

M7A1:

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### **The Trojan War: A Historiographical Case Study**

History, as is soon discovered by any aspiring student of the discipline, is truly greater than the sum of its parts. In addition to accurately gathering facts and data about past events, historians must also evaluate the broader implications of less tangible aspects of the human condition. Individual bias, prejudice, and cultural affinities all influence historiography and are no less important than the sources which constitute historical research. Identifying, embracing, and addressing these concepts are often what separates amateur historians from professional historicists and an examination of otherwise common historical topics, through this nonpartisan lens of objective historicism, yields intriguing results. The Greek legend of the Trojan War, for instance, has long been a topic of historical debate and prompted a variety of questions among the academic and historiographic community. One is thus compelled to ask, what have been some of the major historiographical views concerning the fate of Troy and Homer's fabled Trojan War? Ancient historians explored the collective cultural implications of the tale; medieval chroniclers strove to validate and assimilate unearthed accounts of the war; humanists of the Renaissance sought illumination through the evaluation of their epic predecessors; and modern developments continued to spark debates well into the twentieth-century. The Trojan War, a pseudohistorical epic tale, is thus a fertile topic in which to illustrate a wide spectrum of varied scholarly debate over the much broader thematic background of historiographic research.

### Antiquated Views and Classical Opinions

“The works of Herodotus and Thucydides together,” according to Professor Carolyn Dewald, “created an intellectual field that we still call... historic, or history.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, it is fitting to begin a historiographic evaluation of the Trojan War with the opinions of those historicists chronistically situated nearest the epicenter of the epic Greek myth. While Herodotus may have the dubious distinction of being known as both the ‘Father of Lies and the Father of Truth,’ his views on the drama at Troy nonetheless shed an intriguing light on ancient historiographic methodologies. Thucydides, an Athenian patrician and historian, likewise provides an acute glimpse of how the Trojan War mythos was interpreted by his fellow Greeks. Herodotus and Thucydides principally concerned themselves with matters of pan-Greco conflicts (the former primarily focused on the Persian War while the latter wrote extensively of the Peloponnesian War).<sup>2</sup> Given that the Greek myth of the Trojan War was inextricably linked with Grecian culture, it is thus understandable why both men make mention of the conflict within their works.

Although Herodotus himself was not a native Athenian, his historical studies significantly contributed to the collective social memory of what would one day become greater Greek culture.<sup>3</sup> He traveled extensively across the Mediterranean and compiled a number of elaborate works during his lifetime.<sup>4</sup> He never dedicated an entire volume solely to the Trojan War, and identified some of the story as fiction, but nonetheless cited several accounts of the conflict in many of his studies.<sup>5</sup> Some of his narratives, such as the extensive *Histories*, often make reference to specific characters or events associated with the siege of Troy or the Trojan War.<sup>6</sup> *Book Nine*, for instance, describes the punishment of the Persian ruler, Artayctes,

charged with the desecration of the temple at Protesilaus (so named for a Greek warrior associated with the first expedition to Troy and initial battle of the Trojan War):<sup>7</sup>

Once at Elaeus, during Xerxes' march towards Athens, he [Artayctes] tricked him and stole the treasure of Protesilaus the son of Iphiclus. Protesilaus is buried in Elaeus on the Chersonese, and there is a precinct there surrounding the tomb.<sup>8</sup>

Herodotus was consumed with painting the distant history of the Mediterranean in broad strokes while Thucydides was a historian narrowly focused on contemporary intra-Greek conflict.<sup>9</sup> In addition to writing a series of works dedicated to the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides actually commanded troops in battle.<sup>10</sup> Thucydides was therefore interested in what Dr. John Tosh refers to as, “the practical applications of historical context... much less likely to make the headlines, but... no less important.”<sup>11</sup> Like Herodotus, Thucydides made extensive use of narrative but was more analytical and dispassionate in the application of his trade.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the Athenian sought to answer questions concerning the nature of democracy, society, and warfare.<sup>13</sup> It should therefore be of little surprise that tales of the Trojan War found their way into several of Thucydides’ works. *Book One of the Peloponnesian War*, for example, offers that:

It is reasonable to think that that Trojan expedition was greater than all in previous history, but still short of the modern scale. If once more we can trust Homer’s poems in this respect — and it is likely that, being a poet, he would exaggerate — even so Agamemnon’s forces seem less than those of the present day.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless if it was fact or fiction, the Trojan War influenced many ancient cultures outside of Greece and nowhere was this more evident than in the ‘eternal city’ of Rome. “In the first few lines of the *Aeneid*,” states Professor Andrew Erskine, “Vergil simply and succinctly connects Rome and Troy.”<sup>15</sup> Erskine’s work, *Troy Between Greece and Rome*, is a book dedicated to the critical dual significance that the siege of Troy played within Greco-Roman

culture.<sup>16</sup> In introducing his work, Erskine notes that while historians, like Herodotus and Thucydides, initially explored Trojan studies on one side of the Adriatic, others, such as Livy and Dionysios of Halikarnassos, later evaluated the topic on distinctly more Roman terms.<sup>17</sup> Livy, born in what is now part of modern day Italy, was a critically acclaimed Roman historian and produced the notable work, *History of Rome*.<sup>18</sup> Dionysios, a Dorian immigrant, was culturally more distant from Rome than Livy, but nonetheless crafted one of the most pro-Roman historical accounts of the city's founding in his *Roman Antiquities*.<sup>19</sup> Erskine makes note that both of these historians lived in "a time when the rulers of Rome, Augustus and his predecessor Caesar, were promoting their family's Trojan descent."<sup>20</sup> Thus, both men, much like their Greek predecessors, utilized a refined historical awareness to interpret and contribute to the social memories of their respective cultures. Erskine argues that such self-identifying historical fiction was a necessary and intrinsic element of Rome's foundation mythology and eventual ascension to power.<sup>21</sup> Troy's powerful legacy, as shall be seen, eventually outlasted even the Western emperors of Rome and thus remained an active historiographical topic of interest in even the most troubling of times.

#### Dares Phrygius and the Dark Ages

The mid-first millennium was a disastrous era for much of Western Europe; Rome fell to the barbarian hordes and a great shadow was cast over scholarly pursuits of classical interest. Historians were not excluded from this devastation but nonetheless managed to salvage several battered facsimiles of the past. Some attempted to travel an enlightened path but it would still take many centuries for historiography to truly evolve into what Tosh refers to as "the study of the writing of history."<sup>22</sup> Complicating matters was also a long list of fraudulent works which

often fell into the hands of aspiring historians, monks, or medieval chroniclers. Such forgeries confused many scholars and all too often distorted the views of those striving to better understand the past. One such example, *De excidio Troiae historia*, was an alleged first-hand account of the Trojan War.<sup>23</sup> Princeton University's Frederic Clark cites a fateful mistake made by Isidore of Seville, "the seventh-century compiler whose cataloguing of classical erudition helped lay the groundwork for medieval and early modern encyclopedism."<sup>24</sup>

Upon affirming that "among us, Moses first composed a history, on the beginning of the world," he [Isidore] unexpectedly declared that "among the pagans, Dares Phrygius first composed a history, concerning Greeks and Trojans." Only later did the encyclopedist mention more well-known Greek historians (to modern audiences at least) like Herodotus.<sup>25</sup>

Isidore would have most likely not have made such a bold proclamation had he known that Dares was nothing more than a faceless ghost of the past, and his *De excidio* a fraudulent piece of fiction. However, the counterfeit manuscript was too compelling to dismiss and Isidore, much like some other historians of his era, apparently had great difficulty in "distinguishing histories from poetic fables," and often "equated historical writing with eyewitness observation."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the false claims of an imaginary warrior, who never actually participated in the siege of Troy, were thrust upon the collective historiographical psyche of medieval European scholars.

Dares Phrygius' combat journal, which was a Latin work supposedly discovered and translated from its original Greek by the fourth-century writer Cornelius Nepos, continued to be a source of study through the Dark Ages.<sup>27</sup> The manuscript was so popular, in fact, that hundreds of copies still exist today.<sup>28</sup> "Throughout the Middle Ages," notes Clark, "Dares served not only as a name to invoke, but also as a source to appropriate and rework..."<sup>29</sup> Several writers and historians of the era, such as Geoffrey Monmouth and William of

Malmesbury, often referenced Dares in their works (the former conjured Phrygian while writing his pseudohistorical *Historia regum Britanniae*, while the latter made use of the *De excidio* in compiling the *Chronicon* of Eusebius-Jerome).<sup>30</sup> The quality and accuracy of such work was still a far cry from the academic clarity of more empirical historiographic disciplines, such as Bloch and Febvre's *Annales* inquiries.<sup>31</sup> A good deal of medieval historiography, much like some classical works, was focused on exploring and developing group and self-identities.<sup>32</sup> Compilations and biographies, such as Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia regum Britanniae*, often referenced Troy in the Roman tradition; that is, the story was used to legitimize authority.<sup>33</sup> Monmouth wildly claimed, for instance, that Britain was settled by a decedent of Troy:

*Brutus! there lies beyond the Gallic bounds  
An island which the western sea surrounds,  
By giants once possessed, now few remain  
To bar thy entrance, or obstruct thy reign.  
To reach that happy shore thy sails employ  
There fate decrees to raise a second Troy  
And found an empire in thy royal line,  
Which time shall ne'er destroy, nor bounds confine.*<sup>34</sup>

Fortunately, more objective views of history would emerge in the coming centuries.

Intellectual and social movements, such as the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution, would influence the development of historiography and prompt many historians to ask new questions about Troy and the Trojan War.

#### Modern Research and Future Debates

The modern era brought with it some decidedly different historiographic opinions concerning the accounts of Dares Phrygius. During the early Renaissance, for instance, Coluccio Salutati (a Florentine bureaucrat, humanists, and historian) directly contested the views of

quasi-reliable sources such as Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis (a medieval compiler and chronicler of questionable credibility).<sup>35</sup> While Salutati's grounds for doing so were not precisely aimed at academic or historiographic purity, his line of inquiry was nevertheless an important step in the direction of more scholarly debates concerning the fate of Troy.<sup>36</sup> Clark offers, "Salutati invoked Livy, that 'most venerable author' or *nobilissimus autor*, asking whether one would rather follow a trusted and genuine Roman historiographer... or Dares and Dictys."<sup>37</sup> However, it should also be noted that the *De excidio*, and some other questionable works, did remain in the historiographic limelight for much of the early modern period. Clark cites, for instance, that many enlightened regions, such as "Erasmian Spain and papal Rome," continued to rely upon the fraudulent story of the *De excidio* until approximately the eighteenth-century.<sup>38</sup>

The nineteenth-century was a landmark era for modern historians concerned with classical studies and the Trojan War for two major reasons. First, the English historian and politician, George Grote, published his extensive twelve-volume study, *A History of Greece*.<sup>39</sup> His work, first released in 1846, is still widely regarded as one of the most authoritative and comprehensive studies of the classical world.<sup>40</sup> Roughly two decades later, Heinrich Schliemann (a German dye salesman) and Frank Calvert (an English archeologist) excavated several ruins at Hissarlik, a site in Turkey now recognized as the remains of Troy,<sup>41</sup> Their discovery and work in the field of archeology had far reaching implications for many historicists and historiographers. This claim becomes evident when comparing the work of Grote to that of later modern historians. Prior to Schliemann and Calvert unearthing Troy, Grote (a respected expert in his field of study) summarized his thoughts on the matter:



The siege of Troy is an event not to be reckoned as history, although Herodotus, the “Father of History,” speaks of it as such, and it would be quite impossible to understand the history and character of the Greek people without a study of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* poems...”<sup>42</sup>

Clearly, Grote and many of his peers completely questioned the mere existence of Troy and openly asserted that much of the Trojan war was Homeric fiction. Following the discovery at Hisarlik, however, popular historiographical opinions on the matter varied. Take, for example the argument of Sir Moses Finely, a twentieth-century classical historian:

Blegen and his colleagues may have settled, insofar as such matters can be determined with finality by archeology, that Troy VIIa was destroyed by human violence. However, they have found nothing... which hints at *who* destroyed Troy.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, it can be observed that the emerging field of archeology at least illuminated a portion of the debate surrounding Troy but modern historicists, like Finely and his peers, recognized the limits of the new discipline. As historiographers, these men had evolved with the times and were now motivated by a need to examine the past simply for the sake of doing so; pursuing their work in the spirit of what Leopold van Ranke referred to as “*wie es eigentlich gewesen* [how it really was].”<sup>44</sup>

Today’s examinations of the Trojan War are clearly more academic and empirical than past pursuits. However, they also focus on what Tosh refers to as, “Historical *difference*,” which, “lies at the heart of the discipline’s claim to be socially relevant.”<sup>45</sup> Contemporary historians thus attempt to maintain a fine balance between objective disinterest and cultural relativity. Interdisciplinary studies, relying upon fields such as archeology, literature, and anthropology are often referred to with increasing regularity by many of today’s modern historicists. For example, Literature and History Professor Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp asks, “Which role do the epics play in the complex process of turning the past... into meaningful

history and... as cherished treasures enshrined in the 'cultural memory' of the early Greeks – buttress their collective identity?"<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, Professor of History and Archeology, Manfred Korfmann asserts that, "Despite assumptions to the contrary, archaeological work of the new Troy project has not been performed for the purpose of understanding Homer's *Iliad* or the Trojan War."<sup>47</sup> These dissenting and conflicting opinions may complicate the study of the Trojan War, but it is also reasonable to conclude that such inquiries will continue to occupy the historiographic community for the foreseeable future. While this interdisciplinary approach may cause a bit of friction within certain academic circles, it nevertheless continues to reveal more significant revelations than the one-dimensional approaches of the past.

Historiographic examinations of Troy and the Trojan War have varied significantly over the past two thousand years. Classical and medieval historians, from Herodotus and Thucydides to Isidore of Seville, often centered their studies on awareness that Homer's epic tale was an intrinsic and powerful facet of the Western social consciousness. Thematically, this approach continued through the late Middle Ages and into the early Renaissance (albeit under the initial influence of fraudulent documents such as Dares Phrygius' *De excidio Troiae historia*). The modern era brought with it many social and intellectual innovations which influenced and affected the examination of Troy and the greater whole of historiographic studies.

Many of today's historians subscribe to a hybrid historiographic approach that combines the cultural interests of past studies with objective contemporary methodologies. Homer's epic has proven to be a fertile topic of debate and future historicists will undoubtedly continue to make their arguments for many years to come. The form, content, and context of these debates will undoubtedly be dictated by other relevant interest within related fields of study

and a holistic interdisciplinary approach to understanding the past. The future of historiography, as has been illustrated by this case study of Troy and the Trojan War, ultimately lies within the ability of its practitioners to achieve a critical balance between objective historical analysis and a subjective empathetic interpretation of past events.

Notes

1. Carolyn Dewald, introduction to *The Histories*, by Herodotus (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), xi.
2. Ibid., xi.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., xxii.
5. Ibid., xxi.
6. Ibid., xxiii.
7. Ibid., xxiii.
8. Herodotus, *The Histories*, translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2008), 587.
9. P. J. Rhodes, introduction to *The Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2009), ix.
10. Ibid., x.
11. John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods, and New Directions in the Study of History* (London: Routledge, 2015), 29.
12. Rhodes, introduction, x.
13. Ibid., x.
14. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, translated by Martin Hammond (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2009), 7.
15. Andrew Erskine, *Troy Between Greece and Rome: Local Tradition and Imperial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1.
16. Ibid., 1.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Walter Englert, "Livy," *Reed College*, accessed October 7, 2015.

19. "Dionysius of Halicarnassus," Encyclopedia Britannica (2015), accessed October 7, 2015.
20. Erskine, *Troy Between Greece and Rome*, 15.
21. Ibid., 16.
22. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 52.
23. Frederic Clark, "Authenticity, Antiquity, and Authority: Dares Phrygius in Early Modern Europe," *Journal Of The History Of Ideas* 72, no. 2 (April 2011), 184.
24. Ibid., 183.
25. Ibid., 184.
26. Ibid., 184-5.
27. Ibid., 184.
28. Ibid., 184.
29. Ibid., 185.
30. Ibid., 185.
31. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 53.
32. Ibid., 54-5.
33. Clark, "Authenticity, Antiquity, and Authority: Dares Phrygius in Early Modern Europe," 185.
34. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, translated by Aaron Thompson with revisions by J. A. Giles (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999), 14.
35. Clark, "Authenticity, Antiquity, and Authority: Dares Phrygius in Early Modern Europe," 185.
36. Ibid., 185-6.
37. Ibid, 186.

38. Ibid., 186-7.

39. Paul Cartledge, Introduction to *A History of Greece: From the Time of Solomon to 403 B.C.*, by George Grote, condensed and edited by J. M. Mitchell and M. O. B. Caspari (London: Routledge, 2001), ix.

40. Ibid., ix.

41. Mark Lehrer, David Turner, and Heinrich Schliemann, "The Making of a Homeric Archaeologist: Schliemann's Diary of 1868," *The Annual of the British School at Athens*, 1989, 221.

42. George Grote. "Fall of Troy: B. C. 1184." *The Great Events by Famous Historians: A Comprehensive and Readable Account of the World's History, Emphasizing the More Important Events, and Presenting These as Complete Narratives in the Master-words of the Most Eminent Historians*, edited by John Rudd, Vol. 1, 70-91. Chicago: The National Alumni, 1905, 70.

43. M. I. Finley, J. L. Caskey, G. S. Kirk, and D. L. Page, "The Trojan War," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 84 (1964), 1.

44. Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 7.

45. Ibid., 26.

46. Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, "Homer in the Word of Odysseus: Old Problems and New Perspectives in Recent Research," *Ordia Prima* 1, (January 2002): 115.

47. Manfred Korfmann, "Was There a Trojan War?" *Archaeology*, 57(3), May/June 2004.

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