

Normally this column examines recent developments in archaeology, but it is often interesting and instructive to cast a glance backwards. This is especially true as we approach the summer of 1976: exactly 100 years ago, in August 1876, the now almost legendary father of classical archaeology made one of his greatest finds. On the occasion of this anniversary, we would like to pay a modest tribute to Heinrich Schliemann - merchant, scholar, and lover of the classics.

Schliemann is most famous today for his excavations at Troy: it is indeed well known that he had a devout belief in the accuracy of the Homeric epics, that he was convinced that the city of Troy was real rather than mythical, that he, to the astonishment of professional archaeologists, actually located the site of the Trojan War. But less well known is his activity at the site of Mycenae on mainland Greece. If it is less famous, however, it is equally important, for at Mycenae Schliemann literally resurrected a civilization that had been long forgotten.

Schliemann was fascinated by Homer's references in the Iliad to "golden Mycenae" and to the powerful House of Atreus that ruled the city and its neighbouring Argive plain. Convinced as usual of Homer's historicity, he arrived in the area in the summer of 1876, eager to recruit local workers for his excavation. The Greek government was somewhat less than enthusiastic, but finally gave him permission to dig. There were, however, two strings attached: first, Schliemann had to consent to having an ephor, or overseer, appointed by the Greek government keep an eye on the excavation, and second, he had to agree to turn over everything he found to the Greek government. Schliemann was chagrined, but agreed to the terms nonetheless.

The excavations began near the area of the now famous Lion Gate and soon reached a circular area some 87 feet in diameter. As earth was slowly removed, Schliemann discovered a circle of upright slabs within which the ground had been carefully levelled; more digging revealed stone gravemarkers, called stelai, with relief carvings. Then shaft-graves came to light beneath the levelled ground and what is today called Grave Circle A had been uncovered.

But Schliemann's interest began to increase even more when his wife Sophia came across the first real treasure of the excavation, a gold ring. Once the gleam of gold appeared, the local workmen were dismissed, and Schliemann, Sophia, and the ephor began the laborious clearing of the actual graves, often working with only a pocket-knife.

It was the fifth grave cleared that fulfilled Schliemann's dreams: there were three bodies within, all with golden breastplates on their chests and golden death masks over their faces. Schliemann was convinced that he had found the grave of none other than Agamemnon, King of Mycenae and leader of the Greek forces against Troy. He lifted one mask and in his dramatic manner kissed it, proclaiming that he had now gazed upon the face of Agamemnon.

The rest is history, of course. More and more gold came to light and an entire citadel was eventually excavated. The Mycenaean civilization could now no longer be considered a myth invented by Homer; it was real and, thanks to Heinrich Schliemann, we today can now study its achievement.

Happy anniversary, H.S., wherever you are!