

HOW ATHENS GOT ITS NAME

Retelling by Joanna Davis-Swing

In ancient times, when the world was young, Cecrops was born of the earth. Half man, half snake, he roamed rugged mountains, wooded valleys, and rocky shores. He traveled wide before venturing into the region of Attica in Greece. Here lived goat farmers and bee keepers in peaceful tranquility, and Cecrops became their king. 1

He planned a beautiful city, set atop a large rock that rose from the plains. Fertile land spread out below, and the nearby sea boasted two open harbors. The gods on Olympus watched Cecrops and approved of his plans. They could foresee that his city would rise to fame and fortune in the world, and they wanted a share of the glory. Indeed, the gods fought over who was to be the patron of the city. Zeus, who deplored fighting on Mount Olympus, declared a contest between Poseidon, god of the sea, and Athena, goddess of wisdom. Each would give Cecrops a gift, and Cecrops himself would decide who would be patron of his city. 2

On the appointed day, Poseidon and Athena gathered with Cecrops and his people on top of the rock. Poseidon carried his trident and stood proudly surveying the land. Modest Athena wore her golden helmet and carried her spear. Cecrops signaled for the contest to begin, and Poseidon immediately raised his trident high, then struck it mightily into the ground. The rock shook and the earth trembled. A great crack appeared in the rock and spread wide, filling with water. The people gasped at this marvel and rushed forward to taste the water. It was saltwater, fitting for Poseidon, god of the sea, but of limited use to humans and farmers. 3

Athena smiled gently, then bent to the ground. In silence, she dug into the earth and worked in the dirt. Gradually, a small plant emerged; it grew and grew until it was full size, covered in green leaves and laden with yellowish-green berries. Athena gazed upon the tree in satisfaction but did not utter a word. 4

Poseidon looked at the tree, then he looked at the saltwater spring. He roared with laughter, which traveled out to sea. Finally there was silence. Athena spoke: "This small tree is yet mighty. Oil from its fruit will be one of the favorite offerings of the gods, and rich men will bedeck themselves with it for the feast. Women will use it to light the lamps and do the cooking. This oil will be prized among all the lands, so the city will grow wealthy and renowned as its merchants trade the world over. This is my gift." 5

Cecrops had little trouble making up his mind. He chose Athena as the winner and named the city after her: Athens. And so it came to be that Athena's gift provided prosperity to her city, which has been honored for its beauty and wisdom ever since. 6

Source: Courtesy of Joanna Davis-Swing.