

The ancients regarded the head as the seat of intelligence. This belief is reflected in the story of Athena, Greek goddess of arts and crafts, who was "born" from the head of Zeus after he swallowed her mother Metis ("wisdom"). In late classical times, Athena herself was considered an embodiment of wisdom. Another supposed quality of the head was that it could retain powers after death; this is seen in the myths of Perseus and Orpheus. After Perseus decapitates the gorgon Medusa, her head is still able to turn men to stone, and Perseus uses it as a weapon against his enemies. When the minstrel Orpheus is torn limb from limb by angry Bacchantes, his head floats out to sea, still singing. This curious belief in the power of the severed head is reminiscent of the ancient Celtic practice (recorded by several classical writers) of cutting off the heads of slain enemies and keeping them in one's house. In Celtic thought, the head was the home of the soul, and possessing someone's head gave you control over their spirit and personal powers. The head thus acted as a good luck charm, protecting the owner and warding off evil. In Irish myth, which contains elements dating back to ancient times, severed heads are capable of talking, singing, and moving around.

In Gaul, the heads of enemies were nailed to the front of one's house to protect it from intruders. Some skulls have actually been found with the nails intact! Irish legend tells of a king who builds a castle with spikes protruding from the walls; each spike has impaled on it the head of a nobleman who failed in an impossible quest to win the hand of the king's daughter. Similarly in Greek myth, King Oenomaus of Pisa decapitates a dozen suitors of his daughter Hippodamia when they prove unable to defeat him in a chariot race--his own chariot is pulled by winged horses--and nails their skulls over the door of his palace as a warning to others. In another myth, the African giant Antacus wrestles and kills all visitors to his kingdom and uses their skulls to build a shrine for his father Poseidon, until he is finally squeezed to death in a wrestling match with Heracles.

Anthropologists refer to the primitive custom of "insult cannibalism", in which parts of slain enemies are eaten as a form of revenge. The Gauls who captured the Greek town of Callion in 279 BC are said to have eaten the tenderest of the inhabitants. Insult cannibalism is also seen in the story of the Seven Against Thebes, in which the mortally wounded hero Tydeus of Calydon chews the brains of his opponent Melanippus. This act of barbarism so offends Athena that she changes her mind about giving Tydeus a medicine that would make him immortal.

Some mythical characters have more than one head, such as the three-headed underworld goddess Hecate, and the Roman god Janus (shown in art with two or even four heads). However, a plurality of heads does not necessarily make you smarter. As his tenth labour, Heracles steals the cattle of the three-headed king Geryon. Geryon foolishly pursues the mighty hero and is shot dead for his trouble. There are also several mythical monsters with multiple heads, such as Cerberus (a triple-headed dog), the Chimaera (which has the heads of a lion, a goat and a snake), Scylla (a female creature with six dogs' heads) and the Hydra (a nine-headed serpent). In each case the extra heads make them more dangerous and terrifying than normal animals. Scylla snatches sailors from passing ships, the Chimaera attacks cattle and breathes fire, Cerberus eats any shades who try to leave Hades, and the heads of the Hydra (which grow back double whenever one is cut off) have poison fangs. The Greeks may not have had computers, but they did invent the megabyte!

Lastly, some mythical characters have the head of one creature and the body of another. Centaurs are horses with human heads and arms. The Sirens resemble birds with women's heads. The Minotaur, offspring of the Minoan queen Pasiphae and a bull, is shown as mostly human but with the head (and sometimes tail) of a bull. The Sphinx, a character in the Oedipus myth, is a winged lion with a woman's head. The Sphinx reminds us of the similar creature, though with a male head, who guards the Pyramids of Egypt; early Greek visitors to Egypt may have brought this idea home with them. Many of the Egyptian gods were portrayed with animal heads or at least with horns, such as Isis, who has the horns of a cow but is otherwise human in form. (She was sometimes confused with the Greek maiden Io, who was turned into a cow by Zeus and wandered to Egypt.) The Greek god Pan is shown as having the horns and legs of a goat. Horned gods also appear in the Celtic pantheon, such as Cernunnos, who has on his head the antlers of a deer. The concept of the horned god was indeed so strong in Celtic myth that medieval Christian writers took pains to vilify him as Satan. The modern image of the Devil as a creature with horns, a long tail, and sometimes wings, hooves or claws, owes much to the gods and monsters of ancient myth.