

Ma'jū were a rapacious and murderous people (or peoples) who lived north of Asia. It is plausible that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was a mighty king who blocked their path by building a barrier comparable to the Great Wall of China. Historians agree that North-Eastern Asia was inhabited by a fast growing ferocious people who were a constant threat to their neighbours, the Chinese being one of them. Sometimes they managed to penetrate as far as the Middle-East and Northern Europe, where some of them settled and led a civilized life. Others, however, returned and continued plundering and looting. Some historians therefore, basing themselves on Ibn Miskawayh's *Taḥdhīb ul-akhlāq* and on the treatises of the Ikhwān al-safā', are of the opinion that Ya'jū and Ma'jū were people who lived North of Asia.

Next, Ṭabāṭabā'ī deals with the question of who Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is and where the wall or barrier he built is to be found. He starts by reviewing several answers to this question. Some have suggested that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is the Chinese emperor Shih hunang-ti, who built the great wall, completed in 264 BC, in order to protect his people from the Mongols.³ According to others, the wall was built by one of the kings of Assyria, which in the 7th century BC was invaded by the Scythians entering through a mountain pass in the Caucasus. They regularly plundered the capital Nineveh. In order to ward off these attacks, the king built a wall, possibly even the wall known in the Islamic tradition as the *Bāb al-abwāb*.⁴ Both these opinions are unacceptable in the eyes of Ṭabāṭabā'ī, because they are at variance with what the Quran tells us. The latter also holds true for the prevailing view that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is Alexander the Great. Scholars such as Ibn Sīna (980-1037) and Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī (1149-1209)⁵ hold this view, which is even supported by reliable traditions. Admittedly, Alexander made long journeys, and he ruled over large parts of the world. However, he was not the only king with such a vast empire. Moreover, in contrast to Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, he was not a believer in God and the resurrection, nor was he just and righteous. Finally, no history book tells us that he built a wall.

The identification of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn with Alexander the Great, according to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, is the result of mixing up two Alexanders.

3 As a matter of fact, in the 3rd century BC Shih huang-ti connected a number of existing defensive walls into a single system.

4 "Gate of the Gates", the Arabic designation of a pass and fortress at the E. end of the Caucasus." (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e., s.v. Bāb al-abwāb)

5 Ṭabāṭabā'ī refers to Rāzī's "great commentary", i.e. his *Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* or *Kitāb al-tafsīr al-kabīr*. Cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e., s.v. Fakhr-al-Dīn al-Rāzī

According to Ibn Kathīr's *al-Bidāyah wa'l-Nihāyah* there was a Dhū 'l-Qarnayn Alexander, whose father was the first emperor of Rūm and who was a descendant of Sām b. Nūḥ. He was a God-fearing and righteous king, whose minister (*wazīr*) was the prophet Khidr, and who went to look for the water of life. This Alexander was mistaken for Alexander of Macedon, son of Philip, who was a polytheist, with a philosopher as minister, and who lived almost 2000 years after the first one. However, Ṭabāṭabā'ī adds, in history there is no trace of an Alexander, who is supposed to have lived some 2000 years BC, to have been a God-fearing king and to have had Khidr as his minister.

Next Ṭabāṭabā'ī deals at some length with the view that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is to be identified with one of the Himyarite kings of Yemen. This view is held – albeit with different details – by, among others, Ibn Hišām in his *Sīra* and his *Tījān*,⁶ al-Maqrīzī in his *al-Khiṭaṭ*,⁷ and Abū Reyhān Bīrūnī in his *Āthār al-bāqiyya*.⁸ All agree that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was a title borne by several Himyarite kings, but they differ as far as their exact identities are concerned. Al-Maqrīzī e.g. writes that his real name was Ṣa'b b. Dhī Marāthid, a descendant of the prophet Nūḥ. He started off as a very cruel ruler, but later on in his reign submitted to God; in Jerusalem he met with Khidr and together they made long journeys to the East and the West. During one of the journeys Khidr discovered the fountain of (eternal) life and drank thereof, without saying anything to Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. The latter, during another journey, built the wall of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj. According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, al-Maqrīzī's story does not answer the question where this wall is to be found. It cannot have been one of the walls of Yemen or the neighbouring countries, because these walls, e.g. the famous wall or dam of Mārib,⁹ were built for irrigational purposes or to collect drinking water, and not to prevent the intrusion of an uncivilized people. Moreover, in constructing these walls neither iron nor molten lead was used as in the case of the wall of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj. Finally, there were no uncivilized people living in the neighbourhood of Yemen. In another version we are told that the Dhū 'l-Qarnayn of the Quran was a powerful, monotheistic, righteous Yemenite king, whose

6 Ibn Hišām is famous for his edition of the *Sīra* (Life of Muhammad) of Ibn Ishāq. His *Kitāb al-Tījān* is on South Arabian Antiquities (Encyclopaedia of Islam, n.e., s.v. Ibn Hishām).

7 Taqī al-Dīn Abū 'l-'Abbās Ahmad b. 'Alī b. 'Abd al-Kādir (1364-1442), an Egyptian historian, well-known for his *al-Mawā'id wa'l-i'tibār fī dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa'l-āthār*, commonly known as *Khiṭaṭ*. This work deals with the topography of al-Fuṣṭāṭ and Cairo as well as with Alexandria and Egyptian history in general (Encyclopaedia of Islam, n.e., s.v. al-Maqrīzī).

8 Encyclopaedia of Islam, n.e., s.v. Bīrūnī.

9 Encyclopaedia of Islam, n.e., s.v. Mārib.

original name was Šamaryar'aš. At the head of a large army he travelled first to the West, to Egypt and beyond, and then turned to the East, to Turkestan and China. It was probably during the latter journey that he met a people who requested him – since Yemenite kings are well-known for their skill in constructing walls – to build them a wall to prevent Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj descending upon their country. So this wall is to be identified, at least partly, as the Chinese wall. This Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was also the one who, during his journey to the East, built Samarqand, which was originally called Šamarqand. That Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was an Arab king is corroborated by the fact that in the Quran, Arabs inquired after Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, whereupon his story is told as a lesson and an example for the Arabs. Since Arabs are usually not very much interested in the history of other peoples, Dhū 'l-Qarnayn would not have been mentioned in the Quran – as the kings of Rūm, Iran or China are not mentioned in the Quran – had he not been an Arab.

The problem with this view, Ṭabāṭabā'ī writes, is that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn cannot have built the Chinese wall, since he lived many centuries before Alexander the Great, while the Chinese wall was built after Alexander. This problem cannot be solved by assuming, as the author of the *Tafsīr-i Jawāhir* did, that the Quranic Dhū 'l-Qarnayn must be identified with a Yemenite king who lived much later. In the eyes of Ṭabāṭabā'ī the identification of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn with a Yemenite king is not convincing, since the stories about the kings of Yemen belong to the genre of stories told in coffeehouses, which are not based on sound historical evidence.

The view that appeals most to Ṭabāṭabā'ī is that the Quranic Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is no less than Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid empire. He conquered first Babylon and then Egypt and afterwards he marched to the East. According to Ṭabāṭabā'ī, this idea was first put forward by a near-contemporary scholar, whose name is not mentioned, and was later developed by the Indian scholar Maulānā Abū Kalām Āzād (1888-1958).¹⁰ In his Quran commentary, Ṭabāṭabā'ī borrows Āzād's view and elaborates upon it.

The reason for Ṭabāṭabā'ī's preference for the identification of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn and Cyrus is that the historical data about Cyrus

10 On this influential Muslim scholar and politician cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e. (Supplement), s.v. Āzād, Abū 'l-Kalām. He is the author of a celebrated Quran commentary, entitled *Tarjumān al-Quran*. The latter work was unfortunately not available to the present writer. The available English translation does not cover the Quranic passages dealing with Dhū 'l-Qarnayn.

match the Quranic description of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn very well. Like his Quranic counterpart, Cyrus was a pious man, a monotheist, who believed in the hereafter, as is clear from the Old Testament. In Isaiah e.g. it is said:

Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron: And I will give thee the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I, the LORD, which call thee by thy name, am the God of Israel.¹¹

Cyrus's piety is also borne out by inscriptions dating from the time of Darius. He was a magnanimous and noble ruler, as can be seen from the way he behaved after conquering a country: he granted the defeated people forgiveness, treated their leaders with respect, protected the weak and punished criminals. Jewish literature praises Cyrus highly because he ended the Babylonian captivity and even provided the means for rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem. In Ezra we read:

Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem."¹²

Verse 7 adds:

11 Isaiah 45:1-4 of the King James version.

12 Verses 1:2-4 of the King James version.

Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods.

Greek historians such as Herodotus speak highly of Cyrus and mention his chivalry, compassion, unselfishness and generosity.

As to why Cyrus should be called Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, Ṭabāṭabā'ī finds a clear answer in the archeological evidence. He points out that a statue was recently discovered in the South of Iran, representing a figure with two horns on his head. According to classical historiography, Cyrus wore a crown or headdress with two horns. This is also confirmed, Ṭabāṭabā'ī adds, by the Old Testament, where Daniel describes a vision in which he saw Cyrus in the form of a ram with two horns.

In the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar a vision appeared unto me, even unto me Daniel, after that which appeared unto me at the first. And I saw in a vision; and it came to pass, when I saw, that I was at Shushan in the palace, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in a vision, and I was by the river of Ulai. Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great.¹³

In an explanation of this vision Daniel is told “The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia.”¹⁴

The statue Ṭabāṭabā'ī refers to is almost certainly a carving at Pasargadae that has been analysed by David Stronach. In Stronach's words, the carving “shows a four-winged, closely bearded male figure facing left, i.e. inwards towards the centre of the building. The figure bears a crown on its head, attached to a close-fitting ribbed cap.” On this crown two “long twisted horns of an Abyssinian ram” are to be seen. What Stronach considered to be “the four-winged guardian

¹³ Daniel 8:1-5.

¹⁴ Daniel 8:20.

figure”¹⁵ is in the eyes of Ṭabāṭabā’ī the Achaemenid king himself, who is then identified with Dhū ’l-Qarnayn because of the two horns of his crown.

Concerning the journeys of Dhū ’l-Qarnayn, he is said to journey to the West, “Until, when he reached the setting of the sun, he found it set in a spring of murky water” (Quran 18:86). Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains that this corresponds with Cyrus’ campaign against Lydia in Asia Minor: the Quranic phrase “near it he found a people: We Said ‘O Zulqarnayn (thou hast authority,) either to punish them or to treat them with kindness’” (18:87) shows that Cyrus’ campaign was motivated by his wish to end an uprising and to do justice. Dhū ’l-Qarnayn’s journey to the East, “Until, when he came to the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people for whom We had provided no covering protection against the heat” (18:90) is Cyrus’ journey to Bactria, undertaken to subdue wild peoples, who were terrorizing the whole region.

Ṭabāṭabā’ī then explains that in the mountains of the Caucasus there is a dam or wall built in a mountain pass. This pass, called Dāryāl, connects North and South, and via this pass malicious people from the North used to invade the South and plunder countries such as Armenia, Iran and Assyria. Historians mention that Cyrus undertook an expedition to the North of Iran to suppress a revolt. During this expedition Cyrus, at the request of local people, built a wall or dam, which is the only dam in the world in which iron is used. This wall is not to be confused, Ṭabāṭabā’ī adds, with the so-called *Bāb al-abwāb*, which is situated in the neighbourhood of the Caspian Sea.¹⁶

The words Ya’jūj and Ma’jūj are of Chinese origin, Ṭabāṭabā’ī explains, and designate the Mongols in a generic sense of the word, i.e. including different historical manifestations of this ferocious people (Scythians, Huns, Mongols), who from their original homeland in North-East Asia repeatedly attacked the civilized world through the Dāryāl pass, until they were stopped by a dam, built by Cyrus.

Ṭabāṭabā’ī admits that the view put forward by Abū Kalām Āzād, although it is more consistent with the Quran than other

15 *Pasargadae. A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961-1963*, Oxford, 1978, 47-50.

16 According to *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (n.e., s.v. Bāb al-abwāb), ‘the Gate of the Gates’, the Arabic designation of a pass and fortress at the East end of the Caucasus, in Persian Darband, later under Turkish influence ‘Iron Gate’, mod. Derbent. The ‘Gates’ are the mouths of the E. Caucasus valleys, al-Bāb itself (‘the Gate’) in the main pass being the most important. It was originally fortified against invaders from the North at some date not determined, traditionally by Anūshīrwān (6th century A.D.), who is said to have built a wall seven farsakhs in length from the mountains to the sea.

interpretations, is not undisputed. He addresses the question of how the ferocious appearance of the Mongols in the 7th/13th century can be harmonized with the Quranic verses "... when the promise of my Lord comes to pass, He will make it into dust, and the promise of my Lord is true. On that day We shall leave them to surge like waves on one another" (18:98-99). If Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj cannot cause havoc as long as the wall exists, where was the wall when the Mongols overran the civilized world in the 13th century? Moreover, what is the meaning of a dam or wall in our day and age, when barriers, whether natural or manmade, no longer seem to play an important role? The answer lies in the correct interpretation of the words "He will make it into dust" (*da kā'a*). This should be interpreted as "losing its meaning", "becoming irrelevant." Therefore, the promise of the Lord is essentially the promise that the human race will make progress, implying that the different peoples and races will draw closer to one another and will no longer be separated by walls and dams. This is confirmed by the verse "Until the Gog and Magog (people) are let through (their barrier), and they swiftly swarm from every hill" (Quran 21:96). Another possible interpretation is that the wall or dam disappeared underground or was inundated, since the Arabic verb *dakāa* can also mean "to bury." Ṭabāṭabā'ī, however, prefers the first interpretation.

Two examples will suffice to show that although his Quran commentary, *al-Mizān*, exerts a dominating influence in contemporary Shiite exegesis, Ṭabāṭabā'ī's equation of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn with the Achaemenid king Cyrus has not entirely supplanted the classical view that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn is Alexander the Great, among modern Shiite Quran exegetes.

This classical view is to be found a Quran commentary written by the female theologian (unfortunately hardly known in Western scholarship) Banū Amīn Eṣṣahānī (1895-1983),¹⁷ under the title *Makḥzan al-ʿirfān*.¹⁸ According to her, Alexander of Macedonia was known for his bravery and courage and the Arabs therefore compared him to a ram and its horns, hence the name Dhū ʿl-Qarnayn. Other explanations of this name, given by people not versed in science and history, are nonsensical and not worth mentioning. Bānū Amīn

17 For biographical and bibliographical information on her see Nahīd Ṭayyebī, *Zindigānī-yi bānū-yi īrānī. Bānū-ye mojtahede Nosrat al-sādāt Amīn*, Tehran 1380/2001.

18 This work was published in 1404AH/1349Sh in 10 vols. (Tehrān: Ḥarakat al-nisā' aL-moslimāt). I have used the edition to be found on the CD *Jāme'*, Tehrān: Khāne-ye ketāb, n.d.).

Eṣfahānī acknowledges that the title Dhū 'l-Qarnayn was also given to other people, e.g. to Wajīh al-Dowle Hamadānī, whom the Fatimid ruler al-Zāher bi-amr Allāh appointed as governor of Iskandariyya in 414 AH, and who died in 428 AH. But the Dhū 'l-Qarnayn mentioned in the Quran is Alexander the Great. He was a just and god-fearing king and, according to some, even a prophet. When, during one of his travels, “he found a people who scarcely understood a word” (18:93), he was able to communicate with them because God had given him the capacity to understand their language, as Solomon had been given the capacity to understand the language of the birds. According to another interpretation, Bānū Amīn adds, these people had in their midst an interpreter to communicate with Dhū 'l-Qarnayn. So they were able to ask him to free them from the evil of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj. Although Bānū Amīn states that their identity is known only to God, that does not prevent her providing some details about their physical appearance and other qualities. They are either extremely tall or extremely short. A tradition going back to the prophet Mohammad tells us that no one of these people dies without leaving behind a thousand heavily armed sons.¹⁹

Bānū Amīn also mentions that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, after building the wall, went on till he reached a very pious and righteous people. Their front door was always open, because, so they explained, there no thieves among them. No one was poor and they had no leaders, because their behaviour made every form of leadership superfluous. They buried the dead at the entrances of their houses, so as to be constantly reminded of the finiteness of life. Out of fear of committing a sin, they never laughed, and they were always asking God's forgiveness. Neither were they ever sad because they had surrendered completely to what God had preordained for them.

In another Quran commentary, written by the influential cleric Makārim Shīrāzī (born in 1345/1927),²⁰ Ṭabāṭabā'ī's influence is paramount. In his *Tafsīr-e namūne*,²¹ he deals with the same questions Ṭabāṭabā'ī raises (Who was Dhū 'l-Qarnayn? Where is his wall to be found? Who are Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj?), and gives more or less the same answers. Only occasionally does he comment on Ṭabāṭabā'ī's view or

19 Similar details are given by Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (1627-1698) in his *Haqq al-yaqīn* (Teheran, 1332, 475-476), where we are told that some have such big ears that they used one ear as a mattress and the other as a blanket.

20 Biographical and bibliographical information on this well-known grand ayatollah is to be found on his website (www.amiralmomenin.net).

21 I have used the version on the CD-Rom mentioned in note 2. The CD-Rom Jāme' contains the edition that was published in Tehrān: Dār al-eslāmiyye, 27 vols., 1352/1973-1366/1987.

add details. For example, the latter's view that God's promise, mentioned in 18:98 ("He will make it into dust, and the promise of my Lord is true.") refers to the progress of mankind, is in the eyes of Makārem Shīrāzī a little far-fetched. And in his commentary on 18:93 ("he found a people who scarcely understood a word"), he remarks – as does Bānū Amīn Eṣfahānī – that Dhū 'l-Qarnayn may have been able to communicate with these people either through an interpreter or because he was given the capacity to understand their language, as Solomon was given the capacity to understand the language of the birds.

The main difference between Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Makārem Shīrāzī is that the latter explicitly examines the didactical points of the story of Dhū 'l-Qarnayn and Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj. The first lesson is that nothing on earth happens unless we use the possibilities given by God. Moreover, the story can serve as a lesson for governments in several respects. Like Dhū 'l-Qarnayn, a government must both reward and punish; it must take into consideration the different conditions of life of its subjects. Security is one of the most important conditions for a healthy social life. As Dhū 'l-Qarnayn did not accept the money offered to him by the people who had asked him to build a dam, political leaders must not concern themselves with material profit, but be content with what God puts at their disposal. On the other hand the sequel of this verse ("Help me therefore with strength [and labour]") makes it clear that people in distress must actively participate when being rescued. From the solid way in which Dhū 'l-Qarnayn built the wall, using iron and copper, we can learn that in everything we do, we must proceed in the most thorough manner. Like Dhū 'l-Qarnayn who, having built the wall, acknowledging that it was a mercy from God, we must not be proud and haughty, we must always appreciate God's might. Finally, we must acknowledge that everything on earth is transitory and finite, even if it is built from iron and copper.

Works cited:

- Anawati, G.C., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. Fakhr-al-Dīn al-Rāzī, 1965.
- Boilot, D.J., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e., s.v. Bīrūnī, 1960.
- Dunlop, D.M., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. Bāb al-abwāb, 1960.
- Fleisch, H., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. Ibn Hishām, 1971.
- Isfahānī, B.A., Makhzan al-ʿarīfīn, Teheran, 1349/1970, 10 volumes
- Majlesī, Muḥammad Bāqer, *Ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, Tehran, 1953.
- Makārim Shīrāzī, Tafsīr-i namūni, Teheran, 1352-1973-1366/1937, 27 volumes
- Müller, W.M., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e., s.v. Mārib, 1991.
- Rosenthal, F., *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, n.e., s.v. al-Makrīzī, 1991.
- Stronach, D., *Pasargadae. A Report on the Excavations Conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies from 1961-1963*, Oxford, 1978.
- Ṭabāṭabāʾī, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *Al-Mīzān, the CD-Rom Nūr al-anwār, version 2*, Qumm: Computer Research Center of Islamic Sciences, Vol. 13, 497-544.
- Ṭayyebī, Nahīd, *Zindigānī-yi bānū-yi īrānī. Bānū-ye mojtahede Nosrat al-sādāt Amīn*, Tehran, 2001.

بودند بسیاری اسپندی بودند ساری چنین بار باز بر این گروه در این بستی بوسه بران این مال ما بخت به نسی با به با نسی	پیرانه در مشرب پیگیری بچاره گری برکت و دود یکی داشت سستی و در چو گویان بر گویان کسی را نه اندیشه گرم	سند در این نهری برکت کوشت کنای و اور و سبک کروبی در کنای و سبک دسته در سبک و سبک بختال و دودان بر چو دود	بجز این و دانش سبک بر این و دودان و سبک چو با آدینه و دود در سبک و سبک و دود بختال و دودان و سبک
--	--	--	--



بجز این و دانش سبک بر این و دودان و سبک چو با آدینه و دود در سبک و سبک و دود بختال و دودان و سبک	بجز این و دانش سبک بر این و دودان و سبک چو با آدینه و دود در سبک و سبک و دود بختال و دودان و سبک	بجز این و دانش سبک بر این و دودان و سبک چو با آدینه و دود در سبک و سبک و دود بختال و دودان و سبک	بجز این و دانش سبک بر این و دودان و سبک چو با آدینه و دود در سبک و سبک و دود بختال و دودان و سبک
--	--	--	--