

Unfathomable Evil: The Presentation of Gog and Magog in Persian Literature

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Compared to the Arab world, in which the figures of Gog and Magog are increasingly used in public spheres as symbols for an enemy or an unknown danger, there are few such publications in modern Iranian society. Naturally the Shiite religious doctors comment on Gog and Magog as an eschatological sign, but outside the technical religious literature they appear in Iran mainly as types of those who speak an unintelligible language. We can perhaps see the origins of this in Persian literature of the tenth to twelfth centuries. In this essay, I shall concentrate primarily on the genres of the wonders of creation, classical world histories, and Alexander romances, as they appear in classical Persian.

Gog and Magog appear twice in the Quran (18:90-99; 21:96). In Surah 21, the reference is brief and they appear only as an eschatological sign: “till, when Gog and Magog are unloosed, and they slide down out of every slope. Then the true promise is near by” (21:96-97). In Surah 18, the Surah of the Cave, the account is longer, is set in the far past, and features the incomprehensibility of Gog and Magog’s language. The story is one incident in a longer account of the doings of the hero Dhu’l-Qarneyn, (‘he of the two horns’):

Then he followed a road. Till, when he came between the two mountains, he found upon their hither side a folk that scarce could understand a saying. They said: O Dhu’l-Qarneyn! Lo! Gog and Magog are spoiling the land. So may we pay thee tribute on condition that thou set a barrier between us and them? He said: That wherein my Lord hath established me is better (than your tribute). Do but help me with strength (of men), I will set between you and them a bank. Give me pieces of iron – till, when he had levelled up (the gap) between the cliffs, he said: Blow! – till, when he had made it a fire, he said: Bring me molten copper to pour thereon. And (Gog and Magog) were not able to surmount, nor could they pierce (it). He said: This is a mercy from my Lord; but when the promise of my Lord cometh to pass, He will lay it low, for the promise of my Lord is true. And on that day we shall

let some of them surge against others, and the Trumpet will be blown. Then We shall gather them together in one gathering.¹

Here, the Quran describes Dhu'l-Qarneyn's journey to a mysterious land ravaged by the hordes of Gog and Magog and erects a barrier between them and the civilised world. There has been much debate about the figure of Dhu'l-Qarneyn and whether he can be identified with Alexander.² Some scholars believe that Dhu'l-Qarneyn is Cyrus the Great who built a rampart in the far east of his Empire to ward off the roving Turkic tribes.³ Other scholars are of the opinion that he is the Chinese Emperor Shih hunang-ti and the rampart is the Chinese wall.

It is not clear how we should imagine the setting: a mountain defile, a valley between two mountain ranges, or a gap between two walls. The geographical setting has always been a point of dispute. Each literary tradition has developed its own reading. According to the Persian polymath Abu Reyhan Biruni's *Ketab al-tafhim*, the tribes of Gog and Magog are situated in the same region where Turkic tribes can be found.⁴ Although it is not clear where Gog and Magog originally came from, in Persian sources they attack the civilised world from the north of the Caucasus, where the famous Darband pass is located.⁵ In Arabic (and several Persian) sources, this pass is translated as *Bab al-abvab* and is mythologized in a number of texts as the locality of the fortification made by Alexander. This attribution cannot be true because as Kettenhofen indicates, "the Darband fortress was certainly the most prominent Sasanian defensive construction in the Caucasus

1 18:92-99, Pickthall's translation.

2 See F. Doufekar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus. Zeven eeuwen Arabische Alexandertraditie: van Pseudo-Callisthenes tot Sūrī*, PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2003, chapter 3, pp. 118-173; see also F. de Polignac "Cosmocrator: l'Islam et la légende antique du souverain universel," in *The Problematics of Power: Eastern and Western Representations of Alexander the Great*, Bern: Peter Lang, 1996, pp. 149-64. For a study on Gog and Magog in various literary traditions see A.R. Anderson, *Alexander's Gate, Gog and Magog, and the Inclosed Nations*, Cambridge / Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1932.

3 In his commentary on the Quran, Baha al-Din Khorramshahi emphasizes that Allama Tabatabai in his *al-Mizan* and Khazaeli in his *Elm-e Quran* believe that Zolqarneyn is Cyrus. This view is elaborated by Abu Kalam Azad in his *Korush-e Kabir (Zolqarneyn)*, trans. Ebrahim Bastani Parizi, Tehran: elm, 2001. See The Quran, comm. by B. Khorramshahi, Tehran: Jami, 1995, p. 304. For this identification of Dhu 'l-Qarneyn with Cyrus the Great see Ter Haar's contribution in this volume. For other views on Zolqarneyn's identification see F. Doufekar-Aerts, "Alexander the Great and the Pharos of Alexandria in Arabic Literature," in *The Problematics of Power*, pp. 191-202.

4 Abu Reyhan Biruni, *Ketab al-tafhim*, ed. J.D. Homai, Tehran: Babak, 1983, p. 196; see also Sh. Shahbazi, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Haft keshvar.

5 E. Kettenhofen in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Darband.

and could have been erected only by an extremely powerful central government.” Its construction technique as Kettenhofen points out “is similar to other 6th-century fortifications, like those at Takht-e Solayman.”⁶ In other words, Islamic authors, whether Persians or Arabs, may have identified Alexander’s legendary fortification with a real fortification of a more recent period.

In addition to the Quran and traditions, there are several fantastic stories about Gog and Magog in the genre of *Ajayeḅ al-makḥluqat*.⁷ This genre draws its information from a variety of sources including the Bible. As we will see, several accounts report that Gog and Magog are descended from Japheth (Genesis x. 2).⁸ One of the oldest Persian sources in which Gog and Magog are mentioned is Mohammad ibn Mahmud Hamadani’s *Ajayeḅ al-makḥluqat* (completed 12th century), a forerunner of Qazvini’s eponymous work of the same genre.⁹ Gog and Magog appear at least twice in Hamadani’s book. Their first appearance is in the section describing the “Wonders of the Turks.” Hamadani classifies the Turks in groups, one being the tribes of Gog and Magog, who “have long claws, teeth like wolves and their mouths resembles those of a camel. Their entire body is covered with hairs. They bark like a dog.”¹⁰ Hamadani emphasises that they will destroy the world. Hamadani knows where they come from: “In the Chinese’s ocean there are numberless Gog and Magog, and when waves appear, they are thrown on the land where they procreate.” He then returns to their appearance and habits: “In appearance they are like man, in behaviour like a gazelle, their nails like a swine and their hair like a sheep. Whatever they see, they devour. They are descended from Japheth.” In the same chapter, Hamadani refers to the Sanjali, whom he identifies as a Chinese tribe. This tribe descends from Gog and lives on the coast of the Chinese ocean. He states: “they are extremely short of stature. They dive in the depth of the ocean [during the day] and come to the surface at night. They come in and out of the ships and do not harm anyone. Whenever they appear on the surface of the ocean, it is a sign of the ocean’s restlessness and the ships will slacken

6 See E. Kettenhofen in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Darband.

7 For more information on this genre see S. von Hees, “The Astonishing: a Critique and Re-Reading of ‘Aḡa’ib Literature,” in *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 8, No. 2, July 2005, pp. 101-120.

8 For an elaborate treatment of Gog and Magog in the Bible see Sverre Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38-39 as Pre-Text for Revelation 19, 17-21 and 20, 7-10*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001.

9 For the relation between Qazvini’s and Hamadani’s books, see the introduction to Hamadani’s *Ajayeḅ-nama*, ed. J. Modarres Sadeqi, Tehran: Markaz, 1996, p. 18.

10 Mohammad ibn Mahmud Hamadani, *Ajayeḅ-nama*, ed. J. Modarres Sadeqi, Tehran: Markaz, 1996, p. 230.

the sails. When they dive in the water and disappear, the sea calms and the ships hoist the sails.”¹¹ What is interesting in this depiction is that Hamadani distinguishes between Gog and Magog. According to Hamadani, Gog is an amphibious creature whom human beings need not fear. The Gog is beneficial, since he warns man of the rage of the ocean.

In another chapter on the “Wonders of regions and countries,” Hamadani refers for the second time to Gog and Magog when he describes the rampart (*sadd*) made by Dhu’l-Qarneyn. When Alexander arrives in this region, the local ruler comes to him and complains: “Behind us, there are tribes who are short of stature, with broad faces, and they want to destroy our land. Alexander said: ‘What is the reason?’ The ruler answers: ‘hostility is in their nature, we have never harmed them.’”¹² After this conversation between Alexander and the local ruler, Hamadani describes how Alexander builds an iron fortification:

Alexander gathered twenty thousand smiths who placed innumerable layers of iron and bronze upon each other. Afterwards they placed a layer of copper upon them and then a layer of sulphur till these layers reached the top of the mountain. When this job was finished, people brought firewood for several years and placed it over the wall. Then they set fire to them so that the bronze would melt and the layers of iron and bronze would mix with each other.¹³

Hamadani links the wall ingeniously with the end of time motif, adding an apocalyptic character in his description:

When the rampart became one unified whole, Alexander inscribed on it the following words: “We built this rampart by God’s power. When eight hundred and six years passes after the coming of Mohammad the Arab, the wombs will be torn, the heart will be hard, people will shed blood unjustly, fornication (...) will appear, and man will take over the appearance of a woman and woman the appearance of a man, then a breach will appear in this

¹¹ Hamadani, *Ajayeb-nama*, p. 230.

¹² Hamadani, *Ajayeb-nama*, p. 449.

¹³ Hamadani, *Ajayeb-nama*, p. 449.

rampart. There will appear so many creatures with short legs that they will cover the face of the earth. They will eat everyone and destroy everything. Then they will depart for the kingdom of Persian king Shapur. But it is here that he will kill them all.¹⁴

Hamadani goes on with another account of Gog and Magog:

It is said that Caliph Vatheq dreamed one night that a breach had appeared in Dhu'l-Qarneyn's rampart. He was horrified. He dispatched Salam the Interpreter with a large army and a letter to the kings of Sarir and Arran. Salam says: "we travelled till we arrived at a region with black earth. It stank dreadfully. The ruler of Khazar advised us to rub vinegar on our faces so that no harm would come to us. After a long journey we finally arrived at a huge building made of iron, copper and bronze. Neither the height nor the breadth of the building can be described. It had a gate that was seventy cubits long. A lock of seven cubits was on the gate and above the lock a key of fourteen notches hung from the chains of the gate. There was a watcher who, with a group of horsemen with heavy axes, struck the gate every Friday so that on the other side of the gate Gog and Magog would hear and be afraid. When they struck the gate, they would place their ears on the gate. They could hear a huge clamour and would say, 'that it is the sound of Gog.'" Salam asked them: "has any of you ever seen Gog?" They answered: "One night, several Gog and Magog climbed to the top of the gate. A black wind blew and one of them fell in our land." When I counted [back, I realised] it was the same night that Vatheq had his dream. After this event, it took two years and four months for Salam to return to Samargand.¹⁵

Another elaborate account of Gog and Magog appears in *Haft Eqlim* by Amin Ahmad Razi, who introduces elements we have not seen in Hamadani's description. For the sake of convenience I translate the text in full:

According to many historians, Gog and Magog derive from Japheth, son of Noah. As each lineage migrated to one region of the world, they would start to cultivate the land. Gog and Magog

14 Hamadani, *Ajaye-b-nama*, p. 449.

15 Hamadani, *Ajaye-b-nama*, p. 450.

chose to go the Eastern borders, to a place where the rampart (*sadd*) of Alexander was built, and a huge number of people were born to their line. According to Abdollah b. Umar, the children of Adam are divided into ten groups. Nine of these belong to Gog and Magog, and one tenth constitutes the rest of the inhabitants of the earth. In some accounts, it is said that Gog and Magog are two different tribes and each tribe is divided into four categories. No individual dies before giving birth to one thousand. As far as their appearance is concerned, they can be grouped into three classes. The first group concerns individuals who are 120 *gaz* tall,¹⁶ but whose breadth does not at all correspond to their stature. The second group consists of people whose height and breadth are each 120 *gaz*. The third group comprises people whose height varies between one hand-span (*shibr*) and 40 cubits (*dhar*). The latter group is also famous as the ‘carpet-ears.’ Even the elephant and rhinoceros are no match for Gog and Magog. Whatever wild and injurious animals they may encounter, they will survive. And amongst Gog and Magog, when someone dies, they eat their flesh. They cannot be regarded as a ‘people,’ they live in the same way as animals.¹⁷

In Razi's description, Gog and Magog are humans, descending from Noah's son Japheth [as also Hamadani]. He is familiar with various accounts of the builder whose wall kept them from the civilized lands:

According to *Rowzat as-safa*, historians report that the rampart of Gog and Magog was built by Dhu'l-Qarneyn the Greater and some are of the opinions that it is one of the creations of Dhu'l-Qarneyn the Lesser. This is the same person as Eskandar b. Dara b. Bahman b. Esfaniyar who is also called Eskandar-e Rumi.¹⁸

By identifying a Greater and a Lesser Dhu'l-Qarney, the author leaves possibilities open to the reader but chooses his own interpretation. In his view, Dhu'l-Qarney is Alexander the Great, who descends from Persian kings. This descent is a commonplace in

16 F. Steingass writes: “a cubit, a length of 24 finger breadths, or six hands.” See *Persian-English Dictionary*, London: Routledge, fifth edition, 1963, under gaz.

17 Amin Ahmad Razi, *Haft Eqlim*, ed., J. Fazel, Tehran: Elmi, n.d., vol. iii, pp. 515-16.

18 Amin Ahmad Razi, *Haft Eqlim*, p. 516.

Persian Alexander romances: Alexander's rule is placed in the Kiyanid dynasty and forms a full chapter in the Persian national epic, the *Shah-nama* (completed 1010), by Ferdowsi. It is here that the confusion about the identity of Dhu'l-Qarneyn starts. As indicated by M. Southgate, several Persian Alexander romances omit the episode in which Alexander is presented as the son of Philip's wife. In Persian romances the story begins with a battle between Alexander and Darab, Darius' father, who defeats the Greeks and marries Philip's daughter. Shortly afterwards, Darius finds that she has foul breath and sends her back to her father, at which time she is already pregnant of Alexander.¹⁹ In the meantime Darius fathers another son who is named Darius, so that Alexander and Darius are half brothers.²⁰ In the next excerpt, Razi elaborates on the building of the barrier.

Alexander ordered them to make bricks of iron. They built the wall with those bricks upon which they poured melted copper. It is reported that the length of the wall is 100 *parasang* and its width is 50 *parasang* and its foundation has been constructed in such a way that it reaches the water. Its height is as high as a mountain. They have made a gate with two doors. The width of each door amounts to 60 cubits and its height is 70 cubits. The length of each gate is 5 cubits, which is made of zinc. They have put a lock on the gate whose length is seven cubits and it has a key measuring 7 cubits with 24 notches, and each notch is as big as a mortar. The king who is in those outer regions has arranged to go there every Friday with a group of strong-bodied men taking heavy axes with them. In one blow they hit those axes against the door and they make the locks shudder, to prove that this door is guarded. And also this is very well-known, that Gog and Magog go every day in front of the wall and attack the wall with teeth, tongue and claw until there is just a little bit left. Then, because they are getting tired, they leave it, saying, "when the morning comes we will make a breach." When they return next day, they

19 On the legend of Alexander's foul breath see D. Davis, "Sekandar, Skordion, and Darab's Queen's Bad Breath," in *Studies on Persianate Societies*, vol. 1, 2003, pp. 92f.

20 Minoo S. Southgate, "Portrait of Alexander in Persian Alexander-Romances of the Islamic Era," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 97, No. 3, 1977, pp. 278-84, see especially pp. 279-80. Also see W. Hanaway in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Eskandar-nama. For a concise historical account of Alexander the Great in Persian see P. Briant in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Alexander; Claude-Claire Kappler, "Alexander dans le Shāh Nāma de Firdousi: de la conquête du monde à la découverte de soi," in *The Problematics of Power*, pp. 165-90; F. Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus*, chapter 4.4.1., pp. 184-85; D. Davis, "Sekandar, Skordion, and Darab's Queen's Bad Breath," in *Studies*, pp. 89-95.

see the wall as it was before, by the power of Almighty God. Until Resurrection Day, this is what happens to them.

And when it is time for their escape they will make a hole in the rampart and come out and spread themselves over the earth and eat any animal they find, and if one of them dies they will eat him too. They will become superior to all that lives at that time, and those who do not die at their hands will lock themselves up in fortifications. After that they will wage a war against almighty God and will launch their arrows to the heavens and by the power of almighty God the arrows, now blood-stained, will return. And they will be overjoyed at this, and will say: we have conquered the inhabitants of the earth and now we will also conquer the inhabitants of heaven. After that the praised and almighty Truth will send a worm to them, a worm called Fa^cf. These worms will creep into their ears and ruin them. And the people who had fled them and had gone into hiding in the mountains and in strong fortifications will return to their dwellings in joy. And after that the Almighty God will cause rain to fall upon them so that the surface of the earth is made clean of their filthy corpses, which are thrown into the sea.²¹

Razi's description of Salam's journey to the rampart follows the text of Hamdani quite closely but adds other material.

And on the paths and in the kingdoms it is written that Caliph Vatheq dreamt that the rampart of Gog and Magog was opened. He sent Salam the Interpretor with fifty persons to examine the wall and Salam went from Samara to Armenia and from there to the lands of Arran and from that district to Bab al Abwab and from Bab al Abwab to the region of Khazar. The king of Khazar was called Tarkhan. He went to the persons who accompanied Salam. The group from Khazar went for 26 days until they reached a land where a bad smell was always penetrating the nose. For ten more days they travelled in that land until they reached a place where they could see a mountain, and a fortification on that mountain, but they did not find traces of habitation in that area. The Caliph's people passed that place and

²¹ Amin Ahmad Razi, *Haft Eqlim*, 516-17.

travelled seven more stages until they reached two fortifications close to a mountain. The wall of Gog and Magog was situated in the ravine in that mountain. Although it was a narrow passage, it led to many open spaces and places. The whole of that land was encompassed by a strongly fortified fortress where the guardians of the wall of Gog and Magog lived. They were Muslims and they knew Arabic and Persian, but they were ignorant of the ruling Abbasid caliphs. However it may be, they entertained Salam for the day and on the next day they took him with them, for they had agreed to bring him to the wall. Salam saw a mountain and a river; on the mountain there was nothing growing and the near side of the river had been covered with stones. The fortress was built so high that it could not be any higher. After that, Salam was able to relax, he put the thought of the wall of Gog and Magog being broken from his mind. He hastened back to the caliph, and it is said that Salam's journey lasted two years and four months.²²

In *Tarikh-e habib al-seyr* by Ghiyath al-Din b. Humam al-Din al-Huseyni, better known as Khwand Amir, one chapter is devoted to the character-traits of Gog and Magog, which diverges in minor ways from Hamadani's account. The points of difference are underlined:²³

It is reported in *Rowzat al-safa* that Gog and Magog were the sons of Motushalkh ibn Yafith b. Nūḥ. And as each lineage migrated to one region of the world, they would start to cultivate the land. Gog and Magog went to the farthest Eastern borders, near a place where the rampart (*sadd*) of Dhu'l-Qarneyn was built. They stayed there, and a huge number of people were born to their line. According to Abdullah b. Umar, the children of Adam are divided into ten groups, nine of them belong to Gog and Magog, and one tenth constitutes the rest of the inhabitants of the earth. In some accounts, it is said that Gog and Magog are two tribes, which are further divided into four hundred tribes. No individual dies before giving birth to one thousand offspring. As far as their appearance is concerned they can be grouped into three classes. The first group concerns people 120 *gaz* tall but whose breadth does not at all correspond to their stature. The second group consists of

²² Amin Ahmad Razi, *Haft Eqlim*, pp. 517-18.

²³ From: Ghiyath ad-Din b. Homam ad-Din al-Hosayni (Khwand Amir), *Tarikh-e habib as-seyr fi akhbar-e afrad-e bashar*, Tehran: Khayyām, n.d., p. 679.

people whose height and breadth are each 120 *gaz*. The third group comprises people whose height varies between one hand-span and 40 cubits. The latter group is also famous as the ‘carpet-ears.’ Even the elephant and rhinoceros are no match for Gog and Magog. If any wild and carnivorous animals encounter Gog and Magog, they will not remain alive. One of their condemnable habits is that when someone dies, they eat their flesh. They have no religion (*millat*), knowing neither God nor His creation, living in the same way as animals.

PERSIAN ALEXANDER ROMANCES

In Persian Alexander romances, the figures of Gog and Magog play a significant role, mainly in the sections in which Alexander builds an iron gate to prevent them entering the civilised world. One of the oldest extant epic texts in New Persian that depicts the story of Gog and Magog extensively is Ferdowsi’s *Shah-nama*.²⁴ In the section on the Kingship of Alexander, Ferdowsi tells how the inhabitants of Bakhtar complain about Gog and Magog. Here, Ferdowsi recounts how people inform Alexander about their fears: Gog and Magog have stolen repose, peace and sleep from them. Ferdowsi gives us a vivid picture of their appearance, their eating habits, their voices and their remarkable fecundity,

All their faces are like the face of a dromedary
 their tongues are black, their eyes are full of blood.
 The colour of their faces is black, their teeth like those of swine.
 How could anyone dare to approach them?
 Their entire body is covered by hairs, such hairs as dark as indigo.
 Their body, chest and ears are like those of an elephant
 When they sleep, they make one ear a mattress
 while the other forms a blanket over their bodies.
 One thousand children will be born from each female,
 how can one count how numerous they are!
 When they come together, they are like quadrupeds
 When they gallop, they resemble wild asses.

24 See R. Hillenbrand, “The Iskandar Cycle in the Great Mongol Šāhnāma,” in *The Problematics of Power*, 203-229.

In spring when clouds roar
 and the green of the seas begins to bubble,
 when serpents (*tinnin*) fall down from the sky
 the air then shouts like a lion.
 The clouds rain heaps of serpents
 and many groups of Gog and Magog come to eat.
 This is their food for each year
 through which their chests and manes grow.
 From spring onwards they eat plants,
 they spread out in every direction.
 When winter falls, they become emaciated
 and they sound like the cooing of a pigeon.
 In spring, see how they are roaring
 like a wolf, or like colossal elephants.²⁵

The picture is typical of the description of demons, enemies, and other wicked characters we encounter in Persian literature. They eat meat once a year in spring, which is enough to make them grow manly. During this season they behave like wolves and produce a roaring sound like a wrathful elephant. Ferdowsi's compatriot, Tabari, also mentions that Gog and Magog feed only on a kind of serpent (*tinnin*) which falls in spring from heaven.²⁶

Ferdowsi's description is an effective summary of what we see in other literature on Gog and Magog. The authors were fascinated by the origin and procreation of Gog and Magog. While some believed that they originated from "Adam's nocturnal emission of semen mixed with earth," others were of the opinion that they were descended from "Eve's menstrual blood."²⁷ Another aspect of Gog and Magog was their overwhelming number, which caused horror in the civilised world: they were thought to outnumber humans nine to one.²⁸ Eating habits, appearance, and size complete the picture of horror.

The second part of Ferdowsi's accounts describes Alexander building the rampart, with considerable detail about the means of construction:

25 Ferdowsi, *Shah-nama*, critical edition based on M.N. Osmanov, ed. S. Hamidian, vols. 6-7, Tehran: Qatre, 1994, pp. 84-5, ll. 1430-1443.

26 E. van Donzel & C. Ott in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Yadjudj wa-Madjudj.

27 See E. van Donzel & C. Ott in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Yadjudj wa-Madjudj. In dictionaries, the word *tinnin* is explained to be a kind of serpent, a dragon or even a sea-dragon.

28 E. van Donzel & C. Ott in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, under Yadjudj wa-Madjudj.

Alexander came to the mountain and looked at it;
then he brought a group of philosophers together.
He ordered that several smiths should be summoned
with huge hammers, copper, bronze
immeasurable quantities of limestone, stone, and wood
to be used in what they were going to build.
People brought everything that Alexander needed
so all was ready and his thought was at peace.
All the master builders and smiths of the world
then gathered around Alexander
to help him to build the rampart.
From each region a group of wise men gathered
building two walls from two sides of the mountain.
From the foot to the summit of the mountain
they built a wall whose breadth was 180 metres.
Two metres of this was built of charcoal
and two metres of iron with some copper laid on it.
Over all of the wall, they scattered sulphur.
This is the magic of a wise king!
They mixed a great volume of naphtha and oil
and poured it over the structure.
Then Alexander ordered them to place
a great mass of charcoal over the wall, and to set it on fire.
At the request of the conquering king
hundreds of thousands of smiths brought many pairs of bellows
The sound of the bellows reached the top of the mountains,
and the stars were frightened of the heat of the fire.
Thus some time passed after this event
of the burning of fire and the smiths' exertions
'till the substances melted together entire
by the heat of the fire that they had set.
The world was released from Gog and Magog
the earth became a flourishing and peaceful place.
The height of the wall was five hundred cubits
and its breadth three hundred.
Through Alexander's famous rampart
a world was relieved of evil.
The nobles praised him saying:
"May the world be not without you!"
They brought to the king great quantities

of all that they had in that region.
 He did not accept any of it, for he was content with himself;
 the world was astounded by his manner.²⁹

In his Alexander romance, Nezami describes Gog and Magog, but without any elaboration on the rampart.³⁰ Alexander is journeying from China to the north when he comes across a community who ask him to free them from the assaults of Gog and Magog. When Alexander asks them who these creatures are, the people describe them as follows:

A group of people are in the steppes, their name is Gog.
 They are like us human beings but have the nature of demons.
 Like demons with iron hearts, and claws [as sharp as] diamonds,
 they are like wolves: evil of nature, mixed in colour.
 Their hair grows down from their heads to their feet
 to conceal any sign of their faces.
 Their claws and teeth are like those of a wild beast
 ready to shed blood with tooth and claw.
 When they gallop they can outstrip the wind;
 they can bore through steel with their nails.
 They walk and eat but do not thank [God]
 there is not one among them who knows God. (...)
 They have no occupation but eating and sleeping.
 None of them dies without giving birth to a thousand.
 A plant grows in their land
 which is like pepper with hot seeds.
 They feed on this plant day and night
 and will not go anywhere; they sleep on the spot.
 When the full moon appears, they grow excited
 and come into motion like worms.
 Then they eat whatever they find without fear;
 this is their habit until the moon wanes.
 When the waning moon passes from sight,
 they all lose their greed entirely.
 Each year a black cloud drops

²⁹ Ferdowsi, *Shah-nama*, pp. 86-7, ll. 1453-75.

³⁰ For general aspects of Nezami's Alexander romance see F. de Blois in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under *Eskandar-nama* of Nezami; also see J.Ch. Bürgel, *Nizami. Das Alexanderbuch Iskandarnama*, Persian Heritage Foundation series, 37, Zürich: 1991; idem, "Krieg und Frieden im Alexanderepos Nizamis," in *The Problematics of Power*, pp. 91-107.

oppressive serpents (*tinnin*) on their lands,
which are so big that they satisfy the hunger
of Gog and Magog in the steppe and mountains. (...)
They do not eat anything but leaves and the roots of plants;
They never fall ill 'till the day of their deaths.
When one of them dies,
the others all eat him.
In their desert there is neither a corpse
nor a grave to be seen.
The only virtue of their land is that it's free
from any cadaver or carrion.
Each time that they attack us,
they destroy our homes,
and plunder our sheep,
and eat all our edible things (...)
We flee from them to these high mountains,
like birds flying to a tree.
They do not have such legs
to bring us down from the top of the mountain.
If you could ward off these monstrous beasts,
you will be rewarded [by the Almighty]. (...)
Thus Alexander erected a rampart of steel,
which could not be broken till Judgement Day.³¹

Although Nezami follows Ferdowsi and other accounts by Persian authors, his treatment of Gog and Magog is less callous, allowing Gog and Magog to some human character traits. His description has many similarities with Mir Khund's depiction. Nezami opens his description by stating that Gog and Magog are like human beings but they have the disposition of a demon or a wolf, heartless and aggressive. Nezami refers to their long hairs but in a different way. In previous accounts, we read that the bodies of Gog and Magog were covered by hairs but in Nezami's depiction the hair on their head is so long that it reaches their feet and covers their faces. This means that Nezami does not need to describe their faces, which in other sources are compared to a camel. They have short legs. Nezami compares their nails and teeth and their bloodthirstiness to wild beasts. Another motif, which occurs

31 Nezami Ganjavi, *Iqbal-nama*, ed. V. Dastgirdi, Tehran: Armaghan, 1938, second edition, Ilmi, 1984, pp. 224-26.

in other literary accounts, is their ability to breach the rampart. Nezami mentions that they can make a hole in the steel.

There is an element of moral education here: they are uncivilised humans who do not care for their appearance and do not believe in any god or religion. They do not occupy themselves with any work which would make their land prosper or develop their intellect, they only eat and sleep, and have terrible table manners. Thus those who do not make efforts in these matters, are behaving like Gog and Magog. But there is also a critique of civilized excess: Gog and Magog eat meat once a year, and otherwise plants, and they never grow ill.

Nezami had more than hundred imitators, several of whom also composed an Alexander romance with the obligatory theme of Gog and Magog.³²

GOG AND MAGOG IN PERSIAN DIVANS AND LITERARY PROSE

Gog and Magog also appear in other literary contexts. In the collected poetic works (Divans) of Persian poets, several references are made to Gog and Magog. Compared to other names that form an onomastic rhymed pair such as Harut and Marut, the references to Gog and Magog are very limited: they can usually be counted on the fingers of one hand in each divan. A number of poets such as Hafez never mention Gog and Magog. They usually appear as part of the ‘harmonious imagery’ that accompanies Alexander, Dhu’l-Qarneyn and the rampart. In addition to allusions to the ‘historical’ Alexander and his encounter with Gog and Magog and erecting a rampart, many references have a metaphoric character. In the following couplet from his ghazal number 314, Sana’i of Ghazna refers to the rampart and Gog to indicate that one should be like a barrier against carnal desire:

Be a barrier (*sadd*) made by Alexander before the Gog of carnal desire and if you are searching for Paradise, do not exaggerate about your worldly power.³³

32 See G.R. van den Berg, "Descriptions and images: Remarks on Gog and Magog in Nizami's Iskandarnama, Firdausi's Shahnama and Amir Khusrau's A'ina-yi Iskandari," in a forthcoming publication: *Nizami Ganjavi – Artistic and Humanistic Aspects of the Khamsa*, eds. Ch. van Ruyambeke & Ch. Bürgel, Cambridge, forthcoming, 2007.

Most of Anvari's references are to a hole made in the barrier. In these references, Anvari wonders how it could be possible for a person to make an opening in a barrier built by Alexander. In another poem, Anvari states how the rampart of Gog and Magog forms a prison for human beings at the end of time.³⁴ The poet Farid ad-Din Attar compares the power of imagination to Alexander's strong fortification.³⁵

The same types of references that we encounter in Divans also occur in Persian literary prose. To give only one example, in a literary debate (*monazara*) between the eye and the heart, by Mohammad Zangi Bokhari, the heart accuses the eye of resembling Magog:³⁶ "Although you are the watch of the castle of the body, you are very drowsy; although you are the Alexander of the six dimensions, you are in reality the Magog of the wall of rebellion." Here, the heart compares the ability of the eye to see in all directions to the way that Alexander visited all corners of the world, but then refers to the eye as a rebel who wants to make openings in the wall. This is a reference to the eye's curiosity to see the unseen. In this treatise, the heart tries to establish its superiority to the eye, but each time the eye produces well-founded answers, often based on the Quran and traditions. In the entire debate, the heart protests against the eye and accuses it of being the cause of its pain. In such debates, the heart assumes the role of a suffering and captivated persona who is trapped in the arena of affliction while the eye shoots arrows without compassion. It is in this context of animosity and cruelty that the heart compares the eye to Magog.

From this brief survey, we can conclude that in Persian texts written between the tenth and the twelfth centuries, the authors rely more or less on the same material, but in each text they introduce some new elements. The image of Gog and Magog presented in Persian literature endorses the general idea of the enemy and of the barbarian in medieval Iranian world, and seldom mentions their eschatological role.³⁷ Gog and Magog are represented as ferocious hordes of terror threatening the civilised sedentary people. Although

34 Anvari, *Divan*, ed. M.T. Modarres Razavi, Tehran: Elmi, 1993, vol. II, p. 1043, qet'a 493, l. 13.

35 See Farid ad-Din Attar, *Divan*, ed. T. Tafazzuli, Tehran: Elmi va Farhangi, 2005, p. 18.

36 Zangī-nama, ed. I. Afshar, Tehran: Khajā, 1993, p. 105.

37 Several character-traits of Gog and Magog are identical with descriptions of demons in Persian literature. See M. Omidšalar in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, under Div. Also compare W.R. Jones, "The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 13, No. 4, 1971, pp. 376-407.

several accounts say that Gog and Magog are vegetarians and even harmless to human beings, their wild nature, cannibalism, feeding on serpents and carrion are generally foregrounded.

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