

Zeus: the man, the myth, the legend



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Throughout the pantheon of Greek and Roman myth many of the gods are depicted in only one, revered gaze. Zeus on the other hand is depicted as many things which include; the ruler of the other gods, a brother, a warrior, a tyrant, a just king, a vengeful deity, an adulterer and a rapist. Zeus embodies what many perceived to be perfect masculinity in antiquity. He was the target of deception and revenge, mostly from his angered wife Hera, but he was the target of many vengeful acts none the less. However the one aspect in Zeus' canon that is most important in explaining why he was such an important figure in Mythology is that he was depicted as a father, even in myths where he was portrayed in another light such as a warrior or as a son attempting to usurp his father's position, his patriarchal side always showed in some manner in many of the stories.

Zeus' name in Greek comes from a root word meaning bright. It is interesting to note that the planet Jupiter, which is the same name as Zeus in Roman is typically the brightest object in the night sky, seems to be an interesting etymological comparison. Zeus took control of the sky when the Olympian gods inherited control over the world while his brother's Hades and Poseidon were given control over the underworld and the Oceans, respectively.

Typically Zeus is associated with the lightning bolt, his weapon if choice, as well as the eagle, a majestic symbol of nobility. The Oak tree is also tied to Zeus as it is a sturdy tree that grows for hundreds of years.

Zeus was the youngest of the first generation Olympian gods which also included Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. When he was born Zeus was hidden to grow up on the island of Crete in order to prevent his father, Cronus, from eating him just as he did to his older siblings. Instead of

eating Zeus, Cronus was tricked into eating a stone which in turn made him regurgitate all of his devoured children only then to be slain by Zeus who was protecting his siblings. This can be juxtaposed to a father who would protect his children. The Olympian gods ally together and fight all of the Titans from atop mount Olympus, this was known as the Titanomachy. This ten year war was aided not only by the Cyclopes, but the Hecatonchires as well. When the Olympian gods finally won the Titans were then imprisoned in Tartarus.

Zeus engaged in lascivious acts with goddesses which gave birth to many children which included; Aegipan, Persephone and Zagreus, Orion and Manes, Ares, Eileithyia, Eris, Hebe, Ersa and Carae, Limos, Apollo and Artemis, Hermes, Athena, The Muses Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania, Zagreus and Melinoe, Ersa, Nemean Lion and Pandia. Their mother's were Aix, Anake, Demeter, Dione, Thalassa, Gaia, Hera, Eos, Eris, Leto, Maia, Metis, Mnemosyne, Persephone and Selene respectively. Themis who was the first wife of Zeus gave birth to Astraea, Nemesis, Horae, Auxo, Carpo, Thallo, Dike, Eirene, Eunomia, Pherusa, Euporie, Orthosie, and The fates Atropos Clotho and Lachesis (Wikipedia - Zeus).

In addition to having plenty of children with goddesses Zeus also had children with many mortals, these children include; Aeacus, Hercules, Amphion and Zethus, Arcas, Britomartis, Perseus, Tityas, Dardanus and Iasion. Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon, Aglea, Euphrosyne and Thalia, Kronios, Spartaos and Kytos, Thebe, Epaphus and Keroessa, Sarpedon, Polydeuces, Castor and Helen of Troy, Lorcus, Argus and Pelasgus,

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Alexander III of Macedon (Alexander the Great), Meliteus, Tantulus, Balios and Xanthus, Hellen, Dionysus, Lacedaemon, Palici, Litaë, Tyche and Ate. The mortal mothers of these children of Zeus are; Aegina, Alcmene, Antipoe, Callisto, Carme, Danaë, Elara, Electra, Europa, Eurynome, Himalia, Iodame, Io, Lamia, Laodamia, Leda, Maera, Niobe, Olympias, Othreis, Pluto, Podarge, Pyrrha, Semele Taygete and Thalia respectively (Wikipedia - Zeus).

The Gigantomachy was the battle of the Olympian gods against the giants. The Giants, who were born of the blood of Uranus spilling onto the Earth were half human and half serpentine creatures. This myth depicts Zeus in the warrior light because it was Zeus who fought the leader of the Giants Typhoeus. Typhoeus was beaten by Zeus and thus so were the giants. They were imprisoned in Earth which to Greeks gave reason as to why volcanoes are scattered along the Earth's surface.

The fact that he fought Typhoeus alone exemplifies what many of the Greeks and Romans thought were how a warrior should behave, that and if he did not do so he would lose the stigma that he was the epitome of masculinity.

The myths of Zeus are so widely varied and his behavior within the myths are just as varied that some have postulated that Zeus is the conglomeration of many minor gods who over time were blurred into one supreme being. In addition the many bizarre acts of Zeus can be a way for many people to justify their obscure behavior.

Zeus had relations not only with mortal females, but also mortal males. One of the most notable tales of this is that of Zeus and Ganymede. Ganymede was a slave boy who Zeus became infatuated with, one day Zeus sent eagles

down to Earth to retrieve Ganymede and bring him to Olympus there he became a cup-bearer. That way he was always around when Zeus needed him to be. This is an example of how Zeus sometimes abused his power to get whatever he wanted. This tale also reflects how Roman society viewed homosexuality and accepted it the way they did.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the tale of the great flood is another fine example of Zeus wearing yet another hat. This myth Deals with ruler of Arcadia Lycaon and his tyrannical behavior. Lycaon thought he would serve Zeus one of his children as a sacrifice. As one would expect Zeus found this repulsive and decided to not only punish Lycaon, but the rest of humanity as well. He first transformed Lycaon into a wolf, it suited his personality. This was the typical style of most transformations in Ovid's works. Zeus then decided to wipe the Earth clean of the human race and start fresh, thus the great flood much like the story of Noah's Ark. In the Greek version, there were however two survivors Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha. In order to repopulate the Earth they were instructed to throw the ' bones' of their mother over their shoulder to repopulate the Earth, these instructions from the oracle had to be interpreted in order for the oracle to maintain that it was never wrong. They Figured that the ' bones' were actually rocks from mother Earth, this was the correct interpretation and the Earth was populated once more. In regards to Zeus this story once again shows his parental side due to the way he reacted to Lycaon's transgression.

The myth of Zeus and his relationship with Callisto is one that shows how he can, when faced with urgency, can react for the betterment of others not just himself. The story goes that after Callisto was found to have a child with

Zeus she was turned into a bear, after her son Arcas grew up he was in the woods and was confronted by her mother in bear form, he was about to kill her when Zeus stepped in and transformed then into constellations, these constellations were Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.

The tale of Zeus and Demeter shows Zeus as a just and understanding ruler. The story deals with Hades being given permission to take Persephone to the Underworld to be his wife, the bulk of the story deals with Demeter sulking and trying to figure out who kidnapped her daughter. Also in her anger she brings famine and drought upon the world. After hearing all the people crying out in hope due to hunger Zeus steps in and sends Hermes to retrieve Persephone, but she had already had eaten food in the underworld and if that occurs it is said that no one can leave. So in the end Persephone must spend a portion of every year with Hades in the underworld. This myth shows how Zeus is an understanding individual and how he does his best for the betterment of all under his all mighty rule.

There are many other myths associated with Zeus such as him punishing Prometheus to having his liver eaten out of him regularly. Or the Zeus and his punishment for Tantalus and his blasphemous act of sacrificing his some to the gods.

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