



THE GODS OF GREECE MEET THE GODS OF ROME

When Rome gained the supremacy of the ancient world, the old Greek gods survived, but the Romans renamed them and changed their characters somewhat. Whereas the Greek divinities had both good and bad qualities, the Romans tended to see each of their gods as representative of a particular virtue. Thus, the gods became more remote from the people as they became examples of unattainable perfection.

Zeus, now renamed Jupiter, was still the supreme deity—the protector of the state, guardian of law, and defender of truth and virtue. He controlled the lives of human beings, but he never came down to earth to mingle with the people. His wife, Juno (Hera), was a protectress of women in general and especially of women during childbirth.

Athena's Roman name was Minerva. She was still a warrior-goddess, a goddess of wisdom, and a patroness of handcrafts. Along with Jupiter and Juno, she was worshiped in a temple on the Capitoline Hill in Rome.

Mars (Ares) was held in higher esteem by the Romans, a warlike people, than he had been by the Greeks. He was honored through festivals and sacrifices; the month of March was named for him; he was reputed to be the father of Romulus and Remus, the mythical founders of Rome; and he was second in importance only to Jupiter.

Venus's role in Roman mythology was almost identical with Aphrodite's in the Greek myths. She was the goddess of love and beauty; Mars was her lover. But she was also a nature goddess who caused the flowers to bloom in the spring. In addition, she was a protectress of Rome.

Pluto (Hades) was to the Romans the ruler of the dead and a giver of wealth—remember that Hades was guardian of all the treasures (minerals) under the earth. Pluto's wife, Proserpina, was the equivalent of the Greek Persephone.

Neptune was originally the god of moisture who filled the springs and streams. In later myths, like the Greek Poseidon, he was god of the sea.

Diana, like Artemis, was the moon goddess and the goddess of forests and hunting. Like Juno, she was a protectress of women in childbirth.

Apollo, the sun god, was worshiped by the Romans as he had been by the Greeks. You will remember that Apollo had the sun's power to heal. When, in the fifth century B.C., Rome was threatened by a plague, the people adopted Apollo as their own, hoping to receive his healing powers.

But the Romans also had an ancient sun deity of their own; he was Janus, the god with two faces—one looking backward, the other forward. Appropriately, Janus's name was given to the first month of the year. A temple and archway were dedicated to him. Roman soldiers marching off to war went through the arch to gain his special protection. His temple gates remained always open in wartime and closed in peacetime. Only three closings occurred in seven hundred years!

Ceres, goddess of the harvest, was the Roman counterpart of Demeter. Vesta, goddess of the hearth and protectress of the sacred altar fire, was like the Greek Hestia. In Vesta's temple, six virgins from noble Roman families guarded the sacred fire at all times.

Mercury was the Roman Hermes, god of commerce. On May 15, his festival day, merchandise was sprinkled with sacred water to guarantee high profits.

Vulcan, god of fire and of volcanoes (think of where Hephaestus's forge was located), was just like Hephaestus.

Bacchus, like Dionysus, was a god of fertility and wine. His sacred rituals were called Bacchanalia; gradually, they changed into orgies, causing his name to be associated with drunkenness. Of the Roman gods, Bacchus unfortunately became the most human.