

## From the Mediterranean to Universality? The Myth of Alexander, Yesterday and Today

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*Few myths have had as widespread a diffusion among different civilizations as the legend of Alexander the Great. From its beginning during Alexander's lifetime, the myth aimed at illustrating special rights to universal sovereignty. For this very reason, it was of long-lasting interest to various figures in Mediterranean history who, for political, ideological or religious motives, made claims to world-wide authority. But since Alexander had built his own image not as the hero of a conquering civilization, but as a universal figure mediating between various peoples, his myth could never be appropriated, and remains one of the transcultural bridges our time so dramatically needs.*

When Alexander the Great reached the edge of the ocean at the western end of the world, he found a strip of land that closed off the Mediterranean, allowing passage between Africa and Andalusia. In order to separate the two continents and put an end to the fighting between their peoples, he had the Straits of Gibraltar dug. The slightly higher ocean waters then rushed into the Mediterranean, inundating several towns in the process. Such, at least, is the legend told by certain western Arab authors, Idrîsî, for example. In contrast, others wrote that Alexander had a bridge built over the Straits in order to join the two continents and continue his conquests.<sup>1</sup> In these tales, one can readily identify the transposition (for once highly faithful) of the legend of Hercules, as related by Diodorus Siculus (IV, 18, 5–6). Here, too, the hero is credited with the two contradictory exploits of opening up or narrowing the passage between the ocean and the inner sea. On the whole, Arab authors forgot Hercules, but his statue remained standing at Cadiz until the end of the twelfth century, giving rise to opposing interpretations. One held, for example, that the idol's outstretched arm indicated the entrance to the Mediterranean to sailors coming from the ocean; another that, conversely, it barred passage between the two seas.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing could more aptly symbolize the two ways of interpreting Alexander's posthumous glory as it spread down through the centuries, extending far beyond the geographical and historical setting in which it was forged. Did it stand for a genuine opening to universality, building bridges and acting as a guide towards undreamt-of passages between cultures? Or, alternatively, did it represent a gradual loss of original meaning and historical truth, drowned by the torrent of belated inventions and fanciful interpretations that only the outstretched arm of critical reason can hold back? Even more than the exploits that gave birth to it, the conqueror's fame, at the beginning of the modern era, extended far beyond the Mediterranean setting, reaching beyond Europe to Ethiopia and all of Muslim Asia, as far as Indonesia. This fame, however, was based almost entirely on a legendary vision of the conqueror, conveyed by the extraordinarily prolix offshoots of a Greek *Life of Alexander the Macedonian*. Attributed by Byzantine scholars to Callisthenes, Aristotle's nephew, this work was actually composed in Alexandria in the third century AD, that is, in the historical context of the Roman Mediterranean, whose imprint can be clearly seen in the oldest version of the text.<sup>3</sup> Another striking fact is that a map of the legend's distribution over the three continents can be very neatly superimposed on a map of other 'facts of civilization' that arose on the shores of the Mediterranean, in particular the three great monotheistic religions. So what link can be made, through Alexander's image, between the Mediterranean, where it took shape, and the rest of the world? Is it possible to attempt an understanding of how a legend that was forged and remodelled according to specific historical contexts could become an almost universal myth? Can the fable be seen as revealing a truth while, at the same time, conveying mental representations adopted and adapted by very different civilizations?

In order to do this, we must first rid ourselves of the linear conception of a progressive transformation of history into legend, through deformations and accretions, becoming ever more unlikely with the passage of time. It is true that from the first known version of the pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander was not only the conqueror of Greece, Darius and Poros: he also subjugated Rome, the Occident and the whole of India. His insatiable desire led him beyond the limits set by all the great conquering figures supposed to have preceded him (Heracles and Dionysos, the Pharaoh Sesostriis and Cyrus the Elder) to the outermost bounds of the known world, in the process discovering and fighting the strangest imaginable peoples and animals. As revealed to him in a dream by the god Serapis when Alexandria was founded, the Macedonian was master of the inhabited world, the universal sovereign *par excellence*. In later versions, emphasis was placed on the far-fetched dimension of his adventures, and the fascination with the

inaccessible, by including new developments inspired by the appearance of legends that were circulating independently. These were in the form of 'Alexander's Letters' on exploring remote regions. Tales of diverse origin, which had not appeared in the oldest version, thus spread and became universally popular, greatly exciting the imagination: how the hero voyaged through the dark regions of the Land of the Blessed, where he came close to discovering the source of immortality; how he dived to the depths of the ocean in a glass bell; and, lastly, how he rose up into the atmosphere in a gondola or basket borne aloft by eagles or griffins. This was a particularly famous episode in the West, where it gave rise to a fertile iconographic tradition.

The myth of Alexander is, however, far more than a wild fabrication. A study of the sources reveals that in fact, the original author of the myth was often Alexander himself. He did not hesitate to construct his own legend by directing the presentation and dissemination of his story in accordance with his political designs, thereby providing later generations with both material and instructions for continually rewriting the myth.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore misleading to contrast the so-called 'historical' biographies (whether the 'vulgate' inspired by Clitarchus's *Life of Alexander* or those by Diodorus Siculus, Justinus, Quintus Curtius and Plutarch, or Arrian) with the legendary lives. Both versions, carefully worked out in parallel, may have as a common source the same myths, invented during the conqueror's own life or in the Hellenistic period.

The theme of universal sovereignty, which remained a fundamental driving force behind all the adaptations of the legend, illustrates this process particularly well. It appears on the occasion of one of Alexander's most celebrated adventures: his voyage to the Libyan oasis of Siwah in early 331, after conquering Egypt, to consult the oracle of the god Ammon. Most of Alexander's biographies deal with this initiative at length.<sup>5</sup> After the perilous crossing of the desert, where the king and his army escaped death thanks to divine intervention, Alexander is said to have been greeted as the Son of the god by the prophet of Ammon. Then he is said to have received from the oracle confirmation of his divine origins, together with the promise of a universal empire. However, none of the accounts we have of this episode can be considered reliable testimony, all of them being inspired by the 'official version' which Callisthenes published two years after the visit. This was at a time when, having inherited the legacy of the murdered Darius, Alexander was preparing the ground for an imperial and absolute monarchy, radically opposed to the traditional conception of Macedonian royalty. In this context, whatever the conqueror's innermost belief about his birth, the idea of his divine origins and invincibility was very useful in making his exceptional nature known and freeing him from ordinary laws.

The descriptions and interpretations of the episode provided by ancient authors reveal more about how Alexander subsequently made use of it to impose his conceptions, than they do about the precise content of the oracle's message, and its original import. The Libyan sanctuary, despite its remoteness, was familiar to the Greeks, who had discovered it through the intermediary of the city of Cyrene. The god, identified with Zeus, had long been venerated in parts of the Greek world, and his oracle, already renowned, had received distinguished visitors, including the Spartan naval commander Lysander at the end of the fifth century BC.<sup>6</sup> There was thus nothing exceptional about Alexander's visit. It is perfectly understandable that the conqueror was anxious to consult such a famous oracle at the crucial moment when, Egypt having been vanquished, he was preparing himself to set out once more for Asia, with an eye to the decisive confrontation with Darius. What appears to be less likely is that he should have wanted to question the god about his birth. The legends surrounding Alexander's conception, the revelation his mother had supposedly made to him in secret as to the mystery of his origins, are probably nothing more than inventions which *a posteriori* reinforced the myth of his divine paternity.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the title of 'son of Ammon' was simply the local version of the name that had long made Egypt's sovereigns the sons of Amen-Ra; it was far from being a privilege granted to Alexander alone. The latter had no doubt performed the rites at the Memphis temples, which conferred on him the authority of legitimate sovereign of Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, these initiatives were of interest only to the Egyptians, and more particularly to the clergy, whose confidence was indispensable for the establishment of Macedonian rule; hence, they were scarcely remembered by Greek historians. On the other hand, the Siwah episode could speak to the Greeks and Macedonians; as a result, its importance grew, perhaps in Alexander's own mind, and in any case in his political strategy and historiography.

The fortunes of the ensuing myth by far exceeded its inventor's initial intentions. The conqueror's death could have led to the stagnation of a legend intimately connected with his person, if, as was initially planned, his body had been buried at Siwah. In contrast, however, it was to have a new destiny, thanks to the clever Ptolemy, who managed to exploit it for his own ends. Ptolemy, appointed satrap of Egypt in 323, had immediately renounced the ambition (which was to prove fatal for most of the other Diadochi) of reconstituting Alexander's empire for his own benefit. Instead, he endeavoured to put his regional power on a solid footing, and to this end he sought to win over the local elites, in particular the clergy, as Alexander had done previously. Thus, when in 321 he captured the king's remains, which were being taken to Macedonia, he first had Alexander buried at Memphis. In this way, the conqueror was presented as the heir of the

Pharaohs.<sup>9</sup> It is probably on this occasion that Ptolemy arranged to issue the first coins on which Alexander, his forehead decorated with the ram's horn, the emblem of Ammon-Zeus, and his head covered (in imitation of Heracles wearing the lion's skin) with an elephant's remains, symbolizing his Indian victories, was represented as both son of the deity and the unvanquished conqueror. Possession of Alexander's body enabled Ptolemy to revive the two founding myths and the two conceptions (Egyptian and Greek) of the universal power of the deceased. He thus benefited from the specific legitimacy which they conferred, particularly when, following the example of his rivals, he finally assumed the title of king. More than anyone else, Ptolemy could then present himself as the conqueror's heir.<sup>10</sup>

It was no doubt after Ptolemy was proclaimed king that Alexander's body was transported from Memphis to Alexandria. There, Alexander was both founder of the new capital of Egypt and protector of the new dynasty that used him as its authority. This transfer represented a major change, because it turned the conqueror's tomb and myth into the foundations of the universalist ideology developed by the Ptolemaic monarchy. Instead of reigning effectively over the entire empire, it was in fact the Ptolemies' intention to make Alexandria into the symbolic capital of the inhabited world and of their line, the heir to the project of universality attributed to Alexander.<sup>11</sup> The Ptolemies' use of Alexander's memory favoured the birth of Alexandrian legends, whose traces are to be found in the vulgate, and above all in pseudo-Callisthenes. In the latter, Alexander's paternity is attributed both to the god Ammon and the Pharaoh Nectanebes, the last Egyptian sovereign, who was driven out by the Persians and took refuge in Macedonia (Nectanebes II actually fled to Nubia). Having managed to win the favour of Olympias through his talents as a magician and astrologer, Nectanebes informs her that she must mate with the god Ammon in order to bear a son who would avenge Philip's wrongs. He then sends her a dream in which the queen sees the god Ammon (identified by his ram's horns) mating with her and predicting the birth of this son. Lastly, disguised as Ammon, Nectanebes becomes intimate with Olympias and conceives Alexander (1.4–7). But when Alexander later reaches Siwah, the god Ammon recognizes him as his own son. He also indicates to him where to found a city that would preserve the memory of his name forever (1.30). Having identified the site in question, the conqueror builds Alexandria and discovers there an ancient shrine of the god Serapis, sovereign of the universe. He makes a sacrifice to the god, who later appears to him in a dream and takes him by the hand to lead him to a mountain, where the deity announces to Alexander that he will be invincible and the city everlasting: it will be the 'capital of all the inhabited land', where his body will rest and where kings of all nations will come to honour him as a god (1.33). Having

subsequently reached Memphis (in fact, Alexander arrived from the west, after having subjugated Rome and Carthage), the conqueror discovers a statue of Nectanebes, the subject of a legend according to which this king would return, not in the shape of an old man, but as a young man, in order to deliver Egypt. Alexander then embraces the statue, exclaiming, 'This, then, is my father and I am his son' (1.34): things have come full circle.

The most remarkable elements of these Alexandrian tales are, on the one hand, the fusion of the two myths (Greek and Egyptian) of the king's conception, and, on the other, the fact that the myth of the imperial investiture shifts from Siwah to Alexandria. Simultaneously the son of Ammon and the son of Nectanebes, Alexander stands at the crossroads of a Greek legend born out of the Libyan pilgrimage and the ancient Egyptian tradition of the Pharaoh's divine conception, as it had been elaborated at Thebes. There, in the temple of Luxor, built under Amenophis III (1408–1372), the scenes carved on the walls of the room of the 'divine birth' show how the king was begotten by the god Ammon. The god had assumed the appearance of the father of Amenophis, Pharaoh Thutmose IV, in order to become intimate with Queen Moutemouia, foretold by Isis, when dreaming of the god's coming. After the birth, the baby is presented to Ammon, who recognizes him as his child. The king is thus son of both his earthly father and the god who formed his divine essence, his *Ka*.<sup>12</sup> Despite the differences between a sacred narrative and a phantasmagoria bordering on farce, the parallels with the legend of Nectanebes/Ammon and Olympias are sufficiently precise to allow it to be seen as a belated and distorted echo of the Theban myth. This is all the more likely since restoration work was carried out in the name of 'Alexander son of Ammon' in the very heart of this temple, which was designed in its entirety as a place for the legitimation and deification of the pharaoh. Ancient myths were therefore undoubtedly transferred to the Macedonian among the members of the Egyptian clergy in person, in the process of preserving and adapting the national traditions to the new political and cultural context. This process is symbolized by the figure of one Manethon, a priest at Heliopolis, counsellor to Ptolemy I and author of a Greek-language history of Egypt.

It is also significant that, in pseudo-Callisthenes, the oracle uttered by Ammon at Siwah relates no longer to Alexander's invincibility, but to the site where Alexandria is to be built; the revelation to the conqueror of his universal destiny is thus subordinated to the founding of the city, since it falls to the god Serapis. The latter, 'invented' by the first Ptolemies by combining the attributes of Greek deities (Zeus, Plouton, Asclepius) with the Memphite cult of the bull god Osiris-Apis, and particularly dear to the dynasty, had become the great protecting divinity of the city as well as the symbolic figure of Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>13</sup> This shift made the creation of

Alexandria into the decisive moment of Alexander's imperial investiture; it also transformed the account of the city's origins into a myth of the founding of a predestined metropolis, whose fate was identified with the promises of universal and eternal glory given in this location to the *cosmocrator* and affiliated with his remains. On the other hand, there is a striking absence from these accounts of another divinity, Dionysos, despite his paramount status in the official elaboration of the Alexandrian myth in Alexandria itself.<sup>14</sup> The figure of Ammon, exclusively associated with the person of Alexander, could not by itself guarantee the devolution of the conqueror's legitimacy to the Ptolemaic dynasty. Now Dionysos had long since been looked upon as the conqueror of a fabulous Orient, and the Macedonians thought they had rediscovered traces of his passage or identified local forms of his worship among certain Indian peoples. Alexander could therefore be said to have walked in the footsteps of the god, and the theme of the Oriental (and above all Indian) triumph became common to both conquerors. The Ptolemies endeavoured to develop the myth of Alexander, 'the new Dionysos', in order to turn it to good account for themselves. Distantly related to the Macedonian royal family, they could call on the spirit of the god, who was one of their mythical ancestors. The representation of Dionysos' Indian triumph (followed by a chariot bearing the statues of Alexander and Ptolemy I) in the procession organized by Ptolemy II for one of the first *Ptolemaia* – festivals created in honour of his parents, who were deified in 279 – was one of the first demonstrations of a propaganda campaign intended to demonstrate the continuity between the god, the conqueror and the new dynasty. So Dionysos rapidly became the mythical founder and protector of the Ptolemaic line, as well as the linchpin of an ideology that combined the god triumphant, Alexander unvanquished and the Ptolemies, descendants of the former and heirs of the latter. It was a single image of conquering royalty, whose Oriental victories symbolized the universal dimension.

The Dionysian myth plays only a modest role, however, in pseudo-Callisthenes, as well as Alexander's Herculean image, which it both completed and challenged. At the most, there are sporadic references to the conqueror's exploits, which ultimately surpass even those of Heracles and Dionysos. This expunging reveals one of the aspects subsequently at stake in the myth. In fact, the Herculean and Dionysian themes of royal propaganda tended to recur in the various forms of Alexandrian imitation that spread around the Mediterranean. At the same time, there was an increase in those vying to be included in the performance of the conquering, absolute and charismatic monarchy for which the Macedonian had provided the model: not only the Ptolemaic or Seleucid kings and, on occasion, the Hellenized dynasts such as Mithridates, but also the Roman *imperatores*,

and in particular those active in Greece and the East. It was these *imperatores* who, despite a hostile tradition, essentially republican and national or philosophical in nature (particularly on the part of the Stoics), which denounced the tyranny and degeneracy of the Oriental despot, or feared the role that might be played by the memory of the conqueror in resistance to Rome, hastened to appropriate the myths and symbols of the *imitatio Alexandri* in order to consolidate their personal power. They emerged victorious from this political and ideological competition waged on a Mediterranean-wide scale. Pompey, Caesar, Mark Anthony and Octavian thus contested the role of the conqueror's emulator or heir, sometimes playing up the comparison with Hercules and Dionysos in their triumphs, like Pompey, or Mark Anthony, who differed in making immoderate use of Dionysian attributes. Several emperors – Caligula and Nero, and then Commodus, Caracalla and Alexander Severus – in turn pretended to be the new Alexander, as well as the new Hercules or the new Dionysos, sometimes to the point of infatuation.<sup>15</sup>

The Roman appropriation of Alexander's Herculean or Dionysian image explains the unobtrusiveness of this image in the late Alexandrian legends. Indeed, these have fairly obvious anti-Roman overtones, not only when they tell of Alexander going to Italy to receive the submission and tribute of the Romans (1.29), but also in the course of the prophecies revealed to the conqueror by Serapis in the ancient recension (1.33). When the god predicts that Alexandria will flourish and 'surpass the more ancient cities', the reference is clearly to Rome, which had by then supplanted Alexandria in the role of a metropolis with universal claims. This may be the reason why this phrase disappeared from the first Latin translation by Julius Valerius. When Serapis announces to Alexander that kings will come from all over the world to kneel before his remains, this is a transparent appropriation of the pilgrimages that Cesar Octavian, and then Caligula, had made to the conqueror's tomb. Their purpose was obviously not to acknowledge Alexandria's supremacy, but, on the contrary, to show who would be the Macedonian's true heirs. Indeed, Octavian had even refused to visit the tombs of the Ptolemies, stating that he 'had wanted to see a king, not the dead'.<sup>16</sup> Through their myths, the Greeks of Alexandria protected themselves against the Romans' appropriation of their founder and his story. Serapis's assurances concerning the eternal glory of the city, 'ornament of the world, eternal source of envy', are an almost literal reply to the words in which the orator Aelius Aristide, in the second century, epitomized the Roman appropriation:<sup>17</sup> 'This unique accomplishment, the only monument which he [Alexander] left behind and which is not unbefitting to his noble nature, by which I refer to the city which bears his name close to Egypt – this he founded for our benefit, so that it would become ours, so that it would be, after ours, the greatest city of our empire.'



Thus it is obvious that a simple process of fabrication provides no insights into the constantly renewed topicality of a myth, where, particularly during periods of political upheaval, what was at stake was the legitimation of particular rights of sovereignty via the appropriation of the memory and model of the conqueror. But transmitting these rights to actors of the universal history who grew ever more numerous and distant would not have been as effective without the extraordinary adaptability of the myth, which allowed the most unanticipated reinterpretations. Just one example will suffice to describe this infinite capacity for mutation. The legend referred to earlier, according to which Alexander had subjugated Italy and Rome, is inserted in pseudo-Callisthenes just after the reference to a wonder: his passage, dry-footed, through the sea that bathed the coast of Pamphylia, and which had receded before Alexander (1.28). Plutarch and Arrian also report the episode, the latter explaining that the coastal road taken by the king and his army between Lycia and Pamphylia could only be used when there was a north wind, since it was under water when the wind blew from the south. Through a miracle, the wind had turned and begun to blow from the north just as the Macedonians reached the road.<sup>18</sup> The abrupt change from Asia Minor to Italy, which the pseudo-Callisthenes then inflicts on his hero, doubtless results from the confusion between Lycaonia, which is where Alexander was supposed to be going, and Lucania. But this re-routing is of interest for reasons beyond the absent-mindedness that probably gave rise to it. This episode of the receding Pamphylian sea, which opened to Alexander the road to Rome and universal conquest, also opened the road to Jerusalem to him. What followed was a prodigious career as a servant of God, and this took him far further than any other aspect of the myth. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, working to record Jewish history in terms familiar to Greek thought in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, could not let pass the opportunity to establish a link between two founder-heroes – Moses and Alexander – in order to show that the crossing of the Red Sea was no more surprising than that of the sea of Pamphylia, these miracles forming part of God's designs.<sup>19</sup> The episode showed that the destruction of the Persian Empire took place within the perspective of a providential history, whose final revelation is entrusted, in Josephus, to another legend, which appears in the Talmud as well as in certain recensions of pseudo-Callisthenes.<sup>20</sup> This is the conqueror's arrival in Jerusalem, where he prostrates himself before the High Priest Iaddous, who was waiting for him on Mount Scopus resplendent in all the emblems of his office. To his dumbfounded companions, Alexander explains that he is actually prostrating himself before the god whose pontiff had appeared to him in a dream, while he was still hesitating to move on to Asia, in order to assure him that he would conquer the Persians. By making his vision concrete, the

meeting with Iaddous proves that his expedition was guided by the God of Israel, to whom the king then offers a sacrifice in the temple. And when he is shown the Book of Daniel, with the prophecy of the victory of the single-horned goat of the West (a Greek, according to the accepted interpretation) over the two-horned ram of the East (the empire of the Medes and the Persians), Alexander clearly recognizes himself in the victorious Greek.<sup>21</sup>

This account consists of a breathtaking series of traditions and legends that have been turned around and fitted into each other. Alexander's prostration of himself is the mirror image of the famous obeisance which the conqueror once tried briefly to demand from the Macedonians and the Greeks, as well as from the Persians, when he succeeded Darius. The premonitory vision of the High Priest is in the tradition of all the dreams or visions that precede those decisive crossings on which the fate of empires depends; these include that which spurred Xerxes to cross the Straits (in the other direction) in order to conquer Greece. Alexander's self-identification with the empire-destroyer of the prophecy in the Book of Daniel, obviously written after the event, completes the circle between the text, the event and the exegete. Finally, one cannot fail to note numerous parallels between this account and the Alexandrian legends: the dream where the conqueror sees himself promised victory by an individual who is both radiant and venerable; the sacrifices made at the city's temple; the revelation scene that makes Alexandria or Jerusalem the place where the king sees confirmation of the divine essence of his undertaking. This always takes place on an elevated site: the mountain where Serapis takes him, Mount Scopus ('lookout') outside Jerusalem. All are common elements, albeit differently combined. In actual fact, in Josephus the immediate consequences of the transformation of Alexander into the servant of the God of Israel remain limited to local affairs. The episode is in effect inserted into the tale of the disputes (which actually came about much later) between the Jews and the Samaritans, in order to exclude better the latter's claims to religious separatism. But the long-term consequences were of universal scope: Christianity and Islam inherited this conception of the conqueror and breathed into it a new vigour by remodelling it to their liking. And to the extent that for the Jews, as for Greek kings or Roman emperors, appropriation of Alexander's memory proceeded from the wish to affirm specific rights in the organization of the world, this central theme of the myth also became part of Christian and Muslim legend. In the West, the influence of Josephus, from this point of view, was considerable.<sup>22</sup> Its full extent can be judged by examining the frescoes that Pope Paul III ordered from Perin del Vaga and his studio for the Sala Paolina of the Castel Sant'Angelo in 1545. The dual iconographic design of this ceremonial hall – the lives of Alexander and of Saint Paul – refers to the image of his

authority which this pontiff, Alexander Farnese, aspired to give in the temporal world. Strikingly, the first scene in the life of Alexander, on the north side of the vault, the starting point of the reading of the iconographic cycle, is the one in which the conqueror prostates himself before the High Priest Iaddous (just above the conversion of Saint Paul, the starting point of the other cycle). There could be no clearer reading of the eminent authority the pontiff intended to impart to the sacred power, relative to the earthly powers.<sup>23</sup>

The Pamphylian sea episode is just one example of the symbolic games resulting from the theme of passage, of crossing. The crossing of obstacles, and in particular of rivers and other expanses of water, is indeed a recurrent theme in the lives of Alexander, in particular in Arrian's *Anabasis*. In Arrian's account, victory over natural obstacles is one of the forms assumed by the conqueror's *pothos*, his insatiable desire to go ever further, his craving for space and discovery, to the point where the hero appears as master of navigation and of the river crossings that mark his progression.<sup>24</sup> Any crossing, however, can assume an initiatory meaning. Thus, the theme of the triumphal crossing of a body of water is one sign of testing the sovereign's legitimation in a vast array of traditions. It is manifested, for example, in the Iranian world: for Cyrus the Great marching on Babylon, the first stage in the formation of the Persian Empire; for Xerxes on his way to Greece in 481; and lastly for Cyrus the Younger, also marching on Babylon in 401, the crossing of a normally impassable river or a strait constitutes a decisive test.<sup>25</sup> The subjugation of the watercourse, whether by force (Cyrus the Great) or by miracle (Cyrus the Younger, before whom the level of the Euphrates dropped until the river could be crossed), demonstrates the legitimacy of the conqueror, while the rebellion of the Hellespont against Xerxes foreshadows the defeat of the Great King. The royal Macedonian legend itself presents a comparable episode, recounted by Herodotus: Perdicas, founder of the dynasty, whose royal destiny is said to have been revealed in a quasi-accidental fashion, escaped the killers pursuing him as a result of the providential flooding of a river he had just crossed.<sup>26</sup> Alexander had the very same adventure in pseudo-Callisthenes: separated from Persepolis by the River Stranga, which freezes between sunset and sunrise, and flows during the day, the king, wishing to make his way to Darius, disguises himself and crosses the river at night (2.14–16). Unmasked, he is forced to flee and escapes his pursuers by re-crossing the river at dawn, just before the ice breaks up; but in the meanwhile he had been led to Darius' palace by the king himself, who took him by the hand, like Serapis in Alexander's dream, and in this gesture of involuntary investiture, Alexander sees – rightly – the sign of his future victory.

Thus, because it assumes the dimension of an investiture or an initiation,

the crossing of a body of water plays a fundamental role in the construction of legends, by lending itself remarkably well to all kinds of modifications and reinterpretations. As a narrative threshold, it makes possible the smooth introduction of the strange and the wondrous. Often, monster-infested lakes and seas bar the way to unknown, hostile worlds. Such is the river that stops the army in the *Letter from Alexander to Aristotle on the Wonders of India* (3.17), or the ocean whose crabs prevent Alexander from reaching the island where voices inform him of his imminent death (2.38). In the *Letter to Olympias and Aristotle*, which, in the Byzantine  $\beta$  recension, contains Alexander's most fantastic exploits (2.23–9), reaching a river whose stones impart a black colour to all those who touch them marks the transition between the previous series of encounters with the savage peoples, and the subsequent series of fabulous voyages (the immersion in the ocean, the exploration of the Land of the Shades or the Blessed, and the voyage in the atmosphere). Finally, the theme of the river that can be crossed intermittently serves as a basis for drawing a parallel between the two imaginary and utterly antithetical societies of the Brahmans or Gymnosophists and the Amazons. The former peacefully enjoy the fruits of a generous nature and mock the conqueror's insane ambition.<sup>27</sup> Now, in pseudo-Callisthenes, they live separated from their wives, who only reunite with them each new moon (3.5). More specifically, according to the *Treatise on the Peoples of India and the Brahmans*, written by Bishop Palladius in the fourth century and included in certain manuscripts of pseudo-Callisthenes,<sup>28</sup> they live on one of the banks of the Ganges and their wives on the other, with the monsters that infest the river allowing free passage only 40 days a year (3.9–10). Similarly, the historians constantly refer to the meeting between Alexander and the queen of the Amazons, (normally to shed doubt on it) in the context of meetings with the horse-riding peoples of the plains, Scythians and Chorasmians.<sup>29</sup> But pseudo-Callisthenes has these fierce women warriors living apart on an island in the middle of a river inhabited by ferocious animals, and separated from the men, who till the soil and whom they meet during the 30-day period of annual festivities (3.25–7).

From here, one can trace this theme through the most diverse texts and cultures. In the  $\gamma$  recension of pseudo-Callisthenes, perhaps already Christianized, but in any case greatly influenced by Jewish traditions, it is by crossing a new obstacle, the Ammorhous, in other words the river of sand (actually of sand and water, which flow alternately every three days), that Alexander enters the world of fabulous peoples and animals (2.30). This river of sand has a counterpart in the Jewish legend of the tribe of Levi who, removed by God from the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar and hidden from the rest of humanity in order to live peacefully in equality and piety, was separated from the world by the river Sambation, whose sand ceased to flow

on the Sabbath day.<sup>30</sup> The analogies between this society of the just and that of the Brahmins and their respective rivers are so striking that a comparison is inevitable. Indeed, it does appear in the *Book of the Countries* by the Arab geographer Ibn al-Faqih (tenth century) where Alexander, at the western edge of the world, crosses a river of sand when it stops running, on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and encounters a tribe of Israelites who call themselves Brahmins and live a life of poverty and prayer.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the Amazons' inaccessible island (in certain Byzantine versions of pseudo-Callisthenes it is encompassed by a bronze wall) together with the very ancient myth of the Isle of the Blessed, constitutes the origin of what was to become the best-known legend: the City of Copper that Solomon built at the ends of the earth, a legend that was also known to Ibn al-Faqih and became the subject of one of the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>32</sup> By making one crossing after another, Alexander thus reaches the furthest thresholds of the earthly universe and attempts to step across them in turn. It is here that a final legend, one of the most famous, makes it possible to grasp all the complexity of the interactions between the myth of Alexander and the image of the sovereign, while revealing the importance of the iconography in the genesis and the reworking of its main themes: Alexander's voyage in the atmosphere, in a gondola borne aloft by two griffins enticed by bits of meat on the ends of spears held by the king.<sup>33</sup> This account is not included in the oldest version of pseudo-Callisthenes: it appears only with the late Greek recensions of the eighth or ninth centuries and in the tenth-century Latin translation of Archpriest Léon de Naples, the source of an enormous body of texts. However, the constitution of the legend is more ancient, and results from combining several types of tales and representations. The stratagem of the gondola pulled by eagles had long been known in the Orient; it appears for example in the ancient Jewish legends of the *Wisdom of Ahikkar*.<sup>34</sup> The replacement of eagles by griffins (solar animals whose psycho-ritual function appears clearly in Roman funerary symbolism in the imperial period) and the insertion of the airborne voyage in pseudo-Callisthenes immediately after the quest for the Islands of the Blessed and the source of immortality in the Land of the Shades (a form of voyage in the Beyond) show that the episode lies at the crossroads of two representations. One is that of the universal conqueror impelled to leave the earthly universe to reach first the abode of the dead, and then that of the gods. The other is that of the celestial, indeed solar, apotheosis, of the deceased sovereigns as disseminated in the Roman world of the second and third centuries.<sup>35</sup> This voyage, like the immersion in the ocean that is sometimes associated with it, allows the *cosmocrator* to transcend the limits assigned to ordinary mortals. However, it also brings him up against the limits of his condition: Alexander cannot attain immortality in his lifetime

and must return to earth. The result is an ambiguity that influences all the variations on the theme. In the Talmud, this same exploit is attributed to Solomon and to Alexander, because they are both universal sovereigns guided by God. However, the most ancient allusion to this adventure (doubtless fourth century), in the Jerusalem Talmud, underscores the limits imposed on the insatiable ambitions of the great conquerors. Alexander, aloft in the skies, is said to have seen the earth like a ball and the sea like a cauldron; statues show him holding a ball, because he reigned over the entire earth, but not with a cauldron, because only God reigns over the sea.<sup>36</sup>

By referring to a statue (specifically, a representation of a sovereign typical of late imperial iconography) this brief allusion highlights a facet of the myth's genesis on the basis of the interpretation of figurative monuments. Numerous traces of this can be found in the importance accorded to specific gestures in pseudo-Callisthenes, such as those of Serapis or Darius taking Alexander's hand (2.61) and that of Alexander embracing the statue of Nectanebes in Memphis (1.34). In another version, this statue holds a globe in its left hand, while its right hand holds a crown that it is placing on the conqueror's head (2.27). These all recall ancient representations of investitures or triumphs of sovereigns: for example, the *dextrarum junctio* of the Romans and the accolade of the Tetrachs in the sculpted group of Venice. Another token of this is Alexander's appearance in the Koran (Surat *The Cave*) metamorphosed as the 'man with two horns', evidence of an independent legend, already manifest in Syriac texts. There, the memory of portraits of the conqueror with the ram's horn of Ammon, or as the *cosmocrator*, his head bearing a lunar crescent, and possible echoes of Daniel's dream blend with other elements, in particular the legend of Moses, whose forehead radiated beams of light as he came down from Mount Sinai.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the development of the image of the sovereign, in particular the shift to a frontal, symmetrical representation of the king on his throne or triumphal chariot, in keeping with the oriental model (which became canonical in late antiquity and in Byzantium) played a paramount role in fixing the iconographic scheme of Alexander's journey aloft. The Coptic textiles of the seventh and eighth centuries, sources of a later iconographic tradition, illustrate the shift from the image of a conquering Alexander, still close to the official representation of the triumphant emperor, to that of the hero shown full face, on a chariot (and then, the West, in a gondola or on a throne) surrounded by griffins, characteristic of ascent.<sup>38</sup> The airborne journey thus subsumes the traditional signs of victory and the divine consecration of the king.

The very broad dissemination of this legend and its representations throughout the medieval West, where it sometimes symbolized the Macedonian's excessive pride – as in the mosaics of the cathedrals of

Apulia (Otranto, Trani) – makes all the more interesting a comparison with its rewriting in the Muslim East, which will provide a final idea of the progressive universalization of the myth. The Arab sources are not unaware of the stratagem of the airborne voyage in a gondola. This, however, is the doing of ungodly, proud and conquering tyrants, blinded by excess. Like the Babylonian Nimrod or the Persian Kay Kavous, they have in mind an assault on heaven and are punished by God; the Persian miniatures show them in exactly the same way as Byzantine and Western iconography represents Alexander's exploit.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, in the Muslim tradition Alexander is shown as ascending to heaven led by an angel, who is showing him the broad expanse of the earth, subject to his power by God himself. This ascent takes place at Alexandria, immediately after the founding of the city. The Arab tradition turns out to be far more faithful to the original basic framework of Alexandrian legends about the revelations of Serapis than are the Byzantine and Latin traditions. At the same time, it brings Alexander closer to the prophets who, like him, are led away by an angel to be initiated into the mysteries of heaven. Nevertheless, Alexander does not go as high as the prophets: his ascent, like the vain efforts of the ungodly conquerors, stops at a point from which it is possible to gaze on all the earth, but not to see the heavens open. This play of oppositions and similarities is a perfect illustration of Alexander's special position in the Muslim imagination. Vested in the Koran with an eschatological task – confining the impure peoples of Gog and Magog behind a wall that will not collapse until Doomsday – Alexander conquers the world in order to smooth the paths of revelation, without himself being a prophet. His mission thus places him at the watershed between the history of the great ancient sovereigns and the history of the prophets, and his myth unifies the time of universal empires and the time of revelation.<sup>40</sup>

And it is here, undoubtedly, that the ultimate truth of the myth resides: always between two worlds. Because he had himself wished it thus, Alexander always found himself both sufficiently close and sufficiently distant to make it possible, situated between these two, to envisage the unity of history and attain the universal. It is also this which, to this very day, imbues his legend with a meaning far beyond the civilizations that developed it and have handed it down to us. Because it defies any final appropriation, and ultimately exists only in a movement of crossing from one shore to the other, the myth of Alexander conceals an invitation to accept the unexpected and the finite. As early as the Arab legend, and even more in the great Persian poets, in particular Nezâmî, initiation into finiteness and discovering limits, far from being a sign of failure, constitutes the necessary condition for the revelation to Alexander of the universality of the mission that God has entrusted to him.<sup>41</sup> In the midst of the arrogant

aggrandizement of cultures blind to their own weaknesses and the intransigence of refusals and withdrawals (in our own day, some see confrontation as the only form of contact between civilizations) the myth of Alexander embodies acceptance, devises transition, and encourages listening to others, an attitude of vital importance in the Mediterranean first and foremost, but elsewhere as well.

*Translated by Ruth Morris*

#### NOTES

Some parts of this paper were originally written for volume II.3 of the collection *I. Greci*, edited by E. Seltis (Einandi, forthcoming).

1. Idrīsī, *Description de l'Afrique et de l'Espagne*, ed. and trans. R. Dozy and M. De Goeje (Leyden, 1866), p.198; Ibn Khallikan, *Biographical Dictionary*, trans. De Slane, Vol.III (London, 1866), pp.481–2; Maqrīzī, *Khitāt*, trans. Bourriant (Cairo, 1895), p.45.
2. Ibn Khallikan, op. cit., p.482; Abu Hamid al-Gharnāṭī, *Tuhfat al-albāb*, ed. and trans. G. Ferrand, JA 207, 1925, p.69; Al-Maqqarī, trans. P. de Gayangos, *The History of the Muhammedan Dynasties in Spain* (London, 1840), pp.77–9.
3. On the genesis of the 'Pseudo-Callithenes' and its innumerable adaptations and translations (first Latin translation made in Rome in the fourth century, various Greek versions; for example, composed in Alexandria and Byzantium from the fifth to ninth centuries, then ramifications and variants which proliferated and spread through the Middle Ages from Sweden to Ethiopia and from Spain to Mongolia), the basic works are still: R. Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexanderromans* (Munich, 1975); G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956); D.J.A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus* (London, 1963); Ch. Frugoni, *La Fortuna di Alessandro Magno dall'antichità al medioevo* (Florence, 1978); L. Braccesi, *L'ultimo Alessandro* (Padua, 1986).
4. As definitively demonstrated by P. Goukowsky, *Essai sur les origines du mythe d'Alexandre* (Nancy, 1978–80).
5. Diodorus Siculus, 17.49–51; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 26.10–27.9; Arrian, *Anabasis*, 3.3–4. See also the analysis by Goukowsky, *Essai ... I. Les origines politiques*, 1978, pp.24–5.
6. I. Malkin, *Myth and Territory in the Spartan Mediterranean* (Cambridge, 1994), pp.158–67.
7. Plutarch 2.3–3.5: In a dream, Olympias had seen her belly struck by lightning, or a snake had shared the queen's bed.
8. Arrian, III.I.4, D. Crawford, 'Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis', in D. Crawford, J. Quaegebeur and W. Clarysse, *Studies on Ptolemaic Memphis* (Louvain, 1980), pp.5–6.
9. A. Schmidt-Colinet, 'Das Grab Alexanders der Grosse in Memphis?', *Hefte Archäologischen Seminars der Universität Bern*, 3 (1991), p.43. The alleged 'tomb of Alexander' whose discovery at the oasis of Silwah was heralded with great publicity, is known to be merely a small temple from the Roman period which was already known in the nineteenth century and where the inscriptions mention Emperor Trajan only. This pseudo-discovery is another illustration of the frenzy generated by the fetishist quest for this tomb since the nineteenth century.
10. Quintus Curtius 10.10.31; Pausanias 1.6.3; Goukowsky, *Essai I*, pp.91–2, 133–45.
11. Ch. Jacob and F. de Polignac (eds.), *Alexandrie IIIe siècle. Tous les savoirs du monde ou le rêve d'universalité des Ptolémées* (Paris, 1992).



12. R. Gayet, *Le temple de Luxor* (Cairo, 1994), p.97; L. Bell, 'Luxor Temple and the Cult of the Royal Ka\*', *Journal of Near East Studies*, 44, 4 (1985), pp.251–94.
13. P.M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria I* (Oxford, 1972), pp.246–56.
14. P. Goukowsky, *Essai II: Alexandre et Dionysos* (Nancy, 1981), pp.3–83.
15. O. Weippert, *Alexander-imitatio und römische Politik in republikanischer Zeit* (Wurzburg, 1972); L. Braccisi, *Alessandro e i romani* (Bologna, 1975); G. Wirth, 'Alexander und Rom', in *Alexandre le Grand. Image et réalité* (Geneva, 1976), Fondation Hardt, *Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique*, pp.181–210; P. Vidal-Naquet, 'Alexandre le Romain', in Arrian, *Histoire d'Alexandre*, trans. P. Savinel (Paris, 1984), pp.330–43; and the collection *Neronia IV: Alejandro Magno, model de los emperadores romanos* (Brussels, 1990), Col. Latomus 209.
16. Suetonius, *Vies des Douze Césars: Auguste*, p.18.
17. *Eloge de Rome*, p.26.
18. Arrian, 1.26.1–2; Plutarch, 17.6–8. Strabo gives a slightly different version.
19. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.347–8.
20. Josephus, op. cit., 11.329–35; *Babylonian Talmud*, Yoma 69a; Pseudo-Callisthenes, recensions e and g (2.24); D. Pacella, 'Alessandro e gli ebrei nella testimonianza dello Pseudo-Callistene', *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 12 (1982), pp.1255–69.
21. *Daniel*, 8.1–27.
22. P. Vidal-Naquet, *Il buon uso del tradimento. Flavio Giuseppa e la guerra giudaica* (Rome, 1980), pp.53–61, refers to 'quinto vangelo'.
23. R. Harprath, *Papst Paul III als Alexander der Grosse. Der Freskenprogramm der Sala Paolina in der Engelsburg* (Berlin/New York, 1978); E. Gaudio, *Gli affreschi di Paolo III a Castel Sant'Angelo* (Rome, 1981), pp.109–110.
24. Ch. Jacob, 'Alexandre et la maîtrise de l'espace. L'art du voyage dans l'Anabase d'Arrien', *Quaderni di Storia*, 34 (1991), pp.5–40.
25. Herodotus, I, 189–90; VII, 33–6; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, I, 4, 17–18; J.-L. Desnier, *Le passage du fleuve. Essai sur la légimité du souverain* (Paris, 1995), pp.17–49.
26. Herodotus, VIII, 137; Desnier, *Passage*, pp.36–40.
27. Arrian, 8.11; Plutarch, 64.
28. W. Berghoff, *Palladius De Gentibus Indiae et Bramanibus* (Meisenheim, 1967).
29. Arrian, 4.15; Plutarch, 40; Quintus Curtius, 8.1.7–9.
30. R. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews IV* (Philadelphia, 1939), pp.316–18.
31. Ibn al-Faqih, *Abrégé du livre des pays*, trans. H. Massé (Paris, 1973), pp.103–7. See F. de Polignac, 'Cosmocrator: l'Islam et la légende antique du souverain universel', in M. Bridges and J.C. Bürgel (eds.), *The Problematics of Power, Eastern and Western Representations of Alexander* (Bern, 1996), pp.159–61.
32. Ibn al-Faqih, pp.109–11; Ch. Genequand, 'Sagesse et pouvoir', in Bridges and Brügel (eds.), *The Problematics of Power*, pp.127–8; 'Autour de la ville de bronze: d'Alexandre à Solomon', *Arabica*, 39, 1992, pp.328–45.
33. Ch. Settis Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri per griphos ad aerem elevati* (Rome, 1973).
34. F. Nau, *Histoire et sagesse d'Ahikar le Syrien* (Paris, 1909), pp.213–15, 222–3.
35. Settis Frugoni, *Historia*, pp.25–131.
36. *Jerusalem Talmud*, Avodah Zarah III.1.42.
37. F. de Polignac, 'L'homme aux deux cornes. Une image d'Alexandre du symbolisme grec à l'apocalyptique musulmane', *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome. Antiquité*, 96 (1984), pp.29–51; H.P. l'Orange, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture* (Oslo, 1947), p.25.
38. Settis Frugoni, *Historia*, pp.147–207; A. di Vita and C. Alfano (eds.), *Alessandro Magno, storia e mito, Catalogo della mostra* Rome, Palazzo Ruspoli, 21.12.1995/21.5.1996 (Rome, 1995), pp.161–73 (Ch. Frugoni) and No.143.
39. Nemrod: Tabari, *History II* (Biblioteca Persica, State University of New York, 1987), pp.107–9; Kay Kavousi, *Firdousi, Livre des Rois*, trans. Mohl (Paris 1976), II, pp.31–4.
40. F. de Polignac, 'Alexandre entre ciel et terre: initiation et investiture', *Studia Islamica*, 84 (1996), pp.135–44.
41. Nezâmi [sic], *Iskandarnama*, trans. J.C. Bürgel: *Das Alexanderbuch* (Zurich, 1991).