The Kypria

“Kypria” is a plural adjective in ancient Greek, the title being shorthand for ta Kypria epea, “the Kyprian epics.” It is not clear why the poem was referred to in the plural, but the adjective connects it Cyprus, the large island in the eastern Mediterranean colonized by Greeks in the Bronze Age, and to the love-goddess Aphrodite, who was supposedly born there and thus acquired the cult title “Kypris.” The poem itself was lost in late antiquity and is known to us only through quotations, references and summaries. Little if any of the action of the Kypria seems to have taken place on Cyprus, however, and the derivation of the title from the probable land of origin is unique; other place-name titles refer to the dramatic setting (Iliad, Corinthiaka).

The Kypria was attributed to Homer; according to one story, the poet gave away the epic as a dowry for his daughter. Many ancient writers rejected Homeric authorship; some associated other poets, Stasinos and Hegesias, both supposedly natives of Cyprus, with the epic. In the classical period and later, the Kypria received some influential poor reviews. The fourth-century philosopher Aristotle argued that the Homeric epics were superior in part owing to the narrow focus of their plots, contrasting them specifically with the episodic nature of the Kypria. Aristotle’s negative assessment has been widely accepted, even by modern scholars who have no access to the poem itself. On the other hand, the relatively large number of ancient references to the Kypria, and the fact that the poem remained “in print” for perhaps a millennium, demonstrate that it did at one time find a sizable audience.

Whether or not the Kypria fell short of literary excellence, it certainly has the ingredients of an entertaining epic, with a fast-paced and sweeping plot, a large and colorful cast, and a love story amid the war-story. Female characters seem to have been especially prominent; Helen, Iphigeneia, Deiadameia, and of course Aphrodite, all play significant roles. The narrative covered the beginnings of the Trojan War through to its ninth, and next-to-last, year, roughly the point where the Iliad begins. The pacing of the plot is suggested by the fact that all of this action was packed into a narrative about half as long as one of the Homeric epics.

According to the Kypria, the reason for the Trojan War is the desire of the chief god Zeus to relieve the earth of excess population. Thus the events described in the Iliad and Odyssey can all be viewed be explained in terms of this plan. The mutual slaughter of Greeks and Trojans, including the many Greeks who perish when Achilles abandons the battlefield in the Iliad, and the deaths of many Greeks during and following their returns from Troy, such as Agamemnon and his men, and Odysseus’ men and the suitors of his wife, all thin the ranks of mankind.

Striking parallels for this “destruction of mankind” theme can be found in the Enuma Elish, a Babylonian creation epic far older than any known Greek poem. A better-known parallel is the story of the flood, which appears in Genesis as well as the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh. The Catalog of Women, a poem attributed to Hesiod, presents the theme with the twist that Zeus’ intent is specifically to eliminate semi-divine heroes, those like Achilles born from the union of gods and humans.

As Aristotle noted, episodes from the Kypria found their way onto the Athenian stage, such as Euripides’ Iphigeneia at Aulis. The Judgment of Paris, a major scene in the Kypria, is the earliest clearly identifiable epic episode to appear on a Greek vase,
(the so-called “Chigi vase,” dating to around 650 BCE), though there is no way of knowing if the painters were inspired by the *Kypria* specifically. Apart from using the *Kypria* as a source, later poets, such as Apollonios Rhodios and Virgil, may have looked to it as a model for the incorporation of love-stories into the martial genre of epic.

**outline of the Kypria**
Zeus pities the overburdened earth and plans the Trojan War
Wedding of Peleus and Thetis (parents of Achilles)
Judgment of Paris (aka Alexander)
Paris seizes Helen
Paris and Helen stop at Sidon on their way back to Troy
Marriage of Paris and Helen at Troy
Story of the Dioskouroi (Kastor and Pollux, brothers of Helen)
Greeks raise an army to attack Troy
Odysseus feigns madness to avoid the army but is exposed by Palamedes
1st assembly of Greek army at Aulis in Euboia
Teuthranian expedition
Achilles carried to Skyros by a storm, marries Deiadameia
2nd Assembly at Aulis
Agamemnon incurs the wrath of Artemis
Iphigeneia sacrificed to appease Artemis
Greeks land on Tenedos: quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon
Philoktetes bitten by snake and abandoned on Lemnos
Greek Army lands at Troy
Hektor kills Protesilaus
Achilles kills Poseidon’s son Kyknos
Embassy of Odysseus and Menelaus to the Trojans
Greeks ravage the Troad
Meeting of Achilles and Helen
Achilles prevents Greek army from disbanding
Achilles raids Aineias’ cattle
Greek raids on Lymessos, Pedasos, etc; capture of Briseis and Chryseis
Achilles kills Troilos
Achilles captures Lykaon; Patroklos ransoms Lykaon on Lemnos
Odysseus and Diomedes engineer the death of Palamedes
Zeus contrives the withdrawal of Achilles from battle
Catalog of Trojans

_Ancient References to the Kypria_
Suda s.v. *Homer*os (III 525, 26 Adler)
[Homer] on Chios wed Aresiphone, the daughter of Gnotor of Kyme, and had two sons and a daughter; and she married Stasinos of Cyprus … who received from/gave to him
[Homer] certain other poems as well … the Cycle, hymns, *Kypria*.

Aelian *VH* 9.15 = Pindar fr. 265 SM
This is also said in this regard, that [Homer, being in want of resources to bequeath his daughter gave to her to have as a present the Kypria; and Pindar agrees with this.

Herodotos 2.117 (a)
On account of these passages [liiad 6.289-292, Odyssey 4.227-230] not least of all, but most of all it is clear that the Kyprian epic is not Homer’s but someone else’s.

Aristotle Poetics 1459a37
The others [poets except Homer] compose poems about one person and one period of time and one action with many parts, such as the one who composed the Kypria and the Iliad Parv. For in in fact from the Iliad and Odyssey no more than one or two tragedies can be made, but from the Kypria many

Photios Bibliothèke 319a34 (V 157 Henry)
[Proklos] speaks also about the Kypria poem, including how some attribute the epic to Stasinos of Cyprus, some to Hegesinos from the city of Salamis on Cyprus, and others to Homer, saying that he gave it to Stasinos on behalf of his daughter and that the work was called “the Kypria” after Stasinos’ fatherland.

Athenaios 15.682d
Flowers used for wreaths are mentioned by the author of the Kypria, whether this was Hegesias or Stasinos. But Demodamas, a man of Halikarnassos or Miletos, in his work on Halikarnassos, says that the Kypria was composed by a Halikarnassean.

Perizonius in Ael VH 9.15
Aelian explains the title in this way: since many references are made to Venus, the patron goddess of Cyprus, in the epic … therefore it seems the poem was entitled “Cypria.”

fragments of the Kypria
Proklos quoted by Photios:

Zeus plans with Thetis [or: Themis] about the Trojan War. And Eris [“Strife”] arrives on the scene while the gods are celebrating the the wedding of Peleus and causes a conflict among Athena, Hera and Aphrodite over who is most beautiful. These goddesses are led by Hermes to Alexandros [aka Paris] on Mt. Ida according to the instructions of Zeus in order to engage in a contest. And Alexandros judges in favor of Aphrodite, since she promised him marriage to Helen. At Aphrodite’s bidding Alexandros then outfits a naval expedition, and Helenos [a prophet who is his brother] foretells what is going to happen, and Aphrodite tells him to sail with Aineas [Aeneas, her son]. Kassandra [sister of Alexandros and Helenos, also a seer] also makes clear what will happen.

But Alexandros proceeds to Lakedaimon, and is received as a guest by the sons of Tyndareus [Helen’s father], and afterword in Sparta by Menelaos, where during the festivities he gives gifts to Helen. Afterwards Menelaos sails to Crete, having instructed Helen to see to the needs of their guests until their departure. At this moment Aphrodite then brings Helen together with Alexandros, and after they have sex they seize a great
deal of moveable property and sail away during the night. But Hera sends a storm against them, and they are carried to the city of Sidon, which Alexandros takes by force. He then sailed to Ilion [Troy], and completed his marriage to Helen.

At this point Kastor and Polydeuces were apprended in the act of taking the cattle of Idas and Lynkeus, and Kastor is killed by Idas, and Lynkeus and Idas are killed by Polydeukes, and Zeus ordains for them immortality on alternating days. After this Iris reports to Menelaos what had happened at his home. Menelaos returns and plans a campaign of an army against Ilion with his brother [Agamemnon], and visits Nestor. Nestor in a digression narrates for him how Epopeus carried off the daughter of Lykourgos and was killed, and the stories of Oidipous and the madness of Herakles and about Theseus and Ariadne.

Then they travel through Greece assembling the leading men. They catch Odysseus in the act of feigning madness because he was unwilling to join the expedition, when at Palamedes’ suggestion they seize his son Telemachos as punishment. After this they assemble at Aulis and perform sacrifices, and Kalchas explains the omen of the snake and the sparrows, and foretells what will happen to them.

Then they put to sea and are driven to Teuthrania and sack it, mistaking the city for Ilion. Telephos goes out to help and kills Thersandros and Polyneikes, and is himself wounded by Achilles. As they sail off from Mysia a storm falls on them and scatters them. And Achilles makes landfall in Skyros and marries the daughter of Lukomedes, Deidameia.

Then Telephos, arriving at Argos in accordance with a prophecy, is healed by Achilles, so that he would be a guide for the voyage to Ilion. And after the fleet had assembled for a second time at Aulis, Agamemnon went hunting for wild animals and, having struck a deer, declared himself superior to Artemis. The goddess became angry and held up the voyage by sending storms. But Kalchas explained the goddess’ anger and declared that they sacrifice Ipigeneia [daughter of Agamemnon] to Artemis, so they sent for her on the pretence that she would wed Achilles, and prepared to sacrifice her. Artemis however seizes her and moves her among the Tauri, and makes her immortal, and substitutes for the girl a deer on the altar.

Then they sail to Tenedos, and, as they are feasting Philoktetes was struck by a hydra and, on account of the stench [of his wound] was left behind on Lemnos, and Achilles, because he was summoned late, quarrels with Agamemnon.

Then the Trojans hold back the Greeks as they disembark at Ilion, Protesilaos is killed by Hektor. Then Achilles turns the battle against them after he kills Kyknos, son of Poseidon. And the dead are collected, and an embassy is sent to the Trojans, demanding Helen and the possessions [taken from Menelaos by Paris]. When they refuse to listen, the Greeks attack the walls.

Then they go out into the country and sack the outlying cities, and afterwards Achilles desires to see Helen, Aphrodite and Thetis bring them together in the same place.

Then Achilles holds back the Achaians when they want to return home, and then he drives off the cattle of Aineias, and sacks Lynnessos and Pedasos and some other outlying cities, and kills Troilos [a son of Priam]. Patroklos takes Lykaon [another son of
Priam] to Lemnos and ransoms him. Out of the plunder Achilles takes Briseis as his prize of honor, and Agamemnon takes Chryseis.

Then ther is the death of Palamedes, and a plan of Zeus, who causes Achilles to desert the alliance of the Greeks in order to relieve the Trojans, and a catalog of the allies who fought for the Trojans.

[Apollodoros] *Epitome* 3.2-4
Zeus orders Hermes to bring Alexandros to Ida, in order that the judgment be made by him. And the goddesses promised they would give gifts to Alexandros: Here offered him rulership over all men, and Athena victory in battle, and Aphrodite marriage to Helen. And he chooses Aphrodite, and sails to Sparta in ships [or: a ship] built by Phereklos.

For nine days Alexandros was entertained by Menelaos, but on the tenth day, when Menelaos has to go to Crete to perform funeral rites for his maternal grandfather Katreus, Alexandros persuades Helen to sail off with him.

F14: Herodotos 2.117 (b)