FROM GREEK HERO TO ISLAMIC PROPHET:
THE LONG LITERARY JOURNEY
OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AND
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THE SPEAKER
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The figure of Alexander the Great has traversed more than twenty centuries of literary history. Throughout this time, two distinct visions are dominant. On the one hand, he was a valiant hero, the just and wise king, a messiah; on the other hand, there was the ferocious warrior, the insatiable dominator, and challenger of divine power. This duality was explored by a multitude of authors across genres, from classical historiography to rabbinical traditions, from Christian apocalyptic literature to Islamic stories of the prophets and European courtly romances. It invited a constantly revised reflection on sovereignty: the qualities of a prince, the nature of universal rule, and the abuse of power.

But he was not just a ruler. Alexander was also the ‘king explorer’, whose power and political projects were based above all on a detailed cosmographical knowledge. While Alexander consistently represented a model for Roman and Byzantine emperors as well as for Arab caliphs and Persian princes, and later European kings and Turkish governors, Alexander narratives were filled with fragments of geographical, ethnographical, political, and technological knowledge, updated across the centuries and myriad languages, so that every Alexander romance could become the occasion for a cosmographical survey of the world.

This paper will follow these two main strands in reading Alexander’s astonishing success as a literary character, and, with a particular focus on the textual traditions that emerged in the Asian regions, will try to outline the role of Alexander literature as a symbolic conveyor of ancient wisdom and knowledge into the modern world.

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Illustration: Detail of the Alexander Mosaic, representing Alexander the Great on his horse Bucephalus (Wiki Commons).

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