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SCHLIEMANN AND THE SHAFT GRAVES

By O. T. P. K. DICKINSON

Though not the earliest excavator, Schliemann is surely one of the best known, and though he is perhaps most famous as the excavator of Troy his work at Mycenae was equally spectacular in its results and ultimately of greater importance for the study of Aegean pre-history. It seems appropriate, in the centenary year of his excavation of the Shaft Graves in 1876, to present an up-to-date assessment of their significance and of Schliemann himself. This study has developed from the chance discovery that in a letter to Max Müller at Oxford Schliemann reported a detail of the excavation that is not in the published account;¹ in an ensuing hunt for other documents contemporary with the actual excavation, I learned much about Schliemann that seemed to me of considerable interest, as I hope it will be to others outside the small circle of Aegean specialists.

Schliemann was by any standards a remarkable man, but there is a growing tendency to present him in an almost hagiographical way, and not unnaturally his accounts of himself have always been accepted at face value. Unfortunately, as W. Calder has recently demonstrated,² these accounts are not reliable: Schliemann had a strong penchant for dramatizing and romanticizing his life, liking to trace the hand of Fortune and the workings of Fate, and it is clear than on occasion he wholly invented episodes. This might seem of more interest to the psychologist than the archaeologist, but Schliemann has captured popular imagination as the amateur who, in the face of all the experts, vindicated a lifelong belief, and it is legitimate to inquire to what extent this was true. In fact, as Calder has shown, there is no evidence that his ambition from childhood was to discover Troy; his single-minded pursuit of wealth seems to have had no ulterior motive. Having acquired it, he seems to have been at a loss for something to do, being constitutionally incapable of relaxation and on bad terms with his first wife. He travelled widely, displaying some interest in antiquities and even measuring the bricks of the Great Wall of China, but he apparently fell under the spell of Greece and of Homer quite suddenly.

In 1868 he did his first digging, an attempt to find Odysseus' palace on Mt. Aetos in Ithaka; characteristically he indulged the hope that some cremation-urns which he found were those of Odysseus and Penelope (they were in fact Roman). He also trenched

fruitlessly for three days on Pinarbaşı, then widely believed to be the site of Homer's Troy, and was more ready, in the absence of finds, to be persuaded of the case for Hisarlik presented by Frank Calvert, an amateur antiquarian of considerable ability, who was part-owner of the site. Once persuaded, Schliemann threw himself into plans for excavation with enthusiasm, but, as he was often to do later, he neglected the proprieties, beginning without the permission of the Turkish government or the owners of the land that he was actually digging (he had Calvert's permission, but had his own ideas of where the most important finds were to be made). This was rectified, but his determination to find Homer's Troy had unfortunate results archaeologically, for he was mainly concerned to identify prominent landmarks of the epic such as Priam's palace and the Scaean Gate and tended to neglect what he did find in the search for them. He finally identified them to his satisfaction a short while before discovering the 'Treasure of Priam', after which, apparently convinced that he had done all that was necessary, he ceased excavation, in June 1873. One motive for this abrupt end may have been his desire to get the Treasure out of the country quickly, an action clearly in breach of his agreement with the Turkish Government that he could only lamely justify by the claim that the Turks would have melted it down, 'whereas, in my hands, it is of incalculable value for scholarship'.³ It is important to remember that as a result of this action and of his previous exaggerated claims, he had a poor reputation at this time in the eyes of both scholars and governments.

The events preceding and during the excavations at Mycenae are complex. The most detailed account is to be found in Ludwig's biography,⁴ but until the sources are fully published there will remain some obscurities. I have been able to consult many useful primary sources, most notably a diary containing accounts of Schliemann's activities between 1874 and 1876 (hereafter referred to as *Tagebuch*; I am grateful to the Gennadius Library for permission to quote from this) and his reports to *The Times*, but I have not seen the diary kept by Stamatakis, the Greek archaeologist sent to oversee Schliemann, which might prove enlightening. It has been possible to avoid the pro-Schliemann bias of the biographies that I have consulted⁵ and give what I hope is a more balanced account.

Schliemann had been applying for permission to dig at Mycenae and other sites, notably Olympia, for some years, and tried to use the Treasure as a bargain-counter. In his own eyes his success at

Troy made him a complete expert, and he was furious when the Olympia permit was awarded to the Prussian government, commenting loftily on the methods used there in a later letter to Müller.⁶ He continued to hope for Mycenae, but in February 1874 he might seem to have ruined his chances for ever by beginning excavations there wholly illegally, as he candidly admitted.⁷ He was quickly stopped by the police following a furious telegram from the Ministry of Public Instruction in Athens, which he reports in tones of injured innocence: '... he said that I had no right to make even the least archaeological researches at Mycenae and that they must confiscate all that I had found in my little excavations.'⁸ The 'little excavations' were in fact no less than thirty-four trenches, of unknown size but dug to considerable depths, apparently with the intention of discovering the depth of soil above bedrock on the various terraces of the acropolis; they also included an excavation in the side-chamber of the 'Treasury of Atreus', then known as the 'Tomb of Agamemnon', with the avowed hope of finding Agamemnon's grave.⁹ Given Schliemann's removal of the Treasure of Priam, one does not like to contemplate what he might have done if he had found anything valuable. Quite unrepentant, he went on to dig four 'holes' at the site of the Argive Heraion near Mycenae, but found little.

Despite being stigmatized in Athens as little better than a robber, Schliemann obtained a permit for Mycenae only two months later, but was prevented from taking it up by a lawsuit, brought by the Turkish government for the recovery of the Treasure, which occupied him for a year. It was not until August 1876, after further negotiations, that he began at Mycenae, after a preliminary week at Tiryns. Understandably, given his record, the Ministry imposed limits on the number of workmen to be employed and of separate areas of excavation, and Stamatakis, the Ephor (senior archaeological officer) of the Argolid was appointed to ensure that they were observed. This man has been treated most unsympathetically by the biographies, which take their tone from Schliemann's angry and contemptuous references to him at the time; yet later, when it suited his purpose, Schliemann could describe him as a distinguished archaeologist and deplore his untimely death.¹⁰

In fact, it is impossible to read the extensive excerpts from letters and telegrams dispatched by all concerned quoted by Ludwig¹¹ without feeling considerable sympathy for Stamatakis, who had been given an impossible task and was only lukewarmly supported by the Ministry. Schliemann believed that he alone knew what was

to be done and should be left alone to do it, particularly since he was spending his own money on the excavations.¹² He broke the conditions of his permit when it suited him; he had little concern for the remains of later Mycenae, which naturally interested the classically trained Stamatakis, and was ready to demolish them without proper record; and his methods were so wholesale that he subcontracted one large trench at the rate of one drachma per metre of earth removed.¹³ In protesting against such behaviour Stamatakis was closer to a modern archaeologist. If he was perhaps over-officious, he had plenty of provocation; Schliemann flew into a rage when opposed, and his young Greek wife, who at first tried to mediate, was later to inform Stamatakis that he had no right to reproach her husband. 'He was a learned man, this wall was Roman and was interfering with the progress of the work; I, on the other hand, was not a learned man, and would be well advised to make no remarks.'¹⁴ Schliemann threatened more than once to stop his excavations, but it is amazing that he was allowed to continue; such behaviour would not have been tolerated in any foreign archaeologist working in Greece later, and it reflects no credit on his biographers that they should seem to find it excusable. It may be noted that, to judge from the letters of the later Ephor Philios, Schliemann behaved similarly at Tiryns in 1884.¹⁵

Schliemann's intentions at Mycenae are not entirely clear. At Troy his guide had been the *Iliad*; for Mycenae he had to rely on the short account of the site given by the mid-second-century A.D. traveller Pausanias. The latter reported the tombs of Agememnon and his companions to be within the walls, which Schliemann took to mean the prehistoric walls and not, as was generally thought, the much wider Hellenistic circuit,¹⁶ and, since one of his major aims was to find these tombs, he sited a large trench south of the Lion Gate. But he also intended to clear two of the treasuries, as the tholos tombs were then called, though in the event he only worked in the 'Tomb of Clytaemnestra', and hoped to find inscriptions and sculpture like that above the Lion Gate, as he informed *The Times*,¹⁷ and even, apparently, to clear the whole acropolis. The sheer quantity of earth to be shifted made this inconceivable, but it indicates his approach: he was still thinking in terms of clearing standing structures (he was annoyed at being made to leave a baulk of earth against the Lion Gate as a precaution against possible collapse) rather than of studying strata, and seems to have imagined, rather naïvely, that the remains of Homeric Mycenae would be preserved intact below later material.

Although in the trench south of the Lion Gate some of the slabs of the Circle A wall, at first taken to be tombstones, and several sculptured grave-stelae were found at an early stage, Schliemann was uncharacteristically slow to pursue this promising lead, and spent more of his energies on clearing the 'Tomb of Clytaemnestra', and later on house-remains north and south of the Circle. His early diary entries are in fact rather dull, recording the number of workmen, occasional details of progress, and comments on some notable finds, especially any Mycenaean figurines, by which he was peculiarly fascinated; only rarely does his personality show through in outbursts of speculation or sentiment, of which the following may be quoted: 'It was blowing quite a gale today and we suffered cruelly from the dust, which was continually blown in our eyes. But still I proclaim that there is nothing sweeter than excavation, particularly in remnants of prehistoric times, where every pot-sherd reveals a page of history.'¹⁸

Interrupted by disputes with Stamatakis and furious telegrams to the Ministry, by the visits of the Emperor of Brazil to Hisarlik, whither Schliemann was summoned to show him round, and Mycenae, and, from October, by outbreaks of heavy rain, the excavation continued throughout the summer and autumn. Slowly the circuit of the Circle A wall was revealed, but it was not until the removal of the sculptured stelae for dispatch to Athens that Schliemann discovered that they stood above shafts cut in the rock. He began to dig these out and simultaneously to remove the earth-fill of the Circle, but, discovering gold ornaments and other objects in the fill of one shaft, thought that they had been plundered in antiquity. He was near to giving up; on 12 November he wrote in the diary, 'wishing to terminate the excavations today in order to leave tomorrow morning, I pursued the excavations with the utmost vigour', but goes on to relate how towards evening there was found at the bottom of one shaft 'on the bones of a corpse, quite a mass of large gold leafs with impressions of numerous circles and spiral lines'.

In the following days Schliemann established the existence of a total of five graves. The second to be cleared contained only a single burial with relatively modest goods, but the third contained really rich burials, and Schliemann telegraphed exultantly to *The Times* that he had discovered 'immense tombs containing jewelry . . . It is impossible to describe the rich variety of the treasure'. Heedless of the frequent rain and the discomfort—he and his wife removed all the objects in the burial-layer themselves—Schliemann pressed on,

at first taking the time to record interesting details of the distribution of goods but later summarily listing them and giving up altogether before the burial-layer of the fifth grave. This grave is, however, well described in his letters to *The Times*: the first burial uncovered caused particular excitement, for it had somehow been preserved in a semi-mummified state. This was the 'man with the round face', whom Schliemann described in a telegram to the Minister as 'very like the picture which my imagination formed of Agamemnon long ago'.¹⁹ The 'face of Agamemnon' is thus *not* the finest of the burial-masks, usually illustrated as such, but one much less distinguished. Schliemann was by now convinced that he had found the burials of Agamemnon and his followers.²⁰

After clearing the fifth grave, Schliemann returned to Athens on 6 December. Despite his success, he remained resentful of the restrictions imposed upon him, and refused to continue, as he wrote to Müller;²¹ it was left to his draughtsman to find a treasure of gold objects cached to the south of the Circle, and to Stamatakis to find a sixth grave a year later.

Schliemann may have been bitter at not being allowed to keep any of the finds; he wrote to Burnouf, Director of the French School of Archaeology at Athens, 'I have found an unparalleled treasure of trinkets and jewels. All the museums in the world put together do not possess one-fifth of it. Unfortunately nothing is mine but the glory.'²² He also felt that his right to publication had been infringed by announcements made by Stamatakis, and suffered some difficulty in arranging the photography of his finds. But he found satisfaction in the fame that this discovery brought him; no less a personage than Gladstone consented to write an introduction to the publication (which first appeared in English), and he was particularly lionized in London.

In many ways this was the high point of Schliemann's career. Although under the influence of his colleague Dörpfeld his later work at Troy and Tiryns was considerably more scientific, it was less exciting, and he made no comparably spectacular discoveries; in the attempt to repeat his success, he moved restlessly from site to site, always returning to Troy. In the new world of Aegean archaeology that was developing he remained something of an outsider, and he never received proper recognition from the German scholars who dominated classical studies at that time; his theory on the identity of the Shaft Grave burials was never widely accepted, though it was considerably more rational than some (one saw in the finest burial-mask a Byzantine Christ Pantokrator!), and at the end

of his life it became clear that the Shaft Graves could not be contemporary with the Troy of the Treasure of Priam, underlining the sad truth that his finds, however spectacular, did not prove the historicity of the *Iliad*.

Schliemann does not, in fact, deserve the title of 'father of Mycenaean archaeology' which he is sometimes given; this should be reserved for the Greek archaeologist Tsountas, the first to make sense of the increasing quantities of material excavated in the Aegean, to which he had himself largely contributed, in a masterly synthesis.²³ Yet even his work was made obsolete by the series of discoveries made in Crete from 1900 onwards, notably by Sir Arthur Evans. For a while it was generally accepted that Mycenaean civilization was merely a branch of the more ancient civilization of Crete, dubbed Minoan, and that it was introduced by Cretan conquerors and colonists, and it was not until the 1920s that the individual features of the mainland civilization began to be stressed by Wace and Blegen. The controversy that developed has often been described; here I shall only draw attention to Evans's theory that the Shaft Graves were the resting-place of burials removed from the tholoi in a time of danger, which was necessary in order to support his high date for the 'Treasury of Atreus',²⁴ and to Karo's demonstration of the many individual and non-Cretan features of the Shaft Graves in his comprehensive publication,²⁵ which together indicate the central role that the Shaft Graves continued to play in theories about the Aegean Bronze Age.

Yet the Shaft Graves remained somewhat mysterious. Schliemann's account had left enough obscurities for it to be not entirely clear how they were built and used, and they constituted such a remarkable departure from the notably poor and limited culture of the preceding phase on the mainland that more than one theory that they were the graves of an alien aristocracy was advanced, although a Cretan origin was generally discounted. The discovery of a second grave-circle in 1951, now fully published,²⁶ solved many problems but introduced others, and there is still no general agreement on the origins of the Shaft Grave group and the source of their wealth. With the accumulation of evidence it has become clear that they do not hold the unique key to the origins of Mycenaean civilization, but their evidence remains crucial, for the establishment of power-centres on the mainland, of which Mycenae was pre-eminent, was a development that would affect the course of Aegean history irreversibly.

This is not the place to set out in detail a case that I have made

elsewhere, in a book soon to be published in *Studies in Mediterranean Archaeology*, but I shall outline some conclusions. First and most important, I am convinced that the occupants of the Shaft Graves, the rulers of Mycenae during its rise to power, were natives of the mainland and probably of Mycenae itself. Study of the graves in chronological sequence (those of the second circle stretch back two generations or more before the first of Circle A) reveals that at the beginning they hardly differed from other mainland graves in layout or contents. Wealth and exotic features appeared progressively, but the most characteristic grave-goods, the weapons, jewellery, and precious vessels, have clear Aegean ancestors and can sometimes be linked to mainland finds of earlier date, while rarities like the grave-stelae and burial-masks are the latest to appear, and have no close parallels anywhere; they are best seen as locally developed expressions of wealth and pride, possibly inspired by distant rumours of Egyptian practice. There is no constantly recurring class of grave-goods of clear foreign origin, as one would expect if the graves held a newly arrived and culturally advanced aristocracy, and in any case the sheer unlikelihood of such an intrusion has never been sufficiently stressed. Expunging the later glories of Mycenae and Greece generally from our minds, we must accept that Mycenae was until this time an obscure acropolis in the centre of the poorest and most backward part of the Aegean, likely to be entirely unknown outside its immediate neighbourhood and hardly attractive or accessible to war-lords either from the Near East or the northern steppes.

If native, the Shaft Graves rulers will have been 'Greek'. This does not imply anything about their forms of society or artistic ability or sensitivity in themselves or their craftsmen; it relates merely to the language that they spoke. Despite difficulties in the theory and a prevalent suspicion of the 'invasion hypothesis', I still think it plausible that the population-group whose Indo-European dialect was to be dominant in the formation of the Greek language moved into the Greek mainland in the late third millennium B.C., when a radical cultural change, extending to cooking-pots and house-plans, can be detected, and when cultural development, until then moving along similar lines to that of other Aegean societies, was abruptly halted. The newcomers must have absorbed elements of the previous population, but they acquired none of their arts; the break is so complete as to suggest the possibility of a natural disaster like plague or famine, which could explain the desertion of many small sites. For several centuries the pace of development was so slow on the mainland as to be virtually undetectable; the population's

main preoccupation may have been getting enough to eat, and although there was contact with the Aegean civilizations, these had no significant influence.

The essential feature of the development of Mycenaean civilization was the establishment of principalities, generally based on prominent acropolis-sites or large mounds, which accumulated resources on a scale not seen on the mainland since the mid-third millennium B.C., and presumably controlled substantial territories. Most of the features that are called Mycenaean are the material expression of the rulers of these territories, their tombs, treasures, and weapons; the main benefits gained by the bulk of the population at this stage are likely to have been increased protection from local famine, more abundant supplies of raw materials, and improvements in technology. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of the new rulers, who managed their business well enough to found an enduring prosperity, far exceeding anything seen on the mainland before Mycenaean times or for several centuries after them.

The occupants of the Shaft Graves were among the earliest, if not absolutely the first, of these ruling groups, and they were certainly the most successful. After a hundred years of excavation Mycenae remains the most impressive mainland site, outshining the rest in the total effect of its great buildings, tombs, and fortifications, and it is clear that its craftsmen and artists generally led the rest of the mainland and, after the collapse of Crete, most of the Aegean. The special circumstances which caused this pre-eminence are still obscure; I have argued elsewhere²⁷ that involvement in channelling supplies of the essential metals from Europe might explain Mycenae's superabundant wealth and close connection with Crete, both evident in the contents of the Shaft Graves. But it must be admitted that the positive evidence for such a theory is slight (most of the evidence usually advanced for extensive early Mycenaean activity in Europe is not very reliable or convincing). However, there can be no doubt of Mycenae's dominant position, although sites like Thebes and Pylos rival it in the later 'palace period'.

That Schliemann discovered Circle A and thus drew attention to Mycenae as a site of real and not merely legendary importance was fortuitous, and his methods would not be acceptable today, although he took considerable care over the excavation of the graves themselves. His determination, though an admirable quality, led him into behaviour that can only be called reprehensible. But he deserves credit for his prompt and detailed publication, an example still too

rarely followed, and for removing the study of Greek prehistory from the realm of theory by going out and looking for material evidence, and for this much may be forgiven him.

NOTES

1. E. Meyer, 'Schliemann's Letters to Max Müller in Oxford', *JHS* 82 (1962), 92: the first finds in the 'largest tomb', i.e. T. IV.
2. 'Schliemann on Schliemann: a Study in the Use of Sources', *GRBS* 13 (1972), 335–53.
3. E. Ludwig, *Schliemann of Troy: the Story of a Goldseeker* (trans. D. F. Tait, Boston, 1931), p. 185.
4. Ludwig, op. cit.
5. Ludwig, op. cit.; R. Payne, *The Gold of Troy* (New York, 1959); L. and G. Poole, *One Passion, Two Loves* (New York, 1966).
6. Meyer, op. cit., p. 94.
7. Meyer, op. cit., p. 86.
8. *Tagebuch*, 2 Mar. 1874, translated from the French.
9. *Tagebuch*, 26, 28 Feb. 1874.
10. H. Schliemann and C. Dörpfeld, *Tiryns* (London, 1886), pp. liv and 368.
11. Ludwig, op. cit., pp. 201–7.
12. Meyer, op. cit., p. 90.
13. *Tagebuch*, 9 Aug. 1876.
14. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 202.
15. Ludwig, op. cit., pp. 298–9.
16. Meyer, op. cit., p. 89.
17. *The Times*, 11 Sept. 1876, 11.
18. *Tagebuch*, 5 Sept. 1876; also *The Times*, 1 Nov. 1876, 4, in slightly different form.
19. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 208.
20. Meyer, op. cit., p. 92.
21. Meyer, op. cit., p. 95.
22. Ludwig, op. cit., p. 209.
23. C. Tsountas and J. I. Manatt, *The Mycenaean Age* (London, 1897).
24. A. E. Evans, *The Shaft Graves and Bee-Hive Tombs of Mycaenae* (London, 1929).
25. G. Karo, *Die Schachtgräber von Mykenai* (Munich, 1930–3).
26. G. E. Mylonas, 'Ο Ταφικός Κύκλος Β τῶν Μυκηνηνῶν' (Athens, 1973).
27. 'The Shaft Graves and Mycenaean Origins', *BICS* 19 (1972), 146–7 (summary), and *The Origins of Mycenaean Civilization* (forthcoming).

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