

The Hippos of Troy

Why Homer Never Talked about a Horse

Francesco Tiboni



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Preface

This book sees the light about five years after the first academic paper I wrote on this topic, while I was a PhD student at the Centre Camille Jullian at the University of Aix-en-Provence. However, it is inspired by a keen interest in naval archaeology, cultivated during more than fifteen years of fieldwork and research on ancient wrecks and ships, both underwater and inland.

Over this time, I have had the occasion to collect iconographical and technical data from several different contexts, particularly referring to the pre-archaic world. As I worked through these data and tried to achieve a good comprehension of the naval dimension of the Mediterranean between the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age, I became increasingly aware of the fact that naval archaeology is usually considered a specialised field, essentially linked to the study of wrecks and submerged contexts, and rarely used in the wider comprehension and the analysis of the social dimension of the ancient peoples living around the Mediterranean Sea.

On the other hand, during these years, I became more and more convinced that ancient texts and iconography are still too often used uncritically in the analysis of the maritime and naval contexts of the ancient Mediterranean, without a proper understanding of the roots of most modern-day interpretations. In this way, many important elements and data can be lost.

This book represents the main result of my attempts to suggest a refocused and more multidisciplinary approach to archaeological research on the naval dimension of the ancient world. This problem feels more and more fundamental, particularly at present, when naval archaeology appears dominated by an excessive focus on technological issues at the expense of research on the main themes and of results.

My approach to the theme of the Wooden Horse of Troy has never been an attempt to understand what the horse could have been in actuality; this book and what it contains it is rather the result of a five year study of the real naval dimension of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Mediterranean Sea.

Indeed, the possibility of shedding a light on what Homer actually said in his laconic description of the last night of Troy is, in fact, the product of the chance I have had to deeply analyse the naval context of the Mediterranean Sea of that period with a proper naval archaeological approach, that is by performing a wide analysis of all the images, words and wrecks pertaining to that period.

I hope to make a helpful contribution to naval archaeology, but I also intend this work to be sufficiently clear and accurate that archaeologists, historians, and philologists working on Homer and his time find it useful in their own investigations.

Introduction

To deal with the Homeric epics is to engage with one of the most complex and dangerous topics of the entire modern culture, as these narrations represent the cornerstone on which western civilisation is built.¹

Conventionally located chronologically between the 13th and the 11th centuries BCE, the Trojan War represents the very first historical appearance of Greece, even though we lack any direct evidence of its precise context.² What was narrated by Homer took place in an age of heroes, when kings and princes ruled wide lands from their palaces and sailed the sea to enlarge their sphere of influence. The vivid narrations made by the ancient author of the events of a period that we still call the beginning of ‘The Dark Age of Greece’³ serve to highlight all the more the limits of our present knowledge of where and when all these things happened, assuming they do have a historical basis. The shade that covers the ill-defined period that, after the Trojan War, ends with the migrations that laid the foundations for Greek culture of the historical era, still affects our ability to understand the real dimension of the Homeric epics.

Turning to ancient Greek historians, we can reasonably argue that the events of the Trojan War were first given a factual dimension in the 5th century BC,⁴ with the Greek historian Herodotus’ statement that those events occurred around eight centuries before the time he was writing. In the same century, as noted by Dickinson, ‘it is symptomatic [...] that Thucydides, in his famous account of the past of Greece, found it easier to calculate the dates when the Boeotians and Dorians supposedly moved into southern Greece by reckoning downwards from the Trojan War’,⁵ thus demonstrating that, although unimpressed by the so-called ‘age of heroes’, that author believed that the remote traditions of the Trojan war contained truth.

This idea of a factual basis for the events narrated by Homer, while widely accepted,⁶ is still debated. Some scholars plausibly refuse to consider the Greek bard as a proper historical source. Following the road defined by Moses Finley,⁷ and after George Grote’s warnings not to confuse myths with historical facts,⁸ they underline how Homer is indeed a poet and a storyteller.⁹ That both the Iliad and the Odyssey must be considered as merely literature appeared clear also to some ancient authors, as indeed was noted by Finley, ‘to those who called Homer the teacher of Hellas, Plato replied: Yes, he is “first and most poetical among the tragic poets”’.¹⁰

¹ Ieranò 2013: 11.

² On this topic, among the others, Kline 2018, Strauss 2006, Latacz 2004.

³ Whitley 1991: 5.

⁴ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 172.

⁵ Dickinson 2006: 1.

⁶ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 179-81; Cline 2018: 103; Boardman 2014: 25.

⁷ Finley 2002.

⁸ Grote 1856: iv-xii.

⁹ Ieranò 2015: 11-13; D’Agostino 2007.

¹⁰ Finley 2002: 11. The author also noted that ‘*the philosopher Xenophanes had protested that ‘Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is disgraceful and blameworthy among men: theft, adultery, and deceit’’* (Finley 2002: 11).

In the absence of indisputable evidence, it appears plausible that Homer used a sort of literary license to mix together different peoples, different events, as well as different centuries of intermittent wars to create his epics;¹¹ as stated by Susan Sherrat 'it is inconceivable that the Trojan War motif, which forms the essential background of both epics, could have been invented out of nothing in the eighth century'.¹² In the deafening silence of any written source, archaeology is our sole guide.

Although there is still no direct way of relating archaeology and poetry, a number of modern authors¹³ consider increasingly clear that Homeric narrations relate to the world of the Bronze Age of the eastern Mediterranean region. The siege of Troy, as described in the Iliad, clearly recalls the city sieges as recorded in the Levantine tradition,¹⁴ as well as those depicted on the silver 'Siege Rhyton' of c.1600 BC, discovered by Schliemann in one of the shaft graves at Mycenae.¹⁵ According to these scholars, we can also find interesting evidence pertaining to the Homeric world from the excavation held at Hissarlik, the site of the presumed Troy,¹⁶ as well as in the Hittite 'Alaksandu Treaty' or in the 'Tawagalawa Letter', recently deciphered.¹⁷

With regard to the Trojan Horse, both these sources, the Hissarlik excavations and the Hittite texts, do provide us with some useful elements to understand why, when he referred to the cunning used by the Achaeans to conquer Troy at the end of the siege, Homer never spoke of a giant wooden simulacrum of a horse.

During the 1995 campaign, in the VIIb₂ layer of the citadel, archaeologists discovered the very first, thus far the sole, Bronze Age object with a reliable inscription found at Troy.¹⁸ Dated to c.1100 BC,¹⁹ it is a small bronze disc, about two cm in diameter, inscribed both sides with a hieroglyphic script in use in Bronze Age Anatolia. Once deciphered, it appeared clear that this object was in origin a seal, with a name on each side, one masculine and the other feminine, and that it must have belonged to a scribe.

The presence of a scribe is usually associated with the presence of a centre of administration, and Troy appears to have been one of these centres. Even though we have no direct evidence for the presence of any archive in the citadel, it is likely that in the excavated citadel at Hissarlik there was such a structure, 'traces of it would have been destroyed when the mound was levelled to build the temple of Athena'²⁰ in the mid-7th century BC.

The importance of Troy as the main centre of its area, as recently supposed on the basis of some Hittite documents²¹ appears to be confirmed also by the reading of some cuneiform records, where we can find clues about Troy's involvement in the events of the Bronze Age of the eastern Mediterranean. The archives of the Levant provide evidence that, at least in

¹¹ Cline 2018: 101-3.

¹² Sherrat 2010a: 5.

¹³ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 179-81; Cline 2018: 103; Boardman 2014: 25; Sherrat 2010a.

¹⁴ Liverani 2017: 122-29.

¹⁵ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 180-81.

¹⁶ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 143-70; Cline 2018: 67-99; Hertel 2001: 35-93.

¹⁷ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 174-79; Cline 2018: 51-64; Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011: 101-22.

¹⁸ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 173.

¹⁹ Cline 2018: 92.

²⁰ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 174.

²¹ Cline 2018: 51-54.

the Bronze Age, the Hittite empire and the Mycenaeans from *Ahhiyawa*, the Hittite name for mainland Greece and its islands,²² were in conflict, and that one of the citadels involved in these conflicts was *Wilusa*. The possibility that *Wilusa* might be identified with Troy came in 1998, when David Hawkins deciphered the hieroglyphic inscription carved on the Karabel relief,²³ giving the fixed point that made it possible to locate the capital of the land of *Arzawa*, the Hittite centre of *Apasa*, in Ephesus, and the land of *Wilusa* in the Troad. ‘The only site known in the Troad large enough to have been its administrative centre in the Bronze Age is Hissarlik. *Wilusa* and *Ilios* are thus one and the same’.²⁴

Some cuneiform texts from Anatolia provide information about the relationship between the Hittite rulers and the Mycenaean princes of the Bronze Age.²⁵ Among these, the most interesting appears to be the so-called *Tawagalawa letter*, a clay tablet preserved from a group of three, carved in cuneiform symbols, which gives an account of a correspondence between an unnamed Hittite king and the king of *Ahhiyawa*.²⁶ In this document, attributed to Hattusili III (1267-1237 BC), the king of Hatti writes to the king of *Ahhiyawa* referring to him as ‘his brother’²⁷ and discusses a possible conflict, rather a simple ‘diplomatic issue’,²⁸ involving the Hittites and the people of *Ahhiyawa*, that is the Mycenaeans.

Although surely appealing, the hypothesis to identify this conflict between the Hittites and the people of *Ahhiyawa* with the Trojan war can be neither confirmed or refuted. Whatever the truth, however, this letter does provide important clues for the correct interpretation of what Homer narrated when reporting the end of the ten-year siege at Troy.

Strictly linked to the world of the Bronze Age Levant, we can plausibly argue that the Homeric narration was grounded in the diplomatic and military customs and practices of that time, which involved, in the case of a defeat in a fight or a war, the payment of a tribute.²⁹ Some ancient texts³⁰ testify that the practice of tribute bearing and princes’ gifts was common in the Bronze Age Levant, and also involved the area of Anatolia during the early first Millennium BC. As noted by Oscar White Muscarella concerning the 8th century BC ‘it is known from Neo-Assyrian texts that subject peoples gave as tribute [...] gold, silver, tin, ivory, camels [...], objects that they acquired by trade or tribute. That is, they gave the Assyrian king what he wanted and expected’.³¹

Therefore, despite the great number of theoretical and philosophical discussions around the meaning of the Wooden Horse, from Pausanias to modern-day scholars, it is more likely that the deception planned by Athena might have been conceived within the framework of the customs and practices proper to the war and diplomacy of the time. Whatever that time was: the second millennium BCE of the presumed Trojan War, or the 8th century BC of Homeric Greece.

²² Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011: 4.

²³ Hawkins 1998.

²⁴ Shapland, Fitton 2019: 179.

²⁵ Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011.

²⁶ Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011: 101-22.

²⁷ Cline 2018: 61.

²⁸ Beckman, Bryce, Cline 2011: 121.

²⁹ Uberti 2005: 41-96; Canckik-Kirschbaum 2003: 31-39.

³⁰ Hoftijzer, Van Soldt 1998.

³¹ Muscarella 1998: 156.

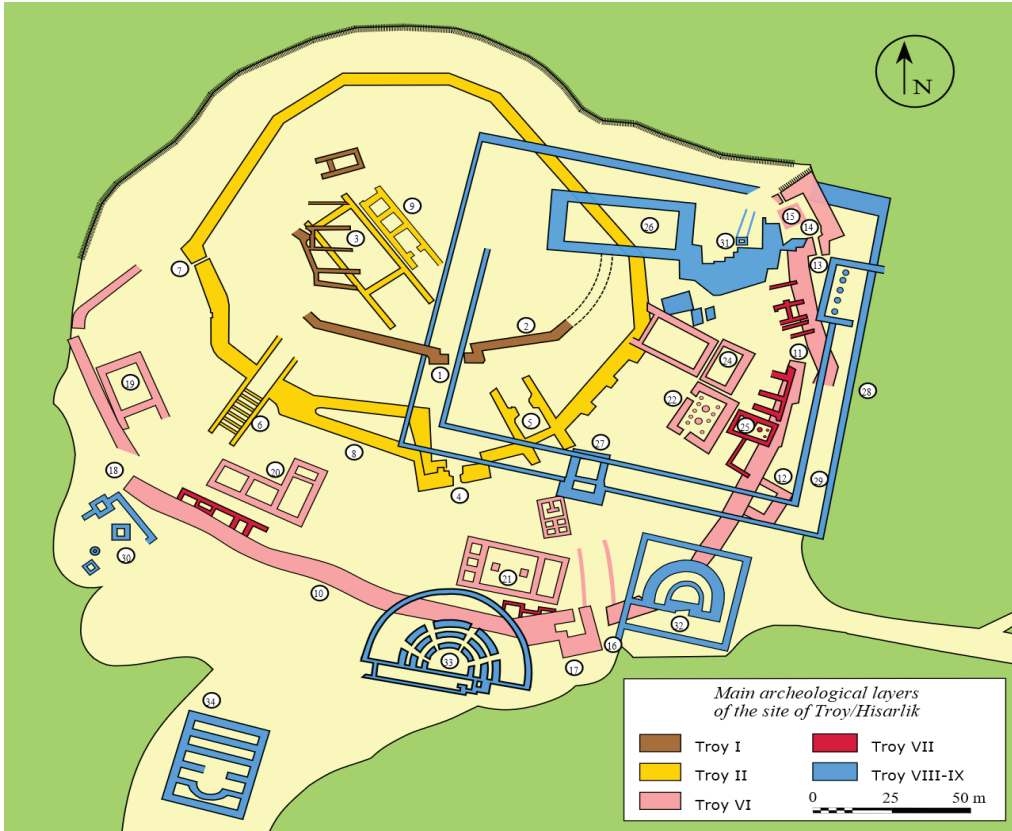


Figure 1. The archaeological site of Hissarlik/Troy - plan.

Following Muscarella, it is more likely that in order to fake their surrender, the Achaeans pretended to give the Trojan (or in the context of the 8th century BC, Phrygian) king what he wanted and expected. And what he wanted could not have been a giant wooden statue in the shape of a horse.

Archaeology at Troy

The idea of a factual basis for Homer's narration may rest on the possibility of identifying the real site of Troy, usually identified with Hissarlik (Figure 1).³² So, before analysing in detail what Homer said when he spoke of the Trojan Horse, it must be noted that, since the first identification of the historical Troy made by Schliemann, several scholars have investigated the site of Hissarlik in search for the archaeological evidence of the Trojan War.

Two years after Schliemann's death in 1890, architect Wilhelm Dörpfeld started a two-year excavation of the site, between 1893 and 1894,³³ during which he located, on the top of the

³² Latacz, J. 2004:15-117.

³³ Dörpfeld W., 1902.

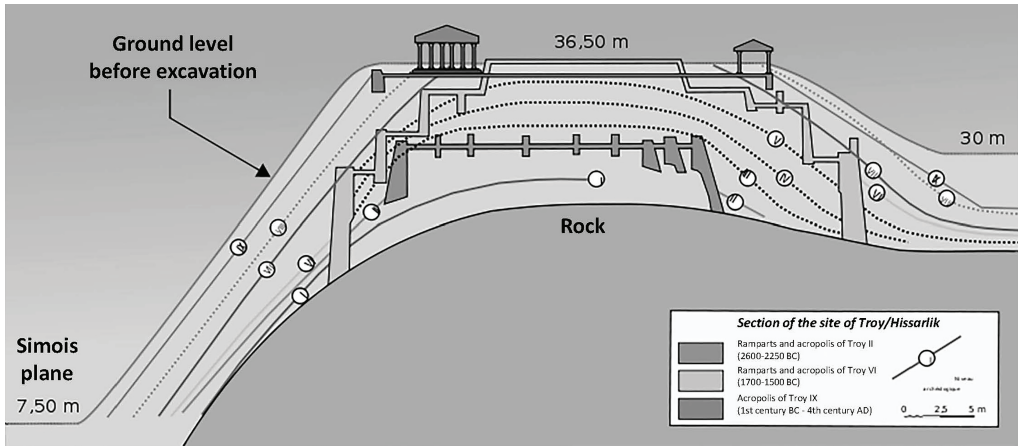


Figure 2. The archaeological site of Hissarlik/Troy – section.

citadel of Hissarlik, the layers of the so-called Troy VI (Figure 2). The presence of a series of fortifications, walls and towers led him to identify this layer, Troy VI, with the Troy narrated by Homer, as suggested, for instance, by the presence of an eight metre high tower, part of a great wall, clearly recalling what was narrated by the ancient bard in the sixteenth book of the *Iliad*³⁴

τρὶς μὲν ἐπ’ ἀγκῶνος βῆ τείχεος ὑψηλοῖο
Πάτροκλος [...]

Thrice did Patroclus set foot upon a corner of the high wall [...]

The upper layer of Troy VI investigated by Dörpfeld, labelled Troy VIh, appeared to be the richest phase of the city, with its big palace and several elements, particularly ceramic sherds, testifying to a close commercial relationship with the Mycenaean world, possibly proof of the historical friendship between the Mycenaean and the Trojans before the abduction of Helen³⁵.

The presence of a layer with strong evidence of fires and destruction allowed the scholar to state that Troy VI must have been abandoned after a war, that is, according to Dörpfeld, after the Mycenaean conquest.

Some years later, in the years 30 of the twentieth century, Prof. Blegen could demonstrate, during the new campaigns of research arranged on the site by the University of Cincinnati, that those proofs of war and conquest were in fact the indisputable signs of an earthquake. Although, according to Dörpfeld, the long dispute on the existence of Troy and its site had come to an end with the identification of Troy VIh, some thirty years later, Carl Blegen could demonstrate that the sequent phase of the citadel, labelled Troy VIIa, did not show any evidence of the presence of a new people at Hissarlik. The archaeological record of potteries and finds investigated in Troy VIIa was not to be read as the result of a sudden interruption of the Trojan culture, rather the reconstruction of a crumbled city, pertaining to the same

³⁴ Homer, *Iliad*, XVI 702-3.

³⁵ Cline 2018: 80.

cultural framework. Further, according to the author, this layer could have been named Troy VII rather than Troy VIIa, although he decided to 'preserve the old terminology' to avoid possible confusion.³⁶

In particular the presence of Mycenaean potteries together with local Trojan imitations of Mycenaean forms in the layer of Troy VII allowed Blegen to exclude the idea of a sudden change of the cultural actors living in Troy VIh and Troy VIIa, as well as the possibility that the end of Troy VI was consequence of a conquest. 'It seemed more likely that the Mycenaeans were still in a commercial relationship with the Trojans'³⁷ during the whole life of Troy VIIa, which lasted for about a century and a half.

In addition, Blegen found several proofs of a possible earthquake on the site, particularly thanks to the examination of the fallen walls, so that at the end of his research, he stated 'we are almost sure that the end of the city could be attributed to a big earthquake'.³⁸ The geo-archaeological examination of the archaeological record corroborated what was reported by Blegen.³⁹

As for Troy VIIa, the excavations held by Blegen led to the discovery of a great number of proofs of a violent destruction of the city, among which widely diffused evidence of fires, human skeletal remains, and archaeological contexts of destruction were all compatible with a war scenario like that narrated by Homer.⁴⁰ On the basis of the analysis of the ceramic records, particularly of the Mycenaean imports, Blegen dated this destruction to 1260-1240 BC. In this interpretation, sudden ruin appeared to be followed by a rapid and partial reconstruction of the city,⁴¹ which he labelled Troy VIIb1, and then by a phase of abandonment. This latter, labelled Troy VIIb2, marked the end of the Bronze Age occupation of the site, at the end of the 12th century BC.⁴²

After Blegen's analysis of the site, debate on the dating of the destruction of Troy VIh flourished among scholars, and as well pointed out by Eric Cline, 'some of them have recently proposed to locate this event between 1130 and 1100 BCE'.⁴³ However, following Penelope Mountjoy's deep study of the pottery found during the excavation held by Blegen, it seems more likely that the date of the end of Troy VI h corresponds to c.1300 BC. Mountjoy's study also confirms the idea of the possible earthquake as the cause for the abandonment of Troy VIh.⁴⁴

The identification of the Troy of Homer with the layer labelled Troy VIIa has been recently revived by Manfred Korfmann of the University of Tübingen on the base of new scientific proofs. Korfmann, who has directed important excavations at the site between 1998 and the early 2000s, has had the possibility to investigate not only the citadel of Troy, but also a substantial portion of the lower city by means of new technologies. His discoveries, which also

³⁶ Blegen C.W., 1963: 145. The idea to identify Troy VIIa with a supposed Troy VII is reflected even in Manfred Korfmann interpretation of the site of Hissarlik as clearly stated in Korfmann M., 2004 and 2003: 5-14.

³⁷ Cline 2018: 84

³⁸ Blegen C.W., Caskey J.L., Rawson M., 1953: 331.

³⁹ The idea of the big earthquake was in fact supported by Rapp (Rapp: 1982: 55-6).

⁴⁰ Blegen C.W., Caskey J.L. Rawson M., 1958:11-12; Blegen 1963: 162.

⁴¹ Mountjoy P.A. 1999b

⁴² Cline 2018: 89.

⁴³ Cline 2018: 86.

⁴⁴ Mountjoy P.A., 1999a

include a probable moat, evidence of fires, and remains of weapons and unburied skeletons, have shed a new light on the site of Troy. According to Korfmann most of the elements excavated on the site permit stating that Troy VII shows no cultural break with Troy VIIa, while it is possible to identify evidence of fire and destruction between Troy VIIa and VIIb. This evidence, all suggesting a war scenario, can be dated, in accordance with what was proposed by Mountjoy, to around 1180 BC.⁴⁵

While on the one hand, some of the elements discovered by Korfman seem to permit proposing the identification of Troy as Wilusa,⁴⁶ the new date suggested for the destruction of Troy VII, not widely accepted, introduces the possibility to create a link between the end of the city and the Sea Peoples.⁴⁷

Was it a horse?

To understand why, as we are going to demonstrate, when describing the end of Troy and the Achaean conquest of the city after a ten-year siege, Homer never talked about a gigantic wooden-horse proceeds from the precise identification of the site of Troy. However, it should be noted, before we begin our journey, that over the years many scholars have tried to identify what the horse could have been in reality, and to relate it to the ruins of Hissarlik.

While many authors, following the idea of Pliny The Elder, according to whom⁴⁸

equum (qui nunc aries appellatur) in muralibus machinis Epeium ad Troiam inventit

Epeius at Troy invented a war machine to surpass the walls named horse (now we call it battering ram)

have interpreted the contrivance as a primitive battering ram used to break the walls, on the other hand, some scholars have tried to figure out how a gigantic wooden horse could have been built to host all the heroes needed for a raid.⁴⁹

Furthermore, following Blegen's discovery of the proofs of the earthquake, Fritz Schachermeyr proposed to interpret the Trojan horse by linking it to the way that Homer describes the earthquake generated by the beating of the horse's hooves on the ground, by divine intervention of Poseidon.⁵⁰

In 2009, Joaquin Ruiz de Arbulo first proposed, on the base of the analysis made by Austin⁵¹ of Vergil's description of the horse, to identify the horse with a sacred and ritual boat. According

⁴⁵ Korfman theory about the identification of Troy was discussed in the early 2000s and firmly rejected by one of his colleagues at Tübingen, Frank Kolb in 2002. On this topic, among the others see Cline 2018: p. 98-9.

⁴⁶ Particularly the moat and some elements like the golden seal with the inscription cited above. On this topic see Cline 2018: 92-9.

⁴⁷ The problem of the correct identification of the Sea Peoples is nowadays strongly debated among the scholars. On this topic Cline E.H., O'Connor D. 2012; Sandars N., 1985. It is noteworthy that the Achaeans have often been included among the Sea Peoples.

⁴⁸ Pliny The Elder, *Naturalis Historiae*, VII.56.

⁴⁹ Jones, J. W. 1970, Rand, H. 2015.

⁵⁰ Schachermeyr F., 1950: 189-203.

⁵¹ Austin 1950.

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to the scholar, in fact, we can imagine a ritual ship, decorated with a horse figurehead, left on the beach as a gift for the deities. The boat, likely a processional boat, with wheels, must have been very similar to those still visible on the depictions of the ritual processions for Dionysus, displayed on some black-figured vases of the Classical Greece.⁵²

This reading was, as we will see, the closest one to the correct interpretation of what Homer actually said. The bard, in fact, never described the use of any war-machine, any gigantic wooden horse, and also never referred to a sacred or to a ritual boat. He has only spoken of a *hippos ship*, a merchant-ship, used in its standard way, that is according to maritime rules and the customs of the Mediterranean of the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age.

⁵² Ruiz de Arbulo, 2009: 549.