

DIP OF THE HORIZON

screenplay by
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ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAINSIDE - PRE-DAWN

Cold. Still. Stars fading out of a graying sky.

AL-BIRUNI (30s, spare build, exact and unhurried in his movements) climbs the last stretch of the slope alone, carrying a wooden instrument case.

A YOUNG SHEPHERD (14), already up with his flock, watches him from a distance. Not wary. Curious, in the way of someone who has seen this before and still doesn't understand it.

Biruni finds his spot. Sets up a homemade quadrant on a modified tripod, working from memory rather than instruction. He is not hurrying, though the light is changing fast.

He sights along the instrument toward the horizon. Marks something on a wax tablet with a stylus. Waits. Sights again.

The Shepherd drifts closer, unable to help himself.

SHEPHERD

What are you looking for?

BIRUNI

(not looking up)

Nothing. I'm measuring what's already there.

He crouches, does not show the boy the instrument's face. Instead he works arithmetic into the dirt with a stick – an angle, a known height, a formula worked through by feel.

SHEPHERD

Measuring what.

BIRUNI

How big the thing is that we're both standing on.

The boy looks down at the mountain under his own feet. Then out at the horizon. He is plainly unconvinced that lines scratched in dirt could know something his eyes can't.

He doesn't argue the point. He just turns back toward his flock.

Biruni looks at the number in the dirt for a long moment – no triumph in it, just a private, settled satisfaction. He packs the quadrant away.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY WORKSHOP, KHWAREZM - DAY

Cramped, well-used. Astrolabes in various states of construction hang from the walls and lie across worktables. Biruni works beside two APPRENTICES on a half-finished astrolabe, running a finger along its rete, feeling for error before the numbers confirm it.

BIRUNI

This star's arm is wrong.

APPRENTICE 1

It matches the tables we copied.

BIRUNI

Then the tables we copied are
wrong.

(beat)

Copying isn't the same as check-
ing.

He recalculates on the spot, quick and assured – the ease of
a man for whom this kind of work costs him nothing.

The COURT ASTROLOGER (50s, unhurried, comfortable in every
room he enters) drifts in, glancing over the shop with the
easy familiarity of someone who's never once doubted his own
usefulness here.

ASTROLOGER

The stars are generous today.

(beat)

Or they will be, once I've fin-
ished with them.

BIRUNI

The stars don't need your help.

ASTROLOGER

(not unkindly)

No. But the ruler does.

Biruni doesn't dignify it with a response. The Astrologer
doesn't need one – he wasn't really asking.

CUT TO:

EXT. KHWAREZM, CITY STREET - DAY

Ordinary life. A market. A canal catching the light. The observatory's dome visible above the rooftops in the background – unremarkable, everyday, the way a thing looks right before you learn you're about to lose it.

CUT TO:

INT. BIRUNI'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Biruni at a low table, notebooks fanned around him in careful disorder. Among ordinary astronomical notes, he lifts out a small clay tablet – Sanskrit characters, copied years earlier from a merchant's ledger.

He can't read it. He's kept it anyway.

Beside it, a page of his own guesses at a few of the characters – visibly revised more than once, crossed out, re-annotated in a different ink. He looks at the page for a while. Doesn't write anything new tonight. Sets it aside, carefully, like something left open on purpose.

CUT TO:

EXT. KHWAREZM, OBSERVATORY COURTYARD - DAY

Smoke on the horizon, thin at first. A sound underneath the ordinary noise of the courtyard – distant, wrong. A horn.

People start moving with purpose. The Astrologer crosses the courtyard at a near-run, all his earlier ease gone.

ASTROLOGER

Ghazni's army. They're not stopping at the gates.

Biruni doesn't run toward shelter. He runs for the workshop.

CUT TO:

INT. OBSERVATORY WORKSHOP - CONTINUOUS

Chaos outside; inside, Biruni is eerily, terribly focused. Saddlebags – clearly not enough room for everything the room holds. He has to choose.

He takes: the portable astrolabe. The notebooks. The clay tablet.

He has to leave: a larger instrument, one we recognize from earlier in the scene – one of the astrolabes he was correcting with the apprentices. He touches its edge once. Leaves it.

GHAZNAVID SOLDIERS enter – not gratuitous, but clearly here to take inventory of a place, not to ask permission. An OFFICER looks over the workshop the way you'd appraise livestock.

OFFICER

You're the instrument-maker.

BIRUNI

I'm an astronomer.

OFFICER

(already turning away)

You're coming with the instruments.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROAD TO GHAZNI - DAY

A displaced column moves under guard – scholars, craftsmen, crated goods. Not quite prisoners. Not remotely free.

Biruni walks near the rear, notebook open even while walking, sketching a star position from memory. Correcting a figure without breaking stride. The work does not stop. Only where it happens has changed.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNI COURT, ANTECHAMBER - DAY

Biruni waits in a line of requisitioned scholars and craftsmen – a mixed, uneasy group. A CHAMBERLAIN moves down the line assigning roles with the flat efficiency of a man taking inventory.

CHAMBERLAIN

(not looking up)

Instruments and tables. You'll work under the court astronomer.

BIRUNI

I'd like to request something else.

The Chamberlain looks up. This doesn't happen.

CHAMBERLAIN

Go on.

BIRUNI

When the campaign goes into India – I want to go. Not with the army. Ahead of it, or beside it. It doesn't matter which. I want to learn the language. Not through translators. Myself.

CHAMBERLAIN

Why would you want that.

BIRUNI

Because a number translated by someone else isn't the same number. I want the number itself.

The Chamberlain doesn't understand this. Doesn't pretend to. But it's strange enough that he's not willing to decide it on his own authority.

CHAMBERLAIN

That's not mine to grant.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNI COURT, AUDIENCE HALL - DAY

Biruni stands before MAHMUD OF GHAZNI – not a monster, not a caricature. A man who has spent his life evaluating what things are for.

MAHMUD

You're the one who wants to learn their language before we've finished taking their cities.

BIRUNI

Yes.

MAHMUD

Most men want the gold first.

BIRUNI

I don't have a use for gold I can't check.

Mahmud studies him. This isn't admiration exactly – more like the mild interest of a man who's found an odd tool that might still turn out to be useful.

MAHMUD

Go, then. Learn what you like. Bring back whatever's useful.

BIRUNI

I intend to bring back what's true. Whether or not it's useful is your problem, not mine.

A beat. Mahmud doesn't react much either way – he's already moving his attention to the next matter in the room, which is itself the point. To power, this whole exchange is a rounding error.

CUT TO:

EXT. GHAZNI, CITY GATE - DAY

Biruni joins a column heading toward the Indus – traveling in the protection of Mahmud's army, but toward a different purpose than the soldiers around him.

He carries the same saddlebags from the workshop. Takes out the clay tablet once. Looks at it. Puts it away.

WIDE SHOT: the column moving out, into terrain none of them have mapped the way Biruni means to map it.

HARD CUT TO BLACK.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

EXT. INDUS FRONTIER, ENCAMPMENT - DAY

Biruni separates from the main column. His escort is thin, provisional – he is tolerated here, not protected.

First sight of Indian territory: a river valley, not a horizon-at-height composition – deliberately different framing from the mountain that opened the film.

In the middle distance, a figure – PANDIT, an ASTRONOMER-PRIEST – works alone with an instrument Biruni doesn't recognize. Biruni watches for a long moment before approaching.

CUT TO:

EXT. OBSERVATORY SITE, RIVER VALLEY - DAY

Biruni approaches on foot, alone, hands visible, no escort in frame. Pandit watches him come with open wariness – every reason to distrust anyone arriving behind Mahmud's army, and he doesn't hide it.

Biruni doesn't attempt charm. He sets down his own saddlebags, unpacks his quadrant, and takes a reading in full view – silent, procedural, exactly as he did alone on the mountain in the film's opening.

Pandit watches the whole sequence without moving.

PANDIT

(finally, testing)

You're measuring the same thing
we measure.

BIRUNI

I don't know yet. That's why I'm
here.

A long beat. Pandit doesn't warm to this. But he doesn't
walk away either.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. OBSERVATORY, WORKING SESSION - DAY

Biruni and Pandit, working the same eclipse prediction in
parallel, each on his own instrument, in his own notation.
Neither explains his method to the other. Neither can read
the other's page.

They finish within moments of each other. Compare results –
not the working, just the final numbers.

The numbers agree.

Neither man says anything for a moment. It isn't triumph.
It's closer to recognition – two people who have just
learned, without yet being able to say why, that they are
doing the same thing.

Biruni's notebook page, glimpsed close: the layout delib-
erately echoes the astrolabe-correction pages from Khwarezm
– same hand, same habits, now describing an instrument he'd
never seen a month ago.

CUT TO:

INT. PANDIT'S HOUSE / STUDY - DAY

Lighter register. Biruni, trying to arrange a second meet-
ing, runs headlong into four incompatible ways of naming
"when." A servant gives one date. Pandit's assistant gives
another. A third figure, consulted for confirmation, gives a
third.

BIRUNI

I am trying to determine a single day. I now have four.

PANDIT

(not quite hiding his

amusement)

You have four systems. The day is the same day.

BIRUNI

Then the day is easy. The systems are the problem.

He sits, and – visibly delighted rather than frustrated – starts building a conversion table on the spot, cross- referencing all four. Pandit watches this happen with something close to affection he isn't ready to admit to yet.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVERBANK - DAY

Brief. Biruni and Pandit walking. The calendar problem leads naturally into the deeper one underneath it.

PANDIT

Your calendar assumes time runs in one direction and ends somewhere.

BIRUNI

Doesn't yours?

PANDIT

Not always. Not in every system I
could show you.

He doesn't explain further here. Lets it sit as an open
door.

CUT TO:

INT. STUDY - DAY

The central scene of the act.

Biruni has been working through a term – PRAMĀṆA – that
keeps appearing in Pandit's explanations of how a claim be-
comes knowledge rather than mere assertion. He proposes an
Arabic gloss for it, something in the region of "proof" or
"evidence."

BIRUNI

If I write it as "proof" –

PANDIT

Then you've written a court docu-
ment. Not what I mean.

BIRUNI

"A means of valid knowledge,"
then. Closer?

PANDIT

Closer. Still not it. Your word
already has a job. It works for a
judge, weighing one claim against
another after the fact. Mine
works before that – it's what
lets a claim be the kind of thing
that could be weighed at all.

BIRUNI

Then it isn't a word. It's a category.

PANDIT

It's several categories, and how many of them count depends who you ask inside my own tradition. Perception counts. Inference counts. Some schools count testimony. Some don't. You're not translating a word. You're translating an argument that hasn't finished happening.

Biruni sits with this. Doesn't immediately write anything. This is new – earlier in the film, the instinct to resolve into a clean note would have been immediate.

BIRUNI

Then I won't translate it.

PANDIT

You have to write something.

BIRUNI

I'll write what it isn't. And why.

He picks up the stylus. On the notebook page – held on camera – he does not write a translated term. He writes, instead, a description of the gap itself: what "proof" captures, what it misses, why no single Arabic word can hold both.

This is the notebook's first entry of this kind in the film: not a record of an equivalence, but a record of a failure to find one, made precise enough to be useful anyway.

CUT TO:

INT. STUDY - NIGHT

Biruni alone, re-reading the page from the day. Old habit surfaces – he begins, almost without noticing, to compress his own note back down into something cleaner, more citable.

He stops. Reads what he's just written. Crosses it out. Returns to the longer, harder version.

No dialogue. The correction is the whole scene.

CUT TO:

EXT. RUINED OBSERVATORY/LIBRARY SITE - DAY

Biruni and Pandit arrive at a site recently destroyed – Mahmud's forces, not long past. Instruments smashed. Texts burned or scattered. The specific, itemized loss of things that cannot be rebuilt from memory.

Shot with restraint. No spectacle. Just the wreckage, walked through slowly.

PANDIT

(hard, not performed)

Tell me what any of it is worth.
The listening. The careful word
you wouldn't write yesterday be-
cause it wasn't exact enough. Set
against this.

BIRUNI

(a long beat)

I don't know.

PANDIT

That's not good enough.

BIRUNI

I know.

No further exchange. Pandit walks the ruin alone. Biruni doesn't follow him into it. The scene ends without reso-

lution – deliberately. Nothing later in the film should be allowed to fully answer this.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNAVID CAMP, TENT - DAY

A visiting CLERIC, aware of Biruni's work, wants it put to use.

CLERIC

You've spent a year learning their errors in detail. Put that detail to use.

BIRUNI

I've spent a year learning what they believe, and why, on terms they'd recognize as their own.

CLERIC

That's a strange thing to be proud of.

BIRUNI

If you want a refutation, you don't need me for that. Anyone can refute what they haven't understood. It's understanding it that takes the year.

The Cleric doesn't push further here – files it away rather than escalating. (Escalation is Act Three's job, not this scene's.)

CUT TO:

INT. STUDY - DAY

Pandit reads a draft passage of Biruni's. Stops. Reads it again.

PANDIT

This is closer to your own
philosophers than to what I told
you.

BIRUNI

(defensive, brief)

It's a translation. Something is
always –

PANDIT

Not this much. Read it again.

Biruni reads it again. We watch him find the distortion himself, a beat late, the way you find a mistake you already half-knew was there. He picks up the stylus and begins revising, in front of us, without further argument.

This is 2.7's counterpart: the discipline he thought he'd internalized alone, shown to still need Pandit's eye. He hasn't arrived. He's still working.

CUT TO:

EXT. OBSERVATORY / STUDY, LATER - DAY

Word arrives – the campaign is concluding, or the political weather has shifted; either way, Biruni is recalled to Ghazni. Practical, unglamorous packing. The felt asymmetry of the exchange sits under everything: what Biruni gets to carry home, and what stays.

CUT TO:

EXT. RIVERBANK / OBSERVATORY THRESHOLD - DUSK

Restrained. Not sentimental.

Pandit hands Biruni a text – something Biruni can't fully use without further help, deliberately left incomplete rather than a tidy closing gift. In return, Biruni offers the clay tablet from Khwarezm – the one he's carried and annotated since before he could read a word of it.

Pandit turns it over once. Doesn't need it the way Biruni needed it. Takes it anyway, understanding the gesture for what it is.

PANDIT

You'll write this without me now.

BIRUNI

Badly, probably.

PANDIT

(not quite warmth, not

quite its absence)

Try not to make it clean.

Biruni nods. No further words. He turns and walks toward the column re-forming behind him.

HARD CUT TO BLACK.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT. GHAZNI, BIRUNI'S QUARTERS - DAY

Biruni back among his own instruments. They read differently now – competence that used to cost him nothing now sits oddly against two years of effort. He unpacks the notebooks from India: the accumulated mess, the unresolved contradictions Pandit told him not to make clean.

He lays them out on the table in some rough order. Doesn't start writing yet. Just looks at the volume of it – crossed-out pages, marginal notes, the second kind of entry from the Pramāṇa scene sitting alongside ordinary translations.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNI COURT, ANTECHAMBER - DAY

A COURT FIGURE greets Biruni with vague, uncomprehending warmth.

COURT FIGURE

They say you learned their whole religion.

BIRUNI

I learned a fraction of it. Carefully.

COURT FIGURE

(already moving on)

Good, good.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNI, SHARED WORKSPACE - DAY

The COURT ASTROLOGER, older now, still doing exactly what he did in Act One – reading the instruments toward whatever answer is wanted. He and Biruni share the space without much conversation. The contrast needs no dialogue: the Astrologer unchanged and comfortable, Biruni visibly changed and visibly tired in a way that isn't about to go away.

CUT TO:

INT. CLERIC'S CHAMBER - DAY

The CLERIC from the Ghaznavid camp – or a superior standing in for him – requests to see the manuscript-in-progress. Direct pressure now.

CLERIC

Nobody is asking you to lie.

BIRUNI

No. You're asking me to leave out the parts that are true and inconvenient. That's a different kind of lying. Not a lesser one.

CLERIC

Consider carefully who reads this, once it's finished. And who decides what you're given to

finish it with.

He doesn't threaten outright. He doesn't need to. The implication – patronage, access, material support, all of it contingent – sits in the room without being named.

CUT TO:

INT. BIRUNI'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

Writing. Not a triumphant montage – a laborious one.

Draft pages fill with cross-outs. The camera holds on the page in extreme close-up at intervals, echoing – deliberately, if a match-cut is achievable – the Sanskrit tablet notes from Khwarezm, then the Pramāṇa page from India, now the manuscript itself. Same hand. Same habit. Increasingly abstract objects.

At one point, Biruni writes a passage, reads it back, and catches himself doing exactly what Pandit caught in the study scene months earlier – smoothing something foreign into something too comfortably familiar. This time there is no one else in the room to catch it.

He crosses it out. Rewrites it harder – a beat longer, a beat more honest – without anyone watching him do it.

Later in the same night, working through material on traditions he encountered only by report rather than direct study, he writes a line acknowledging exactly that – that for some of what follows, he is relying on what he was told rather than what he verified himself. He underlines it, rather than smoothing it into the surrounding text as if it carried the same weight as his firsthand work.

CUT TO:

INT. GHAZNI COURT, AUDIENCE HALL - DAY

Biruni before MAHMUD again. Older. Same transactional register as their first exchange, though something in it has shifted with time rather than with any change in Mahmud himself.

MAHMUD

Two years, and what do I have.

BIRUNI

A book that won't tell you what
you already believe.

MAHMUD

(a beat – almost respect,

not quite)

That's not nothing. It's also not
much.

BIRUNI

It's what's true. I told you
that's what I'd bring back.

Mahmud doesn't stop him. Doesn't praise him either. Already turning his attention elsewhere – the same gesture from Act One, not warmed by two years, only repeated. That repetition is the point: the work's value was never going to depend on this room recognizing it.

CUT TO:

INT. BIRUNI'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

The preface.

Shot as close to one unbroken take as the scene allows. Biruni alone, writing. Both notebooks – India's, and the manuscript's own draft history – present in the room without being shown directly; their weight is in how he writes, not in cutaways to them.

He writes, in his own words (paraphrased here, not quoted verbatim from any historical text): that he intends to set

down what the people of India hold to be true, in terms they would recognize as their own – neither defending it nor refuting it, only representing it as it stands.

He finishes the passage. Sets down the stylus. No one is in the room to witness this. No music swell, no triumphant turn to camera. He looks at the page the way he looked at the number in the dirt on the mountain, at the start of the film: private, settled, no external validation attached to it or needed by it.

CUT TO:

INT./EXT. GHAZNI, VARIOUS - DAY

Brief coda. A SCRIBE copies the manuscript by hand – ordinary, unglamorous, ink and patience. No sense of the book's later importance; just the plain mechanics of how consequential work actually enters the world, one copied page at a time.

CUT TO:

EXT. GHAZNI OR UNSPECIFIED, LATER - DAY

Biruni, aged now, doing something small and specific – measuring, calculating, still at it, still unhurried. No summing-up dialogue. The accumulated craft stands for itself.

CUT TO:

EXT. MOUNTAIN SIDE - PRE-DAWN

The same location as the opening. The same stillness.

A figure climbs the last stretch of the slope, carrying an instrument case – NOT Biruni. Younger. We don't need to know exactly who; it could be the grown Shepherd from the opening, or simply someone new to whom the practice has passed. The film doesn't explain the substitution. It trusts the image.

The figure sets up a quadrant. Sights toward the horizon. Marks something down. The same gesture, exactly, that opened the film – except the man who taught it to no one in particular is nowhere in the frame.

The horizon hasn't moved.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE. END OF SCREENPLAY.

END OF ACT THREE

END OF SCREENPLAY