Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Corto Maltese. The Golden House of Samarkand (Corto Maltese, 7) by Hugo Pratt ", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elzbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/835. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Hugo Pratt

Corto Maltese. The Golden House of Samarkand (Corto Maltese, 7)

Italy; France (1974)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Architecture Bible Cassandra Golden Fleece Greek History Jason Narcissus



We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Corto Maltese. The Golden House of Samarkand (Corto Maltese, 7)
Country of the First Edition	France, Italy
Country/countries of popularity	Italy; Spain; United Kingdom; France; Germany; United States of America
Original Language	Italian
First Edition Date	1974
First Edition Details	Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand (Book 7)*. Milan: Milano Libri, 1974.
ISBN	9781684051861
Official Website	cortomaltese.com (accessed: September 9, 2019)
Genre	Graphic novels
Target Audience	Young adults (teens)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Elzbieta Olechowska, University of Warsaw, elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com

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Creators



Hugo Pratt (1989) by Erling Mandelmann. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 (accessed: January 3, 2021).

Hugo Pratt , 1927 - 1995
(Author, Illustrator)

Graphic novelist Hugo Pratt (15/06/1927 - 20/08/1995) was born in Rimini, Italy, in 1927, with grandparents from England, France, Turkey, and Spain. Aged 10 he went to Ethiopia, where his father was serving in the Italian army. Pratt returned to Italy, to Venice, in 1943, when his father was captured by the British army in Ethiopia and never seen again by his family. Pratt later moved to Argentina, where his children were born. He returned to Italy in 1963 when Argentina experienced an economic crisis. He began illustrating myths for the children's magazine, *Corriere dei Piccoli.* Florenzo Ivaldi then offered to back him financially to work on further creations. He developed the comic book *Sergeant Kirk* and, in 1967, *Sergeant Kirk* featured the character that would make Hugo Pratt famous, Corto Maltese. He moved to France in 1970 and developed the Corto Maltese character further within his own series. Pratt later returned to Italy, and continued publishing Corto Maltese stories until the final one, *Mu*, in 1989. The term "drawn literature" was coined to describe Pratt's work, which raised the level of what was thought possible in graphic story-telling. He moved to Switzerland in 1984 and died there in 1995.

Sources:

Bio at cortomaltese.com (accessed: September 9, 2019)

Corto Maltese Series at penguinrandomhouse.com (accessed: September 9, 2019)

Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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Additional information

Adaptations

France, animation: *Corto Maltese: La maison dorée de Samarkand* (2002) original title.

English language version: *Corto Maltese and the Gilded House of Samarkand*.

Summary

The Maltese adventures typically involve a mission to locate an item of some sort within a challenging environment. In this, the seventh instalment in the series, Corto has heard tell of a manuscript by Lord George Byron the poet which Byron's friend, Edward Trelawny, hid on the island of Rhodes. Corto is on Rhodes to retrieve the manuscript. He locates it without too much difficulty and it contains a map to the "Great Gold" - the treasure of Alexander the Great, which is in the Golden House of Samarkand in "Kafiristan," in what is now Uzbekistan. Corto heads north from Rhodes, taking a boat into the Black Sea, then travelling by land to the Caspian Sea and beyond. High adventure unfolds, as Corto becomes embroiled in partisan struggles between Italian, French, and Turkish soldiers, Yazedi, pan-Turkic nationalists, and Bolsheviks from Russia and elsewhere, as the Caucacus region explodes in conflict. Corto is reunited with Rasputin, whom he knows from a previous adventure. Surviving numerous arrests, battles, and cases of mistaken identity, Corto and Rasputin travel with an Armenian girl whom Corto has promised to reunite with her surviving family and finally reach Samarkand.

Corto tells the girl the story of King Cyrus, who offered treasure for the hand of Queen Tomyris in marriage. The queen killed the king, took the treasure, and hid it. Years later, another king, Alexander, found the gold, had it melted it down and recast in the shape of the sun and re-hid it within a mountain. The adventurers will now recover it. In dark mountain passages, they seem to discover it, but perhaps it is just a mirage. Corto realises that was indeed a hallucination. He takes it very philosophically while Rasputin threatens to kill the other two. Unruffled, Corto looks for a way out of the mountain's tunnels. On reaching sunlight they are met by the British in the form of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, who invite them to travel with them. Corto and Rasputin discuss their plans besides a campfire. Corto is still convinced that the treasure is there somewhere but for now, he will

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travel to reunite the Armenian girl with her family.

Analysis

The ancient world provides a tantalizing promise of adventure, riches, and purpose in this adventure with the wandering sailor, Corto Maltese. Antiquity is both ever-present and always just out of reach. It provides the tantalizing goal that Corto pursues but cannot capture, and an ongoing frame of reference between many of the characters.

The first layering of connection to antiquity is found in the source of Corto's knowledge of the treasure. On the first page of the novel (p. 7, with p. 20), we are informed that Corto is seeking treasure known to Lord Byron and Edward Trelawny. Corto himself is a Byronic figure; their shared interest in the treasure and its connection to the classical past reinforces Corto's characterisation as a latter-day Romantic figure. Another character, Venexiana Stevenson, with whom he travels for some time, compares his journey to a Kipling story (p. 94), *The Man Who Would Be King*, in which two British soldiers search for Alexander's treasure, is explicitly recalled. This extends the framing of Corto's journey to include the classicising and adventure-heroism of the late Victorian-Edwardian era. Although Venexiana is able to interpret Corto's actions in this light, the association is still heavily gendered and it is clarified that Venexiana did not like the Kipling stories but her father read them to her. There is some slight implication that she might have been better off with the fairy tales that her father refused to read rather than with the adventure stories that have contributed to her growing up to be an adventurer. Reference to Kipling and to Byron and Trelawny place Corto (and the author himself) in a tradition of adventurers bewitched by the romance of Alexander and antiquity.

The first frames of the novel feature no humans but classical style statuary of deer (stag, then stag and deer). Corto is the first human character to appear, and he is depicted sitting at ease enjoying his surroundings. The statues help to establish the Greek environment of Rhodes while Corto's apparent comfort suggests both his characteristic calm and an appreciation of aesthetics.

There are other elements which draw out classical hints within the modern world. Corto visits an old friend on Rhodes. She is depicted much like the women in Minoan frescos, with long dark tresses, partly tied back, partly framing her striking face. For readers familiar with

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Minoan art-work, this creates a sense of an eternal Greekness; an ancient Greekness still found in the living world. The woman's name is Cassandra, and it transpires that like her ancient mythical namesake she can predict the future. She reads Corto's future in his coffee grounds; she predicts "terrible things" and describes one of the images of Corto as "a modern day Narcissus." This emphasis on the negative is another reflection of Trojan Cassandra. Unlike his ancient counterparts, Corto does not dismiss Cassandra's predictions, but he does note that they are "not very cheerful", concluding, "it must come with your name" (p. 18).

Cassandra tries to warn Corto about pursuing the mission. She tells him that it will end in disappointment and reminds him, "Cholcis is a mythical land, where Jason himself was left alone and desperate." Corto replies, "Fortunately my name isn't Jason." (p. 22). Corto is showing confidence with his rejection of the relevance of classical mythology, but if the reader senses that the flippancy is a bluff they will have their suspicions quickly confirmed. Corto is taken to the Black Sea by Cassandra's brother. One of the first things the brother does is to offer a sacrifice to "the god of the sea", despite the fact that he is a Christian (p. 22). The first thing Corto does is to ask questions about Cassandra's prophecies. The brother replies that she is good at prophecy but given to prophecies of misfortune, confirming her likeness to her mythical counterpart. Casandra's brother turns out to be called "Narcissus", reiterating the concept of a "modern-day Narcissus" and establishing an embodiment of that idea – the eternal Greekness again – in contrast to its metaphorical use to Corto earlier (Corto is later revealed to have had another friend called "Pandora", p. 67). Corto rejects the notion that he is a modern Jason, but remains troubled by the prophecies. All the prophecies in the novel come true, Cassandra's and those given later by a Yazidi seer (p. 70–71). This reinforces the idea of some vague aspect of antiquity surviving in the modern world.

The sacrifice to the god of the sea made "because you never know" (p. 22), is swiftly followed by a storm which threatens to sink them off the coast near Tarsus. Corto senses the storm coming and secures the vessel, saving him and Narcissus. A classical temple above them on the clifftop seems to oversee their difficulties. Ultimately, however, it is Corto's seamanship, not prayer or sacrifice, which saves the day, and Corto advises Narcissus to get his boat a motor (pp. 24–25). Narcissus then makes a weak joke about St Paul and Tarsus. It is enough to remind the reader of the area's rich history and is a further

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example of shared culture between two men of a different nationality (p. 25).

There is an unanswered question within the novel of how much Corto knows about the treasure and about antiquity more broadly. Through him, its identity shifts depending on the circumstances, reflecting the complex history of the region. The map refers to the treasure as "Tresor D'Alexandre" (p. 19), and Corto recognises the route on the map as being that of "Alexander of Macedon" (p. 20). Once he is further into Asia, however, Corto tells the head of school of Dervish, "I'm looking for the legendary treasure of the Great Persian King Cyrus… hidden by another great… Alexander the Macedonian." (p. 46). That this is a diplomatic way of referring to it rather than the way he thinks of it is confirmed the next time he refers to the treasure, when it is once again the "treasure of Alexander" in conversation with another European (p. 94, with 100). Later we discover that Corto knows more. He tells the Armenian child a story of the treasure, drawing on the Herodotean story of Cyrus and Queen Tomyris of the Massagetae (p. 139; Herodotus, 1.205–214). He says that Cyrus wished to marry Tomyris and offered her a great deal of treasure to persuade her. She rejected him, had him decapitated, and hid the treasure. Alexander later found the treasure, had it melted down, and hid it in the mountain. In the Herodotean tradition, Cyrus does sue for Tomyris' hand, but offers no treasure; after a mutual display of bad faith, Cyrus is killed in battle and Tomyris has him decapitated. Many readers will learn about Tomyris and Cyrus through the story Corto tells the Armenian girl, placing the reader in the child's position, with Corto acting as a provider of information. It is part of Corto's mystery that he knows things but we do not know how he knows them or how much he knows. The act of telling historical stories is itself important for characterisation here too. Corto shows a thoughtful kindness to the girl in telling her this camp-fire story, and this both expresses his good nature and anticipates his decision to focus on protecting the child over pursuing the gold further. This in itself reflects an element of the ancient Herodotean tradition, for the story is told with the moral that Cyrus loses his life in pursuing gain and glory in attacking the Massagetae when he would have been better off protecting what he already had.

Ancient artefacts are briefly glimpsed by the reader and the adventurers before they disappear and are found to have been a hallucination (p. 143). The gold takes the same form as that shown in the depiction of the gold in Corto's story, which had been represented

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visually through stylised line-drawings (p. 139). The gold is a great sphere, intended by Alexander (Corto says) to represent the sun. This is an interesting choice as it would seem to reflect the sun found throughout a lot of Persian art. Ancient amphora is piled beside the gold sphere and next to it a large statue which is decidedly non-Greek and not particularly Persian. It has the head of something like a monkey, raised arms, wings, a serpent's tail, and a pronounced penis and testicles. Whose version of the hallucination is this? Is it Corto's? Is it a shared hallucination? Does Corto imagine Alexander having created a Persian sun image? Why does the statue take this bizarre form? Answers are as elusive as the treasure. Antiquity pervades the story but is ultimately out of reach.

Material promoting the Corto Maltese series frequently refers to him as a "modern Ulysses" (e.g. here and here, accessed: September 9, 2019). This is a relatively fair description as he is a wily sailor who travels on many adventures, although unlike Ulysses he never seems to be seeking a home. This casting of him as a Ulysses works with the association that modern readers are likely to have with that character regarding travel, daring and varied foes. In some instances in *The Golden House of Samarkand*, the association can seem even closer. Corto has a LotusEater/Hades-like experience, for example, in which drugs induce a dream-like state in which he sees those he has loved, and debates with himself (pp. 49-55; *Odyssey* 9.84–96; 11.). We also see Corto's friend, Rasputin, drawn into training troops in a conflict he is an outsider too - a reflection of the events that take place in *The Man Who Would be King* (p. 102). These intertextual elements all work well in their own right and do not need to be fully recognised in order for them to function effectively within the story. Nonetheless, they, and all the many references to the ethnic conflicts in the regions through which Corto passes, with Turks, Armenians, Russians, and Kurds, the mention of Byron and Trelawny, to Cyrus, Tomyris, and Alexander, the Yazidi, the Dervishes, the Hassassins, and Marco Polo, all combine to express the many complex layers of the history and culture of the region, both of enactors and those who have acted as commentators on it. Greek history plays a special role in all of this, it provides the driving frame of the narrative and Corto thinks of the gold as Alexander's although he knows that Cyrus had it first. Ultimately, however, classical antiquity is but one history amongst many and Corto is presented as making the right choice in putting compassion for a vulnerable child above his desire for the celebrated historic gold.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Alexander the Great Architecture Bible Cassandra Golden Fleece Greek History Jason Narcissus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Conflict Freedom Heroism Historical figures Integrity Journeys Masculinity Political changes War
Further Reading	Interview with publisher/translator (accessed: September 9, 2019).
Addenda	Entry based on: Hugo Pratt, *Corto Maltese: The Golden House of Samarkand*, transl. Dean Mullaney and Simone Castaldi, Euro Comics (imprint of IDW Publishing) 2018, pp.144.

Translation:

Simone Castaldi is Associate Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Hofstra University, USA. He is the author of *Drawn and Dangerous: Italian Comics* of the 1970s and 1980s (University Press of Mississippi, 2010). Publisher, Dean Mullaney, edited Castaldi's translations to increase their use of English idiom.

See:

Profile at hofstra.edu (accessed: September 9, 2019)

Interview at cbr.com (accessed: September 9, 2019)

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