

Alexander Stories in Ajami Turkic

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Introduction

The manuscript

The story is contained as an appendix in a copy of Rabghūzī's Eastern Turkic *Qıssa al-Anbiyā'* (folia 165v – 172v of manuscript C245 of the Oriental Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Sanktpeterburg). The pages are tightly written in a kind of *nasta'liq*, the number of lines varying from 30 to 36. The same copyist has been at work in the section of the manuscript that contains the *Qıssa*, where he provided the beginning (ff. 1-4) and a section lacking at the end of the *Qıssa-i Yūsuf*, besides some additions at the margins of damaged leaves, from another, unknown, manuscript (see Boeschoten & al. 1995: xxiv for details). Whereas the copy of the *Qıssa* itself can securely be dated around 1560 A.D., the additions containing the Alexander stories must have been copied considerably more recently, probably in the 18th, maybe even in the 19th century.¹ The text is written on big sheets (26,5x17,5 cm) of white paper with no watermark that is very different from the rest of the manuscript. An important feature of the text is made up by the interlinear and marginal glosses explaining some lexical items to would-be readers with a Tatar background. The glosses were added by the copyist himself.

The present text edition ends at the last complete story on f. 171v. The last leaf (f. 172r-v), that is rather badly damaged, is nevertheless included in the facsimile reproduction (p. 98-99).

Content

The stories constitute one drip in the ocean of mediaeval stories about Alexander the Great. In the East, generally, works about Alexander stem from very different streams of traditions. Firstly, they are connected to the narrative tradition emanating from the various versions of the “pseudo-Callisthenes” Greek Alexander romance – mostly, but not exclusively², from its Syriac translation. Secondly, ancient Greek historiography has played some role in the tradition, notably for the aristocratic versions of *Eskandarnāme* from the Islamic context, such as the most influential one amongst them, that of Nizāmī Gandjavī. With him, Alexander ends up as a philosopher and a prophet. The latter role emanated from the identification of Alexander with the Koranic pseudo-prophet Dhūlqarnain. There exist also popular versions,

1 In the catalogue (Dimitrijeva 2002, p. 461, no. 2003) the text has been (rightly) listed separately. However, the description is not entirely correct. The Alexander stories begin on f. 165v, and not later on in the manuscript.

2 As is evident from, e.g., Aerts (2003).

some of which seem to be connected with oral performance by story tellers (*naqqāl*) (Hanaway 1970). This is an important point, because this practice opens a channel for the penetration of motifs and themes from other popular Persian adventurous stories. All in all, the literary tradition associated with Alexander the Great is extremely vast and variegated, and exhibits remarkable parallels in the developments in the medieval Islamic and Christian cultures.

The present collection contains six stories³ written in prose, but inter-dispersed with verse sections in a short and simple kind of *ramal*. As we shall see, they centre round a limited number of motifs. Alexander and his retinue wage war on various kings, but these battles only provide the frame for the stories. In fact, they are looking for remarkable spots to visit and, in doing so, they make marvellous discoveries. In most cases they inspect castles or other localities, containing inscriptions left by kings of former times, and treasures they eventually take as booty. The collection of gold, silver, gems and valuable objects is a common feature of popular Alexander stories.

The inscriptions (mostly in verse) found at the tombs of kings of former times (stories 3, 5, 6) boast of the prowess of the deceased, and at the same time warn Alexander of the vanity of life and the ever present threat of sudden death. In two instances a “stranger” or an “old man” (i.e., Azrael) makes his appearance in order to take the souls of the king or his son. This *memento mori* theme is already present in Alexander’s obituary in the γ -version of the pseudo-Callesthenes (cf. Stoneman 1991: 187).

Besides, various complex mechanical contraptions feature prominently in the stories. In Story 1, gold and silver fish play with jewels in a pond, and Aristotle gives a show with a family of mechanical peacocks. In story 6, an impressive castle with a crystal dome is defended by a mechanical ram that bars the approach to it at the bridge over the moat. After Alexander and his party have overcome this obstacle, it appears that the castle’s entrance is protected by a huge canon ball that comes down on anyone climbing the stairs leading up to it as a result of an ingenious mechanism set in motion by the steps of the stairs. Although these contraptions are called “spells” (*ḥisim*), there is nothing supernatural about them. Rather more fanciful is the account of the various types of magnets in story 2. In the same story, as an echo of the accounts of fanciful adventures in popular Alexander romances, a castle is defended by an army of Dogheads (f. 166r31).

The figure of Alexander is not characterized in any way. Besides him, the main actors are his ministers Aristotle and Platoon, and a warrior named *Gharaqī*. Aristotle and Platoon have clearly separated roles. Aristotle is the technical man, who succeeds, among other things, in breaking the mechanical “spells”. Platoon, on the other hand, is the philologist who succeeds in deciphering the texts of the inscriptions, in whatever difficult language they might have been written. *Gharaqī* is the

3 After the sixth story, another one begins on folio 171v. Since leaf 172 is badly damaged, I refrained from including the rest of the text into this edition.

one who is sent to master the most difficult executive tasks, and as such may have some affinity with the *'ayyārs* in Persian popular stories (cf. Yamanaka 2002). In general, the personal names and toponyms are not easy to identify (see the Index of Names; I have refrained from a thorough investigation here).

This is not the place for a lengthy elaboration on the different branches of this tradition, or of any special branch, for the simple reason that so far I have been unable to find versions in any language bearing any close resemblance to the present collection of stories.⁴ In particular, I have failed to find a Persian version of which the present work could be a translation or adaptation. It is obvious that the stories ultimately emanated from the widespread tradition about Alexander's adventures in India and China that goes as far back as the "Letters to Olympia" in the pseudo-Callesthenes.

Language

As for their language, the stories belong to a group of works that have been written in Iran or Anatolia roughly between the 13th and 16th centuries. As is the case with all written Turkic varieties of the time, the language of these documents is not homogeneous. However, they all have a clearly discernable Western Oghuz (henceforth: WO) basis, which means that they are close to Old Anatolian Turkish, or form part of it, depending on the criteria of classification. As compared to the contemporary written language used in Anatolia, the syntactic patterns show the effects of contact with New Persian more clearly. Another peculiarity of the works written in Iran is the occurrence of Eastern Turkic orthographic, morphological and lexical elements. This feature is shared by a certain number of works written in Anatolia, a fact that some decades ago has led to the so-called *olga-bolga* debate. Another matter to be addressed in connection with the relationships inside the WO written varieties is the thesis of the "Oghuz split", as proposed by Bellér-Hann (1990).

I will return to these issues in due course. But first I will proceed to give a description of the relevant peculiarities of the language of our text. I will not endeavour to give a full description, but I will pick out the features that set it apart diachronically and otherwise in a general Western Oghuz context.

The lexicon

I will start with the lexicon, because my arguments for fixing the date of the original composition of the stories around 1500 AD are mainly based on a number of lexical items. First and foremost, a number of lexemes occur that disappeared from Old Ottoman in the 16th, or already in the 15th century, and are absent in modern Azer-

⁴ However, at short notice, just before sending this book to the publishers, the existence of an *İskendernâme* from the Old Anatolian period came to my notice to which the stories presently edited clearly bear a connection (cf. note on p. 12).

baijanian as well. A sizable number of these items at the time was shared with Eastern Turkic (henceforth: ET), such as *ornat*= ‘to place’, *tāḡ* ‘equal’⁵. Other lexemes are more typically Old Anatolian/Old Ottoman: *di!* ‘come on’, *sämrän*= ‘to roll up one’s sleeves’, *bayuq* ‘certainly’ (only once).

A limited number of items, however, are clearly of ET, to be more precise, of Khwarezmian Turkic origin, most notably two cases reflecting the transition */-d-/ > /z/: *kāzin* ‘after’ and *ız*= ‘to send’. Other items are: *qara*= ‘to look’, *yibär*= ‘to send’, *bar*= ‘to go’ (as a postverb in *erü barur*), *erin* ‘lip’ (besides *dudaq*) and *barça* ‘all’. Only the last item occurs more than once (three times, to be precise).

The archaic form *aydı* ‘he said’ (from **ay*=; 168r14 and *passim*) is used exclusively to introduce direct speech. The present tense equivalent is *äydür* (or *aydur*).⁶

Two cases are of particular interest. Firstly, *bala* for ‘child’, occurring once in the phrase: *on dört fāwus yawruçağ-ları, ya’nī balaları* (165v29), where the addition of *bala* as a synonym for *yawruçağ* looks like an explanation for a non-Oghuz reading public. Secondly, we find (*aṭ*) *dağası* ‘horse shoe’ in the phrase: *aṭna’lı, ya’nī aṭ dağası* (167v11), where *dağa* obviously is a Tatar item. We are thus warned that ET features indeed may have resulted from the copying process.

Spelling and phonetics

One feature clearly linked to ET literary tradition is the consistent spelling of velar /ŋ/ with the digraph كڭ, the sole exceptions being very few renderings of the genitive case with ك alone and the occasional rendering of the genitive with نك (for /nŋ/, cf. p. 6), a convention also encountered in Khwarezmian Turkic works (e.g. the *Qışaṣ-i Rabghūzī*).⁷ In two cases we find /n/ for etymological /ŋ/: *daḡın, şuḡın* (imperative, 167v18), as against *götäriḡ* (167v24). One odd (hypercorrect?) case is *eṣäḡ* (167v2), where we would expect /n/.

Remarkable is the frequent usage of ج. In the Khwarezmian Turkic context, this grapheme is used to differentiate between the bilabial fricative /β/ (< Old Turkic /b/) and labio-dental /v/ (written with و). This is at least true for the copy of the *Qışaṣ* in the present manuscript; earlier copies employ ف or just ف. E.g., the present text has سؤ (*suw*) ~ سو (*su*), as against سف ~ سف (*suw*). I employ the transliteration symbol [w] for ج. We find examples such as *däwä* ‘camel’ (besides *devä* and the archaism *täbä quṣı* ‘ostrich’), *säwin*= ‘to rejoice’, *qarwaṣ* ‘female slave’, *aw* ‘game’, copula 1st person plural -wUz. Spellings with ج are the rule for lexemes that have undergone the Western Oghuz shift */b-/ > /β-/ > /w-/, e.g. *war*= ‘to go’ ~ *var*= ~ *bar*= (an archaism, occurring once), *wer*= to give’ ~ *ver*=, *war* ‘there is’ ~ *var*. There are also examples of stems affected that never were attested with /b/, e.g. *qaw*= ‘to pursue’,

5 This last element also occurs (with /t-/) in the *Kitāb-ı Dede Qorqud*, that has no *olga bolga* features.

6 Other archaisms are two copula particles *erkän* (inferential in 166v2, converb in 170r21) and *ersä* (conditional, 167r5).

7 For details see below.