CHAPTER FOUR

THE ALEXANDER ROMANCE IN THE ARABIC TRADITION

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INTRODUCTION

Alexander’s story permeated many genres of medieval Arabic literature including history, geography, wisdom literature, Quranic exegesis, and stories of the prophets. For some he was considered nabī [prophet], while for others he was wali Allah [friend of God]. They called him Dhulqarnayn—the Two-Horned—and al-Iskandar. Some authors joined the two figures while others treated them separately. Al-Ṭabarî, a ninth-century author, reflects the dichotomy surrounding the Macedonian conqueror by narrating Dhulqarnayn’s life and deeds in his Tafsîr, an exegetical study of the Quran, and Alexander’s story in his Tâ’rikh [annales], an historical work. News of Alexander may have reached Arabia from the Syriac as early as 514 A.D.¹ and circulated orally in Mecca and Medina before the revelation of the Quran since it is included in sura 18:83–98. Fahd says that a second version of the Alexander romance was translated directly from Pehlevi into Arabic and used by the early historians (30). Given the nature of the Quranic account, it was probably not Quintus Curtius, Arrian, or Plutarch who contributed to the original Arabian conception of Alexander, but rather the legendary material that spawned from the Alexander romance. With the expansion of the Islamic empire, Arabic authors gathered legends concerning Alexander from Persia in the east to al-Andalus in the west and blended them with material from the Pseudo-Callisthenes (PC). As part of the adoption process,

¹ A.R. Nykl (ed.), Rekontamiento del rrey Alisandre, in Revue Hispanique 77 (1929), pp. 444–445. See also K.F. Weymann, Die aethiopische und arabische Übersetzung des Pseudo-Callisthenes (Kirchain, 2001), pp. 64–65. On the other hand, F. Corriente says that the translations from the Syriac into Arabic must have occurred between the seventh and eighth centuries. See “Dos elementos folklóricos comunes en la versión etíope de la leyenda de Alejandro y la literatura árabe.” Al-Andalus 32 (1967), p. 225.
Western-Arabic authors gave Alexander a lineage tying him to Spain or North Africa, while an Arab author of Persian origin like al-Ṭabarī claimed he was the son of King Darius.²

This essay makes observations on the authorship, dating, language, and theme of a group of representative texts from the medieval Arabic Alexander tradition. In the second part of the essay, we highlight the episodes that define the Arabic Alexander tradition. Where appropriate we point out important distinctions between the numerous versions as well as their commonalities.

The Quran

The Muslim holy book transmits a fragmentary version of Alexander’s story in the sura titled Al-Kahf [The Cave] (18:83–98).³ He is called Dhulqarnayn, a nickname for which the most diverse explanations have been invented. In light of the beginning episodes in the PC, it seems most reasonable that the name ‘Two-Horned’ is attributable to his relationship with the two-horned Egyptian god, Amon,⁴ although the Arab texts seem to prefer to attribute the nickname to his arrival in the lands of sunrise and sunset.⁵ In the aftermath of Muhammad’s revelation and with the first attempts to understand the allusive words

² For his Andalusian origin see I. Friedlaender, Die Chadhirlegende und der Alexanderroman, (Leipzig, 1913), p. 276; for his Persian origin see al-Ṭabarī below.
⁵ See, for example, Nykl (ed.), Rrek.: “¿Por que se lombra [i.e., nombra] a-Dzu-l-qarneini? Disso: Rrekontome Hisam, hijo de Ka’bi, disso: ke tenia dos kuernos ke ligaba sobrellos sus tokas. Disso: enpero lonbrolo Allah a-Dzu-l-qarneini porkel llego a los kabos de la tierra, a sol saliente i-a sol poniente” (475). García Gómez gives eleven reasons that Arabic authors offer for his nickname in Un texto árabe occidental de la leyenda de Alejandro Magno, (Madrid, 1929), p. xlviii, n. 1. In Mīrāt al-zamān, Ibn al-Jawzī gives twelve reasons for the nickname (f. 77v) each according to a different authority. An excellent study of Alexander’s nickname is A.R. Anderson, “Alexander’s Horns,” TPAPA 58 (1927), 100–122.