

THE PANTHEONS

The officially recognized gods of a culture—its **pantheon** (from the Greek *pan-theon*, meaning “all gods”)—reflect that culture’s value system and view of itself. The Egyptian pantheon speaks directly to that culture’s obsession with death and resurrection, which may have arisen from its constant confrontation with the processes and effects of the passage of the sun and the flooding of the Nile. The Hebrew development of a single patriarchal god concerned with the actions of a “chosen people” suggests a culture with a sense of exclusive identity and mission. The Greek immortal family on Mount Olympus, a family preoccupied with both its own pleasures and the actions of mortals, personifies a realistic if somewhat skeptical view of human nature and the dilemma of a species that revels in life even as it is defined by death.

All pantheons are **ontological** and **teleological**; that is, they are metaphors for the human attempt to make sense of existence itself and to assign an ultimate cause to that existence. To “read” a pantheon is to read a culture’s sense of itself and of the nature of the cosmos.

Questions to consider

The reader should consider what these pantheons say about the nature of the human familial experience. How do these different pantheons reflect cultural values and customs? Do some of these pantheons have a soap opera tinge to them? How are the pantheons religious in nature? Do Jews, Christians, and Muslims have pantheons? Why have humans always needed gods?

MESOPOTAMIA (SUMER): Gods of the Elements

The oldest pantheon known to scholars is that of ancient Sumer in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). The Sumerian pantheon is fully representative of the elements of nature and the universe and creation itself. The goddess Ki (also known as Ninsurhag, Urash, and Earth) mates with An (Sky), who also mates with Nammu (the primal waters). From the An–Ki union comes Ninlil, the air goddess, and Enlil, the air god. From the An–Nammu relationship comes the trickster god Enki. Enki’s union with his sister Ningikuga, the goddess of the reeds, results in the moon goddess Ningal. Ningal joins with Nanna, the moon god and son of Ninlil and Enlil, and produces the sun god Utu and the “Queen of Heaven and Earth,” the great goddess of love Inanna (Ishtar). Inanna’s sister is Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld. Inanna’s husband is the shepherd

Dumuzi, the son of Enki and the sheep goddess Sirtur (Ninsun). Ereshkigal's mate is Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven.

It was the Sumerians who invented writing, and one of the world's earliest recorded myths, that of the conception of the moon god Nanna, a patron of the city of Ur, is found in **cuneiform** script on a clay tablet dating from the second millennium BCE.

In this myth, Ninlil, the air goddess, loves Enlil, the air god, the greatest of the Sumerian deities and the source of order in the universe. Ninlil's mother, Ki, the earth goddess, tells her daughter how to attract her beloved's attention.

In those days the mother, her begetter, gave advice to the maid,
 Nunbarshegunu gave advice to Ninlil:
 "At the pure river, O maid, at the pure river wash thyself,
 O Ninlil, walk along the bank of the Idnunbirdu,
 The bright-eyed, the lord, the bright-eyed,
 The 'great mountain,' father Enlil, the bright-eyed, will see thee,
 The shepherd . . . who decrees the fates, the bright-eyed, will see thee,
 He will . . . , he will kiss thee."

[Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*
 (Harper, 1961), p. 45.]

Ki's instructions work. Enlil notices Ninlil and impregnates her, and the moon god Nanna comes into the world.

EGYPT: Death and Resurrection

The Egyptian pantheon is marked by a struggle for supremacy among various gods, a struggle that mirrors conflicts among ruling religious and political factions in various parts of Egypt beginning as early as 4000 BCE. At one moment in Egyptian history the pantheon of Heliopolis, led by Atum or Re, predominates. At another time Amun in Thebes reigns supreme. The pharaoh Akhenaton even introduced a form of sun god monotheism in the fourteenth century BCE. Because of this struggle for religious supremacy and because of the existence of distinct cultural centers, the Egyptian pantheon is marked by inconsistency. The few consistent themes, associated with the passage of the sun and the seasonal flooding of the Nile, reflect the culture's emphasis on the sun and on death and renewal. In another consistent motif, the Egyptian immortals are typically depicted as having human bodies and animal heads. If one god emerges as the central figure in the overall Egyptian pantheon, it is

Osiris, whose myth, with that of his son Horus, is intricately related to questions of pharaonic legitimacy and the afterlife. A pharaoh dies as Osiris; his successor reigns as Horus.

The Gods of Heliopolis

Summarized below is the Ennead, essentially the pantheon of Heliopolis, which is usually considered to be the most orthodox of Egyptian religious centers. This pantheon was formed by the twenty-eighth century BCE and is found in the Pyramid Texts.

Atum is the sun god. He is at various times and places Ra or Re or Khepri or Amun. As Amun, or Amen-Ra, the sun god of Upper Egypt, he is the Great Eye of the heavens and of creation.

Shu and his sister Tefnut are the result of Atum's act of masturbation or ex-pectoration. When the god embraces his children, he bestows on them his divine essence, or Ka. Shu is the life spirit, while Tefnut is world order or cosmos. Shu and Tefnut produce Geb and Nut.

Geb is the spirit of life; Nut, an Egyptian great mother goddess, is the spirit of order. One of the great images of Egyptian mythology is that of Geb and Nut being separated by their father, Shu; Nut becomes the star-filled heavens and Geb becomes the earth, with his sometimes-erect phallus (perhaps represented in Egypt by the ubiquitous obelisk) reaching for his consort.

The children of Geb and Nut complete this most important of Egyptian pantheons.

Osiris is the god of the underworld and of grain. He was the most popular of Egyptian gods, equivalent in spirit to Attis in Phrygia, Adonis in Babylonia, and Dionysos in Greece. He is a god who dies and in one sense or another is revived.

Isis, like Demeter in Greece, is a goddess of mysteries. Her cult spread as far as Rome. Isis is the goddess of earth and moon. She is the sister-wife of Osiris and plays the most significant role in his resurrection.

Seth (sometimes spelled Set) is the brother of Osiris and Isis and is their nemesis, a force of evil and darkness in the world. He murders his brother and is married to their sister Nephthys.

Nephthys is a goddess of death and dusk. She assists her sister, Isis, in the reviving of the dead Osiris.

Horus, conceived miraculously by Isis and her dead husband, Osiris, has aspects of the sun god; he is the light that defeats the darkness associated with Seth. Horus is the *puer aeternus*, or divine child, of the Egyptian pantheon. He is the spiritual force behind the reigning pharaoh.

The Separation of Geb and Nut

The Pyramid Texts tell this story of the pantheon, implying the separation of Geb and Nut to make room for creation between them.

(Priest speaks):

O Nut, spread yourself over your son Osiris, and hide him from Seth. Protect him, O Nut!

Have you come to hide your son? . . .

(Words to be spoken by Geb):

O Nut! You became a spirit,
you waxed mighty in the belly of your mother Tefnut
before you were born.

How mighty is your heart!

You stirred in the belly of your mother in your name of
Nut,

you are indeed a daughter more powerful than her mother . . .

O Great One who has become the sky!

You have the mastery, you have filled every place with your beauty,
the whole earth lies beneath you, you have taken possession thereof,
you have enclosed the whole earth and everything therein within
your arms. . . .

As Geb shall I impregnate you in your name of sky,

I shall join the whole earth to you in every place.

O high above the earth! You are supported upon your father Shu,
but you have power over him,

he so loved you that he placed himself—and all things
beside—beneath you

so that you took up into you every god with his heavenly barque,
and as “a thousand souls is she” did you teach them
that they should not leave you—as the stars.

[R. T. Rundle Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*
(London, 1959), pp. 48–49.]

INDIA: The Trimurti

The Indian-Hindu pantheon developed over time. In the early pre-Hindu Vedic mythology, Dyaus and Prithivi, the sky father and earth mother, were central. They were followed later by the **triad** of Surya the sun god, Indra the king of the gods, and Agni the fire god. In the Vedas, the creator is Prajapati. Eventually, there arises the concept of the all-encompassing Brahman, the single essence of all reality—something less tangible than but comparable to the God of monotheistic religions. In classical Hinduism the primary

embodiments of Brahman are the *trimurti*, or triad, of Shiva the ascetic lord of the dance of life, Vishnu the preserver, and Brahma the creator, although the great goddess Devi in her various forms has long been a more important figure than Brahma.

Most Hindus worship one of the three gods of the triad as the supreme deity, and connected with each of the three are stories of marriages. Shiva's wife is Parvati, goddess of the mountain Himalaya. Parvati is the mother of the much-loved Ganesha, who is born as Vighneshvara.

Pârvati's companions, Jayâ and Vijayâ, tried to convince her that she needed her own servant. And when Śiva intruded into her bath, she decided to create a gate-keeper (*dvârapâlaka*) from a little dirt from her skin. In so doing, she created a formidable being, Vighneshvara. The next time that Śiva attempted to burst in upon his wife, Vighneshvara prevented him—even driving him away with a cane that left a few cuts on Śiva. Furious, Śiva sent his *Bhuta-ganas* (demons), who were also promptly defeated. The gods, including Vishnu, tried to gain Śiva's favor by defeating this upstart. Pârvati saw the gods ganging up on her son and sent two fierce goddesses to help with magic. They protected Vighneshvara from injury by using *mâyâ* ("magic," "illusion") to misdirect the aim of the god's weapons. Then Vishnu, lord of *mâyâ*, confused the goddesses, and they returned to Pârvati. At that moment Śiva attacked Vighneshvara and easily cut off his head. Of course, the meddling sage Nârada appeared to tell Pârvati about the death of her son, and Pârvati created a thousand fighting goddesses to punish the slayers. The gods were suffering pitifully, so Nârada and other sages raced to Pârvati and begged that she end her revenge. This she did as soon as her son was brought back to life.

In all versions of this myth, Śiva sent attendants to find a head, and one of a dead elephant was brought back. That head had only one tusk (*eka-danta*) and would make Vighneshvara into the elephant-faced god (*gajânana*), Ganeśa. When Pârvati saw her restored son, she took him before the assemblage of gods, presided over by her husband Śiva, and presented her son. Śiva promptly apologized to all and gave Ganeśa command of his demon forces (*ganas*), acquiring a role that gained him the title Ganapati.

[George M. Williams, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*
(Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 133.]

Vishnu's wife is Sri or Lakshmi, who was born from the supreme being's left side and represents, among many other qualities, prosperity and good fortune. Vishnu has many earthly incarnations, or avatars, of whom the most famous are Krishna and Rama, who play major roles in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* epics. Lakshmi is incarnated as the wives of the avatars: Rukmini, for instance, as Krishna's feminine counterpart and Sita as the heroic wife of Rama.

The most famous of the Vishnu myths takes place in the context of a war in heaven between the gods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*).

In the sixth *manvantara* (world cycle) of the current *kalpa* (eon), the *devas* were losing in their battles with the *asuras*. One account said that the god Indra had slighted a *brâhmin* sage named Durvâsa and from that day on the power of the gods declined. So the *devas* went to Brahmâ, who immediately—as was usually the case in the Vaishnava myth cycle—counseled them to go to Vishnu.

Vishnu told the gods to follow his instructions exactly. They would have to work with the demons, but in the end Vishnu would enhance their glory. So the *devas* convinced the *asuras* that they must work together in order to obtain the drink of immortality. They would need to churn it up from the Milky Ocean (*kshîra-sâgara*). First, herbs were thrown in the clear waters. Mount Manthara was used as a churning staff, and the giant snake Vâsuki became the churning rope. The *devas* took Vâsuki's tail, while the *asuras* grabbed his head with its fiery breath. Vishnu became the support for the mountain as the turtle *avatâra* (Kûrma) and simultaneously took an invisible form and pressed down on the mountain from above. The gods and demons pulled back and forth with Vâsuki, stirring the ocean and bringing all manner of things into being: Kâmadhenu (the wish-granting cow), Vârunîdevî, Pârijâtam, the *apsaras*, Chandra-Soma (the moon), venom (*halâhala*), which was absorbed by the serpents (*nâgas*), Dhanvantari with the pot of amrita, and Mahâlakshmî. The *avatâra* Kûrma raised Mount Mandara when it started to sink. The demons grabbed the pot of amrita from the sage Dhanvantari and would have become immortal had they drunk it. But the demons were tricked out of their share when Vishnu appeared as Mōhinî and mesmerized them with her feminine charm and beauty. She told the *asuras* that she was lonely and looking for a mate. Mōhinî said that they should close their eyes and the one who opened them last would be the one she would marry. But Mōhinî went immediately to Devaloka (heaven) and gave the amrita to the *devas*. And even

though the *asuras* attacked, the *devas* were strengthened by the divine drink and won dominion over the three worlds.

[George M. Williams, *Handbook of Hindu Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 189–190.]

GREECE: Originators and Olympians

Like the Egyptian pantheon and the Indian one, the Greek pantheon, as we saw in our discussion of creation myths, emerged in stages. In Greek myth, two dynasties must be overcome violently before Zeus and his family can rule the universe. Hesiod's *Theogony*, the epics of Homer, and the *Homeric Hymns* are among our major sources for the theogonic Greek myths as they emerged in the ninth through seventh centuries BCE.

More than any other pantheon, the Greek hierarchy of gods and goddesses, which emerged from the ancient wars in heaven was modeled on human families. The official Olympian gods, the family of Mount Olympus, headed by Zeus, were simply members of the most powerful of Greek families. Like other members of the rich and powerful classes, the Olympian family was marred by instances of immorality, arrogance, and stubbornness. In the Greek view, the gods were to be approached warily rather than in a familiar or loving manner. They were not to be trusted and could not be counted on for mercy. They were an exaggerated version of what a human family might become if endowed with infinite power. They were a mirror of human nature itself. Furthermore, they represented the irrational forces of physical nature.

Other aspects of Greek religion were not so deeply rooted in hierarchy or the existing social structure. The cults of Dionysos and Demeter, for example, have been called earth religions, as opposed to the sky religion of the Olympians. Their cults were associated with fertility, with deep emotion, and even with mystery or mysticism and had a wide following among the people. The earth religions were probably well established in the land we now call Greece or in the lands to the east of Greece long before the emergence there of the religion of Zeus, which very likely resulted from a merging of the religions of various Mediterranean and northern peoples.

The Greek pantheon, as it had developed by the time of Homer and Hesiod, was made up officially of twelve gods and goddesses, although there is disagreement as to the exact composition of the group.

The Children of Kronos and Rhea

Zeus is the Greek version of the Indo-European chief sky god. He is the patriarch of the Greek pantheon, a pantheon that gives cosmic significance to a patriarchal social system. As a sky god concerned particularly with weather—his standard is the thunderbolt—and as a lover of many, Zeus has links to the

older fertility gods. He is the father of Herakles and Helen of Troy by mortal women (Alcmene and Leda, respectively). He produces Athena out of his own head. And he is the father of Dionysos by Semele, who herself has earth goddess antecedents. It is generally assumed now that Zeus was himself originally an earth god of ancient Crete.

In one myth, Zeus, in the form of a swan, takes advantage of the mortal Leda. The latter subsequently lays an egg, from which Helen and possibly also Clytemnestra or Castor and Pollux are hatched. Leda was later deified as the goddess Nemesis. The following poem is William Butler Yeats's version of the rape of Leda.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

[W. B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan," in
The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (Macmillan, 1957), p. 211.]

Hera is Zeus's sister. She is also his constantly cross wife, unhappy with his extramarital affairs. Poseidon is Zeus's brother and after the defeat of the Titans is made lord of the seas, a role reflected in his tempestuous and often quarrelsome nature. These characteristics would also seem to be appropriate to his role as god of earthquakes, although it is possible that this role refers to an earlier stage of the god's existence when he was associated, as he was at Athens and Troezen even in classical times, with powers of fertility that came from within the earth. Poseidon is also the god of horses and is the father by Medusa of the winged horse Pegasus. Among his other children, by many women—immortal and mortal—are the great Athenian hero Theseus and the cyclops Polyphemus, the one-eyed monster blinded by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. In that Homeric epic, Poseidon's revenge

on Odysseus for having thus insulted him is the reason for Odysseus' difficulties. Poseidon's symbol is the trident. Traditionally, bulls were sacrificed to him.

Hestia is the first-born of Kronos and Rhea, a virgin goddess whose name was well known to all Greeks as goddess of the home—specifically, of the hearth or sacred fire. Few stories are told of her, but she was important as a figure to be honored in rituals of sacrifice.

One of the most famous of the Greek myths involves three important members of the Olympian family: Demeter, Persephone, and Hades. Demeter, the sister of Zeus and the mother by him of Persephone (or Kore), spends more time in the world than on Mount Olympus. This is appropriate, as she is the goddess of agriculture, the Olympian version of the great goddess. Her daughter is identified with young crops and, as the wife of Hades, with death. Demeter's cult, most fully developed in the Mysteries of Eleusis, was, with that of Dionysos, pervasive in Greece. The Eleusinian Mysteries grew out of a popular cult that had been strongly influenced by a similar cult centered on the Egyptian goddess Isis. The Eleusinian version was eventually recognized officially in Athens. It was a cult concerned with the earth, with fertility, and, like the cult of Dionysos, with the connection between fertility and death—with the burying of the seed in order that it might generate new life. Given this connection, it is not surprising that Demeter came to be associated with the idea of the human soul's immortality.

Hades is, with Zeus and Poseidon, among the most powerful of the gods. When Zeus divides up responsibility for his dominions, he gives Hades control over the underworld, which is also called Hades. Hades is the dark god, the god who carries the two-pronged staff with which to goad people into the lower world. He also carries the keys of Hades and is accompanied by the three-headed dog Cerberus. Like his brother Poseidon, he is associated with horses.

The myth of Demeter, Persephone (Kore), and Hades, originally told in the *Homeric Hymns* and later recounted by Ovid, is retold here by William Hansen.

Persephonê is the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Zeus gave his unmarried brother Hades permission to seize Persephonê, saying nothing of this arrangement to the girl or her mother. One day as Persephonê gathered flowers in a meadow with a number of Oceanids, the earth in the Nysian Plain gaped open and Hades burst forth on his golden chariot, seized her, and carried her away against her will to his gloomy kingdom. She cried out, but by the time her mother heard her voice, the girl had disappeared. While Persephonê dwelled with Hades in Erebos, Demeter in grief searched the earth for her, and when she learned what had happened, she was furious. She kept herself apart from the

other gods in her grief and anger, keeping the seeds concealed in the ground, so that agriculture came entirely to a halt. Had not Zeus intervened, the human race would have perished and the gods would have been deprived of their sacrifices.

Since Demeter angrily refused to return to Olympus or to allow the seeds to emerge until she should see her daughter, Zeus dispatched Hermes to the House of Hades to persuade the god to bring Persephonê back. Hermes went beneath the earth to Hades's mansions, where he found the lord and his consort sitting on a couch. Persephonê was longing for her mother. Hades said Persephonê was free to visit her mother, but he also pointed out that he was no unsuitable husband for her, since he was a brother of her own father, Zeus, and since as Hades's spouse she would become mistress of everything that lived and would acquire great honors among the gods. But secretly he gave Persephonê a pomegranate seed to eat before her departure so that she would not remain forever with her mother. Demeter and Persephonê were joyously reunited, but when Demeter discovered that Persephonê had eaten in Erebus, she perceived that Persephonê would have to live a third of the year with her spouse and two-thirds of the year with her mother and the other immortals. Zeus gave his approval to this plan. After Demeter caused the fields once again to luxuriate in produce, she and her daughter went to Olympus to join the other gods, where they dwell beside Zeus.

[William Hansen, *Classical Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 259.]

The Children of Zeus

Athena, or Pallas Athena, the patroness of Athens, is the goddess of wisdom, and she is concerned with the arts, especially weaving and spinning. She created the olive tree, which is sacred to her. Athena is also associated with war and is often depicted carrying a spear and shield and wearing a helmet decorated with griffins. She is one of the great virgin goddesses; the Parthenon (Greek *parthenos*, meaning "virgin") on the Acropolis was her temple. Athena is the particular patron of the wily Odysseus in Homer's epic, and in another myth she casts the deciding vote in favor of Orestes in his trial for the revenge killing of his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthos.

This ancient goddess in all probability originated as a fertility-oriented patroness of the pre-Greek Mycenaean and Minoan rulers and gained her virginal aspect only after the establishment of the patriarchal sky religion during classical times.

Her paradoxical nature is reflected in the story of her remarkable birth. In the classical version of her story, as told by Hesiod, Pindar, and Apollodorus, Athena springs fully armed from the head of her father, Zeus. Thus stripped of her feminine origins and nature, she reflects the patriarchal value system. Athena stands in direct contrast to her sister Aphrodite, whose exaggerated sexuality and stereotypical femininity are equally revealing of that system.

Zeus has four children by his wife Hera. Of these, Hebe, the cupbearer for the gods, goddess of youth, and wife of Herakles after he is immortalized on Mount Olympus, and Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth, are not made much of in Greek myth. Two other offspring, the gods Ares and Hephaistos, however, are more important. Ares, the god of war, carries a torch and a spear. Hephaistos, the lame god of fire and crafts, carries a smith's hammer and tongs. Ares and Hephaistos are perhaps best known for their relationships with the goddess Aphrodite. Hephaistos is her husband. Ares is her lover and the father by her of Eros, the god specifically associated with the pangs of love.

According to one story, Aphrodite (a Greek word meaning "foam-born"), as the meaning of her name suggests, was born of the foam of the sea. The foam was said to have been caused by the semen from the mutilated genitals of the god Uranos. Aphrodite is often depicted emerging from a seashell. After her birth she comes to land on the island of Cythera but is also attached to Cyprus. In another birth story, Aphrodite is the child of Zeus by the nymph Dione.

As goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite is, above all, seductive—an immortal version of the femme fatale. Two of her most famous liaisons are with the youth Adonis, who is killed by a wild boar but restored to her for six months of each year, and with the mortal Anchises, by whom she becomes the mother of Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's great Roman epic, the *Aeneid*. Representing the dangers of love, she is in that account held partly responsible for the Trojan War, because it is she who tempts Paris to award her the golden apple by promising him the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen.

The following tale of a love triangle involving Aphrodite, Ares, and Hephaistos is told by Homer.

The herald arrived with the minstrel's singing lyre. Demodocus advanced into the cleared space. About him grouped boys in their first blush of life and skilful at dancing, who footed it rhythmically on the prepared floor. Odysseus watched their flying, flashing feet and wondered.

Then the lyre-player broke into fluent song, telling of the loves of Ares and coiffed Aphrodite in the house of Hephaestus. How they first came together by stealth and of the many gifts that Ares gave

her, until he was able to defile the bed and marriage of Hephaestus the King; and of the eventual coming of Helios, the Sun, to the King, with word of their loving intercourse as he had witnessed it. When Hephaestus had heard the dismal tale, he hastened to his forge, elaborating evil for them in the depths of his breast. He set the great anvil in its stock and wrought chains which could be neither broken nor loosed, that the guilty pair might be gyved in them for ever and ever. Out of his bitter rage against Ares was born this device. He went then into his marriage chamber, where stood the bed he had cherished, and about its posts he interlaced his toils. Others, many of them, hung down from aloft, from the main roof-tree over the hearth; gossamer chains so fine that no man could see them, not even a blessed God, with such subtlety of craft had they been forged. When Hephaestus had meshed all the bed in his snare, he pretended to set forth for Lemnos, that well-built city which in his eyes is much the dearest land of earth. Nor was it a loose watch that Ares of the golden reins was keeping upon Hephaestus. As soon as he saw the great craftsman leave he took his journey to the famous house, chafing for love of well-crowned Cytherea. She was but newly come from Zeus, her mighty father, and had just sat down when Ares was in the house, grasping her hand and saying: "Come, darling, let us to bed and to our pleasure; for Hephaestus is now abroad, visiting in Lemnos among the barbarous-spoken Sintians."

His word of their lying together gave her joy. They went to their bed and snuggled deep into it, whereupon the springes of artful Hephaestus closed about them and tightened till they were not able to lift a limb nor move it. At last they understood there was no escape. Then the great God of the mighty arms drew near again and re-entered: he had turned back short of Lemnos when Helios, the spying Sun, had given him word. As he made heavily toward his home grief rooted in his heart: but when he stood there in its entry savage passion gripped him so that he roared hideously and declaimed to all the Gods:—

"Father Zeus and every other Blessed Immortal, hither to me, and see a jest which is unpardonable. Because I am crippled, Aphrodite daughter of Zeus, does me dishonour, preferring Ares the destroyer, Ares being beautiful and straight of limb while I was born crooked. And whose fault is that, if not my parents'? Would they had not brought me into life! Look how these two are clipped together in love's embrace, here, in my very bed. To watch them cuts me to the heart. Yet I think they will not wish to lie thus, not even

for a very little while longer, however mad their lust. Soon they will not wish to be together, yet shall my cunning bonds chain them as they are until her father has utterly repaid the marriage fee—every single thing I gave him for this bitch-eyed girl: though indeed his daughter is beautiful, despite her sin.”

His mouthing gathered the gods to the house of the brazen floor. Poseidon the Earth-girdler, beneficent Hermes and royal Apollo the far-darting, came: but the Lady Goddesses remained at home, all of them, quite out of countenance. In Hephaestus’ forecourt collected the Givers of Weal: and unquenchable was the laughter that arose from the blessed Gods as they studied the tricky device of Hephaestus. One would catch his neighbour’s eye and gibe: “Bad deeds breed no merit. The slow outrun the speedy. See how poor crawling Hephaestus, despite that limp, has now overtaken Ares (much the most swift of all divine dwellers upon Olympus) and cleverly caught him. Ares will owe him the adulterer’s fine.” Words like this one whispered to the other: but of Hermes did Zeus’ royal son Apollo loudly ask: “Hermes, son of Zeus, messenger and giver of good things: would you not choose even the bondage of these tough chains, if so you might sleep in the one bed by golden Aphrodite?” And to him the Gods’ messenger, Argus-bane, replied: “If only this might be, kingly, far-darting Apollo! If there were chains without end, thrice as many as are here, and all you Gods with all the Goddesses to look on, yet would I be happy beside the Golden One.”

At his saying more laughter rose among the Immortals: only Poseidon laughed not but was still entreating lame Hephaestus the craftsman to let Ares go. Now he spoke out, with winged words: “Loose him: and for him I promise whatever you require; as that he shall discharge the penalty he has incurred before the undying Gods.” The famous strong-thewed God answered him: “Do not thus constrain me, Poseidon, Earth-girdler. The bonds of a worthless man are worthless bonds. How could I hold you liable before the Immortals, if Ares gets away free of his debt and this snare?” And to him replied the Earth-shaker: “Hephaestus, even if Ares absconds, leaving his debt unpaid, I myself will discharge it to you, wholly.” And the lame master said, “I cannot refuse: nor would it be seemly to refuse such surety.” So saying great Hephaestus loosed the chain and the couple when they were freed of the trap and its restraint swiftly fled away—he to Thrace and smiling Aphrodite to Cyprus, to Paphos, her sanctuary with its incense-burning altar. There the

Graces bathed her and anointed her with ambrosial oil, such as is set aside for the ever-living Gods. There they put upon her glorious clothing, till she was an enchantment to the eye. Such was the song of the famous minstrel.

[T. E. Lawrence, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 111–114.]

Apollo, or Phoibos Apollo, as Homer calls him, was a relative latecomer to Mount Olympus. His origins are unclear, but it is possible that he was originally an Asiatic god. His mother was Leto, thought by some to be the Anatolian goddess Lada from Lycia. The Greeks said that he was born on the island of Delos and that he was a sacred twin, one of many in mythology. His sister was the great virgin huntress Artemis. Regardless of whether he was Asian in origin, Apollo becomes in Greece a metaphor for the very essence of things Greek. He is the god of what has come to be thought of as the peculiarly Greek ideal of moderation—in the arts as well as in style of life—and the god of law. In the trial of Orestes, in which the old earth forces are made subservient to Olympian reason, it is he along with Athena who brings reason to the Greek world.

To think of Apollo is to think of beauty and order. He has often been compared to Dionysos. Thus we speak of the necessary and productive tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in the arts—the tension between discipline and deep emotion—as, for instance, in a Shakespearean sonnet. Apollonian form (its strict meter and its fourteen lines), which contain particular urgency to the poet's Dionysian passion.

Apollo's home is Delphi (once Pytho), where he wrests control of the oracle from the dragon or python that guards it. Pythian Apollo and all that he represents as the protector of the organized Olympian religion thus takes control of prophecy from the older, more mysterious earth forces. The mystery is not altogether lost, however. If Delphi is the home of Apollo, it is also a favorite haunt of Dionysos in the winter months.

Apollo is the god who reminds man of the necessity of self-control and self-knowledge. "Know thyself" and "Nothing too much" are his primary mottoes. By the fifth century BCE, the cult of Apollo had taken precedence over that of Zeus himself. The great Sophoclean tragedies make this abundantly clear. The quest of Oedipus is a quest for self-knowledge on the personal as well as on the general human level.

Finally, in late classical times, Apollo, as a god of light, was associated with the sun—sometimes with the sun god, Helios. His sister, Artemis, also came to be associated with the moon goddess, Selene.

More often than not, Apollo is depicted in art as a handsome youth, usually nude, with a lyre or a bow and a quiver of arrows.

The goddess Artemis, considered by the Greeks to be the twin sister of Apollo, is the virgin goddess of the hunt and the protector of the young (both animal and human). She is almost certainly Asian—specifically Anatolian—in origin. As Ma in Cappadocia or Cybele in Phrygia, she is the greatest of the great mothers, anything but a virgin. In Ephesus, where her cult was strongest, she was Artemis of the many breasts, a mother to all life. Much of this aspect of her character probably blended into the Demeter and Persephone cults in Greece, but remnants of the old Artemis remained in the new Greek version. The Greek Artemis is still the goddess of childbirth, and as a huntress, she is still associated with the wild. Her virginity and the masculine aspect of her nature suggest, as in the case of Pallas Athena, a defeminization of the great goddess—an undermining of her powerful matriarchal cult—by the patriarchal Homeric/Olympian religion. The Olympian Artemis has no qualms about employing violence. When young Acteon, hunting in the wilds, happens to come upon the naked Artemis bathing, the goddess, made furious by this intrusion on her virginal privacy, sets her hunting hounds upon the youth, who pays for his transgression with his life. As Ovid describes it, Artemis (Diana) turns the youth into a stag and sets his own hounds upon him to tear his body to pieces.



Among the most popular of Greek gods was Hermes, the son of Zeus by Maia, daughter of the Titan Atlas, who holds the world on his shoulders. Hermes was probably of Minoan/Mycenean origin. His name in Greek is related to the word for a stone cairn. The tradition of Hermes and the cairn took form in the herms—the small posts or pillars with human head and phallus representing fertility—that were so prevalent in ancient Greece. The herms had particular functions that were in keeping with qualities associated with the god. They were road markers, and Hermes is the god of the road and of travelers. He is himself a frequent traveler from Mount Olympus, serving as the messenger of Zeus. Herms were also often used as grave markers, and Hermes is the god who leads people to Hades. Finally, herms were property markers that served to ward off evil from Athenian houses, and Hermes was a popular household god.

Hermes is a trickster of sorts, delighting in petty theft and shrewd deals (see the stories of him included in this book's section on tricksters). Yet Zeus seems to have trusted him above all others with his commands. With his broad hat, his golden caduceus (the staff with writhing snakes later given to the medicine god, Asclepius), and his winged sandals, Hermes is most often depicted skimming over the earth on an important mission for his father.

Dionysos is at once the most ambiguous and the most foreign of the Greek gods. His cult became so powerful that the gods and their priests had little choice but to admit him to Mount Olympus. If the theologians and poets of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE were Apollonian by nature, they, like Pentheus in Euripides's the

Bacchar, were forced to confront the ecstasy that was Dionysos, the ecstasy that complements Apollonian order and discipline and is so necessary to art and religion. So it was that the Greeks recognized this popular Thracian and probably Anatolian god, associated with the strange orgiastic rites of the Phrygian mother goddess Cybele and her son-lover Attis (himself a Dionysos figure), and gave him a respected place with Apollo as a resident of the oracular center at Delphi. Dionysos in fact reigned at Delphi in the winter months, when his dances were performed there. Through his association with drama, he was also honored at the great dramatic festivals such as the City Dionysia in Athens. As has been suggested, the reconciliation of Apollo and Dionysos is appropriate to the paradoxical nature of both art and prophecy, in which discipline and possession or inspiration are so closely related.

Dionysos is a god who dies and returns to life. His ritual was itself a ritual of death and rebirth in which flesh was consumed and fertility celebrated with drums and dance and the constant presence of ecstatic women, or maenads, who may have taken part in mysterious orgies. Dionysos is thus, like Osiris in Egypt, Adonis in Babylonia, Tammuz in Sumer, Attis in Phrygia, and even the early form of Zeus in Crete, associated with crops—specifically, in his case, with the grape (and therefore with wine)—and with sexuality (Dionysos was described by Plutarch as the god of all life-giving fluids). Dionysos is a god very much of the earth and, as such, is always an outsider among the gods. Even his birth is odd. Fathered by Zeus on the mortal Semele, he is delivered from Zeus's thigh, where the supreme being hides the fetus after it is removed from his mother, who dies after foolishly making Zeus promise to reveal himself to her in his true form.

One of Dionysos's most famous escapades is described in the *Homeric Hymns*.

What I remember now
is Dionysus, son of
glorious Semele, how he appeared
by the sand of an empty sea,
how it was far out, on a promontory, how
he was like a young man,
an adolescent
His dark hair
was beautiful, it
blew all around him, and
over his shoulders, the strong
shoulders, he held a purple cloak.
Suddenly,
pirates appeared, Tyrrhenians,
they came on the sea wine

sturdily in their ship
and they came fast.
A wicked fate drove them on.
They saw him,
they nodded to each other,
they leaped out
and grabbed him,
they pulled him
into their boat
jumping for joy!
They thought he was
the son of
one of
Zeus' favorite kings:
they wanted to tie him up
hard.
The ropes wouldn't hold.
Willow ropes,
they fell right off him, off arms and legs.
He smiled at them,
motionless,
in his dark eyes.
The helmsman saw this,
he immediately cried out,
he screamed out to his men:
"You fools!
What powerful god is this
whom you've seized,
whom you've tied up?
Not even our ship,
sturdy as it is,
not even our ship
can carry him.
Either this is Zeus,
or it's Apollo, the silver-bow,
or else it's Poseidon!
He doesn't look like
a human person,
he's like the gods
who live on Olympus.

Come on!
Let's unload him, right now,
let's put him
on the dark land.
Don't tie his hands
or he'll be angry, he'll
draw terrible winds to us,
he'll bring us a big storm!"
That's what he said.
The captain, however,
in a bitter voice,
roared back:
"You fool,
look at the wind!
Grab the ropes,
draw the sail.
We men
will take care of him.
I think
He'll make it to Egypt,
or Cyprus,
or the Hyperboreans,
or even further.
In the end
he'll tell
who his friends are,
and his relatives,
and his possessions.
A god sent him to us."
He said this,
then he fixed the mast
and the sail of the ship.
And a wind began to blow
into the sail. And then
they stretched the rigging.
Suddenly,
wonderful things
appeared to them.
First of all,
wine broke out, babbling,

bubbling over their speedy black ship,
it was sweet, it was fragrant,
its odor was divine.

Every sailor who saw it
was terrified.

Suddenly,
a vine sprang up,
on each side,
to the very top of the sail.

And grapes, all over,
clung to it.

And a dark ivy
coiled the mast,
it blossomed with flowers
and yielded
pleasing fruit.

Suddenly,
all the oar-locks
became garlands.
When they saw this
they cried to the helmsman
then and there
to steer their ship
to land.

But
the god became a lion,
an awful lion
high up on the ship,
and he roared at them
terribly.

And then,
in their midst,
he put a bear,
a bear with a furry neck,
and it made gestures.

It threatened,
and the lion,
on the high deck,
scowled down.

Everybody

fled to the stern,
 they panicked, they ran
 to the helmsman, because
 the head of the helmsman was cool.
 But
 the lion, suddenly,
 leaped up, it seized
 the captain!
 They all wanted to escape
 such a doom
 when they saw it.
 They all jumped ship
 into the sea, they jumped
 into the divine sea.
 They became dolphins.
 As for the helmsman,
 he was saved:
 the god pitied him,
 he made him very rich,
 and told him this:
 "Courage, divine Hecator,
 I like you.
 I am Dionysus
 the ear-splitter.
 My mother,
 Cadmaean Semele,
 had me
 when she slept with Zeus."
 Farewell,
 son of Semele,
 who had such a beautiful face.
 Without you,
 the way to compose a sweet song
 is forgotten.

["The Hymn to Dionysos," trans. Charles Boer, in
The Homeric Hymns (Swallow, 1970), pp. 13–17.]

ROME: The Renamed Olympians

The Romans essentially absorbed the Greek gods, primarily through the Etruscans, who were an important presence on the Italian peninsula between

900 and 500 BCE. The primary difference between the Greek and Roman understandings of the gods lay in the Romans' greater emphasis on the gods as personifications of abstractions—love, war, fortune, and so forth. It can also be said that the Roman version of the earlier pantheon was more an official state religion with political ramifications than a religion that spoke to personal or spiritual needs.

In Western literature, the Latin and Greek names for the Olympians have been used almost interchangeably. The list that follows indicates the equivalent names:

Coelus (Heaven) and Terra (Earth) = Uranos and Gaia
 Saturn¹ and Ops (or the Phrygian Cybele) = Kronos and Rhea
 Jupiter or Jove = Zeus
 Juno = Hera
 Neptune = Poseidon
 Pluto = Hades
 Ceres = Demeter
 Proserpina = Persephone
 Vesta² = Hestia
 Apollo = Apollo
 Diana = Artemis
 Minerva = Athena
 Venus = Aphrodite
 Cupid = Eros
 Mars = Ares
 Mercury = Hermes
 Vulcan = Hephaistos
 Bacchus = Dionysos

ICELAND (NORSE): The Aesir and the Vanir

As in the case of the creation story, our sources for the Norse myths are Icelandic works, the *Elder* or *Poetic Edda* of the tenth century CE and the *Younger* or *Prose Edda* written by Snorri Sturluson in about 1220 CE.

The Norse gods and goddesses, known as the Aesir, live in a place called Asgard. As in the case of the Greek myth, these gods gain predominance only at the cost of warfare with another group of gods, called the Vanir. The Aesir are led by Odin and

¹ Saturn is associated with the Roman tradition of the Saturnalia, a festival of renewal and fertility marked at times by licentiousness.

² Thus, vestal virgins were priestesses of Vesta.

Frigg, the Vanir by Freyr and Freya, who are children of the god Njord and are associated, like the Vanir in general and the Greek Titans, with the forces of the earth. Freyr and Freya, as brother and sister, remind us of Osiris and Isis as well. Like the Egyptians, they are, above all, representative of fertility. Eventually the Aesir and the Vanir are reconciled. The end of the gods will come at the apocalyptic Ragnarök.

Odin is the father god. He is also—like Dionysos, Attis, Osiris, and so many others, including Christ—a god who in some sense experiences death. Odin (known as Wodan or Wotan among the Germanic peoples) is married to Frigg, who possesses knowledge of the future, but he is the father of the thunder god, Thor, by Earth herself. Another son of Odin is Baldr, the most beautiful and best of the gods. Baldr is killed by Hoder with the help of the trickster god Loki, whose offspring are the wolf Fenrir and the World Serpent (who will fight against the Aesir at the end of the world), as well as Hel, the ruler of the underworld. The story of the death of Baldr is the Norse version of the descent to the underworld.

The following is the story of the Norse war in Heaven.

In the early days there were two sets of gods, the Vanir, led by Njordr and his children Freyr and Freya, and the Aesir, led by Odin, Tyr, and Thor. These tribes went to war, perhaps owing to an insult by the Aesir to a member of the Vanir. At first the Vanir took the advantage, pressing their attack on Asgard, the home of the Aesir, and destroying the protective walls around it. The Vanir were skilled in *seidr* and other forms of magic unknown to the Aesir and feared and loathed by them, and this magic may have been the secret to the early success of the Vanir. Eventually the Aesir seem to have proved to be the greater warriors, however, and battled the Vanir back to Vanaheim, their home. Neither group was entirely victorious, though, and eventually the two tribes sought peace.

According to some accounts, the gods determined to seal their truce with an exchange of hostages. Njordr and his offspring left the Vanir to live among the Aesir, while Honir and Mimir went from Asgard to Vanaheim. At first the exchange seemed an equitable one: Njordr and Freyr soon held high rank as priests among the Aesir, while Freya taught those who would learn the forbidden magic of *seidr*. For their part, Honir was honored as a powerful leader, while Mimir's advice was held to be peerless in its wisdom. It soon became apparent to the Vanir, however, that they had fared rather poorly in the exchange. While Honir was an able leader as long as Mimir was present to advise him, he was indecisive and ineffectual without his counselor. As it appeared that they had been

duped, the Vanir decided to take their revenge upon Mimir: they cut off his head and sent it to Odin as a token of their displeasure.

Odin, however, always one to see the profit to be made from adversity, was far from discomfited by this grisly gift. Instead, he smeared the head with herbs and balms to preserve it, and whispered magic charms to give it speech. Henceforth Odin was never without the wise counsel of Mimir, and increased his own power, prescience, and wisdom through his acquisition of the bodiless head.

[Christopher R. Fee and David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes, and Kings* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 16.]

IRELAND AND WALES: The Family of Don and the Tuatha de Danann

In the Welsh tales collectively known as *The Mabinogi* or *Mabinogion*, we learn of the family of Don. In Ireland we have the equivalent Tuatha De Danann, the people of Danu. Danu/Don is the great goddess whose reign stretches far back into pre-Celtic Britain and beyond that to Indo-European roots in ancient India, where Danu—the mother of the demon Vrtra—mourns the death of her offspring at the hands of the patriarchal god Indra.

THE FAMILY OF DON

In Wales, Don is a daughter of Mathonwy, the ancient founder of the House of Don and is sometimes said to be the wife of the god of death, Beli. Another child of Mathonwy is Math, the god of wealth who requires that his feet rest on a virgin's lap unless he is at battle. When his virgin/footstool is corrupted by his nephews—Gilfaethwy and the storyteller Gwydion—Math turns the young men into wild animals for a year. Gwydion apparently fathered the great Lleu with his sister, the dawn-goddess Aranrhod, whose loss of virginity was revealed when she was brought to Math as a replacement for his corrupted footstool. As she stepped over Math's magic wand to test her supposed virginity, two boys, Dylan and Lleu, emerged from her. Dylan escaped to the sea, and Lleu was protected and reared by Gwydion.

Besides Gofannon, Gwydion, Gilfaethwy, and Aranrhod, the children of Don include, among lesser figures, the god Lludd . . . and Penardun, who with her husband Llyr (the ocean-god Lir in Ireland and probably the source for *King Lear*) parented Manawydan, the sea-god. By another marriage Penardun was the mother of the

peacemaker Nisien and the strife-maker Efnisien. Llyr fathered the famous Bran and Branwen by another wife.

Bran, whose Irish equivalent is also Bran, a god of the other-world, leads an army into Ireland to protect his sister Branwen, wife of the Irish king Matholwch. Branwen's safety had been threatened by the malicious behavior of her half-brother Efnisien. After a terrible battle, only five pregnant women remained in Ireland to form a new population, and only seven Britons—including the great poet-warrior Taliesen—returned home, led by the head of the dead Bran, which remained magically alive and talking.

THE TUATHA DE DANANN, THE FIRBOLG, THE FOMORIANS, AND THE INVASIONS OF IRELAND

The Irish version of Don is Danu (Dana), the great-mother of the Tuatha De Danann. It was said that the Tuatha De Danann had come to Ireland originally from Greece or from a hole in the sky, that they had been protected by a magical mist, that they had once lived in the ancient cities of Findias, Gorias, Murias, and Falias, and that they were expert at magic and enchantment. It was they who brought druidry to Ireland.

The Tuatha De Danann had to fight for the control of Ireland with the terrible sea-born demonic giants called the Fomorians (Fomorii, Fomors, or Fomhoire) in the north and the dark Firbolg (Fir Bholg) in the south. The Fomorians are traditionally associated, like the ancient Greek Titans and the Vedic Asuras, with forces of nature that stand against order; in the Germanic traditions this role is played by the giants. The Fomorians are often depicted as misshapen, with one eye or one foot. The Firbolg were said by some to be descendants of the Nemedians, who had preceded the Firbolg and the other early peoples in Ireland and were led by Nemed (Nemhedh), son of the king of Scythia in Greece. They had come to Ireland in search of the gold of the Fomorian king Conann. Most of the invaders were drowned, but Nemed was able to establish a foothold, and he built forts and cleared land. The Nemedians were known as great artisans.

In their craftsmanship the Nemedians resembled the Partholonians, who, under their king Partholon, had come to Ireland before them, had fought the Fomorians—led then by the footless Cichol Grinchenghos—and had been destroyed by a plague. Partholon had murdered his father and mother in an unsuccessful attempt to take power in his original homeland. As in the case of

King Arthur, Partholon's history was marred by the story of his wife Dealgnaid's affair with one of his servants, Togda. The Partholonians themselves, according to the twelfth-century Christian writers, had been the second invaders of Ireland, the first being pre-Flood followers of Noah's granddaughter Cesair or, according to others, the Irish Banbha. Of this group, only Fintan (the "Old White One"), survived to live for many centuries and to bear witness to the past.

As for the Nemedians, much of their energy was spent in wars with the Fomorians, and eventually Nemed and 3,000 of his people died of a plague. After Nemed's death, the Nemedians were controlled by the Fomorians, who demanded excessive tribute of them. But with the help of Greek allies, the Nemedians, led by Nemed's son Fergus, were able to defeat their enemy. It was Fergus who killed the Fomorian king Conann. But few Nemedians survived an attack from the sea by another Fomorian king, More, son of Dele. After this battle, the Nemedians scattered in three groups. One group went to mainland Greece where they were enslaved and made to transport bags of soil on their backs from fertile land to rocky terraces in the hills. Thus the name Firbolg, or "bag men."

Along with other early peoples, the Gailioin and the Fir Dhomhnann, the Firbolg would eventually, upon their return, institute in Ireland the idea of the association of the sacred kingship and the fertility of the land. It was they who divided Ireland into provinces or "fifths." Another group of Nemedians, led by Fergus's son, escaped to Britain. The final group, led by Beotac, went to the northern Greek Islands. This group set about learning the mysteries of creation, including magic and druidry. According to some, a few of these people became so knowledgeable that they were deified as the Tuatha De Danann.

The rulers of the Tuatha De Danann when they came to Ireland were King Nuada (Nuadhu) and his warrior queen, Macha. They established their court at Tara. Nuada Argetlamhor is known as Nuada of the Silver Hand, whose Welsh counterpart in this aspect is the Lludd cognate, Nudd of the Silver Hand. Nuada was so named because after he lost his hand in a defeat of the Firbolg at the First Battle of Magh Tuireadh, the medicine god, Dian Ceeht, replaced the lost limb with a silver version. It was the loss of the hand that led Nuada to transfer his crown to Bres, the handsome son of a Tuatha De Danann woman and the Fomorian king Elatha, and the husband of the fertility-goddess Brigid. When Bres's tyrannical ways led to his dethronement, he turned to the Fomorians for help.

Nuada was restored to the throne, but he gave up power to Lugh, who used his slingshot at the Second Battle of Magh Tuireadh to kill the much feared Balor, a glance from whose "evil eye" could destroy armies. As Balor's eye was opened, Lugh cast his missile with such force that the eye was driven back through the skull of Balor, and thus its destructive power was unleashed upon the Fomorians. By that time, however, Balor already had killed Nuada as well as Macha, the warrior-goddess queen. With the defeat of the Fomorians the Tuatha De Danann could afford to spare Bres in return for his teaching them the arts of agriculture. That Bres was so clearly related to fertility suggests that the myth of this war might have been derived from the same Indo-European theme of divine conflict as was the Norse myth of the battle between the Vanir and the Aesir. Hence the Fomorians seem to constitute at one time both the productive powers of fertility and the fearsome forces of destruction that exist side by side in nature.

The relationship between the one-handed Nuada and the battle-god Lugh calls to mind a similar one between the Norse Tyr and Odin, and this relationship seems to have very old roots. Further, several similarities between Odin and Lugh imply that both have some common Indo-European ancestor: Lugh was part Fomorian, just as Odin was part giant, and the name *Lugh* itself may well come from a Gaulish word for "raven," an animal explicitly linked to Odin. Finally, the association between Nuada and Lugh also may be the genesis of the Arthurian story of the fisher king; *Nuada* may be derived from a word meaning "fisher," and the original myth seems to have had to do with a powerful war figure who comes to the aid of a maimed king.

Two other deities stand as particularly important figures in the Irish pantheon, figures of whom other tribal gods and goddesses were in some sense emanations. These primary deities are the Dagda as the tribal father and the Morrigan as the earth-mother/war-goddess, who was associated in triple form with Macha—a figure descended from the Gaulish horse-goddess Epona and one related to the British mare-goddess Rhiannon—and Bodb. The Dagda, father of Brigid, was a primary leader of the Tuatha De Danann; he was the protector of a magic cauldron of prosperity that had been brought from the city of Murias. The Dagda was known as "the Good." As the story goes, before a great battle the gods held a council of war during which each god announced his particular powers and intentions. When the Dagda's turn came he said, "I will do on my own all that you promise to do." In short, he is "the Good" because he was good at everything, assimilating the positive qualities of all the gods.

As for the Morrigan, she brings together the fruitful elements of a fertility goddess and the fear associated with a battle-goddess. Like her ancient Indian ancestor the goddess Devi, she is at once mother and destroyer, goddess of life and of war. Celtic goddesses often exhibit voracious sexual appetites, and the Morrigan combines such amorous lust with bloodlust. The story is told of how Morrigan made sexual advances toward the Irish hero Cuchulainn, advances to which he did not respond; at his death she took vengeance for this insult by perching on his shoulder as his life blood flowed from him. This story resembles the incident in the ancient Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh*, in which the advances of the great goddess Inanna or Ishtar are refused by the mortal hero Gilgamesh. The combination of fertility and destructive power manifested in the Morrigan is associated with the identification of goddess and “sovranty” in Irish mythology; cropfields and battlefields both do their part to make up the country, and the Morrigan has power over both.

[Christopher R. Fee and David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes, and Kings* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 69–73.]

JAPAN: The Kami

Shinto deities in Japan are known as *kami*. Shinto is literally “the way of the *kami*.” For the Japanese Buddhist, the Shinto *kami* are sometimes seen as earthly representations of buddhas. In the esoteric traditions of the Shingon Buddhist sect especially, the *kami*—like everything else in the universe—were outward representations of the Buddha Dainichi. But the concept of *kami* involved more than divinities per se in the pre-Buddhist Japanese culture. That culture was animistic; that is, everything in the world was seen as “animated” by a vitality that came from the spirit realm, the realm of the five primordial deities. These deities were the “heavenly *kami*,” the ones who came into being at the beginning of time. They were Amenominakanushi, Takamimusubi, and Kamimusubi, the creators, and later Umashiashikabihikoji and Amenotokotachi, who represented the energy of life, and Heaven. Among the *kami* who followed and who were central to Japanese mythology were the First man, Izanagi, and the First Woman, Izanami, the parents of the great sun goddess Amaterasu, the ancestor of Japanese emperors, and her storm god brother Susanowo.

[David A. Leeming, *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 225.]