

# The Hellenistic Far East in Historical Fiction. Ancient History, Modern Ideologies

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## ABSTRACT

It has become a truism that it is impossible to reconstruct a narrative history of Central Asia in the period after Alexander. Scant literary or epigraphic sources, and the pitfalls of reconstructing dynastic histories from coins, make scholars wary of writing 'history' in the traditional academic sense. It may therefore come as a surprise that Hellenistic-period Central Asia has emerged as the setting for a number of historical novels. This paper aims to deconstruct the research process that lies behind the crafting of narrative in several such pieces. It will identify the primary sources and works of scholarship used by authors, and explore how these have been used to construct visions of Hellenistic Central Asia which reflect not just on the ancient record, but on the modern authors' political and social context. The works discussed will include Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* (on Alexander and his routes in Afghanistan), Teodor Parnicki's (1955) *Koniec Zgody Narodów/The End of the Concord of Nations* (which explores the resonances of cultural encounter in Hellenistic Central Asia for the post-War world), and Gillian Bradshaw's (1990) *Horses of Heaven* (which uses a hypothetical Graeco-Bactrian alliance with Ferghana as the backdrop for historical romance).

## KEYWORDS

Historiography; historical fiction; numismatics; Graeco-Bactrian; Indo-Greek; Ai Khanoum.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholarly attitudes towards 'recovering' the history of Hellenistic Central Asia have changed over time, but for a long time there was a common conviction a) that there was a lost narrative history to be recovered; and b) that recovering such a history was desirable. Some have taken point (b) further and regarded the recovery of a lost narrative as the very *raison d'être* of the scholar of Central Asia. Tarn, in *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, dwelt at length on the hypothetical lost ancient Greek narrative which he refers to as 'Trogus' source':

There was once a Greek history which covered the Farther East generally, apparently down to 87 BC, and there was another Greek history which also dealt with the Farther East, though seemingly only as an appendage to the history of Parthia; [...] the scraps tend to combine, not into other scraps, but into at least the outline of a whole. There will be something to be said about this later, but, as there was once a tradition, it is somebody's business to attempt to recover the outline of it; one is not labouring in a vacuum. (TARN 1951 [1938], xxi)

Other historians of the mid-twentieth century speculated on the identity of the author of 'Trogus' source', and the contents of his work (ROY 1939; BUSSAGLI 1956). Narain conceived of his own work, *The Indo-Greeks*, as one of political history (NARAIN 1957, Preface). Although wary of the scope afforded by numismatic evidence to the historian to 'wander off into the land of romance, if he is not disciplined in understanding the limitations of the source he is

using', Narain also viewed his (primarily numismatic rather than textual) task as one of the 'reconstruction of the history of the Indo-Greeks' (NARAIN 1957, Preface).

The archaeological publications on Ai Khanoum by Bernard and other DAFA members make it clear that they are engaged in a different enterprise. To this date, the prevailing theme in works on Hellenistic Central Asia, by writers of all nationalities, had been one of recovering a lost narrative history. Any such language is entirely absent from the reports on Ai Khanoum published in the *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1966–1980), whose tone – although at times making the delight of excavators at the spectacular finds very evident – is more rigorously scientific. The word 'histoire' is itself avoided in these publications, which refrain from historiographical speculation and reflection.

In contrast, more popularising reports on Ai Khanoum, especially those in the English language, maintain the language of historical rediscovery. In a public lecture at the British Academy in 1966, for example, Bernard takes this as his rhetorical starting point, before shifting his focus to his main subject, the archaeological remains:

Until now the knowledge that could be gleaned about this oriental Hellas of the third and second centuries BC was tantalizingly meagre. As far as its history was concerned, our information, deriving from two sources – on the one hand, a few rare texts by Greek, Latin, and Chinese historians, transmitting for the most part scraps of older, lost writings, and, on the other hand, the abundant coinage of the sovereigns of this Greek state – permitted us to trace, with much conjecture, its broadest outlines. [...] But what about any evidence of its material and cultural civilization? What about its monuments? (BERNARD 1967, 71–72)

Bernard appears to be tailoring his approach to his audience in two senses. It is in the English-language scholarship that the 'lost narrative history' trope was most common; and his talk was delivered as the British Academy's annual Albert Reckitt Archaeological Lecture, and was thus open to the public. Part of the reason for a return to more narrative approaches by Anglophone historians in the 1970s was precisely because of the need to speak to a wider audience who favoured such styles. Writing in the journal *Past and Present* in 1979, for example, 'narrativist' historian Lawrence Stone proposed that 'one further reason why a number of "new historians" are turning back to narrative seems to be a desire to make their findings accessible once more to an intelligent but not expert reading public, which is eager to learn what these innovative new questions, methods and data have revealed, but cannot stomach indigestible statistical tables, dry analytical argument, and jargon-ridden prose' (STONE 1979, 15). As well as a historiographical approach, the choice to frame investigations into Hellenistic Central Asia as a search for a lost historical narrative therefore represents a particular mode of public communication.

I imagine that few of the participants at the third meeting of the Hellenistic Central Asia Research Network in Prague in 2018, where the present paper was delivered, would conceive of themselves as engaged in the enterprise of reconstructing the narrative history of Hellenistic Central Asia. Yet there is another group of writers whose goal is precisely that: authors of historical fiction set in the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. The choice of these kingdoms as the setting for works of fiction offers a challenge – in the lack of the Greek and Roman narrative sources used by authors such as Mary Renault in her works on Alexander – but also freedom to interpret and invent. For those of us who have rejected a narrative framework in our own approach to Hellenistic Central Asia, such works can be similarly both challenging and liberating to read. We may be irked at a reconstruction of dynastic relationships which does not match with our own reading of the numismatic evidence, but yet

drawn to the imaginings of personalities and quotidian details which we would not be able to include in our own work.

The very existence of historical fiction set in Hellenistic Central Asia, or otherwise engaging with its history, may be surprising to some, but in fact there are a large number of such works, in a range of languages (for some examples, see COLORU 2008). I do not presume to cover all of them here. They range from the fanciful (a romance about Alexander and Roxana *The Maid of Bactria*: KIRKMAN 1913) to the utterly ridiculous (a post-Soviet dictator searches for the lost tomb of Alexander and Hephaestion in the Pamirs: BERRY 2007). Authors include academic scholars of the Hellenistic period (PFROMMER 2007; I am grateful to Gunvor Lindström for this reference) and writers of comic fantasy (HOLT 1999).<sup>1</sup> The three works I shall consider here are Rudyard Kipling's novella *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), Teodor Parnicki's *Koniec 'Zgody Narodów' / The End of the 'Concord of Nations'* (1955), and Gillian Bradshaw's *Horses of Heaven* (1990). I have selected these particular works principally because their authors are relatively explicit about their sources of historical information, and their desire to craft a historical, as well as literary, narrative. These works cover a broad chronological range, from the late nineteenth to late twentieth century, and reflect developments in scholarship on Central Asia at one remove. As well as changing views of ancient Central Asia, they also show what has remained constant – a preoccupation with cultural contact and ethnic intermingling – whether the author is writing a tale of adventure, historical science fiction, or romance. I aim to deconstruct the research process that lies behind the crafting of narrative in these pieces. I will identify the primary sources and works of scholarship used by the authors, and explore how these have been used to construct visions of Hellenistic Central Asia which reflect not just on the ancient record, but on the modern authors' political and social context.

## THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

*The Man Who Would be King* is well known to most modern scholars of Central Asia, and has frequently been analysed as a product of nineteenth-century British preoccupations with ancient connections between Greeks and Indians (see, for example, VASUNIA 2013, 77–89, and MAIRS 2018). It was first published in Kipling's collection of stories *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Eerie Tales* in 1888, when he was twenty-three years old and working as Assistant Editor of *The Pioneer* newspaper in Allahabad. The narrator is a newspaper editor in Lahore, where Kipling himself had worked until the year before the publication of the story. He meets two adventurers, Dravot and Carnehan, who have decided to go to Kafiristan and set themselves up as divine kings, an enterprise which ends in disaster when they are revealed to be mortal.

Kipling several times mentions publications which his fictional heroes consult, and which we should suppose that he also had at his disposal. Dravot and Carnehan arrive in the narrator's newspaper office, and say that they 'require to see Books and Atlases' to plan their expedition to Kafiristan. Carnehan says:

'We have come to you to know about this country, to read a book about it, and to be shown maps. We want you to tell us that we are fools and to show us your books.' He turned to the bookcases.

'Are you at all in earnest?' I said.

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1 I am thankful also to the many participants at HCARN III in Prague who shared with me their own favourite Central Asian historical fiction guilty pleasures.

‘A little,’ said Dravot, sweetly. ‘As big a map as you have got, even if it’s all blank where Kafiristan is, and any books you’ve got. We can read, though we aren’t very educated.’

I uncased the big thirty-two-miles-to-the-inch map of India and two smaller Frontier maps, hauled down volume INF-KAN of the ‘Encyclopaedia Britannica’, and the men consulted them.

As Dravot recalls his time in Afghanistan during the Second Afghan War:

I handed him Wood on the ‘Sources of the Oxus.’ Carnehan was deep in the ‘Encyclopaedia.’

‘They’re a mixed lot,’ said Dravot, reflectively; ‘and it won’t help us to know the names of their tribes. The more tribes the more they’ll fight, and the better for us. From Jagdallak to Ashang. H’mmm!’

‘But all the information about the country is as sketchy and inaccurate as can be,’ I protested. ‘No one knows anything about it really. Here’s the file of the “United Services’ Institute.” Read what Bellew says.’

‘Blow Bellew!’ said Carnehan. ‘Dan, they’re a stinkin’ lot of heathens, but this book here says they think they’re related to us English.’

I smoked while the men poured over Raverty, Wood, the maps, and the ‘Encyclopaedia.’

Kipling’s reference is to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1882), which contained an article by Henry Yule on ‘Kafiristan’, of which the author as well as his characters clearly made use (on this and Kipling’s other sources see MARX 1999 and VASUNIA 2013, 77–89). It is notable that Captain John Wood’s (1841) *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus*, the next work to which the narrator refers, was already some decades old, and moved fluidly between description of contemporary Afghanistan, and the region’s past. In such works, as in Kipling’s story, past and present are conflated, and ancient and modern-day populations identified with one another. This can be seen in the frequent reference by Dravot and Carnehan to both themselves and the Kafiristanis as ‘sons of Alexander’, in contrast to other local populations. Where little information is available, ancient sources are taken as equally valid as modern ethnographical observations (see further MAIRS 2018).

Wood is probably best known to Central Asianists today for his visit to the site of Ai Khanoum, whose name he recorded as ‘I-khanam’ (BERNARD – FRANCFORT 1978, 33–38). He noted the mounds and standing walls of the ancient city, but had no response to his queries about coins and relics (WOOD 1841, 394). He is interested in the persistence of traces of Alexander and the Greeks in the present day, but is on the whole more sceptical than Kipling’s characters – who cannot have read him too closely. He mentions the Alexander historians from time to time, but most often to state with regret things like ‘it is in vain in the delta of such a river [the Indus near Karachi] to identify existing localities with descriptions handed down to us by the historians of Alexander the Great’ or ‘it is almost vain to look, after the lapse of so many centuries, for indications of the Grecian general’s march’ (WOOD 1841, 11, 39). He met several people in northern Afghanistan who claimed to be descendants of Alexander, and found such claims unconvincing: ‘Among a rude and half savage people, not given to chronicle their doings, and with whom books and men to read them are equally rare, we would search in vain for valid evidence, either in support or refutation of these pretensions’ (WOOD 1841, 372).

Major Henry W. Bellew, author of the third source named by Kipling’s narrator, was an army surgeon who had travelled in Afghanistan and Chinese Turkestan. He wrote several books on Afghanistan and the Pashto language, but Kipling’s reference is specifically to the publication of a lecture he delivered in 1879 on ‘Kafiristan [sic] and the Kafirs’ at the United



Services Institute in Simla (BELLEW 1879). As Kipling's narrator states, Bellew's account is indeed 'sketchy and inaccurate' (MARX 1999, 50). In contrast to Wood, he does put faith in local accounts of descent from Alexander: 'their claim to this ancestry is not without some foundation for we are told by the historians of Alexander's Asiatic conquests that the king married the fair Roshana, a noted beauty, the daughter of a noble of the district which is now known as Roshan; whilst from the same authorities we learn that 10,000 of his Greek soldiers had taken to themselves wives of the country' (BELLEW 1879, 14). This is the story preferred by Dravot and Carnehan, although the comments of Kipling's narrator may suggest that he does not give it so much credence.

Finally there is H. G. Raverty's *Notes on Káfiristan* (RAVERTY 1859), used as a source by Bellew, and itself drawing on Wood (MARX 1999, 50). Like Bellew and Wood, Raverty was also an officer in the British Indian Army. He published on Afghanistan and the Pashto language. He cites Wood on the claim to descent from Alexander in Wakhan, and appears to have a similar view of such claims. Although no other sources of information on Kafiristan are named explicitly in *The Man Who Would Be King*, the fact that Raverty's article was published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* suggests that Kipling may also have drawn on other writings in this journal. The *JASB* covered a wide and eclectic range of topics, but one of its staples in the nineteenth century was accounts by British soldiers of their attempts to trace the routes of Alexander in the North-West, or find 'evidence' (archaeological remains, oral history, human physical characteristics) of his presence (MAIRS 2018; MAIRS forthcoming).

Kipling had a rich range of written resources at his disposal. His father, John Lockwood Kipling, was curator of the Lahore Museum, which had splendid collections of Gandharān art and Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek coins (RODGERS 1891; SMITH 1889, which includes a *Descriptive list of the principal Buddhist sculptures in the Lahore Museum* supplied by John Lockwood Kipling himself). It is probable that these collections, too, served as sources of inspiration for Kipling's fictional account of lost descendants of Alexander in Kafiristan. 'Graeco-Buddhist' sculptures are certainly mentioned in his later novel *Kim* (1901), whose opening scenes take place at the Lahore Museum.

*The Man Who Would Be King* is not, of course, principally about the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms, but rather about their precursor – Alexander – and putative successors – the British in India. At the time the novella was published, there was very little available modern scholarship specifically on these kingdoms. Ancient authors such as Polybios and the Alexander historians were used by the writers whom Kipling cites, but he does not seem to have used them directly himself. Kipling's choice of the notion of lost Greek descendants in Kafiristan as a narrative 'MacGuffin' is in fitting with how other writers in British India used the topic: as a subject worthy of investigation principally because it was thought to reflect on the nature, significance and legitimacy of British rule in India.

### **KONIEC 'ZGODY NARODÓW' [THE END OF THE 'CONCORD OF NATIONS']**

The life history of Teodor Parnicki (1908–1988) almost reads as an historical novel itself (on his life and works, see SKALMOWSKI 1999). Born in Berlin to a Polish father and Polish-Jewish mother, he spent most of his early life in Russia and spoke Russian as his first language. In 1920 he ran away from his military school in Vladivostok across the border to Harbin in China, where he joined the émigré Polish community and started to use the Polish language for the first time (see BOURKANE 2015 and BOURKANE 2018 on the influence of Parnicki's time in China on his work). He studied at the Polish university in Lwów, present-day Ukraine, during

which time he travelled in Turkey and southern Europe. During World War II he was first deported to Kazakhstan, then worked for the Polish Embassy in Moscow and Tehran, before spending a short time in England, and a longer period in Mexico City. Parnicki spent the last two decades of his life in Warsaw.

His novel *Koniec 'Zgody Narodów'* was written in Mexico and published in Paris. The eponymous 'Concord of Nations' is a Graeco-Bactrian ship on the Oxus. Its plot, which might be better characterised as 'historical science fiction' rather than more straightforward 'historical fiction' (JAMROZIAK 1978), almost defies concise summary:

The action of Parnicki's book takes place in the year 179 BC and is located on the board of the main ship of the dynasty, floating on the Oxus river. The ship, isolated from the outside world, is a scene of the 'great adventure' of the two main protagonists: Heliodor, the old top agent of the dynasty's secret service and his wife, Dionea. The immense ship, whose name was recently converted to the current watchword of the dynasty, 'The Concord of Nations of the Heart of Asia,' becomes a peculiar microcosm, in which the complex political play slowly unveils deeper layers of the cultural melting pot of the Central Asia as well as the religious and philosophical motivations of protagonists' activities. Anxiety and fear permeate 'The Concord of Nations' and the main characters, isolated and forcefully engaged in a complicated interplay of a political investigation are bound to slowly unravel the mystery of each other's identity, and discover carefully hidden secrets of their past. All five main characters of the novel – three top secret agents, Heliodor, Theophilus, and Mankuras (a Hindu agent of King Demetrius), Dionea (Heliodor's wife) and a mysterious Greek adolescent Leptines – engage in the series of interrogations, narrative accounts and questionings, slowly unveiling the complexity of the Hellenistic mosaic of the Greek kingdom in Asia. (MARKIEWKA 2013, 169)

Parnicki's literary style has been described by one critic as 'rambling, tedious, muddled... on the verge of total chaos' (SKALMOWSKI 1982, 82). *Koniec 'Zgody Narodów'* is certainly not a light read, in any language.<sup>2</sup> The book was cleared for publication by the Polish censor principally because he thought that its opaque language and complex plot lessened any potential for subversion:

The novel may have some analogies with the current reality (the choice of the hero himself – the head of security and his fate, the eavesdropping system on the ship, the problem of coexistence of conquered nations with the Greek masters, etc.), in particular fragments on pp. 11, 46–47, 87–90, 537–538, 596, 636. If the author even intended these allusions, they suffer, however, from a lack of concentricity, not giving effectively in general any harmful guiding idea. In addition, these possible analogies are overwhelmed by the flood of people and events, tedious psychology and the difficulty of language<sup>3</sup> (KANIECKI 2011, 207).

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- 2 I have primarily used the French translation by Elisabeth Czachorowska (PARNICKI 1991) rather than the original Polish. There is no published translation into English, or to my knowledge any other language.
  - 3 Powieść może nasuwać pewne analogie z aktualną rzeczywistością (sam wybór bohatera – szefa bezpieczeństwa i jego zmiennych losów, system podsłuchów na okręcie, problematyka współżycia podbitych narodów z panami greckimi itp.), które w szczególności mogłyby nasunąć fragmenty na s. 11, 46–47, 87–90, 537–538, 596, 636. Jeśli byłyby to nawet zamierzone aluzje ze strony autora, to jednak cierpią one na brak koncentryczności, nie dając w efekcie jakiejś generalnej, a szkodliwej idei przewodniej. Pozatym te ewentualne analogie są przygniecione natłokiem osób i zdarzeń, nużącym psychologizmem oraz trudnością języka.

*Koniec 'Zgody Narodów'* has been analysed from multiple angles, both in isolation and in the context of Parnicki's other writings. Psychological (MARKIEWKA 2013), theological (MARKIEWKA 2007) and philosophical (CZERMIŃSKA 1972; JUSZCZYK 2004) readings have been pursued, but my interest here is naturally in works which analyse it as a work of – and response to works of – historical narrative about Central Asia.

Parnicki's greatest debt is to Tarn, but he also makes use of primary numismatic evidence. Coins are described several times in the novel, for example when a character compares an image of Demetrios I Kallinikos on a coin to the image and iconography of Alexander the Great (PARNICKI 1955, 320; SZYMUTKO 1994, 74). Although some of his description of Graeco-Bactrian coins comes from Tarn, Tomasz Markiewka has suggested that Parnicki had a more direct source of information. As a youth in China, his mentor had been the diplomat Konstanty Symonolewicz (1884–1952), who had worked on the Bactrian and Indian coins in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg between 1908 and 1912 (MARKIEWKA 2013, 168–169; a paper delivered by Symonolewicz to the numismatic section of the Russian Archaeological Society on Bactrian and Indian coins is mentioned by ZHEBELYOV 2017, 67). It is possible that Symonolewicz possessed publications on these coins which Parnicki read. In any case, it seems very likely that the young Parnicki's first introduction to the Greek kingdoms of Central Asia came from Symonolewicz during his time in Harbin.

In 1956, the year after the publication of *Koniec 'Zgody Narodów'*, Parnicki wrote to a friend that his immediate source of inspiration was Tarn:

...the major stimulus to write this book was almost accidental acquaintance with an amazing work by a British Hellenist W.W. Tarn *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (1938). [...] I found this work in 1951, while I was searching for information regarding Parthians which was related to my work on *Word and Flesh* [Polish *Słowo i ciało*]. What I was looking for – I did not find there, but a brand new world opened before me, the world that fascinated me from the first sight – the Greeks in Asia in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century before Christ. (Trans. MARKIEWKA 2013, 169)

This is also clear from surviving archival materials. While writing *Koniec 'Zgody Narodów'* in Mexico, Parnicki kept a series of notecards containing short quotes from the writings of Tarn and from Polybios. As well as *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, these show that *Hellenistic Civilisation* (TARN 1927) and *Alexander the Great and the Unity of Mankind* (TARN 1933) were important in shaping the novel (MARKIEWKA 2007, 167). Parnicki also found inspiration in Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*, the first volume of which appeared in 1934.

What was it that drew Parnicki to Tarn and to the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom? So much about Hellenistic Central Asia spoke to his own experience of the interwar and postwar world. Parnicki was fascinated by the creative potential of communities of mixed descent: 'the hybrid subjectivity of very intelligent yet fragile "half-caste" protagonists, facing complex mechanisms of politics, nationalisms, religions, cultures and civilizations' (MARKIEWKA 2013, 167). This has, of course, been an important theme in Hellenistic history since the time of Droysen, but for Parnicki in his circumstances it took on a particular urgency. Like him, one of the main characters of the novel, Leptines, is half-Jewish and his experience between cultures and identities is foregrounded. It is hard not to read passages such as the following and think of Parnicki's own experience as a multilingual perpetual exile in Moscow, Vladivostok, Harbin, Lwów, Tehran, London, and Mexico City:

‘What can you make out of half-castes?’

‘You want to say: what can a half-caste do that could not be done either by a pure Greek, or a pure Jew, or a Brahmin or a Shudra? I’ll tell you: he can create such a community that has never been anywhere in the world. Not just one half-caste, but a whole class of us.’

‘A community happier than any other?’ (PARNICKI 1955, 485; trans. MARKIEWKA 2013.)

Parnicki’s characters refer to their ultimate origins in Greece, but ‘even though they try to reinforce their Greekness by all available means, it becomes clear that it is the heart of Asia that has transformed the Greeks rather than the other way round. “What has the heart of Asia done to the Greek people?” is a sentence constantly repeated in the novel’ (MARKIEWKA 2013, 171). Culture and civilization are relative: characters compare the encroachment of the Massagetae and Chorasmii into Sogdiana and Bactria to the Greeks’ own earlier encroachment into Central Asia (PARNICKI 1955, 473).

In this and in other respects Parnicki engages in dialogue with Tarn, rather than adopting his information and conclusions uncritically – even though, at times, we find correspondences at the level of phraseology. Tarn’s ‘Bactria almost was the Oxus, in the sense that Egypt was the Nile’ (TARN 1951 [1938], 102), for example, is deliberately echoed in Parnicki’s ‘that river was for the Greek kingdom in the heart of Asia what the Nile was for Egypt’ (PARNICKI 1955, 7; trans. MARKIEWKA 2013). The relationship between *Koniec ‘Zgody Narodów’* and its ‘source’ *The Greeks in Bactria and India* has been analysed at length by SZYMUTKO 1994: as ŻUREK 2016 points out, a formidable endeavour, given the length and density of both books. Parnicki includes a conversation which playfully references the debate over which ‘Magnesia’ Euthydemus traced his origins to. Tarn plumped for Magnesia on the Maeander; Parnicki gives the original name of the ship ‘The Concord of Nations’ as the ‘Meandria’ (PARNICKI 1955, 152; discussed by SZYMUTKO 1994, 77).

Like Kipling, then, Parnicki makes creative use of the source material at his disposal, in creating a narrative which bears some relation to the historical evidence, but is entirely his own. I do not know if he read the reports of the discovery of Ai Khanoum, but I am certain that he would have been only too delighted, and inspired, to find material confirmation, of sorts, of the hybrid literary world he had created.

## **HORSES OF HEAVEN**

The American author of the historical romance *Horses of Heaven* (1990), Gillian Bradshaw, in contrast to Kipling and Parnicki, is an academic Classicist, who studied at the University of Michigan and University of Cambridge. As an author of mass-market fiction, who is still alive and writing in the age of the internet, there is also considerably more information available on the sources she used in her novel. The heroine of *Horses of Heaven*, Heliokleia, is a Graeco-Bactrian princess in the mid-second century BC, who is married off as part of a military alliance with the (much older) Saka king of Ferghana. She has a Greek education, practises Buddhism and maintains a correspondence with her mentor Nagasena at the court of her Uncle Menander. Heliokleia moves to Alexandria Eschate, where she experiences a culture clash and ultimately runs off with her husband’s son. The story is narrated by Heliokleia’s Saka lady-in-waiting, Tomyris, who has a (perhaps anachronistically) feminist perspective. Indian and Parthian characters also feature.

Bradshaw was already a well-established novelist, with a reputation for historical accuracy, by the time she published *Horses of Heaven*. She has stated in an interview that ‘I don’t like to violate historical fact. I like to make an educated guess, when you reach a point where nobody



is sure want went on' (EVANS 1989, 5). Her choice of topic for her new novel was received with some scepticism:

Gillian Bradshaw now wants to write about the Bactrian Greeks in Central Asia in 150 BC, 'but my agent and publishers are extremely sceptical'. I sympathise with them, though I don't doubt her ability to make a good story out of the period. But while her books on King Arthur were very popular, do Bactrian Greeks really have the same allure? (EVANS 1989, 5)

The many unfamiliar names led Bradshaw's publisher to ask her to include a guide to pronunciation (BRADSHAW 1990, vii).

Fortunately for the scholar of Central Asia (and Bradshaw cannot have imagined many among her readership), she states directly in the novel's Preface and Epilogue what sources she used (TARN 1951 [1938]; NARAIN 1957; WOODCOCK 1966; the Oxford Classical Dictionary; COLLEDGE 1967; Sulimirski on the Sarmatians in the Cambridge History of Iran; ZAEHNER 1961; MARSDEN 1969; SCULLARD 1974; Herodotos; Polybios; the Avesta), and her views on them. Within the text, she further quotes from or mentions Euripides, Simonides, Herakleitos, and Sappho. In addition to citing published works, Bradshaw thanks the Department of Coins and Medals of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge for allowing her to look at their Bactrian coinage 'for so frivolous a purpose as this novel' (BRADSHAW 1990, viii). She introduces the book as:

a fantasy set in a real time and place. The time, 172 of the Seleucid Era, is the nice round date of 140 BC; the place is Central Asia. The Hellenistic Greek kingdom of Bactria flourished in what is now Afghanistan from the conquest of Alexander the Great until approximately that date. Its history, however, is a patchwork of ignorance and controversy, and very often all that is known of a Bactrian ruler is his name. Antimachos the God, Heliokles the Just, Demetrios the Invincible – we know they existed because they struck coins, but what they did that was godlike, just, or invincible, no one can say. I am not a historian, and this book owes more to imagination than to learning. I could even have set this story in an imaginary world – but I find real worlds more surprising and more interesting. (BRADSHAW 1990, vii)

The influence of Tarn and Narain, and their interpretations of the numismatic evidence, is clearest in the novel. Tomyris thinks that 'Yavana queens do nothing but plot and poison people', and that 'any of her family, all they want is power: Eukratides murdered his master for it; Platon his father, Heliokles his brother' (BRADSHAW 1990, 6, 374). In an extended scene, Tomyris examines Graeco-Bactrian coins and reads personality into the images of the rulers:

I looked at the Bactrian silver coins I'd been given as an advance salary: most of them had Heliokles' face on them, though some had his father Eukratides'. Both kings had a large nose, an indulgent, fleshy chin, and sharp, dangerous eyes: strikingly ugly faces and pleasant ones.

'Do you suppose she'll look as much like a pig as her father?' I asked Armaiti, showing her the coins.

Armaiti giggled, she whispered confidentially, 'She might and she might not. She's only a Eukratid on her father's side, you know.'

'Who was her mother?' I asked.

Armaiti's face lit up as she realised I hadn't heard this juicy piece of news. 'Her mother was the sister of King Menander of India, the daughter of Demetrios the Invincible.'

'What?' I asked, shocked. 'She's a descendant of Antimachos?'

[...]

I thought of the face I'd seen on an old coin – delicate, with a long nose and fine eyes, and a peculiar smile as though it were laughing at itself, amused to be on a coin at all. King Antimachos the God, it had said beneath the face. On the reverse of the coin was a winged thunderbolt. (BRADSHAW 1990, 19, 20–21)

The family relationships Bradshaw outlines correspond to the 'Chart showing the Indo-Greek kings in genealogical and chronological arrangement' in NARAIN 1957, 181, although the fictional character Heliokleia and her mother are of course absent.

Bradshaw recommends the popular book by George Woodcock as 'much more readable' than Tarn and Narain, which of course it is, although unscholarly and highly speculative (see HOLT 2012, 83–84). It is easy to see how Woodcock's approach may have been appealing, even useful, to a novelist. He begins an earlier article, in *History Today*:

The story of the Greeks in India begins in the shifting mists of prehistoric legends and ends in the obscure chaos of nomad invasions during the century before the birth of Christ. A few figures, such as Alexander and Menander, are sharply illuminated by fame in the prevailing half-light; but, apart from them, the history of Greek infiltration into north-western India, with its shadowy dynasties and its thirty-odd kings, is recorded in scanty fragments of literary and numismatic evidence, often so ambiguous in its implications that historians still disagree widely over the extent of Greek dominion, even at its height under the various rulers of Bactrian origin during the second century BC. Yet the Greeks left their permanent mark on India, and particularly on its art, in which the Hellenistic echoes continued to reverberate for many centuries after the last Greeks were absorbed into the general Indian population. (WOODCOCK 1962, 558)

Leaving aside the romanticising language and colonial overtones – it could have been written in 1862, never mind 1962 – what this article offers is an opportunity for a creative writer to succeed where historians have failed.

Despite being the first of the works considered in this paper to have been published after the discovery and excavations of Ai Khanoum, archaeological publications are missing from Bradshaw's bibliography, nor is there any direct evidence of her having used archaeological evidence in the description and dialogue of the novel. This is not because the archaeological evidence was not available to Bradshaw. Her education at the University of Cambridge, and mention of the Fitzwilliam Museum in her Preface, suggest strongly that she used the library of the Faculty of Classics in Cambridge. I used this library myself for several years, and was able to consult its complete set of the Ai Khanoum reports in the *Mémoires de la délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*, and the *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*. Why, then, did Bradshaw not make use of these resources? It is possible that there was a language barrier, but it is also possible that – for someone engaged in the venture of reconstructing a narrative – the deliberately non-narrative approach of the Ai Khanoum reports (with the possible exception of BERNARD 1985) was less appealing.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three works discussed above belong to very different modern social and political contexts, and each in its own way speaks to its author's milieu. Kipling, writing in British India, was concerned with how the British identified with Alexander, and thus saw themselves

in India's past. Alexander's campaigns, and the possibility of a lasting Greek genetic legacy in India and Central Asia, were an obsession for nineteenth-century British soldiers and writers who – explicitly or implicitly – saw the British as the cultural and political heirs of the Greeks. Parnicki wrote at a time when European empires and monarchies were on the wane. Like Kipling, he sees his own world reflected in Hellenistic Central Asia, but this is one of cultural interaction and insecurity about previously-unchallenged monolithic identities. Bradshaw's work, while on the surface less political, also deals with notions of the relativity of ideas about 'civilisation'. Her depiction of a Graeco-Bactrian world in decline, in confrontation with the new powers of the steppe, might also be related to the downward twentieth-century trajectory of major world empires.

I opened this article by tracing a general trend in the scholarship on Hellenistic Central Asia away from attempts to reconstruct historical narrative. It is notable that even those novelists who were writing at a time after major archaeological discoveries in Central Asia have not taken account of these in creating their fictional worlds. Bradshaw, certainly, might have drawn on work on Ai Khanoum, and even Parnicki might have been exposed to early Russian archaeological publications on sites such as Samarkand. It would be interesting to read a novel about Hellenistic Central Asia which uses archaeological material to shape its description of ancient people, places and practices; a task, perhaps, for one of the members of the Hellenistic Central Asia Research Network.

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