

The Iliad

Book Twelve The Fight at the Barricade

[The battle continues at the wall, with Achaeans hemmed in; Polydamas advises Hector to leave the chariots behind; Trojans organize themselves into five companies for the assault; two Lapith spearmen guard the Achaean gate; Trojans receive a bad omen; Polydamas advises Hector not to attack the wall; Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus about their warrior code; Sarpedon assaults the wall; Menestheus asks for help from Ajax and Teucer; Ajax responds; Glaucus is wounded; Hector demolishes the doors in the gate; the Trojans breach the wall; Achaeans retreat to their ships]

And so, as Patroclus, Menoetius' fine son, looked after
wounded Eurypylus in his hut, Trojans and Achaeans
kept fighting on in clusters. The Danaan ditch
and the high broad wall weren't going to hold out long.
They'd built the wall, then dug the ditch around it,
to protect the ships and guard the ample plunder
stored inside. But they'd built it without sanction
from immortal gods—they'd made no splendid offering,
no sacrifices to the gods, asking them to keep
[10] their swift ships safe, so the wall soon fell apart.
As long as Hector lived and Achilles' anger
did not relent and Priam's city wasn't captured,
the huge Achaean wall remained intact.
But after so many of the finest Trojans died,
many Achaeans, too, though many did survive,
in the war's tenth year, Priam's city was destroyed.
When Achaeans sailed back to their dear native land,
then Poseidon and Apollo planned to erase that wall,
by stirring up the raging power of all rivers
[20] flowing from Mount Ida to the sea—Rhesus,
Heptaporus, Caresus, Rhodius, Granicus,
Aesepus, the sacred Scamander and Simoeis,
where many ox-hide shields and helmets had fallen
in the dust, along with a race of people half-divine.
Phoebus Apollo merged the mouths of all these rivers,
then for nine days drove the flood against the rampart.

Zeus brought constant rain to wash the wall away
into the sea more quickly. And Poseidon, too,
the Earthshaker himself, holding his trident,
[30] led the work, his waves eroding all foundations,
wood and stone Achaeans had worked so hard to set there.
He smoothed the shores of the fast-flowing Hellespont,
covering huge beaches once again with sand. The wall gone,
he changed the rivers, so they flowed on as before,
their lovely waters in their customary channels.
All this Apollo and Poseidon would do later on.

But then the din of war raged round the sturdy wall.
The battered timbers on the tower rattled.
Argives, broken by Zeus' whip, were all hemmed in
[40] beside their hollow ships, held back by fear of Hector,
whose powerful presence scared them, for, as before,
he battled like a whirlwind. Just as some wild boar
or lion faced with dogs and huntsmen keeps turning,
confident of his strength, and men form in a line,
preparing to go against the beast, hurling spears
in volleys from their hands—still it doesn't tremble,
show any fear in its brave heart, but its courage
kills the beast—repeatedly it whirls itself around,
threatening the ranks of men—that's how Hector then
[50] moved through the troops, urging men to attack the ditch
and charge across it. But his swift-footed horses balked,
standing at the very edge, neighing loudly,
terrified because the trench was wide to cross.
They couldn't easily jump over it or get through.
On both sides there were steep banks along its length,
with many large sharp stakes driven in the upper edge,
set there by Achaea's sons as a protection
against their enemies. There was no easy way
horses pulling chariots with wheels could move across.
[60] Even men on foot weren't confident about it.
Then Polydamas, coming up beside bold Hector, said:

“Hector, you other leaders, you allies,
it’s foolish to think of driving our swift horses
through this trench. It’s difficult to get across,
with those sharpened stakes projecting from it,
right by the Achaean wall. There’s no way
any charioteer could get down and fight.
There’s not much room. I think we’d get badly hurt.
If high-thundering Zeus intends to help the Trojans
[70] and harm Achaeans, wipe them out completely,
I’d prefer that happened right away,
so Achaeans all die here, far from Argos,
unremembered. But if they turn us back,
drive us from the ships, and trap us in the trench,
and if Achaeans then reorganize,
I don’t think any of us will get back
to our city with the news. But come,
let’s all agree to what I now propose—
attendants should hold the horses at the ditch.
[8] 0We’ll arm ourselves with heavy weapons,
then all follow Hector bunched up tightly.
Achaeans will not push us back, if it’s true
they’re already headed for destruction.”

What Polydamas had just proposed pleased Hector.
With his weapons, he jumped from his chariot to the ground.
The other Trojans did not hesitate. Seeing him do that,
they leapt quickly from their chariots and left them there.
Each man told his charioteer to keep the horses
in good order by the ditch. The men broke up in groups
[90] and organized themselves to form five companies,
with each one following its own leadership.
Some went with Hector and worthy Polydamas.
They were the best and most numerous, especially keen
to breach the wall and fight on at the hollow ships.
Cebriones went with them as third commander.
Paris led the second group, along with Agenor
and Alcathous. Helenus and godlike Deiphobus,

two sons of Priam, led the third contingent,
with a third commander, warlike Asius,
[100] son of Hyrtacus, whose huge horses had carried him
all the way from Arisbe by the Selleïs river.
The fourth group of warriors was headed by Aeneas,
Anchises' brave son, with Archelochus
and Acamas, two sons of Antenor, well skilled
in all the elements of war. The famous allies
Sarpedon led. He'd chosen to command with him
Glaucus and warlike Asteropaeus, for they seemed
clearly the best of all the others, after himself,
for among them all he was pre-eminent.
[110] These men linked themselves with sturdy bull's hide shields,
then in their eagerness made straight for the Danaans.
They thought no one could stop them, as they charged the ships.

Other Trojans and their famous allies followed
what excellent Polydamas had said to them,
but Asius, son of Hyrtacus, leader of men,
did not want to leave his horses or their driver,
the attendant charioteer. He brought them with him
as he went for the ships. The fool! He would not escape
his grim fate and come back from the ships to windy Troy,
[120] proudly boasting of his chariot and horses.
Before that happened an unwelcome fate took him
on the spear of Deucalion's proud son, Idomeneus.
Asius moved off to the left of the line of ships,
where Achaeans used to pass with horse and chariot
when returning from the plain. That's where he drove
his chariot and team. He found the gates unbarred—
men had drawn the long bolt and were holding them ajar,
just in case they might save one of their companions
escaping from the battle to the ships. At those gates
[130] Asius firmly aimed his horses. His men followed,
shouting loudly. They thought Achaeans could hold out
no longer, that they'd be assaulting the black ships.
How wrong they were! For at the gates they found two men,

two of the finest—proud-hearted sons of Lapith spearmen.
One was powerful Polypoetes, son of Peirithous,
the other Leonteus, a warrior like man-killing Ares.
These two made their stand before the lofty gate,
like two high-topped mountain oak trees which defy
wind and rain each and every day, anchored there
[140] by huge extensive roots—just like that, these two men,
trusting the power in their arms, held their position,
as great Asius approached. They did not run off.
Holding bull's hide shields up high, with loud shouts,
Asius' men came straight for the well-built wall,
behind lord Asius, Iamenus, Orestes,
Adamas, Asius' son, Thoön, and Oenomaus.

Up to now, the two Lapiths had been urging
well-armed Achaeans from inside the rampart
to defend their ships. But when they noticed Trojans
[150] charging the wall and Danaans running off and shouting,
the two men hurried out to fight beyond the gates.
Like wild mountain boars taking on a confused mob
of men and dogs attacking them—the beasts charge sideways,
shattering trees around them, ripping out the roots,
gnashing their teeth noisily, till someone
hits them with his spear and takes away their lives—
that's how the shining bronze sounded on these two,
as they moved out against the flying weapons.
But they fought bravely, relying on their strength
[160] and on those troops standing on the wall above them,
who kept throwing rocks down from the sturdy tower,
defending themselves, their huts, their well-built ships.
Stones fell to earth like snowflakes which some strong wind
pushing shadowy clouds drives downward in a storm,
so they strike the fertile earth, that's how thick and fast
flying weapons rained down then from Trojans and Achaeans.
Helmets and bossed shields rang out as they were hit
with rocks the size of millstones. Then Asius,
son of Hyrtacus, groaned in vexation, struck his thigh,

and cried out:

[170] “Father Zeus, how you love to lie!
I didn’t think these warrior Achaeans
could withstand the force of our all-powerful hands.
But they’re like yellow-banded wasps or bees
who’ve made their home by some rough road
and won’t leave their hollow house, but stay there,
guarding their offspring from the hunting men.
That’s how these men refuse to yield the gate,
though there’s just two of them, until they kill us
or are killed themselves.”

Asius complained,
[180] but his words did not win over Zeus’ mind,
for in his heart he wished to give Hector glory.

Other troops were battling on at other gates.
It would be hard for me to report all these events,
even if I were a god. For by that stone wall
blazing fires broke out everywhere. Though in distress,
Achaeans had no choice but to defend their ships—
gods helping Danaans in the fight were sad at heart.

The two Lapiths now began to kill in earnest.
Powerful Polypoetes, son of Peirithous,
[190] with his spear struck Damasus through his cheek piece.
The bronze helmet didn’t stop the spear—its bronze point
tore straight through his skull, splattering his brains
all through his helmet. That checked his fighting fury.
Then he slaughtered Pylon, as well as Ormenus.
With his spear, Leonteus, Ares’ assistant, hit
Hippomachus, son of Antimachus, in his belt.
Then, pulling out his sharp sword from its scabbard,
he charged the Trojan mass, struck Antiphates,
hitting him at close range first. So he lay there,
[200] on his back, motionless. Leonteus then struck down

in quick succession Menon, Iamenus, and Orestes—
all these lay prone there, on the all-nourishing earth.

While the two Lapiths were stripping shining armour
from the dead, young troops with Polydamas and Hector,
the most numerous and bravest of the men,
the ones most keen to breach the wall and burn the ships,
still stood along the ditch in some perplexity.
For as they'd assembled, eager to cross the trench,
a bird had gone above them, a high-flying eagle,
[210] moving past the left flank of the troops, gripping
in its talons a huge blood-red snake, still alive,
still struggling. It hadn't lost its will to fight.
Doubling up, it struck the bird that clutched it
beside the neck. The eagle, stung with pain,
let the snake fall down onto the ground, dropping it
right in the middle of the crowd. Then with a cry,
it flew off downwind. Seeing that writhing snake,
lying there in their midst, Trojans shuddered. It was a sign,
a powerful omen, from aegis-bearing Zeus.
[220] Polydamas then approached bold Hector and spoke out:

“Hector, you're always taking me to task,
though I give good advice in our assemblies.
For you maintain it's not appropriate
that someone else speak out against you,
either in a council meeting or in war,
for he should always back your leadership.
But now I'm going to say what seems to me
the best course we should take. Let's not advance
to fight Danaans by their ships. In my view,
[230] this is how all this will end. If that omen
was sent to Trojans keen to cross the ditch,
a high-flying eagle on our army's left
holding in its talons a blood-red snake,
still living, which it let drop before it reached
its nest, thus failing in its purpose,

to bring that snake back for its offspring,
then, like that bird, if we, with our great strength,
breach the gates and the Achaean wall,
and if Achaeans then retreat, we'll come back
[240] from the ships by this same route in disarray,
leaving behind many Trojans slaughtered
by Achaean bronze, as they defend their ships.
That's how a prophet would interpret this,
someone who in his heart knew the truth of signs
and in whom the people placed their trust."

Hector with his gleaming helmet scowled and said:

"Polydamas, I don't like what you've just said.
You know how to offer better comments.
But if you're serious in what you say,
[250] the gods themselves must have destroyed your wits.
You're telling me to set aside the plans
of thunder-loving Zeus, what he promised,
what he himself agreed to. You tell me
to put my faith in long-winged birds. I don't care,
or even notice, whether they fly off
to the right, towards Dawn's rising sun,
or to the left, towards the evening gloom.
Let's put our trust in great Zeus' counsel,
for he rules all mortals, all immortals.
[260] One omen is best—fight for your country.
Why are you afraid of war, of battle?
Even if the others are all slaughtered
by Achaean ships, you need have no fear
that you'll be killed. Your heart is neither brave
nor warlike. But if you hold back from war,
or with your words convince some other man
to turn away from battle, then you'll die,
struck by my spear."

Hector finished speaking.

Then he led his troops away. They followed him,
[270] making a huge noise. Thunder-loving Zeus then sent
gusting storm winds down from Ida, driving dust
straight at the ships, to disorient Achaeans
and give glory to Hector and the Trojans.
Trusting Zeus' sign and their own power, they tried
to force the great Achaean wall, dragging down
the tower's supporting beams, smashing parapets,
prying up projecting columns Achaeans had first put
into the earth to shore up their wall's foundations.
They dragged these back, hoping to undermine the wall.
[280] But even now Danaans did not back away.
They repaired the parapets with leather hides,
then hurled out weapons from there across the rampart
at the attacking Trojans.

The two Ajaxes
moved back and forth along the wall, urging men on,
firing up the fighting spirit in Achaeans.
To some men they called out words of encouragement.
Others, the ones they saw clearly moving off,
back from the fight, they taunted with abuse.

"Friends, whether you're an Achaean leader,
[290] or average, or one of the worst—for men
are not all equal when it comes to battle—
there's enough work here for everyone,
as you yourselves well know. So let no one here
turn back towards the ships, now you've heard
from your commander. Keep pushing forward,
keep shouting to each other, so that Zeus,
Olympian lord of lightning, may grant
we beat off this attack, repel the Trojans,
and drive them to their city."

Shouting words like these,
[300] the Ajaxes incited the Achaeans to fight on.

As snowflakes on a winter's day fall thick and fast,
when Counsellor Zeus begins to snow, to demonstrate
to men his weapons—first he calms the winds,
then snows steadily, till he's completely covered
high mountain peaks, jutting headlands, grassy meadows,
fertile farms of men, shedding snow on harbours,
inlets of the blue-grey sea, where waves roll in
to push back snow, while, from above, all the rest
is covered over, when Zeus storms with heavy snow—
[310] that's how thick the stones fell then on both sides,
some thrown on Trojans, some from Trojans on Achaeans.
The noise reverberated all along the wall.

At that point, glorious Hector and the Trojans
would not have crashed the gates or long bolts in the wall,
if Counsellor Zeus had not stirred his son Sarpedon
against Achaeans, like a lion going at short-horn cattle.
Sarpedon held his round shield in front of him,
forged by a smith of beautifully hammered bronze,
the inside formed of leather stitched in layers,
[320] held in place with golden wires encircling the rim.
Holding this shield before him, brandishing two spears,
he hurried forward like a mountain lion
long ravenous for meat, whose bold spirit pushes him
to go even into the protected sheep fold
to attack the flock, and even if he comes across
herdsmen with dogs and spears guarding sheep inside,
he won't leave that fold without making an attempt,
so he springs on one, seizes it, or is hit himself
in the first rush, by a spear from some swift hand—
[330] that's how godlike Sarpedon's spirit drove him then
to assault the wall, break down the parapets.
He called to Glaucus, Hippolochus' son:

“Glaucus,
why are we two awarded special honours,
with pride of place, the finest cuts of meat,

our wine cups always full in Lycia,
where all our people look on us as gods?
Why do we possess so much fine property,
by the river Xanthus, beside its banks,
rich vineyards and wheat-bearing ploughland?

[340] It's so we'll stand in the Lycian front ranks
and meet head on the blazing fires of battle,
so then some well-armed Lycian will say,

'They're not unworthy, those men who rule Lycia,
those kings of ours. It's true they eat plump sheep
and drink the best sweet wines—but they are strong,
fine men, who fight in Lycians' front ranks.'

Ah my friend, if we could escape this war,
and live forever, without growing old,
if we were ageless, then I'd not fight on
[350] in the foremost ranks, nor would I send you
to those wars where men win glory. But now,
a thousand shapes of fatal death confront us,
which no mortal man can flee from or avoid.
So let's go forward, to give the glory
to another man or win it for ourselves."

Sarpedon spoke. Without making any move
Glaucus agreed. They marched on straight ahead,
leading their large company of Lycians.
Seeing their advance, Menestheus, son of Peteos,
[360] shuddered, for they were aiming at his part of the wall,
bringing destruction with them. He looked around
at the Achaean tower, hoping he might see
some leader to protect his comrades from disaster.
He saw both Ajaxes, so keen for war, standing there.
Nearby was Teucer, who'd just come from his huts.
But there was no way they'd hear him if he shouted—
the noise was too intense. The din of smashed-in shields,
gates, and horsehair helmets—that sound reached heaven.

The doors were now all barred. Men stood outside them,
[370] trying to knock them down by force to pass on through.
Menestheus quickly sent herald Thoötes to Ajax:

“Noble Thoötes, run and call Ajax—
or rather both of them, if that’s possible—
that would be the best solution. Here we face
complete destruction any minute now.
Lycian leaders are pressing us so hard,
the ones who previously in bloody fights
have demonstrated their ferocity.
But if they’re having trouble where they are,
[380] with fights breaking out, let mighty Ajax,
son of Telamon, come by himself—
and with him that expert archer Teucer.”

Menestheus finished. Thoötes heard him and obeyed.
He ran along the bronze-clad Achaeans’ barricade,
then came and, standing by both Ajaxes, spoke up at once:

“You Ajaxes, leaders of bronze-armed Achaeans,
the son of Peteos, raised by gods, is calling you
to go to him and help relieve the battle strain,
if only for a while. And he’d prefer
[390] you both come. That would be the best solution.
There they face immediate destruction.
Lycian leaders are pressing them so hard,
the ones who previously in bloody fights
have demonstrated their ferocity.
But if you’re having trouble where you are,
with fights erupting, then let mighty Ajax,
son of Telamon, come by himself—
and with him that expert archer Teucer.”

Thoötes finished. Great Telamonian Ajax then agreed.
[400] At once he spoke winged words to Oïlean Ajax:

“Ajax, you and powerful Lycomedes,
you both stay here, stand firm. Rouse Danaans
to battle hard. I’ll go over there,
deal with that fight, and come back quickly,
once I’ve helped them out as best I can.”

That said, Telamonian Ajax left. With him
went Teucer, his brother, both from the same father.
Pandion also went, carrying Teucer’s curving bow.
Moving along the wall the three men reached the place
[410] where stout-hearted Menestheus stood. Here they found
soldiers hard pressed in the fight. The Lycians,
led on by powerful commanders, their kings,
were climbing up the parapets like some black whirlwind.
Ajax and the others jumped right into the fight.
The noise grew more intense.

Ajax, son of Telamon,
was the first to kill a man, brave Epicles,
companion of Sarpedon. Ajax hit him
with a massive jagged rock lying inside the wall,
near the top. No man now alive could heft that stone
[420] in his two hands, not even someone young and strong,
but Ajax raised it high, then hurled it, smashing
the man’s four-ridged helmet and completely crushing
his entire skull. Epicles fell, like a diver,
from that high tower, and his spirit left his bones.
Teucer struck mighty Glaucus, son of Hippolochus,
with an arrow shot from high up on the wall,
as Glaucus was moving up. He hit him on the arm,
on a part he saw exposed. That stopped Glaucus’ charge.
He climbed back down the wall, but stealthily,
[430] so no Achaean man could see that he’d been hit
and boast aloud about it. Sarpedon was upset
at Glaucus’ departure, when he noticed it,
but he did not neglect to keep up the attack.
He lunged at Alcmaon, Thestor’s son, speared him well,

then yanked his spear back, which pulled Alcmaon with it.
He fell forward—his finely decorated armour,
all of bronze, echoed as he crashed onto the ground.
With his strong hands, Sarpedon grabbed the parapet and pulled.
The whole construction fell apart, breaching the wall,
[440] creating a passage through for many men.

Ajax and Teucer now advanced together
to attack Sarpedon. Teucer hit him with an arrow
on the gleaming strap around his chest which held
his protective shield. But Zeus defended his own son
from deadly fates to make sure he'd not be destroyed
by the ships' sterns. Ajax then jumped in, striking his shield.
The point did not pass through, but its momentum
knocked Sarpedon back in the middle of his charge.
Sarpedon withdrew a little from the parapet,
[450] but did not retreat completely, for his heart
was set on seizing glory. So he called out,
rallying his godlike Lycians:

“You Lycians,
Why is your fighting spirit lessening?
It's hard for me, although I'm powerful,
to breach this wall alone and carve a pathway
to the ships. So come, battle on with me.
The more men there are, the better the work done.”

Sarpedon called. Fearing the censure of their leader,
troops made a heavy push around their counsellor king.
[460] On the other side, the Argives reinforced their ranks
inside the wall. For both sides a major fight ensued.
Lycians, though strong, could not break the Danaan wall
and cut their way through to the ships. Danaan spearmen
could not push the Lycians back, repel them from the wall,
now they'd reached it. As two men with measuring rods
quarrel over survey markers in a common field,
striving for a fair division in some narrow place,

that's how the parapet kept these troops apart.
High on the wall they hacked each other's armour—
[470] leather bucklers and large round shields across their chests,
quivering targets. Many men were wounded,
flesh slashed with pitiless bronze, those who turned aside
and left their backs exposed while fighting and those
hit right through their shields. Everywhere along the wall,
along the parapet, men's blood was spattered
from Trojans and Achaeans. But even so,
Trojans could not dislodge Achaeans from the wall.
Just as an industrious and honest woman
holds her scales, a weight on one side, wool on the other,
[480] until they balance, so she can glean a pittance
for her children, that's how evenly the battle raged,
until Zeus gave glory above all other men
to Hector, son of Priam, who was the first man
to jump inside that wall of the Achaeans.
He raised a resounding yell, crying to his Trojans:

“Drive forward, you horse-taming Trojans.
Breach that Argive wall. Then burn the ships
with a huge fire.”

With these words, he drove them on.
Their ears all caught his call. Hurling themselves at the wall
[490] in a dense mass, gripping sharp spears, they began to climb.
Hector picked up a rock lying before the gates,
thick at its base but tapering sharply on the top.
Two of the best working men now living
could not lever that stone out of the ground easily
into their cart, but Hector carried it with ease alone.
Crooked-minded Cronos' son made it light for him.
Just as a shepherd has no trouble carrying
a ram's fleece in one hand, hardly noticing the weight,
so Hector lifted up that rock, then carried it
[500] straight to the doors guarding the strongly fitted gates,
high double doors with two cross pieces holding them inside

secured with a single bolt. Hector moved up closer,
planted himself before the doors, his legs wide apart
to throw with greater force, then hurled that rock
right at the centre of the doors. He smashed both hinges.
The stone's momentum took it clear through the doors.
The gates groaned loudly. The bolts were sheared right off.
The impact of that boulder shattered all the planks.
Glorious Hector, his face like night's swift darkness,
[510] leapt inside. The bronze which covered his whole body
was a terrifying glitter. In his hand he held two spears.
Once he'd jumped inside the gates, no one moving out
to stop him could hold him back, except the gods.
From his eyes fire blazed. Wheeling through the throng,
he shouted to his Trojans to climb the wall.
His men responded to his call. Some scaled the wall,
others came pouring through the hole made in the gates.
Danaans were driven back among their hollow ships
in a rout, and the noisy tumult never stopped.