

Heinrich Schliemann

Fran O'Rourke

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Walking through the site of ancient Troy last month my thoughts turned to Heinrich Schliemann, the German archaeologist who in the late nineteenth century discovered the lost city of Homer. The story of the Trojan War had captivated the popular imagination for millennia and enticed explorers to search for the location of the famed conflict. Some doubted the place ever existed, claiming Homer invented the epic account of the ten-year siege of the city by the Greeks, described in the *Iliad*.

Growing up in the small town of Ankershagen in northern Germany, Heinrich Schliemann was fascinated by the legends of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Or so he claimed. But like Homer's classic account, Schliemann's own story blended epic achievement with mythic invention. He stated that at the age of seven he vowed to one day discover the lost city of Troy.

In fact Schliemann's interest in archaeology only emerged in middle age. It was after he had accumulated enormous wealth that he turned his attention to the classical learning which he was deprived of as a boy. His father, a Lutheran minister, was sacked for embezzling church funds and Heinrich left school to work in a grocery shop. At the age of nineteen he walked over two hundred kilometers to Hamburg, where he became a cabin boy on a ship bound for Venezuela. The ship sank in a gale off the coast of Holland. Schliemann survived by clinging to an empty barrel. Drifting ashore he was fitted out by a farmer with a pair of clogs, torn trousers and woolen cap. Arriving in Amsterdam he sought help from the German consul, Herr Quack, before finding employment at a counting house in the city on the Amstel. There he worked tirelessly, spending his spare time learning the languages that would equip him for international business. He became fluent in English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.

When asked if he could translate some letters that had arrived from Moscow, he replied: “Give me a few weeks!” He soon wrote his first business letter to a Russian agent and at the age of twenty-five settled in St Petersburg where he earned enormous wealth by acquiring a monopoly in indigo. During the Crimean war he later captured the market of salpetre, an ingredient necessary for gunpowder. When he eventually made it to America he further increased his wealth in the Californian gold rush.

Unhappily married, through false papers he secured a divorce in Indiana. With his sole aim now the search for Troy, he requested an Orthodox priest to find him a Greek wife who would share his passion for the ancient world. In Athens he married the seventeen year old Sophia Engastromenou. Their marriage was a happy one; Sophia worked by his side on the excavations and bore him a son and daughter.

In Turkey, Schliemann explored the area traditionally associated with Troy, but at the suggestion of Frank Calvert, an English expat who owned land in the area, began to excavate a mound in Hisarlik. He soon found what he claimed was the historic Troy. Unlike present day archaeologists who work with a soft brush and trowel, Schliemann removed layer upon layer of earth by the barrowful. He got into trouble with the Ottoman authorities over his licence to excavate and accusations that he smuggled artefacts out of Turkey. By a supposed lucky coincidence on the eve of his departure he unearthed an exquisite collection of gold jewelry and ornaments, which he baptized “Priam’s Treasure” after the legendary king of Troy. Wishing to romanticise the tale, he claimed his wife transported it in her shawl to avoid the authorities. A famous photograph shows the bejeweled Sophia wearing a panoply of diadem, earrings and necklace.

The Ottoman government pursued Schliemann for his booty, which he secretly transported to Greece and eventually gifted to the Berlin Society for Prehistory. At the end of WWII the so-called “Priam’s Treasure” was transported by the Red Army to Moscow, where for almost half

a century it lay hidden in the vaults of the Pushkin Museum. In 1994 Russia invited international scholars to view the collection. Although it was not Priam's treasure, but a cache from a period some 1,200 years earlier, it was an extraordinary moment for the world of archaeology.

Although he made other amazing discoveries in Greece, particularly at Mycenae, from where Agamemnon led the Greeks to recapture Helen, Heinrich Schliemann is most famous as the one who discovered Troy. He has been criticised by later archaeologists for his excavation methods and his unreliable documentation, but also recognised as the father of Mediterranean archaeology. Among his admirers were William Gladstone who popularized his discoveries in Britain, and Sigmund Freud, who confessed that Schliemann was the only person whose life he envied.

Heinrich Schliemann was born two hundred years ago on January 6th 1822.