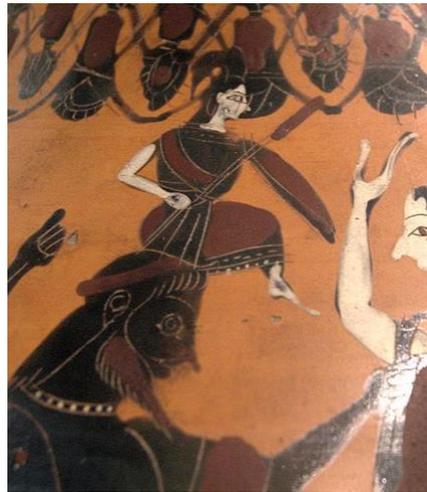


## Athena — Warrior goddess

Athena was the daughter of **Zeus**, the king of the gods, and **Metis**, Titan goddess of good counsel and wisdom. (The **Titans** were the gods who ruled before the Olympian gods). Hesiod, an ancient Greek storyteller, said that Mother Earth had told Zeus that if Metis gave birth to a son, Zeus would be overthrown. Zeus therefore swallowed Metis, so that she could not give birth. Some time later Zeus had a headache and he needed **Hephaistos**, the blacksmith god of craftsmanship, to open his head to stop the pain: this was the moment of Athena's birth. In some ancient pictures she is shown wearing armour at her birth, when she jumped out of Zeus' head.



The birth of Athena on a black-figure amphora, ca. 550–525 BC, in Paris (Musée du Louvre F 32).

We can recognise Athena on pots by the things she wears, especially her helmet, lance and **aegis**. The aegis was the fleece or skin of a special goat, on which Zeus placed the head of the Gorgon Medusa [[Myth and Religion 5, 51](#)]. **Medusa** was a mythical monster who was so horrible that her gaze turned everyone into stone. So Athena gave Perseus a bronze shield to use as a mirror when he cut off her head. By looking at Medusa's reflection in the mirror, rather than her face, Perseus avoided being turned to stone. Grateful for Athena's help, he gave her the head as a present.

Athena was a goddess with many different roles, especially wisdom, war and handicraft. She was wise because of her parents and her strange birth from the

head of Zeus. The owl, which the Ancient Greeks believed to be the bird of wisdom, therefore became one of her symbols [Greece 37]. When armed for war, she is called **Athena Promachos** (champion or fighter) [Greece 37]. This Athena, goddess of war, took her chariot into battle on the side of the Greeks in the Trojan War [Warfare 20]. Alongside the Olympian gods, Athena fought in the **gigantomachy** (battle with the giants) and overpowered the giants, who had brought chaos into the world [Greece 32].

The warrior Athena protected people and their cities, so she was also a city goddess. In this protective role she is called **Athena Polias**, which means Athena of the city, (**polis** is the Greek word for city state). At Athens she became the patron goddess because she won a competition against Poseidon, the river god. According to a founding legend of Athens, the god who brought the most useful gift to the Athenians would lead the city. Poseidon brought a salt-water spring and Athena an olive tree. Can you guess why the Athenians decided that the tree was more useful and picked Athena as their city goddess?

The Athenians built Athena a big temple on their **Akropolis** (high city), which is called Parthenon because it celebrates **Athena Parthenos** (virgin) [Greece 34]. This Athena, in her role a maiden goddess, set a model of behaviour for young Greek girls. **Athena Ergane** (worker), the goddess of handicraft, was also an important role model for Athenian girls, who wove beautiful cloth and clothes.

Stefanie Ulrich