Gilgamesh

A Mesopotamian Epic

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

Like most epics, the epic of *Gilgamesh* is based on at least a grain of truth. Many scholars believe that Gilgamesh was an actual king who reigned over the city-state of Uruk, in Sumer, sometime between 2700 and 2500 B.C. Gradually, over the centuries, King Gilgamesh became a legendary figure, rather like King Arthur in the European Middle Ages. Tales of Gilgamesh's exploits grew and were probably recited in verse for centuries before they were recorded in writing. The earliest written fragments date from about 2000 B.C. Later the tale was repeated and reworked by writers from the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures. Some scholars believe that the epic was finally put into its most complete form by a scribe in 1300 B.C.

The Original Epic Hero?

The Gilgamesh of the epic is a superhuman hero, two parts god and one part human. He thus possesses both supernatural powers and human weaknesses, and in many ways it is his human weaknesses that make him so interesting to us and to the ancient peoples who eagerly listened to and learned from his exploits. He is the leader of his people and the builder of a great city, yet he suffers from excessive pride. In fact, it is because he rejects the love of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, and insults the gods that he suffers the death of his dear friend, Enkidu. Refusing to accept death—"the common lot of man"—Gilgamesh embarks on a quest for immortality. With superhuman strength, courage, and persistence, he confronts obstacles along the way, but he must ultimately contend with human limitations.

Gilgamesh may, in fact, be the original epic hero. Versions of the epic of *Gilgamesh* have been found at sites almost as far north as the Black Sea and as far south as Jerusalem and from the Mediterranean coast eastward to the Persian Gulf. The epic was so widely known that many scholars believe it served as an **archetype,** or model, for hero myths that would appear later in Greece, India, and Persia.

A New Version of the Epic

The story of Gilgamesh as we know it today is based on eleven clay tablets containing cuneiform (kyo͞o·nē′ə·fôrm′) script—the wedge-shaped characters used as a writing system by ancient Mesopotamians. These tablets were among 25,000 discovered in modern Iraq, at Nineveh, in the buried ruins of the library of King Assurbanipal of Assyria (669–626 B.C.). Nineveh was razed by Persian invaders in 612 B.C., and the original tablets were broken and marred. The recent discovery of older versions of the epic, however, ha helped scholars clarify many parts of the stor that once were missing or vague.

The epic of *Gilgamesh* reveals a great deal about the ancient Mesopotamians' sometim pessimistic views of existence, but it also shows us the sensitivity and humanity of th ancient peoples, who are not unlike us in t joys, sorrows, and strivings.

from Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

Although this story is thousands of years old, its two main characters experience some of the same desires and yearnings for adventure as young people do today. They leave the safety of home together to seek adventure, and they take on challenges that will prove their worth—and, perhaps, help them establish a place in the world. Can you think of a pair of "friends to the end" in a contemporary book or movie who also share important adventures together? How does the bond of their friendship help or hinder them? Describe what happens to each character and to their friendship as a result of the challenges they face together.

Literary Focus

The Foil

Many heroes, such as Beowulf, "go it alone," proudly seeking fame and glory entirely through their own efforts. Sometimes, however, a hero is provided with a companion who serves as his **foil**—a character who sets off the other character through strong contrast. The foil emphasizes the differences between the two characters. A famous example of a foil is Dr. Watson, the practical and down-to-earth companion who accompanies the brilliant, eccentric, and intuitive detective Sherlock Holmes. In *Gilgamesh* the foil is Enkidu, who, in contrast to Gilgamesh, represents the natural man, a pure-hearted and uncomplicated person who is innocent of the ways of civilized society.

A **foil** is a character who helps to define another character by means of contrast.

For more on Foil, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Background

Gilgamesh, who is two-thirds god and one-third human, is handsome, courageous, and strong, but he is also impulsive and willful. His people, upset with his tyrannical treatment of them, pray to the gods for relief. In response the gods send a match for Gilgamesh: the wild man Enkidu, reared by animals and unfamiliar with the ways of civilization. The two become close friends, and Enkidu joins Gilgamesh on a series of adventures. Craving an adventure that will bring them fame, they plan a journey to the cedar forest. There they will confront the monstrous guardian of the forest, the evil giant, Humbaba.

As this part of the story opens, Enkidu is terrified of meeting the monster. Gilgamesh urges him on.

Vocabulary Development

austere (ô•stir′) *adj.*: restrained; spare; very plain.

decreed (dē•krēd′) *v.*: ordered; commanded.

contortion (kən•tôr′shən) *n.*: twisted shape or motion.

squall (skwôl) *n.*: violent storm that doesn't last very long.

North Caroli Comp Goal 1.03; 5.01;

from Gilgamesh
A Verse Narrative

***retold by* Herbert Mason**

Why are you worried about death?
Only the gods are immortal anyway,
Sighed Gilgamesh.
What men do is nothing, so fear is never
Justified. What happened to your power
That once could challenge and equal mine?
I will go ahead of you, and if I die
I will at least have the reward
Of having people say: He died in war
Against Humbaba. You cannot discourage me
With fears and hesitations.
I will fight Humbaba,
I will cut down his cedars.
Tell the armorers to build us two-edged swords
And double shields and tell them
I am impatient and cannot wait long.

Thus Gilgamesh and Enkidu went
Together to the marketplace
To notify the Elders of Uruk
Who were meeting in their senate.
They too were talking of Humbaba,
As they often did,
Edging always in their thoughts
Toward the forbidden.

The one you speak of, Gilgamesh addressed them,
I now must meet. I want to prove
Him not the awesome thing we think he is
And that the boundaries set up by gods
Are not unbreakable. I will defeat him
In his cedar forest. The youth of Uruk
Need this fight. They have grown soft
And restless.

The old men leaned a little forward
Remembering old wars. A flush burned on

Gilgamesh holding a lion. Relief from the palace of Sargon II (8th century B.C.), Khorsabad, Iraq.
Louvre, Paris.

(Top left) detail of mosaic from the Turkish palace Attalos II (3rd century B.C.).
Pergamon Museum, Berlin. The Bridgeman Art Library.

Their cheeks. It seemed a little dangerous
And yet they saw their king
Was seized with passion for this fight.
Their voices gave the confidence his friend
Had failed to give; some even said
Enkidu's wisdom was a sign of cowardice.
You see, my friend, laughed Gilgamesh,
The wise of Uruk have outnumbered you.

Amidst the speeches in the hall
That called upon the gods for their protection,
Gilgamesh saw in his friend that pain
He had seen before and asked him what it was
That troubled him.

Enkidu could not speak. He held his tears
Back. Barely audibly he said:
It is a road which you have never traveled.

The armorers brought to Gilgamesh his weapons
And put them in his hand. He took his quiver,
Bow and ax, and two-edged sword,
And they began to march.

The Elders gave their austere blessing
And the people shouted: Let Enkidu lead,
Don't trust your strength, he knows the forests,
The one who goes ahead will save his friend.
May Shamash° bring you victory. . . .

After three days they reached the edge
Of the forest where Humbaba's watchman stood.
Suddenly it was Gilgamesh who was afraid,
Enkidu who reminded him to be fearless.
The watchman sounded his warning to Humbaba.
The two friends moved slowly toward the forest gate.

When Enkidu touched the gate his hand felt numb,
He could not move his fingers or his wrist,
His face turned pale like someone's witnessing a death,

He tried to ask his friend for help
Whom he had just encouraged to move on,

Gilgamesh between two demigods supporting the sun. Detail from a stone monument (9th century B.C.), Tell Halaf, Syria.

Archaeological Museum, Aleppo, Syria/Dagli Orti. The Art Archive.

59. Shamash (shä′mäsh): god associated with the sun and human laws.

Vocabulary

austere (ô•stir′) *adj.*: restrained; spare; very plain.

But he could only stutter and hold out
His paralyzed hand.
It will pass, said Gilgamesh.
Would you want to stay behind because of that?
We must go down into the forest together.
Forget your fear of death. I will go before you
And protect you. Enkidu followed close behind
So filled with fear he could not think or speak.
Soon they reached the high cedars.

They stood in awe at the foot
Of the green mountain. Pleasure
Seemed to grow from fear of Gilgamesh.
As when one comes upon a path in woods
Unvisited by men, one is drawn near
The lost and undiscovered in himself;
He was revitalized by danger.
They knew it was the path Humbaba made.
Some called the forest "Hell," and others "Paradise";
What difference does it make? said Gilgamesh.
But night was falling quickly
And they had no time to call it names,
Except perhaps "The Dark,"
Before they found a place at the edge of the forest
To serve as shelter for their sleep.

It was a restless night for both. One snatched
At sleep and sprang awake from dreams. The other
Could not rest because of pain that spread
Throughout his side. Enkidu was alone
With sights he saw brought on by pain
And fear, as one in deep despair
May lie beside his love who sleeps
And seems so unafraid, absorbing in himself the phantoms
That she cannot see—phantoms diminished for one
When two can see and stay awake to talk of them
And search out a solution to despair,
Or lie together in each other's arms,
Or weep and in exhaustion from their tears
Perhaps find laughter for their fears.
But alone and awake the size and nature
Of the creatures in his mind grow monstrous,
Beyond resemblance to the creatures he had known
Before the prostitute had come into his life.

Figure of a man from the
Square Temple at Tell Asma
(c. 2750–2600 B.C.), Ira

National Museum, Damasc
© Giraudon/Art Resource, New Yo

Gilgamesh (center) depicted on a Chaldean seal.
Bettmann/CORBIS.

He cried aloud for them to stop appearing over him
Emerging from behind the trees with phosphorescent° eyes
Brought on by rain. He could not hear his voice
But knew he screamed and could not move his arms
But thought they tried to move
As if a heavy weight he could raise
Or wriggle out from underneath
Had settled on his chest,
Like a turtle trapped beneath a fallen branch,
Each effort only added to paralysis.
He could not make his friend, his one companion, hear.

Gilgamesh awoke but could not hear
His friend in agony, he still was captive to his dreams
Which he would tell aloud to exorcise:°
I saw us standing in a mountain gorge,
A rockslide fell on us, we seemed no more
Than insects under it. And then
A solitary graceful man appeared
And pulled me out from under the mountain.
He gave me water and I felt released.

Tomorrow you will be victorious,
Enkidu said, to whom the dream brought chills
(For only one of them, he knew, would be released)
Which Gilgamesh could not perceive in the darkness
For he went back to sleep without responding
To his friend's interpretation of his dream.

114. phosphorescent (fäs′fə·res′ənt) *adj.*: giving off light after being exposed to heat.

126. exorcise *v.*: to drive out.

Did you call me? Gilgamesh sat up again.
Why did I wake again? I thought you touched me.
Why am I afraid? I felt my limbs grow numb
As if some god passed over us drawing out our life.
I had another dream:
This time the heavens were alive with fire, but soon
The clouds began to thicken, death rained down on us,
The lightning flashes stopped, and everything
Which rained down turned to ashes.
What does this mean, Enkidu?

That you will be victorious against Humbaba,
Enkidu said, or someone said through him
Because he could not hear his voice
Or move his limbs although he thought he spoke,
And soon he saw his friend asleep beside him.

At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax
And struck at the great cedar.
When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,
He hurried down the path that they had seen
But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak
At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash
Saying, I have followed you in the way decreed;
Why am I abandoned now? Suddenly the winds
Sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba
Like a water buffalo's bellowing down the path,
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing arms
Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.
His single stroke could cut a cedar down
And leave no mark on him. His shoulders,
Like a porter's° under building stones,
Were permanently bent by what he bore;
He was the slave who did the work for gods
But whom the gods would never notice.
Monstrous in his contortion, he aroused
The two almost to pity.
But pity was the thing that might have killed.
It made them pause just long enough to show
How pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw
Him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground
Until he thought his friend was crushed to death.
He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make

Man carrying a goat, from a Sam'al basalt bas-relief (c. 730 B.C.).
Pergamon Museum, Berlin. The Bridgeman Art Library.

168. porter *n.*: person who carries things for other people.

Vocabulary

decreed (dē•krēd′) *v.*: ordered; commanded.
contortion (kən•tôr′shən) *n.*:

His final strike against his friend, unable
To move to help him, and then Enkidu slid
Along the ground like a ram making its final lunge
On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed
To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,
As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,
Returned to life
And stood over Humbaba with his ax
Raised high above his head watching the monster plead
In strangled sobs and desperate appeals
The way the sea contorts under a violent squall.
I'll serve you as I served the gods, Humbaba said;
I'll build you houses from their sacred trees.

Enkidu feared his friend was weakening
And called out: Gilgamesh! Don't trust him!
As if there were some hunger in himself
That Gilgamesh was feeling
That turned him momentarily to yearn
For someone who would serve, he paused;
And then he raised his ax up higher
And swung it in a perfect arc
Into Humbaba's neck. He reached out
To touch the wounded shoulder of his friend,

And late that night he reached again
To see if he was yet asleep, but there was only
Quiet breathing. The stars against the midnight sky
Were sparkling like mica° in a riverbed.
In the slight breeze
The head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree.

Babylonian sculpture of head of Humbaba carved to resemble intestines (c. 1800–1600 B.C.). British Museum, London. The Bridgeman Art Library.

206. mica *n.*: kind of thin, crystalline mineral.

Homer and the *Iliad*

Europe's first and most enduring literary epics, the *Iliad* (il′ē · əd) and the *Odyssey* (äd′i · sē), were composed sometime between 900 and 700 B.C. We know little about Homer, the author of these epics. He was probably a native of the Greek district of Ionia on the western coast of Asia Minor. The name *Homer* may mean "hostage," suggesting that the poet may have been a slave or descended from slaves. Homer belonged to a class of bards who played a vitally important role in Greek society, serving as both oral historians and entertainers. Tradition says Homer was blind, a detail probably based more on convention than on fact: In Greek culture, physical blindness was often a metaphor for profound insight.

The Legend of the Trojan War

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tell stories about the heroes and events of the Trojan War. According to oral tradition, the war began not with a battle but with a beauty contest—an unusual beauty contest. Three goddesses—Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera—decided to compete for a golden apple that was inscribed "To the Fairest." The gods, smart enough not to get involved in a potentially hazardous situation, chose a mortal to judge the most beautiful goddess. Paris, a young and handsome but naive prince of Troy, was selected. Each goddess in turn tried to bribe Paris in order to get his vote. The bribe Paris finally accepted was Aphrodite's, for she offered him the most appealing gift of all—marriage to the world's most beautiful woman, Helen, the wife of King Menelaus of Greece. Paris took Helen from Menelaus, and the two sailed for Troy. Outraged by the abduction of Helen, the Greek chieftains, bound by oaths of loyalty, banded together under the leadership of Menelaus's brother, Agamemnon, and attacked Troy. The war party laid siege to Troy, beginning a conflict that would drag on for ten years before the Greeks would finally succeed in sacking Troy and recapturing Helen—thanks to the wiles of the clever hero Odysseus.

Background to the *Iliad*

The *Iliad* opens as the Trojan War enters its tenth year, and it closes several weeks later. The story revolves around two main characters: Achilles, the bravest and handsomest warrior in the Greek army, and his enemy Hector, the honorable warrior-prince of the Trojans. In Book 22 of the epic, the conflict between these two antagonists reaches its tragic climax.

The tragedy that is at the heart of the *Iliad* is set into motion by a human emotion: the anger of Achilles. Human beings are the epic's combatants, but gods and goddesses take sides and profoundly affect the outcome. The Greeks saw their deities as immortal and powerful but in many ways just like humans: interested in human events and actions and capable of the same weaknesses as people—rivalry, jealousy, anger, and pettiness. The Greek gods and goddesses could and did involve themselves in human affairs and could either help or hinder individual people. Ultimately, though, as Homer's epic demonstrates, a person's fate was based as much on his or her own character and actions as on a proper relationship with the gods.

Before You Read

from Book 22: The Death of Hector

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

The *Iliad* is essentially a war story, and its heroes are warriors, but men like Achilles and Hector are not just bloodthirsty killers eager for the next fight. Homer's warriors strive to achieve *arete*, or personal honor and excellence. In their eyes it is honorable to fight bravely for one's king and comrades and dishonorable to seek safety for oneself when one's friends are threatened. To die at the hands of a more powerful enemy is far preferable to them than living with the dishonor of having fled a fight or failed to give one's all in battle. What do the concepts of honor and personal excellence mean to you? How can an ideal of honor make a better society? (Could it also harm a society?) Take some notes on contemporary ideals of honor and how they compare and contrast with the *arete* of Homer's heroes.

North Carolina Competency Goal
1.03; 4.03; 5.01; 5.03

Literary Focus

The Epic Simile

One of the most important features of the *Iliad* is Homer's use of extended comparisons called **epic similes** (also known as **Homeric similes**). Homer's comparisons often extend over many lines and make use of the words *like* and *as*. These complex figures of speech usually compare extraordinary, heroic actions to simple, everyday events that Homer's audience could easily understand. For example, in lines 1–3 of this excerpt from Book 22, Achilles, in hot pursuit of Hector, is compared to a hunting dog: "nonstop / as a hound in the mountains starts a fawn from its lair, / hunting him down the gorges, down the narrow glens." By using the familiar image of a hunt, Homer makes it easy for his listeners to imagine Achilles racing headlong after Hector.

An **epic,** or **Homeric, simile** is a long, elaborate comparison of two events, one unusual and heroic, the other familiar and ordinary.

For more on the Epic, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

Background

As the *Iliad* begins, the war between the Greeks and the Trojans has been a stalemate for nearly ten years. Each army has fought bravely, and each has received the help of the gods. Apollo assists Hector and the Trojans, and Athena aids Achilles and the Greeks (who are also referred to as the Achaeans or the Argives). Prior to Book 22, Hector kills Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend, and strips the corpse of its armor, leaving the body exposed and unburied. Because the Greeks believed that a soul could not find rest until certain burial rites had been performed, Achilles is enraged at Hector and seeks revenge.

Vocabulary Development

groveling (gräv′əl•iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: crawling; humiliating oneself in front of authority.

gallant (gal′ənt) *adj.*: noble; brave.

scourge (skʉrj) *n.*: means of inflicting severe punishment. Usually the word refers to a whip.

fawning (fôn′iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: cringing and pleading.

the Iliad

from Book 22: The Death of Hector

Homer

translated by **Robert Fagles**

The Characters in the *Iliad*

The Greeks

Achilles (ə·kil′ēz′): son of a mortal king, Peleus, and the sea goddess Thetis; king of the Myrmidons; mightiest of the Greek warriors.

Patroclus (pə·trō′kləs): Greek warrior and dearest friend of Achilles.

The Trojans

Hector (hek′tər): son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba; commander of the Trojan forces.

Paris (par′is): son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba; also known as Alexandros.

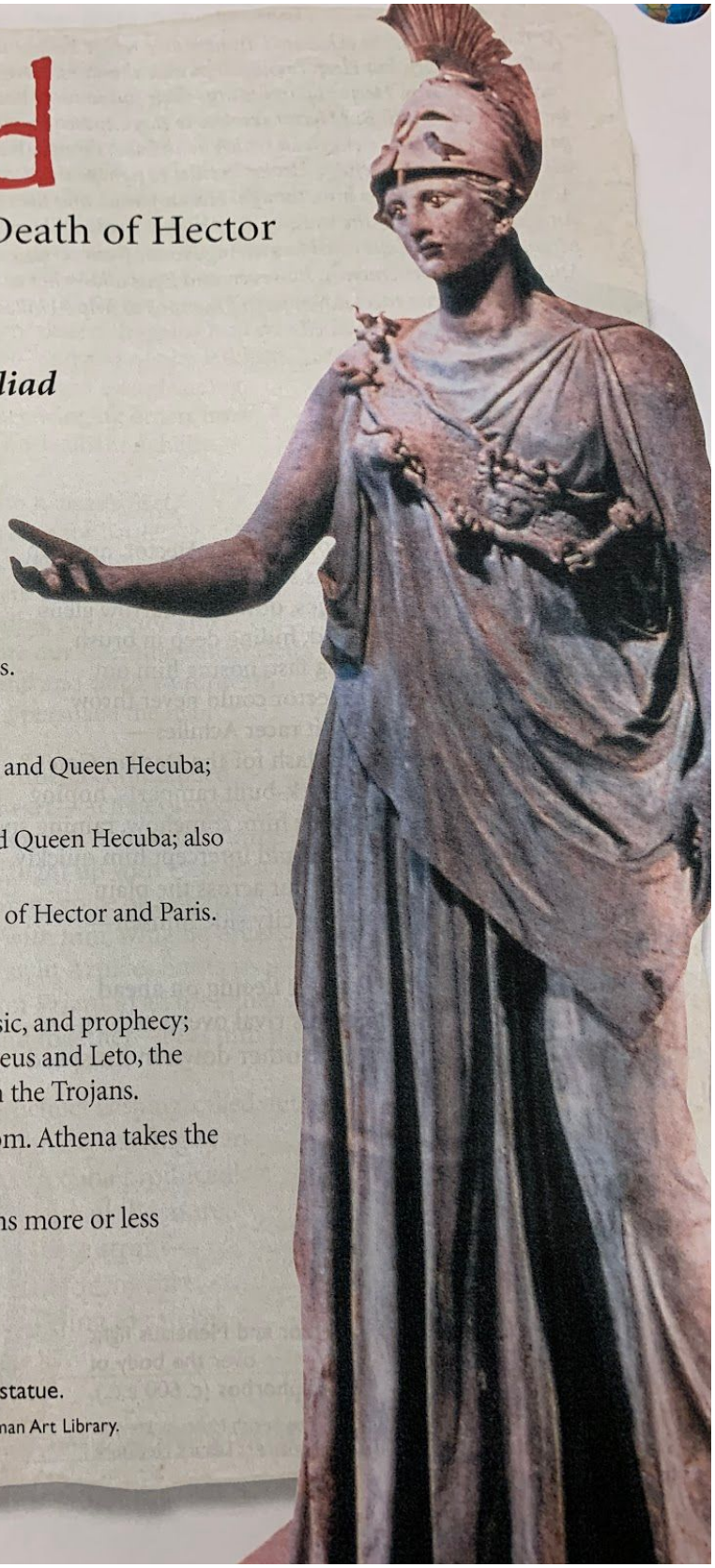
Priam (prī′əm): king of Troy; father of Hector and Paris.

Gods and Goddesses

Apollo (ə·päl′ō): god of poetry, music, and prophecy; often referred to only as the son of Zeus and Leto, the daughter of Titans. Apollo sides with the Trojans.

Athena (ə·thē′nə): goddess of wisdom. Athena takes the Greeks' side in the conflict.

Zeus (z$\overline{oo}$s): father-god. Zeus remains more or less neutral throughout the conflict.



The goddess Athena (c. 335 B.C.). Bronze statue.

National Archaeological Museum, Athens. The Bridgeman Art Library.

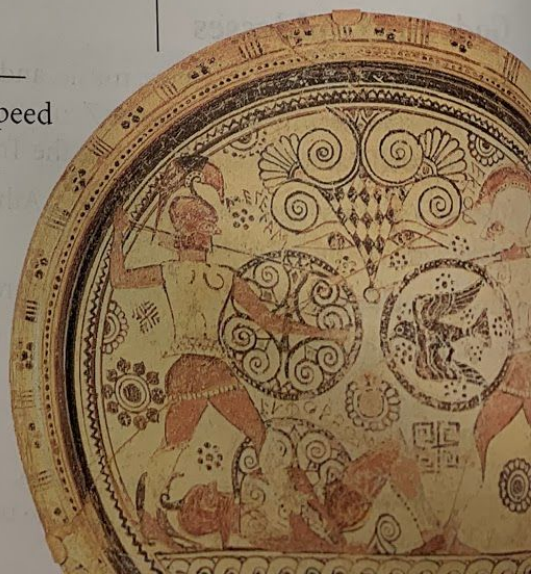
As Book 22 opens, the exhausted Trojans take refuge behind the walls of their city, but Hector remains outside the gates. As Achilles races toward Troy, Hector's parents urge their son to come back inside the city walls. But Hector resolves to stay exposed outside the gates. After an inner struggle in which he considers simply bargaining with Achilles peacefully, Hector decides to fight to the death. As Achilles bears down on him, though, Hector panics and flees in fear. An epic chase around the walls of Troy begins. Looking down from Mount Olympus, Zeus considers saving Hector from certain death. Athena protests vehemently, however, and Zeus allows her to do as she wishes. Athena races down from Olympus to help Achilles, her favorite. Hector's fate is sealed.

And swift Achilles kept on coursing Hector, nonstop
as a hound in the mountains starts a fawn from its lair,
hunting him down the gorges, down the narrow glens
and the fawn goes to ground, hiding deep in brush
but the hound comes racing fast, nosing him out
until he lands his kill. So Hector could never throw
Achilles off his trail, the swift racer Achilles—
time and again he'd make a dash for the Dardan Gates,°
trying to rush beneath the rock-built ramparts, hoping
men on the heights might save him, somehow, raining spears
but time and again Achilles would intercept him quickly,
heading him off, forcing him out across the plain
and always sprinting along the city side himself—
endless as in a dream . . .
when a man can't catch another fleeing on ahead
and he can never escape nor his rival overtake him—
so the one could never run the other down in his speed

1–18. Achilles repeatedly prevents Hector from nearing the city gates, where his comrades might supply him with extra weapons.

? *What words and comparisons emphasize Achilles' speed?*

8. Dardan Gates: gates of Troy. Dardania, a city built near the foot of Mount Ida, became part of Troy.



Hector and Menelaus fight over the body of Euphorbos (c. 600 B.C.).
The British Museum, London. The Bridgeman Art Library, New York.

nor the other spring away. And how could Hector have fled
the fates of death so long? How unless one last time,
one final time Apollo had swept in close beside him,
driving strength in his legs and knees to race the wind?
And brilliant Achilles shook his head at the armies,
never letting them hurl their sharp spears at Hector—
someone might snatch the glory, Achilles come in second.
But once they reached the springs for the fourth time,
then Father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales:
in them he placed two fates of death that lays men low—
one for Achilles, one for Hector breaker of horses—
and gripping the beam mid-haft the Father raised it high
and down went Hector's day of doom, dragging him down
to the strong House of Death—and god Apollo left him.
Athena rushed to Achilles, her bright eyes gleaming,
standing shoulder-to-shoulder, winging orders now:
"At last our hopes run high, my brilliant Achilles—
Father Zeus must love you—
we'll sweep great glory back to Achaea's fleet,
we'll kill this Hector, mad as he is for battle!
No way for him to escape us now, no longer—
not even if Phoebus the distant deadly Archer
goes through torments, pleading for Hector's life,
groveling over and over before our storming Father Zeus.
But you, you hold your ground and catch your breath
while I run Hector down and persuade the man
to fight you face-to-face."

So Athena commanded
and he obeyed, rejoicing at heart—Achilles stopped,
leaning against his ashen spearshaft barbed in bronze.
And Athena left him there, caught up with Hector at once,
and taking the build and vibrant voice of Deiphobus°
stood shoulder-to-shoulder with him, winging orders:
"Dear brother, how brutally swift Achilles hunts you—
coursing you round the city of Priam in all his lethal speed!
Come, let us stand our ground together—beat him back."

"Deiphobus!"—Hector, his helmet flashing, called out to her—
"dearest of all my brothers, all these warring years,
of all the sons that Priam and Hecuba produced!
Now I'm determined to praise you all the more,
you who dared—seeing me in these straits—
to venture out from the walls, all for *my* sake,
while the others stay inside and cling to safety."

? **25–31.** *How does Zeus decide the fates of Hector and Achilles? What is the final judgment?*

Athena. Silver coin (c. 324–323 B.C.).
Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, England. The Art Archive/Dagli Orti.

48. Deiphobus (dē·if′ō·bəs): one of Hector's brothers.

? **34–52.** *What does Athena tell Achilles she is going to do? How does Athena trick Hector?*

Vocabulary

groveling (gräv′əl·iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: crawling; humiliating oneself in front of authority.

Map of ancient Troy. The Greek ships and encampments are shown outside the walled city.

Bettmann/CORBIS.

The goddess answered quickly, her eyes blazing,
"True, dear brother—how your father and mother both
implored me, time and again, clutching my knees,
and the comrades round me begging me to stay!
Such was the fear that broke them, man for man,
but the heart within me broke with grief for you.
Now headlong on and fight! No letup, no lance spared!
So now, now we'll *see* if Achilles kills us both
and hauls our bloody armor back to the beaked ships
or *he* goes down in pain beneath your spear."

Athena luring him on with all her immortal cunning—
and now, at last, as the two came closing for the kill
it was tall Hector, helmet flashing, who led off:
"No more running from you in fear, Achilles!
Not as before. Three times I fled around
the great city of Priam—I lacked courage then
to stand your onslaught. Now my spirit stirs me
to meet you face-to-face. Now kill or be killed!
Come, we'll swear to the gods, the highest witnesses—
the gods will oversee our binding pacts. I swear

? **73–79.** What does Hector vow? Why does he now have courage?

I will never mutilate you—merciless as you are—
if Zeus allows me to last it out and tear your life away.
But once I've stripped your glorious armor, Achilles,
I will give your body back to your loyal comrades.
Swear you'll do the same."

A swift dark glance
and the headstrong runner answered, "Hector, stop!
You unforgivable, you . . . don't talk to me of pacts.
There are no binding oaths between men and lions—
wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds—
they are all bent on hating each other to the death.
So with you and me. No love between us. No truce
till one or the other falls and gluts with blood
Ares who hacks at men behind his rawhide shield.
Come, call up whatever courage you can muster.
Life or death—now prove yourself a spearman,
a daring man of war! No more escape for you—
Athena will kill you with my spear in just a moment.
Now you'll pay at a stroke for all my comrades' grief,
all you killed in the fury of your spear!"

With that,
shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
but seeing it coming glorious Hector ducked away,
crouching down, watching the bronze tip fly past
and stab the earth—but Athena snatched it up
and passed it back to Achilles
and Hector the gallant captain never saw her.
He sounded out a challenge to Peleus' princely son:
"You missed, look—the great godlike Achilles!
So you knew nothing at all from Zeus about my death—
and yet how sure you were! All bluff, cunning with words,
that's all you are—trying to make me fear you,
lose my nerve, forget my fighting strength.
Well, you'll never plant your lance in my back
as I flee *you* in fear—plunge it through my chest
as I come charging in, if a god gives you the chance!
But now it's for you to dodge *my* brazen spear—
I wish you'd bury it in your body to the hilt.
How much lighter the war would be for Trojans then
if you, their greatest scourge, were dead and gone!"

Shaft poised, he hurled and his spear's long shadow flew
and it struck Achilles' shield—a dead-center hit—

? 78–98. *What pact has Hector offered Achilles? Why does Achilles refuse the pact?*

106–117. Hector is emboldened by Achilles' unsuccessful attack.
? *What do Hector's words suggest about the relationship between mortals and gods? What is Hector unaware of?*

Vocabulary

gallant (gal′ənt) *adj.:* noble; brave.
scourge (skʉrj) *n.:* means of inflicting severe punishment. Usually the word refers to a whip.

but off and away it glanced and Hector seethed,
his hurtling spear, his whole arm's power poured
in a wasted shot. He stood there, cast down . . .
he had no spear in reserve. So Hector shouted out
to Deiphobus bearing his white shield—with a ringing shout
he called for a heavy lance—
but the man was nowhere near
him, vanished—
yes and Hector knew the truth in his heart
and the fighter cried aloud, "My time has come!
At last the gods have called me down to death.
I thought he was at my side, the hero Deiphobus—
he's safe inside the walls, Athena's tricked me blind.
And now death, grim death is looming up beside me,
no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This,
this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago—
Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer—
though often before now they rushed to my defense.
So now I meet my doom. Well let me die—
but not without struggle, not without glory, no,
in some great clash of arms that even men to come
will hear of down the years!"
And on that resolve
he drew the whetted sword that hung at his side,
tempered, massive, and gathering all his force
he swooped like a soaring eagle
launching down from the dark clouds to earth
to snatch some helpless lamb or trembling hare.
So Hector swooped now, swinging his whetted sword
and Achilles charged too, bursting with rage, barbaric,
guarding his chest with the well-wrought blazoned shield,
head tossing his gleaming helmet, four horns strong
and the golden plumes shook that the god of fire
drove in bristling thick along its ridge.
Bright as that star amid the stars in the night sky,
star of the evening, brightest star that rides the heavens,
so fire flared from the sharp point of the spear Achilles
brandished high in his right hand, bent on Hector's death,
scanning his splendid body—where to pierce it best?
The rest of his flesh seemed all encased in armor,
burnished, brazen—*Achilles'* armor that Hector stripped
from strong Patroclus when he killed him—true,
but one spot lay exposed,
where collarbones lift the neckbone off the shoulders,
the open throat, where the end of life comes quickest—*there*
as Hector charged in fury brilliant Achilles drove his spear
and the point went stabbing clean through the tender neck

123–139. *What truth does Hector now realize? What does he decide to do?*

146–155. *What descriptive words does Homer use to create a vivid image of Achilles' charge?*

156–165. Here we are reminded that Hector is wearing Achilles' old armor. Achilles had given the armor to his dear friend Patroclus, whom Hector had killed.

How does Achilles mortally wound Hector?

Chariot race depicted on black-figured amphora with white glaze (6th century B.C.).

Louvre, Paris. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

but the heavy bronze weapon failed to slash the windpipe—
Hector could still gasp out some words, some last reply . . .
he crashed in the dust—
godlike Achilles gloried over him:
"Hector—surely you thought when you stripped Patroclus' armor
that you, you would be safe! Never a fear of me—
far from fighting as I was—you fool!
Left behind there, down by the beaked ships
his great avenger waited, a greater man by far—
that man was I, and I smashed your strength! And you—
the dogs and birds will maul you, shame your corpse
while Achaeans bury my dear friend in glory!"

Struggling for breath, Hector, his helmet flashing,
said, "I beg you, beg you by your life, your parents—
don't let the dogs devour me by the Argive ships!
Wait, take the princely ransom of bronze and gold,
the gifts my father and noble mother will give you—
but give my body to friends to carry home again,
so Trojan men and Trojan women can do me honor
with fitting rites of fire once I am dead."

175–182. This exchange between Hector and Achilles emphasizes the importance the Greeks and Trojans placed on a proper burial. Without "fitting rites," both men believed, the soul of the departed would never find rest.

? What does Hector plead?

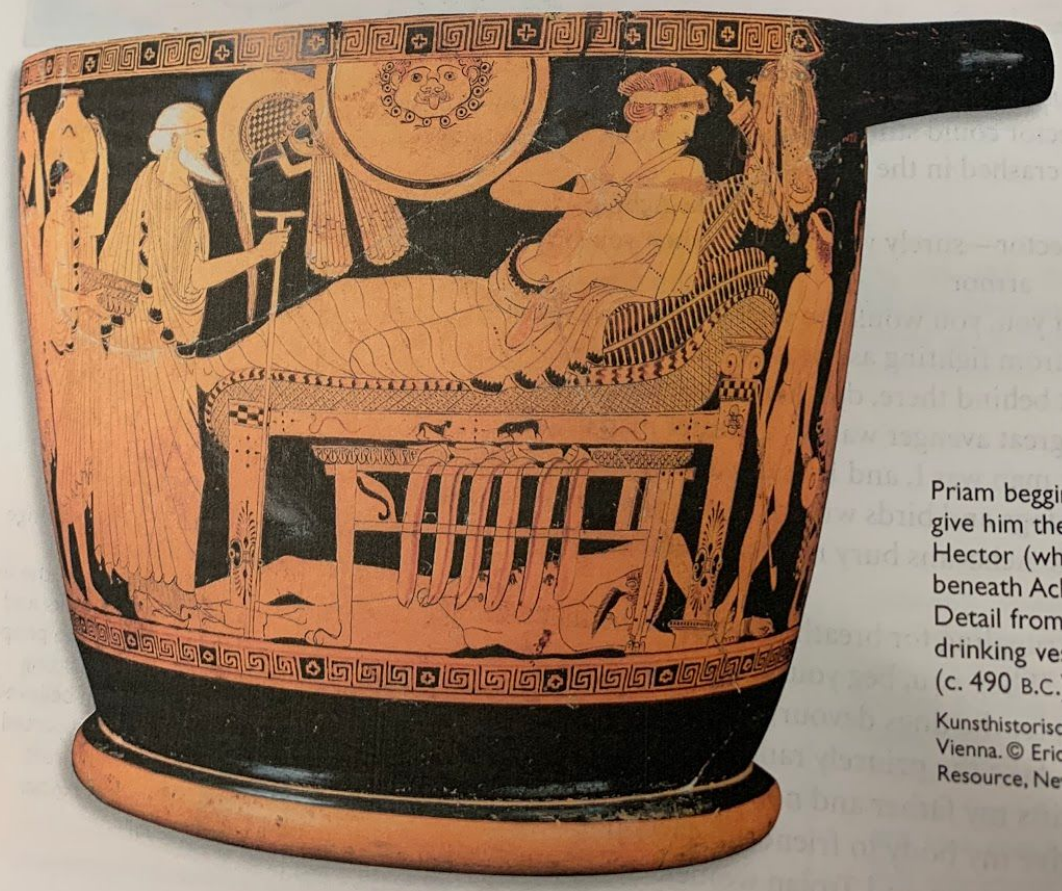
Staring grimly, the proud runner Achilles answered,
"Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now
to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—
such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?
No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom
and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more—
no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out
your bulk in gold! Not even then will your noble mother
lay you on your deathbed, mourn the son she bore . . .
The dogs and birds will rend you—blood and bone!"

At the point of death, Hector, his helmet flashing,
said, "I know you well—I see my fate before me.
Never a chance that I could win you over . . .
Iron inside your chest, that heart of yours.

Vocabulary

fawning (fôn′iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.:* cringing and pleading.

? **183–194.** *How does Achilles react to Hector's plea?*



Priam begging Achilles to give him the body of Hector (which lies beneath Achilles' couch). Detail from Greek drinking vessel (c. 490 B.C.).

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

But now beware, or my curse will draw god's wrath
upon your head, that day when Paris and lord Apollo—
for all your fighting heart—destroy you at the Scaean Gates!"°

Death cut him short. The end closed in around him.
Flying free of his limbs
his soul went winging down to the House of Death,
wailing his fate, leaving his manhood far behind,
his young and supple strength. But brilliant Achilles
taunted Hector's body, dead as he was, "Die, die!
For my own death, I'll meet it freely—whenever Zeus
and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!"

With that he wrenched his bronze spear from the corpse,
laid it aside and ripped the bloody armor off the back.
And the other sons of Achaea, running up around him,
crowded closer, all of them gazing wonder-struck
at the build and marvelous, lithe beauty of Hector.
And not a man came forward who did not stab his body,
glancing toward a comrade, laughing: "Ah, look here—
how much softer he is to handle now, this Hector,
than when he gutted our ships with roaring fire!"

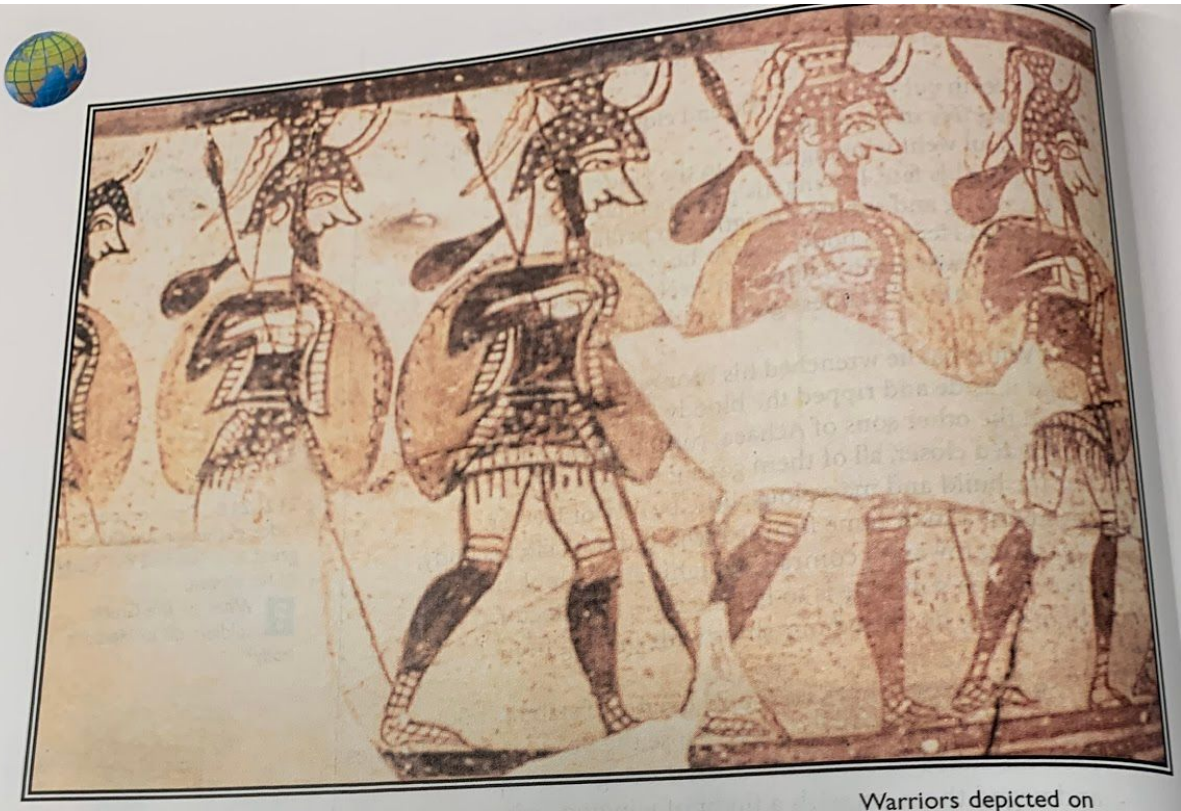
Standing over him, so they'd gloat and stab his body.
But once he had stripped the corpse the proud runner Achilles
took his stand in the midst of all the Argive troops
and urged them on with a flight of winging orders:
"Friends—lords of the Argives, O my captains!
Now that the gods have let me kill this man
who caused us agonies, loss on crushing loss—
more than the rest of all their men combined—
come, let us ring their walls in armor, test them,
see what recourse the Trojans still may have in mind.
Will they abandon the city heights with this man fallen?
Or brace for a last, dying stand though Hector's gone?
But wait—what am I saying? Why this deep debate?
Down by the ships a body lies unwept, unburied—
Patroclus . . . I will never forget him,
not as long as I'm still among the living
and my springing knees will lift and drive me on.
Though the dead forget their dead in the House of Death,
I will remember, even there, my dear companion.
Now,
come, you sons of Achaea, raise a song of triumph!

200–201. Paris . . . Gates: Hector is foretelling Achilles' ultimate fate. Achilles will later be slain by Paris, who will shoot an arrow into Achilles' heel, the only vulnerable part of his body.

212–218. Achilles' comrades gather around the great warrior and the body of his victim.

? *What do the Greek soldiers do to Hector's body?*

232–237. In the midst of his victory cry, Achilles pauses to remember his dear friend Patroclus, whose death has now been avenged.



Warriors depicted on Mycenaen ceramic vase (detail) (c. 1300–1100 B.C.).

National Archaeological Museum, Athens. © Scala/Art Resource, New York.

Down to the ships we march and bear this corpse on high—
we have won ourselves great glory. We have brought
magnificent Hector down, that man the Trojans
glorified in their city like a god!"

So he triumphed
and now he was bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector.
Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet,
he knotted straps of rawhide through them both,
lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag
and mounting the car, hoisting the famous arms° aboard,
he whipped his team to a run and breakneck on they flew,
holding nothing back. And a thick cloud of dust rose up
from the man they dragged, his dark hair swirling round
that head so handsome once, all tumbled low in the dust—
since Zeus had given him over to his enemies now
to be defiled in the land of his own fathers.

247. famous arms: Hector's armor.

242–253. Achilles' wrath i
so great that he cannot sto
at merely killing Hector.

? *How is Hector's body transported from the scene of death? How do you feel as you read this description?*