

## Introduction to Early Ancient Greek History

The early history of Greece was long a mystery. Not even the Ancient Greeks remembered how their ancestors first came into that land. Many myths sprang up about their history, myths that have been an enduring part of Western literary culture ever since. Many of these myths involved the Greek gods, anthropomorphized deities who were immortal but were said to look and act like humans and interfere in human affairs.

### *The Mytho-History of the Greeks*

According to Hesiod—one of the earliest Greek writers, whose work on the gods, *Theogony*, dates from the eighth century BC—out of the chaotic void of nothingness at the beginning of time, the primordial goddess Gaia (the Earth) gave birth to Uranus, the Sky. Uranus then impregnated Gaia and she gave birth to the Titans, twelve gigantic gods—six male and six female—as well as many monsters. When Uranus banished some of these monsters to the underworld, Gaia convinced her youngest Titan son, Cronus, to castrate his father. Cronus did so, throwing his father's genitals into the sea. From the blood of Uranus sprang giants, and from the sea was born Aphrodite, the goddess of love and fertility.

Cronus became the ruler of the Titans and made his sister Rhea his wife. He was always suspicious that one of his sons would overthrow him as he had overthrown his own father, so he devoured his children upon their birth. Rhea, angered at the death of all her children, tricked Cronus by switching one of her newborn children with a rock. Cronus ate the rock and the child-god Zeus escaped. Zeus returned fully grown and gave Cronus a potion that made him throw up the children he had eaten. Then Zeus and his siblings battled against Cronus and his Titans. Zeus and his brothers and sisters won, cast the Titans into the underworld, and became the rulers of the world.

Zeus devoured his first wife, who was already pregnant. As a result, his daughter Athena burst forth from his head. Athena was the goddess of wisdom, strategy, and crafts. Zeus then married his sister, Hera, who was the goddess of women, marriage, and childbirth. Zeus, however, continually committed adultery with goddesses and mortals alike. His affairs with goddesses resulted in the birth of divinities, while his affairs with mortals resulted in demigods, mortal children with certain god-like abilities.

Besides Zeus, other important gods include Zeus's siblings Poseidon (god of the sea), Hestia (goddess of the hearth and home), Hades (god of the underworld), and Demeter (goddess of agriculture). Other gods include Zeus's offspring (usually the result of his adulterous affairs): Apollo (the god of music, healing, and the sun), Ares (the god of war), Artemis (the goddess of animals and hunting), Dionysius (the god of wine, chaos, and pleasure), Hermes (the god of language, trade, and messengers), and Eris (the goddess of discord). Hephaestus, the fatherless son of Hera and the husband of Aphrodite, was the god of fire and metalworking.

The Greeks believed that the gods interfered in the affairs of humans and shaped history. The most important example of this is the Trojan War, the story of which is central to the historical identity of the Greeks. The Ancient Greeks considered the

Trojan War a vital event in Greek history, and many rulers traced their ancestry back to the heroes of the war. The Greeks believed that Zeus started the Trojan War to reduce the population of the world and to kill off his demigod children and their descendants, many of whom were the great heroes of the war. He feared that they might become a threat to him, as he had been a threat to his own father, and his father to his grandfather. He kept Eris, the goddess of discord, from attending a wedding party, and as a result she became angered and sowed discord by throwing into the party an apple inscribed with the words "For the fairest." The goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite quarreled over who was fairest, and Zeus had Hermes lead them to the Trojan prince Paris to be judged. Each of the three goddesses offered Paris something in return if he judged her the fairest: Hera offered him kingship over Asia, Athena offered him wisdom and skill in battle, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris judged in favor of Aphrodite, and was awarded Helen.

There was a problem, however. Helen, as the most beautiful woman, had many suitors, including all the most powerful men in Greece, and her father feared that if he awarded her hand to one of them, the others would fight to take her, which would start a war. So Odysseus, a wise and cunning Greek hero, came up with a plan: All the suitors would swear an oath to defend the right of whatever man was chosen to marry Helen. Helen's father married her to Menelaus, the king of Sparta. Nonetheless, Paris journeyed to Sparta, and when Helen saw him she instantly fell in love with him, as Aphrodite had promised. Helen ran away with Paris, who took her to his home city of Troy.

Now, bound by their oath to defend Menelaus's claim to Helen, the rulers of Greece declared war on Troy. They were led by Menelaus's brother Agamemnon, the ruler of Mycenae. The Greek rulers and their armies sailed to Troy, in Asia Minor, and besieged the city for ten years. Constant battles were fought between the Greeks and the Trojans. The gods were divided in their loyalties, some backing the Greeks, others backing the Trojans. Thus it became as much a war of the gods as of mortals. At the same time, the demigod descendants of Zeus fought in the war, and many, such as Achilles, were killed. In the end, the Greeks stormed Troy and burned it to the ground. Helen was returned to Menelaus.

The events surrounding the Trojan War were narrated in poems attributed to the Greek poet Homer. Two of these poems survive: the *Iliad*, which covers part of the siege of Troy and the experiences of Achilles, and the *Odyssey*, which tells the story of Odysseus's difficult journey home after the war. While the Greeks believed that Homer had composed these poems, research conducted in the twentieth century, such as that done by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, demonstrates that long before they were written down the Homeric epics were oral poems, memorized and repeated by bards throughout early Greece. These stories evolved and were embellished over time.

### *Uncovering Greece's Past*

For generations, people believed that the stories of the Trojan War told in the epic poems attributed to Homer were just myths. Many doubted that the city of Troy had ever existed at all. However, the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann was

determined to prove that these stories were based in fact. Using the *Iliad* as a guide, he determined a site where he believed Troy was located, and began digging in 1871. He found a rich ancient city, which he believed was the historic Troy. In 1876, he began digging in Mycenae, and found what he believed were signs of Agamemnon's royal residence. His discoveries set off a wave of interest in the archaeology of Greece.

Schliemann's methods have, however, become a source of controversy. He was not a trained archaeologist, and some scholars say he simply set off to find evidence of the events narrated in Homer's epics and then interpreted whatever he found to fit with his expectations. Nonetheless, his discoveries were a major step in the study of Greek history. He provided much information about the Bronze Age Greeks, who became known as the Mycenaeans. Other archaeologists built upon Schliemann's accomplishments. At the turn of the twentieth century, Sir Arthur Evans discovered an even older civilization, which he named the Minoans, on the island of Crete. The myths that had shrouded Greece's early history were slowly being removed, and a clearer sense of the origins of the Greeks uncovered.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars have learned a great deal about Greece before its classical period. Little writing from this period survives, and Linear B, the writing system of the Mycenaean Greeks, was not deciphered until the early 1950s by Michael Ventris. The major source of information about Bronze Age Greece and the ensuing Greek Dark Ages, therefore, is archaeology. Through archaeological evidence, we now have a much better sense of how civilization developed on mainland Greece and the nearby islands of the Aegean Sea.