

WAS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE HORSE?



As *Doctor Who* celebrates its 60th anniversary, **DAVID WILLS** asks whether British science fiction's most enduring hero could possibly have been responsible for the Fall of Troy

Staring out from a 7th-century BC pithos in the Mykonos Archaeological Museum, some (rather unconvincingly) hidden Greeks are poised to unleash a massacre upon the streets of Troy. But was the Doctor among them?

During the early years of *Doctor Who*, the British television series which celebrates its 60th anniversary this autumn, the titular alien's adventures were as often set in Earth's past as in an intergalactic future. This was integral to the original brief – of the series as well as the BBC more generally – to inform as well as to entertain. In a now-lost world of broadcasting consumption, adults who had been watching Saturday afternoon football were joined by their children, who were waiting to enjoy reviews of the latest pop music on *Juke Box Jury*. To keep such a diverse audience entertained, it was vital to offer not merely straightforward storytelling and terrifying monsters, but also in-jokes and thought-provoking analogies with modern life.

Faced with the often-leaden narrative pacing, legendarily wobbly backdrops and sometimes desperately implausible extra-terrestrial creatures played by extras in rubber masks, it can be difficult to appreciate today how influential the Doctor's view of history truly was. Yet in 1965 over 8 million viewers were enthralled by the time-traveller's four-episode encounter with the likes of Odysseus and Achilles on the plain outside Troy, and learned, in a major rewriting of ancient tradition, that the means for the city's destruction was the Doctor's idea.

In the opening of *The Myth-Makers*, the Greeks proclaim the imperious figure (veteran actor William Hartnell) who emerges from a materialized blue box to be Zeus. However, a piratical Odysseus conforms to his wily reputation by swiftly taking this 'Doctor' and his travelling companion Steven (Peter

Purves, later a household name from *Blue Peter*) into custody as Trojan spies. In a dry run for their fateful reaction to the horse, the patrolling Trojans manoeuvre the apparently abandoned TARDIS into their city. This results in the Doctor's other young companion Vicki (Maureen O'Brien, in her last episodes of the series) being captured as a trophy of war. Renamed for no obvious reason by a trusting Priam as Cressida, Vicki is denounced by Cassandra as a 'sorceress' but treated to an encounter with the rather eligible Trojan prince Troilus. Meanwhile, forced by Odysseus to devise a way into Troy, the Doctor designs the horse and then witnesses from its belly the slaughter which ensues.

For those viewers who experienced a mid-20th century British education, the echoes of Homer, Shakespeare and, when Troilus' cousin Aeneas arrives with a fleet of ships to rescue the Trojan survivors, Virgil, would have been clear. However vehemently the Doctor dismisses the Greece of the *Iliad* as a fiction – the idea of the horse, he initially scoffs, is "obviously absurd" and "invented by Homer as a dramatic device" – it is his intervention which turns the story into reality. In addition to the Doctor's creation of the horse, Achilles is only able to defeat Hector in combat because of the distraction provided by the arrival of the TARDIS, and it is Vicki who persuades a despairing Troilus that they can together build another Troy.

In passing, the Doctor is said to have coined the phrase "the glory that is Greece", recalling not merely a line from Edgar Allan Poe's 1845 poem *To Helen*, but also the title of a much-reprinted historical volume of 1911

by the BBC's sometime Director of Education, J. C. Stobart. Yet the portrayal in *Doctor Who* of these heroes' exploits is less than glorious. Helen, according to Menelaus, is a serial adulteress hardly worth the trouble of a lengthy siege, and the Doctor rages against a "selfish, greedy, corrupt, horrible" Odysseus who wishes his allies Agamemnon and Achilles dead so that he can get his hands on a greater share of the booty. With episodes of dangerous tension between the Superpowers a recent memory, television viewers of 1965 will have been all too familiar with the narrative's most prominent themes – accusations of spying and an arms race designed to solve a stalemate. The story's conclusion, in which the whole city is destroyed together with its civilians, must also have resonated with adults who recalled from 20 years before the bombings of the Second World War.

The writer Donald Cotton's original pitch for *The Myth-Makers* included his own list of preparatory reading, which has since been cited as evidence of his attention to detail and concern to show historical accuracy. Whilst Cotton himself concluded that 'the wooden horse is almost certainly completely a myth,' the academic books would have provided him with some justification for a script which turns Homer's poetry into a reality.

Stanley Casson's *The Discovery of Man* (1939), for example, praised Heinrich Schliemann for proving doubting scholars wrong through his excavation of Troy, emphasising that 'the bulk of the stories in Homer belong to that Bronze Age and have a solid foundation in fact.' However, Cotton's reading of H. L. Lorimer's *Homer and the Monuments* (1950), a 500-page examination of material culture which includes over 60 pages on the design of shields alone, is likely to have been more influential in generally establishing his credentials as a writer of historical drama than impacting directly upon the final script.

LEFT Publicity still taken during the 1965 filming of *Doctor Who – The Myth-Makers*. William Hartnell as the Doctor, Ivor Salter as Odysseus and Francis De Wolff as Agamemnon. © BBC and reproduced with permission

In the early 1980s Cotton revisited his Troy story for Target's range of *Doctor Who* novelisations. In the years before commercially-released videos, and decades before streaming services, these books provided fans with a window onto whole eras of the TV show that were otherwise unattainable. By this stage, however, Cotton had no access to original footage. Many early *Doctor Who* stories were simply wiped so that the expensive rolls of tape could be re-used, and only the audio of *The Myth-Makers* had survived. Published exactly 30 years after the original, lost, transmission, Cotton's novel was later selected by *Doctor Who Magazine* as the best of a series which cumulatively sold some 13 million copies.

Written during a decade in which the British Empire existed as mere remnants, Cotton's book emphasises that the origins of foreign conquest lie in greed. Menelaus reminds Agamemnon that their expedition is really about seizing 'King Priam's trading concessions' through the Bosphorus. Like later European imperialists, the ancient Greeks make off with the treasures of Troy, 'to form the nucleus of the Parthenon collection, no doubt,' the narrator scornfully observes.

The brutality shown by the Greeks in this version amplified, with Steven referring to them as 'the ruffians whose rather shady little exploits were magnified by later generations, until they came to seem like heroes.' Homer, here said to have been in the Greek camp as a young observer, is shocked to discover that Troy was 'way ahead of us when it came to gracious living,' and so the outcome of the war means that 'all the sane sophistication it stood for disappeared.'

Cotton evidently had the 1980's tabloid reputation of Prince Andrew as "Randy Andy" in mind when Homer, as narrator, excuses the amorous behaviour of Paris: 'the second sons of Royal Houses – especially if they are handsome as the devil – have a lot of temptation to cope with.' The casual homophobia common at the height of the AIDS epidemic is perpetuated

in references to Achilles as 'sensitive' and a 'ballet-boy'.

For young British readers, wholesale changes to school curricula must have made some of Cotton's literary references a challenge. Agamemnon, for example, is 'a coarse bully of a man, who looked as though he deserved every bit of what was coming to him when he got home.' More colourfully, Cotton's 'Homer' observes that the Greeks' 'disastrous Trojan escapade takes the Bacchantes' bath-salts for incompetence. If not the Gorgon's hair-net.'

With the latest iteration of *Doctor Who* now a firm fixture of BBC drama, the current generation of fans can visit ancient Greece through a 2021 audio release of *The Myth-Makers*. The vivid orange design of the vinyl is evocatively entitled

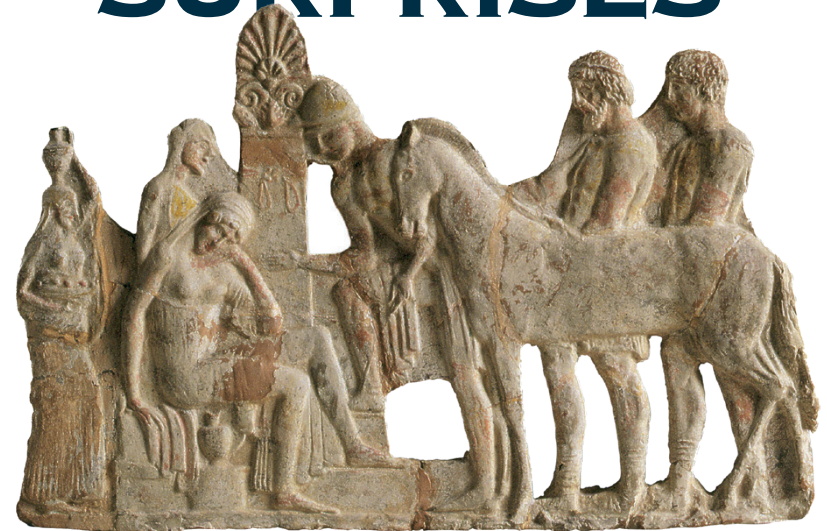
'Trojan sunset splatter'. But with the vital visuals and action still missing, understanding *Doctor Who's* take on Greek mythology is an archaeological process, involving fragments such as the script, audio track, props and photographs, as well as the later novelisation. These have already inspired a variety of reconstructions available on YouTube, including hand-drawn animations and tableaux made from Lego.

Recently, another lost episode of 1965 *Doctor Who*, entitled *Mission to the Unknown*, has been brilliantly recreated by a film crew at the University of Central Lancashire, complete with Daleks. Perhaps, then, following other re-imaginings over the years, it is not impossible that a new live-action version will emerge of the only *Doctor Who* adventure thus far to be set in Greece. **A**

BELOW Detail from 'The Mykonos Vase' *pythos*, c. 675 BC, Mykonos Archaeological Museum.
© Tor Wills/Mykonos Archaeological Museum



A POT OF SURPRISES



JOSH BEER argues that ancient audiences were just as partial as us to elements of surprise – even when a storyline was already familiar

Surprise is a comparatively under-treated topic in discussions of tragedy. F. L. Lucas once gave a reason why:

Surprise is for one night, not for all time. The dramatist who snatches at it is liable to pluck the blossom and lose the fruit. Even when it succeeds it may be too successful, and leave the audience too astonished to give their full attention to what immediately follows. Surprise may, in general, be left to melodrama and some kinds of comedy: Tragedy has in her quiver two more keenly pointed shafts than this – Suspense and Tragic Irony.

TRAGEDY: SERIOUS DRAMA
IN RELATION TO ARISTOTLE'S
POETICS, 1972, PP. 105–6.

While I do not wish to downplay the importance of suspense and tragic irony, surprise is not so easily dismissed as Lucas suggests. A Greek tragedian competed against two other tragedians at the annual festival of the Great Dionysia for a prize in which the winner took all. There was no guarantee that there would be a second performance of a tragedy. Moreover, many spectators would remember previous treatments of the myth by other playwrights, and they might well wonder what would be new when Sophocles, say, or Euripides presented his version of a tragedy that another playwright or playwrights had produced before him. In other words, I suggest, part of the audience's enjoyment was

that they wanted to be pleasantly surprised by what was unexpected in a new version.

Here I should like to consider four tragedies in which Orestes kills his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus after they had murdered his father on his return from Troy: Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*. In each of these plays a pot of some variety is used as a stage-prop. After *Electra* is given the pot in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, Sophocles and Euripides play games as to who is to carry the pot or what kind of pot it is. Finally, in his *Orestes*, Euripides turns this motif into an open joke with a surprise result.

ABOVE 5th-century BC 'Melian relief' showing the recognition scene between Orestes and Electra at the tomb of Agamemnon. Observe the vessel beside Electra's foot. © Canellopoulos Museum