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Alexander the Great in Iran: The Two Faces of Sikandar

The history of the reception of Alexander’s figure in Iranian myth-historical memory is a very complex one. It is, at least in a simplified approach, a two folded story: the historical memory of Alexander the Macedonian or Greek (and then the Roman Alexander) according to the Persian Zoroastrian writings that mentioned him and the Arabic-Koranic figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn (the Two Horned One), a mysterious figure mentioned in the 18th Surah (the Surah al-Kahf or the Surah of the Cavern) that has been later identified by the Islamic writers (both Arabs and Persians, and later even by the Muslim Turks) with Iskandar or Sikandar of Macedon¹.

The hard evidence in the case of the Iranian legends about Alexander the Great is very late. The earliest Iranian written sources on the figure of the Macedonian conqueror are of Sassanian period and they are followed by the Islamic sources concerning the figure of Alexander the Great/Arabic *Iskandar*. These Islamic sources (or rather, more appropriately, the Arabian and Persian sources of the Islamic Middle Ages) could be divided into narrative sources born out of the Arabic and Islamic tradition (like the 18th *Surah* of the *Koran*, the

¹ There are many variants of the Arabic name Iskandar or of the Persian name Sikandar that reproduced, with a modified spelling and pronunciation however, the Greek name Alexander (Ἀλέξανδρος): Iskander, Sikander, Skander, Iskender, and Skender to name only the main versions that appear in many languages of the Near and Middle East, once conquered by Alexander’s armies: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu, to name but a few (and also in Albanian, an Indo-European idiom of the Western Balkans, which is probably descended from the Illyrian, Southern Thracian, or even Dacian-Moesian ancient Indo-European languages once spoken in the Balkan-Carpathian-Lower Danube regions). This short study is in fact the essence of my previous studies, published between 2013-2015 (although the main part of this article has been written by me in October 2009 as an unpublished communication at an International Conference on oral and written traditions in ancient Greece, organized by the Faculty of History, University of Bucharest). My articles treating this very issue and preceding this study are the following: D.-T. Ionescu, **Alexander the Great in the Persian Legends: From Alexander of Macedon to Sikandar. The Circulation of Mythical *Topoi* between the Greek Alexander Romance and Firdousi’s *Shah-Nameh*** (electronical version only), in the *Chaos e Kosmos* XIV (2013), pp.1-22; D.-T. Ionescu, **Alexander the Great in the Persian legends:from the Pseudo-Callisthenes’s Greek Romance about Alexander of Macedon to the Sikandar of Firdousi’s *Shah-Nameh***, in *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* 2014, 15 (4), pp. 100–117; D.-T. Ionescu, **ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN THE PERSIAN LEGENDS:FROM ALEXANDER OF MACEDON TO SIKANDAR THE CIRCULATION OF MYTHICAL TOPOI BETWEEN THE GREEK ALEXANDER ROMANCE AND FIRDOUSI’S SHAH-NAMEH**, in *MOESICA ET CHRISTIANA | Studies in honour of Prof. Alexandru Barnea on his 70th anniversary Editura Universității din București | 2015 | pp. 507-517.*

Surah of the Cave/*Al-Kahf*) and the Persian epic poems of the 10th to the 15th centuries. The Arabian-Islamic sources in most cases amalgamate the figure of *Iskandar* (Alexander of Macedon) with the mysterious figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* (the One with the two-horns), already mentioned in the *Al-Kahf Surah*. Most Islamic scholars, from the early Middle Ages on, identified the Two-Horned one (*Dhū'l-Qarnayn*) with Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, there are also other interpretations, identifying the Two-Horned with half-prophetic and princely figures of the Pre-Islamic Arabs. However, in the context of the recent surge of Islamic fundamentalism (with deep roots in the decolonization era of the middle 20th century), the figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* it is rumored to have been identified by some Islamic learned clergymen rather with the Great Persian Achaemenian Kings, namely with Cyrus the 2nd the Great and Darius the 1st the Great than with the “Western” or European monarch (ancient Macedonian and Greek) Alexander the Great. Referring to the Islamic Mediaeval Scholars, one must also ponder the cross-influence between the Islamic-Arabic and the Sassanian Middle Persian tradition about *Iskandar/Sikandar*, in the shaping of the figure of Alexander the Great, as it appears in the Persian prose narratives (which were written as well in Arabic as in the new emerging modern Persian language in the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries after Christ in Iran and in the Iranian part of Central Asia, the eastern Iranian vast region known as Khorasan, those lands being conquered by the Muslim Arabs in the middle and late 7th and early 8th centuries CE) and in the Persian epic and heroic poems written in Iran and Central Asia in the new Persian language (references to *Sikandar* appear also in Persian lyrical poems). This is a complex problem of interrelated influences, on which we'll continuously refer in this short study².

We shall postpone a bit the discussing of the figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* of the Koran, insisting instead on the Iranian Pre-Islamic tradition on *Iskandar/Sikandar* (Alexander) and *Dārā* (Darius). The classical theory of Theodor Nöldeke (*Geschichte des Artachšir I Pāpakān, aus den Pehlevi übersetzt, in Beiträge zur Kunde der Indogermanischen Sprachen, Bd. IV, 1878, 36*)³ is that the Persians of the Sassanid era did not remember anything from the Achaemenid history that preceded them, except the name of their last king, *Dārā*, son of another king, named *Dārāb*. He further refined his theory in his *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans* (in the *Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien-Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Bd. XXXVIII. 5, Wien, 1890*). Th. Nöldeke thought

² Casari 1999, pp.3-30 (esp. 9-13).

³ Nöldeke 1878; Th. Nöldeke, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans. Denkschriften der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Phil.-Hist. Classe Bd. XXXVIII. 5, 1890*.

that in Pre-Islamic Iran has occurred a *damnatio memoriae Alexandri Magni*: his main proof was a late-Sassanian compilation of Achaemenian, Parthian Arsacid, and Sassanid history. This book of Pre-Islamic Persian history was entitled *Xwadāy-nāmag* (the *Book of Kings* or rather the *Book of the Rulers*, in the Pahlavī or Middle Persian language). This literary-historical work (or rather a section of it, concerned with *Sikandar* and *Dārā*), lost in its original form (but mentioned and used by later Arabian and Persian authors) was thought by Nöldeke to stem from the Greek Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes via the Syriac translation of the Greek original version. The *Sikandar* section of it was a *Pahlavī* translation of a Syriac text (rather than a direct translation from the Greek original in Middle Persian). Nöldeke's theory was completed by the criticism of the Greek Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, done by A. Ausfeld in his seminal work entitled *Zur Kritik der Griechischen Alexanderromans. Untersuchungen über die unechten Teile der ältesten Überlieferung* (Karlsruhe, 1894). On the contrary, the British scholar Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge considered that the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes was itself a translation made after a Middle Persian (*Pahlavī*) translation of the Greek original⁴.

The very existence of this Middle Persian version (*Pahlavī* or *Pehlevī* Sassanian translation) of the Greek Alexander Romance is in itself a pure hypothesis of E. A. Wallis Budge. We do not have, as far as I know, a preserved Middle Persian text of the Pseudo-Callisthenes (be it an Arsacid Parthian or a Sassanian Persian text); if such a text really existed, which is very possible, it could have been a Middle Persian adaptation or even a direct translation from the Greek text of Pseudo-Callisthenes (and as such the source for the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes, as E. A. W. Budge supposed to be the case) as well as it would have been also a Middle Iranian translation from a Syriac or even from an old Armenian variant of Pseudo-Callisthenes⁵. E. A. W. Budge, basing his assumptions on the

⁴ Budge 1889, *passim* and AA.VV. 1960, vol. III, p.81. Shahbazi 2003, pp.6-7 tries and in my humble opinion succeeds in demonstrating that there is a much longer (and at least for us hidden) Alexander tradition in Pre-Islamic Iran, rather than only the tradition of the late-Sassanian period. However, the existence of that oral and possibly even written tradition on Alexander the Great in the Seleucid, Parthian Arsacid, and Persian Sassanid Iran is only suggested by late Hellenistic oracles, written in Greek.

⁵ Budge/Evans-Wentz 2003, pp. XII-XIII and XX-XXI: E.A. Wallis Budge acknowledges that he firstly believed the Syriac version of the Alexander legend (created, in its two main variants, in the 6th-7th centuries after Christ) was a translation from Arabic. He nevertheless recognizes that Th. Nöldeke has developed a better theory and according to it a Syrian author from the eastern parts of the Syriac speaking area (*i.e.* from Mesopotamia or present day Iraq) had in fact translated the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes from *Pahlavī* into the Syriac language (in an eastern dialect of the Syriac idiom). He has even suspected that a Christian Nestorian proficient in both *Pahlavī* and Syriac did this translation (an example of the bilingual background of many inhabitants of Mesopotamia in the 6th-7th centuries after Christ, who were fluent in both Middle Persian and Syriac, is given by the *Historia Monastica* of Thomas of Margā, according to Wallis Budge). Even more so, Wallis Budge acknowledges his debt of gratitude to the work of Theodor Nöldeke, A. Ausfeld and C.F. August Dillmann. It is also the problem of the Armenian version of the Alexander legend, written by Moses of Khorene

realm of textual hermeneutics, concluded that the Syriac version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes Romance of Alexander was a translation from a Middle Iranian book that contained the Middle Persian form of Pseudo-Callisthenes' Alexander. The Syriac version of Alexander's Romance and its putative Middle Iranian original were both dated in the 6th -7th centuries AD, on the eve of the downfall of the Sassanian Empire and of the Arabian-Islamic conquest of Syria and Persia⁶.

However, this shadowy and hypothetical *Pahlavī* version of the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes was not the only evidence for the existence of a Middle Persian (Sassanian Iranian) tradition about Alexander the Great. The Zoroastrian *Pahlavī* writings of *Bundahišn* and *Denkart/Dinkard* give us a negative image of an "accursed (*gizistag/gizistak*) Alexander the Roman", destroyer of the temples of the Good Faith/Religion (the Zoroastrian sanctuaries of *Ahura-Mazdā* and of the holy fire *Atar*, symbol of the heavenly glory of God) and slayer of the Magi. Interesting to see is the fact that to the Zoroastrians the Macedonian Alexander is already perceived in Sassanian times as a Roman (Alexander the Roman), due to the very fact that the most dangerous enemy and the deadliest western foe of Parthian and

in the 5th century after Christ, considered being the oldest translation of the Greek Alexander Romance in another language. On the basis of the Armenian version the one of the oldest Greek versions (the disappeared Greek version) of Pseudo-Callisthenes' Alexander Romance has been reconstructed (Budge 1889). Moreover, Nöldeke considers the *Pahlavī* version of the Alexander legend of not being older than the 7th century after Christ. A Syrian Christian from what is now Iraq had translated this legend from Middle Persian to Syriac and an unknown Arabian scholar translated this legend from Syriac into Arabic. The *Pahlavī* version is thus the ultimate source for both the Syriac and the Arabic versions of Alexander's legend. The Arabic version of the Alexander Novel became afterwards the basis of the Ethiopic Alexander Romance. This confession of E.A. Wallis Budge makes the original author of the theory Greek- *Pahlavī*-Syriac line of transmission of the Alexander legend to be also Th. Nöldeke, who has previously defended the thesis of a translation from Syriac into *Pahlavī* and therefore of a Greek-Syriac- *Pahlavī* line of transmission of the Alexander Romance. The technical terms (words of Iranian origin) in the Syriac versions of the Pseudo-Callisthenes have eventually convinced both Nöldeke and Budge for the anteriority of the lost *Pahlavī* version of the Alexander Romance to the preserved Syriac variants of the same legend. For an analysis of Alexander's Syriac legend *vide* Czegledy 1957, pp.231-249.

⁶ Budge/Evans-Wentz 2003, p.XXIII and Nöldeke 1890, p.24 ff.: In the Holy Koran (in the *Surah al-Kahf*, the *Surah* of the Cavern or the XVIII *Surah* of the Qu'ran) appears the myth of Dhū'l-Qarnayn (The Two-Horned One), identified by most ulterior Muslim scholars with Iskandar the Macedonian (or the Roman) that is with Alexander the Great. The basis of the Arabic legend about Dhū'l-Qarnayn (later identified with Iskandar) has been most probably drawn by the early Arab Muslim writers (the scribes who transcribed the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the Koranic commentaries or *Hadiths*) in the 7th and 8th centuries after Christ from the Syriac legend of Alexander (namely the so called "Christian Legend", the "Brief Life of Alexander", and especially the older metrical homily on Alexander the Great, attributed to Jacob of Sorugh from the early 6th century after Christ; he died approx. AD 521). According to Wallis Budge (he quotes here a certain Colonel Yule), from the Arabian and later from the early new Persian versions of Alexander's legend, vehiculated by Muslim merchants to South-Eastern Asia (Indochina and Malaysia) appeared a Malay and even a Thai story about Alexander the Great (the Arabian, Persian, and later even the Muslim Indian traders were responsible for this remarkable cultural phenomenon in lands traditionally dominated by the culture of India and the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism; for the Malaysian story about Alexander of Macedon *vide* Bausani 1963). In Egypt also existed a Christian Coptic legend of Alexander the Great, created in all probability, according to Wallis Budge, before the 10th century after Christ. From the Persian epic poem *Iskandar-Namā* of the Persian-Azeri poet Nizāmī of Ganġa (the 12th century after Christ) drew inspiration the Turkish speaking (and writing) poet Tāj al-Dīn Ahmed ibn Ibrahim el-Ahmedi, towards the end of the 14th century after Christ. His poem (an *Iskender-Name*) forms the foundation of the Turkish legend about Alexander the Great.

Sassanian Iran was, at least from the 1st century BC, the Roman Empire, and from the late 4th century AD, the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium. Other Zoroastrian writings, such as the *Ardā Wīrāz-Nāmag/Arda Virāf Nāmak*, *Bahman Yasht*, and the *Vendidad*, as well as the older and Iranian inspired Greek text that was entitled *Oracula Hystaspis*, all these contained fragments about Alexander the Great (the evil Roman man coming from Egypt to destroy the *Ērān Šahr*, the Kingdom of Iran and the Good Religion of Iran, namely the Mazdaean Zoroastrian Faith), seen in an unfavorable light, as a destroyer of the royal and princely families of old Persia, as an arsonist of the kingly palaces of Iran (the memory of the burning down of Persepolis), and also as the conquering western king that ordered sacred Zoroastrian texts to be burned, after translating at least a part of them into Greek and bringing the translations back to Greece and Macedonia. All these Zoroastrian fragmental stories about Alexander of Macedon transformed into Alexander the Roman (*Alaksandar* or *Aleksandar* in Middle Persian will later give *Iskandar*, *Sikandar*, or *Sikander* in the new Persian language) suggest that, at least for the Zoroastrian Iranians, Alexander the Great was the “bad boy” or the villain of their history. In fact, all these written Zoroastrian documents make us believe in the existence of an Iranian Zoroastrian legend about Alexander the Macedonian/Roman as the anti-hero of the ancient history of Iran⁷. All these clues point out to the emergence of an Iranian pre-Islamic legend about the Macedonian conqueror, a legend that was in all probability born out of an oral tradition soon after the death of Alexander himself, transmitted most probably orally in Iran under the Seleucids, and put into writing probably under the Parthian kings (the Arsacid dynasty) or surely under the reigns of the Persian Sassanian *shahanshahs*⁸.

Nevertheless, we cannot have the definitive proof of the birth of an oral Iranian tradition about Alexander soon after his death. Due to the fact that very few Macedonian kings and satraps (if any, with the notable exception of Peucestas in *Persis*) knew the Old Persian language, this Iranian tradition could very well have been both oral and written from the very beginnings, since the Seleucid kings remained ignorant of its very existence due to obvious linguistic reasons (an unknown language and writing could well be a formidable

⁷ *Šāhān šāh* means literally “King of kings” in Middle Persian and at least in the early phase of New Persian this expression has been preserved as such (it originates in the Old Persian Achaemenian royal title of *Xšāyapiya xšāyapiyānām*, although putting the plural Genitive case before the singular Nominative: *xšāyapiyānām Xšāyapiya*). For the Zoroastrian realm of influence throughout the Middle East, *vide* Shahbazi 2003, p.7. See also, for a thorough examination of the cultures of the Near East and their response to Hellenism, Eddy 1961, pp.10-21; for the daemonic nature of Alexander in the minds of devout Zoroastrians, I find very useful the short but thorough article of Gnoli 1995, pp.175-176. As for the development of the Middle Persian epic and legends *vide* Müller 1897.

⁸ Wald, Slușanschi, Băltăceanu 1987, pp.162-163; Wolski 1990, pp.11-18; Wiesehöfer 2011, pp.113-132.

cultural barrier). The culture of the ancient Pre-Islamic Iran was predominantly an oral culture, although there are also written texts in ancient Iranian languages, as the Avestan *Gāpās*, the hymns or songs of praise for *Ahura-Mazdā*, the sacred fire *Atar*, and *Miṭra*, or the Old Persian inscriptions at Behistun (*Bagistān*), Susa, and Persepolis. It is difficult to conceive that a Seleucid or even a Greco-Bactrian king in Eastern Iran would have tolerated a bad press for their illustrious predecessor Alexander (although the Seleucid monarchs were also conscious imitators of the Achaemenids and Antiochus I was the son of Seleucus Nikator by the Iranian princess Apame, the daughter of Spitamenes, who was the hero of the Bactrian-Sogdian anti-Alexander resistance). Whatever were the connections of the Seleucid kings with the Iranian past, in all probability they remained firstly and always Macedonians, in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of their subjects, be they Iranians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Anatolians, or mixed descendants of the European conquerors and colonists (Macedonians, Greeks, Illyrians, and Thracians as well) by local Asian women. Nevertheless, this negative Iranian Zoroastrian legend about Alexander the Great appears to be entirely independent of the Greek Alexander Romance or Novel of Pseudo-Callisthenes, and only distant echoes of this legend can be heard in the Persian Islamic poems. These Persian epics were in their turn heavily influenced by the Arab Muslim tradition about *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* and indirectly by the Syriac and Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes legends on Alexander the Great⁹.

One cannot conclude from this evidence that in Pre-Islamic Iran there was only a negative image of a daemonic Alexander, whose wrath destroyed for a time the glory that was Iran. Tacitus (*Annales* VI. 31) tells us that in the letter written and sent by the Parthian King of kings, the Arsacid Artabanus II, to the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar, there was a phrase in which the Parthian in fact reclaimed from the Romans the territories and lands once ruled by the Great Achaemenid Kings of old and by Alexander the Great: “*reposcerunt...possesa olim Cyro et post Alexandro*”. No more, no less; the Parthian kings (or at least Artabanus II) saw themselves as the rightful successors of Cyrus II the Great and of Alexander of Macedon¹⁰. By adopting the title of Φιλέλλην, the Arsacid kings in fact assumed the Seleucid legacy and with that the inheritance of the Greco-Macedonian-Iranian Empire of Alexander the Great. Ammianus Marcellinus (*Res Gestae* XVII. 5. 5) makes the Sasanian *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) Shapur II to send a letter to the Roman Emperor Constantius II. In that epistle

⁹ Wald, Slușanschi, Băltăceanu 1987, pp.162-163; Grainger 1990, pp.1-4; Yarshater (ed.) 1996, pp.40-55; Yarshater (ed.) 1998, pp.609-614.

¹⁰ Wolski 1990, pp.8-9.

the Persian monarch wrote to his Roman counterpart that “*ad usque Strymona flumen et Macedonicos fines tenuisse maiores imperium meos antiquitates quoque vestrae testuntur*”. In doing so, Shapur reclaimed his lawful inheritance of the Achaemenid Persian Empire of Darius I the Great and Xerxes, the only Persian “Kings of kings” that ruled over Thrace and Macedonia (*Strymona flumen et Macedonicos fines*) and probably also the legacy of Alexander’s empire that stretched from Macedonia and Thrace till Eastern Iran, Central Asia, and Northwestern India, all over Southeastern Europe (the Balkans), Western Asia, and Egypt. In invoking the authority of the Greek and Roman historians (“*antiquitates quoque vestrae testuntur*”), Shapur clearly hinted at the great Achaemenian monarchs of the distant past and possibly also at Alexander the Great, recovered unto the Persian history and glory for external political and propaganda necessities. It is obvious that the “King of kings of Iran and Non-Iran”, to quote the official title of the Arsacid *Shah shahans* (*Šāh šāhān*) and Sasanian *Shahanshahs* (*Šāhānšāh*), were very keen to remember to themselves and remind to the Romans about the ancient and present power and glory of Iran, especially when they felt themselves strong and the Romans were in Persian eyes not so powerful as in the by-gone days of an Augustus or of a Trajan¹¹.

Another important strand of Middle-Eastern tradition about Alexander the Great is represented by the Islamic lore on *Dhū’l-Qarnayn* and *Iskandar*. The first evidence is provided by the *Koran*, in the form of the 18th *Surah*, the Cavern’s *Surah* (*Surah al-Kahf*). In this *Surah al-Kahf* (the 83-97 verses) is mentioned the legendary figure of *Dhū’l-Qarnayn*, The Two-Horned One. This mythical hero is not explicitly equated by the *Al-Koran* with *Iskandar* (Alexander of Macedon), although the ulterior Muslim writings (other than the *Koran*) make this assumption. Nevertheless, the basic tenets of the *Iskandar* Islamic legend are already there in the myth of *Dhū’l-Qarnayn* in the *Koran*. These main topics are the conquest of the four corners of the world (or at least from the rising to the setting of the sun) and the building at the northern frontier of a wall made out of melted bronze and iron, in order to protect a speechless people (or a people who can hardly utter intelligible words, probably a metaphor for an incomprehensible language) from the depredations and havoc wrought by the Gog and Magog (*Jūj wa Majūj* or *Ya’gūḡ* and *Ma’gūḡ* in classical Arabic and Syriac respectively), the heralds of the end of the world. However, in the end, Alexander’s wall (*Dhū’l-Qarnayn*’s or *Iskandar*’s wall, if we choose to think and write in Islamic categories)

¹¹ Wolski 1990, pp.8-9. The Greek and Latin titles of the Iranian kings were βασιλεὺς βασιλέων and *Rex regum*, translating the Old Persian Achaemenian royal title of *Xšāyapiya xšāyapiyānām*, the “King of kings” (*vide* Slušański 1994, vol. I, p.101). The title of Φιλήλλεν could, in a minimalist view, to mean only the right and duty of the Parthian king to defend and protect the Greek-speaking settlers of his realm.

will be breached and ruined, this fact heralding the end of times and the coming of the Last Judgment in Islamic terms. The Muslim esoteric interpretation of this passage of the Koran is that *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*'s wall (the metal wall of the Two-Horned Alexander) represents the Islamic religious law, the *Sharia'h* that is a product of divine revelation, which will last till the end of time¹².

I shall pass by all the intermediate links of transmission of *Iskandar/Sikandar*'s legend in the Muslim Arab and early Muslim Persian tradition (end of the 7th century A.D.-second half of the 10th century A.D.) and I will only mention the main episodes preserved by the Arab-Persian tradition about *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* or *Sikandar* in the Persian-speaking world:

1. The memory of the names of some great Achaemenian monarchs is preserved: Darius (there were three Great Persian Kings with this name) and Artaxerxes (again there were at least three Great Persian Kings thus named; it is also possible that Arses, who reigned after Artaxerxes III Ochus and was poisoned by the eunuch king-maker Bagoas, to have born after coronation the royal name of Artaxerxes IV, and the usurper Bessus, who killed Darius III Codomanus, took also the royal name of Artaxerxes V).

2. The name Alexander (ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος, Arabic *al-Iskandar*) of the Western (for *aṭ-Ṭabarī*, Alexander of Macedon is the Roman conqueror that means the Byzantine Greek invader of Persia) conqueror of Iran remained the same name of the European ruler who fought his decisive battle against Darius (*Dārā*) in Irak, in Mesopotamia, and then married the daughter of the defeated Persian Great King *Dārā*, who was killed by some of his grandees and trusted companions of his royal personal guard. The Persian royal princess' name was mistakenly rendered as *Raušanak* (Rhxane), who was in fact an aristocratic young lady of Bactrian or Sogdian descent and the first official wife (in 327 BC) of Alexander the Great. The Macedonian king and conqueror of Iran will have also one or two Achaemenian royal princesses as official wives (the weddings of Susa in 324 BC) and also an aristocratic Iranian lady, Barsine (Artabazus' daughter and Memnon of Rhodes' widow) as his official mistress (after the battle of Issus and her capture at the conquest of Damascus by Parmenion's troops in 333 BC). In fact, the memory of Darius' daughter Stateira and of her rival and killer Rhxane were conflated in the Arabic-Iranian tradition about Alexander of Macedon.

3. After the conquest of Iran, *al-Iskandar* fought in India, returned to Mesopotamia, and died in central Irak (at Babylon, according to the classical historians, in June 323 BC).

¹² Glassé 1991, pp.22-23.

His body was taken to his foundation, Alexandria in Egypt (*al-Iskandarīya*), in a golden sarcophagus. He did create an united Macedonian-Iranian Empire (that was confounded with the Roman Empire by the later Iranians), but after his death the Persian Empire that was included in his new world empire split in many parts (the age of Alexander's Successors, the *Diadochi* and the *Epigoni*, Διάδοχοι and Ἐπίγονοι for the Greek historians).

This basic scheme will be more or less preserved by later Persian narrative sources interested in the legend of *Sikandar*, the Persian name rendering the Arabic form *al-Iskandar* of the Greek name Ἀλέξανδρος that will become in Latin and later in English and German Alexander. Moreover, *aṭ-Ṭabarī* makes *al-Iskandar* the son of king Philip of Macedon, who was in Persian eyes a vassal of the Great Persian Kings of kings. Alexander (*al-Iskandar*), after succeeding his father as king of Macedon, ceased to pay tribute to the Persian Great King Darius (that was *Dārā*, the son of *Dārāb* and the nephew of *Ardašīr*) and then challenged *Dārā* and utterly defeated him. It even appears that *aṭ-Ṭabarī* knew that *al-Iskandar* was the disciple of Aristotle (*Aristu*, *Arašṭū*, or even *Aristāṭālīs* in the Arabic and Persian sources) and therefore replied to the Persian emissaries seeking tribute that he killed the hen that produced the golden eggs, a clever metaphor of the tribute Macedon once paid to Persia. It is also clear that *aṭ-Ṭabarī* knew the name of the Indian king defeated by Alexander (*al-Iskandar*), a king named *Fūr* (Πόρος or Porus in the classical sources). Alexander also met and discussed metaphysics with the Indian philosophers. Symmetrically, to the 14 years of *Dārā*'s reign corresponded the 14 years of *al-Iskandar*'s reign. Incidentally, Alexander the Great reigned for 13 years (336-323 B.C.) and Darius III Codomanus only for about 6 years (336-330 B.C.). Nevertheless, the depth of *aṭ-Ṭabarī*'s knowledge about Alexander of Macedon could only mean that he or his sources had direct or indirect access to the Greek and Latin sources that wrote about the Macedonian hero, mainly to Pseudo-Callisthenes¹³.

The next great Muslim writer and scholar who wrote about *al-Iskandar* (of course, not exclusively about him) was *al-Mas'ūdī* (died at about 956 AD), who lived and worked at about a generation from the time of *aṭ-Ṭabarī*. *Al-Mas'ūdī*'s main contribution to the Alexander legend is included in his work entitled *Murūğ'al-Dahab* (in fact, in Arabic the title

¹³ Bachmann 2005, pp.10-11. The story of *al-Iskandar* was in Islamic literature a literary genre known as *'ibra* in the Arabic language, that is a model or an example; the Latins would have called it an *exemplum* and the Greeks a παράδειγμα. For Alexander's image in the Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Literature *vide* Abel 1966, pp.119-139; Pfister 1976, *passim*; Goukowsky vol.I, 1978 and Goukowsky vol.II, 1981; Polignac 1984, pp.29-51; Gnoli 1995, pp.175-176; Aerts 1996, pp.69-85; Bürgel 1996, pp.91-107; Deuchler 1996, pp.15-26 for Alexander's role in the heroic mythology of the Christian Middle Ages; Doufekar-Aerts 1996, pp.191-202; Genequand 1996, pp.125-133; Grignaschi 1996, pp.109-123; Hillenbrand 1996, pp.203-229; Kappler 1996, pp.165-190; Polignac 1996, pp.149-164; Sawyer 1996, pp.135-147; Sourdél, Sourdél 1996, p.60; Pfrommer 2001, *passim*; Shahbazi 2003, pp.1-38; Wiesehöfer 2011, pp.113-132; Zuwiyya 2011, pp.73-112.

is longer and translated could mean something as *the Golden Fields and the Mines of Precious Stones*). In his work, *al-Iskandar* appears less as a warrior and conqueror king than as a philosopher (in Arabic *failasūf*, obviously an adaptation of the Greek word φιλόσοφος). He went as far as India in search of knowledge. He competed in practical and also in esoteric wisdom against the Indian sages and holy men¹⁴.

Other important Muslim writers (many of them were born and educated, or at least lived a part of their life in Persia and were of mixed Arabic and/or Persian origin) who have written about *al-Iskandar* and had a significant contribution to *al-Iskandar*'s legend were *al-Mubaššir ibn Fatik* of Cairo, in Egypt, during the Fatimid dynasty (the 10th and early 11th centuries) and *at-Ta'labī* of Persia, born in the Iranian city of *Nīsābūr* (Nishapur), sometime in the 10th century AD and who died around the year (AD) 1035. They wrote also in Arabic and we shall not dwell too long on their writings. Nevertheless, we must mention some interesting *topoi* of their Alexander stories. In *al-Mubaššir*'s text one can find *al-Iskandar* as the son of king *Failafūs* (Philippos) and of the queen *Rūfūyā* (Olympias) and as the disciple of the philosopher *Aristāṭālīs*. *Al-Iskandar* is the victor in the war against king *Dārā* of Persia, who, after the decisive battle won by *Iskandar* and after the betrayal of his great vassals, is eventually slain by them and dies in the arms of *Iskandar*, giving to the winner a quite long sermon (for a mortally wounded and dying man) of how to be a good and righteous king. This entire scene is unbelievable and typical for an Oriental fable. However, many elements of the story are to be found in the Greek and Latin authors, especially in Pseudo-Callisthenes and the writers belonging to the so-called *Vulgata* or Vulgate tradition, stemming from Clitarchus. Interesting is to mention a fact: *al-Iskandar* is explicitly identified here with *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*. Afterwards, he goes to India and fights against king *Fūr* (our *Porus* of the classical tradition) and meets the Indian Brahmins. Here we find *Iskandar* driven by the thirst for wisdom (*hikma*) and knowledge (*'ilm*). To the Brahmins, who asked *Iskandar* the gift of immortality, in order to humble him, the world conqueror answered by affirming his divine mission from Allah (the prophetic dimension of *al-Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*). In the end, *Iskandar* will leave this world as naked as he entered it, a *topos* dear to many a writer from the Christian, Islamic, and even Buddhist traditions (however, the Buddhists and the Hindus refer to other great monarchs, taken as examples from the ancient mythology and myth-history of India). *Al-Mubaššir* appears as one of the earliest Muslim writers who differentiates and binds together the two sides of *Iskandar*: the worldly conqueror *al-Iskandar*, who lives by the sword

¹⁴ Bachmann 2005, pp.11-12.

and the prophet of Allah, *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, whose divine mission is the affirmation before all peoples of the transcendent unity of God. *Iskandar*'s quest for the fountain of Eternal Life or Immortality that makes the world conqueror to be a kind of new *Ghilgamesh* ultimately fails. It is a *topos* associated to *Iskandar* at least beginning from the writings of *aṭ-Ṭabari*¹⁵.

At-Ta'labī wrote in his turn a literary work in Arabic. This book can be integrated in the genre known to the Arabs as *Qisaṣ al-anbiyā'* (*Stories about the Prophets*). Nevertheless, the true heroes of his book are heroines, beautiful women who are the precious stones of his stories. However, an undisputed male hero in his book is again *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, seen as equal in importance with a great man of Islamic history and legend, a huge figure and a cosmic hero for the Shiite Muslims, the fourth khalif 'Alī, the step son or son in law of the prophet *Muhammad* (Mohamed). In this legend, under the counsel of the Archangel Raphael, *Iskandar* asks the sages about the exact location of the Fountain of Immortality/Eternal Life. They replied that it is to be found towards the West, an echo of the 18th *Surah* of the Koran, the *Surah al-Kahf* (*Surah* of the Cavern), verse 86. However, this proves to be dangerous: the Fountain of Life is situated in a dark zone, where no man and not even the *Ĝinnis* (Non-Human Spirits) ever trod. Undeterred, the fearless *Iskandar* sets himself in motion, seeking and searching for the Fountain, not out of a desire for his individual physical immortality, but out of a personal quest for physically worshipping God into eternity, like the Archangel Raphael does. Finally, he encounters a figure older than any human being and yet eternal young, "the Green Man" of Islam, known to the Arabs under the name *al-Khaḍir* or *al-Hiṣr* and to the Persians as *al-Hiṣr*. He points to *Iskandar* the precise location of the Fountain of Life. However, the hero will eventually lose his way to the Fountain of Life and with hardship *Iskandar* will come out of the dark region, the land of darkness that surrounds the Fountain of Life¹⁶.

¹⁵ Bachmann 2005, pp.12-14.

¹⁶ Bachmann 2005, pp.14-17 (esp.14-15). There are a few comments to be made on this topic: *Iskandar* is here more *Ghilgamesh* the king of Uruk than Alexander of Macedon. He sets forth in quest for the Fountain of Life exactly as his older Sumerian counterpart sets out in quest for the Herb of Immortality and after finding it, he eventually lost it. Both heroes encounter in their path a figure like the biblical *Mathusalem*: *Ghilgamesh* seeks counsel and guidance from *Utnapishtim* and *Iskandar* from *al-Hiṣr*, who was compared to the prophet Elijah from the Jewish tradition and even with Saint George in the Christian lore. *Al-Hiṣr* was even seen as a Pre-Islamic vegetation daemon (thus the explanation of his green colour, his eternal youth, and his almost all-encompassing wisdom), or as an Islamic reflection of the older Middle Eastern figures of *Utnapishtim* and *Mathusalem*. The setting of the Land of Darkness but also of the Fountain of Life in the West is equally extremely interesting: one should not forget that for the ancient Egyptians the land of the dead, where the Sun-God *Amun-Ra/Ammon-Re* goes every night, is the West. For the ancient Greeks, the golden apples of the Hesperidae, searched for by the hero Heracles, who brought some as his 10th labour to king Eurystheus of Mykenae, are located also in the West. Even for the ancient Celts or Gaels of Ireland, the land of the living or of the ever young (that is the dead heroes of old) is also situated somewhere in or to the West of Ireland, the *Tir na'nOg* of Irish myth *vide* Markale 1971, *passim* and AA. VV. 1999 [1997], p. 222. For the role of the King in

We shall now come to the Persian writers who wrote their poems in the new Persian language, evolved out of the spoken form or forms of the Middle Persian idiom. Despite its spoken dialects, a literary form of Persian, greatly enriched with Arabic vocabulary, but ultimately based upon the *farsī* or the Iranian dialect of *Fars* (the ancient province of *Persis*, *Pārs*, or *Pārsā*), emerged: it was and still is the *darī*, the language of the Iranian Islamic royal courts of the early Middle Ages.

The great Persian epic poet of the city of *Tūs*, *Abū'l-Qasīm Mansūr Firdāwsī* (better known to the West as Firdousi or Ferdousi) wrote in the late 10th and the early 11th centuries AD at the court of the Turkish-Iranian sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (today Ghazni in Afghanistan) his great epic poem in Persian verse (*masnavī*), named *Shah-Nameh* or *Šāh-Nāma*, *the Book of Kings*, telling the mythical, legendary, and, for more recent times, the historical history (if one can use such a term) of Iran in about 120.000 verses. He was a contemporary or near contemporary of other great Persian poets, Rudaki and Dakiki. His inspiration was, apart from his own genius, from the traditions orally preserved by the landed gentry and petty nobility of Persia and Iranian Central Asia, the *dekhans* or *dikhans*, by the itinerant singers, story tellers, and court poets, and also from a Middle Persian book (a work written in Sassanian *Pahlavī*), written by one learned late Sassanian Persian scholar named Danishver Dekhan and entitled *Xwadāy-Nāmag/Nāmak*, *the Book of the Rulers* (that is the book of the deeds of the kings of Iran). This priceless work was not destroyed by the Muslim Arab conquerors of Persia. It was preserved, not translated (because it contained heathen traditions in the eyes of the new Muslim rulers of Iran and Central Asia; nevertheless, it was an important book for a people with a religion of the book, as the Zoroastrians were seen by the Muslims); however, in the course of time some acceptable (in Islamic eyes) parts of it were translated or rather adapted into Arabic. Alexander the Great or *Iskandar* becomes *Sikandar* for Firdousi, who dedicated some 2500 verses to him in the Persian epic. The great (perhaps the greatest) Iranian epic poet integrates the Iranian, Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes, and Arabic Koranic traditions about *Iskandar*; and thus *Sikandar* becomes the older half-brother or step brother of *Dārā* and also the son of *Dārā*'s father, king *Dārā(b)* of Iran and of a Macedonian princess, the daughter of king Philip of Macedon. After some intrigue we pass by, *Sikandar* shall fight *Dārā* and win the crown of *Ērān Šahr*. He was, by his father's side, at least as rightful and lawful king of Iran as *Dārā* was. Finally, *Sikandar* becomes a *Šāh Ğahāndār* (Βασιλεὺς κοσμοκράτωρ, *Rex Mundi*), after fighting and conquering the Indian

the Celtic world view and his relationship with his Great Druid *vide* Markale 1977, Walter 2004, and Walter 2006, *passim*.

kings *Kayd* and *Fūr* (again Πόρος or *Porus* of our classical sources). After many challenges and heroic deeds and exploits, *Sikandar* will reach the earthly Paradise, where an oracle will tell him of the futility of his earthly ambitions and his approaching death. *Sikandar* is thus fully integrated and assimilated by Firdousi into the royal lines of Pre-Islamic Iran. In the end we have the morality of the emptiness of human ambitions, pride, and endeavors, even if *Sikandar* remains for Firdousi and generally speaking for the world of Islam the absolute paradigm of a greater than life king and worldly hero. Another western figure brought by Firdousi to illustrate the empty human vanity is another *Rūmī* like *Sikandar*, the *Qayṣar-i Rūm*, Caesar of Rome¹⁷.

The second great Iranian poet, who wrote in Persian about *Iskandar*, is *Nizāmī* of *Ganġa* (1141-1209). He wrote *Iskandarnāma* (*Alexander's Book* or rather *The Book of/about Alexander*) on Alexander's mythical deeds. This book on Alexander is part of a cycle of five poems (*hamsa*). There are two parts of *Iskandarnāma*, the first part being *Šarafnāma* (*The Book of Honor*) and the second part is entitled *Iqbālnāma* (*The Book of Destiny/Fate*). In the first part *Iskandar* is the invincible hero and the conqueror and king of the entire world. He succeeds in conquering Persia and defeating the unfortunate rival king *Dārā*, he conquers the impregnable fortress that keeps the cup and throne of the mythical *Shah* of Persia *Kay Khusraw*, and his final integration and legitimization as King of Iran is given by his marriage with *Dārā's* daughter, princess *Rūšanak* (Roxane of the classical historians of Greece and Rome). His integration in the Iranian universe by Firdousi and *Nizāmī* is somehow similar with that of William the Conqueror among the English kings¹⁸.

The second part of *Nizāmī's* work, much like that of Firdousi, contains numerous elements combining Classical and Islamic traditions about Alexander the Great: he is the disciple of Aristotle and like his teacher is adept of the Abrahamic monotheistic religion, he goes to pilgrimage at Kaaba of Mecca, he meets the queen *Qaydāfa* of *Al-Andalus*, who is the Ethiopian queen Candaces in Pseudo-Callisthenes. *Iskandar/Sikandar* goes through the land of the Amazons and through the land of Darkness in search of the earthly Paradise and of the

¹⁷ Browne 1956, pp.118-119 (2nd ed. 1956; 1st ed. 1902); Casari 1999, pp.3-30 (esp.14-15). The figure of Caesar was adopted as a symbol of heroic resistance against the Muslim conquerors by the princes of Eastern Afghanistan in the late 7th –early 8th centuries AD, due to the military victories of the Byzantine Caesars/Roman Emperors of the East against the Arab invaders and unsuccessful besiegers of Constantinople in 674-678 and 717-718 AD. From Eastern former Bactria the name Caesar in the form *Guesar* was adopted as the name of a mythical and epic hero of the non-Buddhist Tibetans and Mongols, *Guesar de Ling*. This is at least the hypothesis of the Professor and Hungarian Academic Dobrovits Mihály, who thinks that the Tibetan and Mongol heroic name *Geser* or *Guesar* is to be connected, *via* the Afghan non-Islamic prince *Kesaro Fromo* of the early 8th century AD, with Caesar/*Kaisar* in Medieval Greek.

¹⁸ Browne 1956, p.118.

Fountain of Life, he meets the Archangel *Isrāfīl* (Raphael or Gabriel of the Biblical tradition), he builds his famous metal wall against the *Yāğuğ* and *Māğuğ* (the Biblical Gog and Magog) etc. For these great Persian poets, *Iskandar* or *Sikandar* is already a Persian hero and Great King¹⁹.

Other Persian poets (or rather poets of Persian language, writing their works in the Persian idiom) who used the figure of *Iskandar* in their poems (which became now more didactical works of the *Fürstenspiegel* or *Specula Principum* type that was also known to the Medieval West rather than mythical-epic heroic poems like before) were *Taršūsī* (in the 12th century AD), *Amīr Khusraw* of Delhi (1251-1325), and *Ĝāmī* (in the 15th century AD). They wrote respectively *Dārābnāma* (*The Book of Darius*), *Āyīna-yi Iskandarī* (*Alexander's Mirror*), and *Hiradnāma-yi Iskandarī* (*The Book of Alexander's Wisdom*). Perhaps also the Persian Alexander literature (directly or through Central Asian Turkic intermediary) will give birth in Mongolia, in the 14th century AD, after the Mongol invasion and conquest of Persia in the 13th century AD, to the Mongol novel on *Sul-Qarnay* (the Mongolian rendering of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*), from which only 4 fragments remain (maybe also the Persian and Arabic Islamic merchants and sea-traders or seafarers brought the legend of *Iskandar* to Malaysia, a fact that gave rise to a Malaysian story about *Sikandar*)²⁰.

Conclusions:

The Greek Alexander legend of Pseudo-Callisthenes, most probably in his written form, heavily influenced the Oriental legends about Alexander the Great. Along the written Greek-Egyptian Alexander Romance most probably also circulated many oral variants of this legend, in the vernacular dialects of Western Asia. These were eventually written down, perhaps starting as early as the 4th or 5th century after Christ (and surely from the 6th century), and the mutual influence, interplay, and interdependence of the *Pahlavī*, Syriac, and Koranic Arabic traditions on Alexander of Macedon finally gave rise in the 7th -10th centuries after Christ to the Islamic (and mainly Persian) myth or legend about *Iskandar/Sikandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, a larger than life character and a mythical hero, who combines the traits of

¹⁹ Casari 1999, p.19-20.

²⁰ For all this material *vide* Cleaves 1959, pp.1-99; Bausani 1963, *passim*; Abel 1966, pp.119-139. In fact there are a lot more early Muslim Arabic-Persian stories about *Iskandar/Sikandar*: in about 750 AD the Iranian Manichaean scholar *Ibn al-Muqaffac*, formally converted to Islam, translated the *Xwadāy-Nāma* from *Pahlavī* into Arabic. We have afterwards the chronicles of *Dīnavarī* (he died in 895/896 AD), *Yacqubī* (at aprox.880AD), *Ṭabarī* (839-923 A.D.), *Ṭacalibī* (aprox. 1000 A.D.), the anonymous histories of Persia, Seistan, and Arabia (the 10th -11th centuries A.D.), *vide* Căndea 1969, pp.V-XV. For all these one must see Browne 1956, pp.118-119; Glassé 1991, pp.22-23; Sourdél, Sourdél 1996, p.60; Yarshater (ed.) 1996, pp.40-55 and Yarshater (ed.) 1998, pp.609-614; Shahbazi 2002/2003, pp.34-38.

Alexander the Great with the features of a pre-Islamic prophetic figure, who paved the way for the spread of Islam. Moreover, this new Persian Alexander is integrated by the Islamic poets and scholars of Persian language into their Iranian history, as one of their greatest *Shahanshahs*. By doing so, they deliberately chose to forget the bad Persian image of the “evil Alexander the Roman”, preserved nevertheless in the Zoroastrian holy writings, which had been written in Sassanian *Pahlavī* (Middle Persian language and script).

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