

**“The Iliad”: in brief**

“The Iliad” by Homer recounts some of the significant events of the final weeks of the Trojan War and the Greek siege of the city of Troy. Although the story covers only a few weeks in the final year of the war, in *Iliad* we find links and references to many of the Greek legends about the siege; the earlier events, such as the gathering of warriors for the siege, the cause of the war, and related concerns. The epic narrative takes up events prophesied for the future, such as Achilles' imminent death and the fall of Troy. The narrative ends before these events take place. However, as these events are prefigured and alluded to more and more vividly, when it reaches an end the poem has told a more or less complete tale of the Trojan War.

The *Iliad* also begins with an invocation to a god or gods, at a banquet, by calling for a blessing; the poet seeks the blessings for this effort of his. *The Iliad*, begins with the invocation to the goddess of poetry:

***"Sing, goddess of epic poetry, the story of the anger of Achilles."***

In a primary epic the theme is usually stated at the beginning of the epic, because these poems are so long and so complex, although the basic stories would have been familiar to the audiences. After the invocation to the Muses the story begins with Chryses, a Trojan priest of Apollo, offering the Greeks wealth for the return of his daughter Chryseis. Although most of the Greek army is in favour of the offer, Agamemnon, who has won Chryseis as war prize refuses. Apollo inflicts a plague over the Greek army as the Greeks have refused his priest.

After nine days of plague, Achilles, the leader of the Myrmidon contingent, calls an assembly to deal with the problem where, under pressure, Agamemnon agrees to return Chryseis to her father. In return he forcefully picks Achilles' captive, Briseis from the tent where she was being held. Achilles furiously declares that he and his men will no longer fight for Agamemnon.

Achilles becomes very upset, sits by the seashore, and prays to his mother, Thetis, goddess of water, or one of the 50 Nereids, daughters of the ancient sea god Nereus.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some sources argue that she was one of the earliest of deities worshipped in ancient Greece. Only one written record, a fragment, exists attesting to her worship and an early Alcman hymn exists that identifies Thetis as the creator of the universe. In the Trojan War cycle of myth, the wedding of Thetis and the Greek hero Peleus is one of the precipitating events in the war which also led to the birth of their child Achilles.

Achilles asks his mother to ask Zeus to bring the Greeks to the breaking point by the Trojans, so Agamemnon will realize how much the Greeks need Achilles. Thetis does so, and Zeus agrees.

When news of the Greek deployment reaches King Priam, the Trojans respond in a sortie upon the plain. The Trojans and their allies are described by the poet, at this point, just as he did the Greeks earlier.



The armies approach each other, but before they meet, Paris offers to end the war by fighting a duel with Menelaus, urged by his brother and head of the Trojan army, Hector.

While Helen tells Priam about the Greek commanders from the walls of Troy, both sides swear a truce and promise to abide by the outcome of the duel. Paris is beaten, but Aphrodite rescues him and leads him to bed with Helen before Menelaus can kill him.

However, Hera's hatred of Troy forces Zeus to arrange for the Trojan Pandaros to break the truce by wounding Menelaus with an arrow. Agamemnon rouses the Greeks, and the battle resumes.

In the fighting, Diomedes kills many Trojans, including Pandaros, and defeats Aeneas, whom Aphrodite rescues, but Diomedes attacks and wounds the goddess. Apollo faces Diomedes and warns him against warring with gods. Many heroes and commanders join in, including Hector, and the gods supporting each side try to influence the battle. Emboldened by Athena, Diomedes wounds Ares and puts him out of action.

Hector rallies the Trojans and prevents a rout; the Greek Diomedes and the Trojan Glaukos find common ground and exchange unequal gifts. Hector enters the city, urges prayers and sacrifices, incites Paris to battle, bids his wife Andromache and son Astyanax farewell on the city walls, and rejoins the battle.

Hector duels with Ajax, but both sides are forced to retire with night approaching. The Greeks agree to burn their dead, and build a wall to protect their ships and camp Paris offers to return the treasure he took and give further wealth as compensation, but not Helen, and the offer is refused. A day's truce is agreed for burning the dead, during which the Greeks also build their wall and a trench.

The next morning, fighting begins anew. This time the gods refrain from joining the battle under the order of Zeus. The Trojans prevail and force the Greeks back to their wall. However, night falls before the Trojans can assail the Greek wall.

The Greeks are by now, desperate. Agamemnon admits his error, and sends an embassy composed of Odysseus, Ajax, Phoenix, and two heralds to offer Briseis and extensive gifts to Achilles. All this while he had been camping next to his ships requesting him to return to battle. Achilles angrily refuses Agamemnon's offer and declares that he would only return to battle if the Trojans reached his ships and threatened them with fire.

In the morning, the fighting is fierce, and Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Odysseus are all wounded. Achilles sends Patroclus from his camp to inquire about the Greek casualties, and while there Patroclus is moved to pity by a speech of Nestor's. The Trojans attack the Greek wall on foot. Hector, ignoring an omen, leads the terrible fighting. The Greeks are overwhelmed and routed, the wall's gate is broken, and Hector charges in.

When the battle reaches the ships of Achilles, Patroclus cannot stand to watch any longer and begs Achilles to be allowed to defend the ships. Achilles relents and Patroclus leads the Myrmidons into battle and arrives as the Trojans set fire to the first ships. The Trojans are routed by the sudden onslaught, and Patroclus begins his assault by killing Zeus's son Sarpedon, a leading ally of the Trojans. Patroclus, ignoring Achilles' command, pursues and reaches the gates of Troy, where Apollo himself stops him. Patroclus is set upon by Apollo and Euphorbos, and is finally killed by Hector.



Achilles is mad with grief when he hears of Patroclus' death and vows to take vengeance on Hector; his mother Thetis grieves, too, knowing that Achilles is fated to die young if he kills Hector. Achilles is urged to help retrieve Patroclus' body but has no armour. Bathed in a brilliant radiance by Athena, Achilles stands next to the Greek wall and roars in rage. The Trojans are dismayed by his appearance, and the Greeks manage to bear Patroclus' body away. Polydamas urges Hector again to withdraw into the city; again Hector refuses, and the Trojans camp on the plain at nightfall. Patroclus is mourned. Meanwhile, at Thetis' request, Hephaestus fashions a new set of armor for Achilles, including a magnificently wrought shield. Zeus lifts the ban on the gods' interference, and the gods freely help both sides, as the battle turns extremely gory. Achilles battles his best, burning with rage and grief for his companion.

Driving the Trojans before him, Achilles cuts off half their number in the river Skamandros and proceeds to slaughter them, filling the river with the dead. The river, angry at the killing, confronts Achilles but is beaten back by Hephaestus' firestorm. The gods fight among themselves. The great gates of the city are opened to receive the fleeing Trojans, and Apollo leads Achilles away from the city by pretending to be a Trojan.

All except for Hector have retreated into the city, who, feels the shame of the rout and resolves to face Achilles, despite the pleas of his parents, Priam and Hecuba. After a brief duel, Achilles stabs Hector through the neck. Before dying, Hector reminds Achilles that he, too, is fated to die in the war. Achilles takes Hector's body and dishonours it by dragging it behind his chariot.

Patroclus is honoured by Achilles who carry out his burial rites. The Greeks hold a day of funeral games, and Achilles gives out the prizes. Dismayed by Achilles' continued abuse of Hector's body, Zeus decides that it must be returned to Priam.

Priam takes a wagon out of Troy, across the plains, and into the Greek camp unnoticed. He clasps Achilles by the knees and begs for his son's body. Achilles is moved to tears, and the two lament their losses in the war. After a meal, Priam carries Hector's body back into Troy. Hector is buried, and the city mourns.

As in all Primary Epics, epithets play a very important role. Homer uses specific sets of epithets for his major characters that assist in easy identification, when for the sake of metrical purposes, he abstains from naming them. *Illiad* is also characterised by enumerations of characters, objects and events, throughout the play. In keeping with the epic traditions gods and men intermingle freely; gods often interfere in the course of action and also directly participate in the events. The battle shoulder to shoulder in the wars with men, and settle their own scores as well.