



Athena: A Biography

Lee Hall

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Author Lee Hall takes the unusual tack of melding the hypothetical “life” of one mythological being—the goddess Athena—into a single, chronological narrative. By drawing upon the richness of ancient history, archaeology, and classical art and literature, she follows the metamorphosis of Athena’s identity, tracing through it not only the origins of our concepts of justice and revenge, our attitudes toward wisdom and the useful arts, but the disturbing mistrust of women inherited from the ancient world, as well as the struggle between male and female that attended the very birth of western culture. Hall traces the earliest vestiges of Athena back to the fertility and survival rituals of prehistoric Crete. She then follows this deity associated with the “mother goddess” as she migrates to the mainland. But once there, Hall finds, Athena becomes an “honorary male,” complete with helmet, spear, and shield. The goddess once associated with rituals of nurturing and fecundity now relishes the savagery of war, even masterminds the triumph of the Greeks over the Trojans in Homer’s *Iliad*. Athena forsakes her elemental female virtues and identity as she is co-opted by the male-dominated warrior culture of the Mycenaeans. The third distinctive phase of Athena’s career is as the special deity of Athens, where she makes herself felt in the great festivals, art, and architecture of her city, but here too she must betray her gender as the price of civilization. In completing the transition to urban life, one of her last acts is to drive underground the Furies, trapping and containing the ancient and angry female energy. Athena is thus a profound and often troubling exploration of the changes in human consciousness—especially with regard to gender and power—that brought humanity from fertility cults to the Age of Heroes to a time that embraced civic order and the search for wisdom and beauty. A fascinating story, it is also a boon to anyone looking for an entertaining and comprehensible narrative that effectively weaves together the Homeric epics, Greek drama, and modern archaeological discoveries.

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