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THIS WEEK

Many an admirer of Greek art has felt quietly relieved that the most revered statues of the fifth century are no longer with us. The twelve-metre Zeus at Olympia, like the Athena in the Parthenon, was brilliant with gold and ivory and, as Peter Thonemann writes this week, might easily seem to us “tacky”, or worse. Much better that we can merely read about these monsters and enjoy the sight of elegant marbles instead. One of the books under review, by the Cambridge ancient historian Robin Osborne, makes much of the cultural change that came when gods were given the look and scale of bodies to which humans could not aspire, a shift that “undermines” the divine basis of human morality. Thonemann is sceptical, and prefers to consider the way in which the gleaming giants represented the popular expectation of what a great god among them would look like, noting the persistent power of chryselephantine dreams.



Interaction between man and god has long been a favourite way of portraying danger, the myth of Actaeon, torn apart by hounds after disturbing Artemis in an open-air bath, becoming one of the most popular in European poetry and art. In *Cynthia’s Revels* (1600) by Ben Jonson (above), the goddess is held to stand for Queen Elizabeth I and Actaeon for the Earl of Essex, doomed to be executed in 1601. Brian Vickers, while highly praising Ian Donaldson’s new Life of Jonson as “the first to do justice to the range and complexity of his life”, finds these correlations not quite as simple as is claimed. In our opening piece this week, Frederic Raphael considers the life of the Viennese journalist and novelist, Joseph Roth, whose writings were steeped in the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire after the First World War. Roth was Jewish and from the edge of his ruler’s domains, but reinvented himself as a Catholic from the capital. He had a “sublime double vision” encompassing a wide range of dualities but his best notion of God was “that of the spiritual emperor essential for any gracious hope to remain feasible”. PS

LETTERS	3	Frederic Raphael	Joseph Roth A Life in Letters – Translated and edited by Michael Hofmann
POEM	5	John Kinsella	Wild Ducks, Cambridge
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR	6		Reception in the Classics, Napoleon’s death, Handel in Vauxhall, etc
BIOGRAPHY	7	Brian Vickers	Ian Donaldson Ben Jonson – A Life
CLASSICS	8	Peter Thonemann	Andrew Faulkner, editor The Homeric Hymns – Interpretative essays. Verity Platt Facing the Gods – Epiphany and representation in Graeco-Roman art, literature and religion. Robin Osborne The History Written on the Classical Greek Body Michael Squire The Art of the Body – Antiquity and its legacy
MUSIC	10	Peter Williams	John R. Near Widor – A life beyond the Toccata
RELIGION	11	David Blow	Ali Rahnema Superstition as Ideology in Iranian Politics – From Majlesi to Ahmadinejad
PSYCHOLOGY	12	Andrew Scull	Simon Baron Cohen Zero Degrees of Empathy – A new theory of human cruelty
POLITICS	13	Joseph Luzzi	Maurizio Viroli The Liberty of Servants – Berlusconi’s Italy; Translated by Antony Shugaar. Beppe Severgnini Mamma Mia! – Berlusconi’s Italy explained for posterity and friends abroad; Translated by Giles Watson
COMMENTARY	14	Jan Marsh Jeremy Noel-Tod Rachel Hadas Then and Now	Grave doubts – Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the exhumation poems A wasted opportunity Freelance TLS April 1, 1977 – Re-registering Joseph Roth
ARTS	17	Joseph Horowitz Leo Robson Laurie Maguire	George Gershwin, DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin The Gershwins’ “Porgy and Bess” (Richard Rodgers Theater, New York) The Descendants. Young Adult (Various cinemas) Thomas Middleton and William Rowley The Changeling (Young Vic)
FICTION	19	Alison Kelly Laurence Scott Keith Miller Kate Webb Edmund Gordon	Nathan Englander What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank Ben Masters Noughties Craig Raine The Divine Comedy Will Eaves This is Paradise Peter Hobbs In the Orchard, the Swallows
HISTORY	22	Barbara Donagan Alastair Hamilton Leo Hollis	Charles Carlton This Seat of Mars – War and the British Isles, 1485–1746 Sebouh David Aslanian From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean – The global trade networks of Armenian merchants from New Julfa John Marriott Beyond the Tower – A history of East London
PHILOSOPHY	24	Constantine Sandis Emma Borg	John Skorupski The Domain of Reasons François Recanati Truth-Conditional Pragmatics
SOCIAL STUDIES	25	Lesley Jackson	Gill Saunders, editor Recording Britain
IN BRIEF	26		Paul Morand Tender Shoots. Holly Dugan The Ephemeral History of Perfume – Scent and sense in early modern England. Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse Reasonable Atheism – A moral case for respectful disbelief. George W. Liebmann The Last American Diplomat – John D. Negroponte and the changing face of American diplomacy, 1960–2010. Gustavo Pérez Firmat The Havana Habit. Peter Clark Dickens’s London. Alex Calder The Settler’s Plot – How stories take place in New Zealand. William Gibson Distrust That Particular Flavor
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28	Maureen Bell	Joad Raymond, editor The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture – Volume One: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660
MEMOIRS	30	Ferdinand Mount	Ronald Blythe At the Yeoman’s House
	31		This week’s contributors, Crossword
NB	32	J. C.	James Joyce’s new book, Legal lexicon, Saint Jeanette

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On the south bank of the Zayandarud, opposite Isfahan, the former Safavid capital of Perisa, the frescoed Armenian cathedral, the churches and the merchants' houses still testify to the existence of one of the most prosperous mercantile communities of its time. In 1604 the Persian ruler Shah Abbas I destroyed the city of Julfa, on the Aras just north of the present Iranian border, and deported its population. The suburb of Isfahan the Armenians finally came to inhabit was known as New Julfa. The merchants of the old city were already successful purveyors of raw Persian silk, and that was the commodity in which they and their descendants specialized, under the Shah's protection, in their new homeland. Within an astonishingly short time, they established an international network of extraordinary dimensions. In many of the existing Armenian communities, the immigrants from New Julfa were soon predominant – in Venice, Livorno, Amsterdam, London, Aleppo and, above all, in India – and, before the seventeenth century was out, they had established new ones further afield – in Tibet, China and the Philippines. Their ingenious use of a Russian route for transporting silk from Persia to Europe led to settlements in Astrakhan, Kazan, St Petersburg and Moscow. In the early eighteenth century, they even crossed the Pacific and extended their web to the New World.

In contrast to the European trading companies, which had military support, the New Julfans set up their stations peacefully. Their neutrality enabled them to circumvent the boycotts imposed on one another by the Europeans and to act as go-betweens in the East among the Spanish, the English and the French. Also in contrast to the Western organ-

ALASTAIR HAMILTON

Seboud David Aslanian

**FROM THE INDIAN OCEAN
TO THE MEDITERRANEAN**

The global trade networks of Armenian merchants
from New Julfa

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izations, but like those of the far larger communities of Multani Indians and Sephardic Jews, the New Julfan firms were based on the patriarchal structure of the extended family, their agents bound by the terms of the *commendas*, strict contracts of which the trust resulting from familiarity was an essential component. The merchants of New Julfa, however, formed a relatively small community, probably numbering some 30,000. This, Seboud David Aslanian argues in *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean*, was to be their greatest weakness. Various reasons have been advanced for their sharp decline in the late 1740s. While the Armenians successfully survived the collapse of the Safavid dynasty and the Afghan occupation of Isfahan in 1722, the rapacity of Nadir Shah was too much for them. Faced with exorbitant taxation and the threat of torture and execution during his visit to Isfahan in 1747, they started to emigrate. New Julfa never recovered. But, Aslanian claims, even without the atrocities of Nadir Shah, the community

Silk routes



A detail from a section of tiles on an interior wall, Sacred Bethlehem Church, New Julfa, Isfahan, Iran

could hardly have sustained its success. Its size would ultimately have prevented its expansion, and it would have been unable to compete with the English East India Company later in the century.

One of the most interesting features of the New Julfan merchants is their relationship with the Armenian Church. The church of New Julfa, which initially retained its jurisdiction over the Armenian communities in India and continued to supply the churches in the East with priests, played an important part in holding the New Julfans together, in providing them with information often vital for

their trade, and in cementing the trust on which their network rested. Yet many Armenians proved remarkably flexible in their confessional commitment. It was not unusual for merchants in Spanish-held territory (such as Manila) to convert to Catholicism and then to revert to the Gregorian Armenian faith as soon as they were back in Persia. The great Shahrimanian family, which settled in Venice, the home of the Catholic Armenian Mkhartist congregation, in 1698, and was elevated to the ranks of both the Austrian and the Italian nobility, converted definitively to Catholicism but, despite the hostility this aroused in New Julfa, its members appear to have retained ties with the Persian community. The New Julfans in Spain, Italy and France had no hesitation about frequenting Catholic churches in the absence of churches of their own, and in Cádiz they went so far as to patronize the local religious confraternity of the Brotherhood of Jesus the Nazarene, based in the church of Santa María where they had a chapel. Rome, certainly, pressed for conversion and dispatched missionaries to Isfahan, but in New Julfa, Aslanian shows, the true Catholics remained an exiguous minority.

From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean is a fascinating book. Seboud David Aslanian has been tireless in his consultation of archival sources in India, Armenia and Iran, throughout Europe, and even in Mexico. Most of the merchants' letters are written in the archaic Julfan dialect, still "nearly incomprehensible to most Armenians", which the author is one of the few scholars to understand. One might regret, however, the publisher's choice of an Armenian typeface for the quotations: it hardly does justice to that handsome alphabet.