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THE RECEPTION OF T. S. BAYER'S *HISTORIA REGNI GRAECORUM BACTRIANI* (1738)

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“The Greeks got into Troy by trying ... everything is done by trying!”

Theocritus, *Idyll* 15.61–62.

Theophilus (Gottlieb) Siegfried Bayer (1694–1738) is usually credited as the first person in modern times to address the history of the Greeks in Bactria in a serious way.¹ Bayer's *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani: in qua simul graecarum in India coloniarum vetus memoria*, brings together numismatic and historical research. He describes two Graeco-Bactrian coins which he was able to examine first hand, and collects and comments upon the Classical historical sources on the Greek kingdoms of Bactria and India. It was published in St. Petersburg in 1738, where Bayer, a German, held an academic position. In this short article, I am interested in two questions surrounding the *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani*. First (and relatively briefly), how Bayer conducted his research without first hand access to source material and without himself travelling in Bactria – or indeed further east than St. Petersburg. Secondly, the way in which Bayer's scholarship was received by some of his contemporaries and by later writers, outside the field of Bactrian studies – which was at that time more or less his sole preserve. As we shall see, Bayer's work was still, in some quarters, being cited as the major modern work on Bactria almost a hundred years after its first publication.

¹ Holt 1999, 72–73; Coloru 2009, 33–40. (I am grateful to Omar Coloru for sending me a copy of his book, which first introduced me to many of the sources discussed here.) On Bayer and his scholarship see Babinger 1915 and Lundbæk 1986. His papers are held in the Special Collections Department of Glasgow University Library

In terms of his scholarly training and intellectual development, Bayer followed a trajectory which might be familiar to many modern historians of Bactria. He started his career as a Classicist, but in the early 1730s, in St. Petersburg, he made a conscious decision to move beyond the Classical Mediterranean world. In a letter of 29 June 1732, he declared to his fellow German Classical scholar, Johann Matthias Gesner (1691–1761): “Good-bye Muses! My heart, deserting Greece and Rome, is set on the Barbarians!”² In 1735 he gave up his chair in Greek and Roman Antiquities and took up a position in Oriental Antiquities.

Despite his Classical background, Bayer approached Bactria via China, and his Bactrian studies date to this period, the last few years of his life, when he had made a conscious decision to divert his attentions from the Classical world to the Orient. What Bayer principally meant by going over to the barbarians, in fact, was studying Chinese, although he published on a wide range of Near Eastern and Asian languages. Bayer was one of very few Europeans at the time who had access to materials on the Chinese language, through his earlier studies in Berlin where some relevant manuscripts were kept and his subsequent correspondence with Jesuit missionaries in China. This correspondence was tortuously drawn out. Letters were carried across Siberia between St. Petersburg and Peking, and a year or more might go by between missives. The information he gleaned from such sources and informants was not sufficient for Bayer to actually ‘learn Chinese’ in any real sense, and he was very clear that his own writings, such as the *Museum Sinicum*,³ were not adequate for learning the language and were not intended as instruction manuals.⁴ His self-declared intention was to gather, order and disseminate what information there was available to Europeans on Chinese grammar, vocabulary and script so that others might build on his work. As I shall discuss below, more intensive contacts between Europe and China meant that his work was in fact superseded relatively quickly.

One might take from this that Bayer had the kind of talent and desire to create order and rationality out of apparent disorder which might suit him to treat the lacunose literary and numismatic sources on Bactria. He was an exceptionally hard worker, a very wide-ranging and un-blinkered academic, and deserves further credit for his willingness to ‘have a go’ at straightening out a poorly researched subject such as the Chinese language and seeing what useful directions scholarship on it might take. In the preface to the *Museum Sinicum*, and on several occasions in his personal letters, he quotes from the Hellenistic poet Theocritus:

² Quoted by Lundbæk 1986, 152.

³ Bayer 1730.

⁴ Lundbæk 1986, 5.

εἰς Τρόην πειρώμενοι ἤλθον Ἀχαιοὶ πείρα θῆν πάντα τελεῖται, ut aiebat anus Syracusia.

“The Greeks got into Troy by trying ... everything is done by trying!” as the old Syracusan woman said.⁵

One might well also read this as Bayer's mission statement for his work on Bactria.

Bayer's Bactrian studies stemmed more directly from another of his research interests, numismatics. By the time he came to work on Bactria, he had already published one eastern 'history from coins', of the state of Osroene in upper Mesopotamia.⁶ This was followed in 1737 with an article *De Re Numaria Sinorum*.⁷ The coins discussed in this study had been acquired by the Russian statesman Count Osterman (1686–1747) from Peking. The great achievement of the *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani*, however, was in its integration of numismatic and historical evidence.⁸ Bayer worked from two coins which were also available to him locally, in the collection of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. These were a supposed tetradrachm of Eukratides – later shown to have been a drachm⁹ – and a bronze of Menander, erroneously attributed to Diodotos. Very few Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings are mentioned in Classical histories, but Eukratides and Diodotos – and indeed Menander – are among those who are. Bayer thus had the opportunity both to identify these coins as Bactrian and to contextualise them historically, and, incidentally, to put together a compendium of and commentary on the Greek and Roman sources. Throughout his discussion, he displays the same combination of frustration and dogged determination expressed by other historians of ancient Bactria since.

The importance and the limitations of the *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani* were recognised by those who built on Bayer's work, but its substance percolated into the European scholarly consciousness less through dedicated sequels and responses – which did not follow for some years – but through reviews and excerpted translations read to various learned societies and published in their journals. The French historian Claude-Marie Guyon, whose history of Parthia (part of a multi-volume *Histoire des empires et des républiques depuis le déluge jusqu'à Jesus-Christ*) appeared in 1741, even appears to have been ignorant of Bayer's work altogether. His brief discussion of the troubles of the Bactrian kingdom in the first part of the second century BC certainly makes no reference to it.¹⁰ It is sur-

⁵ Theocritus, *Idyll* 15.61–62; I transcribe the lines as printed in Bayer 1730.

⁶ Bayer 1734.

⁷ Bayer 1737.

⁸ Bayer 1738, now available online through Google Books. A manuscript copy recently sold at auction for £13,700: Christie's, London, Sale 7471, 14 November 2007.

⁹ Browne 2003.

¹⁰ Guyon 1741, 21, 40–41.

prising that this should have been the case, given that an English publication, the *History of the Works of the Learned*, had carried an advance notice of the *Historia*'s impending publication as early as October 1737:

By our last Accounts of the State of Literature abroad we learn from *Petersburgh*, that they had just finished the Impression of M. *Bayer*'s History of *Bactria*. His *Musæum Orientale*, and his *Latin* Dissertations on the *Seres*, *Saces*, and *Chinese*, were then in the Press.¹¹

This was followed by passing mentions, and several very favourable reviews, in scholarly publications. The *Journal des Savants* announced that:

M. *Bayer*, Professeur à Pétersbourg, Membre de l'Académie des Sciences de cette Ville & de la Société Royale de Berlin, a donné depuis quelques tems une Histoire du Royaume Grec des Bactriens, & c. Cet ouvrage est intitulé : *Historia Regni Græcorum Bactriani, in quâ simul Græcorum in Indiâ Colonialium vetus memoria excolitur. Auctore Theophilo Sigebrido Bayero Academico Petropolitano, & c.*¹²

By the time this, and other reviews, appeared, Bayer was already dead, a fact which the *Bibliothèque raisonnée des ouvrages des savans de l'Europe* lamented as "une grande perte pour la République des Lettres".¹³ The article in the *Bibliothèque raisonnée* provided a very detailed summary of the contents of the *Historia* (it runs to almost thirty pages), reproducing the by now standard rhetoric of the obscure and fragmentary history of the Greek kingdoms of Bactria pieced together through careful scholarly investigation. Even an educated readership are far more likely to have read about Bactria in digests and *comptes-rendus* such as this – in vernacular languages and published in the capitals of western Europe – than in the original Latin volume, issued in the Russian Empire. In 1742, for example, an extract from the *Historia* was published in Italian translation.¹⁴ As late as 1835, an English reference work, *The Penny Cyclopædia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, cited Bayer in several places in its article on 'Bactria, or Bactriana (now Bokhara)' and referred the reader to his work.¹⁵ One might question whether the purchaser of a budget encyclopaedia in early nineteenth-century England was likely to do so.

Less than twenty years after Bayer's work, the tools and resources at the disposal of a researcher into the Greek kingdoms of Bactria were already incomparably richer. This was because of the rapid advances made in European knowledge of China, its language and history. On 7 May 1754, the Orientalist Joseph de Guignes read a paper before the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-*

¹¹ [History of the Works of the Learned] 1737; see Coloru 2009, 33ff., for this and several of the following references.

¹² *Journal des Savants*, March 1740, 560–561.

¹³ [Bibliothèque raisonnée...] 1740, 268.

¹⁴ [Notizie letterarie] 1742.

¹⁵ [Penny Cyclopædia] 1835.

Lettres in Paris, reporting on his 'Recherches sur quelques événements qui concernent l'Histoire des Rois Grecs de la Bactriane, & particulièrement la destruction de leur Royaume par les Scythes, l'établissement de ceux-ci le long de l'Indus, & les guerres qu'ils eurent avec les Parthes'.¹⁶ Like Bayer, and others who have worked on Bactria before and since, de Guignes' scholarly interests were wide ranging.¹⁷ Some of his achievements should be better remembered (his recognition that cartouches in Egyptian hieroglyphic texts contained royal names), others are best forgotten (his theory that ancient China had been settled by Egyptian colonists). De Guignes recognised the value of Bayer's work, as well as its limitations:

[P]ersonne n'a travaillé avec plus de succès que M. Bayer. Son ouvrage, plein de recherches curieuses, renferme toutes les lumières que peuvent nous fournir les auteurs Grecs ou Latins, quoique d'ailleurs il ne contienne presque point de détails, & qu'il soit plutôt une dissertation chronologique qu'une histoire suivie.¹⁸

Bayer had accomplished the fundamental task of collecting and discussing the references to Bactria in the works of Greek and Roman historians. What de Guignes aimed to do was to build on this work by incorporating the data from ancient Chinese sources. Bayer's work was synthetic rather than analytical, and de Guignes' knowledge of the Chinese material enabled him to approach a more specific topic, that of the events of the mid-second century BC, in which the Greek kingdom of Bactria fell to outside invaders. Bayer's *Museum Sinicum* of 1730 had aimed to gather together all the information on the Chinese language and writing system available to European scholars at that date, pieced together from unpublished manuscripts and correspondence with European Jesuits in Peking. But Bayer, in St. Petersburg, was not fully abreast of the latest developments in European Sinology, and the *Museum Sinicum* had become little more than an antiquarian curiosity within only a few years. Christian missionaries were already bringing their knowledge of Chinese – and Chinese converts – back to Europe and a *Collegio dei Cinesi* was established in Naples in 1732. It is in the period following this exponential growth in European knowledge of China, its language, culture and history, that de Guignes was able to undertake his more specialised inquiry into the history of the Greek kingdom of Bactria, and, with the availability of Chinese historical sources, the period of the invasions was one which he considered promising.

What is remarkable is the extent to which, in the mid-eighteenth century, the latest advances in knowledge of the Greek kingdom of Bactria began to reach an audience beyond the learned academies of St. Petersburg and Paris – at least in

¹⁶ Published as de Guignes 1759.

¹⁷ See, most recently, Wolloch 2011.

¹⁸ de Guignes 1759, 17.

some form. Snippets of information about the history of Greeks in Bactria were presented to the readers of various more popular publications as novel factlets, curiosities, the sort of arcane scholarly exotica which a gentleman at leisure might find diverting. The British journal *The Critical Review* (1756–1817), for example, offered a review of de Guignes' study presented so as to entertain the reader, or perhaps to enable him to bluff his way in drawing room conversation.¹⁹ The comment that "Greek authors only mention it [Bactria] at random" has a curious kind of naïve truth to it. The obscurity of the topic was evidently attractive to the reviewer, even if the typographical errors in his transcription of the French title suggest that he was perhaps not in a position to fully appreciate it. "The reader, who desires further satisfaction," he proposes, "will find his trouble recompensed in the perusal of the memoir." As with the later perusers of the *Penny Cyclopædia*, one might wonder how many of his gentleman readers ever sought out the original publication.

The article's context gives us good reason for such scepticism. Although the piece in *The Critical Review* has a respectful and scholarly tone, this is not representative of the content of the journal as a whole. It counted several notable philosophers and thinkers among its contributors, but alongside more serious work it also reviewed guilty pleasures – which it feigned with varying degrees of credibility and sincerity not to enjoy. "As novels go," one reviewer sniffs, "the Adventures of Sylvia Hughes may be thought tolerable".²⁰ This same volume for 1760 – the one in which the piece on Bactria also appears – contains everything from 'Short Animadversions on the Difference now set up between Gin and Rum' to 'A friendly and compassionate Address to the Methodists'.²¹ But although *The Critical Review's* content tended towards the catholic, it was more puritanical in its intellectual judgements:

This is the æra of nonsense, when the press groans under a multiplicity of absurd, foolish, and ridiculous publications, that disgrace a nation distinguished by foreigners for its good sense and learning.²²

Its appreciation of de Guignes' work on the history of Bactria must be understood as part of the journal's avowed programme for the nation's intellectual improvement. It was only in the following century, in the context of British and Russian imperialism in India and Central Asia, that more in-depth research – both amateur and academic – into the lost Greek kingdoms of Bactria would be conducted and disseminated. In St. Petersburg in the early eighteenth century Bayer had been able to study coins which had arrived there through circuitous

¹⁹ [A Society of Gentlemen] 1760, November, 392–393.

²⁰ [A Society of Gentlemen] 1760, November, 486.

²¹ [A Society of Gentlemen] 1760, 74, 249.

²² [A Society of Gentlemen] 1760, July, 79.

routes – through correspondence with Europeans in Peking, or indirectly through various routes and markets from Central Asia, a region into which Russian imperialism had yet to make substantial inroads. From the late eighteenth century onwards, the number of European travellers, soldiers and spies (who were often all three) who journeyed through the former Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek territories, and brought back curios and artefacts which they had acquired there, grew exponentially.

For the modern historian of ancient Bactria, the importance of Bayer's work goes above and beyond simple precedent, although it is of course fundamental and ancestral to all Bactrian studies since. Bayer's work remains relevant, and potentially instructive, because of his scholarly agenda – in the *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani* and other studies – of reclaiming an obscure topic, making it accessible to a wider audience, and persuading this audience that it can be made knowable. This, in some ways, has been the task of every historian of Bactria since. We might relate Bayer's programme, for example, to W. W. Tarn's attempt, in his *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (first edition 1938), to reclaim Bactria as part of the wider Hellenistic world.²³ Tarn (who was not, as far as I am aware, familiar with Bayer's work) sets out to do this in large part because he believes that previous studies have made Bactria exotic and foreign to an extent that impedes it being considered as part of a real political and cultural world. Another direct parallel between Bayer's and Tarn's work is in the preface to *The Greeks in Bactria and India*:

A word must be said here about the sources, though they will sufficiently appear as the book proceeds. They are of course very scrappy. But they were not always scrappy. ... [A]s there was once a tradition, it is somebody's business to attempt to recover the outline of it.²⁴

Tarn characterises the history of Greek Central Asia and India as hopelessly muddled, and while he admits that he does not have mastery of the range of languages and scholarly disciplines to do the topic justice, assumes the basic task of getting the material in order and finding something practical to do with it. In both of these connected aims – redeeming Bactria's reputation for obscurity and exoticism and ordering the source material – present-day historians are still working towards these same goals.

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²³ The programmes of both Bayer and Tarn are discussed by Holt 1988 and Holt 1999, *passim*.

²⁴ Tarn 1951 [1938], xxi.

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Abstract

Theophilus (Gottlieb) Siegfried Bayer (1694–1738) is usually credited as the first person in modern times to address the history of the Greeks in Bactria in a serious way. Bayer's *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani*, brings together numismatic and historical research. He describes two Graeco-Bactrian coins which he was able to examine first hand, and collects and comments upon the Classical historical sources on the Greek kingdoms of Bactria and India. It was published in St. Petersburg in 1738, where Bayer, a German, held an academic position. In this short article, I am interested in two questions surrounding the *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani*. First (and relatively briefly), how Bayer conducted his research without first hand access to source material and without himself travelling in Bactria – or indeed further east than St. Petersburg. Secondly, the way in which Bayer's scholarship was received by some of his contemporaries and by later writers, outside the field of Bactrian studies.