



Greek Mythology

For Grades 3-5

This Pack contains:

4 ARTICLES
2 IMAGES
1 VIDEO
1 INTERACTIVE

ARTICLE

Greek mythology

The people of ancient Greece worshiped many gods and heroes. They told stories about the gods and built temples to honor them. The stories about the gods make up Greek mythology. Those stories, or myths, have survived for more than 2,000 years.



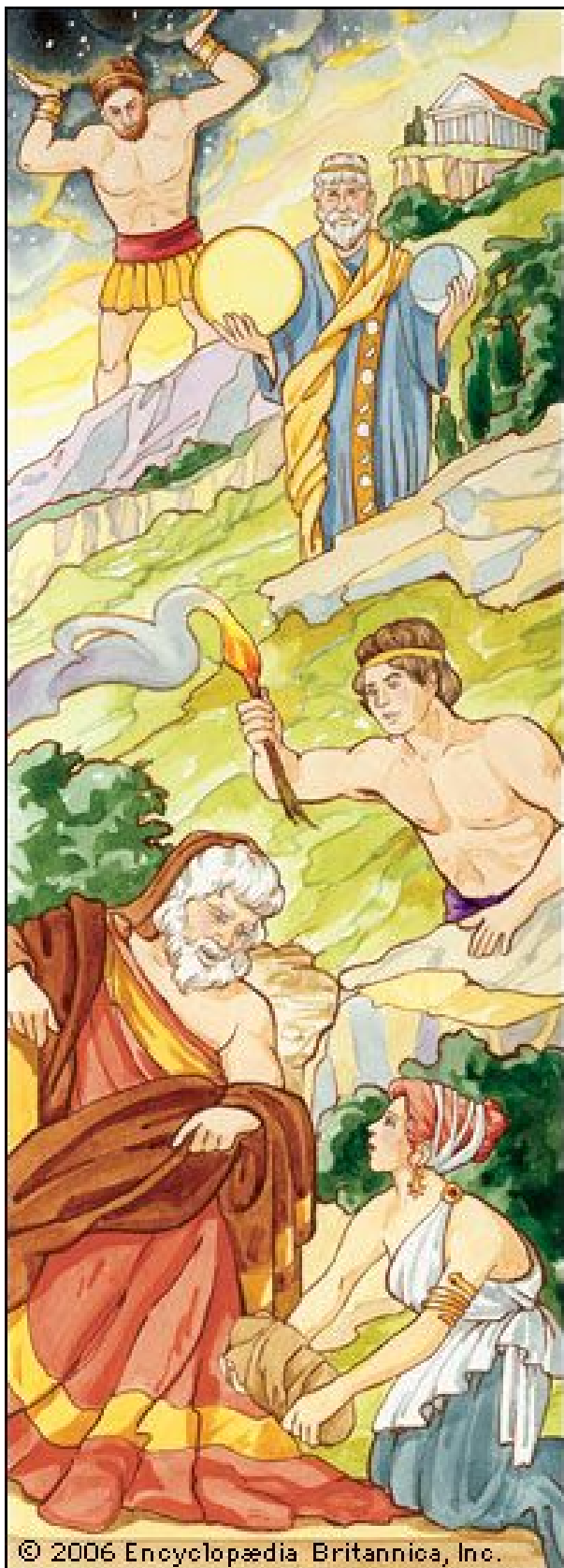
In ancient Greek mythology, Zeus was the chief god. He ruled over all the other gods as well as humans.

Judie Anderson/Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

The myths of ancient Greece are similar to those of many other cultures. They tell how the world was created and help explain why things happen.

The Myths

All of the stories from ancient Greece were told over and over again before they were written down. So there are many different versions of the stories. Some of the oldest versions come from two long poems called the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They tell of the gods and their dealings with humans. The poems were said to be written by a man named Homer.



The Titans were a group of giants in the myths of ancient Greece. Among the more important Titans were Atlas, Hyperion, Prometheus, Cronus, and Rhea.

Judie Anderson/Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Another poet, Hesiod, wrote a work called the *Theogony* in about the 700s BCE. In the *Theogony* Hesiod explained the history of the gods. He said that Uranus (Heaven) and Gaea (Earth) had 12 children, known as the Titans. One of the Titans was Cronus, who rebelled against Uranus and took control. But then one of Cronus's sons—Zeus—in turn rebelled against Cronus. After 10 years of battle, Zeus and his brothers and sisters finally defeated the Titans.

Zeus and the other major gods then lived on Mount Olympus. There they watched over the lives of humans and governed all. Zeus rewarded good conduct and punished evil. Zeus's wife was Hera.

In Greek mythology, figures called nymphs were associated with trees and water.

In addition to Zeus and Hera the major gods and goddesses included Apollo, Ares, Aphrodite, Artemis, Athena, Poseidon, and Hermes. There were also humans who were considered heroes because they performed amazing feats, including Heracles.

Influence

The Romans later adopted many of the same gods but gave them names of their own. In that world, the chief god was Jupiter, and his wife was Juno.

Ever since the time of the Greeks and the Romans, writers and artists have continued to find ways to retell the stories. Countless statues, paintings, books, songs, and other works have been based on the mythology.

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ARTICLE

ancient Greece

The area that is now Greece was home to the first civilizations in Europe. Ancient Greece had powerful cities, great thinkers called philosophers, and fine art. The idea of democracy—rule by the people—also came from ancient Greece.



A map shows the major regions and cities of ancient Greece.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



Many remains from ancient Greece are still standing today. Three columns remain from a temple called the Tholos at Delphi. The temple was built in the early 300s BCE.

© efesenko/Fotolia

Aegean Civilizations

Greek civilization began sometime after 3000 BCE on the island of Crete. Crete lies south of Greece, on the southern border of the Aegean Sea. This first civilization is called the Minoan civilization.

In the 1500s BCE Greek-speaking people developed another civilization on the Greek mainland. This civilization was called the Mycenaean civilization. The Mycenaeans conquered the Minoan capital between 1500 and 1400 BCE. In about 1200 BCE they probably fought a war against Troy, a city in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Many Greek legends tell of this war, called the Trojan War. Two great poems from ancient Greece tell of Mycenaean times. The poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were said to be the works of a man named Homer.

In about 1100 BCE the Dorians, a people from the north, invaded. Mycenaean civilization came to an end. Many Mycenaeans moved across the Aegean Sea. They settled in Ionia in Asia Minor.

Greek Cities

The Dorians settled mostly in the western sections of Greece. The people in the eastern parts became known as Ionians. Together, the Dorians and the Ionians formed the civilization known as classical, or ancient, Greece. They built cities in most of what is now Greece.

By 800 BCE the Greeks were building cities in new lands, too. Some went east to the Black Sea. Others settled in the west, on the island of Sicily and the mainland of Italy.

Most of the classical Greek cities, called city-states, were independent of each other. Athens and Sparta grew to be the most important city-states. Athens spread its influence by uniting all the surrounding villages. By contrast, Sparta sent armies to make slaves of its neighbors. By the 500s BCE Sparta had the strongest army in Greece.

The Hellenes



A dish from 530 BCE features a sailing boat surrounded by dolphins.

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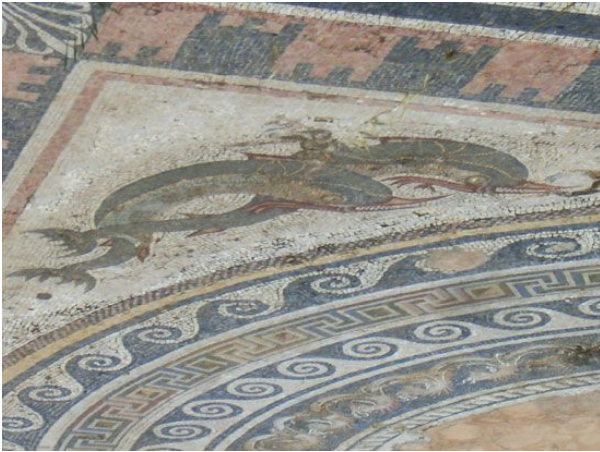
Despite their differences, the Greeks came to think of themselves as one people. They called themselves the Hellenes.

The Hellenes shared a similar culture and spoke forms of the Greek language. They even invented the word barbarian to describe anyone who did not speak Greek.

Some figures in Ancient Greek and Roman mythology		
Major Gods and Goddesses		
Greek name	Roman name	description
Aphrodite	Venus	goddess of love and beauty
Apollo	Apollo	god of music, healing, light, prophecy, and the Sun
Ares	Mars	god of war
Artemis	Diana	goddess of wild animals, hunting, and the Moon
Athena	Minerva	goddess of war, wisdom, and handicrafts
Demeter	Ceres	goddess of grain and farming
Dionysus	Bacchus	god of wine and merriment
Hades	Pluto	god of the underworld
Hephaestus	Vulcan	god of fire
Hera	Juno	queen of the gods; goddess of marriage and women's lives
Hermes	Mercury	messenger of the gods
Hestia	Vesta	goddess of the home and architecture
Poseidon	Neptune	god of the sea
Zeus	Jupiter	king of the gods
Other Figures		
name	description	
Atlas	Titan who carried the heavens on his shoulders	
Daedalus	inventor who made wax wings for himself and his son, Icarus	
Helen of Troy	beautiful woman who caused the Trojan War	
Heracles (Hercules)	hero who completed 12 nearly impossible tasks	
Midas	king whose touch turned everything to gold	
Muses	nine sister goddesses who inspired people in the arts and sciences	
Narcissus	handsome young man who fell in love with his own reflection	
Orpheus	musician who tried to rescue his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld	
Pandora	the first woman; she opened a jar that released evil into the world	
Pegasus	winged horse who brought thunder and lightning to Zeus	
Perseus	hero who killed Medusa, a monster with snakes for hair	
Prometheus	Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans	
Titans	giants who once ruled the world; included Cronus (god of farming) and Prometheus (god of fire)	

A table lists the major gods and goddesses of ancient Greece and ancient Rome.

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An ancient Greek mosaic shows the sea god Poseidon riding two dolphins. The mosaic was made from many small, flat colored stones.


Dinkum

The ancient Greeks believed in many gods. They pictured their gods as larger, more beautiful, and more powerful humans. These gods were said to live on Mount Olympus in northern Greece.

People often gathered together for festivals in ancient Greece. The most famous festival was the original Olympic Games, which began in about 776 BCE.

Democracy and Culture in Athens

ANCIENT GREEK FORMS OF GOVERNMENT





MONARCHY

Before 800 BC
Rule by a king, who inherited power and passed it on to his heirs

OLIGARCHY

800 BC–650 BC
Rule by a small group of wealthy nobles





TYRANNY

650 BC–500 BC
Rule by a tyrant—a noble who seized absolute power

DEMOCRACY

After 500 BC
Rule by the people (in ancient Greece, this meant adult male citizens)




Image credits (top to bottom): Nastasic/iStock.com, Prisma Archivio/Alamy, Interfoto/Alamy, akq-images/Newscom © Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Many city-states in ancient Greece passed through four stages of government: monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, and democracy.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Kenny Chmielewski

Powerful leaders ruled most of the city-states. Eventually, Athens took the first steps toward democracy. In 621 BCE a ruler named Draco drew up a written code of laws. Then, in the last years of the 500s BCE, another leader

set up a democratic government. All free men with Athenian parents were members of the city's lawmaking group. However, women, foreigners, and slaves were not included.

Athens also became the Greek center of literature and the arts. The philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were great teachers there. Poets and playwrights wrote works that are still read and performed today. Painted pottery became a fine art and a great industry. Athenians built beautiful buildings and sculptures out of marble.

The Persian Wars

In the 500s BCE the empire of Persia (modern Iran) took over the Greek cities in Ionia. In about 499 BCE the city of Miletus started a rebellion against the Persians. Athens sent 20 ships to aid the Ionian Greeks, but the Persians crushed the revolt.

Beginning in 490 BCE, the Persians attacked the Greek mainland several times. The Greeks fought back and finally defeated the Persians in 479 BCE. After the Greek victory, Athens grew stronger.

The Peloponnesian War

By the 400s BCE, Athens controlled most of eastern Greece, many of the Aegean islands, and the Ionian coast in Asia Minor. The Spartans thought that Athens was too powerful. They began the Peloponnesian War against Athens in 431 BCE.

At first, the Athenians avoided battle on land. They stayed within the walls of their city. Their navy attacked Sparta from the sea. The Athenians stayed safe until 430 BCE, when plague (a deadly disease) broke out in the city. The disease killed one-quarter of the people, including Pericles, their leader.

Sparta won the war in 404 BCE. Sparta kept a leading position for only 30 years, however. In 371 BCE another Greek city, called Thebes, defeated Sparta.

Rise of Macedonia

In the 300s BCE Macedonia, a kingdom to the north, gained strength. The Macedonians were distantly related to the Greeks. The Macedonian king Philip II conquered the Greek city-states by 338 BCE. When he died in 336, his son Alexander came to power.

Alexander, called Alexander the Great, was a military genius. First he defeated the Persian king Darius III in 333 BCE. Then he spent a decade conquering lands from Egypt to India. He took Greek civilization to much of the ancient world.

The Hellenistic Age

Alexander died in 323 BCE. The period following his death is called the Hellenistic Age. "Hellenistic" means "Greek-like."

Alexander's empire broke into three main kingdoms in Macedonia, Egypt, and the Middle East. In these kingdoms, Greek culture mixed with local cultures. In Greece itself, some of the cities regained their independence or joined together in leagues.

Ancient Rome conquered all of Greece and the three Hellenistic kingdoms by 30 BCE. Greece remained under the Roman Empire until 395 CE. Then it became a part of the Byzantine Empire.

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ARTICLE

Muses

In ancient Greek and Roman mythology the Muses were nine sister goddesses. They inspired people in the arts and sciences. Before poets or composers in ancient times began any great work, they asked the Muses for help. The word museum comes from a Greek word meaning "place of the Muses."



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The nine Muses were said to help people sing, dance, and write poetry.

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According to legend, the father of the Muses was Zeus, the chief god. Their mother was the goddess of memory, named Mnemosyne. They helped people to sing, write poetry and dance. Each of the nine Muses had a specialty.

Calliope was the Muse of epic poetry, Clio of history, Erato of love poetry, Euterpe of music, Melpomene of tragedy, Polymnia of sacred poetry, Terpsichore of dancing and choral song, Thalia of comedy, and Urania of astronomy.

In some accounts, the muse Terpsichore is the mother of the half-bird, half-woman Sirens.

In stories the Muses were often companions of Apollo, the god of music and prophecy (predicting the future). Popular writers and artists in ancient Greece and Rome were believed to have been inspired by the Muses.

Statues of the Muses were a popular decoration in ancient Greece and Rome. Sculptors often showed each Muse holding a symbol of her specialty.

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ARTICLE

mythology

Mythology is the rich collection of traditional tales called myths from cultures all over the world. Many myths date back to ancient times. They are stories about how the world was created and why certain things happen. Today the word myth is often used to describe something that is not true. But a myth is not just a made-up story. Myths tell of gods, heroes, and events that a group believes, or at one time believed, to be real. A culture's myths are often closely tied to its religion.



Many different cultures have created myths to explain the world around them.

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Background

Thousands of years ago people did not have the sciences to help them understand life. For instance, they did not know why the Sun rises each morning or why the seasons change. Ancient people saw sickness, death, and natural disasters, but they did not understand what caused them.

Groups of people developed their own stories and beliefs to explain the world around them. These stories were usually not written down. Instead they were part of an oral tradition, meaning they were passed from one generation to another by telling them out loud as stories. Upon hearing the stories, people accepted them as the truth. In this way, myths became beliefs. It is for this reason that mythology is closely associated with religion.

Types of Myths

Since each group of people developed their own explanations, mythology differs from culture to culture. But all myths try to answer basic questions such as: How was the world created? How did life on Earth begin? Why is there evil in the world?

Myths explain the origins of Earth in many different ways. Many cultures believe that an all-powerful god created the world. For example, a myth of the Polynesian people tells that the god Io formed the world out of water and darkness. People living in the cold lands of what is now northern Europe believed that the mist was created first. According to the ancient Scandinavian tradition, the mist flowed through 12 rivers and froze, filling the emptiness of the world with many layers of ice, which was later melted by a warm wind. Other cultures, including the Arapaho of North America as well as civilizations in Egypt and Japan, thought of humans as descendants of a sun god.

To explain the origin of human beings, an ancient story from India described a being called the Self. When the Self became lonely, it divided into two parts, creating man and woman. Their children became the human race. Many myths from western Africa tell that the first beings were a pair of twins. The Sumerians, an ancient Middle Eastern people, believed that the first people came from clay. According to their myths, the water god told his mother to mold bits of clay into the shapes of people.

Many cultures also have myths explaining why there is evil in the world. For example, an ancient Greek myth tells the story of Pandora, the first woman on Earth. She opened a jar and released all kinds of evil on the world. A great variety of other myths explain the origins of animals, plants, and events in nature.

Many other myths tell of the gods. Stories discuss their births, special powers, and victories over monsters or enemies. Many cultures also have myths about heroes with amazing strength or cleverness. For instance, ancient Greek myths tell that the brave warrior Heracles completed 12 nearly impossible tasks. The Chinese hero Yü is said to have saved China by draining the land after a huge flood.

Collections of Myths

Many groups of people developed complex collections of myths, especially in ancient times. Their stories describe a group of gods and the world that the gods live in.

The ancient Egyptians had many gods. Some looked like people and some looked like animals. The doglike god Anubis was the god of the dead. Re was the sun god. For a time a ruler named Amenhotep made the Sun the only god. He called the god Aton, and he changed his own name to Akhenaton, or Ikhnaton. But after he died the other gods were worshipped again.

Some figures of Egyptian mythology

name	description
Amon	one of the chief gods
Bastet	goddess of music and pregnant women; cat-headed
Hathor	goddess of women and love; cow-headed

Horus	god whose eyes were the Sun and the Moon; appeared as a falcon
Isis	important goddess; wife of Osiris and mother of Horus
Khnum	god of fertility; ram-headed
Mont	god of war; falcon-headed
Nut	goddess of the sky
Osiris	important god of the underworld
Re	chief Sun god
Seth	god of disorder; had some features of a dog
Thoth	god of the moon, wisdom, and writing; ibis-headed

The ancient Greeks also worshipped many gods. They believed that a group of major gods lived on Mount Olympus. The members of this group are often called the 12 Olympian gods. Some of the members changed over time. But Zeus was always the king of the gods.

Some figures in ancient Greek and Roman mythology

Major gods and goddesses		
Greek name	Roman name	description
Aphrodite	Venus	goddess of love and beauty
Apollo	Apollo	god of music, healing, light, prophecy, and the Sun
Ares	Mars	god of war
Artemis	Diana	goddess of wild animals, hunting, and the moon
Athena	Minerva	goddess of war, wisdom, and handicrafts
Demeter	Ceres	goddess of grain and farming
Dionysus	Bacchus	god of wine and merriment
Hades	Pluto	god of the underworld
Hephaestus	Vulcan	god of fire
Hera	Juno	queen of the gods; goddess of marriage and women's lives
Hermes	Mercury	messenger of the gods
Hestia	Vesta	goddess of the home and architecture
Poseidon	Neptune	god of the sea
Zeus	Jupiter	king of the gods
Other figures		
name	description	
Atlas	Titan who carried the heavens on his shoulders	
Daedalus	inventor who made wax wings for himself and his son, Icarus	
Helen of Troy	beautiful woman who caused the Trojan War	
Heracles (Hercules)	hero who completed 12 nearly impossible tasks	

Midas	king whose touch turned everything to gold
Muses	nine sister goddesses who inspired people in the arts and sciences
Narcissus	handsome young man who fell in love with his own reflection
Orpheus	musician who tried to rescue his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld
Pandora	the first woman; she opened a jar that released evil into the world
Pegasus	winged horse who brought thunder and lightning to Zeus
Perseus	hero who killed Medusa, a monster with snakes for hair
Prometheus	Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans
Titans	giants who once ruled the world; included Cronus (god of farming) and Prometheus (god of fire)

Although most myths were not recorded, the Greeks wrote about them in poems and dramas. The oldest of these writings are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, epic poems from the 700s or 800s BCE. The poet Homer is said to have written these sources, which focus on events surrounding the Trojan War. They also tell of the activities of the gods. Myths about the Greek gods describe their births, their victories over monsters or rivals, and their special powers. The Greeks viewed their myths as divine or timeless truths. These truths influenced not only literature, but the thoughts of Greek philosophers as well.

The ancient Romans borrowed much of the mythology of the Greeks. They gave many of the Greek gods new names. For example, Zeus became known as Jupiter. The great Roman poet Ovid preserved these myths in his works. The stories became the source of poetry, drama, paintings, and other works of art that are familiar to people in Europe and the Americas.

Norse mythology developed long ago in northern Europe. Its main god was Odin. He and the other gods lived in Asgard. A palace called Valhalla was part of Asgard. After dying in battle, human warriors were taken to Valhalla by warrior women called Valkyries.

Some figures of Norse (northern European) mythology

name	description
Balder	god of light and peace
Freyja	goddess of love, fertility, battle, and death
Freyr	god of fertility, rain, and sunshine
Frigg	goddess of marriage; wife of Odin
Hel	goddess of the dead
Loki	god of mischief
Odin	chief god
Thor	god of thunder
Tyr	god of war and justice
Ull	god of hunting
Valkyries	female messengers of Odin who took the souls of heroes to Valhalla (heaven for warriors)

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 IMAGE

Mount Olympus

Britannica Note:

In Greek mythology, Mount Olympus was the home of the gods and the site of the throne of Zeus, the chief god.



Mount Olympus is the highest mountain in Greece.

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Greek mythology



The Titans were a group of giants in the myths of ancient Greece. Among the more important Titans were Atlas, Hyperion, Prometheus, Cronus, and Rhea.

Judie Anderson/Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

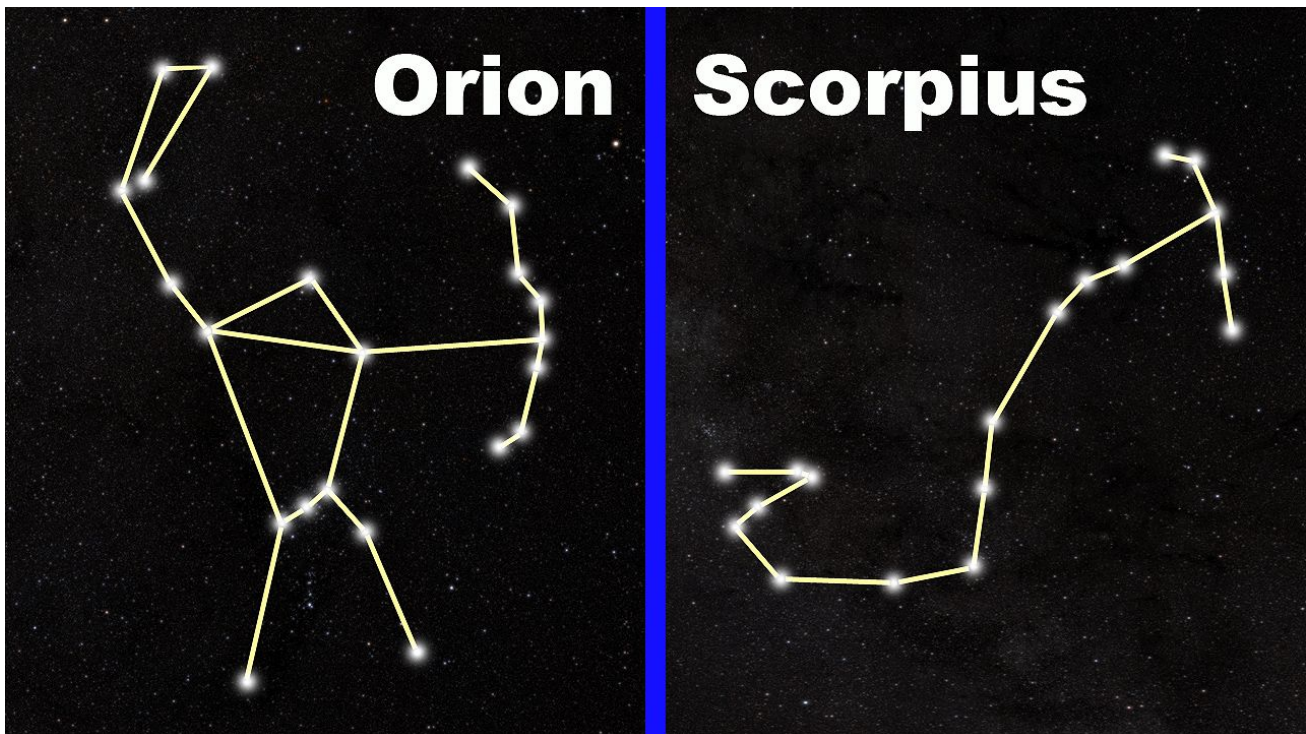
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constellation



Video Transcript

NARRATOR: The ancient Greeks named many constellations after gods, heroes, and beasts from their mythology. One of the best-known examples is Orion. In Greek mythology a scorpion killed the great hunter Orion. They were both placed in the sky as constellations, but they are in different parts of the sky. When one is rising the other is setting, so the scorpion can never attack Orion again.

The ancient Greeks named many constellations after gods, heroes, and beasts from their mythology.

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↻ INTERACTIVE

Greek mythology

Click on images and names in this interactive to find out more about the major characters in Greek mythology.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Yvette Charboneau text, Patrick O'Neill Riley art

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