In the Greek epic tradition, a formidable warrior, the most fearless Greek fighter of the Trojan War and the hero of Homer's *Iliad*. Legend held him invulnerable from weapons because he had been dipped by his mother, Thetis, in the River Styx at birth, except for the heel by which he was held. Achilles sought glory fighting at Troy, but an arrow shot by Paris struck his heel and killed him.

**Achilles**

According to Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles was the Greeks' best fighter in the Trojan War, famed for his strength and courage. The story of Achilles is dominated by prophecies about the future, and by desperate attempts to avoid fate—common themes in Greek mythology. As in other tales, the prophecies come true: despite the efforts of his mother, Achilles dies at Troy while still a young man.

Achilles was the son of the sea goddess Thetis and the mortal Peleus, king of Phthia. Long before his birth, the earth goddess Themis predicted that Thetis would give birth to a son who would be more powerful than his father. Zeus, king of the gods, and his brother, the sea god Poseidon, had both wanted to marry Thetis, but the prophecy put them off, since neither wanted to be overthrown. Instead, Themis said that Thetis should marry a mortal, Peleus, so that her son would be half mortal and thus no threat to the gods. Other versions say that Zeus's wife, Hera, helped to raise Thetis, and the sea goddess refused Zeus's advances out of loyalty to her.

Several events occurred at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis that would have a bearing on Achilles' life. For a wedding gift, the gods gave the happy couple the enchanted horses Xanthus and Balius, which would later pull Achilles' chariot. More significant, during the wedding ceremony, Eris, goddess of discord, threw a golden apple among the guests. The apple was inscribed with the words *For the fairest*, and was claimed by three goddesses: Hera; Athena, goddess of arts and war; and the love goddess Aphrodite. Zeus asked the mortal Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, to judge the victor. Paris chose Aphrodite in return for the goddess's promise to help him win the most beautiful woman alive—Helen, daughter of Zeus and the mortal Leda.

**Achilles' younger years**

Another of Themis's prophecies regarding Achilles was that he would die in battle. When Achilles was born, Thetis tried to protect her beloved son from his fate. According to one version of the story, she dipped him in the magical Styx River in the underworld in order to make him immortal, but she held onto her son by the heel, which became the one vulnerable point on his body. In other versions, Thetis tried to protect Achilles by applying ambrosia (the ointment of the gods) to his body by day and putting him in the embers of fire by night to burn away his mortality. Peleus, however, was alarmed by his wife's behavior and prevented her from continuing her treatment of Achilles. His intervention irritated Thetis, who left her husband but continued to watch over her son.
Thetis is depicted in this painting dipping her son Achilles in the River Styx, by Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640).

Peleus sent Achilles to be educated by Cheiron, a centaur (a human with the body of a horse) famed for his wisdom and kindness. Cheiron trained the boy to use weapons and taught him many other skills, including healing and playing the lyre. However, as Achilles grew older, he became unruly, stealing things and vandalizing the other centaurs' homes, and Cheiron despaired of his disobedience. After his time with Cheiron, Achilles returned to live with Peleus. His new tutor was Phoenix, whom Peleus had made king of the Dolopians. During his time with Phoenix, Achilles became acquainted with the youth Patroclus. Peleus made Patroclus his son's attendant, and the two became lifelong companions.

The Centaur Cheiron

A centaur was a creature that was human from the waist up, but with the body and legs of a horse. The centaurs, who were said to have been born out of a cloud, lived in the mountains of Thessaly in central Greece. They were mostly drunken and violent creatures, but one of them, Cheiron, was not like the rest. He was the son of Cronus, the ruler of the Titans, and he was renowned for his gentleness and wisdom. Cheiron was a master of healing. He knew all about medicinal herbs and potions —Asclepius, god of healing, gained his knowledge of medicine from Cheiron. Besides helping to raise Achilles, the great centaur also taught Jason, Actaeon, Patroclus, and Peleus, Achilles' father, among others. Cheiron's life ended after the hero Heracles accidentally shot him with a
poisoned arrow. He was badly hurt and longed to die, but he could not because he was immortal. However, the Titan Prometheus offered to become immortal in his place, and Cheiron was finally allowed to die.

**Sent away to hide**

When Achilles was nine, the seer Calchas said that the great war that was to take place at Troy could only be won if the Greeks had Achilles fighting on their side. This prophecy terrified Thetis, who dreaded her son's death in battle. Hoping to save him from the war, she disguised Achilles as a girl named Pyrrha and took him to live in secret at the court of King Lycomedes on the island of Scyros. She told Lycomedes that Pyrrha was Achilles' sister, and the king believed her. In another version of events, Thetis sent her son to Scyros before Calchas's prophecy, and it was only after the seer gave his prediction that she insisted Achilles hide from the Greeks by pretending to be Pyrrha. At first Achilles was mortified at having to dress as a girl, but he soon realized it was a good way to get close to Lycomedes' daughter, Deidamia. The two fell in love, and by the time Achilles left Scyros, at age 15, Deidamia had given birth to their son, Neoptolemus.

**The outbreak of war**

Paris sparked off the Trojan War when, aided by Aphrodite, he ran away with Helen, who was married to King Menelaus of Sparta. Many other Greek leaders who had originally hoped to marry Helen themselves had sworn an oath to her stepfather Tyndareos that they would fight anyone who tried to harm her marriage to Menelaus. They now were obliged to go to Troy to help Menelaus win back his wife. Achilles himself had not taken the oath, but because of Calchas's prophecy, the Greeks needed him to go to Troy, too. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, having heard where Achilles was, went to Scyros to collect him. He tricked Achilles out of his disguise by lining up a row of ornaments together with a spear and a shield. Odysseus then played a war trumpet, which caused Achilles instinctively to reach for the weapons, revealing himself as a trained soldier.

Achilles eagerly responded to Odysseus's request that he join the Greeks in their war against Troy. Still only 15, he became the leader of the Myrmidons, an army of soldiers from Phthia, who took 50 ships to Troy. His closest friend, Patroclus, also went with him to the war. Events before the Greeks landed at Troy demonstrated both Achilles' valor and his hotheadedness. He attempted to save the life of Iphigeneia, daughter of the Greek leader Agamemnon, when Agamemnon was poised to sacrifice her to ensure favorable winds for the Greek ships. Iphigeneia, however, offered herself for sacrifice anyway, and the Greeks set sail, landing not in Troy but, by accident, in Mysia, where Achilles acted honorably for a second time. On Mysia, an army led by King Telephus attacked the Greeks and drove them back to their ships. Achilles, however, stood firm and inflicted a serious wound on Telephus. An oracle told Telephus that his wound could only be cured by the one who had caused it. He raced after the Greeks. Odysseus, guessing that the cause of the wound was Achilles' spear, advised Achilles to rub rust from the weapon into the king's body. In thanks, Telephus showed the Greeks the way to Troy. As their journey continued, however, the Greeks stopped at the island of Tenedos, where Achilles fell for Hemithea, the sister of King Tenes. Tenes tried to keep Achilles away from her, and in a fit of anger the young Greek killed him. This murder caused even more grief for Thetis, for it had been said that whoever killed Tenes would in turn be killed by his father, the sun god Apollo.
This illustration from a c. sixth-century-BCE kylix (wide-bowed Greek cup) depicts Achilles (right) bandaging the arm of his friend Patroclus.

During the ten-year siege of Troy, the Greeks raided other settlements in the area for supplies, or attacked them because they supported the Trojans. Achilles and his men sacked the island of Lesbos and captured 12 nearby cities. The warrior also killed countless Trojans and their supporters, including King Priam's son Troilus, and Cycnus, a son of Poseidon, whose body could withstand the blows of any weapons. Achilles killed Cycnus by strangling him with the straps of his own helmet. Besides fighting, Achilles managed to develop passionate feelings for Polyxena, a daughter of King Priam, even though she was a Trojan. He also kept a slave girl, Briseis, in his camp. He had captured her in Lynnessus, one of the cities he had raided.

The fatal argument

In the 10th year of the war, Achilles had a huge quarrel with Agamemnon that involved the youth's slave girl, Briseis, and the commander's slave girl, Chryseis. Achilles and other Greek warriors pleaded with Agamemnon to restore Chryseis to her father, a priest of the sun god Apollo, to save the Greeks from a plague sent by the angry god. Agamemnon did as the other soldiers asked, but he replaced his slave girl with Achilles'. Achilles was so furious that he withdrew from the battle, refusing to fight or to let his men fight. His decision was disastrous for the Greeks. Without Achilles and his armies, they soon lost ground to the Trojans, who eventually reached the Greeks' ships and began to set fire to them. The success of the Trojans was mainly the work of Zeus, whom Thetis had begged to help teach Agamemnon a lesson for upsetting her son. Thetis's wish was granted: Agamemnon soon tried to make amends to Achilles. He sent an embassy of three men to Achilles' tent—Odysseus, Achilles' old tutor Phoenix, and the warrior Ajax—who relayed Agamemnon's offer to return Briseis, along with gifts of land and riches, if Achilles would fight again. However, Achilles would still not relent.

In the end, what changed Achilles’ mind was a tragedy. His companion Patroclus offered to go into battle wearing Achilles' armor and pretending to be him. He hoped this would encourage the Greek forces and scare the Trojans. Achilles agreed to the plan. Although Patroclus was successful at first, he
chased the Trojans too far and was killed by the Trojan commander Hector. Now Achilles, spurred on by grief and the desire for revenge, deeply regretted his behavior. He wanted nothing more than to kill Hector—even if it cost him his life. Thetis finally began to come to terms with Achilles’ fate and helped him by arranging for Hephaestus, god of fire and metalworking, to make new armor for her son.

Achilles reentered the battle against the Trojans, killing dozens of them. He drove the Trojans back inside their city walls, but Hector turned to meet him at the city gates. Helped by Athena, Achilles killed Hector with a spear wound to his neck, but he was still angry. For the next nine days he dragged Hector's body around the battlefield. Only later, when he had finally calmed down, did he allow Hector's father, King Priam, to take the body back to Troy for a dignified funeral. In his epic the Iliad, Greek poet Homer (c. ninth–eighth century BCE) describes a poignant reconciliation between the Trojan king and the Greek warrior: Priam goes to the Greek camp to beg for his son's body, and Achilles is reminded not only of his own father but of the grief he himself has felt for the loss of Patroclus. The two men weep, then share food together, before Achilles hands over Hector's body to Priam.

The death of Achilles

Achilles himself was not to live much longer. His killer was Paris, brother of Hector and Troilus, and whose affair with Helen had ignited the whole war. In some versions, Achilles was killed in battle, although in others it happened while he was trying to make negotiations to marry Polyxena. Either way, Paris aimed an arrow at him, and Apollo, who supported the Trojans, directed its flight so that it killed Achilles. In one account the arrow landed in the hero’s heel, the only vulnerable point on his body.

Because Achilles had a divine mother and a human father, ancient writers were divided as to whether he was immortal or subject to death. In some versions of the tale, Achilles ended up with other mortals, including Agamemnon, in the land of the dead. In Homer’s epic the Odyssey, which concerns itself with events after the fall of Troy, Odysseus meets Achilles’ spirit in the underworld. The spirit is inconsolable: though Odysseus tells him that he holds much authority among the dead, Achilles replies that he would rather be alive and have no power than to be recognized as a leader in the underworld. However, other sources state that, after his death, Achilles became immortal and went to live on an island in the Black Sea.
This statue of the dying Achilles, by German sculptor Ernst Herter (1846–1917), echoes the classical Greek style and is an exhibit in the Achilleion Palace, Corfu.

Achilles' place in mythology

Although the details of his story are unique, Achilles was a familiar character in mythology and folklore—a hero with a weakness. His story draws parallels with other legendary characters, such as Balder, the Norse god of beauty, who was killed by the one thing in the world to which he was vulnerable (mistletoe); and Hindu prince Arjuna, whose hesitation before a battle led the god Krishna to deliver a speech on the right course of action in warfare. Some scholars regard Achilles' weakness as his heel; others regard it as his behavior—for instance, his unruly conduct while under Cheiron's tutelage and his withdrawal after Agamemnon took his slave girl. According to this argument, the Greeks admired Achilles' skill in battle, but they did not approve of the way he was constantly at the mercy of his emotions. Hector, by contrast, with his high morals and steely self-control, was much closer to the Greek ideal of a perfect soldier.

Sources

The most famous work about Achilles is Homer's epic poem the *Iliad*, which focuses on the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. However, the *Iliad* says little about Achilles' early life or his death. These and other details were elaborated by later writers, including Greek poet Pindar (c. 522–c. 438 BCE), Greek dramatists Euripides (c. 486–c. 406 BCE) and Apollodorus (third century BCE), and Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE). Roman poet Statius (45–96 CE) began a long poem on the life of Achilles called *Achilleid*. He finished only a small part of it, although he was the first to include the story of Achilles' heel. In Hindu mythology the god Krishna was also killed by an arrow in his heel, his one vulnerable spot. It is possible that this element of the story was somehow copied from the Hindu legend, or that Statius's version influenced the Indian story.

Like other Trojan War heroes, the mythical Achilles may have been based on someone real who lived in the 12th or 13th century BCE. Archaeologists believe that it was during this period that the historical events thought to lie behind the Trojan War took place. Over time, tales of a great warrior who died at Troy could easily have been embellished into the story of a half-divine hero. Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), the conqueror of ancient Greece and the Persian Empire, appeared to believe that Achilles was a real figure: he claimed that Achilles was his ancestor, and he saw him as a role model.

Achilles in the modern world

Today, Achilles is remembered as a great warrior. His story has inspired many paintings, songs, poems, and modern retellings, such as the novel *Achilles* (2002) by Elizabeth Cook. Achilles also features in numerous plays, children's books, and films that deal with the subject of the Trojan War, including the Hollywood movie *Troy* (2004), in which Achilles is played by the actor Brad Pitt. Most of all, people remember the Greek hero's story in the phrase *Achilles' heel*, which means a weak point in an otherwise strong person or organization. The hero also inspired the medical term *Achilles' tendon*, which refers to the strong tendon that runs down the back of the heel, connecting the leg muscles to the foot. If this tendon is damaged, it is impossible to run.

See also: AGAMEMNON; AJAX; APOLLO; BALDER; HECTOR; IPHIGENEIA; ODYSSEUS; PARIS; PATROCLUS; PELEUS; POSEIDON; PRIAM; THETIS; ZEUS.

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