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**ANONYMOUS, *Sefer Toledot Aleskandros* [*Romance of Alexander the Great*]**

**In Hebrew, manuscript on paper**

**[Italy, or perhaps Spain, c. 1520]**

*35 folios, complete (collation i<sup>4</sup>, ii<sup>8</sup>, iii<sup>6</sup>, iv<sup>8</sup>, v<sup>4</sup>, last page tipped in), on paper (watermark close to Briquet 5923: échelle inscrite dans un cercle et surmonté d'une étoile, Florence, 1513-14), modern pagination 1-70 in black ink, in a Sephardic script, on 36 lines (written space 120 x 80 mm.), ruled in blind on versos (oddly for a different two-column text), lines filled out by lacunae instead of extending or condensing individual letters, catchwords on each folio in the lower gutter margin, catchwords for quires in cartouche form (e.g., p. 24), 2-line initial word panels without frames, first few leaves with minor defects and restorations, not affecting text, some damp-staining at the top affecting the first 7 to 10 lines, Bound in modern blind and gold-tooled red morocco, title and shelf mark on spine, two modern paper flyleaves back and front. Dimensions 250 x 140 mm.*

Unique version of the Romance of Alexander the Great in Hebrew, existing only in this single manuscript, which is closely related to a western European Latin version translated through an Arabic intermediary, suppressing certain Christian features of the tale, and with a distinguished provenance.

**PROVENANCE**

1. Written in the Mediterranean in a French-Spanish script on paper manufactured in the second decade of the sixteenth century in Italy and, therefore, possibly written in central Italy.
2. Daniel Itzig (1773-1799), Berlin, Germany, successful Jewish banker and book collector, his stamp on pp. 2 and 70.
3. London, Jews' College, their stamp, p. 2 (see Neubauer, no. 145, pp. 45-46), thereafter deposited in the Chief Rabbi's office, London, United Synagogue, Library of Beth Din.

4. Sale, New York, Christie's, *Important Hebrew Manuscripts and Printed Books from the Library of the London Beth Din*, 23 June 1999, lot 6.

## TEXT

This codex presents a unique version of the tale of the life of Alexander the Great, which exists only in this single manuscript. A compilation of two translations from the Arabic, the present text has been published and translated by van Bekkum. The first part (ff. 1-10) of the manuscript is similar to the translation added as an interpolation in the book *Josippon* (Interpolation B in Flusser's edition), and the second part is similar, but not identical, to the translation in Paris, BnF, MS héb. 671 (see Levy [1886] and Kazis [1962]). According to Van Bekkum the ex-London and Paris versions are of common origin, but the present manuscript more closely relates to a western European Latin original and may be a more reliable reflection of the Arabic intermediary than the Paris manuscript.

A colophon attributes the translation to Samuel ibn Tibbon (c. 1165-1232), a Provençal philosopher and theologian well known for his translations from the Arabic into Hebrew. Samuel was an enthusiastic supporter of Maimonides, whom he translated, and he wrote a commentary on the Bible. The text of the colophon (p. 70, f. 35v) reads: "This book has been completed and copied by the scholar and true searcher of the secrets of existence and wisdom, Rabbi Samuel, son of Rabbi Judah ibn Tibbon, of blessed memory, from Granada, Spain, and he copied it in the days that he [also] copied 'The Guide' [for the Perplexed=Maimonides] that cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir. Some people possess this book in the version of Al-Harizi, full of errors, because he copied it from the [left blank] language and the aforementioned perfect copyist copied it from the Arabic language into the Hebrew language. May his reward be complete!" From the nineteenth century to the present day, scholars have unanimously doubted the authenticity of the colophon (cf. Steinschneider, 1893, p.; Flusser, 1957, p. 168, and 1978; Kazis, 1962, pp. 31-33; and van Bekkum, p. 23). However, the colophon remains interesting for several reasons, and, even if the attribution is fanciful, it should nonetheless be taken seriously. It fits with the fact that Samuel, who traveled widely, went as far as Alexandria. It confirms what appears to be true from a study of the text: that this manuscript is closer to the Latin transmission of the Alexander Romance than most other extant versions. And, it lends credence to the theory of van Bekkum, who was able to show that "not only the London and Paris versions of the Alexander Romance but also their Arabic predecessor originate from a western European country" (p. 33).

Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.E.) of Macedonia established a great empire that extended from Greece through Asia Minor and even into Pakistan. Perhaps his vast realm accounts in part for his wide influence. The Romance of Alexander the Great was the most widespread and popular tale of classical antiquity in the Middle Ages (versions exist in 80 languages), being taken up by Arabic, Persian, Judaic, and Indian cultures as well as western

Christendom, as opposed to the stories of Homer, Virgil, or those of the Roman emperors, which remained confined to Greek or Latin audiences. This diffusion is explained partly by the continuing relevance of the real Alexander's role in unifying the Mediterranean and Iranian world, but also owed a lot to the purely legendary additions to his story, in which he set out to discover the earthly paradise and the secret of eternal life. There is a complicated history of the spread of the different versions, some being translated directly from Greek into Latin, while others are presumed to have been translated into Arabic from Syriac and possibly passing through Hebrew intermediaries before being translated into Latin. Two main sources are worth citing, because most versions go back to one or the other: first, the Pseudo-Callisthenes written in Greek in the third century C.E.; and second the *Historia de Preliis*, the Latin translation of c. 950 attributed to Leo, the archbishop of Naples.

Whereas Alexander became for the medieval Latin West a model of heroic kingship and one of the Nine Worthies, along with Hector, Judas Maccabees, Charlemagne, and King Arthur, for Jewish culture he was a ruler who recognized their society and protected their ancestral traditions. For example, one episode tells of Alexander's visit to the High Priest in Jerusalem, when he granted the right of the people to keep the Torah, not change their precepts, and ordered the tribute that had been imposed on them every seven years to be removed (p. 14, f. 28). It is said that he had more influence on the development of Judaism than any one individual not a Jew. The ex-London manuscript emerges as an excellent study-piece for the exchanges between Latin and Hebrew cultures in the secular sphere in the Middle Ages.

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