

TRANSLATED BY RICHMOND LATTIMORE

THE  
ILIAD  
OF  
HOMER

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY RICHARD MARTIN

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to an insidious Orientalism that has its roots in Greek antiquity. It is not about a clash of civilizations, much less so a contest between evil and good. Unlike many a later epic (including Virgil's *Aeneid*), this poem does not deal with ethnic, national, religious, or ideological conflicts and aspirations. In fact, it is difficult to determine the poem's real protagonist: the Greek Achilles and his victim, the Trojan Hektor, are attractive and repellent in equal degrees. Some would say Hektor is actually the more sympathetic character. The *Iliad* is about heroes as humans, and what constitutes humanity. Its enduring value lies in the poem's recognition that even the worst enemies are deeply, fundamentally the same—desirous of glory and immortality, while subject to pain and death. Its power—like that of so much Greek literature—comes from the realistic depiction of mortals as they gradually learn that they can never be gods. In this existential recognition, it transcends the anxieties of tribe or state.

The story of a war to take Troy, in other words, is primarily a backdrop for human concerns that fascinate audiences in any age. The *Iliad* would be just as compelling a piece of art even if Troy existed only in the imagination of poets. Nevertheless, through the centuries, the attractive power of the epic has been compounded for many readers by the dark mysteries that surround it. Did a Trojan War really take place? How did the poet Homer know of it? Did a man named Homer even exist? When, where, and how was the epic composed? How did it achieve such perfection and influence? In what follows, we shall explore briefly the answers that have been offered for these questions—though never totally agreed upon—while placing the *Iliad* in a series of relevant historical and cultural contexts.

First of all, it is important to realize that the *Iliad* is an Iron Age poem about an event supposed to have taken place in the Bronze Age. Historians in ancient Greece, working with family memories and temple records, came up with a range of dates for the Trojan War from 1184 BC (Eratosthenes), to around 1250 BC (Herodotus) to 1334 BC (Douris). More than four centuries thus elapsed between the latest traditional date given by the ancient Greeks themselves for the destruction of Troy and the earliest possible recording of the epic in written form—a longer gap than that which separates us from the time of Shakespeare's maturity. Therefore, the *Iliad* as we have it cannot be based directly on an eyewitness account, or even a reliable reminiscence from the poet's great-grandfather. It is not impossible that it ultimately derives from poems and stories originating with actual survivor tales, but the form in which we have it cannot possibly itself date to the twelfth or

thirteenth century BC. To begin with, most of the linguistic forms in the *Iliad* come from a later period. By extension, the concerns of the poem are most likely not those of the original fighters at Troy but of a society—or multiple societies—generations later that looked back to the Trojan War as an important symbolic event, perhaps for the very foundation of their own communities. Even if the kernel of the *Iliad* was put into poetic form nearer to the time of the fall of Troy, in the intervening centuries before it achieved its final status the story was certainly subjected to all sorts of changes in length, expansiveness, and detail, through stylization, shifts of emphasis, and innovations in characterization and plot. Above all—as literary critics since Aristotle have acknowledged—the epic makes no attempt to narrate the whole story of a war against Troy, focusing instead on only a few days in the tenth and final year of the Greek siege against the city, and on a personal dispute (albeit one with vast consequences) within the ranks of the assembled Greek warriors. The poem's concentrated force relies on an audience that *already* knows most of the basic details about the struggle, an audience that has probably encountered many other versions of the tale of Troy, from tellers whose names we will never discover.

Greeks and Romans in ancient times had little doubt that there once existed a mighty city of Troy a few miles from the sea near the Hellespont, the narrow entrance to the Propontis, which leads in turn to the Black Sea and its resource-rich hinterlands. By the seventh century BC, a town was established by settlers of Greek ancestry on the ruins of an earlier site. It was called Ilios—a name used already in the epic for Troy, and the word from which the *Iliad* gets its name. In later ages, celebrities like Xerxes the king of Persia, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar visited the place, confident that they were gazing on the very soil where Hektor and Achilles clashed and the towers of Troy were toppled. On his way to punish the mainland Greeks, in the spring of 480 BC, Xerxes dedicated a sacrifice of one thousand oxen to Athene of Ilios, while his sage-priests, the magi, poured offerings to “the heroes.” The historian Herodotus (7.43) does not speculate on the royal motives, or whether the dead warriors thus honored were Greek or Trojans. What counts is that generations of military leaders associated their own deeds with those from the gloried past through their ostentatious tourism at the spot. The Romans had further reasons for venerating Troy, since it was claimed that they were direct descendants of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who escaped the city's destruction and traveled with his kin to Italy to start afresh. Augustus, the first Roman emperor,

visited Troy in 20 BC. Both Julius Caesar, before him, and the emperor Constantine, three centuries later, contemplated building a new Roman capital on the site.

Ilion survived after the Roman empire in the West had fallen to barbarian tribes in the fifth century AD. But after 1200 AD, when the site seems finally to have been abandoned, Troy evaporated into the mists of myth. Even as the *Iliad* itself was being preserved through the efforts of scholars and scribes in Byzantium (the inheritor of the eastern Roman empire), the landscape associated with it was gradually forgotten. The eighteenth century, which saw an increase in travel to the eastern Mediterranean, brought aristocratic memoirists like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and amateur antiquarians like her compatriot Robert Wood (1716–1771) to the broader region of the Troad. They found—or imagined they found—topographical details that matched those in the texts of the *Iliad*. Lady Montagu remarks on the pleasure she took “in seeing the valley where I imagined the famous duel of Menelaos and Paris had been fought, and where the greatest city in the world was situated.” She professes admiration for “the exact geography of Homer, whom I had in my hand. Almost every epithet he gives to a mountain or plain is still just for it.”<sup>1</sup> Wood’s tour resulted in the posthumously published, widely read *Essay upon the Original Genius and Writings of Homer: With a Comparative View of the Ancient and Present State of the Troade* (1775). Insisting on the exactness of Homeric descriptions, whether of wind directions or landscape, Wood concluded that “stript of all poetical embellishments” the *Iliad* contained “in general a consistent narrative of military events, connected and supported by that due coincidence of the circumstances of time and place which History requires.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite such on-site observations, most scholars in the early nineteenth century remained skeptical about whether real historical events lay behind the stories of the Greek heroic age. The British historian George Grote (1794–1871) in his influential twelve-volume *History of Greece* chose 776 BC—the traditional date for the founding of the Olympic games—as the beginning of reliably recorded history. Within thirty years of the publication of his first two volumes (1846), Grote was proved mistaken: the Homeric epics, which he had spurned as evidence, emerged as more trustworthy guides to the past than had been imagined. Civilizations with features described by Homeric poetry, going back to seven centuries before Grote’s starting date for Greek history, were now laid bare.



It was the labor of amateurs, rather than academics, that paved the way to a new understanding of the *Iliad's* historicity. The first, Frank Calvert (1828–1908), worked as a businessman and representative of British and American interests in Ottoman-ruled Asia Minor during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. A passionate, self-taught antiquarian, he had concluded from intimate acquaintance with the landscape that the mound (*tell*) of Hisarlik, a few miles from the sea, was the most likely location of Homer's Troy. He managed to buy a portion of the area, but officials of the British Museum turned down his requests for the necessary further funding, and Calvert abandoned the project after a few trial digs in 1865. Always at the service of interested travelers, Calvert in August 1868 explained his theories to a visiting German explorer, Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890). Another self-educated amateur, Schliemann was a visionary and wealthy entrepreneur who had forged his own way, starting out as a poor office boy (among his other profitable endeavors, he had sold provisions to miners during the California gold rush and war supplies to armies in the Crimea). He was also a tireless, if not downright mendacious, self-promoter, prone to manipulate facts to his own advantage. Whatever the truth or fantasy in Schliemann's autobiographical "recollections"—that he had been inspired to rediscover Troy as a boy, upon seeing a picture book of the saga, or hearing a drunken miller recite Homeric verses in Greek—there is no doubt that it was his resources and persistence that finally uncovered the remains of a great city at Hisarlik.

Starting in October 1871 and for the next two years, Schliemann excavated the mound of Hisarlik, digging relentlessly to the lowest level. As he was more or less inventing archaeological practice—an art still in its infancy—he did not take care to record the layout of higher strata on the site, destroying valuable clues in the process. Calvert correctly deduced from the presence of stone rather than bronze artifacts that Schliemann's widely heralded discovery of the "city of Priam" in fact revealed a much older phase of habitation. Subsequent investigations by Schliemann, up to his death in 1890, then for a season (1893–1894) by his successor Wilhelm Dörpfeld, and from 1932 to 1938 by the American archaeologist Carl Blegen, exposed a total of nine layers and nearly fifty sublayers. The earliest layer, "Troy I," was occupied in the Early Bronze Age, around 3000 BC. "Troy II," which Schliemann had thought to be contemporaneous with the *Iliad's* events, is in fact a thousand years older than the estimated period of the Trojan War. If the city underwent siege and destruction, as described

by Homeric poetry, the likeliest stages for it are the levels designated "Troy VI" (1800–1275 BC) and "Troy VII" (1275–1100 BC). Archaeologists believe that during the latter period, in particular, many more people took refuge inside the defensive walls of the upper town, having for some reason abandoned the lower. There are no inscriptions to pinpoint this site as the place that the Greeks destroyed. But the era would match ancient calculations for the period of the war, and the physical remains are suggestively reminiscent of details in the *Iliad*. Moreover, excavations led by Manfred Korfmann of Tübingen University from 1995 until his death in 2005, have now shown that the upper city on the site (which critics had long dismissed as being too small for the Homeric Troy) was merely a fraction of a much more extensive settlement, capable of sustaining a population of nearly ten thousand.

If the mound at Hisarlik can now be recognized as having concealed a series of fortified citadels that resemble those known from the ancient Near East, complete with surrounding lower town, there is also further evidence that might explain why a war could have been fought over this place. The major political force in Anatolia (present-day Turkey) in the second millennium BC was the Hittite empire, centered on Hattusa (now Böğasköy, near modern Ankara). Continuing archaeological work, combined with increasing knowledge of the ancient Hittite language (from texts first deciphered in the early twentieth century) have produced a picture of a wide-reaching, highly organized imperial power with connections extending as far as the Levant and Egypt.

Troy, it appears, was a vassal state. Hittite official documents mention *Taruwisa* and *Wilusa*, which closely match the Greek words used, apparently as synonyms, for the besieged city in the *Iliad*: *Troiê* and (*w*)*Ilios* (traces of an original initial "w" sound can be detected in the *Iliad*'s verses). Even more intriguing, a royal treaty of King Muwattalli II (circa 1290–1272 BC) pledges support for one *Alaksandu* of *Wilusa*—possibly a Hittite form of the Greek name Alexander (another name for the Trojan warrior Paris), although the document was written a century before the putative date of the war that this son of Priam caused by abducting the Greek queen Helen. The Hittite texts also refer to *Abhiyawa*. This term was probably borrowed from one of the words early Greeks used to describe themselves: *Achaiói*. Unfortunately, it remains unclear where the Hittites located the people thus named, whether further down the coast of Asia Minor (near ancient Miletus), on offshore islands like Lesbos, or on the other side of the Aegean

(mainland Greece). Nor is the precise relationship of *Abbiyawa* to Trojans specified: were they considered enemies, neighbors, or a distant power?

Troy must have been an important ally, given its strategic location in ancient times on the seacoast, before accumulated silt pushed the shoreline farther from the city. An attack could well have provoked a defensive response from a number of cities in the Hittite sphere of influence throughout western Asia Minor. The *Iliad*, in fact, represents the number of far-flung Trojan allies as far outnumbering fighters from the city itself and, since they speak many languages, harder to control than the unified Greek forces (2.803–4).

Several scenarios have been suggested to explain why and by whom Troy might have been destroyed in the twelfth century BC. At this time, a general disruption and movement of populations occurred around the Aegean, with numbers of settlements falling into disuse. Natural disasters, crop failures, or pressure from groups in the hinterland may have been the root causes. Egyptian inscriptions of the era refer to problems with marauding “Sea Peoples,” possibly coming from the east. Perhaps these mysterious bands carried out attacks that were later attributed to Greeks who ended up settling the coast near Troy. On the other hand, it is not unlikely that Greek warriors themselves were involved in widespread raids during this time of general collapse. What has become clear only in the last century is the extent to which Greek civilization, in the form of a highly bureaucratized, palace-centered culture, had already spread its influence by the era of Troy’s fall. Once again, Schliemann can be credited with a major role in bringing this early Greek culture to light. Temporarily blocked by Ottoman authorities after his first season at Hisarlik, he turned to other sites. In August 1876, Schliemann began excavations at the ancient citadel of Mykenai, discovering in a short time shaft graves rich in ancient artifacts, including gold burial masks. His dating of the tombs, which he believed were the resting places of Agamemnon and Klytimestra, was again too early by several centuries. But this find, together with subsequent discoveries, proved that a network of palace centers existed from around 1600 BC until around 1100 BC, when the Bronze Age in the Mediterranean came to an end. The civilization shared by these sites was given the name “Mykenaian.”

Scholars soon recognized that the centers of this newly emerging archaic culture matched, to a remarkable extent, the fabled sites celebrated in Greek myths, some of which had no longer been inhabited in historical times. The-

bes, Athens, Orchomenos, Tiryns, Sparta, and Pylos arose as Mykenaian powers; they also were the subject of rich storytelling traditions about the age of heroes from a generation or two before the Trojan War. The circumstantial evidence that the Mykenaians were, in fact, Greeks, took longer to verify. Arthur Evans, a British archaeologist, in 1900 uncovered a vast palace complex at Knossos, Crete, predating Mykenaian remains on the mainland, and characterized by signs of high civilization—masterpieces of wall painting, elaborately carved gemstones, precious vessels, imports from Egypt, statuettes, and ritual artifacts. He dubbed this newly found culture “Minoan,” after the mythical King Minos, who was said to have ruled the vicinity at the time of the hero Theseus. Evans also found thousands of clay tablets bearing inscriptions in an unknown, picture-based writing system. Carl Blegen, who had moved on from Troy to excavate the western Greek site of Pylos in 1939, discovered a similar trove of six hundred tablets there—at a Mykenaian palace site. Yet more emerged from Thebes and western Crete. Whether by sudden invasion or gradual infiltration (perhaps after the weakening effects of earthquakes and tsunamis), Mykenaians, it became clear, had taken over former Minoan palaces in Crete. In 1952, their so-called Linear B tablets, dating from 1300 to 1200 BC, were deciphered by the English architect and self-taught cryptologist Michael Ventris (1922–1956). The language proved to be Greek; the texts were official accounts concerning personnel and supplies in the palace economy.

In short, the discoveries of a few generations showed that something like the war depicted in the *Iliad* could well have taken place, at the site of Hisarlik, with allies of the Hittite empire unsuccessfully sustaining a siege by Mykenaian Greeks. The relative time frame remains unclear, especially when it comes to causes and effects. Were the conquerors of Troy refugees from a catastrophic collapse of the Mykenaian palace system in mainland Greece, desperate to get the riches of the city that guarded the route to the Black Sea? Or did an extended siege like that in the epic *bring about* the downfall of major Mykenaian centers by draining resources and sapping manpower? Further enigmas await the discovery of new evidence. Were a series of small-scale attacks over decades compressed by later popular imagination into a “Trojan War”? What is the relation between the attacks on the coast of Asia Minor and later Greek colonization of the area? And how does the fall of the Hittite empire based at Hattusa—also around the pivotal year 1200 BC—fit into the entire puzzle? It is possible that the next several decades will bring clarification of at least some of these mysteries.

Whatever its connections to actual historical events, the *Iliad* as we have it is far from containing the whole story of the Trojan War. The poem sometimes alludes to episodes from the beginning of the conflict, but in a brief and indirect fashion, often within the speeches by individual characters, like the recollections of Odysseus in 2.299–332. There are no extended flashbacks in the poet's own voice. In order to reconstruct the entire series of relevant events, we must go back to the origins of the world, according to Greek myth. We can piece together the story from such sources as the *Theogony* of Hesiod (roughly contemporary with the rise of Homeric poetry in the eighth century BC) and the so-called Cyclic epics of the seventh and sixth centuries BC (filling out the Trojan War narrative "cycle") of which only random citations and a few plot summaries from later sources now survive. As an audience for Homeric epic most likely had these details in mind, it is worthwhile reviewing them.

Gaia, the Earth, was one of the first creatures. She saw to it that her abusive husband, Ouranos ("sky") was overthrown by their son Kronos, who was in turn displaced by her favorite grandson, Zeus. With the aid and advice of his grandmother, the young god Zeus gained the kingship, overcoming the older divinities in pitched battles, and by swallowing a dangerous wife, Mêtis ("cunning intelligence"), came to ensure that his own reign would never be overthrown. Instead of producing a son stronger than her spouse, as had been predicted, Mêtis (now inside her husband) bore Athene, who sprang full-grown from the Zeus' head. Since Zeus owed Gaia a debt for her support, when she eventually complained of the increasingly heavy burden of human life on her land surface, he allowed a massive war to decrease world population. Thus the conditions for the Trojan War were put in place by political maneuverings early in cosmic history.

The more immediate cause arose from another unusual marriage involving divinity. The ever-amorous Zeus desired a sea nymph Thetis, but the same fear—that the offspring of a powerful goddess might oust him from his rule—led him instead to marry her off to an unsuspecting mortal, Peleus, allegedly to reward the hero's pious behavior in resisting the adulterous advances of a mortal queen. It was at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis that Discord (Eris), who had not been invited, tossed the famous apple inscribed *kallistêi*—"to the fairest." Three goddesses—Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite—each claimed to match that description. Zeus

chose a Trojan youth named Paris to decide the contest. He favored Aphrodite's promise of pleasure (after rejecting the lure of wisdom or power offered by the others) and received, as his reward, the ability to seduce the world's fairest woman, Helen—inconveniently married at that time to Menelaos, a powerful king in Greece. The *Iliad* refers to this scenario only once (2.4.25–30). As with so many other background details, this tale was undoubtedly known already to the hearers of the epic. It was told in one of the many poems or sagas now lost.

Helen's unusual birth foretold a remarkable career. Her father was Zeus, who visited her mother Leda (already married) in the form of a swan, the result of their union taking the form of two eggs. From one came Helen and her sister Klytaimnestra, from the other her brothers Castor and Pollux (the "sons of Zeus" or Dioscuri whom she seeks in vain to catch sight of at 3.236–44). By the time Helen was of marriageable age, she had suitors from every part of Greece. Menelaos, the son of Atreus, was chosen to be her husband. His brother Agamemnon married Klytaimnestra. As if foreseeing eventual trouble, the unsuccessful suitors of Helen swore an oath to retrieve her if the need ever arose. Odysseus, the suitor who had suggested this harmonious solution, was in return rewarded by Helen's (nominal) father, the mortal Tyndareus, king of Sparta, who persuaded his niece Penelope to marry the Ithacan hero. It is not unlikely that we are meant to recall this family bond when, in the *Iliad*, Odysseus repeatedly takes the side of the sons of Atreus and does their will.

From the *Iliad*, we get glimpses of a world in which the elite members of different cultures around the Mediterranean maintain friendly relations, exchanging gifts and visits. Hosted by Menelaos in Sparta as a guest-friend, Paris first caught sight of the woman promised for his judgment. Armed with Aphrodite's seductive wiles, he persuaded Helen to elope with him to Troy, taking with her much of her husband's wealth and leaving behind a nine-year-old daughter, Hermione. The oath of the suitors thus was put into effect and, after a failed diplomatic mission to Troy, Greek troops mustered to take vengeance and recover the errant wife. Complications immediately arose. Before leaving for Troy, the Greeks convened at Aulis, the main port for the city of Thebes in eastern Boeotia. An ominous sign occurs at their communal sacrifice: a snake emerges near the altar and devours eight sparrows along with their mother. Kalchas, the official seer of the expedition, interprets this to mean that it will take nine years of siege at Troy before the city can be taken in the tenth.

(The seer's prophecy is recalled by Odysseus at 2.299–332 as he tries to rally the weary Greeks.)

The attempt as described above ends in confusion and failure. The Greeks cross the Aegean but mistakenly land at Mysia, a region south of Troy, and sack the chief city there, thinking it to be their goal. Telephos, a Greek-born son of Herakles, while defending his adopted Mysian city is wounded by Achilleus. The Greeks retreat, yet still fail to reach Troy because a storm scatters their ships. Some versions have Achilleus land on the island of Skyros at this stage, where he weds the royal princess Deidameia, later to bear him a son, Neoptolemos. Others place the meeting earlier, saying that Thetis, his mother, hid the young hero, disguised as a girl, in the royal court on Skyros so that he would not have to go to war. In this latter version, it is Odysseus on a recruiting mission who tricks Achilleus into giving himself away. Pretending the island is under attack, he sounds a trumpet and the young man, eager for martial glory, leaps to arms. Ironically, Odysseus himself had been tricked into going to the war from his home island: an earlier recruiting party had placed his infant son Telemachos in front of the plow driven erratically by Odysseus while he feigned madness. It was clear he was sane when he swerved aside. Odysseus later took his revenge by framing Palamedes, the Greek recruiter who detected his charade, prompting the warrior's execution for treason.

With the troops gathered again in Aulis to ready their second attempt on Troy, Telephos visits Achilleus to be cured (which can be done only using the weapon that earlier wounded him) and stays in order to guide the Greek ships back to the right location. Another ominous sacrifice takes place. Artemis sends contrary winds against the fleet in punishment for Agamemnon's killing of a sacred stag. Kalchas reveals that Agamemnon must offer up his own daughter, Iphigeneia, to enable the expedition to depart. On the pretense that she is to be engaged to Achilleus, the girl is lured to Troy and killed (or, in some versions, miraculously spirited off by Artemis at the moment of the sacrifice, with a stag left in her place). The *Iliad* refrains from ever mentioning this episode—perhaps to characterize Agamemnon more sympathetically—but versions of the sacrificial scene became famous in the fifth-century dramas of Aeschylus (*Agamemnon*) and Euripides (*Iphigeneia at Aulis*).

Even before establishing a beachhead, the Greeks lose two important leaders: Philoktetes, abandoned with a festering snakebite on Lemnos (cf. 2.716–25), and Protesilaos, struck down by Hektor as the Greek troops

storm ashore (cf. 2.698–702). Once landed, they first aim for a peaceful solution, sending another diplomatic embassy to the city to ask for Helen's return, but it comes back to camp empty-handed. The Greeks settle in for a long siege. The failure to take Troy for nine years, as the *Iliad* depicts it, stems less from poor strategy than from the natural advantage of the defenders: the citadel is well fortified and allied cities from all over the Troad and beyond have sent troops to swell the number of fighters. Luring the Trojan heroes from their stronghold is the only way to gain the upper hand. Meanwhile, the Greeks engage in attacks on smaller cities along the coast in an effort to cut off Troy's lines of supply. Achilles himself boasts of leading twenty-three such raids (9.328–29). Chryseis, the priest's daughter whose ransoming sparks the *Iliad's* central quarrel, was acquired as a captive in one of these forays (1.366–69), the same one that killed the father and brothers of Andromache, Hektor's wife, in Thebes (6.414–28), while Achilles gained his own war bride Briseis in yet another, at Lyrnessos (2.688–93).

As noted already, the events narrated in the *Iliad* occupy only a few weeks in the tenth and final year of the siege of Troy. Part of the remarkable artistry of the poem is the way in which it manages to allude to many previous and subsequent events in the war, while keeping a sharp dramatic focus on the main storyline, which is as much about an internal struggle in the Greek ranks as it is about the external enemy. We need only mention the major plot elements here, noting the tight handling of the time frame, as each reader will best experience the power of the *Iliad* by plunging directly into Lattimore's rendition and reading, as far as possible, straight through the poem. A more detailed analysis of the craft of the narrative is in the "Style" section below.

The *Iliad* derives much of its force from a simple, lucid structure—cause, effect, solution—with each of these three narrative movements generated by crucial human decisions. The epic opens dramatically when Achilles, on the tenth day of a ruinous plague sent by Apollo, publicly asks Kalchas to name its cause. The seer blames Agamemnon's impious rejection of the aged priest Chryses, who had ventured to the Greek camp to plead for the return of his captive daughter (Chryseis). Agamemnon reluctantly gives back the girl, but is provoked by Achilles' criticism into taking in turn for himself Briseis, that hero's concubine. Insulted at this loss of status, Achilles withdraws from the battle. Meanwhile, he begs his divine mother



Thetis to pressure Zeus to favor the Trojans temporarily, thus punishing the Greeks who he thinks dishonor him.

Destruction ensues. In the absence of their best fighter, the Greeks agree to a truce, long enough to stage a duel between the aggrieved parties, Menelaos and Paris (also called Alexandros), the Trojan who eloped with Helen. The duel is inconclusive (Paris having been spirited off the field), the truce is broken, and battle rages, with the gods taking an increasingly interventionist role. Another duel, between Aias and Hektor, ends in a draw, and a daylong cessation of conflict allows both sides to bury their dead. The Greeks use the time to construct a defensive wall. In view of mounting losses, Agamemnon is forced to send an embassy, promising Achilles extensive gifts if only he will return to the fight. He refuses. In the worsening situation, the main leaders of the Greeks are wounded and Hektor leads his Trojans to breach the Greek wall. Meddling by various gods turns the fight into a tug-of-war. Patroklos, the closest companion of Achilles, enters the battle in his younger friend's armor, kills Sarpedon, a son of Zeus, and is in turn felled by Hektor (with the assistance of Apollo). Only this catastrophe rouses Achilles, who rejoins the battle with new, divinely made armor. After a climactic battle in which the gods take sides in the general destruction, Achilles (with aid from Athene) slays Hektor. But rather than giving back the corpse to the Trojans, in his continuing rage over the loss of Patroklos he drags it each day around the city, bound by the feet to his chariot. The poem concludes with a mirror image of its beginning: an old man (Priam) ventures to the camp of his enemy in order to ransom his child, but—unlike the priest Chryses—is pitied and given what he wants: the body of Hektor for burial. The *Iliad* ends with Hektor's funeral back in Troy.

The solution of the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, with Achilles' final acknowledgment of his foe's humanity, leads to the conclusion of the *Iliad* but not the war. The poem foreshadows the imminent death of Achilles in several passages. The hero is aware that he is destined to die young if he fights at Troy (9.410–16). One of his horses, temporarily given voice, warns that Achilles' doom is near (19.407–10). And Hektor, on the point of dying, foretells that his slayer will be slain by Paris and Apollo at the gates of the city (22.358–60). Alongside these explicit testimonies, the demise of Achilles' stand-in, Patroklos, provides an extended foreshadowing of the grief to come. It is not accidental that the

name *Akhilleus* is most plausibly etymologized as “grief [*akhos*] for the fighters [*laos*].”

A few episodes of the overall saga intervene between the death of Hektor, narrated in the *Iliad*, and that of Achilleus (not told in the poem). The Amazon Penthesileia, the daughter of the war god Ares, newly arrived to help the Trojans, is slain by Achilleus. Another ally from the east, Memnon the son of the goddess Dawn, meets the same fate (but is immortalized, thanks to his mother’s entreaties). Achilleus is killed on the point of entering Troy, and Aias carries his body back to the Greek camp for burning, but Thetis snatches the body from the pyre and takes her son to a place called the White Island—whether he, too, is immortalized in the post-*Iliad* tradition is unclear. The reminiscence of Achilleus’ funeral in the *Odyssey* (24.35–94) presents a different story: Achilleus is cremated, his bones are placed in a golden urn with those of Patroklos, and the vessel is entombed under a prominent mound.

Odysseus, in competition with Aias to inherit the arms of the fallen hero, manages to pervert justice, and Aias, insane with anger, kills the herds of the Greeks and then himself. Learning that only the bow of Philoktetes can take Troy, Odysseus (or in some versions his friend Diomedes) brings the long-abandoned hero back from Lemnos: it is he who kills Paris. Odysseus also brings Neoptolemos, the son of Achilleus, from Skyros to Troy. The stage is set for the final conquest. By Athene’s instruction (or a plan of Odysseus), the Greeks build a towering, hollow wooden horse and fill it with their chosen warriors, while the rest of the troops pretend to sail away in defeat. Brought into the city as a dedication to the gods amid joyous revels, the horse enables the Greeks to infiltrate the citadel of Troy. While the fleet returns from its offshore hiding place, the leading fighters eliminate the Trojan elite. Neoptolemos kills Priam at the very altar of Zeus; Menelaos retrieves Helen; the “lesser” Aias (son of Oileus) rapes Cassandra, the Trojan priestess, tearing her away from Athene’s altar while she clutches a talismanic statue of the goddess. The Greeks burn the city and sacrifice Polyxena, a daughter of Priam, at the tomb of Achilleus, as if in compensation for all his grief. The family of Hektor is treated brutally: Odysseus (or Neoptolemos) flings the young Astyanax to death from the city walls, and Neoptolemos claims as his war prize the boy’s mother, Andromache. Knowing about this ending deepens the emotional experience of the *Iliad*’s depiction of Hektor’s last moments with his wife and child (6.390–502).

Athene's wrath at the desecration of her altar hounds the Greeks—including Odysseus—on their journey home. The *Odyssey* details his incredible ten years of wandering until being reunited with the long-suffering Penelope. As a contrast to this main plot, the *Odyssey* prominently mentions the successful homecoming of Nestor to Pylos; how the lesser Aias lost his life at sea; the delayed trip of Menelaos; and the fatal return of his brother Agamemnon. The cautionary tale of Agamemnon—slain by his wife and her lover Aigisthos soon after his triumphant return—is given as a warning for Odysseus by none other than the victim himself in the underworld (*Odyssey*, book 11).

These individual heroic fates were more fully narrated, it seems, in the *Nostoi* (Returns). As with the other non-Iliadic episodes just mentioned, our main source for this lost epic comes from late antiquity in the form of a condensed plot summary of the so-called Cyclic epics. These poems of the archaic period (seventh–sixth century BC) are attributed to a number of obscure poets thought to have lived later than Homer. They include the *Cypria*, which told of events from the wedding of Peleus through the first nine years of the Trojan War; the *Aithiopsis*, which picks up where the *Iliad* ends and continues the story to the dispute over Achilles' armor; and the *Little Iliad* and *Sack of Ilium*, which together narrate the last days of the city and the departure of the Greeks. Although the Cyclic epics might have been designed after the composition of the Homeric poems, to fill in the gaps and provide details not narrated in them, it is also likely that earlier versions of their material existed even during the era in which the *Iliad* was shaped. Parallel motifs abound, for which it is difficult to assign priority. It has been suggested that the death of Patroklos and the fight over his body (*Iliad* books 16 and 17) are modeled on a more familiar story of the death of Antilochos, a son of Nestor, known to the Cyclic poets as well as later tradition. What is more important is the strong possibility that the early audiences for the *Iliad* had in their minds the entire Trojan saga as it came to be written down later in the Cyclic poems, including the origins of the conflict and the ultimate fates of the Greek veterans. Every *Iliad* character and theme would have taken on greater resonance and depth for such listeners. That a body of such lore, perhaps even in poetic form, already existed when the *Iliad* was composed can explain why the Homeric poet is at liberty to begin the poem in the midst of the war, without a long exposition, filling out the picture with fleeting references as the narrative progresses.

Having seen where that narrative fits in the broader scheme of the saga, one can speculate briefly about the deeper roots for the entire Trojan story. In a traditional culture of oral storytelling—such as that of archaic Greece—tales are constantly remodeled but their elements are often centuries old. The *Iliad* comes at the end of a tradition that may reach back for a millennium in the region of the Aegean, even—paradoxically—to a time before any historical Trojan War of the twelfth century BC. Starting about 1700 BC, paintings that show the siege of a city and attacking ships adorned the walls of Minoan houses. The Town Mosaic, a series of terracotta plaques from the palace at Knossos on Crete, depicts house facades, soldiers, and a ship (although the underlying narrative, if any, is unclear). A somewhat later series of fresco scenes in the West House at Akrotiri, on the island of Santorini (Thera), features a flotilla of ships, and warriors marching with body-length shields near a town, while women watch from the walls. Perhaps epics about famous sieges were already in circulation a thousand years before Homeric poetry was put into definite form, centuries before Greek culture came to replace that of the Minoans.

Further afield, Near Eastern parallels to early Greek literature have captured the attention of scholars in recent decades. Achilles' relationship with Patroklos looks remarkably like the bond between Enkidu and Gilgamesh, the protagonist of an epic tradition reaching back to 2000 BC and widespread for 1,500 years in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (modern Iraq). Recorded on cuneiform tablets, in various versions in Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian, and Hittite, the earlier epic tells of the gods' creation of Enkidu, a man of the wild, to be a match for the city hero Gilgamesh. Together they win fame as slayers of the monstrous forest guardian Humbaba, yet this and the slaughter of the Bull of Heaven eventually entail Enkidu's death. The Near Eastern story then shifts into an *Odyssey*-like journey to a mythical land where Gilgamesh seeks from Utnapishtim the secret of immortality. But episodes such as the hero's encounter with his companion's ghost (tablet 12; cf. *Il.* 23), his conversation with his goddess mother, and the discomfiting of a love goddess who subsequently complains to her divine parents (Ishtar in *Gilgamesh*, Aphrodite in 5.348–80), remind one of the *Iliad*. Unlike the Homeric poem, *Gilgamesh* depicts a primeval struggle between forces of nature and culture. An overall tragic tone, however, and similar attitudes toward the ephemeral nature of fame and mortality, pervade both compositions.

At the furthest remove, some plot elements of the *Iliad* might go back to the period when Greek was not yet fully differentiated from the dialects that would evolve into Latin, Persian, Sanskrit, and early forms of the western European languages (the Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic groups). On the basis of detailed grammatical resemblances among the historically attested tongues, an unrecorded parent language, dubbed "Indo-European," has been reconstructed. It was probably spoken by tribes living in what is now southern Russia around 3000 BC. The hypothesis of a shared Indo-European linguistic origin accounts for resemblances among individual words: thus Greek *patēr*, Sanskrit *pitar*, and Latin *pater*—all meaning "father"—derive from one older stem. Similarly, names for some divinities—*Zeus* (Greek), *Dyaus* (Sanskrit) and *Ju-piter* (an archaic Latin compound, meaning "sky father")—can be traced to a common original. Shared elements in legal procedure and religious ritual are also convincingly explained by assuming that Indo-European speakers carried their culture with them as they moved out from their common homeland toward the Balkans and the Mediterranean, on the one hand, and on the other to central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Furthermore, pieces of poetic diction, metrical patterns, and narrative motifs appear to show a common Indo-European heritage. The *Iliad's* backstory of an abducted bride who is won back by warrior brothers appears in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana* (circa fourth century BC), while aspects of Hittite law and ritual have been detected in Homeric language, and the Homeric concept "unwithering fame" (Homeric *kleos aphthiton*) is paralleled exactly in the archaic literature of India and Ireland.

More work remains to be done on all the sources that may have contributed to the masterwork of the *Iliad*. It is clear that the poem will always be much more than the sum of such parts, a new and distinctively Greek vision, albeit it with very ancient origins.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE VISION OF THE *ILIAD*: THE LIMITS OF MORTALITY

The *Iliad* depicts the events of a few weeks in the last year of the siege of Troy. Within this concentrated space, the poem gives a sense of greater magnitude by alluding to all of the most important episodes in the ten-year saga, going back to the abduction of Helen. At the same time, while recounting in detail fierce attacks and pitched battles, it also manages to impart an indelible vision about the nature of human existence.

In the universe painted by the *Iliad*, humans are at the blazing center. Their motivations and concerns generate the action in the poem, while the gods are often reduced to the role of enablers or spectators. The passionate decisions of heroes like Achilles and Hektor—to avenge a companion's death, to take a stand outside the Trojan walls—are what determine the arc of the *Iliad's* plot. The style of the poem collaborates with this vision: the spaciousness of the epic means that every thought and gesture, spear cast and threat, intimate conversation and lament can be recorded. The poetic consciousness behind the *Iliad* demands that these *must* be recorded: the meticulous attention to living detail is another way of expressing the centrality and worth of human experience, whether Greek or Trojan.

Because men and women, human psychology and social institutions, are at the heart of the *Iliad*, it is inevitably a poem about death, the chief element that distinguishes mortals from gods. The opening lines highlight the destructive wrath of Achilles, which to the harm of his enemies as well as his own companions, "hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting of dogs, of all birds." The last scenes of the poem center on the funeral for Hektor, victim of Achilles' anger. All through the intervening books, death shadows every action. We hear of the slaying of scores of warriors—240 named, many others anonymous—and view the sometimes spectacular demise of several at excruciatingly close range: Deukalion decapitated (20.481), Erymas, his skull smashed, his mouth spewing blood (16.345), Mydon trampled by his own horses (5.588). Constantly at the edge of our vision is the specter of mass destruction, either of the Trojans defending their doomed city or of the attackers, beset by plague and slowly wasting away (1.49–52). Death is neither abhorred nor celebrated in this world, however. Instead, just as the *Iliad* distills the Trojan saga into a few days of intense fighting, it crystallizes by means of this one theme—death in battle—the essence of what it means to be human. Life is a struggle each person will ultimately always lose; the question is how one acts with that knowledge.

Homeric heroes respond to this fate with a mixture of resignation and resistance. "As is the generation of leaves," says Glaukos to Diomedes, "so is that of humanity" (6.146), as he tries to defuse his opponent's attempt to compare heroic genealogies. A similar broad view of the cycle of human existence marks the words of Apollo to Poseidon (21.464), except the god makes a different point: that he and fellow divinities should therefore not

waste their effort on mankind. Achilles at the end of the poem, with his new, hard-won clarity about the working of the world, tells the old Trojan king Priam of the stewardship of Zeus, who mixes disproportionately from “an urn of evils, an urn of blessings” (24.528). Unlike the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* contains no extended depiction of the underworld, Hades’ realm, a grim holding area where strengthless ghosts maintain little more than their names. It is simply a place where (as Achilles exclaims on seeing his companion’s ghost) “there is left something, a soul and an image, but there is no real heart of life in it” (23.103). Whereas modern readers assume that one’s inner spirit is somehow the “real” self, the *Iliad* describes the opposite: the *psykhai* (souls, spirits) of dying heroes fly off to Hades while their “selves” (*autous*) are left behind (in the form of their dead bodies). In line with this view of the afterlife, it is well understood that a life on earth of striving, even of pain, is preferable to an eternity of gloom.

Counterbalancing the darkness of death and loss is the brilliance of glory, which ensures that a person’s name, a marker for his or her self, lives on forever. The most detailed description of the ideology underlying the heroic quest for glory comes in the words of Sarpedon of Lycia to his companion, Glaukos (12.315–28):

... It is our duty in the forefront of the Lykians  
to take our stand, and bear our part of the blazing of battle  
so that a man of the close-armored Lykians may say of us:  
“Indeed these are no ignoble men who are lords of Lykia,  
these kings of ours, who feed upon the fat sheep appointed  
and drink the exquisite sweet wine, since indeed there is strength  
of valor in them, since they fight in the forefront of the Lykians.”  
Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle  
would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,  
so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost  
nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.  
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us  
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,  
let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.

Several points are worth noting: first, if mortals could live forever—that is, could be like gods—glory would be useless. Only death gives value to renown. Second, glory is a commodity to be exchanged: one wins it by

the effort to kill an opponent, and the vanquished give it, like a gift, to the conqueror. In this zero-sum game, there is only so much glory to go around. Third, glory has both an economic and symbolic reality. Warriors are honored by the community with special privileges, grants of land, and feasts because on its behalf they risk death. This in turn gives them a wide reputation, spreading the fame of their people, which gives grounds for the community's expenditure and ensures that their lives will not be forgotten. At the same time, the rewards of their fighting, whether cattle, weapons, or women, are visible marks of the honor they hold in the community, and a means of maintaining status among fellow warriors. For this reason, the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon is deadly serious. Forced to return the young woman Chryseis, his prize of honor (*geras*), to end a divinely sent plague, Agamemnon in turn takes Achilles' war prize, Briseis, prompting the hero's boycott in protest at his consequent loss of honor. In Achilles' view, status alone motivates Agamemnon's greater *geras*, despite his own equal efforts (1.161–68). Their clash over entitlement emphasizes the disequilibrium between authority and ability, a mismatch familiar still today between those with power and those with talent.

Ideally, the short-term glory by which a warrior is recognized while alive, comprising material marks of honor, is a foretaste of long-term fame, one's reputation after death. The reputation desired by Iliadic heroes is that represented by the very medium itself of Homeric poetry, which bestows *kleos*—"fame," "report," or "glory bestowed by poetry." *Kleos* is literally "that which is heard" (cf. the verb *kluô*, "hear," cognate with English "loud"). The *Iliad* describes several warriors as having chosen to go to Troy "for glory" (*meta kleos*: for example, Iphidamas 11.227). Other characters express awareness of their eventual commemoration. Helen believes that she and Paris will be "subjects of song" (*oidimoi*) for future generations (*Il.* 6.358). Hector imagines something akin to poetic epitaphs mentioning him (7.89–91).

Achilles is seen performing stories of fame (9.186–89), while accompanying himself on a lyre. The hero of the *Iliad* apparently sings about past figures, such men as Meleagros, whose unfortunate tale, an example of the "glories of heroes" (*klea andrôn hērôn*), is recounted to him later in the same episode by the aged Phoinix (9.524–25). The *Iliad* itself, meanwhile, is explicitly characterized by the poet as what has been heard from the Muses, in contrast to and relying on what the goddesses, with timeless knowledge, once observed when events were unfolding (2.484–86). For



Achilleus, however, “unwithering fame” (*kleos aphthiton*) must come at the price of death at Troy, in contrast to a return home without glory (9.413). He was never fated to enjoy the short-term rewards of war, over which he has quarreled. Instead, his desire to punish his fellow Greeks because they do not honor him enough only hastens his own death. Hard-pressed because Zeus has been persuaded by Achilleus’ mother to turn the tide against them, the Greeks beg Achilleus to return. But, in his magnificent reply to their embassy in book 9, the hero rejects the entire system of honor as material payment, tainted by injustice as it now appears to him. He seems to believe, as well, that the choice his mother Thetis once told to him—that he can leave Troy for a life of anonymity—is a real option. He declares to Odysseus that he will take ship the very next morning. After the speeches of his old guardian Phoinix and his fellow fighter Aias (9.432–642), he hedges, softening his attitude until he finally concedes the possibility of returning to battle if the Trojans manage to push all the way to the beached Greek ships. Meanwhile, an audience familiar with the character of Achilleus knows that he will never sail back home, abandoning long-term glory. The only suspense comes from not knowing exactly how and when he will return to the war that will eventually spell his death.

Here, another aspect of the *Iliad* vision becomes crucial: the importance of companionship. For this theme the poem seems to draw most deeply on actual experiences, ancient but instantly identifiable to moderns, as shown by the work of the psychiatrist Jonathan Shay with veterans of the Vietnam and Iraq conflicts. It is a universal theme in war stories, glimpsed in documents like a Japanese kamikaze pilot’s letter to his parents a week before his death: “My co-pilot is Uno Shigeru, a handsome boy, aged nineteen, a naval petty officer second class. His home is in Hyogo Prefecture. He thinks of me as his elder brother, and I think of him as my younger brother. Working as one heart, we will plunge into an enemy vessel.”<sup>4</sup>

In the battle scenes of the *Iliad*, the closeness of male friends, with the consequent desire to take revenge for a companion’s death, is regularly the prime motivation for one warrior to attack another. The core of the poem is shaped out of one such episode, writ large. Patroklos, an older fighter who has been sent to guide and advise Achilleus, begs out of pity for the devastated Greeks to be sent into the fray dressed in Achilleus’ own armor, to terrify the Trojans at least long enough for the troops to get a brief pause to recover. Still nursing his wounded pride, Achilleus accedes to this request by his nearest and dearest companion. Patroklos succeeds in mowing

down scores of the enemy but is killed by Apollo, Euphorbos, and Hektor, acting in sequence. Grief and rage over Patroklos' death induce Achilles to abandon his boycott, enter the battle, and slay Hektor, even though he knows this means imminent death for himself. The poet never makes moral judgments, but leaves it to Achilles to voice in self-reproach one of the deepest conclusions of the *Iliad*—that personal honor, no matter how precious, cannot take precedence over the life of a friend (18.97–105).

Pity turns out to be a key component in the total vision of this surprising epic. Achilles' rage persists even after he kills his friend's slayer, leading him to mistreat Hektor's corpse, dragging it behind his chariot as he races around the ramparts each day, a taunt to the Trojans and a horrific continuation of revenge. Pity becomes the concluding note of the poem. In what are among the most humane lines of the *Iliad*, Achilles after a tense conversation, seeing the aged Priam sitting before him, thinks back to his own father and weeps (24.509–12). This moment of shared grief brings him to surrender the corpse of his enemy. It is appropriate that the poem concludes with the funeral of Achilles' victim, for Hektor of all warriors evokes the most pity. The audience has listened, in book 6, to the tender scene of his parting from his wife Andromache, as he goes off to certain death; they have heard of his proud delight in their infant son (knowing, despite the poet's reticence, that the child will not survive the fall of Troy). And from the concluding lament by Helen—ironically, the woman who unwittingly caused the whole war—we finally learn of Hektor's gentleness of manner in his role as her only friend in the city.

Even the gods feel pity. Poseidon, emerging from the sea to view the ongoing battle on the plain of Troy, empathizes with the Greeks whom he sees being overcome by their enemies (13.15). Moved by pity, the gods as a group discuss how they might steal away Hektor's corpse when they see Achilles mistreat it (24.23). While the *Iliad* yields center stage to humans, much of the power of its vision in fact comes from its depiction of the gods as beings that feel, and act, like humans. As the ancient literary critic Longinus (first century AD) remarked: "Homer seems to me, in recording the wounds of the gods, their conflicts, deeds of vengeance, tears, and bindings, all sorts of mixed passions, to have as much as possible made the men of the *Iliad* gods, and the gods men" (*On the Sublime* 9.7).

Through the poet's attention to the working of the divine in human lives, the *Iliad* gains depth and resonance in two major ways. First of all, the divine dimension sheds glory on the humans at Troy. That the gods are so

intensely concerned with warriors and their fates elevates the mortals to a special plane. At a deeper emotional level, we hear throughout the *Iliad* of humans actually descended from Zeus or Ares or Poseidon. Achilles himself is a grandson of Aiakos, who in turn was a son of Zeus. His elemental opponent, the river god Xanthos (also called Skamandros) is also a son of Zeus, making their encounter in book 21 something like a family fight. Although the Greek gods father many children, the *Iliad* persuades its audience that Zeus and his kin feel concern and anxiety for their individual offspring. When his son Sarpedon, a Trojan ally, is about to be killed by Patroklos, Zeus actually ponders whether he might save him (but abandons the idea when Hera objects: 16.433). In sum, mortals are separated from gods by only a few facts—chiefly, that they will grow old and eventually die. Ageless and immortal, fed on nectar and ambrosia, with clear *ikhôr* in their veins instead of blood, the gods live at ease in cloudless calm on the snowy height of Mount Olympos. They are more massive—when Athene mounts Diomedes' chariot in book 5, the axle groans with her weight—and they can choose to appear in whatever guise they like. But they are not alien: when they do communicate with humans in the *Iliad*, it is in human form (even if they may depart in the form of birds, like Poseidon at 13.62, or perch in trees, like Athene and Apollo at 7.59).

The second poetic consequence of the Homeric understanding of the gods stems from this closeness. The symbiotic bond of gods and mortals is always teetering between adoration and antagonism. Like the high-strung heroes of the poem, hypersensitive to their honor, the gods need humans to worship and acknowledge them (e.g., Poseidon, at 7.446). Because the gods are inquisitive, meddlesome, proud of their favorite humans, and dangerously quick to anger, mortals must offer sacrifice, making sure to fill heavenly nostrils with the savor of roasting meat or pouring out wine and prayers. At the same time, humans who get too close to the gods risk being struck down. The career of Achilles is a prime illustration. Young, well-made, a warrior but also a singer (he is the only hero seen doing this), Achilles looks and acts like Apollo. It is no accident that Apollo, as Hektor predicts in his own death speech (22.359) will ultimately be the god who slays Achilles, just as he did his companion Patroklos. The epic through its formulaic style (see also the "Style" section below) draws attention to the dangers of heroes antagonizing gods. Patroklos rushes at Apollo on the field of battle four times "like a divinity" (*daimoni isos*)—and pays with his life. Zeus and his siblings have overthrown their own Titan parents,

according to Greek myth; they themselves take care never to be subverted by mortals, even by half-divine heroes.

It would be a mistake, however, to depict the gods' world in the *Iliad* as a swirling chaos of divine powers. Most of the gods (Hades excepted) dwell together in an organized household on the peaks of Olympos (conceived as being simultaneously a real mountain and an unreachable ethereal space). Ruling from on high is the father-god Zeus, who backs up his commands with a white-hot thunderbolt. Hades and Poseidon, his brothers, have their realms of underworld and sea. Others fall into line as sons or daughters of Zeus. There is a nice economy in such a polytheistic system—one god balances another, and humans cover their bets by praying to many. The Trojan War intrudes on divine harmony, however, as gods take sides, some with the Trojans, others the Greeks. Aphrodite, goddess of sex and desire, is the distant cause of the conflict, inasmuch as it was she who gifted Paris with the ability to seduce Helen (in return for his naming her fairest among goddesses). She is also the mother of the Trojan ally Aeneas (the ultimate ancestor of the Romans), and therefore is devoted to the Trojan cause. Apollo, god of divination and harmony, the initiator of young men, is also connected with Troy, for reasons more obscure, perhaps related to the historical existence of important Apollo shrines in Asia Minor. His twin sister Artemis joins him, even egging him on to fight, until she has her ears boxed and is driven off by Hera (21.481). Finally supporting Troy is Ares, the god of all-out war and battle madness.

Allied with the Greeks are the powerful goddesses Hera and Athene, the wife and daughter of Zeus, respectively. Athene is goddess of crafts, including warcraft (as opposed to mere murderous strength), and Hera is connected with marriage and sovereignty. The two are naturally opposed to Troy, since Paris passed them over in favor of Aphrodite in the divine beauty contest. Poseidon's enmity seems to originate a generation earlier, when he helped build Troy's wall for the king Laomedon, who then failed to pay as promised. Another elemental god, the divine blacksmith Hephaistos, forges new armor for Achilles at the request of Thetis, and later scorches the river Xanthos in order to rescue the hero from its flood.

The Greeks worshiped multiple gods, as can be seen in the excavated remains of ancient temples, cult sites, and altars, with their great number of dedicated votive objects, from humble figurines to precious gold-clad statues. The vividness and variety of the divine depictions, however, were seen by at least some in antiquity not as an age-old tradition but rather as

the invention of specific poets. The fifth-century BC historian Herodotus attributed to Homer and his contemporary Hesiod such basic information as the genesis and forms of the gods, as well as the titles, honors, and skills by which they were known (*Histories* 2.53). This is to say, poetry supplemented or even guided the Greek religious imagination, much more than did the activity of priests. In the absence of dogma or a sacred book, ancient Greek religious thought was more open to innovation and creative re-shaping, giving it a flexibility that seems strange to modern monotheists in highly organized, global faiths. The closeness of gods and humans within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can have occurred precisely because the composers of epic were always free to elaborate their own thoughts concerning both the divine and mortal worlds, and drew them alike.

Of course, the poems do not celebrate just *any* mortals: the major epic characters are heroes. Both poet and audience know that men of their own time cannot compare with those of the heroic age of the Trojan War, who were mighty in war, and physically stronger. Heroes were celebrated for *aretê*, “excellence,” or “virtue.” Relying on this, they strove to be “best” (*aristos*—root of “aristocracy”), and their bids for martial success, as stylized in the *Iliad* (e.g., Diomedes’ extended killing spree in book 5), are called *aristeiai*, “displays of excellence.” Various members of the audiences for epic would have traced their own ancestry back to heroes—either those associated with the Trojan War, or some of the nearly nine hundred other mortal figures who were locally important and celebrated in antiquity for heroic skills ranging from wrestling prowess to skill at sacrifice. More surprising for the modern audience, ancient Greeks worshiped these figures, bringing them offerings of animals and food, in something resembling ancestor cult or the medieval devotion to saints. The tombs of heroes were considered sites of power, and heroes could be invoked to favor the worshiper, protect his family and city-state, and even heal illnesses. While almost any warrior in the *Iliad* can be designated *hērôs*, the ideology of heroism extended far beyond the fictional inventions of poets.

The idea of the *hērôs* who has a status between man and god appears to be a uniquely Greek invention. Herakles, whose exploits took him over the known world, conspicuously combined a warrior’s courage with aberrant, even berserk, behavior (sometimes excused as “madness” sent by his nemesis Hera). He died, but paradoxically lived forever after he was taken up onto Mount Olympus following his self-willed incineration on Mount Oita. His story may be taken as a paradigm for others—the hero fights,

rules, often sins, dies, and then gains postmortem fame (a form of immortality) along with semidivine power. Even the parricide Oedipus was associated with heroic honors in several places; the tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles (produced posthumously in 401 BC) tells of the struggle between Athens and Thebes over claims to the Theban hero's prized burial site. Most striking to modern sensibilities is the idea that heroes are not necessarily morally upright. An Achilles or Odysseus can bring about the deaths of many, intentionally, without remorse, and still be considered a model of toughness, skill, or endurance.

With consummate artistry, the epic composer differentiates the heroic mortals in the *Iliad* by noting their different ways of speaking, of doing battle, and of interacting with other warriors, women, and the gods. A conspicuous and sophisticated set piece, the conversation on the walls of Troy (book 3), enables the poet to mention the variety of major male characters, while tacitly contrasting the views of them that we get from persons of different gender, age, and ethnicity (Helen and her interlocutor Priam): there is the kingly Agamemnon (or so he appears to Priam), Helen's former brother-in-law; Odysseus, broad and sturdy in appearance like a ram among ewes, whom Helen remembers for his cunning; the huge battle tower Aias; and godlike Idomeneus, leader of the Cretans. We do not glimpse Menelaos in this scene, although his laconic speaking style is recalled by one of the attendant Trojans, in contrast to Odysseus' rhetorical brilliance. A series of episodes introduces the audience to other main figures. Characterization through likeness and contrast subtly operates over the course of the poem. Achilles, short-tempered and ardent, is unlike the more temperate, family-oriented Hektor, but bears a resemblance to the brash Diomedes. Agamemnon comes across as harsher and unfeeling, especially in contrast to the brother whom he overshadows, the milder Menelaos. Odysseus comes close to him in status, but is clearly far more strategically intelligent. In another pairing of brothers, Paris invites comparison with Hektor, emerging as a less important, even frivolous, figure, although more directly responsible for the war. The pair of Trojan allies Glaukos and Sarpedon evokes the dynamic relation between Patroklos and Achilles, as also that between Hektor and his more cautious brother Poulydamas. Nestor, the aged adviser on the Greek side, finds a parallel in Priam among the Trojans. In short, the technique is kaleidoscopic, offering intriguing patterns and family resemblances that shift and deepen the further one works into the poem.

On a slightly smaller scale, the same approach produces a vivid, varied set of female characters. At first, the male focus seems to slight women: Chryseis, the captive girl about whom the initial quarrel erupts in the Greek camp, never speaks for herself. In this she resembles the anonymous women of Lesbos—famous only for skills at craft—whom Agamemnon promises to Achilles in his later attempt to woo him back to war (9.270). But in the unfolding of the poem, women are far from being mute objects of exchange. Another captive, Briseis, whom we first hear about as a counterpart to Chryseis, turns out to make one of the most impassioned laments at the death of Patroklos (19.282), giving voice to a social category that another poet might have treated as marginal or forgettable. The acknowledged existence of strong, independent goddess figures makes an interesting background for the poem's depiction of mortal equivalents. Hekabē, the mother of Hektor, echoes something of Hera's nagging tone when she chastises her husband Priam (24.201). On the other hand, Andromache, wife of Hektor, is shown possessing a combination of strength and tender vulnerability that is never on view among divine females. She is clearly the summit of feminine virtue in the poem.

As such, she makes for a final, fascinating contrast with Helen. The woman whose elopement or abduction began the conflict at Troy, Helen remains the most intriguing female figure in the *Iliad*. The story with which she is connected is an old one paralleled in many cultures, as catalogued by Stith Thompson in *The Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*<sup>5</sup> (R151.1: "Husband rescues stolen wife"). Helen's mother was commonly said to be the Spartan woman queen Leda, impregnated by Zeus in the form of a swan, or—less commonly and more grimly—to be Nemesis, the goddess of divine retribution (cf. the mostly lost epic poem *Cypria*). We see Helen as the wife of Paris, but know she has been the consort of Menelaos: the doubleness tied to her character is persistent. Her earlier experiences before reaching Troy are rarely alluded to—for example, her flight from Sparta with Paris (3.444) and visit to Sidon (6.292)—thereby allowing the audience to judge her mostly by her own words, rather than pigeonholing her either as a wanton or a victim. Deftly sketched interactions over books 3 and 6 with the disguised Aphrodite, Priam, Paris, and Hektor show Helen, by turns, sarcastic, defiant, regretful, complaisant, ashamed, wistful, and resigned. She is a shimmering figure, impossible to pin down. It is appropriate that another tale, possibly as old as Hesiod (fr. 358 MW), elaborated by the choral poet Stesichorus in the sixth century BC and later exploited by



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