

Introduction



The Greek myths were first passed on by word of mouth, down through the violence of a dark age. The two or three centuries beginning about 1125 B.C.E. were marked by strife and turmoil. The course of civilization was set back by centuries. Later Greeks, looking back through the dim prism of the centuries of violence, spoke of a time when heroes walked the earth. These exceptional men and women fought monsters, performed superhuman feats and consorted with the gods themselves.

The Ancient Greeks were polytheists and believed in a multitude of immortal **deities**. The greatest of these lived on the remote heights of **Mount Olympus** but were by no means aloof from the mortals below. The Olympian gods communicated with their subjects by omens and oracles. Spokespersons for the divine, oracles, answered questions often in riddles. The greatest was at **Delphi**. The gods decided the outcome of athletic contests and battles. They even took up arms themselves. And they aided or hindered the heroes in their quests.

A hero's lot was out of the ordinary from the very outset. He or she might be the offspring of an immortal deity. Some heroes were abandoned in the wilderness as babies. **Oedipus** and the heroine **Atalanta** were thrown to fate in this way. Oedipus was saved from certain death by the kindness of a shepherd. Atalanta was nursed by a bear. When she grew up, she could outrun, outshoot and outwrestle most men, fellow heroes included.

Heroes often received an unusual education. Some were tutored by **Chiron**, greatest of the centaurs. The **centaurs** were half man, half horse. Notoriously uncivilized, they were prone to such behavior as disrupting wedding feasts by trying to carry off the bride. Chiron was distinguished from the other centaurs by his civility and cultivation of the healing arts.

Back before the Dark Age, kingdoms had produced glorious arts and crafts, typified by the **golden masks** found on the site of ancient **Mycenae**. The myths go back at least as far as this era, known as the Mycenaean. It is also known as the Heroic Age.

As the time of the heroes gave way to the dim centuries of violence, ruins and abandoned dwellings lay scattered upon the land. The kingdoms that had seen the exploits sung about by bards like Homer now lay in shambles. Some speculate that Dorian invaders from the north with iron weapons laid waste the Bronze Age culture. Others look to internal dissent, uprising and rebellion. Or perhaps some combination brought the era to an end.

One thing is certain — civilization had taken a giant backward step. Material culture and the life of the mind were reduced to a lower common denominator. And when the flame of learning and the aspiring spirit was kindled anew, people looked back across the time of darkness to what seemed a golden age. Then it was, they thought, that a special breed of men and women had trod the earth—not quite gods but not quite human either. They made up stories about them, some based perhaps on faint recollections of real individuals.

These were the **heroes of Greek mythology**.



Trojan WAR

The **Trojan War** was over. The clever Greek Odysseus had tricked the enemy into bringing a colossal wooden horse within the walls of Troy. The Trojans had no idea that Greek soldiers were hidden inside, under the command of Odysseus.

The Greeks had been laying siege to Troy for nine long years, but suddenly it looked like their whole army had departed, leaving the horse behind.

That night, while the Trojans slept, Odysseus and his men emerged from the horse's belly. Opening the city gates, they admitted their comrades, who had snuck back in the dark.

Troy was sacked and the Trojans utterly vanquished. Now it was time for Odysseus and his fellow warriors to return to their kingdoms across the sea. Here begins the tale of the Odyssey, as sung by the blind minstrel Homer.

