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# The Siege of Troy



General Editor  
**KIREET JOSHI**

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*Illumination, Heroism and Harmony*

# The Siege of Troy



General Editor: KIREET JOSHI



# Illumination, Heroism and Harmony

## *Preface* .

The task of preparing teaching-learning material for value-oriented education is enormous.

There is, first, the idea that value-oriented education should be exploratory rather than prescriptive, and that the teaching-learning material should provide to the learners a growing experience of exploration.

Secondly, it is rightly contended that the proper inspiration to turn to value-orientation is provided by biographies, autobiographical accounts, personal anecdotes, epistles, short poems, stories of humour, stories of human interest, brief passages filled with pregnant meanings, reflective short essays written in well-chiselled language, plays, powerful accounts of historical events, statements of personal experiences of values in actual situations of life, and similar other statements of scientific, philosophical, artistic and literary expression.

Thirdly, we may take into account the contemporary fact that the entire world is moving rapidly towards the synthesis of the East and the West, and in that context, it seems obvious that our teaching-learning material should foster the gradual familiarisation of students with global themes of universal significance as also those that underline the importance of diversity in unity. This implies that the material should bring the students nearer to their cultural heritage, but also to the highest that is available in the cultural experiences of the world at large.

Fourthly, an attempt should be made to select from Indian and world history such examples that could illustrate the theme of the upward progress of humankind. The selected research material could be multi-sided, and it should be presented in such a manner and in the context in which they need in specific situations that might obtain or that can be created in respect of the students.

The research team at the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) has attempted the creation of the relevant teaching-learning material, and they have decided to present the same in the form of monographs. The total number of these monographs will be around eighty to eighty-five.

It appears that there are three major powers that uplift life to higher and higher normative levels, and the value of these powers, if well illustrated, could be effectively conveyed to the learners for their upliftment. These powers are those of illumination, heroism and harmony.

It may be useful to explore the meanings of these terms – illumination, heroism and harmony – since the aim of these monographs is to provide material for a study of what is sought to be conveyed through these three terms. We offer here exploratory statements in regard to these three terms.

Illumination is that ignition of inner light in which meaning and value of substance and life-movement are seized, understood, comprehended, held, and possessed, stimulating and inspiring guided action and application and creativity culminating in joy, delight, even ecstasy. The width, depth and height of the light and vision determine the degrees of illumination, and when they reach the splendour and glory of synthesis and harmony, illumination ripens into wisdom. Wisdom, too, has varying degrees that can uncover powers of knowledge and action, which reveal unsuspected secrets and unimagined skills of art and craft of creativity and effectiveness.

Heroism is, essentially, inspired force and self-giving and sacrifice in the operations of will that is applied to the quest,



realisation and triumph of meaning and value against the resistance of limitations and obstacles by means of courage, battle and adventure. There are degrees and heights of heroism determined by the intensity, persistence and vastness of sacrifice. Heroism attains the highest states of greatness and refinement when it is guided by the highest wisdom and inspired by the sense of service to the ends of justice and harmony, as well as when tasks are executed with consummate skill.

Harmony is a progressive state and action of synthesis and equilibrium generated by the creative force of joy and beauty and delight that combines and unites knowledge and peace and stability with will and action and growth and development. Without harmony, there is no perfection, even though there could be maximisation of one or more elements of our nature. When illumination and heroism join and engender relations of mutuality and unity, each is perfected by the other and creativity is endless.

In Homer's description of the events of the siege of Troy, we are presented with a vast field of war where men are tested to reveal the depth of their courage, strength and heroism. In this process, human nature is honed by gigantic forces both human and divine that purify the lower nature and bring out the latent noble and god-like possibilities. The struggles between the Greeks and the Trojans revolve around issues of power and honor. The Iliad shows us the conflict between mighty human spirits, and how the Gods intervene in such conflicts to work out a Divine Will. Homer casts the life of Man in divine proportions. This is the power which the true seer offers to those of us who are able to enter into the ancient spirit and atmosphere, and to feel what is going on behind the outer action.

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\* \*



Helen  
of  
Troy

*Painting  
by  
Evelyn  
de Morgan  
(detail)*

# The Siege of Troy

## Introduction

“There are four very great events in history, the siege of Troy, the life and crucifixion of Christ, the exile of Krishna in Brindavan and the colloquy with Arjun on the field of Kurukshetra. The siege of Troy created Hellas, the exile in Brindavan created devotional religion (for before there was only meditation and worship), Christ from his cross humanised Europe, the colloquy at Kurukshetra will yet liberate humanity. Yet it is said that none of these four great events ever happened.”

from *Thoughts and Aphorisms* — Sri Aurobindo

*What is the siege of Troy and why has one of India's greatest seers and poets declared it to be one of the very great historical events, something that may be considered of global importance to Mankind? At certain moments in evolution as it expresses itself in the outer events that collectively we call history, there arises a need for the human race to re-discover the old truths of life, thought and action and to give them fresh shape. The siege of Troy marks such a moment, for that event generated the impulse which led to the creation of Hellas.*

*What was Hellas and what has been its contribution to the human march? Hellas is the name given to the nation, language and culture that sprung up in Greece in the fifth century BC and that in the following centuries spread its influence throughout the*

*Mediterranean world. It eventually laid its imprint on most of the nations emerging in what was to become modern Europe.*

*In the Hellenic world we see the birth of the first human society which made mind its ruling power. "A sound mind in a sound body" was the acknowledged aim of life in ancient Greece. By a sound mind they meant a mentality whose capacities were thoroughly developed and fitted for a noble use in all fields of life, and by a sound reason they meant a rationality that was capable of a wise and tranquil ordering of life and a rule over its passions. The Greek focus on the mind gave a special emphasis to the philosophical, aesthetical and political dimensions of life. It did not, however, recognize the spiritual dimension to the extent that we find evident in Asia.*

*The Greeks (as they are more commonly called by historians) were passionate seekers for Truth, but especially for the actual truth of things, for the laws of truth which could act effectively in life. The mind of the Hellene took delight in the play of reason for its own sake and followed with eagerness the many movements of mind, always seeking the hidden reality which they sensed expressed itself in rational, universal laws which could be discovered by men. This quest for Truth extended to all domains of human life. In the intellectual domain, this free play of intelligence led to the discovery of a range of philosophical systems. These systems were the base upon which many later western philosophers constructed their philosophical systems of thought. In the field of politics the Greeks understood that one of the primary conditions for the development of the perfect society was the development of the free individual. Thus, they chose to rule themselves by creating an assembly where every citizen had an equal vote. In so doing, they made the first bold experiment in democratic political forms. The life that blossomed in Athens in the fifth century BC took humanity a step further in its quest for a right balance of freedom and restraint. This initial experiment stimulated further experimentation in Europe and eventually led to the development of the modern democratic state on that continent.*

*The Hellene vision of Life was not shaped by mind alone;*

beauty in all its forms was equally dear to it. In fact, the Hellenes developed a remarkable aesthetic sense that saw the beautiful wherever it turned its gaze and bowed to it with reverence in every form and activity. This fine sense for form and rhythm, for precision and clarity, and above all for harmony and order, is the central fact of Greek culture.

The thirst for Truth and Beauty led to a search for perfection not only of material form, but also in the actions of life. The Greeks called this truth in action, arete or excellence, and they greatly admired a man whose thoughts and sentiments radiated it and whose actions were governed by it. A life thus lived became a worthy offering to the gods. Note that this arete is not a specialized skill; it is a unifying power that radiates from the man who has successfully integrated his being.

The Greek hero is the embodiment of Truth in action. We will see this clearly later when we look more closely at Achilles, the most revered of their heroes. For the Greeks, heroes are representative men whose individual actions are always viewed in relation to a larger divine framework. Often a Greek hero's strength or individual prowess in action was attributed to his semi-divine parentage. This immortal element binds its human receptacle to the gods and sets him the heavy task of restraining human passion so he can express the nobler, more divine aspects of his nature that will work out the Divine Will.

It is through Homer's epic The Iliad that the Greek spirit that had been growing in the previous centuries was finally gathered and given form. Later, this new spirit was transmitted to all mankind, but first it revealed the Greeks to themselves, unifying them and making of them one people. Through this epic, Homer presents the Greek world-view, a view of life where men are seen as a base metal beaten and shaped by the gods and fate until their inner golden nature is revealed. He showed the Greeks more than just heroic deeds; his poetic genius drew aside the curtain of outer events and gave a vivid picture of the inner forces there at work.

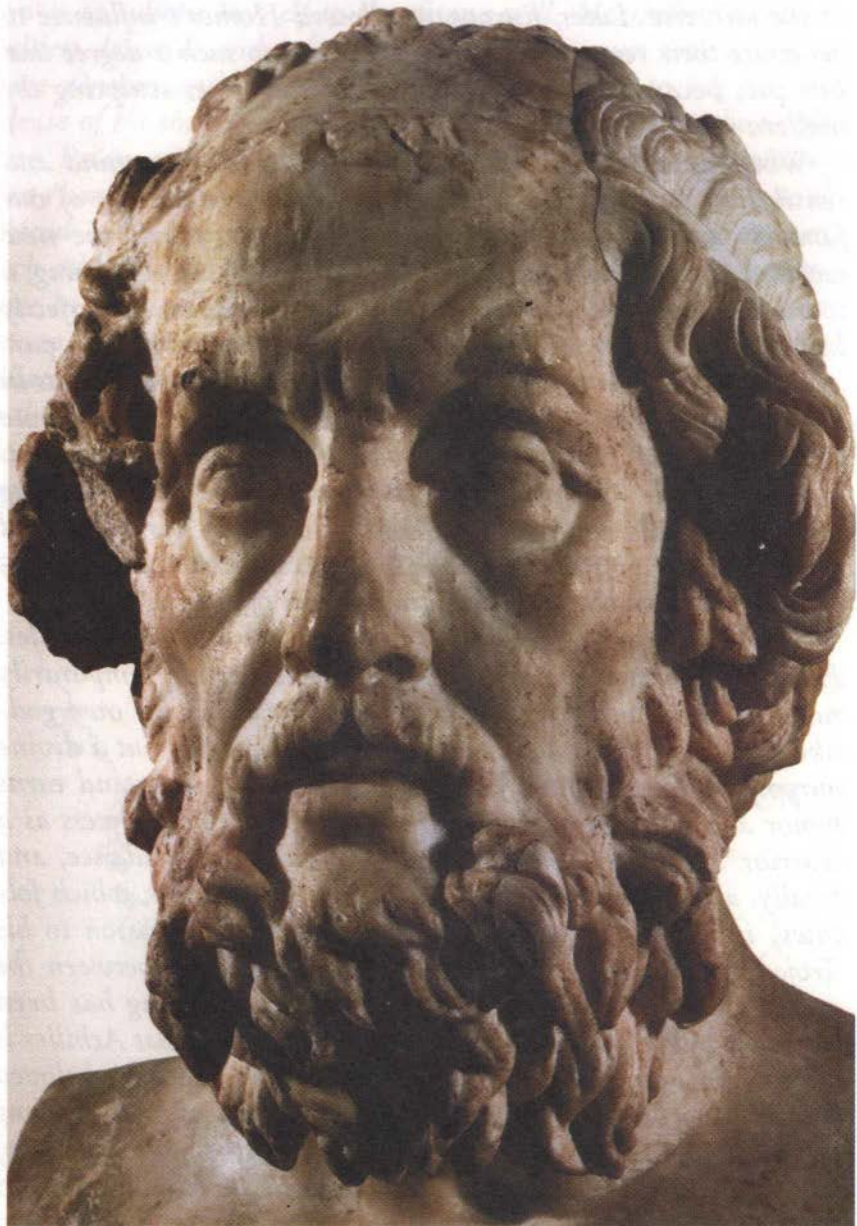
What were the events leading up to the siege of Troy? The conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans was ignited by an ignoble

act on the part of the Trojan prince, Paris. While a guest at the palace of Menelaus, the king of Sparta, Paris stole the king's wealth and abducted his wife, Helen. While Paris and Helen were still at sea, the Greeks took immediate action and sent an embassy to Priam, the king of Troy, demanding Helen's return. This, the Trojans refused to do; partly because of the fact that Helen herself declared that she had accompanied Paris of her own free-will. And so the stage for war was set.

Greece at that time was a collection of semi-independent small kingdoms, most of whose kings had bound themselves in an oath to honor whichever man was chosen as Helen's husband and to stand by him in case of future threats to the marriage. So, when Menelaus discovered the treachery, he and his brother Agamemnon, the mightiest of the Greek lords, summoned all the oath-takers to redeem their pledge and to gather men and ships for war with Troy. When the Greek fleet finally set sail for Troy, it included men in its ranks who were destined to become heroes in the course of the war that followed: such great names as Odysseus, Diomedes, Ajax and, greatest of all, Achilles.

In Homer's description of the events of the siege of Troy, we are presented with a vast field of war where men are tested to reveal the depth of their courage, strength and heroism. In this process, human nature is honed by gigantic forces both human and divine that purify the lower nature and bring out the latent noble and god-like possibilities. The struggles between the Greeks and the Trojans revolve around issues of power and honor. The Iliad shows us the conflict between mighty human spirits, and how the Gods intervene in such conflicts to work out a Divine Will. Homer casts the life of Man in divine proportions. This is the power which the true seer offers to those of us who are able to enter into the ancient spirit and atmosphere, and to feel what is going on behind the outer action.

For centuries, Greeks of all walks of life read Homer's epics as the base of their formal education and as a guide in cultural and civic matters of all kinds. It is the common heritage of Homer that helped them to form an integral vision of Man and his place



Homer (Rhodes, late hellenistic period)

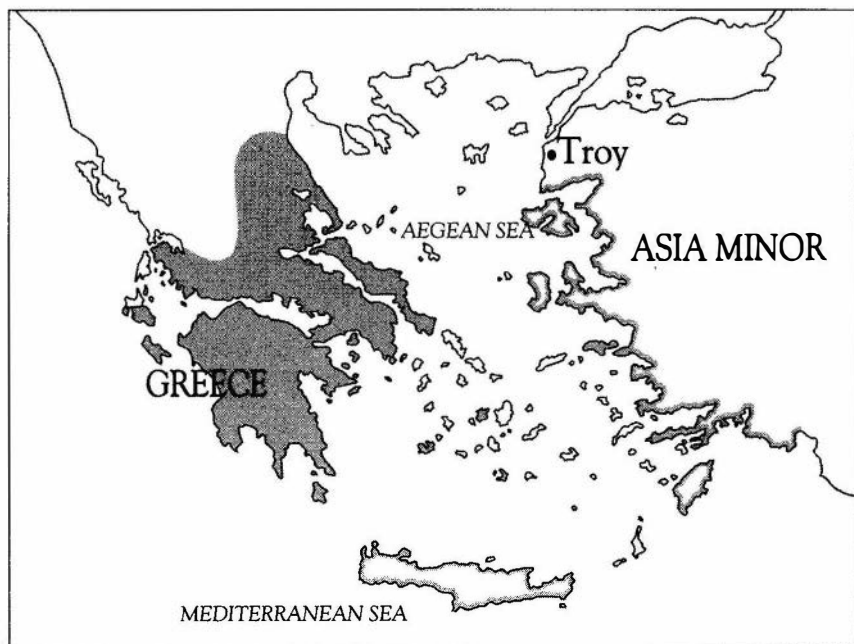
*in the universe. Later, Europeans allowed Homer's influence to penetrate their respective lives and cultures to such a degree that his epics became one of the most powerful forces sculpting the modern mind.*

*When we approach Homer's epic with a modern mind and sensibility, we must make the effort to cast aside many of our familiar attitudes and assumptions and plunge into the new world that the Greeks were in the process of calling into being, a world Sri Aurobindo describes as "lucid and slender and perfectly little." The Greek conception of a hero does not always run parallel to our modern conceptions. Their hero is one who delights in his manhood and enters into all its activities — and in those times that meant war, plunder, adventure — with a happy heart. He worships the Olympian gods in the prescribed way, honoring them outwardly by burning thighs of oxen on his altar, and inwardly with an attitude of humility and reverence, always recognizing his own place in the divine scheme of things.*

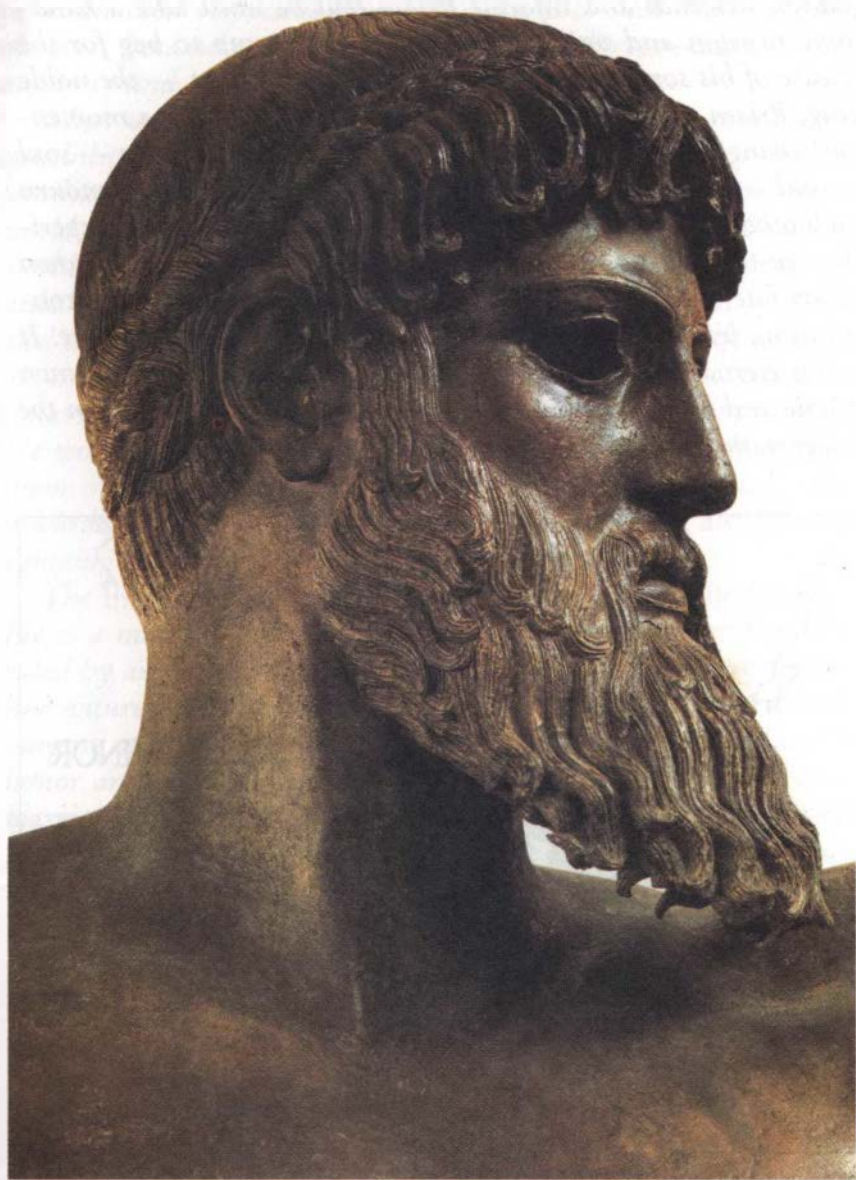
*The Iliad gives us a striking example of such a hero in Achilles. He is a man who abides in the human dimension temporarily ruled by anger and grief, but is pulled godward by his own god-like nature's response to the call of the gods to work out a divine purpose at Troy. Achilles fulfills his social obligations and earns honor and glory through his physical courage and prowess as a warrior. He reveres the gods and listens to their guidance, and finally, at the climax of the Iliad (in the last chapter, which follows) is able to express pity and mercy and compassion to his Trojan opponent, Priam. The momentous meeting between the greatest of the Greek warriors and the Trojan king has been arranged by the gods who are outraged by the fact that Achilles is defiling the body of defeated Prince Hector. To honor his beloved friend Patroclus and to assuage his own feelings of guilt at being the cause of his friend's death, he daily drags the naked corpse of Hector behind his chariot around the walls of Troy. Messengers are sent from Zeus to rectify this indignity. Achilles is told point blank by his goddess-mother, Thetis, that he must hand over the body of Hector in return for a ransom. Achilles' immediate reac-*



tion is to submit himself to the divine will. Meanwhile another goddess descends and informs Priam that he must take a handsome ransom and venture into the enemy camp to beg for the release of his son's body. When the two finally meet — the noble king, Priam and the long-wrathful Achilles — there is a momentous change. These bitterest of enemies, gaze at each other — soul to soul — and reach a state of compassion in which they mourn each other's losses and grieve over the losses that all men experience in the field of war. They part and each goes on to his own severe fate, but readers of generations live inspired by their reconciliation, by the example of men uplifted into a diviner sphere. It is this eternal moment that Homer has immortalized for his own people and for all men and women who yearn to be free from the lower nature and to live in the highest part of themselves.



Areas in grey represent Greek territories between the 11th and 10th centuries BC.



*Zeus (Bronze statue 470 - 460 BC)*

## Achilles and Priam

*This passage is the final chapter of Homer's Iliad. It describes the events that followed upon Prince Hector's defeat by Achilles and how the gods intervened to soften Achilles heart so that he would give the vanquished prince the honor and respect he so richly deserved.*

The games were over now. The gathered armies scattered, each man to his fast ship, and fighters turned their minds to thoughts of food and the sweet warm grip of sleep. But Achilles kept on grieving for his friend<sup>1</sup>, the memory burning on... and all-subduing sleep could not take him, not now, he turned and twisted, side to side, he longed for Patroclus' manhood, his gallant heart — what rough campaigns they'd fought to an end together, what hardships they had suffered, cleaving their way through wars of men and pounding waves at sea. The memories flooded over him, live tears flowing, and now he'd lie on his side, now flat on his back, now face down again. At last he'd leap to his feet, wander in anguish, aimless along the surf, and dawn on dawn flaming over the sea and shore would find him pacing. Then he'd yoke his racing team to the

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1. Who has been unexpectedly killed by the Trojan Prince Hector

chariot-harness, lash the corpse of Hector behind the car for dragging and haul him three times round the dead Patroclus' tomb, and then he'd rest again in his tents and leave the body sprawled facedown in the dust. But Apollo pitied Hector — dead man though he was — and warded all corruption off from Hector's corpse and round him, head to foot, the great god wrapped the golden shield of storm, so his skin would never rip as Achilles dragged him on.

And so he kept on raging, shaming noble Hector, but the gods in bliss looked down and pitied Priam's son. They kept on urging the sharp-eyed giant-killer Hermes to go and steal the body, a plan that pleased them all, but not Hera, Poseidon or the girl with blazing eyes<sup>1</sup>. They clung to their deathless hate of sacred Troy, Priam and Priam's people, just as they had at first when Paris in all his madness launched the war. He offended Athena and Hera — both goddesses. When they came to his shepherd's fold he favored Love who dangled before his eyes the lust that loosed disaster. But now, at the twelfth dawn since Hector's death, lord Apollo rose and addressed the immortal powers: "Hard-hearted you are, you gods, you live for cruelty! Did Hector never burn in your honor thighs of oxen and flawless, full-grown goats? Now you cannot bring yourselves to save him — even his corpse — so his wife can see him, his mother and his child, his father Priam and Priam's people: how they'd rush to burn his body on the pyre and give him royal rites! But murderous Achilles — you gods, you choose to help Achilles. That man without a shred of decency in his heart... his temper can never bend and change — like some lion going his own barbaric way, giving in to his power, his brute force and wild pride, as down he swoops on the flocks of men to seize his savage feast. Achilles has lost all pity! No shame in the man, shame that does great harm or drives men on to good. No doubt some mortal has suffered a dearer loss than this, a brother born in the same womb, or even a son... he grieves,

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1. Athena

he weeps, but then his tears are through. The Fates have given mortals hearts that can endure. But this Achilles — first he slaughters Hector, he rips away the noble prince's life then lashes him to his chariot, drags him round his beloved comrade's tomb. But why, I ask you? What good will it do him? What honor will he gain? Let that man beware, or great and glorious as he is, we mighty gods will wheel on him in anger-look; he outrages the senseless clay in all his fury!"

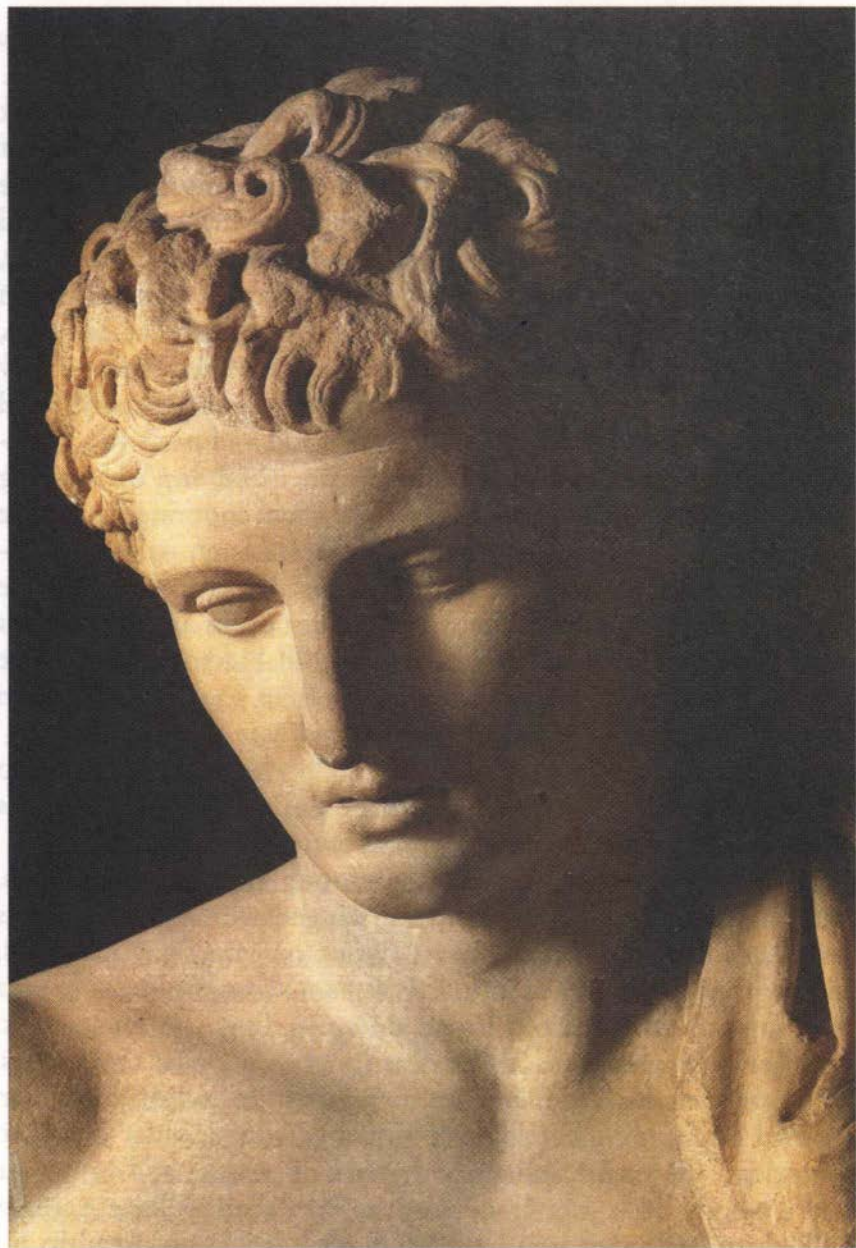
But white-armed Hera flared at him in anger: "Yes, there'd be some merit even in what you say, lord of the silver bow — if all you gods, in fact, would set Achilles and Hector high in equal honor. But Hector is mortal. He sucked a woman's breast. Achilles sprang from a goddess — one I reared myself: I brought her up and gave her in marriage to a man, to Peleus, dearest to all your hearts, you gods. All you gods, you shared in the wedding rites, and so did you, Apollo. There you sat at the feast and struck your lyre. What company you keep now, these wretched Trojans. You forever faithless!"

But Zeus who marshals the storm clouds warned his queen, "Now, Hera, don't fly into such a rage at fellow gods. These two can never attain the same degree of honor. Still, the immortals loved Prince Hector dearly, best of all the mortals born in Troy... so I loved him, he never stinted with gifts to please my heart. Never once did my altar lack its share of victims, winecups tipped and the deep smoky savor. These, these are the gifts we claim — they are our rights. But as for stealing courageous Hector's body, we must abandon the idea — not a chance in the world behind Achilles' back. For Thetis is always there, his mother always hovering near him night and day. Now, would one of you gods call Thetis to my presence? — so I can declare to her my solemn, sound decree: Achilles must receive a ransom from King Priam, Achilles must give Hector's body back."

So he decreed and Iris, racing a gale-wind down with Zeus' message, mid-sea between Samos and Imbros' rugged cliffs, dove in a black swell as groaning breakers roared. Down she plunged to the bottom fast as a lead weight sheathed in a

glinting lure of wild bull's horn, bearing hooked death to the ravenous fish. And deep in a hollow cave she came on Thetis. Gathered round her sat the other immortal sea-nymphs while Thetis amidst them mourned her brave son's fate, doomed to die, she knew, on the fertile soil of Troy, far from his native land. Quick as the wind now Iris rushed to the goddess, urging, "Rise, Thetis — Zeus with his everlasting counsels calls you now!" Shifting on her glistening feet, the goddess answered, "Why... what does the great god want with me? I cringe from mingling with the immortals now — Oh the torment — never-ending heartbreak! But go I shall. A high decree of the Father must not come to nothing — whatever he commands."

The radiant queen of sea-nymphs seized a veil, blue-black, no robe darker in all the Ocean's depths, and launched up and away with wind-swift Iris leading — the groundswell round them cleaved and opened wide. And striding out on shore they soared to the high sky and found farseeing Zeus, and around him all the gods who live in bliss forever sat in a grand assembly. And Thetis took a seat beside the Father, a throne Athena yielded. Hera placed in her hand a burnished golden cup and said some words of comfort, and taking a few quick sips, Thetis gave it back... The father of men and gods began to address them: "You have come to Olympus now, immortal Thetis, for all your grief — what unforgettable sorrow seizes on your heart. I know it well myself. Even so, I must tell you why I called you here. For nine whole days the immortals have been feuding over Hector's corpse and Achilles' scourge of cities. They keep urging the sharp-eyed giant-killer Hermes to go and steal the body. But that is not my way. I will grant Achilles glory and so safeguard your awe and love of me for all the years to come. Go at once to the camp, give your son this order: tell him the gods are angry with him now and I am rising over them all in deathless wrath that he in heartsick fury still holds Hector's body, there by his beaked ships, and will not give him back — perhaps in fear of me he'll give him back at once. Then, at the same time, I am winging Iris down to greathearted Priam,



Hermes (detail of statue by Praxiteles c. 400 BC)

commanding the king to ransom his dear son, to go to Achaea's ships, bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage."

So he decreed and Thetis with her glistening feet did not resist a moment. Down the goddess flashed from the peaks of Mount Olympus, made her way to her son's camp, and there he was, she found him groaning hard, choked with sobs. Around him trusted comrades swung to the work, preparing breakfast, steadying in their midst a large fleecy sheep just slaughtered in the shelter. But his noble mother, settling down at his side, stroked Achilles gently, whispering his name: "My child — how long will you eat your heart out here in tears and torment? All wiped from your mind, all thought of food and bed? It's a welcome thing to make love with a woman... You don't have long to live now, well I know: already I see them looming up beside you — death and the strong force of fate. Listen to me, quickly! I bring you a message sent by Zeus: he says the gods are angry with you now and he is rising over them all in deathless wrath that you in heartsick fury still hold Hector's body, here by your beaked ships, and will not give him back. Oh give him back at once — take ransom for the dead!"

The swift runner replied in haste, "So be it. The man who brings the ransom can take away the body, if Olympian Zeus himself insists in all earnest."

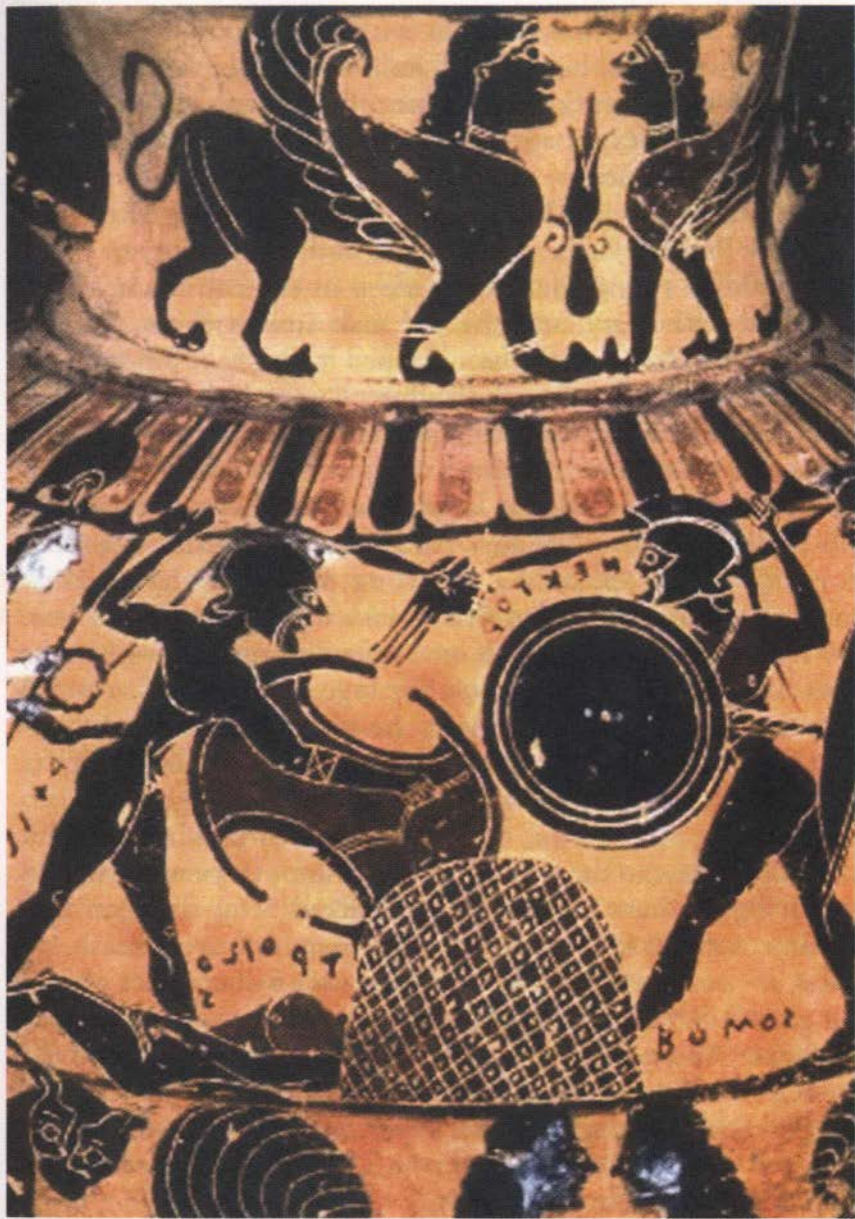
While mother and son agreed among the clustered ships, trading between each other many winged words, Father Zeus sped Iris down to sacred Troy: "Quick on your way now, Iris, shear the wind! Leave our Olympian stronghold — take a message to greathearted Priam down in Troy: he must go to Achaea's ships and ransom his dear son, bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage. But let him go alone, no other Trojan attend him, only a herald with him, a seasoned, older one who can drive the mules and smooth-running wagon and bring the hero's body back to sacred Troy, the man that brilliant Achilles killed in battle. Let him have no fear of death, no dread in his heart, such a powerful escort we will send him — the giant killer Hermes will guide him all the way to Achilles' presence.



And once the god has led him within the fighter's shelter, Achilles will not kill him — he'll hold back all the rest: Achilles is no madman, no reckless fool, not the one to defy the gods' commands. Whoever begs his mercy he will spare with all the kindness in his heart."

So he decreed and Iris ran his message, racing with gale force to Priam's halls where cries and mourning met her. Sons huddled round their father deep in the courtyard, robes drenched with tears, and the old man amidst them, buried, beaten down in the cloak that wrapped his body... Smear'd on the old man's head and neck the dung lay thick that he scraped up in his own hands, groveling in the filth. Throughout the house, his daughters and sons' wives wailed, remembering all the fine brave men who lay dead now, their lives destroyed at the fighting Argives' hands. And Iris, Zeus' crier, standing alongside Priam, spoke in a soft voice, but his limbs shook at once — "Courage, Dardan Priam, take heart! Nothing to fear. No herald of doom, I come on a friendly mission — I come with all good will. I bring you a message sent by Zeus, a world away but he has you in his heart, he pities you now... Olympian Zeus commands you to ransom royal Hector, to bear gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage. But you must go alone, no other Trojan attend you, only a herald with you, a seasoned, older one who can drive the mules and smooth-running wagon and bring the hero's body back to sacred Troy, the man that brilliant Achilles killed in battle. But have no fear of death, no dread in your heart, such a powerful escort will conduct you — the giant-killer Hermes will guide you all the way to Achilles' presence. And once the god has led you within the fighter's shelter, Achilles will not kill you — he'll hold back all the rest: Achilles is no madman, no reckless fool, not the one to defy the gods' commands. Whoever begs his mercy he will spare with all the kindness in his heart!"

And Iris racing the wind went veering off and Priam ordered his sons to get a wagon ready, a good smooth-running one, to hitch the mules and strap a big wicker cradle across its frame.



Achilles kills Hector  
(Attic black figure amphora c. 550 BC)

Then down he went himself to his treasure-chamber, high-ceilinged, paneled, fragrant with cedar wood and a wealth of precious objects filled its chests. He called out to his wife, Hecuba, "Dear woman! An Olympian messenger came to me from Zeus — I must go to Achaea's ships and ransom our dear son, bearing gifts to Achilles, gifts to melt his rage. Tell me, what should I do? What do you think? Myself — a terrible longing drives me, heart and soul, down to the ships, into the vast Achaean camp."

But his wife cried out in answer, "No, no — where have your senses gone? — that made you famous once, both among outland men and those you rule in Troy! How can you think of going down to the ships, alone, and face the glance of the man who killed your sons, so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron! If he gets you in his clutches, sets his eyes on you — that savage, treacherous man — he'll show no mercy, no respect for your rights!

"Come, all we can do now is sit in the halls, far from our son, and wail for Hector... So this, this is the doom that strong Fate spun out, our son's life line drawn with his first breath — the moment I gave him birth — to glut the wild dogs, cut off from his parents, crushed by the stronger man. Oh would to god that I could sink my teeth in his liver, eat him raw! That would avenge what he has done to Hector — the coward the man Achilles killed — my son stood and fought for the men of Troy and their deep-breasted wives with never a thought of flight or run for cover!"

But the old and noble Priam answered firmly, "I will go. My mind's made up. Don't hold me back. And don't go flying off on your own across the halls, a bird of evil omen — you can't dissuade me now. If someone else had commanded me, some mortal man, some prophet staring into the smoke, some priest, I'd call it a lie and turn my back upon it. Not now. I heard her voice with my own ears, I looked straight at the goddess, face-to-face. So I am going — her message must not come to nothing. And if it is my fate to die by the beaked ships of Achaeans armed in bronze, then die I shall. Let Achilles

cut me down straightway — once I've caught my son in my arms and wept my fill!"

He raised back the carved lids of the chests and lifted out twelve robes, handsome, rich brocades, twelve cloaks, unlined and light, as many blankets, as many big white capes and shirts to go with them. He weighed and carried out ten full bars of gold and took two burnished tripods, four fine cauldrons and last a magnificent cup the Thracians gave him once — he'd gone on an embassy and won that priceless treasure — but not even that did the old man spare in his halls, not now, consumed with desire to ransom back his son. Crowds of Trojans were mobbing his colonnades — he gave them a tongue-lashing, sent them packing: "Get out — you good-for-nothings, public disgraces! Haven't you got enough to wail about at home without coming here to add to all my griefs? You think it nothing, the pain that Zeus has sent me? — he's destroyed my best son! You'll learn too, in tears — easier game you'll be for Argive troops to slaughter, now my Hector's dead. But before I have to see my city annihilated, laid waste before my eyes — oh let me go down to the House of Death!"

He herded them off with his staff — they fled outside before the old man's fury. So he lashed out at his sons, cursing the sight of Helenus, Paris, noble Agathon, Pammon, Antiphonus, Polites loud with the war cry, Deiphobus and Hippothous, even lordly Dius — the old man shouted at all nine, rough commands: "Get to your work! My vicious sons — my humiliations! If only you'd all been killed at the fast ships instead of my dear Hector... But I — dear god, my life so cursed by fate! — I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy and now, now not a single one is left, I tell you. Mestor the indestructible, Troilus, passionate horseman and Hector, a god among men — no son of a mortal man, he seemed a deathless god's. But Ares killed them all and all he left me are these, these disgraces — liars, dancers, heroes only at beating the dancing-rings, you plunder your own people for lambs and kids! Why don't you get my wagon ready — now, at once? Pack all these things

aboard! We must be on our way!"

Terrified by their father's rough commands, the sons trundled a mule-wagon out at once, a good smooth-running one, newly finished, balanced and bolted tight, and strapped a big wicker cradle across its frame. They lifted off its hook a box-wood yoke for the mules, its bulging pommel fitted with rings for guide-reins, brought out with the yoke its yoke-strap nine arms long and wedged the yoke down firm on the sanded, tapered pole, on the front peg, and slipped the yoke-ring onto its pin, strapped the pommel with three good twists, both sides, then lashed the assembly round and down the shaft end under the clamp they made the lashing fast. Then the priceless ransom for Hector's body: hauling it up from the vaults they piled it high on the wagon's well-made cradle, then they yoked the mules — stamping their sharp hoofs, trained for heavy loads — that the Mysians once gave Priam, princely gifts. And last they yoked his team to the king's chariot, stallions he bred himself in his own polished stalls.

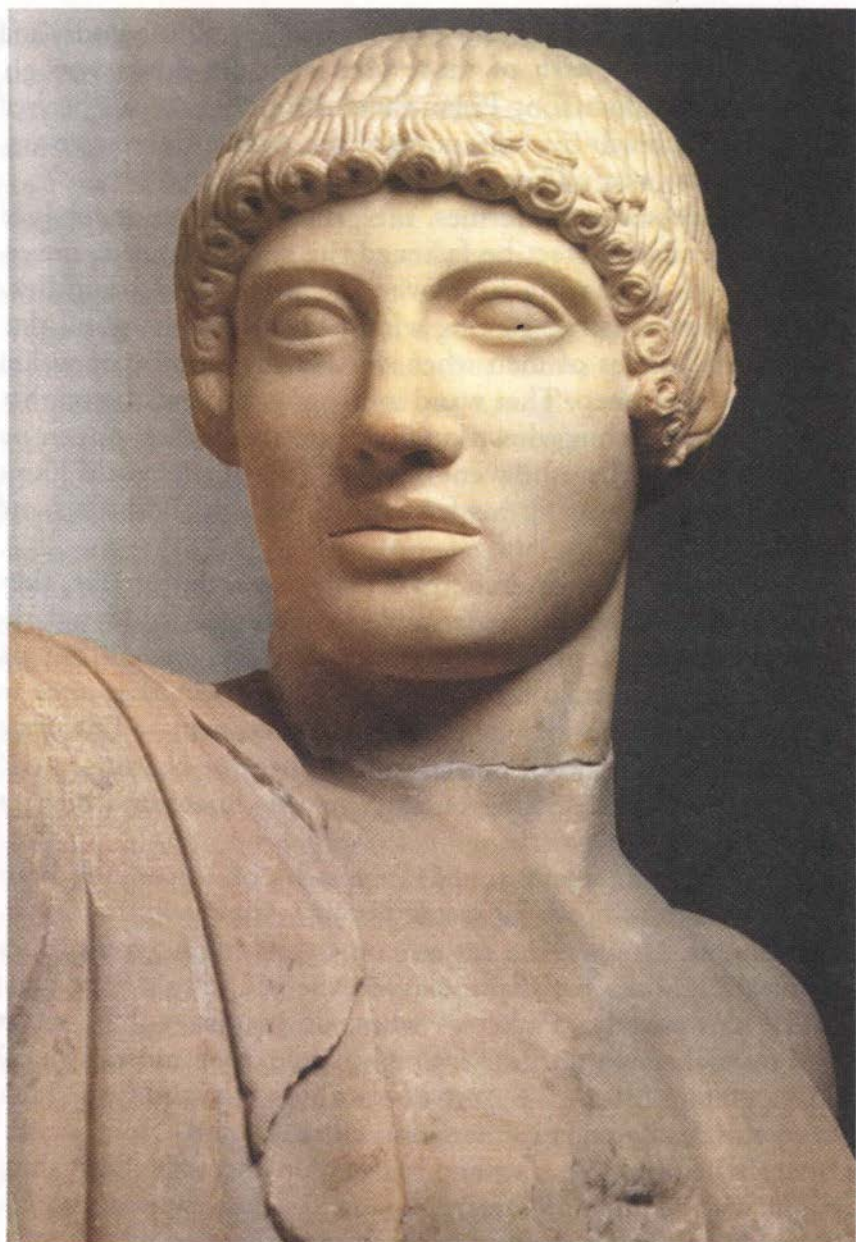
No sooner were both men harnessed up beneath the roofs, Priam and herald, minds set on the coming journey, when Hecuba rushed up to them, gaunt with grief, her right hand holding a golden cup of honeyed wine so the men might pour libations forth at parting. She stood in front of the horses, crying up at Priam, "Here, quickly — pour a libation out to Father Zeus! pray for a safe return from all our mortal enemies, seeing you're dead set on going down to the ships — though you go against my will. But if you go, you must pray, at least, to the great god of the dark storm cloud, up there on Ida, gazing down on the whole expanse of Troy! Pray for a bird of omen, Zeus' wind-swift messenger, the dearest bird in the world to his prophetic heart, the strongest thing on wings — clear on the right so you can see that sign with your own eyes and trust your life to it as you venture down to Achaea's ships and the fast chariot-teams. But if farseeing Zeus does not send you that sign — his own messenger — then I urge you, beg you, don't go down to the ships — not for all the passion in your heart!"

The old majestic Priam gave his answer: "Dear woman, surely I won't resist your urging now. It's well to lift our hands and ask great Zeus for mercy."

And the old king motioned a steward standing by to pour some clear pure water over his hands, and she came forward, bearing a jug and basin. He rinsed his hands, took the cup from his wife and taking a stand amidst the forecourt, prayed, pouring the wine to earth and scanning the high skies, Priam prayed in his rich resounding voice: "Father Zeus! Ruling over us all from Ida, god of greatness, god of glory! Grant that Achilles will receive me with kindness, mercy. Send me a bird of omen, your own wind-swift messenger, the dearest bird in the world to your prophetic heart, the strongest thing on wings — clear on the right, so I can see that sign with my own eyes and trust my life to it as I venture down to Achaea's ships and the fast chariot-teams!"

And Zeus in all his wisdom heard that prayer and straight-away the Father launched an eagle — truest of Zeus' signs that fly the skies — the dark marauder that mankind calls the Black-wing. Broad as the door of a rich man's vaulted treasure-chamber, well-fitted with sturdy bars, so broad each wing of the bird spread out on either side as it swept in through the city flashing clear on the right before the king and queen. All looked up, overjoyed — the people's spirits lifted.

And the old man, rushing to climb aboard his chariot, drove out through the gates and echoing colonnades. The mules in the lead hauled out the four-wheeled wagon, driven on by seasoned Idaeus. The horses came behind as the old man cracked the lash and urged them fast throughout the city with all his kinsmen trailing... weeping their hearts out, as if he went to his death. But once the two passed down through crowded streets and out into open country, Priam's kin turned back, his sons and in-laws straggling home to Troy. But Zeus who beholds the world could hardly fail to see the two men striking out across the plain. As he watched the old man he filled with pity and quickly summoned Hermes, his own dear son: "Hermes —



*Apollo (Temple of Zeus, Olympia, c. 470 BC)*

escorting men is your greatest joy, you above all the gods, and you listen to the wish of those you favor. So down you go. Down and conduct King Priam there through Achaea's beaked ships, so none will see him, none of the Argive fighters recognize him now, not till he reaches Peleus' royal son."

So he decreed and Hermes, the giant-killing guide, obeyed at once. Under his feet he fastened the supple sandals, never-dying gold, that wing him over the waves and boundless earth with the rush of gusting winds. He seized the wand that enchants the eyes of men whenever Hermes wants, or wakes them up from sleep. That wand in his grip he flew, the mighty giant-killer, touching down on Troy and the Hellespont in no time and from there he went on foot, for all the world like a young prince, sporting his first beard, just in the prime and fresh warm pride of youth.

As soon as the two drove past the great tomb of Ilus, they drew rein at the ford to water mules and team. A sudden darkness had swept across the earth and Hermes was all but on them when the herald looked up, saw him, shouted at once to Priam, "Danger, my king — think fast! I see a man — I'm afraid we'll both be butchered on the spot — into the chariot, hurry! Run for our lives or fling ourselves at his knees and beg for mercy!"

The old man was stunned; in a swirl of terror, the hairs stood bristling all over his gnarled body — he stood there, staring dumbly. Not waiting for welcome the running god of luck went straight up to Priam, clasped the old king's hands and asked him warmly, "Father — where do you drive these mules and team through the godsent night while other mortals sleep? Have you no fear of the Argives breathing hate and fury? Here are your deadly enemies, camping close at hand. Now, what if one of them saw you, rolling blithely on through the rushing night with so much tempting treasure — how would you feel then? You're not so young yourself, and the man who attends you here is far too old to drive off an attacker spoiling for a fight. But I would never hurt you — and what's more, I'd beat



off any man who'd do you harm; you remind me of my dear father, to the life."

And the old and noble Priam said at once, "Our straits are hard, dear child, as you say. But a god still holds his hands above me, even me. Sending such a traveler here to meet me — what a lucky omen! Look at your build... your handsome face — a wonder. And such good sense — your parents must be blissful as the gods!"

The guide and giant-killer answered quickly, "You're right, old man, all straight to the mark. But come, tell me the truth now, point by point: this treasure — a king's ransom — do you send it off to distant, outland men, to keep it safe, for you? Or now do you all abandon sacred Troy, all in panic — such was the man who died, your finest, bravest man... your own son who never failed in a fight against the Argives."

But the old majestic Priam countered quickly, "Who are *you*, my fine friend? — who are your parents? How can you speak so well of my doomed son's fate?"

And the guide and giant-killer answered staunchly, "You're testing me, old man — asking of noble Hector. Ah, how often I watched him battling on the lines where men win glory, saw the man with my own eyes! And saw him drive Achaeans against the ships that day he kept on killing, cutting them down with slashing bronze while we stood by and marveled — Achilles reined us in: no fighting for us while he raged on at Agamemnon. I am Achilles' aide, you see, one and the same good warship brought us here. I am a Myrmidon, and my father is Polyctor, and a wealthy man he is, about as old as you... He has six sons — I'm the seventh — we all shook lots and it fell to me to join the armies here at Troy. I've just come up from the ships to scout the plain — at dawn the fiery-eyed Achaeans fight around the city. They chafe, sitting in camp, so bent on battle now the kings of Achaea cannot hold them back."

And the old and noble Priam asked at once, "If you really are the royal Achilles' aide, please, tell me the whole truth, point by point. My son — does he still lie by the beached

ships, or by now has the great Achilles hacked him limb from limb and served him to his dogs?"

The guide and giant-killer reassured him: "So far, old man, no birds or dogs have eaten him. No, there he lies — still there at Achilles' ship, still intact in his shelters. This is the twelfth day he's lain there, too, but his body has not decayed, not in the least, nor have the worms begun to gnaw his corpse, the swarms that devour men who fall in battle. True, dawn on fiery dawn he drags him round his beloved comrade's tomb, drags him ruthlessly but he cannot mutilate his body. It's marvelous — go see for yourself how he lies there fresh as dew,



Achilles kills Penthesilea

the blood washed away, and no sign of corruption. All his wounds sealed shut, wherever they struck... and many drove their bronze blades through his body. Such pains the blissful gods are lavishing on your son, dead man though he is — the gods love him dearly!”

And the old man rejoiced at that, bursting out, “O my child, how good it is to give the immortals fit and proper gifts! Now take my son — or was he all a dream? Never once in his halls did he forget the gods who hold Olympus, never, so now they remember him... if only after death. Come, this handsome cup: accept it from me, I beg you! Protect me, escort me now — if the gods will it so — all the way till I reach Achilles’ shelter.”

The guide and giant-killer refused him firmly, “You test me again, old man, since I am young, but you will not persuade me, tempting me with a gift behind Achilles’ back. I fear the man, I’d die of shame to rob him — just think of the trouble I might suffer later. But I’d escort you with all the kindness in my heart, all the way till I reached the shining hills of Argos bound in a scudding ship or pacing you on foot — and no marauder on earth, scorning your escort, would dare attack you then.”

And the god of luck, leaping onto the chariot right behind the team, quickly grasped the whip and reins in his hands and breathed fresh spirit into the mules and horses. As they reached the trench and rampart round the fleet, the sentries had just begun to set out supper there but the giant-killer plunged them all in sleep... he spread the gates at once, slid back the bars and ushered Priam in with his wagon-load of treasure. Now, at last, they approached royal Achilles’ shelter, the tall, imposing lodge the Myrmidons built their king, hewing planks of pine, and roofed it high with thatch, gathering thick shaggy reeds from the meadow banks, and round it built their king a spacious courtyard fenced with close-set stakes. A single pine beam held the gates, and it took three men to ram it home, three to shoot the immense bolt back and spread the doors — three average men. Achilles alone could ram it home

himself. But the god of luck now spread the gates for the old man, drove in the glinting gifts for Peleus' swift son, climbed down from behind the team and said to Priam, "Old man, look, I am a god come down to you, I am immortal Hermes — my Father sent me here to be your escort. But now I will hasten back. I will not venture into Achilles' presence: it would offend us all for a mortal man to host an immortal face-to-face. But you go in yourself and clasp Achilles' knees, implore him by his father, his mother with lovely hair, by his own son — so you can stir his heart!"

With that urging Hermes went his way to the steep heights of Olympus. But Priam swung down to earth from the battle-car and leaving Idaeus there to rein in mules and team, the old king went straight up to the lodge where Achilles would always sit. Priam found the warriors inside... many captains sitting some way off, but two, veteran Automedon and the fine fighter Alcimus were busy serving him. He had just finished dinner, eating, drinking, and the table still stood near. The majestic king of Troy slipped past the rest and kneeling down beside Achilles, clasped his knees and kissed his hands, those terrible, man-killing hands that had slaughtered Priam's many sons in battle. Awesome — as when the grip of madness seizes one who murders a man in his own fatherland and flees abroad to foreign shores, to a wealthy, noble host, and a sense of marvel runs through all who see him — so Achilles marveled, beholding majestic Priam. His men marveled too, trading startled glances. But Priam prayed his heart out to Achilles: "Remember your own father, great godlike Achilles — as old as I am, past the threshold of deadly old age! No doubt the countrymen round about him plague him now, with no one there to defend him, beat away disaster. No one — but at least he hears you're still alive and his old heart rejoices, hopes rising, day by day, to see his beloved son come sailing home from Troy. But I — dear god, my life so cursed by fate... I fathered hero sons in the wide realm of Troy and now not a single one is left, I tell you. Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came, nineteen born to me

from a single mother's womb and the rest by other women in the palace. Many, most of them violent Ares cut the knees from under. But one, one was left me, to guard my walls, my people — the one you killed the other day, defending his fatherland, my Hector! It's all for him I've come to the ships now, to win him back from you — I bring a priceless ransom. Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right; remember your own father! I deserve more pity... I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before — I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son."

Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand, he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory, both men gave way to grief. Priam wept freely for man-killing Hector, throbbing, crouching before Achilles' feet as Achilles wept himself, now for his father, now for Patroclus once again, and their sobbing rose and fell throughout the house. Then, when brilliant Achilles had had his fill of tears and the longing for it had left his mind and body, he rose from his seat, raised the old man by the hand and filled with pity now for his gray head and gray beard, he spoke out winging words, flying straight to the heart: "Poor man, how much you've borne — pain to break the spirit! What daring brought you down to the ships, all alone, to face the glance of the man who killed your sons, so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron. Come, please, sit down on this chair here... Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts, rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning. What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit? So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men live on to bear such torments; the gods live free of sorrows. There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus' halls and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings. When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man, now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn. When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only, he makes a man an outcast. Brutal, ravenous hunger drives him down the face of the shining

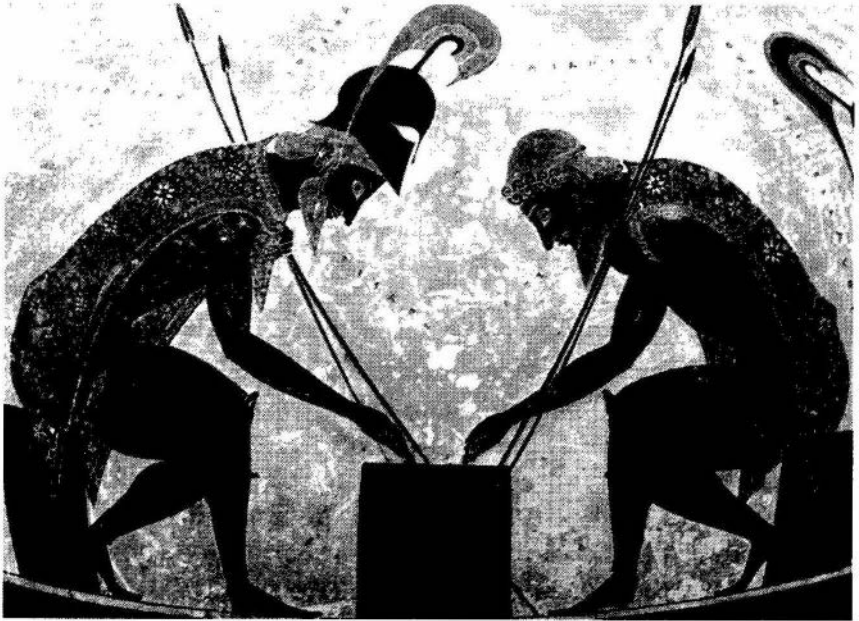
earth, stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men. So with my father, Peleus. What glittering gifts the gods rained down from the day that he was born! He excelled all men in wealth and pride of place. He lorded the Myrmidons, and mortal that he was, they gave the man an immortal goddess for a wife. Yes, but even on him the Father piled hardships, no powerful race of princes born in his royal halls, only a single son he fathered, doomed at birth, cut off in the spring of life — and I, I give the man no care as he grows old since here I sit in Troy, far from my fatherland, a grief to you, a grief to all your children... And you too, old man, we hear you prospered once: as far as Lesbos, Macar's kingdom, bounds to seaward, Phrygia east and upland, the Hellespont vast and north — that entire realm, they say, you lorded over once, you excelled all men, old king, in sons and wealth. But then the gods of heaven brought this agony on you — ceaseless battles round your walls, your armies slaughtered. You must bear up now. Enough of endless tears, the pain that breaks the spirit. Grief for your son will do no good at all. You will never bring him back to life — sooner you must suffer something worse."

But the old and noble Priam protested strongly: "Don't make me sit on a chair, Achilles, Prince, not while Hector lies uncared-for in your camp! Give him back to me, now, no more delay — I must see my son with my own eyes. Accept the ransom I bring you, a king's ransom! Enjoy it, all of it — return to your own native land, safe and sound... since now you've spared my life."

A dark glance — and the headstrong runner answered, "No more, old man, don't tempt my wrath, not now! My own mind's made up to give you back your son. A messenger brought me word from Zeus — my mother, Thetis who bore me, the Old Man of the Sea's daughter. And what's more, I can see through you, Priam — no hiding the fact from me: one of the gods has led you down to Achaea's fast ships. No man alive, not even a rugged young fighter, would dare to venture into our camp. Never — how could he slip past the sentries unchal-

lenged? Or shoot back the bolt of my gates with so much ease? So, don't anger me now. Don't stir my raging heart still more. Or under my own roof, I may not spare your life, old man — suppliant that you are — may break the laws of Zeus!"

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order. But Achilles bounded out of doors like a lion — not alone but flanked by his two aides-in-arms, veteran Automedon and Alcimus, steady comrades, Achilles' favorites next to the dead Patroclus. They loosed from harness the horses and the mules. They led the herald in, the old king's crier, and sat him down on a bench. From the polished wagon they lifted the priceless ransom brought for Hector's corpse, but they left behind two capes and a finely-woven shirt to shroud the body well when Priam bore him home. Then Achilles called the serving-women out: "Bathe and anoint the body — bear it aside first. Priam must not see his



Achilles and Ajax playing a game of dice  
(black figure amphora by Exekias, 540-530 BC)

broods on the spate of griefs the gods poured out to her.

So come — we too, old king, must think of food. Later you can mourn your beloved son once more, when you bear him home to Troy, and you'll weep many tears."

Never pausing, the swift runner sprang to his feet and slaughtered a white sheep as comrades moved in to skin the carcass quickly, dress the quarters well.

Expertly they cut the meat in pieces, pierced them with spits, roasted them to a turn and pulled them off the fire. Automedon brought the bread, set it out on the board in ample wicker baskets. Achilles served the meat. They reached out for the good things that lay at hand and when they had put aside desire for food and drink, Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling now at the man's beauty, his magnificent build — face-to-face he seemed a deathless god... and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam, beholding his noble looks, listening to his words. But once they'd had their fill of gazing at each other, the old majestic Priam broke the silence first: "Put me to bed quickly, Achilles, Prince. Time to rest, to enjoy the sweet relief of sleep. Not once have my eyes closed shut beneath my lids from the day my son went down beneath your hands... day and night I groan, brooding over the countless griefs, groveling in the dung that fills my walled-in court. But now, at long last, I have tasted food again and let some glistening wine go down my throat. Before this hour I had tasted nothing."

He shook his head as Achilles briskly told his men and serving-women to make beds in the porch's shelter, to lay down some heavy purple throws for the beds themselves, and over them spread some blankets, thick woolly robes, a warm covering laid on top. Torches in hand, they left the hall and fell to work at once and in no time two good beds were spread and made. Then Achilles nodded to Priam, leading the king on with brusque advice: "Sleep outside, old friend, in case some Achaean captain comes to visit. They keep on coming now, huddling beside me, making plans for battle — it's their duty.



But if one saw you here in the rushing dark night he'd tell Agamemnon straightaway, our good commander. Then you'd have real delay in ransoming the body. One more point. Tell me, be precise about it — how many days do you need to bury Prince Hector? I will hold back myself and keep the Argive armies back that long.”

And the old and noble Priam answered slowly, “If you truly want me to give Prince Hector burial, full, royal honors, you'd show me a great kindness, Achilles, if you would do exactly as I say. You know how crammed we are inside our city, how far it is to the hills to haul in timber, and our Trojans are afraid to make the journey. Well, nine days we should mourn him in our halls; on the tenth we'd bury Hector, hold the public feast; on the eleventh build the barrow high above his body — on the twelfth we'd fight again... if fight we must.”

The swift runner Achilles reassured him quickly: “All will be done, old Priam, as you command. I will hold our attack as long as you require.”

With that he clasped the old king by the wrist, by the right



Hector's corpse attached to Achilles' chariot  
(as represented on a Roman sarcophagus)

hand, to free his heart from fear. Then Priam and herald, minds set on the journey home, bedded down for the night within the porch's shelter. And deep in his sturdy well-built lodge Achilles slept with Briseis in all her beauty sleeping by his side.

Now the great array of gods and chariot-driving men slept all night long, overcome by gentle sleep. But sleep could never hold the running Escort — Hermes kept on turning it over in his mind... how could he convoy Priam clear of the ships, unseen by devoted guards who held the gates? Hovering at his head the Escort rose and spoke: "Not a care in the world, old man? Look at you, how you sleep in the midst of men who'd kill you — and just because Achilles spared your life. Now, yes, you've ransomed your dear son — for a king's ransom. But wouldn't the sons you left behind be forced to pay three times as much for you alive? What if Atrides Agamemnon learns you're here — what if the whole Achaean army learns you're here?"

The old king woke in terror, roused the herald. Hermes harnessed the mules and team for both men, drove them fast through the camp and no one saw them.

Once they reached the ford where the river runs clear, the strong, whirling Xanthus sprung of immortal Zeus, Hermes went his way to the steep heights of Olympus as Dawn flung out her golden robe across the earth, and the two men, weeping, groaning, drove the team toward Troy and the mules brought on the body. No one saw them at first, neither man nor woman, none before Cassandra, golden as goddess Aphrodite. She had climbed to Pergamus heights and from that point she saw her beloved father swaying tall in the chariot, flanked by the herald, whose cry could rouse the city. And Cassandra saw him too... drawn by the mules and stretched out on his bier. She screamed and her scream rang out through all Troy: "Come, look down, you men of Troy, you Trojan women! Behold Hector now — if you ever once rejoiced to see him striding home, home alive from battle! He was the greatest joy

of Troy and all our people!”

Her cries plunged Troy into uncontrollable grief and not a man or woman was left inside the walls. They streamed out at the gates to meet Priam bringing in the body of the dead Hector — his loving wife and noble mother were first to fling themselves on the wagon rolling on, the first to tear their hair, embrace his head and a wailing throng of people milled around them. And now, all day long till the setting sun went down they would have wept for Hector there before the gates if the old man, steering the car, had not commanded, “Let me through with the mules! Soon, in a moment, you can have your fill of tears — once I’ve brought him home.”

So he called and the crowds fell back on either side, making way for the wagon. Once they had borne him into the famous halls, they laid his body down on his large carved bed and set beside him singers to lead off the laments, and their voices rose in grief — they lifted the dirge high as the women wailed in answer. And white-armed Andromache led their songs of sorrow, cradling the head of Hector, man-killing Hector gently in her arms: “O my husband... cut off from life so young! You leave me a widow, lost in the royal halls — and the boy only a baby, the son we bore together, you and I so doomed. I cannot think he will ever come to manhood. Long before that, the city will be sacked, plundered top to bottom! Because you are dead, her great guardian, you who always defended Troy, who kept her loyal wives and helpless children safe, all who will soon be carried off in the hollow ships and I with them — and you, my child, will follow me to labor, somewhere, at harsh, degrading work, slaving under some heartless master’s eye — that, or some Achaean marauder will seize you by the arm and hurl you headlong down from the ramparts — horrible death — enraged at you because Hector once cut down his brother, his father or his son, yes, hundreds of armed Achaeans gnawed the dust of the world, crushed by Hector’s hands! Your father, remember, was no man of mercy... not in the horror of battle, and that is why the whole city of Troy mourns you now, my

Hector — you've brought your parents accursed tears and grief, but to me most of all you've left the horror, the heart-break! For you never died in bed and stretched your arms to me or said some last word from the heart I can remember, always, weeping for you through all my nights and days!"

Her voice rang out in tears and the women wailed in answer and Hecuba led them now in a throbbing chant of sorrow: "Hector, dearest to me by far of all my sons... and dear to the gods while we still shared this life — and they cared about you still, I see, even after death. Many the sons I had whom the swift runner Achilles caught and shipped on the barren salt sea as slaves to Samos, to Imbros, to Lemnos shrouded deep in mist! But you, once he slashed away your life with his brazen spear, he dragged you time and again around his comrade's tomb, Patroclus whom you killed — not that he brought Patroclus back to life by that. But I have you with me now... fresh as the morning dew you lie in the royal halls like one whom Apollo, lord of the silver bow, has approached and shot to death with gentle shafts."

Her voice rang out in tears and an endless wail rose up and Helen, the third in turn, led their songs of sorrow: "Hector! Dearest to me of all my husband's brothers — my husband, Paris, magnificent as a god... he was the one who brought me here to Troy — Oh how I wish I'd died before that day! But this, now, is the twentieth year for me since I sailed here and forsook my own native land, yet never once did I hear from you a taunt, an insult. But if someone else in the royal halls would curse me, one of your brothers or sisters or brothers' wives trailing their long robes, even your own mother — not your father, always kind as my own father — why, you'd restrain them with words, Hector, you'd win them to my side... you with your gentle temper, all your gentle words. And so in the same breath I mourn for you and me, my doom-struck, harrowed heart! Now there is no one left in the wide realm of Troy, no friend to treat me kindly — all the countrymen cringe from me in loathing!"

Her voice rang out in tears and vast throngs wailed and old King Priam rose and gave his people orders: "Now, you men of Troy, haul timber into the city! Have no fear of an Argive ambush packed with danger — Achilles vowed, when he sent me home from the black ships, not to do us harm till the twelfth dawn arrives."

At his command they harnessed oxen and mules to wagons; they assembled before the city walls with all good speed and for nine days hauled in a boundless store of timber. But when the tenth Dawn brought light to the mortal world they carried gallant Hector forth, weeping tears, and they placed his corpse aloft the pyre's crest, flung a torch and set it all aflame.

At last, when young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more, the people massed around illustrious Hector's pyre... And once they'd gathered, crowding the meeting grounds, they first put out the fires with glistening wine, wherever the flames still burned in all their fury. Then they collected the white bones of Hector — all his brothers, his friends-in-arms, mourning, and warm tears came streaming down their cheeks. They placed the bones they found in a golden chest, shrouding them round and round in soft purple cloths. They quickly lowered the chest in a deep, hollow grave and over it piled a cope of huge stones closely set, then hastily heaped a barrow, posted lookouts all around for fear the Achaean combat troops would launch their attack before the time agreed. And once they'd heaped the mound they turned back home to Troy, and gathering once again they shared a splendid funeral feast in Hector's honor, held in the house of Priam, king by will of Zeus.

And so the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses.

\*  
\* \*

## Appendices

### Summary of the Iliad

At the opening of the poem, the Greeks have already besieged Troy for nine years in vain; they are despondent, homesick, and decimated with disease. They had been delayed at Aulis by sickness and a windless sea; and Agamemnon had embittered Clytemnestra, and prepared his own fate, by sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia for a breeze. On the way up the coast, the Greeks had stopped here and there to replenish their supplies of food and concubines; Agamemnon had taken the fair Chryseis, Achilles the fair Briseis. A soothsayer now declares that Apollo is withholding success from the Greeks because Agamemnon has violated the daughter of Apollo's priest, Chryseis. The King restores Chryseis to her father, but, to console himself and point a tale, he compels Briseis to leave Achilles and take Chryseis' place in the royal tent. Achilles convokes a general assembly, and denounces Agamemnon with a wrath that provides the first word and recurring theme of the *Iliad*. He vows that neither he nor his soldiers will any longer stir a hand to help the Greeks. (I-II)

We pass in review the ships and tribes of the assembled force, and (III) see bluff Menelaus engaging Paris in single combat to decide the war. The two armies sit down in a civilized truce; Priam joins Agamemnon in solemn sacrifice to the gods. Menelaus overcomes Paris, but Aphrodite snatches the lad safely away in a cloud and deposits him, miraculously powdered and

perfumed, upon his marriage bed. Helen bids him return to the fight, but he counter proposes that they “give the hour to dalliance.” The lady flattered by desire, yields. (IV) Agamemnon declares Menelaus the victor, and the war is apparently ended; but the gods, in imitative council on Olympus, demand more blood. Zeus votes for peace, but withdraws his vote in terrified retreat when Hera, his spouse, directs her speech upon him. She suggests that if Zeus will agree to the destruction of Troy she will allow him to raze Mycenae, Argos, and Sparta to the ground. The war is renewed; many a man falls pierced by arrow, lance, or sword, and “darkness enfolds his eyes.” (V) The gods join in the merry slicing game; Ares, the awful god of war, is hurt by Diomed’s spear, “utters a cry as of nine thousand men” and runs off to complain to Zeus. (VI) In a pretty interlude the Trojan leader Hector, before rejoining the battle, bids good-by to his wife Andromache. “Love,” she whispers to him, “thy stout heart will be thy death; nor hast thou pity of thy child or me who shall soon be a widow.” Then he strides down the causeway to battle and (VII) engages Ajax, King of Salamis, in single combat. They fight bravely, and separate at nightfall with exchange of praise and gifts — a flower of courtesy floating on a sea of blood. (VIII) After a day of Trojan victories, Hector bids his warriors rest. (IX) Nestor, King of Elian Pylus, advises Agamemnon to restore Briseis to Achilles; he agrees and promises Achilles half of Greece if he will rejoin the siege; but Achilles continues to pout. (X) Odysseus and Diomed make a two-man sally upon the Trojan camp at night and slay a dozen chieftains. (XI) Agamemnon leads his army valiantly, is wounded, and retires. Odysseus, surrounded, fights like a lion; Ajax and Menelaus cleave a path to him and save him for a better life. (XII-XIII) When the Trojans advance to the walls that the Greeks have built about their camp (XIV), Hera is so disturbed that she resolves to rescue the Greeks. Oiled, perfumed and ravishingly gowned, and bound with Aphrodite’s aphrodisiac girdle, she seduces Zeus to a divine slumber while Poseidon helps the Greeks to drive the Trojans



Agamemnon's funeral mask

back. (XV) Advantage fluctuates; the Trojans reach the Greek ships, and the poet rises to a height of fervid narrative as the Greeks fight desperately in a retreat that must mean death. (XVI) Patroclus, beloved of Achilles, wins his permission to lead Achilles' troops against Troy; Hector slays him, and (XVII) fights Ajax fiercely over the body of the youth. (VIII) Hearing of Patroclus' death, Achilles at last resolves to fight. His goddess-mother Thetis persuades the divine smithy,



Hephaestus, to forge for him new arms and a mighty shield. (XIX) Achilles is reconciled with Agamemnon, (XX) engages Aeneas, and is about to kill him when Poseidon rescues him. (XXI) Achilles slaughters a host of Trojans. The gods take up the fight: Athena lays Ares low with a stone, and when Aphrodite, going for a soldier tries to save him, Athena knocks her down with a blow upon her fair breast. Hera cuffs the ears of Artemis; Poseidon and Apollo content themselves with words. (XXII) All Trojans but Hector fly from Achilles; Priam and Hecuba counsel Hector to stay behind the walls, but he refuses. Then suddenly, as Achilles advances on him, Hector takes to his heels. Achilles pursues him three times around the walls of Troy; Hector makes a stand, and is killed. (XXIII) In the subsiding finale of the drama, Patroclus is cremated with ornate ritual. Achilles sacrifices to him many cattle, twelve captured Trojans, and his own long hair. The Greeks honor Patroclus with games, and (XXIV) Achilles drags the corpse of Hector behind his chariot three times around the pyre. Priam comes in state and sorrow to beg for the remains of his son. Achilles relents, grants a truce of twelve days, and allows the aged king to take the cleansed and anointed body back to Troy.

from Will Durant — *The Life of Greece*

## Before the siege of Troy

Troy's strong walls were reputedly built with the help of the gods Poseidon and Apollo. The Trojans were further favored by the gift of the Palladium, an image of Pallas-Athene which fell to them from heaven. By the time Priam and Hecuba ruled, Troy was a prosperous center of civilization in Asia Minor. Priam and his wife had many children, but Hector was the noblest and most beloved. Prior to the birth of their son Paris, his mother dreamed of a firebrand. That dream was given the interpretation that the child about to be born would

be the cause of Troy's destruction. To save their city, the parents decided to send the babe to be left on Mt. Ida. As fate would have it, the child was rescued and then raised by kind shepherds. He became a hearty and strong youth with a reputation for his good looks.

## After the Iliad

Even after the death of Hector, the Trojans continued to fight sending out fresh heroes to take his place. One was the Amazon queen Penthesilea, who was killed by Achilles. It was said that when he removed her helmet and saw her beauty, that he stood fixed in sorrow at the fate of so fair a face. Memnon, the Egyptian, arrived to assist Troy, but he too was felled by Achilles. Finally it was the hero's time to die. The god Poseidon guided an arrow of Paris to the one vulnerable spot in Achilles' body: the heel by which his mother held him when she dipped him into the immortalizing water of the river Styx. Still Troy did not yield. Achilles' son, Pyrrus, entered the fray, and the poisoned arrows of Philoctetes were brought to be used. With one of them Paris met his death. An oracle said that Troy would not fall as long as it had possession of the Palladium, a sacred statue. Odysseus and Diomedes resolved to steal it, but the Trojans continued to resist. At last Odysseus hit upon a plan. Under his guidance they fabricated an immense wooden horse which moved on wheels. The belly of it was hollow and large enough to hold twelve armed men. This giant horse with its hidden cargo of twelve soldiers was left outside the walls of Troy and the Greeks pretended to leave their camps for home. The Trojans debated about what to do with the horse and finally, considering it to be a gift from the gods, decided to make a breach in their massive walls and drag it inside their city — fatal mistake. While the Trojans slept that night, the Greeks hidden within the horse climbed out, signaled their fellow Greeks and opened the gates for them to



The Trojan Horse (painting by Tiepolo)

enter. The Greeks stormed the city killing many of the men and capturing the women and children. Priam was stabbed to death by Achilles' son. The only Trojan hero to escape was Aeneas, who later, according to legend, went on to found Rome.

The princes of Greece sailed away, each with a share of the spoils, but many did not have a joyful homecoming. Some were ship-wrecked or driven astray in stormy weather. Some came back to find themselves forgotten or supplanted. Most ill-fated was King Agamemnon, who was stabbed to death by his wife and her lover. She had never forgiven her husband for sacrificing their daughter in return for gaining fair winds for sailing. Most famous of the returning heroes is Odysseus, whose travels and eventual homecoming are recounted in the *Odyssey*, the other of Homer's two great epics.

## Achilles: the archetypal Greek hero

The Greek conception of a hero does not always run parallel to our modern or yogic conceptions. Achilles himself gives a brief definition of a hero when he remembers his heroic and now deceased friend, Patroclus: "... he longed for his manhood, his gallant heart— what rough campaigns they'd fought to an end together, what hardships they had suffered, cleaving their way through wars of men and pounding waves at sea."

The Greek hero is fully a man and enters into the activities of ancient manhood — war, plunder, adventure — with a happy heart. He worships the gods in the prescribed way, honoring them outwardly by burning thighs of oxen, and inwardly with an attitude of humility and reverence, always recognizing his own place in the divine scheme of things and recognizing that whatever powers are at his disposal are ultimately god-given.

The *Iliad* gives us the striking example of such a man — Achilles, who abides in the human dimension of life, but is pulled godward by unseen forces (called gods by the Greeks). Achilles fulfills his social obligations, earns honor by his physical courage and prowess as a warrior, reveres the gods and listens to their guidance. He is able to express pity and mercy and friendship to his foe when the gods demand it of him.

In Homer's description of the events of the siege of Troy we are presented with a vast field of vital education: war. In the experience of war a man is tested to see the strength of his courage and heroism. His nature is honed by gigantic forces (human and divine) that work to bring out noble human possibilities. The struggles between the Greeks and the Trojans, between Achilles and his king Agamemnon, revolve around issues of power and honor (two of the usual passions that dominate man's lower vital). From one point of view Achilles is a god-like hero who allows himself to be overpowered by enormous vital passions: pride, anger, grief and finally a blood-

thirsty revenge. In spite of these indisputably lower movements, a transformation is brought about in him when he finally follows the divine command to “check your rage” and opens his heart in a spirit of mercy and compassion to his enemy. The climax of the *Iliad* is not Troy’s defeat (in fact that event is not even included in Homer’s tale), it is the reconciliation of two of its most powerful antagonistic figures. This may not be a verifiable historical fact, but it is a poetic fact of the highest order. Homer allows us to enter into a spirit and atmosphere which passed away centuries ago, but still has the power to uplift us because it expresses the universal human possibility of rising above the lower nature.

According to Greek mythology, Achilles, the greatest warrior of Agamemnon’s army at Troy, was the son of the mortal king Peleus and the immortal sea-nymph Thetis. In one tale of his childhood, it is related that his mother dipped him into the river Styx to thus immortalize him and to make him invulnerable in war. Apparently she was interrupted in her task, the result being that he was invulnerable with the exception of the heel by which she held him. (Hence our modern day expression “Achilles heel” which means a weak point.) Achilles was educated by Chiron, the elder centaur known for his deep wisdom. An oracle in his father’s court predicted that Achilles would die fighting in Troy. To escape this prophecy his mother disguised him as a girl and sent him to live with the daughters of a neighboring king. However, another soothsayer proclaimed that Troy could not be taken without Achilles’ help, so the Greeks sent wily Odysseus to search for him. When discovered by Odysseus, Achilles was quite willing to join the Greek army and headed his father’s Myrmidon troops when the fleet embarked for Troy.

By examining closely several descriptions of the hero Achilles, his nature may be better understood. First of all, he is renowned for his physical strength, boldly describing himself as “swift and excellent... brilliant.” He furthermore proclaims that “no man is my equal among the bronze-armed

Acheans.” Homer gives an example of his strength in comparison to normal men: “A single pine beam held the gates [*to Achilles’ camp*] and it took three men to ram it home, three to shoot the immense bolt back and spread the doors — three average men. Achilles alone could ram it home himself.”

Others concur with Achilles’ glowing self-evaluation. He is described by Odysseus, another of the great Greek heroes as: “brave...godlike...greatest of Acheans, greater than I, stronger with spears by no small edge.”

Beyond mere physical courage and strength was his fearless poise in the face of his own immanent death. He had known from childhood that he has the power to choose the course of his life:

“Mother tells me,  
The immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet  
That two fates bear me on to the day of death.  
If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,  
My journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.  
If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,  
My pride, my glory dies...  
True, but the life that’s left me will be long.”

As he is about to kill a young Trojan in battle he utters this speech about himself:

“So friend, you die also. Why all this clamour about it? Patroclus is also dead, who was better by far than you are. Do you not see what a man I am, how huge, how splendid and born of a great father and the mother who bore me immortal? Yet, even I have also my death and my strong destiny, and there shall be a dawn or an afternoon or a noontime when some man in the fighting will take the life from me also either with a spear cast or an arrow flown from a bowstring.”

His death is forecast more than once and each time he meets

the prospect with a calm courage. In the next passage, he has a conversation with his horses which have been divinely inspired by the goddess Hera to warn him of his impending death:

“But the day of death already hovers near and we are not to blame, but a great god is and the strong force of fate...”

He answers:

“Why prophesy my doom? Don’t waste your breath. I know, well I know — I am destined to die here, far from my dear father, far from my mother. But all the same I will never stop till I drive the Trojans to their bloody fill of war.”

Achilles is loved by the gods. It is known that he will die in the siege of Troy, but the gods will ensure his glory among men and his immortal fame. They enhance his own innate prowess as a warrior with their power. One of the greatest Trojans, Aeneas, comments:

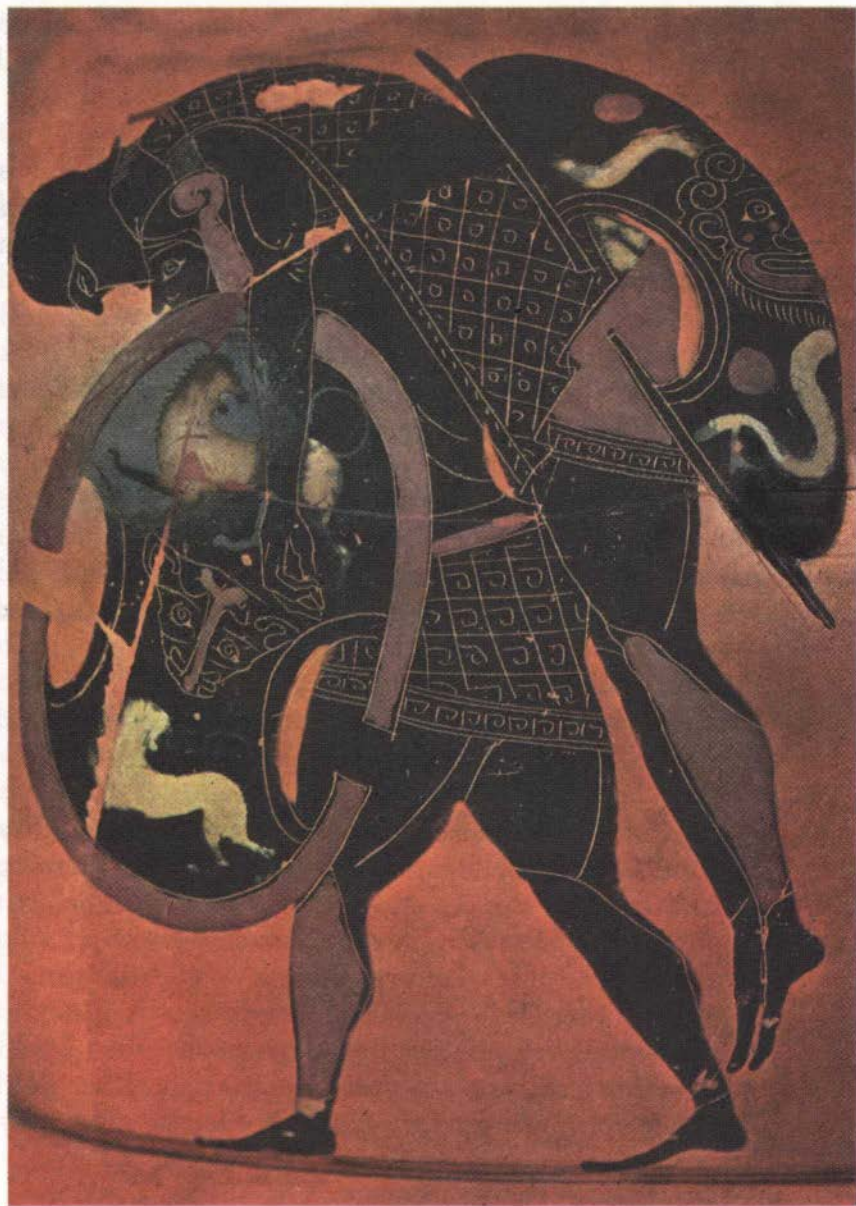
“That is why no mortal can fight Achilles... at every foray one of the gods goes with him, beating back his own death. Even without that power his spear flies straight to the mark, never stops; not till it bores clean through some fighter’s flesh.”

The gods, too, have complimentary words to say about Achilles.

Poseidon advises Aeneas not to fight against Achilles, saying:

“Aeneas — what god on high commands you to play the madman? Fighting against Achilles’ overwhelming fury — both a better soldier and more loved by the gods.”

Iris calls him “brilliant Achilles”. Zeus, chief of the Gods, says:



Ajax carrying the body of Achilles  
(painted by Exekias, c. 540 BC)



“Achilles is no madman, no reckless fool, not the one to defy the gods’ commands. Whoever begs his mercy he will spare with all the kindness in his heart.”

Usually Achilles is on good terms with the gods and is favored by them, but at one point in the battle he quarrels with Zeus’ river, the Scamander. The river begs him to desist from his bloodshed as his clear waters are being polluted:

“Stop Achilles! Greater than any man on earth,  
Greater in outrage too —  
For the gods themselves are always on your side!  
But if Zeus allows you to kill off all the Trojans,  
Drive them out of my depths at least, I ask you,  
Out on the plain and do your butchery there.  
All my lovely rapids are crammed with corpses now,  
No channel in sight to sweep my currents out to sacred  
sea—  
I’m choked with corpses and still you slaughter more,  
You blot out more! Leave me alone, have done —  
Captain of armies, I am filled with horror!”

When Achilles is almost overwhelmed by the river’s fury, Poseidon and Pallas Athene encourage him with these words:

“Courage, Achilles! Why such fear, such terror?  
Not with a pair like us to urge you on — gods-in-arms  
Sent down with Zeus’s blessings, I and Pallas Athene.  
It’s not your fate to be swallowed by a river:  
He’ll subside, and soon — you’ll see for yourself...  
But once you’ve stripped away Prince Hector’s life,  
Back to the ships you go! We give you glory —  
Seize it in your hands!”

Achilles is an irresistible and bloodthirsty fighter. In Homer’s description of the fight to the death with Hector we can

feel the savage intensity of Achilles as a warrior.

“...but Achilles was closing on him now like the god of war, the fighter’s helmet flashing, over his right shoulder shaking the Pelian ash spear, that terror, and the bronze around his body flared like a raging fire or the rising blazing sun. Hector looked up, saw him, started to tremble, nerve gone, he could hold his ground no longer, he left the gates behind and away he fled in fear — and Achilles went for him, fast, sure of his speed as the wild mountain hawk, the quickest thing on wings, launching smoothly, swooping down on a cringing dove and the dove flits out from under, the hawk screaming over the quarry, plunging over and over, his fury driving him down to break and tear his kill — so Achilles flew at him, breakneck on in fury with Hector fleeing along the walls of Troy, fast as his legs would go... So Hector could never throw Achilles off his trail, the swift racer Achilles — time and again he’d make a dash for the Dardan Gates (safety), trying to rush beneath the rock-built ramparts, hoping men on the heights might save him, somehow, raining spears but time and again Achilles would intercept him quickly, heading him off, forcing him out across the plain and always sprinting along the city side himself... And Achilles charges, too, bursting with rage, barbaric, guarding his chest with the well-wrought blazoned shield, head tossing his gleaming helmet, four horns strong and the golden plumes shook that the god of fire drove in bristling thick along its ridge. Bright as that star amid the stars in the night sky, star of the evening, brightest star that rides the heavens, so fire flared from the sharp point of the spear Achilles brandished high in his right hand, bent on Hector’s death, scanning his splendid body — where to pierce it best?”

Achilles on the battlefield is a personification of martial violence, as this passage vividly illustrates:

“Achilles now

Like inhuman fire raging on through the mountain gorges  
Splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of timber,  
The wind swirling the huge fireball left and right —  
Chaos of fire — Achilles storming on with brandished  
spear

Like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he killed  
And the earth ran black with blood. Thundering on,  
On like oxen broad in the brow some field hand yokes  
To crush white barley heaped on a well-laid threshing  
floor

And the grain is husked out fast by the bellowing oxen's  
hoofs —

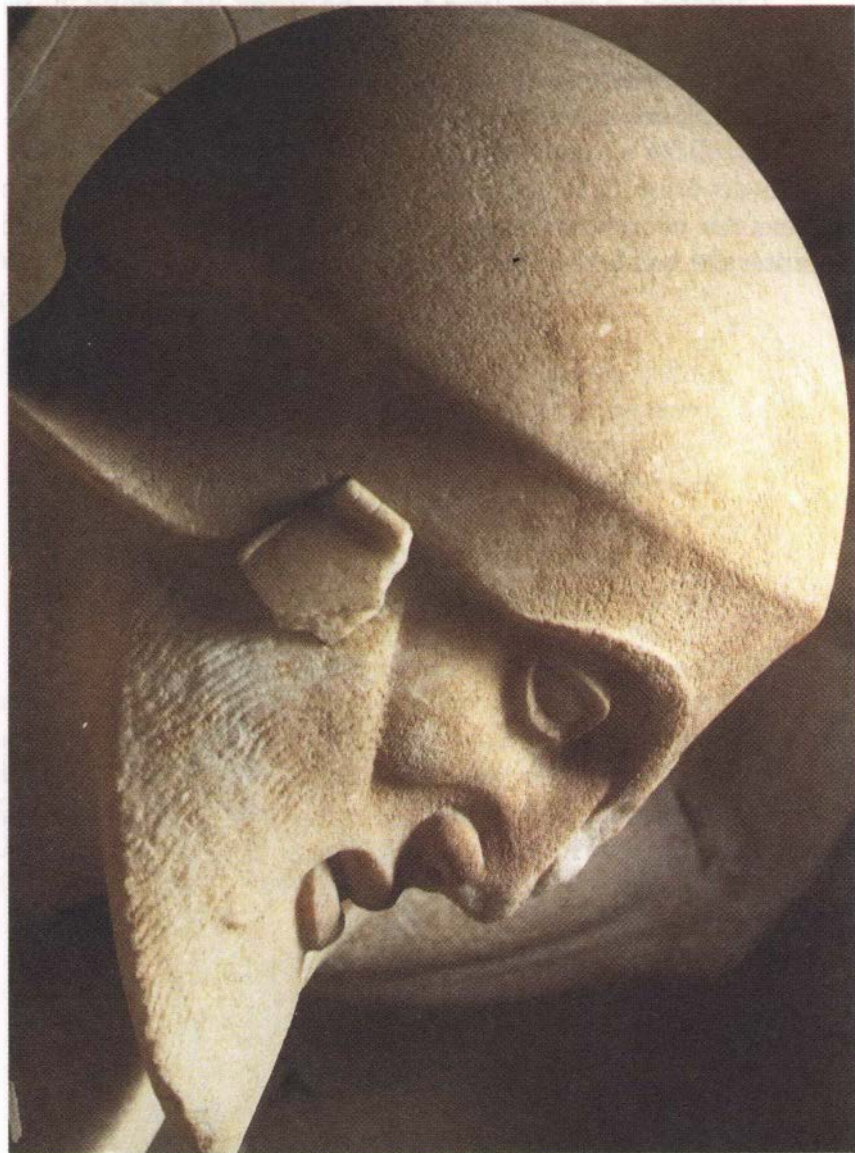
So as the great Achilles rampaged on, his sharp-hoofed  
stallions

Trampled shields and corpses, axle under his chariot  
splashed with blood,

Blood on the handrails sweeping round the car,  
Sprays of blood shooting up from the stallions' hoofs  
And churning, whirling rims — and the son of Peleus  
Charioteering on to seize his glory, bloody filth  
Spattering both strong arms, Achilles' invincible arms.”

Achilles is not only a fierce warrior; his nature has another aspect too — that of a refined mind and emotions, qualities much admired by the ancient Greeks. He is a devoted and faithful friend to Patroclus, his childhood companion. When this friend is killed in battle and comrades bring him the painful news, Achilles is overwhelmed with grief:

“A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.  
Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,  
He poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face  
And black ashes settled onto his fresh clean war-shirt.  
Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,  
Achilles lay there, fallen...  
Tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands...”



Dying warrior  
(detail from a pediment sculpture, temple of Aphaea, c. 500 BC)

Antilochus kneeling near, weeping uncontrollably,  
Clutched Achilles' hands as he wept his proud heart  
out—

For fear he would slash his throat with an iron blade.  
Achilles suddenly loosed a terrible, wrenching cry..."

His devotion to his friend and the pain of his death lead him  
to set aside his prideful anger, heal his quarrel with his king and  
re-enter the battle to take a bloody revenge.



This amphora was originally placed as a tomb marker over a grave. A scene of a funeral is painted on it. (760-750 BC)

“Enough. Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.  
Despite my anguish I will beat it down,  
The fury mounting inside me, down by force.  
Now, by god, I can call a halt to my anger —  
It’s wrong to keep on raging, heart-inflamed forever.  
Quickly, drive our long-haired Acheans to battle now!”

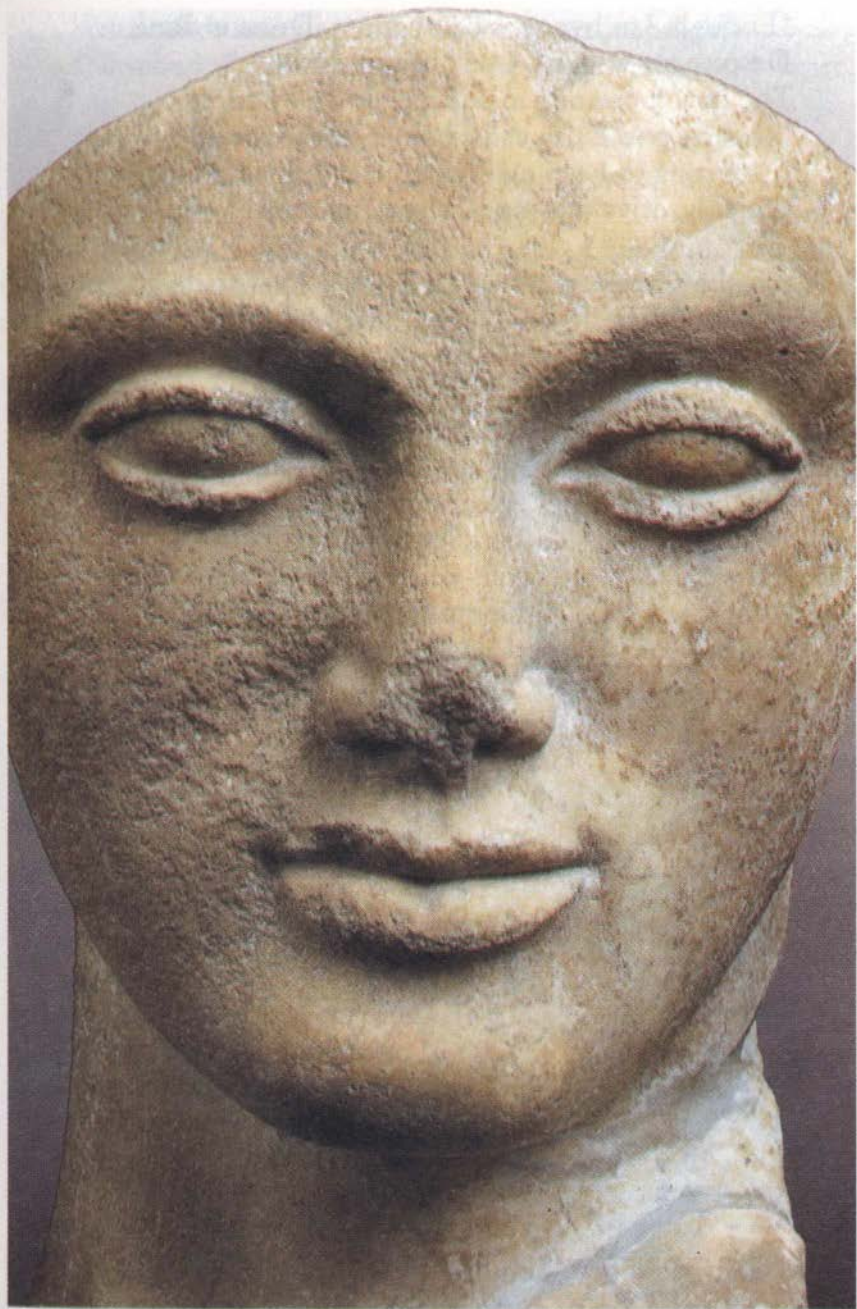
When the Greeks send an embassy to persuade the proud hero to re-join the fight, Homer gives us a brief but telling glimpse of Achilles at home:

“Reaching the Myrmidon shelters and their ships,  
They found him there, delighting his heart now,  
Plucking strong and clear on the fine lyre —  
Beautifully carved, its silver bridge set firm —  
He won from the spoils when he razed Eetion’s city.  
Achilles was lifting his spirits with it now,  
Singing the famous deeds of fighting heroes.”

Achilles is a man of refinement. He entertains his guests with every courtesy and prepares the meal for them with his own hands. Later on, in Patroclus’ honor he organizes and presides over funeral games, showing respect for each of the Greek heroes and sorting out the ego clashes that arise during the competitions with a gentlemanly tact. However, his fierce devotion to his friend’s memory leads him to extreme actions:

“Farewell, Patroclus, even there in the House of Death!  
Look — all that I promised once I am performing now:  
I’ve dragged Hector here for the dogs to rip him raw —  
And here in front of your flaming pyre I’ll cut the throats  
Of a dozen sons of Troy in all their shining glory,  
Venting my rage on them for your destruction!”

No delineation of Achilles’ character would be complete without a mention of his cardinal defects: pride and anger.



Homer's first lines tell us of the wrath of Achilles and of its disastrous consequence: the destruction of so many great fighters. However, his anger and its results serve a higher purpose, and this, too, Homer makes clear from the very beginning of the poem:

“Sing to me, Muse, of the wrath of Achilles Pelidean,  
Murderous, bringing a million woes on the men of  
Achaëa,  
Many the mighty souls whom it drove down to Hades,  
Souls of heroes and made of their bodies booty for vultures,  
Dogs and all birds; so the will of Zeus was wholly accomplished  
Even from the moment when they two parted in strife  
and anger,  
Peleus' glorious son and the monarch of men Agamemnon.”

*(Translation of lines 1-7 by Sri Aurobindo)*

To understand the nature of Achilles' pride and anger, it is useful to look a little more closely at the nature of the quarrel between Achilles and his king, Agamemnon. The episode begins when Achilles responds to the problem at hand — the fact that Greek soldiers are dying of a pestilence — with calm reasonableness. He consults a soothsayer and then in public assembly tries to persuade his king to follow the prescribed advice, i.e. to return the captured slave girl to her father, Apollo's priest. The king replies by asking Achilles to give up his own slave girl to replace the one that will have to be returned. The modern reader must understand the extent to which this is insulting behavior on the part of the king. Throughout the Iliad Achilles is acknowledged without question as the greatest Greek fighter. He has fought long and hard on the king's behalf and has fairly won his booty. To be deprived of it is to be deprived of the honor and glory of which



it is the outer sign. Their quarrel quickly escalates to the point where Agamemnon delivers this hostile speech:

“You (and he refers to Achilles) — I hate you most of all  
the warlords  
Loved by the gods. Always dear to your heart,  
Strife, yes, and battles, the bloody grind of war.  
What if you are a great soldier? That’s just a gift of god.  
Go home with your ships and comrades, lord it over  
Your Myrmidons!  
You are nothing to me — you and your overweening  
anger.”

Being addressed in such a way by his king awakens a fury in Achilles’ heart and he struggles to control it, finally receiving divine help:

“Anguish gripped Achilles.  
The heart in his rugged chest was pounding, torn...  
Should he draw the long sharp sword slung at his hip,  
Thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now?  
Or check his rage and beat his fury down?”

Hera and Athena rush to intervene, demanding self-control and obedience from their favored hero:

“Down from the skies I come to check your rage —  
Stop this fighting, now. Don’t lay hand to sword.  
And I tell you this — and I know it’s the truth —  
One day glittering gifts will lie before you,  
Three times over to pay for all his outrage.  
Hold back now. Obey us both.”

Achilles is quick to respond, ready to surrender his small will to that greater Divine Will:

“I must — when the two of you hand down commands,  
Goddess,  
A man submits though his heart breaks with fury.  
Better for him by far. If a man obeys the gods  
They’re quick to hear his prayers.”

In a way, the rest of the Iliad is about how circumstances arrange themselves so that Achilles fulfills this initial promise of obedience to the Divine Will. Achilles withdraws himself and his men from the siege and says he will not rejoin the battle until the Achaeans are disgraced. Several friends make attempts through reason to change his mind, arguing that the Trojans would be overjoyed to see the king and his finest warrior angry with each other, but for a time nothing persuades the hero. The Greeks begin to suffer terrible losses in battle, so much so that Achilles’ friend Patroclus begs to be allowed to fight in Achilles’ stead to hearten the Greek troops in their hour of need. Achilles permits his friend to don his own heavenly armor, little suspecting that the outcome of this brave venture will be Patroclus’ death at the hands of Prince Hector. Achilles is overcome with grief when he realizes that he has bought his own glory and honor with the death of his beloved friend. This pushes him to take revenge by re-entering the battle. His rage, still furiously ignited, is now at least spending itself to help the Greek cause, the one favored by Zeus. He rises in public assembly and says:

“For years to come, I think  
They will remember the feud that flared between us  
both.  
Enough. Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.  
Despite my anguish I will beat it down,  
the fury mounting inside me, down by force.  
Now, by god, I call a halt to my anger—  
It’s wrong to keep on raging, heart inflamed forever.  
Quickly drive our long-haired Achaeans to battle now!”

This god-like man stands as an example to all Greeks — indeed to humanity — as one who subdues his lower nature and puts himself in the hands of the gods to work out a divine purpose. In a way he may be compared to Arjuna who is asked to make a similar surrender. Both offer their capacities as skillful and courageous warriors to be used by a force greater than their own that works in the lives of men to work out inscrutable will. At the deepest level, the true hero is the man or woman who is able to make the complete surrender to the Divine.

## A brief comparison of Achilles and Arjuna

Nowadays it is an undisputed fact that the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad* are two of the world's greatest epics. In these times of a growing global consciousness it may be of interest for students and teachers of East and West to compare the two splendid heroes that are introduced to world civilization in these epics.

Although both poems are literary expressions of a particular people, it is clear that they are founded on actual historical events that have assumed great importance in the life of mankind. The *Mahabharata* gave us the great spiritual teaching of the *Gita* which it is said will yet liberate mankind; the *Iliad* led to the creation of Hellas and modern western civilization. Both epics have put before us heroes who upheld the ancient warrior code of life and battle. Arjuna and his Greek counterpart, Achilles, are representative men — master-men in the making who have been chosen by the gods and given a divine work. It is, in both epics, the warrior's dharma to battle for the right, to lay down his life, or to win a glorious victory for a just cause. Both men are conscious of a divine mission in life and in various ways are the constant recipients of divine guidance — Arjuna directly from Lord Krishna, and Achilles, as directly from Zeus, Athena, and other Greek deities.

The seers who wrote these epics attributed semi-divine parentage to both heroes. Arjuna is said to be the son of the god Indra and Achilles has a divine mother: Thetis. These heroes have received special training in the art of warfare, and have even been given divine armor and weapons that give them an extraordinary power on the battlefield. There, none can equal them and they display a remarkable physical prowess and an unwavering physical courage. Circumstances around them have been arranged so that they are called to fight for a just cause. Each one aims for a great achievement in battle, and to each a victory is given. Achilles is eventually killed by the Trojans, but his re-entry into the field of battle assures their eventual victory, for so it has been foretold. Arjuna is part of the victorious army on the field of Kurukshetra. Krishna has assured him that he and his brothers are destined to win.

Both of these personalities exhibit heroic qualities of the highest order. Besides physical skills and even great physical beauty, both men are known to have qualities of the heart. Each one displays a loyalty that is inspiring: Arjuna serves his brothers, mother, and wife in a most loyal fashion; Achilles is devoted to his friend Patroclus and makes every effort to avenge his death so that he can be given a fitting funeral. Both men are said to be noble in bearing and are recognized as heroes by the men around them. They are refined in their tastes — not merely brute soldiers. Achilles played the lyre and sang; Arjuna was enough of a dancer to train a princess in that graceful art.

But even more interesting is the way these men are shown to respond to a divine guidance. Arjuna faces doubt and faint-heartedness about his chosen mission at the commencement of the great war. He turns to Krishna for help and soon thereafter his mind is illumined and he again takes up his mission — but this time with a deeper understanding of its hidden values. The great message “Abandon all dharmas and take refuge in Me alone”. Armed with its Light Arjuna takes his stance in battle

on the side of a right trying to establish itself in the midst of a darkness that has overtaken the entire Kshatriya race. Achilles also must face the limitations of his lower nature. He is struck by pride and anger and deserts his king when his help is most needed. He has to be prodded by the gods and by circumstances to re-direct that anger so that he can re-enter the fray, and finally to check it completely at the order of the gods. He does not reach the spiritual heights described in the *Gita*. His surrender takes longer. He clings to grief and anger until he gets the direct command from Zeus to return Hector's body to the Trojan King Priam so that it may be honorably buried. At that moment he rises to his greatest height and achieves a harmony with his enemy.

The heroes of both epics may be further illumined by deeper comparison of their natures. Such a reflection will widen the understanding between the peoples of East and West and can be a valuable aid to teachers around the world.



The fight between Hector and Achilles

## Notes

### Homer

To the ancients the poet was foremost a seer, an inspired artist capable of revealing hidden truths to his race or nation. No bard greater exemplifies this than Homer, the man credited with composing the most outstanding of Greece's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Who was Homer? No one knows for sure. Later Greeks believed that he was a blind minstrel from the island of Chios. In ancient times his authorship of both epics was undisputed. Modern investigation of Homer's texts showed many inconsistencies of fact, style, and language between the two poems and led to serious questions about authorship. Today, however, most scholars believe that both poems were conceived in a unified way and reflect the creative process of a single author who shaped traditional material into an inspired masterpiece which "... revealed the Hellenic people to itself in the lucid and clear nobility and beauty of an uplifting of life and an artistic sense of the humanity and divinity of man." (Sri Aurobindo — *The Future Poetry*)

### Homeric epics

The Homeric epics were composed between 900-700 BC. These poems describe legendary events that in all likelihood can be traced to real historical struggles for control of the waterway leading from the Aegean Sea through the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea. Such skirmishes would have taken place as early as 1200 BC — many years before Homer told his tale to Greek audiences. It is obvious that the Greeks of Homer's time were familiar with his stories, their heroes

and the outcome of their adventures. Surely Homer was a rhapsodist. These were wandering bards or minstrels who were the historians, entertainers and at their best — the mythmakers of their time. These minstrels travelled from village to village singing of recent legendary events, and of the doings of heroes, gods, and goddesses

Modern scholars have studied the living oral tradition in Eastern Europe and have come to the conclusion that stories like the *Iliad* were probably first told aloud following a basic story line, but freely improvised according to the capacity of the individual bard. The oral storyteller is apt to have a stock of story-telling formulas ready in his memory. Such formulas abound in Homer and are called epithets. These are short descriptive phrases which are used repeatedly by the poet. For example: the sea in Homer's epics is always 'wine-dark' and the goddess Athene is always 'gray-eyed.' This technique is characteristic of Homer's epic style and has a unifying effect on the story. Besides that, it may also help the story-teller by giving him a breathing space during which he can inwardly prepare the next portion of the tale.

Homer was first of all a great story teller. His descriptions "seem poetic to us; yet they are of an inexpressible naturalness, though delineated with a purity and intimacy never equalled. Even the strangest and most fantastic of the described occurrences have an inevitable naturalness. The ancients represent life itself; we commonly describe its effects." (Goethe) His story is one of epic proportions. He gave a hitherto unknown power of word and structure to the epic form. Homer was the first to imagine a hero whose spirit would triumph amid self-destruction. He expresses an attitude that came later to be known as typically Greek: that what is most worth having in life can often be had only at the peril of life itself. "Beauty, like glory, must be sought though the price be tears and destruction. Is not this thought at the very center of the Trojan War? For its hero Achilles, the very perfection of Greek chivalry, was given precisely this choice by the gods. They offered him a long life with mediocrity or glory with an early death" (H.D.F Kitto — *The Greeks*)

## What is an epic?

An epic or heroic poem is a work that is characterised by being a long, narrative poem on a great and serious subject, one that is told

in an elevated style, and is centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, nation, or the human race. Most traditional epics are shaped by a literary artist who uses historical and legendary materials which have been developed in the oral traditions of his nation, usually during a period of expansion and warfare. In an epic often the hero performs superhuman deeds in which super-physical powers (the gods) are involved. The setting of an epic is vast and the actions that occur within that setting are of great (and even cosmic) importance.

### Notes on *Ilion*: a modern poem

A selection from a modern rendering of a portion of the story of the siege of Troy demonstrates that Homer's contribution to western civilization is still vibrant in its impact on the modern sensibility. Sri Aurobindo's poem, *Ilion*, gives a lucid poetic description of the powers at work behind the curtain of history and proposes some suggestions about the historical meaning of this particular power struggle between men of conflicting cultures and values. He reveals that Hellas will rise to power, but that it, too, will eventually fall and make way for other races who will take their turn in leading man's evolutionary march. In this passage Zeus, the chief of the Greek gods, encourages his fellow gods to set aside their sentiments in the face of the suffering that war inevitably causes and to remember their unwavering aim: to work out the Divine Will on the lower planes of manifestation.

“Now too from earth and her children voices of anger and weeping  
Beat at our thrones: 'tis the grief and the wrath of fate-stricken  
creatures.

Mortals struggling with destiny, hearts that are slaves to their  
sorrow.

We unmoved by the cry will fulfill our unvarying purpose.

Troy shall fall at last and the ancient ages shall perish.

You who are lovers of Ilion turn from the moans of her people.

Chase from your hearts their prayers, blow back from your nostrils  
the incense,

Let not one nation resist by its glory the good of the ages.

Twilight thickens over man and he moves to his winter of darkness.



Troy that displaced with her force and her arms the luminous  
ancients,  
Sinks in her turn by the ruder strength of the half-savage Achaians.  
They to the Hellene shall yield and the Hellene fall by the Roman.  
Rome too shall not endure, but by strengths ill-shaped shall be broken,  
Nations formed in the ice and mist, confused and crude-hearted.  
So shall the darker and ruder always prevail o'er the brilliant  
Till in its turn to a ruder and darker it falls and is shattered.  
So shall mankind make speed to destroy what was mighty creating."

\* \* \*



## *Glossary*

- Achaea:** the land of the Achaeans, i.e. Greece. Two distinct territories one in southeast Thessaly and the other in the northern Peloponnesus.
- Achaeans:** They were the Greeks of the Heroic Age, who

had become, by the time of the siege of Troy, the most powerful of the Greek tribes. They were probably originally central Europeans who came into Greece around 2000 BC and gradually adopted Greek speech and customs. From this tribe descended the kings of Athens, who brought order and power to that city.

- Achelous:** river in Phrygia (Asia Minor), east of Troy.
- Aegean:** sea between Greece and Asia Minor.
- Agamemnon:** eldest son of Atreus and brother of Menelaus, King of Mycenae and Argos, Agamemnon was the commander in chief of the Greek forces against Troy. On his return to Greece, he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her paramour Aegisthus; his death was avenged by his children, Electra and Orestes.
- Agathon:** Trojan, son of Priam.
- Argives:** alternative name for the Achaeans or Greeks.
- Alcimus:** alternative name for Alcimedon, a Myrmidon commander.
- Andromache:** wife of Trojan Prince Hector.
- Antiphonus:** Trojan, son of Priam.
- Argos:** another name for mainland Greece.
- Automedon:** Charioteer of Achilles; he drove the immortal horses Balius and Xanthus given Peleus by Poseidon.
- Barrow:** a large sepulchral mound; a tumulus.
- Bird of omen:** to discover the will of the gods, the Greeks consulted oracles who observed the flight of birds.
- Briseis:** daughter of Briseus, a Lyrnessian from the Troad; she became Achilles' slave-concubine when he sacked her town and killed her husband. She was later taken from Achilles by his king Agamemnon. This act set off the quarrel between the two which forms the central unresolved problem in the Iliad.
- Cassandra:** the most beautiful daughter of Priam and Hecuba; She was loved by Apollo, but deceived him. In retaliation he cursed her with the gift of prophecy, with the hitch that her prophecies would never be

believed.

**Cauldron:**

a large kettle.

**Centaur:**

a member of the race, half man and half horse living in the mountains of Thessaly.

**Chiron:**

centaur renowned for his skill in medicine.

**Dardanus:**

son of Zeus and Electra, the daughter of Atlas; he married the daughter of Teucer and became the ancestor of both the younger and older branches of the royal house of Troy.

**Deiphobus:**

son of Priam and Hecuba, a great Trojan hero.

**Dius:**

Trojan, son of Priam.

**Funeral games:**

athletic events and chariot races held in honor of a deceased man, usually someone who was heroic in battle.

**The Fates:**

the three goddesses of destiny who preordain the course and outcome of every human life. They are represented as three old women spinning.

**Hector:**

the eldest son of Priam and Hecuba and mightiest of the Trojan warriors. He was the leader of the Trojan forces during the siege until he was slain by the Greek hero, Achilles.

**Hecuba:**

the chief wife of Priam and mother of nineteen of his fifty sons.

**Helenus:**

Trojan, a son of Priam who was both warrior and prophet.

**Hellespont:**

narrow strait dividing Europe from Asia at the final exit of the waters of the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara; the modern Dardanelles.

**Hippothous:**

Trojan, son of Priam.

**Ida:**

mountain in northwest Asia Minor, southeast of the site of ancient Troy. It was a seat of Zeus.

**Idaeus:**

Trojan, herald of Priam.

**Ilus:**

legendary Trojan king, son of Dardanus and ancestor of Priam. He was one of the chief builders of Troy, which was named Ilium after him.

**Iris:**

goddess, messenger of Zeus who travels on a rainbow.

**Judgment of**

**Paris:**

a tale of ancient Greece. According to it, all the

gods and goddesses were invited to the wedding feast of the mortal Peleus (Achilles' father) and Thetis, a sea-goddess, except one immortal: Eris. The slighted goddess threw a golden apple inscribed with the words 'for the fairest' into the center of the guests and the daughters of Olympus quarreled over to whom it should be given. They finally agreed to take the judgment of a fair shepherd boy, Paris, who was actually a son of Priam. Each goddess offered him something: Hera, to be king of the richest realm on earth, Athene, to gain fame as the wisest and bravest of men, and Aphrodite, the most beautiful woman as his wife. He gave the apple to Aphrodite who later arranged for him to abduct Helen, who was the acknowledged beauty of her era, but already the wife of Menelaus. This story is the mythical explanation behind the siege of Troy.

- Lesbos:** island and city off the coast of Asia Minor south of Troy.
- Leto:** Greek goddess, mother of Apollo and Artemis by Zeus.
- Libation:** the pouring out of a liquid as an offering to the gods.
- Lyre:** a stringed instrument of the harp class used by ancient Greeks to accompany song and recitation.
- Macar:** legendary founding king of Lesbos.
- Mestor:** Trojan, son of Priam.
- Mt. Olympus:** mountain in northeastern Thessaly, home of the Greek gods.
- Myrmidons:** the people of Phthia, in southern Thessaly, ruled by King Peleus and commanded at Troy by his son Achilles.
- Mysians:** Trojan allies living east of Troy.
- Niobe:** a Phrygian woman whose six daughters and six sons were killed by Artemis and Apollo.
- Paris:** the son of Priam and Hecuba, said to be the handsomest of mortal men. At birth he was left on the mountainside because a prophecy forecast that he would bring about the destruction of Troy.

However he was rescued and raised by shepherds and was later accepted by his parents. It was his abduction of Helen which was the cause of the Trojan War.

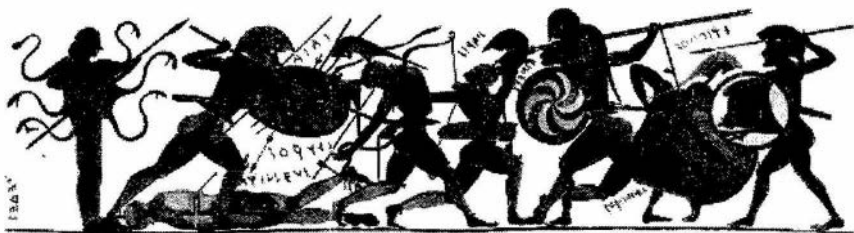
- Patroclus:** Achaean, brother-in-arms of Achilles, killed by Hector.
- Peleus:** king of the Myrmidons, father of Achilles by the goddess, Thetis.
- Pergamus:** the citadel of Troy.
- Phrygia:** region in Asia Minor east of Troy.
- Polyctor:** the false name given by Hermes as his father when in disguise he meets Priam on the way to the Greek camp.
- Priam:** king of Troy, father of Hector and Paris.
- Thetis:** sea-goddess, daughter of Nereus, married to Peleus and by him the mother of the hero Achilles.
- Thrace:** country north of the Aegean and the Hellespont; its inhabitants fought as Trojan allies.
- Tripod:** a vessel on three legs.
- Troilus:** Trojan, son of Priam.
- Troy:** This city (also called Troas or Ilios or Ilion or Ilium) was located on the western shore of modern Turkey directly on the trade routes between Greece and the Middle East (see map p. 17). This strategic location put Troy in a position to levy tolls on all vessels wishing to pass through the Hellespont to trade in the Black Sea region, a fact that probably accounts for the reputed wealth and power of the Trojans. The archeologists Schliemann and Dorpfeld excavated nine cities on a hill about three miles from the sea. Of these nine cities, Troy VI was destroyed by fire at about the time of the traditional date of the Trojan War (1194-1184 bc). It is likely that this is the Troy to which Homer refers.
- Trojans:** the people of Troy. They claimed descent from a legendary hero, Ilus, who founded their city. Myths tell us that two gods helped to fortify the city walls, making it a significant stronghold in the region. The Trojans as we meet them in the *Iliad*

are a highly civilized people ruled by a wise and benevolent king.

**Xanthus:**

the divine name given to a river of the Troad which was named Scamander by mortals.

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The fight over the dead body of Achilles

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Illumination, heroism and harmony are three major powers that can uplift life to higher and higher levels. It may be useful to explore and illustrate the meanings of these three terms by giving examples of those qualities through appropriate stories. The story of the Siege of Troy in the Iliad gives us a striking example of a hero in Achilles. He is a man who abides in the human dimension temporarily ruled by anger and grief, but is pulled godward by his own godlike nature's response to the call of the gods to work out a divine purpose at Troy. Achilles fulfills his social obligations and earns honor and glory through his physical courage and prowess as a warrior. He reveres the gods and listens to their guidance, and finally, at the climax of the Iliad, is able to express pity and mercy and compassion to his Trojan opponent, Priam. The momentous meeting between the greatest of the Greek warriors and the Trojan king has been arranged by the gods who are outraged by the fact that Achilles is defiling the body of defeated Prince Hector. Achilles is told point blank by his goddess-mother, Thetis, that he must hand over the body of Hector in return for a ransom. Achilles' immediate reaction is to submit himself to the divine will. When the noble king Priam and the long-wrathful Achilles finally meet, there is a momentous change. These bitterest of enemies, gaze at each other — soul to soul — and reach a state of compassion in which they mourn each other's losses and grieve over the losses that all men experience in the field of war. They part and each goes on to his own severe fate, but readers of generations live inspired by their reconciliation, by the example of men uplifted into a diviner sphere. It is this eternal moment that Homer has immortalized for his own people and for all men and women who yearn to be free from the lower nature and to live in the highest part of themselves.

