

ALEXANDER AND THE FANTASTIC CREATURES OF THE EAST

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Abstract. The popular text of the *Alexander Romance* contained many animals and strange creatures that meant a challenge for the translators of the Greek text into Slavonic in any of its two recensions. The techniques employed varied, as much as the illustrations that often accompanied such literary depictions. No other text contained such a variety of fantastic animals except for the *Physiologus*, with which the *Alexander Romance* has particularly interesting connections, especially in East Slavic. The present article explores the translations of real and fantastic animals and creatures as well as the literary connections between both works.

Keywords: Slavic Alexander Romance; animals; Physiologus; creatures

The Greek *Alexander Romance* (AR) was a well-known text throughout the long Slavic medieval and early modern periods. In Slavonic, two translations were made from two different versions of the Greek *Alexander Romance*. The first one was made from the version β, a well-known version since it is the closest to the famous manuscript L that has been, by far, the most translated into modern languages (Torres Prieto, 2021, pp. 197 – 215). This is the base of the East Slavic version (ESAR). Traditionally known as ‘khronograficheskaia’, because it is sometimes, but not always, embedded within historiographic narratives, it is a version highly interpolated with texts of various provenances. This version is divided into three books in modern editions of the text and all the subsequent translations. The first book narrates the childhood and youth of Alexander and his first conquests. The second one focuses on the battles against Persians, as Alexander and his army start their journey to the East and until the death of Darius. Finally, the third book narrates the encounters of Alexander with king Porus in India, Queen Candace in Ethiopia and the Amazons and, in some variants, the final encounter with Gog and Magog, until Alexander finally learns about the prophecy about his impending death and starts his return home but dies in Babylon without managing to complete his return.

The other translation was made from the later and shorter version ε of the *Alexander Romance*, probably with some additions from γ. The modern edition of this

version, which in size is almost half as long as β , is divided not in books, but simply into chapters, although this division is quite problematic (Trumpf, 1974).¹ This is the base of all the South Slavonic versions, including those made in Muscovy at the end of the fifteenth century and later, that have traditionally received the name of ‘Serbian’. Characteristic of this later version is a much less scrupulous respect for historical accuracy, a higher intervention of the Christian God throughout the narrative, including some original interpolations not present in the Greek text, and also a much more colourful array of fantastic creatures that Alexander finds in his travels.

In the long version β of the Greek, there are approximately 43 mentions to different animals and various fantastic creatures (see Table 1). The first mentions of animals in the plot are related to the conception of Alexander. Nectanebo advises Queen Olympias to allow the god Ammon to enter her chamber. Ammon will look like a ram (identified by the horns in his head). The Greek version β uses the terms “κέρατα ἔχων ἐκ τοῦ μετώπου πεφυκότα καὶ ταῦτα χρυσοῦ παραπλήσια.” (Book I, ch. 4, 10), which could be translated as “and horns growing from his forehead, these also made of gold”.² When the wizard Nectanebo dressed as the God Ammon visits the Queen’s chambers, the description is, however, slightly amplified: “ὁ δὲ Νεκταναβὸς ἠτοίμασεν ἑαθτῶ πόκον κριοῦ ἀπαλωτάτου σὺν τοῖς κέρασι τῶν κροτάφων αὐτοῦ, καὶ ταῦτα χρυσοῦ παραπλήσια, καὶ σκῆπτρον ἐβέλινον καὶ ἱμάτιον λευκὸν καὶ τρίβωνα καθαρώτατον δρακοντιοῦντα” (Book I, ch. 7, 1), translated into English as: “Nectanebo, meanwhile, procured a fleece of softest sheep’s wool, with the horns still attached to its temples. The horns shone like gold. He also procured an ebony spectre, a white robe and a cloak resembling a serpent’s skin”. The serpent’s skin will become an important element in the narration afterwards. For its part, the South Slavic *Alexander Romance* (SSAR), contrary to the Greek version ϵ , gives a more elaborated description of the aspect of Nectanebo as he enters Olympias’ chambers: “и самъ вѣниде къ неѣи въ образѣ бога амона. таково же образъ амоновъ юсть. глава орлова а на неѣи розы василисковѣ. и ока аспидова. и ноги львовы. крыли же грѣисныи злати и чръни. сицевъ образъ амоновъ бѣ.” (Marinković & Jerković, 1985, pp. 27 – 28, f. 12r and 12v)

In the AR, most animals and creatures in the narrative are quite ordinary. In the case of the creatures that are extraordinary, sometimes the translators created specific terms by translating the constituent parts of the term (eg. Яблокоядецъ from μηλοφάγος), other times creating calques from the Greek (Сатуръ from Σάτυρος), and others the Greek terms are translated as periphrases (челобек без голова). Sometimes, scribes seem to be confused about the right translation when in fact it mattered the most: in East Slavic both ὄρνις and πετεινός were translated simply as birds (птица in ESAR), but there is an important difference in Greek that was missed here: ὄρνις is a bird, while πετεινός is in fact a flying creature, a winged being. This is in fact a subtle but important difference. At the end of Book I, when Alexander is choosing the place where to found Alexandria in Egypt, after the an-

ecdote about the flour eaten by the birds (ὄρνις) that was also described in Plutarch and Arrian, when the interpreters of omens told Alexander the meaning of this, they say that people from that city will be famous around the world, “because the winged animals (πετεινά) inhabit the whole world”. Aside from the fact that the *Alexander Romance* was probably composed in Alexandria, and that bit of self-promotion is hardly subtle, it is not the same to compare the future inhabitants of Alexandria to birds than to winged, flying beings, which, could also be angels, or phoenixes or any other flying creature. Likewise, when Alexander is taken into the heavens by the birds or griffons, a part never translated into Slavonic, belonging only to the famous manuscript L of the β version or the γ version, the Greek scribe does indeed make a distinction between the creatures that fly Alexander into the heavens (ὄρνις) and the flying creature who talks to him in Greek (πετεινός). Not so in the Slavonic versions, where the episode of the ascension of Alexander into the heavens is missing from both translations. Instead, and following the corresponding version β for ESAR or the ε version for the SSAR, they both reproduce the Greek phrase δύο ὄρνεα πετόμενα καὶ μόνον ἔχοντα ὄψεις ἀνθρωπίνας, Ἑλληνικῆ δὲ διαλέκτῳ ἐξ ὕψους ἐκράυγαζον (version β, Book II, 40, 1) as две птицы летяща, илища обличие человекъче, главѣ человекъчестѣи. Єдина же птица еллинскимъ языкомъ свыше възва (Tvorogov, 136); or the more laconic expression in version ε ὄρνεα ἀνθρωποειδῆ (Trumpf, 1974, p. 34, 7), rendered into SSAR as в. птица чловѣко образна (Marinković & Jerković, 1985, p. 374).

A similar case of confusion, or simplification of animals, is provided in the case of serpents and dragons. For example, the animal that crawls to the feet of Olympias at the banquet indicating that Alexander is the son of the god Ammon and not of Phillip of Macedon is described in Greek as δράκων, which was rendered into East Slavic as змей/змий (m.). Often translated into modern languages as “serpent”, rather than dragon, in no case the Greek uses the term ὄφις (snake), which does translate into modern languages as both snake and serpent. The confusion is sometimes also indicated in the illustrations. In the case of the text of the ESAR, the most lavishly illustrated one of this version is of course the *Litsevoj Svod*, the chronicle commissioned by Ivan the Terrible that contains 331 illustrations accompanying the text of the ESAR. In the illustration corresponding to this part of the narrative (БАН, III. Б. № 76 17.17.9, f. 594v) after King Phillip has initially been convinced by the omen delivered by a sea-hawk that Olympias has not really been unfaithful when she got pregnant while he was away in campaign because it had been in fact the god Ammon who had impregnated her, he grows increasingly suspicious and openly accuses her of adultery in a banquet. When Nectanebo sees this, and using his magic skills, he metamorphoses himself into a serpent, in English, in Greek a δράκων, who, we are told, approaches the Queen and allows himself to be caressed by her before changing himself again into an eagle and flying away. What the illustrator of the *Litsevoj Svod* drew, without any shadow of a doubt, is very similar to

a crocodile, and thus a dragon, which in Western translations became a serpent, in the illustrated Russian chronicle became a crocodile.

In order to understand how a dragon or serpent can become a crocodile for the illustrator, it is necessary to look into the transmission of the only other text that presents and discusses animals in some length: the *Physiologus*. The *Physiologus* was a well-known text in Slavonic. In her recent study, Ana Stoykova isolated two different versions of the Slavic *Physiologus* (Stoykova, 2021, pp. 352 – 386). The version Slavic α (based on the Byzantine *Physiologus*) is known today in eight copies, all of Russian origin and dated between the fifteenth to the end of the seventeenth centuries. One of the earliest copies, dated to the mid-fifteenth century, is also illustrated. From the list of animals mentioned in the AR that are not specific to the Alexander tale, such as the Amazons or the Dog-Headed people, the *Physiologus* contains only a few chapters on animals mentioned in the text: chapter 1 on the lion, chapter 6 on the eagle, chapter 36 on the hind or deer, and chapter 43 on the elephant. The relation between the *Physiologus* and the *Alexander Romance* is quite intriguing, in fact.

The relation between both texts goes back to the famous manuscript K of the Greek text of the *Alexander Romance* (version β), currently in Moscow (GIM Syn. gr. 298). The story of this manuscript is interesting: dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, it arrived to Russia from the Monastery of Iviron in Mt. Athos according to a colophon in the mid-17th century. This manuscript contains, aside from the *Alexander Romance* (ff. 6 – 109v), some other works, such as some by pseudo-Alexander Magnus (ff. 109v – 115r), Nikephoros Phokas (ff. 115v – 136r), Kekaumenos' *Strategikon* (ff. 136r – 229r), Andreopoulos Mikhael (ff. 232v – 246v, 252r – 302r, 531r – 550r), interspersed with some Aesop's fables (249v – 250v, 494r – 531r), Euthymios of Peribleptos (ff. 339r – 340v), Kyrillos of Alexandria (ff. 341v – 344r), Symeon Seth's *Stephanites et Ichneutes* (ff. 351r – 439r) and Epiphanius of Salamis' *Physiologus* (ff. 550r – 576r), an attribution of the work that, as Caroline Macé has pointed out recently, is the most common attribution in Greek manuscripts of the text (Macé & Gippert, 2021, pp. 49 – 107).³ What is also important is that this particular manuscript contains several passages from the other Greek version of the *Alexander Romance*, namely version ϵ , that will eventually be the source of the other Slavic version, SSAR. Considered first as a contaminated witness, it is more likely a hybrid or transitional version between the various Greek versions (see Table 2). More importantly, many of the passages in which version β seems to import parts of version ϵ are precisely those dealing with encounters with fantastic beings.

One of the oldest illustrated manuscripts, coincidentally also named K by A. Stoykova in her study and belonging to the above-mentioned oldest version Slavic α is a manuscript from the Kirillo-Belozerski monastery (RNL, f. 351, 68/1145), containing a *Palaia Interpretata*, excerpts from various Old and New

Testament apocrypha and an illustrated *Physiologus* between ff. 377r and 404v. In several passages devoted to the description of the snake (ὄφις in the Greek original) corresponding to chapter 11, the Russian version uses the term previously used to translate δράκων in the AR, this is, змеи, to render the Greek passages on snakes. Between folia 382v and 383v, the texts reads as follows:

О змии.

Господь рече в Евангелии: „Будите мудри, яко змия, и кротци, яко голубие“. Фисилог рече, яко четыре вещи имать. Первая же вещь ей си. Егда состарееся, невидети начнет очима, и аще ся хошет поновити, алчет 40 дни и ноши 40, дондеже ослабеет ей плоть, и поищет расселины камены узкы, и ту совлечет с себе кожу, и снемши кожу, обновится. Ты убо, человече, аще хощеш мира сего, узким и скорбным путем, алчьбами плоть истнити, „узок бо путь вводяй в вечную жизнь“.

О змии

Егда придет змий на источник воды пит, не несет с собою яда, но в гнезде своем оставит и. Лепо убо се и нам есть, тщащимся на воду животную и безлобную, якоже есть полна божественных и небесных словес – в церкви Божиин, не носить с собою злаго яда, но духом отврещи от себе.

О змии.

Егда видит змия нага человека, боится его и отвратится от него, аще ли и видит оболчена, то плозит нань – Фисилог рече. Тако имы разумом разумеем, яко егда отец наш бе Адам наг в породе, то не може его змия прельстити, да аще и ты имаши одежду.

О змии.

Егда приступит человек к змии, хотя ю убити, все тело свое на смерть предаст, а главу змий крыет. Подобаеет убо и нам все тело свое предати Христа ради на смерть, а главу хранити о гресех и о делех, якоже сотвориша пресвятии мученици. „Всякому убо мужю глава есть Христос“, – якоже пишется.

It seems clear that many of the characteristics attributed to the *Physiologus*' змеи were understood by the copyists and the illustrators of the *Illuminated Chronicle of Ivan IV*, who worked closely together in their production, as belonging to the biblical snake but also to some reptile that crawled the earth, and therefore closer to a crocodile, particularly if the illustrator thought that the metamorphosed Nectanebo was a snake coming from Egypt. The relation between both works in the description and depiction of animals, and their mutual influence, is also to be observed in another slightly later manuscript of the *Physiologus* from the sixteenth

century (GIM Uvarov 515) that, being a translation of the Byzantine version of the *Physiologus*, mentions nevertheless, in an entry absent in the above-mentioned Kirillo- Belozerski and others, a description of the Gorgon, concluding that its head was in possession of Alexander and that is why he managed to conquer so many peoples. It might not be a coincidence, though, that this entry about the Gorgon goes immediately before the entry about the Snake.

Although modern literary classifications could lead us to assume that the *Alexander Romance* and the *Physiologus* belong to different literary spheres, they clearly had, in the mind of the copyists and illuminators, many more points in common than our modern categories would lead us to assume. A case of cross-fertilization as the one explained above in the case of conception and description of fantastic animals is yet another example of the rich imaginative heritage known and used by medieval Slavic scribes.

Table 1. List of some animals mentioned in the East Slavic *Alexander Romance* (ESAR)

Greek Term (acc. to R. Stoneman 2007 – 2012)	East Slavic term (acc. to O. V. Tvorogov 1999)	English translation (acc. to R. Stoneman 1991)
δράκων	зме́й / зми́й (m.)	serpent
ἰέρακα θαλάσσιον	морскии ястребъ	sea-hawk
λέων	львь/левъ	lion
κρίός	овен	ram
ὄρνις	птиц	bird
πῶλος	жеребець	stallion, foal, colt
θηρίον	звера	wild beasts
ἵππος	конь	horse
βοὸς (Βουκέφαλος)	вол (волюя глава)	bull
ἀράχνη	поучина	spider
ἀετός	орёлъ	eagle
ἔλαφος	елень (олень)	hind/deer
πετεινά	птица	bird (flying creature/ave)
Σάτυρος	Сатуръ	satyr
κύνες	пси	dogs
λύκος	волкъ	wolf
ἀγέλα	стадо	sheep
κάμηλοι	вельблуди	camels
μυιῶν	мух	flies
σφήκες	шеръшни	wasps
αἴγας	козы	goats

μηλοφάγος	Яблокоядецъ	Apple eater
ἰχθύος	рыбы	fish
φώκας	ворвони	seals
ελέφας	слон	elephant

Table 2. Interpolations of version ε in Greek MS. K (version β)

Parts inserted from ε (chapters according to Turmpf's edition)	Place where they are inserted in β	Folia from GIM Syn. gr. 298	Summary
6, 2 – 4	I 21-22	f.22v, 9 – 23v,14	Philip wishes to marry another woman but Alexander stops him.
7 – 9,1	I 23-24	f.24v, 1 – 28r,3	Battles and victory of Alexander over the Scythians. Alexander in Thessaloniki.
21, 4	II 8	f.48v,17 – 49r,13	Filipo, the doctor, gives the medicine to Alexander and saves him.
16,5	II 15 (after)	f.55r, 21 – 55v, 6	Dialogue between Candaules, son of Candance, and Darius.
25, 2 – 3	II 33	f.67v, 23 – 68v, 13	Encounter with fantastic beings.
28, 2 – 4	II 33	f.69r, 1 – 69v, 16	Encounter with fantastic beings.
26, 1 – 2	post II 36	f.70v, 4 –23	Encounter with fantastic beings.
26, 2 & 27 & 29, 1 – 2	post II 37	f.71v, 6 – 72r, 23	Alexander and Sesonchos.
36, 4 – 5	post III 3	f. 76v,21 – 77r, 19	Battle of Alexander against the Indians.
37, 3	III 4	f. 77r, 23 – 77v, 9	Alexander and Porus.
39	post III 17	f. 82r, 19 – 84v, 2	Alexander and Eurymithres, king of Bersiles.
42, 2 – 43,1	III 17	f. 82r, 19 – 84v,2	Dialogue between Candaules and Antiochos, and between Antiochos and Alexander.
43, 6	post III 23	f. 94r, 17 – 94v, 8	Farewell words of Alexander to Candaules addressed to Candance.
38, 4 (?)	post III 26	f. 97r,21 – 97v,1	Uncertain origin of these lines, possible parallel.

46, 2 – 3; 44, 3 – 4; 44, 5; 46, 3 – 5; 46, 5 – 6; 44, 4; 46,6;	III 32, 33, 34 (at various points)	f. 104v, 21 – 109r, 18	Mixed wording of both ver- sions.
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NOTES

1. This version was edited by J. Trumpf, but it does not reflect at all the disposition of the text in the sole full extant witness of this version, namely, Bodleian Library MS. Barocci 17.
2. All quotations from the Greek *Alexander Romance*, version β , Books I and II, including the tables, are taken from the critical edition by Richard Stoneman (2007 – 2012), *Il romanzo di Alessandro*, Fondazione Lorenzo Valla: A. Mondadori, whose last volume unfortunately remains unpublished. The translations into English of this version are taken from Richard Stoneman's own translation in (1991), *The Greek Alexander Romance*, Penguin Books.
3. Macé lists this very manuscript in her own study of Greek transmission of the text as MS Σ (Macé & Gippert, 2021)

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