



# ALEXANDER THE GREAT II. IN ZOROASTRIAN TRADITION

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The heritage of the Sasanian period includes two widely divergent storylines about Alexander, both of which were presumably transmitted by Zoroastrians and can therefore be labelled “Zoroastrian.” One of these, which portrays Alexander in a positive light and is continued in the later Persian Alexander Romances, is discussed elsewhere (see *ESKANDAR-NĀMA*). This tradition appears to be at least partly of non-Iranian origin, but had clearly become fully integrated into the storytelling tradition of the Sasanian Zoroastrians.

It may be typical of the still predominantly oral character of Sasanian culture that different and indeed contradictory traditions continued to be transmitted on the same subject. The second storyline on Alexander, describing him as the “accursed” (*gizistag*) wrecker of the Zoroastrian tradition, figures prominently in works reflecting the views of the Sasanian court and priesthood. It is found both in religious literature and in semi-secular sources likely to have been inspired by court circles.

A full version of the second storyline is found in the *Ardāy Wirāz Nāmāg* (1.1-7; text: Vahman, 1985, pp. 76 f.; tr. Bailey, 1943, pp. 151-52, and Gnoli, p. 137): “Once Zarathustra had received the religion it was propagated in the



world until 300 years were completed. Then the accursed, wicked Evil Spirit deluded the accursed Alexander the Roman (i.e., Byzantine), who lived in Egypt, in order to cause the people to have doubt about this religion; and he came to the land of Iran with great destruction, strife, and trouble. He killed the ruler of Iran and destroyed the court and sovereignty, and ruined them. And this religious tradition (*dēn*), the entire Avesta and Zand as it was written on adorned ox-hides in golden ink, had been placed in Pābak's (city of) Istaxr in the Fortress of Archives (*diž ī nipišt*). That ill-omened adversary, the wicked, evil-doing heretic Alexander the Roman, who lived in Egypt, carried them off and burnt them. And he slew some of the religious authorities (*dastwarān*), judges, *hērbēds*, *mōbēds*, religious leaders, and able and wise people of the land of Iran. ... Since they (the Iranians) had no rulers, chiefs, leaders, or judges who knew the religion, and they were doubtful about things connected with the Divine Beings, many types of sects, beliefs, heresy, doubt, and disagreement came into being in the world.”

Like some later sources (see Gnoli, pp. 134-35), the *Iranian or Greater Bundahišn* (33.14, 36.8-9; Anklesaria, 1956, pp. 274-77, 306-7; cf. Bailey, p. 153) places Zarathustra 258 years before the death of Dārā son of Dārā, and states that “thereafter, in the reign of Dārāy ī Dārāyān, the Caesar Alexander marched from Rome and invaded the land of Iran. He killed King Dārāy and destroyed all the rulers and priests (*mōymardān*) and distinguished men (*paydāgān*) of the land of Iran. He quenched many fires. Of the religious tradition (*dēn*) of the Mazda-worshippers he took the *Zand* and sent it to Rome, he burnt the Avesta, and divided the land of Iran among 90 heads of families (*kadag-xwadāy*).”

The *Dēnkard* gives essentially the same information in the following account of the transmission of the sacred Zoroastrian texts (tr. Boyce, 1984, p. 114): “Dārāy son of Dārāy commanded that two written copies of all Avesta and Zand, even as Zardusht had received them from Ohrmazd, be preserved: one in the royal Treasure and one in the Fortress of Archives. Walaxš the Ashkanian [*aškāni*, Arsacid] commanded that a memorandum be sent to the provinces (instructing them) to preserve... whatever had survived in purity of the Avesta and Zand as well as every teaching derived from it which, scattered through the land of Iran by the havoc and disruption of Alexander, and by the pillage and plundering of the Macedonians, had remained authoritative, whether written or in oral transmission. His Majesty, Ardashir, King of kings, son of Pāpag, acting on the just judgment of Tansar [Tosar], demanded that all



those scattered teachings should be brought to the court. Tansar assumed command, and selected those which were trustworthy, and left the rest out of the canon.” (For further references to the same storyline, see Bailey, pp. 151-54.)

Non-specific negative references to Alexander are found in the *Zand i Wahman Yasn* (3.26; Cereti, p. 135): “That (branch, representing an epoch) of brass is the reign of the *Aškāniyān* (i.e., Arsacids), who will remove from the world the heretical sect of the idol-worshippers (or “Buddhists”: *jud-ristagih i but*); and the wicked Alexander the Christian (*kilisāyig*; cf. Kreyenbroek, 1985, pp. 101-2) will be made to disappear from this religious tradition (*dēn*) and will be ruined and lost.” The same source (7.32; cf. Cereti, p. 144) foretells that at the end of the Millennium of Zarathustra, Mithra of spacious pastures will cry out: “As to these nine thousand years of the Treaty which He made, until now Dahāk of evil religion, Afrāsyāb the Turanian, Alexander the Byzantine (*hrōmāyik*), and the demons with parted hair, with leather girdles, have ruled for a period of a thousand years more than the Treaty (stipulated).”

The original part of the *Tansar-nāma*, which represents an effort on the part of Sasanian court circles to propagate a version of history that stressed the legitimacy of the dynasty, contains a passage where Ardaxšēr’s high priest Tansar writes to Gušnasp, ruler of Parišwar, Tabarestān, Gilān, Daylamān and Rōyān): “You wrote that ‘although the king seeks the truth of the ancients, yet he may be accused of forsaking tradition; and right though this may be for the world, it is not good for the faith’. ... If your concern is for religious matters, and you deny that any justification is found in religion, know that Alexander burnt the books of our religion—1200 ox-hides—at Istaxr. One third of that was known by heart and has survived, but even that was all legends and traditions, and men knew not the laws and ordinances. ... Therefore the religion must needs be restored by a man of true and upright judgment” (Boyce, 1968, pp. 36-37).

In other words, the Pahlavi Books and the *Tansar-nāma* all place Alexander in the context of a construct of history which depicts the period from Zarathustra’s acceptance of the Religion until the last Darius (i.e., roughly, the Achaemenid period) as a golden age, when all was as it should be. The coming of the fiendish Alexander shatters this idyllic state of things, which later Zoroastrian rulers, notably the Sasanians, seek to restore as best they can (which, as Tansar points out, helps to justify their rule). This storyline shows clear and possibly significant parallels with Pahlavi accounts of the



*Cosmogony* which states that Ohrmazd originally created the world in a perfect form, which was nearly destroyed by Ahreman's onslaught but partly reasserted itself because of its inherent goodness.

The question as to how much of the above storyline was based on objective fact, and what role cultural, religious, and political considerations belonging to later times played in its construction, has been variously answered by scholars. In his introduction to the *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Ādurfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš* (II, pp. 6-9), B. T. Anklesaria appears to accept the story of Alexander's destruction of Zoroastrian sacred texts as historical; and in a recent work, G. Gnoli argues that the "date of Zarathustra" implied by the *Greater Bundahišn* (258 years before the death of Dārā son of Dārā), was probably preserved in the Zoroastrian tradition because it is historically correct.

Most other scholars, however, are more sceptical, rejecting as mythical both the "date of Zarathustra" and the "1200 ox-hides" containing the whole of the Avesta. Given the largely oral character of cultural transmission under the Sasanians, the fact that the information on Alexander found in these works is strikingly limited and largely unvaried suggests that it goes back to a tradition that was purposely formulated and circulated with specific aims in mind, rather than to a range of accounts that were directly based on living memory.

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