Timeline of Classical Mythology

	Greece	Ancient Near East	Italy
Early Bronze Age 3000–2100 BCE		**MESOPOTAMIA (SUMER)** Writing systems develop (c. 3000 BCE) **MESOPOTAMIA** Gilgamesh rules the city of Uruk (c. 2800 BCE) **MESOPOTAMIA** Sargon of Akkad defeats the Sumerian states (c. 2300 BCE)	
Middle Bronze Age 2100–1600 BCE		**MESOPOTAMIA** *In the Desert of the Early Grass* (1750 BCE) **ANATOLIA** Rise of Hittite Empire (1750 BCE) **EGYPT** *Hymn to Thoth* (1332 BCE)	
Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean) 1600–1150 BCE	Linear B used in mainland Greece Mycenae and other cities destroyed (1200–1150 BCE)	**MESOPOTAMIA** *Epic of Gilgamesh, Enuma Elish,* and *The Descent of Ishtar* (early versions) **ANATOLIA** Troy destroyed (1200–1150 BCE)	
Iron Age 1150–750 BCE	First Olympics (776 BCE)	**MESOPOTAMIA** *Epic of Gilgamesh, Enuma Elish,* and *The Descent of Ishtar* (standard versions) **ANATOLIA** Height of the Phrygian Empire and worship of Cybele (eighth century BCE) **LEVANT** Israelites, Philistines, and Phoenicians flourish in the region **LEVANT** Portions of the Hebrew Bible, including Genesis, composed	Traditional founding date of Rome (753 BCE)

	Greece	Ancient Near East	Italy
Archaic Period 750–490 BCE	Homer (750 BCE), *Iliad* and *Odyssey* Hesiod (700 BCE), *Theogony* and *Works and Days* Anonymous (700 BCE), *Homeric Hymns* **ATHENS** Peisistratid tyranny (546–510 BCE) **ATHENS** Democratic reforms (508 BCE)	**LEVANT** Portions of Hebrew Bible, including Genesis, redacted	Roman Republic begins (509 BCE)
Classical Period 490–323 BCE	Persian Invasion of Greece (490–479 BCE) Aeschylus (525–456 BCE), *Prometheus Bound* and *Oresteia* Sophocles (497–406 BCE) Herodotus (484–425 BCE), *Histories* Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) Euripides (480–407 BCE), *Medea, Bacchae, Iphigenia among the Taurians* Plato (429–347 BCE), *Symposium*	**EGYPT** Alexander the Great conquers Egypt (336–323 BCE) **MESOPOTAMIA** Alexander the Great captures Babylon (331 BCE) and dies in Babylon (323 BCE)	
Hellenistic Period 323–30 BCE	Greece comes under Roman control (146 BCE) Apollonius of Rhodes (c. third century BCE), *Argonautica*	**EGYPT** *Cosmologies at the Temple of Esna* (second century BCE) **LEVANT** Region conquered by Rome (66–62 BCE) **EGYPT** Region conquered by Rome (31 BCE)	
Imperial Roman Period 30 BCE–476 CE	Plutarch (46–120 CE) Pausanias (115–180 CE), *Description of Greece* Xenophon (c. 150 CE), *An Ephesian Tale* Anonymous (c. 150 CE), *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*	**LEVANT** birth of Jesus (1 CE) **ANATOLIA** Ephesus is named the provincial capital of the region under Rome's control (30 CE)	Senate grants Octavian the title of Augustus (27 BCE) Catullus (84–54 BCE), *Attis* Vergil (70 BCE–19 CE), *Aeneid* Ovid (43–17 CE), *Metamorphoses* Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE), *Medea* Apuleius (c. 123 CE), *Cupid and Psyche*

myths, to understand better not only who the Greeks were but also how the Greeks themselves developed the field of mythology (the study of myths).

1.2 WHAT IS CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY?

Many university course catalogues, textbooks, and scholarly journals have "classical mythology" in their title, yet what qualifies as a "classical" myth—and what distinguishes "myth" from "mythology"—requires some clarification and explanation. The word "classic" derives from Latin—not Greek—and describes something that belongs to a certain category, group, or class. Over time, however, the word evolved to mean something that exemplifies the best qualities of a particular group or class, and thus is in a class (or league) of its own. To call a car, musician, or novel a classic is to imply that the object or person is somehow exemplary and better than all other members of its group, because she, he, or it embodies the ideal characteristics of the whole group. The adjective "classical" was first used by Renaissance scholars to describe Greek and Roman antiquity, because, in their eyes, Greece and Rome represented the pinnacle of success in the arts, political structures, and philosophy, to name but a few of the areas that Renaissance scholars found worthy of such high praise. Thus "classical" myths are myths from ancient Greece and Rome. Like most of what the West has inherited from Greece and Rome, these myths have been considered classics and are described as classical. Classical myths, especially those from Greece, are considered beautiful, extravagant, expressive, and meaningful, as well as part of a robust mythological corpus. Consequently, Greek myths have played an important role in shaping how scholars think about both the category of myth and mythological systems more generally.

We turn now to a brief survey of the myths of ancient Greece, after which we introduce their relationship to myths from the Ancient Near East, many of which predate and intersect with Greek myths. In so doing, we are deliberately broadening the definition of classical myths by including non-Greek influences on Greek myths. We then look at myths from Rome, which postdate Greek myths and owe much, although not all, of their form and substance to their Greek predecessors. Our goal in this chapter—and throughout this book—is to develop a comprehensive, if schematic, introduction to myths from ancient Greece in relation to myths from the Ancient Near East and Rome.

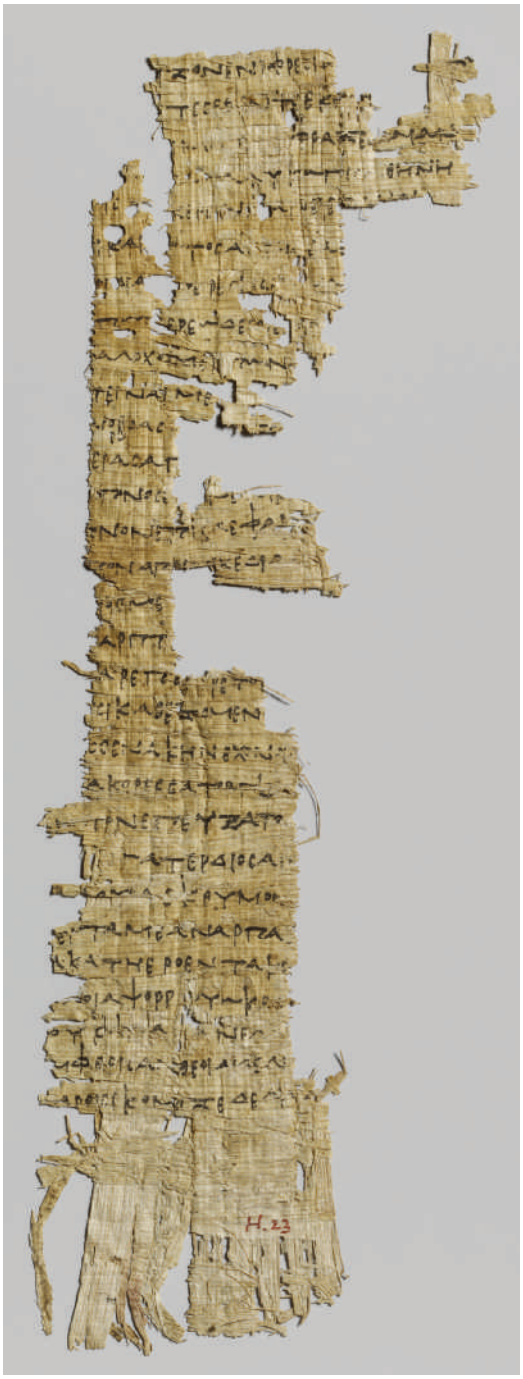
MYTHS FROM ANCIENT GREECE

"Ancient Greece" refers less to a well-defined geographical area than to the places where Greeks lived. These places include modern Greece and the coast of modern-day Turkey, as well as the eastern edges of present-day Italy and the coast of the Black Sea. The chronological period associated with general

studies of ancient Greece begins with the introduction of bronze (c. 3000 BCE) and ends with the Roman conquest of Greece (146 BCE), which then becomes an important province in the Roman Empire.

Throughout this long stretch of time, the Greeks did not organize themselves politically into one nation but instead mainly dwelled in small communities called city-states, each of which had its own independent government. The Greek term for city-state is *polis*; often translated as "city," it is the origin of the English word "political." City-states waged wars with one another and even enslaved one another, although they could, and sometimes did, work together to defend Greece against outside invasions, such as the Persian invasions in the fifth century BCE. Regardless of the hostility or shared purposes that characterized relations among the Greek city-states, the Greeks as a whole had a shared identity, if not a shared government. This shared identity, in the words of the Greek historian Herodotus (484–425 BCE), rested on the fact that the Greeks are defined by a shared language, a shared religion and way of life or culture (*Histories* 8.144). Thus ancient Greece is wherever Greeks dwelled. To this list we might add their shared mythological corpus.

Myths in the Archaic Period The Greek mythological corpus was created and circulated during all periods of Greek history but evolved and changed as Greek city-states and their relations with one another changed. We begin our survey of Greek myths with the Archaic Period (750–490 BCE) and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These two epics were originally oral compositions developed over many generations before being written down (Figure 1.2). Consequently, they contain descriptions of objects and customs that are found in the Late Bronze Age (1600–1150 BCE), as well as in the Iron Age (1150–750 BCE) and the Archaic Period (750–490 BCE). During the Iron Age and Archaic Period, anonymous poets composed and recited poems in hexameter verse on the subjects found in these epics. Each line of a poem composed in hexameter verse has twelve beats that may vary in rhythmic structure for dramatic



1.2 Fragment of the *Odyssey*. Papyrus with Greek script. Egypt. 285–250 BCE. *Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY, ART378594.*

emphasis. This versatile meter enabled poets to remember and combine phrases called "formulae" while adhering to a general story. This method of composition meant that no one oral performance was identical to any other.

These epics are commonly attributed to Homer, yet "Homer" is a shorthand expression for generations of anonymous bards who composed and performed poems in the style of Homer. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that we possess are not transcripts of a performance—it would take nearly twenty-four hours to recite either of these epics! Presumably, recitals were much briefer and featured one episode from these longer tales. The epics we possess most likely owe their length and current arrangement of stories to whoever committed them to writing. When and how these epics were first written down is debated; sometimes Peisistratus, the Athenian tyrant, is credited with having them written down in 565 BCE, although some scholars posit that the epics were committed to writing closer to the time that the Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet to the Greek language in the eighth century BCE.

In addition to Homer's two epics, the *Homeric Hymns*, poems of varying length in hexameter verse composed in the same manner as Homer's epics, are dedicated to a god or goddess and preceded the performance of epics. Finally, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, said to be by Hesiod (eighth to seventh century BCE), are also hexameter poems, orally composed by poets and eventually recorded in writing, in a similar manner to Homer's poems.

Although the Homeric epics and hymns and Hesiod's poems were not sacred texts, they were nonetheless important for making sense of Greek gods and goddesses. Again Herodotus is our guide for understanding how Greeks viewed these poems. He writes that Hesiod and Homer described the genealogical relations among the gods and goddesses and detailed their appearance and traits (*Histories* 2.53). Because Greeks lived in small communities that were not unified into a nation, their gods were initially worshipped in local temples and altars. Any one god or goddess therefore might have different characteristics, depending on where he or she was worshipped, and the relationships among a group of local gods were often simply geographical. Herodotus's comments, then, show how important these early Greek poets were in creating a framework (mostly through constructing the gods in one large extended family) in which local deities could be located and organized.

Thus recitations of Homer and Hesiod contributed to the transformation of local deities, worshipped in small communities and city-states, into gods recognizable to all Greeks—that is, into Panhellenic deities. (*Pan* means "all," and *Hellenes* is the word the Greeks use for themselves.) Indeed, these poems were recited at Panhellenic sanctuaries, such as Olympia, during festivals that Greeks from all over the Greek world could attend. Our understanding of Greek myths also relies on the framework and conceptions of the gods found in Homer's and Hesiod's poems. Yet no sooner did these poets name,

identify, and describe the gods in a mostly genealogical framework that was committed to writing than the Greeks began to question this framework and all that it implied or taught about the cosmos and the gods.

Myths in the Classical Period Whereas some Greeks already expressed skepticism about the conceptions of the gods found in Homer and Hesiod during the Archaic Period, in the city of Athens during the Classical Period (490–323 BCE) Greeks began to examine their myths in earnest. Their inquiries laid the foundation for all subsequent studies of mythology. Why and how the Greeks became critics of their own mythological systems is linked to the dramatic, even revolutionary, explosion in creative and intellectual activities that prompted later scholars to label the fifth and fourth centuries BCE in Greece the Classical Period. Just as Renaissance scholars first called all of Greek and Roman antiquity "classical" because of the regard in which they held the achievements of those civilizations, this period of time in Greece has come to be known as the Classical Period, because above all others it was thought to embody the pinnacle of the Greek commitment to reason and beauty. In addition, this era in ancient Greece witnessed the development of many scholarly disciplines such as mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and biology (to name but a few) that still shape how we study the world and organize knowledge.

During the Classical Period, Homeric and Hesiodic poems continued to be recited at festivals in Athens; tragedians such as Aeschylus (525–c. 456 BCE), Sophocles (497–406 BCE), and Euripides (480–406 BCE) composed plays about and including gods and goddesses; the historian Herodotus composed and recited his *Histories*, which, although devoted primarily to the Persian Wars, nonetheless contained stories about the gods; and temples such as the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis were constructed with sculptures depicting the gods. In other words, the Greek mythological corpus continued to grow in words as well as in the visual arts.

At the same time, *muthos* (the Greek word for myth) became defined and interrogated. The philosopher Protagoras (490–420 BCE), one of the most renowned teachers in Athens at the time, wrote, "Man is the measure of all things," swatting the gods aside and setting human beings at the center of the universe. Plato (428–348 BCE), recognizing that myths persuade their listeners to adopt ideas about the gods that he often judged erroneous, wanted to ban myths from his ideal republic. Not surprisingly, however, Plato himself employed traditional myths and created some of his own, such as the myth of Er or of Atlantis, to teach his philosophical doctrines.

Palaephatus, an obscure figure who wrote at the end of the fourth century BCE, both collected and debunked mythological stories in his book *On Incredible Tales*. For example, he offered this explanation of the tale about a nymph named Callisto whom the goddess Artemis turned into a bear: Callisto walked into the

forest and was torn apart by bears; when one of the bears emerged from the forest, witnesses believed it to be the transformed girl. Palaephatus set out to rationalize stories about which audiences were increasingly skeptical—if they ever were believed to be literally true in the first place. But Greek gods and goddesses and the stories about them were not entirely dismissed or considered irrelevant. The trial of the philosopher Socrates (c. 469–399 BCE), in which he was prosecuted for mocking traditional gods, conveys the anxieties generated by the interrogation of tradition and traditional views about gods.

As members of Athenian society continued to question their beliefs and stories about the gods, they also advanced rational arguments, called *logoi* (the singular is *logos*), about the universe, including the gods, society, and humankind. They began to define myths (*muthoi*, the plural of *muthos*) as the opposite of *logoi*. If *logoi* were rational arguments that relied on logic and statements made in straightforward prose, then *mythoi* were not rational and included stories, metaphors, symbols, and images. If *logoi* explained all the cosmos as accurately as human reason allowed, then *mythoi* were inaccurate fictions that did not aim to describe things as they are.

The similarities between the Greek definition of *muthoi* and the modern definitions of myth surveyed earlier in this chapter are not accidental. The Greeks had a rich, vibrant mythological corpus; by the end of the Classical Period, they also had a rich, vibrant critique of *muthoi*. They embraced and continued to develop a wide range of responses to their mythological corpus in ways that proved influential in the Western world.

Myths in the Hellenistic Period and Beyond During the Hellenistic Period (323–30 BCE), one of the key responses to Greece's mythological corpus was less interrogative than retrospective. Educated Greek scholars and teachers who lived in Alexandria, the cultural and political capital of Hellenistic Egypt, began to collect and imitate earlier Greek myths and stories. Callimachus (310/305–240 BCE), for example, composed hymns dedicated to gods and goddesses, but his hymns were witty, urbane, and full of obscure references. Apollonius of Rhodes (third century BCE) composed a relatively short epic in hexameters called the *Argonautica*, about Jason's quest with his Argonauts for the Golden Fleece. In Apollonius of Rhodes's version, the weak-willed protagonist Jason bears little resemblance to Homer's heroes.

When the Romans gained control over wide swathes of the Mediterranean (they decisively took control of Greece in 146 BCE and Egypt in 30 BCE), they began uniting peoples of many different languages and cultures under their rule. Greeks in the elite vanguard of the Roman Empire continued to expand and, increasingly, to explain the Greek mythological corpus. Among these, Plutarch (46–120 CE) wrote treatises on Delphi (where he was a priest), biographies of famous Greek and Roman statesmen, and treatises on Greek,

Roman, and Egyptian philosophy, theology, and customs. Pausanias (second century CE) traveled throughout Greece and described its temples, buildings, and customs, thus preserving many features of Greek culture. By the fifth century CE, the Roman Empire became Christianized, and the Greek mythological system became quiescent.

Classical mythology can now be more accurately defined. Like biology (the study of *bios*, "life") or anthropology (the study of *anthropoi*, "human beings"), classical mythology is the study of myths: that is, the sort of tales that the Greeks themselves labeled *muthoi*. Although classical myths may come from any period in Greek or Roman antiquity, Greek myths from the Archaic and Classical Periods compose the core of most studies of classical mythology. This is because of the vibrant mythological corpus the Greeks created during these periods *and* their contributions to analyzing this corpus. Even so, Greek myths and Greek mythology were never isolated from the myths and peoples that lived among and around Greek-speaking peoples. These include people and myths from the Ancient Near East and the people and myths of Rome. Greece's interactions with the great empires to its east and with Rome to its west were very different. Each contributes to the study of classical mythology in different ways.

MYTHS FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The "Ancient Near East" (Map 1.1, pp. 22–23) refers to a large geographical region that has four regions; the peoples who dwelled in each area developed their own mythological corpus. In the north is the large landmass called Anatolia or Asia Minor (modern Turkey), and in the south is Egypt. On the west and bordering the Mediterranean Sea is the Levant (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine). To the east is ancient Mesopotamia, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (modern Iraq). The empires and kingdoms in these four regions developed at different paces from one another, as well as from Greece, which was a relative newcomer to the region. For example, the Egyptians and the Sumerians had writing systems and complex hierarchical social structures long before the Greek alphabet was adapted from the Phoenicians. In addition, almost all of these regions and the smaller communities within them were ruled for thousands of years by kings who were believed to be sacred. The lion, as the king of beasts, was often adopted for their insignia and guardians, as is evidenced by the famous gate of Ishtar, which was decorated with lions (Figure 1.3). Greece, by contrast, eventually developed democratic systems of governance.

Beginning in the Bronze Age, when it too was ruled by kings, Greece interacted with the empires and kingdoms in the east through trade, war, travel, and migration. Additionally, it shared a language group with some of its eastern neighbors. One of the two language groups in the Ancient Near East is