

Assessing the Evidence for the Trojan Wars

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The recent or forthcoming releases of several new sword-and-sandal epics (Gladiator, Passion of the Christ, Alexander the Great, and Hannibal, among others) have sparked a wave of interest in antiquity not seen since the days of Cecil B. DeMille. This has been the case for Troy in particular, and since the "Troy" filmmakers have taken certain liberties with both Homer's narrative and Bronze Age archaeology, I've included here a synopsis of what we have learned from the recent Tuebingen-Cincinnati excavations in and around the mound of Troy. These have been directed by Manfred Korfmann since 1988, and I have had the pleasure of serving as Head of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine excavations and research since that time.

We should begin with a review of geography, because this is the most important component of the story. Troy is located in northwestern Turkey, near the modern city of Canakkale, and it occupies the easiest crossing point between Europe and Asia. In antiquity the site controlled the entrance to the Dardanelles or Hellespont, a narrow strait that connected the Aegean Sea with the Sea of Marmara, Constantinople/Istanbul, and the Black Sea.

Troy's strategic geographical location made it a target of attack throughout its history. We speak of one Trojan war, but in fact there were many, stretching from the third millennium B.C. through 1915, the date of the Battle of Gallipoli, which occurred on the opposite side of the straits from Troy. Whoever controlled Troy, or Gallipoli for that matter, could control all maritime traffic between the Aegean and Black Seas. The wars, in other words, were fought for money and power, not for a woman named Helen.

The site of Troy is now a mound measuring roughly 600 x 450 ft., which consists of ten (not nine) settlements, one built above the other, and representing a period of nearly 4,500 years of occupation. The first settlement was founded ca. 3,000 B.C., and the last settlement dates to the late Byzantine period, ca. 1400 A.D. In the course of this sequence of habitation, the mound rose more than thirty feet above the surrounding plains. When the settlement was first founded, the water of the Dardanelles extended all the way to the northern side of the mound, but silting gradually moved the coastline further away, and by the late Bronze Age it was at least a mile from the site. The area to the north of the mound had become quite marshy, and ships would have been forced to dock near the modern town of Besiktepe, on the Aegean.

The story of the war, according to Homer's *Iliad* and other ancient sources, involves two principal opponents: the united cities of Mycenaean Greece against Troy and its allies (the Amazons and Lycians among them). It was thus a struggle between east and west, punctuated by the abduction of women on both sides: the Trojans seized Helen, wife of King Menelaos, from Sparta; the Greeks seized the Trojan women Briseis and Chryseis as concubines. After a series of battles spanning ten years, the city was destroyed, with a colossal wooden horse serving as the Greeks' means of entry into the city. In antiquity, the battle was believed to have occurred in the late Bronze Age, during the first quarter of the 12th century B.C.

If we examine the remains of Troy during that period, we find evidence for two destructions, one occurring in the early 13th century (the 6th settlement), and one at the beginning of the twelfth century B.C. (the 7th settlement). The sixth settlement was the strongest and largest of the Bronze Age phases of the site (the Bronze Age, in general, is 3,000-1,000 B.C.). The dates of the settlement are roughly from 1700-1275 B.C., and there were two main components of its defensive system: a fortification wall surrounding the citadel, and a large ditch cut from the bedrock, which completely surrounded the Lower City (the residential area to the south of the citadel).

The citadel fortification walls were over 12 ft. thick and over 27 ft. high, and were constructed of limestone topped by mudbrick. The ditch was located 1200 ft. to the south of the citadel, and measures about 12 ft. in width and 6 ft in depth. It is also likely that there was an additional defensive wall on the inner side of this ditch, The citadel/ditch combination constitutes one of the most sophisticated defense systems preserved from a late Bronze Age site. To successfully attack the city, a warrior would have needed to dismount from his chariot and climb into and out of the ditch, all the while dodging arrows shot by the defending Trojans; it would then have been necessary to run through 1200 ft. of terrain and subsequently scale a stone wall over 27 ft. high. This made the city practically impregnable. The interior of the citadel was occupied by a series of large, multi-room limestone buildings, although none would have contained the colossal stone and gold images of gods that figure so prominently in the film "Troy".

Who were the people who built such elaborate defenses? In spite of the extensive excavations that have taken place at Troy over the course of the last 130 years, we have only one piece of writing from the late Bronze Age levels to help us with the answer. This is a bronze seal, discovered in 1995, and only a few millimeters in diameter. It contains an inscription in Luwian, the language used by the Hittite kingdom in central Turkey during the second millennium B.C.

This is not the first time that evidence has surfaced of a link between the Hittite kingdom and Bronze Age Troy. Although we have virtually no writing from Troy, a series of clay tablets have been uncovered in the Hittite capital at Hattusa. One of the tablets, dating to the early 13th c. B.C., speaks of a political alliance between the Hittites and Aleksandu (Alexandros), the ruler of Wilusa. Alexandros was another name for Paris, the son the legendary king Priam in the *Iliad*, and experts in the Hittite language believe that Wilusa was the Hittite name for Ilion, which was another geographical designation for Troy and its surroundings.

Other late Bronze Age tablets speak of Troy/Ilion as a bone of contention between the Hittites and the Ahhiyawans. Many scholars would identify the latter group as the Achaeans, another name for the Mycenaean Greeks. It looks as if the west coast of Turkey was alternately claimed by both the Hittites and the Greeks, and there is good archaeological evidence that the Greeks had a foothold in some of the cities on the west coast of Turkey in the 15th, 14th, and 13th c. B.C. It is conceivable that Troy was caught up in this struggle between east and west during the late Bronze Age.

Why would Troy have been such a prize? Some scholars have claimed that it was the site's strategic geographical location that made it so desirable. This theory assumes that Troy would have been a desirable target for attack because the victor would have controlled commercial traffic to and from the Black Sea, and would have charged ships that sought passage through the straits. The charges would have been in the form of goods and raw materials, not coins, since coinage as we know it was not invented until the seventh century B.C. We do not yet have enough evidence to be able to assess the extent of the traffic that moved through the Dardanelles in the late Bronze Age. Additional excavation at sites around the perimeter of the Black Sea should clarify the situation.

There is no evidence for a Helen as the spur to war, although women were clearly viewed as commodities in the late second millennium B.C. Our best evidence for this comes from the Mycenaean palace of Pylos in southwestern Greece, where archaeologist Carl Blegen discovered a large number of clay tablets written in an early form of Greek called Linear B. One of these tablets, dating to the thirteenth century, speaks of women seized as slaves from the west coast of Turkey and taken to Pylos, where they were charged with running the textile industry.

The sixth settlement of Troy was severely damaged ca. 1275 B.C., and the damage seems to have been caused by a major earthquake. Seismic activity has always been a problem in this region, and it continues to be. The citadel walls were repaired, and life continued, although not as before. Most of the inhabitants who had lived outside the walls of the citadel now moved inside it, or around its perimeter.

The interior of the citadel became crowded with houses, some with party walls, and enormous storage vessels or pithoi were sunk in the floors of the houses. Security was clearly more of a concern than it had been, and the residents attempted to bring enough provisions so that they would be able to subsist within the protection of the walls for a longer period of time. This settlement, which was the seventh, was destroyed by an attack ca. 1200 B.C. The destruction level is nearly 5 ft. high in some places, and contains burned timbers, parts of human skeletons, arrowheads, and piles of sling stones that were intended to have been used in the attack.

There is no evidence that a colossal horse with hollow interior played any role in the attack, although it is conceivable that the citadel walls were struck with a battering ram that contained horse decoration. The armor worn by the attackers would have been made of bronze (not steel as in the current "Troy" film), and at least some of the helmets would probably have been constructed of boar tusks. Homer speaks of these boar tusk helmets in the *Iliad*, and they are actually preserved at several ancient sites, such as Knossos and Midea, although no Bronze Age armor has been discovered in the current excavations at Troy.

The material in the destruction level does not give us the identity of the attackers, and the period around 1200 witnessed the destruction of a large number of citadels in both Greece and Turkey, including Mycenae, Tiryns, Pylos, and Hattusa. The causes of this widespread destruction are disputed, but it is not due to only one factor: earthquakes, warfare, and probably climatic change, which adversely affected agricultural production, appear to have been involved.

This did not signal the end of habitation at Troy: sections of the walls were repaired, as were the buildings, and new houses were built as the seventh settlement continued. Pottery began to be produced in a different way beginning ca. 1130 B.C., and the new forms and techniques bear similarities to those that are known from the Balkans; consequently, scholars usually assume that there was an influx of settlers from southeastern Europe, although there is no evidence that this influx was accompanied by an attack. Another earthquake probably occurred in the tenth century B.C., after which we have virtually no evidence for habitation until the late eighth century B.C., when the *Iliad* was probably written down.

By the seventh century, this site had been identified as the place where the Trojan War had occurred. Sections of the late Bronze Age citadel wall would still have been visible at this time, and the custom of the Locrian Maidens appears to have been instituted. This is a tradition linked to the Greek hero Ajax, who reportedly raped Cassandra, daughter of King Priam, in the sanctuary of Athena at Troy. As penance, the Greek city of Locris, which was the home town of Ajax, was obliged to send two maidens to Troy annually to serve Athena and clean her sanctuary. This tribute continued until the early first century B.C., and the presence of these maidens would have helped advertise the site as the location of the Homeric war. A series of high profile visits followed, including the Persian king Xerxes, during his wars with Greece; Alexander the Great, during his wars with the Persians; and many of the Roman emperors, who traced their descent from the Bronze Age Trojans.

The best overall treatment in English of the evidence for the Trojan War is the revised version of Michael Wood's *In Search of the Trojan War* (California, 1996). For a more in-depth analysis of the most recent discoveries at Troy, you can turn to *Studia Troica*, the annual excavation journal of the current excavations, published by Philipp von Zabern (<http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/troia/st/>), as well as the Troy website: <http://classics.uc.edu/troy/eng/index.html>. The best English translations of Homer's *Iliad* are by Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fagles.