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Historical Trojan War

The legendary Trojan War has had such a profound cultural impact that in America today, almost half a globe and over two and a half millennia removed from the blind Ionian poet Homer who first authored these legends, most people understand perfectly well such terms as an "Achilles' Heel" or a "Trojan Horse" whether or not they even know the origins of the terms. From the vocabulary of the common man to the literary critiques of the classicists and from ancient Greek oral tradition to today's required high school reading, the Trojan War of the *Iliad* has deeply penetrated Western thought. Yet, one serious question about it still remains quite controversial: "Was there actually a Trojan War?" For some sort of historical Trojan War to be proven, four main points from Homer's *Iliad* need to be confirmed: that there was a notable historical city of Troy, that there was a Greek civilization capable of a unified invasion of Troy, that the Greeks conducted enough activity in the area of Troy for it to be possible for them to come into conflict, and that the Greeks and Trojans actually fought. Although much of the evidence is circumstantial, enough historical and archaeological proof survives to suggest that a historical Trojan War did happen, just not exactly the way Homer described it.

The archaeological site of Hissarlik in the extreme northwestern corner of Asia Minor, located less than an hour's walk from the Hellespont (today called the Dardanelles Strait), has long been identified as the legendary city of Troy (Blegen, 1963, p. 21-22). In ancient times, famous figures such as Xerxes and Alexander made offerings to the gods at this site identified with legendary Troy in hopes of obtaining divine favor in war (Bryce, 2002, p. 184). However, not until the 1870s, by the urging of his friend Frank Calvert, did the famous archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann begin excavating the location, claiming that he had found the site of the legendary conflict (Blegen, 1963, p. 24-25). Upon digging, archaeologists discovered that nine

stratified archaeological layers existed at the site, each with multiple sublayers, with Hissarlik VIIa eventually being identified as the best candidate to be the Troy found in Homer's *Iliad* because its approximate time of settlement of 1300-1260 BCE corresponds to the Late Bronze Age in which the Trojan War was traditionally set, and because it contains evidence of a particularly violent destruction, such as destroyed architecture, fire damage, sling bullets haphazardly lying around (when the defenders win, they neatly collect and organize them for future use), human bones showing evidence of violent deaths, and a significantly smaller population in the succeeding settlement (Blegen, 1963, p. 28, 161-2, 174; Korfmann, 2004, p. 37).

However, as well as all this evidence seems to match up with what would have happened in the Trojan War, all it concretely shows is the possibility, not proof, of it being the same place, for there have been no written records (with the exception of a single seal) ever recovered from Hissarlik from Hissarlik I to Hissarlik VIIb, so nothing from within the archaeological site exists to connect it to Troy (Blegen, 1963, p. 35; Latacz, 2004, p. 49-50). Although some scholars have tried to use the *Iliad* to prove that Hissarlik, is Troy by using methods such as comparing the topography of the poem to observations made at Hissarlik or drawing parallels between the offset slope of Hissarlik VIIa's walls and the account in the *Iliad* of Patroclus attempting to take the city by simply running up the walls, none of their theories present any evidence that could not be attributed by a skeptic to mere coincidence (Blegen, 1963, p. 15-16, 23; Bryce, 2002, p. 185).

If no concrete evidence exists within the site for identifying Hissarlik with Troy, then scholars must look for evidence from an outside source, which is where records of the nearby Hittite Empire come into play. The Hittites were a powerful group of people who were ruled by a king who resided in the city of Hattusa located east of Troy in central Anatolia and who

possessed vast amounts of territory during most of the Second Millennium BCE (Korfmann, 2004, p. 40). As the Hittites spread out from their capital and conquered lands, they eventually encountered the settlement at Troy. A treaty found in Hittite cuneiform details an agreement between King Muwatalli II of the Hittites (c. 1290-1272 BCE) and an "Alaksandu of Wilusa" to have Wilusa, part of the "land of Arzawa," be subservient to the Hittites in foreign policy but maintain a great degree of its economic and domestic autonomy (Latacz, 2004, p. 75-77). Linguists have connected Hittite "Wilusa" to Greek Late Bronze Age "Wilios," which by Homer's day had become "Ilios," a name he uses as an alternative designation for the city of Troy, showing that at least Ilios existed somewhere, not just in fantasy (Latacz, 2004, p. 82-86). The connection here to Hissarlik is that the "Arzawa" that Wilusa is said to have been a part of has been shown by other evidence to designate Western Anatolia generally, which encompasses the site of Hissarlik (Bryce, 2002, p. 189). Of more direct relation to Hissarlik in the treaty is the use of the god of the "subterranean watercourse of the land of Wilusa" as a divine witness, which corresponds with an extensive water-mine construction found under Hissarlik dating back to the Third Millennium BCE that would have been of great importance to its inhabitants (Latacz, 2004, p. 83-85, 110). Additional evidence that links Wilusa to the archaeological site of Hissarlik is provided by a fragment of a letter from Muwatalli II to the king of Seha River Land, a place known from other evidence to be not too far south of Hissarlik, that states that a Hittite force on its way to Wilusa needed to pass north through Seha territory to get to its destination, which once again places Wilusa at Hissarlik (Bryce, 2002, p. 191). As for the name Troy, linguists have determined that it comes from the Hittite name "Taurisia," which is listed in two Hittite documents from around 1400 BCE as being a political entity neighboring Wilusa (Latacz, 2004, p. 93-97). Although this would seem to be problematic in presenting Troy and Ilios as two

separate territories and not as one city with two names as Homer does, what probably happened was that Wilusa absorbed Taurisia soon after 1400 BCE, for Taurisia ceases to appear in Hittite texts after the references listed above while Wilusa continues to be mentioned in Hittite documents, and so the names became interchangeable in all but official discourse (Bryce, 2002, p. 190).

These Hittite texts support the possibility that Hissarlik was actually the location of a Late Bronze Age city called Troy, but for this site to be truly the Troy of legend the city would need to have been more than a mere backwater hamlet; it would need to have been a large, wealthy, and prosperous city that people would find worth fighting over, and indeed it was. Because of its location on the Hellespont, Troy was extremely important as a crucial node in long-distance trade routes—both maritime between the Black Sea and Aegean Sea and overland between Asia Minor and Europe (Sherratt, 2010, p. 3). As a result, Troy naturally accumulated great wealth, as evidenced by riches from a variety of locations found throughout Hissarlik's stratified layers (Sherratt, 2010, p. 3). Because of this wealth, and also access to rich soil and bountiful fishing grounds, Late Bronze Age Troy was able to grow to an impressive estimated population size of approximately 6,000 people (Bryce, 2002, p. 188). A lower city made up of most of Troy's inhabitants sprung up covering about 180,000 square meters (Bryce, 2002, p. 188). In the event of an attack, those inhabitants would in event of an attack rush inside the unparalleled-in-the-area fortified citadel of about 20,000 square meters to join the few hundred aristocrats who normally lived there (Bryce, 2002, p. 188). This apparently happened quite often—that other powers tried to take the city and seize its riches for themselves—for archaeological evidence shows that many repairs and improvements were continuously being made to the citadel's fortifications (Korfmann, 2004, p. 37). So, the evidence paints a picture of

a prosperous city that possessed imposing defensive fortifications and was rich in wealth and fame from its trading connections, which would all seem to match Homer's portrayal of Troy in the *Iliad*.

The Trojans' part in the Trojan War would seem then to be plausible, but the other half of the equation necessary for the war is whether or not the Greeks had a unified kingdom capable of launching such an invasion as the Trojan War. From excavations of archaeological sites, scholars have concluded that the Bronze Age Mycenaeans were a civilization of people living in city-states located on the Peloponnese peninsula off the Greek mainland who experienced respectable prosperity and built great palaces, likely existing as a society of warriors (Raaflaub, 1998, p. 390). One bit of evidence that suggests that the Mycenaeans had a unified political structure comes from an inscription in an Egyptian funerary temple of Pharaoh Amenophis III (c. 1390-1352 BCE) which lists the city of Mukanu as capital of the Danaja (Latacz, 2004, p. 130-131). Linguists have identified Mukanu as Mycenae, a particularly impressive centrally-located Mycenaean city, and Danaja as Danaoi, a term Bronze Age people used to refer to the Mycenaeans (Latacz, 2004, p. 130-131). If the Mycenaeans had a capital, then they probably had a king, which is further evidenced by an Egyptian record from 1437 BCE in which it is recorded that Pharaoh Tuthmosis III (c. 1479-1435 BCE) received a gift from the prince of the Danaja, suggesting that one leader represented all (or at least a great many) of the people of the civilization (Raaflaub, 1998, p. 390; Latacz, 2004, p. 132). Further evidence for the power of this monarch comes from a Hittite source in the "Tawagalawa letter" sent from the Hittite King Hattusili III (c. 1275-1250 BCE) to "the King of Ahhijawa" (whose name has not survived) whom he addresses as "great king" and "my brother" (Latacz, 2004, p. 123). The Tawagalawa letter holds much more information of significance which will be covered later, but what is

important in this regard is that in using the terms "my brother" and "great king" the Hittite king shows great respect to the ruler of the land of Ahhijawa, a name that linguists have connected to Achaea, which is another contemporary term for Bronze Age Greece (Bryce, 2002, p. 192). These terms place the King of Ahhiyawa on the same level as the King of Egypt, to whom Hattusili III had also referred in this way, and on the same level as the Hittite King himself, for such titles are reserved exclusively for one's peers (Latacz, 2004, p. 123; Bryce, 2002, p. 192). The Hittite and Egyptian kingdoms were quite large and their kings were very powerful people, so applying this same characterization to the Mycenaeans and their king makes it quite likely that they were capable of a concerted invasion of foreign lands as recorded—if not quite on the fantastical scale described by Homer—in the *Iliad*.

Common sense would dictate that if the Mycenaeans did actually launch an invasion into Anatolia to take Troy, then some records would exist of the Mycenaeans already being a political and economic player in the region in order for them to be aware that Troy was a place that could be attacked. Simple yet convincing evidence that the Mycenaeans were in economic contact with Asia Minor is provided by significant quantities of Mycenaean pottery identified as coming from the Greek mainland (not locally-made imitations) found at many different sites on the Anatolian coast spanning all the way down (past Anatolia) to Egypt and up all the way to the city of Troy itself, which clearly demonstrates that the Mycenaeans had trading relationships with various places in Anatolia, very likely including the Trojans (Chapman, 1969, p. 73-76). Because of an especially high concentration of Mycenaean pottery found in the city of Miletos, located about midway up the Anatolian coastline, as well as other archaeological evidence that its inhabitants shared the Mycenaeans' burial customs, weapons, and jewelry, it seems highly likely that Miletos and a few smaller towns were established in the Late Bronze Age as

Mycenaean colonies (Benzi, 2013, p. 509). Hittite evidence confirms these archaeological suggestions, for in the aforementioned Tawagalawa Letter the Hittite King recognizes the Ahhijawan leader as lord of the city of Millawanda, equated by linguists to Miletos (Bryce, 2002, p. 192). The Tawagalawa Letter does far more than just prove a diplomatic relationship between the Hittites and Mycenaeans based on proximity though, for it establishes that the Mycenaeans were militarily active from their base in Miletos as evidenced by the Hittite ruler both requesting that the Ahhijawan king stop giving aid and protection to Piyamaradu, a pirate type figure who was conducting numerous raids into Hittite territory, and more directly by mentioning that the Ahhijawans and the Hittites had engaged in warfare in the past (Bryce, 2002, p. 192). Evidence thus shows that the Mycenaeans were involved in Anatolia through trade, colonization, diplomacy, and military exploits, so it is completely conceivable that the Mycenaeans could have gone to war with the Trojans.

However, the feasibility of something happening and its actual occurrence are two very different issues. Therefore, specific evidence proving that a war actually happened must be found if a historical Trojan War is to be verified rather than relying arguments solely utilizing probability of a war because of proximity and wealth to make the case, though these are valid points. Archaeological evidence here begins to wear thin, for though level VIIa at Hissarlik does exhibit characteristics of a city in the Late Bronze Age destroyed by war, no archaeological evidence has been found that shows that it was specifically the Mycenaeans who were the attacking power in the conflict (Korfmann, 2004, p. 37, 41). As a result, it is once again Hittite sources that must be turned to in order to attempt to prove this conflict. As previously mentioned, Troy lay within the region called Arzawa, wherein, though too far west for the Hittites to exercise direct power over its inhabitants, the cities were definitely a part of the Hittite

sphere of influence and were required to recognize Hittite overlordship (Bryce, 2002, p. 192). Because of this, the Hittites had a stake in defending these territories, and precisely this motivation to protect Troy (and other locations) caused the Hittite King Hattusili III to write his Tawagalawa Letter to the Ahhiyawan king (Latacz, 2004, p. 75-77). In the Tawagalawa Letter, one of the places Piyamaradu was attacking was Wilusa, so herein lies evidence of at least a Mycenaean-sanctioned (if not a truly Mycenaean-fought) attack on Troy (Latacz, 2004, p. 280). Additionally, and of more direct importance, in the Tawagalawa Letter, King Hattusili III mentions that he and the Ahhiyawan king had gone to war over Wilusa in the past, which, while the conflict he was referencing theoretically might not have actually included Troy as a battlefield, makes a potential siege at Troy seem very likely indeed (Bryce, 2002, p. 192). So, while nothing explicitly says that the Mycenaeans attacked Troy, when taken in conjunction with the archaeological evidence from Hissarlik showing that Troy was conquered, the Hittite evidence declaring that the Mycenaeans fought a war to take over Troy builds a powerful case, albeit circumstantial, that the Mycenaeans did in fact lay siege to Troy.

However, even if the Mycenaeans did launch an invasion that besieged and conquered Troy, the military details would have looked very different from how Homer describes them (besides just the preposterousness of the gods playing an active role and some of the heroes' ridiculous exploits). Firstly, the size of the great fleet of over 1,000 ships as described in Homer's Catalogue of Ships would not be realistic for the time period, being several times larger than any other fleet recorded in the ancient world (Bryce, 2002, p. 193). Also, only in extremely rare circumstances throughout history were ancient Greek hoplites able to rally back to battle after their lines had been broken and they had begun to flee as Homer often portrays them to do, so a real battle probably would only last a maximum of a couple hours before one side would

retreat back to their base, not a whole day as Homer depicts (Raaflaub, 2008, p. 481-482). Furthermore, due to the technology of the time, a continuous siege lasting ten full years as described by Homer would be out of the question for these people, and so it would be much more likely either that the siege only lasted a few months, as was common during the Bronze Age, or that the "siege" of ten years was not a scenario of unceasing conflict but instead a situation in which Mycenaean forces would camp out in front of the city for several months out of the year, returning each year (Bryce, 2002, p. 193).

Some people claim that because of these (and other) inconsistencies between the *Iliad* and the military facts known about the time period, the Trojan War was clearly fictitious. However, those people would be missing the point, for as Dr. Franz Hampl put it, "The *Iliad* is not a history book," and Homer was a poet writing for entertainment using the Trojan War as a backdrop to a story, not a historian writing to preserve historical records of specific battles for future scholars (Latacz, 2004, p. 90; Bryce, 2002, p. 194). For example, no one would try to defend the position that the dialogue between characters in the *Iliad* is a verbatim record of what was actually said by the heroes on the plains of Troy, for the conversations in the story are meant to advance a plot and occasionally convey truths, not serve as an official transcript. Moreover, even if Homer thought he was recording facts—which he clearly did not—the *Iliad* still could not be considered a definitive account of the Trojan War, for Homer likely wrote in the 700s BCE while the events he was writing about likely took place in the 1200s BCE, and he probably had oral tradition as his only real source of information for the Trojan War, so the *Iliad* would only be considered a secondary source for the Trojan War, not a firsthand account, with the implication that any "facts" that are present in Homer's account should not simply be taken for granted to be correct (Latacz, 2004, p. 204-205). When Homer is thus approached with these

considerations in mind, one can look at both the *Iliad* and a historical account of the Trojan War

as different products of an original event rather than foolishly attempting to compare them to

each other to judge the reality of that original event. Bearing this in mind and combining it with

knowledge about the formation and evolution of myth, many elements in the *Iliad* that might be

viewed as markers of historical impossibility can be explained as conventions of mythmaking.

For example, the continuous fighting over a period of ten years in the *Iliad* was likely a result of

Homer picking various episodes in the history of Trojan-Mycenaean conflict from a timespan of

multiple decades or even centuries and combining and compressing them down into ten years

(Bryce, 2002, p. 193-194). Additionally, Homer's inclusion of an impossibly long ten-year siege

was likely a result of increased Greek contact with cities of Mesopotamia, whose leaders,

because of the prominence of inter-city rivalry in that culture, considered sieges to be part of the

"required agenda of heroic exploits" as evidenced by artwork on their artifacts (Sherratt, 2012, p.

12-13). Also, the unrealistic Catalogue of Ships that Homer provides, when analyzed for age of

linguistic features, can be dated to sometime in the 700s BCE, which makes it a new invention

placed into the oral tradition likely to reflect an eighth-century outlook on early panhellenism,

taking on a characteristic of the present time period as myths so often do, and because of this

cannot with any fairness be held up to historical scrutiny (Raaflaub, 1998, p. 400). Furthermore,

any attempt to discredit a Trojan War because Homer's listed heroes do not appear as famous

leaders in other contemporary sources is undertaken in vain, for myths have a natural tendency to

collect and place together many different renowned individuals across geographical regions and

chronological periods. Similarly to how the German *Nibelungenlied* weaves together a single

story involving characters historically located over 400 years apart, Homer's *Iliad* places

together on the plains outside Troy local heroes with legends pertaining to individual city-states

already established, such as Sarpedon, Tlepolemos, Idomenus, and Hector, whose myths hail from Lycia, Rhodes, Crete, and Thebes, respectively, as proven by archaeological finds (Raaflaub, 1998, p. 396).

In spite of all this evidence about how in details the *Iliad* is made up of inventions and does not represent historical fact, what is important to note for the historical study of the Trojan War is that, though covered by many layers of poetic invention, there lies behind the *Iliad* a kernel of truth in its overall premise (Bryce, 2002, p. 183). In understanding the nature of these ancient epic "histories," a crucial element of them is that the audience "knows" the story to be true (Sherratt, 2010, p. 5). An example of this can be found within Homer's work itself, for in the *Odyssey,* the poet Demodokos, whose name itself (probably) means "popular consensus" must recite his poem *kata kosmon*, meaning what everybody considers to be the "truth" (Sherratt, 2010, p. 5). Since a historical epic that no one believes is useless, people must have believed the *Iliad* (or at least its ancestor in oral tradition), and since they believed the *Iliad* they must have had some knowledge of events similar to what are described in the story, which they could only obtain if those events actually happened. Very few ancient commentators were skeptical of the *Iliad* as a source of history, reflecting a cultural historical awareness that at least the main points of these events took place (Bryce, 2002, p. 183).

To summarize the above information, research has shown that level VIIa at the archaeological site of Hissarlik, which can be identified as ancient Troy, shows evidence of destruction around 1260 BCE, the same time as the Mycenaeans of ancient Greece were under unified rule, conducting extensive activities in coastal Anatolia, including the region where Troy was located, and went to war over control of the city of Troy. Although archaeological evidence has yet to be found that specifically indicates that the Mycenaeans took over Troy, somebody did

in fact destroy Troy, and logic would seem to dictate that with this much circumstantial evidence and a lack of other candidates, the Mycenaeans were probably the ones to lay siege to and temporarily take over Troy. As a matter of historical realism the conflict in which this occurred did not include interventions of the gods, thousand-ship fleets, ten-year-long sieges, full-day battles, or (almost) immortal heroes. Rather, what the Trojan War probably looked like was a series of conflicts over many years between the Mycenaeans and the Trojans, who were allied with the Hittites, in which eventually at one point the Mycenaeans did achieve the victory of conquering Troy, though this victory was short-lived and they left the city and made peace with the Hittites. So although admittedly no historical evidence exists that conclusively proves the historicity of the Trojan War, such a war cannot be disproven by the facts and is actually supported by much evidence that suggests the likelihood of an actual historical conflict, though not the Trojan War as Homer excitingly tells it, but rather a Trojan War among many Trojan Wars.