

The Lost Valley of Iskander

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ABSTRACT

The belief that a lost Greek legacy could be discovered in remote regions of Central Asia has long been popular in Western culture. This paper delves into the adventure tale *The Lost Valley of Iskander* by American pulp fiction author Robert E. Howard (1906–1936). The story unfolds in Afghanistan during the peak of the Great Game, and involves a concealed valley where the descendants of Alexander's army have endured across centuries with their ancient culture and ethnic purity intact.

I contextualize *The Lost Valley of Iskander* as an exemplary literary reflection of the European (and American) preoccupation with the presence of Alexander and the Greeks in Baktria and India, highlighting the racial stereotypes Howard employs to juxtapose the ancient Greeks to the surrounding 'barbaric tribes'. At the heart of Howard's story lies the conflation of Classical Greece and contemporary western Europe. On a broader scale, my paper addresses the impact this preoccupation had on modern scholarship (both colonialist and anticolonial historical narratives related to 'Hellenistic' Baktria and India). I contend that in the depiction of the Greco-Baktrian kingdoms as European or 'Western', scholarship, travel writing, and adventure fiction mutually informed one another.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan; colonialism; Robert E. Howard; Alexander the Great; Greco-Bactrian kingdoms; borderlands.

The title of this paper derives from a short story by American pulp fiction author Robert E. Howard (1906–1936). *The Lost Valley of Iskander* is an adventure tale set in mid-nineteenth century Afghanistan, when the so-called Great Game was at its peak. The hero is a gunslinger of Irish descent from El Paso, Texas, named Francis Xavier Gordon. He works, reluctantly, as a scout and messenger for the British colonial authorities on the North-West Frontier.¹

Gordon – known in the East by his Arabian *nom de guerre*, El Borak or 'The Swift' – is the main protagonist of half a dozen stories that Howard wrote in 1934 and 1935 (TOMPkins 2010).² In *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, Gordon must warn the garrison in the British outpost at Ali Masjid in the Khyber Pass (**Fig. 1**) of a secret plot to 'embroil Central Asia in a sacred war and send howling hordes of fanatics across the Indian border' (HOWARD 2010, 5).

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- 1 As a typical Howard hero, Gordon has no respect for authority, and no sympathy for the British colonial project in India and Afghanistan; but as Morgan Holmes noted, El Borak's concern is not with extending British domination, 'it is about preventing the next would-be Genghis Khan or Tamerlane from emerging in Central Asia' and overrunning sedentary society, slaughtering thousands (FINN 2013, 273–274).
 - 2 The name El Borak was borrowed from the 1915 pirate novel *The Sea Hawk* by Rafael Sabatini (HARDY 2010, 534). The translation 'the Swift' is not entirely correct, as the name likely was inspired by al-Burāq, the name of the magical horse-like mount that carried the Prophet to the Heavens, and which in turn derives from the Arabic adjective *barq* ('lightning', cf. C. Gruber, 'al-Burāq', in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* online) or Middle Persian **barāq* or **bārag* ('mount' or 'riding beast', cf. SHAKED 2002).



Fig. 1: The Khyber Pass with the Fortress of Ali Masjid. Colored lithograph by James Rattray, 1847 (Wellcome Library, London; inv. no. 30331i).

Riding alone through the inhospitable hills of an unmapped corner of Afghanistan, Gordon finds himself hunted by a ‘human bloodhound’: the malicious pro-Russian Austro-Hungarian named Gustav Hunyadi – the mastermind behind the plan to overrun India – and his band of bloodthirsty Turkish and Afghan henchmen aiming to stop him at all cost. Just when they threaten to finally overhaul him, he meets a handsome young man armed with an archaic-looking sword. Gordon immediately feels that there is something unusual about the appearance of the young man:

His hair caught Gordon’s attention. Blue eyes, such as the youth had, were not uncommon in the hills. But his hair was yellow, bound about his temples with a band of red cloth, and falling in square-cut mane nearly to his shoulders. He was clearly no Afghan. Gordon remembered tales he had heard of a tribe living somewhere in these mountains who were neither Afghans nor Muhammadans. Had he stumbled upon a member of that legendary race? (HOWARD 2010, 8).³

³ Citations are from the 2010 Del Rey edition of the El Borak stories, compiled and annotated by Rusty Burke. Burke’s text follows Howard’s original typescript kept in the Public Library of his hometown Cross Plains, Texas, and restores the original title *Swords of the Hills*.

It soon turns out that indeed he has. The young man, whose name is Bardylis, leads Gordon to the safety of a hidden valley where an ancient Hellenic civilization lies undiscovered. ‘Who are you people?’ Gordon asks Bardylis. ‘You are not an Afghan. You do not look like an Oriental at all.’ The young man replies: ‘We are the Sons of Iskander. When the great conqueror came through these mountains long ago, he built the city we call Attalus, and left hundreds of his soldiers and their women in it. Iskander marched westward again, and after a long while word came that he was dead and the empire divided. But the people of Iskander abode here, unconquered. Many times we have slaughtered the Afghan dogs who came against us.’ It is then that Gordon understands:

Light came to Gordon, illuminating that misplaced familiarity, Iskander – Alexander the Great, who conquered this part of Asia and left colonies behind him. The boy’s profile was classic Grecian, such as Gordon had seen in sculptured marble, and the names he spoke were Grecian. Undoubtedly he was the descendant of some Macedonian soldier who had followed the Great Conqueror on his invasion of the east (HOWARD 2010, 11).

The lines that follow teach us that a classical education not only nurtures highbrow cultural capital and the ability to think logically and analytically – it also helps you get around in Afghanistan.

To test the matter, he spoke to Bardylis in ancient Greek, one of the many languages, modern and obsolete, he had picked up in his varied career. The youth cried out with pleasure. ‘You speak our tongue!’, he exclaimed, in the same language. ‘Not in a thousand years has a stranger come to us with our own speech on his lips. [...] Surely, you, too, are a Son of Iskander?’ (HOWARD 2010, 11–12).

The Lost Valley of Iskander does not rank among Howard’s finest work. Written around 1934, Howard’s agent, Otis Kline, was unable to sell it to one of the pulp magazines, and the story was finally published posthumously in 1974, almost forty years after the death of the author (on the publication history, see HARDY 2010, 541–542). Howard originally gave it the rather indistinct title *Swords of the Hills*, but it is better known by the title that was used in the volume in which it was first printed. Howard purists may object to this unauthorized intervention, but it could be argued that Glenn Lord, the editor of that volume – which is entitled *The Lost Valley of Iskander* after the renamed tale – did the story a favor.

I draw attention to this lesser-known Howard ‘yarn’ because I consider it exemplary for the lost world or lost city literature set in Central Asia, and by extension the European (and in this case, also American) preoccupation with the Greek presence in ancient Bactria and India. My paper is thus concerned with the entanglement of popular culture, historiography and archaeology, and the ways in which contemporary cultural and political issues impact scholarly views of the past. Howard’s story is based upon the trope of the Western adventurer who ventures into inaccessible, barbarous lands on the trail of Alexander. The best-known example is Rudyard Kipling’s novella *The Man Who Would be King*, in which two British rogue soldiers travel to remote Kāfiristān in search of the treasures allegedly left behind there by Alexander (KIPLING 1888).⁴ Howard goes beyond Kipling’s original fantasy by confronting his readers with a community of ethnically pure Hellenes that has survived through the centuries

4 On the image of Alexander and the so-called ‘Greco-Bactrians’ in Kipling’s novella, see VASUNIA 2013, 77–90; MAIRS 2021.

with their ancient culture intact. Studying this story, I argue, can help us unravel the colonial attitudes that have informed modern views of ancient Central Asia.

TRAVELLING SWORDSMEN IN GRIM LANDS

Robert E. Howard (**Fig. 2**) is known today mainly as the creator of Conan of Cimmeria, a pseudo-Celtic warrior whose adventures take place in a variety of historical settings only thinly disguised as fantasy lands (and who is never called ‘Conan the Barbarian’ in any of Howard’s stories). His work stands out among the authors who produced texts for the American pulp magazines of the 1920s and 1930s because of his vivid writing style, and the unsettling darkness lurking underneath his best stories.



Fig. 2: Robert E. Howard (after LOUINET 2018, 19).

During his short lifetime – he took his own life at the age of thirty, having hardly ever left his native Texas – Howard wrote over three hundred works of fiction for pulp magazines such as *Thrilling Adventures*, *Oriental Stories*, and above all *Weird Tales*. He was active in a wide range of genres, including historical adventure, humorous tall tales, boxing stories, fantasy, western, horror, and so-called spicy stories. Action is the driving force of these tales, which are often quite violent, as adventure stories typically are. They are characterized by their preference for dialogue and very fast pace. *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, too, begins *in medias res* as Gordon, slumbering lightly under the cold stars, wakes up barely in time to repel a sudden sword

stroke, kills his first man by the end of the first paragraph, and amid flying bullets jumps on his horse and gallops off into the dark night chased by Hunyadi's howling wolf pack.

Howard deserves serious consideration from academics because, alongside J. R. R. Tolkien and H. P. Lovecraft, he is one of the three most influential authors in the history of fantasy fiction. His imprint on Western pop culture is enormous. He invented the sub-genre of Sword & Sorcery – a term coined by Fritz Leiber – in which traveling swordsmen battle evil magicians, monsters, and demons, hunt for treasure, rescue princesses, repulse seductive witches, and sleep with gorgeous queens. Howard contributed substantially to the development of these genre tropes (and gender stereotypes), but primarily responsible are the often abysmal attempts at imitating him. An abundance of rewritings and pastiches by self-declared 'posthumous collaborators', the iconic cover art for the controversial Lancer Conan series of the 1960s by Frank Frazetta (who gave Conan his trademark long hair), the appropriation of Conan as a cartoon character by the Marvel Company and later Dark Horse Comics, three Conan movies, none of which is actually based on a Howard story and only one of which is noteworthy (the first one, with Arnold Schwarzenegger), a plethora of Howard-inspired B movies especially in the 1980s, two TV series, and multiple video games: all this and more ensured Howard's status as a major icon of American culture.⁵

RACE AND CULTURE IN HOWARD'S FICTION

Highly controversial is the question whether the undeniable racism in Howard's writings is only casual, and 'normal' for the type of stories he wrote and the social milieu that he belonged to – the white, Anglo, rural Texan middle classes – or that his work is infested with a more profound concern with racial purity.⁶ The latter was argued above all by Benjamin Garstad in two well-researched articles (GARSTAD 2010; 2016; cf. SHOVLIN 2013). Lorenzo DiTommaso on the other hand argued that Howard uses race in his fantasy stories as a literary device, allowing rapid plot development and instant world building: 'This not only freed Howard from having to populate a world *ex nihilo*, but also allowed the imagination of his readers to shoulder most of the burden' (DITOMMASO 2006, 112–113; a similar procedure can be seen in Howard's rather sketchy recreation of colonial-era Afghanistan and its multiethnic inhabitants).⁷ Others again

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- 5 We may add for good measure the still popular 1970s tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, which combines characters and tropes from Tolkien and Howard. Note also the 1980s action figure *He-Man*, with accompanying animated children's series *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, created by toy factory Mattel and featuring as its titular hero a muscular male Barbie inspired by the 1982 movie *Conan the Barbarian*; with the He-Man franchise we reach the absolute nadir of (indirect) Howard adaptations. See PRIDA 2013, making a case for the critical study of the Conan figure as a cultural product. Howard became controversial again when Michael Barkun (2003, 119–123) traced the conspiracy theory claiming the existence of a mind-controlling extraterrestrial reptilian elite aiming at world domination, popularized by conspiracy theorist David Icke, back to Howard's short story, *The Shadow Kingdom* (1929); I personally feel that the 1980s TV series *V*, in which reptiloid aliens disguised as humans take over the earth, may have exerted a more direct influence (Howard's serpent men are primordial, not extraterrestrial).
 - 6 A well-informed and nuanced, though at times slightly apologetic, discussion of the controversy is offered by FINN 2013, 85–108. Finn makes the important point that this type of criticism (which he calls 'postmodern') is often based upon a selective reading of stories.
 - 7 Cf. DITOMMASO 1996, one of the earliest scholarly discussions of Howard's work in a peer-reviewed academic publication, and the first study of the role of race in Howard's world building. DiTommaso, however, worked from the first publication of Howard's Conan stories in book form published

contend that 'it is incredibly naïve to throw a twenty-first century value judgment onto people who were living a hundred years ago' (FINN 2013, 102).

It is no easy task to make an evenhanded judgment about this issue. On one hand, Howard's perspectives on race and utilization of racial stereotypes indeed reflect the prevailing attitudes of his time and social milieu. The employment of (negative) ethnic stereotypes was expected of authors who penned adventure stories for the Interbellum pulp magazines. These publications primarily targeted a white middle-class readership. Racialism moreover is a key feature of fantasy and continues to serve as the fundamental underpinning of the world-building that defines the genre until today (DITOMMASO 2006). On the other hand, Howard's stories and letters consistently convey a sense of a *hierarchy* between 'races', encompassing both the fictional and purportedly real ones; this is underscored by his persistent interpretation of history as an ongoing struggle between races for supremacy (GARSTAD 2010, 240). It is true that within Howard's writings, the 'races' in fact frequently are ethnic or cultural groups such as Picts, Celts, or Comanche. However, it is noteworthy that these groups are consistently characterized in terms of their shared physical and psychological traits, in other words their perceived racial features.⁸

The crux of the matter appears to hinge on the specific story under scrutiny. In certain instances, Howard seems to employ racial stereotypes as a matter of convenience, adhering to the conventions prevalent in the genres he engaged with. Alternatively, he may be conveying a deeper anxiety regarding the perceived erosion of white supremacy in the American South. In Howard's stories and letters, miscegenation potentially leads to the overthrow of civilizations because it weakens the 'higher' race while strengthening the 'lower' one, and this in Howard's view offered a justification for segregation: 'masters may only maintain their supremacy as long as they do not mix with their slaves' (GARSTAD 2010, 237). This is exemplified by his stories set in the American South, notably the Southern Gothic novella *Black Canaan* (1936).⁹ In this narrative about an African-American uprising in the swamps of Louisiana, the most threatening antagonist arguably is a sensual voodoo witch of mixed racial descent; known as the Bride of Damballah (in fact the name of a divine being in African diasporic religions), she literally paralyzes the white male protagonist with her black magic and sexual allure.

It is not easy to see why the specter of racial degeneration exerted such a strong hold on Howard. The community where he resided, the small town of Cross Plains in central Texas, was almost entirely white; he had only experienced multiethnic societies during brief stays in larger towns like New Orleans and San Antonio. His notions regarding interracial conflict were partly grounded in the distinct Anglo-Texan narrative traditions and frontier mythology that shaped him as a writer (see FINN 2013, 63–84). These narratives tended to categorize the inhabitants of Texas on the basis of their perceived ethnicity. Native Americans, notably the Apache and Comanche, often served as adversaries. Howard's views may in addition have been shaped by his extensive correspondence with his mentor, fellow pulp author H. P. Lovecraft, whose blatant racism and xenophobia are well-documented aspects of both his biography and his stories, and who shared his concerns about immigration and racial decline through

by Lancer Books (1965–1968) from which negative racial depictions had been expunged (SHOVLIN 2013, 92). The original uncensored texts became available with the fourteen-volume Howard series published by Del Rey Books between 2003 and 2011.

8 In his fictional Hyborian world, Cimmerians for instance have black hair while the neighboring Vanir all have red hair; they are both a strong and proud people and they are constantly at war with each other. On the enduring influence of Howard's racial world building in later fantasy, see DITOMMASO 2006.

9 On this story, see GARSTAD 2010.

his letters. Compared to Lovecraft, however, Howard was remarkably nuanced. His work also contains positive portrayals of non-white people (mainly men), and as Mark Finn pointed out, ‘the majority of rogues and despicable characters in Robert’s [stories] are the white Europeans or their cultural equivalents’ (FINN 2013, 97).

Be that as it may, race theory in any case informs *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, as we shall examine below. But that story is also an exception within Howard’s oeuvre because of the relatively positive treatment of a highly civilized, urbanized people, in this case the ancient Greeks. Usually, Howard idealizes the type of the upfront northern barbarian, whom he then contrasts with the degenerate city-dwellers of so-called civilized countries.¹⁰ ‘Aryans deteriorate swiftly in sedentary and peaceful life’, says the narrator of *Children of the Night*, a 1931 short story in which Howard presents his ideas about racial development. ‘When they pen themselves in with city walls, they seal their doom’ (HOWARD 2008, 156). What accounts for his positive take on the sophisticated Hellenes is their alleged preoccupation with bodily health: ‘Evidently these descendants of Grecian athletes have as much admiration for physical perfection as had their ancient ancestors’ (HOWARD 2010, 13). Moreover, the Greeks’ persistent struggle for survival against the fierce Afghan tribal warriors surrounding them draws parallels to settlers on the American frontier – one of various indications that Howard’s perspective on Afghanistan draws inspiration from Texan folklore and frontier stories. Like the more isolated white communities in rural Texas (or so it could be believed), the Greeks of Attalus have not degenerated because they never interbred with the surrounding non-whites.

The El Borak stories are marked by racialism, as the varied peoples converging in Central Asia are frequently depicted with distinct but generally unfavorable inherent characteristics. Gordon/El Borak is superior to them all – not because he is an American but because he is a Texan frontiersman who descends from a race of Celtic warriors. Battling devious Russians and savage Afghans, while despising the so-called civilized British and decadent Persians, he is the adventure genre’s stock character of the Western hero in an exotic setting who is superior to the native peoples he encounters in physical, moral, and intellectual terms, and as such is comparable to Henry Rider Haggard’s Allan Quatermain and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Tarzan (Howard was well-acquainted with these men’s works), or indeed Howard’s own Conan.

HOWARD’S AFGHANISTAN

Howard was fairly well-informed about ethnology and history through his substantial private library and the local public libraries he frequented.¹¹ His stories reflected the popular stereotypes of his day, and were determined by the demands of the genres that he worked in. His views on history and culture were informed by social Darwinism, which was not uncommon in the Interbellum period. In colonial writings, non-Western societies that supposedly have not

10 Another opposition Howard uses, is that between northern *barbarians* like Conan (who act according to a code of honor) and non-white *savages*. Examples of the latter category can be found in the Conan tales *The Vale of Lost Women*, set in a fantasy version of ‘Dark’ Africa, and *Beyond the Black River*, in which savage Picts stand in for native Americans threatening peaceful settler communities; the two stories are widely regarded as belonging to respectively the worst and the best that Howard wrote.

11 A list of books owned by Howard has been compiled by Rusty Burke and is available online at the website *Howard History: The Life and Times of Robert E. Howard* (howardhistory.com), maintained by Rob Roehm; and as a ‘legacy library’ at *Librarything* (librarything.com/profile/RobertEHoward). I was unable to consult HERRON 1984.

yet reached the higher rungs on the civilizational ladder are habitually described as ‘tribal’ – a term suggesting barbarism and the absence of statehood. Afghanistan is no exception; as Nivi Manchanda (2018) showed, the word ‘tribe’ became a ‘generic signifier of all things Afghan’.

Howard’s Central Asian fiction leans heavily on the work of Talbot Mundy, the British-American author of adventure stories set in colonial India and on the North-West Frontier. Mundy saw Afghanistan as ‘the home of contrasts, of blood-feuds that last until the last-but-one man dies’, where marauding savages dwelled ‘above the golden subcontinent [India], from which perch it ceaselessly broods and breeds the warriors who might descend in human flashfloods, human avalanches’ (quoted by TOMPKINS 2010, xix). This is echoed in *The Lost Valley* when Howard writes that ‘in the Afghan mountains all fights were to the death’ (HOWARD 2010, 3). But also his other Afghan stories proceed from the premise that Afghanistan is home to barbaric tribes bent on invading India. At the age of seventeen, Howard had read at least five Mundy novels: *The Winds of the World* (1915), *King – of the Khyber Rifles* (1916), *The Ivory Trail* (1915), *The Eye of Zeitoon* (1920), and the Western Front novel *Hira Singh* (1918). It was also around this time that he created the character of El Borak. On July 30, 1923, Howard wrote to his friend, the later author Tevis Clyde Smith, about his belief that ‘[w]hen India turns from war to trade and becomes debauched the wild tribesmen of Afghanistan come down the Khyber Pass with torch and sword’ (ROEHM – BULLARD 2021, 12). As the young age at which he wrote these lines already suggests, this is a borrowed view, dating to a time when he was dreaming of being himself a writer like Mundy, as his many letters to Smith reveal. But the fact that this was such

Thoughts of an Afghan on a raid.

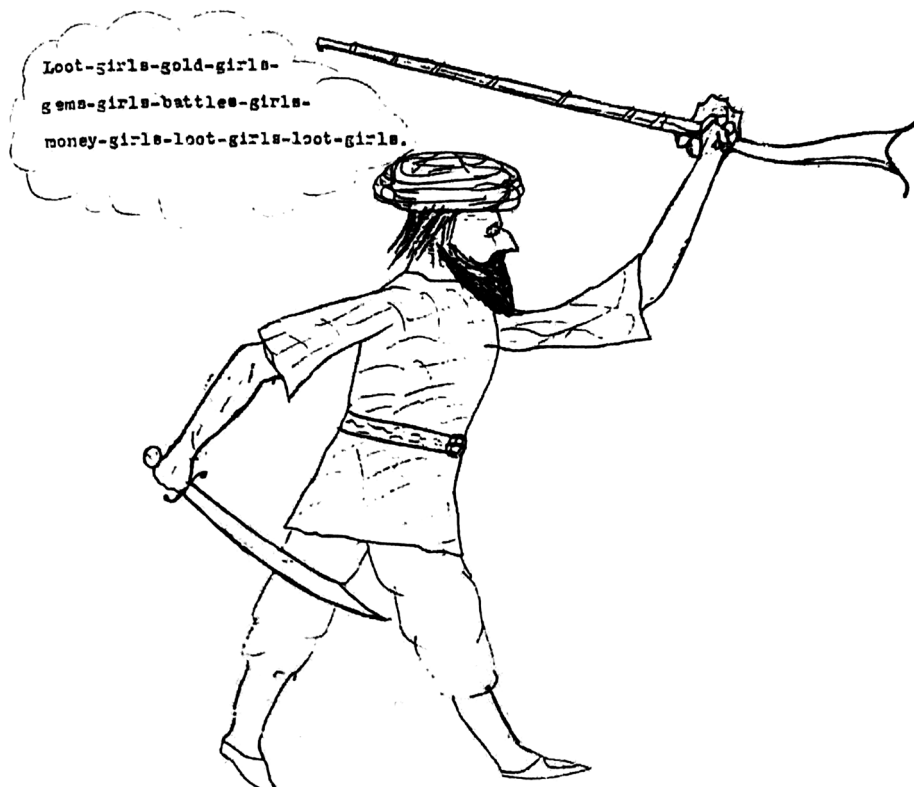


Fig. 3: Drawing by Robert E. Howard, enclosed in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith (ROEHM – BULLARD 2022, 447, no. 365).

a popular paradigm in his time allows us to use *The Lost Valley of Iskander* as a paradigmatic story for Western views of the contrast between the Greeks in Baktria and the barbaric tribes surrounding them. These notions can be literally illustrated by a rudimentary sketch enclosed in a later letter to Smith; the drawing is entitled ‘Thoughts of an Afghan on a raid’ and it shows a turbaned warrior armed with scimitar and musket, his mind set on plunder and rape (**Fig. 3**).

For Howard, too, the Khyber Pass signified a border between civilization and barbarity, like Hadrian’s Wall, or the Black River in his own fictional continent, Hyboria. Gordon/El Borak however prefers the warlike tribes north of Khyber to the civilized Europeans, earning their respect with his bodily strength and manly courage (**Fig. 4**).¹² El Borak is thus an outsider in both worlds. The character was loosely based upon some real-life adventurers in nineteenth-century Afghanistan – in particular the American Alexander Gardner and the Scottish explorer Alexander Burnes – and two fictional heroes created by Talbot Mundy: Dick Anthony of Arran, a Scotsman fighting the Russians in Iran in a series of stories run by *Adventure* magazine in 1914–1915; and Athelstan King, the titular hero of the 1916 novel *King – of the Khyber Rifles*.



Fig. 4: Afghan tribal warriors in British service. Colored lithograph by James Rattray, published in 1847 (National Army Museum, London; inv. no. 1966-08-26-11).

Gordon has more than a few characteristics in common with the better-known Conan, who, incidentally, has his own blood-stained Afghan adventure: the novella *The People of the Black Circle*, published in *Weird Tales* in 1934, is set in a fantasy version of Afghanistan called Afghulistan. The plot features many elements normally seen in El Borak stories, including fierce Afghul tribesmen, a ‘Zhaibar Pass’ as boundary between civilization and barbarity, and a beautiful princess from Vendhya (India) named Yasmina – a name derived directly from Talbot Mundy’s Central Asian stories, and also used (as ‘Yasmeena’) in the El Borak story *The Daughter of*

¹² This of course is a trope of Western adventure stories in ‘exotic’ settings, seen also in the works of Henry Rider Haggard (Allan Quatermain), Edgar Rice Burrough (Tarzan), and Karl May (Old Shatterhand).

Erlík Khan. This story was published in the same year as *The People of the Black Circle* and it is clear that Howard reworked an original El Borak tale by changing the names and adding some supernatural elements, hoping to sell it as a fantasy story.

Only five El Borak stories were printed during Howard's lifetime; another two were published posthumously – including the story under scrutiny, which saw publication only in 1974 in the previously mentioned collection *The Lost Valley of Iskander*, edited by Glenn Lord and with illustrations by Michael William Kaluta (Fig. 5). The volume was reprinted six times during the 1970s and 1980s, and thereafter *The Lost Valley* appeared in several other Howard anthologies. In 2010, Ballantine Books in New York published a critical collection of all El Borak stories in which the texts as far as possible were restored to what Howard originally wrote (BURKE 2010); in this collection, *The Lost Valley of Iskander* appeared under its original title, *Swords of the Hills*.

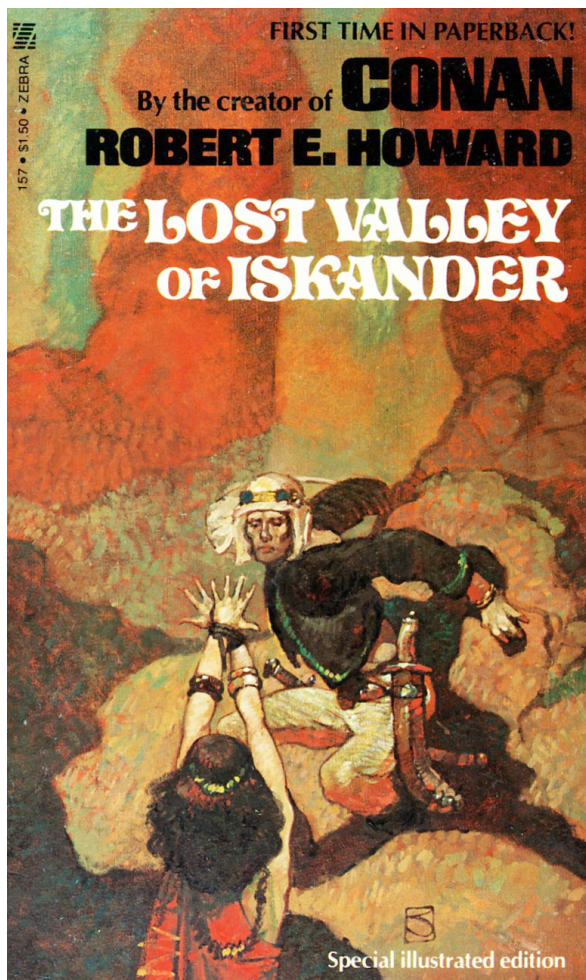


Fig. 5: *The Lost Valley of Iskander*. Cover art by Jeff Jones for the first paperback edition, 1976.

LOST RACES AND THEIR HIDDEN CITIES

The Lost Valley of Iskander is obviously inspired by Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* of 1888. In this novella, two British army NCOs venture into remote Kāfiristān to set themselves up as kings among the pagan population, who turn out to be the descendants of

Alexander's troops.¹³ Howard's library contained a copy of Kipling's *The Phantom Rickshaw and Other Tales*, in which *The Man Who Would be King* was published, and the idea of a hidden valley where the descendants of Alexander's army still practiced their pagan religion, though not invented by Kipling, was certainly inspired by this story. Note, however, the idea of a lost Greek city in distant Afghanistan. John Huston's 1975 film adaptation of the *The Man Who Would Be King* introduced such a city, with the fanciful name Sikandergul, and the local girl Daniel Dravot (Sean Connery) falls fatally in love with is called Roxane (Shakira Caine). The city of Sikandergul is a forbidding mudbrick fortress topped by a white marble temple based on the Parthenon.¹⁴

No lost city features in Kipling's original story. The idea of a lost city however is standard fare in the adventure genre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Howard certainly knew the books that set off the lost city craze, Henry Rider Haggard's African novels *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She: A Story of Adventure* (1887); and he had in his library a copy of that other quintessential lost city novel, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar* (1918).¹⁵ To be sure, Howard himself published numerous stories about the rediscovery of lost cities, most of them set in his fantasy land Hyboria, but with names indicating the corresponding historical cultures in the real world: pseudo-pharaonic Kutchemes (*Black Colossus*, 1933), the abandoned island city of Xapur in the Vilayet Sea (\approx Caspian Sea; *The Devil in Iron*, 1934), deserted Alkmeenon in Vendhya (*The Jewels of Gwalhur*, 1935), pre-Columbian Xuchotl (*Red Nails*, 1936), and many more.¹⁶

Kipling's story echoes the real-life undertakings of Josiah Harlan, an American adventurer who in 1838 forged his own private kingdom in Afghanistan, declaring himself the Prince of Ghor and the heir to Alexander the Great (SCHLIEPHAKE 2019, 129–144).¹⁷ In 1842, Harlan published his memoirs, which Kipling used. And there were others as well. As already mentioned, of particular importance for Howard's character of Gordon/El Borak were the American adventurer Alexander Gardner and the Scottish secret agent Alexander Burnes, who called himself 'Sikandar' (TOMPKINS 2010, xxv). In his *Travels into Bokhara* (1834), Burnes wrote:

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- 13 Kāfiristān, 'Land of the Infidels', is the derogatory name of present-day Nuristān before the Kāfirs were forcibly converted to Islam by the Afghan general Ghulam Haidar in 1891–1892; the Kalash of Chitral, who fell under the British Empire, were able to retain their pre-Islamic and, according to some, pagan Greek customs and beliefs (see below).
- 14 There is also a copy of the Athenian Tower of Winds (postdating Alexander by two centuries) in the courtyard before the royal palace. The movie eventually was not filmed in Afghanistan, as per John Huston's original plans, but in Morocco. Huston also wanted to depict the lost Greeks of Sikandergul as essentially white but found the local extras too 'small, dark and ugly'; blonde wigs were therefore distributed among them, but the result was unconvincing and the idea to make them resemble northwestern Europeans was dropped (CULL – CHAPMAN 2009, 162).
- 15 Inspired by Rider Haggard, Burroughs built his career on inventing such places and penned an astonishing number of 38 lost race/lost city novels, many of them set in Africa; they include four more books on Opar as well as stories featuring Imperial Romans, medieval English crusaders, Vikings, Neanderthals, and others, who all somehow lost their way in the African interior where they retained their original cultures through the centuries. For a full list, see the *Lost Race Checklist* compiled by Jessica Amanda Salmonson in 2000 on the website of ROH Press. Another foundational text of the genre is Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), featuring dinosaurs and other prehistoric beings on an isolated plateau in the Amazonian rain forest.
- 16 Including, in a real-world setting, so to speak, a Lovecraftian story that brings us closer to El Borak and *The Lost City of Iskander*: Beled-el-Djinn, the accursed City of Devils in the Arabian desert, rediscovered by the (fictional) American adventurer Steve Clarny and his Afghan companion, Yar Ali (*The Fire of Asshurbanipal*, 1936).
- 17 For Kipling's sources, consult MAIRS 2021; on Harlan, see also the biography by MACINTYRE 2004.

I heard from these people a variety of particulars regarding the reputed descendants of Alexander the Great, which are yet said to exist in this neighborhood and the valley of the Oxus, as well as the countries near the head of the Indus. The subject had occupied much of my attention, and a tea merchant of our small caravan had amused me on the road from Khooloom, with the received lineage of these Macedonians.¹⁸

Another likely influence was Charles Masson, a British explorer and collector, and, according to some, impostor – his real name was James Lewis – who searched for lost cities of Alexander in Afghanistan (MASSON 1840).¹⁹ Howard's library contained two more recent travel books about the region: Lowell Thomas' *Beyond Khyber Pass* (1925) and *Through the Heart of Afghanistan* (1928), the English translation of Emil Trinkler's *Quer durch Afghanistan nach Indien* (1927). We moreover have the testimony of Howard's fiancée, Novalyne Price Ellis, who recorded in her memoir *One Who Walked Alone* that around 1933/4 Howard told her that he was reading about Alexander the Great's campaigns in Central Asia because he aimed to write a story about a surviving Greek colony in modern Afghanistan (ELLIS 1986; cited by HARDY 2010, 542). Exactly what books he consulted to get the historical background right is unknown, and not much of it found its way to *The Lost Valley of Iskander* beyond the rather basic fact that Alexander had been in Afghanistan and had left garrisons there; the *couleur locale* of Attalus is reminiscent more of fifth-century Athens than fourth-century Macedonia, even though Attalus is not a democracy but a monarchy ruled by a strongman named Ptolemy.

THROUGH CENTRAL ASIA ON THE TRACKS OF ALEXANDER

The belief that descendants of Alexander's army could still be living in remote corners of Afghanistan as a distinct ethnic group pervades European travel writing of the nineteenth century. It acquired new momentum in the later twentieth century with the advent of television. Both the National Geographic team that traced the journeys of Alexander the Great in the 1960s and Michael Wood in his 1998 BBC documentary were impressed by the idea that the Kalash(a) people in the Chitral district on the Afghan-Pakistani border were the descendants of Alexander's men and had preserved aspects of Greek culture, including religion. To be sure, Greek ancestry has been claimed by, and ascribed to, three ethnically and linguistically distinct populations of the Hindu Kush region: the Burusho, Kalash, and Pathans (CAROE 1958; BIDDULPH 1977; LINES 1999; CACOPARDO 2011).²⁰ These associations with Alexander often date to the (early) modern period and they were created in interaction with European travelers in Central Asia, including classically-educated British officers campaigning on the North-West Frontier, precisely because they *expected* to find traces of Alexander (BALL 2012; COLORU 2013). Wood, to his credit, expressed considerable doubts in his TV show. The myth of Greek groups still living in the Hindu Kush region has now been thoroughly debunked by genetic research (QAMAR – AYUB – MOHYUDDIN *et al.* 2002; MANSOOR – MAZHAR – KHALIQ *et al.* 2004;

18 Cited by TOMPKINS 2010, xxv.

19 On his adventures in Afghanistan, see now RICHARDSON 2022.

20 A detailed account of the attestations and development of these claims and ascriptions is provided by CACOPARDO 2011, who finds no evidence for them before the early modern period (excepting the Central Asian rulers claiming Alexander as an ancestor, which was politically motivated and can be placed in an Islamic Alexander tradition, on which see AKASOV 2009).

FIRASAT *et al.* 2007).²¹ Although the links with Alexander's army or Hellenistic-period Greek colonists are 'essentially fantasy' (MAIRS 2011, 13), these associations deserve more research to understand their function for local populations in their contacts with outside powers, and their significance for identity formation.

The Western obsession with finding the traces of Alexander and the Greeks in Bactria and India is deeply rooted in European self-identification since the eighteenth century. On the North-West Frontier, the British Empire 'was stepping into the shadow of Alexander's epic conquests' (BALL 2012, 135). The modern European appropriation of 'Classical' Greece as the progenitor of western Europe also stimulated a profound interest in the possible influence of Hellenism on the arts of Central Asia and India among European scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²² Archaeologists working in British India had a preference for Buddhist material culture because they postulated that Greek influence in Central Asia was the incentive for the development of Gandhāran art (VAN AERDE 2018; cf. MAIRS 2009). Explorers ventured into Afghanistan in search of archaeological traces of Alexander's campaign (SCHLIEPHAKE 2019; COLORU 2021). The notion that the Greeks brought civilization to Central Asia has been abandoned in present-day scholarship, but it once formed the very core of Western narratives about the 'Hellenistic East'. In an (in)famous 1902 essay *Hellenism in the East*, the introduction to the two-volume *The House of Seleucus*, Sir Edwyn Bevan explicitly equated the alleged Hellenization of the Middle East and Central Asia by Alexander and the Seleukids with the blessings of British colonial rule in India, followed some decades later by W. W. Tarn's influential monograph *The Greeks in Bactria and India* which aimed at claiming Hellenistic-period Central Asia for Greek history (BEVAN 1902, 1–20; TARN 1938).²³ Bevan proudly wrote that, 'we may say with perfect truth that the work being done by European nations, and especially by England, in the East is the same work which was begun by Macedonia [and] a peculiar interest must be felt by Englishmen in those Western kings who ruled in Asia twenty centuries ago' (BEVAN 1902, I, 19).

Illustrative of the overvaluation of 'Greek' influence in Central Asia is the persistent belief that the *pakol* (also known as the Chitrali cap), the well-known mushroom-shaped woolen headdress worn by males in the Hindu Kush region, was introduced there by Alexander's Macedonians because it resembles the *kausia*, the typical soldier's cap known from Mediterranean terracottas. Bonnie Kingsley, in response to these views, reversed the argument and claimed that the cap is originally Central Asian: adopted by Alexander's Macedonian troops in the harsh winter of 327/326, it became a Mediterranean soldier's cap after their return to the west (KINGSLEY 1981a and 1981b).²⁴ I can offer no solution to this problem, only the observation that a time gap of more than 2,000 years between the ancient *kausia* (or whatever the thing was

21 Cf. CACOPARDO 2011, who refutes the claims of Greek descent for the Kalash on linguistic and cultural grounds. To be sure, not many professional scholars gave much credence to the story; an early rejection of the Greek ancestry of the Kāfirs, was published in *The Geographical Journal* by the British geographer, colonel Thomas H. Holdich, who served in the second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878–1879 (HOLDICH 1896).

22 On these travelers and their written accounts, see the book-length treatment by SCHLIEPHAKE 2019; a good overview of colonial British and Russian approaches to Hellenistic-period Central Asia is provided by COLORU 2021, 130–136.

23 On the controversial issue of 'Hellenism in the East', see now Chapter 2, 'Hellenism's great debates', in HOO 2022, 39–70.

24 E. A. Fredrickmeyer (1994) reacted to Kingsley's contention by arguing that the similarity between the two caps is only superficial, the iconographic evidence elusive, and the literary evidence for the ancient Macedonian *kausia* scarce.

called) and the modern *pakol* is perhaps a bit too long to assume a direct relationship. But the issue illustrates the excessive significance attached to Alexander's three-year presence in Central Asia in Western scholarship (on this problem, see now HOO 2024). Moreover, direct links between Central Asia/India and the Mediterranean had been institutionalized by the Achaemenid Empire centuries before the arrival of Alexander's marauding army.

European preoccupation with Alexander and the Greeks in Central Asia is the result of the modern European self-identification with ancient Greece. In the course of many centuries, a wide variety of cultural translations of the figure of Alexander developed throughout Afro-Eurasia – Persian, Armenian, Arabian, Ethiopian, Malaysian – but the view of Alexander as a western European dominates present-day scholarship as well as most popularizing interpretations. For instance, the recent Netflix series *Alexander: The Making of a God* (2024), like Oliver Stone's film *Alexander* twenty years earlier, gives us a blonde, blue-eyed, English-speaking Alexander subjugating the effeminate non-white 'Orient', where men wear eyeliner and wield curved scimitars inspired by nineteenth-century Orientalist art.²⁵ Another case in point is the modern historiography of Alexander's campaigns in Baktria and Sogdia: Timothy Howe has shown how contemporary Russian, British, and American military involvement in present-day Afghanistan has shaped modern accounts of Alexander's Central Asian campaigns, pointing out the frequent adoption of terminology such as 'guerilla', 'insurgency', and 'counter-insurgency' (HOWE 2016).²⁶ It is the same conflation of Ancient Greece and contemporary Europe that induced modern scholars to conceptualize the Greco-Baktrian kingdoms as outposts of Hellenism rather than as polities and cultures in their own right. Together with the nineteenth-century colonial myth of Central Asian remoteness, this is what lies at the heart of stories such as *The Man Who Would Be King* and *The Lost Valley of Iskander*.²⁷

TRAVEL ACCOUNTS, ADVENTURE STORIES, AND MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

The significance of European self-identification with Ancient Greece for the older Central Asian research, and especially the significance of Alexander for the legitimization of the British Raj, is fairly well known. The issue has lately been dealt with by Rachel Mairs in her contribution to *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great* (2018), by Marike van Aerde in her important essay on the archaeology of Taxila (VAN AERDE 2018), by Omar Coloru in his work on the colonial-era historiography of 'Hellenistic' Baktria (see, e.g., COLORU 2021), by Phiroze Vasunia in his book on *The Classics and Colonial India* (2013), and by Christopher Schliephake in a book-length study of European travelers in the footsteps of Alexander (2018).

The point I want to make, is that there is a tripartite dialectic interaction between scholarship, travel writing, and adventure fiction. As we have seen, works of fiction like *The Lost Valley of Iskander* belong to a much wider genre, that of the lost city or lost race fiction that became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Victorian England, the main popularizer of this subgenre was H. Rider Haggard with *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and

25 Needless to say, Persian swords were straight, not curved.

26 Also see MANCHANDA 2020, exploring how the pervasive tropes about 'barbaric' Afghanistan have legitimized Western interventions in the region from the nineteenth century to the present.

27 The film poster for the 1975 movie *The Man Who Would Be King* promised audiences the adventures of 'a two-men army [...] battling their way through the Khyber Pass, across the barbaric Afghan Plains, over the frozen peaks of the Himalayas and into the fabled land of Kafiristan' (CULL – CHAPMAN 2009, 164).

She (1887) and these novels' sequels. Such stories 'present imperial exploration and discovery as adventure' and they have been described as 'fantasies of appropriation' that systematically present invasion and conquest as 'the rediscovery of something that originally belonged to the European explorers' (SEED 2011, 11). This is where Antiquity and archaeology come in, since the lost cities are usually presented as havens of civilization established in faraway lands by migrants from the Mediterranean (STROOTMAN 2013). *King Solomon's Mines* would not have been written without the 'discovery' in 1871 of the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in Mashonaland by the German explorer Karl Mauch, who claimed that he had found biblical Ophir (HALL 1995, 185).²⁸

Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* sits a bit awkwardly in this set-up because the *anabasis* of the antiheroes Dravot and Carnehan ends not in (re)conquest but in catastrophe, and because Kipling wrote his story as a critique of imperialism.²⁹ Howard, on the other hand, presents Greeks still living in the proto-Ai Khanoum that El Borak discovers in nineteenth-century Afghanistan as a superior race of athletes and conquerors. The fact that centuries of living in the wild Hindu Kush mountains has made them partly barbaric saves them from occidentalist condemnation by the author who created them. 'They were lower' Howard writes, 'on the cultural scale than their Hellenic ancestors, but they were still more highly civilized than their fierce Afghan neighbors' (HOWARD 2010, 14).

The development of the lost city theme in Victorian literature went hand in hand with sensational archaeological discoveries by real-life treasure hunters such as Henri Layard, Heinrich Schliemann, Aurel Stein, and Richard Hall. As a result, the idea that a substantial Hellenistic legacy was yet to be discovered in isolated mountain areas of Central Asia became widespread in Western popular culture during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This encouraged attempts to travel through Central Asia 'in the footsteps of Alexander' (BUTLER 2018; MAIRS 2018; SCHLIEPHAKE 2020) – until finally a real lost city was uncovered at the site of Ai Khanoum.³⁰

28 The first excavators of Zimbabwe, Theodore Bent and Richard Nicklin Hall, contended that the architecture was Phoenician (BENT 1895; HALL – NEAL 1902). A good overview of the shifting interpretations of the site's cultural identity is provided by HALL 1995, 185–194. The initial refusal to attribute the building of Great Zimbabwe to a local population is somehow strangely reminiscent of the conviction that Ai Khanoum in Bactria was a Greek and not a Bactrian city. The presentation of imperial conquest and colonization as *return* rather than intrusion was not unknown in the Hellenistic period either; the Seleukids in particular found the traces of their ancestors and Greek traveling heroes all over the Near East which allowed them to claim the region as their own (STROOTMAN 2021). The Ptolemies likewise framed their usurpation of power in Egypt as a 'return' by presenting themselves as the descendants of Aigyptos, the eponymous first pharaoh of Egypt who had fled to Greece after losing his throne to his treacherous twin brother, Danaos (STROOTMAN – VON REDEN 2021, 40–42; for Egyptian audiences, the story referred to the myth of Osiris and Seth, see KAMPAKOGLOU 2016).

29 That Kipling can hardly be read as an apology of empire has often been noted: 'since the two white adventurers who are its protagonists are the scum of Anglo-Indian society, while the tribes they set out to 'civilize' may, it is speculated, be descended from Alexander's army', Kipling is parodying British colonialism in India (HARRISON 1982, 40–40); Dravot and Carnehan are 'simultaneously representatives and parodies of the Empire builders Kipling elsewhere idealizes' (BAUER 1994, 39–41), and through them Kipling 'was plainly comparing the British Empire to a get-rich-quick scheme hatched by a couple of ruffians' (CULL – CHAPMAN 2009, 154). On Kipling's (shifting) attitudes to the British Empire in India, see MCBRATNEY 2011.

30 The use of the motif of traveling in Alexander's tracks as a discursive instrument in light of Britain's self-proclaimed historical mission by colonial officers, geographers, archaeologists, and solitary

HOWARD'S AFGHANISTAN AS BORDERLAND

El Borak's Central Asian adventures can be characterized as borderland narratives. Howard's fiction, particularly his fantasy, western, and historical adventure stories, are replete with borderland tropes and characteristics. Through his Texan hero El Borak, Howard projects the frontier traditions of his native Texas on Afghanistan. Also his focus on conflict between ethnic groups rather than states can be understood as part of a Texan storytelling tradition:

Texas was borne out of violence, and its history bears that out – but it's the nature of the violence that is worth noting. All of the major wars fought in and around Texas were cultural clashes – white settlers versus Native Americans. Or white versus Hispanic. Or Native American versus Native American. Stories of the last of the Indian wars with the Comanche were still being told and retold in Robert's time by aging survivors of the carnage.³¹

Like the better known Conan – a character 'much closer to the American frontier tradition than epic fantasy' (FINN 2013, 239; cf. TROUT 2004; SHOVLIN 2013; WEISS 2013) – El Borak is essentially a liminal figure in a liminal setting: both are exiles from their native country – respectively the cold northern borderland of Cimmeria and the nineteenth-century Texan frontier (Gordon hails from El Paso, an archetypal border town) – and both are outsiders in the civilized and barbaric lands where their constant travels bring them. As Jared van Duinen writes about the borderland settings of the Conan stories, in particular *Beyond the Black River*,

The interaction between borderlands regions and civilised centres is a constant theme and the borderlands are often presented as sites where the civilised (and civilising) narrative unravels. In many ways, Conan functions as an embodiment of the borderlands. He is a product of a borderlands region (Cimmeria) and Howard often deploys him to expound the civilisation-barbarism dichotomy. [...] He becomes prized by agents of these civilised centres due to his borderlands knowledge and qualities (VAN DUINEN 2016, 351).

The figure of El Borak performs a similar narrative function. *The Lost Valley of Iskander* stands in a long tradition of colonialist and white supremacist narratives focused on the Greek presence in Central Asia. The Greeks are described as beautiful healthy blue-eyed blonde 'Grecians' with their 'classic Grecian profile' (HOWARD 2010, 11). It is significant that in Howard's story, the Greeks left behind by Alexander consisted of both men and women, as we already saw, so that their ethnic purity is secured.³²

Based upon the standard image of western European settler communities in colonial America, the Greeks of Attalus are presented as outsiders struggling for survival in a hostile environment. They are contrasted in racial terms to the surrounding 'Muhammadans'. This is particularly the case with 'a shifty character' named Abdullah: a Tajik trader who is allowed

adventurers along the North-West Frontier is explored at length by SCHLIEPHAKE 2019; BUTLER 2018 describes how journeys 'in the footsteps of Alexander' regressed from romantic *Wanderlust* to tourist attraction.

31 FINN 2013, 94–95.

32 A 1986 comic adaption of the story by Roy Thomas (scenario), Howard Chaykin and Ernie Chan (drawings), and Don Warfield (coloring), transplants Iskander's lost city to the world of Conan, locating it somewhere south of Stygia (≈ Egypt), but still involving the historical figure of Alexander the Great, and featuring Greeks with pink skin and yellow hair; in this Marvel version, the youth Bardylis has become a blonde woman in a bikini.

into the secret valley to sell beads and mirrors to the Attalan ladies in return for locally produced wine and textiles. He is described as ‘a vulture-like figure’ with ‘rat-like features, [...] a venomous grin’ and eyes ‘shining with hate and fear’ (HOWARD 2010, *passim*). He is also an arms smuggler through the Khyber Pass, supplying the tribes with modern British breech-loading rifles. It is no surprise then that Abdullah turns out to be devious and treacherous: like a latter-day Ephialtes, he leads Hunyadi’s barbarous horde by a secret path into the hidden valley of the Greeks. However, because of El Borak’s personal preference for the wild Afghan hinterlands beyond Khyber, and because of the story’s implicit rejection of Western civilization (explicit in various other Howard yarns), Howard’s Afghanistan ambiguously enough is also a place where the narrative of Western superiority is challenged. In that sense, too, these are typical borderland stories.

CONCLUSION

In *The Lost City of Iskander*, the Greeks in Central Asia are imagined as western Europeans surrounded by barbaric Asians. Though Howard’s racial ideas are rooted in typical Interbellum American, viz, Texan concerns about perceived threats to Anglo-American supremacy, the imagery he uses in *The Lost City of Iskander* derives from a western European construction of a Classical Heritage and colonialist ideas about the impact of ‘Hellenism’ in ancient Bactria and India. The depiction of the Classical Greeks as fair-skinned and blonde is the ultimate consequence of the modern European equation of the ancient Greeks to modern (western) Europeans. From Bevan’s and Tarn’s projection of the British Empire’s civilizing mission onto Alexander and his Successors to Narain’s postcolonial subversion of these viewpoints and Eddy’s focus on ‘Near Eastern’ resistance to ‘Hellenism’, this identification lies also at the heart of many scholarly approaches to ‘Hellenistic’ Central Asia in the twentieth century (BEVAN 1902; TARN 1938; NARAIN 1957; EDDY 1961).³³

An unprejudiced approach to ‘Hellenistic’ Central Asia, I argue, is only possible if we abandon the view that the ancient Greeks are ‘Westerners’, to be distinguished sharply from ‘Oriental’ civilizations, as is still the norm in both Classical studies *and* the study of the Ancient Near East. But Classical Greece is not ‘European’; it is an integral part of the wider *koine* of interacting peoples and cultures in the eastern Mediterranean.

The tale of El Borak and the lost city of Alexander ends with a savage battle between the valiant Greeks and Afghan tribesmen. The enemies are defeated because the American Celt Gordon fights alongside the Greeks, to whom he feels strangely related. Of course, Gordon kills Hunyadi. After the battle, he refuses an offer by the Attalans to stay and be their leader. ‘I must go to my own people,’ Gordon said, ‘and it is still a long road to travel. [...] A little food to carry with me on my journeys is all I ask from the people of Attalus, who are men as brave and valiant as their royal ancestors’ (HOWARD 2010, 27). And so, the city is saved, and it remains hidden until this day – still waiting to be rediscovered and reclaimed by the West. The story of the forgotten Greeks of Attalus is thus one of the many fictional tales that anticipated in the West the discovery of the lost city of Ai Khanoum long before it actually occurred.

33 For discussion of the historiography, see STROOTMAN 2014, 20–26, and STROOTMAN 2023, 13–16; HOO 2022, 39–70.

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