

## Athena

Below you will find a short description of the goddess Athena. Please bear in mind that many myths, in a variety of ways, have been told about the goddess. This information is intended as a starting point for your project, so please remember that the point of the competition is to create a brand new story about the goddess. (To the Romans Athena's name was Minerva).

Let us start at the beginning. Athena is one of the Olympic gods, she is the daughter of Zeus (king of the gods) and Metis (Personification of Thought/Goddess of Wisdom). When Metis became pregnant, Zeus received a prophecy that the child would be extremely powerful, and could defeat him. Fearing the loss of his position as king of the gods, he resolved to get rid of the possible threat by swallowing Metis whole. Problem Solved! Or so he thought. Some time later, he had an enormous headache, and Hephaestus (the black-smith god) opened his head (literally). Out jumped Athena in full body armour. This myth was one of the Athenians' favourite and there are many depictions of it, for example on the Parthenon and on Greek Vases.

Who was Athena as a goddess? She was many things to many people. To Ancient Greeks, gods were rarely responsible for just one thing, and so we find Athena involved in war, helping mortal heroes on their adventures, teaching people how to weave. She was also known as a virgin goddess, meaning that she never married.

One of her nicknames, *Promachos*, means first in battle, characterizing her bravery and determination. Another, *Pallas*, meant "the one carrying a spear". There are many statues of Athena inspired by these nicknames in the Museum of Classical Archaeology. She wears a helmet, and carries a spear and a shield. She also often wears an *aegis* (a protective piece of clothing) and is accompanied by the goddess of victory, Nike. Athena is very different, however, from the god of war, Ares. As a goddess of Wisdom, her skills lie in cunning and logic. She often helps heroes, such as Odysseus or Perseus, through carefully crafted plans and stratagems.

Because of her wisdom, the Owl is one of the symbols of Athena. The other, an olive tree, reminds Greeks of the contest between Poseidon and Athena. Each wanted to become the patron god of Athens (the city did not yet have a name then), and each was asked to demonstrate their gifts to the population. Poseidon made a spring of clear water appear, and Athena wisely made use of the water to plant an olive tree. She was chosen to be the patron of the city, giving it its name.

As you can see Athena, smart, brave, and not interested in settling down, inspired a lot of stories - we can't wait to see how she inspires you!

For more inspiration, why not pay a visit to the Museum of Classical Archaeology to check out our latest exhibition, 'Goddesses' by Marian Maguire, one local artist's reimagining of Athena and her friends for a modern age. If you can't get to Cambridge, take a look at the Museum website to hear the artist's own account of her latest works (<https://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/museum/exhibitions/exhibitions/goddesses>).