



# Alexander the Great

The Making of a Myth

**Large print guide and audio transcripts**

Please do not remove from the exhibition



Alexander the Great is one of the most famous figures of the ancient world. He was born in Macedonia in 356 BC. By the time of his death aged 32 he had built a vast empire that stretched from Greece, through Egypt and Persia, and as far as India.

Following the story of Alexander's life, this exhibition looks at the myths and legends that surround him. It explores how and why they became ever more fantastical as they spread across the cultures of Europe, Asia and beyond. With objects from 25 countries in 21 languages, the exhibition shows how one historical person could serve many purposes creating shared narratives with universal appeal. The Alexander Romance was at the heart of this storytelling for over a thousand years, but the legends also found their way into epic poetry and drama, and more recently into novels, comics, films and video games.

Alexander the Great: The Making of a Myth is supported by Kusuma Trust.

The Man and the Legend

# **The Man and the Legend**

# The Man and the Legend

Legends about Alexander the Great began to circulate in his lifetime and continued to develop after his death, overshadowing historical facts. Over time, Alexander was adopted by a range of cultures and faiths, each one re-interpreting him for their own needs. Here we explore his contrasting faces. For some he was a prophet, for others he was an agent of the devil. As a conqueror he sought to be master of all, but he was also a philosopher-king, seeking knowledge and immortality.

## Alexander's Empire

The map shows the short-lived empire Alexander built. It extended from his native Macedonia to the northwestern frontier of India. He began by bringing much of Greece under his control, then led his army into the Persian Empire. The arrows show his journey of conquest.

Ancient historians provided a partial outline of his life and travels. Storytellers have added multiple layers of myth and legend, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction.

# Alexander or Iskandar?

There are many ways of writing and transliterating the names in this exhibition according to language or culture. For example, Alexander is also known as Iskandar or Sikandar. His wife, referred to here as Roxana, is also known as Roshanak or Roxane. We have used the Anglicised forms throughout for consistency.

## A Classical Alexander

This bust captures Alexander's facial features as recorded in ancient sources. The original was created some two centuries after his death, and was designed as part of a whole-body statue. The portrait shows a beardless youth with long curling locks, his neck bent slightly to the left. This style of presentation, combining blossoming youth with driving energy, was imitated by generations of later rulers and emperors.

Cast copy of a marble head of Alexander,  
2nd–1st century BC  
London, around 1872  
Museum of Classical Archaeology, University  
of Cambridge

# A Medieval Alexander

This 15th-century Alexander was imagined with two prominent tusks rising from his lower jaw. The feature appears to have been inspired by a line in this German adaptation of the *Alexander Romance*, which states that ‘his teeth were as sharp as those of a wild boar’. The artist has also provided Alexander with a chinstrap beard, long hair and a hat reminiscent of those worn by Byzantine emperors at the time.

Johann Hartlieb, *Das Alexanderbuch*  
(*The Alexander Book*)  
Augsburg, 1473  
The National Library of Scotland

## A Christian Alexander

An enthroned King Alexander is described as 'enemy of devils' in this scroll in the Ethiopian Ge'ez language. He is shown as a Christian ruler with his hand raised in blessing, and with magical abilities to ward off evil. He presides over musicians and angels leading a captive Satan. The image is typical of Ethiopian Christian culture, and the scroll was used as an amulet, or protective charm.

Magical scroll  
Ethiopia, 18th century?  
Or.12859

# A Philosophical Alexander

Alexander is a philosopher-king in this scene from the Persian Khamsah by the 12th-century poet Nizami. He is surrounded by seven sages – including Aristotle, Socrates and Plato – and questions the origin of the universe. Receiving contradictory replies, the wise ruler declares God to be the creator of all. Alexander's features in the painting deliberately resemble those of the artist's patron, Sultan Husayn Bayqara of Herat, portraying him as a second Alexander.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander), from his Khamsah (Five Poems); artist Bihzad Herat, Afghanistan, 1494–95  
Or.6810, f. 214r

## Origins of a Legend

Legends about Alexander started to spread during his lifetime, and eventually began to appear in biographical, historical and even scientific texts. These inspired speeches and letters which were falsely attributed to Alexander or his companions. Together they formed the principal sources for the Alexander Romance, a single account of Alexander's legendary life. This was compiled in Greek, probably at Alexandria by the end of the 3rd century AD. Preserved in many versions and translations, the Romance transmitted Alexander's stories across Europe and Asia.

# Records: An Astronomical Diary

This Babylonian tablet is the earliest historical record of Alexander's victory over King Darius of Persia. The battle took place at Gaugamela, today in Iraqi Kurdistan, in 331 BC. The tablet was written during Alexander's lifetime by officials of the god Marduk in Babylon. It is part of an astronomical diary recording important celestial omens including, here, a lunar eclipse bringing about death and plague which is directly linked to Darius's defeat.

Babylonian astronomical diary  
Babylon, Iraq, 331–330 BC  
British Museum, 1880,0617.496

# **Histories: Plutarch's Life of Alexander**

One of the most important Ancient Greek biographies of Alexander was compiled by the historian Plutarch around AD 100. This manuscript, copied and decorated in Renaissance Florence, preserves the first translation of Plutarch's Life of Alexander into Latin. Stories about Alexander were first collected by his friends and generals during his lifetime. These are now lost but traces survive in the works of Plutarch and other ancient historians, which all influenced the Alexander Romance.

Plutarch, Life of Alexander  
Florence, 1470  
Harley MS 3485, f. 367r

# Speeches: A Student's Homework

A shaky Greek hand wrote this papyrus almost 2,000 years ago. It preserves the homework of a child whose task was to sketch what Alexander might have said after he defeated Darius of Persia. Model speeches such as this were very popular in ancient classrooms and inspired many of the fictitious speeches preserved in the Alexander Romance.

Model-speech in the name of Alexander  
Oxyrhynchus, Egypt, AD 150–225  
Papyrus 756

## Travelogues: Mythical People

The wrapping of an Egyptian mummy preserved these 2,200-year-old papyrus fragments. They contain portions of a Greek scientific work that describes a mythical people who consumed the tongues of their defeated enemies. Works describing the wonders of the strange lands visited by Alexander's army were an important literary output of his campaigns. Although the travelogues themselves have often been lost, the information they contained frequently survives in the fantastical adventures of the Alexander Romance.

Collection of Barbaric Customs  
Gurob, Egypt, 3rd century BC  
Papyrus 489

# Letters: Alexander Writes to Aristotle

This 15-metre parchment scroll preserves one of the most famous literary creations inspired by the Alexander stories. Composed as a letter from Alexander to his teacher Aristotle, it describes encounters with fantastical beasts and the peoples of the East. The text was later incorporated into the Alexander Romance and into historical works such as this Latin world chronicle.

Letter of Alexander to Aristotle about the Wonders of India  
England (possibly Battle Abbey), 13th century  
Cotton Roll xiv 12

## The Alexander Romance

The earliest illustrated copy of the Greek Alexander Romance survives in this 750-year-old manuscript. The Romance, the fully developed account of Alexander's legendary life, was originally composed in Greek about 1,800 years ago. It became a 'best-seller' of the medieval world, surviving in multiple versions and numerous languages. The pages displayed here show Alexander entering Rome, welcomed by bowing senators (on the left) and citizens holding palm leaves (on the right).

Historia Alexandri Magni (History of Alexander the Great)

Eastern Mediterranean, 13th century

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,  
MS Barocci 17

# **A Conqueror in the Making**

# A Conqueror in the Making

Alexander's origins and conception were legendary in both East and West. He was the son of Philip of Macedon, but for some his father was the serpent-magician Nectanebo or even the Persian emperor. Various stories sought to legitimise Alexander's rule depending on the context. Alexander takes a two-fold journey through life. His horse Bucephalus represents his physical and military training. On the spiritual side he learned statecraft, philosophy, ethics, astrology, alchemy and medicine under the guidance of his mentor Aristotle.

# Alexander's Origins

Alexander was the son of Olympias and Philip II of Macedon. By the 4th century AD, however, fantastical stories about his origins had emerged and spread across Europe and into Asia. Some of these legends pointed to divine origins involving snakes. In the Greek Alexander Romance, Alexander's father became the magician Nectanebo, the deposed pharaoh of Egypt. He seduced Olympias disguised as the god Amun in the form of a serpent or horned dragon. Meanwhile, in Persia Alexander was regarded as King Darius's half-brother and, therefore, his legitimate successor.

## Olympias and the Serpent

This Roman medallion was minted 1,700 years ago. It shows Alexander's mother reclining on a couch, with her name 'Queen Olympias' written in Latin around the edge. A serpent is shown curling upwards at the foot of the couch, resting its head in the queen's hand, referencing the legend of Alexander's divine origin from snakes. The other side of the medallion bears a portrait of Alexander dressed as the mythical hero Heracles in a lion's scalp.

Roman copper medallion (contorniate)

Rome, 4th century

British Museum, R.4803

# Olympias and the Dragon

In this first printed edition of the French Alexander Romance, the former pharaoh Nectanebo tricks Olympias into committing adultery after slipping into the royal bed. The bare-breasted queen is identified by her crown, whereas Nectanebo has disguised himself as the horned god Amun. Alexander was said to be the result of this union. Rumours that Alexander's natural father was a pharaoh added legitimacy to his later conquest of Egypt.

Alixandre le Grant (Alexander the Great)  
Paris, 1506  
C.39.d.64

## Olympias and Nectanebo

Alexander's conception is illustrated in this copy of the French Alexander Romance. On the left, the former pharaoh and magician, Nectanebo, forewarns Queen Olympias that a god will visit her. On the right, the queen is shown lying with the promised god, in fact, Nectanebo, who is shown in the form of a dragon. The volume was dedicated to Margaret of Anjou, future wife of King Henry VI of England.

Roman d'Alexandre en prose  
(French Prose Alexander Romance) in the  
'Talbot Shrewsbury Book'  
Rouen, France, 1444–45  
Royal MS 15 E. vi, ff. 5v–6r

# Alexander's Albanian Ancestors

Originally composed in 1188, this French epic narrates an alternative story of Alexander's origins. It claims that his grandfather was the Albanian hero Florimont ('flower of the world'), who rescued the beautiful Greek princess Romadanaple from an evil Hungarian king. They went on to marry and their first child was Philip, who later became king of Macedon and father of Alexander.

Aimon de Varennes, *Roman de Florimont*  
(*Romance of Florimont*)

France, 1295

Harley MS 4487, ff. 14v–15r

## Alexander's Persian Ancestry

This Mughal copy of a 12th-century collection of folk-tales in Persian narrates yet another version of Alexander's ancestry. Nahid, daughter of Philip of Macedon, is married to the Persian emperor as part of a diplomatic alliance. Later rejected on account of her bad breath, she was sent home to Greece where she gave birth to their son, Alexander. This version of Alexander's origins saw him, in Persian eyes, as the legitimate heir and successor to the throne.

Abu Tahir Muhammad Tarsusi, Darabnamah  
(Story of Darab)  
Mughal India, 1580–85  
Or.4615, f. 129r

# Alexander's Conception

The ancient legend of Alexander's conception from snakes is gruesomely animated in this episode of the 2017 Indian television series *Porus*. Played by Sameksha Singh, Olympias is portrayed as a strong woman who rebels against her violent husband. She prays to the god Zeus to give her a son who can restore her pride and conquer the world. Suddenly thousands of snakes appear and crawl across her body, symbolising Alexander's divine conception.

*Porus* (television series), written, directed and produced by Siddharth Kumar Tewary, episode 4

India, 2017–18

One Life Studios, 2017

## **Olympias Gives Birth to Alexander**

The representation of Alexander's birth befits a future conqueror in this 15th-century humanist account of his life in French. His mother's luxuriously ornamented canopy bed is surrounded by attendants, while a midwife tends to the infant. The two golden eagles perched on the palace roof predict Alexander's future rule over Europe and Asia. The temple burning in the background symbolises his destruction of the Persian Empire.

Vasco da Lucena, *Les Fais d'Alexandre le grant* (The Deeds of Alexander the Great)  
Bruges, 1490–95  
Royal MS 20 C. iii, ff. 14v–15r

# Bastard Son

Remedies Against Fortune by the Italian poet Petrarch comprises discussions on how to respond to over 250 moral dilemmas. 'Bastard Son' considers the challenge of raising a child fathered by another man. The example of Philip of Macedon is cited, suggesting widespread familiarity with the stories of Alexander's unconventional origins. The illustration in this early German edition shows Philip initially rejecting the new-born infant but later accepting him as heir. The long-tailed beast may represent Alexander's natural father Nectanebo in the guise of the god Amun.

Petrarch, Von der Artzney bayder Glück  
(Remedies Against Fortune)  
Augsburg, 1532  
C.39.h.25

# **Bucephalus, Legendary War-Horse**

The story of the faithful war-horse Bucephalus symbolises Alexander's physical feats and training to become a military commander. Bucephalus, a savage, man-eating beast, was tamed by Alexander, who rode him bareback through the city. This fulfilled the oracle which foretold that whoever rode Bucephalus would be king of the world. They were to become constant companions.

# Bucephalus Tamed

This bronze statuette from 1834 captures the moment when Alexander tamed the wild stallion Bucephalus. It illustrates the legend that Alexander, realising the horse was afraid of its own shadow, turned him towards the sun, stroked him with his hand and leapt onto his back. A large bronze version stands today in the quadrangle of Edinburgh City Chambers and is the most celebrated artwork of the Scottish sculptor John Robert Steell.

John Robert Steell, Alexander and Bucephalus  
Edinburgh, 1834

By kind permission of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry, KT and the Trustees of the Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust

## Bucephalus Caged

According to the Alexander Romance, the man-eating horse Bucephalus was so uncontrollable that King Philip had him locked in an iron cage. This is how the 15-year-old Alexander first came across the stallion. Bucephalus immediately acknowledged his future master, bowed down and licked the young prince. The episode is portrayed with a woodcut in this German retelling of the Alexander story. In common with some other illustrations of the period, Bucephalus looks more like a lion than a horse.

Johann Hartlieb, *Das Alexanderbuch*  
(The Alexander Book)  
Strasbourg, 1514  
12403.g.16

# The Journey Begins

Alexander rode Bucephalus during his military campaigns in Greece, the Middle East and even as far as India. The two are frequently portrayed together, as in this illustration on the pages of a 16th-century Greek version of the Alexander Romance, written by Demetrios Zenos. Historians and storytellers report that Bucephalus died of exhaustion in Punjab, although in other versions he reappears at Alexander's death bed.

Demetrios Zenos, *Ho Alexandros ho Makedon*  
(Alexander of Macedon)

Venice, 1529

G.10797

## **Bucephalus Tells his Story**

Katherine Roberts writes fantasy fiction for young adults. In *I Am the Great Horse*, she tells Alexander's story from the perspective of Bucephalus. New characters have been introduced, most notably the young slave girl Charm, and in contrast to the usual narrative, Bucephalus does not die in India. Instead, Charm nurses the warhorse to health and they rush across Asia to meet up with their master in Babylon.

Katherine Roberts, *I am the Great Horse*  
Frome, 2007  
H.2007/2570

# Bucephalus the Man-Eater

With his glowing red eyes and an insatiable appetite for human flesh, Alexander's horse appears as a terrifying monster in the 1999 Japanese anime *Reign: The Conqueror*. Based on the three-volume novel *Arekusanda Senki* (*Alexander: War Chronicles*) by Hiroshi Aramata, it narrates how some young Macedonians tried to capture the man-eating horse risking their lives. Suddenly Alexander appears in a gleaming white outfit with an A on his chest and tames the monstrous horse with a single touch.

*Reign: The Conqueror* (television series),  
directed by Yoshinori Kanemori and Rintaro,  
episode 1

Korea–Japan, 1999

© Alexander Committee

## Alexander and Aristotle

A princely education included instruction in statecraft, ethics, astrology, alchemy, magic and medicine. Alexander's mentor is acknowledged to have been the famous scientist and philosopher Aristotle. The theme of Alexander's relationship with Aristotle was developed across multiple cultures. By the 5th century AD, treatises attributed to Aristotle were widely circulated, and were often presented as guidance for Alexander. Preserved in western and eastern languages alike, they exerted a profound influence on medieval and post-medieval thinking and writing.

# Aristotle and His Pupil

Animal species and their medicinal properties are described in this early Arabic bestiary. It is based on a treatise attributed to Aristotle and the 11th-century physician 'Ubayd Allah ibn Bakhtishu'. This illustration occurs in a section devoted to Aristotle, who is depicted on the right as old and bearded. His pupil, unnamed, is thought to be the young Prince Alexander who was often portrayed together with his mentor Aristotle.

Kitab na't al-hayawan (On the Characteristics of Animals)

Baghdad?, about 1225

Or.2784, f. 96r

## Schooling with Aristotle

A graphic novel approach has been taken by the creators of this Alexander biography, with speech bubbles and panel illustrations to encourage reading. The story opens with the young Prince Alexander catching a damselfly, which he shows to his teacher Aristotle.

Works such as these are well-researched, but writers still need to draw on their creative imagination to bring the detail to life.

Rob Shone, Anita Ganeri and Chris Odgers,  
Alexander the Great

Brighton, 2005

YK.2005.b.677

# Advice for King Henry VIII

According to tradition, Aristotle addressed some of his works to the young Alexander. The idea was reused in this Latin pamphlet by Bernard André, dedicated to his student Henry VIII. Presenting Henry as the future Alexander and himself as his teacher, André encourages the young king to follow his father's example and govern his country by relying on his advisors. This manuscript was presented to the young Henry.

Bernard André, *Aristotelis ad Alexandrum... oratio* (Aristotle's Speech to Alexander)  
England, 1509–17  
Royal MS 12 B. xiv, f. 10r

## Arabic Secret of Secrets

The *Sirr al-asrar* ('The Secret of Secrets') was originally composed in Arabic around the 10th century. It consists of letters supposedly from Aristotle to his pupil Alexander, and contains advice on kingship, summarised visually as a 'Circle of Justice'. This 15th-century manuscript was almost certainly commissioned for the ruler of Herat, Prince Baysunghur. It would have carried a powerful message, implying a comparison between him and the idealised figure of Alexander.

*Sirr al-asrar* (Secret of secrets); calligrapher  
Ja'far al-Baysunghuri  
Herat, 1425–26  
Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library

# The Secret of Secrets in Latin

A seated Alexander is shown debating with Aristotle in this copy of the Secret of Secrets in Latin. Considered genuine advice from Aristotle to Alexander when translated from Arabic in the 12th century, the text was highly regarded in medieval Europe. This manuscript is dedicated to the future King Edward III of England and is decorated with the heraldic arms of his family.

Secretum secretorum (Secrets of secrets)

London, 1326–27

Add MS 47680, f. 12r

# Philosophy Crowns Alexander

Having completed his princely education, the young Alexander is shown being crowned. The image appears on the title page of a 1,000-year-old copy from England of the Latin version of the *Alexander Romance*. Wearing a crown and holding a sceptre and orb, Alexander appears as the powerful, wise ruler of his kingdom. The personified figure of Philosophy stands on the left, brush in hand to anoint him.

Collection of Latin texts about Alexander  
the Great

England, 11th century

Royal MS 13 A. i, f. 1v

# Building an Empire

# Building an Empire

Alexander succeeded his father Philip as King of Macedon in 336 BC. Within ten years he had conquered the Persian Empire and held territory from Greece to Punjab – all by the age of 30. The stories of Alexander's progress describe real and imaginary encounters with the peoples of distant lands, connecting cultures and faiths. As a military leader, he inspired generations of rulers – good and bad – during the centuries that followed.

# Persian Empire

Alexander was victorious against the Persians at the battles of Granicus and Issus in present-day Turkey. Following this he conquered Egypt and laid the foundations of the city of Alexandria, which would become the intellectual and cultural centre of the Mediterranean. His final military victory over Persia took place in 331 BC at Gaugamela, Northern Iraq, although the Persian king Darius remained a fugitive until his assassination the following year.

# Alexander founds Alexandria in Egypt

Alexander's most important Egyptian legacy was the foundation of Alexandria. This was one of at least 20 cities founded by him in his name. Legend credits him with building the lighthouse of Alexandria, regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was attributed with talismanic powers, and had a mirror at the top so people inside the city could see approaching enemies. On the right is an unrelated illustration of the celebrated Bath of Tiberias in present-day Israel.

'Abd al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Bulhan* (Book of Surprises)

Iraq or Iran, 14th century

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,  
MS Bodl. Or. 133

# Alexander the Pharaoh

Alexander arrived in Egypt in 332 BC when it was under Persian rule. After expelling Darius's governor, he was greeted as liberator and crowned as pharaoh. This carving in the Temple of Amun in Luxor (Upper Egypt), commissioned by Alexander himself, shows him as a pharaoh, performing a sacrifice to the god.

## Alexandrian Lighthouse

Alexander never went as far as China, but tales of his exploits travelled via the Alexander Romance far beyond the lands he conquered. Shown here is a Chinese encyclopedia originally compiled in 1607. The text describes how Alexander (referred to as Dzo-k'at-ni, two-horned) built a tower: 'On top was a mirror. If soldiers came raiding from other lands, it would reflect them in advance.' The image on the facing page relates to the next entry in the encyclopedia.

Wang Qi and Wang Siyi, *Leishu Sancaituhui*  
(Encyclopedia of the Collected Illustrations of  
the Three Realms)

China, 19th century

15024.a.1

# An Unsuccessful Attempt at Diplomacy

As relations between Macedon and Persia deteriorated, diplomatic solutions failed. In this painting, Darius's messenger delivers gifts to Alexander. These include polo sticks, a ball and sesame seeds – childish items indicating that Alexander should go home and grow up. But if he ignores the warning, Darius threatens to lead a vast army, as countless as the sesame seeds, against him. Meanwhile Alexander, throwing the seeds to the birds, promises that his soldiers will similarly devour the Persian army.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander),  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems)

Bengal, 1531–32

Or.13836, ff. 21v-22r

## Alexander and Darius in Battle

Alexander confronted his arch-enemy, the long-bearded Darius, at Gaugamela in 331 BC. The battle is dramatically represented in this 16th-century copy of the Armenian Alexander Romance. The Armenian version, completed in the 5th century AD, is one of the earliest translations from the Greek original. Alexander and Darius are depicted here with halos, indicating their royal status, and are flanked by their armies. The severed body parts of soldiers and horses are trampled underfoot.

Armenian Alexander Romance

Constantinople, 1544

Courtesy of The University of Manchester

# Battle of Issus

H. G. Wells is best known for his pioneering works of science fiction, but also compiled factual texts such as this encyclopedic history of the world. The chapter on Alexander is brought to life with a colour illustration of the Battle of Issus (333 BC) by Charles Dudley Tennant. The scene captures the moment when the Persian king Darius realises his battle is lost and begins to flee. Alexander is shown centre stage on his white war-horse.

H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History*  
Revised and corrected edition. London, 1920  
09007.dd.1

## Battle of Gaugamela

The Greek and Persian armies met for the final time at Gaugamela. The 12th-century poet Nizami describes how they fell on each other like ‘armies of ants and locusts’. The battle-scene depicted here is credited in the text panel above to the famous artist Bihzad, who was active in Herat in the late 15th century.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander),  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems)  
Herat, Afghanistan, about 1490  
Add MS 25900, ff. 231v–232r

# Alexander Comforts the Dying Darius

Following his defeat at Gaugamela, Darius fled north but was mortally wounded by two of his own men. When he caught up with the Persian king, Alexander ordered the traitors to be bound – here seen standing on the right. In this dramatic scene, Alexander, weeping, comforts the dying Darius and agrees to his final requests: to look after his family, to marry his daughter Roxana, and to preserve the fires of the Zoroastrian religion.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Isfahan?, Iran, 1604  
IO Islamic 966, ff. 334v-335r

## Death of Darius

Darius is shown on his deathbed in this hand-coloured edition of the poet Firdawsi's Persian epic *Shahnamah*. He is making his last requests and being comforted by the weeping Alexander. The long moustaches, thick beards and extravagant jewels reflect mid-19th-century fashions, but the setting is traditional and demonstrates a continuity of style through the centuries.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Bombay, 1849  
14807.h.4

# Execution of the Traitors

Alexander's punishment of Darius's two assassins is dramatically illustrated in this manuscript, which was produced in Western India or Delhi. According to the poet Nizami, the unnamed traitors were generals in the Persian army and had acted at Alexander's request in return for payment. Alexander claimed afterwards that he had not believed they would carry out their plot, so he paid them their due reward, only to follow up by ordering their execution.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander),  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems)

India, 1460–75

Or.16919, f. 215r

## Performing Darius's Death

Live storytelling still plays an important role in Iranian culture. Storytellers traditionally perform in coffee houses, reciting and embellishing well-known literary works and popular folk epics. Filmed on location in Iran in 1996, the storyteller here gives a vivid rendering of the death of Darius. The painted backdrop replicates the scene as traditionally portrayed in Persian manuscripts.

In the footsteps of Alexander with Michael Wood (television documentary)

London, 1998

Courtesy of Maya Vision International Ltd

# India and Beyond

By 326 BC Alexander had reached Punjab, the easternmost limit of the former Persian Empire. Here he defeated the local king Porus, sparing his life and setting him up as a subordinate ruler. In legend, however, Alexander killed Porus in single combat and continued on into the unknown. His journey took him across India to China and Russia. Accounts of his sensational travels remain popular up to the present day in music, film and television.

## **Battle between Porus and Alexander**

Faced with an army of elephants, Alexander ordered blacksmiths to make 1,000 iron horses and riders which were filled with oil. These were set on fire at the head of the advancing army. The panic-stricken elephants turned back and the whole Indian army fled.

The paintings were added to this copy of the Shahnamah at the beginning of the 17th century for the great Mughal statesman and patron 'Abd al-Rahim Khan Khanan.

Firdawsi, Shahnamah (Book of Kings);

artist Kamal

India, about 1616

Add MS 5600, f. 361v

# The Porus Coin

This coin was issued by either Alexander or a successor. It commemorates one of Alexander's greatest victories: the defeat of the elephant army of the Indian ruler Porus at the Battle of Hydaspes (326 BC). Alexander is shown on horseback, using a spear to attack Porus on his colossal war elephant. The other side of the coin depicts Alexander holding Zeus' thunderbolt, symbolising his claim to be son of the Greek god.

The Porus Coin

Babylon?, about 323 BC

British Museum, 1887,0609.1

## Encounters with War Elephants

The Macedonians were initially unsure how to respond to Indian war elephants carrying howdahs full of armed men. Alexander is credited with the idea of making red-hot pokers to scare the beasts and gain the advantage. This woodcut of the scene appears in several versions of Hartlieb's German-language adaptation of the Alexander Romance. The elephants' cloven hooves suggest that the artist may never have seen an elephant in real life.

Johann Hartlieb, *Das Alexanderbuch*  
(The Alexander Book)  
Augsburg, 1483  
IB.5949

# Alexander Romance in Russia

Alexander's triumph over Porus's war elephants is illustrated in this 17th-century copy of the Slavonic Alexander Romance. It was first translated from the Greek in present-day Serbia about 700 years ago and was very popular in Slavic countries. This copy was made in Russia and once formed a single volume with the manuscript to the right. Following their separation about a century ago, the two halves are reunited here for the first time.

Slavonic Alexander Romance

Russia, 17th century

Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library

## **Grand Duke Dimitry in Battle**

This Russian chronicle illustrates the Battle of Kulikovo (1380) between the Russian Grand Duke and the invading Mongol army. It originally formed a single volume with the Slavonic Alexander Romance exhibited to the left. The battle shown is unrelated to Alexander but its inclusion alongside the account of Alexander's campaigns deliberately invites comparison between the two. Following their separation about a century ago, the two halves of the volume are reunited here for the first time.

The History of the Rout of Mamai  
Russia, 17th century  
Yates Thompson MS 51, ff. 38v–39r

# Handel's Opera Alessandro

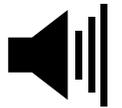
Over 30 operas featuring Alexander had already been composed across Europe by the time George Frideric Handel created Alessandro for the London stage in 1726. Handel's story begins with Alexander capturing the mythical Indian city of Oxidraca on the River Ganges, and centres on an attempted mutiny and the rivalry between two women, Lisaura and Rossane (Roxana). This volume contains Handel's original handwritten score for the opera, including his corrections.

George Frideric Handel, *Alessandro*  
London, 1726  
R.M.20.a.5, ff.5v–6r

# Libretto for Handel's Opera Alessandro

The words for Handel's opera *Alessandro* were written by Paolo Antonio Rolli. They were published separately so that audiences at the King's Theatre Haymarket, where the piece was first performed, could follow the Italian singers while checking against an English translation. Comparison with Handel's manuscript score shows small changes to the words: Alexander is described here as the 'offspring' (prole) of Tonante (Jove/Jupiter), rather than his 'son' (figlio).

Paolo Antonio Rolli, *Alessandro*  
London, 1726  
163.g.32



# Handel's Alessandro

This is the first scene of Handel's 1726 opera Alessandro. It features a dramatic musical entry by Alexander as he breaks through the gates of the city of Oxidraca.

Handel, Alessandro (Act 1, excerpt)  
Performed by René Jacobs (Alessandro)  
and La Petite Bande, conducted by  
Sigiswald Kuijken

# Alexander and the War Elephants

Sikandar is one of the earliest and longest cinematic retellings of the Alexander story. His battle with Porus's war elephants is performed with live animals and hundreds of actors. The film was released during the Second World War and its portrayal of Alexander as the foreign invader and Porus as a national hero aroused patriotic sentiment. This extract shows the speech of the Indian king Porus to his soldiers before the Battle of Hydaspes.

Sikandar (film), produced and directed by  
Sohrab Modi

India, 1941

Film © Minerva Movietone / Mehelli Modi

# Alexander Meets the Brahmans

Parallel to Alexander's military successes in India are his more peaceful encounters with Indian philosophy and religions. These formed part of his spiritual quest. Here Alexander and his philosophers meet the Brahmans, who wore only leaves and lived on a diet of seeds. The contrast between the naked philosophers and the luxuriously dressed Alexander emphasises the Brahmans' message: greed is the root of all evil and we will leave this world naked and without our possessions.

Firdawsi, Shahnamah (Book of Kings)  
Rajaur, Northern India, 1719  
Add MS 18804, f. 117v

## Alexander and Dindimus

Fictitious dialogues between Alexander and his contemporaries are a key component of the Alexander Romance. Some of these dialogues continued to circulate separately for many centuries, owing to their philosophical messages. In this short series of exchanges with Dindimus, King of the Brahmans, Alexander is asked why he wants to make war on them, given that they have no possessions. After Dindimus has explained their beliefs, Alexander concludes that he is the 'most excellent amongst men'.

The Upright Lives of the Heathen Briefly Noted  
London, 1683

10606.aaa.39

# Pleading for an Idol to be Spared

In Buddhist Kandahar, Alexander receives an impassioned plea from a priestess who asks for the golden statue to be left unharmed. Moved by her words and her beauty, Alexander spares it. This painting was commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar, who had conquered Kandahar in 1595 while this manuscript was being completed. The painting would have intentionally invited comparison between Akbar, famous for his religious tolerance, and Alexander.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander), from his Khamsah (Five Poems); artists Mukund and La'li Lahore, 1593–95 Or.12208, ff. 317v–318r

## Alexander Conquers China

After a failed attempt at diplomacy, Alexander declared war on the ruler of China. This scene, the 13th-century poet Amir Khusraw tells us, shows the Chinese warrior Tengu being pulled from his horse. Alexander went on to fight a second champion, Kanifu, who, on defeat, turned out to be a beautiful woman in disguise. She gladly surrendered and accompanied him when he moved on towards the Caspian Sea.

Amir Khusraw, *A'inah-i Iskandari* (Alexander's Mirror), part of his *Khamsah* (Five Poems)  
Iran, 1571  
Add MS 22699, ff. 159v–160r

# Weird War Tales

Alexander's eastward quest reaches the Himalayas in this children's adventure story from DC Comics. The Macedonian army arrives at a village of Chinese merchants, who initially tolerate their occupiers believing they will soon move on. Alexander's arrogance, however, leads to a rapid deterioration in relations and the village elders decide to expel the soldiers with an explosive demonstration of their 'fire of the gods' (gunpowder). The story is introduced by the skeletal figure of Death.

Paul Kupperberg and others,  
'Fire of the Gods!'

Weird War Tales, vol. 1, issue 75 (1979)

Private collection of Paul Gravett

## Battle with the Russians

Alexander's battle with the Russians is a major episode in the Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander) by the 12th-century poet Nizami. Alexander, on his way home from China, received the news that Queen Nushabah had been kidnapped by the Russians. He readily came to the rescue and seven fierce battles took place before Alexander liberated Nushabah and defeated the Russian leader Qintal.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander),  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems)

India, 1460–75

Or.16919, f. 242v

# Prince Henry Frederick's Armour

Alexander's Asian campaigns decorate this magnificent suit of armour, commissioned for the eldest son of King James I of England in 1607. The gilded images of battle scenes, some with turreted elephants, represent English royal propaganda of the time. The armour was designed to inspire the young prince – praised by his contemporaries as 'the second Alexander' – to become a king comparable to, or even surpassing, Alexander.

Armour of Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales  
Netherlands, about 1607  
Board of Trustees of The Royal Armouries

# Alexander and Religion

Alexander claimed divine status, and was acknowledged as son of the Egyptian god Amun or Pharaoh of Egypt. He featured in the key texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Jewish sources he sacrificed to God in Jerusalem, while in Ethiopia he was regarded as a Christian prophet. Medieval Islam associated him with Dhu'l-Qarnayn (two-horned) of the Qur'an. However in Zoroastrianism, the main religion of the Persian Empire, he was demonised as the destroyer of the religion.

# Alexander in the Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud was written around AD 500 and is a primary source of Jewish religious law. This passage is one of several legends it contains about Alexander. It records how he bowed down before the High Priest, Simon the Righteous, who had led a delegation from Jerusalem to meet him. This edition was printed by Daniel Bomberg, who was the first to publish the complete Babylonian Talmud. It has served as a model for all subsequent editions.

Bomberg Talmud, Yoma 69a  
Venice, 1520–23  
Or.73.h.1, vol. 3, f. 274r

## Alexander's Secret Circumcision

Alexander arrives at the entrance to the Garden of Eden in this Hebrew manuscript. Asking to be let in, he was told 'No heathen or uncircumcised male may enter.' That night Alexander was circumcised, but he ordered his physicians to keep it secret. The story demonstrates the extent to which Alexander was believed to conform to Jewish practice and the positive way in which he was regarded in Jewish tradition.

Sefer Alexandros Mokdon (Tales of Alexander the Macedonian)

Italy?, 12th or 13th century

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,

MS.Heb.d.11

# Alexander Kneels before the High Priest

This 16th-century engraving probably represents Alexander bowing before the High Priest at Jerusalem. The interpretation is supported by the style of armour and the clean-shaven, youthful face. The engraving was produced during the papacy of Pope Paul III, born Alessandro Farnese. This Alexander/Alessandro link may hint at a deeper significance, in which Alexander was being used in contemporary papal propaganda.

Italian School, Alexander before the High Priest of Jerusalem  
Rome?, about 1547–48  
British Museum, 1859,0806.310

## Alexander in Jerusalem

Alexander is pictured kneeling at the gates of Jerusalem in this copy of the French Alexander Romance. The High Priest shows him the biblical Book of Daniel with the prophecy of the fight between a ram and a goat (second illustration), symbolising his future victory over Persia. In the third illustration, Alexander offers gifts at the Temple. First recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius in the 1st century AD, this story was incorporated into almost all medieval versions of the Alexander Romance.

Roman d'Alexandre en Prose (Prose Alexander Romance)

Southern Netherlands, about 1290–1300

Harley MS 4979, ff. 27v–28r

# Alexander, Prophet of Christ

Ethiopic literature developed a particular Christian role for Alexander. In this anonymous Story of Alexander, he is a forerunner of Christ, closely modelled on the prophets of the Old Testament. In chapter 6, shown here, the Spirit of God reveals the future incarnation of Christ to Alexander, who is chosen to be a prophet: 'For I have set thee to be a prophet unto Me by reason of the purity of thy body, and through thy prayers which have come unto Me.'

Zena Eskender (The Story of Alexander)  
Ethiopia, 18th century  
Or.827, f. 14r

## Story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn

The Qur'an tells the story of Dhu'l-Qarnayn (meaning two-horned), whom many have associated with Alexander. Travelling to the ends of the world, Dhu'l-Qarnayn constructed a barrier against the barbarous peoples of Gog and Magog, which would fall at the end of time. This illuminated volume was produced for Rukn al-Din Baybars, who later became the twelfth Mamluk sultan, Baybars II.

Qur'an, surah 18, verses 83–87

Cairo, 1304–06

Add MS 22409, ff. 84v-85r

# Alexander with Ram's Horns

Alexander is represented wearing ram's horns on this 2,300-year-old silver coin issued by the ruler of Thrace, an ancient kingdom in south-eastern Europe. The image represents him as the son of the ram-headed Egyptian god Amun. Coins such as this were common for many centuries following Alexander's death, and would have made the image of a two-horned Alexander familiar throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Silver Tetradrachm of Lysimachus  
Lampsacus, Thrace, about 305–281 BC  
British Museum, 1841,B.506

## Alexander Visits the Ka'ba

Alexander's visit to the Ka'ba at Mecca – now the most sacred site in Islam – is a minor episode in the 11th-century *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings) by Firdawsi. Here Alexander kneels, his hands raised in prayer, surrounded by worshippers in traditional white clothing. Such details reflect the increased importance of the Ka'ba as a pilgrimage site and indicate Alexander's full integration into the Islamic tradition.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Shiraz, Iran, late 16th century  
IO Islamic 3540, f. 381r

# Alexander 'The Accursed'

Alexander was generally regarded as a hero in Islam, but within the Zoroastrian religion he was called 'The Accursed'. This letter records how Alexander burned the Zoroastrian sacred texts, which had been written on 1,200 ox-hides. The original text, attributed to the Zoroastrian chief priest Tansar, is lost and survives only in this Persian version translated in the 13th century.

Letter of Tansar, in Ibn Isfandiyar's *Tarikh-i Tabaristan* (History of Tabaristan)  
Iran, 1656  
Add MS 7633, f. 10r

## **Destruction of the Fire-Temples**

Alexander had promised Darius to safeguard the Zoroastrian religion, but his actions show otherwise. The poet Nizami describes how Alexander destroyed the fire-temples, burned the sacred texts and introduced Islam. In this episode the Zoroastrian priestess, Azar Humayun, changed herself into a dragon to defend her fire-temple. Alexander tasked his philosopher Balinas to break her spells and once defeated, she was given to him in marriage.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander)  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems)  
Iran, 16th century  
IO Islamic 387, f. 337v

# Empire Builder and Role Model

Rulers in the past, such as Julius Caesar and Christina of Sweden, often cited Alexander as an inspirational figure. Louis XIV of France encouraged comparison with the ancient king, and Prince Henry Frederick of England was given armour decorated with the Asian campaigns. In Greece, Alexander's victory over the Persians was used to promote a new uprising against the Ottomans.

An increasing awareness of the lives destroyed by empire building means that world leaders today rarely acknowledge Alexander as a role model. In one superhero comic, he is even the inspiration for Superman's evil adversary.

## Louis XIV and Alexander

Alexander and his entourage are shown entering Babylon after the defeat of Darius on this Italian-made fan. Alexander is represented with the colours and facial features of King Louis XIV of France, who often compared himself to Alexander. The image is based on a large oil painting by the French artist Charles Le Brun. The fan was produced for the international fashion market, promoting French royal propaganda across early modern Europe.

Fan depicting Alexander's triumphal entry into Babylon

Italy, 1690–1700

Victoria and Albert Museum. Given by Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt and Lady Wyatt.

# Julius Caesar and Alexander

Early in his career, Julius Caesar was a local official in southern Spain. The historian Plutarch recounts that on reading a biography of Alexander, Caesar burst into tears at how little he had achieved compared to the Macedonian king at the same age. In this Dutch history of the Ancient World, Caesar is shown admiring a bust of Alexander mounted on the wall above.

Martinus Stuart, *Romainsche  
Geschiedenissen* (Roman histories)  
New edition. Amsterdam, 1830  
1308.i.1–10

# Queen Christina of Sweden and Alexander

The 17th-century monarch Christina of Sweden was a patron of the arts who abdicated her throne after 24 years, converted to Catholicism and relocated to Rome. This anonymous early biography of the queen reports that Alexander was the 'hero of all antiquity she admir'd most'. The volume also includes this first English translation of Christina's unfinished essay in which she discusses Alexander's life and achievements.

The Works of Christina Queen of Sweden  
London, 1753  
8406.aaa.14

# Alexander, Champion of the Greeks

Alexander's helmeted head is at the centre of this manifesto published by the Greek revolutionary Rhegas Pheraios in 1797. The portrait, surrounded by depictions of Alexander's generals and greatest military achievements, was intended to inspire the Greeks and their supporters to fight for the liberation of Greece from the Ottoman Empire. Rhegas's Alexander has become an iconic image, recurring in books, posters, murals and even on the sides of battleships.

Rhegas Pheraios, Monophyllo (Pamphlet)  
Facsimile reproduction. Originally printed in  
Vienna, 1797

## Alexander versus Superman

Alexander makes an unexpected appearance in this Superman comic. The evil villain is the 'Planeteer', a megalomaniac expert on magnetism who sees himself as the reincarnation of Alexander, intent on conquering the world. To achieve this, he kidnaps eight heads of state, including Margaret Thatcher (centre right, dressed in green), whom he imprisons within a magnetic field, until rescued by Superman.

Paul Kupperberg, Bob Rozakis and others,  
'The Conqueror from the Past!'  
Superman, vol. 1, issue 387 (1983)  
Private collection of Paul Gravett

# Alexander's Relationships

# Alexander's Relationships

Alexander was polygamous. The rivalry between his two principal wives, Roxana and Stateira, became a subject for playwrights and novelists. Despite the marriages, questions about Alexander's sexuality have been asked since ancient times. Storytellers and artists today often focus on his relationships with his general Hephaestion and the eunuch slave Bagoas.

Powerful female characters play a central role in stories about Alexander. Candace, Nushabah and the queen of the Amazons are among several who engage with Alexander on their own terms and whose lands remain unconquered by his army.

# Alexander Visits Queen Nushabah

Nushabah is depicted here enthroned as queen of the women-only city of Barda, in today's Azerbaijan. Alexander visits the queen in disguise, but is revealed as an imposter when faced with his own portrait. They both sit down to a sumptuous feast before he is sent on his way. This copy of the poet Nizami's *Khamsah* was made for Shah Tahmasp of Iran and is one of the finest examples of 16th-century Iranian book art.

Nizami, *Iskandarnamah* (Story of Alexander),  
from his *Khamsah* (Five Poems);  
artist Mirza 'Ali  
Tabriz, Iran, mid-16th century  
Or.2265, f. 48v

## Candace of Ethiopia

Candace was a royal title in the ancient Nubian kingdom of Kush in Sudan. According to the Greek Alexander Romance, Alexander met a queen Candace 'of remarkable beauty'. She was old enough to be his mother and in some versions of the text even asks to adopt him. This wood engraving of a Candace of Ethiopia (described here as Nubia and Abyssinia) appears in a 1902 issue of the British children's magazine Chatterbox.

'Candace, Queen of Ethiopia'  
Chatterbox, new series, no. 28 (1902)  
P.P.5992.g

# The Amazon Queen

The queen of the Amazons, flanked by her army of women, gives Alexander the keys to her realm. The ancient Greek myth of the Amazons, a nation of warrior women, was incorporated into medieval stories about Alexander. Negotiations between the two parties resulted in a peaceful outcome instead of war. This French history of the world from the late 13th century was copied in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César (Ancient History to the Time of Caesar)  
Acre, Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem,  
13th century  
Add MS 15268, ff. 202v–203r

## Harum, City of Women

The Amazons are represented in the poet Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* as residents of the women-only city of Harum, later Barda in today's Azerbaijan. Here they are virgin warriors who sleep in their armour and are obliged to leave if they want to marry. This scene shows Alexander's reception by 2,000 women who were sent to greet him with gifts of crowns, clothes and jewels. Intent on peace and friendship, he toured the city before leading his army westwards.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)

Tabriz?, Iran, 1536

Add MS 15531, f. 345r

# Roxana Brought Before Alexander

Roxana is introduced to her future husband Alexander in this French-language account of his life by the Portuguese historian Vasco da Lucena. She is dressed as a European princess in a magnificent garment and cone-shaped headdress (hennin). The portrayal of the couple reflects the latest fashions at the royal courts of late-medieval Europe, for which this manuscript was created.

Vasco da Lucena, *Les Fais d'Alexandre le grant* (The Deeds of Alexander the Great)  
Lille, about 1470–80  
Royal MS 17 F. i, ff. 178v-179r.

## Wedding of Alexander and Roxana

One of Alexander's first acts after ascending the throne was to send for Roxana (Rawshanak in Persian) and her mother. They arrived after an exchange of gifts bringing a dowry of gold, silver, carpets, clothes and jewels. 'Lovely as the moon', Roxana captivated Alexander with her 'soul-bewitching face'. The poet Firdawsi tells us that their marriage was celebrated as far afield as China, and the whole world rejoiced.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Qazvin, Iran, about 1590–95  
Add MS 27257, f. 326v

# Alexander Marries an Indian Princess

The Shahnamah gives a detailed account of Alexander's expedition against King Kayd of Hind (India). Kayd avoided war by offering four gifts as tribute: his daughter, his all-knowing philosopher, his personal physician and his never-emptying goblet. Alexander was entranced by Kayd's unnamed daughter and married her 'according to the Christian religion'. Her arrival is depicted here: 'her hair plaited, her eyebrows arched like a bow, and her eyes like heavenly narcissi.'

Firdawsi, Shahnamah (Book of Kings)  
Sultanate India, 1438  
Or.1403, f. 318r

## Women's Voices

Stephanie Thornton gives a voice to the women who were present during major events of the past, but who generally remain silent in the standard histories. *The Conqueror's Wife* focuses on Alexander as seen through the eyes of four historical figures: Alexander's half-sister Thessalonike, his companion Hephaestion, the Persian princess Drypetis and Queen Roxana. Thornton shows how each may have contributed to Alexander's achievements, and how it was the women who were left to fight over his legacy.

Stephanie Thornton, *The Conqueror's Wife*  
New York, 2015  
Private collection of Adrian S. Edwards

# Roxana and Stateira on the London Stage

The Rival Queens is a tragedy centred on the conflict between Alexander's wives Roxana and Statira (Stateira). The jealous Roxana is goaded into eliminating her rival, with Alexander arriving on the scene just in time to hear Statira plead mercy for her assassin. Alexander dies soon after, poisoned at the command of the same conspirator. The play is by the 17th-century dramatist Nathaniel Lee. It was first performed in 1677 at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, and was regularly revived until the mid-19th century.

Nathaniel Lee, *The Rival Queens, or the Death of Alexander the Great*  
London, 1677  
11774.g.29

## Alexander and Hephaestion

The family of the Persian king Darius was captured following the Battle of Issus and presented to Alexander and his general Hephaestion. Sisygambis, Darius's mother, mistakenly bowed before Hephaestion, then pleaded mercy for her error. Alexander replied 'My lady, you make no mistake. This man is Alexander too', referencing his relationship with Hephaestion. This painting by the Englishman George Frederic Watts is a small-scale copy of a monumental work by the 16th-century Venetian master Paolo Veronese.

George Frederic Watts, The Family of Darius  
before Alexander the Great  
Venice or London, not before 1853  
Shingley Art Gallery, Tyne and Wear Museums

# A 21st-Century Comic

The relationship between Alexander and Hephaestion is today often explored through an LGBTQ lens. This story by the comic-book artist Hamish Steele references the episode in which Sisygambis, Darius's mother, mistakes Hephaestion for Alexander. In this version Alexander's response is to tell Hephaestion that he is also Alexander, 'for you are my heart and soul'. The statement prompts the humorous aside 'Get a room.'

Hamish Steele, *Alexander and Hephaestion*  
London, 2018

Image supplied by Hamish Steele

## Mary Renault's Bagoas

The historical novels of Mary Renault were commercially successful and well regarded by classical scholars. *The Persian Boy* is the second book of her Alexander Trilogy, and follows the life of the adult Alexander from the perspective of Bagoas, a young Persian slave who develops a sexual bond with his master. It was written in the early 1970s when public attitudes towards homosexuality were beginning to change in the West. Bagoas is represented on the jacket of this first edition with Michelangelo's drawing 'Female Head with Earring'.

Mary Renault, *The Persian Boy*

London, 1972

Private collection of Adrian S. Edwards

# Inspiration for Mary Renault's Bagoas

Mary Renault and Kathleen 'Kasia' Abbott had been students together at St Hugh's College, Oxford. In this letter, Mary tells Kasia about her new novel *The Persian Boy*. On the second page, she quotes the lines from the Roman historian Curtius which inspired her to develop the character of Bagoas:

'Among these [great gifts] was Bagoas, a eunuch of remarkable beauty and in the very flower of boyhood, who had been loved by Darius and was afterwards to be loved by Alexander.'

Letter from Mary Renault to Kathleen  
(Kasia) Abbott

Cape Town, 17 August 1972

By kind permission of the Principal and  
Fellows of St Hugh's College, Oxford

## Alexander, Bagoas and Gender Identity

The gender identity of Alexander's eunuch slave Bagoas has become a topic of interest for some artists today. In this drawing, the androgynous nature of both Alexander and Bagoas is emphasised, as they engage in a romantic kiss. The work was created by Deva (Dinara Lukmanova), a Russian artist and illustrator based in Vietnam who specialises in depictions of androgynous characters in history, literature and mythology. It was originally posted on the DeviantArt digital platform.

Deva, Bagoas Kissing Alexander  
Vietnam, 2015  
Image supplied by Develv

# Oliver Stone's Bagoas

This is the draft screenplay for Oliver Stone's Hollywood film *Alexander* (2004), supplied to Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, one of the film's historical advisors. The relationship between Alexander and his slave Bagoas is highlighted in the scene shown. The eunuch Bagoas has just won a dancing competition staged to entertain the troops. The soldiers cheer and call for the king to kiss the victor, which he does 'on the lips', as originally reported by the ancient historian Plutarch.

Oliver Stone, screenplay for the film *Alexander*  
Revised 3rd draft. Los Angeles, 2003  
Private Collection of Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones

Mythical Quest

# Mythical Quest

# Mythical Quest

The historical Alexander travelled only as far as north-west India, but the mythical Alexander continued on into the unknown. Seeking the outer limits of the world, he travelled through strange lands inhabited by people with faces in their chests, sirens, griffins and dragons. His journey led him on a mythical quest in search of new experiences and the key to immortality.

# Medieval Map of the World

Alexander features 17 times in the largest world map known from the Middle Ages. The map combines genuine places, biblical locations and mythical events including those relating to Alexander's fantastical adventures. Christ's body is superimposed over the world as it was understood at the time, with Jesus' head and East at the top. Captions explain the scenes and are quoted in the identifying labels (right). The map was originally produced around 1300 by the nuns of the monastery of Ebstorf in northern Germany but it was destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II.

The Ebstorf Map (reproduction)  
Original created at Ebstorf, Northern Germany,  
around 1300

© Kloster Ebstorf, downloaded from  
<https://www.leuphana.de/ebskart>

## 1 **Macedon**

‘This land is Macedon... the homeland of Alexander.’

## 2 **Altars of Alexander**

‘These are the altars of Alexander ... in the land of Scythia.’ [marking the end of the world]

## 3 **Land of the Amazons**

‘This is the land of the Amazons: women who fight like men.’

## 4 **Gog and Magog**

‘This is where Alexander closed in the two unclean nations, Gog and Magog, who are the allies of Antichrist. They eat human flesh and drink blood.’

## 5 **Miopar**

‘The island of Miopar. Legend has it that Alexander used their special ships to explore the bottom of the sea...’

## 6 **Cannibals**

‘These are cannibals, very fast people because they have legs which are similar to those of horses. They feed on human flesh and blood.’

## 7 **Fish eaters**

‘The fish eaters eat only fish and drink salty sea water but when Alexander conquered them he forbade them to do this.’

## 8 **Trees of the Sun and Moon**

**9 Palace of King Porus**

**10 Tomb of Darius**

‘Here is the tomb of Darius, built by Alexander the Great.’

**11 Alexandria**

‘The city of Alexandria, which Alexander the Great founded.’

**12 Oracle of Amun**

The Siwa oracle in the desert where Alexander was told he would be king of Egypt.

# **Flying Machines and Diving Bells**

Over time new legends were added to the Alexander Romance. These told of Alexander's ascent into the sky in a carriage lifted by griffins, and his journey to the bottom of the sea in a diving bell. These became some of his best-known adventures. Challenging human limitations, they inspired writers and artists through the ages.

# Griffins Carry Alexander Up into the Sky

Alexander rises into the skies in this 14th-century copy of the Alexander Romance in French. The wooden structure in which he sits is chained to four griffins, which carry him up as they try to grasp the hunks of meat attached to lances over their heads. The accompanying text tells us that, from above, the earth looked like a field prepared for crops, and the sea like a serpent curling around it.

French prose Alexander Romance  
Northern France or Southern Netherlands,  
14th century  
Royal MS 20 A. v, ff. 70v–71r

# **Kai Kavus and his Flying Machine**

This scene depicts the mythical king of Iran, Kai Kavus. The details are clearly modelled on Alexander's flight into the heavens as told in the Alexander Romance, although the story is never directly connected with Alexander. The king constructed a throne with lances from which hunks of meat were suspended. Four eagles were bound to it, which carried him upwards until they fell, exhausted, leaving Kai Kavus stranded and regretting his ambition.

Firdawsi, Shahnamah (Book of Kings)

Iran, 1486

Add MS 18188, ff. 17v-18r

# Alexander's Flight with Griffins

Alexander's flight is shown in profile on this 850-year-old enamel plaque. The imagery recalls the biblical prophet Elijah's ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire. The plaque itself could have been produced to decorate a cross or an altarpiece.

The Rolls Plaque of Alexander's flight  
Liège, about 1150–60  
Victoria and Albert Museum. Purchased  
with the assistance of the National Heritage  
Memorial Fund and Art Fund.

## A Pre-Raphaelite Ascent

The flight of Alexander appears on the cover of this 19th-century re-writing of the Alexander Romance for family reading. In this instance, four griffins are tempted ever upwards by lumps of flesh attached to the corners of the roof under which Alexander is seated. The cover designer was Fred Mason, who was loosely associated with the later stages of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. His illustration has been printed or 'blocked' directly onto the buckram cloth binding.

Robert Steele and Fred Mason, *The Story of Alexander*  
London, 1894  
12403.ff.10

# Baudolino's Mythical Quest

Baudolino by the Italian novelist Umberto Eco features an expedition led by the main character, Baudolino, from 12th-century Constantinople into the mythical East. His encounters clearly echo Alexander's own adventures in the Romance. Basilisks (rooster-headed serpents), sciapods (one-legged people) and blemmyes (people with faces in their chests) all cross his path. The cover of this edition even incorporates an image of Alexander being borne through the air by griffins, extracted from a 15th-century manuscript.

Umberto Eco, Baudolino  
3rd edition. Milan, 2016  
YF.2021.a.6256

## **Journey to the Bottom of the Sea**

Alexander explores the depths of the sea in this Persian poem by the 13th-century poet Amir Khusraw. More than 1,000 workmen construct a wooden ship and a diving bell made from molten glass. Alexander prepares to embark with his advisers: the prophets Khidr and Ilyas, and the philosophers Aristotle, Apollonius and Plato. This manuscript was copied in the 16th century but the illustrations were repainted in the 19th century, adding a contemporary ship flying the English and Scottish flags.

Amir Khusraw, *A'inah-i Iskandari* (Iskandar's Mirror), from his *Khamsah* (Five Poems) Iran, 1574, but with early-19th century overpainting  
Add MS 7751, ff. 183v-184r

# Alexander Explores the Ocean Depths

Alexander is shown in a special diving bell in this 600-year-old copy of the French Alexander Romance. His glass vessel is attached by a rope to a boat. Inside he carries a cockerel to tell him the time and a cat to purify the air, reflecting popular beliefs of the time. In the boat, Alexander's mistress cuts the rope, abandoning him for the young man beside her. The illustration on the right shows Alexander's army encountering giants with sword-like horns.

Roman d'Alexandre en Prose (Alexander Romance in Prose)

Paris, 1420–25

Royal MS 20 B. xx, ff. 77v–78r

## A Fairy-Tale Descent

Robert Steele produced this modern adaptation of the Alexander Romance as a fairy tale for Grace, thought to have been one of his ten children. In this version, Alexander is lowered into the ocean seated in a box made of green glass and iron, and sealed with pitch. The style of the illustration by Fred Mason is evocative of the Arts and Crafts designs produced in the same period by Edward Burne-Jones for the Kelmscott Press.

Robert Steele and Fred Mason, *The Story of Alexander*  
London, 1894  
12410.ff.14

# Wonders of Creation

Divine creation inspired a special genre of 'wonder' literature. This included stories about Alexander's mythical encounters in India and beyond. These became an integral part of the Alexander Romance from medieval times in both European and Eastern literature and art.

# The Romance of All Chivalry

This reworking of the Alexander Romance in Anglo-Norman French was produced in 12th-century England and presents Alexander as a model of chivalric virtue. He is shown in the lower left-hand corner receiving advice from a one-eyed giant about the monsters he will encounter. Further on are scenes of the cannibals Gog and Magog, the sea people ('torturers and robbers of human flesh'), armourers forging a sword on a blue anvil, and various peoples who eat moles, rats and dogs.

Thomas of Kent, *Le Roman de toute chevalerie* (The Romance of All Chivalry)  
England, 13th century  
Master and Fellows of Trinity College,  
Cambridge

# Scary and Awful People

Cheap, hand-coloured Russian prints (lubok) were sold in large numbers at markets.

This one depicts the fantastical people and mythological beasts that Alexander and his army met on their travels beyond India. The text explains that they captured some of these 'scary and awful people' and offered them food, which they did not accept and so died of starvation. Alexander's men also caught a one-eyed person, but he ran away.

Liudi divyia naidenyia tsarem Aleksandrom  
Makedonskim (The Strange Men Found by  
King Alexander of Macedon)

Russia, about 1820

British Museum, 1934,0402.24

## **Snakes, Griffins and Long-Necked Beasts**

These fantastical beasts relate to a visit that Alexander and his army made to the mythical Valley of Jordia. Portrayed are a griffin, a dragon with snakes, and a long-necked beast, as well as the king and some soldiers on horseback. The episode first appears in a letter about India said to be from Alexander to Aristotle. It is retold in this 1514 edition of Hartlieb's German version of the Alexander Romance.

Johann Hartlieb, Das Alexanderbuch  
(The Alexander Book)  
Strasbourg, 1514  
C.39.h.14

# Alexander visits Dragon Island

Several episodes in this encyclopedia by the 13th-century author al-Qazwini refer explicitly to Alexander's travels in the Indian Ocean. The upper part of this leaf describes the people of the island of Jaba, who have faces on their chests. The lower part describes a visit by Alexander to another island where a dragon was terrorising the inhabitants. Alexander killed the dragon by feeding it two bulls which had been skinned and filled with poison.

al-Qazwini, 'Aja'ib al-makhluqat wa-ghara'ib al-mawjudat (Wonders of Creation and Oddities of Existence)

Mosul, Iraq, about 1300

Or.14140, f. 35r

## Alexander Kills a Dragon

Alexander encountered a fierce dragon terrorising a large city as shown in Firdawsi's *Shahnamah*. To satisfy its hunger, the dragon was fed five cows every night. Alexander ordered the next five cows to be skinned and filled with poison. The ravenous dragon appeared, 'his two eyes like blood and fire came continuously from his mouth', and devoured the bait. He collapsed, poisoned, only to be finished off by the sharp arrows of Alexander's soldiers.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)

Isfahan, Iran, 1614

Add MS 16761, ff. 190v-191r

# Alexander and the Cursed Snake

Alexander and the Cursed Snake are the two main characters of a popular Greek shadow puppet performance. These plays derive from a Turkish tradition and are named after their stock character, Karagiozis, a lazy trickster. Alexander was adopted into these comic shows in the 19th century as a dragon-slayer, whose reward for killing the beast is stolen by Karagiozis. The two puppets were designed as souvenirs by the manufacturer Markos.

Alexander and the Cursed Snake  
Athens, about 2000  
Private collection of Richard Stoneman

## Deadly Sirens

Alexander and his army face the deadly charm of the sirens of the unknown realms beyond India. The sirens are shown as long-haired naked women who drag men under water to lie with them until they are lifeless. Alexander, an imperial eagle on his chest, is shown above fighting a dragon wearing a crown of emeralds. This 15th-century copy of the Latin Alexander Romance was written in England and illustrated by a Flemish artist.

Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni (The Battles of Alexander the Great)

England, 15th century

The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

# Alexander Spies on the Fabled Sirens

After a voyage of 40 days, Alexander arrived at the Black Sea where he was told of a place where water-maidens gathered every night to sing. Everyone who heard them was struck senseless. Watching from a distance, Alexander was deeply moved by their haunting music but returned to his camp unscathed. The poet Nizami's Iskandarnamah is one of several works included in this compilation for the 15th-century prince Iskandar Sultan, ruler of Fars in south-west Iran.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander)  
Iran, 1410–11  
Add MS 27261, ff. 285v–286r

## **Search for Immortality**

As Alexander's power and dominions increased, so too did his preoccupation with his own mortality. Nearing the end of his journey, Alexander's quest took him into the Land of Darkness in search of the Waters of Life. Beyond this he reached a mythical paradise where he remained a spectator, watching from outside. Obsessed with the future, he sought comfort from oracles, though the messages he received were never what he hoped to hear.

# Alexander's Wall against Gog and Magog

This Syriac text was originally written in the 7th century. It presents Alexander as a hero defending the world from invasion by the 'unclean nations' ruled by Gog and Magog. It describes how Alexander built an iron wall to keep the barbarians at bay. At the end of time God will open the gates and let them through, bringing destruction with them. The text influenced apocalyptic writing in the Middle Ages.

Neshana d-leh d-Aleksandros (Exploits of Alexander)

Alqosh?, Iraq, 1709

Add MS 25875, ff. 352v–353r

## Gog and Magog in Tales of the Prophets

Tales of the prophets were a popular literary genre based on stories adapted from the Qur'an and other Islamic literature. In this collection by the 12th-century writer al-Naysaburi, Alexander watches his workmen while the local tribesmen make bricks. The text, quoting the Qur'an, tells how Alexander, referred to as Dhu'l-Qarnayn (two-horned), built the wall to protect the oppressed peoples, here defined as Muslims. But finally, he warns, 'Gog and Magog will break the wall and wreak destruction.'

Ishaq ibn Ibrahim al-Naysaburi,  
Qisas al-anbiya' (Tales of the Prophets)  
Iran, 16th century  
Add MS 18576, ff. 117v-118r

# Man-Eating Peoples of Gog and Magog

These fragments are all that remain of the earliest printed version of the *Alexander Romance* in Middle English. They survived in the binding of another book. The text differs from all others and describes the man-eating peoples of Gog and Magog, who have green bodies, teeth like horses, and eat 'wormes', 'snakys' and 'paddis brode' (young frogs).

Kyng Alisaunder (fragment)  
London, about 1525  
C.40.m.9.(27.)

## Lost in the Land of Darkness

This is one of nine leaves that survive from a single manuscript of the Coptic translation of the Alexander Romance. The fragment describes how Alexander and his army set off to explore the Land of Darkness, riding mares whose foals were left behind to call their parents back to the light. When a mysterious voice predicts his imminent death, Alexander turns back. He brings with him some objects he had gathered in the dark, which later turn out to be diamonds.

Coptic Alexander Romance (fragment)  
Atripe, Upper Egypt, 14th century  
Or.3367(2)

# Alexander Enters the Land of Darkness

Alexander is seen here at the edge of the world, setting off into the Land of Darkness where the sun neither rises nor sets.

Alexander's confidence contrasts vividly with the questioning glances of his followers as they face the darkness ahead. This copy of the world history by the 13th-century minister Rashid al-Din was almost certainly copied under the author's supervision in Tabriz, Iran.

Rashid al-Din, *Jami' al-tawarikh*  
(Compendium of Chronicles)

Tabriz, Iran, about 1314

Courtesy of the University of Edinburgh

## Discovery of the Water of Life

In this version of Alexander's journey into the Land of Darkness, he becomes separated from his guides, the prophets Khidr and Ilyas. They find a spring and sit down to eat bread and fish. When a fish is accidentally dropped into the water, it miraculously comes back to life. Both prophets drink the water and achieve immortality. Alexander is pictured as a spectator in the background (in red), watching from afar, always seeking, but never reaching the object of his desire.

Nizami, Iskandarnamah (Story of Alexander),  
from his Khamsah (Five Poems);

artist, Talib Lala

Shiraz, Iran, 1665

Add MS 6613, ff. 63v-64r

# Alexander and the Talking Tree

At the world's end, Alexander was told of a tree with two trunks, one male and one female, which would speak by day and by night. He sought it out. At midday the male part foretold the end of his 14-year rule, and at nightfall, its female counterpart announced: 'Death will come soon.' This image depicts the awe-struck Alexander, with the slope behind forming a dramatic cliff representing the edge of the world. The manuscript was created for Ibrahim Sultan, the governor of Shiraz, Iran.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)

Shiraz, Iran, about 1420–25

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,  
MS Ouseley, Add. 176

# The Trees of the Sun and the Moon

In the Alexander Romance, Indian wise men took Alexander to visit the Trees of the Sun and the Moon. The Tree of the Sun told him that he would soon die and the Tree of the Moon informed him that he would never see his mother again. The story is retold in this graphic novel by the Malaysian writer and artist Reimena Yee. In this version, the trees also remind Alexander of all the lives that his empire-building has destroyed.

Reimena Yee, *Alexander, the Servant and the Water of Life*

Kuala Lumpur, 2021

Digital files supplied by Reimena Yee

# Mount Qaf and the Angel

This 12th-century encyclopedia includes 59 anecdotes about Alexander. In the episode illustrated here, Alexander has emerged from the Land of Darkness to see a brightly shining mountain and an angel. He is told that it is the primeval Mount Qaf, which in Islamic tradition symbolises the cosmic mountain linking the terrestrial and celestial worlds. This is one of a very few Persian manuscripts surviving from India during the early 16th century, illustrated in a style heavily influenced by regional artistic traditions.

Ahmad Tusi, 'Aja'ib al-makhluqat  
(Wonders of Creation)  
Delhi–Agra, around 1520–40  
Or.14949, ff. 38v–39r

## Alexander at the Gates of Paradise

Alexander's journey to Paradise is uniquely illustrated in this manuscript of the French Alexander Romance. The image on the far left shows him at the gates of Paradise, where he is denied entry. As compensation, he is given a miraculous apple (third column), which is heavier than anything else, but becomes weightless when covered in dust. On the far right, Alexander's philosophers explain that this relates to his imminent death.

Voyage au paradis terrestre  
(Voyage to Earthly Paradise)

Tournai, Flanders, 1338–44

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,  
MS. Bodl. 264

# Alexander and the Miraculous Apple

This 16th-century manuscript, discovered in Taymouth Castle, Perthshire, is one of the two copies of the Alexander Romance in Scots. The poem was composed by Sir Gilbert Hay in the 15th century and contains a long description of Alexander's attempt to enter Paradise. In the middle of the page on the right, the text narrates how the guardian of Paradise offers Alexander a miraculous apple to forewarn him 'that thou has short time for to live'.

Gilbert Hay, *The Buike off King Allexander the Conqueroure*  
Scotland, 16th century  
Add MS 40732, ff. 227v–228r

Journey's End

# Journey's End

# **Journey's End**

Threatened with a potential mutiny in Punjab, Alexander was forced to turn back and lead his army through the desert to Babylon. On arrival, they were met by bad omens and Alexander became fatally ill. The cause of his death remains unknown, although there are plenty of stories. His body was transported on a magnificent carriage to Egypt, where it was eventually placed in a mausoleum at Alexandria. The tomb is now lost, but the sarcophagus that once held his body may have been identified.

## Alexander Quells a Mutiny

Summer 326 BC saw the exhausted Macedonians waiting to cross the Hyphasis (Beas) River in Punjab. Alexander gave a rallying speech, but General Coenus stepped forward and urged him to return home.

Alexander was forced to relent and the long journey back to Babylon began. This untitled etching by the Italian print-maker and artist Antonio Tempesta probably depicts the scene, with Coenus standing spear in hand before the mounted Alexander.

Antonio Tempesta, *Alexandri Magni praecipuae res gestae* (Alexander the Great's Special Deeds)

Antwerp, 1608

The National Library of Scotland

# Return through the Gedrosian Desert

On the return journey, Alexander led most of his soldiers through the Gedrosian Desert of Balochistan, in today's Pakistan and Iran. They faced thirst, famine and plague, and many did not survive. Avoid Being in Alexander the Great's Army! uses humorous illustrations and gruesome facts to encourage children aged seven to nine to engage emotionally with the soldiers' plight.

Jacqueline Morley and David Antram,  
Avoid Being in Alexander the Great's Army!  
Brighton, 2005  
YK.2006.a.1391

## Alexander Refuses Water

In the 1960s the American explorers Helen and Frank Schreider were sent by National Geographic magazine on an expedition to retrace Alexander's journey across Asia. The account of their time in Balochistan is shown here. It is accompanied by an illustration of Alexander refusing to accept water brought to him in an upturned helmet, to show that he was suffering the same as his soldiers. The artwork is by Tom Lovell, a painter known for his interpretations of historical scenes.

Helen Schreider and Frank Schreider,  
'In the footsteps of Alexander the Great'  
National Geographic, vol. 133, no.1 (1968)  
Ac.6192

# Alexander in Britain

The French medieval romance *Perceforest* contains a long account of an unexpected diversion made by Alexander. His ship is blown off course in a storm and he lands in Britain: an island of dark forests and evil enchanters. Alexander eventually brings order to its people by appointing two of his followers as kings of England and Scotland. The illustration, suggestive of Alexander and his companions arriving in Britain, is probably recycled from another work.

*Perceforest*  
Paris, 1528  
85.k.5–6

## Death of Alexander

Alexander's re-entry into the city of Babylon was accompanied by a series of bad omens, including the birth of a part-human creature which was taken as a sign of his imminent death. He did indeed fall terminally ill after attending a banquet, perhaps from typhoid fever or another infection. The Alexander Romance, however, is clear: he was deliberately poisoned. As his life force slipped away, the Macedonian troops filed past and even his loyal war horse Bucephalus reappeared to shed a final tear. Alexander died in June 323 BC, aged just 32.

# A Bad Omen

Alexander arrives in Babylon to be crowned king of the world in this 14th-century manuscript of the French Alexander Romance (lower left). Celebrations are marred, however, by a bad omen: a creature consisting of a stillborn baby in the upper half and beast in the lower. The illustration in the second column represents Alexander discussing the ominous baby with a soothsayer. He is warned that it signifies his upcoming death.

French prose Alexander Romance  
Paris, 1333–40  
Royal MS 19 D i, ff. 40v–41r

## Death Foretold

The epic Shahnamah gives a Persian take on the birth of the portentous child. Here it had a human chest and shoulders, and a cow's tail and hooves. When consulted, the astrologers fell silent. Reluctantly they foretold: 'Your majesty will soon be dead.' Accepting their prophecy as his fate, Alexander fell ill that very day. This single leaf comes from one of the earliest known illustrated manuscripts of the Shahnamah. The style of clothing shows Mongolian influence.

Firdawsi, Shahnamah (Book of Kings)  
Iran or Iraq, about 1300  
Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library

# Macedonian Soldiers File Past

Alexander became critically ill with a fever following a banquet in Babylon. A rumour spread among the Macedonian soldiers that he was already dead, and so they forced their way into the room where he lay. Alexander weakly reached out to each of them as they filed past. This atmospheric drawing of the scene is by the French artist André Castaigne, and was published in the American periodical *Century Magazine*.

Benjamin Ide Wheeler, 'Alexander's Death'  
*The Century Magazine*, vol. 58, no. 6 (1899)  
P.P.6383.c

## Alexander's Death

Realising that death was imminent, Alexander ordered that he should be carried outside. In full view of his soldiers, he delivered his last words in a feeble voice, advising them to be thoughtful and modest, and to follow his example after he had gone. This 16th-century copy of Firdawsi's epic poem depicts the actual moment of his death. A physician takes his pulse while another makes notes. In the background courtiers and soldiers wipe away their tears.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Qazvin, Iran, 1585–86  
Add MS 27302, ff. 413v-414r

# Bucephalus Laments

With its 250 coloured illustrations, this 14th-century manuscript is the most famous copy of the Greek Alexander Romance. On the left, Alexander lies on his deathbed surrounded by his queen and generals, with the Macedonian army in mourning below. On the right, his horse, Bucephalus, sheds tears at his master's death in front of Alexander's turbaned Persian soldiers represented below. The images are explained with red captions written in Greek, which, after the manuscript fell into Ottoman hands, were translated in the margins into Turkish.

Venice Alexander Romance  
Trabzon (Trebizond), Turkey, 14th century  
Museum of the Hellenic Institute for Byzantine  
and Post-Byzantine Studies

## Alexander's Funeral Procession

This popular version of Alexander's life reflects a Persian tradition. His coffin is carried through his dominions, in accordance with his final wishes, with his arm hanging loose to show that he goes to the grave empty-handed. The pall-bearers, wearing distinctive tall, angled hats, wipe away tears. This work adopts a superficially Islamic guise but with its stories of demons, kidnappings and seductions, it was intended primarily as entertainment.

Manuchihr Khan Hakim, Iskandarnamah  
(Story of Alexander)

Tehran, 1857–58

14787.k.8

# Debate on the Final Resting-Place

Here soldiers carry Alexander's sealed coffin while Persians and Greeks argue heatedly over where he should be buried. A Persian insists that it should be in Iran, the land of the king of kings, while a Greek presses for Greece, Alexander's native homeland. Finally an oracle decides: 'His remains belong in Alexandria.' This painting is unsigned but can be attributed to Muhammad Yusuf al-Husayni, one of the foremost artists of 17th-century Iran.

Firdawsi, *Shahnamah* (Book of Kings)  
Isfahan, Iran, 1640  
IO Islamic 3682, ff. 343v-344r

## After Death

An elaborate funeral carriage was constructed to transport Alexander from Babylon to his place of burial. Historical evidence suggests that the plan had been to take him home to Macedon, but the funeral procession took an unexpected turn and travelled instead to Egypt.

The current location of Alexander's body is not known. For many centuries it was preserved in a magnificent tomb at Alexandria, but this too is now lost. Alongside more fanciful stories, there are theories that point to a stone sarcophagus that could once have held his body.

# Alexander's Funeral Carriage

The historian Diodorus Siculus, writing over 250 years later, provides a detailed account of the funeral carriage built to carry Alexander's body. His description mentions a roof of gold, a colonnade with a golden net, various statues and four iron wheels. It was pulled by 64 mules and accompanied by roadmenders, mechanics and soldiers. Many attempts have been made to recreate the carriage using Diodorus's account, including this engraving published in a 19th-century French academic pamphlet.

G.-E.-J. Guilhem de Clermont-Lodève,  
Examen critique (Critical Examination)  
2nd edition. Paris, 1810  
584.h.12

## Funeral Procession

Legends of Alexander's funeral carriage inspired generations of scholars, artists and politicians to re-imagine and even rebuild it. This monumental painting by the French artist André Bauchant is an independent reconstruction based on ancient descriptions. It shows Alexander's general Ptolemy in a chariot, dressed as a pharaoh, as he leads the ornate funeral procession through a rocky landscape in front of amazed spectators.

André Bauchant, *Les Funérailles d'Alexandre-le-Grand* (The Funeral of Alexander the Great) *Tourneboeufs?*, 1940  
Tate: Bequeathed by Arthur Jeffress 1961

# Hermit Sisoës finds Alexander's Coffin

This 18th-century icon depicts a Greek legend about the early Christian hermit, Sisoës. Wandering in the Egyptian desert, he unexpectedly discovers Alexander's coffin. Struck by the instability of human life and glory, he performs a poetic lament over Alexander's remains, which is inscribed on the tombstone to his left.

Saint Sisoës at Alexander's Tomb  
Venice, 18th century  
Museum of the Hellenic Institute for Byzantine  
and Post-Byzantine Studies

## Quest for the Tomb

The search for Alexander's tomb, coffin and body has continued into the 21st century. In *The Lost Tomb*, Andrew Chugg introduced a radical theory about the body. He proposed that the remains may have been deliberately disguised as those of St Mark when Christianity became the official religion in Alexandria. Consequently, Alexander's body could be the one said to have been stolen by Venetian merchants and placed at the high altar of St Mark's Basilica in Venice.

Andrew Michael Chugg, *The Lost Tomb of Alexander the Great*  
London, 2004  
m05/13003

# Uncle Scrooge Finds the Lost Tomb

The mystery of the lost tomb of Alexander is solved in this Disney comic-book story about Uncle Scrooge and his great-nephews Huey, Dewey and Louie. While in modern-day Egypt searching for evidence of the ancient Library of Alexandria, their dog picks up the scent of papyrus on a football pitch. Below, they discover a hidden chamber which contains Alexander's crystal sarcophagus, and also that of Queen Cleopatra.

Don Rosa, 'Guardians of the Lost Library'  
Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge, no. 383 (2008)  
ZK.9.a.11518

# Clarke and the Alexandrian Sarcophagus

Edward Daniel Clarke was employed to help trace archaeological artefacts that had not been handed over following the British victory over the French at the Battle of Alexandria in 1801. A tip-off led him to a hospital ship where he retrieved a stone sarcophagus, which local people believed had once held the body of Alexander. Clarke was convinced by their stories and, after it had been transferred to the British Museum, published this book outlining his reasons.

Edward Daniel Clarke, *The Tomb of Alexander*  
Cambridge, 1805  
C.155.a.4

# Alexander's Sarcophagus?

The original of this sarcophagus (stone coffin) was prepared for Pharaoh Nectanebo II of Egypt during his lifetime. He fled into exile and it was never used for its intended purpose. The empty coffin was later moved to Alexandria, where some researchers believe it held the body of Alexander. When found by Napoleon in 1798, the sarcophagus was being used for ritual ablutions at the Attarin Mosque, hence the 12 plugholes drilled near the base.

Replica sarcophagus of Nectanebo II of Egypt  
Egypt, about 345 BC  
Original held at the British Museum

# Alexander's Tomb in a Video Game

Alexander's lost tomb has proved fascinating to software developers as well as historians and archaeologists. The visuals in this space were created by the French video game company Ubisoft in 2017 as part of the game Assassin's Creed Origins. Players visit ancient Alexandria including the tomb of Alexander. The digital reconstruction was based on designs by Jean-Claude Golvin, who was inspired by the mausoleum of Emperor Augustus in Rome. The interior was created by Ubisoft's teams. It reflects the political objectives of Ptolemy I, who had the tomb built partly as propaganda to legitimise his succession as pharaoh of Egypt. The wall-paintings represent Alexander's birth; his education with Aristotle; his conquest of the world; and Alexander crowning Ptolemy. The marble statues are an artistic interpretation and in reality may have been Egyptian rather than Roman in style.

## Alexander Is But Clay ...

Despite his substantial military successes, Alexander was mortal like anyone else. Shakespeare highlights this point in his tragedy Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The young prince, skull in hand, muses how we all decompose to dust, and that even Alexander could therefore have been used to plug a hole in a beer barrel. Top left are the lines as printed in the earliest surviving version of the play, the so-called 'Bad Quarto'.

William Shakespeare, The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark  
London, 1603  
C.34.k.1

## Alexander Lives and Reigns

Alexander lives on in Greek folklore, as illustrated in this popular graphic novel. Alexander's sister (here Cynane, but often Thessalonike) survives as a gorgon or mermaid, who grabs hold of passing boats and demands to know whether Alexander still lives. The only way for the sailors to secure their release and avoid being dragged to the bottom of the sea, is to cry 'He lives and reigns!', a phrase echoed over the sea in the final panel.

Sophia Papadaki and Vasilis Zisis, Ho Megas Alexandros (Alexander the Great)  
Athens, 1953?, reprinted 1973?  
YF.2021.a.8072

# Acknowledgements

# Acknowledgements

Supported by Kusuma Trust and Assassin's Creed, a Ubisoft Original.

© 2017 Ubisoft Entertainment.

Patricia G. and Jonathan S. England –  
British Library Innovation Fund

With thanks to

The American Trust for the British Library

The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation

The Hellenic Foundation, London

Professor James H. Marrow and

Dr. Emily Rose

The British Library is grateful for the advice we have received from the members of the advisory board: Lindsay Allen, Faustina Doufikar-Aerts, Haila Manteghi, Scot McKendrick, Elisabeth O'Connell, Richard Stoneman and Guen Taietti

With thanks to all the British Library staff members who have contributed to the planning and delivery of the exhibition.

Curation: Adrian S. Edwards, Peter Toth, Ursula Sims-Williams, Yrja Thorsdottir

Project management: British Library

Exhibition design: Drinkall Dean

Graphic design: Lombaert studio

Construction: SetWorks

Graphic production: MacroArt

Lighting design: DHA

Quantity Surveyor: Fraser Randall

AV: Clay Interactive

Film editing: Laurie Garnons Williams

AV installation: Integrated Circles

Introductory film, images of Alexander:  
British Library

Copyright of the University of Manchester

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,  
MS. Ouseley add. 176, fol. 311b

Every effort has been made to contact the copyright owners of images and digital media in the exhibition. If you are a rights holder and are concerned that you did not grant permission, please contact the British Library's Exhibitions department.

This exhibition has been made possible as a result of the Government Indemnity Scheme. The British Library would like to thank HM Government for providing indemnity and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

# The Next Chapter in Alexander's Story

Delve further into the legends surrounding this fascinating figure with our events, workshops and online resources. A great place to start is our Alexander the Great web space where you can find articles written by our curators and detailed descriptions of items from our collection.

Learn more at [bl.uk/alexander-the-great](http://bl.uk/alexander-the-great)

Become a Member today and we'll refund your ticket

Revisit the making of Alexander's myth. Become a Member today and you can visit our exhibitions as many times as you like, for free. Plus get priority booking on events, access to our Members' Room and discounts in our cafés and shops.

Visit the Information Desk to join.  
[bl.uk/membership](https://bl.uk/membership)

### **For budding historians**

Attend free exhibition workshops and events  
for school students and teachers  
[bl.uk/learning](https://bl.uk/learning)

### **Support Us**

Help us keep a world of ideas and inspiration  
open for everyone  
[support.bl.uk](https://support.bl.uk)

### **Stay in touch**

[bl.uk/enewsletter](https://bl.uk/enewsletter)  
[@britishlibrary](https://twitter.com/britishlibrary)

## **Alexander's myth, explored.**

Hear from the experts.

Join us for events and courses inspired by the exhibition, onsite and online [bl.uk/more-news](http://bl.uk/more-news)

Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend

Tuesday 25 October / 19.00

Lindsay Allen, Tom Holland and Richard Stoneman reveal the man, leader and mythic icon.

Alexander: the Final Cut, with Oliver Stone  
in conversation

Thursday 8 December / 18.00

A screening of Oliver Stone's epic film,  
introduced by the director himself.

Alexander, Between Fantasy and History

Friday 27 January / 19:00

A lecture by Robin Lane Fox

# Videos Transcripts

# Reign: The Conqueror

It's here.

Ptolemy, you take it from the left. Do it!

Uh-huh.

Come on!

Who is this?

Who are you?

You're not taking away my game.

The horse is mine.

Cleitus, what the devil are you doing here?

What? What do you want Philotas?

Who is he?

Cleitus.

Just a low-rank knight of the cavalry shunned  
by all his ilk.

# Sikander

King, Porus!

Hail, King Porus!

My brave, fiery and iron-man warriors!

You're the children of great warriors who fought but never ran away from the battlefield.

You're the citizens of the country that had lost many children but never let its pride crush.

Today an egoistic foreigner wants you to bring the flag of India down.

Or else, he'll destroy us.

If you want to save your country's pride, if you want your country's flag to always hoist high then gather all your strengths and march.

And even after meeting death, divert the enemy.

And prove this to the world that you can't just live but die for your country.

# Performing Darius' Death

As close as the eyelashes of an eye, the  
armies stood face to face  
Alexander was ready, sword in hand and the  
battle signals were given.  
Alexander crushed Darius' army.  
Now Alexander planned to attack Iran itself.  
Alexander smashed Darius' army.  
Darius escaped and fled away.  
One of the king's nobles then said 'Darius is  
not a man of war'  
'He is no longer fit to wear the crown.'  
Then he drew a dagger and stabbed King  
Darius in the chest.

