

THE GODDESS ATHENE

Athene was the virgin goddess of wisdom and war. She oversaw the safety of the state and was the most important goddess after **Hera**.

The birth of Athene

There are many different versions of Athene's birth, but this is the most frequent one:

Zeus fell in love with **Metis**, the Titaness of wisdom. She was expecting his baby when Zeus heard a prophecy that any child Metis had would be greater than its father. Zeus could not permit this, so he turned Metis into a fly and swallowed her. This was how Zeus gained his great wisdom.

Later, Zeus was walking by Lake Triton in Libya when he developed a terrible headache. He ordered **Hephaestos** to crack his skull open, which the smith-god did, as he knew he could not harm an **Immortal**. From the split appeared a female figure in full armour. Zeus introduced her as his daughter, Athene.

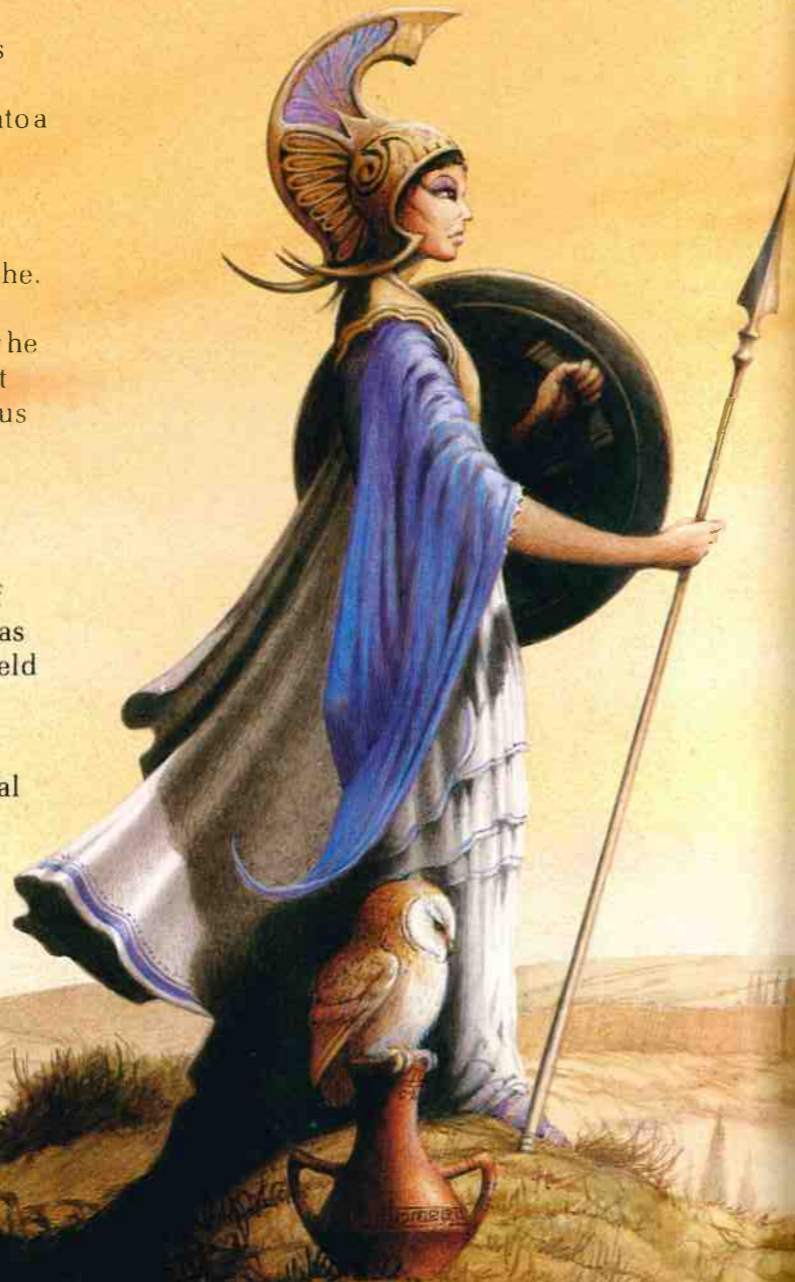
Goddess of wisdom and war

Athene inherited Metis's wisdom and preferred to settle disputes by reasoning. If forced to fight, though, she was invincible as goddess of war. She took care of Zeus's shield (the aegis) and other battle-gear.

The owl was her special bird and she was patroness of the olive crop and of the capital city of Greece (see story opposite).

Pallas and Athene

When she was young, Athene had a great friend, **Pallas**. One day they were practising with their spears when Athene killed her friend by accident. To show her sorrow, she put her friend's name before her own and was afterwards often known as Pallas Athene.



The invention of the flute

Athene is said to have invented the flute. She first played it at a banquet of the gods and everyone seemed to like it, except **Hera** and **Aphrodite** who would not stop giggling. (There was always rivalry between these three goddesses – see page 41.)

Athene was puzzled until she glimpsed her reflection in a pool. She soon saw what they found funny, as to play the flute she had to puff her cheeks out, which looked silly. She cursed the flute and threw it away. It was later found by **Marsyas** (see page 17).

The naming of Athens

Athene and **Poseidon** quarrelled over the naming of the greatest town in Greece. At last they agreed that whoever gave the town the best gift should also name it.

Poseidon dug his trident into the rock on which the town stood and out gushed a stream, giving access to the sea so it could become rich and powerful through trade.

Athene created the olive tree as her gift. It provided food and oil for the inhabitants and made them rich through exports, so it was judged the better gift and the town was named Athens after her. A special shrine was built to Athene on the Acropolis (the hill above Athens). It was called the **Parthenon**, from the word *parthenos*, meaning "maiden", which was another of Athene's titles.

The weaving contest

Athene was also goddess of crafts. This story shows how proud she was of her weaving.

Princess **Arachne** was a skilled weaver. She even boasted that she was better than Athene so the goddess challenged her to a contest. They both wove the most beautiful work they could. When they had finished, Athene was infuriated to find that **Arachne's** really was equal to hers, and in a jealous rage she tore the girl's weaving up. Arachne was so frightened that she tried to hang herself. Athene was then ashamed and saved Arachne from death by turning her into a spider. Ever since then spiders have woven beautiful webs.

Athene's anger

Athene's short temper features in many of the myths about her. For instance, when a man called **Tiresias** accidentally came across Athene in her bath, she blinded him for daring to look at her. She made up for her hasty action by giving him the gift of seeing the future and he advised **Oedipus** (page 29) and **Odysseus** (pages 46-47).

Another time, a crow brought Athene some bad news. Until then crows had been white but in her fury, Athene turned the unlucky messenger black and they have been black ever since.

Medusa, daughter of the sea-god **Phorcys**, suffered too. She offended Athene, who turned her into a hideous monster. The story of Medusa and her sisters (the **Gorgons**) is told on page 24.