

Alexander the Great Conqueror and Captive of Death: His Various Images in Byzantine Art

George Galavaris

Volume 16, Number 1, 1989

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073324ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073324ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Galavaris, G. (1989). Alexander the Great Conqueror and Captive of Death: His Various Images in Byzantine Art. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 16(1), 12–18. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073324ar>

Article abstract

La personnalité et les exploits d'Alexandre ont enchanté les écrivains, les poètes et les artistes. Ce phénomène a contribué à la création des divers images d'Alexandre dans l'art et la littérature byzantins. Les plus anciennes de ces images, remontant à l'Antiquité, sont celles du chasseur idéal, du héros, du bon prince.

Le *Roman d'Alexandre*, la poésie byzantine épique, les commentaires sur le livre de Daniel et autres textes des Pères de l'Église, par leurs illustrations et leurs oeuvres d'art apparentées, ont associé Alexandre aux héros de l'Antiquité et de l'Ancien Testament, le liant ainsi au monde chrétien. *L'Ascension d'Alexandre*, l'un des thèmes les plus populaires du cycle pictural du roman, étendit l'empire du Grand Conquérant aux cieux, tout en soulignant ses limites, celles d'un mortel.

Puis, aux époques byzantine tardive et post-byzantine, l'image d'Alexandre devint associée à un genre poétique traitant de l'éphémère humain. Selon une légende, le moine Sisoès découvrit la tombe et les ossements d'Alexandre. C'est pourquoi Alexandre est représenté dans un sarcophage ou foulé aux pieds par Charon. Ces compositions sont populaires dans les fresques des Monastères du Mont-Athos et dans la peinture d'icône crétoise. Alexandre y symbolise la futilité de toute gloire terrestre.

Mais ces moines et ces poètes qui méditèrent sur la mort du héros et sur le destin de l'homme ne voulurent pas tout de même le voir disparaître dans un tombeau ou demeurer captif de la mort. Ainsi dans quelques icônes post-byzantines, Alexandre devient à la fois symbole de l'éphémère et de l'homme juste dont l'âme, à l'heure du trépas, est reçue par l'archange Michel. Son élévation au Paradis est le thème des légendes que l'on trouve dans la tradition littéraire traitant d'Alexandre.

*Alexander the Great Conqueror and Captive of Death: His Various Images in Byzantine Art**

GEORGE GALAVARIS

McGill University

To Kurt Weitzmann

RESUME

La personnalité et les exploits d'Alexandre ont enchanté les écrivains, les poètes et les artistes. Ce phénomène a contribué à la création des divers images d'Alexandre dans l'art et la littérature byzantins. Les plus anciennes de ces images, remontant à l'Antiquité, sont celles du chasseur idéal, du héros, du bon prince.

Le *Roman d'Alexandre*, la poésie byzantine épique, les commentaires sur le livre de Daniel et autres textes des Pères de l'Eglise, par leurs illustrations et leurs oeuvres d'art apparentées, ont associé Alexandre aux héros de l'Antiquité et de l'Ancien Testament, le liant ainsi au monde chrétien. *L'Ascension d'Alexandre*, l'un des thèmes les plus populaires du cycle pictural du roman, étendit l'empire du Grand Conquérant aux cieux, tout en soulignant ses limites, celles d'un mortel.

Puis, aux époques byzantine tardive et post-byzantine, l'image d'Alexandre devint associée à un

genre poétique traitant de l'éphémère humain. Selon une légende, le moine Sisoès découvra la tombe et les ossements d'Alexandre. C'est pourquoi Alexandre est représenté dans un sarcophage ou foulé aux pieds par Charon. Ces compositions sont populaires dans les fresques des Monastères du Mont-Athos et dans la peinture d'icône crétoise. Alexandre y symbolise la futilité de toute gloire terrestre.

Mais ces moines et ces poètes qui méditèrent sur la mort du héros et sur le destin de l'homme ne voulurent pas tout de même le voir disparaître dans un tombeau ou demeurer captif de la mort. Ainsi dans quelques icônes post-byzantines, Alexandre devient à la fois symbole de l'éphémère et de l'homme juste dont l'âme, à l'heure du trépas, est reçue par l'archange Michel. Son élévation au Paradis est le thème des légendes que l'on trouve dans la tradition littéraire traitant d'Alexandre.

Alexander's campaign against the Persians revived bitter memories in the minds of the Greeks. These memories probably prompted the architect Deinocrates (or Stasicrates) to propose to Alexander the creation of the eighth wonder of

the world: a colossal figure of the world conqueror carved out of the marble rock of Mt. Athos—the rock Poseidon hurled at one of the giants when they warred against the gods. The young king was to be represented holding a city in his left hand and “with his right should pour forth a river running with roaring water into the sea.”¹ Alexander did not approve of the proposal, and his image was never carved on Mt. Athos.² However, it was des-

* This study was originally presented as a lecture at the Alexander Symposium at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, on 7 May 1983. It is printed here in a revised form. I owe sincere thanks to Professor Neda Leipen, Toronto, who was the soul of the Alexander Symposium, and Professor Rigas Bertos, Montreal, for his patience in listening. For photographs, I am indebted to Professor Kurt Weitzmann, Princeton, N.J.; Dr. Vera Zaleskaya, Leningrad; Dr. Aimilia Geroulanou, Athens; and Dr. Soterios Kadas, Thessaloniki, who went to Mt. Athos especially to photograph the monuments reproduced here for me.

1 Plutarch, *Alexander*, LXXII, 3-4, in *Lives*, The Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1919), vii, 424, 427. The incident was also reported earlier by Strabo, Book xvi, ch. 1:23, ed. A. Meineke (Leipzig, 1853), iii, 894.

2 Cf. S. Kadas, *To Hagion Oros* (Athens, 1980), 9. Later artists were fascinated by this daring project and imagined the heroic or divine colossus in different ways, as exemplified

tinued to be represented on the walls of the monasteries established by Byzantine monks on that same mountain, when it became the garden of the Virgin Mary. This Christian image grew out of meditations on Alexander's destiny by Church Fathers, monks, emperors, poets, and artists. It evolved from earlier Byzantine images of Alexander that must be discussed first (Fig. 4).

In the formative years of the Byzantine Empire, the Hellenistic tradition that related Alexander to the gods died out. Among the last manifestations of this concept were a golden plate from Abukir (fourth or fifth century) and a relief from Messeni (fourth century), now in the Louvre, which represents Alexander with the lion skin of Heracles.³ The Eastern Christian artists were enchanted by Alexander the great hunter-warrior-ruler—the ideal prince who chases wild animals, mostly lions, for the benefit of his people. In this image one sees the continuity of a notion of kingship that can be traced as far back as the Assyrian kings. The royal hunt has always been considered symbolic of transcendent victory, of the triumph of good over evil. In accordance with this tradition many hunting scenes in late antique and early Christian times have been interpreted as evocations of Alexander the victor. He is represented as the ideal hunter as late as the seventh century in a fragment of an Egyptian textile, now in Washington, D.C. (Fig. 5).⁴ The fragment contains two mirror

images depicting “Alexander the Macedonian,” as a Greek inscription attests, on either side of the Tree of Life which indicates the symbolic meaning of the hunt. The theme continues throughout Byzantine art. However, much of the concept of the perfect prince adorned with Aristotle's “megalopsychia,” embodied in the person of Alexander, passed on to the Byzantine Emperor who became the hero and the symbolic hunter.⁵

The image of the hero was a powerful one in ancient Greek culture. From Heracles to Achilles and finally to Alexander, heroism was trumpeted and made public. In the Christian world in general, and in Byzantium in particular, the emphasis, on the other hand, was placed on the martyr. Martyrs' deeds tended not to be revealed; there was only the fact of their sacrifice. And yet in the hero there was the element of the martyr to whom Alexander was to be related. Early Church Fathers compared Alexander the hero to the heroes of faith. John Chrysostom, for example, said of Alexander that virtuous and great as he had been, he was not like the martyrs of faith.⁶ But the people, the scribes, and poets who produced the different verse and prose versions of Alexander's romanticized deeds did see him as a martyr. John Chrysostom wrote that in his time people attached Alexander's coins to their heads and feet.⁷ As late as the early nineteenth century, when Dodwell visited Greece, he mentioned that it was customary for women to wear coins of Alexander the Great as amulets.⁸ Alexander's early “unjust” death, at a time when it seemed nothing could stop him from achieving his heart's desire, led to his being viewed as a martyr. This is indicated, for example, in the narration of Alexander's testament and death in at least one of the versions of the Tale of Alexander.⁹

His personality, exuberant nature, romantic beauty, generosity, and early death enchanted writers, poets, and artists who wove Alexander's cloak, and all these characteristics were often cited in the titles of manuscripts containing Alexander's saga.¹⁰ They contributed to the creation of his various images that appeared in Byzantium, parallel to one another or even woven together: the ideal prince-emperor, the hero for whom the earth was not enough, the Christian martyr whom

by a drawing by Pietro da Cortona made in the mid-seventeenth century to honour Pope Alexander VII, now in the British Museum, and a 1721 engraving by Johann Fischer von Erlach, in the National Library of Vienna (Fig. 4) (N. Yalouris, “Alexander and His Heritage,” *The Search for Alexander*, An Exhibition [New York, 1980], 10-20, esp. 14-19, fig. 9; P. Huber, *Athos, Leben, Glaube, Kunst*, 3rd ed. [Zurich and Freiburg im Br., 1982], figs. 2-3).

- 3 A. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniaten* (Budapest, 1943), 14, 85-88, 102-103; A. and E. Alföldi, *Die Kontorniat-Medallions*, *Antike Münzen und Geschnittene Steine*, vi, 1 (Berlin, 1976); Royal Ontario Museum, *The Search for Alexander, Supplement to the Catalogue* (Toronto, 1983), 35, S-50; M. C. Ross, “Notes on Byzantine Gold- and Silversmith's Work,” *Journal of Walters Art Gallery*, 1 (1955), 59-67; A. Grabar, *L'Empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Strasbourg, 1936, repr. London, 1971), 93ff.; H. J. Gleixner, “Alexander der Grosse,” *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst* (Stuttgart, 1966), 1, cols. 96-99; H. J. Gleixner, *Das Alexanderbild der Byzantiner*, diss., Munich, 1961, a very important study with emphasis on literary sources. I am indebted to Prof. Marcell Restle of the University of Munich who made this work available to me. See also F. Pfister, *Alexander der Grosse in der byzantinischen Literatur und in neugriechischen Volksbüchern*, *Probleme der neugriechischen Literatur*, III (Berlin, 1960); cf. M. Bieber, *Alexander the Great in Greek and Roman Art* (Chicago, 1964).
- 4 K. Weitzmann, ed., *The Age of Spirituality, Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to the Seventh Century*, *Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, November 1977-February 1978 (New York, 1979), 91, 92 no. 81; cf. 89 no. 79.

- 5 Grabar, *Empereur*, 137ff.; Gleixner, *Alexanderbild*, 11-22.
- 6 J. P. Migne, *Patrologia cursus completus, series graeca* (Paris, 1857-66), I, xi, cols. 581-82. Henceforth *PG*.
- 7 *PG*, xl, col. 240.
- 8 Cited by Ph. Koukoulès, *Byzantinon bios kai politismos*, 6 vols. (Athens, 1948-55), vi, 265.
- 9 D. Holton, *The Tale of Alexander, The Rhymed Version*, *Byzantine kai Neellenike Bibliothekē*, 1 (Thessaloniki, 1974), 176ff., vv. 2680ff., 2770ff., 2823ff.
- 10 G. Wagner, *Carmina graeca medii aevi* (Leipzig, 1874), ix-x.

the people wished to see resting in the green pastures of the redeemed.¹¹

The *Alexander Romance* is generally known under the name of pseudo-Callisthenes, but in fact it has no connection with the historian Callisthenes of Olynthus who accompanied Alexander on his expedition. The source of this mistaken attribution is to be found in the titles of several manuscripts.¹² Regardless of its authorship and sources, this romance was one of the Byzantines' most beloved readings. From the fifth century on, it underwent numerous revisions and adaptations. Their authors used the material rather freely, so that the various versions differ greatly.¹³ A Greek version of the Romance in verse appears for the first time in 1388 in cod. Venice, Marciana 408.¹⁴ In addition there exists another, post-Byzantine version in prose to which the modern Greek rendering, the so-called *Phyllada tou Megalexandrou*, is related. It was published for the first time in Venice in 1680 and has been reissued several times since then.¹⁵ Finally, there is a rhymed version, illustrated with woodcuts, which originated in Zakynthos shortly after 1500.¹⁶

Among the extant Eastern manuscripts, there are a number with illustrations: two Greek codices of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (one in Oxford, Bodl. Lib. cod. Barocci 17, with much-flaked miniatures, and the other in the Hellenic Institute in Venice with a series of important full-page illustrations), two Serbian manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Belgrade and Sofia respectively,¹⁷ and several Armenian codices with dates ranging from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries.¹⁸ All these codices, although late in date, have a common root in an early Greek model. Illustrations made for the *Romance*, however, are also found in other types of manuscripts, such as hunting treatises. Thus, the tenth-century *Cynegetika* of pseudo-Oppian (now in Venice, Bibl. Marciana cod. gr. 479) includes three scenes stemming from the *Romance*, depicting Alexander bringing Bucephalus to Philip, Bucephalus imprisoned behind iron bars (on the upper part of the miniature), and Alexander chasing Darius (Fig. 6).¹⁹

Of the preserved complete illustrated manuscripts, the most precious is the one in the Hellenic Institute in Venice.²⁰ Xyngopoulos, who first published the manuscript fully, tentatively assigned it to Crete and the fourteenth century. When Gal-

11 Despite major works by philologists on various problems (contributions made by Greek scholars are of special significance), a complete, systematic study of all these aspects of Alexander's image in Byzantium and modern Greece considering the evidence of both texts and images has not as yet appeared. For the image of Alexander in the West see G. Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge, 1956; repr. 1967), and for more recent bibliography, especially on the legend of Alexander, C. Frugoni, *La fortuna di Alessandro Magno dall'antichità al Medioevo* (Florence, 1978).

12 D. J. A. Ross, *Alexander Historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature*, Warburg Institute Surveys, 1 (London, 1963), 5 and n. 2.

13 For the textual problems, dates, and relations of extant manuscripts and proposed theories in general see R. Merkelbach, *Die Quellen des griechischen Alexander-roman* (Munich, 1954); Pfister, *Alexander*; Gleixner, *Alexanderbild*, 61ff.; for the modern Greek versions see G. Veloudis, *Der neugriechische Alexander Tradition in Bewahrung und Wandel* (Munich, 1968). For a brief presentation of the various problems and more complete bibliography see D. Holton, *He Hellenike paradosi tou mythistorematos tou Megalou Alexandrou*, Keimena kai Meletai Neoellenikes Philologias, ed. G. Zoras, LXXIII (Athens, 1973), and also *Tusculum-Lexikon*, 3rd ed. (Munich and Zurich, 1983), 35-37 with bibliography. The exact nature of the "versions" is a subject of discussion among philologists. The question is whether there are indeed versions of the *Romance* or groups of texts (*Textgruppen*) that present similarities among themselves. The latter view is supported by Veloudis, *Alexander Tradition*, 20-21.

14 For the latest edition see S. Reichmann, *Der byzantinische Alexander-gedicht nach dem cod. Marcianus 408*, Beiträge z. klass. Philologie, XIII (Meisenheim am Glan, 1963).

15 K. Mitsakis, *Der byzantinische Alexander-roman nach dem cod. Vindob. theol. gr. 244*, Miscell. Byz. Monascenia, VII (Munich, 1967), K. Mitsakis, "Diegesis peri tou Alexandrou," *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher*, XX (1970), 228-301.

16 Holton, *Tale of Alexander*, with an excellent introduction.

17 V. R. Petković, "Le Roman d'Alexandre illustré de la Bibl. Nat. de Beograd," *Studi bizantini e neoellenici*, VI (1940), 341ff. and pls. xciv-ciii; A. Grabar, *Recherches sur les influences orientales dans l'art balkanique* (Paris, 1928), 108 and pls. xii-xvi (miniatures of the manuscript in Sofia no. 771 [381]); K. Weitzmann, *Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1984), 104; Holton, *Paradosi*, 22-23.

18 A list of the most important illustrated Armenian manuscripts and bibliography is in Weitzmann, *Mythology*, 104, to which the following should be added: P. N. Akinian, "Die Handschriftliche Überlieferung der armenischen Übersetzung des Alexanderromans von Pseudo-Kallisthenes," *Byzantion*, XIII (1938), 201-206, and the more recent A. M. Wolohojian, *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes* (New York and London, 1969). Among the richest extant illustrated Armenian manuscripts are Venice, San Lazzaro, cod. 424, thirteenth or fourteenth century, in F. Macler, *L'enluminure arménienne profane* (Paris, 1928), 21, pls. 1-xiv; Vienna, Mechitarist-Congregation, cod. 319, from 1694, most recently in Heide and Helmut Buschhausen, *Armenische Handschriften der Mechitaristen-Congregation in Wien*, 2nd ed. (Vienna, 1981), 169f., no. 37; and Paris, Bibl. Nat., cod. arm. 291, from 1712, in Macler, *Enluminure*, 26, pls. XLVI-LIX. Special mention should also be made of cod. Jerusalem, Armenian Patriarchate, MS 473 from 1536, in N. Bogasian, *Grand Catalogue of St. James' Manuscripts*, 7 vols. (Jerusalem, 1966-77), II, 460-66, figs. 24-26, and B. Narkiss, ed., *Armenian Art Treasures of Jerusalem* (London, 1980), 92.

19 Weitzmann, *Mythology*, 104ff., 118, and figs. 108-109.

20 A. Xyngopoulos, *Les Miniatures du roman d'Alexandre le Grand dans le codex de l'institut hellénique de Venise* (Athens and Venice, 1966), a complete publication with several reproductions in colour; L. Gallagher, "The Alexander Romance in the Hellenic Institute at Venice: Some Notes on the Initial Miniature," *Thesaurismata*, XVI (1979), 170-207.

lagger subsequently discussed the manuscript's textual problems, picture cycles, relatives, and other related questions, he suggested that it was a product of the Empire of Trebizond, commissioned by a member of the ruling dynasty, the Grand Comneni, most likely in the second half of the fourteenth century. Its miniatures show how artists conceived Alexander, for they were the ones who in essence interpreted the legend delivered to them by writers and poets, constantly adapting their illustrations to the changes made in the text itself. However, they never broke the pictorial tradition they inherited from the Hellenistic period. In turn, writers, poets, and illustrators all responded to the demands of the people who perpetuated Alexander's images in their oral tradition.

The identity of the emperor represented in the title miniature, fol. 1r, has been disputed (Fig. 7). Xyngopoulos saw it as a portrait of Alexander, while Gallagher suggested it was a portrait of the ruler who had commissioned the manuscript. It is immaterial for this discussion which one of the two views is more likely correct, because in the illustrations of the text the image of Alexander is that of a contemporary Palaeologan emperor. Although Christian insignia have been avoided whenever possible, the crossform of the *prependulia* has been retained in proper Byzantine fashion.²¹ By such means the illustrator suggests a Christianization of Alexander's image. Occasionally, as Gleixner has observed, Alexander wears a starry garment, which transforms him into a *cosmocrator*.

This Christianization takes another form in the story of Alexander's visit to Kandaki, the queen of the Ethiopians. The queen places a panel portrait of Alexander, which a painter has secretly produced, in a chest as a holy relic (Fig. 8).²² Furthermore, throughout the illustrations the artist has extended this rendering—consciously I believe—to representations of statues of kings or other persons that take the form of icons or panels enclosed in frames. However conventional this system may be, it reflects a desire to Christianize the heroes of the *Romance* and to turn away from constant pictorial references to the pagan past.

Apart from the *Romance*, in the epic poem *Digenes Akritas*, the story of Basil Twyborn Borderer, probably written in the eleventh century, there are very interesting echoes of the Alexander theme—in fact textual interpolations from the pseudo-Callisthenes *Romance*, intended to create a

parallel between the hero Digenes and Alexander.²³ In this epic, Alexander retains the image of the legendary hero to whom Digenes aspires. But there is something more: in the fabulous mosaic of the imaginary palace of Digenes, amidst the wondrous paradise, painted fair in gold mosaic, are the triumphs of Alexander “the wise.” He is placed next to the heroes of antiquity on the one hand and the heroes of the Old Testament on the other. Next to him stand Samson, Moses, and Joshua.²⁴ A visual relative of this literary image is a silver bowl of the twelfth century, now in Leningrad, where Alexander ascending into the heavens is related to Samson (Fig. 9).²⁵ The poem and the bowl represent another attempt to bring Alexander into the world of the heroes of the Christian God.

This “sanctification” of Alexander occurred much earlier in exegetical literature—expositions of the holy books written by Church Fathers—for he had already entered the prophetic books of the peoples with whom he had come into contact.²⁶ Of special interest is the commentary of the Book of Daniel and its illustrations. Daniel, whose grave was in the city of Susa (where one of the instances of Alexander's deification occurred), presents two allegories (7:1-28; cf. also 2:31f.). In one of them he describes four beasts. The first two were interpreted as images of the kingdoms of the Babylonians (Nabuchodonosor) and the Persians (Darius), while the fourth one was seen as an image of the Roman Empire (Augustus). The Church Fathers interpreted the third of these beasts, resembling a winged leopard, as an image of Alexander the conqueror, who destroys the Persian Empire in accordance with the plan of God.²⁷ The illustrators followed this interpretation and identified the beasts accordingly, as a miniature from the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes shows. Although the illustration (Fig. 10) belongs to an eleventh-century copy now in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, cod. 1186, the archetype of the *Topography* was written in Alexandria in the sixth century and was illustrated in the same area.²⁸ Alexander “the

23 For a discussion of these parallels see Veloudis, *Tradition*.

24 J. Mavrogordato, ed. and trans., *Digenes Akrites* (Oxford, 1956), 219, 221, 223, vv. 3350-3409.

25 C. Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri elevati per griphos ad aerem*, Istituto storico Italiano per il medioevo, Studi storici, Fasc. 80-82 (Rome, 1973), 174ff.; *Iskusstvo Vizantij v sobranija SSSR*, Exhibition Catalogue, Leningrad, 3 vols. (Moscow, 1977), II, 83, no. 553, with more complete bibliography.

26 Gleixner, *Alexanderbild*, 52ff. with earlier references.

27 John Chrysostom was one of the early Fathers who proposed such an interpretation, *PG*, LXXXI, col. 1417; Gleixner, *Alexanderbild*, 54-55; cf. also Cary, *Medieval Alexander*, 120.

28 For a general discussion of the codex see P. Huber, *Heilige*

21 See, for example, fols. 44r, 52v, 53v, etc., Xyngopoulos, *Miniatures*, pls. xxv, 51; xxx, 62; xxxi, 63; Gleixner, *Alexanderbild*, 123.

22 For a colour reproduction see Xyngopoulos, *Miniatures*, pl. xi.

Macedon," represented in the guise of a Byzantine emperor, is part of the prophetic vision and an instrument of the plan of God. This interpretation can be related to the Byzantine imperial ideology—the *kalos basileus* who is protected by the Lord and is led by him to victory. However, Alexander's position within God's plan acquires another dimension in the course of the iconographic development of this vision of Daniel in Byzantine art. Developed into an independent iconographic theme, it found a place in the *Painter's Manual* by Dionysius of Fournia, and because it refers to the Last Day (esp. Daniel 7:9f.), it was included in representations of the Last Judgment in both frescoes and icons.²⁹ Thus, Alexander's image, placed among the other three kings of the ancient world, was given an eschatological meaning.

From the pictorial cycle of the *Alexander Romance*, artists greatly favoured the Ascension or Ascent of Alexander. It has been ascertained that many Byzantine representations of the subject had an influence on Western art, through the presence of Greek artists who worked in the West, through the circulation of minor works of art, mostly ivories and textiles, or even directly through an illustrated pseudo-Callisthenes manuscript that may have entered western Europe via southern Italy.³⁰ Although textual versions of the story vary, its nucleus remains the same.³¹ This is also true for the representations, which in the East repeat the basic rendering of the theme, as can be seen by comparing a fourteenth-century relief from Mistras to three earlier examples:³² a ninth- or tenth-century ivory, now in Darmstadt; the well-known twelfth- or thirteenth-century relief on the church of San Marco in Venice; and a thirteenth-century textile from Regensburg, now in Berlin, dependent on Byzantine prototypes (Figs. 11-12).³³

Berge, 48ff.; for its complete illustration see K. Weitzmann and G. Galavaris, *A Catalogue of the Illustrated Manuscripts in St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai* (forthcoming).

29 See A. Nyngopoulos, *Museion Benaki, Katalogos ton Eikonon* (Athens, 1936), 54-55, for examples and references; and M. Chatzidakis, *Icones de Saint-Georges des Grecs et de la Collection de l'Institut Hellénique de Venise* (Venice, 1962), 88-89.

30 See Ross, *Alexander historiatus*, 54; and M. Bendinelli Predelli, "La Storia di Alessandro Magno palazzo Chiaramonte di Palermo," *Prospettiva*, Rivista di storia dell'arte antica e moderna, no. 46, offprint (1986), 13-21.

31 For a brief account see Yalouris, "Alexander and His Heritage," 16.

32 The relief, first published by A. Orlandos, was part of the exhibition *The Search for Alexander*, 190, 191c.

33 Reproduced and discussed in Settis-Frugoni's excellent study *Historia Alexandri*, which deals with the textual and pictorial transmutations of the theme. New material is presented in a forthcoming article by Ch. Bouras in *Δελτίον Χριστιανικής Αρχαιολογικής Ηεταρείας* (1989).

Any discussion of the iconography of the scene must take into account—among other related themes—the representation of the Ascension of the Prophet Elijah. In many instances the scene depicts the fiery chariot heraldically arranged in the manner of the rendering of Alexander's Ascension.³⁴ A seventeenth-century Greek icon, for example, can demonstrate the compositional affinity of the two themes (Fig. 13). The relationship is not accidental and does not pertain to forms only, but exists in various ways in the Alexander saga. For instance, in the Ethiopian Christian *Romance of Alexander*, he is considered a companion of Elijah.³⁵ For the Byzantines, however, the prophet of the fiery chariot was closely related to the cult of Apollo-Helios. That is why Elijah's chapels were always erected on top of hills and mountains. In the mind of the artist who used Alexander's Ascension as a model for the Ascent of Elijah, Alexander continued to be associated with a solar divinity.

The Ascension or the Exploration of the Heavens by Alexander has a symbolic meaning. In its nucleus, the story can be traced back to very early sources such as the legend of Etana, the old Babylonian deified king of the first dynasty of Kish in the third millennium B.C., who flies to heaven because he wishes to obtain immortality. Representations of the event occur in Akkadian seals, ca. 2350.³⁶ The search for immortality is not stated in the Alexander legend; the meaning of this search is too manifold to be discussed here. It is only possible to point out that its pictorial rendering is closely related to imperial images representing the triumph of the emperor riding his chariot or quadriga and that, in general, the composition can be considered an image of triumph and glory. The relation of such imperial images to the Ascension can be demonstrated by comparing the Darmstadt ivory, referred to earlier, to a fourth-century medallion of Constantius II (Figs. 11 and 14). Similarities include the raised right hand, a sign of the *cosmocrator*, and the globe held in the left hand.³⁷ The triumphal meaning of the Ascension is further suggested by the quadriga of the sun and even by the heraldic arrangement of the griffins indicating a "master of animals."³⁸

34 See O. Demus, "Elijah and Alexander," in *Studies in Memory of David Talbot Rice*, ed. G. Robertson and G. Henderson (Edinburgh, 1975), 64-67; cf. also G. Galavaris, *The Icon in the Life of the Church*, Iconography of Religions, xxiv, 8, Institute of Religious Iconography, University of Groningen (Leiden, 1981), pl. x, c.b.

35 E. A. Thompson Wallis Budge, *The Alexander Book in Ethiopia* (London, 1933), 236-37.

36 Cf. also "The Flight of Gilgamesh," in Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri*, 48-49, fig. 9.

37 Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri*, 96, 183-84.

38 For a full discussion of the meaning of the griffins in

On the whole, the Latin West interpreted the Ascension in a negative way. Through this celestial journey Alexander is seen as an Antichrist. No man may ascend to heaven who has not deserved to do so by good works.³⁹ On the contrary, the Christian East saw the legend in a positive light only. The world is not enough for the hero who desires to penetrate the secrets of the cosmos. The heavens belong to him too. But by exploring the heavens, the Christian hero realizes the limitations of his glory before the glory of God.

In the thirteenth century, when a new wave of humanism invaded the spirit of Byzantium and the political strength and glory of the Empire waned, a spirit of pessimism and melancholy was introduced into literature and art. A special type of religious poetry was created, written in the *koine*, the language of the people, dealing with the transience of earthly existence. Although it has been suggested that one of the earliest works of this genre, *A Sinner's Prayer*, may have been composed in the twelfth century, most known works cannot be dated earlier than the end of the thirteenth century. Among them, *An Alphabet of Contrition and Soul-Aiding of the Transience of this World* is well known.⁴⁰ Alexander's image came to be associated with this literature. It is now that he entered Athos, the Holy Mountain, as captive of death.

Briefly, the story of this new "Alexander Adventure" has been reconstructed as follows: sometime before the year 1484, a certain Sisoës composed a poem that was a meditation on death over an open grave.⁴¹ The illustration for the poem was the source of frescoes, painted on the walls of the monasteries, in which the text of the poem was enclosed; its function was to explain the scene. In the process, the author of the poem was confused with St. Sisoës, the famous anchorite of the Egyptian desert, who was now depicted meditating over the open grave. This phase of the development of the theme is exemplified, among other representations, by a sixteenth-century fresco in the narthex of the *catholikon* of the Stavroniketa monastery on Mt. Athos (Fig. 15). But at the beginning of the same century, in a number of the Sisoës compositions, the grave and skeleton were iden-

tified with those of Alexander. Thus, he became a component part of a composition whose meaning is the futility of earthly life. This pictorial association of Alexander with images of transience has deeper roots.

In late antique philosophy, Alexander was conceived as equal to all men before the face of death.⁴² The Christian Fathers transmitted this thought to the Byzantine world and eventually the idea was introduced into later recensions of the *Alexander Romance*. For example, Alexander seeks in vain the Fountain of Life; his Ascension serves to remind him of his humanity. It was only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that the *Romance* was enlarged with didactic reflections on the vanity of human glory and Alexander was presented as an image of Fate to which all people are subjected.

As a general symbol of this transitoriness, an image of the human confrontation with the grave, and not as an historical image, Alexander was incorporated into the Sisoës compositions in the sixteenth century. At first he is introduced by the name "Alexandros" only, cited near the sarcophagus that contains the skeleton, as seen in a fresco in the monastery of Dionysiou on Mt. Athos (Fig. 16a, b).⁴³ Some later representations depicting Alexander trampled by Charon himself should be interpreted in the same spirit, as a symbol of our common human fate. The fact that there are examples—such as an eighteenth-century fresco in the monastery of Gregoriou on Mt. Athos (Fig. 17)—in which the crowned figure is not identified attests to this interpretation. It is the symbol of the mighty and their fate. In other instances, however, as in a 1765 fresco in the monastery of Philotheou, Mt. Athos, Death, in the form of a black skeleton, treads on a crowned figure wearing the costume of a Byzantine emperor, identified as "Alexandros," and attacks the figure with his huge scythe (Fig. 18).⁴⁴

However, as the Sisoës theme was repeated in frescoes and icons, a later monk who could no longer understand the name "Alexandros" at the sarcophagus brought about a change. He qualified "Alexandros" as "the Macedonian" and/or "the King of the Hellenes." Thus the symbol of transience became concrete: once more it was the historical Alexander. Another legend was born according to which the anchorite Sisoës discovered Alexander's grave in the desert. Long

relation to Alexander, see Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri*, 209ff., 331ff.

39 Cary, *Medieval Alexander*, 134f., 291.

40 In general, see K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 1897), translated into Greek (Athens, 1964), 822ff.; for the text of the *Alphabet* see Wagner, *Carmina Graeca*, 242-47.

41 The development of the Sisoës image from the textual and pictorial points of view has been admirably discussed by R. Stichel, *Spät- und Nachbyzantinischer Vergänglichkeitsdarstellungen*, Byzantina Vindobonensia, v (Vienna, 1971), 84f., 91ff., 100ff.

42 Marcus Aurelius, among others, provides valuable evidence for this concept. See W. Hoffmann, *Das literarische Portrait Alexanders des Grossen im griechisch-römischen Altertum* (Leipzig, 1907), 80ff.; Stichel, *Vergänglichkeit*, 105-106.

43 Stichel, *Vergänglichkeit*, 83, 86, 111, fig. 11.

44 Stichel, *Vergänglichkeit*, 41, fig. 5.

inscriptions accompanying these large compositions—as for example in a 1566 fresco in the monastery of Barlaam at Meteora—refer to the historical Alexander, to the legend, and to the poem of futility (Fig. 19).⁴⁵

And yet the same monks and poets who sang the beauty and the glory of the “Christian” Alexander and meditated on the death of a hero did not wish to see him vanish as dust in a grave. He was not to remain a captive of death. While the Armenian Alexander saga compared Alexander’s life to that of Christ⁴⁶ and the Ethiopian Christian *Alexander Romance* presented the hero crying out to God to receive his soul (God granted his request amid thunder and lightning),⁴⁷ the Greeks sought the aid of the archangel Michael.

In a number of post-Byzantine Greek icons—most of them unpublished and found in churches and monasteries on the Greek islands—Michael is depicted in full military armour trampling on a half-naked man who seems to be sleeping. The archangel holds his sword point down in his right hand and lifts up a small feminine figure in swaddling clothes triumphantly in his left. This is the soul he has rescued from the dead man. In some of these icons, the dead man is identified by inscription as King Alexander.⁴⁸ It has been said, and with good reason, that Michael is an angel of death, or that death is conceived as an angel and that in representations like that one just described Michael should be seen as a substitute for the figure of Charon.⁴⁹ In other words, this composi-

tion should be seen as another pictorial version of humanity’s common fate, of human transience.

A detailed study of Michael’s role at the hour of death, which should consider dogmatic precepts of the Church and certain pictorial themes such as the Death of the Just Man and the Last Judgment, may bring this interpretation into sharper focus. Here it can only be suggested that the personified Death and the archangel Michael should be kept apart. While Charon is the personification of Death who strikes man with his scythe after God’s command—a very common concept in folklore—Michael is the *angelos psychopompos* par excellence.⁵⁰ He comes to receive a person’s soul either to rescue it from the demons who sometimes are also depicted near the dying man or to present it to its Judge; in at least one known icon, the dead man is referred to as “merciless and unrepentant.” In general, however, inscriptions on these icons point to the terrible hour of death.

In light of this evidence, it can be suggested that in these icons Alexander stands, on the one hand, as a symbol of humanity’s fate, its mortal nature: not even this great king and world conqueror could escape the terrible hour of death; his crown, in some icons fallen off his head, has proved powerless. On the other hand, Alexander may be seen as the just man whose soul at the hour of his death is being received by the archangel, who will eventually lead it to Paradise.⁵¹

45 For the Greek text of this particular inscription and a German translation see Stichel, *Vergänglichkeit*, 88.

46 Cf. Heide and Helmut Buschhausen, *Armenische Handschriften*, 169, no. 37 (cod. 319 dated to 1694).

47 Budge, *Ethiopia*, 256.

48 Chatzidakis, *Ikônes*, 91, no. 60, pl. 57; Th. Ch. Aliprantis, *Thesouroi tis Siphnou* (Athens, 1979), 40, no. 20; 43, no. 7; 60f., no. 11.

49 Stichel, *Vergänglichkeit*, 37f.

50 See N. G. Politis, *Neoellenike Mythologia* (Athens, 1871; repr. 1979), II, 237ff., 302ff.; also A. Rosenberg, *Engel und Dämonen* (Munich, 1967), 92ff., 101ff.

51 The legends of Alexander’s arrival in Paradise, the Gates of Eden, found in the literary traditions of both East and West may also be understood as expressions of the wish of their creators to include Alexander among the redeemed. See Cary, *Medieval Alexander*, 18, 150, 258-59 and *passim*; also I. J. Kazis, *The Book of the Gestes of Alexander of Macedon, A Metric Hebrew Version of the Alexander Romance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), 16-17.

Department of Art History
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T6

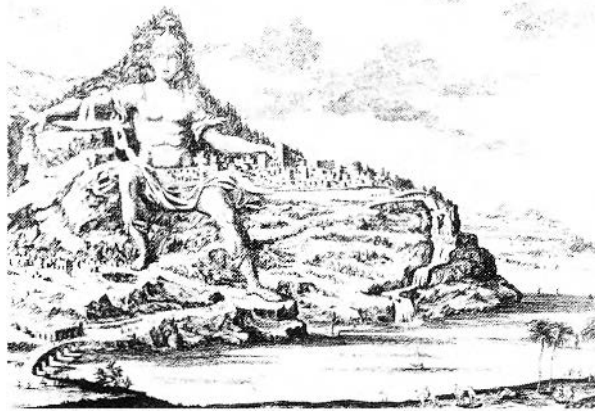


FIGURE 4. Engraving by Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, 1721. Vienna, National Library (Photo: Reproduced from P. Huber, *Athos* [Zurich and Freiburg im Br., 1982]).



FIGURE 5. Tapestry medallion, Egypt, seventh or eighth century. Washington, D.C., Textile Museum (Photo: Reproduced from K. Weitzmann, ed., *The Age of Spirituality* [New York, 1979]).

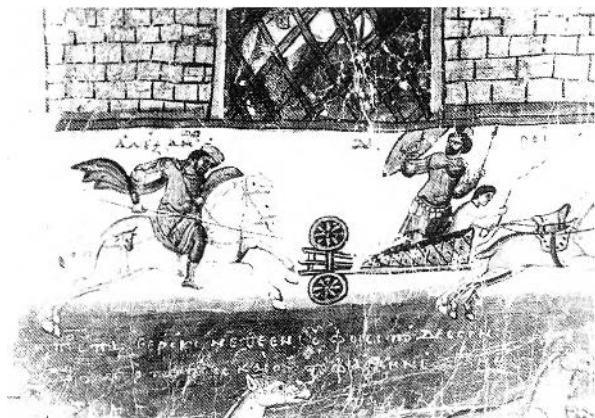


FIGURE 6. Cod. gr. 479 (Pseudo-Oppian), fol. 8v. Venice, Bibl. Marciana (Photo: Courtesy Professor Kurt Weitzmann).



FIGURE 7. *The Alexander-Romance*, fol. 1r, fourteenth century. Venice, Institut Hellénique (Photo: Reproduced from A. Nynopoulos, *Les Miniatures du roman d'Alexandre le Grand* [Athens and Venice, 1966]).



FIGURE 8. The Alexander-Romance, fol. 143v, fourteenth century. Venice, Institut Hellénique (Photo: Reproduced from A. Nynopoulos, *Les Miniatures du roman d'Alexandre le Grand* [Athens and Venice, 1966]).



FIGURE 9. Silver bowl, twelfth century. Leningrad, Hermitage (Photo: Courtesy of the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad).



FIGURE 10. Cod. gr. 1186, fol. 31r, eleventh century. Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine (Photo: Courtesy of the Monastery).

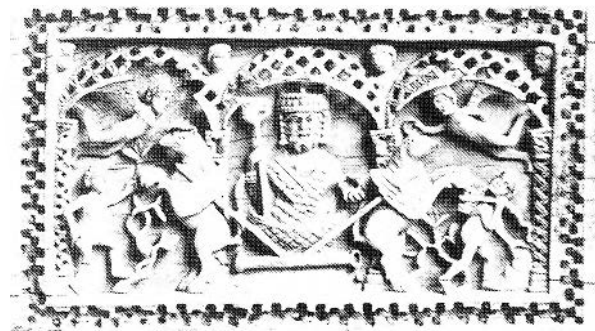


FIGURE 11. Ivory box (detail), tenth or eleventh century. Darmstadt, Landesmuseum (Photo: Courtesy Professor Kurt Weitzmann).



FIGURE 12. Textile, thirteenth century. Berlin, formerly Schlossmuseum (Photo: Reproduced from C. Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri elevati per gryphos ad aerem* [Rome, 1973]).

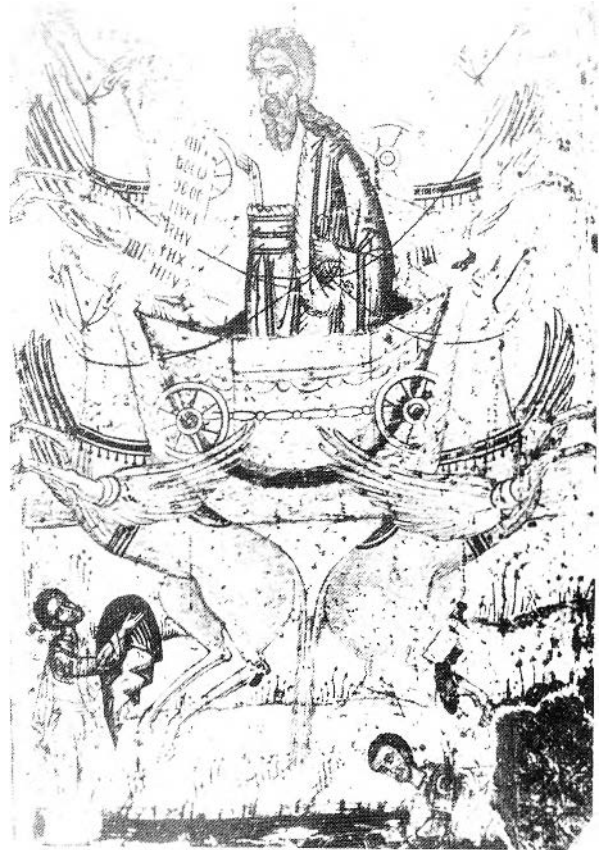


FIGURE 13. Greek icon, 1655. Kolliken, Switzerland (Photo: Reproduced from G. Robertson and G. Henderson, eds., *Studies in Memory of David Talbot Rice* [Edinburgh, 1975]).



FIGURE 14. Medallion of Constantius II, fourth century (Photo: Reproduced from C. Settis-Frugoni, *Historia Alexandri elevati per gryphos ad aerem* [Rome, 1973]).

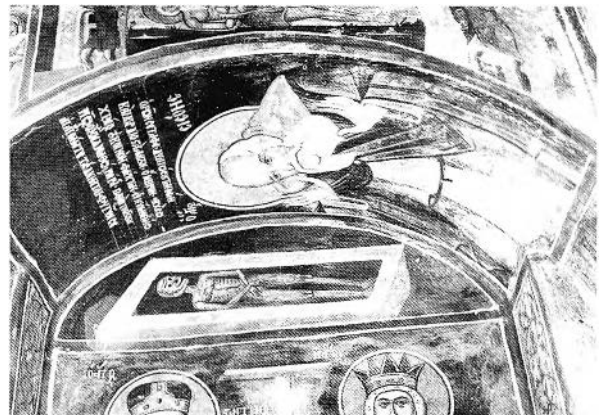


FIGURE 15. Fresco, 1546. Athos, Monastery of Stavroniketa (Photo: Courtesy Dr. Soterios Kadas).



FIGURE 16a, b. Fresco, ca. 1546-47. Athos, Monastery of Dionysiou (Photo: Courtesy Dr. Soterios Kadas).



FIGURE 19. Fresco, 1566. Meteora, Monastery of Barlaam (Photo: Reproduced from R. Stichel, *Spät- und Nachbyzantinischer Vergänglichkeits-darstellungen* [Vienna, 1971]).

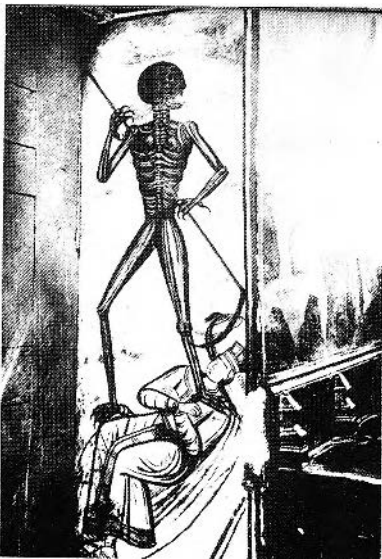


FIGURE 17. Fresco, eighteenth century. Athos, Monastery of Gregoriou (Photo: Courtesy Museum Benaki, Athens).

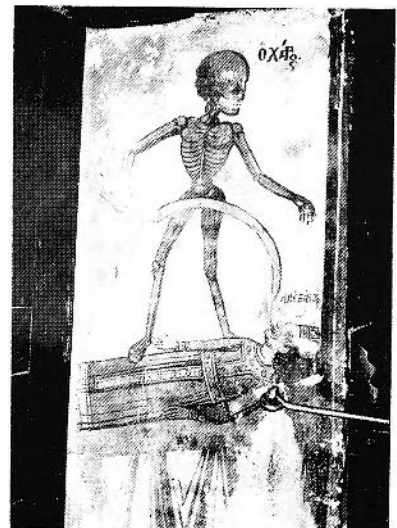


FIGURE 18. Fresco, 1765. Athos, Monastery of Philotheou (Photo: Courtesy Dr. Soterios Kadas).