

## Alexander the Great: The View from Persia

Western scholars are used to basing their biographies of Alexander the Great on ancient sources, especially employing Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Plutarch, and Arrian. A quite different biographical tradition, however, arose in Persia, based on the work of two poets, Firdawsi (c. 940-1020) and Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209). Both poets are required reading in Iran's educational system. Students start to read a simplified version of Firdawsi—the Homer of Iran—already in first grade, for example; and readings continue all the way through twelfth grade. Outside school and throughout life, Iranians absorb tales of Alexander the Great via Naqqali, a form of Persian theater often held in traditional coffee houses, in which a narrator brings Firdawsi's work to life through recitations, gestures, and improvisations. The alternate view of Alexander the Great provided by Firdawsi and Nizami is therefore the cornerstone of an Iranian's view of the West.

While in recent years classical scholarship has begun to embrace Firdawsi's treatment of Alexander the Great in his *Shah-Namah*, or *Book of Kings*, and Nizami's *Iksander Namah*, or *Book of Alexander* (Stoneman 2008, 24-44; Selden 2013, 142-43), there is still much to explore. We have undertaken a fresh translation of the two works, and this paper will serve to introduce our initial results. The Persian view includes many tales of Alexander the Great that are unrecognizable to the West. For example, according to the Persian traditions, although Alexander the Great came from the West, he was himself at least sometimes considered half-Persian, he was monotheistic, and he even made a pilgrimage to Mecca. The reason for the differences between the western and the Persian biographies of Alexander? The Persians wanted to claim Alexander, the man who conquered and ruled Persia, as one of their own, through both his ethnicity and his religion.

## Bibliography

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