

## Topic Page: [Mythology](#)

Definition: **Greek mythology** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Collection of stories mainly concerning the adventures of gods and heroes. In the myths, the gods are not wholly admirable figures: they have similar weaknesses to humans and are capable of great vindictiveness, revenge, and favouritism. Greek myths were often explanatory, offering answers to questions of human nature and the universe, clarifying abstract ideas, or explaining religious matters in a more rational manner. From the time of Homer (9th century BC), Greek polytheism formed a coherent system with a pantheon of 12 deities who dwelt on Mount Olympus: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Hephaestus, Ares, Demeter, Hestia, and Hermes. Major religious centres included Delphi and Olympia.

### Summary Article: **Mythology**

From *Chambers Dictionary of the Unexplained*

The word 'mythology' comes from the Greek words *mythos*, a story or legend, and *logos*, a discourse. It is used to describe bodies of traditional stories about gods and superhuman beings, although many also include human heroes. However, it is extremely difficult to give a hard and fast definition; the boundaries between mythology, legend and folklore are blurred, and in many instances the words are used interchangeably – as can be seen in the body of modern folk tales that are known (among other things) as both 'urban legends' and 'urban myths'.

Humankind has always demonstrated a need to create such stories, whether as the basis of religion or simply to try to explain in human terms phenomena or events that seemed mysterious. In pre-literate societies these myths would be communicated orally and passed down from generation to generation, often being elaborated on and expanded as the need for more comprehensive accounts and explanations developed. Perhaps the earliest known examples of myths come from the worship of the Moon and the Sun by early cultures. The Sun and Moon were seen as possessing power, for good or evil, over human lives, while being changeable and largely unpredictable. creation myths explain how life began and how the world and its inhabitants came to be – this is usually attributed to a deliberate act by a supreme being (or beings). Such myths often include an account of the first human beings, the progenitors of a whole race.

Often, what is called mythology by one culture, or a subsequent generation within a culture, should more properly be described as the elements of religious belief that have been superseded, discredited or are just considered not to describe the 'true' faith. This is the case, for example, with Classical mythology, perhaps the most familiar body of such stories within Western societies and passed down through centuries of literature and scholarship.

The ancient Greeks believed in immortal gods that emerged from the primeval chaos to control aspects of their daily lives, characterizing them as human-like beings whose capriciousness went a long way towards explaining seemingly random incidents. These gods included Zeus, the 'father of the gods', Athene, goddess of wisdom, Ares, god of war, Poseidon, god of the sea and of earthquakes, and Aeolus, god of the winds. They inhabited a different world or 'heaven' (Olympus), from which they could look down on human affairs and interfere at will. They had to be honoured or propitiated with sacrifices and other offerings to ensure that they would look favourably on terrestrial endeavours. Their control even continued beyond the mortal lifespan, with Hades, god of the underworld, ruling over the spirits of

the dead.

Below the rank of these Olympian gods was ranged a cast of thousands of lesser, but still superhuman, usually immortal, creatures such as nymphs, oreads and dryads, spirits such as the genius loci (literally, 'spirit of the place'), or monsters such as sirens. The existence of human beings who seemed to be possessed of extraordinary powers, such as strength, wisdom or musical ability was often explained in terms of their being the offspring of an immortal and a mortal. This was the case with great heroes, often known as demigods, such as Heracles (or Hercules as the Romans knew him).

Heroes in myths were often obliged to undertake dangerous quests, such as Jason's epic voyage in search of the Golden Fleece, or to carry out seemingly impossible tasks, such as the Twelve Labours of Hercules. These feats have been interpreted as allegories of the passage from boyhood to manhood, using archetypes who embodied exaggerated levels of recognizable human qualities. The retelling of such traditional tales was thought to demonstrate important lessons in what it is to be an adult, encouraging the virtues of strength and resourcefulness in the young men of a tribe or people.

Often, cities or societies would seek to establish their legitimacy or ancient lineage by attributing their origin to some mythical figure. Examples of this include the story of the founding of Rome by the wolf-suckled twin brothers Romulus and Remus. Similarly, in the mythology of Japan, Japanese emperors were said to have had a common ancestor who was the offspring of the sun goddess Amaterasu.

The 'national myth' by which a nation or state sought to affirm its particular identity or right to independent existence typically featured heroes fighting to win freedom from tyrants or monsters and victoriously founding their own societies. Examples of this are to be found all over the world, not all of them being essentially ancient. A relatively recent national myth is that of the Swiss hero William Tell. Stories are told of his struggle for Swiss freedom from the Austrian oppressors, locating the events in the 14th century. Everyone knows the tale of Tell being forced to shoot an arrow through an apple placed on his son's head, even if they are unsure of the specific circumstances surrounding this feat of skill and courage. However, there is no evidence that William Tell ever existed in real life. His supposed deeds are echoed in myths found in other European countries, and it seems that he was actually a 15th-century product of a need to create a legitimizing mythical hero around whom a glorious tradition of fighting for freedom could be constructed. Such stories may not have any religious content and could, perhaps, be considered to be better categorized as legend.

Many of the gods of the Greek pantheon were taken up by ancient Rome, sometimes differing only by a change of name – Jupiter for Zeus, Neptune for Poseidon, Mars for Ares and so on. Many elements of Greek religion were also believed in by the Romans, such as the eleusinian mysteries or the gift of prophecy attributed to the sibyls and the oracle of delphi.

In Britain the various peoples who invaded the country after the decline of the Romans brought their own brands of mythology. In particular, Norse mythology had many echoes of its Classical counterpart, with a pantheon of gods installed in a kind of heaven (Asgard) under a father-figure (Odin). Heroes who died bravely in battle would be carried off by the Valkyries to the great hall in heaven (Valhalla) where they could continue to feast and brawl to their hearts' content. The Norse peoples, however, did not believe that this arrangement would last forever. The world would come to an end in a great, mutually destructive, conflict between good and evil gods (known as Ragnarok) – a better world would then emerge. In German myth this was called Götterdämmerung ('Twilight of the Gods').

The older Celtic mythology survived in those parts of the British Isles that were not overrun by these invaders. The Gaelic-speaking peoples of Ireland and Scotland shared many myths and tales of heroes such as Finn MacCool (also known in Scotland as Fingal), Cuchulain and the warrior-poet Ossian (or, in Irish myth, Oisín). The strangely regular, almost geometric, basaltic rock formations seen in the Giant's Causeway and Fingal's Cave on the coastlands of the Gaels (now known to be the product of ancient volcanic activity) were explained by them as being the work of such mythical giants.

There was a Celtic heaven, of course, known as Tir nan Óg ('the land of youth'), where the dead remained eternally young. In one tale this was visited by Ossian, who thought he had spent only a short time there but who, on his return to Ireland, was immediately transformed into an aged man (having actually been away for over a hundred years). The fame of Ossian was revived as late as the 18th century when the Scottish poet James Macpherson (1736–96) achieved Europe-wide literary fame with poems based on Celtic mythology, which he claimed he had translated from Ossianic originals.

Welsh myths were collected in the medieval period in a group of tales known as the *Mabinogion* and an English translation was published in the 19th century. These stories of pre-Norman heroes, with their connection to a centuries-old oral tradition, played an important role in the development of the modern Welsh nationalist movement.

Enduring traces of many mythologies remain in modern society. We still talk of an uncertain outcome as being 'in the lap of the gods'. We continue to divide our week into days named after ancient gods: Sunday (from Sun), Monday (from Moon), Tuesday (from Tiw, Norse god of war), Wednesday (from Woden, a form of Odin), Thursday (from Thor, Norse thunder god), Friday (from Freyja, Norse goddess of married love) and Saturday (from Saturn, Roman god of agriculture). Similarly, in an increasingly secular age, many strands of mythology, which are unconnected with mainstream modern religion, continue to exercise a hold on believers.

Some myths go further than simply involving supernatural beings and human heroes; as well as numerous mythical beasts, mythical places also feature in many cultures. These often take the form of lost lands or lost continents. Such stories show extraordinary persistence, the story of Atlantis, for example, having been current since the Classical period. To this day explorers make new claims to have discovered its submerged ruins.

Why does humankind still feel the need for mythology? Perhaps it fulfils a desire for larger-than-life heroes and feats, or helps satisfy a yearning towards the magical or mysterious that forms a fundamental, albeit unconscious, characteristic of the human psyche – or maybe we all just enjoy a good story.

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Munro, M. (2007). Mythology. In U. McGovern (Ed.), *Chambers Dictionary of the unexplained*. London, UK: Chambers Harrap. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/mythology>

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