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HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FIGURE OF DHUL-QARNAYN IN SURAH AL-KAHF

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Abstract

The identity of Dhul-Qarnayn in Surah Al-Kahf has been a perennial debate between Alexander the Great and Cyrus the Great. This study aims to reconstruct Dhul-Qarnayn's identity historically and validate his travel route using a topographical approach. This study uses critical historical methods and a comparative study of interpretations (classical and modern) combined with geographical data. The analysis shows that the characteristics of Cyrus the Great are more in line with the Qur'anic description of a just monotheist leader than Alexander, who worshipped many gods. The topographical approach identifies the "black muddy sea" and the "gap between two mountains" with geographical locations in the Caucasus region and the western border of Persian rule. This study emphasizes the importance of combining archaeological and geographical data in understanding the historical narrative of the Qur'an.

Keywords: Dhul-Qarnayn; Ya'juj and Ma'juj; Al-Kahf; Alexander the great; Cyrus II.

INTRODUCTION

The story of Dhul-Qarnayn is a classic verse of the Quran that has also been told in other holy books, such as the Old and New Testaments. In the Koran itself, the story started with his wandering, stated in Surah Al Kahf, verses 83-98 (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.). Dhul-Qarnayn's story was already known in the Syrian version of the 'Alexander Legend', which also refers to the older civilizations, such as Jewish or even Egyptian culture (Donzel & Schmidt, 2009).

Dhul-Qarnayn is one of the most debatable figures in Surah Al Kahf. Some scholars believe that Dhul-Qarnayn was the Persian emperor, Cyrus, who was also called "Israel liberator" by Jews and was popular amongst the Arabs as Khai Khosroe (Pratama, 2015). Cyrus II, or Cyrus the Great, was the Achaemenid Persian King. He was famous for his policy of preserving the nation's local identity, which had been conquered by the Persian army, and for guarding it at any cost (Kaziewicz & Bauer, 2013).

According to the Old Testament of the Bible, Cyrus II was mentioned in Ezra 1:2, when he told his people that he had been appointed by the God of heaven to build the temple of God in Jerusalem in Judah (*Old Testament Bible*, n.d.). Therefore, he is a famous figure in Jewish history, and the Jewish people assigned him the title "the anointed of the Lord" (Ducksters, 2026). The Jews were hunted, killed, and destroyed in the Persian civilization before Cyrus II. However, he proposed that Jewish people return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. Over 40,000 Jews were moved from Egypt to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, they become enemy with the residents surrounding the area: Arab, Philistine, and Ammonite (Charles N. Pope, 2021).

The Koran does not address this issue. Nevertheless, it states "the Two-horned one" in Surah Al Kahf, and Yusuf Ali interpreted this statement as "King with Two Horns", who had territory from the East to the Western world, and so he assumed that Dhul-Qarnayn was Alexander the Great (Ali A. Y., 1968).

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Figure 1. Two sides of a coin from the Hellenistic Greek period (305-281 BC). Alexander was portrayed with a horn (Nissan & Zuckermann, 2015).

Literally, the Arabic word Dhul-Qarnayn means a person with two horns, or a person with two braids: left and right, west and east. This term refers to connotative, denotative, or even symbolic meaning (Hak, 2012). Raghib mentioned that some scholars viewed Dhul-Qarnayn as Alexander the Great because Alexander's kingdom stretched from west to east. Many contemporary scholars, such as Ibn Sina, also believed that he was a great king. However, others were not entirely sure, since Alexander was a follower of Aristotle, which made him a polytheist and an unbeliever. While some other experts assumed that Dhul-Qarnayn was indeed a prophet, insufficient data were provided, and one hadith narrated by Abu Dawood stated that even the Prophet Muhammad did not know whether Dhul-Qarnayn was a prophet (Sukdaven & Ahmed, 2017). According to Yaqut al-Hamawi, Dhul-Qarnayn was the first Alexander, not Alexander the Great, as the first was a follower of Prophet Moses and Khidr, a fortress builder, and could explore places others could not. The gap between the first Alexander and the last one (Alexander the Great) is huge enough. Ibn Kathir agreed with this idea, adding that the first Alexander is a believer and student of Prophet Khidr, while the last is a nonbeliever and student of Aristotle. The gap year itself is approximately 2000 years (Hak, 2012; Ibnu Katsir, n.d.; Yaqut ibn-'Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi, n.d.).

Some mufaseer believed that Dhul-Qarnayn was the son of Marzaban, son of Marzabat al-Yunani, son of Yafit, son of Noah. It was also mentioned that there were four biggest emperors in the world, two believers (moslem) and two non-believers (kafeer). The two believers were Solomon and Dhul-Qarnayn, while the kafeers were Nimrod, king of the Mesopotamian Kingdom, and Nebuchadnezzar II, emperor of New Babylon (Riddell, 2017).

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology that combines historical-critical methods with topographical analysis to connect written narratives with physical-geographical evidence. Unlike previous, more normative research, this study establishes a clear source boundary between classical and modern literature. Primary data sources include verses from Surah Al-Kahf and authentic hadith to establish theological parameters, while secondary sources are divided into two main categories: classical commentaries such as those by At-Tabari and Ibn Kathir to understand traditional interpretations, and modern scholarly works and recent archaeological journals that provide historical data on the Achaemenid and Macedonian Empires. The initial steps of the research began with a heuristic phase to gather artifactual evidence, such as the Cyrus Cylinder and ancient expedition records, followed by a process of source criticism to assess the moral and

theological credibility of candidate figures such as Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great (Nighat Shakur, 2022; Omar, Abdelgelil, & Aziz, 2019).

The operationalization of the topographical approach in this research was carried out concretely through spatial correlation techniques, in which geographical descriptions in the Quran were mapped into actual geomorphological contexts. Researchers analyzed the term 'ainin hami'ah (black muddy spring) by examining visual correspondences in coastal areas with mud volcanic activity or sedimentary swamps on the western border of the candidate figure's power. Furthermore, the identification of bayna as-saddayn (between two mountains) was carried out by examining strategic mountain passes, such as the Darial Gate in the Caucasus, using digital topographic data to verify whether these natural features allowed for the construction of iron and copper defensive structures as described in the text. Through this approach, historical and geographical data were synthesized using a comparative analytical framework to determine which figure was most consistent with spatial and ethical criteria. The final stage of the research concluded with the compilation of a historiography that systematically reconstructed Zulkarnain's journey, which not only answered the figure's identity but also provided a concrete spatial context for the narrative (Daneshgar, 2016; Dangor, 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Identity Analysis: A Historical Comparison of Cyrus the Great and Alexander the Great

This study's discussion of Dhul-Qarnayn's identity focuses on examining two primary candidates: Cyrus the Great of Persia and Alexander the Great of Macedonia. Based on theological analysis, Alexander's identification as Dhul-Qarnayn faces significant inconsistencies because historical records depict Alexander as a Greek polytheist who claimed to be the son of the god Zeus-Ammon (Sukdaven & Ahmed, 2017). Conversely, the Qur'anic narrative depicts Dhul-Qarnayn as a just, monotheistic ruler (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.). Cyrus the Great emerges as a stronger candidate through the evidence of the Cyrus Cylinder, which documents his policies of protecting Jewish monotheists and restoring their place of worship in Jerusalem, which align with prophetic values (Ducksters, 2026). The discovery of artifacts in the form of coins and a relief depicting Cyrus wearing a two-horned crown also provides important archaeological evidence for the title "Dhul-Qarnayn," or possessor of two horns (Daneshgar, 2016; Dangor, 2022; Omar et al., 2019). According to the Quran, Dhul-Qarnayn set out from his palace toward the place where the sun sets in the spring, or the ocean of black mud, surrounded by people (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.).

The exact location of black mud in the ocean is unknown. Meanwhile, sundown can be defined differently depending on each person's location. From the equatorial perspective, sunset always occurs in the west, while in middle latitudes it occurs in the northwest or southwest, depending on the observer's position. However, if Dhul-Qarnayn was believed to be Cyrus II, then the northwest path of the Kingdom would extend into Europe, ranging from the Black Sea to the North Sea. Interestingly enough, the Black Sea has mud volcanoes beneath its surface. They are at a depth of around 2000 m. These muds form small cones; some reach 120 m in height and are therefore called mud volcanoes (Shnyukov & Yanko-Hombach, 2020). These muds are rich in volatile gases, including methane, which could contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. The Black Sea would be the ideal location for a sunset from the Persian king Cyrus II's perspective (Adolph, Farke, Lehner, & Ehlers, 2018; Wikipedia, 2019).

On the other side, if Dhul-Qarnayn was the first Alexander or the last Alexander (Alexander the Great), then sunset from his point of view will be landed through North Sea. The Wadden Sea stretches from the Netherlands to Denmark, passing by Germany with a coastline of 500 km. It has peat deposits along its shore for up to 40 km, and the area is well known for its extensive tidal mudflats, believed to be remnants of a mangrove forest millions of years ago.

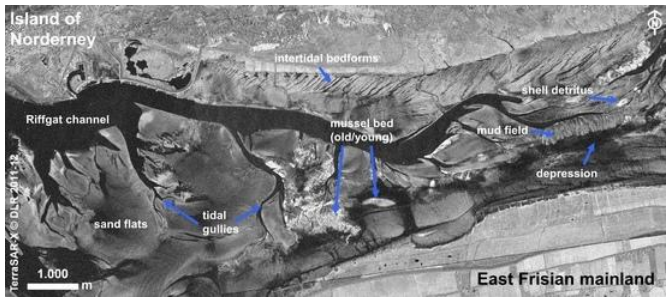

Figure 2. Mud Mapping of Wadden Sea (Adolph et al., 2018)

After that, Dhul-Qarnayn reached the second location, a place where the sun rises. If the sunset appeared in the west, then sunrise will be somewhere in Asia, spread from the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Around 300 BC, Japan, for example, was still a nomadic hunter-gatherer [23], society, and therefore the description matched Al Kahf 90, where it is stated that they had no knowledge of shield protection to protect them from the sun (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.).

Figure 3. Map of South China Sea to Pacific Ocean (Japan Forward, 2018)

Reevaluating the Travel Route Through Topographical Understanding

The implementation of a topographical approach provides new insights into Dhul-Qarnayn's journey, which had previously been viewed as merely allegorical. The initial journey westward, described as reaching a "black, muddy spring," has been geographically identified as a coastal location with hydrothermal activity or a dark swamp, similar to those found around the Black Sea or the Lydian region on the borders of the Persian Empire (Adolph et al., 2018; Wikipedia, 2019b). Meanwhile, the description of the eastward journey to a group unprotected from the sun evokes the bare, low-lying plains of Central Asia or the eastern steppes. This analysis demonstrates that the descriptions in the Quran possess spatial accuracy that can be verified through scientific methods (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.; Brown, 2008).

During the 500 BC period, if Dhul-Qarnayn was believed to be Cyrus II, world civilizations were concentrated in only a few places. For Asia, that would apply only to North India and small areas in Southeast China. Interestingly enough, Southeast Asia at this time was no longer nomadic. They had already started to build homes during this age and transform themselves into the Iron Age (Time Maps, 2019a).

Figure 4. World Map of 500 BC [25]

Meanwhile, during this age, Oceania, including Australia, located in the Pacific Ocean, began using stone as a new tool. This condition covered most places of Asia, from Oceania to the wide mainland of Central Asia. According to the figure above, the existence of civilization is shown in green, red, and purple (Time Maps, 2019a).

According to TimeMaps (Time Maps, 2019b), at 2500 BC, the lifespan of the first Alexander, the civilizations had only emerged in three places: the Indus Valley of India, Egypt, and Mesopotami. If the first Alexander was believed to have lived during the age of Moses, he would likely have stayed in Egypt or Palestine, meaning he lived in the world's largest empire at the time.

Until then, Dhul-Qarnayn managed to reach the final destination according to Al Kahf, which is mentioned as "a place between two mountains" (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.). People in this place, still, according to the Quran, had almost no ability to communicate, and it was due to Ya'juj and Ma'juj, who always cause destruction in their land, and therefore, Dhul-Qarnayn made them a barrier between the mountains, which was created from iron bars (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.).

During that time, the advanced technology of forging iron into a powerful barrier was not known universally. This miraculous idea of an iron barrier had an obviously terrific grasp of the modern scientific concept behind it. Therefore, very few kingdoms would likely understand this technology, and it would be limited to the biggest civilization of that era, which made sense to those three kings.

Let's take a look at ancient Egyptian civilization. Around 3000 BC, the Egyptians discovered that mixing a small proportion of tin with copper ore produced bronze, and the period was called the Bronze Age. Bronze is harder in structure and more difficult to oxidize compared to non-alloy structure at that time (Marcia Wendorf, 2019).

In the Quran itself, Dhul-Qarnayn was named to pour a quantity of solid iron into molten copper (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.). It means that Dhul-Qarnayn had a deep knowledge of metallurgy and could formulate alloy mixtures on his own.

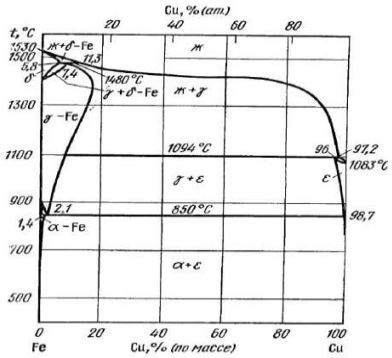

Figure 5. Copper Iron Alloy (Lukyanov et al., 2014)

As shown in the figure above, the Cu and α-Fe phases have very narrow solubility ranges, meaning that only a small amount of one can be dissolved in the other (Philip Howie, 2016). Copper was added to steel alloys to increase their corrosion resistance and improve strength through

precipitation hardening (Tom Chandler, 2025). As soon as the molten copper comes into contact with the solid iron, the molten metal migrates to the solid one. The same event also occurred during the dissolution of solid metal into molten copper, and it happened simultaneously. This interaction increased in line with temperature. In other words, the higher the temperature, the higher the chance of dissolution and penetration of both metals. The melting point of copper is 1085 ºC, while this paper reports the microstructure of Cu/Fe alloys at 1200 and 1300 ºC (Ishida, 1986).

Geomorphologically, the Darial Gate (on the present-day border between Georgia and Russia) is a naturally occurring vertical fissure formed by the Terek River, which cuts through granite rock formations in the Eastern Caucasus Mountains. Unlike typical mountain passes, the Darial Gate features extremely steep, high rock walls that reach 1,800 meters. It is known as the "Gates of the Caucasus" in ancient military defense mythology.

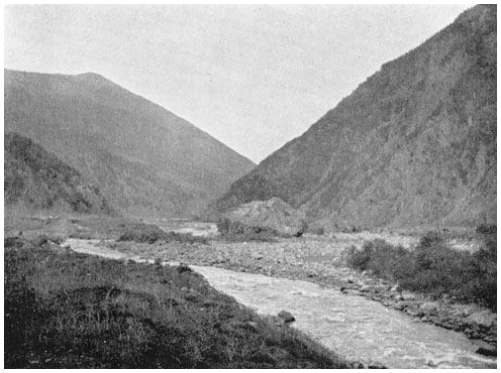

Figure 5. Darial Gate

The Darial Gate was crucial as it served as the only major migration and invasion route from the northern regions to the southern regions, such as West Asia. The rock structure in the Darial Gate area is dominated by very hard igneous rocks. This is supported by archaeomineralogical findings indicating that the Caucasus region is rich in iron and copper ores, which have been mined since 3000 BC. Therefore, the construction of a barrier using metallic materials (molten iron and copper) at this narrowing point of the cliff is technically very plausible.

Furthermore, the use of the descriptions "*bayna as-saddayn*" (between two barriers) and "as-sadafayn" (two mountains resembling shells) in Surah Al-Kahf can correspond to the topography of the Darial Gate, which resembles a narrow corridor with nearly impassable vertical stone walls, thus making it possible to construct a barrier at its midpoint to repel the invasion of Gog and Magog.

Comparative and Historical-Critical Approaches to the Darial Gate

Classical commentators (such as al-Tabari or Ibn Kathir) typically identified Gog and Magog as descendants of Yafith ibn Nuh, a nomadic group in northern Asia (Ibnu Katsir, n.d.). However, regarding the location of the barrier, classical interpretations were often speculative (Sinaga, 2022) or conflated various great walls (such as the Great Wall of China or the Wall of Derbent) due to the lack of geographical data at the time (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021).

Modern research (such as that by Abu al-Kalam Azad, supported by sources) (Daneshgar, 2016; Dangor, 2022; Muhammad & Kajee, 2021; Omar et al., 2019; Sukdaven & Ahmed, 2017) shifts the focus from Alexander the Great to Cyrus the Great as the figure of Dhul-Qarnayn. Unlike the stone Wall of Derbent, the Darial Gate is considered to best fit the Qur'anic description, as it is specifically referred to in ancient Armenian historical records as "Phak Korai" (Cyrus's Gate) and in Persian as "Aahni," meaning "made of iron/steel" (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021).

Historically, the northern Caucasus was inhabited by the fierce Scythians, who frequently raided the Medes and Persians in the 7th century BC (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021). It is the Scythians who are historically-critically identified as the Gog and Magog group encountered by Cyrus (Dhul-Qarnayn) (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021). The Qur'an mentions the use of iron pieces and molten copper (*qithran*) (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.; Ishida, 1986), and critical analysis shows that the Darial

Gate is located in the region of Georgia, which historically has the oldest tradition of iron metallurgy, making the procurement of large quantities of iron material (estimated at thousands of tons) logistically more feasible there than anywhere else (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021). The Qur'an mentions that the inhabitants there "barely understand speech" (*Al Quran Al Kareem*, n.d.). Historically, Georgian is an insular language with no connection to the Indo-European family, thus fitting the Qur'anic description of the communication barriers that Dhul-Qarnayn encountered upon his arrival in the Caucasus (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021).

Geomorphology of the Caucasus Gap and the Iron Wall of Gog and Magog

The most important point in the explanation above is the discovery of a gap between two mountains and the construction of a barrier wall. Based on topographic information and historical records, the Darial Gate in the Caucasus Mountains is the most geomorphologically suitable location for the construction of Dhul-Qarnayn's wall. This narrow gap was a primary route for the migration and invasion of nomadic tribes from the north, often referred to in writings as Gog and Magog, towards the civilized areas of the south (Muhammad & Kajee, 2021). The use of iron and molten copper metallurgy technology, mentioned in verse 96 of Surah Al-Kahf [1], demonstrates the advancement of ancient civil engineering and indicates that the Metal Age had arrived. Evidence of the remains of defensive fortifications in the Caucasus region supports the notion that the wall represents a legacy of past glory, built to protect the local population from the threat of attack, while also supporting the theory that Dhul-Qarnayn was a leader with political power and technological superiority for his time (Daneshgar, 2016; Dangor, 2022; Donzel & Schmidt, 2009; Hak, 2012; Ishida, 1986; Muhammad & Kajee, 2021; Omar et al., 2019; Pratama, 2015; Sukdaven & Ahmed, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, based on comparative-historical analysis and a topographical approach, Cyrus II, also known as Cyrus the Great, is the most theologically and historically consistent candidate for Dhul-Qarnayn compared to Alexander the Great. The findings of this analysis demonstrate that Cyrus's monotheistic nature, along with archaeological evidence such as two-horned coins and historical reliefs, align with the Quranic description of Dhul-Qarnayn as a just leader. Geographically, this study successfully reconstructed Dhul-Qarnayn's travel route by identifying the Darial Gate in the Caucasus Mountains as the most geomorphologically appropriate location for the barrier against Gog and Magog. This validation is supported by the conformity of the 1,800-meter-high vertical mountain structure with the description of Bayna as-Saddayn in the Quran, as well as the presence of iron and copper ore resources in the area, which support the technical feasibility of building a giant metal wall at that time to repel Gog and Magog. This research contributes to the use of interdisciplinary methods that combine historical criticism with digital topographic analysis to provide a concrete spatial context for the Quranic narrative. It can be concluded that this study has successfully shifted the paradigm of interpretation of the story of Dhul-Qarnayn from mere allegorical fragments to historical reconstructions that can be verified through science, primarily geological and archaeomineralogical data.

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