

Common Entrance Greek Myth Notes

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PERSEUS

Perseus and Medusa

Acrisius, a king of **Argos**, was told by the oracle that he would be killed by his own grandson. He imprisoned his daughter **Danae** in a brass tower so that she could not have a child who would grow up and kill him. However, Jupiter came into the tower in the form of a golden shower and soon afterwards she had a son by him whom she named **Perseus**.

Acrisius put them into a boat (or chest) without any food, hoping that they would drown or starve. However, the boat floated safely to the island of **Seriphus** where they were found by a kind fisherman, Dictys.

When Perseus was a young man, the island's king, **Polydectes**, became jealous of him. He also wanted to force Danae to marry him. Perseus was determined to protect his mother from the evil king. Therefore, to get rid of Perseus, Polydectes ordered him to bring back the head of the **Gorgon Medusa** one of three Gorgon sisters. Medusa was a monster with the body of a woman, bronze arms and hands and a head covered with snakes. She turned to stone anyone who looked at her.

Help from the gods

To help him in his quest Perseus received the following help from the gods:

A pair of winged sandals from **Hermes** (messenger of the gods).

A helmet which made the wearer invisible from **Hades** (king of the Underworld)

A curved sword made of diamonds from **Hephaestus** (god of fire)

A highly polished shield from **Athene** (goddess of wisdom and war)

Perseus went for guidance to the **Graiae** (three sisters of the Gorgons) who had one eye and one tooth between them. By hiding the eye and tooth, Perseus blackmailed the sisters into telling him the way to Medusa's lair.

When he arrived, he was able to kill Medusa with his sword while she slept by looking at her in his polished shield. This acted like a mirror so he did not have to look directly at her. In this way, he avoided being turned to stone. When Perseus cut off Medusa's head the winged horse **Pegasus** sprang up from her blood.

Perseus and Andromeda

As he flew home with Medusa's head in a sack, Perseus saw a beautiful girl called **Andromeda** who was tied to a rock by the edge of the sea. Her father, **King Cepheus of Ethiopia** had been told by the oracle that his daughter had to be sacrificed to an enormous sea monster, sent by the god **Poseidon** to ravage the land. Perseus showed the monster Medusa's head and turned it to stone. He was then able to kill it easily. The king promised Perseus that he could marry Andromeda. However, Perseus did not realise that Andromeda had already been betrothed to the king's brother **Phineus**. During a banquet, an angry Phineus attacked the palace with his men. Perseus turned Phineus and his men to stone using Medusa's head. Perseus then returned to Seriphus where his mother had hidden from Polydectes in the temple of **Athene**. Perseus turned Polydectes to stone and then gave Medusa's head as an offering to Athene.

PERSEUS

The Death of Acrisius

Perseus then set off back to Argos with his mother and Andromeda. On the way he took part in some games at **Larissa**. His grandfather Acrisius was also there, still trying to avoid Perseus and the fulfilment of the oracle. Perseus threw a discus which landed in the crowd and killed Acrisius making the oracle prediction finally come true. Perseus refused to accept the kingdom of Argos and instead founded the kingdom of Mycenae.

THESEUS

Theseus

Aegeus and Aethra

Aegeus, King of **Athens** went to **Troezen** where he met the princess **Aethra**. They conceived a child but Aegeus left Athens before the child was born. However, he left a golden sword and a pair of sandals under a rock and told Aethra that if she had a son who could lift the rock and retrieve them he should come to Athens as heir to the throne.

Aethra had a son, Theseus. When Theseus was sixteen he was able to recover the sword and sandals and went off to Athens. He decided to take the more difficult coastal route to the city to free the road from various villains who terrorised it.

Theseus and the Minotaur

Theseus finally reached Athens and lived happily with his father.

However, the king of **Crete**, **Minos**, had once waged war on Athens and refused to make peace until the Athenians agreed to send him seven young men and seven girls every year. These were to be devoured by the **Minotaur**, a monster with the body of a giant and the head of a bull. Minos kept him in a huge maze called the **Labyrinth**, underneath his palace at **Knossos**, designed by the famous inventor **Daedalus**.

Theseus decided to kill the monster and therefore volunteered to be one of the seven young men. As he left Athens, he promised Aegeus that he would change the sails of his ship from black to white as a sign of victory so that Aegeus would know if his son had been successful as soon as the ship came into view.

Theseus' journey home

When they arrived at Crete the King's daughter, **Ariadne**, fell in love with Theseus and decided to help him. She gave him a sword and a ball of thread which he unravelled as he went through the Labyrinth. Theseus found the Minotaur and killed him after a struggle. He successfully retraced his route back through the Labyrinth using the thread. He then fled back to his ship with Ariadne and the other Athenians.

On their journey home they stopped for the night at the island of Naxos. The next day they set sail but deliberately left Ariadne behind. She was eventually found by Bacchus, (god of wine), who made her his wife. As the ship came closer to Athens, Theseus forgot his arrangement with his father about the sails. Aegeus, seeing the black sails, thought that Theseus was dead and killed himself by throwing himself into the sea. To this day the sea is known as the **Aegean Sea**.

JASON

Jason and the Golden Fleece

Jason's father **Aeson** was the king of a land called **Iolcos**. However, he had been driven from the throne by his half brother **Pelias**. When Jason was a young man he was told by the oracle to demand the throne back from **Pelias**. On his way there he helped an old woman across a deep river. The old woman turned out to be the goddess **Hera** who always helped Jason from then on.

Meanwhile, **Pelias** had been warned to beware of a young man wearing only one sandal. Jason arrived to claim his kingdom with only one sandal having lost the other in the river as he rescued **Hera**. As he recognised his enemy, **Pelias** decided to get rid of him by sending him on an impossible journey: to bring back the Golden Fleece which was still held at Colchis by King **Aeetes**.

The Argonauts

Jason asked a man called **Argus** to build him a ship for the voyage. The ship was named **Argo** after him. Jason set sail with 53 companions who were known as the Argonauts.

Two adventures on the voyage

King Phineus and the Harpies

They then reached the island of blind king **Phineus**. **Phineus** was a prophet who had been blinded when he had made a prophecy which one of the gods did not like. His second punishment was that he was unable to eat. Every time food was placed before him, the **Harpies** snatched it away. The Harpies were monsters with the heads of women and the bodies and wings of vultures. Two of the Argonauts (the winged sons of the **North Wind**) drove the Harpies away. To thank them, **Phineus** told them how to avoid their next peril, **the Symplegades**.

The Symplegades (Clashing Rocks)

These were huge rocks in the sea which crashed together whenever anything passed between them. Following **Phineus'** advice, the Argonauts released a dove which flew between the rocks. The rocks crashed together and as they began to open again the Argonauts rowed the **Argo** through the gap as fast as they could. Once the Argonauts had sailed through, the rocks stayed open forever.

Jason in Colchis

Aeetes, King of Colchis, was amazed when the Argonauts arrived in his kingdom. When Jason demanded the Golden Fleece, the king set him three tasks which he thought would be impossible. He hoped that Jason would be killed.

The tasks

1. To yoke two fire breathing bulls and plough the Field of Ares
2. To sow the ploughed field with dragon's teeth and kill the army of warriors which grew from the teeth.
3. To kill the fleece's dragon guardian which never slept and to steal the fleece.

JASON

Help from the gods

Jason would not have managed these tasks without the gods' help. Aphrodite helped by causing Aeetes' daughter, Medea to fall in love with Jason. She had magic powers and promised to help him if he would marry her and take her back to Greece. She told him how to perform the first two tasks and gave him magic ointment to protect him from the bulls' fiery breath.

The taking of the Fleece

Jason successfully completed the first two tasks. He killed the armed men who sprang from the teeth by throwing a rock into their midst. This caused them to fight one another until all were dead.

Aeetes then said that if Jason killed the fleece's dragon guardian they could take the fleece away. But Medea warned him that her father meant to sacrifice them at dawn. Jason sent the rest of the Argonauts away to prepare the ship. Medea put the dragon to sleep and Jason took the fleece from its tree and hung it round his shoulders. They then ran to the Argo and sailed away. Medea's brother Apsyrtus went with them.

Medea's father soon discovered what had happened and followed the Argo. He would soon have destroyed them all if Medea had not sliced her brother to pieces and dropped the pieces overboard. Aeetes had to stop to gather up the pieces for burial and so the Argo easily escaped.

Jason and Medea

Avoiding many perils on the way home, the Argonauts at last returned to Iolcos. Using her magic powers Medea turned Jason's father into a young man again. Meanwhile Pelias still refused to give up the kingdom to Jason. Medea approached his daughters and told them she would give them the power to give Pelias back his youth too. However, instead, she caused the daughters to murder him.

Jason and Medea were forced to flee the country and went to Corinth. Here Jason left Medea and planned to marry another king's daughter. Medea was to be banished. In revenge, Medea poisoned the king and his daughter and her own children. She then fled to Athens. Jason was eventually killed many years later when a beam fell on him from the rotting Argo.

HERCULES

Hercules

Hercules was the son of **Zeus** but his mother was not Zeus' wife (Hera) but another woman called Alcmena. Because of this, Hera hated Hercules throughout his life. She tried to kill him when he was still a baby by sending two giant snakes into his bedroom. Hercules strangled them both with his bare hands.

When he was eighteen he married **Megara**, the daughter of the king of Thebes. Soon afterwards, Hera caused him to have a fit of madness which made him murder his wife and children.

He asked the oracle how he could make up for this terrible crime. He was told that he would have to obey all the commands of **King Eurystheus** (king of **Mycenae**) for twelve years. As soon as the cowardly king saw Hercules he was terrified by his strength and made up some tasks which he thought would be impossible.

Four of the Twelve Labours

1. The Lion of Nemea

Hercules was ordered to destroy and bring back the great lion which had been attacking the countryside of Nemea for many years. To his surprise, Hercules found that his weapons had no effect against the lion. He stunned it with his enormous club and strangled it with his bare hands. He took the lion back to the king and Eurystheus fled in terror. He then built himself a huge brass jar to hide in whenever Hercules frightened him. Hercules made the skin of the lion into a cloak which he always wore from then on.

2. The Hydra

Hercules was then ordered to kill **the Hydra**, a huge, poisonous water snake with fifty heads which lived in the marshes of **Argos**. Each time Hercules cut off a head, two more grew. He therefore ordered his friend **Iolaus** to burn the root of each head with a red hot iron after Hercules had cut it off. The plan worked and when Hercules had killed the Hydra he dipped his arrows in its poisonous blood.

5. The Augean Stables

Hercules was then ordered to clean the stables of **King Augeas** ruler of **Elis**. He had three thousand oxen but their stables had not been cleaned for ten years. Augeas promised him a tenth of his herd if he succeeded. Hercules completed the task in just one day by diverting the river **Alpheus** to run through the stables. Augeas refused to give him his reward however, so Hercules drove him from Elis and made his son king instead.

12. Cerberus

The last labour was to fetch the monstrous three headed dog **Cerberus**, guardian of the Underworld. **Hades**, King of the Underworld, allowed him to take the dog provided he captured him with his bare hands. Hercules did so and on his return, Eurystheus fled in terror to another city. Cerberus was then taken back to Hades.

The death of Hercules

HERCULES

After the labours, Hercules married a girl called **Deianira**. On their way home from the wedding, the centaur **Nessus** offered to carry Deianira across a river. While doing this he tried to steal her away. Hercules shot him with a poisoned arrow but as Nessus lay dying he gave his cloak (soaked with poisoned blood) to Deianira. He said that it would have the power to win back Hercules' love if she should ever lose it. Of course this was a trick.

Many years later in a battle, Hercules captured the princess **Iole** whom he had once wanted to marry. When she heard this Deianira thought that Hercules would leave her. She sent him the cloak to win back his love as Nessus had promised.

The poison in the cloak infected Hercules. As it spread, he built himself a funeral pyre. This was a tall bonfire used by the Ancient Greeks to burn bodies at funerals. While he waited for the flames to burn him up, Jupiter took pity on him and sent his chariot to carry him to heaven. Therefore the oracle's prophecy that Hercules would be received amongst the gods finally came true.

THE TROJAN WAR (PARIS)

Paris

Paris was the son of Priam and Hecuba, king and queen of Troy. Before he was born, Hecuba had a nightmare in which the child turned out to cause the destruction of his city and his family. When the baby was born the king and queen gave him to a shepherd who was told to leave him on Mount Ida to be eaten by wild beasts. This was done so that the dream could never come true. However, the shepherd could not face doing this and brought him up as his own child. When Paris grew up he married a nymph called Oenone.

The Judgement of Paris (How the Trojan War started)

There was once a big wedding for a man called Peleus and a nymph called Thetis. (In a few years they became the parents of the Greek hero Achilles). All the gods and goddesses were invited to the wedding except Eris, the goddess of Strife (trouble). To gain revenge she went to the feast anyway and threw down a golden apple with "for the fairest" written on it. Paris was asked to decide to whom it should be given. Three of the goddesses, Hera, Athene and Aphrodite all promised him a gift if he chose them. Hera offered power, Athene wisdom and Aphrodite the most beautiful woman in the world. She was called Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta. Paris chose Aphrodite and gained her friendship but the undying hatred of the other two goddesses.

Paris takes Helen

Paris sailed to Greece on a mission to bring back Hesione Priam's sister, who had been captured by Hercules. However instead of doing this, Paris went to Sparta to find Helen. When he met Helen they fell in love. While Menelaus was away on an expedition Helen sailed back to Troy with Paris. Menelaus enlisted the help of his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae to sail to Troy with many Greek forces and try to bring back Helen. This was the start of the Trojan War.

THE TROJAN WAR (ACHILLES)

Achilles

Achilles was the son of **Peleus** (a mortal man) and **Thetis** (a sea nymph).

His mother tried to make him fully immortal by dipping him in the **River Styx**, in the Underworld. He was made immortal except for his heels. This was because his mother had held him there to dip him in the water and forgot to dip his heels as well.

This meant that his heels could easily be injured and eventually led to his death from **Paris**. He shot him there with an arrow guided by Apollo.

Achilles' parents had been told by the oracle that Achilles would die in the Trojan War. Therefore his parents hid him in Scyros dressed as a girl. Then a prophet told the Greeks that the war would not be won without him and he was found by **Odysseus**.

Zeus then offered Achilles the choice between a long prosperous life in his own kingdom or a short life which would make him forever famous among men. Achilles chose the second option.

The Wrath of Achilles

In the tenth year of the Trojan War, a quarrel arose between Achilles and **Agamemnon**, king of Mycenae and commander of the whole Greek army. This was because Agamemnon had stolen the daughter of Apollo's priest to be his girlfriend. Apollo was so angry that he sent a plague to punish the whole Greek army. Agamemnon had to give the daughter back, but stole Achilles' girlfriend instead. In a furious rage because of this, Achilles withdrew from the war with his troops and refused to fight any more.

The Duel

Paris (son of Priam, king of Troy) and Menelaus (king of Sparta and husband of Helen) agreed to fight a duel to settle the war once and for all. The winner would take Helen and all her possessions.

The fighting was fierce but at last Menelaus had Paris by the helmet straps and was about to strangle him. However, Zeus did not want the war to end so, just as Menelaus was about to kill Paris, **Aphrodite** rescued him by cloaking everything in mist.

The Death of Patroclus

After Achilles withdrew from the battle, the Greeks fared very badly in the war. This was because Achilles' mother, Thetis, had asked Zeus to punish Agamemnon and the Greek army for angering her son. The Trojans drove the Greeks back to their ships. Agamemnon offered Achilles gifts as an apology. Achilles refused them.

Eventually Achilles' best friend **Patroclus** persuaded Achilles to allow him to wear his armour into battle. Patroclus wanted to fool the Trojans into thinking Achilles had returned. Very reluctantly Achilles agreed but told him to keep away from Hector. Patroclus led Achilles' men (the Myrmidons) against the Trojans. The Trojans were briefly fooled but then Patroclus forgot (or ignored) Achilles' warnings and fought against Hector. Hector killed him and took Achilles' armour. Achilles was devastated and at last decided to re-enter the war to take his revenge.

The Death of Hector

Achilles' mother, Thetis, persuaded Hephaestus, (god of fire) to make her son some new

THE TROJAN WAR (ACHILLES)

armour. He made peace with Agamemnon who gave him back Briseis, Achilles' girlfriend whom Agamemnon had stolen to replace his own. The next day Achilles led the Greek forces against the Trojans and routed them. Finally he met Hector. Athene had fooled Hector into thinking that Achilles was Hector's brother Deiphobus coming to help him. Achilles killed him, dragging his body back to the Greek lines. He also attached the body to the back of his chariot and dragged him three times around the city of Troy as vengeance for the killing of Patroclus.

Hector's body was then left to be eaten by dogs. This would have been considered an outrage by the Trojans and the Greeks who both believed that it is very important to give a proper burial to a corpse. Since the Greeks also believed this, Achilles' action in leaving Hector unburied was quite deliberate and was part of his revenge.

Meanwhile, Achilles built a huge funeral pyre to Patroclus and held funeral games in his honour. Finally, Hector's father Priam, king of Troy, went to Achilles to beg for the return of Hector's body. Achilles, advised in a dream to be merciful by the gods returned Hector's body. There was a truce for nine days while the Trojans mourned his death. After this, many more troops were killed on both sides before an arrow from Paris, guided by Apollo, struck Achilles in the heel (the only part of his body which was not immortal) and killed him. His armour was given to Odysseus.

THE TROJAN WAR (THE WOODEN HORSE)

The Wooden Horse

This was the plan which finally brought the ten year Trojan War to an end. It was devised by Odysseus who was famous for his clever plans. The Greeks built a huge hollow horse out of wood. Inside it some of the bravest Greek heroes were hiding. These included Diomedes, Menelaus and Odysseus himself. The rest of the Greeks then sailed to the island of Tenedos, about twelve miles away. This was to make the Trojans think that the Greeks were sailing home and had abandoned the war.

The next morning the Trojans did think that the war was over and began to rejoice. They then found the wooden horse but they could not decide whether it was a Greek gift for Athene which should be dragged into the city or a Greek trick which should be destroyed at once.

Laocoon

Laocoon was a Trojan priest. He thought that the horse should be destroyed. He threw his spear at the horse in frustration but Athene (who was on the Greek side) managed to disguise the hollow sound which it made.

Poseidon (who was also on the Greek side) sent two huge water snakes to punish Laocoon. They caught him and his two small sons as they were sacrificing on the shore. The snakes wrapped themselves around the three and crushed them to death.

Sinon

The Trojans then found a Greek named Sinon whom the Greeks had left behind. He persuaded the Trojans that he wanted to join their side because the Greeks had treated him badly. This was a lie! His real purpose was to convince the Trojans to take the horse inside the city walls. He also said that the horse had been built as a gift to Athene and if they took it into the city they would always be protected. Despite the warnings of Cassandra, (a fortune teller no one ever believed) the horse was finally dragged into the city.

The Trojans wildly celebrated the end of the war and eventually, overcome by the wine, fell asleep. Under cover of darkness, Sinon released the Greeks from inside the horse. They then rushed to the city gates and signalled to the Greek fleet to return from Tenedos.

In the slaughter which followed Troy was burnt to the ground. King Priam and all his family were killed (Priam by Achilles' son Neoptolemus). Only his nephew Aeneas escaped with his father and small son Ascanius. They went on a long voyage to find a site for a new city. When Aeneas was killed in battle his son built his own city, Alba Longa. The founder of Rome, Romulus, was born in this city many years later.

THE ODYSSEY

The Odyssey

The Odyssey was a poem composed by a blind man called Homer. It was about the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus on his way home from the ten year Trojan War. It took him another ten years to get back to his island home, Ithaca, where he was king.

Odysseus and the Cyclops

Odysseus and his men landed on an island to get supplies on the way back home. They went into a cave full of giant cheeses. Suddenly a huge Cyclops arrived with only one eye. His name was Polyphemus and he was son of the sea god Poseidon. He ate a few of the men and then rolled a huge rock in front of the cave to trap them. Odysseus had to think of a plan quickly. He offered the Cyclops some very strong wine. He told him his name was No One. The wine sent the Cyclops to sleep. Odysseus then plunged a sharp stake into his only eye.

The other Cyclops heard his cries and arrived outside the cave, only to hear Polyphemus groaning "No One has blinded me." They left, confused. The next day when Polyphemus let out his sheep Odysseus and his men escaped by clinging onto the sheep's stomachs. Polyphemus felt the backs of the sheep but did not discover them. As they set sail Odysseus made fun of Polyphemus and also stole some of his sheep. Polyphemus threw a huge rock at the ship and nearly sank it. He then prayed to his father Poseidon, god of the sea, for revenge. Because of his treatment of Polyphemus, Poseidon caused difficulties for Odysseus for the rest of his journey home.

Circe

Circe was a goddess and a witch who lived on an island. When Odysseus and his men landed on the island they split into two groups. Odysseus' group stayed with the ships while his deputy, Eurylochus went exploring with his group. They soon found Circe's house. She invited them all in except Eurylochus. He hid outside to see what would happen. Circe gave the men a feast then turned them into pigs with her wand!

Eurylochus went back to the ship to tell Odysseus what had happened. Odysseus set off to rescue the men. On the way he met **Hermes**. He gave Odysseus a herb called **moly** to protect him from Circe's spell. Circe tried to turn Odysseus into a pig but the moly saved him. She had to turn the other pigs back to men. Odysseus then lived with Circe for a year. After that she helped him by giving him advice on how to get home.

The Sirens

These were monsters with the heads of beautiful women and the bodies of birds. They tricked men into going to their island by their magical singing. When they got there the Sirens would kill them. Their island was full of decaying corpses and bones. When Odysseus and his men sailed past he plugged his men's ears with wax so they could not hear the singing. However, Odysseus wanted to hear the singing so he asked his men to tie him to the ship's mast so that he could hear the music but not be tricked into his death. The plan was a success and the ship sailed past without any problems.

Scylla and Charybdis

Scylla and Charybdis had once been beautiful sea nymphs until both upset the gods. Scylla became a monster with six heads and twelve feet. If a ship sailed near her she would seize six

THE ODYSSEY

men at a time and devour them. Charybdis became a whirlpool which sucked in and cast out the water three times a day. Their lairs were on opposite sides of the narrow sea channel between Italy and Sicily. When he reached the sea channel, Odysseus chose to sail next to Scylla and lost six of his men as a result.

The Cattle of the Sun

They then arrived at Thrinacie where they were marooned for a month by unfavourable winds. The men are told that they must not kill the cattle belonging to the sun god, Helios under any circumstances. However, when the food ran out the men killed the cattle while Odysseus was asleep. As a punishment, Zeus wrecked the fleet with a thunderbolt. Only Odysseus survived and drifted to the island of Ogygia. This is the home of the nymph Calypso.

Calypso

When he arrived on her island Calypso fell in love with Odysseus and kept him a prisoner for seven years. Athene finally asks Zeus to intervene. He sent Hermes to the island to ask Calypso to set Odysseus free. She reluctantly agrees but gives Odysseus very little help to prepare for his journey so he is forced to build his own raft.

The Homecoming of Odysseus

After leaving Calypso, Odysseus was shipwrecked in a storm caused by Poseidon. He was eventually washed up on an island called Phaeacia. He was helped on his journey back to Ithaca by the island's king, Alcinous.

He was found on the shores of Phaeacia by the king's daughter, Nausicaa. After spending some time at their palace (where Odysseus told the story of his adventures) he was taken back to Ithaca in a Phaeacian ship (the Phaeacians were famous for their skill at sailing).

When he landed he was met by Athene disguised as shepherd. She told him not to reveal his identity to anyone except his son Telemachus who was now twenty years old.

The Suitors

Together Odysseus and Telemachus returned to the palace. During Odysseus' absence about a hundred suitors, led by Antinous, had come to the palace to gain Penelope's affections and marry her. They had spent many years in the palace rioting and eating Odysseus' food. During that time Penelope had tricked them by promising to marry one of them when she had finished making a funeral shroud for Odysseus' elderly father Laertes. However, every night she used to unpick the shroud and so it was never finished. The angry suitors eventually discovered the trick and Penelope had to promise to marry the suitor who could draw Odysseus' bow and shoot arrows through twelve axe heads. All tried and failed. However, Odysseus, still in disguise, took up the bow and easily performed the task.

There was a great battle in which most of the suitors were killed. When it was over, Penelope refused to believe that Odysseus really had returned until she had given him a test. She called a servant to bring out Odysseus' bed for the stranger to sleep in. Odysseus declared that this would be impossible because the bed had been made out of a tree and could not be moved. She was finally convinced of his identity because only he and Penelope had ever known this secret.

The remaining suitors vowed revenge and tried to gather support from some of the other Ithacans. They marched on the palace and a fight started. However Athene stopped the battle and commanded peace.