



ESKANDAR-NĀMA

ESKANDAR-NĀMA, Alexander the Great and the adventure tale about him known generically as the Alexander romance. Eskandar –nāma exists in many versions in Persian, popular and courtly, and in prose and poetry. The background of the tale and the major Persian versions will be discussed here.

Development of the Alexander Romance. Eskandar –nāma is based, not on historical sources, but ultimately on an account of the life and deeds of Alexander the Great written in Greek. The tale probably took shape in Alexandria between the 3rd century B.C.E. and the 3rd century C.E. Later it was ascribed to Callisthenes (q.v.) and when this ascription was shown to be incorrect, the author came to be called Pseudo-Callisthenes (for the sources of the tale, see Merkelbach). The Greek text of the tale was translated into Latin in the 4th century C.E., and thence spread to all the major vernacular languages of Europe. At more or less the same time it was translated into Syriac and possibly into Pahlavi, and this Syriac version became the source of translations into languages of the Middle East and Central and South Asia. It spread as far afield as China and Southeast Asia, becoming one of the most widely disseminated tales known (for the manuscript tradition, see Kroll, Ross, Cary).

Exactly how the tale reached Sasanian Persia and entered the Persian oral and literary traditions is not clear. According to Theodor Nöldeke, the Syriac version was translated from a now lost Pahlavi version. This view, widely but not universally accepted, has been challenged, most recently by Richard N. Frye (pp. 185-88). Frye questions the existence of a Pahlavi version, holding



that philological evidence casts doubt on Nöldeke's thesis and that the Syriac version probably descends from a much older Syriac translation of the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes, not from a supposed lost Pahlavi version. Frye extends his argument by examining the content of the Syriac version which, he maintains, could not reflect a Pahlavi source. The differences may be accounted for by reference to tales from folklore or oral tradition which were probably current throughout the Middle East and the Iranian world and which entered the Persian literary tradition sometime in the Sasanian period (for an overview of the European and Eastern versions of the tale, with emphasis on their similarities and differences, see Abel, Pfister).

Two attitudes toward Alexander have come down to us in the Persian tradition: one through oral and literary texts descending from the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes tale, and the other through the Zoroastrian priestly tradition. In the versions descended from the Greek, Alexander is usually portrayed positively as a world hero and sometimes a sage. In the few mentions that we have of Alexander in the Pahlavi texts, he is characterized as *gujastak*, "cursed, evil," and is counted with *Žahhāk* and *Afrāsīāb* as one of Iran's greatest enemies (see, e.g., *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg*, pp. 76-77, 191; Markwart, *Provincial Capitals*, p. 9; Yarshater, pp. 472-73).

Two aspects of the story are important in differentiating the versions of the Alexander romance that descend from the Greek through the Syriac from those influenced by Persian oral tradition. The first is the genealogy of Alexander. In the Pseudo-Callisthenes tale, and the Syriac version, Alexander is the son (by an illicit union) of the Egyptian Pharaoh Nectanebos and Philip of Macedon's wife Olympias. In many of the Persian versions, including that of Ferdowsī, Alexander is the son of *Dārāb* (Darius II?) and the daughter of Philip of Macedon. The second aspect is the way in which Alexander himself is viewed in the text. In the Persian versions of the story, Alexander is usually identified with *Ḍu'l-Qarnayn*, a prophet mentioned in the Qur'ān 16:84 (see Watt). In the early New Persian commentary on the Qur'ān entitled *Tarjoma-ye tafsīr-e Ṭabarī* *Ḍu'l-Qarnayn* is mentioned twice in connection with the wall of Gog and Magog (I, p. 196; IV, p. 918). Stories of Alexander/*Ḍu'l-Qarnayn* appear in popular lives of the saints, such as Abū Eshāq Nīšābūrī's *Qeṣaṣ al-anbiāʾ* (pp. 321-33 and in a chapbook version, Kabul, n. d., pp. 94-101). Among the historians, Ṭabarī (I, pp. 692-704; tr., IV, pp. 87-95), gives the fullest summary of the tale of Alexander, including the birth story in which Alexander and *Dārā* are half-brothers, the details of which appear in various Persian



versions. Neither the historians (Ṭabarī, Mas'ūdī, Dīnāvārī, Ḥamza Eṣfahānī) nor Ferdowsī develop the prophetic role of Alexander which the connection with Du'l-Qarnayn suggests, presenting Alexander as a conquering hero and a just king. Neẓāmī Ganjavī develops the prophetic side fully in what is the most extensive surviving version in New Persian.

The Persian Alexander Romances. As different versions of the tale were told by Persian poets and popular storytellers, these versions departed from the original Pseudo-Callisthenes story and became, to varying degrees, Iranianized. The versions that have survived in New Persian can be divided into two groups according to their form and intended audience. Those produced in a courtly milieu for an educated audience are in *maṭnawī* verse, while those for a popular audience are in prose. Ferdowsī's version, in the meter *motaqāreb* (see 'ARŪŽ), completed ca. 400/1010 (the earliest version surviving in New Persian), gives some idea of the Persian elements in the story (*Šāh-nāma* [Moscow] VI, VII). Dārāb, son of Homāy, defeats Filakūs (Philip) of Macedon and demands his daughter Nāhīd in marriage. Soon after their marriage Dārāb sends Nāhīd back to her father because of her bad breath. She is pregnant and gives birth to Alexander. By another woman Dārāb has a second son called Dārā (Darius III; see DĀRĀ[B] ii.), who succeeds his father at the age of twelve. Alexander, now king of Rūm, chooses Arṣṭālīs (Aristotle) as his advisor and ceases to pay tribute to Dārā. War is declared and after three defeats Dārā flees to Kerman and appeals to Porus (Fūr), king of India, for aid. He is soon stabbed by two of his counsellors, Māhīār and Jānūšiār. As Dārā dies he asks Alexander to marry his daughter, Rowšanak (Roxana), and to preserve the Avesta and the religion. Alexander executes the assassins and assumes rule of Persia.

Keyd, a local ruler in India, dreams of an attack by Alexander's army, and to ward off trouble, sends Alexander four valuable gifts: his beautiful daughter, a wise sage, a skilled physician, and a magical, ever-filled cup. Alexander defeats Porūs, king of India, and marches to Mecca where he settles a dispute, and then on to Egypt. He proceeds to Andalusia where he negotiates a peace with Queen Qeydāfa. There follow a number of fantastic adventures in both the East and the West, including a visit to the country of the Amazons. Alexander's interest is aroused by stories of the Water of Life, and he seeks the prophet Keẓr as his guide (for the relationship between Alexander and Keẓr, see Friedländer; Pfister, pp. 143-50). They enter the Land of Darkness, where Keẓr finds the Water of Life and achieves immortality but Alexander fails to find it.



Further adventures take Alexander as far as China, on the way to which he builds the wall of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj (Gog and Magog), until Aristotle requests that he return home. En route portents appear, and he dies in Babylon. He is buried in Alexandria, Egypt, in a golden coffin filled with honey.

A number of events in Ferdowsī's version may be mentioned that indicate the degree to which the story had become Persianized by the 4th/10th century. The story of Alexander's birth in Ferdowsī's version is an important step in this process because it brings him into the line of Achaemenian kings. Because he is the half-brother of Darius III he gains a legitimacy as king of Persia that no complete outsider could have. Before his death Philip makes Alexander crown prince, another factor in his legitimacy, since when he conquers Darius he is a king in his own right, not simply a military adventurer. The first military encounter between the two kings takes place at the Euphrates instead of the Tigris, thus implying a more distant western frontier of the Persian kingdom. After the defeat of Darius, Ferdowsī makes no reference to the burning of Persepolis, an incident widely attributed to Alexander. On his return journey to Babylon, Alexander passes a cave which contains a treasure left by Kay Kōsrow.

Neẓāmī's (535/1141-605/1209) Alexander romance, completed ca. 599/1202, is divided into two books entitled *Šaraf-nāma* and *Eqbāl-nāma* or *Kerad-nāma*. Neẓāmī introduced significant formal innovations in his Alexander story. One is that he begins major sections of *Šaraf-nāma* with a *sāqī-nāma* and major sections of *Eqbāl-nāma* with a *moğannī-nāma*, each of which is two lines of *matnawī* verse calling on the cupbearer or musician to bring the poet wine or play for him. After this there follows a short section called *andarz* (advice), and then the actual narrative begins, called *dāstān* (tale, story). In *Eqbāl-nāma* the *dāstān* is the story of Alexander and a similar section of narrative called *afsāna* is a narrative about some other character. The *dāstān* usually ends with a moral or an interpretation of the preceding action.

Neẓāmī begins by mentioning three birth stories but says that the best is one that has Alexander the son of Philip of Macedon. Alexander's first teacher is Nichomachus, and Aristotle is his classmate. On Philip's death Alexander becomes king and soon goes to the rescue of the Egyptians who have been attacked by an enemy. He returns victorious and decides to cease paying tribute to Dārā. Their armies meet in battle and two traitorous officers slay Dārā. One of his dying wishes is that Alexander marry his daughter Rowšanak. Now that Alexander is king of Iran, he sets out to destroy the fire temples of



the Zoroastrians. He marries Rowšanak but since he wants to travel the world, he sends her back to Rūm along with his treasure for safety's sake. He first receives the submission of the Arab lands, and visits the *ka'ba*. From there he travels to the land of Barda' where he meets Queen Nūšāba (Qeydāfa in *Šāh-nāma*), who rules over a court of women. He returns to the East and subdues the fortress of Darband in the Alborz, and then a fortress called Sarīr. He explores the cave of Kay Kōsrow and then continues east to India. The Indian king Keyd makes peace by sending the four gifts mentioned by Ferdowsī, and Alexander proceeds thence to China. After considerable negotiations, and a contest between the Greek and Chinese painters, the Kāqān of China submits with dignity to Alexander. He now begins the homeward journey, via the Qepčāq plain and the land of the Rūs, against whom Alexander must fight seven battles before subduing them. His last major adventure before reaching Rūm is his visit to the Land of Darkness in search of the Water of Life. Kezr is his guide, and the results are always the same: Kezr drinks from the spring and becomes immortal and Alexander loses his way and never finds the elixir. *Šaraf-nāma* ends when Alexander reaches Rūm.

While *Šaraf-nāma* is the story of Alexander as world conqueror, *Eqbāl-nāma* is the story of Alexander as prophet. It contains less of a narrative thread than *Šaraf-nāma* and more stories and themes from folklore or oral tradition. The book opens with Alexander desiring to seek knowledge rather than pleasure. There follow some accounts of why Alexander was called Du'l-Qarnayn, the story of Mary (Mārīā) the Copt and some other popular stories, the account of a debate in which seventy philosophers refute the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, and a disagreement between Plato and Aristotle. Alexander holds conversation with a number of philosophers: Socrates, a magus from India, Aristotle, Thales, Apollonius of Tyana, Porphyry, Hermes, and Plato. Soon after this, Alexander is called by God to be a prophet and he sets off to travel the four corners of the world again to convert unbelievers to monotheism. After many new and fabulous adventures he returns to Rūm and writes his will, dying after a last interview with his mother. His son Eskandarūs relinquishes the kingdom and becomes a pious hermit, and the book ends with final statements from several philosophers.

Later Versions of the Alexander Romance in Poetry. Neẓāmī's Alexander romance is the last work of his *kamsa*, a collection of five narrative poems that set a pattern that was imitated by Persian poets for hundreds of years. The next major Alexander story is the *Ā'ina-ye eskandarī* by Amīr Kōsrow Dehlavī



(651-725 /1253-1325; q.v.), in the meter *motaqāreb*, completed by 699/1299-1300 (ed. D. Mirsaidov, Moscow, 1977), part of his *kamsa*. As the date of composition of Alexander stories moves farther from the date of *Šāh-nāma*, some of the prominent Persianizing elements disappear. In Amir Ƙosrow's version there is no mention of the family relationship between Alexander and Dārā, and no account of Alexander's defeat of Dārā and marriage to Rowšanak. Amir Ƙosrow's formal innovation is to open each major section with an *andarz*-like passage, followed by an anecdote (*hekāyat*), then the narrative of Alexander, and finally a *sāqī-nāma* or *moğannī-nāma*. Amīr Ƙosrow's version contains the major Persian story elements: the march to China, building the wall against Gog and Magog, conversations with philosophers, attacks on fire-worshippers, and the contest of the Chinese and Greek painters, but it lacks the account of the Land of Darkness and the Water of Life and of Alexander's becoming a prophet. The story ends with conflicting versions of Alexander's death and burial.

The fourth major version is the *Ƙerad-nāma-ye eskandarī*, again in *motaqāreb*, completed in 889/1484-85 by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (ed. Ḥosayn Aḥmad Tarbiāt, Moscow, 1984), the seventh *maṭnawī* of his *Haft owrang*. If Ferdowsī's version can be thought of as the most straightforward and connected narrative of the four, with a minimum of moralizing, then Jāmī's must be seen as the most fragmented, disconnected, and moralized. Following some traditional introductory matter, it is divided into twenty-seven units of about seventy-five lines each, having a uniform structure. The pattern is for each unit to begin with a short narrative about Alexander, called *dāstān*, or a *ƙerad-nāma* (words of wisdom) by a Greek philosopher. This is followed by a brief anecdote (*hekāyat*) to illustrate, comment on, or confirm the preceding passage, and finally a four-line *sāqī-nāma* which also comments on the point in question. Then the cycle begins again. The short narratives about Alexander in these units do not form a connected story but appear to have been chosen for their exemplary content. Jāmī acknowledges the narrative tradition of Ferdowsī, Neẓāmī, and Amīr Ƙosrow by beginning with Alexander's birth, briefly summarizing his career, and ending with his death, but the short tales about the conqueror seem to be randomly arranged. The emphasis throughout is on wisdom and the lessons that are taught by the past. The poem resembles a mirror for princes rather than an account of Alexander's life. Jāmī uses the figure of Alexander to articulate some of his ideas about the question of monarchy, and only about a quarter or a third of the work deals directly with Alexander.



Four other courtly versions of the Alexander romance may be mentioned: (1) Zayn-al-Ābedīn ‘Alī ‘Abdī Beg Navīdī Šīrāzī (921-88/1515-80), *Ā’in-e eskandarī*, in *motaqāreb*, completed in 950/1543 (ed. A. Raḥīmov, Moscow, 1977); (2) Badr-al-Dīn Kašmīrī (10th/16th cent.), *Eskandar-nāma* (*Cat. Bibliothèque Nationale* III, pp. 352-54, no. 1835); (3) Tanā’ī Mašhadī (10th/16th cent.), *Sadd-e Eskandar* (see Golčīn-e Ma‘ānī, *Kārvān-e Hend* I, pp. 259, 268); (4) Ḥasan Beg ‘Etābī Takallū (d. ca. 1020/1611-12), *Sekandar-nāma* (see Golčīn-e Ma‘ānī, *Kārvān-e Hend* II, p. 868).

Prose Versions of the Alexander Romance. It remains to characterize the popular prose versions of the Alexander romance. The oldest surviving example is *Eskandar-nāma*, written down between the 6th/12th and the 8th/14th centuries (ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1343 Š./1964; tr. M. S. Southgate as *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, New York, 1978). The manuscript is defective at beginning, middle, and end. Since its publication two other manuscripts have come to light (see Semenov, pp. 13-14).

The tale is told in the words of a popular storyteller. It identifies Alexander with Du’l-Qarnayn and makes him the half-brother of Dārāb, but he does not marry Dārāb’s daughter Rowšanak as he does in many other versions. Most of the incidents mentioned in *Šāh-nāma* are present here, but the character of Alexander is entirely different from what it is in the courtly versions. In the popular tale, in addition to being a bumbling and indecisive world-conqueror, Alexander is a slave to an overwhelming passion for women and sex. The storyteller projects upon Alexander the perennially comic figure of the man with multiple wives and many attendant problems, making him much more human than godlike and clearly reflecting a popular conception of the great king.

The other major popular prose version forms the second half of Abū Ṭāher Ṭarsūsī’s *Dārāb-nāma* (ed. D. Šafā, Tehran, 1344 Š./1965). The story dates from the 6th/12th century. Alexander, half-brother of Dārāb, quarrels with the Persian king and will attack him. Dārāb’s daughter, Būrān Doḡt, raises an army to oppose Alexander, thus setting in motion a series of conflicts between the young woman and Alexander which ends in their being reconciled and joining forces. Būrān Doḡt may be a popular representation of the Iranian deity Anāhitā (see Hanaway, 1982; ANĀHID). The story contains many of the usual elements of the Alexander romance plus many elements from folklore. Alexander is shown as lacking physical courage and often in difficulties with women. He succeeds through his wits and good looks rather than through



manliness and courage. Lacking imagination, he is often timid and tongue-tied, and frequently needs help from Būrān Dokt. Thus Alexander is again reduced to the level of the average man.

A quite different popular rendering is a chapbook version: *Eskandar-nāma-ye haft jeldī* by Manūčehr Kān Ḥakīm (Kabul, n. d.). Alexander is identified with Du'l-Qarnayn and is called *šāheb-qerān*. Almost nothing remains of the basic events of the courtly versions. His adventures are often with fairies (*parīs*), demons (*dīvs*), and vigilantes (*'ayyārs*) and require the breaking of magic spells, much like the chapbook accounts of Amīr Ḥamza and other popular heroes (for a detailed comparison of the various versions of the Alexander romance, see Hanaway, 1970).

See also [KAMSA OF NEZĀMĪ](#).

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