

MYTH AND RELIGION



Using this digital sourcebook

This interactive PDF explores Myth and Religion in ancient Greece and Rome.

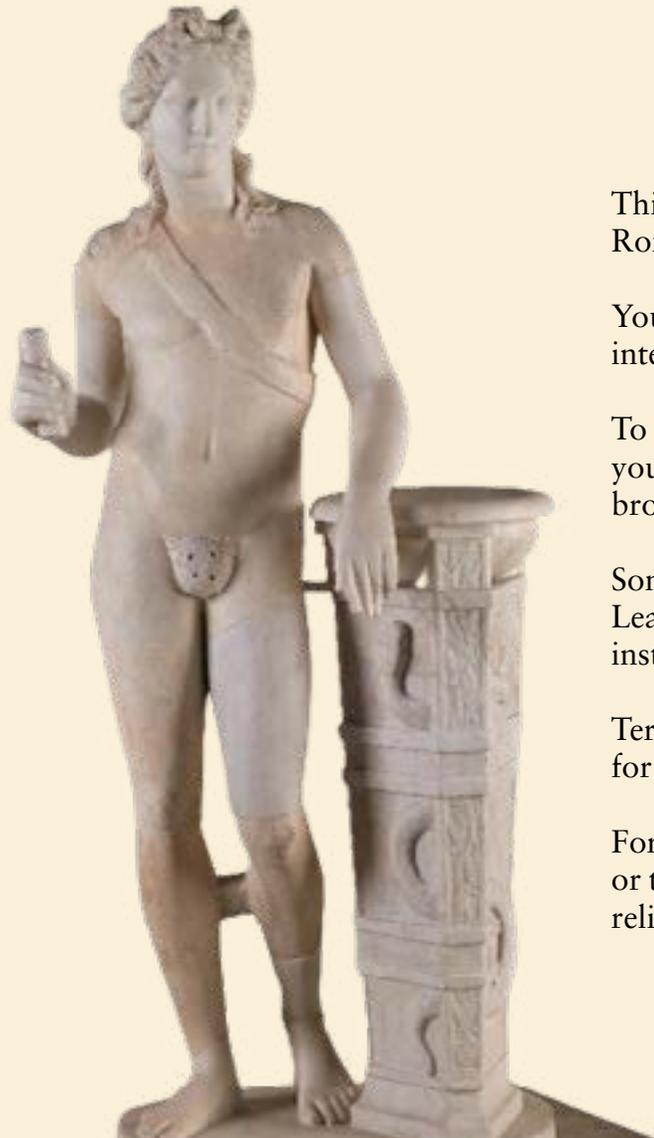
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Some boxes are interactive. If you see a prompt to Click to Reveal or Learn More, you can do this to reveal a new question or fact. Some images instruct you to hover for more information.

Terms in **bold** may be words you are less familiar with – hover over these for a glossary pop-up.

For more information on any of the artefacts included in the sourcebook, or to discover more objects relating to ancient Greek and Roman myth and religion, visit the National Museums Liverpool online collection.



MYTH AND RELIGION

PART 1: THE GODS

The Greeks and Romans worshipped many gods whom they believed governed specific spheres of their life. Poseidon was the god of the sea, for example, while Aphrodite was the goddess of love. The practice of worshipping multiple gods is called **polytheism**.

For the most part, in stories about the gods and in artistic representations of them, the Greeks and Romans depicted the gods in human form – their gods were **anthropomorphic**.

The gods also often acted like humans, and were subject to the same moral failings as those who worshipped them. In general, Graeco-Roman religion was transactional. It was believed that the gods would look out for humanity in exchange for their worship, and the gods could only be kept happy through regular sacrifices.

Artists developed specific ways of depicting the gods based around a set of common features, which can be used to identify them in statues and on pots.

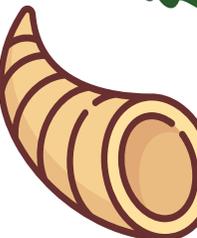
ACTIVITY

Look at the table on the next page to learn about iconography surrounding the gods





GREEK GOD	ROMAN EQUIVALENT	RESPONSIBILITIES	IDENTIFYING ICONOGRAPHY
Zeus	Jupiter	King of the gods, in charge of the sky, justice, fate	Bearded and holding a lightning bolt, (Roman) accompanied by an eagle
Hera	Juno	Queen of the gods, in charge of family, marriage and childbirth	Wearing a crown, accompanied by a peacock
Demeter	Ceres	The harvest	Wearing a crown, holding crops
Poseidon	Neptune	The sea, horse-riding, nobility	Holding a trident
Hephaistos	Vulcan	Blacksmithing and crafting	Holding forging tools, with a limp
Apollo	Apollo	Music, culture, prophecies, medicine and the sun	Youthful, holding a bow or a lyre
Artemis	Diana	Hunting, wild animals, childbirth and the moon	Holding a bow, with wild animals
Athena	Minerva	War, crafting, wisdom	Holding an owl, wearing armour, especially a tasselled breastplate or shield called the aegis
Aphrodite	Venus	Love	Naked
Ares	Mars	War (The Roman Mars was also a farming god)	Wearing armour
Dionysus	Bacchus	Theatre, wine	Ivy wreath, wine cup, accompanied by mythical creatures called satyrs and maenads, holding a pine-cone-topped staff called a thyrsus
Hermes	Mercury	Messenger god, in charge of trade and travel	Cap, winged sandals and caduceus (staff formed from two entwined snakes)
Hestia	Vesta	Hearth and home	Rarely depicted, shown with veiled head
Hades	Pluto	The underworld	Holding a cornucopia ('horn of plenty')



BLACK-FIGURE HYDRIA, C. 520 BCE – 510 BCE



Museum number: 1977.114.13

The name hydria comes from the Greek word for water – this is a jug made for carrying and pouring water. The main scene is a procession of gods from left to right. All the gods have lively expressions as if they are celebrating a festival. On the shoulder of the hydria there is a scene of three riders holding double spears.



ACTIVITY

Can you identify the gods depicted on this vase?



ROMAN STATUE OF ZEUS, 1 CE – 100 CE

This is an over-life-sized statue of the king of gods inspired by Greek classical sculpture. The eagle, which has been restored, is a symbol of Zeus' regal authority. The right arm would have once held a spear or a sceptre; the left, raised arm would have held Zeus' lightning rod.



As king of the gods, Zeus/Jupiter was the most important god in the Graeco-Roman pantheon. He overthrew his father Chronos to introduce the reign of the **Olympian gods** and was often depicted in romantic tangles with (both male and female) lovers, much to the frustration of his wife Hera/Juno. He was the father of several important heroes including Heracles/Hercules. Hera/Juno, ironically, was the goddess of marriage.

The temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus sat on the Capitoline Hill in the heart of Rome. For the Greeks, one of Zeus' most important shrines was at Olympia, where every four years the Olympics were held in his honour. The ancient Olympic festival was about much more than just sport – it was a sacred time, one of the few **panhellenic** or Greece-wide religious occasions during which all war was put on hold and the various Greek city-states would gather together for communal celebrations.



[Click image](#)

'Hang a golden chain from heaven and all you gods and goddesses grab hold of it; you would not drag highest Zeus the counsellor from heaven to earth, however much you tried. But if I wanted to drag you up here, I could drag the land, the sea, and you at the same time, then tie the chain around the peak of Mount Olympus and leave you all hanging there. So much greater am I than gods and men.'

Zeus addressing a council of the gods:
Homer, *Iliad* 8.19-27

Museum number: 59.148.2

ROMAN STATUE OF APOLLO AS A LYRE PLAYER, C. 100 CE – 200 CE



Museum number: 59.148.14

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infomation

On Apollo's chest is a strap to which his **cithara** (lyre) would have been attached. Apollo was the god of music. He is leaning against a tripod with a snake, symbols of his ability to predict the future. Apollo is usually depicted as a handsome young man. Here, he wears his hair in a feminine style to emphasise his youthful beauty. Adolescence is often represented in ancient art by ambiguity of gender expression.

Hover for more
infomation

As the god of culture and the arts, the worship of Apollo was hugely popular throughout Greece and Rome. The first Roman emperor Augustus particularly associated himself with Apollo, to indicate to the Roman people that he intended to renew Roman culture after years of civil war. Apollo was also associated with the sun; appropriately, his twin sister Artemis/Diana was connected with the moon.

Apollo had an important shrine at Delphi in Greece, where his priestess would issue oracles, answering questions put to her with a riddling message delivered in the form of a poem. The Greek word for prophet is **mantis** (plural: manteis). Apollo and Zeus were the main gods responsible for delivering prophecies to mortals through manteis. The Greeks and Romans also believed that the future could be told by reading the entrails of sacrificed animals or tracking the flights of birds. The Roman word for an entrail-reader is **haruspex**, and haruspices were incredibly important in Roman society.



THINKING POINTS:

ROMAN STATUE OF ATHENA, C. 1 CE – 100 CE

Athena/Minerva was the goddess of war, but also of crafting and wisdom. In her Greek form, she was the patron of the city of Athens, undoubtedly the most important city in Greece. Here, she was worshipped on the Acropolis, or ‘high city’ – a jutting piece of rock which still dominates Athens’ skyline today. Her main temple on the Acropolis was called the Parthenon, which is the Greek word for ‘maiden’ – a reminder that Athena never married or took a lover. This statue, while a later Roman copy, is based on the cult statue of her which stood in the **Parthenon**.

Every year, the Athenians celebrated the **Panathenaea** in her honour; every four years, they held a special extended version called the Great Panathenaea. The festival was believed to have been founded by the legendary hero Theseus himself, and involved musical competitions, athletic events, public sacrifices and the Panathenaic procession.

This procession would involve carrying two dresses or **peploi** up to statues of Athena on the Acropolis, where they would be dedicated to cult statues of the goddess (including the Athena Parthenos statue).

According to myth, Athena and Poseidon both competed for the honour of giving Athens its name. To persuade the people that the honour should be his, Poseidon struck the ground with his trident and a fountain of water formed. Unfortunately, it was undrinkable salt-water – a fitting gift from the god of the sea, but completely useless. Athena meanwhile caused the first olive tree to grow on the Acropolis. This was an incredibly useful gift, as the olive was an important food source in the ancient Mediterranean. An olive tree still grows on the Acropolis today.

In some versions of the myth, all the women of Athens voted for the goddess Athena to be their patron while all the men voted for the male Poseidon – but as there was one more woman than men, Athena won the contest by a single vote!



CAST YOUR VOTE!

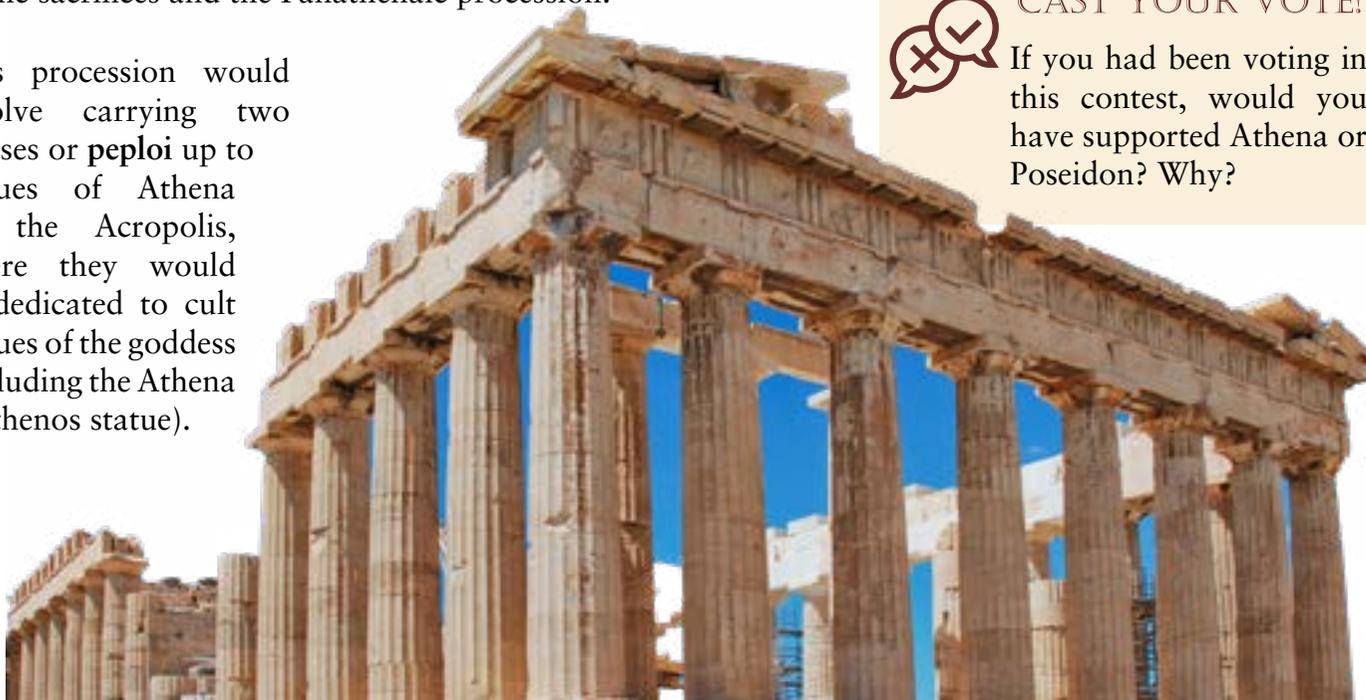
If you had been voting in this contest, would you have supported Athena or Poseidon? Why?



Museum number: 59.148.8

The way Athena stands and the thick drapery of her dress derive from the famous but now lost gold and ivory statue of Athena Parthenos, or Athena the Maiden, created by the famous Greek sculptor Pheidias in the fifth century BCE, for Athena’s temple in Athens.

The goddess is young and has an oval face, large eyes and a serious but serene expression. She wears a helmet and a long, belted dress or peplos. With her left hand, Athena probably once held a spear or a shield while her raised right arm probably held the statue of the winged goddess Nike (Victory). The owl she currently holds is an eighteenth-century restoration to allude to the wisdom of the goddess.



PART 2: DEATH AND BURIAL

Like all cultures, Greeks and Romans placed great significance on death, and practised specific rituals surrounding burial in order to ensure their loved ones passed on safely. They practised both burial and cremation. Confusingly, the Greeks called the underworld and the god of the dead by the same name – Hades.

In literary sources, Hades was usually depicted as a bleak, colourless place where the shades of the deceased would spend eternity in perpetual limbo – very different from the Judaeo-Christian idea of heaven. But it was worse to be barred from entering Hades at all. Only those who received proper burial rites could cross into Hades.

The Greeks buried their dead outside of the city to avoid pollution, or **miasma**, affecting the living. The graves of many citizens, particularly those who were more well-off, were marked with stelai, engraved stone markers like the one shown here. A **stela** would often depict the dead person, perhaps surrounded by their family members, and a short inscription. Because of this, grave stelai are useful sources of information for later historians interested in the everyday lives of Greeks.

Family members would be expected to maintain their loved one's grave and regularly bring their departed shade offerings of wine, oil or other foodstuffs. Special Greek pots like the white-ground lekythos on the next page were used to make offerings – the colour white was associated with death in the ancient world.

In ancient Athens, burial rites were used as an ostentatious symbol of a family's wealth until the early Fifth Century BCE – the bigger the stela, the louder the lament, the richer the family. The Athenian politician Solon passed democratising laws regulating funerary practices, and limiting the size of grave-markers.



Museum number: 7.7.75.1

GREEK GRAVE STELE FROM EPHESUS, C. 300 BCE – 1 BCE

The top of the stela has the shape of temple with a small cornice. There is a frame with the inscription underneath. The relief scene shows a bearded man seated in a throne and another one standing in front of him. The two men join their hands in greeting, a gesture typical in funerary scenes. Behind the young man who is standing there is a young woman in a pose of mourning. Her relationship to the men is revealed in the inscription: 'Herodotos Skyllionos. His nurse set this up.' Nurses were professional carers of children and young adults but we do not know why the nurse of an older man was of such a young age in the relief. Ironically, this stela had an afterlife all of its own. It was used as an anchor for a ship, which explains the hole drilled into its base.

STAGES OF A GREEK FUNERAL

Prothesis: The laying out of the body (similar to a wake) for 2 days

Lament: The vocal expression of grief by female relatives

Ekphora: The funerary procession to the burial ground, dawn of the third day

Burial or Cremation on a funeral pyre

Blood sacrifice to Hades, god of the dead

Mourning period for 30 day

ATHENIAN LEKYTHOS, 470 – 440 BCE

A **lekythos** was a flask used for either oil or perfume. Its long, thin neck and wide rim meant that liquid would pour out of it slowly. Lekythoi were associated with women's beauty products and funerary rituals. This lekythos is white-ground, meaning that a special kind of clay has been applied to give its surface a distinctive white covering. White symbolised death in Greek art. On the vase, two worshippers approach a grave marker with wreaths. From the left, a young man approaches the tomb; he holds two spears in his left hand, which are perhaps offerings to the dead. To the right, a woman stands facing the tomb. There are traces of red colour in her dress. The gesture of her right hand suggests she has just placed a wreath.



Museum number: 49.50.5

STAGES OF A ROMAN FUNERAL

The body would be laid out at home (similar to a wake) for 8 days during which female relatives would lament

The funerary procession to the burial ground would take place on the eighth day; family members would wear wax funerary masks representing dead ancestors

The burial or cremation would take place

Relatives would hold a banquet in honour of the deceased, at home or sometimes near the tomb

In ancient Rome, middle-class and wealthy Romans would have their remains laid to rest in highly ornate stone ash chests (if they had been cremated) or sarcophagi (in the case of burial). Poorer Romans ensured they would receive due rites by joining **funeral clubs**, a kind of social insurance scheme whereby they would pay a monthly fee in return for funeral expenses upon death.

As you can see from the example on the next page, ash chests were decorated lavishly and were designed to stand out. Romans buried their dead along roadsides where they could be seen by passers-by, and where family members could visit to bring offerings. The Romans believed that deceased relatives were a source of protection, and worshipped their ancestors as gods called **Manes**.

ROMAN ASH CHEST, 70 CE – 75 CE



Museum number: 59.148.325

This ash chest was dedicated to Flavius Eutyches by his mother, Flavia Peloris, as identified in the inscription. He died aged only 5. The name Eutyches was a Greek name and was often given to slaves who retained it after they were freed. Eutyches was born free, though as he is described as the son of 'Spurius', he may have been an illegitimate child.



ACTIVITY:

Make a list of the decorative features on this ash chest. Do you think it would stand out on a roadside?



ACTIVITY:

Watch this video on *Roman Burial Customs* by **Dr Chrissy Partheni**

<https://youtu.be/V0lGFTtaC08>



This resource was created by the Advocating Classics Education (ACE) project and the Liverpool World Museum as part of the AHRC funded project (AH/V006592/1) 'Improving access to Classical Studies in museums and schools' on which Dr Arlene Holmes-Henderson (King's College London) was Principal Investigator.

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