

# Section 8 – Greek Mythology

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## Creation Mythology

The earliest known collection of Greek mythology was written by Hesiod, circa 700 BCE. It is called the Theogony, or ‘genealogy of the gods’. In it, Creation begins with Chaos, which is an empty void. In its limitless nothingness, the Earth, Gaia, took form, along with certain other primary beings, all of which are transcendent: Eros, Love; Tartarus, the Abyss; and Erebus, Darkness.

The goddess Gaia, without the aid of a partner, gave birth to the sky, Uranus, who then fertilised her. The similarity between this and the Sumerian myth of Nammu and An is obvious. From this initial union, the Titans were born. There were six males, Coeus, Crius, Cronus, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Oceanus, and six females, Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Rhea, Theia, Themis, and Tethys.

After Cronus’ birth, Gaia and Uranus decided that no more Titans would be born. Instead, Gaia gave birth to the one-eyed Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Ones, or Hetaconchires. Uranus threw all of these into Tartarus, which enraged Gaia. She persuaded Cronus, her youngest and most wily son, to castrate Uranus in revenge, which he did with a sickle she provided.<sup>1</sup> Taking his sister Rhea as consort, he became ruler of the Titans.

Because Cronus had betrayed his father, he feared that his offspring might do the same, so every time Rhea gave birth, he swallowed the baby. After several such cycles, Rhea tricked Cronus by removing the child Zeus from his blanket and putting a stone there instead. Cronus was duped and swallowed the stone. Zeus grew up and drugged his father, causing him to vomit up all Rhea’s other offspring, as well as the stone. With his siblings and the help of the Cyclopes, whom he had already rescued, Zeus challenged his father directly. He won, and Cronus and the Titans were thrown into Tartarus.

Zeus then set himself up as king of the gods. The meme of father-son conflict is then repeated as Zeus, also suspecting his children would attempt to overthrow him, swallows his first wife, Metis. However, she was already pregnant with Athena, who later burst forth from Zeus’ head, in full battle armour and ready for war.

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<sup>1</sup> Notice the symbolism – a sickle, given by the goddess, is used to cut down the god. The sickle is symbolic both of the Goddess and of agriculture.

Both of these accounts are important because they appropriate the female power of creation through birth and give it to a male. Although the act caused his demise, the children Cronus had eaten were reborn through being vomited up. Furthermore, while Rhea was the instigator, the direct provocation for this came from another male, Zeus, who administered the drug, which may be seen as a metaphor for male semen, to his father, causing him to give birth. The same meme is repeated in the way that Zeus ate his first wife yet gave birth to their daughter, from his head.<sup>2</sup>

One of the greatest of her powers, the ability to give birth, is here being stripped away from the Goddess and given to male deities. This strongly suggests a socio-political situation in which a Goddess culture was being overthrown by a patriarchal one.

Zeus set up his palace at the top of Mount Olympus, and the rest of Rhea's children formed his court. Later, he took as consort Hera, who symbolised the year and represented the Goddess' power to control time, and thus all cycles of life and death; she is the Great Goddess herself. By marrying the Goddess, Zeus gained ownership and authority over her: this is a meme with which the reader will by now be familiar.<sup>3</sup>

The Greeks also had a seasonal myth that is reminiscent of the familiar Dumuzi/Tammuz/Osiris stories, but with significant changes. In Greek mythology, dominion over the Underworld and the Earth is in the hands of a male deity, Hades/Pluto. As we have seen, chthonic male deities are the patriarchal usurpers of original Goddess power.<sup>4</sup> The seasonal dying and rising is done by a female goddess, Persephone.

Persephone's mother is Demeter, one of the most ancient deities in the Greek pantheon. She is responsible for the harvest, through the fertility of the Earth. She is also the law-giver, who is seen as representing the organised structure of settled agrarian life, and it is telling that we see a woman in this seminal role, which may hark back to an original matriarchy.

Demeter's name is made up of two parts, the suffix 'meter', which is derived from the Indo-European word for 'mother', and the prefix 'De'. There are divided academic views about this element, some arguing that it comes from the Indo-European 'Da' meaning 'Earth', so Demeter is 'Earth-Mother'. Others suggest it may derive from the Cretan word for barley, making her 'Harvest-Mother' or, less literally,

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<sup>2</sup> Zeus gave birth to several deities, from different parts of his body, including his thigh. This is clearly an attempt to appropriate the power of giving birth to men.

<sup>3</sup> Hera is not one of Rhea's offspring but comes from a different, older tradition. Since the 19th century, she has been identified by scholars, e.g. Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815–1887) as the Great Goddess, and likely the Supreme deity of a pre-existing matriarchal culture. Her subjection to Zeus probably mythologises the overwhelming of this matriarchal culture by a patriarchal one.

<sup>4</sup> 'Chthonic' means 'of or relating to the Underworld'.

'Mother of Life'. From our point of view, however, fascinating though these different interpretations are, they all signify that Demeter and the Great Goddess are identical.

Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and dragged down into the Underworld to be his bride. This is a metaphor for the annual autumn sowing of seed. In the city of Eleusis, this always took place at a full moon, another stamp of the Goddess. The seed of life, Persephone, is put into the soil, the Underworld, a form of death and burial. However, the seed and the Goddess rise when the new year warms, bringing life back to Earth.

In the Eleusian Mysteries, this was celebrated as a cycle of three phases. In the first, Persephone and Pluto went into the Underworld at the sowing time. This was the 'descent'. Then followed 'the searching', the months of winter when Demeter searches for her daughter and nothing grows. There is an echo here of Isis' desperate search for Osiris or Ishtar's for Tammuz. In spring came the 'ascent' when the new crops came forth and, metaphorically, Persephone rose from the Underworld to be reunited with Demeter.

We saw that in the earlier mythologies, the power of death and resurrection of life was in the hands of the Goddess. She regulated this cycle without the consent of a male, and through it controlled time itself. Persephone, who is both the dying back in autumn and the bursting forth of life in spring, is now controlled by a male deity. This is another illustration of how Goddess power was removed and again serves as evidence of a pre-existing matriarchal phase of settled culture, established before the patriarchy.

We have seen again and again how myths reflect the cultures that invent them. Examining a few well-known Greek legends will be sufficient to spot the symbolic messages contained within them.