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ONLY THE GOOD DIE YOUNG.
THE DAY OF ALEXANDER'S DEATH
IN THE *ALEXANDER ROMANCE**

In the tradition of the *Alexander Romance* (or Pseudo-Callisthenes), Alexander's death is in reality the tale of a murder by the hands of his courtiers, led by Antipater, afraid of being replaced because of an animosity with Olympias. The king's last moments (Ps.-Callisth. III 33) are inserted in an apocalyptic frame: the sky darkens, the earth trembles, the statue of Zeus moves, a star drowns in the sea and then returns to the sky. What follows, in the text, after the narration of his burial in Alexandria (III 34), is the list of the cities he has founded and the summary of his life (III 35).

In *recensio* α we read ἐγεννήθη μὲν οὖν Τύβτι τῇ νεομηνία ἀνατολῆς οὐσῆς, ἐτελεύτησε δὲ Φαρμοῦθι τετράδι δύσεως (KROLL, *Historia*, 146). Unluckily, we have only one manuscript of this version in Greek (A = Par. gr. 1711, 10th century), which is very badly preserved in the final folios of the text (these words are in the lower margin of f. 427^v), and it is unclear whether there was a continuation of this passage in what now has been lost. Τύβτι and Φαρμοῦθι are respectively the fifth and the eighth month of the ancient Egyptian calendar. For the purpose of this article it is not important to discuss the historicity of these dates¹: what is important is that he is born at dawn and dies at dusk, in a very symbolic solar image.

This is how the passage reads in the later versions:

recensio β – 5th century²:

ἐγεννήθη μὲν ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος μηνὶ Ἰαννουαρίῳ νεομηνία, ἀνατολῆς οὐσῆς ἡλίου, ἐτελεύτησε δὲ μηνὶ Ἀπριλλίῳ νεομηνία, δύσεως οὐσῆς ἡλίου. καὶ ἐκάλεσαν τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς τελευτῆς αὐτοῦ νεομαγα διὰ τὸ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον νέον τετελευτηκέναι.

|| 3 νεομαγα **KL** : νεομέγα **B** : νεομάγα **VS** : def. **F**

* My thank goes to Professors A. Sirinian and D. Tripaldi for their linguistic help in the writing of this article.

¹ It is my intention to work on this topic in a future article.

² Ed.: BERGSON, *Alexanderroman*, 191. Mss. **B** = Par. gr. 1685; **F** = Laur. 70,37; **K** = Mosq. mus. hist. 436; **V** = Vat. gr. 1556; **S** = Par. suppl. gr. 690; **L** = Leid. vulc. 93.

recensio λ – 7th/8th century³:

ἐγεννήθη δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ θαυμαστός ἐν μηνὶ Ἰαννουαρίῳ νεομηνία ἀνατολῆς ἡλίου. ἐτελεύτησε δὲ μηνὶ Ἀπριλλίῳ νεομηνία δύσεως ἡλίου, καὶ ἐκάλεσε τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς τελευτῆς αὐτοῦ νεομηνία διὰ τὸ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον νέον τελευτῆσαι.

|| 3 νεομηνία **WP** : def **OU** : om. **HGN**

recensio γ – after 9th century⁴:

ἐγεννήθη δὲ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος μηνὶ Ἰαννουαρίῳ νεομηνία ἀνατολῆς οὐσῆς ἡλίου. ἐτελεύτησε δὲ μηνὶ Ἀπριλλίῳ νεομηνία δυσικοῦ ὄντος ἡλίου. καὶ ἐκάλεσαν τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς τελευτῆς αὐτοῦ νεόμαγα διὰ τὸ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον νέον τετελευτηκέναι.

|| 3 νεόμαγα **RD** : νεομαχία **C**

The Egyptian months are changed into Julian months⁵, and Alexander's birth is still set during the new moon and at dawn, and his death at dusk. Clearly, for what concerns the name of Alexander's death day, the scribes did not understand the passage. It is the explanation «because Alexander had died young» that makes the word νεομάγα/νεομέγα/νεομαχία/νεομηνία incomprehensible: νεο- indeed indicates youth, but none of the endings have anything to do with death⁶.

I suggest the possibility that under this word lies a much older syntagm, of Egyptian origin. Let us start with a phonetic analogy: in Egyptian the verb *mnj* (Coptic ⲙⲟⲛⲛⲉ) bears a clear assonance with the Greek μηνία. *Mnj* has the first meaning of «landen», and the second of «sterben»⁷, with the idea of landing on the other side, traversing a land to reach another one. As early as the *Pyramid Texts*⁸, we find the expression (*n*) *hrw* (*n*) *mnj*⁹, literally meaning «(in the) day of landing», thus, by extension, «(in the) Tag des Sterbens, Todestag». It emerges, I suggest, that the expression (*n*) *hrw* (*n*) *mnj* as a whole could be phonetically connected with

³ There is not yet a published edition of the final words of the *Romance* in this version. I plan to publish it in the near future as result of my PhD thesis. Mss. **O** = *Barocc.* 23; **U** = *Ath. Iber.* 165; **H** = *Holkham.* gr. 99; **G** = *Marc.* gr. cl. II 1290; **W** = *Vat.* gr. 171; **P** = *Auct.* T.5.21 (*misc.* gr. 283); **N** = *Ambr.* O 117 sup.

⁴ Ed.: PARTHE, *Alexanderroman*, 458. Mss. **R** = *Barocc.* 20; **C** = *Par.* suppl. gr. 113; **D** = *codex Venetus* AEIB n. 5 di San Giorgio dei Greci.

⁵ Usually, Tybi corresponds to May, and, incidentally, Alexander was born in July.

⁶ Already TAŠEAN, *Stoyn-Kalist'eneay*, 197 considers this word a *mrelcowac* (enigm).

⁷ ERMAN, GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch*, II, 73f.

⁸ For literary and epigraphical attestations, see ERMAN, GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch, Belegstellen* II/1, 108f.

⁹ It bears to note that (*n*) *hrw* (*n*) *mnj* finds a parallel with the wide-spread demotic syntagm *hrw* (*n*) *mwt* 'day of death' (*The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* [CDD], H 74).

νεομηνία. My hypothesis is that the Greek tradition could have acted in a double way: on a first level, this sentence was verbally translated with τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς τελευτῆς, and on a second level *μη/μοο*ne was phonetically associated with *μηνία* and (*n*) *hrw* (*n*) with *νεο-*. Thus the reading *νεομηνία* was formed, which could be considered as the original Greek¹⁰ – a parallel, also, with the *νεομηνία* which appears immediately before. From this Greek ‘re-assembly’ of the word, the paraetymology διὰ τὸ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον νέον τετελευτηκέναι. This is indeed an explanation based on the signifier (*νεο* → *νέον*), but it could have been helped by the Egyptian phonetic assonance between the concepts of landing (*mnj*), dying (*mw[t]*) and rejuvenation (*m3j*¹¹; cf. also demotic *ir m3y* ‘to become new’: *CCD M 14*) and, also, by a conceptual assonance with well-known Egyptian eschatological ideas: to be dead is to become young again¹², and the human body rejuvenates after dying, as the sun does, an *imitatio Solis* which can be found in Egyptian culture since the first funerary texts, «a cyclical course of life, return to the origin, overcoming death, consummation as conception, and restoration through (re)birth»¹³.

The problem with this suggestion is that this word does not appear in *recensio α*, which is the version compiled in Alexandria in the 3rd century AD, but the only manuscript of this recension extant in Greek is not well preserved. The ancient translations of *α*, specifically the Latin version of Iulius Valerius (4th century) and the Armenian translation (5th century), can be helpful in this sense. In the Armenian version, we read «his army called that day sacred because of Alexander who died young» (WOLOHOJIAN, *Romance*, 159)¹⁴; the Latin has *obitus tamen eius diem*

¹⁰ There is, obviously, the problem of the readings of the other manuscripts. I believe the starting point is always the difficulty, for the scribe, to understand the passage and the word that did not make sense. 1) *νεομάγα*(v), the most ancient reading (in ms. S, of the 11th century): *-αγ-* could be a misreading of *-ην-*, in early minuscule writing, but I believe the use of *νεομάγα* is more to be ascribed to the idea of the *μάγοι*, protagonists of the earlier chapters (III 30, with a Chaldean prophetizing the death of Alexander), and of magic in general, completely accepted and acceptable in a text such as the *Romance*; 2) *νεομέγα*: this term (found in B alone) could either be a variant of *νεομάγα* or a word-play on the adjective *μέγας*, clearly linked to ὁ μέγας Ἀλέξανδρος; 3) *νεομαχία*: the term could derive from *νεομάγα* with both a simple palaeographical reading of *γ* as *χ* and an attempt to create a word which could in any case be referred to a warrior king.

¹¹ ERMAN, GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch II*, 25f. For literary and epigraphical attestations, see ERMAN, GRAPOW, *Wörterbuch, Belegstellen II/1*, 40f.

¹² For a similar word-meaning game, see Horap. *Hier.*, I 21 1f. (Νεῖλου δὲ ἀνάβασις σημαίνοντες, ὃν καλοῦσιν αἰγυπτιστὶ Νοῦν, ἐρμηνευθὲν δὲ σημαίνει νέον, ποτὲ μὲν λέοντα γράφουσι).

¹³ ASSMANN (transl. D. LORTON), *Death and Salvation*, 174.

¹⁴ Incidentally, it bears noticing that in Armenian (T^{REANC}, *Patmowt' iwn*, 186 and SIMONYAN, *Patmowt' iwn*, 351) the incriminated word is նուիրաւ (*nowirac*), past par-

etiam nunc Alexandriae sacratissimum habent (ROSELLINI, *Res gestae*, 187). Neither of these passages are the direct translations of the wording of the *recensiones* β-λ-γ, but both of them show that α probably had an additional sentence, after the last surviving ones in cod. A, which mentioned the day of Alexander's death as a day that was celebrated.

I do not intend to restore an original text: in fact, I do not believe that in a work such as the *Alexander Romance* it is even right or possible to speak about an 'original', as it is part of a 'popular' literature which cannot be treated by traditional philological methods. What I intended to show is that it is possible that also the final, wrongly interpreted and differently written words are a further proof¹⁵ of the Egyptian environment in which the core of the *Romance* was originally conceived.

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ticiples of the verb $\epsilon\mu\iota\lambda\eta\mu\epsilon\iota$ (*nowirel*), 'to offer, to sanctify', ἀγιάζω, καθαγιάζω (NBHL, 452). Here again, whilst the explanation of the word («because of Alexander who died young») has nothing to do with the word itself, on a phonetical level we still find the /neo/ or /nu:/ sound as its first element.

¹⁵ Only to mention one of them, the *Romance* opens with the so-called *Nectanebus Romance*, the history of the last Egyptian pharaoh and, allegedly, Alexander's real father: there probably existed a sort of Egyptian *Nectanebus Romance*, as can be inferred from the beginning of the *Alexander Romance* itself; the so-called *Demotic Chronicle*, a series of difficult oracles dated to the third century BC; and a 2nd century BC Greek papyrus [UPZ 1 81 (= Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities I 396 + Leiden, National Museum of Antiquities P. d'Anastasi 67)]; as well as from a Demotic original (Copenhagen, Carlsberg Papyrus Collection P. 562 Vo.) often called the *Nectanebus Dream*, where the pharaoh has a dream in Memphis and acts accordingly. On the Egyptian background of the *Alexander Romance* the bibliography is very extent. Just to mention a few fundamental texts, see FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, I, 676-687: 676f., JOUANNO, *Naissance et métamorphoses*, 57-125 (with bibliography), STONEMAN, *Romanzo di Alessandro*, I, XLVIII-LV.

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