

## CHAPTER 5

66 HOMER AND  
HISSARLIK

# ALWAYS LOOK A GIFT HORSE IN THE BELLY THE TROJAN WAR

The expression “Never look a gift horse in the mouth” means that if someone gives you a present, you should just take it and not look too closely to see if there’s anything wrong with it.

But sometimes it pays to check out a gift. If you were at war for years and years, and thousands of enemy soldiers kept trying to break into your city, wouldn’t you be suspicious if all but one of them suddenly disappeared? And if they left a huge wooden horse outside your city walls, and their only remaining soldier said it was a present, you might think that there was more to this weird gift than a sudden attack of generosity.

This was the situation that the people of Troy (also called Ilium) found themselves in. According to the myths, it all started when Paris, a Trojan prince, was asked to give a gold apple to the most beautiful goddess. Aphrodite said that if he chose her, she would give him the most beautiful woman in

the city. Paris chose Aphrodite, and she gave him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. This led to the Trojan War, which lasted ten years. The Greeks finally won, but they were so angry that they destroyed the city of Troy. The Trojan horse was the key to their victory. It was a huge wooden horse that the Greeks hid soldiers inside. The Trojans thought it was a gift and let it into the city. The Greeks then opened the doors of the horse and attacked the city from within.



*The creator of this pot showed the Trojan horse with wheels, making it easy for it to enter the city.*



the world. (They thought that a goddess could just give people away.)

Paris thought that Aphrodite's offer was the best, so he chose her. His reward was the celebrated beauty, Helen.

One problem was that Helen was already married to a Mycenaean king, Menelaus of Sparta. But Paris didn't care—he just went to Sparta, picked up Helen, and went back to Troy.

Menelaus asked his powerful brother Agamemnon and other Greek leaders to help him get his wife back. They set sail for Troy and tried to break through the high city walls. Many famous warriors and courageous but unnamed soldiers, as well as civilians, died on both sides. According to the Greek epic the *Iliad*, the Trojans and Greeks fought for ten years.

Also according to the *Iliad*, Paris's brother Hector felt especially pessimistic about the Trojans' prospects for winning the war. During a break from the fighting, he says to his beloved wife,

For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it:

There will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish.

He imagined his parents and his brothers dying at the hands of their enemies. But what upset him the most was the thought of his wife becoming the slave of a Greek soldier:

And some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you:

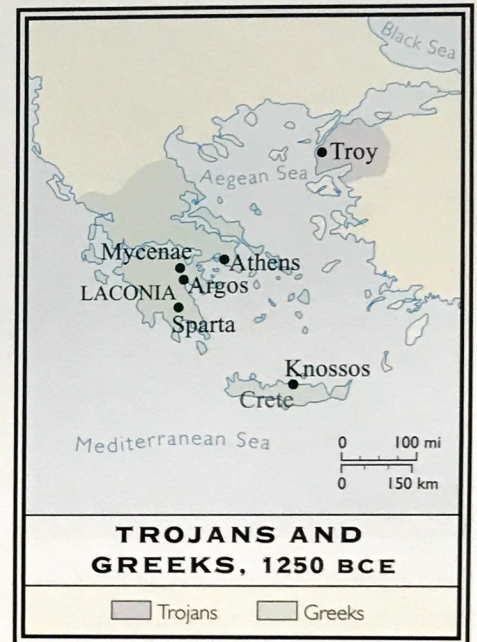
“This is the wife of Hector, who was ever the bravest fighter

Of the Trojans, breaker of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion.” . . .

But may I be dead and the piled earth hide me under before I

Hear you crying and know by this that they drag you captive.

The war dragged on. It looked as though neither side would ever win. But then the wily Greek hero Odysseus



“ Homer, *Iliad*, about 750 BCE



“Trojan horse” now means something that looks harmless, but can cause damage.

One computer virus was called the Trojan Horse Virus.

thought of building a huge horse and hiding some soldiers in it. He hoped that the Trojans would like the horse so much that they would drag it inside the city walls.

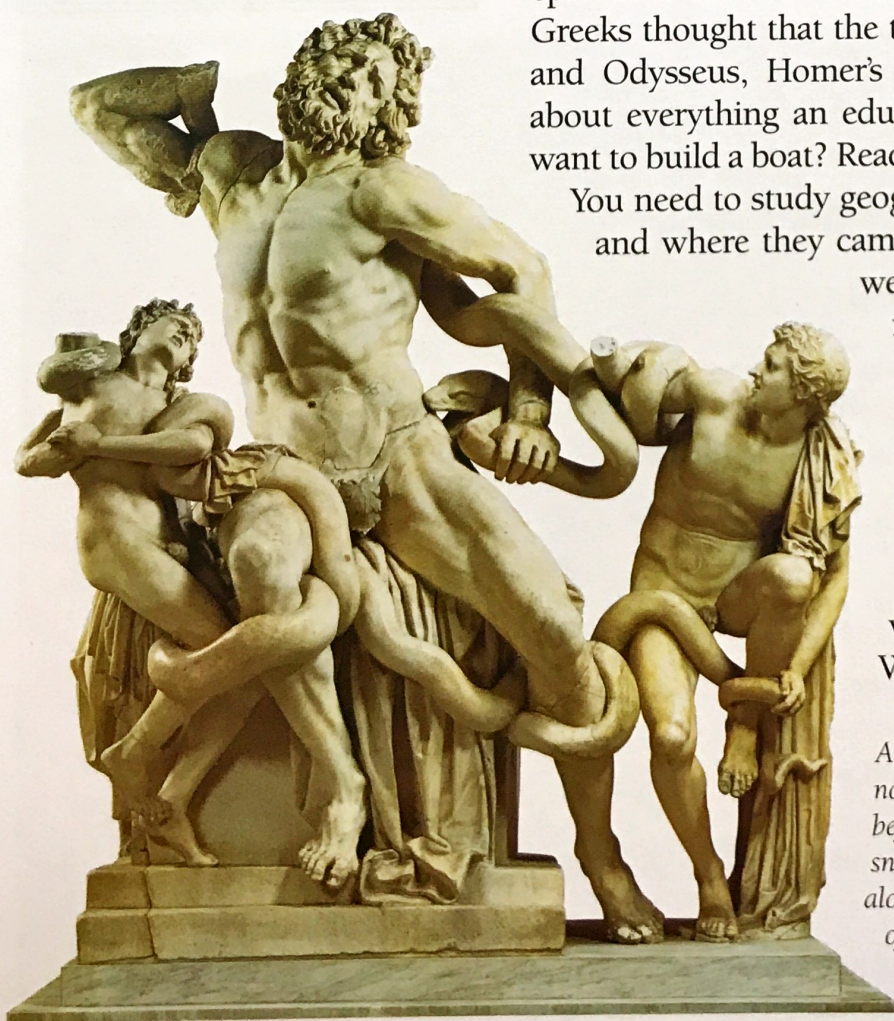
The Trojans fell for it, and they opened their gates. They pulled the horse inside. Later that night, after the people of Troy had all gone to bed, one of the Greek soldiers opened a secret door in the belly of the Trojan horse. Soldiers poured out into the dark city.

Hector’s gloomy prediction came true. The Greeks slaughtered most of the sleeping Trojans, and imprisoned others for future use as slaves. Then they burned down the city, killing everyone who couldn’t get away in time. The Greeks went home in triumph.

There’s a lot more to the story of the Trojan War than the episode of the horse and the fall of Troy. In fact, the ancient Greeks thought that the two books that tell the story of Troy and Odysseus, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, contained just about everything an educated person needed to know. You want to build a boat? Read descriptions of great ships in them.

You need to study geography? Read the list of Greek ships and where they came from in the *Iliad*. Even manners were covered. How should a naked man behave when he accidentally stumbles upon a princess and her friends playing ball? (To see how Odysseus handled this embarrassing situation, see the *Odyssey*, Book VI.)

For many centuries, people wondered if the story of the Trojan War was a made-up legend, or if it



*A prophet named Laocoön warned the Trojans not to take the horse inside the walls. But before he could get anyone to listen, some snakes swam out of the sea and strangled him along with at least one of his sons. The sculptor of this huge statue shows another son escaping. He is on the right, slipping the snake’s coils off his leg.*



had some basis in fact. By modern times, most people thought it was just an exciting story. One of the few people who was convinced that it was based on a real war was a man named Heinrich Schliemann.

When he was seven years old (in 1829), Schliemann was fascinated by a book that had a picture of Troy burning down. He made up his mind to find what remained of the city.

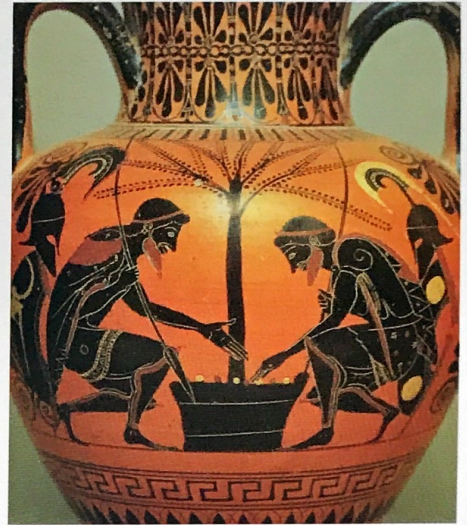
He read and reread the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* until he figured out where he thought he could find Troy. He decided that it must lie under a mound of dirt near a town called Hissarlik in present-day Turkey.

Most people laughed at him. But they stopped laughing when Schliemann, digging at Hissarlik, struck a rich treasure of gold jewelry. It was in a layer of the mound that looked as though it had been where a great city had once stood—a city that had been destroyed by fire. He was convinced it was the Troy of the *Iliad*. Schliemann smuggled the jewelry out of Turkey. The Turks were furious, and they refused to allow him to return to the site at Hissarlik.

While Schliemann was waiting for the Turks to change their minds, he went to Greece, to where he thought Mycenae must be, to look for the tombs of Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra (Helen's sister). Once again, luck was on his side. Almost immediately, he found a group of graves. The gold and other treasures that he found in the graves proved that very powerful people were buried there. Schliemann was thrilled. He was sure they were the graves of ancient kings and queens—maybe even the very ones he was looking for.

After a while, the Turkish government allowed Schliemann to return to Hissarlik and continue his excavation. He kept digging there until he died, sure that he had found Troy.

But not everyone was convinced. From the start, some people said that Schliemann was wrong. They said that the part of Hissarlik where he had found the treasure was from 1,000 years before the war that Homer wrote about, and that the tombs that he hoped were of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra were also from the wrong time. Most modern archaeologists agree with them, and add that it looks like



*The great Greek warriors Achilles and Ajax are letting the Trojans think that they are so relaxed that they are going to play a board game. They are showing off, though. They're not relaxed enough to take off their armor before picking up the dice!*

#### EVERYBODY'S GOT A SORE SPOT

The greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War was Achilles. He was the son of a mortal man and the goddess Thetis. His mother dipped him in the River Styx to make sure that he would be immortal, like her. But she held him by the heel and the heel never got wet, making this his vulnerable spot. Guess where an arrow hit him during the Trojan War? The expression "Achilles' heel" means a weakness that can cause harm.



### Was Helen Innocent?

The historian Herodotus didn't believe that Helen was the cause of the Trojan War. When Herodotus was in Egypt, he heard that when Paris was sailing to Troy with Helen, he was shipwrecked on the Egyptian coast. When the Egyptian priests heard that Paris had kidnapped the wife of a man who had been his host, they were outraged. One of them told him he had to depart right away, leaving behind everything he had stolen from Sparta, including Helen.

Herodotus seemed to think that this story made sense, writing in the *Histories*:

*“I myself am in agreement with this version of the story, especially when you bear in mind that if Helen had been in Troy, she would certainly have been surrendered to the Greeks whether Paris liked it or not, for neither Priam nor any member of his household was crazy enough to risk being ruined along with their children and their city just so Paris could have Helen for his wife.”*

Schliemann made up some of the entries in his diary, where he wrote about what he had found each day. Some even say that the “mask of Agamemnon” is a modern forgery, or that some parts like the beard were added later. Most archaeologists agree that Schliemann was careless and destroyed many beautiful and interesting artifacts and important buildings in his eager search for Troy.

What's the truth? Was there ever a Trojan War? If so, when and where did it happen? And why? If the fighting wasn't over Helen, what was the cause of the war?

Often, wars are fought for economic reasons. Many scholars think that the Trojan War happened around 1200 BCE, when Greece was probably being invaded by strangers from the north. The Greeks might have been looking for new places to trade to take the place of the countries they could no longer get to during the invasions. Maybe they were seeking places to send colonists.

It's possible that we'll never know. But sometimes things turn up when you least expect them. Archaeologists thought for years that the Trojan jewelry that Schliemann found was lost during World War II. Some said it was melted down to make new jewelry. But in 1994, a team of researchers found it in a museum in Moscow.

Who knows? Maybe someday an archaeologist working at Hissarlik or some other spot will dig up a giant horse-shoe, or a helmet saying “I belong to Hector.” Maybe you will be that archaeologist.

*Nobody knows the name of the king in whose grave this solid-gold mask was found. Heinrich Schliemann thought he knew who it was, however. When he first saw it, he exclaimed, “I have gazed on the face of Agamemnon!”*

