

Fictional Storytelling in the Medieval Eastern Mediterranean and Beyond

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A Hero Without Borders: 3 Alexander the Great in the Medieval Persian Tradition

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Sources

The medieval Persian Alexander tradition emerged as a result of the conflation and merging of variegated sources, encompassing the Greek *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, Zoroastrian religious texts, the Qurʾān and surrounding exegetical literature, Arabic historiographic and wisdom literature, as well as orally-transmitted folk traditions.

Since the chain of transmission has many omissions, reconstruction of the ways by which the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* entered the Iranian domain remains hypothetical. The crux of the problem concerns the interrelation of the Middle Persian (= Pahlavi; lost) and the Syriac (extant) translations, both belonging to the reconstructed δ recension.¹ While the classical hypothesis introduced by Theodor Nöldeke suggests that the Pahlavi translation was made from Greek (presumably in the 6th century) and served as a prototype for the Syriac rendition,² a more recent view by Claudia A. Ciancaglini advocates the primacy of the Syriac translation executed directly from Greek and later translated into Middle Persian.³ The Syriac version gave rise to several Arabic translations (presumably in the late 8th – early 9th centuries), some of which possessed a Christian hue.⁴ These in turn were rendered into New Persian not later than the first half of the 10th century.⁵ Since not a single New Persian translation of

1 For recension δ^* , see the contributions by U. Moennig and F. Doufkar-Aerts in this volume, pp. 160–89 and 190–209 respectively.

2 Nöldeke, *Beiträge*, esp. pp. 1–24.

3 Ciancaglini, “Gli antecedenti del *Romanzo siriano* di Alessandro”; ead., “The Syriac Version”; see also Wiesehöfer, “The ‘Accursed’ and the ‘Adventurer’”, p. 128 and note 48 there.

4 On the potential multiplicity of Arabic translations from Syriac, see Doufkar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 76–90 and stemma on p. 91; on the Christian nature of some Arabic versions, see *ibid.*, pp. 71–72; Macuch, “Pseudo-Callisthenes Orientalis”, p. 260; see also below, pp. 212–13.

5 The time-period when the Greek *Alexander Romance* was introduced into the Iranian tradition is subject to controversy. According to one opinion, it was included already in the Middle Persian chronicle *Xʿadāy-nāmag* (“The Book of Lords”) which started taking shape some time

the Greek *Alexander Romance* has come down to us, this translational movement can be reconstructed only with the help of vestiges found in early medieval Persian texts dealing with the Alexander material.

Running parallel to the penetration of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* into the Perso-Arabic domain, Alexander's figure was susceptible to the adaptive process of Islamisation, which became possible on account of the exegetic activity revolving around the mysterious character of Dhū al-Qarnayn ("The Two-Horned"), mentioned in a Qur'anic *sūra* (Q 18: 83–97). According to one interpretation, ultimately accepted as authoritative, Dhū al-Qarnayn is identified with Alexander the Greek – al-Iskandar al-Rūmī – who was sent by God to subdue the peoples of the World, calling them to the monotheistic faith.⁶ The status of Dhū al-Qarnayn in exegetical literature, however, always remained controversial: while some exegetes conceded that he was a prophet, albeit sent "without a revelation" (*ghayr mursal*), others confined his status to that of "a pious servant of God" (*al-'abd al-ṣāliḥ*) and a virtuous ruler.⁷ Among the major themes of the Dhū al-Qarnayn tradition are the discussion of his appellative; the complex of motifs relating to the building of the Wall against Gog and

in the 6th century and comprised a semi-official written account of Iranian national history through the lens of the Sasanian dynasty (see, e.g., Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", p. 289; Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, pp. 91–99). Another, more plausible view, suggests that Alexander material could have been incorporated into the *X'adāy-nāmag* only later, with the latter's translation and re-working into Arabic some time in the 8th or 9th centuries (see, e.g., Frye, "Two Iranian Notes", pp. 187–88, note 5; Yarshater, "Iranian National History", p. 472).

- 6 For a detailed discussion of the Qur'anic story of Dhū al-Qarnayn from the historical perspective of its formation, its reflection in Arabic and Persian sources, as well as a variety of explanations relating to appellation, see Šafavī, *Iskandar*, pp. 269–305; Abel, "Dū 'l-Qarnayn, Prophète de l'Universalité"; Wheeler, "Moses or Alexander", and recently, Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 135–55. In an attempt to settle chronological discrepancies, medieval exegetes and historians suggested the existence of two Dhū al-Qarnayns: Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Akbar (the elder Dhū al-Qarnayn) and Dhū al-Qarnayn al-Aṣghar (the younger Dhū al-Qarnayn). The former is the one mentioned in the Qur'an; he lived after the Prophet Ṣāliḥ and before the Prophet Ibrāhīm (Abraham) and is famous for erecting the Wall against Gog and Magog. The latter is identified with Iskandar-i Rūmī, who conquered Iran and whose counselor was Aristotle. For exhaustive descriptions of the deeds ascribed to both figures, see Mirkhvānd, *Tārīkh-i Rauḍat al-ṣafā*, Tehran, 1960–72, vol. 1, pp. 91–95, 640–69; also *The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk)*, vol. 11: *Prophets and Patriarchs* (SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Bibliotheca Persica), trans. W.M. Brinner, Albany 1987, p. 23; *The History of al-Ṭabarī (Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk)*, vol. 1v: *The Ancient Kingdoms* (SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies. Bibliotheca Persica), trans. M. Perlmann, Albany 1987, p. 87.
- 7 See, e.g., Abū Ishāq al-Tha'labī, *Kitāb qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā' al-musammā bi-'l-'Arā'is*, Cairo 1921–22, pp. 252–53; Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār*, ed. Ḥikmat, vol. 5, p. 735.

Magog and to the journey through Darkness including the Water of Life legend; Dhū al-Qarnayn's arrival at the extremities of the world, etc.⁸

Yet another constituent of the medieval Persian Alexander tradition was the Zoroastrian perception of Alexander; retained mainly in Zoroastrian religious texts, this perception perpetuated Alexander's negative image as arch-enemy of Iran, thus reflecting vague but painful memories of the Macedonian conquest amplified by the political agenda of the late Sasanian period.⁹

The syncretic confluence of traditions and sources sketched above is highly visible in the treatment of Alexander in the *Shāh-nāma* ("The Book of Kings") of Firdausī (ca. 940–1020).¹⁰ While closely following a Syriac recension, the chapter on Alexander/Iskandar in the *Shāh-nāma* is at the same time saturated with Islamic motif clusters, such as Iskandar's pilgrimage to the Ka'ba, the Search for the Water of Life in the Darkness under the guidance of Khidr and the sinister encounter with the angel Isrāfīl, Iskandar's erection of the Wall against Gog and Magog, etc.¹¹ Concurrently, there are scattered allusions to Christian notions and practices: thus, Iskandar moves his army against the Persian king Dārā under the banner on which the phrase "The Devotee of the

8 These and other themes are examined in detail in Doufrikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 155–88.

9 For an appraisal of the hostile Zoroastrian view of Alexander, including the main "accusations" found in Zoroastrian writings and their possible historical grounds, see Gignoux, "La démonisation d'Alexandre le Grand"; Wiesehöfer, "The 'Accursed' and the 'Adventurer'", pp. 124–28.

10 The *Shāh-nāma* is an epic poem depicting Iranian national history from a semi-legendary perspective, starting with the mythological creation of the First Man and ending with the historical Muslim conquest of Iran in the 7th century. Based chiefly on a New Persian version of the Middle Persian chronicle *X'adāy-nāmag* (see above, note 5), the poem is organised around fifty periods of rulership of Iranian kings, Alexander/Iskandar being one of them. The scholarly literature on various aspects of this work is immense. For a brief overview of Firdausī's life and of the structure and epic character of the *Shāh-nāma*, see most recently Feuillebois-Pierunek, "L'épopée iranienne", pp. 149–72; for a summary of its contents, see Fouchécour, "Une lecture". A thorough survey of the main themes, sources and chronology of Iranian national history, pertinent to the understanding of the *Shāh-nāma* is found in Yarshater, "Iranian National History". For translations, see Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, trans. A.G. Warner and E. Warner, 9 vols., London 1905–25 (in verse); Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, trans. Banu-Lahuti et al., 6 vols., Moscow 1957–89 (in verse, in Russian); Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, trans. J. Mohl, 8 vols., Paris 1876–78 (in prose, in French); for the most recent English partial prose translation, see Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, trans. D. Davis, New York 2006.

11 See Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq and Umīdsālār, vol. 6, pp. 48–50, lines 627–61; pp. 91–95, lines 1328–1405; pp. 96–100, lines 1421–76 respectively.

Cross" (*muḥibb-i ṣalīb*) is written;¹² he marries Fighistān, the Indian king's daughter, "according to Christ's custom" (*ba-rasm-i Masīḥā*);¹³ a bishop (*sukūbā*) prepares Iskandar's body for burial.¹⁴ Taking into account Firdausī's well-known fidelity to his sources that precludes poetic licence, the Iskandar chapter in the *Shāh-nāma* seems to be based – through a New Persian intermediary – on a composite Arabic version of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* which alongside the dominant Islamic character bears some Christian traces incorporated into it from a Christian Arabic translation.¹⁵

In addition to the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* tradition, the *Shāh-nāma* preserves the legacy of the Zoroastrian negative attitude towards Alexander, which is most palpable in the chapters of the *Shāh-nāma* dealing with the Sasanian dynasty and its sovereigns, i.e., the chapters unrelated to the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and based on the Middle Persian chronicle *Xʿadāy-nāmag* as their ultimate source.¹⁶ Thus, Iskandar is alluded to as the one who sows hostility and defiles the fortunes of Iranian kings;¹⁷ he is described as their zealous foe (*kīna-dār-i suturg*)¹⁸ and is mentioned in the same breath as the most bitter enemies of Iran, the tyrant foreign rulers Ḍaḥḥāk the Arab and Afrāsiyāb the Turanian (anachronistically identified as Turk) who brought calamity and disorder onto

12 Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭlaq, vol. 5, p. 533, line 54.

13 Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭlaq and Umidsālār, vol. 6, p. 28, line 351.

14 Ibid., p. 123, line 1822.

15 This New Persian intermediary was most probably the prose *Shāh-nāma* of Abū Manṣūr ibn ‘Abd al-Razzāq, which was based on the Middle Persian *Xʿadāy-nāmag* (see above, note 5) and served as Firdausī's main source. Alternatively, Firdausī's reliance on an independent composition in New Persian comprising the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* cannot be excluded (see Ṣafā, *Ḥamāsa-sarāyī*, pp. 546–47; Ṣafavī, *Iskandar*, pp. 78–79). As for the Arabic Christianised translation underlying Firdausī's chapter on Iskandar, its nature is difficult to establish. Traces in such an early work as the *Shāh-nāma* would, however, contradict K.F. Weymann's supposition that an Arabic version was Christianised rather late, by the compiler of the Ethiopic translation (14th–16th centuries); see Weymann, *Aethiopische und arabische Übersetzung*. Moreover, the recently discovered *Sirat al-Malik Iskandar Dhū [sic] al-Qarnayn* which was copied in the 17th century by Yūsuf b. ‘Aṭīya (known as Quzmān) and which seems to be the *Vorlage* of the Ethiopic version (on this, see in detail Doufīkar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 58–73 as well as her chapter in this volume, pp. 200–01), notwithstanding its subtle Christian background, differs too significantly from the Alexander story in the *Shāh-nāma* to imply any relation between the two.

16 See above, note 5.

17 Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭlaq, vol. 8, p. 30, line 368.

18 Ibid., p. 257, line 3361.

the Iranian kingdom with their illegitimate rule,¹⁹ – all this in glaring contrast to Iskandar's recognition as a legitimate Iranian king in the section devoted to him.²⁰ Finally, the chapter on Iskandar in the *Shāh-nāma* incorporates Iskandar's letter of consolation to his mother and the funeral sayings of Greek philosophers (*ḥakīmān-i Rūm*) over his coffin,²¹ which derive from the Arabic wisdom literature on Alexander.²²

The chapter on Iskandar in the *Shāh-nāma* signified his transformation in the Persian domain into a metahistorical, semi-mythic figure that attracted to itself a host of heterogeneous cultural traditions and was receptive to additions and modifications. Firdausī's version amalgamated sources and influences which would permeate – in various ways and to different degrees – most medieval Persian texts devoted to Iskandar after Firdausī. Among these texts, considered below, are narrative poems *Iskandar-nāma* of Niẓāmī-yi Ganjavī (ca. 1141–1209/10), *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī* ("The Alexandrian Mirror") of Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī (1253–1325) and *Khīrad-nāma-yi Iskandarī* ("The Alexandrian Book of Wisdom") by 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (1414–1492), as well as folk narratives in prose the *Dārāb-nāma* ("The Book of Darius") ascribed to Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī (written down probably in the 12th century) and the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* ("The Book of Iskandar"; compiled between 12th–14th centuries). As shown below, each of the texts moulded Iskandar's character in a distinct manner, thus imparting a peculiar ambiance to the Persian Alexander tradition.

19 Ibid., p. 64, lines 822–28; Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq and Umīdsālār, vol. 6, pp. 180–81, lines 666–69. For an examination of the negative references to Iskandar in the *Shāh-nāma*, their textual antecedents in Sasanian literature and the general historical context, see Yamanaka, "Ambiguïté". See also above, note 9.

20 It should be noted, though, that the echoes – albeit indistinct – of the negative attitude are found in the Iskandar chapter as well. These echoes comprise the episode of Iskandar's partition of Iran into small principalities at Aristotle's/Arasṭālīs's advice in order to prevent it attacking his native Rūm (= Greece; see Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq and Umīdsālār, vol. 6, pp. 116–18, lines 1719–45; for a summary of the episode's sources, see Yamanaka, "Ambiguïté", pp. 344–48) and the motif of bad breath which prompted the expulsion of Iskandar's pregnant mother by her Iranian husband (see Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq, vol. 5, pp. 523–24, lines 95–106; and pp. 215–16 below).

21 See Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭāq and Umīdsālār, vol. 6, pp. 119–22, lines 1766–1800 and pp. 125–27, lines 1848–80 respectively.

22 See note 45 below.

The Multifaceted Iskandar

1 *An Ambiguous Heir to the Iranian Throne*

A version of the Iranian national past epitomised in Firdausī's *Shāh-nāma* ascertains the continuity of Iranian history through the sequence of rulers of Iranian descent who ascended the throne in orderly succession within the royal family and as such were invested with "divine grace" (the *farr*) and thus legitimised. In order to ensure this continuity, Alexander, the ultimate "Other" in the Sasanian tradition, was integrated in the official Iranian historical cycle through the account of his Iranian parentage, best represented by Firdausī's narrative.²³ According to the gist of this narrative, Alexander/Iskandar was born of the abruptly-ended marriage of Darius/Dārāb with Nāhīd, daughter of the Qayṣar of Rūm, Philip/Faylaqūs. During the nuptials Dārāb sensed bad breath in his newly-wed, which made her instantly repugnant to him. The result was that the ill-fated girl, already pregnant with Dārāb's offspring, was sent back to her father. To avoid disgrace to himself and his daughter, Faylaqūs adopts the new-born as his own son. At the same time, Dārāb marries another woman and gives birth to Dārā. Iskandar's half-Iranian lineage is revealed only later, during his strife with this same half-brother.²⁴ Although the historical version of Alexander's origin from Philip of Macedonia and his wife Olympias was well-known in Perso-Arabic historiography in Firdausī's time, the Iranian account of his descent won overwhelming popularity among early Arabic and Persian historians and men of letters and acquired an almost authoritative nature.²⁵

23 For an interpretation of the reasons underlying Alexander's Iranisation along the same lines, see Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, p. 97; Southgate, "Portrait of Alexander", pp. 279–80; Gaillard (trans.), Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, p. 25.

24 See Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭṭlaq, vol. 5, 517–25, lines 43–125.

25 For an appraisal of an historical vs. an Iranian versions of Iskandar's descent, see Rubanovich, "Why So Many Stories?", pp. 203–07. The attempt to Iranicise Alexander might have been encouraged by – or even modelled on – a much earlier endeavour to mobilise him for a national cause, as in the *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and its Syriac derivative, which present Alexander's concocted descent from Nectanebo (= Nectanebus), an Egyptian king and magician, and Queen Olympias, Philip's wife (see *The Greek Alexander Romance* I, 1–12, trans. R. Stoneman, London 1991, pp. 35–44), thus compensating for the national defeat and reinstating the conqueror's deeds in the national history. Contrary to an opinion that Muslim historians failed to convey the version of Iskandar's Egyptian descent (see Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, p. 19), it was in fact in circulation in the Islamic world, on the very "margins" of Alexander-material, especially from the end of the 12th century onwards when the true significance of Iskandar's Iranian descent as a tool of the foreign conqueror's legitimisation had receded into the background,

Notwithstanding the lending of Iranian lineage to Iskandar, his status as an heir to the Iranian throne is not without ambiguity. Examined in the Zoroastrian context, the motif of the bad breath of the Macedonian princess may hint at her alienated, impure status vis-à-vis her Iranian husband.²⁶ While Iskandar was ultimately accepted as Iranian on account of his paternal lineage, he still remains alien on account of his mother's foreign and, therefore, impure origin.

A similar ambiguity, expressed more vehemently and explicitly, is found in a *dāstān* – folk epic romance in prose – the *Dārāb-nāma* (“The Book of Darius”) ascribed to Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī and written down some time in the 12th century.²⁷ While reiterating the familiar story of Nāhīd's marriage to and subsequent expulsion by the Iranian king Dārāb, the *dāstān* offers a complementary account of Iskandar's birth and upbringing, distinguished by typically folkloric features. After returning home to her mother and with the time of delivery approaching, Nāhīd sets up a tent at the foot of a mountain where the sage Aristotle/Arasṭāṭālīs dwells in his hut. After giving birth to a beautiful boy, the girl, heart-broken, departs, leaving the boy in the tent. The boy is suckled by a she-goat that belongs to an old woman who lives in a nearby town. The old woman brings the boy to the sage Arasṭāṭālīs, who discerning the divine radiance (*farr-i īzādī*) emanating from the child, realises that it must be royal offspring. Arasṭāṭālīs then nurtures and educates Iskandar, teaches him all the sciences, including fortune-telling and astrology, till the boy reaches his tenth year. Iskandar's dexterity in fortune-telling and dream-interpretation makes him the talk of the town, but at the same time brings upon him troubles of every sort. After a long period of wandering, adventure and hardship Iskandar

metamorphosing into just another story (see Rubanovich, “Why So Many Stories?”, pp. 205–06, 220–22).

26 See *ibid.*, pp. 207–12. It is not incidental that in one version of the story, recorded in the *Dārāb-nāma*, after having sensed his wife's rotten breath, Dārāb performs an act of self-purification; see Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Ṣafā, vol. 1, p. 389. The denunciation of Iskandar's non-Iranian mother by means of an evocative motif of bad breath seems to indicate the “shift of guilt” from his figure on to that of his mother, thus revealing the reticence inherent in incorporating Iskandar into the Iranian tradition.

27 On the *dāstān* as a genre in medieval Persian literature and on its characteristics in connection with orality, see recently Rubanovich, “Orality in Medieval Persian Literature”, pp. 660–75. For the *Dārāb-nāma*'s translations, see Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, trans. N.B. Kondyreva, Moscow 2000 (into Russian); Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, trans. Gaillard (partial French translation of the second part with a valuable introduction).

chances on his mother, is recognised by her and at last becomes the heir apparent of his grandfather Fīlqūs/Philip, the ruler of Rūm.²⁸

Notwithstanding Iskandar's Iranian lineage on his paternal side and his own evolving self-identification as Iranian, in the *Dārāb-nāma* the purity of his genealogy is incessantly questioned by his rivals who mock him as “fatherless Rūmī” (*rūmī-yi bī-pidar*)²⁹ or “fatherless offspring of a Rūmī” (*rūmī-zāda-yi bī-pidar*), alluding to his Greek mother.³⁰ Unlike in the *Shāh-nāma*, his half-brother Dārā staunchly rejects any kinship with Iskandar, accusing him of being a bastard (*ḥarām-zāda*) and his mother – promiscuous (*nāpārsā*).³¹ Iskandar's “crisis of identity” which is closely linked to his (il)legitimacy as an Iranian ruler is further reinforced by his strife with Būrāndukht, the daughter of the vanquished Dārā, who rises up to avenge her father. In the *Dārāb-nāma* Būrāndukht is clearly identified as the bearer of Iranian national sentiment and a host of allusions is established between her character and those of Iranian kings and heroes of the past.³² However, the conflict between the Iranian and the alien constituents, sharply delineated at the beginning of Iskandar's story, soon finds unexpected resolution: surprised by Iskandar while bathing in a stream, the naked Būrāndukht marries Iskandar and elevates him to the Iranian throne.³³ From now on she zealously joins Iskandar in his prophetic mission of spreading Islam through conquests.³⁴

The theme of discord between the two main characters of the *Dārāb-nāma* embodies the essential opposition between the national (local/Iranian) constituent personified in Būrāndukht and the religious (alien Rūmī/Islamic) component represented by Iskandar, which is dynamically resolved in the har-

28 See Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 1, pp. 387–422. For an examination of the folkloric features of the story, see Rubanovich, “Why So Many Stories?”, pp. 215–18; for a discussion of its variants in other medieval Persian texts, see *ibid.*, pp. 220–24, 227–31.

29 See Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 1, pp. 498, 505.

30 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 543; vol. 2, pp. 36, 76.

31 *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 441–42, 452, 459.

32 She is repeatedly referred to as the “queen of Iran” (*malika-yi Īrān* or *bānū-yi Īrān*) and “the devoted lover of the Land of Iran” (*dūstdār-i Īrān-zamīn*). See, e.g., *ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 543; vol. 2, pp. 15, 20, 23, 24, 27, 54, 60. On the Iranianness of Būrāndukht, see also Gaillard (trans.), Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, pp. 30–31. Hanaway goes so far as to suggest that Būrāndukht might be a folk manifestation of the Zoroastrian goddess of water Anāhītā (see Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, pp. 39–54; *idem*, “Anāhītā and Alexander”).

33 Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 2, p. 92.

34 On Iskandar as a prophet disseminating the monotheistic faith of Islam, see below.

monious fusion of the two.³⁵ One wonders whether the peculiar picture presented in the *Dārāb-nāma* might reflect the historically-based perception of Islamisation processes in Iran through the lens of a folk storyteller.

2 *Iskandar as a World-Conqueror: A Disenchanted Peregrinator or an Ideal Ruler?*

Iskandar's role as the ultimate world-conqueror seems uncontested in the Perso-Arabic tradition. In all narrative Persian sources the plot is built around Iskandar's movement in time and space in his quest for universal power. At the same time, notwithstanding the positive epithet *jahān-dār* ("world-possessor") widely applied to Iskandar, his standing as the universal sovereign is not without controversy in some of our texts. The dismissive stance towards Iskandar's restless pursuit of world dominion and his thirst for earthly possessions is evident, for example, in the treatment of his character in the *Shāh-nāma*. His conquests lack a sense of purpose and are driven by insatiable curiosity, turning the hero into a kind of idle peregrinator rather than a determined world-conqueror.³⁶ Iskandar's failure to attain immortality, which is epitomised in the famous episode of his search for the Water of Life,³⁷ makes him both an emblem of condemnable vanity and a symbol of man's vulnerability in the face of Destiny and God's decree. The motif of human conceit and condemnation of bloodshed comes to the fore in his encounters with Qaydāfa (Candace of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*), Queen of Andalus, and with Faghfūr, King of China.³⁸ Although Firdausī closely follows the episodes as they appear in the extant Syriac recension, motif after motif, his emphasis is on the concept of the ideal ruler and ideal kingship, pivotal for the *Shāh-nāma* as a whole. For Firdausī, Qaydāfa and Faghfūr exemplify the ideal sovereign: just, noble, generous, restrained in their emotional reactions, and above all, possessing the *khirad*, an inborn wisdom. Their lucid distinction between virtue and sin places them above Iskandar with his quenchless desire for conquest and riches. In her admonition of Iskandar, Qaydāfa recites the tenets that embody the model of the ideal ruler: success is not attained by a ruler's personal prowess, but is determined by the guidance of God and Destiny; he who sheds the blood of kings deserves punishment in the Fire of Hell; good deeds and generosity will earn a ruler a good name in generations to come. This is in fact a kind of "Mirror for Princes" in miniature, reflecting the ethic-moralistic standpoint of

35 See Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 403–07.

36 See, for example, Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", pp. 304–05.

37 See Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭlaq and Umidsālār, vol. 6, pp. 91–96, lines 1328–420.

38 See *ibid.*, pp. 51–74, lines 671–1055 and pp. 106–11, lines 1551–647 respectively.

Firdausī in his monumental work. The story of Faghfür's visit to Iskandar's camp in the guise of his own messenger, and the example of munificence and humility he gives to Iskandar, provide a kind of a mirror-episode to the Qaydāfa tale. The didactic import of their encounter differs little from the moral lesson taught Iskandar by the noble Queen. These episodes, in addition to his visit to the Brahmans,³⁹ act as the turning points in Iskandar's education: he is taught that immortality is to be found neither in world conquest nor in the quest for universal power, but in the good name which a ruler bequeaths when he departs for the other world and which is earned by just and benevolent deeds alone. In the *Shāh-nāma* Iskandar, disenchanted in his war prowess and in his striving for world dominion, treads the path towards self-recognition and understanding the essence of a perfect king.⁴⁰

A substantially different treatment of Iskandar's figure is given in the *Sharaf-nāma* ("The Book of Glory") of Nizāmī-yi Ganjavī, which comprises the first part of his diptich *Iskandar-nāma*.⁴¹ The disenchanted peregrinator of Firdausī is transformed into an accomplished conqueror, unaffected by an Iranian sensibility.⁴² His conquests, however, are propelled by the urge to bring justice to the oppressed rather than by the ultimate goal of dominating the world.⁴³ Moreover, Iskandar's positive representation in the *Sharaf-nāma* is

39 See Firdausī, *Shāh-nāma*, ed. Khāliqī-Muṭlaq, vol. 4, pp. 740–78, lines 1056–133.

40 These aspects of Iskandar's representation in the *Shāh-nāma* are examined in Kappler, "Alexandre dans le *Shāh Nāma* de Firdousi", esp. pp. 173–82; eadem, "Le roi 'au cœur éveillé'; eadem, "Alexandre et les merveilles".

41 The poem consists of two parts: the above-mentioned *Sharaf-nāma* (composed after 1188) and the *Iqbāl-nāma* ("The Book of Fortune") which is discussed below. The dating of the poem is problematic, the whole being completed probably in 1194. For a detailed discussion of the poem's dating and dedicatees, see de Blois, *Persian Literature*, pp. 441–46; idem, "*Eskandar-nāma* of Neẓāmī", pp. 612–13. On Nizāmī and his works, see Bertel's, "Nizāmī". For the *Iskandar-nāma*'s translations, see Nizami, *Das Alexanderbuch*, Iskandarname, trans. J.Ch. Bürgel (Manesse Bibliothek der Weltliteratur), Zürich 1991 (in prose); Nizami Gyandzhevi, *Iskender-name*, trans. K. Lipskerov, *Sobranie sochineniy v pyati tomakh*, vol. 5, Moscow 1986 (in verse); the *Sharaf-nāma* is translated into English (see Nizami, *The Sikandar Nama, e Bara*, trans. H.W. Clarke, reprint, Delhi 1995), the *Iqbāl-nāma* into Italian (see Neẓāmī di Ganjē, *Il libro della fortuna di Alessandro*, trans. C. Saccone, Milan 1997).

42 Nizāmī prefers the historical version of Iskandar's origin from Filqūs/Philip, labelling all other accounts "nonsensical talk". For the poet's treatment of Iskandar's birth, see Rubanovich, "Why So Many Stories?", pp. 212–15.

43 Thus, Iskandar's campaign against Dārā is motivated by his desire to relieve his own people of the burden of taxes paid to the Iranian king, who is depicted as arrogant and unwise (see Nizāmī, *Sharaf-nāma*, ed. B. Tharvatīyān, Tehran 1989, pp. 179–85, esp. pp. 182–83,

not marred by the episodes which have their source in Firdausī's unfavourable accounts, i.e., Iskandar's encounters with Queen Nūshāba (corresponding to Firdausī's Qaydāfa) and with the Khāqān of China (corresponding to Firdausī's Faghfūr). While possessing unflattering undertones in Firdausī's version, these episodes in the *Sharaf-nāma* are mitigated by Iskandar's expressions of magnanimity, losing much of their didactic import.⁴⁴ In the same manner, Iskandar's attempt to find the Water of Life is not perceived as a failure or a sign of vanity in view of the hero's gradual development from world conqueror to philosopher-king guided by sages, and ultimately, a prophet of monotheism (see below). Whereas Firdausī accentuates Iskandar's imperfections to enable him (and the reader) to understand the nature of the perfect ruler, Nizāmī unhesitatingly portrays Iskandar as such, emphasising his concern with fighting injustice and bringing prosperity to his subjects – dimensions typically required of the ideal ruler according to medieval Perso-Muslim concepts of kingship.

3 *Iskandar as Philosopher-King and Prophet*

The perception of Iskandar as philosopher-king is rooted in early Arabic sources, such as the *Epistolary Romance* which includes correspondence between Alexander and Aristotle, the *ḥikam* tradition of wise maxims and anecdotes ascribed to Iskandar, and the funerary sentences of philosophers uttered during his interment.⁴⁵ In medieval Persian literature, however, *ḥikam* collections have not gained the same popularity and the view of Iskandar as philosopher-king is best reflected in large narrative forms. The most important representation of this kind is found in the *Iqbāl-nāma*, the second part of Nizāmī's *Iskandar-nāma*. Whereas the first part of the diptych, the

lines 68–75); his conquest of Egypt is launched after the locals asked for his help in liberating them from the oppression of the Zangīs (roughly identified with Ethiopians; see *ibid.*, pp. 131–32); his subjugation of the Derbend fortress is aimed at eliminating the robbers who attack passing caravans (see *ibid.*, pp. 329–38).

44 For Nizāmī's treatment of the Nūshāba episode, see Rubanovich, "Re-writing the Episode of Alexander and Candace", pp. 132–34, 139–40. Significantly, Qaydāfa's accusations that Iskandar is not averse to bloodshed are counteracted in Nizāmī's portrayal of the hero citing examples of his disposition to nonviolence, even towards his foes. On this, see Bürgel, "Conquérant", pp. 66–70; *idem*, "Krieg und Frieden"; *idem*, "Nonviolence", esp. pp. 77–79.

45 For a survey of the Arabic wisdom literature as a significant component of the Arabic Alexander tradition, see Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, pp. 93–133, especially pp. 102–20, 123–28. See also Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", pp. 306–14. For it as a source of medieval European Alexander tradition, see Doufikar-Aerts, "Influences arabes".

Sharaf-nāma, is plotted around Iskandar's campaigns across the world, the *Iqbāl-nāma* is loosely structured around diverse self-sustaining tales and parables, each demonstrating some moral-ethical or philosophical issues.⁴⁶ In these tales Nizāmī draws on concepts prevalent during his time, when occult sciences – among them alchemy, astrology and magic, – medicine and music were considered part and parcel of the philosophical stock.⁴⁷ The tales are followed by Iskandar's dispute with the Indian sage (*hakīm*) and by a philosophical discussion on the origins of the universe among Iskandar and the seven philosophers – Arastū (Aristotle), Vālīs (Thales), Balīnās (Apollonius of Tyana), Suqrāt (Socrates), Farfūriyūs (Porphyry), Hirmis (Hermes Trismegistus), and Aflaṭūn (Plato).⁴⁸ Significantly, contrary to Iskandar's representation in the *Shāh-nāma* as seeking wisdom and advice from others, in the *Iqbāl-nāma* he supersedes his companions in sagacity and philosophical discernment, serving as the focal point (*nuqṭa-gāh*) of their circle. In accordance with Nizāmī's dynamic conception of his hero, after having achieved perfection in philosophical knowledge, Iskandar moves to the ultimate stage of development, that of the monotheistic prophet.⁴⁹

While following Iskandar's identification with the Qur'anic Dhū al-Qarnayn, Nizāmī expands and transforms the conventional framework of the Dhū al-Qarnayn narrative.⁵⁰ Thus, Iskandar goes on his mission equipped with the philosophical knowledge described in the three Books of Wisdom (*khirad-nāma*) presented to him by Aristotle, Plato and Socrates.⁵¹ Contrary to usual depictions of Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn as converting infidels by the sword (see below), Nizāmī's hero is peaceful and tolerant, and his missionary activity is

46 See Nizāmī, *Iqbāl-nāma*, ed. Tharvatiyān, pp. 73–123.

47 No comprehensive research has yet been done on the possible sources and import of Nizāmī's philosophical tales as a whole. The first steps in this direction were made by J.Ch. Bürgel; see Bürgel, "Geheimwissenschaften"; idem, "Occult Sciences"; idem, "Wettstreit"; idem, "Conquérant", pp. 71–72; idem, "On Some Sources of Nizāmī's *Iskandarnāma*", pp. 24–30.

48 See Nizāmī, *Iqbāl-nāma*, ed. Tharvatiyān, pp. 123–41.

49 Ibid., pp. 141–46. Nizāmī's triad of "conqueror – philosopher – prophet" seems to betray his acquaintance with the political philosophy of al-Fārābī (d. 950); see Bürgel, "Conquérant", p. 66; idem, "L'attitude d'Alexandre", pp. 54–55.

50 See pp. 211–12 above.

51 See Nizāmī, *Iqbāl-nāma*, ed. Tharvatiyān, pp. 147–62. Nizāmī's preoccupation with Greek philosophy and philosophers in the *Iqbāl-nāma* appears to reflect his favourable stance towards the latter and should be appraised against the backdrop of historical tensions between theological orthodoxy and certain philosophical strands in Islam during the poet's time. See Bürgel, "L'attitude d'Alexandre", pp. 53–56.

not emphasised.⁵² Finally, as a result of his encounter with an ideal community where no ruler or governmental institutions exist, where people are prosperous, just and equal, Iskandar abandons his prophetic mission as redundant.⁵³ Nizāmī's triple and dynamic concept of the hero, depicting his gradual evolution from world conqueror to philosopher-king to monotheistic prophet who admits the possibility of a community self-guided by sacred knowledge without a need for a ruler or a prophet, is singular, insofar as Iskandar's portrayal in the Perso-Arabic domain is concerned.

Indeed, the two later poems, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī* of Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī (completed in 1299–1300) and *Khīrad-nāma-yi Iskandarī* by 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (completed ca. 1485),⁵⁴ although written in response to Nizāmī's *Iskandar-nāma*, offer a static image of Iskandar as an ideal ruler and differ in their approach to his representation as a philosopher-king and prophet. The differences can in part be attributed to the desire of the two poets not to repeat their predecessor who, in Amīr Khusrau's expression, "took the filtered (i.e. clear) wine [of Iskandar's story] and left the sediment to us".⁵⁵ Amīr Khusrau thus omits most of the stories related by Nizāmī, providing his own versions of those which he keeps.⁵⁶ Moreover, he polemicises with his predecessor on Iskandar's prophetic status, stating that according to his inquiries (*taḥqīq*), Iskandar was not a prophet (*payghambar*), but a person invested with sanctity

52 Bürgel, "Conquéant", pp. 73–74, and note 44 above.

53 See Nizāmī, *Iqbāl-nāma*, ed. Tharvatiyān, pp. 209–13, lines 95–175, esp. lines 167, 168, and 170: "Had I seen this people earlier, / I wouldn't have circumvented the world. // I would have sit in a corner of some mountain / worshipping God.' // When [Iskandar] saw (those people's) religion and devotion, / he renounced completely [his] prophethood". The gist of the episode is given in Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", p. 334; Bürgel, "Conquéant", pp. 74–76; Casari, "Alessandro", pp. 31–33. For examination of the episode of the Perfect City in terms of a utopian society and terrestrial paradise and for possible sources and parallels, see Bertotti, "Vedute di Città Perfette"; Casari, "Alessandro", pp. 34–43; idem, "Un lieu de traduction", pp. 389–93.

54 On Amīr Khusrau and his works, see Schimmel, "Amīr Kōsrow Dehlavī"; on the sources of the *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, see Piemontese, "Sources and Art"; for the poem's translation, see Amir Khusrau, *Lo Specchio Alessandrino*, trans. A.M. Piemontese (Medioevo romanzo e orientale. Testi, 5), Soveria Mannelli 1999. On Jāmī's life and works, see Bertel's, "Dzhami"; Losensky, "Jāmi".

55 Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, ed. Mīrsayyidūf, p. 26, line 388.

56 See, for example, the extensive account of Iskandar's war against the Khāqān of China, which, according to Amīr Khusrau, is based on what he read in chronicles other than those used by Nizāmī (Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, ed. Mīrsayyidūf, pp. 47–106, esp. pp. 47–48, lines 697–701). For a summary of the contents, see Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", pp. 336–49.

(*vilāyat*) and granted the powers of discovery and miraculous deeds (*kashf-u karāmāt*).⁵⁷ In this manner, the Iskandar of Amīr Khusrau is first and foremost an explorer and an inventor.⁵⁸ As for the philosophical facet of the poem, Amīr Khusrau's hero is interested in philosophical knowledge of a practical, utilitarian kind which could be applied to inventions. Ancient philosophy as a tool for independent thinking and reasoning is condemned and its followers are doomed to death.⁵⁹ Amīr Khusrau introduces into his *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī* a lengthy episode involving Iskandar's struggle with the Greek philosophers who declined his call to convert to the true religion on the basis of their predilection for the "light of the reason" (*nūr-i khirad*) at the expense of revelation brought by messengers (*fīristādagān*), i.e. prophets.⁶⁰ The Greeks fight valiantly against Iskandar, but are finally vanquished when their land is flooded as a result of Iskandar's ruse, only three emerging alive – Falātūn/Plato, GHRQĪL (Heraclite?) and Farfīlqūs (Porphyry? or Paraclete?).⁶¹ Of the three, Plato consents to Iskandar's request to counsel him on his voyages.⁶²

While in the *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī* philosophy is clearly contraposed to Islamic faith and religion, and the view of Iskandar as philosopher-king is not promoted, the *Khīrad-nāma-yi Iskandarī* of Jāmī offers – at first sight – a picture of Iskandar that is much closer to the one created by Niẓāmī. Iskandar's nature as an ideal ruler is determined by the fact that he is chosen by the people to rule over them after his father's death.⁶³ Jāmī surrounds his protagonist with Greek philosophers who teach, guide and counsel him from childhood to death. Their wise advice come in the form of seven *khīrad-nāmas*, "books of wisdom", which are clearly modelled on the three *khīrad-nāmas* in Niẓāmī's *Iqbāl-nāma*.⁶⁴ At the same time, their contents have nothing to do with Greek

57 Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, ed. Mīrsayyidūf, pp. 27–28, lines 406–10.

58 Conspicuous examples of Iskandar's inquisitive character are the invention of astrolabe by Arastū/Aristotle under his guidance (see Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, ed. Mīrsayyidūf, pp. 154–56) and his exploration of the ocean (see *ibid.*, pp. 237–76). The latter episode is examined in detail in Piemontese, "Le submersile Alexandrin"; Casari, "The King Explorer", pp. 191–99.

59 For the poet's invective, see Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī, *Ā'īna-yi Iskandarī*, ed. Mīrsayyidūf, pp. 178–81.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

61 *Ibid.*, pp. 182–96. See also Bürgel, "L'attitude d'Alexandre", pp. 56–57.

62 It seems that in this work Plato and Aristotle are dissociated from the bulk of Greek philosophers – a particular, which needs further inquiry.

63 See Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", pp. 353–54.

64 In addition to Aristotle, Socrates and Plato in Niẓāmī's version, Jāmī includes the advice of Pythagoras, Hermes, Hippocrates and Asclepius, promoting the latter to the status of philosopher.

philosophy; instead, Jāmī employs them to unfold Sufi tenets and ideals, typical of the rest of his poetic legacy.⁶⁵ Due to the attenuated narrative, which gives way to a collection of wisdom precepts of the *ḥikam* type, the distinct traits of Iskandar's character are impossible to determine: he serves as mouth-piece for Jāmī's ethical and ascetic concepts.

A fascinating development of the theme of Iskandar's prophethood is offered by two medieval folk romances in prose, whose peculiar treatment of his character is described in a separate discussion below.

4 *Iskandar through the Lens of Folk Tradition*

Two medieval Alexander romances in prose (*dāstāns*) have come down to us, which have firm roots in the oral storytelling tradition.⁶⁶ One is the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* ("The Book of Alexander") written down probably in the 12th century and redacted in the 14th century.⁶⁷ The other is the *Dārāb-nāma* mentioned above,⁶⁸ which can be divided into two parts: the first telling the story of Iskandar's father Dārāb, hence its title, while the second deals with Iskandar *per se*. At first approximation, these romances furnish a portrayal of Iskandar as known from the *Shāh-nāma* of Firdausī and especially from the *Iskandar-nāma* of Niẓāmī: a pious and just king of Iranian lineage, a prophet, whose circumvention of the world is propelled by a divine mission to fight idolatry and spread the "true faith" (*dīn-i ḥaqq*), i.e. Islam. At the same time, a close reading reveals that whereas the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* partially follows the outline of the Iskandar chapter in Firdausī's epic and the *Dārāb-nāma* demonstrates some motif affinities with that of Niẓāmī, the similarities are superficial at most and the treatment of Iskandar in the two *dāstāns* presents a highly idiosyncratic picture, incongruous with his portrayal in the epic poems.

In the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* Iskandar is represented first and foremost as *ghāzī*, a religious warrior, annihilating or converting infidels and sacrificing the principles of just rule for the religious cause.⁶⁹ His actions are

65 On this, see Bertel's, "Glavnye versii", p. 362; Feuillebois-Pierunek, "Les figures d'Alexandre", pp. 196–97.

66 On the genre, see note 27 above.

67 For the stages of its composition and redaction, see Rubanovich, "Reconstruction of a Storytelling Event"; for its partial translation, see *Iskandarnamah. A Persian Medieval Alexander Romance*, trans. M.S. Southgate (Persian Heritage Series, No. 31), New York 1978.

68 See note 27 above.

69 See *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, p. 70: "Religion (faith) is above kingdom and kingship" (*dīn bālātar az mulk-u pādshāhī*). The narrator seems to be conscious of the polemics around the prophetic status of Iskandar Dhū al-Qarnayn and backs his prophethood

prompted by “divine inspiration” (*ilhām-i rabbānī*), and he is assisted by an angel who guides him in his mission. Correspondingly, the figure of Aristotle/Arastātālīs is stripped of any philosophical significance and reduced to the king’s vizier, slavishly executing his orders. Iskandar’s holy war justifies all means – “The faith and Islam will cover up for all the wrong-doings”⁷⁰ – and is the only way to gain absolution from sin and earn God’s benevolence. Thus, the ethical-moral aspect of nonviolence pivotal to Iskandar’s representation by Firdausī and Nizāmī does not exercise any influence in the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* and gives way to the precedence of sacred war (*jihād* or *ghazā*) as the proper religious conduct of a ruler.⁷¹ This simplified view seems to be linked to the *Iskandar-nāma*’s origins in a popular strain within Islamic exegetical literature, embodied in the genre of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* (“The Tales of the Prophets”) and Qur’anic commentaries (*tafsīr*) of a more folk variety.⁷²

With the emphasis on Iskandar’s religious zeal, the attributes of the ideal ruler advocated in the *Shāh-nāma* and the *Iskandar-nāma* of Nizāmī, as well as in the poems of Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī and Jāmī – magnanimity, generosity, righteousness, modesty and moderation – seem to lose their relevance. The Iskandar of this folk romance is a trickster whose cunning (*makr*) and ruses (*hīla*) are described positively by the narrator;⁷³ his greediness is not condemned; he is far from brave constantly turning for help to his fairy wife, the

indirectly, through comparison with such incontestable prophetic figures as Moses, Daniel and particularly Solomon (on the explicit analogy between Solomon/Sulaymān and Iskandar, see below, pp. 226–27).

70 *īmān va islām hama-yi badihā bipūshānad*; see *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, p. 616.

71 For a discussion of violence as a key-feature in the character of Iskandar in the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma*, see Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 310–11, 340–44. For emphasis on nonviolence in the treatment of the character by Firdausī and Nizāmī, see above. An interesting, if unconvincing, attempt to provide an historical background to Iskandar’s depiction as *ghāzī* as reflecting the military religious campaigns of Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna (r. 998–1030), is made by Venetis, *Persian Prose Alexander Romance*, pp. 81–110.

72 For an analysis of the sources of the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma*, see Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 115–30, 157–63.

73 See, for instance, *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, pp. 16–18, 58–78, 244–45. The manifestations of Alexander/Iskandar as trickster are found already in the Greek *Alexander Romance* (for discussion, see Stoneman, “From History to Fiction”, pp. 123–24, 126) as well as in early Islamic historiography, where Iskandar is described as “a sly and cunning man” (*mard-ī muhtāl-u gurbuz*; see Abū al-Faḍl Bayhaqī, *Tārīkh-i Mas’ūdi*, ed. S. Nafīsī, 3 vols., Tehran 1940–53, vol. 1, p. 101). The positive view of a crafty ruler in the *Iskandar-nāma* may possibly reflect the concept of the political usefulness of intrigue and ruse in Islamic statesmanship (see Ignatenko, “Intriga”, esp. pp. 110–11).

mighty warrior Arāqīt. The most singular feature of this narrative, however, is Iskandar's peculiar relationships with women. In sharp contrast with Iskandar's typical representation in Islamic sources as reserved and even practising sexual abstinence,⁷⁴ the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* is replete with blunt references as to Iskandar's sensual nature and to his virility, depicting him as "voluptuous and extremely lustful for women".⁷⁵ Pondering this development, W. Hanaway suggests considering it as a projection on the portrayal of Iskandar of "...a perennially comic figure, that of the man with multiple wives and all the attendant problems", connecting it to "the conflict inherent in the male-dominated, female secluding society of medieval Iran...".⁷⁶ The sensual facet of Iskandar's character in the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma*, however, possesses a clearly positive overtone, being granted a dual "authorisation" by the narrator. The first is based on royal governance: in his capacity as powerful king, Iskandar should be able to provide the needs of his harem readily and equally, for "the kings have no choice in this matter";⁷⁷ while his might is actually appraised according to the number of daughters of subdued kings found in his seraglio.⁷⁸ The second type of "authorisation" is of a theological nature and dovetails with the origins of the *Iskandar-nāma* in popular exegetic literature; it is best expressed in the character's own words: "Since I grew up and became a man, I married seventy two women. They were all virgins. And in the writings of the prophets (*kutub-i payghambarān*), Peace be upon Them, the God Almighty commanded: 'Marry virgins so that your household would remain flourishing and prosperous!'"⁷⁹ Furthermore, close examination of the text reveals that Iskandar's representation in the *Iskandar-nāma* is modelled on the figure of the prophet Solomon/Sulaymān. The basis of such a representation is provided by a set of distinct traits common to Iskandar and Sulaymān in exegetical

74 See, for example, 'Unşur al-Ma'ālī Kay Kāvūs, *Qābūs-nāma*, ed. Ġ.-Ĥ. Yūsufī, Tehran 1996, p. 130; Niẓām al-Mulḳ, *Siyar al-mulūk also known as Siyāsāt-nāma of Niẓām al-Mulḳ*, ed. H. Darke, Tehran 1962, p. 229; Abū al-Manşūr al-Tha'ālibī, *Ta'riḫ ghurar akhbār mulūk al-Furs wa siyyarihim*, ed. and trans. H. Zotenberg, Tehran 1963 [Or. publ. Paris, 1900], pp. 413, 430. For Alexander's characterisation as one who "abstained from women" (*kāna zāhidan fī-l-nisā'*), see *ibid.*, p. 443.

75 See *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, p. 309.

76 Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, p. 126.

77 *va pādshāhān-rā az īn chāra nabāshad*; see *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, p. 407.

78 See *ibid.*, p. 757.

79 See *ibid.*, p. 154. For additional manifestations of the same thematic strand, see Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 313–17. On the benefits of polygamy and regular sexual intercourse for a Muslim believer as reflected in Islamic theological writings, see Bürgel, "Love, Lust and Longing", pp. 86–87.

literature, resulting in the perception of the two as homologous figures.⁸⁰ Iskandar's relationship with women is one of the thematic foci that correlate with Sulaymān's *vita*. Sulaymān's image as a prodigious lover is well attested in various Islamic sources, which not only specify the vast number of wives and concubines, but also depict his unusual sexual prowess, linking it to his military prowess in the holy war against the infidel.⁸¹ Moreover, Arāqīt, the principal woman character in the *Iskandar-nāma*, appears to be based on Queen Bilqīs, Sulaymān's famous spouse. Their resemblance is manifest not only in their mixed – half-human, half-demonic – origin (Arāqīt was born of a human mother and a demonic father, “exactly like Bilqīs”, as the narrator claims⁸²), but also in their analogous roles in the face of the male authority of their counterparts. Despite their valiant efforts to retain their independence as sovereign queens and as women, they have to accept male domination on both planes – political and personal. For Muslim exegetes emphasis on the virile facet of Sulaymān's character served as additional confirmation of his power and authority as a universal ruler. Exactly the same aspect is highlighted by the narrator of the *Iskandar-nāma* in his summary of Iskandar's exploits: “There appeared Iskandar, who conquered the whole world, vanquished all the rulers, subjugated them all, laid the world under tribute, wedded daughters of every ruler, and made Arāqīt renounce her kingdom for his sake...”⁸³ The idiosyncratic relationship of Iskandar with women, which, for a modern reader might convey an impression of “profound cultural irony”,⁸⁴ in fact involved no irony on the part of the narrator who followed closely the prototypical pattern of Prophet Sulaymān.

In the *Dārāb-nāma* the character of Iskandar is no less perplexing. Apart from the problematic nature of his status as an Iranian king discussed above, Iskandar is depicted in a conspicuously non-heroic fashion: he is indecisive, timid and almost cowardly, heavily reliant on the military aid of his wife Būrāndukht.⁸⁵ Although as a youth Iskandar is taught all knowledge (*hunarhā*)

80 The specific ways in which the parallelism between Iskandar and Sulaymān is manifested in the anonymous *Iskandar-nāma* are elaborated in Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 364–87.

81 See, e.g., Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār*, ed. Hikmat, vol. 7, p. 191; Ismā'īl b. 'Umar ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-'l-nihāya*, ed. 'A. Shīrī, 8 vols., Beirut 1992–93, vol. 2, pp. 35–36; *Tarjuma-yi Tafsīr-i Ṭabarī*, ed. H. Yaghmā'ī, 7 vols., Tehran 1960–89, vol. 5, pp. 1229–30.

82 See *Iskandar-nāma*, ed. Afshār, p. 364.

83 *Ibid.*, p. 757.

84 Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, p. 128.

85 For examples, see Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 1, pp. 398, 424, 433–34, 479, vol. 2, p. 479. See also Gaillard (trans.), Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, p. 15.

by Arastātālīs and becomes accomplished in the arts, medicine, astrology, physiognomy, dream-interpreting, geometry and philosophy, later on, as a result of a heated argument between them, the acquired knowledge eludes Iskandar. Since that time, we are told, he is unable either to read a letter or interpret a dream, becoming an ignoramus (*chunān shud ki mardum-i nādān*).⁸⁶ From that moment on, Iskandar is no better than an unwitting commoner (*āmmī*), dependent on the advice of Greek and Indian sages who accompany him in his voyages. Moreover, in contrast to the traditional representations of Iskandar as a universal ruler in Perso-Islamic literature, including the works discussed above, in the *Dārāb-nāma* he is not interested in exercising political sway over the Universe; he is indifferent towards symbols of power and at a certain point in his voyages even repudiates his kingship in favour of Būrāndukht.⁸⁷ This highly unusual representation led scholars to interpret Iskandar almost as an “anti-hero” and to emphasise the positive role of Būrāndukht as the real hero of the romance, explaining such peculiar treatment as a vestige of the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian tradition, overtly hostile to Alexander.⁸⁸

This interpretation of Iskandar’s character, however, tallies neither with the narrator’s view which invites the audience to look at Iskandar’s life and follow the example of “this just king”,⁸⁹ nor with the positive description of his prophetic status as “a teacher of the God’s religion”, i.e. Islam.⁹⁰ Iskandar’s prophethood provides a proper context for understanding his ostensible ineptitude. The episode of the loss of Iskandar’s acquired knowledge can best be interpreted in terms of his initiation into prophetic status. In order to become the perfect tool for exercising God’s will, Iskandar is deprived of his own volition and independence embodied in the acquired skills which had rendered him self-sufficient. He is humbled and becomes an empty vessel, ready to take in and convey the prophetic message.⁹¹ Iskandar’s transformation into an ignoramus seems to parallel the concept of *ummī*, “illiterate”, linked to the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad’s illiteracy, i.e., his want of any other knowl-

86 See Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 1, p. 447. For the entire episode, see *ibid.*, pp. 442–49.

87 See *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 93; also pp. 239, 336, 521.

88 See Gaillard (trans.), Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, pp. 14, 23–29; eadem, “Alexandre”; Hanaway, *Persian Popular Romances*, pp. 118, 126–27.

89 *dar ḥāl-i Iskandar naẓar-ī kun va az ān pādshāh-i ‘ādil ‘ibrat-ī gūr*; Abū Ṭāhir-i Ṭarsūsī, *Dārāb-nāma*, ed. Šafā, vol. 2, p. 579.

90 See *ibid.*, p. 356.

91 See Rubanovich, *Beyond the Literary Canon*, pp. 394–98.

edge besides that of God, makes him susceptible to God's message.⁹² In the same way, Iskandar's renunciation of worldly power in favour of his Iranian wife should be interpreted as yet another step in the realisation of his prophethood: indeed, only after having relinquished the throne, does Iskandar embark on his prophetic mission around the world.

Conclusion

Medieval Persian literature has enriched the Alexander tradition with multifarious accounts, from which Alexander emerges as a complex and polyvalent figure. The poems of Firdausī, Niẓāmī, Amīr Khusrau Dihlavī and Jāmī highlight – each in their own way and form – ethical-didactic precepts relevant to their time. With folk prose romances one enters the realm of popular religiosity with its leaning towards syncretism and the harmonisation of heterogeneous, and at times not easily reconcilable, elements. The dual tendency to iranicise and islamise the hero, thus elevating him to the status of pious Iranian king permeated by religious zeal, reflects a conception of Iskandar anchored in folk storytelling on the one hand and in popular religious literature with its loose exegetical techniques on the other. Consequently the epic and philosophical aspects that underlie the poetic versions of the *Alexander Romance* are pushed into the background, deemed irrelevant to the worldview propagated by the romances through the character of Iskandar. Taken as a whole, the Persian medieval Alexander tradition lends the tale of Alexander its peculiar flavour providing modern readers and scholars alike with an opportunity to approach the creative imagination of medieval poets and folk storytellers.

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⁹² See Geoffroy, "Ummī".

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