|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| National Geographic News: NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM/NEWS |    |

|  |
| --- |
|  |
| **Is Troy True? The Evidence Behind Movie Myth**  |
| **Stefan Lovgren in Los Angeles for National Geographic News, May 14, 2004** |
|  |
|  |
| Did the city of Troy really exist? Is the Trojan War myth or military reality? And what about that giant horse? As the blockbuster Brad Pitt film *Troy* storms the cinemas, archaeologists and historians are shedding light on the ancient city and epic that inspired the movie. In the Greek poem *The Iliad,* the basis for *Troy,* Prince Paris of Troy steals the gorgeous Helen, of Greece, from her husband, King Menelaus. The act brings the two nations to war, and eventually Greeks led by the warrior Achilles lay siege to Troy. The poet Homer probably wrote the epic in the eighth or ninth century, B.C., several hundred years after the war is supposed to have taken place. Much of it is no doubt fantasy. There is, for example, no evidence that Achilles or even Helen existed. But most scholars agree that Troy itself was no imaginary Shangri-la but a real city, and that the Trojan War indeed happened. Archaeologists who have been digging into the myth of Homer's poem believe the legendary war may have been a process rather than a single event. "The archaeological and textual evidence indicates that a Trojan war or wars took place, and that Homer chose to write about one or more of them by making it into a great ten-year-long saga," said Eric Cline. Cline is a historian and archaeologist at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C. **Nine Cities** In northwestern Turkey, Heinrich Schliemann excavated the site believed to be Troy in 1870. Schliemann was a German adventurer and con man who took sole credit for the discovery, even though he was digging at the site, called Hisarlik, at the behest of British archaeologist Frank Calvert. The site contains nine cities built on top of each other. There is a citadel in the middle and a town around it. A high wall fortified the town. Eager to find the legendary treasures of Troy, Schliemann blasted his way down to the second city, where he found what he believed were the jewels that once belonged to Helen. As it turns out, the jewels were a thousand years older than the time described in Homer's epic. Today archaeologists believe that the sixth and seventh oldest cities found in layers at Hisarlik are the best candidates for the Troy of *The Iliad.* Resplendent and strong, city number six looks like Homer's Troy. The problem is that this city's destruction in 1250 B.C. does not appear to have been caused by war but an earthquake. But Homer's story may provide a clue. In *The Iliad,* the Greeks breach the city walls by hiding inside a giant horse, which they present as a gift to the Trojans. The Trojan horse could have been a metaphor for Poseidon, a god associated with horses who was both the god of the seas and earthquakes. "The suggestion is that Homer knew that the city he was describing had been destroyed by an earthquake," Cline said. "But that's not how you want to end your monumental saga—with a whimper. So he concocted this idea of a Trojan horse." The seventh oldest city at the site, on the other hand, fits the description of a city under siege and destroyed by war in 1175 B.C. Archaeologists have found arrowheads in the streets. But the city itself was not as grand as the one described by Homer. "Homer may have taken the description of Troy 6 and the destruction of Troy 7, and, using poetic license, blurred the two into one ten-year-long war," Cline said. **Sea People** In the late Bronze Age, Troy, if located at the Hisarlik site, would have been a great prize for power-hungry kings. Perched at the entrance to the Black Sea, the city would have been at an international crossroads. The Greek Mycenaean empire would have lain to the west. The Hittite empire, which stretched from Mesopotamia to Syria, would have been to the east. As for its great wealth, Troy may have acquired that by taxing seafarers traveling into the Black Sea. "It would have been a great plum for the Mycenaeans to capture," Cline said. "This war may have been fought for the usual reasons: economic gain, greed, glory, territory, and the control of trade routes." Or the Greeks may not have fought the Trojan War at all. One theory suggests that the lesser known Sea Peoples wrecked Troy. Originally from what is now Italy, the Sea Peoples swept across the Mediterranean Sea from west to east. According to inscriptions found in Egypt, this group came through Troy at the time of the Trojan War, around 1200 B.C. Yet another theory, supported by ancient Hittite texts, suggests an intermittent, 200-year conflict that raged between the Hittite empire and a rebel coalition that included Troy. In this text, the Mycenaeans of Greece actually allied themselves with the Trojans against the Hittites. Archaeologists have found Mycenaean pottery in Troy 6, supporting the suggestion that the two nations were allies. The least plausible explanation, most archaeologists agree, is that the Trojan War was fought over Helen, described by Homer as the most beautiful woman in the world. However, there is a historical precedent for a war being fought over an injustice done to a king. In the 14th century B.C., the Hittite king received a letter from the Egyptian queen. She said her husband had died and asked the Hittite king if he could send a son for her to marry. The Hittite eventually agreed and sent one of his sons. On his way to Egypt, however, the prince was killed. Believing the Egyptians killed him, the Hittites declared war on Egypt. "If the Hittites and the Egyptians could go to war in the 14th century over the son of the king, why wouldn't the Mycenaeans and Trojans go to war less than a hundred years later because the king's wife has been kidnapped?" Cline asked. "One can't really rule out that it was fought over Helen, but at the moment we don't have any supporting data for that." **Romantic History** One thing is clear: The wars seem to have ended an age. "Homer is writing a memory of the end of the world," said Diane Thompson, author of *The Trojan War: Literature and Legend from the Bronze Age to the Present.* "Nostalgia fuels his writing, and it has fueled it ever since." When the Roman poet Virgil in the first century B.C. rewrote Homer's story in his own classic *The Aeneid,* he turned the Greeks into scruffy villains and described the Trojans as beautiful losers who went on to found the Roman Empire. Through the ages, European people clung to this version—many of them tracing their ancestry back to Troy. "It's a brilliant story of love and war," Thompson said. |
|  |

|  |
| --- |
| © 1996-2008 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.  |