INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-16
The Fall of Troy

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July 25, 1986

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Dear Peter,

For an archaeologist, a first visit to Troy provides a personal dimension to an already familiar image. I'd say it's something like seeing the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, or the Grand Canyon for the first time. Troy's familiarity, though, is not primarily visual. My own most vivid association was with the sixth-grade class where we struggled through the easy English version of the Iliad, reading about the stiffly heroic struggle between the Greek and Trojan armies, finally coming to the part about the huge wooden horse.

It's not particularly easy to get there. The trip takes two full days of driving from Istanbul-- across the congested Bosphorus Bridge, through a long stretch of factories and warehouses, and then through the rolling hills along most of the Asian shore of the Sea of Marmara. Canakkale, the major town in the vicinity, is a dusty disappointment. And the campgrounds and motels clustered along the coastline are humble, for despite the famous image, Troy is not one of Turkey's main tourist spots.

I had made the journey to go back to the end of the Late Bronze Age, but found that it was almost impossible to ignore the many grim reminders of the battles that raged there during World War I. Along the coastal road near Troy stand many small, concrete memorials. And across the water, on the tip of the Gallipoli Peninsula, loom the gigantic monuments to the tens of thousands of Turkish defenders and troops of the British, French, Australian, and New Zealand Expeditionary Force who fell there in 1915.

These disturbing images clashed with my fantasies. Even if the story of Troy is itself a tale of bloody warfare, the families of the fallen no longer come to hear speeches and weep over graves. Troy is today the object of a much more lighthearted fascination. Even in the sixth grade we learned about how a strange character named Heinrich Schliemann devoted his life and fortune to digging up the fabled city, and how he discovered the treasure of Priam, its king.

The mound of Hissarlik, where Schliemann made archaeological history, offers no striking first impression. About 3 miles down a wind-

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ing asphalt road off the main highway, past fields and the village of Hissarlik, the site is still impossible to see. It's only at the end of the road with the parking lots and souvenir shops that one senses some sort of attraction. And it's only after a walk of another half-mile down the access road that one sees the red Turkish flag fluttering above a grove of pine trees, behind which rises the huge, modern wooden horse.

The horse has become the symbol of the Trojan War, but it's only the climax of the story, a long saga well known to the ancient Greeks and Romans, but today pieced together from the surviving fragments of dozens of ancient texts. The Iliad itself relates the events of only one year of a ten-year struggle, and the whole affair took at least twenty years if you count the ancient Miss Universe contest that started it all.

Archaeology can add nothing about the personal details of the story, of how Paris, son of Priam the king of Troy, chose Aphrodite as the most beautiful of the goddesses, and how Aphrodite enabled him to abduct Helen, the wife of Menelaus the Spartan king. Archaeology can only provide a reassurance that a violent confrontation between the Trojans and the Greeks took place at the end of the Mycenaean period, during the 13th century BC. The rest is beyond confirming or disproving, for in this case archaeology is not only the handmaiden of history. It is the delivery boy of myth.

There's something about the image of two national wills pitted against each other in combat that has kept the memory of Troy alive for thousands of years. Thucydides called the siege of the city the first great war between Europe and Asia. Euripides and Aeschylus elaborated on specific details of the story with the reverence of biblical commentators. The story of Troy spawned early Greek patriotism, and that emotion was merely transformed after Athens lost its position of dominance. While the Greeks continued to sing the praises of Agamemnon, Odysseus, Ajax, and Achilles, national claims were also derived from the losing side.

From the ashes of Troy new empires were born. Later patriots found or imagined that their own nations' destinies began with the fall of Troy. Despite the outcome of the battle, the few Trojan survivors were later proudly claimed as the fathers of new nations: Aeneas wandered toward central Italy and founded a city called Roma; Antenor sailed with his followers up the Adriatic to the lagoons of Venice; and farthest traveled of all, a Trojan named Brutus reportedly found a new home in the cold and rainy British Isles.

Today Troy's patriotic significance is hardly mentioned. Gone are the days when European statesmen and military leaders could inspire their listeners with the heroic images of the Iliad, as Lord Kitchener had done at the start of the ill-fated campaign for Gallipoli. Troy now lives primarily in the clichés and trademarks of popular culture, of "Trojan horses," "apples of discord," condoms, and the anachronistically gladatorial costumes of the University of Southern California marching band. It also lives, of course, in the compulsory reading of sixth-graders, high-schoolers, and undergraduates,

making their way through the materpieces of world literature with varying degrees of detail and academic drudgery.

Only in one small community is a passionate interest in the meaning of Troy still alive. And there too it's more a question of modern patriotism than historical study, for the archaeologists and classical scholars who tirelessly rehash the issues, occasionally spicing them with accusations of their opponents' dishonesty and malice, all acknowledge that Troy is their spiritual home. For at the mound of Hissarlik at the end of the 19th century, the modern techniques of archaeology were born. And while the spiritual father of this enterprise was not a fleeing Trojan prince but a self-made millionaire named Schliemann, he has nonetheless become the hero of a new myth of Troy.

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Tucked away in a corner of the dusty parking lot of the Helen and Paris Souvenir Shop stands a small plank cabin with a sun-yellowed cut-out of a slight and somewhat timid-looking man. "This is not Schliemann's House," reads the handlettered sign in English, French, and German over the doorway, an apologetic message that goes on to explain how the structure was built a few years ago by a German film company for a television docu-drama about the excavations of Troy. Despite the disclaimer, the cabin has obvious commercial value for the owners of the gift shop, for during the last century, Schliemann has pushed the antique Greek and Trojan heroes from center stage. The German film company is just one in a long line of modern myth-makers who have taken a heroic tale as literally as any of the ancient poets of Troy had done.

Schliemann himself clearly encouraged the stories. His memoirs read like a fairy tale too good to be true. Born in Mecklenburg, Germany in 1822, he made a fortune as an international commodities trader in St. Petersburg, and added to that fortune when he immigrated to America. As the founder of a highly profitable bank and commercial exchange for prospectors during the California Gold Rush, Schliemann eventually became a United States citizen and later proudly recalled a private chat at the White House with President Millard Fillmore.

Despite these colorful modern adventures, ancient Troy, it seems, was always his obsession. From the time his father gave him a Christmas present of a book illustrated with melodramatic scenes of the sack of the city, Schliemann claimed he was destined to dig up the proof that the story was true. At the time, few classical scholars believed that the story of the siege and conquest of Troy-- whatever its literary significance-- had any greater historical basis than the struggle between Zeus and the Titans or the various wranglings of the other figures of Greek mythology. But having a fortune to support him, Schliemann made his dreams come true. After identifying the mound of Hissarlik as the most likely site of the ancient city, he hired workers, they dug, and he found.

The most dramatic moment in the Troy excavations, first told in Schliemann's own account of the digging and continuously elaborated in a succession of kitschy novels and films since that time, came in

the late spring of 1873, when, standing with the workers in a deep trench, he suddenly saw a glimmer of gold. Quickly dismissing the workers for an unexpected rest break, he summoned his wife Sophia. And feverishly digging together to avoid detection, they uncovered an incredible cache of gold vessels and jewelry that Sophia excitedly wrapped up in her shawl.

This was the famous "Treasure of Priam," Scliemann's most important archaeological evidence that he had, in fact, discovered the city of the Homeric epics. Its location was in the destruction debris of the next-to-lowest of nine superimposed levels-- indicating its great antiquity. And the fact that the treasure was found in a chest apparently hastily dragged out of a nearby palace at the time of the city's destruction seemed to match the Homeric description of the Trojans' fear and confusion at the time of their city's fall.

Unfortunately, it's no longer possible to see these artifacts. Schliemann was so convinced of their immense archaeological value and so fearful that the Ottoman government would confiscate them, that he smuggled them out of the country. Their location today is uncertain, for although they later surfaced in Berlin, the Trojan gold vessels and jewelry disappeared sometime during World War II. According to some accounts they were destroyed in the intensive Allied bombing. Other, more sinister reports suggest (without any firm basis) that they were discovered by the arriving Red Army and are today secretly stored in the Soviet Union.

The fate of the objects themselves, though, is not the focus of the modern controversy. Later archaeological work at Troy after Schliemann's death in 1890 proved quite conclusively that Troy II should be dated to the Early Bronze Age (c.2500- c.2200 BC), about a thousand years before the generally accepted date for the Trojan War. The question now is more basic. Was Schliemann's discovery of the "Treasure of Priam" nothing more than an elaborate hoax?

The suspicions began in the mid-1960's, when a German psychoanalyst, W.G. Niederland, studied Schliemann's private papers and suggested that the explorer's obsession with digging could be linked to deep-seated childhood conflicts. That rather commonplace Freudian observation soon gave way to more serious charges. In 1972, William Calder of the University of Colorado found direct evidence in one of Schliemann's letters that he had fabricated the story of the Christmas in Mecklenburg when he vowed, as a seven-year-old, that he would some day uncover the remains of Troy.

The floodgates were now opened and the extent of Schliemann's calculated myth-making poured forth. David Traill of the University of California at Davis revealed that much of Schliemann's career in America-- as he later proudly recounted it-- was a mixture of exaggeration and fantasy. Traill showed that Schliemann had obtained his citizenship by perjury, had gained his fortune by shady dealings in gold dust, and that his private meeting with President Fillmore never took place.

Like a shark smelling blood, Traill quickly went in for the kill.

In an 1984 article in the Journal of Hellenic Studies, he presented what he believed was evidence of Schliemann's dishonesty in the story of the discovery of the "Treasure of Priam" itself. Confusion in the various published accounts of the date and even precise location of the treasure first aroused his suspicions, as did the later testimony of a workman who claimed that the "treasure" contained no gold and was found not in a chest inside the city but in a tomb outside the walls. Most damning of all was the role played by Sophia Schliemann, who had reportedly stood by her husband, wrapping up the precious finds in her shawl. Traill reconstructed the evidence of Schliemann's diaries and personal correspondence to prove that Sophia played no part in the discovery. She was in Athens visiting her family at the time.

Traill's conclusion was that Schliemann simply invented the story of the "Treasure of Priam," piecing the collection together from individual finds uncovered during all three seasons of the dig. Acknowledging the possibility that Schliemann might have obtained some of the objects from sources other than the excavation, Trail nevertheless concluded that since the surviving drawings of the finds show that they are all from the Early Bronze Age, they were probably, individually, authentic. It's just that Heinrich Schliemann, recognizing what the public might want to be discovered at Troy, made their archaeological dream come true.

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Schliemann still has his defenders, as does the legend of Troy. Donald Easton, of Liverpool University, has countered many of Traill's accusations, claiming that while Schliemann might occasionally have been prone to romantization and exaggeration, the story of his discoveries is substantially reliable. This is, of course, only part of a larger problem, for the connection between the site itself and the city described in the Homeric epics is the subject of a scholarly debate that has implications for the modern understanding of the collapse of the Mediterranean civilizations of the Late Bronze Age.

In archaeology, as in most other scholarly fields, I suppose, outlandish ideas are a good way to get attention, and such is the case with the study of Troy. In the last few years, some iconoclastic scholars have gone so far as to suggest that the real Troy is not in Turkey at all, but on the Adriatic coast of Yugoslavia instead. For most archaeologists and classicists, this idea is a naive geographical misinterpretation, but that is not to say that the location of Homeric Troy is sure. The problem has a more vertical aspect. Which of the nine superimposed city levels at the mound of Hissarlik was besieged, conquered, and immortalized in the legends of the Trojan War?

Schliemann, as I said, was initially confident that it was Troy II. The evidence of fire, destruction, and the treasure-- whatever its origin-- were his strongest arguments. But when he gained the assistance of Wilhelm Dörpfeld, an experienced architect and field archaeologist, in his final seasons of excavation, the confident initial identification collapsed. Schliemann's own excavations in Greece, in the meantime, had undermined the dating. The pottery found at Mycenae, the capital of Troy's great enemy Agamemnon, was completely different

from that found in Troy II. Many of the same types of Mycenaean vessels, however, were found considerably higher in the levels, in Troy VI. Dörpfeld therefore became convinced that Troy VI was the Homeric city. Unfortunately Schliemann had already destroyed a large part of that city in his eagerness to get down to Troy II.

After Schliemann's death, Dörpfeld carried on the Troy excavations. He uncovered the remaining southern fortifications of the sixth city and their impressiveness and strength confirmed the Homeric connection in his mind. But times change and so do convictions. In the 1930's, when an expedition from the University of Cincinnati went to the site to dig up what was left of the ruins, Troy VI fell out of favor to be supplanted by the stratum above it. The ancient stories of the city's siege and conquest were now associated with Troy VIIA.

Carl Blegen, one of the directors of the Cincinnati excavations, believed that the impressive fortifications of Troy VI were destroyed by an earthquake, not attackers, and he saw evidence in the next city, VIIA, that appeared to represent preparations for a siege. In many of the houses of this stratum were an unusually large number of storejars and silos-- for emergency provisions? And the pottery types of VIIA also seemed right. Since the time of Schliemann and Dörpfeld, the study of Mycenaean pottery had advanced considerably. And since the Trojan War was still believed to be one of the events that destroyed the equilibrium of the Late Bronze Age civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean, it seemed significant that Troy VIIA contained some of the latest Late Bronze Age pottery types.

Wait. The story isn't over. Scholars may be returning to Troy VI as the city of myth. Although Blegen's ideas became the accepted theory for decades, some new ideas have surfaced as the result of a television show. Michael Wood of the BBC thought Troy might be a good subject for a documentary series, and in his recent presentation, The Search for Troy, broadcast this year in America, he suggests that Troy VIIA was destroyed by a mysterious group called the "Sea Peoples" and that Troy VI was the one conquered by the Mycenaean Greeks.

The growing number of scholars who have accepted Wood's admittedly non-professional hypothesis now argue that we've long mistaken the true meaning of the Trojan War stories. Instead of coming at the end of the Mycenaean period (c.1250- c.1200 BC), it might have occurred at the height of Mycenaean power, around 1300 BC, or even slightly before. In that case, it would have little to do with the collapse of the Late Bronze Age civilizations, but rather be-- as the ancients suggested in their poems-- an important, but not the only, extension of Mycenaean power. In this light, the opinions are returning to the original, romantic message of the Iliad. And if another surprising, recent clue is any indication, there's still a long way to go.

In a symposium on the Trojan War held last year at Bryn Mawr College, Calvert Watkins of Harvard presented his translation of a sensational ancient text. Sensational might not seem the right way to describe a one-phrase fragment of a Hittite poem, but its implications are far-reaching all the same. Found at Bogazköy, the Hittite capital near modern Ankara, and dated to the 13th century BC, it mentions

"steep Troy," an epithet repeatedly used by Homer, and it seems to be part of a literary epic that was already ancient and well-known throughout Asia Minor in the Late Bronze Age.

If that is the case (and here I should mention that Watkins himself is still hesitant to draw any definite conclusions), then it might be futile to seek the legendary Troy in either VI or VIIA. Its true place may lie centuries before those cities were constructed. Who knows-- in a decade or two archaeologists may again be singing Schliemann's praises as the perspicacious discoverer of the Early Bronze Age siege of Troy II...

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So what is one to make of all the conflicting interpretations and meanings as he or she walks out past the huge wooden horse at the entrance to the excavations themselves. I don't have an answer. Although my visit to the site gave me a clearer mental picture of the various points of archaeological contention, it's the meaning of only the modern Trojan horse that I think I understand.

The city wall and bastion of Troy VI are the most impressive remains left standing after all the years of digging, and appropriately enough, they serve as the backdrop for most tourist snapshots. At the moment I first wandered by the fine ashlar blocks that had been jarred from their original positions by either an earthquake or the Mycenaeans, three young American visitors were sitting cross-legged on top of the structure reading aloud a passage from a paperback Penguin edition of the Iliad.

It was late in the afternoon and the site was almost totally deserted. There were no guided tours to tag along with and eavesdrop on the local guides' rendition of the story of Troy VIIA. The houses of that stratum lay just inside the eastern gate of the city and the natural forces of exposure and erosion have done them more damage than the armies of Agamemnon (or the Sea Peoples?) could ever have done. Pieces of some of the famous storejars are now scattered throughout the area. Only imagination and a talent for reading the plans in the guidebooks can restore that city level to life.

Up on the bare marble platform of the Temple of Athena, from the ninth and latest of Troy's levels, the panorama of the flat Trojan plain and the glimmer off the water in the Dardanelles strait present themselves to the visitor. The scene, though, needs another touch of imagination to give it the proper significance. Was it there on the nearby coast that the invading Greek longships were beached? Was it there that funeral pyres were built and there Odysseus came up with his cunning horse-trick?

Where can one see the rich and well-built city praised by the ancient poets? Certainly the few remaining buildings from Troy II don't seem to fit. The tiny citadel of the Early Bronze Age now lies at the bottom of Schliemann's great trench. Archaeological remains like those are mute evidence waiting to be given a modern layer of significance. And it can be found there in the shade of overgrown

weeds and a fig tree. A weathered sign reads: SPOT WHERE THE TREASURE OF PRIAM WAS FOUND.

The excavations of Troy were a triumph of determination and hard digging, but the inherited significance of the site itself was never completely ignored. Behind the interpretations of Schliemann, Dörpfeld, and Blegen lay ideas of what that famous city should look like, and I think it's the same with every visitor who walks through the site. The image of Troy in each person's mind is subconsciously fitted to the archaeological picture. And it's a perfect fit more often than not.

Fortunately, despite the current archaeological wrangling, there's not much at stake in the interpretation of Troy today. While scholars may argue bitterly about Schliemann's penchant for exaggeration, and while they may debate the significance of the pottery sherds found in Troy's various levels, it's the romantic story of ancient heroism and modern discovery that most tourists come to see. Troy is no longer a symbol of patriotism and national sacrifice; it's just a fairy tale clothed in soil and stone.

Its modern use is innocuous, even amusing. I certainly won't ask about meaning from the tourists who tramp through the ruins listening to the story of Paris and Helen and then wait their turn to pose for snapshots peering out from the windows in the body of the huge wooden horse.

Best Regards,

Neil

Received in Hanover 7/31/86