

Preparing to Read the *Odyssey*

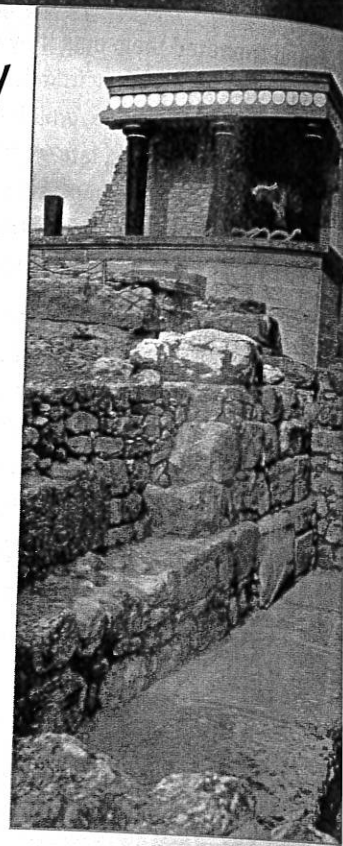
Homer's epic poems celebrate the legendary heroes and heritage of a great culture.

Historical Background: Ancient Greece

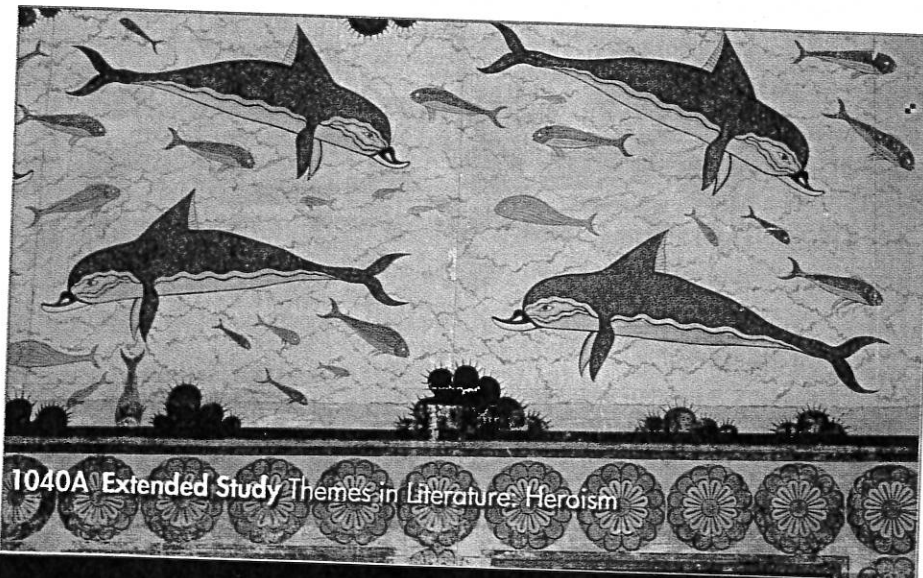
The world of ancient Greece included the Greek mainland, dipping down from continental Europe, and western Asia Minor, the Asian part of present-day Turkey. It also included hundreds of islands in the Aegean (ē jē ən) Sea, the arm of the Mediterranean Sea between mainland Greece and Asia Minor, and in the Ionian (i ō nē ən) Sea, the arm of the Mediterranean to the west of mainland Greece. Odysseus, the legendary hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, was said to be the ruler of Ithaca, one of the western islands.

The Minoans and Mycenaeans Nearly a thousand years before Odysseus would have lived, Greek civilization rose to greatness on Crete, another island south of the mainland. By about 2000 B.C., a sophisticated society called the Minoan (mi nō ən) civilization had developed on Crete. Judging by the archaeological evidence, the Minoans produced elegant stone palaces and fine carvings and metalwork. They also developed a writing system, preserved on a few hundred of the clay tablets on which they wrote. Scholars call that writing system Linear A and have yet to decipher it.

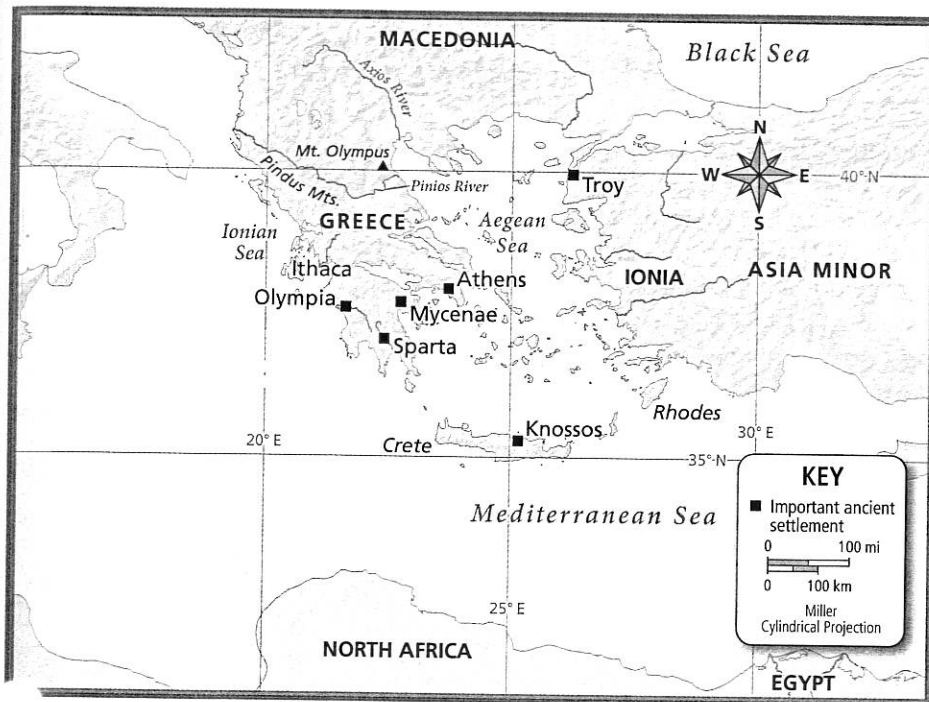
For several centuries, Minoan civilization dominated the Greek world. Then, in about 1450 B.C., it collapsed rather suddenly, perhaps due to earthquakes and invasion. With the weakening of Minoan culture, the Mycenaeans (mī sə nē ənz) became the dominant force in the Greek world. Originating on mainland Greece, the Mycenaeans had swept south and into Crete. Strongly influenced by Minoan civilization, the Mycenaeans too had a palace culture, an economy based on trade, and a writing system that mostly used clay tablets. Evidence of their writing is found in Knossos and Chania on Crete as well as in Mycenae, Pylos, and Thebes, three of their mainland strongholds. Because the Mycenaeans spoke an archaic, or older, form of Greek, scholars have been able to decipher their writing, known as Linear B. It was used primarily to keep palace records.



Sir Arthur Evans, the British archaeologist who worked extensively on Crete, named Minoan civilization for King Minos (mī nās), a ruler of Crete in Greek mythology.



◀▲ The photograph above shows a reconstruction of one wall of The Palace of Minos at Knossos, Crete. The photo at left shows a fresco, or wall painting, from the palace's interior.



◀ Ancient Greece included mainland territories and hundreds of islands clustered in the the Aegean and Ionian Seas. Odysseus' kingdom of Ithaca is a small island in the Ionian Sea.

Legendary Conflicts The writing and archaeological remains suggest early cities with large central palaces and thick protective walls, each ruled by a wanax, or king. Others in society included priests, slaves, workers in trades or crafts, administrative officials, and a warrior class. The Mycenaens wore armor in battle, in which they engaged with apparent frequency. Their warfare with Troy, on the northwest coast of Asia Minor, has become one of the most famous military ventures of all time—the Trojan War. If there really was a King Odysseus, he would have been a key player in that conflict.

Scholars date the Trojan War to somewhere around 1200 B.C. Shortly thereafter, Mycenaean civilization collapsed as the Greek world fell into chaos and confusion. For some three hundred years, writing seems to have disappeared in what is often called the Greek Dark Ages. Then, in about 850 B.C., Greece began emerging from this darkness, spurred by flourishing trade throughout the Mediterranean region. Along with the economic boom came a resurgence of the arts and learning that peaked with the epic poems of Homer. These poems—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—chronicle the Trojan War and the subsequent adventures of the hero Odysseus.

The Rise of City-States After Homer's time, Greek civilization grew more organized and sophisticated. Smaller communities organized as city-states—cities that functioned independently, as countries do. Among them were Sparta, known for its military prowess, and Athens, the birthplace of democracy. Though rivalries sometimes led to warfare among city-states, the Greeks still recognized their common heritage as Hellenes, as they by then usually called themselves. They coordinated efforts to fight common enemies, such as the Persians. They participated in the Olympic games, which records indicate began in 776 B.C. Together, too, they saw the works of Homer as pillars of their heritage, two great epics that celebrated their common past and its heroes.

The Greek word for "city-state" is *polis*, the origin of our words *metropolis* and *politics*.



Greek Mythology and Customs

All aspects of Greek culture reflected belief in the Olympian gods.

Ancient Greek religion was based on a belief in many gods. Zeus was king of the gods; Hera, his beautiful and powerful wife. Other gods and goddesses were associated with different aspects of nature or human behavior. The most important ones were said to dwell on Mount Olympus, the tallest mountain in Greece, where Zeus sat on a throne of gold. These Olympians, however, were not the first gods.

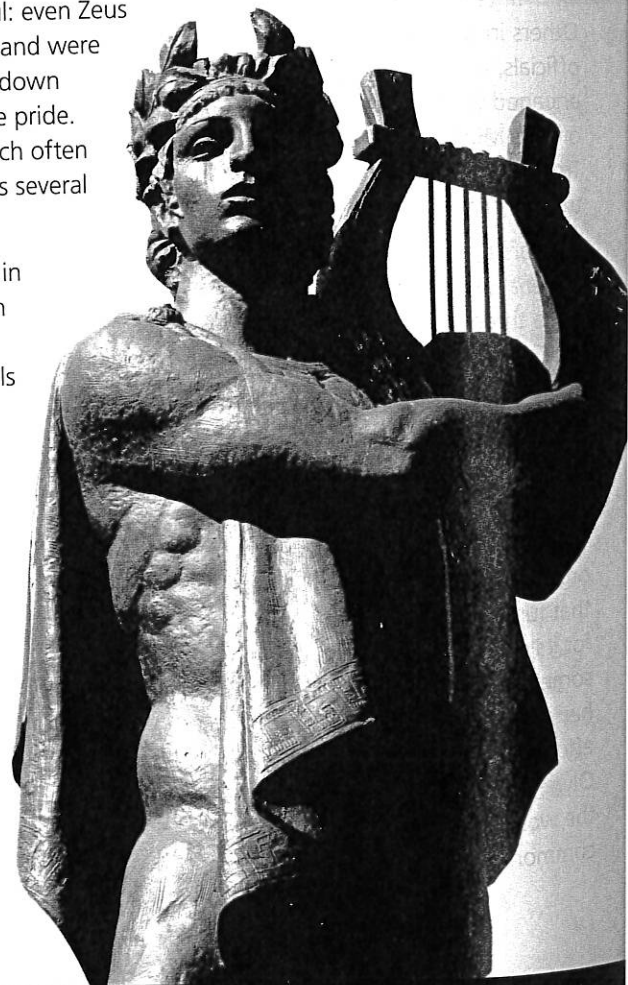
The Titans are Overthrown The early poet Hesiod (hḗ sē əd) wrote a mythic account of the origin of the gods in *Theogony*, a work the Greeks revered almost as much as Homer's epics. According to that origin myth, first there was Chaos, a dark, empty void. Out of Chaos came the Earth, personified as the goddess Gaea. The Earth generated the skies, personified as the god Uranus, who with Gaea produced the giant gods known as Titans. Cronus, the chief Titan, ruled the universe until he was displaced by his three sons, who split the universe among them. Zeus, the most powerful of these sons, became ruler of the heavens. His brother Poseidon became ruler of the seas. The third brother, Hades, became ruler of the underworld, a dark region also called Hades, which was inhabited by shades of the dead.

The Greek gods were powerful, but they were not all-powerful: even Zeus had to bow to fate. The gods displayed many human qualities and were often vengeful and quarrelsome. They were also quick to slap down human beings guilty of hubris (hyōō' or hōō' bris), or excessive pride. To appease the gods, human beings performed sacrifices, which often involved the killing of animals. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus makes several sacrifices to plead for divine aid on his journey home.

Celebrating the Gods The Greeks worshipped the gods in temples dedicated to many gods or just one. The Parthenon in Athens, for instance, was a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena. The Greeks also celebrated their gods at great festivals such as the Olympic games, which were dedicated to Zeus.

The Greeks believed in prophecy, which they associated with the god Apollo. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus journeys all the way to the underworld to consult the blind prophet Tiresias (tī rḗ sē əs), who continues to have the gift of prophecy even though he has died. The Greeks also believed in myths, stories about gods and heroes that they used to explain the world around them. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* drew on these myths; however, for future generations of ancient Greeks, Homer's two epics—like Hesiod's *Theogony*—took on the aura of myths themselves.

▼ Apollo, the god of light and music (among many other things), is often shown with a lyre, the stringed instrument from which the English word *lyric* derives.



Gods in Greek Mythology

You may be more familiar with the Roman names for the Greek gods. The ancient Romans accepted Greek mythology, but they had their own names for its gods and heroes. For example, they called Odysseus *Ulysses*. For each Greek god listed below, the Roman equivalent is also given.

Zeus (zōōs) king of the gods and ruler of the heavens; Roman *Jupiter*, sometimes called *Jove*

Hera (her' ə) wife of Zeus and goddess of married women; Roman *Juno*

Poseidon (pō sī'dən) god of the seas; Roman *Neptune*

Hades (hā'dēz) god of the underworld; Roman *Pluto*

Aphrodite (af' rə dītə) goddess of love and beauty; Roman *Venus*

Ares (er' ēz) god of war; Roman *Mars*

Apollo (əp ol' ō) god of prophecy and music; also called *Phoebus* (fē' bəs); Roman *Apollo*

Artemis (är' tə mis) goddess of the hunt and the moon; Roman *Diana*

Athena (ə thē' nə) goddess of wisdom, skills, and war; Roman *Minerva*

Hephaestus (hē fes' təs) god of fire and metalwork; Roman *Vulcan*

Hermes (hər' mēz) god of commerce and cunning; messenger of the gods; Roman *Mercury*

Demeter (di mē' tər) goddess of the harvest; Roman *Ceres* (sir' ez)

Dionysus (dī' ən ī'səs) god of wine and revelry, also called *Bacchus* (bak' əs); Roman *Dionysus* or *Bacchus*

Hestia (hes' tē ə) goddess of home and hearth; Roman *Vesta*

Helios (hē' lē os') sun god; Roman *Sol*

Uranus (yōō rə' nəs) sky god supplanted by his son *Cronus*; Roman *Uranus*

Gaea (jē' ə) earth goddess and mother of the Titans and Cyclopes; Roman *Tellus* or *Terra*

Cronus (krō' nəs) Titan who ruled the universe before his son *Zeus* dethroned him; Roman *Saturn*

Rhea (rē' ə) wife of *Cronus* and mother of *Zeus*; Roman *Cybele* (sib' ə lē)

Cyclops (sī klops) any one of three Titans who forged thunderbolts for *Zeus*; plural, *Cyclopes* (sī klō pēs)

The Fates three goddesses who wove the threads of each person's life: *Clotho* (klō' thō) spun the thread; *Lachesis* (lak' i sis) measured out the amount of thread; *Atropos* (ə trə pis) snipped the thread

The Muses (myōō' ziz) nine goddesses who presided over the arts and sciences, including *Calliope* (kə lī' ə pē'), the Muse of epic poetry

▼ Poseidon, god of the sea, was also the god of earthquakes and horses. His symbols include the trident, a three-pronged spear.





HOMER *epic poet*

THE POEMS ATTRIBUTED TO HOMER STILL INFLUENCE LITERATURE AND CULTURE TODAY.

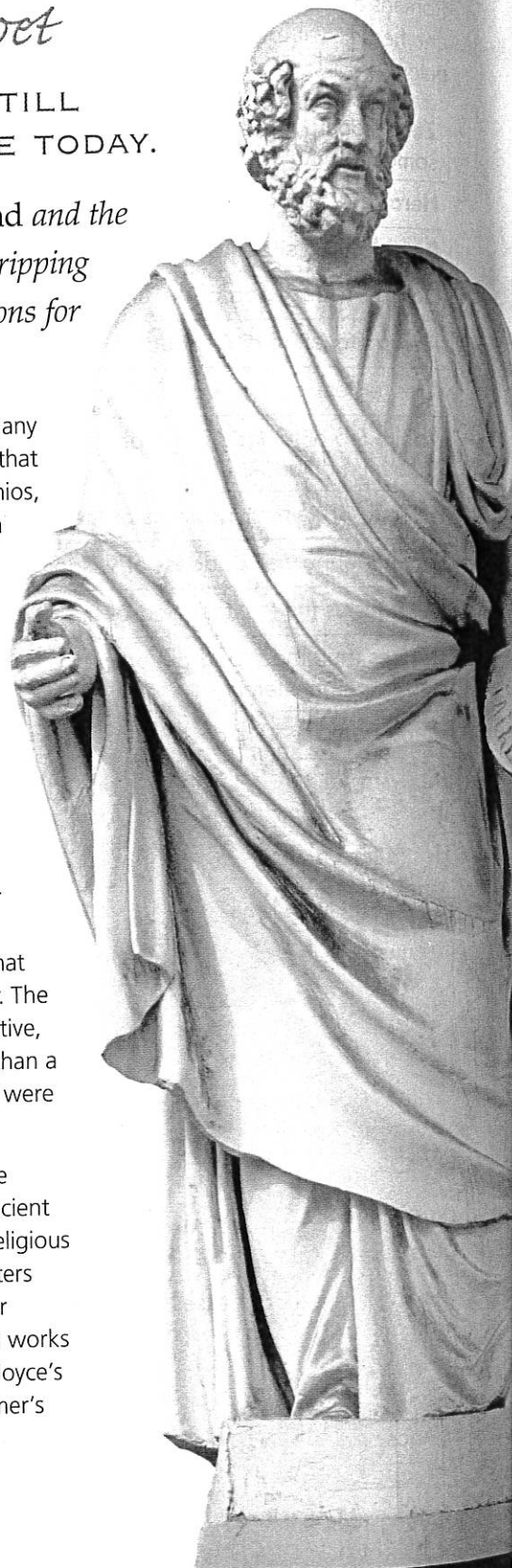
Homer is the legendary poet credited with writing the Iliad and the Odyssey. These epics, known for their sweeping scope, gripping stories, and vivid style, have captured readers' imaginations for almost 3,000 years.

Was there really a Homer? No one can prove his existence with any certainty, for no authentic record of Homer's life exists. Tradition has it that he was born in Ionia in western Asia Minor, perhaps on the island of Chios, and that he was blind. The location is not unreasonable, for Ionia was a center of poetry and learning, where eastern and western cultures met and new intellectual currents were born. Descriptions of Asia Minor in the *Iliad* show in-depth knowledge of the landscape; moreover, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* contain plot elements found in the world's first known epic, *Gilgamesh*, which by Homer's era had traveled from Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) to become familiar in Asia Minor. For example, the hero Gilgamesh visits the underworld, just like the hero of the *Odyssey*; he also has a very good friend who is killed, just like Achilles has in the *Iliad*.

Most efforts to date Homer's life place him somewhere between 850 and 750 B.C. As a Greek oral poet, it is unlikely he lived much later, for by then writing had been reintroduced to Greek culture. The details in Homer's epics make clear that the poems were orally composed and that the *Iliad* was written first and probably some years before the *Odyssey*. The two epics differ in style: the *Iliad* is a single long, highly dramatic narrative, while the *Odyssey* is episodic and reads more like an adventure novel than a drama. For these reasons, some scholars even speculate that the epics were composed by two different poets.

Inspiring Poems Whatever the truth about Homer may be, no one disputes the quality of the two epics with which he is credited. The ancient Greeks revered the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They recited the poems at religious festivals and had children memorize them in school. All the Greek writers and philosophers who came after Homer drew on the two epics. Their influence spread to Rome and beyond, and they became foundational works of western literature. Even in modern times, great works from James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros* have been directly inspired by Homer's verse.

1040E Extended Study Themes in Literature: Heroism



The Epic Form

An **epic** is a long narrative poem that relates important events in the history or folklore of the culture that produced it. Its central character, or **epic hero**, is a larger-than-life figure who embodies traits that the culture values. Typical among those characteristics are physical strength, bravery, high birth, fame, and effective skills as a leader and in battle.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* influenced virtually all the great western epics that followed them. From the *Aeneid*, the great epic of ancient Rome, to *Beowulf*, the foundational epic of Old English; from *The Divine Comedy*, the masterful epic by the Italian poet Dante, to *Paradise Lost*, the brilliant epic by Britain's John Milton—all had Homer's epics as models. Literary devices in Homer's epics are often imitated in these later works, even though many of the later epics were not orally composed. Influential literary devices found in Homer's epics include the following:

- **Opening invocation to the Muse:** The speaker of the poem asks the Muse for inspiration.
- **Starting the story in medias res**, or "in the middle of things": Beginning (after the invocation) with action instead of background information helps capture audience attention.
- **Lofty style:** Elegant language stresses the nobility of the subject.
- **Objective tone:** By keeping an emotional distance, the poet focuses attention on the story.
- **Meter**, or a fixed rhythmic pattern: A strong meter helps the oral poet remember the lines. In the original Greek, the *Odyssey* uses hexameter, or six beats to a line, which helps create a fast pace.
- **Epithet**, a characterizing phrase for a person, place, or thing: Recurring epithets are easy to remember and can help fill out the meter. Some examples of Homer's epithets include "rosy-fingered dawn" and "son of Laertes" for Odysseus.
- **Epic simile**, a long comparison over many lines: Such similes were another way to fill out the meter and aid the poet's memory.

lonia, from where Homer may have come, was on the west coast of Asia Minor. The Ionian Sea, where Odysseus's island of Ithaca lies, is off the west coast of Greece. The duplicated names are likely no coincidence; Greek speakers from Ionia probably migrated to the west of Greece and brought the name with them (just as British settlers often brought British place names to America).

▼ The island of Ionia, Homer's possible birthplace, as it appears today