CASTLES

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CASTLES

A FORTIFIED HISTORY OF THE WORLD

DAN JONES



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For Jo

þanne gan I meten a merveillous swevene,
þat I was in a wildernesse, wiste I neuere where.
[Ac] as I biheeld into þe Eest, an hei3 to þe sonne,
I sei3 a tour on a toft trieliche ymaked,
A deep dale byneþe, a dongeon þerInne,
Wiþ depe diches and derke and dredfulle of si3te.
A fair feeld ful of folk fond I þer bitwene
Of alle manere of men, þe meene and þe riche,
Werchynge and wandrynge as þe world askeþ.*

Piers Plowman: Vision One, Prologue
William Langland

And so castles made of sand
Fall in the sea
Eventually.

Castles Made of Sand
The Jimi Hendrix Experience

* Then I began to dream a marvellous dream, that I was in a wilderness, though I never knew where. But as I looked upwards, east, towards the sun, I saw a finely made tower on a low hill. Below it was a deep hollow containing a dungeon, with deep ditches, dark and dreadful to see. Between them I found a lovely field full of folk: all manner of men, the poor and the rich, working and wandering as the world demands.

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We shape our buildings
and afterwards
our buildings shape us.

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

Introduction

One evening in March 1314 thirty men gathered silently below the north face of Castle Rock, a steep volcanic plug of dolerite in Scotland's capital city, Edinburgh. Among them was Thomas Randolph, earl of Moray, one of the wealthiest noblemen in Scotland, and a veteran of the wars to defend the kingdom from the English, which had just reached a critical moment. Looming 130–140m above them at the top of the rock-face was Edinburgh Castle, held by an English garrison.

Since almost the dawn of history, this rock had been a stronghold. In the Iron Age, it was a place for war-bands to gather and feast before they rode into battle. For the past 300 years it had been home to a castle, protected by the natural defences of the cliff and by towers and walls built in timber and stone. At the highest point of the castle compound was a chapel dedicated to the canonised Scottish queen Margaret of Wessex. Ever since her death at the castle in 1093 St Margaret had been working miracles: a book of the gospels dedicated to her floated when dropped in water, flashes of light were seen bursting from her tomb, and when her remains were exhumed for reburial in 1250 CE, the sweet smell of 'spice merchants and springing flowers' emitted from her grave.[1]

The men at the bottom of Castle Rock would need another miracle if what they planned that evening was to come to a good end.

Their scheme was simple, but not easy. The English garrison had been lodged on Castle Rock for the past eighteen years. Moray's aim was to prise them out. Since he did not have the siege towers, catapults and blockading armies that would be needed to do so by attrition, he would be making his attempt by ruse. At any moment, on the more accessible, southern walls of the castle, another band of his men would be feigning an assault, to draw the castle guards' attention. At that point Moray and his team would begin climbing the rock's north face. To aid them in their climb they had three essential things: rope ladders, a local guide and their nerve. If any one of these failed, they were in trouble.

The guide – so chroniclers later said – was an enterprising gallant named William Francis, who had once lived in the castle, when his father had served as its constable. In those days, Francis kept a secret lover in the city, and he had found a safe climbing route down (and up) the rock so he could sneak out by night to go and see her. Since what was fair in love was fair in war, Francis had offered to show Moray and his men the way. 'I practised that route so long,' he said, 'I know the path exactly, though the night be never so dark.'[2]

As the light faded, and the sounds of an affray came from the opposite side of the castle, Francis led Moray's little band on their ascent. It was hard climbing, and halfway up they were glad to find a ledge on which they could perch and catch their breath. As they paused, however, they heard a sound that sucked the air out of their lungs again. From above them came a watchman's voice, shouting, 'Away, I see you well!'

Along with the cry came a shower of stones.[3]

Had the sentry really seen the climbers as well as he claimed, their adventure would have been over. Yet from the silence that followed it seemed – as the chronicler put it – 'he did not see them at all… The watchmen, when they heard no movement, all left that

post together, talking as they went farther away.' Below, Moray, Francis and the rest of the men continued their climb. When they reached the top of the cliff they came to a wall some 4m (12 feet) high. They threw up a rope ladder, and one by one, scrambled onto the ramparts. For a brief moment they found themselves in the castle, unopposed.

Then the watchmen came running.

Fierce fighting immediately broke out. With cries of 'Treason! Treason!' the whole garrison started to rush from the south side of the castle to the north. 'The constable, who was brave, fully armed rushed to the alarm, and with him many bold and stout men,' wrote the chronicler.[4] But Moray had the advantage of surprise, and he used it. 'With weapons in many ways they struck at each other with all their might, until swords, fair and bright were bloody to the hilts.'[5] Eventually, the constable was killed, and when he fell, his men lost heart. They fled their posts and, behind them, Moray and his bold climbers let the rest of their comrades in.

In the opinion of the chronicler, Moray's storming of Edinburgh Castle was a siege second only to Alexander the Great's conquest of Tyre in 332 BCE. It also seemed proof that St Margaret had been looking out for the Scots. In her chapel at the castle there was an inscription in old French. '*Gardez vous de François*,' it read. For years, men had thought this an imprecation against Frenchmen. Now, its meaning was clear. It was a prophecy that one day, Edinburgh Castle would fall to the wiles of a crafty old swain called Francis.



On any given Saturday morning in the late 1980s, one of my parents would take my sister and me on the bus from our home in Edinburgh's suburbs, down through Morningside to the main shopping thoroughfare of Princes Street. I was not yet ten years old,

but there were already things that seemed to me to be eternal to the city. The drone of bagpipes, always playing somewhere. The smell of beer brewing. The smell of the sea. And up there, above Princes Street Gardens, huge and grand on its crag, watching us as we went about our errands, emitting a loud boom every lunchtime when the cannon known as the One O'Clock Gun was fired: the castle.

Back then I did not know much about Edinburgh Castle. I did not know about Iron Age war-bands, or St Margaret's miracles, or that the castle had been passed back and forth during the Scottish wars for independence, conquered by daring men like the earl of Moray. I did not know that Mary Queen of Scots had given birth to the future James VI and I there, that it had been bombarded by English troops in the 'Lang Siege', that it had served as a prison in the Napoleonic Wars, or that it contained the Scottish Crown Jewels. Had anyone told me these things, I would have been interested, but it would only have confirmed my opinion of the castle, which was already significant. This huge, ancient building was an essential part of the fabric of the city we called home. Edinburgh was unimaginable without it.

As I grew up, other castles entered my imagination. Whenever we made the long drive to south Wales to stay with my grandparents, we would pass Castell Coch, the Marquess of Bute's extraordinary neo-Gothic fairytale folly, nestled amid the colourful beech trees of the Fforest Fawr. On summer holidays abroad we might also bump into a castle. I remember a stranger on the beach in Sicily pointing out an old Norman fortress set half a mile or so back from the sand, and explaining that it was connected to the shoreline by smuggler's tunnels. (This seemed to me a Mafia-adjacent twist on one of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* novels, set in the English countryside near the fictional Kirrin Castle.*) As a fourteen-year-

* Kirrin Castle is strongly reminiscent of the ruins of Corfe Castle, on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. In the novels it is the scene of much criminal enterprise.

old I went on an unusually exotic school trip aboard a cruise liner, which sailed around Egypt and the Holy Land, and saw for the first time the Citadel in Jerusalem and the remains of the Hospitaller fortifications on Rhodes. It was beneath the latter fortifications, defended and lost by crusader knights in 1481 following a heroic battle with Suleiman the Magnificent's forces, that my teenage cabin-mates and I bought and consumed our first ever bottle of vodka, with what felt like comparably spectacular results.

Soon after that I began to take a serious interest in history. As a first-year undergraduate, aged eighteen, I became fascinated by the Middle Ages, and from that point on, castles were unavoidable. I studied the Plantagenets – learning with glee about the siege of Rochester Castle in 1215, when 'Bad' King John collapsed one of the towers by firing a mine greased with pig-fat. I worked on the crusades, marvelling at Richard the Lionheart's imprisonment in Trifels Castle on his way home from the Third Crusade – an incarceration that had profound consequences for English politics and produced a rich body of romantic legend. I considered the dying days of the Middle Ages, when in 1527 Pope Clement VII was trapped for months behind the walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome by the marauding armies of the Habsburg emperor Charles V – unable to grant Henry VIII of England an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, thereby beginning the chain of events that led to the English Reformation.

Now and again my studies led me outside the Middle Ages. There were castles there, too. Studying nineteenth-century America, I encountered the Third System fortresses built in the 1820s–40s to defend the eastern seaboard of the fledgling United States, which were blown to pieces in the 1860s, not by foreign enemies, but by guns operated by Americans during the US Civil War. A paper covering Europe between the world wars featured the Maginot Line, that tragic chain of fortifications which resembled a Cubist deconstruction of a castle, built in the 1930s to fortify

France against German aggression, and scornfully bypassed by the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe during the Blitzkrieg of May 1940. These were not castles in the same way that Edinburgh Castle or the Tower of London were castles. But they seemed to be cousins in the same extended family. I was fascinated by them then. I still am today.



What is a castle? That is a surprisingly difficult question to answer definitively, and if you approach a historian with it casually, you are likely to be strongly besieged. In the late eleventh century CE the Burgundian cleric Anselm, who came to England to serve as archbishop of Canterbury, thought he had the answer, when he wrote: *Castellum enim dicitur quaelibet turris, et murus in circitu ejus*: 'any tower with a wall around it is called a castle'.[6]

Anselm based his definition of a castle on England in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest, when the chief tool of colonisation used by William the Conqueror was precisely this: a tower with walls around it, known in Latin as *castellum* and Old English as a *castel*. Yet other definitions were available. For one thing, even in Anselm's day, *castellum* had a complex etymology. In the fourth century CE St Jerome had used it in his translation of the Bible (known as the Vulgate) to render the ancient Greek word κώμη, which today we might translate as 'rural settlement' or 'village'. Mary and Martha of Bethany, sisters of Lazarus, therefore lived in a *castellum*. Was that a motte-and-bailey castle of the sort Anselm saw spreading like a pox across Norman England? Certainly not. Nor was it what the Romans of first century CE Judea would have called a *castra* – a fortified camp for soldiers – though that too could be rendered into medieval English as 'castle'. The French of Anselm's day used the word *chastel*, but that was on a linguistic trajectory of its own towards the word *château*, which would come

to mean anything from a fortified building to an unfortified manor house or even a vineyard.

In 1954 one of the greatest castle scholars who ever lived, R. Allen Brown, tried to pin down the meaning of 'castle' as it stood in his time. Brown was described after his death as 'an "old" historian in terms of shunning trendy topics and approaches. He refused to tolerate nonsense, and he spoke his mind plainly, doubtless stepping on many toes.'[7] He ought, therefore, to be a good man to listen to. But even Brown could not quite make up his mind. 'The castle is basically a fortified residence, a residential fortress,' he wrote. But Brown's *basically* was what in poker would be called a 'tell'. Almost immediately he qualified his definition: 'the castle is the fortified residence of a lord, which is to say any lord, not necessarily the prince or a king.'

Or was it? Brown now clarified his clarification. In fact, the castle 'is the fortified residence of a lord, and as such differs from other known forms of fortification in the history of the West both earlier and later, by its duality as both residence and fortress and by its private as opposed to public or communal nature.' But maybe even this was imprecise. 'Of course, there will be untidiness round the edges of this special category of fortification, and scholarly qualifications to be made...'[8]

That this brilliant historian, who devoted much of his career to the study of castles, gave no quarter to nonsense and valued plain speaking, could find it so hard to describe the thing he knew most about suggests the task is not a straightforward one. So it may be easiest – and truest – to say that a castle can be many things. The current edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives twenty-one different meanings, including: 'A large building or set of buildings fortified for defence against an enemy; a fortress, stronghold'; 'A name for large mansions or country houses, which were formerly feudal castles'; 'Ancient British or Roman earthworks, [such] as... Maiden Castle at Dorchester'; 'A tower or

elevated structure on the deck of a ship'; 'A small wooden tower used for defence in warfare; a tower borne on the back of an elephant'; 'A visionary project or scheme, day-dream, idle fancy.'[9] Evidently, this is a topic on which reasonable people may differ.

With that in mind, this book takes a broad view on what a castle was – and is. At its core is a series of chapters about the castles of western Europe during the Middle Ages. But it also examines the castle's origins in the fortified cities that emerged during the Bronze Age in the eastern Mediterranean. It looks at the hilltop settlements of the Iron Age, the desert fortresses of the early Islamic caliphates, Viking ring fortresses, the iconic Norman motte-and-bailey castles, the dynastic seats of European kings and princes in the golden age of chivalry, the vast crusader fortresses built on religious and military frontiers in the thirteenth century, the architecturally and aesthetically beautiful strongholds of the Italian renaissance and the angular and the bristling artillery fortresses of the age of gunpowder. It looks at great walls in China, Iran and beyond, reasoning that in a sense, these can be understood as attempts to make a castle of an entire realm. It includes a chapter on Japanese castles in the age of the samurai, and it looks at castle-building in the Americas from the age of Christopher Columbus to that of Walt Disney. It also concerns itself throughout with the *idea* of the castle, and the way that the castle of the imagination has intersected with the reality of fortification – from Homeric myth to Gothic literature, from King Arthur to Count Dracula, from Neuschwanstein to Disneyland.

So this is a book that takes an inclusive, ecumenical, maximalist approach to its topic. As with all my books, it uses human storytelling to drive historical analysis, to show how in this case, as Winston Churchill once said of the Palace of Westminster, 'we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.' *Castles* treats castles, as one historian has put it, as 'stage settings'.[10] And in doing so it wanders freely through time. Although I am a

medievalist, I have not hesitated to stray outside my lane – for while I believe historians must inevitably specialise, it is a wonderful thing to embrace breadth as warmly as depth. Each chapter of this book focuses on a particular age of castle-building, selects human stories from that time, then sets those stories in their ancient and modern context. In doing so it aims to satisfy one of the many definitions of history: a conversation between past and present.

There are, of course, many things this book does not do, and many places it does not go. Largely these coincide with places I myself have not yet been. The vast and fascinating topics of Indian forts, west African slave-trading castles, Russian kremlins, Korean fortresses, Central Asian desert castles, Omani castles and Ethiopian fortified cities would form the basis for another book again – and maybe they will do in the future. For now, all I can say is that this is a personal tour of castles I have encountered in what I hope has been only the first half of my life.

As ever, many people have helped me as I have worked on this book, and to everyone who has answered my questions or offered their advice on any of the chapters that follow, know that I am very grateful. My first professional engagement in castle-bothering was filming two seasons of *Secrets of Great British Castles*, originally commissioned by Ben Frow at Channel 5 in London, and subsequently shown worldwide on Netflix. I raise my glass to Billy McGrath and the team at Sideline Productions in Dublin. Thanks in particular to my patient editors Terezia Cicel, Holly Harley and Richard Milbank, to my wise friend and career-long vibes coach Walter Donohue, to my brilliant agent Georgina Capel, and to my family, who can mostly take or leave a castle, but have stuck with me all the same.

To all of them, thank you. To everyone else, enjoy the ride.

Dan Jones
Staines-upon-Thames, spring 2026



1



BRONZE AGE CITIES

O Ilium, home of the gods!
O walls of the people of Dardanus,
famous in war!

VIRGIL, *THE AENEID*

Night had come rushing up from the sea, wrapping Troy in darkness, when the Greek liar called Sinon crept to the wooden horse and slid back the pine bolts that held fast the door to its belly. Almost everyone else in the walled city with its fortified citadel was asleep: worn out from a day of drinking to celebrate the end of the siege.

For ten years Troy's people – the Trojans – had been under attack by Greek armies, bent on punishing them for the theft of Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in the world. The plains outside Troy had seen vicious fighting. Great heroes had been slaughtered battling for its walls. But now, at last, the Greeks seemed to have given up. They had lifted the siege and gone home, taking their thousand ships out of the Dardanelles strait and back across the Aegean Sea. All they left behind was this huge, strange, monumental horse, which wily Sinon, posing as a defector, had told the Trojans was an offering to the gods.

As quick to hijack divine favour as they had been to kidnap fair Helen, the Trojans had hauled the horse through their gates, all the way to the citadel, while young boys and virgin girls sang hymns and their elders adorned shrines with festal garlands.

In this way the Trojans sealed their own fate. While they slept, Sinon opened the horse, and out slid a platoon of Greek warriors, led by Thessandrus and Sthenelus, Odysseus and Epeius. 'They moved into a city buried in wine and sleep, slaying the guards and opening the gates.'[1]

Outside their comrades were waiting, for the rest of the Greeks had not, in fact, gone home. They had merely taken a short sail over the horizon, returning by moonlight to await the signal to strike. When the gates swung open they poured into Troy in their thousands, sacking, looting, burning, killing, defiling temples and snatching women and children. Greek warriors blocked the streets and took control of the routes in and out of the city. 'Bitter grief was everywhere,' recalled one account of the massacre. 'Everywhere there was fear, and death in many forms.'[2]

The Greeks headed through the citadel in which stood the palace of the ruler, King Priam. Here lay the last bastion of Trojan hope. This was their fortress; the final part of their city, and indeed their civilisation, that they could hope to defend. Here, the Trojans made their last stand. They tore stones from the defensive towers and hurled them at their attackers, 'rolling down onto the heads of their enemies the gilded beams and richly ornamented ceilings of their ancestors.' They stood shoulder to shoulder with drawn swords guarding the doorways that gave access to the fortified palace.[3]

It was all in vain. The Greeks were too many and the shock of their attack too sudden. The citadel was breached, and soon the palace surrendered. King Priam was run through with a sword. By daybreak Troy was on fire. 'It was the fall of an ancient city that had long ruled an empire.'[4]

The Trojan War was over, and – according to the stories that were repeated and reworked over the centuries that followed – a new age had begun. This was an age of wanderings: Odysseus the Greek making his way home to Ithaca, Aeneas the Trojan finding

his way to Carthage and thence to Italy, where his descendants founded Rome. Britons, Franks, even Vikings would link their lineage to this one, epic siege.

Or at least, this was how it was told. The battle for Troy, which is thought to have taken place around 1190–1180 BCE, is a historical mystery clothed in the rich trappings of legend. As portrayed by later storytellers – starting with Homer in roughly 750–650 BCE, four centuries after the war's end – and fleshed out by the Roman poet Virgil between 29 BCE and 19 BCE – the Trojan War was a test of human strength and divine favour played out on and around the stone defences of a walled Bronze Age city. It started with a kidnapping and ended with furious, bloody sack of a citadel, the consequences of which would echo for eternity.

What *really* happened at Troy has been hotly debated by historians for centuries. Was there a siege? An earthquake? Some scholars doubt anything happened at all. The best that can be said with respect to the facts is that a fortified Bronze Age city, *which came to be identified* with legendary Troy, existed; that it was defined by its strong stone defences, consisting of a walled city with a heavily defended citadel; that late in the Bronze Age it suffered catastrophic destruction; and that this destruction was never forgotten by the generations who came after it.

But what can also be said with confidence is that the Trojan War has become a central part of the western literary and cinematic canon. From Homer to Euripides, Virgil to Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer to William Shakespeare, Robert Wise to Christopher Nolan, Margaret Atwood to Madeline Miller – generations of writers, dramatists, filmmakers and artists have sung of Troy's resistance and its fall. Many more will do so in future, revisiting and revising the matter of how, during the age of heroes, a mighty fortification came crashing down.

Inevitably, in the retelling, Troy has morphed and evolved, and every age has remodelled the Trojan War according to its

own preoccupations. Sometimes this has meant massaging its characters to fit contemporary archetypes. Sometimes it has meant redesigning its defences. For the late medieval writer Guido delle Colonne, Troy was the forerunner of the early Renaissance Italian fortified city: 'surrounded by walls and towers, fortified with many gates.'[5] For the illustrator of a luxurious calfskin edition of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, produced for a wealthy patron in the early fifteenth century CE, Troy was a dusty pink Gothic castle, with soaring turrets and narrow windows opening onto comfortable chambers in which lovers could meet.

To these men, the Bronze Age walled city with a prestigious, heavily defended citadel was the forerunner of the castle, just as the people who fought over it were the ancestors of western civilisation. That makes Troy – and other Bronze Age cities like it – a natural point of embarkation for any journey through the history of fortification.

In more than one sense, Troy was where it all began.



The ruins of the city called Troy lie on a large plain in modern Turkey (Türkiye), in a corner of Anatolia traditionally known as the Troad. Today this area is connected to nearby cities by a new, fast, multi-lane toll road which briefly becomes the world's longest suspension bridge as it crosses the Dardanelles. That little saltwater strait, less than a mile wide at its narrowest point, rough but swimmable,* links the Aegean Sea with the Sea of

* The ancient name for the Dardanelles was the Hellespont. Its narrowness is an essential plot device in the legend of Hero and Leander. Leander swam the strait nightly to visit his lover, Hero, until one evening he lost sight of the shore and drowned. Much later, in 1810, Lord Byron also swam the Hellespont and did not drown, later boasting of his athletic prowess: 'I plume myself on this achievement more than I could possibly do on any kind of glory, political,

Marmara, and thereby the Mediterranean with the Black Sea. It is a commercial and military artery and a pinch point on the world map. As one ancient poet wrote: 'Nowhere does a smaller stretch of water sever Asia from Europe.'[6] Once upon a time, before the coastline retreated to its present lie, Troy's proud, sloping walls overlooked it.

Over the millennia, Troy has gone by many names. To the Greeks it was *Ἴλιον*. To the Romans, it was *Ilium*. The Hittites, who ruled a powerful nearby kingdom in ancient Anatolia, called it Wilusa. There have been nine distinct cities of Troy over the ages, each built on the ruins of another, then all eventually lost for centuries beneath the smothering earth. In modern times archaeologists have numbered these in chronological sequence, from Troy I to Troy IX, and applied careful subdivisions within these broader phases. Today the excavated mound where the remnants of all these Troys lie is open for exploration by scholars and tourists. The site is known as Hisarlik, which in Turkish means 'Place of Fortresses'. From Troy's earliest days, that is what it was.

Humans have roamed the Troad since at least 5,000 BCE. The first to settle at what became Troy did so around 3,000 BCE, in the early Bronze Age. The spot they chose had many advantages. The countryside around was thick with pine forests. The soil yielded seams of copper, gold and clay. Natural springs bubbled with freshwater, and there were two rivers close by, known in antiquity as the Scamander and Simoeis. Most important of all, Troy sat beside a large saltwater bay: a cool, calm lagoon which gave passing sailors shelter from the stiff winds and strong currents of the Dardanelles. Troy's first settlers made a living from

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poetical, or rhetorical,' he wrote. See Mirka Horová, '"Headlong he leapt—to him the swimmer's skill / Was native": Byron at Sea', *The Byron Journal* 47, No. 1 (2019), 5–16.

servicing the traffic that came up and down that seaway, busying themselves in trade and hospitality.*

At its heart, 'Troy I' was a simple place, comprising a couple of dozen little oblong houses made with stone foundations and mudbrick walls, along with a few larger halls, of the sort that archaeologists today call 'megarons'.[7] In this it was not exceptional: there were many other settlements like it in the Troad. What made Troy I stand out was its fortifications, which were unusually massive. Around their dwellings, Troy's first settlers constructed a 280m circuit of walls: limestone blocks stacked 3m thick and 3.5m tall.[8] Access was via a gate 2m wide, overlooked by a pair of towers.

To conceive of such thick defences was impressive enough: the early Trojans must have had energetic leadership and a sense of communal identity. To quarry the stone, move it, assemble it and continually strengthen these fortifications would have taken thousands of man-hours. But, clearly, the duty of fortifying this place to such a magnificent standard was given economic, military and even cosmic importance. That was as good as written into the stones themselves. Built into one of Troy's towers was a slab known as a *stele*, carved with a stern warrior's face glaring out from beneath a military helmet. These walls, their towers and this image sent a simple message to visitors.

Troy was not for the taking.



On the plains of Bronze Age Anatolia, Troy's first, bristling defences were state of the art. But they were not original. The basic architectural idea at work – of gathering people and dwellings in

* It is not wholly inaccurate to think of Troy at this time as a Bronze Age motorway service station.

strategic locations, then throwing up a barrier around them – was already ancient. Its origins lay in the Stone Age.

One of the first known examples of man's instinct to fortify can be seen in an archaeological site in the modern-day Czech Republic, called Dolní Věstonice. There lies evidence of one of the earliest formal human settlements ever discovered. It was built more than 20,000 years before Troy was founded, when much of the world was cased in ice* and the people of central Europe shared their land with cave bears and lions, wolves, wolverines and woolly mammoths.[9]

In those times, most humans were still nomadic hunter-gatherers, who followed the migratory patterns of the animals they killed for food. At Dolní Věstonice, however, another lifestyle prevailed. Here, in locations dotted across the hillside, a community of mammoth-hunters settled semi-permanently, making huts, cookhouses and hearths for bonfires. Families lived, worked, hunted and ate. Some wove cloth, some processed furs and some fashioned beautiful figurines from fired clay and carved ivory. When people died, they were buried. This was what we might tentatively call a village, and its boundary was strewn with mammoth tusks and bones, piled around with vegetation and grass-sod.

Dolní Věstonice was not a city as men of the Bronze Age would have recognised it, nor were the scatterings of bones and turf what we might think of as a wall. Yet they formed a perimeter, and a pointer towards the future of life, which was to be communal, enclosed and fortified. As the millennia went by, the earth warmed, the ice retreated, farming began and the Old Stone Age (the Paleolithic) gave way to the New Stone Age (the Neolithic). By

* A time given the distinctly unsexy title of the Last Glacial Maximum, or, colloquially, the last Ice Age. Theoretically in the twenty-first century CE, we still live in an Ice Age, although perhaps not for very much longer.

11,000 BCE the first agricultural revolution was underway, and now, rather than chasing down megafauna with spears, humans began to grow crops and herd animals – activities which inclined them to stay in one place and defend themselves. To mark their territory and dissuade potential enemies from attacking, communities started closing themselves off, digging ditches around their living areas and building walls using the toughest materials they could lay their hands on. Mammoth tusks and turf strips had been all well and good in the chill of a glacial maximum. Amid the fertile throng of the agricultural revolution, sticks and bones gave way to stones.

Making walls from chunks of rock called for many pairs of hands and much time. But this new, agricultural man was busy and ambitious. The largest Stone Age towns were home to hundreds of families, and their new ways of living created surplus and wealth. This gave people both the means and the motive to build defensive fortifications. Those who had the most to defend built the biggest walls; and those who built the biggest walls accrued the most glory. The most famous early example of this was a city in Mesopotamia, in the heart of the so-called Fertile Crescent,* the cradle of civilisation. This was a town called Jericho.

Jericho (also known as *Tel es-Sultan*) was built on a landscape that was inhabited from at least 10,500 BCE. The first humans to leave their mark there were hunter-gatherers, attracted to natural springs which flowed freely just north of the Dead Sea. But two and a half thousand years later, farming was enjoying an almighty boom, and Jericho had become a permanent settlement. Its people grew wheat, barley and pulses. They hunted animals. They built mud-brick houses. In these houses they made pottery,

* The swathe of land between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates, covering parts of modern Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, the birthplace of farming and technologies including the wheel, irrigation and glassmaking.

tools and jewellery and created macabre art out of plastered and painted human skulls.

By 8,000 BCE several thousand people lived in Jericho and they built a spectacular circuit of stone fortifications. The walls of Jericho were 3.5m high and 2m thick, overlooked by a tower that loomed 8.5m above them. For thousands of years this was the tallest structure on Earth: effectively the first wonder of the world.*

Jericho's walls were functional. But they were also monumental. In other words, they allowed the inhabitants of the city to live securely in their own homes and rent-free in their neighbours' heads. Indeed, Jericho's walls made such an awesome impression on people that they found their way into the foundational religious scriptures of the region. When the earliest texts that would form the Hebrew Bible were composed, blending history with theological narrative, the walls of Jericho had stood for more than six millennia, and had been rebuilt more than a dozen times. They were thought to be unbreakable by human hands – susceptible only to the might of God. The Book of Joshua told how God's favoured people, the Israelites, wished to take Jericho from its inhabitants, the Canaanites. They tried first to do it by force of arms. But Jericho's walls were much too strong for human hands to destroy. Only when the Israelites resorted to prayer, ritual chanting and the blowing of horns did God intervene and knock the fortifications down for them.†

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* Eventually to be superseded by the Pharaoh Djoser's pyramid tomb, built around 2650 BCE.

† God instructed the Israelites to send priests to parade the Ark of the Covenant around Jericho's walls on six consecutive days. On the seventh day, they marched around the walls seven times, blew horns and yelled. God did the rest: the walls of Jericho fell down, and the Israelites stormed the city, slaughtering almost ever inhabitant, save the family of a prostitute collaborator called Rahab (Joshua 6:1–27).

So as the Stone Age gave way to the Bronze Age, from 3500 BCE onwards, walled towns were emerging all over the world. And they only grew in popularity. Fortified settlements emerged in the Yangtze River valley in China around 3500 BCE.*[10] From about 2500 BCE, desert folk in Arabia began to fortify their oases with long circuits of walls, which protected both their water-wells and the houses they built around them.[11] Even on the fringes of human civilisation, the idea was catching on: around 1450 BCE, folk at a site called Grimspound in Dartmoor, southern England, surrounded their stone huts with a granite wall nearly 500m in circumference.[12]

Then, around 1350–1200 BCE, in Mycenae, on the Peloponnese peninsula of Greece, fortifications were erected on so vast a scale that later generations could hardly believe they were manmade. They became known as Cyclopean Walls, since it seemed that the huge stones from which they were made could only have been heaved into position by the Cyclopes: the ancient one-eyed monsters who had also presented the god Zeus with his thunder-bolt.

The Cyclopean Walls at Mycenae were constructed from blocks cleverly slotted together so that they held their form with no need for mortar, locked in place only by the force of their collective weight. They soared 12m high in places and the city inside was accessed by the Lion Gate – a set of heavy wooden double doors set into the stone, above which sat a massive triangular limestone lintel carved with lions guarding a column. These fortifications, which outlasted the civilisation that built them by thousands of years, were potent symbols of a rich, self-assured, military society which advertised its greatness by encircling and defending itself.

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* Modern researchers in China have found nineteen walled towns in the Yangtze Valley dating to the Lower and Upper Qujialing period (roughly 3500 BCE to 2500 BCE).

The Cyclopean Walls are still visible at Mycenae today. They are wondrous even when viewed in the age of skyscrapers and space travel. In scale and antiquity they can be read as companion pieces to the sun-baked ruins of Troy at Hisarlik. Indeed, it is hard to look at Mycenae and not think of Troy, because in mythology the two places are inseparable. Mycenae, with its Cyclopean Walls, was said once to have been the domain of King Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus and tormenter of the Trojans. In Homer's telling, Agamemnon and the Myceneans were key players in the epic, fantastical, ten-year conflict that came to be called the Trojan War.

So it is to Bronze Age Troy that we can now, therefore, return.



If we were to suspend our disbelief and use Homer as a literal historical source for what happened during the Trojan War, then we would come away with a vivid, exciting, sometimes heart-breaking narrative, full of famous names and tragic-heroic deeds.

The outline of the story handed down by Homer is well known: King Priam's son Paris was granted by the goddess Aphrodite the love of the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen, Queen of Sparta. Paris stole his new beloved from her husband, King Menelaus; so Menelaus' brother Agamemnon of Mycenae led a revenge mission. A coalition of Greeks took ship and besieged Troy for ten years. During the course of this war, many great warriors died. The Trojans lost Paris and Hector, the Greeks, Achilles and Ajax. Eventually the wooden horse was wheeled through the city's gates, and the furious endgame arrived. Troy was destroyed and the survivors scattered. Countless works of art and literature have conjured scenes from this war, and its heroes have lent their names to everything from capital cities to kitchen cleaning products.

Today, of course, no one uses Homer as a literal historical source, any more than they use Ian Fleming's James Bond novels to study the factual history of post-war British spycraft. Yet if we accept that *something* real happened at Troy to inspire the stories that became the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (as well as the clutch of other contemporary Homeric-era texts collectively known as the Epic Cycle) then it is not unreasonable to look for traces in the archaeology at Hisarlik. At the very least, we may hope to glimpse what the fortified city that inspired the great stories looked like.

Assuming the date of the Trojan War was around 1190–80 BCE (while noting that some scholars would place it as early as 1250 BCE), then it belongs to the phase of Troy's development known to archaeologists as Troy VIIa. By this time, Troy was no longer the squat little limestone-surrounded village that had been founded in 3000 BCE to offer refreshment to sailors at the edge of a Dardanelles lagoon. It was big, strong, famous and rich.

A millennium and a half had passed since the city's first foundation, and in that time its buildings, suburbs and fortifications had expanded dramatically. Now Troy was a heavily defended city centred on a citadel, covering a plot of about five acres (two hectares). The citadel's limestone walls were 10m high and up to 5m thick, flared at their base so that they could bear their own massive weight, and topped with mudbrick breastworks that could be easily and cheaply repaired and replaced. Wide streets, paved and drained, led all the way from the south gate to the heart of the citadel, passing between fine dwellings designed to the owners' individual tastes.[13]

Inside the citadel walls lay the most prestigious buildings – palaces, temples and public spaces used by the city's elites: warriors who wielded ornate bronze swords, women who wore fabulous gold jewellery, priests who conducted holy rites with priceless sacred artefacts. For the first time in Troy's history, horses could be found ambling around the town, while their

owners used fashionable pottery which copied designs familiar to other well-to-do Mediterranean cities, including Mycenae. Imported goods arrived from even further afield: fashionable Trojans ate and drank from vessels that had been crafted in Cyprus and the Levant. Outside these walls in the residential district – or lower city – lay humbler houses.[14] These, too, had some protection: the lower city was encircled by a defensive ditch and more walls, and access through these was controlled through two or more gates.

In short, twelfth century BCE Troy was an important Bronze Age city: prosperous, well planned, linked by trade to the world around it. Its population may have been as large as 10,000 souls.[15] It was prone to damage from human enemies – particularly when Anatolia was dominated by a people known as the Hittites – and natural disasters – such as earthquakes, caused by one of the frequent slippages of the highly active North Anatolian fault line near which Troy sat. But for all that, Troy was, as Homer would later write, a 'fine town' with 'spacious streets' and 'sturdy walls'.[16]

Yet in about 1180 BCE it suffered calamity.

Who or what wrought this terrible damage on Troy is a matter of some contention, and archaeologists have come to different conclusions. Some think it really was attacked by Greeks from the lands and islands around Mycenae – just as the *Iliad* and other texts claimed.[17] Others believe Troy was hit by a major earthquake – for which the Trojan Horse was an elaborate poetic metaphor.[18] Others again believe Troy was targeted by the mysterious Sea Peoples, who ravaged the eastern Mediterranean around 1200 BCE and are often blamed for the civilisational catastrophe known as the Late Bronze Age collapse.[19]

Whatever happened, the devastation left permanent marks. Human bodies were left unburied in the streets. Houses burned down. Arrowheads and heaps of stones for hurling in slings were scattered in large numbers.

Was this, perhaps, the Homeric Trojan War? It is impossible to say. Clearly, *something* happened at Troy in or around 1180 BCE, but no one yet knows exactly what it was. The most that can be said from looking at the current archaeology is that around the time the Trojan War is supposed to have taken place, the fortified city whose defensive walls had been weakened by at least one earthquake was militarily assaulted and damaged again. It was not destroyed forever, nor is there any hard evidence to link the archaeology we can see today at Troy to any of the named figures from the *Iliad*. To those who yearn to find some tangible proof of Homer's legendary history, this is disappointing.

But if we are thinking about the way that fortification and imagination have wound around each other over the millennia, this is not entirely bad news. For although the details of Troy's assault around 1180 BCE are now lost, and may never be known, what has filled their place is a rich body of conjecture and fantasy, and a long history of great civilisations rooting their own origin stories in the myth of Troy.

This tells us much about the power of fortifications to stir the human imagination. And that is at least half our story.



When Homer wrote his account of the Trojan war in the late eighth or early seventh century BCE – around 400 years after the putative events he described – he was retelling a tale already old and beloved, passed down orally by generations of bards and storytellers. The long lists of names, ships, kingdoms and deeds in which the *Iliad* delights seem to have been preserved with pride by those who wished to give honour to the names of the glorious dead. Homer also peppered his story with 'historically accurate' details that rang true to the appearance of Troy in the twelfth century BCE: the styles of helmets and arms Homer described were authentic to

the Bronze Age, and his depiction of Troy's sloped walls also spoke to its appearance during the period archaeologists would one day label Troy VIIa, rather than in his own time.

The effect was convincing enough to persuade informed readers that Homer was describing a real conflict, even if in exaggerated form. So once written down, Homer's works and the rest of the Epic Cycle became canonical history. The great Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, both writing in the fifth century BCE, took it for granted that the war for Troy's walls had actually taken place, and quibbled only Homer's command of detail. The works of many other poets also expanded on Homer's tale, and scenes from the struggle became recurring tropes of art and sculpture. Its popularity was self-perpetuating.

The Trojan War was not only a story told in song and writing. Today countless museum galleries are filled with artefacts inspired by the battle for Troy's walls. In the British Museum collection in London we can find a wine-mixing bowl and a dress-pin dating back to Homer's day, the first showing the abduction of Helen by Paris, the second the Trojan Horse. A fourth century BCE bronze Etruscan beauty mirror in the same collection is engraved on the back with a scene of King Menelaus reclaiming his bride Helen.[20] In the Troy Museum (Troya Müzesi), around a kilometre from the archaeological site at Hisarlik, there sits the breathtaking Polyxena Sarcophagus: a huge marble casket dating to around 500 BCE. The sarcophagus has been made to resemble a temple, around which is carved in relief the dreadful scene of Priam's daughter Polyxena being sacrificed by her Greek captors in one final act of war: the girl's blood drenching the altar as her mother weeps and mourners tear at their hair.

As these items and others like them attest, fascination with the battle for Troy's fortifications was intense, widespread and long-lasting. In first century CE Egypt, colossal statues of the pharaoh Amenhotep III (originally erected on the banks of the Nile around

1350 BCE, long before the Trojan War) started to be associated with the African king Memnon, slaughtered by Achilles at Troy. Visitors attested to hearing the statue groan at dawn, supposedly the timeless echo of Memnon's mother, the dawn goddess Eos, mourning her son with each new day.[21] In Syria, mosaics were laid in villas depicting scenes from the Trojan War alongside images of other Greek mythological figures, including Hercules and Poseidon. Even in England mosaics have been found illustrating the violent clash between Achilles and Hector, the two heroes hurtling towards one another on chariots.

There was almost nowhere in the western world that the stories of Troy's siege and fall did not become famous. But it was particularly cherished in Rome, where the citizens traced their civilisation's birth back to the story of Aeneas fleeing the collapsing walls of Troy as the city fell. The story was most famously articulated by the poet Virgil in his epic twelve-book history the *Aeneid*, which was written during the reign of the first Roman emperor Augustus, between 29 and 19 BCE, and supplies today many of the details of the Trojan Horse episode. Romans devoured Virgil's work, and decorated their homes with scenes from it. Recent excavations at Pompeii, buried by a volcanic eruption in 79 CE, have revealed a house with a banqueting room decorated with frescoes showing pairs of characters from Troy: Paris and Helen, Cassandra and Apollo.[22] Yet even before Virgil and Vesuvius, great Romans were fascinated by the Trojan War.

In 48 BCE the Roman general Julius Caesar sailed up the Dardanelles, admiring the doomed ancient lover Hero's tower on its 'melancholy shore' before putting in further up the coast and taking a tour of the ruins of Troy. According to the poet Lucan, who described this scene, what Caesar found at Troy was a pile of rubble. 'He walked round the burnt city… now only a famous name, and searched for the mighty remains of the wall that Apollo raised,' wrote Lucan. He saw 'barren woods and rotting

tree-trunks' growing over what had once been palaces. The citadel was 'covered over with thorn-brakes: the very ruins [had] been destroyed… When he stepped carelessly over the rank grass, [his guide] bade him not to walk over the body of Hector.'[23]

Caesar took all this in. Then, in Lucan's telling, he scraped together an altar of grass-sods, lit incense and prayed. 'All ye spirits of the dead, who inhabit the ruins of Troy; and ye household gods of my ancestor Aeneas,' Caesar intoned, 'place incense due upon your altars, and solemnly invoke you in your ancient abode. Grant me prosperity to the end, and I will restore your people… a Roman Troy shall rise.'[24]

For anyone who knew their Roman history – which was more or less anyone who could read Lucan – this was a scene freighted with significance. Before visiting Troy Caesar had crushed the forces of the Senate in battle at Pharsalus. Now he intended to transform Rome in his own image, effectively destroying the Republic to take power as dictator.* Lucan knew that in giving Caesar his poetic moment on the wrecked fortifications of Troy, he was casting the general as a new Aeneas, setting out from the exact same ruins to start a new era in Roman history.[25]

As usual with Trojan tales, the story Lucan told gained something in the writing. Troy in 48 BCE was not quite the wasteland that Lucan, in his poetic rapture, described. There was more there than rubble and brambles. Yet Troy had still fallen a long way from its fortified Bronze Age splendour. The Troad was in a deep economic slump, with many cities so poor they could not even afford to hold religious festivals. Troy's walls and buildings very

* The battle of Pharsalus was fought in Thessaly on August 9th 48 BCE. It was a decisive victory for Caesar over troops led by Pompey, which gave Caesar immense advantage in the civil war for control of the Republic. Of course, Caesar was murdered in Rome just four years later in 44 BCE, and it would be his great-nephew and adopted heir Octavian who took supreme power as Augustus and turned the Republic into the Empire.

likely still showed the signs of an attack that had taken place sixty years before Caesar's arrival, when a Roman general called Fimbria had laid siege to the city for eleven days and then burned many of the citadel's public buildings as punishment for the Trojans' resistance. Another earthquake had added to the misery.[26]

So although Lucan exaggerated the dismal state in which Caesar found Troy, he did so only by degrees. The former fortress-city had long ceased to be the thick-walled redoubt of a warrior people. Troy would remain inhabited until 600 CE, with an injection of money from Rome ensuring that a bathhouse, theatre, temples and imperial statues could be found, marking it out as a decent little imperial outpost. But it would never regain its ancient military majesty. It was just another town.

Except it wasn't. Caesar, Virgil and Lucan ensured that Romans in the imperial age would see themselves as Trojans reborn. And when Rome also fell, the western half of its empire collapsing in the fifth century CE, the people of the successor kingdoms that sprouted on its ruins did exactly the same. So-called barbarians marched into the lands from which Roman legions withdrew, and once they settled they began to feel the need to dignify their own pre-histories.

Thus, in the seventh century CE a chronicler named Fredegar claimed that the Franks, a Germanic people who had settled in what had once been Roman Gaul, were directly descended from King Priam of Troy. Having been cast out of Troy by the Greeks, they chose a new king called Francio. '[He] was very strong in war, and for a long time fought with a great many peoples, but in the end, after devastating part of Asia, he entered Europe and settled between the Rhine or the Danube and the sea.'[27] (Fredegar also claimed that from the Trojans had sprung other warrior races including the Turks and Macedonians.)

In England, a similar fantastical origin story was concocted. The creative Welsh chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing

in the twelfth century CE, claimed that the ancient kingdom of Britain was founded by Brutus, a great-grandson of Aeneas, thrown out of Italy for accidentally killing his father during a stag hunt.[28] According to Geoffrey, this Brutus was told in a prophecy that he was destined to live on an island called Albion, which was once full of giants; when this came to pass and he founded its capital he called it New Troy. Not long after, the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturluson reflected on the Norse myths that had been the religious bedrock of Scandinavian society before Christianity swept in. Snorri contended that the Norse gods were in fact bastardised versions of the heroes of the Trojan war. 'As for the long tale that they tell of Ragnarok, that is the wars of the Trojans,' he wrote.[29]

Gods came and went, but the legend of the clash for Troy's walls and citadel proved a historical constant. And so it was that long after Troy ceased to be of any consequence as a fortification, or even as a town, its symbolic significance continued to grow. Well into the modern era, when sensible scholars had come to scoff at the notion that the Trojan War was 'real', and were uncertain whether a place called Troy had ever existed, the myth lingered on. Medieval poets and dramatists like Benoît de Sainte-Maure, Boccaccio and Chaucer all had their way with Troy, using its imagined walls as the setting for romantic adventure. Early modern dramatists including William Shakespeare followed their lead. The Trojan War provided inspiration for artists from Peter Paul Rubens to J. M. W. Turner, and sculptors from Gian Lorenzo Bernini to Filippo Albacini. Opera writers such as Henry Purcell and Hector Berlioz composed great works that riffed on the *Aeneid*. Early filmmakers like Manfred Noa sought to charm audiences with their rendering of Homeric myth.

But no one did quite so much to dramatise the legends of Troy and the majesty of her ancient walls as a businessman, adventurer and sometime conman of the late nineteenth century, who convinced himself and the world to varying degrees that he

had recovered from historical obscurity the 'real' walls of Troy over which Hector, Achilles, Ajax and Odysseus had fought. He was called Heinrich Schliemann, and in his story all the threads of Troy's historical reality and mythic attraction were once more spun together.

One morning in the late spring of 1873 the German multimillionaire and amateur archaeologist Schliemann walked around the half-excavated site at Hisarlik, watching his team of 160 hired labourers toil in the dirt. It was nearly five years since Schliemann had first visited the area, surveying the mysterious mound and – as he would later tell the story – becoming convinced that this spot perfectly matched 'the topographical requirements of the *Iliad*.'[30] This was his third season digging to prove it.

Now, as he surveyed the works, Schliemann stopped. He had seen something glint in the light. 'A large copper article of the most remarkable form' was poking out of the dirt, and nearby he thought he saw the glimmer of gold.[31] In equal parts excited and keen to prevent his workers from stealing, he announced it was lunchtime and sent the whole team off to relax. Then he set to work scrabbling in the earth with his knife, discovering vases and vessels in gold, copper and silver, along with swords, axes, shields, ornaments, jewels and trinkets. There were around 9,000 pieces in total. Retrieving them 'required great exertion and involved great risk,' he later wrote, 'since the wall of fortification, beneath which I had to dig, threatened every moment to fall down upon me. But the sight of so many objects, every one of which is of inestimable value to archaeology, made me reckless.'[32]

Sensing a need to work discreetly – not his normal style – Schliemann recorded that he summoned his wife, Sophia,

who wrapped the treasures in her shawl and helped him carry them away. Sophia was later photographed wearing some of the most spectacular items of jewellery that Schliemann had found, including a magnificent headdress made from more than 16,000 pieces of gold.[33] Her photograph was taken in Athens, after Schliemann smuggled his haul out of Turkey. He used the striking image to try and convince the world that he had not only discovered the location of Homeric Troy, but that he had prised from the ground with his own knife a hidden cache, buried as the walls fell and the Greeks came storming in: a priceless hoard he called Priam's Treasure.

Schliemann's discoveries – and the image of Sophia wearing what he called 'The Jewels of Helen' – caused a great sensation in 1873–74 and sparked lively debate in learned journals and the popular press. Not everyone was convinced. Certainly, academics did not begin to take Homer's account of the Trojan War as being factually true. Serious doubts were aired about Schliemann's understanding of the site on which he was digging, and some scholars accused him of being a fraudster who had his entire hoard manufactured in Greece. Most, though, accepted that he had found something very important, even if it was not totally clear what that was. As one expert from the British Museum put it: 'from the day I first saw the photographs of Dr Schliemann's discoveries, I entertained no doubt whatever as to the genuineness of the objects found, nor did his account of the mode of their discovery suggest to me any doubt as to the truth of his statements.'[34]

We now know that the truth was murkier. Schliemann certainly deserved credit for having dug for Troy in the right place. Yet he gave little credit to – and quarrelled bitterly with – others who had led him to that conclusion – notably an expatriate Briton called Frank Calvert, who had bought a section of the mound and made some preliminary excavations before Schliemann began his work.

Schliemann's methods of digging were as destructive as they were revealing, and he seriously damaged large parts of the mound of Hisarlik as he gouged out a huge trench over his many seasons of digging, using dynamite to blast his way through precious archaeological layers, destroying forever what they held. His work brought to light many artefacts that have illuminated the history of the Bronze Age and classical cities that stood at Troy. But he was often wildly mistaken about his findings. The walls below which he found 'Priam's Treasure' were likely those of what is now called Troy II, which had been built at least a thousand years before the Trojan War was supposed to have taken place.

Moreover, Schliemann lacked basic reliability as a witness to his own life. He was possessed of a low cunning and a great hunger for fame. Time and again in his writing he sacrificed accuracy for sensation. He edited his own journal entries to recast his life in the most adventurous light. He outright invented entire escapades.

His account of what happened at Troy on the day he found 'Priam's Treasure' was a typical emulsion of truth and lies. The hoard of jewellery, tools, vessels and weapons may have been a single discovery, or may have been accumulated from different spots over several weeks of digging. His story about having removed it with the help of his wife was a plain untruth: Sophia Schliemann was in Greece on the day he claimed to have pulled the treasure from the earth. Finally, his removal of the goods from Turkey was at best sharp practice, and his subsequent donation of the bulk of the find to museums in Berlin inadvertently led to its disappearance when Berlin was taken by Soviet troops in 1945.*

In the harshest analysis, then, Heinrich Schliemann was a chancer, a liar and an irresponsible amateur who distorted public

* 'Priam's Treasure' was taken to Moscow in 1945 and classified as war reparations, then kept in secret until the 1990s. It is now on display in the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

understanding of Troy and the Homeric war for its fortifications. Worse, perhaps, he knew exactly what he was doing, writing in private that he understood Homer was 'an epic poet and no historian' and admitting that linking the fortifications he had excavated could not literally be the citadel over which Achilles and Hector battled to the death.[35]

And yet Schliemann had done what no one else had been able to do. More than 3,000 years after Troy had fallen in whatever the Trojan War really was, almost 2,000 since Julius Caesar had trod lightly about its ruins, 1,200 years since it had been abandoned for good, the great fortress city had finally yielded itself up. For an archaeologist, there was no greater prize in the world.

What Schliemann achieved at Troy in the 1870s – despite his rank malpractice – was a coup to sit alongside any of the greatest discoveries in history. What was more, he followed it up directly between 1874 and 1876 with a dig at Mycenae, which revealed treasures and skeletons just inside the Lion Gate, which he named as the burial-spot of King Agamemnon. He also began excavation at Tiryns, another massive Bronze Age palace-fortress with towers and Cyclopean Walls. Through his work – cavalier, bombastic, self-regarding and misleading as it often was – whole new fields of study into Bronze Age Greece, its civilisation and its fortifications, were born. It is impossible to tease apart history, archaeology, myth and rhetoric, for they are all part of the same story.

And this is, in many ways, the story of Troy. The walled city that stood, fell and was rebuilt so many times between the Bronze Age and the dawn of the Middle Ages has a vital place in the history of fortifications. It was at one point a state-of-the-art city-fortress at a place where continents divided and great seas flowed into one another. On that basis alone it has so much to tell us about the origin of the castle as a walled bastion as well as a symbol of wealth and power.

But Troy is also important because of the web of fantasy, legend and half-truth that has been spun around it over hundreds of years. From Homer's day to Schliemann's, and right up to our own, Troy has been the subject of irresistible stories, great works of art and wild exaggerations which stir our imagination as powerfully as any essay of carefully researched academic fact.

Today, a few miles from the excavated mound of Hisarlik, near the centre of the seaside town of Çanakkale, stands a great wooden horse. It was built by the producers of the 2004 Hollywood movie *Troy*, starring Brad Pitt. It is a popular attraction around which, in the summer months, there is a constant swarm of tourists having their photos taken. Did any such wooden horse really exist, to be fatally wheeled through the heavily guarded gates that gave access to the thick, unstormable walls of fortress Troy? If it did exist, did it really look like that? For almost everyone who takes a selfie beside the modern wooden horse, these questions are likely to be meaningless. The story of Troy's fall in the waning years of the Bronze Age is meant to be enjoyed as myth as well as history. The same is true to some degree of every castle in this book.