

Trojan War Basics

According to legend, the war began because of a beautiful woman. The princess Helen, daughter of Leda and Zeus, was known to be the most beautiful woman in all Greece. As such, she had many suitors. Many of the suitors were powerful kings or princes, and they all came to Sparta to win her hand. Her step-father, King Tyndareus, didn't know which to choose: to choose one would anger the others, and war would result. Finally one of the suitors, wise Odysseus from Ithaca, offered a solution. He told King Tyndareus to force all the suitors to make a solemn oath: whoever was chosen by the king to be Helen's husband, the other suitors would support him. And if anyone tried to break up the new marriage, the other suitors would come to the couple's rescue. Thus the suitors all took the oath, and King Tyndareus could safely announce his decision. He would give Helen to Menelaus, brother of Agamemnon.

Meanwhile, across the Aegean Sea, the Trojan prince Paris had just received a promise from the goddess of love, Aphrodite. The three goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite had come to Paris and asked him to judge which of them was the most beautiful (this is the famous story of the Golden Apple). Aphrodite promised Paris that if he chose her, she would give him the world's most beautiful woman in return. Paris chose Aphrodite, and the goddess told him he would have to cross the sea and go to Sparta in Greece. Once he was there, she would help him to get Helen from her husband Menelaus.

Paris stole Helen from Menelaus and took her back to Troy. When Menelaus realized his wife had left with the foreigner, he and his brother Agamemnon sent out messengers to remind all the Greek suitors of their solemn oath to defend the marriage. Since it would be shameful to break a solemn oath, most of the Greeks agreed to go to Troy.

The war lasted ten years, much longer than the Greeks had expected. It finally ended when the clever Odysseus, the same man who had suggested the oath, came up with the idea of the wooden horse (known afterwards as the Trojan Horse). The city of Troy was destroyed, nearly all the Trojan men were killed and the women taken as slaves, and Helen was taken back to Sparta by her husband Menelaus.

Homer's Iliad

*Anger be now your song, immortal one,
Achilles' anger, doomed and ruinous,
that caused the Achaeans loss on bitter loss
and crowded brave souls into the undergloom,
leaving so many dead men--carrion
for dogs and birds; and the will of Zeus was done.*
. -excerpt from Homer's *Iliad*

The *Iliad* is a poem about the struggle of two characters, Agamemnon and Achilles.

The *Iliad* does not cover the whole story of the Trojan War. Instead it presents just one episode of the war: the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon that occurred in the war's ninth year.

Agamemnon was the commander of the Greek armies that went to Troy. As a commander, he was arrogant and selfish, and often let his pride cloud his judgment. Achilles was the greatest warrior of all the Greeks. He was hot-tempered and also very proud.

During the war, when girls were captured from the enemy they were kept as slaves. Girls were considered part of the war booty. Agamemnon had one such slave girl named Chryseis. Achilles had a girl named Briseis.

The father of Agamemnon's slave girl was a priest of Apollo. When the priest came to ransom back his daughter from Agamemnon, the Greek commander insulted him and told him if he came back again he would be killed. As the priest left the Greek camp, he prayed to Apollo to get revenge on the Greeks.

Apollo listened to the priest's prayer. The Greeks began to die from a disease sent to them by the god. Finally Agamemnon realized he would have to give the girl back. But he decided that he, as commander, could not be left without a girl. It would be a dishonor. So he told Achilles he would take his girl, Briseis, to replace Chryseis.

Achilles was enraged by this decision. He announced that he would no longer help Agamemnon in his war against the Trojans. After Agamemnon took Briseis, Achilles refused to fight.

This was good news for the Trojans. Achilles was the greatest Greek warrior.

With Achilles out of the battle, the Trojan side began to dominate.

Hector was the greatest of the Trojan warriors. Although not as great a warrior as Achilles, with Achilles refusing to fight there was no Greek warrior who could stand up to Hector. The Trojans fought their way closer and closer to the Greek camp. If they could manage to burn the Greek ships, the Greeks would have no hope: they would not be able to get back to Greece; their morale would be broken and their cause would be lost. . . .

Gilgamesh

This myth is about a terrible king named Gilgamesh who meets this man named Enkidu who becomes his best friend and together they go on many adventures. But one day Enkidu gets very sick and dies, Gilgamesh is so upset that he goes on a quest to find everlasting life. Gilgamesh travels to the end of the world and finally finds the god Utnapishtim and tells him to give him everlasting life.

Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that if he can stay awake for a week, he will grant Gilgamesh everlasting life. But Gilgamesh can't stay awake for a whole week!, Before he leaves to go back to his homeland Utnapishtim's wife asks Utnapishtim to tell Gilgamesh where to find a plant that restores youth. Gilgamesh finds this miracle plant but it then gets stolen from him by a snake. After that Gilgamesh decides to return home, he is sad that he cannot live forever but he has come to accept that even though he will eventually die; humankind will live on and so will the awesome city of Uruk that he is king of and helped to build.