

## Before the Beginning: No Story of Troy Before *The* Story of Troy

It is commonly said that the *Iliad* represents the Trojan War in a microcosm. It foreshadows events after the end of the poem's time frame (the death of Achilles, the destruction of Troy), and symbolically alludes to events long before the inception of Achilles' wrath (the gathering of ships at Aulis, Paris' seduction of Helen). The long stretch of Battle Books, too, with their perpetual give and take of pursuit and retreat, seems to stand in symbolically for the ten years of inconclusive battle waged on the Trojan plain. But this view is also misguided. As I argue in this paper, the *Iliad* pointedly *elects not* to pose its depiction of the Trojan War as microcosmic; rather, it attempts to persuade its audience that there was *no story at all* before Achilles' withdrawal from the army in the tenth year of the war, and that the fall of Troy follows necessarily upon Hector's death and burial. The *Iliad* asserts itself as the complete account of the fall of Troy – comprehensive in scope but efficient in the telling.

In this paper I focus on the *Iliad*'s depiction of the nine years leading up to the series of events narrated in the *Iliad*, and I examine how the poem's depiction of the past impacts the present of its plot. I argue that the *Iliad* has two strategies for highlighting the primacy of its own story over preexisting traditions about the Trojan War: (1) by co-opting events associated with the beginning of the war for use in its own story and (2) by minimizing the significance of war-events that occurred before the poem's timeframe.

What have the Greeks been up to for all this time? According to the *Iliad*, little of interest – at least at Troy. In Book 2's dramatic demonstration of the Achaeans' restlessness Odysseus explains that the Achaeans have grown weary (*ἀσχαλάαν*) from years of simply “lingering” there (*ἐνθάδε μμνόντεσσι*, 2.296). As M.L. West notes, we hear nothing “of fighting at Troy, no mention of any individual on either side who was killed there” (West 2011:

34). Indeed, the *Iliad* insists consistently that the Trojans did not engage battle beyond their gates for as long as Achilles was active on the battlefield. This is stated explicitly by five different speakers in six different ways on six separate occasions in the poem (5.788, 9.352, 13.105, 15.720, 18.287, 20.28). According to the account told in the *Iliad*, the danger to the Achaeans has been so insignificant for the first nine years of war that it had not even been necessary for them to build defensive fortifications until the tenth year, after the withdrawal of Achilles (Scott 1921: 164). Of stories associated with the Trojan War that occurred before the time-frame of the *Iliad*, the poem betrays little knowledge or interest – and of these, it refers only to events that occurred either before the Greek landing at Troy or in the first days of the war, before fighting commenced.

In its attempt to valorize Achilles and his destructive wrath, the *Iliad* confines the Trojan War within the limits of Achilles' *menis*. But, as the poet would have us believe, the action narrated in the *Iliad* is not a microcosmic representation of the war; rather, we are to understand that Achilles' wrath in fact triggered every event key to Troy's destruction.

### Bibliography

Du , C. 2002. *Homeric Variations on a Lament by Briseis*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

Foster, B. 1914. "The Duration of the Trojan War," in *The American Journal of Philology*. Vol. 35, No. 3. 294-308.

Kullmann, W. 2001. "Past and Future in the *Iliad*." Leofranc Holdford-Stevens, tr., in Cairns (2011) 385-408.

van Leeuwen, J. 1906. "Homerica," in *Mnemosyne*. Vol. 34. No. 2. 181-223.

- Lowe, N.J. 2000. *The Classical Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*. Cambridge.
- Page, D. 1959. *History and the Homeric Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scott, J. 1913a. "The Assumed Duration of the War of the Iliad," in *Classical Philology*,  
Vol. 8, No. 4. 445-456.
- Scott, J. 1913b. "Paris and Hector in Tradition and in Homer," in *Classical Philology*,  
Vol. 8, No. 2. 160-171.
- Scott, J. 1921. *The Unity of Homer*. The University of California Press.
- Suzuki, M. 1989. *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic*. Ithaca:  
Cornell University Press.
- Vivante, Paolo. 1991. *The Iliad: Action as Poetry*. Twayne Publishers.
- West, M.L. 2011. *The Making of the Iliad: Disquisition and Analytical Commentary*.  
Oxford.
- Zarker, J. W. 1965, "King Eëtion and Thebe as Symbols in the *Iliad*. *Classical Journal*  
61: 110-14.