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Alexander the Great in the Persian legends: from the Pseudo-Callisthenes’s Greek Romance about Alexander of Macedon to the Sikandar of Firdousi’s Shah-Nameh

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.
The main aim of my study is to analyse the origins and evolution of Alexander’s legend in the Islamic world and especially in the Persian speaking realms. My starting point is the Greek Alexander Romance that was most probably written in Alexandria of Egypt; in this article I try to follow the spreading of Alexander’s legend that stems from Pseudo-Callisthenes’s Greek Alexander Romance into the world of the Near East and Middle East. The successive transformations suffered by the figure of Alexander in the Syriac, Middle Persian (Sassanian Pahlavī), and Arabic Islamic literature have formed the basis for the creation of Alexander’s figure of a rightful Persian “King of kings”, as it appears into the epic poems of Firdousi and Nizami. However, underground this official image of Iskandar Dhū-l Qarnayn (“the Two-Horned Alexander”) or simply Sikandar in the new Persian language evolved after the Arab Islamic conquest of Iran, there was another strand of Iranian tradition about Alexander of Macedon, namely the Zoroastrian tradition that perceived the Macedonian hero as a destroyer of the “Good Religion” and of the true Kings and nobility of Iran; in short the Macedonian conqueror was seen by them as a wrathful demon. This image of the bad or accursed “Alexander the Roman” is constructed according to the Zoroastrian religious principles: the true Iranian Kings ruled through the grace of the supreme creator God, the righteous and good Deity Ahura-Mazdā (Ormazd/Ormuzd); Alexander appears here more of a destroying entity of the race sprung from the Evil One (Angra Mainyu/Ahriman). This image of an evil “Alexander the Greek/Macedonian/Roman”, was further strengthened by the never ending conflicts between the Parthian Arsacid Kingdom and the Seleucid Kingdom, then from the struggle between Parthia and Rome, and finally by the wars fought between Sassanian Persia and the Eastern Roman Empire. It has nevertheless influenced as a Zoroastrian background the image of the good Shahanshah Sikandar (the good “King of kings” Alexander) in the Persian epic poems (Firdousi’s Shah-Nameh and Nizami’s Iskandar-Nameh).

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Another important part of this study is the discussion on the origins of some figures that appear linked to Alexander in the Islamic legends: the mysterious figure of Dhū-l Qarnayn (“The Two-Horned One”) that appeared in the 18th Chapter (Surah Al-Kahf) of the Koran and that was later identified by the Hadith (the Commentaries to the Koran) and by Islamic scholars with Alexander of Macedon, but also with other royal and prophetic figures from the Pre-Islamic Arabic and Persian past. It was also of special importance the bound formed during Iskandar’s (Alexander’s) quest for the “Fountain of Life” (the Alexander counterpart to the Grass or Herb of Immortality searched by Ghilgamesh, King of Uruk) with the “Green Man” of Islam, Al-Khadir. The mythological and religious underground of both Dhū-l Qarnayn’s and Al-Khadir’s figures is underlined by this article of mine.

**Key words:** Alexander of Macedon, Sikandar, Iskandar Dhū-l-Qarnayn, Shah-Name, Iskandar-Name

The purpose of this short article is to give an overview of the evolution of Alexander’s figure in the realm of Persian epic and myth. It also involves the influence of the Koranic legend of Dhū-l-Qarnayn upon Persian legend and the identification of that mysterious figure with Iskandar/Sikandar, the Arabic and Persian name of Alexander of Macedon. In order to truly understand this posthumous evolution of the Macedonian hero, one must consider the birth of Alexander’s legend in the West as well as in the East, due to the spreading of Pseudo-Callisthenes’s Greek Novel of Alexander. It is a well-known fact that the Greek Novel about Alexander of Macedon (the Greek Alexander Romance) was first written in Egypt at Alexandria, in the 2nd or the 3rd century A.D. Nevertheless, the birth of Alexander’s Romance is a longer process, spanning the period from the 3rd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. In the making of the legendary figure of Alexander the Great, the man’s deeds counted as much as the image created during his lifetime and after his early death. The Alexander legend incorporated elements of the Greek and Macedonian tradition as well as Egyptian elements about the great Macedonian king and conqueror. For example, the idea of presenting the great Macedonian warrior king as a natural son of the last Pharaoh of Egypt, Nectanebo the 2nd, and of the Macedonian-Epirote queen Olympias, appears to be one of such Egyptian topics in the formation of the Greek legend of Alexander the Great, as it is known to us from the pages of Pseudo-Callisthenes.

Even this very expression, from the pages of Pseudo-Callisthenes, clearly implies the written origin of the Greek legend of Alexander the Great, JO Megalev-xandro”. However, the problem is not that simple and we can assume the existence of oral legends about the Greek-Macedonian conqueror of the East, stories that were born soon after his untimely death. Needless to say, to assume the existence of an oral legend is one thing and to prove its very existence is quite another. We’ll never have the ultimate proof of the birth of the Greek Alexander Romance out of
a mass of oral legends about the Macedonian king of the East, and the form which has reached our time of the Greek Novel of Alexander suggest more the work of one writer or of a few writers at most. The Latin, Syriac, Armenian, possibly Pahlavi, and all the other translations of the Greek Alexander Romance are the independent and yet interdependent works of distinct individuals, who deserve credit in their own right, yet the main mythical framework, remains more or less the same. As a matter of pure hypothesis and looking only at the narrative style of the Greek Alexander Romance, one can only presume the influence of oral stories about the Macedonian king interwoven with the legends of the East on the Greek writer or the Greek writers of Alexander Romance in the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. in Alexandria of Egypt. In order to be clearly understood, this is only a matter of conjecture.

The hard evidence in the case of the Iranian legends about Alexander the Great is very late. The earliest Iranian written sources on the figure of the Macedonian conqueror are of Sassanian period and they are followed by the Islamic sources concerning the figure of Alexander the Great/Arabic Iskandar. These Islamic sources (or rather, more appropriately, the Arabian and Persian sources of the Islamic Middle Ages) could be divided into narrative sources born out of the Arabic and Islamic tradition (like the 18th Surah of the Koran, the Surah of the Cave/Al-Kahf) and the Persian epic poems of the 10th to the 15th centuries. The Arabian-Islamic sources in most cases amalgamate the figure of Iskandar (Alexander of Macedon) with the mysterious figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn (the One with the two-horns), already mentioned in the Al-Kahf Surah. Most Islamic scholars, from the early Middle Ages on, identified the Two-Horned (Dhū’l-Qarnayn) with Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, there are also other interpretations, identifying the Two-Horned with Arabian half-prophetic and princely figures of the Pre-Islamic Arabs. However, in the context of the recent surge of Islamic fundamentalism (with deep roots in the decolonization era of the middle 20th century), the figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn was identified more by some Islamic learned clergymen with the Great Persian Achaemenian Kings, Cyrus the 2nd the Great and Darius the 1st the Great, rather than with the Westerner or European Alexander the Great. Referring to the Islamic Mediaeval Scholars, one must ponder also the cross-influence between the Islamic-Arabic and the Sassanian Middle Persian tradition about Iskandar/Sikandar, in the shaping of the figure of Alexander the Great, as it appears in the Persian prose narratives (written as well in Arabic as in the new emerging modern Persian language) and in the Persian epic and heroic poems written in Iran and Central Asia in the new Persian language (references to Sikandar appear also in lyrical Persian poems). This is a complex problem of interrelated influences, on which we’ll continuously refer in this short study (Casari 1999: 3–30, esp. 9–13).

We shall postpone a bit the discussing of the figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn of the Koran, insisting instead on the Iranian Pre-Islamic tradition on Iskandar/Sikandar (Alexander) and Dārā (Darius). The classical theory of Theodor Nöldeke
(Nöldeke 1878: 36) is that the Persians of the Sassanid era did not remember anything from the Achaemenid history that preceded them, except the name of their last king, Dārā, son of another king, named Dārāb. Th. Nöldeke thought that in Pre-Islamic Iran occurred a damnatio memoriae Alexandri Magni: his main proof was a late-Sassanian compilation of Achaemenian, Parthian Arsacid, and Sassanid history. This book of Pre-Islamic Persian history was entitled Xwadāy-nāmag (the Book of Kings, in the Pahlavī or Middle Persian language). This literary-historical work (or rather a section of it, concerned with Sikandar and Dārā) was thought by Nöldeke to stem from the Greek Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes. E.A. Wallis Budge considered that the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes was itself a translation made after a Middle Persian (Pahlavī) translation of the Greek original (Budge 1889: passim).2

The very existence of this Middle Persian version (Pahlavī or Pehlevī Sassanian translation) of the Greek Alexander Romance is in itself a pure hypothesis of E.A. Wallis Budge. We do not have, as far as I know, a Middle Persian text of the Pseudo-Callisthenes (be it an Arsacid Parthian or a Sassanian Persian text); if such a text really existed, which is very possible, it could have been a Middle Persian adaptation or a direct translation from the Greek text of Pseudo-Callisthenes (and as such the source for the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes, as E.A.W. Budge supposed to be the case) as well as it would have been also a Middle Iranian translation from a Syriac or even an old Armenian variant of Pseudo-Callisthenes. E.A.W. Budge, basing his assumptions on the realm of textual hermeneutics, concluded that the Syriac version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes Romance of Alexander was a translation from a Middle Iranian book that contained the Middle Persian form of Pseudo-Callisthenes's Alexander. The Syriac version of Alexander's Romance and its putative Middle Iranian original were both dated in the 6th–7th centuries A.D., on the eve of the downfall of the Sassanian Empire and of the Arabian-Islamic conquest of Syria and Persia.

However, this shadowy and hypothetical Pahlavī version of the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes was not the only evidence for the existence of a Middle Persian (Sassanian Iranian) tradition about Alexander the Great. The Zoroastrian Pahlavī writings of Bundahišn and Denkart/Dinkard give us a negative image of an “accursed Alexander the Roman”, destroyer of the temples of the Good Faith/Religion (the Zoroastrian sanctuaries of Ahura-Mazdā and of the holy fire Atar, symbol of the heavenly glory of God) and slayer of the Magi. Interesting to see is the fact that to the Zoroastrians the Macedonian Alexander is already perceived in Sassanian times as a Roman, due to the very fact that the most dangerous enemy and the deadliest western foe of Parthian and Sassanian

2 A. Shapur Shabbazi (Shahbazi 2003: 6–7ff.) tries and in my humble opinion succeeds in demonstrating that there is a much longer (and at least for us hidden) Alexander tradition in Pre-Islamic Iran, rather than only the tradition of the late-Sassanian period. However, the existence of that oral and possibly even written tradition on Alexander the Great in the Seleucid, Parthian Arsacid, and Persian Sassanid Iran is only suggested by late Hellenistic oracles, written in Greek.
Iran was, at least from the 1st century B.C., the Roman Empire, and from the 4th century A.D., the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium. Other Zoroastrian writings, such as the *Ardā Wirāz-Nāmag/Arda Virāf Nāmak, Bahman Yasht*, and the *Vendidad*, as well as the older and Iranian inspired Greek text that was entitled *Oracula Hystaspis*, all these contained fragments about Alexander the Great, seen in an unfavourable light, as a destroyer of the royal and princely families of old Persia, as an arsonist of the kingly palaces of Iran (the memory of the burning down of Persepolis), and also as the conquering western king that ordered sacred Zoroastrian texts to be burned, after translating them into Greek and bringing the translations back to Greece and Macedonia. All these Zoroastrian fragmental stories about Alexander of Macedon suggest that, at least for the Zoroastrian Iranians, Alexander the Great was the “bad boy” or the villain of their history. In fact, all these written Zoroastrian documents make us believe in the existence of an Iranian Zoroastrian legend about Alexander the Macedonian/Roman as the anti-hero of the ancient history of Iran. All these clues point out to the emergence of an Iranian pre-Islamic legend about the Macedonian conqueror, a legend that was in all probability born out of an oral tradition soon after the death of Alexander himself, transmitted most probably orally in Iran under the Seleucids, and put into writing probably under the Parthian kings (the Arsacid dynasty) or surely under the reigns of the Persian Sassanian *shahs*.

Nevertheless, we cannot have the definitive proof of the birth of an oral Iranian tradition about Alexander soon after his death. Due to the fact that very few Macedonian kings and satraps (with the notable exception of Peucetas in *Persis*) knew the Old Persian language, this Iranian tradition could very well have been both oral and written from the very beginnings, since the Seleucid kings remained ignorant of its very existence. The culture of the ancient Pre-Islamic Iran was predominantly an oral culture, although there are also written texts in ancient Iranian languages, as the Avestan Gāḥās, the hymns or songs of praise for *Ahura-Mazdā*, the sacred fire *Atar*, and *Miṣra*, or the Old Persian inscriptions at Behistun (*Bagistān*), Susa, and Persepolis. It is difficult to conceive that a Seleucid or even a Greco-Bactrian king in Eastern Iran would have tolerated a bad press for their illustrious predecessor Alexander (although the Seleucid monarchs were also conscious imitators of the Achaemenids and Antiochus I was the son of Seleucus Nikator by the Iranian princess Apame, the daughter of Spitamenes, who was the hero of the Bactrian-Sogdian anti-Alexander resistance). Whatever were the connections of the Seleucid kings with the Iranian past, they remained firstly and always Macedonians, in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of their subjects, be they Iranians, Syrians, Anatolians, or mixed descendants of the European

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3 Even in the *Oracula Sibyllina* we can find traces and reflections of that negative image of Alexander in the Iranian realm of influence throughout the Middle East (see Shahbazi 2003: 7). See also, for a thorough examination of the cultures of the Near East and their response to Hellenism, S.K. Eddy (Eddy 1961, 10–21); for the daemonic nature of Alexander in the minds of devout Zoroastrians, I find very useful the short but thorough article of Gh. Gnoli (Gnoli 1995: 175–176).
conquerors and colonists (Macedonians, Greeks, Illyrians, and Thracians as well). Nevertheless, this negative Iranian Zoroastrian legend about Alexander the Great appears to be entirely independent of the Greek Alexander Romance or Novel of Pseudo-Callisthenes, and only distant echoes of this legend can be heard in the Persian Islamic poems. These Persian epics were in their turn heavily influenced by the Arab Muslim tradition about *Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn* and indirectly by the Syriac and Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes legends on Alexander the Great (Yar-Shater 1996: 40–55; 1998: 609–614).

One cannot conclude from this evidence that in Pre-Islamic Iran there was only a negative image of a daemonic Alexander, whose wrath destroyed for a time the glory that was Iran. Tacitus (*Annales* VI. 31) tells us that in the letter written and sent by the Parthian King of kings, the Arsacid Artabanus II, to the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar, there was a phrase in which the Parthian in fact reclaimed from the Romans the territories and lands once ruled by the Great Achaemenid Kings of old and by Alexander the Great: “*reposcerunt… possesa olim Cyro et post Alexandro*”. No more, no less; the Parthian kings (or at least Artabanus II) saw themselves as the rightful successors of Cyrus II the Great and of Alexander of Macedon (Wolski 1990: 8–9). By adopting the title of Filevllhn, the Arsacid kings in fact assumed the Seleucid legacy and with that the inheritance of the Greco-Macedonian-Iranian Empire of Alexander the Great. Moreover, Ammianus Marcellinus (*Res Gestae* XVII. 5. 5) makes the Sasanian *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) Shapur II to send a letter to the Roman Emperor Constantius II; in that epistle the Persian monarch wrote to his Roman counterpart that “*ad usque Strymona flumen et Macedonicos fines tenuisse maiores imperium meos antiquitates quoque vestrae testuntur*”. In doing so, Shapur reclaimed his lawful inheritance of the Achaemenid Persian Empire of Darius I the Great and Xerxes, the only Persian Kings of Kings that ruled over Thrace and Macedonia (*Strymona flumen et Macedonicos fines*) and probably also the legacy of Alexander’s empire that stretched from Macedonia and Thrace till Eastern Iran, Central Asia, and Northwestern India, all over Southeastern Europe (the Balkans), Western Asia, and Egypt. In invoking the authority of the Greek and Roman historians (*antiquitates quoque vestrae testuntur*), Shapur clearly hinted at the great Achaemenian monarchs of the distant past and possibly also at Alexander the Great, recovered unto the Persian history and glory for external political and propaganda necessities. It is obvious that the King of kings of Iran and Non-Iran, to quote the official title of the Arsacid *Shah shahans* and Sasanian *Shahanshahs*, were very keen to remember to themselves and remind to the Romans about the ancient and present power and glory of Iran, especially when they felt themselves strong and the Romans were in Persian eyes not so powerful as in the by-gone days of an Augustus or of a Trajan (Wolski 1990: 8–9).

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4 The Greek and Latin titles of the Iranian kings were Basileu;” basilevwn and *Rex regum*, translating the Old Persian Achaemenian royal title of Xšāyatiyā xšāyatiyānām, the King of kings. The
Another important strand of Middle-Eastern tradition about Alexander the Great is represented by the Islamic lore on Dhū'l-Qarnayn and Iskandar. The first evidence is provided by the Koran, in the form of the 18th Surah, the Cavern's Surah (Surah al-Kahf). In this Surah al-Kahf (the 83–97 verses) is mentioned the legendary figure of Dhū'l-Qarnayn, The Two-Horned One. This mythical hero is not explicitly equated by the Koran with Iskandar (Alexander of Macedon), although the ulterior Muslim writings (other than the Koran) make this assumption. Nevertheless, the basic tenets of the Iskandar Islamic legend are already there in the myth of Dhū'l-Qarnayn in the Koran. These main topics are the conquest of the four corners of the world (or at least from the rising to the setting of the sun) and the building at the northern frontier of a wall made out of melted bronze and iron, in order to protect a speechless people (or a people who can hardly utter intelligible words, probably a metaphor for an incomprehensible language) from the depredations and havoc wrought by the Gog and Magog (Jūj wa Majūj or Yağūğ and Mağūğ in classical Arabic), the heralds of the end of the world. However, in the end, Alexander's wall (Dhū'l-Qarnayn's or Iskandar's wall, if we choose to think and write in Islamic categories) will be breached and ruined, this fact heralding the end of times and the coming of the Last Judgment in Islamic terms. The Muslim esoteric interpretation of this passage of the Koran is that Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn's wall (the metal wall of the Two-Horned Alexander) represents the Islamic religious law, the Sharia'h that is a product of divine revelation, which will last till the end of time (Glassé 1991: 22–23; Casari 1999: 12–13). In order to understand the origin of the Koranic legend of Dhū'l-Qarnayn, we must take into consideration the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes.

The Syriac legend of Alexander the Great, translated and adapted from Greek as one of the first Alexander romance versions in a Semitic language, was written in the 6th century A.D. or in the first half of the 7th century A.D., a fact making this epic novel a close predecessor or even a near contemporary text with the legend of Dhū'l-Qarnayn, as it is found in the 18th Surah of the Koran. In the Syriac legend we find the topic of the metal wall built against Yagūğ and Magūğ (the Syriac names of Gog and Magog). This wall was forcefully identified with the fortifications built by the Parthian and Persian kings in the Caucasus and on the northern frontier of Iran against the Sakā, the Huns, and the White Huns (the Chionites and Hephtalites), who were attacking Persia from the steppes of Eastern Europe (via the passes of Caucasus mountains, like the Iron Gates of Derbent) and, more often, from the steppes of Central Asia towards Eastern Iran (Sogdiana and Bactria). Alexander's wall could be seen also as a dim reflection in the west of the early Great Wall of China, built by the Qin and the Han Chinese Imperial dynasties against the Altaic and Indo-European nomads of the Mongolian and Turkistan steppes, the Xiongnu, the Yueh-Zhi, and the Wu-Sun. The Syriac legend title of Filevillhn could, in a minimalist view, to mean only the right and duty of the Parthian king to defend and protect the Greek-speaking settlers of his realm.
of Alexander of Macedon was written either at approximately 521 A.D. by Jacob of Sorugh or later, between 629–636 A.D., in the context of the war between the emperor Heraclius of Byzantium and the Sassanian Shahanshah of Persia, Chosroes/Khusraw II Parviz.

After the Arabian Islamic conquest of Sassanid Persia (which included almost all of the Iranian plateau and of the southern part of Central Asia), the legend of Dhū’l-Qarnayn from the Koran interfered with the Iranian traditions about Alexander the Great. The result will be a proliferation of myths and legends about the legendary Šāh Ğahāndār (King of the World, Weltherrscher, Rex Mundi) named Iskandar or Sikandar (sometimes also Iskander or Sikander) in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. There was also a lost epistolary Greek novel about Alexander’s diadochi (Diavdocoi), of whose very existence we know from an Arabic version from the 8th century A.D., attributed to the secretary Sālim Abū l-Alā of the Umayyad Khalif Hišām ibn Abl al-Malik (724–743 A.D.) (Casari 1999: 10–11).

The Muslim scholar al-éabarī, born in about 839 A.D. and who died in 923 A.D., wrote in his Koranic commentary (Tafsīr) about Dhū’l-Qarnayn, who, according to al-éabarī, was born in Egypt and was named Marzūba al-Yūnānī ibn Mardbeh. The name al-Yūnānī means the Greek and ibn Mardbeh (the son of Mardbeh) suggests an Iranian origin, since Mardbeh is an Iranian name. Therefore, al-éabarī wrote of a possible Egyptian-Iranian-Greek origin of the Koranic figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn. He appears to be a descendant of the biblical Yūnān, Yāfīt, and Nūl (Yunan/Jonan, Japhet, and Noah) (Bachmann 2002/2003: 6–7; Polignac 1984: 29–51; Pfommer 2001: passim). The two-horns of Dhū’l-Qarnayn could also be an allusion to the pilgrimage of Alexander the Great to the oracle of Zeus-Ammon in the Siwah oasis, the ram-horns of Zeus-Ammon were adopted in the iconography of Alexander of Macedon as a symbol of his alleged direct descendence from Zeus-Ammon, as Son of Ammon, in the best tradition of the Pharaohs.

There is also another Muslim tradition (Wahb’s tradition) about Dhū’l-Qarnayn, a legend that makes him “a young man from Rūm”, a fact that points to the Two-Horned one as being a JRwma’o”, a Rūmī that is a man from the Eastern Roman Empire, a Roman of Greek speech and culture. This Rūmī founded and built the capital city of Egypt, al-Iskandariya, which is the Arabic form of the Greek word Ἀλεξανδρεία, or in Latin Alexandria ad Aegyptum, as the Romans

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5 The possible Middle Persian (Iranian Pahlavi) influence on the Syriac legend about Alexander the Great is shown by the Darius’s epistle to Alexander. In this royal letter we find as gifts from Darius to Alexander a golden ball and a Polo cross/mallet, an allusion to the youth of the Macedonian king, but also to the equestrian games of the young Persian knights. Before the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes exists also a Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic legend of Alexander the Great (that appears in the Talmud and the Midrash), dated before the year 500 A.D. (probably from the 5th century A.D.); and probably also from the 5th–7th centuries A.D. there is an Armenian legend with the same topic (however, the Armenian legend does not contain the episode of the Alexander’s quest for the Fountain of Life). See: (Casari 1999: 8–11; Czeglédy 1957: 231–249). In fact there are two written versions of Alexander’s Syriac legend, one in prose and the other versified.
called the town of Alexander the Great in the Nile delta. The Arabic article al-
sounded the same with the first two sounds of jAlexandria. We know also that
the Koranic commentary (Tafsīr) of al-éabarī was preceded by an older Koranic
commentary, written by one named Wahb ibn Murabihih (deceased at about 730
A.D.), so dating from the late 7th or early 8th century A.D. In fact, both Wahb
ibn Murabihih and al-éabarī made Dhū'l-Qarnayn a man from Rūm, named al-
Iskandar (that is in Greek of jAlevxandro”), who was called the Two-Horned one
because both sides of his head were allegedly made out of copper (is it here a dis-
tant and distorted memory of Alexander’s bronze helmet or rather of his image
with two ram horns, as Alexander is represented on some Hellenistic coins?!).
Therefore, in these early Islamic versions, al-Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn was a serv-
ant of God (Allah), who sent him to conquer the whole earth and to bring all
peoples of the world under his sway. In fact, in this version of Wahb, one can see
that Dhū'l-Qarnayn conquers the peoples of the West (Nāsik), South (Hāwīl),
East (Mansik), and North (Tāwīl), builds a fleet with his troops and crosses the
seas (after conquering the Nāsik people and before invading the Hāwīl), and
eventually builds a wall against Yağūg and Mağūg. The Yağūg and Mağūg were
portrayed as wild tribes, who live like prey animals, a kind of human beasts
(probably a memory of the attacking nomadic Huns). After constructing the wall
made out of melted bronze and iron, Dhū'l-Qarnayn will finally reach a pious
people, who thoroughly practice the arts of self-control, through sheer ration-
ality, the commandment of love for one's enemies, and ascetic exercises. Thus,
Dhū'l-Qarnayn, the violent conqueror, learns a way of controlling the aggressive
impulse innate in human nature. This is the end of Wahb's narrative cycle about
al-Iskandar Dhū'l-Qarnayn (Bachmann 2002/2003: 7–8).

In order to conclude this first reception of Alexander's figure in the Arabic-
Persian early Islamic world (the late 7th–early 10th centuries), we can safely say that
al-Iskandar merged at an early date with the mysterious figure of Dhū'l-Qarnayn,
the Two-Horned one. What remained of the original figure of the Macedonian
king Alexander the Great was the image of a heroic and chivalric monarch, a victo-
rious warrior and a triumphant world sovereign, who somehow became entrusted
with a divine mission. As a matter of fact, his two-horns seem only indirectly to
hintValue at the oracle of Zeus-Ammon (the Egyptian god with ram horns, Ammon-
Re or Amun-Ra) in the Siwah oasis and to Alexander's expedition there across
the Libyan Desert. More probably, for an Islamic audience, the surname Dhū'l-
-Qarnayn meant only the lord or master of the two ages (qarn in classical Arabic
could mean an era or epoch, but Alexander's two horns could also have been
a symbol or metaphor of his power). The two periods of time could have been
the era before the coming of Islam and respectively the age of Islam. Therefore,
the Two-Horned Iskandar has come full circle, becoming from the son of Zeus-
Ammon (as the Egyptian-Macedonian Alexander of Pseudo-Callisthenes is, born
out of wedlock and bred in the true spirit of Greek heroes), a hero and proph-
et of Allah. For many Muslims, al-Iskandar the Macedonian (and Roman) king
and conqueror became one with the dim prophetic figure of Dhū’l-Qarnayn. The courage, willpower, and wisdom are still Alexander’s, but the real force and power of this hero comes ultimately from Allah, Who gave him the victory. Iskandar’s mission was to submit the peoples of the world to his might and sway, in order to prepare the way for the spread of Islam. In the end, what really counts is neither Alexander’s quest for knowing the mysteries of heaven and earth, the deepness of oceans, or the secret of immortality, nor his bravery, intelligence, or tenacity. The real and true victor is Allah and Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn is only God’s instrument on earth, at that particular moment of time. Alexander can become, for a while (in fact for a fleeting moment), a king of human space and human race; but only God is the Lord of Space and Time.

This mythical image of Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn came not only from the Syriac version of Pseudo-Callisthenes, but also from the Old Testament (I. Moses 10.2; Ezekiel 38 and 39) and even from the New Testament (the Gospel of Mathew, chapter 5, verse 44). Alexander’s wall is a barrier against the forces of chaos, who, by breaching this frontier, will herald the end of times (Bachmann 2002/2003: 9).

Al-éabarī wrote also a universal history and in that work one can find inserted a history of Allah’s prophets and of the earthly rulers, with the story of Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn contained in it. It appears that after the old Dārā(b), the son of Ardašir, who reigned over Eran Šahr (the kingdom of Iran), his son Dārā came to the throne of Iran and reigned for 14 years. These names, Dārā(b), Ardašir, and Dārā, seem to be the new Persian versions of Darius (Darei’o”, the Old Persian name of Dārayavauš) and Artaxerxes, clearly Old Persian royal names, maybe even reminders of Darius I the Great and respectively Darius III Codomanus and also of Artaxerxes III Ochus. The abuses of Dārā against his nobles led to the armed intervention of al-Iskandar. In the war between these two kings the final confrontation took place in Mesopotamia, were they both and their armies fought each other for a year. Some Iranian nobles joined al-Iskandar and other men from Dārā’s personal guard betrayed him and cut his head, bringing it to al-Iskandar. However, the noble al-Iskandar punished their betrayal by death sentences and afterwards married Dārā’s daughter, called Raušanak (Rhoxane). Then, al-Iskandar waged war in India and the eastern parts of the world. After that he returned west, hoping to arrive at al-Iskandariya (Alexandria) in Egypt, but he died in central Iraq (the death at Babylon, for the classical historians of Greece and Rome). He ruled exactly the same number of years as Dārā that is 14 years. After Iskandar’s death, his body was taken to Alexandria in Egypt in a golden sarcophagus. Al-éabarī’s conclusion is that the fragmented Roman Empire (sic!) before al-Iskandar became a unity during Iskandar’s reign and conversely, the Persian Empire, once a united power before the reign of al-Iskandar, became divided in rival kingdoms and principalities after Iskandar’s death. We can see in this Arabic-Persian version of Alexander’s saga the preservation of some classical elements of Alexander’s history, elements taken from the Greek and Latin sources. Al-éabarī’s narrative structure runs as follows:
1. The memory of the names of some great Achaemenian monarchs is preserved: Darius (there were three Great Persian Kings with this name) and Artaxerxes (again there were at least three Great Persian Kings thus named; it is also possible that Arses, who reigned after Artaxerxes III Ochus and was poisoned by the eunuch king-maker Bagoas, to have born after coronation the royal name of Artaxerxes IV, and the usurper Bessus, who killed Darius III Codomanus, took also the royal name of Artaxerxes V).

2. The name Alexander (αλ-ελξανδρό‘, Arabic al-Iskandar) of the Western (for al-éabarī the Roman conqueror that is the Byzantine Greek) conqueror of Iran remained as the same name of the European ruler who fought his decisive battle against Darius (Dārā) in Iraq, in Mesopotamia, and then married the daughter of the defeated Persian Great King Dārā, who was killed by some of his grandees and trusted companions of his royal personal guard. The Persian royal princess's name was mistakenly rendered as Raušanak (Rhoxane), who was in fact an aristocratic young lady of Bactrian or Sogdian descent and the first official wife of Alexander the Great. The Macedonian king and conqueror of Iran will have also one or two Achaemenian royal princesses as official wives and also an aristocratic Iranian lady, Barsine (Artabazus’s daughter and Memnon of Rhodes’s widow) as his official mistress. In fact, the memory of Darius’s daughter Stateira and of her rival and killer Rhoxane were conflated in the Arabic-Iranian tradition about Alexander of Macedon.

3. After the conquest of Iran, al-Iskandar fought in India, returned to Mesopotamia, and died in central Iraq (at Babylon, according to the classical historians). His body was taken to his foundation, Alexandria in Egypt (al-Iskandariya), in a golden sarcophagus. He did create an united Macedonian Empire (that was confounded with the Roman Empire by the later Iranians), but after his death the Persian Empire that was included in his new world empire split in many parts (the age of Alexander’s Successors, the Diadochi and the Epigoni, Diavdocoi and Epivgonoi for the Greek historians).

This basic scheme will be more or less preserved by later Persian narrative sources interested in the legend of Sikandar, the Persian name rendering the Arabic form al-Iskandar of the Greek name αλ-ελξανδρο‘ that will become in Latin and later in English and German Alexander. Moreover, al-éabarī makes al-Iskandar the son of king Philip of Macedon, who was in Persian eyes a vassal of the Great Persian Kings of kings. Alexander (al-Iskandar), after succeeding his father as king of Macedon, ceased to pay tribute to the Persian Great King Darius (that was Dārā, the son of Dārāb and the nephew of Ardašīr) and then challenged Dārā and utterly defeated him. It even appears that al-éabarī knew that al-Iskandar was the disciple of Aristotle (Aristu, Arastū, or Aristātāliś in the Arabic and Persian sources) and therefore replied to the Persian emissaries seeking tribute that he killed the hen that produced the golden eggs, a clever metaphor of the tribute Macedon once paid to Persia. It is also clear that al-éabarī knew the name of the
Indian king defeated by Alexander (al-Iskandar), a king named Fūr (Povro” or Porus in the classical sources). Alexander also met and discussed metaphysics with the Indian philosophers. Symmetrically, to the 14 years of Dārā’s reign corresponded the 14 years of al-Iskandar’s reign. Incidentally, Alexander the Great reigned for 13 years (336–323 B.C.) and Darius III Codomanus only for about 6 years (336–330 B.C.). Nevertheless, the depth of al-éabarī’s knowledge about Alexander of Macedon could only mean that he or his sources had direct or indirect access to the Greek and Latin sources that wrote about the Macedonian hero, mainly to Pseudo-Callisthenes (Bachmann 2002/2003: 10–11).

The next great Muslim writer and scholar who wrote about al-Iskandar (of course, not exclusively about him) was al-Mas‘ūdī (died at about 956 A.D.), who lived and worked at about a generation from the time of al-éabarī. Al-Mas‘ūdī’s main contribution to the Alexander legend is included in his work entitled Murūğ’ al-Dahab (in fact, in Arabic the title is longer and translated could mean something as the Golden Fields and the Mines of Precious Stones). In his work, al-Iskandar appears less as a warrior and conqueror king than as a philosopher (in Arabic failasūf, obviously an adaptation of the Greek word filosofos”). He went as far as India in search of knowledge. He competed in practical and also esoteric wisdom against the Indian sages and holy men (Bachmann 2002/2003: 11–12).

Other important Muslim writers (many of them were born and educated, or at least lived a part of their life in Persia and were of mixed Arabic and/or Persian origin) who have written about al-Iskandar and had a significant contribution to al-Iskandar’s legend were al-Mubaššir ibn Fatik of Cairo, in Egypt, during the Fatimid dynasty (the 10th and early 11th centuries) and at-Ta‘labī of Persia, born in the Iranian city of Nīsābūr (Nishapur), sometime in the 10th century A.D. and who died around the year 1035 A.D. They wrote also in Arabic and we shall not dwell too long on their writings. Nevertheless, we must mention some interesting topos of their Alexander stories. In al-Mubaššir’s text one can find al-Iskandar as the son of king Failafūs (Philippus) and of the queen Rūfūyā (Olympias) and as the disciple of the philosopher Aristātālīs. Al-Iskandar is the victor in the war against king Dārā of Persia, who, after the decisive battle won by Iskandar and after the betrayal of his great vassals, is eventually slain by them and dies in the arms of Iskandar, giving to the winner a quite long sermon of how to be a good and righteous king. This entire scene is unbelievable and typical for an Oriental fable. However, many elements of the story are to be found in the Greek and Latin authors, especially in Pseudo-Callisthenes and the writers belonging to the so-called Vulgata or Vulgate tradition, stemming from Clitarchus. Interesting is to mention a fact: al-Iskandar is explicitly identified here with Dhū’l-Qarnayn. Afterwards, he goes to India and fights against king Fūr (our Porus of the classical tradition) and meets the Indian Brahmins. Here we find Iskandar driven by the thirst for

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6 The story of al-Iskandar was in Islamic literature a literary genre known as ‘ibra in the Arabic language, that is a model or an example; the Latins would have called it an exemplum and the Greeks a paravdeigma.
wisdom (*hikma*) and knowledge (*'ilm*). To the Brahmins, who asked *Iskandar* the gift of immortality, in order to humble him, the world conqueror answered by affirming his divine mission from Allah (the prophetical dimension of *al-Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn*). In the end, *Iskandar* will leave this world as naked as he entered it, a *topos* dear to many a writer from the Christian, Islamic, and even Buddhist traditions (however, the Buddhists and the Hindus refer to other great monarchs, taken as examples from the ancient history of India). *Al-Mubaššir* appears as one of the earliest Muslim writers who differentiates and binds together the two sides of *Iskandar*: the worldly conqueror *al-Iskandar*, who lives by the sword and the prophet of Allah, *Dhū’l-Qarnayn*, whose divine mission is the affirmation before all peoples of the transcendent unity of God. *Iskandar*’s quest for the fountain of Eternal Life or Immortality that makes the world conqueror to be a kind of new *Ghilgmesh* ultimately fails. It is a *topos* associated to *Iskandar* at least beginning from the writings of *al-éabarī* (Bachmann 2002/2003: 12–14).

*At-Ta’labī* wrote in his turn a literary work in Arabic. This book can be integrated in the genre known to the Arabs as *Qisas al-anbiyā’* (*Stories about the Prophets*). Nevertheless, the true heroes of his book are heroines, beautiful women who are the precious stones of his stories. However, an undisputed male hero in his book is again *Iskandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn*, seen as equal in importance with a great man of Islamic history and legend, a huge figure and a cosmic hero for the Shiite Muslims, the fourth khalif, ‘Ali, the step son or son in law of the prophet Muhammad (Mohamed). In this legend, under the counsel of the Archangel Raphael, *Iskandar* asks the sages about the exact location of the Fountain of Immortality/Eternal Life. They replied that it is to be found towards the West, an echo of the 18th *Surah* of the Koran, the *Surah al-Kahf* (*Surah of the Cavern*), verse 86. However, there is danger; the Fountain of Life is situated in a dark zone, where no man and not even the *Ğinnis* (Non-Human Spirits) ever trod. Undeterred, the fearless *Iskandar* sets himself in motion, seeking and searching for the Fountain, not out of a desire for his individual physical immortality, but out of a personal quest for physically worshipping God into eternity, like the Archangel Raphael does. Finally, he encounters a figure older than any human being and yet eternal young, “the Green Man” of Islam, known to the Arabs under the name *al-Khair* or *al-Hir* and to the Persians as *al-Hisr*. He points to *Iskandar* the precise location of the Fountain of Life. However, the hero will eventually lose his way to the Fountain of Life and with hardship *Iskandar* will come out of the dark region, the land of darkness that surrounds the Fountain of Life (Bachmann 2002/2003: 14–17, esp. 14–15)⁷.

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⁷ There are a few comments to be made on this topic: *Iskandar* is here more *Ghilgmesh* the king of Uruk than Alexander of Macedon. He sets forth in quest for the Fountain of Life exactly as his older Sumerian counterpart sets out in quest for the Herb or Grass of Immortality and after finding it, he eventually lost it. Both heroes encounter in their path a figure like the biblical *Mathusalem*: Ghilgmesh seeks counsel and guidance from *Utnapishtim* and *Iskandar* from *al-Hir*, who was compared to the prophet Elijah from the Jewish tradition and even with Saint George in the Christian lore. *Al-Hir* was even seen as a Pre-Islamic vegetation daemon (thus the explanation of his green col-
We shall come now to the Persian writers who wrote their poems in the new Persian language, evolved out of the spoken form or forms of the Middle Persian idiom. Despite its spoken dialects, a literary form of Persian, greatly enriched with Arabic vocabulary, but ultimately based upon the farsī or the Iranian dialect of Fars (the ancient province of Persis, Pars, or Pārsā), emerged: it was and still is the darī, the language of the Iranian Islamic royal courts of the early Middle Ages.

The great Persian epic poet of the city of Tūs, Abū’l-Qasīm Mansūr Firdawṣī (better known to the West as Firdousi or Ferdousi) wrote in the late 10th and the early 11th centuries A.D. at the court of the Turkish-Iranian sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (today Ghazni in Afghanistan) his great epic poem in Persian verse (masnavī), named Shah-Nameh or Šāh-Nāma, the Book of Kings, telling in about 120 000 verses the mythical, legendary, and, for more recent times, the historical history (if one can use such a term) of Iran. He was a contemporary or near contemporary of other great Persian poets, Rudaki and Dakiki. His inspiration was, apart from his own genius, from the traditions orally preserved by the landed gentry and petty nobility of Persia and Iranian Central Asia, the dekhans or diqhans, and also from a Middle Persian book (a work written in Sassanian Pahlavī), written by one named Danishver Dekhan and entitled Xwadāy-Nāmag/Nāmak, the Book of the Rulers (that is the book of the deeds of the kings of Iran). This priceless work was not destroyed by the Muslim Arab conquerors of Persia. It was preserved, not translated (because it contained heathen traditions in the eyes of the new Muslim rulers of Iran and Central Asia; nevertheless, it was an important book for a people with a religion of the book, as the Zoroastrians were seen by the Muslims); however, in the course of time some acceptable (in Islamic eyes) parts of it were translated or rather adapted into Arabic. Alexander the Great or Iskandar become Sikandar for Firdousi, who dedicated some 2500 verses to him in the Persian epic. The great (perhaps the greatest) Iranian epic poet integrates the Iranian, Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes, and Arabic Koranic traditions about Iskandar; and thus Sikandar becomes the older half-brother or step brother of Dārā and also the son of Dārā’s father, king Dārā(b) of Iran and of a Macedonian princess, the daughter of king Philip of Macedon. After some intrigue we pass by, Sikandar shall fight Dārā and win the crown of Eran Šahr. He was, by his father’s side, at least as rightful and lawful king of Iran as Dārā was. Finally, Sikandar becomes a Šāh Ğahāndār (Basileu; kosmokravtwr, Rex Mundi), after fighting and
conquering the Indian kings Kayd and Fūr (again Povro" or Porus of our classical sources). After many challenges and heroic deeds and exploits, Sikandar will reach the earthly Paradise, where an oracle will tell him of the futility of his earthly ambitions and his approaching death. Sikandar is thus fully integrated and assimilated by Firdousi into the royal lines of Pre-Islamic Iran. In the end we have the morality of the emptiness of human ambitions, pride, and endeavours, even if Sikandar remains for Firdousi and generally speaking for the world of Islam the absolute paradigm of a greater than life king and worldly hero. Another western figure brought by Firdousi to illustrate the empty human vanity is another Rūmī like Sikandar, the Qaysar-I Rūm, Caesar of Rome (Browne 1956: 118–; Casari 1999: 3–30, esp. 14–15)8.

The second great Iranian poet, who wrote in Persian about Iskandar, is Nizāmī of Ganğa (1141–1209). He wrote Iskandarnāma (Alexander’s Book or rather The Book of/about Alexander) on Alexander’s mythical deeds. This book on Alexander is part of a cycle of five poems (hamsa). There are two parts of Iskandarnāma, the first part being Şarafnāma (The Book of Honour) and the second part is entitled Iqbālnāma (The Book of Destiny/Fate). In the first part Iskandar is the invincible hero and the conqueror and king of the entire world. He succeeds in conquering Persia and defeating the unfortunate rival king Dārā, he conquers the impregnable fortress that keeps the cup and throne of the mythical Shah of Persia Kay Khusraw, and his final integration and legitimization as King of Iran is given by his marriage with Dārā’s daughter, princess Rūšanak (Rhoxane of the classical historians of Greece and Rome). His integration in the Iranian universe by Firdousi and Nizāmī is somehow similar with that of William the Conqueror among the English kings (Browne 1956: 118).

The second part of Nizāmī’s work, much like that of Firdousi, contains numerous elements combining Classical and Islamic traditions about Alexander the Great: he is the disciple of Aristotle and like his teacher is adept of the Abrahamic monotheistic religion, he goes to pilgrimage at Kaaba of Mecca, he meets the queen Qaydāfa of Al-Andalus, who is the Ethiopian queen Candaces in Pseudio-Callisthenes. Iskandar/Sikandar goes through the land of the Amazons and through the land of Darkness in search of the earthly Paradise and of the Fountain of Life, he meets the Archangel Isrāfīl (Raphael or Gabriel of the Biblical tradition), he builds his famous metal wall against the Yāğ uğ and Māğ uğ (the Biblical

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8 The figure of Caesar was adopted as a symbol of heroic resistance against the Muslim conquerors by the princes of Eastern Afghanistan in the late 7th–early 8th centuries A.D., due to the military victories of the Byzantine Caesars/Roman Emperors of the East against the Arab invaders and unsuccessful besiegers of Constantinople in 674–678 and 717–718 A.D. From Eastern former Bactria the name Caesar in the form Guesar was adopted as the name of a mythical and epic hero of the non-Buddhist Tibetans and Mongols, Guesar de Ling. This is at least the hypothesis of the Professor and Hungarian Academic Dobrović Mihály, who thinks that the Tibetan and Mongol heroic name Geser or Guesar is to be connected, via the Afghan non-Islamic prince Kesaro Fromo of the early 8th century A.D., with Caesar/Kaisar in Medieval Greek.
Gog and Magog) etc. For these great Persian poets, Iskandar or Sikandar is already a Persian hero and Great King (Casari 1999: 19–20).

Other Persian poets (or rather poets of Persian language) who used the figure of Iskandar in their poems (who became now more didactical works of the Fürstenspiegel or Specula Principum type known also to the Medieval West rather than mythical-epic heroic poems) were Tartūsī (in the 12th century A.D.), Amīr Khusraw of Delhi (1251–1325), and Ğāmī (in the 15th century A.D.). They wrote respectively Dārābnāma (The Book of Darius), Āyīna-yi Iskandarī (Alexander’s Mirror), and Hiradnāma-yi Iskandarī (The Book of Alexander’s Wisdom). Perhaps also the Persian Alexander literature will give birth in Mongolia, in the 14th century A.D., after the Mongol invasion and conquest of Persia in the 13th century A.D., to the Mongol novel on Sul-Qarnay (the Mongolian rendering of Dhū’l-Qarnayn), from which only 4 fragments remain (maybe also the Persian and Arabic Islamic merchants and sea-traders or seafarers brought the legend of Iskandar to Malaysia, a fact that gave rise to a Malaysian story about Sikandar).9

The conclusions of this study can be summed up as follows:

The Greek Alexander legend of Pseudo-Callisthenes, most probably in his written form, heavily influenced the Oriental legends about Alexander the Great. Along the written Greek-Egyptian Alexander Romance (Novel or Story would have been more appropriate words, nevertheless the term Romance stuck in use for naming Pseudo-Callisthenes’s work) most probably circulated also many oral variants of this legend, in the vernacular dialects of Western Asia. These were eventually written down, and the mutual influence and interdependence of the Pahlavī, Syriac, and Koranic Arabic traditions on Alexander of Macedon finally gave rise to the Islamic (and mainly Persian) myth, story, or rather tale about Iskandar/Sikandar Dhū’l-Qarnayn, a larger than life character and a mythical hero, who combines the traits of Alexander the Great with the features of one or several Arabic Pre-Islamic prophetic figure or figures, who have paved the way for the spread of Islam. Moreover, this Arabic-Persian Alexander is integrated by the Islamic poets and scholars of Persian language into their Iranian history, as one of their greatest Shahanshahs. By doing so, they deliberately choose to forget the bad Old Persian and Middle Persian image of Alexander, preserved nevertheless

9 For all this material see: (Cleaves 1959: 1–99; Bausani 1963: passim; Abel 1966: 119–139). In fact there are a lot more early Muslim Arabic-Persian stories about Iskandar/Sikandar: in about 750 A.D. the Iranian Manichaean scholar Ibn al-Muqaffā, formally converted to Islam, translated the Xwadāy-Nāma from Pahlavī into Arabic. We have afterwards the chronicles of Dinavari (he died in 895/896 A.D.), Yacqubi (at aprox. 880 A.D.), Tabarī (839–923 A.D.), Thacalibī (aprox. 1000 A.D.), the anonymous histories of Persia, Seistan, and Arabia (the 10th–11th centuries A.D.). One can also find useful the Introduction or Foreword [Cuvânt înainte] written by the Romanian scholar Virgil Cândea to a Romanian translation made by George Dan (after a French translation from the Persian original by Jules Mohl of Firdousi’s Shah-Name that became Firdousi or Ferdousi, Le Livre Des Rois (Firdawsi 1876–1878)) of only a selected part of the famous Shah-Name of Firdousi (see Firdawsi 1969: V–XV). One must see for all these: (Browne 1956: 118–119; Glassé 1991: 22–23; Sourdel, Sourdel-Thomine 1996: 60; Yar-Shater 1996: 40–55; 1998: 609–614; Shahbazi 2002/2003: 34–38).
in the Zoroastrian holy writings that were written in the Middle Persian language called the Sassanian Pahlavī.

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