

The Dream of Troy. The Literal versus the Literary. Some remarks on the present state of biographical studies on Heinrich Schliemann

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While Schliemann may well be the “Father of Mycenaean archaeology”, his paternity has nonetheless been contested since the 150th anniversary of his birth in 1972, when he was accused of having been a “pathological liar”.¹ Accusations of mendacity, fraud, deception and even psychopathia have become a *leitmotif* in Schliemann studies. In the word of one scholar, “the halo [has been replaced] with uniformly black horns and forked tail”.²

The divisions between the two camps of Schliemann scholars, the adorants and the detractors, are almost as unbridgeable as those between the Achaeans and the Trojans. It certainly is not news that Schliemann could at times be less than scrupulous in his affairs with other people, although, as papers given at this Congress have already shown, we still cannot pass conclusive judgement on whether his foibles severely affected his archaeological work. The present “state of the art”, however, has led to scholars being almost forced to choose between Schliemann’s hagiographers and his detractors. Should this division, so harmful to a clear-headed appreciation of the man and his work, have arisen in the first place? Do the methodological and interpretational approaches used on both sides need radical overhauling? I think they do, and as a contribution to this process I should like to examine Schliemann’s so-called “dream of Troy” in order to ascertain that while Schliemann’s childhood oath to his father to excavate Troy may, in fact, have been a “romantic fabrication” as some have claimed, the whole process by which it was adopted was far more complex. It will be shown that the “dream”, along with Schliemann’s autobiographical statements concerning his interests in archaeology

and Homer prior to 1868, should not be treated simply as statements to be measured for accuracy against a corpus of facts, but as a necessary exercise through which Schliemann expressed his concept of the world and his own place in it.

It has been categorically asserted that “no trace of interest in excavating Troy has been found in any of Schliemann’s voluminous letters or diaries” prior to his meeting with Frank Calvert at the Dardanelles on 15 August 1868. Furthermore, interest in things Homeric, archaeological, or even Greek, are said to have been far from Schliemann’s mind until 1868 when - for reasons unexplained - he suddenly became interested in, and towards the end of the year obsessed with, antiquity.

This sudden leap into the realm of things archaeological perplexed me. I was prepared, on a strictly factual basis, to allow Schliemann some licence in his first published autobiography of 1869, *Ithaka, der Peloponnes und Troia*, but it made little sense to suppose that the whim of a middle-aged man could, overnight, turn into a twenty-year commitment of mental, physical and material resources to an undertaking as daunting as the sack of Troy itself. With this in mind, I went through most of Schliemann’s letters and diaries from 1856, when we know that he mastered modern Greek, to August 1868, when he decided to excavate Troy. I wanted to discover what Schliemann was thinking during this period, how his mind was working if it was indeed *not* pondering the problems of antiquity and his own future career.

Let us look then at “the literal”, namely the results of this research. I stress that I have not even noted any references to Schliemann’s published biographies

1. Calder III 1972, 335-53. On additional revelations since 1972, cf. Calder III 1986, 17-47. For a useful bibliography of work on Schliemann from 1972 to 1985, see Calder III and

Traill (eds) 1986, 261-263.

2. Arnott 1987.

here; only letters and diaries have been utilised. Schliemann's knowledge of Modern Greek was quite good in early 1856, which means that he must have started learning it in 1855 at the latest. His Greek letters from 1856 to 1859 provide an interesting insight into how he regarded his latest linguistic hobby, and certainly bear no relation to any letters written in any other tongue. Firstly, we find Greek letters to his family: on 2 April 1856, he addresses his Aunt and her family "in the language of my thoughts and dreams... I know that you have a precise knowledge of the language which you, as you told me, taught my father". Schliemann's father had at least a rudimentary knowledge of Greek as a number of letters are addressed to him in that language.³ On 9 April 1856, Schliemann wrote to him expressing his dissatisfaction with the "lies and deception" of business and that there was nothing he wanted more than to leave commerce and undertake a journey to Greece where "philology and archaeology will provide me with plenty of useful labour for a long time".

That Schliemann contemplated leaving commerce in the late 1850s is well known; at times he expressed a wish to return to Germany and settle down on a farm,⁴ at others (11 June 1856) he again stated that he wanted to liquidate his assets and open an office of some sort in Athens where "I shall devote the rest of my life to scholarly studies which I love with a passion".⁵ I might well have passed these emotions off as the froth of wishful thinking rather than a firm statement of intent, but the context of all the letters from the late 1850s rules this out completely. During this period of his life Schliemann was becoming nothing less than obsessed with Greece, modern and ancient, and also with Homer and the ancient writers. He acquainted himself with a wide circle of Greek friends both in St Petersburg and, by correspondence, in Athens, including prominent figures of the day. On 2 December 1856, Schliemann wrote to Peter Skaramangas:

"Were I ever so lucky to overcome my avarice and vanity and withdraw my fortune from the changes and fluctuations of commerce, I would immediate-

ly make my home in your excellent country to spend the rest of my life there immersed in scholarly pursuits. Whatever current opinion thinks of the future of Greece, I am certain that she has a bright future before her."

Four days later he sent an application to Panayotis Soutzos in Athens for a subscription to the periodical *Ἡλιος*, and declares himself a lover of ancient and modern Greek. This was no hyperbole, as we can see from the letters of the following years where he badgered and nagged nearly every Greek in St Petersburg for books, lessons and conversation practice. In October 1857 he stated in a letter that he wanted to begin learning ancient Greek as quickly as possible since he was afraid that his business obligations would soon take up too much of his time. 1857 and 1858 saw preparations for a visit to, as he terms it in not a few letters, "*τὴν νέαν μου πατρίδα*".

Going through these letters I could not help but sympathise with Schliemann, if indeed it is permissible for the so-called scholar to have human feelings. I saw him on those cold St Petersburg evenings bent over his books, correcting a letter in Greek to Skaramangas or someone else in which he proudly quotes "my beloved Homer". For his pains he was by his own account ridiculed at the Stock Exchange and publicly by his own wife. One senses a profound loneliness that would have destroyed a lesser man: a wish to escape into the world of Greece, modern as well as ancient, and drink the cup of ancient learning to the full. In August 1857 he remarks to Panayotis Soutzos that he is delighted with the periodical *Helios* and "with the renaissance and flowering of the fatherland of Homer and Demosthenes". He felt that he could play a part in this renaissance, this re-birth of a great people, and at the same time identified his own rebirth after years of wheeling and dealing in commodities. To his former teacher, Carl Andress, he writes in April 1857 (in Greek) that the Russians think only of money and know nothing of Homer or Plutarch; a passage from Homer comes to his aid: "For of a surety know I this in heart and soul: the day shall come when sacred Ilios shall be laid low, and

3. Cf. Deuel 1977, 366, note 5. "There exists a record of his father's university education that appraises his thorough understanding of the New Testament 'in the original tongue', which must have been Greek. It is also on record that his elder brother Friedrich instructed him in Greek. In addition, he was adept in Hebrew ... Knowledge of

Latin was routine at the time for any high school student and certainly for a university graduate". Note that due to the Papist Vulgate version, protestant clergymen were obliged to learn the original Greek.

4. July 18, 1856, to Philip Kalkman.

5. June 11, 1856, to Rhodokanakis.

Priam, and the people of Priam with goodly spear of ash" (*Iliad* VI.447-9: ed. Loeb).

A year later, Schliemann addressed another Greek letter to Andress, this time reminiscing "that time 25 years ago in Kalkhorst where you taught my cousins Adolph and Emil ancient Greek. Although I was young and did not know the Greek language... the sound of the divine lines of Homer still sings in my ears, as if it were but yesterday, even though then I did not even know the alphabet". He continues to state that Andress' Greek lessons fired his passion for foreign languages, which would consume him from the age of twenty.

By early 1859, he had mastered Latin as well and addressed his father a letter in that tongue on 19 June. Here he relates the tale of the drunken miller who had so upset the young Heinrich in 1836 by reciting Homer and firing in him a desire to learn the language.

In 1858 and 1859, mentions of "my future Greek homeland" abound, while he seems to have made plans to settle in Greece permanently, including a request for information from the Bank of Greece on investment opportunities. Finally, in 1858-59 came the great Mediterranean tour, the culmination of which would be the visit to Greece.

Prior to discussing this important tour, let me reflect on the letters just discussed. Indeed, no one should be so naive as to take all the sentiments expressed therein as concrete statements of intent. However, the mere fact that they are expressed indicates that they are statements of desire; a desire fired by passion for things Greek - modern and ancient - and fed by a love for Greek literature, especially Homer. No amount of textual acrobatics can deny this.

Let us turn now to the tour of 1858-59 in order to ascertain how far Schliemann applied his knowledge "in the field" so to speak. The tour took him from Italy through Egypt via Malta, then to Palestine, Syria (including Lebanon) and thence to Asia Minor, the Dodecanese and Athens. In Italy, Pompeii made a striking impression on him, while Homer was his guide while passing Sicily where Aeolus had provided Odysseus with the good winds for his journey to Ithaca. In Egypt he learned Arabic. Naturally, both here and in Palestine the ancient sites would intrigue him, but we can discern a keen archaeological eye as well. Petra, for instance, especially fascinated him and he took not only detailed notes (which I have not as

yet located in any guidebook of the period), but also drew rough plans. Questions arise: after seeing sherds and ruins of foundation walls of the lower city of Petra he ponders "I wonder, however, [how] a city could be built betwixt these tremendous rocks where there is hardly vegetation enough to support a few sheep". But the ruins of Balbek astounded him by their immensity. Finally he reached Chios where he met a local schoolteacher (frequent companions of Schliemann on his stays) and was enthusiastic as to his reception and the school he inspected. He writes: "Indeed, this friendly reception on my first time on Greek soil cannot but increase the idea which I already have for the fatherland of Homer".

In Athens, much time was extensively given over to studying the ancient ruins and once again he draws rough plans of the monuments. He even claims to have met the great architect and archaeologist, Pittakis, who guided him around the Acropolis. By the end of April, however, he had come down with a serious fever (quite clearly apparent in the weakness of his hand in the diary), not to mention a lawsuit, which forced him to make his way back via Constantinople. Passing through the Dardanelles on 24th of June 1859 he noted: "This morning we approached the beautiful island of Tenedos where, according to Homer, the Greek fleet had gathered prior to the siege of Troy. Opposite Tenedos and close to the Turkish castle, I could see the mouth of the Skamander the meagre waters of which now wind their way through the plain of Troy". Little would he have guessed that it would be left to him to excavate Troy and give material substance to the daydream of that summer morning.

Business and family problems were to take up nearly all Schliemann's time in the early 1860s, and his Greek correspondence falls off with a corresponding increase in business letters. Eventually, 1863 saw his retirement, more or less, from business. China and Japan followed. And what of Homer? He had not been forgotten, for on 30 March 1866 he writes to his cousin Adolph informing him of plans to visit Odessa, Constantinople, Troy, Ithaca and Athens in that year. He repeats the same sentiments to his uncle on April 8 where he states that he will celebrate St John's Day amongst the ruins of ancient Troy. Unfortunately, events once again conspired to prevent this visit: he mentions difficulties in obtaining a passport at Odessa. The Black Sea was not without interest, how-

ever. His attention is now almost exclusively devoted to archaeology:

“27 August, 1866: Taganrog: I arrived at 6.00 pm. and hurried to the Museum ... There are many skulls there, the shape of which indicate the presence of different races. A few gold diadems were placed on the heads of the dead. Rusted swords, a few pots and many wooden couch frames were found, the latter used in burial. Thence I went to the hills at the heights of the city where everywhere large excavations have been made, especially at the hill on the peak where the palace and tomb of Mithridates is said to have been. Excavations have been made everywhere to a depth of 50 feet and everywhere one finds bits of clay pots, bone etc. This indicates clearly that this was an inhabited area and that one generation followed another for thousands of years. But nowhere can one see the blocks of foundations or the walls of the ancient houses. Thus, I think the ancient houses were made of wood or the blocks were reused on the large hill near the city.”

At Theodosia he mentions the Scythian tumuli “older than the Greek colony”, as well as more recent ruins.

After failing to visit Troy in 1866, Schliemann established himself in Paris where he devoted himself to scholarly pursuits of a varied nature. In late 1866, three years before *Ithaque*, a friend even suggested he take a degree at Rostock University. He was an assiduous member of the *Société de géographie*, attending its lectures as often as he could. One of these on 3 May 1867 (which we know Schliemann attended) was a talk discussing a new book by a certain George Nicolaïdes entitled *Topographie et Stratégique de Iliade* (1867) where the reality of Homer’s Troy was underlined and its site at Pinarbaşı confirmed.⁶

Another talk at the Society on 20 March 1868 discussed Georg von Hahn’s work in Asia Minor, which must mean his excavations at Balli Dag. We know from his letters from February of that year that Schliemann was actively participating in the Society at precisely this time; there seems little doubt that he attended the talk. We now know that by August 1868 Schliemann was not only acquainted with Nicolaïdes

and von Hahn, but also used copies of their works as guides in the Troad.

Schliemann in 1868 was not so much at the beginning of a dazzling new future, full of uncharted territory, but at the end of a period of nearly 13 years during which he had, amongst other things, read Homer and interested himself in antiquarian matters. When we take this into account, it is no surprise to find that Schliemann, after inspecting the Balli Dag site for himself in 1868, rejected its candidacy. I would not even rule out that after doubting Balli Dag, he may well have entertained the Hisarlik theory prior to meeting Calvert on the 15th of August that year. Remember that through Nicolaïdes Schliemann was aware of the Hisarlik theory.

With the above evidence providing a context, let us conclude with the problem of the “dream of Troy”. David Traill has shown that Schliemann’s statements in his post-1874 autobiographies concerning his childhood oath to his father that he would excavate Troy are to all intents and purposes false. Traill has shown that the “dream of Troy” postdates a dispute between Calvert and Schliemann in the mid 1870s that culminated in Calvert publicly stating that he, in fact, had introduced Schliemann to the Hisarlik theory. Schliemann inserted the “dream” into his autobiography thenceforth in order to confound Calvert’s claims.

Traill’s theory is a carefully argued and convincing interpretation of the literal facts. However, the elucidation of this particular problem of 1874 cannot act as the king-post for a broader hypothesis doubting many other aspects of Schliemann’s autobiography, such as his antiquarian interests and knowledge of Homer prior to 1868. The evidence provided by his letters and other material, much of it noted by Emil Ludwig in his biography, seems here to be inexplicably ignored. It is not difficult, especially in Schliemann’s case, to isolate and disprove specific factual incidents that appear in his autobiography. But when one approaches the sum of these facts, both genuine and fictitious, within their context it soon becomes clear that the literary fabric into which they are woven provides an important insight into the man himself, far more than any amount of concrete facts could ever do.

Calvert’s claim that Schliemann had been ignorant

6. I am still engaged in verifying if this George Nicolaïdes was the school teacher of the same name with whom

Schliemann spent a few days at Odessa in 1866.

of the Hisarlik theory in 1868, innocent though it may have been, was taken by Schliemann as nothing less than an attempt to deny him the crowning glory of his turbulent life. This is hardly surprising when we consider that by 1874 Schliemann had already been immersed in Homer and antiquity for nearly 20 years. If we stress Schliemann's understandable haziness on Hisarlik in 1868, we are in danger of overlooking his very real awareness of Homer and antiquarian matters in that year. Moreover, in August 1868, Calvert could not have found a better listener than Schliemann when he made the suggestion that Troy was to be found at Hisarlik. After the disappointing experience at Balli Dag, Schliemann could now make more than an informed guess concerning Calvert's suggestion if indeed, as I stated earlier, he had not already entertained the Hisarlik theory some days prior to meeting Calvert. Note furthermore that Calvert's trenches had uncovered the remains of Ilium, which no one doubted was at Hisarlik. Schliemann could not have taken this as clear proof that Troy existed beneath this level, and thus we must suppose that his own ponderings on the matter - and not simply Calvert's suggestion - convinced him that Hisarlik was indeed the site of Troy.

Schliemann's reaction to Calvert's statements of 1874 must thus be understood in a broadly literary and psychological context. He was clarifying his own aim in life, an aim scoffed at by his Russian business colleagues, while he learnt Homer between balancing his books, and laughed at by the academics when he had the audacity to burst in on their inner sanctum with such mighty force in the 1870s. His written

work, even before the 1860s, is a monument to an inferiority complex, a complex as much created by those who refused to understand him as by the man himself. Schliemann's "dream" of Troy may be poetic licence, but I think it goes too far to call it "fabrication" since through literary devices he was making an attempt to perceive the triumph of his later life as the culmination of all his earlier struggles and aspirations. These are focussed on one particular point, his vow to his father to excavate Troy when he grew up. When we consider the strained and quite traumatic relationship that he had with his father, the whole dream of Troy becomes a "tama", a votive offering to rescind the dishonour of the family and keep a vow that despite the father's misdeeds, Schliemann would carry the family name forwards, as Aeneas had carried Ascanius. This is literary imagery of the first order. Furthermore, Schliemann and others of his time could never have taken a modern "confessional" approach to his autobiography; this would not only have been considered pathetic, but unbearably vulgar as well. In approaching Schliemann we must approach the texts and letters he left as "facts" in themselves, as maps and guides which with proper methodological and interpretational skills, biographers can mould into testimonies of a complex and unpredictable genius living in a world seething with ideas, emotion and the excitement of living on the brink of a new age.

I am sure that when we come to terms with the "man behind the mask" we shall be pleasantly surprised.

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