

# Athena, Poseidon, and Civilization

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Athena is in our time perhaps the most respected of the Greek gods. She represents the power of knowledge that many modern readers associate with the Ancient Greeks: the logic and reason that was preserved in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. She stands apart from many of the other deities, but perhaps most notably from Poseidon. Where he is raw power, she is there to tame it; where his method is blunt and clumsy, hers is delicate and careful. She stands as a representative of the new order of gods, farther from the Titans and those who came before, and as such is a great figure to both the ancient Greeks and to the modern reader of Greek mythology. In this way, Athena and Poseidon stand as symbols of the conflict between the discerning power of the later Olympians and the unreasoning force of those who came before.

As a child of the head of the Olympians and the cleverest of the Titans, Athena was born out of both power and reason. Her mother, Metis, who represented reason, was incapacitated by being swallowed by Zeus, and so Athena took up her mother's duties and expanded on them, becoming the goddess of logic, of warfare, and also of specific crafts. Though a goddess of warfare, Athena did not represent the bloodthirsty and indiscriminate fighting of her brother Ares: where he is depicted as flanked by Fear and Dread, Athena is most often seen with Victory. More peaceable than her father Zeus and his brothers and more civilized than her own brother Ares, Athena was not just the goddess of warriors but the goddess of victors. Her aim was strategy and victory, making whether she cared for bloodshed somewhat irrelevant. Certainly she did not enjoy the slaughter of war as primally as her brother Ares.

As far as proximity to the primal strength of the Titans, Athena's heritage put her in the

middle. She was not as distant from them as Apollo, but not as close as Poseidon. This can be seen in her attributes, for though she was not as warlike as her uncle, she was certainly more so than her half-brother Apollo, who was the god of medicine and healing. Athena, while the sovereign of domestic arts such as weaving, was also seen in a more active and engaged position than her brother Apollo, as when she led in battle. While he was seen as an agent who worked from a distance, Athena was close to the mortals, in fact even speaking on Apollo's behalf in Euripides' *Ion*. In Homer's *Iliad*, she was involved in the battle of Troy, at one point going so far as to help Diomedes drive his spear into Ares. Though a brutal act, one must note that it was Diomedes himself who charged Ares, that the victim of the act was the god of brutal slaughter himself, and that Zeus himself gave permission for this act at Hera's request<sup>7</sup>.

Poseidon, brother of the king of the Olympians, was a powerful god indeed. The Greeks acknowledged Poseidon's great powers in the *Homeric Hymn to Poseidon*, calling him "a tamer of horses and a saviour of ships"<sup>3</sup>. Still, he was not a savior to all sailors: certainly not to Odysseus, whose raft he wrecked out of anger. Son of the Titan Kronos and the Titaness Rhea, Poseidon's power was raw and forceful. When Zeus overthrew Kronos, the universe was divided between him and his two brothers. Hades was given the underworld, Zeus took the sky, and Poseidon was given what was once the Titan Oceanus' domain. This is appropriate, as the moody waters of the Mediterranean and Aegean seas were a good fit for Poseidon's personality. Like the raging waves, he flooded cities without hesitation in his anger, as he did when Attica was given to Athena (Graves 59). Also under his power were earthquakes, for which he was given the name *Ennosigaios*, ("shaker of the earth"), and wild beasts, as in Euripides' play *Hippolytus*, where Poseidon caused a wild bull to rise from the ocean<sup>2</sup>.

Because of his birth, Poseidon was among the closest of the Olympians to the Titans. His station put him closer still, since the ocean, or the ruler thereof, was an existent force from early times. Its governance went from the power of the ocean itself (Pontos) to the Titan of the ocean (Oceanus) and eventually came to rest in the hands of Poseidon. As any god of the ocean, he ruled with unpredictable force. Though his brothers Zeus and Hades also had control of the world above and below, respectively, Zeus' power was largely manifested through his many offspring, and

Hades' power was hardly a factor in everyday life like Poseidon's – no one except Charon made a profession of sailing back and forth across the river Styx.

A comparison between Athena and Poseidon becomes clear in the story of their competition for the patronage of Athens. The gods had decided to choose cities to worship them in particular, says Apollodorus in *The Library*, and both Athena and Poseidon chose Attica. Both gods provided gifts: Poseidon struck the ground with his trident and created a spring of salt water, and Athena planted an olive tree<sup>1</sup> This draws an obvious comparison, one between a gift with many uses that nurtures life and a gift that, though a symbol of great power, is ultimately less useful. The gods were called on to judge who should have the city and gave it to Athena; Poseidon was so incensed that he drew up a flood upon it. This story was important to the Athenians, tying the name of their city to the olive tree that was such an essential part of life for them.

The Panathenaia, celebrated in Athens on Athena's birthday, carried several reminders of the etiological story about the patronage of the city. The prizes for the various games were amphorae of olive oil, associated with Athena's gift to the city. Various amphorae that have been recovered have depictions of Athena, Poseidon, and the olive tree, and the myth was even so important as to be found on one of the pediments of the Athenian Acropolis, a position shared with the Gigantomachy, the story of the battle against and, ultimately, victory over the Giants by the Olympian gods<sup>8</sup>.

Perhaps the most famous example of a struggle between Athena and Poseidon, however, is in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus' patron is Athena, and his adversary is Poseidon after he enrages the god by blinding his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. In its chronicling of Odysseus' adventures in attempting to return home, Homer's *Odyssey* tells of Poseidon's attempts to hinder Odysseus' return and also Athena's attempts to ease his journey while at the same time trying not to anger her uncle Poseidon. In the end, it was Athena's doing that brought Odysseus to the island of Drepane, and from there, Odysseus used his own cunning to return to his home in Ithaka. Poseidon, so enraged at the Phaeacians who delivered Odysseus, "struck [their] ship with the flat of his hand [...] and turned her into stone, crew and all"<sup>4</sup>. As before, here Athena worked subtly and discreetly to reward the clever hero of the tale, whereas Poseidon used force to strike down both

Odysseus' raft and the ship of Odysseus' benefactors, again exhibiting his poor sportsmanship.

Another story illustrative of the relationship between Poseidon and Athena is that of the horse. In some stories, Poseidon is said to have created the first horse; but at the very least he had a strong connection to the wild horse. Poseidon pursued Demeter when she was seeking her daughter Persephone, and to avoid her pursuer, Demeter changed herself into a mare. Poseidon, however, recognized her and transformed himself into a stallion, raping her and producing a wild horse, Arion. But although Poseidon may have created the horse, it was Athena who invented its bridle, literally allowing the Greeks to harness the power of the horse in another example of their competition between might and craft<sup>5</sup>.

The Titans' world was one of great and unreasoning force. In copies of Greek myths that we read now, we see their reign as short, only a repetition of the theme of the father fearing his own obsolescence made real through his son. But the might of the Titans was primal and real, and their powers were largely associated with physical forces such as the sun or the ocean. At the most abstract, they were concepts such as memory, or natural law, and their power follows them in their close descendants who take up their positions.

The Olympians, in contrast, were far more abstract in their aspects as befits the gods of a civilization. Most of the Olympians ruled over concepts such as medicine, the hearth, or metalwork. Theirs was a calmer and more discerning force, one that had room for a god of inebriation and a goddess of beauty. Though the males of the first generation of the Olympians (Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus) nonetheless had power like that of the Titans before them, often their power was muted in what was a more crowded world than the Titans had inhabited.

Poseidon's force, then, fell closer to the Titans than the Olympians. Poseidon was cruel and forceful with the women he courted, as with his rape of a grieving Demeter, and especially with his rivals, as when he dried up the streams of the river gods sent to handle his dispute with Hera over the city of Agrolis<sup>5</sup>.

As a counterpoint, Athena was just and fair, even among Olympians. Unlike the fits of jealous rage seen among her siblings spurring such events as the murder of Orion or the numerous fates imposed on mistresses of Zeus by Hera, Athena was seen to strike down a mortal out of jealousy

only once, in the case of Arachne, whose fate was more a product of her own hubris than any fault of Athena's, and who, despite her slight, was not killed.

The relationship between Athena and Poseidon speaks to the values of those who worshiped them. The transition from the Titans to the Olympians marked a transition from unreasoning force to forces that, while still powerful, were now just and fair. Graves says that, in contrast to other gods and goddesses, Athena was only known to have acted from jealousy once, and when caught bathing, as her sister Artemis had been, she was more forgiving in her punishment, simply blinding the trespasser, and then even going so far as to give him second sight<sup>6</sup>. Athena, then, stands farthest into the realm of reason, embodying ideals that we would associate with the Olympians and with the civilization of Ancient Greece better even than her siblings.

## References

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