

1 | Introduction

Formation and Diffusion of the Alexander Legend

RICHARD STONEMAN

Alexander III (the Great) was born in the Macedonian city of Pella in the north of the Greek peninsula in 356 BC. Following the assassination of his father, Philip II of Macedon, in 336, he took up the cause of an attack on the Persian Empire, which his father was planning, and in spring 334 crossed the Hellespont into Persian territory with an army of at least 30,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry. In the course of the next eleven years he took control of all parts of the Persian Empire, from Egypt eastwards; when the reigning Great King, Darius III, was assassinated by two of his nobles in summer 330, Alexander succeeded him as 'King of Asia'. Not content with this defeat of his rival, Alexander continued his march into Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, first to suppress Persian pretenders and then to reclaim the provinces of Bactria and Sind which had been part of the empire of Darius I but had since slipped from Persian control. A confrontation with an Indian local ruler, Porus, on the river Hyphasis (Jhelum) in spring 326 led to the reinstatement of the latter as a vassal ruler. But soon after this the army expressed discontent with the never-ending march to the end of the world, as the monsoon season made camp and fighting conditions insupportable. In November 326 Alexander announced a retreat, and his fleet sailed down the river Indus to the outer Ocean, arriving at Patala (Hyderabad) some six months later in mid-325. A challenging march through the desert of Gedrosia (Baluchistan) to return to Susa and thence Babylon killed a large portion of his army, but eventually the remnant were reunited with the fleet under Nearchus at Carmania (Kerman). Alexander's closest friend, Hephaestion, died at Ecbatana (Hamadan) in autumn 324; in spring 323 Alexander entered Babylon, which was to be the capital of his empire. But he was taken ill and died suddenly on 10 June 323. Rumours of poison were rife, but the cause was probably cholera, typhus or a related marsh-borne disease, exacerbated in a constitution weakened by wounds and grief.¹

¹ There are many biographies of Alexander. A recent classic is Lane Fox 1973, while the standard scholarly treatment is Bosworth 1988. Stoneman 2004 is a brief introductory sketch.

This short and dazzling career quickly became the material for legends as well as historical accounts. In this introduction I aim to sketch the main lines of Alexander's impact in Greek and Roman antiquity, and to set the scene for the developments more fully explored by the other contributors. I have made no attempt to provide complete bibliographical references for this sketch, since literature is cited more fully by the individual contributors. (See also the bibliography in Stoneman 2008). Throughout the two millennia under consideration the main focus has to be on texts and works of art; if Alexander was also bruited upon the tongues of men (as passing references in Shakespeare, for example, suggest) this is scarcely or rarely recoverable by historians in any detail.

Alexander himself had been keen to create his own image and legend by various actions including his visit to the tomb of Achilles at Troy, his consultation of the oracle of Ammon at Siwa in Egypt, where he was hailed as the son of the god, and the creation of a story that even Heracles had failed to conquer the Sogdian rock as he had done. Historians accompanied him to record his achievements, including Callisthenes, who wrote of how the sea drew back to allow his army to pass at Phaselis, but Callisthenes was later implicated in a plot against the king's life and was executed, or died in prison. Alexander was strict in his choice of artists to portray him: Apelles in painting and Lysippus in sculpture. Most painting is lost, though Apelles became a figure of legend in his own right, celebrated in baroque art and in John Lyly's play *Campaspe* (see also Stoneman, Chapter 15 in this volume). The depiction of Alexander in ancient art is surveyed by Olga Palagia (Chapter 3), who shows how widely diffused his image became, in a way that parallels his repeated appearances in literature.

Alexander's physical remains also became a focus of veneration, memory and cult, after his general Ptolemy secured control of his funereal catafalque and brought it to Memphis, later transferring the body to Alexandria, the city Alexander founded in 331, which remains his greatest monument. Dorothy Thompson (Chapter 2) shows how central the memory of Alexander was to the Ptolemaic kings who ruled Egypt, and how his legends, many of which originated there, infiltrated Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions.

In the generation or two after Alexander's death, the legends multiplied rapidly, and came together in the Greek *Alexander Romance* which in medieval times was falsely attributed to Callisthenes. The core of this work was formed in the reign of Ptolemy I and II of Egypt, but scholars disagree whether the earliest recension as we have it was fully formed at this period or whether it was composed some 600 years later (before 330, when

it was translated into Latin). It combines different kinds of text – Hellenistic biography, a notably unreliable historical framework, ‘limping’ iambic verse narrative, *chreiai* or clever sayings of the protagonist who appears as more of a trickster than a hero, an Egyptian novella based on the theological doctrine that the pharaoh is the son of Ammon, a detailed account of the founding of Alexandria with much circumstantial detail, a quasi-Utopian description of the life of the Brahmins, as well as an interview with these philosophers which sets up a contrast of the meditative and active lives. These disparate elements were combined, perhaps in Hellenistic Alexandria, into what may be the world’s first novel.²

Despite the imaginative appeal of this narrative, the figure of Alexander was not often to the fore in the wars of his Hellenistic successors. Seleucus, who became king in Babylon and ruled the largest portion of Alexander’s empire, may have devised a romance of his own life with notable similarities to the *Alexander Romance*,³ Ptolemy was eager to secure possession of Alexander’s body in his new capital of Alexandria, which Alexander had founded, while a spurious ‘Will of Alexander’ circulated which had the primary purpose of supporting Ptolemy’s claims;⁴ but later Hellenistic kings did not make much of Alexander as a model, except for Philip V, and later Mithradates VI of Pontus.⁵ It was in Rome that Alexander came to figure prominently as an example and model of military prowess.⁶ The first general to trade on the connection seems to have been Scipio Aemilianus, about whom a story circulated that he had, like Alexander, been sired by a serpent.⁷

In Greek writing Alexander had become not just King of Asia but, like the Persian kings, ‘Great King’. The playwright Plautus in the second century BC is the first to refer to him simply as ‘Alexander magnus’, Alexander the Great. The title was adopted in the late first century BC by Pompey, who styled himself Pompeius magnus, brushed his hair like Alexander’s, and wore a cloak that he claimed had been Alexander’s. Mark Antony also saw Alexander as a model as he attempted to portray himself as a Dionysiac ruler of the East. After the Civil Wars were over, several emperors adopted Alexander symbolism to emphasise their supreme position in Rome, the first of these being Augustus.

² I tried to imagine the circumstances of its composition in Stoneman 2009. On its ramifications in succeeding millennia see Stoneman 2008, and on the Greek and Latin base texts see Stoneman 2011.

³ Fraser 1996; Ogden 2017. ⁴ Bosworth 2000; for another view see Heckel 1988.

⁵ Bohm 1989; on Mithradates see Mayor 2010. ⁶ Spencer 2002; Peltonen 2019.

⁷ Ogden 2009.

Alexander was very frequently used as an exemplum for rhetorical and other purposes. The historian Livy (9. 18.8–19) insisted that if Alexander had encountered Romans he would not have had such an easy time of conquering the world. So Alexander was both a model to emulate and one to prove the superiority of the Romans, an approach to his achievement that is found also in the late antique imperial panegyrics.⁸ Among Greek writers of the Roman Empire Alexander generally symbolised the glorious past now overshadowed by Roman power, while Latin writers frequently concentrated on the king's vices of anger, drunkenness and cruelty to make various philosophical points.⁹

Some emperors, notably Trajan, who planned an Eastern campaign, and Caracalla, liked to model themselves on Alexander. It is possible that the *Alexander Romance* first came to prominence in this period: perhaps there was even a 'Caracallan recension' of the work. It seems that both Plutarch and Philostratus were aware of stories that we now know from the *Romance*. But the approach of such 'second sophistic' writers to Alexander was very different from that of the *Romance*; they were not interested in fabulous tales and quirky anecdotes, but in Alexander as a heroic example of the Hellenism that had reached its peak 600 years before. Sulochana Asirvatham (Chapter 4) explores this 'Trajanic moment' in detail, and whets the appetite for her forthcoming book.

The *Romance*, as previously mentioned, was translated into Latin shortly before AD 330 by Julius Valerius Alexander Polemius, probably the same man as Flavius Polemius, consul in AD 338. The *terminus ante quem* is assured by the reference to Rome as *domina omnium gentium*, which could not have been said after the foundation of Constantinople. This work is written in an elaborate Latin which makes use of many literary allusions, and represents an attempt to raise the fabulous history of Alexander to a higher cultural level than the miscellany of folktale and fancy that was the Greek *Romance*. Several other works about Alexander appeared in the early fourth century.¹⁰ The most significant is the *Itinerarium Alexandri Magni*, addressed to the emperor Constantius on the occasion of his departure for an Eastern campaign, and dated to the 340s. It is possible that this book is also the work of Julius Valerius, which might explain why it is rather short on usable geographical information (since Julius could not have acquired any of that from the *Romance*!).¹¹ Another work is the *Epitoma rerum gestarum Alexandri*, probably of the fourth or fifth century. Unlike the

⁸ Peltonen 2019, 72–3. ⁹ Stoneman 2003b. ¹⁰ Stoneman 1999.

¹¹ Lane Fox 1997. See the edition by Tabacco 2000.

Itinerary, it is a historical ‘breviary’ of the kind produced by several authors at this period. It makes use of many sensational elements of Alexander’s adventures, perhaps going back to Clitarchus, and presents a generally favourable view of the hero. The work was combined in the Metz Codex (the only MS, destroyed by bombing in World War II) with a second work, *Liber de morte Alexandri testamentoque eius*, which is based on a work that appeared in all versions of the Greek *Romance* and Julius Valerius. The two works may be by the same author; at any rate they are the products of a period (the late fourth century) which saw increasing attention to Alexander as a religious emblem. This is seen in the series of medallions or contorniates representing Alexander as New Dionysus: such talismans were attacked by the Christian author John Chrysostom (347–407). The contemporary mosaic from Souéidié-Baalbek portraying the birth of Alexander (Figure 1.1) seems intended as a kind of nativity scene to counteract the similar portrayals of the upstart divinity of the Christians. Christian Djurslev (Chapter 5) investigates the very frequent appearances of Alexander in Christian literature, where familiar stories are reinterpreted to bolster Christian positions and to demonstrate their equal claims to the authority of antiquity.

Ory Amitay (Chapter 6) studies a parallel development in the early centuries AD among Jewish writers. The story of Alexander’s visit to Jerusalem, for which a foretelling was found in the Book of Daniel, was recounted in Greek by Josephus and thus found a place in Christian writings too. The story has generally been regarded as fiction though Ben Shahr (2018) argues that Alexander probably did visit the city. Alexander was also regarded as a benefactor of the Jewish community of Alexandria, while Syriac apocalyptic texts about Alexander and other anecdotes from the *Romance* tradition entered the Talmud and formed the basis of a highly individual early Hebrew *Romance*. (Later Hebrew *Romances* are derived from the medieval Latin *Historia de Proeliis*: on which see later in this chapter.)

Two very different views of Alexander are purveyed by Orosius (early fifth century), the pupil of St Augustine, who treats Alexander and his father, Philip, as bloodthirsty tyrants, and by Fulgentius (fifth–sixth centuries), who is the first to use material from the *Romance in extenso* in his *de aetatibus mundi et hominis*. Both works were quite well known in the Middle Ages, and alongside them were two other strands, one deriving from the Latin *Letter to Aristotle about India* and the other based on the story of Alexander’s encounter with the naked philosophers of India. The former was originally written in Greek, but that

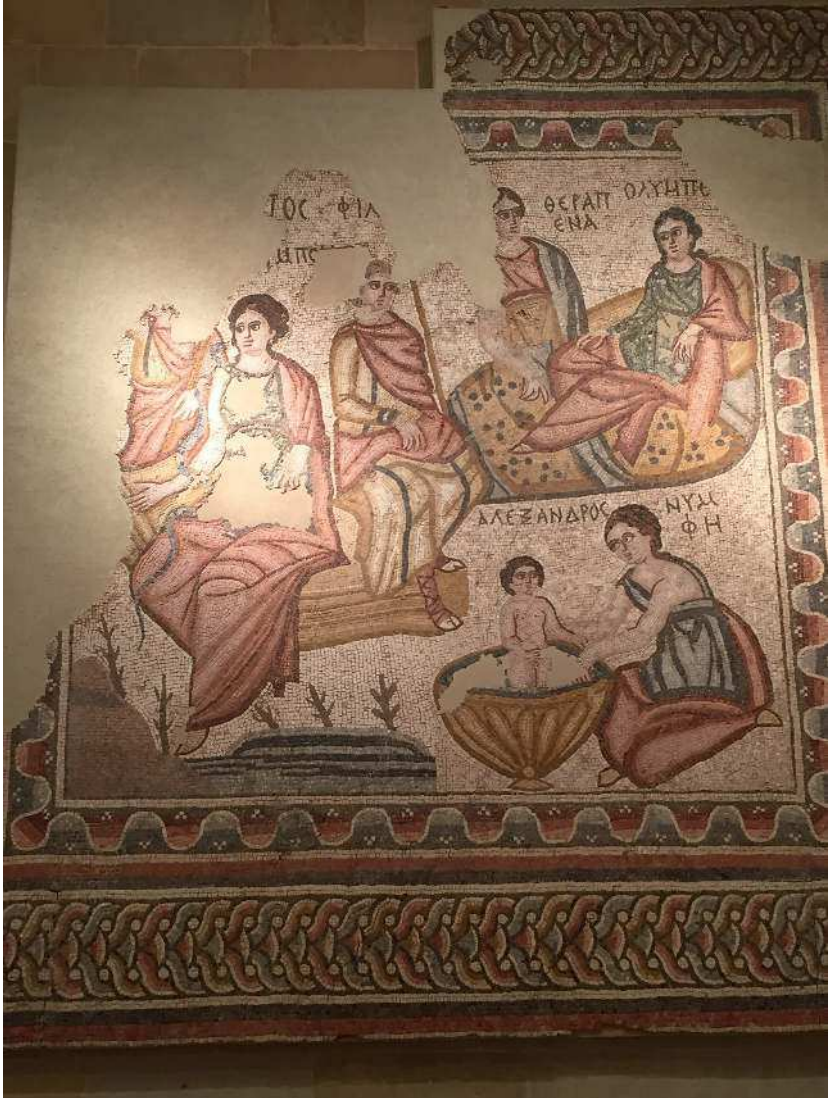


Figure 1.1 Mosaic from Souéidié-Baalbek, representing the nativity of Alexander the Great. Second century AD.

version only survives in mutilated form. The Latin *Letter* was copied many times from the ninth century onwards and translated into many languages, including the Old English version found in the Beowulf manuscript. Almost the first work of English literature is thus an Alexander text. The encounter with the naked philosophers was developed into a set-piece exchange of letters between Alexander and their



Figure 1.2 'Contorniate' medallion representing Alexander the Great. Fourth century AD.

leader, Dindimus, before the eighth century. The *Romance* itself was forgotten until a copy of the Greek original was discovered in Constantinople by Leo the Archpriest of Naples on a diplomatic mission in the tenth century. His translation is included in a MS now in the cathedral library in Bamberg, which also includes the *Letter* and the *Correspondence*. Leo's translation became the basis of the immensely successful expanded Latin version known as the *Historia de Proeliis*, which exists in three recensions dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries.¹²

The *Historia* made Alexander a household name throughout the Middle Ages. Beautifully illustrated MSS of the *Historia* were produced, which fed into the heroisation of Alexander as an ideal ruler, a crusader against the Eastern foe, and a type of everyman with immortal longings. Vernacular translations and developments appeared in English, German, French and other languages, notable among which is the long cycle culminating in the French *Roman d'Alexandre*. (It is estimated that the beautiful MS of the latter, Bodley 264, would have cost as much as a chapel to produce.) He was

¹² See briefly Stoneman 2008, 199–216.

revered as one of The Nine Worthies who encapsulated courtly and chivalric culture. He appears in church architecture in many depictions of his aerial flight, and also in works of wisdom literature such as the *Secretum Secretorum*. Aspects of the medieval Alexander are explored by Maud Pérez-Simon (Chapter 7) and Mark Cruse (Chapter 8), as well as Susana Torres-Prieto (Chapter 9). The more hostile tradition, based on Orosius, is tracked through various texts by Charles Russell Stone in his book *From Tyrant to Philosopher-King*.¹³

Besides these prose treatments, Alexander became the subject of two epic poems in the Middle Ages. The poem of Quilichinus of Spoleto (1236) is a versification of the third recension of the *Historia*, while the *Alexandreis* of Walter of Châtillon (probably completed in 1182) is a magnificent epic in the Virgilian style, complete with divine apparatus and a scene in Hell where the gods plot Alexander's poisoning. The narrative is heavily based on the *History* of Q. Curtius Rufus (of which there are more than 100 medieval MSS, going back to a ninth century archetype) and presents Alexander as a heroic figure whose career is forwarded by Fortune but who fails to become a Messiah: 'a five-foot grave suffices for a man who had previously found the whole world insufficient' (X. 448–50). That there is no treatment of these epic poems in this volume is a matter for regret: though good groundwork has been done, there is a wide scope here for further research and critical analysis.¹⁴

The Greek tradition on Alexander developed on similar but separate lines from the Latin West. Anthony Kaldellis (Chapter 10) traces this development from the foundation of Constantinople in 330 to its fall in 1453. The Greek Alexander is generally a heroic figure, a model for a number of Byzantine emperors, and his story is purveyed in long texts, in both prose and verse, as well as in cameo appearances in texts of other kinds. The final flowering of this tradition comes in a work beyond Kaldellis' chronological scope, the *Phyllada tou Megalexandrou*, published in Venice in 1680. In this text the explorer, sage and noble king conquers the whole world only to meet the common end of mortals, so that the author concludes with an evocation of 'Solomon's' words, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' Again the grave is all that remains for one for whom the whole world was not enough, and the message is an explicitly Christian one.

¹³ Stone 2013.

¹⁴ For a brief discussion see Cruse (Chapter 8). There is a reliable edition of Walter by Marvin L. Colker and a good translation with introduction by R. Telfryn Pritchard. Quilichinus was edited by W. Kirsch (1971).

Meanwhile in the East Alexander's story was pursuing a separate trajectory. One version of the Greek *Romance* was translated into Armenian in the fifth century and another into Syriac in the sixth. Through the latter it became known to the Arabs and also to the Persians. As a conqueror of Persia, Alexander became a fixture in the Persian tradition. Though perceived in one aspect as a destroyer and an enemy of the Zoroastrian religion, he was also by conquest a legitimate king of Persia and thus had to be accorded a place in the epic tradition of the succession of kings. This tradition first appears in two works of the eleventh century AD, the *Darabnameh* of Tarsusi and the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi. Both drew on the Syriac version of the *Romance* (whether via a Pahlavi version is disputed) but changed Alexander's genealogy to make him the son of Philip and a Persian princess, thus the half-brother of Darius III (Dara), whom he supplanted. Alexander – Iskandar in Persian – is a heroic king who even becomes a prophet of God and visits the Ka'aba in Mecca in Ferdowsi. In Tarsusi he is accompanied on his travels by several Greek sages, notably Plato; he devotes much of his time to intellectual investigations while his victories are won by his feisty wife Burandukht. Tarsusi's picaresque tale is extravagant and often extremely funny.¹⁵ Haila Manteghi (Chapter 12) studies the ramifications of the royal Alexander in Persian literature, while my chapter on Amir Khusraw (Chapter 13) studies a later imagining of the connection with Plato in a text which makes Alexander the central figure of a 'mirror for princes'.

The genesis of the Arabic tradition on Alexander must go back to Ghassanid times when Syriac learning reached the Arabian peninsula. Syriac texts made Alexander into an apocalyptic figure who saves the world from the forces of evil.¹⁶ In this aspect he features under the name of Dhu'l-qarnain (Two-Horned One) in Sura 18 of the Qur'an. Under this name he also appears in several extensive Arabic romances which bear some relation to the Greek *Romance* but add immense material: these have been effectively studied and presented by Z. David Zuwiyya.¹⁷ The perennial question has been whether there was ever an Arabic translation of the Greek *Romance*, since the latter provided the structure of the historians' accounts. Faustina Doufikar-Aerts has come as close as anyone to determining an answer in her book *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, but this is only one strand of the Arabic Alexander.¹⁸ Doufikar-Aerts (Chapter 14) builds

¹⁵ I especially like the visit to a magic sweet shop, where the doors lock automatically when Alexander tries to steal some sweets.

¹⁶ Stoneman 2017. ¹⁷ Zuwiyya 2001.

¹⁸ Doufikar-Aerts 2010; also my sketchy treatment, Stoneman 2003a.

on her earlier researches to construct a broader picture of the meanings of Alexander in the Arabic tradition, as prophet, sage (he was a pupil of Aristotle), explorer and scientist.

While Alexander remained and remains a name to conjure with in the Islamic world as far east as Afghanistan, in the West the Alexander of the *Romance* reaches his apogee in the magnificent MSS of the *Roman d'Alexandre*, and then with the invention of printing goes into a decline. The *Historia* was printed more than once, as was Quilichinus' poem, but the wider circulation of other sources, notably Q. Curtius, induced a rather different approach to the conqueror in the early modern period. I have traced some of this background in an article about Samuel Daniel's *Philotas* and the *History of the World* of Walter Raleigh, where the rationalist and 'philosophical' hostile treatment of Seneca begins to take hold from Erasmus onwards.¹⁹ My second contribution in this volume (Chapter 15) explores the most elaborate treatment of Alexander in Jacobean drama. In William Alexander's plays, a medieval sense of mutability is allied to a rather profound historical expertise: both in this author and in Raleigh, a sense of the past as an object of research begins to come to the fore.

But the use of Alexander as a figure of drama did not have to be closely allied to history, as Jon Solomon (Chapter 16) shows in his work on Alexander in opera. The conquest of India and the romance with Roxane were the most popular subjects for the Alexander operas of the eighteenth century, while the themes of magnanimity and destructive anger, deriving from the Curtian treatment of the hero with an admixture of Seneca, are the mainsprings of the plots. While these are works of entertainment in which the music is to the fore, a simple conception of 'heroism' continues to pervade these works, though that drops away after the French Revolution.

The 'heroic' Alexander continues, however, to be the dominant presentation in the historians of eighteenth-century England, Germany and France, which are discussed by Pierre Briant (Chapter 17). He shows how the conception of Alexander as a strong, good king combined with the view of him as a reformer and bearer of civilisation who was able to take on the decadent East and improve it both economically and politically. The view of Alexander as a champion of the West against the decadent East, which is usually associated with the work of Johann Gustav Droysen, was thus emerging more than a century before him.

This Alexander is also the theme of Josef Wiesehöfer's contribution (Chapter 18), in which he shows how the ideal king was present even in

¹⁹ Stoneman 2013.