

## Schliemann's initial views on Homer: Biographical, literary, and touristic origins of a cultivated image of *naïveté*

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Was Schliemann's initial belief in the historicity of Homer in reality the romantically naïve conviction that has come to be commonly associated with his name? The unquestioned view is that at the outset of his archaeological career Schliemann considered the Homeric tales to relate events just as they had actually happened. After all, he admits in *Troy and its Remains* (1875) that he had initially believed in Homer "as in the Gospel itself".<sup>1</sup> Seemingly unshakable proof of an utterly naïve belief in the historicity of Homer is found in his first work on archaeology, *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* (1869). Schliemann recounts his Ithacan excavations on Mt. Aetos beginning with the site of Odysseus' bedroom; after relating Homer's description of the olive tree that stood in Odysseus' bedroom and from which Odysseus had constructed his marriage bed (book XXIII of the *Odyssey*), Schliemann tells us that he encountered solid rock at the depth of 66 centimetres, but "that there were many cracks into which the roots of the olive tree might have penetrated."<sup>2</sup> He then tells of how he excavated five small vases of human ash which, he tells us, might very well contain the remains of Odysseus and Penelope or their descendants.<sup>3</sup> From the Garden of Laertes to the Field of Troy, Schliemann seems unable, in this work, to view Homer as anything less than a perfect account of ancient history. Of course, Schliemann's extravagant claims regarding the Scaean Gate and Treasure of Priam at Troy during his excavations there from 1871 to 1873 are legion.

The reason why Schliemann's initial views on the historicity of Homer have never been subjected to any real scrutiny is that one has assumed them to be inferable from his publications. Now we often view schol-

ars and scientists as people who have certain well-defined convictions and then act on these convictions. Thus, in Schliemann's case, one has tended to attribute certain limitations of his early work to particular views regarding Homer that he held. Yet the evidence shows, I think, that Schliemann's highly impulsive and action-oriented nature led him to act first and think later. Nor do his writings necessarily express his actual thoughts. What he writes is often a post hoc rationalization of actions that he had earlier undertaken without any clear set of assumptions. The degree of historicity in Homer is the type of scholarly question that Schliemann had little time or intellectual capacity to clarify in his own mind prior to the act of writing and publication; it was the process of communicating his results that forced Schliemann to articulate, somewhat after the fact, something approaching a set of prior assumptions.

Let us however put aside the usual assumptions about Schliemann and begin our inquiry from scratch. Schliemann's archaeological career began in 1868 with a four-month voyage through Italy, Ithaca, the Peloponnese, and the Troad; what does his published and unpublished correspondence, as well as his unpublished travel diary tell us about his understanding of Homer prior to and during this voyage? In this paper I will present in simplified form some of the tentative conclusions that I and my collaborator David Turner have reached in the course of work on Schliemann's beginnings as an archaeologist.

By far the least understood and least digested aspect of Schliemann's initial views on the Homeric sites is that they were shaped by currents of nineteenth-century tourism. His correspondence and travel diary of 1868 leave no little doubt that Schlie-

1. Schliemann 1875, 17.

2. Schliemann 1869, 30.

3. Schliemann 1869, 32.

mann embarked on his fateful voyage as a tourist without any scholarly pretensions. As a tourist, Schliemann was interested in *curiosities*, as he had been during earlier trips. Before mentioning the types of curiosities that occupied Schliemann during his travels of 1868, I cannot resist citing a revealing letter that Schliemann had written to his Mecklenburg relatives nine years earlier from Lebanon while touring the Middle East. Certainly Schliemann is not to be faulted for reporting matter-of-factly that he had visited the graves of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Hebron; why be a skeptical spoil-sport about such stimulating sites pointed out by the guides? Yet Schliemann goes on to write: "Enclosed is also a piece of Madame Lot; that is, of the salt pillar she was transformed into when she turned around".<sup>4</sup> This sheds light on his later claim of having excavated vases containing the ashes of Odysseus and Penelope; yet the enclosure of Lot's wife is so obviously outrageous that we cannot resist asking: was it meant in earnest or as a joke? Of course, it was a joke. Yet in a broader context, this either-or question may miss precisely the point. Much of the charm of tourist curiosities such as Lot's wife lay in the voluntary suspension of skepticism that it permitted, indeed demanded of the tourist. For the tourist, there is a certain pleasure involved in taking, so to speak, a vacation from the mental rigors of differentiation and discernment that are a part of regular working life.

Let us turn now to Schliemann's voyage of 1868 which he had originally undertaken expressly as a "pleasure trip".<sup>5</sup> He left Paris at the end of April and returned in early September, spending about one month in Rome, Southern Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor, respectively. In Rome, Schliemann fills 65 pages of his diary with descriptions of the churches, villas, palaces, museums, and excavation sites that he visits. For most of his information he depended on a single source, John Murray's *Handbook of Rome and its Environs*.<sup>6</sup> Comprehending a site means knowing when it was constructed and by whom, as well as what important events took place there; not so much the thing itself, but rather the people and history connected with it - be it a temple, ancient villa, statue, or

forum - determine its significance. In his diary of 1868 he writes: "We [Schliemann and his servant] went afterward to the Palazzo Spada, where I saw again the beautiful and magnificent statue of Pompey the Great. There is no doubt that this is the very statue at whose feet Caesar fell mortally wounded, because Suetonius tells us that Augustus removed it from the Curia and placed in front of the Temple of Janus, where it was discovered; on the left leg there is a large red spot and it is said that this is Caesar's blood" (May 19). Schliemann feels no more compelled to contest the authenticity of the statue than he does the relics of Christ in the Roman churches or, in the Roman Forum, "the fig tree where Romulus and Remus were abandoned" (May 7). As a tourist, he is content to admire the city's curiosities in light of whatever scholarly determinations or popular beliefs make the sites more wondrous. Fanciful legends are no less stimulating than the scholarly certitudes.

All of this would have a fateful impact on Schliemann's approach to the archaeological remains of the Homeric age in July and August of 1868. Sifting the actual historical events from literature and legends was not to be a priority. For the tourist Schliemann, quaint stories are as pertinent as well-documented facts. Especially the Roman churches may well have reinforced his willingness to suspend rationalistic skepticism for the sake of fully immersing himself in the enchantment of the Eternal City. Thus, whereas Murray mentions "the stump of a column to which St. Bibiana is said to have been tied when she suffered martyrdom",<sup>7</sup> Schliemann, in recounting his visit to the church of Santa Bibiana, feels free to describe the object in greater detail, but without articulating the same degree of skepticism: "In an iron cage in a corner of the church is the ancient column of rosso antico, to which St. Bibiana was tied when she suffered martyrdom by being beaten with leaden balls" (May 10).<sup>8</sup> On May 18 he visits the basilica of San Paolo: "In one chapel they showed me a cross that spoke three times to St. Bridget... I went to the Church of San Paolo alle Tre Fontane. They showed me the column upon which St. Paul was beheaded. His head took three bounces and each time there sprang up a foun-

4. Meyer 1936, II0, no 4. Letter of 26 May/10 June 1859.

5. Lehrer and Turner 1989, 222.

6. Most probably the eighth edition (Murray (ed.) 1867).

7. Murray (ed.) 1867, 146.

8. Excerpts from the 1868 travel diary are translated by me from the original Italian and quoted by permission of Prof. Donald Nicol, Director of the Gennadius Library (Athens) where the diary is preserved.

tain from the pavement. These 3 fountains are still there". Again, Schliemann dispenses with Murray's disclaimer: "The interior is celebrated for the 3 fountains which we are told by the legend sprang up where the head of the apostle bounded as many times from the earth".<sup>9</sup> In sum, Schliemann is less interested in doubting the historical authenticity of such stories than Murray's *Handbook*.

Schliemann took an almost cult-like interest in at least four historical figures whose traces he records as he encounters them in Rome: Nero, Cleopatra, Beatrice Cenci, and most especially Jesus. Already in 1859 Schliemann had visited all the sites connected with Jesus in Jerusalem. Among the details of the trip that he recalls in his Italian language exercises of 1861-62 he recollects having been led to a date-palm supposedly planted by Jesus; here Schliemann did express his doubts about the plausibility of the legend. In his Roman diary entries, he does not even bother to inquire into the actual historical basis of the relics he sees. In the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano he notes "the Last Supper in bronze bas-relief and behind it the true table of the Last Supper" (May 8). In the cloisters of the basilica he inspects the so-called Measure of Christ, which Schliemann describes as "brought by St. Helena, consisting of 4 columns with a table above". He continues: "There is an altar where the priest doubted while saying mass; the host that then fell out of his hands perforated the altar and came to rest on the stone. In one wall [is] a large piece of porphyry on which the soldiers cast lots for the raiments of Christ". He copies its Latin inscription. In the basilica of Santa Croce di Gerusalemme, two days later, he notes that a piece of the True Cross is conserved there. "I did not succeed in seeing the piece of the True Cross today, but they promised to show it to me tomorrow". In the church of San Sebastiano he was shown "the impression of Christ's feet made when he was met by St. Peter who cried 'Domine quo vadis'" (May 18). In sum, Schliemann was fascinated by doubtful relics of famous figures, and it is not surprising that he should later take an interest in analogous relics of Odysseus and Priam.

Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Greece* (1854) provided Schliemann with almost all of his

information during his travels in Ithaca and the Peloponnese; his acquaintance with the scholarly literature, of which his treatise *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* gives such impressive testimony, did not begin until after his return to Paris. More importantly, Murray's *Handbook of Greece* molded Schliemann's experience in Ithaca, his first major stop in the Homeric world, as a decidedly literary one. Murray's section on Ithaca begins with a quotation from G.F. Bowen's Ithaca in 1850: "There is, perhaps, no spot in the world where the influence of classical associations is so lively or so pure as in the island of Ithaca ... Here, therefore, all our recollections are concentrated around the Heroic age; every hill and rock, every fountain and olive-grove, breathes Homer and the Odyssey; and we are transplanted by a sudden leap over a hundred generations to the most brilliant period of Greek chivalry and song".<sup>10</sup> Just how deeply this fantasy of reliving classical antiquity caught Schliemann's fancy is shown by the fact that he translated this last sentence word for word into French and, without quotation marks, incorporated it into his own description of Ithaca in *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie*.<sup>11</sup>

With Murray in hand, and before undertaking any excavations, Schliemann spent three days surveying the Homeric curiosities of Ithaca: the Castle of Odysseus on Mt. Aetos, the Cave of the Nymphs, the Fountain of Arethusa, and the Stalls of Eumaeus. He will have read in Murray that "Homer's descriptions are still as accurate in Ithaca as they are elsewhere - proving him to be the great father of History and Topography as well as of Poetry".<sup>12</sup> Of the Cave of the Nymphs Murray writes, for example: "It is highly probable that these are the very localities alluded to by Homer...".<sup>13</sup> Yet despite calling Homer "the great father of History" and declaring that the poet had been intimately acquainted with the topography of the island, Murray never equates the episodes of the *Odyssey* with historical fact and indeed Murray makes fun of scholars "professing to have seen the very mill in which Ulysses ground his corn, and the very chamber in which Penelope wove her web".<sup>14</sup> Not only in *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* did Schliemann fail to heed this warning - for reasons still to

9. Murray (ed.) 1867, 183.

10. Murray (ed.) 1854, 81.

11. Schliemann 1869, 19-20.

12. Murray (ed.) 1854, 82.

13. *Ibid.*, 84.

14. *Ibid.*, 85.

be probed -, but in his original travel diary as well. During his survey of the southern part of the island, Schliemann in his diary notes “ruins of many walls and one can easily perceive the walls of the 12 stables of the stall of Eumaeus”. Neither this statement nor his surmise regarding the scattered brick fragments “which undoubtedly came from the buildings of Eumaeus” was warranted by the information provided by Murray. Schliemann remained in “tourist mode” throughout his travels of 1868. The few critical attempts recorded in the diary at reconciling what he saw with details of the Homeric poems were feeble at best. Noting that the descent from the Stalls of Eumaeus to the Arethusa Spring “is now very precipitous and craggy for the 960 swine of Eumaeus”, Schliemann conjectures that there would have existed a wide road in antiquity. After his excavations at Pinarbaşı and most probably after his first meeting with Frank Calvert, Schliemann wrote in his travel diary: “The city was never on this site, and if it was, how could they [the Greeks] have pulled the wooden horse 2 versts from the Scaean Gate to the acropolis where there is no gate and only a very small door?”<sup>15</sup>

Yet later that same year when Schliemann was writing *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* in Paris, he had begun to change roles. After immersing himself in the scholarly literature, he was no longer the uncritical tourist that he had been during his travels. As author of a treatise that was aimed both at educated laymen and at scholars, he began to mix different styles. He played the role of a tour guide who sought to inspire awe in his readers with the descriptions of Homeric curiosities in Ithaca, the Peloponnese, and the Troad. With extensive references to ancient writers and modern-day scholars, he presented a number of arguments bearing on the identification of modern localities with places described by Homer. On top of that, Schliemann gave free rein to his literary ambitions and included a number of fictitious episodes in his published work. No reader of *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* can fail to notice the fantasy of seeing Homeric antiquity come back to life in Ithaca. The Ithacan natives are moved to tears upon hearing Schliemann tell of their ancestors’ joys and sufferings through his spontaneous translations from Homeric Greek to their modern dialect. In chap-

ter 7 he tells us that “in every peasant house of the island of Ithaca classical antiquity is seen to live again” and, lo and behold, shortly afterwards he tells of an encounter with four aggressive dogs, whose ferocity Schliemann escapes by remembering what Odysseus did under analogous circumstances.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Murray’s Handbook provided the inspiration for this fictitious episode simply underscores the extent to which Schliemann’s charming naïveté reflected, as much as anything else, a literary topos widespread in the nineteenth century.

The Northern European fantasy of reliving or recreating classical antiquity in Greece two thousand years later is attested in countless books written by nineteenth-century travelers and writers, especially those from England and Germany. A whole Grecophile literature revolves more or less around this fantasy, which burned most ardently of all when Northern European Grecophiles reached Ithaca. Thus, Schliemann’s famous naïveté in the Ithaca chapters of *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* resulted from a mixture of scholarly and literary styles that other writers endeavored to keep separate; in mixing literary and scholarly discourse, Schliemann’s main mistake involved essentially a miscalculation about his reading audience and the degree of intellectual rigor that his readers would demand. He thought he could have it both ways: as a scholar and as a man of letters.

The long-forgotten, albeit eminently readable works of an Austrian contemporary of Schliemann help make plain to what extent the seemingly naïve account of his Ithacan sojourn reflected a common literary fantasy. In the 1860s and 1870s, the Homer enthusiast Alexander von Warsberg published several volumes of travel memoirs describing localities of the Homeric world and resuscitating the age of Homer in the reader’s imagination. In the letter to his publisher that forms the introduction to his three-volume work *Odyseeische Landschaften* (1877) he signs not his name, but rather the epithet “ein Bürger von Ithaka” (“a citizen of Ithaca”).<sup>17</sup> Wherever he sails, Homer accompanies him as his tour guide, source of inspiration, and breviary. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his chapter on Ithaca should reveal striking similarities to Schliemann’s account,

15. Translated excerpts from Schliemann’s 1868 travel diary are given in Lehrer and Turner 1989, 236 and 244.

16. Schliemann 1869, 58-60.

17. Warsberg 1878-79, vol I, vii.



even though Warsberg's scattered remarks about his more illustrious contemporary are uniformly negative. As his boat makes its first docking on the island, Warsberg feels "just like Odysseus returning home".<sup>18</sup> Like Schliemann, he finds modern-day Ithaca conducive to imagining oneself transported back in time to the days of Odysseus. "In mildness, quiet, and the patriarchal provinciality of circumstances one forgets the present and really lives as if in the Odyssean past after just a few days ... Verily, I have led a Homeric life in Ithaca".<sup>19</sup> Like Schliemann, he encounters an idyllic utopia in Ithaca and writes, far more pointedly than Schliemann: "Ithaca is the only real republic of the utopic dreams of socialism and equality".<sup>20</sup> Everywhere he finds faces, native customs, harbors, and scenes of daily life reminiscent of the *Odyssey*, much as Schliemann had done.

Yet Warsberg's beautifully written and inspired chapter on Ithaca also helps us to identify, by way of contrast, the eccentricities of Schliemann's account. First, Warsberg conceives the Homeric poems expressly as an aesthetic and not as a historiographical work. In matching, as Schliemann had done, various localities on the island to those mentioned in Homer's poem, he identifies them as the settings for a literary work, not as the sites of genuine historical events.

Second, and more significantly, Warsberg distances himself from scholarly pretensions in the idyllic account of his experience. He avoids Schliemann's mistake of trying to please both laymen and scholars. In the introduction of his *Odyseeische Landschaften* he makes no secret of his scorn of scholars: "Only by forgetting the falsifications of our scholastic studies, which is difficult to achieve by peaceful means, for only violent revolutions succeed at making *tabula rasa* ... can one hope to revive, reactualize, comment on and explain the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*."<sup>21</sup> Unlike Schliemann, who used all means at his disposal to gain the approbation of the scholarly world, Warsberg was keenly aware, from the outset, of the discursive rules as well as the limitations of his scholarly contemporaries. He eschews, for example, the scholarly over-emphasis on Greek mythology in attempts to reconstruct the religious beliefs of the ancient Greeks. About two decades ahead of his time,

Warsberg instead insists - without being able to formulate it as such - on a more anthropological approach that deduces religious practices from out of the context of the Mediterranean lifestyle and the practices and attitudes of everyday life. He closes his attack on the philologists with an appeal to the reader: "Never let yourself be intimidated in any way by mere scholasticism. Its status is purely servile, and wherever it erects itself as an end in itself ... so strike it all the more boldly on its head, for you have the divine spark and the genuinely fruitful and fundamentally creative vital force more in your own innate, simply found common sense than in the understanding of others' gathered wisdom."<sup>22</sup> Only in the final section of his chapter on Ithaca does Warsberg condescend to try his own hand at making a few scholarly remarks on the *Odysseus*, but not before first "confessing a part of these sins against the holy spirit of the poet."<sup>23</sup>

Let us now try to summarize the origins of Schliemann's seemingly naïve belief in the absolute historicity of Homer in *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie*. On the one hand, the influence of nineteenth-century tourism seems to have inclined him to view specific localities in Greece and the Troad not merely as settings chosen by Homer for fictive events, but as places that one can fantasize about as having witnessed actual historical events. Schliemann supposed, wrongly, that his readers would be willing to suspend their natural skepticism in favor of awe and enjoyment in the way that vacationing tourists are often willing to do. On the other hand, Schliemann also miscalculated when he assumed that he could mix scholarly and literary modes of writing. He wanted to have it both ways: to impress the scholars and earn the admiration of lay Homer enthusiasts. His naïve belief in the historicity of Homer may reflect, therefore, less an intellectual deficit than an inaccurate appraisal of readers' reactions to his mixture of writing modes. In other words, the embarrassing aspects of *Ithaque, le Péloponnèse et Troie* reflect not so much naïveté on Schliemann's part as a miscalculation about his readers. Once the fiasco became obvious to Schliemann, he was only too happy, in subsequent works, to portray himself as a romantic whose initial views on Homer were those of a naïve enthusi-

18. Warsberg 1878-79, vol III, 132.

19. *Ibid*, vol III, 141.

20. *Ibid*, vol III, 143-144.

21. Warsberg 1878-79, vol I, vi.

22. *Ibid*, vol III, 241.

23. *Ibid*, vol III, 302.

ast. There is, to be sure, a grain of truth to this image of Schliemann that he himself cultivated in later years. Yet in reality Schliemann's transgression lay not in his simple-mindedness, but in his unwilling-

ness to select his target audience carefully and adhere to a uniform writing style that would be acceptable to this single reading audience.

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