

The Trojan War Unearthed: An Exploration of Literary Sources and Archaeological Discoveries

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Abstract: It is widely believed that the first collection of written stories or literature in general was laid down by the Ancient Greece. The most memorable pieces within their rather extensive pool are Homer's two epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These epics portray a grand image of their world, with gods and goddesses, heroes, monsters, curses, prophecies, and most importantly a war. The ten year long war, which started in the name of honour and ended with what is probably the most iconic siege in history, has been sketched out in the two epics a lot of other stories. Highly romanticised in all of these accounts, the war have been the subject of awe and speculation for centuries. Did the war of troy really take place? If yes how much of the story's depiction was actually true? Drawing on an extensive collection of classical texts, including the works of Homer, Herodotus, and Hesiod this paper sifts through the layers of myth and history surrounding the Trojan War. Through this analysis, it seeks to discern the historical accuracy of the war and the extent to which it was romanticized in ancient storytelling.

Keywords: Trojan War, Myth, Archaeology, Excavations, Iliad, Odyssey, Epic, Greeks, Hisarlik, Helen of Troy.

Introduction - The literature of Ancient Greece was a rich treasure trove of epics, lyrical and pastoral poetry, tragic and comic drama, prose history and philosophy. The Ancient Greeks were foundational in the formation and naming of many of the genres, which we now use extensively. It is safe to say that we owe a lot of our knowledge about writing and critiquing to the classics. A lot of Greek and Roman literature portrays or draws references from the War of Troy. As such there is no single version of the war and it has to be pieced together through a lot of perspectives and fragmented accounts for a full view. The primary sources for a basic understanding are Homer's epics, as they provide a chunk of information about what happened before, during and after the war. The *Iliad* deals with the wrath of Achilles during the tenth year of the war whereas the *Odyssey* explains the end of the war and the legendary siege of Troy. Being a Roman text Virgil's *Aeneid* depicts the people of Troy and how they had to flee the city post the siege, and is another major text to describe the war. The Romans claimed their lineage to Troy. A lot of other small accounts are found in what is called the '*Epic Cycle*' a series of stories related to the Trojan War. They include *Cypria*, *Aethiopis*, *Ililiupersis*, *Nostoi* and *Telegony*. These survive only in fragments and summaries.

Hesiod attempted to classify the heroes of the war in his periods of world's mythical history. He referred to the time of the Trojan War as the 'Heroic Age', the fourth of the late ages. Herodotus who came 300 years after Homer,

claimed that the actual history differed from the myth of Homer's creation.

Merging together all of these texts, the story of Trojan War can be understood as follows. It starts with Zeus and Poseidon contesting for the love of a sea nymph, Thetis. Before either brother could act on their desire, they are informed of a prophecy which says that the son born of Thetis to either of them will be more powerful than their father and will possess a weapon that will be more powerful than the Lightning bolt or the Trident. Afraid of the prophecy, Zeus forced Thetis to marry Peleus, King of Pthia. Their wedding feast was organised and all of the gods and goddesses were invited except for Eris, the goddess of strife.

Angered by this humiliation, Eris tossed a golden apple inscribed with the words for the fairest towards the goddesses. Hera, Athena and Aphrodite started arguing about who the apple was meant for. They made Paris, son of King Priam the judge for this issue. Paris was unable to make a decision, so the goddesses started bribing him. Hera promised him strength as a ruler, Athena offered him wisdom and Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman on earth. Paris decided in favour of Aphrodite.

Assured by Aphrodite's promise Paris went to Sparta under the disguise of a diplomatic mission and sneaked into Helen's chambers. Before Helen could look up she was shot with an arrow by Cupid or Eros, and fell in love with Paris. He took Helen to Troy, whether Helen went

willingly or not is a matter of debate.

Menelaus, Helen's husband, convinced his brother Agamemnon to lead an armada against Troy to retrieve his wife. A thousand ships sailed for the coast of Troy lead by Greek heroes like Odysseus, Ajax, Nestor and Achilles. The battle lasted for ten years, throughout which the Greek were unable to take down the walls of the city of Troy. The ten years though were marked by continuous raids on the villages outside the city walls and looting and enslaving the residents. Both the sides were backed by certain gods. While Aphrodite and Apollo were the major supporters of Troy, Hera and Athena were continuously aiding the Greeks. The ten year long stalemate was broken by Odysseus when he came up with a plan to breach the walls of Troy. The Greeks made a show of defeat and returning for their homelands, leaving behind a large wooden horse. Odysseus also planted a double agent, Sinon, who convinced the people of Troy that the Greeks had left the horse as a gift and that it would bring them great fortune. The people of Troy unwittingly and despite warnings from several advisors, including their princess Cassandra, let the horse in the city. When night fell the Greek army hidden in the horse came out and sacked the city, hence ending the Trojan War.

Even if the Greeks technically won the war they committed a lot of atrocities in the process, like the rape of Cassandra by Ajax in the temple of Athena and the brutal murder of Hector's infant son. The Greek heroes paid for all of their sins on the way back home. They were thrown off course time and time again and a lot of Greeks were lost on the way. Those who did make it back to their homeland faced other challenges. Some were murdered, others were exiled and a few were sentenced to both.

Helen in whose name the war had been fought returned with her husband Menelaus after the death of her two successive Trojan husbands. After Menelaus' death she was exiled to the island of Rhodes where she was hanged by a vengeful war widow.

The Trojan War was also related to the foundation of Rome. The Romans claimed that their founder was the Trojan hero, Aeneas who fled Troy following the siege and founded Rome after roaming a lot of places in search of a home including Carthage.

There are obviously a lot of variations to this story. Different authors have claimed different accounts of the war. Herodotus who was a historian believed that Helen was not even present in Troy when the war was being fought. In his version Paris was shipwrecked in Sparta where he was found by Helen and nursed back to health. During this period they fell in love with each other and eloped. Their ship ran into a storm again though and they had to dock in Egypt. Paris' slaves revolted and informed the king at Memphis that a Trojan stranger has abducted the queen of Sparta. Believing the slaves, the king of Egypt kept Helen until her husband could come to retrieve her. The Greeks

oblivious to this fact, headed to Troy to demand the return of Helen. When they were told that Helen was not in Troy, the Greeks declared war. This version has been rejected for the fact that if Helen was truly not in Troy, the Greeks would have found out at some point during the ten years. Despite their disagreements all of these authors seem convinced that a war did in fact take place. To the readers and critiques that came after the classical period of Greeks and Romans however, a question has always been posed, how much of the myth is actually a myth?

Philosophers of the modern era have varying belief in the truth of the war and myths in general. While David Hume dismissed myths as a result of "fearful humans making up stories in a way that was comforting to them", Johann Gottfried Herder believed them to be "deeply profound truths". According to Walter Burkert "myth is a traditional tale to something with secondary partial reference".

All of their views were a little sceptical due to the lack of historicity and solid evidence. This held true until 1873, when an amateur and untrained archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann claimed to have found the ancient city of Homeric Troy. Until then there had only been vague theories about the location and existence of Troy, also known as Ilium. Hisarlik was widely believed to be the site of ancient Troy. It is a strategically important location as a major trading route. It is near both the Aegean Sea and the Strait of Gallipoli also known as Dardanelles. A mound was present at this site at the west end of a ridge projecting in an east-west direction from a mountain range. All of these coincided with Homer's descriptions for Troy, but Heinrich Schliemann was the first to take a gamble and actually dig the place for evidence.

Born in 1822, Heinrich Schliemann was a German businessman and archaeologist. Since childhood he had been fascinated by the idea of Troy he had read about in the book 'world history for children'. He was a naturally talented linguist and spoke more than 15 languages. Earlier working on a ship, he amassed a great wealth in 1851, thanks to his talent with languages, turning profit during a gold rush. He retired in 1858 and spent his time touring classical archaeological sites. In 1868, he met a fellow enthusiast, Frank Calvert. Calvert had also been fascinated by the idea of Homeric Troy and had conducted research on the mound in Hisarlik and excavated trenches. He was convinced that it was the site of Troy. His family owned land in Hisarlik, including the eastern half of the Hisarlik mound. Lacking funds he asked Schliemann to continue the search. Schliemann began excavations in 1870. It took him three years to find what he believed he was looking for. Heinrich Schliemann's excavations unearthed nine layers of a city. Believing one of the lowest level to be Homeric Troy Schliemann claimed to have found the treasure of Priam. It contained gold, valuable artefacts and jewellery including a famous golden diadem. He had also found pottery, gold jewellery, bronze kettle and figurines. But it seemed that

he had been a little hasty in both his excavations and claims to have found 'Homeric troy'.

According to historical estimates, the troy of homers epic fell around 1180 B.C. the layer in which Schliemann found the treasure was troy II which was inhabited around 2550-2300 B.C. troy II seems to be too early in history to be the city homer had described. When these facts came to light Schliemann found himself on the end of a lot of criticism not just because of a claim poorly made but because in his hurry to find just one particular layer, he destroyed all of the layers before. His excavation methods were questioned as he employed 80-160 unskilled workers daily, and they dug a 14 m trench through the centre discarding building rubble from layers considered too late in time to be troy. Later studies showed that the troy Schliemann was looking for might have been troy VI or troy VII a. one of his critic commented that Schliemann had accomplished what the Greeks could not: bring down the walls of troy. He was also sued by the Turkish government for smuggling the treasure out of the country as it was technically the property of turkey.

Despite all of his shortcomings Schliemann was the first person to pinpoint and excavate the site of troy. He allegedly also found other evidences of the war. In 1876, Schliemann started excavations at Mycenae. Here he discovered a gold funeral mask of the Greek Bronze Age which he deemed to be "the mask of Agamemnon".

His work was continued by Wilhelm Dorpfeld a German architect who was known for his stratigraphic excavations. In his searches of the layer troy VI, he found a city with a citadel surrounded by a defensive wall, a megaron (large rectangular central hall), pottery and jewellery along with evidences of destruction by fire, which were all consistent with homers description of king Priam's palace in Iliad. Further digs revealed massive five metre thick defensive stone walls surrounding the citadel with several large towers, public buildings such as workshops storage rooms, gateways and mud brick houses all suggestive of a city with complex social and economic structure. This layer also seemed closer in time to estimated dates of war.

These claims were further investigated by American archaeologist Carl Blegen between 1932 and 1938. He diverged from Dorpfeld's opinion of troy VI being the real troy. This was because he found compelling evidence to suggest that troy VIIa had witnessed lengthy siege and was ultimately sacked. His team found Greek style arrowheads

buried in walls, unburied skeletons, animal bones, scorched buildings and other buildings divided into rooms that could accommodate families seeking shelter. Blegen dated fall of troy to c.1250 BCE.

Consequently a lot of discoveries have been made all pointing VIIa as the site of troy. Manfred Korfmann who led an international team found a 'place of burning' with burial urns, amphora and burned bones.

Everything considered it is highly unlikely that the basic plot of homers epic was completely fictional. After all the role of bards in ancient Greece was to pass on traditional tales by the word of mouth. While most of their stories were passed on from generations, they were free to take creative liberties and make additions to these tales, which explains the involvement of gods and the supernatural in these epics. The archaeological evidences found in Hisarlik also point towards the existence of a city and a long war. Although how much of it was real is up for speculation. From a literature point of view, the war gives us valuable insight into the psychology of countless of victims of war. We have accounts of the winning side, the losing side and the people who came before and after, making its literature invaluable.

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