

A LATE ARAB WRITER'S NOTE ON ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Abu 'l-Fidā was born in November, 1273. He had a successful career in the service of Sultan al-Malik al-Nāṣir, rising from Governor of Ḥamāt in central Syria to the rank of prince and finally sultan. He died in Ḥamāt on 27th October, 1331. The two literary works upon which his fame rests are his history of the world, *Mukhtasar ta'rikh al-bashar* a survey of pre-Islamic history and the story of Islam as far as 1329, and his Geography, *Taḳwīm al-buldān* which he finished in 1321. This was supplemented by physical and mathematical information largely derived from the Arabic translation of Ptolemy, and quickly replaced all preceding geographical works. Some of his poetry survives, but most of his other writings on religion and literature have disappeared.

The *History* consists of brief chapters in which a great deal of information is compressed into small space, so that little or no detail is given about any individual. Alexander, however, attracted Abu 'l-Fidā's interest because of the epithet „Two-Horned“ which was attached to him by Mediaeval writers, a description which started from coin-portraits showing him wearing the ram's horns of Zeus-Ammon. It is worth comparing this fairly sober account with the phantasies of an earlier writer such as Al-Mas'udi who collected most of the well-known fables about Alexander and wove them into a single, spectacular account¹.

„His father was one of the Kings of Grece which was then divided into various separate states. When he became King, Alexander attacked them and turned them into his own Kingdom. From there he led an expedition againts Darius, King of Persia, and killed him. Then he made war on India and brought the far Chinese under his sway. At last he journeyed back in the direction of Alexandria, which he himself had founded. He died in the region of Sawād², (some authors say, in a city of Shahrzūr),³ aged 36⁴. His body was placed in a golden

¹ See P. G. Maxwell-Stuart: „Al Mas'udi's account of Greek History“, *Rivista di Studi Classici* 23 (1975), 273—8.

² Mesopotamia.

³ A district in Kurdistan. The name is of Persian origin.

⁴ He was actually 33 when he died, in Babylon.

coffin and sent to his mother⁵. He had reigned for nearly 13 years⁶. At that time, therefore, the Kingdom of Greece, which had been divided, was united. The Kingdom of Persia, on the other hand, which before had been a single whole was torn in pieces. The disease which killed Alexander was quinsy, though some people say he was carried off by poison⁷.

He was the friend and disciple of Aristotle who persuaded him to spare the lives of the Persians and to set in authority their chief men and those suitable to exercise sovereignty, each in his own particular province. By these means he would ensure that enmity and envy would arise among them and so they would never unite in a common cause. When Alexander approved of this argument and handed over control of the provinces to them, there arose 'kings of the successor-states', as they are called.

Alexander had red hair and blue eyes.⁸ Before him the Greeks, as I said, were divided into different states. So, as soon as he became King, he made war on them, killed their Kings, and became master of a whole Greek empire in Europe⁹ and in Asia. Afterwards, he brought the whole of North Africa under his command and founded Alexandria. In the East he began to make war on Darius. During this expedition he came to Jerusalem and treated the Jews with respect.¹⁰ Next he set out for the Persian Gulf, brought the native rulers under his command, killed Darius, and did those things I have mentioned before.

A few people, indeed, add that he built a wall from the East to the North round the tribes called Gog and Magog.¹¹ But if one seeks the truth, this was not done by Alexander but by *Dhu 'l-Karnain* (the

⁵ Al Mas'udi gives a detailed account of this episode and of the Queen's receiving the coffin; *Murūdj al-Dhahab*, chapert 25. The story is without historical foundation.

⁶ This is correct. He became King in 336 and died in 323 B.C.

⁷ R. D. Milns says that the symptoms of Alexander's last illness are compatible with those of strychnine poisoning, *Alexander the Great*, (London 1968), 257. See also A. B. Bosworth: „The Death of Alexander the Great. Rumour and Propaganda,” *C. Q.* n. s. 21 (1971), 112—136. Quinsy or malaria are the other possible causes. See R. Lane Fox: *Alexander the Great*, (London 1973), 470.

⁸ See further C. de Ujfalvy: *Le type physique d'Alexandre le Grand*, (Paris 1902), 168.

⁹ By 'Europe', he means the area to the north of Greece, i.e. principally Thrace.

¹⁰ This episode has its origins in a reference by Josephus: *A. J.* 11. 314—339. See F. Pfister: *Alexander der Grosse in den Offenbarungen der Griechen, Juden, Mohamedaner und Christen*, (Berlin 1956), 25sq. G. Cary: *The Mediaeval Alexander*, (Cambridge 1956), 127—130.

¹¹ Yadjudj and Madjudj. *Ezekiel*, chapters 38 and 39. *Genesis* 10. 2. *Koran*, sura 18. 92—99; 21. 96. The Gog and Magog can be identified with the Scythians, the wall with the great wall of Derbent, and the builder with Cyrus the Great of Persia. For a full discussion, see the commentary on sura 18.95 by Malik Ghulām Farid: *The Holy Qur'an*, (Lahore 1969). See also K. Czeglédy: „The Syriac Legend concerning Alexander the Great,” *Acta Orientalia* 7 (1957), 231—249.

Two-Horned) who is mentioned by God in the Koran¹². He was a more ancient King, contemporary with Abraham; some say he was Feridūn¹³, others another King. So those who think Alexander the Greek built the wall are mistaken.

Similarly, everyone has it that it was Alexander who had the epithet „Two-Horned“, but this is quite untrue. The word *dhu* is purely Arabic and this epithet is one of those used by the Kings of Yemen, who are Arabs. (Notice also-Dhu-Jadan, Dhu-Kalā', Dhu-Nuwās, Dhu-Shanātir). The one called Dhu 'l-Karnain was Al-Sa'b ibn al-Ra'ish¹⁴. This Al-Sa'b is said to have been „Two-Horned“. God gave him great power on earth; he built a very great Kingdom and constructed a wall round the Gog and Magog.

Ibn Sa'id (from Ma'rib) records that Ibn 'Abbās, to whose father God was gracious, when asked about Dhu 'l-Karnain of whom God speaks in the Holy Book, answered: „He was from Himyar“¹⁵. This confirms the opinion that he was Al-Sa'b because Al-Sa'b was a very powerful King and also came from Himyar.

When Alexander was dead his son rejected his inheritance and devoted himself to religion¹⁶. In consequence, Alexander's empire was divided among the 'Kings of the successor-states', the Kings of Greece, and others.“

It is clear that this account is derived from two sources, since Abu 'l-Fidā repeats himself. The first section is quite remarkably accurate. Alexander's expedition against the city-states of Greece is not represented as imperial aggression against sovereign kingdoms, as it is in the second section, and the ascription of his death to disease rather than poison shows common sense in the face of traditional rumour. The only serious mistakes are the assertions that he conquered the Chinese and that his coffin was returned to Queen Olympias. It is easy to see how the first was made. Alexander's army ventured into Sogdia, beyond the trading-city of Samarkand, and Sogdian merchants undoubtedly crossed the desert to China where numbers of small clay figures have been found¹⁷. The assumption that Alexander himself had pressed so far is quite understandable.

¹² Sura 18.82 sq. Farid identifies him with Cyrus the Great. According to South Arabians, however, Dhu 'l-Karnain was a local King, Tubba' al-Akran. The literature on Alexander's horns is extensive. See A. R. Anderson: „Alexander's Horns“, *Trans. Proc. Am. Philol. Soc.* 58 (1927), 100—122. A. Abel: „Du'l Qarnayn, prophète de l'universalité“, *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire orientales et slaves*, 11 (1951), 5—18. M. Brocker: *Aristoteles als Alexanders Lehrer in der Legende*, (Bonn 1966), 83—6.

¹³ Obviously not the famous Ahmed Feridun of the 16th century.

¹⁴ King of the Yemen. Al-Rā'ish, according to Al-Tabarī, was a nickname given to him because he brought so much loot into his kingdom: *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa 'l-Muluk*, (ed. M. H. Zotenberg, Paris 1958), Vol. I, chapter 69. Cf. Al Mas'udi: *Murūdj al-Dhahab*, chapter 43.

¹⁵ In South Arabia.

¹⁶ Alexander, the son of Alexander and Roxana, was born soon after his father's death in 323 B. C. He and his mother were imprisoned by Cassander until 311 when they were both put to death. See Diodorus Siculus: 19. 105.

¹⁷ See R. Lane Fox: *op. cit.*, 300,485.

Aristotle's Machiavellian advice to Alexander, however, is an odd piece of fiction. It is true that the King confirmed Persian satraps in their power wherever he could, but his motive seems to have been no more than that dictated by common sense¹⁸. The 'Kings of the successor-states', (presumably the Diadochi, though this is not quite what the Arabic says), seem to come into existence almost as part of a general uprising as a result of this policy — a patent mistake, though the tradition of major disturbances in the Macedonian army which greeted Alexander's increasing favour to the Persian nobility may have become mixed with the quarrels over the Empire after his death, and so passed into Abu 'l-Fidā's source in this form.

The second source is not in the least reliable. It is full of errors — 'kings' of the Greek states, the expedition to Jerusalem, the monastic leanings of Alexander's son — and serves only as a peg on which to hang Abu 'l-Fidā's discussion of the title Dhu 'l-Karnain. One's suspicions are aroused that, whereas the second source is merely a collection of Alexander-fables such as are to be found in the various prose and verse 'Romances', the first was based upon, if not a translation of, Greek material from a much earlier period, the survival of which into the thirteenth century bears witness to the indispensable role of Arabic learning in the preservation of ancient history.

Queens' College, Cambridge.

P. G. Maxwell-Stuart.

¹⁸ There is a passage in an Arabic letter, perhaps translated from a Greek original, purporting to be from Aristotle to Alexander. The letter may be authentic. In it, Aristotle advises the King to remove the Persian nobles from their estates and exile them to Macedonia and Thrace, in revenge for the exile of Asiatic Greeks from their cities. See S. M. Stern: *Aristotle and the World State*, (Oxford 1968), 4—5, 9, 25—34. Such advice is unique to this letter and is perhaps more in keeping with traditional Greek attitudes to the 'barbarian' than the more underhanded mode of thinking illustrated by Abu 'l-Fidā's source.