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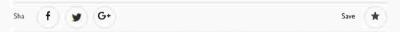
'World War Zero' wiped out empires 3,000 years ago

Oliver Moody, Science Correspondent

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The siege of Troy was merely the last battle in a great conflict, it is argued FINE ART IMAGES/HERITAGE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES



Babies hurled from battlements; priestesses raped at the altars of their gods; virgins sacrificed over the graves of warriors.

The end of the Trojan War is violent enough in the Greek myths — but what if truth were bloodier than legend? A new book claims that the siege was only the last chapter of a Bronze Age "Zeroth World War" that brought down three empires in the space of a couple of generations.

Eberhart Zangger, a Swiss geo-archaeologist, argues that civilisation across the eastern Mediterranean was broken and plunged into a dark age by a shadowy alliance of cities in what is now western Turkey. He believes that the sack of Troy in about 1200BC was merely the coda to a wave of invasions that devastated Mycenaean Greece, the Hittite empire and the Egyptian New Kingdom. The collapse of these superpowers around the end of the 13th century BC is one of the enduring mysteries of ancient history.

It is clear that cities and palaces were razed in a spasm of conflict stretching from the Red Sea to the Peloponnese. Yet the rest is largely unknown, save for what little can be gleaned from Greek myths and a few cryptic references in Egyptian inscriptions to a warlike force known as the "Sea Peoples".

Dr Zangger believes these were the Luwians, a little-known group of states in Anatolia whom he claims joined forces and went on the rampage, triggering a ripple of social upheaval that unseated the most powerful rulers of the age.

In *The Luwian Civilisation: The Missing Link in the Aegean Bronze Age*, he sets out more than 340 possible Luwian city sites and suggests that the Trojan War was really a pre-emptive strike by the Greeks.

"The Trojan War described by Homer and other ancient authors was a counterattack against the previously victorious Sea Peoples," he writes. "[It] was not fought to release a kidnapped woman, as Homer tells his audience, but more likely to gain access to mineral resources and trade routes. Troy may not even have been the focal point of this encounter; instead it was merely the scene of the last battle in this great conflict."

Other authorities on the period said that the theory was interesting but too simplistic. Many historians believe that the late Bronze Age collapse was caused by a combination of climate change, chaotic migrations and social unrest.

John Bennet, director of the British School at Athens and a former colleague of Dr Zangger, said the real problem was explaining why the sprawling empires had failed to recover from the setbacks.

Borja Legarra Herrero, teaching fellow in Mediterranean archaeology at University College London, said there was little concrete evidence that the Luwians amounted to more than a group of peoples who happened to share the same language family.

He added: "The use of 'World War Zero'... plants a modern political state configuration 3,000 years in the past. The whole collapse of the Bronze Age systems is a much more complex phenomenon."



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