

**POISED FOR
GREATER GLORY**

The Alexander Mosaic, on display in the National Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy, shows the conqueror astride his war horse, Bucephalus.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM



A detailed mosaic of a horse's head, possibly from the Alexander Mosaic, is the central focus. The horse is depicted in profile, facing right, with a brown and white mane and a white blaze on its face. The mosaic is composed of small, colorful tiles in shades of brown, orange, red, and white. The background is a dark, textured blue. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the mosaic.

Expanding an Empire

ALEXANDER IN INDIA

AFTER SUBDUING PERSIA, ALEXANDER THE GREAT SET HIS SIGHTS ON INDIA, A MYSTERIOUS LAND AT THE EDGE OF THE EARTH. THE ENCOUNTER WOULD LEAVE AN ENDURING MARK ON BOTH GREEK AND ASIAN CULTURE.

The March to India

Spring 327 B.C.

Alexander the Great marries Princess Roxana of Bactria to secure political power in his new territory.

Summer 327 B.C.

Alexander turns his attention to the kingdoms lying beyond the Hindu Kush and starts planning his campaign.

Spring 326 B.C.

Alexander and his army take the forbidding fortress of Aornus. Even Heracles himself, it was said, would have been unable to capture it.

Spring 326 B.C.

The Macedonian army crosses the Indus River and is welcomed by Ambhi, King of Taxila, who presents Alexander with gifts and allies with him.

Spring 326 B.C.

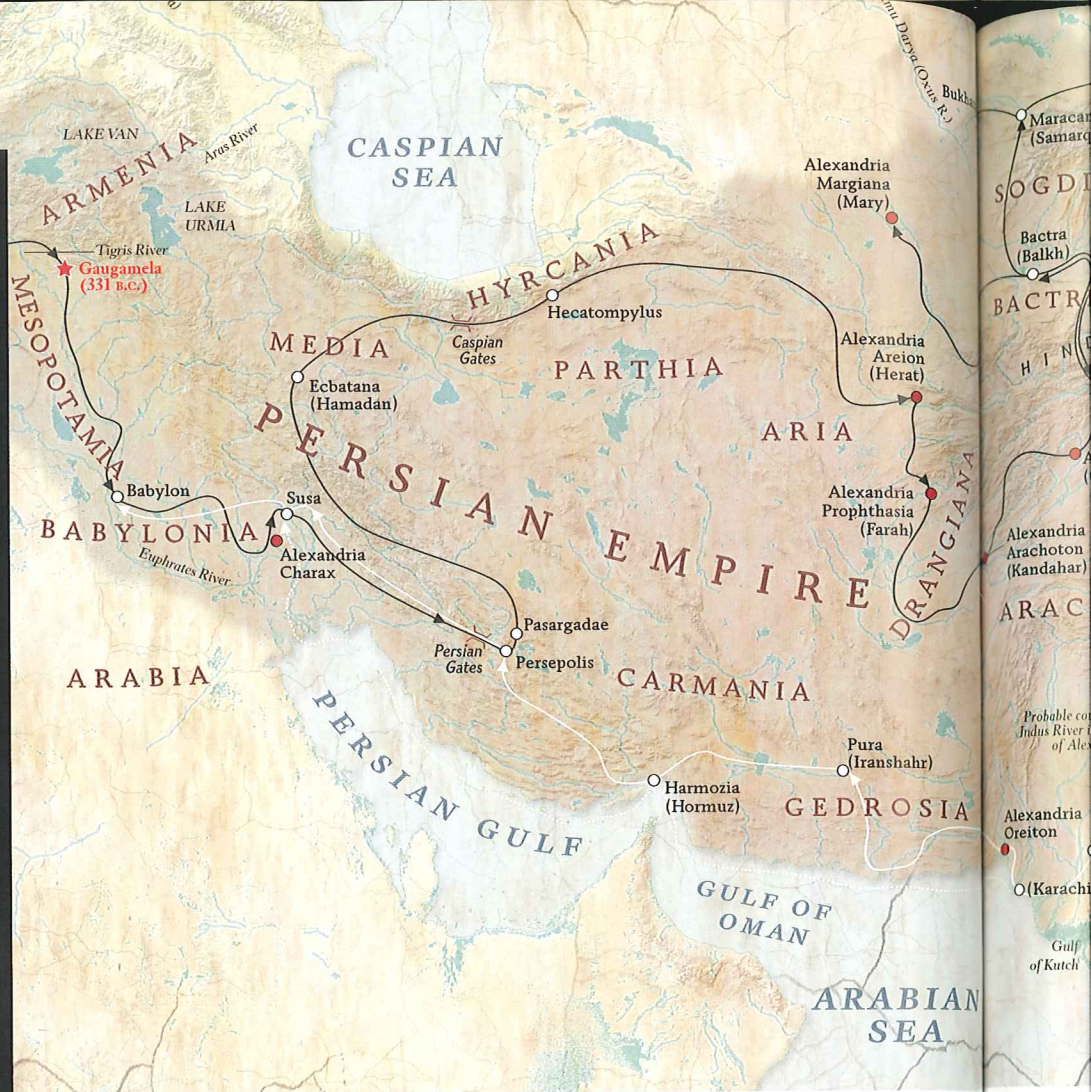
Alexander defeats King Porus of the Punjab at the Battle of the Hydaspes, where Porus's formidable war elephants unleashed panic.

Summer 326 B.C.

Despite securing an alliance with Porus, Alexander loses the support of his troops, who mutiny. Alexander suspends his campaign.

Fall 326 B.C.

Alexander's army splits in two and begins to retreat from India.



ALEXANDER'S AMBITION

After conquering the Persian Empire, Alexander planned his Indian campaign in the Macedonian city of Amphipolis where this coin (below), depicting Athena, was minted.



BPK/SCALA, FLORENCE

In 328 B.C., Alexander the Great, at age 26, had a choice to make. After defeating Darius III of Persia and later crushing a rebellion by the Sogdian leader Spitamenes, the entire expanse of the former Achaemenid Empire now belonged to Alexander. He controlled the territory stretching from modern-day Turkey through Mesopotamia to the Iranian plateau and the Oxus and Jaxartes River Basins (respectively the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya today), nearly two million square miles. But would the great military leader be content to rule these lands, or would he try to expand his kingdom?

Beyond the Hindu Kush lay India, a land that the Greeks knew about more from legend than experience. In the past, Persian kings had attempted to impose their law on the nearest parts of that land: the east of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Indus Valley. However, the governors, or satraps, installed there failed to establish control over peoples fiercely protective of their independence, such as the Malavas and the Oxydracae.



CARTOGRAPHY: EOSGIS.COM



FORMIDABLE BARRIER
ALEXANDER CROSSED THE PEAKS OF THE HINDU KUSH IN AFGHANISTAN TO REACH INDIA.

MOUNTAINS OF MYTH

WITH PEAKS OVER 23,000 feet high and stretching for more than 500 miles, the Hindu Kush mountain range is the natural border between the Iranian plateau and the Indus River Valley. The Greeks called it Paropamisus, which comes from a Persian term meaning “peaks over which an eagle cannot fly.” They identified it with the mythical mountain where Zeus chained the Titan Prometheus, condemning him to have his liver eaten every day by an eagle.

TON KOENE/AGE FOTOSTOCK

Undaunted by this precedent, Alexander yearned to advance farther than the great Achaemenid kings by marching into these mysterious lands. Mythical Greek gods and heroes, such as Dionysus and Heracles, set foot there in legend, but no mere mortal had followed them.

Determination to conquer the known world drove him forward to India. Alexander’s campaign seemed unstoppable at first. He advanced into the foothills of the Hindu Kush within just a few weeks, taking villages and cities in the face of strong resistance.

After crossing the Indus and defeating the Indian king Porus at the Battle of the Hydaspes, Alexander moved toward the Ganges Valley, determined to conquer the entire Indian subcontinent. But when he reached the Hyphasis River (now known as the Beas), his soldiers revolted. Eight months of fighting had exhausted them, and they refused to go any farther. Alexander was forced to give up and to return his forces to Mesopotamia. Over time, the territory he had gained would slip back under local control.

East Meets West

Alexander did not reach the far coast of Asia. Nor could he keep the grand promises of wealth he had made to his soldiers. But Alexander’s Indian adventure was far from a failure: He had ventured into a previously unknown world. His campaign was one of the earliest moments of cultural contact between East and West, and that encounter left a deep impression on many of those involved, as recorded in various chronicles and reports that were commissioned by Alexander himself.

In the Greek imagination, India was a hazy land that lay at the farthest edge of the world. Before Alexander the Great’s expedition, little news of the region came as far west as Macedonia, and what did arrive in Europe was distorted and fantastical. Very few Greeks had previously ventured so far. Only Scylax of Caryanda had traveled through a part of it as an explorer

LEGACY OF ALEXANDER

The kingdom of Bactria, in modern-day Afghanistan, maintained close links with the Greek world, as the lettering on this second-century B.C. coin (below) attests.



ANG/ALBUM



in the service of King Darius I of Persia around 515 B.C. He ventured down the Indus to the ocean and then sailed along the coast to Egypt. Unlike the detailed report he wrote for the Persian government, the account of his travels, which he wrote later, held its share of improbable tales.

Another Greek, Ctesias of Cnidus, wrote the first treatise on India in the early fourth century B.C.—even though he never actually went there. The information collected in his account came from the travelers, traders, and ambassadors he met during the years he spent at the Persian court as a royal doctor. In both their accounts, Scylax and Ctesias presented India as a land brimming with marvels and wonders, no doubt adding to Alexander's motives to mount an expedition there.

Brave New World

In Alexander's time, the Macedonian soldiers encountered a completely foreign land unlike any they had seen before. After crossing the snowcapped mountains of the Hindu Kush and having braved the range's

MACEDONIANS VERSUS INDIANS

This silver decadrachm (below), made in Babylonia around 324 B.C. to commemorate Alexander's victory over Porus, shows a Macedonian rider attacking two Indian warriors on an elephant.



BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

terrifying ravines, the expedition entered the Indus basin. The river impressed them with its size—six miles wide according to surviving accounts. Its violent whirlpools, deafening roar, spectacular floods, and lurking crocodiles were all compared to the Nile in Egypt. When he saw the Indus and before he discovered that it flowed into the ocean, Alexander himself speculated that the Indus could be the source of the Nile due to the similarity between the two rivers' flora and fauna.

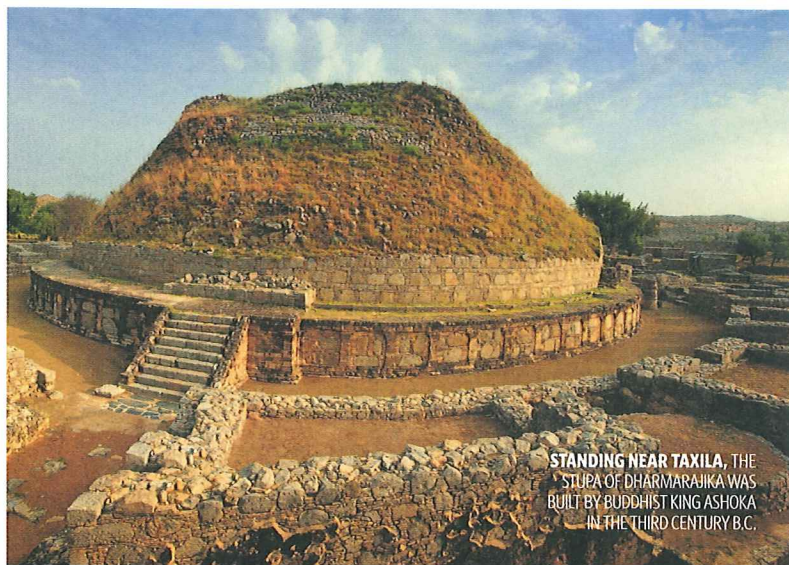
The region's animals and plants were of immense interest to the Macedonians, especially to the traveling scholars who accompanied them. Alexander ordered them to collect specimens for cataloging and study. References to these discoveries can be found in a range of scholarly Greek works, such as the botanical treatise by Theophrastus, one of Aristotle's followers, and other treatises kept in the Library of Alexandria. Details about the India expedition also found their way into collections of rarities and curiosities. The Greeks recorded seeing trees with



ALEXANDER AND PORUS

The defeated King Porus is brought before Alexander after the Battle of the Hydaspes in this 17th-century painting by Charles Le Brun.

WHITE IMAGES/SCALA, FLORENCE



STANDING NEAR TAXILA, THE STUPA OF DHARMAAJIKA WAS BUILT BY BUDDHIST KING ASHOKA IN THE THIRD CENTURY B.C.

HAEDEM KHAWAR/GETTY IMAGES

A MAGNIFICENT WELCOME

AMBHI, RULER OF TAXILA, a strategic city in modern-day northern Pakistan, allied himself with the Greeks, and on Alexander the Great's arrival offered him splendid gifts: 3,000 bulls, 10,000 sheep, many talents of silver, and 30 elephants. The Macedonians immediately sacrificed the bulls to their gods and held athletic games and an equestrian tournament before crossing the Indus River.

trunks so thick it took more than five men to wrap their arms around them. They spoke of a tree with such long branches and dense foliage that numerous riders could sit in its shade. Most likely, they were describing the banyan tree, which can indeed grow to a spectacular size.

The Macedonians also noted other fantastic trees with strange twisting roots, giant leaves larger than a shield, and abundant, odd-looking fruits, described in one account as "bean-like pods, nine inches long, and as sweet as honey." But their attractive appearance was deceptive, they wrote, "as you are unlikely to survive if you eat one." It is thought these "dangerous" fruits were probably bananas or mangoes.

The Greeks also came across brightly colored plants they had never seen before. Some of them were poisonous, but some had medicinal properties of which they quickly learned to take advantage. Once they found out how to use them with the aid of local experts, they could treat the men who fell ill in the extreme climate with its constant rain that rotted their

clothes and rusted their weapons. They also learned to treat snake and insect bites. Some of this information found its way into instructional poems such as the one composed by Nicander in the second century B.C. on poisons and their antidotes.

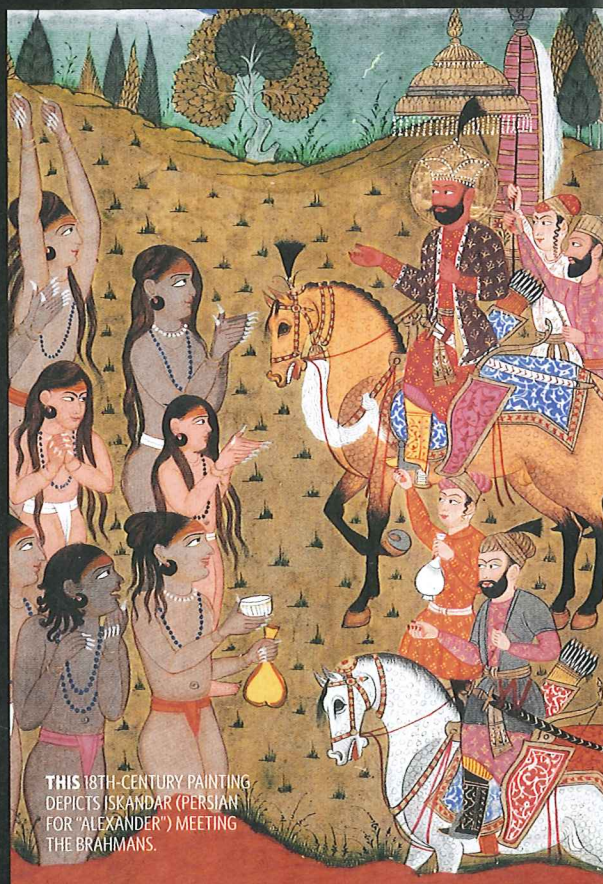
Fierce Creatures

The variety and richness of India's wildlife was also a revelation to the Greek invaders. They recorded with awe tigers, parrots, and rhinoceroses. They saw different kinds of apes, some so large that when the Macedonian troops saw them from a distance from high up in the mountains they mistook them for the massed ranks of an army on the march.

The Greeks recorded seeing trees with trunks so thick it took more than five men to wrap their arms around them.

INDIA'S NAKED PHILOSOPHERS

During his time in Taxila, Alexander was intrigued by the custom of its sages to not wear clothes as they went from village to village. These people were the Brahmins, whom the Greeks called gymnosophists, which means "naked philosophers." Some had long hair, while others shaved their heads. At a meal with Alexander, it was observed that they all "ate standing up . . . The most nimble of them balanced on one leg, holding onto a beam with his hands; he switched legs when he got tired. He stayed like that all day long." One of the gymnosophists, Calanus, joined Alexander's expedition. After he fell ill in Pasargadae, he burned himself on a pyre, much to the astonishment of the Greeks.



THIS 18TH-CENTURY PAINTING DEPICTS ISKANDAR (PERSIAN FOR "ALEXANDER") MEETING THE BRAHMINS.

ERICH LESSING/ALBUM



ALEXANDER'S APPEAL TO ARTISTS LASTED CENTURIES, AS EVIDENCED BY THIS 17TH-CENTURY WORK DEPICTING THE NEWS OF CALANUS'S DEATH.

DANIEL ARNAUDET/RMN-GRAND PALAIS

GODDESSES CYBELE AND NIKE RIDE IN A LION-DRAWN CHARIOT ON THIS THIRD-CENTURY B.C. DISK FROM FROM AI KHANUM



SIGNS OF ASIA AND GREECE

ALEXANDRIA ON THE OXUS, modern-day Ai Khanum, was founded by Alexander the Great and remained a center of Hellenism in the East for centuries. Located in northeastern Afghanistan, its art and culture bore the marks of both Asian and Greek traditions. Paul Bernard, a French archaeologist, excavated the city from 1964 to 1978. He uncovered typically Greek buildings such as a theater, a gymnasium, and temples of Olympian gods, as well as Greek coins bearing pictures of Hindu gods and even Indian-influenced sundials. The Soviet-Afghan War forced work to halt in 1978, and the ruins were extensively looted. Today virtually nothing remains of this once prosperous settlement where two cultures intertwined.

ALBUM

The Macedonians also encountered large snakes such as the 22-foot-long pythons that Abisares, the King of Kashmir, gave Alexander as a gift when he surrendered. One chronicler described their surprise at the variety and ferocity of these snakes, which were a constant threat to local people: "They colonized the highest villages during the rainy season, the local people forced to build beds high off the ground. But many still had to leave their homes, overwhelmed by the invasion." Even familiar animals had surprises in store. Dogs trained by the Indian king Sophytes were able to fight lions and would not let go of their prey even if one of their legs was slowly cut off.

Elephant Warriors

Not surprisingly, the animals that most impressed the invaders were elephants, especially the way they were used in war by their enemies. Alexander's cavalry had faced elephants during the Battle of Gaugamela at the start of their invasion of the Persian Empire, but there had only been a few of them there.

Later, at the Battle of the Hydaspes, King Porus massed around 200 of the beasts, which to the Macedonians resembled fortresses or towers. Accounts describe how their trumpeting created confusion among the soldiers and horses. In the midst of the fray, elephants picked up weapons and enemy soldiers with their trunks and gave them to their drivers. In some instances, they crushed them with their colossal feet. Chroniclers also recorded an emotional scene when Porus was knocked off his mount. His elephant protected him against the enemy attempts to strip him of his weapons before lifting him onto its back again.

Elephants also became valuable war booty, a gift that Alexander was pleased to receive from the various Indian monarchs who submitted to his military forces. The invaders also witnessed the ingenious method Indians used to hunt elephants: They dug pits and lured the males into them using females in

GREEK ART IN THE EAST

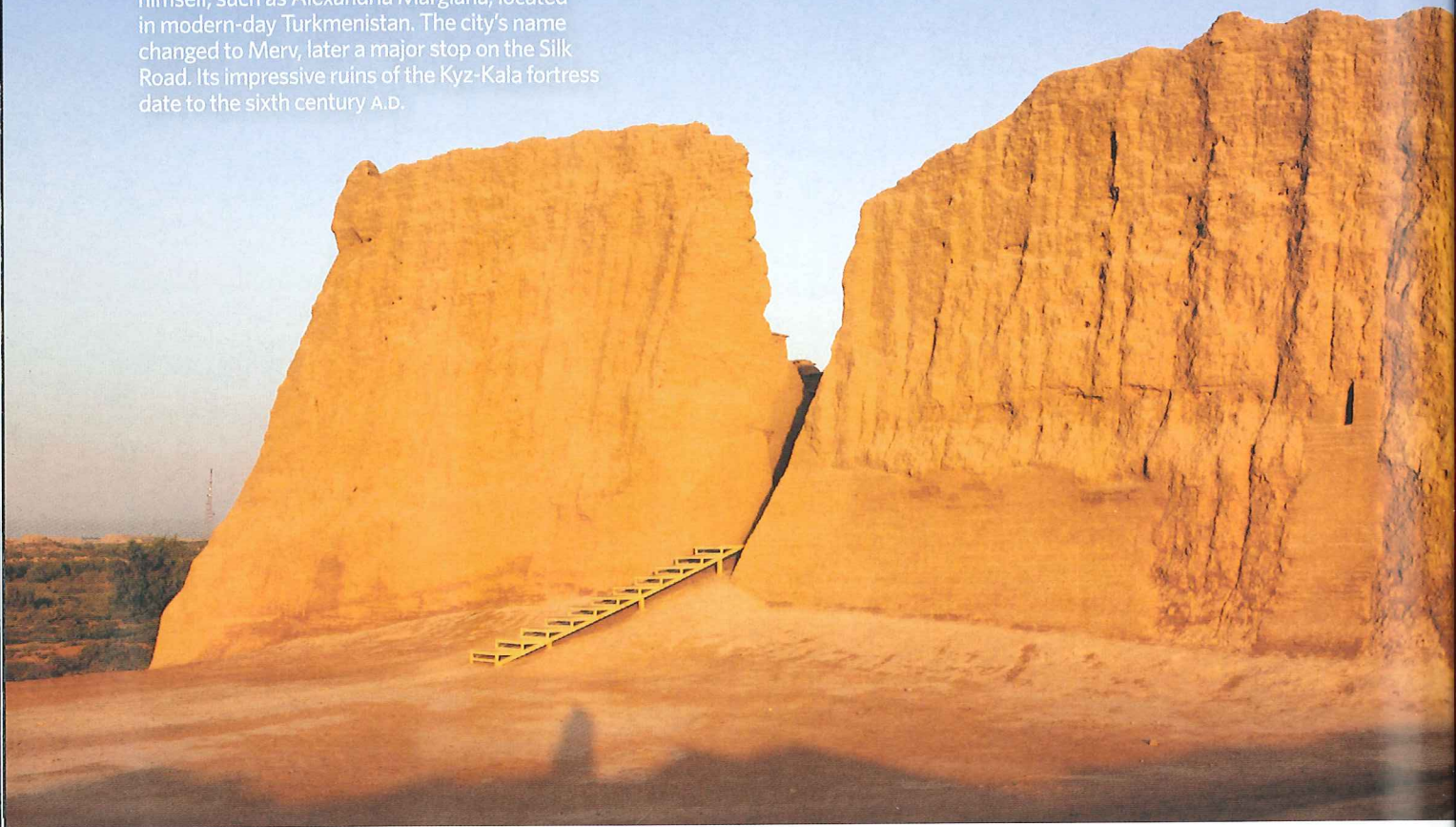
Hellenic influences are reflected in this first-century stela (below) from But Kara, Pakistan, in which ascetic Brahmans, in Greek clothing, make gestures of consolation.



SCALA, FLORENCE

ABUNDANCE OF ALEXANDRIAS

Alexander was notorious for naming cities after himself, such as Alexandria Margiana, located in modern-day Turkmenistan. The city's name changed to Merv, later a major stop on the Silk Road. Its impressive ruins of the Kyz-Kala fortress date to the sixth century A.D.



heat. Once captured, the elephants were weakened through starvation to make them easier to tame.

Exotic Dress, Familiar Gods

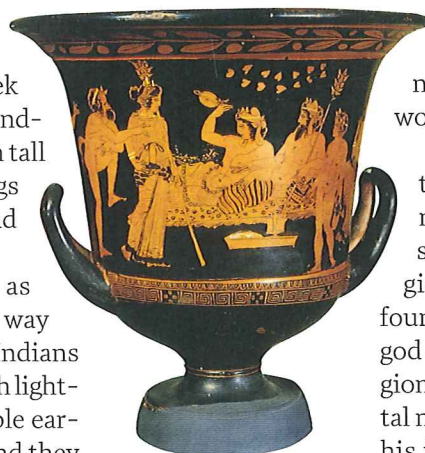
It was said that there were no fewer than 5,000 cities between the Hyphasis and Hydaspes Rivers—an exaggeration, perhaps, although it was certainly true that the regions the Macedonians passed through were densely populated compared to Greece.

Settlements such as Taxila and Sangala tended to be much larger than Greek cities. They were also fortified and defended by experienced warriors armed with tall bows and fearsome chariots. The kings were adorned with precious stones and followed by extravagant entourages.

Indian customs struck the Greeks as breathtakingly exotic, especially the way they dressed. One chronicler wrote, “Indians are of a thin build. They are tall and much lighter than other men . . . They wear marble earrings (or at least the rich Indians do) and they

DIVINE WINE

Ancient wine jars often depict the Greek god of wine, Dionysus, eating and drinking with his followers (below). The Greeks believed that Dionysus visited India.

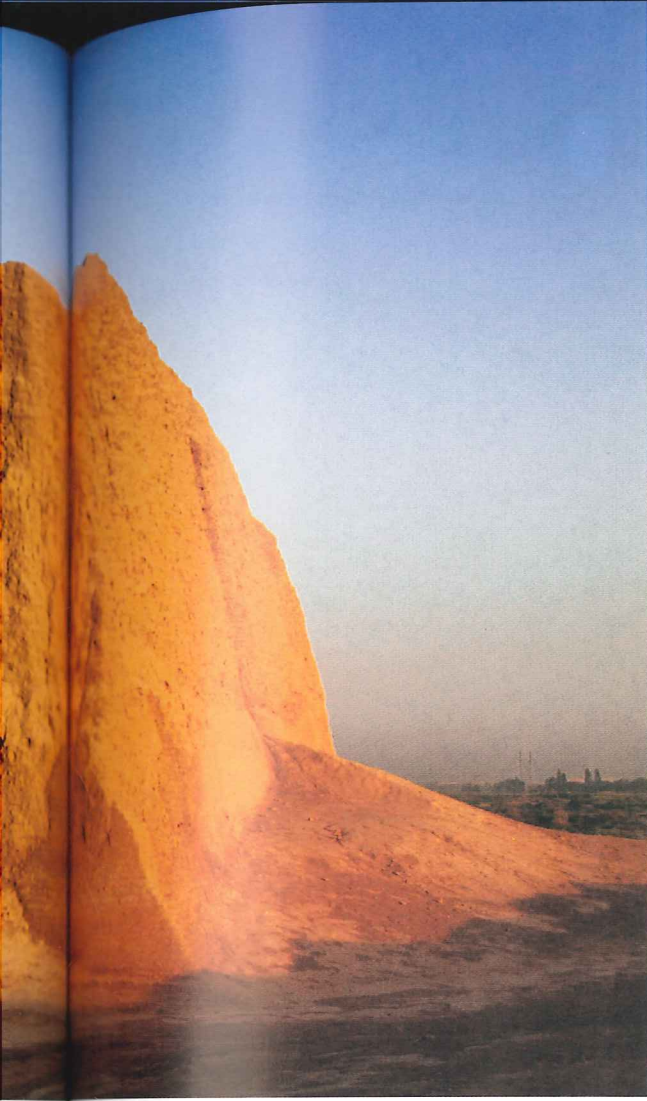


SCALA, FLORENCE

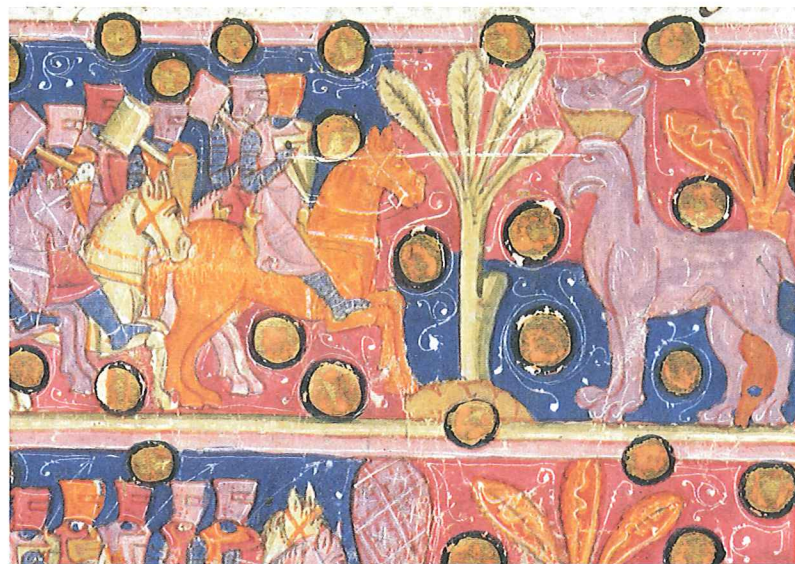
dye their beards, some the purest white, others dark blue, others red, purple or even green. They wear clothes made of extremely shiny linen. They wear a tunic that reaches down to their calves and a cloak on their shoulders. Others wrap it around their heads.”

The inhabitants of some regions they crossed were notable for their longevity, frugality, and good health. But the Macedonians also recorded less exemplary customs, such as suttee—the burning of widows at their deceased husband’s funeral—an “honor” the dead man’s wives would fight over.

In spite of the great cultural distance between the Indian and Hellenic worlds, the members of Alexander’s expedition noted similarities, especially in the field of religion. For example, they believed they had found cultural traces of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, on Mount Meros in the Nysa region. In the story of Dionysus’s birth, his mortal mother Semele dies while pregnant. Zeus, his immortal father, takes the unborn child,



TIM WHITBY/ALAMY/ACI



BRIDGEMAN/ACI

LEGENDARY MONSTERS

ALEXANDER'S INDIAN ADVENTURE spawned fantastic stories that spread across Europe and lingered for centuries. An Anglo-Saxon text, presented as a letter from Alexander to his tutor Aristotle, reported flying mice and fish-eating men. As late as the 14th century, histories of Alexander's Indian campaign, like *L'Histoire ancienne*, were being illustrated with fantastic beasts, like the griffin (right) as it faces off against warriors on horseback.

sews him up in his thigh, and gives “birth” to him later. “Meros” means “thigh” in Greek, a sign that Alexander’s scholars took as evidence of Dionysus’s influence. The Greeks were quick to arrange a sacrifice to the god. “Many high-ranking officials adorned him with ivy garlands and soon fell into a trance, possessed by the god, and invoked the name of Dionysus, running around in a frenzy.”

The people of the area were happy to accept the suggestion, as it ensured they would be treated benevolently by their conquerors. Alexander himself saw it as confirmation that although he had penetrated so far into the strangest of lands, he was nevertheless walking in the footsteps of a familiar god, and that his aim of establishing world dominion enjoyed divine blessing.

Perhaps the greatest impact on the Macedonian king and his men was India’s vast size. Even at the farthest extents of their Asian incursion, they realized that India vastly exceeded anything they had imagined when crossing the Hindu Kush. As a result of the Macedonian

conquest and their discoveries, India became much better integrated into the Greek worldview. The new knowledge of the East was incorporated in the map of the world drawn in the third century B.C. by the great geographer and mathematician Eratosthenes of Cyrene, chief librarian at the Library of Alexandria.

Parallel to such rationalization, the legendary status of India, the land at the world’s end, continued to exert a strong fascination across the Mediterranean world. The accounts of returning travelers, half chronicle, half legend, haunted and stimulated the Greek mind for many centuries afterward. ■

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ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS IN ANCIENT GREEK CULTURE.

Learn more

BOOKS

Alexander the Great

Philip Freeman, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan

Frank L. Holt, University of California Press, 2012.

THE HELLENIC LEGACY

The political effects of Alexander's Indian campaigns were short-lived, but the cultural effects would last for centuries to come. During the period of the Hellenic Seleucids in the third and second centuries B.C., permanent Greek settlements took root in Central Asia, and their culture permeated through the region. The greatest manifestation of Greek influence can be seen in the art that developed in Gandhara in modern-day Pakistan: Depictions of princes and Buddhist divinities are rendered in a notably Greek style.



WHITE IMAGES/SCALA, FLORENCE



The "Flower Genie"

This fourth- or fifth-century A.D. sculpture was found in a Buddhist monastery in Hadda, in eastern Afghanistan. It shows a *deva*, or god, bestowing flowers. The realistic sculptural technique comes from Greece.





BRITISH MUSEUM/SCALA, FLORENCE

A Buddha of Two Worlds

This Buddha sculpture has Hellenistic features, such as the clothing and the *krobylos*, a bun hairstyle. This is evidence of the Hellenization of the Kushan people by the second or third century A.D.

The Myth of Troy

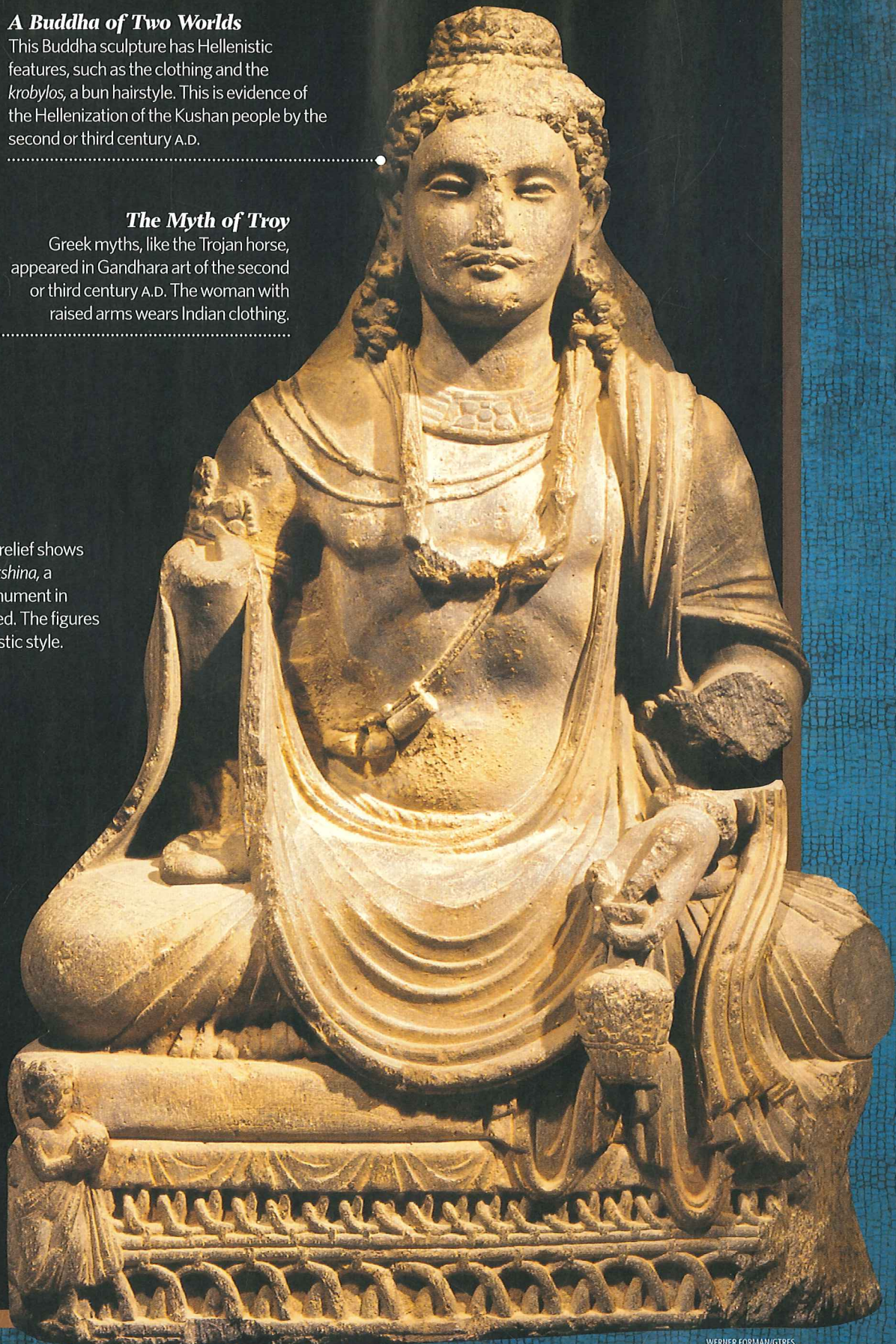
Greek myths, like the Trojan horse, appeared in Gandhara art of the second or third century A.D. The woman with raised arms wears Indian clothing.

Buddhist Ceremony

This first- or second-century A.D. relief shows several people performing *pradakshina*, a procession around a stupa, a monument in which relics of Buddha are guarded. The figures wear tunics draped in the Hellenistic style.



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WERNER FORMAN/GTRES