

Warrior Goddesses of the Ancient Near East and Greece

by

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Since civilization started, humans have practiced religion in some form. The earliest religions were animistic, based on the belief that inanimate objects, natural phenomena, and plants have spirits, or polytheistic, where one worships multiple gods who hold domain over our world. Polytheistic religions, a religion with multiple gods and goddesses, have existed as early as ancient civilizations such as Egypt and Mesopotamia, and possibly earlier.

Two of the most well-known ancient civilizations with polytheistic religions are ancient Greece and ancient Egypt. The Greeks and their gods, who were said to live on Mount Olympus, are well known to this day, and the literature and studies surrounding their civilization and mythology are well documented. Likewise, with the ancient Egyptians, their deities have been studied and documented from the hieroglyphics on pyramid walls and temple inscriptions. Numerous types of writings on the gods of these two societies exist, from children's books to academic studies and papers, all focused on the mythology and stories the people who worshiped these gods left behind.

This paper will look at the phenomenon of warrior goddesses in early polytheistic religions, specifically focusing on the geographical areas of the ancient Near East and Greece. It will focus on two particular warrior goddesses: Inanna/Ishtar from Mesopotamia and Athena from Greece. This paper looks at what makes these goddesses so different from the other goddesses of their respective religions. How were these goddesses represented by those who worshiped them? What titles and areas of life did they hold domain over, other than war? What was written about these goddesses, and what legacies do they leave behind?

There is so much more to these goddesses than meets the eye at first. I have chosen to title them warrior goddesses, for both Athena and Inanna/Ishtar hold domain over war. However, when looking further into these figures, one can see the vast range of activities of these goddesses. They are divine goddesses, outside the realm of mortal circumstances, but so very like humans in their behaviors and actions. They display emotions and desires similar to humans.

I have always had an interest in mythology, ever since I was a very young child. My fascination started with ancient Egypt and progressed from there, as I read every book I could get on mythologies from around the world. When brainstorming ideas for my senior project, mythology was at the very top of my list of topics I would want to cover, and from there, narrowing it down, I fell upon the topic of warrior goddesses. Why do they exist in societies where war was a male dominated activity? This is not a question I will be answering in this paper, but one I hope to answer in the future as I continue my studies.

In this paper, we will not only be looking at the societies from which these goddesses came from, but their mythologies, the literature that surrounds them, and how they were worshiped. We will examine the attributes, characteristics, titles, and domains held by these goddesses. There are similarities between these goddesses that you will see as you read this paper, and links between their societies in the form of their myths, such as the myth of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*. The world was a very interconnected place, even as far back as the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia, and that can be seen in what survived and was left behind by their people. Mythology, literature, and art can tell one a lot about a society.

Some of my questions are what epics were written about them, what do the legends say about them, and how were they depicted in these stories? In the case of Athena, one question is what does her birth have to do with her relationship towards mortals? In the case of Inanna/Ishtar, another question was how did she evolve and change over time? For both Athena and Inanna/Ishtar, epics were written that featured these goddesses: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the two Homeric epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are samples of what literature surrounds these figures. While more Greek writings were preserved and still exist to this day than writings from Mesopotamia, there are still plenty of sources to consult regarding Inanna/Ishtar.

I have also examined the ancient societies where these goddesses were worshiped, giving background information to help the reader further understand the circumstances from which these

goddesses rose from. When studying mythological figures, it is vital to understand the background societies from which these divine beings arose. Art is another area I have looked at, from statues to seals and architecture, these goddesses have left their mark on many more areas of life than just religion.

Each goddess will have two chapters dedicated to them. The first chapter will introduce the civilization they are from, give background information and important details, then go on to introduce the goddess to readers and give important details and information about them. This chapter will have the main, most important information about the goddess that the reader needs to know. It will go into the most details about general aspects of the goddess, such as their domains, their history, and their powers. The second chapter will focus on the goddess in literature and art, focusing on the most important pieces of literature and select art pieces from various museums around the world. Both primary and secondary sources were utilized in the writing of each chapter. Turabian style footnotes were used in the paper, using *A Manual for Writers: Of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* 9th edition by Kate L. Turabian as a guide.

This paper relies in equal parts on both primary and secondary sources. For secondary sources, I have utilized the Purchase College Library to find both primary and secondary sources. JSTOR was my primary source to find academic, peer-reviewed papers with the information I needed. Primary sources used in this paper for Athena's chapters include translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Robert Fagles, a professor renowned for his translation of classic works, as well translations of the Homeric Hymns by Diane Rayor, and Hesiod's works by Apostolos Athanassakis. Primary sources for Inanna/Ishtar include James B. Pritchard's 3rd edition of *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, a hefty collection of translated texts and documents from the ancient Near East. Also utilized was Stephanie Dalley's translation of *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld* in her collection of Mesopotamian myths, and Samuel Noah Kramer's own translation of *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*, and N. K. Sander's translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Secondary sources include many papers found on JSTOR and other places, such as Susan Deacy's "We Call Her Pallas, You Know': Naming, Taming and the Construction of Athena in Greek Culture and Thought", and Evy Johanne Håland's paper on the weaving of the peplos for Athena, as well as Rivkah Harris's paper titled "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites." As for secondary source books, works by renowned authors such as Thorkild Jacobsen and Samuel Noah Kramer were utilized for Inanna/Ishtar, while Susan Deacy was vital for the research on Athena with her book by the same name. Books on mythology by Thomas Bulfinch, and Roman poet Ovid were also read in preparation for this paper.

Chapter 2: Inanna/Ishtar

Mesopotamia is considered the most accomplished of the early civilizations in history, according to Samuel Noah Kramer, one of the world's leading experts on the Sumerians.¹ There are many reasons for this but foremost is their establishment of writing, called cuneiform which was deciphered by historians and archeologists who could then construct a detailed Mesopotamian history. A system of wedge or triangular shapes used to form signs on clay tablets, cuneiform was originally developed in southern Mesopotamia to write in Sumerian language. In 1857 several scholars translated an inscription, and when compared to each other, their translations were nearly identical. The cuneiform script had been officially deciphered.² Linguistic evidence found in cuneiform tablets- the names of cities, as well words such as the words for farmer, smith, mason, and others- as well as archaeological evidence left behind shows us that the first settlers of Sumer were not in fact the Sumerians, but rather a group of people now called the Ubaid people, or the Proto-Euphrateans.³

Mesopotamia was divided into two parts, with the southern half being home to the Sumerians, called Sumer, and the northern part being called Akkad, after the Akkadians who lived there. In the 3rd millennium BC, the land of Sumer consisted of about a dozen city-states, each comprising a large, walled city surrounded by villages. Each city-state had a large temple dedicated to the city's main god situated on a ziggurat, with the main temple being the most important building in the city-state.⁴ The 4th millennium BC was moderately peaceful for Mesopotamia, but by the 3rd millennium wars and raids were a regular occurrence.⁵

¹ Samuel Noah Kramer. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3.

² Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 18.

³ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 40-41.

⁴ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 73-74.

⁵ Thorkild Jacobsen. *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 77.

Then, in the 24th century BC, a Semite by the name of Sargon conquered Lugalzagesi, king of Erech, and brought about the mighty dynasty of Akkad, which according to Kramer, "...brought about the end of the Sumerian people, at least as an identifiable political and ethnic entity."⁶ Sargon of Akkad is considered to be the world's first emperor, conquering first southern Sumer, and then moving to the west and north on his conquest, and finally to the east, where he attacked the cities of Elam and Barahshi, and looted them.⁷

Sargon's conquest reached as far as the coast of the Mediterranean, Lebanon, and Anatolia.⁸ He built the city of Agade close to the city of Kish, and for a brief time Agade became the most prosperous city in the ancient world.⁹ Considered to be favored by the war goddess Inanna/Ishtar, Sargon forever changed the direction of the world with his conquest and achievements.¹⁰ After Sargon came his two sons, then his grandson, Naram-Sin, who continued to expand the empire his grandfather had created to new heights of power and glory.

The Akkadian dynasty continued for a few more generations before it fell. Naram-Sin's son, Sharkalisharri, succeeded him and very little commemorative inscriptions exist from his time, giving us very few details about his reign and the subsequent collapse. We do not know if anarchy occurred after his 25 year reign and death, or if his rule collapsed due to disaster.¹¹ While the exact reasons for the end of the dynasty are unknown, archaeological evidence suggests a lack of rainfall and drought, along with a cataclysmic event in around 4000 B.C. that may have been caused by a major meteor fall burning vegetation and leading to more dire conditions for the inhabitants. As well, displacement of local populations may have been another indirect but significant factor of the downfall of the empire.¹²

⁶ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 59.

⁷ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 60-61.

⁸ Benjamin R. Foster. *The Age of Agade: Inventing Empire in Ancient Mesopotamia*. (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 3-4. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/inghamton/reader.action?docID=4218326>

⁹ Kramer, *The Sumerians*, 61.

¹⁰ Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 4-5.

¹¹ Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 23.

¹² Foster, *The Age of Agade*, 24.

According to renowned Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen, "...the earliest form of Mesopotamian religion was worship of powers of fertility and yield, of the powers in nature ensuring human survival."¹³ Ancient Mesopotamian religion was polytheistic and included many gods and goddesses who filled and represented a variety of roles. This included gods such as Enki, the god of water, Enlil, god of the winds, and An, god of the sky. Cults began to form around these gods, and alongside these, images of the gods, starting from the Uruk Period (4,000-3100 B.C.) and lasting until the end of Mesopotamian civilization. Early on these images were the gods in their non-human forms, but later as images of gods in human form became more prevalent, these earlier, non-human images were considered more as emblems, though still representative of the gods.¹⁴ According to Jacobsen, the gods of Mesopotamia were represented in three different ways: as the vital force of a phenomenon, as leaders or rulers, and as parental figures, caring about the individual who worshiped them and their actions just as a parent would their child.¹⁵

Each city-state had a large main temple in the center of it, and each had its own city god or goddess. For example, Inanna was the goddess of the city of Uruk, while Enki was the god of Eridu.¹⁶ Each god or goddess had priests and priestesses to take care of the temple as well as worship them. Cuneiform tablets showed a complex and developed cult of deities that were worshiped in numerous ceremonies. In Uruk, documentation of offerings primarily concerned Inanna, as she was the principal goddess of the city.¹⁷ Other documents show listings of offerings for the gods or high ranking dignitaries, as well as allotments of food towards the temple workers.¹⁸ There were also documentations of festivals, which would last for several days, and would include the information of

¹³ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 26.

¹⁴ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 14.

¹⁵ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 20.

¹⁶ Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), ix-xi

¹⁷ Krystyna Szarzyńska. "OFFERINGS FOR THE GODDESS INANA IN ARCHAIC URUK." *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 87, no. 1 (1993): 7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23281582>

¹⁸ Szarzyńska, "OFFERINGS FOR THE GODDESS INANA IN ARCHAIC URUK," 7-8.

which temple and god were being venerated, and if processions from other temples would also join in.¹⁹ For Inanna, there were at least two separate festivals held in archaic Uruk, the festival of Morning Inanna, and the Festival of Evening Inanna, showing her connection to Venus and the morning and evening stars.²⁰

We also know from cuneiform tablets that there were oracles, as prophecies of these oracles were written down in the clay and preserved. One such oracular text dates to 648 B.C. and concerns the king Ashurbanipal, in which in a dream the goddess Ishtar tells Ashurbanipal to stay where he is and make merry while she exacts her wrath upon the king of Elam.²¹

The goddess Inanna was worshiped in Sumer from early in the 3rd millennium B.C. to the 1st millennium B.C. She was also known as the goddess Ishtar in Babylon during the last millennium B.C.²² Early cult images or emblems show Inanna represented as a gatehouse, showing her identification with the storehouse that was used to store food and other goods.²³ In connection with her husband Dumuzi-Amaushumgalanna, who is associated with shepherds, as well as the spring and fertility, Inanna represented the fertility of the land and the safekeeping of the fruits of labor.²⁴ According to Jacobsen, "... she was in origin the numen of the date storehouse who married Amaushumgalanna of the date harvest at the time the harvest was stored; also that her range was early extended to that of the storehouse generally, including wool, meat, and grain."²⁵

¹⁹ Szarzyńska, "OFFERINGS FOR THE GODDESS INANA IN ARCHAIC URUK," 8. why in caps

²⁰ Szarzyńska, "OFFERINGS FOR THE GODDESS INANA IN ARCHAIC URUK," 10.

²¹ James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 451.

²² Alleyn Diesel. "Felines and Female Divinities: The Association of Cats with Goddesses, Ancient and Contemporary." *Journal for the Study of Religion* 21, no. 1 (2008): 74. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24764036>

²³ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 20.

²⁴ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 135.

²⁵ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 135.

As far back as the third millennium B.C. Inanna/Ishtar was associated with the date palm in cylinder seals.²⁶ The name of the branches of the date palm tree (specifically the spadix holding fruit) in Sumerian are a play on the name Inanna meaning “Lady of Heaven” as well as “Lady of the Date Clusters”.²⁷ As her husband is associated with the date harvest, and Inanna is the Lady of the Date Clusters, she stores the fruits of her husband within her storehouse.

Over time, Inanna also became a goddess of love, rain and storms, the morning and evening star, and war. Jacobsen speculated that Inanna was once several different, original deities that coalesced and merged into one multi-faceted goddess as time passed.²⁸ This would explain the vastness of her domains and titles, which include “Queen of Heaven and Earth” and “Lady of a myriad offices”.²⁹ Inanna was also a patron goddess of prostitutes, as the evening star would come out alongside the harlot as she started her work. As well, Inanna protected the alehouse in which the harlot works.³⁰ In documentations from archaic Uruk, the city over which Inanna presided, separate documents listed the goddess as “Morning Inanna” and “Evening Inanna”, showing her connection to Venus as the morning or evening star, as well as “Princely Inanna”. The offerings listed differ based on the epithet, however there is a uniformity in the three different registries, showing that these were not merely poetic titles given to the goddess, but rather “...stable elements of names connected with three different aspects of Inana.”³¹

Aspects of Inanna such as war goddess, rain goddess, and goddess of the evening and morning stars, also are aspects of the Akkadian and semitic goddess Ishtar.³² Jacobsen adds that whether it is a coincidence that Sumerian Inanna shared the characteristics of being a goddess of war, the morning

²⁶ Irit Ziffer. “Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses.” *Egypt and the Levant* 20 (2010): 420.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23789949>

²⁷ Ziffer, “Western Asiatic Tree-Goddesses,” 423.

²⁸ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 135.

²⁹ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 141.

³⁰ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 140.

³¹ Szarzyńska, “OFFERINGS FOR THE GODDESS INANA IN ARCHAIC URUK,” 8.

³² Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 140.

and evening star, as well as rain with the Akkadian Ishtar, or if the goddess was actually semitic in origin, "...the fact that she had similar characteristics was what prompted the identification with Ishtar cannot be definitively determined with our present knowledge."³³

In terms of Inanna/Ishtar's sexuality, it took precedence over almost all her other attributes other than her bloodthirstiness in war. Professor Rivkah Harris states, "She can be wild and savage, excessive in her sexuality and love of war."³⁴ She was venerated over her fertility and ability to give life and fertility to the land and people. Numerous hymns celebrated her fertility as well as her genitals, while others described her lust for blood and battle, some even do both. Harris asserts, "Her sexual encounters mingle eroticism with violence."³⁵ According to author Alley Diesel, in the annual sacred marriage rite between Dumuzi and Inanna performed by the king and a priestess of Inanna in place of the gods, Inanna/Ishtar's "... role as wife and mother is not emphasized, but rather her autonomous, awesome sexuality."³⁶ Harris agrees in this statement; Inanna-Ishtar as a mother and wife are not significant in her mythology.³⁷

³³ Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 141.

³⁴ Rivkah Harris. "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and Coincidence of Opposites." *History of Religions* 20, no. 3 (1991): 264. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062957>

³⁵ Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and Coincidence of Opposites," 264.

³⁶ Diesel, "Felines and Female Divinities," 75.

³⁷ Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as a Paradox and Coincidence of Opposites," 269.

Chapter 3: Ishtar/Inanna in Literature and Art

Inanna-Ishtar is a very interesting figure as a goddess; she holds domain over many areas of life and as a goddess of war, is a paradox within herself. She is a liminal figure, according to Rivkah Harris, as she is ambiguous, androgenous in her warrior status while at the same time being a sexual creature and a goddess of love and fertility.¹ Time and time again she showed both male and female traits that juxtapose each other in texts and myths; by doing this, she broke the boundaries between the sexes.² She was a fickle creature with a wrathful heart and did not hesitate to take vengeance on those whom she felt had wronged her. She stopped at nothing to get what she wanted, no matter the consequences for the world around her.

At the same time, she could be loving and nurturing to those who worship her and acted as a protectress at times. Inanna/Ishtar's presence in mythology is rich, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld* (also known as *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*), she is present in many myths, stories, and hymns. It is in these myths that we find out her characteristics as a goddess. She was at times wild and untamed, lustful and full of pride; however, according to Professor of Religion David Kinsley, as Ishtar she played a motherly role to several Babylonian kings, and as Inanna, played the role of a personal savior to those who worshiped her.³ As Kinsley says, Inanna/Ishtar embodied sexual desire, indeed, they *were* sexual desire, for without the goddess, procreation could not go on, and life would have cease to exist.⁴ These attributes are noted in both the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*.

¹ Rivkah Harris. "Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and Coincidence of Opposites." *History of Religions* 20, no. 3 (1991): 265. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062957>

² Harris, "Inanna-Ishtar as a Paradox and Coincidence of Opposites," 268.

³ David Kinsley. *The Goddesses' Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 135-136.

⁴ Kinsley, *The Goddesses' Mirror*, 120.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Ishtar goes to Gilgamesh and offers him gifts fit for a god if only he will wed her. However, Gilgamesh responds by pointing out the terrible fates of her past lovers, all of whom met those fates because of the goddess.⁵ This sends Ishtar into a fit of rage, and she goes to her father, crying and telling him that “...Gilgamesh has heaped insults on me, he has told over all my abominable behavior, my foul and hideous acts.”⁶ She asks then for the Bull of Heaven to be sent down to destroy Gilgamesh, if it is not, she threatens to smash the doors of hell and unleash the dead to mingle with the living. Her father gives her the Bull of Heaven and she leads it down to earth, where it causes destruction and death until Gilgamesh and his partner Enkidu slay it.⁷

Ishtar leaps up on the walls of the city of Uruk, and bemoans that Gilgamesh has killed the Bull of Heaven, to which Enkidu responds by tearing off the thigh of the bull and throwing it in her face, telling her, “If I could lay my hands on you, it is this I should do to you, and lash the entrails to your side.”⁸ Ishtar then gathers together ‘her people’ the courtesans, the prostitutes of her temple, and they mourn the loss of the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu has a dream that night where the gods decide that for their deeds, slaying the Bull of Heaven, one of the pair must die. Enkidu is chosen and is stricken with a debilitating sickness.⁹ As he lay dying, Enkidu places the blame for his death on Ishtar, telling Gilgamesh, “My friend, the great goddess cursed me and I must die in shame.”¹⁰ Ishtar is not one to be trifled with, she is a vengeful goddess full of pride, and to scorn her or deny her of what she wants will only lead to trouble, especially for mortals.

In *Inanna’s Descent to the Nether World/The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld*, there are some differences between the Sumerian and Babylonian versions, but they are essentially the same tale. In both versions, Inanna/Ishtar goes down to the Netherworld to visit her sister, Ereshkigal,

⁵ N. K. Sanders, trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. (1960), 12. <http://www.aina.org/books/eog/eog.pdf>

⁶ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 12.

⁷ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 12.

⁸ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 13.

⁹ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 13.

¹⁰ Sanders, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 14.

goddess of the netherworld, for some unknown reason. In the Babylonian version, when she is refused entry, Ishtar threatens to, "...smash the door and shatter the bolt, I shall smash the doorpost and overturn the doors, I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living: The dead shall outnumber the living!"¹¹ This is very similar to the threat she made in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Ereshkigal, upon hearing that her sister has come to visit her, is enraged, but agrees to let her enter her domain. There are seven gates, and at each gate, the goddess is forced by the gatekeeper to remove an item of hers, including her clothes, breastplate, jewelry, and crown. Upon stepping naked into the Netherworld, Inanna/Ishtar is judged by the judges of the dead, and is killed, her rotting corpse hung on a hook like a slab of meat.¹² After she dies, there is no fornication and no impregnation among animals or humans.¹³ Before she had gone down to the underworld, Inanna/Ishtar had told her messenger, Ninshubur in the Sumerian version and Papsukkal in the Babylonian version, that if she does not come back within three days and three nights, to go to the gods and ask them for help.

On the fourth day, he does just this, and finds help in the god Enki or Ea, the god of water, creation, and knowledge, who proceeds to create two beings from the dirt under his fingernails, and gives them the water and food of life to sprinkle on Inanna/Ishtar's body to bring her back to life.¹⁴ The goddess is brought back to life, and allowed to leave the underworld, however, she must find a replacement for her in the netherworld. In James Pritchard's Sumerian translation, the story ends abruptly and has no real conclusion. However, in Stephanie Dalley's Babylonian translation, we can see that Ishtar's lover, Dumuzi, is chosen to take her place.¹⁵

Samuel Noah Kramer released his own translation of the Sumerian version, in which we can also see that Dumuzi, Inanna's husband, is chosen to replace her in the underworld, for he had not

¹¹ Stephanie Dalley, trans. *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 155.

¹² Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 55.

¹³ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 158.

¹⁴ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 56.

¹⁵ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 160.

mourned her as he should have.¹⁶ Dalley also added in a footnote that in the Sumerian story, Dumuzi's sister, Geshtin-anna begged for him to be released periodically.¹⁷ It is prudent to point out the similarities between the Greek myth of Hades and Persephone and this myth of Inanna/Ishtar's journey to the world of the dead, one could even call *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World* a predecessor to the myth of Persephone. Both Dumuzi and Persephone are deities of the spring, and both spend time in the Underworld and above it every year. Both myths deal with the underworld, a place forbidden to mortals, and death and rebirth, either symbolically in Persephone's case, or literally in the case of Dumuzi.

There are numerous hymns that invoke Ishtar and Inanna, from hymns of war to hymns of protection. One of the oldest love poems in the world involves Inanna and her marriage to Dumuzi, a shepherd god, and their sacred marriage rite. In the hymn *The Courtship of Inanna and Dumuzi*, Inanna is reluctant to marry Dumuzi, insisting to her brother, Utu the sun god, that she wants to marry the farmer instead.¹⁸ Eventually, she does join with Dumuzi, and there are long passages about their coupling, in which Inanna describes the union between them using plants, grains, plowing fields, and the fertility of the land as synonyms for sex between the two gods.¹⁹ At one point in the hymn, the following passage occurs, almost seeming out of place in relation to previous passages:

“The Queen of Heaven,
The heroic woman, greater than her mother,
Who was presented the *me* by Enki,
Inanna, the First Daughter of the Moon,
Decreed the fate of Dumuzi:
“In battle I am your leader,
In combat I am your armor-bearer,
In the assembly I am your advocate,
On the campaign I am your inspiration.

¹⁶ Samuel Noah Kramer. ““Inanna's Descent to the Nether World" Continued and Revised. Second Part: Revised Edition of "Inanna's Descent to the Nether World"” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 5, no. 1 (1951): 13-14.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1359570>

¹⁷ Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 162.

¹⁸ Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer. *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 32-33.

¹⁹ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 37-39.

You, the chosen shepherd of the holy shrine,
You, the king, the faithful provider of Uruk,
You, the light of An's great shrine..."²⁰

Inanna is described as Queen of Heaven, which is one way her name can be interpreted, and states that she is the leader of battle, the armor-bearer in combat, she is the one to inspire Dumuzi on war campaigns. Here, although not rooted in violence, she still showed her title as warrior goddess. Her relationship with Dumuzi is vascillating, for at times she was a loving wife, and at other times, such as in the end of *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*, where she did not find him mourning her; then she was a wrathful spouse, cursing him to be killed and dragged down to the Underworld as a replacement for her, and as a punishment for his actions which spited her.

Inanna/Ishtar as goddesses of a wide array of domains were often called upon by worshipers to perform miracles or were invoked in certain rituals, processes, or laws. One example can be found in a Neo-Babylonian text of the adoption of the son of a prostitute, in which a man went to his sister, who is a prostitute, and asked to adopt her son. Ishtar is evoked in the vow that he would take care of his sister's son, and he swore on her name, as well as Anu, the god of the sky.²¹ Both Inanna/Ishtar were protectresses of prostitutes, so it makes sense that her name was evoked in a situation such as this that involved a prostitute.

The famous Code of Hammurabi also invoked the goddess by both her Sumerian name and her Babylonian name in both the prologue and epilogue. Both goddesses are mentioned by their names, with Hammurabi stating that he is the one who put Inanna's great shrines in perfect condition and claimed to be a favorite of the goddess.²² He also stated that he is "...the one who makes the heart of Ishtar glad..."²³ In the epilogue, Hammurabi mentioned that both Inanna and Zababa, a war god, have

²⁰ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna, Queen of Heaven and Earth*, 44-45.

²¹ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 547.

²² Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 164-165.

²³ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 165.

entrusted him with a mighty weapon to be used to end wars and smite his enemies.²⁴ Further along, towards the end, Hammurabi once again invoked Inanna, calling her “...the lady of battle and conflict...” and wished that she would curse his enemies and their rule with “...her great fury in her wrathful heart!”²⁵ He wished Inanna to cause great evil to befall on those who would challenge him, and that his enemy would be captured and sold as a slave to enemy lands.²⁶ These statements line up with other statements made about Inanna/Ishtar in which violence and battle are key aspects of her character.

When speaking of art and the goddess Inanna/Ishtar, one cannot overlook one of the most significant finds in Mesopotamian archaeological history: the Ishtar Gate. Built by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II, the gate stands today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.²⁷ Covered in blue-glazed bricks that have stood the test of time extraordinarily well, the gate features multiple copies of two animals, the dragon and the bull, emblazoned on the bricks.²⁸ The gate led into the city, to the road known as the Processional Way, with the sides of the walls on either side of the Processional Way decorated with friezes of the sacred animal of Ishtar, the lion. According to archaeologist and assyriologist Leonard King, it appears there were 60 lions along each wall, some made of white enamel with yellow manes, and others yellow with manes of red.²⁹

²⁴ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 178.

²⁵ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 179.

²⁶ Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 179-180.

²⁷ “Ishtar-Tor (III. Baustufe) Bauausstattung / Installation (Architekturekonstruktion)” The Collections, Staatliche Museen de Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz, accessed April 25, 2022 [http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultLightboxView/result.t2.collection_lightbox.\\$TspTitleLink.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=0&sp=1&sp=Slightbox_3x4&sp=48&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=T&sp=58](http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultLightboxView/result.t2.collection_lightbox.$TspTitleLink.link&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=0&sp=1&sp=Slightbox_3x4&sp=48&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=T&sp=58)

²⁸ Leonard W. King. *A History of Babylon: From the Foundation of the Monarchy to the Persian Conquest*. (New York, NY: AMS Press, Inc. 1969), 51.

²⁹ King, *A History of Babylon*, 58-59.

Although there are very few depictions of Inanna/Ishtar as a lion, if any at all, she was heavily associated with the animal in many other ways.³⁰ Her association with the lion appeared as early as early Akkadian cylinder seals and continued until the Neo-Babylonian period (626-539 B.C.).³¹ According to Professor Brent Strawn, Ishtar and her Sumerian counterpart Inanna were the only goddesses that the epithet *labbatu* ‘(Divine) Lioness’ was attributed to.³² In accordance with her link to lions, Jacobsen states, “Her chariot is drawn by seven lions, she rides a lion, or she is herself the lion.”³³ The goddess was sometimes depicted as holding a double headed lion mace, a divine symbol also held by the war god Ninurta, and other Semitic war goddesses such as Anat and Astarte.³⁴ Other hymns invoked and described Inanna/Ishtar’s rage in battle such as the following line quoted by David Kinsley in his book *The Goddesses’ Mirror* “Like an awesome lion you annihilated with your venom the hostile and the disobedient.”³⁵ In fact, the Sumerians called battle “the dance of Inanna”, for in the midst of the chaos of battle, in the fear, slaughter, and tumult, the goddess made herself known forcefully.³⁶

The goddess Inanna/Ishtar was a complex being, starting out as the numen of the storehouse and evolving over time to become the lady of battle, the Queen of Heaven and Earth, and a goddess of love all in one. Her domain reached farther than these titles, as she was a protector of prostitutes, the embodiment of the morning and evening stars, and a goddess of rain and fertility. She was a complex figure, but one who was worshiped as a personal goddess to many who sought her protection or favor. She was a being who left her mark on those who knew of her and may have even inspired deities who

³⁰ Brent A. Strawn. *What is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*. (Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press Fribourg, 2005), 209.

https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/150391/1/Strawn_2005_What_Is_Stronger_than_a_Lion.pdf

³¹ Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?*, 194.

³² Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?*, 208.

³³ Thorkild Jacobsen. *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 136.

³⁴ Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?*, 210.

³⁵ Kinsley, *The Goddesses’ Mirror*, 133.

³⁶ Kinsley, *The Goddesses’ Mirror*, 133.

came into being after her. If one looks, there are certainly similarities to be found between Inanna/Ishtar and Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. It is not too far out of the realm of possibilities that the stories of Inanna/Ishtar found their way to Greece and inspired a kind of combination of attributes between the goddesses, but that is a focus for another paper.

Chapter 4: Athena

Of all the ancient polytheistic religions, that of the Greeks had some of the most important influences on society and literature. Their early stories were documented by poets and writers such as Homer and Hesiod and were passed down to Hellenistic and Roman societies. There were approximately two dozen major deities and many more minor ones, but the key figures were the twelve Greek gods known as the Olympians. These were Zeus, Hera, Artemis, Apollo, Ares, Athena, Poseidon, Hades, Hermes, Hephaistos, Aphrodite, and either Dionysus or Hestia. The story of the origins of these gods was first written down by Hesiod, a poet from Cyme. As Athena is the focus of this chapter, it is important to discuss Hesiod's poem.

Hesiod's epic poem is entitled *The Theogony*: "In it we can trace the beginnings of what would later be a Greek sense of history."¹ Although the *Theogony* does not have one continuous narrative, as many scholars have pointed out, the *Theogony* attempts to systematically arrange an account of the order of the world as Hesiod saw it.² Hesiod tells the Muses, the daughters of Zeus who hold domain over the arts, to

"Sing the glories of the holy gods to whom death never comes,
the gods born of Gaia and starry Ouranos,
and of those whom dark Night bore, or briny Pontos fostered.
Speak first of how the gods and the earth came into being
and of how the rivers, the boundless sea with its raging swell,
the glittering stars, and the wide sky above were created."³

The *Theogony* tells the tale of primordial gods including Chaos and Gaia, detailing the births of various other Primordials, then the Titans, and the Olympian gods, along with the names of various monsters, nymphs, and other mythical beings scattered in its lines.

¹ Truesdell S. Brown, ed. *Ancient Greece* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1965), 3-4.

² Brown, *Ancient Greece*, 4.

³ Hesiod. *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*. Translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 13-14.

There is some evidence of these gods' background in even older cultures like those of the Minoans and Mycenaeans, the predecessors to the Greeks. Aspects of both Minoan and Mycenaean religion have found their way into the pantheon of the Hellenic Greeks. Greek gods such as Zeus, Poseidon, Artemis, and Athena have been found in Mycenaean cities such as Pylos and Knossos.⁴

In Minoan society, there were two goddesses of interest that can be linked in some ways to Athena: the snake goddess and the bird goddess. Athena was associated with snakes, as she was the one who created them as Medusa's hair, according to the Roman poet Ovid, and her breastplate was made out of them.⁵ Her aegis was also linked to snakes- in some versions of tales it is Medusa's head attached to her shield, David Kinsley describes it as "...the serpent-ringed aegis..." in his book *The Goddesses' Mirror*.⁶ Classicist Susan Deacy states that "Usually, she is shown wearing the aegis as a kind of over-garment: a scaly, serpent-fringed object that enables her to cause terror or disarm her opponents."⁷

The snake goddess of the Minoans had been depicted in statues and figurines with snakes wrapped around her arms and body, as well as there being snakes on her tiara.⁸ As for birds, Athena in various instances has been linked with birds; from being called "owl-eyed" in the Homeric Hymns to turning into various birds in stories like the *Odyssey*, her link with birds is well documented.⁹ In the case of the Minoan bird goddess, statues depicting this goddess have a bird perched on her tiara.¹⁰ Sometimes these two goddesses go hand in hand, with one statue in Kannia, Greece, showing the

⁴ Michael Jameson. "MYCENAEAN RELIGION." *Archaeology* 13, no. 1 (1960): 36.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41663732>

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.S. Kline. (Ann Arbor, MI: Borders Classics, 2004), 227.

⁶ David Kinsley, *The Goddesses' Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), 148.

⁷ Susan Deacy. *Athena*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 7.

⁸ Geraldine C. Gesell. "From Knossos to Kavousi: The Popularizing of the Minoan Palace Goddess." *Hesperia Supplements* 33 (2004): 139. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354066>

⁹ Diane Rayor. *The Homeric Hymns: A Translation with Introduction and Notes*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 98.

¹⁰ Gesell, "From Knossos to Kavousi: The Popularizing of the Minoan Palace Goddess," 139.

goddess with snakes on her tiara and arms, as well as a bird perched on her cheek.¹¹ As archaeologist Geraldine Gesell suggests, “The division between snake goddess and bird goddess is not strict and there is evidence for other aspects or goddesses.”¹²

There are also links to older religions in Greek mythology. The story of Athena’s birth, her emergence fully grown from Zeus’ head, parallels a Hittite myth called the Kingdom in Heaven, where a god named Kumarbi bit off the genitals of the god of heaven, Anu, in order to overthrow him. This act impregnated Kumarbi with several gods that needed to be cut out of him, and it is even said that one of these gods emerged through his skull.¹³ There are also links to the Mesopotamian story of the warrior goddess Inanna’s descent to the netherworld. Upon entering the netherworld, Inanna loses seven garments that represent her godly power, but upon her rebirth and exit, she emerges fully clothed and with her powers, causing a fellow god to flee, similar to Hephaistos fleeing the birth of Athena.¹⁴ As the Greeks travelled to distant lands to trade, it is possible that these myths were read or overheard by the Greeks and brought back to their homeland and mixed in with their own original mythology.

The Greek gods as depicted in myths were strikingly like mortals. They felt emotions like lust, anger, jealousy, and sadness, just as any mortal does. They were also nearer to mortals than gods in other ancient religions, directly interfering with mortal actions. Athena was even called “the goddess of nearness” by classical philologist W. F. Otto due to her extremely hands-on role in the stories of many heroes.¹⁵ Gods could even be wounded by heroes, as in the case of Hesiod’s story *Shield*, when the hero Herakles stabs Ares, the god of war, in the thigh, severely wounding him.¹⁶

While the Greek gods shared many traits with mortals, there are two main differences: immortality and awesome powers. The gods could not be killed by sickness or old age, while they

¹¹ Gesell, “From Knossos to Kavousi: The Popularizing of the Minoan Palace Goddess,” 140.

¹² Gesell, “From Knossos to Kavousi: The Popularizing of the Minoan Palace Goddess,” 140.

¹³ Deacy, *Athena*, 19-20.

¹⁴ Deacy, *Athena*, 20.

¹⁵ Deacy, *Athena*, 59.

¹⁶ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 143-144.

could be wounded, they could just as easily be healed quickly. The gods were also imbued with powers far beyond anything achievable by mortals. They had the power to transform the form of others and themselves, on many occasions Zeus and Athena, among others, turned themselves into various animals, and there are multiple stories of the gods turning mortals or nymphs into flowers. Certain gods have specific powers; Apollo had the power of prophecy and had his oracle at Delphi.¹⁷ Poseidon was known as the “Earthshaker”, insinuating that it is he who caused earthquakes.¹⁸ The goddess Aphrodite was known to be able to make people fall in love with each other, or even make her fellow gods become overcome with lust.¹⁹

Greek religion was largely practiced in public festivals, at temples, large and small, as well as at major events, which were crucial to the social and political life of the polis. Festivals such as the Chalkeia, the Festival of Smiths, at which both Hephaistos and Athena were honored, and the Athenian festival Panathenaia, held in honor of the city’s patron goddess, are just two examples of such festivals held in honor of the gods.²⁰ Sacrifices were also a part of Greek religious practices, usually animals, but tales of human sacrifices were also told, such as the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon’s eldest daughter. The story goes that Agamemnon offended the goddess Artemis by killing a stag sacred to the goddess of the hunt, and in retaliation she spread a disease among the army and would not allow the fleet of Greek ships to pass on to Troy unless she was given a virgin sacrifice, one related to the offender. This sacrifice was to be Iphigenia. The endings for this story differ, but according to Thomas Bulfinch, just as Iphigenia was about to be sacrificed, led to the altar under the pretense of marrying Achilles, the goddess took pity and swept her away, leaving a deer in her place, and took her to her temple at Tauris to be a priestess of Artemis there.²¹

¹⁷ Thomas Bulfinch, Joseph Campbell, and Bryan Holme. *Myths of Greece and Rome*. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1981), 22.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 11.

¹⁹ Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1990), 376-377.

²⁰ Deacy, *Athena*, 52, 77.

²¹ Bulfinch, Campbell, Holme, *Myths of Greece and Rome*, 249.

One can find numerous remains of temples all over Greece. From small shrines to gods to enormous temples in major Greek *poleis*, these temples were vital centers of religion and worship to the gods. Various activities would take place at these temples, for example, Apollo's temple at Delphi was home to an oracle, or a priestess who was said to act as a messenger between the gods and mortals to deliver messages. Apollo's oracle at Delphi was visited by people who wanted to know what their future held, or simply to get advice from the gods. It was even said that the stone used by Rhea to trick Kronos into not eating Zeus landed at Delphi when Kronos threw up his children.²²

Athena was well known for helping heroes. She helped Perseus defeat Medusa, the snake-haired gorgon that she created, and in return he gives her Medusa's head to put on her aegis. There is also Herakles, the son of Zeus and the mortal Alkmene, to whom she gives great aid to numerous times, including convincing Hera to suckle him when he was abandoned by his mother, and helping him in his famous twelve labors.²³

Naming ancient Greece's main city after her reflects the many roles the goddess plays. Not only were her olives a staple crop of Athens, but she was also embedded into the very corners and foundations of the city. Annual festivals were held in Athens each year honoring Athena, including the Panathenaia and the Chalkeia, among others, and at the Akropolis stands several temples, including the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena Parthenos, the temple of Athena Nike, and the Erechtheion, or the house of Athena Polias. The sculptor in charge of the reconstruction of the Parthenon, Pheidias, also created a statue of Athena, the famous *Athena Parthenos*, which has since been lost to time, but recreations and descriptions of the statue remain.

Pausanias, a Greek geographer and traveler famous for his descriptions of the Greek world, described in great detail the statue, mentioning the various animals on the helmet, the head of Medusa

²² Mary Lefkowitz. *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 16.

²³ Deacy, *Athena*, 65.

resting on her breast, how she held a figurine of Victory and in the other hand a spear while a shield lays at her feet, and a statue of Pandora is located on the base of the statue.²⁴ In the Parthenon, on the walls are friezes, also created by Pheidias, showing images of important Athenian events, including on the east frieze the weaving of the peplos for Athena. There is also a procession of the major god and goddesses of Athens, Athena among them.²⁵ These different aspects of Athena were vital to her worship, as they allowed her to hold domain over numerous areas of life, from the polis to victory in war, and as a protector of civilization.

Numerous Greek playwrights wrote plays that featured the actions of these gods. Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides are only three of what were likely hundreds of playwrights whose plays have survived; their plays feature gods who interfered with mortal lives, showing favor to those they liked, and cursing those they did not. Plays like Sophocles' *Ajax* feature the wrath of the gods and the consequences, while others, such as the last play of the *Oresteia*, *Eumenides* by Aeschylus, shows the benevolence of the gods in meeting out justice to those who deserve it.

The most important polis in Greece was Athens, the birthplace of democracy and named after the goddess. According to the myths, there was a contest between Athena and Poseidon to see who the city would be named after. Each god presented a gift to the people of the city- Poseidon gave them the horse, and Athena gifted the people the olive tree. The citizens then voted and chose Athena to name the city after and made her their patron goddess.²⁶ Athens dominated the Greek sphere as a center for trade and commerce, as a vast maritime power, and a cultural center. The Acropolis was the location of Parthenon, the Erechtheion and the temple of Athena Nike, the most important buildings dedicated to the city's patron goddess, Athena.

²⁴ J. J. Pollitt. *The Art of Greece 1400-31 B.C.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1965), 69.

²⁵ Jerome J. Pollitt. "The Meaning of the Parthenon Frieze." *Studies in the History of Art* 49 (1997): 61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42622168>

²⁶ Bullfinch, Campbell, Holme, *Myths of Greece and Rome*, 126.

During the Greco-Persian War (499-449 B.C.), Athens rose as a major maritime power, and united with other Greek city-states to defeat the Persian forces. In the second half of the 400s B.C. Athens wielded enormous power and influence over the arts, as well as politics, philosophy, and literature.²⁷ Under the leadership of Pericles (461-429 B.C.), the Athenians had to rebuild and replace monuments that had been damaged or destroyed by the Persians. Pericles put Pheidias, the great sculptor, in charge of his building programs.²⁸

Athena's birth was an extraordinary matter even among the unusual creations of the Theogony: she had no mother. Instead, according to Hesiod, she emerged from the head of her father, Zeus.²⁹ Jealous of a prophecy that his first wife Metis would bear a son who would overthrow him, Zeus tricked Metis into transforming herself into something small and swallowed her. After a while, he grew a splitting headache that would not go away, and in an attempt to get rid of it, Hephaistos split his head open with an ax, and out sprung Athena.³⁰ In Homeric Hymn 28 to Athena, she emerged as a fully grown woman, wearing armor and bearing a spear, shouting a war cry that caused the world to erupt into chaos: "Great Olympos reeled violently beneath the might of her shining eyes, the earth let out an awful cry, and the deep shifted, churning with purple waves."³¹

While Athena was primarily a goddess of male activities, such as war, she is also the goddess of the most important female activity in ancient Greece: weaving. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, on line 65, Athena was the one who gives Pandora, the first woman created by the gods from clay, her robes, and who teaches her how to weave and other skills.³² In the *Iliad*, it is specifically mentioned that Athena wore robes made by her own hands.³³ There was an annual weaving of the peplos, the outer

²⁷ J. J. Pollitt, *The Art of Greece 1400-31 B.C.*, 66.

²⁸ J. J. Pollitt, *The Art of Greece 1400-31 B.C.*, 66.

²⁹ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 34.

³⁰ Deacy, *Athena*, 18.

³¹ Rayor, *The Homeric Hymns*, 99.

³² Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 66.

³³ Homer. *The Iliad*, 188.

robe, for Athena, held every year in Athens during the Panathenaia festival, or the festival for all Athenians, which marked the beginning of the new Athenian year.³⁴ This ritual was a very long and arduous process, involving women in all ages of life from young girls to married women. The warp, or lengthwise threads, was set on the loom around October or November, during the festival of Chalkeia, during which Athena was honored as a goddess of handicrafts.³⁵ The peplos, would be completed in about nine months, and then, on the 28th day of Hekatombaion, or the day of Athena's birth, would be carried through Athens and presented to Athena, or rather the life-sized statue of her, and she would be dressed in her new peplos.³⁶ There are even friezes in the Parthenon that depict the peplos ceremony.³⁷

Another key to Athena's identity is her virginity, as evidenced by the epithet *Parthenos*. In the Hymn to Aphrodite, Homer said that there were three goddesses who Aphrodite's power cannot touch: Hestia, Artemis, and Athena: "The work of golden Aphrodite does not please Athena, the owl-eyes daughter of Zeus who bears the aegis. Athena rejoices in warfare and the work of Ares: combat, struggles, and glorious deeds."³⁸

The hymn mentions how Athena taught both men and women their crafts. She was no mother or wife, though she did have a role in childbirth under extreme and unusual circumstances. As Athena herself was born out of unusual conditions, fully formed, and armored from Zeus' head by a blow from Hephaistos' ax, so too was she involved with the production of children in similarly strange circumstances. At Delphi, there is an altar to Athena Zosteria ('of the girdle'), a testament to the legend

³⁴ Evy Johanne Håland. "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece." *Cosmos: The Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society* 20 (2006): 155.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337905546_Athena%27s_Peplos_Weaving_as_a_Core_Female_Activity_in_Ancient_and_Modern_Greece_Cosmos_The_journal_of_the_Traditional_Cosmology_Society_20_155-182

³⁵ Håland, "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece," 156.

³⁶ Håland, "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece," 159-161.

³⁷ Håland, "Athena's Peplos: Weaving as a Core Female Activity in Ancient and Modern Greece," 162.

³⁸ Rayor, *The Homeric Hymns*, 75.

that Athena loosened the goddess Leto's girdle, thus allowing her to give birth to Apollo and Artemis.³⁹

There is also the legend of Erichthonios, Athena's 'son', although not directly born from her. According to Apollodoros, Athena went to Hephaistos for weapons, and the god become overcome with lust for her, chasing her to have sex with her. Athena fled, and managed to escape, but not before some of Hephaistos's semen landed on her leg. In disgust, she used a wool cloth woven by her hand to wipe it off her leg and cast it to the ground. Thus, Erichthonios was born from the earth, Athena's wool cloth, and Hephaistos's semen.⁴⁰

Athena was a very complex and multi-faceted goddess. She was a fierce and cunning warrior, something very unusual to see for a woman in ancient Greece, but she was a goddess, not a mortal, so this changes the circumstances. French classical scholar Nicole Loraux argues that divine femininity is different from that of mortals, in that it will be displaced, and purer.⁴¹ Athena had no mother, and is born from Zeus' head, so she belonged almost completely to the realm of males. According to Deacy, women who come into contact with Athena often suffer grief.⁴² For example Arachne was turned into a spider for outshining Athena in the art of weaving, and Athena's childhood friend Pallas died at Athena's hands in a sparring accident. Aside from being a warrior, she was a goddess of wisdom and wise counsel, with her guiding many heroes on their journeys and advising them, Odysseus and Herakles being only two out of the many.

Athena was also a virgin; she had no desire to procreate and did not lust after mortals or fellow gods. Other things Athena held domain over include weaving and crafts, childbirth under unusual circumstances, and various activities involving the sea, such as navigation and shipbuilding.⁴³ Her

³⁹ Deacy, *Athena*, 132.

⁴⁰ Deacy, *Athena*, 53.

⁴¹ Susan Deacy. "'We Call Her Pallas, You Know': Naming, Taming and the Construction of Athena in Greek Culture and Thought." *Pallas* 100 (2016): 69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24886635>.

⁴² Deacy, *Athena*, 71.

⁴³ Deacy, *Athena*, 6.

history is long and varied, and her origins can be traced back to before the Greeks in the bird and snake goddesses of the Minoans. Her mythology is rich and her influence near indescribable.

Chapter 5: Athena in Literature and Art

Athena figures prominently in many pieces of Greek literature. In the *Eumenides*, the final play of Aeschylus' trilogy the *Oresteia*, Athena had to cast her vote on whether Orestes shall be deemed innocent or guilty for matricide, and the goddess tells Orestes: "There is no mother who gave birth to me. With all my heart, I hold with what is male- except through marriage. I am all my father's...".¹ Athena was utterly loyal to her father, Zeus, and favored male mortals, particularly heroes who had shown favorable the traits that she regarded highly, wisdom, cunning, courage, and strength, heroes such as Odysseus, Herakles, Perseus, and Achilles.

Athena first appears in Hesiod's *Theogony* on line 13, being called "... gray-eyed Athena, daughter of aegis-bearing Zeus...".² On line 318, she is called a goddess of war and on lines 573-577, a goddess of crafts, specifically weaving.³ Hesiod indicates that Athena is also a goddess of wisdom, saying that she "... in strength and wisdom would be her father's match...".⁴ It is only later, in lines 924-926 that Hesiod finally tells us of Athena's birth, how she comes forth from her father's head, and that she is born a warrior goddess.⁵

Athena was also a key character in the *Iliad*, Homer's work about the Trojan War. As the patron goddess of Troy, she should have been on the side of the Trojans, but since they had spited her, she was firmly on the side of the Greeks, who host her favored heroes, including Odysseus. She constantly intervened in the war on behalf of the Greeks, including persuading the Greeks to stay and fight the Trojans, rushing through their ranks with her aegis to encourage the Greek fighters, and

¹ Aeschylus. "The Oresteia: Eumenides." In *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, Edited by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, Translated by Sarah Ruden (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2016), 168.

² Hesiod. *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*. Translated by Apostolos N. Athanassakis. (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), *Hesiod*, 11.

³ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 19, 25.

⁴ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 33.

⁵ Hesiod, *Hesiod*, 34.

saving Menelaus from being severely wounded by an arrow.⁶ She also aided the hero Diomedes, giving him strength to keep fighting the Trojans and even lifting the mist from his eyes so that he could tell apart mortals and gods on the battlefield. She gave him strict instructions, saying “So now if a god comes up to test your mettle, you must not fight the immortal powers head-on, all but one of these deathless gods that is- if Aphrodite daughter of Zeus slips into battle, she’s the one to stab with your sharp bronze spear!”⁷ As seen in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and other myths, Athena worked closely with heroes she found to be befitting of her help, giving them help and blessings, and shielding them from doom as she willed it.

From the very start of the *Iliad*, Athena took a very hands-on approach to war. In the very first book of the *Iliad*, Achilles is in a fight with Agamemnon for taking his captured lover, Briseis, and Achilles draws his sword, prepared to slaughter the king in anger. At the behest of Hera, Athena swoops down, invisible to all except Achilles, grabs him by the hair and stop him from murdering Agamemnon. She tells him “Stop this fighting, now. Don’t lay hand to sword. Lash him with threats of the price he will face.”⁸ Achilles sheaths his sword; he will not disobey the orders of Athena. The goddess has a strong loathing for the Trojans, for one of their own, Prince Paris, spited her by choosing Aphrodite as the fairest goddess over Athena and Hera. Hector asks his mother to gather all the women of Troy and give their best robes to Athena at her shrine, and to promise a sacrifice of twelve young heifers if the goddess will take pity of the besieged city and protect them from Diomedes, a Greek hero who is aided by Athena herself.⁹ When the Trojans and their priestess of Athena, Theano, pray to the goddess for help, “...Athena refused to hear Theano’s prayers.”¹⁰

⁶ Mary Lefkowitz. *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 59, 61.

⁷ Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1990), 168.

⁸ Homer, *The Iliad*, 84.

⁹ Homer. *The Iliad*, 198.

¹⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, 205-206.

Odysseus is the special focus for Athena in these epic poems. Time after time, she advised him on what to do, guided him on his journey back to Ithaca, and even protected him from death. When Odysseus finally arrives on Ithaca in book 13 of the *Odyssey*, Athena was the one who greets him in the form of a shepherd boy. After an exchange, during which he lies to her about who he is, Athena unveils herself, shedding her disguise to reveal her godly form, and tells him, “We’re both old hands at the arts of intrigue. Here among mortal men you’re far the best at tactics, spinning yarns, and I am famous among the gods for wisdom, cunning wiles, too.”¹¹

She also revealed it was she who helped him on his journey home; she was the one to make the Phaeacians greet Odysseus warmly and help him reach Ithaca.¹² Later, in the battle between Odysseus and Penelope’s suitors, she was the one who spurs Odysseus on in the fight, as well as causing spears to miss their mark in his flesh, all the while perched in the rafters in the form of a swallow.¹³ “Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus- who always stands by you, shields you in every exploit...”, is what she says to Odysseus on the beach of Ithaca, and she truly means it, showing it with her actions and words.¹⁴

In art, Athena is usually able to be picked out from other goddesses due to her aegis, according to historian Marina Warner. As previously stated, the aegis is usually worn by Athena as a breastplate, with the head of the gorgon Medusa proudly displayed, but Warner stated that it can also be worn across the breast as a cloak or a sling.¹⁵ Athena is also shown at times wearing a helmet, most often a Corinthian helmet with a plume, as seen in multiple stone reliefs of the goddess, including a relief known as “Pensive Athena.” Located at the Acropolis Museum in Athens, Greece, Athena can be seen

¹¹ Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 1996), 296.

¹² Homer, *The Odyssey*, 296.

¹³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 446-447.

¹⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 296.

¹⁵ Marina Warner. *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1985), 107.

<https://archive.org/details/monumentsmaidens00warn>

wearing a Corinthian helmet and leaning on her spear, looking down at a stele with a thoughtful expression on her face.¹⁶

The most famous statue of Athena, the *Athena Parthenos*, created by sculptor Pheidias has long since been lost to the ages, but it was described by several sources, including Pausanias, and thus recreations of the statue were made. The original was said to have stood almost 40 feet tall, with Athena's arms, feet, and face, as well as the face of the gorgon, all made from ivory, with her other paraphernalia being made from gold.¹⁷ Smaller versions of the statue from the Classical period have also been found, such as the *Varvakeion Athena* statuette, a copy of the original that dates to around 200-250 A.D. With a height of about 3.5 feet, the statuette depicts Athena wearing a peplos with her aegis covering her entire breast, covered in snakes with the face of the gorgon in the middle. Her helmet is Attic in style, and has three crests, one sphinx in the middle and two *pegasoi* (winged horses), one on either side of the sphinx. In her right hand she holds a statuette of the goddess Nike, and in the other she holds her shield, resting on the ground, with Erichthonios as a snake coiled inside the shield. Discovered in Athens in 1880, the *Varvakeion Athena* is considered to be the best preserved and most faithful copy of the original statue. The statuette resides at the National Archaeological Museum of Athens in Greece.¹⁸

Athena in the literature of the Greeks was shown to be a benevolent goddess, but also a wrathful one as well. She protected and guided her favored heroes, and those who are not among them often suffer severe consequences. Susan Deacy has pointed out the fates suffered by women who encountered Athena, often not pleasant ones, such as the fates of Medusa, Arachne, and Athena's childhood friend Pallas.

¹⁶ "Relief of the "Pensive Athena"," The Acropolis Museum, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/relief-pensive-athena>

¹⁷ Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, 107.

¹⁸ "129 The "Varvakeion" Athena Copy from AD 200-250 of the original from 438 BC," Classical Period, The National Archaeological Museum, accessed April 22, 2022, <https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/klasiki-periodos-2/>

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