

# Nestor advises

James Morwood



*One of the rare representations of Nestor in Greek art: a spectator at the fight over the body of Antilokhos on the frieze of the sixth-century B.C. Siphnian Treasury at Delphi.*

Homer's portrayal of Nestor in the *Iliad* has been much admired. The wise old man from Pylos in Greece, who has outlived two generations of mortal men and now rules among the third, is always treated with affectionate respect by the poet and, through him, by his other characters, even when their patience is being most tried during his garrulous reminiscences. His fellow Greeks have awarded him a beautiful slave girl as a prize for his supremacy in giving advice. And he certainly gives a lot of it.

## The peace maker

Near the start of the poem Agamemnon, the Greek commander in chief, has a devastating quarrel with his leading warrior, Achilles. While all the other Greeks are reduced to an appalled silence, Nestor intervenes to reproach the two of them. Commending them - with more tact than accuracy - for their pre-eminence in counsel as well as in fighting, he calls them both to order. Agamemnon gives him offensively short shrift, one line precisely, and Achilles totally ignores him and subsequently withdraws from the fighting with results that prove catastrophic for the Greeks. Clearly his sane intervention here is in part a means of stressing how far beyond reason the two antagonists have been swept in their rage. Nestor, the touchstone of good sense, has alone of all the Greeks made an effort to defuse the situation, thus earning the right to advise them both - one of them directly, the other indirectly later on.

At the start of Book 2 Zeus sends down evil Dream in the likeness of Nestor to mislead Agamemnon into the disastrous belief that he can now take Troy. Encouraged by this false Nestor, he makes his own crazy proposal that, as a test of the Greeks' morale, he should tell them to make for home. The authentic Nestor is suspicious of the dream but accepts it on the highly dubious grounds that it was seen by Agamemnon. He breaks up the council, pre-empting any debate of

Agamemnon's lunatic idea. A discussion at this point might have saved his commander from a ludicrous blunder. Nestor's judgement here is perhaps undermined by his excessive deference to King Agamemnon.

When the latter's speech to his troops predictably misfires and the men make for the ships in their eagerness to sail home, it is Odysseus, not Nestor, who saves the day by rallying and bullying the runaways. Yet it is Nestor who receives Agamemnon's ecstatic plaudits. There is not a hint that Nestor's over-hasty termination of the previous meeting had contributed to the fiasco.

## Resistance leader

In Book 7 Nestor displays a fine independence when the Trojan prince Hektor challenges a Greek to single combat. When no one dares to take him on, Nestor shames nine leaders, including Agamemnon, into standing forward. Later that day, he suggests the building of a wall and ditch to protect the Greek ships, and 'all the kings applauded his proposal'. Before long (in Book 8) we see his cool and intrepid spirit when he is in mortal danger on the battlefield. In these two books, the old Gerenian horseman has gained in stature.

By the end of Book 8, the Trojan forces are camped on the plain, and at the start of Book 9 Agamemnon again makes his proposal - this time seriously - that the Greeks should sail home. There is a long and pregnant silence, broken not by Nestor but, with scathing contempt, by the young warrior Diomedes. His scornful suggestion - that Agamemnon should go off home leaving the rest of them to fight and win - meets with universal approval. Nestor endorses his words in what at first sight appears a somewhat patronizing style ('...in counsel too you are the best among all of your age... But of course you are young...').

In fact, it is at this moment that we see the wisdom of Nestor at its most tactful and calculating best. With consummate diplomacy, he mediates Diomedes' devastating criticism of Agamemnon, enabling the latter to take it on board without an unacceptable loss of dignity. Nestor knows that now is not the time to get down to the nitty-gritty and so he proposes a dinner party - to be hosted by Agamemnon whose huts are full of wine - at which proposals about what to do next will be made.

### Nestor vs. Achilles

My reconstruction of what Nestor is up to here is as follows. He has thought for some time that the only solution is to get Achilles back into the fighting, and it seems that the sole way to encompass this is to bring about some kind of rapprochement between Achilles and Agamemnon. So his suggestion that Agamemnon lay on a dinner party - the wine element is shamelessly stressed - would, if adopted, enable Nestor to make his proposal to his 'softened up' host in the post-prandial bonhomie. A good meal, plentiful drink, and the obligations of a host would stand the best chance of establishing an atmosphere suitable for frank debate.

And so it proves. After dinner Nestor comes out with an uncompromising statement of the cause of all this woe and the necessity to appease Achilles. To achieve this aim, he points out the need for soothing gifts and pleasing words. Agamemnon takes his frank criticism extremely well. He

admits he was blinded and, in a famous list, offers Achilles vast reparations. Nestor is doubtless delighted as he listens - so delighted that he perhaps fails to take in the crudely unapologetic, in fact downright provocative coda to Agamemnon's speech:

'Let him yield - Hades is the one who never pities or yields, and for that he is of all the gods the most hated by men - and let him submit to me, in that I am the greater king and can claim to be his senior in age.'

Agamemnon speaks here with a voice a million miles removed from the kind of pleasing words that Nestor has in mind. Odysseus very sensibly omits these lines when he conveys the gist of the speech to Achilles. While Nestor had insisted on pleasant words to establish an atmosphere in which Achilles could readily accept the soothing gifts, Agamemnon offers gifts aplenty but harsh and provoking words.

Nestor in fact fails to take account of the bloody-mindedness of Agamemnon's concluding lines and pre-empts further debate by himself appointing three ambassadors to go to Achilles' hut with Agamemnon's offer. He permits no discussion either of whether Agamemnon has gone far enough - he hasn't - or over the choice of ambassadors.

While the selection for this mission of Aias, the plain-speaking fighter, and Phoinix, Achilles' old tutor, is intelligent, that of Odysseus appears questionable. Though generally the obvious choice as an ambassador, the latter is mistrusted by Achilles. He sits down opposite him to keep an eye on him and after Odysseus' speech remarks pointedly, 'I hate like the



*A view of part of the remains of the Mycenaean palace at Nestor's Pylos (bathroom in left foreground).*



A gold seal from a beehive tomb at Pylos.

gates of Hades the man who hides one thing in his mind and speaks another'. At all events, the embassy, launched by Nestor amid such high hopes, totally fails. Having got matters into train with such brilliant tact, Nestor's self-confidence in his own abilities as a fixer leads him to take things into his own hands - and effectively to hamstring the embassy before it has even begun.

Nestor's finest hour

We now come to Book 11 and to Nestor's finest hour. Here he takes the wounded Greek surgeon Machaon from the thick of battle back to camp. Stationary on the stern of his ship, Achilles spots them and sends Patroklos along to investigate. It is at this point that Homer reminds us of Nestor's reputation for good advice by telling us of Hekamede, the woman the Greeks had given him as a tribute to his supremacy in this sphere. Some remarkable counsel will surely emerge - and it does.

When in a tearing hurry Patroklos asks him for information, Nestor spots a unique opportunity to reach Achilles through the man he loves the most. He invites Patroklos in and asks him to sit down. Already he is thinking out how he can play this crucial scene. Patroklos refuses the invitation but stays to comment on the harsh and uncompromising nature of his master. Now suddenly the rage and frustration of the Greeks at Achilles' totally selfish and apparently unending withdrawal from the fighting find bitter expression on Nestor's lips in a passage of considerable power. Patroklos is held rooted to the spot.

Now why does Achilles show such concern for those sons of the Achaians who have been wounded by flying weapons - when he knows nothing of the great distress that has afflicted the whole army? Our leading men are lying wounded in their ships, shot or stabbed. Diomedes has been hit: Odysseus and Agamemnon have been stabbed: Eurypolos too has been hit by an arrow in the thigh: and now here is another I have just brought in from the battle. No, Achilles is a great fighter but he has no thought or pity for the Danaans.

Of course he is still the same old Nestor, and he withdraws from his fighting talk into his longest reminiscence ever; but it all leads back with overwhelming emphasis to Achilles, and in his climactic conclusion Nestor proffers his celebrated advice. He suggests that Achilles lets Patroklos go out against the Trojans dressed in his armour.

Patroklos stays silent: he is clearly impressed. Returning to Achilles, he persuades his friend to let him act as Nestor has proposed. Looked at from one point of view, Nestor's advice is disastrous since it sets in motion the succession of events that leads to the deaths not only of Hektor but of Patroklos and Achilles too. Looked at from another viewpoint, it resolves the action from its impasse and, by involving Achilles again in the fighting at first by proxy and then in person, it paves the way for Greek victory in the Trojan War.

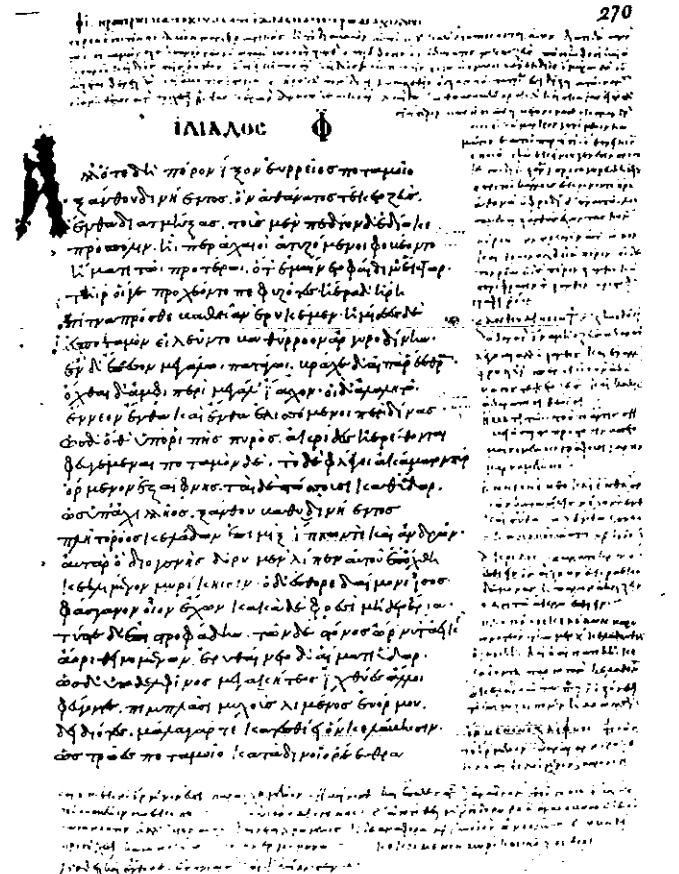
Nestor's words in this great speech seem to spring from instinct rather than reason. As he responds to Achilles' sadistic curiosity without premeditation, we see a slightly ridiculous old man finding in the depths of his experience and in the bottom of his heart the surpassing wisdom that sets in motion the action of the rest of the poem.

Last words

Nestor's final piece of advice comes in Book 23 when he tells his son how to win the chariot race. Homer's aim here is surely to reintroduce us to Nestor in his role of adviser after a gap of eleven books. The poet is in fact paving the way for the great moment when Achilles hands Nestor a prize of a two-handled bowl as a memory of the burial of Patroklos - but surely also as a kind of Oscar for life achievement. The bowl is not very grand - it was the fifth prize in the chariot race - but it's the thought that counts and Nestor is extremely touched.

Achilles' generous gesture is entirely appropriate for Nestor's last appearance in the Iliad. Flawed though Nestor's advice-giving may at times have proved, in Book 11 his wisdom is startled into an instinctive and tragic response which renders him the voice of sanity in a world gone mad. It is only fitting that in Book 23 he should receive his palm.

James Morwood offers wise advice to pupils at Harrow.



An early-tenth-century ms. of the Iliad with the ancient scholia. This is the opening of Iliad 21.