REFLECTIONS

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THE OTHER SCHLIEMANN

Anyone with even a mild interest in archaeology eventually comes across the name of Heinrich Schliemann, the nineteenth-century German businessman who, obsessed from childhood on with Homer's *Iliad,* was convinced that he knew the location of the ruins of the city of Troy, went to Turkey to dig in a hill at a village called Hissarlik, and actually did uncover the ruins of Troy—in fact, a whole series of Troys, stacked one atop the other, going back thousands of years. The one that Schliemann thought was the Troy of King Priam and the hero Hector was actually a different one a thousand years older than the city of the Trojan War, and it remained for an American archaeologist, Carl William Blegen, working at Hissarlik just before the Second World War, to demonstrate that the true Homeric city was one many levels higher; but even so, Schliemann had certainly found Troy, nine different Troys piled up in that hill, and his name remains immortal in the annals of archaeology.

It can be an awkward thing to be the son or grandson of a famous ancestor. Johann Sebastian Bach had a number of sons who were very capable composers, but when one says "Bach," everyone knows that Johann Sebastian is the one who is meant. Thomas Mann's son Klaus wrote some fine novels, but it was his father who won the Nobel Prize. Charles Francis Adams was an important diplomatic figure in the American government in the nineteenth century, but he is primarily remembered as the son and grandson of U.S. presidents. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had a son named Franz who was a composer also, but . . . well, you probably get the idea.

And then there was the other archaeologist named Schliemann.

He was Paul Schliemann, Heinrich's grandson. Alas, he was a man of no particular abilities, which did not stop him from making a desperate attempt not merely to equal his grandfather's great achievement but to surpass it. Heinrich had found the lost city of Troy. Paul staked a claim to having found nothing less than the lost continent of Atlantis. The October 20, 1912, issue of the flamboyant and sensation-loving New York newspaper, William Randolph Hearst's *American,* featured a long article by the younger Schliemann headed "How I Discovered Atlantis, the Source of All Civilizations." In fact he did not assert that he himself was the discoverer; he declared instead that his grandfather, shortly before his death in 1890, had given a friend a sealed envelope, marked "To be opened only by a member of my own family, if he pledges himself to devote all his life to the work sketched herein." And on the outside of the envelope Schliemann had added cryptic instructions: "Break the owl-headed vase. Study its contents. They refer to Atlantis. Excavate east of the ruins of the Temple of Sais and among the tombs in Chacuna Valley. . . . You'll find proof of my theories."

Following instructions in the letter, Paul broke open an owl-headed vase that was among his grandfather's collection of artifacts. Within it, he said, were unusual square coins made of an alloy of platinum, aluminum, and silver, and a square metal object of the same material bearing the inscription in Phoenician characters, "Found in the Temple of the Transparent Walls." With it were pieces of bone and clay inscribed, likewise in Phoenician, "From the King Cronos of Atlantis."

Atlantis! The fabulous lost continent

about which so many had speculated ever since Plato, nearly 2500 years ago, had written of it in two dialogues called *Timaeus* and *Critias*: a huge island continent, larger than Asia and Africa put together, that lay just outside the Atlantic side of the Mediterranean, a continent whose great civilization had suddenly been destroyed in a violent earthquake nine thousand years ago. That Atlantis had once existed, a fact unknown in Plato's Greece, had been passed down through generations of Egyptian priests, one of whom had told an ancestor of Plato's friend Critias about it. Plato was just writing a pretty story in order to make a philosophical point; Aristotle, Plato's most famous pupil, made that clear in a single dismissive sentence, saying, "He who invented it also destroyed it." But gradually the Atlantis fable passed from fiction to fact, and in the great surge of exploration that began in the fifteenth century some of the Spanish explorers who came in contact with the Incas, Mayas, and Aztecs of the New World began to put forth the theory that those peoples were descendants of the Atlanteans who had fled the destruction of their homeland in ancient times. One who took that notion seriously was a Frenchman, Charles-Etienne Brasseur, who in 1864 came across a Mayan manuscript that had lain hidden in a Spanish library for three hundred years and proceeded to "translate" it, after a fashion:

"The master is he of the upheaved earth, the master of the calabash, the earth upheaved of the tawny beast (at the place engulfed beneath the floods)—it is he, the master of the upheaved earth, of the swollen earth, he the master of the basin of water."

Pure gibberish, since at that time no one knew how to translate the Mayan glyphs, but to Brasseur these words proved that the Mayans were refugees from lost Atlantis, leading another French pseudoscientist of the same era, the physician Augustus le Plongeon, to build on Brasseur's work, producing his own equally fanciful "translation" of some Mayan glyphs that told, at least to his own satisfaction, of the destruction of Atlantis in a single night, the swallowing up of its sixty-one million inhabitants, and the flight of the survivors to Yucatan (by way of Egypt, where they paused long enough to construct the Sphinx).

The fantasies of Brasseur and Le Plongeon showed the way for Paul Schliemann, who in his newspaper article told how his grandfather had examined certain vases and other artifacts in the Louvre in Paris that came from the valley of Tiahuanaco in the Peruvian Andes and found them identical, but for the Phoenician inscriptions, to the supposed Atlantean artifacts Schliemann had unearthed at Troy. One notable ancient monument at Tiahuanaco, known today as the Gateway of the Sun, is a vast gate standing alone and leading nowhere, carved from a ten-ton block of lava, ten feet high and twelve and a half feet wide. Engraved on its center are bizarre images of alien-looking figures, and nearby is a stone pyramid fifty feet high. There is also a red sandstone figure twenty-four feet high, eerie and even frightening in that desolate landscape. Since Le Plongeon had told of the sojourn of the Atlantean survivors in Egypt on their way to Peru, the Tiahuanaco monuments were, to Paul Schliemann, conclusive proof of the existence of Atlantis.

He let it be known that he had devoted the years from 1906 to 1912 to an intensive program of research that took him to Egypt, to Peru, to the Mayan ruins of Central America, and to other archaeological sites all over the world. In Tibet, he said, Buddhist priests had given him a four-thousand-year-old Babylonian manuscript that described the destruction of Atlantis by an earthquake after the star Bel fell to earth. He went on to say that he was still at work on the mystery of Atlantis and would soon publish a book offering startling revelations.

The first reaction of scholars was one of surprise and excitement. The name of Schliemann, after all, was sacred among archaeologists. But then came some dis-

turbing second thoughts. Where was Paul's Babylonian manuscript? And the Babylonians had not had "manuscripts" at all—they wrote on clay tablets. Coins made of platinum and aluminum? Platinum was an extremely rare metal, and aluminum in its metallic form had been unknown until the nineteenth century. Where were those coins, incidentally? And why had the elder Schliemann, a man much given to self-promotion, kept the whole astonishing discovery a secret to his dying day? Nor did the curators of any archaeological museums recall any visits by Paul Schliemann.

Then came the revelations, and they were not pretty ones.

The Russian-born archaeologist Alexandre Bessmertny, a student of Atlantean lore who was suspicious of Paul Schliemann's alleged findings, consulted Wilhelm Dörpfeld, who had taken part in the excavations at Troy, and got this reply:

"I gladly inform you that I have already been asked about the report made by Dr. Paul Schliemann, though I do not recall by whom. As far as I can remember, I replied at that time . . . that Heinrich Schliemann did not work extensively on the Atlantis problem, at least to my knowledge. I never heard about activities concerning Atlantis from him, although I was his assistant from 1882 to 1890, the year of his death. It is true that we talked about Atlantis occasionally, and I think it likely that Heinrich Schliemann may have collected notes about Atlantis. But I do not believe that he carried out any work on that theme himself."

Now it was Paul Schliemann's cue to bring forth some tangible proof—the coins, the inscribed plaque, his book, anything. But he remained silent. What could he say? The game was up. In his sorry need to seem important, he had invented the whole thing. There were no proofs. There was no revelatory book. This sad little man had had his moment of public attention, and it seemed just then that he would indeed become as famous as his great ancestor, but it was all just a pitiful hoax. He vanished back into the obscurity from which he had come. The lost continent of Atlantis remains lost to this day, though a few vociferous followers of Brasseur and Le Plongeon cling to their hopes that it will sooner or later be discovered. If Plato, who loved truth above all else, had known what later generations would make of his airy fable, he quite probably would never have set it down for the credulous to read. ❍