

## BOOK REVIEWS

Barry Strauss, *The Trojan War: A New History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), XXVIII + 258 pp.

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Rewriting the story of the Trojan War has a long and distinguished tradition. Already in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Stesichorus refused to believe that Helen had gone to Troy. Much later, Dio of Prusa (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) claimed that it was actually the Trojans who had won the war, not the Greeks. Scholars, poets, and pundits of various persuasions have been at it ever since. This latest contribution, by Barry Strauss, comes in the wake of Manfred Korfmann's work at Hisarlik, and its popularisation in Joachim Latacz's *Troy and Homer*. As usual, the aim is to establish 'what really happened at Troy'; and as usual, the plan derails because there is no getting away from Homer.

Strauss informs us that the Trojan War did happen, but not as Homer describes it: after a brief Introduction, we are offered a rewrite of the story in eleven chapters, from the abduction of Helen (*pace* Stesichorus) to the eventual fall of the city (*pace* Dio), and its reconstruction under Aeneas. Troy emerges as a Korfmannian centre of commerce, complete with lower city and port, though without a significant navy: an attractive prize for the 'Vikings of the Bronze Age' (aka Greeks/Achaeans; cf. p. 2). So far so un-Homeric. But Homer, though in need of correction, did get some things right; more, in fact, than Latacz and Korfmann suspected. Thus, Strauss is able to reconstruct the course of the 'real' war largely on the basis of the *Iliad*. He even describes its protagonists in some detail: Helen, 'one suspects, knew just what she was doing' (p. 17). Paris was the 'cosmopolitan prince' to Menelaus' 'provincial warrior' (p. 22). 'Hector was a great warrior but a mediocre husband' (p. 50). 'Ajax ... was ... a murderous giant who never passed up a fight' (p. 79). And so on. By typecasting Homer's famously complex characters, Strauss to some extent gets round the problem that the precise details of the Homeric story cannot be historically accurate: powerful women and mediocre husbands *might* have been involved. Indeed, Strauss argues that they *were* involved, be-

cause that is how life must have worked in 'the Bronze Age', and because this is how, to a very large extent, it still works today.

There are obvious problems with Strauss's approach. For a start, he does not sufficiently emphasise that the *Iliad* was not composed or performed for a 'Bronze Age' audience. As for the question how many 'Bronze Age' memories are preserved in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Strauss wavers between the strong claim that Homer retained detailed information about historical events and characters, and the much weaker claim that he was generally 'authentic' (e.g. p. 74, a propos of the gods). Strauss should of course not be faulted for failing to settle the question, for *The Trojan War* is not conceived as the kind of book that might solve such a complex and debated issue. Its aim is rather to stir the reader's imagination. 'We might imagine', Strauss says time and again, or simply: 'imagine ...', 'picture ...', etc. The following extract sets the scene for chapter 3, and is fairly typical in tone. (Similar passages can be found at the beginning of chapters 2, 4, 9, and 11):

'Helios the Sun, who sees everything and knows the gods, is beginning his ride in his four-horse chariot, turning the sky a gauzy blue and the sea the color of widow's tears. Gulls fly toward the cliffs of the Gallipoli Peninsula across the Dardanelles to the north, framed by the barren peaks of the islands of Imbros and Samothrace. The scene is completed by the brown hills of the island of Tenedos in the west and, in the east, the rolling Trojan Plain, with the long ridge of Mount Ida rising ghostlike in the distance. A pastoral scene, as we might imagine it, then the Greeks appear.' (p. 49)

'The scene', as Strauss himself calls it, is meant to be alluring in its visuality: readers are invited to conjure it up before their eyes, perhaps in the form of a single slow camera shot, with a voice-over for the opening sentence. In fact, much of Strauss's narrative reads like a film script. Using the language of film makes for an exciting story but also allows Strauss to make what he has to say seem more intuitively true than would otherwise be possible. Visual impact, as well as being the prerogative of film, has long been an important aspect of Homeric archaeology. Images were crucial to Korfmann's (re)discovery of the 'real' Troy VI, as displayed in the notorious Troy exhibition of 2001/02;<sup>1</sup> and striking images and visual displays already contributed toward sensationalising Schliemann's excavations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Strauss's work, quasi-cinematic scenarios combine with material remains to suggest first-hand experience of the past. It is instructive to see how this works in practice. On p. 180, Strauss first gives a detailed but purely imaginary account of the chaos that reigned when Troy was sacked ('Imagine Troy's narrow streets clogged

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1. For the controversies surrounding the Troy exhibition, see for example J. Cobet and H.-J. Gehrke, 'Warum um Troja immer wieder streiten?', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 5/6 (2002), 290-325; J. Haubold, 'Wars of Wissenschaft: the new quest for Troy', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 8.4 (2002), 564-79; C. Ulf, *Der neue Streit um Troia – eine Bilanz* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003); G. Weber, 'Neue Kämpfe um Troia. Genese, Entwicklung und Hintergründe einer Kontroverse', *Klio* 88 (2006), 7-33.

...'), before citing archaeological evidence which is compatible with that account but by his own admission proves nothing. At times, the interplay between archaeology and cinematic imagery becomes very elaborate. At the end of his book Strauss writes:

From his half-built home on the citadel, one evening Aeneas might have looked out on the plain, a tawny sea of grain lying still in the pale blue light. Turning, he would see Poseidon's realm, a silvery ribbon stretching as far as the islands' walls. And as a brisk breeze of Boreas ruffled his hair, he might have looked down on the new town rising. With all the inevitable problems, Aeneas might have been proud of his role in lifting up Troy like a stone out of deep water, to use a Hittite expression. The lofty works of the gods, the peaks of Mount Ida and Samothrace, would soon be replicated once again by the proud man-made towers of Troy.' (p. 189)

Here again the writing combines the vividness of film with archaeological props. Strikingly, the process of imaginary reconstruction is done within the story itself, as Aeneas contemplates a new Troy rising from the rubble. A Hittite simile draws attention to the fact that in this closing tableau, as indeed throughout his book, Strauss shifts the emotional focus of the war from the Achaeans to the Trojans, from Greece to Anatolia. The idea goes back to Korfmann (and, indirectly, Cavafy, Virgil, and arguably Homer himself), but is here taken to new extremes. For Strauss, 'Troy was the city of light and life at the meeting place of the world' (p. 22). It was also 'a good place to be a woman' (p. 22). The Greeks, needless to say, brought death, not life, on their 'black ships'; nor were they good to women, as Helen realised when she 'opted out' (p. 24). But the Greeks had three things going for them that made them uniquely powerful: 'they were less civilized, more patient, and they had strategic mobility because of their ships' (p. 10). 'Less civilized', and so more powerful? Perhaps one senses here some of the anxieties surrounding America's ongoing 'War on Terror'. Strauss himself quotes it as his preferred model for the Trojan War (p 5).

As a contribution to Homeric scholarship, Strauss's book has serious shortcomings. It does not advance our understanding of the Homeric poems, whose nature and poetic texture it misrepresents in its quixotic quest for 'the truth'. Strauss deserves credit for helping to bring Korfmann's excavations to the attention of an English-speaking public, though the basic work here was already done by Latacz, and Strauss has little to add that might convince those who remain sceptical. *The Trojan War* will no doubt strengthen interest in the Greeks' neighbours, especially the Hittites. That is a good thing, and if it can only be achieved through an imaginative retelling of the Trojan War, so be it. My problem, ultimately, is that the retelling itself is rather weak: the writing is florid, and clichéd. The overall aesthetic resembles that of the blockbuster *Troy*. It is hard to make Homer 'feel fresh' (as the dustjacket advertises), but other attempts, for example by Logue or Schrott, seem to me more convinc-

ing.<sup>2</sup> *The Trojan War* aims to combine Homeric scholarship with imaginative retelling but, ultimately, falls short of either.

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2. For Christopher Logue's celebrated 'account' of the *Iliad* (his term), see C. Logue, *War Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001); *All Day Permanent Red: War Music Continued* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003); *Cold Calls: War Music Continued* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005). For discussion of Logue's cinematic technique see E. Greenwood, 'Logue's tele-vision: reading Homer from a distance', in B. Graziosi and E. Greenwood (eds), *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 145-76. For Raoul Schrott's more controversial 'Übertragung' of the *Iliad* see *Homer, Ilias. Neu übertragen von Raoul Schrott* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2008). Reactions range from enthusiastic to scathing; for an example of the former see S. Zweifel, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung Online* (05/10/2008); for the latter P. Dräger, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (30/08/2009); a fuller version is available at <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/troia/deu/Rezension-Schrott-Homer.pdf>.

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