



TO UNDERSTAND  
JUST ONE LIFE YOU  
HAVE TO SWALLOW  
THE WORLD



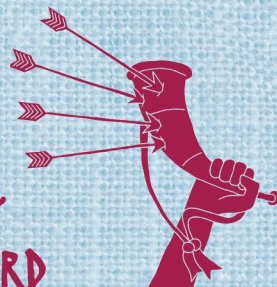
HE HAD DECIDED TO  
LIVE FOREVER OR DIE  
IN THE ATTEMPT

ENDING AT  
EVERY MOMENT  
BUT NEVER ENDING  
ITS ENDING



ONCE  
UPON A  
TIME...

A MAN  
SHOULD  
SUFFER  
GREATLY  
FOR HIS LORD



THE ONLY  
WAY TO GET  
RID OF A  
TEMPTATION  
IS TO YIELD  
TO IT

# THE LITERATURE BOOK



FATE  
WILL  
UNWIND  
AS IT  
MUST

BIG IDEAS SIMPLY EXPLAINED



HUMAN BEINGS  
CAN BE AWFUL  
CRUEL TO ONE  
ANOTHER

EVERY  
MAN IS THE  
CHILD OF HIS  
OWN DEEDS



I AM NO BIRD;  
AND NO NET  
ENSNARES ME



IF THIS IS THE BEST OF  
ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS,  
WHAT ARE THE  
OTHERS?



DEAD MEN ARE  
HEAVIER THAN  
BROKEN HEARTS







**THE**  
**LITERATURE**  
**BOOK**



# THE LITERATURE BOOK





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A freelance editor and writer, Robin Laxby has a degree in English from Oxford University, England, and has worked as a publishing director in London. He has reviewed fiction for *The Good Book Guide* and has published five books of poetry since 1985. The Society of Authors recently awarded him a grant to complete a 30,000-word prose poem.

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Diana Loxley is a freelance editor and writer, and a former managing editor of a publishing company in London, England. She has a doctorate in literature from the University of Essex. Her published works include an analysis of colonial and imperial ideology in various key texts of 19th-century fiction.

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A lecturer in English literature at De Montfort University, England, and writer for The Australian Ballet, Hila Shachar has a doctorate in English literature from The University of Western Australia. She has published widely on literature and film, including her *New York Times* featured book, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature* (2012). She is also the author of several studies on the adaptation of literary works, feminism in literature, and popular and classic fiction. She is currently writing a monograph on literary biopics, examining the screen adaptation of the figure of the author.

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## ALEX VALENTE

A researcher at the University of East Anglia, England, literary translator, and writer, Alex Valente has contributed to the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (2015), the *Cultures of Comics Work* (2016), and several smaller poetry and prose publications, in both Italian and English. He has also taught first-year English literature modules at the University of East Anglia.

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## BRUNO VINCENT

As a former bookseller, then a book editor, and now a freelance writer, Bruno Vincent has spent his entire working life around books and the written word. He is the author of ten titles, including two *Sunday Times* top ten best sellers and two volumes of Dickensian Gothic horror stories for children.

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Nick Walton is Shakespeare Courses Development Manager at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He has written introductory material for the Penguin editions of *Timon of Athens* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, and is coauthor of *The Shakespeare Wallbook*. He is also a contributor to DK's *The Shakespeare Book* in the Big Ideas series.

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Marcus Weeks studied music, philosophy, and musical instrument technology, and had a varied career, first as a teacher of English as a foreign language, then a musician, art-gallery manager, and instrument restorer before becoming a full-time writer. He has written and contributed to numerous books on the humanities, arts, and popular sciences aimed at making big ideas accessible and attractive, including many titles in DK's Big Ideas' series.

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A theater studies administrator at the University of Essex, England, Penny Woollard has a doctorate in literature, from the same university, titled "Derek Walcott's Americas: the USA and the Caribbean." She has lectured on Walcott and has also taught American literature at Essex university.

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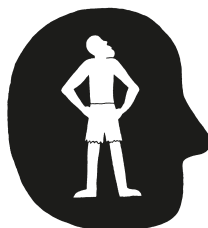
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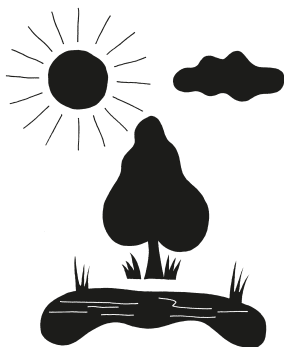
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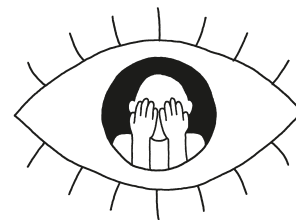
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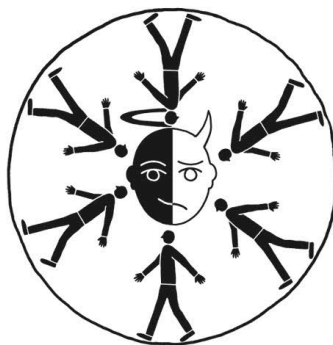
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# CTION







**S**torytelling is as old as humanity itself. The tradition of capturing the events and beliefs of communities reaches back to a time when humans first sat by a fire and told tales. History was preserved in the form of legends and mythologies that were passed down from one generation to the next, and offered answers to the mysteries of the universe and its creation.

Written accounts emerged at the same time as ancient civilizations, but at first the invention of writing met simple, prosaic functions—for example to record transactions between traders or tally quantities of goods. The thousands of cuneiform clay tablets discovered at Ugarit in Syria reveal the already complex

nature of the written form by 1500 BCE. Writing soon evolved from a means of providing trading information, to preserving the oral histories that were integral to every culture and their customs, ideas, morals, and social structures. This led to the first examples of written literature, in the epic stories of Mesopotamia, India, and ancient Greece, and the more philosophical and historical texts of ancient China. As John Steinbeck so succinctly put it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1962: “Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it, and it has not changed except to become more needed.”

Miss Bingley of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* may have been talking fatuously when she declared: “How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book!” but this sentiment rings true for many of us. Despite the almost limitless diversions that face readers today, literature continues to satisfy a spiritual or psychological need, and open readers’ minds to the world and its extraordinary variety. There are works penned hundreds of years ago that continue to enchant and amuse to this day; complex postmodern texts that can be challenging in the extreme, yet still hold us in their grip; and

new novels that feel so fresh that they read as if words have only just been invented.

### Defining literature

Although the simple definition of “literature” is “anything that is written down,” the word has become primarily associated with works of fiction, drama, and poetry, and weighted with the impossible-to-quantify distinction of merit and superiority. These values are intrinsic to the canon of literature drawn upon for academic study and appreciation that has been evolving since the middle of the 19th century. The term “canon” was borrowed from the ecclesiastical canons of authorized religious texts.

The literary canon—a collection of works commonly agreed to be of exceptional quality—was formed almost entirely from familiar works of Western European literature.

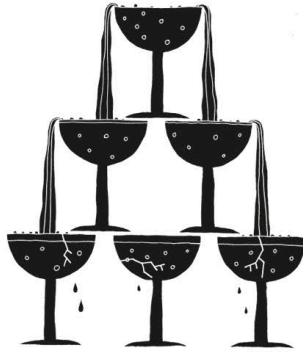
Since the mid-20th century, cultural and literary theorists have done much to destabilize the canon by disputing the authority of these lists of the works of “dead, white Europeans.” The idea of a perceived canon of “great works” still stands as a useful framework, but rather than the term being used to define the same set of titles, it evolves with each new generation, which

“

I begin with writing the first sentence—and trusting to Almighty God for the second.

**Laurence Sterne**

”



reexamines the ideology and power structures that underpin the selections of previous generations, and questions why certain other works were excluded. Arguably, studying how literature is created and testing its place in the canon may help to make us better readers. In the same spirit, this book features many titles that are traditionally regarded as “great works,” but explores their place in the wider story of literature, and within a richer mix of writing drawn from around the globe. They sit alongside newer texts that empower some of the voices that were silenced over the centuries by social constructs such as colonialism and patriarchy, and Europe’s dominance over literature.

### Choosing books

This book takes a chronological journey through literature, using more than a hundred books as guideposts along the route. It also takes a global approach, exploring literary texts from a wide range of different cultures that many readers may not have encountered previously.

*The Literature Book’s* chosen works are either exemplars of a particular writing style or technique, or represent a group or movement that took a new direction, which

was then adopted by other contemporary writers or expanded upon by future generations. The works are arranged chronologically to highlight the emergence of literary innovations against the social and political backdrop of their times. For example, during the 17th and 18th century, French literature evolved from Molière’s neoclassical comedies of manners into Voltaire’s satirical undermining of Enlightenment optimism, and later into a savage depiction of decadent French aristocracy shown in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, published in the lead-up to the French Revolution. These changes in literature inevitably overlap as writers pioneered techniques that

took time to enter the mainstream, while others continued literary traditions from previous eras.

Lists are always contentious; arguably the hundred or so books chosen here could be replaced with a hundred others, many times over. They are not presented as a definitive list of “must reads,” instead each work is framed by a focus or context that is supported by a timeline of related literary milestones and events. Cross-references link to works of a similar type, or that have influenced or been influenced by the book under discussion, while more than 200 titles are listed for further reading, exploring the literary landscape of each period in greater detail.

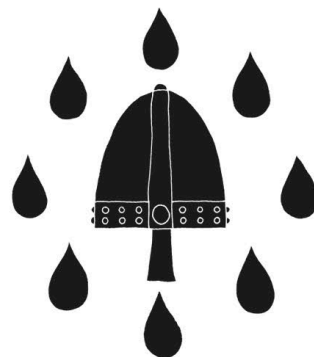
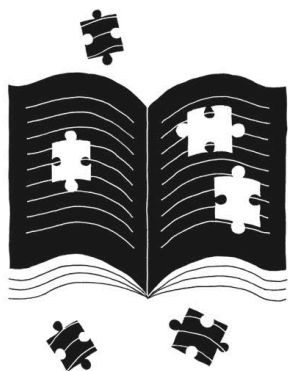
### The story of literature

Around 4,000 years ago, the first stories to be written down came in the form of poems such as Mesopotamia’s *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and India’s *Mahabharata*, which were based on oral traditions. Rhyme, rhythm, and meter were essential aids to memory in songs and oral accounts, so it is unsurprising that the first texts made use of familiar poetic devices. Many early written texts were religious, and sacred texts such as the Bible and the Koran tell »



Some books leave us  
free and some books  
make us free.  
**Ralph Waldo Emerson**





the stories of early histories, and have influenced writing for centuries. The form of literature that became Greek drama used a narrative balladlike form and introduced characters with individual voices, choruses of commentary, and the distinct categories of comedy and tragedy that continue to be used today. The collections of stories that make up the Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights* have multiple origins, but this prose fiction, written in plain speech, makes use of techniques that eventually became a mainstay in modern novels, such as framing (which introduces stories within the framework of another story), foreshadowing, and the inclusion of repetitive themes.

Although the vast medieval era was studded with secular highlights such as the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and tales of chivalric romance, it was dominated in the West by religious texts in Latin and Greek. During the Renaissance, the joint energies of new philosophical investigation and sheer invention opened the door to literary innovation. The driving force behind the Renaissance was the production of new translations of ancient Greek and Roman texts which freed scholars from the dogma of the church. A humanist program of education which

incorporated philosophy, grammar, history, and languages was built on the wisdom of the ancients. The Bible was translated into vernacular speech, enabling Christians to commune directly with their God. Gutenberg's printing press brought books into the lives of ordinary people, and authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio made everyday life the subject of literature. By the early 17th century, Miguel de Cervantes and Daniel Defoe had given the world what many scholars consider to be the first novels, and the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays was published.

### The rise of the novel

Drama and poetry continued to evolve as the novel rose inexorably in importance, and by the end

of the 18th century the novel had become a major form of literary expression.

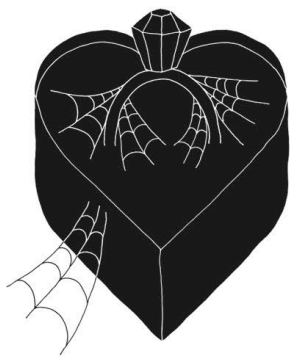
Just as artists are described in terms of movements such as Baroque and Rococo, so literary history is defined by authors united by a particular style, technique, or location. The Romantic movement, characterized by stories driven by the emotions of idiosyncratic heroes, rather than plot and action, had its roots in the German Sturm und Drang movement. Meanwhile, in England, the Romantic poets testified to the power of nature to heal the human soul, and similar themes were taken up by the New England Transcendentalists. The word "genre" was increasingly applied to fiction's subsets—for example, novels in the gothic genre. In the 19th century, Romanticism was superseded by a new form of social realism, played out in the drawing rooms of Jane Austen's English middle and upper classes, and Gustave Flaubert's provincial French towns, but used increasingly to depict the harsh lives of the poor. Fyodor Dostoyevsky described his novel *Crime and Punishment* as "fantasy realism," and the dark interior monologues of the murderer Raskolnikov have the elements of a psychological thriller. Over the years,



A word after a word after  
a word is power.

**Margaret Atwood**





fiction has diversified into multiple genres and subgenres, which today include everything from dystopian novels to fictional autobiography and Holocaust writing.

Alongside the growth of the novel, the vocabulary of literature expanded to describe styles of writing: for example, “epistolary” novels were written in the form of letters; and “Bildungsroman” and “picaresque” denoted coming-of-age tales. The language used within literature was developing too, and novels in the vernacular voice broadened the scope of national literature with writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain capturing the diversity of the people of the US.

In the early 20th century, Western society was revolutionized by industrial and technological advances, new artistic movements, and scientific developments. Within two decades, a generation of young men had been wasted in World War I. A perfect storm of literary experimentation followed, as Modernist writers searched for inventive stylistic features such as stream-of-consciousness writing, and wrote fragmented narratives representing the anguish and alienation of their changing world. After a brief period of literary

optimism and experimentation, the world was again thrown into turmoil as World War II began, and the production of literature slowed as many writers became involved in the war effort, and produced propaganda or reported from the front rather than writing literature.

### The global explosion

After two brutal global wars, the world was ready for change, and literature was central to the counterculture in the West of the 1950s and '60s. Postmodernist writers and theorists focused on the artifice of writing, demanding more of the reader than simply engaging with a realist narrative. Novels now had fractured or nonlinear time spans, unreliable narrators, episodes of magical realism, and multiple-choice endings. During this period, the West, and in particular writing in English, also loosened its grip on world culture. Postcolonial writing emerged in countries such as Nigeria, South Africa, and India, and authors such as Gabriel García Márquez helped raise the status of a group of South American writers of extraordinary creativity.

Modern literature now sings with the previously unheard voices of feminists, civil rights campaigners,

gay people, black and Native Americans, and immigrants. There is a healthy meritocratic blurring of distinction between classic and popular fiction. Global publishing, independent and internet publishing, global literature courses, national and international book prizes, and the growing number of works published in translation are bringing Australian, Canadian, South African, Indian, Caribbean, and modern Chinese novels, among others, to a world audience. This vast library of global literature has become both a reminder of shared connections worldwide and a celebration of difference. ■



Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul.

**Joyce Carol Oates**



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# HEROES LEGEND

3000 BCE—

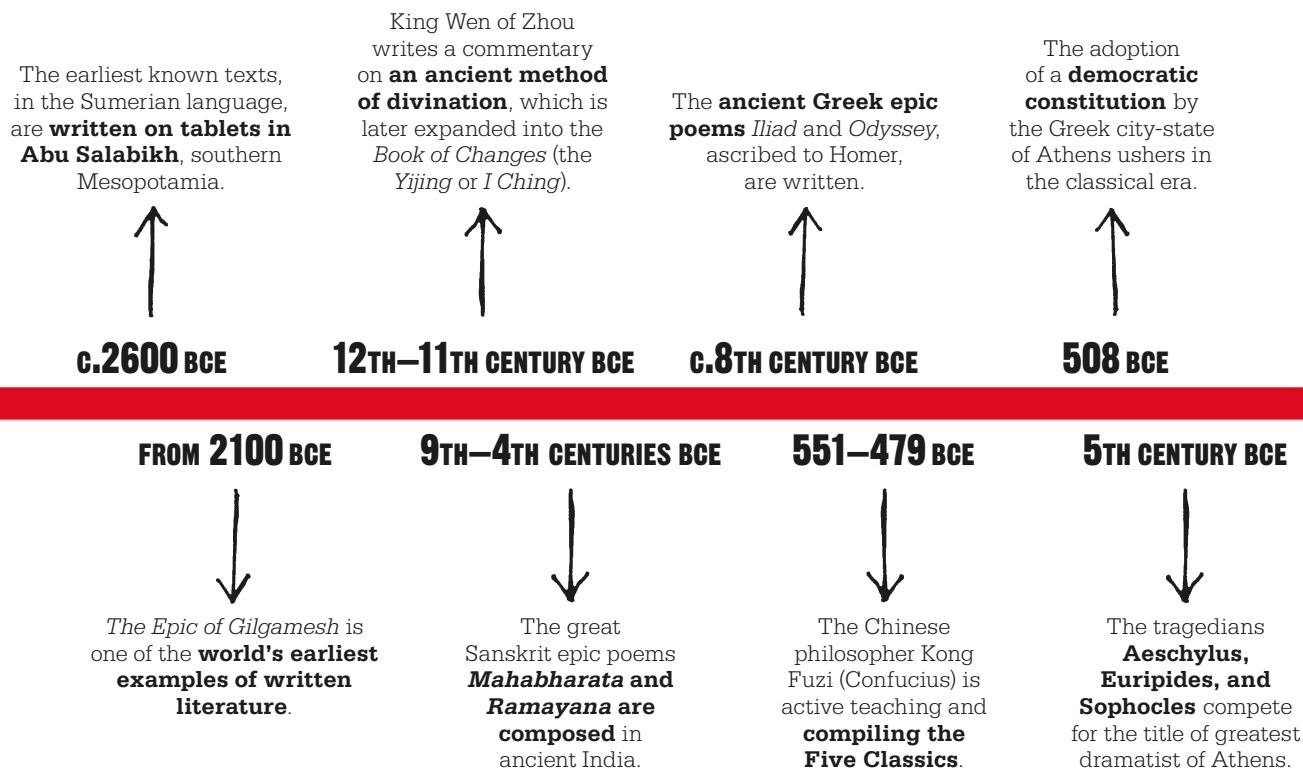
1300 CE

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AND  
S



**S**ystems of writing were first used as a means of recording administrative and commercial transactions. Gradually, these systems became more advanced, preserving ancient wisdom, historical records, and religious ceremonies, all of which had previously been memorized and were passed down orally. Throughout the world's early civilizations, in Mesopotamia, China, India, and Greece, the written canon of literature first emerged as history and mythology.

The form that this earliest literature took was a long narrative poem, known as an epic, which focuses on the legends surrounding a great warrior or leader, and his battles to protect his people from their enemies and the forces of evil. The combination of historical

events and mythical adventures, told in a metrical verse form, explained the people's cultural inheritance in an exciting and memorable way.

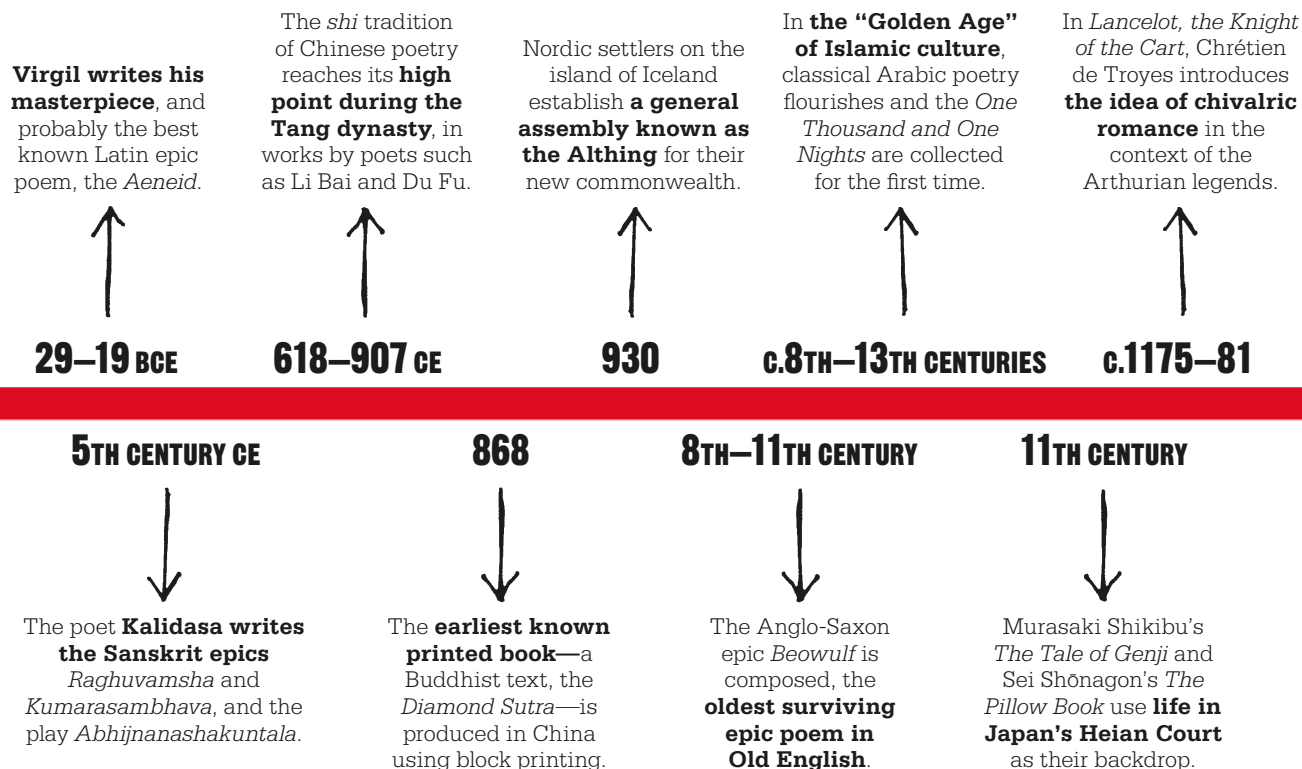
### Tales of gods and men

The first known epics, which include the various versions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the great Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, often tell of the origin of a civilization, or a defining moment in its early history. Seen through the exploits of a heroic individual or a ruling family, these epics also explained the involvement of the gods, often contrasting their powers with the frailties of human heroes. This was a theme that also appeared in the later epics ascribed to Homer. His heroes Achilles and Odysseus are depicted not only

as noble warriors in the Trojan War that established ancient Greece as a great power, but also as very human characters confronting both fate and their own weaknesses. Later, as Greek influence declined, Roman poets developed their own Latin version of the form, even borrowing the story of the Trojan War, as Virgil did in the *Aeneid*, to produce an epic of the beginning of Rome. The scale and depth of Homer's epics, and their poetic structure, provided the foundation on which Western literature is built.

### Greek drama

Another product of the tradition of storytelling in ancient Greece was drama, which developed from recounting a narrative to acting out the part of a character and thereby bringing the tale to life. Gradually,



this dramatic storytelling became more sophisticated, and by the time Athens was established as a democratic nation-state, the theater was an integral part of its culture, with dramatists such as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles producing tragedies and comedies which attracted audiences of thousands.

### From Europe to Asia

In northern Europe oral storytelling prevailed, and the tales of these cultures were not written down until around the 8th century. The earliest known complete Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, relates history and mythology preserved by the Scandinavian ancestors of the English. The later Icelandic sagas also drew from the Norse legends. Meanwhile, in mainland Europe the nobility were entertained by

professional poets. Some poets took their subject matter from the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome, while the troubadours of southern France chose stirring stories of Charlemagne and his men in battle with the Islamic Moors and Saracens. The *trouvères* of northern France, in contrast, recited lyrical and passionate tales of chivalry and courtly love about the reign of the legendary King Arthur of Britain.

Farther east, during the “Golden Age” of Islamic culture in the late medieval period when scholarship was held in high esteem, epic narrative tales such as those in the *One Thousand and One Nights* were valued for their capacity to entertain, although poetry was considered to be the highest form of literature. In ancient China, too,

heroic legends were considered more a form of folklore than literature, and the first written texts to be accorded the status of classics were those that preserved the history, customs, and philosophy of the culture. Along with these factual texts, however, was a collection of odes that provided a model for Chinese poetry for centuries, reaching its high point under the emperors of the Tang dynasty.

In the 11th century, Japan, which had been dominated by Chinese culture, produced its own distinctive literature in the Japanese language. Fictional prose accounts of life in the Heian court developed from the ancient chronicles of the ruling dynasties, anticipating the emergence of the novel in Europe. ■



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Bronze Age literature

### BEFORE

**30th century BCE** Systems of writing first emerge in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

**c.2600 BCE** The earliest known texts—although not literary ones—are written on tablets, in the Sumerian language, at Abu Salabikh, Mesopotamia.

**c.2285–2250 BCE** The earliest known author, Akkadian princess and priestess Enheduanna, lives and works in the Sumerian city of Ur.

### AFTER

**c.1700–1100 BCE** The Rig Veda, the first of the four Hindu sacred texts known as Vedas, is written in northwestern India.

**c.1550 BCE** The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is the first of the Egyptian funerary texts to be written on papyrus rather than the walls of tombs or coffins.

# ONLY THE GODS DWELL FOREVER IN SUNLIGHT

## THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH (FROM 2100 BCE)

**W**riting first appeared in Mesopotamia at the beginning of what is now known as the Bronze Age (c.3300–1200 BCE). Cuneiform symbols, originally devised as a means of recording commercial transactions, had evolved from numerals into representations of sounds, which offered a means of writing down the Sumerian and Akkadian languages.

Among the fragments of texts discovered in 1853 by the Assyrian archaeologist Hormuzd Rassan are tablets inscribed with tales of the legendary King Gilgamesh of Uruk, which are some of the earliest examples of written literature. The stories had probably been passed down orally in a form that combined history and mythology.

### From tyrant to hero

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, as the collected tales are known, tells how the oppressive ruler of the Mesopotamian city of Uruk is taught a lesson, and goes on to become a local hero. To punish

Gilgamesh for his arrogance, the gods send the “wild man” Enkidu, formed from clay, to torment him. After a fight, however, they become friends, and embark on a series of monster-slaying adventures. Angered by this turn of events, the gods sentence Enkidu to death. Gilgamesh is distraught at the loss of his companion, but also becomes aware of his own mortality. The second half of the tale tells of Gilgamesh’s quest for the secret of eternal life and of his return to Uruk—still a mortal, but a wiser man and more noble ruler. ■

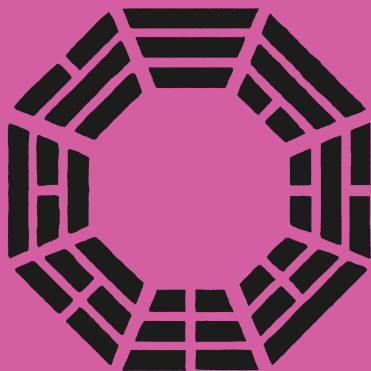
“

The life that you seek  
you never will find.

***The Epic of Gilgamesh***

”

**See also:** *Mahabharata* 22–25 ■ *Iliad* 26–33 ■ *Beowulf* 42–43 ■ *Njal’s Saga* 52–53



# TO NOURISH ONESELF ON ANCIENT VIRTUE INDUCES PERSEVERANCE

**BOOK OF CHANGES** (12TH–11TH CENTURY BCE),  
ATTRIBUTED TO KING WEN OF ZHOU

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### The Five Classics

### BEFORE

**c.29th century BCE** Fu Xi, China's mythical first emperor, devises a method of divination with trigrams, the basis for a Chinese writing system.

### AFTER

**c.500 BCE** The original *Book of Rites*, describing Chinese rituals and ceremonies, is compiled, traditionally thought to be the work of Confucius.

**2nd century BCE** A Confucian canon of writing begins with the so-called Five Classics.

**136 BCE** Emperor Wu of Han describes the *Zhou yi* as the foremost of the classics, and titles it *Book of Changes*.

**960–1279 CE** During the Song era, scholar Zhu Xi includes the Four Books, each of which appeared before 300 BCE, in the canon of Confucian literature alongside the Five Classics.

**T**he *Book of Changes* is about divination; it is a kind of oracle. The original method of divination from which it evolved is attributed to the legendary emperor Fu Xi, and was formalized by King Wen of Zhou (1152–1056 BCE) in a text known as the *Zhou yi*. The “King Wen sequence” describes 64 hexagrams, possible combinations of numbers obtained by casting yarrow stalks or coins, each associated with a certain situation or circumstance, to which Wen offered judgements. Later scholars added comments in the “Ten Wings,” including the Great Commentary, which together with the *Zhou yi* became known as the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* or *I Ching*, as it is still often called).

The book is often referred to as one of the Five Classics, with the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing*), *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*), *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), and *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*). These Classics are believed to have been compiled by Kong Fuzi (traditional dates 551–479 BCE), who is better

known in the West as Confucius. Kong Fuzi's moral and political philosophy was adopted as the official ideology of China during the 3rd century BCE.

Much later, in around the 12th century, shorter writings—either ascribed to Confucius or said to have been inspired by his teachings—were grouped into the Four Books of Confucianism.

### A source of wisdom

The Five Classics and Four Books were the main point of reference for Confucianism as a state ideology. The *Book of Changes* seems an odd fit for rational Confucianism, but it was thought to be a source of great wisdom. It complemented the volumes of Confucian philosophy, history, etiquette, and poetry as a book to be consulted not only for its prophetic ability, but also as a model of wise counsel, describing what the “superior man” should do in various situations, and it has remained a source of wisdom in China (and beyond) to the present day. ■

**See also:** *Quan Tangshi* 46 ■ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 66–67 ■ *The Narrow Road to the Interior* 92



# WHAT IS THIS CRIME I AM PLANNING, O KRISHNA?

**MAHABHARATA (9TH–4TH CENTURIES BCE),  
ATTRIBUTED TO VYASA**



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### The great Sanskrit epics

### BEFORE

**3rd millennium BCE** Vyasa writes the original version of the *Mahabharata*, in which he appears as a character.

**c.1700–500 BCE** The Vedas (the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda) are composed in Sanskrit, and together constitute the first of the Hindu scriptures.

### AFTER

#### c.5th–4th century BCE

According to tradition, Valmiki writes the *Ramayana*, using the *sloka* (meaning “song”) which becomes the standard Sanskrit verse form.

**c.250 BCE–1000 CE** A canon of Hindu texts known as the Puranas develops. It includes the genealogy of the deities and narratives of cosmology.

**T**he epic poetry of the Indian subcontinent is among the oldest known literature, and it emerged from a long oral tradition of storytelling and reciting. As with other ancient literature, the tales are a mixture of mythology, legends, and historical events, which developed over centuries and were eventually written down.

In addition to this epic poetry, ancient Indian writing includes the Vedas, which are the central sacred texts of Brahminical Hinduism, recorded from around the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE. The Vedas and the poetry were written in Sanskrit, which was regarded as the common literary language of

**See also:** *The Epic of Gilgamesh* 20 ■ *Iliad* 26–33 ■ *One Thousand and One Nights* 44–45 ■ *Ramayana* 55 ■ *The Canterbury Tales* 68–71 ■ *Midnight's Children* 300–05 ■ *A Suitable Boy* 314–17

“

Poets have told it before,  
poets are telling it now,  
other poets shall tell this  
history on earth in the future.

### ***Mahabharata***

”

ancient India, and is the language from which many Indo-European languages evolved.

Up to the 1st century CE, Sanskrit literature was dominated by the Vedas and two great epic poems: the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Although the *Ramayana* contains historical narrative, mythology, and folktales, it appears to be an original work by a single poet, and is traditionally attributed to the sage Valmiki. In contrast, the *Mahabharata*, the better known and much longer of the two, has a more complex provenance, which suggests a long period of evolution.

### **A gift of Vishnu**

The *Mahabharata* probably first took shape in the 9th century BCE and only reached its final form in around the 4th century BCE. The work is very long and comprises more than 100,000 verse couplets, known as *shloka*, divided into 18 books, or *parvas*. In addition to recounting the story of two warring families, it tells of their history, and that of India and the Hindu religion that is integral to it. At the outset, the narrator of the first book,

the *Adi Parva* (“The Book of the Beginning”), explains: “Whatever is here, is found elsewhere. But what is not here, is nowhere else.”

According to tradition, and as described in its opening section, the *Mahabharata* was written by a poet and wise man called Vyasa. Said to have lived in the 3rd millennium BCE, Vyasa was an avatar (incarnation) of the Hindu god Vishnu. The narrator of the greater part of the epic is Vyasa's disciple Vaisampayana, but two other people also narrate sections: a minstrel-sage, Ugrasrava Sauti, and a courtier, Sanjaya.

Vaisampayana explains how Vyasa dictated the entire story to the elephant-headed god Ganesha in a single sitting. Subsequently, many years later, Vaisampayana's story takes its final form as the *Mahabharata* when it is retold by Sauti to a meeting of Hindu sages,

as described in the *Adi Parva*. This complicated nesting of frame narratives probably reflects the existence of different historical versions of the story before it took the shape we know today.

It is also typical of the way in which the historical, mythological, and religious intertwine throughout the *Mahabharata*. Although the central plot concerns the split in the ruling Bharata family of northern India, and the ensuing battle at Kurukshetra and its aftermath, the story is given a mythical dimension by the introduction of the character Krishna, another avatar of Vishnu. There are also numerous subplots, and several philosophical and »

**The sage Vyasa dictates** the epic *Mahabharata*, which means “Great Story of the Bharata,” referring to a ruling family of northern India. The scribe is elephant-headed god Ganesha.



religious digressions, one of which, the *Bhagavad Gita*, has become important in its own right. The epic explores themes of family ties and conflict, duty and courage, fate and choice, and presents them in a series of allegories to explain the elements of *dharma*, a complex concept of “correct conduct.”

### Family divisions

After its explanatory preamble, the *Mahabharata* proper describes how the ruling clan of the Kuru becomes divided into two rival families, the Kaurava and the Pandava. These are the descendants of two princes, the blind Dhritarashtra and his

brother Pandu. The enmity begins when Dhritarashtra is denied the throne because of his disability. Pandu becomes king instead, but a curse prevents him from fathering children. The gods, however, impregnate his wife and the line of Pandava seems safe. But the 100 sons of Dhritarashtra feel that they have a claim to the kingdom, and after Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, is crowned, they trick him into losing everything in a game of dice. In disgrace, the Pandavas are sent into exile.

Some years later, the five Pandava brothers return to claim the throne, and so starts the series

**Arjuna's desire** to behave in accordance with *dharma* causes him to waver before acting, but his charioteer Krishna guides him on the path of correct conduct.

#### Arjuna

War is wrong.

Killing family and friends is abhorrent to me.

Violence runs counter to my moral code.

These actions will be sinful.

#### Krishna

You have a duty to fight a just war.

You have a duty to protect your people and their rights.

You must put aside personal feelings and attachments.

It is a far greater sin to neglect your duty.

“Man is not the master of destiny, but a wooden doll that is strung on a string.”

**Mahabharata**

of battles at Kurukshetra. The second son of Pandu, Arjuna, goes into war with his cousin and close companion Krishna as his charioteer, but only reluctantly joins the fight after Krishna persuades him that it is his duty to fight for what is right. The war turns out to be a bloodbath, in which almost all the Kauravas are slaughtered; the few who survive take their revenge on the Pandava troops by murdering them in their sleep. Only the five brothers survive the massacre, and they ensure the Kauravas are wiped out completely.

Yudhishtira becomes king again, but the victory is hollow and the poem goes on to detail the war's awful aftermath. Krishna, or at least this particular incarnation of Vishnu, is accidentally killed, and the Pandavas begin their long, dangerous journey to heaven. Only at the very end are the brothers reunited, and reconciled with their cousins the Kauravas, in the spiritual world.

### Moral dilemmas

*Dharma* is a recurrent theme in the *Mahabharata*, both in terms of how this notion applies to each of us in every situation, and of how it is a difficult path to follow, because of human weaknesses and the





**Dhritarashtra reaches out blindly** for his wife Gandhari, who has bound her eyes to share his darkened world. Bad actions in a previous life meant his disability was a consequence of *karma*.

force of fate. As Kripa—one of the Kauravas—says in the tenth book, *Saṃskṛta Parva* (“The Book of the Sleeping Warriors”), “There are two forces: fate and human effort—all men depend on and are bound by these, there is nothing else.” What is right and wrong is seldom clear, and it is by reconciling conflicting interests such as love and duty that we can achieve liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

In each of the *Mahabharata*’s episodes human strengths and weaknesses are contrasted, and the battle between right and wrong, writ large in the devastating war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, is shown to be complex, subtle, and ultimately destructive. While most of the poem shows its characters dealing with moral dilemmas in their human affairs, in the final sections, and especially after the death of Krishna, we see

them facing their spiritual fate. The story ends, after much tragedy and conflict, with the protagonists achieving eternal bliss, but also with the warning that the human struggles continue here on Earth.

### Cultural touchstone

The *Mahabharata*’s wide-ranging plot and subject matter, built on favorite mythological and historical stories with a moral and religious message, have ensured the epic’s popularity up to the present day. Such was its success that for several centuries only the *Ramayana* could rival its claim to be the great Sanskrit epic. While it cannot match the *Mahabharata* for sheer scope and excitement, the *Ramayana* is more consistent and elegantly poetic, and together the two inspired a school of Sanskrit epic poetry that flourished from the 1st to the 7th centuries CE. As sources of Hindu wisdom and Indian history and mythology, the great epics enjoy a cultural value in India comparable with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the West. ■

## The Bhagavad Gita

At the heart of the epic *Mahabharata* is the war at Kurukshetra, beginning with the sixth book, which includes a section now known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, the “Song of the Blessed.” Prior to battle, Arjuna, the Pandava prince, recognizes members of his family in the opposing Kaurava army, and lays down his bow. But his cousin and companion Krishna reminds him of his duty to fight this just war. The philosophical dialogue between them is described in the 700-verse *Bhagavad Gita*, which has become an important Hindu scripture in its own right, explaining such concepts as *dharma* (right conduct), *karma* (intentions and outcomes), and *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth). Although Krishna’s counsel is specific to Arjuna’s duty to fight, the battleground setting can be interpreted as a metaphor for the opposing forces of good and evil in general, and Arjuna’s crisis of conscience as representing the choices we all must make.

“

When the Gods deal defeat to a person, they first take his mind away, so that he sees things wrongly.

**Mahabharata**

”

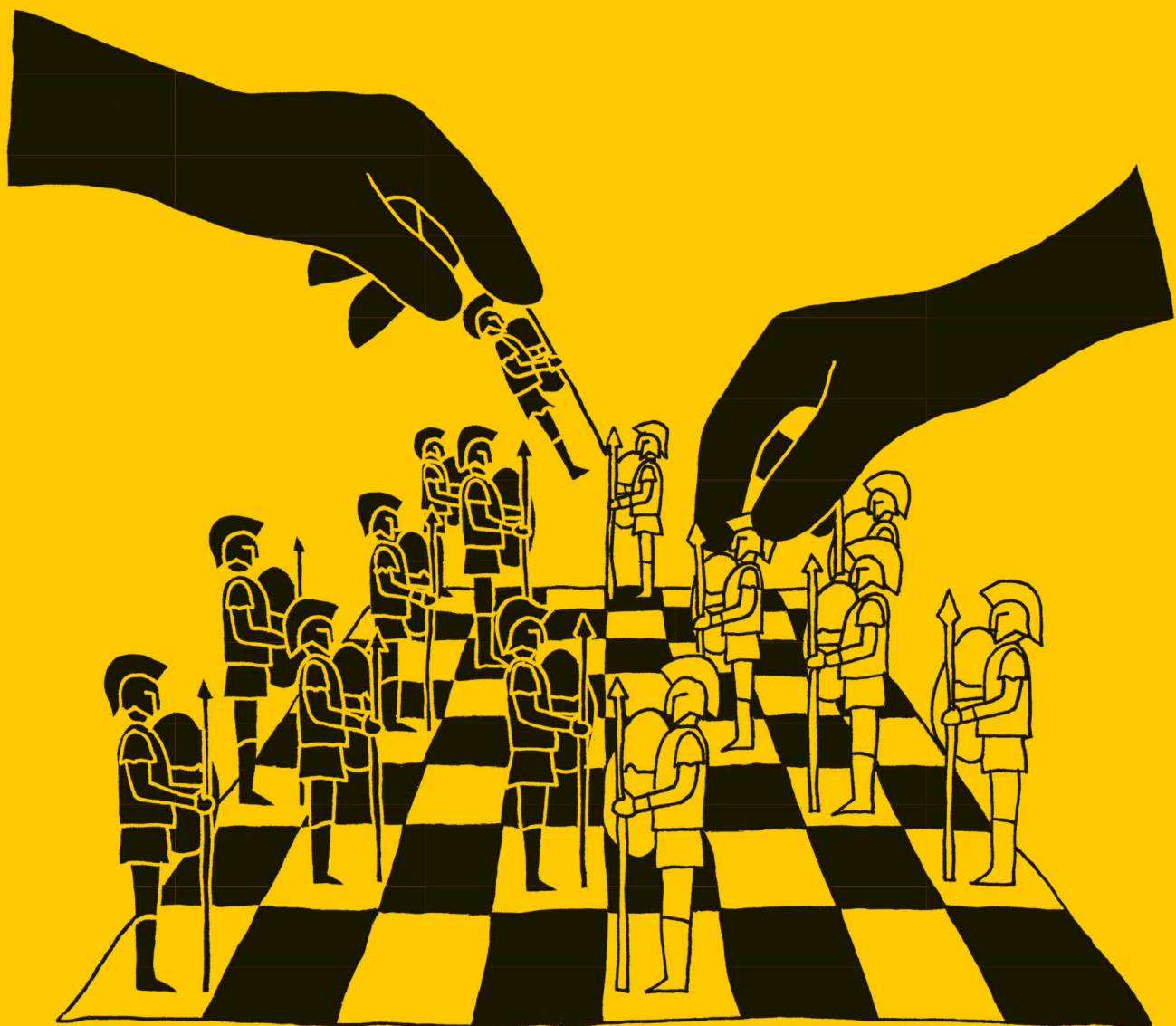


# **SING, O GODDESS, THE ANGER OF ACHILLES**

***ILIAD* (c.8TH CENTURY BCE),  
ATTRIBUTED TO HOMER**







## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### The Greek epic

### KEY DATES

**From 2100 BCE** Versions of the first known written literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, appear in the Sumerian language.

**9th century BCE** The epic *Mahabharata* emerges in India.

### AFTER

**c.8th century BCE** Attributed to Homer, the epic *Odyssey* continues the story of a leading figure in the *Iliad*, Odysseus.

**c.700 BCE** At roughly the same time as the final versions of the Homeric epics take shape, Hesiod writes the *Theogony* (“Birth of the Gods”), a poem that describes the creation of the world and the mythology of the ancient Greek gods.

**1st century BCE** The Greek epic poems provide a model for Roman poets such as Horace, Virgil, and Ovid.

**E**pics are narrative poems that recount the story of a hero who represents a particular culture. They chronicle his quests and ordeals, and account for the hero's choices and motives, so helping to establish and codify the moral principles of a society.

Epics were among the earliest forms of literature in many cultures around the world. These popular stories were initially told orally, and over time were embellished, reinterpreted, formalized, and finally written down, often laying the foundation's of a culture's literary history. Epics usually contained many characters and genealogies, and were long and complex in structure. They were probably learned by rote in a repetitive poetic meter, or recited to a musical accompaniment, since it is far easier to memorize verse than prose. Indeed, the word “epic” itself is derived from the ancient Greek word *epos*, meaning both “story” and “poem.”

### The Trojan War

In ancient Greece many epic tales were told about the Trojan War—a conflict between the Achaeans

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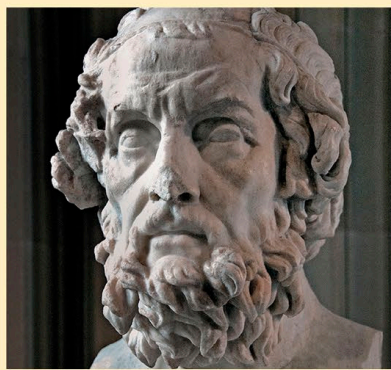
Drink deep of battle.

***Iliad***

”

(an alliance of the Greek states) and the city of Troy. The first and most famous of these accounts were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both attributed to a single author, known as Homer. Historians concede that these epics were inspired by actual events—sporadic wars between Greece and Troy did occur some five centuries before the works were written—but their characters and plots are works of the imagination. However, the Greeks of Homer's era would have believed these stories to be true accounts of the heroism of their ancestors.

The Greeks began to write down their epics around the 8th century BCE. Like the spoken tales on which they were based, they



**Homer lived in a time** before realistic portraiture. This bust is based on images of the writer that appeared only in the 2nd century BCE.

## The Homeric question

The two great ancient Greek epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are traditionally ascribed to the poet Homer—yet little is known about him. Since the time of the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, widely differing suggestions have been made for Homer's dates of birth and death, place of origin, and other details of his life. Classical scholars refer to “the Homeric question,” which includes a number of related issues. Who is Homer—did he ever exist, and if so when? Was Homer

the sole author of the epics, or one of a number of authors? Did the author or authors of the work originate them, or simply make a written record of poems that had been passed down orally through the generations?

Many scholars argue that the epics evolved from an oral tradition and were refined and embroidered upon by multiple poets in several versions. Solid evidence is lacking and the Homeric question is yet to be answered definitively.

**See also:** *The Epic of Gilgamesh* 20 ■ *Oedipus the King* 34–39 ■ *Aeneid* 40–41 ■ *Beowulf* 42–43 ■ *Odyssey* 54 ■ *Theogony* 54 ■ *Metamorphoses* 55–56 ■ *Digenis Akritas* 56 ■ *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* 57 ■ *Ulysses* 214–21

**The Greeks and Trojans** were helped or hindered by the gods, who used the conflict to fight their own battles. Hera, Athena, and Poseidon were aligned with the Greeks, while Apollo, Aphrodite, and Artemis supported the Trojans. Zeus remained largely neutral.

### The Gods

**Zeus**  
king of  
the gods

**Hera**  
queen of  
the gods

**Athena**  
goddess of  
wisdom

**Poseidon**  
god of  
the sea

**Apollo**  
god of  
the sun

**Aphrodite**  
goddess  
of love

**Artemis**  
goddess of  
the moon

### The Achaeans (Greeks)

**Agamemnon**  
king of  
Mycenae

**Achilles**  
Greece's greatest  
warrior

**Patroclus**  
companion of  
Achilles

**Menelaus**  
king of  
Sparta

**Odysseus**  
commander, and  
king of Ithaca

### The Trojans

**Priam**  
king of  
Troy

**Hector**  
son of  
Priam

**Paris**  
brother of  
Hector

**Helen**  
wife of  
Menelaus

**Aeneas**  
a son of  
Aphrodite

took the form of narrative poems. These Greek epics have a regular meter—each line is comprised of six basic rhythmic units, and each of these units contains one long and two short syllables. This meter is known as dactylic hexameter, or more commonly, “epic meter.” Variations on this basic rhythmic pattern give the flexibility needed for poetic composition.

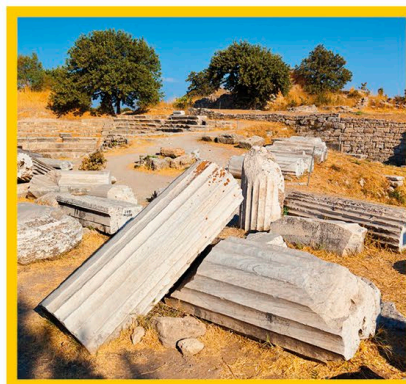
### A tale of gods and men

The *Iliad* is a sophisticated piece of storytelling. It relates the tale of the war in Ilium (Troy) from the perspective of one character in particular—Achilles. Parts of the story of the war are told in flashback, or in prophecies of the future. Woven into this plot are subplots and insights into the lives of the protagonists.

How much of this complexity can be credited to Homer, and how much is a result of refinement and embroidering over previous generations, is impossible to tell. The result is a work that combines history, legend, and mythology, while offering the essential ingredients of good storytelling—adventure and human drama—that make it a compelling read.

The *Iliad* is massive, both in its length and its narrative scope (it is, after all, where we get the idea of things being on an “epic” scale), consisting of over 15,000 lines of verse, divided into 24 books. Rather than simply telling the tale chronologically, Homer grabs the reader’s attention by using a device common to many epics. This is to drop the reader straight into the thick of the action,

or *in media res* (“the middle of the thing”) as described by the Roman poet, Horace. Homer’s account starts in the final year of the conflict, which has already been »



**Troy was believed** for many years to be a mythical city. However, archaeologists now agree that excavations in Anatolia, Turkey, have revealed the Troy of Homer’s *Iliad*.



raging for nine years. Homer digresses to explain some of the background to the events he is describing, but he assumes much prior knowledge about the causes of the conflict, which contemporary readers would have known well.

### Origins of the war

The roots of the Trojan War can be found in events that occurred at the wedding of the sea nymph Thetis to the Greek hero Peleus, who was a companion to the hero Hercules. The celebrations were attended by many gods and goddesses, including Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. An argument broke out between the three goddesses, each of whom claimed to be the most beautiful. To resolve the dispute, Zeus asked Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy, to judge a beauty contest between them. Aphrodite offered Paris a bribe—the hand of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, Helen was already married to Menelaus, brother of King Agamemnon of Mycenae, a Greek state. The subsequent abduction of Helen by Paris triggered the conflict.

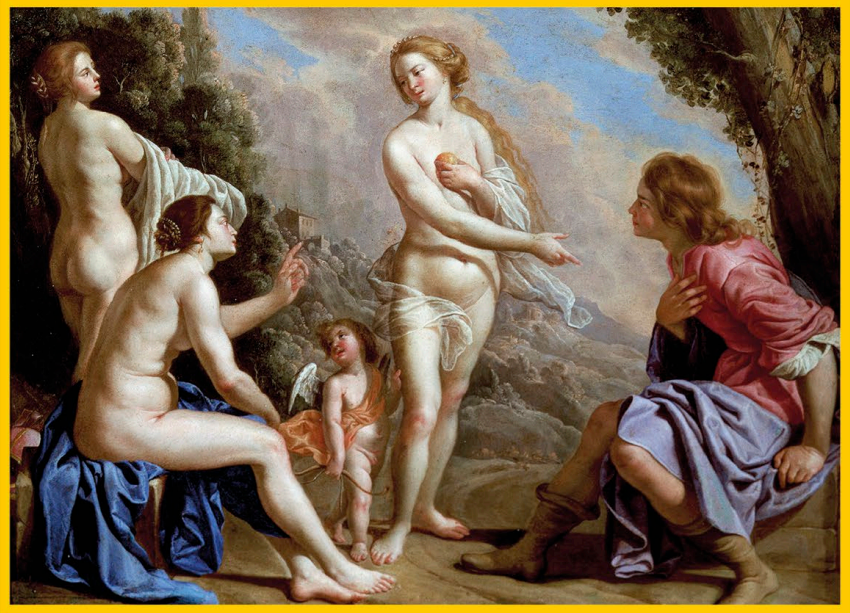
Readers join the narrative when Agamemnon's Achaean forces are fighting to recapture Helen. The book's opening, "Sing, O Goddess, the anger of Achilles" sets the scene,

“

Victory passes back and forth between men.

*Iliad*

”



preparing the reader for a story of war, but also implies that this is a tale of personal vengeance—and alludes to the involvement of the gods. The history of the war runs in parallel with Achilles' story, and his sense of honor and valor mirrors that of the Greek nation itself.

### The power of anger

Anger is a predominant theme in the *Iliad*, manifested in the war itself and as a motivation for the actions of the individual characters. There is the righteous anger of Agamemnon and Menelaus over the kidnapping of Helen, but also the wrath that drives Achilles and makes him such a fearsome warrior, provoked again and again by events in the story. His anger is not directed solely at the Trojans, nor even restricted to human foes; at one point he is so enraged he fights the river god Xanthus.

Underlying the wrath of Achilles is a sense of honor and nobility which, like that of the Greek people, is offended by disrespect and injustice, but is sometimes directed

**When Paris is asked** who is the “fairest” goddess, Hera tries to bribe him with empire, Athena with glory, and Aphrodite promises him Helen, the world's most beautiful woman.

inward as he struggles with the conflicts that arise between duty, destiny, ambition, and loyalty.

At the beginning of the *Iliad*, Achilles becomes enraged by King Agamemnon, the Greek commander, who has taken for himself Briseis—a woman who had been given to Achilles as a prize of war. Unable to vent his anger toward the king directly, Achilles withdraws to his tent, refusing to fight any more. Only the death in action of his close friend, Patroclus, at the hands of Hector, the eldest son of King Priam and the hero of the Trojans, brings him back into battle, more violently than ever, by giving him a focus for his anger.

### A tale of two heroes

Hector is, like Achilles, a military leader. He is considered the noblest and mightiest of the Trojans

warriors. But his character and motivation stand in contrast to those of Achilles, highlighting two very different attitudes to war.

Achilles is driven by an inner rage, but also the nobler motives of defending the honor of his king and country, and ultimately avenging the killing of Patroclus, his comrade-in-arms. Hector fights out of loyalty—to Troy, of course, but also to his family. In addition to being protective of his younger brother, Paris, whose abduction of Helen has caused the war, he is loyal to his father, Priam, who is portrayed as a wise and benevolent king. Achilles is the professional soldier, with few family ties, and Hector the reluctant but fierce fighter, defending home and family rather than honor.

Homer portrays both men as noble, but not without their flaws. Their characteristics and situations are metaphors for the contrasting values of society and those of the individual, and those of duty and responsibility compared with

loyalty and love. Neither side is wholly right or wrong, but in this war one must emerge victorious. Even though both heroes ultimately die in the conflict—Achilles slays Hector, and is himself killed by a fatal arrow in his heel—it is the heroism personified by Achilles that wins out over Hector's bonds of kinship. Ultimately, the *Iliad* affirms that there is glory in warfare, and that honorable reasons exist for fighting.

### Destiny and the gods

Homer knew that his readers—the Greeks—were aware of the outcome of the story because if Troy had won the war, there would have been no Greek civilization. The Greeks were destined to win, and to reinforce this inevitability, Homer makes reference to many prophecies throughout the *Iliad*, and to the role of fate and the gods in deciding the war's outcome.

To the ancient Greeks, the gods were immortals who had dominion over certain realms or possessed

“

Among all creatures that breathe on earth and crawl on it there is not anywhere a thing more dismal than man is.

***Iliad***

”

certain powers; they were not the omnipotent deities of later beliefs. Occasionally they interacted with humans, but generally left them to their own devices. In the *Iliad*, however, several of the gods had vested interests that led them to become involved in the Trojan War from time to time. The war had, after all, been triggered by the abduction of Helen, the daughter »

Community-minded, Hector is a family man who tries to avert wider bloodshed.

Dependable, Hector leads his men bravely, bonded by ancestral loyalty.

Moderate in mood, Hector is fallible and weakens in the final confrontation.



**The warriors** Hector and Achilles have contrasting personalities and motivations, which provide recurrent themes in Homer's examination of the heroic ideal.

Individualistic, Achilles is absorbed in his own thirst for glory.

Unpredictable, Achilles is indifferent to others and obsessed with honor.

Hot tempered and prone to rage, Achilles thrives in the violence of battle.

“

I have gone through  
what no other mortal on  
earth has gone through;  
I put my lips to the hands  
of the man who has  
killed my children.

***Iliad***

”

of Zeus and Leda. Paris had seized Helen in collusion with Aphrodite, so sides had already been taken on Mount Olympus, the home of the gods. There were also other connections between the gods and the mortals: Thetis, for example, was not only a sea nymph but also the mother of Achilles.

Such allegiances prompted the gods to intervene in human affairs, protecting their favorites from

harm, and making life difficult for their enemies. Apollo in particular is fiercely anti-Greek, and causes them trouble on several occasions. For example, when Patroclus goes into battle disguised as Achilles, by wearing Achilles' famously protective armor, Apollo contrives to dislodge it, allowing Hector to kill him. Incensed by the death of his best friend, Achilles vows vengeance. And again the gods intervene: his immortal mother Thetis presents him with a new suit of divine armor, specially forged by the god Hephaestus.

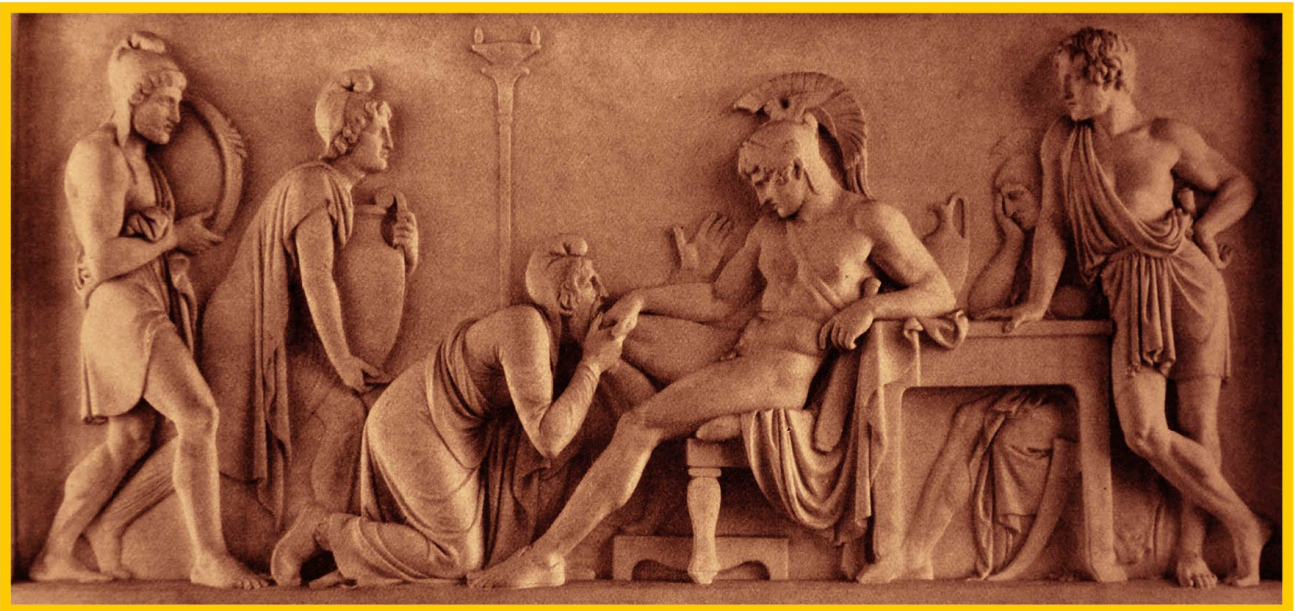
The need humans have for such protection underlines the difference between them and the gods—their mortality. Heroes go to war knowing they face death, but reconcile themselves with the knowledge that all humans must eventually die. The characters are not only mortal, but their creations are impermanent. They know that the war will have more than human casualties, because one nation must be destroyed—and even the victorious civilization will come to

an end one day. Homer sometimes overtly states this fact by citing prophecies of the future for both the *Iliad*'s main characters and for Troy, but it is implicit that this is the common fate of mankind—the destiny of every society. What lives on, however, is the glory of the heroes and their great deeds, recounted in the stories passed down through the ages.

### **Beyond the conflict**

After war, bloodshed, and fury, Homer's epic ends with peace and reconciliation. In perhaps the most memorably moving scene of the poem, the elderly King Priam visits Achilles and pleads for the return of the body of Hector, his son. Achilles is moved by the old man's plea, and a temporary truce is called to give the Trojans time for an appropriate funeral, and this

**Priam kisses Achilles' hand**, and asks him to take pity and surrender the body of his son Hector, whom Achilles has killed in battle. Achilles displays empathy with Priam's grief.





also lays Achilles' rage to rest. But despite this apparently peaceful ending, we know that this calm will be short-lived. The battle will resume, Troy will fall, and at some point Achilles will die. The story is not over yet.

Indeed, Homer's second epic poem, the *Odyssey*, ties up some of the loose ends by following the fortunes of another of the Greek heroes, Odysseus (known to the Romans as Ulysses), as he makes his way home to Ithaca from Troy after the war. In the *Odyssey*, the hero recounts the eventual destruction of Troy, and the death of Achilles, but this is very much background to the story of his own arduous journey.

### Western cornerstone

It is almost impossible to overstate the impact of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* on the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and therefore the whole of Western literature. They were not simply the first literary works in Europe, but monumental examples that firmly laid the foundations of the epic genre.

Homer's expert use of complex and highly visual similes gave his poetry unprecedented depth, and his mastery of dactylic hexameter provided an inspirational musicality to his verse. The meter used by Homer was adopted for subsequent epic poetry in Greek as well as in Latin, and the hybrid dialect he used became the recognized Greek of literature.

Perhaps most significantly of all, Homer turned an oral tradition of stories about folk heroes into a literary form—the epic. He also set out the characteristics of that form; for example, that the main narrative should follow the hero's quest or journey, and that this should be set against a historical backdrop, with



multiple interweaving or episodic plots. Homer also set the standard for the subtext of the epic, where personal and social values often stand in opposition.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* inspired a number of Greek poets to write epics on similar themes, but they also influenced the new form of drama that developed in the classical period. While Homer was popular reading in ancient Greece, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were standard texts in ancient Rome,

**The *Odyssey*** details the death of the hero Achilles. He is killed by an arrow fired by Paris, which is guided to the one vulnerable spot of Achilles' body—his heel—by the god Apollo.

inspiring poets to develop a distinctive Latin epic poetry. This reached its height in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which in addition to being a homage to Homer took as its starting point the fall of Troy.

### Eternally influential

Reverence for the Homeric epics did not end in classical times. Homer's works were widely read and studied in the Middle Ages and their stories have been retold countless times in different forms.

Homer's ancient poems can be considered the antecedents of medieval sagas, as well as the novel. Since the beginning of the 20th century, other forms of mass-audience storytelling—from movies to television series—have followed the epic model, and are deeply indebted to Homer for their structure and cultural relevance. ■


“

Zeus knows, no doubt,  
and every immortal too  
which fighter is doomed  
to end all this in death.

***Iliad***

”





**HOW DREADFUL  
KNOWLEDGE  
OF THE TRUTH CAN BE  
WHEN THERE'S NO HELP IN  
TRUTH!**

***OEDIPUS THE KING*** (c.429 BCE),  
**SOPHOCLES**





## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Classical Greek drama

### BEFORE

#### c.7th century BCE

Dithyrambs, song and dance entertainments by a chorus, are performed in honor of Dionysus in Delos and Athens.

**c.532 BCE** Thespis, considered to be the first actor, appears on stage playing a role in a drama.

**c.500 BCE** Pratinas introduces satyr plays—a satirical genre.

**458 BCE** Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the only trilogy of the classical period to have survived intact, is first performed in Athens.

**431 BCE** Euripides' *Medea* introduces a realism that shocks audiences.

### AFTER

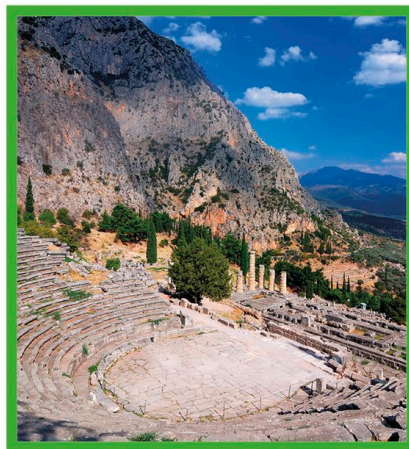
**423 BCE** Aristophanes' comedy *The Clouds* satirizes the social scene in Athens, and in particular Socrates.

**W**ith the revolt that overthrew the last tyrant king in 510 BCE, and the establishment of a form of democracy, the city-state of Athens ushered in the era of classical Greece. For two centuries, Athens was not only a center of political power in the region, but also a hotbed of intellectual activity that fostered an extraordinary flowering of philosophy, literary culture, and art, which was to have a profound influence on the development of Western civilization.

Classical Greek culture was dominated by the achievements of Athenian thinkers, artists, and writers, who developed aesthetic values of clarity, form, and balance—principles that were epitomized by classical architecture. A human-centered view also influenced the development of a comparatively new literary art form, drama, which evolved from religious performances by a chorus in honor of the god Dionysus.

### The birth of drama

By the beginning of the classical era, religious performances had changed from essentially musical

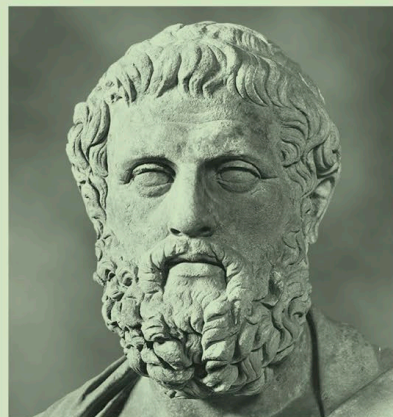


**Delphi's theater** has three spaces: the stage, the orchestra or chorus (in front), and the amphitheater. It was built in the 4th century BCE and could seat about 5,000 people.

ceremonies to something more like drama as we know it today, with the addition of actors to play the parts of the characters in a story, rather than simply narrating.

This new form of entertainment was enormously popular, and formed the focal point of an annual festival of Dionysia, which was held over several days in a custom-built open-air theater that attracted audiences of up to 15,000 people.

## Sophocles



Sophocles was born (c.496 BCE) in Colonus, near Athens. He showed an early aptitude for music, and through this became interested in the art of drama, encouraged and perhaps trained by the innovative tragedian Aeschylus. With his first entry in the Dionysia theater contest in 468 BCE, he won first prize from the reigning champion Aeschylus, and he soon became the most celebrated tragedian of his generation. In all, he wrote more than 120 plays, of which only a handful have survived intact. Sophocles was also a respected member of Athens society, and

was appointed as a treasurer in Pericles' government and later as a military commander. He married twice, and both his son Iophon and grandson Sophocles followed in his footsteps as playwrights. Shortly before his death in 406 BCE, he finished his final play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, which was produced posthumously by his grandson.

### Other key works

**c.441 BCE** *Antigone*

**c.429 BCE** *Oedipus the King*

**c.409 BCE** *Electra*

**See also:** *Iliad* 26–33 ■ *Aeneid* 40–41 ■ *Odyssey* 54 ■ *Oresteia* 54–55 ■ *Medea* 55 ■ *Wasps* 55 ■ First Folio 82–89 ■ *The Misanthrope* 90

Writers submitted work to be performed at the festival, in the form of a trilogy of tragedies followed by a comic play, and competed for prestigious prizes.

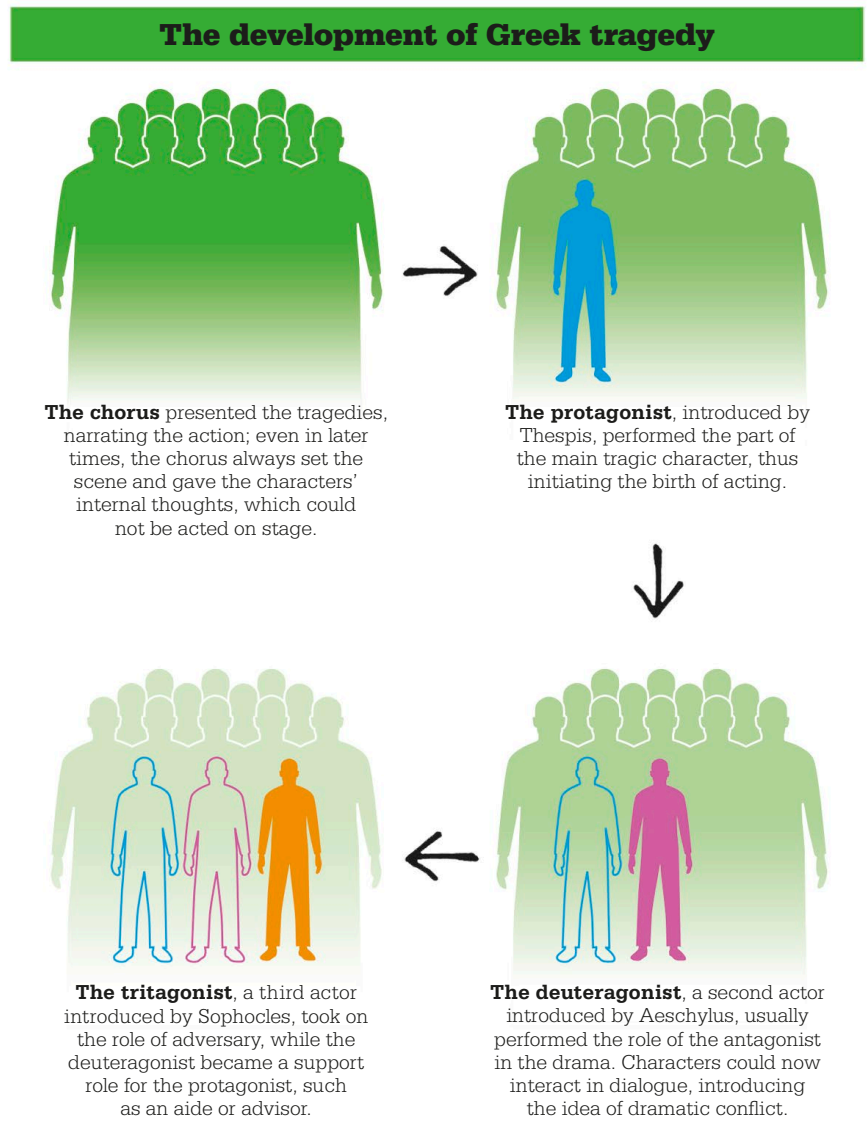
Three dramatists dominated the prizewinners' list for much of the 5th century BCE: Aeschylus (c.525/524–c.456/455 BCE), Euripides (c.484–406 BCE), and Sophocles (c.496–406 BCE). Their contribution, which amounted to several hundred plays, set a definitive standard for the art of tragedy. Aeschylus, as the earliest of the three great tragedians, is generally considered the innovator, initiating many of the conventions associated with the form. He is credited with expanding the number of actors in his plays, and having them interact in dialogue, which introduced the idea of dramatic conflict. Where formerly the chorus had presented the action of the drama, the actors now took center stage, and the chorus took on the role of setting the scene and commenting on the actions of the characters.

The move toward a greater realism was sustained by Euripides, who further reduced the role of the chorus, and presented more three-dimensional characters with more complex interaction.

### Breaking with convention

Of the three great dramatists, it is Sophocles whose tragedies have come to be regarded as the high point of classical Greek drama. Sadly, only seven of the 123 tragedies he wrote have survived, but of these perhaps the finest is *Oedipus the King*.

The play was one of three written by Sophocles about the mythical king of Thebes (the others



being *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*), known collectively as the Theban plays. Breaking with the convention of presenting tragedies in trilogies established by Aeschylus, Sophocles conceived each of these as a separate entity, and they were written and produced several years apart and out of chronological order.

In *Oedipus the King* (often referred to instead by its Latinized title *Oedipus Rex*), Sophocles created what is now regarded as the epitome of classical Athenian tragedy. The play follows the established formal structure: a prologue, followed by the introduction of characters and the unfolding of plot through »



a series of episodes interspersed with commentary from the chorus, leading to a choral *exodus*, or conclusion. Within this framework, Sophocles uses his own innovation of a third actor to widen the variety of character interaction and enable a more complex plot, creating the psychological tensions synonymous with the word “drama” today.

Typically, a tragedy of this sort was the story of a hero suffering a misfortune that leads to his undoing, traditionally at the hands of the gods or fate. As classical tragedy developed, however, the hero’s reversal of fortune was increasingly portrayed as the result of a frailty or fault in the character of the protagonist—the “fatal flaw.” In *Oedipus the King* both fate and character play their part in the tragic events. The character of Oedipus is also far from black and white. At the beginning of the play he appears as the respected ruler of Thebes, to whom the people turn to rid them of a curse, but as the plot unfolds his unwitting involvement in the curse is revealed.

“  
The greatest griefs are those  
we cause ourselves.  
”  
***Oedipus the King***

This revelation contributes to the atmosphere of foreboding that was a characteristic of the best classical tragedies. The sense of doom arose from the fact that many of these stories were already well known, as that of Oedipus must have been. Such a situation creates tragic irony, when the audience is aware of a character’s fate and witnesses his unsuspecting progress toward inevitable doom. In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles ratchets up this atmosphere of inevitability by introducing various references to prophecies that were made many

years before, which both Oedipus and his wife Jocasta have ignored. The story is not so much about the events that lead to Oedipus’s downfall, as about the events that prompt revelations of the significance of his past actions.

### Tragedy foretold

The chain of events begins with Thebes stricken by plague. When consulted, the oracle at Delphi says that the plague will abate when the murderer of Laius, the former king of Thebes and previous husband of Jocasta, is found. Oedipus seeks the advice of the blind prophet Tiresias to find the killer. This puts Tiresias in a difficult position because, although blind, he can see what Oedipus cannot: that Oedipus himself is the unwitting murderer, and advises him to let the matter rest. But Oedipus demands the truth, and then furiously refuses to believe the prophet’s accusation, while Tiresias further reveals that the killer will turn out to be the son of his own wife. A rattled Oedipus recalls a visit to Delphi as a youth, where he had gone to determine his true parentage, having overheard that he had been adopted. Instead, the oracle told him that he would murder his father and marry his mother—so he had fled, journeying toward Thebes. On his way to the city, he had met and killed an older man who barred his way.

The significance of this is not lost on the audience, especially when Sophocles introduces Jocasta, Oedipus’s wife and the widow of Laius, who comforts Oedipus by arguing that prophecies are untrue;

**An ancient house mosaic** depicts masks used in tragedies. Actors often wore masks, some with exaggerated expressions, to help convey the character they were representing.





there was a prophecy that Laius would be killed by his son, she says, when he was slain by bandits.

This information makes clear to the audience that the prophecy given to Oedipus has been self-fulfilling; it prompted him to leave home and set in motion the events that led to his unconsciously killing his own father Laius and becoming king of Thebes in his place, with his own mother Jocasta as his wife.

The climax is reached as things become clear to Oedipus. He reacts by blinding himself. The chorus, which has throughout the tragedy expressed the inner thoughts and feelings that could not be expressed by the characters

themselves, closes the drama by repeating to an empty stage that “no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead.”

### The Western tradition

*Oedipus the King* gained immediate approval with Athenian audiences, and was hailed by Aristotle as probably the finest of all classical Greek tragedies. Sophocles’ skillful handling of a complex plot, dealing with themes of free will and determinacy, and the fatal flaw of a noble character, not only set a benchmark for classical drama, but also formed the basis of the subsequent Western tradition of drama.

**Aristophanes’ comedy *Wealth*** (*Ploutus* in Greek), performed here by modern actors, is a gentle satire that focuses on life—and the distribution of wealth—in Athens.

Following their deaths, there were no Greek tragedians of the same stature as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. Drama continued to be a central part of Athenian cultural life, but the plaudits were more often given to the producer or actors than the writer himself. The comedies of Aristophanes (c.450–c.388 BCE) also helped to fill the void left by the absence of great tragedy, and gradually popular taste grew for less serious drama.

Even today, however, the tragedies of the classical Greek period remain significant, not least for their psychological exploration of character, which Freud and Jung used in their theories of the unconscious, drives, and repressed emotion. The surviving works of the Athenian tragedians, and *Oedipus the King* in particular, were revived during the Enlightenment, and have been performed regularly ever since, with their themes and stories reinterpreted by many writers. ■

“

Why should anyone in  
this world be afraid,  
Since Fate rules us and  
nothing can be foreseen?  
A man should live only  
for the present day.

***Oedipus the King***

”

### Aristotle's *Poetics* c.335 BCE

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) held the tragedians in high regard, and his *Poetics* is a treatise on the art of tragedy. He saw tragedy as a *mimesis* (an imitation) of an action, one that should arouse pity and fear. These emotions are given a *katharsis*, a purging, by the unfolding of the drama.

The quality of such a tragedy is determined by six elements: plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle, and melody. The plot must be a “unity of action,” with a beginning, middle, and end.

At least one of the characters should undergo a change in fortune, through fate, a flaw in character, or a blend of the two. Next in importance is thought, by which he means the themes, and the moral message, of the play. This is followed by diction, the language, such as the use of metaphors, and the actor’s delivery. The spectacle (scenery and stage effects) and melody (from the chorus) should be integral to the plot and enhance the portrayal of character.



# THE GATES OF HELL ARE OPEN NIGHT AND DAY; SMOOTH THE DESCENT, AND EASY IS THE WAY

*AENEID* (29–19 BCE), VIRGIL

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

**Literature of the Roman world**

### BEFORE

**3rd century BCE** Gnaeus Naevius writes epic poems and dramas based on Greek models, but in Latin and about Roman mythology and history.

**c.200 BCE** Quintus Ennius's epic *Annals* tells the history of Rome following the fall of Troy.

**c.80 BCE** Cicero's oratory as a lawyer marks the beginning of the "Golden Age" of Latin literature, which lasts until the death of Ovid in 17 or 18 CE.

### AFTER

**1st century BCE** Horace's poetry includes the *Odes*, the *Satires*, and the *Epodes*.

**c.8 CE** Ovid's narrative poem *Metamorphoses* is published.

**2nd century** Apuleius writes the irreverent *Metamorphoses*, also known as *The Golden Ass*.

**R**ome began to replace Greece as the dominant Mediterranean power from around the 3rd century BCE, and it is from that time that the first literature in Latin appeared.

The influence of Greek culture on ancient Rome was enormous to begin with, and a recognizable Roman literary culture emerged only slowly. Although Roman writers were writing in Latin, they produced poetry, drama, and histories firmly in the Greek mold until around 80 BCE when the statesman, orator, writer, and poet

Cicero inspired the beginning of a "Golden Age" of Latin literature, which established the style and forms of a distinct Roman tradition.

## Roots of empire

The so-called Golden Age straddled Rome's evolution from Republic to Empire. This transformation, which involved the turmoil of civil wars, was reflected in a shift from the historical and rhetorical writings of Cicero, Sallust, and Varro, to the poetic works of Horace, Ovid, and Virgil, especially during the reign of Emperor Augustus from 27 BCE.

## Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro was born in 70 BCE in Mantua, northern Italy. He spent much of his early life in this part of the Roman Republic, and wrote his poems of rustic life, the *Eclogues*, there. Virgil's next major work, the *Georgics*, was dedicated to his patron, the statesman Gaius Maecenas. Virgil also befriended Octavian, who was to become Emperor Augustus, and established himself in Rome as a poet alongside Horace and Ovid. He began work on his

magnum opus, the *Aeneid*, in around 29 BCE, encouraged by Octavian, and continued writing and revising it until his death from fever in 19 BCE. It is said that on his deathbed Virgil asked that the *Aeneid* be destroyed, possibly because of his disappointment with Augustus's reign, but it was published posthumously on the orders of the emperor.

## Other key works

**c.44–38 BCE** *Eclogues*  
**29 BCE** *Georgics*



See also: *Iliad* 26–33 ▪ *Metamorphoses* 55–56 ▪ *The Golden Ass* 56 ▪ *The Divine Comedy* 62–65 ▪ *Paradise Lost* 103

“

Endure the hardships  
of your present state,  
Live, and reserve  
yourselves for better fate.

***Aeneid***

”

Acknowledged during his lifetime as Rome's leading literary figure, Virgil wrote a number of poetic works, but it is for his epic *Aeneid* that he achieved lasting respect. His story of the ancestry of Rome was possibly commissioned by Emperor Augustus, and the rising tide of pride in the new imperial era no doubt played some part in the patriotic poem's success.

Despite its nationalistic theme, the *Aeneid* has its roots in Greek literature, and especially Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, on which it is largely modeled, sharing the same regular poetic meter, or classical "epic meter." The 12 books of the *Aeneid* recount the journey of Aeneas from his home in Troy to Italy, and the war in Latium (the land of the Latins), which ultimately led to the foundation of Rome.

### A Homeric achievement

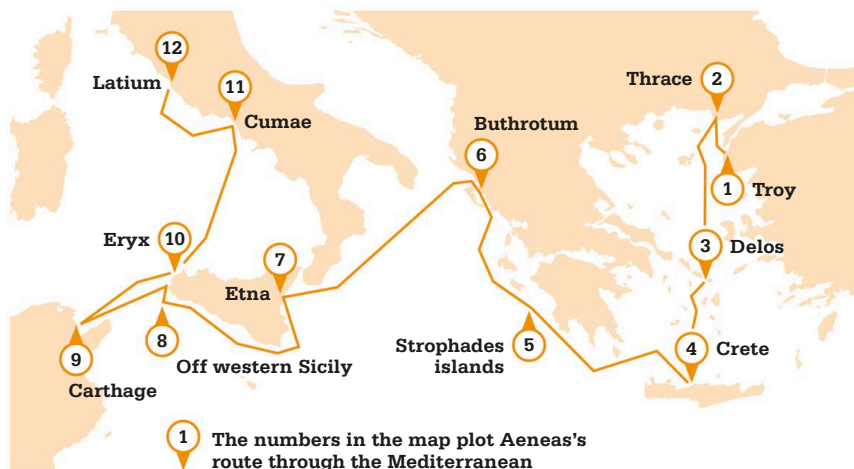
Aeneas was already known as a character in the *Iliad*, but Virgil's continuation of his story neatly connects the legends of Troy with those of Rome, and in particular the virtues of the hero with traditional Roman values.

## Aeneas's travels in the Mediterranean

**1 Troy:** Flees the city with others, including his father King Anchises, and his wife's ghost tells him to find the land of the Tiber.

**4 Crete:** Has a dream in which the gods appear to him and reveal that the land of his forefathers that he seeks is in distant Italy.

**5 Strophades islands:** Survives attack when taken off course to the home of the Harpies, who prophesy that a famine lies ahead in Italy.



**9 Carthage:** Meets and falls in love with Queen Dido, and only leaves her because the gods persuade him he must resume his journey.

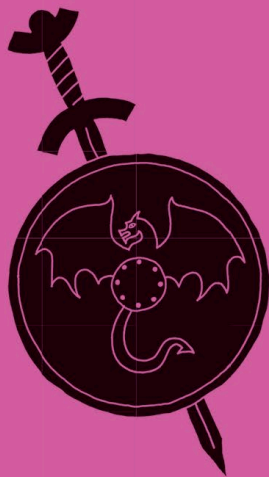
**11 Cumae:** Is guided by the prophetic Sibyl to the underworld, where he talks to spirits and the future Rome is revealed to him.

**12 Latium:** Welcomed here at the mouth of the River Tiber by King Latinus who offers his daughter Princess Lavinia in marriage.

Virgil begins the poem "Arma virumque cano ..." ("I sing of arms and a man ..."), stating his themes in a similar way to the *Iliad* ("Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus ..."), and takes up Aeneas's story on his way to Italy as he is forced by a storm to land in Carthage. Here, he tells Queen Dido of the sack of Troy. Feigning retreat, the Greeks had hidden offshore and left behind a vast, wheeled wooden horse. The Trojans were persuaded by a Greek agent that the horse was under Athene's protection and would make Troy impregnable. At night, after the Trojans had taken it within the walls, a select band of warriors emerged and opened the gates for the returned Greek army.

Throughout the epic, Virgil emphasizes Aeneas's *pietas*, his virtue and duty, which is steered by fate and the intervention of the gods, taking him from his home to his destiny in Latium.

The *Aeneid* not only secured Virgil's reputation as a distinctly Roman writer, but went on to become probably the most respected work in Latin. Virgil was revered as a writer throughout the Middle Ages, and appears as the guide in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Stories from the *Aeneid* have been retold continuously since it first appeared, and the idea of danger represented by the "Trojan horse"—"Beware of Greeks bearing gifts"—has entered popular culture. ■



# FATE WILL UNWIND AS IT MUST

**BEOWULF (8TH–11TH CENTURY)**

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Anglo-Saxon literature

### BEFORE

**7th century CE** Caedmon, a shepherd-turned-monk at Whitby Abbey, writes a hymn that is the first-known example of a poem in Old English.

**c.8th century CE** Fragments of runic inscription carved on the Ruthwell Cross—now in Scotland but once part of the kingdom of Northumbria—are lines from a poem now known as “The Dream of the Rood,” which blends warrior imagery with the Crucifixion story.

### AFTER

**c.1000** The epic poem *Waldere* is transcribed. Only two fragments have survived, but they offer insights into the Anglo-Saxon warrior ideal.

**10th century** Benedictine monks compile an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry now known as the Exeter Book.

**A**lthough academic opinions differ about the exact date *Beowulf* was written, it is the earliest Anglo-Saxon epic poem to survive in its entirety. It is told in the language now known as Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, which developed from the Germanic languages brought over to Britain by Scandinavian invaders, and remained the common language until the Norman Conquest in 1066.

Old English was widely spoken in England and southern Scotland from the 5th century, but written literature in the vernacular only

emerged gradually. During the 7th century, Britain underwent conversion to Christianity. Latin was the language of the literate classes, and used in the Christian monasteries and abbeys where manuscripts were created. But by the reign of King Alfred (reigned 871–899), Old English translations of Christian Latin texts were appearing alongside original texts.

### An oral tradition

It is likely that *Beowulf* dates from between the 8th and early 11th centuries, because it appears to have been written from a pagan perspective, in spite of its pagan subject matter. It is not clear whether *Beowulf* was composed by the person or persons who wrote the original manuscript, or whether this was a transcription of an older poem. There was an Anglo-Saxon oral tradition of storytelling by reciters of poetry known as “scops,” mentioned in several Old English texts including *Beowulf*, and it is possible that the poem had been passed down orally many years before it was recorded.

Like its language, the poem's story has its roots in Scandinavia, and deals with the legends of the



Each of us must expect an end of living in this world; let him who may win glory before death: for that is best at last for the departed warrior.

***Beowulf***



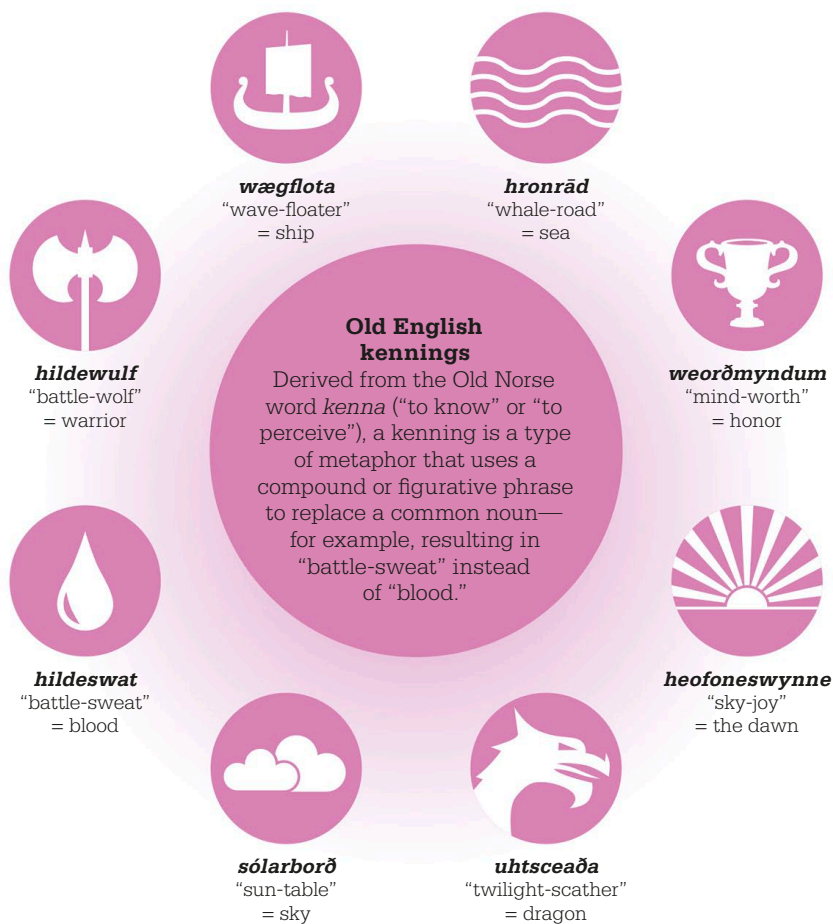
**See also:** *The Epic of Gilgamesh* 20 ■ *Mahabharata* 22–25 ■ *Iliad* 26–33 ■ *Aeneid* 40–41 ■ *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* 50–51 ■ *Njal's Saga* 52–53 ■ *Cantar de Mio Cid* 56–57 ■ *The Divine Comedy* 62–65 ■ *The Lord of the Rings* 287

people there, including several historical figures from around 500 CE. It tells of the life and exploits of a Geatish warrior, Beowulf, who comes to the aid of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, to rid the land of the monster Grendel and then Grendel's mother. Beowulf progresses from a brash young adventurer to become a respected king of the Geats, following Hrothgar's advice to "Incline not to arrogance, famous warrior!" His final battle is to save his own people from a dragon.

### Both epic and elegy

In addition to the story of a monster-slaying hero, and the battle of good and evil, the poem deals with themes of loyalty and brotherly love, the ephemeral quality of life, and the danger of pride and arrogance in the face of humanity's inevitable doom. The English writer and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien argued that *Beowulf* is as much an elegy as an epic, mournful as well as heroic; not just a lament for the death of the eponymous hero, but also a nostalgic elegy for a dying way of life, and of our struggles against fate.

Although the manuscript of *Beowulf* was preserved in the late 10th- or early 11th-century Nowell Codex, it was regarded as simply a historical artifact until the 19th century, when the first translations into modern English were made. Not until the 20th century, largely due to Tolkien's championing of the work, was its literary merit recognized. *Beowulf* has now been translated countless times into many languages, and in addition to its popularity in its own right, the poem has influenced much recent fantasy literature. ■



### Poetry in Old English

*Beowulf* is in the form of an epic poem—3,182 lines long—in a declamatory (forcefully expressed) style and using idiosyncratic Anglo-Saxon poetic devices.

Most strikingly, unlike the rhyme schemes of modern verse, Old English poetry is typically written in a form of alliterative verse. Each line is divided into two halves, which are linked not by the rhyming of the ends of words, but by the similar sounds of the beginnings of words or

syllables. The two halves of each line are often divided by a caesura, or pause, effectively marking them as an alliterative couplet. Another feature is a metaphorical device known as a kenning: a figurative compound word in place of a less poetic single word, such as *hildenaedre* ("battle-serpent") for "arrow."

Devices such as these pose problems for the translator into modern languages, especially given the richness of allusion in Old English.



# SO SCHEHERAZADE BEGAN...

*ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*  
(c.8TH–15TH CENTURY)

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Early Arabic literature

#### BEFORE

**610–632** According to Islamic belief, the Koran (Arabic for “Recitation”) is revealed to Muhammad by God.

**8th century** A collection of seven pre-Islamic poems, some dating to the 6th century, are written in gold on linen, and are said to have been put up on the walls of the Kaaba at Mecca. They are known as *Al-Mu’allaqat* (“hung poems”).

#### AFTER

**c.990–1008** Badi’ al-Zamān al-Hamadāni writes *Maqamat* (“assemblies”), a collection of stories in rhymed prose that relate the encounters of the witty Abul-Fath al-Iskanderi.

**13th century** *The Story of Bayad and Riyad*, a romance about the love of a merchant’s son for a foreign court lady, is written in Islamic Andalusia.

**A**cross the Arab world there is a long tradition of storytelling, with folktales passed down orally through many generations. However, from the 8th century onward, with the rise of flourishing urban centers and a sophisticated Arabian culture that prospered under the guidance of Islam, a widening distinction was made between *al-fus’ha* (the refined language taught at educational centers) and *al-ammiyyah* (the language of the common people). Pre-Islamic literature written in the vernacular—including traditional

folktales—fell out of favor with the educated elite, and writers of Arabic literature turned away from composing works of imaginative prose to focus instead on poetry and nonfiction.

### The appeal of stories

Yet despite the emphasis placed on the “high art” of poetry, there was a continuing public appetite for a good yarn. Although not highly regarded by Arabic scholars, the collection of tales that appeared under various titles over the next few centuries, but which are now

## A Golden Age of Islamic literature

By the mid-8th century, the territory controlled by Muslims stretched from the Middle East across Persia into the Indian subcontinent, and from North Africa into Iberia. Sophisticated urban societies throughout the Islamic world became cultural as well as political centers.

This was the beginning of an Islamic golden age, which lasted for about 500 years. Centers of learning, such as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, attracted polymaths—proficient

in science, philosophy, and the arts—as well as scholars of the Islamic holy book, the Koran.

The Koran is the word of God, revealed to Muhammad, so it is considered not only a source of religious knowledge, but also the model for Arabic literature. Its style and language greatly influenced the classical Arabic literature that flourished from the 8th century onward, mostly in the form of poetry, which was held in much higher regard than narrative fiction.

**See also:** *Mahabharata* 22–25 ■ *The Canterbury Tales* 68–71 ■ *The Decameron* 102 ■ *Children's and Household Tales* 116–17 ■ *Fairy Tales* (Andersen) 151 ■ *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* 152 ■ *The Prophet* 223

## The nights of Scheherazade



As night falls, Scheherazade enthralls her husband by continuing the previous night's story.



After concluding the tale, she starts another, often with a character telling their own story.



Having reached a cliff-hanger at daybreak, her life is spared so that the ending can be heard.

known as the *One Thousand and One Nights* or the *Arabian Nights*, was perennially popular.

The collection came together in a chaotic fashion over several centuries, and no canonical version of the tales exists. Storytellers combined ancient Indian, Persian, and Arabic tales, with more stories being added over the centuries. The oldest Arabic manuscript still in existence is believed to have been put together in Syria in the late 15th century. It is written in everyday language that offers a strong contrast to the classical Arabic of poetry and the Koran.

### Tales within tales

The structure of the *One Thousand and One Nights* takes the form of a frame narrative, where one story contains all the others within it. The framing device is the tale of Princess Scheherazade, who faces execution by her husband, Prince Shahryar. After his previous wife's adultery, the prince believes that all women are deceitful; he has vowed to marry a new bride every day, "abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honor." The princess averts her fate by withholding the ending

of a story she tells on her wedding night, leading Shahryar to delay her execution. After 1,001 such nights, he confesses that she has changed his soul and he pardons her.

The tales told by Scheherazade intermingle fantastic tales set in legendary locations with stories involving historical figures—such as Haroun al Rashid (c.766–809), ruler of the Abbasid Caliphate during the Islamic Golden Age. The diverse nature of the tales is responsible for the wide variety of genres to be found within the

collection, from adventure, romance, and fairy tale, to horror and even science fiction.

### Influence in the West

It was not until the 18th century that the stories became known in Europe, thanks to a retelling by French scholar Antoine Galland in *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1704–17). The manuscript from which Galland translated was incomplete, falling well short of 1,001 nights worth of stories, so he added the Arabic tales of "Ali Baba," "Aladdin," and "Sinbad." These were never part of the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, but have since become some of the most well-known stories from the collection in the West.

Galland's book derived much of its popularity from its exoticism, with its tales of genies and flying carpets, and was an important influence on the folktale-collecting movement taken up by the Brothers Grimm and others in the early 19th century. A translation of the original stories by Sir Richard Burton in 1885 inspired a more serious interest in Islamic culture—but in the Arab world the tales are still regarded as entertaining fantasies rather than literature. ■



O my sister, recite to us some new story, delightful and delectable, wherewith to while away the waking hours of our latter night.

***One Thousand and One Nights***







## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Imperial Chinese poetry

### BEFORE

**c.4th century BCE** A collection of lyric poems, *Songs of Chu* (*Chu Ci*), is compiled, attributed to Qu Yuan, Song Yu, and others.

### 2nd and 3rd centuries CE

Cao Cao, later the Emperor Wu of Wei, and his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi, establish the *jian'an* style of poetry of the later Han dynasty.

### AFTER

**960–1368** During the Song and Yuan dynasties, the lyric *ci* style becomes more popular than the Tang formal *shi* style.

**1368–1644** Ming dynasty poetry is dominated by Gao Qi, Li Dongyang, and Yuan Hongdao.

**1644** Manchu rulers establish the Qing dynasty, opening a period of scholarship in and publication of Tang literature.

# SINCE LIFE IS BUT A DREAM, WHY TOIL TO NO AVAIL?

*QUAN TANGSHI* (8TH CENTURY),  
A COLLECTION INCLUDING POEMS BY  
LI BAI (LI PO), DU FU, AND WANG WEI

**C**hina has a tradition of poetry that can be traced back to the 11th century BCE. While some early poetry was in a lyric style—*ci*—in the shape of songs and love poems, a more formal style—*shi*—tackled reflective themes and used stricter structures. During the early Han dynasty, in the 3rd century BCE, a collection of 305 *shi* poems was compiled, the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*). Considered one of the Five Classics of Chinese literature, it set the standard for subsequent classical Chinese poetry.

## Poetic traditions

This *shi* tradition reached its apex in the Tang era (618–907 CE). In the 8th century in particular a number of brilliant poets emerged. Foremost among them were Li Bai (701–762), also known as Li Po, whose poems included nostalgic meditations on friendship; his friend Du Fu (712–770), known as the “poet-historian”; and the polymath Wang Wei (699–759), whose nature portraits seldom mentioned any human interference.

In 1705, the Kangxi emperor (reigned 1661–1722) commissioned the scholar Cao Yin to compile a definitive collection to be known as the *Quan Tangshi* (“Complete Tang Poems”) with almost 50,000 poems by more than 2,000 poets. A shorter anthology was compiled in around 1763 by Sun Zhu, *Three Hundred Tang Poems* (*Tangshi sanbai shou*), which, like the *Book of Odes*, was accorded classic status, and has remained essential reading in China to the present. ■

“

We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.

**“Alone Looking at the Mountain”**

Li Bai

”

**See also:** *Book of Changes* 21 ■ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 66–67 ■ *The Narrow Road to the Interior* 92



# REAL THINGS IN THE DARKNESS SEEM NO REALER THAN DREAMS

*THE TALE OF GENJI* (c.1000–1012),  
MURASAKI SHIKIBU

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

**Literature of the Heian court**

### BEFORE

**c.920 CE** The first anthology of *waka* (classical Japanese poetry) is published, known as *Kokinshū* (*A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern*).

**Late 10th century** The fairy tale *The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo* is written.

**c.1000** Sei Shōnagon completes *The Pillow Book*, observations on life in the court of the Empress Consort Teishi.

### AFTER

**Early 12th century** *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*) is compiled, containing stories from India, China, and Japan.

**1187** *Senzaishū* (*Collection of a Thousand Years*), the final imperial anthology of *waka* (classical poetry), is completed by Fujiwara no Shunzei.

**J**apanese art and culture flourished in the Heian period (794–1185), when the imperial court was located in Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto). It was during this period that classical Japanese literature began to emerge, distinct from Chinese language and culture. And although Chinese remained the language of both officialdom and the nobility, the simpler form of the Japanese *kana* syllabic script increasingly became the national language of literature.

### Imperial patronage

Poetry was highly regarded and encouraged by the Heian emperors, who commissioned eight major anthologies of poems in Japanese. At the end of the 10th century, however, works in prose also began to appear, including histories and folktales, such as *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, and an original story, *The Tale of the Lady Ochikubo*, thought to have been written by a member of the Heian court.

More significantly, Murasaki Shikibu (973–1014 or 1025), a lady-in-waiting at the court, wrote what is considered to be the first Japanese novel (and what some consider the first ever novel)—*The Tale of Genji*. In its 54 chapters, it recounts the lives and loves of “Shining Genji”—the disinherited son of a Japanese emperor—and his descendants. Although presented as a sequence of events rather than a true plot, the character portrayals are compelling, giving not only an insight into the life of courtiers at the time, but also their thoughts and motivations, making this arguably a precursor of the modern psychological novel.

Murasaki probably intended *The Tale of Genji* for a readership of noblewomen, but it won a wider audience and became a classic, appearing in many editions from the 12th century onward. Despite its status, its complex style meant it was not translated into modern Japanese until the 20th century; the text is usually annotated to explain its cultural references. ■

**See also:** *The Pillow Book* 56 ■ *The Narrow Road to the Interior* 92 ■ *The Love Suicides at Sonezaki* 93





# A MAN SHOULD SUFFER GREATLY FOR HIS LORD

*THE SONG OF ROLAND* (c.1098)

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### *Chansons de geste*

### BEFORE

**5th–11th century** In Anglo-Saxon Britain poets known as scopos entertain the courts by singing or reciting epics of mainly Scandinavian history.

**880** The *Canticle of Saint Eulalia* is one of the early texts in the northern vernacular *langue d'oïl* (Old French).

### AFTER

**Late 11th or early 12th century** Early poems of the Matter of France appear, such as the *Chanson de Guillaume* and *Gormont et Isembart*.

**c.1200** *Cantar de mio Cid*, the first known Spanish epic poem, is written.

**14th–15th century** The great age of medieval French poetry is ended by the upheaval of the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) and the devastation of the Black Death (c.1346–53).

**A**lthough some religious texts appeared in the vernacular Old French as early as the 9th century, literature in French is generally considered to have its beginnings in the epic poems known as *chansons de geste* (“songs of heroic deeds”) that were recited or sung at court by minstrels or *jongleurs*. Originally, these narrative poems in verse were part of an oral tradition, but from the end of the 11th century they were increasingly written down.

### Legendary exploits

The *chansons de geste* formed the basis for the Matter of France, one of three parts of a wider literary cycle of medieval works, mainly in Old French. The Matter of France featured the exploits of historical figures such as the Frankish king Charlemagne. Neither of the other two literary cycles—the Matter of Rome (the history and mythology of the classical world) and the Matter of Britain (tales of King Arthur and his knights)—was the subject of *chansons de geste*.

One of the earliest *chansons* from the Matter of France was *The Song of Roland*, a version of which was by a poet known as Turolf. In some 4,000 lines of verse, it tells of the legendary Battle of Roncevaux (modern Roncesvalles) in 778, during Charlemagne's reign. In the fight for the Muslim stronghold of Saragossa in Spain, Roland is betrayed by his stepfather and ambushed. Refusing to call for help he puts up a valiant fight, but as his men are massacred he blows a call for revenge on his oliphant (an elephant-tusk horn) with such force that he dies. Charlemagne answers, arriving and defeating the Muslims.

The *chansons de geste* inspired a tradition of *cantar de gesta* poetry in Spain, including the Castilian epic *Cantar de mio Cid*, and many of the poems were retold in German and as the Old Norse *Karlamagnús saga*. Even after poets from the 12th century developed a preference for writing courtly lyric poetry, the finest *chansons de geste*, such as *The Song of Roland*, remained popular until the 15th century. ■

**See also:** *Beowulf* 42–43 ■ “Under the Linden Tree” 49 ■ *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* 50–51 ■ *The Canterbury Tales* 68–71