II. Monographien mit übergreifender Thematik


PIERRE BRIANT, eminent historian of the Achaemenid world and the Empire of Alexander, has already authored a number of significant articles and monumental books. In the current scholarship on the history of Alexander, beside BRIANT’s book *Alexandre le Grand*,¹ his *Darius dans l’ombre d’ Alexandre*,² *Lettre ouverte à Alexandre le Grand*,³ and *Alexandre des Lumières*⁴ are of equally great significance. The last title is a history of Alexander’s story from the Middle Ages to modern times, with a particular focus on the memory of Alexander during the European Enlightenment. The present book seems to pursue the same project, but from new perspectives and over a wider range of places and periods: it is an analytical history of Alexander’s legacy in the world’s memory, from the Roman Empire to the Malayan world and from ancient Babylonia to Hollywood.

The pocket-size, though rather thick, volume contains eight chapters, each divided into several subchapters. The discussion does not follow a traditional chronological order, but an intelligent thematic approach.

The book starts with a chapter on the elaboration and reception of the ‘western’ image of Alexander, the heroic conqueror, in European political discourses and visual arts (sculptures, coins, medallions, paintings, etc.) from Antiquity to the 19th century. By discussing a wide-ranging selection of materials, this chapter puts forward a clear idea of Alexander’s role in Hellenistic and Roman Imperial art, in European churches and Renaissance courts, and in the royal palaces of France, Italy, and Spain in the Early Modern period and up to the Napoleonic Era.

In the second chapter, the ‘western’ Alexander confronts his oriental images and their developments throughout history, from the violent, tyrannical image of Alexander ‘the Accursed’ (*Aliksandar i gizistag*) in the Iranian Zoroastrian tradition to the just, sage image of Alexander ‘the Two-Horned’ (*Iskandar-i ḍu’l-qarnayn*) in the Iranian Islamic tradition, from the Alexander of the Byzantines to the Alexander of the Ottomans, and eventually Alexander in the Indian, Malayan, and African worlds. For an Orientalist, this chapter is probably the most interesting, since BRIANT tries to reconstruct the contradictory images of Alexander from Oriental viewpoints in the *longue durée*. He scrutinises Zoroastrian Pahlavi texts to discuss the formation of the negative Zoroastrian view of Alexander’s invasion and the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. Also, for understanding the positive Islamic view of Alexander as a noble sage, BRIANT concentrates on both Persian poetry and Perso-Arabic historiographical writings of the Islamic period. BRIANT highlights

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the Iranisation of the *Alexander Romance* of Pseudo-Callisthenes in the Islamic period and even proposes the possibility of its influence on the missing Sasanian *Xwadāynāmag* (Book of the Lords) via a primary Syriac version (p. 101). But what is missing in his discussion is the origin and process of transmission of the *Romance* into the Iranian tradition.

BRIANT mentions the translations of the *Alexander Romance* in various Oriental languages such as Armenian, Syriac, and Arabic (p. 99), although he does not focus on them in detail. In an erudite study of the Syriac version of the *Romance*, THEODOR NÖLDEKE had proposed the hypothesis of the existence of a lost Pahlavi version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes’s *Romance of Alexander*, which, in his opinion, was the basis of the Syriac translation. His extensive arguments were based on philological features of the Syriac text such as loanwords, personal and geographical names, and calques from Pahlavi, which show that the Syriac text could not be a direct translation from Greek, but has been translated from a Pahlavi intermediary translation of the Greek original text.\(^5\) Despite RICHARD N. FRYE’s doubt\(^6\) and CLAUDIA A. CIANCAGLINI’s detailed criticism of NÖLDEKE’s hypothesis,\(^7\) a recently published Pahlavi papyrus from Egypt seems to be a fragment of a Pahlavi translation of the *Alexander Romance*,\(^8\) which supports the hypothesis NÖLDEKE developed more than a century ago. The Pahlavi tradition based on the Greek *Romance of Alexander* found its way gradually to Syriac literature, Perso-Arabic historiography, and Persian lyric poetry. This shows that there have been parallel traditions of writing the story of Alexander in Iran as early as the late Sasanian period: a Zoroastrian pan-Persian tradition and a tradition based on the Greek *Alexander Romance*. The latter most probably emerged after the Sasanian conquest of Egypt by Khosrow II in 618/19, when Greek materials in Egyptian archives became easily accessible to Sasanian educated scribes, who had a chance to translate Greek texts to Pahlavi. Both these Pahlavi traditions might have been the origin of the two major branches of narratives that reached the 10th-11th century Persian poet Ferdowsi. This included the *Romance* version of Alexander’s story in Ferdowsi’s *Book of Kings* (*Shāhnāmeh*) after the legendary dynasty of the Kayānids, but later, in the book’s

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5 TH. NÖLDEKE, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans*, Wien 1890 (Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, philosophisch-historische Classe 38/5).


historical part dealing with the Sasanians, where Alexander’s negative image from the Zoroastrian tradition is recalled.

BRIANT’s discussion of Alexander’s characters in the Iranian traditions is generally convincing. There are two minor misunderstandings in the part concerning FERDOWSI’s *Shāhnāmeh*. FERDOWSI’s ‘patron’ is mentioned (p. 109) as ‘le sultan Mahmoud de Tuš’ (*sic*), whereas the Ghaznavid ruler of late 10th–early 11th century, Sultan Mahmoud of Ghazni, is meant. Also, when discussing the successors of Alexander in the *Shāhnāmeh*, the dynasty of ‘Aschkanides’ is considered as ‘corresponding to the dynasty which we call Sasanian’ (p. 110). In fact, the Alexander legend in FERDOWSI’s work serves as a transition point from the epic-mythical part of the *Shāhnāmeh* on the Iranian legendary dynasty of the Kayānids – who appear in the Iranian national epic instead of the Achaemenids – to the historical part on the Iranian historical dynasties of the *Aškāniān* (Arsacids/Parthians) and *Sāsāniān* (Sasanians), respectively. A few errors in the transcriptions of Iranian names should also be mentioned, e.g., ‘sād-stūn’ (p. 107) for the Persian toponym sad-sotun, ‘Shamanides’ (p. 505) for the Islamic dynasty of Sāmānides, and the Turkish spelling ‘Iskender’ (*passim*) for the Persian Eskandar. In the following three chapters of the book, BRIANT discusses the modern receptions of Alexander and his deeds, respectively, in historical discourses, media, and modern western scholarship. It ranges from the popular interpretations of heavy metal music bands and Hollywood filmmakers to the scholarly reception of modern intellectuals and academics. The author advances a critical discussion of ‘judging Alexander’ in the sixth chapter, which is not limited to Alexander’s image from different historical perspectives, but actually touches some important general issues of modern European history.

Eventually, in the seventh chapter, BRIANT discusses very recent examples of Alexander’s presence in politics and arts, for instance, the political use of Alexander’s character in post-Soviet Tajikistan, among American troops in Afghanistan, and above all in present-day Republic of North Macedonia and Greece. The book ends with a concluding chapter and appendices, including acknowledgements, bibliography, notes, and index. Since the wide range of subjects and huge amount of materials discussed in the book vary from subchapter to subchapter, the author starts each part with an introduction to the historical context and types of sources and documents for the subject in question. After drawing a brief outline and arranging a mosaic of fragmentary sources, he tries to analyse the issue by combining the materials. For each topic, a number of key references for further reading are provided in the notes.

To sum up, PIERRE BRIANT’s new book is not only a very interesting and informative analytical work for specialists, but its attractive subject, clear language, and not very complicated discussions recommend it to also to a much wider range of non-specialist francophone readers.

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