

The Myrmidons

(Adapted from Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myrmidons>)

The **Myrmidons** (or **Myrmidones**; Greek: Μυρμιδόνες) were an ancient nation of Greek mythology. In Homer's Iliad, the Myrmidons are the soldiers commanded by Achilles. Their eponymous ancestor was **Myrmidon**, a king of Phthiotis who was a son of Zeus and “wide-ruling” Eurymedousa, a princess of Phthiotis. She was seduced by him in the form of an ant. An etiological myth of their origins, simply expanding upon their supposed etymology—the name in Classical Greek was interpreted as meaning “ant-people,” from *murmekes*, “ants” (the Latin word *formīca* is cognate) — was first mentioned by Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*: in Ovid's telling, the Myrmidons were simple worker ants on the island of Aegina., transformed into people by Jupiter to restore the island’s population to its king Aeacus, father of Peleus and grandfather of Achilles.

Later use of the term

The Myrmidons of Greek myth were known for their loyalty to their leaders, so that in pre-industrial Europe the word “myrmidon” carried many of the same connotations that “robot” or “automaton” does today. “Myrmidon” later came to mean “hired ruffian” (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) or “a loyal follower, especially one who executes orders without question, protest, or pity, unquestioning followers.”



17th/18th-century
woodcuts

21st-century Achilles, aka Brad Pitt



Zeus turns ants into men. Drawing from the 17C AD. Photo © Mazarin Förlag - GML