THE PATH OF THE ROMANIAN IMAGINARY UNIVERSE FROM HISTORY TO THE FANTASTIC IN THE 17th CENTURY: THE CASE OF ALEXANDRIA

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Abstract*: In the 17th century, the sphere of translations of folk books from the Byzantine-Slav literature has greatly expanded without leaving the religious field entirely. The translations, still carried out by the clergy, are now addressed to popular masses in order to educate them ethically and help them evolve. The popular book aims to help the man (especially the peasant) clarify his moral sense, to make him aware of his power, his rights, and his freedom, to awake his courage. Some of the books reached us in the Slavonic language since ancient times and have long circulated in original copies. Since the 17th century, translations started to appear, which unfortunately have been preserved in few incomplete copies. The most popular book in our old literature is the fabulous novel Alexandria, the history of Alexander the Great and Darie of Persia.*

Keywords: *folk book, historical truth, collective imaginary*

In the 17th century, the scope of translations of popular books from the Byzantine-Slavic literary heritage becomes considerably wider, without completely breaking away from the domain of religion. Carried out by clergy, as before, translations are now addressed to the masses as well, aiming, on the one hand, to educate them with respect to ethics, and, on the other, to provide instruction. The purpose of popular books was, together with the Bible, to aid people (especially peasants and townsfolk) to clarify their sense of morality, to make them aware of their strength, rights and freedom, to arouse their courage. Some of these books reached us very early in Slavonic and circulated for a long time in the form of first-hand copies. Starting with the 17th century, translations began to appear; however, the few copies of these that have been kept until today are incomplete. The most widespread popular book in our old literature is the fantastical novel "Alexandria", the history of Alexander the Great and Darius of Persia.

As far as the sources of the book are concerned, N. Cartojan believes that the first novel in Romanian literature, "Alexandria", although originally a Byzantine creation, has nevertheless come to us from the West, where the great Macedonian conqueror was transformed, according to the ideas of medieval chivalry, into an emperor-knight, characterised by courtoisie and generosity, virtues much favoured by medieval minstrels. Thus, this piece of writing travelled from the East to the Western countries, where, starting with the 11th century, it was turned into verse and adapted to the local context. The novel of Alexander passed from France into Italy, then went on to reach the Serbians, who passed it on to us, as fraught with fantasy elements as its oriental versions, but with a hero changed into a Christian emperor with chivalrous traits, according to Western medieval thought, as

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already mentioned. The characters in the new book are found, next to Christian figures, in our icons, and their names are included among our traditional names, while the fantasy elements have made their way into our fairy tales. The more legends, apocryphal writings and novels such as "Alexandria" spread, the more they became mixed with folklore, thus giving rise to an ongoing cycle which featured more and more of the mystical and the fantastical.

To gain a better understanding of the changes undergone by "Alexandria" along the ages, on Romanian as well as foreign soil, of the additions made in accordance with the Romanian spirit and, finally, to become aware of the amount of history and literature present in this popular novel, first we require some information about the accounts of famous historians regarding the life of Alexander of Macedon, so that a comparison can then be made between historical and popular books, between primary information and the way it was assimilated by various peoples. Of the plethora of historians who tackled the life of Alexander, we shall dwell upon two, namely Plutarch and Rufus Curtius.

The life of Alexander as written by Plutarch is one of the basic sources of the history of Alexander the Great. However, the Chaeronean biographer lived from 60 to 120 A.D. From Alexander's death on 16th June, 323 B.C. until the time of Plutarch, the figure of the great conqueror had captured the attention of many historians, and popular legends had had the time to embellish his wondrous military achievements with the most fantastic details. Plutarch knew many more details than he mentions in 'The Life' of Alexander. He must also have been acquainted with the testimonies of critical minds such as Aristobulus's and with even more legends of the kind that can be read in "Alexandria".

Greek philosophers turned out to be hostile to the figure of Alexander. In Rome, especially in the schools of rhetoric of the first half of the 1st century A.D., Alexander was seen as the enemy of liberty. To downplay his merits, philosophers would attribute most of his victories to luck rather than valiance.

Plutarch treats Alexander quite favourably, without sliding into the exaggerations of popular imagination. He is not always critical of certain versions. For instance: which parts of the legends about Alexander's birth are true? Plutarch provides two versions of events, leaving the choice to the reader. On the other hand, it appears that Plutarch does not always grasp the diversity and significance of the problems Alexander faced; thus, the latter's portrait, although lacking the unreal glories that popular fantasy embellished it with and not omitting the stains left behind by his acts of cruelty, nevertheless fails to outline his facet as the economic organiser of the conquered empire. Be that as it may, it is important to note that Alexander's portrait, though retouched by a moraliser's brush, comes much closer to the truth than the ones in popular "Alexandria".

In "Alexandria", avengers were human, kindness was manly, generosity was ponderate, anger was easily tamed, love was moderate, work was not without rest. All of these highlight – or perhaps it was the other way around – the moral examples and lessons that accompany Alexander during his expeditions. Plutarch does not leave out these characteristics found in popular tales, but rather enhances the portrait of the perfect hero. In his moral writings, Plutarch applauds Alexander's legacy. However, his choice of words in supporting his own work cannot help but give rise to one question: is it history or literature that even this well-known historical biographer is making?:

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"[…]for we are not writing history here, but recounting the lives of men, and besides, one's valour or fault is not always made apparent by the most glorious of deeds, but it is often so that a trifle, a word, a jest will reveal a man's nature more aptly than those battles in which soldiers fall by the tens of thousands…. Thus, just as painters depict a man's special traits, so must we seek to better distinguish the exceptional marks of the soul and portray the life of each man, leaving to others the recounting of great deeds and battles astonishing to the world."(Plutarh, 1957)

Let us go through a few episodes which bring the two accounts about Alexander closer to each other and a few others that set them apart. Plutarch recounts how, before her wedding night, Olympias, Alexander's mother, had a dream: it was thundering and a bolt of lightning hit her womb; as it struck, a blaze rose, then split into several flames and vanished. Later on, after the wedding, Philip dreamt that he was stamping a seal onto his wife's womb and that the seal bore the likeness of a lion. Another time, when Olympias was sleeping, a snake was seen lying by her side and ever since Philip was afraid of sleeping next to her, thinking that someone stronger than him was coming in onto her. Plutarch says that there was talk of an oracle of Apollo commanding Philip to bring sacrifices to Ammon and honour him more than any other god. There were also rumours that Philip lost that eye with which he peeped through the crack of the door and saw the lion take the form of a snake and lie next to his wife. Later on, as Olympias was seeing Alexander off to an expedition, she confessed to him the secret of his birth and urged him to make sure that his thoughts and deeds were worthy of his origin. In the Romanian version of "Alexandria" there are the same tales about Ammon God, the lion, the tiny snake coming out of an egg in Philip's dream and even about Olympias's confession as to the secret of Alexander's birth. It is thus clear that Plutarch borrowed some of the legends which were circulating about the way the great conqueror had come into the world, which legends resorted to superhuman ancestry to explain Alexander's conquests and glories.

In Plutarch's account, Alexander's famous horse was called Bucephalus, which is also the name used to refer to it in other historical writings, while Romanians turned the name into Ducipal (perhaps Romanian popular mentality found it fit to put the horse's name in connection with the rank of its imperial master).

Plutarch's descriptions present Alexander as filled with ambition and a desire for vengeance. He ascends to the throne at the age of 20 and his first thought upon his coronation is: 'That Demosthenes who called me a child when I was in the midst of battle against the Illyrians and the Triballi, and a boy when I reached Thessaly will see that I am a man when I am under the walls of Athens.'. In the Romanian version of "Alexandria", Demosthenes is replaced by Darius, who calls Alexander 'a little suckling boy' and sends him toys, which enrages him.

The size of his army is reported by historians to have been between 30,000 and 40,000 riders and infantry men. When Alexander urged his soldiers to battle or inspected his troops, he rode on a different horse, in order to spare Bucephalus; however, he would not go to war without it. He was valiant in battle and would organise celebrations and games after each conquest; he was fond of wise men and of humour. The expeditions are recounted by Plutarch in a manner that is true to reality; nothing fantastical happened (except for the occasional premonitory dream). The fantastical episodes in the popular book "Alexandria"

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are not featured in the historian's work. Everything is presented in the form of a military campaign record. In the fantastical popular story there is no mention of the episode of Bucephalus's death, which caused Alexander terrible grief, as he felt that he had lost nothing other than a close friend. Besides, he even founded a city called Bucephalia in the horse's memory. In the popular book, similarly to fairy tales, it is the horse that avenges its master's death. When speaking about Alexander's death, Aristobulus says that the latter, suffering from great heat and insane thirst, drank a lot of wine and thus became delirious and died on the thirtieth day of the month of Daisios. In the Memoirs, Alexander's end is described in the smallest details from his first to his last day of agony. No one suspected that he had been poisoned immediately after his death, but it is said that the rumour spread six years later. Olympias sentenced many to death and had Iollas's ashes scattered, as she thought it was he who had poisoned Alexander. Roxana (not Ruxandra) happened to have just had a baby and was held in high esteem by the Macedonians. However, she was lured into a trap together with her sister and they were killed, then their bodies were thrown into a well. In "Alexandria", Ruxandra stabbed herself and her body fell over the lifeless body of Alexander.

This is roughly the style in which Plutarch recounted "The Life of Alexander" in chapter IX of his Parallel Lives. Better known and more appreciated than this work was that of Curtius, The Life and Deeds of Alexander the Great. Curtius's book was appreciated on Romanian territory as early as the 17th century. The oldest translation into Romanian of parts of Curtius's "Alexandria" was carried out by M. Costin around 1671-1672. He also used Curtius's work is his own historical writings about the Dacians and other ancient peoples that inhabited our region. M. Costin makes a clear distinction between the work of Rufus Curtius, which he calls Faptile lui Alexandru Machidon (The Deeds of Alexander of Macedon), and "Alixăndria populară" (the popular Alexandria), which he qualifies as "untrue… full of fairy tales".

In the beginning of his book, the author presents Alexander as a scholar, thirsty for knowledge and intelligence. He valued Homer's work more than anything else and believed that the latter was the only writer to have presented very aptly the wisdom necessary to man, thanks to which empires could fall. He had such a great cult for Homer that it was said that the Greeks had given him the sobriquet "Lover of Homer". Once, cheerfully putting out his hand for a bright-faced man who had brought him good news, he said: "What good news do you bring me that warrants such a cheerful face, other than that Homer is resurrected?"

In Curtius's account as well, Alexander's horse was called Bucephalus and it seems that the name was due to the horn on its forehead, which made its head resemble that of an ox. Bucephalus means 'ox head' in Greek. The horse is tamed through cleverness (Alexander climbs in the saddle without Bucephalus seeing his shadow and rides him to exhaustion). After achieving a few resounding victories, Alexander says: 'Macedonia is too small for so great a warrior', which on Romanian soil became: 'Let it be known, ye, boyars, that great will be the misfortune of him who from now on raises his sword against the Macedonians, for he will perish by Alexander's hand and by Macedonians he will be expelled'.

Philip's separation from Olympias (Olimpiada for Romanians) is featured in the Romanian version as well, except that the latter recounts that some boyars determined Philip

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to leave her and does not specify the name of his other wife. Curtius tells us that Olympias's iciness and pride pushed away Philip's love more and more every day. Some say that that was the reason behind her repudiation. It appears that, although married to Olympias, Philip took a second wife, Cleopatra, without divorcing the first. The Romanian version outlines Romanians' cult for the family: Alexander's rage being unleashed at the news of Olympias's repudiation, she is brought back. Philip's death occurs differently as well: in our version, Philip, being ill, was injured while trying to save Olimpiada from being carried off by one Anarhos. History tells us that Philip was basely stabbed by Pausanias, a member of his personal guard whom he had humiliated. Philip was thus punished, as his achievements had led him to believe that he was equal to the gods. In the Romanian rendition, he dies defending Olympias and, in this manner, redeems his sin of having left her a few years before.

Olimpiada, whom the popular book portrays as full of virtues, as a mother should be, is proven by history to be a conniving and vengeful woman, who ordered the hanging of Cleopatra, after having had her son burned a few days before Philip's death. Many of the people hated Olympias's tyranny, and, since Philip had several sons, it was unclear who would succeed him. Alexander won the throne by virtue of his battle plans and conquests. In the popular version, Alexander was the sole heir and there was no question regarding the succession, which reflects a sense of respect for order and tradition, which preserves unblemished the image of the family.

The popular book goes through the Troy episode relatively quickly and what is in fact recounted is the fall of Troada, such as it circulated on Romanian territory (overlapping with "Istoria căderii Troadei" ("The History of the Fall of Troy")); the integration of the parts about Dacia and Rome shows that the transformation took place on Romanian soil. The Troy episode is situated in the Romanian version after the encounter with Darius-Darie, while history shows that chronologically it preceded the latter. The first confrontation between Darius and Alexander, according to the popular book, takes place via letters. This episode features fairy-tale elements as well, such as obstacles in the hero's path, trials which he overcomes due to his intelligence. More exactly, Darie sends Alexander two hollow caskets to fill with hops and two sacks of poppy seeds to count in order to find out the number of his troops. In turn, Alexander sends Darius a bag of peppercorns to eat in order to see that Macedonians are lions 'while Persians are sheep'. The expressions used are metaphors and reflections of a way of thinking characteristic of the Romanian mentality, which is also present in fairy tales and legends.

Alexander's death as well is much amplified and dramatised in the popular version of "Alexandria". Rufus Curtius makes no mention of Ruxandra and her suicide worthy of a veritable classical tragedy heroine, nor of the 'courtois' mentality. It is highly unlikely that Romanians should have been familiar with Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet', yet it remains to be discovered whether this ending is also found in the other renditions, particularly the Western ones, which may have drawn inspiration from certain sources (such as "Tristan and Iseult").

Compared to Curtius's account, the popular book is more reduced and compact; the episodes are shorter, many of Alexander's battles are omitted. Only the episodes which bear a certain significance are featured: the battle against Darie, the defeat of the Greeks, the

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episode of the Jerusalem idols, etc. The stories selected were those that pleased the reader and the masses more, without boring them with historical details and battle-related technicalities. The moments chosen were the ones of importance for the psychology of the common Romanian, animated by the Christian spirit. Scholarly chroniclers, such as M. Costin, despised the lies in "Alexandria", along with its fanciful geography and history; however, they did retain the moral and epic background which motivated them to read the actual biographies of the hero as written by Curtis and Plutarch. To less cultivated readers, such as father Ion the Romanian, "Alexandria" did not provide only literary enjoyment, but also the illusion of being acquainted with deeds and landscapes in the existence of which they believed. This is the explanation for the insertion of Ptolemy's arrival in Scythia, by the Acrîm Tătaru sea, which is based on the real expedition of Alexander into Dacia in 335 B.C. and for the interpolation about Romanians originating from Rome. At the same time, heroes such as Darie and Por became very well known among the people, while ogres, Ducipal and the blajini (the gentle ones) were woven into the fabric of fairy tales and traditions.

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