

John Stathatos: The Book of Lost Cities

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The pictures – ten in all – in *The Book of Lost Cities* are of parched and rocky landscapes laid out under skies of an implacable blue, in the style of Ernst Haas, for instance, and Harald Sund and other contributors to Time-Life's fine series of the 1970s on *The World's Wild Places*. Texts, in columns to the left, are of around 400 words each, in the scholarly prose of the Edwardians. The triptychs are completed to the right by cursory maps of Central Asia and the Middle East – of the sorts of areas known to veteran Magnum photographers. Each triptych features a city vanished or reduced to ruin: Azzanathkona to Tigranocerta. Stathatos's sources are – he claims – old publications of all sorts: annals, diaries and the essays of archaeologists. In actuality the pictures are of Afghan scenery taken years ago, before the Soviet invasion.

Joan Fontcuberta, the Barcelona photographer, remarks that Stathatos's erudition is "infused with delirium". He and Yves Abrioux also refer to Borgesian labyrinths – as seen in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. Stathatos, it must be admitted, can go over the top, but then his sources were always prone to exaggeration. You accept fabulous tales of anthropophagy from Pliny and Strabos and from Joyce's tar in the shelter in *Ulysses* – you remember, the raconteur with the postcard from Bolivia. Stathatos's tall but scholarly stories stand in sharp contrast to postmodern travel writing in the Granta style. A Cappadocian king called Ariobarzanes will always catch at



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the imagination, as surely will the story of Mythridentes, who strapped a "small, sharp knife under his penis, with which, by and by, he cut his unfortunate nephew's throat" – from the narrative of Tigranocerta. Mythridentes, a king, was at the time negotiating with his nephew Ariarathes, also a king. Both had been subject, previously, to body searches "with due apologies for royal sensibilities". It is at a point like this that Stathatos's narrations jump from Amenia 50bc to airport experience in the 1990s.

The narratives are engrossing. Their being true is hardly to the point compared to their being accurate transcriptions and pastiches of a kind of writing. From time to time the illusion is interrupted and we leave the library, with its tales of Seleucid dynasties, to be searched for penknives in Athens airport, or to walk the streets of some postmodern city with women "abominable for shaving their heads and for wearing red" – from the Azzanathkona entry. The texts ask you to pay attention, and they induce self-awareness, mainly about the pleasures of reading and the acceptance of evidence.

Normally, in front of art in the 1990s you can call it a day

sooner rather than later and pass on and out of the building. The *Book of Lost Cities*, though, doesn't let go that easily. Its texts are sonorous and attractive, and sometimes inauthentic in tone, and they ask to be read for anomalies. Then, after a while, they ask to be analysed, for each one gives a similar but not identical account of a disappearance. Sometimes they were destroyed, sometimes merely lost sight of – or they slipped into oblivion. Origins are mentioned in five out of the ten, and warfare in seven. Food, clothing, ritual and symbols recur. Thinking further you might notice that motifs and events are all given – in the annalists' style – only a certain amount of space, and that the whole impression is one of briskness, of actions fiercely entered into and quickly resolved. Photographers lately have dwelt on catastrophe: think of Karl de Keyzer's pictures from the old USSR and Richard Misrach's *Desert Cantos* and *Violent Legacies* (1992). We are to blame, Misrach suggests, in pictures of recent damage in the Nevada desert. Stathatos, though, has gone further down the trail, to a point where responsibility no longer matters. The pictures, for instance, take place in geological

time, among rock strata and dried-up river-beds, in airless spaces borrowed from Mars as photographed by *Sojourner*. At such a distance into the future there is no point in caring about our mismanagement of the environment and all those venal sins which brought our tenancy to an end. What survives in the collective memory – now housed in *Tlön* – are a few outrageous stories of the king with the knife beneath his penis and the forty-nine stranglers waiting at their fifty doors in Daedala. What survives are a few motifs: a burning palm, a boar's head and a winged thunderbolt in *Arkiotis* in the Seleucid satrapy of Carmania. *The Book of the Lost Cities* functions, in other words, like a humanist fable. What was of interest about us was our preoccupation with symbols and emblems – golden griffins, double headed axes and suchlike – and our capacity for wishful thinking, some of which took but most of which resulted in Azzanathkona, *Arkiotis* and suchlike botched enterprises. We entered into the project, by this account, equipped with little more than the desire to make a mark. The results may have been pitiful and ruinous, but somehow they mattered – as art and literature, or just as motifs and words. At the end of the day – or in the imperturbable reaches of space – art matters, Stathatos implies, less because it would do us good than because of its affrontery – those sonorous (invented) names announcing themselves in the wilderness.

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