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Julius Valerius and the Evolution of the 'Letter to Aristotle about India'

1 The Problem

Alexander's 'Letter to Aristotle about India' (the 'Letter') is extant in several divergent versions. It forms ch. 3,17 of the oldest recension of the Greek *Alexander Romance* (*AR*), but the single MS of this version (A, Parisinus gr. 1711) offers a very abbreviated text in comparison with the Latin translation by Iulius Valerius (probably the consul of 338 CE)[1] and the Armenian translation (fifth c. CE?).[2] Later recensions of the *AR*, those known as beta and lambda (and lambda's unique variant, L), reduce this long chapter to a few lines; in the Byzantine recensions known as epsilon and gamma (in that order), the events of this chapter are told as a third-person narrative. In addition, there are two Latin versions of a free-standing text referred to as 'The Latin Letter to Aristotle about India', of the seventh and tenth centuries respectively;[3] the first is in Latin, the second in a Latin that shows many features of Italian. The tenth century translation of the *AR* by Leo the Archpriest includes the Letter, but includes quite a few episodes that are not in any of the other translations nor in the Latin Letters; though clearly Leo was using a Greek MS that in some ways resembled A, the version he had of alpha cannot be the same as the one we have.[4] The 'new' episodes that he includes may have been in his Greek source text, or it is possible that he inserted them from elsewhere. Leo represents in effect a third tradition.

Though Iul. Val. and the Armenian translation are witnesses to a pre-existing longer version of the Greek letter,[5] the question arises whether the free-standing Latin Letters are witnesses to a full version which was already abridged in the Greek of the *AR*.[6] This would be of interest because it would imply that the Latin Letters are independent witnesses to a Greek tradition about Alexander in India that would go back perhaps as early as the third century BCE. Can such an idea be sustained? Conversely, if the Latin Letters are late compositions, is there evidence of influence from Iul. Val. on the form

1 Stoneman (1999) 174–177; Callu (2010) 23 suggests a date after 360 for the *Res Gestae Alexandri*.
2 I rely on the English translation by Wolohojian (1969).
3 Pfister (1910); Boer (1973); translations Gunderson (1980) (the seventh century version), Stoneman (2012) (the tenth century version). Feldbusch (1976) provides a parallel text of the first letter, AR 3,17, Iul. Val. and the Syriac translation.
4 A is an MS of the eleventh century.
5 The Syriac translation is also pertinent, but it interpolates material from the beta recension (*AR* 2,32–33; 36–40), and the Letter to Olympias (3,27–28): Gunderson (1980) 41. It thus resembles the versions of lambda and Leo.
6 Gunderson (1980) 34 regards the *AR* as an 'epitome' of the Letter.

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they take? I ask, then, in what ways Iul. Val. can help us to understand the formation of the tradition that culminates (chronologically) in the Latin Letters. The fact that Leo's version differs again suggests that the Greek version which lies at the root of all three was an open text and may have been in continuous re-formation from the third century BCE onwards. Walther Boer ([1973] ii) declines to consider the relations between *Epistula* and the *AR* as his full attention is on the establishment of the text of the *Epistula.* Thus, though the question of their differences has been widely considered, that of possible interactions between them has been largely set aside.

2 Early elements in the Letter(s)

I begin by considering elements of the narrative in the Letters which look as if they could belong to an early stage of the tradition. (For the purpose of this discussion the two Letters may be treated as a single text, since the differences between them are almost entirely linguistic).

At *Ep*. 1,26–27 (*AR* 2,10) Alexander comes upon statues of Heracles and Dionysus, marking the limits of their explorations. Alexander is delighted at this evidence that he has gone further than his famous predecessors; he also bores holes in the statues to verify that they are of solid gold. Alexander's devotion to these two gods, and his adoption of them as models for his own exploration, is embedded early in the tradition and is a keynote of the *AR* as well as of the historical accounts.[7] In alpha, Iul. Val. (3,17,420–423) and Arm. (p. 126), however, it is a stele of Sesonchosis that the party encounters. The identification of Alexander with this early Egyptian Pharaoh belongs to a propaganda movement of the first half of the third century BCE, probably to be associated with the adoption by Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II of Alexander as founder of their kingdom.[8] The divergence of the two episodes seems to correspond to that between a more historical version of Alexander's expedition and a more propagandistic one.

At *Ep*. 1,9 the story of Alexander being offered a helmet of water in a desert place where all the army is suffering from thirst is added to the episode of alpha/Iul. Val. (3,17,403–404)/Arm. (p. 125) where the army encounters a lake of bitter water and suffers from thirst. It is possible that the alpha tradition simply omitted this detail, but it is equally possible that the episode, which is attested in the historical tradition (though at different moments in the expedition)[9] was inserted here, where it fits well, by an au-

7 Heckel (2015), O'Sullivan (2015) 46–49; Stoneman (2019) ch. 4; Stoneman (2021).

8 Ladynin (2018) associates the Pharaoh with a Ptolemaic ambition of world-dominion; Trnka-Amrhein (2018) shows how Alexander's adventures in turn influenced the presentation of this Pharaoh in Diodorus and in the Sesonchosis novel.

9 Arr. *An.* 6,23,1, in Gedrosia, 'or earlier among the Paropamisadae, as some other accounts have it'; Curt. 7,5,1–12 (Sogdiana); Frontinus *Strat.* 1,7,7 on the way to Siwa. Plut. *vitae Alex.* 42,7 has a variant, set during the pursuit of Darius in 330 BCE, in which men bring water in skins for their sons, but

thor more *au fait* with the historical sources than with the legends. In any case the detail looks early. Possibly it derives from Cleitarchus.[10] Gunderson ([1980] 133–135) suggests that it might be the work of one of the bematists.[11]

The episode when Alexander's friend Philon or Pheidon[12] goes to explore the island which then sinks (Iul. Val.3,17, 333–364) is not in the Letter. However, it is in alpha, where Pheidon undertakes to make the crossing, arguing that 'if there is any danger, I will run it for you … If I, Pheidon, should die, you will find other friends; but if you, Alexander, die, all the world will be saddened'. The argument is precisely the same as that used by the men who bring water to Alexander in the desert according to Plutarch (*vitae Alex.* 42,7), but the occasion is different. The author of alpha seems to be drawing on a report of neat sayings relating to Alexander's *megalopsychia*, while the Letter, in omitting the episode, appears closer to a more sober historical source. There is no known person called Pheidon among Alexander's companions, and the only ones named Philo(n) (Berve [1926] 797–799 and Abschnitt II, 80) do not seem pertinent in this context.[13] This fact again suggests that the character is fictional, and that his absence reflects a closer adherence to history than his presence.

Rather significant is the role of Porus in the different narratives. Iul. Val. does not mention him at all in the Letter-narrative, and neither is he in Arm., for he has been killed in a duel earlier in the story (*AR* 3,4,4, alpha, beta etc). However, in the Letter (1,24–26; 2,10), following his defeat, he 'became a friend instead of an enemy of the Macedonians, and accompanied us to the memorials of Heracles and Dionysus'. Since in reality Porus was not killed, but had his life spared by Alexander and was restored to his kingdom, the version of the Letter might be regarded as being closer to history. A story of this kind was certainly current long before the date of the earlier Letter, since Philostratus in his *Life of Apollonius* (2,20–21) describes how Porus went adventuring with Alexander after their encounter in battle.

However, the position is complicated by the fact that the A MS (alone among the alpha-texts) also refers to Porus going adventuring with Alexander on the road to Prasiace (*AR* 3,17,24). This is inconsistent with the report of Porus' death earlier in the same book (at *AR* 3,4,4). However, his involvement is not developed at any length, as the narrative moves directly to the episode of the Oracular Trees, and all further references to Porus treat him as dead, whereas in the Letter (1,28–31) Porus shares in a number of further adventures before the messengers arrive to tell the king about the Trees (38). Minor characters in Homer may die and come back to life again, but the resurrection

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offer a helmet-ful to Alexander. Their words, 'if you live, we can get other sons, even if we lose these', interestingly echo another passage of the alpha tradition; see next paragraph.

10 Hamilton *ad* Plut. *Alex.* 42,7.

11 He notes the use of the word *metator* at 9,11. He interprets the Letter as a defence of Alexander (126).

12 The variation is presumably due to delta and lambda being confused in transmission.

13 I have wondered if the name might actually refer to Peithon (Berve [1926] 623), who was with Alexander at the Malli town and then became satrap of the region. He is also associated with Alexander's encounter with a monstrous snake at Arr. *Ind.* 15,10.

of a major character like Porus can only be regarded as a mistake. I can only suppose that the scribe added the detail to his text in a moment of aberration: it is not an integral part of the narrative in A, as it is in the Letter. I do not think this one reference can be taken as undermining the distinction I have suggested between a more 'historical' tradition in the Letter and a more 'fabulous' one in alpha.

Another small detail that might suggest an early tradition for the Letter is the remark on p. 57 that the Ganges flows southwards. This is consistent with early views about the course of the Ganges, perhaps particularly so if it is accepted that Scylax of Caryanda sailed down the Ganges and not the Indus,[14] while in Ptolemy (2nd c. CE) and later authors, including the *Tabula Peutingeriana,* it is clear that it flows in an easterly direction. Early geographical ideas are also apparent in Alexander's report that, in India, he was able to see the mountains of Ethiopia (*Ep.* 36): Gunderson ([1980] 123; 126) goes so far as to propose that the author was drawing specifically on Aeschylus' *Prometheus Vinctus* and on Ctesias. However, the alpha tradition too regards Prasiace and Persis as much closer to each other than a look at a map would suggest. Commenting on alpha (*AR* 3,17,4.2 / Iul. Val. 3,17,605–610), J-P. Callu notes the implication that India Major and India Minor are very close together.[15] The rivers that Alexander alludes to in the Letter, Occluadas and Buemar, are instanced nowhere else, though it is possible that the name Oceanus is concealed in the former.[16] No conclusions can be drawn from them about the date of composition.

What of the Dog-heads, who feature prominently in the Letter but do not occur in the alpha tradition? In the Letter they appear as opponents of Alexander (1,32–33), and then (41–42) the priest of the Oracular Trees is described as dog-headed. In this case the version of the Letter could not be described as staying closer to sober history; however, in its evident aim to provide comprehensive geographical information about the east, it can be seen as drawing on a tradition that goes back a long way in Greek literature. Herodotus and Agatharchides in their references to dog-heads were describing north African baboons, but Ctesias (45,37–41) has a long description of their way of life, though the name he gives them, Kalystrioi, cannot be identified with any known Sanskrit term. Megasthenes too, in the generation after Alexander, was familiar with Sanskrit lore about dog-headed peoples on the far fringes of India. (The Chinese, too, conceived of dog-headed people in Central Asia).[17]

The situation is similar in regard to the Seres. These are mentioned by the author of the Letter both at the beginning (1,7) and at the end (1,58). The author introduces them at the point where the expedition sets off from the palace of Porus to the interior of India: 'I promised (the guides) prizes if they would lead me and my army intact into Bactria and to the far-removed Seres.' Their reappearance at the end thus provides a neat example of ring-composition and a sense of 'mission accomplished' in the project

14 Panchenko (1998) and (2003); Stoneman (2019) 26–28.

15 Callu (2010) 252 n. 351.

16 Gunderson (1980) 73 n. 50.

17 Stoneman (2019) 281–285, with previous literature, above all White (1991).

that Alexander had described to Aristotle. It indicates, not least, that the Letter is in important ways a unitary composition rather than an outgrowth of alpha. The Seres, who are the 'silk people', i. e. the Chinese, are described as 'the most just among all nations', which is what Ctesias says about the Dog-heads.[18] But the reference to the Seres in Ctesias is suspect, and is likely to be an interpolation in the text of Photius' summary.[19] If that is so, the earliest author to mention the Seres is Strabo (late first c. BCE). He refers to them twice at 15,1,20, where he seems to be quoting Nearchus on the subject of *serike*, i. e. silk, and at 15,1,34, where the words 'some say' suggest that the information is not, like the previous sentences, drawn from Onesicritus.[20] Nearchus is then the only possible Alexander-related source for reference to the Seres, though it must be noted that he only speaks of *serike*, and not of the people as such. At 11,11,2 Strabo mentions them again, in conjunction with the Phryni, and cites Apollodorus of Artemita for the information. In the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, by contrast, the land of China is known as Thina, and the Seres are not referred to. Aristotle writes about silkworms but does not refer to the Seres.[21] The term 'Seres' becomes current quite suddenly in Augustan poetry, in the context of ideas about Roman universal dominion.[22] This may be due to the prominence in Rome of Agrippa's map, which marked their position in the east, a mere 480 miles from the 'Caucasus':[23] the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, which is widely thought to have some relation to Agrippa's map, shows the name of the Seres in the far east though it shows no geographical feature that could be regarded as representing China. Apart from the reference to 'Serica' which may come from Nearchus, then, the earliest references to the people, the Seres, belong to the Augustan period, in Strabo, Agrippa and the poets. It seems unlikely that they could have been mentioned so prominently in a third-century BCE text of the kind I have been imagining as the basis of the Letter.[24] However, it would be reasonable to imagine an author working on a broadly historical text and adding to it the geographical information about the Seres that had recently become prominent. Perhaps – to speculate freely – this could have taken place about the same time that Philostratus was drawing on some text that sent Alexander adventuring with Porus. The idea has sometimes been mooted that there was a 'Caracallan recension' of the *Alexander Romance*, due to Caracalla's strong interest in the conqueror; perhaps an *Urform* of the Letter could also have been taking shape about this time?

18 Cf. Stoneman (2016a).

19 See Lenfant's note on Ctes. 75.

20 Cf. 15,1,37 'they say'.

21 Paus. 6,26,6, with Frazer's (1913) note.

22 Hor. *Carm.* 3,29,27 and 1,12,56; Verg. *Georg.* 2,121, Ov. *Am.* 1,14,6, etc.

23 Plin. 3,17; 6,37; Nisbet/Hubbard (1970) on Horace *Carm.* 1,12,56.

24 But note that Alexander is described as reaching China in the Syriac *Romance*, which is based on a variant of the alpha tradition customarily known as delta*. Gunderson (1980) 74 observes that this identification of the Seres and the Chinese belongs to a later period of antiquity than the time of the Letter (which he regards as very shortly after Alexander).

Turning away from speculation, let me briefly refer to another work, the *Itinerarium Alexandri*. This has sometimes been thought to be another work of Iulius Valerius, but Rafaella Tabacco has shown that this is unlikely, since the *Itinerarium* contains details that are in A, but not in Iul. Val. There is one verbal parallel between the *Itinerarium* and the Letter, but the *Itinerarium* includes none of the lively stories about India that are in Iul. Val. and the Letter.[25]

3 Other differences between alpha and the Letters

There are also certain differences between the alpha versions and the Letters from which it is difficult to draw any clear conclusions. One case in point is the list of names of Alexander's companions who are with him in the grove of the Trees. A (*AR* 3,17,31) states that there were nine and gives their names as Parmenio, Craterus, Iollas, Machetes, Thrasyleon, Machaon, Theodectes, Diphilos and Neocles, which makes nine. Kroll restored a tenth name, Philip, from the Syriac. Iul. Val. (3,17,555–558) has a recognisably similar list but without specifying the number involved (there are nine): Parmenio, Craterus, Isyllus, Machetes, Thrasyleon, Machaon, Theodectus, Diphilus and Neocles. The Armenian (p. 129) lists nine and states that they are ten: 'Parmenion, Krateron, Oullon, Machitas, Thrasileonta, Sachaona and his companion, Theodechton, Niokle, ten men in all'. The Letter (first version) names three men on p. 47 – Perdicas, Ditoricas (or Cleitus) and Philotas – stating that they are three in all.[26] On p. 52 the number of companions who are with Alexander to hear the Moon Tree speak has increased to fourteen (though the author does not state a number), and their names are Sermition, Protesilaus, Mistomus, Timotheus, Lacon, Traseleon, Deditus, Macon, Erocles, Silbrus, Sunsiclus, Perdicas, Philotas and 'the Praetorian Prefect Coradas'. Only four of these even resemble any of the names in the alpha lists, and several of them do not look like Greek or Latin at all. The second version of the Letter only specifies the initial three, calling them Perdiccas, Clitus and Philotas, and omits the second list.

Some of the names in each list are those of known companions of Alexander (including Parmenio and Philotas, who were dead by this stage of the campaign), but most of them seem purely fictional, in both traditions. It is impossible to draw any conclusions from them about the authenticity, or the priority, of either the alpha tradition or the Letters.

A similar observation holds for the list of strange beasts that harass the army during the Night of Terrors. Rather than list them all, I confine myself to observing that Iul. Val. reverses the order of lynxes and pards of A, and, more significantly, adds the memorable creature called the Odontotyrannus (3,17,455); the absence of this creature in A is

25 Tabacco (2000) xiii and 239.

26 Some MSS have Ditoricas, others Cleitus. See the apparatus in Boer (1973) 47.

an omission, not a lacuna in the MS. The Armenian (p. 126) presents this as a 'unicorn' in the English translation, while the Syriac word is Mashqelat, which Budge (*ad loc.*) suggests might be a form of the Sanskrit word Makara, a kind of sea-monster. Iul. Val. therefore clearly had access to a better text of the Letter than that transmitted in A. The list in the Letter(s) is similar though shorter, and it does include the Dentityrannus (1) or Dendetyrano (2) (the Old English version gives this as 'dentes tyrano'); Leo also has a similar list and (17,4) calls the beast odontotirannos. The list in the Letter(s) could be interpreted as an abridged version of the original alpha-text; certainly both traditions included the Odontotyrannus. No case can be made for the priority of either.

Finally, the trees that surround the grove of the Sun and Moon are called myrobalanos in alpha and Iul. Val., which is an authentic tree-name.[27] Iul. Val. states that the Sun and Moon trees 'resemble cypresses', but then identifies them too with myrobalani. The Letter (44), has *brebionas*, which seems to be a *vox nihili,* and the second version of the Letter (17) has 'resembling cypress'. In this case the alpha tradition seems closer to botanical reality and thus, perhaps, to historical reality.[28]

4 Literary Qualities of the Letter

So far I have argued that the alpha tradition that includes Iul. Val., and the two versions of the Letter, respectively represent developments of two different base texts (open texts) of, maybe, the third century BCE. The Letter represents a version of the Indian adventures which, while largely fictional, is closer to historical events than that of alpha. The Alexander of the Letter is more ordinary and vulnerable than the cunning hero of alpha.[29] In addition, the Letter shows many signs of being an independent and carefully constructed composition. In saying this I am at odds with both Merkelbach and Gunderson, who both regard the Letter as 'confused'. Gunderson writes 'complete recovery of the Greek original from these materials is obviously hopeless [...] But both Merkelbach and Ausfeld assume that the Letter in its original Greek form more closely adhered to the course of events outlined in our extant Alexander historians.'[30]

In rating the Letter higher than alpha as a composition I instance first of all the fact that in alpha Alexander's army sets out for Prasiace on four separate occasions *AR* 3,17,1; 8; 23; 42; Iul. Val. 3,17,316; 375; 481; 605). The conquest of Darius may or may not have been mentioned in alpha, since it is included in Arm. (p. 125), but not in Iul. Val. The Letter, by contrast, gives a much more carefully structured narrative of

27 It is *amala* or *amblaki* in Hindi. Cf. Thphr. *HP.* 4,2,6.

28 Cf. Stoneman (2016b).

29 Gunderson (1980) 128: 'His reactions are those of an ordinary human being. There is no suggestion <that> Alexander took the heroic view that his death must be accompanied by the distinction with which he lived'.

30 Gunderson (1980) 74. On 58 Gunderson describes the passage about the journey through snow and darkness at 33–36 as 'exceedingly confused'.

the march, with ring-composition announcing the intention of reaching the land of the Seres and then concluding the Letter with the expedition finally doing so. Furthermore, the opening and closing sections of greeting and farewell to Aristotle are fully worked out and in no way skimped as they are in A. The setting of the narrative in a letter is taken seriously. This applies even to the Old English translation of the Letter, which translates the opening address and closing valediction *verbatim*, though, curiously, it concludes the letter after the episode of the Trees, thus omitting the adventures of the last ten chapters entirely.[31] These episodes are also absent in alpha/Iul. Val., though they do occur in the gamma-recension, which narrates the Indian episode in the third person.

In the Letter the Porus episode is considerably extended vis-à-vis alpha, and includes an exchange of letters between the two kings[32] as well as a visit of Alexander to Porus in disguise in which he conveys to Porus that his opponent is 'a decrepit old man' (24–26). Disguises are a favourite trick of the Alexander of the *Romance*, but this non-historical episode is well integrated into the narrative of the Letter and fits its colourful atmosphere.[33]

The Letter does seem to have borrowed from the *AR* at one point, namely the description of the City of the Sun (3,28) on p. 4–6 of the Letter. The golden vine of the Persian kings, and other details of the Palace of Cyrus/Xerxes, are here transferred to Porus' capital. This section of the Letter does seem to be quite misplaced: it comes at the very beginning of the narrative, after the defeat of Darius, and anticipates Alexander's arrival in Fasiace and defeat of Porus, which are then narrated at much greater length on pp. 24–26. It cannot be explained away by saying that it is a kind of advance notice of what is to be narrated later, since it contains considerable detail about the palace that is quite different from what is given later.[34] This account is in all the recensions (and in A the river they cross is given the real name of Tanais, while in later recensions it is corrupted to Tenos), and was also known to Philostratus (*Ap.* 1,25,2); so it is certainly an early element and will have entered the Letter at an early stage of its development.

Gunderson ([1980] 34), assuming that the *AR* is a work of second or third century CE, proposes that the author of the *AR* made use of the existing Greek letter and epitomised it. I do not share his confidence that the composition of the *AR* took place at

31 The OE version is of the eleventh century (Fulk [2020] x sets it in the year 1010, while Anderson [1957] 379 puts it in the middle of the eleventh century; on the MSS of the OE see Rypins [1924] xxxiv–xxxv), and thus contemporary with the second Latin version. Did the OE author simply choose to omit these chapters? Or did he have a faulty exemplar? It seems less likely that he was working from a completely different version of an 'open text', since the translation sticks very close to the Latin original.

32 Only in two MS families: Gunderson (1980) 55.

33 Gunderson notes that Merkelbach was of the opinion that the *Romance* drew on the Letter for the disguise motif.

34 The golden columns that Alexander bores into to check their composition do however recur, both p. 4 and later p. 27.

this date, and believe that it had attained more or less its present form some six centuries earlier.[35] This would not preclude the author of the *AR* from making use of the original version of the Letter, but I hope I have said enough to show that the two traditions are separate. Similarly, it seems impossible that Iul. Val. made use of any version of the Letter. Conversely, I suggest, there is no possibility that the author of the Latin Letter made use of Iul. Val. The latinity of the two texts is quite dissimilar. I briefly characterised the language of Iul. Val. in 1999 as archaic and artificial, citing the studies of C. Fassbender (1909) and Domenico Romano (1974) for the incidence of Low Latin features such as double compounds (*abrelegare, proeliatio*) and a striving for elaboration, *amplificatio*, rather than the *verbatim* simplicity recommended by Jerome in his discussion of translation methods in *Epist.* 106.[36] In *Epist.* 57 Jerome's approach is more relaxed, preferring a Ciceronian insistence on conveying sense more than verbal correspondence, 'not a verbose clumsiness but holy simplicity'. But neither of Jerome's preferred approaches well characterises Iul. Val.'s mannered and strained style. The Latin of the Letter (in its first version) is nothing like Iul. Val.'s, and adheres more closely to Jerome's ideal of plainness. Iul. Val. was not a text to attract imitators, and this may be one reason why it faded from view.[37] The plain Latin of the Letter matches the plain Latin of Leo, and it was these two authors who established the base texts that spread like wildfire through the literature of the Middle Ages. Iulius Valerius, like James Joyce, wrote in a style that it was impossible to imitate or to develop further; one could only start again.

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35 Stoneman (2009). For the opposite view, Jouanno (2002).

36 Stoneman (1999) 176.

37 It did however influence the only slighter later *Itinerarium*, and was also accorded the honour of an *Epitome*, not much later. This latter exists in more than 60 MSS from the ninth century onwards, and was often employed as a prefatory text to the Letter: Cary (1956) 24–26, Stoneman (2008), 236–237, with further references.

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