



Athena, an important goddess of the ancient Greeks, was believed to be the protector of Athens. She was also a warrior who was, among other things, a champion for the city named in her honor.

Goddess of wisdom, Athena was the daughter of Zeus (chief god of the Greeks). Her mother (according to one view of the story) was a nymph by the name of Metis.

Greek mythology has a very interesting story about Athena's birth. We learn about it from the Perseus Project at Tufts University:

*Zeus heard a prophecy that the child Metis bore after she gave birth to Athena would become the lord of heaven, so, to prevent this from happening, he swallowed Metis while she was still pregnant with Athena.*

So ... if Zeus swallowed Athena's mother, before Athena was born, how did she come into the world? Get ready for another interesting tale:

*When the time came for Athena to be born, the smith god, Hephaistos, opened Zeus' head with an axe, and Athena stepped out, in full armor. The birth of Athena was a favorite topic of Greek vase painters.*

Pheidias, who created the famous statue of Zeus—one of the wonders of the ancient world—also created a statue of Athena. Although the statue is lost, it was described in ancient sources. It was so large that a special place had to be built to accommodate it. The still-standing Parthenon, at the Acropolis in Athens, was that place.

The British Museum tells us about the famous statue (which was named for Athena in her maiden form):

*The Parthenon in Athens was built about 447-438 BC to house a colossal statue of the goddess Athena Parthenos ("the maiden"). The temple was the crowning glory of a great program of architectural renewal masterminded by Perikles, who was then leader of the Athenian democracy.*

*The statue was constructed from gold and ivory [known as chryselephantine for "chrysos" (gold) and "elephas" (ivory)] by Pheidias, the most famous sculptor of all antiquity. Athena was shown with one hand resting on a shield, which was carved with scenes of battle between Greeks and Amazons, a female race of warriors.*

*The statue has not survived. Knowledge of its physical appearance must be pieced together from literary descriptions and representations of it in other artworks...*

*According to ancient tradition, Pheidias contrived to place a portrait of himself and of Perikles on the shield. It has been suggested that they are the two men who stand back-to-back below the central mask of a gorgon: Pheidias would be the balding figure on the left with arms raised, with Perikles to the right, one foot raised on a fallen Amazon and arms raised obscuring his face from view.*

Although the Parthenon is missing its reason-for-being, there is a model of the once-famous Athena Parthenos. We see an image of it at the top of this page. It is maintained by the Royal Ontario Museum whose curators describe it with these words:

*This model of the famous but now lost statue of Athena Parthenos, made by Pheidias to stand in the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis, is the first accurate model of this statue ever produced. It was based on ancient evidence and is still referred to today by experts the world over.*

The Romans' equivalent of Athena was a goddess known as Minerva.

Click on the image for a better view.

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## Media Stream



### Athena - Greek Goddess of Wisdom

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