

REFLECTIONS

GOG AND MAGOG II

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I spoke in last issue's column about the medieval tales of the wall that Alexander the Great supposedly built in the Caucasus to keep the fierce barbarian tribes of Gog and Magog from breaking loose into Europe, a kind of prototype of the gigantic wall of ice that George R.R. Martin invented in his *Game of Thrones* series of fantasy novels story to prevent an assortment of dangerous marauders—"wildlings," zombies, the mysterious White Walkers, and various other creatures—from coming down out of the north and attacking the civilized inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. And I told of two quite real walls that had been constructed for a very similar purpose: the one that Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti built to separate China from Mongolia in the third century B.C., and the one that the Persian King Anushirvan built in the Caucasus eight hundred years later. One or both of these walls gave rise eventually to legends crediting Alexander the Great, who had lived long before both Ch'in Shi Huang Ti and Anushirvan, with having built a huge wall between two mountains to protect the world against the terrifying wild tribes known as Gog and Magog.

These Alexander legends somehow found their way into the Koran, where Alexander is known under the Arabic name of Dhu'l-Qarneyn, "the two-horned one." (He was shown with horns on some of his coins, symbolic of his conquest of Egypt—it's a long story.) Inevitably, rulers of the new Moslem empire that came into being in the seventh century A.D. sent Arab explorers into remote northern parts in search of Alexander's wall, and indeed they found it—or somebody else's wall, at any rate.

The first of these explorers was a certain Sallam the Interpreter, who was said to speak thirty languages. The Caliph Wathiq-bi'llah, who became ruler of the Islamic world in 812, dreamed that the wall of Dhu'l-Qarneyn had been breached. Greatly alarmed, since it was widely believed that the coming forth of Gog and Magog from behind the wall would mean the end of the world, the Caliph sent Sallam to investigate. He set out from Samarra in Iraq with a company of fifty troops and proceeded northward into Armenia and thence eastward through the Caucasus, continuing into a land of ruined towns, which he was told had been invaded and devastated by Gog and Magog. Beyond there he found Alexander's wall itself, which he described in great detail:

"And the Rampart which Dhu'l-Qarneyn built is in a broad opening between two mountains, the breadth of which is two hundred cubits. That was the road through which they [Gog and Magog] issued and spread over the earth. And he dug the foundation of it of the depth of thirty cubits, and built it of iron and copper until it reached the surface of the ground. Then he raised two side pillars near to the mountains on both sides of the opening twenty-five cubits broad and fifty cubits high. . . . The whole was built with iron bricks sheathed in brass, each a cubit and a half by a cubit and a half, and four finger-breadths high." Sallam described the gate as having a bolt "seven cubits long and a fathom round, which two men could not draw." There was also an immense lock, from which hung a key a cubit and a half long. Adjoining the gate were two huge fortresses.

The wall was in perfect repair but for one crack as thin as a thread. Sallam scraped some rust from this crack to show to the Caliph. Upon asking the guardians of the fortress whether they had ever seen Gog and Magog, he was told that giants were often

seen atop the mountains within the wall, and that every Monday and Thursday the guardians tested the wall with hammer-blows to make sure it was still intact. Satisfied, Sallam returned to the Caliph, his round-trip journey to the wall having taken more than two years. Which wall was it that Sallam had seen? It is unlikely that it was the one built in the Caucasus by King Anushirvan of Persia, since that one was well known in the Islamic world, and it would not have taken Sallam that much time to reach it. Perhaps he had come upon some outlying western spur of the Great Wall of China, which was still being maintained then under the auspices of China's T'ang Dynasty. Or, perhaps, the entire tale of the expedition was invented by the ninth-century head of the Caliphate's intelligence service, Ibn Khurradadhbih, whose *Book of Roads and Kingdoms*, the oldest surviving work of Arabic geography, is our source for the story of Sallam's expedition.

Be that as it may, the world went on believing in the existence of the terrible tribes of Gog and Magog somewhere in the far north, and the great wall that had been built to keep them penned up. In 1263, some three and a half centuries after Sallam's expedition, the Moslem geographer Zakariya al-Qazwini wrote a book called *Monuments of the Countries and Histories of their Inhabitants*, in which he had this to say:

"Yajuj and Majuj [Gog and Magog] are two Turkish tribes, descended from Japheth son of Noah. They dwell to the east of the Seventh Clime." He goes on to tell the story of how, when the king whom the Koran calls Dhu'l-Qarneyn visited those parts, the people begged for his help against these ferocious enemies, telling him, "They destroy our dwelling places and our crops and our fruits. They consume everything, even the grass. Like wild beasts, they slaughter our herds. They even eat the vermin that crawl on the earth. No other species multiplies like they do. Not one of them dies without fathering a thousand children." The description of these people that was given to Dhu'l-Qarneyn is worthy of one of George R.R. Martin's fantasy novels: "Their height is half that of a man of medium stature. They have fangs like wild beasts, and claws instead of fingernails. Hair grows down their backbones. They have two enormous ears, one of which is exceedingly hairy on the outside, but hairless inside. They wrap themselves in one, and sleep in the other. Their bodies are so hairy that they are completely hidden. They call out to one another like pigeons and bay like dogs. They copulate like animals, wherever they eat." Each day they dig away at the wall, hoping to break through, but each night Allah restores what they have dug. The day is coming, though, when they will penetrate the wall, and then they will drink up all the water until the world is completely dry, and massacre all the inhabitants, and "when no one is left they will shoot an arrow into the sky and it will fall back reddened with something like blood, and they will say, 'We have overcome the people of the earth, and we have reached the people of the heavens.'" But then, says the chronicler, Allah will send a worm called *naghaf* that will enter their ears and nostrils and destroy them.

It is a fine apocalyptic tale, and surely generated many a nightmare among the citizens of the Islamic empire. Nor did the tale disappear. If anything, it gained strength in the thirteenth century as the Mongol hordes under Genghis Khan and his sons came marching out of Central Asia to conquer China and Tibet, to attack the frontiers of India and the borders of Persia, going on into Russia, and venturing into Europe as far as Hungary before calling a halt to their westward expansion and pulling back into Asia in 1241. The Mongols might not have been Gog and Magog, but they were certainly a hostile force that had erupted out of a far-off land, and no wall, not even China's great one, had been sufficient to hold them back.

A century later, Arab geographers were still talking about Gog and Magog, and by then the legendary wall of Alexander the Great in the Caucasus had been subsumed entirely into the very real one that ran across northern China. The geographer Abulfeda (1273–1331) wrote, "The Ocean turns northward along the east of China, and then

expands in the same direction till it passes China, and comes opposite to the rampart of Yajuj and Majuj.” And Ibn Battuta, a globe-trotting Arab from Tangier who spent twenty-eight years roaming the world, covering seventy-five thousand miles, made an even more explicit identification of the Great Wall as the bulwark against Gog and Magog in the lengthy account of his travels that still survives today.

Ibn Battuta set out for China from India in 1341, accompanying an embassy from the Sultan of Delhi, whom he had served for eight years. Shipwrecked en route, the resilient Arab spent a year and a half in the Maldiv Islands, then visited Ceylon, Bengal, and the Malay Archipelago, and finally got to China in 1347, late in the period of Mongol rule.

“China,” he wrote, “is the safest as well as the pleasantest of all the regions on the earth for a traveler. You may travel the whole nine months’ journey to which the empire extends, without the slightest cause for fear, even if you have treasure in your charge.” How much of China Ibn Battuta actually saw is difficult to determine, since he describes only the coastal regions of the south and seems to think much of the interior is uninhabited. But he does note that sixty days’ journey north of Canton, his base for much of his visit, is “the Rampart, or Great Wall of Gog and Magog.” Of the lands beyond the Great Wall he says, “This territory is occupied by wandering tribes of heathen, who eat such people as they can catch, and for this reason no one enters their country or attempts to travel there. I saw nobody in this city who had been to the Great Wall, or who knew anybody who had been there.”

After that we hear very little about Gog and Magog, though Sir John Mandeville, that most unreliable of witnesses, does provide a lengthy account of them in his largely fictional fourteenth-century account of his travels. Mandeville reverts to the old idea that they are penned up behind Alexander’s alleged wall in the Caucasus, and he puts the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel back there with them for good measure. When the Antichrist comes, Mandeville says, they will break down the gates of the wall and come rampaging out into the cities of mankind.

The lands of Gog and Magog remained on maps for centuries—Mercator’s map of China of 1569 showed them, though he put them up by the Arctic Circle, far north of the Great Wall, which he also charted. By now, though, with every inch of our planet mapped and Googled, we know that we need not fear the fangs and claws of Gog and Magog as they break free of their imprisonment and ride down in fury upon us. What dire creatures are yet to emerge from behind the ice wall that protects the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros, only George R.R. Martin knows, and surely he will tell us in due course. But, derived as they may be from these ancient tales of Gog and Magog, they remain creatures of fantasy and nothing more, and they will remain safely shielded from us in the pages of his novels. We should all be grateful for that.