

## Section 8 – Greek Mythology

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In the West, Greek cultural influence is so pervasive that we often are unaware of it. Most of the foundation of our philosophy comes from Greeks like Plato and Aristotle, and our enlightened view of science from others like Lucretius and Democritus. Our mathematics was first established by those like Pythagoras and Euclid. Many of the words we use are Greek in origin. Greek examples shape our ideas about art and culture. It is not an exaggeration to say that we see the world through Greek-tinted glasses.

Greek culture spread throughout the Middle East during the second half of the first millennium BCE. Initially, this was done by the Greeks themselves, through trade and conquest. Alexander the Great established Greek cities like Tarsus and Alexandria throughout the region, as well as dynasties of Greek rulers such as the Ptolemy Pharaohs in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire which stretched from modern Turkey to India. The Romans, who adopted Greek culture, reinforced its influence in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, and spread it across their empire.

Greek mythology shows clear similarities with the others we have already discussed, from Sumer and its successors and from Egypt. Did the Greeks, or at least the proto-Greeks, directly borrow from the Mesopotamian tradition in the way that Akkadia did from Sumer? Walter Burkert is convinced that some tales were directly borrowed. He points to similarities between the rendition of the Story of Atrahasis in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the part of Homer's *Iliad* where Poseidon, who is a parallel to Enki, claims the right to 'become active' on the plain of Troy, saying:

‘There is hardly another passage in Homer which comes so close to being a translation of an Akkadian epic. In fact it is not so much a translation as a resetting through which the foreign framework still shows.’<sup>1</sup>

The close relationship between Greek and Akkadian mythology is important because both had a great influence on the later cult of Christianity.

Although the European revival of interest in Greek culture is usually reckoned to have begun with the Renaissance, it is only in the last two hundred years that researchers have begun to understand the rich and complex tapestry of interwoven strands that make up its mythology. Much was considered to be completely fictional until Heinrich Schliemann, using Homer's *Iliad*, discovered Mycenaean Troy in 1868 and demonstrated that civilisation in Greece went back deep into the Bronze Age.

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<sup>1</sup> Burkert, W. *The Orientalizing Revolution – Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*. Harvard University Press. 1998.

An agrarian culture had been established in the southern Balkans by around 2800 BCE. It was a continuation of preceding Neolithic culture. Exposure to a more aggressive, herding culture from the northern Balkans brought change, although this cultural shift was slow and not universal; the Mycenaeans, for example, only practised limited animal husbandry. It has been argued, by Joseph Campbell and others that the earlier culture may have been a matriarchal, Goddess culture which was over-run by the more aggressive, patriarchal, warrior people. There are strong indications in the mythology to support this.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Greek mythology is the sheer size of the pantheon. Unlike the relatively simple ones of Sumer and Egypt, in Greece there are hundreds of deities. Many of these are clearly cognate to others in the simpler cultures, where there is only one. For example, the Sumerian Inanna is cognate to a bevy of Greek goddesses including Hera, Aphrodite, Cytherea and many others. Why did this extreme proliferation occur?

Sumer and Egypt are alluvial plains crossed by major rivers that, except in time of flood, were safe and efficient means of communication. While individual cities did develop their own variations on an original mythological theme, there was so much cultural exchange that these were relatively minor.

Greece could hardly be more different. The mainland, the Peloponnesus, is a harsh and impenetrable country of high mountains intersected by narrow valleys with few passes. In winter, the mountains are snowbound, and even these passes are closed while, in summer, were crossed by narrow trails that could only be followed by a single column. There are no major rivers to serve as navigation routes.

Greece is not just the Peloponnesus, however; it is also a great archipelago scattered across the Aegean Sea, which has an invidious reputation for treachery. In winter, storms that last for days can blow up in hours and the sea is full of deadly lee shores and rocks waiting to catch the unwary mariner. Even today, few small boats go out at all between the months of November and March. In summer, flat calms can last for weeks while a pitiless sun burns down from a cloudless sky, and Greek ships often had to rely on oars for propulsion. Even then, sudden storms and violent winds can appear from nowhere. Nonetheless, until recently the only means of communication between the islands was by venturing out onto this dangerous sea.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in this land where contact between populations was so difficult, different versions of culture and myth proliferated.

We have no independent record of the first oral traditions, although the earliest written records reference much older myths. Throughout history, the scribes who recorded myths changed them to suit their political ends, and Greece was no different.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Cuthbertson, referencing a range of epic mythology, shows how myths and epics are written and modified to support political and social agendas. His view is now mainstream. (Cuthbertson, G. *Political Myth and Epic*. Michigan State University Press. 1975)