

THE TROJAN WAR A NEW HISTORY

“Barry Strauss boldly treats the Trojan War not as mythology or poetry but as history. To the epics of Homer and other Greek sources he adds a broad knowledge of the Bronze Age, of its physical remains and of written evidence from the Hittite and Egyptian archives. The result is an exciting tale written in a lively style that brings Homer’s heroes and the world in which they lived to vibrant and colorful life.”

--Donald Kagan, Sterling Professor of Classics and History, Yale University

Every college student is familiar with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and every schoolchild knows the story of how the Greeks used the Trojan Horse to breach the walls of Troy. In his two great epic poems, Homer tells how the heroes of ancient Greece laid siege to a powerful city in order to win back their treasure, their honor, and the wife of their king. But did the Trojan War really happen? Or is it just a myth embellished by a poet? Until recently, most scholars held the latter view. Now, acclaimed historian and author Barry Strauss argues that spectacular new evidence shows that the Trojan War did indeed take place, in many ways as Homer described but with fascinating differences, in **THE TROJAN WAR: A New History (Simon & Schuster; September 19, 2006; \$26.00)**. In this first full military history of the Trojan War, Strauss draws on revolutionary new archeological, linguistic, and cultural findings to give us a fresher, more accurate, and more controversial picture than ever before of the Greeks and the Trojans, and the conflict between them.

Strauss, a professor of history and classics at Cornell University, last chronicled the clash between the ancient Greeks and the Persians that saved Western civilization in *The Battle of Salamis*. Named one of the best books of 2004 by *The Washington Post*, it was called "a military epic of the first order" by *The Boston Globe*. Strauss fell in love with Homer’s works as a young man and has lived in Greece. In addition, he has visited many of the places associated with the war in that country and in modern Turkey, including Troy itself, where he consulted with the excavators.

BARRY STRAUSS

"Much of what we thought we knew about the Trojan War is wrong," Strauss writes. He then goes on to replace outmoded and incorrect notions about the war with conclusions based on the latest and most complete findings, including:

- *Homer was mostly right.* It is true that Homer, writing about 500 years after the Trojan War, exaggerates and distorts in some respects. But overly skeptical scholars have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, Strauss contends.
- *Troy was a large and wealthy city for its day, just as Homer says.* Twenty years ago, it looked as though Troy was just a small and poor pirates' nest of only about half an acre. Now, thanks to new excavations, we know that it was about seventy-five acres in size, with a population of 5,000 to 7,000 people – a very substantial city for its time.
- *The Trojan Horse may well have existed.* Most contemporary scholars believe that the Trojan Horse must have been a myth, and that the Trojans never stood a chance. But it was the Greeks who were the underdogs, Strauss maintains, and only a trick – very possibly the Trojan Horse – allowed them to take Troy.
- *There was no siege of Troy. The Trojan War was more like the war on terror than World War II.* Strauss argues for the first time that the Trojan War consisted mainly of low-intensity conflict and attacks on civilians rather than a long siege and a series of major battles.
- *The big battles on the plain of Troy took place more or less as Homer describes them, but we exaggerate their importance.* Closely massed infantry units, champion duels, and the use of chariots for battlefield transportation (like jeeps) are not the poet's invention: all were really part of Late Bronze Age warfare. But pitched battle was more dramatic than decisive; it makes an exciting story in the *Iliad* but it did not win the war.
- *The Trojans and the Greeks were ethnically different peoples.* A generation ago, scholars thought that the Trojans were Greeks, like the men who attacked them. But as Strauss shows, architectural and written evidence compiled since 1991 suggests otherwise. The recently discovered urban plan of Troy and newly uncovered writings indicate that the Trojans were in the orbit of their ethnic cousins, the Hittites, who were a major military power in the ancient Near East.
- *The war probably lasted a long time but considerably less than ten years, as reported by Homer, who was using a figure of speech that should not be taken literally.* It is unlikely that the Greeks could have continued to supply their forces in Troy and maintain control over their lands and holdings back home for an entire decade, Strauss asserts.

Helen of Troy – captive beauty or early feminist?

Furthermore, scholars have long doubted the actual existence of Helen of Troy – the woman whose face supposedly launched a thousand ships after she left her Greek husband, King Menelaus, for Prince Paris of Troy, and took her vast dowry with her. Strauss, however, maintains that a queen named Helen may well have been the immediate cause of the Trojan War. During the Bronze Age, when the Trojan War took place (around 1200 B.C.), queens wielded great power and kings frequently made wars over marriage alliances. Yet as Strauss explains, Helen would have enjoyed even greater status in Troy than among the Greeks. She may have been an early feminist who sought not only a more appealing lover but greater independence and influence.

An intriguing new view of the Greeks in the Bronze Age

As Strauss reveals, the causes of the Trojan War were more complex than an adulterous wife, a jilted husband, and a stolen fortune, as in Homer's account, although deeply personal elements were undoubtedly crucial. The Greeks, whom he calls "the Vikings of the Bronze Age," built some of the first warships and invented what was essentially the world's first navy. They were aggressive raiders and traders who roused fear among the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean. Located at the entrance to the Dardenelles, the water link between the Aegean and the Black Sea, Troy would have been an irresistible commercial and strategic prize for them. Unfortunately for the Trojans, Troy stood exposed on the bloody fault line between the Hittites to the east and the rising Greek civilization to the west. As allies of the Hittites, the Trojans would have been natural targets for the Greeks.

The first book to ask what the war would really have been like

Strauss's history of the Trojan War is the first to ask what that war would really have been like, and the first to argue that it was mainly about raids and sneak attacks rather than big battles. In that sense, it is an account for the age of terrorism, which employs the evidence of warfare in ancient Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, and Syria to reconstruct the course and conduct of the war. Troy "was not a fruit to be easily picked," Strauss writes. The city was a sturdy fortress, with an able army.

But Troy also had weaknesses, which the Greeks cunningly exploited. Dozens of unfortified towns lay in its rich hinterlands and on nearby islands, overflowing with the supplies and the women the Greeks coveted. The Trojans enjoyed all the rewards of wealth and urban sophistication. But the Greeks had advantages of their own: they were less civilized, more patient, and they had strategic mobility because of their ships. In the end, Strauss concludes, those factors trumped Troy's cultural superiority.

The best new archaeological evidence for the war

According to Strauss, the best archaeological evidence indicates that the Trojan War probably took place sometime between 1230 and 1180 B.C. Stockpiles of arrowheads, spearheads, and sling stones as well as unburied human bones suggest that the city had prepared for a long siege but was suddenly sacked and burned. Some skeptics deny the veracity of the Trojan War because few weapons have been found in the ruins of Troy compared to other ancient cities that had been sacked. Strauss replies that it was heavily picked over for relics in ancient times and disturbed by subsequent rebuilding. Other historians are troubled by the close proximity of the dates of the Trojan War to the destruction of the great palaces of mainland Greece around 1180 B.C. But the Greek myths say that the Trojan War gave way to civil war and chaos within the Greek homeland, which would fit the archeological evidence.

Were Homer's characters real?

Aside from Helen, Strauss asks, were Homer's immortal characters real? Was there a warrior named Achilles who in a rage killed thousands? Did Aeneas suffer through a bitter war only to have the last laugh as a king? What about Hector, Odysseus, Priam, Paris, Hecuba, Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Thersites? Although their existence is unproven, he responds, it is plausible, and their character and actions are generally supported by all the latest discoveries. "We can almost say," he writes, "that if Homer's heroes had not existed we would have had to invent them." [p. xxxvii]

In **THE TROJAN WAR**, Barry Strauss – a master storyteller and one of our most distinguished authorities on the classical world – makes a compelling and groundbreaking case for the historical reality of the epic struggle between the Greeks and the Trojans, while preserving the magic and majesty of Homer’s timeless vision.

“Barry Strauss brings fresh insight, breadth, and surprising humor to one of history’s iconic conflicts. *The Trojan War* is the last word; it is so good, so concise and perfect, it may well preempt future historians from ever trying to improve on it.”

--David L. Robbins, author of *The Assassins’ Gallery*

About the Author:

Barry Strauss is a professor of history and classics at Cornell University who writes on war, politics, and sports from ancient to modern times. His many books include *The Battle of Salamis*, the bestselling *What If?: The World’s Foremost Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (contributor), *Rowing Against the Current: Learning to Scull at Forty*, and *The Anatomy of Error: Ancient Military Disasters and Their Lessons for Modern Strategists*. He has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other organizations. A former director of Cornell’s Peace Studies Program, he lectures frequently at the U.S. Marine Corps University, the U.S. Naval War College, and the U.S. Naval Academy. Professor Strauss has appeared in ten television documentaries on PBS, the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, the National Geographic Channel, and the BBC. His op-ed pieces have appeared in such newspapers as *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Newsday*. He lives in Ithaca, New York, with his wife and two children.

About the Book:

THE TROJAN WAR

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Simon & Schuster

Publication Date: September 19, 2006

ISBN: 0-7432-6641-X

Price: \$26.00

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