

## Praise for *GREEK MYTHOLOGY: The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook*

"Albert gives a witty and unapologetic perspective on famous classical stories through a modern, feminist lens."

—**Rachel Smythe**, creator of the *Lore Olympus* Webtoon

"This is not your grandma's mythology primer. Liv Albert continues her work to bring Greek mythology into modern times with this refreshing, forward-thinking, and best of all, hilarious almanac. Paired with the stunning artwork by Sara Richard, the book feels like an heirloom created for our generation to pass down."

—**Emily Edwards**, author and host of the *Fuckbois of Literature* podcast

"Beautifully illustrated and instantly absorbing, *Greek Mythology: The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook* tells the familiar stories in a fresh, entertaining way and also delves into more obscure myths, origin stories, and characters—leaving no corner of Greek mythology unexplored."

—**Jenny Williamson**, cohost of the *Ancient History Fangirl* podcast

"Gripping, deftly executed, and beautifully told, *Greek Mythology: The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook* is at once a primer for those new to mythology and a compass for those looking to further explore the stories that still shape our world. Feminist and wise, this is a must-read for fans of *Lore Olympus* or Percy Jackson."

—**Genn McMenemy**, cohost of the *Ancient History Fangirl* podcast

## **Praise for *GREEK MYTHOLOGY:* *The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook***

"I highly recommend reading this book if you want to know all the gossip straight from Mount Olympus. This will be a treasured book for any new or longtime Greek mythology obsessives."

**–Mari Phillips, owner of MYTHSNTiTS, illustrator**

"Liv brings her trademark panache to this collection! This handbook is packed with connections between ancient myth and popular culture. It's a wild ride accompanied by Sara Richard's gorgeous illustrations, suitable for those who adore mythology and enthusiastic beginners.

This book is a treat for anyone who likes their ancient past with a dose of humor. We know that we do!"

**–Dr. Rad and Dr. G, cohosts of *The Partial Historians* podcast**

"Brilliant, funny, and exciting....Greek mythology can be complex, and Liv has explained it in a way that is easy to digest, with some beautiful imagery alongside the stories."

**–Jeff Murray, artist**

# GREEK MYTHOLOGY

## The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook

*From APHRODITE to ZEUS, a Profile of  
Who's Who in Greek Mythology*

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LIV ALBERT

Illustrated by SARA RICHARD

**Adams Media**

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi



Adams Media

An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

57 Littlefield Street

Avon, Massachusetts 02322

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First Adams Media hardcover edition March 2021

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Interior design by Sylvia McArdle

Illustrations by Sara Richard

Manufactured in China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-1-5072-1549-4

ISBN 978-1-5072-1550-0 (ebook)

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# DEDICATION

*For Odysseus, my first love*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all of my family and friends, specifically any one of them who ever let me spout mythological facts and stories at seemingly random intervals throughout my life. Thank you to every one of the listeners of my podcast who do the same, but at much more regular intervals. Thank you to my pandemic friends, Genn and Jenny (of the *Ancient History Fangirl* podcast!), who cheered me on while I wrote this book....I needed it.





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# INTRODUCTION

Escaping a labyrinth after killing the vicious monster that lives in it...lusting after your own reflection...hunting with a female warrior who's a whiz with a bow and arrow: The world of Greek mythology is filled with danger, love, adventure—and lots of family dysfunction. There's a good reason the stories are still being told today in books, movies, TV shows, and webcomics: Greek myths are eternal and endlessly entertaining. Gods, goddesses, creatures great and small, and mere mortals join together in dramatic, fascinating, hilarious, and often violent tales of nature and humanity's flaws and foibles.

Though they often had otherworldly powers, ancient Greek gods and goddesses were very...human. They got jealous and angry; they were vengeful and manipulative; they were always making mistakes and doing things they were told not to do. This endless parade of remarkable characters and their tales can be confusing and hard to remember, so let *Greek Mythology: The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook* tell you dozens of their stories in a clear, engaging way.

This book is broken down into four parts:

1. **What Is Greek Mythology?:** a beginner section that outlines what you need to know to get started (how and when did these stories originate, anyway?)
2. **The Olympians:** character profiles for all the Olympian gods
3. **Deities, Etc.:** these are the characters who aren't Olympians but aren't mortal either
4. **Heroes and Mortals:** the major heroic and mortal players of Greek mythology

Each key character gets their own entry, in which you can learn their name and aliases; what place, topic, or trade they ruled; their origin story; and the most famous adventure they're involved in. Some character entries include sub-characters: gods or mortals so closely associated with that character that they are best learned about together.

Whether you want to brush up on your trivia (which god is the dwarf planet Pluto named after?), better understand a piece of pop culture (such as Rachel Smythe's Webtoon *Lore Olympus* or everyone's favorite Disney animated film, *Hercules*), or just enjoy these exciting stories, *Greek Mythology: The Gods, Goddesses, and Heroes Handbook* gives you a front-row seat for the outrageous trials and tribulations of these ancient superstars.

A decorative border with a repeating Greek key (meander) pattern in blue and gold, framing the page on the left and bottom.

## PART 1

# WHAT IS GREEK MYTHOLOGY?

Greek mythology began as an oral tradition thousands of years ago. The ancient Greeks used these stories to understand and explain the natural world around them. How was the world created? Where did humanity begin? Over time these myths were passed down; eventually some were written down as epic poems or, later, as plays that were performed in front of audiences of thousands of spectators in the world's first theaters.

The stories of the ancient Greeks revolved almost exclusively around the characters in them. Their stories are universal and very much resemble the stories and themes told today in books and movies and on television—good versus evil, triumph over adversity, rooting for the underdog, and so on. Greek mythology and its characters have inspired, and are still inspiring, new works of popular culture. The stories are eternal, universal, and truly some of the most thrilling and entertaining works of fiction. But, of course, the ancient

Greeks (for the most part) believed their stories were not fiction at all but rather history or, sometimes, contemporary anecdotes of encounters with gods and monsters. What makes Greek mythology so special is the way the gods interacted with the humans in creative, manipulative, and often violent ways. A warning: The gods assaulted other gods, nymphs, and mortals often.

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An important note about Greek mythology in general is, in a word, variation. Because the stories were told orally over hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years, there are many different versions and interpretations. In order to properly tell these stories, certain variations have been selected for this book so as not to confuse you with endless asides of “According to...” and “But another source...,” although some alternate sources have been included.

The Romans also took many Greek gods and myths and made them their own. While they were often portrayed differently in the respective cultures, they had shared origins. Because of this, the two cultures’ mythologies are often conflated. There are some select Roman stories referenced here (the Roman poet Ovid was a really good storyteller), but it’s always made clear when the story being told is of Roman origin.

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## The Creation Myth: Gods and Titans

The world of Greek mythology began with Chaos, a mass of nothingness from which sprang Gaia. Also known as Mother Earth, Gaia was the personification of the earth itself. She quickly became lonely and created herself a husband, Ouranos (yes, like Uranus, the planet). Together they spawned:

1. **The Titans**, a group very similar to the gods, humanlike and different mostly only in name and overall importance in the mythology; they are sometimes also referred to as gods.
2. **The Hecatonchires**, a very cool, if rarely mentioned, race of monsters, each with one hundred hands and fifty heads.

One of the Titans, Kronos, became power hungry and obsessed with overthrowing those above him in the hierarchy of deities. Kronos castrated his father, Ouranos, and threw the body parts he'd removed from his father into the sea. From the falling droplets of blood were born two types of creatures:

1. **The Erinyes**, better known as the Furies, three women whose lives were devoted to punishing those who broke the natural laws of the world.
2. **The Gigantes**, a race of bloodthirsty giants.

So, Kronos had made a name for himself...but it wasn't a good one. His mother, Gaia, was then hell-bent on overthrowing him and regaining her own power. And even Kronos's wife, Rhea, another Titan, quickly tired of him. Not because she was angry about what he did to Ouranos (also her father; there were a lot of shared parents among couples in Greek mythology—it's best not to think too hard about it) but because every time she gave birth to one of their children, Kronos simply ate the child whole. There



was a prophecy that a child of Kronos would one day overthrow him just as he did his own father, and Kronos believed he could nip it in the bud by eating the children.

Rhea gave birth to five children, all of whom Kronos ate before they could utter a sound. Finally, fed up (rightfully so!) with all her children being eaten, Rhea arranged to have her next child whisked away before Kronos could see him and brought down to earth to Mount Ida, on the island of Crete. There the child would be raised far away from his father and, with any luck, would live to adulthood and be able to fulfill the prophecy that Kronos feared. When Rhea gave birth to her sixth child, he was whisked away as planned. In place of the baby, Rhea handed Kronos a large rock swaddled like a newborn, which he swallowed. The child, meanwhile, was brought to Crete and named Zeus.

In time, Zeus grew up to become the strong, powerful god who his father had always feared. As with nearly all prophecies in Greek mythology, the one feared by Kronos came true. Zeus, with the help of his mother, snuck up on Kronos and forced him to vomit up his children, Zeus's siblings. One by one, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia were "reborn" from Kronos's stomach. These children of the Titans overthrew and imprisoned Kronos and the Titans who sided with him in a war known as the Titanomachy. The children then positioned themselves on Mount Olympus, the new home to the gods, and gave themselves the name Olympians from it.

Eventually these original Olympians coupled up with each other and with other deities (stories of these couplings are told in their character entries), and with that, the Olympians were complete (sort of...details on that to come). They were Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Demeter, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Hephaestus, Ares, Hermes, Dionysus, and Hestia.

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There were technically only ever twelve Olympians at a time. Hestia eventually gave up her spot to Dionysus (she was never all that into their drama), and Demeter wasn't always considered to be one, but as one of the original siblings, she deserves her place in the story (more on that later).

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The Olympians went on to create the natural world on earth, including creating humans themselves (that story is told in the entries on Prometheus and Pandora). Once they had created that world, they decided to wreak havoc on it and its people any time the desire arose (and it arose often).

## Gods, Heroes, Mortals, and Monsters

The Olympians were the most powerful of the Greek gods, but there were hundreds of other gods and deities in the mythology. The word *deities* is used broadly here: They were humanlike characters who were (for our purposes) not Olympians but also not mortals. There are a lot of characters in Greek mythology that fall under this category.

There were the Titans who weren't imprisoned with Kronos, like Prometheus and Epimetheus, as well as other gods both major and minor that have important stories to be told, like Eros (Cupid). There were heroes, some the children of gods and others pure mortals with epic and famous histories (like Heracles, Perseus, Cadmus, and more!). Their stories are equally important and equally dramatic even when they don't include encounters with the Olympians...though they usually do, in one way or another.

You'll also encounter everyday humans who also figured into many stories of Greek mythology. These mortals were often used as the playthings of gods, as mothers of heroes by those gods, or as examples of hubris to be punished by the gods (Tantalus, anyone?).

And then there are the monsters. The nonhuman creatures and monsters of Greek mythology are some of the most memorable: Who hasn't heard of the Cyclopes or the many-headed Hydra? Many of the most famous and murderous monsters of Greek mythology were the children of Typhon and Echidna, who were two of the original monsters (more on those two in their entry).

## Other Important Deities

✦ Nymphs were minor deities associated with different aspects of nature. There were a great many types of nymphs, grouped by where they lived and what they were devoted to. The most common types of nymphs were:

- **Naiads** were nymphs of rivers, streams, and other bodies of fresh water. A subset of these were called Oceanids, freshwater nymphs who were specifically daughters of the Titan Oceanus, the personification of the great river that the Greeks believed encircled the world (yes, it's confusing that Oceanids were *freshwater* nymphs).
- **Dryads** and **Hamadryads** were nymphs of the forests; their job was to protect the trees of the woods. Hamadryads differ from Dryads in that these nymphs were each devoted to a specific tree.
- **Hesperides** were nymphs of the sunset, daughters of the Titan Hesperis, the evening star. They guarded the Garden of the Hesperides, where famed golden apples grew.

- **Nereids** were nymphs of the sea and typically daughters of various sea gods and Titans, including Nereus.
  - **Lampades** were the nymphs of the Underworld. They carried torches through the world of the dead and accompanied the goddesses Persephone and Hecate.
- ✦ The nine Muses (*Mousai* in Greek; *Musae* in Latin) were goddesses of knowledge, music, and dance and were the inspiration for all artists, poets, and playwrights of ancient Greece. They were the daughters of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Each muse was goddess of a specific aspect of inspiration: Calliope was the muse of epic poetry, Thalia of comedy, Euterpe of lyric poetry, Terpsichore of dance and choral song, Melpomene of tragedy, Polyhymnia of religious hymns, Erato of erotic poetry, Clio of history, and Ourania of astronomy.
- ✦ The Fates, or the Moirae (their original Greek name), were the three goddesses who determined the fate of every individual on earth. The ancient Greeks believed a person's fate was woven into a thread of life, all handled by the Fates. The goddess Clotho spun a person's life thread, creating their life; the goddess Lachesis measured the person's life thread, determining their life span; and the goddess Atropos handled the cutting of a person's life thread and therefore their death. You may recognize this concept from the 1997 Disney film *Hercules*. In that version, the Fates are conflated with another trio of women from Greek mythology, the Graeae, three crones who shared one eye and one tooth between them.
- ✦ The Furies, or the Erinyes (their original Greek name), as briefly mentioned earlier, were goddesses of vengeance and retribution. These goddesses were in charge of

punishing humans for their crimes, particularly murder of family members. Their names were Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone, and they were depicted as monstrous, with wings, and snakes for hair or snakes coiled around their limbs.

One of the torturous professors in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Alecto Carrow, was named for one of the Furies. The name of Alecto's brother, Amycus, also came from Greek mythology: Amycus was a man who killed people by imprisoning them in a box.

- ✦ Sirens were monsters that were half women, half birds. They were both monstrous and beautiful, and were best known for their song, which they would use to lure sailors out of their boats and to their deaths. The only way to safely pass by the Sirens was to completely block your ears with wax so not a single note of their song could get through. Odysseus famously wanted to hear the Sirens' song, so he tied himself to the mast of his ship so he could hear it without jumping in the water (the men on his ship used wax, so they were not affected).
- ✦ Satyrs and centaurs were the most famous half-human creatures. Satyrs were top-half human, bottom-half goat, and were typically found causing trouble (both lighthearted and not!). Centaurs, meanwhile, were top-half human, bottom-half horse and, with the exception of Chiron (he trained many of the heroes and was the inspiration for the satyr named Phil in the 1997 animated film *Hercules*!), were horrible creatures.

## PART 2

# THE OLYMPIANS

**T**he ancient Greek pantheon of gods is extensive. There is a god or minor deity for almost everything you can imagine. Dawn and dusk? There are gods for that. Epic poetry? There's a muse for that. Even individual rivers and streams were likely to have a god devoted to them. But the gods who *really* mattered were the Olympians: the original gods, the ones who defeated the Titans and created the world as we know it. Zeus assigned the other Olympians tasks to create the plants, the animals, and even the humans of earth.

The Olympians believed that because they *created* the creatures and people of earth, they also had every right to *mess with* those same people. And so they did—the Olympians caused endless problems for the humans of earth. Sometimes they brought storms and plagues upon them; other times they would fall “in love” with the people of earth. It was never *real* love, though; it was a desire for power and control. The Olympians wanted *a lot* of power.

There were always twelve Olympians, but those twelve varied depending on the time period and the source. They

were made up of the original siblings: Zeus, Poseidon, and Hera, and sometimes Hades, Demeter, and/or Hestia. Demeter isn't always considered an Olympian—sometimes she is one and Hades is not; other times, it's the other way around. Later, as the mythology and stories of the gods evolved, Hestia, too, left her seat at the table of the Olympian gods. From there, children of the original siblings joined the group: Athena, the twins Apollo and Artemis, and Hermes (all children of Zeus); Hephaestus, child of Hera; Ares, child of Zeus and Hera; Aphrodite, sometimes daughter of Zeus, sometimes daughter of Ouranos (you can read all about it in Aphrodite's entry); and Dionysus, the last Olympian to join the fray, replacing Hestia. Dionysus was unique because he was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman.



