

INDIA IN THE *ALEXANDER ROMANCE*\*

by

ALEKSANDRA SZALC

The history of the campaign of Alexander the Great is known to us from sources written years after it happened. The first-handed accounts of Alexander's companions, Onesicritus of Astypalaia, Nearchus of Crete, Aristobulus of Cassandrea or Chares of Mitylene, have come down to us only in fragments and testimonies. This scarcity of sources concerning Alexander prompted scholars to expand their area of research to include Oriental sources, epigraphic sources and other evidence which could shed new light on Alexander, a figure who may seem well known and well researched now. These new sources have been neglected for a long time since they were considered fanciful and valueless as a historical source. The main subject of this dissertation, the *Alexander Romance*, is one of such sources. The authorship of the *Romance* is unknown, but has been attributed to Callisthenes of Olynthus (and cited as Ps.-Callisth.). This anonymous text is a fictional biography<sup>1</sup> of Alexander which was extremely popular in the Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The fact that the *Alexander Romance* was read so widely contributed to the popularity and presence of the Macedonian king in the culture of both the East and the West.

Dividing my scholarly interests, which focus both on the history of Alexander the Great, Greek-Indian contacts and the history of Ancient India, I decided to try to look at the *Alexander Romance* as a historical source; this kind of approach can be found in recent studies on Alexander<sup>2</sup> and fulfils the need for interdisciplinary study on the history of the Macedonian conqueror. I examined the *Alexander Romance* from both sides; as a historian approaching another source

---

\* Summary of a doctoral dissertation *Indie w Romansie o Aleksandrze*, written under the supervision of Professor Krzysztof NAWOTKA in the Institute of History, University of Wrocław.

<sup>1</sup> ROSS 1988: 5.

<sup>2</sup> FRASER 1972: vol. I, 3–5; 1996: 38–46; BAYNHAM 2000; BOSWORTH 2000; McINERNEY 2007.

for the history of Alexander and as a person interested in Greek–Indian contacts in Antiquity.

The campaign of Alexander the Great in the *Romance* preserves the historical timeline, although it does contain a lot of fanciful material. The third book in particular, which focuses on Alexander's stay in India, is rich in various fictional motifs. This book is the subject of my detailed analysis, which is focused on dividing the layer of information on India known from earlier writers from the new elements which may hide authentic information on the Indian landscape, art or literature. This method of study revealed the level of fanciful stories in early writings on India as well as in the later accounts of India, created after the Alexander's campaign. It also explored how much of this material found its way into the *Romance* and how it was used, as well as considering if there is something new and authentic about India in the legend of Alexander.

The main source of this dissertation was the earliest version of the Alexander *Romance* (referred to as the  $\alpha$  recension) and dated most probably to the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD<sup>3</sup>. It is necessary to underline that the  $\alpha$  recension means the lost archetype of the *Romance*. The text which is being used and generally accepted as the closest to the archetype is called manuscript A, edited by W. KROLL (*Historia Alexandri Magni (Pseudo-Callisthenes)*, vol. I: *Recensio vetusta*, edidit Guilelmus KROLL, Berlin 1926). The motif of the Water of Life, also examined in this doctoral thesis, comes from the  $\beta$  recension (4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. AD). As the witnesses of the earliest recension, I used also the translation into Latin by Iulius Valerius (4<sup>th</sup> c. AD) and the Armenian version (5<sup>th</sup> c. AD). Furthermore, I examined the branches of the lost  $\delta^*$  recension; the Latin translation by Leo the Archpriest (10<sup>th</sup> c. AD) and the Syriac recension of the *Romance* (6<sup>th</sup> c. AD), which is not only close to the lost archetype of the *Romance*, but also marks the beginning of the Oriental tradition of the *Alexander Romance*. For the expanded variant of the Water of Life, I used also the manuscript L, which belongs to the  $\beta$  recension. The main Greek sources used in the dissertation were: the *Indica* of Ctesias of Cnidus, Herodotus, Megasthenes, the accounts of Alexander's companions and the Vulgate. As for the Indian literary sources, I examined the selected hymns of *Veda*, *Upanishads* and the epics: *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*. Other important sources were: the books of law by Manu (*Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC–3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD) and the *Arthaśāstra* by Kautilya (2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD). I also had an opportunity to conduct my research on early Indian art in Indian museums and *in situ*.

The dissertation contains a detailed analysis of five episodes from the *Alexander Romance*, which takes place in India or nearby in the undefined East. The first chapter focused on the analysis of the image of the Indian landscape, fauna and flora and mostly the monsters which attacked Alexander during the

---

<sup>3</sup> See: STONEMAN, GARGIULO 2007: XXV–XXXIV; KROLL 1919; ROSS 1988: 5; JOUANNO 2002: 13; STONEMAN 1991: 28. *Contra*: AUSFELD 1907: 151 f.; ROHDE 1914: 198; PFISTER 1946: 42–44.

so-called “night of terror”. The next episode of interest was Alexander’s dialogue with Indian gymnosophists. The main focus of my research in this chapter was to find matching questions (both with respect to sense and structure) in the Indian literature preceding the events described in the *Romance*. I also stressed the importance and place of dialogue in Indian literature. The third chapter contains an analysis of the meeting of Alexander and queen Kandake of Meroe. The location of her kingdom seemed uncertain to me, as the majority of its descriptions may be attributed to India. The last chapter is devoted to the two episodes which mark the symbolic end to Alexander’s journey and his life; the episode of the Water of Life and the meeting with the prophetic trees of Sun and Moon.

This analysis revealed that, in fact, the majority of the elements in the description of India in the *Romance* can also be attributed to the real India; these elements also correlate with early Greek accounts of India. Indian artefacts which can be seen nowadays in Indian museums, *in situ* and in the literature also reveal a connection with the *Romance* and other Greek writings on India.

The first chapter should be considered as an analysis of the motifs related to the Indian landscape, such as the presence of huge, unknown animals, multiple-handed people, creatures with additional limbs or composite creatures. The research I conducted has revealed that such composite monsters as for example ταυρελέφαντες (Ps.-Callisth. III 17, the bull-elephant composite) are uniquely represented in early Indian art, starting from the first millennium BC, including the seals from Mohenjo-daro, the Brahmanical and Jaina caves in Badami (Karnataka) and Ajanta (Maharashtra), up to the present times in Southern India (the *gopura* in Srirangam, Tamil Nadu). These and other examples, like multiple-handed people, fit the thesis that the *Romance* may describe authentic Indian pieces of art seen in India by Alexander’s companions.

The account of Alexander’s meeting with Indian philosophers is frequently interpreted as a Cynic text, included in the *Romance* for moral purpose<sup>4</sup>. Alexander poses witty, riddle-like questions to the philosophers to examine their wisdom (in other versions of the dialogue preserved in Plutarch (Plut. *Alex.* 64), he threatens them with death in the case of a wrong answer). In contradiction to this view, I have decided to search for similar dialogues with respect to their form and merits (content). This research showed that the hymns of the *Veda*, *Upanishads* and the epic *Mahābhārata* contain questions of the same form and meaning as those in the *Romance*. Furthermore, the tradition of the riddle contest and the neck-riddle is widely reflected in Indian culture<sup>5</sup>. It is also worth noticing that the life of the Indian gymnosophists as described in the *Romance* is not very distant from their authentic behaviour. They cannot be ascribed to any particular school of philosophy, but their habits are positively confirmed in ancient Indian

---

<sup>4</sup> WILCKEN 1923: 161 f.; BROWN 1949: 47; POWERS 1998: 84 f.

<sup>5</sup> HUIZINGA 1949: 106; SZALC 2011: 17.

law codices like the *Arthaśāstra* or the *Mānava-Dharmaśāstra*, contrary to the popular belief that they dwell in idyllic, nearly utopian scenery and have nothing in common with authentic Indian ascetics.

The next chapter should be considered as an attempt to locate the kingdom of queen Kandake of Meroe; it is said that the queen dwells in the palace of the legendary queen Semiramis, but the exact location of this palace remains a matter for discussion. The landscape as described in the *Romance* (III 21 f.) is a mosaic of various motifs; the name Kandake is in fact the Nubian royal title meaning “queen mother”, the queen lives in the palace of the legendary Assyrian queen Semiramis, but on the other hand, the number of characteristics, such as the pepper trees, the beryl, the richly ornamented monuments carved from a single stone, or the caves “inhabited by the gods” indicate that the episode takes place in India. What is more, the queen’s palace is ornamented by Median columns typical of Gandhara art. It looks like a giant chariot pulled by twenty elephants. This type of Indian chariots, pulled by elephants or resting on their backs, may be seen in India even nowadays.

The last chapter is devoted to one of the late but significant episodes in the *Alexander Romance*, namely the search for the Water of Life. This episode appears in the  $\beta$  recension of the *Romance*, dated to the 4<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. AD and is not present in the  $\alpha$  recension. The idea of water which brings one back to life is almost totally unknown in Greek literature. Despite some ideas proposed by researchers<sup>6</sup>, the circumstances of the creation of the episode and its geographical location remain unclear. The idea of reviving water which gives immortality features substantially in Indian beliefs, and its presence in the Indian subcontinent has been uninterrupted to the present times. Various examples from Indian literature: the *Vedas*, epics and fairy tales, confirm this long-lasting tradition. However, since the Indian origins of this idea cannot be clearly proved, I decided not to determine the Indian origin of the episode.

The second part of the last chapter contains the analysis of Alexander’s meeting with the prophetic trees of Sun and Moon, this time undoubtedly placed in India. The very first mention of the Indian custom of reverence for trees comes from Ctesias’ account and it is safe to assume that this particular information has found its way into the *Romance*. The research I conducted shows that the cult of the Sun and Moon and of trees has a long tradition in India, which is why, in my opinion, this episode can be safely assumed to be authentic information on Indian customs.

The thesis presented here should be considered as a historical approach to neglected sources on the history of Alexander the Great and Greek–Indian contacts. I decided to look at the *Alexander Romance* as the historical source, contrary to the long held view that the *Romance* is completely useless and does not

---

<sup>6</sup> FRIEDLAENDER 1913; MEISSNER 1894; DAWKINS 1937: 173–192.

contain any valuable historical information. In my opinion, the results presented are convincing and at the same time indicate the necessity to expand research in previously neglected areas, as is being done these days with other minor sources as well as with other parts of the *Romance*, which have been omitted from this dissertation.

*University of Wrocław*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AUSFELD 1907: A. AUSFELD, *Der griechische Alexanderroman*, Leipzig 1907.
- BAYNHAM 2000: E.J. BAYNHAM, *A Baleful Birth in Babylon. The Significance of the Prodigy in Liber de Morte. An Investigation of Genre*, in: A.B. BOSWORTH, E.J. BAYNHAM (eds.): *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, Oxford 2000, pp. 242–262.
- BOSWORTH 2000: A.B. BOSWORTH, *Ptolemy and the Will of Alexander*, in: A.B. BOSWORTH, E.J. BAYNHAM (eds.): *Alexander the Great in Fact and Fiction*, Oxford 2000, pp. 207–241.
- BROWN 1949: T.S. BROWN, *Onesicritus. A Study in Hellenistic Historiography*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1949.
- DAWKINS 1937: R.M. DAWKINS, *Alexander and the Water of Life*, *Medium Aevum* IV 1937, pp. 173–192.
- FRASER 1972: P.M. FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vols. I–III, Oxford 1972.
- 1996: *Cities of Alexander the Great*, Oxford 1996.
- FRIEDLAENDER 1913: J. FRIEDLAENDER, *Die Chadirlegende und der Alexanderroman*, Leipzig 1913.
- HUIZINGA 1949: J. HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London 1949.
- JOUANNO 2002: C. JOUANNO, *Naissance et métamorphoses du Roman d'Alexandre. Domaine grec*, Paris 2002.
- KROLL 1919: W. KROLL, *Kallisthenes*, *RE* X 2 (1919), cols. 1674–1726.
- MCINERNEY 2007: J. MCINERNEY, *Arrian and the Greek Alexander*, *CW* C 2007, pp. 424–430.
- MEISSNER 1894: B. MEISSNER, *Alexander und Gilgames*, Leipzig 1894.
- PFISTER 1946: F. PFISTER, *Studien zum Alexanderroman*, *WüJbb* I 1946, pp. 29–60 [reprinted in: IDEM, *Kleine Schriften zum Alexanderroman*, Meisenheim am Glan 1976, pp. 17–52].
- POWERS 1998: N. POWERS, *Onesicritus, Naked Wise Men, and the Cynics' Alexander*, *SyllClass* IX 1998, pp. 70–85.
- ROHDE 1914: E. ROHDE, *Der griechische Roman und seine Vorläufer*, Leipzig 1914.
- ROSS 1988: D.J.A. ROSS, *Alexander Historiatus. A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature*, Frankfurt am Main 1988.
- STONEMAN 1991: R. STONEMAN, *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Harmondsworth 1991.
- STONEMAN, GARGIULO 2007: *Il Romanzo di Alessandro*, vol. I, R. STONEMAN (ed.), T. GARGIULO (trans.), Rome 2007.
- SZALC 2011: A. SZALC, *Alexander's Dialogue with Indian Philosophers – Riddle in Greek and Indian Tradition*, *Eos* XCVIII 2011, pp. 7–25.
- WILCKEN 1923: U. WILCKEN, *Alexander der Grosse und die indischen Gymnosophisten*, *SPAW*, *Philos.-hist. Kl.* XXIII 1923, pp. 150–183.

