

THE FLYING KING: THE NOVELISTIC ALEXANDER (PSEUDO-CALLISTHENES 2.41) AND THE TRADITIONS OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT

Ioannis M. Konstantakos*

* Professor of
Ancient Greek
Literature, National
and Kapodistrian
University of Athens.
iokonstan@phil.uoa.gr

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ABSTRACT: The story of Alexander's flight is preserved in early Byzantine versions of the *Alexander Romance* (codex L, recensions λ and γ) but is already mentioned by Rabbi Jonah of Tiberias (4th century AD) in the *Jerusalem Talmud*. The narrative must have been created between the late Hellenistic period and the early Imperial age. Although there are differences in details, the main storyline is common in all versions. Alexander fabricates a basket or large bag, which hangs from a yoke and is lifted into the air by birds of prey; Alexander guides the birds upwards by baiting them with a piece of meat fixed on a long spear. The same story-pattern is found in oriental tales about the Iranian king Kai Kāūs and the Babylonian Nimrod. Kai Kāūs' adventure was included in the Zoroastrian *Avesta* and must have been current in the Iranian mythical tradition during the first millennium BCE. It is then transmitted by Medieval Islamic authors (Ṭabarī, Bal'amī, Firdausī, Tha'alībī, Dīnawarī), who ultimately depend on Sasanian historical compilations, in which the early mythology of Iran had been collected. The story of Kai Kāūs' ascension is earlier than Pseudo-Callisthenes' narrative and contains a clear indication of morphological priority: in some versions the Persian king flies while seated on his throne, which reflects a very ancient and widespread image of royal iconography in Iran and Assyria. Probably Alexander's aerial journey was derived from an old oriental tradition of tales about flying kings, to which the stories of Kai Kāūs and Nimrod also belonged. The throne had to be eliminated from Alexander's story, because the episode was set during Alexander's wanderings at the extremities of the world. The Macedonian king had therefore to fabricate his flying vehicle from readily available materials. Later, after the diffusion of Pseudo-Callisthenes' romance in the Orient, the tale of Alexander's



ascension might have exercised secondary influence on some versions of the stories of Kai Kāūs and Nimrod, regarding specific details such as the use of the bait.

KEYWORDS: Alexander the Great; *Alexander Romance*; Kai Kāūs; Iranian myth; flying throne; flying machine.

O REI VOADOR: O ALEXANDRE ROMANESCO
(PSEUDO-CALÍSTENES 2.41) E AS TRADIÇÕES DO ANTIGO ORIENTE

RESUMO: A história do voo de Alexandre é preservada em antigas versões bizantinas do *Romance de Alexandre* (códice L, recensões λ e γ), mas já é mencionada por Rabi Jonas de Tiberíades (século IV d.C.) no *Talmude de Jerusalém*. A narrativa deve ter sido criada entre o final do período helenístico e o início da era imperial. Embora haja diferenças nos detalhes, o enredo principal é similar em todas as versões. Alexandre fabrica um cesto ou uma sacola grande, pendurada em um artefato em forma de canga e levantada no ar por aves de rapina; Alexandre guia os pássaros para cima, atraindo-os com um pedaço de carne fixado em uma longa lança. O mesmo padrão de história é encontrado nos contos orientais sobre o rei iraniano Kai Kāūs e o Nimrod babilônico. A aventura de Kai Kāūs foi incluída no Avesta zoroastriano e deve estar presente na tradição mítica iraniana durante o primeiro milênio Antes da Era Comum. É então transmitida por autores islâmicos medievais (Ṭabarī, Bal‘amī, Firdausī, Tha‘ālibī, Dīnawarī), que acabam por depender das compilações históricas sassânicas, nas quais a mitologia primitiva do Irã havia sido coletada. A história da ascensão de Kai Kāūs é anterior à narrativa de Pseudo-Calístenes e contém uma clara indicação de prioridade morfológica: em algumas versões o rei persa voa sentado no trono, o que reflete uma imagem muito antiga e difundida da iconografia real no Irã e Assíria. Provavelmente, a jornada aérea de Alexandre foi derivada de uma antiga tradição oriental de contos sobre reis voadores, à qual também pertenciam as histórias de Kai Kāūs e Nimrod. O trono teve que ser eliminado da história de Alexandre, porque o episódio foi ambientado durante suas andanças em lugares extremos do mundo. O rei da Macedônia teve, portanto, de fabricar seu veículo voador com os materiais mais disponíveis. Mais tarde, após a difusão do romance de Pseudo-Calístenes no Oriente, a história da ascensão de Alexandre pode ter exercido influência secundária em algumas versões das histórias de Kai Kāūs e Nimrod, sobre detalhes específicos, como o uso da isca.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Alexandre, o Grande; *Romance de Alexandre*; Kai Kāūs; mito iraniano; trono voador; máquina voadora.

ALEXANDER'S FLIGHT IN THE *ALEXANDER ROMANCE*

According to a legend, Alexander the Great, during his long expedition to the remotest places of the Orient, tried to rise up to the sky, in order to observe the world from above and discover the limits of the earth. For this purpose he fabricated a kind of flying device, which was fastened on large vultures. With the help of

these birds Alexander managed to fly for some time, until adverse circumstances forced him to return to earth.

In its full form, this famous episode is first attested in some versions of the Greek *Alexander Romance* by Pseudo-Callisthenes. It is not included in the earliest extant redaction of the romance (α , third century AD) and it is also absent from most of the manuscripts of the second oldest Greek version β , which was probably compiled around the fifth century AD. It appears only in one idiosyncratic codex, L (Leidensis Vulc. 93, copied in the early fifteenth century), which occupies a peculiar position within the tradition of β and contains many additional episodes, especially regarding Alexander's fabulous travels in the East. The text transmitted in this codex must have been composed between the fifth and the seventh or eighth century AD. The story is also taken over in the early Byzantine redactions λ and γ , which may be dated to the seventh century or later; these are derivatives of redaction β but have been contaminated with various elements of different provenance.¹

Outside the Greek corpus of texts, the tale of the Macedonian king's ascension is preserved in the Latin translation of the romance by Archpresbyter Leo of Naples (tenth century) and in its Medieval Latin offshoots, which are generally known under the title *Historia de preliis* (eleventh and twelfth century).² During the Middle Ages, thanks to the wide diffusion of Pseudo-Callisthenes' work through many vernacular versions, the narrative of Alexander's flight became extremely popular, both in Europe and in the East; it inspired a multitude of art monuments and is mentioned by a great number of authors.³ The oldest known allusion to this adventure is traced in the *Jerusalem Talmud*, the vast repository of Rabbinical Jewish wisdom and lore, which was compiled around AD 400. Rabbi Jonah of Tiberias, a Palestinian *amora* of the fourth century AD, is quoted there to have briefly commented on Alexander's ascension and his view of the world from above.⁴ The Talmudic

¹ On these versions of the Greek *Alexander Romance*, their textual tradition and date see Bergson, 1965, p. v-xxv; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 201-11; Jouanno, 2002, p. 247-8, 271, 279-80, 305-6, 440-3; Stoneman, 2007, p. lxxiii-lxxxviii; Stoneman, 2008, p. 230-2.

² Leo, 3.27ⁿ.4-5; see Pfister, 1913, p. 126; Millet, 1923, p. 99-100, 103-6; cf. Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 6-8; Pfister, 1976, p. 293-6; Schmidt, 1995, p. 11-3; Jouanno, 2002, p. 279, 295, 302; Morosini, 2011, p. 329-30. *Historia de preliis* (versions J¹, J², J³), ch. 115; see Millet, 1923, p. 99-102; Steffens, 1975, p. 180-1; Hilka, 1977, p. 156-61; Hilka; Steffens, 1979, p. 238-41. Leo's model must have been a Greek text of the recension α contaminated with various admixtures from redactions β and λ ; these interpolations also included the episode of the flight. See Pfister, 1913, p. 19-22, 100-1; van Thiel, 1974, p. xxviii-xxxix; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 99; Ross, 1988, p. 45-7; Jouanno, 2002, p. 16-7, 39-40.

³ On the story and its diffusion see generally Loomis, 1918; Millet, 1923; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 11-9, 147-329; Pfister, 1976, p. 168-9, 286-300; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 83-8, 204-6; Ross, 1988, p. 107; Stoneman, 1991, p. 193-4; Stoneman, 1992, p. 96-7; Schmidt, 1995; Jouanno, 2002, p. 272-5, 279-80, 294-8, 301-3; Stoneman, 2008, p. 114-20; Abdullaeva, 2010; Melville, 2012; Stoneman, 2012, p. 444-7.

⁴ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Avodah Zarah, 3.1: "Rabbi Jonah said: when Alexander the Macedonian wanted to ascend, he rose and rose and rose, until he saw the world as a globe and the ocean like a bowl. Therefore one represents him with a globe in his hand". See Lévi, 1881, p. 239; Lévi, 1883, p. 93; Guggenheimer, 2011, p. 362. Cf. Meissner, 1894, p. 6-7; Meissner, 1917, p. 31; Millet, 1923, p. 107;

passage indicates that the story of Alexander's flight had been formed and was already well diffused by the fourth century.

It is impossible to determine how much older the tale is and when it was first invented. Many legends of this kind, concerning Alexander's wondrous adventures in the Orient, may have originated in the years after the Macedonian conqueror's death, based on the fabulous yarns of the veterans of his expedition.⁵ However, if the story of the flight had been formed at such an early age, it should have become a standard component of the lore of Alexander by the early Imperial period. One might wonder, in that case, why this particular episode was not included in the earliest Greek redaction α of Pseudo-Callisthenes' romance. The answer may be sought in the peculiar character of the single extant Greek representative of redaction α , the lacunose and corrupt codex A (Parisinus gr. 1711); in this text the fabulous elements of the narrative are methodically reduced for the sake of greater verisimilitude. It has been argued that the prototypical form of the *Alexander Romance* may have included many more such fairy tales about extraordinary travels, wondrous lands, and marvellous sights, and is better reflected in this respect by the later redactions β , λ , and L. But the redactor of the text of A removed several episodes of this kind, so as to purge his version from the more extravagant and incredible pieces of lore and give it a "historical" appearance.⁶

If the episode of Alexander's ascension was part of the original layout of the *Alexander Romance*, it should have been developed by the late Hellenistic period or the first centuries of the Roman Empire. Some scholars have indeed adduced parallel passages of other Greek writings, from the end of the Hellenistic era to the second or third century AD, which may echo the Macedonian king's ascension to the sky.⁷ These are interesting *testimonia*, although they cannot definitively prove knowledge of the episode of Alexander's flight in the form found in Pseudo-Callisthenes. Recently Richard Stoneman has drawn attention to

Kazis, 1962, p. 18; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 12-3, 139-40; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 85; Jouanno, 2002, p. 279, 301; Stoneman, 2008, p. 107, 112, 116-7; Amitay, 2010, p. 72-3, 191-2. The story is also mentioned in other early Rabbinical sources: see Kazis, 1962, p. 18-9; Amitay, 2010, p. 114; Dönitz, 2011, p. 24.

⁵See Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 10-11; van Thiel, 1974, p. xxv-xxvii; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 55-6, 59-68; Gunderson, 1980, p. 3, 5-6, 123-4; Stoneman, 1991, p. 9-14; Stoneman, 1994a, p. 119-21; Aerts, 1994, p. 34-5; Jouanno, 2002, p. 23-5.

⁶See Merkelbach, 1977, p. 64-5, 132-5; Stoneman, 2007, p. lxxiv, lxxvii; Konstantakos, 2017, p. 451-2. This theory is not acceptable to all scholars (see e.g. Gunderson, 1980, p. 83-5; Jouanno, 2002, p. 264-5; Nawotka, 2017, p. 188). Nevertheless, it reposes on significant textual indications; see Trumpf, 1965, and Konstantakos, 2017, p. 451.

⁷Settis-Frugoni (1973, p. 24, 122-31) would date the formation of the tale of the flight in the Severan age, because it seems to be reflected in certain episodes of Philostratus' *Apollonius of Tyana*. Millet (1923, p. 107, 119) associates Alexander's flight with Menippus' heavenly journey in Lucian's *Icaromenippus* (cf. Aerts, 1994, p. 35). Anderson (2012, p. 85-6) adduces a passage from Arrian, *Anab.*, 4.18.6-19.3: Alexander is told that he needs winged soldiers (*πτηνοὺς στρατιώτας*) to take the Sogdian Rock; when the Macedonians mount on the rock, Alexander boasts that his men are indeed winged.

a passage from the beginning of the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo*, which was written most probably in the first century BCE. In the prooemium of this work the pseudepigraphous Aristotle addresses his pupil Alexander the Great. He remarks that it was not possible for a man to leave earth behind, reach the heavenly region with his body, and survey that holy space with his physical eyes; therefore, the soul accomplished the same journey to heaven by means of philosophy.⁸ Given that this apostrophe is addressed to Alexander, it might entail an allusion to the legend of the Macedonian king's rise to the sky. The putative Aristotle would indirectly taunt his disciple for his legendary attempt to sail to heaven in bodily form, instead of trusting the purely intellectual peregrinations of his philosophically trained soul. The fairy tale of Alexander's flight would thus be artfully combined with the philosophical *topos* of the heavenly journey of the *psyche*.

Furthermore, in the two oldest Greek sources of the episode, the codex L and the recension λ of Pseudo-Callisthenes, the story of the flight forms part of a long letter which is sent by Alexander to his mother Olympias and his teacher Aristotle. This letter fills the latter half of the second book of the romance (2.23-41) and chronicles the Macedonian conqueror's journey beyond the borders of the subdued Persian kingdom, into the unknown territories of the farthest East and up to the edges of the world. The rise to the sky is the final adventure of this epistolary narrative (2.41) and marks the culmination of Alexander's rash desire to reach the edges of the earth. The letter to Olympias and Aristotle is absent from the Greek text of A and is included only in later recensions (β, λ, L) but contains legendary traditions of considerable antiquity.⁹ Many such "letters of wonders", regarding the extraordinary experiences of the Macedonian conqueror and his troops in the East, seem to have circulated in the Hellenistic period, in the aftermath of Alexander's far-reaching expedition, which unveiled so many exotic lands to the Greeks.¹⁰ It is thus highly likely that the letter to Olympias and Aristotle, like other fictitious epistles incorporated into the text of Pseudo-Callisthenes, goes back to a Hellenistic composition.¹¹ Overall, in spite of the

⁸ *De mundo*, 391a: ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οὐχ οἶόν τε ἦν τῷ σώματι εἰς τὸν οὐράνιον ἀφικέσθαι τόπον καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐκλιπόντα τὸν ἱερὸν ἐκεῖνον χώρον κατοπευθεῖσαι, καθάπερ οἱ ἀνόητοί ποτε ἐπενόουν Ἀλωάδαι. ἢ γοῦν ψυχὴ διὰ φιλοσοφίας, λαβοῦσα ἡγεμόνα τὸν νοῦν, ἐπεραιώθη καὶ ἐξεδήμησεν etc. See Stoneman, 2012, p. 445; cf. Centanni, 1991, p. xvi-xviii. On the date and provenance of the *De mundo* see Thom, 2014, p. 3-16 with further references.

⁹ The march into the Land of Darkness and the story of the water of life draw on age-old Mesopotamian myths from the second millennium BCE, such as those of Gilgamesh and Adapa. Alexander's pursuit of immortality, the basis of the main narrative, is already mentioned by the Cynic Teles (fr. IV^A, p. 43 Hense) in the third century BCE.

¹⁰ See van Thiel, 1974, p. xiii-xiv, xxiv-xxix; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 55-72; Gunderson, 1980, p. 32-3, 75-7, 85-6, 90, 108-10, 121-2; Stoneman, 1991, p. 10, 13-4; Romm, 1992, p. 108-16; Schepens; Delcroix, 1996, p. 440-1; Fraser, 1996, p. 224-6; Jouanno, 2002, p. 23-5; Stoneman, 2007, p. xxvi-xxvii, xliii-xliv, lvii, lxxvii-lxxix.

¹¹ See van Thiel, 1974, p. xiii-xiv, xxiv-xxix; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 63-5, 132-6; Gunderson, 1980, p. 83-6, 90, 108-10, 121; Rosenmeyer, 2001, p. 172-3, 190; Konstantakos, 2017. Settis-Frugoni (1973, p. 14-5) believes that the episode of the flight was included in an epistle of wonders by the fourth century AD.

lack of absolute proof, there are many indications that the tale of Alexander's flight was developed in late Hellenistic times, as part of the extensive legendarium concerning the Macedonian hero's marvellous adventures in the Orient.

Here is a summary of the episode, as it is found in the recension λ and the codex L. The entire adventure is narrated by Alexander in the first person and included in his letter to Olympias and Aristotle.¹² After a march of many days through strange countries, Alexander and his army reach the so-called "Land of the Blessed" (μακάρων χώρα), where the sun does not shine (2.39). Alexander wishes to find out if this place is truly the outer limit of the world, the point at which the sky inclines and meets the earth. He orders his men to capture two of the large vultures that are endemic in that region; these birds are very strong but tame. Alexander leaves the two vultures without food for three days. He also has his men construct a wooden contraption in the shape of a yoke and fasten it on the vultures' necks. Furthermore he fabricates a kind of large basket or bag, on which more details will be given below. He ties this supersized bag to the yoke and sits himself inside it, holding in his hands a long spear with a horse liver fixed on its tip. The famished vultures immediately fly upwards, in order to reach the appetizing liver, and thus drag the bag with the Macedonian hero up into the air. The two birds rise to such a great height, that Alexander believes he has reached very close to heaven. At that exalted region he encounters a bird in human form (πετειὸν ἀνθρωπόμορφον), which admonishes him: "Alexander, why do you attempt to investigate the sky, although you have not grasped the things of the earth? Return to the ground quickly, lest you become prey to these hungry vultures". The human-avian creature also draws Alexander's attention to the sight of the earth below. When the Macedonian king looks downwards from that height, the sea appears like a gigantic serpent coiled up in a circle, while the earth resembles a small round disk placed at the centre of the serpent's coil. The hero then points his liver-baited spear towards the earth, and the vultures fly in that direction. In the end, he lands on the ground, half-dead from horror and exhaustion, at a distance of seven days' journey from his army camp. Luckily, Alexander finds there

¹² Similarly in Leo's Latin translation the flight is narrated in a letter of wonders which Alexander sends to Olympias (3.27^{ll}, cf. above, note 2). This time the letter is placed in the third book, at a more advanced point of the action, right before the finale. Alexander has already explored India (3.1-6, 17), the Ethiopia of Queen Candace (3.18-24), and the country of the Amazons (3.25-6), and has arrived at Babylon (3.27). He then writes to his mother Olympias; immediately afterwards he is poisoned by the conspirators in a symposium and dies (3.31-5). See Pfister, 1913, p. 24-32, 100-1, 126; Millet, 1923, p. 89, 103-4; Schmidt, 1995, p. 74-5; Jouanno, 2002, p. 302. In the Greek codex C (Parisinus suppl. gr. 113, copied in 1567), a representative of the recension γ, and also in the Latin redactions of the *Historia de preliis* the letter format has been suppressed and the story is cast in third-person narrative. But the flight is still placed in the context of Alexander's marvellous explorations at the edges of the world.

one of his subordinate satraps; the latter provides the king with a retinue of three hundred horsemen, so that Alexander reaches his camp with safety.¹³

The contraption used by Alexander as a vehicle for the flight is an important narrative element. The precise nature of this “flying machine” will prove to be of great significance in the comparative discussion of the next sections, when the Greek story will be confronted with the oriental legends of Kai Kāūs and Nimrod. The details of the description vary in the different versions and codices of Pseudo-Callisthenes. One group of variants is offered by L and the manuscripts O (Bodleianus Barocc. 23, fourteenth century) and W (Vaticanus gr. 171, sixteenth century), which belong to recension λ. Firstly, a wooden yoke is fabricated and the two vultures are harnessed to it: προσέταξα κατασκευασθῆναι ξύλον ὁμοιον ζυγῶ και τοῦτα προσδεθῆναι μέσον τοῦ ζυγοῦ (L, “I ordered that a piece of wood should be constructed, similar to a yoke, and that the vultures should be tied to the middle of the yoke”); προσέταξα κατασκευασθῆναι ξύλον ὁμοιον ζυγοῦ και τοῦτον δεθῆναι ἐν τοῖς τραχήλοις αὐτῶν (OW, “I ordered that a piece of wood should be constructed, similar to a yoke, and that this should be tied to the vultures’ necks”). Then Alexander continues as follows: ταύτην δὲ κατεσκεύασα ὡσπερ σπυρίδα (L, “this I fashioned like a basket”) or εὐθὺς δὲ κατεσκεύασα ὡσπερ σπυρίδα (OW, “right away I fashioned something like a basket”).¹⁴ The σπυρίς is presumably a kind of basket or pannier of large dimensions, big enough to accommodate a grown man; but there is no mention of the material out of which it is made.

On the other hand, the idiosyncratic manuscript P (Bodleianus misc. 283, copied in 1516) offers a mixed text, which combines elements from the recensions λ and β, together with some interpolations from redaction α. In this codex the narrative of Alexander’s flight is transcribed in a form of demotic Greek, rather close to Modern Greek parlance. It is also enriched with additional details: Εἶτα ὄρισα νὰ φέρουν δέρμα βοδίου και νὰ τὸ δέσουν εἰς τὴν μέσην τοῦ ζυγοῦ. Ταῦτα δὲ κατασκεύασας, ὡσπερ κοφινίδα ἐκόλλησα εἰς τὸν ζυγόν (“Then I ordered that they should bring the hide of an ox and tie it in the middle of the yoke. And when I fabricated all these, I stuck them on the yoke like a pannier”).¹⁵ In this case, the vehicle of the flight must be a kind of large sack or pouch, given that it is made of ox-hide. It is compared to a basket or pannier (κοφινίδα), but it obviously cannot be a plaited, wickerwork structure, like a proper basket. The ox-hide fabric would provide a more solid and compact texture, similar to that of a leather bag.

Some scholars think that the ox-hide must have been an authentic element of the original form of the story, which was inadvertently lost from the text of the other manuscripts. They therefore introduce a mention of it also into the text of codices LOW, so as to restore

¹³ For the text of L and λ see Bergson, 1965, p. 201-3; van Thiel, 1959, p. 33; van Thiel, 1974, p. 120-1; translations of this version are offered by Centanni, 1991, p. 159-61; Stoneman, 1991, p. 123; Bounoure; Serret, 1992, p. 87. For the text of recension γ (codex C) see Engelmann, 1963, p. 315-7; Stoneman, 2012, p. 286-8.

¹⁴ See Millet, 1923, p. 92-3; van Thiel, 1959, p. 33; Bergson, 1965, p. 202; van Thiel, 1974, p. 120.

¹⁵ See Millet, 1923, p. 92-3; cf. van Thiel, 1959, p. 33; van Thiel, 1974, p. 120; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 110-1, 216.

what they take to be the prototypical version of the narrative. Helmut van Thiel achieves this with the smallest possible intervention by adding two words: *κατεσκεύασα <δέρμα βωδίου> ὥσπερ σπυρίδα* (“I fashioned <a hide of an ox> like a basket”). Gabriel Millet introduces more extensive additions and amalgamates phrases from codices L and OW, thus producing a mixed and rather pleonastic formulation: *<Εἶτα προσέταξα βύρσαν ἐνεχθῆναι> καὶ ταύτην προσδεθῆναι ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ ζυγοῦ. Ταύτην δὲ κατεσκεύασα ὥσπερ σπυρίδα* (“<Then I commanded to bring me a hide> and tie this in the middle of the yoke. This hide I fashioned like a basket”).¹⁶

No substantial response has been hitherto made to this reconstitution of the text. Van Thiel’s proposal, in particular, has been almost universally adopted in subsequent reproductions and translations of the L version.¹⁷ However, the ox-hide and the related details need not represent authentic elements of the prototypical narrative; they may be secondary additions introduced by the scribe of P. The latter, by adding the mention of the ox-hide, may have wished to render the description more complete and precise, and especially to complement the phrase *ὥσπερ σπυρίδα* of the original text, which might sound elliptic and lacking at first impression. In fact, the formulation *κατεσκεύασα ὥσπερ σπυρίδα*, as found in LOW, is perfectly acceptable in the sense “I made something like a basket”, “I fabricated a kind of basket”. The particle *ὥσπερ* would function, in that case, in a limitative or modifying manner.¹⁸ The use of *ὥσπερ* with a substantive in this sense can be documented from the text of the *Alexander Romance* itself. See 3.28 in the recension β: *ἐξαίφνης ὥσπερ βροντὴ βιαία αὐλῶν καὶ κυμβάλων ... ἐγένετο* (“suddenly something like a violent thunder of pipes and cymbals was heard”); and further in the same chapter, *ἦν δὲ ἐν μέσῳ τῆς ὀροφῆς ὥσπερ ὀρτυγοτροφεῖον* (“in the middle of the roof there was something like a quail-cage”).¹⁹ The idiom is common already in Classical Attic.²⁰

As for the problematic *ταύτην* of codex L (*ταύτην δὲ κατεσκεύασα...*), this may be a false reading or corruption of another word, such as the adverb *εὐθύς* used in OW; *εὐθύς* might have been corrupted into *ταύτην* due to influence from the preceding *τοῦτα*.²¹ Alternatively, *ταύτην* could be the mutilated remnant of a prepositional locution of time, such as *μετὰ ταῦτα*

¹⁶ See Millet, 1923, p. 92-8, 129, 131-2; van Thiel, 1959, p. 18, 33; van Thiel, 1974, p. 120.

¹⁷ Van Thiel’s text is adopted by Stoneman, 1991, p. 123; Centanni, 1991, p. 158-9; Bounoure; Serret, 1992, p. 87.

¹⁸ See Liddell; Scott; Jones, 1940, p. 2040, s.v. *ὥσπερ* II: “to limit or modify an assertion or apologize for a metaphor, *as it were*, *so to speak*”.

¹⁹ See Bergson, 1965, p. 177 (lines 14-5) and p. 178 (lines 5-6). The second phrase recurs in the text of the recension γ.

²⁰ See Ar., *Wasps*, 395, *ὥσπερ φωνὴ μέ τις ἐγκεκύκλωται* (“something like a voice has surrounded me”); Xen., *Symp.*, 4.28, *ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὥσπερ κνήσμά τι ἐδόκειν ἔχειν* (“I felt as if I had something like a sting in my heart”); Xen., *Resp. Laced.*, 12.6, *ἔστι δὲ τοῦτο ὥσπερ ἐξέτασις* (“this is a kind of inspection”); Xen., *Cyr.*, 8.2.27, *ὥσπερ νόμον κατεστήσατο ὁ Κῦρος* (“Cyrus instituted a kind of regulation”).

²¹ *προσέταξα κατασκευασθῆναι ξύλον ὁμοιον ζυγῷ καὶ τοῦτα προσδεθῆναι μέσον τοῦ ζυγοῦ. ταύτην δὲ κατεσκεύασα* (L). In their editions of L Bergson (1965, p. 202) and van Thiel (1974, p. 120) emend indeed the transmitted *ταύτην* into *εὐθύς*.

οὐ πρὸς ταῦτα. In any case, even if the ox-hide is assumed to have been included in the original form of the episode, van Thiel's supplement to the text of LOW cannot be accepted as it is. The phrase δέρμα βοδίου has been lifted out from the demotic Greek text of codex P and reflects the colloquial language of this latter manuscript. It cannot be introduced without change into the text of codices LOW, which offer a version written in more elevated and archaising language. If the archetype of LOW did mention the ox-hide, a more ancient word should have been used, such as βύρσα, σκῦτος, or at least δέρμα βοός or δέρμα βόειον.

Finally, in codex C (Parisinus suppl. gr. 113) of the recension γ there is no reference to a basket or bag. Alexander ties the wooden yoke on the vultures' necks and sits directly on the middle of the yoke: προσέταξε κατασκευασθῆναι ξύλον ὁμοιον ζυγῶ καὶ τοῦτο προσδεθῆναι ἐν τοῖς τραχήλοις αὐτῶν. εἶτα ἐλθὼν αὐτὸς ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ ζυγοῦ ἐκράτησε τὸ δόρυ etc. ("he commanded to fashion a piece of wood in the form of a yoke and tie it on their necks. Then he came himself in the middle of the yoke and held the spear...").²² This version was clearly produced by reduction and simplification of the fuller form of LOW, through omission of the σπιρίς. In Archpresbyter Leo's Latin translation the description of the flying apparatus is even more shortened. Alexander is vaguely said to prepare an "invention" (*ingenium*) to sit on, and binds this "invention" on griffins with chains. A little later, after a few lines of text concerning the king's flight, a new detail is incidentally disclosed: Alexander's flying vehicle was equipped with an iron guard-rail or grating (*cancellis ferreis*), which protected the king from suffering harm during his landing.²³

The details of Alexander's flying apparatus vary in the different redactions of Pseudo-Callisthenes. In some versions the vehicle constructed by the Macedonian king includes more components and accessories (e.g. the large basket, bag, pouch, or railed container); in other texts the contraption is simpler, consisting only in a plain wooden yoke

²² See Millet, 1923, p. 92-3; Engelmann, 1963, p. 315; Stoneman, 2012, p. 286-7.

²³ Leo, 3.27¹¹.5: Preparavi ingenium, ubi sederem, et apprehendi grifas atque ligui eas cum catenis ... Divina quidem virtus obumbrans eos deiecit ad terram longius ab exercitu meo iter dierum decem in loco campestri et nullam lesionem sustinui in ipsis cancellis ferreis ("I prepared an invention on which I could sit, and I captured some griffins and bound them with chains ... A divine power overcame them and threw them down on the earth in a rustic place, ten days' journey away from my army, but I suffered no injury in those iron guard-rails"). See Pfister, 1913, p. 126; Millet, 1923, p. 100, 127; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 111, 216-7; Schmidt, 1995, p. 27. The derivative redactions of the *Historia de preliis* develop this point and render it more specific and colourful; Alexander's vague *ingenium* is transformed into a vehicle or chariot (*currus*), surrounded by an iron guard-rail, so that the king may be secure during the flight. See e.g. redaction J¹, chapter 115 (Millet, 1923, p. 101; Hilka; Steffens, 1979, p. 240-1): iussit venire architectonicos et precepit eis facere currum et circumdari eum cancellis ferreis, ut posset ibi securus sedere. Deinde fecit venire grifas et cum catenis firmioribus fecit ligari eas ad ipsum currum ("he commanded that craftsmen should come, and instructed them to make a chariot and surround it with iron guard-rails, so that he might sit therein with security. Then he had griffins brought to him and had them bound to the aforementioned chariot with very strong chains"). The description is similar in redactions J² and J³; see Millet, 1923, p. 101, 127-8; Steffens, 1975, p. 180-1; Hilka, 1977, p. 156-9; cf. Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 111, 217.

attached to the flying birds. Nevertheless, all versions share a basic common feature: the Macedonian king constructs his flying apparatus on the spot, in the faraway region where he has camped with his army, in the course of his peregrinations in the distant East. As a result, Alexander is obliged to improvise and use the plain materials that are easily available in the military camp during the campaign: a piece of wood for the yoke, the hide of an ox for the man-transporting bag or appropriate stuff for a big basket, or at most a container reinforced with iron guard-rails for greater safety. In general, the contraption is simple, more or less light, and rudimentary; it serves to attach the king as fast and securely as possible to the two vultures, whose physical power is the driving force of the flight.

ORIENTAL TRADITIONS OF FLYING KINGS

The motif of the flying hero had a long ancestry in the ancient Greek imagination, especially in the mythical tradition. Icarus and Daedalus flew with artificial wings in order to escape from King Minos; Bellerophon rode the winged horse Pegasus; Perseus employed a pair of winged sandals; Ganymede was snatched by an eagle and transported to heaven.²⁴ Later Greek narratives of human flight occur mostly in humorous works, such as Aristophanes' *Peace*, Lucian's *Icaromenippus* and *True Histories*, and are express parodies of mythical tales, such as the flights of Bellerophon and Icarus. None of these stories presents great similarities with the legend of Alexander's ascension; on the contrary, there are important differences with regard both to the apparatus and to the purpose of the aerial journey. The mythical heroes use artificial wings or ride a magical horse in order to fly. These means are different from the elaborate contraption fabricated by Alexander, which consists of an entire vehicle (albeit an improvised one) and a connecting device to fasten the vehicle on the necks of large birds.

The aims of the heavenly travel are also hardly the same. Alexander rises into the air in order to explore the heavenly region and observe the earth underneath, hoping to find the ends of the world. In Greek mythology the motivation of Bellerophon's last and infelicitous flight comes perhaps closest to this kind of desire: at the end of his life Bellerophon wished to see the heavens and come face to face with the gods, either out of arrogance or in order to question them about the evil prevailing in the world. His abortive ascension was therefore inspired by a transgressive and hubristic desire for knowledge,²⁵ which somewhat resembles Alexander's reckless eagerness to discover the ultimate limits of the universe.²⁶

²⁴ For surveys of the ancient sources of these myths see Gantz, 1993, p. 274-5, 304-10, 312-6, 558-60. Cf. Jouanno, 2002, p. 273-4; Stoneman, 2008, p. 117-8; Stoneman, 2012, p. 444; Anderson, 2012, p. 85-6.

²⁵ See Pind., *Isth.*, 7.43-8; Eur., *Bellerophon*, fr. 286-9, 293-7, 308 Kannicht; Asclepiades of Tragilus, *FGrH* 12 F 13 (from Schol. on Hom., *Il.*, 6.155b); Collard; Cropp; Lee, 1995, p. 98-9.

²⁶ Cf. Loomis, 1918, p. 136; Anderson, 2012, p. 86. On Alexander's obstinate curiosity for the unknown, as displayed in the *Alexander Romance*, see Gunderson, 1980, p. 84-5, 128-9; Stoneman, 1992, p. 97-8; Aerts, 1994; Fusillo, 1994, p. 272-3; Stoneman, 1994b, p. 95-6, 102; Jouanno, 2002, p. 213-4, 236, 269-78, 293-4; Stoneman, 2007, p. lxi-lxiv, lxxi.

Similar motives incite Trygaeus in Aristophanes' *Peace*, who ascends to heaven in order to question Zeus about the war that devastates Greece (56-235), and Menippus in Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, who wants to learn about the cosmic mysteries of the universe and the will of the gods (4, 10, 23-34). These amusing narratives are of course comic adaptations of Bellerophon's mythical quest.

Otherwise, the heroes of Greek myths fly in order to carry out more efficiently their heroic labours and struggles against monsters and formidable enemies (Perseus, Bellerophon's early adventures), to escape from persecution (Icarus and Daedalus), or to undertake service in heaven (Ganymede). There is nothing truly comparable to Alexander's case in these stories. All things considered, earlier Greek myth and fiction do not seem to have exercised much influence on the tale of Alexander's flight. The sources of this adventure must be sought elsewhere, in the rich legendary traditions of the ancient Near East.

The oldest known story of a heroic flight in the Near-Eastern imaginarium is the myth of Etana, the primeval king of the Sumerian city of Kish: he rode on the back of an eagle and flew to heaven, in order to meet the goddess Ishtar and obtain from her a magical plant which would allow him to beget a son. The story is amply narrated in an Akkadian epic poem of the second millennium BCE, preserved on cuneiform tablets dating from the 19th century BCE onwards.²⁷ This age-old Mesopotamian tale does not present very close analogies to Alexander's adventure. The purpose of Etana's flight is not knowledge and discovery of the secrets of the world but the acquisition of a wondrous substance for procreation. His motive is not insatiable curiosity but the fundamental existential need to perpetuate his bloodline. Accordingly, the Sumerian king's foray into heaven does not have a transgressive dimension; in the extant narrative his quest is presented in a positive light. As for the means of travel, Etana uses a large bird of prey, which recalls Alexander's vultures; but, unlike the Macedonian hero, he needs no vehicle and technical apparatus, since he rides directly on the eagle's back, like Bellerophon on his winged horse or Trygaeus on his grotesque dung-beetle.²⁸

²⁷ See Haul, 2000; Dalley, 2000, p. 189-202; Foster, 2005, p. 533-4. Cf. Levin, 1966; Röllig, 1992; Selz, 1998; Horowitz, 1998, p. 43-66; Kinnier Wilson, 2007; Winitzer, 2013.

²⁸ There is only one striking parallel between Etana's story and Alexander's flight. While flying on the eagle, Etana looks down and sees the earth and the sea gradually becoming smaller. When he has travelled upwards for one league, he sees that the land has become much smaller, while the sea around it looks like a paddock (or a sheepfold). After he has risen for another league, the land seems like a garden plot and the sea has the size of a trough. In another version of the poem, the land looks at first like a hill, while the sea turns into a brook; then the land appears like an orchard, and the sea around it is like an irrigation ditch. See Selz, 1998, p. 166-8; Horowitz, 1998, p. 45-7, 52-65; Haul, 2000, p. 23-7, 89, 150-1, 196-9, 204-5; Dalley, 2000, p. 198-200; Foster, 2005, p. 543, 551-2. Alexander has the same kind of experience. When he looks down from a great height, the sea appears like a gigantic serpent coiled up in a circle and the earth resembles a small round disk, similar to a threshing-floor (ἄλων). The vision of the world below, which seems to diminish in size, is a common motif in stories of flight (see also Ar., *Peace*, 821-3; Luc., *Icar.*, 11-3). But the narratives of Etana and Alexander are

More impressive analogies are traced between Alexander's ascension and a group of other narratives, basically of Old Iranian provenance; these refer to the legendary Kai Kāūs (or Kāvūs), one of the monarchs of the Kayanian dynasty, which ruled Iran, according to mythical tradition, in the distant, primeval age of heroes. Kai Kāūs is also reported to have risen into the sky by use of a flying machine. The narratives of this episode are dispersed in various different sources, which range from the sacred texts of the ancient Zoroastrian religion to medieval Islamic poets and chronographers. Many significant differences can be traced between the multiple versions of the legend, especially with regard to the pragmatic details of the king's flight. It is necessary to survey the various extant variants and offshoots of Kai Kāūs' adventure, in order to attempt afterwards a full comparison with the corresponding tale of Alexander.

The earliest probable allusion to Kai Kāūs' ascension is contained in a hymn of the *Avesta*, the sacred canon of the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures – a large collection of hymns, prayers, and liturgical texts which were used in the religious practice of ancient Iran. In its extant form, the *Avesta* was written down during the Sasanian period (fifth or sixth century AD). However, as is generally agreed by experts, the original formation and the materials of the corpus go back to a much more ancient age. The texts that make up the *Avesta* were orally composed over an extended period, presumably during the late second and the first millennium BCE, and were orally preserved and transmitted for many centuries by the priests of Zoroastrian Iran.²⁹ The allusion to Kai Kāūs is included in *Yasht* 14.39, a hymn to Verethraghna, the divine spirit of victory. A passage of this text seems to say, according to one scholarly explanation, that the mythical bird Vāraghna or Vārengana, a large bird of prey (variously identified as a species of eagle, falcon, or raven), guided the chariot of Kavi Usa (the Avestan form of Kai Kāūs' name), as it also carries the chariots of the lords and the sovereigns.³⁰ If this interpretation is followed, the description would imply that Kavi Usa rose into the air in his chariot, which was lifted upwards by the Vāraghna bird, in a way similar to Alexander's vehicle, which was fastened to two vultures by means of a chariot's yoke.

strikingly similar in their peculiar use of this motif; in both cases the sea and the earth are closely combined and compared to common, human-scale objects of the ordinary world. On the parallels and possible relations between Etana and Alexander see Meissner, 1894, p. 17-8, 31; Millet, 1923, p. 118-9; Christensen, 1936, p. 36; L'Orange, 1953, p. 69; Levin, 1966, p. 58-9; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 145-6; Hofmann; Vorbichler, 1979, p. 139; Selz, 1998, p. 152-4, 158-9, 169-70; Haul, 2000, p. 17, 75, 89-90; Dalley, 2000, p. 189; Jouanno, 2002, p. 274, 296-7; cf. Stoneman, 2008, p. 117; Stoneman, 2012, p. 444-5, 447; Anderson, 2012, p. 85.

²⁹ On the compilation of the *Avesta* and the formation and dating of its materials see Rypka, 1959, p. 7-16; Gershevitch, 1968, p. 10-28; Boyce, 1968, p. 33-4; Alberti, 1974, p. 14-20, 65-7; Boyce, 1975, p. 19-20; Yarshater, 1983, p. 412-3; Malandra, 1983, p. 16-31; Boyce, 1990, p. 1-3, 22-3; Hintze, 1994, p. 42-5; Skjærvø, 2005, p. 2-8, 34-6; Hintze, 2009, p. 1-65; Skjærvø, 2013; Lecoq, 2016, p. 43-58.

³⁰ See Darmesteter, 1881, p. 513-4; Darmesteter, 1883, p. 241-2; Alberti, 1974, p. 363; cf. Loomis, 1918, p. 136; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 141. It must be noted that the explanation of this verse is contested; a different interpretation is offered by Racht, 1996, p. 245; Pirart, 2010, p. 241; Lecoq, 2016, p. 536.

Kai Kāūs' flight was also described in another part of the *Avesta*, which has not survived to the present day. The *Dēnkard* ("Acts of Religion"), an encyclopaedic Zoroastrian work compiled in the Middle Persian (Pahlavi) language around the ninth or tenth century AD, gives a summary of the now lost books of the *Avesta*, which were still available in Sasanian times.³¹ One of these books, the *Sūdgar Nask*, narrated Kai Kāūs' story in detail (*Dēnkard* 9.22.5-12). The demons held a council to discuss a way for destroying the mighty king Kāi Ūs (the Middle Persian form of Kai Kāūs' name). Aeshm, the demon of wrath, went to Kāi Ūs and caused him to be no longer satisfied with his extensive sovereignty over the continents of the earth; Kāi Ūs now wanted to extend his rule to the heavenly region. Therefore, under Aeshm's seductive temptation, Kāi Ūs decided to rise to the sky and oppose the sacred beings. In the company of many demons and wicked people he rose upwards from the top of Mount Alburz, until they reached the outer edge of darkness. There they fought against the archangels and the supreme sacred beings. In the end, they were all crashed and fell to the earth; Kāi Ūs himself was deprived of divine grace and glory and fell into the wide ocean.³²

The means of the flight is not specified in this summary account, although the original Avestan narrative should have provided more details. Given that Kāi Ūs wages battle against the divine beings in the heights, a war chariot, like the one mentioned in *Yāšt* 14.39, is a strong possibility. Alternatively, some kind of fabricated vehicle or flying machine, like those described in later Islamic sources (see below), may have been employed. The summary also omits the driving force which enabled the king to rise in the air. It is unknown whether Kāi Ūs was drawn upwards by birds (as in the *Yāšt* and in Alexander's story) or was elevated by means of the supernatural powers of the demons who accompanied him (cf. Ṭabarī's narrative below). In any case, this abbreviated digest of a lost Avestan book indicates that Kai Kāūs' flight was familiar to the creators of the *Avesta*; it may have been mentioned more than once in the Avestan corpus, and in different variations. The tale must therefore have been current during the first millennium BCE, as part of the mythical lore of ancient Iran.

After the Avestan texts, the story of Kai Kāūs' ascension is expounded in a number of Medieval Islamic writings, mostly works of historiography or poetic mythography in Arabic or Persian, composed from the ninth to the eleventh century AD. These works provide surveys of the earlier history of Iran, including the ample mythological and legendary Iranian traditions about the distant heroic past. Ultimately, the Iranian legends contained in these Islamic sources go back to the rich mythical repository which was current in ancient Iran during the first millennium BCE. Most of these tales are referred to in the *Avesta*. It may

³¹ On the *Dēnkard* and its summaries of the missing parts of the *Avesta* see West, 1892, p. xxix-xxxiii, xxxviii-xlvi; Browne, 1902, p. 97-8, 105; Christensen, 1936, p. 27-8; Rypka, 1959, p. 39-40; Boyce, 1968, p. 43-5; Yarshater, 1983, p. 364, 445; de Menasce, 1983, p. 1170, 1175-6; Gignoux, 1996; Vevaina, 2010; Lecoq, 2016, p. 46-9.

³² See West, 1892, p. 221-3; Vevaina, 2010, p. 234-42; cf. Warner; Warner, 1906, p. 81-2; Millet, 1923, p. 11; Christensen, 1936, p. 31-2; Dumézil, 1971, p. 149-51, 180, 203, 206-7; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 141-2; Yarshater, 1983, p. 374-5, 445; Sundermann, 2008, p. 162-3.

be assumed that they were preserved in oral tradition for many centuries, transmitted from one generation to the next, in the form of popular stories or genealogical accounts of the great Iranian aristocratic families. These tales will have formed the main material of the oral epic poetry which was performed by the Iranian bards, in the courts of magnates or under the patronage of the Mazdaic priesthood, during the Achaemenid and the Parthian period.

In the Sasanian age, a time of great acme for Persian literature and culture, these age-old mythical narratives were collected and written down. The culmination of this erudite work was the compilation of a large prose chronicle, the *Xwadāy-nāmag* (“Book of Kings”), which covered the entire history of Iran, from its primeval beginnings to the death of the Sasanian monarch Khusrau II Parviz (AD 628). The *Xwadāy-nāmag* was soon translated into Arabic and provided the base for other similar chronographic compilations, written in Arabic or Persian, which enriched its accounts with additional narrative materials, taken from other sources (e.g. other Sasanian writings or popular legends from oral tradition). It was presumably from such translations or offshoots of the *Xwadāy-nāmag* that the Muslim historians drew their Iranian stories.³³

One version of Kai Kāūs’ adventure is told in the monumental *History of Prophets and Kings* by the historian Ṭabarī (AD 839-923). According to the original Arabic text of this work, Kai Kāūs arrived in Babylon and declared: “The whole earth is in my possession; now I must learn about heaven, the planets, and what is beyond them”. God gave the king power to rise in the air with his retinue, until they reached the clouds. At that point God deprived them of the power, and they fell downwards and perished. Only Kai Kāūs escaped; but he lost his earlier majesty and henceforth suffered many drawbacks in his kingship and defeats from his enemies.³⁴

Ṭabarī’s *History* was adapted into Persian by the vizier Bal’amī around AD 962/963. Bal’amī introduced new motifs, borrowed probably from another current variant of the myth.³⁵ In this version, Kai Kāūs feels sad and unsatisfied and therefore decides to mount to heaven and observe the sun, the moon, and the stars from close by. He has a magical machine or device constructed and uses his powers and knowledge in order to rise up into the air, together with some of his servants. When they reach the region of the clouds, however, the joints of the machine break and all fall down to the earth; everyone is killed, apart from Kai Kāūs. The latter becomes liable to physical necessity, like an ordinary human being; his subjects do not fear him any longer, and he suffers defeats from his enemies.³⁶

³³ On the antiquity and transmission of the Iranian myths found in the Islamic works see Warner; Warner, 1905, p. 56-70; Nöldeke, 1920, p. 1-19, 41-2; Christensen, 1931; Christensen, 1936, p. 9-43, 107-40; Boyce, 1954; Boyce, 1955; Rypka, 1959, p. 56-8, 66-7, 152-69; Yarshater, 1983; Shahbazi, 1990; Skjærvø, 1998; Konstantakos, 2009, p. 110-4; Manteghi, 2018, p. 22-8.

³⁴ See Perlmann, 1987, p. 5-6; cf. Nöldeke, 1890, p. 26; Meissner, 1917, p. 31; Millet, 1923, p. 112; Yarshater, 1983, p. 374-5; Duleba, 1995, p. 89. Essentially the same story is repeated in the *Chronology of the Kings of the Earth and the Prophets* by Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (AD 961).

³⁵ Cf. Yarshater, 1983, p. 360; Dunlop, 1960, p. 984.

³⁶ See Zotenberg, 1867, p. 464-5; cf. Millet, 1923, p. 112; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 10-11.

At least in Bal'amī's variant the king uses a flying device of his own invention, although no further details are provided about its parts and function. It is unknown if such a device was present in the version known to Ṭabarī; it might have been omitted due to the extreme terseness of Ṭabarī's narration. In any case, Kai Kāūs does not employ birds to provide the driving force for the ascension. He and his followers rise thanks to pure supernatural and magical power, which is granted by God or possessed by the omniscient king. As in the *Sudgar Nask*, the monarch's flight is a challenge against the divine, an attempt of the mortal king to penetrate into heaven and measure himself against the rule of God. Naturally, God throws the hubristic king back to earth and punishes him with loss of all his extraordinary capacity and fortune.

Yet another, fuller version is set out in Firdausī's *Shāhnāmah*, a vast epic poem which covers the entire mythology and history of Iran up to the Muslim conquest. Kai Kāūs has obtained full dominion over the demons, who are obliged to work hard in his service. The demons plan to tempt the king and lead him away from God, so that he may lose his grace and power over them. A cunning demon presents himself to Kai Kāūs in the guise of a noble young courtier. He praises the Iranian king's glory and exhorts him to accomplish the one and only task which remains, in order to render his triumph complete: namely, ascend to heaven, become familiar with the sun, the moon, and the celestial phenomena, and extend his sovereignty over the region of the sky. Kai Kāūs is tempted and constructs a special machine for his flight. He commands his people to catch young eaglets and feed them well with meat and fowl. When the eagles grow up, they become strong and capable of carrying large loads.

Then Kai Kāūs has a throne made of aloe wood and gold; long spears are bound at its four corners, and a lamb's leg is suspended from every spear-head. Four eagles are tied to the throne, and Kai Kāūs takes his seat on it. The eagles, ravenous for food, strive to reach the meat hanging from the spears and thus lift up the throne with the seated king. Kai Kāūs flies in this way for a long time and reaches the firmament; finally the eagles are exhausted, droop their wings, and descend to earth, dragging the throne with them, until they alight in a wild forest. By a miracle, Kai Kāūs is not killed from the fall, but is left alone and hungry in that faraway place. He then understands his error and prays to God for forgiveness and salvation. The Persian army, led by the hero Rustam, finds the king after an arduous search and brings him back in humiliation. The poet adds that there are variant explanations about Kai Kāūs' motives for this reckless enterprise. Some say that he wished to penetrate into the area of the angels; others maintain that he wanted to make war against heaven with his bow and arrows.³⁷

A similar but briefer episode is found in the *History of the Kings of the Persians* by Tha'ālibī (early eleventh century AD). When Kai Kāūs reaches the apogee of his power

³⁷ See Mohl, 1876, p. 30-7; Pizzi, 1887, p. 152-61; Warner; Warner, 1906, p. 101-6; Davis, 2006, p. 184-6; cf. Loomis, 1918, p. 136; Millet, 1923, p. 111-2, 117; L'Orange, 1953, p. 69, 78-9; Dumézil, 1971, p. 181-4; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 87-8; Hofmann; Vorbichler, 1979, p. 138-9; Yarshater, 1983, p. 374-5; Jouanno, 2002, p. 274, 297; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 3-8; Melville, 2012, p. 405-6.

and prestige, Satan comes to lead him astray; the king loses all sense and hopes to become God. He thus decides to mount to the sky and become master of heaven, as he is on earth. The rest of the story is identical to Firdausī's version, including the four eagles, the throne with the spears and the meat suspended on them, the king's flight and fall, and his final contrition and salvation.³⁸ The chronographer Dīnawarī (died ca. 894/895), in his *Book of Lengthy Stories*, also briefly mentions Kai Kāūs' vain idea to go up to heaven. Kai Kāūs is thereby called "possessor of the casket and the eagles". This phrase points to a version in which eagles are exploited for the king's flight, as in the narratives of Firdausī and Tha'ālibī; the "casket" is doubtless a variation of the vehicle, a kind of box instead of the throne or chariot of the other versions.³⁹

Another offshoot of the same cycle of traditions is represented by the stories of the Mesopotamian king Nimrod, who is mentioned in the *Genesis* (10.8-12) as the first great emperor of Babylon and Akkad. In post-Biblical traditions he was identified as the builder of the Tower of Babel and hence as an archetypical rebel against God.⁴⁰ As a result, the mythical pattern of the impious king, who flies to heaven in order to challenge the divine power, was also applied to Nimrod. The story is found again in Medieval Islamic historical works but may stem from an older legend.⁴¹ In Bal'ami's version of Ṭabarī's *History* Nimrod feels ashamed and wrathful, because his great sacrifice to the God of Abraham has not been accepted. He therefore resolves to mount to heaven and make war against God. He orders his craftsmen to fabricate a box or chest, with one trapdoor on the upper side, opening towards the heavens, and one on the lower side, opening towards the earth. Spears with pieces of meat

³⁸ See Zotenberg, 1900, p. 165-7; cf. Lewy, 1949, p. 31-32, 92.

³⁹ See Jackson Bonner, 2014, p. 316-7; cf. Nöldeke, 1890, p. 26; Millet, 1923, p. 111, 117.

⁴⁰ See Ginzberg, 1909, p. 175, 179; Ginzberg, 1925, p. 198-201; Bialik; Ravnitzky, 1992, p. 29-33, 335; Metzger; Coogan, 1993, p. 537.

⁴¹ The story of Nimrod's flight and war in heaven obviously presupposes the post-Biblical traditions about this king's impiety and instigation of the Tower of Babel; these traditions first surface in the *Babylonian Talmud* and the early Midrashic literature, during the last centuries of the Roman Empire. Perhaps the narrative of Nimrod's flight was formed at approximately the same time or not much later. Already in the Biblical book of *Isaiah* (14.13-4) the king of Babylon thinks of climbing to the sky, mounting the back of a cloud, setting his throne above the stars, and becoming equal to the Most High. It would have been easy to combine this image of the arrogant Babylonian king with the building of the Tower of Babel (the emblematic example of transgression, which was also located in Babylon), and then to apply this combination of Biblical motifs to Nimrod, the archetypical ruler of Babylon mentioned in the *Genesis*. Cf. von Rad, 1963, p. 145-7; Westermann, 1984, p. 538-9, 554. Thus Nimrod would emerge as an ideal protagonist for the story-pattern of the reckless king who ascended to heaven. The exact relation between the story of Kai Kāūs and Nimrod's flight cannot be ascertained. The traditions about Kai Kāūs are older, going back to the first millennium BCE, and may have exercised some influence on the formation of the tale of Nimrod in the Roman age (cf. Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 13-4). Alternatively, the two legends may have been the products of a common model, e.g. an older Mesopotamian myth about a king's flight to the sky (see below, and cf. Meissner, 1917, p. 31).

are attached to the four corners of the chest, and vultures are bound to its four legs. Nimrod enters into the chest fully armed, together with a faithful vizier; the vultures rise upwards, in their effort to reach the meat, and lift the chest into the air. Nimrod and his companion fly for three days and nights, until they reach a great height, over the clouds, and cannot see anything above or beneath them. Then the king shoots three arrows towards heaven. But God orders the archangel Gabriel to dye the arrows in blood and throw them back to Nimrod; the foolish king thinks that he has wounded and killed the God of Abraham, and returns to earth.⁴² Other Islamic histories substantially repeat the same narrative, in so far as the mechanics and outcome of the flight are concerned.⁴³

The apparatus of Nimrod's flight is based on the exploitation of large ravenous birds tempted by a bait of meat; the same elements are used in Kai Kāūs' story, according to Firdausī and Tha'ālibī, and in Alexander's adventure. Instead of a throne, a box serves now as a vehicle; compare the casket in Dīnawarī's version. The use of big birds of prey (eagles or vultures), which provide the driving force for the flight, may be a distant echo of the myth of Etana, who rode on the back of an eagle. However, in the stories of Kai Kāūs, Nimrod, and Alexander the hero does not mount on the bird's back, as though on a pack animal, but sits on or inside a special construction (throne, box, casket, yoke, bag), which is fastened to the birds. This method is more complex than the simple journey on the bird's back and may represent a later and more artful fictional invention; it was perhaps created under the influence of the myth of Etana, as a more composite and sophisticated variant, which enriched the flight story with pseudo-technical elements. Another kind of tradition, the imagery of the floating throne, which was widespread in the ancient Near East, may also have exercised some impact on the formation of these narratives (see below).

The similarities between all these oriental stories and Alexander's ascension are evident, especially with regard to the mechanics of the flight. Particular details of the arrangement, such as the kind of the vehicle that is used, the source of the driving force, the number and species of the birds, and the placement of the bait, may of course vary from one tale to another. Nevertheless, in many cases the central concept is the same: the vehicle, in which the king has taken position, is lifted up by large birds of prey, which fly in order to reach pieces of meat that the king has hung above their heads (Alexander, Kai Kāūs in Firdausī, Tha'ālibī, Dīnawarī, Nimrod in Bal'amī). Other aspects of the stories are also analogous. The protagonist is often motivated by an excessive desire for cosmic knowledge. Alexander wishes to discover the edges of the earth; Kai Kāūs wants to learn

⁴² See Zotenberg, 1867, p. 148-50, 158; cf. Lévi, 1881, p. 239; Meissner, 1894, p. 17; Millet, 1923, p. 117; Bolte; Polívka, 1930, p. 373, 395-6; Budge, 1933, p. xxvii-xxviii; L'Orange, 1953, p. 69; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 142; Jouanno, 2002, p. 274, 297; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 9-12.

⁴³ The story is included in the tenth-century Persian translation of Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr* (commentary on the Quran); in the *Lives of the Prophets* by the Persian scholar Tha'ālibī (died 1036); and in the *Gardens of purity*, a work of universal history by the 15th-century Persian writer Mīr-Khwānd. The first and second of these sources also narrate Nimrod's fight with arrows against God. See Rehatsek, 1891, p. 141-2; Brinner, 2002, p. 162-3; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 11-3; Melville, 2012, p. 406.

about the sky and the heavenly bodies (Ṭabarī, Bal'amī, Firdausī, cf. *Sūdgar Nask*). In most of the oriental tales the king's impiety is more emphatically stressed. The senseless monarch aspires to extend his rule over heaven, become equal to God, or make war against the divine beings; his flight is an act of disrespect and hostility towards God, and for this reason it is punished with failure.⁴⁴

Alexander displays no such overt enmity towards the deity, but his foray into the heavenly region does have a transgressive aspect. The human-formed bird, which meets the Macedonian king in the heights, reproves him for assailing the sky and advises him to return to earth. This is a clear indication that Alexander has overstepped a limit set to human endeavour by higher powers. The aftermath of the adventure is also similar in many of the tales. Both Alexander and Kai Kāūs (in Firdausī and Tha'ālibī, cf. *Sūdgar Nask*) land in a deserted or wild area, far from their point of departure, and suffer great hardship; in the end, they are discovered by their own subjects and brought back to their proper abode. Alexander regrets his foolhardiness and decides never to attempt the impossible again.⁴⁵ This recalls Kai Kāūs' contrition and repentance at the finale of the story, when he understands his error and prays for forgiveness (Firdausī, Tha'ālibī).

There is doubtless some relation between Alexander's flight and the oriental tales examined above. Many scholars envisage a straightforward, one-directional process of influence from the legend of Alexander on the eastern traditions. Alexander's ascension is supposed to have provided the model for the narratives concerning Kai Kāūs and Nimrod, after it became widely known in the East – whether as an independent legend, in the context of oral tradition, or as part of the *Alexander Romance*, which was translated into several oriental languages from the seventh century AD onwards.⁴⁶ However, this explanation cannot be accepted in this simple form, because other factors, to be examined in the following section, reveal a more complex picture.

THE FLYING THRONE

The primary obstacle to assuming a direct dependence of Kai Kāūs' flight on Alexander's adventure is chronological. Kai Kāūs' ascension to heaven was already narrated in the *Avesta* and hence formed part of the Iranian mythical tradition that was current in the first millennium BCE. The episode of Alexander's flight, on the other hand, may have been formed in the late Hellenistic or early Imperial period. The exact date of creation of both

⁴⁴ Cf. Hofmann; Vorbichler, 1979, p. 139-40; Vevaina, 2010, p. 235-9.

⁴⁵ See *Alexander Romance* 2.41 (L): οὐκέτι οὖν προσεθέμην ἀδύνατα ἐπιχειρεῖν. Similarly in the other Greek versions. Cf. Loomis, 1918, p. 183-5; Pfister, 1976, p. 12, 297-300; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 87-8; Schmidt, 1995, p. 28-39; Boitani; Bologna; Cipolla; Liborio, 1997, p. 637-43; Jouanno, 2002, p. 272-5; Stoneman, 2008, p. 116-20, 152; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 18-20; Melville, 2012, p. 406-8; Stoneman, 2012, p. 447.

⁴⁶ See Lévi, 1881, p. 239; Nöldeke, 1890, p. 26; Rohde, 1914, p. 192; von Grunebaum, 1946, p. 302; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 142-3; Stoneman, 1992, p. 108; Jouanno, 2002, p. 274-5; Stoneman, 2008, p. 118; Stoneman, 2012, p. 445-6; Manteghi, 2018, p. 68, 199.

these legends is of course unknown; but one would have to indulge in *ad hoc* argumentation and chronological alchemy, in order to make Alexander's story appear earlier than the tradition about Kai Kāūs. One would need to assume that the episode of Alexander was invented quite early in the Hellenistic period, almost immediately after the Macedonian king's campaign in the East, and that it spread very quickly to the Near East and the area of Iran. Even if the former point might be arguable, the latter would be harder to accept, since the first indication of knowledge of Alexander's flight in the Near East is no earlier than the fourth century AD.

On the other hand, one would also have to postulate that Kai Kāūs' ascension was a very late addition to the corpus of the *Avesta*, made only towards the end of the first millennium BCE, after the Greek conquest of the Persian Empire. Such a chain of gratuitous hypotheses does not seem likely. It is more plausible to suppose that the legends of Alexander and Kai Kāūs were originally independent of each other, formed at different times and in diverse cultures, perhaps under the inspiration of a common earlier model. This does not exclude that the two narratives may have influenced each other at a later stage of the tradition, when both of them were well known and diffused in the world of the East.

In addition, the story of Kai Kāūs, at least in some versions, contains a further sign of priority. Narratives of this kind, regarding a king's ascension to heaven, rely on a symbolic and ritual background; they reflect a widespread Near-Eastern image of the king, which occurs in many art objects and illustrations from various parts of ancient Western Asia and may be based on actual appearances of the monarch in official rituals and state occasions.⁴⁷ In ancient Iran, Mesopotamia, and elsewhere the king is often portrayed sitting on a throne which is floating in the air, over the earth.

In the Iranian world the most characteristic images come from the Sasanian age. In various monuments (silver plates, silver and golden cups and dishes, vases, seals) the king is shown seated on a throne which is supported by birds or winged creatures (eagles, griffins, winged horses etc.); alternatively, animals, such as bulls or lions, are tied to the throne and seem to be rising upwards. The concept underlying these pictures is that the throne is floating in the air; it is carried on the backs of the winged creatures or pulled upwards by the animals that rise to the heights.⁴⁸ The idea of the flying throne is considerably older than the Sasanian dynasty. Analogous representations are found in the Achaemenid period. Reliefs in the palace complex of Persepolis, placed in the Throne Hall and the Council Hall, show the Persian king sitting on his throne, which is supported underneath by three consecutive rows of men. These porters are clearly supposed to lift the throne up with their raised arms; they represent the subject peoples of the Persian Empire.⁴⁹ Similarly, on the façade reliefs

⁴⁷ See L'Orange, 1953, p. 118-23; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 85-8; Jouanno, 2002, p. 275.

⁴⁸ See L'Orange, 1953, p. 37-44, 65-9, 72-9, with many examples and illustrations; cf. Merkelbach, 1977, p. 86-7; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 86-8, 197-8; Jouanno, 2002, p. 275, 297.

⁴⁹ See L'Orange, 1953, p. 81, 85-7; Schmidt, 1953, p. 84, 116-20, 134-6; Schmidt, 1970, p. 80-1, 159-60; Root, 1979, p. 95-100, 105-8, 131-3, 147-61; Root, 1995, p. 2628-9; Briant, 2002, p. 173-6, 217-9, 573; Garrison, 2013, p. 578-9.

of the Achaemenid royal tombs at Naqš-e Rostam the king stands on a large platform or dais, which is called a “throne” (gāθum) in the accompanying inscription on the tomb of Darius I; this platform-like throne is held aloft by two tiers of representatives of the subject peoples of the empire.⁵⁰

On the Achaemenid monuments, therefore, the king’s throne is also raised above the ground, although the image is more realistic by comparison to the Sasanian illustrations, given that human porters are employed instead of mythical flying creatures. The Sasanian works may be considered as imaginary recasts or mythicised variants of the more verisimilar Achaemenid representations. Some ancient *testimonia* indicate that analogous mythical and supernatural conceptions were already developed in the Achaemenid age, even though they are not reflected in the preserved monuments. According to Herodotus (3.30.2-3, 3.64.1), King Cambyses saw in his dream a messenger who came from Persia and brought him news about his brother Smerdis: Smerdis had sat on the royal throne and his head touched heaven. Because of this dream, Cambyses feared that Smerdis wished to kill him and take the Persian throne. This vision is essentially based on the image of the king who rises in the sky, while sitting on his throne, and reaches the firmament.⁵¹

In the Herodotean narrative it is not specified whether the raise of the throne is accomplished with the help of birds, flying animals, or in a magical manner. Nevertheless, the entire conception is obviously fantastic and is comparable, in this respect, to the mythicised Sasanian royal pictures. According to another relevant Herodotean tale (1.209), King Cyrus, shortly before his death, saw in his dream Darius, the son of Hystaspes, wearing wings on his shoulders; one of these wings was overshadowing Asia and the other Europe. This dream prophesied Darius’ future kingship. In this case the (future) king is again marvellously raised aloft to the sky, although the throne is lacking.⁵² Both these Herodotean tales seem to be based on Persian material and reflect imaginary conceptions of the flying king, which must have been diffused in Achaemenid Iran.

Similar monuments are known from the Neo-Assyrian culture, before the inauguration of the Achaemenid Empire. A number of reliefs from the palaces of Sargon (722-705 BCE) at Khorsabad and Sennacherib (705-681 BCE) at Nineveh depict the monarch seated on his throne; under the sides of the throne there are two or three rows of small human figures, which support the horizontal arms of the seat with their raised hands. Other Neo-Assyrian monuments also portray thrones whose arms, seat, or legs rest on figures of

⁵⁰ See Sarre; Herzfeld, 1910, p. 14-9; L’Orange, 1953, p. 81-5; Schmidt, 1970, p. 80-6, 92, 95, 98, 100, 106, 108-18; Root, 1979, p. 73-6, 131-3, 148-81; Briant, 2002, p. 173-6, 211; Garrison, 2011, p. 30-47; Garrison, 2013, p. 580-1. For Darius’ inscription see Kent, 1953, p. 137-8; Lecoq, 1997, p. 220; Schmitt, 2009, p. 103. In general cf. Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 88; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 86; Jouanno, 2002, p. 297-8.

⁵¹ Cf. Asheri; Lloyd; Corcella, 2007, p. 429-30.

⁵² Cf. Mallowan, 1968, p. 392-4; Asheri; Lloyd; Corcella, 2007, p. 215.

men or animals.⁵³ These representations express, in a more schematic and symbolic manner, the same idea as the Achaemenid monuments. The viewer is called to imagine that the throne is carried aloft on the raised hands of the supporting attendants or on the animals' backs. Comparable images are found in other parts of western Asia. On the sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos (ca. tenth century BCE) the monarch is shown seated on his throne, which relies on a winged sphinx. The underlying idea may be that the enthroned king can rise in the air, soaring on the back of the flying monster.⁵⁴

The idea of the king who rises aloft on his throne is also attested in ancient Near-Eastern texts. In a Neo-Assyrian prophetic oracle from the time of Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE) the goddess Ishtar of Arbela announces to the monarch that she has established his throne under the wide heavens and that she holds him in the heavens by a curl of his hair.⁵⁵ In a letter of gratitude addressed to King Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE), Kudurru, the governor of the city of Uruk, wishes that the gods may establish the king's throne in the midst of the heavens forever.⁵⁶ The same imagery is scornfully employed in the satirical song against the impious king of Babylon, which is included in the Biblical book of *Isaiah* (14.13-4). The monarch is taunted because he thought of setting his throne in the sky, higher than the stars; the Assyrian image of royal glory is here upturned and serves as a manifestation of the reckless king's arrogance and blasphemy.

All these examples, which occur both in literary texts and in the monuments of several places and periods, are perhaps ultimately dependent on an actual royal ritual or ceremony. This might have taken place on various state occasions (for example, during the coronation or other official appearances of the monarch), in Mesopotamia, in Iran, or in other areas of the East. Seated on his throne, the king would be raised aloft and carried above the ground, on the arms of his attendants.⁵⁷ This kind of symbolic exaltation would serve to highlight the ruler's power and divine right.

In this respect Kai Kāūs' story, at least in the form found in Firdausī and Tha'alībī, involves a much more ancient and authentic element by comparison to Alexander's adventure in Pseudo-Callisthenes. The Iranian king flies to heaven on a throne, which is pulled up by four eagles.⁵⁸ Alexander employs no throne for his flight. In the oldest extant Greek form of the episode (codex L and recension λ) he is hauled aloft in a large basket or sack,

⁵³ See Layard, 1850, p. 299-302; Layard, 1853, p. 150, 198-200; Gressmann, 1909, p. 136-7; L'Orange, 1953, p. 80-1; Pritchard, 1954, p. 129, 293 (fig. 371); Baker, 1966, p. 185-90, 197-201; Kyrieleis, 1969, p. 9-12, 64-81; Root, 1979, p. 150-3; Barnett; Bleibtreu; Turner, 1998, p. 103-4.

⁵⁴ See Pritchard, 1954, p. 157-8, 302 (fig. 456, 458); Baker, 1966, p. 206-7; Kyrieleis, 1969, p. 42, 45, 66; Porada, 1973, p. 361-2.

⁵⁵ See Parpola, 1997, p. 7-8; Luckenbill, 1927, p. 240; Lewy, 1949, p. 93; Pritchard, 1969, p. 450, 605.

⁵⁶ See Waterman, 1930, p. 184-7; Pfeiffer, 1935, p. 136; Lewy, 1949, p. 93.

⁵⁷ See L'Orange, 1953, p. 80, 110; Ghirshman, 1957, p. 272-7; Krefter, 1971, p. 62-3, 96-102; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 88; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 85-8; Root, 1979, p. 151, 153-61; Garrison, 2011, p. 30-1.

⁵⁸ See Mohl, 1876, p. 33; Pizzi, 1887, p. 155; Warner; Warner, 1906, p. 103; Davis, 2006, p. 184-5; Zotenberg, 1900, p. 166.

which is made of ox-hide, according to one manuscript, and is tied to a yoke borne by the large birds.⁵⁹ The motif of the flying throne in the narrative of Kai Kāūs reproduces with exactitude a very old element of royal iconography, which was widespread in ancient Iran and the Near East already from the first millennium BCE. Kai Kāūs' method of flight, therefore, has a ring of authenticity and originality. It includes a morphological motif which must go back to the prototypical form of the tale of the king's flight, and which has been faithfully preserved in some of the oriental versions, while it has been eliminated in the Greek narrative of Alexander.

Of course, the overall picture of the oriental tradition about Kai Kāūs is also complex and hardly unproblematic. One of the chief obstacles to a neat and well-ordered scheme is set by the Avestan versions of the story. In *Yāšt* 14 Kai Kāūs uses a chariot, not a throne, for his ascension to heaven.⁶⁰ In the summary of the *Dēnkard* there is no indication of the vehicle and method of the flight. The flying throne only occurs in two medieval retellings of Kai Kāūs' story. It might be argued that the throne was introduced by the source of Firdausī and Tha'ālibī, the Sasanian *Xwadāy-nāmag* or one of its offshoots. And the compilers of the *Xwadāy-nāmag* might have been inspired by contemporary Sasanian royal iconography, in which the king on the floating throne was a usual image.

⁵⁹ Regarding this important difference cf. Millet, 1923, p. 116-7; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 17; Melville, 2012, p. 405-6. Alexander flies on a throne only in much later western European offshoots of Pseudo-Callisthenes' romance. In some versions of the medieval French *Roman d'Alexandre* (twelfth century) he is seated on a "chair" (*kaiere*, *caiere*, or *chaiere*), which is fastened on winged griffins. From the French romance the "chair" passed into other French texts and English romances. German medieval works speak of a "seat" (*sessel*, *sezzel*, *gesaeze*) in the same context. Alexander is also shown on a flying throne in many European artistic works (reliefs, mosaics, wooden sculptures, decorated church misericords, and miniatures in manuscripts, from France, Germany, Italy, and England) dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth century. See the collections of material in Loomis, 1918, p. 140, 178-81; Boffito, 1921, p. 27; Millet, 1923, p. 121-2, 127-8; Hübner, 1933, p. 46 and pl. 3; Cary, 1956, p. 373; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 87, 197, 211-4, 218-21, 233-9, 250-7, 265-6, 278-9, 287-94, 312-6, 323-9; Schmidt, 1995, p. 15-6, 21-8, 104-8, 128-54; Stoneman, 2008, p. 115-6, 209-10, pl. 7; Morosini, 2011, p. 329, 332-4. In these cases, the use of the seat or throne is an innovation of the western European tradition, not an element of the original Greek narrative. Alexander is so depicted because the throne is *par excellence* the sign of royal power in western iconography (see Millet, 1923, p. 128; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 197, 238-9, 265-6; Schmidt, 1995, p. 22-5, 28, 106-7). In theory, some influence from oriental narratives (e.g. the one concerning Kai Kāūs) or illustrations (e.g. Persian art works from the Sasanian or later periods) on the western tradition cannot be excluded. Such influence must have been exercised via other intermediaries, unrelated to the diffusion of Pseudo-Callisthenes' romance – for example, through the oral dissemination of oriental tales or through the importation of art works and illustrated manuscripts from the East into Europe. See Millet, 1923, p. 128; Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 218-9.

⁶⁰ It is noteworthy, in this connection, that in certain Sasanian monuments (textiles and silver plates) the king is shown rising in the air with his chariot, which is drawn aloft by winged horses. See L'Orange, 1953, p. 64-5.

On the other hand, other Muslim chronographers, such as Ṭabarī, Bal‘amī and Dīnawarī, describe the apparatus of Kai Kāūs’ flight differently, referring to magical powers, a flying machine, or a casket, instead of a throne. Clearly, the legend of Kai Kāūs was widely diffused and frequently retold, so that a great number of variant versions were created, which are reflected in the extant sources from the Avestan era to the Middle Ages. In this respect, it is not unlikely that the particular version of the flight transmitted by Firdausī and Tha‘ālibī may have preserved a very ancient iconographical motif, which was a favourite ingredient of royal ideology during the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid periods. This provides additional support to the view that the tale of Kai Kāūs’ ascension was formed in pre-Hellenistic times, earlier than the story of Alexander’s flight.

CONCLUSION: ALEXANDER’S FLIGHT AND THE ORIENTAL TRADITIONS

In view of the investigations set out above, it does not seem likely that the oriental narratives of Kai Kāūs’ and Nimrod’s flight were modelled after Alexander’s adventure. A more complex pattern of transmission must be surmised: the episode of Alexander’s aerial journey must have been inspired by an ancient tradition of oriental legends, from which the tales of Kai Kāūs and Nimrod also ensued.⁶¹ The stories of this tradition revolved around a king’s ascension to heaven. The myth of Etana may have been the ultimate ancestor of the entire group of these tales; but the tradition was subsequently developed and enriched under the influence of the characteristic Near-Eastern monarchic iconography, which showed the ruler seated on a flying or airborne throne. The stories of this type were created as mythicisations or narrative expressions of that standard royal imagery and, in their prototypical form, must have also described how the central hero-king rose to the sky while seated on his throne. Perhaps the connection to the ancient royal iconography grew weaker with the passage of time, so that the authentic significance of the floating throne was gradually forgotten; possibly the whole imagery of the royal airborne throne fell into disuse after the Sasanian age. As a result, the later medieval authors no longer understood the peculiar symbolic meaning of the throne and felt free to omit this element or to replace it with other contraptions. This may explain why the original detail of the throne only survived in the versions of Firdausī and Tha‘ālibī, while other retellings use different forces and vehicles instead.

The episode of Alexander’s flight must have evolved from this same oriental tradition of tales at some point during the late Hellenistic or early Imperial period. Perhaps its immediate model was a narrative about a Persian monarch. Stories of this type were known in ancient Iran, as indicated by Kai Kāūs’ example, and Persian royal iconography would have favoured their creation and dissemination already from the Achaemenid period. It cannot be excluded that stories of flight, similar to that of Kai Kāūs, also circulated with regard

⁶¹ For this hypothesis cf. Loomis, 1918, p. 136-40; Budge, 1933, p. viii-ix, xxvii-xxviii; L’Orange, 1953, p. 69, 118-9; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 86-8; Hofmann; Vorbichler, 1979, p. 139; Abdullaeva, 2010, p. 25-6; see also Boffito, 1921, p. 30-1; Christensen, 1936, p. 36.

to other Iranian kings. As conqueror of the Persian Empire, Alexander was the immediate successor and heir of the kings of Persia. Thus, stories concerning these latter kings might easily have been transferred to the Macedonian conqueror in the popular conscience.⁶²

At the time when the narrative of Alexander's flight was formed, the imagery of the flying royal throne would still have been a live tradition in Hellenistic or early Sasanian Iran. The Greek creators of the narrative might well have been in a position to know the significance of the throne image. Nevertheless, they would have been obliged to omit this detail, so as to adapt their tale to the broader context of Alexander's adventures. In the Greek texts of Pseudo-Callisthenes the flight is attempted in the course of Alexander's travels in wondrous lands at the edges of the earth. Even before its incorporation into the composite romance, while it was still circulating as an independent narrative, the story must have been envisaged in a similar context. The venture of the flight is very well matched to the other wondrous adventures of the Macedonian king in areas beyond the limits of the known world; it may thus be safely assumed that the flight was designed from the beginning as an adventure of the same kind.⁶³

In this setting of exotic travels and faraway lands, it would have been impossible to use a throne. Alexander could hardly have been expected to carry along such an item during his wide-ranging and arduous campaigns. Even a chariot, such as the one used by Kai Kāūs in the Avestan *Yas't* 14, might have been an accessory difficult to handle in these conditions.⁶⁴ Therefore, the Macedonian king had to fabricate a special, improvised flying machine, which could be constructed on the spot out of simple and easily available materials, such as wood, ox-hide, or wickerwork. This contraption was fastened on large birds which

⁶² Cf. Meissner, 1894, p. 7; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 88. In general, many of the tales about Alexander's wondrous adventures in the course of his eastern campaigns seem to have been based on legendary traditions and folktales which were widespread in the Near East. The veterans of Alexander's army picked up many such stories during their sojourn in the lands of the Orient and incorporated them into their own fantastically embellished reports; they used the legendary story-patterns of the East in order to filter and fictionalise their experiences from the marvellous Macedonian expedition. See Konstantakos, 2015, and Konstantakos, 2019, with further references; cf. also van Thiel, 1974, p. xxv-xxvii; Merkelbach, 1977, p. 55-6, 59, 61-8; Gunderson, 1980, p. 3, 5-6, 97, 100-5, 110-5, 123-4; Stoneman, 1991, p. 11-4; Aerts, 1994, p. 34-5; Jouanno, 2002, p. 24, 145-6, 201; Stoneman, 2008, p. 74-7.

⁶³ Cf. Settis-Frugoni, 1973, p. 14-5, 82-3, 99-105; Millet, 1923, p. 103-4; Schmidt, 1995, p. 39-45, 65-6, 156-65; Jouanno, 2002, p. 302.

⁶⁴ Cf. Millet, 1923, p. 117. In the *Alexander Romance* the episode of the flight forms the culmination of a long journey of the Macedonian king and his companions into the mysterious "land of the blessed" at the edges of the world (2.39-41 in L, λ, and γ). It is exactly at the borders of this wondrous country that Alexander decides to rise into the sky and find out whether heaven and earth converge at that region. It is very telling that at the beginning of this march into the unknown land Alexander leaves behind the largest part of his troops and only takes a select force with him, consisting of the best soldiers and horses (2.39); no chariots, carriages, or other vehicles of transportation are mentioned. See Engelmann, 1963, p. 307-15; Bergson, 1965, p. 132-4, 198-201; van Thiel, 1974, p. 112-21; Stoneman, 2012, p. 274-85.

were endemic in that same place. Every ingredient of the flying apparatus had to be provided by the immediate natural environment or the handy supplies of the expeditionary force. Thus, the throne, chariot, or other royal paraphernalia of the original Iranian tradition had to be replaced in the Greek episode, in accordance with the general storyline of Alexander's legendary biography.

In later times, of course, after Alexander's fictional adventures became known and diffused in the East, the story of the Macedonian conqueror's flight could have interacted with particular specimens of the oriental tradition of ascension tales, such as one or the other version of the narratives about Kai Kāūs and Nimrod. During this secondary process of interchange and mutual contact, some elements of Pseudo-Callisthenes' episode might have been received into the oriental legends. The peculiar method of making the birds rise by use of a bait (pieces of meat placed on long spears) is a prominent example. This motif is almost identical in Pseudo-Callisthenes and in some of the later oriental versions (Firdausī and Tha'ālibī on Kai Kāūs, Ṭabarī and other sources on Nimrod). It may represent an original element of Alexander's story which was subsequently borrowed by the storytellers of the East. In the authentic ancient Iranian versions of Kai Kāūs' legend, the bird or birds (which probably make their first appearance in the Avestan *Yas't*) might have flown without any kind of bait. They could have risen in the air following their proper nature and instinct, or they might have been appropriately trained by the king, in order to drag him and his seat up into the sky.⁶⁵ It is also possible that some of the ancient Iranian variants made no use of birds. The king, seated on his throne, would ascend to the heights thanks to a magical or supernatural power, as happens in the medieval narratives of Ṭabarī and Bal'amī.⁶⁶

In that case, the entire apparatus of spears, meat, and baiting would be an invention of the Greek legend, which passed into the eastern traditions from the romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, after the latter became widely known in the lands of the Orient. In this way, an old narrative debt was repaid. The story of Alexander's flight had been inspired by a long oriental tradition of myths and legends; afterwards, as though to compensate for the narrative material borrowed from the East, the same story about Alexander contributed some new elements to certain later specimens of that old oriental tradition of flight tales. Such mutual exchanges between East and West have indeed sealed the fate of Alexander, both as a historical and as a legendary personage.

⁶⁵ Cf. another famous oriental narrative, the *Story of Abiqar*, in which the wise hero trains a number of eagles to fly with small boys riding on their backs. See Konstantakos, 2013, p. 228-35, with many references to texts, editions, and bibliography.

⁶⁶ Similarly in an Ethiopian *Romance of Alexander* the Macedonian king, in a magical way, becomes smaller in size and flies on his own, like an eagle. See Budge, 1933, p. 167.

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