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Homer & history

by [Victor Davis Hanson](#)

On Barry Strauss's *The Trojan War: A New History*.

Barry Strauss

The Trojan War: A New History.

Simon & Schuster, 288 pages, \$26

Somewhere around 1200 B.C. a group of Greek raiders attacked a prominent Hittite town in northern Asia Minor. After a prolonged siege, they sacked Troy and left. Shortly after returning to the Greek mainland, the victors saw their own cities suffer a similarly catastrophic destruction.

That's about all we surmise with any certainty about the great Trojan War and its aftermath—the most famous but least known of ancient Greek conflicts, one that predated the well-recorded Persian and Peloponnesian Wars of the city-states by over 700 years.

Each generation of classical scholars has a different take on the historicity of the shadowy Trojan saga, always reinterpreting our various sources of information in light of new evidence. There nevertheless remain still three complementary branches of knowledge. First, are the Homeric poems of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (composed orally in dactylic hexameters around 700 B.C.), along with scattered fragments from a largely contemporaneous but lost ancillary epic cycle. Second, this literary evidence is sometimes enhanced by the ongoing archaeological excavations of both Troy and the Mycenaean citadels in Greece. Third, these literary and physical records are further augmented by the difficult translation of both Linear B (the surviving inventory scripts of Mycenaean civilization) and Hittite texts, a corpus of clay records that is occasionally enlarged by new discoveries.

Until recently, it was popular to believe that there never was much of a war at all. M. I. Finley, the late distinguished ancient historian, had long argued that Homer's fictive world was largely drawn from the so-called Dark Ages (1100–800 B.C.). The small kernel of truth about a great war that had survived the end of the Mycenaean world was hopelessly embedded in centuries of oral transmission, exaggeration, and fabrication. So a small raid of a distant past had then been transmogrified by the oral bards of an impoverished society into a never-never-land fable of the aristocratic clans, gift-giving, and tribal blood-feuds of a much later impoverished and depopulated Greece. Trying to pick and choose what might have survived from 1200 B.C. within the thousands of lines from Homer's epics was about as fruitful as reconstructing the little-known court of King Arthur from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, similarly composed centuries after the existence of the early British kings.

Given the unreliability of the flamboyant Heinrich Schliemann and the sober reexamination of his

extravagant claims of finding Priam's city, classicists long ago concluded that Troy VIIa was actually a sort of backwater—hardly the windy Ilium of Homer's hexameters. And while the once dramatic decipherment of Linear B in the 1950s by Michael Ventris, which proved the Mycenaeans were Greek-speakers, did not quite bring to life with any detail Mycenaean lords with Homeric names like Odysseus and Ajax as much as pedestrian palatial inventories of sheep and wine.

The skepticism supposedly confirmed that Homer was to be seen simply as the last bard in a long line of oral poets—fortunate that his version of the Trojan War was codified, since it was contemporaneous with the rediscovery of writing and the rise of the new Greek polis. In short, he offered a hopeless mishmash of Mycenaean, Dark Age, and polis-era artifacts, elaborated upon by the poet's own genius.

Lately, however, the controversy has shifted once again back toward historical authenticity. With much more extensive excavation in the late 1980s and 1990s, we now know that Homer's Troy—currently known as Troy VII—was much larger than earlier thought, and, as it should be, more Anatolian than Greek in character. The newly explored citadel and its environs have grown from less than an acre to over seventy, and may have supported a population of several thousands. The names of some of Homer's heroes appear not only on Mycenaean documents, but also in Hittite as well. And when we compare Homeric battle scenes to those found in contemporary art, wall painting, and Hittite documents of the thirteenth century B.C., an eerie semblance emerges.

It is true that much of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* reflects the later world in which he composed. That is, Homeric agriculture, fighting in mass, and rudimentary politics are drawn from the Hellenic renaissance of the eighth century that Homer himself knew well. This latest history of the Trojan War does not explore that likelihood in any detail, or Finley's less plausible belief that the ninth or tenth century was the source for Homer's material world. Strauss seems to believe instead that even if either view were largely true, there are nevertheless still enough Mycenaean artifacts surviving in the epics—whether descriptions of odd boar-toothed helmets or obscure place names long forgotten by Homer's own time—to justify using the epics as a window into the world of the thirteenth century B.C.

Barry Strauss is a gifted ancient historian who in the last few years has increasingly expanded his talents beyond scholarly articles and academic conferences to bring his considerable knowledge of the Greek and Roman worlds to a broad readership who appreciate accessibility without the loss of academic integrity. In his most recent effort, reminiscent of his earlier treatment of the battle of Salamis, Strauss reviews these old Homeric controversies in light of a great deal of new knowledge, but in a novel fashion designed to appeal to general readers.

In some sense, his “new history” is a thought experiment of sorts: Can one offer a plausible reconstruction of the Trojan War that is faithful to what little we can glean from historical sources, without losing the drama of Homer's stolen Helen, the Greek retaliatory invasion, the grand duel between Hector and Achilles, all capped off with the baleful fall of the city?

Strauss begins with the abduction of Helen and ends with the Trojan horse and the sack of Troy, retelling the story by following Homer's narrative while footnoting parallels from contemporary archaeological, graphic, and epigraphical material to support the stories of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Chapter titles seek to appeal to a modern audience (“The Killing Fields,” “Night Moves,” “Achilles' Heel,” etc.).

The prose is often in the present tense and colloquial in a “you are right there” sense (“And with that, let us meet our leading lady”; “The black ships fill the sea like horses at the starting gate”; “He is massive too, and he is coming at the boys at what seems like an impossible rate of speed”).

Again, the aim is to retell Homer's story of the Trojan wars by rearranging the diverse Homeric

evidence into a continuous chronological narrative, consistent with scholarly evidence of what we know of the thirteenth-century- B.C. Eastern Mediterranean world. In some sense, it is a nineteenth-century sort of defense of the Homeric poems, as Strauss also draws on modern science, common sense, and comparative history to make the case that almost nothing that Homer composed is inherently unbelievable.

In his view, there was an Achilles, Odysseus, Priam, and Hector—or at least something like them—who fought over the plains of Troy:

Did they exist or did a poet invent them? We don't know, but names are some of the easiest things to pass down in an oral tradition, which increases the likelihood that they were real people. Besides, we can almost say that if Homer's heroes had not existed, we would have had to invent them.

And the record of their war-making survived in enough fragmentary fashion over the centuries to allow judicious—and entertaining—reconstruction.

But to pull off such a radical new take on the Trojan War requires three things: scholarly expertise that allows intimate knowledge of the Greek text of Homer, along with familiarity with thousands of scholarly books and articles that frame the age-old Homeric question of authenticity; a writer's flair for imagery and engaging prose; and a most non-academic willingness to experiment and endure pedantic criticism from fellow scholars who will resent such popularization and speculation.

We are fortunate that Barry Strauss possesses all three gifts, and the result is that his Trojan War really is a “new history” that is as different as it is welcome.

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