

Topic Page: [Agamemnon \(Greek mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Agamemnon** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

In Greek mythology, king of Mycenae, and brother of Menelaus. According to Homer's *Iliad*, he led the Greeks at the siege of Troy. Agamemnon was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus.



Image from:

[Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, relief. Greek civilization, 6th Century BC. in Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

Summary Article: **AGAMEMNON**

From *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

The legendary leader of the Greek forces during the Trojan War, Agamemnon was one of the principal characters of the epic conflict. The story of his murder after he returned home was also one of the most famous episodes in Greek literature.

According to the *Iliad* by Homer (c. ninth-eighth century BCE) and the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (525-456 BCE), Agamemnon was the king of Mycenae, an ancient city-state in the Peloponnese in southern Greece. His father, King Atreus, had feuded with his brother, Thyestes. Aegisthus, the son of Thyestes, killed Atreus, and Thyestes took over the throne of Mycenae, banishing Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus. Eventually, with the help of Tyndareos, king of Sparta, they returned and drove Thyestes out. Agamemnon

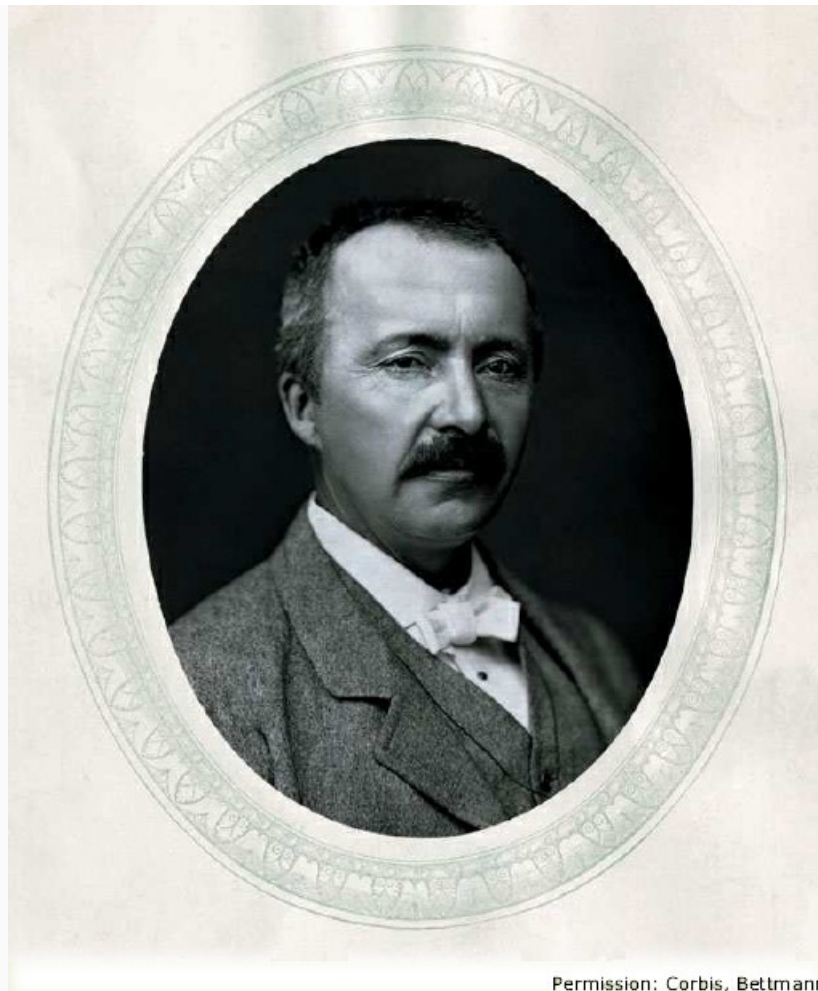
became king, while Menelaus married Tyndareos's daughter Helen and succeeded to the throne of Sparta when Tyndareos died.

Agamemnon married Clytemnestra against her will. In some versions, he even killed her first husband and baby so that he could marry her. This set the tone for their marriage: Clytemnestra always hated Agamemnon. They had at least three daughters: Iphigeneia, Electa, and Chrysothemis, and a son: Orestes. Agamemnon also had children with other women, including Cassandra and Chryseis.

Many modern historians believe that Agamemnon really did exist, although they accept that most of the stories about him are probably fiction. In 1876, famous archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann uncovered the remains of a great civilization at Mycenae, including royal tombs containing bodies with finely detailed gold masks laid over their faces. Although there is no evidence that any of the tombs belonged to Agamemnon, the discovery suggested that the mythical hero was almost certainly based on a real Mycenaean king.

Schliemann's Discoveries

Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) was a wealthy German businessman who retired early, at age 36, to focus on his hobby, archaeology. Although he was only an amateur, he made some of the most important discoveries ever about the ancient world. From 1870 to 1890 he worked on the excavation of Troy, in modern Turkey, revealing that the city had been rebuilt many times, and that it had been at the center of a large-scale war during the 12th or 13th century BCE.



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German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann made many important discoveries concerning Mycenaean culture.

In 1876 he began work at Mycenae, hoping to discover the remains of Agamemnon. The tombs and ruins he found there were full of treasures, including gold burial masks. Schliemann excitedly proclaimed, "I have looked upon the face of Agamemnon!" Later archaeologists, however, determined that the tombs were far older than the 13th century BCE, the earliest estimated period of the Trojan War. Nevertheless, Schliemann's work provided huge amounts of information about the Mycenaean civilization.



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Archaeologists believe that this ancient graveyard was the burial site of kings and other members of Mycenaean royalty.

As with so many other Greek heroes, Agamemnon's story revolves around the Trojan War. The conflict started when Paris, a prince of Troy, in what is now Turkey, ran away with Menelaus's wife, Helen. Menelaus asked his brother Agamemnon to help him win Helen back. Many of the Greek kings and princes who had wanted to marry Helen themselves had sworn an oath to her father, Tyndareos, that they would fight anyone who threatened her marriage to Menelaus. Agamemnon rounded up these former suitors, who included Odysseus, Patroclus, and Diomedes, and gathered them and their armies at Aulis, ready to sail for Troy under his command.

The adventure did not start well, however, because the goddess Artemis was angry with Agamemnon: he had boasted that he was better than her at archery, and she refused to give the Greeks a fair wind. Calchas, a prophet, told Agamemnon that, to appease Artemis, he would have to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. Menelaus persuaded the reluctant Agamemnon to do this, and he sent for Iphigeneia, pretending that he wanted her to marry Achilles. When she arrived with her mother, Agamemnon killed her on the sacrificial altar. According to some versions, Artemis saved Iphigeneia's life by splicing her away from the altar and replacing her with a deer. Either way, however, Clytemnestra lost her daughter and was heartbroken and furious. Clytemnestra returned to Mycenae, while Agamemnon and the Greek forces sailed for Troy.

Agamemnon at Troy

At Troy, Agamemnon commanded the Greek forces throughout the war, which lasted 10 years. He was a forceful and experienced leader, but he sometimes lacked the ability to make firm decisions, and some of the other Greeks resented his luxurious lifestyle.

In the final year of the war, Agamemnon was forced to give up Chryseis, a slave girl he had captured, to the god Apollo. To replace her, he took Briseis, a girl belonging to Achilles, the Greeks' finest and

strongest warrior. Achilles was very upset and angry. He sulked and refused to fight, and because of this the Greeks were almost defeated. They won the war only after Achilles rejoined the fighting following the death of his closest friend, Patroclus. Odysseus's plan for getting past the impenetrable walls of Troy also helped. Odysseus's idea was that a small group of warriors would hide inside a wooden horse made to appear like a gift to the Trojans. Once inside the city, the warriors would emerge from hiding and open the gates to the city, allowing the rest of the Greeks to enter.

Victory and homecoming

Odysseus's plan worked and the Greeks overran Troy and captured many prisoners. Agamemnon himself took Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy, as his mistress, and sailed home. However, during his absence from Mycenae, his wife, Clytemnestra, had taken a lover, Aegisthus, the cousin who had killed Agamemnon's father. Aegisthus was living as king of Mycenae, and he and Clytemnestra were plotting against Agamemnon—to the horror of Agamemnon's devoted daughter Electra. After Agamemnon returned to his palace with Cassandra, Aegisthus (and in some versions, Clytemnestra) murdered them both.

After Agamemnon's death, his son, Orestes, who until then had been in exile, came home to avenge his father. Urged on by Apollo and with Electra's help, Orestes killed Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, despite his mother's plea for mercy. Orestes was himself punished for these crimes. He was tormented by the Furies, who were encouraged by Clytemnestra's ghost, until he was absolved of further punishment by the goddess Athena and a panel of Athenian citizens who sat in judgment of his vengeful deeds.

Agamemnon's soul lived on in Hades, land of the dead. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus visits Hades and meets the hero. Agamemnon explains how he died, and warns Odysseus to take care when returning to his own palace.

The story of Agamemnon is a classic case of a revenge feud. One person is killed; in revenge, another person is murdered, and this second murder inspires yet another killing, and so on. In some ancient societies, such as the Viking culture, people had a legal right to commit revenge killings, but the problem remained of how to break the cycle of violence. The Greeks viewed revenge killings with some sympathy, but they placed a higher value on peace, justice, and harmony. In Greek mythology, revenge tragedies usually ended when the gods intervened to stop them.

How Did Agamemnon Die?

There are various descriptions of how Agamemnon died and who exactly killed him. In the *Odyssey*, when the spirit of Agamemnon speaks to Odysseus, he tells him it was Aegisthus who killed him, after tricking him by inviting him to a feast. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, however, Clytemnestra says that she was the killer, and in another of Aeschylus's works the god Apollo describes how Clytemnestra threw a cloak over Agamemnon as he climbed out of the bath, then stabbed him. In *Electra*, a play by Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE), Electra remembers how Clytemnestra and Aegisthus together killed her father by hitting him on the head with an ax. According to Athenian writer Apollodorus (fl. 140 BCE), Clytemnestra tricked Agamemnon by giving him a specially altered shirt that had no neck or armholes. He tried to put it on, and while he was struggling inside it, Aegisthus killed him. However, all the accounts agree that Clytemnestra or Aegisthus or both were responsible for Agamemnon's death.

Agamemnon in literature

Agamemnon's adventures during the Trojan War are retold in Homer's epic poem the *Iliad*. The story of his murder is recounted in several ancient Greek plays, particularly the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*, the first play in this trilogy, tells of the king's death, while the other two—*Choephoroe* (*Libation Bearers*) and *Eumenides* (*The Furies*)—focus on the tribulations of Orestes. Agamemnon and his family also appear in works by many other ancient writers, including Pindar, Euripides, and Sophocles.

As both a great leader and a tragic figure, Agamemnon has inspired many works of art and literature since ancient times. For example, in the 20th century, novelist Barry Unsworth retold Agamemnon's story in his book *The Songs of the Kings*; British playwright Steven Berkoff wrote a modern version of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*; and Irish poet W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) mentioned Agamemnon in his poem "Leda and the Swan."

See also: ACHILLES; CASSANDRA; CLYTEMNESTRA; ELECTRA; ORESTES.

Further reading

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