Part One

The Rage of Achilles: From Homeric Heroes to Lord and God of the World

Achilles was in many ways the original Greek ideal of youth and manhood, a beautiful man with a divine aura, born of a sea goddess and a mortal king. Real conquerors and rulers including Alcibiades, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon took inspiration from him. And yet his primary passion was rage. The rage of Achilles is what sets Homer's great epic, the *Iliad,* into motion, a rage born of competition with his overlord, the older Agamemnon, which eventually left thousands of Greeks and Trojans dead in steaming heaps on the blood-soaked field before the great city.

The feud between the younger man and his elder is over who should rightfully be given the captive Trojan woman Briseis as a trophy of war. Achilles believes she is his by right because he has been by far the bravest warrior on the Greek side. But Agamemnon claims her for his own because he is not merely a king, but the King of Kings, the commander of the entire Greek force including Achilles. The mixture of erotic jealousy over the possession of the unfortunate woman and their resentment for each other over their status and prestige – Achilles thinks Agamemnon is a coward and a lightweight gaining glory through what are really his own achievements, while Agamemnon finds Achilles insufferably arrogant and insubordinate – boils over in their accusations of each other. You can fairly hear the words spitting through clenched teeth of these two kings clashing:

Then looking darkly at him Achilles of the swift feet spoke:

"O wrapped in shamelessness, with your mind forever on profit, how shall any one of the Achaians readily obey you either to go on a journey or to fight men strongly in battle? I for my part did not come here … to fight against the Trojans, since to me they have done nothing … For your sake, o great shamelessness, we followed, to do you a favor, you with the dog's eyes, to win your honor … Always the greater part of the painful fighting is my work, but when the time comes to distribute the booty, yours is the far greater reward."

Then answered him in turn the lord of men Agamemnon:

"Run away by all means if your heart drives you. I will not entreat you to stay here for my sake … To me you are the most hateful of all the kings whom the gods love. Forever quarreling is dear to your heart, and wars and battles … Go home then with your ships, be king over the Myrmidons. I care nothing about you."

Who was right? It's easy to see in their feud an early version of a very old story – how a talented and ambitious young man is held back and kept down by an older man with position and power he is determined to hang onto all for himself, even though he is less able, and even if it harms everyone's collective interests. Think of Henry Ford II's jealousy of the young Lee Iacocca, who had done so much to revive the fortunes of Ford's own car company, which he had inherited. At their parting, when Iacocca wanted to know why he was being let go, Ford reportedly said, "Sometimes you just don't like somebody." Agamemnon knows that Achilles is indispensable to the war effort against Troy and should not be alienated, but he doesn't care about that in comparison with his own wounded pride. In Homer's poem, Agamemnon ruled the kingdom of Mycenae, and when the nineteenth-century archaeologist Friedrich Schliemann excavated the citadel there, he discovered a mask of pure gold that has ever since been known as "Agamemnon's mask." The link is doubtful, and scholars are divided over whether Agamemnon was even a historical figure at all. But the face is thin, angular, and sly, a tight little smile framed by the neatly trimmed spade beard of the complete villain, reminding one of evildoers and brutes from the Sheriff of Nottingham to the Klingons. It is hard not to picture Homer's portrait of the King of Kings in exactly this way. The citadel of Mycenae itself looms like a dark bird of prey over the surrounding rich farmland, and wandering around the palace remains, hemmed in by steep black peaks on all sides, one feels an electric charge of woe and tragedy, as if Agamemnon really could have been murdered here by his wife and her lover. This is a man who, after all, had cold-bloodedly made a human sacrifice of his own daughter in order to coax the gods into giving him a fair wind for the Greek fleet on its voyage to Troy.

But it's not so one-sided. After all, Achilles *is* insubordinate. The Greek chieftains agreed to Agamemnon being their commander-in-chief by common consent. Because of his personal anger at Agamemnon, Achilles not only withdraws from combat, but deliberately tries to sabotage the whole war effort. In other words, he commits treason against his own side. He does this by enlisting his mother, the goddess Thetis, to plead with the king of all the gods, the great Zeus – who, together with his fellow Olympians, is observing the war from their perch on Mount Olympus as if from the balcony of a movie theatre – to intervene in the war by enabling the Trojans to inflict a defeat on the Greek side in battle, proving that the Greeks can't win without their greatest warrior Achilles and demonstrating Agamemnon's foolishness for alienating him. Thetis had sided with Zeus in his own earlier war against his father, Kronos, whom he had

overthrown (and castrated) to establish the rule of the Olympians over that of the earlier race of giants. The struggle for mastery among the gods parallels the one going on among men. Thetis is, therefore, calling in a favor, and Zeus reluctantly agrees. He is reluctant because he knows that when his wife, the formidable "cow-eyed" Hera, discovers that Zeus has sided with the Trojans against the Greeks, her chosen favorites, her fury will be implacable. (One rather pictures her brandishing a rolling pin). Zeus takes the heat, reminding Hera that he is the senior partner in their dynastic match, and that he had once had her hung by her heels weighted down by iron when she got out of line before. But a price will be paid by Achilles for forcing the direction of the war in this way – Achilles' best friend Patroclus will die fighting in his place.

Although Achilles bridles at the tyranny of his elder, Agamemnon, he is quite capable of being tyrannical himself. (And he's a king in his own right). After smugly watching the Greeks driven back all the way to their ships by the Trojans – Zeus' delivery on his promise to his mother – from the sidelines, Achilles comes back into the thick of the fighting out of his rage on learning that his beloved Patroclus has been killed in combat by the Trojans' greatest warrior, Hector, son of the Trojan king Priam. Achilles' rage is perhaps fueled by his own guilt upon learning that Patroclus had entered battle dressed in Achilles' armor, trying to compensate for the absence of the greatest Greek warrior by making it seem to the other Greeks as if he were present. Achilles had withdrawn from combat in a huff because of his feud with Agamemnon, and he now returns to fight solely to avenge a personal loss by killing Hector. There was a rule of chivalry that called for the body of a fallen opponent to be treated with respect and returned for burial, especially someone of princely rank like Hector. Not only did Achilles not return Hector's body, but in his bottomless fury over his friend Patroclus' death, he dragged Hector's body by its feet from the rear of his chariot around Patroclus' funeral bier for nine days. At this point, Zeus issues a stern warning to Thetis: Tell your son this has gone far enough. *We* get to do this kind of thing to humans because we're gods. Your son, who is mortal, does not. At length, the aged Priam comes under a flag of truce to Achilles' tent to beg for the return of his son's mangled corpse, falling to his knees and wrapping his arms in supplication, weeping, around Achilles' legs. Remembering with pity his own aged father back home, Achilles finally relents, and there is a lull in the war as both Greeks and Trojans solemnly hold funeral games for the noble fallen on both sides. It is a rare instance on Achilles' part of a capacity to feel sympathy for another human being against a backdrop of almost unrelieved narcissism and self-absorption.

Still and all, Achilles possesses a real magnificence, both in Homer's account and in other tales. It is not so difficult to see why the Greeks admired him and saw him as a model for young men. He was courageous in battle. He was proud. The flip side of his selfishness was that he was capable of real affection and loyalty toward those he loved. Personal life meant more to him than public life. Above all, it's hard not to side with him a little in his refusal to knuckle

under to Agamemnon – whose claims were based on the preeminence of his kingdom and his right to avenge the abduction of his brother's wife, but who was a mediocre warrior – just as it's hard not to sympathize a little with any young man who bucks authority in order to push his way forward. There's something magical about him. Homer often likens him to a flash of sunlight, and when he heads out for his battle with Hector, his horse speaks to warn him he will die. Achilles knows he is doomed to a short life but is determined that his brief time on earth will be a blaze of glory. Homer's portrait of him is not uncritical, for Achilles is a complex, disturbed, and disturbing man. He alternates between spasms of blind fury and blue funks of despair over the meaninglessness of existence. His rage is projected upon the entire cosmos, which he tends to hold responsible for his own troubles. If the gods aren't on his side, he will even do battle with them, as when he draws his sword on the river god Skamander. He was the embodiment of what the Greeks called *hubris* – excessive pride verging on madness, a desire to shine and dominate that practically invites the gods to respond by crushing him, putting mere mortals back in their place. All in all, Achilles continued to inspire and haunt the imagination of the ancient Greeks, even as Greek civilization underwent deep changes.

HOMERIC KINGS AND HEROES

At this point, we have to add the realm of history to the realm of myth. Troy was real. Before I visited the site, people kept telling me, "don't expect too much." They knew I had been to extensive and magnificent ruins like those of Ephesus and Pergamon, where not much had to be left to the imagination to envision what they looked like in ancient times, and they didn't want me to get my hopes up that I was actually going to see Homer's Troy, with its enormous walls, temples, palaces, and citadel. But the site was nevertheless quite overwhelming for how evocative it was. True, all that's there are the multiple levels, mostly mere foundations, of the numerous cities (as many as nine) that have been built there, on top of each other, since the early Bronze Age, like a honeycomb of man-made caves where one epoch melds into the next. Yet, there are the clearly visible remains of a gate and rampart. Schliemann, whose excavation had been an act of faith based on his belief in the accuracy of Homer when many dismissed the epic as pure fiction, convinced himself that this had indeed been the main gate of the Troy of the Trojan War, through which the famous Trojan Horse might have been taken. The arch of the gate, one could fantasize, was gone because, as we know from Homer, the Trojans deliberately dismantled it because otherwise the marvelous wooden horse would have been too big to pass through.

Just as extraordinary for me, when you stood on the mound of the rampart, you could look straight out onto the plane that descended gently to the shore, imagining you were a Trojan looking down toward the Greek encampment and their ships. This is where the battles in Homer's tale took place, the

plumed and gleaming columns of the Greeks moving toward the city as the equally splendid Trojan ranks issued from the gate to meet them head on – even though, I was told, the shoreline was located in a somewhat different place in the twelfth century BC, the date the war is assumed by some to have taken place. Traces have been found of a burned citadel, possibly the one the Greeks, according to Homer, torched when they successfully snuck into the city hidden inside the Trojan horse and opened the gates to their army waiting outside. Traces have been found nearby of fields that may have been cultivated by the Greeks during what Homer says was their ten-year siege. Supply lines back to the Peloponnesian mainland were poor, and the army would have had to grow its own crops. All in all, it is a deeply moving place, not the least because of its location in the Dardanelles and the nearby World War I battle site of Gallipoli, reminding one of just how often this patch of the world, linking the Mediterranean with the Black Sea, linking West with East, has been fought over.

But if there really was a Troy, and wars went on there, how can we be sure it's the war Homer recounts in the *Iliad*? Did Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, Ajax, and the other heroes really exist? Was the war caused by the abduction of the world's most beautiful woman, Helen, from the palace of her rather hapless husband Menelaus, King of Sparta, by the visiting Trojan playboy Prince Paris?

The story of the Trojan War has come down to us through different layers, like the excavation of Troy itself. It is familiar to us as the Trojan War because the Romans called it Troy, and the British loved all things Roman. The city in the poem was actually called Ilion – I'm using Troy because everyone recognizes it. Similarly, the war was not really between "the Greeks" and "the Trojans." Homer calls Agamemnon and his allies Achaeans. We call the winning side the Greeks because Homer wrote the epic for an entirely different people than the ones the war is about. They called themselves Hellenes, but the Romans – hence the Brits, hence us – called them Greeks, so I do too.

Scholars are divided between those who believe that Homer's account was entirely fictional, those who believe it was very close to actual events, and all shades in between. Homer may have composed his tales in the ninth century BC, some four hundred years after the war took place. After the Minoan-Mycenean civilization that the war was set in mysteriously died and vanished, familiar to us through the stunning frescoes at Knossos, a dark age of several centuries set in, during which time warrior invaders from the north called Dorians swept down into the old Bronze Age kingdoms and established themselves. We know literally nothing from contemporary sources about Homer other than his supposed name. He was often simply referred to as "the poet." But it is clear that, in composing the *Iliad*, he was drawing upon legends from the Mycenean era to serve as a kind of national epic for an emerging new Greek culture, signaling the end of the dark age. So over time, the Greeks, led by Homer, projected themselves back onto this earlier golden age, becoming the army that invaded and defeated Troy.

(Interestingly, the composition of the Hebrew Bible started at around the same time, and about events that were roughly as far back in time as the Trojan War, and that epic narrative also served as a kind of national myth for the Jewish kingdom of that age and ever after).

Some scholars believe that, starting in Homer's time, the still primitive Greeks, coming across the imposing ruins and burial mounds of the Mycenean era, something they could not have built themselves, believed they were the palaces and tombs of heroes from a vanished Golden Age whose tales may originally have come from the Black Sea region. They chose the mound of some unknown Mycenean chieftain and proclaimed it to be that of Achilles or Agamemnon, venerating it as a shrine, making sacrifices, and perhaps reciting or chanting tales of the hero's great exploits (the distant beginning of ancient Greek tragedy). These scholars don't dispute that there was a war of some kind around 1244 BC between Ilion and mainland Mycenaeans, but it was probably a rather primitive affair. Others, though, believe that the heroes of Homer's poems were real people – maybe not the same in every way, but close – from Bronze Age Mycenean culture, and that they really did fight the Trojan War in heroic splendor, in bronze armor with plumed helmets. According to Barry Strauss, the strongest evidence comes from Hittite records, which contain the names of Bronze Age figures from the thirteenth century BC that are intriguingly similar to those of Agamemnon, Achilles, and others. At the time of the war, there was a huge Hittite empire based in what is now inland Turkey, with a magnificent capital called Hattusha, near today's Ankara. There is good evidence that Troy was an ally of the Hittite empire. The Hittites were not interested in directly ruling the coastal regions on the Aegean Sea. But they did not want the Mycenaeans of Peloponnesian Greece to gain a foothold there. The Greeks of that era – let's follow customary usage and call them that – were akin to the Vikings, sending frequent raiding parties along the Ionian coast. We can imagine that the real-life Agamemnon was one of these bold and avaricious warlords with a trim little fleet. Troy's job as the Hittites' ally was to prevent them from putting down roots on what is today the west coast of Turkey. Troy's location, which sat astride the shipping lanes through today's Dardanelles, made it an ideal buffer state, as well as making the city extraordinarily wealthy from the fees it charged for ships to shelter in their harbor while waiting for favorable winds. This is what we might call a *Realpolitik* explanation of the Trojan War: It was a proxy war on behalf of a great empire by one of its allies against an outside threat. However, it is entirely possible that the flash point for the particular war that Homer writes about was something akin to Paris' abduction of Helen. In the Bronze Age, wars were often justified as vengeance or punishment for some such personal outrage, often involving sexual passion, wounded honor, or a violation of the laws of hospitality. So the abduction of Helen might well have been a convenient pretext for a war that both sides saw coming for what we would now call geopolitical reasons. And that war may very well have been fought by men with names like Achilles and

Hector, who would seek glory from combat whatever the underlying economic incentives to victory might be.

As we saw, Achilles thinks that King Agamemnon has behaved toward him like a tyrant. Starting with the Greeks, monarchy was always closely connected to the danger of tyranny for the simple reason that a monarch with absolute power over his subjects is capable of oppressing them. For the ancient Greeks, some protection against this kind of oppression came from the fact that a proper king, what they called a *basileus*, was a king by hereditary descent, and, therefore, had a motive to respect established tradition, including the laws and customs of his realm. Since he received his throne as the property of his father, he was unlikely to violate the property of others or the right of other fathers to pass their property to their own children. Kingship also had a kind of divine aura – kings often claimed to be descended from a god, and sometimes they functioned as high priests. It was hoped that this would make kings observe the habits of piety themselves, including treating others justly, being moderate, avoiding arrogance or excessive pleasures, and venerating the ancestors. In ancient Rome, for example, whose history began unfolding in the ninth century BC, roughly around the time that Homer composed his lays, although largely unknown as yet to the Greeks, the king was also the *pontifex maximus*, the high priest. When the Romans got rid of their kings and established a republic, they kept the office of high priest, usually exercised by someone from the aristocracy, and the state provided him with an official residence that continued to be called the *Regia*, the king's house, in an echo of the former fusing of high priest with monarch. Its ruins have recently been excavated in the Roman Forum.

In the kind of kingship that Homer writes about in his poems, the king had two important functions. He was the chief of a band of warriors of similarly noble birth, and in peacetime, he ruled his subjects as if they belonged to a single enormous private household in which he was the father (hopefully a good father who ruled benevolently rather than a bad one who was violent and exploitive). The need for a king to be able to lead his fellow aristocrats in war demanded that he prove his worth, his fitness to rule, including through bravery in combat. And it also imposed a certain restraint on his capacity for arbitrary treatment, because he had to answer to his fellow warriors; in some ways, they were his equals, and should he fall short of the mark as a fighter, or treat them with contempt, one of them might fight him for his throne. At this time, there were not as yet standing armies that fought in massed columns, like the famous Greek phalanx or the Roman legion. A Bronze Age king entered the fray of battle surrounded by his fellow aristocratic warriors, more akin to the knights of the Middle Ages.

For the ancient Greeks, monarchy was also closely connected to the importance of the family and the family household. Their word for this was *oikos*, and the art of managing the household properly they called *oikonomia*, from which we get our words for economics and the economy. The family, in other words,

was the realm of property, and also of marriage and child rearing. The king was, in effect, the chief householder of the realm, and his respect for property and family life acted as a symbol and a safeguard for the other householders. Of course, we are talking about a very small proportion of the population – the nobles who fought alongside the king in war were also the heads of their own households and lands during peacetime. Everyone else was a slave, serf, or tenant farmer. In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and especially the *Odyssey*, we get glimpses of this peacetime life. The king's fellow warriors would gather at his palace – the word in ancient Greek was *megaron*, essentially meaning "the big place." It had little if anything in the way of government offices, as we would expect in a modern presidential palace. It was simply a very large private residence. The king was expected to provide the other warriors with regular lavish feasts at which they would gorge themselves with food and drink and recount their own exploits as well as tell stories about past heroes and about the gods, including, for instance, the very active sex life of Zeus, with his many liaisons with human women, and the wrath this provoked in his wife Hera. By feeding his nobles from his own table, the king acted as a kind of father toward them, and they in turn would exercise this role on a smaller scale with their own families and retainers.

Homer vividly depicts one of these gatherings in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus's son Telemachus sets out to find his father, absent for twenty years beginning with the Trojan War, and bring him home to his kingdom of Ithaca. Telemachus stops during his travels at the court of Menelaus, where he is warmly welcomed. With wry humor, Homer depicts how Helen, who ran away with Paris and thereby set in motion a ten-year war that cost a huge number of lives, has apparently returned to her husband absolutely unscathed and free of taint, confidently ruling the roost as much as ever, with her cuckolded husband looking on benignly. (I somehow picture Zsa Zsa Gabor gushing "Dah-link!" when young Telemachus arrives). There is an air of comfort and gracious living, including an after-dinner appearance by a traveling bard who sings songs about the great exploits of the Trojan War in which they were all key participants, a bit as if Homer had traveled back in time and made a cameo appearance in his own poem. The atmosphere is one of peace restored and harmony reestablished – king and queen are reunited, living happily in their household surrounded by their fellow nobles, and everyone is relaxing after the long years of sacrifice and struggle on the shores of Ilium. The royal household perfectly integrates the realms of family life and warrior honor under its broad roof.

Very different is the atmosphere in the royal palace of Ithaca from which Telemachus has journeyed. Because the king, Odysseus, is missing, everything is in disarray. The nobles, convinced Odysseus is dead, are behaving totally out of line. Instead of being invited by the king to feast, as would have happened if their ruler had been there, they simply invade the palace and consume its food and drink at will, loudly carousing and constantly pressing Odysseus's queen, Penelope, to choose one of them to marry. Although their pushiness

was outrageous and bordered on being downright threatening, there was some justification for it. If, as seemed very likely after twenty years, Odysseus were indeed dead, it was urgent that the monarchy be restored as soon as possible. The best way to do this was for one of the other men of noble birth in the warrior aristocracy to take the dead king's widow as his own queen. This would preserve continuity and keep the throne among the bluest of blood. In other words, the badly behaving nobles were looking to establish a new leader who would restore order and keep them in line. In order to remain secure in the rule of their own households, they needed that man at the top heading the superhousehold that made up the entire kingdom of Ithaca. But because Penelope is fiercely loyal to her husband and totally convinced that he is still alive, she stubbornly resists their advances and refuses to join in their drunken partying. Her best hope is that Telemachus – whose own ascent to the throne would be imperiled should Penelope remarry and produce a new heir – will find his father and bring him back to restore royal order.

Odysseus, the hero of the *Odyssey*, provides a very interesting contrast with Achilles, the central character in the *Iliad*. Achilles is a man of action. War is his only element. Homer tells us almost nothing about Achilles' family life or about his son Neoptolemus because it isn't important for our understanding of him. He is brash and direct, never hiding his views, and willing at all times to use force to get his way. Odysseus, by contrast, is a man capable of foresight and subtle planning. He is a warrior, to be sure, but willing to achieve his aims through persuasion, strategy, and deception. Homer calls him the man "of many turns" and says that he possessed more than any of the other Greeks the quality of prudence or practical wisdom (he is repeatedly described as "wise in counsel"). While he does not play a large role in the *Iliad*, in the *Odyssey*, we learn that it was he who devised the strategy of the Trojan Horse, counting upon the curiosity of the Trojans to bring this wooden wonder into the city, bringing about the defeat of Troy through trickery more surely than all of Achilles' battlefield bravery had been able to. Just as Odysseus has a better understanding of human psychology than Achilles and is willing to achieve victory through being smarter rather than always heading for the battlefield, Odysseus is also more involved in his family life and the realm of love than is the single-mindedly violent Achilles. Whereas Achilles is always alone in his warrior's splendor, Odysseus has many interesting flings on his travels, including with a sorceress, and temporarily marries into another royal family, while remaining deeply in love with his wife and eager to return to his son, with whom he has a tear-drenched reunion. Unlike Achilles, he is a man of both war and peace. But that does not mean that Odysseus was a softy or a peace lover. When he returns home, with the help of his traveling companion, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, he is disguised as an old man so that he can observe the outrageous behavior of the nobles before revealing himself and reclaiming his throne. It is almost as if he wants to make himself as angry at them as possible. When he does announce himself, he proceeds to systematically slaughter over

a hundred of the nobles in the great hall, until the floors are awash in blood. When necessary, he is capable of Achillean rage, one hallmark of a king.

When we put all the ingredients of Homer's depiction of kingship together, we see vividly before us a band of brothers in war, led by their chieftain, riding out with him on horseback into battle, then feasting merrily in a great hall with a roaring hearth, seated at tables groaning with food and drink, the king and his family at the head table, the hall pulsing with music and loud with jokes and tales. As dawn approaches, many of the men simply collapse onto the floor to sleep, while the king, his family, and his bodyguards withdraw from the great hall into his sleeping chamber. It is quintessentially Bronze Age, yet it also describes in broad strokes the way of life of the Visigoths and other Germanic tribes during the Roman Empire (before they became an occupying power in the imperial heartland itself), the Norman nobility of William the Conqueror, the Viking longhouses excavated in Newfoundland, and the raucous court of Henry VIII. We often think of history as progressing in a single direction, with one era simply obliterating the traces of the previous one. In this view, the Bronze Age is "over." But it's probably more accurate to think of history in layers. New layers go over the old ones, but the old ones continue on their own time line. As we are about to see, ancient Greece did change profoundly within a couple of centuries of Homer composing his epics, and in ways that did make the Bronze Age culture he had re-created a thing of the distant past (although it continued to inspire). In other ways, though, that Bronze Age culture of knightly combat simply continued on and developed elsewhere, among Germanic tribal kings and feudal courts. It will make its re-appearance in our story in due course. Before we follow the career of tyranny in the classical era of ancient Greece, however, we have to go down a rather different but equally important trail.

KINGS OF THE WORLD: UNIVERSAL MONARCHY

Visitors to the ruins of Mycenae in Greece and those of the Hittite imperial capital of Hattusha in present-day Turkey are often intrigued by the fact that the entrances to both have massive "lion gates" with twin lions carved in relief, symbolic guardians of the city. The resemblance, however, ends there. The seat of the Mycenaean kings – including Agamemnon, I choose to believe – was a compact little cluster of buildings linked by a single road, including some beehive and shaft tombs for prominent people and surrounded by a low-lying wall for defense, nestled for protection between two mountain peaks. It's barely visible until you get to the Lion's Gate, looking from a distance like a mere ridge of rock (and it wouldn't have been much different in ancient times). It may have laid low for an extra measure of security from attack, rather like the farmers in medieval Sicily who built their huts in clusters behind the ridge of a hill for self-defense. You can walk the entire length of the compound, including the megaron, in under an hour. By contrast, the