



Background

At the time of the Trojan War, Greece was not a unified nation. The Greek campaign against the Trojans was led by a loose group of independent tribal lords, or kings, who commanded their own soldiers. Leaders like Achilles and Agamemnon did not owe each other unconditional allegiance.

Rage—Goddess, sing¹ the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,



murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans² countless losses,

hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls,

great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,

5 feasts for the dogs and birds,

and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.

Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,

Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

What god drove them to fight with such a fury?

10 Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at the king

he swept a fatal plague through the army—men were dying

and all because Agamemnon spurned Apollo's priest.

Yes, Chryses approached the Achaeans' fast ships

to win his daughter back, bringing a priceless ransom

15 and bearing high in hand, wound on a golden staff,

the wreaths of the god, the distant deadly Archer.

He begged the whole Achaean army but most of all

the two supreme commanders, Atreus' two sons,

“Agamemnon, Menelaus—all Argives geared for war!

20 May the gods who hold the halls of Olympus³ give you

Priam's city⁴ to [plunder](#) , then safe passage home.

Just set my daughter free, my dear one . . . here,
accept these gifts, this ransom. Honor the god
who strikes from worlds away—the son of Zeus, Apollo!”

25 And all ranks of Achaeans cried out their assent:

“Respect the priest, accept the shining ransom!”

But it brought no joy to the heart of Agamemnon.

The king dismissed the priest with a brutal order
ringing in his ears: “Never again, old man,

30 let me catch sight of you by the hollow ships!

Not loitering now, not slinking back tomorrow.

The staff and the wreaths of god will never save you then.

The girl—I won't give up the girl. Long before that,
old age will overtake her in *my* house, in Argos,⁵

35 far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth

at the loom, forced to share my bed!

Now go,

don't tempt my wrath—and you may depart alive.”

The old man was terrified. He obeyed the order,
turning, trailing away in silence down the shore

40 where the battle lines of breakers crash and drag.

And moving off to a safe distance, over and over
the old priest prayed to the son of sleek-haired Leto,
lord Apollo, “Hear me, Apollo! God of the silver bow
who strides the walls of Chryse and Cilla [sacrosanct](#) —

45 lord in power of Tenedos⁶—Smintheus,⁷ god of the plague!

If I ever roofed a shrine to please your heart,

ever burned the long rich bones of bulls and goats
on your holy altar, now, now bring my prayer to pass.
Pay the Danaans back—your arrows for my tears!”

50 His prayer went up and Phoebus Apollo heard him.

Down he strode from Olympus’ peaks, storming at heart
with his bow and hooded quiver slung across his shoulders.

The arrows clanged at his back as the god quaked with rage,
the god himself on the march and down he came like night.

55 Over against the ships he dropped to a knee, let fly a shaft



and a terrifying clash rang out from the great silver bow.

First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,
he cut them down in droves—

60 and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight.

Nine days the arrows of god swept through the army.

On the tenth Achilles called all ranks to muster—
the impulse seized him, sent by white-armed Hera
grieving to see Achaean fighters drop and die.

65 Once they’d gathered, crowding the meeting grounds,

the swift runner Achilles rose and spoke among them:

“Son of Atreus, now we are beaten back, I fear,
the long campaign is lost. So home we sail . . .
if we can escape our death—if war and plague

70 are joining forces now to crush the Argives.

But wait: let us question a holy man,

a prophet, even a man skilled with dreams—

dreams as well can come our way from Zeus—

come, someone to tell us why Apollo rages so,
75 whether he blames us for a vow we failed, or sacrifice.

If only the god would share the smoky savor of lambs
and full-grown goats, Apollo might be willing, still,
somehow, to save us from this plague.”

So he proposed
and down he sat again as Calchas rose among them,
80 Thestor’s son, the clearest by far of all the seers
who scan the flight of birds. He knew all things that are,
all things that are past and all that are to come,
the seer who had led the Argive ships to Troy
with the second sight that god Apollo gave him.

85 For the armies’ good the seer began to speak:

“Achilles, dear to Zeus . . .
you order me to explain Apollo’s anger,
the distant deadly Archer? I will tell it all.

But strike a pact with me, swear you will defend me
90 with all your heart, with words and strength of hand.



For there is a man I will enrage—I see it now—
a powerful man who lords it over all the Argives,
one the Achaeans must obey . . . A mighty king,
raging against an inferior, is too strong.

95 Even if he can swallow down his wrath today,

still he will nurse the burning in his chest
until, sooner or later, he sends it bursting forth.

Consider it closely, Achilles. Will you save me?”

And the matchless runner reassured him: “Courage!

100 Out with it now, Calchas. Reveal the will of god,



whatever you may know. And I swear by Apollo
dear to Zeus, the power you pray to, Calchas,
when you reveal god's will to the Argives—no one,
not while I am alive and see the light on earth, no one
105 will lay his heavy hands on you by the hollow ships.

None among all the armies. Not even if you mean
Agamemnon here who now claims to be, by far,
the best of the Achaeans.”

The seer took heart
and this time he spoke out, bravely: “Beware—
110 he casts no blame for a vow we failed, a sacrifice.

The god's enraged because Agamemnon spurned his priest,
he refused to free his daughter, he refused the ransom.
That's why the Archer sends us pains and he will send us more
and never drive this shameful destruction from the Argives,
115 not till we give back the girl with sparkling eyes
to her loving father—no price, no ransom paid—
and carry a sacred hundred bulls to Chryse town.
Then we can calm the god, and only then appease him.”



So he declared and sat down. But among them rose
120 the fighting son of Atreus, lord of the far-flung kingdoms,
Agamemnon—furious, his dark heart filled to the brim,
blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire.
With a sudden, killing look he wheeled on Calchas first:
“Seer of misery! Never a word that works to my advantage!
125 Always misery warms your heart, your prophecies—

never a word of profit said or brought to pass.

Now, again, you divine ⁹god's will for the armies,

bruit it about, as fact, why the deadly Archer

multiplies our pains: because I, I refused

130 that glittering price for the young girl Chryseis.

Indeed, I prefer *her* by far, the girl herself,

I want her mine in my own house! I rank her higher

than Clytemnestra, my wedded wife—she's nothing less

in build or breeding, in mind or works of hand.

135 But I am willing to give her back, even so,

if that is best for all. What I really want

is to keep my people safe, not see them dying.

But fetch me another prize, and straight off too,

else I alone of the Argives go without my honor.

140 That would be a disgrace. You are all witness,

look—*my* prize is snatched away!"

But the swift runner

Achilles answered him at once, "Just how, Agamemnon,

great field marshal . . . most grasping man alive,

how can the generous Argives give you prizes now?

145 I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle,

anywhere. Whatever we dragged from towns we plundered,

all's been portioned out. But collect it, call it back

from the rank and file? *That* would be the disgrace.

So return the girl to the god, at least for now.

150 We Achaeans will pay you back, three, four times over,

if Zeus will grant us the gift, somehow, someday,

to raze Troy's massive ramparts to the ground."

But King Agamemnon countered, “Not so quickly,
brave as you are, godlike Achilles—trying to cheat me.
155 Oh no, you won’t get past me, take me in that way!

What do you want? To cling to your own prize
while I sit calmly by—empty-handed here?
Is that why you order me to give her back?
No—if our generous Argives *will* give me a prize,
160 a match for my desires, equal to what I’ve lost,
well and good. But if they give me nothing
I will take a prize myself—your own, or Ajax’



or Odysseus’ prize—I’ll commandeer her myself
and let that man I go to visit choke with rage!
165 Enough. We’ll deal with all this later, in due time.

Now come, we haul a black ship down to the bright sea,
gather a decent number of oarsmen along her locks
and put aboard a sacrifice, and Chryseis herself,
in all her beauty . . . we embark her too.

170 Let one of the leading captains take command.
Ajax, Idomeneus, trusty Odysseus or you, Achilles,
you—the most violent man alive—so you can perform
the rites for us and calm the god yourself.”

A dark glance
and the headstrong runner answered him in kind: “Shameless—
175 armored in shamelessness—always shrewd with greed!

How could any Argive soldier obey your orders,
freely and gladly do your sailing for you
or fight your enemies, full force? Not I, no.

It wasn't Trojan spearmen who brought me here to fight.

180 The Trojans never did *me* damage, not in the least,
they never stole my cattle or my horses, never
in Phthia¹⁰ where the rich soil breeds strong men
did they lay waste my crops. How could they?
Look at the endless miles that lie between us . . .

185 shadowy mountain ranges, seas that surge and thunder.
No, you colossal, shameless—we all followed you,
to please you, to fight for you, to win your honor
back from the Trojans—Menelaus and you, you dog-face!
What do *you* care? Nothing. You don't look right or left.

190 And now you threaten to strip me of my prize in person—
the one I fought for long and hard, and sons of Achaea
handed her to me.
My honors never equal yours,
whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold—
my arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting,
195 true, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder
the lion's share is yours, and back I go to my ships,
clutching some scrap, some pittance that I love,
when I have fought to exhaustion.
No more now—
back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far,
200 to journey home in the beaked ships of war.
I have no mind to linger here disgraced,
brimming your cup and piling up your plunder.”
But the lord of men Agamemnon shot back,

“*Desert*, by all means—if the spirit drives you home!

205 I will never beg you to stay, not on *my* account.

Never—others will take my side and do me honor,

Zeus above all, whose wisdom rules the world.

You—I hate you most of all the warlords

loved by the gods. Always dear to your heart,

210 strife, yes, and battles, the bloody grind of war.

What if you are a great soldier? That’s just a gift of god.

Go home with your ships and comrades, lord it over

your Myrmidons!¹¹

You *are* nothing to me—you and your overweening anger!

But let this be my warning on your way:

215 since Apollo insists on taking my Chryseis,

I’ll send her back in my own ships with my crew.

But I, I will be there in person at your tents

to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize—

so you can learn just how much greater I am than you

220 and the next man up may shrink from matching words with me,

from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength!”

He broke off and anguish gripped Achilles.

The heart in his rugged chest was pounding, torn . . .

Should he draw the long sharp sword at his hip,

225 thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now?—

or check his rage and beat his fury down?

As his racing spirit veered back and forth,

just as he drew his huge blade from its sheath,

down from the vaulting heavens swept Athena,

230 the white-armed goddess Hera sped her down:

Hera loved both men and cared for both alike.

Rearing behind him Pallas seized his fiery hair—

only Achilles saw her, none of the other fighters—

struck with wonder he spun around, he knew her at once,

235 Pallas Athena! the terrible blazing of those eyes,

and his winged words went flying: "Why, why now?

Child of Zeus with the shield of thunder, why come now?

To witness the outrage Agamemnon just committed?

I tell you this, and so help me it's the truth—

240 he'll soon pay for his arrogance with his life!"

Her gray eyes clear, the goddess Athena answered,

"Down from the skies I come to check your rage

if only you will yield.

The white-armed goddess Hera sped me down:

245 she loves you both, she cares for you both alike.

Stop this fighting, now. Don't lay hand to sword.

Lash him with threats of the price that he will face.

And I tell you this—and I *know* it is the truth—

one day glittering gifts will lie before you,

250 three times over to pay for all his outrage.

Hold back now. Obey us both."

So she urged

and the swift runner complied at once: "I must—

when the two of you hand down commands, Goddess,

a man submits though his heart breaks with fury.

255 Better for him by far. If a man obeys the gods

they're quick to hear his prayers."



And with that

Achilles stayed his burly hand on the silver hilt

and slid the huge blade back in its sheath.

He would not fight the orders of Athena.

260 Soaring home to Olympus, she rejoined the gods

aloft in the halls of Zeus whose shield is thunder.

But Achilles rounded on Agamemnon once again,

lashing out at him, not relaxing his anger for a moment:

“Staggering drunk, with your dog’s eyes, your fawn’s heart!

265 Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle

or risk an ambush packed with Achaea’s picked men—

you lack the courage, you can see death coming.

Safer by far, you find, to foray all through camp,

commandeering the prize of any man who speaks against you.

270 King who devours his people! Worthless husks, the men you rule—

if not, Atrides,¹² this outrage would have been your last.

I tell you this, and I swear a mighty oath upon it . . .

by this, this scepter, look,

that never again will put forth crown and branches,

275 now it’s left its stump on the mountain ridge forever,

nor will it sprout new green again, now the [brazen](#) ax

has stripped its bark and leaves, and now the sons of Achaea

pass it back and forth as they hand their judgments down,

upholding the honored customs whenever Zeus commands—

280 This scepter will be the mighty force behind my oath:

someday, I swear, a yearning for Achilles will strike

Achaea’s sons and all your armies! But then, Atrides,

[harrowed](#) as you will be, *nothing* you do can save you—

not when your hordes of fighters drop and die,
285 cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector! Then—
then you will tear your heart out, desperate, raging
that you disgraced the best of the Achaeans!”

Nestor, one of the wisest Greek commanders and counselors, advises Agamemnon and Achilles to concede to each other; both men refuse. To appease the gods and spare the Achaeans further annihilation, Agamemnon orders Odysseus to return Chryseis. As compensation for his lost war prize, Agamemnon abducts Achilles' Briseis. Dishonored, Achilles swears that never again will he join the Achaeans in fighting against the Trojans. He convinces Thetis to persuade Zeus to help the Trojans defeat the Achaeans.



But *he* raged on, grimly camped by his fast fleet,
the royal son of Peleus, the swift runner Achilles.
290 Now he no longer haunted the meeting grounds
where men win glory, now he no longer went to war
but day after day he ground his heart out, waiting there,
yearning, always yearning for battle cries and combat.
But now as the twelfth dawn after this shone clear
295 the gods who live forever marched home to Olympus,
all in a long cortege, and Zeus led them on.
And Thetis did not forget her son's appeals.
She broke from a cresting wave at first light
and soaring up to the broad sky and Mount Olympus,
300 found the son of Cronus gazing down on the world,
peaks apart from the other gods and seated high
on the topmost crown of rugged ridged Olympus.
And crouching down at his feet,
quickly grasping his knees with her left hand,
305 her right hand holding him underneath the chin,
she prayed to the lord god Zeus, the son of Cronus:

“Zeus, Father Zeus! If I ever served you well
among the deathless gods with a word or action,
bring this prayer to pass: honor my son Achilles!—

310 doomed to the shortest life of any man on earth.

And now the lord of men Agamemnon has disgraced him,
seizes and keeps his prize, tears her away himself. But you—
exalt him, Olympian Zeus: your urgings rule the world!

Come, grant the Trojans victory after victory

315 till the Achaean armies pay my dear son back,

building higher the honor he deserves!”

