

Constantine B. Lerner

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This is a copy of the article from printed version of electronic journal

Folklore Vol. 16

ISSN 1406-0957

Editors Mare Kõiva & Andres Kuperjanov

Published by the Folk Belief and Media Group of ELM

Folklore

Electronic Journal of Folklore

Electronic version ISSN 1406-0949 is available from

<http://haldjas.folklore.ee/folklore>

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Tartu 2001

THE “RIVER OF PARADISE” AND THE LEGEND ABOUT THE CITY OF TBILISI: A LITERARY SOURCE OF THE LEGEND

Constantine B. Lerner

The city of Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, was founded by the king Vakhtang Gorgasal in the 5th c. AD on a site that had been inhabited at least since Neolithic times. The site is still famous for the hot springs which to all appearances gave the city its name: in Georgian *tbil-i* means ‘warm’. According to the Georgian legend:

King Vakhtang Gorgasal was hunting in the forest. Suddenly his falcon caught a pheasant. The bird fell into a hot spring and made sound and became well again and flew away. The king gave orders to build a city on this site.

The origin of the folk legend remains entirely enigmatic, yet the parallelism observable in Jewish folklore seems to be indicative. Indeed, the main element of this plot – the unusual spring – apparently resembles the legendary motif of the “river of paradise” which in ancient Jewish folkloristic tradition was associated with Alexander the Great.

Since antiquity there must have existed a number of legends about Alexander, the oldest of the oral tradition seems to be Hebrew. Such legendary stories of Alexander seem to have originated in Alexandria in Hellenistic times and spread among Jews and Christians (Gaster 1897: 487). Some of the legends are reflected in rabbinic stories, while other portions were incorporated into various romances about Alexander the Great.

Thus the rabbinical literature *midrashism* offers the following version of the legend:

Alexander Mucdon [i.e. of Macedo'n] on his return from King of Kcia [in the land of Afriqi and Qartinia] sat by a certain spring eating bread. When he washed some salted fish he had, they exuded a sweet odor. He said, ' This spring seems to come from the Garden of Eden [---]' Then he followed the course of the spring

until he came to the entrance of the Garden of Eden (Byalik & Ravnitzky 1992: 168; Rappaport 1996: 127).

An analogous version of the legend appears in the Greek *Romance of Alexander of Macedon* ascribed to Pseudo-Callisthenes and in the romances of Pseudo-Callisthenes' cycle. However, in the writings of Pseudo-Callisthenes and different translations or elaborated versions the fish does not 'exude a sweet odor' but comes to life (cf Pseudo-Callisthenes 1877; Budge 1889; Wolohojian 1969; Bekkum 1992).

Another version of the legend can be found in the Jewish cycle of the romance – in *An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander Mucdon*. This work is extant in three manuscripts from the 10th-12th centuries: from Damascus (Harkavi 1892), Modena (Levi 1896) and Oxford (Gaster 1897), though the romance itself was created much earlier, already in the pre-Islamic period (Gaster 1897: 411). The Hebrew romance in many respects resembles the composition of Pseudo-Callisthenes, but does not replicate it:

On his return [from Afriqi and Qartinia] Alexander sat by a certain spring eating bread. One of the king's hunters caught some birds, and after killing them, washed them in the water of this river, but when he put them in the water in order to wash them, they came to life and flew away [---] The king exclaimed that it must be the water of the Garden of Eden [---] (Gaster 1897: 531; see also Levi 1896; Harkavi 1892).

This is the only example with birds, since in all the other versions fish appear. This not only attracts attention but hints to a structural difference among the legends as well. Indeed, the *midrashism* as well as the Greek version of the legend consist of three structural elements:

subject (the King) – **direct object** (fish) – **indirect object** (river or spring of an unusual nature)

while in *An Old Hebrew Romance* and the *Georgian legend*, four elements are presented:

subject (the king) – **agent** (king's hunter or falcon) – **direct object** (bird) – **indirect object** (river or spring).

Such parallelism seems even clearer when we take into account another version of the Georgian legend relating the founding of Tbilisi, in which a deer instead of a pheasant is the object of the hunt:

King Vakhtang Gorgasal was hunting in the forest. He shot an arrow at a deer. The deer jumped into a hot spring and made a sound and became well again and ran away [---]

The deer is a common character in Georgian mythology. For example, in Georgian folklore the Milky Way is called the ‘Leap of the Deer’. A mythologized Deer appears even in the ancient Georgian hagiography, *The Life of St. Nino*.¹

Thus at King Mirian’s orders, the crosses are made from a wondrous tree. Hunters tell the king’s messengers: “If an arrow hits a deer, it hastily rushes to the foot of the hill on which this tree stands, speedily eats the fallen seed of that tree and avoids death.” (Lerner 2000: 67)

Thus the use of a deer as the object of hunt in the legend of the founding of the capital is quite understandable.

However, there are two variants of the legend which must be distinguished:

- 1) borrowed, with the **four-component** structure, in which the bird functions as the direct object, and
- 2) local version of the universal legend plot, consisting of **three** elements and the deer as the direct object.

Thus one of the Georgian folk legends about the founding of the capital – the City of Tbilisi – apparently has a literary source and originates namely from the Hebrew romance.

This assumption seems plausible taking into account that *An Old Hebrew Romance* appears to be one of the sources of ancient Georgian historiography (see Lerner 2000). The legend under discussion appears in the context of the *Romance* alongside with the lands of *Afriqi* and *Qartinia* which in Hebrew stories about Alexander refer to Georgia. In Hebrew sources we come across two designations for

the same country: the name according to Greco-Roman tradition is Iberia (i.e. Ifriqi or Afriqi) and the local term is Kartli (i.e. Qartinia; for details see Lerner 2000). Such an interpretation of the terms is confirmed by contextual analysis of *An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander*: all three manuscripts disclose an identical sequence of Alexander's marches:

[...] *the king went forth from there and fought against the inhabitants of Antioch* [...]

[...] *The king went forth from that place and came to the land of Armenia* [...]

And Alexander passed through the Dark Mountains [...]

Alexander went forth from that place and came to Afriqi. The king, departing from there, came to the land of women [...]

After this the king journeyed to the land of Qartinia [...]

(Gaster 1897: 512–528; see also Levi 1896; Harkavi 1892).

Afriqi and *Qartinia* are located beyond the *Dark Mountains* (i.e. the Small Caucasian Mountains) and, remarkably, are mentioned after *Armenia*, that is, to the north of the land. Therefore the lands of *Afriqi* and *Qartinia* clearly refer to Iberia or Kartli (i.e. to East Georgia).

Such an interpretation of geographic names results from the fact that at least one of the historiographic sources of different versions of the legend and romance about Alexander the Great (at any rate, for the account of his campaign to Afriqi and Qartinia) is *Roman History* by Dio Cassius, particularly the part of the work relating to the Caucasian campaign of Pompey the Great which took place in 66–65 BC. The Jewish version of the legend is presented in the *midrashism* and *An Old Hebrew Romance* concentrates on the second part of the Pompey's campaign, the invasion of Iberia (Dio Cassius 1961–1969, Book III, § 37). Ancient legends and *romances* evidently infuse the Caucasian campaign of Pompey with Alexander the Great. Later the Hebrew romance served as one of the sources of the ancient Georgian historical chronicle, *The Conversion of Kartli* compiled in the 7th c AD.

Some confirmation of our hypothesis linking the narrative of Dio Cassius, the Hebrew version of the legend and the romance about Alexander Mukdon and the ancient Georgian Chronicle can be found in some episodes represented both in the Hebrew romance and in the Georgian chronicle. For instance, the Georgian chronicle states that the first king of Kartli was a deputy of Alexander the Great, named Azo(n):

And Alexander was accompanied by Azo [---] and he was the first king in Mcxeta Azo [---] (for Hebrew translation of the Chronicle see Lerner 2000: 91).

The story concerning Azo in Georgian historiography is usually regarded as an echo of some oral legend which existed in Georgia in earlier times (Janashia 1996: 106–107). Nevertheless, this proper name has a literary source. The name seems to be borrowed from the same *An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander Mucdon*:

There reigned over the land of Egypt a man named Philippos. His wife's name was Glophira (Cleopatra) [---] A certain magician lived in the land of Egypt whose name was Bildad, son of Ason [---]

This Bildad seduced Glophira, who later gave birth to Alexander (see Gaster 1897: 499; Levi 1896: 142; Harkavi 1892: 11). Thus, Ason appears to be the grandfather of Alexander, while in the writings of Pseudo-Callisthenes Ason does not appear at all. The name Ason is not found in any biography of Alexander (cf. Trumpe 1974). Hence, at least in this case the Hebrew romance could have served as a source for the Georgian Chronicle.

Thus the narrative of Dio Cassius (the story concerning Pompey's Caucasian campaign) seems a plausible source for the legends and romances about Alexander the Great. In such a "confused" form (as represented in *An Old Hebrew Romance*), the story entered the ancient Georgian Chronicle. Perhaps that is why such an important event as Pompey's conquest of Iberia, which resulted in Roman political domination over the land, was not reflected in Georgian historiography at all. Echoes of Pompey's campaign are discernable in the report of Alexander's journey to Kartli. Thus the portions of the episodes from *An Old Hebrew Romance of Alexander*

Mucdon were reflected in the Georgian historical Chronicle while the episode of the “river of paradise” had found its way into Georgian folklore.

In other words, our observations lead to the suggestion that there existed an ancient Semitic layer in the cultural history of Georgia.

Comment

¹ St. Nino was the first to preach Christianity to Georgians.

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