

Religion

The Greeks praised and feared many gods, who ruled over different areas of their lives. In order to lead a safe and happy life, people worshiped the gods who would, they believed, look after them. This worship took the form of building lavish temples, providing offerings, holding festivals, and making sacrifices. All of these helped to keep the gods happy.

Temples



The columns of an ancient temple

Religion was extremely important in the life of the Greeks, so it is not surprising that their temples were their most impressive buildings. They also had political significance because they were used as a symbol of power and to celebrate success in war.

Key facts

- Temples were built with limestone or marble, with roofs and ceilings made of wood.
- Ox-drawn carts brought the large blocks of stone from quarries. Masons then carved the blocks on site using chisels and hammers.
- The impressive columns were made from cylindrical drum sections, lifted into place with ropes and pulleys.
- Sculptors added decorative friezes around the top parts of the temple and in their triangular pediments.

Festivals

Every city had its own calendar of festivals to worship the gods. The ceremonies usually took place in the open air, inside a temenos (sanctuary). This was a special place away from ordinary life.

Key facts

- Religious festivals and ceremonies included processions, prayers, and sacrifices, and were held to ensure victory in war or a successful harvest.
- No one could enter a sanctuary if they were impure. Greeks believed people who had been in contact with death or childbirth were impure. They could be purified with water or with smoke from burning sulfur.



Athena's sanctuary at Delphi

Gods and goddesses

The most important gods belonged to one family led by Zeus, king of the gods. Zeus was responsible for the weather and is often seen with a thunderbolt in his hand. He was the father of many other gods.



Zeus, leader of the Greek gods

Key facts

- The Greeks believed that their gods lived on the highest mountain on the mainland, Mount Olympus.
- Each god represented a different part of life. Poseidon ruled the sea, Apollo the Sun, Hephaestus fire, Aphrodite love, Ares war, and Artemis hunting and the Moon.
- Hades, brother of Zeus, was god of the underworld. He kidnapped the goddess Demeter's daughter Persephone. Demeter was so upset that she stopped the crops from growing. Zeus persuaded his brother to let Persephone return to Earth for half the year, bringing spring and summer with her.
- Gods often had different names for different roles. Athena Polias was protector of Athens, while Athena Promachos (she who fights in front) was goddess of war.