

Introduction Part 3

The Trojan War and the Two Battling Armies

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Homer's Iliad.

THE TROJAN WAR. The Trojan War was fought by the Achaeans (the Greeks) against the Trojans and their allies in order to restore stolen goods and gain revenge. The major thing stolen was Helen, the former wife of Menelaus, the ruler of the Spartans. Sometime before the war, the Trojan man Paris (also known as Alexander) had seduced and taken Helen from Menelaus. Paris was the son of the Trojan king, Priam, and the brother of Hector. Paris took Helen in response to Aphrodite's promise to reward him the most beautiful woman in the world—which happened to be Helen.

Aphrodite's own promise came because of a beauty contest between the three goddesses Hera,

Athena, and Aphrodite. Thanks to the goddess Strife, the three were at odds with one another. Why? Because Strife, the quarrel-loving goddess, had tossed an apple inscribed with "For the most beautiful" onto the banquet table at Thetis and Peleus' wedding on Mount Olympus. When Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite went to grab the apple, assuming the *obvious*, they ended up fighting over who was the most beautiful. And Strife smiled. When they couldn't agree, they chose Paris to judge between them. He chose Aphrodite, who in turn rewarded him with Helen.

When Paris stole Helen, the Achaeans gathered and sailed to Troy, in present-day north-western Turkey, where they waged a long war to retrieve her.

Through the deception of the Trojan horse, Troy finally fell in the tenth year (after the action of the *Iliad*). After the Achaeans killed all the men and divided up the wealth, women, and children of the fallen city, they returned to their various lands and homes. The latter “returns” (*nostoi*) form the content of other epic poems, including the *Odyssey*, which centers on the return of the hero Odysseus to his home in Ithaca.

The events of the Trojan war—what led up to it, the war itself, and its aftermath, including the so-called returns—are told in the Trojan epic cycle. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are two of the eight Trojan epics that once existed in the ancient world. Unfortunately, the other six are only preserved in fragments or short ancient summaries.

The Achaeans. The Achaeans were an allied group of Greek men, who were out to retrieve Helen from the Trojans. They were led by Agamemnon, the ruler of Mycenae. That said, the Achaean army was a coalition of the willing, as it were, and the not so willing. Odysseus, for example, did not at first wish to go and feigned insanity to avoid it. The Achaeans were an alliance of many independent realms, territories, and households from the north and south, east and west of Greece, including many Greek islands.

Aside from naming them the “Achaeans,” Homer also frequently calls the Greeks “Argives” and “Danaans.” On one occasion, he terms them the “Panhellenes,” and later the “Hellenes,” which is similar to the ancient Greek name for Greece, *Hellas*.

If we take Homer’s Catalogue of Ships denoting the Achaean army found in the second book of the *Iliad* seriously, then there were “29 contingents, 44 leaders, 175 named towns or other localities, 1,186 ships, and . . . about 100,000 men” on the Achaean side.¹ For many reasons, however, including the doubtful logistics of feeding such an army, we cannot take this description literally.

That pointed out, there are a few basic ways to picture the Achaean army—geographically and in terms of leadership. If we look at a map, they were generally from what we call Greece today and the western half of the Aegean Sea. “Generally,” because there were a few eastern Achaean contingents, such as the

one from the island of Rhodes, which was historically an Achaean colony, as well as one Trojan ally further west. But if we draw a line through the middle of the Aegean Sea, down from the modern Greek regional capitals of Xanthi or Komotini (near the ancient city of Ismarus in the land of the Cicones), then the Achaeans were from the western half of the map, and the Trojans were from the eastern half (see “The Warring Sides of the Trojan War” map in “Other Matters of Interest Related to Homer and the *Iliad*”).

Otherwise, we may view the Achaeans through the most significant leaders as they appear in the *Iliad* itself. If we look down at them from the sky, as an eagle might, then we can see each leader’s ships and camp lined up facing the Trojans in the following manner, from left to right. First there is Telamonian Ajax, the ruler of the Salaminians, on the far left. Next comes Idomeneus of Crete, with his righthand man Meriones. They neighbor the camps of (in order) Menelaus of Sparta, Agamemnon of Mycenae, and Nestor of Pylos, the father of Antilochus. In the center are three camps, those of Odysseus of Ithaca, Eurypylus of the Northern Greeks, and Diomedes, the ruler of the Argives. Moving on to the right, there is the lesser Ajax, the son of Oileus and ruler of the Locrians. Then there is the camp of Meges, the leader of men from several western islands, Dulichium included, followed by the camp of Menestheus, the Athenian commander, and the camp of Podarces and Protesilaus of the northern Thessalian contingents. Achilles, the leader of the Myrmidons, and his cherished friend, Patroclus, hold down the far right.

The Trojans and the Trojan allies. Although from the standpoint of the *Iliad*, the Trojans are the enemy of the Achaean Greeks, we should not think of them as non-Greek—not as they would have been if Homer had presented a more historically accurate enemy from a kingdom neighboring Hittite Anatolia. Rather, as Moses Finley writes in *The World of Odysseus*, “the Trojans are as Greek and as heroic in deeds and values as their opponents in every respect.”²

At the center of the Trojan alliance was the city of Troy (Ilios, or the Latinized version, Ilium), ruled by the aging king, Priam, and his wife, Hecuba. Their son

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Hector was the most significant Trojan leader, the “best of the Trojans.” In Homer, he is oftentimes offset by his comrade in arms and co-commander, Polydamas. Other important Trojans are Pandarus, who shoots Menelaus with an arrow; Aeneas, the son of Anchises and Aphrodite; and the elder counselor to Priam, Antenor, whose many sons appear throughout the *Iliad*. As for the allies, Homer most frequently refers to Zeus’ son Sarpedon, the ruler of the Lycians, and his dear friend and partner Glaucus.

Of the twenty-seven Trojan leaders named in the Catalogue of Trojans in the second book of the *Iliad*, seventeen are killed in the course of the *Iliad* compared with a much smaller count for the Achaeans. If you were an Achaean, therefore, you had about a sixty-five percent chance of surviving the *Iliad*’s violence, as one out of every three warriors on the Achaean side per-

ished. On the other side, the odds were almost exactly reversed for the worse. Roughly two out of every three men died.

With this, if from nothing else, we see that Homer favored the Achaeans. But when it comes to the major combatants of the war, the matter is not always so clear. Take Hector, for example. In many ways, it is the Trojan Hector who tugs at our minds and hearts as we read the *Iliad*. It is his yearning for glory and his desire to avoid shame that drives him to leave his wife, Andromache, in order to fight while she remains behind, out of her mind with grief.

Nevertheless, the *Iliad* is about the Achaean hero Achilles and his overwhelming anger that wreaks havoc on the Achaean army. It is to that anger, then, and to the other major themes and ideas of Homer’s *Iliad* that we must now turn.

So ends “Introduction Part 3: The Trojan War and the Two Battling Armies.” **See you in the next item, “Introduction Part 4: The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Iliad*.”**

NOTES

¹ For the numbers, see Malcolm M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 22-23.

² Moses Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 38.

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