

Athena the Almighty

Athena inherited her mother's wisdom and her father's sense of justice. These two features made for a brilliant and merciful goddess. She excelled equally in activities traditionally associated with either women or men, such as weaving and warfare. People in need of aid, especially heroes and soldiers, called upon Athena's protection. Under her care, heroes such as Heracles and Odysseus successfully completed their difficult missions. But Athena's realm of protection extended beyond individuals. She was also the protector of several cities (including Athens and Argos), and she created a system of justice based on law and order (replacing the old system of blood feuds and revenge). A wise and just goddess, Athena sat on many councils and took part in many tribunals.

A Goddess Who Had It All

Athena's influence extended beyond wisdom and war to encompass other spheres. For example, she was a patron goddess of the arts, including literature, poetry, music, and philosophy. Several poets were inspired to praise her gray eyes and her stately presence. Athena was also the patron of spinners and weavers; she was credited with the invention of weaving and other domestic crafts. Thanks to her cleverness and her willingness to work hard, she also became the patron goddess of metalworkers, carpenters, and other skilled workers. Athena was universally admired: by men and women, by warriors and craftsmen, by heroes and commoners.

Well, Who Almost Had It All

There was one area of human experience, however, that Athena could neither understand nor relate to: motherhood. Athena was born without a mother, and she herself had no children, so the idea of motherhood did not interest her.

Athena the Inventor

Athena was credited with several inventions that advanced civilization and made life easier for people. The long list of Athena's inventions illustrates her versatility. Various myths claim that she invented the plow, the yoke, and the bridle. Other inventions included the war chariot, the flute, the trumpet, and the science of mathematics. On a culinary note, she introduced olive oil. Athena is also said to have overseen the building of the first ship, the Argo, which carried Jason and the Argonauts on the quest for the Golden Fleece. Although some myths deny that this was the first ship ever built, all agree that it was the largest ship ever made.

A Hero's Best Friend

Perseus, another great hero described in Chapter 19, accepted a mission from King Polydectes to retrieve the head of the Gorgon Medusa, a terrifying creature with hair of snakes and a stare that could turn mortals and immortals alike to stone. Obtaining Medusa's head seemed an impossible task, but Perseus knew with the goddess Athena on his side, he would be victorious. Athena had her own reasons for wanting Perseus to succeed. To put it simply, she hated Medusa. Athena gave Perseus a polished bronze shield and offered him guidance, and Perseus readily accepted.

When Perseus reached Medusa's lair, Athena told him what to do. Instead of looking at the sleeping Medusa directly — which would turn him to stone — Perseus watched her reflection in his bronze shield. Keeping his eyes on the reflection, rather than looking at Medusa herself, Perseus beheaded the monster. Perseus knew that he never would have succeeded without Athena, so he showed his appreciation by mounting Medusa's head on Athena's shield. A Gorgon's head was a great aid in battle, because it had the power to paralyze one's enemies. This shield became a symbol of the goddess, and rarely was she depicted without it.



1. "Athena inherited her mother's wisdom and her father's sense of justice." Explain what it means to have wisdom and a sense of justice.

2. Why do you believe Athena held qualities usually associated with men and women. (Example - Weaving and Warfare)

3. According to the article Athena was born without a mother which made her not very interested in being a mother, how do you believe this made the women of Ancient Greece feel?

4. Heroes such as Heracles (Hercules), Odysseus, and Perseus looked to Athena for help during their adventures why do you believe they asked Athena for help rather than another God?

5. Give examples from the text as to how Athena influenced Ancient Greek life.