

THE MYTHIC LINE

The Birth of the Gods

Gaea, the Goddess of Earth, and Uranus, the God of the Sky, engendered a race of children known as the Titans.

- Cronus, the youngest of the Titans, with the help of his mother, attacked and banished his father.
- Cronus married Rhea and, in order to maintain his position and power and to protect himself from possible attack from a child, Cronus swallowed the children of Rhea as they were born.
- Rhea was appalled by Cronus' actions and hid one of her children, Zeus, from Cronus by spiriting him away to the Island of Crete.
- Zeus knew that he could not attack Cronus directly. He would need help and would need to use guile, so he had his then-wife, Metis, offer Cronus a herb that she claimed would make him invincible. The herb, however, was an emetic that caused Cronus to vomit up the children he had swallowed. These children organized a successful revolt against Cronus.
- The children, in addition to Zeus, were: Hades, Poseidon, Hestia, Demeter and Hera. These are the original gods of Olympus—the gods of Homer's Odyssey.

Enter Humans

Tantalus, the son of Zeus and a nymph named Plouto, invited the Olympian gods to dinner.

- Wishing to impress the gods by giving them what he most valued, he served up his son, Pelops. This was not a success. The Olympian gods were appalled. Tantalus was sent to Hades to be tormented with eternal longing and Pelops was brought back to life.
- Pelops won a chariot race against Hippodamia's father which gave him the right to marry her. They had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes. Atreus' wife, Aerope conspired with her brother-in-law lover, Thyestes, to trick Atreus into giving up his throne to Thyestes. But Atreus, with the divine help of Zeus and Apollo, tricked Thyestes into giving it back.

- Atreus discovered Thyestes affair with his wife, Aerope, so he killed and cooked Thyestes' sons and fed them to him. Thyestes, in turn, on the advice of the oracle, had a son by his daughter, Pelopia. The oracle promised that, one day, this son would carry out Thyestes' revenge against Atreus. This son was Aegisthus who Pelopia abandoned at birth because of her embarrassment over her incest.
- Aegisthus was found by shepherds, however, and given to Atreus who raised him. When Aegisthus discovered that Thyestes was his father (and grandfather), he killed Atreus but not before Atreus and Aerope had had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus.
- This is the point where the mythic becomes the historical. Menelaus was the king of Sparta who married Helen who ran off to Troy with Paris leading Agamemnon to mount a Greek expedition against Troy.

A Real War That Spawned Epic Poetry

The last days of the Trojan War are the subject of Homer's *Iliad*. After fighting in that war, Odysseus traveled home to Ithaca. His travels and his return to Ithaca are the subject of the *Odyssey*.

The Trojan War, as it may have historically occurred, is described in Barry Strauss' book, *The Trojan War: A New History*. But the gap between that war and Homer's description of it is wide. Archeologists estimate that the war took place sometime between 1210 and 1180 B.C. Homer composed his epics sometime around 700 B.C. which allowed for five hundred years of story telling to precede Homer's composition. Even then, Homer's poems were likely composed as oral poetry to be recited and sung. They may have been written down earlier, but Athenian evidence of their recording dates to sometime between 560 and 527 B.C.