

The Cypria

The *Cypria*—in eleven books by Stasinus or Hegesias¹—tells about the events leading up to the *Iliad*. Exactly where, in Greek mythology, the *Cypria* began can only be surmised. In all probability, it began by interweaving new narrative threads into the fabric of pre-existing tales. The story of the marriage of Thetis, the sea nymph and daughter of Neleus (the “Old Man of the Sea”), was extant long before the *Cypria* was fashioned. This belonged to the narrative tradition concerning the heroic king Peleus, her husband. In the *Argonautica* of Apollonius, Hera (the Olympian wife and sister of Zeus) reminds Thetis of the event:

Do not forget, Thetis,
how it was I that reared you from infancy, and loved you
more than all other sea nymphs that dwell in the salt depths
because you would not bed, for all his urgent longing,
with Zeus—oh, I know him, that’s what he’s always up to,
sleeping around with women, mortal or immortal—
but out of respect for me (*and* because you were scared silly)
you kept him at bay; and he then swore a tremendous
oath, that no deathless god would ever call you wife.
Yet he still, even so, kept at you, very much against your will,
till reverend Themis spelled out the truth of the matter to him,
telling how he [Thetis’s husband] was destined to sire a son of better
stuff than his father. So then, even though he still wanted you,
fear made him give over, scared lest some rival oust him
as king of the gods: he wanted to keep his rule forever.
But I gave you for husband the best of earthly men,
to let you enjoy a marriage that pleased your heart
and bear children; I asked to your wedding feast the whole
company of the gods, with my own hands I lifted
the bridal torch, all because of that kind respect you showed me. (4.790-809)²

At their wedding feast, the gods bring Peleus gifts. Cheiron, the Centaur, gives a stout ash spear, which Athena had polished and Hephaestus had fitted with a bronze head. Poseidon gives immortal horses. Zeus himself, however, does not attend, but rather—as the first thread in the *Cypria* tells us—he sends down Eris (goddess of strife and discord) with a golden apple, upon which is written “For the Fairest.” Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each contend for this recognition, but Peleus refused to bestow it. At Zeus’s command, Hermes takes the apple and leads the three goddesses to a shepherd on Mount Ida.

Years earlier, when Hecuba was about to give birth to her second son³, she dreamed that he would be the cause of Troy’s destruction. To prevent this from happening, Priam, the king of Troy, gave the new-born baby to Agelaus, a servant, to expose on Ida. Agelaus, however, named the child Paris, and raised him to be a shepherd. When grown, he married the mountain nymph Oenone and discovered his true identity. Now, on Ida, Hermes gives Paris the apple and demands that he give it to the fairest of the three goddesses. Each goddess promises Paris precious gifts. Hera promises a vast kingdom; Athena promises great victories in battle; Aphrodite promises the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife. Paris gives the apple to Aphrodite, bringing upon him the resentment of Hera and Athena.

Some time later⁴ Aphrodite commands Paris to build ships and set sail with her (and Anchises’s) son Aeneas. First, she brings Paris to Lacedaemon, where he is entertained by the

sons of king Tyndareus and brothers of Helen, Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux). When Paris and Aeneas again set sail, they are joined by Helen's cousins, Idas and Lynceus. Together, they arrive at the home of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and his wife Helen. On the tenth day of their visit, Menelaus is summoned to Crete on urgent family business, and in his absence, Helen is left in charge of entertaining the guests. However, Idas and Lynceus soon decided to return home,⁵ leaving Helen alone with Paris and Aeneas. While Menelaus is in Crete, Aphrodite brings Helen and Paris together and causes them to fall in love with one another. They steal great treasures from the home of Menelaus, putting them on board the ships. Then, Paris hides Helen on board his ship and, with Aeneas, departs from Sparta.

Hera, in resentment against Paris, brings a storm against his ships and leads them off course. Eventually, Paris and Helen arrive at Troy, where their marriage is celebrated.⁶

Meanwhile, Zeus sends Iris to Menelaus to inform him of what has transpired at his home. Menelaus in haste returns to Sparta and discovers the loss of his wife and treasures. Together with the king of Mycenae, his brother Agamemnon, Menelaus plans an assault on Ilium.⁷ All the Achaean warlords, with their crews, meet at Aulis, where the incident of the serpent and sparrows takes place, which the prophet Calchas interprets (*Iliad* 2.355-89).⁸ After this, the armada sets sail and arrives at Teuthrania, in Mysia, south of Ilium. Mistaking this city for Troy, the Achaeans destroy it. The king of Teuthrania, Telephus, son of Heracles, kills Thersander, son of Polynices, and is himself wounded in his thigh by a spear thrown by Achilles. When the Achaeans, having become aware of their error, depart from Mysia, a storm scatters their fleet. The "Myrmidons" (descendants of the Thessalian patriarch Myrmidon) disembark at Scyros, where Achilles marries Deidameia, the daughter of the king of Scyros, Lycomedes, and has a son, Neoptolemus.⁹

Agamemnon and Achilles return to Argos, perplexed as to how to find their way to Troy. This problem is resolved by the arrival of Telephus, the former king of Teuthrania. The wound that he had received from Achilles's spear would not heal. Seeking aid, Telephus consulted an oracle of Apollo, which informed him that he would be healed when the one who had wounded him would turn physician. Telephus, therefore, disguised as a beggar, set sail for Argos in search of Achilles. There Telephus promised to direct the Achaean armada toward Ilium, if Achilles would heal him. This Achilles does by scraping some rust off of his spear into Telephus's wounded thigh.

Ultimately, the fleet re-assembles at Aulis.¹⁰ There Agamemnon participates in a hunt and shoots a stag. He boasts, "Artemis could not have done it better." This angers Artemis, who sends stormy winds that prevent the Achaean fleet from leaving the harbor. Calchas tells Agamemnon that Artemis can be appeased only by the sacrifice of his loveliest daughter. Agamemnon sends Odysseus and Talthybius as messengers to his wife Clytemnestra (Helen's half-sister), at Mycenae, telling her to send Iphigeneia to Aulis in order that he might confer her upon Achilles as a wife, in reward for his military service. According to one tradition, when Agamemnon is about to sacrifice his daughter, Artemis snatches her away and transports her to Tauris (in the vicinity of what is now the port of Balaclava, in the Crimea). According to this tradition, when Artemis snatches Iphigenia away, she replaces her with a deer, which Agamemnon sacrifices instead, and she makes Iphigenia a priestess in her temple. (Some sources add that Artemis gave Iphigenia immortality.) The earlier tradition, however, is that Agamemnon did in fact sacrifice Iphigenia,¹¹ and in doing so appeased the anger of Artemis. The sacrifice being made, the winds abated, and the Achaean fleet was ready to set sail.

Before reaching Ilium, the fleet land at Tenedos. Before landing, Thetis, the mother of Achilles, warns her son that, whatever he does, he must not harm Tenes, the king of Tenedos, for Tenes was a favorite of Apollo. However, when Tenes saw the Achaean ships attempting to land, he stood on the shore and threw stones at them. Achilles, not knowing the identity of this person, kills him. Afterwards, the Achaeans sacrifice to Apollo, but while gathering wood for the fire, Philoctetes is bitten by a snake. He is carried back onto his ship, but the stench of his wound becomes so bad that Agamemnon orders Odysseus to remove Philoctetes from Tenedos and set him ashore on the island of Lemnos, leaving with him the bow of Heracles for protection and hunting.

After this, Odysseus and Menelaus are sent as envoys to Ilium, where they address a Trojan assembly, demanding the restoration of Helen and the property of Menelaus. The Trojans not only refuse, but threaten to kill the two envoys. Odysseus and Menelaus are saved by the intervention of Antenor. When Agamemnon receives the Trojans' response, he commands the landing of the fleet at Ilium. Meanwhile, the Trojans have gathered on the shore, awaiting the arrival of the Achaeans. Thetis warns Achilles not to be the first to set foot upon Ilium, for the first man to leap ashore would be the first to die. Achilles heeds his mother's warning, and allows Protesilaus the honor of being the first Achaean to raise his sword against the Trojans. Protesilaus immediately kills a few of the enemy, but is then himself killed by Hector. When Achilles sees Protesilaus fall, he sets ashore with his Myrmidons, and throwing a stone, kills Cycnus—whom, as the son of Poseidon, the Trojans had supposed to be immortal. Amazed at the death of Cycnus, the Trojans were filled with fear and fled back into their city. The Achaeans pursued, killing many.

The Trojans, being outnumbered and afraid of Achilles, refused to meet the Achaeans in battle, but instead remained inside the gates of Troy. Achilles approached the city by night and captured Lycaon, whom he afterwards sold into slavery at Lemnos. Achilles also made his way to Mt. Ida, where he found and killed Mestor, a son of king Priam. Afterwards, he led his men in raids against many neighboring towns. Meanwhile, allies (perhaps, confederates in the Hittite empire) arrived to aid the Trojans.

The *Cypria* leads up to the second part of the Epic Cycle of Troy, the *Iliad*. Following the *Iliad* is the *Aethiopis*, which tells of the Achaean struggle against additional Trojan allies, led by the Amazon Penthesileia and by the Ethiopian Memnon. It includes the death of and funeral games for Achilles, and concludes with the contest between Great Ajax and Odysseus for the armor of Achilles. The *Little Iliad* picks up the narrative with the madness of Ajax and tells of the arrival and deeds of Achaean heroes Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. It tells of the death of Paris, the apparent departure of the Achaeans, and the Trojan celebration after bringing the wooden horse into their city. In the *Sack of Ilium* we are given the fateful outcome of the decision to bring the horse within the gates of Troy, including the deaths of Laocoon and Polyxena. Following the *Sack of Ilium* is the account of the *Returns*, which—although it is given very brief consideration by Quintus of Smyrna—was comprised of at least two separate narratives, the *Return of the Atridae* and the *Odyssey*. The Epic Cycle concluded with the *Telegony*, an extension of the *Odyssey*, telling of Odysseus's journey to Thesprotia and of his inadvertent murder by an illegitimate son, Telegonus, and of his deification.

Notes

1. Some say that the *Cypria* was composed by Homer, who gave it to Stasinus as a dowry upon his marriage with Homer's daughter. None of its eleven books are extant. Fortunately, the whole account was read by Proclus, who wrote a summary.

2. Trans. Peter Green. Berkeley: U Calif. P, 1997. (Cf. Apollodorus, *Library* 3.13.4-5.)

3. Hecuba's first-born son was Hector.

4. The number of years required for all of these events to transpire is uncertain; however, if we keep in mind that the son of Peleus and Thetis, Achilles, must (if we demand historical realism) be allowed to reach an age at which he can join Agamemnon's fleet, then we should imagine that several years pass before Paris's ships set sail. According to Apollodorus, Achilles was fifteen years old when the fleet first sailed from the port of Aulis (*Epitome* 3.16).

5. Meanwhile, in Lacedaemon, Helen's brothers had decided to take advantage of the absence of their cousins Idas and Lynceus by stealing and butchering their cattle. Upon returning to Lacedaemon, Idas and Lynceus discover the crime of Castor and Polydeuces. Castor is killed, but Polydeuces kills his cousins and escapes. According to Homer, both brothers are killed (*Iliad*, 3.280-91).

6. According to Herodotus, a storm drives Paris's ship to Egypt. There king Proteus discovers Paris's crime and, after taking Helen from him for safekeeping until she can be retrieved by Menelaus, banishes Paris from Egypt (*Histories* 2.112-20). A later tradition (made use of by Euripides)—in an apparent attempt to harmonize the accounts of Homer and Herodotus—suggested that either Hera or Zeus, with the help of Hermes, transported Helen from Sparta to Egypt, leaving Paris to run off with and marry a phantom Helen.

7. It is here important to know that, because of the great beauty of Helen, all of the Achaean kings and princes had sought her in marriage. Tyndareus, her father, who was then king of Sparta and Lacedaemon, wanted to give her to Menelaus, but was afraid of offending so many powerful rivals. Odysseus, in exchange for Tyndareus's aid in gaining Penelope in marriage, advised Tyndareus "to exact an oath from all the suitors that they would defend the favored bridegroom against any wrong that might be done him in respect of his marriage" (Apollodorus, *Library* 3.10.8).

8. Some scholars date the ten years' war from the time of this prophecy, not from the landing of the Achaean armada at Ilium. See, however, *Iliad* 2.345-46a and note below. One way to resolve this problem would be to make the prophecy of Calchas an immediate antecedent to the embarkation of the second armada—perhaps, just before the affair involving Iphigenia.

9. Another tradition states that, when Achilles was nine years old, Thetis—having learned from prophecy that her son would be enlisted into a war against Troy—whisked him away to Scyros, where he lived in the court of Lycomedes and had an illicit affair with the king's daughter (Apollodorus, *Library* 3.13.8).

10. According to Apollodorus, eight years passed before the Achaean armada again assembled at Aulis (*Epitome* 3.18). This explains Helen's statement, "This, now, is the twentieth year for me / since I sailed her and forsook my native land" (*Iliad* 24.899-900), and—if accepted—makes impossible the theory that the "ten years" of the war begins from the time of Calchas's prophecy. (See note above.)

11. It is now known that human sacrifice was practiced in the ancient Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations. The later Greeks regarded it as blasphemy to allege that the gods could demand such a sacrifice. (Such a development in the idea of God is seen also in the literature of the ancient Hebrews.) Homer mentions neither tradition, although some note that Iphigenia is not mentioned among Agamemnon's living daughters (*Iliad* 9.173-74). Other scholars read "Iphianassa" as a variant form of this daughter's name.

— T. E. Jones, Fall 2010
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