertility of people and the earth. The Hittites of ancient Turkey worshiped Arinna, an important

goddess of both the sun and fertility. In traditional myths from Uganda in Central Africa, the creator god Ruhanga, the sun god Kazooba, and the giver of life Rugaba are all the same deity.

In some mythologies, sun gods have healing powers. **Shamash** (pronounced shah-MAHSH), the solar god of the Babylonian people of the ancient Near East, was known as “the sun with healing in his wings.” Ancient Celtic peoples had Belenus (pronounced BEHL-eh-nuhs), the god of sunlight: besides driving away the predawn mists and fogs each day, Belenus could melt away disease from the sick. When the Romans conquered the Celts, they identified Belenus with their own sun god, Apollo (pronounced uh-POL-oh), who was also a god of healing.

As the most important and splendid deities of their pantheons, some solar deities have been associated with earthly rulers, the most powerful people in society. The Incas of Peru in South America regarded the sun god Inti (pronounced IN-tee), their chief deity, as the ancestor of the Inca royal family. According to Japanese tradition, the country’s imperial family is descended from Amaterasu, the sun goddess.

## The Sun in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The sun is perhaps the most universally depicted object in all of mythological art. It appears in ancient Egyptian and Persian art as well as in some of the first examples of Nordic art. Some of the most enduring depictions of the sun in mythological art include the ancient Egyptian god Ra, usually pictured with the head of a falcon crowned with a sun disk; the Greek gods Helios and Apollo, often shown pulling the sun through the sky with a chariot; and the Japanese goddess Amaterasu, shown exiting the cave where she hides to bring sunlight back into the world. In modern times, the image of the sun is still used in advertising and art to symbolize life, purity, health, and happiness.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Sun deities are often thought of as male figures. However, many sun deities in cultures around the world are female, such as Amaterasu. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research various cultures with either male or female sun deities. Why do you think some cultures view the sun as a male figure, while others

view it as a female figure? What do you think this might indicate about those cultures?

**SEE ALSO** Amaterasu; Apollo; Aten; Lug; Ra; Shamash

## Sundiata

*See* **Sunjata**.



### **Nationality/Culture**

African

### **Pronunciation**

soon-JAH-tuh

### **Alternate Names**

Sundiata

### **Appears In**

The Epic of Sunjata

### **Lineage**

Son of the king of Manding

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## Sunjata

### **Character Overview**

Sunjata is the hero of an African epic popular among the people of Mali in the Sahel region of West Africa. He may be based on a king named Sundiata or Sundjata, who founded the kingdom of Mali around 1240 CE. His story is filled with supernatural elements, from the hero's mysterious birth to his extraordinary strength.

The epic of Sunjata begins with the hero's childhood. The son of the king of Manding, Sunjata was born under unusual circumstances. His mother was pregnant with him for eight years when a magical spirit called a jinni (or genie) told Sunjata's father that the boy would someday become a great king.

As a child, Sunjata performed many amazing deeds and earned the name Mari Djata (the Lion of Manding) because he could transform himself into a lion. Sunjata's father grew afraid of him and used his power to paralyze the boy. But after seven years the king recognized Sunjata's wisdom and restored his son to health. Sunjata's miraculous deeds continued. He taught wild animals to gather firewood and helped a group of witches bring back to life a boy they had killed.

Sunjata lived in the countryside, killing eight hundred elephants and eight thousand lions. However, on the death of his father, he returned to Manding and won a competition against one of his brothers to become king. The young ruler's first task was to kill a terrible beast—a witch in the shape of an animal—that had been terrorizing the people. The old



*The African hero Sunjata may have been based on a king named Sundiata who founded the kingdom of Mali around 1240 CE. The town of Kirina, shown here, was one of three towns that formed the foundation for the empire.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

witch was so impressed by Sunjata's kindness and wisdom that she told him how to kill her. He did so and became a hero. Later, Sunjata went to war against a wicked king who claimed his throne. After defeating this demon king with the help of his sister, Sunjata went on to conquer an extensive area that became the empire of Mali. According to legend, Sunjata ruled with fairness and in peace.

### **Sunjata in Context**

It is generally acknowledged that Sunjata was a historical figure who lived around the thirteenth century CE. Sumanguru, the evil king in the legend, is

believed to be responsible for killing several of Sunjata's siblings in an attempt to protect his kingdom from the royal Keita family, which had rightful claim. Sunjata was exiled at a young age, but gained support from surrounding leaders who all wished to see Sumanguru dethroned. Sunjata eventually led an army against Sumanguru at the Battle of Kirina in 1235 and defeated him. Sunjata spent the next several years reclaiming his kingdom and creating a capital at the important trade center of Niani. As the most important figure in the creation of the Mali Empire, it is not surprising that the people of Mali would expand upon these facts to create an enduring legend about Sunjata.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One central theme in the myth of Sunjata is the idea of the rightful heir to the throne. Sunjata and his siblings, as members of the royal Keita family, were by tradition the rightful inheritors of the kingdom. Although Sunjata was exiled, he eventually claimed his rightful place by defeating Sumanguru. Sunjata himself was able to transform into a lion, which has long been considered a symbol of fierceness, nobility, and leadership.

### Sunjata in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Epic of Sunjata is an important part of West African culture and is still performed by griots, traveling artists who function as musicians, singers, poets, and historians. Many of the most popular musical artists in Mali are griots who have adapted traditional songs and tales into modern compositions. The internationally known singer-songwriter Salif Keita, though not a griot, is acknowledged to be a descendant of Sunjata. The legend of Sunjata, who has historically been referred to as “the lion king of Mali,” may have also loosely inspired the 1994 Disney animated film *The Lion King*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Sundiata: A Legend of Africa* (2003) by Will Eisner is a retelling of the Sunjata myth in comic book form. The book includes a brief historical introduction to its subject. Eisner is best known as the creator of the influential comic series *The Spirit* (begun in 1940) and the graphic novel *A Contract with God, and Other Tenement Stories* (1978).

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Heroes; Witches and Wizards



# Surya

## Character Overview

In Hindu mythology, Surya is recognized as the god of the **sun**. He rides across the sky each day in a chariot pulled by seven horses, and is worshipped as the most visible of all the gods, seen by followers every single day. He is the son of Kasyapa (pronounced kahsh-YUH-puh), and is sometimes said to be in the form of one of the three principal deities: **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh), **Vishnu** (pronounced VISH-noo), or **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh).

## Major Myths

Some Hindus believe that Surya takes the form of the three gods of the Trimurti (pronounced tri-MOOR-tee), the main gods of the Hindu pantheon, as it travels across the sky. In the morning, the sun is Brahma, the creator god. As it reaches the height of its power, it is Vishnu, the preserver. As it descends and ultimately leaves the world in darkness, it is Shiva, the destroyer.

Surya's most notable appearances in myth are found in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, two important Hindu epics. In the *Mahabharata*, Surya is accidentally summoned by princess Kunti (pronounced KOON-tee), who is given the ability to call upon any god and have a child with him. Not believing the power is real, she calls Surya and he appears. He insists on fulfilling his duty, and Kunti immediately gives birth to a son. Ashamed and scared, she abandons the baby in a basket and floats it down the river. The boy grows up to become Karna, one of the central figures in the *Mahabharata*, where he battles the hero Arjuna (pronounced AHR-juh-nuh) at Kurukshetra (pronounced khuh-rook-SHAY-truh). In the *Ramayana*, Surya is the father of the monkey king Sugriva (pronounced soo-GREE-vuh), who pledges his armies to help Rama after Rama assists him in reclaiming his throne.

## Surya in Context

A symbol commonly associated with Surya, and found frequently in ancient Hindu texts, is the bent-cross design called the swastika. The

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

SOOR-yuh

### Alternate Names

Vivasvat, Mitra, Savita, Ravi

### Appears In

The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*

### Lineage

Son of Kasyapa

symbol was originally meant as a sign of good luck or well-being. From India, the symbol spread across Asia and even into Europe, all the while retaining its meaning as a symbol of good fortune (though it was not usually seen as a symbol of the sun, as in Hinduism). Pilots frequently wore the symbol as a good luck charm, or had it painted somewhere on their plane in hopes of safe passage. In the 1920s, however, the Nazi Party of Germany appropriated the symbol as their own in an effort to draw a connection between Germans and the ancient Aryan peoples of India and Iran, who they believed were the most superior race of all humankind. Although in India the symbol is still used in Hindu and other religious decorations, in the West it is now largely associated with the hatred and genocide brought about by the Nazis before and during World War II.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

As the embodiment of not one but all three of the gods of the Trimurti, Surya symbolizes the entire cycle of the universe, from creation to preservation to destruction, in a single day. Surya himself is represented by the sun. The seven horses of Surya's chariot are meant to represent the seven *chakras* (pronounced CHUK-ruh-z), or centers of spiritual energy within the body.

### **Surya in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Surya is often depicted as a golden figure riding through the sky in a chariot pulled by seven horses. He is sometimes shown holding lotus flowers, and is usually depicted with four arms. Many temples have been built throughout India in honor of Surya, including a well-known temple built in the thirteenth century CE in the town of Konark; the entire structure was designed to resemble the sun god's chariot. In yoga, Surya Namaskara, which means "salute to the sun," is the name given to a popular sequence of yoga positions usually performed at sunrise.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

The swastika was a well-regarded religious symbol for centuries before the Nazis adopted it for their own purposes. For this reason, while some people might be offended by the appearance of a swastika in Hindu



religious art, others might see it as an expression of traditional ways and beliefs. Do you think the government should have the right to restrict the display of certain symbols if they are viewed negatively by most citizens? Why or why not? What if the symbol were a Confederate flag—flown by the South during the American Civil War—instead of a swastika?

**SEE ALSO** *Mahabharata, The*; *Ramayana, The*; Shiva; Vishnu



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# T



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Tammuz

See **Ishtar**.

## Tellus

See **Gaia**.



## Tezcatlipoca

### Character Overview

Tezcatlipoca was one of the most important gods of the Aztecs of central Mexico. His name, meaning Lord of the Smoking Mirror, refers to the mirrors made of obsidian, a shiny black stone that Aztec priests used in divination, or attempts to predict the future. Tezcatlipoca played many contradictory roles in **Aztec mythology**. Like other Aztec deities, he could be both helpful and destructive. As a god of the **sun**, he ripened the crops but could also send a burning drought that killed the plants. The protector of helpless people, such as orphans and slaves, he was also associated with royalty, and he gloried in war and human **sacrifice**. Another of Tezcatlipoca's roles was to punish sinners and cheats, even though he himself was often portrayed as untrustworthy.

#### Nationality/Culture

Aztec

#### Pronunciation

tehs-cah-tee-POH-cah

#### Alternate Names

Titlacauan

#### Appears In

Aztec creation myths

#### Lineage

None

Although associated with the sun, Tezcatlipoca was even more strongly linked with night and its dark mysteries, including dreams, sorcery, witches, and demons. Legend said that he roamed the earth each night in the form of a skeleton whose ribs opened like doors. If a person met Tezcatlipoca and was bold enough to reach through those doors and seize his heart, the god would promise riches and power in order to be released. He would not keep his promises, though.

### Major Myths

As a trickster god, Tezcatlipoca delighted in overturning the order of things, causing conflict and confusion. Sometimes these disruptions could also be a source of creative energy and positive change. Tezcatlipoca's ultimate trick was one he played on his fellow god **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l). After introducing Quetzalcoatl to drunkenness and other vices, he used his mirror to show Quetzalcoatl how weak and degraded he had become. Quetzalcoatl fled the world in shame, leaving it to Tezcatlipoca. He did, however, promise to return at the end of a fifty-two-year cycle.

Indeed, the battles between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca led to the creation and destruction of the five different worlds in Aztec mythology. In the first world, Tezcatlipoca created himself as the sun, but Quetzalcoatl defeated him, so he then transformed into a jaguar. Tezcatlipoca led other jaguars in the destruction of all people, which ended the world of the first sun. After that, Quetzalcoatl became the second sun, and ruled his people until Tezcatlipoca turned them all into monkeys for not respecting the gods. This fight between the two gods continued until the establishment of the world of the fifth sun, which is what exists today.

### Tezcatlipoca in Context

Tezcatlipoca reflects the Aztec belief that change—especially change through conflict or disorder—is an essential part of life. Tezcatlipoca is an instrument of change throughout Aztec creation mythology, and while these changes are sometimes positive and sometimes negative, they ultimately reflect the progression of people to their current civilized state. Tezcatlipoca changes all the people into monkeys when they become complacent; this again reflects the importance, in the eyes of the Aztecs, of a human culture that always changes and progresses.

*This mask of the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca is made from a human skull decorated with turquoise and lignite. ERICH LESSING/ART RESOURCE, NY.*



## Key Themes and Symbols

Like many **tricksters**, Tezcatlipoca was a symbol of disorder and mischief. He often tried to interfere with the actions of the other gods, such as when he shamed Quetzalcoatl. One of the main themes running throughout the Aztec creation myths is the conflict between Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl, and how this leads to the creation of each of the different worlds.

## Tezcatlipoca in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Tezcatlipoca was often depicted with yellow and black stripes across his face, and with his right foot replaced by a snake or an obsidian mirror. Sometimes Tezcatlipoca was depicted in the form of a jaguar, a reference to the myth of the world of the first sun. In modern times, Tezcatlipoca has appeared in the 2001 science fiction novel *Smoking Mirror Blues* by Ernest Hogan. The book tells the story of how a version of the god, created by computer programmers, becomes conscious and takes over the body of a human.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the use of obsidian by Aztec and other early Central American tribes. Where

did they get it? What was it used for? Why do you think it played a part in Aztec mythology?

SEE ALSO Aztec Mythology; Quetzalcoatl



**Nationality/Culture**

Greek

**Pronunciation**

THEE-see-uhs

**Alternate Names**

None

**Appears In**

Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*,  
Hyginus's *Fabulae*

**Lineage**

Son of King Aegeus and  
Aethra

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# Theseus

## Character Overview

Theseus, a hero of **Greek mythology**, is best known for slaying a monster called the **Minotaur** (pronounced MIN-uh-tawr). His life and adventures illustrate many themes of Greek myths, including the idea that even the mightiest hero cannot escape tragedy if that is his fate.

**Mysterious Origins** Like many other **heroes** of myth and legend, Theseus was born and raised in unusual and dramatic circumstances. His mother was Aethra (pronounced EE-thruh), daughter of King Pittheus (pronounced PIT-thee-uhs) of Troezen (pronounced TREE-zen). Although some accounts name **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun) as his father, most say that Theseus was the son of King Aegeus (pronounced EE-joos) of Athens, who had stopped at Troezen after consulting the oracle at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye).

The oracle had warned Aegeus not to get drunk or father a child on his way home to Athens, or one day he would die of sorrow. However, at Troezen, Aegeus ignored the warnings and became Aethra's lover. Before leaving for Athens, he placed his sandals and sword under a boulder and told Aethra that if she bore a son who could lift the boulder, that son would inherit the throne of Athens.

Their son Theseus grew into a strong young man, and one day he easily lifted the boulder and retrieved the sandals and the sword. He then set off for Athens to claim his heritage. On the way, he faced a series of challenges: three vicious and murderous outlaws; a monstrous pig that was destroying the countryside; a king who challenged travelers to fatal wrestling matches; and an innkeeper named Procrustes (pronounced proh-KRUS-teez) who tortured people by either stretching them or chopping off their limbs to make them fit his beds. Theseus overcame

these dangerous opponents and killed them by the same methods they had used against their victims.

**Meeting the Minotaur** Upon arriving in Athens, Theseus found King Aegeus married to an enchantress named **Medea** (pronounced me-DEE-uh). Medea tried to poison Theseus, but when Aegeus saw the young man's sword and sandals, he realized that Theseus was his son and saved him from the poison. Medea fled, and Theseus became heir to the Athenian throne. He continued his heroic feats, defeating a plot against his father and destroying a savage wild bull.

Athens labored under a terrible curse. Earlier, Aegeus had sent another warrior, the son of King Minos (pronounced MYE-nuhs) of Crete, against the bull. The prince had died, and in revenge King Minos called down a plague on the Athenians. Only by sending seven young men and seven young women to Crete every year could they obtain relief. In Crete the youths were sacrificed to the Minotaur, a monstrous man-bull that lived below Minos's castle in a maze called the Labyrinth (pronounced LAB-uh-rinth).

Determined to end this grim practice, Theseus volunteered to be one of the victims. When the Athenians reached Crete, Minos's daughter **Ariadne** (pronounced ar-ee-AD-nee) fell in love with Theseus. Before Theseus entered the Labyrinth, Ariadne gave him a ball of yarn and told him to unwind it on his way in so that he could find his way out again. Deep in the maze Theseus met the Minotaur and killed it with a blow from his fist. He and the other Athenians then set sail for Athens, taking Ariadne with them. Along the way, they stopped at the island of Naxos (pronounced NAK-suhs), where Theseus abandoned Ariadne.

Theseus had promised his father that if he returned safely to Athens he would raise a white sail on his homecoming ship. He forgot to do so, however, and left the black sail hoisted. When Aegeus saw the black-sailed vessel approaching, he killed himself in grief, thus fulfilling the prophecy he had heard at Delphi.

**Later Adventures** On his father's death, Theseus became king of the city-state of Athens, where he won honor and was credited with enlarging the kingdom. His name sometimes appears in myths about heroic deeds, such as a battle against the **centaurs** (half-man, half-horse creatures), or the quest of **Jason** and the **Argonauts** (pronounced AHR-guh-nawts) for the **Golden Fleece**. Theseus also went to war against the

female warriors known as **Amazons** (pronounced AM-uh-zonz), and he captured and married one of them—either Hippolyta (pronounced hye-POL-i-tuh), the Amazon queen, or her sister Antiope (pronounced an-TEE-oh-pee). This wife bore him a son, Hippolytus (pronounced hye-POL-i-tuhs).

After his Amazon wife died, Theseus eventually married Phaedra (pronounced FEE-druh), said to be a sister of Ariadne. Phaedra fell passionately in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, who rejected her love. The scorned Phaedra hanged herself, leaving a letter in which she accused Hippolytus of raping her. Furious, Theseus asked the god Poseidon to destroy Hippolytus, and the god fulfilled the king's wish. Later, Theseus learned the truth and knew that he had wrongly caused the death of his only son.

Theseus's final adventures were less than glorious. Seeking another wife, he kidnapped a daughter of **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), the king of the gods. He also became involved in a plot to carry off **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), queen of the **underworld**. These events brought trouble upon Athens, and the people drove Theseus away. Now a lonely old man, Theseus took refuge on the island of Skyros (pronounced SKY-rohs), but the local king, regarding Theseus as a possible rival, pushed the hero off a cliff to his death.

## **Theseus in Context**

The myth of Theseus and the Labyrinth may reflect ancient relationships between the Minoan civilization and the ancient Greeks. Minoan civilization was established on the island of Crete long before mainland Greek culture rose to prominence, with the Minoans lasting until about the fifteenth century BCE. It is quite possible that, in the final days of Minoan prominence, rulers on Crete clashed with Greek forces in an attempt to maintain control of their empire. Ultimately, the ancient Greeks flourished and assumed control of Crete. This history mirrors the myth, with King Minos threatening to attack Athens after his son is killed, and provides an explanation for the tension between the two cultures.

## **Key Themes and Symbols**

One of the themes found in the myth of Theseus is the idea that one cannot escape destiny—the path of one's life as determined by the gods. This was true for Theseus's father, who ignored warnings not to father a



*Theseus, a hero of Greek mythology, is best known for slaying a half-man, half-bull monster called the Minotaur.*

HULTON ARCHIVE/STRINGER/  
GETTY IMAGES.



child. Ultimately, this led to his death by sorrow when he thought his son had been killed. Another interesting theme in the myths of Theseus is the appearance of false messages. When Theseus returned from Crete, he forgot to change the color of the sails on his boat, which caused his father to think he was dead. Later, his wife Phaedra left a letter that falsely accused Hippolytus of raping her, which led Theseus to ask the gods to kill his son.

The myths of Theseus also focus on the theme of ill-fated love. Although Ariadne fell in love with Theseus and helped him escape the Labyrinth, he abandoned her on Naxos as soon as he was able. Later, he fell in love with an Amazon, but she died. He then married Phaedra, who, instead of loving Theseus, loved his son. Theseus then tried to kidnap another wife, a plan that failed and brought him disgrace.

### Theseus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The myth of Theseus and the Minotaur is one of the best-known tales of Greek mythology. Perhaps because of this, the character of Theseus has made several appearances in other works unrelated to the myth. These include a tale from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and William Shakespeare's plays *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Modern retellings of the myth include "The House of Asterion" (1949) by Argentinian fantasist Jorge Luis Borges, and two novels from Mary Renault, *The King Must Die* (1958) and *The Bull from the Sea* (1962), each of which covers different periods of the life of Theseus.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Lost in the Labyrinth* (2002) by Patrice Kindl offers a unique retelling of the myth of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur. The story is told from the point of view of Ariadne's younger sister, Xenodice. In this version of the tale, the Minotaur is mostly gentle but misunderstood, while Ariadne and Theseus may be less heroic than they appear—and it is up to Xenodice to straighten things out.

#### Nationality/Culture

Norse/German

#### Pronunciation

THOR

#### Alternate Names

Donner (German)

#### Appears In

The Eddas, Germanic myths

#### Lineage

Son of Odin and Jord

**SEE ALSO** Amazons; Argonauts; Ariadne; Delphi; Greek Mythology; Heroes; Medea



## Thor

### Character Overview

Thor was the god of thunder and of the sky in Norse and early Germanic mythology. Though **Odin** (pronounced OH-din) held a higher rank,

Thor seems to have been the best loved and most worshipped of the Norse deities (gods). He belonged to the common people, while Odin appealed to the educated and noble classes. A protector of farmers, Thor was associated with weather and crops. Although he could be fearsome, many myths portray him in a comic and affectionate way.

Thor appears throughout **Norse mythology** as a huge, strongly built, red-bearded fellow with a huge appetite. Some myths say that Thor was the son of Odin and Jord (pronounced YORD), the earth goddess. His wife was the beautiful goddess Sif, who seldom appears in myths and remains a somewhat mysterious figure.

Generally good-natured, Thor had a hot temper and his anger was dreadful to behold. He was a fierce enemy of the frost **giants**, the foes of the Norse gods. When people heard thunder and saw lightning in the sky, they knew that Thor was fighting these evil giants.

The thunder god's chief weapon was his mighty hammer Mjolnir (pronounced MYAWL-nir), or Crusher, which the dwarves had forged for him. When he threw Mjolnir, it returned magically to his hand like a boomerang. Among Mjolnir's other powers was the gift of restoring life to the dead. The connection of Thor's hammer with life and fertility gave rise to the old Norse customs of placing a hammer in a bride's lap at her wedding and of raising it over a newborn child.

Thor's treasures included a magical belt that doubled his strength whenever he wore it. He also had a pair of goats, Tanngniost and Tanngrisni, that pulled his chariot across the sky. Whenever he was overcome with hunger, Thor would devour his goats, only to return them to life with Mjolnir.

## Major Myths

According to one well-known myth about Thor, Thrym, king of the giants, came into possession of Mjolnir and declared that he would give it back to Thor only if the beautiful goddess **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh) agreed to marry him. She angrily refused, and the trickster god **Loki** (pronounced LOH-kee) came up with a clever plan to recover Mjolnir. Using women's clothing and a bridal veil to disguise Thor as Freyja, Loki escorted "Freyja" to Jotunheim (pronounced YAW-toon-heym), the home of the giants. Thrym greeted his bride, though he was surprised at her appetite at the wedding feast. "Freyja" consumed an entire ox, three barrels of wine, and much more. Loki explained that she had been

unable to eat for a week because of her excitement at marrying Thrym. The giant accepted this explanation, and the wedding proceeded. When the time came for a hammer to be placed in the bride's lap according to custom, Thor grabbed Mjolnir and threw off his disguise. Then he used the hammer to smash the giants and their hall.

During another visit to Jotunheim, Thor and Loki met Skrymir (pronounced SKREE-mir), an especially large giant. He was so big that when they wandered into one of his gloves, they thought they were in a mansion and slept in one of the fingers. In the morning they found Skrymir sleeping, and Thor tried to crush the giant's head with Mjolnir. Skrymir simply brushed away the blow as though it were no more than a falling leaf.

The gods traveled on to Utgard (pronounced OOT-gard), a city of giants, where the giants challenged Thor to drain their drinking cup and lift their cat from the floor. He could not do either—the cup was connected to the sea, and the cat was really Jormungand (pronounced YAWR-moon-gahnd), the serpent that encircles the world. Although Thor failed the tests, he came close to draining the ocean and removing the world serpent.

Several early Norse sources recount the myth of Thor's encounter with the giant Hymir. Thor disguised himself as a young man and went fishing with Hymir, first killing the giant's largest ox to use for bait. Thor then rowed their boat far out of sight of land and cast his hook. Something bit at the ox, and Thor drew up his line to discover that he had hooked Jormungand, the giant serpent. Placing his feet on the ocean floor, Thor pulled and pulled on the line, while the serpent spit out poison. Just as Thor was about to strike Jormungand with his hammer, Hymir cut the line and the serpent sank back down to the depths. Many myths say, however, that Thor and Jormungand remained bitter enemies, fated to fight again on the day called **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the end of the world, when they will kill one another.

## **Thor in Context**

For the Germanic and Norse people, Thor represented much more than just the god of thunder. In the final years of Germanic dominance, Thor became a symbol of pre-Christian beliefs, embraced by many who held onto their traditional roots and condemned by those attempting to expand Christianity throughout northern Europe. A tree known as



*Thor holding his hammer and riding his chariot pulled by two goats, Tanngiost and Tanngrisni. © CHARLES WALKER/TOFFOTO/THE IMAGE WORKS.*

Thor's Oak was considered sacred by the Germanic tribe called the Chatti.

When a Christian missionary—later known by the name St. Boniface—arrived in the area in an attempt to convert the locals, he noted the importance of the tree in their beliefs. He had the tree cut

down to prove the superiority of Christianity; when Thor did not strike the missionary dead with lightning for this act, many of the Chatti agreed to convert to Christianity. Afterward, Christian missionaries often singled out Thor as an example of a false god who had to be renounced in order to prove one's faith in God. Legends and beliefs about Thor continued, however, as part of a German folk tradition that could not be erased by the spread of Christianity.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

To the Norse and Germanic people, Thor represented the devastating power of storms. The pounding of his hammer symbolized the crackle of thunder; storms were thought to represent Thor's battles against the giants. One of the main themes in the tales of Thor is the ongoing battle between the giants and the Norse gods. Most of his tales center on exacting revenge against the giants, or battling with them in a prelude to the final war against the giants at Ragnarok.

### **Thor in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

In Norse art, Thor is depicted as having red hair and a red beard, holding his trusted hammer Mjolnir and often being pulled in his chariot by his trusted goats. In modern times, Thor is perhaps the best-known god in Norse mythology. This is primarily due to the popularity of the Marvel Comics superhero Thor, based on the mythical god. Thor has appeared in this form in countless comic books and in several animated television series and video games. Thor also appears under his German name, Donner, as a character in Richard Wagner's series of operas known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*).

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Though most of Scandinavia was converted to Christianity by about the twelfth century, the Sami people of northern regions of Finland, Norway, and Russia remained particularly devoted to Thor until they were forcibly converted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today, the Sami maintain a distinctive culture in which many ancient cultural influences are detectable. Using your library and the Internet, find out more about Sami culture. Write a paper summarizing your findings.

**SEE ALSO** Loki; Norse Mythology; Odin



# Thoth

## Character Overview

Thoth was the Egyptian god of wisdom and knowledge. Honored as the inventor of writing and the founder of branches of learning, such as art, astronomy, medicine, law, and magic, he was the god associated with scribes, the official writers who documented ancient Egyptian culture and beliefs. Ancient Egyptians associated Thoth with the moon and identified him as the son of **Ra**, the supreme **sun** god. According to legend, Thoth possessed books of wisdom that contained secret information about nature and magic. Although the books were hidden, certain scribes had access to them.

## Major Myths

Thoth played a key role in the Egyptian story of the **afterlife**. Known to be fair and impartial, Thoth judged the souls of the dead by weighing their hearts against a feather that represented truth. After recording the results, he told **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris), ruler of the **underworld** or land of the dead, whether the individual had led a just life.

Thoth also played an important role in the creation of the Egyptian pantheon, or collection of recognized gods. According to myth, the goddess **Nut**—who had married her twin brother Geb against the wishes of Ra—was not allowed to have children during any month of the year, which originally consisted of only 360 days. Thoth felt sorry for Nut and gambled with the moon in an effort to win a portion of its light. Thoth won and turned that light into five additional days for each year. During those five days, Nut gave birth to her five children: Osiris, **Isis** (pronounced EYE-sis), **Set** (pronounced SET), Nephthys (pronounced NEF-this), and **Horus** (pronounced HOHR-uhs).

## Thoth in Context

The nature of the god Thoth reflects the importance of the moon and calendars in ancient Egypt. Thoth was originally seen as a moon god, with the curve of the beak on his ibis head even resembling a crescent moon. As the observation of the moon became a crucial part of determining the passage of months and seasons—the basis for early

### Nationality/Culture

Egyptian

### Pronunciation

TOHT

### Alternate Names

Djehuty, Sheps, Asten

### Appears In

*Egyptian Book of the Dead*

### Lineage

Son of Ra

## Thoth

*The Egyptian god Thoth writing on a tablet. Thoth is credited with the invention of writing.* © CHARLES WALKER/ TOPFOTO/THE IMAGE WORKS.



Egyptian calendars—Thoth came to be seen as the god of wisdom and knowledge. The Egyptians used these calendars to determine when to plant and harvest crops, and were one the first societies to establish a month and year cycle similar to what is still used today. The first month of the Egyptian year was even named after their god of the moon and wisdom, Thoth.

### Key Themes and Symbols

Thoth represented wisdom to the ancient Egyptians. He was also known as the “tongue of Ra,” the tongue symbolizing his eloquence of speech as the speaker for the supreme god. He was seen as a force of levelheadedness and compromise among the gods, as shown in his acquisition of five extra days in each year for Nut.

### Thoth in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

In works of art, Thoth appears as either a human with the head of an ibis—a bird with a long, curved bill—or a baboon that supports the moon on its head. In modern times, Thoth was popularized by occult author Aleister Crowley in *The Book of Thoth*, which outlined the proper use of a deck of Tarot cards he created known as the Thoth Tarot. The Thoth Tarot has gone on to become one of the most popular decks of Tarot cards ever created.



## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Calendars played a crucial role in ancient societies. Nearly all important tasks, including religious rituals and agricultural tasks, relied upon knowledge of dates and seasons. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the ancient Egyptian calendar. How does it differ from the calendar we use today? Does it have any advantages over our modern calendar? Does it have any disadvantages? Does the Egyptian calendar reflect ancient Egyptian beliefs? If so, how?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Egyptian Mythology; Osiris; Ra; Underworld



# Thunderbird

## Character Overview

An important figure in American Indian mythology, the Thunderbird represents the natural forces of thunder, lightning, and storms. It is also believed to protect humans by fighting evil spirits. Many different cultural groups have their own stories about the bird, and some cultures even refer to groups or races of such birds.

## Major Myths

The Thunderbird is thought by some to be one of the main gods of the sky. It creates thunder by flapping its wings and causes lightning by opening and closing its beak and eyes. Usually described as a huge bird, the Thunderbird is large enough to carry off a whale to eat and to split open trees to find insects for food.

The Algonquian people consider Thunderbirds to be ancestors of the human race, involved with the creation of the universe. According to a Shawnee tale, Thunderbirds appear as boys and can speak backwards. Other cultures believe in four Thunderbirds that guard a nest holding an egg, which hatches all other birds of their type.

A Lakota Sioux (pronounced SOO) myth says that the great Thunderbird was the grandson of the sky spirit that created the world and put people on it. But the water spirit Unktehi (pronounced UN-teh-hee) thought the people were lice, and she and her followers tried to drown

### Nationality/Culture

American Indian

### Pronunciation

THUHN-der-burd

### Alternate Names

Animikii (Ojibwa), Jojo (Kwakiutl)

### Appears In

Various American Indian oral mythologies

### Lineage

Varies

them. The people retreated to the highest hill they could find and prayed for help. The Thunderbird came to fight Unktehi and sent lightning crashing to earth. The ground split open, and Unktehi and her followers drained into the cracks. As a result, humankind was saved.

### The Thunderbird in Context

Though no evidence exists of gigantic birds that existed during the time of humans, the American Indian myth of the Thunderbird may have some basis in scientific fact. According to legend, the birds are the bringers of storms, which means they would appear in front of approaching storm clouds. Storm clouds generally form at the boundary between air masses of different pressures; this collision of air masses can

also result in a strong updraft, or a wind that flows upward. Zoologists are already familiar with large birds that use updrafts as a way to fly without wasting energy; it is possible that the “thunderbirds” of American Indian legend were based on sightings of large birds, such as eagles or condors, that utilized the updrafts created at storm fronts in order to glide with little effort. To some, it might appear that such birds were leading the storm across the sky.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The Thunderbird is an embodiment of the thunderstorm: its wings are associated with thunder and wind, and its eyes are linked to lightning. Although the Thunderbird is associated with fierce power, in many myths it also represents a protective or helpful force for humankind. The Thunderbird was viewed as a provider, since rain was necessary for the growth of crops and for the grasses that fed the buffalo.

### The Thunderbird in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Thunderbird is found in many American Indian cultures. It is often seen on the totem

*A Haida thunderbird sculpture.* © PRIVATE COLLECTION/  
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AMERICANA/THE  
BRIDGEMAN ART  
LIBRARY.



poles of the Kwakiutl (pronounced kwah-kee-OOT-l) of the Pacific Northwest and in the art of the Navajo and Sioux. In modern times, the mythical creature is believed by some to be a real animal that has so far escaped human study, similar to Bigfoot. The legendary bird also loosely inspired a Marvel Comics superhero of the same name, an Apache with superhuman strength and speed whose costume was decorated with an image of the Thunderbird. Many commercial products have borrowed the name of Thunderbird, including a brand of bass guitar, an inexpensive wine, and a line of Ford automobiles, among many others.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Many products and services in modern times take their names from mythical figures. The Ford Thunderbird is one example, and the Venus women's razor is another. See if you can think of another example that has not already been mentioned. Why do you think so many products are named after characters from mythology? Do you think this reveals anything about the place of mythology in modern society?

SEE ALSO Native American Mythology



## Tiamat

### Character Overview

Tiamat was an ancient goddess of salt waters and chaos, or disorder. She is mentioned in the Babylonian (pronounced bab-uh-LOH-nee-uhn) creation story called the *Enuma Elish*, found inscribed on clay tablets dating back to around 1100 BCE. She is the mother of the gods, and her body was used to make the world.

### Major Myths

At the beginning of the universe, Tiamat and Apsu (pronounced AHP-soo), the spirit of fresh waters, gave birth to all the gods. She also gave birth to all manner of beasts, such as serpents and scorpion-people. Tiamat's son Ea (pronounced AY-uh, also known as Enki) soon challenged and

#### Nationality/Culture

Babylonian

#### Pronunciation

TYAH-maht

#### Alternate Names

Thalatte (Greek)

#### Appears In

The *Enuma Elish*

#### Lineage

None

## Divine Creation

A theme repeated throughout world mythologies is the creation of heaven and earth through the sacrifice of a deity or primal being. Marduk split Tiamat in half and shaped heaven and earth from her ribs. Her tears became the source of the two major rivers in Mesopotamia, the Tigris and the Euphrates. In Indian mythology, Purusha, the original being, is sacrificed by the gods and from his body are created the sky, moon, earth, sun, and the four castes of Indian society. These creation stories indicate that people have always sought a divine origin for their existence.

killed Apsu, but he could not defeat Tiamat. Ea then enlisted the help of his son **Marduk**, who destroyed the legions of monsters Tiamat created as her army. Then he rode out in a chariot to do battle with Tiamat in the form of a dragon. As Marduk approached, Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow him, but Marduk threw a storm into Tiamat's mouth and prevented her from closing it. Then he killed her by shooting an arrow into her belly. After cutting Tiamat's body into pieces, Marduk used them to create the heavens and the earth.

## Tiamat in Context

In the myth of Tiamat and Marduk, it is important to understand that Marduk was the patron, or protector god, of Babylon. When Babylon rose to prominence in the ancient world, stories that glorified their chosen god were favored. Earlier versions of the myth developed before the rise of Babylonian civilization may have differed in details related to Marduk. Some scholars have suggested that the killing of Tiamat by Marduk reflects a Babylonian victory over an earlier, matriarchal society where women hold the ruling power. However, this theory is not widely accepted.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The myth of Tiamat emphasizes the connection between the world and the gods, and also highlights the split nature of the universe. The

world and the heavens are created from the dead body of the goddess; similarly, the blood of her ally Kingu (pronounced KIN-goo) is used to make humankind. This reflects the presence of the divine in all parts of the world. The split nature of the universe is shown in the presence of two ancient forces—one a creation of salt water and one of fresh water. This is also shown in Tiamat's defeat, when Marduk slices her in two to create the heavens from one half and the earth from the other half.

### Tiamat in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Tiamat is mostly known from the *Enuma Elish*, which was rediscovered by modern scholars in the nineteenth century. In mainstream culture, Tiamat is a well-known deity in the *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing game universe, though she is depicted as a multi-headed dragon and is only marginally connected with the original Babylonian goddess. Tiamat also appeared in the animated television series *Dungeons & Dragons* (1983), and in several video games, including *Golden Sun* for Nintendo's Game Boy Advance and the *Final Fantasy* series.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The creation myth of the Babylonians is based on the deities of the waters. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, locate Babylon on a map of the ancient world. What sources of fresh water are located near it? What sources of salt water can be found nearby? Why do you think the goddess of salt water is depicted as more powerful and chaotic than the god of fresh water?

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; *Enuma Elish*; Marduk; Semitic Mythology



## Titans

### Character Overview

The Titans were gigantic, powerful, ancient beings that loomed in the background of many Greek myths and tales. Children of **Uranus** (pronounced YOOR-uh-nuhs) and **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the

**Nationality/Culture**  
Greek

**Pronunciation**  
TYE-tuhnz

**Alternate Names**  
None

**Appears In**  
Hesiod's *Theogony*

**Lineage**  
The children of Uranus and Gaia

Titans ruled the world before they were overthrown by the god **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) and his brothers and sisters. Originally there were twelve Titans. The Greek writer Hesiod listed six male Titans—Oceanus (pronounced oh-SEE-uh-nuhs), Coeus (pronounced SEE-uhs), **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs), Crius (pronounced KRYE-uhs), Hyperion (pronounced hy-PEER-ee-on), and Iapetus (pronounced eye-AP-uh-tus)—and six female Titanesses—Tethys (pronounced TEE-this), Themis (pronounced THEEM-is), Phoebe (pronounced FEE-bee), Mnemosyne (pronounced nee-MOSS-uh-nee), Theia (pronounced THEE-uh), and Rhea (pronounced REE-uh). Some accounts add the brothers **Prometheus** (pronounced pruh-MEE-thee-uhs), Epimetheus (pronounced ep-uh-MEE-thee-uhs), **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs), and the moon goddess Selene (pronounced suh-LEE-nee) to this group of Titans. These four gods and a few others are more often described as children of the original twelve Titans.

## Major Myths

The most important tales of the Titans involve the overthrow of their father Uranus and their own battle against the Olympian gods. Uranus hated the children born from his wife Gaia, so he forced her to keep the Titans in Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a dismal pit deep within Gaia's bowels. This caused Gaia much pain, and she asked her sons to help her defeat Uranus by cutting off his genitals with a sickle. Only her youngest son, the Titan Cronus, was willing to do it. After he was successful, the Titans were freed from Tartarus and ruled the heavens. Cronus, with his sister Rhea at his side, was their leader.

However, Cronus was told that when he had children, one of his sons would overthrow him—just as he had done to his own father. To avoid this fate, Cronus swallowed each of his children as soon as they were born. Rhea managed to save only one child, Zeus, by hiding him and feeding Cronus a stone in the baby's place. When Zeus grew older, he gave his father a potion that made him vomit out his other siblings. These children, known as the Olympians, then waged an eleven-year war against the Titans. The Olympians eventually won and cast many of the Titans back into Tartarus, where Uranus had imprisoned them long before. However, several of the Titans—including Oceanus and all the female Titans—did not participate in the war against the Olympians, and therefore were able to remain free.



*Oceanus was one of six male Titans—giant, powerful, and primeval beings that were overthrown by the Greek gods.* VANNI/ART RESOURCE, NY.

## Titans in Context

Some scholars suggest that the reign—and ultimate defeat—of the Titans in **Greek mythology** reflects the conquest of an earlier culture by the one we now associate with the ancient Greeks. This earlier culture is believed to have been matriarchal, meaning women held the primary positions of power within the society. This is suggested by the Titans' close association with their mother, Gaia, and poor relationship with their father Uranus. The ancient Greeks, being a patriarchal society (where men held the most power), were similar to the Olympian gods who take control of the heavens. The regions of the world were divided among the three sons—Zeus, **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun), and **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez)—while the daughters were not given direct rule over anything. If this idea is correct, the myths of the ancient Greeks would be a direct reflection of ancient cultural clashes in the region.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The Titans represent huge, primitive, hard-to-control forces; indeed, many of the Titans are embodiments of the forces of nature and are born from Mother Earth (Gaia). They also symbolize a spirit of rebellion against the authority of the gods, as in the story of the Titan Prometheus, who helped human beings against Zeus's will. The myth of the Titans and their downfall includes a theme common throughout Greek mythology: the fate of a god or person cannot be avoided, no matter how hard one might try to change it.

## Titans in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Titans are featured in ancient art primarily in depictions of the war between them and the Olympian gods. Although some Titans, such as Prometheus, appear in other myths, they were not generally considered important subjects for literature or art. Instead, throughout the centuries, the Olympian gods dominated art influenced by Greek mythology. The most notable exception is Cronus, also referred to by his Roman name, Saturn. One of the most famous images of Saturn is Francisco Goya's grisly painting *Saturn Devouring One of His Children* (1823), which depicts the myth of the Titan leader consuming one of his children in order to keep from being overthrown. Another famous image of Cronus/Saturn eating one of his children was created by Peter Paul Rubens in 1636. More recently, the 1997 Disney animated film *Hercules* included a plot by Hades to release the Titans from their imprisonment and take control of Greece and Olympus. In modern usage, the immense size of the Titans has led to the word "titanic," meaning extremely large.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The myths of the early Greek gods include two examples of sons overthrowing their fathers for control of the heavens—first Cronus defeating Uranus, and then Zeus defeating Cronus. In both cases, the sons are raised by mother figures and have very little or no contact with their fathers. What do you think this theme of conflict between fathers and sons reflects about ancient Greek family life?

**SEE ALSO** Atlas; Cronus; Gaia; Greek Mythology; Prometheus; Uranus; Zeus





# Tlaloc

## Character Overview

To the Aztecs of central Mexico, Tlaloc was a god of rain and fertility. Associated with lightning, thunder, and vegetation, he appeared as a man with circles around his eyes and fangs like the teeth of a jaguar. Tlaloc shared the main temple in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (pronounced teh-nowch-TEE-tlan) with the gods **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l) and **Huitzilopochtli** (pronounced wee-tsee-loh-POCH-tee). The Maya called him Chac, and the Quiché of Guatemala knew him as Tohil.

Tlaloc had both helpful and harmful aspects. He carried four water jugs: one gave rain, but the others poured disease, frost, and drought onto the world. He and his wife, Chalchiuhtlicue (pronounced chahl-kwee-TLEE-kway), supervised the Tlaloque, spirits in charge of weather and mountains. The Tlaloque delivered rain to the earth and produced thunder by clashing their water jugs together.

One level of the Aztec heavens was named Tlalocan after the god. It was a place of abundant vegetation and everlasting spring. The souls of the dead who were sacred to Tlaloc—victims of drowning, lightning, and certain diseases, such as leprosy—went to this lush garden paradise.

## Major Myths

In the myths of the Aztec, there are five different worlds that have come to pass. Each world was destroyed and replaced by the next. The first world was presided over by **Tezcatlipoca**, and was known as the World of the Jaguar Sun. The second world, ruled by Quetzalcoatl, was the World of the Wind Sun. The third world was ruled by Tlaloc, and was known as the World of the Rain Sun. In Tlaloc's world, all people lived on water lilies and were changed into animals, such as dogs and butterflies. Tlaloc's reign ended when Quetzalcoatl destroyed everything in a rain of **fire**. The current age is the fifth world, the World of the Earthquake Sun—which, according to Aztec myth, will end in a series of devastating earthquakes.

### Nationality/Culture

Aztec

### Pronunciation

TLAH-lok

### Alternate Names

Tohil, Chac (Mayan)

### Appears In

Aztec oral myths and codices

### Lineage

Unknown

## Tlaloc

*The symbol of Tlaloc.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Tlaloc in Context

Tlaloc reflected the Aztec belief that human **sacrifice** was an important part of pleasing the gods and maintaining order in the natural world. For Tlaloc, the Aztecs believed that the sacrifice of children—usually viewed as the most perfect or purest members of the society—was required. Priests sacrificed children to Tlaloc during five of the eighteen months that made up the Aztec year. According to tradition, if the victims cried during the proceedings, their tears were a sign of plentiful rain to come. The Aztecs believed that if they failed to sacrifice children, Tlaloc would withhold rain, killing their crops.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Tlaloc, as a god of rain, represented growth and life to the Aztec people. This is shown in the Aztec vision of Tlalocan, which is thought to be always lush and green. The Aztecs also drew a direct connection between human tears and rain, just as they equated blood with the life-giving energy of the **sun**.

## Tlaloc in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Tlaloc appears in many Aztec codices—written documents of Aztec beliefs, calendars, and other cultural information created shortly after Spanish explorers conquered their society. Sculptures of Tlaloc have also been found at various Aztec sites. He is generally depicted as a blue being surrounded by clouds and holding rattles that are used to create thunder.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Human sacrifice may be difficult for people in modern societies to accept or understand, but it was practiced in many areas of the world, and is even mentioned in the Bible when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research human sacrifice in several different societies. What were some of the underlying cultural beliefs or philosophies about human sacrifice in those societies? How has the practice of sacrifice to the gods developed throughout history? What does sacrifice mean in contemporary Western societies?

**SEE ALSO** Aztec Mythology; Huitzilopochtli; Mayan Mythology; Quetzalcoatl



# Tricksters

## Theme Overview

Tricksters are among the most entertaining characters in world mythology. Usually male, they delight in breaking rules, boasting, and

playing tricks on both humans and gods. Most tricksters are shape-changers who can take any form, though they often appear as animals. Tricksters play a prominent role in African and Native American mythologies. They can also be found in the myths of Europeans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and the Aborigines of Australia. Many gods, demigods, and **heroes** from around the world are described as having trickster qualities.

### Major Myths

**African Tricksters** Eshu, a West African trickster also known as Legba, is associated with travel, commerce, and communication—or miscommunication. He often creates quarrels among people or between people and gods. In one myth, he caused conflict between a man and his two wives. Disguised as a merchant, Eshu sold one of the wives a fine hat, which pleased the husband but made the other wife jealous. Eshu then sold a more splendid hat to the second wife. The competition continued, making the husband and both wives miserable. According to another myth, the High God became so disgusted with Eshu's trickery that he left the world, ordering Eshu to remain as his link with it.

Eshu is just one of the many tricksters in **African mythology**. A trickster hare appears in some myths, and tales about a trickster spider called **Anansi** are widespread in West Africa. Anansi is a cunning fellow who acts as God's assistant, although some stories reveal him trying to trick God.

Occasionally the trickster himself falls victim to a trick. One myth about Anansi tells how he cheated the chameleon out of his field. For revenge, Chameleon created a fine cloak of vines decorated with buzzing flies. Everyone wanted the cloak, but Chameleon would sell it only to the spider. The price, he told Anansi, was merely a little food, just enough to fill the tiny hole that was his storehouse. The spider agreed and sent two of his children with grain. However, Chameleon had secretly dug the deepest hole that anyone had ever seen. Anansi's children poured grain into the hole for weeks, and still it was not full. Chameleon ended up with most of the spider's wealth. Anansi received only a few withered vines for his part of the bargain and fled from the mocking laughter of the people. According to the myth, this explains why spiders hide in the corners of houses.

**Native American Tricksters** Tricksters figure prominently in the mythologies of Native Americans. They usually take the form of animals, although they also have some human qualities and may appear human if it suits their purposes. The most common trickster figure is Coyote, but Raven, Crow, Bluejay, Rabbit, Spider, Raccoon, Bear, and others appear in the trickster myths of different Native American groups.

A myth of the Coeur d'Alene people illustrates the sly and bumbling side of Coyote. The first people selected Coyote as their moon. But when they learned that he spied on them from the sky and told their secrets, they replaced him with a chieftain who turned the tables by keeping watch on Coyote. Then, because the **sun** had killed some of Coyote's children, the trickster cut out the sun's heart, plunging the world into darkness. Coyote wanted to take the heart home with him, but he kept stumbling in the dark. In the end he had to return the heart to the sun, which restored light to the world.

Myths of the Algonquian-speaking people tell of a trickster named **Gluskap**. Gluskap lived in the cold north, but during a journey to the warm south, he tricked Summer, a beautiful female chieftain, into returning north with him. After she melted the cold of Winter, Gluskap let her return to her home.

**Other Tricksters** **Maiui**, the trickster hero of the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific Ocean, created the world while he was fishing. He let out a long fishing line and reeled in island after island from the bottom of the ocean. Later, Maui stole **fire** from the **underworld** and gave it to humans.

**Greek mythology** also includes a trickster associated with the gift of fire. The god **Prometheus** tricked **Zeus** and the other gods into granting humans the best part of an animal killed for a **sacrifice**. Angry at having been

*This statue of the West African trickster Eshu was made by the Yoruba people of Nigeria.* © ROYAL ALBERT MEMORIAL MUSEUM, EXETER, DEVON, UK/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



tricked, Zeus refused to let humans have fire, but Prometheus stole a burning ember from the gods for people to use.

Myths from the Micronesian islands of the western Pacific tell of Olifat, son of a human woman and a sky god, who used cleverness, trickery, and magic to obtain the food, drink, and women he wanted. The trickster's greed turned to jealousy and spite when he discovered that he had a brother who had been raised in secret. Olifat caught the brother and cut off his head, offering it to his father in place of the fish that was expected. The sky god restored Olifat's brother to life and turned in anger to Olifat. The trickster slyly pleaded innocence, arguing that since his father had told him he had no brother, he could not have killed a brother who did not exist.

A trickster may be a go-between or messenger between the human and divine worlds. **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez), the messenger of the gods in Greek mythology, was the god of travelers and trade but also of thieves and deceit. As a child, Hermes demonstrated his cleverness by stealing cattle from **Apollo**. He hid their tracks by tying tree bark to their hooves.

The Norse trickster **Loki** was originally a friend of the gods, but eventually they became tired of his tricks and grew to dislike him. In one tale, Loki stole the hair of **Thor**'s wife, Sif. In order to appease Thor, Loki convinced two dwarf craftsmen to each create three magnificent gifts that he could present to Thor. Loki turned himself into a stinging fly in an attempt to distract the second craftsman, Sindri, and his brother Brock, since Loki had wagered his head that the second dwarf could not possibly create gifts more magnificent than the first. When Thor received the gifts, he chose Sindri's gifts as the better of the two. When Brock tried to claim Loki's head, Thor cautioned that he cannot touch Loki's neck, since it was not mentioned in the wager. Brock satisfied himself with sewing Loki's mouth shut.

### Tricksters in Context

Some scholars have suggested that the trickster is one of the oldest figures in mythology. A chaotic and disorderly character, he acts out many human urges and desires that people living in communities learn to control to maintain social order. Trickster myths, especially those in which the trickster's deeds backfire against him in some way, may have developed to teach a moral lesson about the penalties of misbehavior.

Tales in which the trickster is a small but clever animal that emerges victorious teach a different lesson. They show how a seemingly powerless creature can triumph over a mighty one.

While not typically considered purely good or evil, tricksters operate outside the rules of society. Often childish, greedy, lustful, and even nasty, tricksters can also be friendly, helpful, clever, and wise. Sometimes they appear to be clownish, clumsy, or foolish, although they usually possess amazing powers of survival. A trickster may come to a sorry end in one story but then, after being miraculously brought back to life, reappear in other tales. Sometimes a trickster is a creator or culture hero whose activities explain how some aspect of the world came into being. While tricksters are often shown to be selfish, silly, or wrongheaded, they also help people identify with the situations and lessons contained in these myths. In addition, tricksters provide entertaining moments that remind readers and listeners that myths are meant to be enjoyed and shared from generation to generation.

### Tricksters in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Over the years, because of the entertaining appeal of this type of character, many trickster characters have been borrowed from their native mythology and incorporated into newer works. Loki, for example, appears in Marvel comics as a villain who fights against superheroes, including Thor. **Brer Rabbit**, a popular African American trickster derived from other West African tricksters such as Anansi, became the focus of the *Uncle Remus* books by Southern journalist Joel Chandler Harris in the late 1800s. In William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character of Puck incorrectly distributes a love potion among several couples, creating chaos and compounding the romantic problems of all the main characters.

The trickster character also appears in many popular films. One recent example is Captain Jack Sparrow from Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films. Jack shows the classic trickster traits of greed, self-importance, and foolishness, but at the same time he uses his cleverness as a way out of the predicaments he creates for himself.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Trickster Tales From Around The World* (2001) by Ila Lane Gross offers a diverse selection of trickster tales from countries such as China, Saudi

Arabia, South Africa, and Brazil. Virginia Hamilton and Barry Moser's *A Ring of Tricksters: Animal Tales from America, the West Indies, and Africa* (1997) is an illustrated book aimed at younger readers, but provides excellent versions of several popular trickster myths, as well as useful information about the cultures in which the various myths evolved.

**SEE ALSO** African Mythology; Anansi; Animals in Mythology; Brer Rabbit; Hermes; Krishna; Loki; Maui; Native American Mythology



**Nationality/Culture**

French/British

**Pronunciation**

TRIS-tuhn and i-SOHL-duh

**Alternate Names**

Tristram and Iseult

**Appears In**

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, the *Prose Tristan*

**Lineage**

Son of Blancheflor (Tristan) and daughter of Queen Isolde of Ireland (Isolde)

## Tristan and Isolde

### Character Overview

The legend of Tristan and Isolde is the tragic tale of two lovers fated to share a forbidden but undying love. Scholars of mythology believe that the legend originated in Brittany, in western France. In time it was associated with the **Arthurian legends** and became part of the mythology of medieval Europe, told and retold in various versions and many languages.

Tristan (also called Tristram), the nephew of King Mark of Cornwall, was a brave and honorable young man. Some accounts also claim that he was a brilliant harp player. According to the most detailed versions of this legend, the king of Ireland sent a champion named Morholt to demand tribute, or payment, from Cornwall, and Tristan fought Morholt in single combat. Tristan killed Morholt, leaving a broken piece of his sword in the fatal wound. The piece remained in Morholt's body when it was carried back to Ireland. Morholt had wounded Tristan as well, and when the wound did not heal, the young knight went to Ireland, in disguise, to seek help from an Irish princess named Isolde (or Iseult) who was skilled in healing.

After Isolde healed Tristan, he lingered at the Irish court for a while. On his return to Cornwall he praised Isolde so highly that King Mark resolved to marry her. Loyal and obedient to his uncle and king, Tristan agreed to return to Ireland and seek Isolde's hand for Mark.



Back in Ireland, Tristan found that the country was being terrorized by a fearsome dragon. Tristan succeeded in killing the beast. While Isolde was nursing him back to health after the fight, she discovered his broken sword and realized that he was the warrior who had killed Morholt, her uncle. At first she wanted to avenge her uncle's death. However, Tristan had endeared himself to the Irish people by killing the dragon, so Isolde forgave him and agreed to marry King Mark. She set off with Tristan for Cornwall.

Many versions of the legend say that Tristan and Isolde had already begun to care for one another. Their sense of honor might have prevented them from letting their feelings show, but fate now took a hand. Isolde's mother had prepared a magical drink for Isolde to share with Mark—a potion that would make them love each other forever. During the voyage to Cornwall, Isolde and Tristan drank the potion, not knowing what it was, and fell deeply in love.

Although Isolde went through with the marriage to Mark, she could not stop loving Tristan, who was fated to love her in return. They tried to keep their passion a secret, but eventually it became known. Some accounts of the story contain episodes of intrigue and suspense in which King Mark or various knights try to trap the lovers and obtain proof of their guilt. In the end, Tristan fled from Cornwall in despair.

By the 1200s, the legend of Tristan had been interwoven with the Arthurian legends. Tristan had become a noble knight and appeared in some of the stories about Arthur, **Lancelot**, and the Knights of the Round Table. By this time, storytellers had also begun to portray King Mark as cruel or cowardly, perhaps to create a stronger contrast between Mark and Tristan, though in earlier versions of the legend Mark was an honorable man.

Tristan finally settled in Brittany, where he married another Isolde, known as Isolde of the White Hands. His love for Isolde of Cornwall had never died, though. In time Tristan was wounded in battle, and his wife could not cure him. He sent for Isolde of Cornwall, hoping that she could once again heal him. He requested that the ship coming back from Cornwall should have white sails if it carried Isolde and black ones if it did not.

Tristan lay on his sickbed and waited. Finally the ship appeared on the horizon, bearing white sails. Too sick to sit up, Tristan asked about the color of the sails. Jealous of his passion for the first Isolde, his wife lied and said that they were black. Tristan fell into despair, believing that

## Tristan and Isolde

*Tristan and Isolde accidentally drank a love potion intended for Isolde and the man she was supposed to marry. They fell hopelessly in love with each other, with tragic consequences.*

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Isolde had refused to help him, and died. When Isolde arrived and learned of his death, she too died of grief. The two were buried in Cornwall. From Isolde's grave a rose tree grew, and from Tristan's came a vine that wrapped itself around the tree. Every time the vine

was cut, it grew again—a sign that the two lovers could not be parted, even in death.

### Tristan and Isolde in Context

The myth of Tristan and Isolde reflects a fundamental fascination with the idea of doomed love throughout European culture. The first versions of the tale appear to have originated in northern France, but it quickly traveled across the region, with new additions and variations to the same core story. Versions of the tale—usually featuring character names similar to the original tale, but adjusted for local languages—have appeared in Britain, Scandinavia, Italy, Spain, Germany, and even as far east as Poland and Croatia. The tale became commonly known among even the peasant classes, and is remarkable for its similarity across the various cultures of Europe.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The central theme in the story of Tristan and Isolde is forbidden but irresistible love. The two characters are drawn together just as strongly as they are forced apart. Just as Isolde begins caring for Tristan, she discovers he is the killer of her uncle. Though Tristan begins to fall in love with Isolde, he knows she is promised to Mark. The love potion binds them together even as outside forces attempt to separate them.

### Tristan and Isolde in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The legend of Tristan and Isolde, with its emphasis on a love that cannot be denied even when it leads to tragedy, has continued to appeal to artists since medieval times. It inspired three English poems of the 1800s: Matthew Arnold's *Tristram and Iseult*, Algernon Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Last Tournament," one of the Idylls in the Arthurian poem *Idylls of the King*. American poet E. A. Robinson based his *Tristram* on the legend. One of the most influential works to draw on the story was the opera *Tristan und Isolde*, by German composer Richard Wagner. The story has also appeared in many film adaptations, with filmmakers such as Jean Cocteau and Francois Truffaut working on different versions over the years. The most recent was the 2006 film *Tristan & Isolde*, starring James Franco and Sophia Myles as the doomed lovers.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The tale of Tristan and Isolde is one of the best-known examples of the theme of doomed love. The story of Romeo and Juliet, popularized by William Shakespeare, is another. Can you think of a modern tale that centers on this same theme? It can be in a book, a film, or a television show. How does your modern example differ from the myth of Tristan and Isolde? Do these differences reflect cultural differences between modern audiences and medieval European audiences? How? What parts of the tale remain timeless?

SEE ALSO Arthurian Legends; Celtic Mythology

## Trojan War

See *Iliad*, *The*.



## Trolls

### Nationality/Culture

Norse/Scandinavian

### Pronunciation

TROHLZ

### Alternate Names

Huldrefolk, Vitterfolk

### Appears In

Norse and Scandinavian folk tales

### Lineage

Varies

### Character Overview

Trolls were creatures in Norse myth and legend who became part of the folklore of Scandinavia and northern Europe. Generally trolls were thought to be evil and dangerous, although sometimes they interacted peacefully with people. They were clever at building and making things of stone and metal, and often lived in caves or among rocks.

Early stories described trolls as **giants** who lived in castles and roamed during the night. When exposed to sunlight, trolls turned to stone. The stone crags of a place called Trolld-Tindterne (Troll Peaks) in central Norway are said to be two armies of trolls that once fought a great battle until sunrise caught them and turned them to stone. Over time, trolls came to be portrayed as being about the size of humans or, in some cases, as small as dwarves.

In one popular myth, a man named Esbern loved a girl whose father would not let her marry until Esbern built a fine church. A troll agreed to build the church for Esbern on the condition that if Esbern could not



*A troll carved from wood in Grodas, Norway. Trolls are prominent figures in Scandinavian folklore. © E & E IMAGE LIBRARY/HIP/THE IMAGE WORKS.*

discover the troll's name by the time the job was done, the troll would have Esbern's eyes and his soul. Try as he might, Esbern could not learn the troll's name. He was in despair until the girl he loved prayed for him. At that moment Esbern heard the troll's wife singing to her baby, and her song contained the name of her husband.

### **Trolls in Context**

The treatment of trolls in northern European folklore over the centuries can be viewed as a reflection of that region's relationship with Christianity. Early tales of trolls describe them as mystical nature beings or distant relatives of the gods. After the people of northern Europe converted to Christianity, many of their stories featured prayer as a weapon against trolls, who were portrayed as wicked. One folk tale even describes trolls as the unclean siblings of humans who were hidden from God out of shame.

### **Key Themes and Symbols**

A common theme in stories of trolls is a bargain between a troll and a human, in which the human must outwit the troll or suffer a sad fate. This is shown in the tale of Esbern, where the man must discover the troll's

name or he will die. This also illustrates the theme of trolls as clever or crafty **tricksters**, occasionally helping humans but often causing problems.

### Trolls in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Trolls are one of the few mythical creations associated specifically with northern Europe, and they appear frequently in Scandinavian art. Many Scandinavian depictions of trolls resemble squat, stone-like figures with long, flowing hair—similar to the stones seen beneath waterfalls throughout the region, believed by some to be trolls who had been turned to stone by the **sun**. Folk tales of trolls are common in literature, and some early twentieth century illustrators such as Jon Bauer helped to define and popularize the modern image of a troll. Modern fantasy writers beginning with J. R. R. Tolkien have made trolls a standard creature in their fantasy worlds. Although trolls are mostly limited to children's tales in Scandinavia, many people still hold superstitious beliefs about the creatures and will avoid disturbing areas thought to be inhabited by the creatures.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*Troll Fell* (2004) by Katherine Langrish tells the story of Peer, a Scandinavian boy who is forced to live with his evil uncles after his father dies. Even worse, his uncles live in a forest surrounded by mischievous trolls and they plan to offer Peer as a gift to the creatures. The novel is the first in Langrish's *Troll Trilogy*, which also includes *Troll Mill* (2005) and *Troll Blood* (2007).

SEE ALSO Dwarfs and Elves; Norse Mythology



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# Twins

## Theme Overview

As two children born on the same day to the same mother, twins have a unique sense of identity. They have more in common with one another than any two ordinary people, especially if they are identical twins. Yet

twins are also separate beings who may be very different in character. Myths about twins—as partners, rivals, opposites, or halves of a whole—are rooted in this basic mystery of sameness and difference. Twins appear in the myths and legends of many cultures, but they are especially important in African and **Native American mythology**. In some traditions, two children may be considered twins if they are born to two sisters at the same time.

## Major Myths

The mythology of ancient Egypt includes examples of twinship operating in different ways. According to one version of the Egyptian creation myth, the earth god Geb and the sky goddess **Nut** (pronounced NOOT) were twins and also lovers, locked together in a tight embrace. The great god **Ra** separated them with air, leaving Nut arched across the heavens above Geb. Nut and Geb are complementary symbols, meaning that the two complete each other, forming a whole.

Similar myths from around the world associate twins with complementary features of the natural world, such as male and female, day and night, and **sun** and moon. The Xingu (pronounced shing-GOO) people of Brazil, for example, have stories about the twin brothers Kuat and Iae who forced the vulture king Urubutsin to give light to the dark world. Kuat occupied the sun, and Iae the moon. Their wakefulness keeps light in the world, except for a brief time each month when they both sleep and the world experiences nights without a visible moon (also known as a “new moon”).

Twins can also be rivals. **Egyptian mythology** explores this aspect of twin relationship in the stories about the gods **Osiris** (pronounced oh-SYE-ris) and **Set**, twin sons of Nut and Geb. Set was so determined to be born first that he tore his way out of his mother’s womb before he was fully formed. He hated his brother Osiris and eventually killed him. In the mythology of ancient Persia, some accounts of **Ahriman** (pronounced AH-ri-muhn), the spirit of evil, say that he too was a twin who forced his way out of the womb so that he could be born first. Ahriman and his twin and enemy **Ahura Mazda** (pronounced ah-HOO-ruh MAHZ-duh), the spirit of good, are symbols of opposing moral forces that struggle for control of the universe.

Many myths of the Melanesian islands in the southwest Pacific Ocean tell of twin brothers who are rivals or enemies. Often, one twin is

wise and the other foolish, as in the case of To Kabinana and To Karvuvu. The stupidity of To Karvuvu led to unpleasant or dangerous things. For example, he created the shark, thinking it would help him catch more fish. Instead, the shark ate the fish—and people. When To Karvuvu’s mother shed her old, wrinkled skin and became young, he wept because he could not recognize her. To calm him she put on her old skin again. Ever since that time, people have had to grow old and die.

Twins often appear as partners or companions who share a bond deeper than ordinary friendship or even brotherly affection. This is illustrated in the myth of **Castor and Pollux** (pronounced PAHL-uhks). Some versions of their story say that although they were born to the same mother, they had different fathers. Pollux, son of the god **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS), was able to live forever; Castor, son of a human, was not. When his beloved brother was killed, Pollux gave up half of his immortality to restore Castor to life. As a result, each twin could live forever, but they had to divide their time between Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs) and the **underworld**, or land of the dead. The Greeks identified Castor and Pollux with a constellation, or star group, known as Gemini, the Twins.

Aborigines of Australia also associated this constellation with twins. According to a myth told in central Australia, twin lizards created trees, plants, and animals to fill the land. Their most heroic deed was to save a group of women from a moon spirit who wanted to mate with them. The women went into the sky as the cluster of stars widely known as the Pleiades (pronounced PLEE-uh-deez) while the lizard twins became Gemini.

Because the birth of twins is a rare occurrence, some cultures believed that certain gods and **heroes** were twins. In **Greek mythology**, notable sets of twins included the deities **Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss), and two remarkable sisters, **Helen** and Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), who were also the sisters of Castor and Pollux. Some myths of community origins featured royal twins, or those born to gods. The Greeks said that Amphion (pronounced AM-fee-uhn) and Zethus (pronounced ZEE-thuhs), twin sons of Zeus, had founded the city of Thebes (pronounced THEEBZ), while the Romans claimed that the founders of their city were the twin brothers **Romulus and Remus**, sons of Mars.

**Twins in African Mythology** The theme of twins is common to the creation myths of some West African peoples. To the Dogon of Mali,



twins represent completeness and perfection. The symbol of this wholeness is the deity Nummo, who is really a set of twins, male and female. The act of creating the other gods and the world required the **sacrifice** of one part of Nummo. From that time on, all beings were either male or female, lacking Nummo's divine completeness.

The supreme creator deity of the Fon people of Benin is Mawu-Lisa, a being both male and female who is sometimes described as a pair of twins. Mawu is the moon and the female element of the deity, while Lisa is the sun and the male part. They gave birth to all of the other gods, who also were born as pairs of twins.

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, twins are called *ibejis* after Ibeji, the protector deity of twins. People believe that, depending on how they are treated, twins can bring either fortune or misfortune to their families and communities. For this reason, twins receive special attention. One myth links the origin of twins with monkeys. According to this story, monkeys destroyed a farmer's crops, so he began killing all the monkeys he could find. When the farmer's wife became pregnant, the monkeys sent two spirits into her womb. They were born as the first human twins. To keep these children from dying, the farmer had to stop killing monkeys.

**Twins in American Indian Mythology** The role of twins in American Indian mythology is complex. Some pairs of twins combine heroism with the mischievous behavior of **tricksters**. Occasionally, twins represent opposing forces of good and evil. The Huron people of northeastern North America tell of Ioskeha and Tawiskara, twins who fought to decide who would rule the world. The evil Tawiskara, who fought his way out of the womb, used a twig as his weapon against his brother, while Ioskeha used the horn of a stag. Ioskeha, a positive creative force, won the conflict. In the same way, **Gluskap** (pronounced GLOOS-kahb), the creator god and hero of many northeastern myths, had to defeat Malsum, his evil twin who was the source of all harmful things and the ruler of demons. In Iroquois mythology, Good Mind helps his grandmother, the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, place useful and beautiful items on the earth. His twin, Warty One, creates unpleasant things, such as mosquitoes and thorny bushes.

Rather than enemies, twins in Native American mythology are often partners in a task or a quest. In myths from the Pacific Northwest, the twins Enumclaw (pronounced EE-nuhm-klaw) and Kapoonis sought to

## Twins

*Twins that appear in the myths and legends of Africa can bring fortune or misfortune to families and communities. These figures from Yoruba, **ibejis**, are named after the deity of twins, **Ibeji**. PRIVATE COLLECTION/ PHOTO © HEINI SCHNEEBELI/ THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.*



obtain power over **fire** and rock from the spirits. Their activities became so threatening that the sky god made them into spirits themselves. Enumclaw ruled lightning and Kapoonis controlled thunder.

Hunahpú (pronounced WAH-nuh-pwuh) and Xbalanqué (pronounced shi-BAY-lan-kay), hero twins of **Mayan mythology**, descended into the underworld to restore their father to life. They then escaped from the lords of the underworld by outwitting them. Masewi (pronounced mah-SEH-wee) and Oyoyewi (pronounced oh-yo-YEH-wee), culture heroes in the myths of the Acoma Indians of the American

Southwest, made a journey to their father, the sun. The theme of twins in search of their father also appears in the myth of Ariconte and Tamendonare of the Tupinamba people of Brazil. Setting out on a quest to learn their father's identity, these twin sons faced many dangerous trials. Each twin died once, only to be brought back to life by his brother. In the end, they learned that they had different fathers, one immortal and one mortal. Because the twins did not know which of them had the immortal father, they protected one another forever.

Navajo myths tell of Monster Slayer (Naayéé'neizghání) and his twin brother, Child of Water (Tó bájísh chíní). Their father carried the sun across the sky and was too busy to pay attention to his sons. One day the twins went in search of him. After enduring a series of ordeals, they at last found their father, and he equipped them to roam the world fighting monsters.

## Twins in Context

It is easy to see why twins would be considered special in many cultures. Currently, about one in every fifty people around the world is a twin; only one in every five hundred people is an identical twin. For some cultures, the occurrence of twins is rare enough to be thought of as possibly supernatural in origin. At the same time, twins appear frequently enough for most people to be familiar with the notion, which makes twin births ideal for indicating the special qualities of characters in myths and legends. In the United States, the rate of twin births in the twenty-first century has been on the rise, with about one in every seventeen children being born a twin in 2001—most likely due to the use of fertility drugs, which can cause multiple eggs to be available for fertilization at the same time. Studies have also shown that diet may also affect the rate of twin births in a society, with mothers who consume more meat producing twins more often than those who do not eat meat. This—along with the risks associated with bringing two infants to term instead of one—may mean that twins were even more rare in ancient times, and therefore more special.

## Twins in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

As indicated in the previous myths, twins were common fixtures in the stories of cultures around the world. The twins most often found in ancient art are those from the Greek and Roman cultures, such as Castor

and Pollux or Apollo and Artemis. In modern times, twins have also appeared in supernatural or mythical roles: one well-known example is Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia Organa from the *Star Wars* series of films by George Lucas.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In modern times, as in many myths, twins are often depicted as having opposite natures or personalities. However, stories of many real-life twins indicate that they share remarkable similarities in thought and behavior, and even consider themselves to have a supernatural bond with each other. Why do you think twins in myth are so often portrayed as opposites?

**SEE ALSO** Ahriman; Ahura Mazda; Castor and Pollux; Helen of Troy; Hunahpú and Xbalanqué; Masewi and Oyoyewi; Osiris; Romulus and Remus; Set



## Tyr

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

TEER

### Alternate Names

Tiw (Old English), Tiwaz (proto-Germanic)

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Son of Odin

### Character Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Tyr was worshipped as a god of war, justice, and order. One of his roles was to guarantee that contracts and oaths were not broken. Although he appears to have been worshipped earlier than many other Norse gods, he is generally considered to be the son of **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), the leader of the gods.

### Major Myths

Although Tyr appears in very few legends, the best-known story about him involves the fierce wolf **Fenrir** (pronounced FEN-reer) that no chain could hold. The wolf was so frightening that only Tyr was brave enough to feed him. As Fenrir continued to grow, the gods knew he would have to be restrained somehow. The supreme god Odin ordered the dwarves to make a magical ribbon so strong that Fenrir could not break it. Fenrir was suspicious when the gods wanted to tie the ribbon around him. But he allowed himself to be bound after brave Tyr put his hand in the wolf's



*The most famous myth regarding the Norse god Tyr is the story of how he had his hand bit off by the monstrous wolf Fenrir after the gods tried to bind Fenrir.* WERNER FORMAN/ART RESOURCE, NY.

mouth, swearing an oath to free him if he could not free himself. However, when Fenrir realized that he could not escape, the gods refused to set him free and he realized he had been tricked. The wolf bit off Tyr's hand in anger, but the brave god did not even cry out in pain.

### **Tyr in Context**

The story of Tyr and Fenrir reflects the value and importance of stoicism in Norse culture. Stoicism is the tendency to not display emotions openly to others; feelings of joy, pain, sadness, or anger would not appear obvious in the expression or behavior of a stoic person. This quality was seen as a positive thing to the Norse, because it reflected bravery and total self-control. The Norse characteristic of “fearlessness in the face of death” may also reflect their belief that a brave death would be rewarded

by entrance to **Valhalla** (pronounced val-HAL-uh), the heavenly hall of Odin.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes in the myth of Tyr is **sacrifice**. Tyr was the only god willing to place his hand in Fenrir's mouth so the wolf could be tied up. He sacrificed his hand in order to protect the rest of the world from Fenrir's ferocity. Tyr was also associated with victory, and warriors engraved a symbol associated with Tyr known as a *t-rune* on their weapons to ensure victory in battle.

### Tyr in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Early Germanic peoples associated Tyr with Mars, the Roman god of war. The third day of the week, known as *dies Martis* (Mars's Day) in Latin, became known as *Tyrsdagr* to the Norse and entered English as Tuesday. In modern times, Tyr has not enjoyed the same level of popularity as other Norse gods like Odin or **Thor**. However, both DC Comics and Marvel Comics have featured characters based on Tyr—the former was a villain, while the latter more closely resembled the Tyr of Norse myth.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

When Tyr sacrifices his hand in order for the gods to secure Fenrir, he does not cry out in pain. For the Norse, such stoicism was considered to be a sign of strength and bravery. Do you think stoicism is still considered a value in contemporary societies? Give examples to support your opinion.

**SEE ALSO** Fenrir; Norse Mythology

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# U



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Ulysses

See **Odysseus**.



## Underworld

### Theme Overview

From all parts of the world come myths and legends about the underworld, a mysterious and shadowy place beyond ordinary human experience. The underworld is the realm of the dead, the destination of human souls in the **afterlife**. In some traditions, it is also the home of nonhuman, supernatural, or otherworldly beings, such as fairies, demons, **giants**, and monsters. Although usually portrayed as a terrifying, dangerous, or unpredictable place, the underworld appears as a source of growth, life, and rebirth in some myths. Many descriptions of the underworld include elements of earthly life, such as powerful rulers and palaces.

The most common idea of the underworld is that it lies beneath the everyday world. The passage from this world to the other may begin by descending into a cave, well, or pit. However, the distance between the two worlds is more than physical, and the spiritual journey involved

often includes great peril. The souls of the dead are the principal travelers, but sometimes living **heroes**, mystics, and religious leaders also make the journey.

### Major Myths

Some of the earliest descriptions of the underworld occur in myths from ancient Mesopotamia (pronounced mess-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh). One tells how the fertility goddess **Ishtar** (pronounced ISH-tahr) descends into the kingdom of the dead, ruled by her sister Ereshkigal (pronounced ay-RESH-kee-gahl). Ishtar is killed trying to overthrow Ereshkigal. The other gods convince Ereshkigal to release Ishtar, but Ishtar cannot leave the underworld without finding someone to take her place. She determines that her husband, Tammuz (pronounced TAH-mooz), should be her substitute. Some scholars believe that this myth is related to the annual death and rebirth of vegetation.

The underworld Ishtar visits is the same as that described in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, in which the character Enkidu (pronounced EN-kee-doo) has a vision of himself among the dead. The underworld described is a dim, dry, dreary place called the House of Darkness, a house that none who enter leave. The dead dwell in darkness, eating dust and clay. Although recognizable as individuals, they are pale and powerless shadows of their former selves.

This image of the underworld also appears in early Jewish mythology. The Jewish underworld was Sheol (pronounced SHEE-ohl), which means “pit.” It held all the dead who had ever lived. Over time, as the idea of judgment in the afterlife took root in Jewish and then Christian belief, the early, neutral concept of the underworld changed. Sheol became a place of punishment and torment for the souls of sinners.

The ancient Greek vision of the underworld was, at first, much like that of the early Semitic cultures. All the dead went to the same place—a vague, shadowy underworld populated by the ghosts, or shades, of the dead. This realm is sometimes called **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez), after the god who ruled it. Gradually the underworld of Greek and then **Roman mythology** became more elaborate. The kingdom of Hades was said to lie either beyond the ocean or deep within the earth, separated from the world of the living by five rivers: Acheron (pronounced AK-uh-ron, meaning “woe”), Styx (pronounced STIKS, meaning “hate”), **Lethé** (pronounced LEE-thee, meaning “forgetfulness”), Cocytus



(pronounced koh-SEE-tuhs, meaning “wailing”), and Phlegethon (pronounced FLEG-uh-thon, meaning “fire”). **Cerberus** (pronounced SUR-ber-uhs), a fierce, three-headed, dog-like monster, guarded the entrance to the underworld, which consisted of various regions. The souls of the good dwelled in the Elysian (pronounced eh-LEE-zee-uhn) Fields or Islands of the Blessed, while those who deserved punishment went to a deep pit called Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs).

To the Maya of Mesoamerica—a region that encompassed a large area of what is now Central America—the underworld was a dreadful place, but not one limited to sinners. Only people who died a violent death went to a **heaven** in the afterlife. Everyone else entered Xibalba (pronounced shi-BAHL-buh), the underworld, whose name meant “place of fright.” Any cave or body of still water was an entrance to Xibalba. The dead were not confined to the underworld forever. In the Mayan sacred book, *Popol Vuh*, the Hero Twins Hunahpú (pronounced WAH-nuh-pwuh) and Xbalanqué (pronounced shi-BAY-lan-kay) outwitted the lords of Xibalba and left the land of death. The souls of kings and nobles could also escape from Xibalba if they were summoned by living relatives during the Serpent Vision ceremony. The Aztecs of central Mexico believed that the underworld consisted of eight layers, each with its own dangers, such as drowning or sharp blades. Souls descended through the layers until they reached Mictlan (pronounced MEEKT-lahn), the bottommost part of the underworld.

The underworld of **Japanese mythology** was Yomi (pronounced YOH-mee), land of night or gloom. It was empty until the creator goddess Izanami (pronounced ee-zuh-NAH-mee) died after giving birth to the god of fire. The maggots that appeared in her dead body grew into a host of demons who populated Yomi and tormented the souls of the wicked. Although Yomi was said to be a dark region of barren plains and lonely tunnels, artists often portrayed it as an underground palace crowded with the dead and demons. Also there was Emma-Ô (the Japanese version of Yama, the Buddhist god of death), who judged the souls as they arrived in Yomi.

**Journeys to the Underworld** Many myths tell of heroes who entered the underworld while still alive. Those who survived the ordeals of the journey often returned to the living world transformed by the experience, perhaps bearing special wisdom or treasure. Some heroes wished to rescue or reclaim a loved one who had died. In **Greek mythology**,

**Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter) went down to the underworld to try to bring back her daughter, **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), whom Hades (pronounced HAY-deez) had carried off. The Greek hero **Orpheus** (pronounced OR-fee-uhs) traveled to the underworld in search of his wife **Eurydice** (pronounced yoo-RID-uh-see).

Chinese Buddhist mythology tells of a hero named Radish, a follower of Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh). Before leaving on a journey, Radish gave his mother, Lady Leek Stem, money for begging monks. The mother failed to give the money to the monks, but she lied to her son and said that she had done so. When Lady Leek Stem died, she went to **hell**. Radish became so holy that he was made a saint named Mulian. With Mulian's enlightenment, or elevation of spirit, came the knowledge of his mother's torment. He went to hell to save her, although Yama, the king of hell, warned him that no one had the power to change a sinner's punishment. On his way Mulian had to travel past fifty demons, each with the head of an animal and swords for teeth. By waving a wand that Buddha had given him, he was able to make them disappear. Finally Mulian found his mother nailed to a bed, but he could not release her; only Buddha could change a sinner's fate. Mulian asked Buddha for mercy for his mother, and after the proper prayers, Buddha released Lady Leek Stem from hell.

The Ashanti people of Africa have a myth about Kwasi Benefo, who made a journey to the underworld. Kwasi Benefo married four women in turn, and each one died. Miserable and alone, he decided to go to Asamando, the land of the dead, to seek his lost loves. He went to the place of burial and then beyond it, passing through a dark, silent, trackless forest. He came to a river. On the far side sat Amokye, the old woman who greets dead women's souls. She felt sorry for Kwasi Benefo and allowed him to cross the river, though normally the living are forbidden to enter Asamando. Soon Kwasi Benefo found the invisible spirits of his wives. They told him to marry again, promising that his fifth wife would live and that they would be waiting for him in the underworld when his time came to die. Kwasi Benefo fell asleep and awoke in the forest. He brought from the underworld the precious gift of peace of mind, which allowed him to marry and live a normal life for the rest of his days.

**The Other World** In some myths the underworld is a kind of alternative reality, a land not merely of the human dead but of different beings who

live according to different rules. **Celtic mythology** contains many accounts of an otherworldly realm. Its location was said to be far away on remote islands or lying beneath the sea or the ground. Certain caves or hills were believed to be entrances to this other world.

In Wales the other world was called Annwn (pronounced AHN-oon), which means “not-world.” It had a number of different sides. Primarily, the other world was the kingdom of the dead, and its grim ruler was known as Arawn (pronounced AHR-oun) to the Welsh and Donn to the Irish. The other world, however, could also be a joyous and peaceful place or a source of wisdom, magic, and enchantment. The fairies, demons, spirits, and other supernatural beings who lived there were neither purely good nor purely evil. Depending on the circumstances, they could bring humans either harm or good fortune.

Celtic folklore is filled with legends of living people who entered the other world. Some went voluntarily, like King **Arthur** of Britain, who led an army into Annwn to capture a magical cauldron (kettle). Others were lured into the other world by fairies, sometimes in human or animal form. The theme of a human straying into the other world appears in many European fairy tales that draw on the old notion of the underworld as a supernatural realm. In such stories, a human who ate or drank while in the other world could never leave. Those who resisted food and managed to leave found that time had different meanings in the two worlds. After spending a single night in the other world, a person might return to the world above to find that years had passed.

The underworld is sometimes a mirror image of the world above. According to some African myths, the underworld is just like the ordinary world except that it is upside down: its people sleep during the day and are active during the night. In the Congo, tradition says that the world of the living is a mountain and the underworld of the dead is another mountain pointing downward. Chinese myths tell of “China plowed under,” an underworld inside the earth that mirrors every province and town in the world above.

**The Underworld as a Source of Life** The underworld does not always represent the kingdom of the gloomy dead or the home of dangerous beings. In some myths it serves as the point of contact between the surface world of the living and the earth’s powerful creative forces. Among the Ibo people of Western Africa, Ala, the goddess of the underworld, is also the earth goddess who protects the harvest, which

emerges from the ground. Ala receives the dead; burial is thought to be placing the dead in her pocket or womb. However, Ala also ensures life by making people and animals fertile.

The creation myths of many American Indian cultures say that people and animals emerged from an underworld or series of underworlds. In these stories the underworld is a womb in which life is nurtured, or prepared, until the time is right for it to enter the world. One of many such myths is told by the Zuni, who say that the Ahayuuta **twins** were sent deep into the earth by their father the **sun** god to guide unformed creatures up to the daylight. Once above the ground, the creatures changed into human beings.

According to the Jicarilla (pronounced hee-kuh-REE-uh) Apache of New Mexico, in the beginning all people, animals, and plants lived in the dark underworld. Those who wanted light played a game with those who liked darkness. The light-lovers won, and the sun and stars appeared. Then the sun, looking through a hole in the roof of the underworld, saw the surface of the earth, which was covered with water. Eager to reach this hole in the underworld, the people built four great hills that grew upward. But after girls picked the flowers from the hills, the hills stopped rising. Then the people climbed to the roof on ladders made of buffalo horns. They sent the moon and sun through the hole to light the world and dispatched the winds to blow away the water. Next they sent out animals. Last of all, the people climbed up into the new world. Once they reached the surface, they spread out in four directions. Only the Jicarilla stayed in the original homeland near the hole that led up from the underworld.

### The Underworld in Context

Many cultures believe that after death the soul travels to the underworld. In some traditions, the passage to or through the underworld is part of a process that involves judgment of the individual's deeds when alive, and perhaps punishment for evil deeds. In others, the underworld is simply the destination of all the dead, good and bad alike. The different variations of the underworld myth reflect the values of the cultures in which they arose. For cultures that are built on the belief in a mythic struggle between good and evil, the underworld usually represents a place of torment for those not worthy of heaven. For cultures that emphasize the importance of the land as a provider, the underworld might be a

source of life instead of just a repository for the dead. For cultures in which the soul is believed to last forever, the underworld can be a temporary station between lives.

## The Underworld in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Various versions of the underworld appear throughout art and literature. The most common depictions are of the Christian hell, with notable examples being Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, an epic poem that provides detailed descriptions of each level of hell, and the Hieronymus Bosch painting *Garden of Earthly Delights*, created in the early sixteenth century. The Mayan underworld of Xibalba was featured as a central element in the 2006 Darren Aronofsky film, *The Fountain*, which tells three stories about death and the quest for eternal love.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, find another example of a mythical underworld that has not already been mentioned. What culture does it come from? What kind of underworld is it? How do you think this underworld reflects the beliefs of the culture that created it?

**SEE ALSO** Afterlife; Hades; Hell; Ishtar; Izanagi and Izanami; Orpheus; Persephone



# Unicorns

## Character Overview

The word *unicorn* comes from the Latin for “one-horned” and refers to an imaginary beast that appears in the legends of China, Japan, India, Mesopotamia, and Europe. Since medieval times the unicorn has often been portrayed as a horse with a single horn growing from its forehead. Descriptions of the animal in various sources differ somewhat, but they all agree on the horn. According to ancient Greek sources, the unicorn has the tail of a lion and split hooves like a boar. Some images of

**Nationality/Culture**  
Various

**Pronunciation**  
YOO-nuh-kornz

**Alternate Names**  
Qilin (Chinese), Kirin (Japanese)

**Appears In**  
Aelian's *On Animals*, the Bible

**Lineage**  
Varies

unicorns were probably based on real animals, such as the one-horned rhinoceros or the narwhal—a small whale with a single long tooth or tusk that resembles a spiral ivory horn.

In Chinese tradition, the unicorn was one of four magical or spiritual creatures—along with the **phoenix**, tortoise, and dragon—that were regarded as signs of good fortune. The appearance of a unicorn signaled the birth or death of a great person; one was said to have appeared when Confucius (pronounced kuhn-FYOO-shuhs), a famous wise man, was born.

Although unicorns were thought to be fierce fighters, they were also symbols of purity. Perhaps this was because the ancient Greeks and Romans had associated them with virgin goddesses, such as **Artemis**, whose chariot was said to be drawn by eight unicorns. According to tradition, one way to capture a unicorn was to send a very young virgin into the forest. The unicorn would be attracted to her and would rest its head in her lap, at which point a hunter could catch the animal.

### Unicorns in Context

The Western image of the unicorn comes in part from the Hebrew Bible. During its translation into Greek, a Hebrew word for “wild ox” was changed to a Greek word that people interpreted as a reference to either a unicorn or a rhinoceros. Around 400 BCE, the Greek historian Ctesias (pronounced TEE-shee-uhs) wrote of a wild beast in India that had a single horn and fought elephants. It was probably the rhinoceros, though later writers developed an image that much more closely resembled a horned horse.

By the Middle Ages, Europeans had come to believe that these horse-like unicorns really existed in remote parts of the world. Among the legends linked to them was the belief that water touched by a unicorn’s horn became safe for animals and people to drink. From this tradition developed the idea that powdered unicorn horn offered protection against poison and possibly cured disease as well. Rich and important people treasured horns and powders said to have come from unicorns. Some kings, fearing that rivals might try to poison them, drank from vessels that they believed to be unicorn horns.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The unicorn is most commonly associated with purity. This is shown in the idea that a unicorn’s horn could purify a poisoned drink, and in the

legend that one could catch a unicorn only by its attraction to a pure young woman. The unicorn's white color also represents purity.

## Unicorns in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The unicorn has endured through the centuries as one of the most popular mythical creatures ever conceived. Throughout medieval Europe, the unicorn appeared as a symbol of heraldry on the coats of arms of cities and many noble families. In modern times, the unicorn remains a popular decorative image on posters and other items. Unicorns have appeared in books, such as the Peter Beagle novel *The Last Unicorn* (1968) and the *Chronicles of Narnia* series by C. S. Lewis. The Chinese *qilin* is very popular in Asian animated series and video games, and the Japanese *kirin* is used as the logo for a popular beer of the same name.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Last Unicorn* (1968) by Peter S. Beagle tells the story of a unicorn who may be the last surviving member of her species in a mythical land. She embarks on a journey to discover the truth about the fate of the other unicorns, and to try and find others like her that are still alive. Along the way, she joins with various other misfits and outcasts who assist her with her quest.

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology



# Uranus

## Character Overview

Uranus, who represented the sky, was one of the original deities (gods and goddesses) of **Greek mythology**. He was the son of **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth, who also became his wife. Together they had many children, including the **Titans** and the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-pee-z). He was eventually overthrown by his son **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs).

### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

YOOR-uh-nuhs

### Alternate Names

Caelus (Roman), Aeon (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*

### Lineage

Son of Gaia

## Major Myths

Uranus detested the children he had with Gaia. As soon as they were born, he forced them into Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a dark place deep beneath the surface of the earth. This caused Gaia great pain. She asked her children to stop Uranus, but only her son Cronus came to her aid. Cronus cut off his father's sex organs with a flint-bladed sickle and threw them into the sea. According to myth, **Aphrodite** (pronounced af-ro-DYE-tee) was born from the foam where they landed. Uranus became the sky that surrounds the earth, and Cronus replaced his father as king of the universe. But Cronus was later defeated by his son **Zeus** (pronounced ZOOS) who, together with **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh) and other Olympian gods, overthrew the Titans and took their place ruling the universe.

## Uranus in Context

To the ancient Greeks, the mention of the sickle having a flint blade was significant, and puts the era of the old gods into a proper context. Flint, an easily splintered stone, was used in the creation of tools and weapons long before humans had mastered the art of metalworking. Ancient cultures throughout Greece and the surrounding regions were effectively creating bronze tools and weapons at least two thousand years before the writings of mythographers like Hesiod, and in fact were mastering the creation of iron and steel products by that time. For the myth of Uranus to specifically mention a flint blade, then, reflects either the original age of the myth or an attempt to illustrate that the tales of the old gods took place in the very distant past of the ancient Greeks.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes in the myth of Uranus is the overthrow of the heavenly hierarchy. This is shown in Cronus's rebellion against Uranus, as well as by the prediction that Cronus will suffer the same fate as his father. For the ancient Greeks, Uranus represented the most ancient of beliefs and traditions, two generations removed from their own beliefs in the Olympian gods.

## Uranus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though he lies at the heart of an ancient Greek creation myth, Uranus was seldom worshipped and only occasionally depicted in art. Roman



artists sometimes showed a slightly different version of Uranus, known as Aeon and considered to be the god of time, standing over Gaia and holding the wheel of the zodiac (another representation of time). In 1781, when the sixth planet of our solar system was discovered by William Herschel, it was named Uranus in honor of the oldest god.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

Most of the planets in our solar system are named after gods and goddesses from Greek and **Roman mythology**. For several, their names were determined based on similarities to their mythical counterparts. Based on what you know about classical mythology, can you figure out why the planets Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, and Uranus were named the way they were? You may have to do some research about the planets in order to find the answers.

**SEE ALSO** Cronus; Titans



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# V



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Christian

## Pronunciation

saynt VAL-uhn-tye-n

## Alternate Names

Valentinus

## Appears In

Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*

## Lineage

Unknown



## Valentine, St.

### Character Overview

According to tradition, St. Valentine is the saint associated with courtship, travelers, and young people. Early celebrations in honor of St. Valentine took place in the middle of February, around the time of an ancient Roman festival known as the Lupercalia (pronounced loo-pur-KAY-lee-uh). It was customary for men to draw the name of a young girl from a box and celebrate the festival with her. The Christian church substituted names of saints for the women, and individuals who picked them were supposed to draw inspiration from the lives of the saints. During the Middle Ages, St. Valentine's feast day on February 14 became known as a day for lovers. Though a popular theory for many years, modern scholars have discounted the idea that St. Valentine's Day served as a replacement for the Roman Lupercalia.

One story says that Valentine was a Roman priest who became a martyr—a person punished or killed due to his or her beliefs—because he helped persecuted Christians around 270 CE. Sent to prison, he restored the sight of a blind girl, who fell in love with him. According to another tale, Valentine was a young man awaiting execution. He loved the jailer's daughter and signed a farewell message to her: "From your Valentine."

## St. Valentine in Context

The oldest sources of the legend of St. Valentine contain no reference to love or lovers. In fact, the first connection between St. Valentine and romance was offered by English author Geoffrey Chaucer, whose poem *Parliament of Fowls* (1382) suggested that St. Valentine's Day was the occasion on which birds chose their mates. At the time, there were several days dedicated to different saints named Valentine; one of these days was May 2. Chaucer's poem was actually written to honor King Richard II of England, who had gotten engaged on May 2 of the previous year, and this is the date the author refers to as St. Valentine's Day.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The central theme in the myth of St. Valentine is doomed romantic love. St. Valentine fell in love just before he was scheduled to die and could do nothing about it except write a message expressing his love. The myth also symbolizes the importance of religious conviction above all else—including romance.

## St. Valentine in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

St. Valentine has one of the most recognized saintly names in modern times, yet he is known mostly for the romantic holiday he indirectly inspired. The messages of love that pass between two people on that special day are commonly known as valentines, and the term “valentine” is sometimes used to refer to any message of love sent to another person on any day. Unfortunately for St. Valentine, the mythical figure most closely associated with the holiday that bears his name is not Valentine, but the Greek god of love **Eros**—also known by his Roman name, Cupid.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The modern holiday known as Valentine's Day is an example of how beliefs from different cultures can combine to create something new that still retains elements from radically different belief systems. Can you think of any other examples of a holiday that combines beliefs or characters from two or more cultural traditions? Be specific about which

elements come from which culture; you may need to do some research about the holiday to find these answers.



# Valhalla

## Myth Overview

In **Norse mythology**, Valhalla was the great hall of **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), the chief of the gods. It was located in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods of war and the sky. According to legend, the heroic warriors slain in battle gathered in Valhalla. There they enjoyed a glorious **afterlife** and awaited **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), a time of great destruction when they would join the gods to wage a final battle against the forces of evil. Valhalla had more than 640 doors, each wide enough to allow hundreds of warriors to leave at the first sign of threat. Filled with shields and armor, the enormous hall was also the haunt of wolves, ravens, a boar that could be eaten and brought back to life, and a goat that provided an unlimited supply of an alcoholic drink called mead.

The **Valkyries** (pronounced val-KEER-eez), the battle maidens of Odin, selected the warriors worthy enough to live in Valhalla. These warriors entered the palace when they died, and their wounds were healed miraculously. They spent their days feasting and improving their battle skills in preparation for Ragnarok. Those warriors who were killed during practice each day were brought back to life and healed each evening.

## Valhalla in Context

The people of the Norse culture valued bravery in warfare as one of their most important cultural traits. This is reflected in the different versions of the **underworld** that the Norse believed in. Valhalla was the most heavenly, with constant feasting and merriment; it was reserved for those who died bravely in battle in foreign lands, fighting for the advancement of the Norse culture. Those who died fighting to preserve their own lands were next, taken in by the goddess **Freyja** (pronounced FRAY-uh).

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

val-HAL-uh

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

## Valhalla

*A Valkyrie welcomes dead soldiers to Valhalla, the resting place for those who died on the battlefield.* SNARK/ART RESOURCE, NY.



Those who died in other ways were considered to be without glory, and went to the relatively dismal underworld watched over by **Hel**.

### Key Themes and Symbols

For the Norse people, Valhalla represented the rewards of bravery. Valhalla also represented the ideal life to a Norseman: all the food, drink, and song one could ever hope for, with beautiful maidens as servants and plenty of opportunities to engage in battle. Valhalla also stood as a

symbol of preparedness, since it served as a temporary home for soldiers who would ultimately be called upon to fight at Ragnarok, and was designed to allow them to be ready to fight at a moment's notice.

## Valhalla in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Valhalla is the most well-known realm of the dead in Norse mythology, probably because it is also the most heavenly. The grand-scale descriptions of the hall found in the Eddas—the most significant literary source of Norse myths—are not often depicted by artists, perhaps because the immense dimensions would be difficult to capture. The name Valhalla has been used as the title of a long-running Danish comic series begun in 1978; the comic is an adaptation of many of the stories found in the Eddas, and is scheduled to conclude with the events leading to Ragnarok. DC Comics has also borrowed the name for its Valhalla Cemetery, a fictional resting place for superheroes who have died while performing their duties—much like the Norse warriors in the Valhalla of myth.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In Norse mythology, dying bravely in battle was the only way to gain entrance to Valhalla. In the history of religion, there are many examples of religious groups who believe that a special paradise is reserved in the afterlife for martyrs, or those who die for their beliefs. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research the idea of martyrdom in one of the major world religions. Are there important differences between the Norse cultural ideal and religious beliefs about martyrdom? If so, what are they?

**SEE ALSO** Heroes; Norse Mythology; Odin; Ragnarok; Valkyries



# Valkyries

## Character Overview

Female spirits in **Norse mythology**, the Valkyries were servants of the god **Odin** (pronounced OH-din). Originally, the Valkyries were fierce

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

val-KEER-eez

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Varies

creatures who took part in battles and devoured bodies of the dead on battlefields. They later emerged as beautiful female warriors—clad in armor on horseback—who rode over battlefields selecting the bravest slain warriors to enter **Valhalla**, Odin’s great hall in Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd). During battles the Valkyries carried out Odin’s commands, bringing either victory or defeat according to his wishes. After leading slain warriors to Valhalla, the Valkyries waited on them, serving them food and drink, while they awaited their time to do battle once again at **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the final battle between the gods and their enemies.

In several myths, the Valkyries appeared as giant beings with supernatural powers who could cause a rain of blood to fall upon the land, or who rowed ships across the sky on rivers of blood. Some Valkyries caused warriors to die, while others served as protectors, guarding the lives of those most dear to them. Valkyries were often shown as wives of **heroes**. **Brunhilde** (pronounced BROON-hilt), one of the most famous Valkyries in mythology, disobeyed Odin and was placed in an enchanted sleep within a wall of **fire** as punishment.

### Valkyries in Context

Although the origin of the myth of the Valkyries is not known, some historians believe that they may reflect religious rituals among the early Norse people. The worship of Odin was sometimes carried out through human sacrifices, with the most likely victims being fallen enemy warriors. Some believe that these sacrifices may have been performed by female priests; in later centuries, stories of these women could have evolved into the legend of the Valkyries. This would explain the main function of the Valkyries: leading fallen warriors from the battlefield to the **afterlife**.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes in the legend of the Valkyries is the rewarding of bravery on the battlefield. This is ultimately the main purpose of the Valkyries, as they choose the best warriors to reside in Valhalla until the coming of Ragnarok. In addition, Valkyries may have represented the typical Norseman’s view of the ideal woman: brave and independent, yet also beautiful and willing to be a servant to men.





*Valkyries were beautiful female warriors and servants of the Norse god Odin. They influenced human battles and served the slain in Valhalla, the resting place for the bravest warriors.* THE ART ARCHIVE/RICHARD WAGNER/MUSEUM BAYREUTH/GIANNI DAGLI ORTI.

## Valkyries in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

While Valkyries do not appear frequently in older Norse art, the image of the warrior maiden captured the imagination of nineteenth-century painters such as Peter Nicolai Arbo and Edward Robert Hughes. The German composer Richard Wagner based part of his opera cycle *The Ring of the Nibelung* on the legend of Brunhilde. One of the most famous pieces of music from the entire opera cycle—and indeed, one of the most readily recognized pieces of all classical music—is popularly

known as “The Ride of the Valkyries.” Valkyrie was also the name of a superheroine in the Marvel Comics Universe, and Valkyries—or similar warrior maidens who make use of the name—have appeared in numerous video games, such as *The Legend of Valkyrie* and *Valkyrie Profile*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Valkyries are often described as “warrior maidens.” In **Greek mythology**, the **Amazons** were also warrior maidens. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research both Valkyries and Amazons. How are they similar or different? What do you think these myths suggest about the role of women in Norse and Greek societies?

SEE ALSO Brunhilde; Norse Mythology; Odin; Valhalla

## Venus

See **Aphrodite**.



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## Viracocha

### Nationality/Culture

Incan

### Pronunciation

vee-ruh-KOH-chuh

### Alternate Names

Con Tiqui Viracocha,  
Huiracocha

### Appears In

Inca creation mythology

### Lineage

None

### Character Overview

Viracocha was the god who created the world and human civilization in **Inca mythology**. His name means “sea foam,” and one legend states that he rose from Lake Titicaca and transformed the universe from a place of empty darkness. He is a god of both the **sun** and storms, and is said to have destroyed the world once with a great flood. He was also referred to as Old Man of the Sky and Lord Instructor of the World.

### Major Myths

After rising from the lake and bringing light into the darkness, Viracocha created a world with people made from stone. He was unhappy with the



*The Incan god Viracocha.*

THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSEO  
PEDRO DE OSMA LIMA/MIR-  
EILLE VAUTIER/THE PICTURE  
DESK, INC.

result, since the people were disrespectful and ill-suited to becoming civilized. He destroyed the creatures with a great flood, and tried again by fashioning new people out of clay. These were much better at learning civilized ways, and Viracocha's son Inti (pronounced IN-tee) sent his own son and daughter to teach the people how to live and show them the land upon which they should found their society. (In some versions, Viracocha himself wandered the land in disguise, teaching humans the finer points of civilized life.) The location they chose for their society was named Cuzco (pronounced KOOZ-koh), the center of the Inca empire. One of the greatest leaders of the Incas, Pachacuti, was said to be

connected to Viracocha. He ordered the creation of a temple and a golden statue of Viracocha at Cuzco.

### Viracocha in Context

According to Inca tradition, one day Viracocha walked off across the sea and vanished. One day, he would return to the Inca people when he was needed. Viracocha had a bearded face and pale skin, similar to the Spanish soldiers who encountered the Inca people during their conquest of the New World. This may have allowed the Spanish to subdue the Incas easily, since the explorers were viewed as gods by the Inca people.

### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes in the myth of Viracocha is the quest for human advancement. Viracocha destroys his first attempt at people because they are unwilling to better themselves. He then sends his son to ensure that the new people are taught civilized ways and do not fall back into beastly habits. The fact that Viracocha is considered both a sun god and a storm god suggests his complete power over the sky and weather.

### Viracocha in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Viracocha was commonly depicted as a golden figure with a head that resembled the sun with rays of light extending outward from it, and holding staves in his hands. One well-known representation of Viracocha can be found on the Sun Gate, a stone monument at Tiahuanaco in Bolivia. Explorer and author Thor Heyerdahl borrowed one of Viracocha's names, Kon-Tiki, as the name of a raft he built for a trip across the Pacific Ocean in 1947. Heyerdahl also used it as the name of a subsequent book he wrote about the experience, as well as a 1951 documentary film on the subject, which won an Academy Award.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The Inca people believed that Viracocha walked off across the ocean and would return someday when his people once again needed him. Compare this to the myth of King **Arthur** and his final journey to Avalon. Do you think King Arthur and Viracocha both qualify as hero figures for their cultures? Why or why not? What is the significance of

two vastly different cultures—Romano-British and Inca—both having such similar legends?

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; Inca Mythology



# Vishnu

## Character Overview

Known as the preserver, Vishnu is one of three supreme Hindu deities, along with **Brahma** (pronounced BRAH-muh) and **Shiva** (pronounced SHEE-vuh). Vishnu's role is to protect humans and to restore order to the world. His presence is found in every object and force in creation, and some Hindus recognize him as the divine being from which all things come. Vishnu appears in a number of Hindu texts, including the Vedas, the *Mahabharata* (pronounced muh-hah-BAHR-ruh-tuh), and the *Ramayana* (pronounced rah-MAY-yah-nuh).

## Major Myths

Associated with the power of light, Vishnu floated on the surface of the ancient ocean on top of a thousand-headed snake called Shesha. Vishnu's most famous feat in the Vedas was to take the three steps that measured the extent of the world, an act that was part of creation. Some stories credit Vishnu with a major role in creation; others say he assisted the god **Indra** (pronounced IN-druh).

According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu comes to earth in a variety of animal and human forms called avatars. These avatars are embodiments of the god that contain part of his divine spirit and power. Hindus believe that an avatar of Vishnu appears whenever the world or humans are in danger, and in this way, the god helps to overcome evil, bring justice, and restore order.

Vishnu had ten principal avatars. The first, Matsya (pronounced MAHT-see-yah), was a fish that saved the first human, **Manu** (pronounced MAN-oo), from a great flood by leading his ship to safety. Kurma (pronounced KOOR-muh), the second avatar, was the tortoise that recovered some precious objects that the gods had lost during

### Nationality/Culture

Hindu

### Pronunciation

VISH-noo

### Alternate Names

Narayana, Rama, Krishna

### Appears In

The Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*

### Lineage

None



*The Hindu god Vishnu had ten different forms.* HIP/ART RESOURCE, NY.

another great flood. Also saved from the flood was Lakshmi (pronounced LAHK-shmee), a goddess of fortune and beauty who became Vishnu's wife. Vishnu appeared on earth a third time as Varaha (pronounced VAH-rah-hah), the boar. Varaha rid the world of a demon giant named Hiranyaksha (pronounced HAHR-nah-kahsh), who had dragged the earth to the bottom of the ocean and threatened to keep it there. After a thousand-year struggle, Varaha killed the demon.

Vishnu's fourth avatar, the man-lion Narasimha (pronounced nah-rah-SIM-hah), freed the world from another demon, Hiranyakashipu, who had forbidden worship of the gods. When the evil King Vali (pronounced VAH-lee) gained control of the world, Vishnu appeared on earth a fifth time as Vamana (pronounced vuh-MAH-nah), the dwarf. Vamana persuaded Vali to give him whatever land he could cover in three steps. The dwarf then changed into a giant, and his steps extended over both **heaven** and earth. Vishnu's sixth avatar was Parasurama

## Lakshmi, Wife of Vishnu

Vishnu's consort, or wife, is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, love, and beauty. One of her symbols is the lotus blossom, which in Hinduism is associated with creation, purity, and spiritual power. Lakshmi is called the "daughter of the sea" because in Indian mythology she arose from the ocean, like the Greek goddess Aphrodite. Lakshmi has other incarnations: she is Sita, the wife of Rama (an avatar of Vishnu) in the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, and she is Rukmini, the wife of Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu. Hindus believe that marriage continues through many lifetimes, hence Vishnu and Lakshmi remain married through their many incarnations.

(pronounced pah-ruh-soo-RAH-muh), a young man who freed the Hindu priests from a class of warriors known as the Kshatriyas.

Vishnu's most popular and well-known avatars were Rama (pronounced RAH-muh) and **Krishna** (pronounced KRISH-nuh), the great **heroes** of the epics the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Rama, the seventh avatar, saved humans from the demon king Ravana (pronounced RAH-vuh-nuh), while Krishna rid the world of many demons and took part in a long struggle against the forces of evil. The ninth avatar of Vishnu was the Buddha (pronounced BOO-duh), the religious leader whose beliefs weakened the opponents of the gods and who founded the Buddhist faith. Vishnu's tenth avatar, Kalki (pronounced KAHL-kee), has not yet arrived on earth. He will come one day, mounted on a white horse, to oversee the final destruction of the wicked, restore purity, renew creation, and bring forth a new era of harmony and order.

## Vishnu in Context

Vishnu's rise in popularity over the centuries reflects the changing nature of Hinduism. In the Vedas, a collection of ancient sacred texts, Vishnu is only a minor god. Early myths also portray Vishnu as a messenger between humans and the gods. Over time, the character of Vishnu combined the traits of a number of heroes and gods, and by the time the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* were written, Vishnu was seen as one of the most important and popular Hindu deities.

## Key Themes and Symbols

Vishnu's main duty in nearly all myths related to his many forms is the protection of humankind. This is shown when he aided Manu before the flood, and when he fought off demons as both Rama and Krishna. Another theme found throughout the myths of Vishnu is death and rebirth: Vishnu is born into the world in various forms over the ages, and after he accomplishes his goal he disappears from the human world until he is once again needed.

## Vishnu in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Vishnu is one of the most popular gods in Hindu art and culture, and is represented in many different forms. Most often, he is depicted as having blue skin and four arms, each holding an item: a conch shell, a club or mace, a lotus flower, and a disc-shaped weapon called a chakram. Vishnu is also often depicted in the form of Krishna, as he appears in much of the *Mahabharata*. In the form of Hinduism known as Vaishnavism, the most popular type of Hinduism practiced today, Vishnu is seen as the one supreme god.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Vishnu has ten well-known avatars that figure prominently in Hindu myth. Why do you think Hindus view these ten avatars as aspects of the same god, Vishnu, instead of ten different gods? Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research one other major world religion that combines multiple forms within a single deity. What are the functions of the different forms of the deity? Why do you think religions use this symbolism?

**SEE ALSO** Animals in Mythology; Brahma; Buddhism and Mythology; Devils and Demons; Floods; Hinduism and Mythology; Indra; *Mahabharata, The; Ramayana, The; Shiva*

## Vulcan

See **Hephaestus**.



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# W



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture



## Wakan Tanka

### Character Overview

In **Native American mythology**, Wakan Tanka (great mystery) is the supreme being and creator of the Lakota Sioux. Sometimes called Great Spirit, he is similar to the supreme beings found in the myths of many other North American peoples.

### Major Myths

According to Lakota myth, before creation Wakan Tanka existed in a great emptiness called Han (darkness). Feeling lonely, he decided to create companions for himself. First, Great Spirit focused his energy into a powerful force and formed Inyan (rock), the first god. Next, he used Inyan to create Maka (earth), and then mated with that god to produce Skan (sky). Skan brought forth Wi (the sun) from Inyan, Maka, and himself. These four gods were separate and powerful, but they were all part of Wakan Tanka.

The first four gods produced four companions—Moon, Wind, Falling Star, and **Thunderbird**—to help with the process of creation. In turn, these companions created various gods and spirits, including Whirlwind, Four Winds, Buffalo, Two-Legged Creatures (humans and bears), Sicun (thought), Nagi (spirit of death), Niya (breath of life), and Nagila (shadow). All of these beings were aspects of Wakan Tanka. Together, they created and oversee everything that exists.

#### Nationality/Culture

American Indian

#### Pronunciation

WAH-kuhn tahn-kuh

#### Alternate Names

Great Spirit, Wakanda

#### Appears In

American Indian oral mythology

#### Lineage

None

## Wakan Tanka in Context

The idea of Wakan Tanka reflects a common view among American Indian tribes that the natural world is part of a spirit being, or is infused with spirit. Wakan Tanka is not just a specific, defined being, like the various gods in **Greek mythology**, but is a spirit force that can be found in all things, from **corn** to canyons to cockroaches. In modern times, due to the influence of Christian missionaries, Wakan Tanka is often compared to the all-powerful God of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Some dismiss this comparison as simplistic, but some American Indians have incorporated Christian beliefs, such as the appearance of Jesus, into their existing mythology of Wakan Tanka.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The main theme of the myths of Wakan Tanka is the interconnected nature of the world. Wakan Tanka is present in all things as a sacred energy, and the original gods—from whom all other things in the world originate—were made from part of Wakan Tanka. This also suggests unity and harmony with the natural world, as opposed to viewing some natural events, such as storms or **floods**, as hostile or evil.

## Wakan Tanka in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Wakan Tanka remains a central part of American Indian belief, particularly among the Lakota people. The Great Spirit was popularized by the book *Black Elk Speaks* (1932) by John G. Neihardt, and is also mentioned in the popular book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970). Like many American Indian deities, however, Wakan Tanka has not yet penetrated mainstream popular culture in a significant way.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

In mainstream American culture, Wakan Tanka—the Great Spirit—is perhaps best known from *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), an autobiographical account of Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux medicine man, written from conversations between himself and author John G. Neihardt, a poet and amateur ethnographer. The book documents important events in the history of the Sioux people, such as the battle at Little Bighorn and the massacre at Wounded Knee, both witnessed by

Black Elk. It also contains a wealth of information about Sioux beliefs and myths.

SEE ALSO Creation Stories; Native American Mythology



## Witches and Wizards

### Character Overview

Witches and wizards are people thought to possess magical powers or to command supernatural forces. They appear in the myths and folktales of many cultures. The word “witch” usually refers to a female, though male witches exist in some traditions. Men who possess the powers associated with witchcraft are often known as wizards or warlocks.

In many myths and legends, witches are evil, dishonest, or dangerous. Some cultures do not consider them fully human. If not evil by nature, witches may be possessed by demons or wicked spirits determined to harm humans. Yet ordinary men and women may learn magic for the purpose of hurting others. Such people are sometimes called sorcerers and sorceresses rather than wizards and witches. African tradition distinguishes between good magicians, or medicine men, and bad magicians, or sorcerers. Both types are distinct from the nonhuman witch.

Not all witches and wizards are evil. Some myths and folktales feature good spirits or magicians who help people. These are said to practice “white magic” rather than the “black magic” of the evil witches and wizards. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the modern children’s book that became a famous movie, features both kinds of witches. It is easy to tell them apart—the wicked witch is an old hag dressed in black, while the good witch is a beautiful, soft-spoken woman dressed like a princess.

The magicians that appear in myths and folktales, however, are not always clearly labeled. They may be unpredictable and of uncertain character—neither completely good nor completely evil. Their treatment of humans may depend on how they are treated. Often people meet old women, not realizing that they are dealing with witches. In such cases, the witch may reward kindness and punish rudeness.

### Nationality/Culture

Various

### Alternate Names

Sorceresses, Warlocks

### Appears In

Various myths around the world

### Lineage

Varies

**Legendary Witches and Wizards** Witches take many forms. The traditional image in European and American folklore is that of a wrinkled old woman, perhaps wearing a black robe and a cone-shaped hat. These witches communicate with evil spirits called familiars, which often take the form of a black cat. According to legend, Japanese witches have owls as familiars, and African witches have monkeys.

Flight is often associated with witchcraft. In American folktales, witches usually travel through the night skies on enchanted broomsticks. In some parts of Africa, witches are said to fly on bats. African witches often take the form of animals and eat human flesh. In the mythology of some cultures, witches can change into animals to prey upon their victims.

The tradition of witchcraft is ancient. The book of Samuel in the Old Testament of the Bible contains an account of a sorceress called the Witch of Endor. Saul, the first king of Israel, banished magicians from his kingdom but finally asked for advice from the Witch of Endor, who had “a familiar spirit.” Assured that she would not be punished for practicing magic, the witch called up the spirit of Samuel, a dead prophet of the Israelites. The spirit predicted Saul’s defeat in the battle that was to take place the next day.

In the *Odyssey*, an epic of ancient Greece, the hero **Odysseus** (pronounced oh-DIS-ee-uhs) and his men met a witch named **Circe** (pronounced SUR-see). The daughter of a god and an ocean nymph, Circe had the power to turn people into animals and monsters. Her island home was populated with lions, bears, and wolves—all had once been human, but were transformed by her magic. Although she turned some of Odysseus’s men into pigs, the hero used a special herb that protected him from her magic.

Witchcraft and magic played an important role in the **Arthurian legends** of Britain. **Merlin**, a powerful wizard, guided and influenced King **Arthur** throughout his life. A witch named Morgan Le Fay also appeared in the legends and took care of Arthur after he was wounded in battle.

Slavic folklore of eastern Europe and western Russia has a witch called Baba Yaga (pronounced BAH-buh yuh-GAH), a thin old woman whose nickname means “bony legs.” Baba Yaga lives alone in a hut deep in the forest. The hut stands on the legs of a chicken and is surrounded by a fence decorated with skulls. Visitors who wish to enter must recite a magic formula. Although Baba Yaga sometimes helps the hero or heroine of a story, she is generally a dangerous figure who must be outwitted.

One Baba Yaga story concerns a prince named Ivan who needed a very fast horse to rescue his wife from the clutches of a monster. Ivan learned that Baba Yaga had some special horses and asked her for the use of one. The witch said that he must first guard her horses for three nights. She was sure that Ivan would fail at the task because she ordered the horses to gallop away each night. However, Ivan had shown kindness to various animals and insects, and they gathered the horses together for him. Finally Ivan seized one of the horses and rode off to save his wife. Baba Yaga chased him, but he outran her.

Witches and sorcerers occur frequently in American Indian myths. Unlike shamans and healers, they are fearsome and destructive beings. The Navajo of the American Southwest have stories about the *adilgashii*, witches who travel at night in the skins of coyotes or other animals and who use poison made from the ground bones of babies to harm the living. In English, the *adilgashii* are called skinwalkers.

The Tlingit of the Pacific Northwest believe that a man with an unfaithful wife becomes a witch by drinking from a dead shaman's skull. This first witch then creates other witches, both male and female. They acquire dark powers by lurking in graveyards and handling the dead. In a theme repeated in stories from many cultures, the Tlingit witches make dolls out of the hair, clothing, or food of those they want to harm. By placing these dolls in graves to rot with corpses, the witches cause their victims to become sick. A witch can reverse the spell and cure the victim by rinsing the doll in salt water.

## Witches and Wizards in Context

Many cultures around the world include legends or myths about witches and wizards. The way a culture addresses the idea of magic is reflected in these myths. For example, in Christian cultures, magic is almost always considered to be an act of the Devil. In Christian stories, then, witches are evil beings who seek only to cause harm. It is worth noting that many beneficial magical events are described in Christian stories, but these are nearly always referred to as “miracles” instead of magic.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, the belief in witches was widespread. Witches were said to be worshippers of the Devil. Thousands of women and some men were tortured and executed after being accused of witchcraft. The English who settled in North America brought along a fear of witches. A witch hunt in Salem, Massachusetts,

*In Arthurian legend the wizard Merlin is tricked by the enchantress Nimüe into sharing all his secrets. Nimüe then imprisons him behind invisible walls.*

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LIBRARY.



in 1692 resulted in the execution of nineteen people. Even today, accusations of witchcraft can lead to violence in some parts of the world.

In many belief systems, such as Hinduism, magic is seen as something that can be good or bad. In these cultures, wizards and witches might be considered helpful characters or even **heroes**. Very often there are magicians whose sole purpose is to combat evil magic or protect someone from its effects. The wizard Merlin, found in Romano-British legends, uses magic for reasons that are presented as positive or helpful in most cases. In modern times, witches and wizards are viewed rather positively, with many films, television shows, and video games featuring such characters as heroes. This may reflect the feeling that magic and other supernatural forces are taken less seriously because, due to advances in science, they are no longer believed to be the causes of tragic events.

### Key Themes and Symbols

The central theme in stories about witches and wizards is the ability to control people, objects, and events in supernatural ways. This includes everything from making objects disappear to secretly causing a person's illness. In most stories, this control is motivated by a desire for great riches and power, or a desire for revenge. Sometimes the motivation is love, in both good and bad ways. Circe turned the beautiful nymph Scylla (pronounced SIL-uh) into a monster when a man chose her over Circe.

One of the symbols most commonly associated with witchcraft in European cultures is the broomstick. This is an object traditionally linked to women and their domestic duties, and therefore reflects the view that women were considered to be more attuned to the supernatural. Another common symbol across many cultures is the stick or wand used by a witch or wizard; this is often a tree branch or something made of wood or bone, and symbolizes the importance of nature in channeling magic.

## Witches and Wizards in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Throughout history, witches and wizards have never failed to capture the imagination of writers and artists. Artists have traditionally pictured witches as hideous hags, though some characters—such as Circe—are depicted as beautiful and seductive. Authors such as Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, and Sir Thomas Malory included wizards and witches as key characters in some of their most important works. In modern times, L. Frank Baum, Stephen King, and J. R. R. Tolkien have created similar memorable characters. Many television shows have been based on the notion of witches and wizards existing in secret as a part of mainstream society. Some notable examples include *Bewitched*; *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*; and *Wizards of Waverly Place*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Stories about witches and wizards continue to fascinate the public and to inspire writers. In addition to providing an otherworldly atmosphere, such stories often reveal truths about ordinary human existence. In the Harry Potter series of modern fantasy books, British writer J. K. Rowling describes an entire society involved with magic. The reader follows Harry, an ordinary boy, as he studies at the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Between adventures laced with **dragons**, magic potions, and flying broomsticks, Rowling shows how Harry learns about values such as friendship, loyalty, and courage. The first book in the seven-book series is *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (also known as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*).

SEE ALSO Circe; Devils and Demons; Merlin



# Woman Who Fell from the Sky

## Character Overview

In the mythology of the Iroquois and Huron of North America, the Woman Who Fell from the Sky is an ancient ancestor. Also known as

### Nationality/Culture

American Indian/Iroquois and Huron

### Alternate Names

Sky Woman, Ataensic

### Appears In

Iroquois and Huron oral creation myths

### Lineage

None

Sky Woman or Ataensic, she plays a central role in the creation of the earth and all living things. She is also a figure of fertility who provides the first **corn** to people.

### Major Myths

According to legend, the Woman Who Fell From the Sky lived in a world above the sky. One day she became pregnant and fell out of the sky. Some stories say that she fell while chasing a bear, while others say that the tree of life was uprooted and she tumbled through the hole left behind. As the woman fell, ducks flew beneath her to slow her descent. She landed in a vast watery place, with no land in sight. Turtle arose from the water and let her rest on his back. Meanwhile, Muskrat dove beneath the water and brought up mud to form the earth. Soon after, the woman gave birth to twin sons—one good and one evil—who created all the natural features of the earth and sky. According to some stories, she gave birth to a daughter, and that woman was the mother of the **twins**.

The good twin shaped the sky and created the **sun**. He also made the moon, stars, mountains, and many plants and animals. The evil twin set out to destroy his brother's creations. He created darkness to drive the sun from the sky, and made monsters, storms, and various kinds of dangerous beasts. When creation was finished, the brothers fought. The good twin won and banished his evil brother from the earth. Some stories say that the evil twin became ruler of the **underworld**, or land of the dead, and still tries to spread evil in the world. After the Woman Who Fell from the Sky died, her good son planted a seed in her body that grew into the first corn as a gift to the people.

### The Woman Who Fell from the Sky in Context

The myth of The Woman Who Fell from the Sky reflects important elements of Iroquois beliefs. First, the myth reflects a belief in a celestial realm that resembles the world on the ground. Second, it suggests the importance of rain and corn to the Iroquois people. The character can be seen as a symbol for rain, which sustains life and is normally the only thing that falls from the sky. Corn grows from her body like a baby grows inside its mother, reflecting the belief that women are the source of fertility and growth.



## Key Themes and Symbols

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky is a myth dealing primarily with fertility, or the ability to grow and sustain life. The woman is already pregnant at the beginning of the tale; the fact that she has twins adds to her representation as an instrument of fertility. Her twins then go on to create the rest of the world, which makes her the source of all life. When she dies, her body remains a source of fertility, and the first corn grows from it.

## The Woman Who Fell from the Sky in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky remains an important part of the creation myths of several American Indian tribes. Joy Harjo, a poet and member of the Muscogee tribe, explores myth, creation, and everyday life in her collection of poems titled *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*. John Bierhorst's *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky: The Iroquois Story of Creation* is a marvelous retelling of the creation myth, enhanced by Robert Andrew Parker's watercolor and pastel illustrations.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Native American myths contain abundant references to powerful women. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research two or three myths of powerful women and the cultures that produced them. What are some of the characteristics of these women? What are some of the cultural beliefs among Native Americans that might have led to their portrayal of women as powerful?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Native American Mythology; Twins



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# XYZ



Character



Deity



Myth



Theme



Culture

## Nationality/Culture

Chinese/Taoist

## Pronunciation

shee-EN

## Alternate Names

Hsien

## Appears In

*The Eight Immortals Depart and Travel to the East*

## Lineage

Varies



## Xian

### Character Overview

In the Taoist mythology of China, the Xian (or Hsien) are enlightened beings who at one time lived as humans on earth, but eventually became immortal, or able to live forever. Some of the Xian were real individuals mentioned in historical records; others appear only in myths and legends. Early Chinese texts refer to various numbers of Xian, but the most famous of these, the Eight Immortals, were first identified during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

The Eight Immortals are said to travel the universe together in a state of perfect health and happiness. They perform various wonders and miracles and serve as models for those seeking the *tao* (pronounced DOW), or way—the path to an ideal state of being and existence. In Chinese art, these Eight Immortals often appear as a group, each depicted with his or her own characteristic clothing and possessions.

**The Stories of the Eight Immortals** The stories about the Xian explain how each achieved immortality in a different way. The first to reach this state was Li Tieguai (pronounced LEE tee-eh-GWYE, meaning “Li of the Iron Crutch”), a hermit who went forty years without food or sleep. According to some stories, Li Tieguai acquired both immortality and his crutch from the Queen Mother of the West, who saw him limping and begging. Other legends say that Laozi (pronounced low-DZOO), the

founder of Taoism, came down from **heaven** to teach Li Tieguai the wisdom of the gods. One day Li sent his spirit to Laozi. When he returned, he found that a follower had burned his body, believing him to be dead. So Li entered the body of a deformed beggar who had died, gaining both immortality and a new identity.

Several different tales tell of the life of Zhong-Liquan (pronounced DJORNG-lee-choo-AHN), an army officer and state official. Some stories say that after losing a battle he went into the mountains, became a hermit, and learned the secret of immortality from the Flowers of the East. Other tales say that he was a priest or a beggar and that he discovered a jade box containing the magic potion of eternal life.

The most famous of the Xian was Lu Dongbin (pronounced LOO dorng-BEEN), a prince who traveled throughout China slaying **dragons** with a magic sword. One day he met Zhong-Liquan at an inn, and later that night he dreamed that his royal life would end in disgrace. When he awoke, he turned his back on worldly things and followed Zhong-Liquan into the mountains to seek the tao and gain immortality.

The grandnephew of a great statesman and poet, Han Xiang (pronounced HARN shee-YEN) became a follower of Lu Dongbin. While climbing a sacred peach tree one day, he fell from the branches and achieved immortality before he reached the ground. Some stories say he died as a result of the fall and was then transformed into an immortal.

Cao Guojiu (pronounced TSOW gwor-JEE-yoo) was the brother of an empress. Disgusted by the corruption at the royal court, he went into the mountains to seek the tao. He met a boatman on the way and showed him a golden tablet that would admit the holder to the royal court. The boatman—Lu Dongbin in disguise—was not impressed, but he took Cao Guojiu as a disciple and taught him the tao and the secret of immortality.

The immortal Zhang Guolao (pronounced DJARNG gwor-LOW) was also a hermit. Famous for his skills in magic, he traveled around on a white mule that he could fold up like a sheet of paper and put into a carrying bag. Many stories say that Zhang Guolao achieved immortality simply by never dying, or by appearing alive again after people saw him die.

The immortal Lan Caihe (pronounced LARN TSWEE-HUH) sometimes appears as a man and other times as a woman. One day while gathering medicinal herbs, Lan Caihe met a beggar and helped tend the sores on his body. The beggar was Li Tieguai in disguise, and he

rewarded this kindness by granting Lan Caihe immortality. Lan Caihe traveled around the country in a tattered blue dress, urging people to seek the tao.

The eighth Xian, He Xiang (HUH SHEE-yen-GOO), is the only one who is definitely a woman. As a young girl, He Xiang dreamed that a spirit told her to grind up and eat some mother-of-pearl. She did this and became immortal. Thereafter, she floated from mountain to mountain gathering herbs and fruit.

## Xian in Context

The story of the Xian reflects the importance of the idea of immortality in Chinese culture. This notion runs through both Taoism and Buddhism; physical death is often seen as the last stage leading to eternal life. The myth of the Xian, like Buddhist teachings, suggests to believers that immortality is something that can be achieved by anyone. This reflects a view that the godlike figures of Chinese myth are not only closely connected to typical humans, but in many cases represent advanced stages of what it means to be human.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The most important theme that runs through all the tales of the Xian is the search for immortality. Some search diligently for it, while others stumble upon it. In most cases, however, immortality is described as a reward or something that is earned. Usually this is earned through acts of cleansing or purifying, or by giving up worldly things. Several items in the myths of the Xian are ancient Chinese symbols of immortality, such as peaches, jade, and mother-of-pearl.

## Xian in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Eight Immortals are identified in Chinese art primarily by their clothes and the things they carry. Li Tieguai is depicted as a disabled beggar with an iron crutch. Zhong-Liquan is usually portrayed as a bearded old man holding a fan made of feathers. Lu Dongbin is usually shown carrying a sword, while Han Xiang is shown carrying a basket of flowers. Cao Guojiu appears wearing official robes and carrying his golden tablet. Zhang Guolao is shown with a peach—a symbol of immortality—and a feather from the legendary **phoenix**. Lan Caihe is

usually shown with a flute or a basket of fruit. Artists generally portrayed He Xiangfu as a beautiful woman wearing a lotus flower in her hair or on her clothing. The Eight Immortals remain a popular artistic subject in modern times, and several Chinese films have been made about their lives.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

*The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel* (2007) by Michael Scott is a novel about twin California teens who discover they are at the center of a prophecy about saving—or destroying—the world. One takes a job at a bookstore owned by an alchemist who has discovered the secret of immortality. When the book containing the secret is stolen, the **twins** must learn to use their untapped magical powers to get it back.

SEE ALSO Chinese Mythology



### Nationality/Culture

Aztec

### Pronunciation

SHE-pay TOH-tek

### Alternate Names

None

### Appears In

Aztec oral mythology

### Lineage

Son of Coatlicue

# Xipe Totec

## Character Overview

Xipe Totec (pronounced SHE-pay TOH-tek), which means “Our Lord the Flayed One,” was an Aztec god of agriculture and the changing of the seasons. Xipe Totec was also associated with disease, death, and rebirth. He was often the recipient of human sacrifices, with priests removing the skin of the victims as part of a special ritual in his honor.

## Major Myths

Like many other important Aztec gods, Xipe Totec was said to be the child of the goddess **Coatlicue** (pronounced koh-aht-LEE-kway). He was worshipped as the provider of food for the Aztec people. According to myth, he wore a human skin over his golden body, and peeled off the skin to feed the people. He also looked after goldsmiths, and presided over the changing of the seasons. Unlike his brothers **Huitzilopochtli** (pronounced wee-tsee-loh-POCH-tee) and **Quetzalcoatl** (pronounced keht-sahl-koh-AHT-l), Xipe Totec is not the subject of documented

## Human Sacrifice Across Cultures

Human sacrifice has deep roots in world cultures and religions. Just about every world region—from the Americas to Europe to China to India—had societies that practiced human sacrifice. Many religions, including Christianity, have references to human sacrifice in their legends and texts. The purpose of human sacrifice was to offer a gift or atonement to the gods or God in order to placate them, seek protection from harm, or ask for something, such as good crops or more rain. Humans, especially certain categories of humans, such as a firstborn son or daughter, were considered the highest form of sacrifice, hence the most acceptable to the deities. Over time, the sacrifice of humans gave way to substituting animals, or to purely symbolic sacrificial rituals.

myths. However, as the god of the seasons and crop growth, sacrifices to Xipe Totec were plentiful and unusual. Victims, generally slaves, were completely skinned, and a priest would then wear the skin as a ceremonial suit during fertility rituals in honor of the god.

## Xipe Totec in Context

The peeling of Xipe Totec's skin in order to feed the people is a reflection of two important facets of Aztec life. First, it reflects the notion that human **sacrifice** is essential to keep the natural world functioning; the Aztecs believed that blood was the basic fuel needed to power the **sun**. Second, the peeling of Xipe Totec's skin parallels the growth of maize (corn) seeds, which break free of their outer covering as they sprout. Maize was an important part of the Aztec diet and was often referenced in myth.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The central theme in the myth of Xipe Totec is rebirth. Just as spring symbolizes a new cycle of life, Xipe Totec sheds his old, dead skin—much like a snake—and offers it to sustain life. This also represents the Aztec idea that death is necessary to sustain life or to create new life. The color gold is closely associated with Xipe Totec, since he is the protector of goldsmiths and the provider of golden maize. Both are considered treasures, each in its own way.

## Xipe Totec

*This piece of gold jewelry has a representation of the pre-Columbian god Xipe Totec on it.* © OAXACA MUSEUM, MEXICO/BILDARCHIV STEFFENS/HENRI STIERLIN/THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY.



### **Xipe Totec in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

In Aztec art, Xipe Totec was usually depicted as a golden figure wearing a suit of human skin over most of his body, often with parts of the skin



suit—such as the hands—hanging loose to expose his true body underneath. Many statues of the god have been discovered, but he is less often seen in modern art and literature than other Aztec gods.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

For the Aztecs, human sacrifice was not viewed as an act of violence so much as an act of giving life to the gods, and in cultures around the world, human and animal sacrifice is associated with religious beliefs and rituals. In modern times, however, acts such as the skinning of another person are more likely to be associated with murderers and Nazi death camps. How do you think this affects the modern view of Aztec gods such as Xipe Totec? Do you think this also creates a negative bias toward the Aztec culture in modern culture? Is such a bias justified? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Aztec Mythology



## Yellow Emperor

### Character Overview

In **Chinese mythology**, Huang-Di (pronounced hoo-arng-DEE), also known as the Yellow Emperor, was the most ancient of five legendary Chinese emperors, as well as a key figure in Taoism, one of China's main religions and philosophies. He was also a hero credited with civilizing the earth, teaching people many skills, and inventing numerous useful items, including the wheel, armor and weapons, ships, writing, the compass, and coined money. According to tradition, the Yellow Emperor began ruling in 2697 BCE. His long reign was said to be a golden age, and he was honored as a generous and wise ruler. Before Huang-Di came to the throne, order and government were unknown in the world. He introduced systems of government and law to humankind, and he also invented music and the arts.

### Major Myths

Legend says that the Yellow Emperor had four faces that gazed out in four directions, allowing him to see all that happened in the world. In

**Nationality/Culture**  
Chinese/Taoist

**Alternate Names**  
Huang-Di

**Appears In**  
The *Shiji*

**Lineage**  
Son of Shao-dian

## Yellow Emperor

*The Yellow Emperor.* © MARY  
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addition, he could communicate directly with the gods through his prayers and sacrifices. When he traveled around his empire, he rode in an ivory chariot pulled by **dragons** and an elephant, accompanied by

a procession of tigers, wolves, snakes, and flocks of the fabled **phoenix** birds.

During Huang-Di's reign, only one god challenged his authority. The rebel god was aided by the emperor's son Fei Lian (pronounced FAY lee-EN), lord of the wind. They sent fog and rain to drown the royal armies, but the emperor's daughter Ba (drought) dried up the rain and helped defeat the rebels.

After ruling for many years, Huang-Di became tired and weak. He allowed officials to make decisions for him and went to live in a simple hut in the courtyard of his palace. Through fasting, prayer, and meditation, he discovered the *tao* (pronounced DOW), or way—the path to an ideal state of being and existence. The Yellow Emperor continued to rule for many additional years, attempting to bring a state of perfection to his realm. Upon his death he rose into the heavens and became an immortal, or a being who could live forever.

## Yellow Emperor in Context

The Yellow Emperor is regarded as an actual historical figure in Chinese culture. It is common for real historical figures to acquire layers of myth over the centuries, building upon or exaggerating their accomplishments. However, because of the sweeping nature of the Yellow Emperor's achievements—he is believed to have invented traditional Chinese music, medicine, and the calendar, among other things—some have argued that the reverse has occurred: the Yellow Emperor was a purely mythic figure who was given an “historical” identity. This may have occurred as a way for some groups to claim that they are ancestors of the Yellow Emperor, and therefore hold special rights to rule.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The word *huang* means “yellow” as well as “radiant,” which connects the Yellow Emperor to the **sun** as the center part of the universe. The myth of the Yellow Emperor focuses on the theme of progress and advancement. The Yellow Emperor civilizes many diverse peoples and teaches them the basics of civilization, such as medicine and music. The emperor himself then retreats in an effort to achieve his own personal advancement through Taoism. He ultimately achieves this, which leads to his immortality.

## Yellow Emperor in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

The Yellow Emperor is a popular part of the cultural history of China. He has been the subject of many television shows that expand upon the legends of his life. The Yellow Emperor is also mentioned in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges titled “The Fauna of Mirrors,” and in the 2002 video game *Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom*.

### Read, Write, Think, Discuss

For events that are said to have happened in the distant past, there may never be a way of knowing how much of what is believed is factual and how much is legend. In your opinion, would it matter if legendary events could be proven to be either factual or fictional? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Chinese Mythology; Heroes; Xian



#### Nationality/Culture

Norse

#### Pronunciation

IG-druh-sil

#### Alternate Names

None

#### Appears In

The Eddas

## Yggdrasill

### Myth Overview

In **Norse mythology**, a mighty axis, or pole, ran through the universe in which the gods, **giants**, and **heroes** enacted their stormy dramas. That axis, around which all life revolved, was the World Tree, a giant ash tree called Yggdrasill (pronounced IG-druh-sil). The myths paint a complex picture of how the universe was structured around Yggdrasill. Sometimes the World Tree is described as running through nine realms, from the shadowy depths of the **underworld**, or land of the dead, up to the heavenly abode of the gods. At other times, the trunk of Yggdrasill is said to anchor Midgard, the world of humans, while the tree’s three great roots reach down into Jotunheim (pronounced YAW-toon-heyM), the land of the frost giants; Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heyM), the land of mist; and Asgard (pronounced AHS-gahrd), the home of the gods.

Although the World Tree offered an avenue of passage from one realm to the next, the distances and dangers involved in such travel were great. The only creature that could run up and down Yggdrasill easily was a squirrel, which carried insulting messages back and forth between a fierce eagle perched in the tree’s topmost branch and a dragon that

gnawed at its root. Yggdrasill existed in a state of delicate balance, being endlessly destroyed and renewed.

The World Tree was closely linked to sources of hidden or magical knowledge. Its name, which means “**Odin**’s horse,” refers to Odin hanging himself from the tree for nine days and nights to learn secret mysteries. Near one root rose a spring whose waters provided wisdom. Odin was said to have traded an eye to drink this water. Another root sheltered a spring tended by the Norns, three women who determined the fate of all humans.

## Yggdrasill in Context

The Norse people of Scandinavia built their mythological beliefs upon the foundation of the natural world. Even the realms that they considered supernatural were connected by natural elements, such as the rainbow that acts as a bridge for the gods to enter their home at Asgard. It is not surprising that the different worlds of Norse mythology are all connected by a gigantic version of something found in nature—an ash tree. As with the rainbow bridge to Asgard, the belief in Yggdrasill may have been based on simple observations of the natural world; it has been suggested that high-altitude cirrus clouds may have appeared, to an imaginative Norse eye, like branches of a gigantic tree in the far distance. It is more likely, however, that people throughout the world use natural forms to express the symbolic and meaningful elements of myths.

## Key Themes and Symbols

The World Tree Yggdrasill symbolizes the interconnection of the visible world and the worlds of Norse myth. The tree also represents life as an eternal and fundamental part of the world. After the destruction of the gods at **Ragnarok** (pronounced RAHG-nuh-rok), the only humans that survive are those who seek shelter in the branches of Yggdrasill. In Norse culture, the ash tree was associated with protection from evil.

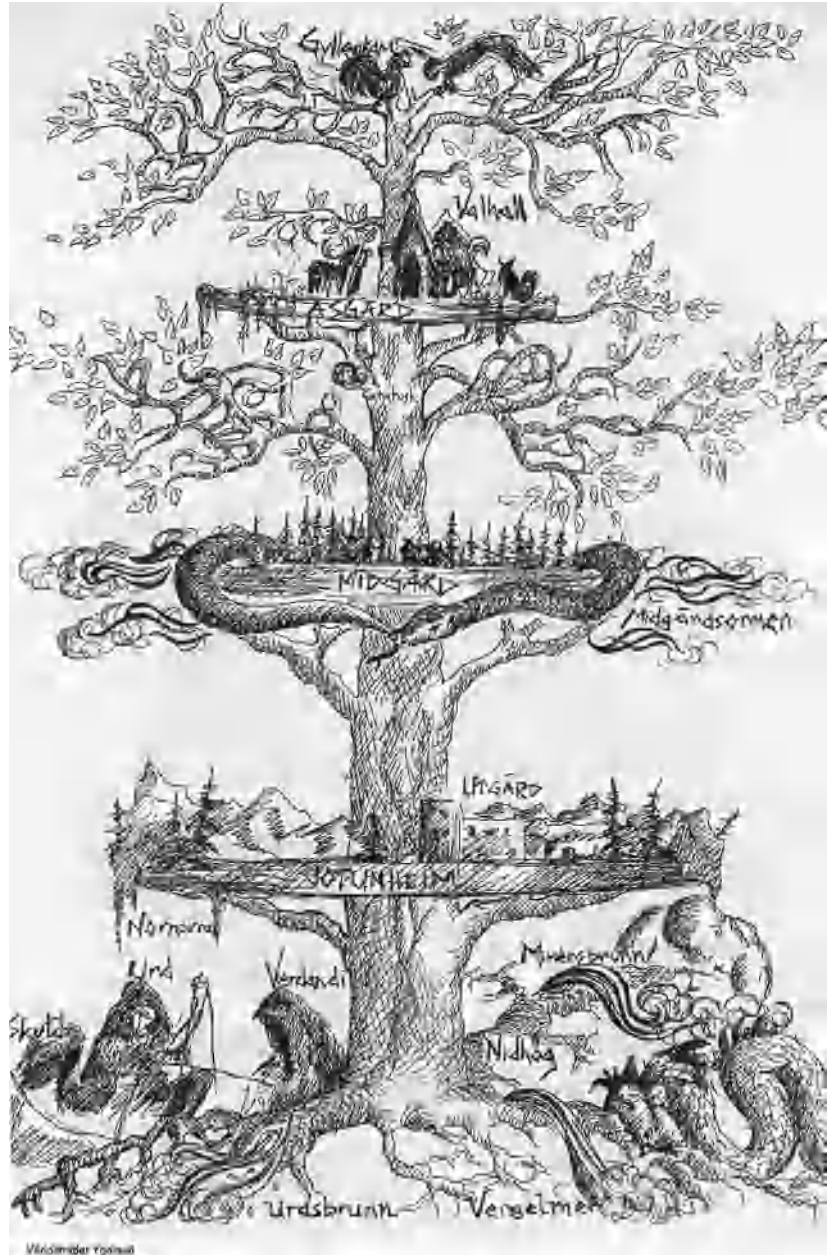
## Yggdrasill in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Although images of Yggdrasill are common in traditional Norse art, they are often decorative or symbolic and are not meant to depict the actual tree in its full glory. Indeed, considering the grand scale of the World Tree, few artists have attempted such a thing. Robert Frost refers to the

## Yggdrasil

*Yggdrasil, the world tree of Norse mythology, with Jotunheim, the land of the frost giants at the bottom; Midgard, the world of humans, in the middle; and Asgard, the land of the gods, at the top.* ©

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tree in his poem “A Never Naught Song.” Yggdrasil has also appeared in science fiction and fantasy literature, such as the themed short-story collection *Rainbow Mars* (1999) by Larry Niven, and the *Hyperion*

*Cantos* series of novels by Dan Simmons, where it takes the form of a gigantic living spaceship, or treeship.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

Yggdrasill is a source of shelter and protection for the last humans at Ragnarok. In modern times, environmental activists sometimes live among the branches of large, old trees—not for their own protection, but to prevent the trees from being cut down. Do you think this is an effective way to draw attention to the uncertain fate of old-growth trees? Why or why not?

SEE ALSO Norse Mythology



# Ymir

## Character Overview

An ancient frost giant of **Norse mythology**, Ymir was formed at the beginning of creation from rivers of ice that flowed from Niflheim (pronounced NIV-uhl-heyM), the land of mist, into Ginnungagap (pronounced GIN-oon-gah-GAHP), the yawning emptiness. Ymir emerged from the ice as it melted from the heat of the **fire** kingdom that lay near these two regions.

As the evil Ymir slept, other frost **giants** formed from the sweat of his body. The first male and female emerged from his left armpit, and another man came from his legs. Ymir drank milk from an ancient cow, which in turn licked blocks of ice and released a man called Buri. Buri's grandsons were the gods **Odin** (pronounced OH-din), Vili (pronounced VEE-lee), and Ve (pronounced VEH). These three gods eventually attacked Ymir while he slept and killed him. As Ymir's blood gushed from his body, it caused a flood that drowned all the frost giants except Bergelmir (pronounced BEHR-gel-meer) and his wife. They escaped in a ship and founded a new race of beings.

Odin and his brothers used Ymir's body to form the world. They took his flesh to make earth; his bones became mountains; his teeth turned into stones and boulders; and his hair became trees and

### Nationality/Culture

Norse

### Pronunciation

EE-mir

### Alternate Names

Aurgelmir

### Appears In

The Eddas

### Lineage

Born of ice and fire



*The Norse gods used the body of Ymir, a frost giant, to form the world.* © MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/THE IMAGE WORKS.

vegetation. The gods made the sky from Ymir's skull and threw his brains into the air to form clouds. Dwarves emerged out of hills and rocks and helped to hold up the sky. Finally, Odin and his brothers used Ymir's eyebrows to make a great wall to surround and protect Midgard, the world of humans.

### Ymir in Context

The myth of Ymir is a Nordic example of the centrality of **sacrifice**—often violent—in many creation myths throughout the world. Accord-



ing to the Norse myth, all life arose from the violent sacrifice of Ymir. Other Norse gods also bore the scars of violent sacrifices they endured for the good of the larger community: Odin sacrificed an eye in order to gain knowledge of the future and the pain humans would have to endure; and **Tyr** sacrificed his hand in order to secure the giant wolf **Fenrir**.

## Key Themes and Symbols

One of the most important themes in the myth of Ymir is the idea of creation through death. It is only when Ymir is killed by Odin and his brothers that the world as humans know it is created. Ymir's blood drowns the old giants, while his hair becomes the vegetation of the land. This also suggests the cycle of death and rebirth that is seen throughout nature every year, but on a much grander scale. Frost is used to symbolize barrenness and hostility, just like the hostile winters the Norse people faced.

## Ymir in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Though his body was used to create the world, Ymir is not one of the more popular figures from Norse mythology. In modern times, Ymir is used as the inspiration for a character of the same name in the Marvel Comics Universe; the Marvel version of Ymir is a giant made completely of ice who seeks to destroy all other forms of life on Earth. This character also appeared in the 2006 video game *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*. The giant's name was used for one of the planet Saturn's many moons. Ymir was also used as the name of the alien monster in the classic science fiction film *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957), though he did not resemble the Norse frost giant.

## Read, Write, Think, Discuss

The idea of all life originating from a primordial sacrifice is found throughout the world. Using your library, the Internet, or other available resources, research origin myths from different continents that have sacrifice as an important element of world creation. Do these myths have anything in common? Do the cultures they come from have anything in

common? Why do you think sacrifice is such an important element in creation myths?

**SEE ALSO** Creation Stories; Dwarfs and Elves; Floods; Giants; Norse Mythology; Odin

## Yu Huang

*See* **Jade Emperor.**



### Nationality/Culture

Greek

### Pronunciation

ZOOS

### Alternate Names

Jupiter (Roman)

### Appears In

Hesiod's *Theogony*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

### Lineage

Son of Cronus and Rhea

## Zeus

### Character Overview

Zeus was the most important deity, or god, of ancient Greece. He was the leader of the gods and the all-powerful overseer of earthly events and human destiny. His role in mythology was complex and filled with contradictions. Zeus was the god of law and social order, yet he came to power through violent revolution. A protector of marriage and the household, he was repeatedly unfaithful to his own wife, **Hera** (pronounced HAIR-uh), and fathered children by a variety of women.

### Major Myths

In a myth that some modern scholars believe reflects the triumph of the Greek gods over more ancient deities, Hesiod told how Zeus became the supreme god. Before the gods existed, the **Titans** ruled the universe. Their chief was **Cronus** (pronounced KROH-nuhs). He and his wife Rhea (pronounced REE-uh) had five children, but because Cronus had been warned that one of his children would overthrow him, he devoured each child as soon as it was born. Zeus was the sixth. Rhea was determined to save this child, so she deceived Cronus by giving him a blanket-wrapped stone to swallow and secretly sent the infant to safety on the island of Crete (pronounced KREET). There, **nymphs** (female nature deities) tended the baby Zeus, while Cretan

warriors sang and clashed their swords so that Cronus would not hear his crying.

When he grew up, Zeus was ready to overthrow his cruel father and avenge the siblings that Cronus had swallowed. He befriended Metis (pronounced MEE-tis), who was either a Titaness or an ocean nymph. Metis devised a potion to make Cronus vomit out the children he had swallowed, and either she or Zeus gave it to Cronus to drink. Cronus spat forth Zeus's sisters, Hestia (pronounced HESS-tee-uh), **Demeter** (pronounced di-MEE-ter), and Hera, and his brothers, **Hades** (pronounced HAY-deez) and **Poseidon** (pronounced poh-SYE-dun). Last of all, Cronus vomited up the stone he had swallowed in place of Zeus. Tradition says that the stone was later set in a place of honor at **Delphi** (pronounced DEL-fye). It was called the *omphalos*, or the navel of the world.

Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon battled the Titans in a conflict that lasted ten years. Zeus also had the help of the hundred-armed **giants** and the **Cyclopes** (pronounced sigh-KLOH-pee-z), one-eyed giants imprisoned in Tartarus (pronounced TAR-tur-uhs), a deep pit of the **underworld** or land of the dead. Released by Zeus, the Cyclopes forged a thunderbolt for him to use as a weapon. In the end, the Titans were overthrown, and Zeus sent all those who had opposed him to Tartarus. Only Titans who had not fought against Zeus, such as **Atlas** (pronounced AT-luhs), were spared.

Zeus and his brothers divided the world. Zeus controlled the sky, Hades the underworld, and Poseidon the sea—although Zeus had ultimate control over his brothers. The gods and their sisters took up residence on Mount Olympus (pronounced oh-LIM-puhs), which is why they and their offspring are called the Olympian deities.

**The Loves of Zeus** Zeus fathered children with a series of partners: nymphs, Titanesses, goddesses, and mortal women. The offspring of these unions included deities, demigods (half human, half god), and **heroes**.

Accounts of Zeus's loves and children vary somewhat, but Metis is usually listed as his first partner or wife. When she became pregnant, Zeus learned that her child would be a powerful god who would one day replace him. Like his father Cronus before him, Zeus was determined to

preserve his power, but he did not wait to swallow the infant—he swallowed Metis. Their child, **Athena** (pronounced uh-THEE-nuh), emerged full-grown from Zeus's head.

Next, Zeus turned to the Titaness Themis (pronounced THEEM-is), who bore him two sets of daughters known as the **Fates** and the Hours. The ocean nymph Eurynome (pronounced yoo-RIN-uh-mee) also had daughters by Zeus, including the **Graces**. His next wife or partner was his sister, the goddess Demeter (marriages between brother and sister deities occur in the mythologies of many ancient cultures). Their child, **Persephone** (pronounced per-SEF-uh-nee), later became the wife of Hades.

Zeus's union with the Titaness Mnemosyne (pronounced nee-MOSS-uh-nee) produced the nine goddesses known as the **Muses**. Leto (pronounced LEE-toh) bore Zeus's **twins Apollo** (pronounced uh-POL-oh) and **Artemis** (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss). Maia (pronounced MAY-uh), the daughter of Atlas, bore him **Hermes** (pronounced HUR-meez). Eventually, Zeus married Hera, his last wife and the mother of three more Olympian deities: **Ares** (pronounced AIR-eez), Hebe (pronounced HEE-bee), and **Hephaestus** (pronounced hi-FES-tuhs).

Yet Zeus continued to have love affairs, many of them with mortal women. He sometimes mated with them in disguise or in animal form. After he visited the princess **Danaë** (pronounced DAN-uh-ee) as a shower of gold, she bore the hero **Perseus** (pronounced PUR-see-uhs). To Europa (pronounced yoo-ROH-puh), another princess, he appeared as a white bull. He came to Leda in the form of a swan. The children of their union were **Helen** of Troy, her sister Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NES-truh), and the brothers **Castor and Pollux** (pronounced PAHL-uhks). His most famous half-human son was **Heracles** (pronounced HAIR-uh-kleez), born to Alcmena (pronounced alk-MEE-nuh), to whom he came disguised as her own husband.

Zeus's relations with other women angered Hera, and she despised all the children he fathered by these women. Hera particularly hated Heracles and frequently tried to harm him. Once, when she had gone too far, Zeus hanged her in the heavens with a heavy block pulling her feet down, and he threw Hephaestus out of Olympus for trying to help her.

Surviving Hera's attacks, Heracles aided Zeus and the other Olympians in a battle for survival. They were challenged by a race of

giants, which **Gaia** (pronounced GAY-uh), the earth, had produced to bring an end to their rule. Zeus defeated the giants as well as various other threats to his supremacy, including a conspiracy among Hera, Athena, and Poseidon.

**The Roman Jupiter** The Romans, who adopted many elements of Greek culture and mythology, came to identify their own sky god, Jupiter, with Zeus. Associated with weather and agriculture in early Roman myths, Jupiter was the god of storms, thunder, lightning, the sowing of seeds, and the harvesting of grapes. As Roman civilization developed, Jupiter became known as *Optimus Maximus*, which means “best and greatest.” He was viewed as the supreme god and the protector of the Roman state. As Rome became a military power, Jupiter took on such titles as “supreme commander,” “unconquerable,” and “triumphant.”

Although Jupiter acquired many of the characteristics and myths associated with Zeus, his marriage to the goddess Juno (pronounced JOO-noh) was more harmonious than that of Zeus and Hera. Moreover, Jupiter shared some of his power with Juno and the goddess Minerva (pronounced mi-NUR-vuh), the Roman version of Athena. The three deities were believed to preside jointly over both divine and earthly affairs.

## Zeus in Context

As a mythological figure, Zeus changed over the centuries. Originally a sky god, he was believed to bring clouds, rain, thunder, and lightning. His cults were associated with mountain peaks where clouds gathered. As **Greek mythology** developed, the figure of Zeus grew larger until he became the dominant force in the Greek pantheon, or collection of recognized gods and goddesses. Later, as Jupiter (pronounced JOO-pi-tur), he was the chief god of Rome.

Some of the earliest accounts of Zeus appear in the writings of Homer and Hesiod. Homer called Zeus “the father of gods and men,” but the term “father” referred more to Zeus’s position of authority than to actual parenthood. Zeus did father some of the gods, but many others were his brothers, sisters, nephews, or nieces. Although he ruled many aspects of earthly affairs and human life, Zeus was not a creator god. Other mythological powers brought the earth and human beings into existence. Zeus enforced the laws that governed them.

## Zeus

*Zeus was the supreme ruler of the Greek gods.* SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY.



### Key Themes and Symbols

One of the central themes found in the myths of Zeus is interference in the affairs of humans. Like many of the Olympian gods, Zeus did not seem content to interact with only other gods and nymphs. He took time and effort to punish specific individuals, such as Phineus (pronounced

FIN-ee-us), a seer whom Zeus blinded for revealing too many of the gods' secrets to humans, or Salmoneus (pronounced sal-MOH-nee-uhs), who impersonated Zeus and was struck dead with a thunderbolt for his mockery. He also provided rewards to others, such as the seer Tiresias (pronounced ty-REE-see-uhs), who took Zeus's side in an argument the god was having with Hera; Tiresias was blinded by an angry Hera, but Zeus gave him the power to see the future.

Another theme common in the myths of Zeus is physical transformation. Very often it was Zeus who transformed himself, such as when he became a shower of gold to reach Danaë, or when he mated with Leda in the form of a swan. However, he often transformed others into animals and objects—usually as punishment, but sometimes for their own safety. Pandareos (pronounced pan-DAHR-ee-ohs) was transformed into stone for stealing a statue of a dog from one of Zeus's temples; Periphas (pronounced PEHR-uh-fas) was a king of Attica whom Zeus changed into an eagle when he died as a reward for living a just life.

### **Zeus in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life**

Ancient artists generally depicted Zeus as a dignified, bearded man of middle age. Often, he was shown holding, or preparing to hurl, a thunderbolt, which took the form of a winged spear or a cylinder with pointed ends. One of the most remarkable images ever created of Zeus was a statue that stood in his temple at Olympia in Greece. The statue was lost long ago, but a description of it survives. The forty-foot-tall statue showed the god seated, with golden lions at his side. The head and upper body were made of precious ivory, and the lower body was draped in gold—truly a glorious and awe-inspiring representation of “the greatest god of all.”

In modern times, Zeus is still the best known of the Olympian gods. He has appeared as a character in numerous television shows and films. Notable examples include *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), and the Disney animated film *Hercules* (1997). He has also appeared in video games, such as *Zeus: Master of Olympus*.

### **Read, Write, Think, Discuss**

In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus was believed to interact with humans frequently, though not always in his godlike form. In modern times,

people generally do not support the idea that a god (or God) regularly appears in physical form on Earth to interact with humans. What do you think this indicates about modern believers when compared to the ancient Greeks? Is there a difference in the way these two groups relate to the realms of the gods?

**SEE ALSO** Athena; Atlas; Castor and Pollux; Cronus; Cyclopes; Danaë; Demeter; Gaia; Graces; Greek Mythology; Hades; Helen of Troy; Hephaestus; Hera; Heracles; Muses; Persephone; Poseidon; Roman Mythology; Titans



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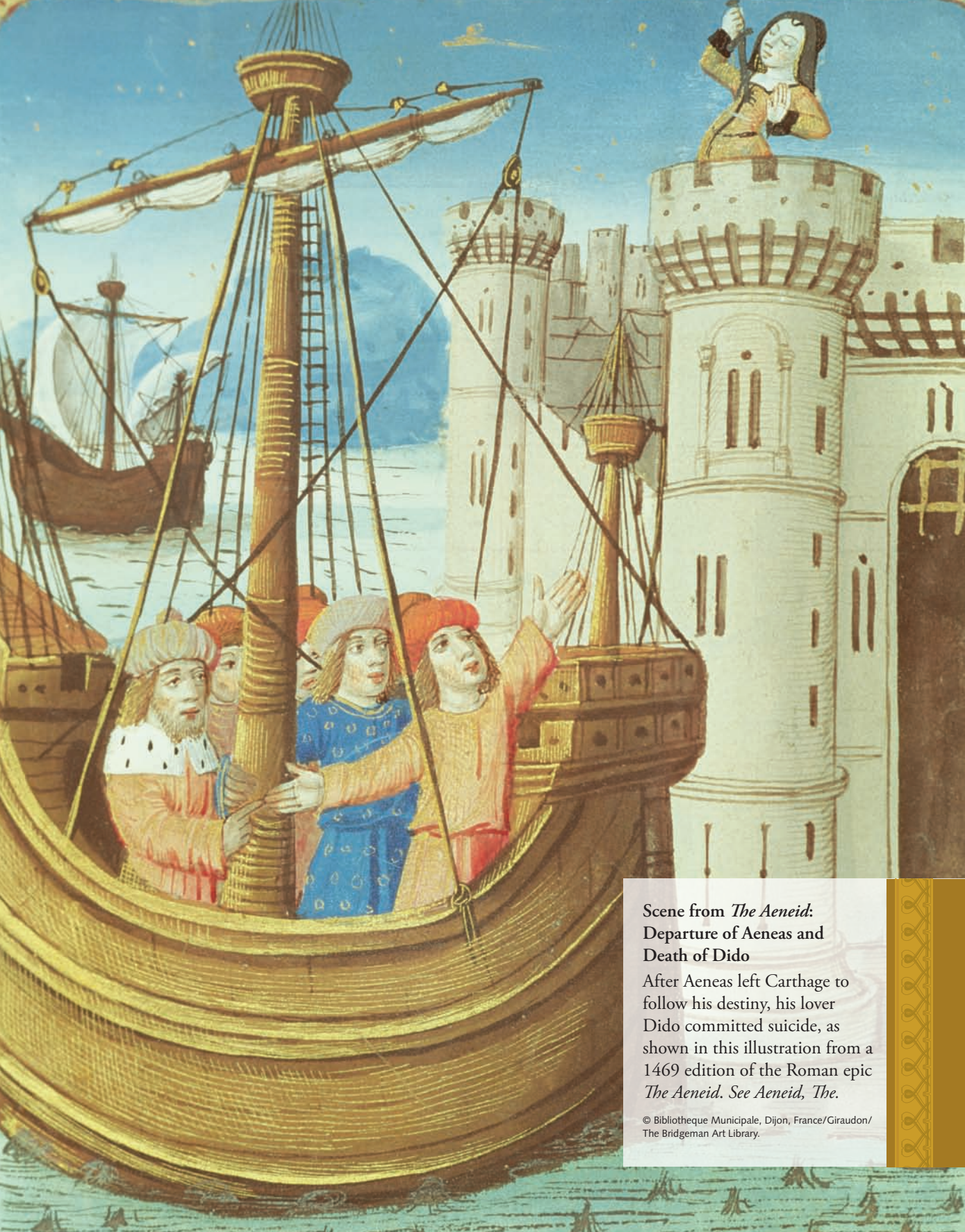
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Scene from *The Aeneid*:  
Departure of Aeneas and  
Death of Dido

After Aeneas left Carthage to follow his destiny, his lover Dido committed suicide, as shown in this illustration from a 1469 edition of the Roman epic *The Aeneid*. See *Aeneid, The*.

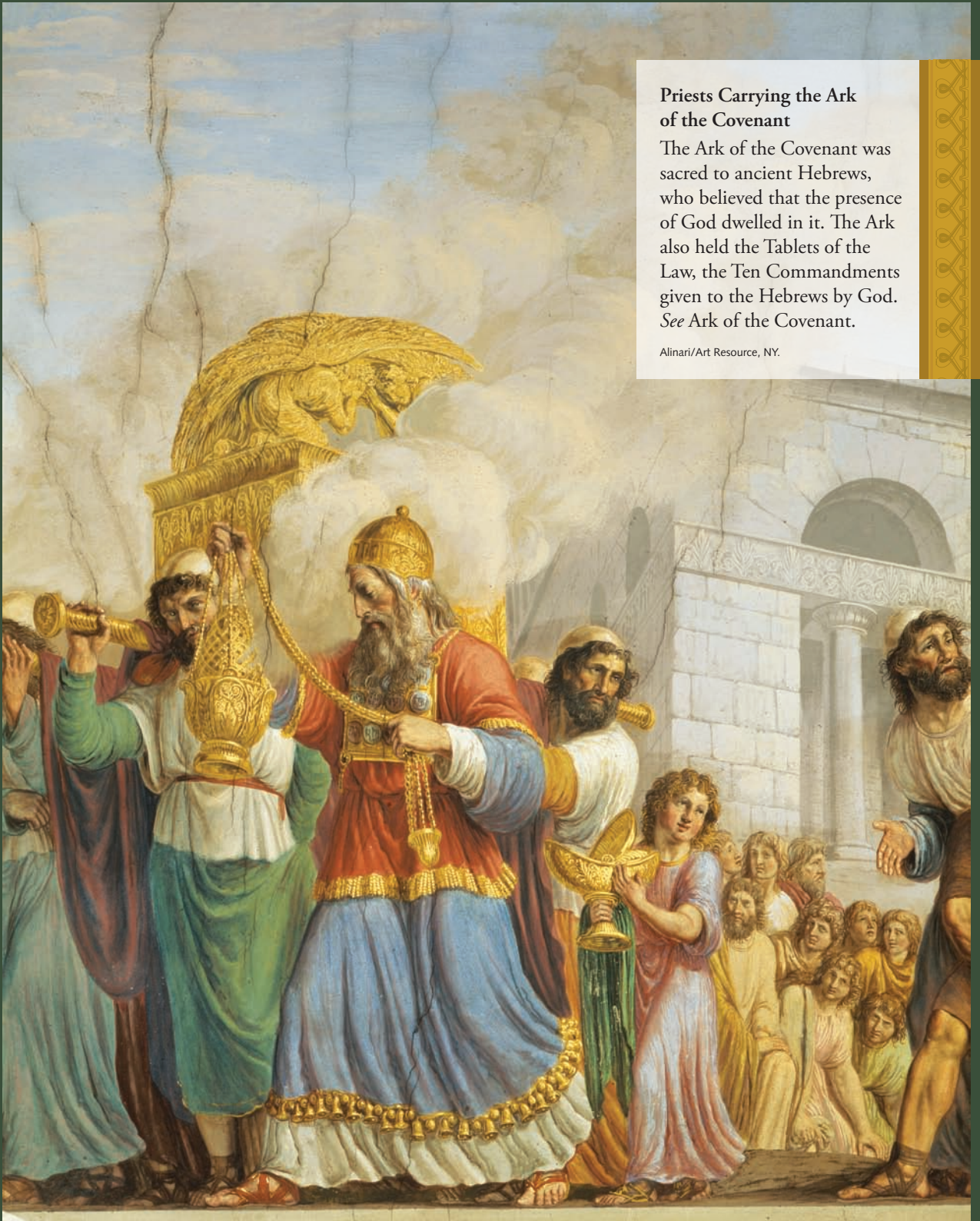
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## Priests Carrying the Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant was sacred to ancient Hebrews, who believed that the presence of God dwelled in it. The Ark also held the Tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments given to the Hebrews by God. *See Ark of the Covenant.*

Alinari/Art Resource, NY.





## Norse Warriors in Valhalla

Norse warriors who died in battle went to Valhalla, a mythical place where they could enjoy feasting, singing, and indulging in mock combat. *See Afterlife.*

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## The Death of King Arthur

After he was mortally wounded in battle, King Arthur travelled by ship to mythical Avalon, where Morgan Le Fay (center, holding a book) and other fairy queens treated his wounds. According to legend, he will return from Avalon some day when England needs him. *See Arthur, King.*

James Archer/The Bridgeman Art  
Library/Getty Images.





## The Basilisk

In European mythology, the basilisk was a small serpent that could kill any living thing with its glance or its breath. It was usually represented as a creature with a dragon's body and wings, and a serpent's head. *See* Basilisk.

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.







**Andromeda's Rescue from the Sea Serpent**  
Condemned to be a sacrifice to a sea serpent, Andromeda escaped her fate thanks to the hero Perseus. He killed the serpent and freed her. *See* Andromeda.

Sir Edward Burne-Jones/The Bridgeman Art Library/Getty Images.



### Amaterasu Emerges From the Cave

Angry at her brother's behavior, the sun goddess Amaterasu shut herself in a cave, depriving the world of sunlight. The other gods tricked her into coming back out so light would return to the world. *See Amaterasu.*

The Art Archive/Victoria and Albert Museum, London/Eileen Tweedy. Reproduced by permission of The Picture Desk, Inc.



### Hippomenes Wins the Race Against Atalanta

Desiring to remain unmarried, Atalanta agreed to marry only the man who could beat her in a foot race. She was so fast that no man had ever succeeded—until Hippomenes beat her by distracting her with golden apples he threw on the course. *See Atalanta.*

Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.







## Achilles Dragging the Body of Hector

In revenge for the death of his friend, Patroclus, Achilles killed Hector in battle and then dragged the body behind his chariot, preventing the Trojans from giving Hector a proper funeral. *See Achilles.*

Vanni/Art Resource, NY.







"THE GOOD WOMAN COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE HER EYES"

### Baucis and Philemon Give Hospitality to Gods

The elderly couple Baucis and Philemon offered hospitality to the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus, thinking they were humble travellers. The gods rewarded them for their good deed by transforming their cottage into a palace. *See* Baucis and Philemon.

© Mary Evans Picture Library/Edwin Wallace/  
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### Paris Awards the Apple of Discord to Aphrodite

Asked to judge a beauty contest between the Greek goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, the Trojan prince Paris offered the prize—the Apple of Discord—to Aphrodite after she promised to give him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. *See* Aphrodite.

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THE APPLE OF DISCORD



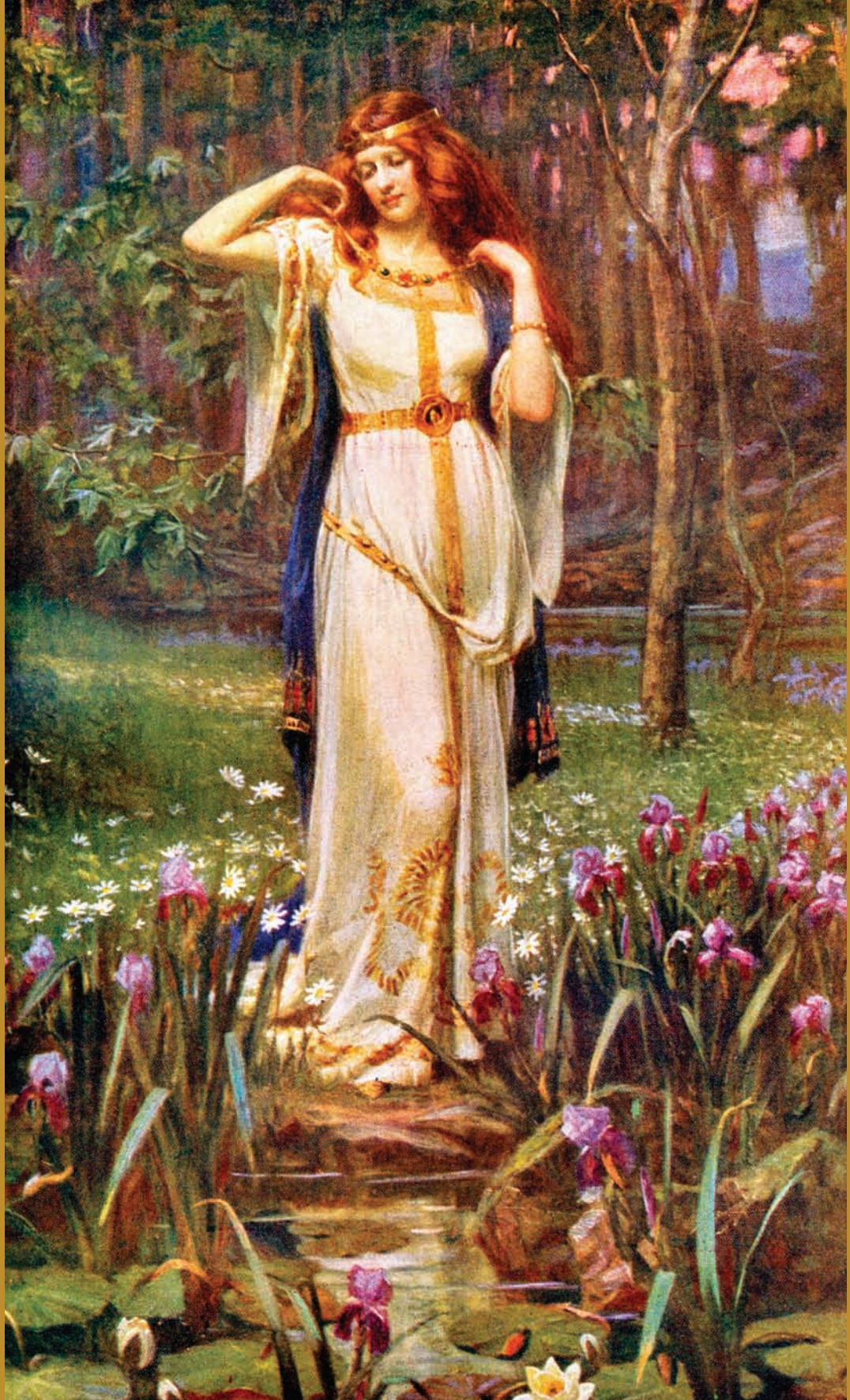


### The God Marduk Sets Out to Attack the Evil Goddess Tiamat

In the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, the god Marduk killed the evil goddess Tiamat and divided her corpse into two parts, which became heaven and earth. See *Enuma Elish*.

© Charles Walker/Topfoto/The Image Works.







## The Norse Goddess Freyja Wearing the Necklace of the Brisings

The Norse goddess of love Freyja acquired her favorite possession, the Necklace of the Brisings, by agreeing to spend the night with each of the necklace's creators. *See Freyja.*

© Mary Evans Picture Library/The Image Works.



## The Sword of Damocles

Damocles learned how uncertain things are for rulers, despite the apparent ease of their lives, when he attended a magnificent banquet held by the ruler of Syracuse and saw a sword suspended by a thread above his head. The sword represented how quickly life can change for the worse for those in power. *See Damocles, Sword of.*

Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.





**The Demon King Ravana Battles with the Army of Rama**  
 Hindu mythology describes a group of demons known as *Rakshasas* who served the demon king Ravana. *See* Devils and Demons.

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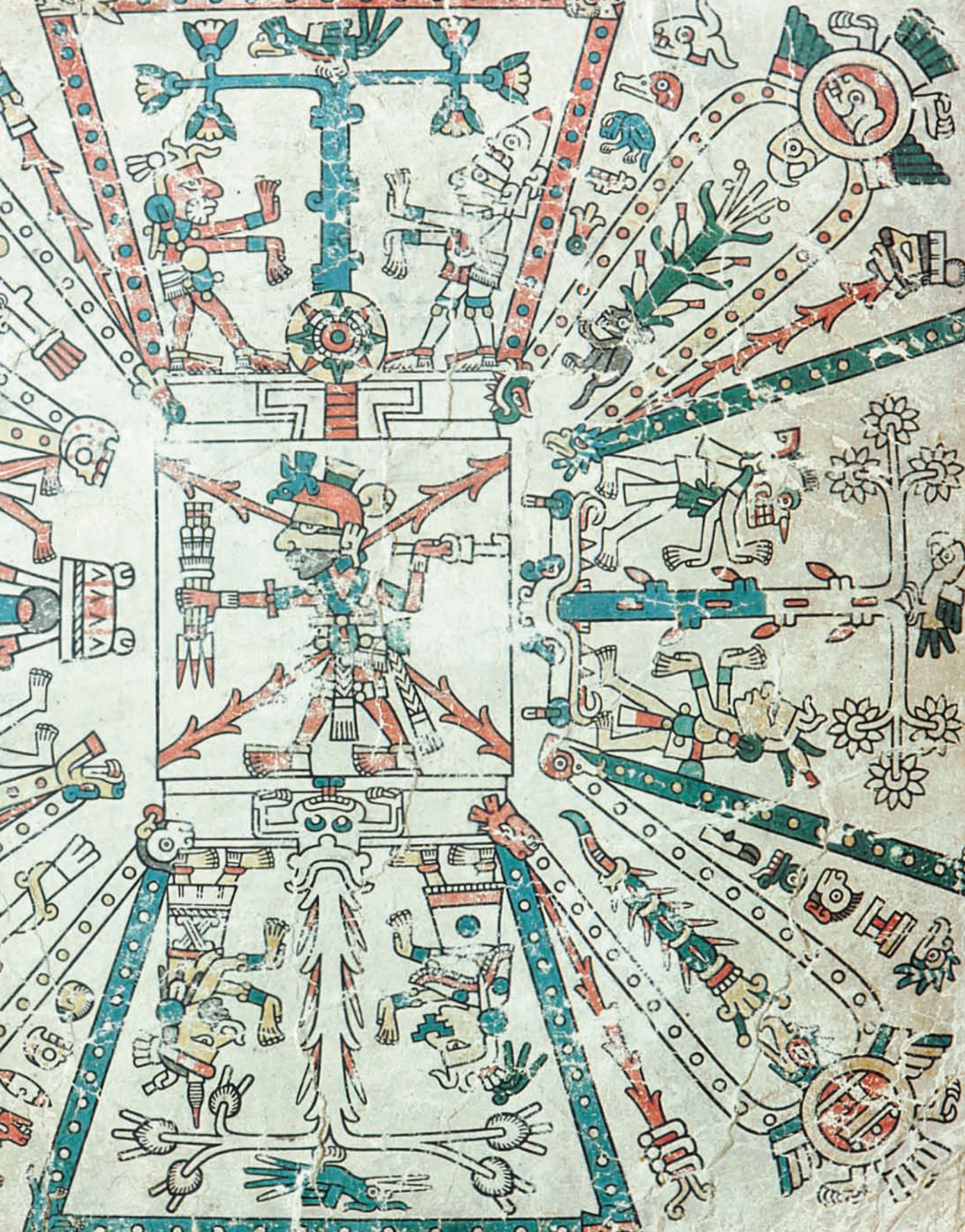
### Aztec Creation Myth

Aztec mythology tells of four creator gods, each associated with a direction and a color: Tezcatlipoca, the north and black; Quetzalcoatl, the west and white; Huitzilopochtli, the south and blue; and Xipe Totec, the east and red. This drawing shows Hucheuteotl, the god of fire, surrounded by the four directions. *See* Creation Stories.

Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.











### The Garden of Eden

According to the book of Genesis in the Bible, the Garden of Eden was an earthly paradise created by God as a home for the first people, Adam and Eve. They lived there until their disobedience introduced sin and death into the world. See Eden, Garden of.

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### Circe Preparing a Potion

The sorceress Circe used her spells to turn men into animals, according to Greek mythology. See Circe.

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## People Left Behind by Noah's Ark

According to the book of Genesis in the Bible, God caused a flood to cover the earth because the people were so sinful. God chose to save Noah and his family, along with pairs of all the animals, in an ark because Noah was righteous. *See Floods.*

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Stature of a Dragon on a  
Malaysian Temple

In some Asian cultures,  
dragons are seen as a positive  
symbol of power and  
happiness. *See* Dragons.

John W. Banagan/Iconica/Getty Images.







### St. George Killing the Dragon

The most popular myth about the Christian saint George concerned his killing of a dragon that threatened a city. *See* George, St.

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### The Fall of the Damned into Hell

According to the Christian tradition, Hell is a lake of fire into which sinners fall to endure eternal torment. *See Hell.*

Scala/Art Resource, NY.



### Hero Mourns the Death of Leander

In Greek mythology, Hero and Leander were lovers who had to meet in secret because Hero was under a religious vow that required her to remain a virgin. While coming to meet Hero one night, Leander drowned; Hero killed herself after discovering his fate. *See Hero and Leander.*

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



### Aeneas and His Companions Fighting the Harpies

In the Roman epic *The Aeneid*, the Harpies tormented Aeneas and his companions by not allowing them to eat. *See Harpies.*

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.







### Temple of Jagannatha (Juggernaut) in Indonesia

Juggernaut is worshipped as a form of Krishna in Hindu society. During the Chariot Festival, an image of Juggernaut travels on an enormous cart; the deaths caused by people being crushed underneath the cart inspired the English word *juggernaut*, meaning a person or power that crushes anything in its path. *See* Juggernaut.

The Art Archive/Stephanie Colasanti/The Picture Desk, Inc.

### King of the *Tengu* Wrestles with Yoshitsune

The *tengu* were minor Japanese deities that were part-bird and part-human. *See* Japanese Mythology.

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美勇水滸傳

木曾駒若丸義仲

約若丸初稚の附本當の  
山中へあまの天狗と  
おろし成長く驚  
見備の持とあり平家  
と赤をへさす武切  
とよく旭將軍と称す

美勇水滸傳

雙











### The Trojan War Rages as the Gods Look On

Although the Trojan War was fought between two mortal armies, the Greek gods took an interest in the war and often interfered in order to give one side an advantage over the other. *See Iliad, The.*

Scala/Art Resource, NY.

### Achilles Defeating Hector

Hector was a brave warrior for the Trojan army, but he was no match for the Greek warrior Achilles, who killed him on the battlefield in revenge for Hector's killing of Achilles' friend Patroclus. *See Hector.*

Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.



### Krishna Lifts a Mountain

Even from a young age, Krishna had supernatural strength. Here he lifts a mountain to prove that he is more worthy to be worshipped than the older gods. *See Krishna.*

© National Museum of India, New Delhi, India/The Bridgeman Art Library.



### Job Tortured by the Devil

In the Bible, God gave the devil permission to take away Job's family, wealth, and health after the devil challenged God that Job would not remain faithful if he was deprived of those things. *See Job.*

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.





### King Midas Turns His Daughter to Gold

King Midas found that his greedy wish to have everything he touched turn to gold backfired when he accidentally turned his own daughter to gold. *See Midas.*

HIP/Art Resource, NY.





### The Snake Legend of the Hopi People

For many centuries, Native Americans have passed their myths from generation to generation through oral stories and artistic representations. *See Native American Mythology.*

© Tom Bean/Corbis.



### Nereids Playing in the Waves

Nereids were a type of nymph that lived in the ocean. *See Nymphs.*

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.



### Odin Coming to Drink from the Fountain of Mimir

Mimir was a giant in Norse mythology who guarded the well of knowledge. The god Odin came to the well in order to gain wisdom by drinking its waters. *See Mimir.*

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### Noah Makes a Sacrifice after the Flood

According to the Bible, God sent a flood to destroy the world, saving Noah, his family, and two of every kind of animal in a large boat called an ark. After the flood waters went down, Noah made a sacrifice to God, and God promised that he would never destroy the world with a flood again, sending a rainbow as a seal of that promise. *See* Noah.

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### Pan Chasing the Nymph Syrinx

In Greek mythology the satyr Pan attempted to catch the nymph Syrinx, who prayed to the gods to save her from his attentions. The gods responded by turning her into a group of reeds, which Pan used to make a set of pipes as a musical instrument. *See* Pan.

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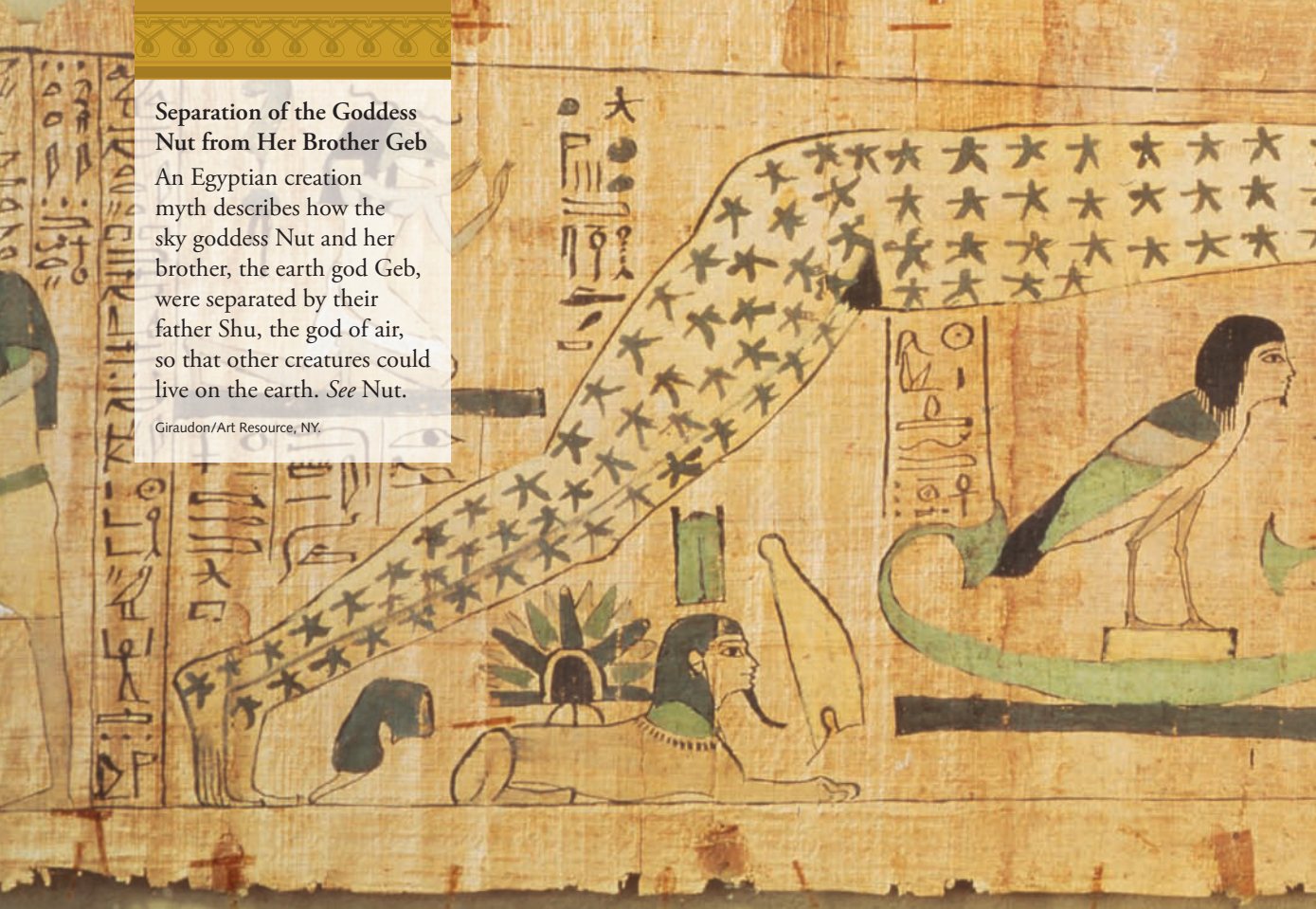




### Separation of the Goddess Nut from Her Brother Geb

An Egyptian creation myth describes how the sky goddess Nut and her brother, the earth god Geb, were separated by their father Shu, the god of air, so that other creatures could live on the earth. *See Nut.*

Giraudon/Art Resource, NY.



### The Marriage of Nala and Damayanti

In Hindu mythology, Nala and Damayanti were lovers who overcame many obstacles to marry and live happily together. *See Nala and Damayanti.*

Victoria & Albert Museum, London/Art Resource, NY.







The Marriage of  
Draupadi to the Five  
Pandava Brothers

According to the  
Hindu epic *The  
Mahabharata*, the  
princess Draupadi  
married all five  
Pandava brothers. See  
*Mahabharata, The*.

K. L. Kamat/Kamat's Potpourri.







Hermod Pleading for the Return of Balder from Hel  
 The untimely death of the god Balder was a significant story in the Norse mythology. See Norse Mythology.



**Rama Fighting the  
Demon Ravana**

Rama, sitting on the  
shoulders of Hanuman,  
fought the demon king  
Ravana in the Hindu  
epic the *Ramayana*.  
*See Ramayana, The.*

HIP/Art Resource, NY.







### The Eight Immortals Cross the Sea

In the Taoist mythology of China, the Xian are a group of eight immortal characters who travel the universe together in a state of perfect health and happiness. *See Xian.*

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## The Hindu God Surya Riding His Chariot

*See Surya.*

Jalaram Temple, Bilimora, Gujarat, India/  
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## The Samsara Being Turned by Yama

According to Buddhist belief, Yama, the Lord of Death, spins the wheel that causes people to continue the cycle of reincarnation until they achieve the highest level of spiritual development. *See Reincarnation.*

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### Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac

Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac on orders from God illustrated his faith and obedience in the Bible.  
*See Sacrifice.*

Scala/Art Resource, NY.

### Zeus Throws Lightning from a Cloud

One of the primary weapons of the Greek god Zeus was the thunderbolt.  
*See Zeus.*

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.







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### The Sirens Call to Odysseus

Most sailors who heard the sirens' song met an unfortunate end; the Greek hero Odysseus avoided this fate by instructing his crew to tie him to the mast of the boat to prevent him from jumping into the ocean when he heard the sirens. The crew were safe because they stopped up their ears so they could not hear. *See Sirens.*

Herbert James Draper/The Bridgeman Art Library/Getty Images.

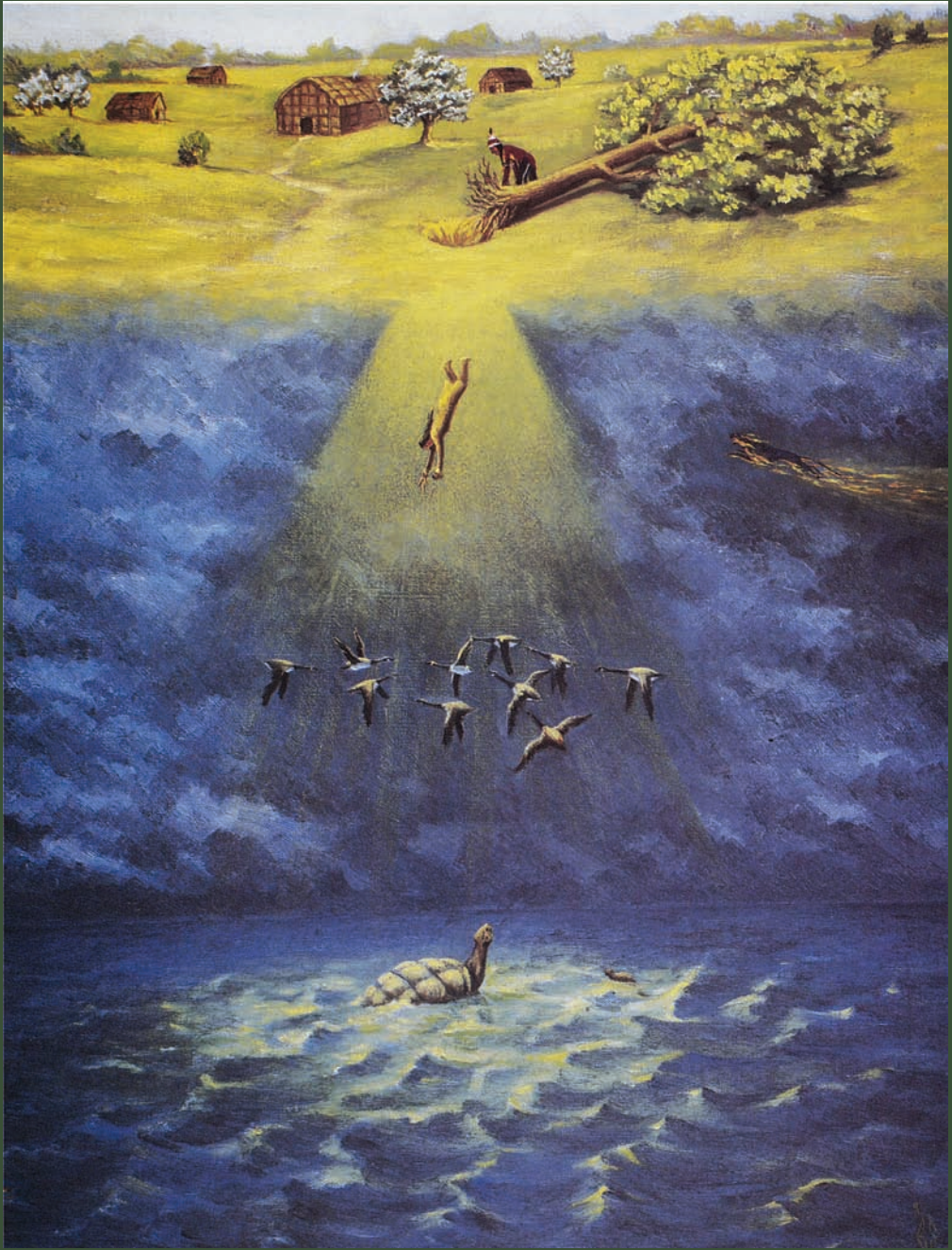


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### A Unicorn with a Maiden

The unicorn was a mythological creature that served as a symbol of purity. According to tradition, one way to capture a unicorn was to send a young virgin into the forest, and the unicorn would be drawn out of hiding by her purity. *See Unicorns.*

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### Sky Woman Falls from Heaven

According to an Iroquois creation myth, the earth came to be after Sky Woman fell from heaven through a hole left by the uprooted Tree of Life. Flying ducks slowed her descent, and a large turtle kept her afloat in the primal waters until she gave birth. Her children created the features of the earth and sky. *See Woman Who Fell from the Sky.*

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### The Sun God Ra in His Solar Barque with Apophis Below

This detail from an Egyptian coffin shows the sun god Ra in his solar barque. Below him is the serpent Apophis, which Ra battles every evening. Egyptians believed that the victory of Ra over Apophis showed the victory of the sun over darkness. *See Ra.*

Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY.



*U•X•L Encyclopedia of World Mythology* covers the major characters, stories, and themes of mythologies from cultures around the globe. Arranged alphabetically, each entry has overview information as well as contextual analysis that explains the topic's or myth's cultural importance in both ancient and modern times. In addition, each entry ends with a discussion question or reading/writing suggestion to inspire critical thinking and personal response.

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-3036-2  
ISBN-10: 1-4144-3036-1

