



## CALLISTHENES

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**CALLISTHENES**, the name of a Greek historian of the period of [Alexander the Great](#). A *History of Alexander* of romantic and legendary character has been incorrectly ascribed to Callisthenes. It is now commonly referred to as “Pseudo Callisthenes” or the *Alexander Romance*.

*Callisthenes*. Callisthenes was born at Olynthus in Macedonia, probably in about 370 b.c. On his mother’s side he was a great nephew of Aristotle, who taught him rhetoric and took him along on his travels (Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.10.1; Plutarch, *Alexander* 55.8; Valerius Maximus, 7.2.11). On Aristotle’s recommendation Alexander engaged Callisthenes to write the history of his planned expedition against Persia. Although the young writer devoted himself to exalting the person of Alexander and his mission as the avenger of Greece, he is said to have been the only Greek who refused to prostrate himself before the king, a Persian custom that Alexander imposed on his entourage after his conquest of Persepolis. This refusal provoked Alexander’s anger, and Callisthenes’ position deteriorated rapidly. The king had him arrested in Karia-tia in Bactria on suspicion of conspiracy and imprisoned him in an iron cage (Strabo, 11.11.4; Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.17.3). There are different versions of the circumstances of Callisthenes’ death. According to Aristobulus (Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.14.3) and to Chares (Plutarch, *Alexander* 55.9) he died of obesity and pediculosis, but Ptolemy’s version quoted by Arrian (loc. cit.), that he was tortured and hanged in the spring of 327 seems more likely (cf. Fränkel, p. 188; Pauly-Wissowa, X/2, cols. 1684-85; Berve, pp. 197-98; Pedech, p. 18).

Callisthenes’ two principal works are the *Hellenica* and the *History of*



*Alexander*, both of which survive only in meager fragments. The *History* was, however, widely used by later historians. In the *Suda* (s.v. Sardanapalos) a *Persica* is also ascribed to him, but in fact the work in question was written by a certain Hellanicus (cf. Pauly-Wissowa, X/2, cols. 1684-85). Among the extant fragments of the *History of Alexander* there is an account of the battle of Issus, which contains details about the numbers of troops and the battle order of the two armies; Polybius has subjected it to a long and severe critique (cf. Pedech, pp. 58f.). Plutarch (*Alexander* 33) appears to have used another passage, in which the battle at Gaugamela (which Callisthenes incorrectly called the battle of *Arbela*, a town situated 90 km south of Gaugamela; cf. Pedech, p. 61) is described.

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*Pseudo-Callisthenes*. This work is a compilation of material, including numerous letters, culled from a variety of sources; some of the narratives contained in it are pure inventions, but others retain a core of historical fact. The work was written in Greek, and several recensions are known; they are conventionally designated by the letters A (the oldest), B, L, E, and G, and all have been edited. The Greek text was also translated into several other languages. Two recently discovered papyri contain some letters extracted from the work, one (Pieraccioni, 1954) from the 1st century b.c., the other (idem, 1951) from a.d. the 2nd century. The most important of the translations are two in Latin by Julius Valerius of a.d. the 4th century and an anonymous translator of the 10th century; one in Armenian, perhaps of the 5th century; and one in Syriac. The Syriac version deserves special comment, for W. Wright (p. 6506) and E. A. W. Budge (p. LXI) expressed the opinion that it was translated from Arabic; Theodor Nöldeke proved conclusively, however, that it is much older and was translated from Middle Persian (cf. Baumstark, p. 129). His argument was based on two main features of the Syriac text: frequent orthographic confusion of r and l (for both of which the letter l was used in Middle Persian) in the spelling of names and the Middle Persian forms of



names like Mehr (Mithras), Ƙosrow (for Xerxes, actually a different name), Guštāzaf (Hystaspes), Rošanak (Roxane), Aryōdukt or Ērāndukt (Rhodogyne), [Abaršahr](#) (Parthia), and Gurgān (Hyrkania; Nöldeke, pp. 13, 15). He estimated that the Middle Persian translation was made by a Nestorian Christian no later than a.d. the 7th century (p. 17; cf. *Grundriss* II, p. 166).

R. Merkelbach, who has made a detailed study of the work of Pseudo-Callisthenes, has distinguished two principal sources: a history of Alexander following the tradition of [Cleitarachus](#) (Merkelbach, pp. 20f.) and a collection of letters, some of which may have belonged to an epistolary novel composed about 100 b.c. He concludes that material from both these sources was compiled about a.d. 300 by the Alexandrian author of the novel (pp. 20f., 224-25).

Among the invented stories is an account in which Alexander poses as ambassador to the court of Darius and is invited to share a meal with the king, who is seated on the highest seat, resplendent in luxurious garments and surrounded by thousands of soldiers. After being recognized by a certain Pasarges Alexander seizes a golden cup and flees (2.14, 15). In the Syriac translation eleven princes or noblemen are mentioned; all have Persian names (Budge, pp. 129-30; tr. p. 73).

Among the episodes that contain a core of truth is the dramatic and prophetic account of the death of Darius III: After receiving a mortal blow from his satraps [Bessos](#) and [Ariobarzanes](#) the king engages in conversation with Alexander, who offers him his freedom. Darius asks his conqueror to avenge him, entrusts to him his mother Rhodogyne and his sister Dadipharta, and gives him his daughter Roxane in marriage before dying in his arms. Alexander then orders him to be buried according to the Persian custom (2.20). The historical facts are that Darius, fleeing before his enemy, was taken prisoner by his own satraps and killed by Bessos before the arrival of the Macedonian (Arrian, *Anabasis* 3.20-22), who did order that he be buried in the Persian royal necropolis.

Of the letters contained in the work several merit special mention: Darius' threat to the "villain" Alexander in Syria (1.36; Merkelbach, p. 232, let. V); the correspondence of Darius with the satraps beyond the Taurus range before and after the battle of the Granicus (1.39, 2.10; Merkelbach, pp. 230-31, 233-34, lets. I-III, IV; in the Syriac translation the satraps Hystaspes and Spithridates appear as Guštāzaf and Sabāntār; Budge, p. 89; tr. p. 51); Darius' command to



Alexander, before the battle at Issus, to appear before him and adore him as a god (1.40; Merkelbach, p. 233, let. VII); Darius' offer of ransom for his family (2.12; *Pap. Hamb.* 129.31-46 [*Griechische Papyrusurkunden*]; Merkelbach, p. 235, let. IX); other correspondence between the two about the captive royal family (*Pap. Soc. It.* III 8-IV 16, IV 14-41, IV 42-48 [Pieraccioni, 1951]; Merkelbach, pp. 238-41, lets. XIV, XV, XVI); Darius' call for help to Poros (king of India) after Alexander's refusal to release his family (2.19.2-5; Merkelbach, pp. 240-41, let. XVIII); Rhodogyne's advice to her son Darius to reconcile himself with Alexander (2.12.3-4; Merkelbach, pp. 241-42, let. XX); correspondence among Rhodogyne, Stateira, Darius' wife, and Alexander (2.22.2-6, 7-10, 11, 12; Merkelbach, pp. 246-47, lets. XXIV-XXIX); and a letter from a certain Polyidos (an old Greek teacher of Darius not mentioned elsewhere) containing news of the emperor's family and Alexander's generosity toward the captives (*Pap. Soc. It.* 1285, II 12.3-7 [Pieraccioni, 1951]; Merkelbach, pp. 237-38, let. XIII).

Despite their partly fictional character these letters offer some points of interest, for example, the titles from Darius' letters to Alexander: "king of kings, great god, and master of 120 peoples" (1.40.2-3), "Darius, king of kings, enthroned with the god Mehr, offspring of the gods, who rises with the sun, to Alexander, his servant" (1.36.4-5, 38.1-2), and the Syriac variant "from the king of kings and the kinsman of the gods, who is enthroned with the god Mehr, the son of the stars, Darius the Persian to Alexander my servant" (ed. Budge, p. 81; tr. p. 46). Merkelbach has compared this last pompous title with that of Šāpūr I in his inscription on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam (Gk. lines 1-2; ed. Maricq, pp. 304-05; ed. Back, pp. 284-88; Merkelbach, p. 231, n. to let. V), and it also recalls the title in the letter from Šāpūr II to the Emperor Constantius (Ammian, 17.5.3), which may point to an Achaemenid origin for the Sasanian usage, as it is unlikely that the compiler of the lost epistolary novel invented the titles himself. It is noteworthy that the use of "servant" agrees with the Achaemenid kings' conception of their supremacy over rulers of inferior rank, princes, and satraps, whom they considered their slaves (OPers. *bandaka*, Mid. Pers. *bandag*; see [banda](#); cf. Merkelbach, p. 51). Merkelbach even suggests (p. 51) that the terms "villain" (1.36, 39; Merkelbach, pp. 231-32, lets. IV, V) and "devastating" (3.2; Merkelbach, p. 248, let. XXXII; compare similar expressions in the inscription of Šāpūr I, ed. Back, pp. 295ff.) belong to the Achaemenid chancery style and reflect the Achaemenid king's manner of expression.

It should be remembered, too, that the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes,



which had been translated from Middle Persian, was itself translated with varying degrees of fidelity into Arabic and Persian; it thus came to the attention of Persian poets and literary men in the Islamic period, and so the *Alexander Romance* helped to shape national traditions then in the process of formation (Nöldeke, pp. 34ff.; *Grundriss* II, p. 246; Yarshater, p. 472). As for the much older Armenian version, it strongly influenced later Armenian historians, and from the 13th and 14th centuries it became an extremely popular work, with, however, numerous interpolations (Ter-Petrossian, pp. 38-39).

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