

## THE BOOK OF LOST CITIES

John Stathatos

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image: the city of Li-jien

Desolate, the few remaining traces of the lost city of Li-jien fight for the attention against a rugged mountainscape. The ruins appear as a poor imitation of nature's masterful rock formations, mirroring in their decay the austere natural monuments rising above them. As a nineteenth century photographic motif of the picturesque Romantic landscape, ruins symbolised the relentless passage of time and the transience of human endeavour in the face of nature's power. With unprecedented imperial growth, photographers turned their cameras towards Northern Africa, the Middle East

and the Extreme Orient, adopting ruins as a pictorial theme in their representation of an expanding world. Topographical photographers combined the pictorial with the scientific as they participated in the exploration and imaging of imperial landscapes. Not simply confined to an evidential role, such photographs were circulated to the public in albums, as lantern slides or stereographs, promoting a wider imperial discourse. Drawing on a tradition of topographical photography, John Stathatos' *The Book of Lost Cities* examines the concept of 'landscape' as a cultural process and explores the deconstruction of the photograph as evidential document.

Despite Yves Abrioux's warning in the introductory essay not to approach the book 'with a scientific – or forensic – urge to discover proof of the existence of the archaic "referents" it documents', the layout of the publication overtly invites such consideration. The book is text heavy – a double page of contextual information, including a simple line drawn map, precedes each of the ten landscape photographs. Reminiscent of a school textbook, I felt compelled, having quickly skipped through the images, to return to the beginning and 'discover' the history behind these mythical places.

Arkiotis, the first city, throws the reader in at the deep end. The succinct and erudite prose of the introductory information assumes a high level of foreknowledge. I found myself quickly stymied by the text, and an examination of the map only served to intensify my frustration. Missing the familiar tools of full references, footnotes and bibliography left me flailing about looking for a way to navigate the work.

The scholarly prose, which, despite its authoritative tone, is strewn with tentative claims gauged from 'scant information' or 'inevitable assumption[s]', serves to invert a text/ image relationship, in which word illuminates photograph. While informed by the preceding text, it is the photograph of Arkiotis that cements what is written, binding the mythical name and fragmented history to what seems to be a tangible location.

On moving through *The Book of Lost Cities*,



however, unease about the 'authenticity' of the information and images began to grow. Drawing on various sources including classical writing, military accounts and anecdotal material, Stathatos varies the type of information presented with each photograph. Such changes affect the balance of the text/image relationship, calling into question the evidential reliability of both media. Reaching Apate, the ninth city, the closing paragraph gives one account of how the city was named. Supposedly a heavily fortified garrison town it was in 'fact' a hoax used to deter a powerful enemy, and never existed at all. One feels by this point Apate may not be alone.

A closing essay by Joan Fontcuberta loads the project with yet another tier of contextual baggage. Stathatos' book is indeed a multi-layered production, which plays with the ambiguity of photographic images and the authority of historical texts to position 'landscape' as a complex cultural construct. The initial focus on whether the 'lost cities' exist or not becomes subsumed by

the re-creation of a historical process that provides an epistemological space in which the reader can embark on their own intellectual journey.

*Siobhan Davis*