

The Titans and the Gods of Olympus: Greek Origin Story

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An illustration of Zeus crowned by Victory Photo: Big History Project

We know the Greek origin story from some of the earliest Greek literary sources that have survived, "The Theogony" and "Works and Days" by Hesiod. This oral poet is thought to have been active sometime between 750 and 650 BCE, within decades of when the Homeric epics "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" took the form in which we know them.

Archaeological findings support the creation story recorded in Hesiod's work; pottery from the eighth century BCE depicts the gods and goddesses he describes. Before Hesiod told this patriarchal version, in which the first woman is the cause of much trouble, Pandora, whose name means "gift giver," was known in oral tradition as a beneficent Earth goddess.

In the beginning there was Chaos, a yawning nothingness. Out of the void emerged Gaia (the Earth) and other divine beings — Eros (love), the Abyss (part of the underworld), and the Erebus (the unknowable place where death dwells). Without male assistance, Gaia gave birth to Uranus (the sky), who then fertilized her.

From that union the first Titans were born — six males: Coeus, Crius, Cronus, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Oceanus, and six females: Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Rhea, Theia, Themis, and Tethys. After Cronus (time) was born, Gaia and Uranus decreed no more Titans were to be born.

Cronus castrated his father and threw the severed genitals into the sea, from which arose Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty and sexuality. Cronus became the ruler of the gods with his sister-wife, Rhea, as his consort. The other Titans became his court. Because Cronus had betrayed his father, he feared that his offspring would do the same. So each time Rhea gave birth, Cronus snatched up the child and ate it. Rhea hated this and tricked him by hiding one child, Zeus, and wrapping a stone in a baby's blanket so that Cronus ate the stone instead of the baby.

When Zeus was grown, he fed his father a drugged drink, which caused Cronus to vomit, throwing up Rhea's other children and the stone. Zeus then challenged Cronus to war for the kingship of the gods. At last Zeus and his siblings, the Olympians, were victorious, and the Titans were hurled down to imprisonment in the Abyss.

Zeus was plagued by the same concern as his father had been and, after a prophecy that his first wife, Metis, would give birth to a god greater than he, he swallowed Metis. But she was already pregnant with Athena, and they both made him miserable until Athena, the goddess of wisdom, civilization and justice, burst from his head — fully grown and dressed for war. Zeus was able to fight off all challenges to his power and to remain the ruler of Mount Olympus, the home of the gods.

One son of the Titans, Prometheus, did not fight with fellow Titans against Zeus and was spared imprisonment; he was given the task of creating man. Prometheus shaped man out of mud, and Athena breathed life into the clay figure. Prometheus made man stand upright as the gods did and gave him fire. Prometheus tricked Zeus, and to punish him, Zeus created Pandora, the first woman, of stunning beauty, wealth, and a deceptive heart and lying tongue. He also gave Pandora a box she was commanded never to open, but eventually her curiosity got the best of her, and she opened the box to release all kinds of evil, plagues, sorrows, and misfortunes, and also hope, which lay at the bottom of the box.

Quiz

- 1 Which answer choice provides an accurate and objective summary of the story?
- (A) According to Hesiod, Cronus was a backstabbing son for harming his father and trying to kill his own children.
 - (B) According to Hesiod, Zeus and the Olympians are the main reason why Pandora opened the box from Prometheus.
 - (C) According to Hesiod, if Pandora had never opened the box, mankind would have less evils and misfortunes.
 - (D) According to Hesiod, Greek gods and goddesses played a role in the creation of the first man and woman on Earth.

- 2 Read this sentence from paragraph 8 of the article.

Prometheus shaped man out of mud, and Athena breathed life into the clay figure.

Does this particular sentence support the MAIN idea of the article? How?

- (A) Yes, because it explains why Prometheus was spared imprisonment.
 - (B) Yes, because it describes how Prometheus created the first man and woman.
 - (C) No, because it does not explain why Prometheus tricked Zeus.
 - (D) No, because it does not describe what was inside of the box Prometheus gave to Pandora.
- 3 Which of the following statements accurately explains the role Cronus plays in the story?
- (A) Cronus betrayed his own father to become ruler of the gods. The mistrust in his relationships after that sparked a series of events that led to the creation of other gods as well as the first man and woman.
 - (B) Cronus created Aphrodite after harming his own father. Cronus' honor influenced the other characters in the story by inspiring them to defeat evil forces.
 - (C) Cronus became ruler of the gods with his his sister-wife, Rhea. Together, they defeated the Titans and ruled over Mount Olympus, the home of the gods.
 - (D) Cronus was one of the first Greek gods created by Hesiod. Cronus was a trustworthy individual who inspired his son Zeus to defeat the Titans and rule over Mount Olympus.

4

How does the article introduce the central figure of Pandora?

- (A) by describing the role Pandora played in ancient Greece, then explaining why she would open the box even after Prometheus told her not to
- (B) by framing Prometheus as one of the innocent Titans, then giving detailed information about the box Prometheus forbade Pandora from opening
- (C) by providing detailed background information about the feud between Zeus and the Titans, then explaining how and why Zeus created Pandora
- (D) by portraying Zeus as a heroic ruler of the Titans, then explaining why Pandora accidentally opened the box Prometheus had given to her

Answer Key

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