



HELIOCLES I

HELIOCLES I, the last Greek king to reign in Bactria (ca. 145-130 BCE; Āy Kānom] in Afghanistan, the French excavators showed that, once the Greek establishment of the city was burnt down, the Greek settlers never returned. The absence of any coin of Eucratides II, Plato, or Heliocles I in hoards or in stray finds from Ai Khanum is remarkable. Far from being a chance coincidence, the fact that the issues stop with Eucratides I's reign is surely explained by one event, the nature of which became clear through the excavation: a sudden catastrophe which struck the city, burning down the palace and bringing the existence of the city to an end.

It is quite likely that the destruction of the Greek city of Ai Khanum was the result of a first attack on the Greco-Bactrian kingdom by the nomads and that this event would have taken place immediately after the assassination of Eucratides by his son around 145 BCE. One is therefore led to assume that the cause of this tragedy was an invasion by the peoples of the steppe, which occurred precisely at a time when Chinese records mention large-scale movements of tribes traveling westwards from northwestern China and southern Siberia. The Chinese imperial Annals (the *Shiji* and the *Han Shu*) provide us with texts based on a report made by a certain Zhang Qian, an envoy of the Han emperor Wudi to the Western provinces between 138 and 126 BCE. He tells us about the arrival in Central Asia of the Yuezhi in the second half of the 2nd century BCE, a conquest which took place progressively in two stages. The numismatic data provided by the Qunduz [Kondoz] and Ai Khanum hoards would thus corroborate the different stages of this advance.



In the first stage, the Yuezhi nomads must have taken first the territories situated north of the Oxus, i.e., Sogdiana, the region of Aï Khanum at the eastern extremity of the plain of Bactria. The second stage of this move must have already been completed at the time of the visit by the Chinese ambassador Zhang Qian in these regions in 129-128 BCE. The Yuezhi, once they occupied a certain territory, copied the coinages of their Greek predecessors. Most of the coins in the Qunduz hoard are indeed posthumous imitations of Eucratides I and Heliocles I. The series of bronze coins imitating the bust of Heliocles I belongs to the category of later imitations.

The final conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that, once they had been completely overpowered by the Yuezhi around 130 BCE, the Greeks had no further control at all over the provinces north of the Hindu Kush; and Heliocles I was the last Greco-Bactrian king.

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