

Ancient Greece: Gods and goddesses



White-ground cup picturing Aphrodite riding
on a goose. Greek, around 460 BC

Visit resource for teachers
Key Stage 2

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Before your visit

Background information

The ancient Greeks believed in a wide variety of gods and goddesses. Many of these may originally have had a connection with forces of nature or natural phenomena - Zeus, for example, was a sky god, whose main weapon, the thunderbolt, was clearly connected with thunder and lightning. They also had characteristics to do with their role in human life - Zeus was the god with responsibility for justice and order. Sometimes gods acquired extra names that indicated this - Zeus Horkios, for example, identifies Zeus in his role as the upholder of oaths. While it is easy to do a simple table of the gods and their main functions, this disguises the complicated and subtle ways in which the gods worked - it is better to get children familiar with lots of ancient Greek myths and legends and allow them to gain a gradual understanding of the nature of each individual god from what they do in the stories.

The Greeks believed in a number of major gods who were thought to live on Mount Olympus - these are often referred to as the Olympian gods - but there were also many other lesser deities and also very minor spirits, for example the many nymphs that lived in streams and even individual trees and mountains. Most of the Olympian gods are recognisable in vase-paintings and sculptures from the objects they carry, the clothes they wear or their poses and actions.

Worship of gods and goddesses took place in formal sanctuaries, which usually contained a temple in which the god was thought to live. Worship actually took place outside the temple - temples were not like churches in that respect. You could also worship gods in sacred places or shrines in the countryside, at home or in the city or as needed - offerings were often made to Dionysus in the men's quarters of private houses before a drinking party. An important form of worship was animal sacrifice, but this tended to be on a large, highly organised community scale. Small offerings such as pouring out wine or milk could be made an everyday basis.

Of course, there was a great deal of variety in the ways in which the ancient Greeks believed in their gods. For many ordinary Greeks, the minor gods were much more important as they were relevant to the day to day life they led. Some Greek philosophers used existing gods to represent aspects of their philosophical beliefs.

Resources

British Museum websites

Teaching history with 100 objects

Free online resources to support teachers working in the new history curriculum through object-based learning. Access information, images, and video as well as teaching ideas for lessons at Key Stages 1-3.

www.teachinghistory100.org

Books

For adults

Cartledge, Paul (ed.), *Cambridge Illustrated History of Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press, 2002

For children

Sheehan, Sean, *Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2002.

Woff, Richard, *The Ancient Greek Olympics*, British Museum Press, 1999.

Woff, Richard, *Pocket dictionary of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses*, British Museum Press, 2003.

Gallery information

Rooms 13 and 14 explore ancient Greek artistic developments and achievements. Room 13 covers ancient Greece from 1050BC to 520BC. Objects on display include sculpture, painted pottery, jewellery, coins and other artefacts from Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and East Greece. Room 14 displays Greek vases from 530BC to 500BC. Objects on display include Athenian pottery depicting hunting, dancing and mythology.

What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 13 is a large rectangular gallery with two exits. One exit leads into Room 14 and the other into Room 12. The gallery consists of wall cases displaying pottery, jewellery and coins and central cases displaying a quantity of pottery. The central cases offer the opportunity to study pots from all angles. All the pots are behind glass, but most of them are at a good height for children - there are a few pots a bit high up, but many of these are reasonably visible to Years 5 and 6. A lot of people walk through these rooms and they can get quite noisy, but there are spaces away from the main through-route where you can gather students together to brief them and discuss what they've seen.

Room 14 is a very small room that contains two cases. It is generally used as a way of moving between Room 13 and Room 15 so is not a good place for large groups to work.

Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

Preliminary Activities

General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by ancient Greece in an atlas and look at the modern countries in which the ancient Greeks used to live.
- Talk about religion in general. Explain that religion has changed and developed over time and in geographical areas.

During your visit

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in room 13 and 14. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Gallery activity: spot the Gods

- Ancient Greek gods and goddesses were associated with different symbols, animals and objects. These often relate to what aspect of the world they were believed to be responsible for.
- This activity requires the students to translate written details into visual clues.

Gallery activity: Dionysos

- Dionysos was the god of wine and happy emotions. He is associated with the drama and the theatre.

This activity requires students to use previous knowledge and visual observation

Gallery activity: A wedding procession

- The Sophilos Dinos is a wine bowl. It is decorated with a procession celebrating the marriage of Peleus and Thetis.
- This activity encourages detailed visual observation skills.

Gallery activity: Hermes

- Hermes is the god of travellers and was the messenger for the gods.
- This activity encourages the students to use visual observation.

Spot the gods

- Look at the pots in Case 8 - this is the biggest glass case in the middle of the room.
- Use the clues in the table below look to find some of the ancient Greek gods and goddesses on the pots.
- Each time you see one put a tick in the box next to their name. (You may not be able to spot every one.)

God / Goddess	Clues	Tick when you find them!
Apollo God of music	During times of peace he carried a musical instrument.	
Athena Goddess of war and wisdom	The only female who wears armour and a helmet and carries a spear.	
Dionysos God of wine and theatre	He carries a wine cup; sometimes painted with grape vines near him.	
Hermes Messenger god	He wears a traveller's hat, carries a traveller's staff and has winged sandals.	
Poseidon God of the sea	He carries a trident (three pronged spear). Sometimes has a sea creature near him.	
Zeus King of the gods	He carries thunderbolts to throw down to earth from his throne.	

- Discuss with your group which god or goddess you found most often. Was there one nobody could find?

Dionysos

- Find the object shown in the picture below. It is a plate with a picture of Dionysos on it.



- Look at this plate in the case and use it to answer the questions below. Circle the answer that you think is right for each question.

- What does Dionysos hold in his hand?
- Was Dionysos the god of wine or the sea?
- Is Dionysos a young man or an older man?
- What is Dionysos sitting on?
- Does Dionysos have a beard?

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| wine cup | sword |
| wine | sea |
| young man | older man |
| chair | stool |
| yes | no |

- Think about what this plate might have been used for

A wedding procession

- Find case 9. This contains a large bowl for mixing wine and water. The bowl has pictures which show a wedding procession.
- Many of the gods and goddesses have been invited to the wedding. Use the information below and tick when you have found them.

- Dionysos is near the front of the procession. His name is written beside him. He is holding the branch of a tree.
- Zeus and Hera ride in the first chariot. Zeus drives the chariot and holds a staff.
- The second chariot is driven by Poseidon who also carries a staff. His chariot is pulled by three black horses and one white horse.
- The third chariot is driven by Ares. Aphrodite is the passenger. Their faces are not clear as the pot has been broken. Five of the Muses are standing near the chariot.
- Hermes and Apollo ride in the fourth chariot. Hermes wears a short tunic. Apollo is carrying a musical instrument.
- The fifth chariot carries Athena and Artemis. Athena is driving. Artemis is carrying her bow and wearing a dress decorated with mythical creatures.
- Can you spot the sea-god Okeanos? He is a fish-tailed god.

Dionysos
Zeus and Hera
Poseidon
Ares and Aphrodite
Hermes and Apollo
Athena and Artemis
Okeanos

Hermes

- Hermes was the god of travellers. Find the pot in the picture below. It is in case 8.
- This pot shows Hermes watching Perseus kill Medusa. Look at the pot in the case and use the clues below to work out which figure is Hermes.



Clue: Hermes has winged sandals.

Clue: Perseus is a human, if he looked at Medusa he would be turned to stone.

Clue: Hermes wears a traveller's hat and carries a traveller's staff.

- When you think you know which one is Hermes draw a large arrow pointing to him on the picture above and write his name next to it

After your visit

Follow-up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage pupils to reflect on the work undertaken in the Ancient Greek galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the pupils to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.

Follow up activity: Spot the Gods

Curriculum links: history, literacy

Skills: investigation, presentation, group work

- Ask the students which gods and goddesses they remember seeing during their visit. Write a list on the board. Redistribute the worksheets and ask the students if there are any gods or goddesses on those that they have not mentioned. Add these to the list.
- Add any extra gods to the list that you would like the students to learn about. Ask individuals or groups to research the gods. They can record their observations as notes or sketches. When they have finished ask students to present their findings to the class.

Follow up activity: Dionysos

Curriculum links: history, literacy, art and design

Skills: observation, discussion, literacy, practical design

- Review the image of Dionysos seen during the visit. Discuss their answers.
- Show more pictures of gods on pottery. Discuss the use of colour, materials and style. Ask the students to design and draw their own image of a god for a pottery vessel. When they have finished they can write a short description of the image, which god it shows, how it is recognisable as that specific god and what type of vessel they chose.
- Use clay to help the students recreate the shape of their vessels. If possible allow this to dry and then use paint to transfer their drawn image onto the clay. If the use of clay is not possible then use paint on paper to transfer the drawn design into a painted design.

Follow up activity: A wedding procession

Curriculum links: history, geography, religion

Skills: discussion, listening, analysis

- Discuss the Sophilos bowl, looking at its decoration, animals, depictions of gods and goddesses and its function
- Discuss the range of gods in the ancient Greek world. Explore their relationship to the world and to humans. Explain that the ancient Greeks attributed natural phenomena to the gods and that they worshipped them for favours to be granted during their lifetime.
- Use this as an opportunity to explore world religions past and present. You may wish to use religions that are practised by students and ask them to present their faith first-hand or you could ask groups to research religions and present their findings.

Follow up activity: Hermes

Curriculum links: history, literacy, drama

Skills: observation, group work, role-play

- Project an image of the pot seen during the visit on the board or redistribute the worksheets. Ask students how they used the clues to help them identify Hermes.
- Write a list of ancient Greek gods on the board (these can be gods you wish the students to learn about or gods that they suggest). Ask the students what symbols, objects or other information can help to identify each god. Write these next to each god's name. Use Hermes and his winged sandals and traveller's hat as an example.
- Split the class up and secretly assign each group a god. Ask them to compose a short drama piece involving the god and other people. The purpose is for each group to end up with something that gives clues so that other groups can guess which god they are depicting. For example asking the 'god' "How fast can those sandals fly?" indicates Hermes.