

Ancient Greece

Religious Beliefs (Panathenaic Way)

- 1. Learn about this site.** You are at the Panathenaic Way, a path that connected a cemetery for Athenian heroes with a religious shrine on top of the Acropolis. Athenians walked on this path during funerals and religious festivals.
- 2. Read the information about religious beliefs, and take notes.** Carefully read and discuss the information below about Athenian religious beliefs. Then, list three important facts about Athenian religious beliefs.

The ancient Greeks were a *polytheistic* (pronounced PAH-lee-thee-ISS-tik) people—that is, they believed in many Gods rather than one God. They believed the Gods played a strong role in the course of human affairs. According to the ancient Greeks, Gods could affect everything, including the annual sprouting of crops, the spread of terrible diseases, and victory or defeat in war and in sporting events. Since they were generally a very religious people, the Greeks looked upon religion as a public, not a private, matter. People who did not believe in the Gods could be publicly accused of offending the Gods, or *impiety*. Athenian juries that convicted people of this charge often sentenced them to death.

There were 12 major Greek Gods. Each had power over one or more aspects of human life. The Greeks called them Olympian Gods because they believed the Gods lived in a palace atop Mt. Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. *Zeus* was the King of the Gods and the God of Justice. *Hera*, Zeus's wife, was the Goddess of marriage. *Poseidon* was the God of the sea. *Hades* was the God of the Underworld, the land of the dead. *Apollo* was the God of the sun, and *Ares* was the God of war. *Athena* was the Goddess of wisdom, the arts, and military victory. *Artemis* was the Goddess of the moon and wildlife. *Aphrodite* was the Goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. *Hermes* was the messenger of the Gods. *Hephaestus* was the God of blacksmithing and crafts. *Hestia* was the Goddess of the home.

To earn the favor of the Gods, most people prayed, made sacrifices, and built sacred places to honor them. These sacred places, called *sanctuaries*, were built in areas of great natural beauty. For example, the Greeks honored Zeus at a place called Olympia. Located on a beautiful, wide, level plain, the Greeks used the site to hold the Olympic Games, their great athletic competition. Another sacred site was Delphi, where the Greeks built a shrine, or *oracle*, to Apollo. At this shrine, they looked for advice from the Gods to guide their actions on earth.