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The Topic of Persia in Medieval Literary Imagination, with a Focus on Middle High German Literature



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Abstract: After a review of how the western world has viewed Persia and Persian culture since the turn of the eighteenth century, this article explores older forms of reception of Persia, first during the seventeenth century, but then, which is the main focus, in the high and late Middle Ages. As far as I can tell, Middle High German poets seem to have been at the forefront within the European context of engaging with the topic of Persia in their romances and other genres. Many of those references, of course, constitute nothing but fiction, and they were most likely not based on practical travel experiences or personal encounters. Nevertheless, we can identify a significant interest in that part of 'the East,' probably determined by the strong impact of the myth of Alexander the Great and his conquest of the Persian empire in the third century BCE on medieval literature. However, most of the references to Persia go far beyond that ancient topic and might signal a significant opening up toward non-European culture to the east already during the high and late Middle Ages. The thematic approach identified here facilitates the combination of a number of different texts from the late twelfth to the late fifteenth and even sixteenth century and intends to provide a new puzzle piece to the exploration of the notion of the Global Middle Ages.

PERSIA AND THE WEST IN CULTURAL-HISTORICAL TERMS

Persia can boast of a long and very rich history and culture that date back to antiquity and exerted a wide influence throughout time,¹ even though modern research has paid fairly little attention to the intellectual exchanges, or at least to the reception of Persia in western literature or the arts.² While we know a lot about nineteenth-century European interest in Persia, earlier forms of reception have been mostly ignored, or are assumed not to have existed.³ As Richard N. Frye now argues, 'Persia has changed from being seen in ancient times as a respected enemy, to an envied enemy, a respected friend, a despised friend, and currently a despised enemy'.⁴ While Persia mattered considerably for the West during antiquity, with the arrival of the Arabs and their conquest of Persia in the seventh century, that is, with the fall of the Sasanian Empire of Iran (Persia) in 651, the situation changed radically.⁵

From a cultural-historical perspective, however, the West has had a continuous interest in Iran, formerly Persia, as documented, for instance, by great literary and philological efforts well before the modern age. This study will present substantial evidence that medieval German poets, above all, had a fairly clear sense of Persia and projected it as an impressive, if not ideal, culture, although the Persians were not

¹ Geoffrey Parker and Brenda Parker, *The Persians: Lost Civilizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

² *Eastern Voyages, Western Visions: French Writing and Painting of the Orient*, ed. by Margaret Topping (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

³ *Persien im Spiegel Deutschlands: Konstruktionsvarianten von Persien-Bildern in der deutschsprachigen Literatur vom 18. bis in das 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Christine Maillard and Hamid Tafazoli, *Faustus/études germaniques* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2018); Marzieh Gail, *Persia and the Victorians* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1951); John D. Yohannan, *Persian Poetry in England and America: A Two Hundred Year History* (New York, NY: Caravan Books, 1977); Hasan Javadi, *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature: With Special Reference to the Nineteenth Century* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2004); Laetitia Nanquette, *Orientalism Versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging Between France and Iran Since the Islamic Revolution* (New York, NY: I. B. Tauris, 2013); Hamid Dabashi, *Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁴ Richard N. Frye, 'Persia in the Mind of the West', in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 14.4 (2003), 403–06 (p. 403).

⁵ Frye, 14.4, 404.

Christians. The purpose cannot be to identify what was actually known about that country far to the east; instead, the interest here focuses on imagology – the working of images about the world, or cross-national perceptions – and mentality in high and late medieval German literature.⁶ The guiding question will hence be how medieval German poets projected that distant land/culture and how they evaluated Persia as such, contributing thereby to a kind of Persia discourse already in the thirteenth century and beyond (maybe even a kind of Persophilia). To set the stage for my actual analysis, I will first explore connections between both worlds as they emerged in the modern period.

PERSIA IN LATE EIGHTEENTH- AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY WESTERN LITERATURE

Since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, above all, western scholars and poets have embarked on studying Persian literature, art, and philosophy more intensively. The Frenchman Anquetil Duperron was the first to translate the *Vendidad* (a kind of an ecclesiastical code) in 1759, followed by works done by Sir William Jones (1746–1794) and Sylvestre de Sacy, who worked on *Pahlavi* texts. The German Romantic poet and scholar Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866) was one of the first to make major contributions to the study of Oriental languages, especially by translating many Asian literary texts, including Persian, such as in his *Die Weisheit des Brahmanen* (The Wisdom of the Brahmins), published in six volumes from 1836 to 1839.⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had already transformed many of the poems by the medieval Persian poet Hafiz (1315–1390) into his own creations in his *West-Östlicher Diwan*

⁶ Albrecht Classen, 'Imagination, Fantasy, Otherness, and Monstrosity in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age', in *Imagination and Fantasy in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Projections, Dreams, Monsters, and Illusions*, ed. by Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 24 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), 1–229.

⁷ *Der Weltpoet Friedrich Rückert, 1788–1866: Dichter, Orientalist, Zeitkritiker*, ed. by Rudolf Kreutner (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016).

(1814–1816),⁸ based on the translation by the Austrian Orientalist, Baron Joseph Freiherr von Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) in the *Enzyklopädische Übersicht der Wissenschaften des Orients* (1806).⁹ Additionally, numerous English poets from the Victorian period engaged extensively with ‘classical’ medieval and modern Persian literature, as Reza Taher-Kermani has now demonstrated in his recent study.¹⁰ If we widen our perspective, we actually recognize a kind of *Persophilia* throughout the nineteenth century, as illustrated already by Hamid Dabashi.¹¹ Let us next take into view what Baroque writers had to say about Persia, a time when the interest in that country developed first more noticeably.

PERSIA IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WESTERN LITERATURE

Recent scholarship has been able to identify older efforts by western intellectuals to learn about Persia; writers, diplomats, and scientists began to explore that part of the Middle East since the early seventeenth century. Most importantly, the Persian poet and Sheik Muslih al-Dīn Sa’di, author of works such as *Bustān* (1255) and the *Rose Garden* (*Gulistān*) (1258), was translated into French for the first time by André de Ryer in 1634. This was followed by a Latin translation in 1651 by Georgius Gentius, parallel with the Persian text: *Musledini Sadi, Rozarium Politicum, sive amoenium sortis Humane Thearum, de Persico Latinum versum necessaiue illustratum*. On the basis of the French

⁸ Atefeh Soleimani, *Goethes Persien-Bild: eine intertextuelle Studie zum ‘West-Östlichen Divan’*, Siegener Schriften zur Kanonforschung, 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016).

⁹ J. T. P. de Bruijn, ‘Hammer-Purgstall, Joseph Freiherr von’, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, XI.6 (2003, updated 2012), 644–46 <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hammer-purgstall>> [accessed 1 May 2020].

¹⁰ Reza Taher-Kermani, *The Persian Presence in Victorian Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). As he summarized in an email to me on 26 April 2020: ‘...my scope in the book is not confined to the study of translations of medieval Persian poetry. The word “Persia” meant more to the Victorians than the poetry of Persia’s medieval poets (e.g., Khayyām or Firdausi). Knowledge of the country had reached the discursive realms of British imagination through thousands of years and from a variety of sources including Classical and Biblical texts, history, and travel-writings’. I would like to express my gratitude to him for reading a draft of my article and for providing me with some valuable feedback concerning his research area.

¹¹ Dabashi, *Persophilia*.

translation, Friedrich Ochsenbach created a German version in 1636 with the title *Gulistan. das ist / Königlicher Rosengart*. In 1654, the North-German diplomat and scholar Adam Olearius published his German translation under the title *Persianischer Rosenthal*, which was subsequently re-published numerous times, including in 1688 and 1696.¹²

PERSIA IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

However, here I want to go even further back and probe whether and to what extent medieval German poets commented on Persia. We can be certain that this was the case, although scholarship has not yet fully paid attention to this topic. We must accept, however, that it would be highly unlikely that those literary remarks were based on actual knowledge about Persia drawn from personal travels, although famous authors such as Marco Polo and Odorico da Pordenone did not ignore that region in their travelogues altogether. The former, for instance, states in his *Travels* (c. 1300): 'Persia, a very great province and at one time a very splendid and powerful one, but now ravaged and devastated by the Tartars. In Persia is the city called Saveh, from which the three Magi set out when they came to worship Jesus Christ with some efforts'.¹³ The latter only touched on Persia, but did not engage further with it.¹⁴ Late medieval spectators might also have been able to glean some information about Persia

¹² Wolfgang Struck, "'Persien in Persien suchen und nicht finden": Adam Olearius und Paul Fleming auf der Reise nach Isfahan (1633–1639)', in *Ins Fremde schreiben: Gegenwartsliteratur auf den Spuren historischer und fantastischer Entdeckungsreisen*, ed. by Christof Hamann, Poesis, 5 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), pp. 23–41; Franklin Lewis, 'Golestān-e Sa'dī', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, XI/1 (2012), 79–86 <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/golestan-e-sadi>>; Elio Brancaforte, 'Persian Words of Wisdom: Seventeenth-Century European Translations of Sa'dī's *Gulistan*', in *Knowledge in Motion: Constructing Transcultural Experience in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods (1200–1750)*, ed. by Gerhild Scholz Williams and Christian Schneider, *Daphnis* 45.3–4 (Leiden and Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), pp. 450–72; Albrecht Classen, 'Persia in German Baroque Literature: Sa'dī's *Rose Garden* and Adam Olearius's Embassy to Persia: New Ways in Approaching World Literature from a Pre-Modern Perspective', *Orbis Litterarum*, 76.2 (2021), 51–66.

¹³ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. by Ronald Latham (London: Penguin, 1958), p. 58.

¹⁴ Odorico da Pordenone, *Relatio de mirabilibus orientalium Tatarorum*, ed. by Annalia Marchisio, Edizione nazionale dei testi mediolatini d'Italia, 41. Series I, 23 (Florence: Sismel – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2016), I.7; III.14; V.6.

on *mappae mundi*, such as the one in Hereford and the one in Ebstorf (both early fourteenth century), although such world maps did not really serve to provide geographical orientation for travelers.¹⁵ None of that, however, would indicate that the medieval poets and their audiences had a clear concept of the geographic and cultural identity of 'Persia', which for them was simply situated east of Damascus, maybe centered on Babylon, the iconic city in the East which the Old Testament had already discussed so much. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between the Arab and the Persian world, as our literary sources will confirm.

In the process of 'worldmaking', as Nelson Goodman called it, i.e., a projection of other parts of the world in people's minds, western people had plenty of opportunities to imagine Persia, especially through the lens of the historical and literary accounts of Alexander the Great.¹⁶ Geoffrey Chaucer reports about the knight in the General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400) that he had been involved in many different battles against Muslims, but the farthest he had travelled appears to have been Turkey and Armenia, and not Persia.¹⁷ His near contemporary, the South-Tyrolean (German) poet Oswald von Wolkenstein, boasted of having seen many parts of Europe and the Middle East, and even included Persia in the list of countries he had visited in his past life – 'Durch Barbarei, Arabia, | durch Hermani in Persia' (Kl. 44, 1–2; [I traveled] through Barbary, Arabia, Armenia and Persia) – but this probably amounted to nothing but name dropping.¹⁸ Even if Oswald had reached those distant

¹⁵ Jürgen Wilke, *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte*, 2 vols, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für historische Landesforschung der Universität Göttingen, 39 (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2001); *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte, kommentierte Neuausgabe in zwei Bänden*, ed. by Hartmut Kugler, Sonja Glauch and Antje Willing, 2 vols (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2007).

¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, IN; Hackett, 1978). For numerous responses to his ideas, see the contributions to *Worldmaking*, ed. by William Pencak, *Critic of Institutions*, 6 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); see also the contributions in *Cultural Ways of Worldmaking: Media and Narratives*, ed. by Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning and Birgit Neumann, in collaboration with Mirjam Horn, *Concepts for the Study of Culture*, 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

¹⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Robert Boenig and Andrew Taylor (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2012), General Prologue, vv. 51–67. See also the contributions in *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer*, ed. by Douglas Gray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ *Die Lieder Oswalds von Wolkenstein*, ed. by Karl Kurt Klein, 4th edn, rev. by Burghart Wachinger, *Altdeutsche Textbibliothek*, 55 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).

countries, which is not completely unlikely in his case, his audience would not have been able to comprehend the specific global perspectives projected here.

Could we thus leave this topic and be content with the sense that Persia indeed was not yet of real relevance for most people in the high and late Middle Ages? Its presence in medieval literature indicates that we should not dismiss this topic out of hand. The name of Persia also appears in other contexts and was used, for instance, by Chaucer, John Gower, and William Caxton on some occasions, but not in any systematic or deliberate fashion.¹⁹ Subsequently, I want to examine specifically how references to Persia entered a range of medieval German literary works and what they might have meant for the various poets. Analyzing the fictional accounts allows us to comprehend the 'mindwork', or spatial mentality, of that time,²⁰ specifically regarding common notions about countries east of Europe, whether based on 'classical' sources, unidentified oral accounts by travelers/merchants, or imagination.²¹ I will finally reflect on the meaning of this imagination of Persia for our currently emerging concept of Global Medieval Studies. The notion of 'worldmaking' as applied here can only refer to a slow accumulation of loose references to that eastern country, somehow associated with wonders of nature and a sophisticated culture, though not yet Christianized. The poets' efforts regarding Persia did, however, lead to a kind of aggregate concept, which might have laid the foundation for early modern explorations of Persia by such travelers and linguists as Adam Olearius.²²

¹⁹ See the entry on 'Persian. *n.* and *adj.*', *Oxford English Dictionary* <<https://www-oed-com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/view/Entry/141452?redirectedFrom=Persian#eid>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

²⁰ Alexander W. Astin, *Mindworks: Becoming More Conscious in an Unconscious World* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007).

²¹ *Imagination and Fantasy in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Projections, Dreams, Monsters, and Illusions*, ed. by Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 24 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2020).

²² Classen, 'Persia in German Baroque Literature'.

PERSIA IN MIDDLE HIGH GERMAN LITERATURE

Anyone interested in world history, especially antiquity, during the Middle Ages was fully aware of the major accomplishments of Alexander the Great (356–325 BCE). No medieval world chronicle could afford to ignore the most successful Macedonian general and ruler,²³ and the number of literary manifestations involving his life is simply legion. There are many facets in his biography that easily explain the emergence of a veritable myth surrounding this astounding leader who managed to defeat the Persian Emperor Darius and establish his own control over vast territories in the Middle East up to India, Palestine, Egypt, and neighboring countries. Medieval artists and poets responded to this myth in a myriad of fashions,²⁴ and it is no surprise that he also figures prominently on various *mappae mundi*.²⁵ In the next section, I will examine a variety of Middle High German voices addressing Alexander and Persia, whether identified as a kingdom or an empire, in order to identify a pervasive and intriguing topic in late medieval German literature influenced by pre-modern ideas of globalism. While medieval and early modern poets regularly talk about ‘Saracens’ as their enemies or simply as religious foreigners, certainly using it as a pejorative term for Muslims in the Arabic world,²⁶ the reference to Persia appears to constitute a different category. Imagologically, Persia was deeply associated with the classical account of Alexander conquering that huge kingdom/empire, and although the Persians are systematically identified as non-Christians, we will observe a considerable degree of respect for Persian rulers or knights in German/European narratives.

²³ Though he is mentioned many times throughout, there is no separate entry for Alexander in the *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. by Graeme Dunphy, 2 vols (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

²⁴ Rolf Bräuer, ‘Alexander der Große: Der Mythos vom unbesiegbaren Eroberer der Welt als Vorbild, Warnung und pejoratives Exempel’, in *Herrscher, Helden Heilige*, ed. by Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich, *Mittelalter Mythen*, 1 (St. Gall: UVK – Fachverlag für Wissenschaft und Studium, 1996), pp. 3–19.

²⁵ Jutta Zackor, *Alexander der Grosse auf mittelalterlichen Weltkarten: Alexander Macedo – domitor mundi?* (Berlin: Winter Industries, 2013).

²⁶ Norman Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens: Interpretations of the Chansons de Geste* (Edinburgh University Press, 1984).

PRIEST LAMBRECHT

We know of many different versions of the Alexander story in medieval literature, whether we think of Walter of Châtillon²⁷ or Priest Lambrecht.²⁸ But wherever we look, the basic story line is always the same, with Alexander waging his war against the mighty but ineffectual Persian Emperor Darius whom he eventually defeats, whereupon Alexander explores further countries to the north and east, until he finally turns west again to rule over his empire. We are specifically told many times that the young leader energetically fights against his enemies and that he manages to gain victory each time, but Persia as such, in geo-physical, political, economic, or artistic terms, does not emerge in our mind.

In his *Alexanderlied* (c. 1150), Lambrecht emphasizes the personal exchanges between Alexander and Darius until the latter's death. The battles themselves are also of great interest to the poet, whereas the Middle Eastern empire hardly gains in profile. Darius, however, is gloriously presented: 'Der Persen kuninc hēre, | der vil grōzir ēre | wielt ubir manich rīche' (3302–04; The King of the Persians who ruled with great honor over many countries).²⁹ However, according to the poet, as soon as he realizes that many of his men have been killed or wounded, he is the first to flee, which makes the entire army run with him, granting the Greeks (Macedonians) absolute

²⁷ Walter of Châtillon, *The Alexandreis of Walter of Châtillon: A Twelfth-Century Epic*, trans. by David Townsend, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

²⁸ *Alexander the Great in the Middle Ages: Transcultural Perspectives*, ed. by Markus Stock (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2016); *Alexanderdichtungen im Mittelalter: Kulturelle Selbstbestimmung im Kontext literarischer Beziehungen*, ed. by Jan Cölln, Susanne Friede, and Hartmut Wulfram, Veröffentlichungen aus dem Göttinger Sonderforschungsbereich 529: Internationalität nationaler Literaturen, 1 (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2000). For the Persian tradition, see *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*, ed. by Richard Stoneman, Kyle Erickson, and Ian Richard Netton, Ancient Narrative, 15 (Groningen: Barkhuis Publishing and Groningen University Library, 2012). For the Arabic tradition, see Faustina Doufikar-Aerts, *Alexander Magnus Arabicus: A Survey of the Alexander Tradition Through Seven Centuries: From Pseudo-Callisthenes to Sūrī*, Mediaevalia Groningana New Series (Paris and Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

²⁹ All translations of Lambrecht's texts are my own.

victory, while Darius appears like a coward and an unworthy leader of his army (3331–42).

Remarkably, Lambrecht comments on the great grief affecting all of the country where parents mourn the deaths of their sons, wives the deaths of their husbands, and children the deaths of their fathers. Darius, however, is increasingly characterized as a weak personality who gives in completely to crying over his miserable defeat.³⁰ While in the past he had conquered many countries and gained the highest respect in the world, now he has been defeated by this Greek warrior, who brought the greatest shame upon him (3303–421). He blames the workings of Fortuna and thus indirectly responds, at least in the medieval context, to the teachings by Boethius in *De consolazione philosophiae* (c. 524), but then in a letter he tries to appeal to Alexander to accept his peace offering, which would make the opponent the de facto ruler of Persia (3479). Of course, as we know from history, and Lambrecht does not deviate from his Franco-Provencal source in this regard, Alexander does not accept this proposal and keeps fighting, both against Darius and then against the Indian King Porus, always gaining victories, irrespective of what new military challenges he has to handle, such as elephants as attack animals.

In the famous letter to the philosopher Aristotle, Alexander outlines the many different wonders he and his men have experienced, which represents a twelfth-century concept of the exotic aspects in the East, Orientalism *avant la lettre*, so to speak.³¹ At the end, Alexander even arrives at the wall surrounding Paradise, but must realize and accept that he has reached the limits of his powers, so he finally returns west. Persia itself, its culture or people, however, do not enter this picture developed

³⁰ For other parallel cases of miserable, pathetic male figures in medieval German literature, see Albrecht Classen, 'Angst vor dem Tod: Jämmerliche Männerfiguren in der deutschen Literatur des Spätmittelalters (von *Mauritius von Craûn* zu Heinrich Kaufringer und *Till Eulenspiegel*)', in *Jenseits: Eine mittelalterliche und mediävistische Imagination: Interdisziplinäre Ansätze zur Analyse des Unerklärlichen*, ed. by Christa Agnes Tuczay, Beihefte zur Mediävistik, 21 (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2016), pp. 213–31.

³¹ Florian Schmitz, *Der Orient in Diskursen des Mittelalters und im 'Willehalm' Wolframs von Eschenbach*, Kultur, Wissenschaft, Literatur: Beiträge zur Mittelalterforschung, 32 (Berlin, Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2018).

by Lambrecht (or Walther of Châtillon), apart from very general comments that hardly contribute to specific cultural awareness.

Even though Alexander overcomes all opposition, defeats all his enemies, and then ascends to the Persian throne, he does not become a second Persian emperor with the typical trappings of an Asian autocrat, focused only on his own affairs. Instead, he endeavors very hard to be a fair ruler, granting justice to everyone who deserves it, and punishing those who have proven to be traitors, and this to the full satisfaction both of the Persians and the Greeks (3978). Otherwise, Lambrecht brings to the table the same fabulous accounts as were contained in the ancient narratives about Alexander. Persia itself, however, remains a fairly unspecific country in the East where the ancient hero Alexander gained his greatest victories and experienced miraculous situations.³²

WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH

We encounter another significant reference to Persia in Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem composed in the vein of a *chanson de geste*, *Willehalm* (c. 1220), based mostly on the Old French *chanson de geste* *Aliscans*. Here the protagonist has to defend himself against a huge army of Muslim and Persian forces that besiege his castle in Provence. As we know from the French source, he had himself been taken prisoner by the Muslim lord Tibalt, but the latter's wife, Arabel, had fallen in love with Willehalm and then eloped with him back to France, where she converted to Christianity and assumed the name of Gyburc. In the first part, we encounter the protagonist facing an overwhelming hostile army that slaughters all of his men – only the protagonist manages to survive and to return to his castle, which Gyburc is defending on her new husband's behalf.³³ One of the greatest losses for Willehalm is the death of his nephew

³² Albrecht Classen, 'Globalism before Globalism: The Alexander Legend in Medieval Literature (Priest Lambrecht's Account as a Pathway to Early Global Perspectives)', *Esboços: histories in global contexts*, 28:49 (2021), 813–833.

³³ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, ed. by Werner Schröder (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978); for an online version of Karl Lachmann's fifth edition (1891), see <<http://www.hs->

Vivianz, who dies while lying in his lap (47–48), but he has no resources left to avenge the death of the young man. After all, as the narrator clearly indicates, the small Christian band of warriors faces a huge army consisting of many different peoples: ‘A company assembled from far and wide was riding in the army of Terramer, and many Moors, black but radiantly beautiful, who had decked themselves out splendidly before they commenced their charge’ (32).³⁴ Willehalm will later remember especially Vivianz’s death after he has defeated the Persian prince.

The situation for Willehalm is nothing less but desperate, facing a hostile ‘global’ army, so to speak, with all of his men dead at the end, with the Christian cause basically lost after this attack from forces having arrived from many parts of the eastern world (49–59). The tired man then tries to make his way back to the castle, when he encounters a group of royal enemies, among them Gyburc’s own son, Ehmereiz, whom she had left behind when she fled together with Willehalm to France to lead a life with him as a Christian woman. The protagonist slays or wounds them all, except for Ehmereiz whom he does not want to touch for those personal reasons (50–51), but only to run into new conflict, this time with two kings, Tenebruns of Liwes Nugruns, and the other, Arofel of Persia, whom the narrator identifies as Gyburc’s uncle (51). In short, Persians are identified as close allies fighting on the Muslim side against Willehalm and hence against the Christian world.

Almost ironically, although the war pits the Christian against the Muslim world, and although the enemies have killed Willehalm’s entire army, the narrator cannot help it but give the Muslims great praise: ‘These were likewise brave knights and veritable rocks in time of the battle, yet these two heroes who had gained much

[augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/13Jh/Wolfram/wol_wi00.html](https://www.augsburg.de/~harsch/germanica/Chronologie/13Jh/Wolfram/wol_wi00.html)>; for an English translation, see Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, trans. by Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984); for critical studies, see the contributions to *Wolfram’s ‘Willehalm’: Fifteen Essays*, ed. by Martin H. Jones and Timothy McFarland, *Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture* (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, Suffolk: Camden House, 2002).

³⁴ Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, 8th edn, rev. ed., *Sammlung Metzler*, 36 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2014).

renown were heading for a heavy toll' (51). While Willehalm can apparently defeat Tenebruns and kill him without great effort, he finds a true match in the Persian prince Arofel, who is identified as the finest and most powerful fighter in Terramer's entire army. For Wolfram, Arofel's greatest virtue, apart from his knightly skills, consists of his exorbitant generosity: 'he himself had excelled to such an extent that no more generous hand was known anywhere so long as he was alive' (52).

Tragically, Arofel's armor shifts suddenly during his charge, which exposes his leg, a great opportunity for Willehalm who immediately cuts it off, which makes his opponent defenseless and useless. Lying on the ground, Arofel then begs Willehalm to let him live, which would seem rather likely because of Arofel's high nobility and great accomplishments as a knight, which his opponent would certainly have appreciated despite the military situation and their differences in religion. Being defeated and now completely at Willehalm's mercy, Arofel makes him the greatest possible offer of material wealth if he lets him live. He even reminds the victorious duke that killing him now would not gain him any honor (52), but Willehalm can only think of his own losses, especially of Vivianz's death, so he rejects any deal, even if it were to include so much gold equivalent to the entire Caucasus mountain. Brutally, he then simply slays the amputated man, another terrible victim of this senseless war.³⁵

But for Willehalm, this represents the only available opportunity to get back home safely: he puts on Arofel's armor, rides on the latter's horse, and can thus make his way through the hostile army without being identified or accosted (53–54). Ironically, however, when he then arrives at his castle, not even his wife Gyburg recognizes him, and she denies him entrance until he has demonstrated to her that the armor he wears hides his true self.

³⁵ James A. Rushing, Jr., 'Arofel's Death and the Question of Willehalm's Guilt', in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 94.4 (1995), 469–82; Florian Nieser, 'Das getilgte Ding: Arofels Schild im 'Willehalm' Wolframs von Eschenbach', in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 139.3 (2017), 329–44.

We are not told much about Arofel's background, except that he is a most worthy warrior, the king of Persia, enormously rich, and highly virtuous, as demonstrated by his generosity. We are clearly given the impression of a most respectable knight, from Persia, a ruler over many princes, a truly courtly protagonist, practically directly borrowed from any of the many contemporary romances, and certainly a character very parallel to Feirefiz in Wolfram's *Parzival* as will be seen below. When the narrator emphasizes, 'The mighty Arofel was fighting boldly now, and indeed he had already attained renown in full measure' (52), we are given the signal that he is a true match for Willehalm, and the latter might not have won their joust at all, had unfortunate circumstances not intervened. Finally, we must also remember that he is Gyburc's uncle, so again someone belonging to her close family, although the family relationship is not getting really clear in the text. While Willehalm spared her son, he could not do so with her uncle. This then concludes this part of the narrative, and we no longer hear about Persia in any other context.

Surprisingly, when we also consider Wolfram's earlier Grail romance, *Parzival* (c. 1205), where he freely plays with hundreds of names of countries, kingdoms, and other locations, Persia appears only twice, and then just in passing (Book 15, 17, and 657, 27).³⁶ Once, when Parzival's father roams the eastern world in search of knightly service and glory, he also spends time in Morocco and in Persia, and we are informed about his activities specifically in Damascus and Aleppo, admittedly reflecting a rather confused sense of geography.

In the other chapter, the courtly lady Orgeluse relates to Gawan the history of the magician Clinschor, who had committed adultery with Iblis, the wife of the king of Sicily; but the king had caught the couple *in flagrante* and castrated the competitor as a punishment for his misdeed. Clinschor then turned to magic in order to

³⁶ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. by Karl Lachmann, trans. by Peter Knecht, intro. by Bernd Schirok (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998). For the English translation, see Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, trans. by A. T. Hatto (London: Penguin, 1980).

compensate for his pain and shame, causing much harm to many different people. As the narrator emphasizes, he learned the art of magic not in Persia, but in a city with a very similar name, 'Persidâ'. Wolfram was obviously familiar enough both with the concrete kingdom of Persia as a geo-political entity and the general assumption that it was the origin of the magical arts, but he dismissed that false belief, and he also spurned the opportunity to explore the meaning of the country in the Middle East for his own narrative.

By contrast, in the early part of the romance, Parzival's father had roamed throughout the world in the east and west, and achieved enormous glory, while serving under Baruc, the ruler of Baldac (Baghdad) (ch. 13). It appears rather unclear whether Wolfram might have thought here also of Persia, since Baghdad was founded in the eighth century and soon turned into the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate, but geographic precision does not matter to him at any rate, very similar to virtually all medieval poets. He is only concerned here with highlighting the attractiveness of those eastern lands, which could have included the Persian empire as well, if we consider that Baghdad probably belonged to it at that time, but then under Muslim rule. For most medieval poets, and so for Wolfram, the specific geo-political and religious conditions in the East were rather nebulous, and Baghdad was simply an iconic city representing 'otherness.' Marco Polo himself comments about it in a rather unspecific manner: 'In Baghdad, which is a very large city, the Caliph of all the Saracens in the world has his seat, just as the head of all the Christians in the world has his seat at Rome' (51).

REINFRIED VON BRAUNSCHWEIG

We have available a long list of other passages in Middle High German literature where the narrators included some comments on Persia, either as a location where luxury items had originated from (*Mai und Beafloer*), or as a major kingdom/empire in antiquity to which a chronicler felt obliged to refer (*Ottokar, Österreichische*

Reimchronik). However, in most cases, Persia appears only fleetingly, maybe as a kind of marker on a mental map which extended also beyond the Holy Land. For instance, the figure of the King of Persia, Arofel, is mentioned once in Ulrich von Liechtenstein's *Frauendienst* (all late thirteenth-century), and in the *Jüngere Titurel* by the poet Albrecht (perhaps von Scharfenberg) another Persian prince joins a tournament and gains much acclaim for his knightly accomplishments. In Wirnt von Grafenberg's *Wigalois* we are even told of the Queen of Persia. Beyond that, there are all kinds of additional allusions to that country in heroic epic poems, in Arthurian tales, in courtly love poems, and other genres.³⁷

Persia gains true importance only in the anonymous but expansive romance, *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, from the late thirteenth century. The protagonist embarks on a crusade to the Holy Land and personally decides the final battle through his victory over a Persian prince who was allied with the Muslim forces. For our purposes, this scene with the two protagonists fighting against each other, the prince at the end begging for his life – just like Arofel in Wolfram's *Willehalm* – and Reinfried ultimately realizing that he would not gain much at all from killing his opponent or from forcing him to convert to Christianity, deserves closer analysis.³⁸ Previous scholarship has already recognized here a remarkable situation in which a definite element of toleration enters the picture because it suddenly dawns upon Reinfried that it would be pointless, if not even foolish, to force a heathen to accept the Christian faith. He would only create a false Christian through that process, deeply hurt and embarrass

³⁷ The *Mittelhochdeutsche Begriffsdatenbank* (Salzburg) lists a total of 638 passages in medieval German literature containing references to Persia.

<<http://mhdadb.sbg.ac.at/mhdadb/App;jsessionid=562A5F3B3112296890B222FD7DCF63E0?action=TextQueryModule&string=Persia&filter=&texts=%21&startButton=Suche+starten&contextSelectListSize=1&contextUnit=1&verticalDetail=3&maxTableSize=100&horizontalDetail=3&nrTextLines=3>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

³⁸ *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, ed. by Karl Bartsch, trans. by Elisabeth Martschini, 3 vols (Kiel: Solivagus-Verlag, 2018).

the prince, and create more aggression and hostility than to gain a new convert to the own religion.³⁹

Undoubtedly, the anonymous poet drew heavily from Wolfram's *Willehalm*, both in his characterization of the Persian prince (here unnamed) and in the description of the battle between Christians and Muslims. However, the defeated opponent is not killed; instead, the two men engage in a lengthy conversation and then basically develop a friendship with each other, whereupon the two embark on a lengthy touristic journey through Persia where Reinfried has the opportunity to witness many of the typical miracles and wonders of the East.

In contrast to Wolfram's *Willehalm*, the anonymous poet makes a great effort to provide us with background information about this Persian prince, here identified as a king. Despite his young age, he stands out in his boldness, courage, energy, and good character (vol. 2, 16749–53). Intriguingly, the poet then goes one step further and specifies that he is Arofel's son, whom Willehalm had slain. Whatever praise on a worthy man any medieval poet might have heaped, here we are presented with the finest character in ethical, moral, and social terms, although he is a heathen and an enemy of the Christians.

Moreover, we also learn that he is the master of the Caucasus mountains, which consist of pure gold (16766–67), and he uses this enormous resource to demonstrate nearly endless generosity. While many other individuals either do not have the necessary means at hand to display such generosity, or are too miserly to follow that ideal, this king spends freely and rewards everyone who might be worthy of it: 'er sô keiserlîchen warp | daz sîn lop noch nie verdarp | und mac verderben niemer' (16813–

³⁹ Albrecht Classen, 'Tolerance in the Middle Ages? The Good Heathens as Fellow Beings in the World of *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, Konrad von Würzburg's *Partonopier und Meliur*, and *Die Heideninne*', in *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik*, 61 (2006), 183–223; Albrecht Classen, 'The Crusader as Lover and Tourist: Utopian Elements in Late Medieval German Literature: From *Herzog Ernst* to *Reinfried von Braunschweig* and *Fortunatus*', in *Current Topics in Medieval German Literature: Texts and Analyses (Kalamazoo Papers 2000–2006)*, ed. by Sibylle Jefferis, Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 748 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 2008), pp. 83–102; Albrecht Classen, *Religious Toleration in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: An Anthology of Literary, Theological, and Philosophical Texts* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), pp. 24–27, with an English translation of the relevant passage.

15; he acted so much like an emperor that his praise was never hurt and will never be damaged).⁴⁰ Young Arofel, as we might call him, has demonstrated his great leadership qualities both with the help of his sword (militarily) and with his virtuous generosity (1619–21). The poet can hardly limit himself in his profuse praise of this young man, the best among the entire world of heathendom (16828), who perfectly fulfills the role of the ideal ruler, demonstrating justice to poor and rich, being a strong defender of his people, and beloved by all women far and wide.

For the narrator, the contrast between Arofel and most other princes in the West sheds a highly negative light on the latter, and we are actually presented with sharp criticism of the general malaise in the aristocratic circles in Europe, while the Persian receives highest praise: 'des wart sîn tugentrîcher lîp | durch al die welt gerüemet' (16928–29; for this reason, this virtuous man was extolled throughout the world). When he prepares himself for the fight with Reinfried, the narrator hastens to present Arofel as the most glorious knight equipped with outstanding armor and weapons, identifying him as a most worthy champion of courtly love, with the classical formula inscribed on it: 'amor vincit omnia' (17119; love conquers all), originally coined by Virgil in his *Eclogue X*. The fact that it is written in Heathen (Arabic), Latin, and German (17120), however, remains an idiosyncrasy by the poet. To be sure, he becomes thereby a most sympathetic figure virtually anyone among the contemporary audience could easily identify with. Although not a Christian, Arofel strongly appeals to the fundamental ideals and values of medieval chivalry and knighthood.

Nevertheless, Reinfried is similarly matched and receives the narrator's highest praise as well, so these two knights emerge as equal opponents, both in character and in physical appearance, in ethical values and social status. Not surprisingly, their joust then pits two virtually perfect and ideal fighters against each other, neither one of them being able at first to overcome the other, which proves to be a close parallel to the joust between Feirefiz and Parzival in Wolfram's grail romance. But, as to be

⁴⁰ All translations from *Reinfried* are my own.

expected, Reinfried ultimately wins, and when Arofel lies before him on the ground, he could have killed him. Yet they engage in a conversation, and soon reach an agreement. When Reinfried then even forgoes his original plan to force the Persian to convert to Christianity, there is no longer any conflict between them, and the two strike a friendship that lasts to the very end of the romance.

As soon as everything is peacefully settled, Arofel embraces Reinfried in a loving fashion (17821) and begs him to join him on a touristic journey through Persia. He balks, however, at the idea of being forced to convert and asks Reinfried to imagine how such a situation would make Reinfried look among his own people, if he had accepted, because of external pressure, the Islamic faith. Both his family and people would suffer 'laster und unêre' (17854; shame and loss of honor), an argument which Reinfried can easily accept, so he quickly changes his mind and no longer requests this action by Arofel, which then removes all remaining conflicts between both men. Reinfried subsequently receives the Holy Land for Christianity, restores all the religious sites, and re-establishes the churches, while he enjoys highest respect by the Persian king and all of the heathendom for his leadership qualities (18214–15).

Even though the poet spends some time discussing the various sites in Palestine, once Reinfried has settled his affairs there and has appointed worthy administrators, he and his friend embark on a really important journey, the voyage across the Persian Empire. Arofel has already demonstrated impatience and asked him intensively to come along with him because there are so many wonders to see (18188–19). What Persia really means, however, remains rather murky; the narrator only comments on the direction they take: 'lant gën Persyâ' (18199; through many lands toward Persia). We know that Arofel is the absolute ruler there, but other details remain elusive.

In fact, from here on, things become rather unspecific, with Persia itself not emerging as a specific country. Instead, we learn about many wonders and miracles there, very much in the tradition of late antique and medieval monster lore. There is the mysterious mountainous region, the Caucasus, with all of its gold and griffins,

then there are giants, the Amazons, monsters, and many other aspects. Reinfried constantly inquires about further wonders, and is most anxious to find out what might happen next, so when he tells the Persian king: “wist ich waz gensît wære | dem gebirge”, sprach der degen, | “sô müest ich hôhes muotes pflügen” (18324–26; ‘If I knew about what is on the other side of the mountains’, said the hero, ‘it would greatly please me’). Arofel feels more than obliged to comply with this wish, so the touristic travel continues for thousands of verses that do not need to be examined here. The narrator simply defines all those countries in the distant East, that is, well beyond the Holy Land, as part of the Persian empire, but he does not go into further details.

There is, however, one significant comment later on that sheds important light on the overall political structure as projected by the anonymous poet. Fairly at the end, a messenger from Brunswick arrives to find his lord and to inform him that his wife back home has delivered a baby boy and that she would want him to return again. The messenger particularly seeks out the ‘bâruc’ (23912; Baruch) because he knows that Reinfried had spent some time at his court. Deeply frustrated over his failure to track down his lord, he relates to the Baruch what he himself knows about Reinfried’s travels; i.e., that he had left the Holy Land and gone to Persia (23940–41). The messenger had followed those tracks, but still missed his lord, who had obviously continued with his journey moving into new territories even further east, but those are not defined in any detail by the narrator and belong, at any rate, to the category of the monster lore and the discourse on the exotic East. However, the messenger also emphasizes that he searched out the Baruch because Arofel is his grandson (23954–55). This thus allows us to argue that already in Wolfram’s *Parzival* (ca. 1205) the land controlled by the Baruch, in whose service Gahmuret (the protagonist’s father) had entered, was supposed to be part of Persia.

Yet, here, the Baruch can only confirm that ‘der hôhgemuot Persân’ (23979; the highly spirited Persian) had traveled, together with his friend, into the country of the Pygmies, where Reinfried then killed a dangerous giant, after which the two men had moved on, without the Baruch knowing anything of their whereabouts. In fact, he

assumes that both have died, which is not true of course, but it indicates that for him there is a vast geographic openness toward the East which not even he can fathom. At that very moment, another messenger arrives with a letter from both the Persian and Reinfried confirming that they are well, which returns general happiness to everyone. The German messenger then sends instructions to Reinfried's army, which the prince had left behind in Persia (24197), to come to join them, obviously in the Baruch's empire, Baldac, which confuses the geo-physical map projected by the poet considerably for the western audience.

Nevertheless, we can conclude that the notion of Persia as a mighty kingdom or empire with a most noble ruler and a respectable culture clearly emerges in this narrative, although the details remain rather obfuscated because the account about the wonders matters more than any possible further comments about Persia itself. Arofel and his people pay greatest respect to Reinfried and honor him profusely when he departs from the East in order to return home (27105–29). The Persians altogether are characterized as noble, chivalric, worthy, and completely comparable to the best people back in Christian Europe. The religious difference never matters in all of those comments, and the narrator concludes with general praise and a high level of recognition of Persia. Finally, Arofel heaps many exotic gifts on Reinfried and stays behind deeply grieved that he is losing his friend: 'Der Persân trûric hie belip' (27207; The Persian sorrowfully stayed behind).

KONRAD VON WÜRZBURG

A near-contemporary, Konrad von Würzburg (d. ca. 1290), the author of numerous short verse narratives, several religious tales, a courtly romance about friendship (*Engelhard*), and the huge *Der trojanische Krieg* (more than 40,000 verses, c. 1280), also composed a massive poem about the lives of two young lovers, Partonopier and Meliur, who have to go through many challenges and difficulties until the

circumstances prove to be right for them to marry.⁴¹ He is the heir of Anjou and Blois, she is the heir of Byzantium, but only once Partonopier has demonstrated through many struggles and ultimately also through his victories at a tournament that he is the right partner for Meliur, have all barriers been removed and can they marry. The protagonist faces, however, a serious contender for her hand: the Persian prince, Floridanz. We do not learn much more about him than in *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, but he is also portrayed as a most noble, worthy character who would have almost been chosen as Meliur's husband and thus as the successor to the throne. But religious concerns at the end prevent this from happening, in addition to Partonopier's victory over him, which then leads to a happy end for the lovers.

Similar to *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, religious differences at first hardly matter. Cultural or ethnic differences also do not play a significant role, which allows us to probe more deeply how Konrad views the Persian and why he included this figure.⁴² Again, Floridanz proves to be an outstanding knight who enjoys everyone's respect, including Partonopier's (15959–61), and the narrator profiles him in glowing terms: 'der küene soldân' (16235; the brave Sultan), suddenly merging the usual title of prince or king with the standard formula for a Muslim ruler, sultan. We find many examples of this, so when he praises him outright: 'ist ouch an êren vollekomen' (16915; he is also perfect in his honors), and 'an herzen unde an muote | ist der vil reine wandels frî' (16920–21; he is impeccable in his heart and mind and is an upright person). We also hear that the Persian prince would be willing to convert to Christianity, if that

⁴¹ Konrads von Würzburg, *Partonopier und Meliur*, ed. by Karl Bartsch, Deutsche Neudrucke (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970). For pan-European approaches, see the contributions to *Partonopeus in Europe: An Old French Romance and its Adaptations*, ed. by Catherine Hanley, Mario Longtin, and Penny Eley, *Mediaevalia*, 25.2 (2004); Rüdiger Brandt, *Konrad von Würzburg, Wege der Forschung*, 249 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987); Rüdiger Brandt, *Konrad von Würzburg: Kleinere epische Werke*, 2nd rev. edn, *Klassiker-Lektüren*, 2 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2009).

⁴² Albrecht Classen, 'The Encounter with the Foreign in Medieval and Early Modern German Literature: Fictionality as a Springboard for Non-Xenophobic Approaches in the Middle Ages: *Herzog Ernst*, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*, *Konrad von Würzburg*, *Die Heidin*, and *Fortunatus*', in *East Meets West in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Transcultural Experiences in the Premodern World*, ed. by Albrecht Classen, *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 14 (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), pp. 457–87 (pp. 471–75). All translations from Konrad's works are my own.

would help him to win Meliur's hand. Indeed, she is emotionally attached to him already, in clear conflict with her feelings for Partonopier (17336–41). For background, we also need to consider that Konrad identifies this prince as connected with Babylon (13340), and yet introduces him in the best possible terms as a courtly knight, exactly conforming to the highest ideals of the western world: 'der soldân ûf der minne solt I wolte ein vrouwen ritter wesen (13566–67; the sultan wanted to be a servant of courtly love, on behalf of a lady).

Although we cannot forget that Floridanz adheres to a non-Christian religion, the narrator always ranks him among the members of the highest nobility (14250); nevertheless, he does not engage in any further discussions about Persia as a kingdom. We are, though, left with an amazing imagination of a highly worthy and respectable courtly and chivalric culture there since Floridanz had almost been chosen as the successor to the Byzantine throne as Meliur's future husband.

PERSIA IN LATE MEDIEVAL GERMAN LITERATURE

In the late Middle Ages, the interest in Persia was also noticeable, but perhaps less so than in the previous examples. In the more or less first proto-novel in prose, *Fortunatus* (first printed in Augsburg in 1509), the protagonist has acquired through accident a miraculous purse that never becomes empty, which allows him to traverse the entire world out of curiosity. At the end, he also explores parts of Asia, after having received official permission to do so by the Sultan of Egypt. At first, he travels through the Empire of Persia, then the kingdom of Cham, and finally reaches India where he visits the legendary Prester John. Persia thus exists on the poet's mental map, but it does not receive any further attention despite the strong focus on travel facilitated by endless amounts of money.⁴³

⁴³ *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Jan-Dirk Müller, Bibliothek der frühen Neuzeit, 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990), p. 489. All translations from *Fortunatus* are my own.

We would face even more difficulties tracking down further references in similar prose novels, such as Thüring von Ringoltingen's *Melusine* (1456), although there Melusine's sons successfully operate in various parts of the eastern Mediterranean, including Turkey and Armenia.⁴⁴ And, turning to the sixteenth century, the interest in Persia seems to have dwindled even further. The only reference I am familiar with is contained in the anonymous *Historia D. Johann Fausten* (printed in 1587), a major representative of early modern German literature, where the protagonist can travel throughout the world with the help of the devil, who will eventually kill him and take possession of his soul. After having spent considerable time in various parts of Europe, Faustus also turns east. The list of his stop-overs, however, proves to be so perfunctory that the individual countries hardly matter, except that they fill a mental map: 'Engelland | Hispaniam | Franckreich | Schweden | Polen | Dennemarck | Jndiam | Aphrican | Persiam | etc.' (England, Spain, France, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, India, Africa, Persia, etc.).⁴⁵ Nevertheless, we should never ignore the fact that all these authors contributed in their own ways to mental maps of a wider, global world, even when they did not much more than to drop names of distant countries, cities, and peoples.

JOHANN SCHILTBERGER

Most impressively, one major 'travel' author, Johann Schiltberger, after having escaped in 1426 from a thirty-year long period of slavery in the Ottoman Empire and neighboring kingdoms following his capture at the battle of Nicopolis in 1396, provided considerably detailed reports also about Persia in his *Reisebuch* (travelogue). This has survived in ten manuscripts and was one of the earliest secular printed books in Germany (1461), which experienced numerous reprints far into the sixteenth

⁴⁴ *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 11–176.

⁴⁵ *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, p. 915.

century.⁴⁶ In his account, Schiltberger obviously drew extensively from other chronicles and travelogues and compiled a rather detailed list of data about the various kingdoms, rulers, cities, and geographical settings. Since he served various lords and was thus sent around the entire Middle East, he also had occasion to come across Persia, which he introduces later in a rather dry, if not dull manner:

The chief city of all the kingdoms of Persia is called Thaures. The king of Persia has a larger revenue from the city of Thaures, than has the most powerful king in Christendom, because a great many merchants come to it. There is also a kingdom in Persia, the capital of which is called Soltania. There is also a city called Rei, in a large country where they do not believe in Machmet as do other Infidels. They believe in a certain Aly who is a great persecutor of the Christian faith; and those of this doctrine are called Raphak.⁴⁷

We learn about rulers, cities, trade conditions, the relationship between Christians and Muslims, then also about an extraordinarily old man who is worshipped as a saint, the availability of gems, markets, mountains, and unicorns. Schiltberger also points out that Persia is an important transit country to reach India. To some extent, we recognize here the same focus as applied by Marco Polo in his *Travels*, and to some extent the interest of a historian, all of which is coupled with mythical accounts derived from the world of wonders. But, in contrast to the literary narratives, we hear nothing of an outstanding, noble, heroic, or chivalric Persian king, and at the same

⁴⁶ Johann Schiltberger, *The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schiltberger, a Native of Bavaria, in Europe, Asia, and Africa 1396–1427*, ed. by Karl Friedrich Neumann, trans. by J. Buchan Telfer (London: Hakluyt Society, 1879) <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/52569/52569-h/52569-h.htm#Page_44> [last accessed on 7 August 2021]; cf. Albrecht Classen, 'Global Travel in the Late Middle Ages: The Eyewitness Account of Johann Schiltberger', *Medieval History Journal*, 23.1 (2020), 1–28 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0971945819895896>>; Albrecht Classen, 'The Topic of Imprisonment in Medieval German Literature: With an Emphasis on Johann Schiltberger's Account About his 30-Year Enslavement in the East', *Studia Neophilologica*, 92.3 (2020), 315–27 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00393274.2020.1755362>>.

⁴⁷ Schiltberger, ch. 33.

time, the author refrains from resorting to the typical fictionalization of Persia seen during the Middle Ages as a location of luxuries, wonders, and miracles.

PERSIA AND THE GLOBAL MIDDLE AGES

Finally, what does that mean in terms of the emerging Global Medieval Studies? Recent scholarship has made great efforts to widen our perspectives, to move away from Eurocentrism and to include other medieval cultures in Asia, Africa, and the Americas as equally important in our global approach.⁴⁸ Literary scholars have followed suit and now are talking increasingly about global literature, and this also with respect to the pre-modern age.

However, none of those efforts, as welcome and important as they certainly are in modern political terms, have overcome the universal and systemic compartmentalization on the ground, which makes it extremely difficult, if not problematic, to compare, for instance, the Middle Ages in the kingdom of Mali with the Middle Ages in China or Peru. In fact, they achieve fairly little because in most cases there were no concrete connections, no direct exchanges, no practical or long-term associations, or communications, irrespective of some economic exchanges at certain meeting points, such as in the Black Sea.⁴⁹ Thematic comparisons as explored

⁴⁸ *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Global Medieval Life and Culture*, ed. by Joyce E. Salisbury, 3 vols (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 2009); *Weltdeutungen und Weltreligionen 600 bis 1500*, ed. by Johannes Fried and Ernst-Dieter Hehl, WBG Welt-Geschichte, III (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010); *The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies*, ed. by Mark Juergensmeyer, Saskia Sassen, and Manfred B. Steger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); *Universal History and the Making of the Global*, ed. by Hall Bjørnstad, Helge Jordheim, and Anne Régent-Susini, Routledge Approaches to History (New York and London: Routledge, 2019); *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Ken Seigneurie, 6 vols (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).

⁴⁹ Geraldine Heng and Lynne Ramey, 'Early Globalities, Global Literatures: Introducing a Special Issue on the Global Middle Ages', *Literature Compass* (2014), 1–6 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12156>>; Geraldine Heng, 'Reinventing Race, Colonization, and Globalisms across Deep Time: Lessons from the Longue Durée', *PMLA*, 130.2 (2015), 358–66; *Europa im Geflecht der Welt: Mittelalterliche Migrationen in globalen Bezügen*, ed. by Michael Borgolte, Bernd Schneidmüller, Julia Dücker, Marcel Müllerburg, and Paul Predatsch, *Europa im Mittelalter*, 20 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2015); Naomi Standen and Monica White, 'Structural Mobilities in the Global Middle Ages', *Past & Present*, 238, suppl. 13 (2018), 158–89; see also the studies collected in *Other Globes: Past and Peripheral Imaginations of Globalization*, ed. by

in the new online *Encyclopedia of the Global Middle Ages* reflect the currently rising awareness that we live in a global world today, but this does not mean that we can, therefore, assume the same for the Middle Ages.⁵⁰

Marco Polo, Odorico ad Pordenone, or Giovanni da Pian del Carpine were true globetrotters, so to speak, and they intensively interacted with the various peoples they encountered in the East. But their explorations did not lead to any forms of outreach from the Chinese or Mongols to the West, and we can hardly conceive of transculturality in that context. In fact, the anonymous author of *Fortunatus* (1509) explicitly states that it would be an absurdity for East Indians, for instance, trying to visit Europe because they would encounter dangerously inclement weather, bad food, and open hostility.⁵¹ The Japanese Middle Ages did not really begin until the late sixteenth century, predicated specifically on 'splendid' isolation. American medieval cultures have virtually nothing to do with the Europeans, whereas there were considerable trade contacts between the sub-Saharan kingdoms and the Mediterranean.⁵² Altogether, only when we take into considerations how intellectuals, artists, diplomats, medical doctors, and others endeavored to translate significant texts or ideas in other worlds for their own audiences, can we begin to talk meaningfully about Global Middle Ages in terms of images of other parts of the world positively associated and well-integrated into the western literary discourse.⁵³ To be upfront, however, all that I can do here is to embark on this topic from a European, specifically medieval German perspective, whereas I cannot yet address the global dimension in terms of intercultural contacts, for instance.

Simon Ferdinand, Irene Villaescusa-Illán, and Esther Peeren, *Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁵⁰ *Encyclopedia of the Global Middle Ages*, ed. by Simon Ford (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) <<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350990005>>.

⁵¹ *Romane des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, p. 491.

⁵² *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa*, ed. by Kathleen Bickford Berzock (Princeton: Princeton University Press; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵³ Albrecht Classen, 'India, Persia, and Arabia in the Mind of a Late Fifteenth-Century German Author: Transcultural Experiences through the Literary Discourse. Antonius von Pforr and His *Buch der Beispiele der Alten Weisen*', *Philological Quarterly*, 99.2 (2020), 119–45.

A significant contributor to this discourse, who also included Persia in his comments about the Middle East, was the anonymous author of the *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* (ca. 1350), who remarked that the Persians did not embrace any particular religion and simply adopted any faith which their neighbors or friends pursued.⁵⁴ It would be necessary to traverse Persia in order to reach India, and the Persians would try their hardest to block both monks and merchants on their way, though they could not prevent their travels altogether. They would impose high tariffs, but would get only little from the foreigners because they are subject to the emperor of Kathagien, meaning, the Mongol Khan, obviously a supporter of Christians (149). Although the narrator proves to be highly detailed whenever he turns to other parts in the Middle East, Persia remains strangely bland here.

Altogether, numerous Middle High German poets already projected the possibility of their protagonists traveling to Persia, interacting with the Persian king/emperor, and enjoying the marvels of Persia, as if they were already developing a form of globalism *avant la lettre*, at least from their own perspective. When seventeenth-century scholars in Europe embarked on studying the Persian language and literature, they certainly embraced more global concepts in spirit as well as in letter than their predecessors, and their nineteenth-century successors can be credited with that ideal as well, pursuing it much more forcefully.

How are we then to evaluate the references to the noble Persian King or to the exotic world of the Persian empire/kingdom in the various Middle High and early modern German texts? We can certainly not claim that Lambrecht, Wolfram, the anonymous poet of *Reinfried von Braunschweig*, or Konrad had a clear understanding of Persia, nor any direct travel experiences, apart from Johann Schiltberger. However, in their literary framework, they endeavored to open up a more global perspective and to project Persia as a significant country: Even though it was located far to the

⁵⁴ *Der "Niederrheinische Orientbericht": Edition und sprachliche Untersuchung*, ed. by Anja Micklin, *Rheinisches Archiv*, 14 (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2021).

east, well beyond the Holy Land, the values of courtly culture ruled supreme there as well.

Despite the religious differences – always duly noted – for the German poets who drew upon a variety of literary genres, the Persian world proved to be intriguing, fascinating, and surely worth their attention, and remarkably never in any negative terms. Even Schiltberger, although having suffered in slavery, provided nothing but factual information about Persia and refrained from commenting on that country from a subjective, negative perspective. Altogether, we face mostly literary imagination, but the fictional discourse already establishes a certain geo-political concept of Persia which facilitated the development in Europe of a medieval global perspective centered in western imagology, at least *in nuce*. The literary public was obviously extensively aware of Persia, however defined, as the many references in the textual examples discussed above indicate. The large number of literary texts in Middle High German including references to or comments about Persia strongly suggests that those poets reflected an opening-up of the medieval worldview and participated, at least in a rudimentary fashion, in what Goodman has called 'worldmaking' on a more global level.

Despite the religious differences, Persia emerged increasingly as a geographical operation platform for western protagonists, and the various audiences were encouraged to recognize in Persia a mighty and highly developed kingdom or empire located somewhere between India and the Holy Land where the European travelers would encounter a sophisticated, as well as materially, ethically, and morally superior world. We cannot yet talk about transculturality in these cases, but the examples discussed here certainly reveal a significant level of interculturality, and this already in the Middle Ages.

CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us then? We can reach several valuable insights from the many references to Persia in the history of medieval German literature, even though they appear to be rather loosely woven into the various narrative fabrics. Compared to those early modern (seventeenth century) and modern (nineteenth century) efforts at translating medieval Persian literature and traveling to Persia in diplomatic missions (Adam Olearius), the situation in the Middle Ages looked very different. And yet, we can now confirm that there was a considerable body of Middle High German literature and other narratives (mostly romances and other genres) in which Persia emerged as a country in the Middle East where western knights and other travelers would encounter a highly developed and sophisticated culture, determined by Islam, but nevertheless completely comparable to the one in the West. Courtly, chivalric, and knightly values were projected onto the Persians, especially the Persian king. But Persia was also associated with many miracles and wonders, which considerably increased its intrigue in touristic terms, if that might not be an anachronistic term.

Schiltberger certainly did not go there voluntarily, but the various poets discussed above happily incorporated a variety of references to Persia that indicate at least a certain level of familiarity with and interest in that country by the western writers, probably induced by classical learned literature (the Alexander myth) and influenced by a panoply of images of a mysterious, luxurious, highly-cultured, yet non-Christian empire. By contrast, both Marco Polo and Johann Schiltberger, who reported about their actual travels, provided concrete details concerning Persia, and the name of this country also appears, though in rather vague terms, on some of the medieval *mappae mundi*. We thus face a fascinating phenomenon of the amalgamation of factual and fictional imagination in the world of medieval and early modern German literature.

Although most members of the medieval audiences in the Holy Roman Empire might not have had a clear understanding of what Persia actually might have meant,

the Middle High German poets strongly insinuated to them that it represented an impressive, even though non-Christian civilization. Granted, we do not learn anything in concrete terms about Persians traveling to Europe, which limits the notion of 'globalism' considerably. Nevertheless, the medieval German imagology significantly opened a gateway toward the Persian East as an attractive, powerful, highly sophisticated, and cultured world.⁵⁵ To what extent these medieval sources later inspired early modern comments and reports about Persia (e.g., Olearius), cannot yet be determined, but I would suggest that we grasp here the emergence of an intriguing discourse from the early Middle Ages to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁶ Persophilia was certainly present already at a very early stage, as the various testimonies in medieval German literature have demonstrated.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See the contributions to *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, ed. by Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

⁵⁶ Albrecht Classen, 'Global History in the Middle Ages: A Medieval and an Early Modern Perspective. The *Niederrheinische Orientbericht* (ca. 1350) and Adam Olearius's *Vermehrte New Beschreibung der Muscovitischen vnd Persischen Reyse* (1647; 1656),' forthcoming in *Philological Quarterly*.

⁵⁷ I would like to express my gratitude to internal readers among the editorial staff and three anonymous outside readers of this paper. Their comments helped me to sharpen my arguments and to clarify some of my comments.