# MYCENAEAN FISHING IN TROUBLED WATERS

EDMUND F. BLOEDOW

In recent years the Trojan War has continued to figure in the forefront of debate. One of the crucial questions still at issue is whether there was indeed a War at all. For the 'believers', the results of the American excavations between 1932 and 1938 and the authority of Carl Blegen did much to bolster their position. On one question, however, the Cincinnati Expedition did not seem to shed decisive light —the motivation for the War, although the results of those investigations have been exploited to this end in various ways. It is the object of this brief discussions to examine more closely one such attempt.

In a recent study of the archaeological evidence which sought to investigate the possibility and extent of commercial and demographic interrelations between the Aegean and Anatolia, the thesis was advanced in connection with Troy that, despite the very considerable amount of Mycenaean pottery discovered there, this cannot be taken as an indication of a Mycenaean settlement; nor, although it was Troy's position that led the Mycenaeans thither, was it commerce that constituted the attraction —but fish[1]. According to this theory, the Mycenaean fleet will have sailed to the Hellespont each summer, set up camp in the Troad, and from that base proceeded to catch and dry fish. Even the pottery can be made to square with this view, namely the high proportion of open shapes in the Mycenaean ware, types less frequently exported. Most important, however, this theory 'has interesting repercussions concerning the possible causes of the Trojan War'[2].

This is indeed a novel and attractive idea, but on what evidence does it rest? Semple, in a study published about half a century ago pointed out that, when the rivers along the Mediterranean coast dry up in May and June, mackerel and tunny migrate to the Black Sea, where

[1] Ch. Mee, "Aegean Trade and Settlement in Anatolia in the Second Millennium B.C.", *AS* 28, 1978, 121-155.

[2] *Ibid.*, 148.

they spawn, and then return again between August and October[3]. These the Mycenaeans, as well as the Trojans, will have caught with nets in the narrows of either the Hellespont or the Bosporus —or both. That there was a fishing industry in antiquity, is 'well attested' (Aristotle, *Hist. Anim.* VIII 12-13). Most important, however, 'there can be no doubt that the prehistoric Trojans were active fishermen',the reason being that 'tunny bones occur in every settlement'[4].

Does the evidence thus interpreted in fact suffice to support the idea of the Mycenaeans being enticed chiefly by this factor, and, secondly, does it support the notion that the Trojan War may have had its roots in rivalry over 'fishing rights'?

To take the Mycenaeans first, unfortunately the bone material discovered by Schliemann during the excavations at Mycenae and Tiryns has never been published, indeed it porbably was never kept. Nor does there appear to be anyting in the Linear B tablets that would point in the direction suggested. Consequently, it is impossible, on the basis of the archaeological evidence from the Mycenaean homeland, to demonstrate that fishing was in any way a factor in motivation that took the Mycenaeans to the Troad.

A possible clue, however, could be the degree to which the Trojans may have depended on tunny (and mackerel) for their food supply. If the quantities of such bones were sufficiently high, a reasonably good case could be made out for something like a 'tunny war'. As Mee argues, tunny bones were found in 'every settlement'. The fundamental question, however, concerns the actual quantities that were discovered. In addition, there are other factors which need to be taken into account.

To begin with the latter, no mackerel bones have been identified, not even tentatively. Secondly, the identification of *Thunnus* never seems to be entirely certain, but is usually identified as 'probably' or 'possibly' or *'thunnus* (?)'[5]

[3] E. Semple, *The Geography of the Mediterranean Region —Its Relation to Ancient History*,London 1932, 214.

[4] Ch. Mee, *AS* 28, 1978, 148.

[5] The aminal bones from Troy were studied by N.-G. GEJVALL (cf. C.W. Blegen, C.G. Boulter, J.L. Caskey, M. Rawson and J. Sperling, *Troy. General Introduction, First and Second Settlements,* Vol. I, 1, Princeton, N.J., 1950, 17, 18).

But even if, for the sake of argument, we accept the identification of *Thunnus*, what of the question of quantities? Unfortunately, Blegen and his colleagues never give the precise number of bones discovered. On the other hand, they usually do give the proportionate quantities. From this emerges that possible *Thunnus* ranks low, compared with the other species. In those instances, e.g., where quantities are indicated 'in order of frequency', the following pattern emerges (excluding shells):

| Phase | No of species cited | Position of Thunnus |
|---|---|---|
| Troy Ie | 6 | Last |
| Troy Ij | 7 | Sixth |
| Troy II | 8 | Last |
| Troy III | 12 (Square E6) | Ninth |
| | 10 (Street 308) | Eighth |
| | 14 (House 300) | Eleventh |
| Troy V | 10 | Ninth |
| Troy VI | 11 | Tenth[6] |

This pattern is further accentuated when we consider the areas where *Thunnus* was found in relation to those where it was not found, and these two in relation to the total number of areas excavated. Taking the specific areas excavated for which finds are separately listed and discussed, we obtain the following breakdown:

[6] It is worth noting that in Troy III (Street 309, Square E6), *Thunnus* seems to be less frequent than such species as *Testudo, Lepus* and *Felis;* in Street 308, less frequent than *Testudo* and *Lepus,* and standing midway between these and *Felis* and *Capreolis;* in Room 300, it stands after *Lepus, Testudo, Canis* and *Castor* (C.W. Blegen, J.L. Caskey and M. Rawson, *Troy. The Third, Fourth and Fifth Settlements,* Vol. II, 1, Princeton, N.J., 1951, 38, 46, 68).

| Phase | No. of areas reporting finds | No. of areas reporting bones | *Thunnus* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Troy I | 46 | 16 | 2 |
| Troy II | 40 | 19 | 1 |
| Troy III | 11 | 9 | 3 |
| Troy IV | 38 | 13 | 0 |
| Troy V | 12 | 8 | 1 |
| Troy VI | 66 | 32 | 1 (?) |
| Troy VII | 42 | 10 | 0 |

Given the fact that Troy VII is the phase contemporary with the period in which the Trojan War has chiefly been dated[7], the circumstances in this phase are particularly apt. Here, all the bones which have been reported fall in VIIa, but what emerges as crucial is that no *Thunnus* at all are reported for VIIa.

What follows from the above, is that there do not appear to be any grounds to conclude that tunny formed part of the vital interests of the Trojans. In addition, Homer never seems to use either θύννος or σκόμβρος in connection with either the Achaenas or the Trojans, althought these terms, together with their cognates, are found not infrequently elsewhere in Greek literature.

In view of this, one may conclude that neither the archaeological nor the literary evidence supports the idea of the Mycenaeans being lured to the Hellespont chiefly to engage in fishing, much less that the Trojan War was essentially, or in any sense, a fish war[8].

[7] That is, by those who have accepted that there was in fact a Trojan War.

[8] The above is but one in a number of attempts to explain the motivation behind the Trojan War as due to 'economic' factors. This is indeed a very plausible cause, but the question cannot be discussed here. The whole subject of the Trojan War will be treated in a broadlybased forthcoming study.