

## The Lost Oasis of Zerzura

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### László Almásy: The English Patient

Zsolt Török in his book *László Almásy, the Real "English Patient."* explains that the eponymous English Patient of Michael Ondaatje's novel, set in the 1930s, has a copy of G C MacCauley's 1890 translation of Herodotus' *History* as a source of information for his exploration of the Libyan desert. The Englishman pastes in pages cut from other books and adds his own observations. His objective was to find the lost oasis of Zerzura!

The hero of the English Patient is based on the real-life explorer, László Almásy (1895-1951), although the book makes no claim to be historic. Indeed, Török says it is often hard to separate the legend of the "Father of the Sands," as the native Bedouins called Almásy, from the truth about his mysterious life. Almásy was in love with the desert, declaring:

I love the desert. I love the endless wasteland in the trembling mirror of the fata morgana, the wild, ragged peaks, the dune chains similar to rigid waves of the ocean. And I love the simple, rugged life in a primitive camp in the ice-cold, star-lit night and in the hot sandstorm alike.

*The Unknown Sahara* [translated by Z Török]

Almásy was born at Bernstein to a Hungarian noble, but not titled family. His father, György, explored inner Asia during the early twentieth century, collecting birds and wildlife specimens. Almásy became interested in the new invention, the internal combustion engine. He attended a private boarding school in England, where, at seventeen, he obtained a pilot's license. He finished up being a motor racing driver and a pilot decorated for his service to the Austria-Hungarian monarchy in the First World War.

His interest in cars led him to test them in the desert. As a representative of the Austrian company Steyr Automobilwerke, Almásy test-drove a car along the Nile from Alexandria to Sudan. In the twentieth-century, the motor car made desert exploration easier than of old, and this led to his interest in the secrets and lore of the Libyan Desert.

Almásy was encouraged to attempt longer expeditions in search of more undiscovered mysteries, namely the three lost wadis (dry river beds) of Zerzura.

## **The Lost Oasis of Zerzura**

Crossing the sands of Libya, he heard the legends of the desert told around the campfire, including the story about the lost oasis of Zerzura. What was it? The *Book of Hidden Pearls*, a medieval Arabic manuscript, *Kitab al Kanuz*, written for treasure hunters, speaks of Zerzura, a place full of gold and treasures in the heart of the desert, guarded by a white bird. Only a brave man could enter the secret village, where in the palace he would find a sleeping queen, to be awakened with a kiss.

In 1969, Emile Schurmacher, a journalist interested in mysteries, explained that the Muslim legend of Zerzura was that, began with a caravan in 1481 AD, wending its way across the desert from the Nile to the oases of Kharga and Darkhla when it was engulfed by an unusually severe sandstorm. Instead of blowing out in a couple of days, this storm lasted over a week and by the time it settled, the caravan, humans and camels, had died of suffocation. Only one man, a camel driver called Hamid Keila shook himself from the shelter of his dead camel and looked upon a plain of sand with just a few bulges and oddments of fabric emerging from beneath it. The caravan had been obliterated.

We know this because months later Hamid Keila turned up in poor shape in Benghazi on the Mediterranean and was able to tell an astonishing tale which was recorded by the Emir's scribes.

The camel driver had climbed the escarpment to get a view of the desert and see whether any oases were accessible. The sandstorm had changed the familiar landmarks and he recognised nothing. He struggled along the scarp hoping that he would get his bearings. Lacking water he was becoming delirious when he was found by a group of men the like of whom he had never seen before. They were tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed. What is more, they carried straight swords not scimitars.

Quizzed by the Emir, the camel driver related his story confidently enough but he always seemed uneasy and rather shifty. The strange men came from a city in the desert called Zerzura where they took the half-dead Keila and treated him with kindness. The citadel was well watered with springs, and vines and palms sprouted. Access was by a wadi that ran between two mountains and from it a road proceeded into the gates of the city, which was walled. Above the gate was a carved bird of unusual appearance and the houses within were white in the sun. Water was plentiful and pools and springs were used by slim light-skinned women and

their children for washing and bathing, and the dwellings were richly furnished.

The people of Zerzura, or El Suri, spoke Arabic but with many peculiar words that the camel driver could not understand until they were carefully explained. The strange people were evidently not Muslim because the women were unveiled and Hamid Keila saw no mosque and heard no muzzein.

The Emir asked the camel driver how he came to be in Benghazi and again looking uncomfortable he said he escaped one moonless night when he had regained his strength, and after a difficult journey north had arrived in the city. The Emir was puzzled and wondered why it was necessary to escape unless he was being held a prisoner. The camel driver was shifty and could not explain why his story was inconsistent, his rescuers having been declared to be kind. The Emir ordered his guards to search the unfortunate man and they discovered in his robes a huge flawless ruby set in a gold ring.

Asked how he had obtained the stone, the camel driver could not answer and the Emir judged that he had stolen it from people who, although apparently infidels, had shown him great kindness. The Emir ordered the unfortunate man to be taken into the desert again and to have his hands cut off. And so he was.

The ring and ruby came into the possession of King Idris of Libya and has been examined by several experts who vouch for its immense value. More important, they declare it to be of European workmanship of about the twelfth century, a date that could link the ring and the apparently Teutonic Arabs with the crusades and the possibility that knights who had got lost in the desert had gone native and survived in their remote idyll. Some parties of crusaders did get lost on the way out to the Holy Land or back from it.

Though it is in the middle of an extremely arid zone, the Gilf Kebir plateau does have water not far below its surface and possibly feeds several surrounding Oases and springs like the Kufra Oasis and, perhaps, Ayn Zuwayyah. The base of the plateau is accessible by road but to enter it and explore it via the steep escarpments is no easy matter.

## **Almásy's Explorations**

In 1929, on a 12,000-kilometer trip in Egypt and the Sudan, Almásy rediscovered an old caravan route—the Darb el Arbain, or Road of Forty—the ancient road connecting Egypt and Africa. Hundreds of thousands of slaves had traveled from well to well down the several-kilometers-wide road. The journey took forty days for the lucky, but the weak died en route, and human and camel

bones mark the ancient road. Almásy was further encouraged in his explorations.

By the time he sought for Zerzura in the early 1930s, only the innermost section of the Libyan desert remained unmapped. Emir Mahmoud had obviously believed the gist of Hamid Keila's story and sent several parties to uncover the lost oasis but none ever did. Would Almásy fare any better?

Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797-1875), an English explorer, heard about Zerzura from the inhabitants of the Dakhla Oasis in Egypt and mentioned it in his writings, as did Gerhard Rohlfs. Harding King wrote "Zerzura was said to lie to the south-west of Dakhla."

Almásy, spoke six languages, including Arabic, and was welcome in the Egyptian king's court. Prince Kemal el Din became Almásy's patron in his search for Zerzura. In 1926 the prince had discovered an enormous sandstone plateau called Gilf Kebir, as large as Switzerland surrounded by steep cliffs. After consulting scientific reports, maps, historical documents, and native Bedouins, Almásy concluded that Zerzura must be somewhere in the unexplored Gilf Kebir region, near the end of the route from the Dakhla Oasis to the Kufra Oasis.

With the exception of the Kufra oases, on its extreme western side, practically the whole Libyan Desert to the south and west of Dakhla was unknown, and labelled on most maps as "impassable dunes", the largest area of unknown ground in the world. What is more the dunes were of a soft yielding sand that even the camels could not negotiate.

The nearest point to Dakhla in the south-western direction was said to have an old road leading from it towards Egypt. The name, Zerzura, suggests a starling, but is also used of any small bird. An unnamed oasis, with a road running back towards Egypt, was marked on the map as lying in this direction, and flocks of birds migrated northwards annually from this part of the desert.

In 1932 a young English baron, Sir Robert Clayton joined Almásy's quest. Wing-Commander Penderel of the Royal Air Force and Patrick Clayton of the Desert Survey, both English, also joined Almásy in an expedition to find Zerzura. Using motor-cars and a light aircraft—Sir Robert Clayton's de Havilland Gipsy Moth I, Rupert—to survey the Gilf Kebir plateau, they found two valleys in the plateau from the air but they could not reach them in their Fords to confirm they were wadis of Zerzura. The party eventually ran out of petrol and water and had to return to Cairo.

Patrick Clayton left to pursue the quest his own way via the Desert

Survey. Clayton approached the Gilf Kebir from the north to look for the valleys seen from the air the previous year. He found the entrance to the main valley, Wadi Abd el Malik, and explored it. Then he went on to the Kufra Oasis, where he met Sir Clayton's young widow, who joined his expedition. Together, they surveyed a second valley.

Almásy's expedition did not set out until March 1933, along with Penderel and other experts. They discovered the Aqaba Pass notched between two sides of the plateau. Almásy led his expedition to the western side of the Gilf, where he discovered Wadi Talh—the third valley of Zerzura. The ancient legend had turned into reality. With the three valleys discovered, Almásy could finally draw Zerzura on the map.

Dr László Kádár, later President of the Hungarian Geographical Society, the geographer of this expedition made several important observations. Prehistoric rock painting sites were found in the Uweinat and Gilf Kebir region at Ain Dua, Karkur Talh and Wadi Sora, south of the Gilf near the present-day intersection of Egypt, Libya, and Sudan. The pictures showed antelopes, giraffes, and even swimmers, which convinced Almásy that the Sahara had not always been a desert. The rock paintings were a scientific sensation and, perhaps, the most important result of Almásy's work.

Almásy later led more desert expeditions in which he explored and surveyed the Gilf Kebir, the Great Sand Sea and the Wadi Hauar in the Sudan. In 1936 he published a scientific account of his expeditions, making reference to Herodotus, the cave paintings and desert scenes.

In 1942, Almásy served as a desert expert for the Axis and led secret missions, including Operation Salaam, when he took two German spies from Libya to Asyut across the desert. Germany needed desert experts during the war and because Almásy's fame had spread to Germany with the publication of his book, *The Unknown Sahara*, he was required to serve as a Hungarian officer in Rommel's Afrika Korps. He made maps, wrote desert manuals, and set up ventures with his reconnaissance patrol.

After World War II he was tried by the People's Court in Budapest and released through lack of evidence. In 1947 Almásy fled Hungary and returned to Egypt with British assistance. He wanted to continue his explorations and find the lost army of the Persian king Cambyses. Herodotus had written about an enormous Persian army that was lost in the Great Sand Sea in the fifth century BC. Unfortunately, in 1951 Almásy died of dysentery in Salzburg just as he had been nominated director of the Desert Institute of Cairo. Almásy's untimely death stopped short his explorations, but he left a legacy of mapping and exploration, and unraveled some of the

last mysteries of the African desert. Among this exploratory work he might well have been an extremely clever double agent.

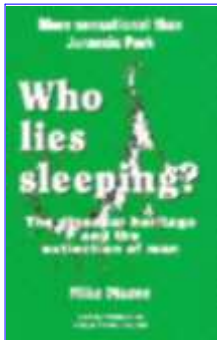
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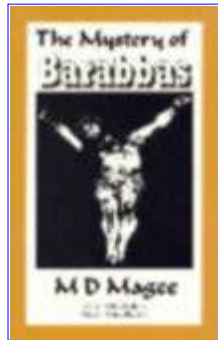
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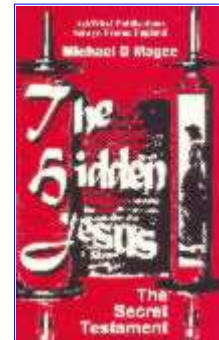
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