Abstract: Alexander the Great’s legacy is well established within the Western canon; however, several non-Western accounts approach his legacy from a different, cultural-specific perspective. These accounts provide a means of teaching students how historical events are reinterpreted to meet particular cultural needs as well as the general malleability of historical narratives.

Key Words: Alexander the Great, world history, *Alexander Romances*, Koran, *Sundiata*, *Iskandarnamah*, narratives

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Globalizing the “Great Man”: Teaching Alexander the Great’s Legacy from an International Perspective

In the twenty-three centuries since his death, Alexander of Macedon has come to hold a prominent place in the Western canon, symbolizing for some the military hero personified while others view his legacy as a tragic tale of greatness lost amidst self-indulgence and megalomania. In more recent decades, world historians have viewed the building of Alexander’s Empire through the lens of cross-cultural interaction, highlighting the exchanges brought about by connecting the Greek world with Persia, India and other once-remote lands of Central Asia. While this pedagogical approach to Alexander is highly effective, the examination of his legacy from an international perspective also presents an innovative way of using a “Western” icon to further students’ understanding of non-Western societies. This paper presents a possible approach for utilizing Alexander’s legacy for this purpose. Comparing interpretations of Alexander within the Koran, in the Persian translations of the *Alexander Romances* and in the Mali epic of *Sundiata* provides students with the opportunity to better understand these cultures by assessing how the Western legacy of Alexander was interpreted to meet the views and beliefs
of other societies at different historical moments. In addition, the utilization of these counter narratives also offers an opportunity to challenge students’ understanding of “traditional” narratives, thus illustrating the malleable and fluid nature of the historical record. Alexander’s case is particularly effective in challenging established narratives, since most students’ knowledge of Alexander, whether coming from an earlier history course or from popular media such as the 2004 Oliver Stone film, is based solely on Western sources, particularly Greek and Roman authors writing centuries after his death. This approach, which met with success in the classroom environment, may provide a possible template for approaching other so-called “Great Men” of both Western and non-Western history from a comparative global perspective.

To begin applying this approach, students are given a short reading from the Koran. One unique element of Alexander’s legacy, in comparison to other major historical figures, is his prominence in several sacred texts. In the Christian Bible, the First Book of the Maccabees begins stating that Alexander, Son of Philip, “fought many battles, and took the strongholds of all, and slew the kings of the earth.”¹ Most Biblical scholars also identify Alexander as the “two-horned” figure discussed prophetically in the Book of Daniel.² However, while mentioned in the Bible mainly in a historical context, Alexander’s presence in the Koran is centered much more deeply in Muslim belief, particularly in regards to Islamic conceptions of the Day of Judgment. In the Chapter of the Cave, the Koran introduces Dhu ‘l-Qarnayn, which in translation means the “two-horned one,” a title associated by many Koranic scholars, like their Christian counterparts,

¹ First Maccabees, 1:2.
with Alexander. After briefly referencing his exploits, it discusses his journey to the “setting of the sun,” where he discovers two mountain barriers and a nearby people who plead with him to build a wall to protect them from the peoples of Gog and Magog. These peoples in Islamic tradition are described as the “Sons of Adam” who, though possessing great military power, were wholly corrupt and thus likely to bring down divine wrath on society when unleashed. Alexander builds a wall of iron with the aid of the local population but after its completion promises that on the Day of Judgment the Lord will destroy the barrier and let loose these hoards to “show Hell to the disbelievers.” According to some Muslim scholars, this act and prophesy establish Alexander as a prophet, though this position is still a matter of serious debate among Koranic scholars.

This reading is followed by a related selection from the Persian version of the Alexander Romances entitled Iskandarnamah. The original Alexander Romances were written in Greece between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., liberally mixing historical fact and fiction. Over the ensuing centuries, different versions of the Romances proliferated throughout Europe, the Middle East, India and Central Asia, with each tailoring its portrait of Alexander to correspond with cultural traditions and norms. The Persian text, written sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, follows this same pattern. In the section given to the students, “Alexander and the Davalpayan, and the War between Them,” Alexander is portrayed in conflict with an Indian people known as the Davalpayan, a beautiful but fierce tribe with lion-like teeth who take captive a group of merchants friendly to the Greeks. Driven to aid these men, in part because, they, like
Alexander in this account, are “all observant Muslims,” the Greeks fight a bloody battle against the Davalpayan, slaying nearly the entire tribe. After this action, the reading recounts Alexander visiting the Tomb of Adam and travelling to Ceylon, where he shows great generosity, particularly to an armless and legless beggar, whom he places in the care of his brother until the man’s death. The reading, as noted above, is explicit in depicting Alexander as a devout Muslim, concluding with him setting sail for Mecca, which he describes as “the House of God.”

Finally, the students are provided with a series of excerpts from the Sundiata, the oral epic of Mali based loosely upon the exploits of the thirteenth-century founder of the Mali Empire. Throughout this literary account of Sundiata’s rise from humble beginnings to the status of a great king, Alexander is presented as a comparative model for his achievements. In the story’s opening passage, the griot telling the tale claims that the greatness of Sundiata even surpasses that of Alexander the Great; “he who, from the East, shed his rays upon all the countries of the West.” The portions of the epic given to the students emphasize the role Alexander played in Sundiata’s formative years, when his tutors fascinated him with tales of the “King of Gold and Silver.” Alexander also is included in the dynastic politics encountered by Sundiata, particularly when he travels to Ghana during a period exile. The epic mentions that the once-mighty king of Ghana, who claimed descent from Alexander himself, was now paying tribute to another king. The disgrace of “the descendants of Alexander” making such payments is made apparent in the narrative.

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3 Koran 18:82-103
In presenting the students with these very different accounts of Alexander, I had three goals. The first, and most immediate, was to spur the critical examination of different types of primary texts. To facilitate this, the students were broken into groups after reading and given a series of questions. For instance, they were asked to identify what elements, if any, of the historical narrative of Alexander’s life related in the textbook could be discerned in these readings. Unsurprisingly, all groups reached a consensus that aside to some vague references to his campaigns in India in the *Iskandarnamah* and the Koran that little was to be found of the conventional narrative. When asked to account for this, some students cited the breakdown of the historical record over time and distance; however, others began to question whether the authors of these works deliberately deviated from the conventional historical record.

The identification and questioning of this deviation was the second goal in the assignment. Clearly depictions of Alexander as a Muslim run counter to the conventional narrative both culturally and chronologically. In accounting for these differences, students recognized in *Iskandarnamah* an attempt to present an idealized royal figure and, indeed, most scholars interpret the Persian Romances as an effort to present Alexander as the embodiment of proper Muslim ruler: brave, just, wise and devout. With some prompting, students also identified Alexander’s presence in the Koran as a possible co-opting of his religious status in earlier spiritual traditions. During his own lifetime, Alexander claimed to be the divine offspring of Zeus-Ammon and even encouraged his worship as the thirteenth god in the Greek Pantheon

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after conquering the Persian Empire.\footnote{Peter Green, Alexander of Macedon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 272.} Christian and Jewish writings from the first century C.E., very similar to those that later appeared in the Koran, contend that Alexander built his great wall at the Caspian Gates to enclose the peoples of Gog and Magog. Therefore, his presence in the Koran can be viewed as an adaption of an old legend by a new religious tradition. Finally, in the case of the Sundiata, students identified the role the invocation of Alexander’s name played in legitimizing the greatness of Sundiata’s conquests. With accounts of Alexander’s exploits only known in the vaguest of forms, as related by Arab gold traders, Alexander’s status as a legendary king of “Gold and Silver” presents extollers of both Sundiata’s and the Mali Empire’s greatness with a context-less benchmark of achievement. The fact that the declining Ghanaian monarchy claimed direct descent from Alexander only further strengthened Sundiata’s status in, in the words of his griots, surpassing the Macedonian King’s achievements. Thus, in all three cases, students, with some aid, provided clear explanations to justify the cultural-specific usages of Alexander’s legacy in a manner differing from the conventional historical record.

It is when this seeming consensus is reached that my third goal in the assignment comes into play: challenging the students’ understanding of what exactly constitutes the conventional historical narrative. Asking the students this question, most respond that the “traditional” narrative of Alexander the Great’s career comes from Ancient Greek sources. However, this is problematic, as none of the main ancient sources generally cited in modern histories of Alexander’s career were the work of his contemporaries. The earliest of the five major works utilized by modern scholars such as Peter Green is that of the Greek historian Diodorus, who
wrote his volume on Alexander during the first century B.C.E., over two centuries after the Macedonian’s death. The source considered the most reliable, Arrian’s *History of Alexander*, was written nearly four hundred years after the King’s passing. These chronological gaps open the door for serious questions regarding the reliability of these sources.⁸

Beyond this chronological issue, the students’ were then further challenged by bringing into question the biases of those writing about Alexander. Plutarch, who wrote on Alexander as part of a comparative work with the life of Julius Caesar, is accused of selectively presenting aspects of Alexander’s personality and history to place the contrast between the two leaders in starker relief. More problematic in the cases of Plutarch, Arrian and the other major chroniclers of Alexander’s life are the sources they employed in writing their histories. While the accounts of Alexander’s contemporaries are lost, these later writers made extensive use of them in their accounts, particularly the histories of Ptolemy, one of Alexander’s leading generals, and Callisthenes, Alexander’s court historian. Ptolemy, who founded an Egyptian dynasty during the wars among Alexander’s successors, tied his legitimacy as a pharaoh to the Macedonian King’s legacy.⁹ Callisthenes, in his official capacity, had some flexibility in his accounts but had his work checked on a regular basis by Alexander himself and was often manipulated in order to generate propaganda favorable to the Macedonian leader. Nearly all other existing contemporary sources were also accounts of Alexander’s inner circle, officers and generals who owed their careers and fortunes to their king. Thus, the idea of an “accepted” narrative of Alexander’s life is demonstrated to be extremely problematic at best.

⁸ Ibid., 569-572.
This picture is further complicated by introducing the role that Western historical cultural norms played in shaping the traditional Alexandrian narrative. The Romances that proliferated in the Middle East and Asia, as mentioned above, also spread throughout the West, with English and French translations enjoying massive popularity during the Middle Ages. Elements of these tales wove themselves into the historical narrative, particularly in regards to Alexander’s youth. Further alteration of the “accepted” narrative occurred during the nineteenth century, when British scholars, amidst their peoples’ own empire-building, projected onto Alexander their Victorian conception of a virtuous imperial ruler. This British imperial revisionism reached its apex in the works of Sir William Tarn, whose view of Alexander as moral crusader attempting to construct a “Brotherhood of Man” shaped historical accounts well into the mid-twentieth century.\(^9\) The result of this third element of assignment demonstrates effectively to students the problematic nature of historical narratives in general and particularly those focused on historical figure of Alexander’s stature and significance. Further, it introduces the concept of historiography and allows students to conduct basic historiographic research.

So, where does this narrative deconstruction of Alexander the Great leave students in terms of understanding history from a global perspective? Essentially, this exercise demonstrates how Alexander, a so-called “Great Man” in the Western tradition, can be used as an effective tool in developing students’ awareness of the problematic nature of narratives. Students come to understand that the established Western interpretation has been shaped by

\(^9\) Ibid., 479.
\(^{10}\) Brooke Allen, “Alexander the Great: Or the Terrible?” *The Hudson Review* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 220-21, and Green, 483-84.
biases, cultural projections and, in some cases, outright myth. Alexander as the idealized Muslim “just king” in the *Persian Romances* shares much in common with the historical Alexander crafted in the works of Tarn and others, embodying in both instances the personification of each culture’s idea of the model leader. While I do convey to students that histories such as Tarn’s, utilizing Arrian, Plutarch and similar sources, likely contains more actual historical material than the Koran or the *Romances*, this exercise conveys that all narratives must be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism and methodical historical investigation.

Beyond teaching this essential skill, this exercise also demonstrates how globally recognized historical figures, even those strongly cemented in an established cultural canon, can provide a window for understanding a widely diverse set of world views. Peter Green, writing on Alexander in this role, aptly states, “Everyone uses him as a projection of their own private truth, their own dreams and aspirations, fears and power fantasies...each country, each generation sees him in a different light.”\(^{11}\) This model, effective in Alexander’s case, could easily be adapted as a template for presenting other historical figures from a world perspective. The utilization of these recognized figures in such a role offers the added advantage of challenging students to reconceptualize their understanding of historical personages they believe they already comprehend. Thus, it may that Carlyle’s dated, Eurocentric “Great Man” of the nineteenth century could reemerge as a twenty-first century “Great Person” capable of further facilitating students understanding of global history.

\(^{11}\) Green, 480.