

REFLECTIONS

GOG AND MAGOG

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In recent years some of you may have watched a fairly popular television show called *Game of Thrones*, the plot of which concerns a struggle for power in the fictional continent of Westeros. One conspicuous feature of the landscape of *Game of Thrones* is a colossal wall of solid ice, three hundred miles long and seven hundred feet high, built thousands of years earlier than the time of the story to prevent an assortment of dangerous marauders—“wildlings,” zombies, the mysterious White Walkers, and various other creatures—from descending out of the north and attacking the civilized inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros.

Westeros, its Seven Kingdoms, the great wall of ice, and the various hostile life-forms penned up behind that wall, all spring from the fertile imagination of George R.R. Martin, who has created the huge series of fantasy novels that gave rise to the television show that has captivated so many millions of viewers. The wall that runs north of the Seven Kingdoms may be a work of fantasy, but it had a prototype in the actual history of our world—the Great Wall of China, which Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the first emperor of China, began building in 221 B.C. to protect his realm against invasion by barbaric tribes of the north. The Great Wall, parts of which still exist, traced a zigzag line for nearly 2,500 miles across China, one twentieth of the circumference of the entire world, and the material it once contained would have been sufficient to form a barrier eight feet high and three feet thick that completely encircled the globe at the Equator. In 1790 a member of the British embassy to the Chinese court calculated that the Great Wall contained more brick and stone than all the buildings of the United Kingdom. Superimposed on a map of the United States, the Great Wall would run from Philadelphia to Topeka, Kansas.

The Great Wall of China, unlike the wall in *Game of Thrones*, was and is real. But there was a version of the Great Wall that belonged to the realm of fantasy: the mighty wall that Alexander the Great supposedly built somewhere in the far northern reaches of Asia to ward off the invasion of the dreaded inhabitants of the unknown north, and especially the mysterious tribes known to Europeans as Gog and Magog. It is here, in the tale of Alexander's wall, that history and fantasy converge, with Ch'in Shih Huang Ti's real world shading into the imaginary one of *Game of Thrones*.

Gog and Magog are Biblical names. In *Ezekiel* we are told, “Son of man, set thy face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the prince of Rosh, Mechech, and Tubal,” and we hear a grim prophecy: “Thou [Gog] shalt come from thy place out of the uttermost parts of the north, thou and many peoples with thee, all of them riding upon horses, a great company and a mighty army. . . . Surely in that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel.” And in the New Testament we read in *Revelations* a prediction that Gog and Magog will burst forth upon us in the end times: “And when the thousand years are finished, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison and shall come forth to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the Earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together in the war, the number of which is as the sand of the sea. . . .”

It is unlikely that the author of *Revelations* knew anything about Ch'in Shi Huang Ti and his Great Wall, and Ezekiel lived four hundred years before that wall was built. Which northern barbarians it was that he feared we will never know; perhaps they

were the Cimmerians, who invaded the Near East about a century before Ezekiel's time, or the Scythians, who came a few decades later. But there certainly were menacing barbarians in the north, and they were a constant menace to the urban settlements beyond. Early in the Christian era the Huns came out of Central Asia, were deflected by the Great Wall, kept going westward into Russia, and eventually tumbled down upon the Roman world, wreaking havoc everywhere. A particularly terrifying Hun invasion in 395 saw the barbarian tribes breaking out of the Caucasus to ravage the Byzantine Empire, the eastern half of the sundered Roman world. It must have seemed then as if the prophecies of Ezekiel had come true, and that Gog and Magog were loosed upon the world.

This linked up with an entirely different set of legends concerning Alexander the Great, in which he was purported to have built a mighty wall between two mountains in the Caucasus to keep back barbarians. A Syrian tale about the mythical exploits of Alexander dating from 514 depicts him encountering a native of the region and saying, "Who are the nations within this mountain upon which we are looking?"

"They are the Huns."

"And who are their kings?"

"Gog and Magog and Nawal the kings of the sons of Japhet," he is told.

Turning now to his troops, Alexander asks, "Do you desire that we should do something wonderful in this land?" And the legend continues:

"They said to him, 'As thy majesty commands, we will do.' The king said, 'Let us make a gate of brass and close up this breach.' His troops said, 'As his majesty commands, that we will do.' And Alexander commanded and fetched three thousand smiths, workers in iron, and three thousand men, workers in brass. And they put down brass and iron, and kneaded it as a man kneads when he works clay. Then they brought it and made a gate, the length of which was twelve cubits and its breadth eight cubits. And he made a lower threshold from mountain to mountain, the length of which was twelve cubits, and he hammered it into the rocks of the mountains, and it was fixed in with brass and iron." Having done this, Alexander causes an inscription to be engraved on the gate, to the effect that at the end of eight hundred and twenty-six years the Huns would break forth and "make the earth tremble," and at the conclusion of nine hundred and forty years "the world shall come to an end by the command of God."

The real Alexander never built any walls in the Caucasus, but in the seventh century the legend that he had done so found its way into the Koran, where Alexander is known by the Arabic name of Dhu'l-Qarneyn, "the two-horned one," a reference growing out of a different legend. The section of the Koran known as "the Cave" describes Dhu'l-Qarneyn as arriving at a place between two mountains where the villagers tell him that the tribes of Gog and Magog come periodically to extract tribute from them, and ask him to build a wall to hold them back. Which he does, fashioning it out of iron and copper, "and Gog and Magog were not able to surmount it, nor could they pierce it."

Perhaps the earliest tales of Alexander's wall may have represented some sort of displacement of awareness of China's Great Wall, rumors of which very likely had reached the western world somewhere along the way, but the Caucasus is very far indeed from northern China. In fact there was a real wall in the Caucasus at the time the Koran was written, and there was no reason to ascribe it to Alexander, because it had been built by the Persian King Anushirvan, during whose reign Mohammed had been born. Anushirvan's wall was at Derbend, on the western shore of the Caspian. It was built around 542, and was generally known as the Iron Gate. No one in the area had any reason to think that the Iron Gate of Derbend was the work of Alexander, who had lived eight centuries earlier. But myths and reality blurred into each other readily enough back then, and in Europe the Iron Gate of Derbend

and the mythical wall of Alexander against Gog and Magog eventually were merged in a collection of tales known as the *Alexander Book*, so that the wall in the Caucasus became “the Iron Gate of Alexander.” Early European explorers, knowing nothing of Anushirvan, thought of it that way—for example, the thirteenth-century monk William of Rubruck, who ventured deep into the Mongol Empire that Genghis Khan had founded, and wrote of “Porta Ferrea, or the Iron Gate, now called Derbend, which Alexander built to exclude the barbarous nations out of Persia.” The great Venetian traveler Marco Polo, visiting China a few years later, said nothing about the Great Wall in his narrative of his journey, though he certainly must have seen some part of it, but he did offer the standard garbled account of Alexander’s supposed wall when describing his own passage through the Caucasus on his way east: “I should let you know that Alexander had a tower and fortress built here, so that the natives could not sally out to attack him. This was called the Iron Gates. It is the place where the *Alexander Book* relates that he shut in the Tartars between two mountains. In fact they were not Tartars, but people called Comanians and various other races, because there were no Tartars at that time.”

Marco also managed to add his measure of confusion to the Gog and Magog story when he spoke of Mongolia: “This is the place which we call in our language Gog and Magog; the natives call it Ung and Mungul. Each of these two provinces was inhabited by a separate race; in Ung lived the Gog, in Mongol the Tartars. . . .”

The Islamic world, too, went on wondering about Gog and Magog for centuries. They knew very well, of course, who had really built the wall at Derbend, and that Alexander the Great had had nothing to do with it. But there was that troublesome tale in the Koran of D’hul-Qarneyn and the wall he had built to hold back Gog and Magog to deal with, too, and, inevitably, Moslem rulers during the early great years of Islamic rule sent Arab explorers to discover that wall. They found a wall, all right, and Gog and Magog as well, or at least said they did. I’ll try to untangle that complicated story next time.