Alexander in legend
adapted from online source material by Douglas Kenning

Alexander is known as **Sikandar** (Alexander), **Iskandar** (Iskandar), and **Eskandar-e Maqdūnī** ("Alexander the Macedonian") in New Persian, **al-Iskandar al-Makduni al-Yunani** ("Alexander the Macedonian Yunani") in Arabic, **Alexander Mokdum** in Hebrew, and **Tre-Qarnayi** in Aramaic (the two-horned one), **al-Iskandar al-Akbar** ("Alexander the Great") in Arabic, بَطْنُ رَدُنُكِسْكِن, and **Skandar** in Pashto.

Through the Greco-Roman historians, Alexander’s life and career was read by every educated person in Roman and post-Roman Europe. The very concept and phrase “Alexander the Great” was a Roman invention (in a comedy by Plautus, 150 yrs after his death). His military genius has been admired and / or emulated by Pyrrhus (who spoke with his ghost), Pompey, Julius Caesar (who wept from a sense of his inferiority to Alexander), Cicero, Caesar Augustus, Louis XIV (who once danced as Alexander in a ballet), Napoleon (who carried Alexander’s biography on his conquests as Alexander had carried Homer and commissioned a famous Alexander table, now at Buckingham Palace), and many others.

But the legend of Alexander proliferated through many channels outside of the formal histories, beyond his military skills, and outside Greco-Roman Western secular culture. These include:

**The Alexander Romance**
In the early centuries after Alexander's death, probably in Alexandria, a quantity of legendary material coalesced into text known as the **Alexander Romance**, later falsely ascribed to Alexander’s historian Callisthenes and therefore known to scholars as Pseudo-Callisthenes. This text underwent continuous revision throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages, adding or rewriting many stories. It was translated into numerous languages and has had significant impact on portrayals of Alexander in later cultures, from Persian to medieval European to Mongolian to modern Greek.

**Bible**
**Daniel** 8:5–8 and 21–22 states that a king of Greece will conquer the Medes and Persians but then die at the height of his power and have his kingdom broken into four kingdoms. This is sometimes taken as a reference to Alexander and the four major successor states of his empire. The writing of the Book of Daniel is thought to have been in the century after Alexander.

**Book of the Maccabees**. Chapter 1, verses 1–7 explains how blasphemous Greek influences reached the Land of Israel, beginning the account with Alexander.

**Qur’an**
Alexander in the **Qur’an** sometimes is identified as Dhul-Qarnayn, Arabic for the "Two-Horned One", possibly a reference to his horn-headed image as the god Ammun on coins minted both during his rule and later.

Competing theories hold that Dhul-Qarnayn could not refer to Alexander, who was a polytheist, but a Persian King, possibly King Cyrus the Great, because Dhul-Qarnayn is described in the **Qur’an** as a monotheist who worshipped Allah (God). Persian Zorastrianism might be called monotheist with pantheist tendencies.

**Persian traditions**
The Sassanid Period (3–7 CE, Middle Persian) Zoroastrian work *Arda Wiraz Nāmag* calls him *gizistag aleksandar*, "Alexander the accursed", remembering him as an embodiment of the Zoroastrian evil force Angra Mainyu or Ahriman in his destruction of the Persian cultural capital Persepolis, burning the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism, and inflicting centuries of foreign rule.

In Islamic Iran, under influence of the *Alexander Romance* (in Persian: *Iskandarnamah*), a more positive portrayal of Alexander emerges, making him even a Prophet of Islam. The *Shahnameh* ("The Book of Kings"), a book of epic poems by Ferdowsi, ca. 1000 CE, that begins with a mythic history of Iran, includes a chapter about Alexander, where he is described as a legitimate child of Darius II or Dara/Darab and a daughter of a Western king "Filfus of Rûm" (i.e. "Philip the Greek"). By the 12th century such important writers as Nezami Ganjavi were making him the subject of their epic poems, a mythical figure who built a wall of iron and copper in which Gog and Magog are confined (or the Caspian Gates to keep them at bay) and who traveled the world in search of the Fountain of Youth (immortality). Later Persian writers would make him a philosopher, portraying him at a symposium with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

There are Afghan chieftains who still claim to be descended from his blood; eighty years ago they would go to war with a red flag they believed to be his banner (Robin Lane Fox, p. 26).

**Near Eastern traditions**

The Syriac version of the *Alexander Romance* portrays him as the ideal Christian world conqueror who prayed to "the one true God".

In Egypt, Alexander’s status as *pharaoh* allowed him to be reconceived as the son of Nectanebo II, last *pharaoh* before the Persian conquest. His defeat of the Persians thus could be proclaimed as Egypt's salvation, proof that Egypt was again ruled by an Egyptian.

**India and Pakistan**

In the Punjab, the only part of greater India that Alexander actually conquered, the name "Sikandar", derived from Persian, is slang to denote a rising young talent.

**South-east Asia**

*Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* is a Malay epic reflecting the importance of Alexander in the lineage of the kings of Sumatra from the 14C.

**European Christian**

During the Crusader Period, promoters of chivalry made Alexander a member of The Nine Worthies, group of heroes who encapsulated all the ideal qualities of chivalry.

But Dante Alighieri, in *Inferno* (Canto 12), puts Alexander in the Seventh Circle of Hell, where the murderers and warmongers are punished in a river of boiling blood, keeping company with Attila and Dionysius of Sicily.

Epic Poems: *Alexandriad* by Adrianus (Greek, now lost), *Alexandreis* (Latin), *Aethicus Ister* (Latin), *Alexanderlied* (German), *Li romans d'Alixandre* (French), *Libro de Alexandre* (Spanish), *Alexanders saga* (Old Norse-Icelandic), *The Buik of Alexander* (Scottish).

**modern Greek folklore**

The colloquial form of his name in modern Greek ("Ο Μεγαλεξάνδρος") is a household term,

Greek seamen will tell you that in the most terrible of storms sailors sometimes hear a voice in the wind; some say it’s the voice of Alexander's sister Thessalonike. Alexander, returning from his quest for the Fountain of Immortality, had washed his sister's hair from a flask of that immortal water. Later, when he died, grief-stricken Thessalonike attempted to end her life by jumping into the sea. But she was immortal, so instead of drowning she became a mermaid. And now, when ships are tossed about, sometimes it is because of storm waves, but sometimes it is because she is shaking the ship's prow. So if the captain hears a female voice ask "Is King Alexander alive?", he had best answer "He is alive and well and rules world!". At this, the mermaid will vanish and the sea will calm. But any other answer will make the sea rage more angrily, or make the mermaid turn into a Gorgon, and drag the ship and all hands to the bottom of the sea.