

The prophecy of Dū-l-Qarnayn (Q 18:83-102) and the Origins of the Qur'ānic Corpus

1.1. Introduction¹

One of the most singular characters of 7th c. Middle Eastern literature is the pious king Alexander of Syriac apocalypses. In several texts, Alexander the Great is described as the mythical founder of the Byzantine Empire and as the recipient of prophecies concerning the end of times. The most ancient of these Syriac apocalypses is a prose work composed around 629 and entitled *Neṣḥānā d-leh d-Aleksandrōs*, “the victory of Alexander”². This text must have been quite widespread in the years immediately following its redaction. In fact, it was known and used as source by the author of a Syriac metrical homely (*mēmṛā*) falsely ascribed to Jacob of Sarug and composed before 640³. Furthermore, the eschatological vision and ideology expressed in the *Neṣḥānā* inspired the authors of two other Syriac apocalypses written in the second half of the 7th c.: the sermon on the end of the world of Pseudo-Ephrem⁴ and the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*⁵.

¹ My thanks to Gabriel Said Reynolds, Guillaume Dye, Nicolai Sinai and Christopher Melchert for their comments on different versions of this article.

² Syriac text and English trans. in Wallis-Budge 1889: 144-158 (trans.), 255-275 (text). French trans. in Bohas 2009: 25-43.

³ Syriac text and German trans. in Reinink 1983 (text: vol. 1; trans.: vol 2). English trans. in Wallis-Budge 1889: 45-88.

⁴ Syriac text and German trans. in: Beck 1972: vol. 1, 60-71 (text), vol. 2, 79-94 (trans.). French trans. in Bohas 2009: 89-95.

⁵ Syriac text and German translation in Reinink 1993b (text: vol 1; trans.: vol. 2). French trans. in Bohas 2009: 96-103. For a discussion of the dates of composition of these texts and

As has long been recognized by scholarship, the story told in the *Neṣḥānā* also displays strong similarities with the narrative concerning Dū-l-Qarnayn at vv. 83-102 of sūrat al-Kahf. The first scholar to notice the relationship between the Syriac and the Qur'ānic accounts was Nöldeke, who considered the former to be the source of the latter⁶. Despite its very important implications for the study of the Qur'ān, Nöldeke's hypothesis has long been forgotten (or ignored) by scholars. Only recently van Bladel has re-examined the relationship between the two texts in light of new outcomes about the date and context of composition of the *Neṣḥānā*⁷. Through a thorough analysis van Bladel highlights the numerous elements shared by the stories told in the two texts. As the Alexander of the Syriac work, the protagonist of the Qur'ānic account travels at the two edges of the Earth before reaching the place where he builds the wall against Gog and Magog. In both texts, the construction of the eschatological barrier is followed by the emission of a prophecy about events concerning the end of times. Other specific details of the Qur'ānic story match precise correspondences with elements found in the Syriac work. Still more significantly, the common points between the two stories always appear in the same order. When comparing the two texts, it clearly appears that in both of them the same story is described by following the same narrative structure. At the end of his analysis van Bladel infers that the size and precision of these common elements can be explained only by identifying the *Neṣḥānā* as the source of the Qur'ānic passage⁸. According to him, the other two possible explanations, i.e., that either the Syriac work depends on the Qur'ānic pericope or the two texts refer to a common source, are both to be dismissed.

While agreeing with van Bladel's analysis, it seems to me that its outcomes require to be corroborated by further arguments. In the following pages I will present some evidence about the connection

their mutual relationships, see the several works published by G. J. Reinink (1983: vol. 2, 1-10; 1992; 1993a; and above all 2003).

⁶ Nöldeke 1890: 27-33.

⁷ In fact, the Syriac text is to be traced back to the thirties of the 7th c. and not to the first quarter of the 6th as Nöldeke thought (see Czeglédy 1957: esp. pp. 246-8; Reinink 2003:155-65). It should be noticed that contrary to Nöldeke, van Bladel also considers vv. 18:99-102 as belonging to the original core of the Qur'ānic story of Dū-l-Qarnayn (van Bladel 2007a).

⁸ In another article van Bladel also points out that early Arabic traditions refer to elements of the *Neṣḥānā* that are not evocated in the Qur'ānic account (van Bladel 2007b).

between the two texts that, as far as I know, had not yet been noticed. Furthermore, I will reexamine the question about the nature of this philological link, and more precisely whether being direct or indirect. The analysis will also extend to the *mēmṛā* by Pseudo-Jacob of Sarug, that as the Qur'ānic pericope on *Dū l-Qarnayn* is in turn connected to the Syriac *Neṣḥānā*.

1.2. The Narrative Structure of the *Neṣḥānā*

The story told in the *Neṣḥānā* is articulated in three main parts (henceforth addressed to parts 1, 2 and 3). In part 1, Alexander undertakes a journey until reaching the edges of the Earth. He first meets a sea of fetid waters (*yamā saryā*) which he unsuccessfully attempts to cross. Then he reaches the place of the sunset, where he and his troops enter the “window of heaven”. Following the Sun’s night path, they arrive at the place of the sunrise⁹. In part 2, Alexander travels until the region of the Caucasus. Here, he meets local people who complain about the incursions of the Huns, among whose leaders are Gog and Magog. Alexander commands his followers to build a wall against the Huns and, once the task is achieved, he announces a prophecy which he orders to be engraved upon the door of the wall. The prophecy predicts the future incursion of the Huns and other events to come at the end of times. In part 3, Alexander engages a conflict with the king of the Persians *Tūbarlaq*, whom he eventually defeats. After stipulating an armistice, Alexander goes to Jerusalem where he establishes his throne.

The story told in part 3 is an allegory of the bloody conflict between Byzantines and Sasanids that went on during the first three decades of the 7th century. This part of the *Neṣḥānā* is to be considered as a genuine product of its author, who retro-projects contemporary events in accordance with a specific propagandistic agenda, whose aim was to glorify Heraclius’ victory over the Sasanians and to support his religious policy in the re-conquered territories¹⁰. The conflict between Alexander and the Persians told in part 3 is paralleled by a similar episode in the *mēmṛā* of Pseudo-Jacob, while it is absent in Q 18:83-102.

⁹ On this curious way of travelling, its antecedents in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and its reflection in the Qur'ānic story of *Dū-l-Qarnayn*, see: van Bladel 2007c.

¹⁰ Cf. Reinink 2003: 155-65; id. 2002: 81-94.

Contrary to part 3, in parts 1 and 2 the author has re-elaborated previous traditions. As for part 1, several elements of the story of Alexander's travels are reminiscent of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*¹¹. Other echoes of the ancient Babylonian poem are to be found in different versions of the story of Alexander's quest for immortality, that are preserved in previous and contemporary sources: the recension β of the *Alexander Romance* (text L: II, 39-41), the Babylonian Talmud (*Tamīd*, 32b) and, interestingly, the *mēmrā* of Pseudo-Jacob¹² and the Qur'ānic passage immediately preceding the story of Dū-l-Qarnayn (e.g., Q 18:60-82)¹³. The presence of these elements outspread among various Alexander stories and related traditions points to the existence of a late antique version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* where Alexander had replaced the ancient hero as protagonist. The fact that the most striking reminiscences of the *Epic* occur in the *Neṣḥānā* and in the *mēmrā* suggests that the literary legacy of the Babylonian poem were particularly vivid in the Alexander traditions circulating in the Syro-Aramaic world. The story told in part 1 of the *Neṣḥānā* must have been drawn by this kind of previous traditions.

As for part 2, it is very probable that the story of the wall against Gog and Magog also circulated before the redaction of the *Neṣḥānā*, even if the latter contains the oldest extant attestation. A possible connection between the Biblical motif of Gog and Magog and a tradition about iron gates built by Alexander already occurs in the work of Josephus – though being bare of any apocalyptic connotation. Other possible hints to the story of Alexander's wall are found in the

¹¹The connection between Gilgameh's and Alexander's stories was first noticed by Meissner (Meissner 1894). The same issue has recently been examined by Henkelman in an excellent and detailed article (Henkelman 2010). Some insightful remarks by van Bladel in van Bladel 2007a: 197, n. 6. See also my previous study in Tesei 2010.

¹² On this episode within the poem of Pseudo-Jacob see the discussion below.

¹³ This passage evokes the episode of Alexander's fortuitous discovery of the source of life. However, the story told in these verses has as protagonist Moses instead of Alexander. In a very influential article, Wensinck identifies the *Epic of Gilgamesh* among the (three) sources of this Qur'ānic pericope (Wensinck *EF*²: 935). Thus, he indicates a number of "gilgameshian echoes" in Q 18:60-82. However, it is likely that rather than directly deriving by the Babylonian epic, these echoes passed in the Qur'ān through the mediation of the traditions concerning Alexander – that Wensinck himself recognizes as one of the sources of Moses' story. A very confused (and confusing) discussion about the relationship between Q 18:60-82 and various texts concerning both Alexander and Gilgamesh is found in Wheeler 1998. On the possible reasons of the replacement of Alexander by Moses and, more generally, on the way the Qur'ān evokes the Alexander story of the water of life, see my recent study in Tesei forthcoming.

works of Jerome – where, as in the *Neṣḥānā*, Gog and Magog are identified with the Huns - and Isidore of Seville¹⁴. Even if it is not possible to determine in which form the story circulated in earlier times, it seems that also part 2 of the *Neṣḥānā* is based on previous traditions. It is also evident that the story of Alexander's wall was originally separated from the previous episode of the Syriac work. This clearly appears when considering the discrepancy between the geographical data present in the two moments of the narration. In fact, we move from a passage from a mythical geography, filled with fantastic and odd elements, to a concrete one where we can clearly recognize sites of the Caucasian region. The version of the story of Alexander's wall that the Syriac author included in the *Neṣḥānā* probably originated in that geographical area.

It is important to observe that the narrative sequence of the stories in parts 1 and 2 has no antecedents in previous extant sources. In other words, previous texts containing elements of the story in part 1 (i.e., the above mentioned passages from the *Alexander Romance* and from the Babylonian Talmud) do not contain any element of the story in part 2. In much the same way, the passages from Josephus, Jerome and Isidore that possibly allude to antecedents of the story in part 2, do not mention any elements of the story in part 1. By contrast, the same combination of two originally independent traditions is found in two sources contemporary to the redaction of the *Neṣḥānā*: the *mēmṛā* of Pseudo-Jacob and the Qur'ānic pericope on *Ḍū-l-Qarnayn*. These texts feature the same way of combining the two pre-existing traditions: the episode of the wall against Gog and Magog always comes behind that about Alexander's journey at the edges of the Earth. Not only the two Syriac sources and the Qur'ānic pericope evocate the same stories, but they also share the order in which previous traditions are organized in the narration. It is also noticeable that the three sources reflect how previous materials have been re-worked. This clearly appears when considering the passages of the three texts dealing with the episode of the Fetid Sea (*'ayn ḥami'a* in the Qur'ānic account, cf. v. 86).

In part 1 of the *Neṣḥānā*, Alexander travels at the edges of the Earth to see “what the heavens are based on and what encircles the whole creation”. However, his desire is frustrated by the impossibility

¹⁴ On the possible references of the myth of Alexander's wall in these sources see: van Donzel & Schmidt 2010: 11-5. See also: Czeglédy 1957: 235-8.

to cross the Fetid Sea. In a following passage (in part 2), the wise men of the Caucasian region tell Alexander that God encircled Paradise with the Fetid Sea - also named as Ocean (*ūqīanūs*) - so that men could not approach the holy place. The idea of a Paradise located across an encircling ocean was quite widespread during Late Antiquity. Nevertheless, it is significant that in the *Neṣḥānā* this ocean coincides with the Fetid Sea that Alexander fails to cross. It is plausible that in a previous version of the story it was not the desire to explore the edges of the world that pushed Alexander to pass over that poisoned ocean, but rather his intention to reach Paradise. It should be noticed that the story of Alexander's attempt to enter Paradise is recorded in the passages of the *Alexander Romance* and of the Babylonian Talmud mentioned above. Actually, the *Neṣḥānā* also contains a clear allusion to this episode:

God made four rivers to go forth from the Paradise of Eden. As He knew that men would dare to go up these rivers to enter Paradise, He drew them inside the earth and brought them through valleys, mountains, and plains [...] As for Paradise, He surrounded it with seas, rivers, and the ocean, the Fetid Sea, so that men cannot get close to it, nor can they see where the rivers have their source [...] ¹⁵.

Given the context, it is almost impossible not to take this passage as referring to the story of Alexander's unsuccessful journey to Paradise. In particular, the text seems to evoke elements also reported in the Babylonian Talmud, where the hero tries to reach the holy place by following the course of one of its rivers. Furthermore, it is significant that the *Neṣḥānā* credits the Fetid Sea with the function of preventing people to enter Paradise. In fact, this represents another hint that Alexander's aim to cross the poisonous waters was originally connected to his intention of reaching the immortal land. Thus, the philological evidence shows that in the *Neṣḥānā* an episode about Alexander's journey to Paradise has been cut off from the narration. Now, it is important to notice that this same "editorial choice" is reflected in both the *mēmṛā* of Pseudo-Jacob and Q 18:83-102. In fact, both texts feature the event of the Fetid Sea without mentioning the

¹⁵ Syriac text in: Wallis-Budge 1889: 206.

original development of the narrative concerning the journey to Paradise.

1.3. *The Relationship Between the Texts*

What has so far emerged is that the *Neṣḥānā*, the *mēmra* of Pseudo-Jacob and the Qur'ānic pericope on *Dū-l-Qarnayn* reflect how pre-existing traditions have been re-worked and combined in a single narration. Since it is improbable that three authors made the same choices independently from each other, one may assume that a philological link is implied. Now, the *crux* is to determine whether the editorial process reflected in the three texts is peculiar to one of them, the other two being influenced by its narrative structure, or is to be ascribed to a previous author whose work provided a common model.

The first possibility to be dismissed is that Q 18:83-102 be the source of the other two texts. In fact, there is no compelling reason to assume that the Qur'ānic account was already in circulation before the composition of the *Neṣḥānā* and the *mēmra*¹⁶. However, even assuming that it was, it still remains unlikely that a Syriac Christian author from North Mesopotamia (i.e., the place where both Syriac works have probably been composed¹⁷) had knowledge of such tradition at a time when the Qur'ānic literary material was hardly known outside the Early Muslim community. Furthermore, because of its very nature, the narrative in Q 18:83-102 could difficulty have provided a model for the authors of the Syriac apocalypses. In fact, as is typical of Qur'ānic narratives, the account on *Dū-l-Qarnayn* is highly allusive and implies references to previous and more developed traditions. Van Bladel reasonably observes that if the author of the *Neṣḥānā* had used Q 18:83-102 as source, “then the Syriac text would have to be seen as a highly expanded version of the Qur'ānic account, which would then need to be understood as an attempt to explain the cryptic Qur'ānic story with rationalizations drawn from stories about Alexander. However, the Syriac text contains no references to the Arabic language the type of which one might expect to find if its purpose was to explain an Arabic text”¹⁸. This same observation can

¹⁶ The problems of chronology of Q 18:83-102 will be discussed in the second part of this article.

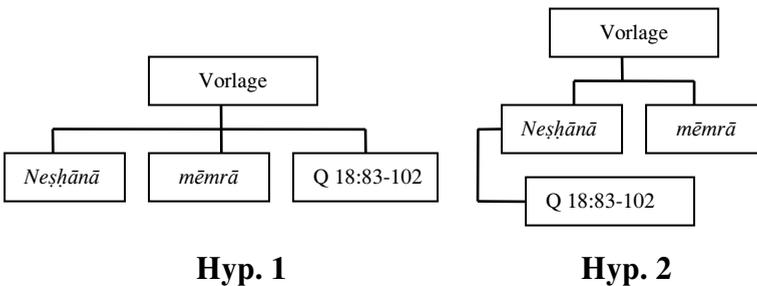
¹⁷ Cf. Reinink 2003: 161-4.

¹⁸ Van Bladel 2007a: 189.

be extended to the case of the *mēmrā*, whose author either might hardly have drawn elements on Q 18:83-102.

To consider the *mēmrā* of Pseudo-Jacob as the source of the *Neṣḥānā* and the Qur'ānic account is also unlikely for several reasons. With regards to the relation between the two Syriac sources, Reinink observes that “no scholar has seriously considered the possibility that the Legend [i.e., the *Neṣḥānā*] is dependent on the Poem [i.e., the *mēmrā*]. And indeed, the very fact that the Legend represents a consistent and coherent story, containing materials that are lacking in the Poem, makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to assume the Poem's priority over the Legend”¹⁹. At the same time, it is not possible to postulate the dependence of Q 18:83-102 upon the *mēmrā*. In fact, the Qur'ānic story of Dū-l-Qarnayn features elements and episodes that occur in the *Neṣḥānā* but not in the homily of Pseudo-Jacob. For instance, Dū-l-Qarnayn's promise of punishment of the wrongdoers at v. 87 parallels the execution of the evil-doers in the *Neṣḥānā*²⁰, while a similar episode is lacking in the *mēmrā*. Furthermore, Dū-l-Qarnayn's travels along the sky-ways (*asbāb*) correspond to Alexander's journey on the Sun's night path described in the *Neṣḥānā*²¹, though any reference to this odd way of travelling is missing in the work of Pseudo-Jacob.

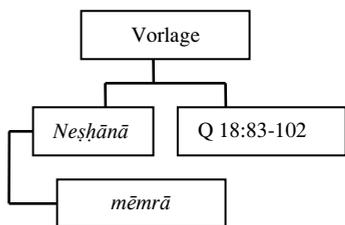
The things being so, the philological link among the three texts can be explained only by four possible hypotheses, simplified in the following graphic:



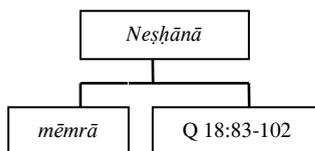
¹⁹ Reinink 2003: 153.

²⁰ On this common point between the two stories see: van Bladel 2007a: 181.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*: 182; van Bladel 2007c.



Hyp. 3



Hyp. 4

Let us now analyze these four possibilities case by case.

A first difficulty with Hyp. 1 emerges when considering elements that do not simultaneously appear in all of them. As already observed, the two Syriac sources present an episode which is absent in Q 18:83-102 (i.e., Alexander's victorious campaign against the Persians) while, by contrast, the *Neṣḥānā* and the Qur'ānic story feature elements lacking in the *mēmrā*. Now, if the three texts shared a *Vorlage*, one might expect that Q 18:83-102 and the *mēmrā* also presented exclusive common points at the exclusion of the *Neṣḥānā*. Nevertheless, this is not the case. The only possible exclusive common element is represented by the episode of the quest for the water of life, that occurs in the *mēmrā* (between parts 1 and 2) and in the Qur'ānic pericope preceding Q 18:83-102 (i.e., Q 18:60-82). In this case, the implication would be that the hypothetical *Vorlage* featured the episode of the water of life and that this episode was preserved in the *mēmrā* and in the Qur'ānic account but not in the *Neṣḥānā*. However, this view involves several difficulties.

Above all, this would imply the original unity of the two consecutive Qur'ānic pericopes in Q 18:60-82 and 18:83-102. This implication is not impossible, since *sūrat al-Kahf* presents a stylistic and thematic coherence. However, even in this case the situation would remain problematic, for Q 18:60-82 appears as an independent narrative separated from the one concerning *Ḍū-l-Qarnayn*. Furthermore, it might be noticed that the story also presents strong differences with the version of the episode of the source of life told in the *mēmrā*, the most evident being the presence of Moses instead of Alexander as protagonist. Of course, one may speculate that the author of the long

Qur'ānic passage (i.e., 18:60-102) drew material from the hypothetical *Vorlage*, that he used this material to elaborate an independent account about Moses and that he put this account aside the one on Dū-l-Qarnayn which he had derived from the same source. This is a complex explanation, but not an impossible one. However, the possibility that the Syriac and the Qur'ānic authors took the episode of the water of life from a common source still remains improbable. What really makes it difficult are the several elements suggesting that rather than deriving from a possible *Vorlage*, the episode in the *mēmrā* has been interpolated by the Syriac author.

Reinink has convincingly argued that Pseudo-Jacob inserted the story of the quest for the immortality with the specific homilistic purpose of showing that “eternal life does not belong to this mortal and woeful life, but to the coming age of the eternal kingdom of heaven.”²² The episode of the water of life told in the *mēmrā* actually appears as an elaboration of a more ancient version of the story.²³ The Syriac author has combined this episode with other sources he used, among which the *Neṣḥānā* occupies a prominent position. The possibility that the Syriac text provided a model for the *mēmrā* had already been envisaged by Nöldeke, who argued the former to be the source of the latter. While other scholars have claimed, by contrast, that the two Syriac texts descend from a common source,²⁴ Reinink has definitively demonstrated that Pseudo-Jacob composed a metrical version of the *Neṣḥānā* as a reaction to its propagandistic and political issues. This happened in a context of doctrinal disputes, where Monophysites affirmed their “communal identity against Heraclius’ religious policy of ecclesiastical unification.”²⁵

Going back to the four hypotheses formulated above, we can dismiss both Hyp. 1 and 2, since the two Syriac texts do not share a common source. Now, the extant (and more important) question to be answered is whether a *Vorlage* lays behind the philological link

²² Reinink 2003: 166.

²³ In my Phd dissertation I have exposed further evidences that prove that the episode of the water of life is interpolated. In fact, the narratological analysis shows that Pseudo-Jacob has modeled an earlier version of the story after narrative patterns found in the *Neṣḥānā*—more specifically in the episode of the execution of prisoners at the Fetid Sea. I plan to present these evidences in a coming article where I will analyze the late antique developments of the legend of the water of life.

²⁴ See the synopsis provided by Bohas in Bohas 2009: 11-7.

²⁵ Reinink 2003: 165-8.

between the *Neṣḥānā* and Q 18:83-102 (Hyp. 3) or if the Syriac text is the direct source of the Qur'ānic pericope (Hyp. 4).

Concerning Hyp. 3, in his study van Bladel observes: “the only way to posit a common source is to assume that everything held in common between the Qur'ānic account and the Syriac *Alexander Legend* [i.e., the *Neṣḥānā*] could have been written for and would have made sense in an earlier context.”²⁶ Van Bladel particularly focuses on the prophecy about the incursion of Gog and Magog emitted by Alexander/*Dū-l-Qarnayn* in the two accounts. Referring to Reinink's studies, he stresses that the Alexander prophecy in the *Neṣḥānā* was composed with the specific purpose to serve as a pro-Heraclius propaganda in the historical milieu of 629-30 CE. According to him, since the Qur'ānic story refers to the same prophecy, the possibility of a common source is to be dismissed. With van Bladel's own words: “If Alexander's prophecy was composed just for this purpose at this time, then the correspondence between the Syriac and the Arabic, which contains the same prophecy reworded, cannot be due to an earlier, shared source.”²⁷ Actually, this is the most critical point of van Bladel's analysis. In fact, some elements suggest that also in this case the author of the *Neṣḥānā* has re-elaborated pre-existing materials, among which a previous form of Alexander's prophecy.

A key element of the prophecy told in the *Neṣḥānā* is the prognostication about two future incursions of the Huns from behind the wall erected by Alexander. The time of these incursions is clearly indicated by two dates: 826 AG (i.e., *Anno Graecorum* or Seleucid era), corresponding to 514-15 CE, and 940 AG corresponding to 628-29 CE. As has long been noticed by scholars, both predictions are *vaticinia ex eventu* that refer to the incursion of the Sabirs in 514-15 CE and that of the Khazars around 627 CE. In the *Neṣḥānā* these nomadic populations from Central Asia are addressed to with the collective designation of “Huns”. To refer to real historical events as having been foretold in ancient times is a typical device of apocalyptic texts. Through these *vaticinia* the author wants his reader to identify the nomadic invasions predicted by Alexander with those really occurred in the immediate past. The reader is thus brought to consider the prophecy as reliable, since some of its predictions appear as having already been

²⁶ Van Bladel 2007a: 190.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 189-90.

accomplished. Once achieved the reader's trust, the author passes to the elaboration of a real prognostication about the future that expresses his own expectations about the developments of sacred history. In this overlapping between fiction and reality, the second date referred to in Alexander's prophecy performs a crucial role as it represents the starting point of the real prognostication of the author.

Now, it should be noticed that the function of prediction of the first Huns' invasion is much less clear. According to van Bladel, "this invasion, which holds no importance in the narrative, serves just as a key for the contemporary audience of the text that they can use to verify the accuracy of the second, more elaborate prophecy, associated with a later date"²⁸. This reading is not entirely satisfactory. Czeglédy more convincingly argues that the Syriac author used a previous form of the prophecy and he adapted it to the contemporary historical context by adding the reference to the second date. Indeed, there is evidence that a prophecy about the invasion of the Huns/Sabirs in 514-15 CE already circulated in the years preceding the redaction of the *Neṣḥānā*. Czeglédy draws the attention to a passage of the *Lives of the Eastern Saints* by John of Ephesus (d. 586 ca.), who was an inhabitant of the Caucasian region touched by that nomadic invasion. In his work he reports about a revelation (*gelyānā*) predicting the arrival of the Huns²⁹. By the mid of the 6th century, when John was writing, the nomadic populations of Central Asia had constantly been identified with the Biblical Gog and Magog and sometimes connected with the motif of Alexander's gates—though no prediction about their coming from behind the wall is ever mentioned by previous authors. On these grounds, it is conceivable that the motif of Alexander's prophecy reported in the *Neṣḥānā* already took shape some decades before the composition of the Syriac apocalypse. It is likely that the author of the latter has adapted to contemporary events a previous tradition foretelling the invasion of the nomadic population. In that case, the reference to 826 AG would represent a legacy of the earlier stage of the prophecy, while that to 940 AG would be an indicator of the more recent development elaborated by the author. Now a question arises: if a previous version of the prophecy existed, could

²⁸ Ibid.: 183.

²⁹ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*: 78. It is a bit surprising that van Bladel does not acknowledge this source. In fact, the reference to the passage from John of Ephesus occurs in Czeglédy's article that van Bladel mentions in his bibliography.

have been included in an early text that already featured the narrative structure and the editorial choices later reflected in the *Neṣḥānā* and Q 18:83-102? Put in different terms, could the pre-existence of the Alexander prophecy on the Huns be an argument in favor of Hyp. 3, that is, of the presence of a *Vorlage* behind the Syriac and the Qur'ānic texts?

Commenting on the passage of John of Ephesus quoted above, Czeglédý infers: “We can hardly interpret this very important date in any other way than by supposing that, in the lifetime of John of Ephesus, that is, in the middle of the 6th century, the Syriac apocalyptic Legend concerning Alexander was already in existence”³⁰. This view presents several problems. It should first be observed that Czeglédý does not clarify what does he exactly mean by “the Syriac apocalyptic Legend concerning Alexander” and, in particular, whether he considers this *supposed early stage of the legend* (henceforth referred to through the acronym SESL) to have included only the episode of the wall against the Huns or also the other narrative components found in the *Neṣḥānā* (i.e., those in part 1). The second view seems to be implied, since Czeglédý considers the SESL to be the model used by both authors of the *Neṣḥānā* and the *mēmṛā*³¹. It follows that, if these two works were independent re-adaptations of a previous tradition, all elements they share must have necessarily already occurred in their source. In this case, the SESL must have featured much the same episodes later occurring in the *Neṣḥānā* and in the *mēmṛā*. Nevertheless, as noticed above, to trace the two Syriac texts back to a common source does not appear as a suitable explanation for the link between them. Actually, the passage of John of Ephesus examined by Czeglédý provides us only with a case for an earlier stage of Alexander's prophecy on the Huns. And also in this case the evidence is less compelling than the Hungarian scholar suggests. In fact, no reference to Alexander or to the eschatological barrier is mentioned in John's report. It may well be that the author of the *Neṣḥānā* adapted a previous prophecy on the Huns, that arose because of their identification with the Biblical Gog and Magog but that was originally independent from the motif of Alexander's wall. This is far from being impossible as no prophecy on Gog and Magog preceding the redaction of *Neṣḥānā*

³⁰ Czeglédý 1957: 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*: 246-7.

features the motif of the eschatological barrier³². That said, the possibility that in the middle of the 6th century the prophecy on the Huns was already set in the framework of the story of Alexander's wall is a concrete one. *But*, the only thing we can reasonably infer with the available data is that an early version of the episode existed and that the author of the *Neṣḥānā* re-adapted it to the needs of his narration. Nothing suggests that in earlier times the story of Alexander's wall and the related prophecy had already been linked to the other narrative components featured in the *Neṣḥānā*. *Pace* Czeglédy, there is no evidence that the Syriac author drew a unique account from a previous text. Actually, there are good reasons to think that he rather derived different episodes from independent sources and that he pasted them together in a new original narrative.

It should be noted that the way that these pre-existing stories are combined in the *Neṣḥānā* is well explained when considering the agenda of its author. Van Bladel makes an insightful remark about the four directions toward which Alexander travels in the *Neṣḥānā*. In fact, the various episodes are put together in order that Alexander's travels trace a cross on the whole world. Van Bladel quite convincingly relates this symbolic evocation to the hopes about a future Byzantine cosmocratic empire that the author of the *Neṣḥānā* expresses in his work³³. Political and ideological reasons also offer a satisfactory explanation for the episode which we have seen to have been excluded from the narration—that is, the one concerning Alexander's journey to Paradise. In fact, this omission acquires its full meaningfulness when considering what the character of Alexander represented for the composer of the *Neṣḥānā*. As Reinink has shown, the Syriac author aims to create an Alexander-Heraclius typology: the reader must understand the glorious *gesta* accomplished by the former in the past as being repeating in the present by the latter. Thus, "Alexander becomes the classical example of the ideal Christian emperor, who considers and fulfills his wordly task in conformity with God's will and with God's assistance"³⁴. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the author of the Syriac apocalypse had substantial reasons to cut the episode of the journey to Paradise off from his

³² Cf. van Donzel & Schmidt 2010: chap.s 1 & 2.

³³ Van Bladel 2007a: 183.

³⁴ Reinink 2003: 162.

work. Indeed, in the *Neṣḥānā* the attempt to reach Paradise is envisaged in strongly negative terms, as it clearly appears from the passage quoted above. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to think that the author of the Syriac work preferred to omit an episode that could put his hero in an embarrassing position.

Thus, the author of the *Neṣḥānā* appears as the most plausible actor responsible for the process of pasting together and cutting out episodes within and from the narration. His editorial choices are reflected in the Qur'ānic story of Dū-l-Qarnayn. The Qur'ān presents the account in the same way it is presented in the *Neṣḥānā* and omits the very episode which the Syriac author excluded from the narration.

1.4 Conclusions

Putting the elements emerged from this investigation aside those of van Bladel's study, it seems to me that we have enough compelling evidence to consider the *Neṣḥānā* as the source of Q 18:83-102 (hyp. 4, among the four previously formulated). Nonetheless, a further argument can be adduced to strengthen this view. As Reinink has shown, the *Neṣḥānā* played a key role in the diffusion of the legend of Alexander's wall in the 7th c. literary circles of the Middle East³⁵. Several sources testify the considerable success the Syriac work enjoyed in the years immediately following its redaction in 629 CE. Between 635 and 640, Pseudo-Jacob used it as a source in the composition of his metrical homily. Few more decades later, both Pseudo-Ephrem and Pseudo-Methodius referred to the story and to the ideology contained in the *Neṣḥānā* to elaborate new concepts of sacred history in response to the rise of Islām. It is very difficult to believe the presence of a related tradition in the Qur'ān to be unrelated to the wide circulation that the *Neṣḥānā* was enjoying in the very same years of the emergence of the Muslim community. As I will show elsewhere, the introduction of the story of the wall against Gog and Magog in the Qur'ān's theological discourse must be related to the lively process of re-interpretation and re-adaptation of the contents of the Syriac work in the decades following its composition.

³⁵ Cf. Reinink 2003.

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