

# Cultural Mythologies of the Greeks, Romans, Norse and Hindu

Many of the world's diverse mythologies possess uncanny similarities. The same stories appear again and again in different types of mythology, but each culture adds its own interpretation of these universal myths.

## Greek Mythology

Greek mythology can be traced back to at least 1200 B.C.E. in much of Asia Minor, as well as Greece. Most written accounts of Greek mythology date from 500 B.C.E., during the Greek Classical Age. Many elements of modern culture, including language and media, continue to reference Greek mythology.

In the community of cultural mythologies, the Greek gods could be dubbed the "dysfunctional family." Adultery, betrayal and tragic pride make Greek mythology's tales an exciting reading. The gods of the Greek Pantheon are the Olympians, who reside on Mount Olympus and are ruled by Zeus, who is married to Hera. Zeus is, in modern terms, a player. He has a roving eye and many tales in Greek mythology deal with his dalliances, the resulting children of his mortal lovers and the exasperation of his wife, Hera.

Greek mythology includes the exploits of mortal heroes as well as tales of gods and demigods. The two great works of Greek Mythology, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, deal with the end of the Trojan War and the long journey the hero Odysseus makes to return home from Troy.

## Roman Mythology

Roman mythology sometimes fares badly when compared to other types of mythology. Often, Roman mythology is dismissed as a simple assimilation of Greek mythology's tales. Certainly many Roman myths retell the older Greek versions. However, to dismiss Roman mythology as some type of mythological plagiarism isn't quite fair. Many scholars believe that the early gods of Roman mythology did not share the human qualities of the Greek pantheon. Over time, the identity of these early gods merged with aspects of Greek mythology.

Ancient Rome had a unique ability to assimilate aspects of other cultures. In fact, historians are able to reconstruct original Roman mythology because of this tendency to borrow and adapt from their neighbors and subjugated colonies. Greeks were often seen as intellectuals, and Greek slaves were often employed as tutors in Roman families. Small wonder then that Greek mythology influenced Roman mythology.

Roman mythology actively tied itself to Greek mythology with the story of Aeneas, a Trojan who travels to found a "new Troy" (Rome) in Italy. Like Greek mythology, many aspects of modern culture have their roots in Roman mythology.

## Greek and Roman Mythology: A Comparison

Roman God	Greek God	Role
Apollo	Apollo	Sun god
Bacchus	Dionysus	God of wine
Cupid	Eros	God of love
Juno	Hera	Goddess of marriage and birth
Jupiter	Zeus	God of thunder and sky
Mars	Ares	God of war
Minerva	Athena	Goddess of wisdom
Neptune	Poseidon	God of the sea
Pluto	Hades	God of the underworld
Venus	Aphrodite	Goddess of love
Vulcan	Hephaestus	God of the forge

## **Norse Mythology**

Norse mythology, on the surface, looks like many other cultural mythologies. As with Greek and Roman mythology, Norse mythology revolves around a family of gods. Dig deeper, however, and it's quickly apparent that Norse mythology differs from other types of mythology.

Norse mythology is the mythology of the Scandinavian countries and the Vikings. Unlike gods in other types of mythology, the Norse gods are mortal. Their apparent immortality is only maintained by eating golden apples.

Vikings who died bravely in battle could expect a rousing welcome in Valhalla, the hall of the leader of the gods, Odin. Every night the fallen heroes would feast and drink, and every day they would do battle and hack each other to pieces.

Unlike many afterlives, Valhalla was not eternal. Odin foresees the end of all things in Ragnarok, a great battle in which the gods and their enemies exterminate each other. The knowledge that their time will end gives the gods of Norse mythology a sense of poignant sadness missing from other European cultural mythologies.

## **Hindu Mythology**

Hindu mythology differs from the other types of mythology discussed here in one very important aspect: While other cultural mythologies are matters of history, Hinduism is a religion practiced by millions of people today.

Hindu mythology stretches back in an unbroken line from the present to at least 2400 B.C.E., making it one of the oldest religions in the world. Central to Hindu mythology is the concept that everything in existence is part of a greater whole.

Three of the most important Hindu deities are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, each of whom has different aspects. Shiva, for instance, can be both creator and destroyer. Along with these three main gods, a number of other gods also exist in Hindu mythology.

## **Egyptian Mythology**

Egyptian mythology is a mixture of sun worship and nature worship. Like many cultural mythologies, Egyptian mythology deified the leaders of the country, the Pharaohs.

There were many gods in Egyptian mythology, including a multitude of local deities. Gods were depicted as human bodies with animal heads. The sun god Ra, for instance, has a human body and the head of a hawk. Anubis, the god of the dead and embalming, has the head of a jackal.

Ra was considered the ancestor of the Pharaohs. While other gods came in and out of fashion over the centuries, Ra's special position granted him consistent worshippers.

Death and the afterlife are central to Egyptian mythology. The soul, or ka, was thought to be intimately tied to the body after death. As a result, the body of the deceased had to be carefully embalmed and buried. Egyptian mythology resulted in elaborate burial and embalming customs, of which the Pyramids at Giza are the most famous, and most elaborate, examples.

Adapted from "Cultural Mythology Resources" at [myths-and-mythology.com](http://myths-and-mythology.com)