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THE IMAGE OF ISKANDAR ZULQARNAYN AND THE FIGURE OF ALEXANDER OF MACEDON: A PHILOLOGICAL AND SOURCE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between the Eastern literary-traditional image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn and the historical figure of Alexander of Macedon in Greco-Roman sources. Using comparative textual analysis, motif typology, and historical contextualization, it identifies semantic transformation mechanisms and divergences in naming and narrative layers. The study clarifies how Alexander traditions were culturally adapted and literarily legitimized across regions.

Keywords

Iskandar Zulqarnayn, Alexander of Macedon, Iskandarnama, source studies, comparative philology, motif, tradition

Аннотация

В статье сопоставляются образ Искандара Зулькарнайна в восточной литературно-традиционной среде и историческая фигура Александра Македонского в античных источниках. Применены сравнительный анализ текстов, типология мотивов и историческая контекстуализация. Выявлены механизмы семантической трансформации, различия в именовании и в сюжетных слоях. Работа уточняет процессы литературной легитимации и культурной адаптации преданий об Искандаре.

Ключевые слова

Искандар Зулькарнайн, Александр Македонский, Искандар-наме, источниковедение, сравнительная филология, мотив, предание.

Texts and legends associated with the name Iskandar took shape as the result of a long-lasting intertextual process across the Near East, Central Asia, and other literary regions. At the center of this process lies a complex relationship between the historical figure Alexander of Macedon and the literary hero Iskandar Zulqarnayn. In ancient historical sources, Alexander is primarily characterized through his military campaigns, political strategy, and experience in building an empire. In Eastern literary traditions, however, the image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn is interpreted as that of a wise ruler, a symbol of justice, and a hero of journeys and discoveries. This duality is of fundamental importance for philology and source studies, as it raises the question of how historical and biographical data were reinterpreted in later texts and how layers of legend were adapted to artistic and ethical ideals.

The relevance of the issue lies in the fact that texts about Iskandar often merge historical facts with legendary elements. As a result, in the reader's perception, the historical figure of Alexander of Macedon and the literary image of Iskandar increasingly become synonymous. However, such an identification is not always scientifically grounded and often emerges without taking into account the cultural and generic transformations of the image.

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The core problem addressed in this study is a systematic analysis of the extent to which, and through which mechanisms, ancient historical sources, Greek romance traditions, and Persian-Tajik as well as Turkic literary schools interacted in shaping the image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn. In existing scholarship, one of two approaches usually predominates: historians tend to treat ancient accounts of Alexander as primary sources and regard Eastern interpretations as secondary, while literary scholars and philologists emphasize the poetic autonomy of the Iskandar image, leaving the question of the historical prototype at a general level. In particular, within Central Asian Turkic literature—especially in the Navoiy tradition—the idealization of Iskandar has been repeatedly noted; yet the specific source layers of this process and the evolution of its motifs have not always been systematized in accordance with source-critical criteria[6].

Therefore, the main gap in the present research lies in the need to present, within a unified analytical framework, the differences between Iskandar Zulqarnayn and Alexander of Macedon in terms of naming, key motifs, narrative structure, and the functions these elements perform. Such an approach helps to define more precisely the relationship between the historical and literary layers of the Iskandar image and to provide a philologically grounded explanation of the points where Eastern and Western literary traditions intersect.

The similarities and differences between the image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn as shaped in Eastern literature and the figure of Alexander of Macedon as depicted in ancient sources are examined on a comparative basis. This approach makes it possible to identify the semantic and ideological transformations that occurred as a historical figure was transformed into a literary hero. The study elucidates the principal historical representations formed in ancient sources, the leading motifs that emerged through the Alexander Romance tradition, and the interpretation of the image as a moral and political ideal in Persian-Tajik and Turkic Iskandarnama texts. Particular attention is also paid to names and epithets, especially to the role of the term “Zulqarnayn” in shaping the meaning of the image.

The integration of philological source criticism and comparative literary approaches necessitates recourse to ancient historical sources. Arrian’s account of Alexander’s campaigns and Plutarch’s biographical portrayal, which present Alexander in a relatively coherent manner closely linked to his military and political activity, are therefore regarded as key reference points that exerted a strong influence on the formation of later perceptions[1; 2].

These sources serve as an essential foundation for identifying the historical and biographical core of the figure. Within the tradition of ancient narratives and legends, the romances about Alexander illustrate the process by which historical events were transformed into literary form. These works functioned as important intermediary sources in the formation of many motifs that later appear in Eastern literary narratives about Iskandar[3]. In this respect, they represent an intermediate cultural layer that mediated the transition of the Iskandar image from ancient historical tradition into the Eastern literary milieu.

In Eastern literary traditions, the image of Iskandar is interpreted in different ways in the works of Firdawsi, Nizami, and Navoiy. Firdawsi portrays Iskandar as a hero associated with epic historical memory. In Nizami’s works, he becomes the protagonist of didactic and romantic epics, emerging as a symbol of knowledge, justice, and life experience. In Navoiy’s writings, the image of Iskandar is reinterpreted on the basis of Turkic poetic and philosophical thought and harmonized with ideas of statecraft and moral responsibility[4;5; 6]. This triad makes it possible to trace the evolution of the image of Iskandar in Eastern literary traditions across different stages and directions.

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Comparative reading of texts reveals how identical or similar plot elements change across different sources. This method makes it possible to determine which episodes remain close to a historical basis and which, over time, have turned into literary fiction. The typology of motifs highlights the core motifs consistently associated with the image of Iskandar—such as world travels, dialogues with sages, the construction of a wall, and the quest for eternal life—and explains their origins and the meanings in which they are employed. Semantic analysis, in turn, elucidates the functions of names such as "Iskandar," "Alexander," and "Zulqarnayn" within the text, the role of epithets in morally legitimizing the image, and the semantic weight they carry.

In this way, historical and biographical data are not rejected; rather, their adaptation within artistic and cultural contexts is explained on a scholarly basis. As a result, the phenomenon of Iskandar Zulqarnayn is interpreted as a complex, multi-layered literary and narrative system. It becomes evident that the methods of constructing the heroic image differ between the ancient historical approach and the Eastern literary tradition. In the works of Arrian and Plutarch, the figure of Alexander is evaluated primarily through his military campaigns, the sequence of strategic decisions he made, his style of governance, and the ways in which his personal character influenced political outcomes[1;2]. Within this approach, the greatness of the hero is determined by his deeds and the results he achieved. Events unfold sequentially and are closely linked to specific places and times. In Eastern Iskandarnama traditions, however, the image of Iskandar is interpreted in a broader sense: he is depicted not only as a commander who conquered lands, but also as a ruler who established order in society, upheld justice, and valued knowledge and wisdom[4; 5]. As a result, the individual biographical features characteristic of the historical figure are gradually absorbed into a literary type. This literary type is then shaped as a generalized image that serves specific moral and aesthetic ideals.

Significant differences can also be observed in the system of motifs. In ancient historical sources, Alexander's travels and campaigns are presented primarily from the perspective of territorial expansion and state governance. In the romance tradition, by contrast, the same events are depicted as adventures filled with discovery, marvels, and various trials[3]. In Eastern literary texts, romance motifs are largely subordinated to didactic purposes and reinterpreted accordingly. Long journeys to distant lands, for instance, are portrayed not as expressions of geographical curiosity but as means of attaining wisdom through experience. Dialogues with sages, in turn, serve to legitimize the image of the ruler by grounding it in knowledge.

In this process, motifs are not transferred directly but are reorganized in accordance with the internal logic of the literary system. As a result, battle episodes are reduced or acquire symbolic meaning, while sections devoted to wise dialogues and moral instruction are expanded. In this way, the image of Iskandar places primary emphasis not on the sequence of events, but on revealing their moral and spiritual significance.

The semantics of naming and epithets make the differences in the interpretation of the image of Iskandar even more explicit. In ancient sources, the name "Alexander" primarily serves to indicate genealogical origin and political status, whereas in Eastern texts the form "Iskandar," as a result of phonetic adaptation, becomes established as an independent onomastic unit. The epithet "Zulqarnayn," in turn, adds an additional semantic layer to the image and functions as a symbolic marker that legitimizes it across various ideological and cultural contexts. [4;7]. According to the results of the analysis, the epithet does not remain a mere descriptive element; rather, it functions as a symbolic device that elevates the image of Iskandar above the level of an ordinary military commander. Within the text, it brings together semantic

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directions that serve to legitimize the hero's actions related to the boundaries of the world, his efforts to establish order, and his authority on a broad, universal scale. For this reason, although the designation Iskandar Zulqarnayn intersects with the image of the historical Alexander in certain respects, it operates as an independent cultural concept that cannot be fully equated with him.

In Eastern Iskandarnama traditions, the relationship between historicity and literariness is organized on the basis of a certain compositional balance. In Firdawsi's works, the image of Iskandar is depicted in close connection with epic historical memory and serves to integrate dynastic and territorial conceptions into a unified system. In this process, the figure of Iskandar functions as a mediating link between historical reality and legendary imagination[4].

In Nizami's works, Iskandar is transformed into the hero of a didactic epic and becomes a symbol of knowledge, justice, and experience; his personal biography serves as material for a poetic and philosophical conception[5]. In Navoiy's works, the image of Iskandar is recoded within the framework of the Turkic literary language and a state-oriented moral and philosophical ideal, becoming a conceptual center associated with the ruler's responsibility and the primacy of knowledge[6].

These differences demonstrate that the image of Iskandar is not that of a "single, uniform hero," but rather a multivariant construct that performs different functions within different literary systems. The findings indicate that the relationship between the historical figure of Alexander and the literary image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn should be understood not in terms of an "original and copy," but as a multi-stage artistic transformation shaped within a trans-cultural process. In the works of Arrian and Plutarch, the portrayal of Alexander is constructed on the basis of selectively chosen historical evidence, with the authors' moral evaluations integrated coherently into the narrative of events[1; 2]. However, this evaluation does not fully correspond to the normative ideal formed in Eastern texts. In the ancient biographical and military discourse, an individual's greatness is often defined by courage, rapid decision-making, and the logic of military victory. In the Eastern didactic discourse, by contrast, greatness is stabilized through qualities such as justice, reason, self-restraint, and moral responsibility. For this reason, certain traits of the historical figure undergo a specific "moral selection" in Eastern texts: compatible features are emphasized, while those that do not conform are marginalized or reinterpreted symbolically. This process is regarded as one of the principal mechanisms of the transformation of the image.

Studies of the Alexander Romance tradition show that from a very early period extraordinary and legendary narratives began to form around the historical figure of Alexander. These narratives were later reworked in various languages and cultural regions, where they were enriched with new artistic and ideological layers[3].

The analysis shows that the romance layer emerges as an important source of motifs in Eastern Iskandarnama texts; however, it is not a passive object of borrowing. Eastern authors, particularly Nizami and Navoiy, adapt these motifs to their own poetic and philosophical conceptions. As a result, episodes of the marvelous often function as trials, occasions for reflection, and vehicles for moral instruction[5; 6]. This situation indicates that the presence of a particular motif does not mean that it performs the same function across different texts. On the contrary, the same motif acquires different meanings in different literary and cultural discourses. For this reason, interpreting Iskandar Zulqarnayn merely as the "Eastern name" of Alexander is philologically insufficient, since behind this designation lie complex semantic systems shaped by diverse genres, purposes, and target audiences.

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Within Russian Orientalist and source-critical traditions, the formation of Iskandar narratives is emphasized as a multi-source process. In this process, translation, retelling, and the incorporation of local cultural codes play a significant role[7].

The results obtained show that the epithet “Zulqarnayn” represents one of such cultural codes. Without providing new biographical information about the hero, this epithet endows the image with a symbolic status and broadens the interpretive framework by linking his actions to ideas of cosmic order, boundaries, and protection.

The semantic function of the epithet is determined by the internal needs of the literary text. Rather than confining the ruler’s image to a specific historical period, it serves to elevate him to the level of a general and universal ideal. In this way, the analysis of onomastic units makes it possible not only to clarify historical identification, but also to reveal the overall conceptual structure of the text.

In Uzbek literary scholarship, the image of Iskandar in Navoiy’s epics is generally interpreted in connection with the concept of the perfect ruler. This approach is explained on the basis of the harmony between linguistic, stylistic, and ideological layers[6]. When this view is supplemented from the perspective of source studies, it becomes clear that the prominence of the image of Iskandar in Navoiy’s works is not limited solely to moral idealization. Rather, it also demonstrates how motifs formed in diverse cultural environments were adapted to the Turkic poetic system. At the same time, in Navoiy’s texts Iskandar is evaluated not by his personal or historical achievements, but by the responsibility of rulership and the burden of knowledge he bears. This aspect fundamentally distinguishes him from the ancient historical discourse. As a result, the phenomenon of Iskandar Zulqarnayn in the Central Asian literary milieu acquires greater significance not as the memory of a historical individual, but as an artistic model of theoretical and ethical conceptions of kingship.

In international scholarship, the ways in which the figure of Alexander was received by different peoples and cultures in later periods are examined. This research explains how his image, transmitted through translations into other languages, was reinterpreted and adapted to new contexts and perspectives[8; 9]. These findings are likewise consistent with this line of inquiry. Interpreting the image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn not as a distortion of historical facts but as a mode of operation of cultural memory broadens the possibilities of scholarly interpretation. Although certain episodes related to the historical Alexander are preserved in Eastern texts, they are reinterpreted in accordance with new genres and literary conventions. For this reason, rather than the opposition between “fact” and “fiction,” greater importance is attached to the functions and meanings assigned to motifs. From this perspective, analyzing Iskandar Zulqarnayn and Alexander of Macedon separately, while demonstrating their points of intersection through processes of transformation, emerges as the most appropriate approach for philological research. The image of Iskandar Zulqarnayn and the figure of Alexander of Macedon are thus interpreted not as the same historical person, but as images shaped differently across various cultures. In ancient sources, Alexander’s greatness is evaluated primarily through his military campaigns and political activity, whereas in Eastern Iskandarnama traditions the ruler’s justice, knowledge, and sense of responsibility serve as the principal criteria. The adaptation of the Iskandar image to different cultural environments can be observed through motifs, names, and epithets, with the term “Zulqarnayn” imparting a symbolic dimension to the image.

The results of the study demonstrate the necessity of paying particular attention to genre, functional purpose, and meaning when examining narratives about Iskandar. From a practical perspective, this approach makes it possible, in teaching and interpreting texts about Iskandar,

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to consider historical information and literary ideas separately. In future research, it would be fruitful to clarify further how motifs associated with Iskandar spread, on the basis of Turkic manuscripts, translations, and regional variants.

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