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The "Metal Army" of Alexander in the War against the Indian King Porus in Three Persian Alexander Books (Tenth-Fourteenth Centuries)

The article focuses on a very particular episode of the eastern Alexander legend, i.e. the building of an extraordinary "metal army" employed by Alexander in his war against the Indian King Porus, which is present in at least three Persian accounts written between the tenth and fourteenth centuries CE: the "Book of Kings" (Shāh-nāmeh) by Ferdowsi, the "Book of Dārāb" (Dārāb-nāmeh), attributed to Tarsusi, and an "Alexander-book" (Eskandar-nāmeh) in prose copied by ʿAbd al-Kāfi ibn Abu al-Barakāt. Compared to the most remote source, the text of Pseudo-Callisthenes, and to the closest ones (the Armenian version of the fifth century, the Syriac text of the sixth-seventh centuries, and the Hebrew version of the tenth-eleventh centuries), it is argued that the Persian authors have not passively received the inherited materials; on the contrary, they have been able to liven up the scene of Alexander's battle against the Indian King Porus by bringing onto the battlefield a fiery and phantasmagorical army of metal, giving us one of the more amazing episodes in the eastern legend of the great Macedonian.

Keywords: Alexander; Metal Army; Telesm; *Shāh-nāmeh*; *Dārāb-nāmeh*; *Eskandar-nāmeh*; Indian King Porus

Introduction

Alexander's story, widely reflected in world literature from antiquity to the Middle Ages and beyond, has been the subject of a multitude of studies and research.[1] In Neo-Persian literature, there is a considerable number of Alexander-books.[2]

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[1]For a few reference works see, for example: Kroll, *Historia Alexandri Magni*; Tarn, *Alexander the Great II*; Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*; Merkelbach and Trumpf, *Die Quellen*. A broad comparative look is in Bridges and Bürgel, *The Problematics of Power*; Harf-Lancner, Kappler, and Suard, *Alexandre le Grand*; Saccone, *Alessandro/Dhū l-Qarnayn*.

[2]There are at least fifteen; see Hanaway, "ESKANDAR-NĀMA" and Zolfaqari, Baqeri, and Heydarpur, "Janbeh-hā-ye mardom-shenākhti," 36-7, to which should be added another Alexandreid, recently published, from the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries: Bāqi, *Eskandar-nāmeh*.

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These are either poems of an epic character in rhyming distichs (*mathnavi*) or extensive stories in prose that tell the adventures of the Greek king, for which there is now a wide range of critical literature.[3]

In addition to various Alexander-books in Persian literature, we also know works that, although not entitled *Eskandar-nāmeh* or "Book of Alexander," largely contain the Alexandrian matter. This is the case, for example, in an eleventh- or twelfth-century work in prose dedicated to the figure of King Darius III, entitled *Dārāb-nāmeh* (The Book of Darius) and attributed to Abu Taher Tarsusi,[4] in which, despite the rather misleading title, the events of Alexander take up about two-thirds of the total volume (see below). There are also works of a historical (historical-geographic) or religious nature, many of which contain chapters dedicated to the Macedonian king,[5] but we will not focus on them in this article.

The remote source of the Persian Alexander-books seems to be the Greek Alexander Romance of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, of which four recensions (α, β, γ, δ) are traceable, a text composed by a native of Alexandria at some date after 200 BC and possibly much later (the earliest extant version in ancient Greek is from the third century AD). Several manuscripts attribute the work to Alexander's court historian Callisthenes, who died before Alexander and therefore could not have written a full account of his life. According to Cary, this text "was subsequently elaborated and enlarged by the addition of much material, especially letters supposed to have been written by Alexander and others."[6] It was translated into Latin in the fourth century AD by Julius Valerius (*Res Gestae Alexandri Macedonis*, widely popular in medieval Europe), and later, as is known, was reworked into the main European languages.[7] In the pre-Islamic period the Pseudo-Callisthenes' Alexander Romance was translated

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[3]There are numerous studies concerning Alexander's romance in Persian literature, including: Nöldeke, Beiträge; Bertel's, Roman ob Aleksandre; Montgomery Watt, "ISKANDAR," 127; Hanaway, "Persian Popular Romances"; Safavi, *Eskandar*; Bertotti, "Vedute di città perfette"; Hanaway, "ESKANDAR-NĀMA"; Kappler, "Alexandre le Grand"; Casari, *Alessandro e Utopia*; Saccone, "Introduzione"; Feuillebois-Pierunek, "Les figures d'Alexandre"; Stoneman, Erickson, and Netton, *The Alexander Romance*. The most recent survey is in Manteghi, *Alexander the Great in the Persian Tradition*.

[4]Tarsusi, *Dārāb-nāmeh*. See also Watt, "ISKANDAR," 133; Tarsusi, *Alexandre le Grand en Iran*; also Gaillard, "Introduction"; Parvin Gonabadi, "Dārāb-nāma"; Ebrahimi, "Sheklgiri-ye chehreh-ye Eskandar." There is also a complete Russian translation by N.B. Kondyreva: Tarsusi, *Darabname*.

[5]The following historical works can be cited, in which information on Alexander is treated or mentioned: Anklesaria, Zand-Ākāsih, 274-7, 306-7; Boyce, The Letter of Tansar, 36-7; Boyce, Textual Sources, 114; Anonymous, Ardā Wirāz Nāmag, 76; Dinawari, *Kitāb al-Akhbār*, 31-41; Ibn al-Balkhi, *Fārs-nāmeh*, 15-16, 55-7; Al-Isfahāni, *Taʾrīkh*, 39-40; al-Masʿudi, *Murūj*, I: 318-32; Anonymous, *Mojmal*, chap. 4; Rāzi, *Rawḥ al-jinān*, vol. VII; Ibn al-Faqih al-Hamadāni, *Kitāb al-buldān*; Tabari, *Taʾrīkh al-rusūl*, I: 693-4, 697, 701; Al-Biruni, *Āthār*, 59-66; Abu Eshāq Nishāburi, Qeṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ.

[6]Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, 9.

[7]The transmission of the text and the relationship between its four recensions (and the derived translations) is discussed in Cary, *The Medieval Alexander*, 9-12, whose book is still a standard reference for the reflection of Alexander's legend in medieval European literature. In addition to the reference works mentioned in note 1, see Berg, "An Early Source"; Abel, *Le roman d'Alexandre*; Ross, *Alexander Historiatus*; Samuel, "The Earliest"; Frugoni, *La fortuna*; Boitani et al., *Alessandro*. See also Zuwiyya, *A Companion to Alexander Literature*; Stock, *Alexander the Great in the Middle Ages*.

into Syriac and from there probably into Pahlavi. The Syriac version essentially became the source of many translations and re-elaborations in the languages of the Middle East, starting with Pahlavi and Arabic.[8] But it is necessary to keep in mind that another source plays a fundamental role in the transmission to the medieval Muslim world of the figure of the great Macedonian. In the Koran,[9] in which a reflection of the Pseudo-Callisthenes' text is captured, probably mediated by the Syrian source, we find a figure called the Two-Horned (*Dhū-l Qarnayn*), a prophet of the monotheism that he spreads to the four corners of the world, which some exegetical currents recognize as the Alexander of the Greek tradition.[10]

In general, it can be observed that, in Persian literature, Alexandrian material is further enriched with fantastic and marvelous elements,[11] which also draw on local folklore, especially in the prose versions intended for a wider audience.[12] In short, the Alexandrian matter emerges in the very rich and varied Persian literary tradition, involving, as Angelo Piemontese asserts, universal history, cosmography, boating, military art, environmental *mirabilia*, mechanics or technical inventiveness, sapiential epistolography, hermeticism, moral philosophy, political doctrine, Koranic commentary, and anecdotes.[13]

Here we will dwell, however, on a very particular aspect, which concerns more the Alexander leader and explorer than the Alexander prophet-missionary. That is, the focus will be on the characters and functions of an extraordinary "metal army" present in Alexander's war against the Indian King Porus in at least three Persian Alexander-books written between the tenth and fourteenth centuries.

The "Book of Kings" (Shāh-nāmeh) of Ferdowsi

The first most famous example of Alexander-books in neo-Persian literature is contained in the *Shāh-nāmeh* (The Book of Kings), a monumental poem in 50,000 couplets by Ferdowsi (940-1020), the most famous composer of the Iranian epic.[14] In this work, the poet dedicates a long chapter to Alexander,[15] as he considers him, to all

[8]See Nöldeke, Beiträge, 1-152; Wright, "SYRIAC LITERATURE," 850b; Yarshater, "IRANIAN NATIONAL HISTORY"; Afshār, "Introduction"; Lévi, "La Légende," II; Lévi, "La Légende," VII; Budge, *The History of Alexander*; Budge, *The Life*; Gaster, "An Old Hebrew"; García Gómez, *Un texto árabe*; De Polignac, "L'image d'Alexander." The most recent and complete study is Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus*.

[9]*Sura* XVIII, 83-98.

[10]On this epithet, see Anderson, "Alexander's Horns"; Abel, "*Dū'l Qarnayn*"; Safavi, *Eskandar*, 265-310; Saccone, "Introduzione", 11-12.

[11]See Abel, "La Figure"; Piemontese, "La figura"; Casari, *Alessandro e Utopia*.

[12]See Marzolph, "The Creative"; Mahjub, "Motāleʿeh"; Zakavati Qaragezlou, "Eskandar-nāmeh-ye naqqāli," 173-6; Dashti, "Qesse-hā-ye ʿāmiyāneh."

[13]Piemontese, "La figura," 177.

[14]For information on Ferdowsi's biography and work, see Pizzi, "Introduzione"; Molé, "L'épopée"; Bausani, "La letteratura," 359-61, 362-84, 421-3; Rypka, *History*, 154-62; Safā, *Hamāseh-sarāyi*, 171-265; Arberry, *Classical*, 42-52; Shahbazi, *Ferdowsi*; Safā, *Tārikh-e adabiyāt*, vol. I: 458-521; Khaleghi-Motlagh, "FERDOWSI ABU'L QĀSEM."

[15] The edition used here is Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*.

intents and purposes, an Iranian sovereign. This is not only because he actually domi-
nated Persia, but also because of his origins, presented by Ferdowsi as Iranian on his
father's side, Dārāb, who had married Nāhid, the daughter of Faylaqus/Filiqus, the
Qaysar of Rum.[16]

In the episode of Alexander's war against the Indian King Porus (Fur, in the original
Persian), the Greek king finds himself in difficulty before an army that is far more
numerous than his own, and is also better armed, having at its disposal a host of ele-
phants. These are animals unknown to the Greeks and Alexander must even have a
wax statue of an elephant built by the wise Greeks (*filsufān-e Rum*), probably to
natural size, in order to understand the problem he has to face. After that he consults
the same wise men to find a solution; then he orders a team of skilled blacksmiths,
coming, says the text, from Persia, Greece and Egypt, to build an army of thousands
of metal knights mounted on iron horses pulled by means of wheels/carts. Let us read
the verses about this Ferdowsian episode:

بفرمود تا فیلسوفان روم یکی پیل کردند پیشش ز موم
چنین گفت کاکنون به پاکیزه رای کی آرد یکی چاره ی این بجای؟
نشستند دانش پژوهان بهم همی چاره جستند بر بیش و کم
یکی انجمن کرد از آهنگران هر آنکس که بودند ازیشان سران
ز رومی و از مصری و پارسی فزون بود مرد از چهل بار سی
یکی بارگی ساختند آهنین سوارش از آهن، ز آهنش زین
به میخ و به مس درزها دوختند سوار و تن باره بفروختند[17]

[Alexander] commanded the Greek wise men
    To build before him a wax elephant
So he said, "Now with enlightened opinion
    Who will find a solution to this problem?"
Those seekers of wisdom gathered together
    Trying to find a solution to the various problems
[So Alexander] had the blacksmiths gathered together
    The best among them
From Greece, Egypt and Persia*
    There were more than forty times thirty
They built a horse made of iron
    And a knight with his iron saddle
They stitched the joints with nails and copper
    And made the knight and the horse's body red-hot.

This iron army must clearly serve to counter the imposing force of the elephants of the
Indian King Porus. Alexander seems aware that, in the face of the bewilderment and
terror caused to the Greeks by the Indian elephants, only a device of great psychologi-

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[16]Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*, vol. V: 520-6, vv. 64-136.
[17]Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*, vol. VI: 43, vv. 550-6. Here and henceforth all translations are mine unless
otherwise specified.

cal impact on the enemy can prevent the defeat of his army. The effect of this iron army—which reminds us, in a completely different context, of another famous army, complete with carts and horses, unearthed by excavations in China in 1974[18]—is not limited, however, to the psychological one. It is clear that, seen from afar, the iron army will misleadingly increase the number of Greek knights that King Porus and the Indian army believe they are facing. Actually Alexander ordered his blacksmiths to build real war machines that, as we shall see, will serve to annihilate the spearhead of the enemy forces, namely the elephants. Alexander shortly thereafter orders his men to fill the bellies of the iron horses with naphtha, or oil, and we will see immediately how this strange iron army will prove to be the decisive weapon:

<div dir="rtl">

به گردون همی راندند پیش شاه درونش پر از نفط کرده سیاه

سکندر بدید آن، پسند آمدش خردمند را سودمند آمدش

بفرمود تا زان فزون از هزار از آهن بکردند اسپ و سوار

از آن ابرش و خنگ و بور و سیاه که دیده ست شاهی از آهن سپاه

سرِ ماه را کار شد ساخته و زو چاره گر کشت پرداخته [19]

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With the wheels/carts[20] they pushed [the horse] near to the king
    Filling his belly with black naphtha
Alexander saw it and was satisfied with it
    To the wise king this seemed to be a useful thing
He ordered them to make over a thousand
    Like that horse and that iron knight
The horses were tawny, brown, white and black
    Which king had ever seen an army of iron?
At the end of the month [the iron army] was built
    And from the work those makers were freed

This decision to fill the bellies of the metal horses with naphtha is Alexander's true "secret weapon." The naphtha inside the iron horses is set on fire, and in front of the Indian army a terrifying vision suddenly appears: an army of flaming knights. The Indian soldiers are horrified and terrified. But the elephants, on the other hand, do not get scared and, on the contrary, launch an attack:

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[18]According to some archaeologists, the creation of the terracotta army, part of the mausoleum of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, Shi Huangdi (260-210 BC), was inspired by the presence of Hellenistic statues spread in Asia following the conquests of Alexander the Great. This hypothesis would account for the sudden appearance in China of statues at natural height, an artistic product apparently unprecedented in Chinese art, while it was common in the Greek world. The hypothesis is based on the discovery, in the excavation area, of European mitochondrial DNA and refined figurines of bronze birds made with lost wax casting, a sculptural technique that was known in Greek sculpture and ancient Egypt. See Johnston, "Ancient Greeks May Have Built."

[19]Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*, vol. VI: 43, vv. 557-61.

[20]Italo Pizzi in Firdusi, *Il libro*, 583-4, translates *gardun* as "ruote" (wheels), but the text is ambiguous.

<div dir="rtl">

از آهن سپاهی به گردون براند که جز با سوارانِ جنگی نماند

[...]

به اسپ و به نفط آتش اندر زدند همه لشکرِ فور سر بر زدند

از آتش بر افروخت نفط سیاه نجنبید از آن کآهنین بُد سپاه

چو پیلان ندیدند ازیشان گریز برفتند با لشکر از جای تیز [21]

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They pushed forward an iron army on the wheels/carts
  That looked like a bunch of knights
[...]
Then inside the horses full of naphtha they set fire
  And all of Porus' soldiers raised their heads up
With that fire the blackening naphtha started burning
  [But] it didn't spread because the army was made of iron
As the elephants didn't see those horses flee
  They swiftly set off on an assault with the army

When the elephants of the Indian King Porus hurl themselves at the iron army, they are burned and frightened by touching them with their trunks, thus being rendered powerless and harmless:

<div dir="rtl">

چو خرطوم هاشان بر آتش گرفت بماندند از آن پیل بانان شگفت

همه لشکر هند باز گشتند همان زنده پیلان گردن فراز

سکندر پس لشکر بد گمان همی تاخت بر سانِ بادِ دمان

چنین تا هوا نیلگَون شد به رنگ سپه را نماندَ آن زمان جای جنگ [22]

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When their trunks were burned with fire [of those iron horses]
  The guardians of the elephants were astounded:
The whole Indian army withdrew
  Including those elephants, terrible and proud.
Alexander chased that evil army
  Running furiously as the wind does
Until the air was darkened [by the night]
  and of his army remained no one to fight.

This strange "war machine"—that is, the army made up of the hot and flaming iron horses—was able to get Alexander out of trouble and solve the battle in his favor by neutralizing the elephants of King Porus.

One might expect that this episode of the Ferdowsian Alexander-book would be taken up by its imitators. But neither Nezāmi[23] in his famous *Eskandar-*

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[21]Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*, vol. VI: 43-4, vv. 562, 565-7.

[22]Ferdowsi, *Shāh-nāmeh*, vol. VI: 44, 569-72.

[23]For general information about the author see Bausani, "La letteratura," 396-439; Safā, *Tārikh-e ada-biyāt*, vol. II, 798-824; Rypka, *History*, 210-13; Arberry, *Classical*, 122-9; Chelkowski, "NIẒĀMĪ GAND-JAWĪ"; Zarrinkub, *Pir-e Ganjeh*; Orsatti, "K̲OSROW O ŠIRIN."

nāmeh[24] of 10,500 couplets nor Amir Khosrow of Delhi[25] in his Alexander-book[26] make any mention of the iron army; both poets even pass over Alexander's war with Porus, perhaps having conceived in their poems another drawing of the Macedonian king, less centered on the epic-war tone and more on the sapiential-prophetic and symbolic one.

The Dārāb-nāmeh *Attributed to Tarsusi*

We find again the same motif of the iron army in a Persian text in prose, that has all the air of a traditional tale or a folk prose narrative (*dāstān*) indebted to oral tradition,[27] the *Dārāb-nāmeh* (The Book of Darius) attributed to the aforementioned Tarsusi, an author of the twelfth century.

It occurs exactly at the moment when Alexander must face the elephants of the Indian king, similar to the episode from Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings* which we examined up close a little while ago. Let us read this passage and then move on to some considerations. Alexander, not knowing what to do in face of the elephants of King Porus, summons Aristotle:

اسکندر ارسطاطالیس را گفت که تدبیر جنگ ما چیست؟ [ارسطاطالیس گفت] این طلسمها بباید ساختن تا این کار تو برآید. اسکندر بفرمود تا آهنگران و زوبین گران و ریخته گران بیاوردند و هر که [خایسکی توانستی] زدن او را جمع کردند و اسپان ریختند و مردان، در زیر پای ایشان گردونها، و در میان ایشان ریگ و گوگرد و نفط اندر مالیدند و همه را بدان نیمهٔ آب بردند .و در شب صف ساختند چنانک فور خبر نداشت و آن دوازده هزار مرد مسین و اسپ در صف بایستانیدند و لشکر در قفای ایشان بایستادند.[28]

Alexander asked Aristotle: "What is the solution you propose to [win] our battle?" Aristotle answered: "You have to build talismans for your problem to be solved." Alexander then ordered the blacksmiths, lance makers and foundrymen to be called and they gathered together everyone who was able to work with a smith's hammer and so they forged horses and knights, placing wheels under their feet. Then they filled the belly [of the metal figures] with sand and sulfur, wetting it with naphtha and they took it all to the opposite bank of the river and at night

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[24]The reference edition of *Eskandar-nāmeh* (*Sharaf-nāmeh* and *Eqbāl-nāmeh*) is Nezāmi, *Kolliyāt*. There are several translations into European languages: Nizami, *Iskender-nāma*; Nizami, *Das Alexanderbuch*; Nezâmi, *Il libro*. Regarding the studies on Nezāmi, we refer to De Blois, "ESKANDAR-NĀMA OF NEZĀMI."

[25]For an introduction to this author see Piemontese, "Introduzione"; Bürgel, "L'attitude"; Safā, *Tārikh*, III/2: 771-97; Piemontese, "Le fonti"; Arberry, *Classical*, 274-82; Bausani, "La letteratura," 261, 281, 283, 461, 470, 484-8, 524-5; Bürgel, *Il discorso*, 68-70; Schimmel, "AMĪR ḴOSROW DEHLAVĪ."

[26]The reference edition is Amir Khosrow, *Ā'ineh* of which a fine Italian translation is available: Amir Khusrau, *Lo Specchio*.

[27]See Rubanovich, "Orality in Medieval Persian Literature," 660-75.

[28]Tarsusi, *Dārāb-nāmeh*, 225.

they lined up in such a way that Fur was totally unaware [of what was going on]. They arranged twelve thousand copper men and horses in rows and placed the army behind them.

Then begins the battle of the Greeks with the Indian army of King Porus who, we are informed, was also reinforced by the presence of elephants equipped with armor whose bodies are described by Tarsusi as being "as big as mountains." Moreover, in this army, there are also furious bulls led by warriors.

As can be seen from these passages, there are few differences from Ferdowsi's version and these focus on specific details: for example, one reads that the army had been forged in copper instead of iron; the knights were 12,000 instead of 1,000 in Ferdowsi's story; the wheels are placed directly under the legs of the horses (in Ferdowsi the text is more vague, and it could be understood that the horses and knights are placed on carts). But certainly the most interesting detail, and which makes the real difference between the two texts, is the presence of another primary character, Aristotle, while in Ferdowsi's text there is only generic reference to "Greek wise men" (*filsufān-e Rum*). Aristotle appears here in a new role as the designer of "talismans" (*telesm*), a word that here refers to a technical device[29] rather than to a talisman with its magical-supernatural features.

Tarsusi is roughly a contemporary of Nezāmi who, in his *Eskandar-nāmeh* in two parts, makes Greek philosophers the privileged interlocutors of the Macedonian king. For example, in the second part (*Eqbāl-nāmeh*) three philosophers (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle) entrust the king with "books of advice" (*pand-nāmeh*) that he will take on his journey to the East. And a philosopher, Apollonius, will accompany him, proving decisive with his "technical" advice in resolving more than one difficult situation, namely by inventing special automatons defined in the text with the term *telesm*,[30] which Tarsusi also uses. It is clear that in this episode Tarsusi shows an attitude similar to the poet Nezāmi, that is, he underlines the "wisdom" and Alexander's ability to make use of science rather than the ability or cunning of the king.

Let us return to Tarsusi's text, which continues like this:

آن طلسمات را براندند. [سپاه فور آن طلسمات را بدیدند] برابر طلسمات آمدند و پیلان بر عادت خویش همه خرطومها بر آن مردان و اسپان زدند، آن خرطومهای ایشان بسوخت که آن طلسمها تفسیده بود و آن پیلان همه روی برگردانیدند. سپاه اسکندر تیغ و تیر و گرز و عمود و ساطور و [...] در ایشان نهادند[31]

They pushed the talismans forward.[32] When Porus' troops saw those talismans, they advanced and the elephants as usual attacked with their trunk touching the

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[29]According to Zabih-Allāh Safā; see Tarsusi, *Dārāb-nāmeh*, 605.

[30]Cf. Saccone, *Viaggi*, 175-303. For the episode concerning the *telesms* of Apollonius, see Nezāmi, *Kol-liyāt*, 1289.

[31]Tarsusi, *Dārāb-nāmeh*, 226.

[32]That is, the army of copper knights.

horses and the knights [of metal], but they were burned since those talismans were red-hot. As a result, all the elephants withdrew, and so Alexander's army started striking them with swords, arrows, clubs, spears, axes.

So, thanks to these extraordinary copper war machines, Tarsusi's Alexander, just like Ferdowsi's, manages to defeat the imposing army of the Indian King Porus. The two stories, as one can see, are very similar in their structure, but a detail emerges above all at the lexical level that cannot escape our attention: horses and copper knights are indicated with the precise term *telesm*, or talismans. In all probability we find a reflection in Tarsusi's account of the ancient link between the art of the blacksmith, the one who forges metal in fire, and the magic and alchemical arts (think here of the use of copper and sulfur, two fundamental elements of this art), well attested in the Greek world and even before in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian ones.[33] The knights and horses of this copper army are undoubtedly a human artifact, the result of a technique at every stage of their construction and use, but the terminology used unequivocally signals a strong ancient magical dimension.

The Episode in Various Recensions of the Pseudo-Callisthenes

It should be investigated at this point what might be the source of this motif, i.e. the iron or copper army that appears in the two Persian Alexander-books examined so far. Upon a further examination of the historical and legendary works written in Greek about the Alexandrian events, we find no mention of this or a similar motif in the episode of the battle with Porus or in the *Bibliotheca historica* of Diodorus Siculus (first century),[34] or in the *Parallel Lives*[35] of Plutarch (second century), or even less in the *Anabases* of Arriano (second century).[36]

However, something similar can be found in the Pseudo-Callisthenes' text, a work considered as a distant source—through various mediations—of the Alexander-story contained in *The Book of the Kings* of Ferdowsi and probably to some extent also later of *The Book of Darius* attributed to Tarsusi. Let us see what the Pseudo-Callisthenes says in the chapter on the battle of the Macedonian king with the Indian King Porus:

> As Alexander was leaving, he saw the regiment of Porus' animals. He racked his brains and thought hard, and what do you think the cunning fellow did? He had all the bronze statues he possessed and all the armour he had taken as booty from the soldiers heated up thoroughly until they were red-hot, and then set up in front of the army like a wall. The trumpets sounded the battle-cry. Porus ordered his beasts to be released. As the beasts rushed forward, they leapt on to the statues and clung to them; at once their muzzles were badly burnt and they

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[33]See Eliade, *Forgerons* and Gilchrist, *Alchemy*, in particular chapter 2. See also Lory, *Alchimie*, 10-24.
[34]The text consulted is the Italian translation Diodoro Siculo, *Biblioteca*.
[35]The text consulted is the Italian translation Plutarco, *Vite*.
[36]The text consulted is the Italian translation Arriano, *Anabasi*.

let go immediately. That is how the resourceful Alexander put an end to the attack of the beasts.[37]

The passage of the Pseudo-Callisthenes' text (third century), which is reproduced very faithfully in the Armenian version (fifth century),[38] is decidedly more sober than the Persian versions analyzed above. On the Indian side it can be seen that elephants are not expressly mentioned; we read of generic beasts or wild animals.[39] The most substantial differences concern the Greek part. Alexander does not have any ad hoc metal army built or forged, but—according to the text—uses "bronze statues and weapons" previously won as booty to create a sort of metal barrier burned by fire, to be placed between his army and the ranks of the enemy. The practical effect is always the same: the Indian beasts, venturing to bite on this red-hot barrier made up of "bronze statues," burn themselves and become useless in the battle.

The Pseudo-Callisthenes therefore speaks of unspecified "bronze statues," and not of horses or knights, which appears to be an obvious and happy fantastic extension of the Greek source by the Persian authors, even if evidently it cannot be excluded a priori that such an extension had already been started in some phase before the appearance of this material in the sphere of the Iranian world. And in fact it can be noted that in the eastern versions such as the Syriac (sixth-seventh centuries), the Hebrew (tenth-eleventh centuries) and the Ethiopian (much later, however, being from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries), there are elements closer to the Persian versions than to the model of the Pseudo-Callisthenes.

For example, in the Hebrew version, which is almost contemporary to the *Shāh-nāmeh* of Ferdowsi, we see the presence of incendiary material, hollow statues, and wheels or rather carts:

> Alexander then took counsel as to how to combat them. As a result, he ordered that hollow bronze statues be made and he had them filled with burning coals. They were then placed on iron carts which he ordered to be brought close to the elephants. Thinking that the statues were real men, the elephants stretched forth their trunks to seize and to devour them. The statues in the meantime had become heated by the fire. Thus when the elephants smelled the fire, they drew back and were unable to approach the Persian forces.[40]

In the Syriac version (sixth-seventh centuries), which could be one of the sources of the *Shāh-nāmeh* through mediations unknown to us (Pahlavi or Arabic summaries and/or re-elaborations), instead of statues we find "brazen images" (i.e. figures in

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[37]Pseudo-Callithenes, *The Greek*, 129-30.
[38]See Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Romance*, 119-20.
[39]Although a few paragraphs before, elephants were mentioned: "When Porus read this letter from Alexander he [...] assembled the barbarian hordes, as well as the elephants and other beasts" (Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Greek*, 129).
[40]Bonfils, *The Book*, 119.

material similar to brass) that have the form—and here is the interesting point as it is close to the Persian versions—of "men and quadrupeds." Also here, as in the later Hebrew version, there is the element of the cart:

> Then he [Alexander] sat down and reflected in his mind, and gave orders to bring such brazen images as could be found among his troops. And when the images were collected, which were in the form of men and quadrupeds—now they were about twenty-four thousand in number—he ordered a smith's furnace to be set up; and they brought much wood and set fire to it, and heated those images in the fire, and the images became glowing coals of fire. Then they took hold of them with iron tongs, and placed them upon iron chariots, and led the chariots before the ranks of the warriors; and Alexander commanded horns and trumpets to be sounded. When the wild beasts that were in the ranks of the king of the Indians heard the sound of the trumpets, they rushed upon the ranks of Alexander's army; and since the brazen images which were full of fire were in the van, they laid hold of them with their mouths and lips, and burnt their mouths and their lips. Some of them died (on the spot), and some of them retired beaten and fled away to the camp of the king of the Indians.[41]

Among the eastern Alexander-books, the Ethiopian version is the one closest, in this context, to the Persian versions examined so far. It seems it has retained considerable vestiges of the lost early Arabic translation of the Syriac version.[42] This could suggest a common Arabic source on which the Ethiopic version and the *Shāh-nāmeh* drew, a hypothesis that deserves a deeper investigation not possible here.

Eskandar-nāmeh In Prose Copied by ʿAbd al-Kāfi ibn Abi al-Barakāt

There is another important prose text not easy to date (about twelfth-fourteenth century) entitled *Eskandar-nāmeh*,[43] which, according to its editor Iraj Afshār, is a Persian version of Pseudo-Callisthenes.[44] But the text in question is actually much

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[41]See Budge, *The History of Alexander*, 90-1.

[42]See Doufikar-Aerts' assessment of Weymann's study in her *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, 4, 60-1. In fact, in the Ethiopian version, the "metal images" represent nothing less than elephants themselves, so that they produce an effect of equal weight on the war scene. Moreover here we read, as in the Persian versions, that the bold idea of creating a metal army came from Alexander's advisors and not from himself as seen in the other versions, because the text explicitly tells of the presence of elephants and not of indefinite ferocious beasts. In addition to the incendiary material, there is also talk of the number of soldiers and the images built, details not of secondary philological importance, which are also found in the Persian versions. See Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Life and Exploits*, 119-21.

[43]Anonymous, *Eskandar-nāmeh*.

[44]Information already given in the subtitle, added by the editor, Iraj Afshār: *revāyat-e fārsi az Kālistenus-e doroughin* (the Persian version of the Pseudo-Callistene) which could only be for promotional purposes since the editor himself does not discuss at all the possible relations of the version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes with *Iskandar-nāmeh* edited by him. In p. 17 of his introduction, before listing the different

wider than that of the known Pseudo-Callisthenes, since it is largely enriched with additional autochthonous elements and various other events.[45] A closer look at the passage about Alexander's war with King Porus reveals other new and interesting elements:

اسکندر چون آن لشکر و آن فیلان چون کوههای آهن بدید بهراسید که او و لشکر او و هرگز چندان فیل یک جا ندیده بودند. لشکر جمله پیش اسکندر آمدند و گفتند ما طاقت [حرب فیلا]ن نداریم و ما با کوه آهن حرب نتوانیم کردن. اسکندر گفت خدای ـ عزّ و جلّ ـ یار ماست، مترسید و دل را قوی دارید که من این ساعت ایشان را مقهور کنم.

پس بفرمود تا مردمان پارس بزودی آمدند و همه تیراندازان چابک. پنج هزار مرد برآمدند که با وی آمده بودند از ولایت پارس. شاه بفرمود تا صندوق ها ساختند و دو هزار مرد گزیده از آن میان اختیار کرد و در آن صندوقها نشاند، هر یک مرد در صندوقی. و بفرمود تا هزار شتر بیسراک را به قیر بیندوند و آن صندوقها بر آن شتران سیاه نهادند و آن تیراندازان را در آن صندوقها بردند با تیر و کمان و ناوک و بفرمود تا هر عرب که در لشکرگاه بودند بیامدند. و بر اشتری دو مرد عرب سیاه بر نشستند با قارورهٔ آتش و نفط و روی بدان صف فیلان نهادند. و اسکندر لشکر بیاراسته و میمنهٔ لشکر ایرانیان را داد و میسره به رومیان داد و خود با خاصگان در قلب بایستاد.

پس لشکر فور چون برابر آمدند فور فیل بانان را فرموده که شما صبر کنید تا بدانید که کار ما به چه رسد. اگر ـ و العیاذ بالله ـ هزیمت بر ما افتد آن گه شما فیلان را از جایگاه بجنبانید.

پس چون لشکر روی در یکدیگر نهادند و آن شتران سیاه را برانگیختند در برابر فیلان و دهل بزدند و آن عربان از پشت اشتران آواز تکبیر برآوردند و آن قاروره های آتش و نفط بر آن فیلان انداختند فیلان از آن هول و فزع روی باز پس کردند و به هزیمت بشدند و تیراندازان از آن صندوقها تیر همی انداختند و آن روز چهارصد فیل زیادت بیفکندند و آن دیگران همه هزیمت گرفتند.

و اسکندر چون بدید که لشکر پارس و عرب هندوان را هزیمت کردند شادمان شدند و روی بدیشان نهاد به جملهٔ لشکر و صف ایشان بردرید.[46]

When Alexander saw Porus's army and the elephants, those awesome mountains of iron, he was alarmed, for neither he nor his men had ever seen so many elephants in one place. His men complained: "We cannot battle elephants; and we have no power against mountains of iron." Alexander replied: "Be not dismayed, for God is on our side. Have courage. They shall be defeated in no time." He then summoned the people of Pars. Five thousand men who had accompanied him from Pars came to his presence, all dexterous marksmen. He ordered them to build boxes; and he chose 2.000 of them to carry out his plan. He ordered 1.000 young, strong camels to be smeared with tar and he had the boxes placed upon the blackened camels, each box manned by an archer with his bows and arrows.

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versions of Alexander's story in various languages, Afshār only says they might be useful for comparative study.

[45] See Afshār, "Introduction," 10-12.

[46] Anonymous, *Eskandar-nāmeh*, 61.

He then summoned all the Arabs in the army, and two dark Arabs mounted every camel. They set for the lines of elephants with bottles of naphtha and with fire. And Alexander positioned his troops, giving the right wing to the Iranians [not "Indians" as in Southgate's translation] and the left to the Rumis, while he and the nobles stood in the center of the troops.

When Porus's army arrived before that of Alexander, Porus said to the elephant drivers: "Wait until you see how we fare in the battle. If, God forbid, we are defeated, use the elephants."

When the armies started the attack, Alexander's men charged at the elephants with the blackened camels. They beat the drums while the Arabs on the back of the camels cried "Allah Akbar", and threw the bottles of flaming naphtha at the elephants, who, terror-stricken, turned to flee. But the marksmen continued shooting at them from the boxes, killing more than 400 elephants, and putting the rest to flight. When Alexander saw that the Arabs and the men from Pars had defeated the Indians, he rejoiced. He attacked the enemy with all his men and broke their lines.[47]

After reading this passage, to doubt that it may be a Persian version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes would be understandable because the episode is constructed in a completely different way from the Greek source. To cite only a few differential elements, and limiting the subject matter to the abovementioned passage, there are no statues or images that are found in the Pseudo-Callisthenes (and in the eastern versions examined above). Moreover, they are not general attacking beasts, but it is explicitly said that they are mounted camels of Alexander's army, whose drivers are armed with bottles full of naphtha that are thrown at the elephants; also the underlining of the presence, in Alexander's army, of "dark Arabs" is clearly an element that has little to do with the Greek source. Rather, there is some similarity with the Persian texts previously examined from Ferdowsi onwards, which explicitly speak of the incendiary material as *naft*, focusing on the significance of the burns inflicted on the enemy's elephants. The author, however, does not consider the "iron army" of the great Ferdowsian poem, which a Persian author of the twelfth century could hardly ignore. His Alexander prefers to rely on living knights and camels, something that can lead us to believe that it is a deliberate and conscious choice. In this prose *Eskandar-nāmeh*, Alexander's cunning is specially highlighted: here he does not resort to an iron army, but prepares a team of apparently harmless camels. The Indian King Porus mistakenly avoids using his breakthrough units, the elephants, underestimating the level of threat the camels could pose. Evidently these camels were prepared in such a way as to seem (although the text does not explicitly say so) in the distance almost a normal caravan of merchants. It is not by chance that Porus, when later he sees the ranks of the elephants

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[47]Anonymous, *Iskandarnamah*, 19-20. A more recent translation is Venetis, *The Persian Alexander*.

routed by the "sappers" armed with incendiary bottles, takes the blame for the mistake saying: "Alas, all is lost. It was a mistake to save the elephants first,"[48] as he had not thrown them into battle from the beginningt, having not even remotely sensed the danger.

Conclusions

The Persian authors, Ferdowsi and Tarsusi in particular, do not emphasize Alexander's cunning as does Pseudo-Callisthenes, but rather underline his wisdom in this episode. If Ferdowsi introduces Alexander to us in consultation with the Greek wise men (*filsufãn-e Rum*), Tarsusi, the supposed author of *Dārāb-nāmeh*, goes even further. He offers us a version of the episode in which he highlights the extraordinary role of Aristotle, whom the Islamic world also perceives as the master of the great Macedonian. In this regard, Tarsusi seems very close to Nezāmi who, as we have seen above, had built the whole second part of his *Eskandar-nāmeh* on the relationship between Alexander and the philosophers, presenting the Greek king as a wise man surrounded by wise men, certainly not as a "smart" character and easily resorting to expedients.[49] From this point of view, the episode narrated in the third Persian Alexander-book (see above), in which philosophers and wise men do not appear, is perhaps more faithful to the spirit of the distant Greek source.

A second consideration concerns the increase of the technical-engineering aspect that characterizes the solutions of the Alexander of the Persian authors compared to the Greek model. An entire enormous factory was set up by Ferdowsi's Alexander with 1,200 blacksmiths, "technicians" coming from Persia, Egypt, and Greece, as if to say that the best international know-how of the time came from those regions. Even Tarsusi, in the footsteps of Ferdowsi, amply underlined the technical aspect with the difference that here Aristotle is presented as an "engineer": it is he who invents the *telesm*, the decisive weapon. In the *Eskandar-nāmeh* of the twelfth-fourteenth centuries, the author, while renouncing the Ferdowsian iron army, invented a new military technique *ante litteram*, sending the troops to the assault with unprecedented "incendiary bottles" thrown by camel-drivers.

Another important element to note in this episode of Alexander's war against King Porus, particularly in the comparison between the Persian Alexander-books of Ferdowsi and Tarsusi and that of Pseudo-Callisthenes, is the presence of wheels, that is, mobility. Ferdowsi with his iron army moving on wheels/carts creates a perception of living knights and horses and therefore creates a more believable apparent threat to the elephants and soldiers of the Indian enemy. The final effect is also psychologically more impressive than that created by the "bronze statues" of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, which stand as a formidable but completely static barrier. It is true, as has been shown above, that the element of the wheels (or of the carts) was already present in the Syriac

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[48]Anonymous, *Iskandarnamah*, 20.
[49]See Nezāmi, *Kolliyāt*, 1181. On Alexander's character in all three works discussed here, see Rubanovich, "A Hero without Borders," 215-29.

version. This further corroborates the hypothesis that Ferdowsi drew on materials deriving indirectly from this source. Tarsusi, as we have seen, explicitly places the wheels under the legs of the horses, further accentuating the aspect of mobility and the likelihood of it being Alexander's army in the eyes of the enemy. Moreover, it should be remembered that, in the Syriac version, the wheels were placed not under the horses, but under a cart that carries the "brazen images … in form of men and quadrupeds." In short, Tarsusi, in painting the scene of the iron army, is certainly more incisive and realistic even than the alleged Syrian source.

Ferdowsi seems to us more convincing also from the more general point of view of the construction of the episode, which is artistically very effective and with great visual impact. It should be noted that in the chessboard of the battlefield Ferdowsi has planned to counter the elephants of King Porus with metal horses in various colors, to make the army more real, and not only with simple soldiers. I used the word "chessboard" not by chance. As is widely known, in the original Indian chess transmitted through Persia to the West,[50] the elephant, whose European counterpart is the bishop, and the horse have about the same value, although they move with different patterns. Can it be assumed that Ferdowsi had in mind the game of chess in building the episode of Alexander's battle against the Indian King Porus? In order to better face his opponent's elephants, Ferdowsi perhaps finds it more convincing that the metal soldiers are mounted on horses and that they are not just pawns on the "chessboard" of the battlefield.

Compared to the most remote source, the text of Pseudo-Callisthenes, and to the closest ones (Syriac text, further summaries or Arabic/Pahlavi reworkings), the Persian authors have not only passively received the inherited materials, but have undoubtedly been able to enliven the scene of Alexander's battle against the Indian King Porus, moving onto the battlefield an entire blazing and phantasmagorical army of metal, and giving us perhaps one of the most amazing episodes of the eastern legend of the great Macedonian.

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[50]See the famous treatise in Pahlavi on the game of chess, Italian translation by Panaino, *La novella*.

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