Athena and Poseidon’s Contest for Athens
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In ancient Greece, myths were created to explain the world and understand what it means to be human. Greek mythology is not just important to ancient Greece, but has spread across the far-flung Greek and Roman Empires. The myths have been told from generation to generation and are still read today. As you read this text, take notes on the characteristics of both Athena and Poseidon, and how they contribute to who wins the contest for Athens.

The stories of our Greek and Roman heroes all share similar traits. Heroes or heroines tend to be born in an extraordinary way, (think of the DC Comics Superman, the sole survivor from the planet Krypton who was saved by his father and sent in a rocket to planet Earth), are often brought up by those who are not their birth parents, and go on to face a series of challenges or quests before they can claim what is rightly theirs. During their heroic careers they are called up to intervene in all kinds of human endeavors; such as battles between peoples, or wars between nations. They are also often conscripted into worthy causes, such as the creation of a new town; laying the metaphoric foundations for what was to prosper into our contemporary major cities that we still walk in today. These stories are called founding myths, and often denote moments in a shared history when new communities arise to later became powerful and prosperous.

One such story comes from Virgil's *The Aeneid* where the popular cult of Romulus and Remus becomes the founding myth of the city of Rome; telling of the twin's unusual infancy, when they were breastfed and reared by a she-wolf after their parents had deserted them.

Our heroine, Athena² was the protagonist of one such founding myth, and she too has a city named after her. And, if you are wondering which city this could possibly be, the clue lies in her name, but it was her name that was given to the city, and not the other way round.

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1. to call upon someone to join a cause or an army
2. The Greek goddess of wisdom
To recall this story we have to start with ‘Once, a long, long time ago’ because the actual date is not important; only the idea that this all took place in our distant past. Once, a long, long time ago the first king of Athens, King Cecrops (quite an extraordinary king himself, as he was part human and part snake), set out to find a patron deity \(^3\) for his city state; already a prosperous \(^4\) and vibrant \(^5\) city. He called on Athena and Poseidon \(^6\) because both in fact desired to be the patron of this beautiful city. Their rivalry was so intense that they almost went to war and just as they were about to attack each other, Athena, with her typical, wise approach suggested that they should hold a contest for the city. With King Cecrops the judge, they set up the contest and decided that whoever presented the city with the best gift would be rewarded with the city itself as the grand prize.

\([\text{5}]\) In the midst of a huge crowd, with King Cecrops presiding over the contest, they went up to the Acropolis \(^7\) to present their gifts to the city. Poseidon was to go first, and he lifted his massive trident (three pointed spear) and struck the earth with it. At the point where the spear struck, a frothy spring burst out producing a sea which is now called Erekhtheis. The people loved it but as they went closer to taste the water, to their dismay the water was salty. Don’t forget that Poseidon was ruler of the sea, and the water sources he controlled were inevitably salty, just like the seas he ruled.

When it was Athena’s turn her act was far less dramatic. She quietly knelt and buried something in the ground which in time grew into an olive tree. This turned out to be a much more useful gift, granting the Athenians not only the olives themselves as sustenance, but also a source of oil for their lamps and for cooking their food as well as the wood from the olive tree to build their boats and houses. Clearly Athena’s gift was deemed by far the better by Cecrops, and he declared her the winner and the patron deity of Athens. Athena became the protector of the city (polis) and many people throughout the Greek world worshiped her as Athena Polias (Ἀθηνᾶ Πολιάς “Athena of the city”). As patron of Athens, she fought in the Trojan War \(^8\) on the side of the Achaeans.

And if you are worried about what happened to the King, you don’t have to be concerned, as the fabulous citadel \(^9\) at the Acropolis was named Cecropia after him. The Sea God Poseidon however was not at all pleased by all of this, and in a wild fury he flooded the Thriasian plain, \(^10\) drowning Attika \(^11\) under his salty sea.

The contest for the city of Athens was later carved into the stone relief \(^12\) on the rear pediment \(^13\) in the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis, with both of our heroes appearing in the center of the composition — the goddess holding her olive tree and Poseidon his trident.

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3. A patron deity is a god who supports and protects the city.
4. Prosperous (adjective): wealthy or successful
5. Vibrant (adjective): bustling, lively, full of energy
6. The Greek god of the sea
7. The Acropolis is the ancient, fortified town center in Athens. It famously contains the Parthenon, an ancient temple, the ruins of which still stand today.
8. The Trojan War was a great war fought between the Trojans and the Achaeans (a group of people including the Athenians) over the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy. This story is the subject of Homer’s Iliad.
9. A citadel is like a fortified town center.
10. flat lands in Attika, just west of Athens
11. Attika (also spelled “Attica”) is a historical region that encompasses the city of Athens.
12. A relief is a type of sculpture, often made on a wall and depicting battle and other historical scenes.
13. The pediment is the triangular upper part of the Temple.
This story deserves an additional telling — this time in the Roman tradition\(^\text{14}\).... Here it was the god Neptune\(^\text{15}\) who was to challenge the goddess Minerva\(^\text{16}\) to the contest over Athens. In this rendering it was Jove (Zeus)\(^\text{17}\) who was to judge them. The outcome however was identical, with Minerva winning the contest with her olive tree, establishing what was said to be the first town in the world and naming it in her own name, Athens. In this version not only did Neptune flood the land with a sea of salt but went on to curse the city with a water shortage which still continues today in modern day Greece.

\(^{14}\) The Romans of Italy had their own mythology, which came nearly 1,000 years after Greek myths. Roman mythology was created by the people of Rome as a religion, and much of it was based on Greek mythology.

\(^{15}\) Poseidon's Roman name

\(^{16}\) Athena's Roman name

\(^{17}\) also known as Jupiter
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best identifies the theme of the myth of Athena and Poseidon's contest for Athens?
   
   A. Democratic contests are more just and preferable than war.
   B. Athens was a vibrant city thanks to Athena.
   C. A useful gift is better than a dramatic one.
   D. Women make better protectors than men.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   
   A. “Their rivalry was so intense that they almost went to war and just as they were about to attack each other, Athena, with her typical, wise approach suggested that they should hold a contest for the city.” (Paragraph 4)
   B. “This turned out to be a much more useful gift, granting the Athenians not only the olives themselves as sustenance, but also a source of oil for their lamps and for cooking their food as well as the wood from the olive tree to build their boats and houses.” (Paragraph 6)
   C. “Athena became the protector of the city (polis)... As patron of Athens, she fought in the Trojan War on the side of the Achaeans.” (Paragraph 6)
   D. “The Sea God Poseidon however was not at all pleased by all of this, and in a wild fury he flooded the Thriasian plain, drowning Attika under his salty sea.” (Paragraph 7)

3. PART A: What does the phrase “metaphoric foundations” most closely mean as it is used in paragraph 1?
   
   A. the mythic ideas of what the city was built on
   B. poetic descriptions of the original buildings in the city
   C. early codes of law, originally written as myths
   D. a comparison of two different cities

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
   
   A. “what was to prosper into our contemporary major cities that we still walk in today” (Paragraph 1)
   B. “These stories are called founding myths” (Paragraph 1)
   C. “often denote moments in a shared history” (Paragraph 1)
   D. “when new communities arise to later became powerful and prosperous.” (Paragraph 1)
5. How are the details about Poseidon’s and Athena’s characters important to the development of the myth’s theme? Cite evidence from the text in your answer.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Athena and Poseidon both gave magnificent gifts, but the king decided Athena won. Is his decision fair?

2. Why did Athena win and Poseidon lose? In other words, what makes a person successful? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.