

Book 12

So there, back at the huts, Menoitios's valiant son
was tending the wounded Eurypylos; but meanwhile Argives
and Trojans were in a massed battle, nor was the Danaäns'
trench to save them much longer, or the broad wall above it:
the wall they'd made for their ships, and dug the encircling ditch 5
—but without any proper grand sacrifices to the gods—
to keep their swift ships and a mass of plunder safe
inside its circuit. But since it was built without the approval
of the immortal gods, not long did it stay unbreached.
While Hektōr still lived and Achilles nursed his wrath 10
and King Priam's city remained unsacked, so long
did the great wall of the Achaians also hold firm;
but when all the best of the Trojans had lost their lives,
many Argives too, some dead, some still surviving,
and Priam's city was sacked in the tenth year, and the Argives 15
had gone back in their ships to their own dear fatherland,
then it was that Poseidon and Apollo hatched their scheme
to level the wall, threw at it the force of all the rivers
flowing out from the mountains of Ida to the sea:
Rhēsos and Heptaporos, Karēsos and Rhodios, 20
Granikos, Aisēpos, bright Skamandros, and Simoeis—
where there fell in the dust many helmets and oxhide shields,
along with a whole generation of half-divine warriors—
the mouths of all these streams Apollo brought together,
and for nine days sent this torrent against the wall, while Zeus 25
brought rain without cease, to more quickly plunge the wall in
the sea.
The Earth-Shaker meanwhile, trident in hand, himself
was the leader: he used the waves to trash all those foundations
of logs and stones the Achaians had labored to set in place,
made smooth the shore beside the Hellespont's strong current, 30
and, the wall once leveled, decked the great beach once more
with sand; then turned the rivers all back to flow
in the channels where earlier they'd poured their rapid streams.

Thus were Poseidon and Apollo to act in time to come;
 but at the moment battle and war's din blazed all about 35
 the well-built wall, and the beams of its towers resounded
 as they took hits, while the Argives, beaten down by Zeus's lash,
 and held back by their hollow ships, were kept from action
 through their terror of Hektōr, the mighty deviser of rout,
 and he, as before, was battling like a whirlwind. 40
 As when, surrounded by dogs and hunters, a wild
 boar or lion turns at bay, exulting in his strength,
 while the men form a solid line, and make their stand
 against him, and they assail him with hunting-spears
 thick and fast, yet even so his indomitable spirit 45
 neither quails nor panics, although his courage can kill him;
 he keeps turning from side to side, making trial of the men's line,
 and wherever he charges, there the ranks give way—
 so Hektōr went through the mass exhorting his comrades,
 urged them on to get over the ditch. But his own horses, 50
 fleet though they were, did not dare, stopped dead at the edge
 neighing loudly: the ditch terrified them by its width,
 easy neither to jump at one bound nor to drive across,
 for round its whole circuit the banks on both sides stood
 overhanging, and up at the top it was planted with sharpened 55
 stakes all its length, driven in there by the Achaians' sons—
 large stakes, set close together, a defense against enemy fighters.
 No horse drawing even a well-wheeled chariot could
 surmount it with ease, but foot soldiers were hot to try it.
 It was now that Poulydamas came to bold Hektōr, saying: 60
 "Hektōr, and you other leaders of the Trojans and allies,
 trying to drive our horses over the ditch is senseless—
 crossing it's really hard, what with those sharp stakes
 set upright in it, so close to the wall of the Achaians!
 Nor is there any way that charioteers can dismount 65
 and fight there: space is cramped, I think we'd get hurt.
 If in his fury against the Achaians high-thundering Zeus
 intends to wipe them out utterly, really means to aid the Trojans,
 then for sure, I'd want this to happen immediately—
 the Achaians perishing here, far from Argos, forgotten. 70
 But if they turn and attack us, drive us back from the ships,
 and we get tangled up in the ditch they've dug, I think

not one of us then would get back to the city, even
to bring the news, once the Achaians had rallied their forces.
Let's all go with my proposal: we should have our henchmen 75
hold the horses in check, by the ditch, while we ourselves,
on foot, armed in our battle gear, all in one mass,
advance behind Hektōr. Then the Achaians will not face us,
if it's true that death's noose is already fastened on them."

So spoke Poulydamas: his shrewd words gave Hektōr comfort. 80
At once he sprang, armed, from his chariot to the ground,
nor did the other Trojans stay gathered behind their horses,
but all, when they saw noble Hektōr, themselves dismounted,
and each man instructed his personal charioteer
to rein back his horses, hold the line there by the ditch, 85
while they regrouped, drew themselves up, and, formed
into five companies, followed behind their leaders.

Some went along with Hektōr and peerless Poulydamas—
the biggest group and the best, those most determined
to break through the wall and fight by the hollow ships. 90
With these two went Kebrionēs as a third, for by his chariot
Hektōr had posted a less-seasoned replacement.
The second group Paris led, with Alkathōös and Agēnōr,
and the third was commanded by Helenos and godlike Deïphobos,
both Priam's sons: third with them went heroic Asios— 95
Asios, Hyrtakos's son, brought to Troy from Arisbē
by his team of big chestnut horses, from the Sellēis river.
Of the fourth group the leader was Anchīsēs' valiant son,
Aineias, and with him went the two sons of Antēnōr,
Akamas and Archelochos, well trained in all fighting skills. 100
The far-famed allies were led by Sarpēdōn, who had chosen
as his fellow commanders Glaukos and warlike Asteropaios,
since they seemed to him clearly the best, beyond all others,
after himself: but he was first over all. So they
lined up, protecting each other with their oxhide shields, 105
and made straight for the Danaäns, eagerly, sure they would not
be stood off longer, that now they'd assail them at their black ships.

Then the rest of the Trojans and their far-famed allies
acted on the advice of sagacious Poulydamas;
but Asios, Hyrtakos's son, that leader of men, refused 110

to abandon his horses along with their driver, his henchman,
 and set out to drive with them against the swift ships—
 fool that he was, not destined to escape the foul death-spirits,
 or, exulting in horses and chariot, to ever return
 from the ships, ever get back safely to windy Ilion, 115
 since too soon his accursed fate was to enfold him
 through the spear of Idomeneus, Deukaliön's noble son:
 for he charged at the ships' left wing, which was where the Achaians
 were coming back from the plain with their horses and chariots.
 There it was he drove his own chariot and team: at the entrance 120
 he found that the gates weren't shut or the crossbar in place,
 but men were keeping them open, hoping to rescue any
 comrades of theirs in flight to the ships from the fighting.
 Straight for this point he drove, and after him followed
 his troops, yelling loudly, convinced the Achaians would not 125
 hold them back any longer, but would fall by their black ships—
 fools that they were: they found at the gates two first-class fighters,
 both high-spirited sons of Lapith spearmen, one
 the son of Peirithoös, powerful Polypoitēs,
 the other Leonteus, a match for Arēs the killer. 130
 These two stood there in front of the lofty gateway
 like high-crested oaks in the mountains, that day by day
 stand up to wind and rainstorms, solidly set
 on their thick and lengthy roots: this was how they both,
 trusting the mighty strength of their hands, stood up 135
 to great Asios's onslaught, did not flee in panic
 as the Trojans made straight for the well-built wall, their oxhide
 shields held high, with loud war cries, gathered around
 Lord Asios, and Iamenos, Orestēs and Adamas
 son of Asios, and Thoön and Oinomäos. For a while 140
 the Lapiths, from inside the wall, had been urging on
 the well-greaved Achaians to fight in defense of the ships;
 but when they perceived these Trojans charging the wall,
 and the noisy confusion and flight of the Danaäns, then
 they both rushed out and fought in front of the gates, 145
 like a pair of wild boars that up in the mountains
 face the rabble of men and dogs closing in, make sorties
 from the flank, tearing through the undergrowth around them,
 ripping it up by the roots, and the sound of their gnashing
 tusks is loud, till a spear strikes home and robs them of life: 150

such was the clash of bright bronze on the chests of these two
 taking hits man to man: most valiantly they fought,
 trusting the troops above them, and their own might.
 Those high up were showering stones from the well-built towers
 in defense of themselves, and their huts, and their swift ships: 155
 thick as snowflakes the stones came plummeting earthward,
 flakes that a strong gale, driving the shadowy clouds,
 pours down thick and fast on the richly nurturing earth.
 Like them flew the missiles from these men's hands, both Achaians
 and Trojans alike, and helmets and bossed shields rang 160
 jarringly, when battered by great quern-like stones.
 Then Asios, Hyrtakos's son, groaned, slapping both his thighs
 in frustrated fury, and cried aloud: "Zeus, Father,
 it seems you too are a wholehearted lover of lies!
 I never really imagined that these Achaian heroes 165
 would be able to hold off our strength, our powerful hands—
 but like a swarm of fine-waisted wasps or bees
 that build a nest on some rocky track and refuse
 to abandon their hollow home and stay in place
 and fight off, for their offspring's sake, the men on their trail, 170
 so these men will not, though there's only the two of them,
 fall back from the gates while they're killing, or until they are
 killed."

So he spoke, but his words did not move the mind of Zeus:
 for to Hektôr it was his heart longed to give the glory.

But others were battling it out around the other gates, 175
 and hard it would be for me, like a god, to tell the whole tale,
 for all around the stone wall there arose devouring fire,
 since the Argives, though distressed, were forced to defend
 their ships; and the gods, too, were cast down in spirit—
 all those who were the supporters of the embattled Danaäns. 180
 Now the Lapiths launched themselves into warfare's combat,
 and the son of Peirithoös, powerful Polypoitēs,
 speared Damasos through his helmet's cheekpiece of bronze:
 the bronze helmet failed to deflect the spear point: it drove
 clean through metal and bone, mashing up as it went 185
 all the brains inside. It stopped his charge stone-dead.
 Polypoitēs next dispatched both Pylôn and Ormenos,
 while Leonteus, the son of Antimachos, scion of Arēs,

spearèd Hippomachos, striking him through his baldric;
 then, drawing from its scabbard his keen-edged sword 190
 he charged through the press and cut down, hand to hand,
 Antiphatēs first, who slumped to the ground, on his back,
 then Menōn, Orestēs, Iamenos—all of them he brought down,
 in quick succession, onto the richly nurturing earth.

While they were stripping these of their shining armor, 195
 Poulydamas and Hektōr and the young men following them—
 the biggest group and the best, those most determined
 to break through the wall and set the ships on fire—
 were still hesitant, stood uncertain beside the ditch.

They'd been eager to cross it—but then there was this omen, 200
 a high-flying eagle, skirting the army on the left,
 clutching a huge blood-red serpent in its talons,
 alive still and struggling: no way had it given up the fight,
 but reared back and struck at its captor, on the breast,
 close to the neck, and the eagle dropped it to the ground, 205
 agonized by the pain, in the midst of the troops, and then
 itself, with a scream, winged off on the wind's blast,
 while the Trojans shuddered at seeing the writhing serpent
 lying there in their midst, a portent from Zeus of the aegis.

Poulydamas now came up and addressed bold Hektōr: 210
 "Hektōr, you always manage to chide me in assembly,
 however good my advice. It would not, of course, be proper
 for a commoner to gainsay you, either in council
 or in war, but rather always to enhance your authority—
 despite that, I'll now tell you what seems to me our best course. 215

Let's not go on to fight the Danaäns for their ships,
 since here is the end I foresee, if it's true that this omen
 came for the Trojans, so eager to cross the ditch—
 a high-flying eagle, skirting the army on the left,
 a huge blood-red serpent clutched in his talons, still 220
 alive: yet he let it drop before he reached his dear home,
 and never managed to get it there, or let his young have it—
 so we, even if we break through the Achaians' gates and wall
 by our great strength, and the Achaians yield the ground,
 shall come back from the ships by the same path in disarray, 225
 leaving many a Trojan behind, slain by the Achaians
 with the bronze, in defense of their ships. This is the way

a seer would interpret this matter, one with clear knowledge
of omens at heart, a man to whom the people listened.”

Scowling darkly, bright-helmeted Hektōr then said: 230
“Poulydamas, what you’re proposing no longer pleases me—
you know how to think up a better speech than that!
But if you’re really making this suggestion in earnest,
then indeed the gods themselves must have killed your common
sense!

You’re telling me to forget loud-thundering Zeus’s 235
own plan, that he promised me, sealed with his assenting nod?
Yet you want me to pay attention to long-winged birds of prey,
creatures I neither bother with nor have regard for,
whether they’re flying right, towards dawn and the rising sun,
or left, in the direction of night and darkness! Rather 240
let us submit ourselves to the purposes of great Zeus,
the ruler over all, both mortals and immortals.

One omen is best, to fight in defense of your country!
Why should you be afraid of warfare and conflict? Even
were the rest of us to be slain, to the very last man, 245
at the ships of the Argives, there’s no fear of your dying,
since your heart is not a staunch fighter’s, is not battle-minded.
Even so, if you yourself shrink from combat, or persuade
some other man with your arguments, turn him against the war,
you’ll lose your life at that moment, felled by my spear.” 250

This said, he led the way, and the rest came after him,
with a deafening clamor, and Zeus the thunderer
whipped up from the mountains of Ida a gale-force wind
that blew dust straight at the ships, confused the Achaians’ minds
while granting great glory to the Trojans and to Hektōr. 255
So, trusting in his portents and their own strength,
they went about breaching the great wall of the Achaians.
They wrenched out the towers’ footings, tore down the breastwork,
pried loose the jutting timbers that the Achaians had first
embedded in the ground as the towers’ buttresses, 260
and hoped, by dragging these out from the Achaians’ wall
to breach it. Yet not even so would the Danaäns give ground,
but stuffed the gaps in the breastwork with their oxhide shields,
hurling missiles from there at the foemen now nearing the wall.

Both Aiases kept ranging to and fro between the towers, 265
 barking out orders, arousing the Achaians' strength and fury.
 One man they'd upbraid gently, another with harsh words—
 anyone they perceived giving up the fight altogether:
 "Friends, Argives, fighters prominent, middling, or
 of lesser account—in no way are all men equal 270
 in warfare—there's work here for all of you: this
 I reckon you know yourselves. Let no one turn back
 to the ships now he's heard these words of encouragement,
 but press forward, give heart to each other—it may yet be
 that Olympian Zeus, lord of the lightning, will grant us 275
 to stand off this assault, drive our enemies back to the city."

So the two cheered them on, roused the Achaians to battle.
 Just as snowflakes fall thickly on a winter day
 when Zeus the counselor stirs himself to produce
 a snowstorm, displaying these arrows of his to mankind, 280
 and, stilling the winds, will strew flakes until he's covered
 the lofty mountain peaks and the headlands' summits,
 the clovered plains and the fertile plowlands of men,
 and over the grey sea's harbors and beaches the snow descends,
 but the waves beat against it, repel it: everything else 285
 wears its mantle, when Zeus's snowstorm comes thickly down—
 just so from both sides the stones flew thick and fast,
 some at the Trojans, some from the Trojans at the Achaians,
 hurled back and forth: the whole wall thudded and clattered.

Yet not even then would illustrious Hektōr and the Trojans 290
 have breached the wall's gates and long door bolt, had not Zeus
 the counselor stirred up Sarpēdōn, his own son,
 against the Argives, like a lion against sleek cattle.
 Straightway he held out before him his well-balanced shield,
 a fine one, of hammered bronze, that the bronze smith had 295
 beaten out, and inside it had stitched oxhides, thickly layered,
 with golden hasps deployed all round its circumference.
 This he held before him, and brandished his two spears,
 and set out like some mountain-bred lion that for a long while
 has been without meat, and his bold spirit drives him on 300
 to attack the flocks, even to enter the close-built farmstead:
 for though there he encounters the herdsmen, who

with dogs and spears are setting a guard around the sheep,
 yet he won't be forced from the steading till he's made his attempt,
 but either he then springs in and snatches his prey, 305
 or is hit, while attacking, by a spear from some quick hand.
 In such wise did his spirit urge godlike Sarpēdōn on
 to make a rush at the wall, and break down its breastwork.
 At once he spoke to Glaukos, the son of Hippolochos:
 "Glaukos, why is it that we two are honored so highly, 310
 get the best places at table, choice meat, cups always full,
 back in Lycia? Why do all men there look on us like gods?
 We have that vast estate too, by the banks of the Xanthos—
 fine acres of orchard and good wheat-bearing plowland.
 "That's why we must take our stand among the front-line Lycians, 315
 and face up with them to the searing heat of battle,
 so that Lycia's corseleted soldiers may say this of us:
 "Not short of renown, then, are Lycia's overlords,
 these kings of ours: they may banquet on fattened sheep,
 and drink the best honey-sweet wine, but there's also great 320
 valor in them—they're out there with Lycia's foremost fighters."
 Ah, my friend, if the two of us could escape from this war,
 and be both immortal and ageless for all eternity,
 then neither would I myself be among the foremost fighters
 nor would I send you out into battle that wins men honor; 325
 but now—since come what may the death-spirits around us
 are myriad, something no mortal can flee or avoid—
 let's go on, to win ourselves glory, or yield it to others."
 So he spoke. Glaukos neither ignored nor disobeyed him,
 and both marched straight forward, leading the Lycian horde. 330
 At sight of them Menestheus, son of Peteos, shivered:
 it was his tower they were making for, bringing destruction.
 He looked out down the line of Achaian battlements,
 in the hope he'd find one of the leaders, to fend off disaster
 from him and his comrades, and saw the two Aiases, both 335
 gluttons for war, standing there, with Teukros beside them,
 just come from his hut. Yet no way could he make himself heard
 by shouting, so great was the din: the sound rose up to heaven
 of blows struck on shields and horsehair-crested helmets,
 or battering at the gates, all now shut, with the enemy outside 340
 up against them, striving to breach them, force their way in.

At once he dispatched to Aias the herald Thoôtēs:
 “Go, noble Thoôtēs, run, summon Aias back here—
 both of them, rather: that would be by far the best,
 for very soon here sheer destruction will be wrought, 345
 so hard do the Lycian leaders assail us, who’ve for long
 been fearsome opponents in these fierce engagements!
 But if for them there too hard fighting has arisen,
 then at least let one of the Aiases, Telamōn’s valiant son,
 come over here, and bring Teukros, that skilled archer, with him.” 350
 So he spoke. The herald heard, and did not ignore him,
 but ran off along the wall of the bronze-corseleted Achaians,
 and went up to the two Aiases, and quickly said:
 “You Aiases, leaders of the bronze-corseleted Achaians,
 the dear son of Peteōs, Zeus’s nursling, is insistent 355
 that you go to him, if only briefly, to face war’s toil—
 both of you, for choice, since that would be far the best,
 since very soon there sheer destruction will be wrought,
 so hard’s the attack by the Lycian leaders, who’ve long
 been our fearsome opponents in the raging conflicts! 360
 But if here for you too a crisis in the fighting has arisen,
 then at least let one Aias, Telamōn’s valiant son,
 come, and bring Teukros, that skilled archer, with him.”

 So he spoke. Great Aias, Telamōn’s son, took notice,
 and promptly addressed winged words to the son of Oileus: 365
 “Aias, you stay here, with powerful Lykomēdēs,
 and urge on the Danaāns to fight with all their strength,
 but I shall go over there, meet the enemy head-on,
 and quickly come back, after I’ve rescued the defenders.”

 So saying, Aias the son of Telamōn departed, 370
 and with him Teukros, his brother, son of the same father,
 and Pandiōn, who was carrying Teukros’s curved bow.
 When they arrived at the tower of great-hearted Menestheus,
 moving inside the wall, they found men sorely pressed,
 for all the mighty leaders and rulers of the Lycians 375
 were assailing the breastworks like a black tornado,
 and they clashed head-on in battle, and loud clamor arose.

 Aias the son of Telamōn was the first to kill his man,
 Sarpēdōn’s comrade, great-spirited Epiklēs—

with a great jagged rock he hit him, that was lying inside 380
 the wall, by the breastwork, at the top of a heap. No man—
 such as mortals today are, even those in the prime of youth—
 could shift it using both hands; but Aias hefted it high
 and flung it, smashing the plated helmet, crushing in
 the whole mass of his skull. Like a diver Epiklēs plunged 385
 off the high tower: the breath of life fled from his bones.
 Now Teukros hit Glaukos, Hippolochos’s mighty son,
 as he charged, with an arrow shot from the high wall—
 caught sight of his bared arm, put him out of the fight.
 Glaukos sprang down from the wall, but discreetly, so no Achaian 390
 would see he’d been hit, and boast loudly over him.
 Grief possessed Sarpēdōn over Glaukos’s departure
 the moment he noticed it; yet he did not neglect the fighting,
 but with a thrust of his spear pierced Alkmaiōn, Thestōr’s son,
 and pulled the spear out again. Alkmaiōn followed the spear, 395
 fell headlong, his bronze-inlaid armor rattling about him.
 Sarpēdōn seized the breastwork in his powerful hands
 and pulled. The whole length of it came free, and the wall
 was laid bare from above: he opened a path for many.

But Aias and Teukros now assailed him at once: the latter 400
 with an arrow to the bright baldric that held his protective shield
 in place over his torso; but Zeus warding off from his son
 the death-spirits, to stop him being killed at the ships’ sterns.
 Aias sprang at him, thrust at his shield: the spear point
 failed to go through, but nevertheless stopped his charge. 405
 He backed off a bit from the breastwork, yet did not withdraw
 completely, for his heart was still set on winning glory.
 So, turning around, he called out to the godlike Lycians:
 “Hey, Lycians, why thus abandon your fighting valor?
 It’s hard for me, strong though I am, to breach this wall 410
 single-handed, and open up a path to the ships—so come,
 join in the attack! The more men, the better the work gets done!”

So he spoke, and they, abashed by the king’s rebuke,
 pressed on harder around their lord and counselor,
 while the Argives against them now reinforced their ranks 415
 inside the wall. A huge task confronted them both.
 Neither were the strong Lycians able to breach the Danaäns’
 wall, and open up a path to the ships, nor yet

could the Danaän spearmen ever thrust the Lycians
 back from the wall, once they'd got up close to it; 420
 like two men in a dispute over boundary stones, who hold
 measuring rods in their hands, on some common plowland,
 each contending for his fair share of a narrow patch,
 so did the breastworks keep these men apart, while above them
 they hacked at the oxhide shields protecting each others' chests, 425
 the round shields and the fringed leather bucklers. Many now
 suffered flesh wounds from thrusts of the pitiless bronze, both when
 any one of the fighters turned round, exposing his back,
 while others were speared clean through the shield itself,
 and all down the line breastworks and towers were splashed 430
 with men's blood from both sides, Achaian and Trojan alike.
 Not even so could they bring about panic among the Achaians,
 who held out—just as an honest woman, a wool-worker,
 holds her scales, raises the weight and the wool in either pan,
 till they balance, to earn a paltry sum for her children: 435
 so these men's embattled conflict was stretched out, taut and equal,
 until Zeus granted the greater glory to Hektör,
 Priam's son, the first to leap down inside the Achaians' wall.
 Now, in a carrying voice, he called out to the Trojans:
 "Up with you, horse-breaker Trojans! Breach the Argives' wall!
 440 Fling your devouring fire in among their vessels!"

So he spoke, urging them on: they all gave ear,
 charged straight at the wall in a mass, then clambered up
 on the footings, sharp spears in their hands, while Hektör
 snatched up and carried a rock that he found lying 445
 before the gates: broad-based, but at its top sharp-pointed.
 Not without effort could two ordinary men
 have heaved it from ground to wagon—the best there were,
 such as mortals today are—yet he easily lifted it
 on his own, since the son of Kronos, that devious schemer, 450
 lightened it for him. As when a shepherd easily carries
 a ram's fleece in one hand, its weight a small burden for him,
 so Hektör hefted the rock and made straight for the beams
 that framed the close-set and strongly jointed gates—
 tall double gates, backed inside with a pair of cross-bars 455
 made fast with a single bolt. Up he came, stood close,
 put his whole weight into his throw, hit the gates in the middle—

legs spread well apart, so the shot would not lack force—
 and smashed them out of their sockets. The rock fell inside
 by its own weight. The gates groaned on either side: 460
 the cross-bars failed to hold, the doors were cracked wide open
 by the rock's force. Illustrious Hektōr leapt through,
 his face like swift nightfall. He shone in the terrible
 bronze that he wore on his body, he carried a couple
 of spears in his hands. None meeting him could have stopped him, 465
 none but the gods, once he'd leapt past the gates, and his eyes
 were ablaze with fire as he whirled about in the crowd
 and called on the Trojans to climb the wall. They responded
 to his appeal: at once some scaled the wall, while others
 streamed in by the well-made gates. The Danaäns fled in panic 470
 among their hollow ships, and a ceaseless clamor arose.