

MR MASSON AND THE LOST CITIES:  
A VICTORIAN JOURNEY TO THE EDGES OF REMEMBRANCE

*Abstract*

*At the crossroads between remembering and forgetting, one may glimpse how the relationship between later cultures and antiquity has been shaped by the awareness of loss; by the presence of what cannot be recalled.*

*James Lewis lived at that crossroads. He was at once spy, fáquí, pioneering archaeologist, and British deserter under a death-sentence. Escaping across India in 1827, he cast aside his former name and became Charles Masson. This article traces his subsequent journey into Afghanistan, into the blank spaces of the map, in search of the lost cities of Alexander the Great. Searching for antiquity, erasing his own past, his excavations led to the discovery of Alexandria of the Caucasus, on the plains of Bagram. His pursuit of the ancient world is extraordinary: mendacious, full of longing, groundbreaking, hovering between fact and fiction as artfully as himself.*

*This article is likewise a dialogue between the desire to remember and the desire to forget – and it argues that in narratives of classical reception, remembrance should not take the stage unchallenged; that which has been erased and forgotten must also be allowed its place, otherwise only half a relationship with the past may emerge.*

Charles Masson was invented in India, one night in 1827. A British deserter, James Lewis, was on the run across the northern plains – escaping from his regiment in the East India Company, and the death-sentence. Frightened and footsore, one night he looked up across his campfire into a pair of huge dark eyes, framed by delicate tufted eyebrows and a vast, tangled beard. The man with the tufted eyebrows asked him his business.<sup>1</sup> Out of the air, Lewis plucked the name Charles Masson; all of a sudden, he was Masson, and a doctor from Kentucky.<sup>2</sup>

He need not have worried. His questioner was no agent of the East India Company, but rather a heartbroken American soldier of fortune named Josiah Harlan – on his way to be proclaimed Prince of Ghor in Afghanistan; soon, Harlan would plant the Stars and Stripes atop the Hindu Kush.<sup>3</sup> After that night, though, James Lewis was never heard from again;<sup>4</sup> he re-created himself as Charles Masson – and Masson soon eclipsed his creator. For years – unable to take ship for England, or build a respectable life in Anglo-Indian society – he let the stories grow. Masson was a doctor – a renowned *tábīb* in the mountains, after not an hour's training.<sup>5</sup> Then Masson was a Frenchman – so convincing that one Victorian *Biographie Nationale* contains an entry for M. Masson.<sup>6</sup> Then he was a British spy. Then an archaeologist – ‘the great pioneer of Afghan archaeology,’<sup>7</sup> excavator of some of the most significant ancient sites in Afghanistan. For years, he searched the plains for coins, tombs, cities – and

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1 Lewis/Masson and one of his fellow soldiers deserted from their regiment at Agra. They met Harlan at Ahmadpur – and Harlan invited Masson to join his Afghan campaign. Masson agreed – but quickly left. cf. Macintyre 2005: 55.

2 cf. Letter from Major David Wilson, reprinted in Forrest (ed.) 1906: 103.

3 The current heir to the throne of Ghor lives in Los Angeles, and is respected for his horror films. Scott Reiniger, known for his role in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), has no plans to reclaim his kingdom. BBC News, Wednesday, 26 May, 2004, *US movie actor is ‘Afghan prince’* [online]. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/3750931.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3750931.stm) [Accessed June 2011].

4 Even the British Library catalogues his diaries under ‘Masson Papers’ (cf. British Library MSS Eur E195).

5 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 17.

6 cf. Whitteridge 1985: 1.

7 Rowland 1976: 72.

wrote grandly about his search. Then he was offered his own kingdom.<sup>8</sup> Then the story drifts out of reach: London, suburban primroses, memories growing fainter; no golden crown; thousands of ancient coins stacked in the British Museum,<sup>9</sup> hinting at tales unresolved. For this is not quite a comely tale; it is an exploration of the incomplete, itself compelled to leave questions open.

Charles Masson hid his former self within a labyrinth of false memories; when he speaks of the past – be that recent or ancient – little can ever be sure. Relationships with antiquity are not infrequently formed on such terms: outside the conventions of scholarship, with uncertainty at their heart.<sup>10</sup> Masson’s improbable adventures challenge us to narrate these boundaries of remembrance; to ask what an account of classical reception might look like, when the presence of antiquity is always uncertain. Recent work within the field has highlighted both the rewards and the difficulties of examining engagements with the past which (go out of their way to) remain elusive.<sup>11</sup> Here, facts and fantasies, discoveries and tricks can never be disentangled, not quite – else the narrative would fail.

Though James Lewis was still a soldier in India in 1826, Charles Masson later told – in language as poised as clockwork – of how he spent 1826 wandering through Persia. Lewis does not simply fade away in Masson’s later writings, he is confounded. Masson’s tales are bear-traps, waiting for belief. Decade after decade, they have ensnared, and illusions have grown deeper.<sup>12</sup> ‘Mr. Masson,’ wrote one admiring British officer, ‘has acquainted me that he is from the State of Kentucky in America [...] He was some time in England, France and Russia, through which latter country he passed from St.

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8 cf. Masson 1842 (vol.2): 360.

9 The Museum’s collection of Masson’s coins comprises 332 originally transferred to it, and 6641 transferred from the India Office collection in 1995. cf. Errington 2001, Errington & Curtis 2007.

10 The virtuoso Victorian forger Simonides, for instance, claimed a place at the heart of intellectual discourse (cf. Elliott 1982).

11 Cook and Tatum’s groundbreaking book on African-American literature (Cook & Tatum 2010) is one powerful example.

12 Some recent examples of authors ensnared include Newby 1998: 90, 136 (Masson was not an American), Ewans 2002: 48 (Masson was still in the army in 1826).

Petersburg to Teflis; and he seems to have had letters of recommendation to some persons of consequence in that place.’<sup>13</sup>

(Mr. Masson never set foot in Russia – or, for that matter, Kentucky.)

Living at the crossroads of memory and forgetfulness, for him, as for Walter Benjamin, they were never opposites, but always intertwined.<sup>14</sup> At the crossroads, he stood – Charles Masson, an imaginary man who longed for immortality; James Lewis, who for many years faced death if he were ever truly remembered.

British soldiers and adventurers turned to the classical past time and again, in nineteenth-century India. Their histories are sharp and troubled – both lost and redeemed through their remembrance. As Vasunia<sup>15</sup> has explored, many sought purpose and identity within the ancient world; latter-day heroes and Alexanders wandered the mountains in search of glory. Alexander Burnes travelled north across the Hindu Kush in 1836-7 and 1838, driven by the ‘desire that I had always felt to see new countries, and visit the conquests of Alexander.’<sup>16</sup> Convinced of his place in an expanding British imperial project,<sup>17</sup> Burnes viewed Afghanistan with the eye of a potential conqueror (though one continually distracted by its antiquities).<sup>18</sup> He spoke with confidence of Britain’s coming ‘success and supremacy’<sup>19</sup> in the region; the Afghans called him ‘the “second Alexander,” the “Sikunder

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13 Letter from Wilson, reprinted in Forrest (ed.) 1906: 103.

14 For Benjamin, in *The Image of Proust*, the word is *verschränkte*; cf. Benjamin (trans. Zohn) 1969: 201-15.

15 This article owes much to Vasunia’s groundbreaking work on India – and the debt is grateful acknowledged.

16 Burnes 1834 (vol.1): vii. cf. also *ibid.*: 13, 113; Burnes 1842: 203-4.

17 *ibid.*: 52.

18 cf. *ibid.*: 19.

19 *ibid.*: 269-70.

sanee.’”<sup>20</sup> (Darker elements still intrude: ‘As we passed through the city some of the people cried out, “Take care of Cabool!” “Do not destroy Cabool!”’)<sup>21</sup> On his return to London, Burnes became a society sensation. Latin dusted official reports and diaries; administrators adopted classical pseudonyms;<sup>22</sup> more, and still more recollection. ‘So frequent are the explicit citations [of antiquity] and so widely distributed across authors,’<sup>23</sup> that their massed presence overwhelms.<sup>24</sup>

Yet ‘often alert to the problems inherent in the comparison,’<sup>25</sup> few of these far-flung children of Empire quite grew into their ancient personae; longing could too easily be overwhelmed with doubt – leaving the wish to recover the past, to play a part from antiquity, far from fulfilled. Alexander Burnes found the stories slipping away from him in Kabul, during the ill-fated British occupation of Afghanistan in 1841. A furious mob descended on his house, killed his assistant, then hacked ‘Sikunder sanee’ to pieces. In Masson, longing and doubt likewise coexisted – yet for him, each was an indispensable part of his identity; the desire to recover the past and the desire to efface it, intertwining.

Masson’s relationship with antiquity took shape not as a memory-project – driven always to preserve – but as a dialogue between the desire to remember and the desire to forget. His story, as it will be told here, is likewise a dialogue between memory and absence. For when looking back to the ancient world, remembrance rarely takes to the stage unchallenged; that which has been erased and forgotten – so fundamental to shaping every act of memory – must also be allowed its place, otherwise only half a dialogue with the past may emerge.

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20 Burnes 1834: vol.1, 117; cf. also Burnes 1842: 73.

21 *ibid.*: 140.

22 cf. Anon (pseud. Caus Marius) 1867, Anon (pseud. Licinius) 1868.

23 Vasunia, ‘Introduction’ in Hall & Vasunia (eds.) 2010: 1.

24 This preoccupation with Alexander was not confined to the British. cf. Ray (ed.) 2007 for Alexander within Indian traditions.

25 Vasunia, ‘Greater Rome and Greater Britain,’ in Goff (ed.) 2005: 61.

### *Charles and Alexander*

Giving Harlan the slip, Masson grew a beard of his own – red and increasingly bushy, it is said,<sup>26</sup> though no portrait survives – and wandered the Middle East, imposing himself with increasing confidence on unsuspecting British officers. (In Bushehr, on the southern coast of Iran – and this was typical – he arrived as ‘a passenger from Bassadore in the sloop-of-war “Euphrates”’<sup>27</sup> and presented himself at the British Residency, where he would be entertained for several months.) From far-flung libraries, the past grew up in his mind – and certain stories lodged themselves deeply. In Persia, he travelled across the mountains and desert with a Colonel Taylor, and helped himself to the Colonel’s books.<sup>28</sup> They were full of Alexander the Great – of his conquests and their history; of the cities he had founded which were now empty spaces on the map, their locations forgotten for thousands of years; of the places where history blurs into myth – and stories as unreal as he. Somewhere in the east lay the site of the Citadel of Adamant, where the soldiers were made of clockwork, and sweet intoxicating music played.<sup>29</sup> Across the mountains, in Afghanistan, lay Nysa, founded by the god of wine himself, where Alexander was said to have found friends at the edge of the known world.

A desert is a strange place for history to take root. Sand-dunes shift, maps prove fragile; open your eyes after a storm, and the world may have been swept away. But the ancient past took shape around Charles Masson in the desert – until the time of Alexander seemed close enough to touch; closer than his former life as James Lewis, private soldier, Bengal Artillery, enlisted October 5th, 1821,

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26 cf. Holt 2005: 132.

27 Letter from Wilson, reprinted in Forrest (ed.) 1906: 103.

28 British Library, India Office Records. Private Papers (European Manuscripts) Handlists. Mss Eur J Johnston, Catalogue of European Mss. Vol.II: 1273-4.

29 Wallis-Budge 1933: 240.

deserted July 4th, 1827, formerly employed by Major-General Hardwick ‘in arranging and depicting his zoological specimens.’<sup>30</sup> Masson resolved to go in search of those cities, and recover that ancient past as surely as he had abandoned his own; he would seek mythical Nysa most of all, founded by a god.<sup>31</sup>

Arrian writes that when Alexander came to Nysa,<sup>32</sup> city of Dionysus, the people sent their leader out before the walls, along with ‘thirty of their most distinguished men’, to speak with him. ‘The story is that when they entered Alexander’s tent, they found him sitting there dusty and travel-stained, still wearing his equipment, his helmet on his head and a spear in his hand. The sight of him sitting thus surprised them so much that they prostrated themselves upon the ground and for a long time spoke never a word.’

When the king urged them to speak, Acuphis, their leader, asked for the city’s freedom, in the name of the god. Dionysus ‘did but as you have done; for you too founded Alexandria in the Caucasus and Alexandria in Egypt and many other cities as well, and will found yet more hereafter, in that you will have surpassed the achievements of Dionysus.’ Alexander granted the people of Nysa their wish – and for days, the city rejoiced.<sup>33</sup>

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30 British Library, India Office Records. Private Papers (European Manuscripts) Handlists. Mss Eur J Johnston, Catalogue of European Mss. Vol.II: 1273. Details of Lewis’s earlier life are scanty – one source is *Indian Antiquary* Vol. XXXIV, March 1841: 194, which suggests that even the name of James Lewis may well have been a pseudonym, adopted by Lewis/Masson on enlistment in the East India Company’s service. Ross disagrees, and argues that ‘James Lewis, for such was Masson’s real name, was born in Aldermanbury, Middlesex, England, on February 16, 1800. His father, George Lewis, of London, married Mary Hopcraft, of Northamptonshire, on March 6, 1799’ (Ross 1933: 221).

31 For Masson’s ongoing fascination with Nysa, cf. British Library MSS. Eur. E. 168, f.4, The Panjab and the Route of Alexander: ‘All who have read of the great achievements and victorious progress of the hero of Macedon will remember his visit to the city of Nysa.’

32 Arrian himself is sceptical of the reports of Nysa – as are later commentators. cf. Stein 1927: 515; Malden 1880: 229; Thirlwall 1837-40 (vol.7): 12-13. Tarn remarks that ‘it is very silly, and probably Akouphis never existed’ (Tarn 2003 (vol.2): 287).

33 Arrian, *Anabasis*, 5.1.1-2.2, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt.

Masson sought a figure as quicksilver as he. Glorious and evil, hero and villain— above all, instability was the essence of Alexander’s character in nineteenth-century India, where he was a ‘tangible presence.’<sup>34</sup> ‘From being a heroic figure exemplifying admirable martial qualities to being a brutal, barbaric despoiler of Asian cultures,’<sup>35</sup> his representations compete and confound. In the Pahlavi books of the Parsees, Alexander is the mindless destroyer of Persian literature and culture;<sup>36</sup> for many British writers, by contrast, he was a bringer of ‘civilization,’ and ‘the seemingly inevitable march of Europe through the East seem[ed] to be prefigured by Alexander.’<sup>37</sup> (As Garton argues, however, the ancient sources had to be ‘comprehensively’ misread to depict ancient Indians as in need of the guiding hands of conquerors;<sup>38</sup> and such reinventions of antiquity in support of Britain’s colonial ambitions were frequently questioned. The case of Ernest Jones, a Chartist who used antiquity ‘to fight the cause of colonial subjects in India’ is exemplary.)<sup>39</sup> Always, the meaning of Alexander was in flux.

An obliging gentleman from the East India Company gave Masson passage across the Persian Gulf in one of the Company’s cruisers. The deserter praised ‘the politeness of her officers,’<sup>40</sup> and drank quantities of their wine. He acquired a compass, an astrolabe, some books, and what scanty maps he could, and set out for the north.

Afghanistan, then, was almost a blank space in British knowledge. Despite the Indian government’s growing interest in the region, and increasing concern over the exposed northern

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34 Hagerman 2009: 344.

35 Stephen Garton, ‘Introduction,’ in Ray & Potts (eds.) 2007: 7.

36 Such Alexanders are catalogued in Modi 1932.

37 Garton in Ray & Potts (eds.) 2007: 7. cf. also Rama Mantena, ‘Imperial Ideology and the Uses of Rome in Discourses on Britain’s Indian Empire,’ in Bradley (ed.) 2010, 54-76. Mantena’s discussion of British attempts to codify ‘what divides the Englishman from the Indian’ (ibid.: 72) is particularly valuable here.

38 Garton in Ray & Potts (eds.) 2007: 11.

39 Vasunia in Hall & Vasunia (eds.) 2010: 2.

40 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 2.



frontier,<sup>41</sup> reliable sources were few and far between: ‘Here I learnt was a news-writer, believed to be corrupt; there another, known to be so; and in another quarter, a subaltern officer would be sent, or rather allowed to wander unaccredited, at his own expense.’<sup>42</sup> Mountstuart Elphinstone’s 1808 embassy to Kabul had filled in some gaps, Alexander Burnes was starting to fill in others, but many remained. Masson was, perforce, ‘a traveller on his own bottom.’<sup>43</sup>

In this region, beyond the scope of British authority, Western travellers who sought the ancient past brought back remembrance one fragment at a time. Expeditions intermittently criss-crossed northern India and Afghanistan – gathering up history wherever they could. In 1808, Elphinstone’s embassy came upon the ‘Tope of Manikyala, a solid circular building of masonry, surmounted by a dome, and resting upon a low artificial mound [...] Those who saw it felt inclined to look upon it as Grecian architecture.’<sup>44</sup> Elphinstone and his company, as fascinated by Alexander as Masson,<sup>45</sup> had little time – and after a few hours’ fruitless search, gave up the site as barren.<sup>46</sup>

Twelve years later, another British traveller passed the same way, and was told ‘by the people that old wells, fragments of pottery, and ancient coins, were frequently discovered.’<sup>47</sup> Later still, Alexander Burnes, on the road to Kabul, obtained a few such coins. Then a French archaeologist, M. Court, began a full excavation, revealing that the place where ‘nothing was to be found’ was ‘strewn with ruins, the remains of massive walls, of old wells, and of tombs and temples.’<sup>48</sup> These were ‘fully

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41 cf. Ewans 2002.

42 Lawrence 1845 (vol.2): 139-40.

43 *ibid.*: 140.

44 Wilson 1841: 31.

45 cf. Elphinstone 1815: 18, 435.

46 Wilson 1841: 31-2.

47 *ibid.*: 32.

48 *ibid.*

proved [to be] the work of Indian artists,<sup>49</sup> not Greeks. Traveller after traveller passed the same way, was captivated by the same monuments, and spent a few hours or days attempting to decode them. Then each moved on. Years later, another traveller would arrive at the same place, and ask the same questions. The work of a month's concentrated study might take decades to grow up. Thus did the region's ancient past take shape in European imaginations, formed slowly, by scattered stories; through narratives in search of a familiar anchor, on the far side of the world.

### *To the North*

Still almost penniless, owning nothing more than what he carried with him, Masson travelled towards Kabul in some style. Sometimes, he would attach himself to hospitable merchants, and borrow their camels, tents, clothes, beds and attendants. (Once, by an Afghan khan's permission, he borrowed his bed-clothes from the khan's harem.)<sup>50</sup> Sometimes, he made a few small coins as a doctor, applying 'cold water, cobwebs, and pressure' and staring intently at *Duncan's Edinburgh Dispensatory*<sup>51</sup> (also his principal prop when he became a local saint). He was – all groundlessly – Haji, merchant, spy, envoy and '*fáquír* from Rum Sham.'<sup>52</sup> Even in his memoirs, Masson's guises are dizzying, the lines between them cryptic. He knew the beggar's song, the prince's greeting, the doctor's touch. He charmed Afghanistan's rulers; he joined with two suspect pilgrims to gather stale loaves from a camp – and was proudly adept.<sup>53</sup> He built himself anew, day after day, out of tricks of the light.

Elusive ever, his was a journey through the blank spaces of the map; and despite Masson's

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49 *ibid.*: 31.

50 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 345.

51 *ibid.*: 161.

52 *ibid.*: 198.

53 cf. Forrest (ed.) 1906: 133.

voluminous, mendacious diaries – the manuscripts full of corrections and crossings-out, as one story is replaced by another<sup>54</sup> – his maps of the Afghan landscape are barely present. A single black line stretches across an empty page in his notebooks (Figure 1a); his route is marked, but the country to either side is scarcely discernible – a brush of ink hints at a mountain range, a faint line might be a river, or a border; the page is otherwise empty.

*[Figure 1a: The world in recent memories: Masson's map of his own travels.]*<sup>55</sup>

When his recollections are not of recent days, but of two and a half millennia ago, the landscape springs up under Masson's pen. The land of Porus, the Indian king who rode into battle against Alexander atop an elephant, is an intricate maze of cities, rivers, borders and elevations (Figure 1b), all neatly labelled, the past secure. In present-day Afghanistan, oblivion was too swift for such faithful remembrance. A ruined village, with but one inhabitant, 'was represented as having been flourishing but two years since.'<sup>56</sup> At the top of a mountain, 'each person had raised a small pyramid of stones in commemoration of his visit; and I [Masson] being otherwise engaged, Gúl Máhomed had erected one for me. They were frail mementos, as it was necessary to appropriate the piles formed by former visitors, and succeeding ones would take the same liberty with ours.'<sup>57</sup> The landscape of nineteenth-century Afghanistan refused to stay still – and Masson could not afford to let his own identity do so; the ancient past, by contrast, could be remembered far less evasively.

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54 cf. Whitteridge 1985: 5. 'Masson left a manuscript list of certain dates where in every case the year as originally written has been corrected to a year later.'

55 British Library MSS Eur. E166 f.13: 76.

56 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 63.

57 *ibid.*: 77-8. Gúl Máhomed, a knowing merchant, was a frequent companion of Masson's.

*[Figure 1b: The world in distant memories: Masson's map of Alexander's travels.]*<sup>58</sup>

On the road to Kabul, city of ice, Masson crossed a plain 'of perhaps two miles in circumference,' on which there were 'twenty-four circular and rather lofty towers. [...] The inhabitants, oppressed with mutual feuds, frequently carry on hostilities from tower to tower, most of which are within musket-shot of each other.'<sup>59</sup> At the foot of one of the towers, he met 'Alladad Khan Chirssi, being a great smoker of chirs, a deleterious composition of hemp-resin. He said that [...] some day his country would be under European authority, [and] begged me to remember him if it should so happen in his time or mine.'<sup>60</sup> Neither Masson nor Alladad Khan were heartened by such a prospect.

And always, in every journey, Masson asked after the past – were there any ancient tombs? Had any coins been found in the ground?<sup>61</sup> Denial was the most common response – and as he crossed the mountains, he traced and retraced the possible routes of Alexander in his mind, wondering if his army had perhaps scrambled up the same slope, seen the same hills.

'There is a story,' wrote Kipling, 'that if you go into the heart of Bikanir, which is in the heart of the Great Indian Desert, you shall come across not a village but a town where the Dead who did not die but may not live have established their headquarters.'<sup>62</sup> Masson rode through this world, one which lay in his imagination half-way between the living and the dead, the ancient world and the present day,<sup>63</sup> belonging entirely to neither.

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58 British Library MSS Eur. E166 f.19: 117.

59 Masson 1842 (vol.1): 153.

60 *ibid.*: 156.

61 *cf. ibid.* (vol.2): 14-15.

62 Kipling 1897: 524.

63 Masson 1842 (vol.1): 148.

Close to Kabul, more heavily-armed men caught up with the travellers, demanding money. Masson and his companions welcomed them, feasted them, packed their pipes with opium, and – the story is lovingly dwelt on, as stories about remembrance invariably are by Masson, his journey across Afghanistan approaching a meditation on memory and loss – stole away in the night, leaving the robbers to the Black Smoke and forgetfulness.<sup>64</sup>

### *The city of ice and the city of Alexander*

In Kabul, in the streets of the citadel, ‘snow is alike preserved, and its square crystallized heaps sparkle during the warm months in the shops of the confectioners.’<sup>65</sup> No passing snowfall does not add to the stocks; snowflakes are hoarded for months – enduring longer, indeed, than cairns of stones, memorials of rock. Kabul, known by Baber as ‘the very best place in the world to drink wine in,’<sup>66</sup> was then one of the most tolerant cities in the world, where different faiths lived and ate together, married one another, and walked in each other’s funeral processions. ‘The Afghans were among the most tolerant of Muslims.’<sup>67</sup> ‘The dissolute Vazír Fatí Khân, when occasionally an Armenian Christian presented himself desiring to become a convert to Islam, was wont to inquire what he had found deficient in his own religion that he wished to change it?’<sup>68</sup>

Masson settled in Kabul for months, and spent his days in search of the past. For him, this was a city of absence, as much as one of memory; many buildings in the citadel ‘have been suffered to disappear, or have been purposely destroyed by the present chiefs, to obliterate, if possible, any

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64 *ibid.* (vol.2): 179.

65 *ibid.*: 234.

66 Quoted *ibid.*: 253.

67 Fletcher 1965: 21.

68 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 244.

recollections of the [earlier] Sadú Zai dynasty.<sup>69</sup> Yet in July 1833, further north, at Bagram,<sup>70</sup> he came upon a genuine city of Alexander.<sup>71</sup> Alexandria of the Caucasus was founded in 329 BC, and the remains of centuries of inhabitants were scattered across the plain.<sup>72</sup> Its location had long been a puzzle – and Masson had become convinced that the current consensus, which located it at modern Kandahar, was mistaken:

In the very first part of Alexander's progress to India, a difficulty presents itself as to the recognition and position of Alexandria ad calcem Caucasi. Major Rennell is positive as to the identity of the modern Candahar and [in] most of the commentators on Alexander are no doubts entertained concerning the ancient name of Candahar [...] Agreeing with Rennell that by Bactria or Backa we must understand Balk, it is impossible that in ten days Alexander could have passed from it to Candahar.<sup>73</sup>

His first expedition to Bagram was fruitless: not so much as a copper coin was recovered, and the people he spoke to claimed that no ancient relics had ever been found.<sup>74</sup> On his second, he borrowed some bad-tempered horsemen from 'a friendly local headman.'<sup>75</sup> First, Masson recovered a single ancient coin – reluctantly brought out by a villager, after threats and glares from his Afghan escort. Then, a dozen more coins, 'procured with difficulty, as their owners were suspicious of my motives in collecting them.'<sup>76</sup> Then, as word spread amongst the villagers that the *Feringhí* [foreigner] would actually pay for these battered pieces, first dozens, then hundreds, then thousands, until – over

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69 *ibid.*: 258.

70 Wilson 1844: 11-12.

71 Masson's identification of the site was confirmed by Bernard 1982.

72 cf. Whitteridge 1985: 65.

73 British Library MSS. Eur. E. 168: 2.

74 Whitteridge 1985: 65.

75 cf. *ibid.*: 65-7.

76 Wilson 1841: 12.

the intermittent years Masson passed in Kabul – sixty-eight thousand ancient coins were parcelled up and dispatched by camel-train to Calcutta, then by ship to London.<sup>77</sup> The empty spaces of the map were richly laden with memories.

The proceeds of his work as *tábíb* helped to pay for those first finds in 1833, now in the British Museum: the application of cobwebs to a wound in a remote village, a stare at *Duncan's Edinburgh Dispensatory*, a few coppers pressed into his hand each time.<sup>78</sup> As the potential of the site became apparent, however ('an ancient city, of immense extent'),<sup>79</sup> Masson began to look for assistance. Late in 1833, he composed a description of his finds, and sent it across the mountains to India, to the Asiatic Society of Bengal; in April 1834, it appeared in the Society's Journal (under the name of Masson, not Lewis, of course).<sup>80</sup> Cautiously, he opened a correspondence with the East India Company, sending letters to Sindh and the British Resident, Henry Pottinger. In Pottinger – later the first British Governor of Hong Kong – Masson found a ready collaborator. In return for his future finds – and the coins which he had already collected from Bagram<sup>81</sup> – Pottinger undertook to fund Masson's excavations:

I have now very great pleasure in forwarding to you the accompanying official correspondence by which you will observe that the Bombay Government has authorized me to place Fifteen Hundred Rupees at your disposal and make me its agent to receive any communications or relics of antiquity, which you may hereafter wish to send.<sup>82</sup>

Masson promised Pottinger that the money would be well spent. 'Coins, which are amazingly

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77 cf. Holt 2005: 132.

78 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 161.

79 Wilson 1841: 12.

80 Masson 1834.

81 cf. Letter from Masson to Pottinger, April 23, 1834, British Library MSS Eur. E161 f.11.

82 Letter from Pottinger to Masson, January 1, 1834, British Library MSS Eur. E161/6-7, f.4a.

plentiful in some parts of Kohistan, I shall perseveringly collect, and forward them without reserve to you, of this a vast collection may be anticipated and at no greater expense than their intrinsic value as old copper or silver.’<sup>83</sup> Their letters gossip about Afghan politics – about power-plays and powerful figures, and a building sense of crisis. ‘It seems almost certain that the [Afghan] King and the Amirs will come to a collision.’<sup>84</sup>

### *Both found and lost*

At Bagram, the finds continued. Often, coins were so damaged that Masson could discern little about them; on other occasions, possessing only a partial picture of the region’s history after the time of Alexander, his identifications missed the mark by centuries.<sup>85</sup> In the case of some faint inscriptions, ‘the state in which the faithless record was found rendered it impossible to do any thing with them, even to copy them.’<sup>86</sup> Masson watched them crumble away, unrecorded; his site of recollection also one of oblivion. Hundreds of miles – and many weeks’ dangerous travel – from any library which might have aided him, he felt the uncertainty of his work keenly.<sup>87</sup> ‘I had no authority to consult but memory.’<sup>88</sup> Pottinger helped where he could – and sent Masson extracts from Gibbon, painstakingly transcribed; putting histories to names: ‘I have the pleasure to enclose you a short memorandum of the Eras of Theodosius, Marcianus and Leo, extracted from Gibbon, by which you will see that they all flourished within the 5th century of our date.’<sup>89</sup> Through miniature pieces of knowledge, passed from hand to hand across the mountains, Masson began to understand the past he was unearthing.

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83 British Library MSS Eur. E161 637, f.11.

84 British Library MSS Eur. E161/6-7, f.4a.

85 Wilson 1841: 24.

86 *ibid.*: 84.

87 *cf.* British Library MSS Eur E161/6-7, f.6a.

88 Masson 1842 (vol.1): 402.

89 Letter from Pottinger to Masson, November 4, 1834. British Library MSS Eur. E161/6-7, f.10a.



In spite of all uncertainty, his records show hour after hour spent in classification; breaking down the thousands of coins by ruler and date, constructing tallies and tables. His ‘Enumeration of Coins procured from the site of Beghram in Kohistaun, and retained by C.M. for the British Government’ veers between the openly perplexed and the obsessively detailed, several times per page<sup>90</sup> – yet it was ultimately, as Cribb puts it, ‘more refined than any achieved so far’<sup>91</sup> in the field; gradually, his remembrance was becoming more secure.

Along with the typical expenses of an excavation – ‘sharpening implements &c. &c.’<sup>92</sup> – Masson’s accounts detail the bribes he was forever paying to keep the work advancing. As he remarked to Pottinger, ‘I forward [...] a note of the absolute expense of labour incurred [...] and should any of the items be considered objectionable, I beg they may be expunged.’<sup>93</sup> Each local official had his particular weakness; one Jemadar would take nothing but ‘presents of fruits at various times.’<sup>94</sup> (What Masson delicately calls ‘disturbances’ sometimes arise, interrupting progress; one of these was ‘terminated by the slaughter of [...] one of the Chiefs of Perwan.’)<sup>95</sup> The finds continued – and Pottinger spoke of his ‘great gratification.’<sup>96</sup>

Others began to take notice. *The Manchester Times and Gazette* praised ‘the distinguished antiquary and naturalist Mr. Charles Masson.’<sup>97</sup> Alexander Burnes complimented him: ‘Mr. Masson has

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90 British Library MSS Eur. E.161, f.11.

91 Joe Cribb, ‘Rediscovering the Kushan,’ in Errington (ed.) 2007, 179-210 (p.189).

92 Letter from Masson to Pottinger, July 6, 1834. British Library MSS Eur. E.161, f.5.

93 *ibid.*

94 *ibid.*

95 Letter from Masson to Pottinger, December 11, 1834. British Library MSS Eur. E.161, f.15.

96 Letter from Pottinger to Masson, July 27, 1834. British Library MSS Eur. E.161/6-7, f.6a.

97 *The Manchester Times and Gazette*, January 9, 1841.

done so much for this branch of discovery.’<sup>98</sup> (Masson did not return the compliment – lengthily and lovingly insulting ‘Sikunder sanee,’ instead.)<sup>99</sup> His work began to influence contemporary scholarship on the region, as George Grote acknowledged: ‘The prodigious number of coins and relics, Greek as well as Mohammedan, discovered by Mr. Masson at Beghram supply better evidence for identifying the site with that of Alexandria ad Caucasum than can be pleaded on behalf of any other locality.’<sup>100</sup> As Bivar recently put it (with perhaps some exaggeration, given the work of Burnes and Elphinstone, amongst others) ‘he was by more than half a century the first [Westerner] to see and appreciate the archaeological heritage of Afghanistan.’<sup>101</sup> Through his increasing command of the ancient past, Masson’s own identity was also becoming more stable. His recovery of antiquity both mirrored and made possible his own slow journey back into memory; gradually, instead of transforming himself day after day, he could allow himself to be remembered securely by others. Charles Masson, the imaginary man, was filling in Western scholarship’s empty places of memory.<sup>102</sup>

Soon, Masson began to do the same for the British government. Once a spy only in rumours,<sup>103</sup> he became one in truth, when the East India Company realized how useful his hoarded diaries could be (and realized exactly who he used to be). A bargain was struck in 1836: his notebooks, and his true remembrance of Afghanistan, for a pardon.<sup>104</sup> Masson kept the bargain faithfully.<sup>105</sup> On the recommendation of India’s Governor-General – and through the intercession of Captain Wade, Political Agent at Ludhiana – he was pardoned for desertion.<sup>106</sup> He was, unsurprisingly, a *very* good spy – and

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98 Burnes 1842: 220-1; cf. also *ibid.*: 161.

99 cf. Masson 1842 (vol.1): v-vi.

100 Grote 1856 (vol.12): 201.

101 Bivar 1988: 575.

102 cf. Whitteridge 1985: 70-1 ; Holt 2005: 133-4.

103 cf. Masson 1842 (vol.2): 51.

104 cf. Errington 2007:11.

105 cf. Ross 1933: 222.

106 *ibid.*; *Bengal Secret Consultations*, June 19, 1834.

soon came to be ‘an authority greatly relied on by the Indian Government.’<sup>107</sup> The new Governor-General, Lord Auckland, was smitten with the idea of annexing Afghanistan – an idea that appalled Masson.<sup>108</sup> ‘The more he knew and learned, the less he felt able to support Lord Auckland's grand scheme of invading.’<sup>109</sup> It gradually became obvious to him, however, that his reports were being used to prepare an invading army. ‘On enquiring I could not learn from Mr. Masson that in his opinion any important difficulties exist to a large body of troops traversing that country by the route he did.’<sup>110</sup>

The invasion went forward. The British were triumphant – and their interest in Alexander only grew more possessive. ‘Before our own no European army, except that of Alexander, has ever traversed Afghanistan, and some interest naturally attaches to his movements among the passes so well known to us.’<sup>111</sup> This gaze looks both forward and back: British experiences in Afghanistan illuminate narratives of Alexander;<sup>112</sup> narratives of Alexander lend the British grand imperial purpose and precedent. Masson was buttonholed one day by an old man, who ‘told how Sikandar Sir Alexander Burnes, in that very room, had sworn by Hazrat Isa, or holy Jesus, that no designs were entertained upon the country.’<sup>113</sup> ‘The old man prefaced his discourse by the declaration that he never saw a *Feringhí* or even thought of one that blood was not ready to gush from his eyes by reason of the wrongs and injuries he had endured.’<sup>114</sup> Burnes himself, returning to Kabul with the British army, enjoyed ‘all the acclaim that his contemporary Masson/Lewis could never achieve.’<sup>115</sup>

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107 *The Morning Post*, June 24, 1842: 2. cf. also Kaye 1851 (vol.1): 137, 208, 353, 497.

108 cf. Masson 1843: 208.

109 Meyer & Brysac 1999: 75.

110 Letter from Wilson in Forrest (ed.) 1906: 104.

111 Malden 1880: 223.

112 cf. *ibid.*: 226: ‘Crossing the Kabul River is no light undertaking, as we know by the unfortunate accident to the Hussars recently.’

113 Masson 1842 (vol.3): 202.

114 *ibid.*

115 Holt 2005: 133.

Yet soon, the occupation began to crumble<sup>116</sup> – and disaster, when it came, was swift and absolute. The Afghans in revolt; chaos; Burnes butchered; the army in stumbling retreat; the commanders at a loss; all but one of the expeditionary force slaughtered or taken prisoner. The Afghan expedition was one of the greatest military catastrophes in British history; ‘never before, perhaps, had the British Government been so insulted and so outraged.’<sup>117</sup>

(Harlan, deprived of his throne in Ghor, watched the campaign unfold and made caustic remarks about the generals’ ‘feats of valour rivalling the victories of Alexander.’<sup>118</sup> ‘I recur to the maxim – “The calamities of England are blessings to America.”’)<sup>119</sup>

Masson left Afghanistan before the disaster, and resigned his post as a ‘news-writer.’ Later in life, he remembered the time with barely-comprehending anger:

It was the general opinion in Kabâl, that if a *single* British officer had accompanied the Shah in 1834 that he would have been successful [in restoring the Shah to the throne, the overt aim of the invasion] – and I could understand that there was truth in it. A *single* British officer might have done as much in 1838. [...] But when Mr. Secretary Macnaghten became inspired by the desire to acquire renown and to luxuriate in Kabâl, the extensive armament was decided upon, which was utterly unnecessary, and which has conducted to the subsequent mischief. [...]

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116 cf. Yapp 1980: 272ff.

117 Kaye 1851 (vol.2): 110; cf. also Ewans 2002: 47-50.

118 Harlan 1842: 2.

119 *ibid.*

It is to be hoped that the good sense of the British nation will never again permit such expeditions as the one beyond the Indus, to be concerted with levity, and to be conducted with recklessness; and that the experience acquired from disasters, may be made beneficial in placing [...] affairs in very different hands from those who have so wilfully abused the power confided to them and whose rashness and folly in plunging the country into wars ruinous to its reputation may yet be punished.<sup>120</sup>

Today, Alexandria of the Caucasus is ringed about with barbed wire, its ancient sites covered over with concrete – for Bagram airbase, the principal NATO outpost in Afghanistan, has been constructed atop the plain.

### *Nysa*

Though he had found much and achieved much, Masson still longed<sup>121</sup> to set eyes on one city, as he had for years – the one which hovered between fact and fiction as artfully as himself; Nysa, the city of the god. For a moment, before the war, he believed that he was close.

Masson was living in Kabul, and had made the acquaintance of the ‘very influential and powerful’<sup>122</sup> Táj Máhomed Khân. Most prominent Afghans owed ‘Hâjí Khân, as commonly called,’<sup>123</sup> considerable things. ‘On more than one occasion,’ he had even preserved the then-ruler of Afghanistan,

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120 Masson 1842 (vol.1): vii-xii.

121 cf. British Library MSS. Eur. E. 168, f.4.

122 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 316.

123 cf. *ibid.*: 305.

Dost Mahomed, ‘from being blinded, if not put to death, by his brother.’<sup>124</sup> The khan was marching north. Masson would go with him. He had heard stories of Bamian – of huge statues carved out of the rock; perhaps of Buddha, perhaps of long-lost kings or gods. Only a handful of Europeans had ever glimpsed them, and none had been able to read them with confidence.<sup>125</sup> Some thought that they might mark a city of Alexander.<sup>126</sup>

The khan took eight hundred soldiers, two cannons, an elephant, and several mysterious strangers – who were somewhat disconcerted to find themselves in competition with one another, along the way. Masson was particularly galled by one ‘pert Hâjî, of Hindustan. This man had visited Persia, and Asia Minor, and being particularly loquacious, would sometimes, uninvited, enter into a narration.’<sup>127</sup> The Haji could match Masson tale for tale; his journey was sometimes an uncomfortable one.

Then, Bamian. Two huge niches carved into a cliff-face; two huge statues, reaching fifty-five metres in height, staring serenely down. Masson, at last, was overawed. He spent days walking along the cliffs, sketching the landscape,<sup>128</sup> trying to decipher the statues from half-remembered books read once in embassies and deserts, and on the decks of transport-ships. He wanted to believe that this was a city of Alexander – that these were statues of ancient kings – but he could not. He knew that they were Buddhas; and though he wondered briefly whether ‘the Greeks of Bactria and Nysa adopted partially

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124    *ibid.*

125    *cf. ibid.*: 383.

126    *cf. Masson 1842 (vol.2): 392-3*: ‘Bamian has been conjectured the site of Alexandria ad Caucasum’; British Library MSS. Eur. E.167: 2, f.50 discusses ‘an identification of it [Bamian] with the Orthospanum of Alexander the Great.’

127    *Masson 1842 (vol.2): 354.*

128    For Masson’s sketches of Bamian, *cf. British Library MSS Eur. G.42.*

[or] totally the Buddha'<sup>129</sup> (this part of his diary is faded and smudged, almost indecipherable), he was soon certain that his city remained elusive.<sup>130</sup> The ghostliness of remembrance comes down again<sup>131</sup> – veiling both Charles and Alexander.

One night, at Bamian, the khan took Masson aside, and spoke of dreams. ‘The khan explained, that he was favoured by visions, and had been instructed in them that he was to become a great man; that the country [...] was “bí-sáhib,” or without a master; and he proposed that he and I should benefit by such a state of things, and turn ourselves into pádshâh and vazír.’<sup>132</sup>

Masson did not long for a crown; he wondered, and smiled, and refused the fearsome khan with care. In Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King*, his echo – the red-bearded drifter Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan – has no such scruples, and sets out for the north of Afghanistan to found an empire for himself. ‘We are not little men,’ he and his companion – who calls Harlan to mind – say, ‘and there is nothing that we are afraid of except Drink, and we have signed a Contract on that. *Therefore*, we are going away to be Kings.’<sup>133</sup> (Their adventure ends poorly.)

One morning, after his dinner with the khan, Masson went out at first light, and walked for miles around the cliff, until he was at the top, directly above the head of the tallest Buddha.<sup>134</sup> Then he gingerly lowered himself down, an inch at a time, and began to chip delicately at the rock above the statue’s head. He left Bamian with a lingering smile, a few short days later.

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129 British Library MSS. Eur. E.168: 3.

130 cf. Masson 1842 (vol.2): 383-4. Masson argues that ‘there can be no doubt of the resemblance’ between the statues and images of Buddha.

131 For the perpetual uncertainty which hangs over Masson’s engagements with Alexander, cf. Forrest (ed.) 1906: 167.

132 Masson 1842 (vol.2): 360-1.

133 Kipling 1897: 559.

134 Holt 2005: 147.

He departed into uncertainty – Nysa never found, though excavations at Bagram advanced; never quite the ‘second Alexander,’ though first Burnes and then Harlan<sup>135</sup> claimed that role for themselves. After he returned to Britain in 1842, few traces of his life can be discerned: a petition here; a furious note scribbled in a margin there;<sup>136</sup> so faint a film of memory that it is almost transparent. ‘It is to be hoped,’ one admirer wrote, ‘that the season is not very remote when intelligent and enterprising Englishmen may follow unrestrictedly in the footsteps of Mr. Masson, and [...] complete the restoration to ancient history of [...] Bactria and Western India.’<sup>137</sup> Yet no-one has ever known just where those footsteps passed. It is an uncertainty which the man who used to be James Lewis laboured many years to create; the gradual obliteration of a self, the task of a decade and a half. It was only finally made possible through the mirror-image of Lewis’s project of oblivion – the success of Masson the archaeologist, the excavator and narrator of antiquity. In relationships with the past, as both Lewis and Masson discovered, forgetfulness may require as deep an effort as remembrance.

The interdependency of remembrance and forgetfulness, and the dialogue between them, structure many relationships with the ancient world; one making the other possible, just as it was for Masson (or should that be Lewis?). Classical reception is enriched by an awareness of that dialogue, and its potential: Lewis balanced on the edge of oblivion for many years, while never losing his fascination with the past, and brought back a long-lost city, and a new self. Far from an unequivocal memory-project, reception is often a process made passionate (made necessary) by loss.

By March 2001, the Buddhas of Bamian had survived for over one and a half millennia. That

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135 cf. Harlan 1842: 209.

136 cf. Whitteridge 1985: 161.

137 Wilson 1841: 50.



month, dynamite, artillery fire and machine-guns reduced them to rubble, on the orders of the Taliban.

[Figure 2: *The absent Buddhas of Bamian.*]<sup>138</sup>

Now, the rubble has been cleared, the empty niches remain – and all that remains of the statues are outlines in the rock, showing where once they stood. Visiting dignitaries and NATO officers come to Bamian as to a memorial, to fix in their memories the place where the Buddhas no longer are; fascinated by what has been lost (Figure 2). It is doubtful whether any of them can discern, above the largest niche, two lines of verse high upon the cliff. Never mentioned by their author, unknown for a hundred years, missed by the Taliban, they endure – a lasting memorial to an imagined self:

If any fool this high *samootch* explore,

Know Charles Masson has been here before.<sup>139</sup>

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138 NATO [online]. Available at: <http://www.nato.int/pictures/2007/070416a/b070416at.jpg> [Accessed June 2011].  
139 cf. Holt 2005: 147-8.

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