



The
Oxford
Expedition
to Establish the
Source of the **Oxus**

Honorary Patrons:
The Marquess of Salisbury
Sir Ranulph Fiennes

INTRODUCTION

Somewhere in the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan, the River Oxus rises before, thousands of miles later, spending itself in the wastes of the Aral Sea. Extraordinarily, its exact source is still not known to geographers. Over the last 200 years at least four different sources have been proposed. All are in the Small and Large Pamirs, spectacularly beautiful wildernesses in Afghanistan which Marco Polo called 'the Roof of the World' long before Tibet laid claim to the title. The Pamirs themselves are enormous grassy basins 14,000 feet high, approached only by yak or horse and occupied by a small number of Kyrgyz nomads.

Now, finally, the question of its source can be decided by an Expedition that spends enough time in the Pamirs to apply modern scientific instruments to the question to decide it once and for all. To become a Patron of this Expedition is to help solve one of the last unanswered questions in geography and exploration.

Such questions are rare in a world which has been completely mapped and the lecture at the RGS announcing the discovery will gather a lot of attention.

Right: Horseman in the Wakhan Corridor near No Shaq, a 7500 metre peak © Duncan Grossart





The Oxus, a vast central Asian river that never reaches an ocean, has fascinated explorers and writers for centuries. Robert Byron's book *The Road to Oxiana* is, amongst other things, an account of a failed attempt to see the river. With the Jaxartes it formed what the ancient Persians believed to be the 'Cradle of the Human Race' because it contained the Garden of Eden, thus the original 'Paradise'. Matthew Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*, a poem which in the old days every English schoolboy was forced to know, is set beside it. Curzon, as usual, put it best:

"The Oxus, that great parent stream of humanity, which has equally impressed the imagination of Greek and Arab and which from three thousand years ago, has figured in the Sanskrit Puranas, the Alexander-historians and the Arab geographers has always appealed to me. Descending from the hidden Roof of the World, its waters tell of forgotten peoples and whisper secrets of unknown lands. They are believed to have rocked the cradle of our race."

For the Hindus the Pamir was the source of the Four Great Rivers of Asia¹. Curzon called it the 'cradle of our race' because it features in the stories of the Aryans who are now known as one branch of Indo-Europeans because the Nazis made the label politically and academically toxic, but very curiously the Wakhan contains a prehistoric petroglyph of a swastika, a detail that would have fascinated the Nazi's *Ahnenerbe* (*Himmler's Race Heritage Research organisation*) who sent an expedition to Nuristan in Afghanistan in the 1930s to search for traces of the Aryans.

But Curzon's interest was also more specifically imperial. The Oxus demarcated the southern edge of the Russian sphere of influence and the northern border of British through an 1872 agreement, even though the geography of its upper reaches was unknown. Lord Salisbury, the Prime Minister who later appointed Curzon Viceroy of India, said it involved 'drawing lines on maps where no human foot has ever trod'.

Left-Top: Fat-tailed sheep in Lake Chakmaktin. © Duncan Grossart
Left-Bottom: Prehistoric Indo-European petroglyph in the Wakhan
 © John Mock.

¹ Ganges, Oxus, Indus and Sita (the last possibly the Tsangpo which they mistakenly thought to rise in the Roof of the World region).

However, Colegrave and I wish to argue that Curzon was wrong in his claimed source, the ice cave in the Small Pamir to which he traced the river and for the discovery of which he won the ultimate prize in exploration, the Gold Medal of the RGS. We believe that Curzon inflated his famously superior personality³ with hot air to bamboozle the RGS into accepting his ice cave as the 'true' source of the Oxus and aim by 2019 to have established the source of the biggest volume of water once and for all using modern scientific instruments.

What actually is the source of a river? Is it the largest headwater, or the highest glacier that feeds it or the source of the biggest volume of water?⁴ We believe that the last is the criterion that most people intuitively use and so what we need to do is follow the river upstream and at each junction of two contributory rivers take the one with the larger flow. This was the method Curzon followed but he was unaware that the river Chelab, feeding Lake Chakmaktin, diverges into two streams and thus he did not correctly identify the source of the biggest volume of water.

PREVIOUS EXPLORATION IN THE WAKHAN CORRIDOR

There have been the following significant expeditions to the Wakhan Corridor.

Marco Polo's journey 1270 - 1295

My journey in 2002 and discovery of (for example) the excellent melons that he writes about in northern Afghanistan and salt mine at Taloqan convinced me that whoever was responsible for the relevant sections of Marco Polo's *Travels* had, indeed, been there. One could argue, though, that that person was not 'Marco Polo'⁵. I wrote about my journey to the Big Pamir in the *Spectator* in 2003 and said that he was right about the sheep with huge horns (now called after him), fire burning with a

different colour and there being no birds flying over the passes. Polo also comments on balas rubies and silver being mined here. There are still workings of balas ruby mines in Shignan identified by Bowersox in Tajikistan (see website for scans of his book) but no signs of silver mining and it would be interesting on this Expedition to try and identify where it was mined.

Bernard Goes 1602 - 1603

All we know of Goes is the passages from his diaries preserved by a Jesuit, Ricci, and discussed in Yule's book *Cathay and the Way Thither*⁶. It reads differently to Polo: it consists of very specific and detailed reminiscences of - for example - his Persian cap being snatched and used as a football and of the fearfully narrow road 'at a great height above the bed of a river' which may well be the terrifying track into the Small Pamir that other travellers mention. Polo's book, on the other hand, reads as if it were an excerpt from a medieval Lonely Planet guidebook.

Wood 1837 - 1838

Wood was the first modern traveller to claim that he had discovered the 'source of the Oxus' and located it in the lake known as Sir Kul in the Big Pamir which I visited in 2002. I believe this is the lake identified by Marco Polo although he comments on the fertility of the country around it which is today green but fairly barren and the difference may well be because Polo was travelling at the end of the 'medieval warm period'. His source is marked A on the map.

The Mirza/ Capus

There was a badly documented attribution of the source to a stream marked B on the map by the Mirza, an Indian scout sent by the Indian Trigonometrical Survey, and then supported by a French explorer, Guillaume Capus. This stream runs towards Sarhad from the Little Pamir.

Trotter and Dunmore 1878

The 1873 Boundary Agreement between Russia and Britain set

the main stream of the Oxus as the border between the two empires, implicitly assuming that Wood's identification of the source was correct. However, Dunmore and Trotter visited Lake Chakmaktin and identified its eastern discharge as the source (marked C on the map) which, they speculated, flowed into western China. It does not - the river makes a great sweeping curve to the north and west and joins the Oxus at Roshan.

Trotter, speaking to the RGS after Curzon had announced his discovery of the source, said: 'There are red letter days in everyone's life and one for me was when I thought I had discovered the principal source of the Oxus' but he effectively surrendered that claim to Curzon in 1895.

His claim also rests on the flow at Roshan exceeding that from the Panj and Oxus tributaries flowing westwards out of the Wakhan.

Curzon 1893

Bestriding the other explorers of the Pamirs like a Colossus is George Nathaniel Curzon who pronounced the southern branch of the river at the conjunction at Qala Panj to be the superior (see Expedition Aims) and located the source of that in an ice cave in the Small Pamir: 'I rode up to the source. There the river issues from two ice-caverns in a rushing stream. The cavern on the right has a low, overhanging roof from which the water rushes tumultuously out... I clambered up to the level of the top of the moraine and from there could see the big glacier with its jagged ice towers and pinnacles and crevasses.' This source is marked D on the map.

Right: Sargent's magnificent portrait of Curzon that greets you at the entrance to the Royal Geographical Society in London. ©RGS

³ 'My name is George Nathaniel Curzon/ I am a most superior person/ My face is pink, my hair is sleek/ I dine at Blenheim once a week' mocked his contemporaries at Balliol and nearly one hundred years after his death that is the description most literate people associate with him.

⁴ See Hugh Leach's admirable discussion of this question in his 1986 talk to the Royal Society for Asian Affairs (formerly the more romantically-named Royal Central Asian Society): Hugh Leach (1986) *A ride to Shīwa: A source of the Oxus, Asian Affairs*, 17:3, pp. 265-266]

⁵ As Frances Wood now argues, saying that Polo did not get any further east than Persia and that much of his terminology is Persian, not Chinese. And Humboldt (1769-1859) was also a sceptic.

⁶ Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither: A Collection of Medieval Notices on China* 1866, pp. 213-214.



If Curzon is correct he also needs to be right about the priority of the Wakhjir river over the Little Pamir river from Sarhad. This is not absolutely clear and, like the flow at Qala Panj, has never been measured scientifically.

I believe Curzon was inspired to visit this part of the Pamirs by Younghusband who had been on the Wakhjir pass to China and thus very near this source in 1891. Younghusband then supported Curzon after his RGS lecture, effectively handing the prize of having discovered the source of the Oxus to him. Curzon was subsequently to have a decisive effect on Younghusband's career, most notably in sending him to Tibet in 1905, and illustrates the importance of powerful allies in making a reputation.

Younghusband wrote evocatively of the spell that the Himalayas and Pamirs, the very 'Heart of a Continent', cast on him at their conjunction very near here: 'My feelings can only be understood by those who have penetrated the mountain solitudes of the Himalaya and stood alone, as I did, in the innermost recesses of the mightiest mountains in the world; separated from the haunts of civilisation... Alone, where almost no white men have ever set foot, where all is pure ice, white and unblemished, and where not even the rustle of a single leaf, the faintest murmur of a stream or the hum of the smallest insect, rose to break the spell of calm repose which reigned around.'

Curzon wrote of his discovery to his party leader and later the Prime Minister who appointed him Viceroy of India, Lord Salisbury, the great-great grandfather of our Honorary Patron. Correspondence on his Afghan journey survives in the Hatfield archives and will be incorporated in my book.

Colegrave 2007

Colegrave, travelling in 2007, proposed a new solution to the problem. He identified the source as a river known to locals at the Chelab which, he suggests, feeds both Lake Chakmaktin and the river identified as the source by the Mirza and Capus. This, he argues, 'unifies in the most unexpected way two of the four claimed sources of the river...and calls into question many of the most important calculations by Curzon and





others. In effect, two of the four contenders for the ‘Source of the Oxus’ become one and with a serious claim to be the proper recognised source.⁷

The Chelab thus rises somewhere as yet unidentified in the Small Pamir, provisionally identified as O on the map, and then divides into two: one branch feeding Lake Chakmaktin (and thus providing Trotter and Dunmore’s source); the other heading south-west to Sarhad. He writes: ‘In effect, two adjacent molecules of water could descend the Chelab, as we called the valley, then separate: one heading to Chakmaktin and the other heading west towards Sarhad; and meet again at Roshan-Vomar north of Khorog.’

‘We did not follow up the Chelab Valley. That valuable additional journey is still to be done; the first succeeding traveller will be able to claim the location of the source itself up the mountain to the north.’ This, of course, is one of the Oxford Oxus Expedition’s main aims.

EXPEDITION AIMS

The Oxford Expedition will establish conclusively which of the four proposed sources is the true source of the Oxus, laying to rest a question that has preoccupied geographers since the nineteenth century.

It will do this by measuring the flow scientifically at the following places:

1. Roshan/Vomar
2. Qala Panj.
3. The eastern exit of Lake Chakmaktin.
4. The conjunction of the Little Pamir and Wakhjir rivers.

And then..

5. Finding the source of the Chelab, somewhere on the watershed of the Great and Small Pamirs.

Left: A tributary of the Oxus at Boroghil in the Wakhan Corridor

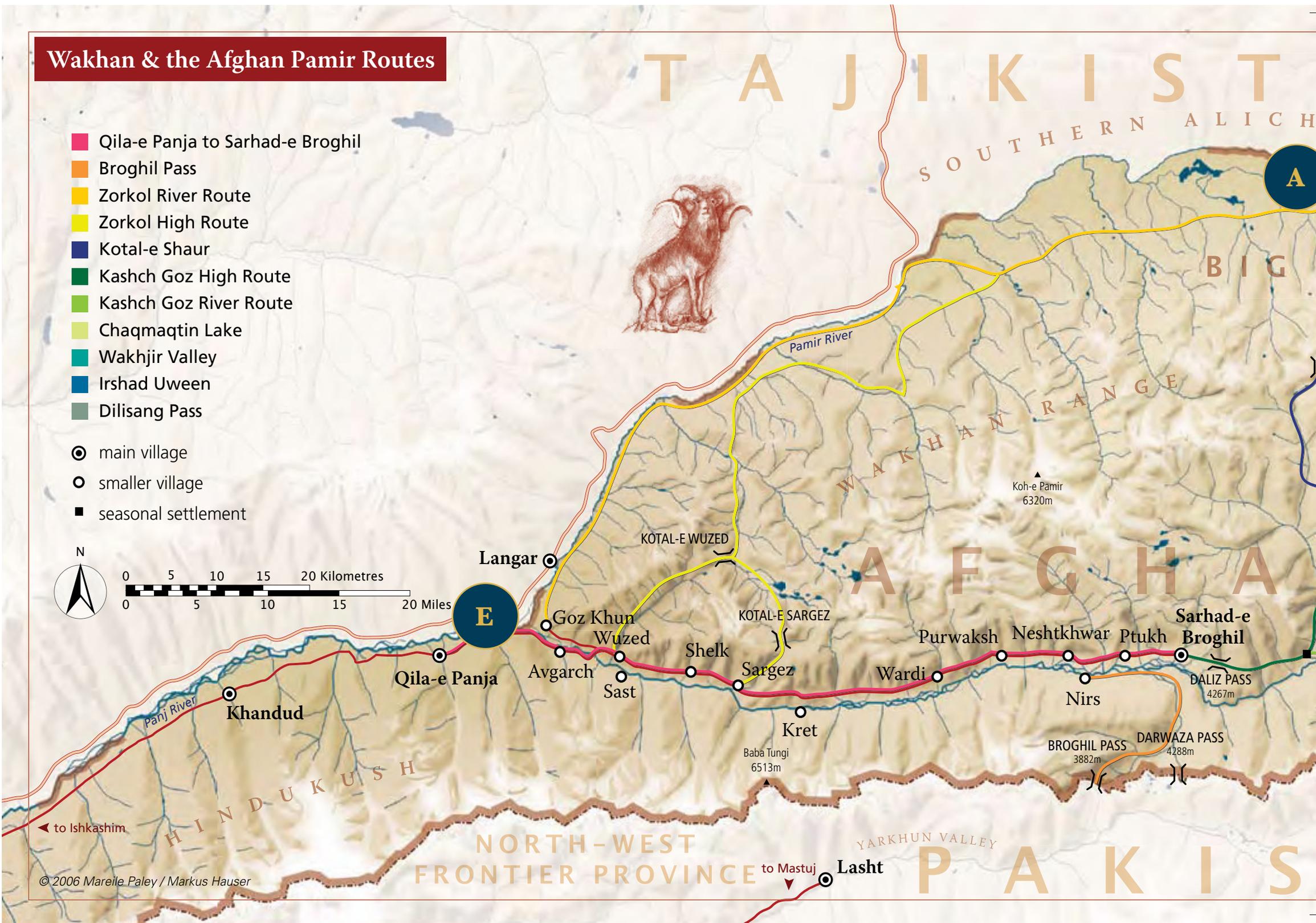
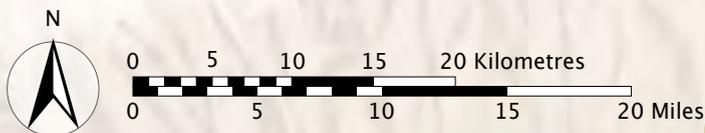
© Duncan Grossart

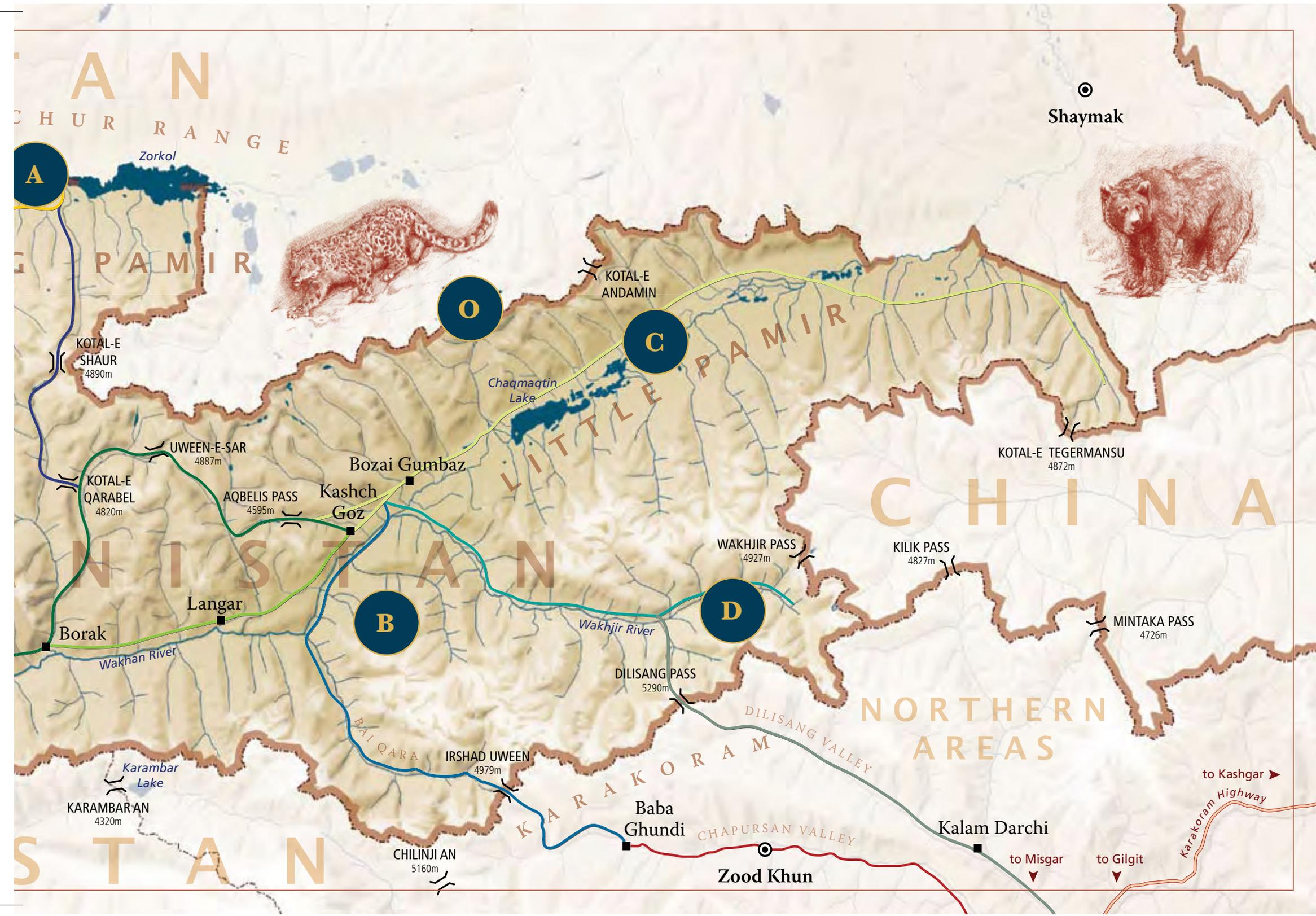
⁷ Colegrave, *Halfway House to Heaven*, 2010 p. 141

Wakhan & the Afghan Pamir Routes

- Qila-e Panja to Sarhad-e Broghil
- Broghil Pass
- Zorkol River Route
- Zorkol High Route
- Kotal-e Shaur
- Kashch Goz High Route
- Kashch Goz River Route
- Chaqmaqtiin Lake
- Wakhjir Valley
- Irshad Uween
- Dilisang Pass

- ⊙ main village
- smaller village
- seasonal settlement







SNOW LEOPARDS

Jack Hewitt, an undergraduate at Oxford University, is joining the Expedition to mount a study of snow leopards and other predators in the Wakhan collecting data that he will analyse with Oxford's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit. Locals told me on my visit to the Wakhan in 2002 that they considered snow leopards a pest because they killed their livestock. This is unfortunate as the International Union for Conservation of Nature puts snow leopards on the Red List and designates the species as Vulnerable with only 2,710 to 3,386 mature individuals in the wild globally. Jack is going to assess locals' interaction with, and attitude to, snow leopards to design an aid project that could help stop their decline. (Leopard-proof sheep pens might be a solution). Another notable species in the Wakhan is the Marco Polo sheep and there are reports that a licensed hunting programme in Tajikistan has led to a rise in the number of sheep and Jack will assess the practicality of this in the Wakhan. The sheep face pressure on grazing from livestock which degrade their pastures and pass on diseases. There are reports that only 1,000 Marco Polo sheep currently live in the Wakhan. His reports on the threats to both species will go directly to President Ghani.

ASCHIANA

I will be raising money for Aschiana by giving talks on my return.

I lived in Kabul for many years and one gets used to the appalling sight of small children begging on the streets for money to buy food for their families. There is a charity that deals with this problem named Aschiana, a word that means 'nest' in Dari.

The founder of Aschiana, Engineer Yousuf, explained how he came to start the charity: 'I was walking home from work and a child asked

¹ www.iucnredlist.org/species/22732/50664030#population

if I needed my shoes polished. I stopped and sat down whilst a child of about 11 began polishing my shoes. I asked him why he was not at school. There was a long pause, the child looked up at me with much anger in his face and replied 'How can I go to school when I have the responsibility of bringing money home to my family. We do not have enough to feed ourselves, how do you think I could pay for school books or clean clothes?' Aschiana pays the children for attending school and gives them a decent lunch.

Aschiana by Andrea Busfield

'In 2005 I moved to Afghanistan. My parents were distraught and my boss thought I was going through a mid-life crisis, but I left London for Kabul because I loved the country, having visited many times before. And among the many reasons I fell in love with the country are the Afghans I met who showed me their world and tolerated all my cultural blunders with patience, good humour and, above all, kindness.'

'Once I was settled in Kabul, I became friendly with three very remarkable young children – Fawad, Ali Reza and Shabnam.

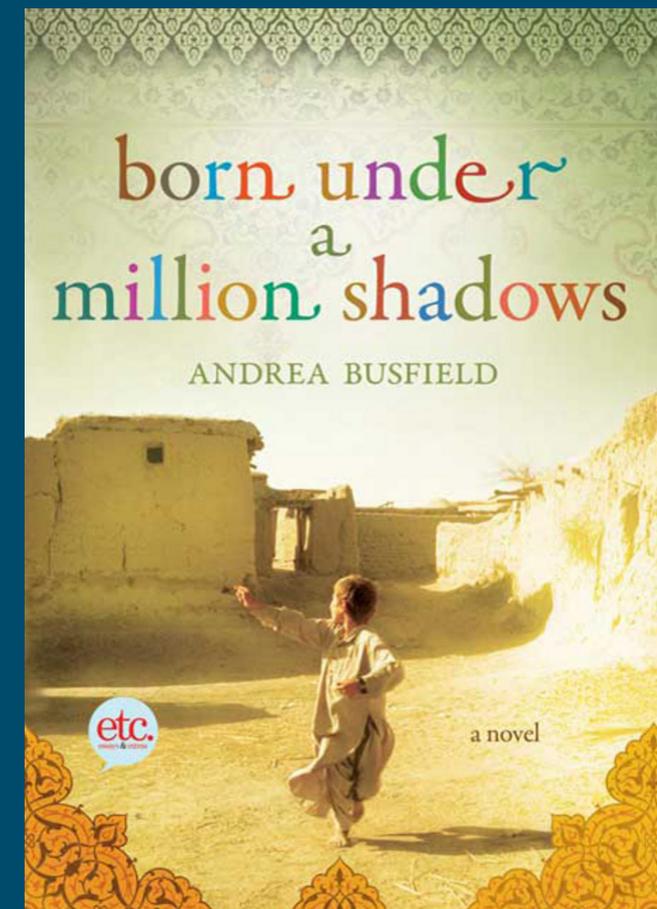
'Fawad acted as my 'bodyguard' during shopping trips to the tourist hub centred around Chicken Street. He was seven years old when I first met him. He had an infectious smile, the right amount of cheek to make him charming, and an incredible command of English learned from the street. In fact, I was so impressed with Fawad, he inspired the main character in my debut novel, *Born Under a Million Shadows*. I then became firm friends with two other children who used to beg for money outside military bases in the city, something that struck me as a fairly dangerous occupation even during those relatively safe days.

'When the time came for me to leave Kabul, I couldn't simply turn my back on these three children who had come to rely on me in some fashion over the three years I'd known them, so I signed them up to a fantastic organisation called Aschiana – a charity that essentially pays street kids to go to school so they can get an education and still provide for their families. This meant that Fawad, Ali Reza and Shabnam continued to get their 'wages' from me, and I got to keep an eye on their progress over the years.

'Thankfully, all three children navigated the difficulties of an Afghan childhood with aplomb and have grown into fine young men and women. We stay in touch to this day – and it's all thanks to Aschiana'

Andrea's first book tells its story through the eyes of 11 year old Fawad, one of the children she sponsored through Aschiana.

Sponsoring one child costs \$1 a day - a tiny amount by western standards but life-changing to a street child giving them food and an education - in short a future.



ROBERT BYRON'S FAILED ATTEMPT TO SEE THE OXUS

The Road to Oxiana, often referred to as the greatest travel book in English, is an account of Byron's ultimately unsuccessful attempts to see the river which then formed the frontier between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. The journey culminated in Afghanistan with this grotesque letter to the Governor of Mazar-i-Sharif:

Your Excellency

Knowing from personal experience that Your Excellency's day is already too short for the public welfare, it is with signal reluctance that we venture to lay before you a trifling personal request.

In undertaking this journey from England to Turkestan - the tedium and exertions of which have been thrice repaid by the spectacle of Your Excellency's wise and beneficent administration - it was our capital object to behold the waters of the Amu Darya, famed in history and romance as the River Oxus and the theme of a celebrated English poem from the sacred pen of Matthew Arnold. We now find ourselves, after seven months anticipation, within forty miles of its banks.

Understanding that an extraordinary permission is necessary to visit the River, we request this permission for ourselves confident that Your Excellency will not be deluded into imputing a political motive to what is but the natural curiosity of an educated man.

The fact that others in their lesser wisdom may be victims of this delusion reminds us that Afghanistan and Russia are not the only countries to be separated by a river. We dare to observe that an Afghan traveller sojourning in France or Germany would encounter no regulations to prevent him enjoying the beauties of the Rhine.

There are indeed countries where the Light of Progress has yet to pierce the night of medieval barbarism and where the foreign visitor must be expected to be obstructed by ill-conceived suspicions. We consoled ourselves during our stay in Persia by the consideration that we should soon be in Afghanistan and should thus escape from a parcel of vain and hysterical women to an erect and manly people, immune from ridiculous alarms and excursions and happy to accord that liberty to strangers which they justly demand for themselves.

Were we right? The answer lies with Your Excellency. Certainly we shall tell of the hotel in Mazar-i-Sharif equipped with every comfort known to the great capitals of the West; of a city in the course of reconstruction on lines that London itself might envy; of bazaars stuffed with all the amenities of civilisation. But are we to add that though Your Excellency's capital holds everything to delight the visitor, nevertheless the chief attraction of the visitor is denied him? That he who comes to Mazar-i-Sharif will be treated as a spy, a Bolshevik, a disturber of the peace, if he asks to treat the shores where Rustam fought? We believe that Your Excellency, jealous of your country's good name, would deprecate such sentiments. We believe, when you have read this letter, they will not be necessary.

But it didn't work and Byron never saw the river that gives his book its name.

The person who did succeed in getting to the Oxus and indeed crossing it at about the same time as Byron failed was Fitzroy Maclean whose book *Eastern Approaches* tells the story. He inspired my redoubtable travelling companion, a diplomat in 1990s Moscow, to emulate his feat. She took me to Herat in western Afghanistan in 1994 from Turkmenistan though we did not thereby cross or see the Oxus. It was 2001 before I actually swam in this legendary river, from the archaeological site of Ai Khanoum which is almost certainly the site of Alexandria-Oxiana, Alexandria-on-the-Oxus, founded by Alexander in 328 BC and settled with his Thessalian cavalry. It was then the front line between Massoud's Northern Alliance and the Taliban. I was the last western visitor to the

site before the Taliban defeat and was treading in the footsteps of French antiquity dealers who were visiting to buy up works of art to sell on the international art black market.

EXPLORERS CLUB

I am very proud have just been proposed as a Fellow of the Explorers Club and will apply to carry the Club Flag on this Expedition. The Explorers Club is a US institution with only 3000 members, founded in 1904 and based in New York.

Its members have a dazzling array of achievements: they were first to the North Pole, first to the South Pole, first to the summit of Mount Everest, first to the deepest point in the ocean and first to the surface of the moon. Peary, Amundsen and Neil Armstrong were all members of this exclusive Club.

Certain Expeditions are allowed to carry one of the Club flags which have flown over both Poles. In order to do so, an Expedition must 'advance human knowledge' by gathering and analysing information and then communicating it to the wider world. In the word's of the Club's charter, an Expedition must 'broaden our knowledge of the universe': mere travel to remote areas is not considered. In this case, we will be finally establishing the source of the Oxus and making a record of the journey public in newspaper articles, lectures to the RGS, Explorers Club, and other bodies, academic articles (the first already commissioned by *Asian Affairs*) and, most importantly, my book originally commissioned by Picador in 2002.

SPINEL MINES

Marco Polo writes of the production of gemstones in Badakhshan, specifically balas rubies saying that the King limited their mining otherwise there would be such an over-supply that their value would collapse. The most famous products of these mines are in the British crown jewels, the Black Prince's ruby and the Tamurlaine ruby, the latter inscribed with the names of its owners which include the famous conqueror.

Bowersox located the workings on the Tajik side of the river, a Kuh-i-Lal and old workings on the Afghan side at Shignan. Marco Polo also writes of lapis lazuli mining in Badakhshan (the 'Blue Mountain' is the oldest continuously-worked mine in the world and I visited in 2001) and silver mining, the location of which is not known.



The Black Prince's Ruby, worn by Henry Vth at Agincourt, on the British Imperial State Crown, from a mine in Badakhshan written about by Marco Polo.

ABOUT ME AND MY AFGHAN TRAVELS

I first went to Afghanistan in 1994 and became involved in a project in Herat to restart the world's oldest tile factory which is located in the Friday Mosque of that city. The interior of the mosque is decorated with dazzling coloured tiles all made at a small workshop inside the mosque. This had run out of the metallic oxides that give the glazes their colours and I was able to get them matched in Stoke-on-Trent and taken out to the factory.

In August 2001 I went back to Afghanistan and travelled around the Northern Alliance-held areas (controlled by the coalition of anti-Taliban forces). I met two Moroccans claiming to be journalists who wanted to interview Massoud, leader of those forces. In fact, they turned out to be two of bin Laden's suicide bombers and on 9th September 2001 they killed themselves and Massoud with a bomb hidden in their camera equipment. I had spent five days living with two of bin Laden's kamikaze fighters and thus had a tiny connection to the horrifying events that unfolded in New York two days later.

I wrote about this meeting in the *Spectator* and that article led to a commission to write a travel book for Picador. That book is extremely overdue but this Oxus Expedition will give me the chance to finish it. I already have about 60,000 words some of which deals with my journey to the Big Pamir in 2002. Then I was told by the locals at Qala Panj that the northern branch of the river was larger - exactly what Wood was told in 1837 and this year I will measure this scientifically.

That year I did another crowdfunded project: western travellers in Afghanistan since Marco Polo have been struck by the small proportion of children with red or blonde hair and blue eyes. Afghans claim they are descended from Iskander's soldiers. Working with University College London I took genetic samples from over one hundred Afghans near the

sites of ancient Alexandria. We did not find any Greek genes. We were able to lay this very old story to rest. The blonde, blue-eyed Afghans that have long fascinated western explorers are not the descendants of Alexander the Great's troops. There is an Indo-European genetic signature, as Wilfred Thesiger and others had suspected, in the Nuristanis.

DID MARCO POLO GO TO CHINA?

Every schoolboy knows Marco Polo went to China and introduced noodles to the Italians or spaghetti to the Chinese, depending on which country their school is in. But every schoolboy could be wrong, according to Frances Wood at the British Library. Polo doesn't mention things that you would expect him to have noticed: foot-binding, tea and the nature of their writing. While in the first edition of her book she doubted Polo's existence she now thinks that it is a compilation of everything that was known about the road to China which was then attributed to a figure whose uncle and father traded with the Mongols.

In my travels in 2002 I found a number of the things that 'Marco Polo' mentions - a salt mine in Taloqan, that fire in the Wakhan burns with a different colour and many people have seen and even hunted the spiral-horned sheep that today bear his name. The expedition website contains a copy of the relevant section of Yule's edition of the *Travels* which Yule annotated based on his knowledge of subsequent western travellers' reports. What is striking, though, is a big gap in the *Travels* before Afghanistan - a gap of 1,500 miles from the Valley of the Assassins to Balkh which omits (for example) Herat. Thereafter, I managed to find all of the things Polo mentions. It will be interesting to travel the Wakhan route with Yule's annotated edition.



MATTHEW LEEMING
OXFORD EXPEDITION TO
ESTABLISH THE SOURCE OF THE OXUS
matthew@oxfordoxusexpedition.com



All experience is an arch wherethrough/
Gleams that untravelled world
Whose margin fades forever and for ever as I move.
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Graphic design by Monchü.
www.monchu.uk

Left: Lake Chakmaktin © Duncan Grossart
Above: Cave fire © Matthieu Paley
Back Cover: A tributary of the Oxus in the Small Pamir © Duncan Grossart



The
Oxford
Expedition
to Establish the
Source of the Oxus