

## CHAPTER 11

### HEROES AT WAR: THE TROY SAGA

#### MAIN POINTS

1. The ancient Greeks certainly believed that the Trojan War, in some form, was a historical event. Likewise, modern scholars think that the Iliad has some loose basis in fact.
2. Archaeological evidence indicates that around 1250 B.C., a settlement, which we label “Troy VIIa,” was looted and burned. The identity of the attackers is not certain, much less the motivation for the attack.
3. Heinrich Schliemann thought he had found the site of Homer’s Troy on the mound of Hissarlik in northwestern Turkey (see Chapter 1). Although scholars were long skeptical, due to inconsistencies between modern topography and the Homeric descriptions, recent geological studies have revealed that the land configuration has changed a great deal since the Bronze Age. It now seems quite possible to reconcile “Homer’s” account with the area around Hissarlik.
4. The decision of Paris is important as a paradigm of the complex world of myth and as the source of inspiration for many other myths.
5. Zeus has arranged a wedding between Thetis, a minor sea goddess, and a mortal man, Peleus; all the gods are invited except Eris, the goddess of strife, who shows up anyway with a golden apple “for the fairest.”

NOTE: The theme of the goddess who is not invited and who shows up with a curse is a familiar folklore motif: Sleeping Beauty (Grimm: Little Briar Rose) sleeps because the thirteenth Wise Woman who was not invited to a feast in Beauty’s honor (twelve were invited, because the king had twelve gold plates) cursed her with death, a curse ameliorated by the other women. In folklore, goddesses or fates often punish people with curses for their neglect.

6. Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite quarrel over the golden apple, so Zeus throws it off Mount Olympus. It lands in a field outside of Troy, where King Priam’s son Paris is tending sheep.
7. The goddesses offer him gifts in exchange for the golden apple: Hera offers power over Asia Minor, Athene offers wisdom, and Aphrodite offers the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris gives the apple to Aphrodite.
8. Priam sends Paris on a diplomatic mission to Sparta; he meets Helen, wife of King Menelaus, daughter of the mortal woman Leda, and of Zeus, who visited Leda in the shape of a swan.
9. While Paris is a guest in their home, Menelaus leaves on a trip, and Paris seduces or abducts Helen. When Paris refuses to return her, Priam feels honor-bound to defend him; Menelaus has allies who come to his support, and the Trojan War begins.
10. The implications of the story of the judgment of Paris involve sequels, because Greek myth is essentially open-ended.
11. Myths occur in a timeless or nonchronological world. Thus, Achilles, son of Thetis and Peleus, would be too young to take part in the battle of Troy, but he is a renowned hero at its beginning. Human time cannot be meaningfully applied to mythic time.

12. Zeus sanctifies family values and social order; Paris violates this order, but family loyalty is also a value under the old clan and kinship system, and Priam's adherence to this value makes the value systems clash.
13. The cosmos itself is not stable; change is in the nature of things, and the gods must cope with the existence of evil. The disharmony in the human world reflects that of the cosmos.
14. The human and the divine are closely connected: humans and gods can intermarry, but they rarely understand each other. Thetis tries to immortalize her son Achilles by dipping him in the divine fire, holding him by the heel. This point of vulnerability remains his mortal, parental heritage: the "Achilles's heel" is the human condition.
15. The gods lack power over human fate; humans have, in a limited sense, freedom to act but must bear the responsibility of their actions. By making a choice, Paris defines himself, as the other heroes do, and each lives the life and death he has chosen.
16. The Iliad and the Odyssey are attributed to Homer, who may have lived on an island off the coast of Asia Minor between 800 and 700 B.C. Legend depicts him as blind, but that may be only a traditional attribute of a prophet who sees moral truths, undistracted by surface appearances.
17. Both poems have signs of oral composition, such as fixed epithets and adjectives, and they share quality of style; however, their perspectives on certain issues differ radically.
18. Many possible explanations for this difference have been proposed. The poet may have changed his mind, later editors may have made changes, or the poems may have been composed by different poets but recorded by the same editor.
19. Both poems use inherited mythic material, adding the device of dialogue and omniscient narrator, shaping the material into the form of the epic containing formal conventions. These conventions include the proem, the semidivinity of the hero, and the hero's katabasis.
20. The choice of the epic form establishes the author's conviction of the seriousness of the story, and the epic is itself an expression of pride in one's civilization.
21. Contrary to the myth, the epic is rooted in human time. The poet continually reminds the reader about the passage of time.
22. Homer's epic poems are not open-ended like the myth, but have a narrative plot structure with beginning, middle, and end.
23. Homer uses epic similes to make supernatural experiences understandable.
24. In addition, Homer uses cliff-hangers and flashbacks to shape the material. He interrupts the chase scene in the Iliad to describe the everyday experience of women doing laundry and thereby contrasts the mad situation of the heroes with the everyday values they are fighting to uphold.
25. The Iliad does not describe the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, the decision of Paris, the gathering of the troops at Aulis, or the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Odysseus is reluctant to come because he is devoted to his wife Penelope and infant son; Achilles is warned by his mother that he will die at Troy if he goes, and she insists that he hide, disguised as a woman. Both heroes eventually arrive, and when the wind dies down, Agamemnon, the appointed general, is led to believe that he must first sacrifice his daughter.
26. The Iliad's focus is the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon and its consequences. The purpose is to explore questions, such as What does it mean to be a hero? How can a hero create a meaningful life for himself in the face of certain death? How can a hero defend civilized values through acts of violence?
27. The heroes are divided beings: they must be warriors, because it is their nature, but this means that they must violate their needs as social beings.

28. Achilles has two possible fates: a long life in obscurity or a short, brilliant one in battle. For both Hector and Achilles, to choose inaction means the death of the soul; however, to choose immortality through honor may require physical death.
29. The hero's reputation must be publicly confirmed by the community, and true heroism can be confused with the external signs of public approval.
30. Enraged by grief, Achilles believes that he can transcend human needs; only after Hector's death does he recognize the needs of the body and reconcile with Priam and the community. Similarly, Hector confuses honor with blind loyalty.
31. A moderate alternative is Diomedes, who has courage but does not exceed his limits. Only in the fifth century B.C., however, would the qualities exhibited by Diomedes become the moral ideal.
32. Odysseus is the most intelligent of the Greek warriors—and the best speaker. He uses a disguise to spy on the Trojans and invents the ruse of the Trojan Horse, but his habit of using deception makes him an ambiguous hero.
33. The gods take sides: Hera, Poseidon, and Athene side with the Greeks; Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite favor the Trojans. Zeus is neutral.
34. The gods intervene in human affairs, either as aggressors or as targets, but even when they are wounded, they do not die; the war is a game to them and the fate of the individual human being seems to lack significance.
35. The gods of the Iliad are not omnipotent; they can't control fate or human behavior. They do reinforce values such as courtesy and the guest-host relationship. Since the Trojans have broken these rules, they must lose in the end.
36. The human connection to the gods happens through their gratitude toward the gods and through prayers and rituals. The gods do not necessarily reward the humans for their pious behavior.
37. Human beings determine their own fate; the dual destinies offered to Achilles show that fate is not predetermined but conditional.
38. Zeus uses scales to weigh the fate of humans, but he does not control them. Example: Sarpedon.
39. The two urns from which Zeus doles out gifts are the image of the human condition: it is not possible to have a life without at least some suffering. The urns are like Pandora's jar, containing both blessings and curses.
40. The heroic code is ambivalent: we admire the dedication and courage of heroes, but we see how such attributes tend toward excess. While the code calls for high ideals, such as friendship, loyalty, courage, and courtesy, it also encourages contempt for inferiors.
41. The ideal mode of fighting was the single combat. Its goal was not to defeat an enemy but to enhance one's own glorious reputation. The hero could choose life, but life without repute was the same as death. He could choose glorious repute, but that was likely to be won only through death.
42. The real victims are the women: some are used as war booty or prizes in games; even those who are not slaves are equally trapped in the social expectations. Helen herself is not loved by Menelaus; Agamemnon despises his wife. Of the Greeks, only Odysseus has a happy family life. The Greek family bonds depicted in the Iliad are typically between father and son.
43. Hector and his wife, Andromache, are devoted to each other, and their household is a model family. They are, however, unable to agree upon a code of action that will answer the needs of both of them.

44. Ironically, the Greeks, who represent family values, have abandoned their own families to go to war, while the transgressors of family values, the Trojans, are depicted as ideal models of family love.
45. Andromache sees the truth that Hector's urge to fight is destructive to the family.
46. Neither Hector nor Achilles is allowed to acknowledge his anima. Each espouses an exclusively masculine heroic code, destructive to families and civilization but, nonetheless, part of the Bronze Age ethic: making war was masculine; staying at home was feminine.
47. From the masculine perspective, the traditional female role in the hero myths is that of the temptress who distracts the hero from his quest. Andromache tempts Hector with the comforts of the domestic life, just as the goddess Siduri in the Epic of Gilgamesh tempted the Mesopotamian hero. From the feminine perspective, however, she is the manifestation of the wise goddess who counsels commitment to family bonds and achievement of continuity through one's children rather than through reputation gained by military feats. Like Demeter in the Homeric Hymn, her priority is life and continuance.
48. Homer comments ironically on the limits of the heroic model, and the women are given the last word in the Iliad. Even so, the focus is on the hero; with the Odyssey, the focus shifts toward a reconciliation of the masculine (animus) and feminine (anima).
49. The Iliad ends on a conciliatory note, with Hector's funeral. The Trojan women carry out their traditional societal function; they raise lament over the body of Hector.
50. Unlike many mythic heroes, Achilles visits a hell that is interior. When he piles up corpses in his encampment, he recreates, in his grief and rage, the atmosphere of Hades. The shade (ghost) of Patroclus visits him. Eventually, after undergoing separation and alienation, he is reconciled with the community.
51. The Iliad does not describe the death of Achilles. According to the myths, he is killed by a shot to the heel by Paris or Apollo. The war goes on, involving additional tests for the Greeks through prophecies.
52. The Iliad also does not describe the end of the war, which, ironically, is not brought about by any battle. The war is not concluded until Odysseus thinks of creating the Trojan Horse as a peace offering. Odysseus and his men hide in the hollow horse and emerge at night to open the gates of Troy. The men of Troy are killed, and women and children are taken prisoner.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Homer, Iliad

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Zeus

Achilles

Thetis, a sea goddess, Achilles's mother

Peleus, Achilles's father

Eris, goddess of strife

Hera

Athene

Aphrodite

King Priam, ruler of Troy

Paris, his son

King Menelaus, king of Sparta

Helen, his wife, the most beautiful woman in the world

Leda, Helen's mother

Hector, Priam's son, Paris's brother

Diomedes, the moderate warrior

Andromache, Hector's wife

Odysseus, King of Ithaca

**KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:**

Homer (eighth century B.C.)

Apollodorus (c. 140 B.C.)

Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17)

Hyginus (c. 25 B.C.)

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)

Sophocles (c. 495–406 B.C.)

W. B. Yeats (1865–1939)