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WEEKLY 21 May 2016

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Trojan war final act in world war zero

Colin Barras

THE Trojan war was perhaps grander than even Homer would have us believe. In fact, the epic conflict may have been a final act in what one archaeologist has dubbed “world war zero” – an event he claims brought the eastern Mediterranean world to its knees 3200 years ago.

And the catalyst? The Luwians – a mysterious and arguably powerful civilisation overlooked by archaeologists. So says Eberhard Zangger, head of the non-profit foundation, Luwian Studies, in Zurich, Switzerland.

The story goes like this. By the second millennium BC, civilisation had taken hold in the eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptian New Kingdom coexisted with the Hittites of central Anatolia and the Mycenaeans of Greece. Then in little more than a generation, all of them had collapsed. Was the culprit climate change? Earthquakes? Social unrest? Experts can't agree.

Zangger says that's because one crucial piece of the puzzle is missing: the Luwian civilisation in western Anatolia played a

crucial role in the downfall. And he has built a case. The literature shows that western Anatolia was rich in mineral and metal ore deposits, making it an important region in antiquity, he thinks.

Through studies of satellite imagery, Zangger has found that the area was densely populated.

Only a handful of the 340 large city-like sites he has identified have been excavated.

“Some of these sites are so large you can see them from space,” says Zangger. “There's so much waiting to be found, it's really just mind-boggling.”

We know from Hittite texts that the Luwian cities sometimes formed coalitions powerful enough to attack the Hittite empire. Zangger thinks that 3200 years ago the Luwians did just that and destroyed the Hittites.

Shortly after, Egyptian texts

document an attack force they termed the “Sea People”. Zangger thinks these were also Luwians, continuing their campaign for wealth and power and, in the process, destabilising the Egyptian New Kingdom.

The Mycenaeans, perhaps anticipating an attack on their territory, formed a grand coalition of their own, says Zangger. They sailed across the Aegean and attacked the Luwians, destroying key cities like Troy – events immortalised in Homer's *Iliad*.

On returning to Greece, in the sudden absence of other threats, Zangger believes the Mycenaeans squabbled and fell into civil war.

Other archaeologists praise Zangger for bringing attention to this region, but question his grander conclusions.

“He's really getting the ball rolling to do larger holistic studies of the area,” says Christoph Bachhuber at the University of Oxford. “Archaeologists will need to discover similar examples of monumental art and architecture across western Anatolia and ideally texts from the same sites to support Zangger's claim of a civilisation.”

The textual evidence available is from after the Bronze Age and can be interpreted as supporting or undermining Zangger's theory, says Ilya Yakubovich, a historical linguist at the University of Marburg, Germany. ■



FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY

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