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Moving in a Circuit: Alexander the Great in Iran from pre-Islamic times to the present

Julia RUBANOVICH

In 334 BCE Alexander (III), son of Philip of Macedonia and Olympias the queen, led the Macedonian-Greek army against the Achaemenid Empire. In the three battles of Granicus, Issus and Gaugamela the Persians were routed and the last Achaemenian king, Darius III, fled to the east of his vanishing empire, where he was assassinated by his satrap Bessus in 330. In the same year Alexander entered Persepolis, the major ceremonial and administrative center of the Achaemenid Empire and "the richest city under the sun", according to an eyewitness account from the time of Alexander, handed down by the first century historian Diodorus (cited in Wiesehöfer 2006: 24). Alexander burnt down parts of the Persepolis terrace, as a symbolic act representing the victorious end of his punitive campaign against the Persians and as a practical measure intended to prevent potential rivals to take possession of the treasures accumulated in the royal capital (Wiesehöfer 2006: 106). Alexander was no doubt attracted by the concept of Persian kingship with its emphasis on divine election, power transference within one family, and world domination. He saw himself as a successor of the Persian kings; he avenged Darius' death, executing his murderer Bessus; he honored and emulated Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire; he abode by Persian customs, catering to his new subjects, much to the dissatisfaction of some of his Macedonian generals.¹

Alexander's pro-Persian sympathies, however, were of no avail for improving his image in the long run. By the time of the Sasanian dynasty at the beginning of the third century CE, Alexander was in ill repute, accused of the barbaric demolition of Persepolis and the destruction of the Avesta, the holy book of the Zoroastrians. It did not matter that the former was only partially true: only certain sections of the vast complex were burnt down and Persepolis remained inhabited long after 330 BCE (Wiesehöfer 2006: 25); as for associating Alexander with the destruction of the Avesta, this was pure invention: the Avesta was not and could not be committed to the flames for the simple reason that at the time of Alexander it had not yet existed in a written form. For centuries it had been transmitted orally and was first written down most likely in the fourth century BC, under the Sasanian king Shapur II (Kellens 1989: 35-6). History had been gradually giving way to myth, to the myth of Alexander the Great which over the centuries was to undergo modifications, re-accentuations, would alter in meaning and function in a peculiar and at times seemingly bizarre fashion. In the present paper I would like to punctuate the most significant transformations of the Alexander myth, with the aim of elucidating how the figure was used (that is, transfigured) at the crossroads of Iranian history to accommodate historical changes and cultural shifts.

I shall start my "Alexander journey from the past to the present" with the Sasanians, the last great pre-Islamic Iranian dynasty, which ruled from 224 to 642 CE. The Sasanians shared a common geographical basis with their distant Achaemenian predecessors: both dynasties originated in the region of Pars/Fars/Persis in the southern part of the Iranian Plateau. Their knowledge of the Achaemenians was restricted to a gener-

al awareness of the existence of a great Persian power in the same area in the remote past, to whose grandeur monuments and carved reliefs bore eloquent testimony (Wiesehöfer 2006: 223-224). Notwithstanding their very limited information, the Sasanians claimed direct succession to the Achaemenids by commemorating their own political and military achievements in the same sites and locations as their predecessors. Thus they anchored themselves in Persian collective memory, conferring legitimacy on their own kingship (*ibid.*: 165-168). The territorial-political continuity was only one of the two pillars on which the Sasanians based their legitimacy. The other was the Zoroastrian religion which acquired official status under the Sasanian kings. The priestly hierarchy was established, the Avesta was committed to writing, the vast exegetical literature around the holy book flourished. It is during this period that the perception of Alexander assumed an unambiguously negative coloring as an evil destroyer of the Sacred Scripture (cf. Yamanaka 1993). In the Zoroastrian text *Arda Viraz-namag*, a kind of visionary treatise, it is written: "...the accursed Evil-spirit, the wicked one, in order to make men doubtful of this religion, instigated the accursed Alexander, the Ruman, who was dwelling in Egypt, so that he came to the country of Iran with severe cruelty and war and devastation; he also slew the ruler of Iran, and destroyed the metropolis and empire, and made them desolate. And this religion, namely, all the Avesta and Zand, written upon prepared cow-skins, and with gold ink, was deposited in the archives, ... he burnt them up. And he killed several desturs and judges and herbad and mobads and upholders of the religion, and the competent and wise of the country of Iran. And he cast hatred and strife, one with the other, amongst the nobles and householders of the country of Iran; and self-destroyed, he fled to hell" (*The Book of Arda Viraf* 1872: 141-143).

The Sasanian royal and religious establishments' concern to cultivate the myth of Alexander as the destroyer of Iranian civilization seems to have been prompted by the prevalent political-ideological situation of the time. The unceasing confrontation of the Sasanians with the Roman and then the Byzantine emperors, of whom Alexander the Great was perceived an ancestor, made the definition of the Same and the Other (or the Sameness and the Otherness) as acute as never before. Pursuing their desire for self-identification, the Sasanians created (or reinforced; see Shahbazi 2005) the idea of Eranshahr ("Empire of the Aryans") as a political concept to be counterpositioned to "Aneran" ("Lands of non-Aryans"), the latter designating both the non-Iranian territories conquered by the Sasanians and those beyond their reach (MacKenzie 1998; Gignoux 1987). Another important concept much promulgated by the Sasanians which would prove of the utmost relevance to the further evolution of the Alexander myth in the Iranian domain, concerned the idea of *xvarrah* (in Middle Persian) or *farr* (in Neo-Persian), that is "divine grace". Only rulers of Iranian descent who ascended the throne in an orderly manner of succession within the royal family could be invested by the divine grace, and thus legitimized. In the case of misdeeds, *farr* would depart from the ruler, leaving him unprotected and exposed to the vagaries of fate and the enmity of evil-doers. Such was the fate of the

1. The article is a revised version of the paper given at the 1st German-Israeli Frontier of Humanities Symposium 2009 "On the Move: People, Ideas, Artifacts." Much has been written on Alexander's Iranian politics and the significance of his adoption of Persian court ceremonial. See, e.g., Briant 2002: 851-855, 869-870, 875-876; Bosworth 1980.

mythological king Jamshid: in his arrogance he dared compare himself to God; the divine grace left him and he was cruelly put to death by the Arab king Dah hak, Iran thus falling prey to the unlawful rule of the usurper (Khaliqi-Mutlaq 1988-2008: I, 41-52). In Sasanian writings the historical Alexander the Greek and the mythological Dah hak the Arab are often mentioned together, forming an accursed pair that brought calamity upon Iran (cf. Yamanaka 1993, 1999).

This negative perception however did not remain dominant for long. The Arab conquest of the seventh century put an end to the Sasanian Empire, and Iran became a part of the Islamic oicumene. The Alexander myth continued to evolve. Only the staunchest medieval Arabic and Persian historians and men of letters, e.g., al-Maqdisi, Ibn al-Jauzi, Nizami, Abu al-Fida', maintained the historical descent of Alexander from Philip of Macedonia (see respectively Huart 1899-1919: III, 152; 'Ata and 'Ata 1412/1992: I, 424; Tharvatiyan 1368/1989: 117-118, esp. ll. 34-37; Fleischer 1831: 76). By far the most common and well established version of Alexander's origin and birth became the account of an Iranian parentage, epitomized by the poet Firdausi in the late 10th century in the chapter on Alexander in his monumental epic poem *Shah-nama* (*The Book of Kings*). According to this account, Alexander was born of the marriage of Darius with the daughter of Philip. The marriage quickly and abruptly came to an end because of the newly-wedded's bad breath, which made her repugnant to the Iranian sovereign. The poor girl was sent back to her father, already pregnant with Alexander who thus qualified as a direct descendant of the royal Iranian lineage in possession of the *farr*, the divine glory (Khaliqi-Mutlaq 1988-2008: V, 520-526). In due course, after a number of conflicts and difficulties, Alexander legitimately ascended the throne of Iran, though spending most of his short life in travelling the world in search of wonders (Khaliqi-Mutlaq 1988-2008: VI, 3-129).

In the absence of the necessary sources, we are unable to track how and when the Iranian version of Alexander's descent came into being. This notwithstanding, two points can be rather safely made. First, the idea to Iranicize Alexander, as well as the pattern for doing so, must have taken shape under the influence of the *Pseudo-Callisthenes*, the Greek Alexander Romance, compiled in Alexandria in the third century by a Hellenized Egyptian and finding its way into the Iranian domain already under the Sasanians. The Greek Alexander Romance makes Alexander an Egyptian by concocting his descent from an Egyptian king and magician called Nectanebo, and Olympias, Philip's wife (Stoneman 1991: 35-44). Secondly, the endeavour to Iranicize Alexander and therefore – at least partially – to legitimize his conquest of Iran was necessary in order to introduce him into the official cycle of Iranian national history, thus ascertaining its continuity. The emphasis on orderliness and continuity, the effort of presenting the history of Iran from mythological times to the Arab conquest in terms of an uninterrupted succession of legitimate Iranian rulers, as exemplified in Firdausi's *Shah-nama*, was all the more important in view of the severe blow to national Iranian feelings as the result of the Arab conquest and the rising awareness of a new Muslim Iranian identity ushered in by the emergence of the first Iranian dynasties in the 10th – early 11th centuries, which were de-facto independent of the Islamic Khalifate (cf. Safavi 1364/1985: 39-41).

An additional stage in Alexander's metamorphosis in the Perso-Arabic tradition was his Islamization. This became possible thanks to the exegetic process revolving around the mysterious character of Dhu al-Qarnayn ("The Two-Horned"), who makes an appearance in the 18th *sura* of the Qur'an (verses 82-102). According to one interpretation, ultimately accepted as authoritative, Dhu al-Qarnayn was identified with Alexander the Greek – Iskandar al-Rumi – who was sent by God to subdue the

peoples of the World, calling them to the monotheistic faith. The Islamization of Alexander signified the culmination of his transformation into a metahistorical, semi-mythic figure that accumulated around itself a host of heterogeneous cultural traditions, a figure highly receptive of additions and modifications and easily subject to re-accentuation of meaning and function. In its basic structure the medieval Islamic Alexander myth can be summarized as follows: an exemplary Islamic ruler of Iranian descent, a paragon of justice, who associates with philosophers and sages and becomes an accomplished philosopher himself; he subjugates the universe; as the last stage of his personal development he is invested by the prophetic mission of proselytizing the true religion among the unbelievers, which he successfully fulfills until his premature death.² At the same time this ideal image is tinged by the motif of human conceit and vanity, forgetful of the inevitability of death, expressed in Alexander's futile search for the Water of Life (cf. Khaliqi-Mutlaq 1988-2008: VI, 91-96; Tharvatiyan 1368/1989: 508-528; Safa 1344-46/1965-68: II, 584-591). Immortality is to be found neither in world conquest nor in the quest for universal power, but in the good name which a ruler leaves after himself upon his departure to the other world and which can be obtained by just and benevolent deeds alone (cf. Kappler 1996, 2000).

The ambivalence of the Alexander myth brought out the topical relevance which accounted for its wide and variegated representations. Thus, the concept of Alexander as Cosmocrator, the Ruler of the Universe, was exploited by Muslim sovereigns or their milieu to allude to their own success and might; again, it was widely used in didactic and religious, especially Sufi, mystic literature to admonish potentates of their religious obligations and the necessity of piety (Rubanovich (forthcoming)).

The twelfth century was a focal point in the development of the legendary Alexander material in the Persian domain. It witnessed the evolution of alternative or complementary accounts concerning Alexander's birth and upbringing. More precisely, in the twelfth century we see an active process of fixing in writing the oral tradition about Alexander. This development is well illustrated by an account found in a popular prose romance titled the *Darab-nama* (*The Book of Darius*), ascribed to Abu Tahir-i Tarsusi (Safa 1344-46/1965-68).

As the story goes, after being expelled by the finicky Darius, Philip's daughter Nahid 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. Nahid is sent with her 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 (Safa 1344-46/1965-68: I, 389-391).

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 of milk to give. One day the perplexed woman decided to put an end to the mystery: she followed the goat, which led her to a tent guarded by a lion. As soon as the lion saw the goat, he went away. 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 tells the woman to take care of the boy; however, discerning the divine grace (*farr-i izadi*) emanating from the child, he realizes that the child must be a royal offspring. Aristotle then brings Alexander up, teaches him all the sciences, fortune-telling and astrology among them, till the boy reaches his tenth year (Safa 1344-46/1965-68: I, 391-394). Alexander's dexterity at fortune-telling and dream-interpretation makes him the talk of the town, but at the same time it brings upon him troubles of every sort. After a long period of wanderings, adventures and hardships Alexander chances on his mother, is recognized by her and at last

2. For discussion, see, e.g., Abel 1966; Bьргel 1995, 1999; de Polignac 1996; Genequand 1996; Piemontese 1995.

becomes the heir apparent of his grandfather Philip, the ruler of Rum (Safa 1344-46/1965-68: I, 394-422).

The folk origin of the narrative can hardly be mistaken. The folk motifs are easily identifiable: "An abandoned child saved" (Aa-Th R 131); "An old shepherdess saves an abandoned child" (El-Shamy 1980: R 131.3.5s); "Animal as guard" (Th B576); "The boy adopted by tigers (animals)" (Type 535); "A dreamer-interpret is punished for an unwanted prophecy. The prophecy comes true" (El-Shamy 1980: J 815.5.1s).

What could be the significance and the import of this alternative sequel to Alexander's birth? From a young prince brought up at court and educated in a courtly spirit, Alexander is transformed into a foundling suckled by an animal, whether goat or sheep (cf. Huma'i [1333/1954]: I, 209), and reared by a sage who teaches him the most non-courtly skills – fortune-telling instead of polo and dream-interpretation in place of the martial arts; and it is only after enduring perilous adventures and humiliations that Alexander ascends the throne.

Placing the alternative account of Alexander's upbringing in a wider perspective of Iranian mythology, a set of significant relationships emerges: the mythological king Faridun who eliminated the vicious usurper Dahhak and restored the legitimate rule, was suckled by a brindled cow, Barmaya, and spent his childhood in the hut of a pious man who dwelt on Mount Alburz (Khaliqi-Mutlaq 1988-2008: I, 62-64); the hero Zal was reared by the mythological bird Simurgh (*idem.*: I, 164-168); the illustrious king Kay-Khusrau spent his childhood among the shepherds in the mountains (*idem.*: II, 364-370). One can multiply examples, citing legends about historical figures such as Cyrus, Darius, Sasan, the eponymous founder of the Sasanian dynasty, let alone characters from world folklore. It seems that we are dealing here with a different mode of legitimizing hero and king, one rooted in the oral tradition and functioning instead of, or perhaps parallel to the official Zoroastrian notion of legitimacy, based on the ethno-religious identification of a ruler as one of the most important prerequisites for his possession of *farr*.

To my mind, the sequel to Alexander's birth marks a kind of watershed in the perception of the figure of Alexander in the Persian-speaking realm. From the twelfth century onwards the Iranian overtones of the Alexander legend had been gradually on the wane. Emphasis came to be placed on Alexander's religious activity in proselytizing Islam; he emerged first and foremost as a God-fearing and pious ruler and the identification with the Qur'anic figure of Dhu al-Qarnayn was hardly ever questioned. The transformations which befell the theme of Alexander's birth and upbringing seem to me closely related to contemporary historical reality: by the twelfth century and later the Persian-speaking realm was ruled mostly by dynasties of non-Iranian origin, often without any illustrious pedigree. The figure of Alexander did not lose its attraction and became well adapted to suit the purposes of various Turkish and Mongol rulers, from the Il-khans of Mongol origin in the thirteenth century to the Safavids of Turkish tribal descent in the sixteenth. The emphasis on the Iranian descent of Alexander ceased to be significant; instead, the touching story of his difficult rise to power might have had more appeal for the non-Iranian rulers and their subjects.

If we conceptualize the perception of Alexander presented here in general theoretical terms, two patterns can be discerned. The pre-Islamic Sasanian pattern is that of negative Alienation, or Estrangement, where the Other is localized at the farthest end of the relative scale "Sameness-Otherness" and is grasped in the present case, as an absolute evil, aggressive and even irrational. For the Sasanians the construction of the negative perception of the Other functioned for the purpose of claiming and reasserting their own exclusivity and superiority, with two dominant aspects: the ethical-religious (hence the legend of Alexander's destruction of the sacred writings) and the ethnic (hence the emphasis on Alexander's Greek origin).

The later, Islamic reception of Alexander demonstrates the pattern of Appropriation, articulated first and foremost in his Islamization. Alexander's essential activities, such as discovering and occupying new lands, mastering a strange, alien space by founding great cities, the Alexandrias (cf. de Polignac 1987; Doufikar-Aerts 1994), his quest for universality, were rethought and assimilated within the Muslim tradition through continuity and not through negation. This pattern of response became possible due to the absolute universality at the core of Islam itself, counterposed to the confessional limitation of Zoroastrianism. The Islamic world-view is of a cumulative nature: Islam embraces in a hierarchical order the two older monotheistic religions, turning them into "additional" components rather than considering them as alien.

In the course of the nineteenth century, as a result of intensive interest in the languages, religions and mythologies of the East, the concept of a proto-Indo-European language was launched, with the term "Arya/Aryan" designating this supposed common linguistic entity that later broke up into language families, the Indo-Iranian languages being one of them. At the same time, the first important discoveries in Achaemenian and Sasanian history and culture were made. With the rise to power in 1925 of Reza Khan, who adopted Pahlavi – the name of the Middle Persian language – as his last name and the name of his dynasty, the ethno-racial connotations of the Aryan concept, explicated in the *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* of Count Joseph Arthur Gobineau (1816-1882) and taken up by Nazi ideologues, came to the fore. In 1934 Persia was officially renamed Iran, "the country of the Aryans"; the Persian language was elevated to the status of the national and only official language of the educational system; a committee was established to purge Persian of Arabic words; the nationalistic idea of one country, one language, one nation resulted in the attempted eradication of any signs of ethnic and linguistic diversity in the multiethnic and multicultural Iran, starting from forbidding non-Persian ethnic groups to give their children indigenous ethnic names and ending with a brutal anti-tribal policy. The 30s' and 40s' of the 20th century signified the dawn of nationalistic historical writings in Iran. As an example, I shall mention the work of Hasan-i Pirniya *Iran-i bastan* ("Ancient Iran"), published in 1930, which combined major European philological, historical and archeological findings about the ancient periods of Iran with a nationalistic method of historiography. Discarding all the age-old Islamic views of Alexander and reluctant to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of Alexander's representation across the centuries, but unable or unwilling to scrutinize historical evidence concerning Alexander, Hasan-i Pirniya insists on the Alexander's Greek origin and treats him as a womanizer, a cruel conqueror and a sworn enemy of Iran.

Ironically, the same approach to the historical Alexander is characteristic of the prevailing contemporary attitude in the Islamic Republic of Iran, notwithstanding the antithetical ideological premises of the two systems. A brief aside is necessary here. It would be a mistake to regard the period from the inception of the Islamic Republic up to the present as homogenous and static as far as the attitude to the history of Iran is concerned. The common tendency has been to marginalize and minimize the significance of the pre-Islamic history of Iran and to present the inhabitants of Iran in terms of an Islamic community (*ummat-i islami*) as opposed to the Iranian community (*ummat-i irani*) which is associated with the secularism of the Pahlavis, a tendency expressed in school textbooks. Radical manifestations of this tendency were the attempts, albeit unsuccessful, to demolish the grave of Cyrus and the memorial to Firdausi, both being among the prime symbols of Pahlavi monarchic rule. Since the 90s' of the last century, however, concern with Iranian Islamic identity begins to reappear, with some intensity. The approach is mostly highly revisionist. Thus, in a book entitled "The False Biography" (*Karnama-yi bi-durugh*) a

writer, poet and a popularizer of history, Puran Farrukh-zad, came to the conclusion that there were two Alexanders: one was the Greek Alexander who ruled only for 12 years and during this brief period could not conquer the land of Iran; he was stubborn, ill-tempered, a drunkard and a libertine who died of syphilis; the other was the Iranian Alexander – Iskandar-i Urumi, a native of Anatolia, a pious Muslim who built the Wall against the Impure Nations of Gog and Magog as described in the Qur'an, and who was thus represented as waging an inner-Iranian war against the Achaemenids. Alexander's invasion is therefore none other than an invention and a plot on the part of the Westerners, both ancient and modern, to humiliate the noble and audacious Iranian nation who would never submit to foreign rule. Although there are more nuanced variants of this somewhat eccentric handling of Alexander's figure in contem-

porary Iranian historical writing, the emphasis is still on the substantial superiority of the Iranian constituent as against the West.

Despite the different motivations – the Pahlavi dynasty wishing to praise the Iranian past and including itself in the line of legitimate Iranian monarchs; the Islamic regime aiming at the denial of any significant Western influence on Iran, – their vision of the historical Alexander the Great appears to be a reductionistic ideological construct, enveloped in a quasi-scientific fabric and averse to historical facts and findings. The Alexander journey from the past to the present ends here, having completed a circle: whatever the motives, the pattern of Alienation has dominated the perception of Alexander in modern Iran, creating a curious continuity between the Zoroastrian past and the Islamic present.

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