

# IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN KING

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Frank L. Holt, *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2012. xxi, 343 pp. ISBN 978-0-520-27342-9.

Frank Holt's most recent book is a detective story seeking clues to find a long-lost kingdom and its king. Ancient reports described an empire of a thousand cities but by the seventeenth century this picture had become "an exotic *mise-en-scène*" (p.22). The search began with the discovery of a single coin, but the range of tools enlarges steadily, drawing new detectives into the search. The book's subtitle identifies the general location of that once "lost world" where the kingdom of Bactria had flourished at the center of the Silk Road linking Greece, central Asia, and India in the wake of the conquests of Alexander of Macedon into the second century BCE. The value of coins as evidence produced a new tool for studying the past in general, numismatics. As coins from unknown locations were joined by archaeological evidence and historical analysis over the past three centuries, the lost world was found. Nine chapters in addition to an introduction and conclusion recount the adventure in a beguiling style that will captivate both non-specialists as well as specialists.

The author has been preparing for this study since his graduate work at the University of Virginia where his M.A. thesis was "The Golden King." He is a distinguished historian of the ancient world who has published seven books and more than sixty articles. One area of his expertise is numismatics: he is a distinguished numismatist who is passionate about proper use of coins but also every other tool necessary to uncover the past. Professor Holt shares his enthusiasm with students at the University of Houston where he was the first recipient of the Distinguished Lectureship in Teaching Excellence Award. His essays over several years for *Saudi-Aramco World* are testimony to his talent for engaging a general audience as well as specialists. These qualities are clearly evident in his engrossing account of the long and dangerous detective search in the *Lost World of the Golden King*.

The account begins with the discovery of the earliest clues: the discovery of ancient coins in Central Asia

was the trigger for the search. The coins were genuine but the location of their minting was unknown. A considerable collection gathered by an advisor to Peter the Great of Russia – Count Jacob Daniel Bruce – spurred scholarly interest in the study of the coins. Three Greek words on a small silver coin prompted the serious Prussian scholar Theophilus Siegfried Bayer to research and publish his study *History of the Bactrian Kingdom of the Greeks, Together with the Ancient Tradition of Greek Colonies in India*. The source of the coin was uncertain – either Astrakhan or Kazan in European Russia – but the words were clear: "[a coin] of King Eucratides the Great." And, importantly, ancient surviving sources wrote of Eucratides who "ruled a thousand cities."

Four chapters trace the evolution of the scholarly use of coins, numismatics, based on the Greek word νόμισμα and the Latin word *nomisma*. Chapter One ("Checklist Numismatics") describes the nature of that evidence in the seventeenth century when coins were treasures collected for their worth as precious metals and as objects of fine art. "Collectors" were untrained – often they were thieves – and the art of collection was dangerous. A French physician was successful when commissioned to expand the collection of Louis XIV, but when captured by Algerian pirates in 1674, he saved his twenty ancient gold coins only by swallowing them. The second chapter tracks the on-going "Dangerous Game: Framework Numismatics" into the eighteenth and nineteenth century when collection remained an enticing but dangerous occupation. A British veteran employed by the East India Company to improve its cavalry horses also was drawn to collecting Bactrian coins. His body was eventually found "dumped in an unmarked grave" (p. 34). The growing attraction of coins turned the trickle of Bactrian coins into a torrent (p. 27), and interest in the finds stimulated publication of examples. Scholars, working in the safety of their libraries, could now use the evidence of coins to insert them into an historical time

frame. In 1843 Johann Gustav Droysen published his concept of a distinctive period within world history – the Hellenistic Age [*Geschichte des Hellenismus* II]. The kings named on the Bactrian coins could provide not only a temporal relationship but also an administrative correlation.

Chapter Three (“The Gold Colossus: Novelty Numismatics”) centers on the spectacular find of a “golden ‘monster’ [coin that] migrated from its home under the armpit of a murderer” in Paris (p. 50). When that thief sought to sell it, “The buyer smoked, and the seller sulked, for a full twenty minutes, when suddenly the [seller]... snatched the check and handed over the [coin]. That night the expert never closed his eyes” (54). The search for coins remained precarious – as it does today – but the “Golden Monster” demonstrated an important development in the professional use of coins when it was housed in the Bibliothèque Impériale in Paris, allowing direct access to the evidence and indirect access through photographic images.

Consequently more scholars were drawn into the study of the evidence. Historians constructed long narratives by fitting together pieces of the “jigsaw” puzzle described in Chapter Four – “Telling Tales: Narrative Numismatics.” Some became curious to discover the character of the images inscribed on the coins. As Professor Holt writes, “...we look into lumps of silver and gold to find their souls.... [The ruler depicted on them] becomes the sort of man whose life we can weave into a narrative largely of our own making, since we have no governing texts” (p. 84). “Narrative numismatics tells tales replete with heroes and histrionics....whether attested in any source or not” (p. 87). The result could be titled “Wishful Numismatics,” although the author is kinder.

The complete reliance on coins for evidence also demonstrated the need for another kind of evidence. With Chapter Five (“Wanted – One Greek City: Archaeology”) another tool joins that of the coins in the search for the kingdom that had produced quantities of coins but remained “lost.” Excavation in the nineteenth century was revealing other lost kingdoms, those of Agamemnon and Nestor and Priam, for instance. However, scientific archaeology rather than illicit digging was slow to emerge especially in the unstable conditions in Afghanistan. Only in the second half of the twentieth century were major sites discovered and meticulously unearthed and recorded. One of the sites was the modern village of Ai Khanum located at the confluence of the Kokcha and Amu Darya – ancient Oxus – rivers. Evidence identified a major city with a palace complex. And among the finds were quantities of coins. The latest specimens antedating the destruction of

the city soon after 146 BCE, bore the name of Eucratides, the image on the once single-known image on the Golden Colossus. Chapter Six (“Letters Here and There – Epigraphy”) adds yet another tool to the search: archaeological finds included other written evidence such as inscriptions on potsherds, stone, papyrus and parchment. Reading these inscriptions (the Greek *epigraphé*) could not only confirm the evidence of the coins but also provide additional information. By the late twentieth century, consequently, numismatics plus archaeology plus epigraphy had combined to produce a fuller, more accurate history of both the coins and their context.

Sadly the continuing value of coins as treasures, the nature of their discovery and conditions in Afghanistan made them hostages. Chapter Seven reports “A Perfect Storm: Rescue and Revisionist Numismatics.” Only six of fifty-seven recorded hoards found between 1821 and 1979 in both Bactria and India were recovered under controlled conditions (p. 136). Coins are auctioned, stolen – even from museums. Hoards are broken up. One means of protection has become available in modern technology such as X-Ray fluorescence spectrometry and precise electronic means of preserving the data provided by the coins themselves even after they have been stolen.

In spite of loss of evidence through theft and warfare, its quantity continues to expand, at times prodigiously. Recent challenges of a different nature are the subject of Chapters Eight and Nine. Akin to many disciplines devoted to study of the past, numismatics has focused on physical evidence, and archaeological excavation has swollen the quantity of those data. Computer technology provides a welcome means to sort and analyze data, and its success has pointed in new directions – for example, theoretical analyses of the results and the development of models to test the implications. Preservation and understanding of data is essential but a growing number of critics argued that the human element in the human-centered disciplines was disappearing; patterns were replacing people. In archaeology, counting the potsherds is useful but equally – or even more useful – is identifying who made the pots, why they were inscribed, and what caused changes over time. In addition to on-going excavation and analysis of finds, the “New Archaeology” calls for study of the relationship between people and their environment in an effort to describe the changing process over time that the material evidence demonstrates for people of all ranks in society.

In Chapter Eight, Professor Holt calls for “A New Beginning: Cognitive Numismatics I.” Inasmuch as the evidence is coins, this chapter uses the “New Archae-

ology" to describe the people who mined the metals, worked the ore, created dies, shaped and engraved the coins, as well as those who supervised the process. In Chapter Nine ("Coins and the Collapse of Civilization") Professor Holt explores the role of those coins in the larger sphere of society after they left the mint: their uses by individuals, cities and kingdoms for essential purposes; the nature and breadth of their distribution. "Coinages reflect the societies that produce and use them" (p. 194). Change over time can reveal an increase in complexity but also indicate emerging weaknesses within a society. This chapter is a masterful portrait of Ai Khanum, the center of a kingdom that had links extending from Greece to India, and its fate. Its wealth was once evident only in a few precious coins whose origin was unknown. Engaging evidence produced by archaeological exploration uncovered a location and context for those coins. That evidence yielded other forms of written evidence, adding epigraphy to the research. New technology vastly increased the ability to store and share that evidence. More recently, a willingness to "forget for a moment the kings of Bactria and concentrate instead on the nameless and faceless people around them" (p. 162) reveals the changing nature of the world in Central Asia over several centuries following the death of Alexander of Macedon.

The presentation throughout is captivating, binding the account through excellent links from start to finish. Eucratides (THE Golden King), introduced in the first chapter, remains a force through the development of the discipline of numismatics and the book. Chapters are woven together chronologically from "The Adventure Begins" (I) to "Coins and the Collapse of Civilization" (IX). The splendid conclusion summarizes the three-

hundred-year adventure that involves "truths [which] have come and gone like guests at a dinner party — some fascinating and full of enlightenment, others loud but lacking substance, all welcome for whatever they might inspire in the conversation" (p. 211). The adventure involves intricate detail, but the larger story is sustained. Particularly useful is fine use of questions throughout the book that focus the readers' attention. "What had happened to all these things? How could the soil of Central Asia yield so much ancient money and yet no monuments?" (p. 89) Answers are given in a fine balance between description and significance of the evidence. For readers wanting references, there are seventy-four pages of notes and thirty-one pages of bibliography. Plates and drawings are essential, and they are numerous and well chosen.

Who could predict that a single coin from an unknown location would produce the new discipline of numismatics, prompt archaeological exploration, and encourage historical research that resulted in the recovery of a lost kingdom that stood at the center of interaction of Greece and Macedonia with India? Just as significant is Professor Holt's account of these developments as an engaging and thoughtful detective story.

#### **About the author**

A specialist on ancient Greece and the Hellenistic world, **Carol G. Thomas** is Professor of History at the University of Washington (Seattle). Her books include *Alexander the Great in His World* (2006), *Finding People in Early Greece* (2005), and *Citadel to City State: The Transformation of Greece 1200–700 BCE* (2003).