

Crafty Athena

by Laurel

Thwack! went the ax of Haephestus, splitting open the mighty head of Zeus. Out sprang Athena, fully grown and, according to some stories, fully armed. She was the daughter of Zeus and his first wife, Metis, who confided in her husband that if she bore him a son, he would be overthrown on his throne, just as he had done his own father. Zeus solved the problem by swallowing his pregnant wife whole, just as his father, Cronos, had done to him and his siblings.

At least that's one version, perhaps the most widely known. Like many popular ancient deities, there are several versions of the story. In yet another variation, she is the daughter of Tritonis and Poseidon, or the daughter of Pallas, a winged giant of Attica. The latter version helps explain the epithet, Pallas, often attached to her name. That tradition goes on to tell of Pallas's attempted rape of his daughter. In horror and disgust she killed him. His skin would become her shield and his wings would decorate her feet.

There's also another story explaining her epithet. The river-god Triton was said to have educated her alongside his daughter Pallas. One day, while playing, Athena accidentally killed her beloved friend. In remorse, she took the girl's name as part of her own. And finally, Pallas was also the name of the giant she killed during the war between god and giant.

One final version of her parentage makes her the daughter of Hephaestus. A logical attribution considering they were both major divinities who symbolized arts and crafts. There often seems a strong connection between the two of them. When worship of Apollo, another artistic crafty deity, was brought to Attica, he was introduced as the son of Athena and Hephaestus. Quite a powerful link between two of the Classical world's most worshipped and beloved deities. It seems Attica wasn't as concerned with the goddess's virginity as the rest of the Greek world.

One last story makes them the parents of a future king of Athens - sort of. Hephaestus had just been given the brush-off by Aphrodite, probably over something involving Ares, when he started lusting after Athena. Getting all worked up, he attempted to rape his half-sister, who easily fended him off. Our humiliated divine craftsman ejaculated onto her leg. In disgust, Athena wiped it off with a bit of wool and let it fall to the ground, and Gaia, her grandmother, who became pregnant. And so Erichthonius- half-serpent, half-man - was born. His name meant "born of the Earth."

Athena took the boy under her protection, putting him in the care of Cecrops's daughters. She placed him in a chest and admonished them not to look inside. Unable to contain their curiosity, they opened the chest, went mad, and leapt from the Acropolis to their deaths. The baby crawled onto Athena's shield, claiming her as his mother.

One of the best known myths involves the city of Athens and which god, or goddess, would possess it. Athena, obviously, and Poseidon both claimed the city. In one version, perhaps the best known, the two divinities show the Athenians what they have to offer. Poseidon causes a spring to pour forth - in some stories, it's of salt water - showing his mastery over the seas. Athena has an olive tree to arise from the ground, offering the promise of its many uses. Cecrops's and the Athenians side with Athena, deciding her gift would be the most useful.

Perhaps the Athenians realized Athena's true importance. She was a champion of the state and would both protect them and show them the way to prosperity. Athena was considered generally to be fair and ethical. She was goddess over many of the domestic skills that made a household, or state, productive and prosperous. She encouraged agriculture and industry.

She invented the plow, rake, bridle, numbers, the chariot, trumpet, flute, navigation, olive oil - and the tree that it came from. She also invented weaving, a skill she's widely associated with even today. Of course, her weaving contest with Arachne helped cement that connection. Arachne boasted she could out-weave even mighty Athena, which she did. In a fit of pique Athena changed her into a spider. One didn't boast they were better than the gods. And they certainly didn't go on to prove it!¹

She remained protective in her aspect of war goddess, leaving the more aggressive roles to Ares and Enyo. She also championed many a hero, either aiding them in their endeavors or setting them on the path to greatness. Among the great heroes who enjoyed her favor were Cadmus, founder of Thebes; Bellerophon, capturer of Pegasus; Perseus, killer of Medusa; Orestes; Odysseus; and especially Hercules. It was Athena who tricked Hera into nursing Hercules as a baby.

Athena also possessed a vengeful side as well, although it was usually deserved. Myrmex became an ant after boasting his invention of the plow. After Ajax raped Cassandra in one of Athena's temples, while the girl clung to Athena's

