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Intro to Anthropology

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A Brief Tour of Greek Mythology

According to the Ancient Greeks, the world began as Chaos. Chaos, in this instance, does not refer to disorder or confusion, but a dark, gaping space of emptiness. Shortly after Chaos, Gaia (the Earth) and Eros (sexual love) came into being as well. “From these three,” writes Richard Buxton in his book *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, “there originated all that exists” (44-45). From Chaos, Erebus (Darkness) and Night were born; the two of them mated, producing Aether (Light) and Day. Gaia, meanwhile, produced Ouranos (Sky), Mountains, and Pontos (Sea). She mated with Pontos, producing several offspring (including Nereus, father of the Nereids), but her true union was with Ouranos. Together, the couple produced three sets of children: the one-eyed Cyclopes, the hundred-handed Hecatoncheires, and the divine race known as the Titans.

But Ouranos, who had become the lord of the universe by virtue of his position as the Sky, grew paranoid that a child of his might one day overthrow him. As such, he threw the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires below the earth, into the terrifying region of Tartarus. As for the Titans, he hid them inside “the recesses of Gaia” (Buxton 46) as they were born. This, understandably, caused Gaia great pain. She grew to resent Ouranos, and she began to construct a plan to overthrow him.

Gaia approached her children, the Titans, and begged them to help her overthrow their father. Carl Kerényi's book *The Gods of the Greeks* records her as saying "Ah, my children--and children, too, of a nefarious father--will you not hear me and punish your father for this wicked ill-doing?" (21). As she pled, she showed them a sickle, and she promised to help them use it to end Ouranos's wicked reign. Only Kronos, the youngest Titan, was brave enough to accept this task, and together, he and Gaia created the perfect plan. That night, as Ouranos and Gaia made love, Kronos used the sickle to chop off Ouranos's genitals. The blood of the Sky fell onto the Earth, giving birth to the Giants, the Nymphs, and the Furies (three infernal deities of vengeance who sought to torment wrongdoers). Kronos threw Ouranos's severed genitals into the sea, and from these, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, came into being.

Ouranos's power was gone, and Kronos took his place as lord of the universe. He freed the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires from Tartarus, but only temporarily. "Heedful of his father's prophecy," explains Edward E. Barthell, Jr, in his book *Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Greece*, "the first act of the new sovereign was to get rid of possible troublemakers, and he reimprisoned the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires" (14). Kronos went on to marry Rhea, but he, like his father before him, feared the possibility of his children ending his rule. So, every time Rhea gave birth to a child, Kronos took that child and swallowed him or her whole. He did this to five children, leaving Rhea with none, and the lord of the universe's broken-hearted queen went to Gaia for assistance. Gaia, who was upset with Kronos for locking the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires in Tartarus, agreed to give her daughter a helping hand.

Shortly afterwards, Rhea became pregnant with her sixth child. When the time came for that child to be born, she and Gaia put their plan into action. "Slyly, Gaia wrapped a great stone

in swaddling clothes and presented it to Kronos,” writes Barthell, “who promptly swallowed it in the belief that he was proceeding according to plan” (14). The child, a boy named Zeus, was hidden in a cave on the island of Crete, where he grew up under the watchful eye of the Cretan king’s daughters. He was reared on ambrosia and nectar, supplied by the milk of a goat named Amaltheia. Amaltheia would go on to become Capricorn, the tenth sign of the zodiac, and her horn was given to Zeus’s caregivers as the cornucopia (the horn of plenty).

Once Zeus was fully grown, he slipped his father Kronos a powerful emetic, which caused the lord of the universe to vomit his other five children back into the world. (The children, being immortal gods, had grown up in Kronos’s stomach.) The siblings of Zeus--their names were Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Poseidon, and Hades--were reunited with their youngest brother, and together, they plotted to take down their father for good.

What followed was a long, brutal war for control of the universe. The Titans, for the most part, took Kronos’s side. However, two of Kronos’s Titan nephews, Prometheus and Epimetheus, aligned themselves with Zeus. Zeus also freed the Hecatoncheires and the Cyclopes, who immediately took his side. The Titans “entrenched themselves in in the Othrys Mountains” (Barthell, 15), while Zeus and his forces made Mount Olympus their headquarters. The ensuing war lasted for ten years before Zeus emerged victorious. The defeated Titans, including Kronos himself, were thrown into Tartarus, and the Hecatoncheires agreed to be their jailers. The only Kronos-aligned Titan who was *not* punished this way was Atlas, another one of Kronos’s nephews. Instead, he was forced to hold the weight of the heavens and the earth on his shoulders forever.

With the Titans defeated, the Olympian gods (for so Zeus and his siblings came to be known as) became the rightful rulers of the universe. But Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades could not decide who would rule over what, so they drew lots. (Their sisters did not participate.) Hades, who drew the shortest straw, became the ruler of the Underworld, where the souls of dead mortals went after they died. Poseidon's straw awarded him dominion over the sea. As for Zeus, he, of course, became the god of the heavens, as well as the king of all the gods on Mount Olympus. Originally, there were only six major gods: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, Hera, and Demeter. But, over time, eight of Zeus's godly children ascended to thrones on Mount Olympus, and in the end, there were fourteen Olympians in all.

The first and most important of these was Zeus, the lord of the universe. He was also the god of the sky and the weather, and he had a bucket of thunderbolts, which he would rain down upon any who displeased him. He was also known as "the father of gods and mortals" (Buxton 69). He used this position to settle arguments among the gods, assist earthly leaders in governing their people, and watch over mortals with what multiple sources describe as a "paternal" interest. His sacred bird was the eagle. He was portrayed as all-powerful, but not infallible; he was perhaps the greatest example of how the Greek gods were given human flaws. Most notably, he had a weakness for beautiful women. Despite the fact that he had a wife, he bedded countless goddesses, nymphs, and mortal women, and he had children by the vast majority of them. He had a tendency to turn himself into various animals in order to seduce women undetected. "There is a tension at the heart of the portrayal of the father of the gods," writes Buxton, "for he can be thought of as simultaneously the source of right and the source of everything" (70).

Hera, one of Zeus's sisters, was also his wife. It is said that she did not want anything to do with him at first, but her rejection did not sour her to him in the slightest; on the contrary, he grew all the more determined to make her his. One night, he sent down a terrible storm, then turned himself into a cuckoo in order to gain Hera's sympathy. "When the cuckoo saw her," Kerényi writes, "he descended trembling and numb into her lap. The goddess took pity on the bird and covered him with her robe" (97). It was then that Zeus changed back into his own shape and "sought to make her his paramour" (Kerényi 97). Hera only agreed to it on the condition that he would marry her. The wedding was a grand affair that took place on Mount Cithaeron, and the wedding night is said to have lasted three hundred years. Hera was the goddess of marriage, and as such, she expected Zeus to be faithful to her. Alas, he was not. She was a jealous, vindictive goddess, and she was known for constantly punishing Zeus's lovers and their children. For instance, when she discovered Zeus's affair with Io (a priestess of Hera), she sent a gadfly to chase the poor girl, and "Io wandered from land to land, driven mad by the stinging of the fly which the queen of the gods sent against her" (Buxton 71). In a similar vein, the story of Heracles is driven almost entirely by Hera's wrath. First, she sent two snakes to kill him in his cradle; he, being a demigod with exceptional strength, strangled them both with ease. Then, after he had reached manhood, she drove him mad, causing him to kill his wife and his children. It was in penance for that crime that he undertook the Twelve Labors, and while he managed to complete them successfully, Hera's constant interference made them far more difficult than they had to be.

Poseidon, also known as the Earthshaker, was the god of the sea. As the sea was two-faced, so was this god; he could be a voice of serene authority, but he also could be

explosively violent. He wielded a trident, which he used to shake up the waves and cause storms at sea. Interestingly enough, Poseidon was also said to be the creator of horses, and there are several different myths about how he brought them into being. One account claims that “it was when the god’s semen spurted onto a rock that the first horse was created” (Buxton 72). Another myth says that Demeter turned herself into a mare to avoid Poseidon’s attentions, and he kept up the chase by turning himself into a stallion. Still another story has Poseidon inventing the horse in a contest with his niece, Athena, for the city of Athens. The people of Athens had decided that whoever gave them the best gift would be the patron of their city, so Poseidon gave them the horse. However, Athens judged that Athena’s olive tree was a better gift, so she got the city.

Hades was the god of the underworld. He was also the god of wealth, for all the riches underground were under his domain. Contrary to popular belief, he was not portrayed as an evil god, but rather, a stern ruler who was focused on maintaining relative balance and held all his subjects accountable to his laws. However, the Greeks were so afraid of him that it was considered bad luck to speak his name. Perhaps the most famous myth regarding Hades in the story of how he met and married his queen, Persephone. She was the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of corn and fertility, whose job it was to make sure that the harvest went smoothly. One day, young Persephone was picking flowers, when Hades saw her and immediately fell in love. He lured her away from her friends with beautiful flowers, then appeared, grabbed her, and carried her off to the Underworld. Demeter was devastated by the disappearance of her child, and she wandered the earth in search of her. While she searched, crops withered, and the earth grew cold and lifeless. Once she was finally told what had become of her daughter, she grew angry, and she refused to attend to her duties while her daughter was in the Underworld. Zeus, fearful of

mass extinction, decreed that Hades had to give Persephone back. However, it turned out that Persephone had eaten the seeds of a pomegranate while in the Underworld, and anyone who ate Underworld food had to stay there forever. Zeus quickly worked out a compromise: “she must spend one-third of the year below the earth, and only for the other two-thirds could she remain with her mother and the rest of the immortals, returning to them with the spring” (Kerényi 239-240). So it came to pass. When Persephone was with her mother, the earth was warm and bountiful, but when she was with Hades, the world was cold, and crops did not grow. That is how the seasons of summer and winter came into being.

Hestia, the oldest of the goddesses, was also the goddess of hearth and home. She was one of the three virgin goddesses; Poseidon and Apollo both wanted her hand in marriage, but she “swore by the hand of Zeus to remain a maiden forever” (Barthell 37) and focused on maintaining a happy home. She was a peaceful, even-tempered goddess, so she did not get nearly as much attention as her more volatile brethren, but she was still venerated as the giver of all domestic happiness. The Romans, who knew her as Vesta, increased her importance tenfold; she had a cult of Vestal Virgins who presided over her sacred flame and prevented it from going out.

Athena was the goddess of wisdom and war. She was Zeus’s daughter by Metis, the personification of prudence. Metis was Zeus’s original wife, before he married Hera, but their marriage was cut short in a rather unconventional way. Zeus was told that “his wife would first have a daughter and, then, a son who displace him as the supreme ruler” (Barthell 22). In order to prevent this prophecy from coming true, Zeus swallowed Metis whole before her child was born. As such, when it came time for Metis to give birth to her child, Zeus got a splitting headache, and one of the other gods (some say Prometheus, some say Hephaestus) split his brow

open with an axe. Out sprang Athena, fully grown, in complete battle array. From then on, she became an essential part of the Greek pantheon. She presided over art, science, learning, craftsmanship, law, order, and justice. She was also a war goddess, but she took no joy in its bloodier aspects; she specialized in strategy. She was known for helping heroes in their quests, most notably Perseus and Odysseus, and she always seemed to know what to do in any given situation. Like Hestia, she was a virgin goddess. “Her divine persona combines masculinity and femininity in an idiosyncratic yet never grotesque way” (Buxton 80). But Athena could also be a wrathful goddess, especially when her pride was wounded. Once, when a young mortal girl named Arachne boasted that she was a better weaver than Athena herself, Athena responded by challenging her to a weaving contest. There are several versions of the story; some say that Athena won easily, while others claim that Arachne’s tapestry far surpassed the goddess’s. Every version ends with Athena turning Arachne into a spider for her insolence.

Ares, the son of Zeus and Hera, was the god of war. But unlike Athena, who specialized in strategy, Ares “glorified in strife for its own sake, revelled in slaughter, and was portrayed as always gloating over the desolation which he produced” (Barthell 27). As far as war was concerned, he did not really care about who was right or who was wrong; he tended to rush into the parts of the battlefield with the most carnage and kill everything in his path. He was blustering, cruel, odious, and bloodthirsty. On top of that, he was a coward; whenever he himself got injured, he would run crying back to Mount Olympus. None of the other gods liked him, with the one exception of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, and she only liked him because he was attractive. The warlike Romans, who called him Mars, treated him with much more dignity, honoring him as the ancestor of their race.

Aphrodite was, as previously mentioned, born from the sea; the blood of Ouranos mixed with sea foam brought her into being. There is a famous painting by Sandro Botticelli that depicts her rising from the waves, standing on a seashell. When she came to Mount Olympus, everyone was dumbfounded by her beauty, and all of the male gods immediately wanted her as their wife. To prevent infighting, Zeus gave her to Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalwork. Unfortunately for their marriage, Hephaestus was ugly. He was so ugly, in fact, that he was hurled out of Mount Olympus as soon as he was born, and the fall crippled him. He spent the next nine years of his life being raised by the sea-nymphs Eurynome and Thetis, and during that time, he mastered the art of metalwork and created all sorts of beautiful things for his rescuers. Eventually, he came back to Mount Olympus, where he continued to hone his craft. Among his creations were Zeus's aegis, Poseidon's trident, Hades's helmet of invisibility, Demeter's sickle, and the bows and quivers of Apollo and Artemis. But, alas, Aphrodite was not interested in her homely but hardworking husband. She preferred Ares, and the two of them began a passionate affair. When Hephaestus found out, he created a set of invisible yet unbreakable chains and hung them over his bed. Then, he pretended to go on a trip. Aphrodite and Ares immediately jumped into bed together, and "the skillfully wrought chains...closed in upon them, so that they could not move a limb, much less stand up. Then for the first time they knew they were trapped" (Kerényi 72). Hephaestus came back and called in the rest of the gods to witness this betrayal, promising not to let them out until Zeus paid back the gifts that Hephaestus gave him in exchange for Aphrodite's hand. When the gods showed up, everyone laughed at the couple, except for Poseidon. The god of the sea begged Hephaestus to set Aphrodite and Ares free, and he even offered to pay the fine himself. Hephaestus consented. Aphrodite and Ares learned absolutely

nothing from any of this. But the goddess of love was more than just a beautiful, lovestruck idiot. She was always there to help the lovelorn, and nowhere was this more evident than in the tale of Pygmalion. Pygmalion was a sculptor who fell hopelessly in love with a statue he created, and it got to the point where his pining consumed his entire life. He prayed to Aphrodite for help. She responded by turning the statue into a living, breathing, woman. The couple got married and lived happily ever after, all thanks to Aphrodite.

Apollo and Artemis, the twins, were born as a result of one of Zeus's many affairs. Their mother was the Titaness Leto, and Hera punished her by an especially cruel method: when the time came for her to give birth to her twins, Hera saw to it that no land would give her sanctuary. Leto was forced to wander around the world until, finally, "little Delos alone braved the fury of Hera and accepted the forlorn mother-to-be" (Buxton 73). So the twins were born on the island of Delos, and they grew to be important members of the Greek pantheon. Artemis, who was born first, was the goddess of the hunt and of wild animals, and she loved to roam the woodlands with her train of huntresses. She was a virgin goddess, and she was incredibly serious about her chastity. In one story, a hunter by the name of Actaeon chanced upon her bathing; she, furious at this breach of her privacy, turned him into a stag, and he ended up being ripped apart by his own hunting dogs. She also expected her followers to remain sexually pure, and she punished them severely if they did not. Her brother, Apollo, was a sort of Renaissance god; music, divination, prophecy, and medicine were all under his domain. He was known for hunting, playing the lyre, and being the standard of male beauty in ancient Greece, but the thing he was most known for was his Oracle at Delphi. People would come from far and wide hoping for advice from the Oracle, and she, who had Apollo's knowledge of the future, would answer them in cryptic

prophecies. Apollo, like his father, had a weakness for women. In one tale, he attempted to woo a nymph by the name of Daphne, but she did not reciprocate his affections. He, undeterred, continued to pursue her. She “begged for Mother Earth to save her, and was turned into a laurel, which thereafter was the god’s favorite tree, a branch of which he wore as a wreath” (Kerényi 141).

Hermes was the messenger god. He was also the god of travelers, herdsmen, merchants, and thieves, and he was the one who escorted deceased souls to the Underworld. From a young age, he proved himself to be a clever trickster; on the day he was born, he stole fifty cows from Apollo’s sacred herd of cattle. He “selected fifty of the choicest cows and, placing sandals of boughs on his feet--so that no telltale tracks would appear, he drove them backwards to the river Alpheius at Pylus” (Barthell 34). This way, the footprints made it look like the cows were going in the opposite direction. When Apollo discovered the truth, he was furious with Hermes, and he dragged the newborn infant to Olympus for justice. Zeus was amused at Hermes’s trick, but insisted that Hermes give Apollo back the cows. Shortly afterwards, Hermes showed Apollo the lyre that he had invented that same day, and Apollo, amazed by the music it produced, offered to trade the cows for it. Hermes agreed. When Hermes became the messenger of the gods, he donned a winged cap and winged sandals, which allowed him to easily fly from place to place. He also carried a caduceus--a staff with two snakes intertwined around it. The caduceus became a recognized symbol of commerce and negotiation. By virtue of his function as the messenger god, Hermes appeared in many myths, and he “performed a number of mythological chores” (Barthell 36). These included guiding heroes to their quests, aiding gods in their tasks, and carrying messages and objects across the heavens, among other things.

The youngest of the gods, Dionysus, was the god of wine. He was the only god to come from a mortal parent; his mother, Semele, was one of Zeus's many love affairs. But Hera, in the guise of Semele's nurse, persuaded Semele to "make a wish that Zeus should come to her in the same ship as that in which she came to Hera, so that Semele, too, might learn what it is like to be embraced by a god" (Kerényi 257). Zeus granted her wish, but, alas, no mortal can stand seeing a god's true form, so Semele died. Zeus was barely able to rescue her unborn child, and he sewed Dionysus into his thigh until the god was ready to be born. Dionysus, in his role as the god of wine, was depicted as a party-loving yet wrathful deity. His followers were known as the Maenads. The Maenads, or "raving ones," were a group of women who had been inspired by Dionysus into a state of ecstatic frenzy (largely due to a combination of wine and dancing). In their frenzy, they were known to tear apart any animal they came across, up to and including humans. These followers made Dionysus a very dangerous god, and there are several stories of him using them to take revenge on someone who slighted him. But his presence was also known for bringing sweetness and comfort. When the hero Theseus abandoned the Cretan princess Ariadne on the island of Naxos, Dionysus rescued her and made her his bride. Eventually, when it came time for Dionysus to take his place as a god on Mount Olympus, Hestia gave up her throne to him. Her place was, after all, by the hearth, so she needed no throne.

The gods of Olympus were a varied bunch, each with their own powers, virtues, and faults. They were divine beings who could perform feats beyond anything in the realm of possibility...and yet, their personalities made them seem almost human. Perhaps that is why, even though Ancient Greece has long since disappeared, the stories of their gods and heroes are still remembered to this day.

Works Cited

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