



Inscriptions of Greek Wisdom at the End of the World

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The conquering armies of **Alexander the Great** demonstrated the military power of **Macedonia** far to the East, in what now is **Afghanistan**, **Pakistan** and the valley of the River **Indus**. They also spread Greek customs and Greek education as far as their colonies reached. Alexander's conquests of the **East** became quickly the subject of historical narratives, and they were embroidered and turned into legend in the Alexander Romances. It is the **inscriptions** [**epigraphs**] that show, more clearly and with more authenticity than the stories, Alexander's footprints on the ground.



The archaeological site of **Ai Khanoum** in Northern Afghanistan is such a case. Its ancient name was **Alexandria Oxiana** [**pic**] "Alexander's city on the Oxus". It was built on the Southern shore of the **Oxus River** [*now, Amu Darya*], and it controlled both the traffic between North and South, across the river, and between West and East, towards modern Tajikistan and **China**.

As any Greek city, it had an **acropolis** with temples, a marketplace, and a large **gymnasium** in the city Center. Three inscriptions have survived in the ruins of this gymnasium; they were inscribed about **300 BC**, well after Alexander's death. One addresses the 2 gods **Hermes** and **Heracles**, the patron gods of the gymnasium and of the young men who received their education and military training here: clever **Hermes** stands for their intellectual training; powerful **Heracles** watches over their military prowess. In a Greek city military prowess was badly needed.

The other 2 inscriptions [**pic**] belong closely together. They are written in 2 columns. One column, written in larger letters, contains Greek wisdom: "Speak well about everybody." "Become a philosopher." "When a child, behave well. When growing up, learn self-control. In mid-life, be just; in old age, give good advice. When you die, cause no suffering."



This is good advice, then and now, and the young citizens of Alexandria Oxiana might have done well to learn and heed it. But it is more than banal wisdom, as the **epigram** in the other column explains: "These wise words of the famous men of old are shown to all in sacred Delphi: there, **Clearchus** carefully copied them and brought them to the precinct of **Cineas**, to shine far and wide." The "famous men of old" are the **Seven Sages**, and these are their maxims. Or rather, these are some of their maxims: we know more from literary texts, and more must have been inscribed on another block that now is lost.



The **Seven Sages** [**pic**] shown with the chief of the 9 Muses **Calliope** and **Socrates** were philosophers and statesmen of early Greece, such as **Thales** of Miletus, **Solon** of Athens, **Chilon** of Sparta, et al. Early on, they became the symbol of **Greek Ethos**, and as such their teachings were inscribed in **Delphi**, the center of earth and universe [*ομφαλος*]. Literary texts preserve many of their sayings, either as simple lists or embedded in a story; the philosopher **Plutarch** has the Seven Sages dine together and talk on **ethics** in their clipped sentences.

These maxims [αποφθεγματα] did not arrive by chance at the Eastern border of the Greek World; they were brought by one **Clearchus**. We know the man. He, too, like Alexander, was a student of **Aristotle**, and he wrote on the education of the young, and on **Indian** and **Jewish** philosophy. **Clearchus** followed Alexander to the East and served as an educator of the new generation of Greeks who were growing up in **Afghanistan**, the sons of **Macedonian** soldiers and, perhaps, **Afghan women** [*Alexander himself married **Roxanne** page 9*]. **Cineas**, on the other hand, remains unknown - but he had his grave next to the gymnasium, in the middle of the city, and this indicates prominence. Greeks **buried their dead** outside the cities: a grave in the city meant that the dead was worshiped as the founding hero of the new city. **Cineas** must have been a founder of Alexandria Oxiana and died in his city; he remained as an example for the young, to be imitated, as they imitated **Hermes** and **Heracles**, and as they followed the aphorisms of the **Seven Sages**.

Greekness, even on the remote shores of the **Oxus** River, meant bodily and intellectual education, and these **remarkable** inscriptions in ancient Afghanistan are as axiomatic today as then.



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