



Relief panel, probably found near Hund, Pakistan, AD 100–200, schist.

TROY: RISING FROM THE FLAMES

As the British Museum prepares to host an exhibition dedicated to Troy,
Victoria Donnellan,
 one of its curators, explains what is in store

Troy is the setting for a story that has enthralled audiences for over 3,000 years. With its forthcoming BP exhibition *Troy: Myth and Reality*, the British Museum is following in the footsteps of some of the greatest authors and artists of all time – from Homer to Shakespeare, Exekias to Rubens.

It is in some ways a daunting prospect, but the opportunity to borrow an impressive selection of Heinrich Schliemann's finds from Troy from the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin was too exciting to be missed. It will be the first time these objects have been displayed in the UK since Schliemann himself exhibited finds from his excavations at Troy at the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A) from 1877 to 1881.

Scholars in the 19th century debated whether the mythical Troy existed and where it might have been located. In 1870, Schliemann began digging at a site called Hisarlık in northwestern Anatolia. He was encouraged by Frank Calvert, a local diplomat and landowner, who had already identified the site with the Troy described by Homer but had found only Greek and Roman material. Schliemann dug a huge trench to the bottom of the mound where he revealed a fortified city which he identified with Homer's Troy.

Schliemann's finds persuaded the world that Homer's Troy had existed and was not just a myth. He interpreted the objects in creative ways that linked them to Homer's account. So, for example, pots decorated with

faces were, for Schliemann, obvious representations of the goddess Athena, described by Homer as 'owl-faced'. This was Schliemann's translation of the Homeric epithet *glaukopis*, more commonly translated as 'bright-eyed'.

It was only late in his life, however, that Schliemann recognized that he had been wrong to seek Homer's Troy in this early level of the site, which archaeologists now call Troy II and date to around 2550 to 2300 BC. In fact, it is the higher levels of the excavated mound of Troy that provide a more plausible setting for a war of the kind described by Homer. It was only in the Late Bronze Age (1600–1200 BC) that Mycenaean Greeks were in contact with Troy. Contemporary textual evidence helps support this



Terracotta face pot from Troy, ca. 2550–1750 BC, Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte.

idea: Hittite texts show that Hisarlık was known as Wilusa in the Bronze Age, a name with linguistic similarities to Ilium, the other name Homer uses for Troy. There is, however, no destruction horizon at the site of Troy that can prove that the Trojan War happened, meaning that the origins of the myth are still uncertain.

The debate about the historical truth of the Trojan War continues to this day, but the exhibition will suggest that more compelling truths can be found in the story itself. The objects from Bronze Age Troy will be joined by remarkable works of art, both ancient and modern, from the British Museum's own collection and numerous lenders from the UK and abroad. Through these objects the exhibition will tell the story of Troy and explore the lasting power of its themes of love and loss, tragedy and triumph, violence and heroism.

The latter comes in many different forms, from the martial prowess of Achilles, to the endurance of the Trojan women and the cunning of Odysseus. Odysseus' adventures provide an example of the versatility of the myth, told and retold, by and for different people, different times and places, revealing an ever-changing kaleidoscope of meanings.

Fundamentally, the *Odyssey* is one of the great adventure stories, a tale of a hero's narrow escapes from death at the hands of monsters and distraction in the arms of seducers. On a pottery stamnos, a storage container made in Athens in about 480–470BC, Odysseus has been tied to the mast of his ship in order safely to hear the legendary song of the sirens, dangerous bird-women who lure sailors to their death on the rocks beneath their lair. His men row

determinedly onwards, ears plugged with wax to render them oblivious to the sirens' power. Over time, this story has been reimagined in diverse ways. For some it has represented the dangers of female sexuality, and for others it has symbolized the psychological journey of those who suffer from the impact of war in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder. In the 20th century, Odysseus' journey has been reinvented by artist Romare Bearden and writer Derek Walcott as an expression of the experiences of the African diaspora. More recently, Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller and Natalie Haynes have looked afresh at Odysseus through the eyes of the women of the story.

Wily Odysseus invents the trick of the Trojan Horse, perhaps the most famous part of the myth, to bring about the fall of Troy, which has withstood the Greek siege for ten long years. The wide reach and cultural flexibility of the myth already in the ancient world are demonstrated by the appearance of this episode in the art of Gandhara, a region of northwestern South Asia (present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan) that has long been a crossroads of cultures.

A relief that was probably found at a Buddhist site near Hund, in Pakistan, shows a figure pushing a wheeled horse. In classical terms, he would be Sinon, the Greek who pretended to have deserted the Greeks and who convinced the Trojans to bring the wooden horse into their city. The other figures seem to represent King Priam, standing behind the horse, the ill-fated priest Laocoön, attempting to

'The story continues to give a voice to people across cultures and through time.'



Odysseus and the sirens, Athenian jar, ca. 480–470 BC, ceramic.

fascinated poets, writers and artists from Homer onwards. In an image by Edward Burne-Jones, inspired by a flower known as Helen's Tears, she stands grief-stricken as the city burns behind her. The stories of Helen and the other women of the Trojan War reflect the experiences of – and attitudes towards – women in ancient Greece and beyond. A recent production by a group of Syrian women refugees of a version of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, first performed in Athens in 415 BC, shows how the story continues to give a voice to people across cultures and through time. The exhibition invites visitors to experience the immediacy of the myth, and reflect on Troy as both an archaeological site and place of the imagination.

Troy: Myth and Reality
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obstruct its advance, and Cassandra, daughter of Priam, throwing up her arms in dismay as she in vain predicts the coming disaster. But the Cassandra figure wears traditional Indian draped clothing and ornaments seen on *yakshi*, female nature or fertility spirits, in South Asian art. The Trojan myth has here probably been reinvented as a Buddhist mythological narrative.

Whether or not the real city of Troy experienced events resembling those described by ancient authors, its story speaks powerfully of the realities of war, of the destruction of a city and the impact on its inhabitants, of the moral ambiguity of heroism in war and of the role of fate versus human responsibility.

At the beginning and end of the story stands the compelling figure of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, whose relationship with – or abduction by – Paris sets off the train of events that lead to the fall of Troy. Both her beauty and the question of her culpability have



Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898), 'Helen's Tears', drawing from 'The Flower Book' 1882–1898.