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The *Iliad's* Pre-Echoes of Future Apocalypse

Abstract: The Homeric *Iliad* has exerted an incalculable influence on later representations of war and our attitudes to heroism, masculinity and combat. It celebrates gargantuan consumption of cattle, precious metals and timber as well as the destruction of human lives. This aspect contributes to its epic grandeur and the excitement and aesthetic elevation we feel as we read it. But the environmental crisis facing us in the twenty-first century suggests that it is time for a new, ecologically sensitive reading of the poem which exposes the cavalier attitudes to natural resources it depicts. We need to repurpose the *Iliad* to help us change our attitudes towards nature and recognise the limits to the materials with which it can supply us. This is crucial if we the planet, and the study of classical literature, are to have a future at all.

Keywords: Homer, *Iliad,* Ecocriticism, Environment, Consumption, Timber, Bronze

1 Weighing down the Deep-Breasted Earth's Expanse

> Sing, goddess, of the dreadful wrath of Peleus' son Achilles.
> It afflicted the Achaeans with manifold causes of grief,
> and sent to Hades the brave souls of many heroes,
> leaving their bodies as spoils for dogs
> and every bird of the air. Zeus' plan was being fulfilled.[1]

So opens the *Iliad*, composed around 2,750 years ago. An erudite ancient scholar commented on the last phrase, "Zeus' plan was being fulfilled".[2] The scholar says that Earth begged Zeus to relieve her of the weight of the multitude of people, who were behaving impiously. So Zeus first brought about the Theban War, which destroyed large numbers, and afterwards the Trojan one, "with Momus as his adviser, this being what Homer calls the plan of Zeus, seeing that he was capable of destroying everyone with thunderbolts or floods". Momus, 'Blame', was the sinister son of Night and brother of Misery (Hesiod, *Theogony* 214); he recommended as an

1 Homer *Iliad* 1.1–5. This and all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 Scholiast D on *Iliad* 1.5. I have slightly adapted the version of West 2003, 80–83.

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alternative to thunder or floods the Judgement of Paris. Thus the Trojan War came about, resulting in "the lightening of the earth as many were killed".

The scholar then quotes a fragment of the lost epic *Cypria*, which narrated the events preceding the war itself:

> There was a time when the countless tribes of humans roaming constantly over the land were weighing down the deep-breasted earth's expanse. Zeus took pity when he saw it, and in his complex mind he resolved to relieve the all-nurturing earth of mankind's weight by fanning the great conflict of the Trojan War, to void the burden through death. So the warriors at Troy kept being killed, and Zeus' plan was being fulfilled.[3]

A similar tradition was recounted in the early epic *Catalogue of Women* attributed to Homer's approximate coeval, Hesiod: "high-thundering Zeus was devising wondrous deeds then, to stir up trouble on the boundless earth; for he was already eager to annihilate most of the race of speech-endowed human beings... Hence, he established for immortals, and for mortal human beings, difficult warfare…pain upon pain".[4] John Perlin suggests that these traditions are mythical responses to the historical depopulation as the Mycenaean world disintegrated.[5] The fall of Troy and the notion of an apocalyptic threat to the survival of the human race have thus been linked in the mythical imagination since the archaic age.

2 The *Iliad* and the shaping of the modern mind

In the epic *Iliad*, Homer introduces the earliest detailed account of the people who were the ancient Greeks. The second book of the poem produces, via a catalogue of the more than a thousand Greek ships that sailed to Troy, a list of the communities who in the mid-8th BCE century regarded themselves as being united because they could enjoy poetry in Greek and had long ago fought together in the siege of Troy. The *Iliad* was performed at festivals where these self-governing Greeks, from diverse communities, met as equals in communal sacred spaces to worship their shared gods, and in doing so invented the competitive athletics contests of which we read an account in *Iliad* book 23 and possess a descendant in the Olympics. The poems recited at these gatherings were the collective cultural property of the independent-minded

3 *Cypria* fr. 1, slightly adapted from the translation of West 2003, 82–83.

4 Slightly adapted translation by Most (2018, his fragment no. 155) 256–259 of supplemented papyrus *P. Berol.* 10560 95–16.

5 Perlin 1991, 8.

Greek warrior peasants wherever they sailed and were fundamental to the transmission of their values. They remained so until the end of pagan antiquity.

Greek epic poems originated in oral composition and had been developed in the process of being memorised, repeated, supplemented and adapted over the course of decades and (parts of them at least) centuries. But between 800 and 750 BCE, Greek culture changed forever. Some resourceful Greek-speakers, probably traders, borrowed the signs used by the ingenious Phoenicians to represent consonantal sounds, added some extra signs to indicate vowels, and used them to write down in Greek their already canonical authors. In inscribing them, no doubt the poet-scribes (perhaps one was an individual really called Homer) made changes which ornamented the language and improved poetic structure.

The classical Greeks knew that the *Iliad* was aesthetically superior to other epic poems because it is not made up of episodes loosely strung together. It is unified by one incident during the Trojan War, a period of a few weeks when the great warrior Achilles became incandescently angry with both his overlord Agamemnon for disrespecting him, and his Trojan enemy, Hector, for killing Achilles' beloved friend Patroclus. But the poem looks backwards and forwards in time to engage the listener with the war's antecedents and consequences.

The *Iliad* created the very core of the Greek sense of self for at least twelve centuries subsequently. Along with the *Odyssey*, it formed the basis of the education of everyone in ancient Mediterranean society from the 7th century BCE; Hegel was correct in seeing that "Homer is that element in which the Greek world lived, as a human lives in the air".[6] Even from pre-Roman days it was not only the Greek world. For a thousand years countless schoolboys living under the Macedonian or Roman empires, whose first languages were Syrian, Scythian, Nubian or Gallic, learned their alphabet through the first letters of Homeric heroes' names, developed their handwriting by copying out Homeric verses, and the art of précis by summarising individual books.[7] They also committed swathes of Homeric hexameters to memory (in Xenophon's *Symposium* 3.5 Niceratus says that his upper-class father required him to learn *all* of Homer by heart), and studied them in early manhood when they were learning to be statesman, soldiers, lawyers, historians, philosophers, biographers, poets, dramatists, novelists, painters or sculptors.

The *Iliad* continued to be read across the Byzantine world for another millennium. Its preservation despite the rising Ottoman threat to Byzantine Greek culture was guaranteed once the fourteenth-century humanist Francesco Petrarch had acquired a copy via a contact in Constantinople. The text was translated into Latin

6 Hegel 1923 (1837), 5.29.

7 See Marrou 1956, 162, and Pack 1967, nos. 2707, 1208.

and began to be read in learned circles in the west; it was printed in the original Greek in Florence in 1488. This precious printed edition unleashed a flood of translations into Latin and modern languages and inspired painters, dramatists and poets alike. Homer became central to the western curriculum; European colonialism ensured that the *Iliad* made its way across empires on every continent. It was included, for example, in the list of Christian books supplemented by pagan authors constituting the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum*. This was designed by Jesuits in Rome in 1599 and exported across the planet by the Society of Jesus' missionaries.[8]

The curriculum was in turn adopted by Western humanists. John Ruskin stressed that it even does not matter whether or not Homer is actually read, since "All Greek gentlemen were educated under Homer. All Roman gentlemen, by Greek literature. All Italian, and French, and English gentlemen, by Roman literature, and by its principles".[9] In the 20th and 21st centuries, Homer has long since ceased to belong to the western world but has become a cultural property familiar on every continent.[10] The subterranean impact of the poem on our species' global psyche may not be over-estimated.

In the case of the *Iliad*, no later author could ever again make a fresh start when shaping a narrative or a visual representation of a quarrel between a self-regarding monarch and his able lieutenant, a council of gods, a siege war, an athletics contest, a viewing of an army from a city wall, a husband parting with his wife and baby, a redemptive meeting of deadly enemies, a hero's funeral, a smith at work, animals being sacrificed, workers reaping, trees being chopped down or a vast ransom of precious metals put on public display. In literary critics' definitions of sublime art, especially 'epic' poetry, massive scale and the evocation of the infinitude of natural resources became an aesthetic requirement largely as a result of the tonal effects of the *Iliad*, thereby inspiring and legitimising the activities of every agent of extractive industrialisation and colonialism in history.

The Homeric *Iliad* is therefore a foundational text in the culture not only of the Mediterranean world and Europe but of the planet. This article makes the case that we can make it foundational to our struggle to save that planet from disaster. It argues that the *Iliad* can be read to expose the deepest contradictions underlying the environmental crisis which we humans have created — it is a priceless document of the mindset of the early Anthropocene. This matters because the ways in which humans view their environments are informed by representations of nature in their art and literature, especially in canonical texts that have been widely

8 Hall 2021, 36.

9 'The mystery of life and its arts' (1868), first published as Ruskin 1869.

10 Graziosi and Greenwood 2007; Hall 2008; McConnell 2013.

translated, adapted, visualized, enacted, and included on the curriculum. How the poets of the *Iliad* depicted relationships between people and the physical world around them has fundamentally affected how we imagine those relationships, too.

Canonical artworks shape the way we see the world and act upon and within it: our "response to the physical world is mediated by our social and literary creation of it".[11] Amitav Ghosh has proposed in *The Great Derangement* that the generic expectations of the western novel, in which weighty individual characters act autonomously in front of circumscribed backdrops, and often struggle valiantly with shortage of natural resources, have scarcely been congenial to evolving a more sustainable attitude to the natural world.[12] Perhaps the violence done to the environment across the Anthropocene has been authorized, if not exacerbated, by the celebration of the exploitation of nature by man in the foundational *Iliad*.

3 The *Iliad* as post-apocalyptic poem?

The Greeks of the archaic age had already asked whether the Trojan War was designed by Zeus to reduce the human population in order to relieve Mother Earth of her burden. The *Iliad*'s apocalyptic visions of elemental cataclysm and the erasure of human civilization are responses to a real sense of precarity and fear of natural catastrophe in the future. Reading the poem in detail reveals anxieties about seismic events, tsunamis, storms, floods, wildfires, plagues and famines that were structural to the archaic Greek imagination, as to other Ancient Near Eastern texts, and are once again to our 21st-century world. But the poets of the *Iliad* may have been responding more specifically to their awareness, drawn from poetry and storytelling as well as material remains, of the great Mycenaean palace civilisations that had collapsed in Greece and Crete at the end of the Bronze Age. The *Iliad* contains distant memories of everything the Mycenaeans had suffered before their civilisation disintegrated — famine, plague, fire, flood, menacing waves, earthquake, whirlwinds, destruction of the works of man. Its poets' visions of apocalypse therefore look forward as expressions of anxieties about potential future catastrophe, but backward to remembered reality.

Yet, central to the ideology of the *Iliad* is the idiom of infinitude, an assumption that the physical earth, its contents, and the resources needed by humans, are somehow limitless. The implied infinity is temporal as well as spatial and quantitative.

11 Rudd 2007, 35.

12 Ghosh 2016, esp. 3–84; see König 2022, xxiv.

The glory of the heroes, who were larger and stronger than those of today, will be forever unperishing. The *Iliad* knows no possibility of the entire extinction of the human race. Most ancient Greeks seem to have celebrated their power over the environment and to have seen man as 'the orderer of nature',[13] and the poem's distinctive idiom of supererogation, of gargantuan scale and limitlessness, was much admired by ancient literary critics. It was regarded by Longinus as lending it true sublimity or elevation. Homer wins the *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* because his evocation of improbably enormous quantities and distances enhances its impact.

4 The limitless world of the *Iliad*

Although there are similar, if shorter, scenes in Mesopotamian Literature, perhaps the most horrifying picture of planetary destruction in the entire ancient repertoire is to be found in the Greek *Iliad*. It is formed in the visual imagination, suitably enough, of the lord of the dead, Hades or Aidoneus, 'The One Who Makes Things Unseeable'. When the gods marshal themselves for war towards the climax of the epic, we are presented with a terrifying picture of a world split in two by an earthquake (20.56–65):

> Then the father of men and gods thundered terribly
> on high. From underneath, Poseidon shook
> the boundless earth and the steep peaks of the mountains.
> The roots of Ida with its many fountains were all shaken,
> and her summits, and the Trojans' city and the ship of the Achaeans.
> Underneath, Aidoneus, lord of those below, was terrified,
> and in his terror leapt from his throne and shouted,
> fearing that above him Poseidon the Earthshaker would cleave the earth,
> and reveal his habitations to mortals and immortals,
> dreadful in appearance and slimy, so even the gods abhor them.

Hades feels the tremors shaking the very matter out of which the earth above and around him are made. He fears a vertical chasm will split the horizontal surface of the earth to reveal his damp demesne in the deepest Underworld.

A distinctive feature of Hades' view of the world is that its constituents are 'boundless' — earth is 'without limit'.[14] A crucial difference between the 21st-century perception of the earth and that of Homer's audience, and most generations since

13 Glacken 1976, 117–118.

14 γαῖαν ἀπειρεσίην (20.58).

him, is that we now know there are limits to the earth and all its resources. The notion that we need to acknowledge the terrifying limitedness of natural resources was at last popularized in 1953 in Fairfield Osborn's *The Limits of the Earth*, where he observed that the history of Greece and Rome "assumes the character of a prologue to modern times".[15] Trying to imagine ourselves into a mindset where there were always new lands to conquer, new forests to chop down and new seams of ore to mine, is an impossibility. But we can begin to glimpse what it felt like by examining the idiom of infinitude that informs Hades' view of the limitless earth and numerous other magniloquent Homeric expressions.

Timber from the forests of Ida is repeatedly said to be of unutterable extent, unspeakable, infinite (*aspetos*), as unspeakable (*thespesios*) as the bronze war equipment of the Achaeans when they march forth (2.457),[16] its gleam reaching the heavens (see section 6). The flocks of sheep and goats that Iphidamas had promised as an additional bride price for his wife before he left for Troy were unutterable (*aspeta*, 11.245), in addition to the more prosaic quantity of a hundred cattle he had already put down as a deposit (see section 5). The Hellespont is 'boundless', without limits (*apeiron*, 24.545), as is the land of Troy that raises its voice to lament Hector (24.776). The Trojans march making a clamour like cranes fleeing from wintry storms and 'boundless (*athesphaton*) rain' (3.4). A false concept of ecological and environmental limitlessness is therefore as key to the depiction of the wrath of Achilles in the *Iliad* as the never-ending questioning of the exact power relations between man and natural phenomenon, man and god, and god and natural phenomenon.

Priam tells Helen he once saw the 'multitudes' of Phrygians encamped along the river Sangarius (now called the Sakarya, in which the pollution is currently rising at an alarming rate).[17] Andromache says that her father had received 'ransom past counting' (*apereisi(a)*) for her mother after taking her captive (6.427), a formula that occurs nine other times in the *Iliad*;[18] Agamemnon applies it to the recompense he is prepared to pay Achilles (9.120). Chryses brought 'ransom past counting' for his daughter Chryseis (1.372); Peisander and Hippolochus say that their father will offer Agamemnon 'ransom past counting' for their lives (11.134). Menesthios' mother was purchased by her husband in exchange for 'a bride-price beyond counting' (16.178).

Another term that often implies an infinite quantity is the adjective *murios*, which in the plural can also mean 'ten thousand' (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 252); the

15 Osborn 1953, 17.

16 ἀπὸ χαλκοῦ θεσπεσίοιο.

17 πλείστους Φρύγας, 3.185; İhlas News Agency 2019.

18 Kirk 1990, 216 on lines 6.425–428.

opening sentence of the *Iliad* says that Achilles' wrath would inflict 'measureless pains' on the Achaeans (1.2), but just before the end of the poem it is Priam who laments Troy's 'countless (*muria*) sorrows' (24.639). The pain the Trojans feel when Sarpedon dies is 'unbearable, unceasing' (16.549). Achilles predicts his death will cause Thetis 'infinite (*murion*) grief in her heart' (18.88): Aeneas' fear of Achilles causes him 'measureless grief' (20.282), just as terror of the enemy can be felt 'infinitely' (*aspeton*, 17.332). The River Scamander intends to conceal Achilles' corpse beneath 'infinite (*murion*) shingle' (21.319–320). Hector had paid for Andromache with 'innumerable (*muria*) bride-gifts' (22.472).

Homer sometimes provides visual images to help his listener envisage uncountable multitudes. Achilles says that he would not accept gifts from Agamemnon even if they were equivalent to all the wealth of Orchomenus, or Egyptian Thebes, 'where the houses contain the most treasures, and there are a hundred gates, through each of which drive out two hundred warriors with horses and chariots'; not even gifts 'as innumerable as grains of sand or dust' will suffice to reconcile them.[19] The Trojan forces are as myriad as leaves and flowers in spring (2.468); Iris, disguised as Polites, tells Priam the Achaeans' numbers are as those of leaves or grains of sand (2.800). Hector addresses his 'tribes of uncounted allies';[20] the Achaeans' helmets and weaponry glitter as they flow thick and fast from the ships, like snowflakes sent by Zeus fluttering as they are blown along by the North Wind (19.357–361).

There is also outrageous hyperbole. Nestor recalls slaying Ereuthalion, the biggest and strongest man he ever saw, whose huge prostrate bulk sprawled over a vast area (7.155–156). Later he claims, implausibly, that in a long-ago battle against the Epeians he single-handedly felled fifty chariots and killed the two warriors riding in them: a display of valour and battlefield slaughter (*aristeia*) of no fewer than a hundred battlefield killings in one incident (11.747–749). The Trojan king Erichthonius had three thousand mares grazing in his pasturelands (20.221). There is especial enormity to the outsize world inhabited by the gods. Hera's chariot has curving bronze wheels with eight spokes, whereas nearly all Bronze Age and Early Iron Age depictions have just four, and only occasionally six.[21] Athena's helmet has two horns and four golden bosses, and is 'fitted out with the men-at-arms of a hundred cities', an image designed to suggest the huge size of both helmet and wearer.[22] It is beyond

19 ὅσα ψάμαθός τε κόνις τε (9.381–385); see Kirk 1985, 245 on line 2.800. Leaves are usually symbols of renewability rather than multitude; for sand in this latter sense see 9.385.

20 μυρία φῦλα περικτιόνων ἐπικούρων (17.220).

21 ὀκτάκνημα (5.723). See Kirk 1990, 133 on lines 5.722–723; Lorimer 1950, 319.

22 χρυσείην, ἑκατὸν πολίων πρυλέεσσ' ἀραρυῖαν (5.744). See Kirk 1990, 135 on lines 5.743–744.

the capacity of the human imagination to visualize a helmet on a scale that can accommodate individual depictions of a hundred cities and their attendant soldiers, presumably in multiples of a hundred. Athena fells Ares and he stretches out across seven plethra: a plethron is a measure approximately equivalent to 100-foot square, or a quarter of an acre (21.407). The sense of unbelievable scale even enters the poem's acoustics. Ares and Poseidon both bellow as loud as nine or ten thousand warriors in battle (5.859–860, 13.148–149; see also 18.219–220).

But infinity is temporal as well as spatial, quantitative and sensory, and often indicated by adjectives with a prefixed 'privative alpha', an 'a' with a negativizing sense; the repeated initial alphas condition the poem's pessimistic emotional and acoustic impact. Agamemnon's sceptre, made by Hephaestus, is 'forever imperishable' (*aphthiton*, 2.46, 186). Hector believes that if he kills Achilles, his glorious reputation will be spoken of by men in days to come and will never die. Helen's griefs are unceasing (3.412), as the tales told by old men can be, says Iris in disguise as Polites to Priam. War is unabating (*aliastos*), as can be battle, din and lamentation (14.57, 12.471, 24.76). The fire that gleams from Diomedes' arms is unwearying (*akamaton*, 5.4), an Ancient Near Eastern motif, too.[23] Achilles is 'insatiable (*akorēton*) of war'. Both divine laughter and human shouting can be 'inextinguishable' (*asbestos*). So is Hector's courage as he faces Achilles before their final showdown. A fit of trembling can be boundless, or unceasing (*aspeton*). The sense of infinitude affects everything. Hera 'rages unceasingly (*asperches*)'; Achilles believed his wrath against Agamemnon would never end; Achilles tells his horses he intends to drive the Trojans to a 'surfeit of war' (19.423).

Unlike the *Iliad's* humans, its immortals, at least the supreme couple, Zeus and Hera, and their favourite messenger, Iris, do seem aware that there are specific if extremely remote limits inherent in the cosmos, at least to the earth and sea, and that a people known as the Ethiopians live faraway near the streams of Ocean that encircle the world (23.205–206). But other geophysical boundaries are deep beneath the earth in Tartaros, where neither sun nor wind can reach them, rather than knowable by living human beings. Zeus tells the furious Hera that he is unconcerned about her anger, even if she should go to the deep place where Iapetus and Cronus now reside at the 'nethermost bounds (*peirath*') of earth and sea' (8.478–479). Hera lies to Aphrodite, saying that she is about to travel to 'the limits (*peirata*) of the all-nurturing earth' (14.200), where Ocean, 'from whom the gods are sprung' (14.301)

23 Kirk 1990, 53 on line 5.4.

and Tethys live, but are endlessly quarrelling.[24] Iris tells the Winds that she needs to travel via the stream of Ocean to the land of the Ethiopians (23.205–206). We are required to imagine Hera grasping the entire bounteous earth in one hand and the shimmering sea in her other when Hypnos prescribes how she is to take her oath to him (14.271–273).

This distinctive idiom of gargantuan scale and unboundedness, 'Homer's characteristic evocation of dimension beyond measurement',[25] is a constituent of the poem's grandeur imitated by emulators and parodists such as Aristophanes and Lucian,[26] and admired by ancient literary critics. Longinus regarded it as lending Homeric epic, especially the *Iliad*, true sublimity or elevation. Longinus identifies as sublime the evocation and deliberate magnification of huge distance, between earth and heaven, encompassed by Eris' stature or the length of divine horses' strides (*Iliad* 4.441–443; 5.770; *On the Sublime* 16). In Longinus' conflation of two passages about Poseidon, whose coming makes forests, mountains, Troy and the Achaeans' ships all quake, the literary critic says that Homer singles out a 'majesty' that surpasses even the Theomachy.[27] Homer is himself 'swept away by whirlwind' when he describes Hector raging like Ares, wielder of the spear, like a wild fire among the mountains in the thickets of a deep wood (16.605).[28] Longinus praises Euripides' intermittent grandeur by quoting a simile from the *Iliad* in which Achilles is compared with a wounded lion working himself up to fight;[29] both the literary critic and the tragedian were responding to the unforgettable imprint on the poem that Homer's refashioning of the lion has left, whether as threatening marauder or victim of the human hunt.[30]

24 οὐδ' εἴ κε τὰ νείατα πείραθ' ἵκηαι/ γαίης καὶ πόντοιο 8.478–479; πολυφόρβου πείρατα γαίης (14.200). See Bergren 1975, 21, 106–107 and 111 on *peirar* referring to the ends of the earth, the limit of the human world, in early Greek poetry, including *Iliad* 14.200–201, 14.301–302; see also *Hymn to Aphrodite* 226–227, Hesiod *Works* 168 and *Theog*. 333–335, 622, 738, 809. On the formidable powers with which Ocean is invested in the *Iliad*, albeit 'with the lightest of touches', see Ali 2019, 241–242.

25 Heiden 2008, 187.

26 Hall 2006, 344–349; Hall (forthcoming).

27 *On the Sublime* 9; this is a conflation of two Iliadic passages: 21.388 (confused in the quotation with 5.750), and 20.61–65.

28 On the *Sublime* 9.

29 On the *Sublime* 15; *Iliad* 20.170.

30 Lonsdale 1990, 1.

5 The (meta)physics of the *Iliad*

The *Iliad*'s evocations of scale, infinity, and the chaotic beauty of elemental and feral nature are some of the characteristics that makes it speak so loud to a modern age riven with anxiety about Armageddon. During Achilles' apocalyptic fight against the River Scamander, Homer introduces a crucial simile that encapsulates the conflicted relations between man and environment that characterise the entire world of the poem. The great river-god behaves like a stream of water whose course a gardener has tried to divert (21.258–264):

It was like when a man guides the flow of a stream of water from a murky spring, leading it through his plants and gardens with a mattock in his hands, creating dams in its course.

> As it flows along, all the pebbles underneath are swept along with it,
> and it rolls quickly onwards with a gushing sound.
> and it overtakes even the man who is guiding it.
> That was how the streaming wave continuously overtook Achilles,
> despite his swiftness. For the gods are more powerful than men.

Man knows how to interfere in nature in order to make it serve his ends but cannot predict the full consequences of that interference. For something — the ancients called it the gods — is more powerful than men.

Investigating the relationship between the physical world, human action and metaphysical, divine power reveals a complex picture. The poem at times offers a cosmic or 'god's-eye-view', especially in descriptions of the gods watching combat from elevated places, and in the similes and on the shield, but the dominant perspective is that of humans bound within claustrophobic local horizons. The boundary between divine corporeality and constitution by a sentient force field, element or material entity is porous. The lines dividing divine, human and even animal and elemental spheres are likewise permeable. Humans can be children, grandchildren of more remote descendants of gods; there is a striking group who are offspring of rivers and water-nymphs. Humans may know that a god is manipulating a natural phenomenon, but they are frequently unaware of it. The difficulty of knowing whether a god is behind an environmental event is emphasized in the extraordinary variety of similes comparing human figures and actions, in the main narrative, to other phenomena in nature. We hear little about the actual elements and weather conditions in the main narrative, and instances of pathetic fallacy are few. Wild fauna of all kinds share the elemental and meteorological world of the heroes, too, but like weather and the elements, preponderate in similes.

6 Changing interpretations of the *Iliad*

The most influential interpretation of the *Iliad* in modern times, Simone Weil's extraordinary essay '*L'Iliade* ou le poème de la force', '*The Iliad*, or The Poem of Force', was written as war broke out in 1939 and first published in 1940. I am in complete agreement with her identification of physical compulsion and violence and their tragic consequences as the central subject-matter of the epic poem. One reason why Weil's essay in hindsight seems so significant is that her account of the annihilation of Troy seems almost eerily to have anticipated the genocides and wholesale destruction of entire cities by both conventional and nuclear bombs which, when she was writing, the humans waging World War II were about to inflict on themselves and on the other organisms with which they share Planet Earth. But another reason for her essay's importance is that it theorised and came to represent the new revulsion that had first appeared at the dawn of the 20th century against the epic's celebration of martial violence. It was the carnage of the Boer War and especially in the Western Front trenches which led to the warriors of the *Iliad* being reassessed and dislodged from their plinths as exemplars of manly heroism.

More recently, it took the rise of feminism in both scholarship and public culture for the plight of the epic's women, locked in the brutal patriarchal system of commodity exchange it depicts, to receive the gender-sensitive readings they deserved. In the 21st century, at the same time as the idea of the 'Anthropocene' has made a mark on the public imagination, and some geologists are dating its inception to the Bronze Age, creative artists have just begun to respond to the sense of excessive consumption and ensuing apocalypse that underlies the *Iliad*. But, with a few notable exceptions,[31] scholarship has lagged behind. Our new awareness of the urgency of the global ecological crisis facing us makes it now a pressing obligation to reassess the Homeric warriors' rapacity towards their natural environment.

During the last few decades, there have been new initiatives in ecological thinking about human literary culture, and these initiatives are beginning to be acknowledged and implemented by classicists as well. In a forthcoming monograph I fuse these approaches with both a more old-fashioned aesthetic appreciation and interest in the relations between the humans performing and profiting from the labour required by the mode of production in any human society.[32] This reveals the *Iliad*'s absolute erasure of mining and transporting ore to smithies, and meagre emphasis on hard domestic or agricultural drudgery. The bifurcated approach, blending

31 See especially Schliephake 2017 and 2020; König 2022.

32 Hall 2025.

ecological thinking with Marxist interest in human modes of production and the labour they entailed, suggests questions ask about the *Iliad*'s 'political ecology' and 'environmental unconscious', and the methods used to try to answer them. This project is the basis for my forthcoming monograph, *The Iliad, Poem of the Anthropocene* (Yale University Press 2025).

This article argues that the *Iliad* can help us fight back against this dire new stage in the history of humanity. A green reading shows that the seeds of environmental catastrophe were already sown by warfare millennia ago: on many occasions, "the antinomies that structure the modern sense of nature (nature and culture, nature and art) seem easily traced to Greek origin".[33] This foundational text in the culture of the world can be instrumentalised in our attempt not only to prevent World War III but to rescue our planet and all the living organisms we share it with from disaster.

7 Excessive Consumption in the *Iliad*

The sheer volume of timber that the *Iliad* assumes was expended on the Trojan War — for ships, arms and fortifications, fires, cooking, funeral pyres — is breathtaking and in mediated aesthetic form is related to the real-world deforestation of the eastern Mediterranean in the same historical period. Mount Ida in particular is regarded as a source of 'limitless' wood. The importance of wood to the economy of the Bronze and Iron Ages is spectacularly revealed in the Iliad's many similes comparing warriors felled on the battlefield with trees being chopped down, and warriors successful in battle with loggers. But humans are also compared with natural events, such as wildfires and rivers in flood, that threaten entire forests. In the *Iliad*, trees may be magnificent, but their purpose is to be exploited by human beings. Tree-felling and carpentry in the poem have long been read by scholars as symbolizing man's commendable shaping of nature into civilization, but their poetic presentation can equally be interpreted as proleptically visualizing the deforestation that has always gone in tandem with man's destruction of his environment.

Although there are occasional nostalgic glimpses of a pastoral life when shepherds tended their animals in the mountains, forests were ruthlessly destroyed throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages, on plains, in valleys and on mountains, to make way for cereal crops and pasturing of livestock. The *Iliad* portrays farmers as desperately vulnerable to elemental and meteorological phenomena, while celebrating

33 Holmes 2017, xi.

over-consumption in the form of the supererogatory quantities of domesticated animals, especially cattle, devoured by Achaeans and Trojans alike. The world of the similes also portrays chaotic complicated interactions, involving metal tools and weapons, between humans, trees and domesticated livestock as well as creatures of the wild. Armed humans and animals are both hunters and hunted in a frenzied dialectic. The terms of the comparison shift constantly, creating confusion as to the precise significance of humanity in relation to the animals it domesticates: are all humans like animals, or does inferior social class make a human like an animal under the power of its pack, flock or herd leader? The permutations are seemingly (almost) infinite: the unruly world of Homeric analogy can never make up its mind.

Dogs disrupt the boundary between feral and tame animals, subservient to and cooperating with humans as guard-dogs and hunting hounds, but also ranging wild across the landscape to scavenge, an ever-present threat to human corpses. Disruption to fixed conceptual and ideological categories is also caused when the effect of the poem's customary idiom of infinitude is punctured by a sudden observation that sounds more appropriate to Hesiod's authorial persona; on these rare occasions, we hear a poetic voice better suited to a struggling peasant farmer than to one of Homer's wealthy men who sacrifice many hecatombs and pay 'infinite' bride-prices and ransoms from their unbelievably enormous flocks and herds. Thetis sounds more like a Boeotian farmer's wife than a goddess when we hear that she had given Achilles windproof cloaks before he left for windy Troy (16.224). A simile imagines two indigent farmers fighting over a tiny patch of land (12.421–423). Another visualizes a poverty-stricken woman weighing the wool she must spin 'to earn a meagre wage for her children' (12.433–435). Pandarus left his horses at home because he knew fodder would be in short supply at Troy (5.202–203). Hector is aware that war entails lavish consumption of capital (18.288–292). Agamemnon knows that the timber of the ships at Troy has begun to rot irretrievably (2.134–135).

Woodland was cleared at an appalling rate to supply the fires for the vats in which crude ore was smelted and for the anvils on which bronze weapons and iron tools were crafted by smiths. But 'work' in the *Iliad* primarily means exertion on the battlefield. The poem, while revelling in hyperbolic accounts of the consumption, feel, appearance and sound of fabulous artefacts and bronze weapons, erases all sign of the vast human labour required to get workable bronze, iron, gold and tin as far as the smithy. There are nearly 450 instances of words related to or compounded with 'bronze' in the *Iliad*. No wonder an ancient tradition arose that Homer had himself been blinded by the bronze arms and armour worn by the resurrected Achilles at his tomb. The poem seems overwhelmingly to celebrate the glare of bronze on the battlefield and its deadly consequences, but on one occasion the poet acknowledges that the sight would distress any but the most hard-hearted

of witnesses (13.343–344), as the hard labour and extractive practices it would have necessitated must surely distress us today.

The greatest metal artefact in the *Iliad* is the new shield Hephaestus makes for Achilles, which depicts cosmic entities such as the sun and stars and Ocean running around its circumference. Humans are depicted in two communities, one at peace and one at war. Although the peaceful community has been celebrated as an ideal both in and beyond the Academy ever since World War II, and read as Homer's humanist vision of the desirability of peace, the shield can equally be interpreted as containing terrifying details even within the apparently peaceful ritual, civic and agricultural scenes. These imply that, from a timeless cosmic perspective, human existence even inside supposedly 'civilised' society is frighteningly precarious, unstable, dangerous and unfair, or, as Thomas Hobbes described life *outside* society, 'poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.[34] A reading inspired by environmentalist Aldo Leopard suggests that we focus, rather, on the image of the circular Ocean as a symbol of the sort of sustainable and mutually beneficial relationship with nature that humans should be evolving.

Book 21 of the *Iliad* portrays the culmination of Achilles' wrath in his fight with the River Scamander, and an elemental confrontation in the conflict between Scamander and Hephaestus' fire. We witness cataclysmic flood and conflagration, the wholesale destruction of life — botanical and zoological as well as human — in scenes of aesthetically brilliant but nightmarish elemental mayhem unparalleled in the rest of the poem; they offer a vision of what the world might have become if Hera had not acted to stop this elemental aquatic apocalypse, merely in order to save Achilles to fight another day. Images of clogged rivers, trees and soil torn from riverbanks, dying humans and other fauna, expanses of water on fire and winds driving fire across flatlands, consuming everything in its path, are terrifyingly suggestive of the scenes of natural and manmade disaster that confront us on news channels today. Achilles directly causes 'natural' catastrophe by his careless assault on the River; in the same book, we are offered that unique and environmentally prescient simile where a gardener's thoughtless interference in nature, by attempting to divert a stream in an orchard, produces unexpected and far from welcome results (21.258–264, see section 5 above).

34 Hobbes 1651, 13.9.76.

8 Fighting back: The *Iliad* as poem *for* the anthropocene

Planet Earth has existed for 4.5 billion years and life for about 3.5 billion. Modern hominids appeared only 500,000 years ago, but people as we know them only emerged about 70,000 years before our era. The *Iliad* shows that the seeds of environmental catastrophe were already sown by warfare at the dawn of civilisation less than ten thousand years ago. Reading the *Iliad* ecologically gives us a new interpretation to add to the previous shifts in its meaning and repurposing across time. But my objective is also to encourage the epic's readers to action in our current battle for the survival of our planet's ecosystems. We need Achilles to go green and make do with just one tripod hereafter.

Marlene Sokolon has argued that we can repurpose the *Iliad* for our turbulent times by reinterpreting it as an early example of protest poetry. We can leverage Achilles' "challenge to authority, anger at injustice, and confrontation with the fragility of the human condition". The *Iliad* "provides insights into why human beings protest, connects political poetry to philosophic questions, and highlights the human being as a perennial protester who must face the inevitable choice of safety or perilous political action".[35] Emily Katz Anhalt, similarly, believes that retelling the story of Achilles' rage can help us to "see the costs of rage and violent revenge and to cultivate more constructive ways of interacting".[36] Sokolon and Katz are not thinking specifically about protesting against the failure of our rulers and industrialists to address continuing human depredation on the environment, but their points are well taken.

The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have retarded international cooperative initiatives aimed at reversing climate change. They have also already caused many thousands of deaths. Journalists and poets have inevitably begun to draw parallels with the tragic conflict portrayed in the greatest classical war poem, the Homeric *Iliad*. As we watch the bombardment of Ukrainian and Palestinian cities and the terror of refugee women and children, the tears of the widowed Andromache in the *Iliad* feel to many of us more agonisingly relevant than at any time since World War II.

The poem not only foresees innumerable fatalities and the annihilation of Trojan civilisation. It also predicts the total depopulation of what is now north-western Turkey and describes aggressive and irreversible Bronze-Age deforestation to provide

35 Sokolon 2008, 49.

36 Katz Anhalt 2017, 3.

the vast amounts of timber and metal needed to support both naval and land militias and to clear land for arable farming and livestock grazing, cooking and sacrifice. There has always been cavalier abuse of natural resources by humans in conflict.[37] Within a few weeks, the Russian invasion destroyed substantial parts of the Ukrainian infrastructure and poisoned its rivers and forests. But it is also causing irreversible damage to the global environment.

The terrible immediacy of the new wars has pushed the environmental crisis disastrously much further down humanity's list of priorities. But the conflicts are also directly and immeasurably exacerbating pollution. The *Washington Post* reports on the 'untold volumes of toxins and pollutants' recently released into the atmosphere.[38] Cluster bombs and thermobaric rockets ignite massive clouds of poisonous aerosols. Wildfire risk and biodiversity loss will blight Ukraine for generations. But they will also blight the world, bringing food crises, and threats of radiation from damaged nuclear plants reaching across eastern Europe and poisoning the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The war has sent oil and gas prices soaring, incentivising searches for new natural sources. Profit-driven fuel providers are cynically using the war as an excuse to make a high-carbon future unavoidable.

To end, however, on a cautiously optimistic note: the trees of Mount Ida have recently been protected by protestors — at least temporarily — from devastation by the contemporary mining industry. Part of the area was declared to be a national park in 1993, but the Turkish state subsequently sold land and mining rights for an enormous sum to the Canadian mining company Alamos Gold Inc. The proposed mining project is just twenty kilometres from Troy. In 2017 the Turkish project partner, Doğu Biga, began felling thousands of trees and removing the entire soil down to the bare rock. Around 200,000 trees were cut down. Cyanides began to be used for gold extraction, putting drinking water supplies at risk.[39]

But the extent of the tree clearance and destruction of natural environments were detected by satellites and drones. Images were collected by a Turkish environmental organisation, and a large protest camp was set up in 2019. Operations were successfully stalled, and the Turkish government removed Alamos' mining licences. The company has responded by registering a claim against the Republic of Turkey with the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes. It was reported in 2021 that the two of its subsidiaries directly involved, Alamos Gold Holdings Coöperatie U.A., and Alamos Gold Holdings B.V. "will file an investment treaty claim against the Republic of Turkey for expropriation and unfair and inequitable

37 Hughes 2014.

38 Nirappil, Duplain, Timsit and Villegas 2022.

39 Davies 2019; Gottschlich 2019.

treatment, among other things, with respect to their Turkish gold mining project. The claim will be filed under the Netherlands Turkey Bilateral Investment Treaty (the "Treaty"), and is expected to exceed $1 billion, representing the value of the Company's Turkish assets".[40]

People's action can work. It has, for the time being, saved some of the last remaining forests of Mount Ida, where the wood, regardless of what Homer's heroes say, never has been infinite. By accessing the *Iliad*'s ecological unconscious, now more than three millennia old, we can, as humans, enrich our struggle to ensure a better future. The *Iliad* is not only the poem *of* the Anthropocene; it has the potential truly to become the poem *for* the Anthropocene.

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