Also Athenai, the Greek goddess of war (strategy) and wisdom, as well as numerous urban arts and crafts (especially spinning and weaving), and one of the most important of the major Olympian gods. Among her symbols were the owl and the olive tree. Athena (whom the Romans later came to associate with their goddess Minerva) was also the patron deity (divine protector) of many Greek cities, most famously of Athens. There, over the centuries, the Athenians raised several temples to her, including the renowned Parthenon and the Erechtheum. The goddess's cult image (statue) inside the Parthenon, known as the Athena Parthenos, was only one of several manifestations of the goddess. She was believed to have a number of different sides to her character, each of which personified a special talent or physical or mental attribute.

By contrast, Athena Promachos (“Athena the Warrior Champion”) and Athena Nike (“Athena the Victor”) were images stressing her physical strength, courage, and fearsome fighting skills. Other manifestations of Athena included Hygieia (“Goddess of Health”) and Ergane (“the Worker”). She was also frequently called Pallas Athena, a term of obscure origins. Some modern scholars think that Pallas may have been the name of a Bronze Age war goddess whose identity merged with Athena's in later times.

Athena was so important to the Greeks that she figured in numerous myths. One of the most famous of these concerned her own birth, which was unusual in that she sprang, fully clad in her armor, from the head of her father, Zeus, leader of the Olympian gods.

Greek poet Hesiod recorded the details of this miraculous birth:

Zeus first took the goddess Metis [daughter of two Titans and a deity known for her great wisdom, much of which she passed on to both Zeus and Athena] as his wife, but later deceived her and swallowed her, for fate had decreed that Metis would conceive children filled with wisdom. And the first of these would be the bright-eyed maiden Athena, who would have strength and wisdom equal to her father’s. Metis remained concealed inside of Zeus and eventually conceived Athena, who received from her father the aegis [his majestic and invincible breastplate], with which she surpassed in strength all her brother and sister gods. While suffering from a headache so extreme, Zeus asked other gods to take weapons and split his head to relieve the pressure. Springing from his the wounds on his head, Zeus brought Athena, fully grown, into the world. She arrived bearing the aegis and clad in battle armor with the crested helmet (which would also become one of her symbols) (Theogony 886–929).

Another myth described how Athena and the sea god Poseidon had a contest to decide which of them would preside over and protect Athens. Poseidon created and gave to the people the horse which they could domesticate and use to their will. Athena then countered him by causing the first olive tree to sprout from the hill’s summit; seeing this, Zeus and the other gods judging the contest declared her the winner. (Other versions of the story say a mortal judged the contest.) Still another tradition held that Athena sent an olive-wood statue of herself hurtling out of the sky. The spot on which it supposedly landed, near the Acropolis’s northern edge, became the site for a succession of temples that housed the sacred statue Athena Polias (“Athena of the City”). The name of these temples—the Erechtheum—derived from Erechtheus, a legendary Bronze Age Athenian king who came to be seen as a sort of partner to Athena or custodian of her temples. (Painters and sculptors often pictured him as a serpent guarding the goddess.)
As might be expected, a majority of the many myths in which Athena took part involved war or adventure. She was the fiercest and most active champion of the Greeks during the Trojan War, for example. (Yet the Trojans still revered her and maintained several shrines to her, one of which held a sacred cult statue, the Palladium. Believing that they could not win the war as long as the Trojans possessed this statue, the Greek warriors Odysseus and Diomedes, with the help of Helen, slipped into Troy one night and stole the Palladium.) During the war, according to Homer in his Iliad, Athena often fought against the war god, Ares, who favored the Trojans. She also aided a number of heroes and adventurers, among them Perseus (to whom she gave the tools he needed to kill the dreaded Gorgon Medusa and who gave her Medusa’s head after he had used it to save his mother—Medusa’s head would then be forged on her shield and become yet another symbol for her), Bellerophon, Jason, Heracles, and Odysseus.

In helping another young man, Athena demonstrated that she could wield justice as effectively as a sword and shield. After slaying his own mother, Clytemnestra, Orestes, son of Agamemnon, was pursued by the vengeful Furies. As described in the third play in Aeschylus’s mighty trilogy, the Oresteia, when Orestes reached Athens, the goddess intervened and arranged for the young man to receive a fair trial. The jury was split, so Athena cast a tie-breaking vote that acquitted Orestes ending the infamous, generations long curse of the house of Atreus.

Yet, despite her generally logical approach to justice, Athena was a god and gods can be wrathful. And although Athena was wiser and more mild-mannered than the pantheon of Greek gods, Athena was still known to become jealous and exact vengeance against those she thought had wronged her. When the young maiden Arachne was growing up, she was taught the fine art of weaving. She was a beautiful young woman and became a very accomplished weaver, stringing together the most sought after tapestries. While working and admiring her own skill one day, she noted that she was probably even a better weaver than the goddess Athena. Of course, Athena heard of this and challenged the girl to a contest. The foolish girl, instead of acquiescing to the goddess, took the challenge. Arachne was to weave first. For her subject she chose the infidelities of the gods, especially Zeus’ many affairs. Arachne’s work was fine and beautiful, almost life-like. Although Athena had to admit that she was impressed by the young girl’s talent and skill, Athena saw the subject of Arachne’s tapestry as arrogant and an offense to the gods. She tore the tapestry to pieces, destroyed the loom and touched Arachne in the head so that she would feel the guilt of her sacrilege. Arachne felt so guilty, though, that she hanged herself. Athena then took pity on the girl loosened the rope to save her life but as she did the rope changed to a web and Arachne was transformed into a spider so that she and her descendants would forever hang from threads and weave the most beautiful pieces in nature.