Character overview

**Agamemnon**

*UXL Encyclopedia of World Mythology*


Full Text:

Agamemnon

Nationality/Culture

Greek/Roman

Pronunciation

ag-uh-MEM-non

Alternate Names

None

Appears In

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hyginus's *Fabulae*

Lineage

Son of Atreus and Aerope, King and Queen of Mycenae

**Character Overview**

According to Greek mythology, Agamemnon (pronounced ag-uh-MEM-non) was the king of Mycenae (pronounced mye-SEE-nee), a kingdom of ancient Greece. The leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War, he is one of the central figures in the *Iliad*, Homer's epic poem about the war. Greek writers generally portray Agamemnon as courageous but also as arrogant and overly proud, flaws that bring him misfortune and eventually lead to his death. The story of Agamemnon is often seen as a warning about the dangers of hubris, or too much self-confidence.

Agamemnon was one of two sons of Atreus (pronounced AY-tree-uhs), the king of Mycenae. While Agamemnon was still a
youth, Atreus was murdered by his nephew Aegisthus (pronounced ee-JUS-thus). Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus (pronounced men-uh-LAY-uhhs) fled to Sparta where King Tyndareus (pronounced tin-DAIR-ee-uhhs) granted them refuge and protection. The king gave his daughters to the brothers as wives. One daughter, Clytemnestra (pronounced klye-tem-NESS-truh), was already married, but Agamemnon killed her husband Tantalus and then married her. Menelaus took her beautiful sister Helen as his bride.

Agamemnon later returned to Mycenae, killed his uncle, and reclaimed his father's throne. He and Clytemnestra had four daughters, Chrysothemis (pronounced kry-so-THEEM-uhhs), Electra, Iphianissa (pronounced if-ee-uh-NISS-uh), and Iphigenia (pronounced if-uh-juh-NYE-uh), and a son, Orestes (pronounced ohr-ES-teez). Meanwhile, Menelaus became king of Sparta after the death of Tyndareus.

Some time later, Paris, the second son of King Priam of Troy, visited Menelaus in Sparta. The goddess Aphrodite had promised Paris earlier that he would have the love of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. When Paris returned to Troy, he took Helen with him. At the time of Menelaus's marriage to Helen, all the rulers of the Greek city-states had promised to come to her defense if necessary. Menelaus reminded them of their promise, and they agreed to go to war against Troy to bring Helen back. Agamemnon was chosen to lead the Greeks in battle.

Agamemnon prepared a fleet of ships to carry the Greeks to Troy. Just before the ships were ready to sail, however, he insulted the goddess Artemis (pronounced AHR-tuh-miss) by boasting that he was a better hunter than she and by killing a sacred stag. As punishment, Artemis caused the winds to die down so that the Greek fleet could not sail.

A seer, or person who can see the future, told Agamemnon that he could please Artemis and gain favorable winds by sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia to the goddess. The king tricked Clytemnestra into sending Iphigenia to him by saying that she was to marry the great warrior Achilles. When his daughter arrived, Agamemnon killed her. Although the sacrifice pleased Artemis, who allowed the Greek ships to sail, his actions would later result in terrible consequences for Agamemnon.

The Trojan War The Greeks fought the people of Troy for nine years and seized many of their cities; however, they failed to capture the city of Troy. This is the point at which the Iliad begins, and Agamemnon's arrogance and pride really come into play.

After winning a battle against the Trojans, Agamemnon was given a female prisoner named Chryseis (pronounced kry-SAY-is) as part of his reward for victory. She is the daughter of Chryses (pronounced KRY-sez), a priest of the god Apollo. Chryses begged for the return of his daughter, but Agamemnon refused. Angered, Apollo sent a plague to devastate the Greek forces.

The hero Achilles (pronounced uh-KILL-eez) demanded that Chryseis be returned to her father. Agamemnon still refused. He finally agreed on the condition that he be given Briseis (pronounced bry-SAY-is), a Trojan captive who was part of the reward given to Achilles. Achilles became so angry that he laid down his arms and refused to fight any longer. This proved to be a costly mistake, because without Achilles the Greeks began to lose ground.
The priest Chryses presented gifts to Agamemnon in an attempt to ransom his daughter Chryseis, who was part of the spoils of war given to Agamemnon. CILLES MERMET/ART RESOURCE, NY.

Achilles returned to the battle only after learning of the death of his close friend Patroclus (pronounced pa-TROH-kluhs). When he rejoined the Greek forces, the tide of battle turned. The Greeks drove off the Trojans, killed the great Trojan warrior Prince Hector, and went on to defeat the people of Troy and destroy their city. After the war, Agamemnon took the Trojan princess Cassandra back home as a prize.

The Death of Agamemnon While Agamemnon was away fighting the Trojans, his wife Clytemnestra took his nephew Aegisthus as her lover. As Agamemnon sailed home from Troy, Clytemnestra was plotting to kill him in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Cassandra, who had the power to foretell the future, warned Agamemnon that his wife would kill him. However, the gods had put a curse on Cassandra: although she would make accurate predictions, no one would believe them. True to the curse, Agamemnon ignored Cassandra's warning.

When Agamemnon returned home, Clytemnestra welcomed him by preparing a bath so that he might purify himself. As the king stepped out of the bath, Clytemnestra wrapped him in a garment that bound his arms so he could not move. Aegisthus then stabbed Agamemnon to death while Clytemnestra killed Cassandra. Another version of the story says that Clytemnestra herself slew Agamemnon with an ax. Agamemnon's son Orestes eventually avenged his father's murder by killing both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the help of his sister Electra.

Agamemnon in Context

Agamemnon was the leader of the Greek armies during the Trojan War, a nine-year battle between the Greeks and the Trojans. Although most ancient Greeks believed the Trojan War to be a historical fact, there is little remaining evidence that the war actually happened. By the 1800s ce, many scholars were convinced that the war was not a real event, and that Troy itself was probably not even a real place. However, more recent archeological finds suggest that Troy was indeed a real city, located in present-day Turkey.

The ancient Greeks, like the people of most ancient cultures in which warfare was common, valued strength and bravery,
and Agamemnon had both. His mission to Troy was successful. But he does not fare as well as the clever Odysseus (another key Greek leader during the war) who knew better when to fight, when to persuade, and when to lie low. Agamemnon was overly proud and blindly ambitious—both qualities that lead him to destruction. Ancient Greece was made up of independent city-states that often clashed. It is clear that, to the Greeks, an effective leader must be more than a brave and capable fighter—he must be diplomatic and clever, too. Agamemnon was not.

Key Themes and Symbols

One of the basic themes of Greek mythology is that all humans have a fate that cannot be escaped and limits they should not try to exceed. The Greeks believed that individuals must face their fate with pride and dignity, gaining as much fame as possible. Agamemnon believed he could change fate by his own actions, and was therefore guilty of hubris. People guilty of hubris would eventually be punished by Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance. Agamemnon's tale also warns of the danger of pride. In ancient Greek mythology, most humans who boast that their beauty or skills surpass those of the gods are punished severely.

Agamemnon in Art, Literature, and Everyday Life

Agamemnon is a favorite character in many works of literature besides the Iliad. The ancient Greek playwrights Aeschylus (pronounced ES-kuh-lus), Euripides (pronounced yoo-RIP-i-deez), and Sophocles (pronounced SOF-uh-kleez) wrote a number of plays based on the life of Agamemnon. He was also a popular subject of ancient Roman authors such as Ovid and Seneca. Later writers, including William Shakespeare and French playwright Jean Racine, included Agamemnon as a character in their works. In modern times, Agamemnon has served as a model for characters in works by poet T. S. Eliot and playwright Eugene O'Neill. Agamemnon has also been portrayed in films, usually those that relate the events of the Trojan War. Actor Sean Connery appeared as Agamemnon in the 1981 time-travel comedy Time Bandits, directed by Terry Gilliam.

Read, Write, Think, Discuss

How does Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia change the course of both the Trojan War and his own life? What choice would you have made if you were in his position? Why?

SEE ALSO Achilles; Aphrodite; Apollo; Cassandra; Electra; Greek Mythology; Hector; Helen of Troy; Iliad, The

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