

**Alexander the Great in the Land of the Rising Sun
A Journey in Manuscripts from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia**

Tuesday 11 June 2024, 3 p.m.

Venue: Weston Horton Room, Weston Library, Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG

Registration is required

Convenors: Nicholas Kontovas (Nizami Ganjavi Curator for the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Ottoman Turkish) and Peter Tóth (Cornelia Starks Curator of Greek Collections)

Few figures throughout history have been as immediately recognisable to so many people as Alexander the Great. Yet, beyond the vast empire which he built during his lifetime, Alexander's fame owes much to the fantastic adventures and deeds attributed to him in the centuries after his death. While many scholars operating in European institutions are no strangers to such legends from their own traditions, too often have they ignored related cycles from the very lands with which Alexander himself was so transfixed: the Middle East and Central Asia.

In this seminar, we will examine the transmission of the Alexander legend eastward in poetic and rhymed prose formats using, wherever possible, illuminated manuscripts held in the Bodleian Libraries. The first of these, MS. Barocci 17, is a 13th c. manuscript of an 8th c. recension of the earlier Greek Alexander romance by Pseudo-Callisthenes. It introduces a number of themes which we will see echoed with various modifications in later interpretations of the Alexander legend.

After touching briefly on a poetic version of the important Syriac-language Alexander romance, we will examine the figure of "The Two-Horned One" mentioned in the Chapter of the Cave in the Qur'ān and associated by many contemporary and later authors with Alexander. To do so, we will make use of MS. Bodl. Or. 793, a splendid Safavid copy of the Qur'ān plundered from the library of Tipu Sultan, the last sultan of Mysore.

From there, we will witness Alexander's entry into the Persian-speaking world, focusing on the *Shāhnāma* of Firdawsī. Accompanied by the vivid and dynamic illustrations of MS. Elliott 325, a late 15th c. manuscript of the text, we will see how the early Islamic Persian tradition represents a clear departure from late Sasanian Zoroastrian views of Alexander in incorporating positive attributes from the Hellenistic and Qur'ānic traditions.

Our next object of study is the model for most Islamicate Alexander legends in the Early Modern period: the *Iskandarnāma* of Nizāmī Ganjavī, the late 13th c. poet who incorporated the legend into his five-volume *Khamsa*. Here, we see the source material as examined through the lens of early versions divided into two sections; the first recounts the stories already familiar to us, whereas the latter interprets the implications of these stories for those who would become better people and, especially, better rulers. The attention to detail evident in the 16th c. MS. Douce 348 from Samarqand attests to the importance which later generations would attach to Nizāmī's *oeuvre*.

Finally, we will examine what many consider to be the most skilled interpretation of the Alexander legend in a Turkic-language context: the *Sadd-i Iskandarī* of the 15th c. Timurid poet and statesman, ‘Alīšēr Navā’ī. Two splendid manuscripts – MS. Elliott 339 (from the lifetime of Navā’ī himself) and MS. Elliott 340 – will help to illustrate not only how intimately connected Alexander had become to the Turco-Persian image of the ideal king, but how lasting an impact Nizāmī’s Late Medieval reworking of the epic had left on Early Modern Islamic poetic traditions.

Rather than presenting a single overarching argument about the interpretation of Alexander in these stories, the purpose of this workshop is to provide an overview of the ways in which the figure has been portrayed in poetry and in book arts in the Middle East and Central Asia from the Early Middle Ages to the Early Modern period. By tracing the same motifs in poetic and visual depictions of Alexander through his many incarnations in these various traditions, we learn not only about the artistic, religious, intellectual, and social contexts in the past which created them, but how the people living in those contexts viewed their own past as well.