

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*

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The purpose of this short article is to give an overview of the evolution of Alexander's figure in the realm of Persian epic and myth. It also involves the influence of the Koranic legend of *Dhu'l-Qarnayn* upon Persian legend and the identification of that mysterious figure with *Iskandar/Sikandar*, the Arabic and Persian name of Alexander of Macedon. In order to truly understand this posthumous evolution of the Macedonian hero, one must consider the birth of Alexander's legend in the West as well as in the East, due to the spreading of Pseudo-Callisthenes' Greek Novel of Alexander. It is a well known fact that the Greek Novel about Alexander of Macedon (the Greek Alexander Romance) was first written in Egypt at Alexandria, in the 2nd or the 3rd century A.D. Nevertheless, the birth of Alexander's Romance is a longer process, spanning the period from the 3rd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. In the making of the legendary figure of Alexander the Great, the man's deeds counted as much as the image created during his lifetime and after his early death. The Alexander legend incorporated elements of the Greek and Macedonian tradition as well as Egyptian elements about the great Macedonian king and conqueror. For example, the idea of presenting the great Macedonian warrior king as a natural son of the last Pharaoh of Egypt, Nectanebo the 2nd, and of the Macedonian-Epirote queen Olympias, appears to be one of such Egyptian topics in the formation of the Greek legend of Alexander the Great, as it is known to us from the pages of Pseudo-Callisthenes.

Even this very expression, from the pages of Pseudo-Callisthenes, clearly implies the written origin of the Greek legend of Alexander the Great, Ὁ Μεγαλέξανδρος. However, the problem is not that simple and we can assume the existence of oral legends about the Greek-Macedonian conqueror of the East, stories that were born soon after his untimely death. Needless to say, to assume the

existence of an oral legend is one thing and to prove its very existence is quite another. We'll never have the ultimate proof of the birth of the Greek Alexander Romance out of a mass of oral legends about the Macedonian king of the East, and the form which has reached our time of the Greek Novel of Alexander suggest more the work of one writer or of a few writers at most. The Latin, Syriac, Armenian, possibly *Pahlavī*, and all the other translations of the Greek Alexander Romance are the independent and yet interdependent works of distinct individuals, who deserve credit in their own right, yet the main mythical framework, remains more or less the same. As a matter of pure hypothesis and looking only at the narrative style of the Greek Alexander Romance, one can only presume the influence of oral stories about the Macedonian king interwoven with the legends of the East on the Greek writer or the Greek writers of Alexander Romance in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. in Alexandria of Egypt. In order to be clearly understood, this is only a matter of conjecture.

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 *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 (*Dhū'l-Qarnayn*) with Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, there are also other interpretations, identifying the Two-Horned with Arabian 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* was identified more by some Islamic learned clergymen with the Great Persian Achaemenian Kings, Cyrus the 2nd the Great and Darius the 1st the Great, rather than with the Westerner or European Alexander the Great. Referring to the Islamic Mediaeval Scholars, one must ponder also 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 (written as well in Arabic as in the new emerging modern Persian language) 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 lyrical Persian poems). This is a complex problem of interrelated influences, on which we'll continuously refer in this short study¹.

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 Nöldeke² 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*. Th. Nöldeke thought that in Pre-Islamic Iran 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*, in the Pahlavī or Middle Persian language). This literary-historical work (or rather a section of it, concerned with *Sikandar* and *Dārā*) was thought by Nöldeke to stem from the Greek Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes. E.A.W. Budge considered that the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes was itself a translation made after a Middle Persian (*Pahlavī*) translation of the Greek original³.

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.W. Budge. We do not have, as far as I know, a 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 a direct translation from the Greek text of Pseudo-

¹ Casari 1999, part. pp. 9-13.

² Nöldeke 1890.

³ Budge 1889. Shapur Shahbazi 2003, pp. 6 ff. 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.

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 an old Armenian variant of Pseudo-Callisthenes. E.A.W. Budge, basing his assumptions on the 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 A.D., on the eve of the downfall of the Sassanian Empire and of the Arabian-Islamic conquest of Syria and Persia.

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 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, due to the very fact that the most dangerous enemy and the deadliest western foe of Parthian and Sassanian Iran was, at least from the 1st century B.C., the Roman Empire, and from the 4th century A.D., the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium. Other Zoroastrian writings, such as the *Ardā Wīrāz-Nāmāg/Arda Virāf Nāmāk*, *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, seen in an unfavourable 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 them into Greek and bringing the translations back to Greece and Macedonia. All these Zoroastrian fragmental stories about Alexander of Macedon 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 Iran⁴. 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 *shahs*.

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 (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. 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 *Mipra*, 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, they remained firstly and always Macedonians, in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of their subjects, be they Iranians, Syrians, Anatolians, or mixed descendants of the European conquerors and colonists (Macedonians, Greeks, Illyrians, and Thracians as well). 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

⁴ Even in the *Oracula Sibyllina* we can find traces and reflections of that negative image of Alexander in the Iranian realm of influence throughout the Middle East, see: Shapur Shahbazi 2003, p. 7. For a thorough examination of the cultures of the Near East and their response to Hellenism, see also: Eddy 1961, pp. 10-21. For the daemonic nature of Alexander in the minds of devout Zoroastrians, I find very useful Gnoli 1995.

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 Great⁵.

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 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 Great⁶. 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 Macedon⁷. By adopting the title of Φιλέλληνας, the Arsacid kings in fact assumed the Seleucid legacy and with that the inheritance of the Greco-Macedonian-Iranian Empire of Alexander the Great. Moreover, Ammianus Marcellinus (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 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* and Sasanian *Shahanshahs*, were very keen to remember to themselves and remind to the Romans about the ancient and present power and glory of Iran, especially when

⁵ Yarshater 1996; E. Yarshater 1998.

⁶ Tac. *Ann.* VI 31: “*Simul veteres Persarum ac Macedonum terminos sequere invasurum possessa Cyro et post Alexandro per vaniloquentiam et minas iacebat*”.

⁷ Wolski 1990.

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 Trajan⁸.

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 *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'ǧūǧ* and *Ma'ǧūǧ* in classical Arabic), 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) 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 time⁹. In order to understand the origin of the Koranic legend of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, we must take into consideration the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes.

The Syriac legend of Alexander the Great, translated and adapted from Greek as one of the first Alexander romance versions in a Semitic language, was written in the 6th century A.D. or in the first half of the 7th century A.D., a fact making this epic novel a close

⁸ Wolski, pp. 8-9. The Greek and Latin titles of the Iranian kings were βασιλεύς βασιλέων and *Rex regum*, translating the Old Persian Achaemenian royal title of *Xšāyapiya xšāyapiyānām*, the King of kings. The title of Φιλέλληνην 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.

⁹ Glassé 1991; Casari 1999, pp. 12-13.

predecessor or even a near contemporary text with the legend of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, as it is found in the 18th *Surah* of the Koran. In the Syriac legend we find the topic of the metal wall built against *Yagug* and *Magug* (the Syriac names of Gog and Magog). This wall was forcefully identified with the fortifications built by the Parthian and Persian kings in the Caucasus and on the northern frontier of Iran against the *Sakā*, the Huns, and the White Huns (the Chionites and Hephtalites), who were attacking Persia from the steppes of Eastern Europe (*via* the passes of Caucasus mountains, like the Iron Gates of Derbent) and, more often, from the steppes of Central Asia towards Eastern Iran (Sogdiana and Bactria). Alexander's wall could be seen also as a dim reflection in the west of the early Great Wall of China, built by the *Qin* and the *Han* Chinese Imperial dynasties against the Altaic and Indo-European nomads of the Mongolian and Turkistan steppes, the *Xiongnu*, the *Yueh-Zhi*, and the *Wu-Sun*. The Syriac legend of Alexander of Macedon was written either at approximately 521 A.D. by Jacob of Sorugh or later, between 629-636 A.D., in the context of the war between the emperor Heraclius of Byzantium and the Sassanian *Shahanshah* of Persia, Chosroes/Khusraw II Parviz¹⁰.

After the Arabian Islamic conquest of Sassanid Persia (which included almost all of the Iranian plateau and of the southern part of Central Asia), the legend of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* from the Koran interfered with the Iranian traditions about Alexander the Great. The result will be a proliferation of myths and legends about the legendary *Šāh Ğahāndār* (King of the World, Weltherrscher, *Rex Mundi*) named *Iskandar* or *Sikandar* (sometimes also *Iskander* or *Sikander*) in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. There was also a lost epistolary Greek novel about Alexander's diadochi (ΔΙΔΟΧΟΙ), of whose very existence we know from an Arabic version from the 8th century A.D.,

¹⁰ The possible Middle Persian (Iranian *Pahlavī*) influence on the Syriac legend about Alexander the Great is shown by the Darius' epistle to Alexander. In this royal letter we find as gifts from Darius to Alexander a golden ball and Polo cross, an allusion to the youth of the Macedonian king, but also to the equestrian games of the young Persian knights. Before the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes exists also a Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic legend of Alexander the Great (that appears in the *Talmud* and the *Midrash*), dated before the year 500 A.D. (probably from the 5th century A.D.); and probably also from the 5th -7th centuries A.D. there is an Armenian legend with the same topic (however, the Armenian legend does not contain the episode of the Alexander's quest for the Fountain of Life). See: Czegledy 1957; Casari 1999, pp. 8-11. In fact there are two written versions of Alexander's Syriac legend, one versified and the other in prose.

attributed to the secretary *Sālim Abū l-Alā* of the Umayyad Khalif *Hišām ibn Abl al-Malik* (724-743 A.D.)¹¹.

The Muslim scholar *aṭ-Ṭabarī*, born in about 839 A.D. and who died in 923 A.D., wrote in his Koranic commentary (*Tafsīr*) about *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, who, according to *aṭ-Ṭabarī*, was born in Egypt and was named *Marzūba al-Yūnānī ibn Mardbeh*. The name *al-Yūnānī* means the Greek and *ibn Mardbeh* (the son of *Mardbeh*) suggests an Iranian origin, since *Mardbeh* is an Iranian name. Therefore, *aṭ-Ṭabarī* wrote of a possible Egyptian-Iranian-Greek origin of the Koranic figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*. He appears to be a descendant of the biblical *Yūnān*, *Yāfīt*, and *Nūḥ* (Yunan/Jonan, Japhet, and Noah)¹². The two-horns of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* could also be an allusion to the pilgrimage of Alexander the Great to the oracle of Zeus-Ammon in the Siwah oasis, the ram-horns of Zeus-Ammon were adopted in the iconography of Alexander of Macedon as a symbol of his alleged direct descendance from Zeus-Ammon, as Son of Ammon, in the best tradition of the Pharaohs.

There is also another Muslim tradition (*Wahb's* tradition) about *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, a legend that makes him “a young man from *Rūm*”, a fact that points to the Two-Horned one as being a *Ῥωμαῖος*, a *Rūmī* that is a man from the Eastern Roman Empire, a Roman of Greek speech and culture. This *Rūmī* founded and built the capital city of Egypt, *al-Iskandarīya*, which is the Arabic form of the Greek word *Ἀλεξάνδρεια*, or in Latin *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, as the Romans called the town of Alexander the Great in the Nile delta. The Arabic article *al-* sounded the same with the first two sounds of *Ἀλεξάνδρεια*. We know also that the Koranic commentary (*Tafsīr*) of *aṭ-Ṭabarī* was preceded by an older Koranic commentary, written by one named *Wahb ibn Murabhih* (deceased at about 730 A.D.), so dating from the late 7th or early 8th century A.D. In fact, both *Wahb ibn Murabhih* and *aṭ-Ṭabarī* made *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* a man from *Rūm*, named *al-Iskandar* (that is in Greek *ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος*), who was called the Two-Horned one because both sides of his head were allegedly made out of copper (is it here a distant and distorted memory of Alexander's bronze helmet or rather of his image with two ram horns, as Alexander is represented on some Hellenistic coins?!).

¹¹ Casari 1999, pp. 10-11.

¹² Bachmann 2005, pp. 6-7; for the same theme see also: Polignac 1984; Pfrommer 2001, *passim*.

Therefore, in these early Islamic versions, *al-Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* was a servant of God (Allah), who sent him to conquer the whole earth and to bring all peoples of the world under his sway. In fact, in this version of *Wahb*, one can see that *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* conquers the peoples of the West (*Nāsik*), South (*Hāwīl*), East (*Mansik*), and North (*Tāwīl*), builds a fleet with his troops and crosses the seas (after conquering the *Nāsik* people and before invading the *Hāwīl*), and eventually builds a wall against *Ya'ğūğ* and *Ma'ğūğ*. The *Ya'ğūğ* and *Ma'ğūğ* were portrayed as wild tribes, who live like prey animals, a kind of human beasts (probably a memory of the attacking nomadic Huns). After constructing the wall made out of melted bronze and iron, *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* will finally reach a pious people, who thoroughly practice the arts of self-control, through sheer rationality, the commandment of love for one's enemies, and ascetic exercises. Thus, *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, the violent conqueror, learns a way of controlling the aggressive impulse innate in human nature. This is the end of *Wahb's* narrative cycle about *al-Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*¹³.

In order to conclude this first reception of Alexander's figure in the Arabic-Persian early Islamic world (the late 7th –early 10th centuries), we can safely say that *al-Iskandar* merged at an early date with the mysterious figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, the Two-Horned one. What remained of the original figure of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great was the image of a heroic and chivalric monarch, a victorious warrior and a triumphant world sovereign, who somehow became entrusted with a divine mission. As a matter of fact, his two-horns seem only indirectly to hint at the oracle of Zeus-Ammon (the Egyptian god with ram horns, Ammon-Re or Amun-Ra) in the Siwah oasis and to Alexander's expedition there across the Libyan Desert. More probably, for an Islamic audience, the surname *Dhū'l-Qarnayn* meant only the lord or master of the two ages (*qarn* in classical Arabic could mean an era or epoch, but Alexander's two horns could also have been a symbol or metaphor of his power). The two periods of time could have been the era before the coming of Islam and respectively the age of Islam. Therefore, the Two-Horned *Iskandar* has come full circle, becoming from the son of Zeus-Ammon (as the Egyptian-Macedonian Alexander of Pseudo-Callisthenes is, born out of wedlock and bred in the true spirit of Greek heroes), a hero and prophet of Allah. For many Muslims, *al-Iskandar* the Macedonian

¹³ Bachmann – Mommsen 2005, pp. 7-8.

(and Roman) king and conqueror became one with the dim prophetic figure of *Dhū'l-Qarnayn*. The courage, willpower, and wisdom are still Alexander's, but the real force and power of this hero comes ultimately from Allah, Who gave him the victory. *Iskandar's* mission was to submit the peoples of the world to his might and sway, in order to prepare the way for the spread of Islam. In the end, what really counts is neither Alexander's quest for knowing the mysteries of heaven and earth, the deepness of oceans, or the secret of immortality, nor his bravery, intelligence, or tenacity. The real and true victor is Allah and *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* is only God's instrument on earth, at that particular moment of time. Alexander can become, for a while (in fact for a fleeting moment), a king of human space and human race; but only God is the Lord of Space and Time.

This mythical image of *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* came not only from the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes, but also from the Old Testament (Exod 10, 2; Ezek 38 and 39) and even from the New Testament (Matt 5, 44). Alexander's wall is a barrier against the forces of chaos, who, by breaching this frontier, will herald the end of times¹⁴.

Aṭ-Ṭabarī wrote also a universal history and in that work one can find inserted a history of Allah's prophets and of the earthly rulers, with the story of *Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn* contained in it. It appears that after the old *Dārā(b)*, the son of *Ardašīr*, who reigned over *Eran Šahr* (the kingdom of Iran), his son *Dārā* came to the throne of Iran and reigned for 14 years. These names, *Dārā(b)*, *Ardašīr*, and *Dārā*, seem to be the new Persian versions of Darius (Δαρειός, the Old Persian name of *Dārayavauš*) and Artaxerxes, clearly Old Persian royal names, maybe even reminders of Darius I the Great and respectively Darius III Codomanus and also of Artaxerxes III Ochus. The abuses of *Dārā* against his nobles led to the armed intervention of *al-Iskandar*. In the war between these two kings the final confrontation took place in Mesopotamia, where they both and their armies fought each other for a year. Some Iranian nobles joined *al-Iskandar* and other men from *Dārā's* personal guard betrayed him and cut his head, bringing it to *al-Iskandar*. However, the noble *al-Iskandar* punished their betrayal by death sentences and afterwards married *Dārā's* daughter, called *Raušanak* (Roxane). Then, *al-Iskandar* waged war in India and the eastern parts of the world. After

¹⁴ Bachmann – Mommsen 2005, p. 9.

that he returned west, hoping to arrive at *al-Iskandarīya* (Alexandria) in Egypt, but he died in central Irak (the death at Babylon, for the classical historians of Greece and Rome). He ruled exactly the same number of years as *Dārā* that is 14 years. After *Iskandar*'s death, his body was taken to Alexandria in Egypt in a golden sarcophagus. *Aṭ-Ṭabarī*'s conclusion is that the fragmented Roman Empire (*sic!*) before *al-Iskandar* became a unity during *Iskandar*'s reign and conversely, the Persian Empire, once a united power before the reign of *al-Iskandar*, became divided in rival kingdoms and principalities after *Iskandar*'s death. We can see in this Arabic-Persian version of Alexander's saga the preservation of some classical elements of Alexander's history, elements taken from the Greek and Latin sources. *aṭ-Ṭabarī*'s narrative structure runs as follows:

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 (Ἀλέξανδρος, Arabic *al-Iskandar*) of the Western (for *aṭ-Ṭabarī* the Roman conqueror that is the Byzantine Greek) conqueror of Iran remained as 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* (Roxane), who was in fact an aristocratic young lady of Bactrian or Sogdian descent and the first official wife of Alexander the Great. The Macedonian king and conqueror of Iran will have also one or two Achaemenian royal princesses as official wives and also an aristocratic Iranian lady, Barsine (Artabazus' daughter and Memnon of Rhodes' widow) as his official mistress. In fact, the memory of Darius' daughter Stateira and of her rival and killer Roxane 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). His body was taken to his

foundation, Alexandria in Egypt (*al-Iskandarīya*), in a golden sarcophagus. He did create an united Macedonian 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*, Διᾶδοχοι 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*, *Arašū*, or *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-Callisthenes¹⁵.

The next great Muslim writer and scholar who wrote about *al-Iskandar* (of course, not exclusively about him) was *al-Mas'ūdī* (died

¹⁵ Bachmann – Mommsen 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.

at about 956 A.D.), 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 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 esoteric wisdom against the Indian sages and holy men¹⁶.

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 A.D. and who died around the year 1035 A.D. 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* (Philippus) and of the queen *Rūfūyā* (Olympias) and as the disciple of the philosopher *Arisṭāṭālīs*. *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 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

¹⁶ *Idem*, pp. 11-12.

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 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 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-Ṭabarī*¹⁷.

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, there is danger; the Fountain of Life is situated in a dark zone, where no man and not even the *Ġinnis* (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-Hiḍr* and to the Persians as *al-Hisr*. He points to *Iskandar* the precise location of the Fountain of Life. However, the hero will eventually lose his way to the Fountain of

¹⁷ Bachmann – Mommsen 2005, pp. 12-14.

Life and with hardship *Iskandar* will come out of the dark region, the land of darkness that surrounds the Fountain of Life¹⁸.

We shall come now 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*, *Pars*, 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 *Ṭūs*, *Abū'l-Qasīm Mansūr Firdāwsī* (better known to the West as Firdousi or Ferdousi) wrote in the late 10th and the early 11th centuries A.D. 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 in about 120.000 verses the mythical, legendary, and, for more recent times, the historical history (if one can use such a term) of Iran. He was a contemporary or near contemporary of other great Persian poets, Rudakī and Dakikī. 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 *dīqhans*,

¹⁸ Bachmann – Mommsen 2005, pp. 14-17. There are a few comments to be made on this topic: *Iskandar* is here more *Ghiligamesh* 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*: *Ghiligamesh* seeks counsel and guidance from *Utnapishtim* and *Iskandar* from *al-Hiḍr*, who was compared to the prophet Elijah from the Jewish tradition and even with Saint George in the Christian lore. *Al-Hiḍr* 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* (the Land of Youth) of Irish myth.

and also from a Middle Persian book (a work written in Sassanian *Pahlavī*), written by one 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* become *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 *Eran 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 Ğhāndār* (Βασιλεὺς κοσμοκράτωρ, *Rex Mundi*), after fighting and conquering the Indian 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 *Qayšar-I Rūm*, Caesar of Rome¹⁹.

¹⁹ Browne 1956, pp. 118-119; Casari 1999, part. pp. 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 A.D., 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 A.D. From the former Eastern 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

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 Honour*) and the second part is entitled *Iqbāl-nāma* (*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 kings²⁰.

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 Fountain of Life, he meets the Archangel *Isrāfīl* (Raphael or Gabriel of the Biblical tradition), he builds his famous metal wall against the *Yāġuġ* and *Māġuġ* (the Biblical Gog and Magog) etc. For these great Persian poets, *Iskandar* or *Sikandar* is already a Persian hero and Great King²¹.

Other Persian poets (or rather poets of Persian language) who used the figure of *Iskandar* in their poems (who became now more didactical works of the *Fürstenspiegel* or *Specula Principum* type known also to the Medieval West rather than mythical-epic heroic poems) were *Taršūsī* (in the 12th century A.D.), *Amīr Khusraw* of

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 A.D., with *Caesar/Kaisar* in Medieval Greek.

²⁰ Browne 1956, p. 118.

²¹ Casari 1999, pp. 19-20.

Delhi (1251-1325), and *Ĝāmī* (in the 15th century A.D.). 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 will give birth in Mongolia, in the 14th century A.D., after the Mongol invasion and conquest of Persia in the 13th century A.D., 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*)²².

The conclusions of this study can be summed up as follows: 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 (Novel or Story would have been more appropriate words, nevertheless the term Romance stuck in use for naming Pseudo-Callisthenes' work) most probably circulated also many oral variants of this legend, in the vernacular dialects of Western Asia. These were eventually written down, and the mutual influence and interdependence of the *Pahlavī*, Syriac, and Koranic Arabic traditions on Alexander of Macedon finally gave rise to the Islamic (and mainly Persian) myth, story, or rather tale about *Iskandar/Sikandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn*, a larger than life character and a mythical hero, who combines the traits of Alexander the Great with the features of an Islamic prophetic figure, who paved the way for the spread of Islam. Moreover, the 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 choose to

²² For all this material see: Cleaves 1959; Bausani 1963; Abel 1966. In fact there are a lot more early Muslim Arabic-Persian stories about *Iskandar/Sikandar*: in about 750 A.D. 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 A.D.), *Yacqubī* (at approx. 880 A.D.), *Ṭabarī* (839-923 A.D.), *Thacalibī* (approx. 1000 A.D.), the anonymous histories of Persia, Seistan, and Arabia (the 10th -11th centuries A.D.). One can find also useful Cāndea 1969. For the Persian-Iranian culture and the Middle (*Pahlavī*) and New Persian (*Farsi* or *Dari*) epic poems between the 7th and the 12th centuries after Christ, see: AA.VV. 1960, pp. 81, 469, 484-485, 495. For all these one must see: Browne 1956, pp. 118-119; Glassé 1991; Sourdél – Sourdél 1996, p. 60; Yarshater 1996; Yarshater 1998; Shapur Shahbazi 2003, pp. 34-38.

forget the bad Persian image of Alexander, preserved nevertheless in the Zoroastrian holy writings in Sassanian *Pahlavī*.

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