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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Lee Holt. *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan.* Hellenistic Culture and Society Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012. xxi + 343 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-27342-9.

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Published on H-War (April, 2013)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

A Numismatic History of the Bactrian Realm

At first glance, a work entitled *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan* appears to promise a narrative history of the obscure realm of the Bactrian Greeks who once ruled over that troubled part of the globe for about one hundred years between their successful rebellion against the Seleucid rulers in about 260 BC and their fall to Sakas and other nomadic tribes a little more than one hundred years later. This misconception grows when one realizes that this book is part of the large Hellenistic Culture and Society series. Nonetheless, any reader who expects to find narrative history, or even an appreciation of narrative history, will be sorely disappointed by this work, which in fact provides almost no narrative history of the Bactrian realm in over two hundred pages of writing (with over one hundred additional pages of supporting endnotes and bibliography).

Instead, most of Frank Lee Holt's book focuses on the subject of numismatics, particularly the study of coins and what the coins of the Bactrian period (260-150 BC) can tell us about the lives of people in that period and afterward. To that end, after an introduction that deals with the echoes and memories of the Bactrian realm within scattered historical and literary references, the book examines various types of numismatics and explains how they were practiced by (mostly) European and American coin collectors and explorers over the last 350 years. First, Holt addresses checklist numismatics; coins are checked against known king lists to make sure that everyone has been accounted for. Then, he covers framework numismatics, in which coins are used to uncover the bare facts of history necessary to frame a historical narrative. Finally, he turns to novelty numismatics, which focuses on unusual and distinctive coins that are often appreciated for artistic reasons without any concern or interest in their historical and cultural context.

At this point, Holt stops his discussion about coins and coin collectors to examine the lengthy and mostly fruitless search for any of the thousand Greek cities in what is now Afghanistan and neighboring countries over which the Bactrian kings ruled. Eventually one city (Al Khanoum) was found and excavated for over one decade before political problems in Afghanistan arose. The site was nearly completely destroyed by native looters who were unappreciative of the reminders of Greek culture in their nation and who reused the ruins that had been dug up for their own homes and village buildings. Next, Holt discusses the scattered epigraphy that demonstrates a highly complicated picture of multilingual people, some of whom were at great pains in those backwoods parts of Hellenistic civilization to show off their erudition in memorials, as well as the more mundane records of tax collections and accounts of Scythian mercenaries.

The book returns to its general focus on coins, arguing that the lack of scientific archeology in much of Afghanistan has led to the need for revisionist numismatics, which attempts to uncover as much as possible about the provenance of the coins that have ended up in private collections across the world based on when they were brought to auction or when rumors about them began to spread. Two chapters on cognitive numismatics follow, in which Holt draws strong conclusions from the evidence of errors on coins, showing that the stresses of civil disorder or environmental disaster have led to increasing errors on coins at key moments. By assessing the location of coin hoards and the amount of coins left behind, he seeks to demonstrate the frustrated hopes and dreams of people of Bactria as their civilization fell and their lands and coins were appropriated by various successor peoples who imitated what they appreciated in Hellenistic culture with their own cognitive maps.

The conclusion points to both the hopes and aims of this work and the frustration that many readers are likely to find with it. Holt briefly recounts the narra-

tives as they have been constructed by leading historians of Bactrian history, including William Woodthorpe Tarn, Awadh Kishore Narain, and Homayun Sidky, showing that these subjective narratives conflict because the basic facts that should undergird a narrative history are simply not present when it comes to Bactrian history. Instead of a typical narrative history, Holt advocates for a look at subaltarn groups in light of his own ideological bias. He creates a picture of ecological collapse and immense civil disorder from the fragmentary facts that can be found on coins, making his criticism of narrative historians for engaging in the same sort of subjective analysis more than a little hypocritical.

Despite the flaws of this work, including its focus on the narrative history of Bactrian numismatics and its clear bias for subhistorical figures whose motives and activities can only be subjectively read from the limited evidence and against elite figures who created much of the available evidence from the ancient realm of Bactria, this work remains of some value. Mainly, Holt looks closely at the raw materials with which historians work when attempting to explain the past, such as archeological sites, coins, other cultural artifacts, and primary documents. Compared to other areas of ancient history, like the study of the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, or Hittites, or even the somewhat more obscure people of Ugarit and Mari (all of whom left large amounts of written evidence), the Greeks of Bactria left meager written evidence. Nonetheless, historians and other researchers must work with the evidence at hand, and have an ethical responsibility to admit where evidence ends and where fancy and subjectivity begin. Holt does well in showing that the previous writers of Bactrian history have fallen short of the highest standards of intellectual honesty and tentativeness in their claims, although he fails to live up to his own lofty standards by making the same errors in the desire to find some sort of truth from the slim evidence that has survived the Hellenistic age in remote and troubled Bactria.

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Citation: Nathan Albright. Review of Holt, Frank Lee, *Lost World of the Golden King: In Search of Ancient Afghanistan*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.
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