

Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World

Patterns of Interaction across the Centuries

Edited by

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Why So Many Stories? Untangling the Versions of Iskandar's Birth and Upbringing

Julia Rubanovich

The tales of Alexander the Great originate in the Greek Alexander Romance, or *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, and represent an impressive instance of dynamic cultural exchange.¹ They wander from one national literature to another, finding their way into almost every medieval literary genre; they readily split into separate motifs and themes, reassembled with acquisition of new meanings and emphases.² In the Perso-Arabic domain, where Alexander the Great became known as Iskandar-i Rūmī/al-Iskandar al-Rūmī respectively, 'high' literature, represented by historical compositions, epic poems and ethical-philosophical treatises, produced primarily for learned reception, as well as folk tradition, appear to share an immense curiosity regarding the figure of Iskandar.³ Examination of a specific theme, that of the hero's birth and upbringing, offers an engaging opportunity to trace the transference of motifs and themes

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- 1 I use both titles interchangeably throughout the paper. The *Pseudo-Callisthenes* was compiled in about the third century CE in Alexandria by an anonymous author and was spuriously attributed – in several fifteenth-century manuscripts of European provenance – to Alexander's historian Callisthenes (executed in 327 BCE). There is an immense scholarly literature concerning the Greek Alexander Romance, its emergence, constituents and various branches. For a bibliography of studies, some of which have become classical, see Conte 2001: 35–45. Among early groundbreaking authoritative works in the field are Nöldeke 1890; Pfister 1913; Merkelbach 1954; Cary 1956. For recent contributions discussing various recensions of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, which provide a relatively established picture of the state of the art, see Stoneman 2011; Jouanno 2002. For a useful and illuminating excursus showing the distribution of the Greek Alexander Romance and its permutations in medieval literary traditions – from Syriac and Hebrew through Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopic to European vernacular literature, including the Scandinavian, – see Zuwiyya 2011a. See also n. 9 below.
 - 2 For instances of modification and revision of episodes stemming from the Greek Alexander Romance along the ideological, cultural, and religious lines of national and religious traditions, see Stoneman 2008; Rubanovich 2015.
 - 3 For most recent general surveys on the Alexander Romance in the medieval Arabic tradition, see Zuwiyya 2011b; Doufekar-Aerts 2010: 3–91; in the medieval Persian tradition: Wiesehöfer 2011; Piemontese 1995. Though not recent, but still a very useful reference is Šafavī 1364/1985. See also n. 9 below.

between the oral and the textual, mapping the mechanisms of the interaction between the two.

A Greek, an Egyptian, an Iranian – and the ‘Two-Horned’: Appropriating the Conqueror

The historical version of Alexander’s descent from Philip of Macedon and his wife Olympias was well-known in Perso-Arabic historiography. According to al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), ‘As for the Greeks and many genealogists, they say that Alexander was the son of Philip . . .’.⁴ However, as early as the third/ninth – fourth/tenth centuries the historical version became overshadowed by the account of Iskandar’s Iranian parentage, epitomized by Firdausī in his *Shāh-nāma* (Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq 1366–86/1988–2008: v, 517–25, ll. 43–125). According to the gist of this narrative, Iskandar was born of the abruptly-ended marriage of Darius/Dārāb with the daughter of the Qayṣar of Rūm, Philip/Faylaqūs (also Faylafūs, Fīlqūs, Fīlqūz, etc.), commonly named Nāhīd. During the nuptials Dārāb sensed bad breath coming from the newly-wed’s mouth, which made her instantly repugnant to him. Even after remedy by means of a curative herb, known as *al-sandar* or *al-iskandarūs* – a name manipulated in various sources to create a folk etymology for the Arabic ‘al-Iskandar,’⁵ – the ill-fated girl, already pregnant with Dārāb’s offspring, was sent back to her father. To avoid disgrace for himself and for his daughter, Faylaqūs adopts the new-born as his own son. Dārāb gets married to another woman, of whom Dārā is born. Iskandar’s half-Iranian lineage is revealed only later, during the strife with this same half-brother.

The Iranian account of Iskandar’s conception most probably appeared already in some versions of the Pahlavi *Khʿadāy-nāmag*, now lost, and from

4 Perlmann 1987: 93; see also *ibid.*: 88–90. In addition to al-Ṭabarī, examples of the unequivocal claim for Iskandar’s Greek ancestry are found in Muṭahhar b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī’s (d. after 355/966) *Kitāb al-badʿ wa al-taʿrīkh* (Huart 1899–1919: III, 152 [Arabic text]; 157 [French translation]); Bīrūnī’s (d. after 442/1050) *al-Athār al-bāqīya* (see Adhkāʿī 1380/2001: 34, 44, 104); in the *Murūj al-dhahab* by al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956; Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1861–77: II, 247–48); in Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d. 597/1200) *al-Muntaẓam* (‘Aṭā and ‘Aṭā 1412/1992: I, 424); Ibn al-Athīr’s (d. 630/1232) *al-Kāmil fī al-taʿrīkh* (Tornberg 1385/1965: I, 282, 284); Abū al-Fidā’s (d. 732/1331) *al-Mukhtaṣar* (Dayyūb 1417/1997: I, 78, 98), etc. For an idiosyncratic identification of Iskandar with Hermes, see n. 42 below.

5 See, e.g., Perlmann 1987: 90–91; Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq 1366–86/1988–2008: v, 523, l. 101; 524, l. 109; Zotenberg 1963: 400; for a learned discussion of the versions of the name in different sources, see Grignaschi 1973: 97–98, 100–101.

then on in its Arabic and Neo-Persian derivatives; it seems to have evolved into an authoritative, official narrative.⁶ The authoritative nature of the account is well reflected in its overwhelming popularity among early Arabic and Persian historians and men of letters: besides Firdausī, Iskandar's Iranian parentage is prominent in al-Dīnawarī's (d. between 281/894 and 290/903) *al-Akhhbār al-ṭiwāl* (ʿAmir and al-Shayyāl 1960: 29–30), in the *Taʿrīkh ghurar akhhbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyyarihīm* of al-Thaʿālibī (d. 412/1021; Zotenberg 1963: 399–400), the anonymous *Mujmal al-tavārikh va al-qīṣaṣ* (completed 520/1126; Afshār and Umīdsālār 1379/2001: f. 12v) and other sources. Those authors who cite both Greek and Iranian versions of Iskandar's origin, such as al-Ṭabarī (Perlmann 1987: 90–91), for example, provide a much more explicit account of the latter than of the former, without adopting a judgmental stand as to their veracity. The Iranian descent version struck roots in medieval folk tradition as well, of which situation two *dāstāns*, the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* and the *Dārāb-nāma* ascribed to Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī (or Ṭartūsī, according to a variant of his *nisba*), both written down probably sometime during the sixth/twelfth century, provide clear evidence.⁷

The endeavour to Iranicize the conqueror and thus – at least partially – legitimize the conquest must have arisen from the need to introduce Alexander into the official cycle of Iranian national history, thus ensuring its continuity.⁸ The attempt might have been encouraged by – or even modelled on – a much earlier endeavour to mobilize Alexander for a national cause, as in the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and its Syriac derivative(s) which are believed to have served as a channel of transmission of the Alexander Romance into the Perso-Arabic domain.⁹ The *Pseudo-Callisthenes* was compiled most probably by a Hellenized Egyptian, who concocted Alexander's descent from Nectanebo

6 For the nature of the *Khʿadāy-nāmag* and the probable process of its compilation, see a succinct survey with bibliography by Wiesehöfer 2011: 117–24; for the existence of several recensions of the *Khʿadāy-nāmag* and a number of Neo-Persian renditions, see de Blois 1992: 120–21; Gaillard 2005: 16.

7 See respectively: Afshār 1343/1964: 3–5; Şafā 1344–46/1965–68: 1, 388–491. For the definition of the *dāstān* genre and its peculiarities, see Rubanovich 2012: 660–75. For more discussion on the story of Iskandar's birth and upbringing in the *Dārāb-nāma*, see below.

8 On this, see, e.g., Hanaway 1970: 86–97; Southgate 1977: 279–80; Gaillard 2005: 25.

9 Due to the heavily deficient chain of transmission, the reconstruction of the ways by which the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* entered the Islamic domain, remains rather hypothetical. The crux of the problem concerns the interrelation of the Pahlavi (lost) and the Syriac (extant) translations. While the classical hypothesis introduced by Nöldeke (1890) suggests that the Pahlavi translation was made from Greek and served as a prototype for the Syriac rendition, a more recent view by Ciancaglini (1998; 2001) advocates the primacy of the Syriac translation

(= Nectanebus), an Egyptian king and magician,¹⁰ and Queen Olympias, Philip's wife (Stoneman 1991: 35–44), thus compensating for the national defeat and recuperating the conqueror's deeds into the national history.¹¹

The fortunes of the Egyptian version on Islamic soil are rather peculiar and worth looking at. It seems that early sources, i.e., till the second half of the sixth/twelfth century, were either unacquainted with it or ignored it. I was able to trace only one account of Iskandar's Egyptian descent, offered by the anonymous author of the Persian *Mujmal al-tavārīkh va al-qīṣaṣ*:

It is told in the *Sikandar-nāma* that [B]akh[t]iyanūsh, the king of Egypt, was a sorcerer. When he became deprived of the kingship, he went – estranged – to the land of Greece and used all kind of trickery till he got himself by sourcery to Filqūs's daughter [*sic*], named Almufid (المفيد). From her Iskandar was born. More implausible stories of sorts are told (*va chand rivāyat-i dīgar-i nā-ma'qūl gūyand*).¹² [But] there is no doubt as for the fact that his mother was Filqūs's daughter (Afshār and Umīdsālār 1379/2001: fol. 12v).¹³

The *Sikandar-nāma*, mentioned in the above quotation from the *Mujmal al-tavārīkh va al-qīṣaṣ*, although it cannot be identified with any certainty, most likely belongs to a branch of the Arabic *Pseudo-Callisthenes* which derives from the Syriac tradition retaining the Egyptian version of Alexander's nativity. The idiosyncratic designation of Olympias as Philip's daughter – instead of his spouse – seems to indicate the lack of proper acquaintance on the part of the *Mujmal's* author with the Egyptian account, which he conflates with a more familiar Iranian one. This piece of evidence suggests that the version of Iskandar's Egyptian descent did circulate in the Islamic world, albeit on the

executed directly from Greek and later rendered into Middle Persian. On this, see also Wiesehöfer 2011: 128 and n. 48 there.

10 Nectanebo is historically identifiable with the last Pharaoh Nectanebo II (r. 360–343 BCE), who fled from Egypt during the attacks of the Achaemenian king Artaxerxes III Ochus (r. 359–58 to 338–37 BCE).

11 See Budge 2005: vi–vii, x; Macuch 1989: 504, 510.

12 Indeed, the accounts concerning Iskandar's descent are not limited to the three versions. Some genealogies connect him to Ibrāhīm through al-ʿĪṣ b. Iṣḥāq (as in al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*, see Perlmann 1987: 93–94, and in the *Murūj al-dhahab*, see Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille 1861–77: II, 248). Rather oddly, Bal'amī in his *Tarjuma-yi Tārīkh-i Ṭabarī* claims the Iranian king Bahman as Iskandar's father (Zotenberg 1867–74: I, 512; see also n. 28 below).

13 If not indicated otherwise, the translations are mine.

very ‘periphery’ of the Alexander-material.¹⁴ This seems to have two principal causes: (a) the irrelevance of the Egyptian origin to Iranian national history which became an integral part of the Islamic historical narrative; and (b) the general uneasiness of Muslims regarding the profuse and conspicuously semi-mythical, polytheistic and magic elements of the Nectanebo story (cf. Macuch 1989: 508). At the same time, the narrative survived unhindered in the Christian Arabic milieu, for the Oriental Christians seem to have shown more tolerance for the polytheistic Egyptian legend (ibid.). It is found, for instance, in the *Ta’riḫ Mukhtaṣar al-duwal* by Ibn al-‘Ibrī (Bar Hebraeus; d. 1286), and is recounted in a section dealing with Artaḫshasht al-Thālith¹⁵ as follows:

... He (i.e., Artaxerxes III) reconquered the Kingdom of Egypt (*mulk Miṣr*) and defeated its king Nectanebo (Niqṭābiyūs; *نقطايوس* [sic]). (The latter) travelled to the country of the Greeks in the guise of astrologer, for he was skilled in astronomy (*‘ilm al-falak*) and in the mysteries of celestial movements. It is said that he had an intercourse with Olympias (Ulūmfidhā), the wife of Philip (Fīlīfūs), King of Macedonia, with the help of his astrological prediction to her (*fī tanjīmihi lahā*). As a result, she became pregnant from him with al-Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn (Ṣāliḫānī 1890: 89).

Ibn al-‘Ibrī’s *Ta’riḫ* represents the abbreviated translation of the first part of his Syriac *Chronography* (Segal 1971: 805). It is probable, therefore, that the author borrowed the Nectanebo story from the Syriac version of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, not sharing the scruples of his Muslim counterparts.¹⁶

Muslim authors’ uneasiness with the Egyptian version of Iskandar’s birth was further implicitly linked to the interpretative process, going on in the first centuries of Islam that revolved around the mysterious character of Dhū al-Qarnayn (‘The Two-Horned’), who makes an appearance in the 18th *sūra* of the Qur’ān (Q 18: 83–100). The figure of Dhū al-Qarnayn gave rise to intense

14 Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate below, vague traces of the Egyptian version start resurfacing from the end of the sixth/twelfth century onwards, reshuffled and reintegrated into various sources pertaining to Iskandar.

15 I.e., the Achaemenian Artaxerxes III; see n. 10 above.

16 Another piece of evidence for the circulation of the episode in Arab(ic) Christian circles is its survival in the Ethiopic Alexander Romance which was in all likelihood translated from an Arabic Christian version of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* sometime between the 14th–16th centuries (see Weymann 1901: 4–5; 70–71; 83; Anderson 1931: 440–41). In view of Ibn al-‘Ibrī’s testimony, the common assumption that an ‘‘Egyptian’’ variant has not been passed down by historians’ (Doufekar-Aerts 2010: 19; cf. Grignaschi 1993: 228) deserves rectification.

polemics among Qur'ān exegetes.¹⁷ According to an interpretation ultimately accepted as authoritative, Dhū al-Qarnayn was associated with Alexander – al-Iskandar al-Rūmī – who was sent by God to subdue the peoples of the world, calling them to the monotheistic faith.¹⁸ The status of Dhū al-Qarnayn, however, always remained controversial: while some exegetes conceded his being a prophet, albeit sent 'without a revelation' (*ghayr mursal*), others restricted his position to that of 'a pious servant [of God]' (*al-'abd al-ṣāliḥ*) and a virtuous ruler.¹⁹

The many versions of Iskandar's birth coupled with the acquired Islamic identity, created an idiosyncratic blend of features – at once harmonious and controversial – which informed the character of Iskandar. To decipher the constituents of the blend, and to grasp its significance, it is necessary to examine the possible constellations generated in relation to the image of Iskandar in specific historical periods and milieux.

What is This Smell? The Motif of Bad Breath

One of the key motifs of the Iranian account of Iskandar's nativity concerns the abrupt expulsion of the already pregnant Greek princess by Dārāb due to her

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- 17 To illustrate the controversies concerning the Dhū al-Qarnayn personage, I may cite his identification as the Ḥimyarite king al-Ṣa'b b. Dhī al-Marāthid (Ibn Hishām 1347/1928: 81–82); as the only son of an old woman from Rūm (al-Ṭabarī 1373–77/1954–57: xv, 17); as the Lakhmid al-Mundhir al-Akbar (Montgomery Watt 1978). For a summary of other contentions, see Ṣafavī 1364/1985: 279–97. For a detailed discussion of the Qur'anic story of Dhū al-Qarnayn from a historical perspective of its formation, its reflection in Arabic and Persian sources, as well as a variety of explanations of the appellation, see Ṣafavī 1364/1985: 269–305; Wheeler 1998; Abel 1951; Montgomery Watt 1978. In an attempt to settle chronological discrepancies, medieval exegetes and historians suggested the existence of two Dhū al-Qarnayns in various time-periods: Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Akbar (Persian: Dhū al-Qarnayn-i Akbar) and Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Aṣghar (Persian: Dhū al-Qarnayn-i Aṣghar). The former is the one mentioned in the Qur'ān; he lived after the Prophet Ṣāliḥ and before the Prophet Ibrāhīm and is famous for erecting the Wall against Gog and Magog. The latter is identified with Iskandar-i Rūmī, who conquered Iran and whose counsellor was Aristotle. For exhaustive descriptions of the deeds ascribed to both figures, see Mīrkhānd 1338–51/1960–72: I, 91–95; 640–69; also Brinner 1987: 23; Perlmann 1987: 87.
- 18 See, e.g., al-Tha'labī 1340/1921–22: 251; Zotenberg 1867–74: I, 518; idem 1963: 400, 442; Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: 86, 104ff.
- 19 See, e.g., al-Tha'labī 1340/1921–22: 252–53; Zotenberg 1867–74: I, 519; Yaghmāyī 1340/1961: 324–25 and n. 6 there; Ḥikmat 1331–39/1953–60: v, 735. However, see also below, on Nizāmī's sublimation of Iskandar's character to the status of the prophet.

bad breath, resulting in the concealment of Iskandar's real parentage. True, the expulsion is required to move the plot forward, creating suspense and explaining the later strife of Iskandar and his half-brother, Dārā, who is unaware – till the very end – of their kinship. However, while the expulsion is conditioned by narrative logic, the grounds on which it is enforced, are highly unusual, if not altogether odd. Notwithstanding the queerness of the 'bad breath' motif and its peculiarity to Perso-Arabic versions of the Alexander Romance,²⁰ it has not attracted the attention of scholars dealing with the Islamic Alexander-matter.

An attempt at interpreting the motif was made by William L. Hanaway in his unpublished dissertation on Persian popular romances before the Safavid period. Hanaway suggested a non-Persian source for the 'bad breath' motif, connecting it with the motif of the poison-damsel, found, albeit not often, in the Sanskrit literature (Hanaway 1970: 57). According to Hanaway, the motif reflects the actual practice of Indian kings of keeping poison-damsels to dispose of their enemies (ibid.). A poison-damsel was a girl who from birth had been reared on poison and had become extremely venomous. Possessing such a valuable quality, she could be sent to a rival king as a gift and would kill him by kissing, touching, mingling of perspiration, or intercourse (ibid.: 57–58). As for the route of the motif's penetration into the Alexander subject-matter, Hanaway refers to the twelfth-century Latin *Secretum Secretorum*, probably translated from the Arabic *Sirr al-asrār*, which allegedly comprises the correspondence between Aristotle and Alexander. There, one of Aristotle's counsels to Alexander is to protect himself from a poison-damsel (ibid.: 59). Hanaway says that the story of Alexander and the poison-damsel entered medieval European literature, namely the Latin *Gesta Romanorum* (compiled ca. 1400), and became a widespread story, connected not only to Alexander but also to other figures (ibid.: 59–60).

Although attractive, the connection of the 'bad breath' motif with the motif of the poison-damsel seems to me rather questionable. The story of

20 I am aware of only two other medieval Persian sources, not connected with the Alexander Romance, that contain a similar motif. The first is Niẓāmī's poem *Khusrau va Shīrīn*, where Khusrau Parvīz is given one year by the beautiful Shakkār to get rid of his malodorous breath (Tharvatīyān 1386/2007: 352, ll. 74–88). The cure suggested by Shakkār is eating garlic (*sīr*; ibid.: 352, l. 76). Curiously, though not mentioned in any source pertaining to Alexander/Iskandar, the Greek word *skandix*, to which the name of Iskandar bears a remarkable similarity, means 'garlic' (Stoneman 2008: 25). The second composition is the *dāstān Firūzshāh-nāma* by Muḥammad-i Bīghamī, in which the foul odour is one of the characteristics of a witch by the name of Zarda (Şafā 1339–41/1960–63: I, 210, 222; cf. Hanaway 1970: 56).

the poison-damsel (or 'the poison maiden')²¹ sent to Iskandar by an Indian king's mother, indeed figures in the Arabic pseudo-Aristotelian *Sirr al-asrār*, which comprises Aristotle's admonishments to Alexander in various fields of rulership.²² However, according to that story, the girl is capable of poisoning during sexual intercourse, either through penetration or sweating, and there is no mention of her bad breath. One may consider a motif transformation. However, the work's *terminus ad quem* is not later than 330/941 (Manzalaoui 1974: 157–58), i.e., more or less contemporaneous with the earliest accounts of Iskandar's birth that propose this 'bad breath' motif, such as al-Ṭabarī's or al-Dīnawarī's. From the point of view of motif transmission and transformation, it is hardly possible that the story of the poison-damsel would have been stripped of all its peculiarities in such a short period, to reappear as a distant echo in compositions similarly dated. Further, it is hard to explain the virtual absence of this story in Arabic and Persian sources other than the *Sirr al-asrār*, whereas it abounds in the European tradition, whether related or not to the Alexander-matter.²³ Moreover, as Hanaway himself notices, the 'bad breath' motif figures only in the versions based heavily on Iranian sources (Hanaway 1970: 62) and thus its derivation from an Arabic source is even more unlikely. Without entirely refusing Hanaway's proposition as a possible hypothesis, I would like to suggest a domestic – Zoroastrian – connection of the 'bad breath' motif, attempting to establish its significance in the context of the Iranian account of Iskandar's descent.

The importance of the olfactory sense is a characteristic feature of Zoroastrian cult and theology, including eschatology, and is well attested in Pahlavi texts. The name of Ahrīman is frequently replaced by a negative epithet *Gan(n)āk Mēnōg*, 'the Stinking Spirit,' as opposed to the sweet-smelling Ohrmazd (Duchesne-Guillemin 1985: 672). The bad smell is connected to death, illness, filth and foul food (*ibid.*). The eschatological descriptions in the *Ardā Vīrāz nāmag*, *Dādestān ī mēnōg ī khrad* and other texts are replete with references to the respective olfactory qualities of paradise and hell: the

21 See Wikander 1968 *apud* Manzalaoui 1974: 211.

22 For the Arabic text, see Badawī 1954: 84–85. For the Indian influence on the *Sirr al-asrār*, see Manzalaoui 1974: 210–13.

23 For the motif in European literature, see Cary 1956: 231, 301. This is not to deny altogether the impact of the *Sirr al-asrār* on Persian didactical writing of the 'Mirror for Princes' kind. Manzalaoui traces its influence on al-Ghazālī's *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* (compiled ca. 503/1109; see Manzalaoui 1974: 220–21; 239–41). At the same time, the compilation and transmission of the *Sirr al-asrār* present such a convoluted issue as to make any passing judgment on its influence highly debatable (cf. Doufekar-Aerts 2010: 103, n. 42).

former is fragrant and aromatically scented (Chunakova 2001: 100–101, 104; eadem 1997: 85), the latter is foul-smelling, fetid and malodorous (Chunakova 2001: 108–109, 117, 121); one of the prevalent torments that the wicked souls suffer in hell is devouring filth and their own excrement (ibid.: 110, 113–14, 119, 120, 122, 128). Significantly, the *dēn*, a believer's faith, is personified as a woman; the *dēn* of the righteous appears to him as a beautiful, perfume-spreading maiden, but the wicked soul is greeted by a naked, filthy, stinking and lecherous hag with crooked knees and bulging buttocks (ibid.: 108).²⁴

In the Zoroastrian context the malodour of the Macedonian princess may implicitly signify her alienated, impure status vis-à-vis her Iranian husband; it is not incidental that in one version of the story, after having sensed his wife's rotten breath Dārāb performs an act of self-purification.²⁵ The denunciation of Iskandar's non-Iranian mother by means of an evocative motif of bad breath may be perceived as a vestige of the hostile Zoroastrian attitude towards Alexander/Iskandar, that emphatically depicts him as Ahrīman's tool, a *gizistag* ('accursed'), the destroyer of the faith and the undoer of the empire.²⁶ The 'shift of guilt' from his figure on to that of his mother reveals the reticence inherent in incorporating Iskandar into the Iranian tradition: he is to be integrated into the national history not as a conqueror, but as a legitimate ruler, a possessor of *farr*; nevertheless, the pre-Islamic national-religious sentiment remonstrates against an unequivocal appropriation – hence the ambiguity underlying Iskandar's character in early Muslim sources, heavily influenced by pre-Islamic Iranian concepts, such as Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma* or the *Dārāb-nāma* ascribed to Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī.²⁷ Although thanks to his paternal lineage, Iskandar was ultimately accepted as Iranian, he still remains an alien on account of his mother's foreign and, therefore, impure origin.

24 On the concept of *dēn*, see Shaki 1996; Vahman 1985. For an insightful treatment of the olfactory perception in general and of the rose scent in particular in pre-Islamic Iran and medieval Persian culture, including mystic poetry, see Subtelny 2007.

25 Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 389; for the quotation, see below, p. 211.

26 Cf. Manteghi 2012: 166; the author suggests considering the “bad breath” as a “sign of Ahrīman”, without undertaking a coherent discussion in favour of her suggestion. The disparity between the two traditions concerning Alexander/Iskandar – the Zoroastrian and the Islamic – has long been noticed and discussed. For a succinct appraisal of the pre-Islamic hostile view of Alexander as arch-enemy of Iran, main ‘accusations’ found in the Zoroastrian writings, and their possible historical grounds, see recently Wiesehöfer 2011: 124–28. For traces of the Zoroastrian tradition in Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*, see Yamanaka 1993; eadem 1999.

27 Cf. Gaillard 2005: 54–68; see also the previous note.

The significance of the ‘bad breath’ motif becomes even clearer in comparison with the account of the descent of Iskandar’s father, Dārāb, which in most sources forms an integral part of the Iskandar story.²⁸ He is the progeny of the king Bahman and his daughter Humāy/Humānī, a favoured type of matrimonial union according to the Zoroastrian religion. Counterbalanced to their pure – in Zoroastrian terms – marriage, the wedlock of Dārāb and Nāhīd ominously imperils the continuation of the Iranian empire: the malodour of the Rūmī spouse, already pregnant with Iskandar, correlates with the fall of the Iranian dynasty through the impending death of Dārā. In this respect, a passage from the *Dārāb-nāma* deserves quotation:

[After having united with Nāhīd], Dārāb fell asleep. With the approach of the morning, he woke up, came to Nāhīd and placed his mouth on hers. An unpleasant smell (*bū-yi nā-kh^vash*) invaded his nostrils. Dārāb turned his head away, stood up, made an ablution (*sar-u tan bishust*), put on his clothes and sat on his throne. He called [his vizier] Jānūsiyār and told him about the matter. Jānūsiyār said: ‘Beware and don’t mention it.’ Dārāb replied: ‘I don’t want and don’t need her.[...] When a child is born from her, he will become an enemy to my son and will ask me to favour Greeks more [than Iranians] (*chun az vay farzand-ī shavad dushman-i bachcha-yi mā buvad va havā-yi rūmīyān bihtar kh^vāhad az man*). Besides, I have a son, Dārāb [*sic*] by name [...]. It is not proper that a quarrel should spring up between them, and I will be cursed after my death. I can not endure God’s reproach. I don’t need her, send her to her father!’ When Dārāb said that, all the Iranians listened and answered: ‘O King, we obey your order.’ (Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 389–90).

It seems, therefore, that notwithstanding the desire to appropriate the conqueror for the sake of Iranian national history, the episode of Iskandar’s birth as represented in early Perso-Arabic sources, betrays the undercurrents of the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian aversion to Alexander/Iskandar. To what extent the authors and their contemporary audiences were mindful of these undercurrents is hard to gauge. However, one can observe that from the second half of the sixth/twelfth century onwards the story of Iskandar’s birth and upbringing

²⁸ The most eloquent confirmation of the fact that the stories of Bahman, Humāy, Dārāb and the birth of Iskandar were closely related and perceived as a single literary unit is the confusion found in Bal’ami’s *Tarjuma-yi Tārikh-i Ṭabarī*, according to which the Greek princess is wedded to and expelled by Bahman, the latter thus emerging as Iskandar’s father (for reference, see n. 12 above). Cf. Gaillard 2005: 24.

underwent considerable alterations, the causes of which lie both in historical events and in the interplay of folk and literary traditions.

Alternative Versions of Iskandar's Birth and Upbringing; the Second Half of the Sixth/Twelfth Century until the Safavid Period

The second half of the sixth/twelfth century was a focal point in the evolution of legendary Alexander material in the Persian domain. The period witnessed two main developments: the historical version of Alexander's/Iskandar's descent from Philip/Filqūs gained a firmer hold with epic poets and historians, and there emerged a range of alternative or complementary accounts concerning Iskandar's birth and upbringing, arising in the oral tradition undergoing during this period an active process of fixation in writing.

a *The Historical Stance: The Iskandar-nāma of Niẓāmī*

The first tendency, the historical, is well articulated in the *Iskandar-nāma* of Niẓāmī-yi Ganjavī.²⁹ The poet appears to be acquainted with a range of opinions regarding Iskandar's descent: 'there are a lot of controversies concerning this story' (*dar īn dās'tān dāvarīhā bas-ī-st*).³⁰ Three of the versions are summarized in the first book of the poem, usually known as the *Sharaf-nāma* (Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 117–19, ll. 17–60). The first version is cited on the authority of the Greeks; its singularity calls for translation *in extenso*:

So it became known from the wise men of Greece (*chunīn āmad az hūsh'yārān-i Rūm*), / that there was a virtuous woman (*zāhid zan-ī*) from that country.

While pregnant, she became miserable one day, / she became separated from her homeplace and her husband (*zi-shahr-u zi-shū-yi kh'ad āvāra gasht*).

When the time of her parturition approached, / and she started experiencing the pain of delivery,

She delivered in a ruin (*vīrāna-yī*) and died. / She was anxious about the infant[']s fate] and giving her last breath [...].

29 The dating of the poem is problematic. The first part seems to have been composed after 584/1188, the whole being completed probably in 590/1194. For a detailed discussion, see de Blois 1994: 441–46; idem 1998: 612–13.

30 Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 117, l. 17. Cf. the statement of the anonymous compiler of the *Mujmal al-tavārīkh va al-qīṣaṣ* on the matter (see above, p. 205).

[...] When the woman died and the infant became an orphan, / thus arranged the Relation of the orphans (*kas-i bī-kasān*; i.e., God),

That [the infant], due to his upbringing and [good] judgment, / would become the master of the worldly realm, from Qāf to Qāf.

King Filqūs came across the woman, / while he was hunting and enjoying the plain.

He saw a dead woman on his way / and an infant near her head:

In the absence of milk, he was sucking his finger, / he was biting his finger (i.e., grieving) for his mother.

[Filqūs] ordered his servants to ride forth / and arrange the business of the dead woman.

He picked up the infant from the road dust, / amazed by the command of Fate.

He took him, raised him and treated him well. / He made him his heir (Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 117–18, ll. 18–32).

The above version of Iskandar's birth is peculiar to Niẓāmī; its singularity seems consciously emphasized by the carefully detailed telling, in contrast to the brief reporting of the usual Iranian narrative (see below). Whatever the singularity, an inquiry into its possible origins shows that the central motif of the version, Iskandar's descent from a pious woman of Rūmī origin, can be traced to the exegetical polemics concerning Dhū al-Qarnayn's identity, as it appears, for instance, in al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmi' al-bayān*: 'Dhū al-Qarnayn is a man of Rūm (*raġul min al-Rūm*), son of an aged woman of theirs (*ibn 'ajūz min 'ajā'izihim*), and she doesn't [*sic*] have a child except for him, and his name was al-Iskandar'.³¹ Moreover, besides a likely connection with the exegetical literature of the *tafsīr* and *qīṣaṣ al-anbīyā'* genres,³² Niẓāmī's version reveals a certain link to the story of Iskandar as a foundling, traceable to oral folk tradition (detailed discussion below). The amalgamation of strands cutting across genres and traditions and contributing to the creation of idiosyncratic narratives may be considered – more than anything else – a distinctive feature of

31 al-Ṭabarī 1373–77/1954–57: xv, 17. See also al-Tha'labī 1340/1921–22: 253; Hikmat 1331–39/1953–60: v, 735. This version is transmitted mostly on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih.

32 Niẓāmī's indebtedness to the *tafsīr* genre in the Alexander-matter is patent, for instance, in his treatment of the episode of Iskandar's encounter with the Amazon Queen Nūshāba (the motif of the 'precious stones repast'), echoing the handling of the same episode in al-Maybudī's *tafsīr Kashf al-asrār va 'uddat al-abrār* (compiled in the sixth/twelfth century; Hikmat 1331–39/1953–60: iv, 437); for details, see Rubanovich 2015.

the Persian Alexander subject-matter. The Nizāmī version of Iskandar's birth, although not at all agreeable to the poet's own taste, reveals the compelling urge for thematic synthesis as the main tendency in the reworking and reception of Alexander-material in the Perso-Arabic domain.

A second version, which Nizāmī cites briefly, concerns Iskandar's Iranian descent from Dārā (= Dārāb): 'Or else, the fire-working *dihqān* / traces his origin to Dārā' (*digar-gūna dihqān-i ādhar-parast / ba-Dārā kunad kisht-i ū bāz pas*; Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 118, l. 33), thus hinting at Firdausi's ancient Iranian source. Whereas Nizāmī expressly declares that as far as Iskandar's descent is concerned his 'ears are open to everybody's opinion' (. . . *gūsh bar gufta-yi har kas-ī-st*; *ibid.*: 117, l. 17), his comparison of historical sources and of the *Shāh-nāma* (*zi-tārīkhā chun giriftam qiyās / ham az nāma-yi mard-i īzad-shinās*; *ibid.*: 118, l. 34) leads him to reject these two versions in favour of the third, the historical one, labelling all the rest 'nonsensical talk' (*gazāfa sakhun*; *ibid.*: 118, l. 35):

Out of the stories of each and every country it turned out as truthful / that the Prince (i.e. Iskandar) descended from Filqūs.

Since other versions didn't withstand a probe, / the narrator did not choose them (*durust ān shud az gufta-yi har diyār / ki az Fil'qūs āmad ān shahriyār// digar gufta-hā chun 'iyār-ī nadāshst / sakhun-gū bar-ān ikhtiyār-ī nadāshst*; Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 118, ll. 36–37).

Nizāmī then goes on to depict the feast during which Filqūs courts his lovely and pure bride (*pākīza-vu nau-'arūs*); she gets pregnant that very night and bears him a son who according to astrological charts will ascend to power (*ibid.*: 118–20, ll. 38–64). Nizāmī ascribes this version to 'the venerable man [who] relates the history of ancient kings' (*chunīn gūyad ān pīr-i dīrīna-sāl / zi-tārīkh-i shāhān-i pīshīna ḥāl . . .*; *ibid.*: 118, l. 38). It doesn't contain any details about the bride's ethnic origin, Iskandar thus being tacitly represented as purely Greek (*rūmī*) and the legitimate heir of his non-Iranian father. For Nizāmī, therefore, the traditional Iranian origin of Iskandar is a fictitious and superfluous folly, non-essential for the poet's vision of the character.³³ With Nizāmī, the Iranian national element cedes to a religious, Islamic outlook. Nizāmī dwells on the triple concept of the hero, depicting his gradual development from a world

33 Nizāmī's predilection for the historical version tallies with his general concern for separating 'lie' from 'truth' in a work of fiction: 'Any account that is separated from reason, / I did not erect my poetry upon it' (*apud* Bürgel 2010: 25; for a discussion of this theme, see *ibid.*: 24–26).

conqueror to a philosopher-king guided by sages, and ultimately, a prophet spreading the message of monotheism.³⁴

b *On the Trace of Oral Tradition: Iskandar as a Foundling*

The second line of development in the Alexander subject-matter in the latter half of the sixth/twelfth century concerns the writing down of complementary accounts of Iskandar's birth and upbringing. Having circulated orally, such accounts were distinguished by typical folkloric features. This line of development may be illustrated by a version found in two works of different genres: one is the *dāstān Dārāb-nāma* ascribed to Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī (Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 387–422), the other is the '*Ajā'ib-nāma*, a kind of encyclopaedic compendium bordering on the *mirabilia* genre, probably compiled by Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd-i Hamadānī (Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: 238).³⁵ Since the *Dārāb-nāma* contains a more elaborate and detailed account, I shall take it as a base of my discussion, with reference to the other text.

As the story goes, after being expelled by the finicky Dārāb, Filqūs's daughter Nāhīd returned home to her mother. The two did not dare tell anybody about the girl's pregnancy. When the time of delivery approached, the mother launched her plan. Nāhīd is sent together with her own former wet-nurse to set up a tent at the foot of a mountain where a sage, Aristotle by name, dwells in his hut. The girl gives birth to a beautiful boy, breast-feeds him till he becomes strong enough, and then, heart-broken, departs, leaving the boy in the tent with a bundle of rich clothes and a signet-ring (Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 390–91).

34 For discussions of Iskandar's image in the *Iskandar-nāma* of Nizāmī-yi Ganjavī along these lines, see Bertel's 1962: 342–59; idem 1965: 318–35; Abel 1966; Bürgel 1995; idem 1999; Piemontese 1995: 179–80; Hanaway 1998: 610–11; de Blois 1998: 613–14; Casari 1999: 36–43; Saccone 2011. For comparative treatments of Iskandar's character in Firdausī and Nizāmī, see Bertel's 1962: 370–93; Ṣafavī 1364/1985: 67–243; Ṣafā 1369/1991. Nizāmī's preference of Iskandar's historical descent influenced later poets, such as Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī (d. 625/1325) and 'Abd al-Raḥmān-i Jāmī (d. 898/1492) who composed poems on Iskandar's deeds as *javāb* to Nizāmī's *Iskandar-nāma*.

35 The '*Ajā'ib-nāma* is dedicated to the last Great Saljūq Sulṭān Ṭughril b. Arslān (r. 571–590/1175–94) and is variously ascribed to Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd-i Hamadānī or Aḥmad-i Ṭūsī (Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: introduction, 21). It contains at least two different versions of Iskandar's birth, on which see below. Significantly, various aspects of the *Dārāb-nāma* and the '*Ajā'ib-nāma* demonstrate an essential degree of thematic affinity (see Piemontese 2000a; idem 2000b: 137, n. 1). The presence of a similar birth story in both compositions may have resulted either from a direct influence or from resort to the same reservoir of traditions.

In a nearby town there lived an old woman who had a she-goat. For several days her goat came back from pasture without a drop to be milked. One day the perplexed woman decided to put an end to the mystery: she followed the goat, who led her to a tent guarded by a lion. As soon as the lion saw the goat, he left. Entering the tent, the woman saw her goat suckling a baby boy. Taken aback, she goes to the sage Aristotle for advice. At first he bids the woman to take care of the boy; however, discerning the divine radiance (*farr-i ʿizādī*) emanating from the child, he realizes that the child must be a royal offspring. Aristotle then nurtures and educates Iskandar, teaches him all the sciences, fortune-telling and astrology among them, till the boy reaches his tenth year (*ibid.*: I, 392–93). Iskandar’s dexterity in fortune-telling and dream-interpretation, as well as his secretarial skills (*dabīrī*) make him the talk of the town, but at the same time bring upon him troubles of every sort. After a long period of wanderings, adventures and hardships Iskandar chances on his mother, is recognized by her and at last becomes the heir apparent of his grandfather Filqūs, the ruler of Rūm (*ibid.*: I, 394–422).

The folk origin of the narrative can hardly be ignored. The motifs comprising the story are easily identifiable and can be defined according to Thompson’s *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, Aarne-Thompson’s *The Types of the Folktale* (Aarne-Thompson 1973) and El-Shamy’s *Guide to Motif Classification* (El-Shamy 1995): ‘An abandoned child saved’ (Aa-Th R 131); ‘An old shepherdess saves an abandoned child’ (El-Shamy, R 131.3.5§); ‘Animal as guard’ (Th B576); ‘The Boy Adopted by Tigers (Animals)’ (Type 535); ‘A dreamer-interpreter is punished for an unwanted prophecy. The prophecy comes true’ (El-Shamy, J 815.5.1§).

A somewhat condensed but similar version of the narrative in the *ʿAjāʾib-nāma* contains further features characteristic of the oral traditional mode. Thus, for instance, a toponym ‘Ammūriya (= Amorium; see Canard 1960) which in other sources designates the town from which Iskandar’s mother originated (cf. Khālīqī-Muṭṭlaq 1366–86/1988–2008: v, 519–20, ll. 47, 49, 55, 61), in the *ʿAjāʾib-nāma* turns into her given name (Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: 238). Another oral feature is the disregard for the historical, diachronic, aspect of events: Iskandar is said to be born in al-Iskandariyya (*ibid.*), i.e. Alexandria, – a detail which makes the historian al-Nuwayrī (d. 733/1333) emphatically wonder how such an ascription can be true: most historians say that it was Iskandar who founded and built al-Iskandariyya (al-Nuwayrī 1923–97: XIV, 299)! Besides this anachronism, the version of Iskandar’s birth in the *ʿAjāʾib-nāma* is distinguished by a conflation of motifs: before abandoning her baby son, his mother ties two pearls to his arm, by which she proposed to identify him when adult

(Mudarris Šādiqī 1375/1996: 238), – the well-known motif transferred, with modification, from the episodes of Rustam and Suhrāb, and Humāy and Dārāb in Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*.³⁶

The versions of the *Dārāb-nāma* and the *ʿAjāʾib-nāma*, while retaining the skeleton of the Iranian narrative, represent an alternative sequel to Iskandar's birth. From a young prince brought up at court and educated in a courtly spirit,³⁷ Iskandar is transformed into a foundling suckled by an animal and reared by a sage who teaches him most non-courtly skills – fortune-telling instead of polo-playing (*gūy-u chauḡān*) and dream-interpretation in place of martial arts; and it is only after going through perilous adventures and humiliations that Iskandar ascends to the throne.

If we place the alternative narrative of Iskandar's upbringing in a wider perspective of Iranian mythology, as reflected above all in the *Shāh-nāma*, a set of significant relationships emerges. Farīdūn was suckled by the brindled cow Barmāya, and spent his childhood in the hut of a pious man who dwelt on Mount Alburz (Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq 1366–86/1988–2008: I, 63, ll. 123–134; 64, ll. 141–147); the abandoned Zāl was reared by Simurgh (ibid.: I, 166–68, ll. 67–90); Kay Khusrau spent his childhood among the shepherds in the mountains (ibid.: II, 368–70, ll. 2415–2447); Dārāb, rejected by his mother Humāy and set adrift in a chest on the waters of the Euphrates, was recovered and raised by a laundry-washer (*gāzur*) and his wife (ibid.: v, 489–97, ll. 22–125; cf. Šafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 11–26). Leaving aside the importance of this motif cluster in propelling the narrative action forward, these accounts form part of the foundation legend or myth in the spirit of oral tradition: a royal offspring – either a foundling or kept in concealment – undergoes hardships and trials and only after having emerged from ordeals, does he win the throne. According to the mindset of the oral tradition, the hero's efforts in overcoming the obstacles on his path from the low to the high grant him the legitimacy which had been denied him in childhood.

The alternative sequel to Iskandar's birth in our sources marks, therefore, a kind of watershed in the perception of the figure in the Persian-speaking realm. Emphasis came to be shifted to Iskandar's religious activity in proselytizing

36 See respectively Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq 1366–86/1988–2008: II, 124, ll. 84–87; 187, ll. 872–877, and ibid.: v, 489, l. 27.

37 As Firdausī puts it: *humarhā ki bāshad kayān-rā ba-kār / Sikandar biyāmūkht az āmūz'igār* ('Iskandar learnt from [his] tutor / [all] the crafts which were appropriate to kings'; Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq 1366–86/1988–2008: v, 525, l. 124; cf. Afshār 1343/1964: 5; Tharvatiyān 1368/1989: 120, ll. 65–69).

Islam, and his identification with the Qur'anic figure of Dhū al-Qarnayn was hardly ever questioned.³⁸ The conclusive association of Iskandar with Dhū al-Qarnayn and the prominence of the Islamic religious aspect of his character in Persian writings together with the indifference towards an ethnic component of his origin prompted Muslim literati to reorient his image, ameliorating and enriching it with alternative accounts from the reservoir of oral tradition. I shall go on to illustrate these developments from the early eighth/fourteenth century onwards, examining the versions of Iskandar's birth as they appear in the historical composition *Rauḍat ūlī al-albāb fī ma'rīfat al-tavārikh va al-ansāb* (completed 717/1317) by Abū Sulaymān Banākātī (d. 730/1329–30), better known as *Tārīkh-i Banākātī*. I shall supplement my discussion with references to the *Jāmi' al-tavārikh* (completed 700–710/1300–1310) by Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl-Allāh³⁹ and to the works of two later historians, Mīrkh'ānd's *Rauḍat al-ṣafā* (second half of the ninth/fifteenth century) and Kh'āndamīr's *Ḥabīb al-siyar* (compiled between 927–930/1520–23).

c 'Iranianness' on the Wane: Curious Choices and Idiosyncratic Results

In the second sub-chapter (*ṭabaqa-yi duvvum*) of the second part (*qism*) of nine in his universal history, in the section that deals with the Kayanids, Abū Sulaymān Banākātī cites four versions of Iskandar's origin:⁴⁰

38 Cf. Dhakāvati Qarāguzlū 1384/2005: introduction, 16, n. 3.

39 A methodological comment is in order here regarding my preference of Banākātī's version over the earlier *Jāmi' al-tavārikh* as the primary point of reference in this discussion. Notwithstanding the common scholarly opinion that supports the notion of Banākātī's heavy reliance on Rashīd al-Dīn's *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*, including direct textual borrowing (see., e.g., Jackson 1989), my examination of the parts pertaining to Iskandar's genealogy and birth in Rashīd al-Dīn's work brings me to conclusion that rather than having borrowed from the *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*, Banākātī relied on a common source/sources. Thus, whereas Banākātī provides an extensive account of Iskandar's birth and upbringing, rich in peculiar details and probably originating in oral tradition, Rashīd al-Dīn presents a substantially abridged and condensed version, which is essentially stripped of particulars, possibly on account of his aspiration to historicity.

40 Shi'ār 1348/1969: 31–45. Banākātī's insistence on four versions seems rather curious considering that he first introduces this Kayanid king under the heading 'Iskandar b. Filāqūs,' which should have spared him any further inquiry into Iskandar's parentage. Similarly, Rashīd al-Dīn mentions the Iranian version of Iskandar's birth in the chapter devoted to Dārāb (Raushan 1392/2013: 1, 565).

– Version One:

This is the shortest of the four and is cited on the authority of a certain *Dīwān al-nasab*.⁴¹ In this version, Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn is Hirmis, son (*pisar*) of Rūmī, son of Lantī, son of Yūnān, son of Tāriḫ, son of Yāfith, son of Nūḥ (Shi'ār 1348/1969: 41). His life spanned one thousand and six-hundred years, hence the name Dhū al-Qarnayn: at that time (*dar ān zamān*) a century (*qarn*) lasted one thousand years (ibid.). This genealogy is found, with modification, in Rashīd al-Dīn (Raushan 1392/2013: I, 574), but not in Mīrkhvānd or Kvāndamīr, and seems to be a distant echo of a version cited by early historians and exegetes, such as al-Ṭabarī.⁴² However, unlike al-Ṭabarī and Rashīd al-Dīn, Banākatī's version of Iskandar's family tree is incomplete and incoherent; it suffers from significant gaps in the chain of ancestors. Moreover, it confounds the genealogy of the two Dhū al-Qarnayns:⁴³ Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Akbar, the builder of the Wall, is typically traced to Yāfith, son of Nūḥ, whereas Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Aṣghar, identified with Iskandar, has 'Iṣ b. Ishāq b. Ibrāhīm as his ultimate ancestors (cf. Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: I, 91). Banākatī seems to be making an attempt at complying with the spirit of the exegetical tradition, represented by earlier *tafsīrs*; however, his lack of precision betrays either a lack of adequate knowledge or of real interest in this version, perhaps both.

41 Cf. Raushan 1392/2013: I, 574. The name of this composition appears in Ḥājī Khalifa's *Kashf al-zunūn* without any clarification (Yaltkaya and Bilge 1360–62/1941–43: I, 817). However, it might be identified with the lost *Dīwān al-nasab* by Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī al-Murtaḍā (fl. early 7th/13th century), a book in the library of the Shi'ite scholar Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266) (see Kohlberg 1992: 147–48, no. 114). Ibn Ṭāwūs made several references to the *Dīwān al-nasab* in his *Kitāb al-mahmūm fī ma'rīfat (nahj or manhaj) al-ḥalāl wa al-ḥarām min 'ilm al-nujūm* (for this work, see ibid.: 32–33, no. 10). I am grateful for Michael Lecker's assistance in my efforts to identify the composition.

42 See Perlmann 1987: 93–94: 'It is (also) said (that he was the) son of Maṣrīm b. Hermes b. Hardas b. Miṭūn b. Rūmī b. Lantī b. Yūnān b. Japhet b. Thūbah b. Sarḥūn b. Rūmyah b. Barbat b. Jubal b. Rūfi b. al-Aṣfar b. Eliphaz b. Esau b. Isaac b. Abraham, God's friend'. As the editor remarks, this genealogical list combines elements from Jewish biblical sources with others originating in Greek mythology (ibid.: 94, n. 263). Cf. also al-Tha'labī 1340/1921–22: 251. The association of Iskandar with Hirmis/Hermes is not surprising in view of the connection in Arabic tradition regarding Iskandar's transmission of Hermetical writings (see Plessner 1971: 463).

43 See n. 17 above.

– Version Two:

The second version cited by Banākatī is by far the most elaborate and richest one of the four; it is introduced (without mentioning any particular source) by the expression ‘they say’ (*gūyand*).⁴⁴ Here Iskandar’s parentage is ascribed to an Egyptian ruler of Iskandariyya (again, the anachronism that stirred al-Nuwayrī’s indignation mentioned above), named Bāzar [Bāzur?], son of Albān (بازر بن البان).⁴⁵ In order to bring to an end his protracted strife with Aflisūn b. Fūqā (*sic*; Rashīd al-Dīn has Fīlfūs; Mīrkhvānd and Khvāndamīr both have Fīlqūs), Bāzar marries Aflisūn’s unnamed daughter. Slandered by servants and driven away by her husband (*khuddām-i ū kayd-ī sākhtand va dukhtar-rā az naẓar-i malik biyandākhtand*), she gives birth to Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn in the middle of nowhere.⁴⁶ By God’s grace, the infant was found by a she-goat (*buz*; Rashīd al-Dīn speaks alternatively of a gazelle, *āhū*, and a sheep, *mīsh*; the latter is mentioned by Mīrkhvānd and Khvāndamīr as well) and reared by an old woman (*pīr-zan*), the goat’s owner (Shī‘ār 1348/1969: 41), who named the child Iskandar (*ibid.*: 42). Having reached adolescence and having been taught some life skills, Iskandar served as an official’s *dabīr*; falsely accused of a misdeed, he flees the realm and after many hardships, chances upon his mother’s town. With her motherly perspicacity she recognizes him, relates the whole story to her father, who appoints his grandson as his heir. After Aflisūn’s (Fīlqūs’s) death, Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn is crowned, takes revenge upon the town where he had been humiliated and embarks on his world conquests with Arastātālīs as his vizier and Ḥiḍr (= Khīḍr) as his commander in chief (*sipahsālār*). In this version, Banākatī gives Dhū al-Qarnayn’s life-span as sixty-eight years.⁴⁷

The similarities of this version with those of the *Dārāb-nāma* and the ‘*Ajā’ib-nāma* are evident. Its oral provenance is emphasized by the generalized ‘they say’ as its source, along with the orally-derived motifs of a child suckled by an animal, a motherly instinctive recognition of the abandoned son, a hero rising to power through hardships, a motif of revenge, etc. Moreover, the episode of Iskandar being employed as *dabīr*, the plotting against him, his fleeing to his mother’s town, and the consequent recognition, are all present in the

44 Rashīd al-Dīn has it: *ba’ḍ-ī gufta-and* (Raushan 1392/2013: I, 575).

45 Mīrkhvānd (1338–51/1960–72: I, 641) has Āzar (أزر), Khvāndamīr (Humā’ī 1333/1954: I, 209) – Bāzar [Bāzur?] without the patronymic.

46 Rashīd al-Dīn abstains from stating explicitly the reason of the girl’s banishment. However, from his wording (‘for some reason their relationship came to the point when . . .; *bāz sabab-ī bā’ith shud kih miyān-i ishān ba-d-ān rasīd kih . . .*; Raushan 1392/2013: I, 575) it appears that the story, as cited by Banākatī, was known to him.

47 Shī‘ār 1348/1969: 42; cf. Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: I, 641–42; Humā’ī 1333/1954: I, 209–10.

Dārāb-nāma (Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 399–422) and thus designate these two versions as source-related.⁴⁸

At the same time, whatever the similarities, Banākati's (and for that matter, Rashīd al-Dīn's) version unprecedentedly treats Iskandar as the offspring of some (unidentifiable) Egyptian ruler named Bāzar [Bāzur?] (or Āzar). This detail may be a vestige of the narrative of Alexander's Egyptian descent, resurfacing in popular garb through the intermediary of oral tradition. Unlike the original story of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, which, due to its semi-mythical and frivolous contents, could not be taken over as it stood into the Islamic milieu, in Banākati's version the mother of Iskandar falls victim to court conspiracies and is not disgraced by an adulterous union with an imposter.

– Version Three:

The third version is cited on the authority of *Jāmi' al-ḥikāyāt va badāyi' al-rivāyāt* and gives the well-known Iranian variant of Iskandar's birth, including the bad breath motif, and the detailed story of Iskandar's witty correspondence with the help of riddles with his half-brother Dārā (Shi'ār 1348/1969: 42–43). As the editor remarks (ibid.: 42, n. 4), the correct title of the source should be *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmi' al-rivāyāt*, a voluminous collection of stories in prose by Sadīd al-Dīn Muḥammad 'Aufi (d. not before 630/1232–33). Indeed, this version of Banākati's is a faithful abridgment of 'Aufi's much more extensive narrative that contains Iskandar's deeds and is probably based on parts of the *Ghurak akhbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyarihīm* by Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1038) and also of the *Shāh-nāma* of Firdausī.⁴⁹

– Version Four:

The fourth version is almost as brief as the first one and is based on historical premises, even if introduced by the general 'they say' (*gūyand*). It attributes

48 Significant for our understanding of Rashīd al-Dīn's selective approach is the fact that the motifs of Iskandar's hardships and persecution, as well as his taking revenge on the treacherous ruler, – all of which are typical of oral tradition, – are absent from his account. Rashīd al-Dīn's acquaintance with these motifs, however, is beyond doubt (see Raushan 1392/2013: I, 575–76).

49 For 'Aufi's original, see Shi'ār 1374/1995: 105–106; the narrative concerning Iskandar is on pp. 105–12; for 'Aufi's use of the two sources mentioned above, see Nizamuddin 1929: 89–90. *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmi' al-rivāyāt* is rich in Alexander-material, comprising eighteen stories relating to Iskandar (see ibid.: 140–260, nos. 151–154, 450, 530, 637, 690, 1025, 1057, 1064, 1171, 1241, 1282, 1524, 1548, 1560, 2025 in the Table). *Jāmi' al-tavārikh* narrates the strife between the brothers in a chapter devoted to Dārā b. Dārāb, without mentioning the authority of the *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt* (see Raushan 1392/2013: I, 547–48).

Iskandar's origin to Filqūs and gives his life-span as the historical thirty-six years, of which fourteen were spent in conquests. Here Iskandar is notable for his building activities, as the constructor of the cities of Marv, Harāt and Iṣfahān, as well as the Wall against Gog and Magog (Shi'ār 1348/1969: 43).

To sum up the representation of Iskandar's genealogy and birth-story in the *Tārīkh-i Banākātī*: the four versions seem to indicate a purportedly unbiased, nonjudgmental stance. The author delivers as much information on the subject as he could assemble, from books and from oral sources. What is interesting, though, is that Banākātī's treatment of the section on Iskandar differs rather strikingly from his handling of the sections on other Kayanid kings: while for the latter he provides detailed and elaborate narratives of their deeds, in the former he is concerned only with Iskandar's birth-story, disregarding the rich narrative canvass which the Alexander story usually supplies.⁵⁰ This discrepancy becomes even more obvious in view of Rashīd al-Dīn's treatment of the matter in his *Jāmi' al-tavārīkh* and of Banākātī's reliance, established above, on the *Javāmi' al-ḥikāyāt va lavāmi' al-rivāyāt* of 'Aufī: both sources incorporate a wealth of Iskandar stories.⁵¹ It would seem that at the beginning of the eighth/fourteenth century Iskandar's descent was a topic of not an inconsiderable import for historians and their audiences, in some cases overshadowing the description of the conqueror's adventures *per se*. In this regard, the emergence/re-appearance of the 'Egyptian' version, particularly articulated and elaborate in the *Tārīkh-i Banākātī*, might suggest a shift in perceiving the figure of Iskandar, as far as modes of imperial legitimation are concerned. The narrative of Iskandar as a foundling plays down, if not altogether replaces, the legitimizing mode that was fundamental to the conceptual world of the *Shāh-nāma* and its offshoots, that is the underscoring of the Iranian ethnic origin of a ruler as the essential prerequisite for his possession of *farr*, and hence, his legitimacy. Banākātī's four versions bespeak the fading out of the ethnic Iranian element in the reception of the Iskandar figure, a process taken up and firmly positioned by later Islamic authors.⁵²

50 Good examples are the sub-sections on Luhrāsp, Gushtāsp and Humāy (see Shi'ār 1348/1969: 32–33; 33–39; 39–40 respectively).

51 *Jāmi' al-tavārīkh*, for example, comprises the well-known episode of Iskandar's visit to the Indian king Kayd (Raushan 1392/2013: I, 579–84); his encounter with the Khāqān of Chīn (ibid.: I, 584–87); the erection of the Wall against Gog and Magog (ibid.: I, 587–91) and some other; for 'Aufī, see above, n. 49.

52 Eloquent evidence in this respect is offered by the encyclopaedic work of al-Nuwayrī *Nihāyat al-arab fi funūn al-adab* (compiled between 714/1314 and 731/1331). Al-Nuwayrī differentiates between the Qur'anic Dhū al-Qarnayn of Sūrat al-Kahf, a companion of Khidr, identified by some authorities with al-Iskandar (al-Nuwayrī 1923–97: XIV, 299–300), and

This waning of the ‘Iranianness,’ inversely correlated with the growing emphasis on Dhū al-Qarnayn’s prophetic mission, is further manifested in Muslim authors’ uneasiness towards the remnants of the alien Zoroastrian practices diffused in Iskandar subject-matter. The Zoroastrian – and Iranian – overtones of the legends thus began gradually to be identified and eradicated. Symptomatic in this regard is an apologetic endeavour on behalf of Muslim historians to offset the famous account of Iskandar’s marriage to Raushanak, the daughter of his half-brother Dārā and hence – union abominable in Muslim eyes – his niece. Mīrkhvānd and following him, Khvāndamīr launch an ardent vindication of Iskandar:

It seems extremely condemnable and implausible (*ba-ghāyat mustankar-u mustab’ad mīnumāyad*) to ascribe to this God-fearing and pious ruler (*pādshāh-i khudā-tars-i dīndār*) a matrimonial union with his brother’s daughter, his niece; even if they say that in earlier creeds such a matter was lawful, still such a claim is not devoid of outlandishness (*va īn da’vī khālī az gharābat-ī nīst*; Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: I, 641; cf. Humā’ī 1333/1954: I, 209).

The sources’ treatment of the ‘bad breath’ motif would seem to be another indication of the same process: it is either misconstrued or disappears altogether. Although Mīrkhvānd and Khvāndamīr mention the motif in the section on the story of Dārāb in connection with Iskandar’s birth,⁵³ they abstain from referring to it in the subdivision dealing with Iskandar-i Rūmī proper, where he is equated with the Qur’anic Dhū al-Qarnayn. Thus, Khvāndamīr recounts that Filqūs’s daughter Rūqiyā (*sic*; i.e., even the Persian name of the princess is changed)⁵⁴ was treated by an old woman (*‘ajūza-yī*) for her bad breath (*bū-yi dahan*) with a *sandar* herb, but without giving this as a reason for her expulsion (Humā’ī 1333/1954: I, 209). Furthermore, according to the version in the *Ajā’ib-nāma*, Dārāb expels Philip’s daughter because of a libel brought against

al-Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn, the conqueror of Iran. He deals with the latter in the section on Greek rulers, identifying al-Iskandar as Philip’s son (ibid.: xv, 235). At the end of this section, he turns to the Iranian version, introducing it with *wa-min ‘ajīb mā qīla fī nasab al-Iskandar* (‘... and from the extraordinary [versions] regarding al-Iskandar’s genealogy...; ibid.: xv, 242), which seems to indicate the rarity, if not the outlandishness of this version, in eighth/fourteenth century Muslim writings. See also discussion below.

53 Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: I, 637; Humā’ī 1333/1954: I, 207 respectively.

54 This is yet another appellation for Iskandar’s mother Olympias, which appears mostly in Arabic sources, with Rūfiyā and Urfiyā as variants. The etymology of this name is unclear. For a range of appellations in the Arabic sources, see Doufīkar-Aerts 2010.

her by envious individuals who circulate a rumour about her low descent from a *ḥajjām*, a blood-letting barber (Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: 238).⁵⁵

It seems, however, that the transformations which befell the theme of Iskandar's birth and upbringing over the centuries, can not be ascribed solely to an urge to purify the figure of the Islamicized Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn of any possible flaw, such as consanguineous marriage. By the seventh/thirteenth century and beyond the Persian-speaking realm had come to be ruled by dynasties of non-Iranian origin, often with no illustrious pedigree in the eyes of their Iranian subjects. The figure of Iskandar did not lose its attraction and became readily adaptable to suit the purposes of various Turkish and Mongol rulers. This development is finely illustrated by Iskandar's reception under the Ilkhanids.

d *Iskandar's Reception under the Ilkhanids*

A range of evidence points to the intense interest in Iskandar's figure on the part of the Īl-Khān rulers. Along with somewhat clichéd comparisons of some of the Īl-Khāns to Iskandar,⁵⁶ – a practice fully exploited by earlier dynasties as

55 Yet another testimony to the tendency of later Muslim Persian historians to distance themselves from an Iranian component in the Iskandar narrative while drawing on the reservoir of narratives extraneous to the conventional Iskandar stock in the Persian tradition, can be seen in Mīrkhvānd's presentation in his *History* of an extensive story, rather romantic in nature, telling how Iskandar defended his Greek mother from the ignominious slurs on her honour uttered by one of the Greek nobles, a certain Fulūs/Falūs (Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: 1, 644–46). The story is told on the authority of the *Nuzhat al-arwāḥ* [*wa rawḍāt al-afrah*] of Imām Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd Shahrzūrī (d. after 687/1288) and seems to originate in Greek sources which Shahrzūrī used through the intermediary of earlier Arabic compositions (on his sources in the parts concerning Iskandar, see Doufīkar-Aerts 2010: 101–102; 102–30). A similar story occurs in the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* (Stoneman 1991: 55–56, Book 1.24), where the name of the accuser is Pausanias. To the best of my knowledge, Mīrkhvānd's *Rawḍat al-ṣafā* is chronologically the first source in Persian to contain the story.

56 Thus, Ūljāytū is titled 'Second Iskandar' (Combe et al. 1954: 80–81 *apud* Hillenbrand 1996: 215), 'Alexander-like in judgment'. In the poetic *Ghāzān-nāma* by Nūrī-yi Azhdarī (compiled between 758/1357 and 763/1362) Ghāzān is named *Sikandar-manīsh* ('Iskandar-natured'; see Mudabbirī [1380]1381/2001–2002: 139, l. 3024; 236, l. 5364), and allusion is repeatedly made in a comparative context to Iskandar's deeds and conquests; thus, e.g., an ascetic (identified with Shaykh Zāhid-i Gilāni; see Melville [2002]2003: 138, n. 18) instructs Ghāzān on the proper conduct, using as exemplars the tale of Iskandar and the Ruler of Chīn (Mudabbirī [1380]1381/2001–2002: 172–73) or the tale of Iskandar's search for immortality (*ibid.*: 163); Ghāzān demands gifts, mentioning the miraculous wine-cup

well, – the making of the so-called Great Mongol *Shāh-nāma* in the 1330s offers compelling testimony of more particular significance to Iskandar's image for the Mongol rulers.⁵⁷ Contrary to other illustrated *Shāh-nāmas* produced between 1300 and 1650, which, if at all, contain only a few illustrations to the Iskandar cycle, the Mongol manuscript is the only profusely illustrated account of the Iskandar story – seventeen illuminations in fifteen folios (Grabar and Blair 1980: 11 and Appendix 1), – as against other tales from the same manuscript and in contrast to the prevailing illustrative tradition of *Shāh-nāma* manuscripts (Hillenbrand 1996: 207–208; 212). Analysis of the ideological programme of the Great Mongol *Shāh-nāma* suggests a particular interest in the themes of legitimacy of rule and imperial glory, expressed above all through the cycles of foreign or usurping kings such as Iskandar and Ardashīr (Grabar and Blair 1980: 24; cf. Hillenbrand 1996: 213).⁵⁸ The great appeal of the Iskandar figure to the Mongols was his being the foreign conqueror *par excellence* in Iranian history, thus providing the Mongol rulers the perfect role model (ibid.: 213; 218–19). In the new historical discourse of the Mongol ideal of world dominion the emphasis on Iskandar's Iranian descent on the paternal side, essential to the national-historical stance of Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma*, must have lost its significance. Looming large against all other ethnic kings of Iran throughout the Great Mongol *Shāh-nāma*, Iskandar provides the Mongols with a model of world-conqueror of non-Iranian origin who by his very conquest of Iran wins the imperial legitimation previously based wholly on the ethnic component, and is incorporated into the chain of legitimate rulers of Iran. In Hillenbrand's expression, 'a primordial, innate and conveniently undefined legitimacy – not a narrowly legal one – takes precedence over the rights conferred by birth and family' (ibid.: 217).

Such a perception of Iskandar under the Īl-Khāns is far from fortuitous and appears to be buttressed by the local Mongolian version of the Alexander

which Iskandar received from the King of Hind (ibid.: 371, l. 8495). For further uses of Iskandar's figure under the Ilkhanids, see Hillenbrand 1996: 213–16, who to a great extent relies on the relevant studies of Melikian-Chirvani (see bibliography in Hillenbrand 1996).

57 The manuscript was produced most probably under the patronage of the last Ilkhanid ruler, Abū Sa'īd (r. 717–36/1317–35), although the patronage of Ghiyāth al-Dīn (d. 736/1336), Rashīd al-Dīn's son, can not be excluded (see Hillenbrand 1996: 206, esp. n. 8). For the most recent survey of the findings concerning the Great Mongol *Shāh-nāma*, see Blair 2004.

58 This is only one theme in a wider range; for further interpretation and suggestions, see Grabar and Blair 1980: 20–27; Hillenbrand 1996: 219–21. I omit the discussion of other interpretations as immaterial for the present subject.

Romance.⁵⁹ Probably a translation from an Uyghur Turkish version (Cleaves 1959: 27; Boyle 1979: 131) dating from the early fourteenth century (Poppe 1957: 105; Boyle 1979: 131), the Mongolian version tells of a man by the name of Sulqarnai (= Dhū al-Qarnayn)⁶⁰ who lived in ancient times in the city named Misir and was favoured by Heaven (Cleaves 1959: 56). He desires to live three thousand years and embarks on a journey. In his peregrination Sulqarnai ascends Mount Sumur, surveying the whole world from the peak and meeting the talking bird (*ibid.*); he then descends to the bottom of the sea in the *qaraba* (probably, a glass vessel; *ibid.*: 78, n. 160), regardless of his *noyads'* admonitions (*ibid.*: 57–58). He enters further into the darkness in his quest for immortality, but, dissuaded by a wise old man, he pours out the water and remains mortal (*ibid.*: 58–60). The version ends with Sulqarnai's return to Misir, where he recounts his adventures to his fellows and specifies his testamentary requirements (*ibid.*: 60–61).

As can be seen from this synopsis, although it shows features in common with a variety of other versions of the Alexander Romance,⁶¹ the early Mongolian version does not contain Sulqarnai's (Dhū al-Qarnayn's) genealogy, of any kind, focusing on his world-encompassing endeavours.⁶² Sulqarnai's proud boast on his return to Misir: 'Now I, on this earth, only I have become *qan*. On this very earth there hath not been born a *qan* who hath joyed as I' (Cleaves 1959: 61), equates Sulqarnai with a Mongol *khān* and encapsulates the

59 This version was transliterated, translated and commented on in detail by Nikolaus Poppe (1957); it was further studied by Francis W. Cleaves (1959), who refined Poppe's readings and translation.

60 How and when the appellation Dhū al-Qarnayn penetrated the Turco-Mongol domain and ousted Iskandar's proper name calls for separate inquiry, beyond our present scope. It seems that in Turkic circles the appellation was well-established by late eleventh century, for Maḥmūd al-Kāshgharī, the compiler of the *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk* (compiled 1072–74), used it throughout his dictionary without feeling any need to explain it, and never mentions the name of Iskandar (see Dankoff 1982–85: III, 245; *idem* 1973; also Boyle: 1976; *idem* 1979: 129). The corrupt form Sulqarnai may indicate the oral provenance of the version.

61 For the relation of various thematic elements to their counterparts in Syriac, Ethiopian, Arabic and Persian recensions of the Alexander Romance, as well as to the Latin version of Leo of Napoli, see Poppe 1957: 106–10; Cleaves 1959: 9–26.

62 The indication of Misir as Sulqarnai's place of origin, though, might suggest the Egyptian variant of Iskandar's birth.

gist of the Mongol imperial programme for universal dominion with Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn as its emblematic figure.⁶³

In addition to his emblematic role as a non-Iranian world-conqueror, Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn's appeal for the Īl-Khān rulers may depend on more specific elements concerning his birth and upbringing, which could sound familiar to Mongol ears. The process of Iskandar's initiation through hardships before he reaches the Iranian throne, brings to mind the story of Temüjin's difficult rise to power, as related, for example, in the *Secret History of the Mongols* (de Rachewiltz 2004: I, 17–27) or, more forcefully, in Mīrkhvānd's *Rauḍat al-ṣafā* (Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: V, 34–36).⁶⁴ Notably, according to those narratives, the adolescence of both Iskandar and the future Chinggis Khan was marked by fatherlessness, albeit for different reasons. Is it possible that the story of Iskandar the foundling, the narrative which became dominant from the late seventh/thirteenth century onwards, addressed the cultural mythology of the new Mongol rulers?

Temüjin's childhood dream as told by both Mīrkhvānd (1338–51/1960–72: V, 33–34) and K'vāndamīr (Humā'ī 1333/1954: III, 16–17) is again a point of resemblance with the Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn stories. Temüjin dreams of holding a sword in each hand, the points reaching East and West. In the morning his mother interprets the dream as signifying her son's sway over the world's extremities. A similar dream comes to Iskandar in the *Dārāb-nāma*, but there it is Arasṭātālīs who interprets it (Ṣafā 1344–46/1965–68: I, 435).⁶⁵ A further curious point of correspondence is an idiosyncratic version occurring in the

63 The equation of Dhū al-Qarnayn with a Mongol *khān* appears reinforced by his testamentary wish: 'When I die, ... cause to offer a thousand fine maidens, filling a thousand *natur* of gold with big pearls, little pearls, and gold ...'; Cleaves 1959: 61). Boyle takes this as a reference to the human victims and grave goods deposited in the tombs of the Mongol *khāns* (Boyle 1979: 132).

64 Cf. the terse remark of the *Jāmi' al-tavārikh*: 'He was thirteen years old when his father died, and most of his relatives and followers abandoned him (*az vay bar-gashtand*). For twenty-eight years he was in distress (*parīshān-hāl būd*) ...' (Thackston 1998–99: I, 139 [English translation]; Karīmī 1338/1959: I, 211 [Persian text]).

65 In addition to the *Dārāb-nāma*, variants of this dream in connection with Dhū al-Qarnayn appear in various Islamic works, e.g., the *Kitāb al-tijān* of Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833 or 213/828; see Ibn Hishām 1347/1928: 82–83) or in the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* by al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035; see al-Tha'labī 1340/1921–22: 251 and English translation in Brinner 2002: 606). They are transmitted mostly on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih (34–114/654–732), and probably pertain to the *Isrā'īliyyāt* tradition. Interestingly, the dream is not found in the *Secret History of the Mongols*.

‘*Ajā’ib-nāma* that tells of Dhū al-Qarnayn’s immaculate conception by the breath of an angel (*naḥkha-yi firīshta*; Mudarris Ṣādiqī 1375/1996: 206, 208).⁶⁶ In the Mongol context this version is reminiscent of the foundational myth of the widowed Alan Qo’a (Ālān Quvā) who conceived from a light (*nūr-u raushanāyī*) that ‘entered through the vent of the tent and went into her belly’ (*az rauzan-i khargāh nūr-ī dar-āmad va ba-shikam-i ū furū-raft*),⁶⁷ as narrated, among other Muslim sources, in Rashīd al-Dīn’s *Jāmi’ al-tavārīkh*,⁶⁸ Mīrkhvānd’s *Rauḍat al-ṣafā* (Mīrkhvānd 1338–51/1960–72: v, 21–22) and, most extensively, in the epic poem *Ẓafar-nāma* of Ḥamd-Allāh Mustaufī (d. ca. 744/1344; ‘Alāqa 1389/2011: VII, 28–31). The *Secret History of the Mongols* tells of a ‘resplendent yellow man,’ whose ‘radiance’ penetrates Alan Qo’a’s womb (de Rachewiltz 2004: I, 3–5).⁶⁹

It seems therefore that the approach to Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn in the Ilkhanid period positioned him as a mediatory figure. On the one hand, he was adopted by the new Mongol rulers to create a link with the Iranian historical past of which he was an integral part. On the other hand, his Iranianness is essentially transformed in order to promote his universality, which would facilitate Mongol acculturation without demanding a break with indigenous Turco-Mongol practices.

66 Could the genial relationship between Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn and his friend (*khalīl*), the angel Rāphā’īl, in al-Tha’labī’s *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (al-Tha’labī 1340/1921–22: 257 and English translation in Brinner 2002: 616–17) be a vestige of Iskandar’s very peculiar mode of conception?

67 Thackston 1998–99: I, 116 [English translation]; Karīmī 1338/1959: I, 171 [Persian text].

68 See Karīmī 1338/1959: I, 170–71 [Persian text]; Thackston 1998–99: I, 116–17 [English translation].

69 Ernst Herzfeld’s conjecture (Herzfeld 1916), followed by Hillenbrand (1996: 222), to the effect that Ālān Quvā (Herzfeld has Alongoa) is none other than Olympias, however tempting for our discussion, must be rejected. The etymological evidence and motif examination proposed by Herzfeld, are too slender and speculative to support the claim. If there were any sensible likelihood of a conflation of Iskandar’s historical mother with the female forbear of the Chinggisid line, we would have found traces of it in some medieval historians. For the significance of the story of Alan Qo’a in medieval Muslim sources in connection with their attempt to amalgamate monotheistic and shamanistic elements in Chinggis’s genealogy, as well as comparing the story with the legend of Maryam, see Biran 2007: 116–18.

The Pinnacle of Syncretism under the Safavids

From the eleventh/seventeenth century onwards the Alexander tradition became supplemented by additional voluminous romances in prose. One of them became known as the Safavid *Iskandar-nāma*, or *Iskandar-nāma-yi haft jildī*, or else *Kulliyāt-i haft jildī*. It was ascribed to a certain Manūchihir Khān Ḥakīm, or, alternatively, to Manūchihir-i Shaṣt-kalla.⁷⁰ This *Iskandar-nāma* seems to be the latest and last version of the Alexander saga in Persian, the earliest manuscript dated from 1106/1694–95 (Dhakāvātī Qarāguzlū 1383/2004: 10). The story of Iskandar in the Safavid *Iskandar-nāma* is treated in picaresque fashion and, unlike other compositions, the prominent role is given to figures of ‘*ayyārs* and acts of ‘*ayyārī*. I shall summarize the first parts of the romance, as relevant to our discussion.⁷¹

Once upon a time, so tell the *rāvīyān-i akhbār va nāqilān-i āthār*, there lived in the land of Egypt (*diyār-i Miṣr*) a pious sage (*ābid*), reputed for his vigils, his uncompromising fasts and his unsurpassed knowledge of sciences, both religious and magical. One day, when he was walking across a cemetery, the sage stumbled upon a human skull (*kalla*); enigmatic words were carved on its forehead: ‘I shall live sixty years and shall shed the blood of another four people’ (*man shaṣt sāl zindaqānī kunam va chahār khūn az man ṣādir shavad*; fol. 1). The sage was a brave man; he took the ‘artefact’ to his hut, crushed it into

70 Due to the sheer volume of the work, it has not been edited in full. An abbreviated version was made by Dhakāvātī Qarāguzlū 1383/2004; the parts pertaining to Iskandar’s adventures in Khatā and India were edited by the same scholar (see Dhakāvātī Qarāguzlū 1384/2005; idem 1388/2009). Brief discussions of the *Iskandar-nāma-yi haft jildī* are Maḥjūb 1382/2003: 1, 350–59; Yamanaka 2002 and Dhakāvātī Qarāguzlū’s prefaces to his editions. A late version dated 1256/1840, which differs from the *Iskandar-nāma-yi haft jildī*, is preserved in the collection of the Oriental Institute of St. Petersburg under MS C 127 (see Miklukho-Maklay 1964: 46, no. 114); it is the same as MS 614 dated 1244/1829, in the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan (see Mirzoev and Bertel’s 1974: 271, no. 1746) and MS 10993, dated 1342/1923–24, in the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan (see Voronovskiy 1975: 95, no. 6844). For a catalogue of the illustrated lithographed Safavid *Iskandar-nāmas* ranging from 1273–74/1856–57 to 1357/1938, see Marzolph 2001: 239–40 and figs. 42; 51; 93.; 104; 121.1; 126.4; 141; 149.1. For a description of two popular printings of the work, titled *Kulliyāt-i haft jildī-yi Iskandar-nāma*, see idem 1994: 41–42, nos. 28, 29.

71 The summary is based on MS Petermann 405–407 and Petermann 708 in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (see Pertsch 1888: 989–91, nos. 1033–1036) and on Dhakāvātī Qarāguzlū’s (1383/2004: 17–19) abridged version.

white grain-like pieces, collected the bits in a glass jar, sealed the jar with wax, and fastened it to the ceiling (fol. 1; cf. Dhakāvati Qarāguzlū 1383/2004: 18–19).

The sage had a daughter, as beautiful as she was inquisitive. So it happened that she entered the hut and saw the jar hanging from the ceiling. ‘Hmm,’ – thought the daughter, – ‘look at my Dad, he has ground so much sugar and doesn’t give me any’. She sprinkled some of the white powder (*gard*) on her hand and licked it. The taste was disgusting; it was decidedly not sugar. The jar was returned to its place, and the incident forgotten, until the first signs of pregnancy appeared in the enterprising girl. After examination, it became clear that she had remained virgin and that it was the ground white powder – once a sinister skull – that had impregnated her: the omen written on its forehead thus began to fulfill itself. In due course the girl gave birth to a boy, who was named Philip/Filqūz, for he was born with a hunch (*qūz*) on his back (fols. 1–2; Dhakāvati Qarāguzlū 1383/2004: 19) – a nice instance of folk etymology.

The sage took care of his grandchild so devotedly that by the age of twelve Filqūz had become the most learned person among the Egyptians in all the occult sciences. He earned his living by fortune-telling and dream-interpretation. Thanks to his cleverness and his mastery at plotting, Filqūz became the ruler of Miṣr and later the Qayṣar of Rūm. However, his good fortune changed when he decided to wage war against Iran: he was defeated by Dārāb and forced to pay tribute. From there on the story continues along a familiar path: Filqūz marries his daughter to Dārāb, the latter spends a night with her, but sends her back to her father shortly after the nuptials because her bad breath makes her repugnant to him. Of this short-lived union Iskandar is born (Dhakāvati Qarāguzlū 1383/2004: 19–28).

At first sight, the narrative appears strikingly bizarre. Unlike all other versions of the Alexander Romance, here Philip the Macedonian receives a birth story of his own; in this story Miṣr and Rūm, a magical conception, a sage, a virgin, an unprivileged childhood with a final attainment of greatness and power are all mixed together in a kind of arbitrary, kaleidoscopic movement, making one wonder what might have been the storyteller’s intention and whether he ever had one.

However, to grasp the meaning behind this ostensible hodgepodge of uncanny tales, one should look at the whole conglomeration of motifs pertaining to the episodes of Iskandar’s birth and upbringing discussed above. The section relating the nativity and childhood of Filqūz, Iskandar’s grandfather, seems to betray a certain bewilderment of the Safavid storyteller; having inherited a host of versions, he seems to have asked himself a question rather like the one formulated as the title of this paper: why so many stories? The Safavid storyteller settles the issue by separating the versions of the tale of

Iskandar's birth and upbringing, thus adding a further thematic stratum to the Alexander saga.

Most of the motifs I have been trying to untangle are transported to the tale of Filqūz. Among them are Iskandar's Egyptian descent, his rearing by a sage, his extraordinary abilities in fortune-telling and dream-interpretation, as well as the hardships he experienced before rising to power. The rather outlandish description of impregnation by the white powder of a ground skull echoes (inversely) Iskandar's conception from the breath of an angel, a holy spirit of sorts, as in the *'Ajā'ib-nāma*. Furthermore, in the true spirit of *Volksliteratur*, the Safavid narrator reworks and includes widely-known folk motifs, familiar from tales of magic and nouvelles.⁷² Thus, for example, the motif 'conception from tasting or licking bonedust or powdered skull' (T532.1.4.2§; see El-Shamy 2004: 286) belongs to the motif-spectrum of the tale-type 0517A§ in El-Shamy's classification.⁷³ So also the motif of 'skull has words miraculously written on it' (F559.4.1; *ibid.*), and the motif of 'prodigious child has supernatural knowledge' (D1810.0.3.3§; El-Shamy 2004: 286).

Significantly, the folklore motifs and tale-types comprising the Filqūz story in the Safavid *dāstān*, surface mostly in folktales of oriental provenance. Thus, for example, they have been gathered from an Egyptian informant,⁷⁴ in Sudan and Iraq,⁷⁵ in various geographical areas of Turkey⁷⁶ and Iran.⁷⁷ At least two versions are found in the collection of Moroccan Jewish tales,⁷⁸ with more parallels from Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq (Noy 1966: 210). Additional versions are preserved in the IFA and were recorded from Jewish emigrants to Israel from Iran, Central Asia (specifically among Bukharan Jews) and Afghanistan.⁷⁹

72 I am grateful to Ulrich Marzolph and Karl Reichl who drew my attention to these widespread motifs. Prof. Marzolph has kindly provided me with scans of publications in the field of motif classification, which were inaccessible to me.

73 El-Shamy (2004: 285–88) summarizes this tale-type as 'Enigmatic Apparition (Dream, Laughing Fish, Speaking Skull, etc.) Leads to Detection of Adultery'.

74 El-Shamy 2004: 287, no. 27; with a curious addition of the informant: '... the baby grew to be hero'.

75 See Nowak 1969: 250–51, Type 261 'Der Totenschädel'; eadem: 380, Type 478 'Die Lachenden Fische'.

76 See Eberhard and Boratav 1953: 116–17, Type 100 'Der Zauberschädel'.

77 See Marzolph 1984: 157, Type 875 D1 'Das Lachen des Fisches'; Loeffler-Friedl 2007: 95–98; 247–48, 'The Dried Skull'.

78 Noy 1966: 112–14, no. 42; 124–28, no. 48; both are Type AT* 895 (IFA). IFA stands for the Israel Folktales Archives (University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel). The second folktale is especially close to the Safavid version.

79 See Soroudi 2008: 136, Type *895 'The Miraculous Child'.

Conclusion

The discussion of various versions of Iskandar's birth and upbringing in the Islamic, mainly Persian, sources from the fourth/tenth to the eleventh/seventeenth centuries demonstrates an extremely high degree of fluctuation and flow in themes, motifs, and meanings between and within the 'compound retorts' of orality and textuality. To isolate a specific tale in order to reach a convincing interpretation, a delicate work of disentangling thread after thread on the preliminary level of careful text-reading needs to be undertaken. In the attempt to trace the historical permutations of the materials located on the interface of orality and textuality and to determine their gist in particular historical periods, a scholar is akin to a sharp-sighted eagle, able to observe from the height of the bird's flight how the threads go on interlacing across the centuries, to create lively, re-accentuated and interlocked narratives that remain viable in the domains of both orality and textuality as inseparable entities.

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