

## Early Greek Literature

### 2 ESSENTIAL QUESTION What literature did the early Greeks produce?

In addition to stories about gods, the Greeks told stories about their ancient heroes. Much of what we know about the early Greeks comes from stories passed down through generations and from long poems that told stories. These long poems are called **epic poems**. According to tradition, a blind man, Homer, composed the most famous epics.

**Epics of Homer** Homer's epic the *Iliad* is about the Trojan War, which started because a Trojan stole a Greek king's wife. In the *Iliad*, the Greeks surrounded the city of Troy for more than nine years, trying to capture it. The *Iliad* is famous for its portrayal of heroes. For example, no one could defeat the Greek warrior Achilles (uh•KIHL•eez). When he was a baby, his mother dipped him in a river that would make him live forever. But an arrow wounded Achilles in his one weak spot—the heel his mother held as she lowered him in the water—so he died.

For centuries, people thought Homer's story was fiction. Around 1870, archaeologists discovered the ruins of ancient Troy. A real war did take place there, but it did not happen exactly as the *Iliad* portrays it.

Homer's other major epic was the *Odyssey*. It describes the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus (oh•DIHS•YOOS) after the Trojan War. The Greek gods decided that Odysseus' trip home should take ten years. During that time, he and his men encountered many dangers. The gods sometimes helped Odysseus and sometimes worked against him.

These ancient stories still influence speech and art today. For instance, we use the phrase *Achilles' heel* to refer to a person's weakest area.

**Aesop's Fables** A **fable** is a short story, usually involving animals, that teaches a moral lesson. A storyteller named Aesop (EE•suhp) is credited with writing down many ancient Greek fables.

#### Primary Source Handbook

See the excerpt from the *Iliad*, pages R51–52.

#### Primary Source Handbook

See the excerpt from Aesop's Fables: The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, page R53.

**Achilles** The ancient Greek epics still influence our culture. For example, in 2004, the movie *Troy* retold the story of the Trojan War. Here the warrior Achilles does battle. ▼



One of Aesop's best-known fables is "The Hare and the Tortoise." In it, a hare (rabbit) makes fun of a tortoise (turtle) for being slow. The tortoise challenges the hare to a race. The hare is so sure he will win that he lies down for a nap. The tortoise never stops but goes at a slow, steady pace to the finish line. The hare wakes up too late for his speed to save him. We still use this story today to encourage people to work steadily at a task that seems impossible to accomplish.

**Cyclops** On Odysseus' long voyage, a one-eyed monster called a Cyclops made him and his men prisoners. The Cyclops ate several of the men before Odysseus defeated him. ▼

**REVIEW** Why are Homer's epics important?

### Lesson Summary

- The ancient Greeks created stories about their gods, who were important to their daily lives.
- The ancient Greeks honored their gods through festivals that included rituals and athletic games.
- Early Greeks wrote fables and epic poems.

### Why It Matters Now . . .

Greek mythology, epics, and fables continue to influence our literature, language, and movies.



## 2 Lesson Review

### Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of

Zeus	myth	epic poem
Mount Olympus	Olympics	fable

### Using Your Notes

**Making Generalizations** Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

2. How were Greek religious beliefs and Greek literature linked? Write your answer as a generalization.

Greek Religious Beliefs	Greek Literature



### Main Ideas

3. Why was mythology important to the lives of ancient Greeks?
4. What role did religious festivals play in Greek life?
5. How are the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* connected?

### Critical Thinking

6. **Drawing Conclusions from Sources** What lesson might the Greeks have learned from the myth of Prometheus?
7. **Comparing and Contrasting** In what key ways were the religions of Egypt and Greece similar and different?

### Activity

**Writing a Fable** Consider a moral lesson that is important to you. Working with a group, create a story that uses animals to teach that lesson.