Hellenic and Hebraic versions of the Alexander romance tell the story of Alexander’s relationship to Egypt twice. At the opening, both claim that Alexander was not the son of Phillip II of Macedon, but rather the adulterous offspring of Phillip’s Greek queen, Olympias, and Nectanebus, the last indigenous pharaoh of Egypt. Subsequently, once Alexander has come of age, both versions relate that he marched his troops from Greece, down the coast of Palestine where he paid reverence to YHVH in his ascent to Jerusalem, before crossing at Pelusium over into Egypt. Here he freed the Two Lands from Persian occupation and—acclaimed by the oracle of Zeus-Amon at Siwah—assumed his father’s throne as pharaoh. Following Egyptian protocol, moreover, he founded a new capital, “Alexandria by Egypt”—a city that effectively linked the commerce of the Nile Valley with trade in the Aegean, and in which he explicitly invited Egyptians, Greeks, and Palestinians to settle. Thereafter, Alexander set forth on the king of Egypt’s traditional campaign to “smite the Asiatics,” where his victories proved greater than those of any pharaoh who had come before him: not only did he defeat Darius, King of Kings; he subjugated the entire Persian empire from the Bosporus to Bactria—with one refractory domain. In Gedrosia, on the southeastern edge of the Iranian plateau, the desert hills
brought him closer than any of his forebears to absolute defeat: thus, having first realized Egypt’s politico-religious ambitions in the East, his campaign ultimately faltered on the brink of ruin, in lands which, according to the traditional Egyptian vision of the world, were the province of Seth, the god of confusion.

Egyptian literary traditions concerning Alexander have come down to us in pieces. A Coptic version of the Alexander romance survives in a unique codex from the White Monastery at Sohaj, now divided between Paris, London, Moscow, and Berlin.1 Moreover, an earlier Egyptian redaction of this material in Demotic—no longer extant but legible through later Greek translation—circulated in Egypt perhaps as early as 275 B.C.: it evidently included the Nectanebus story, as well as an account of Alexandria’s foundation. As befits Alexander’s mixed heritage, moreover, the redactor of the Coptic romance has drawn not only on indigenous Egyptian material, but intertwined this with Hellenic and Palestinian traditions too.

Originally a codex of some 220 pages and roughly 37 chapters, nine manuscript folios survive, in addition to one unattached fragment whose relationship to the narrative remains uncertain. Half of the six surviving episodes are familiar from other recensions of the romance: Alexander’s sojourn to the streams of Paradise on the borders of the Land of Darkness [frag. 7]; his conversation with the Brahmins [frag. 8]; and his poisoning at Babylon [frag. 9]. The remaining three, however, as well as many details of the unattached fragment, find no parallel in redactions of the Alexander romance outside Egypt: one episode, evidently set in Elam, records a conversation between Alexander—disguised as his own messenger—with “Eleazar, the old geezer of the Persians” [frag. 1], subsequent to which Alexander’s forces take possession of the city [frag. 2]; in another, Selpharios composes his Last Will and Testament, in which he commits his son to Alexander’s care [frag. 6]. The third—by far the longest extant portion of the narrative—concerns Alexander’s escape from Chaos in Gedrosia (frags. 3–5), an episode not only central to the worldview of the Coptic romance as a whole, but whose remains prove extensive enough to provide us with a clear picture of the Egyptian redactor’s major interests and his working methods.

1 Critical Edition: O. von Lemm, Der Alexanderroman bei den Kopten (St. Petersburg, 1903).