

Nizami's Philosophy of History

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Abstract

In the works of great poets and writers, the idea of the historical past and the assessment of the past play an important role. A poet and a writer must have a certain philosophy of history in order to revive the past in an artistic way. The works of poets such as Nizami and Dante are rich in philosophical ideas, political views and philosophy of history.

The heroes of Nizami's poem-novels *Khosrov and Shirin* and *Seven Beauties* are historical figures of Iran and the world around it. The literary and political theme of these works is love and an idea of a just ruler. Nizami's last and largest work, *Iskandar-Nama* (The Book of Alexander), explores the ideas of world history, world geography and a just ruler. Nizami develops a historical-geographical concept in accordance with this goal. Iskandar, the ruler of the world in Nizami's interpretation, travels the known world, visiting the places that the historical Alexander the Great did not see. Iskandar engages in philosophical discussions with the seven Greek philosophers he has gathered around him; however, from a chronological point of view, only one of these philosophers is a contemporary and acquaintance of Iskandar. In most cases, Nizami deliberately allows historical anachronisms, implementing his creative ideas in this way.

Keywords

Nizami – Dante – history – geography – philosophy – philosophy of history – anachronism

1 Introduction

The great poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209?) was born, lived and died in the city of Ganja (now in the Republic of Azerbaijan).

Nizami's verse-novels, known as the *Khamsa* (Arabic for “Quintet”) demonstrate his extensive knowledge of world geography, world history and cultures. Nizami, whose works were dedicated to past historical events and human prob-

lems, had a unique philosophy of history. His views on what constitutes a good person, a just ruler, beauty, and love are not outdated, and still read with interest and make one think today. The issue of geographical space and historical time occupy a substantial place in Nizami's work.

Nizami is the author of five verse novels written in Persian. Chronologically, in order of writing, they are: *Makhzan al-Asrar* (Treasury of Secrets), *Khosrov and Shirin*, *Leyli and Majnun*, *Haft Peykar* (Seven Beauties) and *Iskandar-Nama* (The Book of Alexander) which consists of two parts: *Sharafname* (The Book of Honour) and *Iqbalnama* (The Book of Fate) and lyrical poems.

Nizami explores the ideas of world history, world geography and a just ruler, developing a historical-geographical concept in accordance with this goal. Only in his last and most substantial piece of work, *Iskandar-Nama*, was Nizami able to create the image of the hero he was thinking of and looking for. Iskandar, the ruler of the world in Nizami's interpretation, travels the known world (again in Nizami's knowledge and interpretation), visiting the places that the historical Alexander the Great did not see. Nizami's Iskandar also travels to the Caucasus, and his adventures in Azerbaijan as well as his war with the Russians occupy a special place in the *Iskandar-Nama* which is highlighted in this paper.

Iskandar engages in philosophical discussions with the seven Greek philosophers he has gathered around him; however, from a chronological point of view, only one of these philosophers is a contemporary and acquaintance of Alexander. In most cases, Nizami deliberately allows historical anachronisms, implementing his creative ideas in this way.

According to Nizami, the poet is not a historian, and therefore it is impossible for him to refrain from embellishing a historical event. Firdovsi used the *Romance of Alexander* (Pseudo-Callisthenes) as a chief historical source for his *Shahnama*, while Nizami used it in a different way for the *Iskandar-Nama*. Nizami avoids miracles and uses this source more creatively including both history and geography, particularly taking into consideration Azerbaijan and Russians in totally anachronic way.

What ideas and what historical and literary sources did Nizami rely on when creating his Iskandar? How did Nizami use historical sources? How does the history of Iskandar, Nizami's favourite hero, differ from that of Alexander the Great? Why did Nizami allow historical anachronisms? This paper attempts to cover these and similar questions. (Nizami 1981,1983)¹

¹ This article refers to Nizami's works through the enumeration of rhyming couplets or distiches, based on the Baku edition (Nizami Ganjavi. *Six Books*. Elm Publishing House, 1981, 1983).

2 Nizami and the Predecessors Who Inspired Him

Nizami loved and was most influenced by Iranian poet Firdovsi (935–1020), the author of the *Shahnama* (Book of Kings). The storylines of the three poems included in the *Khamsa*—*Khosrov and Shirin*, *Seven Beauties* and *Iskandar-Nama*—featured in Firdovsi's *Shahnama* before the *Khamsa* was written. However, according to Nizami, even though the great 'previous master of words' said a lot in the *Shahnama*, he didn't say everything:

The previous master of words, the judge from Tus
 He adorned word's face like a bride
 In his letter, he strings many pearls of words
 But much worthwhile content remains to be said. (Nizami 1983: 493–494)

Evidently, Nizami considered the *Seven Beauties* in the *Shahnama* to be a half-pierced jewel, and he declared that with his own *Seven Beauties* he had pierced this jewel to the end. He thought the story of Iskandar in the *Shahnama* to be an unpierced pearl, judging it as very poorly described, so Nizami wrote his monumental *Iskandar-Nama* and declared, 'I pierced the unpierced pearl.' So, what are the main differences between Nizami's *Iskandar-Nama* and the story of Iskandar in the *Shahnama*? There are many! These differences are driven by Nizami's philosophical, ethical and aesthetic views, his thoughts on historical time and geographical space.

Firdovsi praised ancient Iran. The *Shahnama* is a poetic history of the Iranian dynasties from the legendary period until the victory of the Arab Islamic armies over Iran. The Iran-Turan conflicts and wars play an important role in the *Shahnama*. Iran also occupies a significant place in Nizami's work: 'The whole world is the body, and Iran is the heart' (Nizami 1983: 356). However, Nizami does not dwell on the legendary and heroic periods of Iran, he is content with just two beautiful poems about two famous rulers of the historical period—Khosrov Anushirvan and Bahram-Gur. In the *Shahnama*, Iskandar is the king of Iran, the elder brother of Dara (Darius III). While Nizami demonstrates his commitment to historical accuracy here: Iskandar (Alexander) is a Macedonian. Nizami mentions the ruler of Macedonia, Feylagusus (Philip II):

His name was Feylagus, and he was a famous king
 Both the Greeks and the Russians obeyed his orders
 His home was in Greece
 His real place was Magdunia (Nizami 1983: 820–822)

Talking about Iskandar, Nizami acknowledges various legends and that most of them are fabricated, he compares the legends and comes to the conclusion that Iskandar is descended from Feylagus (Nizami 1983: 832–851):

There is only one truth in the narrations from each land
That this king was descended of Feylagus. (Nizami 1983: 851)

Firdovsi's *Shahnama* is the largest poem ever written by a single person; the text of the *Shahnama* is about 52,000 distichs (couplets). The section dedicated to Alexander is relatively small—1,261 distichs. Nizami's *Iskandar-Nama* is the largest poem of the *Khamsa* with about 10,500 distichs. Nizami says that he corrected Firdovsi's mistakes:

Where I came across a mistake
I adorned it with the jewel of truth (Nizami 1983: 6781)
He, an old embellisher out there
He was mistaken in his words of truth
I re-wrote those falsehoods over again (Nizami 1983: 6783–4)

In the *Treasury of Secrets*, the first work in the *Khamsa*, Nizami followed Abul-majd Sanai (1048–?1141), a poet from Ghazna, and was inspired by Sanai's Sufi-like work *Hadiqat-ul-Haqaiq* (The Garden of Truth), and at the same time Nizami rated his own work higher:

He raised his flag in Ghazna
This hit the figure on the Rum coin
Although the words on that coin are equal to gold
My gold coin is better than that. (Nizami 1981: 403–404)

After *The Treasury of Mysteries*, Nizami changed his poetic idea and began to write great love poems instead of works with a collection of didactic stories. Even though in *Khosrov and Shirin* and *Leyli and Majnun* Nizami expressed scientific and philosophical thoughts, and appropriate metaphors, as well as moral admonitions, both works went down in history as passionate love stories. Nizami became famous for his 'lyrical character brought to the epic genre' (Rasulzada 1991: 68). The protagonists of these two poems think, move, walk or travel with the desire for love.

3 The *Khamsa* and World Geography

In Nizami's verse-novel known as *Seven Beauties* or *Bahramnama*, Prince Bahram was sent by his father to Arabia, Yemen, where he grows up, is educated and shows bravery. Upon hearing the news of his father's death, he returns to Iran and retrieves the royal crown from between two lions. Bahram spends his days with seven beauties and enjoys life. These girls are the daughters of the seven rulers of the seven nations. Nizami seems to divide the world into seven major regions, parts, or climatic zones: the Maghreb (the West), Rum (Greece, Byzantium), Iran, India, and China, which stretch from far west to far east, and the relatively northern Kharezm (Central Asia) and even more northern Saqlab (Slavic) country.

The Maghreb refers to the countries inhabited by Arabs and Berbers to the west of Egypt in North Africa, as well as Andalusia, the Iberian Peninsula conquered and ruled by a Muslim state. The Europeans called the Andalusian Muslims Moors (moors, maures, moro). The Greeks considered the Mediterranean to be the centre of the world, naming the lands north of it Europe, the lands south of it Africa, and the great lands east of it Asia. Nizami, who had taken close interest in Greek history and philosophy, does not use European, African or Asian terms. Nizami imagines the place we call Africa, consisting mainly of three major parts: Egypt, the Maghreb and Black peoples. Nizami mentions berbers in the Maghreb and uses the words 'Habash' ('Abyssinian'), 'Zanji', 'Zangi' for the people of Black Africa, and also talks about the kingdom of Zangibar (Zanzibar).

Muslims used the word Rum for the Eastern Roman Empire—Byzantium, which they considered to be the main part of the non-Muslim lands we call Europe. Greek was spoken in Rum, including in Anatolia. Even after the conquest of Anatolia by the Turks, the word Rum did not disappear, for example, as in the name of the great Sufi poet Jalaleddin Rumi. The lands 'on the other side' of Rum—to the west—were not of particular interest to Nizami; he used the word 'Afranja' for those lands. The word is associated with the ancient German tribe the Franks; among the Muslims, the common name for the inhabitants of the Western Roman Empire was 'Firang', the words 'Firangistan', 'Afranja' or 'Afrang' were also used for Western Europe. The term 'France' is also derived directly from the word 'Frank'. The travel trajectory of Nizami's protagonist Iskandar, who voyaged all over the world, (Nizami 1983: 2103) also included Afranja.

Of course, Nizami highly valued Iran, and in his *Seven Beauties*, dedicated to the ruler of Maragha, Aladdin Korpe Arslan, he praises this ruler and presents Iran as the heart of the world:

The whole world is the body, and Iran is the heart
 The one who states this will not ashamed of this analogy
 Because Iran is the heart of the Earth
 It is well known that the heart is better than the body. (Nizami 1983: 356–357)

And at essence of this definition, he says to Korpé Arslan, 'Your province is the core of that country' and 'You are the heart' (Nizami 1983: 359). However, unlike Firdovsi, Nizami does not specially refer to the legendary and heroic periods of Iran, and does not worship the kings of Iran, including his heroes Bahramgur and Khosrov Anushirvan, but rebukes them, and through his female heroines implores them to study science and learn courtesy and calls for justice. Nizami chooses as his main protagonist Iskandar—Alexander the Great, who is of Greek origin, or rather, he creates him and raises him to the rank of a prophet.

In ancient Greek times, one of the world's great powers was Iran. In terms of territory and population, Greece was small, and Iran was large. The *Iskandar-Nama* says that the Greeks paid taxes to Iran, and this was still happening when Iskandar ascended the throne. Believing in his own power, Iskandar decided to put an end to this: 'Why should I pay taxes to Dara?' (Nizami 1983: 1609). Thus, Iskandar saw himself as a conqueror and set out to conquer Iran and the world in general:

He refrained from serving the Iranians
 He decided to conquer Iran (Nizami 1983: 1573)
 He decided to own the world. (Nizami 1983: 1667)

Iskandar began his prophetic march in Rum, stayed in Egypt for a few days, and went to Jerusalem, where 'after he settled his affairs' (Nizami 1983: 2103), he continued on the Maghreb-Afranja-Andalusia road:

He rapidly directed the reins of his horse to the West.
 From there he led an army to Afranja.
 From Afranja he went to Andalusia. (Nizami 1983: 2103–2104)

Iskandar 'sailed a ship on the sea' (211), went 'in the direction where the sun was hidden' (Nizami 1983: 2113), and 'saw many uninhabited islands' (Nizami 1983: 2114). Then he went ashore and walked a long way through the great desert: 'They rode in that desert for a month' until

Iskandar reached a large sea
 He admired this deep sea
 The Greeks called it Oceanus. (Nizami 1983: dd. 2122–2123)

Therefore, Nizami takes Iskandar to the Atlantic Ocean too.

Then Alexander 'hurried from the sea to the desert' (Nizami 1983: 2189) and

He reached the Nile River
 He dreamed of seeing the source of the Nile. (Nizami 1983: 2191–2192)

It should be noted that the ancient Greeks did not know the source of the Nile. Many philosophers, scholars, rulers, and travellers in the ancient and medieval world wondered where the Nile began. Even in the modern era, discussions about 'Where do the Nile's tributaries begin?' have not stopped. It looks like Nizami heard about the discussion around the source of the Nile and solved it with the intervention of his favourite hero ...

The springs were mixed with rain
 A river was formed from both of them. (Nizami 1983: d. 2235)

Nizami's Iskandar continues his world tour. Reaching the source of the Nile, Iskandar seems to have reached the utmost south of the known world. Nizami's interesting observations on nature and living conditions in Africa show that he studied these issues carefully. He talks about the rich diamond deposits of these places.

Alexander felt like going to India again, 'raised the flag to the East' (Nizami 1983: 2530), passed through Kandahar, and

Wandering through the countries of the East
 He came again to China. (Nizami 1983: 4572–4573)

Iskandar fulfills his dream of reaching the ends of the known world in every direction. In the Far East, that is in China, too, he wants to reach the sea: 'I want to see the good and the bad of the sea' (Nizami 1983: 2584). Iskandar reaches the sea, in this case the Pacific Ocean, as we know it. This sea, which the Greeks were not familiar with, was not called the 'Ocean' of course; Nizami simply called it the 'Sea of China'. 'The experienced shah boarded the ship' (Nizami 1983: 2625), 'He put the ship in the Sea of China' (Nizami 1983: 2630). After trav-

elling a long way, they came across a strong current in the middle of the sea. 'The direction of the current has been determined' (Nizami 1983: 2635) and it was decided that,

There is no way to the other side
No one knows the other side of the sea. (Nizami 1983: 2647)

They experienced the same situation in the Atlantic Ocean and also turned back:

The sea was in a terrible state
It was impossible to go beyond that. (Nizami 1983: 2124)

4 Nizami's Hero Kings

Nizami's heroes act mainly in territories where Muslims live, trade or fight, in other words more familiar areas. This, as we know it, is Asia. Only one of the 'seven beauties' is non-Asian, from the Muslim Maghreb. Nizami's Iskandar, of course, is the exception; he is a world ruler, changing world history, and a world traveller.

The three successive hero kings that Nizami lovingly created—Khosrov, Bahram and Iskandar—are very different from each other. Accustomed to pleasure and love affairs, Khosrov is far from a perfect ruler, he commits sin after sin: he hurts the villagers; even though he loves Shirin he becomes impatient and resentful and marries the emperor's daughter Maryam; he kills Farhad who loves Shirin; he leaves Shirin again and marries Sheker of Isfahan. Shirin encourages him to study science and perfect himself. Finally, Khosrov, disrespects the Prophet's letter, and is punished:

God took his throne from under him
His son drew his sword to kill him. (Nizami 1981: 5805)

According to E.E. Bertels, Bahram-gur, protagonist of the *Seven Beauties*, 'resembles Khosrov in the first part of the poem' and then 'this ruler is completely renewed from the inside, he comes nearer to the ideal hero.' (Bertels 1981: 23) I should also mention that from the very beginning, from his earliest youth, Bahram 'learned the essence of all sciences' (Nizami 1983: 812). Only in his last and most substantial piece of work, the *Iskandar-Nama*, was Nizami able to create the image of the hero he was thinking of and looking for. In addition to

being a great commander and a just ruler, Iskandar is a highly educated and wise man, and Nizami even elevates him to the rank of a prophet. Khosrov and Bahram are the rulers of Iran, while Iskandar is the ruler of the world. Of course, Nizami's Iskandar is very different from the historical Alexander the Great. Nizami chose Alexander of Macedon, founder of a world empire and subject of legends, to create what he had in mind, namely, the personification of a strong and just ruler, an intelligent and wise man enriched with scientific and philosophical knowledge.

Nizami, who 'found a drop of the water of life' (Nizami 1983: 505), believes in his own strength, intelligence and poetic talent, saying that Iskandar will be immortalized because of the *Iskandar-Nama*.

For a long time with this famous saga
I kept alive his name in the world. (Nizami 1983: 555)

He looked for the spring of life
And now he found what he was looking for. (Nizami 1983: 812)

Nizami's Iskandar travels much more and much further than the historical Alexander the Great, he travels the world:

Iskandar was a king who wandered the world
Supplies were always ready for the trip. (Nizami 1983: 703)

Of course, Iskandar's journey is directed by Nizami, so Nizami himself escapes from his captivity in Ganja, his name and fame travel the world:

Nizami, untie the knot of treasure.
How long will you be a prisoner in Ganja? (Nizami 1983: 274)

Nizami's Iskandar is not just marching into battle for conquest, he is fighting to save the people and the country from oppressors and disaster; Iskandar's war is a just war. He wants to save Egypt from Zangibar, meet the needs for a just ruler in Iran, and cleanse Abkhazia and Armenia of fire worship. Alexander of Macedonia, who killed and captured people, destroyed and burned cities, is a stranger to Nizami; Nizami's Iskandar is a just ruler who does not shed blood unjustly and helps people.

At the same time, Nizami does not forget that Iskandar is a conqueror. Iskandar's march to India seems to be motivated by passion for conquest:

The Iranian land is completely mine
 Now I want to ride a horse to India (Nizami 1983: 4368).
 To eat kebab from the meat of a drunken elephant. (Nizami 1983: 4395)

Iskandar, as it seems, is not drawn to China by a desire to end oppression or restore justice, but by passion.

He went from India to the land of Tibet
 He passed through Tibet and came to the border of China. (Nizami 1983: 4566)

Nizami presents the Chinese khagan either as a 'Chinese ruler' or a 'Turkish ruler'. Iskandar decides to return from China. 'He said goodbye to that Turkish ruler' (Nizami 1983: 5272), the Chinese khagan who had become his friend. Nizami uses the word Turk in many different senses; on the one hand, he talks about ethnic Turks:

From the Caspian Mountains to the China Sea
 I see everywhere full of Turks. (Nizami 1983: 5525)

On the other hand, Nizami uses the word Turk as a multifaceted metaphor that describes qualities such as beauty, grace, a fair complexion, power, strength and goodness.

China and Chinese are Nizami's favourite and widely used terms of geographical and cultural ideas and metaphors. (İsaxanlı 2013: 51–64)

And finally, Iskandar encountered a city that was truthful, just, and did not need protection; he came to a place where utopian social equality prevailed—'None of us has more property than another' (Nizami 1983: 2936). Iskandar came to the conclusion that, "The world stays in its place because of these good people" (Nizami 1983: 2974).

Iskandar 'reached Kerman from the edge of the world' (Nizami 1983: 3021), then came to Kermanshah, and from there to Babylon, where he fell ill. 'The strong man succumbed to weakness' (Nizami 1983: 3067); 'He closed his eyes and, unawares, went to eternal sleep' (Nizami 1983: 3159).

5 Nizami's Philosophy of History. 1

The topics addressed by Nizami are directly related to history, famous people and events of the past. Nizami repeatedly states that he has read many history

books in various languages (mainly Arabic and Dari-Persian). He mentions that he was familiar with a special book, which included 'Everything about the history of rulers' (Nizami 1983: 188) and that one person (Firdovsi) used to turn those histories into poetry—'He came and put them all into verse precisely' (Nizami 1983: 189).

Nizami says that he was not just satisfied with reading this history book, he investigated a lot, collected and read the works of well-known historians and sought out scattered copies:

Again, I searched for all the secret books—
 [Books] scattered to the ends of the earth
 [Spoken] words in Arabic and Dari
 Manuscripts of Bukhari and Tabari
 And those other scattered copies
 that were kept in the treasures of various houses [palaces]—
 I collected all the pages I could get into one sack. (Nizami 1983: 196–199)

In order to understand the historical narrative better, Nizami emphasizes the importance of researching histories of different peoples, studying many sources written in different languages, choosing the right sources and understanding the essence of the historical event:

The trace [story] of the king walking on those horizons
 I did not see written in a concise copy.
 It was scattered across separate copies.
 I got inspiration from each copy.
 I arranged and decorated them in my poem.
 Not just new histories,
 I looked for Jewish, Christian and Pahlavi history.
 I chose what was valuable from each book.
 I took the essence from among covers.
 I collected treasures in every language,
 I wrote this saga from all of them. (Nizami 1983: 692–697)

He writes that while working on the poem *Khosrov and Shirin*, he used a source that was 'thrown away' out of sight:

The story of Khosrov and Shirin is no secret
 There is really no sweeter saga than that (Nizami 1981: 462)
 There was a discarded manuscript of it in Barda. (Nizami 1981: 463)

According to Nizami, the poet is not a historian, and therefore it is impossible for him to refrain from embellishing a historical event; that is, there is a difference between literary, artistic work and historical research. On the other hand, he says he wouldn't accept very outlandish things:

If histories are written in poetry,
It is impossible not to lose the way (Nizami 1981: 753).
But if I found something unbelievable,
I refused to accept it. (Nizami 1981: 755)

At the same time, the poet wants to excite the reader, to make him cry or laugh. A poet's job is not to write a chronicle, describing factually what happened. A great poet like Nizami knows that a poet can also allow lies and says so:

A lie similar to the truth
Is better than a truth far from veracity. (Nizami 1981: 761)

Nizami does not consider it important for the poet and writer of a saga to follow the historical chronology, or rather, that it is impossible to write without breaking the chronology:

Don't see getting ahead or falling behind as a shortcoming;
The writer [of the saga] cannot avoid this. (Nizami 1983: 689)

6 Nizami's Philosophy of History. 2

The life and deeds of Alexander the Great were and written about by his contemporary and travelling companion Callisthenes, also by later historians of the ancient world and philosophers such as Diodorus Siculus (first century), Quintus Curtius Rufus (first century?), Plutarch (first and second centuries), Arrian (mostly second century), and Marcus Justinus (second-third centuries). A collection of stories and legends about Alexander the Great took shape in Greek around the fourth century, became very popular, took the form of an historical novel, gradually acquired the name of the Alexander Romance and similar, was translated into other languages, and, moreover, was updated and changed in every language it was translated into. The tendency to attribute these stories to Callisthenes did not take hold (Callisthenes died before Alexander), and the name Pseudo-Callisthenes was used as the unknown author. These legends became widespread in the Syriac-Aramaic language from the sixth cen-

tury onwards and were translated from this language into Arabic, Persian and other languages (Ciancaglini 2001: 121–140; Stoneman; Erickson; Netton 2012). It is said that there is a connection between the Quranic legend of Zul-Qarnain (Itani 2012: 18: 83–102) and the Alexander Romance.

In the *Shahnama*, Firdovsi used Pseudo-Callisthenes as his source, and did not hesitate to include the miracles characteristic of this source in his saga. Pseudo-Callisthenes is also chief among sources used by Nizami, but Nizami avoids miracles, and uses this source more creatively; his *Iskandar-Nama* is very different from the legends about Alexander the Great from the historical-geographical-philosophical point of view.

According to Pseudo-Callisthenes, Alexander goes to the palace of the Abyssinian princess Kandaki as an envoy. However, the princess is suspicious of the ambassador's behaviour and recognizes Alexander from his portrait kept in her palace. In the *Shahnama*, Iskandar goes as an ambassador not to Abyssinia, but to the palace of the Andalusian princess Kaydaf; moreover, Iskandar also visits the land of warrior Amazonian women who live without men; this is also taken from the Alexander Romance. Nizami explored this topic more deeply and connected it not with Africa or Andalusia, but with his homeland—in today's vernacular, Azerbaijan.

Nizami does not say anything about the great battle of Hidaspes between the armies of Alexander and Fur in Punjab in the year 326 BCE.

Shah of Iran Dara and Iskandar are preparing for war. Nizami has an interesting idea about which peoples constituted the two armies: Dara drew troops from Iran, China, Kharezm, Ghazni and the Qur (Nizami 1983: 1806–1807), and Iskandar drew troops from Egypt, Afranja, Rum and Rus (Nizami 1983: 1842). Here in particular and in general in the *Iskandar-Nama*, the issue of 'Rus', its existence which is incomprehensible at first glance and an anachronism, will be discussed below.

In Iran, Iskandar 'began to eradicate fire-worship' and 'smoked out the fire-worshippers' (Nizami 1983: 2819), then turned to Babylon; from Babylon he 'turned to Azerabadgan (Azerbaijan)' (Nizami 1983: 2836). In Azerbaijan, in the land of fires, he turned to ashes 'the self-burning fire':

There was a fire burning inside the stone fence.
 The fire-worshipper called it 'self-burning' (Nizami 1983: 2838).
 On his order they extinguished
 The old burning fire and turned it to ashes. (Nizami 1983: 2840)

7 Nizami on the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Russians

After long marches and travels, including Azerbaijan, 'He decided to return to his home' (Nizami 1983: 3299). At that moment, the news from the messenger from Azerbaijan radically changed Iskandar's plans.

At that moment from the ruler of Azerabadgan
A messenger like a freeman came (Nizami 1983: 3300)

The messenger said: in Abkhaz and in Armenia which is subordinate to the Abkhaz 'they worship fire' (Nizami 1983: 3304). Alexander did what was necessary:

He transferred his army from Babylon to Armenia
He cleansed the country of this dirt. (Nizami 1983: 3310–3311)

As a result, the 'Davali, the commander of the Abkhaz region' (Nizami 1983: 3316) obeyed him. An old man said, "He (Iskandar) built Tiflis" (Nizami 1983: 3336). And then, 'He made his way to Nushaba in Barda' (Nizami 1983: 3341).

Nizami brings Iskandar to 'mentally strong, open-hearted, sweetly-spoken' Nushaba (Nizami 1983: 3368). 'He made his way to Nushaba in Barda' (Nizami 1983: 3341), the beautiful ruler whose capital city is located near Nizami himself—in Barda. 'The land of Barda is beautiful' (Nizami 1983: 3346):

If you need bird's milk, it can be found here
They kneaded the soil with golden water. (Nizami 1983: 3353–3354)

Although Nizami does say that Barda used to be this beautiful, but not any longer; in the poet's time 'Only a trace of that pomegranate and narcissus remains' (Nizami 1983: 3557). Nizami does not pay special attention to the legends about the Amazons, and he puts forward Nushaba in this regard as well:

Girls with malt breasts and silver legs,
They are together with her in everything (Nizami 1983: 3386).
She entrusted all the work to the women.
She did not need to see men. (Nizami 1983: 3372)

Nizami stays true to tradition; Iskandar goes to Nushaba's palace as an envoy, Nushaba recognizes him from his portrait kept in the palace, and they become friends.

True, historical Alexander the Great did not set foot in the Caucasus. While in Nizami's *Iskandar-Nama* the arrival of Iskandar in the Caucasus, his friendship with Nushaba and the subsequent events related to the Russians form a very important part of the work. In order to achieve his goal, Nizami changed the history as he wished, took Iskandar to countries not mentioned in history in his time, had him meet the people and forced him to go to (just) wars.

Iskandar 'walked like a lion through Shirvan' (Nizami 1983: 3887), captured the fortress of Derbent, and ordered the construction of a 'wall on the narrow road' (Nizami 1983: 3994) to protect the people of that place from the 'savage' Kipchaks. He rested on the shores of Jeyhun and continued with the more traditional work of creating and building. 'It is said that he built Samarkand, which inspires people' (Nizami 1983: 5281).

After marches to India, China and back to Central Asia Iskandar wanted to return to Iran, which he considered his second homeland: 'I was determined to go to the land of Ajam' (Nizami 1983: 5354). However, 'Davali, the ruler of Abkhazia' (Nizami 1983: 5304) came and moaned: 'This is a cry for help because of the injustice of the Russians, O Shah!' (Nizami 1983: 5307). Davali tries to explain to Iskandar in detail who the Russians are, for example:

They raided excessively (Nizami 1983: 5311).

They plundered this people, this country (Nizami 1983: 5312).

They demolished properties in Barda.

They emptied the city which was so wealthy.

Nushaba was taken prisoner (Nizami 1983: 5316–5317).

Because they are the crudest of nations and the lowest of lows (Nizami 1983: 5325)

No one expects mercy from a Russian (Nizami 1983: 5327).

They will make many countries suffer.

They will revel in oppression. (Nizami 1983: 5329–5330)

Upon hearing this news, Alexander became very angry:

If I don't take vengeance on Russian lions

A dog I will be, a dog, not Iskandar, son of Feylaqus! (Nizami 1983: 5345).

We will not leave Nushaba in chains (Nizami 1983: 5348).

He could not sleep that night from anger. (Nizami 1983: 5367)

In historical sources, the term Russian first appears in the ninth century; the people who were building a state around the city of Kiev were named Russians. That is, the Russians appeared on the historical stage about 1,200 years after the reign of Alexander the Great. Why does Nizami resort to such a major, obvious

historical anachronism, bringing the Russians face to face with Iskandar and having them battle each other? Except for Nizami's writing, there isn't even a legend that puts Iskandar and the Russians together. The just ruler Iskandar, the product of Nizami's imagination and poetic mastery, wanted to teach the oppressor a lesson and protect the oppressed, in this case punishing the Russians for occupying the land and looting.

In the ninth to eleventh centuries, the Russians sailed in the Caspian Sea and repeatedly raided and plundered the western and southern shores. In 912–913 and 943–944, the Russians carried out more raids, looting and massacres in these areas. During the invasion of 943–944, they say about 3,000 Russians sailed west from the Caspian Sea along the Kura River to the rich city of Barda, occupying the city for some time (six months, even a year?), robbed and looted. Historical sources say that these Russians were very strong, warrior-like people. Both sides suffered heavy losses in the battles, and in the end the Russian forces were depleted by an infectious disease, and the survivors left Barda by boat. (Yakubovskiy 1926: 63–92; Dorn 1875: 524–530; Logan 1992).

Nizami probably did not know all the details of the real history of Alexander the Great. Like other poets, he relied on stories and legends later known as those of Pseudo-Callisthenes, but in the *Iskandar-Nama* he didn't draw attention to the miracles in Pseudo-Callisthenes's writing, but used information creatively, changed and interpreted it as he saw fit. The Russian looting of Barda, a city that Nizami loved and praised, and the great massacre that took place there probably left their mark not only on the works of historians but also in the memory of the people. Nizami reflected this historical event, well-known to him, in his *Iskandar-Nama* and directed Iskandar to take revenge on the Russians.

Iskandar began to march towards the Russians:

He passed his horse through wavy Jeyhun (Nizami 1983: 5371)

Crossed the Kharezm steppe (Nizami 1983: 5373)

Eventually he reached the Saqlab steppe. (Nizami 1983: 5375)

Although Nizami mentions 'Saqlab steppe', he called this part of the poem 'Iskandar's arrival on the Kipchak steppe'. Iskandar was surprised that beautiful Kipchak women walked among the Kipchak Turks with open faces:

He saw many Kipchak people one this steppe

He saw beautiful women with malt-like shins (Nizami 1983: 5375–5376).

Their faces are never covered.

They are not afraid of their brother or their husband. (Nizami 1983:

5379)

Iskandar was cautious about his young soldiers' behaviour and had to appeal to the Kipchak leaders:

Lustful, single soldiers
 Can get excited from the fire of youth (Nizami 1983: 5380–5381).
 He said delicately to the Kipchak elders,
 It will be better for women to cover their faces. (Nizami 1983: 5388)

Kipchak leaders defended this situation as their custom:

When listening to the words of the king one by one
 In this case, they did not obey the verdict
 Because they remained faithful to their customs. (Nizami 1983: 5391–5392)

Their answer is extraordinarily beautiful and interesting:

They bowed down and said, 'We are your servants
 We are always ready to obey the Shah's decree.
 However, covering the face is not by order
 Because Kipchaks' nature doesn't allow for this custom.
 If your custom is to cover faces,
 According to our custom—the eyes should be closed (Nizami 1983: 5393–5395).
 ... The crime is not the face, but the eyes that look (Nizami 1983: 5396).
 Yes, we are all subjects of the king,
 But we will never break our custom'. (Nizami 1983: 5402)

The *Iskandar-Nama* shows Russians, Burtases, Bulgars, Khazars and Kipchaks living side by side; this demonstrates Nizami's knowledge of the northern peoples' geography.

Nizami describes at length Iskandar's war with the Russians as his greatest, most difficult, and fearful war. Iskandar, who won the war, released Nushaba. In this battle, the Chinese maid, who was presented to Iskandar by the Chinese khagan, but then forgotten and neglected by Iskandar, showed great heroism. Iskandar fell in love with her.

After the war with the Russians, Iskandar received the news that the water of life or water of immortality lay in the far dark north:

There is a dark hijab under the North Pole
 There flows a pure spring of protein water

Under the black hijab, which is called darkness
 Water of life flows in silence. (Nizami 1983: 6446–6447)

Alexander ‘travelled north for exactly one month’ (Nizami 1983: 6478).

They came to a place where
 One could imagine the sun only in a dream (Nizami 1983: 6481).
 On one side, darkness covered every place,
 On another side the deep ocean blocked the way (Nizami 1983: 6484).
 Clarity suddenly disappeared.
 Darkness covered every side of the road. (Nizami 1983: 6487–6488)

Thus, Iskandar reaches another edge of the world, in this case the north, what we now call the Arctic Ocean. Iskandar pursues the water of life in the dark, but he is not fortunate enough to obtain this water of immortality, ‘Iskandar searched, but did not find the water of life’ (d. 6624). He turned and started making his way back.

He reached Russia from happy Bulgaria (Nizami 1983: 6445)
 From there he returned to the Rum Sea
 He sailed ships to the comfortable Rum lands. (Nizami 1983: 6747)

Iskandar ‘took rest from the toil of long journeys’ (Nizami 1983: 6758). Iskandar, a great warrior, a just ruler, and a worldly wise man, was called to be a prophet.

The order came to prophesy
 He did not refuse to obey. (Nizami 1983: 6767)

8 Philosophical Layers and Anachronism in the *Iskandar-Nama*

Alexander, or rather, Nizami’s Iskandar, who learned philosophy and science from Aristotle, is himself a philosopher and likes to maintain friendships with philosophers and organize philosophical meetings. An old Indian sage questioned Iskandar about mysterious issues such as the world, nature and the place of God, the world and its end, life after death, body and soul (spirit), the nature of sleep, the meaning of the evil eye, fortune-telling through the stars, the reasons for there being two colours of human face, black and white. These questions can be analysed in terms of the views of Indian philosophers. Iskandar’s answers seem detailed and convincing. According to Camal Mustafayev,

the eminent scholar on Nizami studies, Nizami is better acquainted with Indian materialism than with Greek philosophy (Mustafayev 1962: 91). In other poems, Nizami asks these and similar philosophical questions, which he answers in the language of his heroes. Iskandar was surrounded by philosophers.

Everyone was proud of certain science
Everyone had their own world. (Nizami 1983: 1002)

Nizami speaks of 'Iskandar's secret gathering with seven philosophers'. Iskandar chose and gathered seven philosophers, saying 'Let's unravel the secrets of the universe' (Nizami 1983: 1474); he asked them one by one to answer the first question 'How did this world come to be at the beginning?' (Nizami 1983: 1482). After seven answers by the philosophers, Iskandar himself takes the floor, and comes out with 'what Nizami said'. According to Nizami, the 'Great Creator' 'first created the mind' (Nizami 1983: 1602).

Which philosophers gathered around Iskandar? The 'Vizier', the 'pure-hearted, intelligent' Aristotle; the 'young', 'scholarly' Bolinas; 'old' Socrates 'master of all', 'great old man' Plato 'scholar' Vales (Fales) Forfuriyus (Neoplatonic Porphyry is not mentioned with any specific feature); and 'well-reasoned', 'sharp-minded', 'heavenly' Hormuz (Hermes). It would not have been possible to bring these philosophers together alive as they lived in different times, some very far apart.

Bolinas was considered a philosopher who could perform miracles. In the *Iskandar-Nama*, Bolinas accompanies Iskandar, advises and helps him during his travels. However, the real Bolinas lived at least four centuries apart from Alexander the Great. The philosopher Hermes, known in Nizami's work as Hormuz, can be identified as the mythological Hermes Trismegistus (Triple Almighty Hermes); the Greeks combined Thot, the Egyptian god of knowledge and magic, and Hermes, the Greek god, to create Hermes Trismegistus.

There is an eight to nine century gap between the times of Fales and Porphyry, two of the seven philosophers in the *Iskandar-Nama*. Socrates died when Alexander was born, and Alexander was seven to eight years old when Plato died. Thus, only one of the seven philosophers mentioned, namely, Aristotle, was acquainted with Alexander the Great; Aristotle had indeed taught him. Nizami also places Socrates and Plato among Iskandar's teachers; after accepting the prophecy, Iskandar wants to go on a journey and seeks advice from his three 'favourite teachers'—Aristotle, Plato and Socrates. Nizami was familiar with the age hierarchy of the Socrates-Plato-Aristotle trio, but he was most likely unaware of the period when the other four philosophers lived, who lived before and after whom; Nizami's use of the word 'young' about Bolinas indicates that he at least accepts Bolinas as having lived after Aristotle.

How well did Nizami know these seven philosophers? Nizami had an idea of Greek philosophy and the philosophers mentioned and talks about some of the views of these philosophers. However, his knowledge was not deep, and Nizami attributed some ideas to these philosophers that they never professed. Nizami had not read the works of Greek philosophers, it seems clear.

Nizami sometimes confused philosophers with each other. The story of the meeting of Diogenes of Sinopus with Alexander of Macedonia is well known. Nizami writes in the *Iskandar-Nama* that this event took place between Iskandar and Socrates. According to Nizami, Socrates lives an ascetic hermit's life.

He likes to live alone in a corner (Nizami 1983: 1184).

'My soul is accustomed to a piece of barley bread

Why should I grieve for the whole wheat bread?' (Nizami 1983: 1242)

Nizami's description of the scene of Socrates' death is true in principle. Stating that there is rivalry and conflict between Plato and Aristotle, Nizami writes that, in order to punish his student's arrogance, Plato invented an unusual musical instrument that could put the listener to sleep and wake him up again with its voice. In fact, such a thing did not happen. There is a legend that with the music played by Farabi, he made listeners cry, laugh, sleep and then wake up. It seems that Nizami used this legend and connected it with Plato. Some ideas connected with Bolinas, according to Nizami, actually belong to Empedocles. (For further information on the ideas of the seven Greek philosophers in the *Iskandar-Nama* and their degree of accuracy, see Mustafayev 1962.)

Regarding philosophers and scholars, Nizami allows several other anachronisms. He describes Archimedes, who lived from 287 to 212 BCE, as a student of Aristotle. However, Archimedes was born 35 years after the death of Aristotle. The information Nizami gives about one of the first alchemists in the history of science, a woman named Maria of Qibt (Maria of Kopt) or Mary the Jewess (Isaxanlı 2018: 38–45) is interesting (the *Iqbalnama* in *Iskandar-Nama*—The story of Mary Gibtli and her preparation for chemistry). Nizami says that Maria learned alchemy from Aristotle, that Iskandar and Mary had a falling out, and that Aristotle reconciled them. In reality, Maria lived after Alexander and Aristotle, and this story has no historical roots.

Nizami is a thinker poet. Nizami's five verse-novels in the *Khamsa* had a decisive influence on the further development of oriental literature. Although

Nizami's poetic prowess is very important for the strength of his poems, his worldview and philosophy of life are equally important. Nizami was well acquainted with the natural sciences, especially astronomy and alchemy, and in his work he masterfully uses his knowledge of sciences to create powerful metaphors. Nizami had some knowledge of Greek, Indian and Islamic philosophy and a broad understanding of music, religion and psychology, and used them effectively in his works.

Nizami's main themes are love, a good man, a just ruler. The poems *Khosrov and Shirin* and *Leyli and Majnun* are based on love, but Khosrov's mistakes and motifs calling him to justice are also important in the work. In *Seven Beauties*, I think the main themes are represented and intertwined. The principal theme of Nizami's last and largest work, the *Iskandar-Nama*, is a just ruler, while other topics take up relatively little space and depend on the main theme.

Most of the heroes of the *Khamsa* are rulers who march for conquest. The geography of the marches and travels shows that Nizami had a very broad idea of world geography. Nizami is not satisfied with just naming the lands, but also talks about the nature, population and traditions (history!) of the places.

Nizami created his ideal of a just ruler in the *Iskandar-Nama* through the poetic image of Iskandar. Although the history of Nizami's character of Iskandar is based on the life story of Alexander the Great, there is a big difference between the literary hero and the real warlord and ruler. Nizami's two ruler-heroes, Khosrov and Bahram, are kings of Iran, and their live their lives in or around Iran, and travel in those lands, while Iskandar is the ruler of the world, and he raids many more and larger countries than the historical Alexander the Great. Nizami decides that his commander, the wise ruler and the prophet will travel and conquer the known world. In this way, Nizami deliberately allows historical anachronisms, as Iskandar meets people who did not appear on the stage of history in the time of Alexander the Great, and also sends him to places where the real Alexander never went.

Nizami tasks his hero Iskandar with travelling, conquering the world, changing world history, and restoring justice and for this purpose he creates his own world geography and philosophy of history.

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