The Iliad

by Homer, about the 700s B.C.

More than 3,000 years ago, a rich civilization flourished in ancient Greece. Theater and poetry played an important role in Greek life. The Greeks often gathered at festivals to watch plays and to hear epics, or long poems, that celebrated their history and their many gods and goddesses. The earliest of the Greek poets whose works still survive is Homer, who probably lived between the 9th and 7th centuries B.C. One of Homer's greatest epics, The Iliad, tells about the Trojan War, which Greece fought against Troy in the 12th century B.C. In the excerpt below, the Greek hero Achilles has just learned that his best friend Patroklos has died in battle. What role do Greek gods and goddesses play in The Iliad?

Achilles' goddess-mother heard the sound of his grief as she sat within the depths of the Ocean. She came to him as he was still moaning terribly. She took his hand and clasped it and said, "My child, why weep' st thou?" Achilles ceased his moaning and answered, "Patroklos, my dear friend, has been slain. Now I shall have no joy in my life save the joy of slaying Hector who slew my friend."

Thetis, his goddess-mother, wept when she heard such speech from Achilles. "Shortlived you will be, my son," she said, "for it is appointed by the gods that after the death of Hector your death will come."

'Straightway then let me die," said Achilles, "since I let my friend die without giving him help... Here I stayed, a useless burthen on the earth, while my comrades and my own dear friend fought for their country—here I stayed, I who am the best of all the Greeks. But now let me go into the battle and let the Trojans know that Achilles has come back, although he tarried long."

why weep' st thou: why do you cry?
slain: killed
slaying: killing
appointed: decided
straightway: immediately
burthen: burden
tarried: waited
"But thine armor, my son," said Thetis. "Thou hast no armor now to protect thee in the battle. Go not into it until thou seest me again. In the morning I shall return and I shall bring thee armor that Hephaistos, the smith of the gods, shall make for thee."

So she spoke, and she turned from her son, and she went to Olympus where the gods have their dwellings. . . .

Now Thetis, the mother of Achilles, went to Olympus where the gods have their dwellings and to the house of Hephaistos, the smith of the gods. That house shone above all the houses on Olympus because Hephaistos himself had made it of shining bronze. . . .

Hephaistos was lame and crooked of foot and went limping. He and Thetis were friends from of old time, for, when his mother would have forsaken him because of his crooked foot, Thetis and her sister reared him within one of the Ocean's caves and it was while he was with them that he began to work in metals. So the lame god was pleased to see Thetis in his dwelling and he welcomed her and clasped her hand and asked of her what she would have him do for her.

Then Thetis, weeping, told him of her son Achilles, how he had lost his dear friend and how he was moved to go into the battle to fight with Hector, and how he was without armor to protect his life, seeing that the armor that the gods had once given his father was now in the hands of his foe. And Thetis besought Hephaistos to make new armor for her son that he might go into the battle.

She no sooner finished speaking than Hephaistos went to his work-bench. . . .

For the armor of Achilles he made first a shield and then a corselet that gleamed like fire. And he made a strong helmet to go on the head and shining greaves to wear on the ankles. The shield was made with five folds, one fold of metal upon the other, so that it was so strong and thick that no spear or arrow could pierce it. And upon this shield he hammered out images that were a wonder to men. . . .

Not long was he in making the shield and the other wonderful pieces of armor. As soon as the armor was ready Thetis put her hands upon it, and flying down from Olympus like a hawk, brought it to the feet of Achilles, her son. . . .

Then Achilles put his shining armor upon him and it fitted him as though it were wings; he put the wonderful shield before him and he took in his hands the great spear that Cheiron the Centaur had given to Peleus his father—that spear that no one else but Achilles could wield. He bade his charioteer harness the immortal horses Xanthos and Balios. Then as he mounted his chariot Achilles spoke to the horses. "Xanthos and Balios," he said, "this time bring the hero that goes with you back safely to the ships, and do not leave him dead on the plain as ye left the hero Patroklos."

Then Xanthos the immortal steed spoke, answering for himself and his comrade. "Achilles," he said, with his head bowed and his mane touching the ground, "Achilles, for this time we will bring thee safely
back from the battle. But a day will come when we shall not bring thee back, when thou too shalt lie with the dead before the walls of Troy."

Then was Achilles troubled and he said, "Xanthos, my steed, why dost thou remind me by thy prophecies of what I know already—that my death too is appointed, and that I am to perish here, far from my father and my mother and my own land."

Then he drove his immortal horses into the battle. The Trojans were affrighted when they saw Achilles himself in the fight, blazing in the armor that Hephaistos had made for him. They went backward before his onset. And Achilles shouted to the captains of the Greeks, "No longer stand apart from the men of Troy, but go with me into the battle and let each man throw his whole soul into the fight."

And on the Trojan side Hector cried to his captains and said, "Do not let Achilles drive you before him. Even though his hands are as irresistible as fire and his fierceness as terrible as flashing steel, I shall go against him and face him with my spear."

And when Achilles saw Hector before him he cried out, "Here is the man who most deeply wounded my soul, who slew my dear friend Patroklos. Now shall we two fight each other and Patroklos shall be avenged by me." And he shouted to Hector, "Now Hector, the day of thy triumph and the day of thy life is at its end."

But Hector answered him without fear, "Not with words, Achilles, can you affright me. Yet I know that thou art a man of might and a stronger man than I. But the fight between us depends upon the will of the gods. I shall do my best against thee, and my spear before this has been found to have a dangerous edge."

He spoke and lifted up his spear and flung it at Achilles. Then the breath of a god turned Hector's spear aside, for it was not appointed that either he or Achilles should be then slain. Achilles darted at Hector to slay him with his spear. But a god hid Hector from Achilles in a thick mist.

Then on toward the City, [Achilles] went like a fire raging through a glen that had been parched with heat. Now on a tower of the walls of Troy, Priam the old King stood, and he saw the Trojans coming in a rout toward the City, and he saw Achilles in his armor blazing like a star—like that star that is seen at harvest time and is called Orion's Dog; the star that is the brightest of all stars, but yet is a sign of evil. And the old man Priam sorrowed greatly as he stood upon the tower and watched Achilles, because he knew in his heart whom this man would slay—Hector, his son, the protector of his City.

In a later battle Achilles killed the Trojan leader Hector. But, just as the gods had predicted, Achilles was also killed in battle, the result of a wound from a Trojan arrow. After many long years of warfare, the Greeks finally defeated the Trojans. For hundreds of years, the Greeks retold the story of the battles, gods, and heroes described in The Iliad. Today this epic poem remains one of the greatest works of literature ever written.
