THE TROJAN WAR

History or Myth?

by Barry Strauss, Cornell University

Every college student is familiar with the Iliad and the Odyssey, and every schoolchild knows the story of how the Greeks used the Trojan Horse to breach the walls of Troy. In his two great epic poems, Homer tells how the heroes of ancient Greece fought a powerful city for ten years in order to win back their treasure, their honor, and the wife of their king.

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Did the Trojan War really happen? After nearly 150 years of scholarship on the historical background to Homer, the answer is: "probably." A large and growing amount of circumstantial evidence has convinced most scholars that there is a kernel of historical truth in the legend. The lack of certainty may be disappointing but, all things considered, it is a sign of real progress. Considering the quality of the evidence, "probably" is a tribute to scholarly detective work. But it doesn't give the subject the sizzle it deserves. "Certainly," not "probably," is the word for the excitement generated by new discoveries in archaeology, inscriptions, paintings, shipwrecks, and from such little-known sources as plants, fossils, and soil science.

This essay looks at three sets of questions: was there a Troy and did a war take place there? Who was Homer and how did he know about the Trojan War? If the Trojan War took place, what was it like?

Many Greek and Roman texts describe the Trojan War, but the earliest and most influential were Homer's two epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. They describe the city of Troy and its location in what is today northwestern Turkey, located at the entrance to the Hellespont (also known as the Dardanelles), the westernmost part of the water link between the Aegean and the Black Sea. The Greeks and Romans built a city at the place that they believed corresponded with Homer's Troy, but the site was later abandoned.

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Beginning with Heinrich Schliemann in 1871, archaeologists have rediscovered and excavated the site, a mound called, in Turkish Hisarlık ("Fortified Place"), commonly referred to today as Troia. Troia includes the ruins of both the Greco-Roman city and the city that Homer describes. More precisely, until recently the site seemed to correspond with the citadel that Homer describes, the half-acre fortress at the highest point of Homer's Troy. But now, new archaeological research beginning in the 1990s, has found evidence that in the 1200s B.C., the era corresponding to Homer's Troy, Hisarlık was, in fact, a city about 75 acres in size. Scholars used to think that the inhabitants of that city were Greek but new evidence suggests that they were ethnically different and probably related to other peoples of ancient Turkey, as in Homer. A generation ago, scholars thought that Troy in the 1200s B.C. was poor and small, but now we know, thanks to recent archaeological discoveries, that it was a big, wealthy city, just as Homer says. Although some scholars dispute that finding, the evidence seems unassailable to many, including this writer.

Troia was destroyed by a raging fire. Such evidence as an unburied skeleton along with arrowheads and spear points suggests a sack. The date was roughly 1200 B.C., which is just around when ancient Greek tradition dates the Trojan War. The city was rebuilt shortly afterwards, just as Homer says.

Who, however, was Homer, and what was the source of his information about the Trojan War? The Greeks believed that Homer lived on the east side of the Aegean Sea, either on what is today the Turkish coast or on one of the nearby Greek islands. They thought that Homer was a genius who wrote both the Iliad and the Odyssey, two very long poems. Modern skeptics doubt that there even was a Homer, preferring to the assign the poems to committees, but geniuses do exist; there was, after all, an Einstein. It is clear, though, that Homer did not pull the poems out of thin air. Rather, he reworked material that had already been around for centuries, and shaped it into stunning works of art. The raw material of the epics was oral poetry, sung by bards and preserved by memory, and probably not written down until Homer's lifetime. Scholars debate whether Homer himself could read or write; the Greek alphabet was invented ca.800 B.C.

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Oral poetry suited the Greek world in the centuries preceding Homer because the art of writing had been lost. Yet there was no shortage of great deeds to remember. Some historical background is needed. Most scholars believe that the Iliad and the Odyssey were composed around 750-700 B.C., about 450-500 years after the Trojan War ca. 1200 B.C. Greece was already an old country by Homer's day, because Greek-speaking civilization began ca.1700 B.C. For five centuries, the Greek world was ruled by a series of rich and warlike kingdoms in mainland Greece that we now call Mycenaean civilization. The Mycenaean kings ruled from great, fortified palaces. Archaeology demonstrates that Mycenae, Tiryns, Thebes, Salamis, Athens, the area around Sparta and many other places prospered in Mycenaean times, just as Homer says. In the poet's own lifetime, some of these places had sunk into insignificance.

Warlike and wealthy, the Mycenaeans raided and invaded the Greek islands and the coast of today’s Turkey. The Mycenaean centuries were an era of great states around the eastern Mediterranean, including powerful dynasties in Egypt and Mesopotamia and wealthy city-states in Canaan (modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine). Nowadays scholars refer to this era as the Late Bronze Age. What is today Turkey was then dominated by the kingdom of the Hittites, whose capital city lay in central Turkey but whose power reached to the Aegean coast. These various states enjoyed lively relations, from trade to war. They were very literate and recorded many of their activities. Thousands of their texts survive: although they do not describe the Trojan War, they provide relevant and tantalizing information.

Hittite documents are especially rich sources for historians. They include treaties and chronicles. They refer to an allied kingdom in western Turkey called both Wilusa and Taruisa. In Homer, Troy too has a double name: it is Ilion (also known as Ilium) as well as Troy. In early Greek, the word “Ilion” was pronounced “Wilion,” so many scholars believe that the Hittite Wilusa-Taruisa is the same place as Homer’s Ilion-Troy, which they locate at the archaeological site of Troia. Hittite documents also state that armies from a place called “Ahhiyawa” invaded western Turkey and attacked the Hittites and their allies. Many scholars identify Ahhiyawa with Mycenaean Greece because Homer calls the Greeks “Achaeans.” To add to the picture of Greek expansion, archaeology demonstrates that the Mycenaean Greeks had a foothold – perhaps a colony – at Miletus, on what is today the Turkish coast several hundred miles south of Troy.

Mycenaean texts do not record specific events but they are useful even so. Mycenaean scribes kept records in an early form of written Greek called Linear B: not the Greek alphabet but, rather, a collection of syllables that few besides scribes could read. Linear B texts show that those kingdoms were more like personal estates than the bureaucratic monarchies found in Egypt or Mesopotamia; in other words, they were a lot like the warring chiefdoms described by Homer. The texts include personal names found in Homer such as Hector – a minor Greek person, not a Trojan prince – and "Trojan woman."

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In short, Mycenaean Greek and Hittite texts refer to people and places found in Homer and they document the background of Greek invasion of western Turkey. But Greeks of Homer's day, ca. 750-700 B.C., had lost the scribal skills needed to read those texts. Both the Mycenaean and Hittite kingdoms collapsed ca. 1180 B.C. and the other states of the eastern Mediterranean were shaken. It was a complex process, poorly understood today, but certainly including war and migration. The next several centuries left Greece relatively poor and largely illiterate.

In the so-called Greek Dark Ages, oral poets kept the historical memory of the Greek people alive. They did not preserve the past with historical precision, but rather, as a fuzzy and glorified set of traditions, but preserve it they did. Hence, although Homer lived ca.750-700 B.C., many features of the Iliad and the Odyssey, from poetic meter and diction to personal and place names, date back centuries earlier, to the Mycenaean Age. Homer mentions Bronze-Age artifacts, from boar's-tusk helmets to throne rooms. We don't know if Homeric characters such as Helen or Achilles really existed, but names are some of the easiest things to pass down in an oral tradition, which increases the likelihood that they were real people.

In addition to Greek oral tradition, Homer might have had access to the traditions of non-Greek peoples. In Homer's day, many non-Greeks lived in what is now western Turkey, including descendants of the Trojans. They had their own poems. They also had written documents since they had never completely lost the art of writing, unlike the Greeks. Of course, Homer could also have seen ancient objects and heirlooms as well as ruins. There are hints in his poems that Homer had visited the ruins of Troy. In short, he had a variety of evidence about the past at his disposal.

Is it ridiculous to think that the Trojan War could have begun because of a runaway queen?

Homer is not quite history but he is more than myth. His poems open a window into the mindset of the Late Bronze Age. For example, Homer's wars arise from personal quarrels, not from abstract principles or the clash of principle. Nowadays, we consider it illegitimate to fight for personal reasons, but the Bronze Age believed precisely the opposite. As we know from documents from ancient Egypt, Canaan, Syria, and what is today Turkey, Bronze-Age peoples considered personal motivation to be the only legitimate cause of war. Indeed, they had an attenuated notion of abstract principles altogether.

Another case is the cause of the Trojan War – in Homer, the abduction (or seduction) of Helen from Sparta to Troy. Is it ridiculous to think that the Trojan War could have begun because of a runaway queen? Not according to Bronze-Age texts that show, for example, that the marital problems of a princess of the Syrian city of Ugarit caused an international crisis. They also show that queens might wield more power than we might expect. Some Hittite queens, for instance, could engage in diplomatic correspondence and sign treaties, others were movers and shakers at court.

Probably the biggest flaw in Homer is that he leaves out the Hittites, except for what might possibly be one or two mentions. Hittite power was in big trouble at the time of the Trojan War, but the Hittites were still the greatest force in what is today Turkey, and Homer should have said much more about them.

To turn to the Trojan War itself, it may have lasted a long time but certainly not for ten years, a period of waging war well beyond the logistical powers of Bronze Age states. Strictly speaking, the Greeks would not have laid siege to Troy, that is, they would not have surrounded it and cut it off from the outside world. Rather, they fought more like the Vikings. They set up seaside camps in enemy territories and raided continuously.

Homer emphasizes big, pitched battles with Hollywood production values, but he is describing an atypical period, and only about two months in a purported ten-year-long war. Big battles have been rare in all periods of history; they were especially uncommon in the Bronze Age, whose states hesitated to risk precious resources in a violent clash of arms. They preferred raids. The real Trojan War would have been more a matter of low-intensity conflict than big battles, more like the War on Terror than World War Two.

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When they did fight battles, Bronze-Age armies tried to keep casualties low by engaging in duels rather than mass assaults. Homeric contests, like those between Achilles and Hector or Menelaus and Paris, are confirmed by records of duels in Hittite texts. And Bronze Age armies did engage in champion battles: that is, they let a battle be decided by one encounter between two warriors or a few encounters between sets of warriors rather than by a general engagement. Still, we need to allow for an element of exaggeration, since Bronze Age chronicles and poems overstress the prowess of kings and princes, sometimes making it seem as if they achieved victory single-handedly. Closely massed infantry units were not unknown but they may have been elite squads.

Bronze arms and armor were clumsy compared to the iron counterparts of later eras, but they got the job done. In any case, many soldiers could not afford bronze armor and had to make do with linen. For most of the Late Bronze Age, swords were too brittle to play a major role in combat; the spear ruled the battlefield, both the pike and the javelin. Around 1200 B.C., however, sword-making technology improved, giving swords a bigger role in battle. As in Homer, chariots served as jeeps rather than tanks; they served primarily to transport officers from place to place rather than being used in charges.

Few scholars place any credence in the Trojan Horse but they should. Hittite and Mesopotamian evidence demonstrates the importance of tricks in Bronze Age warfare. The Trojan Horse could have been used to lure the Trojans into opening their gates to the Greeks. It was more valuable as a decoy than as a way of sneaking the enemy into the gates. Troy was porous enough for the Greeks to enter without the ploy of a wooden horse. But they needed to take the Trojans off guard, and the horse worked like a charm in tricking Troy.

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To sum up, the Trojan War probably really took place; the date was around 1200 B.C. The war bore only a partial resemblance to what Homer describes but it was not completely different. The Iliad and the Odyssey open a window into the mindset and sometimes the practices of Bronze Age warfare. They offer a mythological reflection of the historical memory of the Greek people.

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