The Greeks and Romans - Pantheons Part 3: Crash Course World Mythology #9

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I am Mike Rugnetta and this is Crash Course Mythology, and today, we're continuing with pantheons. And one that is likely to be a viewer favorite. Bring on the ouzo, pour out some nectar, it's the Greeks. Oppa!

War, hunting, metallurgy, the complete inability to deal reasonably with even the smallest bit of conflict. And also, rape while disguised as an animal. And best of all, we already know the Greeks, from paintings and sculptures to those really long books and *The Clash of the Titans* movie. And also, Oppa!

[Opening music]

You might be thinking, wait a minute. Didn't we already talk about Greek gods in the episode on creation stories. And you're right, we did, but that was the first set of Greek gods. Two whole dynasties of divinities had to be overthrown before we get to the Olympians. But before we get into all the sex, ambrosia, and petty conflict, let's define some terms.

We've been talking about pantheons as groups of gods, mainly because us classic nerds like to show off our knowledge of Greek and Latin. National Latin Award Scholar right here, folks. Anyway, pantheon means all the gods, which is already a little weird. There are many gods and they change based upon which versions of the myths you're studying, and then there are demigods, and maybe even some heroes.

Gods, as we are using the term, are divine immortal beings, usually created out of the sexual union between other immortal beings or sometimes out of some unorthodox nativity, like we saw with Aphrodite and the bloody testicle foam. Demigods are minor deities, or the offspring of gods and mortals. They usually have special powers and sometimes can become truly divine. Heroes are exalted mortals, meaning they can die but they can also perform special feats on Earth. Sometimes they're the offspring of a god and a human, sometimes they're just lucky. You know, like pop stars.

Remember Gaia and Oranus and their offspring, the Titans? Let's refresh. These are the first and second sets of Greek gods. The Titans were led by Kronos who overthrew Oranus, and Kronos was so worried about his own children overthrowing him that he swallowed them. That did not work out very well. Whoops. Then, like father, like son, Zeus, son of Kronos and Rhea, decided to overthrow his father. He and his siblings defeated the Titans and become the first Olympians. Roll call!

Hestia, the first child of Kronos and Rhea, became the goddess of the hearth and home. She's not in many myths, but was an important household deity honored with many sacrifices. Hades was the god of the underworld, who you'll remember from the story of Persephone from episode one. Kore's mother was Demeter, another child of Kronos and Reah, and the goddess of agriculture. That's right, she has amazing powers over wheat, figs, and olives, kind of a big deal in an agrarian society. Poseidon became the Lord of the Seas after the Titans' defeat. He was associated with earthquakes and horses and was even the father of a famous one:Pegasus, whose mother was Medusa. Snake hair lady plus water king horse lover equals magic stallion, so yeah, it checks out. God DNA is weird.

Zeus was the last of the Olympians born to Kronos and Rhea, and became the most important. He is the sky god, controlling storms and wielding a thunderbolt, which I think is pretty fair to say, is a boss thing to wield. Which makes sense, 'cause he's also the patriarch of the Olympians, despite being the youngest. He was the leader of the revolt over the Titans, plus he was the baby-daddy of so many gods and mortals, so he gets to wave his bolt around and tell everyone what to do, I guess.

Zeus was the father of the next generation of Olympians, with a variety of wives, consorts, and depending upon how you read it, numerous one night stands, or rape victims. His first wife was Metis, who was from the Titan generation. An older woman, the word *metis* means 'skill' or 'cunning', and she was said to provide wise counsel to Zeus, and because wise counselors often give advice that rulers don't wanna hear, Zeus swallowed her.

It's possible that Metis is the mother of Athena, although it's hard to know because of how she was, um, born? According to one version of Athena's birth, Zeus had a terrible headache and asked his son Hephaestus to help cure it. Since this is pre-Motrin, Hephaestus literally cracked open Zeus' skull and out popped Athena, a goddess of wisdom, war, and the arts, especially spinning and weaving. She was wearing a full suit of armor, and Athena created the olive tree. So she's the patroness of Athens and why we now have tapanade. Incidentally, this is also why Hephaestus is not the god of doctors.

Zeus's second wife was Demeter, with whom he fathered Kore. Hey, gurl! Remember, because Kore means girl? These are the jokes, people. Anyway, that relationship didn't last and Zeus married her sister, Hera. Good thing that there's no god of awkward.

Hera was sometimes associated with childbirth, but mostly her thing was being miffed at Zeus. Hera and Zeus had four children: Hebe, a goddess of youth and the cup bearer to the Olympians, who married Hercules; Eileithyia, who was a goddess of childbirth; the other two children, Hephaestus and Ares, showed up in a number of myths. Hephaestus, a smith who walks with a limp, is the god of fire and crafts. Ares is a god of war, more about, like, carnage than strategy, and they both have a thing for Aphrodite. Because everyone has a thing for Aphrodite.

Zeus's liaisons resulted in other Olympians as well. For instance, with Leto, whose parents were Titans, Zeus fathered the twins Apollo and Artemis. Apollo became the god of the sun and music, also moderation, because that was something that Greeks needed a god for. Artemis was associated with the moon and with the hunt. Like Athena, Artemis was a virgin goddess, and she's sometimes tear apart the bodies of men who saw her naked.

The final child of Zeus to become a member of the Olympian Pantheon is his son with Maia, the daughter of the demigod Atlas who holds up the world. This is Hermes, the god of the road and of travelers. He's Zeus's messenger who also leads people to Hades. Hermes had a winged hat and winged sandals way before Adidas JS Wings. He's a trickster who often makes sharp deals, and he's a god of writing and magic, which basically makes him the Helenized version of Thoth. High five, Thoth. Get you some feathered kicks, my dude.

The final member of the Olympian Pantheon we need to discuss is the one David Leman calls, "At once the most ambiguous and the most foreign of the Greek gods": Dionysus, the god of wine. Dionysus had an unusual birth. After consorting with Zeus, his human mother Semele made a wish to see Zeus in his true form. Regrettable.

When Zeus revealed himself, his godly presence burned Semele to a crisp. Zeus saved the embryonic Dionysus and sewed him up in his thigh from which he was later born. Now, there's archaeological evidence that Dionysus was worshipped in the Ancient Greek city of Mycene as early as 1200 BCE, but many stories portray Dionysus as a foreigner. A bunch of Greek gods originated as deities associated with cults from different cities. Artemis was probably a great mother goddess in Anatolia, for instance, but Dionysus, home-grown. Or home-sewn, I guess.

So why is he considered foreign? Maybe it's because Dionysus represents human traits that are very different from the idealized self-control of Apollo. Dionysus is called the god of wine, but he's more a god of abandon or disinhibition. According to Thurry and Devinney, "the Greeks experienced the power of Dionysus not as drunkenness, but as a kind of fervent inspiration, a religious experience in which the worshippers' instincts were liberated from the bondage of social custom."

The Romans called this the bacchanal, after their version of Dionysus, Bacchus. The cultic rituals of Dionysus are performed by women called Maenads, who leave home, go into the woods, drink and dance and hunt and tear wild animals to pieces as a sacrifice. Yeah, it's all beer pong and keg stands until the ladies start devouring the flesh of still-living beasts. No wonder that Dionysus was psychologically challenging for the Greeks.

Before we finish up, I need to mention the Romans, who borrowed heavily from all of the people they conquered. They imported some of the Greek gods directly into their Pantheon. Others were native gods reimagined as Greek equivalents. So, Minerva, an Etruscan goddess and patron of craft became Athena. Diana, an Italian woodwind goddess was transformed into Artemis, the huntress and so on. So here's a handy chart of all the parallels between Greek and the Roman Pantheons.

The Romans did have some original gods, like Janus, the god of doors and arches, from whom we get January. So you can blame him for the bleak weather. Or Persephone. Or Hades. Or just pomegranates. And in the imperial period, they started turning their emperors into gods, but the Romans didn't tend to develop their own myths around these borrowed gods. Their most important myth concerns the history of Rome itself. We'll talk about that in a future episode, so for now, let's get back to gods behaving badly.

Take it away, Thought Bubble.

Olympian adultery was a lot like the trains in Europe: reliable and frequent. For example, Aphrodite was often unfaithful to her husband, Hephaestus, but none of her affairs caused as much trouble as the time she was caught with the god of war. As told in *The Odyssey*, Helios, the sun god, spotted Aphrodite in bed with Ares and told Hephaestus. So Hephaestus created a magical net so fine that it could hardly be seen, but it was strong enough so that no one could escape it. He set his trap over the bed and then pretended to go off to Lemnos, where he had his volcanic forge.

Seeing him go, Ares and Aphrodite went to bed. As they lay together, Hephaestus's gossamer chains fell on them and bound them together. As soon as Helios told Hephaestus that his wife and her lover were together, he rushed back to his house. He cried out to all of the gods, "Father Zeus and every other blessed immortal, hither to me and see a jest which is unpardonable. Because I am crippled, Aphrodite, daughter of Zeus, does me dishonor, preferring Ares, beautiful and straight of limb while I was born crooked. And whose fault is that, if not my parents? Would they had not brought me into this life! Look how these two are clipped together in love's embrace, here, in my very bed. To watch them cuts me to the heart."

The rest of the gods showed up and LOL-ed heartily, as gods do, both at Ares and Aphrodite caught in the net, but also at Hephaestus himself, with Hermes and Apollo joking that they "would be perfectly happy to be caught in such a net with the goddess of love." Because everyone has a thing for Aphrodite.

Thank you, Thought Bubble.

So this brings us to a question that we haven't really looked at with our other Pantheons. What do the Olympian Pantheon tell us about the Greeks? According to David Leeming, it suggests how they understood themselves and their society: "More than any other Pantheon, the Greek hierarchy of gods and goddesses is modeled on human families. The official Olympican gods, the family of Mount Olympus, headed by Zeus, is simply the most powerful of Greek families. Like other members of the rich and powerful classes, the Olympian family is marred by instances of immorality, arrogance, and stubbornness. They were not to be trusted and they could not be counted on for mercy. They were an exaggerated version of what a human family might become if endowed with infinite power. They were a mirror of human nature itself."

And it's a good thing, too. Mirrors are the only way you can even look at Medusa. Thanks for watching, we'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching and remember: you reap what you sow. Especially if you sew a baby god into your life. You're gonna want to reap that pretty quick.