

Achilles!

Achilles was the hero of Homer's epic, *The Iliad*. I'm sure you all know the world-famous story, so I won't go over all that, but, in the some 3,000 years since the Trojan War, Achilles has come to represent many things in, both in History and in Western culture.

First, though, as with so many other epic characters in History, such as King Arthur, it should be noted that there is no evidence at all that Achilles or any of the major *Iliad* characters ever existed. Homer wrote *The Iliad* a few hundred years after the war was supposed to have occurred (c. 1175 BC). The Ancient Greeks thought the Trojan War was a historical event that had taken place in the 13th or 12th century BC, and believed that Troy was located in modern day Turkey near the Dardanelles. So, it all probability, there was an oral tradition of the war already in existence by the time Homer arrived on the scene. It's thought that he then took story's basics and turned it into what it has become—one of the greatest epics in literature and the world's greatest war story.

By modern times, however, both the war and Troy were widely believed to be non-historical. It wasn't until German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann excavated a site in Asia Minor which he identified as Troy (this claim is now accepted by most scholars) that Troy, itself, was rediscovered by the world. Whether there is any historical reality behind the Trojan War is an open question. Many scholars believe that there is a historical core to the tale, though this may simply mean that the Homeric stories are a fusion of various tales of sieges and expeditions by Mycenaean Greeks during the Bronze Age. It may well be that there was such a conflict (on a much smaller scale), and that some of the names involved—Agamemnon, Achilles, etc—were passed down to later become the protagonists in Homer's work.

When we think of Achilles today, we automatically think of Homer's Achilles, but *The Iliad* spawned a number of other literary works over the millennia, and some of what we associate with Achilles actually comes from these later works. For example, the idea that Achilles was invulnerable except for a heel didn't appear until the appearance of a poem by Statius in the first century AD. Thus, today, "Achilles' heel" has come to mean a person's principal weakness.

Anyone who's read *The Iliad* knows that, although Achilles was the supreme warrior, he certainly wasn't pictured as the most likable character. Hector was far more noble; Aias and Odysseus were much more sympathetic characters.

