

THE GIFTED AMATEUR – HEINRICH SCHLIEMANN

RÉKA GULYÁS

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A long-planned exhibition to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of the best-known amateur archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, opened in Berlin in May. The exhibition, entitled “[Schliemann’s Worlds. Schliemann’s Life, Discoveries and Myths](#),” is unique in many ways. The most striking of these is that the 700 objects on display are housed in two museums next to each other, so to see the whole collection, you have to walk through an inner courtyard from the James-Simon-Gallery to the Neues Museum. But the exhibition promises much more exciting adventures than that.

Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890) has been associated with Troy and Mycenae for the past 150 years. But was it really the German-born merchant who discovered the Troy of Homer’s Iliad? Where did the most famous amateur archaeologist of all time come from, where was he heading, and what motives drove his adventurous life? Visitors will not only get answers to these questions but will also be part of an incredible journey covering significant distances in both space and time.

At the entrance, visitors are greeted by a full life-size video screening of Katharina Thalbach, one of Germany’s best actresses. Her costume, with a top hat and watch chain, recaptures the 19th-century fashion of middle-class men. She appears several times throughout the exhibition, mainly at the fateful events of Schliemann’s life, of which she reports quoting from his diaries and notes. These texts, interpreted by the skilled artist in her deep signature voice, almost come to life; in particular, they convey – in a very authentic way – the enthusiasm and passion of their author and, in places, his extraordinary steadfastness of purpose. The actress sometimes also adds a touch of irony to her voice, hinting that the author’s words are not always to be taken at face value. The first exhibit, which Schliemann admits defined his life, is behind the video projector. It is a Christmas present from 1829, a book entitled *World History for Children* by Georg Ludwig Jerrer. The future amateur archaeologist saw a drawing of Troy on fire in that book for the first time, and that, according to the legend, captured his imagination.

Heinrich Schliemann was born in Neubokow, near Rostock, in 1822, the fifth child of a clergyman and clergywoman. A year later, the family moved to Ankershagen, where the [Schliemann Museum](#) is today.

Schliemann received a good education at the local school, supplemented at home by his father with his teachings. Ernst Schliemann also used to read to his children from Homer’s works, such as the Iliad, translated by Johann Heinrich Voss in 1793. The father, however, stood out in the small town community not only for his education and eloquent orations but also for his debauchery. After the death of his wife in 1831, following the birth of their ninth child, scandals grew around the father. He sent his children to live with relatives, and Heinrich was cared for by a nearby uncle (also a pastor). While living there, young Schliemann attended the Neustrelitz grammar school, where he studied Latin, English, and French. The father lost his job as a pastor due to his immoral lifestyle and ran out of money to educate his children. Heinrich had to give up his studies after only one year; the bright boy was sent to a less eminent school, from which he could not go to university. At 14, he became an apprentice in a small grocer’s shop, which he ran after the owner’s death. Several photographs document these childhood scenes in the exhibition. Despite his health deteriorating during this time, the teenage Schliemann completed the five years of “study time” stipulated in his contract. In 1841, he had his father pay off his mother’s inheritance and tried to thrive on his own in Hamburg, but he failed. He was offered a “good job” in Venezuela, but he never arrived there: the ship he was sailing on was wrecked. A picture of this ship is the next stop in the exhibition. Above the picture of the sailboat bobbing in the waves, visitors can read Schliemann’s dramatic recount of the event. The curators of the exhibition have spent several years examining Schliemann’s famous autobiographical notes and letters,

and – with the help of several researchers – they have managed to “untangle” the facts and myths about Schliemann, of which he was the main propagator. One of the greatest virtues of the exhibition and the catalogue is that the archaeologists and other researchers have gone into the smallest detail and spared no effort in documenting the facts. At the same time, the curators did not aim (as some Schliemann biographers have done) at pulling the veil off Schliemann’s lies but rather to understand him and his excesses and to reveal their origins. The exhibition focuses on Schliemann’s person and personality, in addition, of course, to his remarkable archaeological discoveries.

As part of the exhibition, German public broadcaster ZDF has produced an 18-minute documentary in the Terra X series, entitled “[Heinrich Schliemann – explorer of the century or a cunning tactician?](#)“. In this video, Rüstem Aslan, the archaeologist in charge of the current excavations in Troy, expresses his opinion that Schliemann created a “higher reality” for himself that could also house his minor lies.

But let’s return to the shipwreck, the drama that followed the loss of his mother. Schliemann reported this event three times, each time differently (with different numbers of passengers and victims). The facts are that the ship sank near a Dutch island, Texel, and Schliemann was taken from there to Amsterdam on 19 December 1841. The sick and penniless German castaway was assisted by a consul who provided him with substantial money. In his autobiographies, Schliemann writes about having started his career as a merchant in Amsterdam in absolute poverty, which is not entirely true. It seems sure, though, that he used half of his gradually increasing earnings to get himself educated, including language studies. In addition to his mother tongue and Latin, Schliemann was fluent in English, French, Dutch, Russian, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Arabic. The exhibition includes a detailed presentation of the “Schliemann-method,” a rapid language-learning approach published in print in 1891. The idea was that the learner should spend at least one hour a day learning the foreign language. The program includes reading aloud, no translations, and drafting free texts in a foreign language (carefully corrected by a language teacher and analysed with the student). It was also recommended to spend time with native speakers to improve pronunciation (Schliemann, for example, attended English-language masses to learn the correct pronunciation). Schliemann soon mastered four languages using his method; eventually, he could speak – and, even more importantly for his progress write letters and keep books – in five languages (with German). Thanks to his acquired knowledge of Russian, he finally became able to open his local branch of the Amsterdam shop in St. Petersburg in 1846.

The exhibition’s preparation partially took place during the pandemic, when it was uncertain whether foreign exhibits would arrive. Therefore, curators were also looking for objects possibly connected with Schliemann’s life in other museums in Berlin. As a result, an ornate Russian hunting sledge from Imperial Russia, owned by the Berlin Stadtmuseum, was restored and included in the exhibition, illustrating the Russian episode in the life of the former merchant.

Schliemann followed world events from distant St. Petersburg; but when the gold rush broke out in California, he went there almost immediately, undeterred even the death of his adventurous brother there. He did not go to the New World to find gold, like most, but partnered with the famous American bankers, the Rothschilds, and kept the newly-found treasures of the gold panners and diggers in the safest safe in Sacramento in return for high deposits while they tried their luck in new fields. The exhibited relics of this period of Schliemann’s life include contemporary octagonal gold dollar coins and his handwritten leather-bound register. The business proved lucrative, and Schliemann doubled his fortune in a short time. He invested part of his gold in railway shares, which also paid well. This substantial capital made his later travels possible and provided funds for his archaeological excavations. In 1852, he returned to St. Petersburg, where he married Ekaterina Petrovna Lyshina; they had a son and two daughters. Schliemann’s excellent nose for goods served him well in Russia, too: he bought and sold not only everyday items but also, for example, ingredients of gunpowder (sulphur and saltpetre) and indigo, a substance used to dye textiles for military uniforms (some distinctive blue military uniforms are also on display in the galleries). During the Crimean War, from 1853 to 1856, Schliemann became a supplier to the Russian army; he continued to build up his (by then considerable) fortune and, through these dealings, eventually became a multimillionaire. As his fortune grew, so did his appreciation: first, he became a member of the Amsterdam-based merchant

firm's board, while later, in 1864, he was made an honorary citizen of St. Petersburg. But already in 1858, Schliemann felt that the time had come to see the rest of the world. His first European visits were to Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Italy, while in 1859 he visited Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. In 1864, he sold his entire business and devoted all his time to his travels from that time on. He travelled to India, China, Japan, and North and South America. He kept a diary of his experiences, which was used to reconstruct a Chinese funeral procession in the exhibition (*Fig. 1*). While looking at the colourful miniature sculptures, the visitors listen to Schliemann's description of the event. Schliemann finally settled in Paris in 1866, where he started a real estate business and studied philology, philosophy, literature, and ancient history at Sorbonne University. It was a setback that turned him back to antiquity: his guide to Japan, published in 1867, was not selling well, while he discovered that a similar book by a Greek author, Georgios Nicolaides, was way more successful. He travelled to Greece and Asia Minor in 1868, and on his return, in 1869, he received his doctorate from the University of Rostock with his dissertation entitled *Ithaca, the Peloponnese, and Troy*. Schliemann was then 47 years old and starting a new life. He divorced his Russian wife and very consciously looked for a new spouse. As one of Schliemann's biographers, Danae Coulmas, explains in the ZDF documentary, Schliemann specified in a related marriage advertisement not only that the future wife has to be beautiful and dark-haired but also that she has to have considerable knowledge of Homer and even being able to quote from his works. These criteria were met by a Greek girl, Sophia Engastromenos, almost 30 years Schliemann's junior; they married in 1869.

In 1870, at the age of 48, Heinrich Schliemann began his search for Troy based on the envied but still respected Nicolaides' book and its map. He soon realised that the Greek writer was wrong because Bunarbashi, identified by him as the ancient Troy, was situated too far from the sea. Therefore, following a tip by an English consul (and his findings from shortly before), Schliemann visited Hisarlik near the Dardanelles. The village was part of the Ottoman Empire then, while today, it is in the north-western province of Çanakkale in Turkey. He began his first excavation there, followed by six other campaigns in the area. The former trader was excited, impatient, and inexperienced, which left their mark on his first sondages and excavations: those were carried out even without a digging permit (*Fig. 2*). But he was sure of himself and strongly believed that the stone ramp he found there was the one that carried the Trojan horse that Homer had sung about 3,000 years before. First, he got a 17 metres deep trench of over 800 m² dug to get to the layers he was interested in and the presumed treasures. He caused extensive and irreparable damage with this north-south cut, now known as the "Schliemann trench," which archaeologists still regret to this day. On 31 May, he discovered what he believed to be "Priam's treasures," once owned by the ruler of Troy. The so-called "Trojan Collection" comprises some 10,000 objects. The inventory acquired by Schliemann and his teams includes the world-famous gold artefacts, coins, ceramic vessels, metal tools, spindles, other small objects, and findings of particular significance: botanical specimens. Schliemann had a very original idea for promoting the treasures: he photographed his young wife Sophia dressed in the gold jewellery he had found and sent the photo to the editors of various newspapers. The photo travelled around the world at the time



Fig. 1: Chinese funeral procession, Qing (Manchu) dynasty, before 1878. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / David von Becker

and is still an iconic image today (Fig. 3). Naturally, these gold objects are the exhibition's main attraction; but the other artefacts and tools recovered from the excavation layers may be just as interesting. The findings appear in the beautifully presented and substantial exhibition catalogue with plenty of photographs and with descriptions; the volume also comprises a handy chart that assigns the different layers to their corresponding historical periods, from the Early Bronze Age (3000–2000 BC) to the Byzantine Period (395–600 AD).

Not only Schliemann but also the finds had an adventurous fate, though it is beyond this article to describe their story in due detail. A key event in their story was that Schliemann eventually donated his collection to the German people, and his findings became exhibited first in the Gropius Bau, then the Museum für Ur- und Frühgeschichte in Berlin (on these occasions, both Schliemann and Sophia helped to arrange the displays). During World War 2, bombs demolished the building, and the finds' fate remained a mystery for 50 years. Boris Yeltsin only confirmed in 1993 that the treasures from Troy were in Russia and stored in the Pushkin Museum. The first opportunity to examine "Priam's treasures" using modern scientific methods only opened in December 2021, 150 years after their discovery; the project was led by Vladimir Tolstikov, chief conservator at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. Analyses of 26 gold artefacts have been completed thus far, revealing, for example, the composition of the gold and the types of alloying elements other than silver and copper. The first analyses show a 70% gold content, which is typical of prehistoric gold and might prove that Schliemann's finds are authentic. Luckily enough (from the exhibition's point of view) the investigations started at the end of last year, as all collaborations stopped two months later when the Russo-Ukrainian war broke out. Whether the items from Schliemann's collection will ever be returned to Berlin is a question. But the exhibition curators were in for another surprise: they discovered some other artefacts from Schliemann's collection in Berlin in the inheritance of a former student and later painter, Peter Gräber. In 1962, after the building of the Berlin Wall, Gräber collected artefacts, such as small marble idols typical to Troy, among the ruins of the Gropius Bau (Museum für Ur- und Frühgeschichte before World War 2). He made watercol-

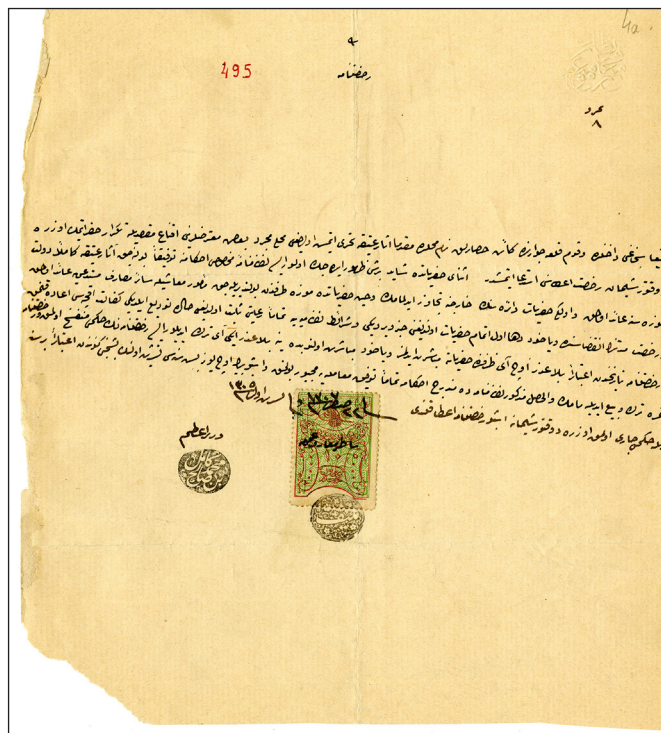


Fig. 2: Schliemann's excavation permit (Ferman) Troy, 1873. © American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Archives, Heinrich Schliemann Papers



Fig. 3: Sophia Schliemann wearing gold jewellery from "Priam's Treasure," 1873. © American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Archives, Carl Blegen Papers

ours of all the artefacts, catalogued them, and even reconstructed some vessels. After the painter died in 2018, his widow handed these albums and artefacts over to the successor of the former museum.

After discovering the lavish finds in Troy, which quickly made him and his wife world-famous, Schliemann could have stopped looking for Greek heroes; but he continued his scientific journey to the sites of Homer's stories. In 1874, he restarted his search in the Aegean with test excavations, while in 1876 obtained official permission to dig up Mycenae. In that case, he followed the ancient description of Pausanias, according to which the tomb of Agamemnon may be found behind the city walls and the Lion Gate. After unearthing the gate, Schliemann continued his excavations nearby and once again found sensational findings in "Mycenae of treasures glittering with gold." Besides pottery, bronze, and silver artefacts, he found a total of 13 kg of gold items ranging from pots, shield buttons, and sword sheaths to various pieces of jewellery and the death mask known today as the "Mask of Agamemnon" (Fig. 4). Of course, Schliemann only assumed that the mask belonged to Homer's hero; it turned out later that the mask was made 400 years earlier – but both Schliemann and the find were already famous by then. The majority of the artefacts from Mycenae arrived at the exhibition from the National Archaeological Museum of Athens and were housed in the second part, the Neues Museum's rooms. Many finds still have small labels with Sophia Schliemann's handwriting on them (Fig. 5). Schliemann had built up some field experience by the time of his excavations in Mycenae, and he was also assisted by a strict supervisor and assistant, Panagiotis Stamatakis. As a consequence, the progress of the excavation and the finds were recorded more accurately. However, later

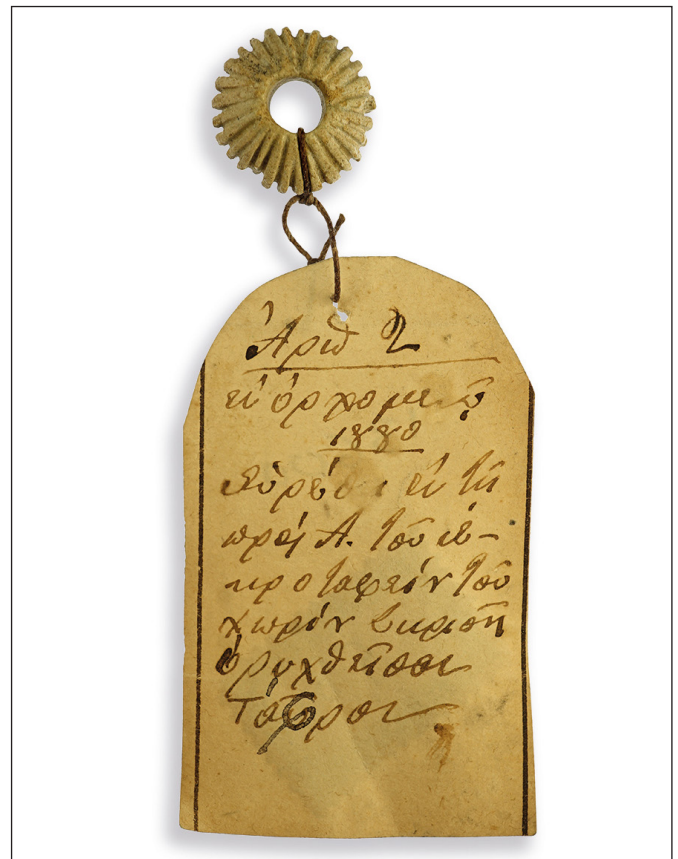


Fig. 4: Faience bead with a label inscribed by Sophia Schliemann, Orchomenos – "Schatzhaus des Minyas" (Greece), Late Bronze Age (second half of the 2nd millennium BC). National Archaeological Museum, Athens, © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Hellenic Cultural Resources Managing and Development Organization / Maria Kontakt



Fig. 5: Schliemann's Worlds: exhibition photo of Schliemann's reconstructed study. Neues Museum 2022, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / David von Becker

the ambitious Schliemann had his Greek colleague retouched from drawings presenting the excavation. When Schliemann felt he could not get any more credit for his work in Mycenae, continued his excavations in Troy and, between 1884 and 1885, had the foundations of a royal palace complex in Tiryns unearthed with Wilhelm Dörpfeld, a young German scholar who became a father of modern archaeology. After the seventh season in Troy, Schliemann organised two conferences on ancient Troy in 1889/1890, at which he presented the results of his excavations to the academic audience. Despite his ear causing him discomfort more and more often, he still went to Berlin and visited the excavations of Pompeii on his way back to Athens. He could not return to his family: on 26 December 1890, he died of compli-

cations of an ear infection (for more information on Schliemann's ear disease, see the [article](#) [in Hungarian] by ear, nose, and throat specialist Dr. Imre Gerlinger).

In the last part of the exhibition in Berlin on Schliemann's life and work, the Municipal Art Gallery of Larissa – G.I. Kataigros Museum offers visitors a possibility to literally take a glimpse at Schliemann's reconstructed study (*Fig. 6*) from his neo-Renaissance villa built in Athens in 1880. One can see his lion-claw desk, armchair, bookshelf, camera, and paintings.

The comprehensive exhibition embraces many topics and presents a wealth of artefacts and personal objects, but there is still plenty to discover for future researchers. Schliemann's legacy consists of more than 50,000 documents held by the Gannadius Library in Athens. His diaries, travel notes, correspondence, photographs, accounts, and publications are constantly digitised to make them available worldwide. Accessibility is even more important in their case as the documents are written in 17 languages, and that is not the only thing that continues to challenge researchers today.

The exhibition will be on display in Berlin until 11 November 2022.



Fig. 6: Schliemann's Worlds: exhibition photo of the "Agamemnon Mask". Neues Museum 2022, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin / David von Becker