
Frank L. Holt, Professor of History at the University of Huston (USA, Texas), has recently published a new book concerning Afghanistan and Central Asia. H. is very well qualified to contribute to this burgeoning field, having written such studies like ‘Alexander the Great and Bactria’ (Mnemosyne, Suppl. To 104, Leiden 1988) and ‘Thundering Zeus: The Making of Hellenistic Bactria’ (Hellenistic culture and society 32, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1999).

The book under review was completed not long after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, from which Holt conceived the concept of the work: «the events of 9–11 and their aftermath have given new urgency ... and this book is one result» (22). Paradoxically, the attacks at the beginning of the 21st century were made against the USA by terrorists whose patrons stayed in a remote country in Central Asia. For this reason, intense interest in Afghanistan has grown in historical research. H. juxtaposes the campaigns of Alexander the Great in Central Asia with the military interventions of the USA, Soviet Union and Great Britain in Afghanistan, noting that (p. XI in ‘Preface’): «The experiences of Alexander the Great, though long ago, still resonate, and they suggest that America’s resolve will be sorely tested in that truculent land» (i.e., in Afghanistan, M.J.O.). To draw parallels between the ancient past and present is sometimes risky, but by combining the most famous figure of the classical antiquity with the unexpected developments in the modern world, H. demonstrates that ancient history need not be an hermenetic discipline.

H.’s book is divided into eight chapters. The main part of the work is preceded by a useful ‘Introduction’ (Chapter I, 1–22) on the character of Afghanistan’s history in 19th–20th centuries, with special emphasis on the British and Soviet invasions, and of its history under Alexander and his successors. Chapters II–V (23–104) deal with Alexander’s campaigns in Central Asia (329–327 B.C.). H. gives a consistent picture of the war with its atrocities. He rightly maintains that the controversial account of the Branchidae is genuine (49). In some cases, however, analogies and assessments drawn by H. are not convincing. Thus, he (51) calls the Sogdian «hyparchs» Ariamazes, Austanes, Orsodates, Catanes, Oxyartes, Sisimthres and Spítamenes «warlords» or even «terrorists» and points out: «Terrorists might seem too strong a term for them, but the word does apply in many ways. They singly and collectively acted as expatriate agents intent upon undermining an established government through violence and intimidation». Such an assessment remains unsatisfactory, although H. tries to justify his strange accusations with the statement (52): «but to the native peoples, Alexander and his generals fully deserved the title» (i.e., terrorists, M.J.O.). Whereas H. had in his previous studies (like ‘Alexander the Great in Bactria’, 75ff) proposed a balanced picture of the native resistance in Central Asia, here he obviously does the opposite. I doubt whether Alexander with his expeditionary army was perceived in Central Asia as an ‘established government’ and whether native local leaders fighting against a cruel foreign invasion may be called ‘terrorists’. While using the notions ‘warlords’ and ‘terrorists’, H. leaves aside the crucial issue of customs and systems of values in ancient Bactria and in other countries of Central Asia as compared with those in modern Afghanistan.
Knowledge of cultural patterns is the basic condition of understanding societies’ behaviour in the political and social spheres. The honorary code of the contemporary Pashtuns, people predominating in modern Afghanistan, (the so-called Pashtunwali), embracing such values as honour, courage, right to freedom and hospitality, belongs to a very distant tradition, going back to the ancient epoch.¹

The available sources demonstrate that Alexander showed the greatest respect for martial virtues of the peoples in eastern Iran and Central Asia.²

Chapter VI (105–124) encompasses Central Asia in the last years of Alexander’s reign (327–323 B.C.). H. pays a great deal of attention, and rightly so, to Alexander’s wife Rhoxana who demonstrated her royal ambitions when she murdered another royal wife Stateira immediately upon Alexander’s death. She and her son Alexander IV were, in turn, murdered in Macedonia in 311/310 B.C. H. accurately observes that Alexander’s line ended with the death of his son and that curiously, the blood of the beheaded rebel Spitamenes coursed through the veins of more than a dozen later kings (119). Indeed, Spitamenes’ daughter Apame (known as benefactor of Miletos), wife of Seleukos I, gave birth to Antiochos I and thus became the ancestor of the Seleukid dynasty.

Chapter VII (125–148), the best in the book, focuses on the history of Bactria after 323 B.C., i.e., from the Diadochs and Seleukids to the Graeco-Bactrian period. The most original observations in this section often hinge on numismatics, a field in which H. feels at home. He emphasizes the amazing discoveries of ancient treasures made in the area of Bactria. Thus, in 1877, a large hoard was discovered on the banks of the Amudarya, the so-called Oxos Treasure, containing over a thousand ancient coins and a number of artifacts of silver and gold. In Tillya-tepe (northern Afghanistan) the Soviet archaeologist V. I. Sarianidi excavated in the 1970s some tombs which yielded more than 20,000 gold objects, including jewelry, weapons and coins. In 1992, the well-known archaeological site of Mir Zakah (eastern Afghanistan) yielded a huge coin hoard, perhaps the largest known in history, estimated to be at least 550,000 coins. They reached collections and museums in Japan, Europe and America, but the archaeological context of the discovery – as often in Afghanistan – remains entirely unknown.

The book’s final Chapter VIII (149–164), entitled ‘Conclusion’, focuses on Ai Khanom, the famous ancient city on the Oxos River/Amudarya (154–164). H. presents an account of the city’s culture and history. Here it must be noticed that in his recently published study the American historian J. D. Lerner, employing a very cautious but efficient source analysis, demolished the established chronology of Ai Khanom almost entirely and proposed a new, more convincing interpretation of the archaeological evidence.³ The book under review contains an appendix with sources, notes, and a rich bibliography.

In H.s book, there are some terminological shortcomings. In the title H. places the name ‘Afghanistan’, which is to him equivalent to ancient Bactria (p. XI in the ‘Preface’, and passim). In reality, however, ancient Bactria was a region embracing what today is northern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and parts of Tajikistan including the Oxos river (Amudarya) valley. The northern border of Bactria was demarcated by the Hissar mountain range, and the southern by the Hindukush,1 while Sogdiana encompassed the Zeravshan and Kashkadarya valleys.2 Although in the Achaemenid epoch and Alexander’s era Bactria and Sogdiana were merged to form one large satrapy, both countries possessed different cultural and political traditions.3 Moreover, the confines of modern Afghanistan embrace areas which for the most part lay beyond the borders of ancient Bactria: the area of Herat (ancient Areia), the Helmand basin (Drangiana/Sakastan), the region of Qandahar (Arachosia), the southern slopes of the Hindukush (Paropamisos), and the Kabul area. Inconsistent terminology does not always allow the reader easily to understand the author’s ideas and analyses. For example, Alexander’s military operations, sketched in chapters III and IV, were conducted not primarily in Afghanistan, but in Transoxiana (i.e., between the Amudarya/Oxos and Syrdarya/laxartes), where the Sogdians supported by nomads offered strong resistance against the Macedonian intrusion.4 Likewise, H.’s use of the terms ‘Greeks’ and ‘Macedonians’ is inaccurate, for he tends to employ them interchangeably or ascribes to the Greeks a higher position than that of the Macedonians (cf. the phrase «Greek and Macedonian invaders», p. 14 and passim). Thus on page 48 H. writes how «Greek soldiers» fought in Sogdiana, while the ancient sources which he cites, (i.e., Curt. 7.6.1–2 and Arr. 3.30.10–11), explicitly mention ‘Macedonians’. It must be underlined that Alexander the Great was a Macedonian king, and the core of his army operating in Central Asia was Macedonian. The role of the Greeks in Alexander’s campaigns in Iran and Central Asia was limited. Greek troops constituted a part of Alexander’s army, but were used mainly as occupying forces and as settlers in new foundations. Moreover, as E. Badian and E. Borza have convincingly demonstrated, in the 4th–3rd centuries BC neither Greeks nor Macedonians considered the Macedonians to be Hellenes or vice versa.5 Contrary to H. (38), the

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1 Cf. G. A. Koshelevno (ed.), Drevneyshie gosudarstva Kavkaza i Sredney Azii (Ancient states of the Caucasus and Central Asia), Moscow 1985, 250. Full discussion may be found in: I. V. P’iankov, Baktria v antichnoi traditsii (Bactria in the Ancient tradition), Dushanbe 1982; idem, Srednyaya Aziya v antichnoy geograficheskoj traditsii (Central Asia in the ancient geographical tradition), Moscow 1997. See also E. V. Rtveldzhe, Alexander the Great in Bactria and Sogdiana, Tashkent 2002 (in Russian).


5 E. Badian, Greeks and Macedonians, in: B. Barr- Sharrar/E. N. Borza (eds.), Macedonia and Greece in Late Classical and Early Hellenistic Times (Washington: National Gallery of Art 1982) [Studies in the History of Art, Vol. 10], 33–51; E. N. Borza, Greeks and
Amudarya/Oxos (about 1630 miles in length) is not «the longest» river of Central Asia. Taking source in the Tien Shan, the Central Asian Syrdarya (ancient Iaxartes) is 1913 miles in length.

While H. highlights horrific aspects of the various wars conducted in Afghanistan, his approach overlooks the exceptional character of the Soviet invasion with its aim of completely annihilating settlements and irrigation networks. It was the Soviet invasion, which destroyed the social structure of modern Afghanistan and opened the ‘Pandora’s box’ in the region. Indeed H. ignores numerous accounts about the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Here, it would be advisable to draw upon such first-hand reports as R. Sikorski’s, ‘Dust of the Saints.’

The author, a political refugee from Poland, who in the 1980s served as the London correspondent for the U.S. ‘National Review’, made an arduous trek across Soviet-occupied Afghanistan in 1987. Sikorski disguised himself as a mujahedeen, and joined a group of resistance fighters carrying arms to a rebel stronghold. With a hatred of Soviet occupation bred in his native Poland, the author won the complete trust of Afghan mujahedeen soldiers and regional rebel leaders.

In sum, with his fluid prose style, H. has published an informative book and shows a wide knowledge of ancient sources and modern scholarly publications. H.s portrait of Afghanistan and ancient Bactria-Sogdiana provides vivid insight into the complex history of that region, often called ‘the Crossroads of Asia’. Sometimes, however, H. skips over evidence and previous scholarship too lightly. All things considered, this is not a book that can be ignored by anyone who is interested in the history of Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Rzeszów

Marek J. Olbrycht
