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Digging up clues to the truth behind the myth

By Josh Fischman

Legendary Troy, perched on a hilltop in what's now northwestern Turkey, draws thousands of visitors every year. And their overwhelming reaction is disappointment. "Most tourists get there and say, "This is it?"" says Eric Cline, an archaeologist at George Washington University. The place of which Homer sang—a rich city with "lofty gates" and "fine towers," temples to Apollo and to Athena, the palace of King Priam with a grand throne room and 50 marble chambers, a land in which thousands of warriors defended the beautiful Helen against an invading Greek force—looks like a rude ruin on a dusty hill. Mostly, there's a fort with big walls, but they encircle an area only about 200 yards across. Around it are some scattered stones. Says Andrew Sherratt, an archaeologist at Oxford University: "It seems like pretty small beer."

Visitors aren't the only ones who feel let down. The small size and relative poverty of the ruins on this mound, called Hissarlik, have led many archaeologists and historians to doubt this was the place of the heroic battles of The Iliad: Frank Kolb, from the University of Tübingen, Germany, has described the site as "a miserable little settlement."

But Troy is getting bigger. Much bigger. Recent excavations have unearthed an extensive town outside the citadel walls, dated to around 1300 B.C.—the approxi-
NOW AND THEN. Troy, when first excavated in the 1800s, looked like an unimpressive mound (above), and it isn’t much more striking today (right). But new excavations reveal that the ruin was, in the Bronze Age, a sizable and powerful city (below).

Bronze Age, from 1600 to 1200 B.C. This was a world where villages were starting to come together and join forces as regional states, and that meant some jockeying for control over land and resources. One of the first to rise to prominence was Mycenae, a city in southern Greece, across the Aegean Sea from Troy—and the legendary seat of King Agamemnon.

Launching ships. Mycenae, according to Homer, was where the trouble with the Trojans started. Agamemnon’s brother, Menelaus, was married to the famous Helen. But Paris of Troy, egged on by some meddlesome gods, kidnapped Helen and brought her home. Agamemnon, to help his brother, rounded up Odysseus, Achilles, a few other accomplished warriors, and a thousand ships, and set sail in pursuit. At Troy, however, they were stymied for 10 years by the army of Paris’s father, King Priam, and the stout walls of the city. Then the Greeks faked a retreat, leaving behind a troop of commandos hidden in a big wooden horse. The Trojans took the horse into the city, the commandos came out at night and opened the city gates, and the Greeks returned to sack the place.

Heinrich Schliemann, the wealthy amateur German archaeologist who made the first serious excavations at Troy, arrived at Mycenae about 3,100 years after these battles supposedly took place. In

SUNKEN TREASURE

The submerged past of the Bronze Age has been pulled up, dripping with clues about lost civilizations. From 200 feet below the ocean surface into the light of day. About 1300 B.C., off the southern coast of Turkey, a large ship foundered and went down near a cape called Uluburun. It lay quietly in its watery grave, undisturbed until spotted by a sponge diver in the early 1980s. Since then, underwater archaeologists have recovered a remarkable cargo from many ports of call, adding

Divers on a Bronze Age shipwreck (left) found a Mycenaean sword (right).
COMPETING POWERS
Around 1300 B.C., two civilizations flourished around the Aegean: the Hittites and the Mycenaean. In between was Troy, situated on a trade route that could control the movement of goods around the region.

1876, Schliemann began cutting a trench just inside the so-called Lion's Gate and found five large, rectangular shafts. They were graves, holding bodies that were, literally, covered in gold. Goblets, swords, breastplates, crowns, and jewelry were everywhere, and the faces were shielded by gold masks. Legend has it that Schliemann held up one of these masks and then wrote to the king of Greece, saying, "I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon." Unfortunately, Schliemann was wrong. The excavated finds predated the Trojan War by hundreds of years—dates verified by later archaeologists. (This wasn’t the first time Schliemann’s enthusiasm leapt ahead of his science. At Troy, he uncovered a cache of jewels, draped them over his wife, Sophie, and pronounced them to be the "Jewels of Helen." Once again, however, he had his dates wrong.)

Agamemnon remains, so far as anyone knows, a fictional character. But Mycenae and its wealth, uncovered by Schliemann, were quite real. Starting about 1600 B.C., the palace-state was a major player in Mediterranean culture and politics. And it was just one part of a larger civilization. Other, similar sites ranged across Greece, including Pylos, Argos, and Tyrins. At all of these places, residents began accumulating wealth and using it to build power bases, says Jack Davis, an archaeologist at the University of Cincinnati. "The palaces are all really big," says Davis. "And they are filled with specialized rooms. There were rooms for food storage, rooms for ceramics, chariot repair shops, and archive rooms with records written on stone tablets. Many of the walls were plastered, and some had frescoes."

Gold and silver. This consolidation of power probably came about because the Mycenaean controlled sources of precious metals and were able to use them to start trading networks. To the south, on the island of Crete, a group called the Minoans had developed elaborate gold and silver craftworks. What they didn’t have was the raw gold and silver; the mainland people did, and that was the start of a mutually beneficial exchange. The Minoans were also trading elsewhere, with Cyprus and Egypt, and the Mycenaeans became plugged into this network. There was one problem: Expanding spheres of influence, inevitably, bump into other expanding powers. The Mycenaean, as they stretched eastward, ran into the empire of the Hittites, a civilization that dominated much of what is now called Turkey. From their capital, Bogazkoy, the Hittites controlled vast trade routes stretching east to Asia, south

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up to a rare snapshot of international relations among growing empires.

The ship carried a cargo of Egyptian ebony, cobalt-colored glass ingots produced in Syria and Palestine, several tons of copper ingots from Cyprus, Canaanite jewelry, delicate silver bracelets, a gold scarab of Queen Neferetiti from Egypt, and two swords from Mycenae. It is, says scientists from the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A&M University, the wealthiest cargo ever found from this period. The diversity shows that, rather than living in isolation, civilizations from Mycenae on the Greek mainland to Cyprus and then on to Egypt were feeling out one another as trading partners. "Things were moving all around the Med at this time," says Andrew Sherratt, an archaeologist at Oxford University. Contact and commerce, of course, can set the stage for conflict, perhaps of the type surmised to have taken place at Troy. -J.P.
toward Egypt and Assyria, and north to the Black Sea. In time, some of these routes began moving goods west to the Mediterranean. And there, Hittite records show, they started knocking heads with a people whom they called the Ahhiyawa. Tablets found in the ruins of Hittite palaces speak of battles and reconciliations with these people along Turkey's western coast and into the Aegean. Today most scholars think the Ahhiyawa were none other than the Mycenaeans.

Here, archaeological records start to recall the Homeric legends. One of those Mycenaean clashes, sometime prior to 1300 B.C., was over an area in northwestern Turkey that the Hittite texts call Wilussa. The Hittites took some pains to maintain good relations with Wilussa because it was a regional power, capable of raising armies and in a position to control key shipping lanes. “Even if the land of Wilussa has seceded from the land of the Hattusa [as the Hittites called themselves], close ties of friendship were maintained . . . with the kings of the land,” wrote a Hittite king to the ruler of Wilussa in a treaty. So here is a bone of contention between the Mycenaeans and their rivals, sitting approximately where Troy sits today. This history sounds more specifically Homeric, says Joachim Latez, a classics scholar from the University of Basel, when one considers Homer’s name for Troy in The Iliad was “Ilios.” Bronze Age Greeks would have pronounced it “Wilios.” And that’s just too close to Wilussa for coincidence. Add to that a Bronze Age seal, inscribed in a Hittite language, found in Troy, and “it’s likely, though not completely certain,” says Rose, “that Troy was Wilussa.”

Forts and slingshots. The new size of Troy adds to that likelihood. Korfmann, among others, had been troubled by the skimpy area covered by Troy’s citadel. He performed a geomagnetic scan that revealed a strange line: It snaked around the citadel, about 400 yards away. Digging down, archaeologists found a deep ditch, several yards across. Behind the ditch the diggers found postholes dug into the bedrock, of the type to support a palisade. The complex appears to be a fortification, designed to stop things like onrushing chariots.

There are other signs of hostilities. The archaeologists have found piles of rounded stones used as ammunition for slingshots. “This is what defenders in a siege would have used. It’s just what we find at Masada, for instance, the site of another famous siege,” says Cline. “That they are piled up means the people are under attack.”

The town that the archaeologists have unearthed between the outer barrier and the fortress walls is no country hamlet. “It

FROM HOMER TO HOLLYWOOD

The publicist from Warner Bros. sounds a little defensive. “You know this is an adaptation, right?” Risa Chapnick says about Troy, the Brad Pitt-powered epic that opened last week. “It’s not going to read exactly like Homer.” The movie studio needn’t worry about desecrating a sacred text: Adaptations of the Troy cycle are a long and proud tradition, and writers from Euripides to Virgil to Shakespeare have used the powerful story to emphasize different themes.

Homer himself (or themselves—some scholars believe there was more than one poet) doubtless indulged in some creative editing of the myths and stories circulating around 750 B.C., when the author of The Iliad supposedly lived. He probably collapsed several battles into one, and his focus on the petty quarrels of the gods and the human suffering they caused very likely found a ready audience among Greeks, who knew their great Bronze Age civiliza-

tions had crumbled into dust. “Homer mattered a lot to the Greek playwrights, and they kept the stories alive,” says Diane Thompson, author of The Trojan War, a study of Troy literature published this year. Euripides, following one of the darker Troy threads, focused on the suffering of captives after Troy’s fall, and his play The Trojan Women is a harsh condemnation of war.

Positive spin. It was Virgil, in the first century B.C., who gave the tales of Troy a hopeful spin and secured their place in Western literature through his poem The Aeneid. It linked the Trojan War to nothing less than the founding of the Roman Empire. “Virgil took this bunch of losers—the Trojans—who were kicked out of their homeland and landed them, after years of wandering, in Italy,” Thompson says. And Italy, in essence, was the Promised Land. Aeneas, the hero of the poem, is rewarded for his persistence and piety with a marriage to an Italian princess, and their
covers a broad area, extending out from the citadel for about 400 yards,” says Rose. “The houses tend to have stone foundations, mud brick walls, and timber roofs. We can even see the remains of Bronze Age kitchens, including cooking vessels and table wares.” Since the houses are in tight groups, yet the groups are scattered around, it’s likely there were more houses in between that haven’t been found or were destroyed. It would be odd to build little clumps of houses at various places between the citadel and the outer wall, says Chine, so it makes more sense to see these groupings as remnants of a denser town. “This is really a neighborhood of many homes,” he says. “Together with the citadel and the ditch, it’s a city, no doubt about it.”

And like any complex settlement, this city had dwellers of different social status, including aristocracy. The archaeologists have found a burial of a man “who seems to have died on the operating table,” says Rose. “There were signs that his brain was swelling and they tried to relieve it with trephination.” This was an ancient medical technique, in which holes were cut into the skull to relieve pressure. It was, obviously, a risky procedure, and not attempted on just anyone. “You don’t trephine commoners. So this was a member of some elite,” says Rose.

It is an intriguing story, yet it leaves troubling loose ends. One of them is that Troy is actually nine cities, one built on top of the other, and the one with the ditch and sling stones—Troy 6—looks as if it was destroyed not by a siege but by an earthquake. There are shattered bricks everywhere and houses shifted on foundations. It’s the next Troy—7A—that has evidence of burned houses and other signs of attack. But that city isn’t as big as Troy 6. So neither really fits Homer’s war. And of course no one has found a Trojan horse. (There is a rather odd-looking beast that’s been erected in front of the site, mainly to show tourists that they’re in the right place.)

Rose isn’t surprised by the unruly ending. “There were many wars that occurred at Troy or around it, from 2000 B.C. through the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915,” he says. “The Iliad speaks of one war between Greeks and Trojans that lasted 10 years. It is conceivable there were a number of battles in the Late Bronze Age and that some lasted for a long time due to the sophisticated defenses of the city. When The Iliad was composed, several centuries later, all these elements could have been compressed into one war against one opponent.” It’s not a neat, poetic conclusion, but that’s usually what happens when you dig in the dirt for the truth: Things end up being a little messy.

WAR STORIES. Troy’s tales appear in (clockwise from upper left) a Virgil poem, a Shakespeare play, a film with Katharine Hepburn, and a painting of lovers Paris and Helen.

descendants founded Rome. The story was embraced by the Roman emperors, who were happy to trace their lineage to ancient heroes; it gave their rule added legitimacy. Tudor kings in England also claimed Aeneas as an ancestor for much the same reason.

Other Englishmen had other ideas about the story. In the 14th century A.D., Geoffrey Chaucer used it to expound on the place of romantic love in a Christian world. In Troilus and Criseyde, a Trojan prince falls for a fickle woman, is emotionally hurt by her, and then is physically hurt—killed, actually—by Achilles. After death, he realizes that earthly attachments have limits when compared with divinity. Two hundred years later, however, Shakespeare presented a more complicated version, Troilus and Cressida, in which Troilus’s beloved’s faithlessness causes him to question the judgments of heaven.

In the past 100 years or so, individual choices have become even more prominent as the role of deities receded. Powerful presences such as Katharine Hepburn and Vanessa Redgrave dominated the action in the filmed version of The Trojan Women, and muscleman Steve Reeves threw his weight around as a righteous Aeneas in the movie The Trojan Horse. Judgment and payback abound in the latest telling, as greedy Agamemnon dies by Trojan hands in the ruins of the city he besieged, and Brad Pitt’s Achilles ends like a heel before he is shot in his own. When will all this killing end? A stricken woman implores Pitt. “It never ends,” he grumbles. He’s probably right: The Battle for Troy, a video game with multiple attack scenarios, has just marched off to electronics-store shelves.

COMING ATTRACTION. Brad Pitt as Achilles the warrior in the new film Troy