The odyssey of Heinrich Schliemann: The uncovering of the city of Troy was one of archaeology's great moments; the discovery of its golden treasure one of the great rewards. Schliemann found it. His wife Sophia wore it. For the first time in 50 years the world is about to see it. Caroline Moorehead tells his story

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Heinrich Schliemann was a strange figure, and his arrogant, driven and highly anxious nature is inseparable from what was one of the most remarkable quests of 19th-century archaeology, the search for Homer's Troy, the city of Priam and Hector, besieged by Achilles and the Achaeans, come to retrieve their kidnapped Helen.

Schliemann's beginnings were modest. Born in January 1822 in the village of Neu-Buckow on the flat, sandy plains of north-east Germany, he was apprenticed at the age of 14 to a grocer. By the age of 24, by dint of extreme determination and a rare aptitude for languages - he was to speak 22 and write perfectly in 11 - Schliemann had been appointed St Petersburg agent by the firm of Schroder & Co, to deal in indigo, the dark blue natural dye from Java and India.

For the next 20 years, Schliemann's life was that of an increasingly prosperous merchant, with an ill-natured Russian wife, three children, and a taste for travel to exotic places. In an age when few people ventured abroad, Schliemann made several world trips, took part in the Californian gold rush and survived a shipwreck.

Everywhere he went, he kept a diary, switching seamlessly between languages according to which country he found himself in. He kept meticulous note of measurements, appearances, local customs, food and behaviour. He was energetic and phenomenally curious, never bored, and he seldom complained.

If the diaries reveal a lonely figure, letters to his family suggest bossiness and a terrible need to succeed.

Satisfied at last that he had made enough money to live off, he abandoned the wife he now hated in St Petersburg and set off for America in search of a divorce. He wrote to a friend in Athens that he wanted a new wife, a young, biddable Greek girl with a good classical education, whom he could mould. A 16-year-old girl from a well-to-do draper's family, with haughty looks and heavy dark hair, was found for him.
After a 19-day courtship, Schliemann and Sophia were married. He was now ready for the second phase of his life. At 46, with fluent Turkish and Greek, he intended to become an archaeologist, and to discover the site of Homer's Troy, over which historians were fiercely divided. Some took the view that Homer was simply a poet, singing of legendary tales, while others insisted that he was a historian of what had really taken place several thousand years before somewhere on the coast of Asia Minor.

Schliemann came to archaeology at an excellent moment. The years of his adult life, from 1850 to 1890, spanned one of the most revolutionary periods in the history of science. New discoveries in geology, anthropology and evolutionary biology made it possible to reach back into what Palgrave had called the 'speechless past', and to seek ways of bringing prehistory - before the known written word - to light.

Schliemann had a very simple plan: to take Homer as a literal guide, and use the descriptive passages in the Iliad and Odyssey as pointers to exact locations. Listening only to Homer, he could not go astray.

Schliemann's ferocious energy and single-mindedness made him attractive company to more tentative men. On a first visit to the area in the summer of 1868, he had had the good fortune to encounter Frank Calvert, the US vice-consul. Calvert had done a bit of digging of his own and now persuaded Schliemann that Troy lay beneath the ruins of Hissarlik, a Hellenistic Roman settlement that rose out of the plain near the Dardanelles, and not, as rival scholars put it, below the nearby village of Pinarbasi.

Early in 1871, Schliemann arrived at Hissarlik, had a camp built, took on workmen and began to dig. Week after week, season after season, he bullied and cajoled his workmen on. Snakes and scorpions slithered out of the rocks, malaria attacked everyone, owls kept him awake at night, but still he went on digging. Walls came to light, fragments of pottery, humming tops, copper nails, a cache of bones; all intriguing, but nothing to suggest the great wealth of Troy. Cutting shaft after shaft, descending layer by layer deep into the ground, he plunged on down. Not everyone was impressed. At scholarly gatherings throughout Europe, there was much talk of the 'romantic financier with the destructive manner of a grave robber'.

On the morning of 31 May 1873, at around eight o'clock, came the proof he had so desperately wanted; treasure, of a quantity and with enough gold and silver to silence even his most sceptical critics. Here, beyond all doubt, lay Homer's Troy. Schliemann's agreement with the Turks had been that all finds were to be shared. He chose to forget it. Duping the Turkish overseer, he smuggled the treasure to Athens. With the time to examine his find more closely, he saw that it exceeded all his expectations: cups, earrings, goblets, bottles, vases, and two magnificent diadems, which he draped round Sophia's neck. Soon, triumphant letters and a photograph of Sophia as Helen of Troy were on their way to Europe's most eminent archaeologists.
Schliemann expected international acclaim. What he got was disbelief, as it became known that a few details of the find had been made up. Sophia had not been with him at the time, as he claimed, but back in Athens - so doubts grew. If Schliemann lied so easily, had he perhaps not stolen some of the pieces from some other site? Had he bought the gold and buried it himself?

Though much of the criticism was silly, something in Schliemann's impetuous, boastful manner, made him the perfect target for men more used to sober reticence. To this day, Schliemann's dishonesty is sometimes remembered more clearly than his achievements.

After Troy, he turned his attentions to the Greek mainland. Though his excavations at Mycenae, Tyrins and Orchomenos yielded exceptional finds - the jewel-covered bodies in the shaft graves of Mycenae were one of the first steps in uncovering the great wealth and power of a Mycenaean age - Troy remained his great love. Gradually the attitude of his critics softened. Victorian England warmed to this small, passionate man in his impeccable clothes. Gladstone, doyen of British Homeric scholars, made much of him. In 1884, Schliemann donated the entire Trojan collection to Berlin, in exchange for honours. For a man so tormented by his critics, especially the German academics who seemed to delight in baiting him, these medals and titles must have seemed very sweet.

Yet something about Troy nagged at him. There were still aspects of his finds that refused to fit into their supposed historical setting. Among his enemies was a German artillery officer called Ernst Botticher, a choleric, provocative man who insisted that Hissarlik was not a city, but a necropolis. Despite two separate missions by experts, who confirmed all Schliemann's findings, Botticher continued to mock. As it turned out, he did Schliemann a very good turn.

For some years then, a young and talented German archaeologist called Wilhelm Dorpfeld had been among Schliemann's assistants. He and Schliemann decided to dig once more at Troy. Within a few days, entirely new buildings were unearthed. Soon it became plain that the city Schliemann had named as Homer's Troy could not have been contemporaneous with Mycenae and the Trojan war. The right Troy lay closer to the surface.

Whether or not Schliemann acknowledged his error, no one knows. He wrote nothing down. Forty-five years later, Dorpfeld stated that Schliemann had understood his mistake. He knew that he had found Troy, but his Troy was an earlier Troy, and the real Troy was a more prosaic and modest place. The scholar in Schliemann, Dorpfeld insisted, had at the last triumphed over the gold seeker.

Schliemann never saw Troy again. The earaches that had plagued him all his life now grew more painful. In the autumn of 1890 he agreed to an operation.

It was a success, but he was too restless to take the time to recuperate.
Deciding to pause in Naples to see the recent excavations at Pompeii on his way home to Athens, he collapsed on Christmas Day. Next morning, his right side was paralysed. As eight of Naples' most eminent doctors discussed what to do, Schliemann died.

Subsequent excavations, the deciphering of Linear B at Knossos, were to confirm many of his theories. Digging too fast, too chaotically and without making proper records, Schliemann had followed Homer faithfully and discovered a lost, prehistoric world. He was a flawed character, but a great archaeologist.