ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND ISKANDER DHU’L-QARNAYN: MEMORY, MYTH AND REPRESENTATION OF A CONQUEROR FROM IRAN TO SOUTH EAST ASIA THROUGH THE EYES OF TRAVEL LITERATURE

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Introduction

At the beginning of the first explorations in Asia by Western travellers, the accounts of classical authors such as Herodotos, Diodoros of Sicily, Curtius Rufus, Plutarch, and Arrian were the sole sources through which they could learn the history of the Achaemenid Empire and the campaigns of Alexander in the East. References to Alexander the Great occur frequently in such records.

We know that Alexander and his prodigious deeds gained unprecedented notice, the like of which had not been attained by any other historical figures. Notably, Alexander, compared to other conquerors of Antiquity, was the first to cross the cultural and geographical borders of the Mediterranean world and spread into a much wider area, so that we could speak of a phenomenon of global proportions. As Leopold von Ranke noted in 1881, Alexander is among the few historical figures for which biography takes hold of World history.¹

The bibliography on the fortunes of the Macedonian conqueror, extensive, increases through the years, as evident in the more recent works of A.B. Bosworth and E.J. Baynham (2002), *Alexander the Great in Fact and

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¹ Author's note: This presentation is an element of my continuing research conducted for the Renewal Project of the Musée Achéménide Virtuel et Interactif (MAVI) and the Achemenet website, under the direction of Pierre Briant, at the Collège de France. I wish to acknowledge the kind and diligent assistance provided to me by Francesca LaPlante-Sosnowsky, Associate Professor, Policy Studies, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. I am also indebted to Faustina Doufikar-Aerts, Associate Professor, Faculty of Theology—CIT VU University of, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, for kindly providing me with useful information about the traditions on Alexander in Arabic and Persian texts.

¹ Von Ranke 1881, 172.
Fiction; R. Stoneman (2008), *Alexander the Great. A Life in Legend*, and A. Demandt (2009), *Alexander der Grosse: Leben und Legende*. Also, from 2003, P. Briant has devoted his public lectures at the Collège de France to contemporary perceptions of Alexander. In 2011, he turned his attention to the topic of descriptions and observations reported by ancient travellers of Persian Achaemenid sites.2

In 1996, an important collection of essays, *The Problematics of Power: Eastern and Western Representations of Alexander the Great*, edited by M. Bridges and J.C. Bürgel, presented broad, high quality analyses of the duality and ambiguity of the figure of Alexander in Western and Eastern art and literature of the Middle Ages. R. Stoneman, with R.K. Erickson and I. Netton, organized *The Alexander Romance in the East*, an international conference in Exeter (26–29 July 2010),3 which considered a variety of issues from fresh perspectives, and also, to its merit, extended the field of research to China. The focus of these works is generally centered on matters of—and related to—art, literature, religion, and the history of political thought. However, in my opinion, a study of the impact of the figure of Alexander on Eastern populations at social and cross-cultural levels remains an important scholarly omission. An effort in this direction, although intended for a general audience and with the limits imposed by the genre, has been recently undertaken by journalist M. Wood, with his documentary *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (1997), and his book of the same title (2001), where he tries to collect the surviving traditions on Alexander in the East through the testimony of local populations.

Although the sources I am going to analyze in this paper date from a period much later than the Hellenistic Age, it is clear that the core of information that they provide on the social imaginary concerning Alexander is the product of a complex process of elaboration and hybridisation of traditions which already took place during Alexander’s lifetime and evolved in the next centuries. Thus, the approach I propose focuses on the effects of this phenomenon in the *longue durée*.

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3 The proceedings are now published in Stoneman, Erickson and Netton 2012.