

THE TREES OF THE SUN AND MOON IN THE *ALEXANDER
ROMANCE* (III 17): GENUINE INDIAN DETAIL?*

by

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ABSTRACT: The visit of Alexander the Great to the Oracular Trees in the *Alexander Romance* is easily regarded as pure fantasy; and the names given to the trees are plainly corrupt in the earliest MS (A). This paper argues that the episode could reflect a visit by the originator of the account, who will have been a member of Alexander's entourage, to a real sacred grove in India. The writer argues that the description of the grove and the trees bears many resemblances to what is known and can be observed of present-day tree worship in northern India. The possibility that the male and female trees may be a pipal and a neem is employed to suggest that the names, now corrupt, were originally something like Vasu(deva) and Ma, gods commonly associated with these two trees. Furthermore, at the present day Indians frequently assert that trees communicate with them or 'speak' to them; such an idea would have been startling to a Greek, who could well have used it to construct a story that the trees speak 'oracles', even though oracular practices are not otherwise found in Indian religion, past or present.

Among the many Indian trees described by the writers on Alexander's expedition, two stand out for their oddity: the oracular Trees of the Sun and Moon in *AR* III17¹. The passage forms part of Alexander's Letter to Aristotle about India, and is present in all recensions of the *AR*². Though the letter as a whole is somewhat lacunose in A, the passage about the trees is present in full with only one apparent corruption. The episode also appears, in slightly different form, in the Latin *Letter to Aristotle about India*³. The Latin is generally supposed to

* I have benefited from discussions of earlier drafts with Richard SEAFORD and Aleksandra SZALC, as well as from the acute observations of an anonymous reader regarding Indological matters.

¹ Currently the only available edition of the oldest recension, α , which is represented by a single MS (A), is that of W. KROLL, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, Berlin 1958. Volume III of the new edition by R. STONEMAN and T. GARGIULO, containing Book III of the *AR* (with the Latin *Letter*, Palladius' *De Bragmanibus*, and the papyri and single inscription), is still forthcoming.

² For a full discussion of the recensions of the *AR*, see R. STONEMAN, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Harmondsworth 1991, pp. 28–32, and idem, *Il romanzo di Alessandro*, Milano 2007, vol. I, pp. LXXXIII–LXXXVIII.

³ Edited by F. PFISTER, *Kleine Texte zum Alexanderroman*, Heidelberg 1910, pp. 21–37; translated in R. STONEMAN, *Legends of Alexander the Great*, London 2012, pp. 3–19. Different oracles are given from those in the *AR*.