

Actually, I can't tell you the truth behind the famous legend; but I can tell you about some of the guesses scholars have made, and vote for the one that seems most plausible to me.

To refresh your memories: the Greeks, after ten years' hard fighting at Troy, pretended to give up and go home. As an offering to Athena, whose temple sat on the acropolis of Troy, they constructed a large wooden horse. Leaving it behind, they embarked in their ships and sailed away. A man named Sinon stayed behind and allowed himself to be captured by the Trojans. He pretended that he had run away from the Greeks, who were going to execute him on a false charge of treason. In response to their questioning, Sinon told the Trojans that the Greeks had indeed gone home, and that if they should take the horse into their city and offer it to Athena, they could never be defeated. The prophetess Cassandra, doomed by Apollo never to be believed by anyone, warned the Trojans it was a trick; but Apollo's curse ensured they would not listen. Laokoon, a priest of Apollo, was not deceived. To show that something might be hidden inside the horse, he hurled his spear against it. The clash of armour heard from within as the javelin struck should have persuaded the Trojans to think twice, but they were still deluded by their hopes of peace, and when Poseidon later sent a pair of sea-serpents to devour Laokoon and his two sons their hopes seemed justified. So they brought the horse into the city, knocking down part of its wall to do so. That night, as the Trojans were celebrating the end of the war, Sinon let a small band of Greeks out of the horse; these slaughtered the guards and opened the gates for the rest of the army, which had snuck back under darkness from the nearby island of Tenedos. The bloody sack of a defenseless Troy, memorably described by Vergil in the second book of the *Aeneid*, followed.

Various explanations have been advanced for this curious tale of a trick that took Troy after ten years' valiant fighting had failed — a trick so transparent, in fact, that the gods had to intervene to make sure it worked. A rather complicated and unlikely explanation was offered by G.M.A. Hanfmann in 1958. He argued from archaeological evidence that after Troy fell to the Mycenaean Greeks it underwent a further invasion of Thracian horsemen. These two events were then conflated in popular memory, and some such saying as "Troy fell before a horse" was in circulation. In addition, the Greeks knew of a Hittite religious procession conducting a figure of a god upon a bronze horse to his temple. The Hittite empire ended in Anatolia (roughly modern Turkey) about 1190 B.C., not long after the fall of Troy. This horse, as well as the god upon it, had magical powers

and was the object of divine worship. Hanfmann here recalls the story in Herodotos and the second book of Plato's *Republic* of the Lydian Gyges (Lydia being a former part of the Hittite empire) who found a magical ring; this ring made him invisible and allowed him to sneak into the royal palace, seduce the queen, and take over the kingdom. The ring was found on a skeleton inside a bronze horse in the ground. Hanfmann thinks that somehow all these elements got put together into the story of the Trojan Horse, which was accompanied by procession into Troy, and had within it the power to bring the kingdom down.

In 1981 L.R. Palmer drew attention to Linear B tablets recording sacrifices to a figure "Embarcation," with a reference to "Horse" in the vicinity. The Linear B tablets are records and accounts found in various Mycenaean centres, and are contemporary with the Trojan War. "Embarcation" would be a divine figure of a familiar type, a personification of an important aspect of people's lives—in this case, getting on board ship to make a voyage, always a perilous business in antiquity. Sacrifice was offered to ensure a safe return. Was "Horse" sacrificed to as well? Poseidon, the later god of the sea, was also god of horses. If it was regular practice to sacrifice to "Horse" (Poseidon) and "Embarcation" upon setting out to sea, early legends would surely have said that "Horse" was offered sacrifice before the greatest voyage of all, the expedition to Troy. Somehow this was transformed over the centuries into a story that "Horse" also helped secure the object of the Mycenaean expedition, that is, the destruction of Troy. Interesting though this theory is, however, it involves a good deal of speculation, and does not seem sufficient to explain the many details of the developed tale.

Uvo Hölscher has pointed out that a magical horse is found in many folktales giving crucial help to the hero. The winged horse Pegasus, upon which Bellerophon rode, is the main example in Greek myth. In a Russian story, such a horse is said to fly over the "inconquerable walls" of a fortress and break open the doors of the dungeon with its hooves, thereby enabling the hero to rescue the princess. Although suggestive, the parallel between such stories and that of the Trojan Horse is not exact: in the case of Troy we are dealing not with a single hero, but a whole army; not with rescuing a princess, but the sack of a city; not with a supernatural horse, but a trick.

Nonetheless, looking to stories with similar structures or purposes is a promising tactic. Following suggestions of W. Burkert, C. Faraone in a recent book has described the Trojan Horse as a kind of talisman gone wrong. A talisman is a holy statue upon which the fate of a city depends; the Trojans originally had one called the Palladion, but the Greeks had already stolen it. The Trojans were deceived into thinking that the horse was a replacement. There is a suggestively similar story in which a bull is

fed madness-causing foods and led to sacrifice in full view of an enemy army. The bull, driven mad, escapes the priests and bolts for the enemy. This is interpreted by them as a wonderful omen; they sacrifice the bull with great celebration, eat the meat, go mad, and are thus rendered easy victims for their foes. Both stories in turn are similar to the "scapegoat" ritual, in which the sins and pollutions of the people are ceremoniously transferred to a victim (human or animal) which is then driven away. The ritual is one of purification. In times of war one drives the victim with all its pollution in the direction of the enemy, thus combining purification of oneself with execration of one's foe. Other stories speak of sending artificial animals stuffed with drugs and magical potions. Such rituals or tricks guarantee the destruction of the enemy.

There have been other guesses too: the horse is a confused reminiscence of Oriental siege-machines; it is a fanciful elaboration of an animal-headed battering-ram; or it is really a hobby-horse used to test young heroes in their rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. Personally I would vote for the Burkert-Faraone theory. Although we must allow for a certain amount of inexplicable detail, especially since these stories were subject to imaginative re-working by generations of gifted story-tellers, the tales these scholars adduce seem to offer the largest number of suggestive parallels to the familiar story of the Trojan Horse. From some such context, we can well imagine, the story of Troy's fateful mistake grew.