In Search of Heinrich Schliemann

Geoffrey Arnott

Controversy and scandal buzz around Heinrich Schliemann, the archaeologist who dug at Troy and Mycenae, and died just over a hundred years ago on Boxing Day, 1890. University teachers in his time called him 'half-insane and confused, with no idea of the meaning of his excavations,' and 'a young Mecklenberg peasant, who's outsmarted the professors.' Today opinion is divided between those who think he was one of the great pioneers of modern archaeology, and those who brand him as a liar and a criminal. What is the truth?

The problem was partly his personal background. He came from Mecklenberg, a backward part of north-east Germany (the German statesman Bismarck said 'when the world ends, it will end three months later in Mecklenberg'). His family should have been socially acceptable (his father was a Lutheran minister), but disaster haunted his early life. His mother died when he was nine, and he was boarded out with unloved relations. Shortly afterwards, his father was found in bed with a maidservant. Family disgrace and subsequent poverty forced young Schliemann to leave school at fourteen and earn money as a shop-assistant.

The shady businessman

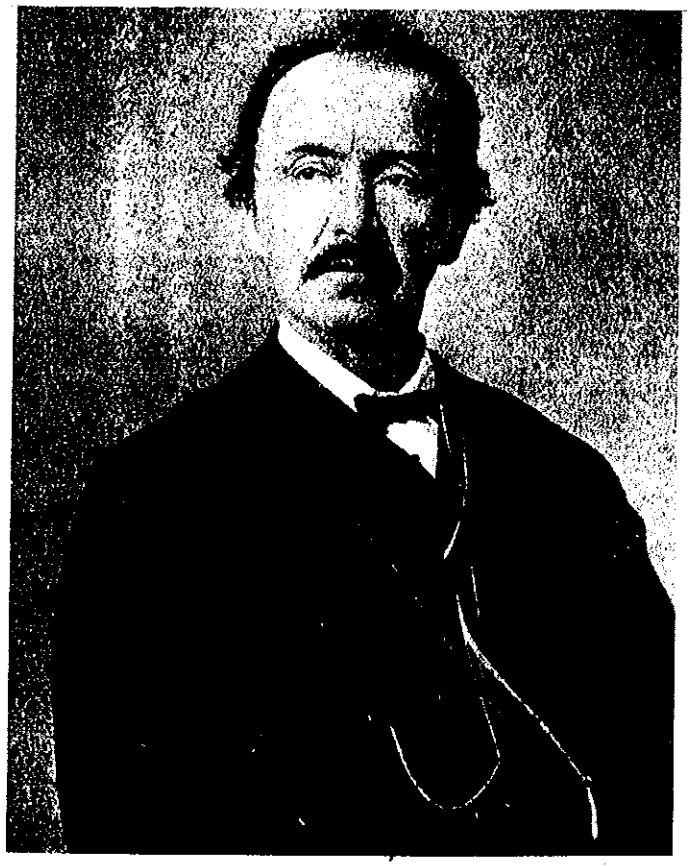
His formal education, with little Latin and no Greek, had ended. Although he tried to make up for this later by privately studying languages and then taking courses in his forties at the University of Paris, he was always loathed by social superiors and professors in Germany for his lack of education and polish, for his provincial dialect, his boorish behaviour and the sharp practice that you'd expect from a shady businessman. In fact before he was forty he had made a huge fortune by trading, mainly in Russia, and it is likely that his energy there and sound business sense were backed up with dishonest practices.

Fraud too can be detected in Schliemann's private life. In Russia he'd married a local beauty, and in his early forties, when ill health persuaded him to leave Russia and retire from business, he wanted a divorce. To secure this he firstly obtained American citizenship with lies about the length of time he'd been in America, and then got his divorce in Indiana with lies about how long he had lived there.

A fantastic life

Schliemann also indulged in private fantasies, dreaming of what might have been and then confusing dream and reality in the accounts that he published about his own life. This creates a major problem for a biographer. Most of what we think we know about Schliemann comes from his own writings: letters, diaries, books, a brief autobiography. The accounts that Schliemann gives of his early life too often mix fact and fantasy.

For example, in his autobiography he tells how at the age of seven he was given as a Christmas present a book with an engraving of Aeneas escaping from a burning, high-walled Troy. He and his father discussed the picture, and Schliemann ends the anecdote by writing 'at last we both agreed that I should one day excavate Troy.' The clear implication is that Schliemann's wish to be an archaeologist went back to early childhood, but a letter that he wrote at the age of 46 to his father (now banished to a remote parish in East



Prussia, with a new wife and family) gives a very different account of that childhood experience with the Trojan engraving: 'when as a ten-year-old boy I sent to you the history of the Trojan War as a Christmas present, I never thought that thirty six years later I would tread the same ground.' Schliemann had visited the area round Troy for the first time in the summer of 1868, and that was when he first decided to excavate Troy.

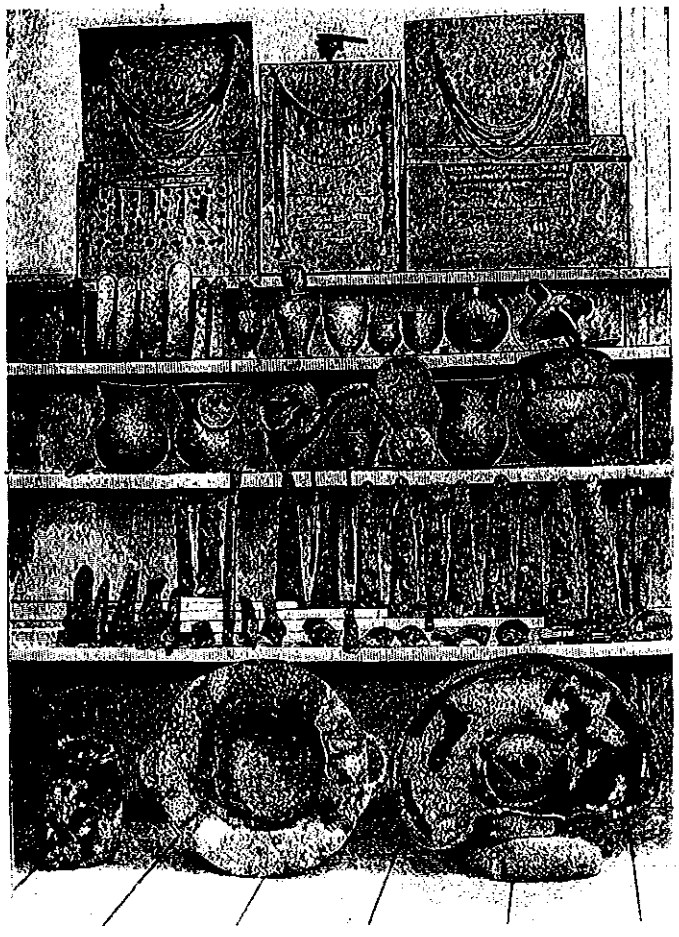
Too much can be made of such discrepancies. It's common for people to romanticise their childhood, especially when their early years have been marked by tragedy, and in Schliemann's time the rules for writing autobiographies did not demand an exact adherence to the truth. Yet if such fantasies find their way also into an archaeologist's excavation reports, they destroy one's trust in the accuracy of his records and in the quality of his achievements.

The great discoveries

So what were his achievements? Up to the age of 41 he was a businessman intent on making money. Then he spent several years in study (the elements of archaeology included) and travel. His serious excavations, which he always financed himself out of the interest from his own investments, began in 1870 when he was 48. In north-west Turkey he excavated the hill of Hissarlik, which he identified as Homer's Troy, first between 1870 and 1873, and later in 1878-79, 1882 and 1890, revealing many of the town's walls, gates and buildings, showing how the town had been rebuilt

The hill Hissarlik in 1894 seen from the north.

several times with each new construction laid over the foundations of the previous one, and discovering on one golden day (31 May 1873) a remarkable treasure of gold and silver vessels and gold tiaras which he wrongly thought belonged to Priam, the king of Troy in Homer's *Iliad*.



A contemporary print of Priam's Treasure on display.

In the summer and autumn of 1876 Schliemann dug at Mycenae in Greece, clearing the so-called 'Tomb of Clytemnestra' and the inside of the Lion Gate, and uncovering a royal cemetery whose shaft graves yielded another spectacular series of finds: gold diadems and necklaces, gold and silver vessels, a bronze dagger-blade inlaid in gold and silver with a representation of a lion hunt, golden death masks, and many other treasures. Schliemann wrongly believed that all these came from the graves of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek expedition against Troy, and his associates. In 1884 and 1885 he laid bare the floor of the Mycenean palace of Tiryns, seven miles from Mycenae, and there too made amazing discoveries such as the wall-painting of a boy leaping over the back of a bull. It is on these excavations that Schliemann's reputation is mainly based. How high does that reputation deserve to be?

A flawed excavator

Schliemann's work had faults. First, the accuracy of his excavation reports can occasionally be questioned, most seriously with regard to Troy. The account of how he came to identify Hissarlik as the site of Homer's Troy, rather than another hill further to the south, is dishonest. Schliemann claims that he himself worked out the reasons for his identification, but in fact he seems to have been persuaded more by the arguments of an Englishman, Frank Calvert, who had previously investigated the site at Hissarlik. Schliemann goes on to describe the help that his second wife gave him in helping to carry the Trojan treasure to safety in her apron. This is a lie; at the time of this discovery his wife was in Athens. Schliemann's fiction here may simply be romantic window-dressing to make his story more interesting, with a detail of no archaeological significance; but how many more such fictions lie undetected in his reports?

Secondly, his archaeological techniques were at first primitive and amateurish, although they improved as he gained experience, especially when he was aided by the German archaeologist Wilhelm Dörpfeld in the 1880's. Schliemann's initial plan at Troy was to drive a wide trench from north to south through the site, removing everything that lay on top of what he thought were the levels of Homer's Troy. This involved the destruction of many ruins of later buildings, such as a very fine council chamber of the fourth century B.C. The same thing happened at Mycenae. The accusation that Schliemann excavated a site as if he were digging potatoes is thus not wholly unjustified.

A third major fault was the result of Schliemann's passionate love for the poems of Homer. He believed that these poems were true historical documents, and he wanted to identify the things which he found at the appropriate levels in his excavations with objects and people mentioned by Homer. Thus he thought that the great treasure which he uncovered at Troy originally belonged to king Priam, and that the royal graves he found at Mycenae were those of Agamemnon and his associates. In fact the Trojan treasure is now known to date about a thousand years before Priam, and the graves at Mycenae about three hundred years before Agamemnon — that is, if Priam and Agamemnon ever existed and the Trojan War was a historical event.

The fortifications of Troy VI being excavated in 1894.

The abiding achievements

On the credit side we can list at least an equal number of positive achievements. There are the finds themselves: the walls, gates and gold at Troy, the royal cemetery at Mycenae and all its treasures, the wall-painting at Tiryns, for a start. These were tremendous. Although Schliemann was not the first man to discover and identify bronze-age sites in Greece and Asia Minor, his finds were certainly more important than those of any contemporary archaeologist working in the area.

Secondly, despite his crude techniques in digging, at Troy he was able to recognise and separate the various levels at which each new city had been built on the foundations of the one before, and by studying carefully the pottery which he found in each level he attempted to work out the dates of each destruction and reconstruction. Of course he made mistakes here, but he had the humility to admit and correct those mistakes whenever necessary. At first he thought that the third level (which he called the burnt city) was the Troy of Homer's poem. Later he realised that this level was only the end phase of the second level. Finally in the year that he died Dörpfeld and he discovered evidence linking the sixth level with Homer's Troy, and they planned to test this evidence with excavations in the following year.

Thirdly, Schliemann did everything in his power to find the true explanations of his finds. He always recognised that an archaeologist's main function is to ask questions. Schliemann's attempts to find the correct answers were not always successful, but he went to great lengths to secure the information necessary for an answer. He searched the European museums for material comparable to his finds at Troy. He corresponded with experts throughout the world on problems he felt unable to cope with himself. And his own scholarship and powers of intuition deserve recognition. At Mycenae he discovered fragments of the 'Warrior Vase', on which there is a painting of a line of soldiers, watched by a woman at the side. Part of the woman has broken off and been lost, but Schliemann impressively identified her gesture from the remaining portion as one of prayer; the soldiers were marching off on an expedition, and she was presumably praying for their safe return.

Finally, whenever possible the finds and other details of his excavations were carefully recorded in full, and then published in newspaper articles and a series of books with remarkable speed.

The balance seems to come down in his favour. Despite the admitted inadequacies in training, technique and interpretation, and despite in his private life the dishonesty which casts some doubts over the reliability of his archaeological records, Schliemann deserves a high reputation. He was a pioneer working in the early days of organised excavation. He attempted to make coherent sense of his discoveries even if he did not always succeed. And the finds (including the Trojan treasure, which disappeared from a Berlin bunker in 1945 only to be rediscovered early this year in a secret Russian store) remain. The shadow cast by doubts over his veracity should not be allowed to eclipse the merit of his achievements.

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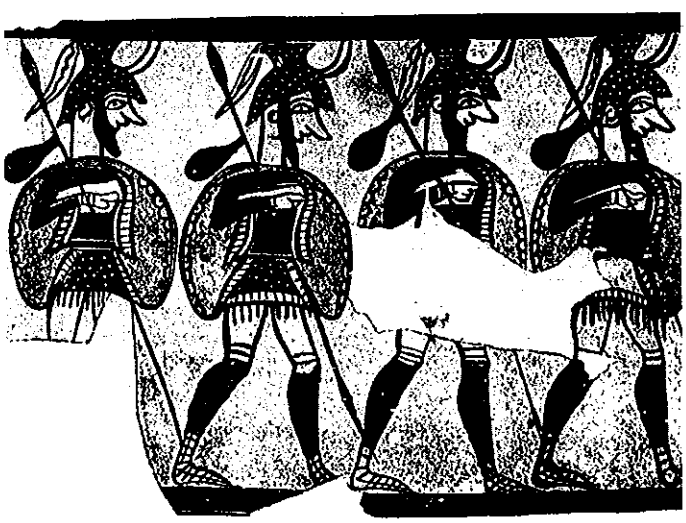
Heinrich and Sophia Schliemann at the exhibition of his Trojan treasure in Berlin.



Part of the warrior vase found by Schliemann at Mycenae.

Whose treasure is it now?

The recovery of 'Priam's treasure' has raised a complex question about who the treasure belongs to now. The treasure was found in the Soviet Union, where it had been taken after the end of the Second World War, along with certain other treasures from the Berlin Museum. Should the treasure now return to Berlin? Schliemann had certainly given the gold of Troy to the German people in 1881, and legally speaking the Berlin Museum may have a claim on the treasure that would be upheld in a court of law. But what right had Schliemann to give away the treasure? The man who is currently excavating again at Troy, Manfred Korfmann from Tübingen, believes that there is a moral duty to return the newly rediscovered treasure to Turkey.