

THE LEGEND OF TROY

Mighty warriors, the world's most beautiful woman, divine intervention and a giant wooden horse – the Trojan War is one of ancient history's greatest stories but, asks **Michael Scott**, how much of the legend is actually true?



For warriors like Achilles, Hector, Ajax and Odysseus, the Trojan War was their way of achieving immortal glory



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Achilles bound together the heels of the man he had just slain in single combat Hector, hero of the Trojans and tied the lifeless body to his chariot. He climbed aboard and encouraged his horses to move, dragging his fallen foe around and around the walls of Troy so that all inside could see the fate that had befallen their bravest and noblest of protectors. Following that humiliation, Achilles rode back to the Greek camp, where, for the next 12 days, he further desecrated Hector's body by refusing the proper burial rituals. It required the intervention of the gods before Achilles returned Hector to his father for a funeral.

The account is one of the most chilling - not only for the death of a warrior in combat, but the disrespect shown to his body - in the text of Homer's *Iliad*, an epic poem about the Greeks' fateful attempts to besiege the city of Troy. The scene has everything that, for Ancient Greeks and Trojans, was both best and worst about war. It offered Achilles the opportunity for eternal glory by defeating Troy's greatest warrior,

while showing how war could lead to humanity putting aside its most basic principles and risk becoming something less than human. The gods themselves are needed to remind Achilles of this.

Homer's *Iliad* is a tale of bloodshed, conquest, struggle, loss, fate, heroism and glory, centred within the Greeks' legendary ten-year campaign. It was a war waged supposedly because of one action: the Trojan prince Paris stealing away Helen, the most beautiful woman

in the world and wife to Menelaus, King of Sparta. To right that wrong, Menelaus, aided by other Greek kings and warriors, including his brother Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax and Achilles, sailed with a huge force to Troy and went to war against Paris, his brother Hector, their father Priam, and the rest of the Trojan people.

BEWARE THE GREEKS

How the war ended is the most famous element of the story. The Greeks, unable to gain a clear victory on the battlefield even after Achilles killed Hector - turned instead to a cunning trick. They built a large wooden horse, hid some of their best fighters inside and left it as a 'propitiatory gift' for the Trojans, before >

The Trojan prince Paris's abduction of Helen sparked a ten-year war, according to the Homeric tales

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Achilles drags the body of Hector behind his chariot, but the gods protect it from physical mutilation

The Trojan Horse - seen in the 2004 film *Troy* - was received as a gift by the Trojan people, but it was a ploy to entice their doors

YOMI KUSUMI
The Trojan priest Laocöus and Cassandra, daughter of King Priam, warned that the wooden horse was a Greek trick and called for it to be destroyed. The Trojans ignored them and suffered the consequences

Paris (standing right) and Helen (seated far left) are urged to form a relationship by Olympians Eros and Aphrodite, while Peitho - goddess of persuasion - watches on from above



DID YOU KNOW?

When Achilles was a baby, his mother attempted to make him completely invulnerable by dipping him into the River Styx (a route to the underworld), but one part of his body did not touch the power-giving waters: his heel.

packing up their camp and seemingly sailing away. Believing the war to be won, the Trojans moved the horse inside the city walls, intending to use it to honour the gods.

That night, the hidden Greeks climbed out, killed the guards and opened the city gates to allow the entire Greek force to swarm in. Priam, King of Troy, was slaughtered along with every Trojan male - adult and child - while the women and girls were enslaved. The Greeks burned Troy to the ground. As for Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships, her husband Menelaus had insisted that he be the one to kill her, but became overwhelmed by her beauty once again and could not bring himself to do it.

The Trojan Horse trick signalled the end of the war and is remembered as one of history's most infamous military manoeuvres. Yet it was not actually mentioned by Homer. The *Iliad* ends with Hector's death and funeral, when the gods finally convinced Achilles to stop disrespecting the body and give it back to the Trojans for the proper funeral rituals.

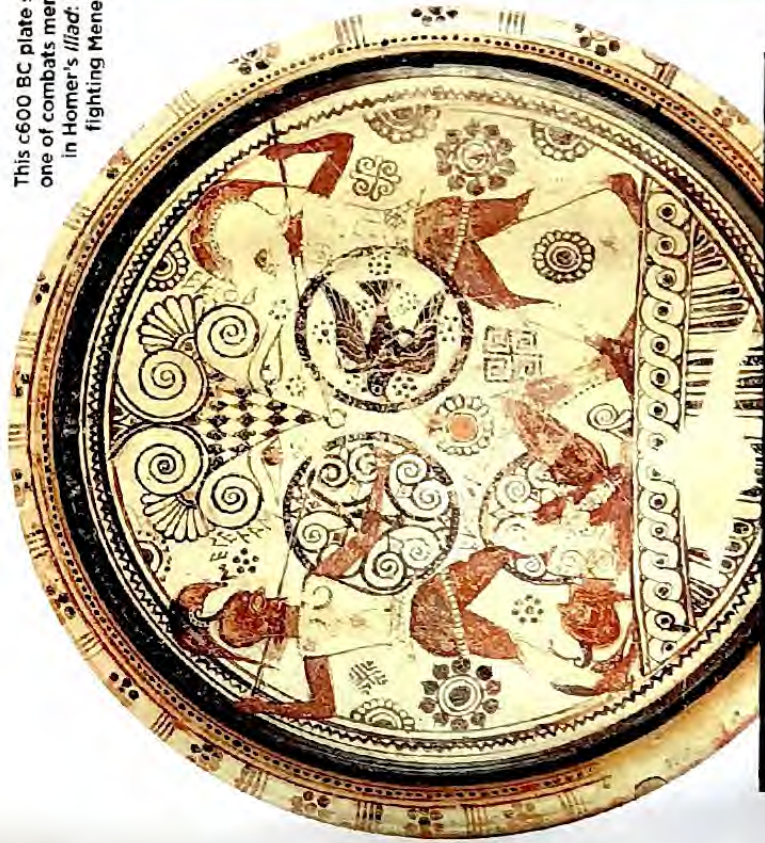
A lot happened between that and the Greeks' building of the wooden horse. Achilles himself had been killed by

Paris after being shot by an arrow through the heel, the only vulnerable part of his body, hence the expression 'Achilles heel'. In turn, Paris would also meet his end after being hit by an arrow, fired by a Greek warrior. Two other Greeks, Odysseus and Ajax, managed to retrieve Achilles' body, but they ended up fighting over his armour and the loser, Ajax, went mad and committed suicide. All such

Achilles became a symbol of heroism; this 18-foot statue of the Greek demigod was erected in 1822 to honour the Duke of Wellington



This 600 BC plate shows one of combats mentioned in Homer's *Iliad*: Hector fighting Menelaus



"THE ENTIRETY OF THE ILIAD FOCUSES ON JUST A FEW WEEKS IN THE FINAL YEAR OF WAR"

accounts of what happened after the fall of Hector come from sources other than the *Iliad*.

In fact, the epic poem does not start at the beginning of the ten-year tale either, with Paris's abduction of Helen. The entirety of the *Iliad* - 15,693 lines of verse - focuses on just a few weeks in the final year of the Trojan War.

ANGER OF ACHILLES

Homer's epic tale begins with a disagreement in the Greek camp between the leaders. The demigod Achilles, strongest of them all, feels affronted as he believes he has not been given the degree of honour he deserves from his fellow Greeks, and as such has decided to withdraw from the fight against Troy. He sits on the beach weeping at the injustices done to him, and even prays to the gods that the Greeks will suffer at the hands of the Trojans without him, so that they will be forced to realise his worth. Zeus, King of the gods, agrees to Achilles' demand, and the Greek forces are unable to make any progress against the Trojans.

The many gods of Olympus have all picked sides in the fight, with some supporting the Greeks and others on the side of Troy. As the battle rages, several gods intervene as they protect their

side or harm the other. When Achilles withdraws, though, Zeus finally forbids the other gods to get involved and the Trojans, led by Hector, sweep down to the Greek encampment and are on the verge of setting fire to their ships. It is at this desperate point that the Greek leaders plead with Achilles to return to the fight. He still refuses, but he allows his closest companion, Patroclus, to wear his armour on the battlefield to inspire the men. But when Patroclus charges into the fray, he confronts Hector and is cut down.

The death sends a grief-stricken Achilles into a rage as he vows vengeance on Hector. With new armour made for him by the god Hephaestus, he rides in his chariot to the walls of Troy and faces the Trojan warrior. Hector ignores warnings from the gods and fights Achilles, during which he is stabbed through the neck and dies.

The events of the rest of the war and indeed how the war came about is told not in Homer, but across a wider cycle of epic poems by other writers. It is from other sources that the 'Judgement of Paris' emerged, claiming that the Trojan prince did not suddenly decide to abduct Helen. The story really began when Eris, goddess of strife and discord, presented a golden apple to be given to the 'fairest'

HOMER: THE POET AND THE ENIGMA

The man named as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is as much a myth as the tales he told of warriors, gods and wooden horses. Early records claimed Homer was blind and hailed from the west coast of what is now Turkey, but any firm details are still unknown. Yet Homer became one of the greatest influences on Greek culture and education, and a main source on the Trojan War - despite being thought to have lived in the eighth or ninth century BC, some 500 years after the Trojan War is thought to have occurred.

Homer may have composed and performed his epics for royal courts and festivals. While he would have been one of many oral poets over many generations, he came to be regarded as the embodiment of the tradition. Not only did poets and reciters come to style themselves as 'Homeridae', or the 'children of Homer', but later generations ascribed much of oral epic poetry to him. In the sixth century BC, the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus paid for the best of these Homeridae to dictate the Homeric epics for his scribes to write down, helping turn them from an oral to a written art.

So while the real Homer built on a tradition of oral epic poetry that went back generations before him, he came to be seen as the forefather of that tradition.

Such is Homer's legacy that he appeared on Greek coins well into the 20th century



The *Iliad* has been translated countless times, notably by Alexander Pope

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GODS AT WAR

Far from just observing the Trojan War from Mount Olympus, the gods picked sides and got involved

HERA

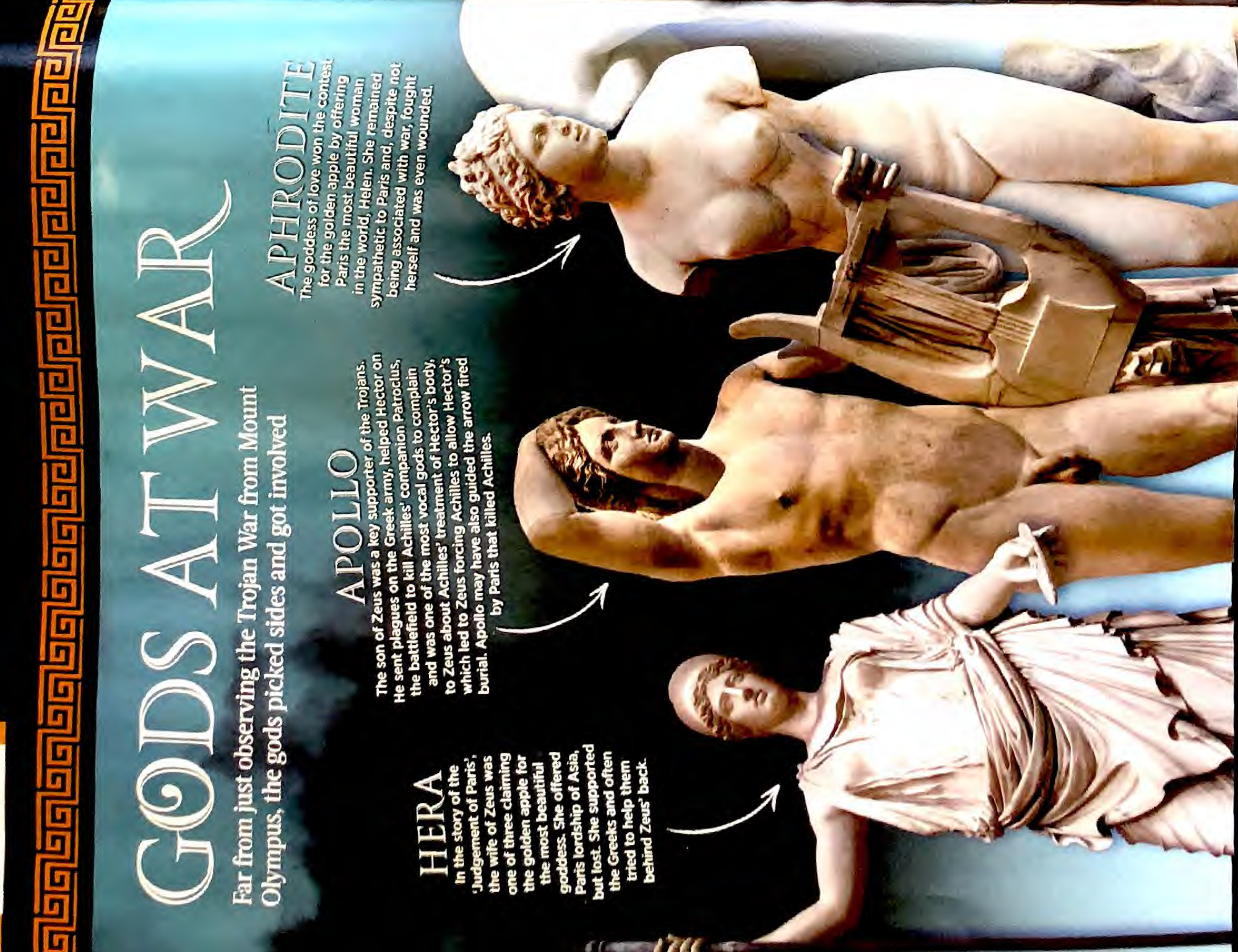
In the story of the 'Judgement of Paris', the wife of Zeus was one of three claiming the golden apple for the most beautiful goddess. She offered Paris lordship of Asia, but lost. She supported the Greeks and often tried to help them behind Zeus' back.

APOLLO

The son of Zeus was a key supporter of the Trojans. He sent plagues on the Greek army, helped Hector on the battlefield to kill Achilles' companion Patroclus, and was one of the most vocal gods to complain to Zeus about Achilles' treatment of Hector's body, which led to Zeus forcing Achilles to allow Hector's burial. Apollo may have also guided the arrow fired by Paris that killed Achilles.

APHRODITE

The goddess of love won the contest for the golden apple by offering Paris the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. She remained sympathetic to Paris and, despite not being associated with war, fought herself and was even wounded.



ZEUS

King of the gods and the ultimate arbiter in Homer's tale, it was Zeus who heard and agreed to Achilles' plea for the Greeks to suffer after he had been dishonoured. It was Zeus who allowed the other gods to intervene in human affairs or not, and it was Zeus who was the keeper of fate - from which neither gods nor humanity can escape.

ATHENA

The goddess of wisdom and cunning was one of the three contestants for the golden apple to bribe Paris of Troy. She offered him victory in battle and wisdom, but she did not win and so supported the Greeks in the war, often joining the battlefield and encouraging the Greek forces to fight harder.

DID YOU KNOW?

When the Greek king Menelaus fought Paris, the man who had taken his wife Helen, in single combat, he defeated the Trojan prince easily and looked to kill him, before the goddess Aphrodite spirited Paris away to within the walls of Troy.

HEPHAESTUS

As the divine blacksmith, he made the weapons and tools of the gods, such as the winged helmet and sandals of the messenger god Hermes. During the Trojan War, Hephæstus designed new armour for Achilles, which he finally decided to re-anneal the scabbard following the death of Patroclus. Hephæstus also participated in the fighting on the Greek side.



The ruins of Troy were discovered in 1871; there are many layers of civilisation as well as the one said to be destroyed by the Greeks



DID YOU KNOW?

King Agamemnon survived the Trojan War and returned to Greece only to be slaughtered by, depending on the version of the tale, either his wife Clytemnestra, who hated him for sacrificing their daughter, or her lover.

For a safe voyage to Troy, King Agamemnon was willing to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia (centre)

Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, sided with the Trojans and was killed by Achilles - as depicted on this amphora, which will be displayed at an exhibition at the British Museum

is over just a few weeks in this final year of the campaign that the action of Homer's *Iliad* takes place.

THE PLOT THICKENS

There are two elements then to understand about the *Iliad* and the larger story of the Greek campaign against Troy. The first is that Homer was, in many ways, more interested in the human and divine interactions in and around the pressure-cooker of the battlefield at Troy than about the war itself. The first word of the *Iliad* is 'anger' - the anger of Achilles. The focus of much of Homer's tale was on the havoc wreaked on the Greeks by Achilles' bitter feeling that he had not been shown enough recognition.

On the Trojan side, Homer's interest was on the personal relationships and responsibilities felt by the different warriors. Paris wanted to be heroic, but lacked courage to defend his siblings and city. Hector deeply loved his wife, child and city, but as a man of courage and honour could not ignore the call to defend his home to the death. All the warriors fought for their communities and their own personal glory - glory they hoped would be spoken about for all time. The Greeks used the word 'kleos' to encapsulate this sense of immortal renown.

At the same time, the gods were portrayed not as benevolent and

goddess. Three claimed the apple: Aphrodite, goddess of love; Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Hera, wife of Zeus. It was put to Zeus to decide who should have the apple, but he instead put it to a human to choose: Paris of Troy. All three goddesses attempt to bribe him. Athena promises victory in war and wisdom; Hera with lordship of Asia; and Aphrodite with the hand of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Sparta. Paris awarded the golden apple to Aphrodite, who ensured Helen fell in love with him.

When Helen's husband Menelaus, King of Sparta, found out, he called upon the other Greek kings to join him in winning her back. Hundreds of regions sent their warriors to the first great meeting of the army at Aulis, where they intended to sail for Troy. There, the soothsayers predicted the campaign would take ten years. Sailing for Troy, the fleet mistakenly attacked the wrong place and were beaten back all the way to Greece. It took years to reassemble another fleet at Aulis for a second campaign, but this time, the leader Agamemnon had to appease the goddess Artemis in return for favourable winds to sail to Troy. She demanded the King sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia. With the sacrifice made, the Greek forces sailed again and landed on the beaches near Troy. They did not spend a decade besieging the city, however. They raided up and down the coast and only really settled in to the all-out attack on Troy in the tenth year since they had first left Aulis, as the soothsayers had said. It

just overlords, but as having human tendencies. They fought, they argued, they plotted, they felt jealousy, and they showed support to particular sides. The *Iliad* tells the tale of the painful and glorious overlapping of these divine and human worlds, leaving no character completely without fault - even the heroic Hector ignored clear warnings from the gods - and no character completely without our sympathy either. Readers of the *Iliad* are confronted with a rich, complex, difficult and murky world in which there is no clear right or wrong. It is this tension that makes the *Iliad* one of the greatest works of world literature.

The second element to understand is the extent to which Homer based his tale on fact. Was there really a Trojan War? Ancient writers in the centuries after the composition of Homer's *Iliad* sought to sift fact and fiction, and



most believed that the events did happen in large part. The legacy of the war certainly remained present in Greek lives. One region, Loeris, continued throughout antiquity to send some of their women each year to act as priestesses of the Temple of Athena at Troy, supposedly to atone for a wrong done by their ancestors during the attacks to take the city. Even a millennium later, Alexander the Great made sure to visit the remains of Troy on his way to conquer Asia, and supposedly picked up Greek armour left there from the time of the war. The Romans, too, were fascinated with the story. In their own epic tales, their progenitor was a surviving Trojan warrior named Aeneas who made his way to Italy. His legend became the focus for Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*.

EXCAVATING A MYTH

Modern scholarship has, on the whole, been more sceptical. In the 19th century, the site of what is now believed to be Troy was discovered a the mound of Hisarlik in modern-day Turkey. The excavations, led by a

German archaeologist named Heinrich Schliemann, were purported to support the grandeur of Homer's narrative, and Schliemann even claimed to have unearthed the jewellery of Helen and treasures of Priam. Yet subsequent excavations and historical enquiry have shown that, while the site is almost definitely Troy, it is not of the size recounted by Homer. The city does show signs of destruction - although archaeological efforts were complicated by the existence of multiple settlements laying on top of one another - and clear signs of connection with the Mycenaean world of the Greeks.

In reality, what the site probably indicates is a raid by Mycenaean Greek states on the territory and citadel of Troy in the 13th century BC, which formed nothing more than part of the ongoing military to and fro of the ancient Mediterranean world at the time. This raid became, perhaps as it was one of the last great campaigns before the Mycenaean world started to collapse in on itself, a suitable foundation for oral poets in the following centuries wanting

to compose a tale about the heroism and deeds of former battles.

From that process of oral composition and re-composition grew the fabulous and fantastic episodes of the Trojan War, of which the *Iliad* is a crowning glory. It is followed by the older narrative, Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells the stories of the ten-year return of the Greek warrior Odysseus to his home. As such, the heroes of antiquity can be assured of one thing: they achieved their desire for immortal glory. ☺

GET HOOKED

EXHIBITION

Troy: Myth and Reality is on show at the British Museum from 21 November until 8 March 2020. www.britishmuseum.org/troy

LECTURE

Professor Michael Scott is giving a lecture - What the Greeks Did With the Idea of Troy - at the British Museum on 17 January 2020. www.britishmuseum.org/events

WATCH

The 2018 BBC One series, *Troy: Fall of a City*, is available on Netflix and Google Play