Greek mythology provided the foundation of Greek religion over 3,000 years ago. It is important to understand some of the fundamental beliefs of that time and place. First you will better understand the important role of religion in ancient Greek culture. Secondly, you will be better able to interpret English literature as you continue through school. So many literary masterpieces rely on the stories and myths of ancient Greece. Finally, you also need to know about the religion of ancient Greece for this simulation. The Wheel of Fate will cause mythical Greek gods and goddesses to intervene into the affairs of your polis.

The Greeks did not believe in one god, but rather believed in many gods, goddesses, and demigods. They were everywhere—on land and sea, in the sky, on the moon, in sacred oak trees, in olives, even in floods and other natural disasters. In short, ancient Greeks believed everything that happened, good or bad, was caused and carried out by hundreds of deities. The Greeks also imagined their gods to be humanlike in body form. They reacted like super-humans, showing love, hate, jealousy, anger, and revenge. Greeks believed the 12 major gods lived atop Mount Olympus, a snow-capped peak in northern Greece.

Religion in ancient Greece was closely connected to the government and, to an extent, to civic pride. Greeks had no priesthood as in ancient Egypt, but had instead ordinary officials who acted as priests. Therefore, no rigid priestly class made careers of their jobs, and few became very powerful. The position became just another civic duty for a citizen. Religious festivals to the gods were numerous and generally joyous occasions. Most poleis had gods or goddesses as patrons and erected statues and temples to them.

Greek temples, unlike churches, were not places for the believers to come together to pray. Instead they were considered houses for the gods. The poleis actually employed a staff of servants to maintain the temples. Inside these beautiful temples was the god or goddess’s statue in front of an altar. A sacred fire at the altar was always kept burning by men and women who served at the temple.
Ancient Greeks had so much respect for their deities that they did not enter the temple. Instead they left offerings at the entrance. Their offerings included wine, milk, cakes, and pastries. They even left lambs, cows, ewes, bulls, and pigs to be sacrificed inside the temple. Draped in wreaths, gilded, and sometimes garlanded, the animals would have their throats slit open and their blood sprinkled on the altar. Once a piece of flesh was offered to the gods, those present shared the rest after the “offering” was burned. Offerings sometimes included a share of a citizen’s harvest or profits, too. The Greeks willingly supported their temples. They truly believed that if the gods or goddesses were not kept happy, then they would turn against the polis.

The ancient Greek religion led to two other lasting achievements: drama and the Olympics. Their religious activities included many festivals during the year. As part of the festivals, the ancient Greeks put great effort into their athletics, poetry, music, and theater.
The 12 Major Greek Gods

The 12 major gods of Mount Olympus ruled over various realms. In addition to these gods and goddesses, there were demons, harpies, furies, fairies, gorgons, sirens, nymphs, and mortal heroes. Each had an elaborate and fascinating history, realm, or task. Greek mortals included Heracles (Hercules), Jason, and Odysseus—persons given great ability and, frequently, strength to perform incredible feats.

Aphrodite (a-fro-DYE-tee): Goddess of beauty and of love

Apollo (a-POL-o): God and patron of many things, including archery, music, prophecy, and medicine; often associated with the sun

Ares (AIR-ees): God of war and combat

Artemis (AR-te-mis): Goddess of the moon; guardian of cities, young animals, and women; “rainer of arrows and mighty huntress”

Athena (a-THE-nee): Goddess of wisdom, patron goddess of Athens; patron of household crafts; daughter of Zeus; protectress of those who worship her in times of war

Demeter (de-MEE-tur): Goddess of crops; giver of grains and fruit

Dionysus (dye-o-NEY-sus): God of fertility, joyous life and hospitality, wild things, and wine

Hephaestus (he-FEES-tus): God of fire and artisans; husband of Aphrodite; he was the only “ugly” god

Hera (HAIR-ah): Wife of Zeus, protectress of marriage, children, and the home

Hermes (HER-meez): God of orators, writers, and commerce; protector of thieves and mischief-makers; guardian of wayfarers; messenger to mortals; son of Zeus

Poseidon (po-SYE-don): God of the oceans and seas; earth-giver of horses to mortals

Zeus (ZYOOZ): Ruler and king of all gods on Mount Olympus; also god of the weather, hence the expression “Thunderbolts of Zeus”
Greek Gods and Oracles

Going Greek

THE ORACLES

Ancient Greeks were fearful of offending their many gods. Some would use every means possible to find out beforehand what lay in the future. They tried star-reading, interpreting dreams, and examining the entrails of animals and the flight patterns of birds. The ancient Greeks also consulted soothsayers and oracles to divine the future. Public oracles were established all over Greece. The oracles of Zeus at Dodona and of Apollo at Delphi became famous.

Greeks believed females were more intuitive. At Delphi, three priestesses, each over 50 years old, were trained to consult the god Apollo through the medium of a trance. On the seventh day of each month, citizens came to Delphi to hear a prophecy. They paid handsomely to hear them. The priestesses worked in a hollow in the earth where natural gases seeped out. (Apollo, it was said, was slain there.) One priestess, called The Pythia, officiated. She took a high seat on a tripod in the grove of olive trees near the decomposed earth and gaseous area. She inhaled the vapors (“divine stench”), chewed on some laurel leaves, and then fell into a delirium with convulsions. Sometimes, The Pythia would utter a sentence or two of incoherent words. The priests nearby translated for the eagerly awaiting visitors.

To remind everyone who came there, there were two phrases carved clearly on upper walls of the temple. These were the words that all Greeks knew and tried to live by: “Know thyself” and “Nothing to excess.” Perhaps, though, if this advice was seriously followed, the oracles at the center of the Hellenic world would be out of business.

Oracles became powerful forces in Hellenic history. But they notoriously gave ambiguous information. In 546 BCE, Croesus (KREE-sus), the King of Lydia, asked the Oracle at Delphi whether or not to attack the Persians. The oracle replied: “If Croesus goes to war, he will destroy a great empire.” Believing he would win, Croesus went out to meet the army of Cyrus (SY-russ), the King of Persia, but was utterly defeated. The great empire he destroyed was his own.

What are several ways that ancient Greeks tried to foresee the future?

Why were many oracles female?

How often did citizens go to the Oracle of Delphi to hear a prophecy?

Who spoke the prophecies of Delphi? Why did she need priests to translate?

What are the two inscriptions on the temple at Delphi?

Explain how Croesus misinterpreted the oracle’s response.
Let's suppose your polis went to the oracle for advice and she said,

"You will go you will return not in the battle you will perish."

What does that mean?

Sometimes it was not only ambiguity, but also bribery at play. In 480 BCE, Athenian leaders feared that Persian hordes were advancing on their city and rushed to Delphi for advice. When the oracle told them to get behind "the wooden wall," Themistocles (them-ih-TAH-kleez), an aggressive Athenian archon, took this to mean that his people were not to hide like cowards literally behind walls, but to fight the Persians from the decks of 200 wooden ships (triremes) in the straights near Salamis.

A closer look at history, however, exposes a somewhat different version. The facts seem to be these: Themistocles already had his battle plan and bribed the Oracle at Delphi to agree with him. She gave an ambiguous message that convinced the council and people of Athens of the merits of his strategy. In any case, his plan worked. The Greeks routed the Persians at the Battle of Salamis. This was one of several key battles that defeated the Persians and, thereafter, they never posed a threat. The Oracle at Delphi's reputation soared.

While it may be difficult for us to imagine a daily life dependent on multiple gods, oracles, and sacrifices, these beliefs were a significant part of ancient Greek life and culture. Ancient Greeks believed in many gods (polytheistic), while many people now believe in a single god (monotheistic). Today there are hundreds of religions practiced throughout the world. Some religions are more prominent, but most still provide the core for particular cultures.