

FOREWORD

Peter Green

In the spring of 328 B.C.E., near the heavily silted Oxus River in Bactria, Alexander's friend and senior officer Ptolemy, having been commanded to sink a well for safe fresh water, instead struck a dark, odd-smelling, viscous liquid that neither he nor his men had ever seen. Feeling that this strange phenomenon might be ominous, he summoned both the king and the royal soothsayers, who duly pronounced "that the effusion was indeed a gift from heaven, but that it portended troubled times." Here, says Professor Holt, is an ancient prophecy that we may well endorse, since the liquid was petroleum, "one of the prime moving forces of modern history." Ironically, this glum but all-too-accurate forecast "is the very first reference to oil in western literature."

Among much else that stuck in my memory when I first read *Into the Land of Bones* at the time of its original publication, this episode made a particular impression on me, since oil, along with Islam, has of course been almost the only major new factor driving events in the Middle East since Alexander's day, and in

Afghanistan—Alexander’s Bactria—has had less direct influence than elsewhere. Indeed, what continues to amaze me most about Holt’s truly magisterial narrative is the degree to which the problems confronting Alexander’s invading Macedonians there, two and a half millennia ago, remain identical with those currently at issue for the occupying U.S. forces today. Even what Holt, in his new preface, refers to, accurately, as the “messy end-game”—the post-war scramble that has already begun (though we hear little or nothing about this in the media) for control of Afghanistan’s vast mineral reserves—was going strong in the Hellenistic period following Alexander’s death, with a mining boom that quarried Bactria’s mountains to extract the ore that went, as he tells, to make literally tons of currency.

The geography, of course, changes least of all: even the rivers hemmed in between the Hindu Kush and the high Pamirs are largely defined by that wild and rocky landscape. Now, as in Alexander’s day, the borders are, as Holt nicely puts it, “nominal, not natural . . . porous to such a degree that rebels can easily drift across and regroup among friendly brethren.” How to tell who’s winning the war? Amid all the “parochialism, tribalism, fierce independence, and mutual hostility,” with local warlords playing their own game (Holt’s learned much about those Alexander had to deal with from their modern equivalents, as well as vice versa), to work out who’s an ally, who’s an enemy, especially when they’re liable to suddenly switch from one to the other as profitability dictates, has always been a bewildering business for the invader. All this Holt examines in a cool, fast-moving, fact-packed narrative that shifts with knowledgeable ease between the activities, and frustrations, of Macedonians, Victorian imperial-

ists, Americans, and Russians, all struggling with a situation in which, as Sebastian Junger famously put it, “fighting Afghans was like nailing jelly to a wall; in the end there was just a wall full of bent nails.”

Holt’s extraordinary book is best known, naturally, as a splendid practical lesson from the past for the present, a lethal demonstration of how First World military men and politicians, especially when confronted by a culture they regard as primitive, tend, fatally, not only to think of violent hammer-and-anvil tactics as the answer, but to persist in that belief long after their ineffectiveness has been made clear. (Perhaps it is on that basis that it has been incorporated into the curriculum of the new National Military Academy of Afghanistan: it would be interesting to know what the Academy’s cadets make of it.)

But *Into the Land of Bones* is much, much more. It offers the best account yet written, incisive and compelling, of a crucial stage in Alexander’s career of conquest, when unprecedented defeats inflicted by an elusive enemy led him to adopt what can only be described as total war, which resulted, for the Macedonians, in huge occupation forces, endless rebellions, and dangerous military exhaustion, psychological no less than physical. It gives a heart-rending description of the wanton destruction, by warfare, modern religious zealots, and, worst, antiquity looters, of Afghanistan’s ancient cultural heritage. It points out exactly how even the great coin-hoards that survive have been ruined as evidence by being split up and traded on the international market. It showcases the innovative way Holt has refined his numismatic and other evidential skills to probe and illuminate dark periods of Greco–Bactrian history. Its scholarship, never paraded,

is stellar, and the use to which that scholarship has been put goes far to refute current gibes at the alleged uselessness of studying antiquity. It is written with elegance, style, and wit. It is, in short, well on the way to becoming a classic, and this updated edition comes in good time to help its recognition as such.