

The Palace of Olympus

~ *Robert Graves*

The twelve most important gods and goddesses of ancient Greece, called Olympians, belonged to the same large, quarrelsome family. Though thinking little of the smaller, old-fashioned gods over whom they ruled, they thought even less of mortals. All the Olympians lived together in an enormous palace, set well above the usual level of clouds at the top of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. Great walls, too steep for climbing, protected the palace. The Olympians' masons, gigantic one-eyed Cyclopes, had built them on much the same plan as royal palaces on earth.

At the southern end, just behind the Council Hall, and looking towards the famous Greek cities of Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Corinth, Argos, and Mycenae, were the private apartments of King Zeus, the Father-god, and Queen Hera, the Mother-goddess. The northern end of the palace, looking across the valley of Tempe towards the wild hills of Macedonia, consisted of the kitchen, banqueting hall, armory, workshops, and servants' quarters. In between was a square court, open to the sky, with covered cloisters and private rooms on each side, belonging to the other five Olympian gods and the other five Olympian goddesses. Beyond the kitchen and servants' quarters stood cottages for smaller gods, sheds for chariots, stables for horses, kennels for hounds, and a sort of zoo where the Olympians kept their sacred animals. These included a bear, a lion, a peacock, an eagle, tigers, stags, a cow, a crane, snakes, a wild boar, white bulls, a wild cat, mice, swans, herons, an owl, a tortoise, and a tank full of fish.

In the Council Hall, the Olympians met at times to discuss mortal affairs-such as which army on earth should be allowed to win a war, and whether they ought to punish some king or queen who had been behaving proudly or disgustingly. But for the most part, they were too busy with their own quarrels and lawsuits to take much notice of mortal affairs.

King Zeus had an enormous throne of polished black Egyptian marble, decorated in gold. Seven steps led up to it, each of them enameled with one of the seven colors of the rainbow. A bright blue covering above showed that the whole sky belonged to Zeus alone; and on the right arm of his throne perched a ruby-eyed golden eagle clutching jagged strips of pure tin, which meant that Zeus could kill whatever enemies he pleased by throwing a thunderbolt of forked lightning at them. A purple ram's fleece covered the cold seat. Zeus used it for magical rainmaking in times of drought. He was a strong, brave, stupid, noisy, violent, conceited god, and always on the watch lest his family should try to get rid of him; having once himself got rid of his wicked, idle, cannibalistic father Cronus, King of the Titans and Titanesses. The Olympians could not die, but Zeus, with the help of his two elder brothers, Hades and Poseidon, had banished Cronus to a distant island in the Atlantic-perhaps the Azores, perhaps Torrey Island, off the coast of Ireland. Zeus, Hades, and Poseidon then drew lots for the three parts of Cronus's kingdom. Zeus won the sky; Poseidon, the sea; Hades, the Underworld; they shared the earth between them. One of Zeus's emblems was the eagle; another was the woodpecker.



Queen Hera had an ivory throne, with three crystal steps leading up to it. Golden cuckoos and willow leaves decorated the back, and a full moon hung above it. Hera sat on a white cowskin, which she sometimes used for rainmaking magic if Zeus could not be bothered to stop a drought. She disliked being Zeus's wife, because he was frequently marrying mortal women and saying, with a sneer, that these marriages did not count-his

brides would soon grow ugly and die; but she was his Queen, and perpetually young and beautiful.

When first asked to marry him, Hera had refused; and had gone on refusing every year for three hundred years. But one springtime Zeus disguised himself as a poor cuckoo caught in a thunderstorm and tapped at her window. Hera, not seeing through his disguise, let the cuckoo in, stroked his wet feathers, and whispered, "Poor bird, I love you." At once, Zeus changed back again into his true shape, and said, "Now you must marry me!" After this, however badly Zeus behaved, Hera felt obliged to set a good example to gods and goddesses and mortals, as the Mother of Heaven. Her emblem was the cow, the most motherly of animals; but, not wishing to be thought as plain-looking and placid as a cow, she also used the peacock and the lion.

These two thrones faced down the Council Hall towards the door leading into the open courtyard. Along the sides of the hall stood ten other thrones-for five goddesses on Hera's side, for five gods on Zeus's.

Poseidon, god of the seas and rivers, had the second-largest throne. It was of gray-green white-streaked marble, ornamented with coral, gold, and mother-of-pearl. The arms were carved in the shape of sea-beasts, and Poseidon sat on sealskin. For his help in banishing Cronus and the Titans, Zeus had married him to Amphitrite, the former Sea-goddess, and allowed him to take over all her titles. Though Poseidon hated to be less important than his younger brother, and always went about scowling, he feared Zeus's thunderbolt. His only weapon was a trident, with which he could stir up the sea and so wreck ships; but Zeus never traveled by ship. When Poseidon felt even crosser than usual, he would drive away in his chariot to a palace under the waves, near the island of Euboea, and there let his rage cool. As his emblem, Poseidon chose the horse, an animal that he pretended to have created. Large waves are still called "white horses" because of this.



Opposite Poseidon sat his sister Demeter, goddess of all useful fruits, grasses, and grains. Her throne of bright green malachite was ornamented with ears of barley in gold, and little golden pigs for luck. Demeter seldom smiled, except when her daughter Persephone-unhappily married to the hateful Hades, God of the Dead-came to visit her once a year. Demeter's emblem was the poppy, which grows red as blood among the barley.

Next to Poseidon sat Hephaestus, a son of Zeus and Hera. Being the god of goldsmiths, jewelers, blacksmiths, masons, and carpenters, he had built all these thrones himself, and made his own a masterpiece of every different metal and precious stone to be found. The seat could swivel about, the arms could move up and down, and the whole throne rolled along automatically wherever he wished, like the three-legged golden tables in his workshop. Hephaestus had hobbled ever since birth, when Zeus roared at Hera, "A brat as weak as this is unworthy of me!" – and threw him far out over the walls of Olympus. In his fall, Hephaestus broke a leg so badly that he had to wear a golden leg-iron. He kept a country house on Lemnos, the island where he had struck earth; and his emblem was the quail, a bird that does a hobbling dance in springtime.

Opposite Hephaestus sat Athene, Goddess of Wisdom, who first taught him how to handle tools, and knew more than anyone else about pottery, weaving, and all useful arts. Her silver throne had golden basketwork at the back and sides, and a crown of violets, made from blue lapis lazuli, set above it. Its arms ended in grinning Gorgons' heads. Athene, wise though she was, did not know the names of her parents. Poseidon claimed her as his daughter by a marriage with an African goddess called Libya. It is true that, as a child, she

had been found wandering in a goatskin by the shore of a Libyan lake; but rather than admit herself the daughter of Poseidon, whom she thought very stupid, she allowed Zeus to pretend she was his. Zeus announced that one day, overcome by a fearful headache, he had howled aloud like a thousand wolves hunting in a pack. Hephaestus, he said, then ran up with an axe and kindly split open his skull, and out sprang Athene, dressed in full armor. Athene was also a battle-goddess, yet never went to war unless forced –being too sensible to pick quarrels-and when she fought, always won. She chose the wise owl as her emblem; and she had a town house at Athens.

Next to Athene sat Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Nobody knew who her parents were, either. The South Wind said that he had once seen her floating in a scallop shell off the island of Cythera, and steered her gently ashore. She may have been a daughter of Amphitrite by a smaller god named Triton, who used to blow roaring blasts on a conch, or perhaps by old Cronus. Amphitrite refused to say a word on the subject. Aphrodite's throne was silver, inlaid with beryls and aquamarines, the back shaped like a scallop shell, the seat made of swan's down; and under her feet lay a golden mat-an embroidery of golden bees, apples, and sparrows. Aphrodite had a magic girdle, which she would wear whenever she wanted to make anyone love her madly. To keep Aphrodite out of mischief, Zeus decided that she needed a hard-working, decent husband; and naturally chose his son Hephaestus. Aphrodite's emblem was the dove, and she would visit Paphos, in Cyprus, once a year to swim in the sea, for good luck.

Opposite Aphrodite sat Ares, Hephaestus's tall, handsome, boastful, cruel brother, who loved fighting for its own sake. Ares and Aphrodite were continually holding hands and giggling in corners, which made Hephaestus jealous. Yet if he ever complained to the Council, Zeus would laugh at him, saying, "Fool, why did you give your wife that magic girdle? Can you blame your brother if he falls in love with her when she wears it?" Ares' throne was built of brass, strong and ugly-those huge brass knobs in the shape of skulls, and that cushion-cover of human skin! Ares had no manners, no learning, and the worst of taste; yet Aphrodite thought him wonderful. His emblems were a wild boar and a bloodstained spear. He kept a country house among the rough woods of Thrace.

Next to Ares sat Apollo, the god of music, poetry, medicine, archery, and young unmarried men-Zeus's son by Leto, one of the smaller goddesses, whom he married to annoy Hera. Apollo rebelled against his father once or twice, but was well punished each time, and learned to behave more sensibly. His highly polished golden throne had magical inscriptions carved all over it, a back shaped like a lyre, and a python skin to sit on. Above hung a golden sun-disk with twenty-one rays shaped like arrows, because he pretended to manage the Sun. Apollo's emblem was a mouse; mice were supposed to know the secrets of earth, and tell them to him. Apollo married several mortal wives at different times. Once he chased a girl named Daphne, who cried out for help to Mother Earth and was turned into a laurel tree before he could catch and kiss her. Apollo owned a splendid house at Delphi on the top of Mount Parnassus, built around the famous oracle that he stole from Mother Earth, Zeus's grandmother.

Opposite Apollo sat his twin sister, Artemis, goddess of hunting and of unmarried girls, from whom he had learned medicine and archery. Her throne was of pure silver, with a wolf-skin to sit on; and the back was shaped like two date palms, one of each side of a new-moon boat. Artemis hated the idea of marriage, although she kindly took care of mothers when their babies were born. She much preferred hunting, fishing, and swimming in moonlit mountain pools. If any mortal happened to see her without clothes, she used to change him

into a stag and hunt him to death. She chose as her emblem the she-bear, the most dangerous of all wild animals in Greece.

Last in the row of gods sat Hermes, Zeus's son by a smaller goddess named Maia, after whom the month of May is called. Hermes, the god of merchants, bankers, thieves, fortune-tellers, and heralds, was born in Arcadia. His throne was cut out of a single piece of solid gray rock, with arms shaped like rams' heads, and a goatskin for the seat. On its back he had carved a swastika, this being the shape of a firemaking machine invented by him-the fire-drill. Until then, housewives used to borrow glowing pieces of charcoal from their neighbors. Hermes also invented the alphabet; and one of his emblems was the crane, because cranes fly in a V- the first letter he wrote. Another of Hermes's emblems was a peeled hazel stick, which he carried as the Messenger of the Olympians; white ribbons dangled from it, which foolish people often mistook for snakes.

Last in the row of goddesses sat Zeus's eldest sister, Hestia, Goddess of the Home, on a plain, uncarved, wooden throne, and a plain cushion woven of undyed wool. Hestia, the kindest and most peaceable of all the Olympians, hated the continual family quarrels, and never troubled to choose any particular emblem of her own. She used to tend the charcoal hearth in the middle of the Council Hall.

That made six gods and six goddesses. But one day Zeus announced that Dionysus, his son by a mortal woman named Semele, had invented wine, and must be given a seat in the Council. Thirteen Olympians would have been an unlucky number; so Hestia offered him her seat, just to keep the peace. Now there were seven gods and five goddesses, an unjust state of affairs because, when questions about women had to be discussed, the gods outvoted the goddesses. Dionysus's throne was gold-plated fir wood, ornamented with bunches of grapes carved in amethyst (a violet-colored stone); sard (a dark red stone); jade (a dark green stone); and carnelian (a pink stone). He took the tiger for his emblem, having once visited India at the head of an army and brought tigers back as souvenirs.

In a room behind the kitchen sat the Three Fates, named Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. They were the oldest goddesses in existence, too old for anybody to remember where they came from. The Fates decided how long each mortal should live, spinning a linen thread to measure exactly so many inches and feet for months and years, and then snipping it off with a pair of shears. They also knew, but seldom revealed, what would be the fate of each Olympian god. Even Zeus feared them for that reason.

The Olympians drank nectar, a sweet drink made from fermented honey; and ate ambrosia, said to be an uncooked mixture of honey, water, fruit, olive oil, cheese, and barley-though this may be doubted. Some claim that certain speckled mushrooms were the true food of the Olympians, created wherever Zeus's thunderbolt struck the earth; and that this kept them immortal. Because the Olympians also loved the smell, though not the taste, of roast beef and mutton, mortals used to sacrifice sheep and cattle to them, afterwards eating the meat themselves.