

Apollo and Artemis: The Twins

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One day Zeus saw a beautiful nymph¹ called Leto and fell in love with her. But he noticed that Hera was watching, and so he changed Leto and himself into quails, birds that are brown and speckled and can easily hide in trees and bushes. But Hera was too clever for him. She saw through this disguise immediately and put a curse on Leto. She told the unfortunate nymph that she would be pregnant, and that she would not be able to give birth to her child anywhere the sun could shine.

Then she sent the great serpent Python to enforce her curse, to drive Leto from any sunlit spot. Zeus tried to help the mother of his child and sent the south wind to float her to an island called Delos. It was a small, rocky place, but Python followed anyway. However, because the island was so small, the wind could push it farther out to sea faster than the serpent could swim. And so, finally, Leto had a place where she could give birth.

It turned out that she bore twins. First she had a lovely baby girl she called Artemis. From all the running and hiding, she was so weak that she had difficulty giving birth to her second child. But Artemis, even though she was just a baby, helped her mother, and a beautiful son was born. Leto called him Apollo.

Zeus had a great many children, but none he loved so much as those twins. They were gifted with strength and courage as well as beauty. Apollo had dark gold hair and deep blue eyes, and extraordinary talents in music, poetry, mathematics, and medicine. He became the god of the sun and patron of the arts and sciences.

¹ nymph: lovely maiden who watches over nature

POSEIDON, APOLLO AND ARTEMIS
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Of all the gods he was probably the most admirable, in his character as well as in his appearance. He could not tell a lie, and so the oracle,² which he established at Delphi,³ was sought out by Greek kings and commoners alike to find out what the future held for them. When the oracle agreed to speak, it always told the truth, although often the prophecies foretold danger and disaster and generally the actual prophecy was couched in phrases that were hard to interpret and were often misunderstood by those who heard them.

Apollo preached moderation. He told his followers to look into their own hearts to find the beginnings of wisdom. However, like all of the other gods, he sometimes did not practice what he preached. Occasionally he even angered Zeus with his impetuous behavior. When he became jealous or angry, he, too, could be cruel.

As soon as he was old enough to shoot a golden bow and arrow Zeus had given him, Apollo went in search of Python, the serpent who had tortured his mother. He found the serpent at the foot of Mount Parnassus and raced up the mountain to shoot a burning arrow at the animal, which screamed with pain and fled, leaving a trail of blood behind. The serpent's hiding place was the cave of Mother Earth at Delphi, considered a sanctuary (a place where all fighting had to stop) by gods and man alike. Apollo knew that he could not follow the huge snake into the cave, but he breathed on his arrows and created a smoke screen, which he shot into the entrance of the cave. The cave filled with smoke, and the serpent, suffocating from the fumes, had to crawl out. Apollo shot him full of arrows, skinned him, and kept the hide as a souvenir of his revenge.

But he had accomplished his revenge in a sacred place, and Mother Earth complained to Zeus that her sanctuary had been defiled. To make amends, Apollo instituted annual athletic games at Delphi (which really were meant to celebrate his victory), and named them after his enemy: the Pythian Games. He also established the Delphic oracle and named the priestesses who gave advice Pythonesses. This did not help the dead Python, but the gesture appeased Zeus and got Apollo back into his father's good graces.

Like Zeus, Apollo fell in love with and pursued many women. He also had many children. The most famous was his son Aesculapius, who was

² **oracle:** a place where the future is foretold

³ **Delphi:** a religious center on the southern slope of Mt. Parnassus, located in central Greece

gifted with miraculous medical knowledge. Even today, when physicians take the oath to do their best to heal and not harm their patients, they use the name of Aesculapius as a symbol of medical knowledge and skill.

Aesculapius was the son of Apollo and Coronis, a princess of Thessaly. She was in love with a young mortal, but Apollo carried her off with him. While she was pregnant with Apollo's son, she went back to her old lover. Apollo could not bring himself to kill the mother of his unborn child himself, so he asked his sister, Artemis, to shoot her with one of her arrows.

He wanted to save the child, however, so he delivered the baby (probably one of the first surgical births in history) and turned him over to the god Hermes, who was immediately struck by the infant's extraordinary intelligence.

The child was sent to Chiron, a centaur—half man and half horse—until that time the most gifted physician in Greek mythology. Aesculapius soon improved on his master's methods. He doctored everyone who came to him and was able to heal even those who were on the point of death.

Eventually the young doctor enraged Hades, who went to Zeus to complain that Apollo's son was robbing him of his victims at the very point when they were supposed to cross over from the land of the living to the land of the dead. Zeus picked up his thunderbolt and threw it at Aesculapius and the patient he was curing at the time, sending both to Hades.

Apollo was not only heartbroken, but also very angry. He found Cyclops⁵ who had made his father's thunderbolt and killed him, a sign against Zeus that the ruler of the gods could not allow to go unpunished. So he banished Apollo to Hades forever.

Until this time Leto had kept away from Zeus, realizing that Hera was watching her, and that any attempt to get in touch with her children's father could only bring more misfortune on herself. But the banishment of her beautiful and clever son gave her the courage to go to Zeus and remind him of their old love. Zeus listened to her and relented. Not only did he allow Apollo to come back to Mount Olympus, he even agreed to bring Aesculapius back to life, with a warning not to rob Hades by curing those sick humans who were already on their way across the river Styx.

⁴ **Thessaly:** a region in central Greece bordering the Aegean Sea

⁵ **Cyclops:** one-eyed giant

⁶ **Styx:** river through which the living pass on the way to the underworld, or land of the dead

According to one legend, Zeus's reversal of judgment angered Aphrodite. So she ordered Eros to shoot Apollo with the arrow of love, and the mountain nymph, Daphne, who happened to cross his path, with the arrow of indifference. When the beautiful god, not used to being turned down by women, started to follow her, she ran away as fast as she could.

Daphne was the daughter of a river god, and when she realized that Apollo was faster than she, she ran to the river and begged her father to save her. He turned her into a laurel tree.⁷ Apollo caught up with the nymph, and found that instead of a beautiful girl, he was hugging a tree with thorns that scratched his face.

So the river god, who knew that Apollo was more powerful than he was and could harm him, gave Apollo a gift to appease him: a crown of laurel leaves. From that day on, crowns of laurel, a plant that would never wither, were awarded to heroes and poets as a sign of extraordinary ability.

Apollo's special friends were the nine Muses, who represented the arts. When he was a very young god, they taught him their skills, so that Apollo became the greatest poet and artist in the universe, improving on everything that the Muses had taught him.

Apollo was one of the few gods who was allowed to keep his original name by the Romans. However, they tended to make him less important than the Greeks had. He was generally pictured as a beautiful young man who somehow never really grew up. Roman statues tend to make him look somehow less masculine than those of the Greeks. His artistic abilities were less respected by the Romans. Music, poetry, and dance were considered among the greatest gifts of the gods by the Greeks, but were generally regarded as entertainment for the masses by the Romans. They respected political and fighting ability in men more than artistic accomplishments.

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Artemis, Apollo's twin, was, in her own way as beautiful as her brother. While he seemed to be surrounded with a golden light, his sister gleamed like silver. Zeus loved her very much.

On her third birthday, he asked her to make any wish—he would make sure she got what she wanted. Artemis, who, in spite of her youth, had seen all the harm that Aphrodite could do to those over whom she had power, wished that she would always be a young girl—never a woman. She

⁷ laurel tree: an evergreen tree with small green leaves and berries

asked Zeus never to give her to any man. Also, she wished for a silver bow and arrow, the best pack of hounds in the universe, and the freedom to run and hunt over the mountains and in the woods for all eternity.

Zeus granted her wishes. He gave her the gift of eternal chastity, but, considering himself more experienced than his three-year-old daughter, told her that she could change her mind about falling in love at any time, if she got tired of the single life.

Artemis went to Hephaestus and asked him to make her a silver bow, but the god of the forge suggested that silver should be created underwater in a cold light. So Artemis swam to the Cyclops who had made Zeus's thunderbolt, and they fashioned for her the most beautiful silver bow, quiver, and arrows in their power. The quiver had a special magic: As soon as it was empty, it filled up again.

Next she visited Pan, who gave her his ten best dogs. From then on Artemis spent her days and nights hunting deer in the woods and streaking across the sky like a silver bolt. She was worshiped as the goddess of the moon and the stars, chaste but happy and fulfilled. Men who came near her, whether they were gods or humans, were frightened away by her fierce hounds.

In many parts of Greece, young women whose relatives wished to marry them off to men they did not love prayed to Artemis to save them. According to legend, she frequently did, although she sometimes had to turn the girl into a tree, a flower, or a deer. But perhaps the Greeks thought that it was preferable to be turned into an enchanted plant or animal than to have to spend the rest of one's life with a mate one disliked.

The Roman name for Artemis was Diana; she became a favorite subject of sculpture and painting. She is usually seen carrying her bow and accompanied by one or more of her many dogs. ♀

