

The Gods of Olympus

Margaret Connolly reflects on the Greek gods and suggests they are still with us.

‘Once upon a time, on high Olympus, lived Zeus, King of the Gods, ruling over his fractious family, and watching with an interest, not always benign, the activities of mankind. For their part, the people at the foot of the mountain knew that they should revere and honour the gods, for if they did not, their cities might fall to their enemies, and their children be sold into slavery before their eyes. Sometimes they might meet a stranger, who must be treated with honour, for he might be one of the gods in disguise. All went well, or at least, not too badly, until some clever men started asking awkward questions – very awkward questions – about the nature of man, about the natural world, and (whisper it quietly) about the gods themselves.’

So what happened next? Nothing much actually. Eventually, a decree was passed in the assembly of Athens, at the instigation of the seer Diopeithes, making it an offence to fail to acknowledge the state gods, and to teach astronomy. This was around the 430s BC. Some six hundred years later, a certain Paul of Tarsus fell foul of the silversmith Demetrius of Ephesus, a wealthy man with a flourishing business making silver statuettes of Artemis, patron goddess of the Ephesians, for preaching that ‘gods made by hands are not gods at all.’ (Acts 19:26)

If I write that ‘the gods of Olympus played an important role in Greek civilization’, somehow I miss the point. The gods were larger than life figures, and to speak of their ‘function in Greek society’ seems rather to demean them to a part of a social system rather beneath their notice. So who were these gods? What do we know of them, and why might the Alexandrian poet Cavafy write, in the second decade of the twentieth century, that

Even though we have broken their statues,
Even though we drove them out of their temples,
In no wise did the gods die, for all that.

In this article I shall briefly examine the mythology of the Greek gods, look at the criticisms that led to Diopeithes’ decree, and comment on the continuing significance of the Olympian deities.

Although I began this article with the sort of paragraph that might introduce a children’s book of Greek mythology, readers will immediately recognise that it is essentially a simplification. The genealogy of the gods was complex, not springing into life fully formed, as Athene sprang from the head of her father Zeus or Dionysus from his thigh. One of the fascinations of the study of religion is the way in which gods and goddesses developed, as nations and civilisations met, through conquest or settlement. For example, at Bath, *Aquae Sulis* in Roman times, the Celtic goddess Sulis was linked with the Roman Minerva, so we find Sulis Minerva worshipped there. The way in which gods evolved historically reinforces the SOF premise that religion is a human creation, with the gods having links to major human concerns and emotions, offering an explanation as to why things happen, and acting as a means of social control.

The Greek gods had individual connections with other Aegean and Middle Eastern deities. For example, Zeus or his equivalent appears among the Minoan, Mycenaean and Indian pantheons, and the name of the Germanic god Ziu reflects similar ancestry. A weather god, with his seat on Olympus (a word of pre-Greek origin meaning ‘mountain’), developed into the ‘Father of Gods and Men’ of Homeric times, but he was father in the sense of being the head of the household, not commonly the creator of gods or men. According to mythology, Zeus had displaced his father, Kronos, who had already dethroned his own father Uranus. The Olympic gods had replaced the Titans as chief gods, and shut them up in prison. These succession myths have close parallels in Akkadian and Hittite texts. The Minoans recounted that Zeus had died and been buried, but was reborn each year as the spirit of vegetation, perhaps as the consort of their chief goddess, the vegetation goddess.

By the time we meet Zeus in classical Greece, he already has a significant back story, and his household reflects the Mycenaean age, with its model of mighty kings and knights, and some-

times recalcitrant vassals, who have to be kept in order. Greek cities were often built on the site of Mycenaean temple citadels, just as many Christian sites have a pre-Christian foundation as a sacred place.

Different gods were particularly concerned with aspects of the physical environment and of human life. For example, Poseidon, brother of Zeus the sky god, originated in Greece as god of earthquakes ('the earth shaker'), water and the sea. Hephaestus, smith to the Olympian gods, was also originally a volcanic and fire god, this time from Asia, whose worship spread via Lemnos to Greece. He was the god of crafts, sometimes married to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility.

The relations between the gods themselves, and with mankind, form a central theme of Greek literature. Whether originally oral epic, as in the case of Homer, or plays written in classical Athens, we encounter the gods through texts created primarily for entertainment, not from a religious corpus. We meet the gods both in horrifying and in humorous situations, underlying which lies the moral message: to fear the gods. In the *Odyssey*, should we laugh or cry when members of Odysseus' crew are turned into pigs by the sorceress Circe?

The poet Hesiod (c700BC) recounts, in his *Theogony*, the origin and genealogy of the gods. This would have been a subject favoured by the bards or rhapsodes, before telling episodes from the stories of Troy or other favourite myths. He begins with a song to the Muses, inspirers of song. Later, he ascribes the creation of woman to the anger Zeus felt at man's theft of fire from the gods, so woman was fashioned to be a continuing annoyance to man, 'a great sorrow to them, and hateful poverty they will not share, but only luxury.' Doubtless his male audience would have laughed and nodded in agreement, and been kept 'on side' by the rhapsode. Greek mythology does not make much of creation myths such as were prominent in other Mediterranean cultures. This illustrates the disparate character of the corpus of Greek myths; not all the stories fitting together into a coherent whole, but more closely resembling an anthology.

Gods and men both had much to gain from co-existence. In exchange for the correct sacrifices and ritual, carried out in a spirit of awe

and respect, the patron gods of a city or community would extend their protection to its inhabitants. To fear the gods provided a foundation for decent human life. Not to fear the gods was to court personal or community disaster. The intervention of the gods took place where human life was seen to be most chancy, in common with religious systems the world over: warfare (the most dangerous situation for humans), agriculture, health, the acquisition of wealth, fertility, childbirth and safe passage by sea. A propitious journey might be facilitated by the correct libations, or a calamitous shipwreck due to the anger of Poseidon.

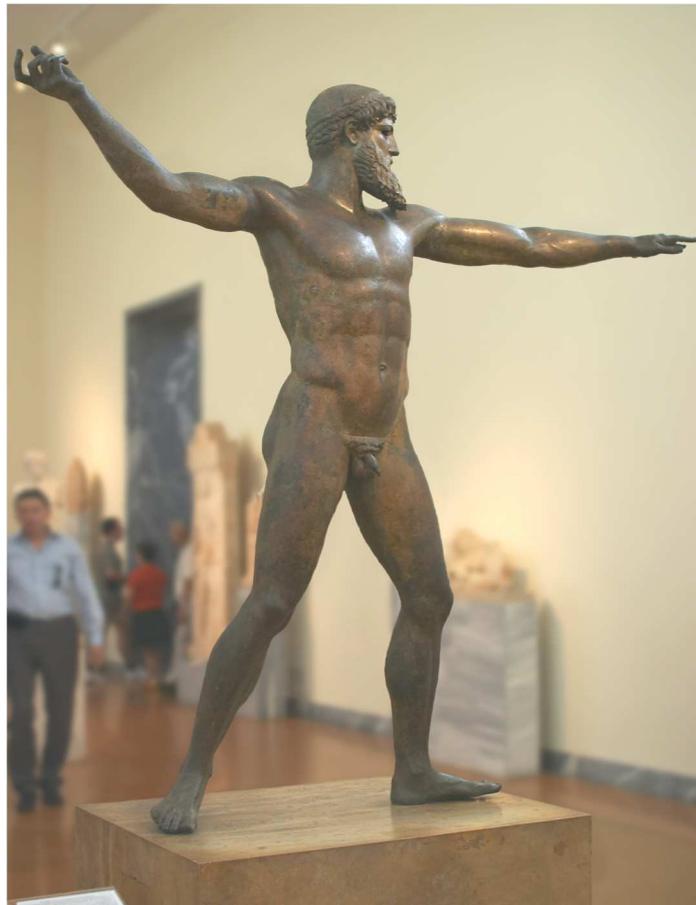
Let us look briefly, for example, at the gods' intervention in warfare, which occurred in different indirect and direct ways: clouding judgement, giving superhuman strength or a glorious appearance, providing brilliant ideas or a loud war cry, or coming down to Earth, under the guise of a known person, to take part in the action, such as when we see the goddess Athene take on the appearance of Deiphobus, brother of Hector the Trojan hero, in the *Iliad*. Believing that his brother has come outside the walls of Troy to assist him in his struggle against Achilles, Hector turns to face his enemy, only to learn the truth too late, and anticipates his own death at the hands of Achilles, son of the goddess Thetis and the mortal Peleus, who is helped by Athene.

Although the gods could show favour to individual humans, they did not have any particular concern for humanity as a whole. Challenged by Poseidon to fight him, outside Troy, Apollo replies: 'Lord of the Earthquake, you would credit me with very little sense if I fought you for the sake of men, those wretched creatures who, like leaves, flourish for a little while ... but in a moment droop and fade away!' The gods did not spend all their time as involved spectators of the human drama. For example, Thetis tells her angry and resentful son Achilles that Zeus and all the gods are absent currently from Olympus attending an Ethiopian feast and will not be back for twelve days, but then she will speak to him on Achilles' behalf. When mortals seek help from the gods, they have to try to attract their attention by pious acts, sacrifices, votive offerings or by reminding the god or goddess concerned of favours the petitioner has done to enhance the profile of the deity involved. Early in the *Iliad*, Apollo's priest Chryses

implores Apollo, 'If ever I have built you a shrine that delighted you or if ever I burnt you the fat thigh of a bull or goat, grant me this wish: Let the Danaans pay with your arrows for my tears!' The gods do not seek to bring about moral outcomes, but to serve their own interests and those of their clients.

Morally, there is little to choose between gods and men. Would it not, after all, help to make our human life more bearable, if the gods, rather than blind chance, manipulated our fate? The gods resemble a souped-up version of ourselves, with a few excellent advantages: deathless, never aging, and able to adopt another human identity at will. The Greek gods would not have understood the Christian teaching that to look upon a woman and to lust after her is to commit adultery with her in the heart. Zeus was always lusting after mortal women, and putting his desires into practice, leaving a trail of offspring, such as Dionysus, the son of Zeus and Semele, in his wake. The Greek gods were just as likely to be violent, spiteful and vindictive towards human beings as they were to show compassion or goodwill.

Thoughtful and reflective citizens began to question whether, if this was the case, the gods of Olympus existed, and to cast doubt on the value of the state cult. 'Concerning the gods', wrote Protagoras (c485-415BC), 'I am unable to discover whether they exist or not; there are many obstacles to knowledge: the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.' Xenophanes of Colophon (c570-503BC) preferred



Zeus or (or Poseidon) c. 460 BC
in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.
Statue found by fishermen in their nets off Cape Artemesium in 1928.
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philosophical monotheism, the existence of one powerful and all-knowing god who has no visible form and engages in no physical activity, apparently the first of many distinguished Western philosophers to pursue this line of reasoning. 'One god, greatest among gods and humans, like mortals neither in form nor in thought.'

As a precursor of the SOF, we should celebrate Xenophanes for arguing that humanity had created gods in their own image, rather than vice

versa. 'But mortals think that the gods are born and have the mortals' own clothes and voice and form.' He suggests that if horses, cows and lions were equipped to describe their gods, 'Horses would draw the forms of their gods like horses, cows like cows, and make their bodies in the form they each had themselves.' (Quoted in fragments by Clement of Alexandria *Miscellanies*)

Many intellectuals in fifth century Athens concerned themselves with considering whether the gods were real and whether there was such a thing as independently existing Truth. Protagoras, for example, argued that it did not matter whether the gods existed, and that all values were relative. Anaxagoras (c500-428BC), tutor and friend of the statesman Pericles, studied astronomy and geology, declaring the sun to be a stone and not a god. He was sent into exile. In 399BC when Socrates was put on trial and condemned to death, the charges were of corrupting the young, and not believing in the City's gods, but in other strange deities.

In the plays performed at Athenian drama festivals, honouring Dionysus, we often find a tension between the playwrights' scepticism about the gods and their fear of them. Athenian plays were often based on familiar myths, and the interest for the audience and the competition judges would have been in assessing the way in which the individual dramatist presented a well-known story, such as the myth of Oedipus, played out by Sophocles in his three plays *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, her choice is to bury her brother, contrary to the command of King Creon, but in line with the presumed will of the gods. When her sister Ismene is too afraid to join her in her act of defiance, Antigone says, 'Do as you like, dishonour the laws the gods hold in honour.' However, the gods do not save her, and she kills herself. Her heroism is purely human, bringing no real honour to the gods whom she is honouring alongside her loyalty to her brother. A fragment from a lost play by Sophocles reads, 'Since the gods conceal all things divine, you will never understand them, not though you go searching to the ends of the Earth.'

It can be argued that Euripides frequently presents the gods in a negative light. He was one of those had up for transgression against Deipeithes' decree, though he was acquitted. In *The Bacchae* Dionysus causes his aunt Agave to dismember her son Pentheus for rejecting Dionysus's divinity. Euripides seems to be saying that if this is how the gods behave, they cannot truly be gods. Or does he show the horror of Pentheus' death to demonstrate the power of the gods? Cadmus, grandfather of Pentheus, laments: 'If any man derides the unseen world, let him ponder the death of Pentheus, and believe in gods.' Many of Euripides' plays end with the arrival of a *deus ex machina* plot device, where a god, goddess or hero appears on stage suspended by a crane, to bring unexpected closure to the story. For example, at the end of *Alcestis* Heracles arrives to restore Alcestis to life, but he is unable to stay to join the celebration, for he must go to perform a labour (as all the audience would know) set by Eurystheus, King of Argos.

Aristophanes' comic play *The Clouds*, produced in spring 423BC, presents a satire on contemporary philosophy, with the chorus of

clouds playing a similar role to the gods, raining down hail on offenders' crops, rather than thunderbolts. The philosopher Socrates appears in this play, enquiring of Strepsiades, a foolish farmer who is the main character, why it is that while the gods are known to punish people who swear false oaths, Zeus frequently strikes, with lightning, trees and even his own shrines, which have clearly not committed perjury.

These examples show that by the fifth century intellectuals and writers openly questioned the existence of the gods. Over time, however, worship of the gods evolved, with greater emphasis placed on cults such as the Eleusinian mysteries, and worship of Asclepius, the god of healing. The well-developed mythology of ancient Greece passed into the Roman world, continuing as one of the underpinning narratives of western civilization, contributing background to the New Testament. Study of the Greek philosophers underpinned medieval theological thought. Much Renaissance art illustrates the myths of Greece and Rome, which appear also on the painted pottery of ancient Greece itself, displayed in our major museums.

The gods of Greece have not fallen out of our consciousness, as have those of many other ancient civilizations. While we may no longer offer sacrifices to the gods of our cities, the gods live on in our literature, and, for some of us, in our hearts. Remember Cavafy from my first paragraph and his poem about the continuing existence of the gods? His poem ends:

O land of Ionia, it is you they love still,
It is you their souls still remember ...
And once in a while, an ethereal, youthful form,
Indistinct, in rapid stride,
Passes above your hills.

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Quotations from Greek literature are taken from the *Penguin Classics* editions.

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