

Greek Mythology in a Nutshell

The most complete version of the Greek creation myths that survives is a poem called the *Theogony* ("Birth of the Gods") by a poet named Hesiod, who lived in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C. (that is, the low-numbered 700s or high-numbered 600s BC). Not much is known about Hesiod except that his dad lost all of his money when his ship sank, and his brother tried to rob him of his inheritance. These two facts may account for the tone of what you're about to read.



Remember that this is just one version of the Greek creation myth — a particularly good and complete one, but by no means the only one. And fans of the *Hercules* and *Xena* TV series will certainly recognize many of the names.

In the beginning, there was Chaos. Darkness covered the earth. Hesiod's creation story doesn't involve something being created from nothing; there was stuff (Chaos), but it was shapeless, mixed-up, and dark.

The first generation of gods

After Chaos, five divinities came into being (it isn't clear how) and began giving shape to things, separating the muddle into specific places and times, and to set the stage for more creation. The divinities were: Gaia (the mother Earth), Tartarus (the underworld), Erebus (the darkness that covers the underworld), Night (darkness that covers Earth), and Eros (Love).

Night and Erebus got together and had some children: Hemera (Day), Phôs (Light), and (a cheery set of quintuplets) Doom, Death, Misery, Deceit, and Discord.

Discord later gave birth to the following other forces: Murder, Slaughter, Battle, and Crime.

The earth is born

Earth held the Sky up above itself. Or rather "herself," because Earth, called "Gaia," was female, and the Sky, called "Uranus" (Earth's child), was male.

Gaia and Uranus had a bunch of kids. First, they had a bunch of monsters; then, perhaps having worked out the kinks in the system, they produced some gods known as Titans.

Our children are real monsters!

Gaia and Uranus's first three kids were monsters with 100 hands (Hekatoncheires) and 50 heads each, which must have been a bit surprising to their parents.

The next three were the *Cyclopes*, giants with one eye in the middle of their foreheads. They were as big as mountains and immensely strong. The three Cyclopes were

- Brontes ("Thunderer")
- Steropes ("Lightning Flash")
- Argos ("Shining Guy")

Eventually, these three would get jobs manufacturing the thunderbolts that Zeus (their nephew who hadn't been born yet) used to blow folks up.



The word *Cyclops* means round-eyed or wheel-eyed. The first part of the word is in the modern words "cycle," "bicycle," and "encyclopedia"; the second part gives us words such as "optical," "optician," and "*myopia*" (nearsightedness). If you have only one of these round-eyed monsters, you have a "Cyclops," which rhymes with "high-tops"; if you have a bunch of them, you have "Cyclopes," which rhymes with "high-top, please."

Meet the Titans, the second generation of gods

Uranus and Gaia had many more children, but their most famous batch of kids was the *Titans*. They were big and strong, too. Uranus hated all these kids, and as each one was born, he shoved it back up into Gaia. Gaia didn't like that. Nevertheless, the Titans, their six sons and six daughters, were

- **Oceanus:** God of the Sea.
- **Thetis:** Sister and wife of Oceanus.
- **Hyperion:** God of the Sun.
- **Theia:** Sister and wife of Hyperion.
- **Themis:** An earth goddess.
- **Rhea:** An earth goddess.
- **Mnemosyne:** Goddess of Memory.
- **Iapetus:** No notable responsibilities.
- **Coeus:** No notable responsibilities.
- **Phoebe:** No notable responsibilities.
- **Crius:** No notable responsibilities.
- **Cronos** : The brightest, strongest, and cleverest of all.

These Titans were the generation before the better-known Olympian gods — Zeus and others.

Gaia's sweet revenge and the prodigal son

Gaia was understandably mad about Uranus shoving her kids back up into her body (they were still alive in there), so she asked her other children, the Cyclopes and the Titans, to help her out. One of her sons, the Titan Cronos, agreed to attack his dad for her. Gaia made a huge sickle out of flint and gave it to Cronos with some pretty explicit instructions.

When Uranus came to see Gaia, he found a nasty surprise waiting for him. Cronos (who was, remember, inside Gaia's womb) reached out with the sickle and attacked Uranus. Cronos cut off part of his father's flesh and threw it into the sea. From the blood were born several more monsters: the Giants and the Furies.

As Uranus's flesh fell into the water, the sea foamed up like certain headache remedies, and the foam produced the goddess Aphrodite. Her name means "gift of the sea foam." She floated around in the sea for a while, and then came to shore on the island of Cyprus, which is why she is often called Cyprian Aphrodite.

The third generation of gods: The Olympians

The third generation of Greek gods were known as the Olympian Gods, because they eventually made their home on Mount Olympus.

After Cronos injured his father Uranus, Cronos set himself up as king of Heaven. He married his sister, the Titan Rhea, and they had a bunch of kids.

Like his father, Cronos didn't want all of his kids to live. He had heard a prophecy that one of his sons would dethrone him and he had no intention of allowing that to happen. So every time Rhea had a baby, he swallowed it whole.

Rhea, like Gaia, wasn't at all happy to see all of her children eaten by their father. So she did what you would expect a young bride to do: She asked her parents, Gaia and Uranus, for help. Gaia and Uranus had some experience in these matters (and apparently had gotten over any lasting bitterness from their own marital difficulties), so they came up with a plan.

When Rhea had her sixth child, Zeus, she smuggled him away to the island of Crete and gave her husband a baby-sized rock wrapped in a blanket instead. Cronos obviously didn't know much about babies, because he swallowed the stone and never gave it another thought.

First among equals: Zeus

After his mother smuggled him away, Zeus grew up safely on Crete. The Nymphs gave him milk from a magical goat named Amalthea, and the *Curetes*, minor gods who had the job of protecting him, banged their spears against their swords every time baby Zeus cried, and that way Cronos never heard him.

Zeus had no particular reason to love his dad, so he got together with his grandmother Gaia and they made Cronos throw up the children he had eaten. The first thing Cronos tossed was the stone Rhea had given him instead of Zeus, so he knew he had been

tricked. The other five babies had grown up in his belly, and they emerged as full-fledged deities. These deities were the *Olympians*:

- **Hera:** Goddess of marriage.
- **Poseidon:** God of the sea.
- **Hades:** God of the underworld.
- **Hestia:** Goddess of the hearth.
- **Demeter:** Goddess of crops and the harvest.

During his fight with his father, Zeus injured Cronos — like father like son! — and part of his flesh dropped into the sea just as Uranus's flesh had.

Dirty Harry feels lucky: Zeus punishes the Titans and battles the Giants

After injuring his father Cronos, Zeus bound the Titans in *Tartarus*, the underworld. He sentenced Atlas, Prometheus's brother, to hold up the sky on his shoulders.

Zeus gets his thunderbolts

Gaia had one more baby, the monster Typhon. *Typhon* had 100 heads and was covered with flame. But Zeus by now had taken control of thunder and lightning, and shot down Typhon with his thunderbolt. Typhon's hopes of terrorizing the universe were ended, but he still needed a job, so he moved to Sicily, where he supplied the volcanic magma for Mount Etna.

Cool thrones for everybody!

After this, the Giants (the ones born when Cronos cut Uranus's flesh) rebelled against Zeus's control. Zeus and his siblings, aided by the hero Heracles (a.k.a. Hercules, a.k.a. Kevin Sorbo), beat the Giants and sent them down to the underworld. Now, Zeus and his brothers and sisters were the ultimate rulers of heaven and earth.

Zeus really showed his stuff in the way he escaped the fate of his father, Cronos, and his grandfather, Uranus. After the dust had settled from the Battle with the Titans, Zeus married Metis (a goddess who was the personification of "Cunning Intelligence").

Just like his father before him, Zeus received a prophecy that his wife would bear a child who would become King of the Gods. Instead of waiting for the child to be born, Zeus was proactive, and swallowed his wife. The child was born anyway, but it came out of Zeus's head — thus avoiding the important detail of the prophecy that Metis would bear the child. The baby was Athena, the wise goddess, who, although she was Daddy's girl, had a lot of her mom's cunning intelligence in her.