DIGGING FOR TROY
From Homer to Hisarlik
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Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another.

—Homer, The Iliad

When your family gets together, do they retell old stories? Is there a story that you love (or hate) to hear again and again? Retelling old tales is how we preserve our personal histories.

Imagine a time before writing. Histories of entire countries were preserved in legend—no history books to recount the past, only the stories told aloud and handed down from generation to generation. Stories repeated about great loves and bloody battles, heroic deeds and treacherous betrayals—stories like the destruction of Troy.
Today we cobble together the tale of the Trojan War from the works of great playwrights and poets, storytellers and historians. A Greek living two thousand years ago would know all these bits and pieces from stories that had been spun for generations. We flesh out the tale from the poets Homer and Virgil, the playwrights Euripides and Aeschylus, and the prose writer Apollodorus, among others. Although there are slight differences, depending on who is telling the tale, the main plot holds fast.

Homer’s *Iliad* recounts fifty-four days of heated battle in a poem about Illos—one name for the city of Troy. Homer uses both Illos and Troy interchangeably in his epic poem. What leads up to those fifty-four days of the Trojan War starts long before Homer’s retelling. It begins with a prophecy.

Hecuba, Queen of Troy, was pregnant again. Loving children, as good mothers—even queens—do, she eagerly awaited the time she would give her eldest son, Hector, a baby brother or sister. But this pregnancy was different. Hecuba’s sleep was troubled. One night she dreamt that, instead of giving birth to King Priam’s child, she bore a torch of flaming snakes. The sparks they spat caught in the tall grass, spreading wildly until the entire plain of Troy roiled with fire. In Hecuba’s nightmare her home, the great walled city of Troy, smoldered in blackened ruin.

King Priam summoned the royal dream interpreters. What could this mean, this fiery end?

The soothsayers muttered among themselves, solemnly nodding in agreement. It could mean but one thing. The nightmare was a warning—the unborn child a curse. Troy was doomed.

“Unless.”

“Unless?”

“Take the infant to the forest. Leave him there to die.”
Heartbroken, Hecuba handed her newborn son to a servant.

King Priam barked orders to mask his own sorrow and guilt. “Take him deep into the forests of Mount Ida—to a place where no one will find him. Do it for the future of Troy.”

The servant carried the bundled babe up the mountainside. He left the sleeping child in the open and hurried home before darkness fell.

A bear lumbering along, snacking on berries, grunted when it heard a plaintive cry. Nose tipped to the sky to catch the unfamiliar scent, the bear stood poised for a moment, then dropped to all fours and followed the sobs. The infant grasped the bear’s fur in his fists. The bear snorted
and then settled down beside the babe, providing warmth through the night. Five days the bear stood guard, and when on the fifth day it sniffed danger in the wind, it trundled off into the trees.

A herdsman calling for a missing calf broke through the underbrush, nearly stepping on the infant, who was waving his fur-coated fists in the air and gurgling.

The herdsman took the babe home to his wife, who named the boy Paris, and raised him as her own. Paris grew strong and extraordinarily handsome. He spent his days wandering the woods and pastures of Mount Ida unaware of his royal heritage and his own unmatched beauty.

While Paris tended his father’s sheep, the gods of Mount Olympus celebrated the sea goddess Thetis’s marriage. Everyone was invited. Everyone, that is, except the goddess of discord, Eris, who (for obvious reasons) was never invited to parties. In a foul mood Eris attended the wedding anyhow, determined to cause more trouble than usual.

Eris rolled a golden apple onto the banquet table. Written on the apple were the words “for the fairest.” All the goddesses squabbled, each believing they were most deserving of that title. After a time the competitors narrowed to three—Hera, the goddess of marriage; Athena, the goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

Hera called on her husband Zeus to settle the dispute.

“Which one of us is the fairest? Who should get the apple?”

Zeus knew better than to choose. If he picked one, the other two would make his life miserable (particularly his wife Hera). So he wisely refused to judge. None of the other gods were fool enough to volunteer.

“The fairest mortal should be the one to pick the fairest immortal,” Zeus proclaimed, secretly relieved by his own cleverness.

The three goddesses materialized on the hillside of Mount Ida directly in front of Paris and demanded he choose the fairest of them.
“If you choose me, I shall make you the wisest in all the world,” Athena promised.

“Choose me, and wealth and power shall be yours,” Hera promised.

Aphrodite stepped close to Paris and whispered in his ear, “The most beautiful woman in the world will love you and no other.”

Paris handed Aphrodite the apple.

Every three years on the plains of Troy, King Priam held a festival. Paris had always been forbidden to go. His adopted father had good reason
for not wanting Paris to show himself in the city, but of course Paris knew nothing of this. Determined to enter this year’s games, Paris snuck off to Troy without telling his father.

He entered three races, winning all three and angering the king’s sons, who did not take losing well. They had drawn their swords and were ready to lop off Paris’s head when an old shepherd pushed through the crowd yelling, “Stop!”

The shepherd, Paris’s adopted father, trembled, sure that he would be severely punished for disobeying the king and allowing the prophe-sied destroyer of Troy to live. He fell to his knees before the king. “I be-seech you, spare your son.”

Priam had never forgiven himself for abandoning his son, and so he welcomed Paris with true joy in his heart. Hecuba took her son in her arms. Only Paris’s sister, Cassandra, was wary.

“What of the omen?” she asked. But the gods had been wicked to Cassandra, granting her the gift of prophecy, and along with it the curse of never being believed.

No one listened.

Paris quickly adjusted to royal life. No sooner had he traded a bed under the stars for one inside the palace, than he sought the woman Aphrodite had promised. The fact that the most beautiful woman in the world was already married—and to the king of Sparta, no less—did not deter him.

Slyly, Paris arranged for his father, King Priam, to appoint him leader of a delegation heading to Sparta. The king and queen, overjoyed at Paris’s return, denied him nothing. Only Cassandra spoke out against his mission.

“Don’t let Paris go to Sparta. It will mean our doom.”

No one listened.

So Priam wished his son that the gods be with him and outfitted him
with Troy’s finest ship. Aphrodite sent fair winds that carried Paris swiftly over the sea to Sparta where King Menelaus graciously welcomed him. Paris established himself into the king’s good favor so effectively that the king treated him like his own son, unaware of the betrayal that was soon to come.

Just as Aphrodite had promised, Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, fell deeply in love with Paris the moment she laid eyes on him. At first opportunity the two slipped away to Troy. Lovesick Helen deserted King Menelaus, her child, Sparta, and all that she knew for Paris.
Bewitched by Helen’s beauty, the Trojans vowed never to let her go. Only Cassandra warned them of the destruction that would follow.

But, of course, no one listened.

When Menelaus discovered he had been deceived by the two people he loved and trusted most, he vowed to be avenged and immediately left to ask his powerful brother King Agamemnon of Mycenae for help. Agamemnon was no stranger to treachery. His ancestors had been poisoned with it. But by the power of Zeus, no brother of his would go unavenged as long as the mighty Agamemnon drew a breath.

Agamemnon sent word to all Greek princes, chieftains, and warriors, reminding them of the oath they took on Helen’s wedding day. Each had sworn to defend Helen’s chosen husband against any man bold enough to steal her away. That time had come. A thousand black ships and fifty times as many men set sail for Troy and vengeance.

Not every Greek was eager to chase after the faithless Helen. When Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, received his summons to join the attack against Troy, he consulted an oracle. The oracle prophesized that if Odysseus left for Troy, he would not return home for a very, very long time. True to his nickname—Odysseus the Cunning—Odysseus hatched a devious plot to release him from his vow to retrieve Helen.

When Odysseus’s spies told him that Agamemnon’s herald was near, Odysseus pretended he had gone stark raving mad. Like a crazed farmer he plowed the beaches, planting salt instead of seeds. With a donkey hitched next to an ox, their gaits unmatched, the plow lurched in all directions, adding to the madness. But the herald was not fooled by clever Odysseus, whose reputation for trickery was well known. Grabbing Odysseus’s little boy, the herald tossed him directly in the plow’s path. Odysseus turned the plow to avoid his son.
“Aha, your ruse is revealed,” the herald called to Odysseus.

Thetis did not want her son, Achilles, to go to battle over Helen any more than Odysseus had wanted to fight. Although it had been her wedding the grievous golden apple had ruined, she did not seek revenge. She feared losing her beloved Achilles in battle far too much. Thetis sent Achilles disguised as a woman to a distant castle to hide among the maidens there. But an oracle had foretold that without Achilles there would be no taking of Troy, and so Agamemnon was determined to have him. If anyone could sniff out a scheme, it was Odysseus. So Agamemnon sent him in search of Achilles.

Disguised as a peddler, Odysseus arrived at the castle where Achilles hid. Gathering all the maidens around him, Odysseus threw open his trunk full of wares. The women admired the jewelry, fingered the fine cloth, and tapped the perfumes to their wrists. Only one maiden reached for a dagger. Odysseus snatched away the veil covering Achilles’ face.

Odysseus and Achilles met the Greeks at Aulis. They prepared to set sail for Troy, but Boreas, the god of the North Wind, had other ideas for the black sails. He beat the ships back with tempestuous storms, and for days and then for weeks the Greeks were no closer to Troy than when they had begun. Agamemnon ordered his soothsayers to consult an oracle.

“Artemis, the goddess of hunting, is grieving. One of our countrymen has slain her beloved hare. She won’t allow safe passage to Troy until you have sacrificed something you love equally well—your daughter, Iphigeneia.”

At first Agamemnon refused. But soon his men’s grumblings turned to talk of mutiny. So Agamemnon sent for his daughter under the pretense that she was to marry Achilles. When she arrived in her wedding dress, Agamemnon told her the truth. Through tears of shame he watched
his brave Iphigeneia walk to the altar and bare her throat to the executioner. The priest slit her throat with one powerful stroke. That night the storm winds died, and the Greeks set sail for Troy.

Agamemnon offered King Priam one last chance to return Helen to Menelaus. From his ship anchored in Troy’s harbor, Agamemnon dispatched an envoy to appeal to Priam.

“Give up Helen, or give up Troy.”
“Never!” the Trojans bellowed.
With this last attempt at peace failed, the Trojan War began. The black ships beached on Trojan shores, and then the Greeks made camp.

The Trojans withdrew inside their great walled city, hunkering down for a long siege.

And long it was. For nine years the two stubborn enemies stood firm, neither keeping an advantage for long. The Greeks grew homesick, and the Trojans tired of their confinement, but neither side gave in.

Eris flitted about the Greek camps, delighted over the turbulence in the air. With patience worn thin from years without home or comfort, quarrels broke out over any slight. Eris was equally content inside the citadel. There tempers flared due to food gone bad and crowded housing.

The restless Greeks attacked and sacked towns up and down the coast. Plundered food filled their bellies, stolen treasures fed their greed, and kidnapped maidens made them forget their homesickness for a moment. Agamemnon took the choicest pickings for himself. Of the maidens, Chryseis, daughter of Apollo’s priest, was the fairest.

Chryseis’s father traveled to the Greek camp to beg for his daughter’s release. He had brought more than enough gold to barter with, but Agamemnon abused the priest with insults and ordered him away. The priest left, but soon after he departed, the Greeks fell ill with a strange fever. One by one Agamemnon’s men died, and the air grew thick with smoke from the death pyres.

Agamemnon summoned the soothsayer. “What evil plagues our camp?”

“You, sire. You have angered Apollo. You have insulted his priest. Apollo shoots plague-tipped arrows into our midst. Until you give up Chryseis, we will all suffer.”

If Agamemnon was to give up Chryseis the Fair, he would have another. He sent two men to Achilles’ tent to rob Achilles of his fairest slave.
Infuriated, the hot-tempered Achilles swore he’d never lift his sword in Agamemnon’s defense. He’d sworn no oath to protect Menelaus. No oath promising to return Helen to Sparta. No oath to Greece. Achilles stormed off the battlefield, determined never to fight the Trojans again.

By now the gods in Olympus had all taken sides. Aphrodite stood firm with Paris, who had awarded her the apple. The rejected Hera and Athena stood just as firmly against him. Thetis, furious now at Agamemnon for the way he’d treated her son Achilles, appealed to Zeus to end the war—granting victory to King Priam and defeat to Agamemnon. Zeus was reluctant to take sides, knowing whoever he crossed would make his life disagreeable. But, in the end, Zeus gave in to Thetis.

Their plan was a simple one, especially for the gods, who tend to like intricate plots. That night Agamemnon would dream that victory against the Trojans was his if he attacked at daybreak.

The next morning Agamemnon awoke calling his men to arms. “We must march today. Zeus has guaranteed our success!”

The Greeks rushed the walled city.

The Trojans poured out of the gates.

The two armies brandished swords, screamed threats, and rushed to meet in battle. King Priam stood on the wall watching the mayhem below. The two armies pulled back, creating two lines facing one another. Between them stood Paris and Menelaus. It would be a fight to the death. Helen’s lover against Helen’s husband—with Helen as the victor’s prize.

The first throw went to Paris. With raised shield Menelaus deflected the spear and then hurled his own with such force that the point shot clear through Paris’s shield and breastplate. Paris felt the fabric of his tunic rip but not his skin. Bellowing with fury Menelaus drew his sword and crashed it down upon Paris’s bronze helmet where the blade shattered into pieces. Now weaponless, Menelaus charged Paris, ready to fight
barehanded. He grabbed Paris by his helmet and dragged him toward the Greek battle line. Alarmed that the fight would end with Paris administering but one blow, Aphrodite broke the helmet’s strap, stirred up a cloud of smoke, and whisked Paris inside the great walls of Troy.

Agamemnon stepped forward. Paris had clearly lost the hand-to-hand combat. Both sides had witnessed Menelaus’s courage and Paris’s cowardice. “To the victor go the spoils! Bring Helen to the gate,” Agamemnon demanded.

The Trojans were ready to hand over Helen when Hera and Athena interfered. The gods hold grudges, and they had not forgiven Paris for giving the apple to Aphrodite. They would not be satisfied until Troy lay in ruins.

Athena swept down onto the battlefield and whispered into a Trojan soldier’s ear. “Shoot.”

The arrow broke the uneasy truce, wounding Menelaus and enraging the Greeks. War!

The Greeks pushed the Trojans back, fighting boldly, shield against shield, sword against sword. When a man fell, his enemy tried to strip him of his armor and weapons while his countrymen stood over him, protecting him from the dishonor.

The fiercest Trojan of all, Hector—eldest son of Priam—drove his chariot through the Greeks like a man possessed. Greek after Greek died at the thrust of his spear—and under his courageous leadership, the Greeks were driven back to the sea.

That night inside Troy’s great walls, the warriors celebrated. In the Greek seaside camp, the soldiers nursed their wounds. Even Agamemnon was losing hope. Only Achilles could beat Hector. And Achilles would not fight. Swallowing his pride Agamemnon offered Achilles whatever he wanted if only he would don his armor and lead the Greeks to victory against Hector. Achilles refused.
The next day Hector led the Trojans past the Greek’s defensive line and to their ships.

Patroclus burst into Achilles’ tent. “I beg of you, my dearest friend, give me your armor. I must rally our men. If you will not lead them, I must. It’s our only hope now.”

Achilles raised his cup—an offering to Zeus. “Grant Patroclus victory and bring my fellow warrior and closest companion back to me unharmed,” he demanded.

The armor fooled the Trojans. One look at the invincible “Achilles” and the warriors scattered. Patroclus chased them to the Trojan wall
where Hector turned to face him. Patroclus tried to step back into the protection of his men, but with his backward step Hector saw an opening and struck with force. His sword pierced Patroclus’s belly. With that killing stroke, Hector felled Patroclus.

When Achilles heard of his beloved friend’s death, he vowed revenge. The anger he’d fanned against Agamemnon now ignited into full rage against Hector. He would see Hector’s death or his own. Nothing short of that would do.

The next morning, in a new set of armor fashioned by the gods, Achilles led the Greeks against the Trojans, killing hundreds with his spear. The Trojans fled back through the gates and inside the protective walls of Troy—all except Hector who, despite Priam’s pleads to come inside, stood to face Achilles.

The two warriors circled one another. Hector hurled his spear with all his might. It bounced uselessly off Achilles’ divine shield. Pulling his knife from a sheath that hung at his thigh, Hector charged. Achilles ran to meet him driven by his own savage hatred. Finding an opening in Hector’s armor at the collarbone, Achilles threw his spear. It pierced Hector through the neck.

Still enraged by Patroclus’s death, Achilles stripped Hector’s corpse of armor and tied the bleeding body by the ankles to the back of his chariot. With the bite of his whip, Achilles drove the horses like demons riding around and around the walls of Troy. Broken and dispirited, Priam, Hecuba, and all of Troy turned away in grief.

Achilles drove his chariot back to the Greek camp with Hector still dragging behind. That night, covered in the cloak of dark, Priam stole into Achilles’ tent, humbling himself to his enemy. To Achilles he offered Hector’s weight in gold if he could but give his son a proper burial. Achilles, seeing Priam’s grief as deep as his own, broke down, his anger now extinguished.
Achilles ordered his servants to wash Hector’s body and dress it in the softest linen robe they could find so that Priam would not see his son’s body bloodied and battered. For nine days, while the Trojans mourned and buried their prince, the two great armies declared a truce.

And then they resumed fighting.

Even without Hector to lead them, the Trojans fought a good battle and many strong Greek warriors fell. Achilles valiantly led the Greeks right up to the walls of Troy. It would have ended then and there, but Paris shot a poisoned arrow and the gods saw to it that the arrow flew...
true. It struck Achilles in the heel. As a child, Achilles’ mother, the goddess Thetis, had dipped his mortal body in the River Styx, making him invincible—all but the heel by which she held him.

The two great Greek warriors Odysseus and Ajax fought like demons to protect Achilles’ body from capture. Warding off blows, they inched their way back to the safety of their camp, dragging Achilles’ lifeless form between them.

Another truce was declared—another fallen warrior mourned.

The Greeks burned Achilles’ body on a funeral pyre and placed his ashes in the same urn as his beloved friend Patroclus. Thetis, encircled by her sisters’ arms, collapsed in sorrow and wept—her beloved son Achilles no more.

Agamemnon awarded Achilles’ divine armor to Odysseus. Ajax, sure that it was he who had earned the armor with his bravery, fell into a jealous rage. He plotted to kill Agamemnon and Odysseus to restore his honor. But Athena, looking down from Olympus, feared that with so many leaders dead, the Greeks would lose and Aphrodite would have her way—again. So Athena cast madness upon Ajax.

Not in his right mind, Ajax declared war on the Greek flocks of sheep and goats. Convinced he was battling Trojans, Ajax swung his sword again and again throughout the night, until on day’s break he looked over the plain to see it strewn with slaughtered animals, his body encrusted with their blood.

Shamed, Ajax plunged the hilt of his sword into the ground and threw himself upon the point.

With Achilles and now Ajax gone, the Greeks were despondent. There was but one last hope. Kill Paris. With Paris dead, the Greeks were convinced Helen would give up Troy and return home. But Paris was not
much of a warrior. He was too cowardly for hand-to-hand combat. He preferred to face his enemies from a distance, and so he favored the bow and arrow. The Greeks arranged for a master archer to challenge Paris to a match that would draw him out from behind Troy’s protective walls.

Paris managed to shoot first but missed, and the archer returned three arrows simultaneously. He wounded Paris in the ankle, hand, and eye. The Trojans carried Paris back inside the walls and to Helen.

Paris died in Helen’s arms.

But still Helen did not come forth.

Desperate, the Greeks hatched one last plot.

The schemer Odysseus designed a huge hollow wooden horse. Carpenters cut a nearly invisible trapdoor into the horse’s hindquarter. Odysseus perched a ladder against the opening and warned the warriors climbing inside not to make a sound until they were given the signal. The Greeks then pretended to strike camp, board their ships, and sail home. Once hidden on the far side of a nearby island, the fleet dropped sail and waited. One Greek soldier remained behind with the story Odysseus had made him memorize.

The next morning Trojan lookouts in the parapets could not believe what lay below. In front of the gates, an enormous wooden horse stood, and behind it the Greek camp appeared deserted, the harbor empty of Greek ships. The Greeks had given up!

Ten long years of warfare and siege were over. The Trojans flooded out of the gates cheering. One lone Greek staggered out of hiding. The Trojans dragged him to Priam where the Greek convincingly wept his way through the story Odysseus had taught him: Agamemnon intended to use him as a human sacrifice to appease the gods. But he had managed to escape into the swamp. He no longer wanted to be a Greek. He swore allegiance to Priam and all of Troy.
“But what of the monstrous horse?” the Trojans asked.

“An offering to Athena. Surely, something so grand would please her. And it’s too large for you to bring into the city and steal the glory. Agamemnon hopes you will burn it where it stands and bring Athena’s wrath down on your heads for destroying her tribute.”

Cassandra warned Priam. “Beware Greeks bearing gifts.”

But no one listened, as was her fate.

One other doubted the story. He begged Priam to be wary. But as he spoke, two vile serpents rose up out of the sea and wrapped their coils
around the man, dragging him to a watery grave. The Trojans, convinced the serpents were Athena’s doing, shouted, “Bring in the carven image.”

So the Trojans dragged the wooden horse through their gates and inside the city walls.

In the middle of the night, when all was quiet and the Trojans lay in a deep sleep, weary from their celebrations, the Greek warriors crept out of the belly of the horse. They threw open the gates of Troy for the Greek army that was waiting outside the walls.

Racing through the city, soldiers torched building after building until all of Troy was in flames. When the Trojans stumbled out of their doors, still groggy with sleep, the Greeks butchered them—men, women, children hacked down.

The sun rose on a city in ruin. Hecuba, once a queen, now a captive, looked over the smoldering city of her nightmare. Anguished, she wailed, “What sorrow is there that is not mine? Country lost and husband and children.”

The Greeks led the few Trojan women who had survived the massacre aboard the black ships. Slaves now, they looked back at their once great city.

... the city is given over to the flames, while the women and children are carried into captivity ...

—Homer, The Iliad

The fall of Troy—a prophecy fulfilled—and all because of an apple and a pretty face.