

BOOK REVIEW

Troy: Myth, City, Icon. By NAOÍSE MAC SWEENEY. New York, NY and London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018. Pp. 185. Paperback, \$75.00. ISBN: 978-1-4725-2937-4.

The city of Troy, and the war against the Achaeans, stands at the heart of the Western imagination. It has shaped political identities, given a sense of history and purpose to its many interpreters and offered powerful parallels for contemporary concerns. It is a name synonymous with mighty battles and quick-witted intrigue, of brazen courage and weak-willed cowardice. It is the war that epitomized ancient Greek heroic culture, with names few could forget, and heroes that still cast important cultural shadows. For the Romans it gave them a link to an imagined past, a sense of history to rival that of Greece. For later peoples it offered them a way to redefine who they were and what they stood for; binding them to the classical world. It offered lessons for those willing to reconsider the twisting tale. The city and war have fascinated generations throughout the ages, because at its heart, it remains the defining story in the canon of Western literature; and the formative keystone in the construction of a Western identity.

Any history of the ancient site has to untangle the web of competing interpretations and political imaginings, to strip back the layers of the epic poem and return to what the archaeology can tell us. In one sense this is a very necessary endeavour, in that it forces the reader to remember the real Troy behind the myth, an ancient city of great mercantile wealth and prestige, and one that reflects the very real political world of the Bronze and Iron Ages. This is what Mac Sweeney ambitiously sets out to do: to write a history of the site, to recognize where fact and fiction merge and chart how the idea of Troy becomes rather more important than the reality. In this sense the book is effective. In dividing the subject into three sub-areas Mac Sweeney importantly separates out a number of these strands and ideas and presents useful depictions of Troy in myth (3-38), archaeology and ancient history (39-112) and as a cultural icon (113-153).

There are issues here. The book itself is something of a genre-hybrid, and it is not always easy to see exactly who it is written for. Some sections read as though from a site guidebook, others are focussed strongly on a general readership, while still more present nuanced and scholarly discussion. There are some other minor

criticisms. The amount of cross referencing is unnecessary, and the repetition between chapters sometimes a touch distracting. The lack of an overall argument and unifying perspective makes the three parts appear a touch disconnected. This is in part because of the many different approaches Mac Sweeney takes, and the admirable attempt to provide in what is a rather slim volume, a fluent narrative history of the site and the ideas it gives birth to. The only reason the book holds together as well as it does is because the writer is a careful and thorough guide.

The book opens with an excellent introduction. It is focused and provides a fluent route into the topic (3-6). Mac Sweeney selects three scenes to present the complexities of writing about Troy; Alexander's visit to Achilles' tomb, Geoffrey of Monmouth writing his *Historia Regum Britanniae* and President Bill Clinton echoing Seamus Heaney's poem *The Cure at Troy* in Derry during the Northern Ireland peace process (4-5). Each of these is well chosen, as they highlight the inherent difficulties of the topic and how Troy and its war became a defining part of Western consciousness. The following chapters however step back from these more nuanced observations and present an overly descriptive and superficial depiction. In Chapter 2 ("The Making of a Myth," 7-15) Mac Sweeney provides an overview of the *Iliad*, but much more was needed here to demonstrate both the complexity of the poem and the different ways of reading it. It feels rather rushed, moving too quickly through the important ideas (e.g. anthropological research and the physical images of the war, 10-12, with the Cycladic relief vase shown on 13). The thoughts on conflict within the hierarchical community are promising, exemplified through the competing definitions of Achilles and Agamemnon (*aristos* and *basileutatos*). Mac Sweeney writes here that '[a]n old system based on warrior pre-eminence was declining, and in its place was emerging a new system based on citizenship, laws and formal codes of authority' (14). This is a compelling and significant interpretation, but needed to be evidenced in much greater detail. The awareness of the epithets used to describe the city is also promising, but again needed to be set out in a more extensive manner (*eudmetos*, *euteichos*, *eupyrgos* and *asty mega*). The third chapter examines the narrative of archaeological discovery (17-28). We see here the familiar names of Calvert, Schliemann, Dörpfeld, Blegen, Korfmann and Rose, but each is presented in too fleeting a manner. More space is given to Schliemann, but even here the story would have benefitted from a greater examination of the finds themselves. The same concerns can be leveled at the fourth chapter (29-38). The discussion of Wilusa and the Hittite evidence is promising, and the deconstruction of the various interpretations into numbered points (32-33) provides a nice summary, but it does not fully support the final points made:

“images from myth came to influence the everyday reality of life at Troy, and ideas from Homer shaped the practical place of Troy in the wider world” (36).

Part 2 (“The City,” Chapters 5-10) is much better. Although the first two chapters here are a touch too descriptive, the following three chapters are excellent. In each Mac Sweeney charts the archaeological history of each site, painting illuminating and thought-provoking sketches of the ancient city and the world into which it belongs. Chapter 5 offers snapshots of the five earliest stages of occupation: Troy I (3000-2550), Troy II (2550-2300), Troy III (2300-2200), Troy IV (2200-2000) and Troy V (2000-1750). This engages well with the established timeline of the site, but in discussing each in only a small number of paragraphs, offers the briefest of glimpses before moving on. In reality each could have been a chapter in its own right, with a much fuller exploration of the evidence that we can see in the archaeological record. Chapter 6 looks at the site in the Late Bronze Age and here Mac Sweeney argues well that it is now that Troy reaches its strongest and most dominant position. The archaeological evidence is more substantial, and consequently the narrative journey through the site feels fuller, if still a touch too descriptive. Mac Sweeney provides windows into Troy VI (1750-1300) and Troy VIIa (1300-1180) and poses useful questions over the role of trade and import (53-54). Although effort is made to place Troy into a wider geographical and political sphere, this is not entirely successful (e.g. 59-60).

The following chapters are the strongest in the book. In Chapter 7 Mac Sweeney turns to the Dark Age (1180-900) and provides a highly convincing interpretation of the confusing archaeological evidence. The questions asked here of the destruction, abandonment and reuse of the site allow for a persuasive narrative of the city to be presented. Chapter 8 looks to Troy in the Greek World (900-335) and again provides an excellent examination of the city through Geometric, Archaic and Classical periods. Mac Sweeney demonstrates well here the Trojan myth existing beyond the shores of the Dardanelles and deep in the Greek heartlands; and that this began to alter and modify the actual city itself (e.g. 75-78). This is also then placed against the construction of Greek identity and the notion of difference (80-82). The final two chapters in Part 2 look to the Hellenistic (334-85 BC) and Roman worlds (85 BC to the 7th century AD). These are very strong chapters that integrate very well the different types of evidence, archaeological and historical. In discussing the Temple of Athena (88-90) Mac Sweeney asks an important question of the Trojans themselves: “Why did the Trojans of the Hellenistic period seek to replicate the sculptural scheme of a famous temple in Athens?” This is all the more bizarre when we recognise this is long after the period of Athenian imperial dominance. The analysis of Troy in the Roman Empire (although

moving a touch too quickly through the imperial dynasties) demonstrates how the idea of Troy became important to the early Julio-Claudian emperors, and consequently they involved themselves in civic building projects within the city (99-109).

Part 3 moves away from the archaeology to consider the ideas of Troy, and its legacy. There are moments here to praise. The engagement with Jacopo Tintoretto's 16th-century image of Helen is emotive and persuasive (131-132), and the 20th-century war poetry is analyzed with great care. However, it is unclear how each of these chapters works together towards a cohesive whole. Chapter 11 looks at the use of Troy as a national creation myth, but this all needed to be set out against the classical ethnography and the medieval manuscript evidence. It is refreshing to see Fredegar and the Franks discussed, but their awareness of Troy (and so too the Carolingians) was coming predominantly from engagement with Rome. This is accepted, in part, but not explored as fully as needed (116). This chapter also would have benefitted from a greater discussion of the methodology surrounding the selection of these varied sources. Chapters 12 and 13 look to love and war, but the inclusion for each needed to be defended more fully in the opening to Part 3 (111-112). The conclusion (Chapter 14) provides a fluent summary that responds well to the opening, with Mac Sweeney's final lines capturing the efforts and limitations of the book: "Troy, like the greatest of cities, the greatest of stories, and the greatest of symbols, defies categorisation. Understanding it is a quest of a lifetime" (153).

This work is ambitious, extensive and impressive. Although there are criticisms to be found, this is a fluent examination of the city of Troy, and one that contains vast amounts of information and observations in what is a thin volume. It charts the history of Troy and shines a light on its importance as cultural icon in western history. The discussions of the city from the Dark Age through to the Roman period are strong, and allow the twisting uncertain remains to be set firmly in their civic backdrop. The awareness of how and why Troy mattered to past societies and continues to matter for us today is useful. It is then a very useful exploration of the ancient city, a city that still captivates the Western imagination.

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