

THE ODYSSEY

AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE



A CHARACTER-BY-CHARACTER
GUIDE TO THE STORY
OF ODYSSEUS



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INTRODUCTION



For 2,700 years, across continents and cultures, the *Odyssey* has been a story for everyone. The ancient Greek epic tells the celebrated tale of a swashbuckling hero and his adventures on the deep blue sea—a saga about monsters and gods, a son finding his father, and a king coming home to take back his kingdom. But like many great stories, the *Odyssey* isn't as straightforward as it first seems. Odysseus is a strange, complicated man. He is not a white knight, out to help those in need. By the epic's end, the main character has worn so many disguises and told so many lies and half-truths that it's hard to tell whether even Odysseus himself knows exactly who he is.

The Odyssey: An Illustrated Guide is a voyage through the heroes, gods, nymphs, monsters, and commoners of the *Odyssey*. We'll meet them in roughly the order in which they appear in Homer's original story. Like Odysseus himself, the characters who surround the epic's central hero have many dimensions. The good guys, very often, aren't so good. The villains, just as often, aren't wicked through and through. From major characters, like Odysseus and Penelope, down to figures with smaller roles, like the Cyclops, Circe, Nausicaa, and Helen of Troy, the *Odyssey's* sprawling cast has fascinated readers for thousands of years. Whether you studied the epic in school or only know bits of the story, this companion book will introduce you to all of them.

We'll meet the Homeric gods Zeus and Athena. We'll get to know scrappy young Telemachus, trying his best to find his father, Odysseus, in spite of the man's twenty-year absence. We'll learn about Penelope, the cornered queen, and the suitors trying to marry her. And as we come to know the *Odyssey's* cast, we'll also explore the story of the *Odyssey* itself, a tale that twists and turns as its many characters encounter one another.

The Homeric gods are immortal, but really, all Homeric characters are immortal. In the millennia since the epic was written, this cast has lived on, appearing in poems, plays, statues, and paintings as later generations have revered ancient Greece's most beloved story.

Just as they did to readers centuries ago, the characters of the *Odyssey* still hold lessons for us today. Odysseus himself ultimately embodies the virtues of intelligence and resilience. Penelope remains dignified and noble, in spite of being mistreated by nearly everyone around her. Even minor figures, like energetic old Nestor, kind Nausicaa, and wise, weathered Menelaus, are admirable in their own timeless ways. And while we'll appreciate the ageless qualities of the *Odyssey's* characters in this book, we'll also do the opposite, and explore what makes them ancient Greek. Immortal as the *Odyssey* is, it was also the product of a very specific age and culture, and the book's smallest details sometimes hold wondrous lessons about the ancient past.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT



In this section, you'll find a brief overview of the ancient Greek world the *Odyssey* arose from—and actually helped create. You'll also learn more about how the Homeric epics were performed orally ages ago, and why they've stood the test of time. In addition, you'll discover the ties between the *Odyssey* and its companion epic, the *Iliad*, and read through a clear synopsis of the *Odyssey*'s plot, timeline, and geography before you begin meeting its principal characters.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIME PERIOD

The *Odyssey* was first set down in its current form between about 725 and 625 BCE. If you're new to ancient Greek history, these dates don't mean much. What's important to understand for anyone interested in the Homeric epics is that they came along very *early* in ancient Greek history. Their appearance in written form coincides with the adoption of the phonetic alphabet in ancient Greece, which means that almost as soon as writing began to flourish in the Aegean world, it was used to record the story of Odysseus. The following timeline provides an overview of both when the events that inspired the *Odyssey* may have taken place and when the epic was actually written.

In a way, the Homeric epics *created* ancient Greece, just as much as they were created *by* ancient Greece. During the Classical period, when Socrates and Plato lived and the Parthenon was built and Athenian democracy reached its apex, the Homeric epics were already three hundred years old, and they'd been a part of the society of the ancient Aegean for a long time.

1800 BCE	MYCENAEAN PERIOD (circa 1750–1200 BCE)	
1700 BCE		
1600 BCE		
1500 BCE		
1400 BCE		
1300 BCE		
1200 BCE		
1100 BCE	BRONZE AGE COLLAPSE AND GREEK DARK AGE (circa 1200–800 BCE)	<i>Events of Homeric epics take place</i>
1000 BCE		
900 BCE		
800 BCE		
700 BCE	ARCHAIC PERIOD (circa 800–480 BCE)	<i>Phonetic alphabet usage grows in Greece</i>
600 BCE		725–625 BCE Homeric epics written
500 BCE		
400 BCE	CLASSICAL PERIOD (480–323 BCE)	<i>What most people think of when they think of “ancient Greece” (Plato, Socrates, etc.)</i>
300 BCE		
200 BCE	HELLENISTIC PERIOD (323–31 BCE)	
100 BCE		
1 CE		

WHO WAS HOMER?

If you’ve heard of the *Odyssey*, you’ve probably heard it described as “Homer’s *Odyssey*.” Who was Homer, though?

For most of history, it has been accepted that a blind poet from the eastern Aegean island of Chios wrote both the *Odyssey* and its companion epic, the *Iliad*. Homer was a revered figure in the ancient Greek world, imagined as the genius who set in motion a great many subsequent

stories, and thousands of years later, scholarship on the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* still calls them the “Homeric epics.” Today, however, more often than not, the accepted theory is that both Homeric epics were ensemble productions that came together over a very long time frame. This theory has been around since 1795, when the German classicist Friedrich August Wolf published it in a book called *Prolegomena ad Homerum*.

Some people still argue for single Homeric authorship, while others believe he wrote one of the poems but not the other. From archaeology, to the careful study of Homeric language, to consideration of some of the objects described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a lot of work has gone into trying to figure out who wrote these epics. After a great deal of research, the general opinion today is that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are very old stories with roots way back in the 1100s BCE that, like metal on a blacksmith’s anvil, were tempered and tempered over eons of performances until they reached their current written form between 725 and 625 BCE. Speaking of performances, let’s discuss how we would have experienced the story of the *Odyssey* if we were ancient Greeks.

ANCIENT GREEK PERFORMANCE CULTURE

Although today people usually read the *Odyssey* in book form, the experience would have been very different in 600 or 500 BCE. Ancient Greek audiences most often encountered stories like the *Odyssey* during public performances, rather than reading them. In earlier centuries, the Greek alphabet was relatively new and unstandardized, and throughout all of antiquity, a box of papyrus scrolls that contained the entire poem would have been ridiculously expensive. The *Odyssey*, more than twelve thousand lines long, or five hundred pages, depending on the translation you’re reading, had to be hand copied during ancient times. Additionally, reading the *Odyssey* wouldn’t have made sense, anyway: The *Odyssey* was a song.

Here’s how people actually encountered the *Odyssey* during the Archaic period. In the ancient Greek world, people got together to hang out. They socialized at house parties, in villages and town squares, and in shrines and temples built in picturesque places where fresh water and nice views drew people in, and wine, food, and good company kept them there. People celebrated seasonal occasions—planting, harvesting, the opening of

the previous season's wine, and the departure of merchant ships when the seas grew calm in the spring. And at all of these gatherings, there was an entertainment industry.

The ancient Greek entertainment industry included musicians, singers, dancers, and storytellers, and, among them, a cast of professional narrators whom we call "bards." These bards, wielding simple harp-family instruments called "lyres" and "kitharas," sang songs and narrative poems to audiences. Bards collaborated with musicians and dancers, and these entertainers were compensated for their work in various fashions, including tips from audiences. As a bard, the better you were, the more money you made, and so there was an incentive for virtuoso retellings, and for making existing poems better and better.

We know from what survives of the earliest Greek poetry that bards sang all sorts of songs. They sang tunes about ancient Greek heroes. They performed numbers that bragged about how great they were, or how stupid their rivals were. They offered ditties that were written for specific occasions, congratulating athletes on victories, spouses on weddings, or party guests on birthdays. They sang graphic songs with adult themes. But of all the many songs ancient Greek bards performed, perhaps the most famous today are the Homeric epics themselves.

Since stories like the *Odyssey* are so long, bards did not perform them all the way through. (A staging of the *Odyssey*, according to one recent scholar, would have taken 20–25 hours.) Instead, a bard might perform a *scene* from the *Odyssey*, singing, for instance, about Odysseus getting past the Sirens, or Odysseus meeting his old dog. These excerpts would be mixed in with other poetry, in variety shows that also included other performers. Such multimedia stage performances were beloved by all of antiquity, and their great popularity is why a precious handful of stories like the Homeric epics were passed down and still exist today.

THE STRUCTURE AND RHYTHM OF THE ODYSSEY

Today, the *Odyssey* is broken down into twenty-four books, with "books" essentially meaning "chapters" rather than printed volumes sitting on shelves. It's a work of verse (in other words, lines of poetry), and though each line has a specific meter, the *Odyssey's* language has no rhymes. In

ancient Greece and Rome, fictional stories were, up until the Common Era, generally told in verse, while nonfictional works, like philosophy and history, were written in prose.

The greatest value that poetry had over prose in antiquity was that poetry was easier to memorize. Today, we think of rhyme and meter (and poetry more generally) as flowery and ornamental. In oral cultures like Homer’s, however, poetry was a database used for preserving information, and rhyme and meter were the mnemonic technologies that powered that database. Ancient Greek poets were masters of using the rhythms and sounds implicit in language to write poetry that *sounded* beautiful, but that *also* contained interior patterns that helped make it easier to memorize.

THE METER USED IN THE *ODYSSEY*

The specific meter used in the *Odyssey* is called “dactylic hexameter.” A dactyl is a metrical foot with one long syllable followed by two short syllables, like “OD-yss-ey,” “IL-i-ad,” “FI-re-fly,” or “AL-li-son.” “Hexameter” means that there are six dactyls in the line. The Homeric epics, from end to end, are written in highly structured language like this.

1	2	3	4	5	6
HERE is one,	THIS is a	LINE in which	EACH foot is	US ually	DACTYL.

The *Odyssey* is made up of twelve thousand of these units, though ancient Greeks substituted dactyls for another kind of metrical foot called spondees in the middles and ends of lines, depending on context (in the earlier example, the final foot is a spondee, rather than a dactyl, which was an ordinary part of Archaic Greek meter). Poetic jargon aside, the original language of the *Odyssey* has a strong rhythmic beat, and its rhythm was part of what drew ancient audiences in.

EPITHETS

Another central element of Homeric poetry is the epithet. (An epithet is a description added to someone’s name, as in “Richard the Lionheart.”) The *Odyssey* uses repeated epithets, like πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς (po-LYT-IASS

DI-os o-DYSS-eus, or “much-suffering godlike Odysseus”), and ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς (po-DAR-kes DI-os a-KELL-eus, or “swift-footed godlike Achilles”). These epithets, repeated dozens of times throughout Homer’s stories and constructed with carefully metered language, helped poets remember long sequences of lines, and just as importantly, helped audience members recall who was who in Homer’s large casts of characters.

Besides meter and epithets, Homeric poetry is sometimes built of larger modular blocks. When characters offer sacrifices to the gods, for instance, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reuse identical selections of text, or nearly identical ones. The same is the case with sequences involving heroes armoring, and characters bathing, praying, sailing, or sharing meals. If you were a Homeric bard who needed to describe a hero armoring, you could simply deploy a prefabricated slab of lines, and audiences may have even enjoyed these repetitious aspects of ancient Greek narrative poetry.

In summation, the language of Homer’s *Odyssey* was carefully structured, and this structuring was crucial to helping performers keep hours and hours of narrative poetry memorized. Today, we might have the lyrics to a few songs memorized, but in 700 BCE, ancient Greek bards were brilliant products of a literary tradition built on memorization and oral delivery, and with training, simple musical instruments, and the modest handful of tools we’ve just discussed, they could entertain crowds for hours.

TIMELESS ELEMENTS OF HOMERIC POETRY

Today, while we don’t get to hear lyres, or see ancient Greek dancers when we read Homer’s *Odyssey*, we still get to enjoy a lot of the same magic that the poem’s original audiences did. Like a modern novel or movie, the *Odyssey* engages its reader by changing scenes. Here, we are atop Mount Olympus, listening to a conference of the gods; there, we survey what has happened on the island of Ithaca during Odysseus’s long absence; here, we observe brave young Telemachus, trying to pinpoint his father’s trail; there, we join Odysseus as he paddles away from the island of Calypso over the dangerous, wild sea, and thus, the story begins! Homer’s narrative technique is varied, rich, and cinematic. The *Odyssey* might be 2,700 years old, but the ways that the epic sets scenes, introduces characters, develops narrative tension, and leverages timeless tools like foreshadowing and dramatic irony are as enchanting today as they were eons ago.

While Homer’s plotting and scene changes are as enthralling as they were in antiquity, his language is just as breathtaking too. The *Odyssey* shimmers with descriptions of rosy dawn over the morning ocean; crystalline springs, vines, and cormorants on woodsy islands; decorative blue enamel paint on polished palace walls; and, at a climactic moment, a bowstring, plucked with the warm and mellow sound of a swallow’s song. The beauty of the *Odyssey*’s language is prismatic, and it befits Homer’s world. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, humanity is a vulnerable thing, pressed beneath the vastly more powerful forces of gods and nature, but nonetheless, within our fragility and transience, there is an intense beauty. The *Odyssey* is a story about a man coming home, but it is also a sequence of vividly narrated scenes, in which even brief descriptions of waves, or looming headlands, or shy smiles together remind us that human life on earth is a long sequence of precious and irrecoverable moments.

THE ANCIENT GREEK MCU

We’ve discussed the *Odyssey*’s historical background and explored how its language worked, in the past and present. Let’s learn about what we might call the “Ancient Greek MCU.” To modern audiences, the MCU (or “Marvel Cinematic Universe”) is shorthand for the fictional world of Iron Man, Captain America, Wolverine, and (appropriately for Homer) Cyclops. These characters have been mainstays of cinematic entertainment for a generation. A different actor might play Spider-Man in different films, but he’s always going to shoot webs out of his hands and do acrobatics among skyscrapers. Hulk might have different motivations for getting involved in a conflict in each new movie, but when he does, he’s going to turn green and smash things, because that’s what he does.

The ancient Greeks had a mythological universe as well, and it worked in much the same way. Odysseus is the hero of the *Odyssey*. He also shows up in the *Iliad*. He’s a character in Sophocles’s *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, and Euripides’s *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Hecuba*, *Rhesus*, and *Cyclops*. The later Roman authors Virgil and Ovid, who loved ancient Greek literature, put Odysseus in their most famous works, the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*, respectively. Odysseus, like Iron Man, was a franchise, but he wasn’t copy-righted. Anyone who wanted to get theater seats filled, or to perk up ears

at a poetic performance, might mention his name, and in doing so enjoy ready-made audience expectations. Odysseus was the wily guy. You might not know the *exact* story that was going to unfold about him, but you knew he was going to be a trickster who outsmarted everyone else.

While every culture has its web of archetypal characters, trying to understand a *different* culture's "cinematic universe" is challenging. The Odysseus of the *Iliad* is a decent enough guy, defending friends and trying to keep everyone on the team together. The Odysseus of Sophocles's *Ajax* is a selfish blowhard who realizes too late that he's caused the suicide of his friend. In other ancient Greek stories, Odysseus plays a hero, a villain, and everything in between. This is the case with many Homeric characters. Iphigenia dies in one version of her story. In another one, she lives. Homer's Helen of Troy goes to Troy. Euripides's Helen of Troy never does. Dionysus is the fun-loving god of wine, isn't he? Or is he the genocidal maniac at the heart of Nonnus's epic the *Dionysiaca*, an ancient forty-eight-book-long Greek poem written *a thousand years after the Odyssey*?

When we first come to the Greek myths, it is often with the mistaken sense that they are narratives that remained relatively static from century to century. They did not. Ancient Greek myths survive in uncountable versions, and in archaeological objects like cups and statues that suggest even more versions, still. The ancient Greek MCU endured for more than ten centuries, and one century's Odysseus was generally a bit different than the previous century's, even if some core elements of his character stayed the same.

Still, if all of this sounds intimidating, there's some good news. Literature ages differently than films do. And words, unlike even the most majestic statues and tympanums, are indestructible. For newcomers to the endlessly tangled thicket of Greek myths, there is no better starting place than the Homeric epics.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE *ILIAD* AND THE *ODYSSEY*

If we picture ancient Greek literature as a river, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are its headwaters. Many of the stories that were told downstream in history in the ancient Mediterranean world, first by Greeks and later by Romans, concerned characters from Homer's two epics. The *Iliad* tells the

story of the Trojan War, while the *Odyssey* tells the story of how Odysseus made it home from this war. For a thousand years, these two epic poems sired new story cycles, including poems, plays, and new epics.

	<i>ILIAD</i>	<i>ODYSSEY</i>
Main Topic	The tenth year of the Trojan War	Odysseus's return from the Trojan War
Length	24 books; 15,700 lines	24 books; 12,000 lines
Setting	In and around Troy (probably northwest of modern-day Turkey)	All over the ancient Aegean, but the second half is on the island of Ithaca
Named After	<i>Ilium</i> , the Greek word for the city of Troy	The main character, Odysseus
Written Form First Appears	Between about 725 and 625 BCE	Between about 725 and 625 BCE

Once, thousands of years ago, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were part of an even *longer* saga. The two Homeric epics were originally the second and seventh installments of an eight-story sequence that today's scholars call the "Epic Cycle."

COMPONENTS OF THE EPIC CYCLE

NAME OF WORK	NUMBER OF BOOKS	MAIN TOPICS
<i>Cypria</i>	11 books	Judgment of Paris; abduction of Helen; start of Trojan War
<i>Iliad</i> *	24 books	Year ten of the Trojan War; death of Hector
<i>Aethiopis</i>	5 books	Arrival of Trojan allies; death of Achilles
<i>Little Iliad</i>	4 books	Death of Paris; construction of Trojan Horse

continued

NAME OF WORK	NUMBER OF BOOKS	MAIN TOPICS
<i>Iliou Persis</i>	2 books	Sack of Troy; rampage of Achilles' son; death of Priam
<i>Nostoi</i>	5 books	Return of Menelaus and Agamemnon from Troy
<i>Odyssey</i> *	24 books	Return of Odysseus from Troy
<i>Telegony</i>	2 books	Subsequent adventures of Odysseus and his sons

*Still survives today. The rest have been lost. (Source: Proclus's *Chrestomathia*)

Our sources on the Epic Cycle are minimal, and from much later on in history than the century that gave rise to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. While the outline shown here is probably not altogether accurate, we definitely know that *something* like this existed when the Homeric poems came together. Homer's epics are enormous, but they don't contain the entire story of the Trojan War by a long shot.

The scene of Odysseus coming up with the Trojan Horse, and the Greeks building it? Not in the Homeric epics. The abduction of Helen of Troy, and the launching of a thousand ships? Nope. Paris shooting Achilles in the heel? Not in Homer. The end of the war? Also, not in Homer. In short, the Homeric epics are a sprawling mass of text, but they don't contain everything we might expect.

The sections of the Epic Cycle that pleased audiences best evolved into increasingly refined and standardized poetry. The rest, though it remained a part of general cultural memory, was staged less and less, and slowly faded away.

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING: THE *ILIAD*

The *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War—whose aftermath we find in the *Odyssey*. The ten-year-long Trojan War was the defining event of an entire generation of mythological characters central to ancient Greek literature. Odysseus fought on the Greek side of this conflict, which, at a very simple

level, pitted the Greeks and their king, Agamemnon, against the Trojans and their king, Priam.

The Trojan War began when the beautiful Greek woman Helen left her husband and married the Trojan prince Paris. Helen was the woman with “the face that launched a thousand ships” from Greece to Troy. The war ended when the Greek tactician Odysseus built a hollow horse to hide Greek soldiers, and the Trojans wheeled it inside their city. Then, out came the Greeks, who were finally able to get Troy’s defenses down and conquer the city.

Homer’s *Iliad* doesn’t tell these stories of the Trojan War’s beginning, nor its ending. It is an epic about the final year of the war, when nine years of carnage and loss have already affected everyone involved. In the *Iliad*’s opening pages, tempers are getting short. The Greeks want to go home. The Greek king is barely holding everything together, and ugly disagreements seethe in the ranks of the invaders. As for the Trojans, besieged for nearly a decade at the epic’s outset, the years have taken their toll on them as well.

A series of whipsawing battles are the main action of the *Iliad*. Desperate to finally end the war, and putting everything on the table, the Greeks charge up from their beach camp to attack the city of Troy. The Trojans fend them off, however, and soon strike back, such that the defenders are suddenly attacking the Greek earthworks, in a shocking turn of the tides. And so it goes, book after book, in a series of jaw-droppingly violent and action-packed chapters in which warriors are compared to eagles, lions, and fire itself, their blood-splattered bronze armor blazing in the Mediterranean sun.

There are hundreds of named warriors on each side, but two stand out as most important. The Trojan champion, Hector, is depicted as a family man and recent father, exhausted by the fighting. He’s a defender who would prefer peace. The Greek champion, Achilles, is also a very human, three-dimensional character. He is the greatest warrior of his generation, but, in the *Iliad*, Achilles is tired of war and thinking about heading home. When Achilles’ dear companion Patroclus is killed, though, Achilles goes into a furious rampage so overwhelming that he defeats the Trojan champion Hector and turns the tide of the war.

The victory of Achilles at the end of the *Iliad* is as unsettling as it is exhilarating. The *Iliad* depicts war as a spectacular test of mortal endurance, but also as something horrifying. When Achilles wins, we know that Troy’s days are numbered, although the city never falls in Homer’s

poem. The *Iliad* isn't about the beginnings or endings of wars, after all, but instead their long, grinding, awful middles. Its last line doesn't promise any peace or resolution. Hector is dead, Homer writes, and so the Trojans bury him. That's it. The war will continue. The warriors, many mangled and dispirited, will keep fighting, including Odysseus.

That's the story of the first Homeric poem, the *Iliad*. If you heard the second Homeric poem—the *Odyssey*—being performed in ancient Greece, you would know this prehistory. You'd sit down to hear a bard sing about Odysseus's homeward adventures, and you'd understand that he was coming home from something transformative, searing, and traumatizing. The Trojan War, in Homer's poetic world, has scarred an entire generation, and Odysseus is no exception.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ODYSSEY'S PLOT

As long and complex as the *Odyssey* is, there's a pretty simple way to understand the epic's twenty-four books. That is to understand it as essentially a three-act play. In the first act, Odysseus's son is trying to find his father, who's been gone for twenty years. The second act recounts how Odysseus gets home. And the third act is a revenge story, revealing what happens when Odysseus makes it back to his kingdom. Here's how those three acts proceed and eventually weave together.

ACT 1: TELEMACHUS

Act 1 of the *Odyssey* is a detective story about an underdog youngster, Odysseus's son Telemachus, and the beginning of a long coming-of-age narrative that's one of the main plotlines of the entire *Odyssey*. When we meet Odysseus Junior, he's about nineteen years old. Young men in ancient Greece, especially highborn ones like Telemachus, underwent physical and military training to get them ready for the vigorous demands of adult life, under the guidance of older male role models. Telemachus, though, has no such role model. The youth, at the *Odyssey*'s opening, has been swept under the rug. More than a hundred men, assuming that Odysseus is dead, have made themselves at home in the Ithacan palace. Almost all of them are trying to marry Telemachus's mother, Penelope, and none of them show the poor teenage prince any respect.

These hundred or so men are called “the suitors.” The suitors, literature’s most notorious couch surfers, are a weird bunch. They seem unconcerned that only one of them can actually marry the queen. Though they’re from prominent families, they appear as little more than blissfully unemployed braggarts in Homer’s story. There’s an absurdity to the suitors, but they’re cruel as well. They don’t care what Queen Penelope wants. They don’t care what Telemachus wants. And so, short on options and prompted by Athena, off Telemachus goes to the east to look for Odysseus, in the direction of Troy, where his dad vanished almost two decades before.

First, Telemachus visits a gabby graybeard named Nestor, an old-timer who’s still alive and kicking even though he was already quite elderly during the time of the Trojan War. Next, Telemachus meets with other heroes who knew his father, Menelaus and Helen, but they can’t help him out much either. By the end of the first act of the *Odyssey* (which concludes with the close of Book 4), Telemachus heads back to Ithaca, planning to try and do what he can there, since he’s turned up no leads.

Many readers hurry through the “Telemachus” books in search of the blockbuster scenes of Odysseus wrestling monsters and braving the briny depths. Act 1 of the *Odyssey*, though, still tells a very touching tale. Telemachus grows considerably over the beginning of the story, conducting himself well in foreign courts and with the deity Athena alike. He may not have the gravitas of his father, but he’s a decent person, and this would have counted for a lot to the story’s original readers, just as it still does to us today.

ACT 2: MONSTERS AND ADVENTURES

That’s Act 1 of the *Odyssey*. What we can think of as Act 2 of the *Odyssey*, or Books 5–12, is the most famous portion of the epic. Before *The Legend of Zelda*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the Arthurian legends, and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, there was Homer’s archetypal tale of a guy on a boat. Odysseus is a prisoner when we meet him, held captive on the plush penitentiary of a nymph named Calypso, suffering a fate that is simultaneously sumptuous and degrading. He’s been there for seven years. When Athena shows up and tells the lusty Calypso to let Odysseus go, the nymph sends him on his way. What ensues is a surprisingly confusing series of chronological jumps and stories within stories that together see Odysseus leapfrogging all over the place and barely staying alive.

From Calypso's island, Odysseus undertakes a very arduous twenty-two-day journey, alone, across part of the eastern Mediterranean. He washes up on the shore of a land called Phaeacia. The Phaeacians are friendly folks. Odysseus is friendly in return. He gets to talking with the Phaeacian king and queen one night, and then, in a four-book-long story within a story, he tells them all about what happened before he ended up stuck on Calypso's island. Thus begins the sequence of island-hopping adventures most of us associate with the *Odyssey*.

The adventures include the island of the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops, the wind god Aeolus, the Laestrygonians, a yearlong hookup with the witch Circe, a visit to Hades, a trip back to Circe, a paddle past the Sirens, a voyage between the monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, the island of Helios, and the shipwreck that led him to wash up on Calypso's island. Odysseus's long narrative is spellbinding and marvelous. Each episode is a self-contained story; each story has an archetypal theme universal to human folklore. An inhospitable Cyclops pays for his rudeness. Men are tempted by what is forbidden. The seductress Circe is seduced. A hero must make an impossible choice. There's a good reason that the epic's central portion is especially famous. After Odysseus tells his tale, the friendly Phaeacians get Odysseus to his homeland of Ithaca in relatively short order.

ACT 3: REVENGE

The entire second half of the *Odyssey* is a revenge story. The epic's final act, Books 13–24 (precisely half of the book), first tells of Odysseus, after partnering with Athena, sneaking around Ithaca and trying to find out who's been naughty and who's been nice.

Once he has some preliminary contacts, the hero, divinely disguised as an old beggar, starts snooping around his palace. The suitors and their flunkies, by this time, have generally been portrayed as unlikable scumbags, and they ridicule and batter the incognito hero. As the plot thickens, foreshadowing and dramatic irony tell us that the return of the king is not going to be a peaceful event.

The tension builds. Odysseus meets his son for the first time, and Telemachus helps his father scheme. In book after book, the suitors fail to give either of the island's rightful rulers an iota of respect, and Odysseus remembers all of it. He notes which servants have been loyal to him. He

conspires with Athena. He tests his wife, Penelope, to see if she can still be trusted. And then, when the time comes, he attacks.

The carnage that ends the epic is shocking. The *Odyssey* shows us peaceful palaces, warm moments of diplomacy, gift giving, and considerate conversations over shared meals. But in the end, it descends into the ultra-violent hurricane of the *Iliad*. Odysseus, Telemachus, and two other men butcher the suitors, even as many of their victims beg for their lives. They kill and torture disloyal domestics who served the suitors. Blood slicks the floor of the Ithacan feasting hall, where so many of the epic's central scenes have happened.

There's a coda. Odysseus and Penelope finally get back together. Odysseus reunites with his father. But then, the Ithacans of Odysseus's kingdom come for revenge. The fathers and families of the suitors Odysseus has killed no longer want to be ruled by a mass-murdering monarch who's been gone for decades. Ithaca is about to explode into factional violence, perhaps starting a new Trojan War and spinning the Ouroboros serpent of revenge for a new generation. But Athena shows up and stops it. And that's the end.

That, then, is the tale of the *Odyssey* in three acts. Act 1: underdog coming-of-age story. Act 2: monsters and adventures. Act 3: revenge. All of them are magnificent and thematically interwoven with one another, their tight plotting and interconnectedness making the *Odyssey* perhaps the best-known story from the ancient world, the Bible excepted.

NOW YOU KNOW

A central dilemma in the Homeric epics is the choice between κλέος (*kleos*), or "battle glory," and νόστος (*nostos*), or "homecoming." Characters who opt for *kleos* go all in on war, seeking to distinguish themselves in battle at all costs, no matter whether or not they survive. Those who opt for *nostos* take a different path. They choose to go home and, in doing so, relinquish the glory of war in order to live happy, unassuming lives. (The modern noun "nostalgia" comes from the ancient Greek word *nostos*.) The *Odyssey* is essentially a story about a hero going from *kleos* to *nostos*. Although the Trojan War is over, Odysseus still bears its scars, both mentally and physically, and his journey back to peacetime civilization is a psychological one as well as a voyage across the sea.

THE ODYSSEY'S CONFUSING CHRONOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY

Both of Homer's epics have complicated time frames. The Trojan War lasted ten years, and Odysseus's journey home, when the *Odyssey* begins, has already taken him an additional nine years. From a big picture, the chronology of the Homeric epics looks like this.

YEAR NUMBER	AGE OF KEY CHARACTERS	WHAT'S HAPPENING
1	Odysseus: 25 years old; Penelope: 20 years old	Helen leaves her husband, and the Trojan War begins.
2		Trojan War is fought.
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		Events of the <i>Iliad</i> take place.
11	Odysseus: 35 years old; Penelope: 30 years old; Telemachus: 10 years old	Odysseus's voyage home begins.
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		
17		
18		
19		Most events of the <i>Odyssey</i> take place.
20	Odysseus: 45 years old; Penelope: 40 years old; Telemachus: 20 years old	

Though the characters' ages in this illustration are mostly guesswork, they should roughly capture how old each main character is at the different junctures of Homer's stories. Put simply, the *Iliad* takes place toward the end of the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey* takes place toward the end of Odysseus's long journey home.

Though it's ultimately just the tale of how Odysseus came home, the *Odyssey* itself has some confusing chronological jumps. A lot of the epic is a story within a story, with Odysseus narrating adventures that have already taken place. So while Odysseus's voyage to Phaeacia and the events on Ithaca take place in the *Odyssey*'s "present day," many of the more famous tales (for example, those about the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops, Circe, and the Sirens) are told as flashbacks.

While more than half of the *Odyssey* takes place on the small island of Ithaca, the main character has put a lot of miles on his odometer by the time he gets there. But where, exactly, does Odysseus go, over the course of his many adventures? That's a tough question to answer.



Ancient “Greece” was a maritime civilization that encompassed a number of modern-day countries. Wherever there were navigable harbors and places where some subsistence and cash crops could grow in the eastern Mediterranean, Greek-speaking settlements flourished. Around 725–625 BCE, when scholars believe the *Odyssey* was completed, Greek civilization encompassed the Aegean basin and parts of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, and it was growing quickly too.

Various readers, over the ages, have speculated where Odysseus went when he traveled to, for instance, Circe’s island, the land of the Sirens, and even the entrance to Hades! As an example, the Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily has often been imagined as the setting that inspired the story of Scylla and Charybdis. Some readers have conjectured that Homer’s Phaeacia was the island of Corfu. This kind of guesswork is fun, and it’s great for Greek tourism. But the *Odyssey* is also a fairy tale, and the ancient Mediterranean was full of dangerous straits and peaceful islands. By the time Homer came along, centuries of bards had created an entire imaginary world full of storied locations. Ithaca is still the same Ithaca it’s been since the Iron Age, and so are Pylos and Sparta. But as for other locations of the *Odyssey*, trying to pinpoint them on a map is a bit like looking for Wakanda or Gotham City.

The 700s and 600s BCE were periods of rapid population growth and migration for Greek-speaking populations. As Archaic period Greeks switched from herding to stationary agriculture, villages grew into cities, and entrepreneurs looked for opportunities to expand. New settlements in the eastern and central Mediterranean rim promised fertile soil and grazing lands. While some Greeks put down roots in western Anatolia and along the Black Sea, even more built colonies in Sicily and southern Italy. As the pace of colonization accelerated, Greek colonizers developed an increasingly keen eye for resource-rich stretches of coastland. The *Odyssey* is a product of this period of waterborne pioneering and homesteading. Throughout the story, Odysseus and his crewmen disembark again and again, and the poem’s early audiences would have understood just what it was like to step off a ship onto a strange shore and not know whether harm or hospitality awaited them there.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Now that you've learned a bit about the Homeric epics and their historical background, it's time to dive into the *Odyssey*. The rest of this book will introduce you to the epic's characters roughly in the order in which they appear in the story and, in doing so, offer a full retelling of ancient Greece's most famous story.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

As you make your way through each character profile, you'll see many quotes from the *Odyssey*. These quotes come from modern renderings of the poem done by different translators with somewhat different styles. Emily Wilson's *Odyssey*, for instance, is economic, metrical, and done in more modern English than has sometimes been customary in Homeric translations. Robert Fagles's is denser and more literal, working to render some of the stranger features of the *Odyssey* into English. E.V. Rieu's translation is in prose (in other words, paragraphs, rather than lines of poetry), which some readers prefer. Other translations used in this volume have other excellent qualities, and if you're interested in reading the poem yourself, there's a section at the end of this book titled Further Resources that will direct you to recommended versions.

MEETING THE ODYSSEY'S CHARACTERS

In the following pages, you'll meet the central characters of the *Odyssey*. And even if you've never read the epic, you'll feel like you know them already. Goodly old Eurycleia, brave young Telemachus, blabbing Nestor, randy Calypso—these characters are archetypes who had many descendants. Each character's profile covers their role in the Homeric epics and facts about their legacy in later literature and cultural history. Each entry wraps up with a small section that delves deeper into the history of the Homeric world, considers Odysseus's story in its original context, and helps you understand the *Odyssey* as ancient Greeks would have understood it. So turn the page, imagine the songs of lyres and the warm Aegean sun all around you, and get to know the cast of Homer's *Odyssey*. Ancient as they are, they're among the most important characters in all literature, and they can still delight and surprise us, just as they did 2,700 years ago.