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Oliver Dickinson
M.A., D.Phil., Reader Emeritus,
Dept. of Classics and Ancient History,
Durham University, U.K.
otpkdickinson@googlemail.com

WAS THERE REALLY A TROJAN WAR?

The traditional tale of the Trojan War and its aftermath not only seems fundamental to the ancient Greek understanding of the past, it also continues to exercise fascination at a popular level even in the modern day. This article therefore considers whether we have any reason for regarding the tradition of the Trojan War as having a historical basis by analysing it from archaeological, material and written sources.

Key-words: Homer, Trojan war, Mycenean Greece, Iliad, Greek Bronze Age

I am very gratified to be asked by my dear friend Helena Tomas to contribute to the *festschrift* for Professor Marina Milićević Bradač, on a topic on which I lectured at the Archaeology Department of the University of Zagreb in 2007. This is a topic on which I have given several public lectures and have also made contributions to another *festschrift*[1] and an academic workshop,[2] and these all share many arguments with a paper that I first gave and published in the 1980s.[3] I have to admit that I have not given the topic close consideration since 2011, although I covered a topic which was very relevant to it in Dickinson 2020, and to my knowledge the topic has not been discussed academically at any length in recent publications.[4] However, the traditional tale of the Trojan War and its aftermath not only seems fundamental to the ancient Greek understanding of the past, it was drawn upon for much of the finest Greek and Roman literature, and it continues to exercise fascination at a popular level even in the modern day.[5] It seems perfectly reasonable, therefore, to consider whether we have any reason for regarding the tradition of the Trojan War as having a historical basis.

Every time that I return to this topic or a closely related one I find that I need to take a somewhat different approach, because there have been changes in the relevant archaeological and historical information, or in the approaches which other scholars have taken, or even in my own views. My first published discussion of the topic, Dickinson 1986, was not primarily concerned with

1 Dickinson 2008.

2 Dickinson 2017, originally given in 2007 and revised for publication in 2011.

3 Dickinson 1986, based on a lecture delivered to an extramural conference at Oxford in 1983, which was reprinted with a little updating in 1998.

4 The last serious discussions that I know of are Bryce 2010 and Cline 2013, although Sherratt 2010 and 2017 are highly relevant and there are brief updating entries on all facets of the story in entries in Finkelberg 2011a.

5 Recently it has provided the basis for several successful novels (Miller 2011; Barker 2018, 2021; Haynes 2019), the Netflix miniseries *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018), and the long running comic book series *Age of Bronze* (Shanower 1998 onwards).

the historical reality or not of the Trojan War, but rather with the belief, then widespread, that the Homeric poems preserved much tradition that derived from Mycenaean times and gave a reasonably faithful picture of the Mycenaean world in the palace period, and particularly of the dominant class that ruled it and would have led the forces involved in any war. Naturally, such a view supported the belief that the Greek tradition of a Trojan War reflected historical reality, and to deny it was to undercut much of the argument for a historical war.

I was certainly not the first to argue that the Mycenaean element in the poems was not great,[6] and that many material features described or referred to belonged rather in what was for a long time called the Dark Age, the name applied to the period between the end of the Bronze Age and the historical period in Greece, now more often called the Early Iron Age. The point that there is little clearly Mycenaean in the poems seems to have become widely agreed,[7] but the belief that there could have been something like a Trojan War has survived, and with it the idea that the ruling class of Mycenaean civilisation was warlike and predatory like the Homeric heroes,[8] and that the famous Catalogue of Ships in Iliad Book II, which gives a detailed account of the forces assembled to attack Troy, derives from Mycenaean sources.

I have long been strongly opposed to both these ideas, as will appear in what follows, and as a result have been deeply sceptical of the idea that the tradition of the Trojan War preserved a historically useful memory of a significant event. But this time around I will begin from a slightly different angle from that used in the past, by emphasising a fundamental point: that our earliest source for the war, the Iliad, is a *fantasy*. As Morris has written, "the epic was not some kind of bad history. It was a poetic creation, what *some* eighth-century Greeks thought the heroic age *ought* to have been like."[9] It does not give a full account of the causes and events of the war, though it hints at much that is not described in detail in the narrative. Some more information emerges in the course of its companion poem, the Odyssey, which is in many ways even more obviously a fantasy, involving encounters with monsters, supernatural beings, and even a visit to an underworld inhabited by the souls of the dead. But the Iliad has its full share of the supernatural; not only are several of the participants the mortal children of gods, but the gods themselves take part in the action. The whole account is situated in a legendary past, an age when heroes could perform feats impossible for any in the poet's own time, kings and princes were fabulously wealthy and lived in magnificent buildings, and Troy was an enormous city, centre of a great kingdom and a wide network of alliances in Anatolia and the north Aegean,

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6 M.I. Finley led the way, cf. especially 1977.

7 E.g. Bennet 1997: 531–33.

8 See e.g. Bryce 2010: 479, also Beckman *et al.* 2011: 99. For criticism of the characterisation of Mycenaean society as warlike see Dickinson 2014.

9 Morris 1997: 558.

that could, with the support of these allies, face a coalition representing most of Greece on equal terms.

Because it is a fantasy, its composer is unlikely to be much concerned with questions of realism, such as might occur to anyone of moderate intelligence, e.g. why were the Trojans so adamant about refusing to hand over Helen; why did the war take so long; and why had Achilles and Hector never met in battle before (indeed, how did almost all the leaders of the various forces involved survive to the tenth year of the war?). Composer, performer and audience might well agree on the point that such questions were not really appropriate. They concerned matters that were part of the tradition and were "in the story" as it had come down to the time of composition. The striking degree to which the principal figures in the Iliad and Odyssey are made to seem "real" in what they say and do makes the appearances and interferences of gods or other supernatural figures seem rather intrusive, though these are often taken almost for granted or pass without much comment by those mortals who are affected by them. But they cannot be ignored, for they often concern crucial developments in the story and thus serve as a reminder that the Homeric epics *are* primarily fantasies, and that neither composer(s) or audiences are concerned with realism as we would understand it, but with how well the story is told and how much it engages the audience.

The question then arises, of course: if the story of the Trojan War as we have it is a fantasy, are there enough links to the historical reality of a period that it could be imagined to contain memories of a real war, around which the fantasy could have formed, as is known to have happened with other epics? My answer to that will be a firm no. I should make it clear from the start that I am not arguing against the idea that the Bronze Age settlement at Hissarlık first excavated by Schliemann, which was clearly the Ilion of classical times and surely the Ilios, alternatively Troia, of the Homeric poems, might have been involved in wars in the course of its long history. What I am questioning is the belief in the kind of war that is presupposed by the tradition, in which a major coalition of forces from many parts of Greece, led by the king of Mycenae, attacked a great city that had many allies in Anatolia and elsewhere, and after a lengthy siege finally captured and destroyed it. Such a war, it should be clear, could hardly have taken place after the palatial Mycenaean period that ended around 1200, in the postpalatial twelfth century.[10] It is very hard to imagine that the surviving Mycenaean centres of that period, when Mycenae itself was much less significant and many others including Pylos had suffered destruction and virtual abandonment, could or would have formed an alliance to engage in a prolonged foreign war.

Simply the fact that the material in the Iliad must have been passed on by oral tradition, because no other means would have been available, would at one time have seemed a strong argument for its veracity.[11] It is an undoubted

10 As has been argued in detail by Hood 1995, cf. also Finkelberg 2011b: 893–895.

11 Cf. the comments in Forsdyke 1954: 18, 23–25 on oral transmission.

fact that there are various references to clearly Bronze Age items in the Iliad, suggesting that the method by which the poetry was composed had a very ancient origin. But a much more sophisticated approach is now taken to oral tradition, based on cross-cultural studies, from which a major point can be seen to emerge, that a main purpose of those who preserved tradition was to give an account of the past of a society that was acceptable to the dominant element in that society; therefore, when circumstances changed, what was handed down as tradition had to be changed to reflect that.[12] The changes in the "origin myth" of the different recognised branches of Greeks and in specific stories such as that of the "Ionian migration" show this principle operating in Greek tradition.[13]

Further, there is no reason to believe that public performances of heroic poetry relied on the faithful reproduction of a set "text", preserved by a guild of bards that would only allow changes by common agreement, as Forsdyke imagined. Taken to its logical conclusion, such an idea might require that poems composed about a historical Trojan war fought in Mycenaean times, which presented the story in a Mycenaean setting, should be at least partly in Mycenaean Greek, which of course they are not. Rather, not only the language but perhaps even the metre of such poems would have changed over the period of transmission, which would surely require the revision of the formulae that seem such an essential part of the oral style of composition; and with such changes would come scope to expand, alter and create at the poet's will. Indeed, it is evident from all that we know about the Archaic poets, whose work seems to have been the ultimate source for many of the most famous Greek myths (although there are references to several of these in the Homeric poems), that they felt under no obligation to "stick to the story", but changed details and invented freely, and the Athenian tragedians continued to add to and alter famous legends to suit their purposes. It would be foolish to suppose that the story of the Trojan War was uniquely free from this kind of treatment, so there is no reason to suppose that even the bare outline of the story has been preserved intact.

In fact, there are perfectly good reasons for supposing that Greek tradition preserved virtually nothing of any historical value from the Mycenaean period.[14] It was remembered that Mycenae and Pylos were once very important places, which they had ceased to be by the end of the Bronze Age, but effectively nothing of the historical context in which they were important survived. As is quite clear from the Iliad, all memory of the Hittites, the great power of Anatolia in the later fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC,[15] was lost. Documents from the Hittite capital, though fragmentary, give us valua-

12 Cf. Henige 1974, ch. 1 on the manipulation of genealogies, and the medieval Irish example cited in Dickinson 2007: 192, and more generally Thomas 1989: 4–8.

13 Cf. Hall 1997, ch. 3, 2002: 25–29 and 67–73, and Dickinson 2006: 51 with citations.

14 Cf. in general Dickinson 2020.

15 All dates cited hereafter are BC unless otherwise stated, and those for Hittite kings are taken from Bryce 2005.

ble information about western Anatolia and its kingdoms in the Late Bronze Age, which, as archaeological evidence shows, had been in contact with the Aegean civilisations even in pre-Mycenaean times.[16] After early conflicts with the Hittite kingdom based in central Anatolia, these western kingdoms were finally subjected by the Hittite king Mursili II (c. 1321–1295) and apparently remained subjected, although not always contentedly, until the collapse of the Hittite kingdom near the end of the thirteenth century. A plausible geography of the region has been worked out, in which the northernmost of the subjected kingdoms was Wilusa, a name notably similar to the (W)Ilios of the Iliad, Classical Ilion.[17] As noted above, this was certainly located at Hissarlık, the site first excavated by Schliemann and the largest Bronze Age site with a fortified citadel in the Troad.[18] Our impression of this site has been considerably changed by the most recent excavations, by Manfred Korfmann, which have established that this site had an extensive "lower city", encircled by a defensive ditch and probable rampart, that spread far beyond the well-fortified citadel that was almost exclusively the focus of the earlier excavators from Schliemann onwards.[19]

No trace has been found of the period of subordination to the Hittites, but this is hardly surprising, given the intensive occupation of the site in historical antiquity. But the reality of Hittite control is made perfectly clear by the treaty struck between the Hittite king Muwatalli II (c. 1295–1272) and the Wilusan king Alaksandu, which refers to help that Muwatalli had given to Alaksandu, apparently against local enemies.[20] Another likely reference to Wilusa is of particular interest in this context, from the famous "Tawagalawa Letter", in fact a draft of a letter that was intended to be sent by, probably, the Hittite king Hattusili III (c. 1267-37) to a king of Ahhiyawa. This territory, it is now generally accepted, was based somewhere in the Aegean region, and at this date it must be an important principality within the general region of Mycenaean Greece. Various indications from the Hittite documents show that this principality had clear and long-standing interests in western Anatolia, particularly with the city of Millawanda, generally identified with Miletus, which was under the control of Ahhiyawa at the time of the letter.[21] The purpose of this letter, in which the king of Ahhiyawa is addressed in very flattering terms by the Hittite king, constantly called "my brother" and sometimes even "Great King, my equal", was to persuade him to withdraw any support from a notorious enemy of the Hittites, Piyamaradu, who was very active in western

16 Cf. Dickinson 2019: 9–10.

17 It is now clear that occupation on the site was not interrupted between the Bronze Age and historical times (Jablonka 2010: 856), and the name is very likely to have been inherited from the past with only a minor change.

18 Rose 2014: 27.

19 Jablonka 2010: 853–55.

20 Beckman 1999: 87–93; Bryce 2005: 226.

21 On this and what follows see Dickinson 2019, especially 12–13.

Anatolia at this time and was currently offshore in Ahhiyawan territory, having been pursued by the Hittite king to Miletus but escaped by sea. The king of Ahhiyawa is asked to write to Piyamaradu and urge him either to make peace with the king of the Hittites, for, although there has been a dispute between the kings of the Hittites and Ahhiyawa over Wilusa, this has been settled diplomatically and there is supposedly no reason for hostility between them,[22] or to move to non-Ahhiyawan territory.

This has been taken to signify Ahhiyawan interest in this part of Anatolia, as part of a supposedly long-standing rivalry between the Hittites and Ahhiyawa for power and influence in western Anatolia, in which Ahhiyawa was the aggressor, if anything,[23] and which has been argued to be the ultimate historical background for the Trojan War, with Wilusa caught in the middle.[24] As part of this theory, it is maintained by a number of specialists that Mycenae controlled the Mycenaean world or at least the most important parts of it, to explain why Ahhiyawa should have been a sufficiently strong power for the Hittite kings to treat with respect. But this view of Mycenae's position in the thirteenth century is a minority view which I do not accept,[25] and it is certainly not reflected in the Iliad, in which Agamemnon is not envisaged as an overlord with the right to require military support from subordinate kings, as the Hittite kings did from the kings of Wilusa and other territories. Rather, the Greek forces form an essentially temporary confederacy which Agamemnon leads because he rules the strongest power and commands the largest forces. [26]

In fact, there is very little real evidence for the supposed rivalry between the Hittites and Ahhiyawa,[27] which relies in part on the assumption that needs to be proved, that the Homeric poems contain a genuine portrayal of the ruling class of Mycenaean civilisation as warlike and predatory. Indeed, the natural assumption from the references in the Tawagalawa Letter is that in the two cases of apparent confrontation mentioned the Hittite king or his repre-

22 It should be noted that Singer (2011: 418) describes this reading as "highly conjectural", and that Beckman et al. 2011: 116, though accepting the reading Wilusa, read less of the name than is in Hoffner 2009: 311. The Hittite king does in fact admit that there is still an unsettled problem between him and the king of Ahhiyawa (see Beckman et al. 2011: 117–19 on paragraph 15 of the letter). But this unsettled problem is unlikely to have anything to do with Wilusa, for if it did there would surely be some indication of this in the text.

23 Cf. Bryce 2005: 59, Singer 2011: 410, 448 ("intense Hittite-Ahhiyawan competition").

24 e.g. Cline 2013: 108.

25 For some criticisms see Dickinson 2019: 13–17.

26 It may be noted that in the Archaic period poets were evidently wondering already why so many Greek rulers were involved in the expedition to Troy, so that a rather absurd story, found first in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, was developed, that an oath was demanded of all Helen's suitors by her mortal father Tyndareos to come to the aid of the winner of her hand if she should be abducted. A reference in the Iliad (4.64–72), apparently overlooked or ignored by later poets, suggests that the goddess Hera herself travelled all over Greece to gather the coalition, driven by her deep-rooted hatred for the Trojans.

27 I no longer take the view expressed in Dickinson 2008: 192, cf. Dickinson 2019.

sentatives were the aggressors,[28] and various documents suggest that quite a close relationship developed between the Hittite and Ahhiyawan royal families from the time of Mursili II up to the time of the Tawagalawa Letter.[29] There are indications that in the reign of Tudhaliya IV (c. 1237–1209), Hattusili's son, relations between the Hittite kingdom and Ahhiyawa may have deteriorated, but there is nothing to suggest that this had any effect on Wilusa. We know only, from a letter probably sent by Tudhaliya IV to a king of another west Anatolian principality, Mira, that the king of Wilusa, Walmu, has been expelled from Wilusa by his subjects and taken refuge in Mira, and that the Hittite king intends to restore him to his throne.[30]

It hardly needs stressing what a different picture all this gives from the impression given throughout the Iliad and Greek tradition generally, that Troy was the centre of a great kingdom and not subordinate to any other power. It is no real surprise that there is no hint of the historical situation in the stories of Troy's early history as set out by Aineias in his confrontation with Achilles,[31] and that the genealogy of the royal line quoted there does not include any of the three kings of Wilusa named in the Hittite documents. In fact, the catalogue of Trojan forces and their allies at the end of Iliad Book 2 does not name any of the other territories and peoples known in western Anatolia from Hittite sources apart from the Lycians; its names generally belong to a later era.[32] It also "archaises" in making Miletus a Carian town, to fit the legend of its settlement by Greeks in the "Ionian migration", whereas in historical fact it was evidently closely linked to Ahhiyawa in the Late Bronze Age, when its material culture became basically Mycenaean, even if at times it was under Hittite control.[33]

So, in terms of faithfulness to the actual historical setting in which such a war would have been fought, the Iliad and the tradition on which it is based fail more or less completely. That said, the supposed reason for the war, the abduction of a king's wife, could have been a perfectly acceptable reason to go to war in the Late Bronze Age, at a time when one of the recognised tools of international diplomacy was marriage between royal families. But the whole story still contains major implausibilities, that such a massive force could or would have been raised and that it should have had the tenacity to besiege Troy for so long, for sieges were not prolonged affairs in Bronze Age warfare, or indeed later. Indeed, what is described in the Iliad is not even a siege, but rather fighting in front of a massive walled city that can hold the whole army of

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28 In both paragraphs 13 and 15 of the text, the Hittite king is surely admitting that he was at fault (Beckman et al. 2011: 117), responding in the unsettled case to the Ahhiyawan king's accusation, "You have used force against me" (Hoffner 2009, 312 translates, "You have acted aggressively towards me.").

29 Dickinson 2019: 13.

30 Beckman et al. 2011: 129, 132.

31 Iliad 20.230–40.

32 Rutherford 2011: 891.

33 Niemeier 2011: 522.

Trojans and allies as well as its normal population but never seems to run short of supplies, and the poetic vividness of the descriptions of the fighting conceals the utter unreality of what is being described. Anyone with experience of fighting in a major confrontation of forces would recognise this unreality, with its emphasis on the exploits of individuals, and perceive if they considered the matter that the sheer intensity of the conflict could not have been maintained day after day, even for the time covered by the Iliad, let alone for ten years. But they would be reminded, if they needed it, that this was a fantasy of the age of heroes, by the constant intervention or threatened intervention of the gods.

To return to the world of historical reality: in my view Greek tradition remembered nothing of the real history of the Troad and the real relations between the powers of Anatolia and the Aegean in the 13th century BC, and this must undercut any theories that try to explain the war as the result of Mycenaean expansionism. But it still seems to be widely believed that the famous Catalogue of Ships in Iliad Book 2 preserves genuine information about Mycenaean Greece, for a Mycenaean identification can be suggested for almost all the sites named.[34] But, on the basis of great familiarity with Mycenaean Greece, built up over many years, I will state flatly that I do *not* think the Catalogue offers a good picture of it in the palatial period. Undoubtedly it presents a picture of Greece that divides the mainland and some of the islands into principalities that are quite different from the familiar city-states of historical Greece, although several of the provincial names in the Peloponnese and the names of local populations in central Greece are the same as in historical times, including the Boeotians. But according to other tradition they should not be there at all, having arrived after the Trojan War,[35] and whoever compiled the Catalogue seems to be deliberately not making Thebes the centre, apparently to allow for the tradition that it had been captured by the sons of the famous Seven Against Thebes, although we know from the latest excavations that Thebes remained an important Mycenaean palatial centre until the period of the Mycenaean collapse. The minimal recognition given to Orchomenos, also a very important centre in the Bronze Age and Thebes's historical rival, may be a concealed way of recognising Thebes's claim to be the proper leader of the Boeotian people. It is appropriate at this point to note that the Catalogue actually begins with the Boeotians, far more of their settlements being mentioned than for any other contingent. The account of them is followed by those of the other contingents from central Greece, Athens and Salamis, before any attention is given to the Peloponnese, where there were many Mycenaean centres at least as important as Thebes, Orchomenos, and Athens, including of course the greatest of them all, Mycenae. But this surprising order is just one of the striking peculiarities of the Catalogue.[36]

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34 The basic argument was made in Hope Simpson & Lazenby 1970.

35 As noted by Thucydides, who produces an inadequate explanation (I.12).

36 For a more general discussion of these peculiarities see Dickinson 2011. Some difficulties were already pointed out in the Conclusions to Hope Simpson & Lazenby 1970, especially 161–164, but this was written under the impression that Troy was a relatively small town.

The most implausible division of the Argolid is also particularly notable. The realm of Diomedes, based in Argos, takes in Tiryns and all of the Argive plain south of Mycenae and the Argive peninsula, while that of Agamemnon, centred on Mycenae, takes in the territories of the later city-states Phlius, Cleonae, Corinth, Sicyon and much of Achaea. It seems clear to me that this is an attempt to harmonise two cycles of legend, in one of which Mycenae was the centre of the Argolid, while in the other Argos, a leading centre in historical fact from the 10th century, filled this role.[37] But archaeology indicates that Argos was not a very important Mycenaean centre compared with Tiryns or Midea, which has many claims to recognition as the third great site of the central Argolid but does not appear in the Catalogue list at all, any more than the port sites at Nauplia and modern Kalamianos, a major town in the eastern Corinthia.[38]

In the territory that provides Nestor's forces, historically western Messenia, there is hardly any overlap between the names of the places from which he draws his contingents and the places that we know from the Linear B archives of Pylos were the local centres of administration. Nestor's kingdom is also considerably less extensive than the territory controlled from Pylos, since it does not apparently include any of the Pamisos valley, and the position of Pylos seems to be imagined in Odyssey Book 3 as on or very close to the coast, whereas Mycenaean Pylos was well inland. These difficulties can only be resolved by the creation of further hypotheses that raise more problems, e.g. that this is part of the evidence that the Catalogue represents the period of Mycenaean decline.[39]

The situation in Laconia, where Sparta is recognised as Menelaos's capital throughout the Homeric poems and indeed Greek tradition generally, surely in recognition of its historical importance, is also strikingly at variance with what we now know of central Laconia in the Mycenaean period. The site of Ayios Vasileios, well south of Sparta and Amyklai, has proved to be a very likely palatial centre, producing evidence of major architectural complexes, widespread frescoes, and an archive of Linear B tablets.[40] The only name that has been associated with it is Pharis, a name otherwise totally unknown in tradition, which is very briefly referred to by Pausanias.[41] The site of the shrine known as the Menelaion, close to Sparta but on the other side of the river Taygetos, seemed before the discovery of Ayios Vasileios to be the most important Mycenaean site in Laconia, with a series of important buildings and by the 13th century a very large settlement; but its impeccably ancient name

37 Iliad 4.376–81 contains a notable attempt at harmonisation, when Agamemnon is made to explain why Mycenae did not participate in the famous expedition of the Seven Against Thebes, led by Adrastos, king of Argos.

38 On Kalamianos see most recently Pullen 2022.

39 Hope Simpson & Lazenby 1970: 162. The arguments for this interpretation depend on an inevitably outdated account of the evidence and involve questionable assumptions.

40 Cf. most recently Wiersma et al. in Wiersma and Tsouli 2022: 57–71.

41 Hope Simpson & Lazenby 1970: 74. The source is Pausanias III.20.3 (Levi 1971: 73).

Therapne[42] does not appear in the Catalogue at all. There is increasing evidence for Mycenaean period settlement at Sparta itself, but the finds remain unimpressive compared with those at Ayios Vasileios and the Menelaion.

There are other absences that are surprising, at the least, such as Kydonia, modern Khania, in western Crete, arguable the most important centre in Crete in the thirteenth century, where Linear B tablets have been found, but the examples that I have cited in detail are, I feel, the most significant, for when dealing with the most important regions of the Mycenaean mainland the Catalogue can be argued never to get it right. However, it cannot be made to fit any post-Mycenaean period either; like the Homeric tradition as a whole it seems to blend old and new, and while the age of some elements may be considerable, they cannot be easily unpicked from what is evidently or plausibly later.

A similar blending of old and new can be detected in many references to material culture. This is particularly clear in descriptions of warfare, which, as has long been pointed out, jumble together references to armour, shield-types and weapons of different periods. Some of the most distinctive and commonly referred to, such as the common use of throwing spears and the bosses on shields, are at best post-palatial Mycenaean,[43] and although weapons are generally described as of bronze or bronze-headed, there are occasional disconcerting references to items, most often weapons, as being of iron, uses of the word for iron as a synonym for weapon, and more general mentions of iron as a desirable substance.[44]

But more significant, to me, are those important areas of social behaviour and material culture where the items or behaviour referred to may be considered *consistently* post-Mycenaean. One is burial customs. The only custom ever described in the Homeric poems involves cremation of the dead and burial of the remains in a vessel under a mound, on which a marker may be placed. This is not just a rite for heroes, but for everyone who merits a burial at all – so it is famously asked for by Odysseus's luckless crewman Elpenor, whose ghost he encountered at the entrance to the Underworld.[45] The very rare Mycenaean cremations that have been identified, most of the post-palatial period, have generally been found side by side with inhumations in the same tombs; none fit the Homeric descriptions, neither do the urn-cremations from Troy dating to the time of Troy VI. Cremation remained a minority rite, practised only by certain communities, even in the Early Iron Age, and where it involves use of a mound such mounds normally contain many burials. But

42 Pausanias III.19.9 is specific: "Menelaos's shrine is there" (Levi 1971: 69).

43 On shield bosses see Dickinson 2006: 157, on spears Dickinson 1986: 27, 2006: 157–158, and on both and the description of warfare generally 2017: 12–13.

44 The sources are discussed in useful detail in Lorimer 1950: 117–21, though the archaeological commentary is now outdated. On iron's value cf. especially Iliad 23: 826–35, and the formula first found in Iliad 6: 48 and repeated four times in the Iliad and Odyssey, which lists iron with gold and bronze as types of stored treasure.

45 Odyssey 11.74–78.

the closest actual analogy to the most elaborately described Homeric burial, that of Patroklos, is an Early Iron Age burial, that found within the structure at Lefkandi on Euboea now known as the Heroön, dating no later than c. 950, in which the remains of the main burial, a cremated adult man, were placed in a bronze amphora within a walled pit and accompanied by a richly provided woman's inhumation and, in a separate pit, four evidently sacrificed horses.[46] But this burial remains unique in the archaeological record of the Early Iron Age, and its main value is to show that there could be relatively magnificent burials then (as shown by other tenth and ninth century burials in the cemeteries of Lefkandi), a fact unknown to earlier generations of scholars, who tended to assume that any suggestion of magnificence must derive from Mycenaean times.

Another area of social custom that was even more important than burial customs is religion. As described in the poems, the religious beliefs and practices seem closest to those of the historical Greeks. Homer's gods are the well known pantheon of historical times, but barely half of these can be identified in the Linear B texts, and the rite normally practised in the Homeric gods' honour, as described in most detail in Odyssey Book 3, was the same as in Classical times, sacrifice of an animal at an altar in the open air and the burning of a portion to the god(s) being honoured. There is certainly evidence that forms of animal sacrifice were practised at some sites in Mycenaean times, but there is no indication that it was central to public religion; other forms of offering such as clay figurines or pots containing foodstuffs seem to have been more typical. Altogether, I think Mycenaean religion as practised, for which the evidence is in fact surprisingly thin and scattered, looks very different from the practices and associated beliefs presented in the Homeric poems.

The dress of high-ranking women is also consistently post-Mycenaean. The poems make no clear references to typical Mycenaean finery, neither the elaborate dresses shown in the frescoes nor the rich range of beads found especially in graves. Instead, dress when described basically consists of lengths of cloth, fastened with brooches; when Penelope's suitors suddenly begin to give her gifts,[47] an embroidered robe is given with a set of 12 gold brooches by Antinous. These brooches must be the fibulae, normally of bronze, that began to appear in the later stages of the Mycenaean period but only became typical in the Early Iron Age.[48] Another gift, by Eurydamas, is described as "a pair of earrings with triple clusters", which exactly fits Lefkandi examples of the late 9th century.[49] This is surely another Early Iron Age reference; indeed, to my knowledge no earrings have been found in Greek contexts dating between c. 1400 and 900.

46 Lemos 2002: 166–167.

47 Odyssey 18.292–298.

48 Dickinson 2006: 161–162, 164.

49 Dickinson 2006: 160, fig. 5.22:18. A pair is described in identical language in Iliad 14: 182–183.

Other material references may suit the Early Iron Age and especially its later stages best, but some caution is needed here.The constant citations of bronze tripods and cauldrons as magnificent items has seemed most appropriate for the 9th to 7th centuries, when such items were the most impressive dedications at sanctuaries. But there is growing evidence that tripod stands with decorated legs, originally Cypriot imports, were already becoming popular in the post-palatial period, if not a little before, and that they were manufactured in Greece throughout the Early Iron Age, at least at some sites, so such references could be quite ancient.[50] However, other metal vessels, cups and jugs, referred to in the Homeric poems are too rarely described in any detail for parallels to be found, and may largely be part of the aura of fairy-tale magnificence that permeates the Homeric descriptions of palaces and princely possessions, clearest in Telemachos's comments on Menelaos's palace, "The whole place gleams with bronze and gold, amber and silver and ivory".[51] Such comments may reflect some of the reality of Assyrian palaces of the 9th to 7th centuries,[52] but I suspect that in large part it is fantasy.

The only palace about which much detail is given in the Homeric poems is of course Odysseus's in the Odyssey, where much of the action take place. But the effort that has been put into trying to reconstruct its plan, producing results with varying resemblances to the Mycenaean palace of Tiryns in particular, may well have been wasted, for it is not at all obvious that the poet had a very clear picture of a building in his mind. The whole complex is surrounded by a most un-Bronze Age fence with a gate. The hall, reached from a courtyard through a porch, is at the centre of the action, and so functions as the place where guests are received and fed; but all the 112 suitors eat in there as well, with quite a number of servants to wait upon them. There are chairs and at least one table, and a variety of seating for the suitors to sit on, and a spear-stand to place weapons in. A single massive pillar within the hall supports the roof, and a stairway leads by the pillar up to Penelope's room, which was big enough to hold her loom; but there must be some place on the ground floor where she can wash herself. Food stores and some form of kitchen should also be accessible somehow from the hall, and we hear at different points about a lockable back door leading to quarters for the female slaves, also some kind of side door that leads to a storeroom for weapons and armour, and a treasure room. Telemachos goes to a separate bedroom outside in the yard to sleep, while the suitors go home to their own houses.[53] I do not think all these features can be fitted into a coherent plan; rather, individual features are effectively conjured up when suitable to the action, without any concern with how they will fit into an overall plan. Mycenaean palaces have

50 Dickinson 2006: 150–153.

51 Odyssey 4.72–73.

52 Cook 2004.

53 This looks like a concession to reality; the poet will have realised that there is no way so many people could find places to sleep within the palace. But this still makes no allowance for those suitors who have come from other islands!

complex plans and second storeys, but no Aegean buildings of the Early Iron Age, to which features like spear-stands might more plausibly belong, are remotely similar. It is, in fact, a fantasy building, perhaps inspired by travellers' tales of Near Eastern palaces.

At best, then, the social and material background of the Homeric poems shows a mixture of Bronze Age and Iron Age features, with a heavy dash of pure fantasy. This mixture is handled with such apparent assurance that it seems evident that it had already been blended together by the time of the Homeric poems' composition, but the possibility that elements might be expanded or independently invented by individual poets can never be ignored. Because such stories concentrate very much on the personalities that they describe, they show little concern with how the prosperity of the different principalities and the great wealth that their rulers dispose of is supported; it is simply part of the background. Some of the wealth probably comes from cattle-raiding or piracy, which seem to be thought of as quite normal and acceptable activities; there are a few references to trade of various kinds, but this is not a typically "heroic" activity, so attracts very little attention. In general, many features of the world claimed to be that of the heroic past are reassuringly familiar and down-to-earth, but this is still in many respects an unreal poetic world, reflecting the way heroes are expected to live. So they are always eating roast meat, constantly handle vessels and other treasures of precious metals, and encounter gods face to face.

It would still be open to supporters of a historical Trojan War to claim that some serious incident involving royal families led to an attack on and destruction of Troy. If, as Korfmann has argued, this was the phase called Troy VI rather than its diminished successor Troy VIIA, then the date of its destruction, now put around 1250, would fit into a period when Mycenaean power was still apparently great. But even if Troy VI did fall to hostile attack, rather than to an earthquake as has been the standard view until now, there is absolutely nothing in the archaeological material to show that it was destroyed by an army deriving from Mycenaean Greece. Moreover, a date about 1250 would place the event in the reign of Hattusili III of Hatti, when a problem over Wilusa between Hatti and Ahhiyawa had apparently been solved diplomatically, and the survival of Wilusa as a functioning kingdom into the later thirteenth century is indicated by the letter cited above concerning the exiled king Walmu, expelled by his own subjects.

If, then, there was no actual great war behind the tradition, how did the story arise? I find the argument attractive, that it was created at a time when the Greeks were becoming increasingly conscious of themselves as a separate people,[54] and when a need might have been felt for a national epic, which showed a great alliance of Greeks – greater than any known in historical times – battling against a non-Greek foe. That the siege of a city was at the heart of the story might well reflect the influence of Anatolian epics that we know of

54 Cf. Sherratt 2010: 6–10, 2017: 49. Sherratt 2017 is a very interesting and persuasive analysis of the formation of the tradition of heroic poetry.

concerning sieges,[55] and the story could have been attached to Troy in particular because remains of the fine citadel wall were surely still visible in the 8th century. But ultimately I think that we must accept that the tale of the Trojan War is a great story, but there is no good reason to think that it has any close link with history.

55 Cf. Bachvarova 2005, especially 131–53, on the "Song of Release", which has some striking links with the Iliad in features of plot development.

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