

# Later Epic

A “Novel” Epic Folk Tale

*Alexander Romance*, Book 3 1-32 (pp. 127-152)

# Fuzzy History

- “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”
  - from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)
- “[Onesicritus] should better be called the captain of unbelievable things, rather than the chief author of Alexander[’s biography]. For all those who accompanied Alexander preferred the marvelous to the true, but he [Onesicritus] seems to have surpassed all others in his telling of marvelous stories.”
  - Strabo, *Geography* 15.1.28

# Bengal Sultanate (1352-1576 CE)

- Founded by Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah, “The just sultan... **The second Alexander**, the right hand of the caliphate, the defender (or helper) of the Commander of the Faithful”
- Succeed by son, Sikandar Shah
  - Royals don't name sons randomly



*Alexander sharing his throne with Queen Nushabah, from the Bengali-Persian Sharafnāmāh (1531)*



# The Historical Alexander III, King of Macedon

- Son of Philip II, King of Macedon (born 356 BCE)
- Ruled 336 – 323 BCE
- Conquered the territories you see here
- Very little of this in the *Romance*



# *Alexander Romance*

- A “Romance” in the pre-modern definition
  - A rousing story that is neither tragic, nor comic, nor epic
  - Tend to focus on human stories with lots of emotions and usually a moral lesson or two
- Tales of Alexander’s life began circulating immediately after his death
  - Onesicritus and other former generals catered to this desire
  - Coincides with rise of folklore as subject in Hellenistic literature
  - Probably oral tradition until the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE
    - Earliest version fairly historical, later versions add more “fantastic” details
    - Form we have now developed by 8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> century CE

# Narrative (take the history with a grain of salt)

Theseus, Oedipus, etc...

- Book 1
  - Alexander's illegitimate parentage from wandering Egyptian king Nectanebo; A. kills both fathers; A. sets out to conquer Persia via Egypt, Greece, and Italy (?!); personal philosophical conversations between A. and Darius; military campaign details
- Book 2
  - Darius allies with Porus "king of India;" A. sneaks into Darius' court; A. takes Darius' capital, Darius is murdered, A. marries Darius' daughter, Roxane; travels seeing magical animals, places, and peoples, plus travels to the bottom of the sea (Underworld analogy); discovers Waters of Life, but fails to drink

Quest for knowledge leads to the quest for immortality



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- Book 3
  - Conquers “India” (Battle of the Hydaspes?)
  - Talks to brahmins in dialectic style
  - Hears fate from talking trees
  - Meets Candace (Semiramis?), Queen of Meroe (Kingdom of Kush)
  - Hears fate from an Egyptian oracle
  - Leads army against the Amazons
  - Writes a letter home to his mother (recap)
  - Writes another letter to his mother that narrates assassination plot and his own death
  - Dies
  - Confusing and self-contradictory will is read, his life is recapped



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# Discussion

- The *Alexander Romance* shows a breaking down of the difference between history and fable. The didactic point of historiography begins to take over the interpretation of past events. What fits the narrative is true, what doesn't is forgotten.
- What would it take to turn non-epics into epics?
  - What would it take to History  $\neq$  epic  $\neq$  folklore Aratus, Archestratus) into epics?
  - What would it take History/epic  $\neq$  folklore Livy) into an epic?
  - Everything blurry... Nonnus? *Alexander Romance* into an epic?
- We can even begin to analyze the *Romance*/Fable as if it were epic...

# The Analysis

- The Narrator's Voice
  - Is there a narrator?
    - Not really... it's not Pseudo-Callisthenes
  - Confusing narrative sometimes, possibly from too many narrators
    - Assassination plot at 32 ff. (p. 151)
  - Multiple story-tellers make the narrative not make sense in places
    - Bucephalus dies in 3 (p. 130) and comes back in 32 (p. 152) as the voice of reason
    - Where on earth is he traveling after India? (18 ff.)

# A Confused Geography

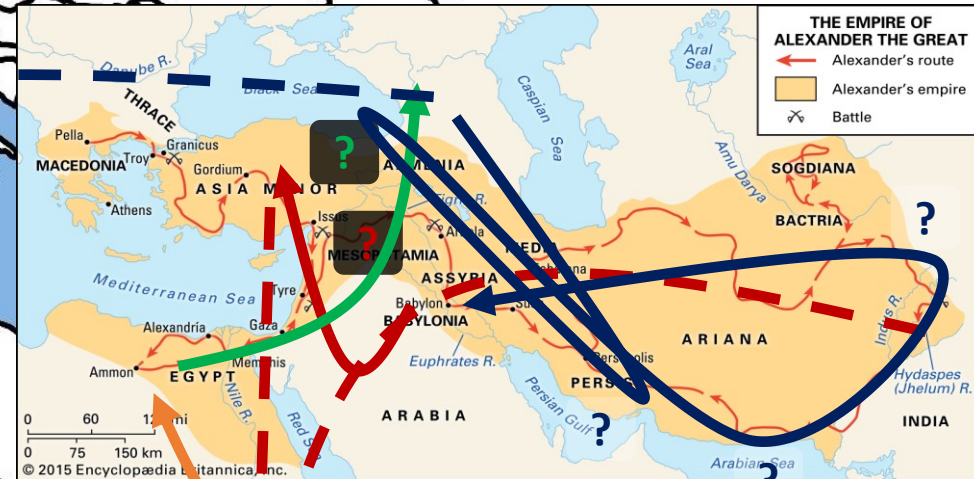
- Map of travels post-India—historically speaking



# A Confused Geography

- Map of travels post-India—*Romance* edition

- We can safely assume geography wasn't the important point
- What matters is that with everywhere he goes and with everyone he meets, he has to be clever



# The Analysis

- Language and Performance
  - Influence of late ideas from multiple narrators?
    - “with the help of Providence above” (25 / p. 143)
    - Humanized Amazons (25-26 / p. 143 ff.)
      - Although they’re still women (“fighting Amazons is futile...”)
  - Racial disparities and skin color in Meroe (18 / p. 136)

# The Analysis

- The Literary Background
  - Fables mostly
  - Also histories and biographies
    - Arrian
    - Diodorus Siculus
    - Plutarch
  - Also “first-hand” descriptions of foreign locations and peoples
    - Onesicritus
    - Megasthenes



# The Analysis

“When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

- First-hand accounts are tricky...
  - Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 46.4: “And the story is told that many years afterwards Onesicritus was reading aloud... the fourth book of his history, in which was the tale of the Amazon, at which Lysimachus [who was with Alexander at that time] smiled gently and said: ‘And where was I at the time?’”
  - Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 1.1: “geographers... crowd on to the outer edges of their maps the parts of the earth which elude their knowledge, with explanatory notes that ‘What lies beyond is sandy desert without water and full of wild beasts,’ or ‘blind marsh,’ or ‘Scythian cold,’ or ‘frozen sea’...”

# The Analysis

- The Social Background
  - Knowledge of world geography and peoples is declining somewhat
  - War is valorous, but only to a point... so what do we do with Alexander?
  - New moralities for new realities
    - Socratic/dialectic dialogue with the brahmins (6 / p. 131 ff.):
      - God(s) and religion still important, but so is what happens in life
      - Humans and kingship are inherently unjust and corrupted
      - Rejecting all worldly concerns can bring peace and happiness
  - Similar ideas apply throughout various cultures and religions
  - New-model folk hero

# The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
  - Awkward mix of being superior and knowing he's inferior
    - The narrative really tries hard to make him the underdog
  - Doesn't rely on others, does things himself
    - Scouts and visits other kings/queens himself (Darius: 1; Porus: 3; Candace 22-23)
    - Challenges Porus to single combat: 4
    - Still bonds with common men (addresses "fellow-soldiers:" 2)
  - Very clever, philosophical even
    - Traps other leaders with rhetoric (Porus: 2; Amazons: 26)
    - Can be a student (brahmins: 6; Candace: 22)
      - But also the teacher (brahmins: 6; Candace: 23)

# The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
  - Beats all adversaries with cleverness instead of the might of his army (Porus: 4; brahmins(?): 6; Bebryces: 20; Candace's sons: 23; Amazons: 26)
  - Memory of his battlefield strategy has transformed him into a generally clever person in all areas of life
    - Cleverness equated with pursuit of truth and knowledge as a sage king roaming the world for information



# Alexander Traditions

- Influences unite regardless of where Alexander actually went



This continuum is why Ilyas Shah tied himself into the Alexander tradition

The diagram features a background map of the Middle East and surrounding regions. Overlaid on this map are several large, semi-transparent, overlapping circles in various colors (light blue, green, orange, red, dark blue). A blue arrow points from the text box in the top right towards the dark blue circle, which represents Persian/Indian influence.