

The Iliad

- Date** ■ Unknown, written down after 750 B.C.
- Place** ■ Unknown
- Type of Source** ■ Epic poem (original in Greek)
- Author** ■ Unknown, attributed to Homer
- Historical Context** ■ Around 1250 B.C. the cities of Mycenaean Greece attacked the city of Troy, also called Ilium, that controlled the vital sea route to the Black Sea. During the "dark age" that followed, tales of the war with Troy were passed down as songs or poems. About 750 B.C., the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet and these epics were written down. The *Song of Ilium*, *Iliad* in Greek, survives as the oldest known Western literature.
- Internal Context** ■ Achilles, the greatest warrior of the Greeks, withdrew from the fighting until his friend Patroclus was killed by Prince Hector, the greatest warrior of the Trojans. After running from Achilles, Hector faces him. Both men know from prophecy that this battle likely means death for both of them.

“I will no longer **fly [from] you**, son of **Peleus**," said [Hector], "as I have been doing hitherto. Three times have I fled round the mighty city of **Priam**, without daring to withstand you, but now, let me either slay or be slain, for I am in the mind to face you. Let us, then, give pledges to one another by our gods, who are the fittest witnesses and guardians of all covenants; let it be agreed between us that if **Zeus** [gives] me the longer stay and I take your life, I am not to treat your dead body in any unseemly fashion, but when I have stripped you of your armor, I am to give up your body to the **Achaean**s. And do you likewise."

Achilles glared at him and answered, "Fool, babble not to me about covenants. There can be no covenants between men and lions, wolves and lambs can never be of one mind, but hate each other out and out and through. Therefore there can be no understanding between you and me, nor may there be any covenants between us, till one or other shall fall and glut grim **Ares** with his life's blood. Put forth all your strength; you have need now to prove yourself indeed a bold soldier and man of war. You have no more chance, and **Pallas Athena** will forthwith vanquish you by my spear: you shall now pay me in full for the grief you have caused me on account of my comrades whom you have killed in battle."

He poised his spear as he spoke and hurled it. Hector saw it coming and avoided it; he watched it and crouched down so that it flew over his head and stuck in the ground beyond; Athena then snatched it up and gave it back to Achilles without Hector's seeing her; Hector thereon said to the son of Peleus, "You have missed your aim, Achilles, **peer of the gods**, and Zeus has not yet revealed to you the hour of my doom, though you made sure that he had done so. You were a false-tongued liar when you deemed that I should forget my valor and **quail** before you. You shall not drive spear into the back of a runaway—drive it, should heaven so grant you power, drive it

Hector knew he would die at Achilles' hand. Achilles also knew he would be the next to die after Hector,

fly [from] you
run away from you

Peleus
King of Aegina and father of Achilles

Priam
King of Troy and father of Hector

Zeus
King of the Greek gods. Zeus was neutral in the Trojan War.

Achaeans
the Greeks

Ares
Greek god of war and destruction. Ares favored the Trojans in the war.

Pallas Athena
*Greek goddess of wisdom and strategy. Athena favored the Achaean*s.

peer of the gods
Achilles' mother Thetis was a goddess.

quail
shake with fear

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into me as I make straight towards you; and now for your own part avoid my spear if you can—would that you might receive the whole of it into your body; if you were once dead the Trojans would find the war an easier matter, for it is you who have harmed them most."

He poised his spear as he spoke and hurled it. His aim was true for he hit the middle of Achilles' shield, but the spear **rebounded** from it, and did not pierce it. Hector was angry when he saw that the weapon had sped from his hand in vain, and stood there in dismay for he had no second spear. With a loud cry he called **Deiphobus** and asked him for one, but there was no man; then he saw the truth and said to himself, "Alas! the gods have lured me on to my destruction. I deemed that the hero Deiphobus was by my side, but he is within the wall, and Athena has tricked me; death is now indeed exceedingly near at hand and there is no way out of it—for so Zeus and his son **Apollo the far-darter** have willed it, though heretofore they have been ever ready to protect me. My doom has come upon me; let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter."

As he spoke he drew the keen blade that hung so great and strong by his side, and gathering himself together he sprang on Achilles like a soaring eagle which swoops down from the clouds on to some lamb or timid hare—even so did Hector brandish his sword and spring upon Achilles. Achilles mad with rage darted towards him, with his wondrous shield before his breast, and his gleaming helmet, made with four layers of metal, nodding fiercely forward. The thick tresses of gold with which **Hephaestus** had crested the helmet floated round it, and as the evening star that shines brighter than all others through the stillness of night, even such was the gleam of the spear which Achilles poised in his right hand, fraught with the death of noble Hector. He eyed his fair flesh over and over to see where he could best wound it, but all was protected by the goodly armor of which Hector had **spoiled Patroclus** after he had slain him, save only the throat where the collar-bones divide the neck from the shoulders, and this is a most deadly place: here then did Achilles strike him as he was coming on towards him, and the point of his spear went right through the fleshy part of the neck, but it did not sever his windpipe so that he could still speak. Hector fell headlong, and Achilles vaunted over him saying, "Hector, you deemed that you should come off unharmed when you were spoiling Patroclus, and thought not of myself who was not with him. Fool that you were: for I, his comrade, mightier far than he, was still left behind him at the ships, and now I have laid you low. The Achaeans shall give him all due funeral rites, while dogs and vultures shall work their will upon yourself."

Then Hector said, as the life ebbed out of him, "I pray you by your life and knees, and by your parents, let not dogs devour me at the ships of the Achaeans, but accept the rich treasure of gold and bronze which my father and mother will offer you, and send my body home, that the Trojans and their wives may give me my dues of fire when I am dead."

rebounded
bounced

Deiphobus
brother of Hector. Athena had taken the shape of Deiphobus to trick Hector into turning to fight Achilles.

Apollo the far-darter
Greek god of the sun, music, and archery, also called Phoebus. Apollo favored the Trojans.

Hephaestus
Greek god of fire. He favored the Trojans.

spoiled
took from a defeated enemy

Patroclus
Achilles' dearest friend. Hector had killed Patroclus, who Hector mistook for Achilles (he was wearing Achilles' armor).

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Achilles glared at him and answered, "Dog, talk not to me neither of knees nor parents; would that I could be as sure of being able to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill have done me, as I am that nothing shall save you from the dogs—it shall not be, though they bring ten or twenty-fold ransom and weigh it out for me on the spot, with promise of yet more hereafter. Though Priam son of Dardanus should bid them offer me your weight in gold, even so your mother shall never lay you out and make lament over the son she bore, but dogs and vultures shall eat you utterly up."

Hector with his dying breath then said, "I know you what you are, and was sure that I should not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; look to it that I bring not heaven's anger upon you on the day when **Paris** and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the **Scaean gates**."

When he had thus said the shrouds of death enfolded him, whereon his soul went out of him and flew down to the house of **Hades**, lamenting its sad fate that it should enjoy youth and strength no longer. But Achilles said, speaking to the dead body, "Die; for my part I will accept my fate whensoever Zeus and the other gods see fit to send it."

As he spoke he drew his spear from the body and set it on one side; then he stripped the blood-stained armor from Hector's shoulders while the other Achaeans came running up to view his wondrous strength and beauty; and no one came near him without giving him a fresh wound. Then would one turn to his neighbour and say, "It is easier to handle Hector now than when he was flinging fire on to our ships" and as he spoke he would thrust his spear into him anew. ,

Paris

a prince of Troy and Hector's brother. Paris caused the Trojan War first by favoring the goddess of love, Aphrodite, among the goddesses in a contest and then by abducting, or seducing, Helen, the Queen of Sparta (legends vary on what happened). He would kill Achilles later in the war, after The Iliad ends.

Scaean gates

one of the main gates of Troy

Hades

Greek god of death, sometimes used as a name for the afterlife

Desecrating a body was a serious issue for Greeks. Until a body was properly dealt with, the soul was trapped on Earth (with a few exceptions).

Source: Homer, "The Iliad, Book XXII," *Internet Sacred Text Archives*, Translated by Samuel Butler, n.d., <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/homer/ili/ili22.htm>> (June 8, 2011).