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HOMER'S *ILIAD* VIA THE MOVIE *TROY* (2004)

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One of the most successful movies of 2004 was *Troy*, directed by Wolfgang Petersen and starring Brad Pitt as Achilles. *Troy* made more than \$497 million worldwide and was the 8th- highest-grossing film of 2004. The rolling credits proudly claim that the movie is inspired by the ancient Greek Homeric epic, the *Iliad*. This was, for classical scholars, an exciting claim. There have been blockbuster movies telling the story of Troy before, notably the 1956 glamorous blockbuster *Helen of Troy* starring Rossana Podestà, and a television two-episode miniseries which came out in 2003, directed by John Kent Harrison. But there has never been a feature film announcing such a close relationship to the *Iliad*, the greatest classical heroic action epic. The movie eagerly anticipated by those of us who teach Homer for a living because Petersen is a respected director. He has made some serious and important films. These range from *Die Konsequenz* (*The Consequence*), a radical story of homosexual love (1977), to *In the Line of Fire* (1993) and *Air Force One* (1997), political thrillers starring Clint Eastwood and Harrison Ford respectively. *The Perfect Storm* (2000) showed that cataclysmic natural disaster and special effects spectacle were also part of Petersen's repertoire.

His most celebrated film has probably been *Das Boot* (*The Boat*) of 1981, the story of the crew of a German U-boat during the Battle of the Atlantic in 1941. The finely judged and politically impartial portrayal of ordinary men, caught up in the terror and tedium of war, suggested that Petersen, if anyone, might be able to do some justice to the Homeric depiction of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*. The anticipation is heightened when we learn that Petersen studied Classics at his Secondary School in Germany. In an interview he has said that while he personally found studying the Latin and Ancient Greek languages tiresome, he relished 'the literature, the fun part.' He particularly liked 'the epic stories with plenty of gruesome action and heroes of all stripes', which 'proved enough rope in the heart of a fourteen-year-old with plenty of fantasy and energy to spare. Achilles was definitely my hero.'¹

Petersen used a script written by David Benioff. Benioff has subsequently achieved huge fame and fortune as co-creator and Executive Producer of the HBO smash hit series *Game of Thrones*. I like to think the idea of epic-scale warfare with warring kingdoms and beautiful women came to him while adapting the *Iliad* for Petersen. He has some literary credentials, having studied English Literature at Dartmouth and Samuel Beckett at Trinity College Dublin. He certainly succeeded in creating a stirring enough story out of the *Iliad*. The principal change is that Agamemnon's motive for invading Troy is explicitly stated to be a desire to expand his empire, enrich himself, and acquire a foothold in the landmass we now call Turkey. This seems fine to me: the selfish, self-aggrandising streak in Agamemnon's character is certainly already present in the *Iliad*. And the economic forces behind the real Greek colonisation of Anatolia justify putting this motivation on a par with the desire to avenge the insult constituted by Helen's defection to Troy. The movie also conveys the political undercurrent of the depiction of the Greek side in the *Iliad*, where there is a tension between the meritocratic values embodied in Achilles, who is the best warrior, and in the regular soldiers who do the work on the battlefield on the one hand, and the aristocratic values expressed by Agamemnon on the other: as King of Kings he claims he deserves greater rewards and credit than his subordinates. Although the movie does not give us the tensest political

¹ From an interview in Martin M. Winkler, *Wolfgang Petersen on Homer and Troy* (pp 16)



moment in the *Iliad*, when the common soldier Thersites attempts to lead a mutiny, the altercations between Agamemnon and Achilles do transmit something of the class-based anger crystallised in the original poem.

The desire for a realistic plausibility which would make the movie work emotionally for a twenty-first century audience even seems to me to justify the almost complete excision of the gods as characters intervening in and directing the action. The exception is Julie Christie as Achilles' mother Thetis, but her divinity is not at all emphasised: she might just be an eccentric druidess who likes to live by the sea. Modern audiences just can't take seeing actors dressed up as Olympian gods seriously enough to make a psychologically convincing movie. As children we may all have loved the divinities in Don Chaffey's *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), especially Honor Blackman as Hera. The special effects were by the peerless master of pre-digital animation, Ray Harryhausen. But in a movie aiming at a serious, even tragic tone, I do think including gods as characters would be disastrous.

My tolerance of Benioff's rewriting of the *Iliad* wears thin when it comes to his treatment of women. When Achilles (Brad Pitt) is too busy worrying about Briseis to devote himself to armed combat, Odysseus (Sean Bean) remarks cryptically to him, 'women have a way of complicating things'. Unfortunately, women scarcely complicate the plot of Troy at all. The movie does doff its cap in the direction of its emancipated third-millennial female audience members by allowing Briseis to stab Agamemnon in the neck. Her action is presented as a feisty post-feminist refusal to be complicit in her own victimhood, when the brutal patriarchal overlord is about to take her captive. But the presentation of the other women is embarrassing. The Homeric poets did it so much better. Helen, a dignified and tragic figure in the *Iliad*, possesses not one iota of mysterious power; nor is she allowed to regret leaving her little daughter back in Sparta. Cassandra, surely one of the most compelling figures in ancient mythology, is deleted, or rather amalgamated into Briseis. So is Chryseis. Where Benioff had the opportunity to give us several young women struggling in different ways to survive a brutal patriarchal conflict, he just refused even to try. But worst of all is the deletion of old Queen Hecuba, whose presentation in the *Iliad* is gut-wrenching. She is given intense encounters with Hector, expresses violent hatred of Achilles, has a painful argument with her husband, and leads the city's women in their temple rituals. She should be sitting beside Peter O'Toole's Priam in all the throne sequences. But Benioff just could not cope with Hecuba's monumental emotions, either. I always ask my students who they would have cast as Hecuba. Vanessa Redgrave and Helen Mirren are popular choices.

Troy variously succeeds and fails in reproducing the aesthetic and moral power of the *Iliad*. But how does it fare in making what is a narrative poem (which works through our ears) into a *visual* and material reconstruction of physical human beings engaged in physical interaction with their environment during a war in Asia Minor during the late Bronze Age?

The Greeks in the *Iliad*, which told the story of the siege of Troy, are Mycenaeans. They take their name from the civilisation which had one of its centres at Mycena in the Peloponnese. Their society lasted from about 1600 BCE to about 1200 or 1100. They were great seafarers. They certainly raided the islands and townships of the eastern Aegean and what is now the western coast of Turkey, and were taking their first steps in what was soon to become the wholesale colonisation of that area. The story of the conflict at Troy is certainly related to real history in that it reflects the ambition of these early Greeks to expand eastwards. Our understanding of the Mycenaeans has changed irrevocably since their archaeological recovery, which began in the mid-19th century. Not only have Mycenaean palaces been excavated at several of the sites so important in Greek myth—Thebes, Tiryns and Therapne (a few kilometres from Sparta) as well as Pylos, Mycena, and Crete. It has also been discovered that the Mycenaeans' inscribed writings, in the script known as Linear B, were in a recognisable forerunner of the classical Greek language. The Mycenaeans definitely spoke Greek and used writing to make lists of food, temple gifts, workers and sailors, but not to write down poetry.

The earliest 'real' ancient Greek voice we can hear speaks to us not from Athens or Sparta, nor even Mycena, but from Pylos on the west of the Peloponnese, near a Mycenaean palace. The elderly Nestor in the *Odyssey*, eloquently played by John Shrapnel, was King of Pylos and it is wonderful that we can visit this possibly historical character's home. That earliest Greek voice we can hear was recorded on a clay tablet between 1450 and 1400 BCE. All the Linear B tablets were inscribed with signs drawn from left to right on a malleable grey clay, but the tablets sometimes appear brown or red, depending on the heat of the fire that in each case



accidentally baked and preserved them. The tablets are mostly the size and shape of a small palm-leaf. That first voice from around Pylos resounds from the rubbish dump into which it was discarded, all those centuries ago, near another Mycenaean palace slightly inland at a site named Iklaina. The scribe's actual words on the tablet are not in themselves particularly exciting. One side records the last part of a man's name, followed by the numeral sign for 'one'—he seems to head a list of personnel. The other side records part of a word related to manufacturing. This mundane clay object, discovered in 2011, is however significant because it pushes back the use of writing to record the Greek language into the 15th century BCE.

In Crete, the main stronghold of Mycenaean culture away from the Greek peninsula, our understanding of early Greek-speakers is more complicated. Long before the Mycenaeans had begun building their palace complexes on the Greek mainland, a people whose name we do not know, but whom we conventionally call 'Minoans' after the mythical king Minos, had established a civilisation on his island. Minoan civilisation reached its apex between 1700 and about 1450 BCE. The ethnicity of the Minoans is disputed. They spoke another language and it was not Indo-European. They also used writing, a syllabic script known as Linear A, but this has not yet been satisfactorily deciphered or translated. Although the palace at Knossos excavated by Sir Arthur Evans in the first years of the 20th century is by far the most famous, there are several other important Minoan palaces and building complexes on Crete.

In the mid-15th century BCE, however, the Minoan palaces were destroyed by fire. Greek-speakers, very likely from the Mycenaean palaces of the mainland, took over the administration of Minoan Crete. Thucydides suggests that the Mycenaean empire had indeed had a large navy in the late Bronze Age, at the time when he thought it was ruled by the Agamemnon who sailed to Troy (1.9). When the Greeks make their entrance into Cretan history, they are therefore already absorbing, if not rapaciously expropriating, the achievements of an earlier civilisation. The reason we can call them Greeks is that they used their own distinctive language instead. But we will never know how exactly how much the mainland Mycenaeans had borrowed from the Minoans, nor the precise process by which Greek became the language of power on Crete. The issue is much debated by archaeologists in the context of the magnificent Thera frescoes. In 1967 the archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos began digging near a farming village called Akrotiri on the southern coast of Thera. The results were astounding. Buried under metres of volcanic ash, Marinatos discovered an entire town, 'the Pompeii of the Bronze Age.' The visitor can walk along the route of the paved ancient street that led into the centre. The residents lived in impressive villas, some with three storeys, bathrooms and plumbing linked to the town's public drainage system. Workshops and larders containing rich finds of pottery lined the streets. They were commercial and utilitarian in function, and possibly dominated by men, to judge from the lack of fresco decoration in most of them. But upstairs, the domestic living rooms, perhaps the domain of women, boasted elegant furniture and plaster walls painted with some of the most reproduced visual images from all antiquity: the Akrotiri frescoes. Those from the 'west house' have a maritime focus so it used to be assumed that it belonged to a rich sailor and was called 'the house of the Admiral'. It contains several frescoes, including one of an arresting young woman with large eyes, ear-rings, and a head shaved except for a pigtail, often identified on no evidence as a priestess. But the richly painted panels of Room 5 make it the 'most famous room in the Aegean.'

Two large panels in Room 5 depict youths, naked and carrying blue and yellow fish. But around the upper parts of the three surviving walls runs a border which consists of frescoes painted on a smaller scale. One depicts military activities; the middle one a landscape which has rather misleadingly been called 'Libyan' or 'Nilotic' because it depicts a winding river and palm trees. The third, the south mural, shows a seascape with towns and ships sailing between them. I gasped when as an undergraduate I first saw the south wall fresco, with its splashing dolphins and seven ships propelled by neat ranks of oars and oarsmen. Their rhythmic rowing is conveyed almost audibly by the imagined shouts of the standing figures at the stern. The smaller town, on the left, portrays an island scene almost exactly like the images which reading about Odysseus' homeland of Ithaca had always engendered in my mind. Craggy mountains form the backdrop to a landscape where wild animals hunt one another, and a shepherd converses over a stream with a man of the town. Their clothes appear quite rough and functional. Other people stand at the harbour, watching the ships sail off to the larger city. The scene is full of movement and energy. Its topic, moreover, is very precisely the boundary between life on land and life at sea, or rather the *lack* of any real boundary between them existing in the ancient Mediterranean islander's mind. The narrative story-telling in this picture is reminiscent of the narrative style of Homeric epic. The



frescoes of Pylos are less well preserved, but suggest that their scenes were similarly action-packed and suggestive of Homeric storytelling: one shows warriors fighting men dressed in animal skins.

Every year that passes reveals further how momentous for our understanding of both the Mycenaeans and later Greeks was the decipherment of Linear B. Finalised in the early 1950s by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, who built (rather more than they admitted) on the earlier work of Alice Kober and Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., the decipherment has allowed us to listen directly to the Mycenaeans themselves. Where before we had only excavations and artefacts, now there are records, however limited, of thoughts which took shape inside Mycenaean Greek heads. We even know some of the Mycenaeans' names, including that of Philaios, a goat-herd at Pylos.

A remarkable fifty-eight names are the same as, or similar to, names of warriors in Homer. Astoundingly, some Mycenaean Greek men bore the names of the top heroes on the Greek and Trojan sides, Achilles and Hector. Other names paralleled in the Homeric texts include Antenor, Glaukos, Tros, Xanthos, Deucalion, Theseus, Tantalos, and Orestes. Sadly, the proper name Nestor has not yet appeared, although many more tablets in Linear B undoubtedly remain to be discovered. A name *ke-re-no* found at both Pylos and Mycenae, moreover, looks similar to Nestor's recurring epithet in the Homeric poems, where he is the 'Gerenian' horseman. The only proper name that it may be possible to associate with an historical figure known from other sources is the last king of Pylos, who from Linear B seems to have been called something like 'Echelaos'. It is enormously suggestive—although it can be no more in the present state of our knowledge--that this happens to be the name of the traditional coloniser of the island of Lesbos, far across the Aegean Sea, and mentioned in the *Iliad*, who was also a son of the Mycenaean mythical hero Orestes.

One striking feature of the proper names in Linear B is how many of them have elements connected with the sea or with sailing: one of the early Greeks named in this script was 'Fair Voyage' (*Euplous*); others were called 'Fair ship' (*Eueōs*), 'Ocean-goer' (*Ponteus*), 'Famous for ships' (*Nausicles*), and perhaps 'Swift ship' (*Okunnaos*). In other respects, too, Linear B confirms the Homeric picture of Greeks to whom sailing and rowing were second nature. At Pylos it is possible that some rowers were conscripted, and perhaps the sons of slave women. There is even a specific mention in one Pylos tablet of a naval expedition, since thirty men's names, perhaps the personnel to man the oars of a single ship, are designated 'oarsmen to go to Pleuron' (P53). This is very likely to be the city called Pleuron, on the north shore of the Gulf of Corinth, which is named in *Iliad* 2.639. A likely reason for sailing expeditions, besides trade, was the acquisition of slave labour. Some of the tablets at Pylos indicate that the labour force was recruited by raids in which captive women and children were brought home and taught trades. The places where the women are said to have come from are across the sea in the eastern island and Asia Minor: Lemnos, Knidos, Miletos and perhaps Chios.

What sort of religion was practised by these real-life seafaring people, with their Homeric names and squadrons of female slaves from overseas? By and large, the gods who have turned up in Linear B are exactly the ones whom we would have predicted. Poseidon was worshipped in reality at Pylos and Knossos, and may even have been the senior god of the Mycenaeans. He was not only the deity of water but the spouse of mother Earth: his name means 'Earth's Husband' or 'Earth's Lord'. Linear B offerings to Poseidon include a jar of homey dedicated 'to the Earth-Shaker.' Besides Poseidon and Earth, named recipients of offerings in the Mycenaean tablets are some of the ones we would expect to be honoured by any pagan Greeks--Zeus, Hera, Athena and Artemis. The offerings they receive are rich and varied: cattle, pigs and sheep, wheat and barley, oil and wine, figs and cheese, honey and spice tablets. Offerings of a non-edible form include sheepskins, wool, and a golden cup, as well as at least one woman. Women seem to have played an important role in religion, as they do in the *Iliad*: they are priestesses, 'key-bearers' and probably some kind of cultic slave. Other individuals were designated cup-bearers, perhaps to perform their duties at sacrificial meals.

The Mycenaean Greeks begin to look very different from their later descendants only when we look at their monolithic political structures. By the eighth century, when ancient Greece emerged as a constellation of independent city-states on islands and lining some of the shores of Mediterranean, the desirability of living in a strictly hierarchical system under an all-powerful hereditary monarch was already being questioned. The Mycenaeans, however, still lived under a monarchical system, as we can see from their term 'king' (*wanax*, the



Homeric *anax*). The *wanax* has some kind of lieutenant or second-in-command, who may or may not have been a military officer, and whose title was *lawagetes*, or ‘people-leader’. The situation seems to have been approaching an emergency at Pylos, which was preparing for an attack when it collapsed, and men were being distributed round local leaders. The *wanax* may also have a special group of courtiers or attendants (*hepetas*). Some tradesmen seem to be designated as working for or belonging to the king—a fuller, a potter and possibly an armour-maker. At Pylos, there was a royal council called something like a *gerousia*, implying that it consisted of men of a mature age, like Nestor.

In all later periods, pagan ancient Greeks owned slaves, often in large numbers. Although we can tell that there was a clear-cut division of types of labour amongst the Mycenaean lower classes, unfortunately it is impossible to be sure whether most of the male workers were technically free or not. It is rather surprising that no term has been deciphered designating people responsible for farming crops, although there are both shepherds and fullers. It has been suggested that the men who worked with livestock were understood to do other kinds of work on the land as well. There are words meaning ‘slave man’ and ‘slave woman’ at Pylos, but most of them are ‘slaves of the god’, which could designate an honorific status or a category of publicly owned religious functionaries or cult attendants. Regardless of their status, however, it is clear that most Mycenaeans did a great deal of often backbreaking work and there were numerous different occupations. Public servants included messengers and heralds. At the upper end of the spectrum of crafts, there are goldsmiths and boilers of ointments or perfume, and a medical doctor. Other early Greeks who have appeared in Linear B include bronze-smiths, cutlers, and bow-makers. Besides the shepherds and goatherds there are huntsmen, woodcutters, masons and carpenters. It is not surprising that ship-building is a distinct craft (*na-u-do-mo*). The women in the palaces worked at carding wool, spinning, and weaving, while both men and women seem to have been involved in making clothes and working flax, which will also have been crucial for equipping ships with sails, and fishermen and hunters with nets. Women ground and measured grain but men made the bread. Male stokers and ox-drivers, and female bath-attendants and serving maids are also attested.

Linear B has told us a good deal about the plants with which the Mycenaeans flavoured their food: celery, beetroot, cumin, sesame, fennel, mint, pennyroyal and safflower. It is interesting that some of these have names borrowed from Semitic languages, suggesting that they were originally imported from Syria—cities like Ugarit, Byblos and Tyre. These exotic tastes will have added variety to the basic diet attested by material finds: wheat, barley, pulses, olives, almonds, fish, shellfish, octopus and grapes. Named timbers include elm, willow, and cypress; furniture is decorated with kyanos, horn and ivory. Horses are mentioned, but not often, which implies they were used for chariots rather than ploughs and farm carts; deer and asses make appearances, and dogs are implied from the word for a huntsman, *kun-agetai*.

The most famous Mycenaean palace is of course at Mycenae itself. Mycenae was built on an acropolis, the citadel surrounded by massive ‘Cyclopean walls’, and one of its Homeric epithets is ‘well built’. But the fabulous treasures which Heinrich Schliemann found in its graves, and which are now in display in Athens Archaeological Museum, more than explained the other Homeric epithet for Mycenae, *rich in gold*. It was in the 1870s that Schliemann conducted the first systematic excavations at Mycenae, with the eyes of the world fastened upon him after his sensational finds at Troy. Some of the visual images from Mycenae have come virtually to define the Greek Bronze Age in the popular imagination, such as the ‘Lion Gate’, the largest remaining Mycenaean sculpture. This had been visible to tourists before Schliemann’s dig, but it was his genius at publicity that brought it to the world’s attention. Even more famous are the golden burial masks which Schliemann discovered in shaft grave circle A, one of which he liked to think revealed the contours of the ‘face of Agamemnon’.¹

But the excavated palace at Pylos is actually the best in physical condition and conveys a strong sense of what it was like for the Greeks who lived there. The Linear B tablets found there have confirmed that it was indeed named Pylos, and that the building was probably begun in the 14th century and completed in the 13th, never to rise again. It was soon afterwards destroyed by the fire which accidentally baked and preserved the inscribed tablets.

The whole complex was built on an acropolis, with steep enough sides to deter assault, and a long wall on one side. It was constructed out of mud bricks and rubble, pressed onto a wooden framework, with wooden pillars



to support the ceilings, planted in fixed stucco mounts. It consisted of more than a hundred individual rooms contained in four main buildings or blocks, together forming a large rectangle. The smallest one seems to have been a wine store. The next largest seems to have been equivalent to a garage—at least, chariots were repaired there. The second largest building may have been used to eat in, since it contains a substantial hall of its own and a good deal of pottery. But it is the main building, in the centre, which clearly constituted the social and psychological centre of the building complex.

The visitor who arrived at Nestor's two-storey palace, as Telemachus did a decade after the Trojan War as described in the *Odyssey*, was taken through a series of ever more stately rooms before he arrived in the presence of the king. He will first have passed through doors on the eastern side of the building and entered an imposing entrance hall (*propylon*). A large proportion of the Pylos tablets were found in rooms on its left, suggesting that this was the administrative and accounting centre, where people and products which entered or left the palace could be systematically recorded. The visitor next entered a court, but will not have minded if he was kept waiting, because it opened onto two adjacent rooms containing a bench to sit on, wine jars set in special holders, and a large choice of different cups. When summoned to the royal presence, the visitor will next have passed through a porch into a vestibule and only then into the large, square throne room, in which the plastered walls were decorated with dazzling frescoes. The throne was positioned at one side, and in the centre there was a massive circular hearth, more than four metres in diameter. Although in winter this will have helped keep the monarch warm, it is designed to make a statement, perhaps a ritual one. It will also have illuminated the gorgeous decorated walls with flickering firelight.

The royal family enjoyed luxury. In this palace, as in Nestor's Pylos in the *Odyssey*, wine flowed abundantly. The Pylos excavators were amazed by the several thousand drinking vessels stored in rooms on the west side of the main building. The palace held plentiful supplies of olive oil, and also assigned a room to making perfume. On the upper floor there must have been many more rooms. On the ground floor there were also at least two independent suites of apartments. One contains a grand terracotta bath, and another a drain which almost certainly provides evidence of access to a toilet.

There is just one apparent reference to writing in the *Iliad*, but it is ambiguous. The Mycenaean king Proteus is angry with his young guest Bellerophon, whom he believes to have attempted to rape his wife. So he sends Bellerophon off to his father-in-law's palace with a tablet engraved with 'dread signs' for the father-in-law, over the Aegean Sea in Lycia in south-west Turkey. The signs instructed him to kill Bellerophon. The words for signs here could mean either pictograms of some kind, like Linear B, or some kind of magical symbols (6.168-70). But even though the Mycenaean Greeks do not seem to have written down their epic songs, they did have poetry and minstrels as we can see from early frescoes and statuettes. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as we can read them today date from rather later, the mid-8th century BCE. They were written down in about 750 BCE in the newly adopted phonetic alphabet which the Greeks had borrowed and expanded from their clever neighbours, the Phoenicians. But we can tell from several elements in these 8th-century epics that they preserve some ancient verse material going back all the way to Mycenaean times.

We know this because early Greek epic is in a distinctive metre, the 'dactylic hexameter', consisting of lines of six 'feet' or emphases. These long lines create a rolling, insistent rhythm, which Victorians liked to imitate in English, as in this translation of line 8 of the *Iliad*, 'Who of the great gods caused these heroes to wrangle and combat?' Here are the two opening lines of J. Henry Dart's Victorian hexameter translation:

SING, divine Muse, sing the implacable wrath of Achilleus!
Heavy with death and with woe to the banded sons of Achaia!

Every line is in the same metre, and there are no subdivisions into groups of verses or stanzas. Poetry which is originally produced without the aid of writing is qualitatively different from the work of literate poets. The distinctive features of Homeric verse derive from its oral nature—lists, repetitions, mirror scenes, and the use of formulae. A 'formula' sounds offputtingly clinical, but it is just the name given to the marrying of two or more words in a recurrent rhythmic cluster—'rosy-fingered Dawn', or 'thus spoke swift-footed Achilles'.



And the form of some words show the verse lines had to have been first composed before the letter ‘w’ (digamma) fell out of use, which was very early. The Mycenaeans used it but the Greeks who later wrote down the *Iliad* did not. The Greek for wine, *oinos*, was originally *woinos*, and the Greek for Troy, Ilium, Ilion, was originally Wilion. Second, the predominance of bronze as the metal of which weapons are made, rather than iron or steel. And third, certain customs. In the Homeric epics, brides are purchased whereas by the classical era they were given away with dowries; in Homer, heroes are still cremated rather than buried. The film did try to make the objects and costumes look plausibly Bronze Age, although there were some serious howlers from this perspective. The villagers who live around Troy own llamas, which did not make it out of the Americas until the 16th century. There is no ‘Port of Sparta’ as indicated in a caption: Sparta is some way inland in the Peloponnese. The infantry use pikes, which were not used on a large scale until the 4th century BCE and Philip of Macedon’s innovations in the Macedonian armed forces. The shields and helmets are also anachronistic, being modelled on examples from at least 500 years later than the period depicted in the *Iliad*. Coins are placed on dead warriors’ eyes in the movie, but coinage had not been invented in the Bronze Age. One of the gifts given to Agamemnon by a vassal king is a red-figure vase, but these are a product of the 5th century BCE, again half a millennium later than the world depicted in the *Iliad*.

Homer’s *Iliad*, ‘Poem about Ilium (Troy),’ created for the Aegean Greeks, west or east, a picture of their obstreperous warrior forefathers, which we are still enjoying in the forms not only of Brad Pitt’s Achilles, but Sean Bean’s Odysseus, Brendan Gleeson’s Menelaus and the inimitable Brian Cox as Agamemnon. The *Iliad* provided them with a detailed narrative of voyage over the Aegean to Asia of the Greek-speaking men of the heroic age, outraged by the insult to their reputation when one of their wives—Helen—ran away with the Trojan Paris. By not calling them ‘Hellenes’, the poets made the story sound archaic by using the ancient clan names *Achaeans*, *Argives* and *Danaans*; the name ‘Hellas’ still only designates one small district in Thessaly. The word *Panbellenes* (*All-Greeks*), which occurs only once, may still only refer to the population of north-west Greece rather than the Peloponnese.

What is certain, however, is that the *Iliad*, however, provided the charter myth of Greek ethnicity for at least twelve centuries subsequently, until the triumph of Christianity and the new world order in the late fourth century CE. It provides a list of the communities who in the mid-8th century BCE regarded themselves as united because they could enjoy poetry in Greek and had long ago fought together in the siege of Troy. That sense of Greek identity was in the same century consolidated by the invention of the Olympic Games, at which you had to be a Greek-speaker to be eligible compete. The *Iliad* offers in its second book a list of all the Greek-speaking peoples which formed the very core of the Greek sense of self. But it is not structured as a list of geographical places, or tribes, or dynastic families. It takes the form of a catalogue of *ships*.

The catalogue of Achaean ships in the poem enacts a roll-call, designed to suit the 8th century BCE, of the twenty-eight contingents of Greeks, in over a thousand vessels, who participated in the Trojan War several centuries before. The Greeks come from mainland strongholds including Pylos, Lacedaemon, Mycenae, Argos, Athens, and Boeotia (although no northern districts) and several islands including Ithaca, Rhodes, and Crete. The list has of course been scrutinised by classicists, historians and archaeologists seeking a straightforward account of Mycenaean Greek populations, but this reading cannot succeed. The catalogue may contain much older, inherited Mycenaean material, but it was given its present form *after* the Greek migrations to Asia, and this must interfere with the way that it portrays the distant past.

By the eighth century BCE, many Greeks lived in new settlements on the Asiatic seaboard, and this is where the relationship between the social geography of the *Iliad* and that of the eighth-century epic poets becomes opaque. The *Iliad*’s list of forces mustered to defend Troy includes the Bronze Age residents of the areas in Asia Minor in which the Greeks later built cities, but describes them *as they were retrospectively visualised in the eighth century*. The largest Trojan contingent by far is furnished by the men of Troy itself and their immediate neighbours the Dardanians, both of whom share their language, culture, religion and protocols with the Greeks. The Phrygians, Lydians and Thracians who lived further away, but also in the northern part of Asia Minor and across the Hellespont, fight for Troy. But the poet of the *Iliad* carefully includes allies who ‘speak other tongues’ from regions which lay to the south of Troy down the coast—Mysia, Caria and Lycia—which his audience knew were in their own day heavily populated by Greeks. Listening to the *Iliad* required them to engage in the act of



remembering, or more likely imagining, Asia before the Greeks came. Perhaps, for them, the Greek conquest of Troy, regardless of its historicity, *symbolically* represented the Ionian forefathers' arrival on the Asiatic seaboard, during the 'dark' centuries, from the Greek mainland and islands. The ambiguous ethnicity of the Iliadic Trojans themselves, similarly, may have functioned to represent the *fusion* of cultures, Greek and Asiatic, which had necessarily resulted.

This raises the problems of the location of Troy and the whether the Trojan War actually happened. There is no contemporary historical documentation of Homer's Trojans, except a handful of controversial references in tablets inscribed by the mysterious Hittites, who from the 18th to the 12th centuries BCE ran a massive empire approximately co-extensive with modern Turkey. In the movie, Agamemnon is concerned that the Hittites may try to wage war on Troy, and he wants to take possession of the city before that happens. But there is no suggestion of this in the *Iliad*. Authentic Hittite tablets, however, do refer to places named 'Wilusa' and 'Taruisa', which may be 'Ilium' and 'Troy'. One precious Hittite text, known as the 'Tawagalawa letter', may even mention the Trojan War. Written by a Hittite king, probably in the 13th century, it is addressed to the king of the *Abhiyawa* (perhaps the *Achaeans*), and refers to an incident in the past, now resolved, when the Abhiyawa were involved in hostile military operations. One of the allies of Troy in the poetic tradition was Eurypylus, said in the *Odyssey* to be leader of the 'Keteioi', who might be the Hittites.

The archaeological evidence is tantalising. The Persian King Xerxes, the Greek Alexander the Great and the Roman Julius Caesar all later visited Troy. They identified it with the ruins of the deserted settlement they could see at what is now called Hissarlik near the Dardanelles. But archaeologists today distinguish between many levels of occupation on the site. The two levels which have most often been identified with the Troy of the *Iliad* are technically known as Troy VIh (15th to 13th centuries BCE) and Troy VIIa (13th to 12th centuries BCE). Troy VIh, which had imposing bastions and sloping walls, was destroyed in the mid-13th century. This can be made to correspond with the assumed date of the Trojan War. But trying to fit the story told in the *Iliad* to 13th-century history is not the best way to understand it. The story told in the *Iliad* is how the Greeks of five hundred years later liked to *imagine* their past. They will have been able to see ruins at Troy, and no doubt durable antiques—armour, for example, or shards of pottery—could help them elaborate the tale. But the concerns addressed in the Homeric epics are those which occupied the minds of the Greeks of the eighth century, transposed into their fictionalised prehistory.

If we knew more about life in the Ionian cities of Asia in the tenth and ninth centuries BCE we would be in a much better position to understand why it was amongst the Greeks that the intellectual and cultural 'miracle' was soon afterwards to take place during the 'archaic' period between the 8th and the 6th centuries. Cultural interaction with the ancient peoples they encountered in the east must have played a crucial role. Since we have no written records of their experiences, it is only possible to speculate. But relationships with the Carians, the inhabitants of the area around Miletus and speakers of an Indo-European language, seem to have been cooperative and involved inter-marriage. Herodotus said that the inhabitants of Miletus spoke Greek with an audible Carian accent. The Lycians must have been an impressive people, to judge from the fight they put up when the Persians attacked their city of Xanthos in around 540 BCE; Sarpedon, one of the Lycian leaders in the *Iliad*, is notably belligerent. It may have been from the Lycians that the Greeks learned to worship Apollo, as the god's Homeric epithet *Lycian* suggests; the only two figures who pray to Apollo in the *Iliad* are on the Trojan side—the priest Chryses and the Lycian hero Glaucus, who says that the god's home is Lycia (16.514-15). From the Phrygian mother goddess Matar, who had connections with an even more ancient Hittite goddess, the Greeks acquired some of the attributes of their goddess Mother/Cybele—her lions and *tympana* (kettle-drums). From the Luwians they borrowed the worship of stones representing gods (*baetyls*), often fragments of asteroids.

But at some point between 800 and 750 BCE, Greek culture changed forever. Greek-speakers borrowed the signs used by the clever Phoenicians to represent consonantal sounds, added some extra signs to indicate vowels, and used them to write down in Greek their already canonical authors. In inscribing them, no doubt the poet-scribes (perhaps individuals really called Homer and Hesiod) ornamented the language and lent the poems better structure and unity. The classical Greeks were already aware that the *Iliad* was aesthetically superior to other epic poems because it is not loosely episodic. It is unified by one incident during the Trojan War, a period of a few weeks when Achilles became angry with both Agamemnon and Hector. But it looks backwards and



forwards in time, much more subtly than the movie *Troy*, to engage the listener with the war's antecedents and consequences. Older inherited material—heroic lays about heroes, proverbs and maxims, astronomical lore—was also carefully shaped to express 8th-century concerns and social values. In writing down these poems, Greeks newly empowered by Phoenician technology invented themselves and their collective past.

How should we visualise the audiences of these poems at around the time when they were first written down? The epics themselves provide several pictures of bards in action. Phemius, Odysseus' minstrel in Ithaca, is already singing about the Trojan War and plays at banquets to entertain aristocrats. Demodocus, in Phaeacia, performs to mark the climax of a day of athletics competitions. In the *Iliad*, Achilles himself whiles away his self-exile from the battlefield at Troy by strumming a lyre and singing. But the picture perhaps closely corresponds to the performance to which most Greeks had access in the 8th to 6th centuries features in another text attributed to Homer. It is a hymn to Apollo of Delos, the tiny central Aegean island where Apollo, along with his mother Leto and twin sister Artemis, received one of his most important cults. The island, which lies near the centre of the 'circle' of the Cyclades, was the traditional site of the birth of the god. From as early as the ninth century, Ionian Greeks were meeting there to dedicate offerings to him and his sister in the famous sanctuary and hear performances of poetry there. It is from the 8th century that much of the earliest evidence dates for the 'Panhellenic' sanctuaries which belonged to all the Hellenes in a neutral space: Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and the Isthmus.

The funeral games for Patroclus held in the *Iliad* book 23 would have felt evocatively Panhellenic to archaic audiences because the competitors in the poem, like them, came from many different Greek regions and islands. It is interesting that the foundation myths of all four festivals with major games claimed that they were associated with funerals. But in the *Iliad* the death of Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend, has a much less light-hearted aspect. The *Iliad* gave the Greeks a way to think about the exciting aspects of war, of the mustering of armies and the clanging of armour, but the audience is never allowed to forget that this excitement comes at a terrible price. In episode after episode, strong, sympathetic characters enunciate their emotional pain. The *Iliad* shows young men dying on the battlefield, to be lamented by parents and widows. It shows the last parting of Hector from his wife Andromache and little son. It shows the elderly Priam and his supposed enemy Achilles weeping together over their respective losses. It foreshadows the extreme situations and moral crises of Athenian tragedy in the dilemma of Achilles, who had to choose between dying young but gloriously, or old but in obscurity. It certainly adumbrates the harsh metaphysical conditions under which mortals in tragedy live, utterly vulnerable to the fickle whims of vindictive and childish gods. In these aspects, it remains vastly superior to any subsequent adaptation. Please go and read it soon.


