The Titans and the Gods of Olympus: Greek Origin Story

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, Big History Project, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.15.16
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We know the Greek origin story from some of the earliest Greek literary sources that have survived, "The Theogony" and "Works and Days" by Hesiod. This oral poet is thought to have been active sometime between 750 and 650 BCE, within decades of when the Homeric epics "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" took the form in which we know them.

Artifacts found by archaeologists support the creation story recorded in Hesiod's work; pottery from the eighth century BCE depicts the gods and goddesses he describes. Hesiod told this male-centric version, in which Pandora, the first woman created by the gods, is the cause of much trouble. But, before this, Pandora — whose name means “gift giver” — was known in oral tradition as a kindly Earth goddess.

In the beginning there was Chaos, a nothingness. Out of the void emerged Gaia (the Earth) and other divine beings — Eros (love), the Abyss (part of the underworld), and the Erebus (the unknowable place where death dwells). Without male assistance, Gaia gave birth to Uranus (the Sky). Uranus in turn fertilized her.
From that union the first Titans were born — six males: Coeus, Crius, Cronus, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Oceanus, and six females: Mnemosyne, Phoebe, Rhea, Theia, Themis, and Tethys. After Cronus (time) was born, Gaia and Uranus decreed no more Titans were to be born.

Cronus cut off his father's genitals and threw them into the sea, from which arose Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty and sexuality. Cronus became the ruler of the gods with his sister-wife, Rhea, as his queen. The other Titans became his court. Because Cronus had betrayed his father, he feared that his offspring would do the same. So each time Rhea gave birth, Cronus snatched up the child and ate it. Rhea hated this and tricked him by hiding one child, Zeus. She wrapped a stone in a baby's blanket so that Cronus ate the stone instead of the baby.

When Zeus was grown, he fed his father a drugged drink. It caused Cronus to vomit, throwing up Rhea's other children and the stone. Zeus then challenged Cronus to war for the kingship of the gods. At last Zeus and his siblings, the Olympians, were victorious, and the Titans were hurled down to imprisonment in the Abyss.

Zeus was plagued by the same concern as his father had been. After a prophecy that his first wife, Metis, would give birth to a god greater than he, he tricked her into turning herself into a fly. Then he promptly swallowed her. But she was already pregnant with Athena. Inside Zeus's stomach they both made him miserable until Athena, the goddess of wisdom, civilization and justice, burst from his head — fully grown and dressed for war. Zeus was able to fight off all challenges to his power and to remain the ruler of Mount Olympus, the home of the gods.

One son of the Titans, Prometheus, did not fight with his fellow Titans against Zeus and was spared imprisonment; he was given the task of creating man. Prometheus shaped man out of mud, and Athena breathed life into the clay figure. Prometheus made man stand upright as the gods did.

Prometheus tricked Zeus by giving man fire. To punish him, Zeus created the first woman, Pandora. She was a stunning beauty with immense wealth, but she had the heart and tongue of a liar. He also gave Pandora a box she was commanded never to open. Eventually, however, her curiosity got the best of her, and she opened the box to release all kinds of evil, plagues, sorrows, and misfortunes. Yet, she also released hope, which lay at the bottom of the box.
Quiz

1. Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the story?
   (A) In the beginning there was Chaos, a nothingness.
   (B) Each time Rhea gave birth, Cronus snatched the child and ate it.
   (C) Rhea wrapped a stone in a baby’s blanket so that Cronus ate the stone instead of the baby.
   (D) Prometheus shaped man out of mud, and Athena breathed life into the clay figure.

2. Which of the following answer choices describes TWO MAIN ideas in the article?
   (A) Earth and human life happened as a result of conflicts between Greek gods and goddesses. Pandora is one reason why the world is plagued with evils, sorrows, misfortunes and hope.
   (B) Before the world existed, there was Chaos and nothingness. According to the myth, human life was started when the first Titans were born.
   (C) Cronus create Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and sexuality. He then became the ruler of the gods with his sister-wife, Rhea.
   (D) Cronus was a deceitful god who betrayed his own father. Zeus ended up defeating Cronus to take over Mount Olympus and rule over all gods and goddesses.

3. What is the MOST important reason why Cronus wanted to swallow his children?
   (A) He was worried that his children were in danger of being betrayed by Rhea.
   (B) He was worried that his children would betray him the same way he betrayed his own father.
   (C) He did not want his children to become imprisoned in the Abyss.
   (D) He was worried that his wife, Rhea, wanted to betray him and remove him from the throne.

4. Based on the story, how did Zeus MOST LIKELY feel when Prometheus gave man fire?
   (A) harmed
   (B) betrayed
   (C) empowered
   (D) supported
Answer Key

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