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Opening the Gates of the North in 627: War, Anti-Byzantine Sentiment and Apocalyptic Expectancy in the Near East Prior to the Arab Invasion

Since the time of the Babylonian Exile the epitome of the “Peoples of the Apocalypse” has been the obscure designation Gog & Magog. The Prophet Ezekiel had warned his fellow expatriates that “Gog in the” far northern “land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal,” head of countless gruesome warriors inimical to God and His chosen people would come at Israel and inflict unprecedented horrors upon them.¹ Already in pre-exilic times his colleague Jeremiah had presaged that an anonymous force described as “all the families of the kingdoms of the north” would conquer the Holy City, an incursion represented in the image of a “boiling bowl” tilted from the north, that he had seen in a divinely inspired vision.² Thus the mythical peoples came to be one of the major eschatological forces of evil in all traditions rooted in the Biblical soil.³

When opening any introduction to the history of the Alexander Romance and related narratives one inevitably comes across the story of the Macedonian’s erection of an iron wall, rampart or gate(s) in some northern mountains by which means he is said to have excluded the “Unclean Nations”, a.k.a. Gog & Magog, from the civilized world. One day, at the last stages of history, all these narratives agree, those peoples would manage to burst through the Gates of the North and fulfil their divinely ordained destructive mission. Thus this story, embedded in a text originating in the 3rd century BCE as it is, appears to be an integral part of the Alexander-tradition(s).⁴ – However, that has not always been so.

¹ Ez 38–39.
² Jer 1,13–15.
³ See also the references to Magog in the genealogical tables of Gen 10,2 and 1 Chr 1,5. More important here are the two more passages in LXX where the name Gog occurs in prophetic contexts: in Num 24,7 (the prophecy of Balaam, predicting Israel’s surpassing of Gog, instead of Agag) and in Amos 7,1 (reading, instead of gizzei ha-melekh, “mowings of the king”, Gog ha-melekh, “King Gog” who is thus said to be coming at the country, leading [hordes like] locust swarms; cf. Boe: Gog and Magog (cf. fn. 7), pp. 65–71. In Num 24,7 also the Samaritan Pentateuch reads Gog instead of Agag: Pentateuchus Samaritanus, ed. [Julius] H[einrich] Petermann, fasc. 4: Numeri, Berolini 1885, p. 429, l. 7; and so do a number of ancient Greek and Syriac translations (Aquilas, Symmachus, Theodotion, Syro-Hexapla): Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt; sive veterum interpretum Graecorum in totum Vetus Testamentum fragmenta, vol. 1: Genesis – Esther, ed. Fridericus (= Frederick) Field, Oxonii 1875, pp. 255–256; cf. Boe: Gog and Magog (cf. fn. 7), pp. 50–60.
⁴ See e.g. Friedrich Pfister: Alexander der Große in den Offenbarungen der Griechen, Juden, Mohammedaner und Christen (Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Schriften der Sektion für
In his *Jewish War* Josephus relates that the Alans, a Scythian people residing at the coasts of Lake Maeotis (Μαιῶτις, the Sea of Azov), in the time of Vespasian (69 – 79) broke through iron gates that Alexander the Great (336 – 323 BCE) had once erected as a barrier in the nearby mountains. Elsewhere, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, at discussing the ethnographic scheme of Genesis 10, he incidentally notes that Scythians was the name by which the Greeks referred to the descendants of Magog, son of Japhet. Neither are these passages indicative of any farther-reaching concern with the Scythians’ identity as the peoples beyond Alexander’s gates nor with their ‘Magogian’ descent; still less does the sober historian seem to be particularly interested in, or even aware of, the eschatological implications of the latter: (Gog &) Magog do not appear as a collective capable of any actions beyond human, intra-historical boundaries. The same applies to all other Jewish texts from the Second-Temple period: Gog & Magog and the construction of Alexander’s gates (if the latter is mentioned at all) appear in historical, ethno- and geographical contexts and their eschatological significance (as assigned to them by no less an authority than the Biblical prophets after all) is virtually nowhere elaborated on.

The Christian tradition on its part, while widely occupied with that eschatological role, contained a rather effective impediment to all too ready an identification of Gog & Magog with any particular *ethnos*: the Revelation of St. John prophesied that Satan would “go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners (γωνίαις) of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.” So, those barbarian hordes, rather than being found in any particular region or direction, in fact inhabited the fringes of the world *all around*, or, as Augustine (354 – 430) has it, were even “spread over the

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4. Rev 20,8.
whole earth,” and represented the “city of the devil” that in the endtime would attack the “city of Christ.”

His contemporary Jerome (347–420), although indeed thinking of Gog & Magog as a well-defined ethnic group, testifying to an equation (like Josephus’s) of the Scythians with them in one of his writings10 and declaring the Huns to be the barred peoples in another,11 nevertheless eschewed identifying Gog & Magog with those very barred peoples – which only could have given Alexander’s wall an eschatological significance.12 Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393–ca. 460) on the other hand indeed assumed that Gog belonged to the Scythians but at the same time mitigated Ezekiel’s prophecy by arguing that the invasion foreseen by him had already taken place in the past and was certainly not to be expected for the eschatological future.13

In 434 St. Proclus, patriarch of Constantinople (434–447), delivered a sermon on occasion of a recently averted Hunnic attack on the city. He quoted God’s announcement of His destruction of Gog & Magog in Ezekiel 38 which he, according to the Church historians Socrates and Theodoret, declared to have been fulfilled in the Hunnic leader Rua’s (precursor of Attila [434–453]) death, struck by lightning, and the extinction of his troops by a plague and fire from heaven.14 Here we find a people identified as Gog & Magog and an eschatological interpretation of their actions and fate – Alexander’s rampart, however, is nowhere in sight.15

9 Augustine, Civ. Dei 20.11, by van Donzel/Schmidt (cf. fn. 7), p. 13, n. 27 wrongly considered “an exception”.
10 Jerome: In Ez. 38 – Commentariorum in Hiezechielem libri XIV, ed. Franciscus [= François] Glorie (CCSL 75) Turnhout 1964, p. 525; he ascribes this equation to “Judaei et nostri judaizantes”.
11 Jerome: Ep. 77,8; see also Kinzig: “Jewish and ‘Judaizing’ Eschatologies” (cf. fn. 5, ibid.).
13 Theodoret: Comm. in Ez., in: MPG 81, 1217. Since he explicitly rejects “Ἰουδαίουκοιμάνεται” about the future coming of Gog & Magog this passage, not unlike Jerome’s quoted above (cf. fn. 10), may be indicative of such eschatological expectations within the more popular, non-intellectual spheres of Byzantine society.
In his commentary on *Revelation*, written, according to Eugenia Constantinou, in 611, Andrew of Caesarea associates *Revelation* 16,12 with Gog & Magog and the Antichrist (from the tribe of Dan) and locates both evil forces in the East, beyond the Euphrates, in Scythia and Persia – an interpretation most probably prompted by the Persian conquests since 603. In his interpretation of *Revelation* 20, 7–8, however, he rejects all equations of Gog & Magog with any particular people(s) while stressing the eschatological, as opposed to a historical, meaning of the verses. Yet again the Gates of the North are not mentioned at all.¹⁶

In short, there are numerous references to Alexander’s erection of the Gates of the North, to Gog & Magog and their presumptive ethnic identity (Sythians, Alans, Huns, Goths etc.)¹⁷ as well as to their future, eschatological role. However, a combination of these three elements, a narrative that would 1) identify Gog & Magog with a particular ethnic group and 2) with the peoples exclosed by Alexander’s gates and 3) would do so in view of the eschatological depredation foreseen by Ezekiel (and/or Jeremiah), appears nowhere in Late Antique Jewish and Christian literatures.¹⁸

It was only in the 6th century, and only beyond the Greek-Aramaic cultural divide, that such a combination came into existence. Syriac-speaking Christians had barely heard of the *Revelation of St John*, with its location of Gog & Magog in the four corners of the world, before the 6th century, a text that even then never received the credit of a

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¹⁷ For an overview of the many attempts at an ethnographic identification of Gog & Magog in late antique literatures also see Anderson: *Alexander’s Gate* (cf. fn. 4), pp. 8 – 14.

¹⁸ Frequently it has been assumed that a fusion of these three elements must in fact have been known – see e.g. Anderson: *Alexander’s Gate* (cf. n. 4), p. 19; Pfister: *Alexander der Große* (cf. n. 4), p. 30; Hannes Möhling: *Der Weltkaiser der Endzeit. Entstehung, Wandel und Wirkung einer tausendjährigen Weissagung* (Mittelalter-Forschungen 3), Stuttgart 2000, p. 44. This assumption, however, also has been rejected from as early as the late 19th century on – see e.g. Arturo Graf: *Roma nella memoria e nelle immagini del Medio Evo*, vol. 2: *Con un’appendice sulla leggenda di Gog e Magog*, Torino 1883, p. 517 – 524; Barry Phillips: “[review of] A.R. Anderson, Alexander’s Gate...,” in: *Speculum* 8 (1933) p. 84 – 85; Axel Klopprogge: *Ursprung und Ausprägung des abendländischen Mongolenbildes im 13. Jahrhundert. Ein Versuch zur Ideengeschichte des Mittelalters* (Asiatische Forschungen 122), Wiesbaden 1993, pp. 39 – 50.
canonical book within the Syriac Churches.¹⁹ For their members it may thus have been much easier to knot together the threads of the “Peoples-of-the-North” and the Alexander’s-Gate traditions with the eschatological Gog & Magog motif.

Yet, while the Syriac translation/adaption of the *Alexander Romance*²⁰ might have long been to find on the shelves of learned Syrians,²¹ that integral narrative was not interpolated into this book, but appeared in two separate texts which, as Gerrit Reinink has demonstrated,²² both were composed around 630: the so so-called *Alexander Legend*²³ and, largely a versified homiletic adaption of the *Legend, the Alexander Poem.*²⁴ A number of narrative elements that appear in them for the first time, most prominently the integrated Gog & Magog tale, now became a permanent feature of the vast complex of Alexander traditions, as represented in the countless later versions of the *Alexander Romance* as well as in certain passages of the Qur’ān and in numerous texts of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditional literatures. – As Richard Stoneman puts it: “The importance of the story is that it is

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²⁰ *Qur’ān* [s]-Gate traditions with the eschatological Gog & Magog motif.

²¹ For a discussion of the texts’ dating and the relations between them see Reinink: “Alexander the Great” (cf. fn. 22).


²⁴ As Richard Stoneman puts it: “The importance of the story is that it is
the main vehicle for the insertion of Alexander into the sacred history of the Christian [and, it should be added: to some degree also of the Islamic and Jewish] world[s].”²⁵ This tale then is one of the many traditions, widely neglected by historians, that the Greek and Latin speaking Christian, as well as the Muslim and, although to a lesser degree, even the Jewish world, owe to Syriac Christianity. – It is the question as to what the historical circumstances and what the purposes were that motivated the emergence of this Syriac story, which the remaining pages of this essay are being devoted to.

The Byzantine world of the first decades of the seventh century was marked by a ubiquitous sense of crisis. In 602 the Constantinopolitan throne had been seized by the centurion Phocas, killing his predecessor Maurice (539–602) and his sons. The usurper’s reign had all the features of an utter tyranny that could only be overcome by another usurpation, committed in 610 by Heraclius, son of the exarch of Carthage, Heraclius the elder.²⁶

In the meantime the Persian-Sasanid archenemy in the person of the šāhān-šāh Xusro II. Parwēz (“Victor,” 590 – 628) had launched a massive campaign of conquest against the Christian empire that was to evolve into the most effective – and, as it was to turn out, the last – venture of its kind in the long history of military trials of strength between the two superpowers.²⁷ The more serious the troubles grew which Byzantium faced, the stronger hope gained ground among the marginalized and oppressed minorities of Jews and non-Chalcedonian Christians in the eastern provinces, that the ‘Roman’ domination would soon come to its well-deserved end.²⁸

Jews even took up arms and sided with the Persians who, after their conquest of Jerusalem in 614, left them in control of the Holy City, where those combatants and their supporters installed an autonomous government headed by a messianic leader who reactivated the cultic service (provisional though it might have been) at the site

²⁸ For a comprehensive reconstruction of these expectations see Lutz Greisiger: Messias · Endkaiser · Antichrist. Politische Apokalyptik unter Juden und Christen des Nahen Ostens am Vorabend der arabischen Eroberung (Orientalia Biblica et Christiana 21), Wiesbaden 2014.
of the former Temple. Syriac Christians, although not as actively and wholeheartedly supporting the Persian conquest as their Jewish fellow countrymen, certainly welcomed the expulsion of the Byzantine overlords. The invaders’ carrying off the relic of the Holy Cross and deporting Jerusalem’s (predominantly Melkite) Christian population were regarded, especially by Monophysites, as divine punishments for the imperial oppression supported by an illegitimate church organization in the name of a heretic dogma.

When Persian armies in 615, and again 11 years later (together with allied Avar forces), even showed up on the shore of the Bosporus, just opposite Constantinople, it became undeniable that the empire was on the verge of doom. This in turn could not but sound the alarm bells of the apocalyptic-


cally tempered contemporaries: was the Roman Empire in decline that spelled no less than history drawing to a close. For Jews and most Christians alike Rome was the last of the four empires which were assigned to ruling the world over the course of history, according to the conventional reading of the prophecies found in the biblical Book of Daniel.\textsuperscript{33}

Wars, plagues, famines and all sorts of natural disasters, the hardships of the Last Days ahead, Near Eastern Jews and Christians clearly perceived their near future above all as one of redemption through the takeover of the Messiah or the returning Christ. Under this prospect they were all too ready to see the different agents at work in their present whom tradition expected for the final stages of the world as they knew it. On the side of the forces of evil these actors naturally included Gog & Magog and it comes as no surprise that Near Eastern Jews and Christians were alertly scanning the current events for those Barbarian hordes to appear on the scene. What, however, was it that may have possibly prompted them to draw a connection between these events and occurrences in the bygone times of Alexander the Great?

By 628 Heraclius had actually gained a sweeping victory against the pagan enemy. Xusrō was dethroned and murdered by a group of conspirators wherupon his son and successor Kavād II. (reigned 628) immediately surrendered and accepted the peace terms dictated by the Byzantines.\textsuperscript{34} Imperial propaganda had long been at


pains to counter the apocalyptic agitation not only by triumphalist rhetoric but by a full-blown new-age ideology as most comprehensively voiced by Heraclius’ court panegyrist George of Pisidia: Not only was the danger averted by an overwhelming victory of the Christian army, not only had the empire carried out its duty as the katechontic force and withheld the destructive powers, but Heraclius had acted as the “world’s saviour (κοσμοράστης)” who had ushered in a cosmic sabbath, equivalent to the seventh day of the creation week and had brought about “a new life, a new world and a new creation.”

In short, as Gerrit Reinink has put it: “Apocalyptic eschatology which predicted the end of the Roman empire was supplanted by imperial ideology using eschatological imagery in order to typify the auspicious new beginning of the empire.” This vision was underpinned by Heraclius’ religious policy, or, at least by the propagandistic representation of this policy: There is a wealth of sources that contain a narrative, obviously circulated by Constantinople, which purported that Heraclius had not just won a war but in fact had at the same stroke converted the Persian Pagan empire to Christianity. The emperor’s efforts to overcome the sectarian splits between Chalcedonians, Monophysites and Nestorians and to unify Christendom under the newly invented dogma of Monenergism (later Monotheletism) temporarily looked decidedly promising. And, shortly after the war, he even made an attempt to convert the Jews, first, it seems, by trying to garner sympathies from them, later by issuing a decree ordering all his Jewish subjects to accept baptism. All these measures couldn’t but give the impression that substantial

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36 Ibid., p. 84. Stoyanov: Defenders and Enemies of the Cross (cf. fn. 29), pp. 55–6, 65–68.


changes in the overall fabric of the world were underway. The imperial propaganda spared no effort to convince the public that these changes (although traditionally largely associated with the eschaton) would lead to the better, to a long Golden Age of the Christian empire preceding the return of Christ.

In the *Legend*’s description of Alexander’s war against the Persians he is personally led by God; the preparations for the war are accompanied by prayers and ritual acts like the burning of incense. His soldiers use the battle cry: “God come to our aid (Alahā tā l-ʿudrānān)”40 God’s leadership likewise was a motif particularly emphasized by the propagandistic representation of Heraclius’s ‘holy war of liberation’ and his soldiers went to battle shouting “God help the Romans (Deus adiuta Romanis!)”, as attested by emperor Maurice’s war manual *Strategikon*41 and by a coin introduced in 615 that featured the same slogan as a legend on its reverse.42 Besides a number of additional motifs that reveal the typological parallels the author implicitly draws between the two kings, the most obvious of these parallels was that Heraclius was the first of the Graeco-Roman monarchs since Alexander who had actually overcome the Persian Empire after almost a millennium. Just like imperial propaganda did with Heraclius’s war, the author of the *Legend* presents Alexander’s campaign against the Persians as having been won through divine intervention.43 Thus one of the most striking anachronisms of the medieval Alexander traditions arose: the

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tale of the Christian (and similarly, in another branch of these traditions: the Muslim) King Alexander.

The story that concerns us here is preceding that of the final victorious battle. When the conqueror is leading his troops northwards, through Armenia, Azerbaijan and beyond, he arrives at a huge mountain ridge traversable only by a narrow pass or canyon by which the “Huns (Hūnayē),” barbarians ruled by Āgōg and Māgōg and 13 other kings, from time to time invade the civilized world, pillaging and ravaging the Roman and Persian lands and massacring their inhabitants.⁴⁴ The Alexander Poem calls these peoples even less unequivocally “Āgōgites and Māgōgites (d-bêt Āgōg w-d-bêt Māgōg).”⁴⁵ The people on this side of the mountains barely have any means to counter their attacks “for they are fiercer than all the kings in their wars.”⁴⁶

To put an end to their misdeeds Alexander orders the gap between the mountains be closed with a wall and huge gates made of bronze and iron and the structure be coated with a magical substance, making it resistant to any attempt at destruction with tools or fire. Marvelling at his own edifice Alexander then has an inscription engraved in it, part of which reads as follows:

... and again I have written and made known and prophesied that it shall come to pass, at the conclusion of nine hundred and forty years another king when the world shall come to an end by the command of God the ruler of creation [sic]. Created things shall anger God and sin shall increase, and wrath shall reign, and the sins of mankind shall mount up and shall cover the heavens ... And the Lord will gather together the kings and their hosts which are within this mountain and they shall ... come with their spears and swords, and shall stand behind the gate, and shall look up to the heavens, and shall call upon the name of the Lord, saying: O Lord, open to us this gate! And the Lord shall send His sign from heaven and a voice shall call on this gate, and it shall be destroyed and fall at the beck of the Lord, and it shall not be opened by the key which I have made for it. And a troop shall go through this gate ... And when the Huns have gone forth, as God has commanded, the kingdoms of the Huns and the Persians ... shall fall upon one another and the earth shall melt through the blood and dung of men. Then the kingdom of the Greeks shall move itself, and shall come and take a hammer of iron in its right hand and a hammer of brass in its left, and ... will smite the hammers upon the other, and as iron which is melted by fire and as brass which boils in the flame, 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 the kingdoms of the Huns and of the Persians shall be desolated the one by the other ... And my kingdom, which is called that of the house of Alexander the son of Philip 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 Romans.

Following this prophecy inscribed at the Gates of the North, its alleged author, lest anybody doubt his predictions, quotes, to substantiate them, Jeremiah 1,14, the verse

⁴⁵ AP, ed. transl. Reinink (cf. fn. 26) I 239; II 283; III 289, passim.
immediately following the abovementioned vision of the “boiling bowl”: *From the north disaster will come at all who live in the country.*

Now, at first glance, the story told by the author of the *Alexander Legend* is perfectly in accordance with what imperial propaganda had to say about the world-historical mission of Heraclius. Accordingly, Reinink characterizes it as “a work of highly propagandistic character” by “a fervent supporter of the emperor,” whom he presented – in the guise of his typological predecessor – as a divinely guided, pious redeemer king. But what dealings had Heraclius with Āḡōḡites and Māḡōḡites, with Gog & Magog?

The date of the northern barbarians’ invasion, as given in the inscription, the year 940, is that of the Seleucid Era most common in Christian Syria; it equals the year 628/90 of the Christian era, the year after the start of Heraclius’ final offensive against Sasanid Persia. He chose a route from the north, from the regions just south of the Caucasus. For several years he had been negotiating an alliance with a king from north of the mountains who, in Byzantine sources, bears the name Ziebel (Zeβηλ), in Chinese ones *T’ong Yabğu Qağan*, *T’ong* being a proper name and *Yabğu Qağan* his title, meaning vice Khan, ruler of the Western Gök-Turkic empire (618–628). Now the “King of the North,” as he referred to himself, crossed the Caucasus with a large army, numbering, according to the chronicler Theophanes, 40,000 troops, to join Heraclius’s forces. – This troop buildup may well have been the decisive advantage of the Byzantines; recently James Howard-Johnston supposed that it was actually the Turks who won the war.

That the northern barbarians are identified as “Huns” relates Alexander’s alleged prophecy to another one that seems to have been known to Syrian Christians: a prediction of the invasion of the “Huns” in the year 826 as it is included in the Mac-

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51 Howard-Johnston: “Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns” (cf. fn. 27).
edonian’s inscription as well. The Seleucid year is equivalent to 614/5 CE, when in fact the Sabirs, a Hunnic people waged a large-scale raid south of the Caucasus. The designation “Huns” obviously served the contemporaries as a generic term to refer to northern nomadic peoples who were of the habit of raiding the lands south of the Caucasus.

We have ample evidence that during the years of their negotiations and alliance with the Byzantines the Gök-Turks repeatedly ventured sanguinary raids on their own account, while even their involvement in regular Byzantine campaigns, among them the capture of Tbilisi, left the affected population stricken with terror. Many of these peoples were Christians living in the Persian empire: Armenians, Georgians, Albanians and others. So, reports about the events are highly likely to have spread over the Near Eastern Christian communities at considerable speed. One eye-witness whose account has been inserted in the Armenian chronicle of Movsès Dasxuranc’i, conventionally entitled The History of the Caucasian Albanians, describes the Turk’s invasion of Čolay, i.e. Derbent:

Like waves in the sea, the Turks fell on the town of Čolay and destroyed it completely. Seeing the terrible threat posed by this vile, ugly, horde of attackers, with their slanting and lidless eyes, and their flowing hair like that of women, the inhabitants were seized by terror. Especially terrifying were the archers, who were skillful and powerful, and rained arrows down like hail on them. And when they (the attackers) saw them, they, like savage wolves, shamelessly threw themselves on the people and mercilessly cut them down in the streets and squares of the town ... They did not even take pity on the children who hugged their slaughtered mothers, and sucked the blood from their breasts instead of milk. Like a flash in the pan they broke into the city through one gate and rushed out of it through another, leaving the rest to birds and beasts.

There were only two passes through the Caucasian barrier both of which were believed to be the locale of Alexander’s erection of the Gates of the North. Earlier tra-


55 Movsès Dasxuranc’i 2,11, transl. Dowsett (cf. fn. 54), pp. 81 – 82.
ditions had ascribed the story to the Gorge of Darial, the only opening in the mountain ridge about half way between the Black and the Caspian Seas. The second passage which allowed for breaking through the alpine obstruction was the narrow littoral between the western shore of the Caspian Sea and the eastern slopes of the Caucasus, since the 6th century overlooked by the Sasanid fortress of Derbent, whose Persian, Arabic and Turkish names illustrate its significance: Darband – “Barred Gate”, Bāb al-Abwāb – “Gate of Gates” and Demirkapı – “Iron Gate.”

Two narratives, contained in sources as remote from one another in time and space as the above-quoted 10th century Armenian historical work of Movsēs Daxuranc’i and the Latin Frankish chronicle of Pseudo-Fredegar, attest to the wide dissemination of the news of the event:

At this time he (Heraclius) unified among his reign all the lands of the Romans and gathered the army to help him break through the great Caucasus mountain, that blocked the countries of the north-east and open the Gates of Čolay (i.e. Derbent) to let numerous barbarian tribes in, with their means to defeat the arrogant Xusrō.57

Heraclius gathered ... from all the provinces of his empire, a great multitude of soldiers and sent an embassy to the Caspian Gate that the Macedonian Alexander once had had erected on the Caspian Sea, made of Bronze and tightly locked, on account of the [ongoing] inundation (inundatio) of most savage peoples who were dwelling beyond the ridge of the Caucasus. These very gates had Heraclius now opened and through them a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers and auxiliary forces payed with gold, poured in to fight the Saracens.58

Pseudo-Fredegar’s version is marked by a peculiar anachronism or confusion: here it is not the Sasanids but the Saracens, the Arabs, against whom Heraclius mobilizes his barbarian allies. Now, the Arabs in fact were to accomplish, less than a decade later, what the Persians hadn’t succeeded to do: they ended the ‘Roman’ domination in the region and expelled Heraclius and his troops.59 – Whatever the cause for this intriguing replacement of one actor with another, there can hardly be a doubt that we are dealing with one and the same narrative which demonstrates that the contemporaries were convinced that Heraclius had had Alexander’s Gates opened and let in barbarian warriors to help him fight the Persians. We have seen the terror spread by the Turks among the South Caucasians and both Movsēs Daxuranc’i and Pseudo-Fredegar use metaphors of waves, streaming and flooding to describe the overwhelming force of the invasion. It certainly hasn’t come by mere chance that Alexander’s inscription in the Syriac Legend quotes Jeremiah with his picture of the bowl pouring out a flood of boiling liquid towards the south. Interestingly this

57 Movsēs Daxuranc’i 2,12, transl. Dowsett (cf. fn 54), pp. 86–87.
58 Ps.-Fredegar, ed. Kusternig (cf. fn. 39), 66.
prophecy had never before – obvious though the connection may seem – been applied to the eschatological invasion of Gog & Magog (the *loki classici* had always been *Ezekiel* and *Revelation*). It is the *Legend* that, as we have seen, unequivocally identifies the “Huns,” i.e. the Gök-Turks, with Gog and Magog. Yet Alexander’s prophecy culminates in the prediction of the triumph of the ‘Roman’ empire, not its demise, which seems to avert any eschatological implications.

A closer look at Alexander’s inscription, however, reveals several inconsistencies. After giving the date 940 AG, i.e. 628/29, the text corruptly continues: “another king when the world shall come to an end by the command of God the ruler of creation.” – The predicate which would inform us just what that ‘future’ king would do at the end of time, is missing. According to what we know, from Movsêš Dasxuranc’i and Pseudo-Fredegar, about how the contemporaries conceived of Heraclius’s alliance with the Turks, we may assume that the missing predicate in the Syrian author’s *vorlage* originally simply stated that that future king would *open* Alexander’s gates. This throws light on a second suspicious passage where the text states that those gates would be “destroyed … at the beck of the Lord, and … shall not be opened by the key which I (Alexander) have made for it.” This detail of the Gates having been locked by a key is again one of the many innovations to be found in the two Syriac Alexander texts.⁶⁰ And it appears here only to be revoked at the same breath – which can only mean that a story about that king opening the Gates of the North with the key Alexander had made for it actually was in circulation and the only reason it appears in our text is that the author, according to his pro-Byzantine agenda, tried to exculpate Heraclius from the charge of having unlocked Alexander’s gates releasing Gog & Magog.⁶¹ We come across a third suspicious passage where the text says that “the kingdom of the Greeks [and Romans] shall move itself … and … will smite the [two] hammers upon the other,” resulting in the destruction of the kingdom of the Huns (i.e. Gog & Magog) and that of the Persians, to defeat and destroy each other. – Altogether these observations lead to the conclusion that the author – or the *redactor* of all the extant manuscripts’ *prototype* – was equally at pains as he was overchallenged by the task to erase from the text of his *vorlage* any trace of

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the emperor – or, the empire – being involved in the break-out of Gog & Magog. Thus he gives an unintended testimony that that was exactly what some of his fellow countrymen and co-religionists told each other about the circumstances of Heraclius’ defeat of the Persians. The Roman Empire had got involved with, if not Satan or the Antichrist, at any rate with the disruptive peoples of Gog & Magog, thereby provoking the advent of the endtime and, by implication, spelling its own doom.

This diagnosis brings us to a last, if far from less momentous, innovation that looms in this realized-eschatology vision of the events of 628/9: The fourth and last world empire that the prophet Daniel had foreseen had actually been founded by Alexander the Great und thus comprised the ‘Greek’, Roman and Byzantine empires – an idea that was to appear, just as the Gog & Magog narrative – again and in a somewhat more elaborated and extended version in the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius⁶² whose Syriac original was composed roughly 60 years later and which, by way of its little younger Greek and Latin adaptations⁶³, was to substantially influence medieval Byzantine and western eschatology. The notion of Alexander having founded the fourth empire rooted in the traditional Syriac exegesis of the four empires schedule of the Book of Daniel. The Peshitta text of Daniel 7, verses 4 – 7, describing a vision of four beasts rising from the sea, bears headlines that read: malkūṭā ḍ-Bābliyē – “Kingdom of the Babylonians,” malkūṭā ḍ-Madāyē – “Kingdom of the Medes,” malkūṭā ḍ-Parsāyē – “Kingdom of the Persians” and malkūṭā ḍ-Yaunāyē – “Kingdom of the Greeks.”⁶⁴ Thus for Syriac Christians the Bible itself had once and for all determined the four empires to be historical realities of a bygone age.⁶⁵ Hence the only way to ‘catch up’ with the standard exegesis of all other denominations, including Judaism, without renouncing the Word of God, for them was to integrate the fourth kingdom of their Bible, that of the ‘Greeks’, with the Roman-Byzantine empire and to declare the two (or three) one and the same fourth empire – the “kingdom of the Greeks which is that of the Romans” – as the Alexander Legend (as we have seen) and, in a somewhat more elaborated form, the Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius do.⁶⁶

In the eyes of Syriac Christians this fourth empire was, as attested by the clumsily veiled hints in the Alexander Legend and the greater narrative framework of Pseudo-Methodius, about to collapse and, thus, history was soon to come to an end and

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⁶⁶ Die Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius, ed., transl. Reinink, 8,2; 9,1 – 9.
Christ to return. The integrated Gog & Magog tale originated as part of a larger counter-discourse within Near Eastern Christian communities, that was directed against the triumphalist Byzantine propaganda in the early 7th century.

**Abbreviations**

AL    Alexander Legend  
AP    Alexander Poem  
BBS    Berliner byzantinistische Studien  
BNGJ    Byzantinisch-neugriechische Jahrbücher  
CCL    Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina  
CFHB    Corpus fontium historiae Byzantiae  
CSCO    Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium  
EJ    Encyclopaedia Judaica  
MPG    Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.): Patrologia Graeca  
PO    Patrologia Orientalis  
TM    Travaux et Mémoires du Centre d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance  
WUNT    Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament