Religious Practices in Ancient Greece

The ancient Greeks worshipped many gods, each with a distinct personality and domain. Greek myths explained the origins of the gods and their individual relations with mankind. Ancient Greek religious practice was based on time-honored observances, many rooted in the Bronze Age (3000-1050 BCE), or even earlier. Although the Iliad and the Odyssey of Homer believed to have been composed around the eighth century BCE, were powerful influences on Greek thought, the ancient Greeks had no single guiding work of scripture like the Jewish Torah, the Christian Bible, or the Muslim Qur'an. Nor did they have a strict priestly caste. The relationship between human beings and deities (gods) was based on the concept of exchange: gods and goddesses were expected to give gifts. Votive offerings, which have been excavated from sanctuaries by the thousands, were a physical expression of thanks on the part of individual worshippers.

The Greeks worshipped in sanctuaries located, according to the nature of the particular deity, either within the city or in the countryside. A sanctuary was a well-defined sacred space set apart usually by an enclosure wall. This sacred precinct, also known as a temenos, contained the temple with a monumental cult image of the deity, an outdoor altar, statues, and votive offerings to the gods, and often featured landscape such as sacred trees or springs. Many temples benefitted from their natural surroundings, which helped to express the character of the divinities. For instance, the temple at Sounion dedicated to Poseidon, god of the sea, commands a spectacular view of the water on three sides, and the Parthenon on the rocky Athenian Akropolis celebrates the indomitable might of the goddess Athena.

The central ritual act in ancient Greece was animal sacrifice, especially of oxen, goats, and sheep. Sacrifices took place within the sanctuary, usually at an altar in front of the temple, with the assembled participants consuming the entrails and meat of the victim. Liquid offerings, or libations were also commonly made. Religious festivals, literally feast days, filled the year. The four most famous festivals, each with its own parade, athletic competitions, and sacrifices, were held every four years at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia. These Pan-Hellenic festivals were attended by people from all over the Greek-speaking world. Many other festivals were celebrated locally, and in the case of mystery cults, such as the one at Eleusis near Athens, only initiates could participate.

Shrouded in secrecy, ancient mystery cults fascinate and capture the imagination. Mystery cults served more personal, individualistic attitudes toward death and the afterlife. Most were based on sacred stories that often involved the ritual reenactment of
a death-rebirth myth of a particular divinity. In addition to the promise of a better afterlife, mystery cults fostered social bonds among the participants, called mystai. Initiation fees and other contributions were also expected.

**The Greek Gods**

The Greek pantheon, the officially recognized gods of a people, had twelve main gods and goddesses. Before the twelve Olympic Gods, the universe was ruled by twelve Titans. Kronos, the leader of the Titans, seized the throne from his father and feared that eventually his children would do the same to him. To protect his power he swallowed all of his children with the exception of Zeus. Eventually Zeus led the Olympic gods in a ten year battle against the titans. Kronos’ greatest fear was realized when the Olympians defeated the Titans and banished them to Tartarus, a place beneath the underworld.

**Zeus**

*Zeus* was the god of the sky and ruler of the Olympian gods. He overthrew his father, *Cronus*, and then drew lots with his brothers *Poseidon* and *Hades*, in order to decide who would succeed their father on the throne. *Zeus* won the draw and became the supreme ruler of the gods, as well as lord of the sky and rain. His weapon was a thunderbolt, which he hurled at those who displeased or defied him, especially liars and oath breakers. He was married to *Hera* but often tested her patience, as he was infamous for his many affairs.

*Zeus*, the presiding deity of the universe, ruler of the skies and the earth, was regarded by the Greeks as the god of all natural phenomena on the sky; the personification of the laws of nature; the ruler of the state; and finally, the father of gods and men.

Using his shield, the *Aegis*, *Zeus* could create all natural phenomena related to the air and the sky, such as storms, tempests, and intense darkness. At his command, mighty thunders would flash and lightning would roll, wreaking havoc; or the skies would open to rejuvenate the earth with life-giving water.

As the personification of the operations of nature, he represented the grand laws of harmonious order, which governed both the natural and the spiritual world. He was the god of regulated time as marked by the changing seasons and the regular succession of day and night.
As the ruler of the state, he was the source of kingly power, the upholder of all institutions connected to the state, and the friend and patron of princes, whom he guarded and assisted with his advice and counsel. He was also the protector of the people, and watched over the welfare of the whole community.

As the father of the gods, **Zeus** made sure that each deity performed their individual duty, punished their misdeeds, settled their disputes, and acted towards them on all occasions as their all-knowing counselor and mighty friend.

As the father of men, he took a paternal interest in the actions and well being of **mortals**. He watched over them rewarding truth, charity, and fairness, while severely punishing perjury and cruelty. Even the poorest and most forlorn wanderer could find a powerful advocate in **Zeus**, for he, as a wise and merciful paternal figure, demanded that the wealthy inhabitants of the earth be attentive to the needs of their less fortunate fellow citizens.

**Poseidon**

Poseidon is the god of the sea and protector of all aquatic features. Brother of **Zeus** and **Hades**, after the overthrow of their father, **Cronus**, he drew lots with them to share the universe. He ended up becoming lord of the sea. He was widely worshipped by seamen. He married **Amphitrite**, one of the granddaughters of the Titan **Oceanus**.

At one point he desired **Demeter**. To deter him, **Demeter** asked him to make the most beautiful animal that the world had ever seen. So, in an effort to impress her, **Poseidon created the first horse**. In some accounts, his first attempts were unsuccessful and created a variety of other animals in his quest; thus, by the time the horse was created, his passion for **Demeter** had diminished.

His weapon was a trident, with which he could make the earth shake, causing earthquakes, and shatter any object. **He was second to Zeus in power amongst the gods. He was considered by Greeks to have a difficult quarrelsome personality. Combined with his greed, he had a series of disputes with other gods** during his various attempts to take over the cities they were patrons of.

**Hades**
Hades was the brother of Zeus and Poseidon. After the overthrow of their father, Cronus, he drew lots with them to share the universe. He drew poorly, which resulted in becoming lord of the underworld and ruler of the dead. Nevertheless, he was not considered to be death itself, as this was a different god, called Thanatos. Greedy like his brother Poseidon, he was mainly interested in increasing his subjects, and anyone whose deeds resulted in people dying was favored by him. The Erinnyes (the Furies) were welcomed guests in his kingdom.

The Greeks were not keen on uttering his name, afraid of causing some kind of reaction that would end up with them dead sooner. Instead, they decided to give him another name, Plouton, deriving from the Greek word for wealth, due to the precious metals mined from the earth. Thus, Hades also became the god of wealth.

Although an Olympian, Hades preferred the Underworld and rarely left his kingdom. His weapon was a pitchfork, which he used to create earthquakes; similar to the way Poseidon used his trident. He also had a helmet of invisibility, which he had received as a gift from the Cyclopes, in order to use it during the clash of the Titans. He was married to Persephone, daughter of Demeter, whom Hades abducted and carried down to the Underworld.

**Hera**

Hera was Zeus' wife and sister, and was raised by the Titans Oceanus and Tethys. She was the supreme goddess, patron of marriage and childbirth, having a special interest in protecting married women. Her sacred animals were the cow and the peacock, and she favored the city of Argos.

Zeus initially courted Hera, but after many unsuccessful attempts, he resorted to trickery. He took the form of a disheveled cuckoo; Hera, feeling sorry for the bird, held it to her breast to keep it warm. Zeus then resumed his normal form and took advantage of Hera's surprise. Hera then married him to cover her shame; their marriage was turbulent and they often clashed.

Occasionally, Zeus treated the other gods with particular harshness; Hera took advantage of that and asked them to join her in a revolt. They all accepted and set the plan in motion; Hera drugged Zeus, and then, the others bound him to a couch. At that stage, however, they began to argue over what the next step should be. Briareus, one of the Hecatoncheires, overheard the arguments; still full of gratitude to Zeus for saving him
and his brothers from a dragon, Briareus sneaked in and quickly untied the knots that held Zeus in place. Zeus sprang from the couch and grabbed his thunderbolt. The gods fell to their knees begging and pleading for mercy. He seized Hera and hung her from the sky with gold chains. She wept in pain all night, but none of the other gods dared to interfere. Her weeping kept Zeus up, so the following morning, he agreed to release her if she swore never to rebel again. She had little choice but to agree. While she never again rebelled, she often interfered with Zeus’s plans and she was often able to outwit him.

Most stories concerning Hera deal with her jealousy and her plans of revenge for Zeus’s infidelities.

**Athena**

Athena was the Greek virgin goddess of reason, intelligent activity, arts and literature. She was the daughter of Zeus; her birth is unique in that she did not have a mother. Instead, she sprang full grown and clad in armor from Zeus’ forehead.

She was fierce and brave in battle; however, she only took part in wars that defended the state and home from outside enemies. She was the patron of the city, handcraft, and agriculture. She invented the bridle, which permitted man to tame horses, the trumpet, the flute, the pot, the rake, the plow, the yoke, the ship, and the chariot. She was the embodiment of wisdom, reason, and purity. She was Zeus’ favorite child and was allowed to use his weapons including his thunderbolt. Her holy tree was the olive tree and she was often symbolized as an owl.

She became the patron goddess of Athens after winning a contest against Poseidon by offering the olive tree to the Athenians.

**Aphrodite**

Aphrodite was the goddess of love, desire and beauty. Apart from her natural beauty, she also had a magical girdle that compelled everyone to desire her.

There are two accounts of her birth. According to one, she was the daughter of Zeus and Dione, the mother goddess worshipped at the Oracles of Dodona. However, the other account, which is more prevalent, informs us that she arose from the sea on a giant scallop. Aphrodite then walked to the shore of Cyprus. In a different version of the myth, she was born near the island of Cythera.
Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus; however, she had an affair with her brother Ares, god of war. When Hephaestus found out about the affair, he devised a plan and managed to humiliate his wife and her lover to the other Olympians. Her holy tree was the myrtle, while her holy birds were the dove, the swan, and the sparrow.

**Apollo**

Apollo was the son of Zeus and Leto, twin brother of Artemis. He was the god of music, and he is often depicted playing a golden lyre. He was also known as the Archer, far shooting with a silver bow; the god of healing, giving the science of medicine to man; the god of light; and the god of truth. One of Apollo’s most important daily tasks was to harness his four-horse chariot, in order to move the Sun across the sky.

Apollo was an oracular god, as he was the prophetic deity in the Oracle in Delphi. People from all over the known world travelled there to learn what the future held for them, through his priestess Pythia. The god was also worshipped in the island of Delos, which was initially dedicated to his twin sister Artemis. In relation to the rituals and practices that took place in Delos and Delphi, it could be said that there were two completely distinct cults in honor of Apollo.

As already mentioned, Apollo was also considered as the god of healing and medicine, either through himself or through his son Asclepius. At the same time, he could also bring forth disease and plague with his arrows; it was considered that a god that can cause disease is also able to prevent it.

**Ares**

Ares was the god of war, and son of Zeus and Hera. He represented the raw violence and untamed acts that occurred in wartime, in contrast to Athena, who was a symbol of tactical strategy and military planning.

He was disliked by both his parents. Whenever Ares appeared in a myth, he was depicted as a violent personality, who faced humiliation through his defeats more than once. In the Iliad, it is mentioned that Zeus hated him more than anyone else; Ares was also on the losing side of the Trojan War, favoring the Trojans. He had an affair with his sister, Aphrodite, who was married to Hephaestus. When Hephaestus found out about the
affair, he devised a plan and managed to humiliate both Aphrodite and Ares. The union of Ares and Aphrodite resulted in the birth of eight children, including Eros, god of love.

There were few temples attributed to Ares in Ancient Greece. Sacrifices would usually be made to him when an army would march to war; Spartans would make sacrifices to Enyalius, another lesser god and son of Ares and Enyo. However, the name was also used as a byname for Ares.

When Ares went to war, he was followed by his companions, Deimos (terror) and Phobos (fear), who were the product of his union with Aphrodite. Eris, goddess of discord and sister of Deimos and Phobos, often accompanied them in war.

**Artemis**

Artemis was the goddess of chastity, virginity, the hunt, the moon, and the natural environment.

She was the daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo. She was born on the island of Ortygia (Delos), where Leto had found shelter after being hunted by the lawful wife of Zeus, Hera. As soon as Artemis was born, she helped her mother give birth to her twin brother, thereby becoming the protector of childbirth and labor. She asked her father to grant her eternal chastity and virginity, and never gave in to any potential lovers; devoted to hunting and nature, she rejected marriage and love.

She was the protector of nature and the hunt; both wild and tame animals were under her protection. She also protected the agriculture and animal herding.

Artemis appeared in a number of myths. In the myth of Orion, which has various versions, Orion was also a hunting companion of Artemis and the only person to have won her heart. However, he was accidentally killed either by the goddess or by a scorpion, which was sent by Gaea. In another myth, Callisto was one of the followers of Artemis and thus she had remained a virgin. Zeus, however, changing his form to resemble Artemis, managed to seduce her. Callisto gave birth to Arcas, but later, she was transformed into a bear either by Hera or Artemis. Arcas almost killed his mother, but Zeus stopped him and placed Callisto in the heavens as a constellation. According to other sources, both Callisto and Arcas were turned into the Ursa Minor and the Ursa Major constellations.
Hephaestus

Hephaestus was the Greek god of blacksmiths, sculptors, metallurgy, fire and volcanoes; thus, he is symbolized with a hammer, an anvil and a pair of tongs.

According to Homer's epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, he was the son of Zeus and Hera. However, Hesiod informs us that Hera bore Hephaestus alone. According to an account, after Hephaestus was born, Hera threw him from Olympus because he was crippled; he fell into the ocean and was raised by Thetis and Eurynome. Another myth has it that he once tried to protect his mother from Zeus' advances and as a result, the father of the Gods flung him down from Olympus, which caused his physical disability; he fell on the island of Lemnos where he became a master craftsman. He was later accepted back to Olympus, and became the craftsman of the gods, creating majestic armors, shields and weapons.

He was married to Aphrodite; after he learned his wife had an affair with her brother, Ares, he devised a plan with which he humiliated both lovers to the other gods.

Hermes

Hermes was the Greek god of commerce, son of Zeus and Maia. Quick acting and cunning, he was able to move swiftly between the world of man and the world of gods, acting as a messenger of the gods and the link between mortals and the Olympians.

He was the protector of travelers, thieves and athletes. He occasionally tricked the other gods for his own amusement or in an effort to protect humans. With the ability to move freely between worlds, he also served as the guide of the souls of the dead to the underworld and the afterlife.

When Hermes was born, he jumped out of his crib, stole Apollo's cattle and then went back to his crib playing innocent. However, Apollo figured it out, grabbed Hermes and went to Zeus to complain. The father of gods simply laughed and didn't punish Hermes. To apologize, Hermes gave Apollo the lyre, which he had just invented. Hermes appeared in many other myths; in the Odyssey, Odysseus was instructed by the god to chew a magic herb with which he would be able to avoid Circe's powers and not be transformed to animals like his companions; in the myth of Pandora, when the gods provided a trait to her, Hermes gave her the ability to lie and seduce with her words.
Hestia

Hestia was the goddess of the hearth, family, and domestic life. She was not worshipped publicly, which is evident by the lack of temples and shrines attributed to her; this comes in contrast to the Roman equivalent goddess Vesta, who represented the public hearth. Her name meant both a house and a hearth, symbolizing the home and its residents. She also represented the coalition and relationship between the colonies and the mother cities. She was Zeus’ sister, but although initially she was included in the Olympian gods, she was later replaced by Dionysus.