

BACKGROUND: the Trojan War¹

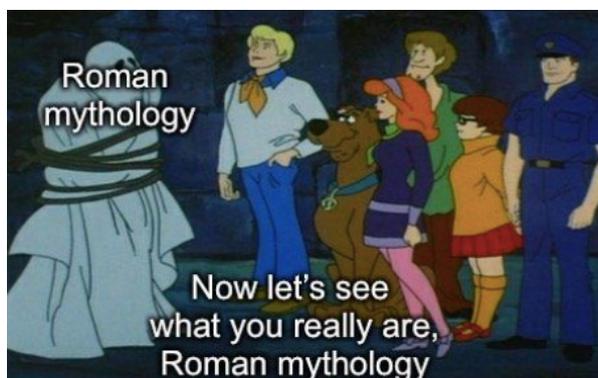
The Romans borrowed most of their myths about gods and heroes from the Greeks. Even the part of their mythology that is distinctly Roman – the story of their founding hero Aeneas – begins with the Trojan War, the ten-year siege of Troy by the Greeks.

The legend of the Trojan War may have been loosely based on a real (but unidentified) historical war, perhaps over trade: Troy was strategically located at the mouth of the Hellespont, a narrow strait that gives access to the Black Sea from the Aegean Sea. The same region was fought over bloodily, for much the same strategic reasons, during the Gallipoli campaign during the First World War. The traditional date for the Trojan War is about 1200 BC.

Archaeological evidence from the site of Troy (first excavated in the 1870s by the German Heinrich Schliemann) suggests that the city was indeed violently destroyed on several occasions. One of these may have given rise over time to the legend of the Trojan War. The war and the subsequent homeward journeys of its participants are narrated in the Greek epic poetry of Homer, a poet of unknown date (scholars cautiously suggest the late eighth century BC). Homer is credited with having composed two long works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The *Iliad* describes a period of several days in the final year of the war during which some key events occur. Agamemnon, the king of Argos and Mycenae, and in overall command of the Greek forces, falls out with the best Greek warrior, Achilles. Achilles withdraws from the fighting, and only re-enters the battle after the death of his best friend Patroclus at the hands of the Trojan prince Hector. Achilles then kills Hector, thus guaranteeing the eventual fall of Troy. The fall of Troy itself (including the famous story of the Wooden Horse) is not narrated in the *Iliad*, which also stops short of describing Achilles' own death, though both events are known to be inevitable.

The *Odyssey* describes the ten-year return journey of the Greek hero Odysseus to his home on the island of Ithaca in north-west Greece, where his wife Penelope and son Telemachus are fending off a crowd of suitors who are eager to marry Penelope and acquire power on the island. Odysseus, after encounters with gods, monsters and hostile cities, as well as a journey to the Underworld, finally returns home and kills the suitors, reclaiming his palace and his wife in one go. From Chapter 2 onwards, you will begin to translate short passages that describe several of the key events before and after the Trojan War.



¹ Cullen, Henry, Taylor, John. *Latin to GCSE Part 1* (p. 136-7). Bloomsbury Publishing.