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'The help of my dear wife': Sophia Schliemann and the discovery of Priam's Treasure

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Colourful tales of the exploits of pioneer archaeologists have long formed part of general works on archaeology aimed at a broad readership, and perhaps particularly of those aimed at younger readers, who have undoubtedly often found them inspirational. Stories of Schliemann's work at Troy and Mycenae have been an integral part of this genre, and it perhaps seems sad to undermine youthful enthusiasm by proving such stories essentially flawed. Yet the letter written by Heinrich Schliemann to Charles Newton of the British Museum on 27th December 1973, published here in transcript and illustrated in Fig 1, destroys just such a 'myth', and does so incontrovertibly, as it comes from the pen of the man who created the story in the first place.

Schliemann's published account of his discovery of the so-called 'Treasure of Priam' in his work *Troy and its Remains* makes exciting reading, and it is no wonder that it has often been retold. He describes the event as follows:

I cut out the treasure with a large knife, which it was impossible to do without the very greatest exertion and the most fearful risk of my life, for the great fortification wall, beneath which I had to dig, threatened every moment to fall down upon me. But the sight of so many objects, every one of which is of inestimable value to archaeology, made me foolhardy, and I never thought of any danger. It would, however, have been impossible for me to have removed the treasure without the help of my dear wife, who stood by me ready to pack the things which I cut out in her shawl and to carry them away.[1]

The image is a powerful one. We see Sophia Schliemann standing by her man as the perfect helpmeet and partner. She gets her hands dirty as she takes the precious things that he is extricating from the Trojan soil, and shares the danger and the labour of removing them. This is the most dramatic moment of Schliemann's archaeological career to date. It would be unkind to ask, as we envisage Sophie clanking gingerly away, why on earth must she hide the things in her shawl? Why the awkwardness and the secrecy of this manoeuvre?

Schliemann would have thought this reaction naïve. He tells us that, at his first glimpse of the find, he called an early break for the workmen so they should not see the treasure emerging. Subsequently he removed it from the site at dead of night, and smuggled it aboard a steamer bound for Athens. He had no intention of sharing the find with the Turkish authorities, as was stipulated in his excavation permit. It would be cynical to say that this was purely for reasons of personal gain: after many years of indecision about the treasure's ultimate fate he would give – not sell – it to the museum in Berlin. And he certainly paid a high price for his actions: the immediate effect was to make him and his excavations unwelcome on Turkish soil. Again it would take years before he was able to pay a large indemnity to the Turkish authorities, after which they relented and allowed him to work at Troy again.

But this note is not about the Treasure itself, its history or the many controversies that were to surround it, all of which are matters fully discussed in an extensive literature. Rather its purpose is to highlight the fact that, in spite of Schliemann's dramatic and even rather romantic published account of Sophia's help in the recovery of the treasure, he later admitted privately that she did not help – because in fact she wasn't even there. She was in Athens when the treasure was discovered.

This emerges, it seems for the only time in the whole of Schliemann's writings, in the penultimate

1. Schliemann 1875, 323-324.

paragraph of a private letter sent to Charles Newton, Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities from 1851-86, which is now preserved in the British Museum and is transcribed here in full. The letter is dated 27th December. The year is not given, but from context must have been 1873.

My Dear Sir

The greek professors try in every possible way to run the Trojan treasure down. They do it for two reasons; 1/ because they are exceedingly jealous of my discoveries and could crucify me and 2/ because they are very anxious it should remain in Greece and are afraid you might take it away. But the truth shall and will be known. I am now decided to exhibit it in Naples or Paris if I can get the permission to place it into the gold room of some museum or some other perfectly secure spot.

Would you kindly give me the direction of Mr Gladstone?

On acct. of her father's sudden death Mrs Schliemann left me in the beginning of May. The treasure was found end of May; but, since I am endeavouring to make an archaeologist of her, I wrote in my book that she had been present and assisted me in taking out the treasure. I merely did so to stimulate and encourage her, for she has great capacities. So f.i. [for instance] she has learned Italian here in less than two months.

If you wish now to visit my diggings at Troy I give you all my maps and plans by which you find every thing. You find there also the labourer and servant who struck the treasure and assisted me to get it off.

27 Decb. *Yours very truly*
C. T. Newton Esq. *Hy. Schliemann*

This letter came to light when I was browsing in a group of unbound and un-indexed letters in the archive of the Greek and Roman Department of the British Museum in the early 1980s. It was first published by David Traill in 1986[2] and has since been referred to in further literature.[3] The editors of the current volume felt, though, that its importance was such that it should be re-published here in full, and illustrated in a high-quality image for the first time.

The importance of the letter of course lies in the light that it throws on Schliemann's mendacity, and, as such, it came to light at an opportune moment. Scholarship was beginning to take a more critical view of Schliemann's writings, and David Traill, along with William Calder, were in the vanguard of a movement that recognized the necessity to question the veracity of some of Schliemann's accounts. It was particularly apparent that his autobiographical writings were often of dubious accuracy. At best, it was clear that he was influenced by the desire to write a life story that would be inspirational. He cast it in the form of a moral tale – a quest, in which determination and single-minded endeavor enabled him at last to find the world of Homer's heroes and to fulfill his lifelong ambition. He dwelt at length on his boyhood experiences and his dream of Troy, perhaps specifically feeling that his story would be influential on the young. At worst, his cavalier attitude to the truth could be thrown into a very harsh light indeed, and his motives could be seen as self-seeking, arrogant, and even slightly mad.

Where, in this spectrum, does his published lie about the presence of Sophia at a pivotal episode in his life fit in? Certainly at the very least it can be seen as part of his self-romanticising. He is the hero of his own epic story, and such a hero should have a perfect wife and companion. If we take Schliemann's word for it, Sophia Schliemann was as intelligent as she was beautiful, and as passionately engaged with his archaeological work as he was himself.

The extent to which this last was true perhaps remained a secret between Sophia and her inmost thoughts. She seems in general to have colluded publicly with the image and role that her husband created for her, and, if she resented being the Galatea to his Pygmalion, she demonstrated this more in passive resistance and in quietly going her own way than in any overt or demonstrable rebellion. In fact we know that she not only played along with Schliemann's fal-

2. Calder and Traill (eds) 1986, 110.
3. The letter is included in my monograph bringing together all the Schliemann correspondence in the British Museum: Fitton 1991, 24, Fig. 5. It is referred to in Moorehead 1994, 134, and in Fitton 1995, 69. This last discusses both Schliemann's work and the contribution of Charles Newton to the early understanding of Greek Bronze Age finds.

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H Schliemann

C. T. Newton Esq

Fig. 1. Schliemann's letter to Charles Newton (27 December [1873]), where he admits that Sophia was not present at the discovery of *Priam's Treasure*.

sified account of her presence at the discovery of the 'Treasure of Priam' during his lifetime, but also perpetuated the story after his death. This is apparent from the fact that she and her children asked the biographer Emil Ludwig to write Schliemann's life story. His *Schliemann: the Story of a Gold Seeker*, published in 1931 - the year before Sophia's own death - preserved and perpetuated the myth of Sophia and her famous shawl.[4]

A number of people must have known that Schliemann's account was in this respect untrue – ranging from family members to workmen present at the Troy excavations. Most would have had no opportunity to put the record straight publicly, even if they had had the inclination to do so. Schliemann himself presumably only felt impelled to mention the matter to Charles Newton because he had reason to suspect that the truth might be known to at least some individuals in archaeological circles, and so might already have come to Newton's ears.

What, then, was Charles Newton's reaction to Schliemann's public lie and private confession? We shall never know. It is tempting to suspect that a serious-minded man of Newton's stature would disapprove, but in fact there is no evidence of this. On the contrary, he made no reference to the matter in his further correspondence with Schliemann, which remained cordial and encouraging. We can only conclude that he thought it unimportant. The world of Schliemann scholarship has certainly taken it more seriously than the recipient of the letter in which Schliemann decided to tell the truth.

4. Ludwig 1931, 23 and 179-190.

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