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Troy - Did It Really Exist?

By Vickie Chao

A long, long time ago, Homer told the story of a fight between the Trojans and the Greeks over a beautiful woman named Helen. Helen was once the queen of Sparta. One day, Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, cast a spell on her. She made her fall for Paris, a Trojan prince. The couple eloped. When her husband, Menelaus, learned of the betrayal, he was very angry. He and his brother (Agamemnon) summoned all the great Greek heroes to join them. Together, they took Troy under siege. For ten years, the Greeks tried to overtake the Trojans, but to no avail. Eager to return home, they came up with a brilliant idea. They built a huge wooden horse and left it outside of the gates of Troy. The Trojans awoke in the morning. They saw the statue but did not know what it was for. At last, they found an abandoned Greek soldier named Sinon. They grilled him with lots of questions. Sinon said that the Greeks had all gone back to Greece. Before they departed, they made the wooden horse to please Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Sinon assured the Trojans that the war was really over. The Greeks simply had had enough of it and decided to call it quits.



The Trojans were elated by what they had just heard. They hauled the wooden horse into Troy and held a great feast to celebrate the victory. Later that night, when all the Trojans were completely drunk, a secret door was swung open in the belly of the wooden horse. Quietly, several Greeks climbed down from it. They unlocked the gates and let the other Greeks in. Together, they launched a surprise attack and subdued the Trojans easily. Menelaus found Helen in a palace. At first, he wanted to kill her. But at the last moment, he changed his mind and took her back. Unfortunately, this show of mercy was for Helen only. The Trojans were not so lucky. By the time the looting was over, they were mostly dead.

Their city was reduced to ashes.

Homer's epic tale about the Trojan War is a fascinating story. For thousands of years, it has lured us and captivated our imaginations. It has also made us wonder: did Troy really exist?

Most scholars used to think the answer was "no." They thought Homer's *Iliad* a mere legend. Then Heinrich Schliemann came along and proved them all wrong. Heinrich Schliemann (1822 - 1890) was a self-made millionaire from Germany. At the peak of his career, he made a risky decision that completely changed the course of his life. Instead of being the successful businessman that he already was, Heinrich Schliemann wanted to become an archaeologist. In 1868, he took his large fortune to Greece. His first task was to find Odysseus' palace in Ithaca. Using Homer's *Odyssey* and local legends as his guides, he unearthed a group of over 20 vases and various objects. Heinrich Schliemann thought they might belong to the legendary king of Ithaca, Odysseus. After finding nothing more there, he set out to find Troy. At the time, many researchers thought a hill called Bunarbashi in Turkey was the most likely site for Troy. Heinrich Schliemann disagreed. He thought a nearby one named Hissarlik (or Hisarlik) was. So he began his digging there. For the first few years, Heinrich Schliemann focused his search on the eastern side of the hill. But he did not find much there. After he switched to the western half, he suddenly struck gold. In 1873, this amateur archaeologist uncovered the foundation of a large building and a cache of gold. He claimed the ruin was Priam's palace and the jewelry Priam's treasure. Priam was a central figure in Homer's *Iliad*, for he was both Paris's father and the king of Troy. Experts were at first skeptical about Heinrich Schliemann's groundbreaking discovery. But they eventually came to accept it. They agreed that Hissarlik was indeed where Troy once stood.

Today, we know that Troy did exist. We also know that the Trojan War did take place, probably sometime between the 12th and 14th centuries B.C. But what was the true cause of the war? Was it really a fight over Helen? Moreover, how much of Homer's *Iliad* is genuine, and how much of it is made-up? Unfortunately, nobody knows -- not yet anyway! Perhaps, at a later time, there will be another Heinrich Schliemann who can answer all those questions. When that day comes, it will surely be very exciting!

