

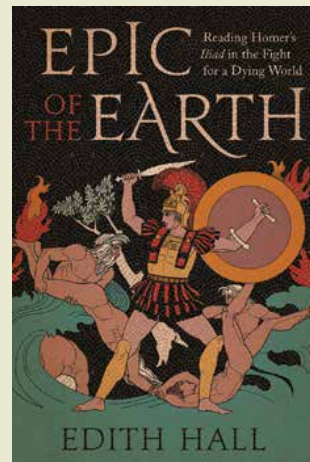
EPIC EARTH

Homer no longer belongs to the Western world, but has become a cultural property familiar on every continent. The subterranean impact of the *Iliad* on our species' global psyche may not be over-estimated. No later author could ever make a fresh start when shaping a representation of a quarrel between a self-regarding monarch and his able lieutenant, a council of gods, a siege war, or a redemptive meeting of deadly enemies. The same goes for the poem's visions of production and consumption of materials: 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 an implied infinitude of natural resources became aesthetic requirements because of the tonal effects of the *Iliad*, which has thereby legitimised the activities of every agent of extractive industrialisation and colonialism in history.

But the poem can help us save our planet if we read it in a way that exposes the contradictions underlying the environmental crisis we have created—it is a priceless document of the mindset of the early Anthropocene. This is what I attempt in my new book *Epic of the Earth: Reading Homer's Iliad in the Fight for a Dying World*.

The mountain range dominating the *Iliad* is Ida. Poseidon describes Mount Ida as 'wooded' and 'with many ridges' (21.439). Ida is a long subalpine massif consisting of limestone and green and black schist blocks. Many streams and waterfalls flow down its southern slope, giving rise to another of Ida's Homeric epithets, 'with many fountains'. An additional epithet for the mountain is 'mother of wild beasts'. Deer,

wild boar, and jackal still roam Ida, but the wolves, lynx, brown bears, and big cats have long since been exterminated by over-hunting.



EDITH HALL explores how the *Iliad* might encourage environmentalism while documenting a long history of devastation and deforestation

These epithets for Ida appear when Hera needs to seduce her husband Zeus. She goes with the god Sleep to the highest forest. Sleep climbs the tallest fir and disguises himself as a bird. It would have been an evergreen coniferous Turkish Fir (*Abies nordmanniana*, the subspecies labelled equi-trojani because it was assumed to have provided the wood for the Trojan Horse). This species, endemic to this single location, has been degraded by human logging for at least four millennia and is now officially endangered. It can reach

a height of 200 feet—Sleep's perch 'reached through the mists up to heaven' (14.288). Hera proceeds to the highest summit at Gargarus (now Karataş), a soaring 5,820 feet above sea level. Further down the slopes, botanical species still abound—succulent grasses and colourful flowering plants. But human activity and global warming have placed some species under threat of extinction.

The archaic Greeks already had a cavalier attitude to natural resources. Whenever they had denuded territory of its forests, they pressed ever further north, east and south from Asia Minor, to expropriate fresh supplies of land, trees and seams of ore from ever more distant peoples. Hades himself speaks of the earth as 'boundless', without limit (20.56-65). A crucial difference between the 21st-century perception of the earth and that of Homer's audience is that we now know there are limits to the earth and all its resources. We are unable to put ourselves in a mindset where there were always new lands to conquer, new forests to chop down and new ore to mine. But we can begin to glimpse what it felt like by examining the idiom of infinitude that informs Homeric magniloquence.

Timber from the forests of Ida is repeatedly said to be of unutterable extent, infinite, as unspeakable as the bronze armour of the Achaeans on the march (2.457), its gleam reaching the heavens. The flocks that Iphidamas had promised as an additional bride-price for his wife before he left for Troy were unutterable (11.245), in addition to the more prosaic quantity of a hundred cattle he had already put down as a deposit. The Hellespont is 'boundless' (24.545). Such evocations of scale, infinity, as well as the chaotic beauty of elemental and feral nature make the *Iliad* speak 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 poem's conflicted relations between man and environment. The great river-god behaves like a stream of water whose course a gardener has tried to divert, but it runs out of control and its torrents overtake him (21.258-64). Man knows how to interfere in nature to make it serve his ends, but he cannot predict the full consequences of that interference. It was impossible for me not to be reminded of this simile while I was researching this passage in September 2023, when the collapse of two dams in Derna, Libya, after a torrential storm, cost the lives of as many as 20,000 people.

The trees of Ida are consumed in gargantuan quantities in the *Iliad*. At the poem's final emotional climax, after forty days of conflict, brutality, and emotional agony, Priam asks Achilles for permission for his Trojans to leave the city inside which they are pent up to gather wood from the mountain (24.662-3). He subsequently orders the Trojans to collect wood for Hector's pyre. It is to be a great pyre, befitting the best of the Trojan warriors. The men go out to the mountains: 'for nine days they collected immeasurable amounts of wood' (24.795). But timber is not immeasurable. The UN Environment Programme's 2020 report, *The State of the World's Forests: Forests, Biodiversity, and People*, makes for a bitter and terrifying read. The world loses at least 37 million acres of forests every year. Yet the endangerment of the Amazon rainforest attracts less attention than it did in the 1980s and 1990s. The invasion in Ukraine, which began in 2022, and the Israel-Hamas conflict that exploded in October 2023, have further retarded international cooperative initiatives aimed at reversing climate change.

There are other obsequies in the *Iliad*, beginning with the densely packed pyres that burned for nine long days in the Achaean camp as Apollo relentlessly let loose his plague-bearing arrows (1.50). For the funeral of Patroclus, says Achilles, the Achaeans need enough wood to make an 'inexhaustible fire', to ensure the flesh of the corpse is fully burnt (23.152), and thus release the soul to Hades. Agamemnon orders the Achaeans to climb the spurs of 'Mount

in multitudes, as many as the stars in the sky (8.555-63). In book 9, a large enough fire is built by the Achaeans for 700 youths, plus seven sentinels, to cook their individual suppers over (9.85-8).

The importance of wood to the economy 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 wildfires and rivers in flood that threaten entire forests. The *Iliad*'s 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 laudable shaping of nature into civilization, but their poetic presentation can equally be interpreted as proleptically visualizing the deforestation that has always accompanied human 'progress'.

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 and especially to provide props in mines and sustain the fires for the vats in which crude ore was smelted and for the anvils on which bronze weapons and iron tools were forged. But 'work' in the *Iliad* 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 signs 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 denoting 'bronze'. 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 greatest metal artefact is the new



Ida with its many fountains' and chop down a vast number of 'high-crested' oak trees to make a pyre that is a massive one hundred foot square (23.114-10, 163-5). In book 7 there are two mass funerals for the dead of both sides involving the collection of even more of wood.

Fires are lit for other combat-related reasons. Hector orders the Trojans to gather an abundance of wood to make hundreds of watchfires (8.507-9). Moreover, every house in Troy is to build a great fire (8.520-1) to ward off ambushers. The fires, we hear, burned

ABOVE [Book cover]

ABOVE Trees for a funeral pyre? Odysseus kills Thracians on a Chalcidian black figure amphora attributed to the Inscription Painter, c. 540 BC, now at the Getty Villa. © Getty Open Content Programme

shield Hephaestus makes for Achilles, which depicts cosmic entities—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 ever since the Second World War and interpreted as Homer's humanist vision of the desirability of peace, there are 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, dangerous and unfair.


Book 21 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 become. Images of clogged

ivers, trees and soil torn from riverbanks, dying humans and other fauna, expanses of water on fire and winds driving fire across flatlands, terrifyingly suggest the scenes of natural and manmade disaster that confront us on news channels today.

The *Iliad* shows that the seeds of environmental catastrophe were already sown by warfare at the dawn of human civilisations less than ten thousand years ago. 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 Ida 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. In 2017 the Turkish project partner, Doğu Biga, began felling thousands of trees and removing the entire soil down to the bare rock. 200,000 trees were cut down. Cyanides began to be used for gold extraction.

But the extent of the tree clearance and pollution was detected by

satellites and drones. Images were collected by a Turkish environmental organisation; a protest camp was set up in 2019. Operations were successfully stalled. 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. In 2021 the company reported that the two of its subsidiaries, Alamos Gold Holdings Coöperatief 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 treatment, among other things, with respect to their Turkish gold-mining project.

People's action can work. It has, for now, saved some of the last remaining forests of Ida. The wood there, regardless of what Homer's heroes say, never has been infinite. By accessing the poem's ecological unconscious, now more than three millennia old, we can 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 Epic of the Earth, a poem for the Anthropocene. 

BELOW Mount Ida has been subject to deforestation for millennia. © Benoguzhan/Wikimedia Commons



MEMORY IN THE ARCHES OF HADRIAN AND CONSTANTINE



EMMA HEAGNEY, joint winner of this year's Hellenic Society Undergraduate Essay Prize, finds mutual aims in two of the great monuments of the ancient world