The Symbols of Life

The Trojan War was precipitated by the abduction of Helen of Troy, the Spartan queen and the most beautiful woman in the world. The rescue of an abducted wife, in some versions an abducted sister, daughter or mother, is a theme found in the myths and folktales of many societies, and features the heroine's return to life from darkness and death.

I hope to show that the myths associated with the Trojan War hide a very different meaning other than that of a rescue attempt by a Greek fleet of a thousand ships, a rescue that inspired Homer's great epic poem the Iliad, and will lead to a remarkable and unexpected conclusion. In addition I will attempt to decode the symbols of life that play an important role in Helen's adventures, because she is not all that she seems to be. Along the way we will also need to look at a variety of myths, even if at first they appear unrelated to the main subject, because we will find that many are in fact closely linked.

Helen, for example, shares several features with the fierce Spartan goddess Artemis Orthia (and strangely enough with Cinderella). Artemis in turn has close ties with the Gorgon Medusa. The Gorgon's demise at the hands of the Greek hero Perseus is directly associated with the slaughter of the great celestial bull by the Roman god Mithras, a type of sacrifice that had previously featured in the art and the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia. Artemis, Perseus and Mithras are all activists driven by an identical need.

These factors appear to be interwoven in a Gordian knot of themes that we'll attempt to unravel throughout the following chapters, but there are underlying motifs of water, rain and sexual symbolism common to all. The interpretation of these myths will help to reveal the true nature and purpose of Helen, and her role in the Judgment of Paris that led to the Trojan War. This will in turn lead to questions about the war itself – did it really take place as Homer described in the Iliad, or is the Trojan War merely an ancient legend

with no historical foundation? The main characters in the story are convincing, however, and seem to have been drawn from life, particularly Achilles.

We are told that he had red hair, and that he had a famously vulnerable heel. His mother, the sea-nymph Thetis, dressed him as a girl. He was educated by the centaur Chiron. We are also told that he was homosexual or, rather, bisexual (he was the lover of Patroclus, Troilus and Polyxena) and that he had an uncontrollable temper. Homer describes how Achilles dragged the body of his adversary, the Trojan Hector, three times around the walls of Troy having tied him to the back of his chariot.

Not someone, then, that you'd care to invite to dinner, or share a flask of wine with, for fear that a misunderstood word or gesture might set him off. Homer dwells on the wrath of Achilles in the Iliad, but Homer didn't invent Achilles any more than he'd invented Helen of Troy – he put flesh on ancient bones. The red-haired and excitable warrior long pre-dated Homer, and his character has survived due to the many generations of storytellers who faithfully preserved the personal details.

Neither Achilles, nor Helen or any of the gods, goddesses and heroes of mythology have been created by the fancy of some poet or rhapsode. They are not the product of a committee or a quango, but have arisen out of some primitive mythopoeic process over a long period. Achilles' origins, and theirs, are as mysterious as his unprotected heel, and later in this book I'll explain exactly why his heel was vulnerable.

The myths and legends that have come down to us from the distant past survive because they continue to tease us and to excite our imagination. They raise questions to which there is all too often no satisfactory answer. How and why were the characters that feature in the myths actually created? If Achilles was not a real, historical figure, how and why did he appear on the battlefield of Troy along with Priam, Hector, Paris and of course Helen, plus a cast of thousands? If Achilles and the rest of the cast were not created from the imagination of the poet, or some other dramatist, what hand or eye framed

their symmetry? The red hair, the bad temper, the cross-dressing – must be conveying a message of some sort, and are a symbol or a metaphor describing a natural phenomenon portrayed in human terms – in a word, anthropomorphosis. A good example is the thunderbolt-hurling figure of Zeus.

Achilles perishes during the battle of Troy when an arrow fired by the reputedly effeminate Paris strikes his heel. Although I said that the heroes of Troy seemed to have been drawn from life, it is unlikely that Achilles and Paris were real historical figures like, say, Alexander the Great, or Hannibal. This presupposes, then, that if they are both the product of poetic fancy, the same might apply to the story of Helen and indeed the Trojan War. And why are we told that Paris was effeminate, and that Achilles dressed as a girl? Is the war, and the rape of Helen, fact or fiction? In the course of this study we will discover the answers to these questions.

The Greeks themselves mostly didn't understand, or perhaps didn't care, how their gods and heroes were created. They may have believed them to be real. But what about the monsters of myth – the Minotaur, the Theban Sphinx, the Gorgon and the Chimera? Socrates took some interest, but then he was a philosopher and it was his job to be curious and ask questions. Even so, he admitted to being puzzled and irritated by the composite lion-goat monster known as the Chimera, although he dodged the issue by saying that anyone who bothered to study the matter had too much time on his hands. Yet many of the questions raised by myths remain unanswered and their meaning unsolved.

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Game of Troy

The site of Troy, the modern Hisarlik, has witnessed several major archaeological digs in recent times, beginning with Schliemann's celebrated campaigns, carried out over a period of twenty years from 1870. Schliemann's efforts were followed by those of his collaborator Wilhelm Dorpfeld in the 1890s, by Carl Blegen in the 1930s, and more recently by the late Manfred Korfmann in 1988. One source puts the number of excavations at more than

30: 'No other prehistoric site in the Aegean world has been investigated more thoroughly than Troy.' And yet the historicity of Troy remains disputed - a controversial and often contentious issue. The controversy arises from our romantic vision of the past, a deep attachment to legend and mysticism at odds with a demand for more factual evidence.

Did Helen really exist, and was there a great Mycenaean ruler by the name of Agamemnon? Michael Wood concludes that at least Helen is possible. Bettany Hughes, in her fine biography Helen of Troy, suggests that Greeks may have seen Helen as the subject of a solar myth, 'the equivalent of winter's abduction of summer' when 'the sun migrated to Africa. The sun's – Helen's – departure is rarely forgiven.' But might Helen have been a real-life person dressed in the ethereal garments of myth, like Joan of Arc? Hughes offers a fusion of both possibilities: 'Surely it is more likely that the Homeric Helen represented one of those real flesh-and-blood people who simply seem extraordinary. That the memory of this vibrant, charismatic mortal was conflated with the memory of a vibrant, charismatic nature goddess.'

My belief is that Helen of Troy, Queen of Sparta, never existed as a real person, but is merely a figure of myth, possibly a goddess similar in character to that of Artemis. She is, in fact, a symbol, and one more closely related to the site of Troy than of Sparta; there is little archaeological evidence of a royal palace at Sparta, where she was worshipped in the form of a tree, a factor in her identity that I'll come to discuss later.

And the historicity of the war? Schliemann was convinced that he had found the real Troy – and sought to persuade others – and so too was the American archaeologist Carl Blegen: 'It can no longer be doubted, when one surveys the state of our knowledge today, that there really was an actual historical Trojan War in which a coalition of Achaeans, or Mycenaeans, under a king whose overlordship was recognised, fought against the people of Troy and their allies.'

There has never been a satisfactory explanation as to why Homer's Ilion is also called Troy, or why Troy has links to the symbol of the labyrinth – in Britain, turf mazes are known variously as 'Troy Town' or 'Julian's Bower'. There was also, in Roman times, a ritual labyrinthine dance measure known as 'The Game of Troy'. What is the connection, if any, between the labyrinth and the town of Troy?

The mound of Hisarlik in north-western Turkey, Homer's Ilion, is a ruin of stratified levels forming a structure known as a tell, in which a layer of mudbrick dwellings, plus accumulated rubbish, serves as a foundation for a replacement level of dwellings, like a pile of triple-decker sandwiches, but it can hardly be compared to the formal design of the Cretan labyrinth. There are several prehistoric examples of these tells in Turkey, one of the best known being Catal Huyuk in the Konya plain, where archaeologists found evidence of what appeared to be an 8,000-year-old bull and mother goddess cult, with attendant leopards and vultures.

Recent excavations have revealed the tell of Hisarlik to be a settlement of considerable size, which has yielded finds of human skulls, Mycenaean weapons, pottery shards, and a treasure trove of gold cups, a silver vase, bracelets, finger rings, and diadems, unearthed by Schliemann, who exuberantly declared that he had found the 'Jewels of Helen'. He had located them, however, in the layer of Troy II, dated about 2,500 BC, some 1,200 years prior to the Trojan war.

The layers of the tell were identified and labelled according to their dates of occupation which, over a period of sixteen years, have engaged the attention of teams of archaeologists and scientists from over twenty different countries. The first level was an early Bronze Age settlement. The level corresponding to the date of the Trojan War is level V1I, while the final layer, identified as a Roman cult centre Ilium, is level IX. Level VI shows signs of damage and conflagration on a massive scale, which some authorities have identified as being caused by earthquakes, since the area is prone to regular seismic shifts,

although it is admittedly difficult to distinguish between natural and man-made damage, especially in ancient sites.

As there is no other major fortified citadel in the entire region of the Troad, it seems reasonable to claim that Hisarlik is the Troy of Homer's epic tale. 'But', asks Kirk, 'does the broad outline of an Achaean siege correspond? First, the possible motives for such an attack, if not obvious, are at least perceptible. Not of course to avenge the seduction of an Achaean queen, still less because of a Judgment of Paris that led to all that; those are mythical and folktale elements; but as a by-product of trade through and beyond the Hellespont'.

Kirk's claim that Troy was perhaps a wealthy trading centre (a claim also made by Korfmann), and therefore a suitable target for raids, is dismissed by Kolb. 'Troy, situated 30 kms from the narrowest point of the Dardanelles, was hardly capable of exercising effective control of this transit way…the assumption of a large Anatolian palatial and commercial city is unfounded, the lack of positive evidence is overwhelming.' The mound of Hisarlik is thought by some archaeologists to be a city identified as Wilusa on the far western limits of what was once the land of the Hittites. While there seems to be supportive evidence that Wilusa (W) ilusa = Ilion, was the Hittite Troy or Hisarlik, Trevor Bryce is doubtful that the site was once the scene of a major conflict. 'Far from providing material or written evidence, our Anatolian sources in fact cast considerable doubt on its historicity, at least in the form in which it appears in Homer.'

The American Hellenist Rhys Carpenter is largely overlooked by modern scholarship, but had some interesting and novel suggestions, including the proposal that the Trojan War might be traced to an attack on the Egypt of Rameses III by the Sea Peoples from the north. M.L.West, describing the rise of the Greek epic, says that the poetic tradition inherited from early Mycenaean times singles out Troy's prominent role from a catalogue of catastrophic destructions of major Greek cities and palaces. Why, he asks, has

Troy alone acquired legendary status while attacks on other cities such as Thebes, Mycenae and Tiryns have scarcely left an echo? Why is Homer's Ilion in particular something to sing about? Only through a study of the related myths and symbols might we arrive at a possible solution to the mystery that surrounds Troy, and if we look at Troy the citadel, and its illustrious captive Helen, it will be helpful first to look at the fascinating process by which myths and symbols are formed to discover what they are really saying.