

A comparison of greek and norse mythology



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Hundreds of years ago people did not have the technology to explain different forces of nature. They created gods, each with separate powers, to rule their domains. Some of the gods were merciful, some were wicked, and others were merely servants of more powerful gods. Looking at the gods, it is easy to tell what the civilization most valued. I am going to look at the Greek and the Norse gods to compare what was most important to their societies.

Both cultures had a king of the gods. In Greek mythology there is no god who is more powerful than Zeus. He is the youngest son of Cronus and Rhea, ruler of the Titans. Cronus was told that one of his children would overthrow him, taking control of his kingdom. To be sure this would not happen, Cronus swallowed his first five children: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Rhea could not bear to see another one of her children, devoured so she replaced Zeus with a rock wrapped in swaddling. Cronus, thinking he ate Zeus, left Rhea time to leave Zeus in a cave where he was raised by a divine goat, Amaltheia (pantheon/odin). After Zeus was grown he went back to Cronus with the help of Gaia and Metis, who made an elixir to cause Cronus to vomit his brothers and sisters. Zeus then led the fights against the Titan dynasty. Afterwards they banished the Titans to Tartarus, the lowest place on earth, even lower than the underworld. Zeus and his brothers then drew straws to find who would rule where. Zeus gained rule of the sky, Poseidon ruled the seas, and Hades ruled the underworld (pantheon/odin).

Zeus is the god of law, justice, morals, thunder, lightning, and rain. It was his job to oversee and make sure laws were being kept. He was worshipped originally as a weather god. He was depicted as a middle-aged man with a

youthful appearance; he was regale and was almost always shown ready to throw a lightning bolt (pantheon/zeus).

Odin is the ruler of the gods in Norse mythology. He was stuck by his own spear pinned to the World Tree. There he learned nine songs and eighteen runes. Odin lives in Asgard; from his throne he observes everything that happens in the nine worlds. Valhalla is a hall in Asgard where the dead warriors are taken; Odin is also known to reside there (pantheon/odin).

Odin is the god of death, war, wisdom, and poetry. Odin can speak with the dead; he questions the wisest of them. Odin only has one eye; it blazes like the sun. He gave his other eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom. Odin has a spear, Gungnir, that never misses its target. He owns an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, two wolves, Geri and Freki, and two raven, Huginn and Muninn. Wednesday is named after him (pantheon/odin).

The main similarity between these two is that they are the king of the gods. Another is that they both value wisdom. Zeus is more focused on law, Odin's focus is on war.

Hades is one of the brothers of Zeus. He is the unlucky one who got to rule the underworld. He is cruel and unforgiving. Only two have ever gone to Hades domain and returned, Hercules and Odysseus. Hades fell in love with Zeus's daughter and devised a plan to abduct her. With Zeus's help they succeeded in the capture of Persephone. Her mother Demeter was so enraged she cursed the Earth. She continued the curse even after she was released. It was only after her mother Rhea was allowed to see her that she let the Earth prosper (message).

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In Norse mythology, Hel is known as the queen goddess of the underworld. She was raised on Asgard but later she was given the underworld to rule. She decides the fate of those who die, the ones who die in battle are allowed to go to Valhalla, and all others go to Hel's domain. She was born with her skeleton on the outside of her body. She was said to be born half black and half white (gods).

One of the most similar qualities the two cultures is that their Underworlds are guarded by large dogs. Cerberus is the three-headed dog that guards the underworld in Greek mythology, although he has been said to have up to fifty heads. Cerberus is the brother of Chimera, a beast with a goat, dragon, and lion head and Hydra the multi-headed serpent. In Norse mythology, Garm is the leader of a pack of dogs that guard the underworld (webhome).

Aphrodite, for the Greeks, was the goddess of love, beauty, reproduction and sexuality. She was born from the sea, which is what her name means. She was born when the severed genitals of Uranos fell into the sea. She had many children and was the patroness of prostitutes (webhome).

Freyia is the Norse goddess of love, fertility, wealth, and war. She married Od, who many believe to be Odin. She lost him and cried tears of gold. Everyday she and Odin split the inhabitants of Valhalla to fight with. Friday is named after her (webhome).

These two are goddesses of love. In each society it was thought to be a women's domain. Also Freyia is one of the only goddess with a vital role in Norse mythology (webhome).

Hermes is the Greek herald of the gods. His realms include shepherds, land travel, merchants, weights and measures, oratory, literature, athletics, and thieves. Hermes is known for his cunning and shrewdness. The day he was born, his mother Maia fell asleep. He ran off and stole his brother Apollo's cattle and took them to Greece. He then quickly ran home and wrapped himself in swaddling and acted like he was there all the time. His duties as herald to the gods were guiding souls to their final destination and sending dreams to people. He is shown as having a winged hat and winged boots. He was best known for his speed and was credited for the invention of the foot race and boxing (pantheon/hermes).

Hermod is the messenger of the gods for the Norse gods. Not being a god of war gives him very little story time. He went to Hel's domain to convince her to let Balder return to the world of the living (webhome).

Other than having similar names, both these gods have been known for their speed. Both are perceived as sleek men wearing winged boots.

Hercules, the god of strength, is the youngest son of Zeus. He is one of the most loved gods of the Greek civilization. He has the most stories told about him. He is perceived as a hero and a great fighter. One of the most famous stories is the trials of Hercules. He had become enraged and killed his wife and children. To restore his status he had to perform several tasks. This is where he defeated such beasts as Cerberus and Hydra, diverted rivers, and even held the entire weight of the world (infoplease).

Thor, the Norse god of thunder, is the son of Odin. He is even more loved than Odin is; one reason is he does not require sacrifice. Thor owns a

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hammer, Mjolnir. Only he can lift it, and it returns to his hand when thrown. Thor wears a belt that doubles his already magnificent strength. He has a chariot that is pulled by a goat, and in his spare time defeats giants (webhome). Thursday was named for Thor.

Both Hercules and Thor were the sons of the kings of the gods; they were the most loved by the common man. Both were superior warriors, and were praised as such.

The enemies of the Greek gods were the Titans. The Titans were the original inhabitants of Mt. Olympus. They were overthrown by Zeus, his brothers, and some Titans loyal to him. Most of the Titans were sent to the deepest part of the Earth. One of the best-known Titans is Atlas, who lead the battle for the Titans and was therefore singled out by Zeus. For his crimes he was made to hold the world on his back (edweb). In one of the trials of Hercules, Hercules had to find golden apples. Atlas, who knows where everything is, offered to get the apples for him if Hercules would hold the world for a while. When Atlas returned with the golden apples, he told Hercules that he would leave him to hold the World. Before Atlas left, Hercules requested that he be allowed to adjust his cloth because they chafed him. Atlas took the World to let Hercules adjust his clothes, but Hercules tricked him and left him with the World (infoplease).

The Norse Giants, also enemies of the gods, were nothing more than a savage race of very large men. The Giants race, however, gave them an elemental type. Fire Giants and Storm Giants were the most powerful of the races (encyclopedia).

Both Titans and Giants were hulking creatures. The Titans were much more civilized than the Giants; the Titans once ruled Mt. Olympus and the Giants were something for Norse gods to fight.

The home of the gods, Mt. Olympus, is where the Greeks hope to go in the afterlife. It was a beautiful place that was open to all good people.

Valhalla was the ultimate destiny of the Norse. In Valhalla, warriors do nothing but fight all day long and feast all night. Valhalla is only a hall of Asgard, but it is the only place open to warriors. Any non-warrior was sent to Hel's domain.

When looking at the two versions of the mythology, it is easy to tell what the cultures held in high regard. The Greeks were a civil people; their chief deity was a god of law, justice, and morals. The Norse, on the other hand, were a people of war. Their chief god was a god of war and death, and the only way to Valhalla was to die honorably in battle. Examining these mythologies is an excellent way to show the similarities and differences of the two cultures.

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