

## The Trojan War—a literary perspective

Source: Adapted from Judy Volem's "The Trojan War" in *Stories of Ancient Greece*

The roots of the Trojan War, according to ancient poet and author of *The Iliad* Homer, began with the marriage of Peleus and Thetis. Eris, the goddess of discord (conflict), had not been invited to the wedding, and in a fit of rage, she crashed the wedding by throwing a golden apple into the reception. In an attempt to spark competition between the three most magnificent goddess, Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, Eris proclaimed that the apple belonged to the "fairest." As Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite fought over the apple and title of "fairest," Zeus attempted to reconcile the competition by claiming that Paris, the most handsome man and prince of Troy, would act as judge.

All three goddesses tried to bribe the young prince in hopes of getting the apple. Athena promised that Paris would be the wisest of all men. Hera promised that he would become the most powerful ruler of all. Aphrodite promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. In typical male fashion, Paris chose Aphrodite. And so, it was decided that Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world. The only problem was that Helen was already married to Menelaus, King of Sparta. With the help of Aphrodite, Helen fell in love with Paris while he was visiting Sparta as a royal guest. In the dark of night, Paris and Helen escaped back to Troy and were soon married.

Once Menelaus discovered Helen's betrayal, he set sail for Troy with the greatest warriors of Greece, Odysseus and Achilles among them. Aided by his brother Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, Menelaus sought to destroy all of Troy. Fortunately, the king of Sparta also had Hera and Athena on his side as they too sought revenge on Paris.

Reaching Troy proved to be a difficult task for the Greeks. Eventually the warriors reached the beaches below the towering city of Troy. Following an unsuccessful attack of the city walls, the Greeks retreated to beaches and settled in for a nine-year long siege of the city of Troy. Following the clever advice of Odysseus, the Greeks attacked and invaded neighboring cities and towns allowing them access to weapons and supplies. Such attacks also allowed them to weaken Troy's allies, thus weakening Troy itself.

In the tenth year of the siege, the Greeks prepared for total war with the Trojans. Both sides would suffer tremendous losses; the Trojans wept over the honorable death of prince Hector, son of King Priam of Troy and brother of Paris, the Greeks lost its nearly-invincible hero Achilles, and Helen suffered the loss of her beloved husband Paris. Finally, as the Greek ships seemed to retreat one night, Helen prayed that the war was over.

As they watched the Greek ships sail away, the Trojans could not help but to notice a giant wooden horse left outside the city walls. King Priam's daughter Cassandra warned the horse was a trick of the Greeks and that it would bring destruction to Troy. But, like always, Cassandra's admonitions were ignored and assuming the gigantic horse was a gift from the Greeks, in some sort of olive branch gesture, it was wheeled inside the city. Unbeknownst to the Trojans, the fiercest of the Greek warriors, including Odysseus, were hidden inside the belly of the horse. Upon nightfall, the Greeks quietly climbed out of the horse and opened the city walls for the rest of their comrades. The Greeks attacked the city of Troy from within and successfully destroyed the entire city. While the other women were carried off by the Greeks as slaves, Helen was spared and was allowed to sail back to Sparta with Menelaus.



Written by Homer sometime around 750 BCE, *The Iliad* offers a detailed account of Greece during the Bronze Age. Despite questions surrounding Homer's existence and the balance between truth and mythology

in *The Iliad*, this literary accomplishment provides historians with great insight into ancient Greek society and the values they held dear. While claims of legitimacy in relation to the entire story are suspect, the basis of the story and the moral implications have helped to shaped our knowledge of the ancient Greeks and the world they lived in.