

the book of lost cities

JOHN STATHATOS

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So much then for the accounts of the Persians and Phoenicians, on whose truth or falsity I have no intention of passing judgement. I prefer to rely on my own knowledge, on the strength of which I will proceed with my history, telling the story as I go along of small cities no less than of great. Most of those which were once great are small today; and those which in my own lifetime have grown to greatness, were small enough in the old days. It makes no odds whether the cities I shall write of are great or small, for in this world none remain prosperous for long.

HERODOTUS, *The Histories*, Book I

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**LOST AND FOUND:
ON THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL POLITICS
OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

Archaeological curiosity and politico-military interests have long gone hand in hand, both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Any number of episodes come to mind as one looks at the photographs in John Stathatos' *Book of Lost Cities*, with their fragments of architecture emerging from rocks and sand. When, for example, Napoleon Bonaparte led an expedition to Egypt in 1798, supposedly to free the natives of their oppressive rulers and carry to them the benefits of modern civilisation, the result was a military fiasco. However, the general took with him a large team of experts who carried out a meticulous study of a land then almost unknown to Europeans; when their findings were published, some 3000 illustrations were laid before the public, giving birth to the fashion for things Egyptian and to Orientalist fantasies which popular culture (especially film) suggests are far from dead, even today. Nor has archaeological exploration in the Near and Middle East lost its power to arouse passions. In the mid-seventies, the discovery of clay tablets in the ancient city of Ebla fuelled unfounded rumours of close correspondences with Biblical texts, provoking virulent attacks on Syria, which found itself unjustly accused of suppressing information which was in fact fictitious. Contemporary

photography cannot hope to approach archaeological themes without coming up against the simultaneously conflicting and complicit strategies of knowledge and conquest.

Intimations of archaeological and imperialist history (including commercial expansionism) abound in the texts accompanying Stathatos' photographs. The first function of these writings is to identify the sites photographed: Daedala, Azzanathkona, Li-jien, etc. However, the citation of such names will not suffice; a fairly complex process of authentication is necessary. In the first place, the cities in question being "lost" – i.e. their precise location having long remained unknown, although their existence was recorded in ancient texts –, the question of identification works against the grain of the customary logic of captions, which is to make mute images declare their identity. Here, it is the photographic "evidence" which "proves" that these mythical names do (or did) indeed refer to something very real. However, if the image thus acts to confirm the veracity of the text, it is equally true that the citation of scholarly sources is necessary to animate the less eloquent photographs – i.e. to signify, in the conventional

manner, that the camera has indeed captured something of note.

Susan Sontag has famously decried photographs as "artificial ruins," suggesting that their phenomenological status as traces of a past moment induces a passive relation to reality. This may indeed be the attitude cosily fostered by the family snapshot album or, more dramatically, by press photography and video footage, not to forget the numerous artistic contexts in which we have learnt to discern some sort of metaphorical or generalised significance as accruing to the photographic image. In contrast, John Stathatos' photographs of all but invisible ruins, or of enigmatic architectural features seemingly lost in the middle of nowhere, suggest that whenever one enters the realm of proof, text and photograph will mutually re-contextualize each other, in an altogether more complex manner. This is true even in academia. On an epistemological level, *The Book of Lost Cities* confirms the thesis of commentators like Bruno Latour who, in a "photo-philosophical" meditation on a scientific expedition to a very different part of the world (the Amazon), argues that reference is defined, not by a statement's designating something which it faces

one-to-one across the gap between word and world, but by the internal consistency of a chain of operations in which words and images frequently swap places, the one acting as the necessary supplement of the other.

If one approaches *The Book of Lost Cities* with a scientific – or forensic – urge to discover proof of the existence of the archaic “referents” it documents, one quickly finds these slipping between one’s fingers. Not only has it already been intimated that it is difficult to pin down the actual sites. Certain of the cities evoked here sit problematically astride two cultures – the Greek and the Asiatic; failing that, they at least testify to regional conflicts which determined their very existence (both their origin and their end). If simply identifying the remains of such places involves sifting through the notoriously unreliable annals of military history, further defining their identity often implies negotiating a position in a politico-theological conflict. The calm of the photographs barely hides a fundamentally conflictual referent, which parallels the relationships of power which the images themselves have to negotiate on a pragmatic level.

Furthermore, to the extent that one defines the context of *The Book of Lost Cities* in terms of scientific or forensic proof, it becomes necessary to check its textual references: questions of citational accuracy and interpretative quality have to be asked and answered for the consistency of the referential chain to be demonstrated. Simultaneously, the fidelity of the images has to be verified. Such, however, is the authority with which the photographic image is vested that the latter necessity will appear less immediate than the former. On the one hand, for example, a reference to an ancient Greek author called Stephanus has, in the context of a city named Daedala, an intriguingly Joycean ring that is felicitously strengthened by the rhyme between the name Stephanus and that of the modern scholar Curtius, so that one is led to wonder whether a non-literal reading of Stathatos’ critical apparatus might not be pertinent.

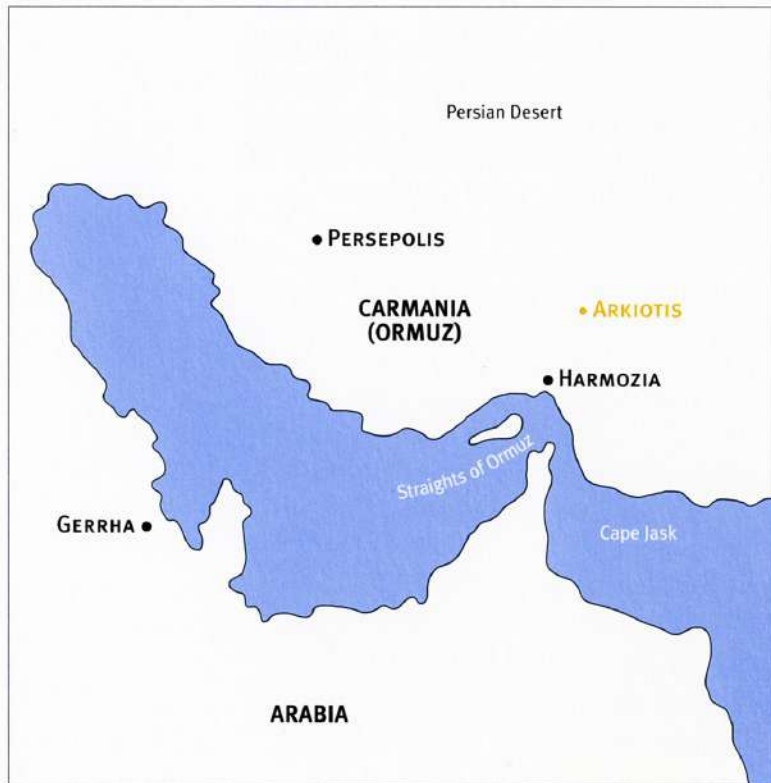
On the other hand, one tends to be lulled into perhaps unjustified confidence by the photographic images as such. Here, manifest content parallels overt pragmatic status. Not since the ephemeral but influential cult of ruins instigated in the late eighteenth cen-

ture have artists really given cause to be suspected of wilfully constructing architectural fragments with the aim of passing them off as genuine. The modern cult of monuments has different connotations, which provide the immediate context for Stathatos' work. The painstaking textual excavations and the careful documentation of anonymous ruins in *The Book of Lost Cities* imply a will to redeem the remote past, this effect being reinforced by a mode of presentation which both renders the images themselves monumental and transfigures them by bathing them in light.

Finally, it is perhaps the very conflation of effects of authority which most provokes one to hesitate. Thus it is significant that the format of Stathatos' light boxes is sufficiently reminiscent of a television screen to call to mind the most recent views of desert landscapes to have received wide publicity, even though they showed ruins altogether less august in character. These were the views of Iraq in the wake of Operation Desert Storm. No previous military campaign had ever produced such carefully managed images: who can say with confidence which were real and which virtual? *The Book of Lost Cities* acknowledges a debt to Borges.

However, associated with the Borgesian erudition of its texts, the undramatic verisimilitude of its photographs outsteps the bounds of erudite literacy. These are not fables of literary epistemology but object lessons in the art of negotiating one's way through the minefield of global communications, at the onset of the age of multi-media.

This essay was first published in *Réels, Fictions, Virtuel* (Actes Sud, 1996), a monograph edited by Joan Fontcuberta to accompany the 27th Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie d'Arles.



ARKIOTIS Tarn's scathing comment on the lost Kingdom of Ormuz and its predecessor state is familiar: "of all the Seleucid satrapies, Carmania is the least known; it seems to have no history". Like most *bon mots*, this one needs to be taken *cum grano salis*. There is, at least, no quarrel over the satrapy's general geographical location: west of Gedrosia, along the coast south of the Persian Desert, dominating the Straights of Ormuz along their northern shore. Alexander the Great's admiral, Nearchos, mentions it in passing in his memoirs, while Onesicritus writes of mines, the gold-bearing river Amanis, and of the head-hunters infesting the hinterland. The exact boundaries are in some doubt, for Strabo's conflation of earlier sources gives the distance from Cape Jask to Macae (Ras Mussendam) in Arabia as "one day's voyage" – unlikely even under the most auspicious of circumstances.

The invaluable Pliny adds to the scant information, noting the presence in the country of the Harmozaei of "*Portus Macedonum et arae Alexandri in promunturio*" (VI, 110) – in other words, of a Graeco-Macedonian town on the Gulf of Ormuz and of altars on Cape Jask attributed to (or dedicated to?) Alexander. Ptolemy (VI, 18) mentions three Carmanian cities: the inevitable Alexandria; Carmania Metropolis (probably modern Kerman); and Harmozia

or Ormozia, doubtless Pliny's Portus Macedonum, from which hand-sewn native coracles operated a regular ferry service to Arabia. Megasthenes adds a fourth place name, that of Arkiotis, placing it somewhere in the Upper Jiruft basin.

By the death of Antiochus IV in 163, the Seleucids had lost most of their Persian satrapies, including Persis and Seistan; on the other hand, Carmania did not at that time, or for the next two centuries, form part of the Bactrian or Parthian realms. The inevitable assumption must be that Carmania, or Ormuz as it was increasingly known, became an independent kingdom, an assumption supported by numismatic evidence of an otherwise unaccounted-for dynasty including kings Bellaios, Tigraios and Goaisos (see Alotte de la Fuye, 1934, and J.M. Unvala, 1935). According to an inscription on the reverse of a silver coin found in Susa, the capital of the Kingdom of Ormuz was Arkiotis, a city briefly but wonderfully enriched thanks to its key position in the southern trade route from India to Persepolis. This route, according to Tarn, was "perhaps" the one taken by the Hyrcanian envoys to Nero in AD 59; clearly identified in the Peutinger Table as a half-way house between Seistan and Ormuz, there may be reason to associate Arkiotis with Marco Polo's Camadi.

Other than a handful of uncertain place-names, little survives of the lost kingdom of Ormuz and its capital: a few porphyry seals, coins whose obverse bears a riotous confusion of symbols (the Ptolemaic eagle, a burning palm, a boar's head, a winged thunderbolt), an incomplete set of ivory spice weights, the strangely shaped and balanced Ormuzian stabbing sword described by Macrobius, an unusually obscene epigram by Martial beginning "*Aspicias ingenium Arkiotæ ...*", a now illegible text inscribed on a vast limestone slab dredged up from the Red Sea in 1873, and, above all, the celebrated bronze statue of Arkiothe Tyche, or Fortune of the City, which was excavated in 1977 by the Imperial Iranian Department of Archaeology, only to be melted down three years later by order of Ayatollah Khorasani. ■





DAEDALA The survival of a Greek city high in the mountains of Central Asia, inhabited by descendants of Alexander the Great's Macedonian troops, has been a staple of the romantic imagination for decades. Sadly, archaeological and epigraphic research have between them pinpointed the sites of Alexander's major settlements in Bactria and India: Alexandria Eschate (Alexandria Ultima) on the Jaxartes is associated with Chodjend, and Alexandria Marghiana with Merv. Thanks to the pioneering excavations of Schlumberger and Bernard, Ptolemy's mysterious Alexandria Oxiana can now confidently be identified with Ai Khanum on the banks of the Amu Darya.

Nevertheless, the Alexander-descent legend of the 'White Kafirs' of Kafiristan is given some credence by the persistent reports of the city of Daedala in the Paropamisadae (Hindu Kush). The story is confused by the apparent existence of two sites of that name, both with connections to Crete. Strabo and Ptolemy identify Daedala as a district in the Rhodian Peraea bordering upon Lycia, while Curtius and Stephanus place it in or near Bajaur, by what Justin describes as the Daedalian Mountains. The answer seems to be that there existed both a Lycian district and an Afghan city by the same name; Stephanus connects them with Crete and

with Daedalos the master-craftsman, stating clearly that "there is another Daedala, a city of Cretans and Indians" in Menander's Indian kingdom.

Most sources agree that Daedala was an Indo-Cretan city, which probably grew out of a settlement of Cretan mercenaries. Intriguingly, we hear also of another Cretan settlement in the same region, Asterousia on the road between Alexandria-Kapisa and Ghazni; given that Asterion was one of the appellations of Minotaur, it may be permissible to identify Asterousia with Daedala, the city named after the builder of the labyrinth. It is certain that labyrinths and bull-worship both appear at Daedala; Isidore of Charax makes veiled allusions to mazes and sacrifices, and Daedala is mentioned with abhorrence in the *Milindapanha*, or *Questions of Milinda* – Milinda, it will be remembered, being the Indian name of King Menander.

Daedala appears to have been the cradle of an unholy mixture of Cretan and Hindu mysticism, the dark obverse of the fertile Graeco-Buddhist synthesis which gave rise to the cultural flowering of Gandhara. A possibly corrupt Chinese translation of the *Milindapanha* dating from the 4th century provides some additional

information on the cult, which had clearly developed an elaborate ritual of human sacrifice; this was a kind of sacred hunt through a labyrinth which offered victims a single, slim chance of survival. A later source, the Pseudo-Aristeas, writes of "the dark and twisting passages of the underground temple, each of whose seven halls have seven doors, behind all of which except for one wait the priests with their strangling cords; but one door of the forty-nine leads up into the light".

The city vanishes from history by the time of the fall of the Kushan kingdoms, as does all trace of its precise location; but in his memoirs, Brigadier-General Sir Alexander Cunningham remembered seeing the sign of the bull's head and of the double-headed axe carved high up a rocky mountain side in the Minjan Valley. ■





GAUZAKA

"The sixteenth day of October we arrived at a city called Ardabil, in the latitude of eight and thirty degrees, an ancient city in the province of Azerbaijan, wherein the princes of Persia are commonly buried: and there Alexander the Great did keep his court when he invaded the Persians. Four days' journey to the westward is the city Tabriz in old time called Tauris, the greatest in Persia, but not of such trade as it hath been, by mean of the great invasion of the Turk. The twentyfirst we departed travelling for the most part over mountains all in the night season, and resting in the day, being destitute of wood, and therefore were forced to use for fuel the dung of horses and camels.

But by the third day of November we found ourselves short of both meat and drink, there being few streams in such barren mountains, and those bitter: and our peril all the greater, for that the captain of the Tartars whom the king had appointed us fled in the night with all his men, so that we like to have perished either of want, or at the hands of the lawless rovers, whereof there was great plenty (though of little else). At which we carried on our march as best we could for five days more, growing weaker by the day: whereon Master Richard Johnson and I set out upon two

horses not yet wholly foundered, to range the wilderness and seek succour, though we knew not whence.

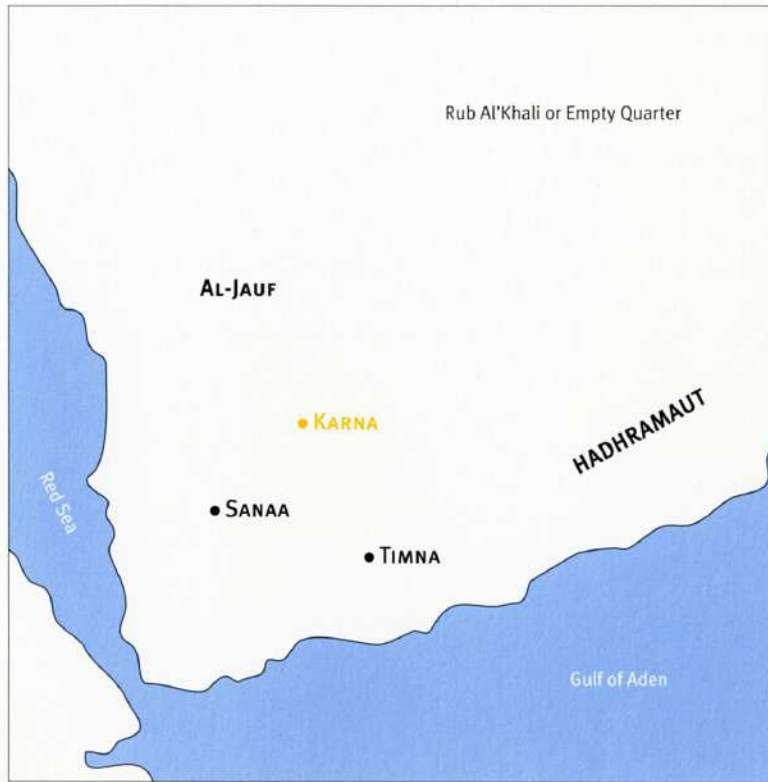
And it so chanced that on the evening of the second day, we escried far off divers horsemen which made towards us. When they came night unto us, we perceived them to be well armed with bows and swords, and the captain richly appointed: who to our surprise addressed us in kind most civil (though we understood him not), and bade us by gestures follow him, the which we did willingly. Thus proceeding we came when half the night was spent to a great wall, and passing through, were led to where our lodging was appointed.

The next day I was sent for to come to the prince of this city, who said unto me, Quoshe quelde, that is to say, Welcome: and an interpreter being sent for, demanded of me of what country I was, and what affairs I had? Unto whom I answered that I was of the famous City of London within the noble realm of England, and that I was sent thither from the most excellent and gracious sovereign Lady Elizabeth Queen of the said realm for to treat of friendship, and free passage for our merchants: but that we had come near death in these inhospitable wastes. And then I fain would know

what city this was, where none was known to be, and which was writ upon no map of ours: to which the prince, whose name was Alrazeik, answered that this was Gauzaka, which had in olden days been most puissant, but now was much reduced in size and power by mean of the black death in his grandsire's time, and latterly by malice of the Amir of Tabriz: and that he sought friendship with us, for protection against the enemies which pressed him sorely.

Whereon I answered that such a worthy prince (as he was), could not but be under the protection of Mahomet: which pleased him greatly, adding, that his city was founded by no less a personage than Sekunder, by which name is designated Alexander. In proof whereof, he bid his servants show us sundry fine buildings of dressed stone, and a tiered theatre in the ancient style, and a great fount in the shape of a coiled dragon, and other such wonders: and the inscriptions thereon all in Greek. But of people there were few, and they ill-dressed, and the great wall in ruinous state. And that night we to horse again, with store for our people, and by many and winding tracks led from Gauzaka ...” ■





KARNA The oldest and perhaps most wholly mysterious of the early kingdoms of Arabia Felix was that of the Minaeans, or Ma'in, of whom Pliny wrote: "The export of frankincense is channelled along a single narrow track in the territory of the Minaei; it is these people who originated the trade and who chiefly practice it, and it is from them that the perfume takes the name of Minaean" (*Historia Naturalis*, XII). At the height of their power in the third century BC, the territory of the Minaeans stretched from the Yemen to the Hadramaut, and their capital Qarnawu (Karna) was located in the southern Al-Jauf. Little is known of the Minaeans; Strabo, quoting Eratosthenes, reports that they were contemporaries of the Sabaeans, and that they traded aromatics to Palestine and beyond.

Karna's fame spread early to the Greek world, helped by a completely spurious etymological connection between Minaeans and Minoans, which in turn suggested a legendary origin in Crete. A Greek tradition spoke of an Arab colony settled by Cadmus in Euboea, while Agatharchides wrote of a long-standing friendship between a certain tribe in the Hejaz and the Boeotians. Ptolemy mentions a city by name of Thebaiopolis in the Wadi Dhahaban, which, according to Diodorus Siculus, was engaged in the mining

of gold. More concrete evidence of a link between Ma'in and Greece can be found in the presence on the island of Delos of a shrine to Wadd'Abb the Moon-god, complete with Minaeo-Greek inscription.

At its zenith, Karna dominated the richest part of the southern Arabian coastline, probably including part of Solomon's Ophir. Inevitably, this aroused the jealousy of their neighbours, and the Minaeans came under increasing pressure from the Sabaeans; Ptolemy's note, looking back from the middle of the second century (*Geography*, VI.7), is the last we hear of the Minaeans until their stone inscriptions were discovered in the 19th century. Among those reporting such finds was, inevitably, Charles Doughty: "As the Sherif commanded... they drew bridle before a grey crag; on whose wall-like face I dimly descried a colossal human effigy. The ancient seems to sit and hold in his hand a camel staff; and ranging therewith are two lines of Himyaric letters." (*Arabia Deserta*, II, 529). Alas, when finally deciphered, such inscriptions often proved less than enthralling:

SMYF' 'SW' and his sons *SRHB'L YKML* and *M'DKRB Y'QR*, sons of *LHY'Y YRHM*, they of *K'LN*, and *DYZ'N* and *GDNm* and *MTLN* and *SRQN* and *HBm* and *YT'N* and [...] the kabirs

and leaders of *SYBN dNSF*: inscribed this inscription on the rock *MWYT*.

Only a single contested passage in the *Chronicles* of Artemidorus suggests what might have brought about the final collapse of Karna: "Of all the cities of Arabia Felix, Karna had been the richest by far; but at the time of the dictatorship of Sulla, there came against her the Sabaeans, and the Qatabaneans, and the Hadramis and laid her low. The reason was in part the oppression she had in years past exercised against them; but above all the fact that in Karna had arisen a monstrous heresy, whereby the Moongod, principal deity of the Arabians, was made inferior to the sun, and his servant. For, held the new doctrine, the sun was at all times complete and indivisible, whereas the moon was only whole upon a single night in every month. And so, because Wadd'Abb had been mocked, his servants killed, and his shrines defiled, they came to Karna in their righteous anger; and when they withdrew at last, Karna was no more." ■





FIROZKOH Firozkoh, lost capital of the Ghorid dynasty, was born and died in blood. The Ghorid princes rise in the mountains of Central Afghanistan in the early 12th century, the 6th of the Hegira; under Ala al-din Husain, known as Jahansuz, "the world's incendiary", the Ghors sweep down into the plains to become the scourge of the Ghaznavids. According to the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* or *Book of Princes*, when Jahansuz came to build his capital he did so with a ferocity which was, even for that period, judged excessive; the *Book of Gerchasp* relates that after the fall of Ghazni, "The general returned merrily towards the Seistan. And having gathered together all his prisoners, he poured out their blood, and having mixed it with earth, he built of this mixture a rampart. From this mortar emerged a serpent; and whoever the serpent bit was sure to die".

The Ghorids adorned their capital with all the riches of Kabul, Herat, and Ghazni which they captured in turn, before successfully challenging their fearsome Kara-Khitay neighbours for possession of Balkh itself, "Mother of Cities". The fame of Firozkoh is confirmed by innumerable mentions in the Arab and Sassanid annals; high in the mountains, the Ghorid fortress was said to be surrounded by walls, towers, balconies and escarpments, crowned

by two golden griffins "the size of camels", loot from the fall of Adjmer in 1192.

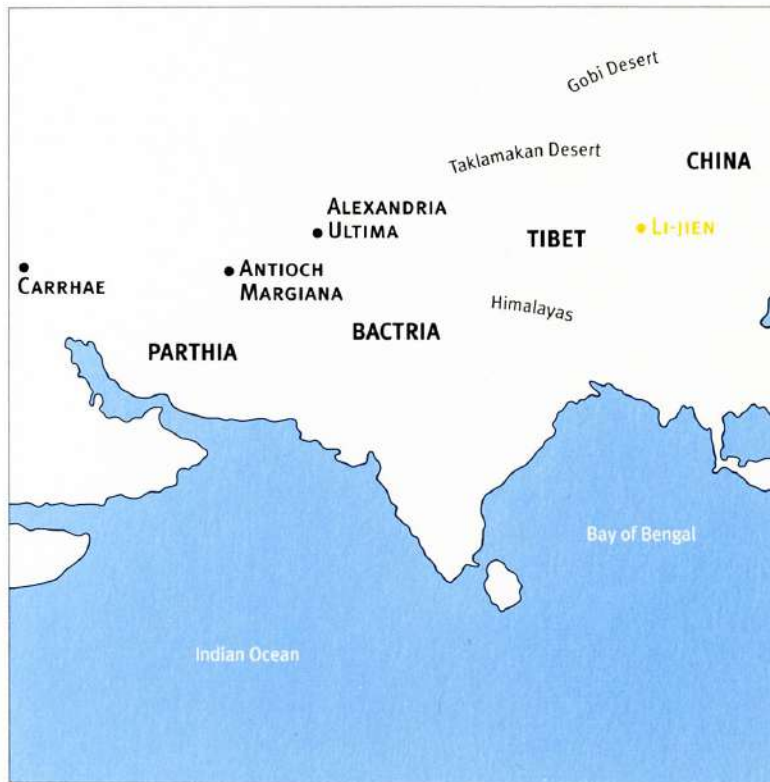
At the death of Ghiyath al-din in 1202, the vast and astonishing Ghorid empire stretched from Khorasan to the gulf of Hormuz and from China to the eastern approaches of Hindustan; it was not to last. In 1222, the Mongol Khan Ogö dai destroys Firozkoh, and the Ghorids vanish from history with the same rapidity as they had appeared. In fact, so complete was the destruction that despite the detailed descriptions of Arab geographers, the city of Firozkoh fades from human memory with equal rapidity – towers, griffins and all.

In 1958, in a slim volume, part XVI of the *Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*, the late André Maricq claimed to have solved the "irritating historical problem" of the Ghorid capital by identifying it with Djam, the site of an impressive minaret on the banks of the Hari Rud; discovered through the happy coincidence of a long shadow falling across the ravine of a summer evening as a Royal Afghan Air Force plane flew overhead, the Minaret of Djam does indeed bear a number of splendid kufic inscriptions to the glory of "the magnified Sultan, King of Kings,

Ghiyath al-dunya wal-din who exalteth Islam", as well as the customary Koranic texts, and these seem to have been sufficient to convince the French archaeologist.

As he writes with absolute confidence, "other sites have been proposed; but Ferrier's suggestion of Zarni lacks all verisimilitude, and earned him the sarcasm of Raverty. The more traditional identification (Maricq is here hinting at that proffered by the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*) was similarly established with a far from rigorous logic". Unfortunately, it becomes clear that Maricq's report was based entirely on a visit of less than 24 hours; a later, more extensive study of the environs made it evident that even a modestly sized village could hardly be accommodated between the steep cliffs. The Soviet invasion and subsequent civil war have made all efforts at elucidating the mystery impossible. ■





LI-JIEN On a cold Wednesday afternoon of November, 1954, the thirty-odd members of London's China Society who braved the unusually inclement weather repaired to the society's premises in Half Moon Street for their quarterly meeting; it was on this occasion that Homer H. Dubs delivered his celebrated lecture on the city of Li-jien, a lecture whose reverberations are still felt in the field of oriental archaeology.

The story began in the fateful year BC 54, when the triumvir Marcus Licinius Crassus, jealous of the military prestige gained by his colleagues Caesar and Pompey, led seven Roman legions and 4,000 allied cavalry into the depths of Parthia, straight into the most spectacular defeat ever suffered by a Roman army. Nearly 10,000 prisoners were marched by the victors to Antioch in Margiana on the far eastern border of Parthia, some 1,500 miles away; according to Ovid (*Odes III/5*), the Romans resigned themselves to marrying barbarians and patrolling the edge of the great Sea of Grass. Other than Velleius Paterculus' discredited account of a survivor of Carrhae guiding Mark Anthony's forces on their retreat eighteen years later, this is the last the West was to hear of Crassus' men for two millennia.

Turning now to the Chinese historians, it is known that in the autumn of BC 36, General Gan Yen-shou, Protector-General of the Western Frontier, moved his armies along the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert and into Sogdiana in a surprise attack on the capital city of the Hun Emperor Jzh-jzh. The city duly fell, and – an event unprecedented in Chinese history – the capture was illustrated in the form of eight scenes or paintings sent to the imperial court. Ban Gu’s account of these paintings, as reported by Professor J.J.L. Duyvendak of Leiden University, includes two incredible elements: the description of “a double palisade of wood”, and of “foot-soldiers lined up... in fish-scale formation”. Both these factors are unknown in any account of eastern military tactics, but both, as per Kromayer-Veith and Conrad Cinchorius, represent characteristic Roman tactics.

When the city fell, the mysterious mercenaries “remained in formation, a formidable body of men ready to defend themselves, as only professional soldiers would do”. Such men would be valuable recruits to the Imperial Chinese army, and usefully free of any lingering loyalty to the late lamented Jzh-jzh. Now came the truly amazing part of Homer H. Dubs’ revelations: in the cadastral register for the year AD 5 inserted in Gan Du’s *History of the*

Former Han Dynasty is included the city and county of Li-jien, which name, a corruption of Alexandria, was used by the Chinese to signify both Rome and the Roman Empire (the origin of this confusion appears to have been the arrival of a Parthian embassy in BC 100 whose presents included jugglers from Alexandria).

It seems, therefore, that between BC 36 and AD 5, a Roman city named Li-jien was founded by the last survivors of Carrhae south of modern Yung-chang in the NW extension of Kansu province, half-way around the world from their native Rome. If further proof were needed, in AD 9 Li-jien was briefly renamed Jie-lu by the Confucian usurper Wang Mang, which means “caitiffs captured in storming a city”. Li-jien is found listed among the counties of China until the 5th century; the city was finally destroyed by a Tibetan incursion in 746. According to the Reverend Amos Spurling, who travelled in the region in the early twenties, the local cuisine is distinguished by its liberal use of an unusually potent fermented fish sauce; it may be that the most persistent cultural contribution of Crassus’ legionnaires was the introduction to China of *garum* sauce. ■





TIGRANOCERTA Tigranocerta, named in honour of King Tigranes of Armenia, Great King and King of Kings by right of conquest and descent from the decaying Seleucid empire, was never a fortunate city. Founded around 89 BC on the edge of the north Syrian plain, its principal purpose was to pander to the vanity of its founder; there being little in the way of opportunities for trade, commerce or manufacture in its desolate location to attract inhabitants, Tigranocerta seemed doomed to remain severely underpopulated until the shifting kaleidoscope of near eastern politics took another turn in the year 78.

To the north-west of Armenia lay the kingdom of Pontus, ruled by Tigranes' father-in-law Mithridates VI Eupator, the brilliant and ruthless opponent of Rome throughout the three Mithridatic Wars. To their contemporaries in dangerous times, what to modern eyes might appear the somewhat excessive ruthlessness deployed by them was no more than the *realpolitik* of a prudent ruler. Mithridates had the requisite quality in abundance, as he publicly demonstrated early in his reign while negotiating a truce with his nephew Ariarathes of Cappadocia, for which it had been agreed that the two Kings would meet in the no-man's-land before their assembled armies, alone and unarmed. With due apology for

royal sensibilities, both were searched for weapons before the meeting; but Mythridates had strapped a small, sharp knife under his penis, with which, by and by, he cut his unfortunate nephew's throat.

Many years later, Cappadocia once again fell victim to the King of Pontus' schemes. Her current king, Ariobarzanes, having as usual proved resistant to Pontic pressure, Tigranes was asked by his father-in-law to resolve the Cappadocian problem once and for all. He did so with a will, returning to his own kingdom with no fewer than thirty thousand Cappadocian captives; what better use for them, under the circumstances, than to make them the happy beneficiaries of the royal enthusiasm for town-planning, installing them *volens-nolens* in Tigranocerta.

Within a decade, the new foundation, now the Armenian capital, had been endowed with a wall sixty cubits in height, a vast palace, hunting parks, splendid public buildings and the greater part of the royal treasury; few however of its forced inhabitants showed much enthusiasm for the place. Accordingly, when in 69 BC Lucius Licinius Lucullus with two Roman legions crossed the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and besieged his new capital, the King of Kings

gathered together an army estimated at a quarter of a million men to relieve the garrison. No sooner had this army appeared than the Romans attacked, despite odds of of 25 to 1; this was so much against expectations that Plutarch has Tigranes gasping "What, do *they* attack *us*?". The result was an undisputed victory for Rome, and the city duly fell.

So vast was the plunder of Tigranocerta that, as Strabo notes cynically, "the delighted troops were easily persuaded to refrain from massacre". The citizens, in any case, were hardly Tigranes' most faithful subjects; in what must be the most extraordinary disposal of a conquered city's population ever seen, they were each given a small sum of journey-money and packed off to their original homes. But first, as described by the amused pen of Alfred Duggan, "was held a little ceremony which must have given great pleasure to the cultured Lucullus. The magnificent theatre of Tigranocerta had been completed just before the siege began, and the company of actors engaged for the opening performance had actually been caught inside the town. In the presence of the Roman army the curtain rose on a short season of Greek plays. Then the whole magnificent foundation, city, theatre, palace and suburbs, was left desolate". ■





AZZANATHKONA Of the caravan city Azzanathkona we know little. Its first and last mention in contemporary annals was in the form of a sketch, one of several learned articles by the orientalist M. Rostovtzeff which appeared in 1928 in *The Helm*, a Russian émigré newspaper published from Berlin. Strangely, though the rest of the articles were subsequently published under the title *O Blijnem Vostoke* (Paris, 1931), the one on Azzanathkona was not included. The name does indeed appear in the index, but only as a local version of the goddess Atargatis, to whom a temple appears to have been dedicated in Dura Europos.

That Azzanathkona was more than a provincial incarnation of Artemis/Atargatis is clear from a Palmyrene inscription quoted in the supplement to Dittenberger's *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones* which places her in an ambiguous but hardly subordinate relation to the great triad of Bel, Yarbihol and Aglibol. Indeed, Rostovtzeff's suppressed article advanced the claim that Azzanathkona was the titular goddess of an eponymous trading centre in the centre of the Nejd desert, well to the south of the Petra-Ctesiphon trading route. The city Azzanathkona appears to have flourished until roughly the middle of the fourth century AD, at which time it was destroyed in a joint raid by the Bene Komara and Bene Mattabol,

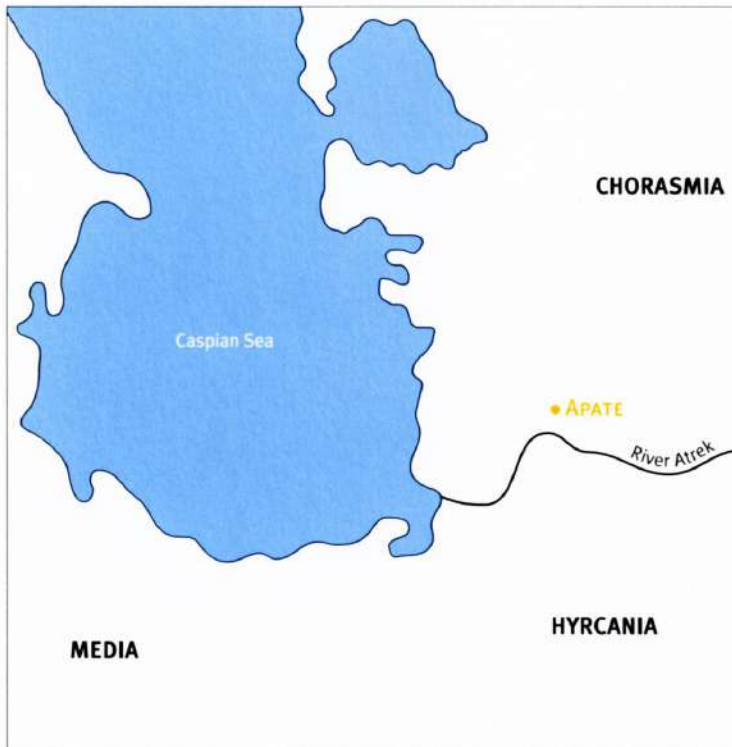
an unusual example of collaboration between two normally hostile desert tribes.

Azzanathkona's power and wealth were based on three factors: its key position on an a minor but still profitable caravan route, control of the region's sole wells, and the fame of its annual winter solstice rites. The nature of these rites is obscure, but that they were of an unusually licentious nature is hinted at in a ferocious attack by Clement of Alexandria; sadly, the learned bishop's information was of a generalised rather than a specific nature, and his condemnation, while all-embracing, leaves us none the wiser. To these few facts can be added the details provided by the Jerash XVII papyrus, according to which the women of Azzanathkona were regarded as abominable for shaving their heads and for wearing red; that a special tax was imposed upon philosophical treatises and itinerant philosophers; and that the performance of Greek plays was punished by banishment.

The location of Azzanathkona remains a mystery. A joint Anglo-American expedition is rumoured to have stumbled across its traces after a freak sandstorm exposed a handful of stone buildings in 1923, but as the expedition was in fact carrying out undercover

surveys for the Aramco oil consortium, its reports remained confidential. André Malraux and Corniglion-Molinier claimed to have caught a glimpse of it from the air in March 1934 during their search for Mareb, but were unfortunately unable to provide precise geographical references. The ravings of a sergeant in the Long Range Desert Group, sole survivor of a unit lost during a training exercise in the Nejd in 1942, do however more or less bear out Malraux's report of its position; he spoke of squat round towers emerging from the sand, of his vehicle's wheels breaking through the ground into an ossuary, and of a plague of scorpions. The entire region is now out of bounds to travellers. ■





APATE A signal problem involved in the precise identification of cities within the compass of the vast Seleucid empire, that enormous area stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to the gates of India, was the overwhelming tendency of its rulers to give the cities they founded names derived from the four Seleucid dynastic names – Antioch, Seleuceia, Apamea and Laodicea. In view of the fact that at least twelve Antiochs are mentioned by historians, administrative chaos would obviously have ensued had the founding name not been accompanied by a geographical designation of some kind, resulting in compound place names along the lines of Antioch-Nisibis, Antioch on the Orontes, Apamea in Syria and so forth.

This characteristically bureaucratic solution was inordinately clumsy, and meant that if, for example, a Greek from Susa had to address a formal document to the provincial administration, he would have to describe himself not simply as a Seleuceian but as a Seleuceian-on-the-Eulaeus. The result was that informal nicknames rapidly came into use, whether based on partial description, as in *Asylum Persarum* ('asylum of the Persians'), or architectural features, as in *Hekatompylos* ('of the hundred gates').

Occasionally the nickname might even have taken the form of a barely-veiled insult, as it did with Antioch in Osrhoene, described by Malalas as *'mixobárbaros'*, the semi-barbaric; this might refer to the mixed nature of its population, or, as von Gutschmid has argued, simply mean 'the uncouth'.

The most intriguing such case is probably that of Apate, which Pliny (VI,55) describes as dominating the north bank of the river Atrek, well-placed to guard the approaches to Hyrcania. The name, of course, meant 'Fraud' in the Greek *koine*, and it has been suggested that the citizens of Apate, the original name of whose city does not survive, were notorious throughout Parthica for the extreme bad faith of their commercial transactions. The discovery in 1975 at Oxyrinchus of two hundred-odd lines of a rather tired attempt at Plautean comedy by one Aelius Rufus yielded another reference to Apate; according to this otherwise unknown provincial dramatist, the city acquired a measure of local fame after it was discovered that a chryselephantine statue of Seleucus II, dedicated by the city magistrates in an attempt to achieve a reduction in taxes, had in reality been fraudulently constructed in gilded wood and white plaster by an itinerant (and long since departed) Corinthian

artist. Whether the fraud was at the expense of the king or the magistrates remains unclear from the papyrus.

Undoubtedly, however, the most audacious proposal regarding the naming of Apate has been that of Florescu and d'Oliveira in Vol. XXVII of the *Transactions of the Bucharest Archaeological Institute*. Basing themselves partly on epigraphical evidence and partly on a manuscript of Frontinus' *Strategemata* then recently catalogued by the library of the University of Coimbra, the two military historians claimed that far from being a Seleucid foundation, later burdened with a libellous nickname, Apate was the site of a monumental 'disinformation' campaign by Parthia directed against Antiochus III. According to the authors' contentious reading of the Coimbra *Strategemata*, the governor of Hyrcania at Tambrax, desperately short of troops with which to hold up the Seleucid advance on Bactra, convinced the enemy envoys of the existence, just behind Tambrax, of a major garrison town, strongly defended and fortified "with three great ditches"; it was this non-existent city which was later given the name of Apate by the jubilant locals, and it was by this name that rumour of it eventually reached the indefatigable Pliny. ■





BUCEPHALA Of all Alexander's battles, Napoleon's greatest admiration is said to have been reserved for Jhelum. This was Alexander's last major set-piece battle, the culmination of his conquest of north-west Punjab; after Jhelum, the obsessive drive towards the uttermost eastern horizon and the shores of Oceanus would end with the army's reluctant march to the banks of the Beas river, the mutiny of the troops, the King's anger, the face-saving excuse of unfavourable omens, and then the sullen retreat. Seventeen thousand miles from Greece, Alexander's advance had finally ground to a halt by the smoking ruins of Sangala.

The battle itself had been brutal, but not without a certain tactical elegance, involving a contested crossing of the Jhelum river and a complicated double envelopment by Greek and allied cavalry, after which the veteran Macedonian foot had to face King Porus' war elephants; there was, however, a price to pay, for in the first hours of battle, Alexander's beloved charger Bucephalas had been mortally wounded. Now twenty years old, he had carried his master all the way from Macedonia.

Two new cities would be founded on either bank of the Jhelum. The one to the east, on the site of the battlefield, was to be called

Nicaea, or Victory, but the one on the west bank, where the army crossed, was named Bucephala in honour of the near-legendary horse. The city was at first unlucky, for on his return from the Beas, Alexander found it badly damaged by the monsoon floods and, in all probability, ordered the site moved to higher ground. Its fate in the years immediately following Alexander's death is uncertain, but it is clear that Bucephala survived the initial turmoil and the Brahmin-led rebellion. Ptolemy included it in a list of major towns in the latter kingdom of Menander, and it is clear that it remained sufficiently Hellenised to become the new capital of the Greek kingdom in India after Menander's death; around the middle of the first century AD, the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* adds that the city had been surrounded by a particularly massive set of walls. Bucephala's importance is confirmed by the presence of a royal mint, whose types include a triton holding a dolphin and rudder, a reference to city's position on the Jhelum, and a horned horse.

This latter motif was singularly appropriate for a city founded in honour of a horse whose name meant "ox-head"; in some early accounts Bucephalas is described as literally sporting horns, though the Suidas later remarks that "Bucephalas did not, as certain authors believe, have horns of his own, but was adorned with

golden horns, so they say, for battle". Such scepticism on the part of the anonymous tenth century compilers is of course admirable, but there remains an intriguing body of references to the breeding, in Bucephala, of horned or otherwise astonishing chargers. The fifth century lexicographer Hesychius of Alexandria includes a strange note to that effect, and another, perhaps deliberately obscure mention may be found in Aristides Quintilianus. Most ambiguous and disputed of all is the reference to the "devil horses" of the Yavana (Greeks) in the Sanscrit astrological text *Gargi Samhita*, one of whose chapters, the Yuga-parana, includes a prophecy of the Greek advance to Pataliputra.

The ultimate fate of Bucephala is unknown; but in Balkh, centuries later, Marco Polo heard from the princes of Badakshan, close by the site of Alexandria Oxiana, that their horses had once been descended from Bucephalas, and were born with horns like unicorns; "but", as Robin Lane Fox puts it, "jealousies in the royal family had caused the only stallion to be put to death, and so the line was now extinct". ■



JOAN FONTCUBERTA

ARCHAEOLOGIES OF THE FUTURE

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University conserves among its holdings the *Voynich Manuscript* (catalogue no. MS 408). H. P. Kraus, a New York book antiquarian, donated the *Voynich Manuscript* to Yale in 1969 after he had repeatedly failed in his attempts to sell it for a large sum. Kraus had acquired the manuscript several years before from Ethel Boole, the widow of Wylfrid M. Voynich, the dealer and collector whose name has come down to posterity in association with the famous manuscript.

Voynich, born in Kaunas, Lithuania, on the 31st of October 1865, and christened Wilfryd Michal Habdank-Wojnicz, had studied at the Universities of Warsaw and St Petersburg before taking his doctorate in chemistry and pharmacy at the University of Moscow. Accused of political radicalism, he was arrested and deported to Siberia in 1885. Wojnicz endured the hardships of imprisonment and forced labour for five gruelling years before he managed to escape in 1890; he made his way to Germany and went into hiding in Hamburg, although he knew all too well that the long arm of the Tsarist secret police could reach him even there. In a moment of clear-sightedness he decided to sell his overcoat and his spectacles and buy his passage to safety with the few pfennigs these raised, sailing steerage class to London on a tramp steamer carrying Polish grain.

In London, Wojnicz met and married an Anglo-Irish fellow radical, Ethel, fifth daughter of the mathematician and logician George Boole (the inventor of Boolean Algebra), and the couple devoted the greater part of their time to writing revolutionary literature and smuggling it into Russia, and to translating the works of Marx and Engels into English. Wojnicz (who by this time had anglicised his

name and signed himself Voynich) also began to take an interest in old books and manuscripts. He turned out to have considerable aptitude in this field, and before long he had established a thriving trade in rare books at his premises at no. 1, Soho Square, where he catered to well-to-do collectors eager to obtain valuable editions.

In 1912, Voynich made a trip to Italy with a view to finding rare old volumes for his clients. In the course of that trip he happened to call at the Jesuit College of Villa Mondragone in Frascati, near Rome. There, in the library, looking through a coffer full of books the priests were interested in selling, a volume written in a strange script he was at a loss to identify caught his attention. Leafing through the manuscript, he saw that most of the pages were illustrated with drawings of plants or stars, maps or human figures, nymphs or naked women. Intrigued and excited by his discovery, Voynich bought the book and took it back to his shop in London. Baffled by the strange symbols that made up the book's mysterious text, Voynich photographed the front and back of each of the 246 quarto pages and sent copies to the most reputed linguists of his time: none of them was able to identify the language or even the script in which the book is written. This was just the beginning of one of the most incredible stories and one of the most fascinating enigmas in the history of science.

The *Voynich Manuscript* is relatively small, measuring approximately 15 by 22 cm. Its pages are of vellum, a kind of parchment made from finely worked lambskin, and the whole book is written in the same hand, in a script known as "humanist cursive", a style that was very much in vogue in Europe in the latter part of the 15th century. The Manuscript contains more than 40,000 words of text,

and most of the pages feature illustrations. There is no title, no date and no indication of the author's identity. Nor is the text organized in sections or chapters; however, on the basis of the subject matter of the illustrations, it can tentatively be divided into five categories, designated Botanical, Astronomical, Geographical, Biological and Pharmaceutical.

As for its origins, the book makes its first appearance at the court of Rudolph II, King of Hungary, Bohemia and Germany and Archduke of Austria and, on the death of his father in 1576, Holy Roman emperor. Historians have been less than enthusiastic about the political legacy of Rudolph's reign, but he is acknowledged to have been a generous patron of the sciences; astronomers such as Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler were among his protégés, but so too were the astrologer-philosopher Giordano Bruno (later burned as a heretic) and black magicians such as John Dee, and rogues, adventurers and occultists like Edward Kelley. In fact, throughout his life, Rudolph II took a keen interest in astrology, magic, alchemy and witchcraft and in strange and wonderful objects and books, which he stored in a special chamber, the *Wunderkammer*, in his palace in Prague, and it is in the inventory of this imperial cabinet of wonders that the first references to the *Voynich Manuscript* appear. Rudolph II, like many other members of the House of Habsburg, suffered from hereditary insanity and depression; his health at this time was already deteriorating rapidly, and he died in his palace in Prague, a total recluse and all but insane, in January 1612. After this the book changed hands several times, and a number of extant letters and documents refer to various attempts to decipher its contents; then, some time around the end of the 17th century, all trace of the manuscript is lost, until

its reappearance in the Jesuit College of Villa Mondragone two hundred years later.

The most disconcerting thing about the book is that, throughout its known history, nobody has been able to understand it, beyond interpreting the drawings and maps. Essentially there are three hypotheses about the text: that it is written in some unknown language (which we might call Voynichese); that it is a very sophisticated code, and, finally, that it is an extremely elaborate hoax or fake (although this would have required an investment of time and ingenuity on a scale all but inconceivable in the 16th century). Among those who have supported one of the first two positions, the first serious attempt at deciphering the text was made in 1921, by Professor William Romaine Newbold of the University of Pennsylvania. Newbold noted that around each character were mysterious lines, so tiny they could only be seen with a powerful magnifying glass or a microscope; he believed it was possible to trace these lines as letters from the Greek alphabet, and concluded that there was a Greek subtext obscured by the unknown characters. Newbold made three bold claims: that the microscopic Greek text was the real content of the *Voynich Manuscript*, that this dated from the 13th century, and that its author was Roger Bacon. However, what he took for "Greek lines" were in fact no more than microscopic cracks in the layer of ink forming the characters, produced by the passing of the centuries.

Other failures followed. In the 1940s two keen amateur cryptographers, Joseph M. Feely and Leonell C. Strong, tried to apply the substitution cipher technique, which consists in assigning a letter of the Latin alphabet to each character in the text — basically the

same simple code used in Poe's *The Gold Bug*. Feely and Strong claimed to have produced a satisfactory translation of the entire manuscript, but their "translation" proved to be a complacent catalogue of meaningless gibberish (for example: "The tree drinks not to have however they mark one two house without height to fire"). After the end of World War II, the team of cryptographers that had cracked the code used by the Japanese Imperial Navy entertained themselves for a time trying out their method on various encoded ancient texts: they cracked every single one except Voynich.

In 1978 the amateur philologist John Stojko declared that the text was a Ukrainian chronicle written in an early, vowel-less variant of that language. Unfortunately, however, his translation bears no relation to the illustrations, nor does it have anything to do with the Ukraine and its history. More damning still, many of the passages read like exercises in Surrealist automatic writing: "The grave lightness of being shoots a dart to the heart with chocolate the fritters sour" (my translation). In 1987 a doctor of medicine by the name of Leo Levitov suggested that the document was the work of the Cathars, the heretical sect that held out in mediaeval Languedoc until the 14th century; as such, it would have been written in a mixture of words from several languages, a kind of polyglot hybrid, in order to keep its message secret from the uninitiated — and the Inquisition. Levitov was not, however, able to bring that secret to light.

In the early 1990s it was the turn of a multidisciplinary team of linguists, cryptographers and computer programmers at MIT in Cambridge, Mass. They started by exploring encoding techniques

known to have been in use during the broadest possible range of dates for the writing of the *Voynich Manuscript*: from 1470 to 1608. One very strong possibility was a Cardan Grille, developed by the Italian mathematician Girolamo Cardano in 1550. The grille is a card with slots cut out of it: when the card is placed over an apparently innocuous text (in fact written using an identical template), the slots reveal the secret message hidden in the text. A computer simulation of the template system was applied to a number of pages, trying different arrangements of windows, but to no avail. The MIT team then tried the Kosta Rule (devised by the 17th century philosopher and chess player Anatoli Kosta): this can be used to pick out letters or syllables in a randomly varying sequential order, like a chess game in which the rules change at every move. That didn't work either. They tried Gauss-Leboyer networks, Mandelbrot fractal scales and a host of other sophisticated new scientific techniques. But the text remained impenetrable.

The only glimmer of hope, the one chink of light in the midst of all this darkness, is offered by a hacker called John Stathatos. Stathatos suspected that in order to throw off the would-be decipherer, each section of the book would have used a different code, and he decided to begin by concentrating on the shortest, the geography section. His analytical methodology also involved working on the illustrations, on the assumption that these were not to be taken at face value but contained a hidden meaning that required interpretation. On stylistic grounds, given the illustrations' resemblance to maps and cartographic diagrams, he intuited that the text accompanying them had to trace out some route or indicate the location of some place. He spent months on the laborious process of submitting the illustrations to test after test. Then when

he least expected it, as is so often the case, eureka! First he passed an image through a blue filter, so that all the blue-scale information disappeared and the red lines were emphasized, and although this made the diagram clearer, there was still no apparent sense to it. But then he applied an anamorphic distortion filter — Stathatos used a Photoshop filter, but in the 15th or 16th century distorting mirrors would have produced the same effect — and to his surprise he started to obtain more or less recognizable contours: a crude map of Asia Minor and the surrounding area. He researched in the ancient maps sections of various university libraries and in due course found some maps by Johannes Blaeu that, although dating from the 17th century, bore a striking resemblance to the results he had obtained from his filter processes.

The first of the Voynich diagrams deciphered as a map by Stathatos covers an area of southwest Asia (in Blaeu, *Persia sive Sophorum regnum*) still clearly recognizable as present-day Iran, showing an empire all extending into the interior along the trade routes to the East. The Persia of that era provided Europe with fine carpets, tapestries, diamonds, turquoises and pearls (these latter came from the islands of the Gulf of Bahrain, which is why the Portuguese and in due course the English established trading colonies to the south of Ormuz). Shah Abbas I — "the Great" — opened his cities to foreign merchants and traders, mainly English and Dutch, and in 1645 granted the latter a monopoly in the silk trade. The other Voynich maps were deciphered using the same process, although in some cases a red filter had to be used and the angular powers of the anamorphism adjusted. There thus emerged graphic representations of relatively small areas such as the lands bordering the Caspian Sea (*Mare de Sala de Bachu olim*

Hyrcanum sive Caspium) or of vast expanses such as all of Tartary (*Tartaria sive Magni Chami Imperium*). Even more remarkable was the fact that the Voynich diagrams indicated points that must surely correspond to cities or mountains; some of these points should be easy to identify on the basis of their position, and then the name in Latin (most probably) or in some other language could be used to establish the equivalent toponym in the Voynichese code. Stathatos identified some of the settlements that dotted the routes of Alexander the Great's expeditions and Marco Polo's travels: Azzanathkona, Daedala, Gauzaka, Tigranocerta, Arkiotis... all of them places of mythical resonances and of old brilliance.

When Latin was taken as the key for deciphering those toponyms, the letter equivalents made it possible to translate several phrases that seemed to be references to *The Emerald Table*, the famous alchemical text that Athanasius Kircher translated from Arabic into Latin in the 17th century. On the other hand, when German was used as the key, the possible translations included gnomic utterances along the lines of "Where the Radiance raised its mansion, there rests the arcane". However, Stathatos has gone no further: he has been unable to move forward in spite of undertaking arduous and costly trips to the ruins of those ancient cities, seeking in their memory some new clue that might help to explain the unknown script. Voynichese remains inscrutable, stubbornly resisting the efforts of the finest minds and the most sophisticated technology, a challenge to our intelligence and its limitations. Anyone who takes up the challenge already knows where to go: item MS 408, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

EPILOGUE The foregoing account contains invented elements but is substantially veracious. Parodying Jorge Luis Borges in his story *Emma Zunz*, the situation is fictitious but readily persuades us because in essence it is true: the protagonists were real, their search was real, the adventures and misadventures were real; the only aspect of the narrative thread that is false are the circumstances. John Stathatos is not a hacker but an artist, although it is very often easy to confuse the two categories. *The Book of Lost Cities* is not a section of the *Voynich Manuscript* (but that is purely accidental) but an epistemological adventure exceptionally rich in nuances and readings. In photographic terms it evokes such pioneers of travel photography as Maxime Du Camp or Francis Frith. In literary terms it clearly alludes to Italo Calvino and his *Invisible Cities*, in which Marco Polo offers Kublai Khan, emperor of the Tartars, a wonderful inventory of cities he has seen on his travels through Persia, Tartary and China. Not to deny the reader the pleasure of discovering the richness of those nuances for herself, I will confine myself to directing her attention, succinctly, to three levels of reflection: the concept of landscape, the ontology of the photograph and a certain imaginary of contemporary culture.

On that first level Stathatos seems simultaneously to direct his irony at the Romantic "landscape with ruins" genre and on the notion of *lieu de memoire* elaborated by Pierre Nora. In effect, nostalgia reverberates in the emptiness of these desert expanses in much the same way that the magma of collective experience they seek to accumulate (foundation, celebrations, wars, decline) dissolves into pure chimera. There is no history or memory lying dormant in those stones. The landscape is stripped of the temporal

dimension, laying bare its essential forms, because landscape belongs not to the universe of living things but to the universe of living forms. To construct the landscape is to express the place, and the place is space made culture, space appropriated by consciousness. The crisis of landscape as genre arises from the questioning of the ideological, cultural and aesthetic mechanisms that turn physical surroundings into landscape, precisely.

As for the images as such, these are loaded with ambiguity and contradict the principle of "identification of place" that we supposedly attribute to the documentary photograph: we see characterless, featureless landscapes, seas of sand and rock that could just as easily be on the planet Arrakis as in the Middle East... Many are dotted with prosaic ruins, but it is impossible to tell whether these are authentic ruins or artificial ruins; the angle of view is too wide and the architectural remains are tiny blips in the expansive dialogue of hills and plains. The text, on the other hand, abounds in the meticulously detailed erudition that the image lacks. The precision of the word contrasts with the equivocal and confusing information of the image. Without their literary anchor, these photographs can be taken to signify almost anything: they can mean everything and nothing. Stathatos shows us how in its intimate nature the photograph forces us to interpret it. What is apparent to the eye is not inherent in its genealogy; its signification is simply the projection made by the spectator. In this new *dérive* our perception of geography and history, of place and time is diluted. It may be that Stathatos is guided by the true quest for knowledge of the archaeologist but, as in Borges, this is an excavation that is made not in the field but in the library, digging down to the roots of our understanding.

In a culture that nowadays is recreated in the false historical memory and in fiction, worldwide bestsellers such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or Gisbert Haefs' *Alexander* illustrate that attraction toward the past as reconstruction oriented toward consumption and entertainment. The landscapes they depict for us are the landscapes of those regions today being destroyed by "preventive" wars, by virtual campaigns that sidestep the independent testimony of public opinion and present themselves as spectacle, as mere video-game effects. They offer us iconic constructs for an iconic war, non-existent scenarios for a non-existent war (it does not exist for the media, it only exists for the victims). Stathatos' panoramas depict those same places, and in their naked sobriety encourage us to reject critically any hint of spectacle.

Perhaps Marco Polo, in Calvino's magnificent incarnation, was in fact a photographer disguised as a merchant: his capacity for observation was photographic, his memory was photographic, his descriptive faculty was photographic... Seven centuries later, John Stathatos seems to have taken up where he left off.

ARKIOTIS On connaît le commentaire acerbe de Tarn sur le royaume perdu d'Ormuz et l'état qui l'a précédé: "De tous les satrapies séleucides, la Carmanie est la moins connue; elle semble ne posséder aucune histoire". Comme tous les bons mots, cette citation doit être prise *cum grano salis*. Il n'y a, tout au moins, aucun doute sur l'emplacement géographique approximatif de la satrapie: à l'ouest de la Gedrosie, sur la côte sud du désert iranien, où elle dominait les rivages nord des détroits d'Ormuz. L'amiral d'Alexandre le Grand, Néarque, la mentionne en passant dans ses Mémoires, et Onesicritus évoque ses mines, la rivière Amanis qui regorgeait d'or, et les chasseurs de têtes qui infestaient l'arrière-pays. En revanche, l'incertitude demeure sur ses limites exactes, car l'estimation de Strabon à partir de sources antérieures évaluée à "une journée de voyage" la distance entre le cap de Jask à Macae (Ras Mussendam); ce qui, même dans les conditions les plus propices, paraît invraisemblable.

L'incontournable Pline apporte une donnée supplémentaire à l'énigme en notant la présence, dans le pays des Harmozaei, de "*Portus Macedonum et arae Alexandri in promunturio*" (VI, 110) – c'est-à-dire d'une ville gréco-macédonienne située sur le golfe d'Ormuz et d'autels sur le cap Jask attribués (ou dédiés) à Alexandre. Ptolémée (VI, 18) mentionne quant à lui trois cités carmaniennes: l'inévitable Alexandrie, Carmania Métropolis (probablement la ville moderne de Kerman), et Harmozia, ou Ormozia, sans doute le Portus Macedonum de Pline, ville à partir de laquelle s'effectuait un service régulier de bacs vers l'Arabie. Megasthène ajoute un quatrième lieu, nommé Arkiotis, qu'il situe quelque part dans le haut bassin de Jiruft.

La mort d'Antiochos IV en 163 a privé les Séleucides de la plupart de leurs satrapies perses, y compris Persis et Seistan; d'un autre côté, la Carmanie ne faisait pas à l'époque, ni pendant les deux siècles suivants, partie des domaines de la Bactriane ni de la Parthie. Il faut donc supposer que la Carmanie, ou l'Ormuz comme l'on en vint à l'appeler, est devenue un royaume indépendant,

hypothèse confortée par les preuves numismatiques d'une dynastie qui ne s'explique pas autrement, et qui comprenait les rois Bellaios, Tigraios et Goaisos (cf. Alotte de la Fuye, 1934, et J.M. Unvala, 1935). Selon une inscription au dos d'une pièce d'argent dévouée à Suse, la capitale du royaume d'Ormuz était Arkiotis, ville qui a connu une brève mais formidable période de richesse grâce à sa position stratégique sur la route commerciale Sud entre l'Inde et Persepolis. A en croire Tarn, cette route était "peut-être" celle employée par les envoyés hyrcaniens à Néron en l'an 59 de notre ère. Clairement identifiée dans les Tables Peutinger comme étant située à mi-chemin entre Seistan et Ormuz, Arkiotis pourrait s'apparenter à la cité de Camadi nommée par Marco Polo.

Il reste peu, en dehors d'une poignée de noms de lieux incertains, du royaume perdu d'Ormuz et de sa capitale: quelques sceaux porphyriques, des pièces dont la face arbore une confusion tapageuse de symboles (l'aigle ptolémaïque, un palmier en feu, une tête de sanglier, une foudre ailée), une série incomplète de poids à épices en ivoire, l'épée ormuzienne bizarrement équilibrée, décrite par Macrobe, une épigramme d'une rare obscurité de Martial qui commence par "*Aspicias ingenium Arkiotae...*", un texte devenu illisible gravé sur une dalle de pierre à chaux pêchée dans la Mer Rouge en 1873, et, surtout, la fameuse statue en bronze de la Tyche Arkiote, dite Fortune de la Cité, déterrée en 1977 par le Département Impérial Iranien d'Archéologie et fondue quelques années plus tard sur ordre de l'Ayatollah Khorasani.

DAEDALA La survie d'une ville grecque située dans les sommets des montagnes de l'Asie centrale, habitée par les descendants des troupes macédoniennes d'Alexandre le Grand, alimente depuis des décennies l'imaginaire romantique. Malheureusement, les recherches archéologiques et épigraphiques ont maintenant permis d'identifier les sites des principales colonies d'Alexandre à Bactre et en Inde: Alexandrie Eschate (Alexandria Ultima), située sur le Jaxartes, peut aujourd'hui être raisonnablement identifiée à

Chodjend, et Alexandrie Marghiana à Merv. Grâce aux expéditions pionnières de Schlumberger et Bernard, nous sommes à peu près sûrs que la mystérieuse Alexandria Oxiana de Ptolémée correspond à Aï Khanum sur les rives de l'Amu Darya.

Toutefois, la légende de la descendance des "Kafirs blancs" d'Alexandre, originaires du Kafiristan, se nourrit de témoignages persistants sur la ville de Daedala dans les Paropamisadae (Hindu Kush). L'histoire est brouillée par l'existence apparente de deux sites portant ce nom, tous deux liés à la Crète. Strabon et Ptolémée identifient Daedala comme un territoire de la Peraea Rhodienne avoisinant la Lycie, tandis que Curtius et Stephanus la situent à l'intérieur ou dans les environs de Bajaur, dans ce que Justin appelle les Montagnes Daedaliennes. Il semblerait en fait qu'il ait existé à la fois un territoire lycien et une ville afghane portant ce nom; Stephanus les associe à la Crète et au maître-artisan Daedalos, affirmant clairement qu'il "existe une autre Daedala, ville de Crétois et d'Indiens" au sein du royaume indien de Ménandre.

La plupart des sources convergent pour étayer l'hypothèse de la filiation indo-crétoise de Daedala, qui fut probablement la descendante d'une colonie de mercenaires crétois. Curieusement, nous entendons parler d'une autre colonie crétoise dans la même région, Asterousia, sur la route entre Alexandrie-Kapisa et Ghazni; étant donné qu'Asterion était une des appellations de Minotaure, il serait peut-être possible d'identifier Asterousia à Daedala, ville qui porte le nom du bâtisseur du labyrinthe. Il est certain que les labyrinthes et le culte des taureaux existaient à Daedala; Isidore de Charax fait des allusions voilées aux labyrinthes et aux sacrifices, et Daedala est mentionnée avec horreur dans le *Milindapanha*, ou *Questions de Milinda* – Milinda, on se le souviendra, étant le nom indien du roi Ménandre.

Daedala semble avoir été le berceau d'un mélange profane de mysticisme crétois et hindou, la face sombre de la synthèse gréco-bouddhiste qui a engendré la floraison culturelle de Gandara.

Une traduction peut-être corrompue du *Milindapanha* datant du quatrième siècle fournit quelques renseignements supplémentaires sur le culte, qui avait de toute évidence développé un système élaboré de rituels du sacrifice humain; c'était une chasse sacrée à travers un labyrinthe qui n'offrait à la victime qu'une maigre et unique chance de survie. Une source ultérieure, le Pseudo-Aristeas, évoque "les passages tortueux et sombres d'un temple souterrain, dont les sept salles possèdent chacune sept portes d'entrée derrière chacune desquelles, sauf une, un prêtre attend avec sa corde d'étrangleur; mais une des quarante-neuf portes mène jusqu'à la lumière."

Lorsque s'effondrent les royaumes Kushan, la ville, ainsi que toute trace de son emplacement précis, a déjà disparu. Dans ses mémoires, le général Sir Alexander Cunningham se souvient toutefois avoir vu le signe de la tête de taureau et la hache bicéphale gravés haut sur les flancs montagneux de la vallée de Minjan.

GAUZAKA "Le seizième jour d'octobre, nous arrivâmes dans une ville appelée Ardabil, à une latitude de trente-huit degrés, ville ancienne dans la province d'Azerbaïdjan où les princes de Perse sont communément enterrés: c'est là qu'Alexandre le Grand entretenait sa cour au moment d'envahir les Persans. A quatre jours de voyage vers l'ouest se trouve la ville de Tabriz, anciennement appelée Tauris, la plus grande de Perse malgré le déclin qu'elle subit après la grande invasion turque. Le 21, nous prîmes le chemin des montagnes, voyageant de nuit et nous reposant le jour, manquant de bois et par conséquent obligés de recourir au crottin des chevaux comme carburant.

Mais au troisième jour de novembre, nous nous retrouvâmes à court de viande et de boisson, les ruisseaux, en ces montagnes arides, étant rares et leur eau quelque peu amère: nous étions d'autant plus en danger que le capitaine des Tartares, nommé par le Roi pour nous accompagner, s'enfuit dans la nuit avec tous ses

hommes, si bien que nous aurions pu périr de manque ou aux mains de rôdeurs hors-la-loi, qui abondaient (contrairement à tout le reste). Nous poursuivîmes tant bien que mal notre marche pendant cinq jours encore, nous affaiblissant chaque jour un peu plus. Alors, Maître Richard Johnson et moi-même partîmes au dos de deux chevaux pas encore courbatus, pour parcourir la campagne en quête de secours, sans savoir très bien où chercher.

Par chance, au soir du deuxième jour, nous fîmes signe à de lointains cavaliers qui se dirigèrent vers nous. Lorsqu'ils parvinrent jusqu'à nous, nous les vîmes bien armés d'arcs et de glaives, et leur capitaine richement vêtu: à notre grande surprise, il s'adressa à nous de la manière la plus courtoise (bien que nous ne le comprîmes point), et nous fit geste de le suivre, ce que nous fîmes volontiers. Nous arrivâmes ainsi dans le cours de nuit à une grande muraille, de l'autre côté de laquelle on nous indiqua notre logement.

Le lendemain je fus convoqué par le prince de cette ville, qui m'accueillit avec les mots *Quoshe quelde*, c'est-à-dire Bienvenue. Puis un interprète fut convoqué pour me demander de quel pays je venais, et en quoi consistait ma mission, ce à quoi je répondis que j'étais de la célèbre ville de Londres, dans le noble domaine d'Angleterre, et que j'avais été envoyé par l'excellente et gracieuse Reine Elizabeth, son souverain, afin d'obtenir l'amitié et le passage libre pour nos marchands, mais qu'en parcourant ces contrées inhospitalières, nous avions frôlé la mort. Je m'enquis enfin de la ville où nous nous trouvions, car elle n'apparaissait sur aucune de nos cartes et nous en ignorions l'existence: ce à quoi le prince, nommé Alrazeik, répondit qu'il s'agissait de Gauzaka, une cité autrefois très puissante qui avait vu sa grandeur et son pouvoir réduits par la peste noire du temps de ses aïeux, puis par la malice de l'Amir de Tabriz, et qu'il souhaitait notre amitié afin de le protéger des ennemis qui le cernaient de près.

Je lui fis savoir qu'un prince aussi méritant, car il l'était, ne pouvait qu'être sous la protection de Mahomet: ce qui lui fit grand plaisir,

sa ville ayant été, ajouta-t-il, fondée par nul autre que Sekunder, nom par lequel était désigné Alexandre. Pour preuve, il somma ses serviteurs de nous montrer, entre autres merveilles, divers beaux bâtiments en pierre décorée, ainsi qu'un théâtre à étages d'un style ancien et une grande fontaine en forme de dragon enroulé, ainsi que des inscriptions, toutes en grec. Mais les habitants étaient peu nombreux, mal vêtus, et la grande muraille était en ruines. La nuit, nous reprîmes notre route, avec des provisions pour les nôtres, en suivant les chemins sinueux qui portaient de Gauzaka..."

Extrait du *Voyage de M. Anthony Jenkinson, de la célèbre ville de Londres à la terre de Perse, envoyé par l'honorable Société des Marchands Aventuriers à la découverte de terres, & c.* (1561).

KARNA Le plus ancien et peut-être le plus pleinement mystérieux des premiers royaumes d'Arabie Félix fut celui des Minaéens, ou Ma'in, à propos duquel Pline écrivit: "L'export d'encens est canalisé le long d'une seule piste étroite dans le territoire des Minaéens; ce sont ces gens qui furent à l'origine du commerce et qui pour l'essentiel le pratiquent, donnant ainsi au parfum le nom de Minaéen" (*Historia Naturalis*, XII). Au sommet de leur pouvoir au cours du troisième siècle av. J.-C., le territoire Minaéen s'étendait du Yémen au Hadramaut, et leur capitale Qarnawu (Karna) se trouvait dans le sud de l'Al-Jauf. On sait peu de choses des Minaéens; Strabon, citant Eratosthène, rapporte qu'ils étaient les contemporains des Sabeans, et qu'ils s'adonnaient au commerce des aromates en Palestine et au-delà.

La célébrité de Karna se répandit très tôt dans le monde grec, grâce à un lien étymologique totalement apocryphe entre les Minaéens et les Minéens, mot qui renvoyait à des origines légendaires en Crète. Une tradition grecque évoquait une colonie arabe peuplée par Cadmus en Eubée, tandis qu'Agatharchide décrivit une amitié de longue date entre une certaine tribu du Hejaz et les Boétiens. Ptolémée mentionne une ville du nom de Thebaiopolis

dans le Wadi Dhaban, dont l'activité, selon Diocurus Siculus, était l'exploitation de mines d'or. Un indice plus tangible d'un lien entre Ma'in et la Grèce est la présence, sur l'île de Delos, d'un lieu saint dédié à Wadd'Abb, le Dieu de la lune, où se trouvaient des inscriptions minaéo-grecques.

A son zénith, Karna dominait la partie la plus riche de la côte sud de l'Arabie, incluant probablement une partie de l'Ophir de Salomon, ce qui devait inévitablement éveiller la jalousie de leurs voisins, et les Minaéens firent l'objet de pressions grandissantes des Sabaéens. Après la mention de Ptolémée, écrite au milieu du VI^e siècle (*Géographie*, VI.7), on n'évoquera plus les Minaéens jusqu'à la découverte de leurs inscriptions gravées dans la pierre au XIX^e siècle. Parmi ceux qui en rendirent compte on trouve, inévitablement, Charles Doughty: "Sur l'ordre du Sherif (...), ils approchèrent leurs montures d'un flanc de montagne gris sur lequel je distinguai vaguement une colossale effigie humaine. Sur la façade se dessinait un vieillard apparemment assis, un bourdon de chameau à la main, accompagné de deux lignes de lettres en Himyaric." (*Arabia Deserta*, II, 529). Hélas, une fois déchiffrées, ces inscriptions ne sont guère passionnantes:

SMYF' 'SW' et ses fils *SRHB'L YKML* et *M'DKRB Y'QR*, fils de *LHY'Y YRHM*, ceux de *K'LN*, et *DYZ'N* et *GDNm* et *MTLN* et *SRQN* et *Hbm* et *YT'N* et (...) les Kabirs et chefs de *SYBN dNSF*: inscrivent cette inscription sur le rocher *MWYT*.

Seul un passage contesté des *Chroniques* d'Artemidore suggère ce qui aurait pu causer la chute finale de Karna: "De toutes les villes d'Arabie Félix, Karna avait été de loin la plus riche; mais au moment de la dictature de Sulla, elle a subi les assauts des Sabaéens, puis des Qatabanéens et des Hadramis, qui ont eu raison d'elle. Cela s'explique en partie par l'oppression qu'elle leur avait fait subir par le passé, mais surtout par le fait que Karna avait donné naissance à une monstrueuse hérésie, qui rendait le Dieu de la lune, principale divinité des peuples d'Arabie, inférieur

au soleil, son serviteur. Car, selon cette nouvelle doctrine, le soleil était à tout moment entier et indivisible, tandis que la lune n'était pleine qu'une nuit par mois. Ainsi, puisqu'on s'était joué de Wadd'Abb, que ses serviteurs avaient été tués et ses lieux saints profanés, ils sont venus à Karna exprimer leur juste colère; et lorsqu'ils se sont retirés, Karna n'était plus."

FIROZKOH Firozkoh, capitale perdue de la dynastie Ghôride, naquit et mourut dans le sang. Les princes Ghôrides surgissent dans les montagnes de l'Afghanistan central au début du XII^e siècle, le 6^e de l'hégire; sous Ala al-din Husain, connu sous le nom de Jahansuz, "l'incendiaire du monde", les Ghôres envahirent les plaines pour devenir le fléau des Ghaznavides. Selon le *Tabakati-Nasiri* ou *Livre des Princes*, Jahansuz fit preuve d'une férocité jugée excessive, même pour l'époque, dans la construction de sa capitale; le *Livre de Gerchasp* raconte qu'après la chute de Ghazni, "Le général s'en alla joyeux vers le Séistan. Les captifs qu'il avait amenés de Caboul, il les avait dans un endroit tous rassemblés: il fit verser le sang de tous, puis de ce sang mélangé à la terre, élever un rempart. Du sang mêlé au sable, il sortit un serpent; et celui qu'il mordait, il le mettait à mal".

Les Ghôrides ornèrent leur capitale de toutes les richesses de Kaboul, Herat et Ghazni, qu'ils capturèrent tour à tour avant d'affronter avec succès leurs redoutables voisins Kara-Khitay pour la possession de Balkh, "Mère de toutes les villes". La notoriété de Firozkoh est confirmée par d'innombrables mentions dans les annales arabes et sassanides; située haut dans la montagne, la forteresse des Ghôrides était, disait-on, entourée de murs, de tours, de balcons et d'escarpements, couronnés de deux griffons dorés "de la taille de chameaux", butin recueilli lors de la conquête d'Adjmer en 1192. A la mort de Ghiyath al-din en 1202, le vaste et étonnant empire Ghôride s'étalait de Khorasan au golfe d'Ormuz et de la Chine aux abords orientaux de l'Hindoustan; mais ses jours étaient comptés. En 1222, le Khan mongol Ogôdai décima

Firozkoh, et les Ghôrides disparurent de l'histoire aussi rapidement qu'ils y étaient entrés. De fait, la destruction de la ville de Firozkoh fut si complète que malgré les descriptions détaillées des géographes arabes, la ville de Firozkoh s'effaça aussitôt de la mémoire des hommes, avec ses tours, ses griffons et tout le reste.

En 1958, dans le seizième tome des *Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*, le regretté André Maricq affirmait avoir résolu "l'énigme, irritante pour l'historien, de la capitale des Ghôrides" en l'identifiant à Djam, le site d'un admirable minaret sur les rives du Hari Rud. Le minaret de Djam fut découvert par hasard, un soir d'été, par un appareil de l'aviation royale afghane, lors du survol d'un ravin traversé par son ombre majestueuse. Il porte un certain nombre d'inscriptions à la gloire du "sultan magnifié, l'auguste roi des rois, Ghiyath al-dunya wal-din qui exalte l'Islam", à côté des habituels versets coraniques, et cet ensemble d'indices semble avoir suffi à convaincre l'archéologue français.

Comme il l'écrit avec beaucoup d'assurance, "D'autres identifications ont été proposées, certes. Mais celle de Ferrier avec Zarni est dénuée de fondement et lui a valu les sarcasmes de Raverty. Et celle que l'on rapporte d'habitude (Maricq fait ici référence à celle contenue dans l'*Encyclopédie de l'Islam*) n'a pas été établie avec une logique bien rigoureuse". Malheureusement, il s'avère que les observations de Maricq étaient entièrement basées sur une visite de moins de vingt-quatre heures. D'une étude postérieure et plus approfondie, il ressort que même un village de taille modeste pouvait difficilement s'établir entre les falaises très raides des environs. L'invasion soviétique et la guerre civile qui l'a suivie ont rendu impossible tout effort pour élucider le mystère.

LI-JIEN Par un après-midi de novembre 1954, bravant un temps inhabituellement rude, les membres de la Société Chinoise de Londres se rendirent aux locaux de la société, situés sur Half Moon Street, pour leur réunion semestrielle; c'est à cette occasion

que Homer H. Dubs prononça son mémorable discours sur la ville de Li-jien, discours dont les résonances sont encore perceptibles au sein de la discipline de l'archéologie orientale.

L'histoire débuta l'année fatidique de 54 avant J.-C., lorsque le triumvir Marcus Licinius Crassus, jaloux du prestige militaire acquis par ses collègues César et Pompéï, dirigea sept légions romaines et 4.000 troupes de cavalerie alliée vers les profondeurs de la Parthie, où ils subirent la défaite la plus spectaculaire de l'histoire de l'armée romaine. Les vainqueurs obligèrent près de 10.000 prisonniers à parcourir à pied 1.500 km, jusqu'à Antioch de Margiana, sur la frontière extrême-orientale de la Parthie; selon Ovide (*Odes* III/5), les Romains se résignèrent à épouser des barbares et à patrouiller la Grande Mer de l'Herbe. En dehors du récit discrédité de Velleius Paterculus, selon lequel un survivant de Carrhae aurait guidé les forces de Marc-Antoine dans leur retraite, ce furent les dernières nouvelles qu'eut l'Occident des hommes de Crassus pour deux millénaires.

Tournons-nous maintenant vers les historiens chinois. On sait qu'à l'automne de 36 avant J.-C., le général Gan Yen-shou, Protecteur-général de la frontière ouest, déplaça ses armées le long de la bordure nord du désert de Taklamakan et pénétra en Sogdiana lors d'une attaque surprise de la capitale de l'Empereur Hun Jzh-jzh. La ville tomba en temps voulu, et il se produisit alors un événement sans précédent dans l'histoire chinoise: la capture fut illustrée sous la forme de huit scènes, ou tableaux, envoyés à la cour impériale. Selon le professeur J.J.L. Duyvendak de l'Université de Leiden, la description faite par Ban Gu de ces tableaux contient deux éléments incroyables: la description d'une "double palissade de bois" et de "fantassins alignés dans une formation en écailles de poisson". Si ces deux facteurs sont totalement absents de la tactique militaire orientale, en revanche, comme le confirment Kromayer-Veith et Conrad Cinchorius, ils sont caractéristiques des tactiques romaines. Lors de la chute de la ville, les mystérieux mercenaires "se maintinrent en formation, corps formidable d'hommes prêts à se défendre

comme seuls des soldats professionnels savent le faire”. De tels hommes seraient des recrues précieuses pour l’armée impériale chinoise, d’autant qu’ils ne conserveraient aucune trace de loyauté envers le regretté Jzh-Jzh. C’est ici qu’intervient la partie vraiment étonnante des révélations de Homer H. Dubs: le registre cadastral de l’année 5 après J.-C., inséré dans *l’Histoire de l’ancienne dynastie Han* de Gan Du, mentionne la ville et le comté de Li-jien, dont les Chinois employaient le nom, une déformation d’Alexandrie, pour désigner à la fois Rome et l’Empire romain (l’origine de cette confusion semble avoir été l’arrivée d’une ambassade Parthienne en l’an 100 av. J.-C., avec parmi ses cadeaux des jongleurs d’Alexandrie).

Il semblerait donc qu’entre 36 av. J.-C. et 5 ap. J.-C., une ville romaine nommée Li-jien ait été fondée par les derniers survivants de Carrhae au sud du Yung-chang moderne, dans le prolongement nord-ouest de la province de Kansî, à l’autre bout de la planète par rapport à leur Rome d’origine. S’il fallait une preuve supplémentaire, en 9 après J.C., Li-jien fut brièvement rebaptisée Jie-li par l’usurpateur confucéen Wang Mang, nom qui signifie “individus capturés pendant l’assaut d’une ville”. Li-jien est mentionné comme comté de Chine jusqu’au cinquième siècle; la ville sera finalement détruite par une incursion tibétaine en 746. Selon le révérend Amos Spurling, qui voyagea dans la région au début des années vingt, la cuisine locale se distingue par son utilisation libérale d’une sauce de poisson fermentée particulièrement forte; il se pourrait que la contribution culturelle la plus persistante des légionnaires de Crassus soit l’introduction en Chine de la sauce garum.

TIGRANOCERTA Tigranocerta, ainsi nommée en hommage au Roi Tigranes d’Arménie, Grand Roi et Roi des Rois, par droit de conquête et de descendance de l’empire Seleucide décadent, n’a jamais été une ville chanceuse. Fondée aux alentours de 89 av. J.-C. sur la bordure de la plaine au nord de la Syrie, sa principale fonction consistait à flatter la vanité de son fondateur. Les opportunités de commerce ou de manufacture étant trop minces pour

attirer à cet endroit désert de nouveaux habitants, Tigranocerta semblait condamnée à rester sévèrement sous-peuplée, jusqu’à ce que le kaléidoscope changeant de la politique proche-orientale n’amorce un nouveau tournant en l’année 78.

Au nord-ouest de l’Arménie était le royaume de Pont, dirigé par le beau-père de Tigranes, Mythridate VI Eupator, adversaire brillant et impitoyable de Rome pendant les trois guerres Mythridatiques. Ce qui nous apparaîtrait aujourd’hui comme une brutalité excessive relevait, aux yeux de leurs contemporains vivant à une époque périlleuse, tout simplement de la *realpolitik* d’un souverain prudent. Mythridate possédait toutes les qualités requises, comme il en fit la démonstration au début de son règne en négociant une trêve avec son neveu Ariarathes de Cappadoce, où il fut stipulé que les deux Rois se rencontreraient en territoire neutre, dans le no-man’s-land, seuls et sans armes, mais flanqués de leurs armées respectives. Avec toutes les formalités requises par leurs susceptibilités royales, tous deux se soumièrent à une fouille avant la rencontre; mais Mythridate avait attaché un petit couteau très pointu sous son pénis, avec lequel il parvint à trancher la gorge de son infortuné neveu.

Bien des années plus tard, la Cappadoce fut à nouveau victime des ruses du Roi de Pont. Son souverain d’alors, Ariobarzane, s’étant comme de coutume montré résistant à l’égard des pressions pontiques, Tigranes fut sommé par son beau-père de résoudre une fois pour toutes le problème cappadocien. Il s’y appliqua avec fougue, rentrant dans son royaume avec plus de trente mille prisonniers cappadociens. Quel meilleur usage pouvait-il trouver, vu les circonstances, que d’en faire les heureux bénéficiaires de l’engouement royal pour l’aménagement urbain, les installant sans façons à Tigranocerta?

Une décennie plus tard, la nouvelle fondation, devenue la capitale arménienne, s’était dotée d’une muraille haute de soixante cubits, d’un grand palais, de terrains de chasse, de splendides bâtiments

publics et d'une bonne partie de la trésorerie royale; mais ses habitants forcés n'affichaient guère d'enthousiasme pour le lieu. Lorsqu'en 69 av. J.-C. Lucius Licinius Lucullus traversa les fleuves de l'Euphrate et du Tigre et assiégea sa nouvelle capitale, le Roi des Rois rassembla une armée estimée à 250.000 hommes pour soutenir sa garnison. Dès l'apparition de cette armée, les Romains donnèrent l'assaut malgré un rapport de forces de 25 contre 1, ce qui surprit tant ses attentes qu'à en croire Plutarque, Tigranes s'exclama: "Quoi, ce sont eux qui nous attaquent?" Le résultat fut une victoire sans appel de Rome, et la chute de la ville.

Le pillage de Tigranocerta fut si total que, comme le note cyniquement Strabon, "l'on persuada facilement les troupes, enchantées, de s'abstenir de massacrer". En tout état de cause, ce n'étaient pas les sujets les plus loyaux de Tigranes ; dans le traitement le plus extraordinaire jamais réservé à la population d'une ville conquise, ils furent renvoyés chez eux avec chacun une petite somme d'argent pour le voyage. Mais auparavant, comme le décrit avec amusement Alfred Duggan, "on organisa une petite cérémonie qui a certainement beaucoup dû plaire au très cultivé Lucullus. La construction du magnifique théâtre de Tigranocerta avait été achevée peu avant le début du siège, et la compagnie de comédiens embauchés pour la première s'était retrouvée piégée dans la ville. En présence de l'armée romaine, le rideau fut levé sur une courte saison de pièces grecques. Puis l'ensemble splendide fut abandonné, ville, théâtre, palais et faubourgs".

AZZANATHKONA Nous savons peu de la ville caravanière d'Azzanathkona. Elle n'est mentionnée qu'une fois dans les annales contemporaines, sous forme d'esquisse, dans le cadre d'une série d'articles écrits par l'orientaliste M. Rostovtzeff et publiés en 1928 dans *Le Casque*, journal de l'émigration russe diffusé à partir de Berlin. Curieusement, alors que les autres articles ont été recueillis plus tard dans l'ouvrage intitulé *O Blijnem Vostoke* (Paris, 1931), celui sur Azzanathkona n'y figure pas. Si le nom apparaît bien

dans l'annexe, c'est pour désigner une version locale de la déesse Atargatis, à qui un temple semble avoir été dédié à Dura Europos.

L'hypothèse qu'Azzanathkona n'était pas simplement une incarnation provinciale d'Artemis/Artagatis semble confirmée par une inscription palmyrène, citée dans le supplément des *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones* de Dittenberger, qui la situe dans une relation ambiguë mais non pas subordonnée, avec la grand triade de Bel, Yarbihol et Aglibol. En effet, l'article supprimé de Rostovtzeff soutenait qu'Azzanathkona était la déesse titulaire d'une métropole commerciale éponyme au centre du désert de Njed, située bien au sud de la route caravanière traditionnelle allant de Petra à Ctesiphon. Il semblerait que la ville d'Azzanathkona ait prospéré jusqu'à environ le milieu du quatrième siècle après Jésus-Christ, avant d'être détruite par l'invasion conjointe des tribus Bene Komara et Bene Mattabol, exceptionnellement alliées pour l'occasion.

La puissance et la richesse d'Azzanathkona reposaient sur trois facteurs: sa position stratégique sur une piste caravanière mineure mais tout de même profitable, le monopole qu'elle détenait sur les puits de la région, et la célébrité de ses rites annuels de solstice d'hiver. La nature de ces rites demeure obscure, mais de la condamnation sans appel que leur adressa Clément d'Alexandrie, on peut déduire qu'ils furent particulièrement licencieux. Hélas, les renseignements donnés par le brillant évêque étant d'un caractère très général, sa diatribe, bien que foudroyante, ne nous instruit guère. A ces quelques éléments de connaissance, nous pourrions ajouter que, d'après les détails fournis par le papyrus Jerash XVII, les femmes d'Azzanathkona, parce qu'elles se rasaient la tête et s'habillaient en rouge, étaient considérées comme abominables, que les traités philosophiques et les penseurs itinérants étaient frappés d'un impôt spécial, et que la représentation de pièces de théâtre grecques étaient punies de bannissement.

Le lieu exact où se situait Azzanathkona demeure un mystère. Une expédition anglo-américaine semble être tombée par hasard sur

quelques ruines de pierre, découvertes par une tempête de sable en 1923. Malheureusement, l'expédition en question effectuait des repérages secrets pour le compte du consortium pétrolier Aramco, et ses rapports demeurent, par conséquent, confidentiels. André Malraux et Corniglion-Molinier affirmaient bien l'avoir repérée depuis le ciel en mars 1934, alors qu'ils recherchaient Mareb, mais sans références géographiques précises à l'appui. Les délires d'un sergent du Long Range Desert Group, seul survivant d'une unité disparue lors d'un exercice d'entraînement dans le Nejd en 1942, confirment plus ou moins les dires de Malraux quant à la position du site. Il évoqua des tours trapues émergeant du sable, l'effondrement du sol sous les roues de son véhicule découvrant un ossuaire, et une invasion de scorpions. Aujourd'hui, la région toute entière est interdite aux voyageurs.

APATE Un problème caractéristique en ce qui concerne l'identification précise des villes au sein du vaste empire Séleucide, cette immense étendue allant de la Méditerranée orientale aux portes de l'Inde, est la tendance générale que manifestaient ses dirigeants à vouloir baptiser leurs villes nouvellement fondées d'après les quatre noms dynastiques Séleucides – Antioch, Seleuceia, Apamea et Laodicea. Étant donné que les Antioches mentionnés par les historiens sont au nombre d'au moins douze, il en aurait résulté un chaos administratif si ces noms n'avaient pas été accompagnés d'une quelconque désignation géographique; d'où les appellations telles que Antioch-Nisibis, Antioch sur l'Orontes, Apamea en Syrie, etc.

Cette solution typiquement bureaucratique était excessivement maladroite, et signifiait que si, par exemple, un Grec de Susa devait adresser un document formel à l'administration provinciale, il devrait se décrire non pas comme un simple Seleuceien, mais comme un Seleuceien-sur-Eulaeus. En conséquence de quoi les surnoms informels devinrent rapidement usuels, qu'ils soient fondés sur une description partielle, comme pour *Asylum Persarum*

(*"Asile des Perses"*), ou sur des caractéristiques architecturales, comme pour *Hekatompylos* (*"Des cent portes"*). Aussi le surnom pouvait-il parfois prendre la forme d'une insulte à peine voilée, comme ce fut le cas pour Antioch en Osroene, décrite par Malas comme *"mixobarabaras"*, la semi-barbare; ce qui pourrait être soit une référence à la nature mixte de sa population, soit, comme l'affirme von Gutschmid, signifier tout simplement *"les frustes"*.

Le cas le plus intrigant de ce type est sans doute celui d'Apate, que Pline (VI,55) décrit comme dominant le flanc nord de la rivière Atrek, bien placée pour garder les voies d'accès à l'Hyrcanie. Le nom signifie bien sûr en *koine* grec, *"fraude"*; de fait, les citoyens d'Apate, dont le nom original de la ville ne survivra pas, auraient été réputés à travers la Parthie pour l'extrême mauvaise foi de leurs transactions commerciales. La découverte en 1975, à Oxyrinchus, de quelque deux cents lignes d'une tentative plutôt terne de comédie Plautéenne, par un certain Aelius Rufus, porta à notre connaissance une nouvelle référence à Apate; selon cet obscur auteur dramatique provincial, la ville acquit une certaine célébrité locale après avoir découvert qu'une statue chrysléphantine de Seleucus II, érigée par les magistrats de la ville dans l'espoir d'obtenir une réduction d'impôts, avait en fait été construite frauduleusement en bois doré et plâtre blanc par un artiste Corinthien itinérant, depuis longtemps disparu. Le papyrus ne dit pas clairement si la fraude était aux dépens du roi ou des magistrats.

Sans aucun doute, la proposition la plus audacieuse concernant l'attribution d'un nom à Apate demeure celle de Florescu et d'Oliveira dans le volume XXVII des *Transactions de l'Institut Archéologique de Bucarest*. S'appuyant en partie sur les preuves épigraphiques et en partie sur un manuscrit des *Strategemata* de Frontinus, qui venait d'être catalogué par la bibliothèque de l'Université de Coimbra, les deux historiens militaires affirmèrent que, loin d'être une fondation Séleucide (accablée ensuite d'un surnom diffamant), Apate était le site d'une monumentale

campagne de désinformation menée par la Parthie à l'encontre d'Antiochus III. Selon la lecture contentieuse que font les auteurs du manuscrit de Coimbra, le gouverneur d'Hyrcanie à Tambrax, qui manquait cruellement de troupes pour retenir l'avancée Seleucide sur Bactra, parvint à convaincre les émissaires de l'ennemi de l'existence d'une grande ville de garnison juste derrière Tambrax, bien défendue et fortifiée "par trois grands fossés"; c'est cette ville inexistante qui reçut plus tard des habitants joyeux le nom d'Apate, et c'est sous ce nom que la rumeur de son existence parvint jusqu'à l'infatigable Pline.

BUCEPHALA De toutes les batailles d'Alexandre, Napoléon réservait, dit-on, sa plus grande admiration pour celle de Jhelum. Ce fut sa dernière bataille magistrale, le point culminant de sa conquête du nord-ouest du Punjab. Après Jhelum, son avancée obsessionnelle vers les terres orientales les plus reculées et les côtes d'Océanus s'achèverait par la marche hésitante de l'armée jusqu'aux bords de la rivière Beas, la mutinerie des troupes, la colère du roi, l'excuse des auspices défavorables pour sauver la face, puis la retraite morose. A vingt-six mille kilomètres de la Grèce, l'avancée d'Alexandre fut brusquement arrêtée près des ruines incendiées de Sangala.

Si la bataille elle-même avait été brutale, elle ne manquait pas d'une certaine élégance tactique, avec une traversée difficile du fleuve de Jhelum et un double encerclement, compliqué par la cavalerie grecque et ses alliées; après quoi l'armée expérimentée des Macédoniens avait dû affronter les éléphants de guerre du roi Porus. Il y avait toutefois un prix à payer, car le cheval bien-aimé d'Alexandre, Bucéphale, avait été mortellement blessé dès les premières heures du combat. Agé de vingt ans, il avait porté son maître depuis leur départ de Macédonie.

Deux nouvelles villes virent le jour sur les rives du Jhelum. Une à l'est, sur le champ de bataille, sera baptisée Nicaea, ou Victoire,

mais celle construite à l'ouest recevra le nom de Bucephala, en honneur du cheval quasi-légitime. La ville n'eut guère de chance à ses débuts, car à son retour du Beas, Alexandre la retrouva gravement endommagée par les inondations de la mousson: sa réaction fut d'ordonner qu'elle soit reconstruite sur des hauteurs situées à plusieurs kilomètres de là. On ignore ce qu'il advint de la ville au lendemain de la mort d'Alexandre, mais il est clair que Bucephala survécut aux troubles de ses débuts et à la rébellion menée par les Brahmin. Ptolémée l'inclut dans une liste des villes majeures au sein du royaume ultérieur de Ménandre, et la ville demeura suffisamment hellénisée pour être désignée capitale du royaume grec en Inde après la mort de Ménandre. Vers le milieu du premier siècle après J.-C., le *Périple de la mer érythréenne* ajouta que la ville fut dominée par une citadelle massive. Son importance est confirmée par la présence d'une monnaie royale frappée d'un cheval à cornes.

Le symbole convenait bien à une ville fondée en hommage d'un cheval dont le nom signifiait "tête de boeuf"; dans certains récits primitifs, Bucéphale est littéralement décrit comme ayant possédé des cornes, bien que le Suidas indique que „Bucéphale n'avait pas, comme certains auteurs le pensent, de véritables cornes, mais il arborait des cornes dorées, dit-on, pour la bataille“. Un tel scepticisme est certes admirable de la part de chroniqueurs anonymes du X^e siècle, mais il n'empêche que des sources intrigantes continuent de faire référence à l'élevage, à Bucephala, de chevaux possédant effectivement, entre autres qualités étonnantes, des cornes. Le lexicographe du V^e siècle, Hesychius d'Alexandrie, comprend une note bizarre à son endroit, et une autre mention, sans doute délibérément obscure, en est faite dans l'oeuvre d'Aristide Quintilianus. La source la plus ambiguë et la plus contestée est sans doute la référence aux "chevaux-diables" des Yavana (Grecs) faite par le texte astrologique sanskrit *Gargi Samhita*, dont un des chapitres, le *Yuga-parana*, contient une prophétie de l'avancée grecque vers Pataliputra.

Le sort définitif de Bucephala est inconnu, mais des siècles plus tard, à Balkh, Marco Polo entendit les princes de Badakshan, près du site d'Alexandria Oxiana, raconter que leurs chevaux descendaient naguère de Bucéphale, et qu'ils naissaient avec des cornes comme les licornes. "Mais, comme le dit Robin Lane Fox, les jalousies au sein de la famille royale avaient entraîné la mise à mort du dernier étalon, et la lignée est par conséquent éteinte".

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