Medical Mythology: Pallas Athena (Minerva)
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Pallas Athena, known primarily as the goddess of war, seems to have had many different responsibilities, including a role as goddess of health. Although she was usually represented as a woman of great beauty carrying a lance, helmet, and shield, her healing powers were commemorated in a statue in Athens called “Athena Paecomia” (Athena the Healer).

Legend notes that when the Greek architect Mnesicles (5th century BC) fell while working on the propylaeum (entrance gate) to the Acropolis and was dying, Athena miraculously healed him. Thus, a statue of Athena stood next to that of Hygeia on the Acropolis. In Sparta (an ancient city in southern Greece), a temple was dedicated to Athena Ophthalmitis—that is, the goddess of the eye. According to tradition, the temple was founded by Lycurgus (king of Thrace; a region in the Balkan Peninsula), who fled to that site after his eye was struck out by Alcander. There he was protected by the Lacedaemonians and thus was able to save his remaining eye.

The gods and goddesses were responsible for many diseases mentioned in the Homeric poems. They not only caused illnesses but also healed them. Reports of miracle cures were common. When Diomedes (a Greek warrior in the Trojan War) was seriously wounded by an arrow and was bleeding profusely, he prayed to Pallas Athena, who immediately restored him to health so that he could return to battle.

Hesiod (Greek poet, circa 800 BC) told how Athena, having no known mother, sprang from the forehead of Zeus in full armor and ready for battle. Another version was that Zeus swallowed his wife, Metis, when she was about to give birth to a child. Shortly thereafter, Zeus experienced an unbearable headache. To cure him, Hephaestus (the Greek god of fire, known to the Romans as Vulcan) split open the skull of Zeus with a bronze axe, and from the gaping wound, shouting a triumphant cry of victory, sprang Athena.

In the Iliad, Athena inspired and fought alongside the Greek armies. The reason for this allegiance is interesting. The story is told that all the gods and goddesses except Eris (Discord) were invited to the marriage of Thetis and Peleus. Furious by the omission, Eris tossed into the hall where the guests were gathered a golden apple with the inscription, “For the Most Beautiful.” Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite all claimed the apple. To settle the affair, Zeus called on Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy. Each of the three goddesses offered Paris a bribe. Hera offered him control over all of Asia; Athena promised him victory in all battles; and Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful of mortal women. Paris selected Aphrodite, who received the golden apple.

The chosen residence of Athena was Athens, a city awarded to her as the prize in a contest with Neptune (god of the sea), who also wanted it. According to legend, during the reign of Cecrops (the first king of Athens), the two deities contested for possession of the city. The gods decreed that Athens should be awarded to the one who produced the most useful gift. Neptune offered the horse, and Athena produced the olive. The gods judged that the olive was the more useful of the two and awarded the city to Athena.

Numerous stamps have honored Pallas Athena. One was issued by the Netherlands in 1936 on the 300th anniversary of the founding of the University of Utrecht.