

Translated excerpt

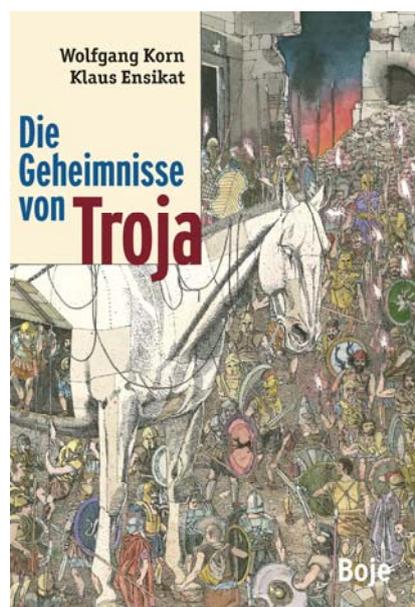
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Die Geheimnisse von Troja

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The secrets of Troy

Translated by Allison Brown



Agamemnon, Priam, Achilles, and Company—A Story of Honor, Vindictiveness, and the Whims of the Gods

Absolute cabin fever!

For more than eight years they had been stuck there on the beach of the Troad. The sun had risen over their camp more than 3000 times with a promise of success, and then it always turned out to be just another day of futile fighting.

Or even worse: a day of never-ending waiting.

And 3000 times the sun also set on their accursed camp, leaving the men alone with their dishonor.

For more than 3000 days and 3000 nights they had already been hanging around together. There was nothing to do except for the occasional battle and plundering raids in the region, because the huge army needed huge amounts of food and even more spoils, honor, and glory.

Which was worse: summer or winter?

It was swelteringly hot and stuffy in the summer. The heroes sweat in their armor and leather clothing.

But the winter was even worse. It didn't get all that cold, but very damp and uncomfortable. It rained for days and the wind never stopped blowing.

And what about all the diseases as a result of the spreading marshlands?

Sometimes the men had diarrhea, then they got colds, and more and more of them were hit by malaria and sleeping sickness.

The men did not take hygiene very seriously, since they thought they would only be there a short time. And so the rotting garbage was piling up at the edges of the camp. You could not even imagine how many pits filled with feces were stinking in the vicinity of the camp.

Pure boredom!

Many of the warriors were from the Peloponnese and the neighboring islands. They could take the opportunity to look at and explore the landscape, to see if in the Troad things were different than where they came from. But the men weren't interested in the landscape and nature.

The men could clean their weapons, but heroes like Achilles or Odysseus had servants to do things like that.

Of course they could get some exercise or do drills: throw spears, practice shooting with a bow and arrow or hand-to-hand combat with a sword. However, they had to be careful not to overexert themselves, because the battle could have resumed at any moment. And besides, the warriors were not very disciplined—as described for us by Homer, a poet from Smyrna, south of Troy. They did hardly any drills and didn't even participate regularly in the fighting.

They could play dice and lose their share of the spoils before they even won them, as many of the warriors had certainly done.

They could tell each other stories, but after 3000 long evenings on the beach of Troas, everyone had already heard everyone else's strokes of fate and all their anecdotes at least ten times. And you had to be careful about jokes and anecdotes—the Greeks were not very tolerant. If anyone felt that his pride had been hurt, then he went for his weapon. That wasn't a sign of shame, but rather it showed his bravery. And that is why they were even there in the first place, namely, to reestablish the honor of one of their men.



They didn't even want to go on the raids to do plundering in the region. After eight hard years everything had already been cleared out anyway. And all of this was mostly Achilles' fault.

Apparently invulnerable, he was raging among the Trojans and their allies. But he would die at some point because he was only a demigod. He would attain glory—and then die.

Maybe it was this certainty that made him so intolerable. People could hope to grow to be old and gray, to have many children, and to die peacefully in their own bed, but Achilles could not. His mother, at least, tried to protect him from his fate. She made sure that he received a set of armor that had been forged on Mount Olympus. And she dipped him in the underworld river Styx, which made him invulnerable. Unfortunately she missed a small spot, where she held on to him: his heal.

Little by little Achilles conquered the cities allied with Troy. He supposedly plundered dozens already, confiscating their treasures and women—including Briseis and Chryseis.

Moreover, he systematically ravaged the environs of Troy—from the Troad to the Ida Mountains, where he had his men steal grain and livestock, since the besiegers had to get their food from somewhere. There was no longer anything even resembling that in the direct vicinity of Troy, because they had already stolen everything, right down to the last piece of grain.

Going stir-crazy!

Here they were herded together in very close quarters. It was no wonder they attacked each other more and more. The warriors developed their whims and became unbearable. Agamemnon had to lead a strict regiment, or else his people would soon start killing each other instead of the Trojan enemies.

BOX:

Achilles: Demigod and Steam Hammer of the Greeks

“Achilles” is the Latin name of the hero that is called “Achilleus” in Greek. In English we use his Latin name. He is like a “Terminator” of the Greek invaders, since there are two reasons why it is virtually impossible to destroy him. For one thing, he is a demigod (son of the goddess Thetis and the hero), and for another, he received his armor and weaponry from the gods.

Achilles is the commander not only of an armada of fifty ships, but also of the elite warriors of the Myrmidons (a Thessalian people in Greek mythology)—a kind of rapid deployment force.

He is much stronger and vicious in battle than his comrades are, although his character is otherwise rather gentle. He is the main character in the story that we are learning about on the following pages.

Agamemnon was the boss of the whole undertaking. He promised everyone: We will sail to Troy, conquer the city after a short siege, collect generous spoils, and free Helen. And voilà—before you know it we’ll be back home again, enjoying timeless glory for our deed. (By the way, wars are still made palatable that way; just think of the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in those cases it wasn’t to save a beautiful woman, but to protect our “freedom.”)



But now the soldiers' morale had gone down the drain! Quarrels broke out over trifles. The best thing was to show strength in dealing with the strong ones, since the weaker ones oriented themselves around the strong ones. Instead of punishing a hundred minor swindlers, it was better to take one of the heroes to task. Then the weaker ones got their act together on their own. So Agamemnon grabbed his strongest adversary: the bold Achilles. It was then easy to find a reason. Why were they waiting there anyway? Yes, most of the warriors were wondering that. At first just occasionally, but after they had been waiting for years already, they started asking themselves all the more frequently: What are we doing here?

The common warriors were of course there because they had to follow their masters, whether they liked it or not. But the tribal leaders, the chiefs, the princes—why were they hanging around there?

The heroes did not even want to be heroes anymore. Every one of them ruled over a kingdom, which is why they were not all that thrilled about taking up arms when Agamemnon came and demanded their allegiance. No, not at all...

Odysseus had recently married Penelope and their son Telemachus was just born. Of course Odysseus did not want to leave, which is why he feigned insanity. He harnessed a donkey and an ox (which have different stride lengths) to his plow and sowed his fields with salt, which makes the soil infertile. But the other princes did not believe him and set a trap to trick him: They laid his newborn son in the path of the plow. If Odysseus were truly insane, he would have run over his son, but instead he stopped the plow and his trick was revealed.

And what about Achilles!? We'll get to him soon.

What was the sense of it all?

Odysseus and his comrades-in-arms Achilles, Agamemnon, and Ajax had been besieging powerful Troy for eight years already. They simply no longer believed that the city would ever fall, because Troy had a massive city wall and an even more massive fortress. They had sufficient water

reserves—two streams. And Troy had access to extensive back country, from which ever more allies continued to emerge.

Was it really simply because the forces of the Greeks and the Trojans were perfectly balanced? Or were there other reasons for the deadlock?

One of the rare distractions was women. Of course there were very few of them in this men's camp, in particular women who were taken as spoils by warriors on raids and kept in the camp as prisoners or hostages. One of them, Briseis, became Achilles' lover—unlawfully, without Agamemnon having been asked. Achilles let there be no doubt about what he thought of Agamemnon. He felt he was not the right person for his position. The best proof was that they had been sitting in one place for more than eight years, and as if that in itself were not enough, an epidemic was spreading throughout the camp: the plague. More and more men were getting sick and the danger was growing that the entire army would be decimated. Nothing helped—neither the herbs that the healers gave the sick men, nor the sacrifices that the Greeks offered to their gods.

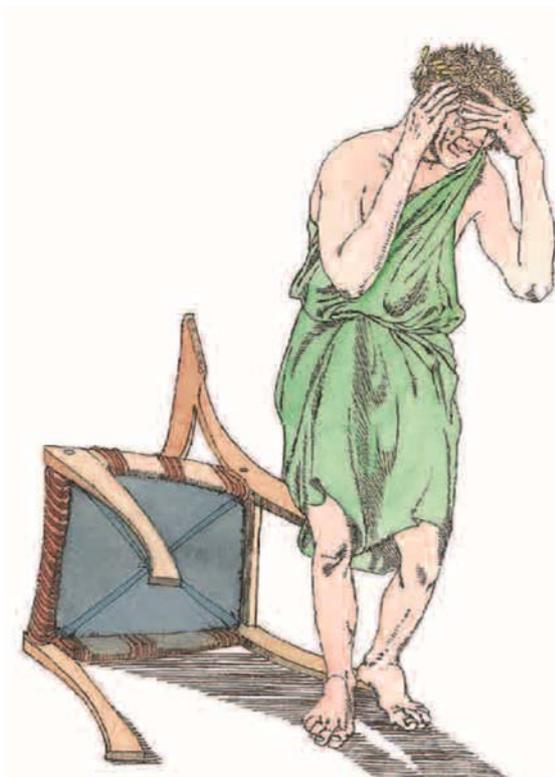
For us today, one thing is clear: it was the deficient hygiene that fostered the spread of an epidemic plague. But in antiquity people thought very differently about it. For them it was a judgment of the gods.



It might be good to know this from the very beginning: In this world of heroes, nothing important happened that was not determined by the gods. The Greeks knew that of course, and that is why in their need they turned to the seer Calchas.

"The gods are angry with us," he responded. "The god Apollo is shooting arrows of pestilence down upon us Greeks."

What made the gods so angry? The seer had an answer for that question as well. One of Apollo's temple priests had a daughter Chryseis. Because Agamemnon took a fancy to her, he captured her and made her his slave mistress. This of course embittered her father, who then attempted to buy her freedom from Agamemnon, but the commander not only chased him away, he also dishonored him. With that, however, he also dishonored Apollo. The seer knew that Apollo would only end the plague when the daughter was returned to her father.



Extremely reluctantly Agamemnon agreed to return Chryseis, though with this he had given in to criticism by Achilles. But he had a chance to seize the moment: "No one is more terrible than you, Achilles. I hate no one more. As Apollo took Chryseis away from me, so shall I take away your Briseis. That should make it clear once and for all who is in charge here!"

Instead of answering, Achilles reached for his sword and he certainly would have cut Agamemnon to pieces if the goddess Athena had not gone between them. Thus Achilles vented his anger only in words: "You tyrant! You egotist."

While Achilles' companion Patroclus handed the slave Briseis over to Agamemnon's henchmen, Achilles went alone to the beach, where he

cried out of rage. Crying was not something shameful among the heroes of antiquity! Achilles cried and his wrath grew. He vowed to take terrible revenge! His revenge was to do nothing and instead watch his fellow warriors get massacred. And when they were at their wit's end, then they would come crawling to him, led by Agamemnon. Who would turn out to be the stronger of the two: Achilles or Agamemnon?

This is how the story of the Trojan War must be told today. We want to hear details, emotions, and drama at all levels. But back then, when the story was written down for the very first time—by Homer, we assume—it sounded very different.

BOX:

The Invaders: Greeks, also called Achaeans or Danaans

The Achaeans were actually only the people who lived in the region of Achaea in the northwestern Peloponnese and founded several cities there. (If you look at a map of Greece, it looks like a big dripping triangle hanging below the Greek mainland. That is the craggy Peloponnesian peninsula.) But in *The Iliad* Homer used Achaeans to refer to all Greeks who participated in the campaign against Troy. Sometimes they are also called Danaans, referring to their legendary ancestor Danaus. The most important people on the side of the Greeks were:

- Achilles
- Agamemnon
- Odysseus
- Ajax, next to Achilles the strongest Greek
- the seer Calchas
- Diomedes, warrior and king of Argos
- Menelaus, king of Sparta, also Helen's husband and Agamemnon's brother
- the old and wise warrior Nestor
- Patroclus, Achilles' companion and chariot driver

Homer's Hexameter

Homer's *Iliad* tells only an excerpt of the entire story. His story covers only fifty-one days in the ninth year of the war and he only made inferences to the preceding and subsequent events. In the first half there are scattered flashbacks and in the second half there are allusions to the future—the fall of Troy. Homer also took every opportunity to mention incredibly many names:

Leitos and Peneleos were leaders of the Boiotians,
With Arkesilaos and Prothoënor and Klonios;
(*Iliad II*, 494–495, trans. Richard Lattimore, 1951)

Several hundred are mentioned in the epic poem, since all lineages of the heroes and princes of the Greeks are mentioned by name.

On top of that, all of Mount Olympus is present—all the gods of the Greeks, from Zeus and Hera, the father and mother of the gods, to Athena, Poseidon, Hermes, Hephaestus, Apollo, Artemis, and Aphrodite.

Finally, the entire story was written in a form that is very difficult to read:

Zeus, exalted and mightiest, sky-dwelling in the dark mist:
let not the sun go down and disappear into darkness
until I have hurled headlong the castle of Priam
(*Iliad II*, 412–414, trans. Richard Lattimore, 1951)

All in all the plot is rather hard to follow and we don't find out how the story ends; there are long lists of names and the most complex of sentences—"Missed the point!" is what every good scriptwriter would say today or every teacher would write in the margin if it were submitted as a school composition.

But things were different in antiquity. Everyone knew how the story ended, since they were raised with it just as we were with *Snow White* or

The Wizard of Oz. Long before Homer, the heroic stories were told around the campfires of the Greeks. Homer's *Iliad* is simply the oldest version of this story that has survived and been passed down. He consolidated all the stories that were told into two huge epics. And he wrote it all in a verse form called hexameter. "Hexameter" literally means "six measures" (Greek *hexa* = six, *metron* = measure). That means that each line of verse has six accented syllables. A strict hexameter always follows each accented syllable with two unaccented ones, except for the end of the line, which has only one unaccented syllable following the last accent.

The example that people like to cite is the opening of the *Odyssey*, here with the accented syllables indicated by a circumflex over the vowel:

ândra moi / ênnepe, / Moûsa, po/lûtropon, / hôs mala / pôlla
 plângthe, e/peî Troî/ês hiër/ôn ptoli/êthron e/pêrse;
 pôllôn / d'ânthrô/pôn iden / âstea / kaî noön / êgnô,
 pôlla d'ho / g'ên pôn/tô pathen / âlgea / hôn kata / thûmon
 ârnumen/ôs hên / tê psûch/ên kaî / nôston he/tairôn.
 (*Odyssey* I, 1–5).

In translation that means

Téll mé,/ Múse, of the / mán versa/tíle and re/sourciful, who /
 wándered
 mány a / seá-míle,/ áfter he / ránsácked / Tróy's holy / cíty.
 Mány the / mén whóse / tówns he ob/sérved, whóse / mínds he
 dis/cóvered,
 mány the / paíns in his / heárt hé / súffered tra/vérsing the / seáwáy,
 fíghting for / hís ówn / lífe and a / wáy báck / hóme for his /
 cómrádes.
 (*Odyssey* I, 1–5, trans. Rodney Merrill, 2002)

Of course the whole thing would be rather monotonous and boring—after all, the *Iliad* has 15,693 verses that are divided into 24 songs—if there were no adaptations and variations. Therefore, sometimes an accent is not followed by two unaccented syllables, but instead there are two accented syllables in a row.

Aside from its pure entertainment value, the *Iliad* also served as a saga of the gods, a heroic epic, and a family chronicle all rolled into one. For example, Homer recounted the events from the perspective of the Greeks as they were regaining strength, and hundreds of Greek warriors and their families were listed in the so-called Catalogue of Ships. Nowadays it bores us to read a list like this but the descendants of these warriors could derive claims for land and social positions from such mention in the catalogue.

BOX

***Iliad*—why not *Troy*?**

Iliad is the Ancient Greek adjective form of *Ilios*, the fortress, thus literally “belonging to or of the fortress.” Since Homer used *Ilios* in his epic poems to signify Troy, one could also translate *Iliad* as “belonging to Troy.”

At first the famous poem did not have any title at all. It was simply *the poem*, just as in Christianity the “Holy Scripture” is the Bible or in Islam “the Book” is the Quran. Not until more than three centuries after it was written, that is, in the fifth century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus selected the name *Iliad* for the central work of the Greeks.

It is not known when and why the name “Troy” became more prevalent. In any case the retellings of the story in the European Middle Ages were already referred to as “Troy stories.”

But what is the central idea of this story?

The *Iliad* is not primarily about the Battle of Troy and its decline, but about the struggle between two men who actually both belong to the same camp: Agamemnon and Achilles. Achilles, as we have heard, is very angry and thus the gods are asked to assuage his rage.

We need always to keep that in mind: The oldest poem of the Western world begins not with love, friendship, courage, or despair—but

with unspeakable rage. And anger and rage are also the motifs that continue to drive it forward.

Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the
Achaians,
hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
of dogs, of all birds, and the will of Zeus was accomplished
since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.
(*Iliad* I, 1–7, trans. Richard Lattimore, 1951).

