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Alexander the Great's Encounters with the Sacred in Medieval History Writing

From the *Shahnameh* to the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*

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Alexander the Great is a useful figure in thinking through the challenges and the opportunities that arise when we consider borders, boundaries, or limits—for two reasons. First, narratives of Alexander consistently emphasize his transgression of the ordinary limits of the world: the third-century Greek text of Pseudo-Callisthenes describes his conquest of the most distant geographical extremes, while the fifth-century Latin account of Orosius opens by explaining how the very boundaries that mark the limits of Europe, Africa, and Asia are defined by the markers set by Alexander.¹ As a result, he is an apt figure to use in thinking through our own limits. Second, Alexander narratives are ubiquitous, found in a wide range of literary traditions spanning Europe, Asia, and Africa. The third-century Greek account of Pseudo-Callisthenes gave rise to both the abundant European versions of the text and those found in Asia and Africa, the former mainly by way of the fourth-century Latin adaptation attributed to Julius Valerius, and the latter primarily through the early Syriac translation. There are medieval Alexander narratives in Castilian, Catalan, Dutch, English, French, German, Icelandic, Italian, and so on, and there are also Arabic, Ge'ez, Hebrew, and Persian versions—and many others. How can we even begin to approach such a diverse tradition? It is unsurprising that some of the most useful work has been collaborative, bringing together teams of scholars to address this wide-ranging body of texts and images.² And this brings me

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to some broad methodological questions: ~~namely~~, how far can we go with this kind of comparative or cross-cultural work? Is it useful to attempt a wide-ranging analysis in the hope of spurring some useful provocations to future research? Or is it problematic even to make this attempt because of the difficulty in addressing such diverse fields of study with sufficient competence?

In the following pages, I will explore the iconography and textual descriptions of Alexander's encounters with sacred space, focusing particularly on his experience at the gates of Jerusalem in the European tradition and his experience at the Ka'ba in Persian literature. By examining how this moment is portrayed in thirteenth-century manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* and in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*, I will give an account of what is at stake in such representations of the sacred. Emphasizing the symbolic logic of gateways and monumental structures, I will suggest how we might relate these to the symbolic logic that appears in medieval maps produced in the eastern Mediterranean, both under Christian rule (in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem) and under Muslim rule. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive account or to give a final word but rather to open up a conversation about what is and is not possible in such a bold exploration. In this approach, I take up some of the challenges laid out by Sebastian Conrad in *What Is Global History?*, where, in a chapter section provocatively titled "When Was the Global?," he invites premodern historians to engage in work that is at once comparative and global: such work "might still be organized as a comparison, but it could pursue very explicitly a global history agenda. . . . [I]t would build on some form of structured integration and treat it as an important context."³ To put it another way, I propose that by juxtaposing Alexander's encounter with sacred space in two dramatically different contexts, we can think through the implications of the global turn using a figure that loomed large in the historical and literary imagination across an extraordinarily wide range of cultures. We can explore our own limits, even as we look back on his.

Alexander at the Ka'ba: The Persian *Shahnameh*

The *Shahnameh* or "Book of Kings" is sometimes called Persia's national epic. It has a cosmological or encyclopedic quality as well, beginning with the creation of the world, the emergence of the first human beings, and an account of their lineage. Its author, Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi, links cosmology and national epic by evoking the great mythic heroes of the Persian past before gradually moving into a more conventional account of the lineage of the kings of Persia almost up to Ferdowsi's own time, in the first decades of the eleventh century. The material becomes steadily more grounded in historical fact as the text goes on: heroic kings who live for several hundred years dominate the middle section, which makes up the bulk of the work, but rulers of normal life spans appear in the later ages. The figure of Alexander the Great appears at the crucial



junction linking the age of heroes with the history of the kings. Alexander appears as a transitional figure, more than a man yet an integral part of the history of Persian rule. The description of the end of his reign is followed by an extremely brief overview of the dissolution of his empire into a number of small principalities before the rise of the Sasanian dynasty, whose royal lineage makes up the rest of the *Shahnameh*.

The poem ends not in Ferdowsi's own time but instead with the last Sasanian ruler, Yazdgerd III, who was forced off his throne by the invading Arab Islamic armies in 651 CE. This poetic celebration of Persian mythic and historical heritage thus draws a discreet curtain over the period when the advent of Islam threatened to overwhelm the native culture. Moreover, the *Shahnameh* provides a powerful counternarrative to the history of conquest, a counternarrative that depends a great deal upon the figure of Alexander the Great. For Persians, it is an article of faith that their nation has never been conquered, even though at times it may have adopted new customs, new religions, and new rulers. In keeping with this perspective, the figure of Alexander is presented in the *Shahnameh* not as a Macedonian invader but as a Persian prince. Instead of being the alien enemy of the Persian ruler, as in Pseudo-Callisthenes's account, he is Darius's secret half-brother and rival.

The legends of Alexander the Great, who emerged from Macedonia to build an empire that stretched from Spain to India, were widely disseminated all around the Mediterranean Sea, reaching throughout Europe and much of Asia and as far south as Ethiopia. The basic outline of the Alexander (Sekandar) story as presented in the *Shahnameh* will be familiar to anyone who has read any one of the many versions of his legend, including the war against Darius (Dara), ruler of Persia; the battles against Porus (Foor), king of India; and the letters describing the marvels of the East exchanged by Alexander with his old teacher, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (Arestalis). Yet Ferdowsi faced a particular challenge in describing Alexander's journeys of conquest into the remotest reaches of the Orient, where he ultimately met his doom. For European readers, Alexander's adventures in Babylon were set in the exotic Orient; for Ferdowsi's readers, Babylon was just down the road. Ferdowsi therefore constructs an even more oriental Orient for his hero, sending Alexander as far as China in search of marvels. At the same time, Ferdowsi's Alexander is also made familiar to Persian readers, drawn into the lineage of Persian kings. The rivalry between Alexander and his half-brother ends in the death of Darius, who gives his kingdom to Alexander on the condition that Alexander marry his daughter and uphold the local religion of Zoroastrianism. Here, conquest is transformed into cultural assimilation, and the heroic age moves smoothly into the lists of Persian kings. Implicitly, the transition ushered in by Alexander foreshadows the greater transition that informs the last lines of the *Shahnameh*, which recount the rule of the Sasanian Yazdgerd III. He would be the last native ruler of Persia until the rise of the Samanid rulers of Khorasan—Ferdowsi's patrons—in 819 CE.

In many respects, Ferdowsi's life of Alexander follows the narrative line set by Pseudo-Callisthenes, featuring many of the same episodes: the birth of the marvelous





Figure 6.1
Iskandar (Alexander) at the
Ka'aba. From Abul-Qâsem
Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Shiraz,
1441. Paris, Bibliothèque
nationale de France, MS suppl.
persan 493, fol. 342r.

and loyal horse Bucephalus, the battle against Darius and conquest of Babylon, the ongoing war against Porus in India, the encounter with an exotic and powerful queen Candace (Qaydafeh), whom Pseudo-Callisthenes places in the distant south. In addition, however, some anomalies appear; among these is Alexander's visit to Mecca, where he encounters the world's holiest site, the Ka'ba. While the episode itself is quite brief in the *Shahnameh*, illuminated images of Alexander at the Ka'ba began to appear in manuscripts of the text in the fourteenth century and became abundant in the fifteenth.⁴ A striking example appears in a manuscript dated by colophon to 1441 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, suppl. persan MS 493, fol. 342r; fig. 6.1). It shows Alexander, clothed in red and accompanied by others, gesturing toward the entrance to the Ka'ba, which is covered in a rich black cloth. The group is enclosed

within the architectural space of the walls encircling the Ka‘ba, the Bait al-Haram (sacred house).

The earliest example of this motif appears about a century earlier, in a manuscript produced in Shiraz in 1330 (Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, MS H. 1479, fol. 170b; fig. 6.2). This image is one among a series depicting Alexander at the Ka‘ba that has been surveyed by Marianna Shreve Simpson in a detailed study of this scene in *Shahnameh* manuscripts from the earliest known example to early modern times. Simpson shows how the emphasis on ritual performance, especially pilgrimage, gradually increased and demonstrates that the depiction of Alexander in *Shahnameh* manuscripts was inflected by other iconographic traditions, especially those found in Nizami Ganjavi’s *Khamsa*.⁵ In this image, we see not a distinct image block cut off from the surrounding text but rather a kind of bleeding together, where image extends out over the text on right and left, and the image itself includes text as a prominent feature at the top. This is markedly different from the well-defined image blocks that appear in later representations of this scene in *Shahnameh* manuscripts. We also will not find a textual banner in the later illuminations; here, the strip of cloth covering the upper part of the Ka‘ba reads, “al-Ka‘ba al-bait Allah.” This is a clear anachronism: in Ferdowsi’s text, Alexander is not a Muslim, and the time frame is explicitly before the emergence of Islam. Nonetheless, the iconographic program pushes the manuscript in another direction, positing the ruler’s physical, momentous encounter with the sacred. Alexander is seated, while another figure close to the door, in a role that Simpson describes as a kind of “tour guide,” is Nasr, of the tribe of Ismail, who appeals to Alexander for help in throwing off the tyrant Jaza’, who has been persecuting his people in Mecca and the surrounding region.⁶

A second image of Alexander at the Ka‘ba appears in a Cambridge manuscript dated 1435 (Fitzwilliam, MS 22–1948, fol. 18v; fig. 6.3). This image is clearly distinct from the Shiraz manuscript of 1330, and it is better preserved than (although clearly related to) the slightly later image of 1441 noted previously (see fig. 6.1). Both feature a similar gateway, angled at the top as though to suggest the opening of the door. In both cases, the figure of Alexander is regal, depicted to the side of the entrance, which is opened to him by his guide. As noted above, the episode of Alexander at the Ka‘ba is quite brief in Ferdowsi’s text; however, the iconographic program that emerges in the fourteenth century clearly magnifies this moment.⁷ Why does this happen? Simpson suggests that the explanation may have to do with the way that religion is depicted in the Alexander episode: Ferdowsi shows Alexander as a Christian—he marries a bride “according to Christian custom” and swears an oath to Queen Qaydāfeh “by the Messiah’s faith” and by “the Holy Ghost.”⁸ The Ka‘ba, then, in Simpson’s reading, functions in the text of the *Shahnameh* not as a pilgrimage site for Muslims but as a geographical center about which the whole wide world is organized: as Simpson puts it, “This place offered a fixed and familiar point of geographical and cultural reference for his audience within an itinerary that otherwise involved distant frontiers (like Andalusia) and even uncharted territories (such as the end of the world).”⁹

While the text downplays the Islamic nature of the site, the iconographic program of the manuscripts, by contrast, develops its sacrality and emphasizes the phenomenon of pilgrimage.¹⁰ This can be seen in the Paris manuscript completed just a few years later in 1441, which shares many features of the Cambridge manuscript (cf. figs. 6.1 and 6.3): for example, it also shows the crenellations demarcating the holy precincts and the black cloth (*kiswa*) covering the Ka‘ba. Later manuscripts, however, handle this scene a bit differently. One such work, dated to 1450, is held at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (Ann Arbor, MS 1963, fol. 346r; fig. 6.4). It is close in time to the other fifteenth-century examples discussed above but shows some interesting variations: we continue to see architectural forms, crenellations, and even the cityscape of Mecca. In the Michigan manuscript, however, we find less of an emphasis on the opening gateway of the Ka‘ba: the draped cloth of the *kiswa* provides less of a sense of immanent access than in the earlier images, and the human figures are turned away from the edifice. What this image does provide, what is strikingly new here, is the illumination of the skyscape above, in a display of *farr* (glory).

Farr is a term that appears repeatedly in the *Shahnameh* and is particularly featured in the Alexander episode. Alexander is said to be “resplendent with *farr*” upon his initial encounter with Darius; the Persian king tells him that “the royal *farr* shines from your forehead as if you were a Kayanid prince.”¹¹ *Farr* was, from a very early date, associated with the light emanating from fire, the sun, and the stars, and it was used to describe mythic kings and heroes. In Islamic Persia, *farr* was integrated into the pictorial depiction of the Prophet and some saintly figures, such as imams, in the form of golden flame.¹² Illustrations of the Prophet’s *mi‘raj* (ascent into the heavens) offer a particularly interesting foil to the representation of *farr* in the scene of Alexander at the Ka‘ba seen in the Michigan manuscript.¹³ For example, the opening pages of an early sixteenth-century manuscript of Sa‘di’s *Bustan*, most likely from Bukhara and Herat (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MS 1974.294.2; fig. 6.5) show Prophet Muhammad mounted on his steed, Buraq, illuminated by a halo in the form of a golden flame. He is, in turn, surrounded by clouds of golden flame, in a convergence of the glories of the heavens with the divine light conveyed by the Prophet himself. Yet unlike other representations of this scene, which show only the Prophet mounted on Buraq, perhaps in the company of attendant angels or other heavenly figures, this image from Sa‘di’s *Bustan* also features, in a lower register, three devout sages presumably meditating on the Prophet’s journey.¹⁴ The earthly flame that mounts from the brazier behind them reaches upward, almost but not quite touching the heavenly flames, in an evocation of the proximity—but slight separation—of the human and the divine.



Figure 6.2 (opposite)
Iskandar (Alexander) at the Ka‘aba. From Abul-Qāsem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Shiraz, 1330. Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, MS H. 1479, fol. 170v. Photo © Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, the Directorate of National Palaces.

Figure 6.3
Iskandar (Alexander) at the Ka‘aba. From Abul-Qāsem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Shiraz, 1435. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library Fitzwilliam MS 22-1948, fol. 18v. Photo © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



Captions for 6.5 and 6.4 appear out of sequence; I believe the images themselves are placed correctly, but this should be checked.

Figure 6.5
The *Mir'aj* of Muhammad. From Sa'di, *Bustan*, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, probably Bukhara or Herat, ca. 1525–35. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, MS 1974.294.2, fol. 3v. Purchase, Louis V. Bell Fund and The Vincent Astor Foundation Gift, 1974. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

While depictions of the Prophet emphasize *nur* (divine light), depictions of Alexander the Great emphasize *farr* (regal glory). At the same time, the relationship between these two is blurred in Alexander's encounter at the Ka'ba. In theological terms, the pre-Islamic concept of *farr* could merge, in iconographic settings, with the Islamic concept of *nur*, so that the emanation of glory from the individual person could be understood as a kind of reflection of the divine nature, though it remained ontologically distinct from it. This can be seen particularly well in the image from the Michigan manuscript (see fig. 6.4): the divine light appears above, in the heavens, in a manifestation of divine illumination that can be understood both in theological terms and Neoplatonic terms as *nur*, light. It is also, however, the site of displacement of Alexander's *farr*. We see this in the treatment of the gold at the top of the frame, signifying the divine light.



Figure 6.4
Iskandar (Alexander) at the
Ka'aba. From Abul-Qâsem
Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*, Shiraz,
1450. Ann Arbor, University of
Michigan Museum of Art, MS
1963, fol. 346r. Photo © University
of Michigan Museum of Art,
Museum Purchase, 1963/1.65.

The other places where this gold appears is on the door of the Ka'ba and in the crown of Alexander, below which his face is downcast. The roof of the Ka'ba is, as it were, crowned with gold—a gold that seamlessly merges with the gold of the heavens. The whole scene conveys a complex message about the nature of kingship, the relationship of *farr* and *nur*, and the limitations of human glory in the face of the divine. This is very different from what we saw in the earlier *Shahnameh* manuscripts.

Here again, a comparison with the iconography of *mi'raj* manuscripts is helpful. A manuscript of Jami's *Yusuf wa Zulaikha* made in Shiraz, circa 1585 to 1590 (Istanbul, Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Kütüphanesi, MS H.1084, fol. 11a; fig. 6.6) shows the Prophet, mounted on Buraq, ascending into the heavens in a scene generally similar to that in the upper register of the New York folio. Here, too, golden clouds of fire borne by angels surround the Prophet, although this image also includes personifications of

Figure 6.6
The *Mi'raj* of Muhammad. From
Jami, *Yusuf wa Zulaikha*, Shiraz,
ca. 1585–90. Istanbul, Topkapı
Sarayı Müzesi Kutüphanesi,
MS H.1084, fol. 11a. Photo
© Presidency of the Republic
of Turkey, the Directorate of
National Palaces.



the planets and constellations. What is strikingly different, though, is the inclusion of the Ka‘ba and sacred precincts of Mecca at the base of the image. The door of the Ka‘ba is shut, the building soberly draped in its black *kiswa*.

In a detailed account of the architectural features of this scene, Christiane Gruber comments on the complex geographical logic that underlies this cosmological vision, revealed by a later Ottoman scribe who had written labels in gold beneath the buildings. Instead of writing the names of the Ka‘ba and adjacent structures, she notes, the scribe had mistakenly identified buildings on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount rather than those around the Ka‘ba in Mecca. She suggests, “To represent the ascension of the Prophet over Mecca—omitting Jerusalem as the interim, earthly stop—would simply not be acceptable to an Ottoman commentator.”¹⁵ Alternatively, it is possible that the enigmatic, half-enclosed buildings that appear in the middle of the painting—which Gruber labels as “unidentified”—are the subject of the Ottoman scribe’s golden labels, in the form of semiabstract architectural elements that mark the Prophet’s point of departure into the heavens. The *mi‘raj* was the second part of an extended process, with the night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (*isra*) followed by the heavenly ascent (*mi‘raj*), departing from the site of the Dome of the Rock, where devout Muslims believe that the imprint of the Prophet’s sandal can still be seen on the rock at the base of the shrine. In this reading, a typological sequence links the bottom register of the painting, showing the Ka‘ba, with the middle register, showing the abstracted buildings of Jerusalem, and finally with the upper register, which shows the Prophet mounted on Buraq, extending his hand and raising his face to the heavenly clouds of flame that flow from above. As in the Michigan manuscript showing Alexander the Great at the Ka‘ba, light is the medium that links heaven and earth and the means of demarcating the line that separates divine and human glory (see fig. 6.4).

Alexander at the Gates of Jerusalem: The French *Histoire ancienne jusqu’à César*

The Alexander tradition is diverse and complex, and the place of the *Histoire ancienne* within that lineage is a curious one: while it is a French vernacular text, composed just a few decades after Alexander romances such as the *Roman de toute chevalerie* and the *Roman d’Alexandre*, it integrates that narrative within a larger account of the history of the world. As in Orosius’s fifth-century universal history, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, the *Histoire ancienne* opens with a geographical overview that nods to the foundational role of Alexander in establishing the boundaries of the ecumene. While Orosius depicts Alexander as a bloodthirsty tyrant, however, the author of the *Histoire ancienne* has a more expansive vision: although Alexander is an overreacher, which leads to his ultimate downfall, his experiences—battles against a Babylonian king; the apocalyptic aura of his exploration of the remotest Orient; and, above all, his experiences at Jerusalem—position him as a typological prefiguration of the crusader kings of the Latin Kingdom.

The Jerusalem narrative found in the *Histoire ancienne* does not appear in Orosius's universal history. It entered into the tradition through Latin translations of Josephus (especially Pseudo-Hegesippus) and was popularized by its inclusion in widely disseminated texts, such as the *Historia scholastica* of Peter Comestor.¹⁶ For Josephus, Alexander's encounter at the gates of Jerusalem is a profoundly textual moment, which is typologically linked to another crucial textual moment: the flight of refugees from the fallen city of Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple, bearing books in Hebrew that would become the foundation of a spiritual rebirth.¹⁷ In that light, it is fruitful to compare the depiction of Alexander at the gates of Jerusalem as presented in the mid-thirteenth-century Dijon manuscript of the *Histoire ancienne* (Bibliothèque municipale, MS 562, fol. 170v; fig. 6.7) with the earliest *Shahnameh* illustration of Alexander at the Ka'ba (see fig. 6.2). The image from the Dijon manuscript shows the moment when the high priest, accompanied by other elders of the community, greets Alexander at the gates of Jerusalem, hoping to dissuade him from conquering this city, as he has done so many others. To their surprise, the conqueror bows down before the high priest, stating that he had seen him, dressed in his ceremonial white garments—including the golden plate adorned with the Tetragrammaton—in a prophetic dream. Alexander then enters the temple, makes a sacrifice, and offers gifts to the Jewish community.¹⁸ Josephus's account is reflected in the *Histoire ancienne*, which states that the high priest "had carried before him a tablet of well-wrought gold, held up high, with the name of Our Lord written on it in the Hebrew language" (si fist devant lui porter une table d'or mout bien faite et haut amont levee, ou li nons Nostre Segnor estoit escrits en ebriu language).¹⁹ Here in the text, the breastplate is a tablet of gold, written in Hebrew characters.

For the illustrator of the Dijon manuscript, however, this was an opportunity to transform the moment into a recognition not of the truth of the God of Israel but of the incarnate Christ. The high priest carries not a golden tablet but what looks more like a three-dimensional object; Bianca Kühnel has suggested that we might even see it as a pyx, a ceremonial container for the consecrated Host.²⁰ As we will see, other manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne* represent this sacred object differently. For the moment, however, let us consider the object in textual terms: what goal is served by this transformation of the plate with the Tetragrammaton into the inscribed or carved object that the high priest holds? In a study of ivory objects, Sarah Guérin has argued that pyxes made to hold the transubstantiated body of Christ were privileged objects, containers that participated in a profound spiritual hermeneutic: "As the Ark sheltered the Tablets of the Law, that is, the Word of God, so did Mary bear Christ, that is, the Word made Flesh (John 1:14), in her womb. Just as the sacrament house and Eucharist could stand in for the Ark of the Covenant and the Tablets of the Law, Mary sheltering Christ was a parallel iteration of the same Old Testament metaphor."²¹ In other words, as the container of the Host, the pyx refers at once to the body of the Virgin bearing the Word of God and to the Ark of the Covenant bearing the Tablets in a prefiguration of



Figure 6.7
Alexander at the gates of
Jerusalem. From Wauchier
de Denain, *Histoire ancienne
jusqu'à César*, Acre, 1260s. Dijon,
Bibliothèque municipale, MS 562,
fol. 170v. Photo: Bibliothèque
municipale de Dijon.

the Incarnation. In this way, Alexander's encounter at the gates of Jerusalem participates in a complex temporality, located both prior to the Incarnation, in the Macedonian's own historical moment, and in the post-Incarnation time of salvation.

Another approach to the image in the Dijon manuscript would be to highlight the fact of inscription. What exactly is the function of written text in the encounter with the sacred—not only in the scene illustrated in the Dijon manuscript showing Alexander at the gates of Jerusalem but also in the early fourteenth-century Shiraz manuscript of the *Shahnameh* (see fig. 6.2)? In particular, is it significant that the textual element entirely drops out of the iconography of this scene in subsequent manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*? There is much more to be said about this, particularly with reference to the supersessionist logic that governs both of these images. In the image from the Dijon manuscript, we see Alexander at the gates of Jerusalem, facing a sacred object that is at once Judaic (the golden plate inscribed with the Tetragrammaton) and Christian (a pyx-like object), manifesting simultaneously the Old and the New Covenant and thus participating in a complex temporality. In the image from the Topkapı manuscript, we see Alexander at the Ka'ba, with a textual banner at the top reading "al-Ka'ba al-bait Allah" (the Ka'ba [cube] of the House of God). While the text of the *Shahnameh* positions Alexander as a Christian in a pre-Islamic world, the illumination positions the reader firmly in a Muslim perspective. The illustrations thus participate in a similar supersessionist hermeneutic, where Jewish and Christian identities in the

Figure 6.8
Alexander at the gates of
Jerusalem. From Wauchier
de Denain, *Histoire ancienne
jusqu'à César*, Acre, 1280s. Paris,
Bibliothèque nationale de France,
MS 20125, fol. 232r.



Histoire ancienne, and Christian and Muslim identities (as well as Persian Zoroastrian and Muslim identities) in the *Shahnameh*, are held in tension.

Other illustrations of this scene in the *Histoire ancienne* are less committed to the supersessionist impulse than what we see in the Dijon manuscript. An exemplar made in Acre in the 1280s is similar to the Dijon manuscript in some respects and yet significantly dissimilar (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 20125, fol. 232r; fig. 6.8). Both images include three priestly figures on one side and three knightly figures on the other; in both, Alexander is kneeling, and a horse appears in the scene. The left-right distribution is consistent. The architectural forms differ: the Dijon manuscript illustrates distinctive building shapes that recall monumental structures in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, such as the Dome of the Rock and the church of the Holy Sepulchre.²² In addition, the colors of the clothing worn by the priestly figures varies slightly, and the three knights and Alexander are helmeted, hiding their faces (and one might also note that the high priest's face has been scraped). Most important, however, the object of veneration is quite different. Where the text invites us to envision a single golden plate marked with the Tetragrammaton, and the Dijon manuscript presents a three-dimensional pyx-like object, the Paris manuscript portrays a form that appears

to be the two tablets of the Law. The effect is not simply to underline the supersessionist hermeneutic we already saw manifested in the Dijon manuscript but to ground it specifically in divine law, reminding us of the fulfillment and replacement of the Old Law of Moses by the New Law of Christ.

Beyond thinking comparatively about these two traditions found in the *Histoire ancienne* and the *Shahnameh*, both depicting Alexander's encounter with the sacred, is there more to conjecture? We have already noted that the representations of Alexander at the Ka'ba that emerge in the early fourteenth century (1330) and take off in the fifteenth century constitute an innovation that defies the relatively minor role that the episode plays in Ferdowsi's text. Why did this interest develop in fourteenth-century Shiraz? Simpson suggests that an interest in pilgrimage practices in the region may have played a role, but she does not speculate further.

Considering the iconography of Alexander at Jerusalem in the manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne* may offer another possibility. All five of the earliest manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne* were produced during the thirteenth century, within a few decades after the work's composition, in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem prior to the fall of Acre in 1291. Jaroslav Folda and Lisa Mahoney have demonstrated that the scriptoria of Acre produced manuscripts of high quality with distinctive features, while recent work on the orthographic and phonological features of the "French of Outremer" has done much to reveal the unique linguistic and literary culture of the region.²³ Is it possible that there was more cross-fertilization, in cultural terms, in that region than has as yet been recognized? The artistic traits of the Acre scriptoria, so well-illustrated in the Dijon manuscript of the *Histoire ancienne*, are sometimes very loosely called "Byzantine," but it would be more apt to describe them as the product of a syncretic, emergent style proper to the eastern Mediterranean region.²⁴ Might this style—and might these iconographic practices around Alexander's encounter with the sacred—have extended more widely along the trade routes and lines of cultural communication as far as Shiraz? What might we learn about the artists and artisans who inhabited this environment? Could presentation manuscripts have circulated across this cultural divide? Would manuscripts have traveled as war booty?

Thus far we have been looking at the image of Alexander's encounter with the sacred in isolation, whether in the Persian tradition or the French. Contextualizing these briefly helps to show which elements of the Alexander story are most typically illustrated. Both in the Paris manuscript made in Acre (fig. 6.8) and in a comparable early manuscript of the *Histoire ancienne* held in London (British Library, Additional MS 15268),²⁵ six images are devoted to the Alexander section of the text. The former includes the following: Jerusalem (fig. 6.8), the Wheel of Fortune, Alexander's armies confronting the Indian armies of Porus, a three-horned beast, a two-headed beast, and Alexander and Porus facing each other to battle in single combat. The British Library manuscript also devotes six images to the Alexander section, many of which overlap with those found in Paris manuscript: the two battle scenes (collective and individual)

are the same, and the two monstrous beasts are the same. The two differences in the London manuscript are, first, the opening illustration, where the Amazons instead of Alexander appear at the gates of Jerusalem and, second, the omission of Fortune's wheel to instead provide, later in the text, the Trees of the Sun and the Moon that prophesy Alexander's premature death.²⁶ Both of these images—the Wheel of Fortune and the oracular Trees—forecast Alexander's future but within strikingly different frames of reference. Anne Derbes and Mark Sandona have explicated the inclusion of the Amazons in this pivotal position in the context of female patronage of the *Histoire ancienne* and related texts from the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.²⁷ What remains is to ask why Jerusalem might have been included or left out in the illustration programs: when is it seen as a crucial moment—as in the Dijon manuscript—and when is it seen as superfluous?

Let us return now to the comparative frame of reference, considering the Dijon manuscript of the *Histoire ancienne* (dating from the 1260s, produced in Acre) against the Paris manuscript of the *Shahnameh* (dating from 1441, produced in Shiraz) (cf. figs. 6.7 and 6.1). As noted above, there are undoubtedly some common features in their iconographic programs. These include the supplicant hands of Alexander in both; his crown and red gown; the clusters of men on each side of the frame, in both pictures; and the central focus, in each case, on a doorway marking the point where the sacred enters the world. Is this just a coincidence? Or could there have been a shared context that links these images, this evocation of Alexander's relationship to the divine? This is not a question that can be answered conclusively in this essay, but it may be a useful question to pose for future research.

One also might want to think in broader terms about the illustration programs, especially with regard to how architectural forms can signify transitions in historical time. An example is the depiction of the Temple of Janus in the Dijon manuscript (fig. 6.9), an image that I have written about before and which Kühnel has also brilliantly addressed.²⁸ This is a very different subject from Alexander at the gates of Jerusalem, but nonetheless one that is thematically comparable to the juxtaposed image from the *Shahnameh*. As Orosius emphasizes, the gates of the Temple of Janus, located in Rome, were periodically shut in order to mark the times of peace that conclude periods of violent warfare. The most important of these periods, for Orosius and for those who adapted his work—as did the writer of the *Histoire ancienne*—is the *pax Augustiana*, the period of peace during the reign of Augustus Caesar that heralded the birth of Christ. The gates of the Temple of Janus were also shut during other moments of peace, and one of these, which occurred during the Punic Wars, is depicted here. We might note some parallels with the scene in the *Shahnameh* illustrated in the Paris manuscript (see fig. 6.1), as well as with the Cambridge manuscript (see fig. 6.3), where the gateway-like quality of the Ka'ba at the center of the image is even more pronounced. Might we observe in these two images, widely separated in their cultural context, a similar alignment of physical space—that is, the liminal space of the doorway—and historical time, at the point where a significant transitional moment is marked?



Figure 6.9
Temple of Janus. From Wauchier
de Denain, *Histoire ancienne*
jusqu'à César, Acre, 1260s. Dijon,
Bibliothèque municipale, MS 562,
fol. 204v. Photo: Bibliothèque
municipale de Dijon.

To pursue this line of thought requires asking what significant transitional moment is marked in this image from the *Shahnameh*. In the text of Ferdowsi, Alexander's visit to the Ka'ba is brief and does not seem to convey a particularly striking message. For the manuscript's illustrators, however, this moment could be seen as a richly meaningful turning point in historical time in light of the supersessionist hermeneutic we discussed earlier. To what extent is pilgrimage evoked in this scene at the Ka'ba? To what extent is Alexander an apt avatar for the experience of the individual pilgrim? And how exactly is sacred space evoked in this scene?

I want to make it clear that I am not arguing that the iconographic program of the Acre manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne* (especially the Dijon manuscript) inspired the iconographic program of the *Shahnameh* manuscripts that show Alexander at the Ka'ba; instead, I am asking whether both derived from a regional artistic culture that shared certain pictorial conventions and had some common interests concerning the depiction of sacred space. To highlight this point, let us return to the Dijon illumination of the Temple of Janus (see fig. 6.9) and the same scene in the London manuscript also produced at Acre (British Library, Additional MS 15268, fol. 242v; fig. 6.10). Only in the Dijon manuscript do we see the harshly schematic vision of the temple, with the two bold gates framing a keyhole-like insert in the middle. The gates of Janus seem to be almost a portal to some other reality, to a cyclical escape from linear time. The British Library manuscript, by contrast, puts the statue off to the side, adjacent to a scene of banqueting Roman senators. It is clear that the Dijon manuscript participates in a different iconographic and spatial logic.



Figure 6.10
Temple of Janus. From Wauchier de Denain, *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, Acre, 1280s. London, British Library, Additional MS 15268, fol. 242v. Photo © The British Library Board, Additional MS 15268.

Mapping the Sacred

This logic, I would suggest, has a lot to do with how those living in the eastern Mediterranean during the thirteenth century thought about Jerusalem. The depiction of Alexander kneeling here at the gate, as in the image from the Dijon manuscript (see fig. 6.7), also offers a glimpse of the center of the world. Medieval maps of Jerusalem produced in the early thirteenth century, like the one held at Saint-Omer (Bibliothèque de l'Agglomération, MS 776) and a closely related late twelfth-century map held in London (British Library, Additional MS 32343, fol. 15v; fig. 6.11), evoke in detailed terms a city that was at once a thriving urban metropolis and the symbolic center of the world. The latter map, in particular, reflects a detailed, practical knowledge of the twelfth-century city under Latin rule. It features a meat market and money exchange, in addition to religious buildings like the church of the Holy Sepulchre and the "Temple of the Lord" (that is, the Dome of the Rock), signifying a lived daily reality. At the same time, the map includes richly symbolic forms, such as the looming central Porta Speciosa that lends an atemporal, even apocalyptic dimension to the map image. Beyond these qualities—of local accuracy and realism and of apocalyptic symbolic space—the Jerusalem maps present a microcosm of the greater world, of which the holy city is the fixed center. Their perfectly circular form is reflected, for example, in the famous Psalter Map produced in the 1260s (London, British Library, Additional MS 28681).²⁹ The function of Jerusalem as central point in space—and pivotal moment in time—is thus affirmed by the maps, just as it is in the illustration programs of at least some of the Acre manuscripts of the *Histoire ancienne*.

Maps produced in the eastern Mediterranean can also provide a valuable context for the symbolic logic of the *Shahnameh* manuscripts examined above. One such example is a map of the Maghrib in a late twelfth-century manuscript of a geographical survey, an abridgment of the tenth-century *Kitāb al-Masālik wa l-mamālik* (Book of roads and



Figure 6.11
Jerusalem city map, Voormezele,
second half of the twelfth century.
London, British Library Additional
MS 32343, fol. 15v. Photo © The
British Library Board, Additional
MS 32343.

kingdoms; fig. 6.12).³⁰ In her study of Islamic maps of the region, Karen Pinto provides a detailed analysis of this image, which she localizes to the eastern Mediterranean. Readers of the *Shahnameh* have long been puzzled by the attribution “Andalus” as the name of the realm of the beautiful and powerful queen whom Alexander encounters; in many versions of the Alexander narrative, this queen is identified as Candace, queen of Ethiopia, but in the *Shahnameh*, she is called “Qadayfeh,” queen of “Andalus.”³¹

In general terms, we might explain this transposition of Ethiopia for al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) as a way of emphasizing remoteness, in something like the way China is introduced into the *Shahnameh* as an even more distant site for exploration and conquest. In other words, the queen is associated with distant lands to the West that are as far away as it is possible to get from Alexander’s climactic eastern conquests in India and beyond. In order to take stock of this transposition more fully, however, we might look at the spatial depiction of the West on this map of the Maghrib contained in the



Figure 6.12
Map of the Maghrib. From Abū
Ishāq al-Iṣṭakhri, abridgement
of *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*,
eastern Mediterranean, AH 589 /
1193 CE. Leiden, Bibliotheek der
Rijksuniversiteit, MS or. 3101, p. 20.
Photo: Leiden University Libraries.

abridgment of al-Iṣṭakhri's geography—specifically at how al-Andalus is depicted, as the large circular land mass to the right, with the red sphere of Cordoba at its center (see fig. 6.12)—to help us unpack the textual logic of the *Shahnameh*. As Pinto points out, the two mountainous forms shown here, the Jabal al-Qilal at lower left and the Jabal Tariq—that is, Gibraltar—together form a kind of symbolic barrier that marks the furthest extent of the Mediterranean. As the Pillars of Hercules, these two mountains form a two-part gate that both anticipates and is fulfilled by the boundary marks set out by Alexander at the extreme points of the world. Renaming Candace, queen of Ethiopia, as “Qadayfeh,” queen of “Andalus,” reinscribes one set of limits—in the remotest South—with another set of limits—in the remotest West, marked by the Pillars of Hercules. Remoteness is always relative, and it is continually reinvented based on where the form of representation, whether textual, iconographic, or cartographic, is produced.

I would like to close with the methodological questions with which I began. Can an exploration of these two very different textual and iconographic conventions be fruitful, bearing in mind that each of these traditions—that of the *Histoire ancienne*

manuscripts, on the one hand, and that of the *Shahnameh* manuscripts, on the other—carries with it a tremendous scholarly burden? I am not personally equipped to delve equally deeply into both of these traditions; would it be wiser to leave the Persian manuscripts to the scholar of Near and Middle Eastern studies and the French manuscripts to the specialist in European medieval studies? Or is there something to be gained by positioning oneself in the awkward middle, to try to take stock of the complex environment of the eastern Mediterranean? Speaking for myself, it seems impossible to investigate the manuscripts of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem without trying to account fully for the complex interplay of cultures found there: those people who were at once fully European, belonging to their various “nations,” and yet also deeply integrated into the Asian world of trade, exchange, and “rough tolerance.”³² It may be the case that only a creative—even daring—approach will bring us closer to them.

Notes

1. Orosius, *Seven Books of History* 1.2; trans. Deferrari, 7–8, with explicit references to Alexander italicized:

Europe begins, as I have said, in the north at the Tanais River, where the Rhiphaean Mountains, standing back from the Sarmatian Sea, pour forth the Tanais flood. The Tanais, sweeping past the *altars and boundaries of Alexander the Great* to the territories of the Rhobasci, swells the Palus Maeotis, whose immense overflow spreads afar into the Euxine Sea near Theodosia. From the Euxine near Constantinople a long narrow body of water leads to the sea which we call Mare Nostrum. The Western Ocean forms the boundary of Europe in Spain at the very point where the Pillars of Hercules stand near the Gades Islands and where the Ocean tide comes into the straits of the Tyrrhenian Sea. Africa begins with the land of Egypt and the *city of Alexandria*. On the shore of that Great Sea, the waters of which touch all the continents and the lands in the center of the earth, we find the city of Paraetonium. From there the boundaries of Africa lead through districts which the inhabitants call Catabathmon, not far from the *camp of Alexander the Great* above Lake Chalearzus, whence they pass near the lands of the Upper Avasitae and across the deserts of Ethiopia to reach the Southern Ocean. The western boundary of Africa is the same as that of Europe, that is, the entrance of the Strait of Gades; its furthest boundaries are the Atlas Range and the islands which people call Fortunatae.

2. Stock, *Alexander the Great*, and Zuwiyya, *Companion to Alexander Literature*.

3. Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, 110–14, at 114.

4. For an overview of pictorial representations of Alexander in Islamic manuscripts (Persian, Ottoman, and Mughal), see Milstein, “Picturing the Archetypal King,” 48–63.

5. Simpson, “From Tourist to Pilgrim,” 127–46. See also Simpson and Marlow, *Princeton’s Great Persian Book of Kings*, and Davidson and Simpson, *Ferdowsi’s “Shāhnāma.”*

6. Simpson, “From Tourist to Pilgrim,” 132.

7. The episode is thirty verses long, of which twenty concern the encounter with Nasr and the overthrow of the tyrant. The episode opens with eight verses on Alexander’s trip to Mecca and the sanctity of the place, and it closes with two verses where Alexander walks on foot to the Ka’ba as the people praise him. See *ibid.*, 128–29, and Davis, *Shahnameh*, 596–97.

8. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 587, 608; cf. Simpson, “From Tourist to Pilgrim” 129.

9. Simpson, “From Tourist to Pilgrim” 130.

10. *Ibid.*, 135.

11. Davis, *Shahnameh*, 567.

12. “The most noticeable legacy of *farr*, though, is the symbol of shoulder-flames used in the representation of saintly Islamic figures. Perhaps because Zoroaster’s *farr* was said to have descended from the Heavens and manifested itself ‘in the form of fire’ (Gnoli), flaming haloes were perceived to underline holiness, and were extended to Islamic saintly figures. The flaming bust on the fire altar of Sasanian coinage, especially on the reverse of some Kōsrow II (Khosrow) issues, may have provided the prototype for such representation. To this day, flaming-shoulders still mark the images of the Prophet and the Imams.”



Encyclopaedia Iranica, s.v. “farr[ah] ii. Iconography of farr[ah].” See also *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “farr[ah].”

13. For an overview of the iconography of *mi'raj* manuscripts, beginning in the early fourteenth century, see *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, s.v. “ME' RĀJ ii. Illustrations.”

14. See the detailed account of this image in Gruber, “Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*),” 229–62, esp. 239–40. Gruber suggests that the painting was added later to the manuscript (text dated 1514, painting added circa 1550, Bukhara). For a striking example of a similar scene except for the three sages seated below, dated 1436–37 (likely Herat), see Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, supp. Turc MS 190, fol. 5r, reproduced as fig. 1.1 in Gruber, *Timurid “Book of Ascension,”* 189. On the relationship of textual descriptions of the “light of Muhammad” (*nur Muhammad*) to visual depictions of a golden nimbus around the Prophet’s head, see Gruber, *Timurid “Book of Ascension,”* 311–13.

15. Gruber, *Timurid “Book of Ascension,”* 350.

16. On the specifics of how both Josephus’s *Bellum Judaicum* and *Antiquitates Judaicae* found their way into the Zacher Epitome of Julius Valerius that was the source of many of the European vernacular versions of the Alexander narrative, see Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 88–90.

17. On Alexander’s encounter at the gates of Jerusalem, see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.8.4–6, ed., trans., and rev. Shilleto, Wilson, and Whiston, 2:296–300; and on the flight of refugees, see Josephus, *The Jewish War* 7, ed., trans., and rev. Shilleto, Wilson, and Whiston, 5:124–73).

18. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.8.5, ed., trans., and rev. Shilleto, Wilson, and Whiston, 2:298–99.

19. Gaullier-Bougassas, *L’histoire ancienne jusqu’à César*, 34, lines 13–14.

20. Kühnel, “Perception of History,” 161–86, at 163. I am grateful to Sarah Guérin for drawing my attention to a large (35 cm) ivory casket of possibly eastern Mediterranean origin, the “Sainte Châsse de Sens,” which bears a striking resemblance to the pyx-like object carried in the Dijon manuscript illustration (fig. 6.7). See Hanson, “‘Sainte Chasse,’” and Nees, “What’s in the Box?,” 67–77.

21. Guérin, “Meaningful Spectacles,” 53–77, at 62 (cf. 71).

22. Kühnel, “Perception of History,” 166–67.

23. Folda, *Crusader Art in the Holy Land*, 393–479, and Mahoney, “*Histoire ancienne*,” 31–52. On the linguistic communities of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, see Morreale and Paul, *French of Outremer*, especially the essays by Laura Minervini (15–29) and Fabio Zinelli (221–46).

24. Mahoney emphasizes the “Byzantine” quality of the *Histoire ancienne* manuscripts but ultimately concludes that they reflect “a rich dialectical relationship with local culture within the specific tensions of the Levant” (“*Histoire ancienne*,” 40–42, at 46). On the complex interrelationships of various ethnic and linguistic groups in the Latin Kingdom, see MacEvitt, *Crusades*.

25. Discussion of this manuscript can be found in Morrison and Hedeman, *Imagining the Past in France*, 103–4. Record and images available at the British Library, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=add_ms_15268&index=0.

26. London, British Library, Additional MS 15268, fol. 203r: the Amazons surrendering to Alexander; fol. 204r: the battle between the Macedonians and the Indians, with elephants; fol. 208r: the beast with three horns; fol. 210v: The beast with two heads; fol. 214v: Alexander and the prophesying trees; fol. 217r: the battle between Alexander and Porus.

27. Derbes and Sandona, “Amazons and Crusaders,” 187–229.

28. Akbari, “Embodying the Historical Moment,” 617–43, and Kühnel, “Perception of History.”

29. On these maps, see Akbari and Mittman, “Seeing Jerusalem,” 116–41.

30. The manuscript (Leiden, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit MS or. 3101; map of the Maghrib at p. 20), is dated AH 589 / 1193 CE and contains an abridgement of the tenth-century *Kitāb al-Masālik wa l-mamālik* by Abū Ishāq al-Iṣṭakhrī. See Abū Ishāq al-Iṣṭakhrī, *Kitāb al-Masālik wa l-mamālik*.

31. On the depiction of Candace in Alexander narratives, see Akbari, *Idols in the East*, 96–104; see also Akbari, “Where Is Medieval Ethiopia?,” 80–91, esp. 86–87.

32. On premodern discourses of national identity, see Akbari, “Historiography,” 368–85. On “rough tolerance,” see MacEvitt, *Crusades*, passim.

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