Early Greek Literature

The area currently known as Greece was inhabited since the Neolithic period and perhaps even earlier, but the culture that would evolve to become Greek begins with the arrival of the Indo-Europeans sometime between 2000 and 1600 BC. From that point, ancient Greek history is divided into several periods:

- Mycenaean 1600 – 1100
- Dark Age 1100 – 776
- Archaic 776 – 479
- Classical 479 – 323
- Hellenistic 323 – 31

Each of these periods is, of course, arbitrary, and the designations modern. While Periodization is problematic, it is also convenient and a useful mnemonic. The Mycenaean Period is roughly the time in which Greece and the Aegean were dominated by a proto-Greek, Indo-European, named for the first of their settlements to be discovered by archaeologists; Mycenae. This Bronze Age culture seems to have disappeared around 1100 amidst some unknown calamity and the upheaval was dramatic enough that the material record, the archaeological evidence, shows a rapid decline in population and settlements. So little information comes to us from the period 1100 to 776 that it is referred to as the Dark Age. The eighth-century, however, indicates a rapid expansion of settlements and population, as well as the emergence of the Greek City State and ancient Greek culture as we know it. In July of 776 the Olympic Games were celebrated for the first time. Although Greek culture was expanding, it was hardly a geo-political force. This period is still dominated by Assyria, Babylon, Egypt and eventually Persia. But in 599 the Greeks came into conflict with the Persian Empire and series of wars culminated in a massive invasion of Greece by Xerxes, King of Persia, in 480. A coalition of Greek city states was able to defeat the Persians in several battles between 480 and 479. Greek independence having been asserted, and Greek military prowess universally recognized, the Greeks then became a major geo-political factor. In this, the Classical Period (479 – 323), we see the great flowering of Greek culture. While all of these facets saw their origins in the Archaic Period, it is in the fifth century that the arts and sciences reach their full maturity. This is the high-point of Greek literature, theatre, poetry, architecture and
philosophy – both natural and moral. And while democracy was invented by the Athenians in 507, it was in this period that democracy spread to many other city states throughout the Greek world.

These city states were, however, plagued by conflict – not the least over the spread of democracy – and it was not until the rise of Macedon that anything close to unity and stability were gained. In 334 Alexander III, King of Macedon, led a coalition Greek force into the Persian Empire and in a ten-year campaign was able to conquer all of the lands from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indus River. Alexander died in 323 and his empire was quickly divided amongst his generals. The death of Alexander is generally regarded as the end of the Greek Classical Period and the beginning of the Hellenistic Period.

The Hellenistic Period is no named because Greek, or Hellenic, culture was spread, by Alexander’s generals and their descendants, throughout the region. Greek was the language of government and commerce and Greek cities and towns were founded across Egypt and the Near East. The most enduring of the Hellenistic kingdoms was Ptolemaic Egypt. It did not fall to the Romans until Cleopatra was defeated at the Battle of Actium in 31, after which all of the Greek world was under Roman dominion.

Sources

Our Greek primary sources rarely come to us directly; that is to say that few copies of any work date to the time of publication or even to the ancient world. Most of these texts were originally written on, and hand-copied to, scrolls of papyrus. These scrolls were held in personal collections or in libraries such as the Library of Alexandria, where scholars and scribes studied them and made further copies. Over the centuries, the task of preserving and copying the manuscripts was taken over by Catholic monasteries and Islamic libraries.

Also during this period, scholars developed a system by which the ancient works were divided and numbered; sometimes by 'books', usually by sections and always by lines. The beauty of this system, once it was standardized, is that every text, regardless of format, publication or language, uses a consistent numbering system. For example, one of the excerpts I offer below is cited as Herodotus i. 56-58.1 In every publication of Herodotus’ Histories those same lines can be found in Book I, Chapters 56 to 58; whether it is a Greek manuscript, an English, German or French translation, just published or five-hundred years old.

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1 Books are usually indicated by numbers (ie: Book 1, Book 2 etc.) but Roman numerals (i,ii,iii,iv etc.), which is my preference, are also acceptable.
Below is an example from Homer’s *Iliad*, Book One, showing the English translation on the left and the Greek original on the right.

[1] Sing to me, goddess, about the wrath of the son of Peleus, Achilles, which brought pain upon so many Achaeans.

[2] Many stout souls did it send, too soon, to meet Hades, while the corpses of the heroes were left prey to dogs and vultures, by the will of Zeus, from the moment they were divided in conflict; the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles.²

[1] μήνιν ἀείδε θεά Πηληϊάδεω Αχιλής ὧν οὐλομένην, ἢ μυρὶ’ Ἀχιοῖς ἄλγε’ ἔθηκε, πολλὰς δ’ ἰφθίμους ψυχάς Ἄϊδι προίψεν ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἐλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσιν ὀιωνοῖσι τε πᾶσι, Διὸς δ’ ἐτελείετο βουλή, ἐξ οὗ δὴ τὰ πρῶτα διαστήτην ἔρισαντε Ἀτρεί̈δης τε ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν καὶ δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.

As you can see, a very literal translation which maintains the line numbers results in awkward English. This is most pronounced in poetry and less so in prose, but in all cases translation from one language to another involves some interpretation and even creativity on the part of the translator.

For example, the following translation is not in verse, but might convey the meaning of the Greek more effectively into English:

Sing to me, Muse, of the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus. That anger which brought so much suffering to the Achaeans from the very moment when Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles first began to quarrel; that anger which sent so many young and brave souls to Hades while their corpses, by the will of Zeus, lay on the field of battle, prey to vultures and wild dogs.

The Alexander Pope translation (in parts more of an interpretation than a translation) is certainly more poetic:

Achilles’ wrath, to Greece the direful spring Of woes unnumber’d, heavenly goddess sing! That wrath which hurl’d to Pluto’s³ glommy reign

² Editor's translation.
³ Pluto was the Latin name for Hades
The souls of mighty chiefs untimely slain;
Whose limbs unburied on the naked shore,
Devouring dogs and hungry vultures tore.
Since great Achilles and Atrides strove,
Such was the sovereign doom, and such the will of Jove!4

**Myth, Religion and the Origins of the Gods and Humans**

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of Ancient Greece is the collection of stories about the gods and heroes that were passed down through the Bronze Age, became the mainstay of the Greek and Latin literary traditions, and continue to influence the way we tell stories to this day. Modern literature and drama are wholly indebted to, are actually derived from, the tradition we now call Greek Myth. While these myths are ‘set’ in the Age of Heroes, what we now call the Bronze Age, the earliest records we have date from the later centuries of the Greek Dark Age (1100 – 776) and the Archaic Period (776 – 479).

The word ‘myth’ comes to English from ancient Greek but the meaning has changed somewhat over the centuries. The Archaic Greek meaning of *muthos*, was ‘statement,’ ‘utterance’ or any sort of spoken declaration or story: Simply ‘that which is said.’ The Archaic meaning of *logos* was ‘story,’ ‘account’ or ‘argument’ implying a computation of things; of ideas or facts. In that sense, a *logos* could be constructed out of a series of *muthoi*. By the Classical period of Ancient Greece the two words had taken on very distinct and even oppositional meanings: *Muthos* was associated with unsubstantiated or fantastic utterances while *logos* referred to a statement, argument or proposition derived from a computation of verifiable evidence.

This is not to say that *logos* is ‘true’ and *muthos* ‘false:’ but rather that the former operates in the realm of the empirical while the latter operates in the realm of the metaphysical. Aristotle, the father of scientific method, thought that myth, or poetry as it was more commonly called, was actually a superior method for the communication of ideas because it deals with the general while more pragmatic forms such as history can only deal with the particular.

*Aristotle, Poetics* 1451a. 35 – b. 5

The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened,

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4 Jove, or Jupiter, is the Latin name for Zeus.
the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.

We saw above that Homer begins the *Iliad* with the line; “Sing to me, goddess…” The *Odyssey* also begins with “Tell me, Muse, of the man…” This should not be dismissed as mere formula; Homer, and anyone who recites the *Iliad*, is invoking divine revelation and what follows, the stories he tells, were thought to be sanctioned by the gods. How else could Homer, or anyone, know anything?

The idea that only God, or the gods, can have true knowledge, and that man only acquires a sampling of this knowledge from the divine, is both ancient and current: Christians believe that the various authors of the Bible, especially of the books of the New Testament, were merely conduits for the word of God. Muslims also believe that the Prophet Mohamed was given the Quran (Koran) by God through a vision. The ancients too believed that true knowledge was the sole possession of the gods but that the gods would occasionally impart glimpses of that universal knowledge to man, through the poets, seers and oracles.

All of our extant works of epic poetry that treat of things divine or things very ancient, begin with the invocation of the gods as the source of knowledge. The earliest of these texts are attributed to two authors, Homer and Hesiod.

**Herodotus ii.53**

...whence the several gods had their birth, or whether they all were from the beginning, and of what form they are, the Greeks did not learn till yesterday, as it were, or the day before: for Hesiod and Homer, I suppose, were four hundred years before my time and not more, and these are they who made a *Theogony* for the Hellenes and gave the titles to the gods and distributed to them honours and arts, and set forth their forms: but the poets who are said to have been before these men were really in my opinion after them. Of these things the first are said by the priestesses of Dodona, and the latter things, those namely which have regard to Hesiod and Homer, by myself.

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5 Quran 2.4.32: “Glory to thee: of knowledge we have none, save what Thou hast taught us: in truth it is Thou who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom”

6 Not to be taken literally, this was a common phrase in Greek simply meaning ‘recently.’

7 Herodotus was writing in the 430s BC, which would put Hesiod and Homer ca. 830 BC. Most scholars today agree with a mid-ninth century date for Homer but suggest that Hesiod was likely later.

8 Dodona is a temple and sanctuary of Zeus in N. Western Greece.
Hesiod

In the eighth-century BC Hesiod, a Greek from Boeotia, composed several texts on the nature of the gods and the origins of man and the world around us. These texts, combined with the works of Homer, comprise the main canon of the Greek mythical past and the foundations of the Greek identity. Hesiod begins, of course, with an invocation of the Muses:

Hesiod, *Theogony* 1 - 4; 22 - 29

[1] From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronus...

[22] And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me — the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis: [26] “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.” So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus.

The phrase “we know how to speak many false things…” may be a reference to the nature of the information that the gods impart. Divine wisdom is always given in riddles and parables; stories which are not literally ‘true’ but are representations of a divine truth.

*Truth*, is a much more complex issue than one might initially suppose. Is it true, for example, that the sun rose this morning? The sun doesn’t ‘rise’ but we still express the untruth of the rising sun every day because it is a convenient expression of the world as we observe it. In the ancient world it was not merely a matter of convenience, it was more the fact that the world around them was strange and often inexplicable. Ancient mythographers were looking for explanations and the simplest was the Intelligent Design theory. If some god or gods created the world we live in, who better than they to tell us how and why they did it?

Hesiod goes on to explain the origins of the universe, the gods, and man:

Hesiod, *Theogony*:

[36 - 52] Come, let us begin with the Muses who gladden the great spirit of their father Zeus in Olympus with their songs, telling of things that are and that will be and that were in times past with consenting voice. Unwearingly flows the sweet sound from their lips, and the house of their father Zeus the loud-thunderer is glad at the lily-like voice of the

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9 The nine Muses, daughters of Zeus, live on Mt. Helicon, on the north side of the Gulf of Corinth.
goddesses as it spread abroad, and the peaks of snowy Olympus resound, and the homes of the immortals. And they uttering their immortal voices, celebrate in song first of all the reverent race\(^\text{10}\) of the gods from the beginning, those whom Earth (Gaia) and wide Heaven (Ouranos) begot, and the gods sprung of these, givers of good things. Then, next, the goddesses sing of Zeus, the father of gods and men, as they begin and end their strain, how much he is the most excellent among the gods and supreme in power. And again, they chant the race of men and strong giants, and gladden the heart of Zeus within Olympus, — the Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus the aegis-holder.\(^\text{11}\)

[116 - 138] Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros\(^\text{12}\), fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night; but of Night were born Aether and Day, whom she conceived and bore from union in love with Erebus. And Earth first bore starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods. And she brought forth long Hills, graceful haunts of the goddess-Nymphs who dwell amongst the glens of the hills. She bore also the fruitless deep with his raging swell, Pontus, without sweet union of love. But afterwards she lay with Heaven and bore deep-swirling Oceanus, Coeus and Crius and Hyperion and Iapetus, Theia and Rhea, Themis and Mnemosyne and gold-crowned Phoebe and lovely Tethys. After them was born Cronus the wily, youngest and most terrible of her children, and he hated his lusty father.

This first group of siblings, the children of Heaven (Uranus) and Earth (Gaia), are called the Titans. Cronus (time) led his siblings in a rebellion against their father and became the ruler of the gods, but he too was overthrown by his children:

Hesiod, *Theogony* 453 – 506

[453 – 506] But Rhea was subject in love to Cronus and bore splendid children, Hestia, Demeter, and gold-shod Hera and strong Hades, pitiless in heart, who dwells under the earth, and the loud-crashing Earth-Shaker,\(^\text{13}\) and wise Zeus, father of gods and men, by whose thunder the wide earth is shaken. These great Cronus swallowed as each came forth from the womb to his mother’s knees with this intent, that no other of the proud sons of Heaven should hold the kingly office amongst the deathless gods. For he learned from Earth and starry Heaven that he was destined to be overcome by his own son, strong though he was, through the contriving of great Zeus. Therefore he kept no blind outlook, but watched and swallowed down his children: and unceasing grief seized Rhea. But when she was about to

\(^{10}\) The Greek word *genos* is here, as often, translated as ‘race.’ It is, of course, the same word we see in other Indo-European languages such as the Latin *genus* and the French ‘genre’ and English ‘gender.’ It refers to origin and means a ‘type’, ‘kind’, or ‘sort.’

\(^{11}\) An *aegis* is a small round shield held by a single handle in the centre.

\(^{12}\) Eros is often translated as ‘love’ but this is unsatisfactory. Eros is the god of passion and desire, especially sexual passion, whence English derives the word ‘erotic.’ It should not be confused with ‘love’ in the sense of ‘devotion’.

\(^{13}\) Poseidon
bear Zeus, the father of gods and men, then she besought her own dear parents, Earth and starry Heaven, to devise some plan with her that the birth of her dear child might be concealed, and that retribution might overtake great, crafty Cronus for his own father and also for the children whom he had swallowed down. And they readily heard and obeyed their dear daughter, and told her all that was destined to happen touching Cronus the king and his stout-hearted son. So they sent her to Lyetus, to the rich land of Crete, when she was ready to bear great Zeus, the youngest of her children. Him did vast Earth receive from Rhea in wide Crete to nourish and to bring up. Thither came Earth carrying him swiftly through the black night to Lyctus first, and took him in her arms and hid him in a remote cave beneath the secret places of the holy earth on thick-wooded Mount Aegeum; but to the mightily ruling son of Heaven, the earlier king of the gods, she gave a great stone wrapped in swaddling clothes. Then he took it in his hands and thrust it down into his belly: wretch! He knew not in his heart that in place of the stone his son was left behind, unconquered and untroubled, and that he was soon to overcome him by force and might and drive him from his honours, himself to reign over the deathless gods.

Zeus Defeats Cronus, *Theogony* 492 – 506

[492–506] After that, the strength and glorious limbs of the prince increased quickly, and as the years rolled on, great Cronus the wily was beguiled by the deep suggestions of Earth, and brought up again his offspring, vanquished by the arts and might of his own son, and he vomited up first the stone which he had swallowed last. And Zeus set it fast in the wide-pathed earth at goodly Pytho under the glens of Parnassus, to be a sign thenceforth and a marvel to mortal men. And he set free from their deadly bonds the brothers of his father, sons of Heaven whom his father in his foolishness had bound. And they remembered to be grateful to him for his kindness, and gave him thunder and the glowing thunderbolt and lightening: for before that, huge Earth had hidden these. In them he trusts and rules over mortals and immortals.

Hesiod goes on to describe the births of the many gods, and the distribution of the jurisdictions by Zeus, who resides on Olympus as father and king of the gods. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod describes how Zeus created humans, but another tradition claims that Prometheus created mankind and that the Hellenic people, the Greeks, are the descendants of Prometheus:

**Apollodorus, Library, i. 7.1**

i.7 [1] Prometheus moulded men out of water and earth and gave them also fire, which, unknown to Zeus, he had hidden in a stalk of fennel. But when Zeus learned of it, he ordered Hephaestus to nail his body to Mount Caucasus, which is a Scythian mountain. On it Prometheus was nailed and kept bound for many years. Every day an eagle swooped on

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14 Two caves on Crete claim to be the Cave of Zeus; on on Mt Dikteon and the other on Mt. Ida.

15 The stone was called the *Omphalos Stone*, a blend of two myths. The stone itself is that which Cronus swallowed, the *omphalos* is the centre of the earth. Delphi, determined when Zeus sent two eagles, one from the east and one from the west, and Delphi was the point where they met (Strabo ix.3.6).
him and devoured the lobes of his liver, which grew by night. That was the penalty that Prometheus paid for the theft of fire until Heracles afterwards released him, as we shall show in dealing with Hercules.

[2] And Prometheus had a son Deucalion. He reigning in the regions about Phthia, married Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora, the first woman fashioned by the gods. And when Zeus would destroy the men of the Bronze Age, Deucalion by the advice of Prometheus constructed a chest, and having stored it with provisions he embarked in it with Pyrrha. But Zeus by pouring heavy rain from heaven flooded the greater part of Greece, so that all men were destroyed, except a few who fled to the high mountains in the neighborhood. It was then that the mountains in Thessaly parted, and that all the world outside the Isthmus and Peloponnese was overwhelmed. But Deucalion, floating in the chest over the sea for nine days and as many nights, drifted to Parnassus, and there, when the rain ceased, he landed and sacrificed to Zeus, the god of Escape. And Zeus sent Hermes to him and allowed him to choose what he would, and he chose to get men. And at the bidding of Zeus he took up stones and threw them over his head, and the stones which Deucalion threw became men, and the stones which Pyrrha threw became women. Hence people were called metaphorically people (laos) from laas, “a stone.” And Deucalion had children by Pyrrha, first Hellen, whose father some say was Zeus, and second Amphictyon, who reigned over Attica after Cranaus; and third a daughter Protogenia, who became the mother of Aethlius by Zeus.

[3] Hellen had Dorus, Xuthus, and Aeolus by a nymph Orseis. Those who were called Greeks he named Hellenes after himself, and divided the country among his sons.

The Myth Cycles

Greek mythology, following the creation of the gods and humans, traces the genealogy of the royal families of the Greek Bronze Age from their divine origins to their eventual demise. Some of these families were extinguished in the wars over the succession of Thebes, even more died in the Trojan War, and the rest were eliminated by a wave of invasions sometimes referred to as the Return of the Heraclidae and sometimes as the Dorian Invasion.

It is impossible to establish any coherent genealogy or chronology because the myth cycles are a jumble of sometimes contradictory and often irreconcilable stories, but there are select data that seem to indicate a time frame. Apollodorus of Athens, for example, is quoted as saying that it was 408 years from the fall of Troy to the first Olympiad. The first Olympiad is dated to 776 BC, giving 1184 BC as a date for the Trojan War (Diod. 7.8.1= Eusebius Chronicle). The genealogies seem to represent descent groups dating back roughly 400 years – a time frame of 1600 to 1200 BC. This coincides with the archaeological record of the culture known as Mycenaean, a proto-Greek culture.
which has been identified with settlements such as Mycenae, Sparta, Pylos and other place names mentioned in the texts of Homer and the other myth writers.

Homer

Homer gives us two of the most celebrated texts in the history of western literature: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The latter is the story of Odysseus and his ten-year voyage home from the Trojan War. The former is often described as an account of the Trojan War, but the war is merely the setting, the story is about Achilles and his anger:

*Iliad* i.1 – 52

Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Zeus fulfilled from the day on which Atreides, leader of men, and godlike Achilles, first fell out with one another. [8] And which of the gods was it that set them on to quarrel? It was the son of Zeus and Leto, for he was angry with the king and sent a pestilence upon the host to plague the people, because the son of Atreus had dishonoured Chryses his priest. Now Chryses had come to the ships of the Achaeans to free his daughter, and had brought with him a great ransom; moreover he bore in his hand the sceptre of Apollo wreathed with a suppliant’s wreath and he besought the Achaeans, but most of all the two sons of Atreus, who were their chiefs. [17] “Atreidai,” he cried, “and all other Achaeans, may the gods who dwell in Olympus grant you to sack the city of Priam, and to reach your homes in safety; but free my daughter, and accept a ransom for her, in reverence to Apollo, son of Zeus.”

[22] On this the rest of the Achaeans with one voice were for respecting the priest and taking the ransom that he offered; but not so Agamemnon, who spoke fiercely to him and sent him roughly away. “Old man,” said he, “let me not find you tarrying about our ships, nor yet coming hereafter. Your sceptre of the god and your wreath shall profit you nothing. I will not free her. She shall grow old in my house at Argos far from her own home, busying herself with her loom and visiting my couch; so go, and do not provoke me or it shall be the worse for you.”

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10 An invocation of divine inspiration is a standard opening in epic poetry.
17 The -ides suffix in Greek means 'son of' or 'descendant of.' So Atreides is Agamemnon, the son of Atreus.
18 Heroes and gods are often given these epithets. 'Godlike' precedes Achilles and Odysseus but too much should not be made of it as a descriptor. The choice was mostly poetic since *dios Achilleus* and *dios Odysseus* have similar meters (Seymour 1891).
19 The events of the *Iliad* begin in the ninth year of the war (ii.295; Apollodorus *Epit.* 3.34). The Greek forces have conquered the outlying islands and most of the mainland allies of Troy and are now camped on the beach before the walls of the city.
20 Apollo.
21 In the action prior to the *Iliad*, the Greek forces had taken Thebe, in Cilicia. Chryses was a priest in the temple of Apollo there and his daughter, Chryseis, was taken as a prize of war.
22 It was typical for captives to be kept or sold as slaves. But aristocratic and wealthy captives were worth more in ransom so it was a standard practice for a ransom to be offered and good manners to accept it.
23 Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and Menelaus, king of Sparta, were both the sons of Atreus.
24 Priam was the king of Troy.
[33] The old man feared him and obeyed. Not a word he spoke, but went by the shore of
the sounding sea and prayed apart to Apollo whom lovely Leto had borne. “Hear me,” he
cried, “O god of the silver bow, who protects Chryse and holy Cilla\textsuperscript{25} and rules Tenedos
with your might, hear me, you of Smintheus.\textsuperscript{26} If I have ever decked your temple with
garlands, or burned your thigh-bones in fat of bulls or goats, grant my prayer, and let your
arrows avenge these my tears upon the Danaans.”\textsuperscript{27}

[43] Thus did he pray, and Apollo heard his prayer. He came down furious from the
summits of Olympus, with his bow and his quiver upon his shoulder, and the arrows rattled
on his back with the rage that trembled within him. He sat himself down away from the
ships with a face as dark as night, and his silver bow rang death as he shot his arrow in the
midst of them. First he smote their mules and their hounds, but presently he aimed his
shafts at the people themselves, and all day long the pyres of the dead were burning.

Calchas, the priest, is then consulted as to the cause of and solution to the plague:

\textit{Iliad} i.93 - 100

[92] “The god,” he said, “is angry neither about vow nor hecatomb, but for his priest’s
sake, whom Agamemnon has dishonoured, in that he would not free his daughter nor take
a ransom for her; therefore has he sent these evils upon us, and will yet send others. He will
not deliver the Danaans from this pestilence till Agamemnon has restored the girl without
fee or ransom to her father, and has sent a holy hecatomb to Chryse. Thus we may perhaps
appease him.”

Agamemnon agrees to return Chryseis, but in compensation he takes Briseis, a woman Achilles
had taken as his prize. Achilles is furious and recuses himself and his men from the war. Without
Achilles, the Greeks fare poorly against the Trojans. Eventually, Patroclus, the cousin of Achilles,
joins the battle and is killed by Hector, the crown prince of Troy, and Achilles, his rage now
amplified, re-joins the battle for the single purpose of gaining vengeance on Hector.

Achilles finally kills Hector, but his anger is not sated. He defiles the body and drags it behind
his chariot to his tent and leaves the body there on the ground.

Priam, the aged king of Troy and father of Hector, aided by the gods, sneaks into the Greek
camp to beg the return of his son’s body:

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{25} Both cities of Mysia, the area on the mainland next to Lesbos. It is often mistakenly claimed that Chryses was from
Chryse.

\textsuperscript{26} Smintheus is an epithet for Apollo with Eastern origins. There was a city near Troy called Sminthe where Apollo
was worshiped.

\textsuperscript{27} Homer never uses the term ‘Hellenes’ as a general term, but refers to the Greeks as Danaans, Achaeans or Argives.
The term Danaans refers to the descendants of Danaus, an Egyptian who migrated to Argos and became king there.
\end{footnotesize}
Iliad xxiv. 470 – 595

The old man went straight into the house where Achilles, loved of the gods, was sitting. There he found him with his men seated at a distance from him: only two, the hero Automedon, and Alcimus, descendant of Ares, were busy in attendance about his person, for he had but just done eating and drinking, and the table was still there. King Priam entered without their seeing him, and going right up to Achilles he clasped his knees and kissed the dread murderous hands that had slain so many of his sons.

[480] As when some cruel spite has befallen a man that he should have killed someone in his own country, and must fly to a great man’s protection in a land of strangers, and all marvel who see him, even so did Achilles marvel as he beheld Priam. The others looked one to another and marvelled also, but Priam besought Achilles saying, “Think of your father, Achilles like unto the gods, who is such even as I am, on the sad threshold of old age. It may be that those who dwell near him harass him, and there is none to keep war and ruin from him. Yet when he hears of you being still alive, he is glad, and his days are full of hope that he shall see his dear son come home to him from Troy; but I, wretched man that I am, had the bravest in all Troy for my sons, and there is not one of them left. I had fifty sons when the Achaeans came here; nineteen of them were from a single womb, and the others were borne to me by the women of my household. The greater part of them has fierce Ares laid low, and Hector, him who was alone left, him who was the guardian of the city and ourselves, him have you lately slain; therefore I am now come to the ships of the Achaeans to ransom his body from you with a great ransom. Fear, Achilles, the wrath of heaven; think on your own father and have compassion upon me, who am the more pitiable, for I have steeled myself as no man yet has ever steeled himself before me, and have raised to my lips the hand of him who slew my son.”

[507] Thus spoke Priam, and the heart of Achilles yearned as he bethought him of his father. He took the old man’s hand and moved him gently away. The two wept bitterly - Priam, as he lay at Achilles’ feet, weeping for Hector, and Achilles now for his father and now for Patroclus, till the house was filled with their lamentation. But when Achilles was now sated with grief and had unburdened the bitterness of his sorrow, he left his seat and raised the old man by the hand, in pity for his white hair and beard; then he said, “Unhappy man, you have indeed been greatly daring; how could you venture to come alone to the ships of the Achaeans, and enter the presence of him who has slain so many of your brave sons? You must have iron courage: sit now upon this seat, and for all our grief we will hide our sorrows in our hearts, for weeping will not avail us.

[525] “The immortals know no care, yet the lot they spin for man is full of sorrow; on the floor of Zeus’s palace there stand two urns, the one filled with evil gifts, and the other with good ones. He for whom Zeus the lord of thunder mixes the gifts he sends, will meet now with good and now with evil fortune; but he to whom Zeus sends none but evil gifts will be pointed at by the finger of scorn, the hand of famine will pursue him to the ends of the world, and he will go up and down the face of the earth, respected neither by gods nor men.

28 Self-imposed exile was a common penance for murder. The guilty party would leave his homeland and find a foreign land in which he could be granted asylum and be given the rites of purification.
Even so did it befall Peleus; the gods endowed him with all good things from his birth upwards, for he reigned over the Myrmidons excelling all men in prosperity and wealth, and mortal though he was they gave him a goddess for his bride. But even on him too did heaven send misfortune, for there is no brood of royal children born to him in his house, save one son who is doomed to die all untimely; nor may I take care of him now that he is growing old, for I must stay here at Troy to be the bane of you and your children. And you too, O Priam, I have heard that you were aforetime happy. They say that in wealth and plenitude of offspring you surpassed all that is in Lesbos, the realm of Makar to the northward, Phrygia that is more inland, and those that dwell upon the great Hellespont; but from the day when the dwellers in heaven sent this evil upon you, war and slaughter have been about your city continually. Bear up against it, and let there be some intervals in your sorrow. Mourn as you may for your brave son, you will take nothing by it. You cannot raise him from the dead, ere you do so yet another sorrow shall befall you."

And Priam answered, "O king, bid me not be seated, while Hector is still lying uncared for in your tents, but accept the great ransom which I have brought you, and give him to me at once that I may look upon him. May you prosper with the ransom and reach your own land in safety, seeing that you have suffered me to live and to look upon the light of the sun."

Achilles looked at him sternly and said, "Anger me, sir, no longer; I am of myself minded to give up the body of Hector. My mother, daughter of the old man of the sea, came to me from Zeus to bid me deliver it to you. Moreover I know well, O Priam, and you cannot hide it, that some god has brought you to the ships of the Achaeans, for else, no man however strong and in his prime would dare to come to our host; he could neither pass our guard unseen, nor draw the bolt of my gates thus easily; therefore, anger me no further, lest I sin against the word of Zeus, and suffer you not, suppliant though you are, within my tents."

The old man feared him and obeyed. Then the son of Peleus sprang like a lion through the door of his house, not alone, but with him went his two squires Automedon and Alcimus who were closer to him than any others of his comrades now that Patroclus was no more. These unyoked the horses and mules, and bade Priam's herald and attendant be seated within the house. They lifted the ransom for Hector's body from the waggon. but they left two mantles and a goodly shirt, that Achilles might wrap the body in them when he gave it to be taken home. Then he called to his servants and ordered them to wash the body and anoint it, but he first took it to a place where Priam should not see it, lest if he did so, he should break out in the bitterness of his grief, and enrage Achilles, who might then kill him and sin against the word of Zeus.

When the servants had washed the body and anointed it, and had wrapped it in a fair shirt and mantle, Achilles himself lifted it on to a bier, and he and his men then laid it on the waggon. He cried aloud as he did so and called on the name of his dear comrade, "Be not angry with me, Patroclus," he said, "if you hear even in the house of Hades that I have given Hector to his father for a ransom. It has been no unworthy one, and I will share it equitably with you."

Priam then takes the body back to Troy. The Iliad ends with the funeral of Hector.