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## Breaking the Marble Ceiling: The Construction of Athena in Greek Thought

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BREAKING THE MARBLE CEILING:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF ATHENA IN GREEK THOUGHT

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the centuries, thousands of scholars have researched ancient Greece. It is, after all, a vast subject, and one which, due to the immense impact that the Greeks had on modern Western civilization, both deserves and demands study. Historians have studied everything from the wars the ancient Greeks fought, to the philosophers, writers, and poets who shaped the way Greek society, and thus our own modern Western society, think. The contribution that most people think about today when they think about the ancient Greeks is their mythology. This makes sense, as the myths from ancient Greece are filled with larger-than-life heroes, powerful gods, and inescapable fate, all of which have made these stories endlessly fascinating for centuries, and have been retold and reused in various ways, influencing everyone, from classic authors such as Shakespeare to modern authors such as Rick Riordan.

The religion of ancient Greece was much more than the myths whose popularity lingers into the modern day. While these myths were important for the ancient Greeks, influencing how they saw their deities, they were by no means the only way the ancient Greeks interacted with their deities. The gods who populate the myths, from the powerful Olympians to the nature spirits who are the personification of various natural features such as trees and rivers, are all parts of the larger Greek pantheon. All deities were associated with different aspects of the world, from powerful natural forces such as storms to human emotions. Zeus was associated with the lightning bolt and was the supreme king of the gods. Aphrodite, a goddess, was associated with love, while Hera was in charge of marriage. Some deities, such as Hestia, were associated with important, but everyday things, such as the hearth fire, and therefore lack myths, yet are important in cult practices. The range of places where deities were worshiped also differed, as some, such as the Olympians were worshiped in nearly every *polis*, while others were only

worshiped in a handful of *poleis*. One of the most important deities of the ancient Greek world, who, like Hestia, was associated with extremely important everyday things, in her case weaving, while also being associated, like Zeus, with larger things, in this case the *polis*, was Athena.

Athena was the virgin goddess of wisdom, weaving, warcraft, and the *polis*. She is always depicted as a fully grown woman, often with a helmet, spear, and some sort of armor, often an *aegis* and a helmet. The *aegis*, typically depicted as a shield or cloak made of goatskin, often adorned with the head of a gorgon, is mentioned in connection with both Athena and Zeus in the *Iliad*. Her association with war, specifically organized war, and with the *polis* meant that she held a particular importance for Greek men, while her patronage of weaving meant that she was also important for Greek women. This is a unique contradiction in a society that had strongly defined roles for men and women, roles that rarely, if ever, overlapped. Yet in Athena, the lines between the outer world of men and the inner world of women are extremely blurred. Athena, alone of all the Greek goddesses, stands with a firm foot in each realm, as a woman who is associated with men's work, yet never loses her femininity. In a world in which women, especially aristocratic women in the city most closely associated with Athena, Athens, were not allowed to do things outside of the home, this contradiction is even more striking. This raises the question of "Why?" Why did the ancient Greeks have a female deity associated with both men's and women's work? Why does Athena, who with her associations with warfare and the *polis* is one of the most Greek of all deities, by her very existence seemingly defies everything that is known about Classical Greek society?

This paper will begin with an examination of Greek culture and religion, in order to provide the context that is important for understanding the peculiarities of Athena. That examination will start with a look into the pre-Greek and early Greek civilizations in Greece, the

Minoans and the Mycenaeans, before looking at ancient Greek civilization as a whole. It will then dive deeper into the roles of ancient Greek women, taking into account the Athenian bias that colors most of our sources for Greek civilization. The paper will then turn to briefly look at ancient Greek religion, giving important context for the pantheon in which Athena resided, before focusing on women in ancient Greek religion, and then finally, on Athena. After an overview of Athena and what she meant to the ancient Greeks both in myth and in cult, the paper will turn to looking at Athena's origins. It will do this by considering the impact that other cultures had on the early Greeks, in particular the Egyptians and the Phrygians. It will then conclude with a brief look at the way Athena was seen in Rome, where the Romans adopted her as one of their goddesses, named Minerva.

To do this, the paper will consult ancient primary sources, such as Homer's *Iliad*, Herodotus' *Histories*, Hesiod's *Theogony*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and the *Homeric Hymns*. These ancient sources give invaluable information not only on the culture of ancient Greece, the way the Greeks thought about themselves, as well as their allies and enemies, but also the ways the ancient Greeks thought about their deities. Thucydides and Herodotus' works also provide important information about the expectations placed on Greek men and women, from a contemporary perspective, while Hesiod's *Theogony* and the *Homeric Hymns* provide essential information about the stories the Greeks told about their gods. Homer's *Iliad* was known universally in ancient Greece and played a large role in the ancient Greeks' understanding of their gods. The *Iliad*, which was recited at all sorts of community events, ensured that most Greeks understood the same myths about their gods, that they understood key components of the personalities of their deities, especially important ones such as Athena. Ancient sources are, of course, limited, as the vast majority of whatever works there were have

not survived. The Greek Dark Ages also play a significant role in limiting ancient sources, as during that period the ancient Greeks were not literate so any developments during that four-hundred-year period were not recorded.

Current scholarship focuses on the perception of Athena in myth, and how that shifted over time. Some attention has been paid by scholars to Athena's connections with other deities, with the most controversial being *Black Athena* by Martin Bernal. Bernal's theory of Athena's origins has been soundly rejected by most scholars, as its hypothesis that Athena's origins lie in sub-Saharan Africa lacks significant evidence. Other historians have, with more evidence, connected Athena to other deities, such as the Hittite Sun Goddess of Arinna.<sup>1</sup> Attention has also been paid to cult practices surrounding Athena, especially in Athens.

This paper aims to bring together these disparate sources in order to come to a conclusion about the origins of Athena, considering both her myths and cult practices. It will consider deities such as the proto-Indo European goddess associated with war, the Minoan snake goddess, the Phrygian goddess Meter, and the Egyptian goddess Neith. Establishing the nature of the influences these deities had on Athena's development can help provide valuable insight into the ways pre-classical Greek society might have interacted with other societies of the ancient world. Consideration of the way the cult practices differed from the myths surrounding Athena can add to this analysis by providing evidence for how everyday people interacted with deities, which often differs from the myths.

Through bringing these disparate sources together and offering a comprehensive overview of these few goddesses' impact on Athena in the context of the society in which she

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<sup>1</sup> Annette Teffeteller, "Greek Athena and the Hittite Sungoddess of Arinna," in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Brill: Boston, 2001), pg 349.

developed, this paper will provide a new look at Athena, and the various parts that work together to form her into the Athena that is known by Classical Greece.

### **Pre-Greek and Early Greek Civilization in Greece**

Before the ancient Greeks dominated Greece, there were other, earlier societies that helped shape the very nature of what would become ancient Greek civilization. These earlier societies were the Minoans whose cultures seemingly inspired the ancient Greeks and their epics, and the Mycenaeans, who were Greek. Minoan civilization was based on the Aegean island of Crete, and first begins to appear around 3000 BCE. They were replaced by the Mycenaeans, who arrived in the Greek nearly 900 years later, sometime around 2100 BCE.<sup>2</sup> The Mycenaeans, unlike the earlier Minoans, were an Indo-European people, and were Greeks, though their culture differed from ancient Greek culture, and was heavily influenced by the Minoans.

The Minoans, named by historians after king Minos from later Greek legend, left behind little more than tantalizing clues and hints at what their way of life was like. Their script, named Linear A by scholars, has yet to be deciphered, so it lurks, taunting linguists and historians alike. Deprived of any written sources, historians have to rely upon and attempt to interpret evidence discovered at Minoan sites. While there is little that can be determined for certain about the Minoans, one thing that is clear is that they were a very sophisticated people. They left behind sprawling, labyrinthine palace complexes, the largest of which is at Knossos.<sup>3</sup> The palaces were filled with frescoes, and altars for what appears to be a bull-cult, marked by various horns of

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<sup>2</sup> Jasper Griffin, "Introduction," in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard R. Palmer, *Mycenaeans and Minoans; Aegean Prehistory in the Light of the Linear B Tablets*, (New York: Knopf, 1965), 55.



consecration, religious axes, and altars.<sup>4</sup> One of the more famous frescoes found at Knossos is the Bull-Leaping Fresco, which appears to tie together both the frescoes and the bull-cult, as it shows a man and two women jumping over a bull. Scholars have posited that this shows a ritual of some sort, perhaps one that became the basis of the later myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.<sup>5</sup> While the bare outlines of their religion can be seen, there are precious few details that can be gleaned from archeology about their religion. It does appear that their religion featured several goddesses, including one who was closely associated with snakes, and who perhaps served as a protector of the house.

As for gender roles, once again, scholars are limited to the archeological evidence. From the limited evidence it appears that Minoan civilization was more egalitarian than the fiercely patriarchal Greek society that followed. From the artwork, it seems that Minoan women not only took part in religious rites, as they would continue to do in later Classical Greek civilization, but that they also played an important role in succession. It has been suggested that in order to ascend to power, a man would have to marry a king's daughter, and that children would be named after their mothers, not their fathers, as would be common in later civilizations.<sup>6</sup> While this is little more than a theory, the fact that it is considered a reasonable theory at all speaks volumes to the ways in which the experiences of Minoan women differed from later Greek women.

For reasons that are unknown today, sometime around 1550 BCE, Minoan civilization began to break down, slowly decreasing in importance and prestige, until it was little more than a

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<sup>4</sup> Sinclair Hood, *The Minoans: The Story of Bronze Age Crete*, ed. Glyn Daniel, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 133-134.

<sup>5</sup> Jasper Griffin, "Greek Myth and Hesiod", in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Hood, *The Minoans*, 117.

legend. The decline likely has something to do with the eruption of Thera around 1630 BCE, a catastrophic event that spread not only ash, but also spawned devastating earthquakes that wreaked havoc on the buildings and palaces on Crete. If this had been followed by invasions from other peoples, perhaps the Mycenaeans as some scholars have suggested, it would certainly explain how Minoan civilization could have been so quickly replaced by the Mycenaeans ca. 1450 BCE.<sup>7</sup>

As Minoan civilization began to collapse, Mycenaean civilization began to rise. The Mycenaeans' writing, named Linear B by scholars, was deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris, revealing Linear B to be an archaic form of Greek.<sup>8</sup> The decipherment of Linear B proved decisively what had, until then, been only a theory; that the Mycenaeans, unlike the earlier Minoans, were Indo-European peoples who had fled the flooding of the Black Sea, and ended up in the Greek islands, and were in fact, Greeks. The decipherment of Linear B means that scholars have been able to discover more about Mycenaean culture than they have about Minoan civilization. Unfortunately, most of the Linear B records that survived are inventories and lists. No stories been discovered, so for cultural information, scholars have to surmise what they can from fragments of writing and artwork, as well as later traditions and legends. These fragments help provide context for some of the finds archeologists have made at Mycenaean sites. From what can be discerned, it seems that goddesses played a significant role in Mycenaean religion.<sup>9</sup> The pantheon they worshiped included many of the gods that later Greeks would worship, such as Zeus, Hera, and Poseidon. There is also evidence that Artemis, Hermes, Ares, and Dionysus were worshiped in some form, and the 'Lady of Athana' that is mentioned occasionally seems

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<sup>7</sup> Hood, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Parker, "Greek Religion," in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 309.

<sup>9</sup> Parker, 309.

like an obvious precursor to Athena.<sup>10</sup> While there is still much that is unknown about the Mycenaeans, it is clear that they had a profound influence on the later Greek civilization, influencing their language, religion, and myths. However, despite their seeming power, around 1200 BCE the Mycenaeans' civilization, just like that of the earlier Minoans, collapsed suddenly, for reasons that are unknown to scholars today.

The Greek Dark Ages began with the collapse of Mycenaean society and were part of a period of chaos and destruction around the entire Mediterranean, not just Greece, as great empires like the Hittites' fell, and even Egypt was forced to retreat within its own borders, giving up its conquests in the Levant. In Greece, the devastation was so intense that for nearly 400 years, the Greeks lost not only literacy but even the memory of having once been literate.<sup>11</sup> Though it is evident that the Mycenaeans had a large impact on the development of early Greek civilization, due to the Dark Ages it is hard to know just how much of subsequent Greek culture is Mycenaean, and how much Greek culture is indebted to other civilizations. It is certain however that the Greeks themselves were aware of earlier, grander cultures that preceded them. They could look at the palace ruins at Knossos, at the "cyclopean" walls of the citadels at Tiryns and at Mycenae itself and conclude that their own culture was a diluted version of what had existed before.<sup>12</sup> Due to the Dark Ages, they had to rely on stories passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation to have any clue of what had happened in a time before them. Their concept of history was intimately tied to the myths and legends they told, and these stories passed down names, events, and sometimes descriptions of places.<sup>13</sup> While stories handed down

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<sup>10</sup> Parker, 309-310.

<sup>11</sup> Griffin, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>12</sup> Jasper Griffin, "Greek Myth and Hesiod", in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88.

<sup>13</sup> Griffin, "Greek Myth and Hesiod," 89.

orally can relay quite a bit of information through different generations, they are subject to alterations with every storyteller. This meant that over time stories evolved as the early Greeks began to interact with other cultures whose stories doubtlessly began to influence the stories the ancient Greeks told themselves. Therefore, while the stories told about the past by the early Greeks may contain some kernel of truth, that truth was altered and added to as the storytellers added things they were familiar with into the stories.

The Homeric epics emerge from the Dark Ages, from this oral tradition of storytelling. Their stories, of epic deeds and mighty heroes blessed by the gods, likely contain some small element of truth. In 1870, archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered the remains of a city he dubbed Troy, whose physical features match the descriptions of Troy found in the *Iliad*. This is evidence that there was some real conflict that the stories Homer related were based upon because he had to get the descriptions from somewhere, and the layer of habitation that Schliemann assigned to the Trojan war was long gone by the time Homer composed the *Iliad*.<sup>14</sup> Therefore his descriptions, and therefore the story, had to have been passed down for generations before Homer. It is plausible that the *Iliad*, and the story of the Trojan War it relates were actually part of what led to the Dark Ages in Greece. Perhaps the story of the Greek heroes' prolonged expedition against Troy could explain the collapse of Mycenaean society. A war of the size and length of the one described in the *Iliad* would have taken away most of the men of fighting age, leaving the Greek islands open to invaders. The mysterious Sea Peoples who inflicted so much chaos upon other civilizations could have very easily preyed on the practically defenseless Mycenaean civilization while the men were away.<sup>15</sup> Or perhaps the Sea Peoples

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<sup>14</sup> Bernard Knox, Introduction to the *Iliad*, 3-64, Homer, trans. Robert Fagels, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 13.

<sup>15</sup> N.K. Sanders, *The Sea Peoples: Warriors of the ancient Mediterranean 1250-1150 BCE*, (Thames and Hudson; London, 1978), 9.

themselves could have been the Mycenaean warriors returning home from war. After all, if they had been fighting for years, only to return home and find that it was not as they had left it, the easiest thing for them to do might have to return to their ships and continue doing what they had spent the last several years doing, what they were doubtlessly good at, raiding and fighting other peoples.

It is in this complex mix of stories, peoples, and events, that Classical Greek mythology began to emerge. Before the reemergence of literacy around 800 BCE nothing was written down.<sup>16</sup> That means that in order to come to some sort of conclusions about Dark Age Greek society, one has to look at the physical remnants left behind to try and piece together some sort of narrative of what happened, and how they evolved.

### **Greek Civilization**

The Dark Ages drew to a close as the Greeks began to rediscover literacy. As they did, they emerge out of the shadows of history, and onto the world stage. Ancient Greek civilization laid the groundwork for modern Western civilization, as it is thanks to the Greeks that Western civilization has the ideas it does about citizenship, humanity, about history, forms of government, and even the very lens through which we interpret the world. It is the Greeks who first, before all other people, developed the idea that people belong to a community and are citizens, and therefore have a stake in their community. The foundations the Greeks laid were taken up and built upon by the Romans, and later cultures, who turned what had been Greek culture into Greco-Roman civilization, and then into Western civilization.

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 32.

Fundamental to ancient Greek society, to the very nature and identity of ancient Greeks, is the *polis* (plural *poleis*). The *polis* is “...the city-state, an institution of which any precise definition obscures the variety in size or shape or social and political organization.”<sup>17</sup> Despite that, a working definition must be proposed. The *polis* was what bound people together, it was a city-state, a self-governing community that ancient Greeks lived in. The *polis* was the foundational unit of Greek society, but it was not just a city, nor the land on which the city or dwellings stood, but rather the citizens of the *polis*. In the words of Themistocles, “We Athenians have a city so long as we have our ships.”<sup>18</sup> The citizens were the *polis* and so as long as they survived, so too did the *polis*. This idea of citizenship, or a city being more than the buildings or the land, that people have a stake in their community and therefore can have a say in it, is a Greek invention, and one that was fundamental to ancient Greek identity. They were dedicated to their *polis* because they were their *polis*, they weren’t just ruled by it. The ancient Greeks clung fiercely to their notions of citizenship, to their home *poleis*, to the point that they were unable to conceive of the idea of a community any larger than their *polis*. They weren’t Greeks, they were Athenians, Spartans, Thebans, and so on, as there was no such understanding of a unified Greece. When *poleis* warred against each other, it was not for the purpose of building an empire, or unified culture but rather, it was for a slight, perceived or otherwise, or for an advantage such as more land or better trade routes.

Despite the differences between *poleis*, and the amount of fighting that happened between them, there are some generalizations that can be made about all *poleis*, as well as some commonalities that tie them together. Ancient Greeks were bound together by the tenuous ties of

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<sup>17</sup> George Forrest, “Greece: The History of the Archaic Period,” in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Forrest, 14.

language, religion, and an understanding that they were, by virtue of their culture, better than the barbarians who didn't speak Greek. Herodotus defined *hellēnikon* or "Greekness" as, "Shared blood, shared language, shared religion, and shared customs."<sup>19</sup> While these ties did not lead the Greeks to unify, they at least allowed for a common understanding of who was, and who was not, Greek. All *poleis* worshiped a similar pantheon of gods, and were familiar with similar myths about the gods, even if their individual perceptions of the gods and their myths differed from *polis* to *polis*. Most *poleis* participated in panhellenic events such as the Olympic games, the Pythian games, the Nemean games, and the Isthmian games, among others.<sup>20</sup> These panhellenic games brought people from different *poleis* together, and likely helped ensure that new stories and ideas were shared throughout the *poleis*, so myths had a chance to spread.

Another common factor in Greek culture across all *poleis* and throughout all of ancient Greek history is the ancient Greeks' obsession with form.<sup>21</sup> This obsession meant they were focused on things looking perfect, on making them look beautiful, rather than advancing to the next stage of innovation. This explains the elegance and simplicity of Greek architecture, the unearthly perfection of their statues, and the exacting requirements of their literature. They strove for the appearance of perfection, rather than actual perfection. This concentrated effort to make things that looked perfect is part of what allowed Greek tastes to dominate the tastes of all other civilizations they came into contact with, for others, such as the Lydians and Etruscans, "...found their own native productions by contrast embarrassingly crude and provincial."<sup>22</sup> Thus, as the Greeks traveled farther from home, through conquest or trade, they spread their ideas, their

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<sup>19</sup> Hornblower, "Greece: The History of the Classical Period," 144.

<sup>20</sup> Jon D Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 128.

<sup>21</sup> Forrest, "Greece: History of the Archaic Period," 6.

<sup>22</sup> Forrest, 7.

culture, and by doing so, worked themselves firmly into the history of Europe, confirming notions of their superiority above all others as they did so.

This, however, is not to say that all *poleis* were created equal. Some, such as Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth, were powerful city-states that dominated the Greek world at different times. Some were smaller, and constantly under threat of attack from the larger and more powerful *poleis* that surrounded them. These smaller *poleis* live on the edge of the historical record, often pushed off the page by the dominant *polis* of Athens. Athens, city of Athena, was, according to the surviving records, the most important city in ancient Greece. It was the *polis* that introduced ideas such as democracy, and, after 478 BCE when they led the Greek alliance against the Persians, the leading *polis* in Greece.<sup>23</sup> They used the foundations built during this war to turn the Delian League, which had been a league of allies, into their own empire, meant to help them control commerce in the Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> Thanks to the silver mine at Laurium, they were able to build and maintain a large, state-of-the-art navy, allowing them unchallenged and unchecked control for years.<sup>25</sup>

When studying ancient Greece, it is important to be aware of the “Athenian bias” that colors most of the scholarship and surviving evidence. Athens is one of few *poleis* to have survived till modern times, managing to stay important, even after the fall of Greece to the Macedonians, the Romans, and the Turks, lasting into the modern era. Because most surviving evidence comes from Athens, scholarship has a source bias towards Athens. So, when it is said that Athens was the most influential *polis*, it should be remembered that it was Athenians, or

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<sup>23</sup> Simon Hornblower, “Greece: The History of the Classical Period,” in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 149.

<sup>24</sup> Hornblower, 150-154.

<sup>25</sup> Forrest, “Greece: The History of the Archaic Period,” 40-42.



sources directly tied to Athens, saying that. All *poleis* had their own individual culture, so making generalizations based on the surviving evidence is difficult, because the evidence does, after all, tend to come from Athens, which appears to be an outlier in its behavior.

### **Women in Ancient Greece**

The lives of women in ancient Greece, unlike earlier Minoan and Mycenaean women, were severely restricted. They had separate spheres they were expected to remain within, and specific roles that they were expected to fulfill. The exact requirements of these roles differed greatly from *polis* to *polis*, with some allowing women more freedom and rights than others. The only commonality that can be found between all *poleis* is the expectation that women would get married and bear children. The age of marriage might vary, the number of children might vary, but the goal was always the same; for women to produce more sons who would grow into future warriors for the *polis*, and daughters who could be married off to help create alliances between families.<sup>26</sup>

An issue with writing about women in ancient Greece is that, with the notable exception of female poets during the Archaic age, Greek women tend to be silent in the historical record.<sup>27</sup> They often weren't taught to write, and if they knew how, little of their writing survives to the present day. This means that the only sources that tell us about the lives, thoughts, and feelings of ancient Greek women come from the pens of men. All too often, the things that Greek men wrote about women tell historians more about the writers themselves than about the women who the writing is supposedly about. What can be gleaned is that the perception of women in ancient

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<sup>26</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> Pomeroy, 52.

Greece was complex. They were simultaneously seen as delicate creatures who needed to be protected, and also as temptresses who were the ruination of men, and as, “the partners of evil works”<sup>28</sup> The myth of Pandora is an excellent example of this dual perception of women.

Pandora is the first woman, created by Zeus to punish men after Prometheus gave them fire.

From Pandora comes the “deadly race and tribes of women/a great plague to mortals...”<sup>29</sup> She is the one who releases the evils of the world from where they had been kept, releasing evils such as plagues, sorrow, and mischief on the world.<sup>30</sup> She is at once the object of desire and disdain, just as the gods had intended her to be. Women, as descendants of Pandora, carry the same associations, they are at once weaker than men, and also the great temptresses who can sway men from their roles and responsibilities.

Women’s roles in Greece changed throughout time, shifting as Greek culture did. While there are no written records from the Dark Ages, as discussed previously, the *Iliad* is an important source that, while it should not be taken as historical truth, is thought to contain some truth about archaic Greek society from around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. While it is not certain if the events within are real, or even if Homer himself was a real figure, what is certain is that the stories within the *Iliad* come from a time earlier than Homer, and therefore contain traces of the culture from which they originated. The *Iliad* was written down around 700 BCE, but the story of the Trojan War probably dates back to sometime around 1050-900 BCE.<sup>31</sup> While it would be a mistake to generalize about the treatment and behavior of women from a work of fiction, there are some possible truths that can be garnered through close examination. Sarah Pomeroy argues

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<sup>28</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Richard S Caldwell, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2015), 63, line 601.

<sup>29</sup> Hesiod, 63, lines 591-592.

<sup>30</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver Taplin, “Homer,” in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 75, 78.

that women were granted more responsibility during the time of the *Iliad* while the men were gone. She says, “[w]hen Agamemnon and Odysseus sailed to Troy, they had no qualms about leaving their wives to manage their kingdoms in their absence, although Agamemnon did leave a herald to look after Clytemnestra.”<sup>32</sup>

Women in Greek epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had a great deal more power and autonomy than their descendants.<sup>33</sup> Clytemnestra, Andromache, Penelope, and even Cassandra were all women with agency and personality, even if their agency and personality were defined by the values of their society. Penelope and Andromache were defined by their fidelity to their husbands, even when their husbands were, in the case of Penelope, missing for years, or, in the case of Andromache, dead. Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, puts her kingdom at risk by taking a lover while her husband is away, and plotting to kill her husband when he returns. She, unlike Penelope, does not take good care of her kingdom in her husband's absence. She is painted as a villain, as a woman who doesn't live up to her duties. The message is clear; good women are wives, and good wives wait for their husbands, even if their husbands are not faithful to them.

This is a trend that continued throughout the entirety of the ancient world, as men were allowed, and often encouraged, to take lovers outside of their marriage, while women who did such were punished harshly for such transgressions. Men who did not have relations outside of marriage were few and far between. One of the few examples of men who were loyal in the modern sense to their wives in literature is that of Laertes in the *Odyssey*, who “was partial to Eurycleia, but did not sleep with her because he feared his wife.”<sup>34</sup> In this then, as in so much of

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<sup>32</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Pomeroy, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Pomeroy, 26.

ancient Greek life, men and women are held to different standards. It is the rare woman who has relations outside of marriage without punishment, and the rare man who refrains from relations outside of marriage.

Let it not be forgotten that the entire Trojan War also began with a woman leaving her husband for another man, for going outside the laws that governed womanhood. The other men were all forced to leave their homes, their families, and their responsibilities to fulfill an oath, all because Helen left her husband. Whether she left of her own accord or was forced to go is beside the point, because what matters is that she left. Menelaus, her husband, *has* to go back and get her for his own honor. He is honor-bound to get her back, otherwise he risks losing the respect of his men because he allowed his wife to be taken. Women are therefore, regardless of the amount that their husbands trust them or respect them, first and foremost the property of their husbands or their fathers if they are unmarried. While they might wield power, they are only doing so with the permission of a man, and are ruling for him, until he can return and take back his throne. Women, regardless of their status or responsibilities, are still subordinate to men, are still the property of men. The notable exception to this is of course goddesses, which will be discussed in a subsequent section.

It is important to keep in mind that these characters are, of course, fictional. Penelope, the virtuous faithful wife, is a stock figure, an image for later Greek women to aspire to, while Clytemnestra, who cheats on her husband, and tries to usurp him, is a warning, showing women what they should not do, and what happens if they push outside the defined roles given to them by society. Yet, despite the fact that these characters are fictional, their very existence within the story itself, the varied roles that they fulfill outside of motherhood, suggests that women during

the Dark Age of Greece, or even slightly before, had more freedoms than their descendants would enjoy.

After the void that is the Dark Ages, women's roles in classical Greece begin to become clearer. Of course, the roles of women varied significantly, as everything did, from *polis* to *polis*. Athens and Sparta are typically pointed to as the opposite ends of the spectrum for *poleis* in everything, and their treatment of women is no exception to this. Athens, typically described as the *polis* that valued intelligence above all else, focused on intellectual and cultural developments. They were the *polis* where democracy emerged, where some of the greatest ancient thinkers, such as Socrates and Plato, lived and worked.<sup>35</sup> Aristocratic Athenian men, the population of ancient Greece which historians know the most about, traditionally aimed at rising through the ranks of government, winning enough support to participate in the assembly aiming for success in government.<sup>36</sup> Spartan society in contrast completely revolved around preparations for war. Spartan boys were taken from their homes at the age of seven to begin training and were only allowed to return to civilian life after they turned thirty.<sup>37</sup> Successful Spartan men were great warriors who defeated their enemies in combat.

The standard descriptions of these two important *poleis* leave out women. Women were not allowed to vote or hold public office in Athens, so they could not aspire to the same things as men. Spartan women could not serve as hoplites, and therefore were fundamentally apart from men in their society. Discovering what women aspired to do and the ways they thought, is difficult because, as noted earlier, women are virtually silent in the historical record, for few

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<sup>35</sup> Oswyn Murray, "Life and Society in Classical Greece," in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 242.

<sup>36</sup> Murray, 242.

<sup>37</sup> Murray, 246.

women were literate, and even fewer left any records behind. Scholars must turn to the writings of men to try and understand the lives and thoughts of women, a dangerous prospect, especially given the way in which Greek men viewed women, and the separate spheres in which they lived most of their lives. When Greek men wrote about women, it was typically in plays. Pomeroy argues that kernels of truth can be gleaned from plays, especially comedic plays rather than tragedies, because, as is true of comedies throughout the centuries, ancient Greek comedies rely on exaggerated images of common tropes and everyday situations for their humor. Common roles for women in comedies included the demanding, shrewish wife, or the innocent young maiden, stereotypes which, as evidenced through their very existence., were familiar to the ancient Greeks <sup>38</sup> A lot of interpretation is needed to glean truth out of plays however, as their main role is to provide entertainment, not record a historical moment. Therefore, where there is some use that can be gleaned from plays, they should always be taken with a grain of salt.

One important source that provides a definite outline for the expectation of women's roles is the laws that govern women in different *poleis*. The laws of Solon, Athens' most famous lawgiver (594 BCE), provide early examples of how women were treated. He "...institutionalized the distinction between good women and whores...[he] regulated the walks, the feasts, the mourning, the trousseaux, and the food and drink of citizen women."<sup>39</sup> Pomeroy argues that Solon did this not because he hated women, but rather because he was trying to eliminate strife among men and strengthen the democracy that at this point was a fragile new institution in Athens. <sup>40</sup> Women, especially women of the upper class, were restricted in what they could or could not do. They were supposed to stay away from guests, withdrawing to the private rooms of

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<sup>38</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 98.

<sup>39</sup> Pomeroy, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Pomeroy, 57.

their houses when male visitors came by. They had separate living quarters from their husbands and did not dine in the same room as them.<sup>41</sup> When they went out in public, they went out with an escort. Everyday women were of course not able to do this, but this was the goal, the mark of the upper classes. Not only were women not to be seen, Pericles claims that, “The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame.”<sup>42</sup> Greek men were protective of their women, to the point of excluding them from society as best they could. Women’s views of this treatment are unknown. Some scholars suggest that this would have been a very bleak existence, while other scholars suggest that women enjoyed their way of life, seeing it as an honor.<sup>43</sup> It is likely that in ancient Greece, just as today, women’s views on their roles in life varied. The cultural innovations that were taking place in Attica, the great plays being written, the famous speeches being given, the debates that took place, were out of reach for them. One thing that was not out of bounds for citizen women was producing more citizens. Citizen women played an important role in ensuring that Athens didn’t run out of citizens, because after the reforms of Pericles, only children born to parents who were both Athenian citizens were considered citizens and could therefore gain all the rights and benefits of citizens.<sup>44</sup> Therefore women, or at least their wombs, were important to the continuation of life in the *polis*.

In contrast, Spartan women appeared to have a much greater degree of freedom. While they, unlike Spartan men, were not sent away from home at a young age, they also had a role to play in their success of their *polis*. Their job, similar to that of Athenian women, was to bear new children who could grow into Spartan warriors. Lycurgus in his laws, “...forbade the inscription

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<sup>41</sup> Bonnie Kutbay, “Some Observations on the Female Weaver in Classical Greek Art,” *Mediterranean Studies* 11, (2002), 25.

<sup>42</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Henry Dale (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1861), 2.45.

<sup>43</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Kutbay, “Some Observations on the Female Weaver in Classical Greek Art,” 25.

of the name of the deceased on a tomb except for a man who died at war or a woman who had died in childbirth.”<sup>45</sup> For a society that valued warriors as much as the Spartans did, this inclusion of women who died in childbirth as the only other group who get their names on a tombstone is significant. It demonstrates the extent to which they valued women, at least women who gave birth and died while doing so. By the fourth century BCE, Spartan women could own land, and even controlled their own dowries. The absence of their husbands and fathers for a good portion of their lives meant that they were freed from the constant oversight and rules of men that so ruled the lives of other Greek women.<sup>46</sup>

Spartan women are in general less quiet in the historical record than Athenian women are, as Plutarch recorded witticisms attributed to them in his *Moralia*. They give a clue if not to the character of Spartan women, then at least to the ways in which they were perceived by the Greek population outside of their own *polis*. A quote that is particularly telling regarding Spartan women is attributed to Gorgo, identified as the wife of Leonidas, the heroic king who had died in the last stand at the Battle of Thermopylae. Plutarch writes, “Being asked by a woman from Attica, “Why is it that you Spartan women are the only women that lord it over your men?” [Gorgo] said, “Because we are the only women that are mothers of men.”<sup>47</sup> Her statement demonstrates the pride which Spartan women had in their roles, as well as in their *polis*. It also shows the sense of superiority they felt over women who did not sacrifice their sons or husbands for their *polis*. While they could not go out and fight alongside their men, they could do their part in giving birth to sons who would become good soldiers. It is also said that Spartan women told

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<sup>45</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 36.

<sup>46</sup> Pomeroy, 39.

<sup>47</sup> Plutarch, “Sayings of Spartan Women,” In *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, (Harvard University Press, 1936), 457.



their men when they left for war to either “come back with your shield or on it.”<sup>48</sup> This glimpse into the psyche of Spartan women reflects both the ways in which Spartan women fit in with other women, such as in the societal expectation that they would become mothers, and also the important ways in which they differed, such as their relative freedom, and outspokenness.

The vast majority of Greek women needless to say did not either come from Sparta or Athens. However, because of the Athenian bias of most ancient sources, and the silence of women in general, there is little concrete information about them. One thing that is common throughout the lives of women outside of their roles as wives and mothers is their role in weaving. Weaving produces cloth, which is not only used in making clothes, also in making sails, and other such essentials for daily life. Before the invention of mechanized weaving in the Industrial Revolution, all cloth had to be woven by hand. This meant that every piece of fabric in ancient Greece was woven by a person. Greek women spent a good portion of their days weaving; women of the upper classes supervised slaves weaving, and lower-class women themselves wove, producing cloth for their family.<sup>49</sup> Weaving is one of the few things that most Greek women had in common, and was a common, labor intensive, everyday task.

The lives of ancient Greek women were determined for them, often at a young age. For elite women, the women about whom most is known, marriages were typically arranged for them when they were very young, and they were typically married in their early teens, while their grooms would be in their early or mid-thirties.<sup>50</sup> Spartan women married a bit later than this, typically waiting until they were eighteen.<sup>51</sup> The large age gap between spouses meant that

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<sup>48</sup> Plutarch, 241.

<sup>49</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religions*, 140.

<sup>51</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 85.

spouses rarely were close in the way modern couples are expected to be. They led separate lives, in Athens living on different levels of the house if possible and operating in different spheres of the world. Men spent their time outside of the house, while women's duties confined them to a life within the walls of their home, with the rare excursion for religious festivals. The average lifespan for ancient Greek women was also about ten years shorter than that for ancient Greek men; this difference was due to the dangerous nature of pregnancy in antiquity.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the relative silence of individual Greek women, there are a few who stand out in history, women whose names have not been lost, and who were real figures, not characters like those found in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. The most famous woman writer from Greece is Sappho of Lesbos. Fragments of her poetry dedicated to her female lovers survive and were quoted by later Greek authors.<sup>53</sup> There were other female Greek poets throughout the Archaic age, who, though they were not as renowned as Sappho, still received lots of praise in their own day. While there is little that can be known for certain about them, it is certain that none of them came from Athens, reflecting Athens' strict gender roles throughout all of ancient Greek history.<sup>54</sup>

One important role held exclusively by women was that of the *Pythia*, or the Oracle of Delphi. She was a priestess of Apollo who was reputed to receive prophecies and impart them to people who had come to ask the oracle for Apollo's advice and guidance. Importantly the *Pythia* was a woman who (theoretically at least) wielded significant, if indirect, power. She did not wield direct power because the prophecies she uttered were heard, and interpreted by, priests of Apollo, who translated her often nonsensical sounding phrases into something that petitioners could understand, or at least, attempt to. The *Pythia* was consulted before any colonies were

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<sup>52</sup> Pomeroy, 84.

<sup>53</sup> Pomeroy, 53-55.

<sup>54</sup> Pomeroy, 52.

founded and in epics before heroes went on quests. Yet, “although the Delphic oracle was supreme in Greece, the woman through whom the god communicated with mortal men served merely as a courier of sorts and had no direct influence on the meaning of the prophecies.”<sup>55</sup> Men were free to take what meanings they could from her prophecies, so her power was likely more theoretical than actual.

Mortal women then, even ones who seemingly had significant religious power, lacked any actual influence. Their lives were taken up with time-intensive tasks, such as weaving, and their days were taken up with raising children. The lives of ordinary women might have differed significantly from this, as most of what is known about Greek women, just as most of what is known about Greek men, focuses on the upper, literate classes.

### **Greek Religion**

Greek religion, like most ancient religions, was polytheistic. Polytheism’s very nature sets it apart from monotheism, in more ways than just the number of gods worshiped. Polytheistic religions, as a general rule, tend to be more accepting of other gods. After all, when their own pantheons are so large, there is little harm in accepting that other people might have gods that are just as real as their own whereas in monotheistic religions, the fact that other cultures have their own deities’ conflicts directly with their own set of beliefs. Inclusivity towards other deities is a common trait throughout ancient polytheisms as opposed to hostility in monotheistic religions. Ancient polytheism also focuses more on the groups’ relationship with the deities, rather than any one individual’s relationship with their deity. The Greeks, then, except in a few mystery cults, did not have a personal, individual relationship with any of their

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<sup>55</sup> Pomeroy, 33.

gods, where they might pray to one deity for themselves; rather, their community as a whole would have a relationship with the gods. So, a temple to Athena wouldn't host services like a modern Christian church would, rather, religious festivals would have taken place there.

Individuals might have gone to the temple to make a sacrifice, particularly after the birth of a healthy child, or after their safe return from the seas, but in general they did not go to the temples to commune with the gods.<sup>56</sup> The temples were the homes of the gods, and sites of festivals, not places where individuals worshiped deities on their own. As Greek culture evolved, hero cults began to rise up alongside worship of the gods. Hero cults provide the individual experience that mainstream Greek religion lacked. Hero cults were, in general, localized, fulfilling local needs.<sup>57</sup> They didn't always have myths or even names associated with them, but were still likely an important part of many individuals' religious observances.

The Greek pantheon of deities was extensive and included many figures beyond the major gods and goddesses. The deities were arranged in different levels, from the powerful gods and goddesses who controlled major events such as weather, death, and emotions, to minor deities such as dryads, nymphs, and naiads, who were less powerful nature spirits. Below these full deities were the demigods, who were children of a human and a god. Demigods tended to play large roles in hero cults, as well as in Greek myths. Many of the greatest heroes in Greek legends were children of different gods and mortals. Herakles, one of the most famous figures from Greek mythology, was a demigod, son of Zeus and Alcmene, a mortal woman.<sup>58</sup> Achilles, the central figure of the *Iliad*, was the son of a Nereid named Thetis and Peleus, a mortal man.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Parker, "Greek Religion" 308.

<sup>58</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 227.

<sup>59</sup> Hamilton, 260.

These demigods often fulfilled great prophecies or had fates beyond those of ordinary mortals. They belonged to a mythic past, a time in which the gods associated much more freely with mortals.

In order to understand the confusing family tree that is Greek mythology, it is first necessary to give a brief account of the origin of the Greek gods in myth. Before the Olympian gods, there were the Titans, and before the Titans, there was Gaia and Ouranos, before them, there was chaos, nothingness. Out of this nothingness came Gaia, who created Ouranos to have company. Gaia is the embodiment of Earth, and Ouranos, the sky. They had many children together; elemental beings such as Okeanos, who is the sea, monsters, such as the Cyclopes who had only one eye and the three Hekatonkheires who each had “a hundred arms unimaginable, and fifty heads on the shoulders of each grew over their strong bodies.”<sup>60</sup> Gaia and Ouranos also gave birth to the Titans who in turn would eventually give birth to the Olympians. The monstrous children were locked within the Earth on the orders of Ouranos, who disliked them. In retaliation, Gaia gave her son Kronos, one of the Titans, a sickle that she had made, and told him to cut off his father’s genitals and then free his monstrous brothers. With the help of the other Titans, Kronos cut his father, but then stopped, refusing to let the Cyclopes and the Hekatonkheires out. From the genitals of Ouranos which had been thrown into the sea came sea foam, and from that sea foam came Aphrodite, reckoned as one of the Olympian gods, despite her unusual birth. Ignoring the pleas of his mother, Kronos settled down with his sister Rhea and proceeded to have children with her. Hesiod lists the children of this union as “Hestia, Demeter, and gold-sandaled Hera and strong Hades, who lives in a palace under the ground and has a

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<sup>60</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, 37, lines 149-153.

pitiless heart, and loud-sounding Earth-Shaker, and wise Zeus.”<sup>61</sup> Kronos, attempting to avoid his fate as told to him by Gaia and Ouranos that his own son would overthrow him, swallowed each of his children as they were born.<sup>62</sup> Unbeknownst to him Rhea, who was tired of watching her husband swallow their newly-born children, had given him a rock in place of Zeus, their youngest. She secreted Zeus away, and when he grew, he returned, tricked his father into throwing up, therefore expelling all his siblings from his father’s stomach.

He and his brothers then completed what his father hadn’t; they freed the Cyclopes and Hekatonkheires, who, as thanks, made each of them a gift that they used in their battle against Kronos. The Olympians fought against their father and his allies, then overthrew him, throwing him into Tartarus, the deepest pit of the underworld. The gods then divided up the world: Hades got the underworld, Poseidon the sea, and Zeus the sky. Zeus married various titanesses, before marrying his sister Hera. His first wife, a Titan named Metis who “knows most of gods and mortal men,”<sup>63</sup> was fated to give birth to a daughter, who would in turn give birth to a son who would overthrow Zeus. To prevent this prophecy, Zeus tricked Metis and swallowed her. He eventually bore Athena, daughter of Metis, from his own head. Hesiod describes Athena as, “awesome, fight-rousing, army-leading, unwearied mistress whose delight is in war and battles.”<sup>64</sup> The pantheon slowly began to grow from there, adding deities such as the twins Artemis and Apollo, Hephaestus, god of crafts, and Persephone (also known as Kore), amongst innumerable others. Eventually, the Greek pantheon contained “...tens if not hundreds of thousands” of deities,<sup>65</sup> a number so large that no individual could be expected to remember all

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<sup>61</sup> Hesiod, 53-54, lines 454-457.

<sup>62</sup> Hesiod, 54, line 464.

<sup>63</sup> Hesiod, 76, line 886.

<sup>64</sup> Hesiod, 79, lines 925-926.

<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion*, (London: Routledge, Taylor & Frances Group, 2016),

the gods. Only a handful of these deities were worshiped everywhere throughout the Greek world, while others were worshiped only by a few *poleis* or cults dotted around the Mediterranean.

Greek mythology thrived off of cults. Ancient Greek cults were not cults in the modern sense of the world, rather, they were religious organizations devoted to a particular god or hero, as described earlier. Cults helped focus the attention of people in a specific group or *poleis*. Having thousands of gods meant that no one person could remember them all, let alone give them adequate worship. Therefore, individuals generally honored the deities and heroes who had shrines in their *deme* and *polis*.<sup>66</sup> Because of this, individual *poleis* had their own pantheon that they were familiar with. This pantheon would differ from *polis* to *polis*, and town to town within each *polis*. Their pantheons would generally include the major gods but would also include gods or goddesses who were unique to each individual *polis*, such as the goddess Aphaia on Aigina, or deities or heroes associated with individual families or tribes.<sup>67</sup> This complex understanding of deities in the Greek world makes it difficult for historians to come to an understanding of any limited pantheon of major deities.

Though the *poleis* were spread out and fiercely independent there was a common understanding of the major characteristics of the gods, as well as a general familiarity with major myths related to the gods, such as the origin myth recounted earlier. This is thanks in part to the panhellenic games, as well as to authors such as Homer, Hesiod, and dramatists such as Aristophanes whose stories were able to spread. Different scholars have come up with different accounts of which deities made up the pantheon of major Olympians, as well as the number of Olympians that should be counted. Robert Parker suggests that the "...pantheon of twelve to

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<sup>66</sup> Larson, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Larson, 24

thirteen deities was composed of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Dionysos, Hermes, Aphrodite, Demeter (normally with Persephone/Kore) and Herakles, with Hestia at the level of the domestic cult.”<sup>68</sup> Larson acknowledges that in Homeric epics, the pantheon is shaped by the needs of the story, which means that Zeus and Athena are most important, with Apollo, Hera, Poseidon, Hephaistos, and Aphrodite being the next most important deities. She also notes that the “less commonly worshiped gods Hephaistos, Ares and Hades are significant in the epic, while the universally worshiped Dionysos and Demeter appear but are given short shrift, and Hestia is completely ignored.”<sup>69</sup> Hesiod’s *Theogony* lists the pantheon as possessing nineteen members,

...Zeus Aigiochos and mistress Hera  
 Of Argos, who walks in golden sandals, and  
 Zeus Aigiochos’ daughter, owl-eyed Athena,  
 and Phoibos Apollo and archeres Artemis,  
 and Poseidon earth-embracer, earth-shaker,  
 and revered Themis and glancing Aphrodite  
 And gold-crowned Hebe and lovely Dione,  
 Leto, Iapetos, and crafty Kronos,  
 Eos, great Helios, and bright Selene,  
 Gaia, Okeanos, and black Nyx...<sup>70</sup>

This list, a great deal longer than the one provided by Parker, includes Titans along with the Olympians. Trying to assemble a definitive pantheon grows even more complex when

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<sup>68</sup> Larson, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Larson, 25.

<sup>70</sup> Hesiod, 28, lines 11-20.



considering the deities represented on pottery, which are often a combination both of local and panhellenic cults.<sup>71</sup> Though all these accounts disagree on which deities are part of the major pantheon, the common deities listed in each are; Zeus, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Hera, and Hestia, in her role as a domestic goddess, a goddess of the hearth who has little role in myth, but seemingly held a great role in daily life, thanks to her association with the hearth. It is significant that out of Kronos' children, only Hades, god of the dead, does not make anyone's list of the gods in the pantheon. This perhaps is due to the fact that the Greeks themselves did not speak of Hades if they could help it, instead referring to him as "the unseen one", "master of many," "receiver of many," or "rich one."<sup>72</sup> His brothers, Zeus and Poseidon, were major gods, who received much worship. Zeus of course is the epitome of the Greek man, as he is the head of the family, and his world, in charge of everything. Poseidon, as god of the sea, received special attention in Greek society because of the importance of the sea for travel, trade, and warfare.

The fact that there was a generally agreed upon range from which the major gods of the Greek pantheon was drawn from does not in any way mean that the characteristics of the gods in each *polis* were exactly the same. For instance, in different poleis, Athena was referred to with different epithets that helped identify the differences in her character for each version of Athena. So, there was a difference between the Athena Parthenos worshiped in Athens and the Athena Chalkioikos worshiped in Sparta.<sup>73</sup> Each individual *polis* would also have their own interpretation of the gods or goddesses depending on what was important to them, or what other gods they worshiped, reflecting the individuality of each *polis* within the Greek world.

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<sup>71</sup> Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion*, 29-32.

<sup>72</sup> Hesiod, 53.

<sup>73</sup> Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion*, 24.

While ancient Greek temples were not centers of worship, serving instead as dwelling places for their specific god, sacrifices were given at temples. Any worship of a god, including sacrifices, would have taken place outside on temple grounds, instead of inside of the building itself, and most often would have been a community-wide celebration. Temples themselves typically were located on places of importance, such as on mountaintops, near springs, in caves, or places where lightning struck.<sup>74</sup> Locations of the temples were also chosen based on the deities' purpose. For instance, Athena, as a goddess closely associated with cities, typically had temples in cities, while Poseidon, as god of the sea, had temples that were near, or within view of, the sea.<sup>75</sup> The most basic feature of a temple, the absence of which meant that the deity was likely not actively being worshiped, was the altar. The altar is where sacrifices were made, where gifts from worshipers could reach the deity they were worshiping. Altars were only for that specific deity; they could not be used for multiple deities.<sup>76</sup> Sanctuaries within temples were also sacred. Inside them, individuals could seek refuge, and, as they were under the protection of that god or goddess, they could not be removed.<sup>77</sup> In order to retain that sanctity though, temples had to remain pure, and therefore visitors would have to cleanse themselves if they were ritually impure. Examples of ritual impurity include having recently had intercourse, having given birth, having visited a woman who gave birth, murdering someone, or going to a funeral.<sup>78</sup> Without cleansing themselves, people could not participate in worship or sacrifice to the gods, effectively cutting themselves off from the gods. Priests and priestesses served the deities in the temples; gods were served by priests, and goddesses by priestesses, with the notable exception of the cult

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<sup>74</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 3-4.

<sup>75</sup> Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Larson, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Larson, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Larson, 7.

of Dionysus, and of the *Pythia* at Delphi, both of which were male gods who were worshiped by women or had a female priestess.<sup>79</sup> While priests and priestesses had a lot of informal power, they were ultimately under the control of whatever government ruled each individual *polis*.<sup>80</sup>

It is hard to overemphasize the fact that Greek religion was not a religion focused on the individual, though individuals did have roles in the worship of the gods. The relationship was always between the group, be it the *polis*, town, or family, never between the god and an individual. Most individuals never had a specific responsibility related to the gods, but there were certain members of the family and the community who did. The male head of the family had special religious responsibilities, outside of their responsibilities for the daily welfare of the family. They were in charge of rites associated with the hearth, such as the welcoming of a new family member, with other household cults, as well as tending tombs of the family's ancestors. Tombstones ensured that a persons' memory lived on after death, so to have a tombstone deteriorate thanks to lack of care was one of the "great horrors for the Greeks."<sup>81</sup> Other than that, men contributed to their communities' worship. They might go to the temple to make sacrifices on behalf of their families or communities, but they did not worship a deity or hero alone.

Just as with their roles in daily life, women's roles in worship were very different to men's. Women's main interactions with deities came through cults *outside* of the home, an interesting contradiction in a society where women often weren't allowed out of the house without a chaperone. Most records of women's involvement in cults come from dedications archeologists have found, most concerning childbirth or their children.<sup>82</sup> Mikalson notes that the

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<sup>79</sup> Larson, 10.

<sup>80</sup> Parker, "Greek Religion," 311.

<sup>81</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 136.

<sup>82</sup> Miklason, 142.

most common deities for women seem to have been, “Artemis, Asclepius, Athena, and Demeter,” deities associated with childbirth, healing, weaving, and motherhood, important aspects of a woman’s life.<sup>83</sup>

Unmarried Greek girls were excluded from any particular role in their family cult, although they sometimes played a role in the state cult.<sup>84</sup> They were left out of responsibilities in the family cult because their fate was to marry, therefore leaving their family and joining the family of their husband. They would most likely marry a man within their own *polis* though, so participation in the state cult was an important, and common, part of their lives. This was especially important in Athens, where the patron goddess was both female and a virgin, and so special rites could only be done by female virgins, or unmarried young girls. When the girls eventually married, they turned to Hera and Aphrodite for their needs as wives, leaving the forever unmarried virgin Athena behind, and turning to Artemis, Demeter, and Asclepius for their needs as mothers.<sup>85</sup>

### **Women in Greek Religion and Myth**

Goddesses play an extremely important role in Greek religion. There were a range of major goddesses such as Athena, Artemis, Hera, and Demeter, as well as minor deities, such as the Muses and the Graces. In myths, goddesses are very involved in the affairs of mortals, often picking champions to accomplish their goals. Sometimes they do this because they are irritated with another god, as Hera often does when she’s seeking vengeance for Zeus’ multiple

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<sup>83</sup> Mikalson, 142.

<sup>84</sup> Mikalson, 148.

<sup>85</sup> Mikalson, 153.

infidelities. Other times, it's to accomplish a specific goal they have, such as when Athena, along with Apollo, command Perseus to hunt down Medusa and kill her.

Women in Greek mythology have a vast range of roles they can fulfill. However, these roles are typically derived from their relationships with men. The three main roles they can fulfill are the wife who often is a mother, the virgin, or the temptress. There are subsections within each section, such as the virgin who will remain a virgin, or the virgin who throughout the course of the story, will succumb to men, either through marriage, or through rape and subsequent death. Even the major goddesses of the pantheon fall into these categories, though their immortality and power afford them more freedom than mortal women ever have.

Hera is the archetypical Greek wife, who is jealous of her husband's affairs but remains loyal to him. However, Hera wasn't just a woman, she was a powerful goddess in her own right which means that she, unlike most Greek women, was not totally subjugated to every whim of her husband. She was able to, and occasionally did, retaliate for his actions. Demeter is the ultimate mother in the Greek pantheon, even though she lacks a husband. It is her sorrow for the absence of her daughter Persephone that was seen as the cause for the seasons, as she literally went to the ends of the Earth searching for her daughter. Aphrodite is the consummate temptress; she is a wife who consistently cheats on her husband, Hephaestus, with both mortal and immortal lovers. She is the one who began the Trojan War by promising Paris the most beautiful woman in the world; in other words, she causes chaos wherever she goes, exemplifying the chaos that is inherent to all women, the chaos that was the great fear of all Greek men. Athena, Artemis, and Hestia are the three main virgin goddesses mentioned in myth. In the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, the author writes, that Athena, "hath no pleasure in the deeds of golden Aphrodite."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> John Edgar, *The Homeric Hymns*, (United Kingdom: Thin, 1891), 73.

Aphrodite also has not conquered “clear-toned Artemis of the Golden Distaff,”<sup>87</sup> and Hestia also resists Aphrodite, as the deeds of Aphrodite give no pleasure to Hestia, “the chaste maiden, eldest child of Cronos the Crafty.”<sup>88</sup> The reasons for their maidenhood are unclear, though the Homeric Hymns do provide details on how Hestia achieved her virginity. As a reward for asking, “Zeus granted her a glorious gift, and she sat down in the heart of the hall, choosing the best portion. In all temples of the gods is she held in honor, and among all mortals is she the chiefest of the gods.”<sup>89</sup> It is striking that out of the great Greek goddesses, only a few are married.

Mortal women in Greek mythology fall into the same categories as goddesses, though with less power. They also generally tend to shift from one category to another more than their immortal counterparts do. For instance, Atalanta is a girl who wishes to remain single forever, vowing to only marry a man who can beat her in a footrace. Though she defeats several men, eventually she does marry a man who bests her, thus shifting her from virgin to wife. As discussed earlier, Penelope is the ultimate Greek wife, remaining faithful to her husband even when he is absent, doing what she can to maintain Ithaca, the land that he left behind. Helen of Troy serves both as a wife, in her marriage to Menelaus, and as a temptress, in her relationship with Paris, regardless of if she went with him willingly or not. These roles are similar to those found in Greek society. Young women before marriage were expected to be pure virgins. When they became married, they were expected to transition to motherhood, and support their husband, while remaining in the shadows.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Edgar, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Edgar, 74.

<sup>89</sup> Edgar, 74.

<sup>90</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 62.

For a people whose deities were so anthropomorphic, sometimes to a painful extent, it seems shocking that such a patriarchal society would have goddesses who wielded such power. Of course, goddesses are emphatically not mortal women, and therefore are not bound by the same set of limitations as mortal women are. However, like mortal women, they have limitations in their roles. While male gods divide the world between themselves, Zeus gets the sky, Poseidon the sea, Hades the underworld, and women get the scraps left over. They are more associated with activities relating to mortals such as love, war, childbirth, farming, hunting, and the home. They are generally either virgins (in the case of Artemis, Athena, and Hestia) or mothers (Demeter, Hera, Nyx, etc.). They, unlike their male counterparts, are generally monogamous, echoing the expectations for ancient Greek men and women. While the gods have scores of relations, fathering innumerable children with mortals and other divine beings alike, goddesses, for the most part, are either virgins or devoted wives.<sup>91</sup> Aphrodite is the only exception to this, as the goddess of love, she is more often with other lovers, mortal or immortal, than she is with her own husband. Athena and Artemis are the two goddesses whose existence most goes against that of traditional Greek women, as they never marry nor have children, and interact with men, often doing manly things.

Greek mythology also includes a few depictions of groups of women who live apart from men. The goddess Artemis is often described as having numerous women with her who forsake the company of men while in her service, such as the huntress Atalanta. Occasionally, the women in her company will leave and marry men, thus fulfilling the traditional role of women in ancient Greek society, such as Atalanta did. The Amazons are another group of women who live outside the bounds of traditional society as understood by the Greeks. Unlike the women

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<sup>91</sup> Mary R Lefkowitz, "Women in Greek Myth," in *The American Scholar* (54, no. 2, 1985), 210.

associated with Artemis, the Amazons did not swear off the company of men. Rather, they would take male lovers, and have children with them, rearing the girls, and mutilating the boys to use as servants, in an abject reversal of Greek society. Importantly in all myths where heroes fight against Amazons, the heroes always win, proving the superiority of men over women.<sup>92</sup>

### **Athena**

Athena; goddess of the *polis*, weaving, and warcraft. A virgin goddess who was a protector of heroes, and a mighty force in legend. She was one of the main deities of the Greek pantheon, and the patron deity of Athens, though worship of her was spread throughout all the *poleis* and Greek colonies. She looms large in the Greek imagination, through her support of great heroes such as Perseus and Odysseus, as well as her association with many of the ideas central to Greek life. She is also associated with the olive tree, as, according to legend, she created the olive tree in a competition against Poseidon to be the patron deity of Athens. The olive tree was central to Greek life, since from olives they made olive oil, an essential part of their diet, and victors at the Olympic games were crowned with wreaths made from the leaves of this important tree. Athena was also the main deity associated with war, especially organized, hoplite warcraft, rather than the disorganized slaughter represented by Ares, the other deity of war. All of these associations, with war, olives, the *polis*, and weaving, were major sources of her importance for the ancient Greeks.

In many ways, Athena stands alone in Greek myth amongst all the deities. She is at once associated with the outer, masculine world of warcraft and politics, as well as the inner, feminine world of weaving. Her association with these two realms, which are otherwise diametrically

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<sup>92</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 24.



opposed in Greek life, is unique. She, like Artemis, is a goddess who not only participates in but actually leads activities otherwise restricted to men. She is, “an ebullient armed warrior, a shrewd companion of hero-kings, and a patroness of the crafts.”<sup>93</sup> She is outside the traditional roles for women in the house, as she engages with men and decision making in the public sphere.

As a virgin goddess, she, like her fellow virgin goddesses, is separated from most Greek women through her lack of a husband and children. She will never fulfill the most fundamental duties of every Greek woman, to marry and have children — and so she is separated from them. Her unusual birth also draws her further away from women, as not only will she never give birth, she herself never experienced traditional birth. Her father is the sole being involved in her birth, giving him complete dominion over her, with no challenge from a mother figure. Athena’s loyalty then is to him and him alone, not to her mother, as she had nothing to do with her birth. She is estranged from mothers and motherhood even further then, as she has no mother of her own, and will never be a mother.

In art, she is typically pictured in two different ways, either as standing with a shield in spear, or sitting tranquilly and without weapons.<sup>94</sup> She’s typically clothed in a *peplos* (a traditional sort of dress that Greek women wore), with a helmet, *aegis* (sometimes a goat-skin cloak, other times a goatskin shield), and other various accouterments such as a spindle depending on the particular image or statue. Some images combine the two, such as the image of Athena at New Ilium, where Athena, “held a spear in one hand and a spindle in the other.”<sup>95</sup> In other words, Athena is, “the archetype of the masculine woman who finds success in what is

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<sup>93</sup> C. J. Herington, “Athena in Athenian Literature and Cult,” *Greece & Rome* 10, (1963): 62, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/826896>.

<sup>94</sup> Robert Luyster, “Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena,” *History of Religions* 5, no. 1 (1965): 133, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1061807>.

<sup>95</sup> Luyster, 135.

essentially a man's world by denying her own femininity and sexuality."<sup>96</sup> By being distanced from women and femininity in almost every possible way, Athena, and her associations with male activities, is made palatable for the Greeks. In myth, she was often depicted as a woman in name only, kept away from any traditional roles or responsibilities associated with womanhood in ancient Greece, except for her connection with weaving.

Athena's virginity is one of her main characteristics. While virginity and abstinence are not unusual characteristics for major Greek goddesses, in Athena it is taken to the extreme. Modesty, always considered an important characteristic for virgins, is pushed even further with Athena, especially in images of her. Artemis, who is very similar to Athena in many regards, including her virginity, "loves bathing and delights in her own body which she willingly and frequently reveals to the gaze of her nymph. Her naked body is fundamental to her provocative kind of chastity."<sup>97</sup> In contrast, the ancient Greeks regarded Athena with an almost prudish eye, as not only does Athena almost never appear naked in myth, but she is also even born fully clothed. Statues of Athena before 480 BCE also show her fully clothed, with her clothing working as a protective layer, shielding her body, and making it almost masculine.<sup>98</sup> Her *peplos* never gapes, never drapes in a revealing way, and does more to hide her body than enhance it. After 480 though, artists begin to emphasize her feminine features, while never portraying her nude, as they would with other deities, most notably Aphrodite. In this way, they straddle the line between recognizing her as a woman and emphasizing her feminine qualities.

For one of the major deities of ancient Greece, it is startling how little Athena herself fits with Greek culture. She is inextricably tied to it, as goddess of the *polis*, weaving, olive-growing,

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<sup>96</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 5.

<sup>97</sup> Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, "Sexy Athena," in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing, (Brill: Boston, 2001), 245.

<sup>98</sup> Llewellyn-Jones, 246.

and warcraft. However, it doesn't make sense that the Greeks, an intensely patriarchal society, would have a female deity in charge of war and the *polis*. If their gods and goddesses had developed along with their society, rather than being a holdover from an earlier civilization or civilizations, it would have made more sense for Ares to be the main deity of war, as he would become in Roman times as he was shifted from Ares, whom the Greeks greatly disliked, to Mars, whom the Romans greatly admired. If developed by the ancient Greeks without outside influence, Ares likely would have been the god of war, Zeus would have been more associated with the *polis*, and Athena would have been just the goddess of crafts and weaving, a feminine version of Hephaestus. After all, Greek women of all social classes participated in weaving, and so it was clearly an important part of their lives. Athena could have then just been the goddess of weaving and remained important. The fact that the Greeks did not do this, that she remained the goddess of war and the *polis*, two things restricted to men, meant that Athena, or the earlier goddesses she was connected with, must have predated ancient Greek society as we know it, and must have been significant enough in these earlier societies that the very idea of changing Athena and her responsibilities simply did not occur to the Greeks.

It is her association with weaving that most closely ties Athena to Greek women in myth. Weaving was an essential part of women's work, one that women of all ages participated in. While at first glance, weaving may seem to be a distinct departure from the rest of Athena's associations, upon further investigation, it becomes evident that weaving is more closely related to her other duties than it may at first seem, as weaving creates cloth, which is essential for the civilized life of the Greeks. Weaving then, just like war, olives, and the *polis* is essential for the very nature of civilized Greek society. Athena in the end is a goddess who is inextricably tied to Greek life, associated with creations and ideas that tie them together.

Weaving is not something just tacked on later, it is something that is an essential part of her characterization in myth and in ritual, and something that has been identified with Athena as early as the poems of Homer.<sup>99</sup> Weaving is an artform for her and one that myths show that she cares deeply about. In the myth about Arachne, an origin myth for spiders related by the Roman poet Ovid, the extent of Athena's care for weaving is shown. After participating in a weaving contest against the skilled mortal weaver Arachne, Athena turns her into a spider when she begins to become too proud.<sup>100</sup> This in and of itself is not unusual, as there are many myths about gods changing the form of mortals as punishment, for instance, Apollo gave King Midas donkey ears as punishment for awarding a satyr first place in a music contest over him.<sup>101</sup> This story about Arachne fits well within a broader category of Greek myths, where it serves to remind humans not to grow too big for their mortal natures, to not think they can challenge the will of the gods, or that they might be better than the gods. For their gods, no matter how humanlike they may sometimes seem, are still divine beings who will (and often do) strike out in anger against followers acting poorly, not for moral failings, but rather for attempting to make themselves better than the gods, to go beyond the bounds of their mortality. It also is interesting is that Athena is defending her skill as a weaver, just as Apollo was defending his skill as a musician. This shows the level to which weaving was associated with Athena, because if it hadn't been, if she hadn't cared, she wouldn't have reacted in such anger to a skilled mortal.

Weaving and spinning have much larger mythical connections than just their association with Athena. Not only does weaving tie women of all classes together, it also has mythical associations with fate, life, and death. While Athena was the foremost deity associated with

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<sup>99</sup> Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 139.

<sup>100</sup> Hamilton, *Mythology*, 426.

<sup>101</sup> Hamilton, 412.

weaving, she was not the only deity associated with it. The *Moirai*, also known as the Fates, or spinners, were a trinity of deities who were reputed to spin the fates and lives of every human being. Their names were Klotho (Spinner), Lachesis (Measurer), and Atropos (Unbendable), and they were defined by their relationship with the spindle. For each human they spun a thread, the length of which corresponded to an individual's life, and within which was their fates, as determined by the *Moirai*.<sup>102</sup> In this way, weaving and spinning are connected with the fate of every man, woman, and child born. The *Moirai* decreed the ways in which a person's life would turn out regardless of their status in society. Fate bound everyone in ancient Greek society, from the lowliest slave, to the mightiest heroes. Even the gods cannot change the fate of an individual, and for that reason, the three *Moirai* were greatly respected and feared. Weaving, women's work, determines fate, and all men, even the mighty heroes of myth such as Achilles and Herakles, are bound by fate, by women's work. Athena's association with weaving, then, is much larger than a simple association with the feminine world, maintaining her connection to womanhood. Weaving has a larger connection with fate, with the gods' involvement in every individual's life. Athena's connection with weaving, her mastery of it, "identifies her as a powerful spinner of fate, and this in turn, implies her mastery of, and special association with, both birth and death."<sup>103</sup> Weaving, just like her other associations, ties her to the very fate of every individual.

The main festival that celebrated Athena was the *Panathenia*, which celebrated her birth. It was held every year in Athens, with every fourth year being the Greater Panathenia. One of the most important parts of the Greater Panathenia was the presentation of a new *peplos* to the olive wood statue of Athena.<sup>104</sup> The olive-wood statue of Athena was life-sized, crudely carved, and

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<sup>102</sup> Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 139.

<sup>103</sup> Luyster, 143.

<sup>104</sup> Kutbay, "Some Observations on the Female Weaver in Greek Classical Art," 22.

ancient.<sup>105</sup> Despite the crude nature of it, it was incredibly important to the ancient Athenians, as “when the Persians came in 480, it was the only divine image that is recorded to have been carried to safety from the doomed city...and six hundred years later, when Pausanias wrote his guide-book to Greece, the piece of wood was still, in his words, the ‘holiest thing’ of all Attica.”<sup>106</sup> The *peplos* presented to this statue every fourth year was saffron yellow, and intricately decorated with scenes from the legendary battles between the gods and the giants.<sup>107</sup> The robe was woven by four young girls, between the ages of seven and ten, who carefully wove and embroidered the *peplos* in preparation for the Greater Panathenia.<sup>108</sup> Aside from the presentation of the robe, the Greater Panathenia also included athletic competitions not only for Athenians, but also for competitors from other *poleis*, just as the Olympic games did.<sup>109</sup> The Panathenia festival was one of the few festivals in ancient Athens that included *all* people who lived in Athens, not just citizens. On the day of the festival, everyone, including metics, freed slaves, and visitors, would gather and participate in a large procession to the Acropolis. “Prominent in the procession would be one hundred Athenian girls carrying baskets...”<sup>110</sup> These girls were young virgins, chosen from prominent families specifically for this honor.

The legends of Athena, the records of her worship, all relay how men interpreted her. In this, as in everything else, next to nothing is known about women’s thoughts about Athena. How did they interpret this goddess of wisdom and weaving, who was between the masculine and feminine worlds in which they lived? Did they recognize in her a fellow woman, to whom they

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<sup>105</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 72.

<sup>106</sup> Herington, “Athena in Athenian Literature and Cult,” 62.

<sup>107</sup> Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 72.

<sup>108</sup> Mikalson, 74.

<sup>109</sup> Mikalson, 79.

<sup>110</sup> Mikalson, 76.

could sacrifice in hopes of health? Did they tell stories about her as they spun thread and wove cloth that no longer survive? It is likely that these questions will never have answers, and only records of events such as the Panathenia give us clues as to the way they thought about her.

### **Origins of Athena**

Despite the fact that Athena plays such an important role in Greek life, little is known about her origins. While to some extent this can be said about every deity, Athena is unique because she does not fit with Greek culture, specifically with Athenian culture. In myth she rejects almost all notions of femininity, though she retains associations with the feminine art of weaving. Her origins may give a clue as to why she is so estranged from ancient Greek notions of feminine behavior.

Her earliest origins may date back to the Indo-Europeans. While there is little that is known with certainty about the ancient Indo-Europeans who fled the flooding of the Black Sea, there are conclusions that scholars have been able to come to by examining the cultures that descended from the fugitives. One of the consistent things scholars have been able to identify is two gods, which are, “succinctly, a male figure of fertility associated with boundaries and a female figure of prosperity associated with warriors.”<sup>111</sup> This female figure of prosperity and warriors clearly survived in ancient Greece as Athena. The immense cultural importance of this early goddess must have ensured her survival through the centuries, surviving centuries of change and turmoil, surviving through the collapse of Mycenaean society and the Dark Ages, to emerge as Athena. It seems likely that her importance might have been further reinforced by the survival of Athens, her patron city, throughout the collapse of the Myceneans and through the

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<sup>111</sup> Roger D. Woodard, “The Disruption of Time in Myth and Epic,” *Arethusa* 35, no. 1 (2002): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44578450.83>.

dark ages, emerging as a powerful *polis*. The survival of her patron city would have only furthered her importance and ensured her survival, especially as later Greek memory held that Athens was the only urban center to survive the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, emerging as a dominant *polis* in classical Greece.

Athena is, of course, closely associated with warriors, but her connection with prosperity seems a bit more vague, especially as she is a virgin goddess. The most obvious connection with prosperity comes from Athena's association with olive trees, which were extremely important to Greek life, and cultivation of which ensured a prosperous life. However, despite her virginity, there are also ways in which she is associated with reproductive prosperity. In Athens, girls who were about to be married were brought by their parents to the Acropolis to offer sacrifices to Athena for the fruitfulness of marriage. After the marriage, the "the priestess of Athena *Polias* would bear the aegis of the goddess to their home, a custom evidently designed to promote the birth of offspring."<sup>112</sup> In some way then, not remembered in myth, Athena must have been closely associated with reproductive prosperity. Some scholars disagree with this, saying that these rituals have no relation to reproductive prosperity, and that, instead, they are connected to her mythical role as a protector of children, as an extension of her role as protector of the *polis*.<sup>113</sup> Other scholars though insist that this is more evidence that Athena must have at one point been a fertility goddess, as evidenced through the various names in which she was addressed, such as "lady", "mistress," and "queen", epithets which are traditionally associated with mother goddesses, who are often fertility goddesses.<sup>114</sup> They further this notion by pointing at the example of Elis, where it is noted that the "ancient cults had a way of resisting

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<sup>112</sup> Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 137.

<sup>113</sup> Luyster, 137.

<sup>114</sup> Luyster, 136.



transformation, the goddess was formally worshiped as Athena Meter (“mother”) and it was said that she was responsibility for the great fertility of the women there.”<sup>115</sup>

It must be asked then, how does a mother goddess become a virgin goddess, who in myth never has a consort nor gives birth to children. Sarah Pomeroy suggests that,

Artemis of classical Greece probably evolved from the concept of a primitive mother goddess, and both she and her sister Athena were considered virgins because they had never submitted to a monogamous marriage. Rather, as befits mother goddesses, they had enjoyed many consorts. Their failure to marry, however, was misinterpreted as virginity by succeeding generations of men who connected loss of virginity only with conventional marriage.<sup>116</sup>

This slow transition noted by Pomeroy could account for the connections Athena held in ritual practice to reproductive prosperity, despite the complete lack of anything to do with reproduction in her myths. This relates back to the Indo-European goddess who is likely the most distant predecessor for Athena. This, however, is not to say that Athena as the Greeks knew her was the exact replica of the Indo-European goddess, as deities shift over time, however slowly, just as culture itself changes. Thus, it is important to consider the roles that other civilizations had in shaping Athena into the goddess the Greeks knew and worshiped.

In looking into the origins of Athena, it is perhaps best to look at the predecessors to classical Greek society, the Minoans and the Mycenaeans. They played fundamental roles in the foundation of early Greek society, influencing the myths of the Greeks, and likely the way in which their culture developed. Therefore, it is understandable that their deities would play important roles in the formation of classical Greek deities. As mentioned in the section on the early inhabitants of Greece, scholars have long drawn connections between Athena and the snake

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<sup>115</sup> Luyster, 137.

<sup>116</sup> Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, 6.

goddess found in Minoan temples. This makes sense, as, after all, one of Athena's symbols is a snake. In many images of the goddess, there is often a snake coiled beside her which, as noted in Herodotus' *Histories*, was closely associated with Athena. He writes, "It is said by the Athenians that a great snake living in their temple guards the Acropolis."<sup>117</sup> The Acropolis was where her temple in Athens, the famous Parthenon, was located. In her mythos, there are multiple myths that involve Athena and snakes. In one, she turns Medusa into a snake-haired monster whose gaze turns men to stone as a punishment. According to some myths and descriptions of images of Athena, her *aegis*, one of her most important symbols, is decorated with snakes. Some myths combine the previous two, describing the *aegis* as having the head of a gorgon, likely Medusa, on it. There are also myths that tell of a son, either biological or a ward, who has two snake tails for legs.<sup>118</sup> These numerous connections with snakes help provide evidence for her connections with the early Minoan goddess.

Aside from mythical connections, there are also material connections that can be made. Martin P. Nilsson makes note of the fact that the Parthenon was built on the ruins of a Mycenaean palace. This seems to suggest a continuity between Athena and the previous deity that was worshiped there, especially given that later Greek memory remembered that Athena had been worshiped there from Mycenaean times on through the Dark Ages, a connection that ties Athena even closer to this earlier deity. Nilsson suggests that Athena was originally a private goddess of the rulers of Mycenae, and that as their power collapsed, their previously personal deity became a public one.<sup>119</sup> He also notes an image of a shield-bearing goddess found

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<sup>117</sup> Herodotus. *Histories*. Translated by Godley, Alfred Denis. London: W. Heinman, 1921, VIII, 41.

<sup>118</sup> Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 146.

<sup>119</sup> Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, trans. F.J. Fielden, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1952), 25.

in Mycenae, who he says was a precursor to Athena.<sup>120</sup> He argues that she might have begun as a protector of the household, but then, as she became associated with the ruling class in Mycenae, her role would have expanded to become protectress of the city. Her warlike associations then, according to this theory, would have developed naturally within a warlike society such as that of the Mycenaeans.<sup>121</sup> In regard to the Minoans, Nilsson expands the relationship even further, pointing out that in Homer she is the only deity who transforms herself, or others, into creatures, typically birds. This, when connected with her cult relationship with both the owl and the crow,<sup>122</sup> provides the basis for Nilsson's connections with the Minoan household goddess, who was apparently associated both with snakes, and with birds.<sup>123</sup>

Other than the Indo-European goddess, and the Minoan and Mycenaean goddesses, there are other early goddesses who might have had an impact on the development of Athena. One is Kybele/Cybele, also known as Meter, a goddess who originated in Phrygia, sometime around the beginning of the first millennium.<sup>124</sup> While there is no unified view on what exactly Meter was associated with, the consensus is that she was a goddess of power and protection, and likely fertility. She appears to be "first and foremost a goddess of power, a city protector, and the most eminent official goddess – the mother and protector of the king and the state."<sup>125</sup> In imagery, Meter was often pictured with predatory birds, and occasionally lions.<sup>126</sup> She was worshiped in Rome, as well as in Athens and other *poleis*.<sup>127</sup> Meter first appears in Greece in the *poleis* of

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<sup>120</sup> Nilsson, 26.

<sup>121</sup> Nilsson, 26-27.

<sup>122</sup> Luyster, "Symbolic Elements in the Cult of Athena," 151-152.

<sup>123</sup> Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, 27.

<sup>124</sup> Birgitte Bøgh, "Mother of the Gods: Goddesses of Power and Protector of Cities," *Numen* 59, no. 1 (2012): 34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23244928>.

<sup>125</sup> Bøgh, 33-38.

<sup>126</sup> Bøgh, 35.

<sup>127</sup> Bøgh, 35.

Perinthos, Salmydessos, Apollonia, Myrmekion, among others around the sixth century BC, where cult images of Meter have been found in Greek style.<sup>128</sup> In order for images of Meter to begin showing up in Greek colonies, the Greeks must have known of her earlier, and the evidence suggests that they did. Traditionally, Meter is most closely associated with Rhea, the Greek Titan, and occasionally as Demeter or Leto.<sup>129</sup> Despite those associations, Meter's importance as a goddess of power and protection seems to align her with Athena. Her association with birds of prey might have furthered these connections, as Athena was also associated with birds, specifically owls. It seems likely that connections with Meter might have been made, and that as she was absorbed into the Greek pantheon, some of her duties were shifted to Athena, who already had similar duties.

How then to reconcile this theory, where Athena originates within Minoan religion, with the theory that puts her origins all the way back with the Indo-Europeans? It seems likely that the Indo-European peoples who became the Mycenaeans combined their cult with the already-existing Minoan cult in a clear example of religious syncretism. They would have combined their deities with those of the Minoans, finding similarities and creating a hybrid deity. This merger of deities is common throughout the ancient world, perhaps most evident in the Romans adoption and subsequent adaptation of the Greek deities. The early Mycenaean goddess would have been very similar to the Indo-European goddess, with hints of the Minoan goddess woven in. She would have been adapted to fit the changing society, perhaps becoming more warlike to reflect the more aggressive Mycenaean culture.

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<sup>128</sup> Bøgh, 39.

<sup>129</sup> Vassileva, "Further Considerations on the Cult of Kybele," 60.

However, to end with the combination of Minoan and Mycenaean deities greatly underplays the importance other cultures had on the development of the young Greek culture. While the Greeks of the Classical period were thoroughly convinced of their own superiority, the Greeks of the Archaic were not so convinced. “The notion of a superior center from which the world is thought to have been viewed was almost certainly absent in the Archaic period. Greeks were familiar with the highly developed and more ancient peoples of the East, while their own position was peripheral. Their starting point was thus not a European center but a place between two worlds: the politically advanced Near East and the more fragmented Mediterranean and Black Sea areas.”<sup>130</sup> This understanding of the advanced cultures that surrounded them would have made them more accepting of others’ ideas, and deities. After all, they continued to be influenced by outside cultures throughout their history, so it only makes sense that during the Dark Ages, and prior this influence still would have been common.

The ancient Greeks were aware of the Egyptians, often trading with them. Early Greek art dating all the way back to the Archaic Period shows strong Egyptian influences, particularly in the depiction of people.<sup>131</sup> They had found in Egypt wealth and civilization at a level they could not have previously imagined.<sup>132</sup> Egypt, united into one kingdom, ruled over by one king, or Pharaoh, well protected from outside forces, with a flourishing culture, developed mythology, and firm understanding of themselves would have seemed deeply impressive to the Greeks whose own independent *poleis* emerging out of the Dark Ages must have seemed shabby and weak in comparison. The people of the Aegean had been in contact with the Egyptians for centuries. “Prior to the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 B.C., there were two eras during which

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<sup>130</sup> Malkin, Irad, *A Small Greek World: Networks in the Ancient Mediterranean*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>131</sup> Griffin, Introduction, 6.

<sup>132</sup> Forrest, “Greece: The History of the Archaic Period,” 20.

there were close relations between the two countries. The first was the period directly following the collapse of Minoan Crete, about 1400 BC to approximately 1340 BC.”<sup>133</sup> During the Mycenaean era, before the Dark Ages, the Egyptians and the Mycenaeans were in contact, and fairly regular contact as well. This can be seen through much of the artwork that has been recovered from Mycenaean sites.

This communication and trade was cut off abruptly when Mycenaean Greece fell into the Dark Ages, around the same time where Egyptian records record attacks from “Sea Peoples,” who, as discussed earlier, very possibly could have been Mycenaeans fleeing the collapse of their society. Contact during that time stopped, as Egypt did her best to defend herself against the mysterious attackers from the sea, all of their attention was devoted to that rather than to outside trade and communication. After they successfully repelled the last great wave of the Sea Peoples at the expense of their empire in 1176 BCE, Egypt was able to begin rebuilding trade, and slowly opened to outsiders. Slowly Egypt and Greece began to rebuild their relations, which eventually flourished, to the point where Greek mercenaries were not an uncommon sight in Egypt.<sup>134</sup> Herodotus in 430 BCE writing in his *Histories* said of Egypt and Egyptians, “...nowhere are there so many marvelous things, nor in the whole world beside there to be seen so many things of unspeakable greatness...”<sup>135</sup> While taking Herodotus at his word is always a tricky undertaking, as he more often than not mixes fact and fiction together with the ease of a storyteller, what can be gleaned from his text is the way Greeks thought about their neighbors. The ancient Greeks were very impressed by the Egyptians, though they often found Egyptian culture a bit alien.

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<sup>133</sup> Ruth Ilsley Hicks, “Egyptian Elements in Greek Mythology,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 93 (1962): 91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/283753>.

<sup>134</sup> Hicks, 92.

<sup>135</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, 2:35.

The centuries of contact between the two peoples meant that there are definite Greek influences on certain Egyptian myths, and definite Egyptian influences in lots of Greek myths, and deities. Greeks and Egyptians shared lots of mythological connections; such as the cult of the Bull, the worship of Isis/Iris, the goddess Io, the migration of the Danaides into Greece, Helen and Menelaus in Egypt, and the killing of King Busiris by Herakles.<sup>136</sup> These myths are shared between the cultures, and involve characters from both, such the myth of Herakles (a Greek hero) killing Busiris (an Egyptian king). It is plausible, then, that in this interweaving of myths, influences would have made their way into the deities. For Athena, the Egyptian goddess who bears the most similarities to her is the goddess Neith, who is associated with war and weaving, just as Athena is.

Neith, unlike Athena, is not the preeminent war deity of her culture. That honor would fall to Horus, who was also closely associated with kings and kingship. Neith was one of the minor deities of war, often pictured as crossed arrows. Egyptian culture was just as strict as Greek culture about boundaries between men and women, yet they also had a female goddess of war. The way they rationalized it was that, according to texts from the Temple of Esna, Neith was said to be “two-thirds male and one-third female.”<sup>137</sup> To modern audiences this division does not make sense, but divisions like this are not terribly uncommon in ancient texts. Gilgamesh, for example, was said to be two-thirds god and one-third mortal. The Egyptians were able to conceive of a goddess who was part male and part female because their gods already straddled the line between human and animal, between our world and the *duat*. Therefore, conceiving of a goddess associated with war who was sometimes reckoned as more male than

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<sup>136</sup> Hicks, 91.

<sup>137</sup> Uroš Matic, “Gender in Ancient Egypt: Norms, Ambiguities, and Sensualities,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79, no. 3 (2016): 177. <https://doi.org/10.5615/neareastarch.79.3.0174>.

female, but was still identified as a goddess, was not as large of a stretch to their imagination as it sounds to modern ears.

It does not seem outside the bounds of reason that Neith might have been an inspiration for Athena. After all, the Greeks had drawn inspiration from the Egyptians from the very beginning of their contacts. It seems plausible then that the early Greeks, encountering a goddess similar to Athena, might have unconsciously brought back some of Neith's features, traits, or legends to be woven into their own myths about Athena. This syncretism of religion was incredibly common throughout the ancient world, occurring constantly throughout history.

The connection between Athena and Neith did not end during the Greek era. During the Greco-Roman period, when the Roman empire stretched over most of the Western world, spreading Greco-Roman religion, cults sprang up that worshiped deities from multiple cultures. The combination of Athena and Neith would have seemed like an obvious one to worshipers, as their many similarities had been noted. Evidence of their connection can perhaps best be seen through examination of festival lamps created in honor of Athena-Neith. These festival lamps were made from terracotta, so they were cheap, and therefore, affordable for the majority of the population. They are not shaped like normal lamps, rather, they take the form of a goddess.<sup>138</sup> This goddess is clearly a combination of Athena and Neith, as she is, "dressed in a *chiton* with an aegis and a crested helmet as well. The large torch, however, – quite an un-Greek attribute for Athena – identifies this figure with the Egyptian war-goddess Neith."<sup>139</sup> While exact details of the worship of these two deities together are not known, the fact that they are identified together

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<sup>138</sup> Květa Smoláriková, "Egyptian Nocturnal Festival of Lamps in Honour of Athena-Neith," *Studia Hercynia* 20, no. 1 (2016): 29.

<sup>139</sup> Smoláriková, 30.



is remarkable. Perhaps this is a later example of what might have happened during the Minoan-Mycenaean merger, where the deities were slowly drawn together over time.

### **Athena in Rome: Minerva**

Just as the earlier Minoan and Mycenaean societies faded, so too did that of the Greeks. After the conquests of Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great, the once independent *poleis* of Greece became part of Alexander's empire, which crumbled after his death.<sup>140</sup> After a few centuries of Hellenism, a period of mixed Greek and Roman influence, the Romans came to dominate the Mediterranean, and eventually, western Europe, with the boundaries of their empire stretching from the southern border of Scotland in the north to the Sahara in the south, to Spain in the west and Mesopotamia in the east. Their empire would last for centuries, and vestiges of it survived through the late Middle Ages. The influence of the Romans in modern times cannot be understated; as it is from the Romans that Western civilization takes the form it does and is as dominant as it has been.

Despite the myriad of important advances and innovations made by the Romans, their culture owed a heavy debt to the Greeks, as there was a great deal of continuity between the two. Their religion especially was indebted to the Greeks, as not only are many of their myths versions of Greek myths, but many of their deities were Romanized versions of Greek deities. Zeus became Jupiter, Hera became Juno, Aphrodite became Venus, and Athena became Minerva. Sometimes the deities didn't even shift names, such as in the case of Apollo, while in other cases the deities underwent a massive change, such as in the case of Ares to Mars, where

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<sup>140</sup> Simon Price, "The History of the Hellenistic Period," in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 365.

he went from a disdained deity of war to a revered deity of the legion and father of the mythical founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus.

Athena was one of the deities who changed when making the transition to Rome. When she became Minerva, she became less associated with warfare, and more associated with crafts. As one of the Capitoline Triad, she retained her importance, even though the nature of that importance changed as she was Romanized. For Romans, the chief importance of Minerva was, “as the goddess of all activities involving mental skill. She was the patroness of craftspeople and skilled workers...[and] the goddess of schoolchildren.”<sup>141</sup> Her associations with warcraft were given to Mars, and she became more of a peaceful goddess, though she never lost all her association with warfare.

While the exact nature of how the Romans came into contact with the Greek deities is not known, several hypotheses have been suggested. Some scholars attribute the introduction of Greek gods into Italy to the Etruscans. However, Fritz Graf asserts that Minerva, like all the other Romanized versions of Greek deities, existed prior to Roman encounters with Greek civilization, but that over the centuries of contact, the more anthropomorphic Greek deities overtook the more abstract Italian deities, resulting in deities that are a blend of the pre-Greek deities and the Greek deities themselves. He furthers this by saying that Minerva is “inseparable from Greek Athena,” but that, as the names of the deities themselves are so different, “there must have been an Italian (Latin, Etruscan) divinity bearing that name who entered the Roman pantheon from the outside. But any trace of this divinity has been obliterated by the Romans’

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<sup>141</sup> Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 509.

identification with Greek Athena – an identification which goes back to the Archaic age.”<sup>142</sup> The earlier deity he refers to is the Etruscan goddess, whose name was *Mrnva*. He furthers his argument by saying that the Roman Minerva is, “an abstraction from the many different forms the goddess Athena had.”<sup>143</sup>

The Romans and the Greeks coexisted for centuries. The area in Italy where Greek colonies were concentrated was called *Magna Graecia*, or Greater Greece. The extent of the interchange of goods and ideas that happened between these peoples was immense and long-lasting, making any investigation into the precise dates of cultural exchanges near impossible.

Athena never stopped evolving. As the Romans transformed her into Minerva, and spread her throughout their empire, they assured that she would remain important to all civilizations affected by the Romans. And so she has, as images of her appear everywhere, and she and the ideas associated with her were embraced by everyone, from monarchies, to revolutions, including the French revolutions.<sup>144</sup> Female leaders throughout time have used her as a model or have been compared to her, especially Queen Elizabeth I of England, Marie de Medici, and Catherine the Great of Russia.<sup>145</sup> It is thanks to the Romans that Athena and Minerva are as significant as they are. Through the Roman empire, Minerva was able to spread, and it is through the Roman empire that she retained her importance, even as empires fell, as the Roman divinities were replaced with the Christian God, and as the centuries passed by. The Roman conception of

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<sup>142</sup> Fritz Graf, “Athena and Minerva: Two Faces of One Goddess?” in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. By Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Brill: Boston, 2001), 139.

<sup>143</sup> Graf, 139.

<sup>144</sup> Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing, “Athena Past and Present: An Introduction,” in *Athena in the Classical World*, ed. By Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing (Brill: Boston, 2001), 5-6.

<sup>145</sup> Deacy, 5.

Minerva is essential to the modern understanding of her, and to her importance. It is thanks to the Romans that Minerva and Athena remain popular, while deities such as Neith and Meter faded into obscurity.

### **Conclusion**

After looking at the influences on Athena, it is clear that this seemingly most Greek of all Greek goddesses was not, in fact, as Greek as might be expected. With origins stretching all the way back to the proto Indo-European peoples, it is clear that Athena is an ancient goddess, more ancient than the Greeks themselves. This idea of Athena, a female deity, being associated both with women's work such as weaving, and with organized warfare, an activity that was most firmly in the realm of men's work, was one that the Greeks could never fully embrace, but neither could they forget or ignore her gender.

When the Indo-Europeans arrived in Greece, they encountered the Minoans, whose snake goddess likely reminded them of their own mother goddess. Their deity slowly began to absorb qualities of the Minoan goddess, and perhaps also cult practices. Perhaps the most recognizable influence that the Minoan goddess had on this early form of Athena is the association with snakes that never quite left her, continuing through Classical Greece. When Minoan civilization was replaced by Mycenaean civilization, their goddess, who became Athena, was a fully hybridized form of the two goddesses. The Minoan deity survived in Mycenaean civilization, as so many Minoan things did, albeit in an altered form. This hybrid goddess was closely associated with warcraft, especially with protection of the home and the city, an extension perhaps of a mother deity's association with the household.

The Mycenaeans were prolific traders, and one of their consistent trade partners throughout their history was the powerful Egyptian empire. Neith was a mother goddess associated with weaving and warcraft and was one of the oldest deities in Egypt. Upon encountering Neith, it seems likely that the Mycenaeans would have associated her with Athena. Certainly, the two goddesses were closely connected, and were even worshiped together in the Greco-Roman era. It makes sense then that the Mycenaeans, in contact with the Egyptians, might have conflated Neith with their Athena, adding characteristics of Neith to Athena. While there is no direct evidence for this, it is a reasonable hypothesis, given the trade between the two civilizations, and the influence that Egyptians had on other facets of Greek life, such as in the arts, as early as the period of Archaic Greece. Another goddess who likely had an influence on the early development of Athena was the Phrygian goddess Meter. Meter is a mother goddess who is sometimes seen as protector of the state and the city.<sup>146</sup> Although Meter doesn't begin to show up in Greece until the sixth century BCE, it is certain that the Greeks were aware of her before then, even if they didn't leave material evidence behind that can be interpreted today. The Mycenaeans, active traders that they were, likely would have encountered Meter and associated her with their premier goddess.

By the time the Mycenaean civilization fell, and the Greeks entered the Dark Age, the goddess who would emerge as Athena had several of her important characteristics already in place. She was associated with the protection of cities, which would evolve into her association with the *polis*. Her association with snakes, particularly the snake that was rumored to have lived underneath the acropolis, was established with the influence of the Minoan goddess who is so strongly associated with snakes. Her affiliation with weaving is harder to pin down, but weaving

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<sup>146</sup> Birgitte Bøgh, "Mother of the Gods: Goddesses of Power and Protector of Cities."

is something that has been important for people throughout history, and something that has had close associations with women since its introduction. The early Indo-European goddess might have been associated with weaving and passed her associations on to Athena. The associations with war come from this early goddess and were likely only reinforced by other goddesses Athena was blended with, such as Neith and Meter. The association of Athena with war, particularly organized war, was so important that no Greeks could think to alter the two. Even when Athena was adopted by Rome as the goddess Minerva, she never lost her association with warcraft, even when she was merged with a more peaceful goddess of crafts.

As all these influences came together, creating the Athena that was known by the Greeks of the Classical era, some things were changed. Most significant is the conception of her virginity, or lack thereof. The Indo-European goddess who I have argued is the oldest ancestor of Athena was a mother goddess, and therefore seemingly not a virgin. Most of the other goddesses connected with Athena were also mother goddesses, who were very closely connected with fertility, especially reproductive fertility. Meter is the supreme Phrygian mother goddess, associated, of course, with fertility. While Neith is only one of many Egyptian mother goddesses, and is not the main mother goddess, she is, in some accounts, the mother of Ra, which elevates her status. While no exact details are known about Minoan or Mycenaean goddesses, many of the features of the surviving statuary suggests that they also were fertility or mother goddesses of some sort. It seems odd then that Athena, alone out of all these goddesses, would be a virgin. However, when one remembers the society from which she took her classical form, it begins to make sense.

The Greeks, for all their virtues, were extremely misogynistic, especially the Athenians, from whom so much of our information comes. The Athenians, with their rigid notions of

gender, were unable to conceive of a deity who had associations with both masculine and feminine roles. This was exacerbated by the fact that the ancient Greeks as a whole didn't trust women very much, as explained earlier in the paper. Women were chaos, created by the gods as punishment for men. Men on the other hand were supposedly rational, the opposites of women as much as possible. Thus, to make Athena palatable, to make her associations with war and wisdom make sense, they attempted to remove any trace of sexuality she once had. If Athena was a virgin, then she would never, by their reckoning, have any desire that might get in the way of her helping Greek heroes. Therefore she, unlike Aphrodite, could be trusted. She represented no threat to men, since she was no temptation. Even Artemis, who was the other main virgin goddess, had her virginity tested a few times, as men spied on her and her women as they bathed. There are almost no stories however where anyone, intentionally or unintentionally, attempts to see Athena bathing, as she, unlike Artemis, never appears to bathe, always appearing fully clothed in myth. Athena is completely and totally separated from any vestige of sexuality in popular myths. Cult practices are a different matter altogether, as the associations of Athena with things typically associated with mother goddesses were retained.

While the exact causes of this shift from mother goddess to a virgin goddess are not known, it seems likely that it follows a shift in society, as it slowly evolved from a more egalitarian society to the patriarchal society that so dominated Greece throughout the ancient period. It seems likely that as women were relegated to the background, while men alone contributed to public life, the roles of their gendered deities began to shift as well. As the spheres in which men and women, especially men and women of the upper classes, became further estranged, women began to be othered. Mother goddesses, who created life, began to be seen as a threat to the total power of men, as discussed by Pomeroy. Women's sexuality was a threat, as it

distracted men from their purpose, whatever that purpose may be. Female goddesses as a group began to become more important to women, while male gods were important for men. Athena, however, could not be removed from the male sphere, regardless of her gender. Her ties to protection, to war, were too ancient for the Greeks to even conceive of separating the two. So, the only way for Greek men to attempt to reconcile these two seemingly irreconcilable ideas, femininity and war, was to use her virginity as a separator. It seems likely that her virginity allowed them to view her as a more sexless being, stripped of the dangers associated with women. It is notable, as pointed out by Mary R. Lefkowitz, that all the major goddesses, other than Aphrodite, are either virgins, or no longer engage in relations with male gods, even if they had in the past, such as Demeter, who after giving birth to Persephone, has no further affairs in mythology. Cult practices might focus on Demeter's fertility, especially in her association with the harvest, but myths do not associate her with male partners, be they divine gods or mortal humans.

The essence of Athena then is consistent from the time the Greeks emerge from their Dark Ages. While certain things about her may shift, the core set of associations tied to her do not. Athena is always associated with wisdom, with warcraft, weaving, and often with crafts in general, turning forces of nature into elegant crafts. Her virginity was the shield that stopped her femininity from being expressed and becoming a danger for men, allowing her to retain the importance that she had always held. The Greeks, who were always incorporating new ideas into their own culture, never stopped adapting her. While perceptions of Athena from *polis* to *polis* varied greatly, these core beliefs were the same.

Cult practices involving Athena differed, often in significant ways, from the ways she is spoken about in myths and epics. Even in Athens, where women and men were the most



separated, and the idea of Athena's virginity was the most important, there were rituals around marriage and birth that included Athena and her priestesses. Myths might sever Athena from any traces of sexuality, but cults never quite made it that far. Athena, while no means a goddess closely associated with childbirth or marriage, still played an important role in these two important events.

While there are many details of her evolution that cannot be known for certain, given the sources currently available, I think this analysis I provide is likely. It consults a wide range of sources and draws conclusions from both primary and secondary sources. However, this research is just the beginning. Further research could be done by considering even more deities and taking a more critical look at Greek cult practices, using inscriptions and other sorts of evidence. It would also be interesting to consider the ways in which Athena is related to other goddesses, especially Artemis, who shares many similar characteristics with Athena, even if she plays a less prominent role in ancient Greek cult practice and mythology. Despite that, this study, which considers both the culture in which Athena developed, and the cultures from which influence might have come, gives important insights into the development of this most widespread and panhellenic of all Greek goddesses. Understanding the contradictions present in Athena provides a richer understanding of the development of Greek society, and the ways in which earlier cultures affected the development of Athena.

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