

## Was There a Trojan War?

by Manfred Korfmann

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Despite assumptions to the contrary, archaeological work of the new Troy project has not been performed for the purpose of understanding Homer's *Iliad* or the Trojan War. For the past 16 years, more than 350 scholars, scientists, and technicians from nearly 20 countries have been collaborating on the excavations at the site in northwestern Turkey that began as an Early Bronze Age citadel in the third millennium B.C. and ended as a Byzantine settlement before being abandoned in A.D. 1350. However, as current director of the excavations, I am continually asked if Homer's Trojan War really happened.



An aerial view of the site as it exists today (Troia Projekt)

### The Size of Troy

Troy appears to have been destroyed around 1180 B.C. (this date corresponds to the end of our excavation of levels Troy VII or VIIa), probably by a war the city lost. There is evidence of a conflagration, some skeletons, and heaps of sling bullets. People who have successfully defended their city would have gathered their sling bullets and put them away for another event, but a victorious conqueror would have done nothing with them. But this does not mean that the conflict was *the* war—even though ancient tradition usually places it around this time. After a transitional period of a few decades, a new population from the eastern Balkans or the northwestern Black Sea region evidently settled in the ruins of what was probably a much weakened city.

The main argument against associating these ruins with the great city described in the *Iliad* has been that Troy in the Late Bronze Age was a wholly insignificant town and not a place worth fighting over. Our new excavations and the progress of research in southeastern Europe has changed such views regarding Troy considerably.

It appears that this city was, by the standards of this region at that time, very large indeed, and most certainly of supraregional importance in controlling access from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea and from Asia Minor to southeast Europe and vice versa. Its citadel was unparalleled in the wider region and, as far as hitherto known, unmatched anywhere in southeastern Europe. Troy was also evidently attacked repeatedly and had to defend itself again and again, as indicated by repairs undertaken to the citadel's fortifications and efforts to enlarge and strengthen them.



German archaeologist Manfred Korfmann of the University of Tübingen has led the excavations at the site of Hisarlık/Troy in northwestern Turkey for the past 16 years. (Troia Projekt)

A spectacular result of the new excavations has been the verification of the existence of a lower settlement from the seventeenth to the early twelfth centuries B.C. (Troy levels VI/VIIa) outside and south and east of the citadel. As magnetometer surveys and seven excavations undertaken since 1993 have shown, this lower city was surrounded at least in the thirteenth century by an impressive U-shaped fortification ditch, approximately eleven and a half feet wide and six and a half feet deep, hewn into the limestone bedrock. Conclusions about the existence and quality of buildings within the confines of the ditch have been drawn on the basis of several trial trenches and excavations, some of them covering a very large surface area. The layout of the city was confirmed by an intensive and systematic pottery survey in 2003. We have also discovered a cemetery outside the ditch to the south. The most recent excavations have determined that Troy, which now covers about seventy-five acres, is about fifteen times larger than previously thought.

### **The Setting of the *Iliad***

Homer took for granted that his audience knew a war had been fought for what was alternately called Ilios or Troy. The bard was mainly concerned with describing the wrath of Achilles and its consequences. He used Troy and the war as a poetic setting for a conflict between men and gods. From the archaeologist's point of view, however, the *Iliad* can be interpreted as a "setting" in an entirely different sense. One may see Homer or his informants as eyewitnesses to Troy and the landscape of Troy at the close of the eighth century B.C., the period when scholars generally agree Homer composed his epic.

Troy was largely a ruined site in Homer's day, but the remains of Troy VI/VIIa, both the citadel and the lower city, were still impressive. Contemporary audiences and later ones from the area around the city were supposed to be able to recognize the general outlines of places where the action happened from descriptive references in the *Iliad*. They could visualize it, for instance, whenever they climbed up a slope to a sanctuary in "holy Ilios." "Holy Ilios" is the most frequently repeated epithet in the *Iliad*, and one would expect to see a sacred building in such a place. We can make a convincing case for a sanctuary or sanctuaries, maybe in the form of a wooden building, from the early seventh century B.C. at the latest--roughly contemporary with Homer--on this site, which subsequently served as a cult center into the late Roman Empire. There is nothing in the archaeological record to contradict the assertion that Troy and the surrounding countryside formed the setting for Homer's *Iliad* in 700 B.C.

#### **Evidence from Homer by Joachim Latacz**

Recent Homeric scholarship has shown that the *Iliad* is the culmination of a protracted oral transmission of past events, transmitted by epic poetry improvised and performed by singers.

### The Hittite Connection

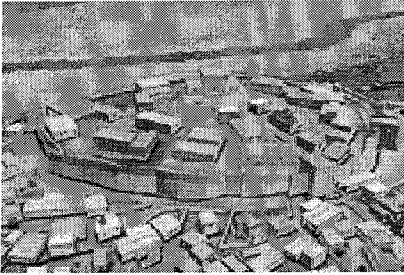
Although Troy is in Anatolia, Carl Blegen, who directed excavations at the site in the 1930s, regarded Troy VI/VIIa as a Greek settlement. The idea of a Greek Troy, one that had also been entertained by Schliemann, became firmly established. These excavators had come from Greece to Troy, both literally and figuratively, and later returned to Greece, and were biased, most likely unconsciously, in their outlook. However, until the 1930s there was very little archaeologically within Anatolia that might have been compared with Troy, and certainly not in western Anatolia.

We know today, from our own excavations and even from earlier ones, that in all main respects, Bronze Age Troy had stronger ties with Anatolia than with the Aegean. We've learned this from the tons of local pottery and small finds, such as a seal with a local hieroglyphic inscription, as well as the overall settlement picture, mud-brick architecture, and cremation burials. Research by Anatolian specialists has shown that what we today call Troy was in the Late Bronze Age the kingdom of Wilusa, powerful enough to conclude treaties with the Hittite Empire; even the Egyptians seem to have been familiar with the city. Furthermore, according to Hittite records, there were political and military tensions around Troy precisely during the thirteenth and early twelfth centuries B.C.--the supposed time of Homer's Trojan War.

#### Evidence from Hittite Records by J.D. Hawkins

The Hittites were a powerful civilization that controlled most of Anatolia in the second millennium B.C.

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Computer-modeling specialists have enabled the excavators of Troy to transform their raw data into a reconstruction of the citadel and lower city at the time of the Trojan War. (Troia Projekt)

On the basis of my years of experience and knowledge of Troy, I feel the question ought to be: "Why should the scholars who won't rule out a possible degree of historicity in the basic events in the *Iliad* have to defend their position?" In light of the remarkable amount of discovery that has taken place over the last ten to fifteen years, the onus to defend positions should now be on those who believe there is absolutely no historical association between what happened at Late Bronze Age Troy and the events in the *Iliad*. On what basis, for instance, are claims made that Troy in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C. was a third-class city, unworthy of foreign invasion and ultimately of Homer's attention? We expect that doubters will finally take note of the new archaeological facts of the case and the findings of a really interdisciplinary approach to Troy research.

According to the archaeological and historical findings of the past decade especially, it is now more likely than not that there were several armed conflicts in and around Troy at the end of the Late Bronze Age. At present we do not know whether all or some of these conflicts were distilled in later memory into the "Trojan War" or whether among them there was an especially memorable, single "Trojan War." However, everything currently suggests that Homer should be taken seriously, that his story of a military conflict between Greeks and the inhabitants of Troy is based on a memory of historical events--whatever these may have been. If someone came up to me at the excavation one day and expressed his or her belief that the Trojan War did indeed happen here, my response as an archaeologist working at Troy would be: Why not?

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