

THE
GODS
OF
OLYMPUS

A History

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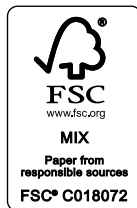
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PART I

BIRTH: ARCHAIC GREECE

HOW THE GODS FIRST APPEARED, how they became specific characters, colonised Olympus and formed into a family: answers to these questions can be sought as far back as the first migrations to the Greek peninsula, the earliest traces of cult, and the great civilisations of the Bronze Age. And, after that, they can be found in archaic Greece, where something happened between the eighth and the sixth centuries BC. It was then that the first temples were built, the first cult statues were housed in them, and Homer and Hesiod defined for the Greeks who the main gods were, how they were born, and how they behaved on Olympus.

Homer and Hesiod were considered great authorities on the gods — but they were never above question. In fact, as soon as their poems started circulating in the Greek world, people expressed doubts about their theological claims. Even with the gift of immortality, the gods of epic seemed too human, and too specifically Greek, to command respect as universal powers. The cult statues housed in temples were vulnerable to similar objections. Radical early critics questioned the anthropomorphic visions of poets and artists, and thereby inaugurated a long tradition of debate — a debate that concerned not just the nature of the gods, but the interpretation of poetry and art.

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AT HOME IN GREECE

TALL, BROAD AND COVERED IN SNOW for much of the year, Mount Olympus stands alone, fully visible from every side. It dominates the landscape for miles around; its dazzling peaks seem particularly incongruous when viewed from the hot low plains around. From the sea, the mountain sometimes looks like a cloud (see plate 1).

In antiquity, Mount Olympus lay very much off the beaten track. People had little reason to go near it, and no incentive at all to climb it, but they could see it – and in turn they felt observed. The Greeks thought that the gods lived among the mountain's peaks and watched what happened down below. Poets elaborated on this notion. Homer described Mount Olympus precisely, mentioning its 'many summits', 'abundant snow', and 'steepness', and giving an indication of just where it was. At the same time, he suggested that this mythical residence of the gods was not quite what it seemed: 'Olympus is never shaken by winds, hit by rain, or covered in snow; cloudless ether spreads around it, and a bright aura encircles it'.¹ So Olympus was both a particular landmark and a place of the mind. Greek communities could see the mountain, agree about its sacredness, and feel united by a shared sense of landscape; but they were also reminded that the gods did not live in our world and were never subjected to the indignities of bad weather.

It is unclear when the mountain first became associated with the gods. In the poems of Homer, the most important deities are explicitly called 'the Olympians', but he was not necessarily the first to place

them on the sacred mountain. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in the form in which we have them, date to the archaic period (roughly the eighth to the sixth century BC), and the Greek peninsula was settled long before that time. We can reconstruct, on linguistic grounds, that the Greeks were descended from speakers of a language also related to Sanskrit and Latin as well as to Germanic, Slavic and other linguistic groups, and which is conventionally called 'Indo-European'. Migrating from central Asia, Indo-European speakers gradually settled in Europe, and introduced broadly shared notions of the gods. So, for example, the Greek Zeus is related to the Sanskrit Dyáus Pitār: they are both versions of the same supreme god, ruler of the sky. It is unsurprising that in Greece this Indo-European god settled on Mount Olympus, the tallest landmark in the area. It is more difficult to establish just when this happened. Answering that question requires dating the Indo-European migrations and investigating the roots of Homeric epic – both of which are quite controversial subjects.

Impressive civilisations were already flourishing in Greece around 2000 BC, more than a thousand years before Homer's time: monumental remains at Mycenae, Tiryns and Pylos testify to this. In the twelfth century BC, however, these civilisations suddenly collapsed. A long period of decline followed, generally known as the 'Dark Ages'. It was only in the eighth century BC that people living in Greece began to flourish again: the next two centuries were characterised by a sharp increase in the population, the rise of the city-state (*polis*), the construction of the first temples and cult statues of the gods, an upsurge in travel and trade, the foundation of new colonies, the reintroduction of writing (a technology that had been lost during the Dark Ages), and the phenomenal spread of epic poetry. Scholars used to think that the Dark Ages corresponded with the arrival of Indo-European tribes from Asia. The impressive archaeological remains at Mycenae and elsewhere were thought to predate that migration, and therefore have nothing to do with Zeus and the rest of the Indo-European pantheon. The many written tablets found at the Mycenaean sites were assumed to record a language unrelated to Greek, perhaps an early form of Etruscan. This theory crumbled quite spectacularly in the 1950s, when Michael Ventris

and John Chadwick (who had worked as a code-breaker during the Second World War) managed to decipher Linear B, the script of the Mycenaean tablets. To widespread amazement, they proved that the tablets actually recorded an early form of Greek.² This made it clear that Indo-European people had been living in Greece long before the Dark Ages, and suggested that they worshipped essentially the same gods as later Greek communities, even though they did not have temples housing cult statues. Archaeologists had obviously misdated the Indo-European migration on the basis of the material record. Now classicists hoped to find some snippets of Greek poetry among the Linear B tablets, perhaps early versions of Homeric epic describing the Olympian pantheon. In fact, they discovered nothing of the kind: on imperishable material, Linear B was used exclusively for matter-of-fact lists and inventories. Mount Olympus never featured, nor did any stories about the gods. Still, even the dry documents of Mycenaean bureaucracy did reveal some surprising facts, by recording sacrifices and other offerings to specific gods, for example.

Tablets from Pylos and Crete indicate, for instance, that Dionysos was already known in the second millennium BC. Homer barely mentioned him, and later Greek texts presented him as a newcomer to Greece, a recent import from the decadent East – but this was evidently not so. We now know that Dionysos was always considered a ‘new’ and subversive god in need of recognition, no matter how long he had actually been worshipped in Greece.³ His youth and exoticism are a matter of personality, in short, rather than age. Homer must have kept Dionysos out of Olympus not because he barely knew this god, as was once supposed, but because he was all too aware of his characteristics: Dionysos would have spoilt the party on Olympus with his drunken excesses. Linear B tablets produced other surprises, too: the god Apollo, for example, was apparently unknown to the Mycenaeans. This ‘most Greek of the gods’, as a famous Hellenist called him, this paragon of beauty and measure, was in fact a rather late addition to the Greek pantheon, had no obvious Indo-European credentials, and was at least partly Semitic in influence.⁴ The Canaanite god Resheph was identified with Apollo early on in the history of this god.⁵

There were, then, some differences between Mycenaean portrayals of the gods and their later appearance in archaic Greece – but there were also some definite connections, and some suggestive echoes of old Mycenaean rituals in Homeric poetry. In the *Odyssey*, for instance, Poseidon receives special worship at Pylos in the Peloponnese, and that is precisely where most of the Linear B tablets concerning his cult have been found. Likewise, Hera is called ‘ox-eyed’ in Homer, and Linear B tablets reveal that she had received rich cattle sacrifices from Mycenaean worshippers, richer even than those offered to Zeus. Perhaps early Greek-speakers had looked right into the eyes of their sacrificial victims and seen in them a shadow of the goddess. Their impression was then passed on through the formulations of ritual and poetic language: *ox-eyed Hera* became a standard Homeric phrase. Beyond such poetic links, there was also an entirely solid aspect of continuity between the civilisations of the Bronze Age and archaic Greece: buildings. In the archaic period, people could still see the remnants of impressive fortifications at Mycenae, Pylos and – most importantly – Troy, on the coast of Turkey, a city that had once been a Hittite protectorate. The Greeks wove stories around those ruins, imagining the great heroes who had once lived and died there. In the case of particularly impressive remains, such as the walls of Troy, it was even suggested that the gods themselves had built them.

One of the most remarkable features of archaic Greek poetry is how insistently, and precisely, it places its tales of gods and heroes in the Aegean landscape. It is as if, in the sudden explosion of travel and trade that characterised the archaic period, people wanted to exchange stories not only about their gods, but also about landmarks, ruins and sailing routes. Homer described the whole eastern Aegean, mentioning hundreds of place names, in a massive Catalogue of Ships in the second book of the *Iliad*. Hesiod, in his *Theogony*, revealed how the gods were born, and simultaneously placed them on a map. Zeus grew up in Crete, he said; Aphrodite came out of the waves near Cyprus. As well as listening to poems about divine travel, the Greeks were increasingly prepared to travel themselves in order to worship the gods. According to our ancient sources, the first Olympics took place in 776 BC: athletes, dancers, poets and musicians

from many different Greek city-states gathered to compete against one another at the small village of Olympia, probably so named after the residence of Zeus. The games were put on precisely as a spectacle for Zeus, but they also attracted enthusiastic human crowds. At roughly the same time, the Delphic oracle opened for business, delivering Apollo's prophecies to all who made the journey to it. Soon, Delphi also started to host competitions in athletics and poetry, in order to make sure that Apollo did not miss out on the celebrations his father enjoyed elsewhere. Criss-crossing the Aegean in poetry and sailing ships alike, the Greeks took possession of the landscape, and placed their gods in it.

The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, a beautiful archaic poem telling the story of Leto's search for a place to give birth, illustrates the process. After nine days of travel and labour, Leto finally delivers Artemis and Apollo on the barren island of Delos, holding on to a palm tree. A sanctuary is built near the sacred palm, and worshippers begin to visit the island, bringing their offerings and gifts. Rewarded for its kindness to the pregnant goddess, we are told that Delos becomes rich, despite its rocky soil. And, indeed, in antiquity Delos attracted pilgrims and worshippers from far and wide. The island sets a pattern for the cult of Apollo: when the god grows up, the *Hymn* continues, he travels to another daunting place, 'a cliff hanging below Mount Parnassos, and a rugged glade below'. There, at Delphi, Apollo defeats a snake-like monster called Python, and decides to build a second temple for himself, where he will deliver oracles to enquiring mortals.

The poem tells us that Apollo needs priests for his inhospitable sanctuary at Delphi and, while considering the problem, 'becomes aware of a swift ship on the wine-dark sea', sailing hundreds of miles away between Knossos and Pylos. Deciding to turn the Cretan crew into his priests, he transforms himself into a dolphin and leaps into the ship, rocking it fearfully as the Cretan sailors struggle in vain to catch him and throw him overboard. Terrified, they sail past Pylos, their destination, and farther north past Elis, until the wind bends their course eastward, into the gulf of Corinth, and they are finally stranded at Krisa, near modern Itea. There Apollo suddenly reveals



3. The journeys of Leto and Apollo.

himself in a shower of sparks: he tells the Cretan sailors that they must abandon their trade, climb the mountain looming above the coast, and tend to his newly founded sanctuary. They will make a good living, he adds, despite their unlikely location, because pilgrims will provide a constant supply of gifts.

It seems that the actual priests who worked at the sanctuary in Delphi really did claim Cretan descent, and explained their life hundreds of miles from their ancestral home by telling the story of Apollo the dolphin. Strange as their tale may seem, it captured the spirit of the age. Everybody was on the move in the archaic period: trade flourished, new cities were founded, and communal worship became part of a quickly expanding economy. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* mentions scores of place names when describing the journeys of the Cretan sailors, Apollo, and his mother Leto, thus offering a virtual tour of the ancient Greek world (see map on p. 18). Modern readers struggle to locate all the ancient toponyms, and can easily get bored; but archaic Greek audiences must have been thrilled, for they recognised their own home towns and landscapes, and realised that they all played a role in the biography of the god. It was through such stories that Greek-speakers began to realise that they belonged together and inhabited the same world. In the fifth century BC, Herodotus claimed that Greekness was a matter of ‘common blood and language, shared temples of the gods, rituals, and common habits’.⁶ Panhellenic centres of cult like Delphi were of cardinal importance precisely because they helped to establish the ‘common habits’ of the Greeks.

For modern tourists, visiting Delphi remains one of the most effective ways of experiencing that ancient sense of Greekness, that early connection between place, poetry and religion. It is best to approach the sanctuary from the sea – as Apollo and his priests did, according to the *Hymn*, and as ancient worshippers arrived in real life. From the coast near Itea, the ancient sanctuary looks like a tiny white speck of marble against the dark cliffs of Mount Parnassos. The ascent is sharp and difficult, but those who follow the country road as it snakes up the mountain are amply rewarded. Up in Delphi, the view is spectacular, and the air bracing, crystal-clear; just to be there

is a spiritual experience, even today. To the south there are open views of blue mountains, and a wide open valley filled with a sea of silvery olive trees. Beyond them, the actual sea glitters, bright blue, in the distance. When one turns north, the outlook changes sharply: right up close a sheer rock face looms over visitors, and beyond it rise the twin peaks of Mount Parnassos. The cliffs and crags seem impenetrable, but right there is where the *Hierā Hodos* starts, the ancient Sacred Way that leads through the sanctuary of Apollo up to the temple where his oracles were delivered.

The sanctuary complex is built on narrow terraces cut into the steep mountainside, exploiting the small space to the full. Inside the sanctuary, the Sacred Way climbs upwards, making two hair-pin bends. The remains of elaborate buildings crowd it on both sides, so that visitors are constantly confronted with unexpected sights. This must have been even more true in ancient times, when intact structures would have impeded an overview of the sanctuary. Clustered around the entrance, there were once many life-size statues raised on pedestals, commemorating assorted wars between Greek city-states – Tegea’s victory over Sparta, for example, and Sparta’s victory over Athens. A few statues also celebrated peaceful activities: the people of Corfu, for instance, set up a large bronze bull in thanksgiving for an extraordinary catch of tuna. After the statues, a little higher up, the Sacred Way was flanked by small, room-size shrines, or ‘treasuries’, built by individual city-states in order to house their votive offerings to Apollo. There were once thirty or more treasuries and, judging from those best preserved, they were exquisite. The Athenians built theirs on one of the best plots, a small triangular terrace just after the first sharp turn: it stood at an angle from the road, showing off both side and front to everyone as they went up, and presenting a dramatic sight to those descending as well. The treasury was built entirely of Parian marble and had a beautiful frieze running all around it. The Athenians were presumably trying to outdo the intricate treasury built just down the road by the people of Siphnos, but it is not clear that they succeeded: the Siphnian shrine, with its two beautiful sculpted women holding up the roof as if they were columns, is hard to surpass. The treasuries

exemplified the competitive stance of ancient Greek city-states, but also revealed a sense of common purpose, showing that all cities and communities paid homage to Apollo. It made sense for the Greek city-states to lavish on their treasuries at Delphi the best craftsmanship and materials they could afford, since the buildings advertised their piety, wealth and achievements to the many pilgrims and diplomats who travelled to Apollo's oracle from all over the Greek world – and indeed from even farther afield.⁷ As visitors climbed up the Sacred Way towards the temple of Apollo, they essentially walked past a small-scale version of Greece, city-state by city-state. The experience of modern tourists is, in that respect at least, not so different: a visit to Delphi, with its treasuries huddled together in one place, still offers a privileged overview of the ancient Greek world.

After the second sharp bend, the Sacred Way leads to the main temple, on the facade of which was carved a scene of Apollo's first arrival at Delphi. The image recalled the story told in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, and mirrored the pilgrims' own travel to the sanctuary: Apollo's journey was the same as those of his priests and worshippers. It was at the temple, at this point of convergence and arrival, that momentous conversations took place: Apollo, through the utterings of the Pythia, his venerable priestess, answered questions put to him by his visitors. Pilgrims made enquiries about the things that most mattered to them, from issues of paternity and infertility (which seem to have been especially frequent) to the outcome of wars and the possibility of settling new lands. The Pythia offered authoritative but rather obscure answers, and several other priests were then at hand to interpret her utterings for a fee. Pilgrims often continued to ponder Apollo's responses, and consult further experts, back home. After that long process of consultation and interpretation, Apollo's revelations usually crystallised into lines of hexameter poetry, and were always found to be true – even if the correct interpretation sometimes emerged only after the relevant events had come to pass.

The proceedings at Delphi might seem entirely baffling from a modern perspective: it is hard to see why the Greeks took such pains