

KEY ASPECTS OF FIFTH-CENTURY GREEK LIFE

GREEK BELIEFS

Myth and Religion

Unlike the religions of southwest Asia, which blended the human with the animal, Greek religion was anthropomorphic. The Greek gods were male and female, with distinct personalities and domains. Myths explained their origins, natures, and relationship to humankind. The art of Archaic and Classical Greece illustrates many mythological episodes, employing symbolic attributes to identify the deities.

There were twelve principal deities. Foremost was Zeus, the sky god and father of the gods, to whom the ox and oak tree were sacred; his two brothers, Hades and Poseidon, reigned over the Underworld and the sea, respectively. “Cow-eyed” Hera, Zeus’ sister and wife, was queen of the gods; she is frequently depicted wearing a tall crown, or polos. Wise Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, who typically appears in full armor with helmet, spear, and the snaky head of Medusa on her aegis (a protective goatskin bib), was also the patroness of weaving and carpentry. The owl and the olive tree were sacred to her. Youthful Apollo, who is often represented with the harp-like kithara or a bow, was the god of music and prophecy; he had many cult sites. His main sanctuary at Delphi, where Greeks came to ask questions of the oracle, was considered to be the center of the universe. Apollo’s twin sister Artemis, patroness of hunting, often carried a bow and quiver. Hermes, with his winged sandals and elaborate herald’s staff, the *kerykeion* (in Latin, *caduceus*), was the messenger of the gods. Other important deities were Aphrodite, the goddess of love; Dionysos, the god of wine and the theater; Ares, the god of war; and the lame Hephaistos, the god of metalworking. Mount Olympos, the highest mountain in mainland Greece, was believed to be the home of the gods.

The Greeks worshipped in sanctuaries located, according to the nature of the particular deity, either within the city or in the countryside. Sanctuaries were well-defined sacred spaces set apart usually by a temenos, or enclosure wall. Inside this precinct, they typically contained an altar in front of a temple,

the house of the god, with a cult image inside. All ceremonies and sacrifices took place outside of the temple. Ancient Greek religious practice, essentially conservative in nature, was based on time-honored observances, many rooted in the Bronze Age (3000–1050 B.C.) or even earlier. Although the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, believed to have been composed around the eighth century B.C., were powerful influences on Greek thought, the ancient Greeks had no single guiding work of scripture like the Jewish Torah, the Christian Bible, or the Muslim Qur'an. Nor did they have a strict priestly caste. The relationship between human beings and deities was based on the concept of exchange: gods and goddesses were expected to answer prayers and humans were expected to give gifts. Votive offerings, which have been excavated from sanctuaries by the thousands, were a physical expression of thanks on the part of individual worshippers.

The central ritual act in ancient Greece was animal sacrifice, especially of oxen, goats, and sheep. Sacrifices took place within the sanctuary, usually at the altar in front of the temple, with the assembled participants consuming the entrails and meat of the victim. Liquid offerings, or libations, were also commonly made. Religious festivals filled the year. The four most famous festivals, each with its own procession, athletic competitions, and sacrifices, were held every four years at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia. These Panhellenic Festivals were attended by people from all over the Greek-speaking world, even from overseas, but many other festivals were celebrated locally. There were also mystery cults, such as the one at Eleusis, near Athens, in which only initiates could participate.

Ideas about Death and the Afterlife

A conception of the afterlife and ceremonies associated with burial were already well established by the sixth century B.C. In the *Odyssey*, Homer described the Underworld, deep beneath the earth, where Hades, brother of Zeus and Poseidon, and his wife Persephone reigned over countless drifting crowds of shadowy figures—the “shades” of all those who had died. It was not a happy place; indeed, the ghost of the great hero Achilles told Odysseus (whom the Romans called Ulysses) that he would rather be a poor serf on earth than the lord of all the dead in the Underworld (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 11).

At the moment of death, the psyche, or animate spirit, left the body as a little breath or a puff of wind; the deceased was then prepared for burial according to time-honored rituals. After being washed and anointed with oil, the body was dressed and placed on a high bed within the house. The *prothesis*, a vigil over the dead, followed as relatives and friends came to mourn. The procession to the cemetery—the *ekphora*—usually took place just before dawn. Very few objects were actually placed in the grave, but monumental earth mounds, rectangular built tombs, elaborate marble stelai (inscribed marble slabs), and statues were often erected to mark the grave and to ensure that the deceased would not be forgotten. Immortality lay in the continued remembrance of the dead by the living.

Philosophy and Science

Greek philosophy is characterized by an emphasis on the question rather than the answer. By the end of the fifth century B.C., Greek thinkers had posed most of the questions that have preoccupied philosophers and scientists ever since, and had arrived at theories to answer them based on observation and reason. Beginning with Thales of Miletos in Asia Minor, who, in the early sixth century B.C., said “All things are made of water,” schools of thought gradually transformed and refined the ideas of what constituted matter. Thales’ ideas persisted until the second half of the fifth century B.C., when Leukippos, another philosopher from Miletos, arrived at his theory of atomic particles. Pythagoras of Samos, in the sixth century B.C., made a fundamental contribution with his theory that numerical relationships underlie everything in the world—a dominant feature in the modern conception of science. The Greek preoccupation with mathematics also gave rise to the theory of perfect eternal ideas, or universals, which can be opposed to the fluctuating world of the senses—a dichotomy that has preoccupied philosophy and religion ever since.

Sokrates, a philosopher well known to all, was an Athenian who lived in the fifth century B.C. Although he left no written work, his ideas are preserved in the works of Plato, his most famous pupil. Sokrates sought to clarify ethical problems by question and answer, the so-called dialogue form of inquiry. He was concerned with the definition of terms such as *moderation*, *friendship*,

and *courage*. For him, the most important activity was the search for knowledge, which he equated with the Good and the Beautiful. This link is a hallmark of Greek thought.

MUSIC

Our knowledge of Greek music comes from several sources, as a number of musical scores and the remains of various instruments survive. Abundant ancient literary references, mostly of a nontechnical nature, shed light on the practice of music, its social functions, and its perceived aesthetic qualities. Inscriptions provide information about the economics and institutional organization of professional musicians, recording such things as prizes awarded and fees paid for services. Archaeological evidence gives some indication of the contexts in which music was performed and of the monuments that were erected in honor of accomplished musicians. In Athens during the second half of the fifth century B.C., a splendid roofed concert hall known as the Odeion of Perikles was erected on the south slope of the Athenian akropolis—physical testimony to the importance of music in Athenian culture. The musical subjects frequently depicted in painting and sculpture give valuable information about how instruments were played and the settings in which they were used.

Music was essential to the pattern and texture of Greek life. Certain Greek philosophers saw a relationship between music and mathematics, and envisioned music as a paradigm of harmonious order, reflecting the cosmos and the human soul. Although the Greeks knew many kinds of instruments, they used two above all: lyres and auloi (pipes). Most Greek citizens were trained to play an instrument competently, and to sing and perform choral dances. Instrumental music or the singing of a hymn regularly accompanied everyday activities and formal acts of worship. Shepherds piped to their flocks, oarsmen and infantry kept time to music, and women made music at home. Musicians performed in contests, at the drinking parties known as symposia, and in the theater. The art of singing to one's own stringed accompaniment was highly developed. However, despite the wealth of circumstantial evidence, the sounds of ancient Greek music are lost to us.

POETRY

The most famous poet of the Classical period was Pindar, an aristocrat from Thebes, the principal city of Boeotia to the north of Attica. He worked from about 498 to 446 B.C., writing tributes to the heroic values celebrated in the Homeric epics. He is best known for his victory odes composed in honor of the winners at the four Panhellenic games of Olympia, Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea. Commissioned by wealthy aristocrats or rulers, the odes were sung and danced by a chorus of men. They extolled pride in family tradition and the striving for arete (excellence) that inspires a man to overcome obstacles in order to win everlasting fame and thereby honor his gods, his family, and his state.

Epic poetry, hymns, and lyric verse flourished well before the fifth century B.C., but drama emerged in Athens during the fifth century and reached maturity with the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. According to Aristotle, drama developed from the dithyramb, a choral song performed by fifty singers at festivals of Dionysos. Gradually, spoken dialogue was introduced and two, then three, actors took precedence over the chorus. At important festivals of Dionysos, three tragic poets had a day each for presenting three tragedies and a satyr play, a burlesque with a chorus representing satyrs. Comic playwrights offered one play each. Some 14,000 Athenian citizens and guests gathered at a theater on the slopes of the akropolis to see the central myths of the Greek past dramatized, satirized, and otherwise reinterpreted. Audiences today still thrill to such masterpieces as the three plays of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, which describe Orestes' return to Mycenae in order to avenge the murder of his father Agamemnon; the *Oedipous Tyrannos* of Sophocles, which tells the tale of the Theban prince Oedipus, who fulfills a prophecy that he would slay his father and marry his mother; and the *Bacchae* of Euripides, which taught that opposing Dionysos brought madness and death. Such tragedies explored the religious and ethical problems interwoven in the great stories of heroic action and the question of fate. In their richness of language, there are no rivals to these close-knit representations of life, unless, perhaps, one considers the works of Shakespeare.

SPORTS

...the man whose brow many crowns have graced achieves a longed-for glory in athletics, triumphant with his hands or the speed of his feet.

—Pindar, *Isthmian Ode 5*, lines 7–10 (ca. 480 B.C.) (Frank J. Nisetich, trans., *Pindar's Victory Songs* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980], p. 311)

The first substantial description of Greek athletics comes from Homer's account of the funeral games in honor of Patroklos in the *Iliad*. According to tradition, the most important games were inaugurated in 776 B.C. at Olympia in the Peloponnesos; even wars were suspended during the Olympic games, held every four years to honor Zeus. By the sixth century B.C., other Panhellenic (*pan* = all, *hellenikos* = Greek) games, in which the Greek-speaking city-states participated, were being held at Delphi, Nemea, Isthmia, and Olympia. The Pythian games at Delphi were held in honor of Apollo and included singing and drama contests; at Nemea, games honored Zeus; and at Isthmia, athletics were celebrated for Poseidon. Many local games, such as the Panathenaic games at Athens, were modeled on these four *periodoi*, or circuit games. The victors at all these games brought honor to themselves, their families, and their hometowns. Public honors were bestowed on them, statues were dedicated to them, and victory poems were written to commemorate their feats.

The Greeks esteemed the male human body as the most beautiful of forms, and they tried through exercise to perfect their own bodies. They felt that their love for athletics, among other things, distinguished them from barbarians, and only Greek citizens were allowed to compete in the games. Athletics were also an important peacetime expression of rivalry that also trained and conditioned men for war. Contests included footraces, jumping, diskos throwing, javelin throwing, wrestling, the pentathlon (a combination of the previous five events), boxing, the pankration (no-holds-barred combination of wrestling and boxing), horse races, and chariot races. There were events for men and boys, and a separate Olympian festival in which young unmarried women competed in honor of Hera.

THE SYMPOSIUM

Let us drink. Why wait for the lighting of the
lamps?
Night is a hair's breadth away. Take down the great
goblets
From the shelf, dear friend, for the son of Semele
and Zeus
Gave us wine to forget our pains. Mix two parts
water, one part wine,
And let us empty the dripping cup—urgently.

—Alkaios, seventh-century B.C. lyric poet (Willis Barnstone, trans.,
Greek Lyric Poetry [New York: Schocken Books, 1967], p. 56, no. 98)

Wine, like grain or olive oil, was considered by the ancient Greeks to be one of the most important gifts of the gods to humankind. Its beneficial power was enormous—it brought release from suffering and sorrow—but it could also be dangerous and required great care in its use. The symposium was a tightly choreographed social gathering of adult male citizens for drinking, conversation, and entertainment. Well-to-do households boasted a room for dining and drinking parties that was designed to hold either seven or eleven high couches set end to end along three of its walls. Reclining two to a couch, the men could communicate easily across the open space in the center of the room. After dinner, the symposiarch, who acted as master of ceremonies, laid down the rules for the evening and established the order of events. He decided the number of kraters to be drunk (a krater was a mixing bowl that stood in a prominent place throughout the evening) and set the proportion of water to wine for each krater prepared by the servants. The ratio usually varied from three parts water to one part wine to three parts water to two parts wine. The ancient Greeks always diluted their wine with water, another practice that they believed set them apart from the barbarians. Servants filled pitchers from the krater and poured the drink into each guest's cup. A well-balanced mixture of wine and water brought conviviality and relaxation to the group. Everyone conversed, often upon specific topics, as in Plato's *Symposium*, while some recited poetry or played music. Jokes, gossip, and games of skill

and balance enlivened the evening. Further entertainment came from professional musicians, dancers, and courtesans. Many kraters, pitchers, and cups made especially for symposia were decorated with scenes of Dionysos, god of wine, and his followers, or with images of the drinking party itself. A well-conducted symposium was a highly civilized event that provided liberation from everyday restraints within a carefully regulated environment.

WARFARE

The frequent armed conflicts between the Greek city-states were conducted primarily by part-time volunteer citizen armies. As prosperity increased during the seventh century B.C., a highly organized form of fighting was developed: more and more men became wealthy enough to equip themselves with about seventy pounds of equipment—an eight- to ten-foot thrusting spear with an iron tip and butt, an iron sword, and bronze armor consisting of a helmet, cuirass (chest and back armor), greaves (shin guards), and a large round shield, called a *hoplon*, about thirty inches in diameter. Named after their shield, these hoplites, or heavily armed foot soldiers, were trained to move in phalanxes, disciplined units that fought in close formation protected by overlapping shields.

In Athens, the type of military service required of a citizen was determined by his social and economic position. Solon, one of the city's archons, or chief magistrates, instituted four classes defined by income. The second wealthiest class of citizens—the *hippeis*—earned enough from their land to maintain a horse, and fought as cavalry; the third wealthiest group—the *zeugitai*—could afford the equipment of a hoplite infantryman. The wealthiest class, the *pentakosiomedimnoi* (“five-hundred-bushel men”), supplied leaders for the armed forces. The poorest class, the *thetes*, who often were hired laborers, participated as oarsmen in the Athenian fleet or archers in the army.

During the sixth century B.C., cavalry played a minor role in battle. The hoplite phalanx, with its bristling front of spears backed by archers and lightly armed troops, was the most important fighting unit for centuries. A successful battle often consisted of one phalanx, hundreds of men across and eight or more warriors deep, pushing against an enemy's phalanx until one or the other broke formation, exposing its hoplites to danger and death.

Images of hoplites and warfare appear on Attic black-figure vases of the sixth century B.C. Some, drawn from contemporary life, show hoplites putting on their armor, bidding farewell before battle, or advancing in phalanx formation; however, the majority incorporate elements from mythology or the heroic past, as known in epic poems such as the *Iliad*. Gods, famous heroes, and Amazons mingle with warriors in hoplite armor and raise warfare to an exalted level. The initiatives taken during the latter part of the sixth century to standardize the Homeric epics in written form fostered a broader interest in heroic subject matter, and soldiering became a mark of citizenship, status, and often wealth, as well as a means of attaining glory.
