



Historically Speaking

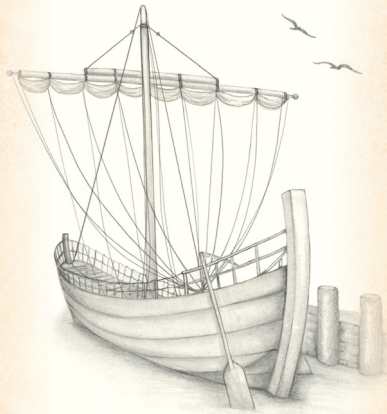
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Athena

Athena (also Athene) is the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, battle, handicrafts, and the protector of cities. The Romans identified her as Minerva. She was most probably a pre-hellenic goddess assimilated by the Greeks. Athena was the daughter of Zeus, the chief Olympian god. Her birth is remarkable. Zeus had a headache and summoned Haestus (the god of the forge) to split Zeus' head open to relieve the pressure. When that happened, out sprang Athena, fully grown and in full armor. This strange myth explains that the goddess of wisdom comes from the head of Zeus. In one version explaining how she came to be within him, Zeus swallowed the goddess of counsel, Metis, while she was pregnant with Athena, which led to her birth from his head. She was the favorite child of Zeus, and so was considered to have great power. Her epithets of Pallas Athena and Athena Parthenos both refer to her virtue as one of the virgin goddess of the pantheon.

The Greeks held Athena in high regard, unlike Ares, the god of war, who is usually shown unfavorably in myth. This seems to represent the Greek dislike for war, but if it comes, then the skills of battle can provide for victory. They were a free people dedicated to keeping that freedom by whatever means necessary.

Athens, Greece is named after Athena as described on the second page of this newsletter. Her sacred bird is the owl, which explains why owls are considered wise.



The Peplos

The virgin goddess Athena is always depicted clad in a peplos. The sacred garment, that was woven by the arrhephoroi and the ergastines, was the focal point of the ritual that took place on the last day of the Panathenaea festival, as it was transported attached to the mast of a ship-cart in a procession to the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis and was delivered to the xoanon (a wooden cult image) of the goddess. The magnificent procession that carried the peplos is depicted on the Parthenon Frieze.



The Parthenon is the temple of Athena Parthenos. It is considered by many to be the most perfect building ever constructed, and is the crown of the Athenian Acropolis.

Ouranian Publishing of Spokane
304 N. Adams Rd.
Spokane Valley, WA 99216-2062
(509) 710-7185



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This excerpt from STRYMON has the bard telling the story of the origin of the city of Athens to the audience in a taverna in that city:

“Mighty Athens is built around a hill you call the acropolis, for it is the highest place in the city, but in the beginning, it was not what we see today. Around it in the earliest of times only a few families were scattered far and wide.

“Then it was that a magnificent being was born from the earth. That being was a man from the waist up and below that the tail of a dragon. His name was Kekrops and he took on the task of leadership, becoming the first king of this land. His reign lasted fifty years, and he brought about many great and important things during his time as king.

“The gods were, in those days, dividing up the villages, towns and cities among themselves, each desiring the sacrifices and adoration given to a patron god or goddess. When it came to this place, now in its earliest days, and under the rule of the man-dragon king,”

Strymon now took on the action of his story. Raising his arms with the imaginary trident in his hands, he brought it down swiftly and stomped on the table to mark the impact, as he said, “Poseidon raced to claim it as his own, and in an effort to win the people over, struck with his mighty trident, a place on the acropolis where a spring of water came forth and formed a small lake. Athena also came swiftly to this place, desiring it for herself, and caused the first olive tree to spring forth also upon the high place.”

As Strymon looked out among the crowd, he could see that his words and actions were beginning to find favor, and he raised and lowered his volume to keep their interest as the men sipped silently on their cups.

“Now, I am a sailor, and so Poseidon is dear to me, but the gift he gave was a spring of salt water, and there was no shortage of that nearby, so while it was an impressive deed, it provided little use. But Athena’s olive tree held the promise of food, oil and trade. So it was that Kekrops declared Athena the winner. She took the town as her own and bestowed on it her own name, and so it was called Athens, the city of Athena.”

There was a murmur among the crowd as some assumed that this brief story was done, and so was not what they had expected from a true bard. Strymon spoke loudly to command their attention once again.

“Now that the city had a patron goddess and a king born of the earth, the city grew quickly. Families chose to move here and many trades were developed. Kekrops ruled wisely and implemented new practices among the people. One such practice was marriage. Before that the people were promiscuous and each woman had children that took their mother’s name, for it was not known who the father might be, but once marriage became the practice of the people, the father was known and the children took the name of their father, and that brought power to men.”

He knew that would meet with approval among this crowd of men, and so he paused to let the comments be made, some decent and some rude.

“Kekrops also declared that mighty Zeus was the chief of the gods and that made his daughter, Athena, even more pleased.

“The king also changed the cruel and bloody practice of animal sacrifice, saying that the gods were better served by something more civilized, for that is clearly representative of this city, as you make your sacrifices of cakes.”



The Parthenon was constructed to house the gold and ivory cult statue of Athena created by the master sculptor Phidias. The statue was begun in 447 BCE and dedicated in 438 BCE. The statue disappeared in late antiquity, possibly destroyed in Constantinople. This representation of the statue is derived by descriptions made by Plutarch and Pausanias.