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Was There a Trojan War?

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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.

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.

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.