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Alexander the Great: *Homo Mirabilis* within Chinese and Mongolian Sources. The Transmission of Legendary Narratives from West to East

The cycle of legends about Alexander the Great fixed in the global collective memory constitutes the most relevant source for historiographical investigation, because it allows us to become aware of the prodigious permeability of the different and geographically distant cultural contexts in the process of reception of his fame, even though – in reality – these territories were not even conquered by his military expedition.

Thanks to the dissemination of both written and oral traditions, even in the Far East as a viaticum of Alexander's *τιμή*, the Eastern cultural entities – which possessed their own legendary tradition about him – have made it possible to identify the traces of the path, that has always been the most prolific scene for cultural encounters, harbouring profound influences in the sphere of contact from West to East.

This contribution represents a sort of re-examination centred on several peculiar aspects and considerations that have already been expressed in two my studies focused on some specific Eastern sources that could be considered as a legacy of Alexander the Great.¹

To introduce the dissertation of this subject, I will firstly try to expose the most popular legends that have spread throughout the Mongolian and Chinese traditions, and then I will conduct a sort of stratigraphic investigation of these same sources, which also show the traces of the path that the narrative episodes took on the route leading them from West to East.

Since the first dissemination of Alexander's *Romance* – from the late Hellenistic period to the Middle Ages and on – we have evidence of the constant activity of adaptation of the narrative plots as a consequence of the process of translation, which has also involved the introduction of new episodes contained within the numerous versions of the *Romance* that have emerged in the areas conquered by the literary character of Alexander.²

1 See Fariello (2021); Fariello/Gallo (2023) 149–180.

2 Within the vast literature dedicated to Alexander's *Romance* see especially Stoneman (2007) together with the bibliography cited there.

Nonetheless, in the different geographical areas where the numerous translations have spread, his figure has increasingly assumed multiple and peculiar aspects of context and narrative typification interconnected to the local cultural backgrounds. All these elements have led to the creation of a different perspective of observation, which has supported the foundation of 'third' spaces of connection, materialised from the study of historiographical narrative between West and East.

Thanks to the mutual influence of the different cultural realities, a peculiar type of literary fermentation of these popular legends began, as they were spreading throughout the different autochthonous substrates, initiating a process of sedimentation of considerable impact within the collective and global historical memory of Alexander's character.

In the wide range of episodes, there were sometimes specific storylines that detached themselves not only from the main plot but even from the original character himself. The epic of his heroic achievements was thus absorbed into the legendary episodes of other heroic characters bound to the local cultural contexts, as, for instance, happened in the case of the tradition of Alexander's *Romance* in Mongolia with Genghis Khan.

Now, the reinterpretation of these Eastern sources takes on a new perspective in my considerations about the specific subject of this conference. *Mirabilia* and violence, in fact, certainly constitute the two excesses that consequently mirror each other in the historiographical sources relating to Alexander. He has become an ambivalent emblem, a sort of conceptual universe characterised by a perpetual dualism, on a level comparable to the alternation of antithetical binomials, such as those found in Chinese thought, where the *yin* 陰 darkness does not only appear in a state of perpetual rotation with its solar *yang* 陽 counterpart, but mainly coexists with it in a relationship of constant complementarity: in the graphic emblem known as *taiji tu* 太極圖, the black dot in the white and, vice versa, the white in the black are indicative of how each agent contains within itself a dualism that mirrors a completeness, a fulfilment of a manifestation.

During the Middle Ages, similarly, Alexander was portrayed as a hero-knight, a guardian of the Christian faith, but also as one of the damned of Dante's hell, due to his pride that had transformed his unstoppable thirst for knowledge into the precise opposite limitation of a proud and closed mind, unable to acquire any more knowledge.³

3 On Alexander in the Middle Age see especially Liborio (1997); Stoneman (1999); Fariello/Gallo (2023) 184–190.

Through the eyes of the Arab world, as well, he was considered a virtuous prince worthy of imitation, especially in the *matnawī* lyrics that spread among the Persian courts; the Two-Horned Alexander mentioned in the *Qu'ran* saved peoples from the hordes of savage barbarians. Nevertheless, in the religious-political context of the Sasanian courts, that legitimised their authority with Zoroastrianism, Alexander was designated as the *gujastak*, the damned being who had destroyed the sacred texts of the Mazdean faith.⁴

So, following this new *yin-yang* 陰陽 perspective and investigating through a reconsideration of the sources analysed, for the purpose of pursuing an accurate survey of *mirabilia* and/or violence, it could be observed that within the Mongolian and Chinese tradition it is possible to perceive a peculiar reception of the legendary narratives about Alexander that predominantly favours the portrayal of an exemplary character, in its extremely positive meanings, to the point of depicting him as a supernatural being capable of glorious achievements, in other words: a *homo mirabilis*.

The Alexander *homo mirabilis* was already encomiastically presented by his contemporaries and by other writers of later periods. Onesicritus labelled him as a “philosopher in action”, but Plutarch elaborated an even more peculiar designation, “philosopher in arms”, to glorify his heroic deeds. His ἀρετή, and his great virtues, against an adverse τύχη, had ultimately led Nike to crown his head with victory.⁵ And, in fact, this adverse fortune, which persistently challenged his ἀρετή, became central to the λόγος of the biographer: ἀνδρεία, ‘courage’ made Alexander a man capable of heroic actions, on the same level of bravery as some of the great heroes such as Perseus, Heracles and Achilles of whom he aimed to become an emulation (Plut. *Alex. fort.* 332a-b).⁶

Among Alexander’s contemporaries, it was precisely Callisthenes who created a projection that aimed to find a new reflection of the homeric heroes’ achievements in the Asiatic campaign: the emerging champion of Hellenism shaped on a brand new version of the ἔπος (*FGrHist* 124 T 10; Strab. 13.1.27).⁷ During his heroic journey to Siwa, through the overcoming dangers faced in the Libyan desert he was consecrated as *homo mirabilis*, becoming the absolute protagonist of extraordinary events.⁸ Arrian attributed great importance to the prodigies that occurred

⁴ See Ionescu (2014); Fariello (2021) 122–124; Fariello/Gallo (2023) 165–169.

⁵ Of the work of Onesicritus only few fragments remain (*FGrHist* 134 F 1–38).

⁶ Cfr. Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.2.

⁷ Arr. *Anab.* 3.3.2.

⁸ Cfr. Callisthenes *FGrHist* 124 F 14a; Strab. 17.1.43; Arr. *Anab.* 3.3–4; Curt. 4.7.5–30; Plutarch creates many connections between Alexander and Achilles, especially in relation to Alexander’s visit to Troy (*Alex.* 15.8–9).

during Alexander's journey throughout the desert that aimed to reach the temple of Ammon: a challenge that the *homo mirabilis* set to consult the oracle (Arr. *Anab.* 3.3 4–5). And if the king's decision to undertake this expedition had the purpose of demonstrating his heroism – because it was motivated by his great desire to emulate the deeds of Heracles and Perseus, from whom he presumed to be a descendent –, the great prodigies that followed had an even more instrumental task, because they consecrated a further virtue of his, namely, the virtue of being able to call upon all others for help, as an excellent man (Plut. *Alex. fort.* 332c-d).

Alexander heroically faced the perils of the desert, just like Perseus, who had been sent by the ruler of Seriphus, Polydektēs, to claim the head of the Gorgon Medusa.⁹ As a paradoxical epilogue, Perseus' undertaking caused the death of the king himself in the very moment he looked into the eyes of the trophy delivered to him by the hero. Just like Perseus or Heracles – who had crossed Libya to conquer the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides –, Alexander was helped by prodigious events that arose to support him against the many adversities and the terrible winds from South that with their sandstorms made it almost impossible to follow the route.

Arrian, active during the reign of the emperor Hadrian, when he mentioned these events, sustains that he firmly believes in the authenticity of the prodigies that took place. Nevertheless, he criticises his sources – Aristobulus and Ptolemy –, because he thinks that they had contributed to undermine the reliability of the supernatural events recounted: because with their discrepancies they had reported two alternative versions of these prodigies, leading the readers to opine that these facts might have been mere inventions. In any case, the miraculous rains in the desert and the snakes that preceded the army showing the way and emitting sounds mentioned by Ptolemy or the two ravens that – in Aristobulus' alternative version – croaked to guide Alexander's army, were all interpreted as irrefutable attestations of divine signs (Arr. *Anab.* 3.3–4).¹⁰

But if the sovereign's divine kinship – also advocated by Callisthenes – corroborated the consolidation of an escalation already contemplated by a predestined fate and customarily appropriate to a son of the gods, Alexander, on the other hand, insisted on a legitimacy of a status that was continually reconfirmed through his heroic deeds.

His *modus operandi* apparently seemed to disengage himself from the privileges inherited by his divine lineage. The ruler did not seem to take advantage of what

⁹ On Alexander's possible reasons for claiming he descended from Perseus, see Sisti (2001) 469–470.

¹⁰ Cfr. Strab. 17.1.43; Diod. Sic. 17.50.6 and 51.4; Bosworth (1977).

Friedrich Nietzsche would have called the “first attribute of divinity”: “light feet”, a fundamental feature that for the philosopher distinguished the god from the hero, who, on the other hand, with his labours stood in opposition to the will of the gods. He had overcome the adversities by means of his heroic deeds, thus, he had made a sort of objection to the destiny that had been appointed for him by the gods.¹¹

Transposing to Alexander this theoretical elaboration rationalised by Nietzsche, it can be said that his steps have to be considered as ‘heavy-footed’. He insisted with particular emphasis on his typical nature, endowed with a special disposition that revealed a supernatural charisma and that was able to trespass beyond the limits of his humanity on the purpose to overcome it: just to confirm himself as *homo mirabilis*.

I suggest that maybe these were the pre-established requirements of a legitimacy discourse, elaborated to make him able – thanks to his achievements – to even better design his ‘public divine ascension’ since he stood as a semi-divine hero. He stepped into history with his ‘heavy feet’, because he was a *homo mirabilis*, who legitimised himself as an extraordinary man, so that he could present himself as a hero, the new Heracles; thanks to his labours, Alexander faced an adverse τύχη.

Constantly struggling with fortune, with his fate, he ascended to a divine status, not only thanks to his hereditary lineage but also by means of his heroic achievements he ascended to the Olympus.

Plutarch tells of Alexander’s great proudness of the many wounds he had suffered in battles. He gloried in his scars that he “carried around as images of virtue and courage engraved on his person” (Plut. *Alex. fort.* 331c).

At the time of his expedition towards the East, his peculiar *modus operandi* made him able to actively involve the populations he was incorporating as subjects of his new ‘multicultural empire under construction’, thanks to the assimilation of customs, iconographic patterns of representation and rituals of local cultures. According to his dynastic manifesto, the sovereign intended to be regarded as the highest authority, adopting a universal language to achieve a global recognition, that, in my opinion, we could almost define as an ‘extreme multilingualism for the legitimacy of political power’.¹² In Plutarch Alexander describes himself as a *homo mirabilis*; in the presence of Diogenes, he portrays himself as a civilising hero comparable to Heracles:

But now, oh Diogenes, forgive me, I imitate Heracles and I am an emulation of Perseus, and following the footsteps of Dionysus, the progenitor god and ancestor of my family [...].

¹¹ Nietzsche (1983) 57.

¹² On this aspect see, for example, Plut. *Alex.* 45.

Thanks to me they will know Diogenes and Diogenes will know them. It is necessary that I counterfeit the coinage and alter the barbaric element with the imprint of a Greek form of government (Plut. *Alex. fort.* 332a).

His desire to create a universal empire took the form in a transformation of the conquest project itself: Alexander did not merely present himself as a ruler of the West conquering the East, but he became the rightful successor of the Eastern sovereigns. From the former presentation of himself as a Panhellenic champion, Alexander transformed his public image to become the universal monarch of the new cosmopolitan world's empire. Once he had reached Asia, the history of Greece came to be recorded on the pages of Eastern history: thanks to Alexander the events of two worlds were thus unified in a single history book.

Plutarch reports that Alexander – described by him as a “philosopher in arms” – was able to surpass the theories of his master Aristotle by implementing a new philosophy of government. In fact:

[...] (he) did not follow Aristotle's advice to deal with the Greeks as a hegemon (ἡγεμονικῶς) and with the barbarians as a dominus (δεσποτικῶς), taking care of the former as friends and family and treating the latter as one would treat animals or plants, [...] he gathered into one body the members scattered on all sides as if he were mixing in a cup of friendship (κρατῆρι φιλοτησίῳ) the lives characters, marriages, ways of life, and forced everyone to consider the inhabited land as their homeland, the army as their stronghold and bulwark, the gentlemen as kin and the wicked as strangers. He taught not to distinguish the Greek and the Barbarian by the chlamys and the shield or by the scimitar and the caftan, but to recognise the Greek by virtue and the Barbarian by wickedness, to consider clothes and tables, marriages and ways of life, mingled by blood and offspring, as common – Plut. *Alex. fort.* 329b-d.

And so, even during the centuries that followed his death, his fame as *homo mirabilis* spread further and further eastwards, towards the remote regions that had not even been conquered by his military successes. In reality, the variety of environments and the assimilation of exotic elements coming from the outside of the original narrative core would have been indicative of the important cultural influence brought about by the popular legends that travelled along the caravan routes of the Silk Road and crossed different geographical areas from West to East.¹³

So maybe we can affirm that it is possible to trace such a route, like the Silk Road: an ‘Alexander’s Fortune Road’.

¹³ On the Silk Road there is an extensive literature. Among the most recent works see especially Hansen (2012); Frankopan (2016). For a re-examination of the Silk Road notion see Waugh (2007); Chin (2013) 194–201.

These are the legends that transcend the boundaries of Alexander's historical reality, mixed with myths and literary fictions. These tales, perhaps, could be seen as a kind of sublimation of his military expedition, which has driven him throughout the unknown, from the West to the Far East, triggering events of a prodigious order, in a fantasy World populated by supernatural creatures: from the voyage on griffins, to the encounter with sirens, – which his literary character faces in the two different iconographic variants: as orthomorphic creatures and also as mermaids, thanks to the introduction of the episodes set in China by means of the Syriac version of the *Romance*.¹⁴

For this reason, is it possible to approach Middle Eastern and Far Eastern sources; they could be considered as a legacy of Alexander the Great's fortune. They constitute a counterpart to the Greco-Roman sources and leave room for a deeper study of the impact that the historical figure exerted even in territories not directly affected by his military conquest. Alexander's *Romance* soon began to spread throughout the Eastern World: it was probably the translation into Syriac – according to others, the translation into Persian – that became one of the main references for the subsequent translations handed down both orally and through written sources, so that Alexander's fortunes could reach ever more distant territories from the West to the Middle East, as far as Mongolia and China.¹⁵

The journey to Mongolia of these legendary themes echoes in literary evidence: an ancient anonymous manuscript identified with the acronym 'TID 155', which together with other documents was found in the early twelfth century in Turfan, Xinjiang by a German archaeological survey. The manuscript, in a fragmentary state, compiled in the Mongolian language with annotations in the language of the Uighur Turks, was studied and translated into German in the 1950s by Nicholas Poppe; it turned out to be a Mongolian version of Alexander's *Romance*.¹⁶

Within this version, Alexander's designation, Sulqarnai, has been identified by Poppe as the Mongolian equivalent of the Arabic-language attribute Zul Garnain (Dhū-l-Qarnayn, meaning the 'Two-horned One').

Francis W. Cleaves¹⁷ compared this version with others, detecting similarities that highlight the fervent exchange between the different cultures that met between West and East in mediaeval times. The text summarises Alexander's life in four narrative episodes, and presents a common denominator, a thematic thread that binds the different plots of the tale: the search for the 'Water of Life', hence

¹⁴ The encounter between Alexander and the sirens is also mentioned in Alexandre de Bernay's *Roman d'Alexandre*: see Liborio (1997) 297–298.

¹⁵ See Fariello (2021) 131–150; Fariello/Gallo (2023) 170–180.

¹⁶ See Poppe (1957); Cleaves (1959); Fariello (2021) 135–137.

¹⁷ Cleaves (1959).

immortality, through the ascension to Mount Sumur, or the cosmic mountain Sumeru in Indian tradition.¹⁸

I will focus exclusively on two episodes, belonging to the Mongolian tradition, which show evidence of the local reception and assimilation of legends imported into the indigenous cultural context: the legend of the ‘peoples of Gog and Magog’ and the ‘Land where the Sun rises’. The latter told of how Alexander reached the farthest place to the east.¹⁹

Its spread to the Mongolia cultural tradition is believed to have developed thanks to the mediation of Central Asian peoples (probably the Turks), who in turn would have passed on the story that was originally conceived within Nestorian circles.²⁰

John of Pian del Carpine (a missionary who was Innocent IV’s ambassador to the Mongols in 1246) reports in his *Historia Mongalorum* an episode set in the legendary land invaded by Genghis Khan (also mentioned in Alexander’s journey) in which Genghis, like Alexander, in fear, set off with his army to North-East after leaving the Caucasus Mountains, and then, eventually, after his journey across the desert, he reaches the ‘Land of the Sun Men’, Nara irgen (*nara* in the Tatar language means ‘Sun’ and *irgen* ‘men’). In this Mongolian narrative tradition, this episode is explicitly believed to be an autochthonous legend.²¹

The episode describes the story of legendary men who had dug their residences underground, under the mountain. The Tartars – after the fight against the local populations – had to prostrate themselves on the ground – face downwards – because the deafening noise of the rising sun had caused the death of many soldiers.

At a later time of the story, the legend tells of Genghis Khan’s wife; she had been taken prisoner by these people, who lived in territories located at the edge of the World where there was only the ocean.²²

During the summer season, at dawn, the deafening noise of the Sun rumbled close to the earth. The Sun’s hostility meant that no one dared to live in the open

18 About the connection between the cosmic mountain Sumeru in Indian tradition and Mount Meros, which is said to have been visited by Alexander near the city of Nisa (Curt. 8.10.12; Arr. *Anab.* 5.2.5–6), see Grossato (2008) 287–290.

19 On the legend of Gog and Magog see especially Schmidt/van Donzel (2009).

20 See Fariello (2021) 130–131; Fariello/Gallo (2023) 171.

21 On the ‘Land of the Sun Men’, reported by John of Pian del Carpine, see Pullé (1913) 77. The story is also reported with a few differences in a chronicle composed by the Franciscan C. De Bridia, who was part of the mission of John of Pian del Carpine, but had stopped on the banks of the Dniepr. Two versions of it survive. See also Painter (1995). The other manuscript was found in 2006: cfr. Guzman (2006) 19–25.

22 The historical events of Genghis Khan in the sources are often mixed with some mythical or legendary material. On this subject, the bibliography is extensive. I mention here only de Rache-wiltz (2004); Biran (2007).

air. The fear of dying due to the noise and lightning, the local people beat huge drums and other instruments in their caves to cover the deafening sound of the Sun with their drums.

Referring to the episode of the peoples of Gog and Magog, it must be stressed out that probably it is possible to trace back a reception process in the Mongolian cultural area, occurred before the time when Alexander's *Romance* became popular in Asia; this historical framework can be connected to the dissemination of its version introduced by Persian literature.²³ In fact, the genesis of this transmission phenomenon has to be traced back to the times when the Nestorian missionaries, who set out from the region of present-day Iraq (Seleucia-Ctesiphon, centre of the Nestorian patriarchate), brought the Christian religion to the populations settled in Central and North Asia.²⁴ This is, therefore, the case of a legacy that was literally 'transferred' into the Mongolian popular tradition's imaginary.

The theme of this episode is the predominant factor that persists and transforms itself according to the local tradition. In this case, it should be considered the genesis or rebirth of the Mongols. The legend is also contained in the collection of the Persian Rashīd al-Dīn: there, it is told that the Mongol peoples, after being trapped for centuries in a valley surrounded on all sides by high mountains and impenetrable forests, had managed to escape by casting an iron barrier.²⁵ The intricate breaking down of the barrier had been done by burning huge quantities of wood and charcoal and using 70 pairs of bellows as mantices – which were made from the oxen that the Mongols had sacrificed –, to feed the flames.

This episode is a symmetrical version of what is known as 'Alexander's Iron Gates', also identified as 'Alexander's Wall'. In the Mongolian legend, Alexander's Wall is an iron barrier that will be destroyed to free the peoples of Gog and Magog.

According to the events of Gog and Magog narrated in the *Bible*, and later repropounded in the Syriac and Ethiopic versions and in the *Qur'an*, the character of Alexander represents a sovereignty enlightened by religious faith.²⁶

However, the sovereign becomes a prophet with salvific traits like Muhammad in the *Qur'an*. In the 18th Sura of the *Qur'an* – the *Sura of the Cave* (*Sūrat al-Kahf*) –

²³ On Alexander's Wall in Persian tradition see Rubanovic (2016).

²⁴ For a comprehensive overview of Nestorianism (more correctly named the Church of the East) in China and Central Asia, see Borbone/Marsonne (2015); Takahashi (2019).

²⁵ On Rashid-al-Din see Boyle (1971) 19–26.

²⁶ The legend of the imprisonment of these peoples has been associated with two passages of Flavius Josephus where Gog and Magog are identified with the Scythians, and mention is made about Alexander's enclosing with an iron gate the peoples who lived in the Caucasus region (*BJ* 7.4.4; *AJ* 1.6).

the legendary ‘Alexander’s Wall’ is described as a fortification of very ancient origins, located in remote territories and built by Dhu-l-Qarnayn, the Two-horned Alexander or Iskandar for Arabic sources.²⁷ An interesting thing to note is that in linguistic terms, the word *qarn* relates to different ideological representations of the ruler. It is no coincidence that in Arabic *qarn* can be interpreted as ‘horn, epoch and century’, all of which could be linked to Alexander. He is a sovereign, son of Zeus Ammon or the Two-Horned, who divides the historical epochs in two with his life and deeds – from classical era to the Hellenistic age – thus splitting a century in the short and mutilated span of his mortal life. In fact, Alexander the Great has often been referred to as the ‘man of two eras’.

Thus, through a process of osmosis, the experience has been transferred from one legendary ruler to another: Alexander the Great’s discovery of the ‘Land where the Sun rises’ is an experience that had become part of the historiographical narration of the Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan, who was also the founder of a universal empire that later extended with Mongol rule from East to West.

According to Nöldeke, therefore, the presence of some specific episodes included within the novel in the Syriac language could confirm the thesis of the novel’s authorship, which would be attributable to an author identifiable as a Nestorian monk stationed at the court of the Sasanians.²⁸

The mythical figure of Alexander can also be found in some Chinese works of the late period, within some geographical sources that seem to be connected to the ancient narrative tradition inspired by the curiosity for knowledge of the new – almost fantastic – worlds next to the West areas beyond the frontiers of the Chinese empire. This desire to acquire information about these territories officially turned out to be materialised when, in 138 B.C. – after a series of unofficial contacts – the Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BC) established a diplomatic mission and the emissary Zhang Qian 張騫 arrived to the Western Territories (Xiyu 西域) in Central Asia, where the political realities of the Greek-Hellenistic *ecumene* were settled.²⁹

The first explicit mentions appear in Chinese sources only from the Southern Song 南宋 era (1127–1279), 1500 years after Alexander’s death. His historical figure is recorded in the *Zhufan Zhi* 諸蕃志 by Zhao Rugua 趙汝适 (1170–1231), in the

27 On Alexander in Arabic sources and in the *Qur’an* see Polignac (1982) and (1984); Fariello (2021) 124–126; Fariello/Gallo (2023) 162–165.

28 Cfr. Cleaves (1959); Boyle (1974).

29 Chapter 123 of Sima Qian’s *Shiji* – which was finished around 90 BC – is an account of the historical events relating to Zhang Qian’s mission (?–114 BC), and provides a series of data on the territories and ethnonyms of Central Asia. Its contents are repeated almost *verbatim* in chapter

coeval *Shilin Guangji* 事林廣記, compiled by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 and later expanded during the Yuan 元 (1279–1368) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) eras, and in the *Sancai Tuhui* 三才圖會, an illustrated Ming-era encyclopaedia by Wang Qi 王圻 and Wang Siyi 王思義 compiled in 1607.

This could be described as a historical echo of the mythical image of the ruler, in which popular legends concerning episodes related to an unusual king kept his memory alive.

The *Zhufan zhi* (Chronicles of foreigners/barbarians) is a significant descriptive text on foreign territories and peoples during the Song dynasty. Here is the relevant passage useful for our discussion:

《過根陀國》

過根陀國，勿斯里之屬也。相傳古人異人徂葛尼於瀕海建大塔，下鑿地為兩屋，磚結甚密；一容糧食，一儲器械。塔高二百丈，可通四馬齊驅而上，至三分之二。塔心開大井，結渠透大江，以防他國，兵侵則舉國據塔以拒敵。上下可容二萬人，內居守而外出戰。其頂上有鏡極大，他國或有兵船侵犯，鏡先照見，即預備守禦之計。近來為外國人投塔下執役掃灑數年，人不疑之；忽一日，得便盜鏡拋沉海而去。

Egentuo 過根陀

The kingdom of Egentuo (Alexandria) belongs to Wusili (Egypt). According to the tradition, in ancient times, an extraordinary ancient man, Cugeni, built a large tower on the shore of the sea, in the depths of which he dug two chambers; the bricks were tightly bound to each other, to the point that there was not even the smallest space left. In one of the two rooms (under the tower), there were stored supplies of grain and cereals, in the other cellar were placed weapons. The tower was 200 *zhang* high. Four horses could pass through it and be led to the upper floors up to two thirds (of the height of the building). In the heart of the tower there was a large well, connected to a canal that led to a large river. To avoid invasions by armies from other countries, the entire kingdom relied on this tower to repel the enemy. In all its height (the tower) could accommodate 20,000 people. Some stayed inside to guard and others went outside to fight. At the top (of the tower) there was a gigantic mirror. When there were warships from other states coming to invade the country, the mirror would let them see them in advance, and plans for defence were immediately prepared. In recent times, it has been given to a foreigner a task to undertake a corvée and a cleaning job at the foot of the tower. No one doubted him. Then suddenly, one day, as soon as he had the chance, he stole the mirror, threw it into the sea and left.³⁰

This account needs some necessary explanation. Cugeni 徂葛尼, the name of the ‘extraordinary man’ (*yi ren* 異人) that appears in the passage is the phonetic

61 of the *Hanshu*, the history of the Han dynasty, compiled two centuries later by Ban Gu; cfr. Hulsewé (1979).

30 Hirth/Rockhill (1911) 147.

transliteration of Dhu-l-karnein, the epithet by which Alexander is known in the Arabic tradition. This name appears here in the section of the kingdom or country of Egentuo 遏根陀, a toponym that turns out to be the phonetic rendering of ‘al-Iskandariyah’, Alexandria, that is, Alexandria in Egypt, described as belonging to Wusili 勿斯里, a toponym identified with Egypt. Zhao Rugua’s description of the fantastic tower on the seashore naturally recalls the Lighthouse of Alexandria, and reflects the excitement and impact of the majesty of the monument, which in ancient times was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the World and which exercised amazement on the explorer. According to the tradition, the monument, designed and built by the architect Sostratos of Knidos in a period from the early phase of Ptolemy I’s reign until 280 B.C. – and for whose design huge amounts of money (800 talents) had been invested – could be seen from up to 50 kilometres away, being between 100 and 130 metres high.³¹

The lighthouse for Zhao Rugua became even more than 200 *zhang* high, a measure that would be equivalent to an improbable height of more than six hundred metres. There is probably a symbolic value here, intended to represent the majesty of the monument created by an extraordinary man.

In this regard, it is interesting to note the adjective that is ascribed to the figure of the sovereign to whom the construction of the lighthouse of Alexandria is erroneously attributed: he is a *yiren*, a *homo mirabilis*.

The Chinese adjective *yi* 異 in the ancient language has the meanings of ‘extraordinary’, ‘different from others’, with a positive connotation, but also ‘foreign’: therefore, it also connotes a relationship of otherness.

In my translation, I have rendered *yiren* as ‘extraordinary man’, *homo mirabilis*, especially in view of the narrative atmosphere of the *Zhufan zhi* passage. The second translation option is ‘a foreigner’. It cannot be entirely ruled out in the context of this geographical work, which is a description of another, different, ‘foreign’ World. The passage, however, closes with a reference to another character who is entrusted with the task of defending and cleaning the lighthouse. The term used to define his status, however, is the more direct *waiguo ren* 外國人, still used in Chinese as a synonym for ‘foreigner’.

In the last lines, Zhao Rugua specifies that no one had ever doubted this man, who is described in the final part of the text as the one who throws the huge mirror of the Alexandria lighthouse into the bottom of the sea and then leaves. The stranger described in the conclusion of the quotation could be a destructive, negative, *yin* 陰, dark version, as opposed to the *yang* 陽 stranger, a positive figure, mentioned at the beginning. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the

31 On the Lighthouse of Alexandria see Fraser (1972) 17–20.

story told by Zhao Rugua can be regarded as the re-proposition of a legend belonging to the Arabic tradition of Alexander's *Romance*. In fact, there is a similar tale from a tenth-century encyclopaedic work compiled by Mas'ūdi, the *Murūj al-dhahabwama'ādin al jawhar*, which describes the lighthouse of Alexandria as a decaying minaret, providing a narrative explanation to justify the monument's deteriorated condition. It is interesting to note how the denomination of the lighthouse described in Mas'ūdi's work as a minaret, a *manāra*, can also be found in the translation and adaptation of the Chinese version by Zhao Rugua, who defines the lighthouse with the Chinese term *ta* 塔, which traditionally indicates the pagoda, an architectural structure derived from the Indian *stūpa* that in China assumed a significant development in height.

The story of Mas'ūdi tells of a Rūmi (which means Byzantine and also indicates the Eastern Roman Empire people) spy who indulges the greed of the Umayyad caliph, Walid I (705–715), with whom he was in service, by taking him to discover treasures in Syria. In this account, the spy tells the caliph about a great treasure hidden by Alexander beneath the lighthouse of Alexandria, and he also explains that the Macedonian ruler had placed a huge mirror to protect it, from which he would sight his enemies to alert the soldiers. The caliph went to Alexandria with the spy who, after destroying the mirror and the lighthouse, escaped to the Byzantine emperor.

A further analogy with the Chinese text can be found in the work of the Andalusian geographer Gharnāti (1080–1169/1170), the *Tuhfat al-albab*. The legend of the destruction of the lighthouse of Alexandria (that probably was elaborated by the Egyptians due to the pre-Islamic rivalry between the patriarchs of Constantinople and Alexandria), travelled all the way to China, thanks to the seafarers of the trade routes that reached Quanzhou: Zhao Rugua himself – who held the position of inspector of foreign trade – may have heard this story from his informers who were also travellers of the maritime trade routes between China and the Islamic world.³²

The second Chinese source is the *Shilin Guangji* 事林廣記 (Extensive Notes on a Forest of Events). It is a kind of encyclopaedia for everyday use, compiled by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚 in the last phase of the Southern Song, thus several decades after the *Zhufan zhi*. The text was later extended in the Yuan era (1279–1368) and the Ming era (1368–1644).

The contents of this encyclopaedia cover a very wide range of topics, also useful in everyday life, including the lives of merchants, their methods of calculation and even a list of city markets. A list of colloquial terms and a large number of

³² Yamanaka (2012).

illustrations are also included; this work was elected as a model for later Chinese encyclopaedias. Here is the short passage about Alexander:

沙弼茶國前後無人到，惟古來有聖人名狙葛尼曾到其國，遂立文字。後載其國係太陽西沒之地。至晚日外聲若雷霆，國王每於城上聚千人吹角鳴鑼擊鼓，混雜日聲，不然則小兒驚死也。

The kingdom of Shabicha had never been visited by anyone. In ancient times, there was only one wise man, named Jugeni, who came to this kingdom and succeeded in establishing writing there. Later, it was recorded that this country is connected to the land where the sun disappears in the West. In the evening, when the sun disappears, it produces a sound similar to thunder. The ruler of the kingdom often gathers thousands of people on the walls of the city to blow horns, ring gongs and beat drums, so that they can mingle with the sound of the sun, otherwise the small children would be frightened to death.³³

Alexander is mentioned here as Jugeni 狙葛尼. The phonetic transliteration differs slightly from that used by Zhao Rugua in *Zhufan zhi*, where Alexander is mentioned as Cugeni. Very often, names of foreign origin could be subject to variations over time or in different geographical areas that were influenced by dialectal and pronunciation variations. In this particular case, the change of the first syllable from *Cu* 徂 to *Ju* 狙 could also be a consequence of a mere matter of spelling, since there is only a variation in the radical between the two synonyms.

This time, the ruler is mentioned in connection with a kingdom called Shabicha 沙弼茶. This was a land where no one had gone before the coming of this man, who is given the appellation *shengren* 聖人, a term found in both Confucian tradition and the Daoist spiritual hierarchy, indicating a being of supreme intellectual and spiritual stature. The adjective *sheng* 聖 can be translated as ‘wise, sacred, holy’ (*shengren* indicates Christian saints in modern Chinese) and also emperor. Each of these meanings can indicate the features of the character of Alexander as *homo mirabilis*: he is a wise, sacred emperor, legitimised by his ‘divine origins’, as the tradition of the king’s dynastic history dictates, and therefore he is considered ‘holy’ because he is deified by his people. Within the quotation, Alexander is the only human being who had travelled as far as to the kingdom of Shabicha, where he gave rise to the writing of chronicles concerning those territories, and thus to the historical records that describe him as “connected to the land where the sun sets in the West”.

In this passage, the ruler of this kingdom celebrates the sunset by gathering his people to blow their horns, ring their gongs and beat their drums, covering the strange thunder-like sound emitted by the star as it disappears over the horizon, so that the children of the kingdom would not be frightened to death.

³³ Chen (1963).

The same tale is repeated *verbatim* in the *Sancai Tuhui* 三才圖會 (Collected Illustrations of the Three Realms), a Ming-era work (1368–1644) compiled by Wang Qi and Wang Siyi in 1607.

The name of this legendary kingdom, Shabicha, corresponds to Jabarsa, an imaginary city at the Western end of the World, sister to its counterpart at the eastern end of the Earth, called Jabalq.

These two cities of the Far East and Far West appear in the above-mentioned 18th *Surah* “of the Cave” within the *Qur’an*, in connection with the ‘Two Horned’, which reaches the two ends of the world.

Moreover, the same episode is mentioned by the *Zhufan zhi*, although the name of the ruler is not specified and, therefore, there is no direct connection with the character mentioned in the episode of the Lighthouse of Alexandria described in account of the reign of Egentuo in Zhao Rugua’s work.³⁴

It can be said that this story is a Chinese adaptation of the ‘Land of Darkness’ where the Sun thunders the people. This episode also has particularly strong points of contact with the above-mentioned plot from the Mongolian version of the Alexander’s *Romance*, which was assimilated and reworked as a narrative theme in the local tradition. In this regard, Cleaves states that most probably the episode can be considered a reproduction of the Mongolian traditional tale, that probably could be the main source of the *Sancai Tuhui*.³⁵

Moreover, I suggest that because the episode also appears in the *Zhufan zhi*, although the name of the sovereign remains anonymous, it cannot be definitely excluded that the Chinese source may have benefited from a transmission process under the influence of Arabic tradition.

Nevertheless, I would point out that it can be assumed that Mongolian tradition, perhaps, has been influenced both by the Ethiopian version of the *Romance* and by Persian narrative traditions: the connection is quite evident especially within the specific episode reported by the *Shilin guangji* and the *Sancai Tuhui*, displaying similarities with the narrative of Alexander’s journey where robot men, resembling mechanical devices, appear. In this episode, Alexander’s faithful companion, named Balinas, builds a bronze automaton that plays the drum to bring down a dangerous typhoon. Thanks to the sound of the percussion performed by this mechanical man, the devastating impact of the typhoon is mitigated and the storm is placated. Although the passage does not seem to be

³⁴ Hirth/Rockhill (1911) 153. Due to an inversion in the order of the Chinese characters that make up its name, the land where the Sun sets is here named Chabisha.

³⁵ Cleaves (1959) 28.

slavishly reproduced in the *Shilin Guangji* and the *Sancai Tuhui*, the influence of the tale in the Ethiopian version of Alexander's *Romance* seems quite clear.³⁶

In relation to the numerous versions of Alexander's *Romance*, it can be concluded that the story of the short Chinese text is an adaptation of the 'Land where the Sun rises' that made deaf the people. In this episode is also possible to find particularly evident points of contact with the above-mentioned plot from the Mongolian version of the *Romance*, assimilated and reworked as a narrative theme of the folk tradition.

The spread of Alexander the Great's fortune in China can also be considered as a legacy that the Arabic world has donated to the Far East: it is the memory and the achievements of the conquering hero, wise ruler and builder of unprecedented monumental works, in other words, a *Homo Mirabilis*.

It was not until 1500 that the phonetic transliteration of Alexander's name would be introduced as Lishan wang 歷山王 by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who during his stay in China also wrote the *Jiaoyou lun* 交友論 (Treaty On Friendship) in Chinese, transmitting to the eastern World anecdotes about the Macedonian sovereign in the form of dialogues based on Plutarch and Curtius Rufus as sources.³⁷

It will thus be the first attestation in Chinese sources of a Western phonetic transliteration. For the very first time in the translation process and adaptation of his name, the new version of Alexander's name moves away from the idea of the 'Two Horned', fixed in Eastern memory. Favouring a more semantic rendering of the name in Chinese, Matteo Ricci alludes to the mountainous land of Macedonia, as the name 'King of the mountains' suggests.

Thanks to the Jesuit missionary, the narrative material on Alexander was greatly enriched and revealed a sort of restoration of the original classical model, coming from the most ancient Greco-Roman sources, which had perhaps contributed to the developing of legendary episodes that later materialised in the Middle East and Far East tradition with the affirmation of the literary character of Alexander. We find, in fact, a correspondence in the Plutarch *corpus* dedicated to Alexander and in Curtius Rufus in the dialogues that build the framework of the character of the sovereign, who becomes a high example of the virtues conveyed in China in the *De Amicitia*.

Going back to the origin of the legend, it must be affirmed that Alexander himself was a restless creator of his own myth. This is testified by an episode, reported in a passage by Diodorus Siculus (17.95.1–2), concerning the moment

³⁶ Lusini (1994) 111.

³⁷ Alexander also appears in another work by Ricci, the *Jiren Shipian* 畸人十篇 ("Ten Discourses of the Man of Paradox"). Cfr. Fu (2023).

when Alexander the Great reached the extreme point of his conquests, the Hyphasis river:

Thinking about how he could have marked the limits of his campaign there, he first erected the altars of the twelve gods, each fifty cubits high, and then laid out the circuit of the field triple the size of the existing one. He dug a ditch fifty feet wide and forty feet deep [...]. He ordered the infantry to erect tents, each containing beds five cubits long, and the cavalry [...] to build two feeders twice as large as normal. Likewise, anything else that was left behind was exaggerated in size. His idea was to build a camp of heroic dimensions, leaving the inhabitants proof of men of great stature, who had the strength of giants.

This passage has been connected to the Chinese history compiled by Sima Qian 司馬遷, the *Shiji* 史記 (first century BC). Within the historical work, it is told that at the very beginning of his reign, the First Emperor Qin Shihuangdi ordered a collection of weapons from all over the ecumene in the capital Xianyang, to melt them down and create twelve bronze statues, weighing about a thousand *shi* (about 60 tons!), which were placed in the imperial palace.³⁸

The idea of making the colossal bronze statues originated from the emperor's desire to reproduce the 'giants' (*daren* 大人), dressed in 'barbarian' (*yidi* 夷狄) clothes, that in the year of the empire's foundation (221 BC) – but before unification – had been seen at Lintao 臨洮, on the western border in Gansu 甘肅. A similar sign, usually considered inauspicious, after the unification was instead interpreted as a positive sign by the ruler, who then ordered the creation of bronze statues (*jinren* 金人) reproducing the giants.

On the basis of these historical sources, Lukas Nickel puts forward the hypothesis that the tradition of Qin statuary, which suddenly emerged with the Terracotta Army and the other artefacts found in the First Emperor's Mausoleum, can therefore be traced back to this initial imitative impulse. He also supposes that the term 'giants' (*daren*) did not actually refer to giant beings, but to statues in another material and not in bronze.³⁹

The occurrence of the term *daren* would rather be connected to a utopian tradition formulated by Chinese culture, the origin of which could be traced precisely in the diffusion of the episode narrated by Diodorus within the cultural circles of China at the time, perhaps through the intermediation of other populations. Within this framework, the peoples of the far West would have been regarded as giants of heroic proportions, precisely in accordance with the idea that Alexander the Great himself would have wished to leave behind himself and the warriors of his army.

³⁸ Sima Qian (1982) 240.

³⁹ See Nickel (2013).

Therefore, this could be seen as an image of greatness or a self-created portrait of *homo mirabilis* elaborated by the ruler himself. An example is the passage from Diodorus, in which he presented himself as a giant of heroic dimensions, not only great in spirit and virtues.

However, it is not known whether the appellation μέγας was programmatically adopted by Alexander: this title in his contemporary sources would seem to have been used in reference to the Macedonian ruler, but this does not, however, constitute proof that Alexander self-designated himself in this way.⁴⁰

In conclusion, it has been underlined the great impact that the figure of Alexander has exerted over the centuries and especially throughout the Eastern World, even in the territories that were not conquered by his military expedition.

However, not only it can be said that during the following centuries the figure of Alexander enjoyed great fortune in the Eastern world, but also that Eastern culture had a great impact on him. This is particularly evident with regard to the great fascination that the Persian empire exerted on him. Following his victory in 331 BC, Alexander transformed himself from a champion of Hellenism into an Eastern monarch, adopting 'barbarian' customs and establishing kinship ties.

The exotic attributes he incorporated in the royal ceremonial and costumes were not only intended to create a dialogue with the subjugated populations. As he crossed the eastern borders, he probably discovered that the horizons that opened up for him during his expedition were much broader. So, it is probable that the appellation μέγας could be considered a reflection of the title by which the Achaemenids used to designate themselves.

Alexander became the rightful successor of the Great King of Persia, like the ancient Oriental rulers he admired, and according to the sources, he was fascinated by him.

Like Cyrus the Great, Alexander became Μέγας Αλέξανδρος.⁴¹ In this regard, we must not forget the parallelism of the *Anabasis* that Arrian dedicated to Alexander with the probable influence of the ancient work of his favourite author Xenophon, who had dedicated to the Great King of Persia the *Cyropaedia*.⁴²

In the reception of Alexander's achievements, the 'orientalising' element and the parallelism with the great rulers of the Eastern world could be recognised very clearly, because Alexander became the rightful heir to the throne of the two

⁴⁰ Cfr. Plutarch who designates Alexander μέγαλοψυχότερος δ'Αχιλλέως (*Alex. fort.* 343b). Cfr. Cagnazzi (2005).

⁴¹ Strabo designates Alexander a φιλόκυρος (11.11.4); see also Burliga (2014) 135.

⁴² Another connection could be detected in the work of Onesicritus, that was considered a sort of story of Alexander's *paideia* and seemed to be inspired by the work of Xenophon: see Brown (1949); D'Angelo (1998) 29.

worlds he had unified. Hence, by presenting himself as a legitimated descendant of the Achaemenid rulers, he became a king of kings by assuming the title of *shā-hanshāh*, adopted by Cyrus II the Great (who reigned 559–ca. 529 BC), which transposed to the Greek World would find resonance in the appellation μέγας.⁴³

Alexander's enterprise made it possible for the history of two Worlds, West and East, to merge within a single narrative space belonging to a geographically larger World, throughout the contingency of boundary lines of political and cultural horizons that were brought into contact.

It is not only the passage from Diodorus that gives us confirmation of the young Macedonian ruler's perfect awareness of the potential of self-fulfilling prophecies, especially in the self-construction of his own myth. Plutarch informs us of the epithet 'both: a good king and a good soldier', dedicated to Agamemnon by Homer, which Alexander often used to designate himself.⁴⁴

Plutarch narrates how Alexander himself, by pronouncing the epithet of the supreme poet, aimed to give a glimpse in the ancient ἔπος describing a prophecy that during Homer's time already would have predicted his coming. However, we can discern the reflection of these gestures, aimed at the sovereign's self-consecration, immortalised with his τιμή.

Definitely, we can trace elements of this λόγος in his several achievements, and also in the prodigious events attested from the sources during the expedition to the Libyan desert. Other supernatural events are narrated by the sources, such as the προσκύνησις of the sea in the presence of the king (Callisthenes *FGrHist* 124 F 31) and the account of a miraculous spring that prodigiously emerged in Lycia near the city of Xanthus, bringing to the surface a bronze tablet with signs of ancient writing that revealed that the Persian empire would be destroyed by the Greeks (Plut. *Alex.* 17.4).

Furthermore, in Aeschin. *In Ctes.* 132, it can be perceived the sense of astonishment and destabilisation in the contemplation process about the imprint that Alexander was able to leave even on his contemporaries: "What bizarre and unexpected event has ever occurred in our time? The life we have lived is not an ordinary life, but we were born to be an object of wonder for our descendants". And again...

I believe that, at that time, there had never been any population or city or a single man to whom the name of Alexander had not come; for this reason, I cannot believe that a man who has no equal among human beings was generated without some divine influence (Arr. *Anab.* 7.30.1).

⁴³ Cfr. Cagnazzi (2005).

⁴⁴ Plut. *Alex. fort.* 331c; Hom. *Il.* 3.179; Xen. *Mem.* 3.2.2.

As it emerges from Arrian's statements, within the thoughts of the ancient men who wondered about Alexander, there was already a strong awareness that, despite his excesses and mistakes, he definitely stood as a *Homo Mirabilis*.

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