**Classics 1 Lesson 5: The Wars of Ancient Greece**

**Were the Wars Mythical?**

In our course so far, we have covered just one war, the Titanomachy, which was clearly a myth, and used to explain how the Gods of Olympus came to be in charge. Another war that is clearly mythical, and linked to how Zeus kept his power, was the **Gigantomachy**, which was a war between the Gods of Olympus and the Giants. Accounts of this myth differ, but agree that this was an attempt by the Giants (sons of Gaia) to overthrow Zeus. Each god seems to have had their own battle with a giant, lasting many years, and the gods even required the help of Herakles/Hercules to win in the end, which then sealed their dominance forever. The most famous war in all of the myths, though, is the **Trojan War**, but what is not absolutely clear is whether or not that war took place for real. Assumptions had always been made that it was a mythical war, and the story given in the myths is, of course, an entire fantasy as you will see, but strip away the gods and the explanation of why the war happened, and there may in fact be a real war in there. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence that Troy is a real place, and that a 10 to 20 year war took place in that area towards the end of the Bronze Age, roughly 500 years before Hesiod was writing *Theogony* and time enough for a major war of historic importance to the Greeks to have become bound up in stories of gods and religion over the centuries.

**Origins of the Trojan War:**

Like any major event in history, there are several things which combined to create the Trojan War. Some accounts suggest that Zeus thought that there were too many humans and that he would create some mischief to do something about that, though this account is rare and most stories of the Trojan War do not include it. The other aspects are more readily accepted though, that there was a Trojan Prince who was exiled from Troy, a wedding to which a god was not invited, and a beauty contest with a reward that led to a war.

The Trojan Prince was Paris, who was exiled from Troy at the moment he was born because a prophecy foretold that the Prince would lead to the destruction of Troy. The servant who had been told to kill him, instead raised him as a sheep farmer as he could not bear to kill a child. Paris was from a royal line, and his brilliance shone through, impressing even Zeus, who knew him to be a fair man. The wedding was the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, to which almost every god was invited, except Eris who was excluded because she could be quite nasty (she was the goddess of discord, or disagreement!). Living up to that, she crashed the wedding briefly, throwing a golden apple (The Apple of Discord) into the crowd, which was a gift for the most beautiful woman at the wedding. Given the calibre of guest, it became a challenge between Athena, Aphrodite and Hera as to who would be given the apple. Zeus did not want to judge between his wife and two of his daughters (and how would it make his other daughters feel!?) so he immediately thought of fair Paris, and asked him to decide, this has become known as **the Judgement of Paris** and has been captured in art by some of the most famous painters in history. Each offered Paris a gift if he would chose them, Hera would make him ruler of Europe and Asia, Athena would make him wise and a good warrior, whilst Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful mortal in the world, Helen, as his wife – she was married to the King of Sparta, but this did not appear an issue to Paris, who declared Aphrodite the winner of the contest, and immediately made an enemy of Hera and Athena for life.

The Trojan War came about when Paris claimed his reward. In some accounts Aphrodite simply brought Helen to Paris, whilst in others Paris takes advantage of the King of Sparta being away and abducts Helen. Some accounts suggest that Helen wanted to go with Paris, but given what we know about women in Ancient Greece it seems ridiculous that Helen could have had any say in the matter at all. It was, after all, the second time she had been abducted, with the King of Sparta winning her himself after a competition to decide who should get to marry her. As a daughter of Zeus (during one of his many affairs) she was highly sought after, and one of the rules of the competition that the King of Sparta won was that if anything ever happened to Helen all of the competitors would come to her aid (well his really) which is another reason why the Trojan War was so big. When Paris refused to hand Helen back to Menelaus the King of Sparta, war was declared by the Greeks.

**The Trojan War:**

Over 100,000 Greeks on over 1,000 ships landed at Troy. There were some initial skirmishes before the Trojans retreated behind the walls of their city, some of the most famous walls in the world, and seemingly impossible to penetrate. The war itself raged for around ten years, during which several significant incidents occurred. Some of the most famous incidents in the war include the death of Achilles, the death of Paris and the Trojan Horse.

The three most prominent Greeks in the battle of Troy are the heroes **Achilles**, Ajax and Odysseus. Achilles and Ajax were cousins, and trained together as children to become great warriors. Ajax was known for having amazing strength, and despite getting no assistance from any gods was one of the greatest warriors alive. Achilles had another advantage, he had been dipped in the river Styx (a river than ran to the Underworld) every day of his youth by his mother in order to make him invulnerable so that swords and arrows could not kill him. His mother was Thetis and his father Peleus, you may recall that their wedding guest list had a lot to do with this whole war! Achilles was a tremendous warrior and perhaps his greatest achievement at Troy was killing Hector, a Trojan Prince (brother of Paris) and himself a great warrior who killed over 30,000 Greeks in the Trojan War. You may be thinking that the death of Achilles seems an impossible incident given his invulnerability to arrows and swords, but his mother had held him by the ankles when she dunked him (more precisely, by the part of the body that we now call our Achilles in his honour) meaning that he had a weakness, or Achilles Heel as we would call it today. This information was passed on by the god Apollo to Paris, who took careful aim with a poisoned arrow and shot Achilles leading to his death. Ajax was so upset by the death of his cousin that he either killed himself (and is usually depicted as having done so) or let his defences down and was killed easily by the Trojans.

Another highly important moment is the death of Paris, who is killed by another Greek hero called Philoctetes. He is essentially a minor hero, but he is thrust into the centre stage by coming into the possession of arrows that belonged to Herakles/Hercules and which he is told are the only thing that can end the Trojan War. He brings these back to Troy and he has four shots at Paris, injuring him severely and causing his death. Paris being the central figure in the story of Troy, his death occurs towards the end of the war, but the walls of Troy are so strong that the Greeks still cannot penetrate them in order to kill the Trojan’s and destroy their city, until the other hero that was mentioned, Odysseus, has a cunning idea.

The Trojan Horse was a massive wooden horse which was left outside the gates of Troy. The Greeks had seemingly departed, their boats gone and no trace of them to be seen. The Trojan’s took the horse to be a peace offering, or some sort of prize, and whilst they debated what they should do with it, brought it into their city. At night, a small group of highly skilled warriors, including Odysseus and Philoctetes, leapt from the horse, killed the Trojan guards, opened the gates for the Greeks, who had returned on boats at night, and then rampaged through the city. This very quickly ended the war and has inspired the phrases “Trojan Horse” for a deception (or a computer virus hidden inside a file), and “beware of Greeks bearing gifts” which nowadays just seems a bit ungrateful.

**Other Wars or Battles:**

The Trojan War, and the Titanomachy, dominate Greek Mythology, but around the time that the myths were being written down, and therefore preserved for historians, there were other battles taking place. For a long time what we refer to as Ancient Greece was a collection of different regions and they did not always get on well. In Hesiod's lifetime the biggest wars would have been between Messenia and Sparta, who faught twice in a short period of time, as well as a war in Turkey, which was common for the time (Troy itself was located in Turkey). Wars between Athens and Sparta were some of the most documented, as they were the two large powers within Greece, and the most famous of those wars was the **Peloponnesian War** spanning almost three decades.

Whilst it was not uncommon for Greek states to fight each other, they would rally together to fight outside forces, most usually the Persians. Persia, which is mostly modern-day Iran, was a powerful state at that time, and could pick off individual Greek states with its powerful army, meaning that they needed the help of others to fight them off (which they got because each state feared that the Persians would gradually try to take over the whole region). These wars are worthy of study in their own right (just one of those makes up the plot of the movie *300*), and whilst it takes us further into Ancient Greek history than we have ventured so far, so is the reign of **Alexander the Great**, one of the most famous Greeks of all time (and a real person, not a myth). Perhaps his greatest achievement is that after many years of defending themselves from Persians, Alexander led the Greeks, who had been unified by his father before his death, into invading Persia and taking them over. Alexander then created the Macedonian Empire, known as **Macedon**, which still ranks as one of the largest ever Empires. Alexander the Great is one of history's most influential figures and himself worthy of a whole course!

**Classics 1 Task 5: The Wars of Ancient Greece**

Please complete this week’s task as a word document and return it as an attachment on teams. The document title should be PUPIL NAME Classics week 5.

**Part A:**

The causes of the Trojan War are laid out in the lesson for you to judge, but often it is Helen who gets the blame – in fact she is commonly referred to as “the face that launched a thousand ships” and usually portrayed as being of low intelligence. Read this article - <https://theconversation.com/was-helen-really-to-blame-for-the-trojan-war-or-just-a-scapegoat-64456> - consider it, and then answer this question – **What was ultimately the main reason for the Trojan War?** (answer in less than 300 words)

**Part B:**

The 2004 movie *Troy* and the 2018 BBC/Netflix collaboration *Troy: Fall of a City* brought renewed interest in the Trojan War, just as previous movies and documentaries have. Both have been heavily criticised, though, for making dramatic changes to the more widely accepted myths. When film adaptations are made of myths, in your opinion, **does it matter if modern remakes of myths change aspects of the story?** Use your own judgement on the length of your response here.

**Part C:**

As ever, there have been words in bold throughout this lesson which you may wish to add to your glossary if you have been maintaining one. This is voluntary, but useful, especially if you plan to keep up an interest in this field and to take it further.

**Next Time:**

In the next lesson we will conclude our course by looking at what the Ancient Greeks have given the world, and the enduring appeal of the myths.

**Further Reading:**

If you are interested in reading more about whether Troy was a real place and a real war, then this BBC article is a starting point - <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200106-did-the-trojan-war-actually-happen> and this TED-ED video is worth watching too - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQbZX9JEQsQ>

If you enjoyed the story of Troy and would like to watch a video summarising the war then this from Foxwede History is a good watch - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPyHgKwgC8o>

If you want to know more about Alexander the Great, this Crash Course History video is a good start - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LsrkWDCvxg>

Whilst if you want a more academic discussion of Alexander then this (45 minute) BBC Radio 4 discussion is very heavy going! - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06d9bkx>