CHAPTER TWO

ALEXANDER AND GOG AND MAGOG IN EASTERN CHRISTIAN SOURCES

In the Eastern part of the Roman Empire Gog and Magog continued to haunt the Christian communities. Eastern Christianity witnessed so many upheavals that the apocalyptic figures of Gog and Magog were continuously evoked in the minds of the people. The tendency of associating actual events with alleged activities of barbarians became concrete when the Huns in 395 and 396 passed through the Darial defile and invaded Northern Mesopotamia and Syria. The regions suffered much from the horse-riding attackers from the north similar to the Biblical figures of Gog and Magog. A new element came to be attached to the Gog and Magog tradition, namely that of a superhuman protector of civilisation. It was found in the overpowering figure of Alexander the Great. With God’s help he was to build a barrier that should shut off the apocalyptic nations until the time fixed by God Himself. Only at God’s signal could they get loose and ravage the earth before they would be finally destroyed.

Apocalyptic expectations and the biblical motif merged into a new concept in which Alexander occupies the central place. Already in the Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander had become an almost mythical hero performing numerous deeds which brought him to the farthest ends of the world. It is this portrayal of Alexander, which is now grafting upon the apocalyptic ideas about Gog and Magog. The historical figure of Alexander and the Gog and Magog motif began probably to be combined in apocalyptic expectations of Syrian Christians in Northern Mesopotamia in the late 4th or early 5th century.

1. The Syriac Alexander Romance

The famous Greek Alexander Romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, an eminent piece of classical popular fiction, was decisive in transforming the historic conqueror into a superhuman being. The Romance is of no historical value, but its exotic tales of Alexander’s exploits
which supplemented much the imagination made it a most popular book in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages.

The Greek version of the Romance seems to have received its literary form in Alexandria at the end of the 3rd century. The text became soon very popular and was rewritten and adapted to the different readers' cultural or national environment. The Romance was spread in numerous versions and languages to the East and to the West. The oldest testimonies of the Romance are the Latin (4th c.) and Armenian version (5th c.). The Syriac tradition is one of the most interesting versions of the many existing oriental redactions of the Romance. It dates from the 7th century and goes back on a quite similar Vorlage of the Greek recensio vetusta (α). The Syrian redactor, probably an East Syrian Christian, added a certain number of until then unknown episodes to the text. The episode of Alexander’s building a wall against Gog and Magog, however, is not found in the oldest Greek, Latin, Armenian and Syriac versions of the Romance. Though the Alexander Romance was decisive for the spreading of the new and supernatural image of Alexander the king in East and West, the barrier episode has not its origin in this text. The fusion of the motif of Alexander’s barrier with the Biblical tradition of the apocalyptic peoples Gog and Magog appears in fact for the first time in the so called Syriac Alexander Legend. This text is a short appendix attached to Syriac manuscripts of the Alexander Romance.

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