



Mythological History, Identity Formation, and the Many Faces of Alexander the Great

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Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia and conqueror of most of the known world in the fourth century BCE, is one of the most prominent figures in folklore throughout the world. He has appeared in stories from places as far flung as Iceland and Indonesia, and each retelling of the Alexander narrative also adds an additional layer of reinterpretation to the story. In addition to relating his conquest of Persia and his march to India, the many narratives of Alexander's life also tell of his invention of a diving suit, exploration of the Land of Darkness, conversion to Judaism, and debate with the naked Brahman philosophers in India, just to name a few myths that have entered the corpus. The purpose of this article is to explore several of these retellings and to place them in their social and political context in order to see how different peoples used the figure of Alexander and his story to fulfill their historical needs. I will examine texts created by three different communities from late antiquity and the early medieval period in order to demonstrate that although Alexander was a pagan, Macedonian conqueror, his personality and actions have been reinterpreted to impart themes important to the various communities that created them. First, I will address several Hellenistic Jewish versions of the Alexander narrative, then I will examine two Byzantine Christian sources, and lastly I will explore a Persian Islamic interpretation. A close reading of the sources can still demonstrate how narratives were reworked to suit the historical needs of their authors and readers, especially in response to times of crisis.

The Macedonian cast his eye on him
And ground his teeth together
And, fuming with rage, uttered the following words:
“...Do you think you can deceive Alexander by telling
These clever fabrications of mythology?”¹

Alexander the Great was a young king of Macedonia who conquered much of the known world in the fourth century BCE. He marched from Greece to India. He is considered one of the fathers of Hellenism, which is a term that refers to the adoption and spread of Hellenic culture and ideology.² Following his death in 323 BCE, much was written about Alexander's life—both historical and popular. In one of the Greek romances written about Alexander (quoted above), Alexander himself claims to reject mythology as a valid source for historical study; however, even the many fanciful Alexander narratives can be valuable historical sources and much can be learned from mythology and folklore. Alexander has appeared in stories from places as far flung as Iceland and Indonesia, and each retelling of the Alexander narrative also adds an additional layer of reinterpretation to the story.³ In addition to relating his conquest of Persia and his march to India, the many narratives of Alexander's life also tell of his invention of a diving suit, exploration of the Land of Darkness, conversion to Judaism, and debate with the naked Brahman philosophers in India, just to name a few myths that have entered the corpus.

The purpose of this article is to explore several of these retellings and to place them in their social and political context in order to see how different peoples used the figure of Alexander and his story to fulfill their historical needs. I will examine texts created by three different communities from late antiquity and the early medieval period in order to demonstrate that although Alexander was a pagan, Macedonian conqueror, his personality and actions have been reinterpreted to impart themes important to the various communities that created them. First, I will address several Hellenistic Jewish versions of the Alexander narrative, then I will examine two Byzantine Christian sources, and lastly I will explore a Persian Islamic interpretation. How do the descendants of peoples with whom Alexander came into contact (and often conquered) re-tell the story? How is Alexander portrayed and how does his story get used by later authors? Why do so many groups choose to redefine themselves by using Alexander the Great? Although the historicity of ancient sources are often difficult to evaluate, especially due to questions of chronology, redactions, and the sources' historical methodology, much can still be learned from their study.⁴ A comparison of the various myths of the Alexander narrative to the "actual events" is impossible to accomplish. However, a close reading of the sources can still demonstrate how narratives were reworked to suit the historical needs of their authors and readers, especially in response to times of crisis.

Methodology

How can historians connect mythology with history and identity formation? These questions have attracted much attention from modern scholars and historians have theorized about the connections between mythology, memory, and identity.⁵ As Bell points out, identity is fundamentally linked to other people:

Historical representation is built in to the formation and constant re-negotiation of identity, for this never-ending process requires the location and embedding of the self or group within a matrix of other fluid identities, all of which are likewise partially framed by and constituted through temporally extended representations of themselves in relation to others.⁶

One manner in which to accomplish such distinction from the “other” is through the construction and interpretation of history narratives. Distinct historical memories denote distinct societies, cultures, nations, or other groups. However, Hobsbawm cautions against accepting historical memory and historical traditions at face value, arguing that many historical traditions are “invented traditions.”⁷ Furthermore, Hobsbawm argues, “[Traditions are invented] more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions have been designed.”⁸ Jews, Byzantines, and Persians all experienced catastrophic change before undertaking their re-workings of the Alexander the Great narratives. It is no surprise that all three societies invent traditions in order to redefine their identities. Bell cautions against the truthfulness of historical memory even further; he theorizes the distinction between memory and myth, and states, “the careless employment of the term ‘memory’ results not only in...confusion” but also can obscure the phenomenon through which “collective remembrance can actually run against the grain of the dominant narrative (or ‘governing mythology’).” Bell asserts that memory is only experiential, and that it enters history through mythologizing in a space known as the “mythscape.”⁹ While exploring the many narratives about Alexander the Great, I will follow Hobsbawm and Bell, amongst others, in order to make the connections between history, memory, myth, and identity clear. Jewish narratives about Alexander challenge the dominant narrative, what Bell calls the “governing myth,” while I argue that the Byzantine Christian and Persian reinterpretations are part of an organic effort to invent tradition and create a “governing myth.”¹⁰

The Jews and Alexander the Great

The Jewish texts on Alexander the Great span a long time period and range in nature from the historical to the mythical. Alexander appears in the writings of the Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in a version of the *Alexander Romance* attributed to Pseudo-Callisthenes probably written by Jews from the great Hellenistic city of Alexandria, in the Talmud, and in medieval Rabbinic re-workings of the *Alexander Romances*, to name but a few examples.¹¹ For this article, I will examine Josephus’s account of Alexander’s interaction with the Jews, written in the first century CE, and the γ -recension of the *Alexander Romance*, which was most likely written by the Jewish community of Alexandria in the third century CE.¹² From the analysis of these texts,

it is evident that the Jews of the Roman Imperial period used the figure of Alexander the Great, and reinterpreted his story, in order to define themselves in a period of change and crisis.

The Jews who created these stories about Alexander the Great lived in a world dominated by outsiders. After the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE), and with the exception of a brief period of semi-autonomy during the Hasmonean Dynasty (166-63 BCE) in the late Hellenistic period, Judea was occupied by a string of foreign powers, and Jews were ruled by foreign leaders. After Alexander the Great's conquests, Jews found themselves under the thumb of a succession of imperial powers, and they were occasionally persecuted for their religious beliefs. They were ruled by the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Ptolemies of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria. After a successful revolt against the Seleucids, the Hasmonean dynasty reigned, with sponsorship from Rome, for around 100 years. Following a dispute over succession, Rome officially took control of Judea and Palestine.

From 66-70 CE the Jews revolted against Rome, and the war ended catastrophically. The Second Temple in Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish religious belief and identity, was destroyed by the Roman general (and later emperor) Titus. Thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans and the Jewish people were emotionally and physically devastated by the war. Only a few years later, from 132-136 CE, the Jews fought Rome again in the Bar Kokhba Revolt, only to be completely crushed; many Jews were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean and Central Asia in exile. How did the Jews react to political and military defeat, and how did they reconcile a religious ideology of being God's "chosen" to the reality of persecution and subjugation? This question is not only relevant following the Jewish revolts against Rome, but also throughout Jewish history more generally — from the Babylonian exile, through the conquests of Alexander the Great, and to the rule of the Ptolemies and Seleucids as well, to name but a few foreign powers who controlled the Jewish homeland. The Alexander the Great narratives as told by the Jews of the Roman Imperial period create an idealized version of "their place in a world governed by Greek monarchs."¹³ Starting with Alexander, who is associated with the birth of the Hellenistic world, continuing on through the Hellenistic successor states, and up through their subordination to Rome, the Jews tried to reconcile their political and social suppression with their belief of being a "chosen people" and of the supreme power of their god.

Periodization during the time period in discussion, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean, can be confusing because of shifting patterns of rule. The groups in power changed somewhat frequently. The "Hellenistic Period" often refers to the time from Alexander's conquests through the fall of the Hellenistic successor states, here the Ptolemies and Seleucids. The Hellenistic Period is followed by the "early Roman Imperial Period," which is often associated with Pompey's invasion of Syria and other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean around 63 BCE, although the Roman Empire did not actually begin until the end of the Roman Civil war in 31 BCE. For our purposes here, it is useful to think of Rome as one in a continuation of foreign powers who occu-

pieced and subjugated the Eastern Mediterranean world and the Jews, though Romans did not necessarily view themselves as such. Although it was not a direct Hellenistic successor to Alexander the Great's empire, in the east Rome was very heavily Hellenized. Administration and communication were still done in Greek; Roman culture and society was dominated by Greek philosophies, religions, and ideas, and in many respects, Rome was seen as a direct successor to Alexander's empire. Although Romans went to great lengths to distinguish themselves from the Greeks, who they viewed as inferior, Roman individuals still used Alexander as a model hero and frequently used him to glorify themselves allegorically.¹⁴ Therefore, I will try to differentiate between the "the Hellenistic period" and the "Roman Imperial Period" though to the Jews, both periods were marked by subjugation at the hands of overlords who were connected to Hellenistic culture.

Jews did not only reside in Palestine, and much of the most important literature created by Jews during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods came from the many large Jewish diaspora communities throughout the greater Eastern Mediterranean. According to ancient authors, including Josephus, there were large Jewish communities all over the world. Cities such as Rome, Sardis, Babylon (outside of the political control of the Roman Empire), and most importantly, Alexandria, Egypt, all had large diasporic Jewish populations. Alexandria was one of the most powerful and successful cities of the world of antiquity, and according to widespread tradition, it was founded by Alexander the Great partly as a result of oracles he received during the early stages of his conquests.¹⁵ Depending on the tradition, the oracles that "spurred Alexander's campaigns and bolstered his spirits" came from the Egyptian god Ammon, the Greco-Roman god Apollo, or the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, and they also prophesized Alexander's conquest of Asia and the world.¹⁶

The texts created by Jews during the Roman Imperial period offer insight into the process of self-definition that takes place in response to the changes of the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. Josephus relates Alexander's visit to Jerusalem in his *Jewish Antiquities*, which dates from the reign of Roman emperor Domitian and was most likely written around 93-94 CE.¹⁷ The historicity of Josephus's work is questionable, and most scholars agree that Alexander never visited Jerusalem.¹⁸ However, in Josephus's story, Alexander visits Jerusalem, converts to Judaism, and grants privileges to the Jews, including periodic exemptions from taxation. Upon Alexander's visit to Jerusalem, Josephus has Alexander prostrate himself before the Jewish high priest and Alexander is allowed to sacrifice in temple. The Jews show him the book of Daniel, which is interpreted as an oracle referring to Alexander's destruction of the Persians, despite the fact that Daniel was not written until after 165 BCE, over 150 years after Alexander's death.¹⁹

What purpose did Josephus's version of Alexander's interactions with the Jews serve? The incident is placed within a larger discussion in *Jewish Antiquities* about relations between the Jews and their neighbors and archrivals the Samaritans. The two groups frequently fought each other, and in the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods the Jews often defined themselves, to

some extent, in relation to the Samaritans, whose practices resembled those of their Jewish neighbors but who did not worship at the temple in Jerusalem and who did not honor the high priest in Jerusalem.²⁰ According to Josephus, the Samaritans got permission from Alexander to build a separate temple on Mount Gerizim by distancing themselves from the Jews. However once the Jews get favorable taxation privileges from Alexander, the Samaritans try to identify themselves with the Jews while trying to maintain their political and religious autonomy from them.²¹ It seems, therefore, that one purpose of Alexander's appearance in Jerusalem in Josephus's work is to draw clear distinctions between the Jews and the Samaritans. Josephus's treatment of the relationship between the Macedonian conqueror and the Jews sets up a power dynamic which not only puts the Jews above the conquering Macedonians, but above their rivals the Samaritans as well. The Samaritans come to Alexander as supplicants, and they give over to Alexander their holdings in the hope that he will ally with them and grant them the right to build a temple.²² On the other hand, when Alexander comes to Jerusalem, the roles are reversed. Alexander prostrates himself before the high priest and honors the god of the Jews.²³ However, the construction of Jewish primacy over the Samaritans from Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* is not the only manner in which Jews play with the Alexander narrative.

Although Josephus was writing after the destruction of the Second Temple, the temple still remained an important unifying symbol. More importantly, after the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple and defeat of the Jews in the First Jewish Revolt, Jews faced a real prospect of losing their identity and even their existence as a people. They had no homeland to speak of and had no temple on which to focus their beliefs and rituals. Josephus's portrayal of the Samaritans as imposters to the Jewish faith serves as an attempt to maintain unity in the face of chaos and understand the place of Jews in a world without a temple. Josephus was proud to say that Jews lived in all parts of the world; he viewed the diasporic nature of Judaism as a gift from God.²⁴ However, Jews needed a new approach to identifying themselves without a temple. This new approach can be seen in the effort of Jews to find their place in a world governed by outsiders — Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors. The story about the Jews' encounter with Alexander in Josephus's *Antiquities* paints Jews in a positive light, especially in relation to one of the heroes of the Hellenistic world. This story also allows Josephus to define Jews against a dangerous "other" — the Samaritans. Josephus uses Alexander the Great as part of an effort to construct a Jewish identity that allowed Jews to retain their sense of being a "privileged people" after the catastrophic destruction of much of Judaism's core unifying tenets.

The tale of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem is mirrored in the γ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. Similar to the story told by Josephus, the Jews are impressed by Alexander's military prowess and are frightened at his approach. However, also as in the story narrated by Josephus, Alexander honors the Jews by adopting their god and dedicating their gifts to him to the god of the Jews.²⁵ Unlike Josephus's story, however, there are no other groups

against which the Jews vie for Alexander's patronage. Nevertheless, the importance of this story is similar to Josephus's mythical insertion: the positive treatment the Jews get from Alexander in this mythical narrative can be included in Jewish history, a useful tool for self-definition and for self-representation to other groups. More importantly, however, this story can be used as an example of how Jews interacted with Hellenism and especially the idea of being ruled by foreign, Hellenistic and Roman Imperial powers. The relationship portrayed between the Jews and Alexander, traditionally seen as the first Hellenistic king, shows how Jews viewed and consciously shaped their relationships to Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors.

In the stories told both by Josephus and by the author(s) of the γ -recension of the *Alexander Romance*, several important conclusions can be drawn about how Jews reconciled the political reality of subjugation with their religious ideology of privilege. First, the characterization of both Alexander and the Jews, especially the Jewish high priest, need to be considered. Alexander descends on Jerusalem with the intent to crush the inhabitants. He is angry with them for either aiding the rebels at Tyre or refusing to accept his rule.²⁶ The Jews are thrown into panic and pray for help. Instead of getting martial power from God, or some miraculous victory over Alexander's Hellenistic juggernaut, God's aid comes in the form of Alexander's mercy. Alexander is impressed by the appearance of the Jewish high priest, who is portrayed as "in an agony of fear,"²⁷ but Alexander remembers a dream that contained a prophecy of his victories, in which the prophecy came from the "God of whom [the Jewish high priest] has the honor to be the high priest."²⁸ There are multiple layers of power implied by this story. First, although Alexander prostrates himself before the Jewish high priest, martial power is still with Alexander, who spares Jerusalem and the Jews only through his divinely inspired mercy. However, complicating this power dynamic is the implication that Alexander's mercy comes from the Jewish god, who intervenes on behalf of his people. The message conveyed to Jewish readers is twofold — on the surface, it implies that Jews should embrace the rule of foreign kings. Here, there are parallels with other stories in Jewish historiography. For example, Jewish traditions dealing with the Babylonian exile and the sack of Jerusalem by Titus portray both a divinely willed subjugation of the Jews by foreigners as retribution for Jewish misdeeds.²⁹ It is God's will that the Jews be in the power of others. The deeper meaning to this message, however, is that the Jews are still the "chosen people," they are just suffering temporarily and this suffering is justified because it is God's will that the Jews be subjugated. Eventually, the Jews will have paid enough for their sins and God will favor them over foreigners in the political realm once again.³⁰

The Hellenistic and Roman Jewish interpretations of Alexander's relationship to their ancestors do not simply provide precedence for foreign rule. As pointed out by many scholars, colonial subjugation of one group to another is not simply a dichotomous relationship of resistance and acceptance.³¹ The colonized often subtly subvert the dominant culture of the colonizer for their own use, through what is often called transculturation, "a

process whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from the materials transmitted by the dominant...culture.”³² The oracles given by the Jews to Alexander, found in the book of Daniel and the dream in Josephus, are clear examples of the “in between-ness” of assimilation and antagonism discussed by post-colonial scholars. There is a long Hellenistic tradition of oracular interactions between humans and gods, and the direct involvement of gods in the daily lives of humans which Alexander himself seems to exploit in many of the early histories written about him.³³ Alexander supposedly received oracles at Delphi from Apollo, and at Siwah (in the Egyptian desert) from Ammon. This tradition gets twisted slightly by these Jewish authors — through transculturation, the Jews adopt elements of the dominant Roman culture. However the adopted elements read differently to Jews and Romans. In Josephus’s *Antiquities*, the oracles that predict Alexander’s conquests and subjugation of Asia come from the Jewish god, “hence the substitution of Yahweh for Apollo or Ammon as the genuine guarantor of success and the introduction of Daniel as prophet of truth would supply a special twist... one could hardly wish for a better example of Jewish expropriation and transformation of a Hellenistic theme.”³⁴ Switching Alexander’s source of power from a Hellenistic god to the Jewish god certainly changes the relationship between Jews and their foreign overlords, especially because of the importance of Alexander as a prototype for Greco-Roman kingship and the connection between the oracles Alexander receives and his conquest of the world and founding of Alexandria. While Alexander might be the one with political power over the Jews in Jerusalem, he can only achieve his many victories through the will of the god of the Jews. In this manner, the Jews create what Bell would call a “subaltern myth” in order to challenge the “absolute meaning” of the governing myth.³⁵

Another manner in which the Jews use Alexander to define their position in the Hellenistic world is by tracing their privileges back through history to Alexander the Great. This practice is evident in Josephus’s *Antiquities* and it is implied in the γ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. Josephus has Alexander grant Jews certain exemptions from taxation, and in the γ -recension, Alexander refuses to take tribute from the Jews and instead donates it to the service of the Jewish god. In the other writings of Josephus, Alexander grants rights and privileges to Jews from around the diaspora, especially to Alexandrian Jews.³⁶ Once this myth of privilege is “embedded in the national discourse, the perception of past and future in a linear historical timeline, as if the claims (often false) of age somehow imbued the nation with moral and political authenticity,” it establishes the best precedent for special treatment.³⁷ Alexander is also connected with the founding of the extremely important city of Alexandria, in modern day Egypt, which was home to a large diasporic Jewish community. When viewed in light of the oracle given to Alexander at Jerusalem, which shifts the power behind Alexander’s conquests from traditional gods to the Jewish god, the Jews can take credit for the founding of the city of Alexandria itself!³⁸

Additionally, Josephus relates in *Antiquities* that Alexander recruits Jewish soldiers, who serve him well. There is evidence apart from Josephus that Jews served with Alexander, and placing Jews in Alexander's army would move them away from the margins, and closer to the center, of society. To become fully functioning members of Hellenistic society, Jews would have to serve in the army because military service was an important marker of social acceptance and integration in the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods.³⁹ As Erich Gruen states, "[there is] a pattern discernable in...reports of the Macedonian's benefactions to Jews, a proper return for their allegiance and their courage, thereby associating the nation with the achievements of the great conqueror."⁴⁰ Jews use Alexander to give themselves important privileges and to show that they have been fully integrated members of society since the fourth century BCE, and they also use Alexander to define their continuing distinctiveness in a Hellenistic world, even though they are ruled by foreigners and no longer have a homeland or temple upon which to build an identity. The mythical portrayals of Alexander demonstrate important facets of the identity of Jews in the Hellenistic in the Roman Imperial periods, as seen in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* and in the γ -recension of the *Alexander Romances*. Alexander is used in particular by the Jews because of his importance in tradition as the first Hellenistic king, as creator of the Hellenistic world, as founder of the great city of Alexandria, and as conqueror of the world. The Jewish reinterpretation of his story serves to create a "subaltern myth" which shapes Jewish identity in the face of an oppressive "governing myth."

The Byzantines and Alexander the Great

The Syriac versions of the Alexander the Great narrative come out of the tradition of the *Alexander Romances* of Pseudo-Callisthenes and contain many similar stories to the *Romances*. They were most likely written in the seventh century CE, and were created somewhere in the geographic region which lay between the Persian and Byzantine Empires, probably in modern Syria or Armenia.⁴¹ That the texts contain religious elements is evident from the highly apocalyptic nature of the narrative. The two texts I will examine are almost exclusively concerned with an apocalyptic prophecy and struggle against the "unclean nations." In this section, I will look at a Syriac source attributed to the ecclesiastical author Joseph of Serugh and a slightly earlier *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* and focus on how the Christian Byzantine writers use the Alexander narratives they create to define themselves, to create a new "governing myth" to define themselves in the face of the disintegration of their empire.⁴²

The Syriac texts about Alexander the Great's life were created at a time of crisis in the Byzantine Empire. They were the products of the seventh century, which saw Byzantium attacked from both old and new enemies. A catastrophic war against Persia was fought from 603-630 CE, the "Huns" of

central Asia invaded Byzantium and Persia repeatedly,⁴³ and the seventh century also saw the rise of a new threat: Islam. The many wars fought by the Byzantines during the time these texts were created left the empire poor, physically and emotionally devastated, and on the verge of collapse. Only a daring military operation by the Byzantine emperor Heraclius saved the Byzantines from defeat at the hands of the Persians during the beginning of the seventh century. Despite Heraclius's victories, the Byzantines lost a string of battles to Persians and central Asian nomads, and they lost significant amounts of territory to the invading Arabs as well.⁴⁴ The Byzantines viewed themselves as defenders of the true faith, Orthodox Christianity, and, like the Jews, saw themselves as a "unique theological entity, part of god's design for the salvation of mankind."⁴⁵ How did the Byzantines respond to the material and ideological crises of repeated defeat at the hands of infidels? How do the Syriac myths about Alexander reflect a conflict between the reality of humiliating defeat and the ideology of divinely inspired strength, and how do the Byzantine authors reconcile this conflict? As theorized by Hobsbawm, the Byzantines invent new traditions in order to define themselves, because their old traditions lose their relevancy "when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated."⁴⁶ The Byzantines look to the past to create new traditions in order to replace the old, defunct traditions. However, why do the Byzantines choose to write about Alexander in order to redefine themselves in the face of change?

The *Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* was most likely written sometime shortly after 628.⁴⁷ It spends very little time with the events of Alexander's life before he arrives in the border-lands near the unclean nations: there is much taken from the *Alexander Romance* tradition, and there are a few new stories. Many of the "historical" events of Alexander's life are not present, or are severely distorted, even when compared to the other *Alexander Romances*. For example, the Persian king is not Darius, and the war against the Persians does not take place in Asia Minor or Persia, as it does in Arrian's account and others.⁴⁸ Once Alexander reaches the border-lands, he learns that the area is controlled by a Persian king, and he also hears about the horrors of the unclean nations: Gog and Magog, which are here called the Huns; he hears about those beyond Gog and Magog, who are "Dog-men," and "Menine," both of whom are described as inhuman and cruel.⁴⁹ Beyond these inhuman, unclean nations is the "Paradise of God." Alexander erects a giant gate in the mountain pass to prevent the unclean nations from entering the civilized lands he has conquered, and upon the gate he inscribes a prophecy.⁵⁰ The main points are as follows: when the Huns conquer all the lands of the Romans and Persians, then God will open the gates built by Alexander, and innumerable kingdoms of the unclean nations will pour out into the civilized world, and everyone will fight each other. In the end, Rome will rule all the lands, and Alexander backs this up with a quote from Jeremiah.⁵¹ As pointed out by Kevin van Bladel,

The *Alexander Legend* combines two traditions (1) Alexander's building of a wall in the Caucasus to hold out the Huns and (2) the identifi-

cation of Huns, a generic term for all Central Asian peoples, with Gog and Magog, thereby associating Alexander with the end of time and giving him the occasion to make eschatological prophecies.⁵²

There are two important connections to make before analyzing the Syriac texts any further. The first concerns Gog and Magog, who are apocalyptic figures originally from the Hebrew Bible, who also feature in the New Testament, and who entered popular culture as symbols of the forces of evil during the apocalypse largely through the *Alexander Romances* and other associated texts.⁵³ That Gog and Magog get conflated with the Huns highlights the religious and eschatological nature of the conflict between the Byzantines and their enemies, as viewed by the Byzantines.⁵⁴ The second concerns the connection between the Greeks of Alexander's time, the Romans of the Roman Imperial period, and the Byzantines who created these texts. Byzantine imperial ideology considered the Byzantine Empire a continuation of the Roman Empire, and in the Hellenistic world, it was common to equate the Byzantines with the Romans.⁵⁵ The Byzantines referred to themselves as "Romans," as evident in the prophecy given in these two texts, and in other texts from throughout the Byzantine Empire.⁵⁶ Indeed, there is a significant amount of scholarly disagreement over where to draw the line between the "Byzantine" and "Roman" Empires. I follow Robert Browning in his idea that the defining characterization which separates Byzantine and Roman society is the importance of Christianity in the former, and therefore use his loose date of 500 CE as the time where the transition from "Rome" to "Byzantine" took place, though in the eyes of contemporaries, the Byzantines were Romans.⁵⁷

This prophecy inscribed on the gate by Alexander is compounded by an apocalyptic vision of God in battle; as Alexander and his troops call on God's help to defeat the innumerable hordes of Persians, "the Lord appeared, coming upon the chariot of the Seraphim, and the watchers and the angels came before Him with praises;" his mighty presence scares the barbarian hordes and gives Alexander victory.⁵⁸ Finally, in case the message has not been conveyed bluntly enough, the Persian king, while in captivity, divines the future using Zoroastrian magic. His oracle predicts exactly what Alexander inscribed on the gate: all kingdoms other than Rome will "be laid to waste" and the Romans "should stand and rule to the end of time, and should deliver the kingdom of the earth to the Messiah who is to come."⁵⁹ The king then submits to Alexander and gives Persia over to him.

The *Discourse of Jacob of Serugh* is written a few years after the *Christian Legend*, and it seems to be a response to the *Legend*.⁶⁰ It contains many of the same stories found in the *Legend*, though it features more information from the *Romance* tradition. It also contains an even more descriptive and violent prophecy of the apocalypse delivered to Alexander by a messenger of God in a dream.⁶¹ In this prophecy, more connections are made between Alexander and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, especially Jeremiah.⁶² God tells Alexander he should make peace with Persia and take Persian territory. The messenger also goes into great detail about all the horrible things that will

happen during the apocalypse; in addition to famine, pestilence, world war, and the unleashing of the unclean nations, the prophecy also forecasts the coming of the Antichrist. The work ends with this prophecy and interprets the books of Jeremiah and Isaiah to imply that God will destroy the earth after the Antichrist appears and Gog and Magog wreak havoc on humanity. There is no mention of a final triumph of good over evil — just the end of history.

The message conveyed by these prophecies and oracles is quite shocking. In the *Christian Legend*, Alexander predicts Roman hegemony over the earth following an apocalyptic battle against the Huns, Persians, unclean nations, and other barbarians. The battle is framed in starkly religious terms. This is made clear by God's actual appearance in battle on Alexander's side in the *Christian Legend* and the connection between Rome (which of course means Byzantium at this point) and Christianity that is present in both texts.⁶³ Furthermore, these narratives explicitly connect Alexander the Great to Byzantium through the prophecy about the victory of the Romans. Alexander in-scribes,

So shall the power of the kingdoms melt away before the might of the kingdom of the Greeks which is that of the Romans...and my kingdom, which is called that of the house of Alexander the son of Phillip the Macedonian, shall go forth and destroy the earth and the ends of the heavens; and there shall not be found any among the nations and tongues who dwell in the world that shall stand before the kingdom of the Romans.⁶⁴

According to this prophecy, the Romans are the descendants of Alexander the Great; since the Byzantines were inheritors of the imperial mandate of Rome, and also connected themselves back to Alexander the Great through their mutual Greekness, it establishes the Byzantines as descendants of Alexander as well. The Byzantines claim Alexander as one of their ancestors and make him their own. It is no surprise that the Byzantines of the seventh century used Alexander the Great's conquests as a medium for self-definition, because Alexander conquered the very same peoples and lands that the Byzantines fought against an over during the seventh century.

The *Discourse* also includes Alexander's victory over the Persians and mentions his construction of the wall to contain the unclean nations. However, here there is no direct connection between Alexander's victories and the apocalyptic prophecies that follow. These connections are not as explicit as in the *Christian Legend*; however, as mentioned above, Byzantine Imperial ideology drew clear connections between Alexander, the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire. Although the prophecies in the *Discourse* end with a wrathful God unleashing horrible destruction upon a wicked populace, the triumphs of Alexander himself are not overturned or diminished. The Byzantines still create a triumphant narrative for themselves through Alexander, and the apocalyptic prophecy is not meant to be interpreted as occurring in the time of the text's creation.⁶⁵ Whether or not the prophecy of Alexander is meant to

apply to the Byzantine present, the two Syriac versions of the Alexander narrative are clearly stories which also happen to redefine the identity of the authors who created them in the face of colossal change; they invent traditions by re-associating Byzantine society with glorious military victories of the past in the face of contemporary temporal weakness, through a special relationship with god.

In both the *Christian Legend* and the *Discourse*, Alexander conquers the Persians and fights the people of central Asia (the Huns), Byzantium's traditional enemies up until the rise of Islam, the Arab invasions, and the later invasions of the Turks. The climax of both stories takes place in central Asia, which was the homeland of the Huns (according to the thinkers of late antiquity), who were terrorizing the world at the time of the creation of these texts. The battles between the forces of Alexander and both the Persians and the Huns take place in the region that was also the borderlands between the Byzantines, Persians, and Huns. These lands were highly contested during the time the Syriac narratives were written. Alexander's conquest of them and his claim of dominance over the lands by building a giant gate on them extend the ideology of ownership of the border regions into the Byzantine present.

The Byzantine authors use broad strokes to characterize the peoples of the earth: there are the good, Christian, Byzantines — represented by Alexander. Everyone else is the “other” — characterized by his or her inhumanity and opposition to God. However, once the connection between the Byzantines and Alexander is established, Byzantine self-definition is taken further than the “us versus them” mentality demonstrated by the broad characterization seen in the delineation between Christian and “other.” The very act of Alexander's construction of a gate in the Caucasus to keep out unclean nations is an act of identity creation and border delineation. The non-Christian, impure peoples of the world (the Huns) are physically cut off from Byzantine (and civilized) society until the end of time. The physical separation also implies separate identities, and this division is enforced through Alexander's gate by the will of God. Thus, the separation between the Byzantines and the Huns is given undertones of religious purity through the association between the Huns and “unclean nations” and the divinely mandated physical separation.

From examination of the Syriac versions of the Alexander narratives, it is evident that the Byzantine Empire in the seventh century was a society in crisis. After decades of war against Persians and invading central Asian nomads, the empire was weak physically and emotionally. Furthermore, the Byzantines had lost significant amounts of territory and aside from an almost miraculously victorious military campaign carried out by Heraclius, the Byzantines saw themselves defeated again and again. Like the Jews, the Byzantines viewed themselves as God's chosen people on earth. After all, they were the stewards of the true faith! How could they reconcile defeat with their imperial ideology of being God's representatives of holiness and righteousness on earth? They responded by inventing new traditions, new governing myths, in order to reshape group identity; “The element of invention is particularly clear...since the history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the

ideology of the nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized.”⁶⁶ Alexander probably never inscribed a prophecy on a gate in the Caucasus about fighting an apocalyptic battle against Gog and Magog, nor did he fight alongside a physical embodiment of God. Alexander the Great, who in the Byzantine period was considered a founding figure of Hellenism, of Greek and Roman civilization, and as a conqueror of the lands and peoples who had defeated the Byzantines repeatedly during the seventh century, offered the perfect medium for Byzantine self-definition in the face of catastrophe. The Byzantines incorporated Alexander into their pantheon of heroic ancestors, and in doing so incorporated his triumphs over the Persians and Huns into their own history. The Byzantine reworking of the Alexander narrative is one facet of the newly constructed “governing myth,” it is not the only aspect of the invented traditions of seventh century Byzantine society. This is accomplished in order to construct a mythical past filled with victory over the very enemies who threatened their existence during seventh century, “for all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion.”⁶⁷

The Persians and Alexander the Great

The Persian versions of the Alexander the Great narrative also come out of the tradition of Pseudo-Callisthenes and the *Alexander Romances*. In this article, I will examine one specific text about Alexander, the anonymous *Iskandarnamah*, which was probably based on earlier versions of the *Alexander Romance*. It entered the Persian corpus through a translation of the Syriac, and it also built on the traditions of earlier Persian works about Alexander.⁶⁸ The *Iskandarnamah* was most likely written sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries; the earliest possible date of its creation is 1030, because of a reference to the death of the Seljuk Sultan Mohammed.⁶⁹ The poem is extremely long and repetitive; the surviving manuscripts are lacuna-filled and unfinished. According to Southgate, “the author or compiler intended the romance for a general audience,” and in this respect the Persian *Iskandarnamah* is similar to many of the other texts examined in this article.⁷⁰ Like the other Alexander narratives from the tradition of the *Alexander Romances*, the story is filled with fantastic and mythical stories barely related to the accepted historical accounts of Alexander’s life. However, despite the ahistorical nature of the text, the *Iskandarnamah* offers insight into the Persian responses to the turmoil and upheaval that characterized the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in the greater eastern Mediterranean. Once again, we see the invention of tradition at work, as White writes,

[T]he difference between “history” and “fiction” resides in the fact that the historian “finds” his stories, whereas the fiction writer “invents” his. This conception of the historian’s task, however, obscures the extent to which “invention” also plays a part in the historian’s operations.⁷¹

As with the Byzantine interpretations of Alexander the Great, the Persian inventions serve to create group cohesion through historical representation.

The Middle East during the eleventh through fourteenth centuries was marked by political fragmentation and frequent warfare. In Iran, as in the wider Islamic world, there was no unifying or dominant power during this time period. The lands of the Persians were distributed between a few minor ruling dynasties, which constantly fought each other, following the disintegration of the Seljuk Empire. In addition to the fragmentation caused by almost continuous warfare between the many shahs and beys who ruled small pieces of Iran, the Mongol invasions constituted a crisis for the Persians who inhabited Iran. At the time of the Mongol invasions, aside from being politically heterogeneous, Iran was also socially and linguistically fragmented. Various Turkish tribes had moved into Iran and had even ruled over the Persians in various kingdoms.⁷² Iran had seen several dynasties rise and fall since the death of Alexander, however most were Persian in origin. Not unlike the Macedonian conquest of Persia and the rule of Alexander's Hellenistic successor states, the arrival of the Mongols constituted a major foreign, destructive conquest of Iran.⁷³

The Mongol invasions of Iran occurred in the 1220s, and by 1258 the Mongols had toppled the last Abbasid caliph and sacked Baghdad. The effects of the Mongol invasion on both the lands and people of Iran were calamitous. Stories of mass slaughter were commonplace; everyone who resisted saw their people massacred and cities burned. Aside from the large loss of life, the Mongol invasion brought social upheaval as the land was laid to waste and taxes were raised.⁷⁴ In the face of such disorder and turmoil, how did the Persians find meaning in their subjugation? Like the Jews and Byzantines, the Persians needed to explain their own defeat at the hands of outsiders. Like the Jews and Byzantines, the Persians saw their victorious enemies as inferior to themselves. In this time of crisis, the Persians, like the Jews and Byzantines, turned to the figure of Alexander the Great to reshape their history and alter their collective memory in order to construct a more triumphant past upon which to build a new identity.

How did the *Iskandarnamah*'s portrayal of Alexander the Great alter Persian identity, and how did this shift demonstrate a response to the catastrophes of the Mongol invasions? The two major factors in the text's reinterpretation of the Alexander narrative which shape Persian identity and their relation to the invading Mongols are 1) the characterization of Alexander as the ideal king and as a legitimate Persian ruler, as opposed to Macedonian usurper, and 2) the portrayal of Alexander as a devout Muslim conqueror and leader. The Persianization and Islamicization of Alexander allow the Persians to claim Alexander as their own and to incorporate his deeds into their history. It also sharpened the contrast between the Persian and Muslim Alexander with the barbarian and infidel Mongols. Like the Byzantines of the seventh century, the Persians use Alexander's victories to construct a mythical past filled with triumph over their enemies. Also like the Byzantine use of Alexander, in the

Iskandarnamah, some of the enemies Alexander conquers are thinly veiled references to the Mongols/Huns — the enemies of the society that created the text.⁷⁵ In this manner, the Persians create a “historical” narrative of triumph over the powers which now subjugate them, in order to construct a new tradition to respond to “rapid transformation of society” which “weakens or destroys” the previous traditions.⁷⁶

The Persianization of Alexander in the *Iskandarnamah* is noticeable almost instantly; the author introduces a story that makes Alexander the son of a Persian king instead of the son of Phillip, king of Macedonia.⁷⁷ According to the *Iskandarnamah*, Phillip sends his daughter to marry Dara, king of Persia. Dara has sex with her and impregnates her, but later sends her back to Macedonia before he knows she is pregnant because she has bad breath. Upon her return to Macedonia, Phillip conceals the origin of the child and claims it as his own in order to save the honor of his house and daughter. Meanwhile, Dara has another child, Darab (Darius), with his new queen. Therefore, Alexander and Darius, the Persian king who he defeats, are half-brothers, and Alexander is the first-born son and therefore legitimate ruler of Persia.⁷⁸ The remainder of the story about Alexander’s conquest of Persia and struggle against Darius serves to portray Darius as an unreasonable and selfish king, who does not know what is best for himself or his country. He will not listen to Alexander’s reasonable request to end the payment of tribute from Rum (here, Alexander’s kingdom) to Persia and refuses to accept a truce offered by Alexander in which he would retain the throne of Persia as a client of Alexander’s, even after Alexander has defeated him in battle and taken his family hostage.⁷⁹ Alexander, meanwhile, “ascended the throne and he conquered the world through justice. He established good laws, suppressed heresy, and put an end to all injustice. Mankind was gladdened by his justice and equity, which brought peace to the world.”⁸⁰ The author of the *Iskandarnamah* sets Darius up as an unjust, irrational ruler and contrasts him with Alexander, who not only has the correct qualities to rule, but is also the actual legitimate ruler because he is the first-born son of Dara.

Needless to say, Alexander defeats Darius in battle, and it is with the death of Darius that the Persianization of Alexander is completed. Stabbed by his own generals, Darius lies slowly dying in Alexander’s lap and tells Alexander to marry his daughter, to adopt Darius’s family as his own, and he recognizes Alexander as his brother. Alexander, always the model for an ideal king in the *Iskandarnamah*, gives Darius a proper burial in a vaulted golden tomb.⁸¹ The people of Iran accept Alexander as their legitimate ruler, and because Alexander is the son of Dara, the nobles and elders of Iran say to him, “May you enjoy your father’s throne.”⁸² Even Darius’s family takes to Alexander and he quickly takes Darius’s place as head of the family and as the legitimate king of Iran. The *Iskandarnamah* goes to great lengths to portray Alexander as an example of the ideal king, putting in his mouth, “I wish to go around the world to establish proper laws wherever I go, to induce kings to righteousness and leniency towards their subjects, to leave a good name wherever I pass, and to protect my subjects from injustice and tyranny.”⁸³ Throughout the narrative,

Alexander is compared to Kaykhusraw, a mythical figure who is considered the greatest king of Persia.⁸⁴ The story also twists the birth narrative of Alexander from the traditional stories of Macedonian or Egyptian origin into one of Persian origin to legitimize Alexander as king of Persia. In the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander appears as the liberator of Persia, who frees its people from an unreasonable and illegitimate tyrant. Through the Persianization of Alexander, the Persians who created the *Iskandarnamah* version of the Alexander narrative claim him as their ancestor, assign his place in their governing myth as great Persian king instead of foreign conqueror, and therefore connect themselves to his identity as ideal ruler.

Similar to his Persianization, the Islamicization of Alexander the Great is an important characteristic of the *Iskandarnamah*, which not only redefines Alexander's identity, but also shifts how the Persians define themselves. Alexander is portrayed as a devout Muslim and is cast as the archetypical Muslim conqueror in the tradition of the Caliphs and later Islamic warrior-kings of the Seljuk periods. When Alexander fights the Indian king Porus, who features in many of the other stories born out of the *Alexander Romances*, he tells his troops, "God is on our side...for these are infidels, and if we kill them we will be *ghazis*" and when they ride into battle, they cry, "*Allah Akbar*."⁸⁵ After conquering Porus, Alexander, ever the magnanimous victor, offers to restore Porus to his throne if he converts to Islam and denounces idolatry. However, Porus declines because he is a practitioner of the religion Jamshid, who was the first idolater according to Islamic tradition.⁸⁶ The conquest of Porus is just one of many struggles which get framed in religious terms by the author of the *Iskandarnamah*. As in the Byzantine versions of the Alexander narrative, Alexander's struggles against the monstrous and mythical people from around the world take on the qualities of holy wars and wars of conversion. Throughout the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander either converts a newly conquered group to Islam or kills them. He repeatedly uses the "names of god" as magical powers to fight infidels.⁸⁷ He travels to Mecca and not only devoutly performs the rituals of the *hajj*, but also purifies the *Ka'bah* by restoring the rightful heir to his position as chief of the city and cleans the shrine of usurpers.⁸⁸ These are simply a few examples of how Islam finds its way into the *Iskandarnamah*; the entire narrative is filled with repeated references to the *Qur'an*, allusions to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and Islamic folk tales.⁸⁹

The portrayal of Alexander as a devout Muslim in the *Iskandarnamah* is one of the most amusing ways in which Alexander gets reinvented throughout history. Not only did the historical Alexander associate himself closely with the pagan gods of the Hellenistic world, he also lived around 900 years before the revelation of Mohammed and rise of Islam! However, although extremely ahistorical, the Islamicization of Alexander serves to associate Alexander with the Persians of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and represents him as an enemy of the infidel Mongol invaders. By conflating the victorious world conqueror Alexander with Islam and therefore with themselves, the Persian creators of this narrative equate the Mongols with the many inhuman and unbelieving peoples which Alexander defeats and subjugates — creating not

only a new “governing myth” of Persian identity and history, but also a “subaltern myth” — one which challenges the “governing myth” of the Mongol invasions.

The Islamicization and Persianization of Alexander the Great in the epic *Iskandarnamah* serves to reinterpret history in order to reassert Persian identity in the face of crisis and defeat. The Persians incorporate Alexander into their history and claim him as an important, righteous conqueror. Despite his historical Greekness and paganism, Alexander is remembered as a devout Muslim and legitimate Persian king in the *Iskandarnamah*. Additionally, the Mongols who invaded Iran in the 1220s, and who subjugate the Persians, are connected to the infidel, non-Persian enemies who Alexander conquers. This subaltern narrative serves to maintain Persian unity and opposition to the invading Mongols. Indeed, just a few years later, the Persians had “conquered the conquerors” and the Mongol rulers had adopted Persian customs and had converted to Islam.⁹⁰ The governing and subaltern narratives constructed by the reinterpretation of the Alexander narrative constitute parts of the governing and subaltern myths created by the Persians in the face of the Mongol invasions. These myths allowed Persian identity the flexibility and strength needed to withstand brutal physical subjugation. These myths assert Persian identity and superiority over the Mongols, and they also redefine Persian identity within the group. The *Iskandarnamah* is an example of how the Persians dealt with the threat of physical and cultural destruction at the hands of the Mongol invaders by reshaping their “governing myth.”

Conclusions

In periods of crisis, people tend to look to the past for reassurance and hope for the future. Especially in times of momentous and often catastrophic change, people reassess their identities and often reinterpret their history in order to define themselves. They seek stability in the memory of the past, though the manner in which the past is remembered is not absolute. Nowhere is the fluidity of historical memory more clear than in the examination of interpretations of the life and actions of Alexander the Great. The Jews of the Roman Imperial period, Byzantines of the seventh century, and Persians of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries all faced subjugation at the hands of foreign powers. All three groups, to some extent, view themselves as superior to their new overlords: this superiority is engrained in fundamental religious and political issues of self-definition. In order to reconcile their newfound subjugation, these groups reinterpret their past and redefine their relationship with the power that has defeated them.

How does Alexander the Great fit into these attempts at redefining identity through the reinterpretation of history? The importance of Alexander as a global and increasingly historically distant figure allows many groups the opportunity to claim him and incorporate his actions into their historical memories in different ways. The Jews use Alexander’s reputation as founder of Hellenism and as the prototype for Greco-Roman kingship to reinterpret their

plight as subjects of foreign powers. The Byzantines, seeing themselves as the inheritors of both Greek and Roman traditions, adopt him as an ancestor and incorporate his victories into their own invented tradition. The Persians alter the birth narrative of Alexander in order to turn him into a Persian, and they make him the ideal king and Muslim in order to turn him from a prototype of Persian defeat into a prototype of Persian victory. These alternate narratives about Alexander are also constituent parts of myths, both subaltern and governing, constructed to deal with change.

The approach of each group is to partly explain away their subjugation by attempting to justify it. The Jewish texts make Alexander a just king and attribute many beneficial actions to him. Furthermore, the Jewish texts have God ordain his rule over the earth directly. In addition to the interpretation of Alexander's story as a direct metaphor for the story of the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantines use prophecy to frame their social, economic, and political collapse as part of a divinely mandated apocalyptic narrative. The Persians deny the subjugation imposed by invading Mongol armies by taking away the historical prototype for a foreign world-conqueror who topples Persian empires.

However, all three groups also use their interpretations of the Alexander the Great narrative in order to subversively assert their superiority over their overlords. The Jews take the agency for Alexander's conquests and achievements away from Alexander and pagan gods and transfer them instead to their own God in an invented subaltern myth. They also have Alexander convert to Judaism and treat the Jews differently than their neighbors. In one text, the Byzantines have Alexander prophesy about the fall of Persia and the other unclean nations, and the ultimate global domination of their own empire! In both texts, the Byzantines capitalize on the story that Alexander conquered the people and lands which were responsible for Byzantine decline in the seventh century. The Persians turn Alexander into one of them, just as they eventually do with the invading Mongol armies. Like the Byzantines, they too rewrite history to attribute glorious victories over contemporary enemies to themselves through Alexander, and in doing so, invent new traditions for themselves. While all of these narratives about Alexander stray from the "historical" accomplishments of the Macedonian conqueror, they still offer insight into the communities that created them. Through examination of their treatment of Alexander and his actions, the ways in which these communities reshaped history and their own identities are evident.

Sources

Arrian. and P. A. Brunt. *Arrian*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976.

Notes

1.Pseudo-Callisthenes and Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London, England; New York, NY, USA: Penguin Books, 1991).

2.Hellenism is an extremely difficult term to define, and scholars debate its origins. I do not have the space to engage in the debate over the origins of Hellenism. For my purposes, it is important to note that Alexander is a figure who quickly becomes associated with Hellenism, and soon after his death people connect his conquests with a major advancement in the process of bringing Greek culture to the wider world. As a working understanding of Hellenism which I will use in this article, see Gruen: "The Greeks, secure and content with their legacy, showed little inclination to learn the languages or embrace the cultures of peoples who had come under their authority...They took their superiority for granted...Hellenic culture, as the stamp of the ascendant classes in many of the cities of the Near East, held widespread attraction and appeal. ...The Process of 'Hellenization' is mysterious and obscure, not easily defined or demonstrated." Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998).

3.The various Alexander myths have been explored by scholars in some depth. An overview of the many sources about Alexander can be found in Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2008), and there are several works which take multiple myths and analyze them together, such as Himanshu Prabha Ray and Daniel T. Potts, *Memory as History: The Legacy of Alexander in Asia* Aryan Books International, 2007). Many works deal with a single source and analyze it without respect to other Alexander myths.

4.For example, in the case of the *Alexander Romances* which will be discussed in detail later in the article, many of their sources are also removed from the events they describe, both geographically and chronologically. In addition, many of their sources no longer survive, which makes evaluation of their accuracy difficult.

5.Much scholarship on theoretical connections between myth, history, identity, and memory is based on the study of modern nationalism. However, I find much of the theory is applicable to the history of the identity formation discussed in this article. For myth, history, and identity, see E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); for the connections between memory and myth, see Duncan Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003), 63, and for the post-colonial theory of transculturation, see Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991), 33. Work on history as literature is from Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

6."[M]emory acts as a powerful cohesive force, binding the disparate members of a nation together: it demarcates the boundary between Them and Us, delineating the national self from the foreign, alien other" in Bell, *Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, 70. Quote in body is from Ibid. 67.

7"‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past." Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* 1.

8.Ibid. 5.

9.Bell, *Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, 66.

10.The idea of organically invented traditions versus actively cultivated inventions comes from Ranger's essay in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 249.

11.See Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* Appendix I for more on the texts.

12. The γ -recension refers to one version of the *Alexander Romance*, attributed to the writer Callisthenes (hence the modern identification of the author as "Pseudo-Callisthenes"), which appears in several different forms. The different recensions come from different places and include different stories, though they follow (more or less) the same basic narrative. For more on the different recensions see Pseudo-Callisthenes and Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* (London, England; New York, NY, USA: Penguin Books, 1991), 29.
13. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*, 194; see also Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
14. Catherine Rubincam, "A Tale of Two "Magni": Justin/Trogus on Alexander and Pompey," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 54, no. 3 (2005), pp. 265.
15. See Appendix V in Arrian and P. A. Brunt, *Anabasis of Alexander* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976) for a discussion of the ancient historical traditions about Alexander's founding of the city of Alexandria. For more on Alexandria, see the Introduction to Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
16. The god is Ammon in Arrian and Brunt, *Anabasis of Alexander*; Apollo in Plutarch and John Dryden, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (Franklin Center, Pa.: Franklin Library, 1982); and Serapis in Pseudo-Callisthenes and Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance*; to name just a few examples. See Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* 197 and n. 23.
17. J. C. Edmondson, "Introduction: Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. J. C. Edmondson, Steve Mason, and J. B. Rives (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.
18. The passage appears in Flavius Josephus et al., "Jewish Antiquities," in, Vol. 6 (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press; Heinemann, 1926), XI.304- XI.347, for a summary of the debate over the historicity of this passage, see Appendix C at the end of the volume.
19. For more on the anachronistic nature of the book of Daniel in Josephus's version of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem see *Ibid.* 477 n. d.
20. For more on Jews and Samaritans see Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* and Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*. Jewish imperialism in the late Hellenistic period is a feature of the Hasmonean Dynasty, which ruled in the late second century BCE, and Jewish-Samaritan relations are discussed briefly in 1 Macc, Michael David Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books : New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), when the Jews conquer the Samaritans, and in the New Testament Gospels, where the moral of the story of the "good Samaritan" is to love all humans regardless of ethnicity.
21. Josephus et al., *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.322-326, XI.340-345.
22. *Ibid.* XI.321.
23. *Ibid.* XI.331-332.
24. Erich S. Gruen, "Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome (Review)," *American Journal of Philology* 127, no. 4 (2006), 618.
25. The brief story of Alexander's visit to Jerusalem in the γ -recension can be found in Pseudo-Callisthenes and Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* 169-170. While there is much more content connecting Jews to Alexander in this recension, I will focus on this story as an example of the relationship between Jews and the Alexander myths in the Hellenistic world.
26. Josephus et al., *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.317-320 and Pseudo-Callisthenes and Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* 168-169, respectively.

27. Josephus et al., *Jewish Antiquities*, XI.326.
28. Ibid. XI.333-4.
29. For Vespasian, see Flavius Josephus and H. St J. Thackeray, *The Jewish War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) and for the Babylonian exile see Isaiah in Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*.
30. Josephus does not take the implications of his depiction this far — he only leaves open the idea that the possibility for a powerful Jewish political force could exist in the future.
31. See especially John M. G. Barclay, "The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome," in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. J. C. Edmondson, Steve Mason, and J. B. Rives (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 315-332, who addresses Josephus's work from a post-colonial perspective.
32. Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, 2.
33. See Plutarch and Dryden, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*; Arrian and Brunt, *Anabasis of Alexander*; and Quintus Curtius Rufus, John Yardley, and Waldemar Heckel, *The History of Alexander* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England; New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1984); as well as Pseudo-Callisthenes and Stoneman, *The Greek Alexander Romance* for examples. Alexander supposedly received oracles at Delphi from Apollo, and Siwah (in the Egyptian desert) from Ammon. For more about paganism and Roman daily life and oracles in general, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).
34. My use of the oracles from Josephus to discuss subversion of Hellenistic themes by Jews is heavily indebted to Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* 197 and Barclay, "The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome," 315-332.
35. Bell, *Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, 74.
36. See Flavius Josephus and H. St J. Thackeray, *Against Apion* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press; W. Heinemann, 1934), and Josephus and Thackeray, *The Jewish War*.
37. Bell, *Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity*, 75-6.
38. Much has been written about the relationship between Jews and gentiles in Alexandria and the connections between this relationship and the extensive literature produced by the Jewish community in Alexandria during the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. For more see Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* and Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition*. For connections between Josephus and the relationship between Jews and gentiles in Alexandria see Josephus and Thackeray, *Against Apion* and the commentary given in Barclay, *The Empire Writes Back: Josephan Rhetoric in Flavian Rome*, 315-332.
39. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* 199.
40. Ibid. 201.
41. Richard Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven [Conn.]; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 232-233.
42. All three texts are accessible in one volume, see Pseudo-Callisthenes and E. A. Wallis Budge, *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889).
43. In Late Antiquity, the term "Hun" was used to refer to central Asian nomadic people. Pseudo-Callisthenes and E. A. Wallis Budge, "A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander," in *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889), 144 n.1.

44. For a more detailed history of the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Heraclius and its interactions with invading Persians and Muslims, see Walter Emil Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992). For the English translation of the *Christian Legend*, see Pseudo-Callisthenes and Budge, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*.
45. Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* (New York: Scribner, 1980), 14.
46. Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 5.
47. Kevin van Bladel, "The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102," in *The Quran in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 184; and G. J. Reinink, Bernard H. Stolte, and Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven, Belgium; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002), 81-94.
48. For the traditional historical account of Alexander's life and conquests see Arrian and Brunt, *Anabasis of Alexander* or the less well-regarded Curtius Rufus, Yardley, and Heckel, *The History of Alexander* and Plutarch and Dryden, *Selected Lives: From the Parallel Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*.
49. "When they go forth to war, they fetch a pregnant woman, and pile up a fire, and bind her in front of the fire, and cook her child within her, and her belly bursts and the child comes forth roasted," Pseudo-Callisthenes and Budge, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 151. The meaning of "Menine" is unclear from Budge's translation.
50. The gate of Alexander is a famous story in the tradition of the *Alexander Romances* and many scholars believe there was a real gate erected somewhere in the Caucasus mountains which was connected to Alexander, though probably not built by Alexander. For more on the historicity of the gate, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 176.
51. The translation of the prophecy written on the gate can be found in Pseudo-Callisthenes and Budge, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 154-156.
52. van Bladel, *The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102*, 187.
53. For more on Gog and Magog, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 176. They are first mentioned in Genesis 10.2 and Ezekiel 38.1-3, then in Revelation 20.7-8.
54. For the Byzantine interpretation of contemporary, seventh century events in an apocalyptic worldview, see G. J. Reinink, Bernard H. Stolte, and Rijksuniversiteit te Groningen, *The Reign of Heraclius (610-641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven, Belgium; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2002), 81-83.
55. Not only did the Byzantines call themselves Romans, their enemies called them Romans too! Invading Persians, Arabs, and Turks all referred to the Byzantines as Romans. Constantine the Great, widely considered to be the founder of the Byzantine Empire, called his capitol city of Constantinople "New Rome."
56. An example of the Byzantine claim to being a continuation of the Roman Empire in their imperial ideology can be seen in Liudprand of Cremona's chronicle of his multiple visits to the Byzantine Empire during the 10th century CE. In these chronicles, a conflict over ownership of the Roman imperial heritage is clearly visible between Liudprand (and his sponsor, Otto I the Holy Roman Emperor) and the Byzantine Court: Liudprand, F. A. Wright, and John Julius Norwich, *The Embassy to Constantinople and Other Writings* (London; Rutland, Vt.: J.M. Dent; Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1993). For more on Byzantine Imperial ideology and the continuum between Rome and Byzantium, see Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* (New York: Scribner, 1980), xi-xxii and 12-14.
57. "[Historical periods] are not separated by clean-cut boundaries. They overlap, and features of the old and new worlds coexist for a time. So any particular date chosen to mark the beginning of a new age is largely arbitrary. One feature which distinguishes the Byzantine Empire from the world of the late Roman period is its Christianity... [though] this state of affairs did not come about

- all at once. There was a long transitional period..." in Robert Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* (New York: Scribner, 1980), xx-xxii.
- 58.Pseudo-Callisthenes and Budge, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 157.
- 59.Ibid. 158.
- 60.van Bladel, *The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102*, 188.
- 61.For the English translation of the *Discourse* see Pseudo-Callisthenes and E. A. Wallis Budge, "A Discourse Composed by Mar Jacob upon Alexander, the Believing King, and upon the Gate which He made Against Gog and Magog," in *The History of Alexander the Great, being the Syriac Version of the Pseudo-Callisthenes*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge (Cambridge: The University Press, 1889).
- 62..Ibid. 167, 191, 193, 195-6.
- 63.The Byzantine Empire was deeply religious, especially in its imperial ideology. For more on the Christian nature of Byzantine imperial ideology, see Browning, *The Byzantine Empire* and Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*.
- 64.Pseudo-Callisthenes and Budge, *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, 155. The conflation of Romans and Greeks is a construction of the Byzantine world, not of the Roman Imperial world.
- 65.This is evident from the amount of time that must pass from the story given by the author until the apocalypse. In *Discourse*, it is 7000 years, while in the *Christian Legend*, the chronology works out to apply to the very moment of the text's creation. For more on the connections between the prophecy in the *Christian Legend* and its interpretation as belonging to the time of the text's creation, see van Bladel, *The Alexander Legend in the Qur'an 18:83-102*, 183-185.
- 66.Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 13.
- 67.Ibid. 12.
- 68.The translation of the *Iskandarnamah* I use is Mino S. Southgate and Iraj Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). This text should not be confused with another Persian text about Alexander the Great, called the *Iskandarnamah*, which was written by the great Persian poet Nizami in the twelfth century. For an important critique of Southgate's translation and editing efforts, see the helpful review by James R. Russell, "Review of Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103, no. 3 (1983) 634-6.
- 69.For Southgate's discussion of the chronology of the text, see Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah : A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 2-3; Stoneman and Southgate seem to lean towards the later dates in the fourteenth century. For connections between the *Iskandarnamah* and other Persian works about Alexander, see Southgate's Appendix I, and Stoneman, *Alexander the Great : A Life in Legend* 38-39. For more on Sultan Mohammed, see Michael Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 100.
- 70.Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 3.
- 71.White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 7.
- 72.For example, the Seljuks were of Turkish origin. For more on early Turkish-Iranian interactions, see Gene R. Garthwaite, *The Persians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), chapter five.
- 73.Although there had been several major non-Persian powers which ruled Iran between the death of Alexander and the Mongol invasion, the effects of these foreign rulers differed considerably and were thus historicized differently by Persians themselves and others as well. "Unlike the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, which brought a new religious and social order, or the Seljuk expansion in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which invigorated the existing Islamic institutions, the Mongol invasions appeared to have little purpose other than conquest and destruc-

tion.” William L. Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2004), 34. “The Mongol invasions were an unparalleled cataclysm for the lands of Iran. Where the Arabs and Turks had been relatively familiar and restrained conquerors, the Mongols were both alien and wantonly cruel.” Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 100.

74. “In some parts of the region agriculture never recovered...Where there had been towns and irrigated fields, the war horses of the conquerors and their confederates were now turned out to graze. Wide expanses of Iran reverted to nomad pastoralism...Peasants were subjected to taxes that were ruinously high...many fled the land or were forced into slavery...” Ibid. 103.

75. As in the Byzantine Syriac narratives, the “unclean nations” are characterized as inhuman and as the “other.” See for example, the description of the Zangis or other strange peoples who Alexander fights and defeats in Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 106. In the *Iskandarnamah*, Alexander conquers seemingly endless amounts of strange peoples, and obviously not all of them refer to the Mongols.

76. Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 5.

77. For a discussion on the various birth narratives of Alexander in the *Romances*, see Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend*, 6-31.

78. Southgate and Afshar, *Iskandarnamah: A Persian Medieval Alexander-Romance*, 9-10.

79. Ibid. 11-13. Notice the Persian equation of Alexander’s historical kingdom of Macedonia to Rome, or Rum. As mentioned above, Byzantine traditions commonly draw clear connection between Alexander and Macedonia, Hellenism and the Greeks, Rome, and then to Byzantium, despite the anti-Greek sentiments of their Roman ancestors. Also, note that the Persians called Byzantium “Rum” as well.

80. Ibid. 10.

81. Ibid. 14.

82. Ibid. 12.

83. Ibid. 11.

84. For examples of comparisons and parallels drawn between Alexander and Kaykhusraw, see Ibid. 53-54, and 65. For more background on Kaykhusraw, see n. 48. Kaykhusraw is one of the heroes (as is Alexander) of the famous Persian epic *Shahnamah*, the “Book of Kings.”

85. Ibid. 19-20, and n. 8.

86. Ibid. 21, n. 10.

87. Another example of a struggle against an uncivilized, exoticized people which gets framed as a struggle between the forces of Islam and infidels can be found in Alexander’s fight against the Davalpayam, who have no shin bones and use people like horses — to ride around on them, Ibid. 36-39. For the use of god’s names as magical talismans, see one example on Ibid. 35.

88. Ibid. 40-41.

89. For example, Alexander’s guide in the Land of Darkness on his search for the Waters of Immortality is the Islamic mythical figure and prophet Khidr, see Ibid. 54-59.

90. Axworthy, *A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind*, 104.

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