

Homer's Odysseus



Homer's Odyssey

ADAPTED AND ILLUSTRATED FOR CHILDREN
BY SOFIA ZARAMPOUKA

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The two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which together contain about 28,000 lines of verse, are the first works of literature in Europe. They were written by Homer, who lived in Greece in about the eighth century BCE, regarding a period of time long before his own, around 1200 BCE.

The *Iliad* concerns Greece's war with Troy, also known as Ilium, and the heroes that took part in it.

The *Odyssey* describes the adventures of the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, between his victorious departure from Troy and his return to his homeland.

The cause of the Trojan War was the anger of the Spartan king Menelaus. He had received Paris, the son of the king of Troy, as a guest at his palace; Paris ate, drank and made merry, but finally seduced Menelaus' wife, the beautiful Helen, and made off with her.

The Greeks viewed this as a national insult. In response, the most powerful of the Greek kings, Agamemnon, who was the brother of Menelaus and the ruler of Mycenae, amassed an army and ships with his friends and allies, and together they went to Troy to punish Paris and bring back Helen. The Trojan War lasted for ten years and ended with a victory for the Greeks.

More than a century ago, the archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann used Homer's poems to discover the location of Troy on the north-west coast of Asia Minor, near the Dardanelles, in what is now Turkey.



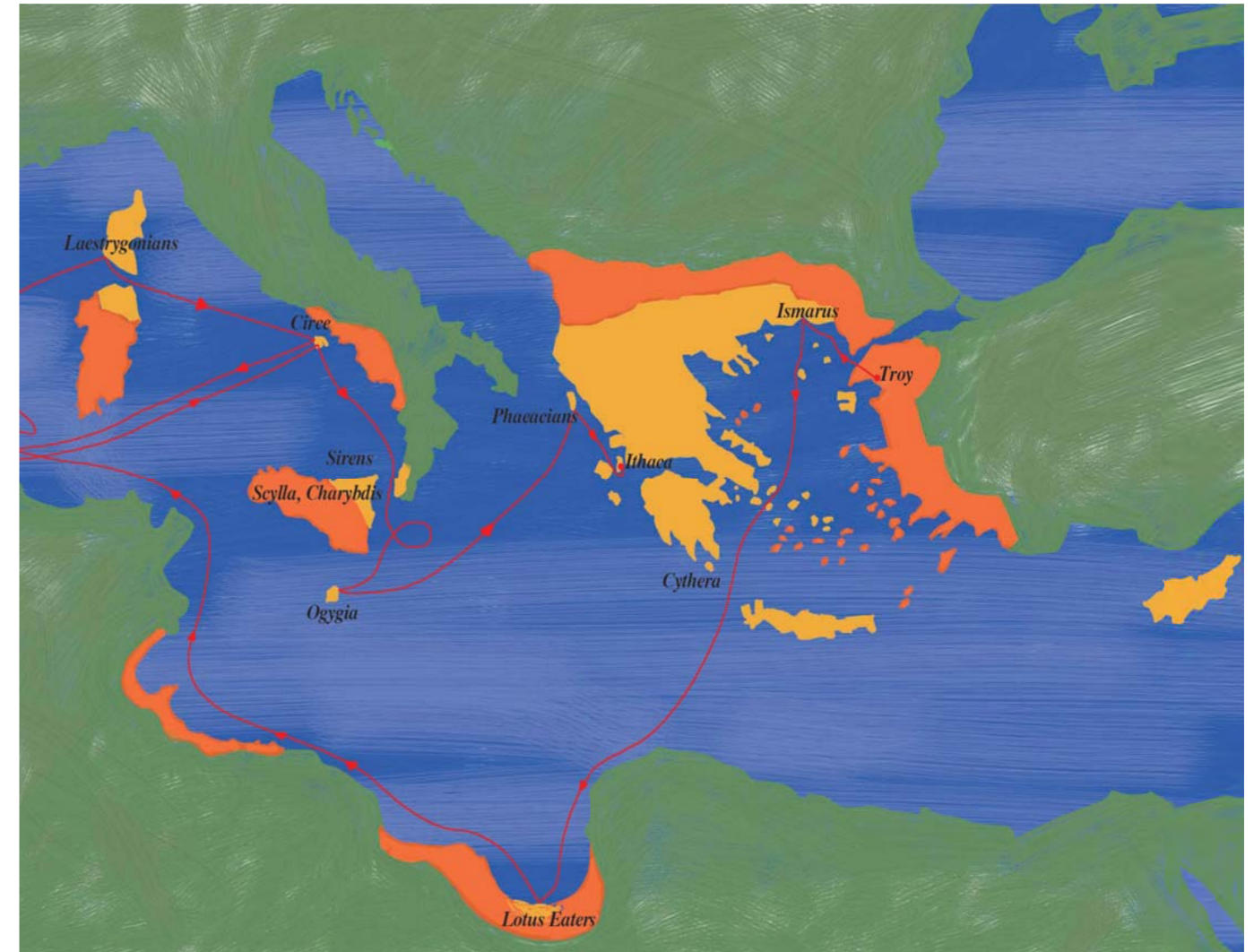
Following his excavation of Troy, Schliemann went on to explore Mycenae and the palace of King Agamemnon, who was the leader of the Greek army. Since then, many other locations referred to by Homer, and previously thought to be mythical, have been discovered. Because of this, we now know that 3000 years ago, the Achaeans – Homer's name for the Greeks – lived in a number of small kingdoms. From inscriptions found in their palaces, we also know that these people spoke Greek.

Scholars in the Alexandrian period divided the ancient texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey into 24 parts known as "rhapsodies", one for each letter of the Greek alphabet. The books in the Iliad are referred to by the capital letters from alpha to omega and those in the Odyssey by the lower case letters. Each book has a different number of lines. In this telling of Homer's story we will not follow the order of the rhapsodies, but the chronological order of the events. The numbering of the verses follows Zisimos Sideris' translation.

In Homer's time, the known world was that encountered by sailors on their voyages around the Mediterranean Sea. Their ships had a single sail and many oars, and so they preferred to navigate in the daytime and during the summer months, staying close to the coastline. The Greeks had explored all the islands and coasts around their sea. When they returned home, they narrated what they had seen on their travels. They saw the Strait of Gibraltar, to the west, as a river leading into the underworld, the land of the dead known as Hades. To the east, at the Bosphorus, where the sun god, Helios, rose at dawn each day, they imagined another river. Their gods, however, lived among them, at the top of Mount Olympus, and people often encountered them wherever they happened to be. Gods and mortals came and went as they pleased in the known world and only Helios and Hades, the ruler of the underworld, lived outside it.

Anyone who studies the *Odyssey* will have their own opinion about where Odysseus and his companions were driven by the winds as they attempted to return home to Ithaca. What we do know is that the winds that filled the sails of the ships in Homer's time are exactly the same as the ones we have today. We also know that even today, sailors journeying without a compass, can find their way based on the position of the sun during the day, and the moon and stars at night. In this book, we can only guess where the winds might have taken Odysseus, and which places he might have visited before arriving at Ithaca, since all the places referred to by Homer after his first port of call, Ismarus, are entirely imaginary.

It is difficult to fit the words of poets onto a map, but nothing is more truthful than art. It is up to us to discover that truth.



BOOK 9 (i), LINES 1-575

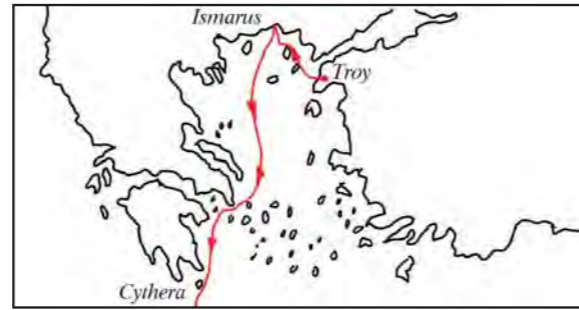
Odysseus sets off on his voyage home and arrives at the land of the Lotus Eaters (39-169).

When he set off on his voyage home, Odysseus had a dozen ships under his command, each with fifty men. However, things went badly for him from the very beginning. The wind was against them and pushed the ships northwards, up to Ismarus, the city of the Cicones, in Thrace.

They anchored there and while waiting for the wind to change, Odysseus' men descended on the city and ransacked it. Odysseus himself had no way of stopping them. After ten years of war they still had not had their fill of fighting.

The Cicones took to the hills to save themselves, and begged their neighbours for help. Odysseus told his men to prepare to leave as soon as possible, but they found a store of sweet wine and immediately began carousing. Night came and finally they fell asleep. At dawn, the Cicones returned and in their attack killed about fifty of Odysseus' men. The remainder ran for their ships and set sail.

Zeus, the all-seeing ruler of the gods, was angry with Odysseus' greedy companions for looting the city of the Cicones. He sent the north wind



to swathe the land and sea in thick cloud, and darkness descended from the sky.

The wind battered the ships, forcing them into the waves. The men took down the sails so that the wind would not tear them to shreds, and rowed with all their might to the nearby shore. They moored there and spent two days and nights until the wind had dropped.

Finally, on the morning of the third day, the sea was tranquil. They raised the sails of the ships and set off again. The journey was calm and they were nearing their homeland, when at Cape Malea, off Cythera, they ran into bad weather again.

For nine days, they were buffeted this way and that by adverse winds; on the tenth, the weather deposited them in the land of the Lotus Eaters.

The exhausted sailors stepped onto the shore and settled down to eat, having fetched water from a nearby spring. When they were full and had rested for a while, Odysseus chose three of them to go inland and find out what sort of people lived there.

However, they were slow to return. The local



people had fed them honey-sweet lotus fruit, which magically made them forget their companions and their homeland, so they didn't want to leave. Finally, when he had got tired of waiting for them to return, Odysseus went to find them and forced them back to the ships. "Let's go!" he said. "Quickly, before the Lotus Eaters come and tempt all of us to stay."

They journeyed through the dark, shrouded in thick mist with the moon hidden in the clouds. No one saw the small island, but all of a sudden they found their ships entering a sheltered harbour, as if guided there by a god. They took down the sails and moored there.

When day came, they set foot on the island, which was verdant, uninhabited and full of wild goats. The men hunted them with their spears, roasted them on spits and enjoyed a feast, as they still had plenty of red wine left from the Cicones. Drunk and well fed, they fell asleep on the shore.

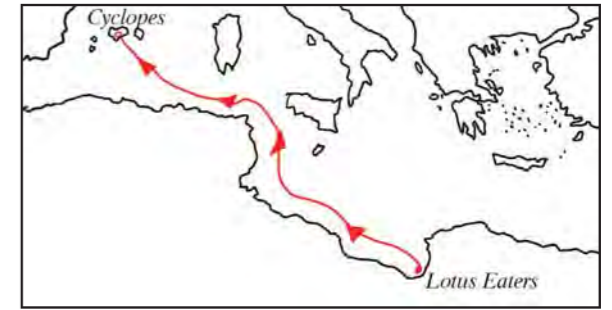
BOOK 9, continued
In the land of the Cyclopes, Odysseus blinds Polyphemus (170-399).

They were woken by voices and the sound of bleating from a neighbouring island, and saw that smoke was rising from it. Odysseus decided to sail across with a group of men to see who lived there, and get supplies.

As they approached, they noticed a remote cave near the shore. Outside it was a sheepfold with a wall around it made of stones, pine trees and oak trees. A man as big as a mountain was sitting there on his own, watching his flock.

They moored in a secluded bay. Odysseus and some of his companions took a flask of sweet wine and jumped down onto the shore. He told the rest of the men to wait on board the ship. As they walked up to the cave it appeared deserted, but on entering, they discovered it was full of cheeses, churns of milk, and a number of sheep and goats, separated into newborns and older animals.

"Let's take as much of the cheese and fattened lambs as we can carry, and get out of this dark cave as quickly as possible!" said Odysseus' companions. But Odysseus disagreed. "Let's wait for the



owner," he said. "He'll make us welcome and offer them to us."

However, when a giant carrying a pile of wood appeared at the entrance to the cave a short while later, they were so afraid that they retreated into the shadows and hid. He had a wild appearance, like an ogre, and a single eye in his forehead. He was the Cyclops Polyphemus. He drove in the ewes that he had brought back from grazing and milked them one by one. He left the rams and the male goats outside and closed the entrance to the cave with an enormous boulder that was too heavy to lift. While the baby lambs suckled, he collected the milk that he had left to curdle overnight and poured it into baskets so that it would turn into cheese. When he had finished all his chores he made a pile of wood and lit a fire.

It was then that he saw them and his questions came thick and fast: "Who are you and how did you get in here? Where are you from? The sea? Are you thieves?"

They froze, unable to utter a word. Finally, Odysseus plucked up the courage to speak. "We are Greeks, returning from Troy. The winds drove

us onto your island and we came to ask for a little food. Zeus, who protects all strangers, will reward you.”

“You must have lost your wits,” retorted the giant. “We Cyclopes don’t care about Zeus or hospitality, because we’re greater than he is. I’ll decide for myself whether to give you anything. Now tell me where your ship is – and be quick about it!”

“Ship? What ship? It was torn to pieces and claimed by the sea when it ran aground on the rocks around your island.”

“Is that so?” said the giant, and reaching out his hand, grabbed two of the men by their legs. He dashed them to the ground, devoured them, and washed them down with a churn of milk. Then he fell asleep.

The unfortunate companions wailed and lamented their fate. Odysseus’ first thought was to stab the Cyclops as he slept. But what would happen to them if he did? How would they open the entrance? Only the Cyclops could move the boulder that kept them trapped inside. They quietened down and, shaking with fear, waited for him to wake up.

The Cyclops got up early the next morning, milked the ewes and left the baby lambs to suckle. When they had finished, he grabbed another two of Odysseus’ men and swallowed them like sardines. Then he rolled the boulder aside, went outside, put it back in place and went away.

Odysseus paced round and round the cave, frantically trying to find a solution. Suddenly he spotted an enormous club in the corner. Made of green olive wood, it was as long as a mast. He cut off a length and gave it to his companions to

sharpen to a point. Then they put it in the embers of the fire to get hot.

Evening came and the Cyclops returned. He put the sheep into the cave, milked them, and before going to sleep, ate another two of Odysseus’ men.

Once he was lying down with a full stomach, Odysseus approached him with a flask of wine. “Here, I brought this for you as a gift, hoping that you’d help us. I didn’t imagine you’d kill six of my men.”

The Cyclops took it and drank it down in one gulp. “That’s good wine, stranger. Tell me your name and you shall have a present.”

“My name is Nobody,” said Odysseus.

“Very well. Your present is that I shall eat you last of all,” said the giant. And with that, he fell into a deep sleep.

Odysseus and his men then put the stake in the glowing embers to get hot again. Two of them lifted it up and thrust it into the giant’s eye. He howled and bellowed like a wild beast, and the rocks reverberated with his screams.

Blind and mad with pain, he whirled around and seized whatever he found before him. The companions ran and hid wherever they could.



In all the world, I never saw anything
sweeter than my homeland.

An odyssey is a journey full of countless
adventures, fantastic places, battles with
monsters and magical encounters, which can
lead you astray and make you forget your goal.
All this and more is described by Homer,
who lived in Greece in the eighth century BCE,
in the first European work of literature.



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