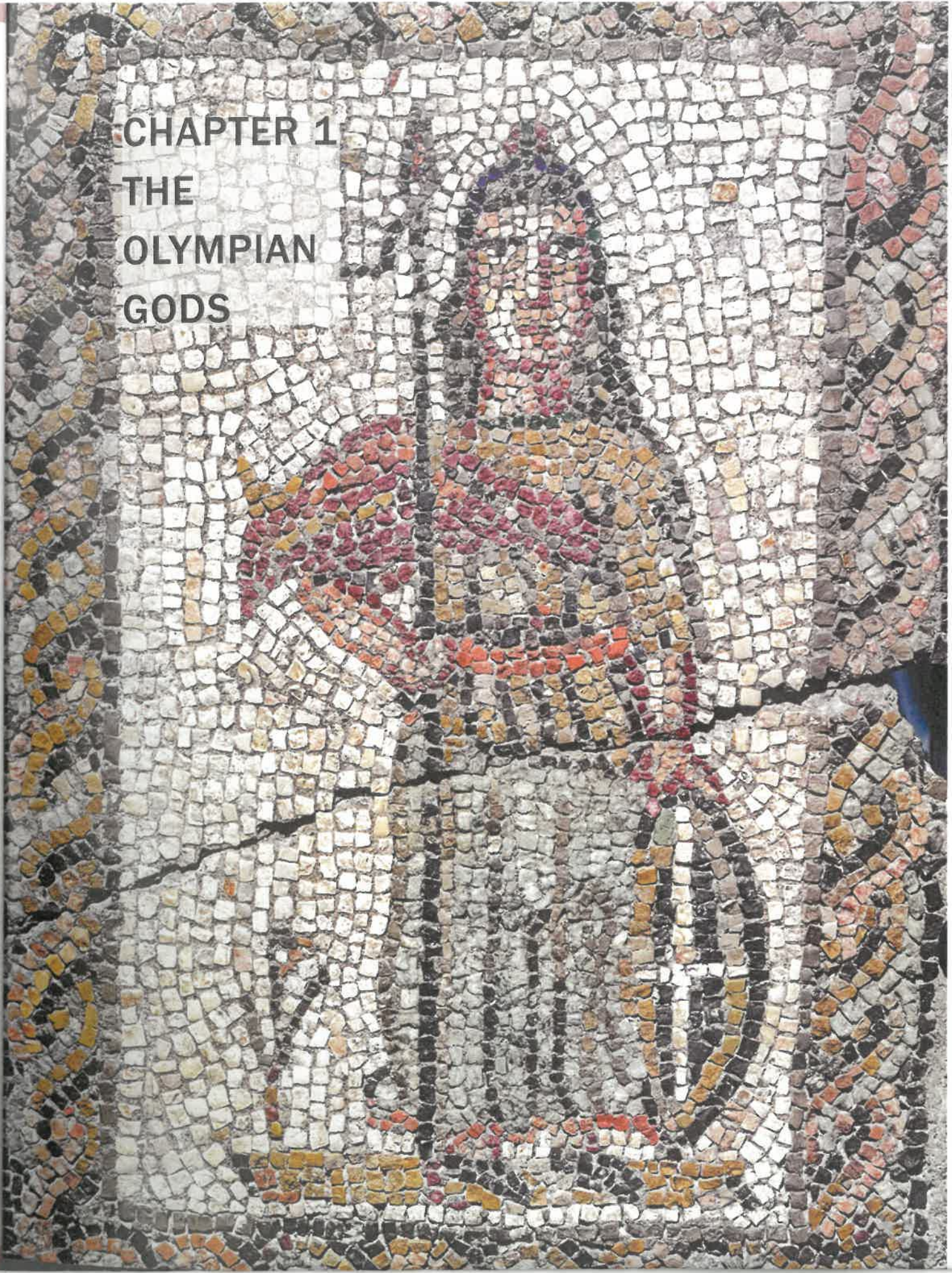


CHAPTER 1
THE
OLYMPIAN
GODS



CW Chapter 1: Introduction

The Olympian gods

The Romans worshipped many different gods and goddesses. As discussed on pp1–4, Rome was a city founded a very long time ago. We do not know much about very early Roman religion, but we do know that over time **Roman culture was influenced by the culture of the Ancient Greeks**. By the middle of the 2nd century BC the Romans had conquered Greece and absorbed much of its literature and religion. It became the Roman practice to match up their own major gods with the Greek gods, and many of the stories the Greeks had told about their gods started to appear in Roman literature too.

The Latin adjective *maior* means *bigger*. Explain the meaning of *major*.

The most famous gods worshipped by the Romans are known as the **Olympian gods**. They have this name because they were paired with the **major** gods whom the Greeks had believed lived on **Mount Olympus**. Here is a list of the Olympian gods with both their Roman and their Greek names. You will see that the Romans believed that each god was associated with different things.



FIGURE 1.1 The summit of Mount Olympus

Mount Olympus is a mountain in Greece and it has one of the highest peaks in Europe. Its summit is often shrouded in cloud, and it is no surprise therefore that it seemed like a natural home for the gods.

Roman name	Greek name	
Jupiter	Zeus	king of the gods
Neptune	Poseidon	god of the sea
Pluto	Hades	god of the underworld, the region inhabited by souls of the dead
Juno	Hera	queen of the gods, goddess of marriage
Venus	Aphrodite	goddess of love
Apollo	Apollo	god of music, prophecy, music, archery and disease
Mars	Ares	god of war
Diana	Artemis	goddess of hunting, childbirth and young women
Minerva	Athena	goddess of wisdom, weaving, and war
Ceres	Demeter	goddess of agriculture
Bacchus	Dionysus	god of wine, fertility and frenzy
Vulcan	Hephaestus	the blacksmith god of fire
Mercury	Hermes	the messenger of the gods and the god of travellers and thieves
Vesta	Hestia	goddess of the hearth and home



FIGURE 1.2 Bust of Jupiter

The shoulders and bare chest in this statue show Jupiter's strength. Jupiter's face has been carved with his characteristic beard. This bust dates from the 2nd century AD and is now part of the collection at The British Museum.

The Greeks, and then the Romans, told many stories about these gods. This chapter focuses on the stories. You may know some of these stories already because many of them are still popular today. In these stories, the gods often do terrible or unkind things. They are a useful reminder that the Romans did not expect their gods to behave well. It might be interesting to think about why these stories are still popular today even though their content is often surprising or unpleasant.

Jupiter, king of the gods

The Romans believed that **Jupiter** was the king of the gods. Even though he was the most powerful of the gods, his **reign** was not always an easy one. Jupiter is often shown in art with his favourite weapon, a **thunderbolt**, ready to throw whenever trouble arose.

Jupiter had not always been the king of the gods. The Roman poet Ovid re-tells the Greek story that **Jupiter became king after he killed his father, Saturn**. Saturn was the king of the Titans. Titans were divine beings, an earlier race of gods. They were monstrous and

The Latin noun *rex* means *king*. Explain the meaning of *reign*.



FIGURE 1.3 Saturn eating one of his children

This chilling painting of the Titan Saturn, the father of many Olympian gods, was created by the Spanish painter Goya towards the end of his life when he had seen a tremendous amount of death and destruction in the Napoleonic Wars. Notice how, in a mainly dark background, the bolting white eyes of Saturn and the red blood of his son stand out.

The Latin adjective *mortuus* means *dead*. Explain the meaning of *mortal*.

uncivilised. There had been a prophecy that one of Saturn's children would kill him and take his place. To prevent this, Saturn swallowed each child as soon as his wife, Ops, gave birth.

As you will read in Exercise 1.4, Saturn's wife decided to trick him. When Jupiter was born, she hid her baby and gave Saturn a stone wrapped as a baby to swallow. Unknown to Saturn, Jupiter grew up in secret. Later, he and his mother tricked Saturn into drinking a potion that made him vomit up all the children he had already swallowed. Together, Jupiter and his siblings defeated Saturn. Then Jupiter and his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, drew lots to decide who would rule which part of the world. **Jupiter took over Mount Olympus** and ruled as king of the gods. Neptune won the sea, and Pluto won the Underworld.

Jupiter settled in to rule men and gods from Mount Olympus. **Jupiter married his sister Juno**, who became the queen of the gods. **Their son, Mars, was the god of war**. Juno was believed to be the goddess of marriage even though her own marriage to Jupiter was not always a happy one because Jupiter had many affairs. Several stories from ancient myth focus on Juno's jealousy and her readiness to take revenge.

Trouble on Mount Olympus: Juno and Vulcan

One of the most famous stories about Jupiter and Juno started as a Greek myth told by the Greek poet Hesiod sometime around 700 BC in a long poem called the *Theogony*. Like many Greek myths, the Romans re-told the same story using Roman names instead. In this story, Juno became really annoyed with the number of children Jupiter had with other goddesses, and even mortal women. **Juno decided to have a child on her own**. Since she was a goddess, she was able to do this. However, the child she

bore was not like the other Olympians; Olympians were all beautiful and this child, Vulcan, was ugly. Despite this, **Vulcan was very clever, and became the god of fire and metalworking**. The Romans believed that Vulcan set up a forge and worked with the one-eyed giants known as **Cyclopes** to make weapons for the gods themselves, including Jupiter's thunderbolts. You can read about some of these weapons in Source 1.1.

In another of the stories told about Vulcan, we hear that **Jupiter threw Vulcan out from Mount Olympus**. This happened because Juno was determined to destroy one of Jupiter's sons by a mortal woman: the hero Hercules, whom we shall read more about in Chapter 2.



FIGURE 1.4 A Cyclops forging Jupiter's thunderbolts

According to myth, the Cyclopes also made weapons for the other gods, such as Neptune's three-pronged trident and Pluto's helmet of invisibility. This mosaic, which dates from the 3rd century AD, was found in Tunisia where it remains today in the Bardo National Museum.

Juno had sent a storm to destroy Hercules, so Jupiter punished Juno by hanging her from Mount Olympus with anvils chained to her ankles. When Vulcan tried to free his mother, Jupiter cast him out from Mount Olympus. Other myths tell us that **Juno threw Vulcan from Mount Olympus** because he was disfigured and ugly. It is important to remember that, when it comes to the myths about the Olympian gods, there is often more than one version.

Vengeful gods: Vulcan and Venus

In another story, Vulcan became so angry with Juno for treating him badly that he decided to take revenge. Vulcan made a special throne and sent it to Juno. Vulcan was such a clever craftsman that, when Juno sat in the throne, she became tied to it and could not get free. Vulcan agreed to release Juno if Jupiter promised that Venus, the goddess of love, would marry Vulcan. This was a bold request. Venus was so beautiful that many gods had fallen in

The Latin verb *quaesivit* means *he asked for*. Explain the meaning of *request*.

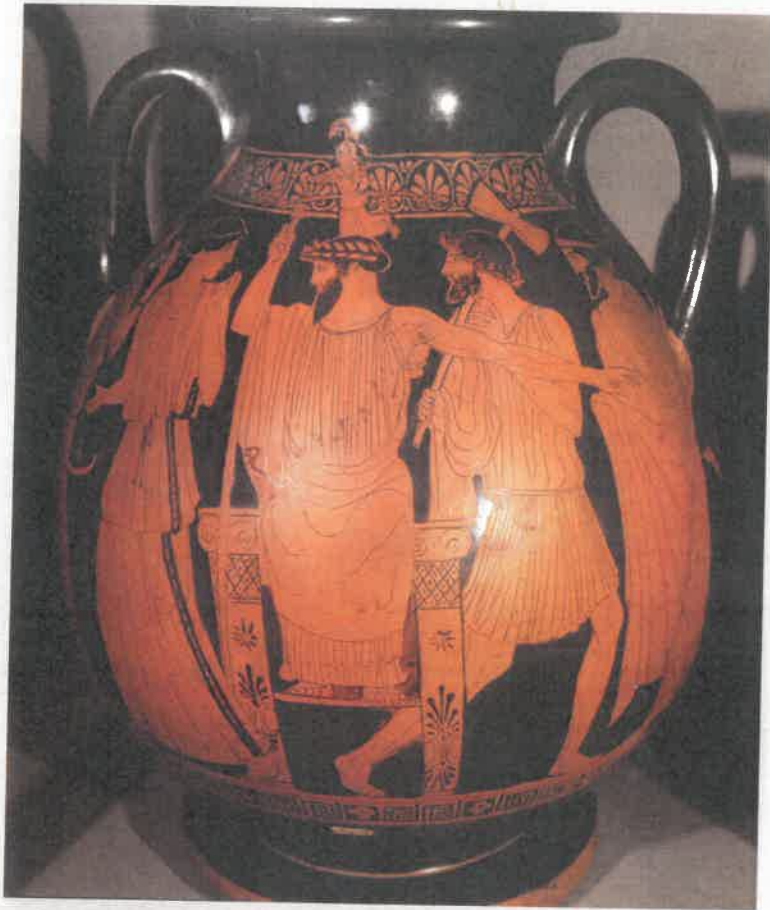


FIGURE 1.5 Birth of Minerva

This vase was created in Greece in the 5th century BC. It shows the story of the birth of the Greek goddess Athena or, as the Romans knew her, Minerva. She is shown here emerging from the head of her father, fully grown and wearing armour.

love with her and wanted to marry her. What's more, **Venus was already in love with Mars**, the god of war and the son of Jupiter and Juno, and so **she did not wish to marry Vulcan**.

Jupiter, however, agreed to Vulcan's demands and, because Jupiter was the king of the gods, Venus had to obey. **Venus married Vulcan, but she was not faithful to him**. In Exercise 1.8, you will read a story from nearly 3,000 years ago that tells how Vulcan eventually caught Venus in bed with Mars.

Wisdom and war: Minerva and Mars

Mars was not the only god of war. The Romans also worshipped **Minerva, the goddess of war, wisdom and crafts** such as weaving. She was the daughter of Metis, the Titan goddess who had been married to Jupiter before he married Juno. Just as Jupiter's father swallowed his children to keep them from overthrowing him, Jupiter decided to swallow Metis before she could give birth to their child. Even though Jupiter had swallowed her, Metis gave birth to Minerva inside Jupiter's body. Soon afterwards, Jupiter began having terrible headaches. To get rid of these headaches, Jupiter asked Vulcan to hit him in the head with an axe. When Vulcan did so,

Minerva jumped out from Jupiter's head, fully grown and armed for battle. You will read a version of this story in Exercise 1.15.

The power of the gods

As we have seen, the gods of Mount Olympus did not set good moral examples for humans. The gods could be petty, mean, cruel and unfaithful, but **the Romans worshipped the gods because they had great power** over the world of mortals. For example, we have seen that the Romans believed that Jupiter controlled the weather, Neptune had power over the seas and Venus had the power to make men and women fall in love.

Many of the stories told about the other Olympians focus on their particular power. For example, the Romans believed that Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, was responsible for the seasons. To explain this, the poet Ovid tells us that Pluto, the god of the Underworld, fell in

The Latin noun *ager* means *field*. Explain the meaning of *agriculture*.

love with Ceres' daughter **Proserpina**. Pluto abducted Proserpina and took her to the Underworld to be his bride. Ceres searched the world for Proserpina and didn't care about her duties as the goddess of agriculture. The crops died in the fields and humans began to starve. Finally, Jupiter decided that because Proserpina had eaten some pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, she would spend part of the year there with Pluto. For the rest of the year, however, she would return to her mother. The Romans believed that when Proserpina returned to Ceres in the spring, the goddess was happy and the earth grew abundant food. In the autumn, when Proserpina returned to the Underworld, Ceres began to grieve again and nothing grew during the winter months.

Some gods had power over a large number of different things at the same time. For example **Apollo** was the god of music, prophecy and archery, and he was both the bringer and healer of diseases. Apollo's twin sister, **Diana**, also had wide-ranging powers. She was the goddess of hunting and wild animals, and she was worshipped as the goddess of childbirth and the protector of girls until they reached the age of marriage.

Many people today have heard of the god **Bacchus**: he was the god of wine and most people now associate him with parties and fun. To the Romans, however, he was a figure of great and dangerous power. He was the god of madness, frenzy and fertility.

Mercury was the messenger god, sent by other gods to carry information between gods and mortals and between the gods themselves, but he was very powerful in his own right as the patron god of travellers and thieves. Mercury is easily recognised by his winged sandals and he appears in many stories in classical mythology and literature as he goes about delivering news and information. The Roman poet Ovid wrote that Mercury did not just deliver messages for the gods; he also carried dreams to sleeping mortals and led the spirits of the dead to the Underworld.

Vesta was a very important goddess for the Romans. She was worshipped as the goddess of the hearth and home. You will read much more about Vesta in Chapter 3.

The Latin verb *abduxit* means *he took away*. Explain the meaning of *abducted*.

The Latin verb *abundavit* means *it overflowed*. Explain the meaning of *abundant*.



FIGURE 1.6 Roman fresco of Diana

This beautiful wall painting (fresco) of Diana, goddess of hunting, childbirth and young women, was found in the Roman seaside town of Pompeii. She is shown with a serious expression, striding forward, and about to place an arrow in her bow.