The Epics of Greece and Rome

In Unit One, you read excerpts from three Eastern epics: The Epic of Gilgamesh from Mesopotamia and the Mahabharata and Ramayana from India. As you may recall, an epic is a long narrative poem that deals with a hero’s adventures and deeds. An epic hero—Gilgamesh or Rama, for example—reflects a culture’s ideals, values, and beliefs.

In this unit, you will read excerpts from two epics of Western cultures: the Iliad from ancient Greece and the Aeneid from ancient Rome. Many scholars believe that these epics and the epics of Eastern civilizations derive from the same tradition. You may therefore notice some similarities between the Eastern and the Western epics. As you will see, however, the Greeks and Romans put their own unique stamps on the epic genre.

Epic Conventions

In the Greek and Roman epics, you will notice certain conventions, or devices, found in other epics. For example, both the Iliad and the Aeneid tell about events set in a distant and glorious past. The events are majestic in scale—heroic battles and dangerous quests. Like Gilgamesh and Rama, the Greek and Roman epic heroes are larger-than-life figures who perform great deeds. Both Achilles, the hero of the Iliad, and Aeneas, the hero of the Aeneid, are half divine: each has a goddess for a mother. Supernatural elements are found in these epics too. Gods, goddesses, and magical creatures appear, at times taking part in human affairs.

Literary Style

One of the distinctive qualities of Greek and Roman epics is their attribution to particular authors. Though these epics still show clear traces of the oral tradition, they also reveal the hands of individual writers shaping materials to create unified wholes. The Greek and Roman epics are also distinguished for the richness and power of their language. Two devices that contribute to the epics’ dignified style are the epithet and the epic simile.

• Homer’s style is marked by an extensive use of epithets—descriptive words and phrases that characterize persons and things. For example, the adjectives “brilliant” and “godlike” frequently appear before Achilles’ name. He is also identified as “the swift runner,” “the headstrong runner,” and “the proud runner.”

• As you know, a simile is a comparison that contains the word like or as. An epic simile is a simile that extends over several lines. Often, epic similes serve to increase the dramatic power of the passages in which they occur, as in Aeneas’ description of Troy in flames:

“I knew the end then: Ilium was going down
In fire, the Troy of Neptune going down,
As in high mountains when the countrymen
Have notched an ancient ash, then make their axes
Ring with might and main, chopping away
To fell the tree—ever on the point of falling,
Shaken through all its foliage, and the treetop
Nodding; bit by bit the strokes prevail
Until it gives a final groan at last
And crashes down in ruin from the height.”

—Virgil, Aeneid
Author Mystery  Homer has long been recognized as one of the world’s greatest poets, but the man himself remains a mystery. Some scholars doubt that he ever actually existed, believing that the epics attributed to him are the work of many poets. Others agree with the ancient view that one great poet wrote both the Iliad and another famous epic, the Odyssey. If he existed, Homer was probably born somewhere in western Asia Minor (what is now Turkey). According to ancient tradition, Homer was blind. The story of his blindness, however, may have simply been a way of praising his wisdom, for Greek legends feature many stories of blind people with great insight.

Singers of the Trojan War  It’s likely that Homer heard singer-poets narrate tales about the Trojan War, a legendary ten-year war waged by Greeks against the wealthy city of Troy, or Ilium, in Asia Minor. Indeed, he may have himself been such a singer-poet, one who late in his life wrote down some of the stories he had told. Many scholars believe that the Iliad was created in the 700s B.C., though the circumstances of its composition remain unclear.

Homer as Teacher  In later centuries, Homer’s epics served as the centerpiece of Greek education. Children learned to read by studying his poems, and they memorized long passages. The epics kept alive the early Greeks’ legends and myths and greatly influenced people’s beliefs about the gods. Many read the poems not just for their exciting stories but because they believed that Homer had revealed important truths about human beings and their place in the universe.

Discovery of Troy  In the late 19th century, archaeologists discovered the ruins of ancient Troy. The evidence they gathered has led many scholars to believe that Homer’s tales about the Trojan War have some basis in fact. Greek armies probably did attack Troy sometime in the 1200s B.C., and they may have destroyed the city.
Build Background

Origins of the Trojan War  According to legend, the Trojan War resulted from an argument among the gods. Eris, the goddess of strife, was angry because she had not been invited to the wedding of Peleus, a mortal king, and Thetis, a sea goddess. To get revenge, Eris threw a golden apple, labeled “for the fairest,” into the midst of the wedding guests. A dispute arose when three goddesses—Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—claimed the prize. Paris, the son of the Trojan king Priam, was chosen to decide which of the three was in fact the most beautiful. Each goddess offered Paris a bribe, but he awarded the apple to Aphrodite, who had promised him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Abduction of Helen  Helen was already married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, when Paris went to Sparta, where he stayed as a guest of the king. According to the customs of the time, a host and a guest had sacred obligations to each other. Paris, ignoring his duty to his host, took Helen back to Troy with him. Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon then gathered warriors from all over Greece to attack Troy and retrieve Helen.

Siege of Troy and the Iliad  The Greek forces sailed to Troy and surrounded the city, besieging it for ten years. The events recounted in the Iliad take place during the final year of the war. The poem focuses on Achilles, the greatest Greek warrior. When he was an infant, his goddess mother had held him by the heel and dipped him into the river Styx in the realm of the dead. After that, Achilles could not be hurt in any part of his body, except for his heel. He does, however, have a fierce temper, which proves costly to the Greeks.

Bitter Feud  Homer’s story begins with a quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces. Achilles, filled with anger, withdraws from the war. As a result, the Trojans, led by the brave Hector, are able to drive the Greeks back to their ships. Achilles returns to combat only after his best friend, Patroclus, has been killed by Hector. With unstoppable energy, Achilles kills every Trojan in his path until he finally meets Hector in a man-to-man battle outside the city walls.

For a humanities activity, click on:
Gods

**Aphrodite** (ə-frohdī’tē): the goddess of love and beauty; favors the Trojans

**Apollo** (ə-pōl’ō): the god of healing, music, poetry, and prophecy; favors and protects the Trojans

**Athena** (ə-thē’nə): the goddess of wisdom and warfare; protects the Greeks

**Hera** (hēr’a): the queen of the gods, sister and wife of Zeus; favors the Greeks

**Hermes** (hûrmēz’): the messenger of the gods

**Thetis** (thē’tīs): a sea goddess, mother of Achilles

**Zeus** (zōōs): the king of the gods, father of Aphrodite, Apollo, Athena, and Hermes; for the most part does not take sides in the war

Greens

**Achilles** (ə-kīl’ēz): the mightiest Greek warrior, son of Thetis and the mortal king Peleus

**Agamemnon** (əg’ə-məm’nōn’): the king of Mycenae, brother of Menelaus and commander of all the Greek forces at Troy

**Calchas** (kāl’kəs): a priest and prophet

**Helen** (hēl’en): the wife of Menelaus, daughter of Zeus and the mortal woman Leda

**Menelaus** (měn’ə-lē’əs): the king of Sparta, whose wife, Helen, was carried off to Troy by Paris

**Nestor** (nēs’tōr): the king of Pylos, oldest and wisest of the Greek leaders

**Odysseus** (ō-dī’sōōs’): the king of Ithaca, known for his craftiness.

**Patroclus** (pə-trō’klōs): a young Greek warrior, best friend of Achilles

Trojans

**Andromache** (än-drōm’ə-kē): the wife of Hector

**Astyanax** (ə-stē’ə-nāks’): the infant son of Hector and Andromache

**Chryses** (krī’sēz’): a priest of Apollo, whose daughter has been captured by the Greeks

**Hector** (hēk’tər): the leader and greatest warrior of the Trojan army

**Hecuba** (hēk’yə-bə): the queen of Troy, wife of Priam and mother of Hector and Paris

**Paris** (pär’īs): the Trojan prince whose abduction of Helen from Greece was the cause of the Trojan War

**Priam** (přī’əm): the king of Troy, father of Hector and Paris