

# Myths and Legends: Achilles and the Trojan War

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The Greek hero Achilles dragging Hector's body behind his chariot around Troy. Photo from Wikimedia.

*Greek mythology began thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain why there were sunrises, floods, sickness and wars. Myths were stories about gods and goddesses who had super powers. They also had human feelings and looked human. These ideas were passed down in stories. The warrior Achilles is one of the great heroes of Greek mythology. According to legend, Achilles was extraordinarily strong, courageous and loyal, but he had one vulnerability — his "Achilles heel." Homer's epic poem "The Iliad" tells the story of his adventures during the last year of the Trojan War.*

## **No Water On His Heel**

Achilles had a complicated family tree. His father was Peleus, the king of the Myrmidons. These people, according to legend, were fearless and skilled soldiers. His mother was Thetis, an immortal sea nymph.

According to myths and stories composed long after "The Iliad," Thetis was very concerned about her baby son's mortality. She did everything she could to make him immortal: She burned him over a fire every night, then dressed his wounds with special ointment. She dunked him into the River Styx, whose waters were said to make people invincible, like gods. However, she gripped him tightly by the foot as she dipped him into the river — so tightly that the water never touched his heel. As a result, Achilles was unbreakable everywhere but there.

When he was 9 years old, a fortune teller predicted that Achilles would die heroically in battle against the Trojans. When she heard about this, Thetis disguised Achilles as a girl and sent him to live on the Greek island of Skyros. To be a great warrior was Achilles' destiny, however, and he soon left Skyros and joined the Greek army.

In a final effort to save her son's life, Thetis asked Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths, to make a sword and shield to keep him safe. The armor that Hephaestus produced for Achilles did not make him unbreakable, but it was distinctive enough to be recognized by friends and enemies.

When Homer wrote "The Iliad" in about 720 B.C., however, readers and listeners would not have known any of this. They knew only that Achilles was a great hero, that he had superhuman strength and courage, and that he was very handsome. Homer painted a more detailed picture: His Achilles was also vengeful and quick to anger. He could be crabby when he did not get his way. He was also deeply loyal and would sacrifice anything for his friends and family.

## The Trojan War

According to legend, the Trojan War began when the god-king Zeus decided to reduce Earth's living population. He arranged a war between the Greeks and the Trojans. He did this by messing with their politics and emotions.

At the wedding banquet of Achilles' parents, Zeus invited the prince of Troy, a young man named Paris, to judge a beauty contest between the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Each of the goddesses offered Paris a bribe in exchange for his vote. Aphrodite's was the most alluring: She promised to give the young prince the most beautiful wife in the world.

Unfortunately, the wife in question — Helen, the daughter of Zeus — was already married to someone else: Menelaus, the king of Sparta. At Aphrodite's urging, Paris went to Sparta, won Helen's heart and took her back to Troy.

Menelaus vowed revenge. He assembled an army of Greece's greatest warriors, including Achilles and his Myrmidons, and set off to conquer Troy and get his wife back. In Homer's telling, this war lasted for 10 bloody years.

## "The Iliad"

When "The Iliad" begins, the Trojan War has been going on for nine years. Achilles, the poem's hero, has led one battle after another. He is undefeated in battle, but the war itself has reached a stalemate.



Homer's story focuses on a different conflict — between his hero and Agamemnon, the leader of the Achaean armies and Menelaus' brother. In a battle that took place before the poem begins, Agamemnon had taken a young Trojan woman named Chryseis during a battle and made her a slave. Chryseis' father, a priest of the god Apollo, tried to buy his daughter's freedom, but Agamemnon mocked his request and refused to release the girl.

Enraged, Apollo punished the Greek armies by sending a deadly disease to kill the soldiers one by one. As his army dwindled, Agamemnon finally agreed to allow Chryseis to return to her father. However, he demanded a lover in exchange: Achilles' wife, the Trojan princess Briseis.

Achilles did as his commander asked and gave up his bride. Then, he announced that he would no longer fight on Agamemnon's behalf. He gathered his belongings, including the armor Hephaestus had made, and refused to come out of his tent.

With the Greeks' greatest warrior off the battlefield, the fight began to turn in favor of the Trojans. The Greeks lost one battle after another. Eventually, Achilles' best friend, the soldier Patroclus, was able to make a compromise: Achilles would not fight, but he would let Patroclus use his powerful armor as a disguise. That way, the Trojans would think that Achilles had returned to battle and would retreat in fear.

The plan was working until Apollo, still seething about Agamemnon's treatment of Chryseis and her father, intervened on the Trojans' behalf. He helped the Trojan prince Hector to find and kill Patroclus.

Furious, Achilles vowed to take revenge. He chased Hector back to Troy, slaughtering Trojans all the way. When they got to the city walls, Hector tried to reason with Achilles, but Achilles was not interested. He stabbed Hector in the throat, killing him.

Hector had begged for an honorable burial in Troy, but Achilles was determined to embarrass his enemy even in death. He dragged Hector's body behind his chariot all the way back to the Achaean camp and tossed it on the garbage heap. However, in the poem's last section Achilles finally returns Hector's body to his father for a proper burial.

### **The Fate Of Achilles**

In his "Iliad," Homer does not explain what happened to Achilles. According to later legends, the warrior returned to Troy after Hector's funeral to get further revenge for Patroclus' death. However, Apollo was still bitter and told Hector's brother Paris that Achilles was coming. Paris, who was not a brave warrior, attacked Achilles as he entered Troy. He shot his unsuspecting enemy with an arrow, which Apollo guided to the one place he knew Achilles was powerless: his heel, where his mother's hand had kept the waters of the Styx from touching his skin. Achilles died on the spot, still undefeated in battle.

## Quiz

- 1 Which selection from "The Iliad" supports the earlier conclusion that Achilles was vengeful at times?
- (A) However, he demanded a lover in exchange: Achilles' wife, the Trojan princess Breseis.
  - (B) Then, he announced that he would no longer fight on Agamemnon's behalf.
  - (C) He gathered his belongings, including the armor Hephaestus had made, and refused to come out of his tent.
  - (D) He dragged Hector's body behind his chariot all the way back to the Achaean camp and tossed it on the garbage heap.

- 2 Which selection from the article supports the idea that the fortune teller incorrectly identified Achilles' fate?
- (A) In a final effort to save her son's life, Thetis asked Hephaestus, the Greek god of blacksmiths, to make a sword and shield to keep him safe. The armor that Hephaestus produced for Achilles did not make him unbreakable, but it was distinctive enough to be recognized by friends and enemies.
  - (B) Eventually, Achilles' best friend, the soldier Patroclus, was able to make a compromise: Achilles would not fight, but he would let Patroclus use his powerful armor as a disguise. That way, the Trojans would think that Achilles had returned to battle and would retreat in fear.
  - (C) According to later legends, the warrior returned to Troy after Hector's funeral to get further revenge for Patroclus' death. However, Apollo was still bitter and told Hector's brother Paris that Achilles was coming. Paris, who was not a brave warrior, attacked Achilles as he entered Troy.
  - (D) He shot his unsuspecting enemy with an arrow, which Apollo guided to the one place he knew Achilles was powerless: his heel, where his mother's hand had kept the waters of the Styx from touching his skin. Achilles died on the spot, still undefeated in battle.

- 3 Read the selection from section "No Water On His Heel."

*According to myths and stories composed long after "The Iliad," Thetis was very concerned about her baby son's mortality. She did everything she could to make him immortal: She burned him over a fire every night, then dressed his wounds with special ointment. She dunked him into the River Styx, whose waters were said to make people invincible, like gods.*

Which of the following words, if it replaced the word "immortal" in the sentence above, would CHANGE the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) everlasting
- (B) undying
- (C) flawless
- (D) never-ending

Read the following selection from section "The Trojan War." Then, fill in the blank.

*At the wedding banquet of Achilles' parents, Zeus invited the prince of Troy, a young man named Paris, to judge a beauty contest between the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Each of the goddesses offered Paris a bribe in exchange for his vote. Aphrodite's was the most alluring: She promised to give the young prince the most beautiful wife in the world.*

The word "bribe" in the sentence above tells the reader that the goddesses \_\_\_\_\_.

- (A) hoped Paris was willing to change his vote for a reward
- (B) thought Paris was not very good at judging beauty by itself
- (C) wanted to win Paris' heart and hand in marriage
- (D) made this offer because Paris was known to be dishonest