

The Treasure of Priam:
An Update

by P. Y. Forsyth

In *Labyrinth* 50 (May 1991), I alerted readers to the recent re-discovery of the famous Bronze Age “Treasure of Priam” found in 1873 by Heinrich Schliemann during his excavation of Troy (at Hissarlik, Turkey). Schliemann had arranged for this collection of more than 400 artefacts (including approximately 260 items of gold) to be smuggled out of Turkey to Berlin, where it remained until the end of World War II. What became of the treasure at that point had long been a mystery until the curator of the Berlin Museum, Klaus Goldmann, tracked it down in Russia. My article closed with the statement that, “for the first time in 50 years, there is a chance that Schliemann’s treasure will once again see the light of day.” Now, almost five years later, the light of day is looking brighter and brighter.

We now know (more or less) what trials befell the treasure at the end of the war. The tale begins at Yalta, where, in February, 1945, the Allies agreed to divide the city of Berlin into four zones of occupation: one each for the British, Americans, Russians and French. Any “treasures” found were not to be removed from their zones, but, in May of 1945, Russian troops moved the Treasure of Priam (which had been hidden at the Berlin Zoo by the Germans) from the British zone to their own Soviet zone. So-called Russian “Trophy Troops” then transported the artefacts illicitly to Moscow, where they were hidden away in the basement of the Pushkin Museum. So things stood until the arrival of “glasnost” and the unsealing of previously top secret documents.

The two Russian art officials now being credited with tracking down the treasure are Grigori Kozlov and Konstantin Akinsha; their newly published book (entitled appropriately enough “Beautiful Loot”) not only tells the tale of Priam’s Treasure, but also claims that over one million “stolen” artworks still remain sequestered in Russia. They assert that a plan to obtain possession of outstanding masterpieces in Germany was even conceived, along with the “Trophy Troops”, prior to the start of the war. According to them, the USSR engaged art historians to create a “shopping list” of treasures to be “liberated” from German hands. Thus,

it is quite likely that other “missing” masterpieces will soon come to light in Russia.

In the meantime, much of the gold jewelry of the Treasure of Priam is indeed going to be put on public display at the Pushkin Museum as of March 1, 1996. Then, in 1997, the artefacts will begin an international tour, with their first stop being Greece. At the moment, the Greek authorities intend to exhibit the artefacts, appropriately enough, in the house of Heinrich Schliemann in Athens. Objecting to this itinerary is Turkey, which (not surprisingly) believes that the treasure should head there first. After Greece the items will indeed move to Turkey, and then on to Britain. There are no plans at present for an exhibit in Germany (or in North America).

From the above, it is clear that the Treasure of Priam will remain a political bone of contention for some time: so far claims for its “ownership” have been filed by Britain, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Russia! International negotiations are going on, but little progress has been made. For example, two years ago Germany and Russia signed an agreement to repatriate artworks stolen from each other in the course of the war, but nothing has actually been done to bring this accord into effect. Moreover, even if an exchange did take place, Turkey, Greece and Britain would still assert their respective claims to the Treasure of Priam. Stalemate!

As negotiations drag on, perhaps for decades, another problem has reared its head. Ever since its discovery by Schliemann, controversy has dogged the Treasure of Priam, with various authorities claiming that at least some pieces are not authentic, but were purchased by Schliemann to “enhance” the more humble artefacts he actually found at Hissarlik. Given what we now know about Schliemann, such allegations cannot be dismissed out of hand, so detailed archaeological and scientific analyses of all the items comprising the Treasure of Priam will need to be carried out. Now, if only someone would agree on who will do the analyses: I can already see scholars and scientists from Russia, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Britain lining up.

Obviously, the trials and tribulations of the Treasure of Priam are far from over. I’ll keep you up to date!