

## 📖 Topic Page: [Menelaus \(Greek mythology\)](#)

Definition: **Menelaus** from *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(mə'nɛɪlā'əʊs), in Greek mythology, king of Sparta, son of Atreus. He was the husband of Helen, father of Hermione, and younger brother of Agamemnon. When Paris, prince of Troy, abducted Helen, Menelaus asked the other Greek kings to join him in an expedition against Troy, beginning the Trojan War. Menelaus, although subordinate to Agamemnon, took a prominent part in the war. After the fall of Troy, he became reconciled with Helen, but before they finally reached Sparta they experienced a long series of adventures. Menelaus appears in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.



Image from: [Plate of Euphorbia, rhodium ceramic depicting duel between Menelaus and Hector in Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library](#)

Summary Article: **MENELAUS**

from *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

**Menelaus, king of Sparta and brother of Agamemnon, was one of the central figures of the Trojan War. Although not one of the main warrior heroes of the epic tale, Menelaus, as the betrayed husband of Helen, forced the leaders of the other Greek city-states to lay siege to Troy. Some say that long after the war, he was made immortal by Zeus.**

The deeds of Menelaus are recorded in the poems attributed to Homer, who lived around the ninth or eighth century BCE, and in works by later Greek authors, such as Pausanias (143–176 CE). There is no evidence that Menelaus ever existed outside the realm of myth, but the ancient Greeks believed that

he, like all the other characters in Homer's poems, was a historical figure. For example, Pausanias, a Greek travel writer, claimed that he could identify the house in Sparta where Menelaus had lived 1,400 years before.

### The curse of the House of Atreus

According to Apollodorus, a second-century-BCE collector and recorder of myths, Menelaus's mother was Aerope, the daughter of Catreus, king of Crete. Atreus, king of Mycenae, was either Menelaus's father or in some accounts his grandfather. This meant that Menelaus was a member of the cursed House of Atreus, also known as the House of Pelops.

In the tragedy *Agamemnon* by the fifth-century-BCE Athenian dramatist Aeschylus, the prophetess Cassandra says that the family from which Menelaus sprang had been cursed for generations. Certainly a reading of the deeds committed by the family supports this view. Every generation saw some monstrous crime, including cannibalism, incest, and murder, usually committed by one member of the family against another.

Tantalus, the clan's founder, killed his own son, Pelops, and served him to the gods in a stew. Pelops, when resurrected by the gods, murdered his prospective father-in-law as well as his own best friend in order to win Hippodameia in marriage. Atreus and Thyestes, the sons of Pelops, quarreled over the rulership of Mycenae and over Atreus's wife, Aerope, whom Thyestes seduced. In vengeance Atreus boiled Thyestes' children and served them to him in a stew. Thyestes also committed incest with his surviving daughter (who later murdered him) in order to conceive a son who would avenge him by killing

Atreus.

In the next generation, Agamemnon, one of Atreus's sons, sacrificed one of his own daughters, Iphigeneia, in order to gain a fair wind from the gods and sail the Greek army to Troy. While Agamemnon was away fighting the Trojans, Thyestes' son Aegisthus seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, and on Agamemnon's return Aegisthus and Clytemnestra murdered him. Years later Orestes, Agamemnon's son, avenged his father's death by murdering Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

## The early life of Menelaus

As far as Menelaus's early life is concerned, few tales exist. However, Apollodorus says that during a civil war between Agamemnon's father, Atreus, and his uncle Thyestes, Atreus was murdered by Aegisthus, after which Menelaus and Agamemnon fled into exile. On their return, Menelaus married Helen, whose mother, Leda, was the wife of Tyndareos, king of Sparta, and whose father was Zeus. Menelaus became king of Sparta when Tyndareos died.

### The Suitors' Oath

Helen was the most beautiful woman on earth, and when the time came for her to marry, she had so many suitors, all from royal families of Greece, that her stepfather Tyndareos was afraid that all the disappointed suitors would quarrel with whomever he chose as her husband. Apollodorus wrote that Odysseus, the wise king of Ithaca, suggested to Tyndareos that he make all the suitors swear an oath to defend Helen's husband, whoever was chosen, against anyone who damaged their marriage. All the suitors agreed to the oath, and Tyndareos then safely chose Menelaus. When Paris, who was not among Helen's suitors, later eloped with her to Troy, Agamemnon used the oath the former suitors had taken to coerce them to form an alliance against Troy.

Several classical authors mention the suitors' oath. In addition to Apollodorus, it is referred to by Pausanias, as well as by the fifth-century-BCE Athenian historian Thucydides, among others. Homer, however, who tells the story of the Trojan War in the greatest detail, never mentions the oath. It is possible that the oath was invented by a poet after Homer's time, but it is equally possible that Homer chose to omit the story of the oath from his poems. This left him free to depict the Greeks as allying voluntarily against Troy.

All sources agree that Menelaus and Helen had a daughter named Hermione. Apollodorus wrote that after the war Helen also bore Menelaus a son, Nicostratus. Besides his child—or children—by Helen, Menelaus had another son, Megapenthes, by a slave, as well as a son called Xenodamus, whose mother was a nymph.

When Hermione was nine years old, Paris, a prince of Troy, visited Sparta and eloped with Helen. Menelaus turned to his brother, Agamemnon, for assistance in retrieving his wife. Agamemnon, who by this time was king of Mycenae, called together an alliance of the Greek city-states and launched a campaign against Troy.

The Greeks were initially prevented from setting sail for Troy by an ill wind that held them in the harbor at Aulis. The seer Calchas revealed that the wind could only be made favorable if Agamemnon sacrificed his eldest daughter to the goddess Artemis. In the play *Iphigeneia at Aulis* by Euripides, a

Greek dramatist of the fifth century BCE, Agamemnon hesitated to pay such a terrible price. Nevertheless, Menelaus, who was afraid of losing the respect of the army if they did not sail, pressed Agamemnon to sacrifice the girl and in the end he did so.

During the war, Menelaus figured rarely except for one significant episode. Agamemnon sanctioned a duel to be fought between Menelaus and Paris. The outcome of the duel was to determine the fate of Helen and the result of the war. If Paris won, then Agamemnon agreed to have the Greeks leave, and Helen would remain in Troy. If Menelaus won, then Helen would be returned to her husband and the Greeks would depart only after the Trojans paid them compensation for the cost of waging the campaign. The duel took place as arranged, but when Menelaus was on the verge of victory, Aphrodite shrouded Paris in a heavy fog and spirited him away from the battlefield.

## Returning to Sparta

Paris, however, was killed in the final stages of the war when Greek warrior Philoctetes shot him with the great bow of Heracles. Helen was then given to Paris's brother Deiphobus. Their union did not last long, however. Soon afterward the Trojans fell victim to a cunning Greek plan. They unwittingly let into the walled city a few Greek soldiers who were hiding inside a giant wooden horse. During the night the Greeks emerged from the wooden horse and opened the city's gates, enabling the rest of the Greek army to invade the fortress.

## Reunited with Helen

When Menelaus reached Helen's chambers, he killed Deiphobus and, according to Pausanias, intended to kill his wife, too. One popular version has it that he entered her room, sword at the ready, but Helen dropped her cloak, beneath which she was naked. At the sight of her, Menelaus lost his resolve and instead brought her back to Sparta. This scene was reproduced many times in Greek art and is by far the most common depiction of Menelaus.

In the play *Trojan Women*, Euripides tells the story that Menelaus took Helen back to Sparta over the strong objections of Hecuba, queen of Troy. Hecuba, who blamed Helen for the war, begged Menelaus to kill Helen before he left Troy, since she rightly distrusted his ability to kill Helen after he had spent any great length of time with her. In the end, however, Menelaus ignored Hecuba's plea and spared Helen's life.

However, Menelaus did not go directly home to Sparta after the war. All sources agree that he quarreled with Agamemnon and set off before his brother's fleet, then was blown off course in a storm. Menelaus and Helen traveled for eight years before they found their way back to Sparta. On their journey, the couple were near Egypt when, according to Homer, Menelaus sought the guidance of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea. Proteus predicted a safe return to Sparta for Menelaus and Helen, and afterward a long life together for the couple. He also promised Menelaus that in the end he and Helen, who was Zeus's daughter, would be made immortal and live forever in the Isles of the Blessed. According to Apollodorus, all this came to pass.

When Menelaus finally disembarked in Greece, he found that his brother had been killed and the funerals for his brother's wife, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus, the usurper, were in progress. He lived thereafter a peaceful life at Sparta, before being made immortal along with Helen. Another version by Pausanias says that the couple died as mortals and mentions the tomb of Menelaus and Helen in Therapne, in Sparta. Menelaus was succeeded as king of Sparta by his son Megapenthes. His daughter Hermione

married Orestes and had a son, Tisamenus, who later became king of Mycenae.

Menelaus is depicted by Homer as a powerful warrior at Troy—certainly stronger than Helen's lover, Paris—but not one of the greatest fighters in the war. He was not as powerful as his brother, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, nor as successful in combat as the great Greek warriors Diomedes and Achilles. Neither was he the most intelligent of the Greeks, a position held by Odysseus. He is depicted as a worthy fighter and leader, but one consistently overshadowed by the heroes who surrounded him.

**See also:** AGAMEMNON; APHRODITE; ARTEMIS; ATREUS; CASSANDRA; CLYTEMNESTRA; HECTOR; HECUBA; HELEN; IPHIGENEIA; ODYSSEUS; ORESTES; PARIS; PELOPS; PROTEUS; TANTALUS; ZEUS.

### Further reading

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