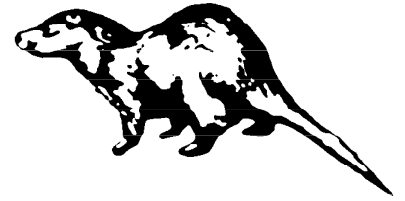# NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY

ANCIENT GREECE: THE ILIAD

TEACHERS' NOTES

The children attend a rural school with a mixed catchment area – children come from both the surrounding villages and a small local town.

Most of the previous history teaching had been undertaken using information books as secondary sources of information, and I was keen to use challenging text material both as a primary source of historical investigation and as a stimulus for poetry writing. I chose *The Iliad* rather than *The Odyssey*, as a large proportion of the class were already familiar with *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* seemed to be a good source of information about Greek warfare.

The topic of the Ancient Greeks had been started a few weeks previously through work on time-lines, location and geography of Ancient Greece, city-states and democracy. The children had also investigated the Greek gods and their importance in the lives of the Ancient Greeks.

I had already read parts of Rosemary Sutcliff's *Black Ships Before Troy* to give the children an overview of the main events and characters in the Trojan War. The role of the gods became apparent, and this led to lively discussion about how much of this could be true. The children initially found it hard to remember who the different characters were – whether they were Trojans, Greeks or gods. So I spent several short sessions using the 'hot-seating' technique: I wrote the names of gods, Trojans and Greeks on different-coloured card and the children picked a card to take on the role of that character whilst the rest of the class questioned them.

Year group/class

The composition of the class changes during each day – in the mornings (including literacy hour) it is composed of 21 Year 4 children, whilst in the afternoon 10 Year 5 children join us to make a class of 31 mixed gender and mixed ability children.

I chose to do some of the background historical work with the mixed year 4/5 class in the afternoon history lesson, followed by literacy work with only the Year 4 group in the morning.

Teaching time

Two sessions of about 1 hour each.

Learning objectives: History

For the children:
• to develop an understanding of the weapons and tactics used in Greek warfare
• to be able to read and understand a challenging text and to be able to extract information from it.

Learning objectives: Literacy

To develop the children's skills in:
• extracting information from a narrative poem
• re-structuring the poem
• writing poems in different forms.

Key History questions

• How can we use *The Iliad* as source material to find out about Greek battles?

• What equipment did the Greeks use?

• Can we find any information about their armour?

• Did the Greeks use horses?

Key Literacy questions

• What are the features of a narrative poem?

• Can you use the same vocabulary as Homer to write a descriptive poem or a haiku?

Resources

• Extracts from *The Iliad*: six different passages were used, so that each group had a different extract. Each extract described battle scenes, including the types of weaponry used and clothing worn.

• Text 1, a description of the confrontation between Menelaus and Paris.

The Teaching: Lesson 1 (History lesson, Years 4 and 5)

Reading: the aim was to develop an understanding of difficult and challenging texts through breaking into the text at a word and phrase level, transforming the texts into a visual form and discussing interpretations.

Episode 1

Focus: Discussion of Trojan War; scanning poetic texts for words or phrases relating to warfare; compiling a vocabulary bank.

First of all we had a general discussion about the Trojan War, and how historians found the information to put into textbooks. The children made suggestions, such as digging up remains, and I then introduced the idea of looking at Ancient Greek literature for information.

I split the children into six groups, with each group working on a copy of one of the six extracts from *The Iliad*. Working in mixed ability pairs they then highlighted any words or phrases that they thought referred to equipment or methods of fighting.

We then collected all the words and phrases as a vocabulary bank on the board.

Episode 2

Focus: Visualising the text – representing the information in pictorial form.

I asked the children to draw a scene to show what they had found out. I provided dictionaries to help them with defining some of the objects referred to. We found we had to resort to a very large, adult dictionary for some of the vocabulary.

The children then visualised the scenes and drew labelled pictures to represent them.

Episode 3

Focus: Plenary – pooling of ideas, discussion and comparison of interpretations.

The children shared the finished sketches and we discussed them. They realised that some pairs had more information on their pictures than others and that this related directly to the text they had been working on.

We then referred back to the original problem of how we know about the past, and the children realised that the materials available to work with limit the accuracy and depth of historical evidence.

The Teaching: Lesson 2 (Literacy hour, Year 4)

Writing descriptive poetry based on *The Iliad*.

Episode 1

Focus: Reading a poetic text; building up a vocabulary bank (20 mins).

I gave all the children a copy of the passage from *The Iliad* describing the beginning of the fight between Menelaus and Paris (Text 1).

I read it aloud and we discussed the setting, remembering the story of the Trojan War. I explained that this time we were focusing on descriptive words used by Homer.

We thought about types of words in sentences and I put up four headings: Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs.

Working in pairs the children highlighted nouns in one colour and verbs in another colour.

These were added under the headings on the board.

We discussed the resulting lists, and the children wrote definitions beside each word (I gave each pair just one word to define and then we pooled our knowledge in the plenary.)

Episode 2

Focus: Vocabulary bank, with focus on adverbs and adjectives.

Now we moved on to the identification of adverbs and adjectives in Text 1, and completed the lists, as for the nouns and verbs.

The children asked for a further heading, for phrases, metaphors and similes. The children found these, and found and added definitions for them.

Episode 3

Focus: Individual writing task, using previously assimilated poetic forms (20-30 mins).

Using the new vocabulary they had discovered, children now wrote their own descriptive poems depicting an aspect of the Trojan War.

Some children wanted to write a haiku straight away (they had been writing haikus the previous week).

Learning outcomes

• The children successfully read and understood difficult and challenging texts.

• The information extracted from the texts was successfully displayed as labelled pictures and this was shared amongst the class.

• The children used a wide variety of unfamiliar vocabulary in their poetry writing and recreated the atmosphere of the battle scenes.

Reflection / evaluation

This pair of lessons was very successful – the children were engaged and involved at all stages. They liked the idea of being detectives and this theme ran through all the stages, both investigating historical evidence and investigating the meanings of unfamiliar words. They could see the purpose of the tasks. I was pleased with their ability to use the vocabulary to create new poems in the literacy work. Their poems showed that they could manipulate the language, demonstrating a good understanding of the vocabulary they had acquired. The

children's knowledge and understanding were assessed from their oral responses in class and the drawings and poetry produced.

The children were very interested and involved in this topic – it could be extended further by:
• asking the children to write a description of the battle as told by a Trojan or Greek soldier
• writing different narrative poems in the style of Homer.