

Athena and Poseidon compete for a coastal town

Athena was the goddess of wisdom. She could get angry, but more typically, she was wise, and kind, and understanding. Athena was born very oddly. Her father was the mighty Zeus. But she did not have a mother. Instead, as the myth goes, she was born directly out of Zeus' brain. Zeus loved all his children. But one of his favorites was Athena.

Athena held a powerful position in the ancient Greek god world. She was an Olympian, one of the council of 12, who held a seat on Mount Olympus. She also had a home there.

Here is a myth about Athena that shows how clever and practical she was.

Nearly every town in ancient Greece had a god that looked after the townspeople. Towns rarely had more than one god to keep an eye on their best interests. Most gods did not share well. So usually, it was one town and if the town was lucky, one god to watch over it.

Poseidon loved watching over towns. He usually picked coastal towns since he was the Lord of the Sea. Poseidon was a very powerful god. His brothers were Zeus and Hades. Poseidon was a moody fellow, but he loved his wife and children and he loved attention. He liked having people build temples in his honor and bring him gifts. They were not very useful gifts for a god, but he enjoyed getting them anyway. As Greece grew and developed, new towns sprang up all the time. Poseidon was always on the lookout for new coastal towns.

He was not the only god who loved to be in charge. Athena, along with other gods, enjoyed that role as well. One day, both Athena and Poseidon claimed a new village.

Most of the time, humans were grateful when they were selected to be under the care of a god. But two gods? That was one too many. Poseidon wanted them to choose which god they wanted. But the people did not want to choose. They could see only trouble ahead if they did.

Athena, goddess of wisdom, daughter of Zeus, understood their worry. She challenged her uncle Poseidon to a contest. Both gods would give the town a gift. The townspeople could decide which gift was the more useful.

Poseidon slapped his scepter against the side of the mountain. A stream appeared. The people were excited. A source of fresh water was so important! But when they tried to drink the water, they discovered it was not fresh at all. It was salt water!

Athena waved her arm and an olive tree appeared. The people nibbled at the olives. They were delicious! The people were excited. The olive tree would provide wood for building homes. Branches would provide kindling for kitchen stoves and fireplaces. The olives could be used for food. The fruit could be pressed to release cooking oil. It was wonderful.

But there was a coastal village. The people could not risk angering the Lord of the Sea, the mighty Poseidon. As it turned out, they did not have to choose. Poseidon chose for them. He laughed his mighty laugh, sending waves crashing against the shoreline. Poseidon proclaimed his niece the winner!

That's how a small village gained a most powerful and wise guardian, the goddess Athena, a guardian who helped them rise to fame. In her honor, they named their village Athens.

King Sisyphus of Corinth tricks Hades

The people of the ancient city-state of Corinth believed their king, King Sisyphus of Corinth, was the cleverest king who ever lived! They were always bragging about him.

But the most clever thing the king did hardly anyone knew about, for a very good reason!

As the story goes

One day, the king of Corinth was busy trying to come up with an idea to solve Corinth's fresh water problem. He saw Zeus fly by, carrying a lovely river spirit in his arms.

"That Zeus," sighed the king. "What a trouble maker!"

Soon after, the river-god Asopus flew by. "Have you seen my daughter?" he bellowed at the king.

"If you will give my city a source of fresh water, I will tell you what I saw," King Sisyphus shouted back. Immediately, a crystal clear stream of fresh water bubbled up.

"Zeus took her that way," the king pointed.

The king knew Zeus would be angry when he heard what the king had done. But Corinth desperately needed a source of fresh water. And now they had one.

Sure enough, Zeus was furious. He told his brother Hades to take King Sisyphus down to the underworld immediately!

"When they tell you I am dead, do not put a gold coin under my tongue," King Sisyphus whispered urgently to his wife. Being a good wife, she did exactly as the king had asked her.

Because the king was a very important person, Hades himself met the king at the River Styx, the entrance to the underworld. Because no gold coin was placed under his tongue, the king arrived at the entrance to the underworld as a poor beggar.

"Where is your gold coin?" Hades demanded to know. "How can you pay for a trip across the River Styx and arrive in the underworld?"

The king hung his head in shame. "My wife was too cheap to pay for the passage."

Hades' mouth fell open. "You go right back there and teach that woman some manners." Hades sent the king back to earth immediately, where he was magically alive and well again.

The king and his beloved wife laughed when he told her about it. But he never told anyone else. You never knew when the gods might be listening.

Icarus flies too close to the sun

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a talented artist. His name was Daedalus. He used his art to make buildings and temples. He was probably the finest architect of his time.

King Minos invited Daedalus to the lovely island of Crete. The king wanted Daedalus to build a maze, a Labyrinth, as a home for the king's beloved pet, the Minotaur. The Minotaur was a horrible monster, with the head of a bull on a human body. The king loved that awful monster and wanted him to have a lovely home.

Daedalus was a bit amazed at the king's choice of pet, but a job was a job. Daedalus planned to make the maze a challenge, so complicated that anyone who entered it would be lost until rescued. That way, the king would be happy, the monster would be contained, and the people would be safe. Daedalus had no doubt he could design such a maze. He really was a fine architect.

Daedalus brought his young son Icarus with him. He was sure the child would enjoy swimming and playing with the other children on the island. Both Daedalus and Icarus were happy they had come. King Minos was happy with his maze. It was peaceful and pleasant on the island. Daedalus was in no hurry to leave.

One day, a group of Greek children sailed to the island. The next day, they sailed safely away, taking with them the king's lovely daughter, and leaving behind them one dead Minotaur.

King Minos was beside himself with grief. He did not believe anyone could have entered the maze and escape alive without help from someone, most probably help from the man who had designed the maze in the first place. (Actually, the children did have help, and not from Daedalus, but that's another myth.) King Minos punished the innocent Daedalus by keeping Daedalus and his young son Icarus prisoners on the island of Crete.

Daedalus tried to think of ways to escape. One day, Daedalus noticed birds flying overhead. It gave him an idea. Wings. He needed wings. Daedalus began to gather all the bird feathers he could find. He glued them together with wax. When two pairs of wings were ready, he warned his young son not to fly too close to the sun or the wax would melt.

Daedalus fastened the wings to their arms. They flapped their wings and took to the sky. They left the island of Crete far behind them. Water sparkled beneath them as far as they could see. The sky was blue. The breeze was brisk, more than enough to keep them in the air. It was glorious!

Icarus flew higher and higher. He flew so high that before he knew what was happening, the sun had begun to melt the wax on his wings. Icarus felt himself falling. He flapped his arms faster and faster. But it was no use. Poor Icarus plunged into the water and drowned.

Sadly, Daedalus continued on alone.

Persephone and Demeter invent seasons

Zeus, the king of all the gods, had two brothers and three sisters. Each had an important job. His sister, Demeter, was in charge of the harvest. If Demeter did not do her job, the crops could die, and everyone would starve. It was important to keep Demeter happy. Everyone helped out with that - both gods and mortals. It was that important.

As the story goes

Demeter loved her little daughter, Persephone. They played together in the fields almost every day. As Persephone smiled up at her mother, Demeter's heart swelled with happiness, and the crops grew high and healthy. Flowers tumbled everywhere. As time passed, Persephone grew into a lovely goddess. That's when the trouble started.

Hades, the king of the underworld, was a gloomy fellow. He normally hung out in the Underworld.

One day, Hades felt restless. He decided to take his three-headed dog out for a chariot ride. Cerberus, his dog, usually stood guard at the gate to Underworld. But Hades gave his pup a break now and then. He scooped up Cerberus, and left a couple of spirits in charge instead.

Hades flew his chariot up to earth. Cerberus leaped out of the chariot and ran around, sniffing flowers with all three of his heads. The dog ran up to a lovely young woman, the goddess Persephone. Some people might have been startled if a three-headed dog came tearing up. But Persephone only laughed and scratched his heads.

Hades loved that old dog. He watched his dog playing happily with Persephone. He heard Persephone's delighted laugh. Hades fell deeply in love. Before anyone could stop him, he grabbed his niece, his dog, and his chariot and dove deep into the darkest depths of the Underworld.

Hades locked Persephone in a beautifully decorated room in the Hall of Hades. He brought her all kinds of delicious food. Persephone refused to eat. She had heard if you ate anything in Hades, you could never leave. She had every intention of leaving as soon as she could figure out how to do so.

Over a week went by. Finally, in desperate hunger, Persephone ate six pomegranate seeds. She promptly burst into tears.

She was not the only one crying. Demeter, her mother, missed her daughter terribly. She did not care if the crops died. She did not care about anything except finding her daughter. No one knows who told Zeus about it, but it was clear this could not go on. Zeus sent his son Hermes to work a deal with Hades.

This was the deal Hermes worked out: If Persephone would marry Hades, she would live as queen of the Underworld for six months each winter. In the spring, Persephone would return to earth and live there for six months. No one especially liked the deal, but everyone finally agreed.

Every spring, Demeter makes sure flowers are blooming and crops are growing and the fields are green with welcome. Every fall, when Persephone returns to the underworld, Demeter ignores the crops and flowers and lets them die. Each spring, Demeter brings everything to life again, ready to welcome her daughter's return.

To the ancient Greeks, that was the reason for seasons - winter, spring, summer, fall.

The fortune teller who speaks in riddles

The ancient Greeks built many, many temples. They believed each temple they built should honor only one god, no matter how big or elaborate the temple. Some cities built more than one temple to honor the same god.

Apollo enjoyed having temples built in his honor. He liked the gifts. He liked the attention. Everyone knew that Apollo was the god of music. He also brought out the sun each day. He had other special powers. Apollo could see the future, not always, but sometimes. Everyone wanted to know the future. So Apollo's temples were busy places, full of people full of questions about their future. His temples were so busy, in fact, that the stream of visitors asking him questions wore him out.

As the story goes

Apollo decided he needed an assistant, a wise woman, an oracle. An oracle, in ancient Greece, was someone who could see the future. But Apollo did not want any old oracle to speak for him. He wanted a real one. But there weren't any real ones, not really. The oracles he had met always had vague answers.

For example, if you asked an oracle if you should plant your garden tomorrow, they might say "the frost will be gone if the gods will it." Not really helpful.

Apollo had the power to magically make someone truly see the future, just as he could. But Apollo didn't want to take the fun out of things. So Apollo set some ground rules for his oracle. He would use his magic to allow her to truly see the future. Apollo's rules stated that she had to tell the truth, but she could not be too specific. That would allow the possibility of misunderstanding. That would make it fun!

Apollo magically turned a young priestess into a real oracle. He magically built a special temple for her home. He magically told a few people here and there about his wonderful oracle.

It did not take long for the word to spread. People came from all over to ask Apollo's oracle a question. People had heard she could really see the future and could only tell the truth.

One day, a weary king came to the temple. He asked Apollo's oracle if he would win the battle. She smiled and told him a great king would win the battle. That was exactly what he had wanted to hear. He went away happy, leaving many gifts for the oracle behind him.

When he led his men into battle, they lost. The king was killed. But people still flocked to Apollo's oracle. They knew she had told the truth. She had to tell the truth. What a pity the king had not listened.

Apollo and the Trojan Horse

Each temple in ancient Greece was dedicated to only one god. Because the Greeks worshiped many gods, there were a great many temples in ancient Greece. Every town had several temples.

The most famous temple dedicated to Apollo was the temple at Delphi. That temple was the home of Apollo's special oracle, a young woman Apollo had gifted with the ability to see the future. Apollo could do things like that.

Apollo enjoyed visiting the temple at Delphi. He enjoyed visiting all the temples that had been built in his honor. One day, he heard about an especially splendid temple that had been built in the city-state of Troy. Apollo heard great things about the temple in Troy that had been built in his honor. The most interesting thing about this temple to Apollo was that the city-state of Troy was not located on the Greek peninsula. Troy started as an ancient Greek colony. Troy was on a different peninsula entirely.

Being a curious god, one day Apollo decided to swing by and take a look at the temple at Troy for himself.

As the story goes ...

Cassandra was not an oracle. She could not see into the future. She was a beautiful young priestess, with great ambition.

When Apollo swung by personally to take a look at his temple, all Cassandra saw was his beauty and his power. She gave him a saucy grin.

Apollo was delighted. Like all the gods, Apollo was very fond of making deals. He offered a deal to Cassandra. If she would give a kiss, he would give her the gift of prophecy so she could see into the future.

Cassandra did not hesitate. She took the deal. As soon as Apollo gave her the gift of prophecy, she looked eagerly into the future. What she saw made her gasp. She saw Apollo helping to destroy her beloved city of Troy. She spit in his face.

Apollo was angry of course. But could not take away his gift. He could only add to it. That's how his power worked. That's exactly what he did. He added something to his gift. From that time on, Cassandra could see the future, but no one believed a thing she said. That's what Apollo had added.

Some time later, Cassandra warned her people that the huge wooden Trojan horse the Greeks had given Troy was hollow - full of Greek warriors, hidden inside - warriors who would destroy the city! The people of Troy did not believe her. They did not even look. They were far too busy celebrating the "defeat" of the Greeks, who had left the horse as a token of defeat (or so they believed.) But the horse was full of Greek warriors. That night, they crept out of the hollow horse and opened the city gates to let the Greek army in. That was the end of Troy.

Ares, God of War, and the magical rock

Ares was the god of war. He was true royalty as far as the gods were concerned. His parents were the king and queen of the ancient Greek god world. His father was Zeus and his mother was Hera.

Ares was tall. He was handsome. He was mean. He was self-centered. Nobody liked him much.

Ares best friend was Eris, the spirit of disagreement. The two often traveled together, and they often brought the spirits of Pain, Panic, and Famine with them.

When the ancient Greeks went to war, Ares often got involved. He did not care who won or lost a battle. He just liked bloodshed. His best friend, the spirit Eris, did not care that much about bloodshed, but she loved to cause disagreement - the angrier, the better. The pair of them were nothing but trouble.

As the story goes....

Once upon a time, a long time ago, Ares, the Greek god of war, was fighting against the Greeks in a field in the northernmost tip of ancient Greece. The field was on the border of Macedonia, a country to the north. The Macedonians were forever crossing the line, trying to conquer the Greek city-states, one at a time. Ares kept a close eye on that field as a many a battle had been fought there. Ares did not wish to miss a good battle. Athena, goddess of wisdom, saw her half brother, screaming and shouting happily, as the Greeks died around him. Athena believed the Greeks cause was just, as they were simply defending their home. She picked up a rock and threw it as hard as she could at Ares. Ares wasn't paying attention as usual. He was busy enjoying the bloodshed. The rock knocked him out cold. When he woke up, the battle was over. The Greeks had won! Ares never knew it was his sister, Athena, who had knocked him out of the battle!

After that, nobody knows how but somehow, a rumor started that the great god Ares had been attacked by a magical rock! Nobody listened to the rumor, nobody that is except two young brothers. The brothers owned the field where battles kept happening. It was very hard to grow crops while men were fighting. The boys had grown into giants! Well, not giants perhaps, but certainly tall and manly and strong. The boys quietly collected a huge stack of heavy rocks, hoping one of them would be a magical rock. Their neighbors thought they were building a wall to help protect their field from the Macedonians. But actually, they were waiting for Ares. They knew Ares would show up sooner or later, because Ares loved bloodshed, and many a battle had been fought in their field. Ares was bound to keep checking. Sure enough, one day, they spotted the great god Ares in their field! They threw rocks at him. They were very fortunate that one of their rocks hit Ares and knocked him out cold before Ares noticed what they were doing. The boys quickly stuffed Ares into a huge vase and plugged the top securely.

Ares was stuck in that vase for a very long time. And for a very long time, the brothers lived a peaceful life. No battles were fought. Their crops flourished. Their neighbors to the north became their friends. Ares might still be in that vase today if one of the brothers had not bragged to a neighbor about what they had done. The god Hermes heard about it. (Sooner or later, Hermes heard about everything.) Hermes rescued his brother, not that Ares said thank you. But Ares never came back to that field, thinking perhaps that the tale of magical rocks was true! Besides, there were many other fields in ancient Greece, and many other battles. As long as there was bloodshed to enjoy somewhere, Ares was happy.

Opening Pandora's Box

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there were two brothers named Epimetheus and Prometheus. They were good gods. They had good hearts. They were good friends.

One day, Prometheus got in trouble with Zeus. Angry over something or other, Zeus had declared that man did not deserve fire. Because he had a kind heart, and he knew how much man needed fire for food and warmth, Prometheus gave man the secret of fire even though Zeus had told all the gods not to do that. Zeus was furious that his order had been ignored. As punishment, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock for many years.

But that was not enough punishment, not for Zeus. Once Prometheus was chained to a rock, Zeus went after Prometheus' brother, the gentle, kind-hearted Epimetheus. Zeus did not chain Epimetheus to a rock. Zeus had a more sneaky punishment in mind.

First, Zeus ordered the gods' handyman, the maker of things - Hephaestus - to make Zeus a daughter. Hephaestus made a woman out of clay, a beautiful woman. He brought her to life, and then brought her to Zeus. Zeus named his lovely new daughter Pandora.

Zeus knew that Epimetheus was lonely. Zeus told Epimetheus that his brother, Hephaestus, had to be punished and that's why he was chained to a rock, but he felt sorry that this punishment left Epimetheus without the company of his brother. That's why Zeus had decided to give Pandora in marriage to Epimetheus. It was not the truth of course, but then nearly everyone in the ancient Greek world knew better than to believe the mighty Zeus.

Epimetheus was kind-hearted and gentle and thoughtful, but he was no fool. He knew Zeus was up to something. But he loved Pandora at first sight.

Zeus gave the newlyweds a gift. Some say it was a jar. Some say it was a box. Whatever it was, it was locked. It came with a note. The note said: "DO NOT OPEN." Attached to the note was a key. It was all very curious.

You can guess what happened next. It was Pandora whose curiosity got the better of her. One day, she used the key to open the box. As she raised the lid, out flew all the bad things in the world today - envy, sickness, hate, disease. Pandora slammed the lid closed, but it was too late.

Epimetheus heard her weeping. He came running. Pandora opened the lid to show him it was empty. Quickly, before she could slam the lid shut, one tiny bug flew out. He gave Pandora a big buggy smile in thanks for his freedom and flew away. That tiny bug was named Hope. And Hope made all the difference in the world.