

Mythology is a worldwide phenomenon, yet attempts to understand it seem no closer to success today than when serious study started at the beginning of the nineteenth century. There is no lack of material, and no lack of theories, but each theory always seems to raise more questions than it answers. In such a situation it is best simply to understand some of the things the myth-maker can do, without claiming that we understand all of them or pretending that one type of myth is more important than another. This series will attempt to reach some such understanding of Greek mythology by studying it under various heads: myth and ritual; myth, science and history; myth and psychology; and finally, myth and literature.

The extraordinary combination of entertainment and inspiration in Greek mythology is a product of heredity and environment. The Greeks started out as one people with the Romans and the ancient Indians (who spoke Sanskrit); this ancestral race we call the Indo-Europeans. No one knows where they lived, but a thousand facts point to their existence; we can even reconstruct their language to an extent. We know some of their religious ideas as well; for example, that their chief god was a male deity of the bright sky and the weather, who turns up in Sanskrit as dyaus pitar, in Latin as Jupiter (early form, Diespiter), and in Greek as Zeus (genitive form, Dios). These people migrated to different parts of the world towards the end of the third millennium B.C.; some went to Italy, some to India, and the ancestors of the Greeks to Greece. They brought the ancestral ideas to their new homes, where they encountered indigenous peoples with different ideas and different languages. The mixing of incomers and natives resulted in three new races: Latins, Indians, Greeks. In Greece, the dominant power was the civilization of Minoan Crete, which flourished in the late third and early second millennium B.C. In the religion of the Minoans, a female deity was paramount, an earth-mother who was responsible for the fertility of all living things. The combination of Indo-European and Minoan produces Greek religion, in which both male and female principles are represented: Zeus and Hera, king and queen of the Olympian gods.

The incomers eventually superseded the natives, and when they did, the period of Greek history that we call Mycenaean begins (1600-1200 B.C.). Mycenae was the greatest of a number of fortresses on mainland Greece around which the society and politics of this period revolved. After four centuries of power Mycenaean civilization also collapsed, for reasons not entirely clear to modern historians. Whatever the reasons, the collapse was catastrophic, and it took another four hundred years for Greece to recover. After these Dark Ages ended ca. 800 B.C., men looked back through them as if through a veil or a mist to the half-remembered, half-understood glories of the Mycenaean age. It became romanticized, a period to be sung of by bards like Homer, a period when men were heroes and gods walked the earth. Hundreds of stories sprang up about the great aristocratic houses of Greece, and of the magnificent expedition to Troy to recover the wife of one of their princes, Menelaus' wife Helen, most beautiful woman who ever lived. History distorted in this manner is more often termed "legend", to signify that "myth" ought to contain some other, more philosophical element. But to the Greeks these stories did convey a great deal of meaning about important questions in life, notably the relation of man to the gods; thus they may properly be called myths.

There you have the two main constituents of Greek mythology: myths that relate to beliefs about the gods; and myths that recall the exploits of heroes. By 800 B.C. the broad outlines of the stories were established, even though our first evidence for them does not come until some hundred years later with Homer and Hesiod. In succeeding centuries down to the Classical Age (490-400 B.C.) the basic stories were elaborated to an incredible degree, chiefly by the poets. As a result Greek mythology seems to us a highly literate creation. One must guard against being fooled by the state of our evidence. Myths continued to live on among ordinary people in a less sophisticated, more basic form, and it is often at that level that the truest meaning or original purpose of a myth is best preserved. It is there also that the connection of mythology with living, operative religious beliefs is best seen. We will be studying this connection particularly in the next instalment. But having done that we must not forget that the literary development of Greek mythology really is unique, and we will conclude the series with a brief look at Homer, Pindar and the great tragedians.