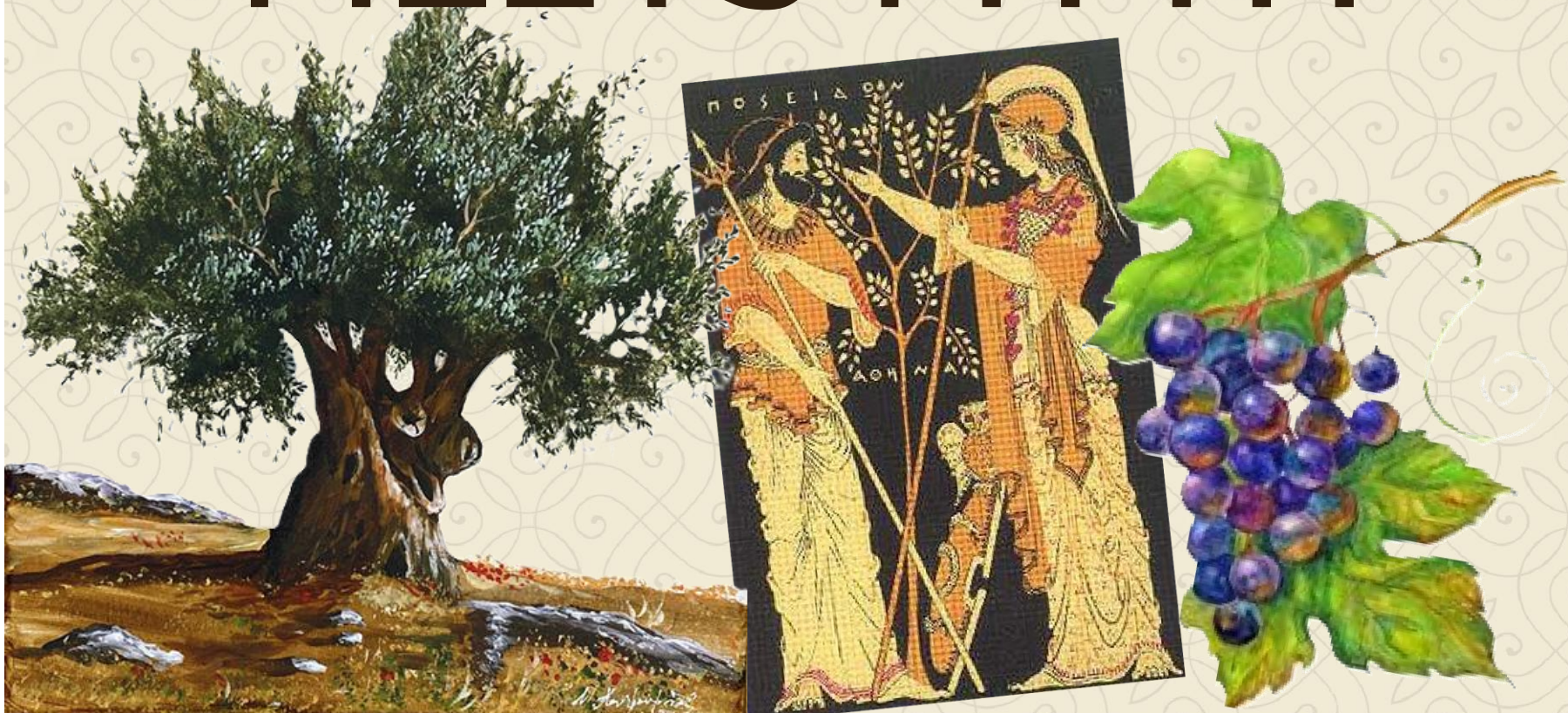


NATURE MEETS MYTH





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Nature and Greek Mythology

"At the beginning of the world, no one was what they seemed. No one and nothing. For example, if you saw an eagle, it could have been a god. If you saw a bull, it might have Zeus hidden within. If a woman saw her husband, she couldn't be sure it was truly her husband! Even the trees, the water and the stones might not actually have been trees, water and stones. Because back then, the immortals were countless. Countless were also the truths they contained."

In Greek mythical thought, humans, nature and gods form a harmonious whole. This harmony,

which is often associated with natural balance in Greek mythology, is sacred.

It is worth noting here the difference in relation to monotheistic religions and our own conception of the world: The gods of the ancient Greeks did not create the world through an act that signifies their transcendence. The gods are born from the world. The Olympian gods appear simultaneously with the universe. Therefore, there is a part of the divine in the world and a part of the cosmic world in the gods. The thunderbolt, the olive tree, the owl and the oak are their sacred symbols: all of nature is sacred, yet it is subject to anthropomorphic gods.



"This is not a religion of nature: the gods of the ancient Greeks were not personifications of natural forces or phenomena. It is something entirely different. The thunderbolt and the high peaks are not Zeus. They belong to Zeus. To Zeus, who is beyond them, since he encompasses everything within a force that touches realities, no longer natural but psychological, moral or institutional."

[Z. P. Vernant](#)



1. THE OLIVE TREE



The importance of the olive tree

Athena offers the olive tree to the residents of Athens



Hercules sits in the shade of the olive tree and Athena fills his cup with wine.

Historians consider the **Mediterranean** basin as the place where olive trees first appeared around 7000 years ago.

The **olive tree**, inextricably linked to the culture of the **Greeks**, is a timeless symbol of peace, wisdom, fertility, prosperity, good fortune and victory. According to mythology, the **olive tree**:

- was brought to the Greeks by the **goddess Athena** and to honour her, they named the city of Athens after her.
- the olive tree was brought by **Hercules** from the land of the Hyperboreans. He planted a wild olive tree in **Olympia**, the branches of which were used to crown the Olympic champions.
- the cultivation of the olive tree was taught by **Aristaeus**, the son of Apollo and Cyrene, who is said to be the **originator of the early press**, using a lever to produce olive oil.

Myths about the olive tree



It is probably the most **famous myth** about the olive tree!

When Cecrops, son of Earth and Uranus, founded the city later called Athens, two gods, Athena and Poseidon, claimed its protection. Poseidon was the first to bring water as a gift to the city by striking the rock of the Acropolis with his trident. Then the goddess Athena struck the rock with her spear and an olive tree grew. None of the two gods would retreat and so the other gods of Olympus were called upon to decide on the protection of the city. Athena managed to gather the most votes and finally got the protection of the city, which was named Athens and had the Olive tree as its symbol! In fact, all the trees that came from Athena's olive tree were sacred trees and were protected by Zeus.

Hercules' club

According to mythology, Hercules always carried a club with him, which he made from an olive tree he found in the Saronic Gulf. Once, according to Pausanias, Hercules visited Troizina and touched the statue of Hermes there with his club. Then the club sprouted, took root and was reborn and remained there like a wild olive tree.





Why do we wreath the winner of the Olympic Games with an olive wreath?



According to Pausanias, the olive wreath was introduced from the 6th Olympic Games onwards, when it replaced the apple that athletes received as a prize.

A namesake of the demigod Hercules, Hercules the Idaeus, along with the rest of his four brothers (the five Dactyls) from Crete, where they came from, went to Olympia. There, according to mythology, he organised the first running races and crowned the winner with a branch of wild olive tree in honour of Zeus. He also decreed that the races should be held every five years, as many as the five brothers were.

Myths of Aesop about the olive tree

In Aesop's myths the olive tree appears as a proud and strong tree that often overestimates itself and boasts about its superiority.

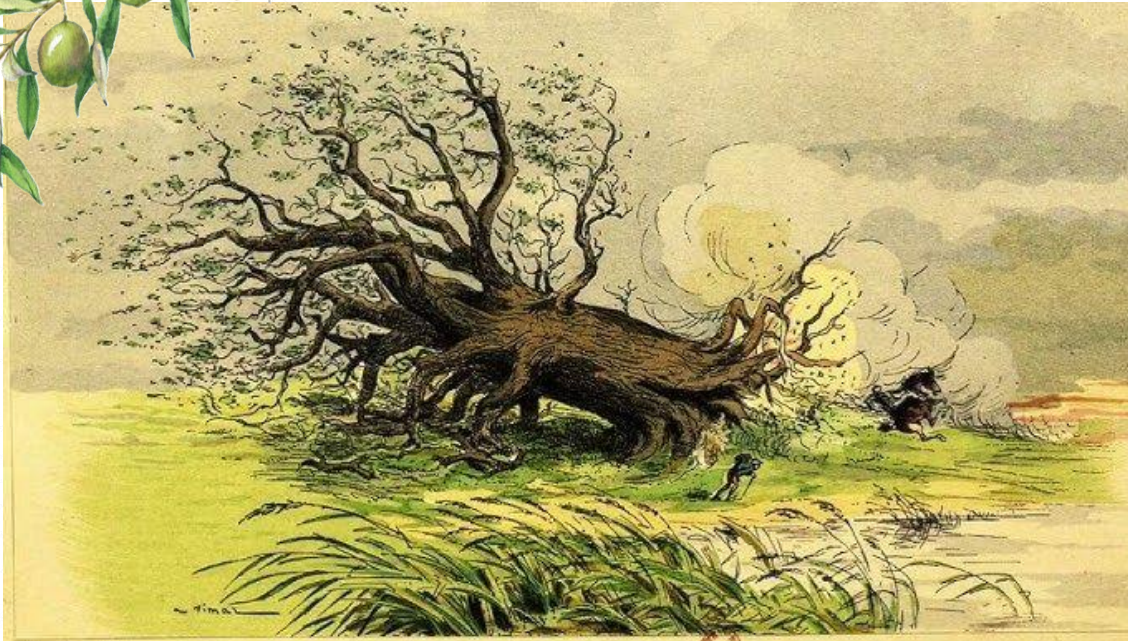


The olive tree and the fig tree

An olive tree mocked the fig tree next to it and said to it: *"Poor thing, your leaves come and go according to the seasons! Don't you see me blooming and having leaves all year round?"* But a hard winter came and snow covered the olive tree. The leaves and branches of the olive tree leaned under the weight and eventually the olive tree was burned by the ice. But the fig tree endured the hard winter as it had no leaves and snow slipped on its bare branches and fell down.



The olive tree and the reed



The olive tree and the reed

The **olive tree** and the reed fought over which was stronger and sturdier, and the **olive tree** told the reed that she always stood strong and sturdy while the reed bent and bent in the wind. One day the wind blew so hard that no matter how hard the **olive tree** stood, it could not resist and eventually its trunk broke. In contrast, the reed, which could bend, withstood the strong wind.

2. THE WINE



*Ancient Greek woman
diluting wine*



Wine in the Ancient Mediterranean



Wine was the most popular drink in ancient Mediterranean. With its deep roots in mythology, integral role in daily life, and significance in rituals, wine spread through colonization to the coastal regions of the Mediterranean and beyond. The Greeks, in particular, became passionate consumers of **wine** and so demand was always high.

Wine was a common, relatively cheap and everyday drink. It was drunk on its own, or as an accompaniment to meals. The Greeks diluted their **wine** with water (1 part wine to 3 parts water). This dilution helped to prevent excessive alcoholism, which (at least among the social elite) was considered a characteristic of 'barbarian' foreign cultures and was widely satirised in ancient Greek comedy. Drunkenness frequently appears in Greek myths as a catalyst for thoughtless and reckless behavior.

God Dionysus and the wine



Nymphs and satyrs

Our Ancient Greek myths subtly conceal truths and historical facts in a simple yet profound way. One such example is the Myth of the "Vine and Wine", which connects wine to the god Dionysus.



This myth tells how the god Dionysus, as a baby, saw a vine growing beside his cradle, where the Nymphs had placed him. Fascinated by its fruit, he reached out, plucked some grapes, and tasted them—becoming intoxicated for the first time. The Nymphs and Satyrs, too, drank the grape juice, growing merry as they danced and tumbled down the mountain. Their revelry carried them through valleys, meadows, cities, and distant lands. At its core, the myth symbolizes both the joy brought by wine and its early spread to other regions.

According to mythology, **wine** was first introduced to people ...



by Oeneas:

According to the legend, a crane would often disappear and when it came back, it would appear full. The shepherd Staphylos, watched it and saw it go to a **vineyard** and eat the **grapes**. It is said that the **grapes** were named after Staphylos. **Oeneas** made the **wine** from the **grapes** and so the **wine** was called oinos - "wine" after his name. The water that was first used to mix the **wine** was taken from the Achelooos river.



Another legend says:

Dionysus had in his retinue a handsome young man, **Ambelos** (= **wine**). One day, while riding a wild bull, **Ambelos** fell and was killed. Then Dionysus begged Zeus to transform him into a plant, namely the Vine (**Ambelos** in Greek).



Myths of Aesop about **wine**

*The fox and the **grapes***

There was a fox which was starving to death, when suddenly she saw a bunch of **grapes** hanging from a vine. She struggled to reach them, but failed. *So what could she do?* She got up to leave and muttered to herself:

Never mind, they are sour anyway!

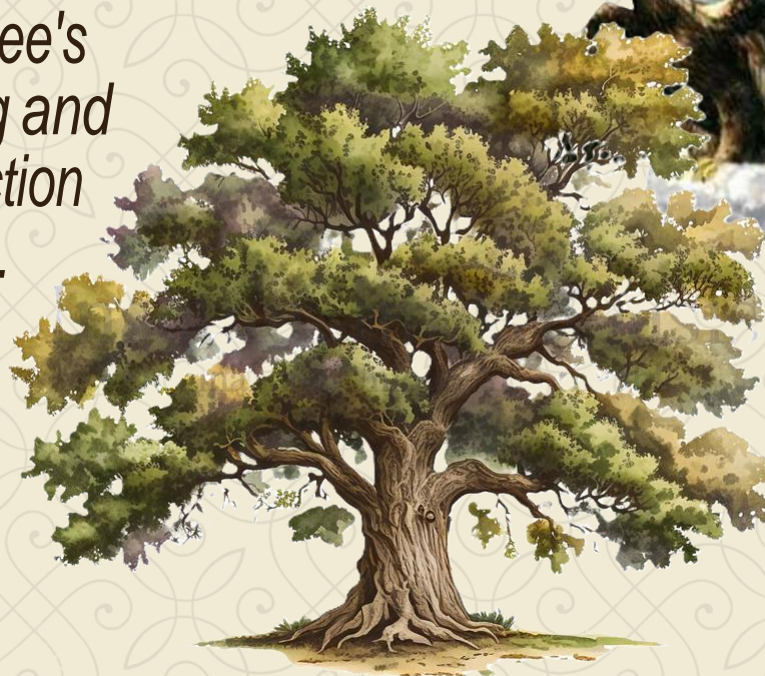


3. THE OAK TREE

Oak tree: The sacred tree of the ancient Greeks

Oak was the sacred tree of Gaia and later of the mighty Zeus. The **oak** was a tree dedicated to the god of thunder because the tree's resistance to lightning and perhaps even its attraction has long been known.

Oak tree: The sacred tree of the ancient Greeks



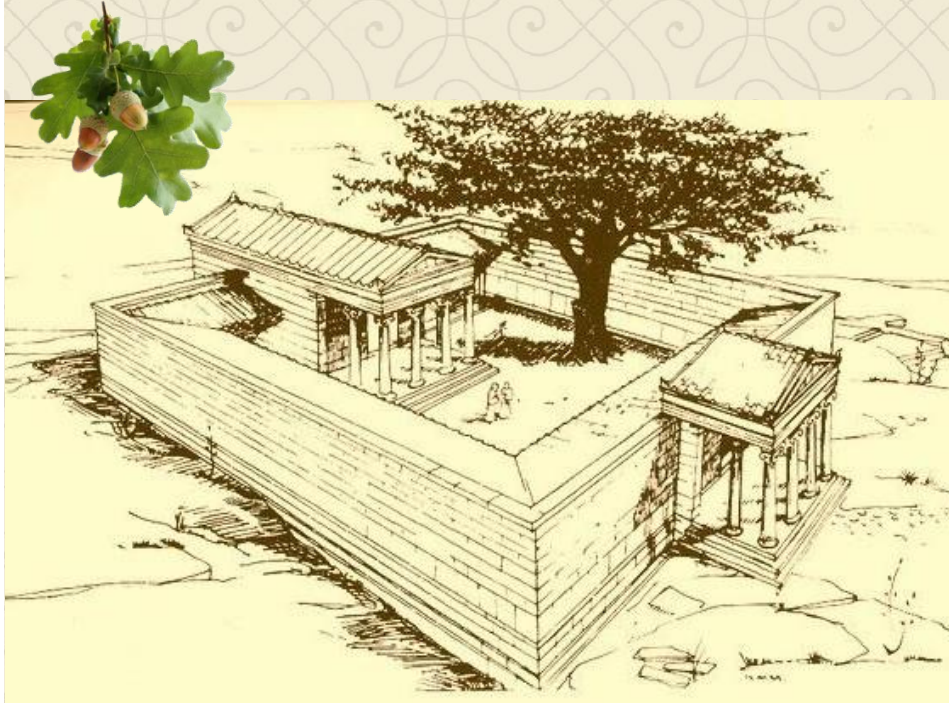
The oak tree and the Oracle of Dodona

The oak was the sacred prophetic tree of the Oracle of Dodona, the oldest oracle in the world dedicated to Zeus.



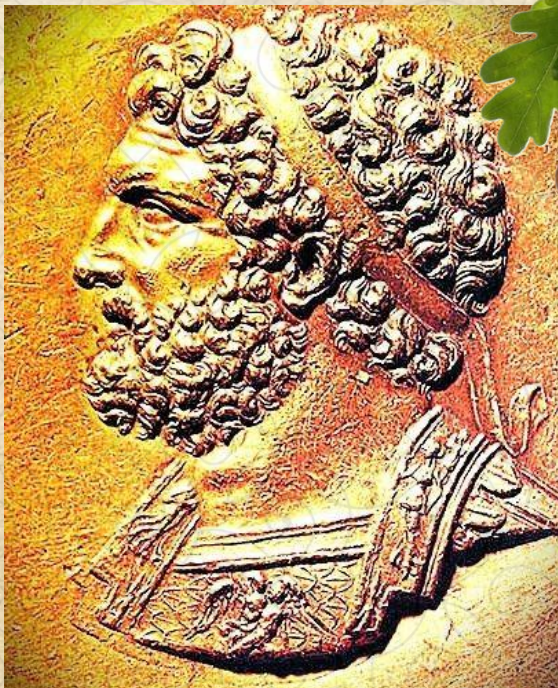
Regarding the foundation of the Oracle of Dodona, Herodotus recounts that two priestesses from Thebes in Egypt were sold into slavery.

One founded the oracle of Ammon Zeus in Libya, while the other founded a sanctuary of Zeus in Dodona beneath a sacred oak that had sprung up naturally. Over time, as she learned Greek fluently, she formally founded the oracle. This account explains the local tradition of the "black dove" that spoke with a human voice: According to one interpretation of the myth, the dove symbolizes the Egyptian priestess, who initially spoke "*barbarian*", meaning an unintelligible foreign language - resembling birdsong- but later spoke Greek, making her words comprehensible to the locals.



A royal tree!

The oak tree was also the sacred tree of the Greek royal houses of Macedonia, historically and archaeologically proven by the numerous archaeological finds discovered in Macedonian royal tombs. Its leaves were the decorations of golden wreaths and especially the golden wreath of **King Philip II of Macedonia**.



King Philip II of Macedonia

4. THE MYTH OF THE CROCUS

According to Greek mythology, **Crocus** was a friend of the god Hermes. One day, while the two friends were playing, Hermes accidentally hit **Crocus** on the head and killed him. A flower grew at the site of the incident. Three drops of the unfortunate youth's blood that fell in the center of the flower gave the spots of the plant that has since been named **Crocus**.



According to another version, **Crocus** was a young man who, because of an unfortunate love for the nymph Smilaka, was transformed into the eponymous plant. At the same time, Smilax became the eponymous climbing plant (*Smilax Aspera-Urbia*).

5. THE FIG TREE

According to the second version, when the goddess of agriculture, Demeter, was informed of the disappearance of her daughter Persephone, who had been kidnapped by Pluto, she left Olympus. She was transformed into an old woman and, deeply enraged as she was, she prevented the earth from producing fruit. In Eleusis she was hosted by the king Phytalus.

In return for his hospitality, she allowed the **fig tree** to germinate and she taught him how to cultivate it. Hence, the Athenians' claim that the fig tree originated in Attica.



*There are two mythological versions about the appearance of the **fig tree**:*



According to the first, it was the tree into which the **Titan Sykes** was transformed by his mother Earth, in order to save himself from Zeus' persecution.

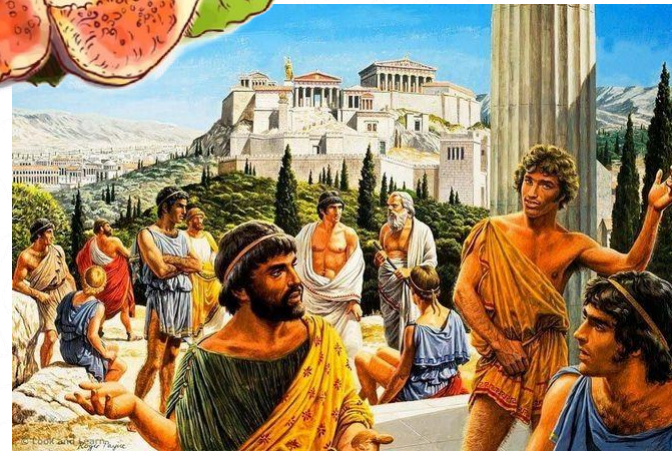


According to History...



Herodotus mentions that Xerxes' decision to conquer Attica was made when he first tasted dried **figs** from Athens. The Athenians were very fond of **figs**, which probably constituted their dinner.

For this reason their export was forbidden by law. There were special rewards for those who reported the theft and export of **figs**, who were called "sycophants". Because there were many false complaints, the term was changed and took on its current meaning that of a flatterer, who excessively praises someone to gain favours.



6. THE APPLE



The *apple* in ancient mythology had a strong erotic role and was considered a magic, aphrodisiac food.

The Apple of Discord

When Thetis married the elderly mortal king Peleus, all the gods were invited to the wedding except **Eris**, who was not allowed to attend by order of Zeus, because she always caused discord and upheaval. Offended, **Eris** threw a golden *apple* (*the apple of discord*) towards the wedding venue which read: "*to the fairest one*". The apple was claimed by Hera, Athena and Aphrodite.



Their dispute was particularly heated and Zeus ordered Hermes to take the goddesses to the handsome **Paris, the prince of Troy**, to decide. The goddesses appeared before him and offered him gifts should he choose each: Athena offered him wisdom and skill in battle, Hera offered him leadership skills to rule Asia and Europe, while Aphrodite offered him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world, *the beautiful Helen*, queen of Sparta. Paris chose the gift of Aphrodite and this was the reason for the **Trojan War**.



7. MYTHS FOR ORANGES

The Golden Apples

King Eurystheus of Tiryns ordered **Hercules** to bring him the apples of the Hesperides. These trees grew in the garden of the gods and were a gift from Gaia to Hera for her marriage to Zeus. Perhaps this is why the orange is considered a symbol of fertility and happy marital life. In order to protect them, Hera entrusted their safekeeping to the nymphs Hesperides and the dragon Ladon, a fearsome serpent with a hundred heads.



After many adventures **Hercules** managed to get three golden fruits and bring them to Eurystheus, who did not want to keep them and gave them to **Hercules**. He gave them to the goddess Athena and she returned them to the garden of the gods, since stealing them was a blasphemous act.



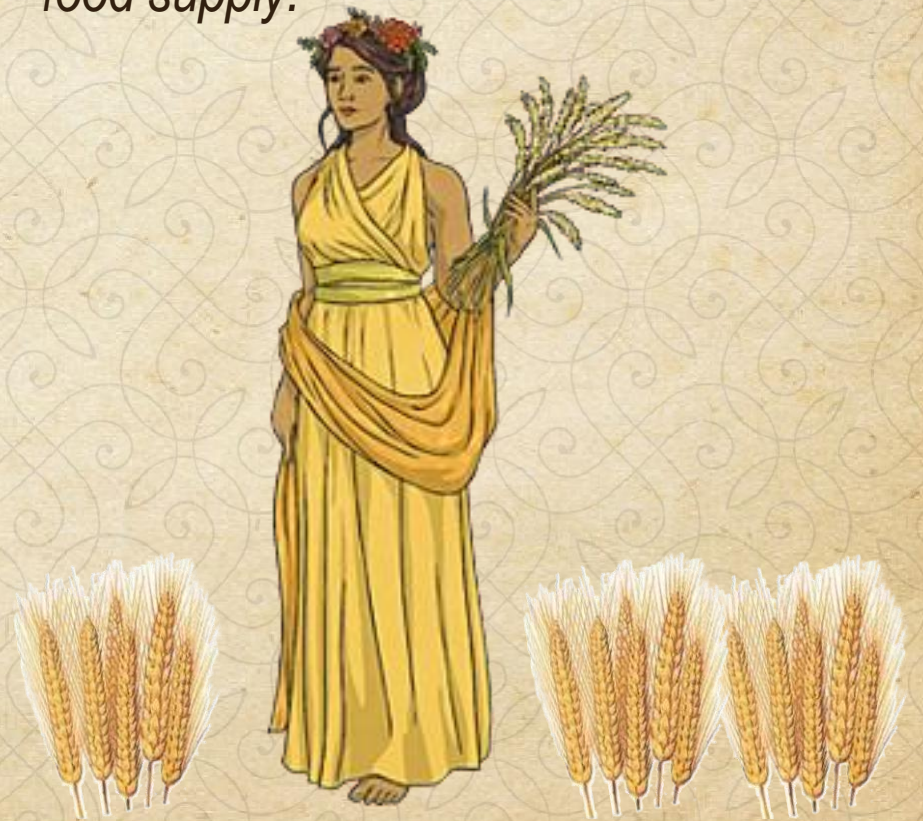


8. THE WHEAT

The orator Isocrates, in his speech *Panegyricus*, emphasizes that the goddess Demeter bestowed upon humanity the gift of cultivated grain, allowing them to rise above a primitive, animal-like existence.

"When Demeter arrived in our land while wandering in search of her abducted daughter, Persephone, our ancestors welcomed her with hospitality. In gratitude, she bestowed upon them two great gifts: first, the fruits of wheat and barley, which freed them from a primitive, animal-like existence, and second, the sacred Eleusinian rituals, through which initiates gained the sweetest hopes—both for the end of this life and for eternity." (Panegyricus, Isocrates 28)

In Greek mythology, wheat, like other cereal, is closely linked to the goddess Demeter. The Athenians proudly claimed that Demeter first taught them how to cultivate wheat and barley, ensuring a stable food supply.





THE

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