# Athena

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Goddess of wisdom, [war](http://www.ancient.eu.com/war/) and the [crafts](http://www.ancient.eu.com/crafts/), and favourite daughter of [Zeus](http://www.ancient.eu.com/zeus/), [Athena](http://www.ancient.eu.com/athena/) was, perhaps, the wisest, most courageous, and certainly the most resourceful of the Olympian gods.

Zeus was told that his son would take his throne from him, just as he had taken power from his father Cronus. Accordingly, when Metis was pregnant, he swallowed her and Athena was born from Zeus’ head, wearing armour and fully grown. A popular theme in ancient art, [Hephaistos](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Hephaistos/) is often depicted in the role of midwife, splitting Zeus’ head with an axe.

Epithets of Athena include Pallas (girl) and Parthenos (virgin), living up to which, she is conspicuous amongst the gods for not indulging in illicit relationships with other divinities, demi-gods, or mortals. Other epithets were Promachos (of war) - perhaps referring to more patriotic, defensive, and strategic [warfare](http://www.ancient.eu.com/warfare/), rather than attacking warfare, in contrast to her more aggressive, conflict-loving brother [Ares](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Ares/), Ergane (of the crafts), and Nike (victory).

The goddess was not to be trifled with as her transformation of [Medusa](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Medusa/) into a Gorgon demonstrates, and her sense of justice was such that acts of impiety were swiftly avenged, as with the Archaean heroes following their capture of [Troy](http://www.ancient.eu.com/troy/) and desecration of the goddess’ sanctuary.

Athena is also associated with household crafts, giving mortals the gifts of cooking and sewing. She is said to have invented the aulos but on seeing her reflection and her puffed cheeks when playing these pipes, she threw them away, to be picked up by the satyr Marsyas.

She is closely associated with [Athens](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Athens/), the [city](http://www.ancient.eu.com/city/) named in her honour after the people of Attica chose her as their patron following her gift of the olive tree, symbol of peace and plenty. The 5th century BCE [temple](http://www.ancient.eu.com/temple/) of the [Parthenon](http://www.ancient.eu.com/parthenon/), which continues to this day to dominate the [acropolis](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Acropolis/) of the city, was built in her honour.  Her adopted son Erichthonios, one of the first kings of Athens, is traditionally credited with inaugurating the Panathenaic festival, held every four years to honour the goddess. The festival included a magnificent procession through the city, the presentation to Athena of a specially woven peplos (depicting the Gigantomachy), and athletic games. Prizes for the games were amphorae painted with a figure of Athena and contained prime olive oil. In her role as protector, she was also revered in many other major [cities](http://www.ancient.eu.com/cities/), notably as patron of [Sparta](http://www.ancient.eu.com/sparta/), as the founder of Thebes in Boeotia, and at [Corinth](http://www.ancient.eu.com/corinth/) where she appeared on the city’s [coins](http://www.ancient.eu.com/coin/).

Protector of [Herakles](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Herakles/), Athena often aids him in his twelve labours, for example, by helping him hold the world as [Atlas](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Atlas/) searches for the sacred apples of the Hesperides. [Perseus](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Perseus/) was another favourite and was given a shield to protect himself in his quest to kill Medusa. [Achilles](http://www.ancient.eu.com/achilles/) is helped to kill Hektor, and [Odysseus](http://www.ancient.eu.com/odysseus/) too was often given the benefit of Athena’s wisdom, for example the idea to dress as a beggar on his return to Ithaca, and he is also protected from the arrows of his rivals when he clears the palace of the interlopers. Jason was yet another hero who benefitted from Athena’s resourcefulness when she encouraged Argo to build the first [Greek](http://www.ancient.eu.com/greek/) long ship which would carry his name and the fame of the Argonauts.

Athena was a major protagonist in [Homer](http://www.ancient.eu.com/homer/)’s account of the [Trojan War](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Trojan_War/) in the Iliad where she supports the Archaeans and their heroes, especially Achilles, to whom she gives encouragement and wise counsel, Menelaos, who is saved from the arrow of Pandaros, and Diomedes, whose spear, in one notable episode, is diverted to injure Ares himself. [Aphrodite](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Aphrodite/) was another divinity who came off second best when she clashed with Athena. She also gave protection to Odysseus and is credited with giving him the idea of the Wooden Horse. Both Homer and [Hesiod](http://www.ancient.eu.com/hesiod/) refer to Athena as ‘bright-eyed’ and ‘Tritogeneia’. She is also frequently called ‘goddess of spoil’, the ‘lovely-haired goddess’, and ‘Alalkomenaian Athena’

Objects associated with the goddess include an owl - symbol of wisdom - and the olive tree. She is often depicted in art with armour, a golden helmet, a shield, and holding a spear. Her armour is the aegis made, in some accounts, from the skin of a Giant, hung with tassels of [gold](http://www.ancient.eu.com/gold/), and featuring the head of the Gorgon given to her by Perseus. The most famous representation of Athena in the ancient world was undoubtedly the monumental gold and ivory statue of the goddess by Pheidias which resided in the Parthenon of Athens and was over 12 m high. The statue has been lost but survives in the form of smaller [Roman](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Roman/) copies and shows Athena standing majestic, fully armed, holding [Nike](http://www.ancient.eu.com/nike/) in her right hand and with a shield in her left depicting scenes from the [Battles](http://www.ancient.eu.com/battle/) of the [Amazons](http://www.ancient.eu.com/amazon/) and the Giants. On her helmet were a [sphinx](http://www.ancient.eu.com/sphinx/) and two griffins. Celebrated surviving depictions of Athena include friezes from the Parthenon and metopes from the temple of Zeus at [Olympia](http://www.ancient.eu.com/Olympia/).

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| **Athena, Arachne and the Weaving Contest**  **A Punishment Story** |
| |  |  | | --- | --- | | http://www.greek-gods.info/greek-gods/athena/stories/athena-arachne/images/Athena,-Arachne-and-the-Weaving-Contest.jpg |  |   In a small town of Ledia, in Northern Greece, there once lived a beautiful maid with the name Arachne. Arachne was famous in town for being a very skillful weaver and spinner and every day many girls and nymphs were stopping by to see her weave.   However, Arachne was a very vain girl and couldn’t stop boasting about her talent. She claimed that she had learned the skill all by herself and that there was no one else in the world who could weave as delicately as her... she even felt that she could compete against [Athena](http://www.greek-gods.info/greek-gods/athena/), the goddess of skill, and win her with ease.   When Athena heard these words, she got disappointed and decided to disguise as an old lady and appear in front of Arachne. "My dear", she told Arachne, "I am old and have much experience from life, so let me give you one advice: don’t ever mess up with a goddess! No mortal can compete against Athena. Take back your words and kindly ask for forgiveness..."  Arachne got furious and threw the thread against the old woman, telling her: "I don’t need your advice, I know best what I can do! If Athena really dares, then she should come here and compete against me!"  At that moment, the old woman transformed herself into the radiant goddess Athena. On her sight, everybody in the room kneeled down in awe... not so Arachne, who couldn't wait to compete against her.  Soon the competition started and both contestants were doing really well. Athena was weaving the Parthenon and her contest with god Poseidon. Arachne, on the other hand, was making fun of the gods by weaving scenes of gods full of weaknesses and fears.  Arachne’s work seemed to be perfect technically, yet it was not beautiful because it was showing disregard of the gods. When she saw this, Athena became very offended and told Arachne: "You may be foolish and stubborn, but you seem to love your work. So why don’t you go ahead and spin forever!"  Immediately, Athena sprinkled her with the juice of magical herbs and the body of Arachne transformed into a small and ugly animal, which nowadays is known as the spider.   **Since then, the spider is cursed to be trapped inside her own web, weaving constantly and endlessly... but having finally all her works destroyed by man!** |

**Study Questions – Answer all questions in complete sentences!**

1. Athena’s mother is Metis, the goddess of prudence. Define in your own words what prudence means.
2. Why was Zeus worried about having a child?
3. How was Athena born and what was she wearing?
4. What image did Athena weave?
5. What image did Arachne weave?
6. What did Athena do to Arachne?
7. What lesson was Athena teaching Arachne and those who were present?
8. What is Athena’s symbol and what does it mean? How does it relate to the story?
9. Add the story of Athena to your reading log.