

What Would Zeus Do?

By Daniel Glick

"Aren't you afraid?" my friends asked, when I said I was still planning to go to Greece, despite headlines blaring fears about Olympic security, unrest in Cypress, and anti-Americanism spreading from Iraq into Europe. I was undeterred. The truth was, I had a rare window of free time, and I wasn't about to let a little international outrage get in my way. Besides, these desperate times required an exceptional pilgrimage. I felt drawn to commune with something that pre-dated Jesus Christ, to venture into a culture that preceded Mohammed. I wanted to visit the youthful stomping grounds of Zeus on the island of Crete. I needed to contemplate world events and ask, "What would Zeus do?"

I knew that modern Greeks were not wild about the war, so I began by taking the temperature of a few mere mortals. The woman who rented me a car in Heraklion held clear convictions about the situation in Iraq. "The Musselmans are crazy," she said, no doubt an easy call for a Greek Orthodox Christian. "But Bush is crazier." Out of Greek mouths, Bush rhymes with "whoosh."

I drove deep into the mountains, sheep and goats and rocky slopes as my only company, and boned up on Greek mythology. Zeus' dad Cronus, I was reminded, had a distasteful habit of eating his children, since he was convinced that one of them would eventually dethrone him. Zeus came along, god-child number six, and his mom Rhea fed Cronus a stone instead of her infant, then spirited Zeus away to a cave in Crete.

When Zeus got old enough to plot revenge, he knew he had to build a coalition of the willing in order to overthrow his dad. So, with some help from other deities, Zeus tricked Cronus, freed his brothers and sisters, and together they successfully dethroned dad. Even Zeus didn't go it alone.

Now Zeus, for those who remember reading *D'Aulaires Book of Greek Myths* as kids, was a short-tempered fellow. Although he was far from perfect (he tricked his sister into marrying him, for example), Zeus conveyed the supreme confidence of somebody at the top of the food chain. He didn't brook much ineptitude, human or divine. He held his own god of war, Ares (whom he called "the worst of his children"), at arms' length, and Zeus knew that all the other gods hated Ares' "vain strutting and senseless bloodshed." Most of all, Zeus didn't like anybody getting too big for their tunics, and routinely smote gods and humans alike when they got too full of themselves.

For that reason alone, Zeus wouldn't have liked Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden. Although Zeus and his council of gods did mingle with mortals, Saddam and Osama decidedly wouldn't have made the "A" list for any Olympian dinner party.

And while gods routinely took different human forms, any mortal who had as many doubles as Saddam would, frankly, be a little suspect.

On the other hand, I'm not sure Zeus would have cottoned to being dubbed "The Big Z," or "Lightning Boy" by President Bush, either. Especially after Bush called the Greeks "Grecians" early in his presidency. Zeus, like most gods, required proper tribute.

I got out of my car and faced the 8,000-foot snow-capped Mt. Ida at the center of the island, seeking inspiration. A thunderbolt on all their houses, Zeus would conclude. The worst sin of all, in Zeus' pantheon, would be the sin of hubris, which comes from a Greek word meaning "excessive pride or wanton violence." Saddam and Osama certainly qualify. But so does Bush, flush with commandeering ancient Mesopotamia and Afghanistan, and alternately wagging his militaristic stick at the axis of evil, wondering where to unleash his bunker bombs next. Bush's smirk and swagger would surely piss Zeus off. Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, as latter day Ares, would equally incur Zeus' wrath.

As even some mortals have pointed out, hubris is indeed a dangerous thing. McGeorge Bundy, President John F. Kennedy's national security advisor, once warned: "There is no safety in unlimited technological hubris." History has unhappily proven that to be a most prescient remark. Even Zeus knew that after he seized power from his dad, he had to share the responsibilities of ruling with the other gods and go about making peace.

One last thought. Some people have voiced the opinion that Jesus would never be caught dead driving an SUV. I'm not sure about that. I'd bet that Zeus' chariot of choice would be a Hummer. The roads in Crete are pretty rough.

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