Chapter 1

“Introduction to Greek Myth”
What is myth?

- Is a myth a lie? Cf. “Mythbusters”
- “mythos” = “utterance,” or “story”
- Myth is ‘a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.’ – Walter Burkert, quoted p. 14
Types of story

- True Myth
- Legend or Saga
- Folktale
A couple of birth stories

- The Birth of Athena from the head of Zeus
- The Birth of Dionysus from the thigh of Zeus
The Birth of Athena as a cosmic event

- Phidias’ sculptural group from the pediment of Parthenon
- Selection from “Homeric Hymn to Athena”
  
  Great Olympus itself started to reel,
  Dazed by the might of the gray-eyed newcomer, and
  earth all around
  Cried out in fear, while the sea heaved, throwing up
  Purple billows and spewing forth sudden foam.
  The brilliant son of Hyperion halted his swift-footed horses,
  Forgetful of time... (tr. Thelma Sargent), see p. 8
Contest of Athena and Poseidon

- Ostensibly to explain why city is called Athens, and why Athena is patron of Athens
- Used to justify disenfranchisement of women (patriarchy at work)
Hephaestus’ attempt to make the moves on Athena
Kleenex kid – Erichthonius
Snaky guy – goddess, and autochthony
Erichthonius sets up Panathenaea
Athena and the Law

- Story told in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*
  - Male primacy
  - Court established as means of adjudicating murder cases
  - Split court goes for the defendant
Civilization v. destructive forces (men v. “other”)
- Metopes
  - Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs

Connection between “us” and “them”
- The Panathenaic Frieze – regular Athenians and gods

“the Greeks acted out their sense of the numinous, the perceived experience of divine or sacred forces present in the world, by honoring ta hiera (‘holy things’).” (p. 7)
Greek gods

- Polytheism
  - Many gods – not omniscient, not omnipotent, not co-eternal with creation

- Anthropomorphism
  - The divine as amplified human
  - Can take other shape
  - Is distinctly “other” in behavior
Zeus and the Olympians

- Family business
- Zeus in charge, but not all hunky-dory
- Workload divided
- Worship not exclusive
Periods of Greek literature

- Archaic (800-480 BC)
- Classical (479-323 BC)
- Hellenistic (322-31 BC)
- Roman (30 BC and later)
Some Greek Sources

- Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th c. BC)
- Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (8th c. BC)
- Homeric Hymns (8th c. BC through Hellenistic period)
- Aeschylus (c. 525-456 BC)
- Sophocles (c. 496-406 BC)
- Euripides (c. 480-406 BC)
More Greek sources

- Library of Apollodorus (mid 2^{nd} c. AD), but Apollodorus (mid 2^{nd} c. BC)
- Pausanias, Guide to Greece (late 2^{nd} c. AD)
- Plutarch, Parallel Lives (AD 46-120)
- Ovid, Metamorphoses (43 BC – c. 17 AD)
Features of Greek literary myth

- Humanism
- Competitiveness (cf. Achilles)
Was there a Trojan War?

Heinrich Schliemann, 19th c.

Troy VI (c. 1250 BC) or Troy VIIa (c. 1150-1180 BC)
Prior to 3000 BC – likely goddess worship, agricultural, maybe matriarchal

3000-1400 BC – Minoan ascendancy (thalassocracy on Crete – not Greek!)

2000 BC – Indo-European invasion – Greeks come to Greece

1400-1100 BC – period of all Greek legend (Mycenae ascendancy)

1100-800 BC – Dark Ages
What about Roman myth?

- Romans didn’t really have myth
  - The gods seen as “forces” not people
  - Everything subordinate to the destiny of Rome