

## Greeks 1: A Summary of the Epic Cycle

The Epic Cycle was a series of epics that were created to surround The Iliad and The Odyssey to give their backstories, continuations and what happened in between. They were not created by the authors of The Iliad and The Odyssey and were not of equal literary quality. They also appear to have been written initially rather than composed orally, as were The Iliad and The Odyssey. It's possible some may have orally composed material in them, but we can't tell because we don't have any of the other epics in this cycle, which may be a reflection of their lower quality: monks copied what they valued through the Middle Ages, and they don't seem to have survived in the Greek speaking Byzantine Empire either as we don't have a single copy.

How do we know they existed? There are lots of references to them, so we know them largely from generally short quotations in various later Greek authors over hundreds of years. Most of the references come from the Hellenistic period from scholars in Alexandria. Our main sources are Proclus, who wrote a "summary of useful knowledge" that discussed them at an unknown date and Photius, in the 9th century AD, who wrote the Bibliotheca, who seems to be basing his knowledge of the cycle on Proclus.

### **Differences with the "Homeric" epics:**

Writing quality

Tolerance of barbarism

Level of supernatural/superstition

Survival

## The supposed order of the Epic Cycle:

Some scholars would place a Theogony (origin of the gods), probably not Hesiod's, in first place, but we have no evidence of it, unless it's Hesiod's, which we'll read. It's likelier this material was included in the beginning of The Titanomachy.

1. The **Titanomachy** (War of the Titans): **Gaia (Earth) and Uranos (Heaven) get busy and create the Titans, the second generation of deities:** Zeus and company will be the 3rd. After some Titans reproduce and Cronos, having replaced Uranos, gets with Rheo and has kids, who eventually revolt and battle their parents' generation. In some versions, two Titans have Zeus's back: Hecate and Prometheus, but we don't know whether this is in this poem. **Chiron the centaur (his father changed himself into a horse in this poem in order to get with a hot filly, who was the daughter of Oceanos) was important as a friend to mankind in this poem and may have been in that role instead of Prometheus. Zeus wins, and the gods inhabit Mt. Olympus.**
2. **The Oedopodeia:** This poem covers the much longer story of Oedipus than Sophocles's plays, and the relationship between them is not known including which was written earlier and how it influenced the other. Early on, **it would have included the oracle to Laius, King of Thebes, warning him that his son would kill him. It would have included Oed's survival of Laius's attempt to expose him as an infant and Oedipus's flight from Corinth to avoid killing his father and marrying his mother and unknowingly heading to Thebes to do just that. A big section would have covered the Sphinx's riddle, and Haemon, Creon's son, seems to have died trying to solve it instead of his very different end in Sophocles's Antigone.** In this poem, his mom/wife is Euryganeia rather than Jocasta in Sophocles or Epicaste in Homer. We don't know whether this is the source of the version in which Oedipus remarried after mom/wife's death. **It's possible mom and Oed didn't have kids in this epic: there's at least one tradition that this was the case, so he had his four kids with his second wife, and it's possible that's who Euryganeia is instead of the mom.** If so, was he blind in this version? We just don't know. The crucial thing is that Oedipus has four kids because they're crucial for the next poem, which is
3. **The Thebais:** This is essentially the story of The Seven Against Thebes, which is referred to in Hesiod and in Homer, particularly with regard to Diomedes's father Tydeus, and about which Aeschylus wrote a surviving play. Essentially, **it probably begins with Oedipus's curse against his sons for, in this case, reminding him of his father by serving him dinner with Laius's bling: they will not divide his possessions peacefully but will war over them.** (We actually have a fragment about this.) **A separate fragment indicates the curse extended to them killing one another,** which is how their story ends in all versions.

In The Thebias, unlike in Sophocles's plays Antigone and Oedipus at Colonus, **Oedipus seems to have died before the curse took effect.** As Sophocles is using these plays, written about forty years apart, largely for contemporary political purposes as we'll discuss in trimester 2, it makes sense he would have changed the original story if it was indeed the one reflected in The Thebias.

While details are uncertain, **Polyneices, the older brother, either leaves or is forced out of Thebes by younger brother Eteocles and uncle Creon, but either way Polyneices ends up in Argos and marries King Adrastus's daughter and gets his father-in-law's support for reconquering Thebes.** Argos and Thebes, along with Mycenae, were more important than Athens and Sparta before the 8th century B.C., and Argos, which was powerful later, may be a stand-in for Mycenae, if the myth represents a real war unknown today. Later versions vary, but in our earliest surviving version (Aeschylus's play) the heroes are Tydeus, Campanus (also mentioned in Homer and The Divine Comedy as a prototype of hubris), Eteocles, Hippomedon, Parthenopaeus and Amphiaraus. Conveniently, **Thebes had seven gates, and each hero attacked one gate defended by Eteocles and his six recruited heroes.** Polyneices's crew have generally been seen as villainous except for Amphiaraus. There was likely a section about a later tradition that Amphiaraus, who was a seer, foresaw his death at Thebes and hid himself when Polyneices called on him, so Polyneices bribed his wife Eriphyle to expose his whereabouts. As we'll see, there's a similar hiding story about Odysseus in The Cypria with regard to the Trojan War but not in Homer. Campanus is often portrayed as killed by a bolt hurled by Zeus as he topped Thebes's wall. Perhaps the most unHomeric fragment we have comes after Tydeus has been wounded by Melanippus, who is then killed by Amphiaraus in battle. Tydeus then requested his head, into which he bit angrily. Sounds like a red card to me. **Crucially for The Iliad, this costs Tydeus Athena's favor, and when he realizes this, he asks her to transfer that favor to his son, Diomedes, and we can see this relationship in The Iliad, especially in Diomedes's aristeia in Book 5,** although Homer doesn't seem to think Diomedes is immortal, which The Thebias does. **This all implies that the other epic cycle poems gave the gods more power over humans' fates than Homer does. Of those who set out from Argos, only Adrastus survives to go home, and Polyneices and Eteocles kill each other in battle, fulfilling Oedipus's curse.** The epic may have said that Amphiaraus brought the head to Tydeus to lure him into losing Athena's favor and promise of mortality in anger at Tydeus's role in convincing the Argives to attack Thebes. If so, this led to the earth swallowing up Amphiaraus after the battle as punishment for Tydeus's hors d'oeuvres. **This all occurs in the generation before the Trojan War: its warriors are just newborns at this time.**

4. **The Epigone:** We have less information about this one, but it **seems to be a sequel to The Thebias with the sons of the defeated heroes joining to attack Thebes and would have included Diomedes.** Such a story is glanced at in one line of The Iliad. It likely contained a story about Manto, Tiresias's daughter, also a seer, who was displaced when Thebes was conquered by the sons. It's mostly a mystery.

5. **The Cypria:** This key epic gives us the **backstory to the Trojan War**. It was early on attributed to Homer, rumored as a dowry to his son-in-law, but Herodotus shrewdly opposed this idea, which isn't true. The first fragment we have indicates that it attributes its events to **Zeus wanting to lessen the number of humans who were "weighing down" the earth, so he decided to cause the Trojan War to do so.** (I think we can assume Homer never considered this idea.) Our best information is that **The Cypria has Zeus consult with Themis, the goddess of righteous thought, and the result is the marriage of the goddess Thetis with human Peleus. The second fragment indicates that Zeus is punishing Thetis for resisting his advances with a marriage to a mortal, but Hera was grateful to Thetis for rejecting Zeus's advances, so she ensured that Thetis's child would be the greatest of mortals. That child is Achilles.**

**The wedding of Thetis and Peleus is key** to the background. A fragment reports that Chiron the kindly centaur, who raised Peleus and will help do the same with Achilles, brought the present of a spear created by Hephaestus, which will eventually become Achilles's spear. However, **the goddess Eris (strife) appeared, never a good thing, possibly, as in later versions, angry because she wasn't invited. She lives up to her function by causing a huge row among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite about who is the most beautiful, probably by throwing down a golden apple as the prize to the most beautiful. This apple will later figure into the famous judgment of Paris, which will go further to bring on the Trojan War.**

**The next existing fragments are about Aphrodite prepping for the contest, in which Paris will decide which of the three goddesses is the most beautiful. It goes on to tell us that Aphrodite bribes Paris with getting with Helen, the world's most beautiful woman, and the next fragments indicate discussion of Helen's famous brother, Castor and Polydeuces, first by explained that Castor was mortal but Polydeuces was immortal and that Helen was the product (in this version) of the union of Zeus with the goddess Nemesis after a long shapeshifting pursuit because she was unwilling. While Helen's mom is more often said to be Leda (this version first appears as far as we know in Euripides's Helen but then becomes much more popular), it's Nemesis in this epic, and that makes sense to its purpose.**

Advised by Aphrodite after naming her the winner, he goes to Greece and stays first with Helen's brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, and then, in Sparta, with Helen and her husband, King Menelaus. Her brothers had earlier rescued Helen when she had been kidnapped as a child by Theseus. The Cypria also gives Helen sons by both Menelaus and Paris who don't show up in The Iliad, where Helen only has one daughter, Hermione, by Menelaus. **Menelaus must go on a mission to Crete and properly instructs Helen to entertain their guests until they are ready to go, and Paris violates all rules of hospitality by The Cypria has Aphrodite bring Paris and Helen together sexually while Menelaus is away, and they board ship for Troy along with a lot of Menelaus's wealth.** It also seems that Castor and Polydeuces couldn't help this time because Castor had been killed by a cousin in a cattle raid, and Zeus decided to make the brothers gods.

At this point, Menelaus consulted with Aggy and Nestor and then gathered soldiers from throughout Greece. Odysseus tried to avoid going by feigning madness by plowing the seashore, but Palamedes put Ody's infant son Telemachus in the bath of the plow, and when Ody stopped to save him, it proved he was sane. Ody was never a Palamedes fan after this and was drowned by Oy and Diomedes later in The Cypria.

**The story continues with the Greek fleet and troops meeting at Aulis and Calchas's prophecy of the snake and sparrow that is also recounted in the The Iliad by Odysseus that the war would last ten years before the Greeks won.** After landing in the wrong place (Mysia), the Greeks set to sea again but are scattered by storms. **After Aggy boasts of his prowess in killing a deer, Artemis decided to hold the fleet at Aulis with an unfavorable wind. Calchis is consulted and explains Artemis's anger and her demand of Aggy's daughter Iphigenia as a human sacrifice, to which Aggy agrees, sending for her under false premises of her engagement to Achilles. In The Cypria, Iphigenia appears to have been saved by Artemis at the last minute by substituting a deer and taken by the goddess to the land of Taurus.** (This is strangely similar to the story of Isaac's sacrifice in Genesis.) Iphigenia is not a character in Homer, where this story doesn't appear and Aggy's daughters have other names.

**The fleet departs and puts in at the island of Tenedos, where the warrior Philoctetes is bitten by a snake, and the wound festers and smells so bad that the Greeks leave him behind when they head to Troy.** This will be important not in Homer but in later versions of the story as the Greeks will need Philoctetes to win the war.

When they arrive on the shore near Troy, no one wants to be the first to disembark, but Protesilaus leaps ashore and is killed by Hector. The story mentions that Thetis told Achilles not to be the first off as that person was doomed, but he then leads a rout of the Trojan army. **Odysseus and Menelaus then go on an embassy into Troy to ask for the return of Helen to avoid the war, but they are refused at Paris's behest, and when Achilles then wants to see Helen, Aphrodite and Thetis bring them together in this epic, likely in a sexual coupling.** When the Greeks want to return home at this point, Achilles rallies them to stay. Achilles then steals Aeneas's cattle, sacks a couple of towns (capturing Briseis in the process) and kills Priam's son Troilus, who nonetheless is still alive in The Iliad. **It then details Achilles getting Briseis and Aggy getting Chryseis, both crucial to the opening of The Iliad. The Cypria seems to end with Zeus's decision to lessen the toll on Troy by having Achilles abstain from combat and then a catalog of Trojan allies, many of whom only arrived in the ninth year (around the time of Achilles's hiatus).** Some scholars feel this indicates that The Iliad known to the author of The Cypria didn't contain this, meaning it was added to The Iliad at a later stage..

6. **The Iliad would fit into the cycle here** but, again, probably predates the rest of it but not necessarily many of the stories that appear in the other epics.

7. **The Aethiopis**: This sequel to The Iliad picks up right after The Iliad and covers the events of the final year of the war as Troy brings in some powerful allies after Hector's death. **Much of this epic likely followed the battles of the Greeks against the Amazons under Queen Penthesileia, a daughter of Ares, and then the Ethiopians under their king Memnon, the son of the goddess Eos.** Later summaries indicate that **the Queen had an aristeia (like Diomedes in Iliad Book 5) but then was killed by Achilles.** Apparently, Achilles then killed Thersites because he claimed Achilles was in love with the Queen. Later traditions indicate this might have been a more noble and popular Thersites than the one in The Iliad. Apparently, Achilles then sailed to Lesbos with Odysseus, who then performed rites to purify him from Thersites's murder.

The epic then tells of **the arrival of Memnon, son of the goddess Eos and probably of her mortal husband Tithonus, in armor created by Hephaesus, which matches Achilles's armor in The Iliad.** There's a good chance the epic contained a scene of Eos requesting this armor for Memnon and its creation, which is paralleled in the later Aeneid, which paid close attention to its earlier models. **In battle, Memnon kills Antilochus, probably while he is defending his father Nestor as in later sources, In revenge, Achilles slays Memnon, and Eos requests of Zeus and is granted immortality for Memnon.** (One wonders whether she had learned her lesson from the Tithonus situation and also asked for eternal youth!) This *may* have been followed, as in later tradition, by the weighing of the souls of Memnon and Achilles by Zeus in the presence of their mothers, as Achilles was killed by Paris and Apollo at the Scaean Gate almost immediately after Memnon was killed and Achilles drove the Trojans back into Troy. **We don't know whether the heel story was part of this epic** (as it certainly isn't part of Homer, where Achilles can be wounded).

**Telemonian (Big) Ajax carries Achilles and his awesome armor back to the ships while Odysseus covers his retreat, and this sets the stage for the awarding of Achilles's armor, which is contested by these two warriors and is awarded to Odysseus,** before which Antilochus is buried and Thetis and the Muses mourn Achilles as his body is prepared for cremation. Thetis takes his soul, at least, and he is granted an immortality like Memnon's but instead of in The East on The White Island. This is completely in disagreement with The Odyssey. **The Greeks then built a funeral mound for Achilles,** which we know was still there in Classical times as Alexander famously stopped there at the beginning of his conquest of Asia in the 330s BC. **The epic seems to end with the suicide of Ajax due to his not receiving Achilles's armor, which apparently overlapped an also appeared in the next epic** (and continuously in Greek literature).

8. **The Little Iliad**: This epic seems to overlap at the beginning with The Aethiopis and at the end with The Sack of Troy, so it may have been an independent attempt to cover this material rather than an attempt to fit between the other two. In antiquity, The Aethiopis and The Sack of Troy were said to have been written by Arctinus and The Little Iliad by Lesches, so they may have been separate authors' takes on largely the same material.

This epic, which the opening fragment identifies as about Ilion (Troy), begins with **Odysseus winning Achilles's armor with advice from Athena and Ajax going mad and eventually killing himself**. It appears that in this epic, Nestor suggested eavesdropping on the Trojans near the walls to see how they rated Ajax and Ody, and two girls were overheard discussing this issue with the better reply favoring Ody's rear-guard action while Ajax was carrying back Achilles's body. (This seems to fit with The Odyssey's view that the judges were Trojan children and Athena.) Ajax's body was not cremated as was normal for heroes but rather buried in a coffin, likely due to the suicide.

**Odysseus then captures Priam's son, the seer Helenus, and extracts from him a prophecy that Troy can't be taken without Philoctetes and his bow.** Recall that he was left with a rancid snake bite back on the island Lemnos as the Greeks went to Troy ten years earlier, and **Diomedes now sails off to bring him to Troy.** (Sophocles has a great play about this.) **Philoctetes is then healed by Machaon, son of the doctor god Asclepius, and then kills Paris in battle.** Menelaus desecrates Paris's body, but then the Trojans bury him.

Apparently, Helen was then married to another of Priam's son, Deiphobus. **Odysseus then brought Achilles's son Neoptolemus to Troy and gave him Achilles's armor. After Achilles appeared in vision to Neoptolemus, a new Trojan ally, Eurypylus, arrived and was successful until Neoptolemus slew him.** The Greeks have now knocked out all of the top Trojan soldiers and their allies, and the prophecies are coming together for them. It's the tenth year, and Philoctetes is present.

At this point, **Athena suggests to Epeius, a very minor character in The Iliad, the idea of the Trojan Horse.** As the horse is being built, **Odysseus disfigures himself to get into Troy and spy. Helen recognizes him but doesn't rat him out, and they discuss fortifications. Odysseus returns to Troy with Diomedes, and they steal the Palladium, sacred to Athena and guaranteeing Troy's safety, from its temple.**

**At this point, the horse was complete, and the Greeks burned their shelters, and those not in the horse set sail for the island of Tenedos, circling back as nightfall came. When the Trojans saw the horse and the departure, they understandably rejoiced and took down part of the city's wall to bring the horse inside.** What follows next are fragments detailing mostly Trojans being slain by Greek heroes, particularly Neoptolemus, one appropriately being saved by Odysseus because he stayed in his house during the earlier embassy in year one, and **finally Neoptolemus's slaying of Priam, not at the altar of Zeus as in later versions but dragged from there to the front of his palace, and then the roundup of Trojan women as captives with Andromache and Aeneas (!?) going to Neoptolemus. Menelaus finally encounters Helen and draws his sword, but the sight of her breasts causes him to drop it.** The epic appears to end with Neoptolemus's dispatch of Hector's son Astyanax, tossing him off the battlements.

9. **The Sack of Troy**: We begin here with the **debate in Troy about what to do about the horse**. Some want to throw it off a cliff or burn it, and others think it's sacred. The latter wins, and the Trojans have a rager to celebrate. **Lacaoon and his eldest son are then consumed by two giant snakes, which Aeneas sees as an omen, and he leaves Troy with a few followers.**

The Greek Sinon, in disguise, sees the horse brought into the city and lights a fire to signal the Greeks near Tenedos, who now return to sack Troy. Those in the horse descend and slaughter the Trojan men. Menelaus kills Deiphobus and takes Helen back to his ship. Neoptolemus kills Priam.

Little Ajax then desecrates the Temple of Athena, where Cassandra has fled to find sanctuary. He drags her off a statue of Athena, damaging the statue. The Greeks are appalled, but Ajax holds the altar, and they leave him there. Cassandra is given to Agamemnon. The Greeks's not punishing Ajax as they should have, despite his sanctuary, causes the troubles on the returns of the Greeks from Troy.

As in **The Little Iliad**, Neoptolemus gets Andromache, but differently, Odysseus kills Astyanax, and Hector's sister Polyxena is sacrificed on Achilles's tomb.

10. **The Returns**: Menelaus and Agamemnon argue about returning. Menelaus wants to leave right away while Agamemnon wants to stay and sacrifice heavily to Athena due to Ajax's crime. Diomedes and Nestor sail off and are the only ones to reach home without incident. Menelaus leaves soon after them and is hit by storms, losing all but five of his ships and ending up in Egypt, as **The Odyssey** relates.

After an interlude in which Calchas and others who left on foot bury Tiresias at Colophon (who should have been dead long before as he was of Oedipus's generation), but in later versions this became the burial of Calchas. Meanwhile, back at Troy, **the ghost of Achilles tries to prevent Aggy and the others from sailing by predicting what will occur**. Neoptolemus apparently leaves on foot and encounters Odysseus, in from the sea, at Maroneia, and then returns home and buries Phoenix and meets Peleus, his grandfather. The epic then covers **Agamemnon's death at the hands of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and its revenge by Orestes (and Plyades)**. It ends with Menelaus's safe return to Sparta.

11. **The Odyssey fits here and is a much better return story.**



12. **The Telegony**: It's a sequel to The Odyssey and picks up late in our current Odyssey, strengthening the position of some scholars who think everything beginning at Odyssey 23:297 was a later addition known to scholars as The Continuation. **This epic repeats the burial of the suitors. Ody sacrifices to the nymphs to thank them for his return,** as he pledged to do in The Odyssey, and he then sails off to Elis to see the stables Heracles cleaned as one of his labors and stay with Augeus's grandson Polyxenus, who is mentioned in The Iliad's catalog of ships but doesn't die in that epic. Polyxenus gives Odysseus an awesome wine bowl. **Ody then has other land travels, which take him to the land of the Thesprotians, where he marries Queen Callidice.** (Perhaps this is related to Tiresias's prophecy in The Odyssey 11.) While there, he leads the army in a war with the Brygans, and Athena saves his side after Ares leads the Brygans, and Apollo makes peace. **Eventually, Callidice dies, and her son with Odysseus, Polypoetes, takes over, and Ody returns to Ithaca.**

Meanwhile, Telemachus has been ruling Ithaca, and Ody's son by Circe, Telegonus, has grown up and sets out in search of his father. He landed on Ithaca, began ravaging (like the Sea People at this time) and killed Ody without knowing who he was when Ody went out to stop him (also not knowing who he was). This is sort of Oedipus territory. Later versions that might come from this epic have Telegonus kill his father with a spear barbed with the spine of a stingray, which Circe had given him when he left home. (This may result from a misinterpretation of Tiresias's prophecy that Ody would die ex halos, far from the sea, as just "from the sea.")

**When Telegonus realizes who he killed, he brings Ody's body, along with Penelope and Telemachus, back to Circe, and the poem features a lament by Telegonus. The final piece of information we know is that Telegonus then married Penelope, and Telemachus then married Circe.** I'd say this epic is best left ignored.

For much more detail, check out Malcolm Davies, The Greek Epic Cycle 2003