THE LEGEND OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT IN THE
CHRISTIAN ORIENT*

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The perennial fascination with the figure of Alexander the Great is reflected in the phenomenal spread of the Alexander romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, a work in itself surely not distinguished either by historical accuracy or (at least for our modern taste) any particular literary merit. There are versions of the Alexander romance to be found among peoples whom neither the Alexander of history nor the Alexander of legend ever visited; the gamut ranges from a Swedish version in the far north through a (fragmentary) Mongolian version in central Asia, all the way to elaborations in Malay and other southeast Asian languages. Only the great wall of China seems to have checked, so to speak, the triumphant literary progress of this literary product of third-century Alexandrian Hellenism.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the complicated questions either of the identifiable sources or of the several recensions of the Greek Alexander romance. The text remained alive, so to speak, through the centuries and, never protected by the hedge of canonization, was considerably modified in the course of

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4 P.J. van Leeuwen, De Maleische Alexanderroman (Meppel, 1937).

time. Here just a brief survey of the various versions of the Alexander legend among the non-Hellenic peoples of the Christian Orient will be presented; Byzantine material proper can be noted only marginally.\(^6\)

The oldest such oriental witness is the Armenian version. Extant in over thirty manuscripts,\(^8\) it represents a translation made directly from the Greek. It has been dated very early, to the fifth century; this dating may need revision, because it assumes in turn the wrong fifth-century dating of Moses Xorenaci\'i's history, which is textually dependent on the Armenian Pseudo-Callisthenes.\(^9\) This Armenian version is nevertheless a good witness to an early recension of the Alexander romance.\(^10\) Of particular interest is the fact that several Armenian manuscripts are richly illustrated, and the cycle may well go back to a prototype, to lost late antique illustrations of the early Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes.\(^11\) The Alexander romance is the only work of profane Greek entertainment literature, as opposed to technical or philosophical works, which was translated from Greek into Armenian in late antiquity. The influence of this version, apart from traces in Armenian historiography, was slight, although it was translated into Turkish late in the seventeenth century.\(^12\)

There seems to have existed no full translation of the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes in Georgian, the other major Christian literary language of the Caucasus area; only Georgian translations, possibly via a Slavonic intermediate stage, of the late medieval Byzantine Alexander legend are known.\(^13\) Of an early Coptic version in the Sahidic dialect (? sixth century) only fragments survive, from a single manuscript (eleventh century), the Coptic text seems to be affiliated to the so-called \(\beta\)-recension of the Greek.\(^14\) This is all rather meager for Christian Egypt - was Alexander too much of a Greek to stimulate the imagination of the nationalistic Copts?


\(^12\) See Pfister, *Kleine Schriften*, 24.

\(^13\) Ross, *Alexander historiatus*, 45.

\(^14\) O. von Lemm, *Der Alexanderroman bei den Kopien* (St Petersburg, 1903), 6.
The Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes\textsuperscript{15} extant in several, albeit late (and unilluminated!) manuscripts, has an interesting history and was immensely more influential than any of the oriental versions thus far discussed. Attempts to connect directly the Syriac with Greek or Arabic prototypes have failed; in fact it has been convincingly demonstrated by Theodor Nöldeke, in a monograph which still is absolutely essential for the serious study of the Alexander romance, that the Syriac was translated from a lost Middle Persian, Pahlavi original.\textsuperscript{16} Both the dating and the purpose of this lost Pahlavi version from the Greek are matters of speculation; in any case the translator was probably a Nestorian Christian, since in Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature Alexander is a uniformly negative figure.\textsuperscript{17} Was this Pahlavi translation intended for edification and entertainment at the court of some Hellenophile Sasanian emperor, or was it meant for the Persian Christians themselves? The Syriac translation in turn should probably be dated to the late sixth or the early seventh century.\textsuperscript{18} Textually it is affiliated with the oldest Greek recension, but also shows some interesting additions, in particular a long episode (derived from a lost Greek text?) of Alexander's journey through central Asia all the way to China.\textsuperscript{19} A Christian Arabic translation (again, like the Pahlavi, in its original form lost) of this Syriac text, probably made in the early ninth century,\textsuperscript{20} is the source of much of the non-Koranic Alexander tradition and legend in the Islamic world, including the flowering of Persian poetry (Firdausī, Nizāmī), which is now beyond our purview.\textsuperscript{21} This lost Arabic translation,\textsuperscript{22} much amplified and


\textsuperscript{18} Nöldeke, ‘Beiträge’, 16 ff.

\textsuperscript{19} See Boyle, ‘Alexander legend’, 16 ff.


\textsuperscript{22} This should be rigorously distinguished from the (still unedited) seventeenth-century translation made by the cleric Yuwaṣaf ibn Suwaidān, based probably on the twelfth to thirteenth-century Byzantine Alexander prose narrative. See J. Trumpf, ‘Zur Überlieferung des mittelgriechischen Prosa-Alexander’, \textit{Byzantinische Zeitschrift} (1967) 22–7 and A. Ch. Loloś in \textit{Graeco-Arabica} iii (1984), 199 ff. The ‘Arabic Pseudocalisthenes’ in an Istanbul
modified, formed the basis for the last major oriental Christian version of the Alexander romance, namely the Ethiopian.23 This version is again extant in several, albeit late manuscripts, unfortunately not illustrated. The Arabic text was transmitted to Ethiopia via Egypt, as might be expected, and it includes some interpolations from the tenth-century Arabic chronicle of Eutychius of Alexandria.24

It is well known that Alexander appears in the Koran (Sura 18) under the name of Du’l-Qarnain, the hero with the two horns. In particular he is described there as shutting in the tribes of Ya’juj wa-Mājūj, the biblical Gog and Magog, by means of an iron gate or dam until the end of time, when they shall burst out of their captivity.25 Now, this episode is not found in the oldest form of the Greek Alexander romance; it was only interpolated, as we shall presently see, into later Byzantine medieval recensions of the text from elsewhere; that is, the Alexander romance stricte dictu cannot be considered as a source of the Koranic narrative.26 The story of the gate27 by contrast is well attested in other related early Alexander legends, to which we shall now turn. This is material which is of interest not only for elucidating the background of the seminal Koranic presentation but also more generally for the emergence of a Christian apocalyptic interpretation of Alexander.

The most important text of this nature is a relatively short Syriac narrative, entitled ‘an exploit (neshānā) of Alexander, the son of Philip the Macedonian, how he went forth to the ends of the world and made a gate of iron and shut it in the face of the north wind, that the Hunāyē might not come forth to plunder the lands.’28

manuscript dating to the fifteenth century, noted at second hand in Cary, Alexander, 12, n. 19, is with some likelihood a free Muslim reworking, not this missing link, as asserted (loc. cit.) by D.J. Ross, the editor of Cary’s book. Cf. B. Meissner, ‘Mubašširs Ahbār el-Iskender’, Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, xlix (1895), 583. To complicate matters, one must take into account the (lost) Arabic translation of the Latin Historia de preliis, subsequently rendered into Hebrew (see I. Lévi in Revue des études juives, 3 (1881) 259).

24 Weymann, Übersetzung, 20ff.
26 Paret’s statement to this effect (Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz (Stuttgart, 1980), 318) is to be corrected.
27 For a well-nigh complete collection of material see A.R. Anderson, Alexander’s gate, Gog and Magog, and the inclosed nations (Cambridge, Mass., 1932) and the same author’s earlier paper, ‘Alexander at the Caspian Gates’, Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 59 (1928), 130ff. However, Anderson had access to the oriental material only at second hand and this led him to some false conclusions; see e.g. Czegledi, Acta Orient. Hung. vii (1957), 236, n. 18. On material culled from medieval Arabic and Persian sources see further C.E. Wilson, ‘The wall of Alexander against Gog and Magog and the expedition sent out to find it by the Khalif Wathiq in 842 A.D.’, in Hirth anniversary volume (London, 1922), 575ff.
28 Budge, History, 255, lines 1–3.
This work, in all its manuscript forms, follows the Syriac version of the Alexander romance proper, but does not appear to depend on it directly. It claims to have been taken 'from the writings in the house of the archives of the kings of Alexandria' but seems to be in fact an original Syriac composition, not a translation from Greek. It is by no means a full biography of Alexander; in particular any allusion to the *histoire scandaleuse* of Olympias and Nectanebus is lacking. It deals only with Alexander's travels, the building of the gate against the barbarians and the subsequent defeat of the king of Persia. The apocalyptic element is very pronounced in this work; Alexander is depicted as a pious, proto-Christian instrument of God, endowed with the gift of prophetic utterance. Several features of the text also occur in the Koranic narrative – the famous horns of Alexander, the journey to the west and then to the east, and of course the central theme of the gate, which will be opened at an apocalyptic *Endzeit* by divine command. But, although this has been proposed by Nöldeke and often repeated since, the work also does not qualify as a direct source for the 'two-horned' Alexander of the Koran, at least not in its present form; recent investigations indicate an *ex eventu* knowledge of the Khazar invasion of Armenia in A.D. 629.

This prose legend (*nesḥānā*) was then in turn the literary source of the Syriac metrical homily attributed to Jacob of Sarug (sixth century) in the manuscripts. The poem however was actually written in the seventh century, shortly before the Muslim conquest of Mesopotamia and Palestine. The political dimension of apocalyptic in this work is very interesting. Thus, Alexander's conquests are identified in detail with Heraclius's territorial gains (or potential claims), and the politically conciliant feature of the *nesḥānā*, that, despite the Persian defeat, the guarding of the gate is a contractually...

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30 Budge, *History*, 32.
fixed joint Roman-Persian responsibility,36 is passed over in the poem in silence.

The legend of Alexander’s shutting in of Gog and Magog is also found in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius, a quite obscure, but extremely influential text, primarily devoted to the eschatological interpretation of the Arab conquest. This work also was composed in Syriac, sometime in the last quarter of the seventh century,37 although it was soon translated not only into Greek,38 but also from Greek into Latin.39 The account of Alexander’s gate in Pseudo-Methodius is not identical with that of the Syriac neshānā, but has some significant differing features, which preclude a literary dependence. The gate is located at ‘the breasts of the north’, a geographical designation otherwise found only in Syriac sources.40 As recent research has abundantly shown, it is the account of Alexander’s gate from this Greek Pseudo-Methodius text which was added to later recensions of the Alexander romance (and not conversely!).41 It is in the form enriched with this apocalyptic interpolation that the Alexander romance became widespread in the Byzantino-Slavic world. The borrowing in some of the recensions of Pseudo-Callisthenes is made directly from Pseudo-Methodius.42 In some manuscripts, however, the Pseudo-Methodius material is further elaborated, true to the genre of the Alexander romance, as a letter from Alexander to his mother Olympias, and cast in a non-apocalyptic form.43 Is this last in itself an archaic feature, prior to the apocalyptic colouring which was gradually given, under the influence of several barbarian invasions of the fourth to seventh centuries, to the story of Alexander’s building of the Caspian Gates? The point richly deserves further investigation!


38 A Lolos (ed.), Die Apocalypse des Ps.-Methodios (Meisenheim, 1976) and Die dritte und vierte Redaktion des Ps.-Methodios (Meisenheim, 1978).

39 E. Sackur (ed.), Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen (Halle, 1898), 59ff.


41 See Merkelbach-Trumpf, Quellen, 148–9.


It is hoped that the importance of the several Christian oriental versions and offshoots of Alexander romance has been made clear. Much more research is of course needed, primarily on the Syriac material. The apocalyptic dimension of Alexander's building of the gate to confine the barbarians, although no invention of the Syriac-speaking Christians (Jewish influences certainly played a role), came to be at any rate significantly developed in Mesopotamian Christian circles. The image of Alexander as apocalyptic guardian of civilization and inspired prophet of the one God was mediated to the medieval Muslim and Byzantine world through the literary activity of these oriental Christians, whose pivotal intellectual and religious contributions to the civilization of the Mediterranean are still all too often insufficiently appreciated.
