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AND ALESSANDRO MENGOZZI

OTHER WORLDS
AND THE NARRATIVE
CONSTRUCTION
OF OTHERNESS

MIMESIS
INTERNATIONAL



This book has been published with the financial contribution of the Department of Humanities, University of Turin.

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www.mimesisinternational.com
e-mail: info@mimesisinternational.com

Isbn: 9788869770951
Book series: *Literature* n. 5

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P.I. C.F. 02419370305

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FIGHTING BEASTS
The Pseudo-Callisthenes Account
of Alexander the Great in India
From Rhetoric to Narrative and Return

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Persia capta graecum victorem cepit

The *Alexander Romance* attributed to his court historian Callisthenes is one of those global literary phenomena that challenge philology both as text criticism and as study of the history and interpretation of a literary text. The fluid textual tradition derives from the literary nature of the text and therefore requires a philological approach that recognizes literary features specific to it and copes with its vast diffusion across languages and cultures (Traina, 1998). “Texts such as the Alexander Romance are so-called ‘open texts’, which present their own particularities and idiosyncrasies with respect to both their internal characteristics and the methodological approach appropriate for them” (Karla, 2012: 638).

Like but perhaps more than the *Story and Proverbs of Ahiqar*, the *Confession and Prayer of Aseneth*, *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, the *Acts of Peter*, *Barlaam and Josaphat*, *The Seven Wise Masters*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *Vis o Rāmin*, *The Life of Aesop*, *Leylī o Majnūn*, *The Alexander Romance* rather than an open text in itself is part of a saga describable as a “text network”, that is an autopoietic, self-organizing narrative system, and develops into a diffusional pattern of interrelated texts (Selden, 2009 and 2012).¹ The narrative plot and the system of values attached to it

1 A description of the Pseudo-Callisthenes as a “text network” in more traditional terms can be found in Stoneman (1994: 121): “the Romance was composed by a process of accretion and is the work not of scholars like the histories, but of popular writers. The development of a text through successive redactions is a characteristic of popular works: other

combine in the open structure of an inclusive patchwork, but are continuously re-told and re-written in multiple versions, hardly conceivable as witnesses of an original or archetypal text. The self-generative, open, inclusive character of the composition makes the *Romance* “a huge narrative aircraft carrier, well equipped with submarines and thereby giving the researcher a good catch of textual artifacts” (Piemontese, 2003: 305). The closed, circular nature of the single act of narration and composition does not produce copies, manageable following a text-critical method, but an instable, fluid, magmatic textual tradition, in which no version can be said to be identical to another.

Text networks – or narrative aircraft carriers – largely employ narrative frames, multiple framing and “narrative in the narrative” technique to construct well-organized collections of texts, be they stories told by a higher-frame character, fictional letters or narrative records of marvelous deeds, places and creatures. Internal narratives are thus safely packed within the main frame or plot which fosters their diffusion through time and space. In the meantime, they can be dropped out of the network or modified to adapt to specific purposes and maybe re-used in other genres: open networks and text carriers, however, do not collapse.

The enormous diffusion of text networks raises serious problems for a comprehensive philological and literary analysis. From the date of composition of its first nucleus, conventionally placed as early as in the third century BC, the Alexander saga is attested through late antiquity, the Middle Ages, until pre-modern times.² Crossing linguistic and confessional borders, it was told, written and re-written in the vast territory of Selden’s (2009 and 2012) “Levantine-Mediterranean tributary states”.

examples include *Appoloniuss of Tyre*, the Medieval Greek *Digenis Akritas* and perhaps the Gospels”. On the popular character of the *Romance* and its relationship with folk-tales, see, below, n. 6.

2 For the circulation of the *Romance* through the 19th century in “pre-capitalistic” Ethiopia and Ottoman Empire, see Selden (2012: 34, n. 111).

The ancient novel flourished as an epiphenomenon within the multi-ethnic tributary empires of the Mediterranean and Middle East—Īrān, Makedonia, Rome, Byzantium, the Caliphates—where it achieved both its greatest artistic complexity and its widest geographical diffusion between the second and twelfth centuries CE (Selden, 2012: 19).³

The area that Selden, from a slightly Euro-centric perspective, labels as “Levantine-Mediterranean”, seems to correspond to one of the four “parallel worlds” that Vlassopoulos (2013) identifies as the main contexts in which Greeks and non-Greeks met and interacted. Rather than around the “Roman East” or the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, Selden’s and Vlassopoulos’ “empires” are centered on Persia.⁴ The *Story and Proverbs of Ahiqar* is the first of Selden’s text networks, and it is written in Aramaic, the official language of the Achaemenid Empire. The creation and diffusion of the Pseudo-Callisthenes is conceivable only after the Macedonian conquest of the Persian Empire, India included. The victory of Aristoteles’ pupil over Darius is explicitly thematized in the *Romance* and, as we shall see, redeployed in the narration of the Indian campaign. Indeed, after Alexander’s birth, the foundation of Alexandria and the destruction of Thebes, the Persian and Indian Wars – thus the formation of the Graeco-Macedonian “tributary empire” – constitute the main narrative clusters of the *Romance*. We should probably consider a *Persia capta* – or even *Asia capta* – phenomenon that introduced the art of text networks in the Hellenistic world and later on, from the East westwards, in Byzantium.

The *Romance* itself, which is an almost epic narrative record of the creation of the Hellenistic world, has been perceived and criticized, not too paradoxically, as an oriental pastiche, “not distinguished either by historical accuracy or (at least for

3 Stoneman (1994: 126–7) suggests that the *Romance* offers a quasi-psychological interpretation of the relationship of Alexander with “Makedonia” as a tributary empire: “response to empire is the underlying theme of the *Romance*. Alexander’s concern with immortality is a metaphor of his anxiety about his imperial rule”.

4 On the connections between Greek – especially as regards the Hellenistic romance – and Iranian storytelling, see Stoneman (2012).

our modern taste) any particular literary merit” (Gero, 1993: 3). More recently, and by a first-class Alexander scholar: “it is hard to identify the appeal and the reasons for the endurance of the artless farrago that is the Alexander Romance” (Stoneman, 2003: 612). From his historical and theoretical standpoint, Selden (2009: 13) replies to Steneman’s dismissive judgment, that the Alexander saga firstly “conforms to what is arguably the most common type of diffusional patterning—the text network—in the Roman East. Secondly, all such narratives explicitly thematize their own dissemination, which suggests that their crosscultural transmission is less an arbitrary matter dependent upon taste, than structurally encoded in the works themselves”.

Alexander is not only a Greek national hero, but a crosscultural and, indeed, imperial hero who embodies the virtues necessary to circulate and surf on the global network that tells his story. He adopts and continues the Persian approach to governing a multinational, multicultural and multilingual empire (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 46–52) and “proves a shrewd tributary administrator, who fosters the independent welfare of his subject peoples, allowing each its own customs and traditions, privileging or homogenizing none” (Selden, 2012: 36).⁵

A closer examination of the narrative structure, the stylistic and rhetorical techniques of the *Alexander Romance* shows that it is anything but an “artless farrago”. Karla (2012: 638) argues for a reading of the text as a *literarisches Kunstwerk* and suggests that

the huge success of the work and the evident charm it has continuously exercised since it was written is due, among other reasons, to the relatively predictable and straightforward linear narrative of the text, to its simple and easy-to-follow structure and to the emphasis on adventure, suspense and the marvelous, as occurs in folktales.⁶

5 On this point, see also Vlassopoulos (2013: 77): “It was Alexander’s ability to replicate successfully the patterns through which the Persian kings had managed to create their own empire which played a crucial role in creating his own”.

6 Since Rohde’s (1914: 197–204) reading of Pseudo-Callisthenes, scholars point out that the rhetorical formalism of certain pages – especially those reporting speeches, dialogues and epistolary exchanges

There is probably no scholar who has enough knowledge of the languages and of the cultures in which the *Alexander Romance* – let alone the saga – has been transmitted and continuously reshaped, to deal with all its witnesses with equal confidence and efficacy. Text networks challenge Pasquali's (1934) ethical ideal of a scholar who strives after the best possible knowledge of the history of a text. Philology should probably confine to (copies of) texts and versions, leaving text networks to literary and historical considerations. Each version, however, needs to be read and placed within the network of authors, readers and texts in which it has been produced and transmitted, i.e., the literary tradition to which it belongs. The *Storia della tradizione* is always there, precedes and – as it were – encompasses text criticism.

In the specific case of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, scholars seem to be modern victims of the blundering prejudice of Greek superiority, which is part of ancient Greek culture and is yet another theme of many a page of the *Alexander Romance*. Classical scholars are generally unprepared, maybe unwilling, to cope with the languages and cultures that do not belong to the

– is to some extent counterbalanced by the attention to the marvelous, unknown East and the narration of fabulous adventures that answer the needs of a popular readership. For example, Cizek (1978) describes Alexander as a folk-tale hero and interprets “the distortion of historical data” in the text as due to narrative techniques that can be read in the light of Proppian functions. Stoneman (1994: 118) interprets most “wonder-tales” of the *Romance* as “derived from folk-tale and other non-historical genres”. More positively, Karla (2012) recognizes folk-narrative techniques – basic leitmotifs associate with the hero, redeployment of a motif and of narrative sequences, triadic schema and antithesis – as factors that ensure cohesion to the text and eventually its success. The critical instruments created for the structural analysis of the folk-tale can certainly provide insightful explanations of the narrative structure of the Hellenistic romance and of Pseudo-Callisthenes in particular. The popular character of the *Romance*, however, should not be emphasized. In fact, the perspective could be reversed: we find in folk-tales a formulaic, almost stereotyped, use of some of the narrative techniques, stylistic features and motifs of major text networks such as the *Alexander Romance*. Kotar (2013: 543) describes the Syriac version of the *Romance* as an occasionally ambitious piece of literature, demanding from the readers a good background in Greek philosophy, mythology and geography.

Greek and Roman world, as if the fact of considering all non-Greek peoples barbarians – according to the widespread ancient conviction – prevents them from acquiring a scientific knowledge of the other languages (Morani, 1998: 175).

Moreover, as we will see from the narrow – though revealing – point of view of the episode of the elephant battle in India, the *Alexander Romance* has served as a depository of topics and narrative materials and has been used to imagine and tell other stories, ideologically bound to, yet historically detached from the original Hellenistic frame. The kaleidoscopic variation of motifs and episodes as organized within the main narrative plot and the chameleonic – glocal – adaptation to different cultures, authorial agendas and readerships make it rather difficult not only to gain a comprehensive picture of its diffusion as “one of the most enduring legacies of Greek antiquity to the medieval world” (Stoneman, 2003: 612), but also to draw a plausible stemma of the relationships and contamination and hybridization processes between various versions, sub-versions and interrelated texts. “With no *Urtext* and lacking any definitive redaction, text networks of this sort remained fundamentally decentered, which makes it virtually impossible to chart with any certainty either their historical development or their full global diffusion” (Selden 2012: 42). Advantages and limitation of a stemmatic approach to the motifs attested in the Arabic Alexander tradition will be dealt with shortly.

A triumph of rhetoric and fiction

The episode of Alexander in India,⁷ at the beginning of the third part of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, re-proposes two intertwined

7 For an overview of Greek historical and ethnographic sources about India, see Xydopoulos (2007), who argues that the representation of India and Indians in the *Romance* is slightly more realistic and less stereotyped than in pre-Hellenistic works, thanks to the radical change of Greek attitudes towards barbarians that occurred after Alexander’s conquests in Asia (on “The Hellenistic world” see Vassopoulos, 2013: 278–331). Although a number of themes, such as the size and strength of Porus soldiers and war-elephants and Alexander’s fear of elephants, are shared by the Pseudo-Callisthenes and the so-called Alexander’s

themes that contribute, as unifying features, to the narrative skeleton of the *Romance*: the superiority of Greek knowledge and culture over the barbarians⁸ and the cunning intelligence of the hero, Alexander the φρηνήρης (*ḥakkīmā* in Syriac), obviously reminiscent of the other Greek national hero: the trickster, conqueror, traveler and explorer, πολύμητις Odysseus (Centanni, 1988: xxviii; Karla, 2012: 641–2).

The Indian episode allows us to exemplify the problems raised by textual variation among versions of the *Romance*, as preserved in Greek and other languages and, at the same time, to appreciate the high level of literary re-elaboration that occurs in the narrative construction of various versions. Arguably, the process of accretion – “wonder-tales” are “more with each successive recension” of the *Romance* (Stoneman, 1994: 122) – is not chaotic. Narrative details come to carry new meanings and structural functions in the fluid textual transmission, in which each witness adds precious pieces to complete a fascinating puzzle. In an accordion-like textual transmission, scribes play as narrators and squeeze and expand the bellows by suppressing, refining or adding narrative details to get desired effects. I will

historians (Xydopolous, 2007: 24–5), the narrative and rhetorical agendas clearly prevail in the *Romance*.

- 8 Pseudo-Callistenes’ Alexander the Great seems to follow, maybe foster or contribute to create, an almost trivial paradigm of orientalist thought, as described by Edward Said (1978). Western Alexander knows the East, attacks and overcomes all Eastern kings, with the imperialistic goal to conquer their lands and exploit their resources – see the opposition of poor Greece vs. rich India in the episode discussed in the present paper. Indeed, Alexander was a model and the Pseudo-Callisthenes a favorite reading among 19th-century Britons, engaged in the construction of the myth of British imperial superiority and the description of subjected India as retrograde and barbarian (Hagerman, 2009; more generally, on the British “obsession with Alexander”, see Ball, 2012). Tackling Said’s Orientalism, Vlassopoulos (2013) critically describes the relationship between Greeks and Barbarians in terms of global vs. glocal processes, within a complex network of cultural, social, political and economic exchanges. See, e.g., in his conclusions: “the interactions between Greeks and non-Greeks took place in a world that was infinitely more complex than any simplistic distinction between West and East” (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 321).

focus on the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes,⁹ since precisely in this episode it has narrative details that differentiate a branch of the oriental versions from the Greek texts.

The Indian king Porus had prepared troops to help the Persian king attacked by Alexander. However, when he heard that Darius was dead, he returned to India. Aware of Porus' hostility, Alexander decides to wage war against him. When the troops

9 For a list of the works, in poetry or prose, that form the Syriac Alexander legend, see Brock (2011), with bibliography. A number of Iranian elements that naturally – if we take a Persian-oriented standpoint such as Stoneman (2012) – led Nöldeke (1890) to assume that the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes had been translated from a lost Pahlavi – more precisely, Middle-Persian – intermediary are interpreted today as the late Neo-Persian patina of a text originally translated from the Greek and later transmitted in an East-Syriac milieu exposed to Persian influence (Ciancaglini 1998 and 2001; Ciancaglini, 2015, responds to van Bladel, 2007, defense of Nöldeke's hypothesis). The relationship of the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes with the Greek recensions of the Romance have been recently investigated by Kotar (2013). Mainly building on Reinink's works, the living overview of the Alexander legend in the Syriac tradition by Monferrer-Sala (2011) does not consider Ciancaglini's finds on the Pseudo-Callisthenes and rather focuses on the spread and fortune of motifs of the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* and of the *Christian Syriac Alexander Legend* (see, below, n. 23–5). A key witness for the East-Syriac Alexander legend (*Romance* and *Legend*) is the manuscript British Library Add. 25875 (1709), that was used as the base text by Budge (1889). The manuscript was compiled according to an ideological agenda, that assigned to Alexander a specific providential role within the late East-Syriac theological interpretation of history and eschatology (Desreumaux, 2000; for the scribe and the cultural environment in which the manuscript was produced, see Murre-van den Berg, 2015: 273 and 276). See Moennig (2016) on similar considerations on the Byzantine reception of Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Life of Alexander* as “a phenomenon of monotheistic medieval cultures” (in general, 163) and the variation among its recensions as “ongoing process of a narrative integration of Alexander into a Christian world” (on recension λ, 165). While the theological motifs of the Syriac Alexander legend and their political implications have received scholarly attention, the position of the *Alexander Romance*, especially as a medieval literary product, in the history of Syriac literature would require further investigation, which falls beyond the scope of the present paper.

arrive in India, soldiers are tired and their chiefs try to convince Alexander that, while the war against Darius had been necessary to liberate Greece from the tax yoke of the Persians, the Indian war is not necessary, since they do not share their leader's love for war and conquest. Alexander, furious, reminds them that they had won thanks to his knowledge of Persian warfare and habits and invites them to return home on their own, if they have courage to "guide themselves wisely".¹⁰ They decide then to follow him (III.1).

After a few days, Alexander receives a letter from Porus.¹¹ In the letter, the Indian king, "a king of gods and men" reminds the Macedonian that even the Greek "god Dionysius returned defeated by the hands of the Indians" and orders him three times to go back to Greece, that is such "a wretched place and has nothing worthy of a king" that Indians never thought to conquer it. The hero's reactions to the letter are masterpieces of rhetorical dialectics.¹² He asks that Porus' letter be read to his troops and then he himself comments on the letter, overturning by antithesis the arguments of the Indian king and foreshadowing his smart stratagem to defeat him. Far from being gods, the Indians and their king are beasts and barbarians,¹³ only proud

10 Direct quotations are from the English translation by Budge (1889).

11 Fictional letters are skillfully inserted throughout the *Romance*. Often they have specific functions in the construction of the narrative, as in the case of Darius and Porus, whereas in other cases the narrative seems to be built upon them, as in the case of the Brahmins or the Amazons. "Scholars ancient and modern have long recognized the association between letter-writing and progymnasmata, school exercises best attested from the Hellenistic and Imperial periods which prepared students for rhetorical composition and declamation" (Arthur-Montagne, 2014: 170).

12 Papyrus finds have demonstrated that Rohde's (1914) theory that insisted on the schools of rhetoric of the Second Sophistic (1st-3rd centuries AD) as instrumental for the emergence of the Hellenistic romance is untenable from a chronological point of view (Hägg, 1991: 243). From a much earlier period and probably constantly in the following ages, rhetoric school exercises remained influential formal models for narrators and novelists.

13 The description of non-Greeks as ignorant beasts is rooted in Greek culture. In the Near East, e.g. in Assyrian historiography, a whole set of formulaic topoi are used to depict a deformed image of the enemy, but in human, moral and political terms: he does not do what he is supposed

of the number of their soldiers.¹⁴ The Syriac Alexander presents thus himself as embodiment of Dionysus ruling over all nations, even more clearly than in the Greek recension α (Kotar 2013: 303).

Verily I say unto you that the barbarians and dwellers in all these regions are all as stupid and as ignorant as the wild beasts that live in their country. Leopards and lions and elephants and panthers are over confident by reason of the strength of their bodies, and it is well known that they can be easily captured by the knowledge of man with stratagems and artifices. In the same way the kings who dwell in these regions, and all the barbarians, are proud by reason of the number of their troops, but they will be easily defeated by the knowledge of the Greeks (Budge, 1889: 89).

Alexander then sends an answer to Porus, in which he resumes and bends to his advantage one of Porus' arguments. Indeed, Greece is a poor country and the awareness of this strongly motivates his troops to defeat rich Indians and prey on their riches. Alexander denounces Porus' arrogance in considering himself a king of gods and the Indians capable of winning over gods. He will not fight against a god, but as a human warrior against a human warrior (III.2). Like in the preceding campaign against Darius and in other episodes of the *Romance*, "the paired letters function like the paired speeches common in histories, employing

to do for and does what he is not supposed to do against Assyrian royal power (Fales, 1982). He is an internal enemy. In Greek culture we find "polarized representations of non-Greeks as an incarnation of everything that was different and opposed to the values and customs that the Greeks held dear" (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 190–1). Barbarians are external enemies and otherness is represented in half-human, non-human or bestial forms. So is depicted the Other in archaic vase painting (Vlassopoulos, 2013: 178) and the marvelous creatures who have inspired many pages of the *Alexander Romance* recall the battle scenes "between Order and Chaos, between Self and Other" that populate Classical Greek art (Amazonomachy, Centauromachy and Gigantomachy; see Vlassopoulos, 2013: 191).

14 That military glory and the number of soldiers are inversely proportional variables is a Greek topos, at least since the battle of Leonidas at Thermopylae.

an antithetical parallelism to rhetorical effect” (Arthur-Montagne, 2014: 174).

As it happened to Nikolaos in the first part of the *Romance* and to Darius in the second, keen readers know that the king’s arrogance will be punished, since hubris punishment is one of the “leitmotifs running through the whole body of the narration” (Karla, 2012: 644 and 649–50).

Much to his – and the readers’ – surprise, Alexander finds that the wild beasts to which he had compared the Indians in his rant to the soldiers are lined up in Porus’ army. From the elegant and reassuring level of the verbal contest, the Indians-beasts and the Indian beasts descend now flank to flank on the story level, ready for a real battle. The Greeks and the hero himself are afraid. Alexander’s rant has created a nightmare on the narrative level. Indian troops are troops of real beasts.

Although admittedly more realistic than dog-men and other wonderful monsters that feature in the *Romance*, the fearful army of beasts is one of Alexander’s – and his readers’ – encounters with the marvelous as a narrative device. It is the unconventional weapon that the villain antagonist deploys to struggle against the hero and that the narrator employs – clearly against the folk-hero paradigm – to trigger and reveal the hero’s ability to devise trickery.

Alexander himself was afraid, because he was accustomed to fight with men and not with wild beasts. Then he sat down and reflected in his mind, and gave orders to bring such brazen images as could be found among his troops. And when the images were collected, which were in the form of men and quadrupeds, – now they were about twenty-four thousand in number – he ordered a smith’s furnace to be set up; and they brought much wood and set fire to it, and heated those images in the fire, and the images became glowing coals of fire. Then they took hold of them with iron tongs, and placed them upon iron chariots, and led the chariots before the ranks of the warriors; and Alexander commanded horns and trumpets to be sounded (Budge, 1889: 90).

The hero reacts to fear as a ζῶον λογικόν: he sits down and thinks, then speaks. As we shall see especially in the Ethiopic version, the stratagem he devises is a triumph of fiction in the

etymological and current sense. He orders the collection of all the bronze that could be found, no less than twenty-four thousand statues of men and quadrupeds. He heats them and puts them on chariots, forging an army of beasts and men and doubling the bestial and human army of the Indians. Just as reality in fiction, Indian troops do not recognize themselves or the enemies in the distorting mirror of the bronze burning army created by Greek knowledge and intelligence. Forged beasts and men triumph over real beasts and men. The artifice of the burning statues indeed captures and defeats the barbarians, as announced by Alexander in the speech that follows the reading of Porus' letter.

When the wild beasts that were in the ranks of the king of the Indians heard the sound of the trumpets, they rushed upon the ranks of Alexander's army; and since the brazen images which were full of fire were in the van, they laid hold of them with their mouths and lips, and burnt their mouths and their lips. Some of them died (on the spot), and some of them retired beaten and fled away to the camp of the king of the Indians. The wise Alexander, having turned back the wild beasts by this artifice, began to fight with the Indians themselves (Budge, 1889: 90–1).

Hot burning statutes created after reflection overcome the marvelous of fighting beasts, evoked by the hero for rhetorical purposes and suddenly embodied in the narrative text as a dangerous and fearful war machine. Finally the wise Alexander begins his true battle. Of course, he eventually wins.

Both from the macro-perspective of the *Romance* as a text network and at the micro-level of the episode as a narrative segment, the story of Alexander in India is the work of a fine artist and a skilled narrator, who disseminates generative details all along the narrative furrows. The episode is inserted in the main narrative plot of the *Romance* as a second redeployment of the motif of the villain king, arrogant and punished,¹⁵ and as

15 The Greek recension β of the Indian campaign not only redeploys the epistolary exchange – and the motif of the arrogant king – but also Alexander's visit in disguise of the enemy's camp. Two crucial themes of the Indian episode are reprised in the addition: the enemy as a beast

further evidence of Alexander's intelligence – two of the features that according to Karla (2012) ensure unity and cohesion to the narrative and thematic structure of the *Romance*. In itself, it is constructed on the interaction of different levels: fictional letters and diplomatic exchanges, rhetorical contest and actual battle. Antithetic oppositions – men and gods, men and beasts, Greeks and barbarians, knowledge and ignorance, statues and real troops – are proposed and resumed at the various levels, creating the sophisticated web on which the needlework of narration embroiders the story. The theme of fighting beasts, in particular, is redeployed at the micro-level of the episode, from rhetoric speech to military action, from mockery to marvelous battle.

Generative details

In telling Alexander's trickery in the struggle with Porus, the Syriac text must be broken or abridged. A copyist may have reacted to different versions of the story. If we compare it with other oriental versions, especially the Ethiopic Romance and some of the Arabic sources, a number of narrative details appear to be misplaced in the Syriac narrative. If the bronze statues of men and quadrupeds were to be found, nice and ready, among the soldiers – as the Syriac text suggests¹⁶ – it is not clear what is the purpose of the smith's furnace that Alexander orders to set

and the divine ancestry of the hero. Porus overturns Alexander's mockery and asks Alexander, disguised as a soldier, to report to the Macedonian king that he will use against him beasts that are as fierce as he is. Alexander risks betraying himself: "King Porus – replies Alexander – before I am back to Alexander, he will hear with his ears all that you have said. – And from whom? – Porus asks. – From Porus, because he is the son of a god and knows everything that is said" (Centanni, 1988: 124–7).

16 The Greek recension β, III.3 explicitly says that the statues are part of the booty that the soldiers had collected (Centanni, 1988: 126–7). The Armenian version specifies that they had been made in Persia and Alexander ordered to put them on chariots when moving to India (Wolohojian, 1969: 116).

up. The metal simulacrum had only to be filled with burning wood and installed on chariots to cope with the two main reasons for Porus's military superiority: the number of soldiers and the presence of both men and beasts in his army.

In this episode, the Ethiopic Alexander is less a solitary, reflective and astute hero than his Greek and Syriac possible ancestors. Counsellors and friends advise him to make twenty-four thousand images of elephants.

He took counsel with his counsellors and with the wise men his friends, and they advised him to make brazen and iron images of elephants. And they made for him twenty and four thousand exact images of elephants, for when Alexander came into the country he brought with him from their various provinces a great number of smiths skilled in the art of metal work, and there were in his army fifty thousand workers in metal. And when the elephants were finished soldiers filled them inside with wood and set it on fire, and when the images had become blazing hot the Greeks brought out the chariots and set the images before them, and they dressed [images of men and placed them] inside them as if they had been men in very truth (Budge, 1896: 120).

The tactical problems are solved by making twenty-four thousand statues of elephants and probably – the text is not very clear – placing on them human-shaped puppets. Both narrative details preserved in the oriental versions – the number of statues and the fact that they represent animals (quadrupeds in Syriac, elephants in Ethiopic) and men – are not attested in the Greek recensions of the Romance. As Budge (1896: 120 n.2) notes, “there is no authority in the Greek for this number”. The available Greek,¹⁷ Armenian (Wolohojian, 1969: 119) and

17 The text of the Greek recension α (“*vetusta*”, based on a 11th-century manuscript) can be found in Kroll (1926, reprint 1958: 101–2; German transl. in Ausfeld, 1907: 86–7); an Italian transl. of the text of the Greek recension β (based on the 15th-century manuscript L) is found in Centanni (1988: 126–7), facing the Greek text edited by van Thiel (1983). The five recensions of the Greek Romance, as reconstructed by modern philologists (α , β , γ , ϵ , λ), have a purely conventional value, as a working hypothesis to classify the manuscript witnesses of the Romance (e.g., Centanni, 1988: xxxiii and Traina, 1998: 313). See

Latin¹⁸ versions speak of statues of men. In a popular Armenian version, in prose and quatrains, orally transmitted and written down in the 18th century (Simonyan, 1998: 286), Alexander lines up sixty thousand heated copper statues of men against the sixty thousand elephants of Porus' army (Bernardelli, 2010: 78–9).

In her detailed survey of the motifs preserved in the Arabic Pseudo-Callisthenes tradition, Doufikar-Aerts (2010: 83, n. 269 and 270) describes the variation of the two narrative details under discussion in five of the six sources that she has individuated and collated as Arabic repositories of narrative materials of the Romance:¹⁹ two of them (Q and M) have the number 24.000, in

Moennig (2016) for a contextualization of recensions β, γ, ε, λ – and especially of highly Christianized ζ* – in Byzantine history, culture and literature.

18 See Julius Valerius (4th century), *Res gestae Alexandri Macedonis* (Rosellini, 2004: 129) and the *Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni* by Leo of Naples (10th century), recension J¹ (Hilka-Steffens, 1979: 146).

19 Q – The *Sīrat al-Malik Iskandar* (Biography of Alexander) is preserved in a 17th-manuscript copied by a certain Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, surnamed Quzmān, and represents “the most important exponent of the Alexander Romance in Arabic” (Doufikar-Aerts, 2010: 71).

M – The *Mukhtār al-ḥikam* (Selected Aphorisms) by 11th-century author Mubashshir ibn Fātik sketches a biography of Alexander, probably based on a shortened form of the Alexander Romance (Doufikar-Aerts, 2010: 25).

A – The *Qiṣṣat Dhī l-Qarnayn* (Story of the Two-Horned One, second half of the 9th century) is preserved in a late Maghribi manuscript and attributed to a story-teller called Abū ‘Abd al-Malik.

U – The *Qiṣṣat al-Iskandar* is a romance-like composition by a certain ‘Umāra (late 8th-early 9th century?) and is preserved in a single manuscript dated 1510. In many places, the text contains “fragments, and sometimes continuous sections, of Pseudo-Callisthenes” (Doufikar-Aerts, 2010: 37).

N – The *Nihāyatu l-arab fī akhbāri l-Furs wa-l-‘Arab* (The Ultimate Aim on the History of Persians and Arabs, 9th cent. ?) contains a *Qiṣṣat al-Iskandar wa-‘ajā’ibu-hu wa-aḥādīthu-hu* (Story of Alexander and Marvelous Things and Tales about Him). Like other Arabic historians, the author places Alexander within the history of the Persian royal dynasty.

The episode of the Indian battle is not attested in the anonymous *Leyenda de Alejandro*, one of the three Western Arabic versions of the Alexander legend studied by García Gómez (1929).

three of them (M, U and N) we find statues of men, whereas the other two (Q and A) have elephants.

We can summarize the variation as follows:

| | Alexander lines up heated bronze statues of |
|--|---|
| Greek, Latin, Arabic U and N, Armenian | men |
| Armenian (oral) | 60.000 men |
| Syriac | 24.000 men and quadrupeds |
| Arabic Q and Ethiopic | 24.000 elephants |
| Arabic M | 24.000 men |
| Arabic A | elephants |

The inclusion of other – unpublished, unknown or lost – witnesses would probably further complicate the picture. This kind of variation in narrative details is hardly manageable with a stemmatic approach. The versions with 24.000 statues probably derive from a sub-archetype in which statues of both quadrupeds/elephants and men occurred. The Ethiopic Romance probably derives from an Arabic version very similar to Q (Doufekar-Aerts, 2010: 71). Far less clear is whether and how they derive from a story as told in the broken Syriac text that we read – with generic quadrupeds instead of specific elephants²⁰ – and whether and why elephants were dropped in or before Arabic M. Interestingly, two Arabic sources (U and N) are in line with the main-stream versions, which do not give the number and have no elephant statues.²¹ They may ultimately derive from Greek versions, by-

20 In the mind of the Syriac translator-narrator or the author of his *Vorlage*, the more generic “quadrupeds” may have appeared preferable to “elephants” alone, so as to mirror both elephants and wild beasts of Porus’ army.

21 U, where “we find passages which represent the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes quite closely” (Doufekar-Aerts, 2016: 200), would prove that an Arabic, perhaps partial, translation of the Syriac Romance was available by the end of the 8th century (Doufekar-Aerts, 2010: 45). As

passing the Syriac intermediary that is usually postulated as a stemmatic node between a lost Greek recension δ^* and the Arabic and Ethiopic Pseudo-Callisthenes traditions.²²

On the contrary, it is rather easy to imagine how these narrative details have sprouted up in the process of retelling and rewriting. Skillful narrators felt the need to stress the smartness and efficacy of Alexander's trickery. The shrewd general had to fight the high number of Indian combatants and the elephants and wild beasts lined up in Porus' army. The bronze statues had to be numerous, maybe twenty-four thousand or, as in the Armenian oral version, sixty thousand, perfectly equal to the number of elephants of Porus' army. Since there were both beasts and men in Porus' army, the statues had to represent men and quadrupeds, as in Syriac, or men and elephants, as in most sources that share this narrative innovation.

In the episode of Alexander in India, textual variation does not primarily derive from imperfect translation, mistakes or misunderstandings in the copying process, but it is part of the

far as narrative details of the Indian episode are concerned, however, U is one of the Arabic sources that is in line with the Greek recensions rather than with the Syriac Romance we read. Necessity and role of a Syriac intermediary need further systematic investigation.

22 See, e.g., the stemmata in Stoneman (2007: LXXXIV) and Doufikaer-Aerts (2010: 91). Doufikaer-Aerts (2016:190) claims that the Syriac translation of the Alexander Romance was "the primary source" for the whole 'oriental' tradition ("Middle East, North-Africa and the entire Islamic world") and singles out as desiderata for further research an internal comparison of the witnesses of δ^* (the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes, the 10th-century Latin *Nativitas et Victoria Alexandri Magni*, completed by Leo Archipresbyter, and the *Historia de Preliis*) and, in a stemmatic perspective, the comparison of the Syriac Pseudo-Callisthenes with the Armenian version that is believed to be "the best preserved exponent of the α^* recension" (Doufikaer-Aerts, 2016: 192). Stoneman (forthcoming) suggests that the innovations of the Syriac version of the *Romance* are due to the creativity of the Syriac copyists rather than to an alleged Greek version δ^* and focuses on two episodes of the *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodios and the *Legend*: the Water of Life and Gog and Magog. I am grateful to the author for sharing with me a previous version of the paper, as read at Mardin Artuklu University, 20-22 April 2012.

autopoietic potential of the text, not only at the macro-level of the text network, but also at the micro-level of narrative details. It is the narrative itself that creates textual variation. The seeds of the multitude and bestial nature of Porus' troops sprout and put forth narrative shoots in the various versions.

Quaedam nova et inaudita ars

The immense fortune of the Pseudo-Callisthenes as a text network is certainly linked to its literary quality as a text of entertainment. It was composed, transmitted and re-elaborated by storytellers – be they narrators, copyists or translators – who mastered the finest and most efficacious rhetorical and narrative techniques and were able to fully exploit the potential of the smallest narrative detail.²³ As such, entertainment appealed to all communities of bourgeois readers and not necessarily literate listeners and functioned as the formal framework or a virtual space within which ethnic and communal identities could be negotiated with the global culture associated with imperial authority.

As the characteristic fiction of the Levantine-Mediterranean tributary state – stretching from the Achaemenid Empire through Rome to the Ottoman regime – the ancient novel aided readers in negotiating the political, economic, and ethnological complexities of tributary rule, in particular its peculiar dialectic between the persistence of local communities under government protection, and their concomitant negation by the apparatus of the state (Selden, 2012: 49).

23 This inclination of translators and scribes to fully exploit the potential of the story and fill all narrative gaps recalls the midrashic *horror vacui* in interpreting and re-writing Biblical narratives and the encyclopedic collection of narrative reconstructions, sometimes competing with each other, in the Islamic *Stories of the Prophets*.

As a vehicle of a shared value system, the *Alexander Romance* triggered a process of globalization of Hellenistic culture in the East, paradoxically including the Greek conviction of their superiority over Eastern barbarians. The superiority of Greek “knowledge” – possibly perceived as a hypernym encompassing Hellenistic science and philosophy – was a globally accepted value, while a Greek trickery to win over an oriental king was simply a well-thought and skillfully told particular case of that general ideological assumption. In this kind of episode, global ideology and culture neatly prevail against glocal claims of any specific oriental culture. Eastern Christian – Byzantine, Syriac, Arabic or Ethiopic –, Arab Muslim, Persian, Indian readers and listeners are free to cheer on the Greek hero, celebrating their belonging to a cosmopolitan culture in which they share the Hellenistic heritage as part of their own “knowledge”.

Syriac apocalyptic motifs of the Alexander legend, probably mediated by Islamic sources, reached Central and Eastern Asia before the *Romance* (Boyle, 1979: 128–9).²⁴ The stories derived from the originally Christian legend, notably the narrative of Alexander – Dhū l-Qarnayn in the Qur’ān – who imprisoned the peoples of Gog and Magog behind a wall and a gate of brass and iron, had been familiar to the peoples of North- Eastern Asia for so long that their Christian origin had been forgotten and they became “part and parcel of the native tradition” (Boyle, 1974: 225).

The peoples of Gog and Magog as mentioned in Ezekiel 38–39 may be identified with the Cimmerians or, as Josephus did, the Scythians. The (7th-century?) Syriac *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*²⁵ and the *Christian Syriac Alexander*

24 Van Bladel (2007: 54–61) offers a clear and comprehensive overview of the Syriac (Christian) and Arabic (Islamic) sources on Alexander. At the present state of research, it is not clear “whether any Arabic version of the Alexander Romance was ever known without some content derived from the Syriac apocalypses” (van Bladel 2007: 56).

25 The text has been published by Reinink (1993). For a discussion of the dating and an ideological discussion of the contents of the Apocalypse, together with other related Syriac texts, see Reinink (1985, 1999, 2002 and 2003); on the dating and various Greek, Latin and Armenian translations, see Bonura (2016), with up-to-date bibliography.

*Legend*²⁶ typologize the Eurasian nomad populations as Gog and Magog barbarians that, provisionally liberated from the prison where Alexander the Great had enclosed them, will eventually be defeated at the end of time. Having been identified with the Scythians, the Alans and the Huns, and in fact with every successive invader from the North and North-East, Gog and Magog were in the thirteenth century, as was both logical and predictable, identified with the Mongols by a number of European authors (Boyle, 1979: 124).²⁷

Motifs from the Alexander saga found their way into the oral and written literatures of both Turks and Mongols. A badly damaged manuscript from Turfan (Xinjiang, China) has preserved a fragmentary short version of a Mongolian Sulqarnai (Dhū l-Qarnayn) romance. The text was edited by Poppe (1957) and Cleaves (1958). Unfortunately, it does not contain the Indian episode. Alexander's struggle against Porus, instead, has an interesting, reversed echo in a series of stories that the Franciscan Giovanni da Pian del Carpine (1185 c.ca-1252) collected from Hungarian and Russian informants (Lungarotti, 1989: 84) or directly from Mongol informants (Boyle, 1974: 222 and 1979: 128). Four years after the Mongol invasion of Eastern Europe, Giovanni was sent as a legate of Pope Innocent the IV to open diplomatic contacts with the Mongols and his report of the journey, known as *Historia Mongalorum*, is the earliest European account of Mongol customs and the first attempt to narrate their history.

Two recensions of the report are known. The second recension seems to have been revised, among other reasons, in reaction to

26 The Pseudo-Methodius and the *Christian Syriac Alexander Legend* (edited by Budge 1889 as a sequel of the Alexander Romance) were influential texts that contribute along with Pseudo-Callisthenes as significant nodes in the macro-text network of the Alexander saga. Part III of Arabic Q and the Ethiopic Romance – as already noted by Weymann (1901) – incorporate into the Pseudo-Callisthenes tradition part of the Syriac Legend, including the building of the wall against Gog and Magog (Doufekar-Aerts, 2010: 60).

27 For an overview of European sources on the Mongols and, more generally, on the contacts between Europe and the Mongols in 12th-13th centuries, see Borbone (2008: 37–40).

critics who had found too many fabulous and marvelous details in the first recension (Lungarotti, 1989). In fact, especially in chapter V, where the *Historia* tells how Genghis Khan, founder of the Mongol Empire, fought all neighboring peoples and subjected the Tartars, the narrative rather naively includes wonderful episodes, encounters with wild mountain men, dumb men deprived of their knee joints, dog-men, etc. As an Alexander *redivivus*, Genghis Khan fights against a “people of the Sun” that can be easily compared with the cave-dwellers variously mentioned and described in the Syriac Legend, the Qur’ān, Pseudo-Methodius and other Alexander-related sources (Boyle, 1974: 222).

Giovanni da Pian del Carpine’s informants tell Mongol history copiously drawing narrative materials from the Alexander legend and it is remarkable that the Italian friar does not seem to be aware of this, as if stories of this kind were new and unknown to the Western world (Lungarotti, 1989: 84). The theme of the pretended novelty of the narrative is explicit in the informants’ account of the Indian campaign of Genghis Khan’s second son, i.e. presumably Ögedei Khan. We read it in the English translation facing the Latin text of the first recension, Chap. V, Par. 17.

When they reached Greater India, which the apostle Thomas converted, the king of the country, who is always called Prester John, although he was not well prepared, immediately sent an army against them which used a new and unheard-of device against the Tartars. They organized a special force of three thousand warriors carrying on the front of their saddles statues of iron or bronze containing live fire in their hollow interior, and before the Tartars’ arrows could reach them they began to shoot fire against them, by blowing it with bellows which they carried on either side of the saddle under both thighs. After the fire they began to shoot arrows and in this way the Tartar army was put in disorder. Some burned, others wounded, they took to flight, and the pursuing Indians felled many and ejected the others from their country, so that the Tartars never returned to India (Skelton-Marston-Painter, 1995: 68).²⁸

28 The Latin text of this episode (Chap. V, Par. 12) as told in the second recension can be found in Menestò (1989: 258–9; Italian transl. by Lungarotti, *ibidem*: 354).

Whoever the informants of Giovanni da Pian del Carpine were, their account is not very favorable to Genghis Khan's son. In keeping with the method and the same type of sources of the whole chapter, they use materials from the Alexander legend, in this specific case from the Pseudo-Callisthenes, but they reverse the roles of the actants. Like Alexander who was scared before Porus' army, the Indians, led by Prester John their king, are initially not well prepared to fight against the Tartars, a constitutive part of the Mongol army since Genghis Khan's time. They devise then against the Tartars a trickery very similar to that used against them by the wise Alexander, their enemy in the Pseudo-Callisthenes. They organize a gunnery troop of cavalry with iron or bronze statues that, filled with fire, function as fire weapons. Despite what Giovanni writes in his report or his informants pretend – *fecerunt quandam novam et inauditam artem contra Tartaros*, the device of hot burning statues is all but new and unheard of. The narrator employs and refines Alexander's stratagem, so as to account for a battle in which the Mongol archery is easily defeated by the Indian improvised artillery.

The insistence on warfare details and possible weak points of the Mongol army answers to needs and expectations of the European readers of the *Historia*, shocked by the recent invasions from the Barbarian East, frightened by the Mongol peril and eager to find military and cultural tactics to contrast it.

The generative potential of the Alexander text network appears not only in the internal, autopoietic proliferation of narrative details and variants, but also in its nonchalant re-use by much later narrators as a repertoire and depository of narrative materials. Probably oral sources of the *Historia Mongolarum* first present Genghis Khan as a reborn Alexander who fights with mixed fortunes against wonderful creatures, moving them from the end of times to the utmost imagined borders of the earth. In an almost ironic reversal, they expand then on the Pseudo-Callisthenes' episode of Alexander in India to depict the heir of Genghis Khan as an ignorant oriental king defeated by the Indians, as if the latter had learnt the lesson of the Greek "knowledge" in Alexander's time.

Alexander's trickery of the troop of statues has become a *topos* that can be employed as a new and unheard of narrative device in Eastern oral history and Western historiography. The Alexander legend enters new rhetorical and ideological webs as a ready-to-use framework for new scenarios of confrontation between West and East, knowledge and ignorance, otherness and self-identity, fear and barbarian bestiality, a local threatened citadel and imperial apocalyptic forces. Barely recognizable and more or less consciously reversed narrative nodes tighten together the grandiose text network of the Alexander saga and texts such as the *Historia Mongalorum*, whose author falls into the trap of its charming web, seemingly unaware of the ultimate sources he is using.²⁹

29 Research for the present paper was financed by the Department of Humanities, University of Turin. In the academic year 2013-2014, Arabic and Syriac texts of the Alexander saga were read in the courses of Arabic Literature (dr. Francesca Bellino) and Semitic Philology (myself). I wish to express my gratitude to my colleague and students for their stimulating comments on texts and topics we dealt with in class and in joint sessions.

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