

MOON SHINING

Glowing and mysterious, useful yet dangerous, the moon was an integral part of the daily lives of the ancient Greeks. They understood it rationally, observed its cyclic changes, and, based on its filling up and emptying, determined the timing of their religious festivals and sacrifices. But it was in art and in literature that they developed an entire world around it. Selene (Moon) was a beautiful, radiant woman, the sister of Helios (Sun) and Eos (Dawn), who traversed the horizon mounted on a horse or driving a chariot. Like her siblings, she would emerge from the waters of Oceanus, the enormous river encircling the earth. She lit up the night and, as soon as her journey was over, dove back into the water.

In the art of Phidias on the Parthenon, this imagery finds its most perfect expression, providing a cosmic setting for celebrated events. In the east pediment, the chariots of the two stars, Helios rising from the waves of the ocean and Selene plunging back down, indicate that the birth of Athena took place at dawn.

Also on the metopes of the temple's north side, which featured scenes from the Trojan War, Selene appears on her horse (metope 29).

Selene was not the object of official cult worship in Greece in the Archaic and Classical periods (6th – 4th c. BC). However, in the popular consciousness she was the supporter of women in love, a helper at magical rituals and, at her eclipse, an omen of disaster. When the moon was new (noumenia), the Athenians would ascend the Acropolis to ask the gods for prosperity for their city and themselves, whereas by the light of the full moon (dichomenia), the night rituals of important city festivals would take place.



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