

Introduction

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Alexander's posthumous fame in the lands that had made up his empire is a paradox. Received for the most part with hostility (except in Egypt, where he was welcomed, and in Babylon, where the rulers knew how to accommodate themselves to changing circumstances), his rule was imposed by force and sometimes with brutality. Zoroastrian tradition in Iran remembers him as the great destroyer, a new Zahhak, and in Iraq his name is still that of a bogeyman. Yet Persian literature presents him as a hero, a legitimate king, a wise ruler and a pious but inquisitive explorer. Arabic Romances develop the picture of the sage and prophet of God. The picture is not unlike that which developed in medieval Europe, of a wise king and Christian, sometimes even Christ-like, opponent of the enemies of Christendom. What these two traditions have in common is the *Alexander Romance*.

Though Alexander's name was hardly one to conjure with, it seems, during the time of the Seleucid Empire, whose political foundations rested on other justifications than that of the first conqueror, the situation was very different in Egypt. Here it was that the *Alexander Romance* originated and started its own journey of conquest of the literatures of the world. Yet not the smallest fragment of the work in Egyptian is known, though Egyptian versions must surely have existed, as we may deduce from the plot of the *Dream of Nectanebo* as well as from the existence of the Coptic versions discussed by Leslie McCoull. From Greek the *Romance* rapidly entered Syriac, in the fifth century AD, and Syriac texts provided the basis for the first independent versions in both Persian and Arabic. The papers assembled in this volume explore the connections and the tensions created by this remarkable – I am tempted to say unique – diffusion of the fictional story of a single man and his conquests and explorations.

Daniel Selden's paper develops a framework for the understanding of the way fluid texts like the *Alexander Romance* cross linguistic and cultural

boundaries, adapting themselves to local circumstances and refusing to be tied to a definitive version. He suggests that such texts are actually more common in antiquity (and perhaps at other periods too) than works defined by a single person's authorship. Sophocles is not Protean as the *Romance* is. Selden makes an ambitious analogy with the conditions of the first multicultural empire, the Achaemenid empire, in which for the first time unity could be sought in plurality, and thus pose the philosophical question that Pre-Socratic philosophers wrestled with as well as the political question that any imperial ruler had to face. The *Alexander Romance* appears in a multiplicity of forms yet somehow – usually – it is still recognisable from its basic structure, content and concerns. Faustina Doufikar-Aerts continues to explore these tensions by considering whether the stories of Alexander that occur throughout the modern Middle East are scattered local legends (as Michael Wood implied in his impressive television series) or whether they are embedded tales, an extensive substrate of which, perhaps, Westerners see only the isolated peaks that poke above the surface.

Warwick Ball, by contrast, suggests that Alexander stories in, for example, Uzbekistan do not have a continuous history but are resurrected at will as political circumstances demand. The creation of a nation just twenty years ago has resulted in the search for new heroes; not just Tamerlane, but Alexander's opponent Spitamenes, after whom a village has been renamed. The blue-eyed inhabitants of Kafirstan, he suggests, have discovered a Greek ancestry because of the availability of a Greek aid project: in the nineteenth century, they did not self-identify as descendants of the Macedonians. Yet in Uzbekistan one is told that Alexander invented the national dish, plov, as well as some of the traditional marriage customs. Such stories are not invented out of nothing for political reasons, but arise because of an undercurrent of consciousness of the story of the conqueror. A local legend may be a particular manifestation of an embedded tale.

All this suggests that the many-in-one phenomenon that is the Alexander story is not a feature simply of late antiquity, but continues even to the present day. If we could understand better how this story of a western conqueror, whose empire broke up as soon as it was gained, has permeated the minds of the peoples of the Middle East, we might come a little closer to understanding what it is that unites two parts of the world that often seem at odds, or at least to a clearer view of the tensions that divide us.

The Alexander that emerges from these papers has many faces. His military prowess is taken for granted but rarely comes to the fore in the stories that derive from the *Alexander Romance*. He can win a battle almost without

thinking about it, because of his natural cleverness. More attention is paid to his battles with non-human opponents – the giant crabs, monstrous beasts, dragons and giant or pygmy people of the lands beyond the world. In the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* (first written in Syriac) he encloses the Unclean Nations of Gog and Magog that threaten the world; the tale moves into the later versions of the Greek Romance but also, directly, into the Qur'an. His cleverness is the counterpart of his inquisitiveness, which makes him in some traditions first and foremost an explorer. In Abu Taher Tarsusi's *Darabnameh* all he does is explore one remote part of the world after another, and after long wanderings he is able to join forces with the philosopher Plato, here a great inventor of wondrous machines. Mario Casari shows how closely exploration of the world entails a kind of intellectual conquest of the world – not just the darkness of the north but the depths of the sea and the heights of the air. By surrounding himself with philosophers – as his imitator Mithridates VI did later – he becomes in effect a philosopher himself, as Sulochana Asirvatham indicates.

The philosopher and inquirer may seem rather far from the conquering hero, and in Tarsusi (again) he becomes notably unheroic; it is his wife Burandukht who makes the military running in this text, which must represent a significant strand of stories current in Iran before Firdausi composed his *Shahnameh*. His real wife, Roxane, is by contrast little more than a cipher in most of these texts, and exhibits much less variation than her Protean husband, as is clear from Sabine Müller's examination of her appearances. The notable sexlessness of the legendary Alexander is one of his most curious features. (But it is thoroughly compensated in the anonymous fourteenth-century *Iskandarnameh*, where he has numerous liaisons, including one with Araqit, queen of the fairies.) This 'Boys' Own' hero's most important feminine relationship continues to be with his mother, or with the substitute mother represented by Candace.

In Muslim authors the philosopher and sage becomes a devotee of Allah and a prophet of his faith. This aspect is to the fore in Nizami and in the Arabic romances. It occurs in parallel with the adoption of Alexander into Jewish wisdom in the Talmud and earlier; his visit to Jerusalem led to one of the quickest conversions to Judaism in history, and was reflected in the latest versions of the Greek *Romance* as well as in the Talmud, where besides building talismans to protect the harbour of Alexandria he becomes a look-alike of Solomon in his wisdom and statecraft.

The Alexander of legend, then, has little in common with the conquering warrior. One area in which his memory does overlap with his actual

achievement is in the memory of him as a builder. Besides the city of Alexandria by Egypt, he is remembered for innumerable ‘walls’ all over Central Asia, from the Caucasus to the Great Wall of China. Lakes, too, bear his name. Anyone who looked about them in Hellenistic Bactria would see plenty of evidence of the Macedonian impact, as Olga Palagia shows in her paper on art; and his iconography, as Agnieszka Fulinska shows, quickly became established as that of ‘the two-horned one’, which became his name in Arabic literature. How early this image of Alexander was established – no doubt through the influence of coinage – is shown by a Sassanian period wall painting (1st-3rd c. AD) at Fayaz Tepa near Termez where the Iranian features are clearly topped by two great curling ram’s horns.

The development of this complex and resonant character can be traced through several core texts. In this volume, Haila Manteghi examines the *Shahnameh* and considers the question of Firdausi’s sources by study of proper names; a similar approach is applied to Mubaššir ibn Fatik’s *Ahbar al-Iskander* by Emily Cottrell. El-Sayed Gad provides a masterly account of the formation of the Alexander who appears in the history of al-Tabari, while David Zuwiyya outlines some of the features of the extensive romance of ‘Umara ibn Zayd. Ory Amitay and Aleksandra Kleczar analyse different aspects of the Talmudic accounts of Alexander, while Corinne Jouanno shows how even late (Byzantine) Greek versions of the *Romance* could be in turn influenced by eastern perceptions. (A similar study could, I am sure, usefully be undertaken for the Turkish *Iskendername* of Ahmedi.) My own paper tries to suggest some possibilities of Persian influence on Greek story at the inception of the tradition.

Several authors bring hitherto undiscussed texts into play. Mario Casari discusses an unpublished Persian geographical account which has an important bearing on the Persian image of Alexander. Hendrik Boeschoten reveals some features of a recently discovered Turkish text, where the hero rejoices in the portmanteau-name of Zülkender, and points to the existence of another MS (of 900 folios!) awaiting examination. Daniel Ogden brings the *Book of the Deeds of Ardashir* more closely to bear on the Persian Alexander story. Yuriko Yamanaka demonstrates that Alexander’s name even reached Chinese geographical accounts through Arab intermediaries.

These papers show how interwoven the Alexander story is with geography in every sense. Alexander as an explorer creates geographical knowledge; his story is geographically dispersed through means that we can only sometimes clearly perceive. The original arrival of his story in Persia from Syriac, and perhaps from oral tradition, is still imperfectly understood but

may yield some secrets to further research. The importance of Christian Arabs in the transmission from Syriac to the Qur'an, and of Nestorian Christians on the Silk Road from the Arab World to China, can be further explored. The *Mappae Mundi* have been studied (and are mentioned by Casari) but could be brought into relation with maps from the east that await investigation, as Doufekar-Aerts has commented. There are surprising convergences of story-motifs, such as the occurrence of mechanical, or 'magical', contraptions in the Turkish text studied by Boeschoten and in the medieval German author Ulrich von Eschenbach (or Etzenbach), and the appearance of Grail-like objects in both the eastern texts and in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, to which Graham Anderson draws attention. Such collocations emphasise the problems awaiting anyone who tries to draw up a stemma of Alexander stories. These are, as Firuza Melville calls them, wandering stories. Their iconography also wanders, as she shows in the case of the famous flying machine which becomes a symbol of Kai Kavus' depravity. (Its meaning in medieval Europe is much more problematic). New connections remain to be made, as Aleksandra Szalc demonstrates in her argument for an Indian origin of the story of the Water of Life, so central to the Alexander legend – and which surfaces again in Grimm's Fairy Tales.

This volume offers a cross-section of approaches to the Protean Alexander-material. I hope that it raises as many questions as it answers, not least about methodology. What is the right way to analyse texts that vary so much from each other? Is source-criticism the way forward, or a stultifying dead end, as Dan Selden suggested in discussion? It certainly has value for some of the disciplines that are less developed than classical philology; for example, such work needs to be done for the first time for Mubashshir. Can this be done through close examination of proper names? Is this more than a new version of the traditional Arabic documentation known as the *isnad*? If traditions are re-invented rather than continuous, is it easier or harder to determine sources, or does the question become scarcely relevant as compared to, say, political context? Do convergences in remotely separated literatures need to be explained? Ory Amitay has proposed the development of a comprehensive database of Alexander-texts, to facilitate comparisons. More too can be done to study the iconography of Alexander stories, especially in the Persian texts. Has the time come to allow the discipline of literary criticism to work on such aspects as character in the romances, and if so how? What is the place of authorial intention in an anonymous text? Should we see humour in such features as Khidr's personal airmail service of Alexander's letters to his mother, or are we guilty of misprision?

In the end, the story of Alexander does, it seems to me, cohere around certain primary motifs: the Faustian search for universal knowledge and dominion, the search for immortality and the contrast of the active and contemplative lives encapsulated in his interview with the Brahmins. I have written that Alexander is a kind of Everyman. But is Everyman a universal figure or is he a western construct? Only further research can tell.