

CHAPTER 5

THE OLYMPIAN FAMILY OF ZEUS

MAIN POINTS

1. Homer and Hesiod established for the Greeks the character and functions of the gods. We learn about the deities' physical attributes from Archaic and Classical visual art.
2. Some of the deities (Aphrodite, Artemis, Poseidon, and Hermes), who had been independently powerful even into Mycenaean times, were transformed, with the passage of time, into the siblings or children of Zeus and thus subordinated to him.
3. According to Homer, Zeus and his two brothers divided the world by casting lots. Zeus received the sky, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the Underworld. As Hesiod's firm focus, however, is on Zeus's progress to lordship, so in his poem the division of the universe among the three brothers belongs to Zeus alone.
4. Greek gods could have been organized in any number of ways. That the Greeks conceived of them as being members of a family is significant, as Zeus's power over the family unit was extensive but neither unlimited nor unchallenged.
5. The children of Cronus and Rhea (Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia) are depicted as having physically mature, perfect human forms.
6. Zeus is King of Heaven, the champion of justice, sworn oaths, and lawful order. He is also a sky god, the god who gathers clouds and creates storms.

NOTE: There is linguistic evidence that many of the European, Middle Eastern, and Indian cultures share a common ancestral culture. The ancient, Proto-Indo-European people whose territories have not been established firmly because of conflicting archaeological and linguistic evidence, but who may have occupied areas between the Danube and the Volga Rivers, north of the Caucasus mountain range, have supplied common words to Indo-European languages all the way from Ireland to Chinese Turkestan. The Proto-Indo-European words for "one-two-three" are "oinos-duwo-treyes"; "brother" is "bhrater," "sky" is "dyeus," and "father" is "pater." From this last constellation of words (sky-father) come the names of Zeus and Jupiter. However, linguists warn that we can't assume that gods have had the same roles in the ancient Indo-European culture as they had later in the Mediterranean area. Today, English and Spanish are the most common Indo-European languages in the world; the most ancient Indo-European language still spoken is thought to be Romany, the language of the Gypsies.

7. Zeus's character is paradoxical: the dignified King of the gods also has an uncontrollable sexual appetite, suggesting that the power of Aphrodite overwhelms that of the King of Heaven. Zeus's lust is both his "shadow" and his will to dominate. His desire is often treated humorously; he frequently assumes the form of an animal when pursuing a new lover.
8. Zeus's offspring include gods such as Apollo and Artemis, heroes such as Perseus and Heracles, and divine abstractions such as the Muses and the Graces, personifications of the highest values of civilization.
9. Poseidon's symbol is the trident, with which he generates huge waves. Poseidon represents the brutal power of nature: the restless sea, the shaking earth, and the virility of horse or bull.
10. Hades rules the Underworld with his wife, Persephone, and wears a cap of invisibility. He is also associated with the gems and minerals of the earth. His epithet "many-receiving" indicates that all human beings will one day be Hades's guests.

11. Hera, Zeus's wife and elder sister, is the patron of married life; her offspring are Hephaestus, Ares, Eileithyia, and Hebe. The Queen of Heaven, Hera alone among the Olympians retains the Great Goddess's parthenogenetic ability; she produces Hephaestus without sex. That he is physically impaired suggests that her power is somewhat diminished. She is often portrayed as a jealous, nagging wife, angry at Zeus's infidelities and resentful of his powers.
12. Hera's frequent appearance in myth as a jealous wife who resents Zeus's power may reflect her resentment at his usurpation of powers formerly her own.
13. On occasion, Hera joined other Olympians in open revolt against Zeus. Once, though, when she wanted to distract him from the Trojan war, she sought help from Aphrodite and seduced him.
14. Demeter represents the life-giving power of earth's soil. A manifestation of the Great Goddess, she is the giver of grain. By siring Persephone, Zeus effectively subordinates Demeter to patriarchal rule.
15. Demeter's function as the Great Goddess is clear when she has sex with Iasion in a fertile field. Their union represents the hieros gamos motif.
16. Although Athene is a virgin and also the goddess of victory in war, she is closely involved in women's lives: the snake, which hides behind her shield, associates her with the Great Goddess, and she is the patroness of weaving—the quintessential task of human women.
17. Athene, the patron of wisdom and military victory, also supervises women's crafts. Otherwise self-disciplined, one myth shows her engaging in a beauty competition with Hera and Aphrodite, which results in the Trojan War.
18. Athene is loyal to the heroes of intelligence and resourcefulness but cruel to humans who offend her.
19. Under terms of an agreement she made with Zeus, Hestia guards the Olympian hearth, never leaving her chosen place. As the principle of the unmoved center, she is crucial to any household, but she has no stories of her own. She becomes much more important in Roman mythology, where she is known as Vesta and guards the sacred flame of Rome itself.
20. Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto, is the giver of both mental and physical harmony. He is a prophetic god, whose Oracle at Delphi was widely consulted throughout the Greek world. He is the god of music and archery and is an embodiment of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment.
21. In late myths, Apollo takes over the function of sun god; in addition he is the protector of the muses. Paradoxically, he is associated with both health and disease. His invisible arrows bring sickness; his son Asclepius, the first physician, represents his healing aspect.
22. Artemis, Apollo's twin sister, is the patron of midwifery and childbirth but is also a virgin who guards her privacy.
23. Artemis is, paradoxically, both patron of the hunt and protector of wild animals. She is often identified with the moon. In Asia Minor, the Greeks associated Artemis with fertility.
24. Hermes, son of Zeus, is Zeus's personal messenger, depicted with winged sandals. Hermes invents the lyre and the panpipes, which Apollo takes over in exchange for cattle and the caduceus, a rod entwined by two serpents and topped by wings, the symbol of the physician's art.
25. A traveler who crosses all boundaries, Hermes was represented throughout Greece by Hermae, ithyphallic figures guarding the gates and doorways from which journeys start.

Hermes also led the souls of the dead on their last journey to the Underworld. The patron of travelers, traders, merchants, highwaymen, thieves, and gamblers, he is also associated with dreams and magic.

26. Hephaestus, Hera's son, is a gifted craftsman married to Aphrodite, who is unfaithful to him.
27. Aphrodite is a personification of human sexuality.
28. Eros is the masculine aspect of Aphrodite and, according to Homer, her son by Ares.
29. Ares is the god of war in its aspect of cruelty and violence. The Greeks worshiped but did not entirely respect Ares; the Romans, in contrast, saw Ares, whom they called Mars, as the patron of their expanding empire.
30. Dionysus, god of wine, intoxication, and ecstasy, is the only major god who is born human. He is the patron of the tragic drama.
31. Pan, who has the shape of a satyr, is a personification of wild nature; he produces enchanting music but also can strike the human heart with fear (panic).

NOTE: The god Pan is, in late Greek tradition, a minor deity, but the worship of Pan-type deities such as the Fauns seems to have been widespread; the mythologist Sir James Frazer mentions that Pan was known in Arcadia as the Lord of the Woods and was considered a woodland deity. According to Frazer, other goat-formed spirits of the woods can be found in Russian folklore, where the Ljeschie are believed to appear partly in human shape, but with the horns, ears, and legs of a goat. The theme of the Pan-type spirit of the woods may have continued with characters in human form such as the Green Man of the Forest in later European tradition, the Shakespearean character of Puck, the quasi-historical Robin Hood, and the children's trickster playmate Peter Pan.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Hesiod, Theogony

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Zeus (Roman: Jupiter)

Cronus (Roman: Saturn)

Demeter (Roman: Ceres)

Hestia, the virgin goddess caring for the Olympian hearth (Roman: Vesta)

Poseidon (Roman: Neptune)

Hades (Roman: Pluto, Dis)

Persephone (Roman: Proserpina)

Hera (Roman: Juno)

Hephaestus, the lame smith, Hera's son (Roman: Vulcanus)

Demodocus, blind bard of the Odyssey

Ares (Roman: Mars)

Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth (Roman: Lucina)

Hebe, a personification of youth (Roman: Juventas)

Athene (Roman: Minerva)

Phoebus Apollo (Roman: Phoebus Apollo)

Leto, Apollo's mother, daughter of Titans

Asclepius, Apollo's son, the first physician

Artemis (Roman: Diana)

Hippolytus, son of Theseus, he made a vow of chastity, which angered Aphrodite, who -
engineered his downfall

Hermes (Roman: Mercurius)

Maia, mother of Hermes

Aphrodite (Roman: Venus)

Eros, the masculine aspect of sexuality, Aphrodite's son according to Homer (Roman: Cupido)

Dionysus (Roman: Liber)

Pan, the personification of wild nature (Roman: Faunus)

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Herodotus (fifth century B.C.)

Homer (eighth century B.C.)

Hesiod (eighth century B.C.)