

Lesson Objectives: Students will learn how Persian poets celebrated Alexander the Great in poetry, art, and culture.

Homira Pashai 3-14-2020

Studies on Persianate Manuscripts, Arts, and Literature

Pictures courtesy of Freer Art Gallery, Smithsonian, The Walters Art Museum

Source: Omidsalar, Mahmoud. *Iran's Epic and American Empire: A Handbook For A Generation in Limbo*. Santa Monica: Afshar Publishing, 2012. And Cornwell, Owen, *Alexander and the Persian Cosmopolis, 1000-1500*. Columbia University, 2016.

Alexander in Persian Poetry

Jami, a poet of 14th century Persia, in *خردنامه اسکندری* the *Khiraḍ nameh Iskandar-i* (Alexander book of Wisdom), noted that when Alexander learns of his death from an angel on the Mount of Qaf قاف, he decides to write to his mother. In his letter, he reassures his mother of the common fate of man and womankind. In his will, he includes a special request of “leaving his hand hanging from under the shroud,” thus, everyone would be able to see the hand that dominated many countries yet, left the world empty-handed.

Jami elaborates on a series of ten elegies from the advisors of Alexander. Then Alexander's coffin is taken to Alexandria, where the advisors' consolate Alexander's mother. Aristotle (aristu), the teacher of Alexander, is among the advisors who consolate Alexander's mother. The scene below shows Alexander's mother mourning for his son.

Alexander the Great, Alexander of Macedonia, is known in Medieval history as a legendary figure who almost reached the status of a deity. In Persian poetry and prose, the history of Alexander includes the story of Alexander in the *Shahnama* شاهنامه by Ferdowsi, *Iskandarnama* اسکندرنامه (Book of Alexander) by Nizami, *Aina-e Sikandari* آینه اسکندری (Mirror of Alexander) by Amir Khusrau Dehlavi, and *khiraḍnam-i Iskandari* خردنامه اسکندری (Alexander Book of Wisdom) by Jami.

After Alexander and King Darius' داریوش last battle at Gaugamela (331 B.C.), east of the city of Mosul in present-day Iraq, the Persian king escaped toward Rey ری, hoping to raise an army to fight or offer a peace treaty to Alexander. But two of the Persian nobles stabbed Darius and escaped. Alexander, on the other hand, found the king dead. Death of Darius for Alexander was entirely permissible since before his death, Darius offered Alexander the western part of his empire and his daughter's hand in marriage. Without Darius in the picture, Alexander could consolidate power over the entire kingdom. According to *Shahnama's* narrative, After Darius' death, Alexander set himself as the protector of the Persian royal family. He addressed Darius' mother as "mother" and accepted Darius' brother as his close advisor. Alexander married the king's daughter, Stateira استاتیرا, and the daughter of Artaxerxes III, اردشیر سوم, Parysatis پریساتیس. He treated the royal family with respect and offered dowries for Darius' daughters. Thus, Alexander positioned himself as the head of the royal household and punished the king's murderers. He also accepted Persian dress and observed the customs of the Persian court.

Shahnama devotes 4816 lines of poetry to the story of Alexander. In the literary tradition of Persia, Alexander is admired as a heroic king. "According to the *Shahnama*, the Iranian king Darab داراب attacks Greece; unable to defend his country against such a powerful enemy, the Grecian King Philip makes a peace offer that includes the marriage of his daughter, Nahid ناهید with Darab. Nahid is sent to Iran and marries the king." As the rest of the story claims, Darab is not pleased by Nahid and sends her back to his father. When she returns, she realizes that she is carrying Darab's child and later gives birth to Alexander. King Philip claims the newborn is his son by one of his wives to save Nahid. "Therefore, according to the *Shahnama*, Alexander is the son of the Iranian king. A similar story, in which Alexander's father is the Egyptian king Nectanebo II (360-343C.E.), exists in the Egyptian version of Alexander's tale. Since these similar

tales existed among two nations whom Alexander vanquished and then sought to conciliate, it could be argued, with equal plausibility, that Alexander's own propagandists may concocted these stories."

While Alexander is known as the one destroying the Persepolis, the fact that Persian poets came to hail Alexander as a great hero always aroused question and controversy. Many identified Alexander as the "Two Horns" ذوالقرنين (Dhu al-Qarnain), mentioned in the Quran, who stopped the monsters Gog and Magog ياجوج و ماجوج (Ya'juj wa Ma'juj) by retaining them between two mountains through the construction of an iron rampart. Alexander also became a legendary figure according to many other cultures. His mother told him that he was the son of Zeus, and in Egypt, he was known as the son of Ammon. Thus, he attained the position of a deity from the time of antiquity to the time of modernity.

The Funeral of Alexander



Write two paragraphs in a journal entry about the characteristic of realistic art.

Can you share with the class a painting or a photograph that reflects the real life of the protagonists?

Also, explain why the piece reflects reality.

Terms:

Antiquity

Aristotle

Elegies

Mount of Qaf

Ferdowsi

Nizami Ganjavi

‘Abdarahman Jami

Amir Khusrau Dehlav

Alexander Searching for Water of Life (Fountain of Youth)

