

Swallow “tales” – Butterflies, Taxonomists, and The Trojan War.

By Mike Newlon

Sing, Muse, of the ruinous rage
Of Peleus' great son Achilles,
That doomed both Greeks and Trojans
To death on the plains of Troy,
And gave Linnaeus and others
The names of so many Swallowtails.

Carl (or Carolus) Linnaeus (1707-1778), Swedish physician/naturalist, developed our system of classification of organisms and the binomial scientific names given to them. He named many butterflies and placed all in the genus *Papilio* (Latin for butterfly). Most are now in other genera but some Swallowtails remain. Linnaeus and his contemporaries took species names for many Swallowtails from classical mythology, especially from the Iliad. Greek names were Latinized: for example “Glaucos” became “Glaucus”. [Trigger warning: in Greek mythology, most people come to bad ends.]

Polydamas Swallowtail *Battus polydamas* (Linnaeus 1758)

In the Iliad Polydamas is a Trojan friend of Hector; his fate isn't described but his son was killed by Odysseus. His name means “ruler of many”.

Black Swallowtail *Papilio polyxenes* Fabricius 1775

Polyxena was the youngest daughter of King Priam of Troy, the sister of Troilus (see Spicebush Swallowtail). Her name means “Many Guests”. She is described in the plays of Euripides but not the Iliad. After the fall of Troy she was sacrificed by the Greeks on the tomb of Achilles. Some say that Polyxena discovered Achilles' vulnerable heel, and that Apollo guided the arrow which killed him, in revenge for Achilles' killing Troilus at the altar of Apollo's temple, where the Trojan had taken refuge.

Johann Christian Fabricius (1745-1808), a student of Linnaeus, specialized in arthropods and described nearly 10,000 species. He defined many currently recognized orders of insects.

Spicebush Swallowtail *Papilio troilus* Linnaeus 1758

Troilus was a son of King Priam of Troy and his Queen Hecuba. His name comes from *Troia*, his city. An oracle prophesized that Troy would not fall if Troilus reached the age of twenty, but he was killed by Achilles before then. In a later addition to his story, made famous by Chaucer and Shakespeare, he falls in love with Cressida, who is slow to reciprocate but ultimately succumbs. After being sent to the Greeks in an exchange of hostages she bestows her affections on Diomedes. In Robert Henryson's 15th-century *Testament of Cresseid* she later leaves Diomedes, is punished by the gods, and dies a leper. In the Iliad, Cressida's uncle Pandaros is a skilled archer killed by Diomedes, in later accounts a dirty old man instrumental in getting Cressida into Troilus' arms. He lives on in our word “pander”. Cressida's name (Chryseis in Greek) means “Golden”. The meaning of “Pandaros” is not known. (The old bastard probably arranged this, to leave no trail.)

Palamedes Swallowtail *Papilio palamedes* Drury 1773

A Greek at Troy, known for his calm nature and good judgement. His name means “ancient wisdom”. He is not in the Iliad but mentioned by other authors. (The Iliad and the Odyssey are the only survivors of eight epic poems describing the origins, course, and consequences of the Trojan War. The others are known only from fragments and quotations by later authors.) As the Trojan War began Palamedes offended Odysseus and later paid for it with his life. Before giving her in marriage, Helen’s father made her many suitors swear that all would defend her union with the man he chose. This was King Menelaus of Sparta. Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, abducted her (with the help of Aphrodite) and Menelaus called the Greeks to fulfil their oaths. Palamedes was sent to Odysseus, who did not wish to go to Troy and pretended insanity. He hitched an ox and ass together and plowed crooked furrows. Palamedes threw Odysseus’ young son Telemachus in front of the plow and Odysseus swerved aside, revealing his rationality. So he had to go to war and never forgave Palamedes. At Troy, Odysseus hid gold and a letter, ostensibly from King Priam, in Palamedes’ tent and arranged for their discovery. Palamedes was condemned by the Greeks and stoned to death. (Palamedes’ mother was Clymene, for whom a genus of moths is named. Enraged at the death of her son, she travelled around Greece encouraging wives of the distant fighters to commit adultery.)

Dru (sic) Drury (1725-1803) was an English goldsmith and naturalist who amassed a large collection of foreign insects. His *Illustrations of Natural History* were published between 1770 and 1782.

Eastern Tiger Swallowtail *Papilio glaucus* Linnaeus, 1758

Glaucos was a prominent Trojan. His name means “blue-gray” (as in Glaucous Gull). He was killed by the great Greek warrior Ajax the son of Telamon.

Old-World Swallowtail *Papilio machaon* Linnaeus 1758

Machaon was a warrior as well as physician and surgeon to the Greeks at Troy. After Menelaus was wounded by Pandarus, Machaon removed the arrow and treated the wound. His name means “He who wishes to fight”, odd for a physician.

(Eastern) Giant Swallowtail *Papilio cresphontes* Cramer 1777

Placed by some in the genus or sub-genus *Heraclides* “descendants of Herakles (Hercules)”, which doubtless refers to its large size. Cresphontes was of the Heraclidae and brother of Aristodemus, for whom another *Heraclides*, Aristodemus Swallowtail *P. aristodemus*, is named. After four failed attempts to conquer the Peloponessus, Cresphontes and his brothers succeed in their fifth. Cresphontes means “strong slayer”, Aristodemus “best people”. Other *Heraclides* are Thoas Swallowtail *P. thoas*, named for one of the Greeks inside the Trojan Horse, and Bahamian Swallowtail *P. andraemon*, named for Thoas’ father, also at Troy. Thoas means “Swift”; Andraemon “Man of Blood”.

Pieter Cramer (1721-1776) was a Dutch merchant and naturalist. He bought specimens from all over the world and described 1600 species. Some volumes of his book appeared posthumously. It was among the first entomology books to use Linnaeus’ system of classification.

Sources: My research was wildly unsystematic, but included:

The Iliad, translated by Emily Wilson. Norton, 2023.

Robert Graves: The Greek Myths, volumes 1 & 2, Penguin reprint of 1960 rev. ed.

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

The Bug Guide <https://bugguide.net/node/view/15740>

Butterflies of America <https://butterfliesofamerica.com/L/Papilionidae.htm>

Behind the Name <https://www.behindthename.com/name/>