The Greek myths were first passed on by word of mouth, down through the violence of a dark age. The two or three centuries beginning about 1125 BC were marked by strife and turmoil. The course of civilization was set back by centuries. Later Greeks, looking back through the dim prism of the centuries of violence, spoke of a time when heroes walked the earth. These exceptional men and women fought monsters, performed superhuman feats and consort with the gods themselves.

The Ancient Greeks were polytheists and believed in a multitude of immortal deities. The greatest of these lived on the remote heights of Mount Olympus but were by no means aloof from the mortals below. The Olympian gods communicated with their subjects by omens and oracles. Spokespersons for the divine, oracles answered questions, often in riddles. The greatest was at Delphi. The gods decided the outcome of athletic contests and battles. They even took up arms themselves. And they aided or hindered the heroes in their quests.

A hero’s lot was out of the ordinary from the very outset. He or she might be the offspring of an immortal deity. Some heroes were abandoned in the wilderness as babies. Oedipus and the heroine Atalanta were thrown to fate in this way. Oedipus was saved from certain death by the kindness of a shepherd. Atalanta was nursed by a bear. When she grew up, she could outrun, outshoot and outwrestle most men, fellow heroes included.

Heroes often received an unusual education. Some were tutored by Chiron, greatest of the centaurs. The centaurs were half man, half horse. Notoriously uncivilized, they were prone to such behavior as disrupting wedding feasts by trying to carry off the bride. Chiron was distinguished from the other centaurs by his civility and cultivation of the healing arts. Among other skills, he taught young heroes...
the medicinal value of herbs and plants.

Back before the Dark Age, kingdoms had produced glorious arts and crafts, typified by the golden masks found on the site of ancient Mycenae. The myths go back at least as far as this era, known as the Mycenaean. It is also known as the Heroic Age.

As the time of the heroes gave way to the dim centuries of violence, ruins and abandoned dwellings lay scattered upon the land. The kingdoms that had seen the exploits sung about by bards like Homer now lay in shambles. Some speculate that Dorian invaders from the north with iron weapons laid waste the Bronze Age culture. Others look to internal dissent, uprising and rebellion. Or perhaps some combination brought the era to an end.

One thing is certain—civilization had taken a giant backward step. Material culture and the life of the mind were reduced to a lower common denominator. And when the flame of learning and the aspiring spirit was kindled anew, people looked back across the time of darkness to what seemed a golden age. Then it was, they thought, that a special breed of men and women had trod the earth—not quite gods but not quite human either. They made up stories about them, some based perhaps on faint recollections of real individuals.

These were the heroes of Greek mythology.

**The Hero Jason**

Jason was the son of the lawful king of Iolcus, but his uncle Pelias had usurped the throne. Pelias lived in constant fear of losing what he had taken so unjustly. He kept Jason’s father a prisoner and would certainly have murdered Jason at birth. But Jason’s mother deceived Pelias by mourning as if Jason had died. Meanwhile the infant was bundled off to the wilderness cave of Chiron

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Orcles were spokespersons for the gods. The word also refers to the prophesies of these spokespersons. In contrast to the advice given Jason’s uncle Pelias to avoid any stranger wearing only a single sandle, oracles were often hard to understand. King Croesus of Lydia was so wealthy that his name gave rise to the expression, “as rich as Croesus”. He consulted the famous Oracle of Delphi before he rebelled against the Persian empire. Croesus was told that if he proceeded, a mighty empire would fall. Croesus took this as an endorsement of his plan, and the oracle came true. Unfortunately the empire that fell was his own.
the Centaur. Chiron tutored Jason in the lore of plants, the hunt and the civilized arts.

When Jason came of age he set out like a proper hero to claim his rightful throne. Unbeknownst, he was to play his part in a plan hatched on lofty Mount Olympus, where Hera, wife of mighty Zeus himself, nursed a rage against King Pelias. For Jason’s uncle, the usurper king, had honored all the gods but Hera. Rashly had he beogrudge the Queen of Heaven her due.

Hera’s plan was fraught with danger; it would require a true hero. To test Jason’s mettle, she contrived it that he came to a raging torrent on his way to Iolcus. And on the bank was a withered old woman. Would Jason go about his business impatiently, or would he give way to her request to be ferried across the stream? Jason did not think twice. Taking the crone on his back, he set off into the current. And halfway across he began to stagger under her unexpected weight. For the old woman was none other than Hera in disguise. Some say that she revealed herself to Jason on the far shore and promised her aid in his quest. Others claim that Jason never learned of the divine service he had performed.

Jason lost a sandal in the swift-moving stream. This would prove significant in Hera’s revenge. For an oracle had warned King Pelias, “Beware a stranger who wears but a single sandal.”

When Jason arrived in Iolcus, he asserted his claim to the throne. His uncle Pelias had no intention of giving it up, particularly to a one-shoed stranger. Under the mask of hospitality, he invited Jason to a banquet. And during the course of the meal, he engaged him in conversation.

“You say you’ve got what it takes to rule a kingdom,” said Pelias with false geniality. “May I take it that you’re fit to deal with the thorny problems that arise? For example, how would you go about getting rid of someone who was giving you difficulties?”

Jason considered for a moment, eager to show a kingly knack for problem solving.

“Send him after the Golden Fleece?” he suggested.

“Not a bad idea,” responded Pelias. “It’s just the sort of quest that any hero worth his salt would leap at. Why, if he succeeded he’d be remembered down through the ages. Tell you what, why don’t you go?”

And so it came to pass that word went out the length and breadth of Greece that Jason was looking for shipmates to embark upon a perilous but highly glamorous adventure. And despite that Pelias had been attracted to the idea precisely because of the miniscule chances of anyone surviving to lay eyes upon the Fleece let alone get past the guarding dragon and return with the prize, large numbers of heroes were ready to run the risk. Among them were Hercules and the heroine Atalanta. So Jason arranged to have a ship constructed by the worthy shipwright Argus, who in a fit of vanity named the vessel more or less after himself, calling her the “Argo”.

Argus had divine sponsorship in his task. The goddess Hera, who had it in for Pelias, enlisted the aid of her fellow goddess Athena. This patroness of crafts secured a prow for the vessel from timber hewn at the sacred grove of almighty Zeus. This prow had the magical property of speaking—and prophesying—in a human voice.

And so one bright autumn morning the Argo set out to sea, her benches crewed by lusty ranks of heroic rowers. And true to Pelias’s fondest aspirations, it wasn’t long before big troubles assailed the company. After stopping for better than a fortnight on an island populated exclusively by women, they put in at Salmydessus.

The king welcomed them but was in no mood for festive entertainment. Because he’d offended the gods, he’d been set upon by woman-headed, bird-bodied, razor-clawed scourges known as Harpies. These Harpies were possessed of reprehensible table man-
ners. Every evening at dinnertime, they dropped by to defecate upon the king’s repast and hung around making such a racket that he wouldn’t have been able to eat had he the stomach for it.

As a result, King Phineus grew thinner by the hour. Fortunately two of Jason’s crew were direct descendants of the North Wind, which gave them the power to fly. And they kindly chased the Harpies so far away that the king was never bothered again. In thankfulness, he informed the Argonauts of a danger just ahead on the route to the Golden Fleece—namely two rocks called the Symplegades, which had the disconcerting habit of crashing together upon any ship that passed between them.

Phineus suggested that it might be best not to experience the effect of these Clashing Rocks firsthand. And he even suggested a mechanism by which this might be avoided. If someone or something could be induced to pass between the crags first, causing them to clash together, the Argo could follow quickly behind, passing through safely before the Symplegades were ready to snap shut again. By means of this device, Jason caused the rocks to spring together prematurely. The Argo was able to pass between them relatively unscathed. Only her very stern was nipped and splintered.

Once arrived in Colchis, Jason had to face a daunting series of challenges before he could even get to the grove where the Golden Fleece was hanging. And it was another irascible king who handed out the assignments. King Aeëtes of Colchis was ruler of this barbarian kingdom on the far edge of the heroic world. He and his people were not kindly disposed toward strangers. On an earlier occasion, however, he had extended a gracious hand to a visitor from Jason’s home town. This may have been due to the newcomer’s unorthodox mode of transportation. For he arrived on the back of a golden-fleeced flying ram.

The stranger’s name was Phrixus, and he and his sister had been on the point of being sacrificed when the ram carried them off. The sister, whose name was Helle, had fallen from the ram’s back into the narrow passage of water that came to be called the Hellespont in her memory. But Phrixus arrived safely in Colchis, where he sacrificed the ram to the gods and hung its fleece in a grove. Aeëtes gave him the hand of one of his daughters in marriage.

King Aeëtes had taken a disliking to Jason on sight. He had no particular fondness for handsome young strangers who came traipsing into his kingdom on glorious quests featuring the trampling of his sacred grove and the carrying off of his personal property. For King Aeëtes considered the Golden Fleece to be his own, and he was in the midst of telling Jason just what he could do with his precious quest when he was suddenly reminded of the obligations of hospitality by another of his daughters named Medea.

Medea was motivated by more than good manners. For the goddess Hera had been looking out for Jason’s interests, and she had succeeded in persuading her fellow goddess Aphrodite to intervene on Jason’s behalf. It was no problem at all for the Goddess of Love to arrange that Medea be stricken with passion for Jason the moment she first saw him. And it was a good thing for Jason that this was so. For not only was he spared a
kingly tongue-lashing and a quick trip to the frontier, but Medea quietly offered to help him in his latest predicament. For once her father had calmed down, he had waxed suspiciously reasonable.

Of course Jason could have the Fleece and anything else he required in furtherance of his quest—Aëtes couldn’t imagine what had possessed him to be so uncooperative. All he required of Jason as a simple token of good faith was the merest of farmyard chores. There were two bulls standing in the adjacent pasture. If Jason would be so kind as to harness them, plow the field, sow it and reap the harvest in a single day, King Aëtes would be much obliged—and only too happy to turn over the Golden Fleece.

Oh, and there was one trifling detail of which Jason should be aware. These bulls were a bit unusual in that their feet were made of brass sharp enough to rip open a man from gullet to gizzard. And then of course there was the matter of their bad breath. In point of fact, they breathed flames.

Along about this juncture Jason thought he heard his mommy, Queen Polymede, calling. But then, as noted, Medea took him gently aside and suggested that she might be of aid. Quite conveniently for Jason, Medea was a famous sorceress, magic potions being her stock in trade. She slipped Jason a salve which, when smeared on his body, made him proof against fire and brazen hooves.

And so it was that Jason boldly approached the bulls and brooked no bullish insolence. Disregarding the flames that played merrily about his shoulders and steering clear of the hooves, he forced the creatures into harness and set about plowing the field. Nor was the subsequent sowing any great chore for the now-heartened hero. Gaily strewing seed about like a nymph flinging flowers in springtime, he did not stop to note the unusual nature of the seed.

Aëtes, it turns out, had got his hands on some dragon’s teeth with unique agricultural properties. As soon as these were lodged in the soil they began to sprout, which was all to the good from the point of view of Jason accomplishing his task by nightfall, but bad from that of the harvest. For each seed germinated into a fully-armed warrior, who popped up from the ground and joined the throng now menacing poor Jason. Here indeed was a prickly harvest.

Aëtes, meanwhile, was standing off to the side of the field chuckling quietly to himself at Jason’s discomfiture and pending dismemberment in sorely mismatched combat. It irked the king somewhat to see his daughter slink across the furrows to Jason’s side. But then Aëtes didn’t think too much of it at the time. Having proven herself polite to a fault, maybe Medea was just saying a brief and proper farewell.

*THE SEED MEN MENACE JASON.*
In actuality, she was once more engaged in saving the young hero’s posterior. This time there was no traffic in magic embrocat-ions. Medea merely gave Jason a tip in basic psychology. Jason, who it was quite clear by now lacked the heroic wherewithal to make the grade on his own, at least had the sense to recognize good advice. Employing the simple device suggested by Medea, he brought the harvest in on deadline with a minimum of personal effort. He simply threw something at one of the men. The man, in turn, thought his neighbor had done it. And in short order all the seed men had turned on one another with their swords until not one was left standing.

Aeëtes had no choice but to make as though he’d give the Fleece to Jason, but he still had no intention of doing so. He now committed the tactical error of divulging this fact to his daughter. And Medea, still entranced by the Goddess of Love, confided in turn in Jason. Furthermore, she offered to lead him under cover of darkness to the temple grove where the Fleece was displayed, nailed to a tree and guarded by a dragon.

And so at midnight they crept into the sacred precinct of Ares, god of war. Jason, ever the hothead, whipped out his sword, but Medea wisely restrained his impetuosity. Instead, she used more subtle means to subvert the monster’s vigilance. Together they made off with the Fleece and escaped to the Argo. Setting sail at once, they eluded pursuit.

Thus Jason succeeded in his heroic challenge. And once returned to Greece, he abandoned Medea for another princess. For though Jason had sworn to love and honor Medea for the service she had done him, he proved as fickle in this regard as he’d been unfit for single-handed questing.

The Hero Theseus

It was by lifting a boulder that Theseus, grandson of the king of Troezen, first proved himself a hero. Theseus was sixteen at the time. He had been raised by his grandfather and his mother, Princess Aethra. One day the princess called Theseus to her side. It was time, she said, that he learned of his father, who was ruler of a mighty kingdom. This was news to Theseus, who had been under the impression that his father was one of the gods.

“Before I divulge his identity,” said the princess, “you must meet the challenge your father has set you.”

Years ago, the king had hefted a mighty stone. Underneath he had placed something for his son to find—if he could lift the weight. Aethra guided Theseus to a forest clearing, in the midst of which was a boulder. Theseus proceeded to lift the stone easily, or so the myth-tellers generally assume. But like most myths, this one is vague about the details. According to one theory, Theseus would have had trouble with a task involving brute strength.

This theory was advanced by Mary Renault in her novel The King Must Die. It is...
based on the tradition that Theseus invented "scientific" wrestling. This is the discipline by which even a lightweight can beat a stronger adversary by fancy footwork, trick holds and using the opponent's momentum to advantage. Theseus would have had little cause to invent such tactics if he'd been capable of beating his adversaries by sheer physical strength. Therefore one may deduce that the hero was a lightweight. So when it came to lifting boulders, Theseus was at a disadvantage. Resourcefulness, another heroic trait, must have come to his aid. He would have looked for some mechanical means to multiply his physical strength.

Beneath the stone Theseus found certain tokens left by his father. His name, Aethra now revealed, was King Aegeus of Athens. Prompted by a sense of heroic destiny, Theseus set out forthwith to meet this parent he had never known. He determined to journey to Athens by land, although his mother argued for the safer route by sea. And in fact the landward route proved to be infested by an unusual number of villains, thugs and thieves. Theseus quickly adopted the credo of doing unto these bad guys what they were in the habit of doing to others.

Setting out from Troezen, his birthplace, the first community of any size through which he passed was Epidaurus. Here he was waylaid by the ruffian Periphetes. Periphetes was nicknamed Corynetes or "Club-Man", after his weapon of choice, a stout length of wood wrapped in bronze to magnify its impact upon the skulls of his victims. Theseus merely snatched this implement from Periphetes and did him in with it. Some say that this incident was manufactured to account for depictions of Theseus carrying a club like his cousin Hercules, one of a number of instances on Theseus's part of heroic imitation.

The next malefactor who received a dose of his own medicine was a fellow named Sinis, who used to ask passers-by to help him bend two pine trees to the ground. Why the wayfarers should have wanted to help in this activity is not disclosed. Presumably Sinis was persuasive. Once he had bent the trees, he tied his helper's wrists—one to each tree. Then he took a break. When the strain became too much, the victim had to let go, which caused the trees to snap upright and scatter portions of anatomy in all directions. Theseus turned the tables on Sinis by tying his wrists to a couple of bent pines, then letting nature and fatigue take their course.

Then, not far from Athens, Theseus encountered Sciron. This famous brigand operated along the tall cliffs which to this day are named after him. He had a special tub in which he made each passing stranger wash his feet. While they were engaged in this sanitary activity, Sciron kicked them over a cliff into the ocean below, where they were devoured by a man-eating turtle. Theseus turned the tables on Sciron, just as he had turned them on Pine-Bender.

Perhaps the most interesting of Theseus's challenges on the road to adventure came in the form of an evildoer called Procrustes, whose name means "he who stretches." This Procrustes kept a house by the side of the road where he offered hospitality to passing strangers. They were invited in for a pleasant meal and a night's rest in his very special bed. If the guest asked what was so special about it, Procrustes replied, "Why, it has the amaz-
ing property that its length exactly matches whomsoever lies upon it."

What Procrustes didn’t volunteer was the method by which this "one-size-fits-all" was achieved, namely as soon as the guest lay down Procrustes went to work upon him, stretching him on the rack if he was too short for the bed and chopping off his legs if he was too long. Theseus lived up to his do-unto-others credo, fatally adjusting Procrustes to fit his own bed.

When at last Theseus arrived in Athens to meet his father King Aegeus for the first time, the encounter was far from heartwarming. Theseus did not reveal his identity at first but was hailed as a hero by the Athenians, for he had rid the highway of its terrors. In honor of his exploits, he was invited to the palace for a banquet. Serving as hostess was his father’s new wife, Medea.

This was the same Medea who had helped Jason harvest a crop of armed warriors and steal the Golden Fleece out from under the nose of the dragon that guarded it. Jason had eventually abandoned Medea, and she had grown understandably bitter. Now she sized up Theseus and decided that he was a threat to her own son’s prospects of ruling Athens after King Aegeus. In fact, Medea’s magic disclosed the identity of Theseus. Years before, she had aided Aegeus, who was desperate for an heir. It was Medea’s power that ensured the birth of Theseus to Princess Aethra of Troezen. Though he left instructions with Aethra should a child be born, Aegeus had either forgotten the incident or despaired of a birth.

Now Medea played on the king’s insecurity. Surely the stranger at the banquet was too popular for the good of the throne. With the people behind him, he might well seize it for himself. Medea persuaded King Aegeus to serve Theseus poisoned wine. And the hero, unawares, would have drunk it had he not paused first to carve his dinner. This, at any rate, is the prosaic version of the myth. Romantics claim that Theseus drew his sword not to mince his boar’s meat but because he had chosen the dramatic moment to reveal his identity.

In any case, Aegeus recognized the pattern on the sword’s hilt. This was his own weapon, which he had left under a rock for his son to discover. Aegeus dashed the poisoned cup to the ground. Medea, meanwhile, stormed out and made her escape in a chariot pulled by dragons.

Theseus was now the recognized heir to the kingdom of Athens. Thus he was on hand when King Minos of Crete arrived to collect his periodic tribute of young men and maidens to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Because his son had died while in the safekeeping of the Athenians, Minos exerted the power of the Cretan navy to enforce this onerous demand.

The Minotaur was a monster, half-man, half-bull, that lived in the center of a maze called the Labyrinth. It had been born to Minos’s wife Pasiphaë as a punishment from the gods. Minos had been challenged to prove that he was of divine parentage, so he called on the sea god Poseidon to send him a sign. The god obliged, and a beautiful white bull emerged from the sea. Minos liked it so much that he neglected to sacrifice it to the gods, as he should have done. As a punishment, Poseidon caused the king’s wife to fall in love with the bull. She had the master craftsman...
Daedalus build her a hollow cow in which to approach the beast. As a result, the Minotaur was born. The monster is generally depicted as having the head of a bull and the body of a man. But in the Middle Ages, artists portrayed a man’s head and torso on a bull’s body.

Some say that Theseus expressed his solidarity with his fellow citizens of Athens by volunteering to be one of the victims. Others maintain that Minos noticed the handsome young prince and chose him to be sacrificed. In any case, Theseus became one of the fated fourteen who embarked with the Cretan fleet.

The sea upon which they sailed was the domain of Poseidon, who together with his brothers Zeus and Hades were the three most powerful gods of the Greek pantheon. Between them they divided creation, Zeus taking Mount Olympus and the sky, Hades the Underworld and Poseidon the sea. But there were other deities of the watery depths, notably the "old man of the sea", the god Nereus, with his fifty daughters, the Nereids. When Theseus was en route to Crete, he encountered one of these divinities.

As the tribute ship drew near to harbor, King Minos made rude advances to one of the Athenian maidens and Theseus sprang to her defense, claiming this was his duty as a son of Poseidon. (Theseus, of course, also claimed to be the son of King Aegeus, but a true hero could be inconsistent in such matters.) Minos suggested that if Theseus’s divine parentage were anything but a figment of his imagination, the gods of the sea would sponsor him. So Minos threw his signet ring overboard and challenged Theseus to dive in and find it.

This Theseus did, being abetted indeed by the deities of the depths. Not only did he retrieve the ring from the underwater palace into which it had fallen, but he was given a jewelled crown by one of the Nereids, either Thetis or Amphitrite.

It was not long after he arrived in Crete that the hero encountered Princess Ariadne, daughter of King Minos. She fell in love with him at first sight. It was Ariadne who gave Theseus a clew which she had obtained from Daedalus. In some versions of the myth it was an ordinary clew, a simple ball of thread. It was to prove invaluable in his quest to survive the terrors of the Labyrinth.

The maze had been so cleverly and intricately contrived by the master builder Daedalus that once thrown inside, a victim could never find the way out again. Sooner or later, he or she would round a corner and come face to face with the all-devouring Minotaur. This was the fate which awaited Theseus.

It is clear from the myth that the Labyrinth was a maze from which none could escape because it was so diabolically meandering. Hence the Minotaur was not just its monster but its prisoner. But how exactly this worked as a practical matter with regard to the victims is less clear. Some versions of the myth have it that they were “enclosed” in the Labyrinth, as if it were a box.

But surely if the procedure were simply to push the victims in and then slam the door behind them, they would have cowered by the entrance rather than proceed into the terrors of the maze. Even if the guards threatened them with swords, it seems likely that some would have preferred the known death to being devoured alive by a monster. Nor could the guards have escorted the victims deep into the maze without getting lost themselves, or risking a run-in with the Minotaur.

Maybe Daedalus built a roof over his invention, so that the victims could be dropped through a trap door into the very center. But perhaps on the whole it’s better not to inquire too closely into the mechanics of the mythological.

When Theseus first entered the maze he tied off one end of the ball of thread which Ariadne had given him, and he played out the thread as he advanced deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine passages. Many artists have
depicted Theseus killing the Minotaur with his sword or club, but it is hard to see how he could have concealed such bulky weapons in his clothing. More probable are the versions of the tale which have him coming upon the Minotaur as it slept and then, in properly heroic fashion, beating it to death with his bare fists. Then he followed the thread back to the entrance. Otherwise he would have died of starvation before making his escape.

Theseus now eloped with Ariadne, pausing only long enough to put holes in the bottom of her father’s ships so that he could not pursue. But Theseus soon abandoned the princess, either because he was bewitched by a god or because he had fallen in love with her sister Phaedra. Some say that he left Ariadne on the island of Naxos, but others maintain that such was his haste that he left her on the small island of Dia, within sight of the harbor from which they had sailed. The deserted and pining Ariadne has been a favorite theme of artists down through the ages.

As the ship bearing Theseus and his liberated fellow Athenians approached the promontory on which King Aegeus watched daily for his return, Theseus forgot the signal which he had prearranged with his father. The vessel’s sails were to be black only if the expedition concluded as on all previous occasions, with the death of the hostages. In the exultation of triumph, or in anguish over the loss of Ariadne, Theseus neglected to hoist a sail of a different hue, and King Aegeus threw himself from the heights in despair.

Theseus was now both king and bona fide hero, but this did not put an end to his adventuring. On one occasion he visited the Amazons, mythological warrior women who lived on the shores of the Black Sea. The Amazons were renowned horseback riders and especially skilled with the bow. They lived apart from men and only met with them on occasion to produce children for their tribe.

Some say that Theseus had encountered the Amazons before, on another post-Minotaur adventure in the company of Hercules. Hercules had been challenged to bring back the belt of the Amazon queen. The queen, for all her reputation of man-hating, had willingly given it to him. But the goddess Hera, who despised Hercules, stirred up trouble. A great battle ensued in which many Amazons were killed.

Now Theseus visited the Amazons on his own. Their leader, fearless and hospitable, came aboard his ship with a gift. Theseus immediately put to sea and kidnapped her. Unfortunately, the dubious nature of this achievement was matched if not exceeded in another of the hero’s quests.

It was the custom in early Greek historical times for the younger sons of noble houses to embark, in the fine sailing months of autumn, upon the honorable occupation of piracy. When Theseus received word that one such pirate and his crew were making off with the royal Athenian herds at Marathon, he raced to the seaside plain. He grabbed the miscreant by the scruff and spun him around to give him what for. But the moment king and pirate laid eyes upon one another, their enmity was forgotten.

"You’ve caught me fair and square," said Peirithous, for this was the pirate’s name, and he was of the royal house of the Thessalian Lapiths. "Name your punishment and it shall
be done," said he, "for I like the looks of you."

The admiration being mutual, Theseus named as penance an oath of perpetual friendship, and the two clasped hands upon it. And so, in the fullness of time, when Theseus decided to carry off young Helen of Sparta, Peirithous agreed to lend a hand. This was the same Helen whose face would "launch a thousand ships" when, as Helen of Troy, the lover and captive of the Trojan Paris, she caused the allies of her husband Menelaus to wage the Trojan War to bring her home.

At the time of Theseus’s contemplated abduction, however, she was a mere lass of thirteen. And Theseus, having succeeded in spiriting her off with Peirithous’s assistance, left her with his mother for safekeeping while he went about his business and she grew of marriageable age. But before this had come to pass she was rescued by her brothers, the hero twins, Castor and Pollux, whose conjoined starry constellation still brightens the night sky between fellow heroes Orion and Perseus.

One day not long after this escapade, Peirithous drew Theseus aside and spoke to him earnestly. "Remember when I agreed to help you with Helen?" he inquired, "and you pledged to help me in turn in any little outing of a similar nature?"

Theseus nodded and muttered yes.

"Good," responded Peirithous. "Spoken like a true pal. Well, I've picked my little exploit. I've decided to make off with Persephone, wife of Hades, King of the Dead."

Theseus was speechless at the very idea of this sacrilege, but a pledge is a pledge. And so the two set off for the Underworld via one of the convenient caverns leading thereto. And at length they fetched up before the throne of Hades. Lacking any false modesty, Peirithous boldly stated his business, adding that he was sure the god would concede that Persephone would be happier with himself.

Hades feigned consent. "If you love her that much and you're sure the feeling's mutual, you may have Persephone. But first, join me in a cordial. Please, take a seat."

He gestured at a bench nearby, and the two heroes, little thinking it was bewitched, seated themselves upon it. And here they stuck like glue. Meanwhile, Hades loosed a flock of torments upon them in the form of serpents and Furies and the fangs of the hellhound Cerberus, not to mention the infamous water of Tartarus that recedes as parched lips draw near.

And here the two heroes would be stuck today, were it not that Hercules happened to be passing by in furtherance of one of his Labors. Seeing his cousin Theseus's plight he freed him with one heroic yank, leaving only a small portion of his hindparts adhering to the bench. But Hercules couldn’t or wouldn’t free Peirithous. And so Theseus’s pal pays for eternity the price of his heroic audacity.

The Hero Bellerophon

The monster called the Chimaera was so fantastic that it has entered our language in the adjective chimerical, describing the improbable product of a wild imagination. Some say the Chimaera had a lion’s front, a goat’s middle and a snake’s tail, with but a single head pertaining to the lion portion. But others submit that the monster had three separate heads—lion, goat and snake—with (or some say without) the accompanying body parts pertinent to each. One thing is certain, the Chimaera was one mixed up monster. Which is not to say that it was lacking in ferociousness or in any way unsuitable as a proper hero’s adversary. The proper hero in question was named Bellerophon.

Bellerophon was a citizen of Corinth who was exiled owing to a murder which he had committed. In those days it was possible to be purified of the guilt of such a crime, and Bellerophon was in due course absolved by King Proetus of neighboring
Tiryns. The king's wife, generally identified as Stheneboea, made a pass at the young hero, and when he repulsed her advances she told her husband that Bellerophon had made a pass at her.

King Proetus cloaked his indignation, not wishing to violate the sacred obligations of hospitality by doing harm to his guest. But he contrived his revenge by asking Bellerophon to deliver a letter on his behalf to King Iobates of Lycia, his father-in-law. This is somewhat surprising in that writing hadn't been invented yet, except perhaps a rudimentary form used for inventory-keeping on the island of Crete and certain parts of the mainland. No wonder Bellerophon couldn't make out the meaning of the message he was to deliver. Either that or the letter was sealed—although for that matter "letters" hadn't been invented yet either.

What the message said was: "Dear Iobates, please do me a favor and kill the person who hands you this." To do so proved impossible, however, as Iobates was bound by the same strictures of hospitality as King Proetus. So instead he feasted Bellerophon for a goodly number of days and nights, until at length he announced that he had a favor to ask of him. Assuming that this had something to do with a return letter to Proetus, Bellerophon may well have been giving thought to establishing the first postal service, when Iobates surprised him with the unexpected nature of his request. Would Bellerophon be so kind as to rid the kingdom of the Chimaera?

Not wishing to sugarcoat the challenge, the king went on to describe the Chimaera as a fire-breathing monster directly related to Hercules' nemesis the many-headed Hydra, and Cerberus, watchdog of Hades. The king was hoping to make good on his son-in-law Proetus's request to do away with Bellerophon, and he had hit upon the Chimaera as the ideal agent in expediting his young guest's demise. And while one might think that he would have made little of the Chimaera's dangers in order to instill a false sense of security, Iobates had sized up Bellerophon and deduced that he was a sucker for a challenge—the bigger the better. And in fact Bellerophon was pleased at the opportunity to elevate himself from mere postal-delivery person to authentic hero. He immediately began to plan his campaign of attack.

Word was that the Chimaera was virtually impregnable to any ground assault. Others had waded in on foot with spear or sword—to their eternal regret. There was even a rumor of a mounted Thessalian who had come up short in the encounter, his horse having been blasted out from under him by the Chimaera's fiery breath. With a keen sense of logistics, Bellerophon narrowed down his viable options to an attack either by air or sea. The latter course being out by virtue of the inland nature of the Chimaera's lair, he settled on the aerial option and immediately set out to procure himself a winged steed.

When Bellerophon was still a boy growing up in Corinth, he had yearned to ride the magic horse Pegasus, immortal offspring of the god Poseidon and the Gorgon Medusa. Pegasus was born when the hero Perseus cut off Medusa's head. Like everyone else, Bellerophon had been unable to so much as approach Pegasus. So he sought the advice of the seer Polyeidus.

Polyeidus suggested that Bellerophon...
spend the night in Athena’s temple. In a dream, the goddess came to him and gave him a golden bridle. And in the morning Bellerophon found Pegasus drinking at the spring of Peirene and slipped the bridle over his head, rendering him tame and rideable. Thus once more, in manhood, Bellerophon sought out the Corinthian watering hole and his trusty mount, and as he did so he gave thought to the essential issue of armament.

Clearly not just any sword or spear would do in fighting the Chimaera. For starters, a lance would be indispensable—the sort of spear best suited to fighting on horseback. And even a proper lance was no guarantee of victory over so substantial a foe.

Again the gods came to Bellerophon’s aid, suggesting that a lump of something indigestible affixed to the end of the spear would have a decidedly deadly effect. Firstly, when thrust into the monster’s maw, it would cause the Chimaera to gag. And secondly, when melted by the beast’s fiery breath, it would trickle down into its innards and cause a fatal case of heartburn.

So Bellerophon trekked all the way from Lycia to Corinth, located the fountain of Peirene and found Pegasus sipping therefrom. Mounting up, the hero made a much speedier trip back to Lycia, swooped down on the Chimaera’s lair and rammed home the secret weapon. And with a great, gasping groan of rage, the Chimaera gave up the ghost.

The ancient city of Corinth was a crossroads of the Greek world. There at the foot of the mountainous citadel, the Acrocorinth, one might expect to find merchants and mercenaries, princes and pirates, heroes and little old ladies selling decoctions of supposedly magic elixir. Fabled of old for its wealth, Corinth was ultimately destroyed by the Romans and rebuilt as a Roman colony. Many of its most impressive remains are from the Roman period. It was the Romans who adorned the Fountain of Peirene with arches, though the fountain itself had been admired long before the Romans came. It was said that the underground reservoir was fed by the tears of the inconsolable Peirene, who had been turned into a spring when she pined for her son, accidentally slain by the goddess Artemis.
The Hero Perseus

King Acrisius of Argos was warned by an oracle that he would be killed in time by a son born to his daughter Danaë. So he promptly locked Danaë up in a tower and threw away the key. But the god Zeus got in, disguised as a shower of gold, with the result that Perseus was born. So Acrisius straightaway stuck daughter and infant into a brazen chest and pushed it out to sea. Perhaps he expected it to sink like a stone, but instead it floated quite nicely, fetching up on a beach on the island of Seriphos. Here a fisherman named Dictys came upon the unusual bit of flotsam and adopted a protective attitude toward its contents. Thus Perseus had the advantage of a pure and simple role model as he grew to young manhood. Then one day Dictys’s brother, who happened to be king in those parts, took a fancy to Danaë and pressed his attentions upon her.

"You leave my mother alone," insisted Perseus, clenching a not-insubstantial fist. And the king, Polydectes by name, had no choice but to desist. Or, rather, he grew subtle in the means of achieving his desires.

"Okay, okay, don’t get yourself into an uproar," he said to Perseus, though not perhaps in those exact words. He put it out that, instead, he planned to seek the hand of another maiden, one Hippodameia.

"And I expect every one of my loyal subjects to contribute a gift to the bride price," he said, looking meaningfully at Perseus. "What have you to offer?"

When Perseus did not answer right away, Polydectes went on: "A team of horses? A chariot of intricate devising? Or a coffer of gems perhaps?"

Perseus fidgeted uncomfortably. "If it meant you’d leave my mother alone, I’d gladly give you anything I owned—which unfortunately is precious little. Horses, chariot, gems, you name it—if I had ‘em, they’d be yours. The sweat of my brow, the gain of my strong right arm, whatever.

I’d go out and run the marathon if they were holding the Olympics this year. I’d scour the seas for treasure, I’d quest to the ends of the earth. Why, I’d even bring back the head of Medusa herself if I had it in my power…”

Pausing for a breath against the pitch to which he’d worked himself up, Perseus was shocked to hear the silence snapped by a single "Done!"

"Come again?" he queried.

"You said you’d bring me Medusa’s head," Polydectes replied. "Well, I say fine—go do it."

And so it was that Perseus set out one bright October morn in quest of the snake-infested, lolling-tongued, boar’s-tusked noggin of a Gorgon whose very glance had the power to turn the person glanced upon to stone.

Clearly, then, Perseus had his work cut out for him. Fortunately he had an ally in Athena. The goddess of crafts and war had her own reasons for wishing to see the Gorgon vanquished, so she was eager to advise Perseus. Why, exactly, Athena had it in for Medusa is not entirely clear. The likeliest explanation is that the Gorgon, while still a beautiful young maiden, had profaned one of Athena’s temples. For this sacrilege Athena turned her into a monster, but apparently this wasn’t punish-
ment enough. Now Athena wanted Medusa's head to decorate her own shield, to magnify its power by the Gorgon's terrible gaze. Athena told Perseus where he could find the special equipment needed for his task.

"Seek ye the nymphs who guard the helmet of invisibility," she counseled the young hero.

And where, Perseus inquired, might he find these nymphs?

"Ask the Gray Sisters, the Graeae, born hags with but an eye between them. They know—if they'll tell you."

And where were the Graeae?

"Ask him who holds the heavens on his back—Atlas, renegade Titan, who pays eternally the price of defying Zeus almighty."

Okay, okay, and where's this Atlas?

"Why, that's simple enough—at the very western edge of the world."

Before sending him off on this tangled path, Athena lent Perseus her mirrored shield and suggested how he make use of it. And while her directions were somewhat deficient as to particulars, Perseus did indeed track down Atlas, who grudgingly nodded in the direction of a nearby cave where, sure enough, he found the Graeae. Perseus had heard the version of the myth whereby these Sisters, though gray-haired from infancy and sadly lacking in the eyeball department, were as lovely as young swans. But he was disappointed to find himself taking part in the version that had them as ugly as ogres. Nor was their disposition any cause for delight. Sure, they knew where the nymphs did dwell, but that was, in a manner of speaking, theirs to know and his to find out. With cranky cackles and venomous vim, they told him just what he could do with his quest. But the hero had a trick or two up his sleeve, and by seizing that which by virtue of its scarcity and indispensability they valued above all else, he made them tell him what he wanted to know about the location of the water nymphs.

At this point Perseus might have paused to consider the extent to which his quest was akin to computer adventure gaming. For starters, there was the essential business of bringing back—as in Jason "bringing back" the Golden Fleece to Colchis where, in the form of a flying ram, it had carted off a young maiden and her brother on the point of sacrifice. How remarkably similar to a gamer acquiring a particularly hard-sought icon for his or her inventory. Or so Perseus might have reflected had he been born in the era of compact discs and read-only memory. And then, in furtherance of his Medusa quest, there was the laundry list of other "inventory" that had to be acquired first, beginning with the shield with the mirrored surface and the helmet of invisibility.

Some versions of the myth have it that the water nymphs in question were pretty much garden variety. Properly referred to as naiads, they were minor deities of a far-less-than Olympian order, mildly powerful in their own limited way, but not even immortal, and confined in their scope of operation to a given body of water. For just as dryads are fairy creatures attached to trees, and Nereids are ocean-going, naiads are nymphs that live in ponds and pools.

Thus when the handsome youth Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in the surface of a pool, he broke the heart of the nymph who dwelled therein, who was condemned only to repeat Narcissus's sighs and murmurs like an echo. In fact, Echo was her name. And thus when the handsome youth Hylas strayed while fetching water for his shipmates on the Argo, some nymphs at the water hole were so smitten that they yanked him beneath the surface to dwell with them forever—much to the despair of Hercules, whose squire he was.

One version of the Perseus myth holds that the naiads he sought were special indeed, having as their domain the dark and lifeless waters of the river Styx, in the deepest Underworld. They were also reputed to
have such bad personal habits that they could be smelled from a great distance. Such is perhaps understandable given the dubious cleansing powers of a river in Hell.

At length Perseus found the nymphs and got the gear. This consisted of the helmet of invisibility, winged sandals and a special pouch for carrying Medusa’s head once he’d chopped it off. Medusa would retain the power of her gaze even in death, and it was vital to hide the head unless occasion called for whipping it out and using it on some enemy.

The god Hermes also helped out at this point, providing Perseus with a special cutting implement, a sword or sickle of adamant. Some add that it was Hermes, not the nymphs, who provided the winged sandals. Thus Perseus was equipped—one might even say overequipped—for his task. In fact, a careful examination of the hero’s inventory leads to the suspicion that we are presented here with a case of mythological overkill.

A quick escape would be essential after slaying Medusa, since she had two equally monstrous sisters who would be sure to avenge her murder, and they had wings of gold or brass which would bear them in swift pursuit of the killer. So at least the winged sandals were a good idea. But if this supernatural appliance guaranteed the swiftest of escapes, why bother with a helmet of invisibility, which would bear them in swift pursuit of the killer? So at least the winged sandals were a good idea. But if this supernatural appliance guaranteed the swiftest of escapes, why bother with a helmet of invisibility, which made it just about impossible for the Gorgons to find you even if you didn’t deign to hurry away? Because it makes for a better myth, that’s why.

And so Perseus sought out Medusa’s lair, surrounded as it was by the petrified remains of previous visitors, and he found the Gorgon sleeping... Yes, even though he had the good old magic arsenal, Perseus was not so foolhardy as to wake Medusa. And even though her gaze could hardly be expected to turn anyone to stone while her eyes were closed, he used the device provided by Athena to avoid looking at Medusa directly. (This suggests that you could be turned to stone just by gazing at Medusa, though most versions of the myth have it that it was the power of her gaze that counted.)

Entering, then, somewhat unglamorously into the fray—if "fray" is the right word to describe a battle against a sleeping opponent—Perseus whacked Medusa’s head off. At just that instant, the winged horse Pegasus, offspring of Medusa and the god Poseidon, was born from the bleeding neck. Then Perseus donned his special getaway gear and departed victoriously before Medusa’s sisters could take their revenge. Though these sisters were immortal, Medusa clearly was not. She died when her head was severed, which required the special cutting implement given to Perseus by Hermes.

Even in death Medusa’s gaze could turn things to stone, so Perseus quickly stored his trophy in the special sack provided by the water nymphs. Returning to Seriphos, he put it to good use on King Polydectes, who had gone back to pestering the hero’s mother just as soon as Perseus was out of sight. Polydectes made the mistake of being sarcastic about Perseus’s conquest of the Gorgon. And since he took this truly heroic accomplishment for granted, he himself was ever afterwards taken for granite.

**The Hero Oedipus**

Colorful encounters awaited the great heroes as they set out on the road, never knowing what strange adventure lay ahead. Sometimes these run-ins were with humans, sometimes not. The hero Oedipus was told to stand aside by a charioteer in a narrow pass. He refused, the chariot rushed him and Oedipus struck down the driver as he passed. The man died. Only long afterwards did Oedipus discover that the stranger was his own father.

Further along the same road, Oedipus came to another narrow place. There perched a beast with the head of a woman, the wings of a griffin and the body of a lion. This mon-
ster—the Sphinx—asked a riddle of all pass-
ers-by. Failure to answer correctly meant
death. She put the riddle to Oedipus: “What
walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at
noon and three at close of day?”

“That’s simple enough,” replied the hero.
“A human crawls on four legs as an infant,
wakes upright on two in the prime of life and
hobbles with a cane in old age.”

Hearing this, the Sphinx promptly ran off
and killed herself. The grateful people of
nearby Thebes made Oedipus their king. Like
all great heroes, he never shirked an encoun-
ter.

The Hero Odysseus

The one-eyed, giant Cyclops who men-
aced and almost put an end to the hero
Odysseus is one of the memorable charac-
ters of Greek mythology. Odysseus and his
shipmates encountered the Cyclops on their
ill-fated return from the Trojan War. This
nine-year conflict pitted the Greeks against
the city of Troy, on the western coast of
what is now Turkey. The Greeks had final-
ly triumphed, but many would not live to
enjoy it.

Odysseus’s shipmates were blown far off
course, and after a number of perils they
reached a small wooded island, where they
beached the vessels and gave thought to pro-
visions. Odysseus had noticed a larger island
nearby, from which came the sound of bleat-
ing goats. This was encouraging to his grow-
ling stomach, and he detailed a scouting party
and led it to the far shore. Here they found a
huge goat pen outside a cave and, inside, all
the cheeses and meat they could desire. They
were lounging in drowsy contentment when
the shepherd came home.

The sight of him brought the Greeks to
fullest attention. He was as big as a barn,
with a single glaring eye in the middle of his
forehead. He was one of the Cyclopes, giant
blacksmiths who had built Olympus for the
gods. This particular Cyclops was named
Polyphemus. He and his neighbors lived
like hermits with their flocks. If the Greeks
were shocked, Polyphemus was pleasantly
surprised. For here before him at his own
hearth was a treat that would nicely vary
his diet.

Taking care to roll a boulder into the
mouth of the cave—a stone so huge that even
a full crew of heroes could not stir it—he
promptly snatched up the nearest two of
Odysseus’s men, bashed out their brains on
the floor and popped them into his mouth.
Then with a belch he curled up in a corner
and drifted happily to sleep. Odysseus natu-
 rally was beside himself with concern. What
had he led his men into?

There was nothing for it, though, but to
wait out the night in terror, for the boulder
blocked the door. In the morning the Cyclops
rolled the massive stone aside, called his goats
together and let them out, some to pasture
and others to the pen in the yard. Then he
sealed the entrance again. That night he had
more Greeks for dinner.

Desperate, Odysseus conceived a plan. To
begin with, he offered the Cyclops wine. This
was especially potent wine, which he and his
men had brought ashore in skins. The Greeks
customarily mixed water with their wine to
dilute its strength. But the Cyclops had never
drunk wine before, diluted or not, and it went
straight to his head. Before he conked out, he
asked Odysseus his name.

“Nobody,” replied the hero.
“Well, Mr. Nobody, I like you,” said the Cyclops drowsily. “In fact, I like you so much that I’m going to do you a favor. I’ll eat you last.”

With these encouraging words he fell fast asleep. Odysseus jumped up and put his men to work. They put a sharp point on the end of a pole and hardened it in the fire. Then, with a mighty “heave-ho”, they rammed it into the Cyclops’ eye.

In agony Polyphemus groped about blindly for his tormentors, but the Greeks dodged him all night long. "Help, come quickly!" he shouted at one point, and his fellow Cyclopes came running.

"What’s the matter?" they called in at the mouth of the cave.

"I’m blinded and in agony," roared Polyphemus.

"Whose fault is it?" they shouted back.

"Nobody’s," said Polyphemus.

"Well in that case," responded the Cyclopes as they departed, "you’ve got a lot of nerve bothering us."

In the morning, as usual, Polyphemus called his flock together and rolled the boulder aside to let them out. He planted himself in the door to bar the Greeks’ escape. Muttering at great length to his ram, he sought sympathy for his affliction.

"Whatever you do," he told the beast, "don’t trust Greeks."

So saying, he stroked the animal’s wooly back and sent him from the cave. Little did he know that Odysseus himself clung to the ram’s belly. And, in a similar fashion, his shipmates had escaped beneath the rest of the flock. When Polyphemus realized the deception he rushed to the seaside, where Odysseus and his men were rowing hard for safety. The hero could not resist a taunt.

"Just to set the record straight, the name’s Odysseus," he called across the water. "But you have Nobody to thank for your troubles—nobody but yourself, that is."

With a mighty curse Polyphemus threw a boulder which almost swamped the ship. But the rowers redoubled their efforts. They left the blinded Cyclops raging impotently on the shore.

And so it was that the next time Odysseus and his crew put in at a beautiful but slightly spooky island, the hero had second thoughts about who would go out and scout for provisions. Having himself led the shore party last time and almost been eaten by the Cyclops for his pains, this time Odysseus put someone else in command and sent him out with half the crew. The rest stayed in camp and alternately worried about the scouts and thanked their lucky stars that they hadn’t been picked.

Their worries were justified. The explorers had come upon a snug little house in a clearing, where a beautiful woman invited them in for tea. They’d already observed that the yard was full of lions and wolves of a surprisingly docile nature, but they chose to overlook this portent that something might be amiss. All but one of the sailors accepted the invitation and went inside. Whereupon their hostess, who turned out to be an enchantress by the name of Circe, turned them into swine.

The one crew member who hadn’t shared this fate reported back to Odysseus, who must have thought a grumpy thought or two about the responsibilities of captaincy before he set out to see what he could do for his men—or, rather, pigs. When he was approaching the house, he happened to run into the god Hermes. Or perhaps it was something more than happenstance. Those of the Olympians who weren’t trying to make Odysseus’s life miserable were bent on helping him, and they’d sent their herald with a timely bit of aid. This was in the form of a sprig of moly, a magical sort of plant which, Hermes assured Odysseus, would counteract the witch’s spells.

Sure enough, Circe had no sooner said hello to her latest visitor and raised her magic
wand to turn him forthwith into a porker than Odysseus drew his sword as Hermes had instructed him to do. And holding the moly to his nose like smelling salts, he said:

"Drop that thing right now or your wand-waving days are over!" (Or words to that effect.)

Circe was so taken aback that she not only spared Odysseus her spells but restored all his men to human form. She and Odysseus became great friends. The hero stayed with her for many a day, and when at last he set out again Circe gave him essential advice about the perils ahead.

It was Circe who told Odysseus that he would have to make a side trip to Hades. Only the blind prophet Teiresias could tell him how to find his way home at last, and Teiresias happened to be dead. So Odysseus sailed west until he reached the stream of Ocean, the broad river that encircles the earth (or so the ancient Greeks conceived their geography). And here he found the frontier of Hades. At the confluence of the infernal rivers Styx and Acheron, Odysseus dug a pit and poured sacrificial blood into it. At which the ghosts of the dead thronged up, eager to drink the vital liquid and regain their living strength.

Odysseus held them all at bay until he had talked to Teiresias, and then he decided to speak to various other deceased celebrities. Among these was the great hero Achilles. Achilles had been the best fighter of the Greeks besieging Troy. He had slain the Trojan hero Hector in single combat and was only brought down himself by the connivance of the god Apollo. Now he lived in paramount honor among the heroic dead. Odysseus hailed him as first among mortals while living and now virtually on a par with the gods, albeit consigned to Hades.

"Enough, smooth-talking Odysseus!" Achilles interrupted. "I'd rather be a lowly farmhand—and a living man—than king of these hollow dead."

Then cheered somewhat by tidings of the prowess of his son, he went striding off across the fields of asphodel, a gray and ghostly flower. Such was the version of Hades sung of by the minstrel Homer. And though others sang of the fields of Elysium, where the likes of Achilles lived on in splendid company, in pleasant surroundings, in heroic pursuits of the hunt and banquet, Achilles' words haunt the memory. Though the humblest toil await, how sweeter indeed the dawn's pink light under an open sky than the strange paradise at the edge of the western world.

Now Odysseus faced an awesome series of challenges, the first of these in the form of the enchanting Sirens. There were two or three Sirens, who had the bodies of women with bird heads and bird feet, or bird bodies with women's heads and voices. Some say that they acquired this form when, as attendants to the goddess Demeter, they witnessed the abduction of her daughter Persephone by Hades, god of the dead.

Persephone was gathering flowers in a meadow one day when a huge crack in the earth opened up and Hades emerged in his chariot. He snatched up Persephone and descended to his realm again. Demeter, goddess of the harvest, was heartbroken, and while she wandered the length and breadth of the earth in search of her daughter, the crops withered and it became perpetual winter. At length Hades was persuaded to surrender.
Persephone for one half of every year, the spring and summer seasons when flowers bloom and the earth bears fruit once more. The half year that Persephone spends in the Underworld as Hades’ queen coincides with the barren season.

The Sirens, meanwhile, had been punished with bird legs for not thwarting the abduction, or they were given wings to extend the scope of Demeter’s search for Persephone. In later years they settled on a rock in the west, off the coast of what is now called Italy. Here the sweetness of their singing, together with the strains of flute and lyre, lured sailors to their doom. Those who heard the haunting melody lost all thought of home and languished on the Sirens’ rock until they died. Or they forgot their sailorly craft and shipwreck ensued.

When the Argonauts passed by on their return from Colchis with the Golden Fleece, Orpheus saved his crewmates from this fate by his own singing and plucking of the lyre. Some claim that he simply drowned out the Sirens. Others say that he sang more sweetly.

Forewarned by Circe of the Sirens’ musical reputation, Odysseus also saved his ships when passing their lair. He plugged up the ears of his crew but, wishing to hear what all the fuss was about, he left his own unplugged. He took the precaution, though, of having himself tied to the mast. So he couldn’t grab the tiller and make for the rocks when, true to their reputation, the Sirens lured him on.

Next his route took him past two obstacles that have become proverbial in the expression "between Scylla and Charybdis". Charybdis was a whirlpool in the narrow strait between Italy and Sicily. Many times a day this monster gulped down the larger part of the surrounding sea and then belched it up again. This constituted a serious impediment to navigation.

Odysseus had decided to risk it because the alternative was worse—the Wandering Rocks, which smashed together upon any ship that tried to shoot the gap between them. These weren’t the same as the Clashing Rocks, which were braved by Jason and the Argonauts as they sailed to Colchis, land of the Golden Fleece. To compound the confusion, Jason and crew encountered the Clashing Rocks on their way to Colchis and the Wandering Rocks on their return. The Nereids, daughters of the Old Man of the Sea, guided them through safely on the latter occasion.

Odysseus had been warned about the whirlpool by Circe, and he told his men to steer clear, keeping up against the base of the cliff opposite. What he didn’t tell the men was that the cliff harbored the dreaded Scylla. Scylla had started out as a beautiful maiden but had ended up a monster with six heads and an equal number of slavering maws. Odysseus had been warned by Circe of the Sirens’ musical reputation, Odysseus also saved his ships when passing their lair. He plugged up the ears of his crew but, wishing to hear what all the fuss was about, he left his own unplugged. He took the precaution, though, of having himself tied to the mast. So he couldn’t grab the tiller and make for the rocks when, true to their reputation, the Sirens lured him on.

And so before you grab some oars and go boating westerly, beware if your course should take you ‘twixt the devil and the deep blue sea.

Heracles

Heracles is the Greek name of the greatest of heroes. The Romans knew him as Hercules, and so he is best known today. Like most authentic heroes, he had a god as one of his parents, being the son of Zeus and a mortal woman named Alcmene. Zeus's wife Hera was jealous of Heracles, and when he was still an infant she sent two snakes to kill him in his cradle. Heracles was found prattling delighted babytalk, a strangled serpent in each hand.

When he had come of age and already
proved himself an unerring marksman with bow and arrow, a champion wrestler and the possessor of superhuman strength, Heracles was driven mad by the goddess Hera. In a frenzy, he killed his own children. To atone for this crime, he was sentenced to perform a series of tasks, or “Labors”, for his cousin Eurystheus, the king of Mycenae.

As his first Labor, Heracles killed the Nemean Lion. This was no easy feat, for the lion’s skin was impenetrable by spears or arrows. Heracles blocked off the entrance to the lion’s cave and throttled it to death with his bare hands. Ever afterwards he wore the lion’s skin as a cloak and its gaping jaws as a helmet.

King Eurystheus was so afraid of his heroic cousin that he hid in a storage jar. From the safety of this hiding place he issued the order for another Labor. Heracles was to seek out and destroy the monstrous and many-headed Hydra.

The mythmakers agree that the Hydra lived in the swamps of Lerna, but they seem to have had trouble counting the monster’s heads. Some said that the Hydra had eight or nine. Others counted between fifty and a hundred. And still others claimed as many as ten thousand. All agreed, however, that as soon as one head was beaten down or chopped off, two more grew in its place. Only one of the heads was immortal, but cutting it off was the challenge. To make matters worse, the Hydra’s very breath was lethal. Even smelling its footprints was enough to bring death to an ordinary mortal. Fortunately, Heracles was no ordinary mortal.

The great hero sought out the monster in its lair and brought it out into the open with flaming arrows. Then he made sure to hold his breath while grappling with the beast. Heracles had the strength of ten, but the fight went in the Hydra’s favor. The mon-

Snakes
Are
Our
Friends

Snakes figure prominently in Greek mythology. Hercules proved himself a hero even as an infant, when he strangled two serpents which attacked him in his crib. Melampus rescued and cared for young snakes whose mother had died. He awoke one night to find them licking at his ears. As a consequence, he gained the power to understand the language of animals and insects.
ster twined its many heads around the hero and tried to trip him up. It called on an ally, a huge crab which also lived in the swamp. The crab bit Heracles in the heel and further impeded his attack. Heracles was on the verge of failure when he remembered his nephew.

Heracles had a twin brother named Iphicles. Iphicles took part in a number of heroic exploits but generally remained in the shadow of his illustrious twin. Heracles employed Iphicles’ son, Iolaus, as his charioteer. Iolaus had driven Heracles to the swamps of Lerna, and he looked on in anxiety as his uncle became entangled in the Hydra’s snaky heads. Finally, Iolaus could no longer bear to stand aside. In response to his uncle’s shouts, he grabbed a burning torch and dashed to the fray.

Now, as soon as Heracles cut off one of the Hydra’s heads, Iolaus was there to sear the wounded neck with flame. This kept further heads from sprouting. In this fashion, Heracles cut off the heads one by one, with Iolaus cauterizing the wounds. Finally Heracles lopped off the immortal head and buried it deep beneath a rock.

This was not to be the hero’s last experience of swamp warfare. A future Labor would pit him against the Stymphalian Birds, man-killers who inhabited a marsh near Stymphalus in Arcadia. Heracles could not approach the birds to fight them—the ground was too swampy to bear his weight and too mucky to wade through. Finally Heracles resorted to some castanets given to him by the goddess Athena. By making a racket with these, he caused the birds to take wing. And once they were in the air, he brought them down by the dozens with his arrows.

In the course of his Labors and afterwards, Heracles accomplished some amazing feats. He once forced the god Poseidon to give way in battle. He wounded Ares, god of war, in another encounter. And he wrestled the great god Zeus himself to a draw. The hero could move mountains that hindered the route of his cattle herd. He could and did toss boulders about like pebbles. He even relieved the Titan Atlas of the burden of holding up the heavens. This came about when Eurystheus challenged him to retrieve the golden apples of the Hesperides.

The Hesperides, or Daughters of Evening, were nymphs assigned by the goddess Hera to guard certain apples which she had received as a wedding present. These were kept in a grove surrounded by a high wall and guarded by a dragon named Ladon, whose many heads spoke simultaneously in a babel of tongues. The grove was located in some far western land in the mountains named for Atlas.

Atlas was a Titan, which is to say a member of the first generation of gods, born of Earth. One of his brothers was Cronus, father of Zeus. Atlas made the mistake of siding with Cronus in a war against Zeus. In punishment, he was compelled to support the weight of the heavens by means of a pillar on his shoulders.

Heracles had been told that he would never get the apples without the aid of Atlas. The Titan was only too happy to oblige, since it meant being relieved of his burden. He told the hero to hold the pillar while he went into the garden of the Hesperides to retrieve the fruit. But first, Heracles would have to do something about the noisily vigilant dragon, Ladon.

This was swiftly accomplished by means of an arrow over the garden wall. Then Heracles took the pillar while Atlas went to get the apples. He was successful and returned quickly enough, but in the meantime he had realized how pleasant it was not to have to strain for eternity keeping heaven and earth apart. So he told Heracles that he’d have to fill in for him for an indeterminate length of time. And the hero feigned agreement to this proposal. But he said that he needed a cushion for his shoulder, and he wondered if Atlas would mind taking back the pillar just long enough for him to fetch one. The Titan graciously obliged, and Heracles strolled off, omitting to return.
As his final Labor, Heracles was instructed to bring the hellhound Cerberus up from the infernal kingdom of Hades. Hades was god of the dead. His realm, to which all mortals eventually traveled, lay beneath the earth and was called the Underworld, or Hades, after its ruler. The first barrier to the deads' journey beyond the grave was the most famous river of Hades, the Styx. Here the newly dead congregated as insubstantial shades, mere wraiths of their former selves, awaiting passage in the ferryboat of Charon the Boatman.

The afterlife, as conceived by the early Greeks, was a grim and gloomy proposition. Although there was no religious dogma on the subject, most imagined that some part of a being lived on after death. What survived, however, was very insubstantial, a ghostly shadow—or shade—of the living being.

The surviving families did their best to provide for these wraiths, sending them off to the Underworld with a bribe for Charon the Boatman, to induce him to ferry them across the Styx to the kingdom of the dead. Here they would live on forever in soulless company—unless, that is, they had been guilty of some egregious sin, in which case they might be punished for eternity by the ruler of the Underworld. The only worse fate, perhaps, might be to lack the toll for Charon and be condemned to wander in lonely desolation on the near bank of the river Styx until the end of time.

The concept of the afterlife was vague and often contradictory. The blind poet Homer, who sang of the Heroic Age, said that the dead passed on to a gray and gloomy realm below the earth, ruled over by Hades. But Homer also spoke of the Islands of the Blessed, located somewhere at the far western edge of the world. Here the greatest heroes went when they died, to live on in comfort and pleasure. In time these two ideas were put together, so that entrance to the Underworld was situated in the west, near where the flat earth dropped off into nothingness. Later still, people began to speak of other entrances to the world of the dead below.

There were two ways to get to the Underworld. The first and simplest was to die. The other way was only open to gods or heroes, who could proceed with caution to Hades’ realm via certain natural chasms and caves. The most popular of these seems have been Taenarum in Laconia. This was the portal chosen by Theseus and his companion Peirithous on their ill-fated venture to abduct Hades’ queen Persephone. And some say that it was via Taenarum that Orpheus pursued his wife Eurydice when, bitten by a snake, she shared the common fate in journeying to the afterlife below. But others maintain that Orpheus’s entrance was Aornum in Thesprotis.

Before becoming a fully fledged member of the godly council on Mount Olympus, the wine-god Dionysus brought his mother up from Hades. She was the heroine Semele, who had been consumed by lightning when she asked Zeus to reveal to her his true nature as storm god. To retrieve her from the Underworld, Dionysus went to Lerna and dove into the Alcyonian Lake, which has no bottom.

In being challenged to bring back Cerberus to the land of the living, Heracles was faced with one of his most difficult Labors. Descending to Hades via Laconian Taenarum, the first problem he encountered was a glowering Charon the Boatman. Charon wasn’t
about to ferry anyone across in his rickety craft unless they met two conditions. Firstly, they had to pay a fare or bribe. And secondly, they had to be dead. Heracles met neither condition, a circumstance which aggravated Charon’s natural grouchiness and caused him to glower more fiercely than usual.

But Heracles simply glowered in return, and such is the perseverance of a proper hero— at least one of Herculean magnitude— that once having set about a task, said hero will not fail to achieve and excel. The task in this instance being glowering, Heracles accomplished it with such gusto that Charon let out a whimper and meekly conveyed the hero across the Styx.

The next and greater challenge was Cerberus himself. The dog had teeth of a razor’s sharpness, three (or maybe fifty) heads, a venomous snake for a tail and for good measure another swarm of snakes growing out of his back. When Heracles closed and began to grapple with the hound, these snakes lashed at him from the rear, while Cerberus’s multiple canines lunged for a purchase on the hero’s throat. Fortunately, Heracles was wearing his trusty lion’s skin, which had the magic property of being impenetrable by anything short of one of Zeus’s thunderbolts. After a titanic struggle, Heracles got Cerberus by the throat and choked the dog into submission.

Taking care to secure the permission of Hades and his queen Persephone, the hero then slung Cerberus over his shoulder and carted him off to Mycenae, where he received due credit for the Labor. In its grueling nature, the entire adventure was so at variance with the experience of Orpheus that it bears noting.

When Orpheus’ wife Eurydice was claimed by Hades for his kingdom of the dead, Orpheus determined to get her back. Journeying to the Underworld by the entrance chasm at Taenarum, he too fetched up on the banks of the Styx. But instead of out-glowering Charon, Orpheus won him over by song. Such was the sweetness of his singing and his strumming of the lyre that not only did Charon willingly submit to ferrying Orpheus across the River of Darkness, but Cerberus, beguiled by the melody, lay down, crossed his paws under his chin and listened entranced.

The mortal status of Greek mythological heroes was subject to varying interpretations. Most heroes were sons of gods, and as such at least semi-divine. But this by no means meant that they automatically got to go to heavenly Mount Olympus when they died. Perseus achieved immortality of a sort by being made into a starry constellation. The Dioscuri, or Hero Twins, were originally accorded a mixed blessing. Polydeuces (Pollux to the Romans) was deemed godly enough to be admitted to Olympus, while his brother Castor was dispatched to Hades as a mere mortal. But Polydeuces interceded on his twin’s behalf, on the plea that he could not bear eternal separation. The gods relented to the extent that the two were allowed to remain together forever, spending half the year deep in the earth beneath their shrine in Sparta and the other half on the airy heights of Olympus.

Heracles was the only hero to become a full-fledged god upon his demise, but even in his case there was his mortal aspect to be dealt with. He received special consideration because he had aided the Olympians in their epic battle against the Giants. These titanic sons of Earth had stormed the godly citadel in a hail of flaming oaks and rocks. And the deities of Olympus would never have prevailed without Heracles and his bow. By virtue of his spectacular achievements, even by heroic standards, Heracles was given a home on Mount Olympus and a goddess for a wife. But part of him had come not from his father Zeus but from his mortal mother Alcmene, and that part was sent to the Underworld. As a phantasm it eternally roams the Elysian Fields in the company of other heroes.
The Olympians

Towering 9000 feet over northern Greece, Mount Olympus was thought of as the home of the gods. As a consequence, the twelve supreme deities of Greek mythology were known as the Olympians. High in the clouds, they lived in a marvelous palace and diverted themselves from time to time by interfering in the lives of the mortals below.

The king of the Olympian gods was Zeus. He sat on a throne of Egyptian marble, inlaid with gold. A purple ram’s fleece cushioned the seat. Queen Hera’s throne was ivory. Over it hung a full moon. To the side of Hera sat Ares, the god of war. His throne, of burnished brass, had a cushion covered in human skin. The throne room, or council hall, was in the midst of the sumptuous palace, built for the Olympians by the Cyclopes, industrious one-eyed giants.

There were twelve supreme Olympians, although the precise configuration of the divine counsel convening on Mount Olympus was subject to change over time. At one point, for instance, Hestia, goddess of the hearth, was a member, but she grew tired of the godly bickering and gladly gave her place to the god of wine, Dionysus.

Demeter’s daughter Persephone was sometimes but not often considered to be one of the twelve. As Hades’ wife, her proper throne was in the Underworld. Nor was the god of the dead, Hades himself, an Olympian, even though he was Zeus’s brother. On the other hand, Zeus’s other brother Poseidon shared the lofty heights of Olympus when he was not breasting the waves in his seaborne chariot. He is often depicted carrying a three-pronged spear, or trident, symbol of his power as god of the sea.

Others in the pantheon were Aphrodite, goddess of beauty, and her husband Hephaestus, master craftsman of the gods;

The Elysian Fields

The Elysian Fields were where the heroes went when they died, to pass an eternity in the pursuits of a heroic leisure—hunting, feasting and bragging. It’s not unreasonable to suppose that these activities included sparring of one sort or another. Having spent their mortal careers hacking, hewing and stabbing at monsters and opponents, no doubt the heroes would have wanted to stay in shape. And thus one can readily imagine the likes of Perseus, say, engaged in boxing or jousting with the likes of Jason.
Hermes, the Olympians’ messenger, and Apollo, god of prophecy and healing. Athena often carries a spear because she is goddess not just of crafts but of the science of war as well. And Artemis the huntress is equipped with a bow.

**Hera**

In Greek mythology, Hera was the reigning female goddess of Olympus because she was Zeus's wife. But her worship is actually far older than that of her husband. It goes back to a time when the creative force we call “God” was conceived of as a woman. The Goddess took many forms, among them that of a bird. Hera was worshipped throughout Greece, and the oldest and most important temples were consecrated to her. Her subjugation to Zeus and depiction as a jealous shrew are mythological reflections of one of the most profound changes ever in human spirituality.

Tens of thousands of years ago, as the evidence of cave art and artifacts makes clear, humanity was focused on the female body, either pregnant or fit to bear children. Childbirth was the closest humans came to the great power that caused the earth to bring forth new life in the spring. To the extent that these distant ancestors of ours were evolved enough to think of worshipping this power, we may safely conclude that they thought of it as female.

 Thousands of years later (and some five to nine thousand years before our own time), the European descendants of these people lived in large villages, with specialized crafts and religious institutions. It is clear from the artifacts they left behind that they worshipped a power (or a group of powers) that came in many forms—a bird, a snake, perhaps the earth itself. And this great power was female. For the human female has the ability to procreate—to bring forth new life.

It is said that it was only when humanity discovered man’s role in procreation that male gods began to be worshipped. There is no reason to doubt, though, that male gods were worshipped before the mystery of birth was fully known. In all probability the greatest powers were thought of as female but there were male deities as well. And it is clear that even after procreation was properly understood, the more peaceful Europeans—perhaps down to the "Minoans" of Crete—continued to worship the Great Mother.

And there were many peaceful Europeans. Many of the largest villages of that distant era were fortified. The culture known as "Old European" did not fear aggression from its neighbors. But then things changed and a great period of violence began. Invaders swept into Europe from the vast central plains of Asia. They brought the Indo-European language family that today includes French, Italian, Spanish and English. They also brought a sky god, the supreme male deity that in Greek mythology became known as Zeus.

Little is known of these early Indo-Europeans, but the peaceful settlements of Old Europe were no match for them. In some places their new culture became supreme, in others there was merger. Hardier mountain folk resisted, though many were displaced from their strongholds, moved on and displaced others in a domino effect. The Dorian invasion of Mycenaean Greece can be seen as
a result of this chain reaction.

The old order seems to have held out longest on Crete where, protected by the Aegean Sea from invasion by land, the high Minoan civilization survived until almost three thousand years ago. Abruptly, then, from the perspective of human existence, the gender of the greatest power changed from female to male. And many of the stories that form the basis of Greek mythology were first told in their present form not long after the shift.

Zeus's many adulterous affairs may derive from ceremonies in which the new sky god "married" various local embodiments of the Great Goddess. That there was some insecurity on the part of the supplanter god and his worshippers is seen in the mythological birth of Athena from Zeus's head—as if to say that the sky god could do anything any Great Goddess could do.

This Goddess continued to be worshipped in some form down into historical times. Her worship is sometimes dismissed as a "fertility cult", largely because religious practices degenerated under new influences. But we may look for traces in the myths of the old order, in which Athena, whose name is pre-Greek, was the Goddess herself.

Under the influence of the Indo-Europeans, this bird goddess became the chief deity of war. Her earlier guise may be glimpsed in her symbol, the owl, which derives from the preceding thousands of years of sacred bird imagery.

**Hermes**

Hermes was the messenger of the gods and more particularly of Zeus. He was the son of that great god and a mountain nymph. As a newborn he was remarkably precocious. On his very first day of life, he found the empty shell of a tortoise and perceived its utility as a sounding chamber. Stringing sinews across it, he created the first lyre.

Hermes was known for his helpfulness to mankind, both in his capacity as immortal herald and on his own initiative. When Perseus set out to face the Gorgon Medusa, Hermes aided him in the quest. According to one version of the myth, he loaned the hero his own magic sandals, which conferred upon the wearer the ability to fly. Some say that Hermes loaned Perseus a helmet of invisibility as well. Also known as the helmet of darkness, this was the same headgear that Hermes himself had worn when he vanquished the giant Hippolytus. This was on the occasion when the gargantuan sons of Earth rose up in revolt against the gods of Olympus.

Hermes' symbol of office as divine messenger was his staff, or caduceus. This was originally a willow wand with entwined ribbons, traditional badge of the herald. But the ribbons were eventually depicted as snakes. To support this mythologically, a story evolved that Hermes used the caduceus to separate two fighting snakes which forthwith twined themselves together in peace.

It was Hermes' job to convey dead souls to the Underworld. And as patron of travelers, he was often shown in a wide-brimmed sun hat of straw. Hermes was known to the Romans as Mercury. His most famous depiction, a statue by Bellini, shows him alight on one foot, wings at his heels, the snaky caduceus in hand and, on his head, a rather stylized combination helmet-of darkness and sun hat.
Hades

As is not surprising, the ancient Greeks did not know what to expect after death. Notions of the afterlife were various and conflicting. Some thought that great heroes lucked out by traveling to the Elysian Fields, where they could hunt and feast and socialize in pleasant company for eternity, while commoners were consigned to a lifeless and boring abode in the Fields of Asphodel. First they'd drink the waters of Lethe, which caused them to lose all memory of their former lives and thus lack anything to talk about.

In its earlier depictions, the underworld kingdom of Hades was such a dank and dark and moldering place that were it laid open to the heavens, the gods themselves would turn away in disgust. Certainly the god Hades was a dread figure to the living, who were quite careful how they swore oaths in his name. To many people, simply to utter the word "Hades" was a frightening proposition. So they made up a euphemism, a word that meant the same thing but with a more pleasant sound.

Since all precious minerals came from under the earth (the dwelling place of Hades) and since the god was wealthy indeed when it came to the number of subjects in his kingdom of the dead, he was referred to as "Ploutos", wealth. This accounts for the name given him by the Romans, who called Zeus Jupiter, Ares Mars, Hermes Mercury and Hades Pluto.

Pan

Pan, the god of shepherds and flocks, was born in Arcadia. Different stories are told of his parentage, most commonly that he was son of the god Hermes and a mountain nymph. Pan was born with a human body but goat legs, hooves, ears and horns. His mother ran away screaming, but the proud papa took him straightaway to Olympus where the gods thought him cute as could be.

Pan once loved a nymph named Echo, but she fled from him and was changed into a voice that can only repeat the last words spoken by someone else. When another nymph eluded his pursuit and was transformed into a reed, Pan was inspired to invent a musical instrument. He took seven reeds, cut them to varying lengths and bound them together to make the shepherd's pipe.

Pan was considered to be the cause of the sudden fear that sometimes comes for no reason, especially in lonely places. That's why it's called "panic".

Centaurs

The centaurs were descendants of Centaurus, a son of the music god Apollo. Most centaurs were governed by the bestial half of their double nature—part horse, part man. Their behavior was uncouth, and a very small amount of wine drove them wild. When
Hercules was entertained by Pholus, one of the few civilized centaurs, he made the mistake of demanding the guest’s prerogative of a beaker of wine. Pholus could not refuse, though he hesitated before unearthing a jug of the liquid which he kept buried underground for fear of just the sort of consequence which now ensued.

As soon as Pholus uncapped the jar of wine, his brothers caught scent of it on the wind from more than a mile away. Driven instantly to madness, they attacked Hercules, and the hero barely succeeded in driving them off with flaming arrows.

On another occasion, a centaur named Nessus offered to ferry Hercules’ wife across a torrent on his back. Midway, his animal nature got the better of him and he tried to force his attentions on his passenger. She shrieked and Hercules came running. He killed Nessus with a single arrow through the heart.

Chiron was not an ordinary centaur, having ended up with his horsely half by virtue of his father, the god Cronus, taking the form of a horse when Chiron was conceived. Chiron became renowned for his civility and wisdom. He served as tutor to many famous heroes, including Hercules and Jason. He taught music and medicine as well as the skills of the hunt.

**Tartarus**

Tartarus was the zone of the Underworld where the greatest sinners were punished for their transgressions. The worst of these offenders were deemed to be those who had sinned against the gods themselves. The greatest crime of all was to abuse the gods’ hospitality. All the more so since to be on familiar terms with the great deities was a particular favor, reserved for the elect. Thus the hero Bellerophon was guilty of the greatest presumption when, in his later years, he dared to ride the winged horse Pegasus to the very gates of Olympus.

Apparently he imagined that his heroic conquest of the Chimaera qualified him automatically for admission to the company of the gods. Zeus repaid this arrogance by sending a horsefly to sting Pegasus. The flying horse reared and Bellerophon was flung from its back, falling so far and landing so hard that he was crippled for life. He spent the remainder of his days a miserable, wandering outcast.

Tantalus, on the other hand, was invited to share not just Zeus’s table but the great god’s secrets. But Tantalus dared to tell these secrets to his fellow mortals. Or, some say, he stole Zeus’s ambrosia. (Nectar and ambrosia were the special treats of the gods. Nectar was fermented honey, or mead. Ambrosia may have been a concoction of honey, water, fruit, cheese, olive oil and barley.) For either or both of his transgressions, Tantalus was consigned to Tartarus—as far beneath Hades as Hades is beneath the sky.

The fifty daughters of Danaus murdered their husbands on their wedding night, driving daggers into their hearts and chopping off their heads. In fairness, they had not sought the marriages and were acting on their father’s homicidal instructions. All the same, they were condemned in the afterlife to a perpetual labor of carrying water from the river Styx in jars—jars that leaked like sieves.

For throwing his father-in-law into a fiery pit, Ixion had to be purified by Zeus. Then he ungratefully tried to seduce the great god’s wife. Hera warned her husband what was afoot, and Zeus fashioned a cloud into Hera’s likeness. Ixion made a pass at the cloud and was caught in the act. In punishment, he spends eternity in the lowest level of the Underworld, chained to a fiery wheel.

**Argus**

Argus was a hero from Arcadia. He is sometimes called All-Seeing to differentiate him from others named Argus. Argus All-Seeing got his nickname from his unorthodox number of eyes. In a classical case of mythological inconsistency, some say he had four eyes—two in the standard placement and two
in the back of his head—while others claim he had up to a hundred eyes all over his body.

This excess ocular equipment made Argus an excellent watchman, a talent which the goddess Hera used to good effect in the case of Io. Io was a young priestess with whom Hera’s husband Zeus had fallen in love. Needless to say, Hera was jealous and angry, so she changed Io into a cow.

Or maybe Zeus himself brought about the transformation to hide the object of his passion from Hera. In any case, once Io had become a heifer, Hera asked Argus to so-to-speak keep an eye on her and let Hera know if Zeus came near. Argus was able to perform this watch around the clock since he could always keep a lid or two peeled while the rest caught a little shut-eye.

But Zeus told Hermes, god of thieves, to snatch Io away, and Hermes resorted to a clever ruse. Disguising himself as a shepherd, he bored Argus with long-winded stories, beguiled him with song and eventually lulled him to sleep by playing tunes on a shepherd’s pipe, recently invented by Pan.

**Caeneus**

Caenis was a young nymph beloved of Poseidon. One day the god said he would give her anything she wanted in token of his affection. Caenis asked to be changed into a man, and an invulnerable fighter at that. Although this was the last thing Poseidon had expected or wished to hear, he obliged, and Caenis became Caeneus. Under her—or rather his—new name, Caeneus became a great warrior and got so carried away with his prowess that he walked into the middle of town one day and propped up his spear in the marketplace.

**Tantalus**

The word “tantalize” comes from the plight of the mythological Tantalus, who so offended the gods that he was condemned in the afterlife to an eternity of hunger and thirst. He was made to stand in a pool in Tartarus, the Underworld zone of punishment. Each time he reached down for the water that beckoned to his parched lips, it drained away. Overhanging the pool were boughs laden with luscious fruit. But each time Tantalus stretched to pluck this juicy sustenance, the boughs receded from his grasp. For his crime, which may have entailed stealing ambrosia from the gods, this great sinner was tantalized indeed.
"Okay, everybody," said Caeneus, "from now on you will worship my spear as a god."

Zeus, hearing this, meditated revenge. Since Caeneus was invulnerable, the great god had to be clever in bringing about his downfall. He decided to get the centaurs stirred up against Caeneus, figuring that these rough and ready beast-men would find a way to do him in. And sure enough they did.

It happened at the wedding of Theseus’s friend, Peirithous the Lapith. The centaurs were unwisely treated to wine and it went straight to their heads, inspiring them to attempt to abduct the bride. Caeneus came to her defense and started killing centaurs right and left. The rest ganged up on him and, finding that he was impervious to weapons, they pounded him into the ground. Caeneus suffocated and, dying, turned back into a woman.

Мідас

Midas was a king of Phrygia, a region nowadays part of Turkey. One day some of his farmhands brought him a satyr they had caught napping in the vineyard. This creature, part man, part goat, still groggy and much the worse for wear, had been thoroughly trussed up to keep him from escaping. Midas immediately recognized Silenus, right-hand satyr to the god Dionysus, and ordered him set free.

Silenus explained that he and his master had just returned from the East where they had been engaged in spreading the cultivation of the grape. Dionysus had brought back a tiger or two, an ever-expanding flock of followers and one very drunken satyr. Silenus had conked out in Midas’s vineyard to sleep it off. Now he was grateful to the king for treating him with dignity, and so was Dionysus. The god was so pleased, in fact, that he offered to grant whatever Midas should wish for.

Now, you didn’t get to rule a kingdom in those days without a pretty active grasp of what makes for a successful economy. Midas didn’t have to think twice. As the simplest plan for the constant replenishment of the royal treasury, he asked that everything he touch be turned to gold.

Arching a godly eyebrow, Dionysus went so far as to ask if Midas were sure. To which the king instantly replied, "Sure I’m sure." So Dionysus waved his pinebranch sceptre and conferred the boon.

And Midas rushed back home to try it out. Tentatively at first, he laid a trembling fingertip upon a bowl of fruit and then a stool and then a wooly lambkin. And when each of these had been transmuted in a trice into purest gold, the king began to caper about like the lambkin before its transformation.

"Just look at this!" he crowed, turning his chariot into a glittering mass of priceless—though—worthless transportation.

"Look what daddy can do!" he cried, taking his young daughter by the hand to lead her into the garden for a lesson in making dewy nature gleam with a monotonous but more valuable sheen.

Encountering unexpected resistance, he swung about to see why his daughter was being such a slug. Whereupon his eyes encountered, where late his child had been, a life-size golden statue that might have been entitled "Innocence Surprised".

"Uh oh," said Midas, and from that point on the uh-oh’s multiplied. He couldn’t touch any useful object without it losing in utility what it gained in monetary value, nor any food without it shedding all nutritional potency on its leaden way down his gullet.

In short, Midas came to understand why Dionysus had looked askance when asked to grant the favor. Fortunately, the god was a good sport about it. He allowed Midas to wash away his magic touch in the river Pactolus, which ever after enjoyed renown for its shimmering deposits of gold.
Orpheus

Orpheus had been taught to play the lyre by Apollo, and such was his skill on the instrument, together with the sweetness of his singing voice, that he could charm wild animals and even cause trees to uproot themselves and follow in his steps. Jason and the Argonauts took him along when they quested after the Golden Fleece, and Orpheus saved them from shipwreck by drowning out the treacherously alluring voices of the Sirens with his own musical stylings.

Orpheus fell in love with a nymph named Eurydice and blissful was their life together until one day she was pursued by a son of Apollo, the minor deity Aristaeus. In her headlong eagerness to escape, she stepped on a poisonous snake, was bitten and died. Disconsolate, Orpheus found a cave which lead to Hades and followed Eurydice to the Underworld. Here his musical charms were so persuasive that the King of the Dead permitted the minstrel to take his sweetheart home with him—on one condition.

This condition was so simple that it takes some explaining to account for Orpheus’s failure to heed it. Perhaps he could not bear to keep his eyes off their beloved object for a moment longer. Perhaps he wanted to share his rapture at birdsong and sunshine as they approached the mouth of the cave. Or maybe he wanted Eurydice to hear the latest lick that he had worked out on his lyre. In any case, he did the one thing he had been forbidden. He turned around and looked at Eurydice, and she was lost to him forever.

Orpheus swore he would never love another, and it may have been the steadfastness of this vow which caused certain wild women of Thrace to tear him limb from limb in a fit of jealousy. They threw his head into a river, and it kept on singing all the way to the sea.

Sisyphus

Sisyphus was founder and king of Corinth, or Ephyra as it was called in those days. He was notorious as the most cunning knave on earth. His greatest triumph came at the end of his life, when the god Hades came to claim him personally for the kingdom of the dead. Hades had brought along a pair of handcuffs, a comparative novelty, and Sisyphus expressed such an interest that Hades was persuaded to demonstrate their use—on himself.

And so it came about that the high lord of the Underworld was kept locked up in a closet at Sisyphus’s house for many a day, a circumstance which put the great chain of being seriously out of whack. Nobody could die. A soldier might be chopped to bits in
battle and still show up at camp for dinner. Finally Hades was released and Sisyphus was ordered summarily to report to the Underworld for his eternal assignment. But the wily one had another trick up his sleeve.

He simply told his wife not to bury him and then complained to Persephone, Queen of the Dead, that he had not been accorded the proper funeral honors. What’s more, as an unburied corpse he had no business on the far side of the river Styx at all—his wife hadn’t placed a coin under his tongue to secure passage with Charon the ferryman. Surely her highness could see that Sisyphus must be given leave to journey back topside and put things right.

Kindly Persephone assented, and Sisyphus made his way back to the sunshine, where he promptly forgot all about funerals and such drab affairs and lived on in dissipation for another good stretch of time. But even this paramount trickster could only postpone the inevitable. Eventually he was hauled down to Hades, where his indiscretions caught up with him. For a crime against the gods—the specifics of which are variously reported—he was condemned to an eternity at hard labor. And frustrating labor at that. For his assignment was to roll a great boulder to the top of a hill. Only every time Sisyphus, by the greatest of exertion and toil, attained the summit, the darn thing rolled back down again.

Europa

Europa was a princess of Tyre, a kingdom in the land of the Phoenicians. One day she was gathering wildflowers in a seaside meadow when she came upon a beautiful white bull. This bull was uncommonly gentle and did not inspire fear. Decking its horns with flowers, Europa was at length emboldened to climb upon its back. Whereupon the bull—actually the god Zeus in disguise—took off at a trot and dove into the sea. Europa was carried off to the island of Crete, where she became the mother of King Minos.

Europa’s brother Cadmus was charged with the duty of finding his sister and securing her return. He consulted the Oracle of Delphi, however, and was told to abandon the search. Instead he was to venture forth until he should meet a cow, to follow this cow wherever it should lead and to found a city upon the spot where it lay down. Such is the foundation legend of the Greek city of Thebes, which goes on to relate how Cadmus and his companions went out to fetch water for their new settlement at a nearby fountain.

Here all but Cadmus were slain by a dragon. Cadmus killed the dragon and, at the prompting of the goddess Athena, sowed some of its teeth in the ground. Armed men sprang up from the earth, just as they later would for Jason under similar circumstances—for the teeth that Jason strewed upon the fertile soil of distant Colchis came from the very dragon that Cadmus had killed. Using the same trick that would eventually serve Jason, Cadmus caused the sown men to fight amongst themselves until only five were left standing. These five, together with Cadmus, became the original inhabitants of Thebes. Cadmus, their king, is said to have taught them the alphabet and the art of writing. Indeed, the Greek alphabet historically derives from the land of the Phoenicians, mythological home of Cadmus and his sister (modern Syria and Lebanon).

The first four letters of the original Greek alphabet—in the upper and lower cases of the standard alphabet still in use today—are: Α (α) ALPHA, Β (β) BETA, Γ (γ) GAMMA and Δ (δ) DELTA.

Minos

The Greek gods (or the ancients who made up myths about them) sometimes showed a strange sense of justice. King Minos did a number of things which—one would have thought—disqualified him for a distinguished career in the afterlife. When challenged to prove his right to the Cretan throne, Minos asked the gods to send him a sign. The deities
instantly obliged, causing a beautiful white bull to emerge from the sea. Minos was so delighted that he decided not to offer the bull for sacrifice as was expected. Instead he substituted another bull from his herd. This displeased the sea god Poseidon so much that he made Minos’ wife fall in love with the bull from the sea. The Minotaur was born as a result.

When Minos besieged Megara, its princess fell in love with him. Learning that the town’s safety depended on an immortal lock of hair which grew from the head of her father the king, she was driven to treachery by her passion for Minos. She cut the hair and Megara fell. It may well be that Minos encouraged the princess in this act. In any case, he was so ungrateful that he spurned her love and allowed her to drown—or he drowned her himself.

According to the Athenians, Minos was a supremely wicked king. But others considered him wise and just. It is certain that the gods rewarded him in the afterlife, making him one of three great judges of the dead.

**Daedalus**

Daedalus was a renowned craftsman and inventor. Before his time statues had their arms fixed stiffly to their sides—Daedalus gave them naturalistic poses and, some say, the power of movement. Daedalus claimed to have invented the saw, but credit instead went to his nephew, whom Daedalus consequently murdered in a fit of professional jealousy. Because of this homicide, he fled his native Athens for the court of King Minos on the island of Crete.

King Minos was a notorious ingrate. One day when his son Glaucus turned up missing, he sought the aid of the seer Polyeidus, hoping to draw on the latter’s powers of prophecy and inner vision. Polyeidus was the same seer who had advised Bellerophon on how to tame the flying horse Pegasus. True to his reputation, he soon found the boy, smothered headfirst in a huge jar of honey. In thanks for this service, Minos locked Polyeidus in a room with the dead boy, telling him that he’d be released when he had returned Glaucus to life.

Polyeidus, a visionary not a magician, hadn’t an inkling what to do, until a snake crawled into the room and died. Its mate slithered away and returned moments later with an herb, which it rubbed on the body. The first snake was brought back to life. Polyeidus applied the same herb to Glaucus and it did the trick. Reasonably expecting thanks and a reward, he was stunned to be told by Minos that he couldn’t even go home again until he had taught Glaucus all his mystical powers. Resignedly, this he did. And in the end, with his freedom in sight, he bid King Minos farewell. "One last thing," he said to young Glaucus. "Spit into my mouth."

With what distaste may be imagined, Glaucus did as instructed—and instantly forgot everything he had been taught.

King Minos behaved with similar ingratitude to Daedalus. In return for numerous services, notably the building of the Labyrinth, Minos had Daedalus imprisoned, either in his workroom or the Labyrinth itself. Admittedly, Daedalus had been compelled to design the Labyrinth in the first place owing to an indiscretion on his part. Minos’s queen, Pasiphaë, had fallen in love with a bull—through no
fault of her own but in consequence of divine vengeance on Minos for—you guessed it—ingratitude to the gods. To help the queen, Daedalus fashioned a lifelike hollow cow inside which Pasiphaë could approach the bull. As a result she gave birth to the Minotaur, half-man, half-bull.

The Labyrinth was invented by Daedalus in order to confine the Minotaur and, some say, Pasiphaë and her accomplice. But there was no cooping up a genius like Daedalus. Having been locked up in his own architectural masterpiece, the great inventor knew better than to attempt the portal. Naturally Minos had placed this under heavy guard, knowing that if anyone could negotiate the twisting passages to the exit it was the creator of the Labyrinth himself. So Daedalus gave thought to other means of escape.

Minos had been kind enough to provide him with a room with a view, looking out over the Cretan landscape many stories below. The king was quite confident that his prisoner would not be leaping to his freedom. What he had overlooked was the probability that the caged bird might fly. Indeed, Daedalus might well have been inspired by the soaring flight of the birds outside his window. It is certain that there were in fact birds in the vicinity because Daedalus managed to possess himself of a goodly supply of feathers. Like the great Leonardo da Vinci many centuries yet in the future, he sketched out on his drafting table a winglike framework to which these feathers might be applied. Building a wooden lattice in the shape of an outsized wing and covering it with the feathers, he set to testing his prototype.

It must have created quite a stir in the dank passages of the Labyrinth when Daedalus began waving this monumental feather duster around. The trials were important, though, for the ultimate invention would be freighted with the risk not just of his own life but that of his son Icarus as well. For Minos had wickedly imprisoned the guiltless boy together with his father.

At last the day was at hand to take to the skies. As he attached one pair of wings to Icarus and another to himself, Daedalus cautioned his son repeatedly.

"Remember all the trouble I had getting these feathers to stick?" he said for the sixth or seventh time. "The binding agent I resorted to is unstable," he pointed out as Icarus fidgeted impatiently. "I had to heat it to make it work. If it gets heated again—by the sun, say—it'll give way and the feathers will come loose. Do you understand, boy?"

To judge by Icarus's expression, he felt his father was belaboring the point. As it turned out, he might have given his old dad more credit for a caution worth repeating. For as soon as they had leapt from the windowsill and caught an updraft which bore them high into the sky about Mount Juktas, Icarus became giddy with exhilaration. Now he knew what a falcon felt like, dipping and soaring at will.

Perhaps with some notion of going down in the annals of aviation with the first high-altitude record, he started flapping with a vengeance. And as he climbed into the thinner air aloft, the sun's proximity began to work as Daedalus had anticipated. The feathers came loose, and Icarus plunged headlong into the sea, which—scant consolation—henceforth bore his name.
Knossos

The island of Crete was the site of the earliest high civilization in Europe. For two thousand years there flourished a culture called Minoan, after legendary King Minos. This civilization was characterized by unique artwork and architecture, notably the imposing complex of buildings at Knossos. The layout of Knossos was so complicated that it would have been incomprehensible to visitors, contributing to the myth of the Labyrinth.

Guides at Knossos today escort visitors to gaze in awe at the “throne of King Minos”, but such ceremonial seats as have been restored more likely served a presiding religious official than a king. The "palace" itself may have been a religious center. And since the deity worshipped was female, the throne was as likely to have served for a priestess as a priest or king.

The abrupt end of the high Minoan civilization has always been a great mystery. It is now believed that the eruption of the nearby volcanic island of Thera, with its shock-wave, clouds of ash and tidal waves, weakened the civilization so much that mainlanders were able to take over rule of Crete. Indeed, when Krakatoa, a volcano in the South China Sea, erupted in 1883 the sonic reverberations traveled three times around the world, and the sky in New Haven, Connecticut, glowed so strangely that the fire department was called out. Ash was ejected almost twenty miles into the air, and day was turned to night for almost three hundred miles around. It has been estimated that the magma chamber of the Thera volcano was five times as large as that of Krakatoa.

Thera is today called Santorini. Its steep cliffs are remnants of the volcano’s rim, and the harbor is actually its flooded interior. The eruption left the volcano hollow inside, and when it collapsed some time later the waters of the Aegean rushed into the cavity. Rebounding when they hit bottom, they caused a tsunami or tidal wave. A tsunami caused by an earthquake in Chile in 1960 was still thirty-five feet high when it reached Hawaii. It is estimated that the Santorini tidal wave started at a comparable height and was still twenty-two feet tall when it reached the shore of what is today Israel. This would have destroyed the low-lying coastal settlements of Crete. Folk memories of this event may underlie the legend of the lost island-continent of Atlantis.

The palace of Knossos burned down a number of times. Open flames, resinous wood and a plenitude of oil storage jars make for a volatile combination in earthquake country. The final conflagration, however, was caused neither by an earthquake nor the volcanic eruption of a neighboring isle. Though its source remains a mystery, it left a profound impression on the people of Knossos. The site was abandoned, as if haunted.

Labyrinth

The name "Labyrinth" comes from the word "labrys" meaning "double-ax", and the dynasty of King Minos was referred to as the "House of the Double-Ax". Clearly there is history behind the myth here, for many images of double-axes have been found by archaeologists on Crete from a time even earlier than that of the mythological heroes.

But such images are far older still, being
found on European icons from as long ago as 5000 BC. And before they became stylized as double-headed axes with curved blades, it is clear that they depicted butterflies. Because of its transformation from a caterpillar, the butterfly represented change and rebirth to the people of the Stone Age, and therefore it was revered as a form of the Great Goddess.

Other images of the Great Goddess in the form of a snake are characteristic of the Minoan civilization. Snakes were sacred symbols because they shed their skin and were in that sense reborn, and the rebirth of the crops and edible plants in the springtime was humankind’s greatest preoccupation. So a snake might be worshipped or serve a ceremonial role, either as a symbol or an embodiment of the Goddess herself. Crete was last outpost of female-oriented religion and the point of contact between prehistoric Europe and the world of the ancient Greeks. Minoan Crete is a window through which we can look back at the spiritual roots of Europe. According to the myths, Zeus was born on Crete or sheltered there in a cave on Mt. Dicte. Thus the Greeks acknowledged a more ancient spiritual heritage.

**Bull Leaping**

From abundant archaeological evidence it is clear that some ceremony involving acrobats and bulls was practiced in ancient Crete. And from the myth of Theseus, one might conclude that these acrobats were captives or sacrificial victims, whose athleticism and timing might have spelled the difference between gory death and popular adulation by the Knossos throngs.

Historians have long speculated on the scant likelihood of anyone grabbing the horns of a charging bull and vaulting up onto or over its back, even with the aid of a "catcher" standing by to steady the leap to the ground.

It has been pointed out that bulls tend to make a sideways sweeping gesture with their horns, the force and speed of which impales anyone within reach. But the long-horned Cretan bull of ancient times may have been a more sluggish creature, bred perhaps for the usefulness of this trait in ritual. Or the bulls may have been drugged for the sport. Still, it is not hard to see how a successful bull-leaper would have been treated like a celebrity in the halls of Knossos.

**Atlantis**

The fabled land of Atlantis derives its name from the Titan Atlas. It was said to be out beyond the western headland where the immortal giant holds up the heavens by means of a pillar on his back. We know of Atlantis because of the dialogues of the philosopher Plato. Plato maintained that the lost island-continent was a real place, not a myth. He in turn had heard of it from certain wise men of Egypt, whose civilization spanned the era when Atlantis was said to have flourished, whereas earlier civilizations in Greece had been wiped out by natural catastrophes—or so the Egyptians said.

Plato’s description of Atlantis bears pronounced similarities to the Greek island of Crete as it must have been during the heyday of the Minoan culture. And whereas Atlantis was supposed to have sunk beneath the waves, Minoan Crete succumbed to the monumental volcanic eruption of the neighboring island of Thera—which may well have been accompanied by a huge tsunami, or tidal wave.
**Shrines**

To this day there are countless roadside shrines in Greece. These are consecrated to the Virgin Mary and various Christian saints. But in ancient times they were sacred to pagan deities. A temple was considered to be the house of a god. Its architecture was often elaborate. In contrast, a typical small shrine consisted only of a simple enclosure and an altar. In addition, there might be a statue of the god, goddess or hero to whom the shrine was sacred. Sacrifices were placed within the sanctuary or burned on the altar. Blood offerings consisted of the meat of an animal, which was burned while wine was poured into the flames. Bloodless offerings included vegetables and fruits. Some cults featured cakes as the offering. One such cake was made from wheat and honey. Sacred animals sometimes lived in the shrine’s precincts. In a temple at Athens there were snakes.

**The Parthenon**

The Parthenon was built on the peak of the Acropolis in Athens during that city’s golden age. Pericles, the great orator and statesman, commissioned its construction. This was during an era long after that of the mythological heroes, but the sculptures which decorated the building’s exterior celebrated their feats, together with those of the immortal gods. They showed Lapiths fighting centaurs, Olympians battling Giants and perhaps scenes from the Trojan War.

The Parthenon symbolized the power and religious devotion of Athens. In later years it became a church and then, when Greece became part of the Turkish empire, a mosque. It survived relatively intact until 1687, when the Venetians, bombarding the Turks, inadvertently exploded a store of gunpowder within the building.

Although a scene like this might conjure up the spirit of Ancient Greece, there were actually no ruined monuments or temples during the Mycenaean Age, the probable setting of the Greek myths. In fact, there were no temples at all, only household shrines. Noble structures such as the Parthenon in Athens or the temple of Apollo at Corinth would not be built for another several centuries.
Fire

The ancient Greeks were well aware that without fire they would be forced to huddle in darkness. In mythology, the Titan Prometheus was considered to be human-kind’s greatest benefactor because he stole fire from the gods and gave it to mortals. The Titan carried it away from Mount Olympus in a fennel stalk—a method of transporting fire that was used down into historical times.

In daily life, however, the immortals could not be relied upon to provide the essential flame. Therefore it was common practice to keep a flame burning—or an ember glowing—at all times. If it went out, the household hearth could be rekindled from a neighbor’s. But if the neighbor’s had gone out as well, it became a matter of rubbing two sticks together or striking a spark from flint. In some ceremonies, a sacred flame was carried from altar to altar by relays of torches.

The Sea

Greek culture grew up around the sea. All the early sites of civilization were along the coast and on the islands of the Aegean. The sea was the highway that linked the Greeks together and permitted their innovations to spread outward, to the shores of the Black Sea, to Italy, Sicily and Africa.

Seafaring in heroic times was a perilous affair. The sailing season, when one might hope to venture forth with any degree of safety, was limited to some fifty days after the end of summer. Prior to that season, the Aegean Sea bakes under the summer sun and any slight imbalance in barometric pressure causes the hot air to rise up suddenly, sucking down cold from the North. Suddenly out of a cloudless sky the north wind rages down with almost hurricane force.

And even in the absence of these dreadful gales, the prevailing wind, the Meltemi, can be relied upon to kick up a choppy and violent sea. Small wonder that the ancient mariners strove to keep land in sight at all times, making their way cautiously from headland to headland. And small wonder that they drew their vessels up on the beach at night.

Caves

Imagine a country so rich in local legends of a hoary antiquity that they go back thousands of years, as far as the time of gods and heroes. Such is modern Greece. Here in the region of Achaia is the cave of Kastria Kalavryta, known as "the Cave of the Lakes". And the story told locally blends with the mythology of the ancients.

When the daughters of the king of Tiryns boasted that their beauty surpassed that of the goddess Hera, they were driven mad. Thinking they were cows, they roamed the countryside in a frenzy. The king called on the seer Melampus to cure them of their mania. (This was the same Melampus who had been given the power to understand the language of insects and animals when he awoke in terror one night to find snakes licking at his ears.) Melampus found the daughters of the king in the Cave of the Lakes, and it was here that he cured them.

It was only in 1964 that the people of Kastria discovered the inner recess of the cave, which is unique for its string of cascading pools. It must have been with pounding hearts that they extended their wooden ladders to the second floor. For they sensed a lingering aura of that far-off time when the presence of the gods was real.
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- - Achiăria against Medusa. 14-16
- - As the Goddess in the form of a bird. 27
- - Born from Zeus's head. 27
- - Gave Bellerophon golden bridle. 12-13
- - Helps Hercules with Stymphalian birds. 22
- - Provides prow for Jason's ship. 3
- - Tells Cadmus to sow dragon's teeth. 33
Athens (ATH-inz) In history, the principle city of Greece (vying at times with Sparta for political supremacy). In mythology, ruled by Theseus. 7-9, 34, 38

Atlantis (at-LAN-tis) According to Plato, an advanced civilization that sank beneath the waves, a legend based perhaps on Minoan Crete. 56, 57

Atlas (AT-las) A Titan who supported the heavens by means of a pillar on his shoulders. Divulged the whereabouts of the Graeae to Perseus. 15, 37 - Relieved of his burden by Hercules. 22

Bellerophon (beh-LAIR-uh-fon) Heroic vanquisher of the Chimaera. 11-12 - Preemptitious in later years. 29 - Tames the flying horse Pegasus. 12-13, 34

Black Sea The shore of this inland sea north of the Asian portion of modern Turkey was the mythological land of the Amazons and the Golden Fleece. 10, 39

Bronze Age The period between the Stone Age and the Iron Age when humankind made implements of an alloy of copper and tin. 2

bull-leaping Sport that may have been practiced in ancient Crete, featuring acrobatic feats over the horns and back of a bull. 37

Cadmus (CAD-mus) Phoenician founder of Thebes, brother of Europa. 33

Caenis (SEE-nis) A maiden transformed by Poseidon into the invulnerable fighter Caeneus. 30

Caeneus (SEEN-yoos) Originally the maiden Caenis, changed by Poseidon into an invulnerable fighter. Killed by the centaurs. 30, 31

Castor (CASS-ter) Mortal brother of Polydeuces, together the Dioscuri or Hero Twins. 11 - As constellation. 24

centaurs (SEN-tawrz) Descendants of Centaurus, half-horse and half-man. Fought with Lapiths at the wedding feast of Peirithous. 1, 28 - Destroy the invulnerable Caeneus. 31 - On Parthenon exterior. 38

Centaurus (sen-TAWR-us) Progenitor of the centaurs, son of Ixion and a cloud devised by Zeus to impersonate Hera. 28

Cerberus (SUR-buh-rus) Hades’ guard dog, whose drool was used in Medea’s attempt to poison Theseus. Carried up from Hades by Hercules. 11, 22-24 - Charmed by Orpheus. 24 - Related to Chimaera and Hydra. 12

Charon (CAIR-on) Ferryman of the dead across the River Styx, a bribe for whom in the mouth of corpse persisted into modern times. 23-24, 33

Charybdis (kuh-RIB-dis) Mythological whirlpool off the coast of Sicily. Together with Scylla, one of twin perils faced by Odysseus. 20

Chimaera (kye-MEE-ruh) Fire-breathing monster combining lion, snake and goat, related to Cerberus and the Hydra. 11-13, 29

Chiron (KYE-ron) Kindly centaur, tutor of Jason and Hercules. 1, 3 - Sired by Cronus when in the form of a horse. 29

Circe (SUR-see) Enchantress of divine lineage, sister of King Aeëtes of Colchis, friend and advisor to Odysseus. 18-20

Clashing Rocks Twin crags (the Symplegades) that menaced Jason and the Argonauts. Different from the Wandering Rocks. 4, 20

Colchis (COL-chis) The kingdom of Aeëtes on the mysterious periphery of the Heroic world. 4, 15, 20, 33

Corinth (CORE-inth) City commanding the narrow neck of land that links the major regions of Greece, ruled in myth by Jason’s uncle Pelias. 12-13, 38 - Founded by Sisyphus. 52

Crete (KREET or KREE-tee) Large Aegean island. Site of Bronze Age high culture known as Minoan. 8-9, 12, 26, 33, 34, 36, 37

Croesus (KREE-sus) Historical king of proverbial wealth. His ancient realm lies within present-day Turkey. 2

Cronus (KROH-nus) Titan father of Zeus. His son usurped him as ruler of the gods. 22, 29

Cyclops (SYE-klops) One-eyed giant of the race that built Olympus for the gods. Plural: Cyclopes. 17-18, 25

Cyclopes (sye-KLOH-peez) Plural of Cyclops.

Daedalus (DEED-uh-lus or DED-uh-lus) Master craftsman who left Athens to serve King Minos of Crete. Builder of the Labyrinth. 8-9, 54-55

Danaë (DAN-ay-ee) Mother of Perseus by Zeus, who entered her locked room in a shower of gold. 13-14

Danaus (DAN-ay-us) King of Argos, who instructed his daughters, the Danaïdes (duh-NAY-i-deez), to kill their husbands on their wedding night. 29
**Dark Age**  Period, roughly twelfth to ninth centuries B.C.E., following the destruction of the Mycenaean kingdoms. 1-2

**Delphi**  (DELL-fye)  Shrine of Apollo and site of the famous Oracle, whose often inscrutable advise was sought down into historical times.  I, 2, 33

**Demeter**  (dee-MEE-tur)  Goddess of agriculture, sister of Zeus, mother of Persephone.  19-20, 25

**Dia**  (DYE-uh)  Small island off Iraklion, Crete, just beyond the harbor of ancient Knossos.  10

**Dicte**  (DIK-tee)  Cretan mountain, site of the cave (which can still be visited today) in which Zeus was born.  37

**Dictys**  (DIK-tis)  Fisherman or shepherd of Seriphos, protector of Perseus and, after the death of King Polydeuces, ruler of the island kingdom.  14

**Dioscuri**  (dye-us-KOO-ree)  The Hero Twins of Sparta, Castor and Polydeuces, brothers of Helen of Troy.  24

**Dionysus**  (dye-oh-NYE-sus)  God of wine, son of Zeus and Semele, rescuer of Ariadne after she had been abandoned by Theseus.  23, 25, 31

**Dorians**  (DOR-ee-unz)  Iron Age invaders of Greece, destroyers of Mycenae and other kingdoms according to one theory partly supported by myth.  2, 26

**Dryads**  (DRY-adz)  Nymphs who lived in trees and died when the tree died.  15

**Earth**  The goddess of the Earth, known as Ge or Gaia.  Mother of the Titans, Cyclopes and Giants.  22, 24, 27

**Echo**  Nymph condemned by Pan (or, alternatively, by Hera) to speak only when echoing the words of others.  28

- And Narcissus.  15

**Elysian Fields**  (i-LEE-zhun or ee-LEE-zhun)  Paradise of the heroes, either in the Underworld or in the far West.  19, 22-24, 25, 28

**Ephyra**  (EF-i-ruh)  Original name of Corinth.  52

**Epidaurus**  (ep-i-DAW-rus)  Ancient Greek city, site of a magnificent fourth century B.C.E. theater where plays are still performed.  7

**Europa**  (yoo-ROH-pa)  Phoenician princess abducted to Crete by Zeus in the form of a bull.  Mother of King Minos.  33

**Eurystheus**  (yoo-RISS-thyoos)  Cousin of Hercules who assigned him his Labors.  King of Mycenae only because Hera delayed Hercules’ birth.  20-22

**Euridice**  (yoo-RISS-tee)  Nymph, wife of Orpheus.  Died of a snakebite while pursued by Aristaeus.  23-24, 32

**Fields of Asphodel**  (ASS-fuh-del)  Dwelling place of most of the shades in Hades.  Asphodel was an ugly weed with a pretty name.  19, 28

**Fire**  Combustible process with uses both sacred and practical in Greek myth and history.  39

**Furies**  Female spirits who tormented evil-doers, particularly those who had committed some crime against a family member.  11

**Giants**  Monstrous children of the goddess Earth.  Besieged Olympus, perhaps in revenge for Zeus’s overthrow of the Titans.  24, 38

**Glaucus**  (GLAW-kus)  Son of King Minos of Crete.  Died and was brought back to life by the seer Polyeidus.  34-35

**Godess**  One name by which we of modern times describe the feminine supreme power worshipped by early humankind.  26-27

**Golden Fleece**  The wooly coat of a magical flying ram, sought by Jason and the Argonauts in a quest.  3-6, 8, 15, 20

**Gorgons**  (GOR-gunz or GOR-gonz)  Monstrous sisters with snakes for hair, tusks like boars and lolling tongues.  The only mortal one of the three was Medusa.  12, 14, 16

**Graeae**  (GREE-ee)  Two (or three) sisters, hags (or swan-like) from birth, with but one eye and one tooth between them.  15

**Great Goddess**  One name by which we of modern times describe the feminine supreme power worshipped by early humankind.  26-27, 37

**Great Mother**  Another name by which we of modern times describe the feminine supreme power worshipped by early humankind.  26-27

**Hades (1)**  (HAY-deez)  God of the dead, ruler of the Underworld, which was known as Hades after the god.  See next entry.  9, 22-24, 25, 28, 32

- Abducts Persephone.  19

- Handcuffed by Sisyphus.  32, 33

- Tricks Theseus and Peirithous.  11

**Hades (2)**  Realm of the dead, either in the far West of the world known to the early Greeks or underground— or both.  11, 19, 22-23, 28, 32

**Harpies**  (HAR-peez)  Smelly birds with the faces of women, who defiled the food of King Phineus of Salmydessus.  4
Hector (HEK-tor) Trojan prince. More noble than the prideful Achilles, paramount warrior of the Greeks besieging Troy. 19

Helen Spartan princess, whose elopement caused the Trojan War. Memorialized in a famous phrase of the poet Marlowe. 11

Helle (HEL-ee) Theban princess saved from sacrifice by a golden flying ram. Becoming dizzy on the animal’s back, she fell into the sea. 4

Hellespont (HEL-es-pont) Strait connecting the Black Sea and the Aegean. Legendarily named for Helle. 4

Hera (HEE-ruh) Goddess of marriage, wife of Zeus, Queen of the Olympians. 22, 26, 29, 30, 39 - And Jason. 3-4 - Sends snakes to attack infant Hercules. 20 - Stirs up Amazons against Hercules. 10 - Throne on Olympus. 25

Hermes (HUR-meez) A prankster and inventive genius from birth, Hermes was the herald of the gods and guide of dead souls to the Underworld. 25, 27, 28 - Helps Odysseus. 18 - Helps Perseus. 16, 27 - Tricks Argus. 30

Hero Twins Heroic Spartan brothers, the Dioscuri, who rescued their sister Helen from Theseus and sailed with the Argonauts. 24

Heroic Age A time, as conceived by the early Greeks of a subsequent era, when individuals unique in courage, strength and physical beauty performed their exploits. 2, 25

Hephaestus (he-FEE-stus or he-FESS-tus) God of fire and crafts or the two together, hence of blacksmiths. Limped owing to a fall from Olympus. 25

Hesperides (hes-PER-i-deez) Nymphs who kept watch in their garden over golden apples given to Hera as a wedding present, later taken by Hercules. 22

Hestia (HESS-tee-uh) Goddess of hearth, home and family. 25

Hippodameia (hip-uh-da-MYE-uh) Maiden whom King Polydectes claimed he was going to marry, as a ruse to disguise his intentions toward Perseus’s mother. 14

Hippolytus (hi-POL-i-tus) One of the Giants, slain by Hermes while wearing the helmet of invisibility. 27

Homer (HOH-mur) Traditionally, a blind minstrel or bard, who sang or performed to music epic poems set in the Heroic Age. 2, 19, 23

Hydra (HYE-druh) A many-headed monster slain by Hercules in the swamps of Lerna. Related to the Chimaera and Cerberus. 12, 21-22

Hypodamus (HEPI-duh-mus) One of the Argonauts, squire of Hercules, who was pulled into a pool by its nymphs and either drowned or lived underwater with them. 15

Icarus (IK-uh-rus) Son of Daedalus who dared to fly too near the sun on wings of feathers and wax. 35

Io (EYE-oh) Princess of Argos, transformed into a heifer by Zeus in order to hide her from the jealous Hera. 30

Iobates (eye-OB-uh-teez) King of Lycia who thought to comply with a request to do away with Bellerophon by sending him after the Chimaera. 12

Iolaus (eye-oh-LAY-us) Son of Iphicles, nephew of Hercules, whose charioteer he was. Aided Hercules in his battle with the Hydra. 22

Iphicles (IF-i-kleez) Brother of Hercules (although it was understood that, unlike Iphicles, Hercules was the son of Zeus rather than the mortal husband of his mother). 22

Ixion (iks-EYE-on) A king who murdered his father-in-law, was purified of the crime by Zeus and proved himself unworthy of the favor. 29

Jason (JAY-sun) Leader of the Argonauts, a team of heroes who journeyed from Greece to distant Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece. 2, 8, 15, 25, 29, 33 - And the challenge at the river. 3 - And the Clashing Rocks. 4 - And the dragon-seed men. 5-6 - And the fire-breathing bulls. 5 - And the Sirens. 20 - And the Wandering Rocks. 20

Juktas (YOOK-tas) Mountain near Iraklion, Crete, and ancient Knossos. 35

Kastria (KASS-tree-uh) A present-day Greek village in the district of Achaia. 39

Kastria Kalavryta (KASS-tree-uh kuh-LAHV-ree-tuh) The Cave of the Lakes in the Greek district of Achaia, rich in mythological tradition. 39
Knossos (NOSS-us) An ancient palace or religious center from the Minoan period on the island of Crete, near modern Iraklion. 36, 37

Labyrinth (LAB-i-rinth) A fiendishly intricate maze devised by Daedalus to house the Minotaur. 8-9, 33
- May have been inspired by travelers’ tales of Knossos. 36
- Origin of the word. 36-37

Laconia (luh-KOH-nee-uh) A region of far southern Greece. 23

Ladon (LAY-don) A many-headed dragon who guarded the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides. Killed by Hercules. 22

Lapiths (LAP-iths) A tribe in Thessaly, of whom at one point Theseus’s friend Peirithous was king. 10, 38

Lerna (LUR-nuh) Village where the “Spring of the Hydra” is still pointed out today. 21-22, 25

Lethe (LEE-thee) A river of the Underworld whose waters induced forgetfulness. 28

Lycia (LISH-ee-a) An ancient kingdom in Asia Minor (the Asian portion of modern Turkey). 12-13

Lydia (LID-ee-a) A region ruled in ancient times by King Croesus, centrally located in what is today Turkey. 2

Marathon Plain north of Athens, site of a famous Greek victory over the Persians, news of which was announced to the Athenians by a man who ran all the way (hence the name of the modern footrace). 10

Medea (mee-DEE-uh or meh-DEE-uh) Famous sorceress, daughter of King Aeëtes. Helper of Jason. 4-6
- And Theseus. 8

Medusa (meh-DOO-suh) The sole mortal of the monstrous Gorgons. Had the power of turning to stone whomsoever she gazed upon. Killed by Perseus. 12, 14-16, 27

Melampus (meh-LAM-pus) Seer who cared for snakes whose mother had died, awoke to find them licking his ears and gained the ability to understand the language of animals and insects. 21, 39

Meltemi (mel-TEM-ee) The steady northerly wind of high summer in Greece and the Aegean Sea. 39

Menelaus (meh-neh-LAY-us) Leader of the Greeks who besieged Troy to retrieve his wife Helen from the Trojan Paris. 11

Midas (MYE-das) Phrygian king who did a favor for Dionysus and was granted what has since been called the Midas touch. 31

Minoan (mi-NOH-an) Of or pertaining to the Bronze Age culture of Crete as exemplified by archaeological discoveries at Knossos. Named after King Minos. 26, 36, 37

Minos (MYE-nos) King of Crete whose insult to the gods eventuated in the birth of the Minotaur. Had Daedalus build the Labyrinth. 8-9, 33-35

Minotaur (MIN-uh-tawr) A monster, half-man, half-bull, born of Queen Pasiphaë’s god-inflicted infatuation with a bull. Terror of the Labyrinth. 8-10, 34-35

Mycenae (mye-SEE-nee) Real city of the Heroic Age, of great wealth as revealed by archaeology. In myth, said to have been founded by Perseus. 2, 20, 24

Mycenaean Age (mye-seh-NEE-an) Period of high cultural achievement, forming the backdrop and basis for subsequent myths of the heroes. Cut short by widespread destruction ushering in the Greek Dark Age. 2, 26, 38

naiads (NYE-adz or NAY-adz) Nymphs (young and beautiful female sprites) of springs, ponds and rivers. 15

Narcissus (nar-SISS-us) Handsome youth who was caused to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool for breaking the heart of the nymph Echo. 15

Naxos (NAK-sos) Island in the Aegean Sea. 10

nectar (NEK-tur) Beverage of the gods, which (like the divine food ambrosia) conferred immortality on any mortal lucky enough to partake of it. 29

Nemean Lion (NEE-mee-un or nee-MEE-un) Preternatural beast with an impenetrable pelt, nevertheless vanquished by Hercules as one of his Labors. 20-21

Nereus (NEE-ryoos) Sea-god, thought of as being very old and correspondingly wise. Father of the Nereids. 9, 20

Nereids (NEE-ree-ids) The fifty daughters of the sea-god Nereus, one of whom bestowed upon Theseus a crown. 9, 15
- Save the Argonauts. 20

Nessus (NESS-us) Centaur killed by Hercules with arrows dipped in Hydra venom. Tricked the hero’s wife into saving his blood for a potion that ultimately killed the hero when he donned a shirt dipped in it. 29

North Wind Godly personification of the wind blowing from the North. Father of two of the Argonauts. 4

nymphs (NIMFS) Young and beautiful female spirits of trees, water and other aspects of nature. Neither human nor immortal. 15, 28
Ocean  A river, personified as a god, which ushered from the Underworld and flowed around the flat earth in a circle.  

Odysseus (oh-DISS-ee-us or oh-DISS-yoos)  King of an island off the western coast of Greece. One of the heroes who fought at Troy. Encountered many perils on his homeward trip—among them a Cyclops and the Sirens.  

Oedipus (EE-di-pus or ED-i-pus)  King of Thebes who unknowingly killed his father and married his mother.  

Olympians (uh-LIM-pee-uns or oh-LIM-pee-uns)  The supreme gods of the Greek pantheon, who were thought to dwell on the heights of Mount Olympus.  

Olympus (uh-LIM-pus or oh-LIM-pus)  Mountain in northern Greece, rising to multiple peaks of over 9000 feet. Generally thought of as the home of the supreme gods. (However, a myth in which two giants piled other mountains on top of Olympus to attack the gods suggests that they were also conceived of as living somewhere in the sky.)  

Oracle (OHR-a-kul)  The answer given by a god to a question asked by a mortal supplicant. Or the place where the answer was given. Or the human agent conveying the divine response.  

Orion (oh-RYE-un)  Legendary hunter, killed by his companion, the goddess Artemis, who was tricked into shooting an arrow at something bobbing far out to sea—the head of the swimming Orion.  

Orpheus (OHR-fye-us or OH-FY-foos)  Minstrel whose music was so sweet trees would uproot themselves to follow in his footsteps. Tried to rescue his wife Eurydice from Hades. - Charms Charon and Cerberus. - Saves Argonauts from Sirens.  

Pactolus (PAK-toh-lus)  Phrygian river whose deposits of gold were attributed to Midas’s washing away of his golden touch. Source of the wealth of the historical Croesus.  

Pan  Shepherd god, son of Hermes, with legs and horns of a goat. Plays the Pan pipes.  

Paris (PAR-is)  Trojan prince who caused the Trojan War by carrying off Helen, wife of the Greek Menelaus.  


Pasiphaë (pa-SIF-ay-ee)  Wife of King Minos of Crete. Her husband’s sacrilege caused her to be punished by giving birth to the Minotaur.  

Pegasus (PEG-uh-sus)  Winged horse, born from the blood of the Gorgon Medusa when she was decapitated by Perseus. Tamed by Bellerophon.  

Peirene (pye-REE-née)  Spring or fountain in Corinth, favorite watering hole of the flying horse Pegasus.  

Peirithous (pye-RITH-oh-us)  King of the Lapiths, great friend of Theseus. Led his people in a war against the centaurs.  

Pelias (PEL-ee-us)  King of Iolcus who sent Jason after the Golden Fleece. Killed by his own daughters owing to the trickery of Medea.  

Periphetes (per-i-FEE-teez)  Club-wielding outlaw from Epidaurus, killed by Theseus.  

Persephone (pur-SEF-uh-nee)  Beautiful daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Abducted to the Underworld by Hades. Sometimes considered an Olympian. - Paroles Sisyphus from the Underworld. - Attempted abduction by Peirithous and Theseus.  

Perseus (PUR-see-us or PURS-yoos)  Son of Zeus, heroic vanquisher of the Gorgon Medusa. - Constellation.  


Phineus (FIN-yoos or FIN-ee-us)  King of Salmydessus who, in thanks to the Argonauts for ridding him of the Harpies, warned them of the Clashing Rocks.  

Phoenicians (fee-NISH-unz or fi-NISH-unz or fi-NEESH-unz)  Historically, famous seafarers from the region of modern Syria who may well have helped found Thebes in Greece, as reflected in the myth of Cadmus.  

Pholus (FOH-lus)  Most civilized of the actual centaurs (Chiron being of another lineage). Died by dropping one of Hercules’s poisoned arrows on his foot.  

Phrixus (FRIK-sus)  Prince who was saved on the point of sacrifice by a flying ram. Later hung the ram’s golden fleece in a grove in Colchis.  

Phrygia (FRIJ-ee-a)  Large region in what is now Turkey.  

Plato (PLAY-toh)  Famous Greek philosopher. Lived from about 429-347 B.C.E.  

Pollux (POL-ukz)  Roman name of Polydeuces, one of the Dioscuri or Hero Twins. Part of the constellation, Castor and Pollux.  

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Polydectes (pol-i-DEK-teez) King of Seriphos who sent Perseus after Medusa’s head, by which he, Polydectes, was ultimately turned to stone. 14, 16

Polyeidus (pol-ee-AYE-dus) Seer (clairvoyant or prophet) descended from Melampus. Advised Perseus how to tame Pegasus. 12 - And King Minos. 34

Polydeuces (pol-i-DYOO-seez) Brother of Castor, together the Dioscuri or Hero Twins. Better known by his Roman name Pollux. Part of a constellation. 11 - Immortal status. 24

Polymede (pol-i-MEE-dee) According to some sources, the mother of Jason. 5

Polyphemus (pol-i-FEE-mus) Cyclops who captured and almost devoured Odysseus. Prevailed upon his father Poseidon to delay the hero’s return home. 17-18

Poseidon (puh-SYE-dun or poh-SYE-dun) Brother of Zeus. God of the sea. An Olympian. 9, 12, 16, 25 - Beaten by Hercules. 22 - Changes Caenis to Caeneus. 30 - Sends Minos white bull. 8, 34

Procrustes (proh-KRUS-teez) A host who adjusted his guests to their bed, chopping or stretching as appropriate. Done in by Theseus. 7-8

Proetus (proh-EE-tus) King of Tiryns, brother of Perseus’s grandfather, King Acrisius of Argos. Hoping to cause Bellerophon’s death, sent him on the journey that led to the hero’s triumph over the Chimaera. 12

Prometheus (proh-MEE-thee-us or proh-MEE-thyoos) Titan, benefactor of humankind. Chained by Zeus to a rock where an eagle picked at his innards. 39

Renault, Mary British author of novels bringing the Greek myths to vibrant life, among them The King Must Die and The Bull From the Sea, which concern the hero Theseus. 6-7

Salydessus (sal-mi-DESS-us) Actual ancient city on the Black Sea, erroneously located on the Hellespont in the myth involving King Phineas and the Argonauts. 3

Santorini (san-to-REE-nee) Aegean island, previously known as Thera, constituting the collapsed cone of a volcano. 36

Sciron (SKY-ron) Bandit who made travelers stop to wash his feet, then kicked them over a cliff while they were doing so. Killed by Theseus. 7

Scylla (SIL-uh) A beautiful maiden transformed into a monster variously described, but possibly with six dogs’ heads on long necks. Menaced Odysseus when he passed her lair off the coast of Sicily. 20

sea The maritime highway upon which many a hero set forth to adventure and by which the Ancient Greeks spread their civilization. 39

shade The insubstantial remains of the dead, a phantom without a body or the power of thought. 25

shrines Places at which gods or heroes were venerated. Less elaborate than temples. 38

Silenus (sye-LEE-nus) Satyr, companion to the wine god Dionysus. Treated with respect by King Midas. 31

Sirens (SYE-rinz) Sweetly singing enchantresses, part woman, part bird, who lured sailors to their doom. 19-20, 32

Sisyphus (SIS-i-fus) King of Corinth, condemned in Tartarus to an eternity of rolling a boulder uphill then watching it roll back down again. 32-33

Sparta (SPAR-tuh) City in southern Greece, mythological home of Helen and the Hero Twins. Rival of Athens in ancient historical times. 11, 24

Sphinx (SFINKS) Monster with the head of a woman and the body of a lion. Riddled passing strangers and killed them if they answered wrong. 16-17

Stheneboea (sten-uh-BEE-uh) Wife of King Proetus of Tiryns. 12

Styx (STIKS) The principle and most famous river of Hades, generally thought of as forming the border of the Underworld. 13, 19, 23-24, 29, 33

Stymphalian Birds (stim-FAY-lee-un) Flying creatures with killer feathers who infested Lake Stymphalus (stim-FAY-lus) in Arcadia. Scared off by Hercules. 22

Symplegades (sim-PLEG-uh-deez) The Clashing Rocks, which smashed together upon any ship passing between them. Braved by Jason and the Argonauts. 4
Taenarum (TEE-nuh-rum) Peninsula in southern Greece where there was a cave through which, some said, access to the Underworld was possible. 23-24

Tantalus (TAN-tuh-lus) Lydian king who offended the gods and was condemned in Tartarus to eternal hunger and thirst, with water and fruit always just out of reach. 29, 30

Tartarus (TAR-tuh-rus) The Underworld zone of eternal punishment. 11, 29, 30

Teiresias (tye-REE-see-us) Blind seer from Thebes. 19

Thebes (THEEBZ) Greek city, founded by Cadmus, ruled in myth by Oedipus. There was another famous Thebes in Egypt. 17, 33

Thera (THEE-ruh) Volcanic Aegean island which erupted disastrously during the time of the Minoan civilization of Crete. 36, 37

Theseus (THEE-see-us or THEES-yoos) Greek hero, more particularly national hero of Athens. Slayer of the Minotaur. 11, 23, 37
- And the Amazons. 10
- And Ariadne. 9-10
- And the boulder. 6-7
- And the brigands on the road to Athens. 7-8
- Dives for the ring of King Minos. 9
- Served poison wine. 8
- Vanquishes the Minotaur. 9-10

Thesprotis (thes-PROH-tus) Region in western Greece, including the valley of the Acheron, where there was an entrance to the Underworld. 23

Thessalian (the-SAY-lee-un) Of or pertaining to Thessaly, a region of northeastern Greece famous for its horses. 10, 12

Thetis (THEE-tis or THE-tis) Best known of the Nereids, the fifty daughters of Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea. Mother of Achilles. 9

Tiryns (TIR-inz) Ancient Greek city. Some said the huge stones of its walls could only have been put in place by Hercules, whose myth is associated with the city. 12, 39

Titan (TYE-tun) Sons of Earth, older than the Gods of Olympus. Zeus’s father Cronus was a Titan. 15, 22, 39

Troeezen (TREE-zun) Greek city ruled by Theseus’s grandfather. 6, 7, 8

Trojan (TROH-jan) Of or pertaining to Troy. See entry below.

Trojan War Nine-year conflict between Greeks and Trojans over Helen, wife of the Greek Menelaus who was taken to Troy from her home in Sparta by the Trojan Paris. 11, 17, 38

Troy (TROY) In myth, a city on the coast of what is now Turkey. A real city on the probable site was destroyed during the Heroic Age. 11, 17, 19

Tyre (TYE-r) Ancient city in what is now Syria. 33

Underworld Another word for Hades, Kingdom of the Dead, which was most often thought of as being underground. 9, 11, 15, 19, 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32-33

Wandering Rocks Two rocks in the sea somewhere near Sicily that not only wandered but crashed together on any ship passing between—just like the Clashing Rocks, but in a different location. 20

Zeus (ZOOS or ZYOOS) Supreme god of the Olympians. Father of Perseus and Hercules. Roman name: Jupiter. 3, 9, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 29, 30, 31, 33
- Indo-European sky god. 26-27
- Sacred grove. 3
- Wrestled to a draw by Hercules. 22

A Note on Possessives

The possessive form of proper names is generally ’s: for example, Mrs. Broderick’s car, Charles’s pencil. Some authorities (e.g. Strunk and White, The Elements of Style) cite ancient proper names ending in -es and -is as an exception; thus Hercules’ club. Others (e.g. Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary) advocate ’s after an s or z sound only if a pronounceable syllable is formed. Thus Daedalus’ invention and Daedalus’ invention are both defensible. (Deciding on the basis of whether or not the ’s is pronounceable certainly provides a great deal of subjective latitude.) In the textual materials for Wrath of the Gods, we have opted for what sounds right to the ear in the given instance; in other words, what one would actually say in speaking aloud. Note that when used proverbially the apostrophe in Achilles’ heel is commonly omitted.