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Celebrating Alexander the Great's lost world

In the mountains of Hindu Kush, on the Pakistan and Afghan border, live Kalash people. Blond-haired and blue-eyed, the 'lost children of Alexander the Great' is how they are often referred to.

The remote valley of the lost children of the Macedon emperor was only one of the numerous stops on seven filming trips to Alexander's lost world that Australian photojournalist and filmmaker David Adams conducted over six years.

After being launched in Northern Europe, the UK and Germany, the David Adams Films' documentary series of six episodes, *Alexander's Lost World*, was launched on 13 August on the History Channel in Australia and New Zealand.

The series follows Adams on his trip through war-torn Afghanistan and Central Asia. Adams and his cameraman are the first men who have dared to follow the 1,500-mile course of the mighty Oxus river, the final frontier of Alexander the Great's empire, to uncover the turbulent history buried there.



David Adams in search of the real Bactra, Kafir Kala (Blasphemers Fort), Zadian Afghanistan. Photo: Greg Nelson.

Wrapped up with a head scarf, with their Afghan driver and guide in front of the vehicle, the two-member crew spent a total of over six months of filming, spread over six years and seven trips.

In the History Channel series, fortresses of the Oxus civilisation, unseen for millennia, have been rebuilt for the first time on TV; the course of the river Oxus has been shown; forgotten cities are brought to life.

Delving deeper into the incredible history of one of the greatest generals to have ever lived, director David Adams explains, came along with his long time wish to get into Wakhan corridor, the panhandle-shaped area in Afghanistan's northeastern province Badakhshan that reaches up to China.

"The corridor has been closed to regular traffic for over 100 years, until 2004. When that opportunity arose I began researching how to get in and what sort of importance the region had. Quite quickly we realised that no one had actually been to the Wakhan; no one therefore had actually travelled the entire length of the Amu Darya River - or the Oxus river, as Greeks used to call it. Along came the exploration of the civilizations that existed along the ancient river and the realisation that no one had actually told the story of the incredible beginnings before the Bronze Age; going all the way through to the time of Alexander and beyond," director David Adams tells Neos Kosmos.

The research and filming of the series started in 2007, in Volos, Greece. The main countries of the exploration were Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan; but by far the longest period of time the crew spent was in Afghanistan. What makes this documentary series different is not really a retracing of the Macedon emperor himself. What its director Adams was looking at was joining the dots between archaeological discoveries of the river Oxus and its civilization, and the early Greek accounts and descriptions of the East, Central Asia and India, and making sense of those reports.



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"When you bring all these explorers together you get this incredible tapestry of the early exploration of the East. Then Alexander comes and he utilises, or appears to utilise, their reports.

"I have been using Ancient Greek accounts as far as Herodotus, looking at the Iliad and Homer's work, Plato... A lot of those records have sort of been dismissed; a lot of people said that early Greeks didn't have much idea of the geography of the world. But on the other hand, when you have a look into it, their reports are amazingly correct in many occasions. That's what was very exciting. They report about an ancient sea, and there is no sea there today. But if you look at ancient climate change - you realise that the world was very different 2-3,000 years ago," Adams says.

One of the topics interwoven in the six hourly episodes of the series deals with Ancient Greeks having always been credited for giving civilization to the East. Was that really the case, or did Alexander, in his conquests, meet with already rich and developed Eastern civilizations? Whatever the case - it was Hellenism that, with Alexander the Great's conquests, was introduced to the East for the first time.

"That as an idea has now widely been challenged and most archaeologists will say that civilizations already existed there - the pre-Persian empire in Bactria and India were rich developed civilizations long before the Greeks arrived.

"The point we make in the series is that Alexander brought Hellenism to the East, and obviously that world was radically changed from that day. What existed before he arrived were these incredibly unique layers upon layers of civilizations, that go right back to the Bronze Age. When the Greeks arrived they were actually exploring or conquering a Persian world. And 500 or 250 years before them, the Persians had done the same thing - they invaded Bactria and Sogdiana and found much older civilizations.

"It's when you go deeper and you look at things like Zoroastrianism and religious cults, they are all connected. Along the Oxus, you find gods similar to Hellenistic gods, just with different names," Adams explains.

Alexander's conquests did change everything, starting from simply leaving Greek mercenaries in the area for number of decades. But Hellenism, as Adams claims, was really spread after his death, when Seleucus, one of his leading generals, became emperor of Bactria.

Construction of the cities like the one Adams' documentary series explores in episode 4, Ai-Khanoum (possibly Alexandria on the Oxus), are often credited as great cities Alexander built. But in fact, Adams explains, Ai-Khanoum was built later, and Seleucus or his son Antiochus are very likely responsible. After 200 years, those Greek settlements were destroyed. But the influence of Hellenism led on.

"You can see it from the drapery of most Asiatic Buddhists, to everything from nuance in language to behaviours and rituals; these all permeated and can still be found, as far east as Cambodia," he says.



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Going back to the lost children of Alexander, the phrase is a bit of misnomer. Despite the fact there was enough Greeks in the region to put 'a fair amount of blood in that area', as Adams puts it, it appears that these peoples in the remote valleys of Hindu Kush and the Pamir are actually left over from much earlier people, from an Early Bronze Age, and are not descendants of Alexander the Great.

"It was only in the 19th century that their small community converted to Islam and those people are actually blood relatives of the early Central Europeans.

But there is still a good deal - they say two per cent of people in these areas that bear the markers of an ancient Greek genome.

A Western man, filming a series in war-torn Afghanistan while unarmed, returned to Australia with the biggest realisation of his filming trips being that 'we are all very similar and probably want the same things'.

"Everyone is the same, everyone has this desire for peace and this idea to understand other people. And all we think to report about these days is wars, disputes, political and religious differences.

"In Afghanistan, we travelled completely unarmed and relied on the hospitality of locals. It's strange to think about it these days, when a Nepalese man working for the USA, when going to a village to inspect the water, arrives with two armed guards. But behind the war is this incredible ancient culture, that we can all find connections to. The amazing thing I realised about Afghanistan and Central Asia is that those sorts of ancient nuances of culture and hospitality, they are still there. In the West, we are far more nuclear, far more separate, but there - those ancient traditions are alive and well," Adams says.

While the process of making this documentary series starts gaining a clearer frame in my imagination, David Adams appears more of an archaeologist and historian than simply a journalist. He reveals he is a journalist aiming for the qualities of the 18th century 'jack of all trades'.

"The old explorers, in the 18th, 19th century were sort of jacks of all trades, linguists, archaeologists, and historians. Once you start delving into ancient history you've got to find a reference to prove your point. Now, I'm trying to finish the thesis of the story turned into a non fiction book," he tells.

Always in search of indigenous people and their disappearing cultures for new documentaries, David Adams is adamant he is not trying to preserve them from the natural flow of life.

"I don't know if there is much one can do to stop another march of civilization. Or the blending of cultures," he argues.

But what he does with his movies is celebrate a difference.



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"In the West, we get caught up in our technologies, so that we forget there is so much nuance in cultures. There is a lot of wisdom in ancient people and ancient cultures. I think they understand things in perhaps a simpler way - they look at the world in an incredibly beautiful way, which we sort of lost.

"All different types of cultures have unique things to offer. Trying to make films about them, to show that they are not scary, that there is nothing to be feared by an Islamic culture, or tribal people; that we are all so similar. The 18th and 19th century old ideas of race don't exist."

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