

# Tales of the Gods: Greek Mythology

Grades 7-8

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# Tales of the Gods GREEK MYTHOLOGY

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# GREEK MYTHOLOGY The Beginnings

## 1. The Beginnings

In this section, students are introduced to the Greek Gods and the Titans through an explanation of those events which brought about the creation of the universe according to the ancient Greek myths.

This section starts with the formation of the universe and the creation of Gaea (Mother Earth) and Uranus (the Sky and the Stars), her son. Then the following are presented:

- the birth of the Titans
- the birth of the Gods
- the war between the Titans and the Gods
- genealogy charts of the Titans and the Gods
- the division of the world under the Gods
- relevant pictures.

This section presents stories of the following Greek myths:

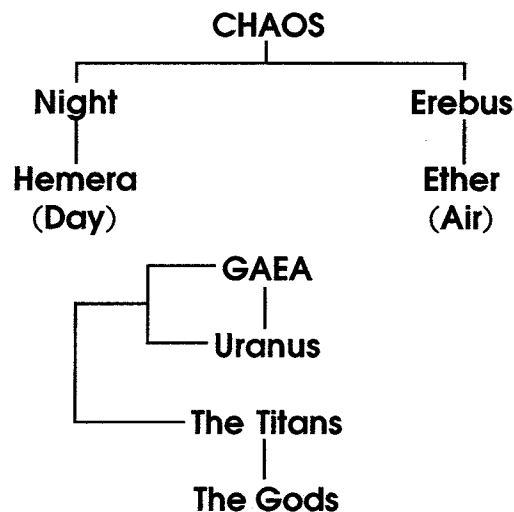
- The Creation of Humans: The Myth of Prometheus
- Evil in the World: The Myth of Pandora.

In the beginning there was **Chaos**. This word for the Greeks did not mean what it means today. Its modern meaning is *confusion*, but it comes from a Greek word meaning *gape*. Therefore, Chaos was a gaping hole, a void, a nothingness.

In the middle of this void of Chaos was **Gaea**, Mother Earth. Since the very ancient Greeks saw the universe in human forms, they believed that these forms began to reproduce:

Chaos gave birth to Night and Erebus, which in turn begot Hemera (Day) and Ether (Air). Gaea (Mother Earth) gave birth to Uranus (the sky and the stars). When Gaea mated with Uranus, the Titans (twelve huge shapes with human form) emerged. The Titans created human beings and in turn were the parents of the great Greek gods of Olympus.

Genealogy charts follow, and these are expanded in the following pages.



# GREEK MYTHOLOGY The Beginnings

## A) The Titans and the Gods

Gaea created the mountains and the seas and made her son, Uranus, her equal, but realized that the earth needed to be peopled. She united with her son to create the first race, the Titans, twelve in total, six male and six female. The modern word *titanic* recalls the size of this first race; note the significance in naming the famous ship *Titanic*. The Titans were:

- Male: Oceanus, Coeus, Hyperion, Crius, Iapetus, Cronus
- Female: Theia, Rhea, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Tethys, Themis.

Next, Gaea and Uranus gave birth to the Cyclopes (three of them—Brontes, Steropes and Arges), who looked like their brothers and sisters, except that they each had one large eye in the middle of the head. Finally, they bore three monsters (Cottus, Briareus and Gyges), who grew arms and heads at an alarming rate.

Uranus saw his children and was horrified at what he saw. So he imprisoned them in the depths of the earth, much to Gaea's disapproval. In time, Gaea came to hate her husband and decided to kill him, but her children would not agree to help her. Only Cronus, the youngest, came to his mother's aid. Cronus agreed to kill his father, and at night, while his father slept, Cronus crept into the room, killed his father and horribly mutilated his body. He threw Uranus's bleeding genitals into the sea, and from the foam which issued forth (according to one legend) sprang Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. Other sources say that Aphrodite was the daughter of Zeus and Dione.

Because of his role in assassinating his father, Cronus became the leader of the Titans, even though he was the youngest, and continued the work of creating the world. His brother, Oceanus married Tethys and together they gave birth to the rivers of the earth. Hyperion and Theia produced Helios (the Sun), Selene (the Moon) and Eos (the Dawn). Iapetus mated with the nymph, Clymene, to give birth to Atlas, Prometheus, Epimetheus and Menoetius.

Finally, Cronus married his sister, Rhea, to give birth to the first six gods, three sons (Hades, Poseidon and Zeus) and three daughters (Hestia, Demeter and Hera). Fearing that one of his children would kill him, as he had killed his father, Cronus swallowed each child as it was born. However, Rhea, wanting to at least save her last child, left Cronus and gave birth to Zeus in a cave. She returned to Cronus with a rock wrapped in a blanket and said, "Here is your latest child." Cronus swallowed the rock whole. In the meantime, Zeus was raised by his grandmother, Gaea, until he became a man. Then he returned to his father, and gave him a drink that made him vomit up his children, now fully grown, and the stone also!

# GREEK MYTHOLOGY The Beginnings

Zeus banished his father to the ends of the earth, and prepared to set himself up as the master of the universe. He placed the stone which his father had thrown up at the foot of Mount Parnassus. Legend has it that this stone was preserved for a long time in the tomb of Neoptolemus in Delphi.

The Titans, however, could not let the banishment of Cronus go unpunished or relinquish their powers to the seemingly upstart gods. So they rebelled against the authority of the gods, all except Oceanus, Prometheus and Epimetheus. For ten years, a mighty battle engulfed the entire earth. Zeus released the Cyclopes and the other monstrous children of Uranus and was rewarded; the Cyclopes gave him his famous thunderbolt which he used to create fire from heaven, and the Cyclopes in turn fought with Zeus and the other gods against the Titans. After a decade of massive destruction, the Titans were finally defeated, and Zeus ensured that they were severely punished.



**The Thunderbolts of Zeus**

Most of the Titans were bound with chains and thrown into the depths of the earth. Atlas, the son of Iapetus and brother of Prometheus and Epimetheus, was given the back-breaking job of standing on the edge of the earth holding the heavens upon his shoulders.



**Atlas Holding the Heavens  
on his Shoulders**

Today, Atlas is often portrayed holding the earth upon his shoulders, and the modern word *atlas*, from the ancient Greek, means a book of maps of the earth. But students often ask, "What is he standing on?" His brother, Menoetius, was banished to the depths of Erebus in the Underworld, as a punishment for daring to rise against the gods.

Zeus and his brothers now set about the task of dividing up the world. Zeus became master of the earth and the skies, and set up his home on the highest mountain in Greece, Mount Olympus; Poseidon became the supreme god of the seas and the oceans; Hades became the lord of the Underworld, the place where the shades of the dead go for reward or punishment after death.

# GREEK MYTHOLOGY The Beginnings

Zeus's sisters also undertook special roles. Hera became Zeus's wife and the patron goddess of marriage and the family, ironic in that Zeus was anything but a family man. Demeter took on the task of helping to grow crops and harvest grains. Finally, Hestia was the virgin goddess, worshipped by those women who dedicated their lives to chastity.

But Zeus had a wandering eye and lusted after other women, so much so that Hera at times assigned special guards to make sure that her husband did not stray too far. In spite of Hera's attempts, however, Zeus fathered children with other women, both goddesses and mortal ladies, and many of these children were included among the great gods of Olympus. With his wife, Hera, he had two sons—Ares, the god of war, and Hephaestus, the god of the forge, who became the blacksmith of the gods. It is ironic that the only legitimate children of Zeus and Hera were these two. Ares was, as befitted his position, argumentative and nasty. Hephaestus was the only Greek god who was not beautiful; he was ugly and deformed, and for this reason preferred to keep himself hidden beneath a mountain where he forged metals from his great fire. The Romans called Hephaestus *Vulcan*, and from his Roman name we get the word *volcano*, a mountain of fire. Hephaestus, however, would win the love of the most beautiful goddess, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty.

Before marrying Hera, Zeus married Metis (or Wisdom). With Metis, Zeus produced Athene, but her birth was unusual: Zeus was warned that any children produced with Metis would overpower him, as he had done to his father, and his father to his grandfather. So before the birth of the baby, he swallowed the pregnant Metis whole. Some time later, Zeus had a splitting headache (literally!). His head opened and out came Athene, fully grown and wearing armor. Athene became the goddess of wisdom and the patron goddess of the city of Athens. With Leto, the daughter of the Titan, Coeus, Zeus produced the twins, Apollo (god of the sun) and Artemis (goddess of the moon). With Maia, daughter of Atlas, he produced Hermes, the messenger of the gods. With Dione, he produced Aphrodite. These were but a few of the many affairs which Zeus would have.

# GREEK MYTHOLOGY The Beginnings

## The Titans and the Gods: Geneology Chart

