

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Greeks Religion, Gods and Heroes

The relationship between the Ancient Greeks and their gods was intimate and permeated every aspect of life. The power of this relationship lay in a tense interaction between the natural and the supernatural. The Greek gods were not strange alien beings but had human form. Their home was not distant and vague - Mount Olympus was real, familiar and situated in Greece. The gods had human desires, failings and strengths, as well as supernatural powers and could relate to mortals on both planes. They could strike mortals dead with thunderbolts or love them and so sire the race of heroes that bridged the gap between the world of the gods and the world of mortal men.

Of the many Greek gods and goddesses who looked after every aspect of mortal life and death the most important were the twelve immortal Olympians. The Greeks knew little of the surrounding world and believed the planet to be flat, with Greece and more specifically Mount Olympus, at its centre. Many of the Greek legends can be seen as explanations of natural phenomena, and natural places, particular trees or rocks for example, were sacred as well as the man-made temples and sanctuaries.



The Newton Hall Athena, freestanding

About AD 100-200, Marble, Museum number: GR.I.2006

The goddess wears her characteristic helmet and snake-fringed breastplate (aegis). Better preserved versions of this figure show that in her right hand (now missing) she once held a spear. This Roman Athena is based on a Greek statue of about 350 BC.

Temples

A temple was thought of as the home of a god or goddess, who was symbolised there by a large statue. Formal religious ceremonies did not take place inside the temple since the interior was reserved as a place for dedicating offerings and for private prayer. Ceremonies, therefore, took place at the altar outside the temple.

Libations and Sacrifices



There were frequent festivities to celebrate the feast days of particular gods; these could include processions, with music and dance, and dramatic and athletic competitions. On these occasions it was common for sacrifices to be made at the altar, often in the form of the ritual killing of specific animals appropriate for each god. When animals were sacrificed, some of the flesh was burnt afterwards but the rest was saved, cooked and eaten by the worshippers. The bones of the sacrificial beasts were sometimes carved into objects which could also be dedicated to the gods. It was common for dedications of food, wine or oil to be placed or poured onto the altar. The pouring of a liquid-offering is known as making a libation.

Jug (oinochoe): boy making an offering

Case 5, Object 6, Museum number: Gr.14.1955

The boy pours liquid, probably wine, onto a flaming altar to his right. On his left, he holds a bowl (phiale) with offerings of food. This would have been the standard "sacrifice" made to the gods. Animal sacrifices were expensive and therefore exceptional.