

# Yeskendir as an Eternal Image: His “Campaign” in Kazakh Literary Art

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**Abstract**—The paper examines the “literary campaign” of Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn (Alexander the Great) as an eternal image in folklore and literature. This historical figure, renowned for his conquests, has been preserved in collective memory through legends, narratives, and poetic works. His image is distinguished by polyvalence, high spiritual value, cultural significance, and wide dissemination, which are key features of an “eternal image.” The study compares depictions of Yeskendir in Eastern and Western literary traditions, focusing on the works of great oriental poets such as Firdousi, Nizami Ganjavi, Jami, and Alisher Navoi, as well as on the poem “Yeskendir” by Abay Kunanbayuly. Particular attention is given to the Quranic story about Zulkarnaiyn, which influenced artistic portrayals of the character. Scholars’ debates on whether Alexander and Yeskendir are the same or different figures are also addressed. In literary tradition, they are often merged into one archetypal warrior and ruler. The article emphasizes how Abay reinterpreted the legendary plot, revealing new dimensions of the hero’s nature. The famous Kazakh legend of “Two-horned Yeskendir” also plays a significant role, inspiring multiple literary adaptations. Through comparative and systematic analysis, the study reveals how Yeskendir’s historical campaign transformed into a symbolic literary journey, securing his place as an enduring cultural and poetic figure.

**Index Terms**—historical personality, eternal image, legend, romantic hero, spring water

## I. INTRODUCTION

All three poems of the great Kazakh poet Abay Kunanbaiuly (1845-1904) are based on legendary oriental stories. Among them is the poem “Yeskendir”, which is consonant with the plots of world literature and folklore. The main character of this poem is Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn.

Yeskendir is a mythical character. His essence as a glorious winner, his historical personality was determined by mythical and legendary “coloring”. Thus, he became one of the eternal images in world history and art. The term “eternal image” is used in literary studies, art criticism, and cultural studies. In encyclopedias and in many scholarly studies, it is defined as a permanent artistic image in literature. Yeskendir’s creative and heroic image brings his personality closer to myth. Therefore, it is natural to frame this image with mythical motifs, exalting it as much as possible in the manner of absolute glorification characteristic of folklore.

Yeskendir is, first of all, a historical figure. How can we explain the “mythologization” of this historical figure? Can historical truth become a myth? To answer this question, let’s look at one of the conclusions for myth and history.

According to Giambattista Vico, an eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, founder of the philosophy of history and ethnopsychology and author of the famous work *New Science of the Common Nature of the Nations*, myth is a historical value that preserves real events experienced by our ancestors in a special form. That is, we can find the history of ancient times in myths. The myth depicts the spirit of the people, the perception and feeling of nature. That is why, the thinker says it is necessary to begin the knowledge of history with myth, which is the source of spirituality. Then, based on this opinion, we find truth in the myth, that is, the history experienced by the people is preserved in the myth (Vico, 2018).

Thus, the legends about Yeskendir, rooted in reality, turned his personality into an “eternal image”.

The eternal image is the term characteristic of Literary studies, Art and Cultural studies. Based on definitions in the dictionaries and research reports, we know that it consists of artistic images in different works.

“Eternal images are literary images, like Prometheus, Phaedra, Don Juan, Hamlet, Don Quixote, Faust, etc., repeatedly depicted in the literature of different countries, in the literary art of different eras, and became special “symbol” of culture.

Traditionally, it includes the heroes of mythology and legends, historical figures (Napoleon, Jeanne d'Arc)", reads one of the encyclopedic dictionaries ("Eternal Images", 2001, p. 121).

In the monograph "Hamlet as an eternal image of Russian and world culture", eternal images and their features are described as follows: "Eternal image is a term of Literary studies, Art and Cultural history, and an artistic image, passing from one work to another, constituting an invariant arsenal of literary discourse. The properties of eternal images (usually found together) can be grouped as follows:

- content capacity, inexhaustibility of meanings;
- high artistic and spiritual value;
- the ability to overcome the boundaries of eras and peoples, common understanding, enduring relevance;
- polyvalence – an increased ability to connect with other systems of images, to participate in various plots, to fit into a changing environment without losing its identity;
- translatability into the languages of other arts, as well as the languages of philosophy and science, etc.
- widespread nature" (Lukov et al., 2010, p. 5).

Proposing such systematization, the authors of the monograph note that eternal images also appear in the form of signs, symbols, mythologems, and that symbol-things and symbol-images are also in this series (Lukov et al., 2010).

A number of eternal images are complemented by characters from national literature and art. It is possible to create a system of eternal images in Kazakh literature, taking into account the conditions characteristic of them, given above as substantiation. Our goal is to consider the eternal images in Abay's verses, included in the classic Kazakh poetry.

One of the "eternal images" in world literature is Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn (Alexander the Great). The roots of these images, revived in Abay's poetry, are connected with Oriental subjects. These stories are based on the heritage of folklore.

In recent years, a number of studies have revisited the literary and cultural afterlives of Alexander the Great / Iskandar Zulkarnain, further underlining the polyvalent, "eternal" character of his image. Gaillard (2023) offers a new reading of the Persian prose romance *Dārāb-nāma*, where Alexander appears as a conqueror and quasi-prophetic figure at the intersection of pre-Islamic Iranian and Islamic traditions. In the Islamic and Malay context, Kurniawan (2025) shows that *Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain* functions as a didactic and political narrative that idealizes Iskandar as a just, Islamized ruler, while another study by the same author traces the broader historical and literary legacy of Iskandar Zulkarnain across Persian, Islamic and Western traditions, emphasizing his role as both conqueror and unifier (Kurniawan, 2024). Within European literature, Benítez (2022) demonstrates how eighteenth-century Spanish theatre continually recodes Alexander as a flexible dramatic symbol through which questions of power and exemplarity are negotiated. Complementing these perspectives, Anson (2022) analyzes ancient historiographical and religious sources to reveal the close interplay between the political and sacral dimensions of Alexander's image, providing a crucial background for later identifications of the "two-horned" ruler with the Qur'anic Dhu 'l-Qarnayn. Taken together, these works confirm that Alexander/Yeskendir remains a living cross-cultural image whose semantic core continues to be adapted to new textual and ideological contexts.

Building on the authors' previous research, this article further develops the analysis of how historical figures and legendary motifs structure literary representations of statehood and collective values. In her earlier co-authored paper "The role of historical figures and legend motifs in the modern prose structure in expressing the idea of statehood" (Turyzbek et al., 2021), Zhanat A. Aimukhambet examined the way mythicized rulers and heroes function as carriers of national ideology in modern Kazakh prose. The present study continues this line of inquiry by focusing on Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn as an "eternal image" whose literary "campaign" reveals the interplay between historical memory, mythopoetic imagination, and ethical reflection. Thus, the article links the authors' prior work on statehood discourse with a broader comparative exploration of Alexander/Yeskendir's cross-cultural literary reception.

Kostyukhin (1972) writes: "There are two traditions of narrating about Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn in antiquity: historical and literary. The pinnacle of the historical tradition is the work of the Roman historian Flavius Arrian *The Campaigns of Alexander*, and a literary tradition also developed along with the historical tradition associated with Alexander. Aristotle's relative Callisthenes stands at the sources of this tradition" (p. 6).

No matter how glorious Yeskendir's historical campaign was, his "campaign in the literary art" was even more glorious and continued from era to era. The paths of the commander who ruled the entire world were not only preserved as historical data but were also illustrated and revered, becoming a constant subject of literary art. He continued his life as an "eternal literary hero".

In literary works information about Yeskendir was mainly taken from historical works. However, it is known that history is used only as a background in the presentation of the main character and the depiction of events in a literary art, and philosophical and ethical issues are of paramount importance. As a great reformer and a glorious commander, Yeskendir became a constant hero of folklore and literary works. The truth is that his "eternal life" was facilitated not only by historical records, but also by works of literary art in the artistic space.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study analyzes the transformation of Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn (Alexander the Great) into an "eternal image" across Eastern and Kazakh literary traditions, with a focal reading of Abay Kunanbayuly's poem "Yeskendir." The primary corpus comprises: Abay's "Yeskendir"; Persian and Turkic epics (Firdousi's *Shahnameh*, Nizami's *Iskandarnāme*,

Jami's *Khirađnāmeḥ-ye Iskandari*, Navoi's *Saddi Iskandari*); the *Alexander Romance* (Pseudo-Callisthenes) and its Western reworkings; historical sources (Plutarch's *Lives*, Arrian's *Anabasis*); Qur'anic passages (Sūrat al-Kahf 83–97); and Kazakh folklore texts and poems (e.g., Dulat Babataiuly, Magzhan Zhumabaev, Akyt Ulimzhiuly) related to the “two-horned” motif. Secondary materials include encyclopedic and theoretical works on “eternal images” (literary studies, art and cultural history).

Methodologically, the research applies a comparative-historical and typological approach, combining close reading with intertextuality and motif analysis. A mythopoetic lens elucidates the mythmaking of a historical figure, while narratology and discourse analysis trace how ethical-philosophical meanings shift across languages, genres, and eras. Source criticism is used to distinguish historiography from legend; hermeneutic interpretation clarifies Abay's philosophical stance; and a limited content/thematic coding maps recurrent topoi (e.g., “living water,” “closed gate,” “two horns,” “wise counselor”).

The analytical framework operationalizes the notion of “eternal image” via criteria adapted from cultural-literary theory: semantic inexhaustibility, axiological weight, transhistorical diffusion, polyvalence, and translatability into other arts/discourses. Each text is evaluated against these criteria, then triangulated across Eastern/Western lines to identify convergences and divergences in Yeskendir's characterization (sage-king vs. conqueror). Validity is supported by cross-checking motifs among primary sources; limitations include the heterogeneity of versions and translation variance, which are mitigated by consulting multiple editions and scholarly commentaries.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plutarch's “Comparative Biographies” can be called the most outstanding work about Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn. In the preface to this work, the ancient Greek writer said: “We do not write history, but biographies, and virtue or depravity is not always visible in the most glorious deeds, but often some insignificant deed, word or joke reveals a person's character better than battles, in which tens of thousands of people, the leadership of huge armies and the siege of cities” (Plutarch, 1994, p. 116). Relying on data from his characters' life in his works, Plutarch tries to reveal their character from any jokes, simple actions and words. First of all, the reliability of such data is weighed. Noting that “Comparative Biographies” contain two sides (historical data and anecdotes about the hero's personal life), scholars say that both are moral judgment.

Plutarch cites myth and legend as evidence of the hero's life. According to him, a myth is a story that a biographer needs to reconstruct. Mythologists repeatedly say that the deep connection of myth with reality, based on subtle hints and allusions, leads to truth. We see that historical events are preserved in the “memory” of the myth from the stories about the flood, the destruction of cities, great campaigns and the heroic deeds. It is also natural that the “fictional” hero in a literary work has a real prototype. We can say the same about any of the characters of mythical stories.

Myths keep historical memory alive. Many real figures later became legendary—Tomiris, Korkyt ata, Hercules, Achilles. Plutarch even links Yeskendir to Hercules and Achilles, while Kazakh tradition connects Edige to a mythical ancestor. Mythic additions ensure that historical heroes continue to live as eternal images.

We have mentioned a literary work, associated with the name of the Greek historian Callisthenes (IV century BC). The work about Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn is known as the “Alexander Romance”. Ethnographic fantasy and legendary-historical biography determined the most popular novel of antiquity – the novel about Alexander. The source of the novel is various folklore, literary and historical stories about the famous commander.

This work contains many references to ancient authors about the kingdom of Macedonia. At one time, the novel was a great success and was translated into many languages. Several versions of the novel have survived to the present day. According to researchers, there are three main plots in the novel: 1) the birth of Alexander; 2) exploits and Indian campaign; 3) death in Babylon. Over time, these stories were completed with new episodes. We can say that the introduction of new plots was caused by the special interest of readers and the goal of exaggerating the personality of the famous commander as much as possible.

The only work that introduced Yeskendir as a knight and romantic hero in the West is the French version of the book about Alexander the Great.

Italian historian Daniele Forconi writes that “the French version of the ‘The Novels of Alexander the Great’ is a work in which Alexander's exploits inspired the courtly tradition, turned the Macedonian commander into a great hero in the Western world, and gave his image a particularly positive character” (Forconi, 2008, p. 120).

The name Zulkarnaiyn is found in verses 83–97 of the sura “Kehf” of the Holy Qur'an. Verse 84 says: “Verily, we have made Zulkarnaiyn mighty on the earth. We gave him convenience in everything”.

In folklore and literature, the history of Yeskendir is greatly exaggerated, and his campaign is depicted not only as a raid but also as a search for “eternal water” (abelkhayat, or living water). According to many researchers, Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn and Alexander the Great are not the same person, but two different people. The Prophet Kyzyr-Ilyas (peace and blessings be upon him) was with Yeskendir, who was looking for eternal water. We also see Aristotle next to Yeskendir on a military campaign. The opinions of scientists about Yeskendir are still divided. Two different groups of historians and scientists believe that one of them (Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn and Alexander the Great) is a legendary person, who lived in antiquity, and the other is Macedonian commander who intended to conquer the world. However, in all works of literary art Yeskendir became the same person.

Yeskendir's first "campaign" in Eastern literature began with Firdousi's "Shakh-name" (written in 977-1010) and Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi's epic "Yeskendirname" (written in 1211), and continued in the epic "Oinaii Iskandriy" ("Yeskendir's Mirror") by the Indian poet Khusrau Dehlavi in 1299-1300.

The great Persian poet Abdirahman Jami, who took Alexander the Great as the prototype of Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn. His epic "Khiradname Iskandary" was written in 1484. Both of these works are in Persian.

The epic "Yeskendir's Fortress" was written in the ancient Turkic language by the great poet Alisher Navoi in 1485.

Kazakh poet Abay revived the theme of Yeskendir, poetized by the great oriental poets, at a new level in the Kazakh land. It is not known exactly in what year this epic was written. The Kazakh writer M. Auezov reports that the poem was included in a manuscript collection in 1898. Abay's first collection "The Story of Yeskendir" was published in 1909.

Among the stories associated with Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn, Abay took the plot about Yeskendir's journey in search of living water, as the basis of his epic. This storyline is modified to tell of Yeskendir's next campaign, when he stumbles upon spring water with a different taste, flowing from a closed gate. Thus, the constant motif of "closed gates" for Yeskendir, mentioned in Abay's poem, is transformed.

The search for eternal life is a constant motif in the mythology of the peoples of the world. The motif about the journey of Gilgamesh, Korkyt was also created for this purpose. The mortal man's striving for immortal life has given rise to several remarkable motifs about the immortality of the soul.

Yeskendir's trip to the land of darkness, that is, towards sunset, is connected with the search for living water. His guide on this journey was Kyzyr (peace and blessings be upon him). Kyzyr first saw the water of abelkhayat, drank it, washed himself, and watered his white horse. When he was about to tell Yeskendir about it, the water disappeared ("Abay Encyclopedia", 1995, p. 229). The story about how Yeskendir built a fortress and imprisoned Yajuj in the mountains in Nizami's poem and in the Quran is also poetized in the epic.

In Nizami's epic the story is depicted in connection with the mystical world. The world of darkness, where Yeskendir wandered, the water of abelkhayat, which Kyzyr (peace and blessings be upon him) drank and gained eternal life are presented in a mythical and legendary description. Nizami presents the historical Alexander the Great and the legendary Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn as one and the same person, creating the image of a wise commander and ruler. Alisher Navoi does not believe that Yeskendir and Alexander are two people. In his poem "Fortress of Yeskendir" he writes:

Not correct fact that Yeskendir is two of them  
If this is true, Jami should know this:

He said: "everyone knows that he is one,  
The secret is known only to one person".

Source given by Nizami,

This is what Jami says to everyone today. (Navoi, 2019, p. 197)

As an eternal image Yeskendir is a collection of personalities from these historical and religious legends.

Yeskendir in the works of Navoi:

Everything cannot be put into words,  
If you don't know who Yeskendir is.

Wonderful his every hour, every day,  
hard to stop the story...

There are many miracles in Yeskendir's life,  
Let's write only after realizing the meaning.

If I said wrong before, I'll correct it,  
I will proclaim the truth to all.

Who dares to attack the home when he is here?  
He was able to become a support for everyone.

Having freed the vast land from the shackles,  
Protected his people from the evil enemy. (Navoi, 2019, p. 197)

Further, Navoi talks about the countries and states conquered by Yeskendir. Thus, he presents him as a victorious commander and a great ruler.

Academician Kaskabasov (2014) classifies the stories about Yeskendir in Kazakh folklore and literature into three types: (1) publicizing Yeskendir's two horns; (2) Yeskendir's departure to Zulmat with his companions Kyzyr and Ilyas in search of living water; and (3) Yeskendir's unexpected encounter with the gates of paradise and the receipt of a bone as a gift in Abay's poem (p. 256). Although the third plot parallels Nizami's version, it is presented differently. Kaskabasov (2014) notes that this motif is characteristic of the ancient Talmud and writes: "this plot entered the Talmud

in early times, when the peoples of the Near and Middle East told about it in the parables” (p. 256). As examples of its use by ancient and medieval authors, he cites the ancient *Alexander Romance*, *Alexander* by the German poet Lamprecht (12th century), and *The Legend of Alexander* by Albert von Chamisso, a leading representative of German Romanticism (18th–19th centuries) (p. 256). This poem by Chamisso was freely translated by the Russian Romantic poet V. A. Zhukovsky, and that version subsequently served as one of the bases for Abay’s poem. However, Zhukovsky’s text does not mention dipping dried fish into spring water, as in the Talmud; Abay may have encountered this motif directly in the Talmud. In other words, Abay’s “Yeskendir” adapts and renews the traditional plot within modern literature. Alternatively, the motif could derive from a legend widely circulated among the Kazakhs.

We can see that famous historical figures are full of contradictions from the images of Attila, Genghis Khan, Amir-Temir, Edige, and Yeskendir tops this list. Yeskendir, first of all, repelling evil, a victorious commander, a virtuous and wise ruler; secondly, the conqueror of the world, a cruel ruler, an insatiable, power-hungry king. These two contradictory characteristics define Yeskendir’s personality as an eternal image. Abay sought to show the character of the ruler and bloodthirsty commander in a critical realistic direction.

The history of the Abay’s poem, whose main character is Yeskendir, unfolds in a realistic manner. The poet mentions the character and gives him a description from the first stanza of the poem:

Does the world remember Yeskendir and his deeds?  
The city of Macedonia is his home.  
He is the son of the king Philip,  
His life is a dream of glory. (Abai, 2020, p. 11)

Abay reveals Yeskendir’s insatiable behavior, talking about a twenty-one-year-old ruler, who threatened his neighbors, gathered an army, killed the rulers of other countries, capturing their cities, and shed rivers of human blood:

Yeskendir made all the khans obedient,  
Each time he conquered, he was not insatiable.  
His greed got bigger and bigger  
He thought about conquering the whole world...

Nobody could argue with him.  
He took everything, threatened everyone.  
No one could get around or stop,  
The one who wants to rule the earth alone. (Abai, 2020, p. 12)

These lines show Abay’s position as a poet. An insatiable desire to rule the whole world is characteristic of all victorious commanders and rulers in history.

Around this characteristic, the list of thesauri that reveal the personality of the protagonist of the poem “Yeskendir” includes the descriptions as “vain”, “jealous”, “insatiable king, threatening neighbors”, “ambitious ruler, eager to rule the world”, “envious”.

The history of Yeskendir’s search for abelkhayat water in religious legends moved into a different direction in Abay’s poem. Abay’s hero falls into the desert during the campaign of conquest:

They walked long and ended up in a devastated desert,  
Drank all the water that carried with them.  
Suffered from heat and thirst, without a drop of water,  
God entrusted him with a difficult task. (Abai, 2020, p. 12)

When the ruler “wandered and could not find water in the wide steppe” with his army, he saw “something emitting a radiant light”. It was a clear spring:

There flows a stream, with a murmuring sound,  
Like a ribbon coming out of a ditch.  
Yeskendir got off, clung to the spring and rushed to drink,  
That special, sweet water. (Abai, 2020, p. 12)

The story about “Yeskendir’s order to wash smoked fish in the spring water”, confirms Abai Kunanbayuly’s reading the Talmud:

He ordered to put in the stream,  
And wash smoked fish in the water.

The fish has become different, it tastes great.  
Surprisingly, the water refreshed it. (Abai, 2020, p. 12)

Thesauri as “special water”, “too sweet”, “different taste of smoked fish when washed” clarify the miraculous effect of spring water.

Struck by the wonderful spring water, Yeskendir intends to find out where the water comes from and to take possession of this place. However, the arrogant commander-in-chief, who believed that “there is no one equal to him”, failed. The stream goes into the gorge, the top of the rock, and the mouth of it is protected by a golden fortress. His army was unable to open the gate. The voice behind the gate says:

- The gate was not ordered to be opened.

This is the gate to the Almighty. (Abai, 2020, p. 13)

In Nizami's epic Yeskendir could not taste the water of abelkhayat, and in Abay's poem he drank spring water, but could not find the way to the source. That is, the gates on this path are closed for him. "Gate to the Almighty" does not let Yeskendir, who conquered the whole world.

In Navoi (2019)'s epic, during his journey by sea Yeskendir plunges into the abyss of sea waters and travels to the underwater world with a mystical vision.

He said to everyone: "I have not seen many miracles,  
Now I say goodbye to you.

That was my first goal,  
Dive into the deep abyss.

If God helps me by giving me patience,  
I'll take a look under the water".

Water is a mystical world that connects two worlds in ancient knowledge. The way to the watery abyss is opened to Yeskendir. His army cannot stop him on this path:

Who can say to Shah: "How come?"  
Yeskendir entered a large glass ball.

The chest ball is waterproof and closed.  
They tied a long rope.

If the ruler is up to something, his people have no peace.  
Outside they will hold one end.

So Shakh was so determined,  
The people lowered the ball into the water. (Navoi, 2019, p. 517)

Under water there is another world, that is, the second world. In Greek myths, Odysseus went to the kingdom of Hades to find out about his fate and his future, Yeskendir saw two worlds at the same time and achieved his goal:

Tirelessly under the water for months,  
Carefully watching the spectacle of the abyss.

When he signaled,  
The people pulled him back.

Who lives forever in the world,  
He achieved his goal and was pleased.

... Enjoyed the joy of this world,  
And that was the end of his journey.

All his life full of glory,  
A bright light of wisdom lit up in his eyes.

There was no one ahead of him,  
He experienced all the wonders of the world.

Saving many unfortunate people from trouble,  
He held all the magic of the mysterious world.

Revealed all sorts of wonderful secrets,  
Even the waters opened up to him. (Navoi, 2019, p. 517)

Thus, Yeskendir's fame is associated with mysticism. Navoi (2019) extols the glory of the great commander not only for militancy, but also for wisdom and wonderful knowledge of the secrets of the two worlds. The underwater world is the key to "the end of Yeskendir's journey", "the glory of his whole life", "the absence of a person equal to him in the world". Yeskendir's underwater journey is his departure to the other world. In artistic representation, this concept is expressed by allusions and gestures. Navoi (2019) alludes to the "eternal life" of his character. "Fascinated with the mortal world", "knowledge of the underwater mystery" reveals the character of Yeskendir as an "eternal image".

Considering that one of the special features of eternal images, as mentioned above, is “the greatest tendency to merge with other systems of images, to participate in various plots, maintaining the identity in a changing environment”, i.e., polyvalence (Lukov et al., 2010, p. 5), one can understand Yeskendir’s image, acting in different plots, and showing his many-sided personality. Comparing the main character image in the epics of Nizami, Jami, Navoi and Abai’s poem, we can say that the common thing of bilateral literary monuments is one character, and the difference is that the hero, on the one hand, is most glorified, on the other hand, is criticized.

The fact that the plots in literary works refute the notion that Yeskendir in legend and Yeskendir in history are two separate people confirms that one of the characteristics of eternal images is a tendency to combine with other systems of images. In the literary and folklore heritage there are not two different people, but two sides of one hero. Historical and legendary stories prove that great personalities are complex, full of contradictions, and not one-sided.

Abay does not doubt Yeskendir’s glory and victoriousness, but criticizes him for his arrogance on the way to glory. Through those closed gates and failed victory, he hints that it is the power of the Creator that brings a person to repentance. A wise man like Aristotle draws conclusions about what happened.

The words, said that “someone” behind the closed gate, to stop Yeskendir:  
Boasting did not fit the mind,  
If you are strong, conquer your lust!  
You are envious and greedy, the world is not enough for you,  
Such a person is not worthy of this place. (Abai, 2020, p. 14)

The gift in the form of a bone indicates the main idea of the poem. We know very well that the sign of omnipotence is the overcoming of one’s own desires and reason, which is like commandment of wise people in the history. This precept is given to Abay’s hero by the stranger.

The poet assigns Aristotle reveal the secret of the bone from the gate:  
Aristotle was the wisest of men,  
It is impossible not to listen to his words:  
“Let them bring the scales and see,  
Which is heavier: the bone or gold? (Abai, 2020, pp. 14–15)  
Yeskendir accepted this offer and weighed the bone.  
They put all the gold that was found,  
But compared to the bone, it was like fluff.

Yeskendir sees this, he is amazed,  
He throws armor and weapons on the gold.  
And watched with interest.  
How a light bone outweighed them. (Abai, 2020, p. 15)

Yeskendir asks Aristotle about the miraculous mystery of the bone. In response, Aristotle takes a handful of earth from the ground and sprinkles on the bone. The bone becomes lighter. The wise Aristotle tells the ruler that “this is orbital bone, and only the earth saturates the eyes of insatiable people, for whom everything is not enough, even though the whole world is in his hands”. Heeding the words of Aristotle, who warned that he should follow that example with a bone from the gate, Yeskendir returns back with his army.

The motif that expresses the main idea is the overweight of the bone of all the gold, silver and weapons on the scales, revealing the meaning of the bone.

The symbolic meaning of the gate in the poem has a deep meaning. The “gate separating the two worlds” is given as a symbolic place that cannot be opened by any person. The door (gate) that cannot be opened in fairy tales is the way to another world, to the afterlife, and to the special place, inhabited by a spirit. By the stranger’s words that “it is the gate to the Almighty” Abay hints at the path of universal humanistic ideals. Yeskendir was forbidden to pass through that gate, because, as the poet pointed out, he could not yet overcome human weaknesses. Having listened to Aristotle, the great commander realized the futility of his actions, and came to the conclusion that “God pointed this out to him”. Abay expressed his humanistic position, showing the human weakness of great personalities as Yeskendir.

According to a folk legend, one of the gates of Sairam, a city with forty gates, towards Alatau, is called “Zil kakpa” (Heavy gates). They say that Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn attacked these gates and could not open them. This motif of the legend also reminds of the closed gates for Yeskendir.

What qualities distinguish Yeskendir as an eternal image? According to Nizami’s epic, he is a hero of a special nature, who saved mankind, trapping the Yajuj tribe, which brought misfortune to people, and who sought eternal life and a glorious commander who shook the world. In Navoi’s epic he is also a glorious and just warrior, a wise commander, whose fame has spread all over the world, and a holy being, who has seen two worlds and knows the secrets of mysticism. In Abay’s poem, this is a self-satisfied, envious, greedy and conceited person. However, at the end of this poem, the main character returns to his unique nature in the legend.

The works of the poets and the poem of Abay Kunanbayuly can serve as examples of the fact that the high spiritual value, wide dissemination, conquering the boundaries of eras and peoples, the boundless space of content and meaning,

free adaptation to various subjects, that define the literary and artistic nature of Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn are inherent in the eternal image.

“This is the gate to the Almighty”... What does the gate closed for a victorious personality like Yeskendir mean? Abay’s artistic position is the chanting a perfect man with high intelligence, who can control his mind, strength and heart at the same time. Why is Yeskendir not in this category? What does the poet mean by the words “if you are strong, conquer your lust”, uttered by an unfamiliar voice from the gate? From a philosophical standpoint, Yeskendir’s actions are contrary to the requirements of a perfect man with high intelligence. The gates leading to the Almighty are open only to those who follow the Creator’s way and avoid sin.

Abai interprets the motif of the unopened gate for Yeskendir from the philosophical and humanistic point and draws a conclusion by the ancient thinker Aristotle’s judgment:

“This is a human eye bone,” he told the ruler.  
Will the eyes be satisfied with thousands?  
Greedy eyes can’t get enough of the whole world  
But will get enough filled with sand.

Do not be angry, my king, I will tell you:  
The Golden Gate did not let you in.  
You asked for a gift and get a bone.  
Look at this and take a lesson! (Abai, 2020, p. 15)

If we consider the human dream of searching for holy water and striving for eternal life is the basis for depicting the eternal ideal of mankind in mythical motifs, Abay’s poem suggests looking for a simple key to this ideal in pure intentions and virtuous thoughts. Thus, the poet reveals a mythical motif with the humanistic sense.

Yeskendir’s name is also found in Abay’s other poems. When Abay’s beloved son Abdirakhman died, he dedicated a poem in which he describes the glory and character of his father Kunanbai, identifying him with eternal images in our national historical knowledge:

Like Yeskendir, Temir, Genghis,  
Famous among Muslims. (Abai, 2020, p. 274)

Thus, Yeskendir, criticized in the poem, is mentioned in Abay’s poems as one of the great people, glorified by historical heroism. In assessing Kunanbai’s contribution to the Kazakh people, it was not for nothing that Abay took such a wise commander and ruler as Yeskendir. Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn, blessed with eternal glory, continued his eternal life as a person walking the path of justice, serving the truth and honoring wisdom.

In this poem Abay revived the image of Eskendir in Kazakh literature. He showed the human nature of the famous commander through the contradictory character inherent in historical figures.

The legend of Eskendir is widespread in Kazakh folklore. It tells about Eskendir’s two horns. A Kazakh poet of the beginning of the XIX century Dulat Babataiuly (1802-1874) wrote a narrative poem “Shashtaraz” (barber), based on this legend. A prominent Kazakh poet who lived at the beginning of the XX century Magzhan Zhumabaiuly (1893-1938) wrote the poem “Eskendir’s two Horns”. There is a poem “Eskendir Zulkarnaiyn” by Akyt Haji Ulimzhiuly (1868-1940), a prominent representative of the religious trend in poetry, who emigrated.

The legends are associated with Eskendir, who had two horns on his head. In order to conceal his horn from people, he constantly killed the barbers, who cut his hair. So in the end, he left one barber alive. But the barber could not keep the secret about Eskendir’s horn and suffered from it. Following the advice of a priest, he went to a well in the deserted place and shouted about the secret. One day a shepherd made a pipe from the reeds growing around this well and sang. However, the words “Eskendir has horns” were sounded from the pipe and the secret spread throughout the country.

In Dulat Babaytaiuly’s poem, the story begins as:

The ruler on the throne  
At the age of seventeen.  
His anger makes tremble  
Both friends and foe,  
When he is enraged  
Even the stone is rolling.  
And there are two horns  
On the ruler’s head.

No one dared to face him,  
And to object to him,  
All four sides were  
Under his control.  
Day after day he rose  
Luck favored him.

If anyone sees his horn,  
He will lose his luck.  
If the secret is revealed,  
Or if someone sees it.

Without showing a living soul,  
Not taking the crown off his head.  
But it is improper for the ruler  
Be with overgrown hair. (Babataiuly, 2013, pp. 104–105)

So the ruler called the barber, declared his condition and cut his hair. However, the barber who saw the horn, although he swore to the ruler, suffered from keeping this secret in him. It seemed that his body was filled with something. He left the city and found a hole in a deserted place.

He came to the river,  
When dawn came,  
To the hole on the shore  
He lay facing down.

Yesterday I cut  
The ruler's hair,  
On his holy head  
"I saw two horns,  
He said it lying on the ground,  
Muttering under his breath,  
And enjoyed his relief  
It pounded in his chest.  
When uttered a thousand times  
Everything inside him.

"I got rid" of trouble,  
The eyes lit up.  
The words from his mouth  
Absorbed into the ground  
Words absorbed into the ground,  
Kept there for seven years. (Babataiuly, 2013, pp. 107–109)

Seven years passed. The water of the river overflowed its banks and flooded the valley. That hole also filled with water and reeds grew there. The reeds remembered his words, absorbed into the ground, and all the people heard the innermost secret. The matter reached the king, and the barber was hanged...

According to Akyt Ulimzhiuly, Eskendir wanted to rule the world alone. For that, he needed to live a long time. So he worried about not dying. However, the near-death for Eskendir was his horn.

He hides his horn from the people  
Even though it was from birth  
As there was a vision in his dream  
If people find out, then he's dead. (Ulimzhiuly, 2020, p. 132)

If others knew about the existence of his horn, Eskendir's death will come. To hide his horn from people,  
He cut off the head of the one, who cut his hair  
And avoided spreading the secret.

His life is safe if no one knows  
The horn was his spiritual wound.  
If God gives him a thousand years of life,  
Barbers would be alive and well. (Ulimzhiuly, 2020, p. 132)

Akyt says that Eskendir had to kill his barbers. Since he did not want to give up his life and did not want to kill his barbers, he asked his teacher Kydyr for a way to get out of that. Kydyr (peace and blessings be upon him) was going to take Eskendir to the living water abelkhayat (Ulimzhiuly, 2020, pp. 143–145).

The narrators of this story interpret the word "Zulkarnayin" as "the ruler of two worlds", not as "two-horned". Such an idea that Eskendir was a king-prophet, who equally ruled over light and darkness, this world and the afterlife, is given in the written literary heritage "Kissa-sul Anbiya" in the XII century.

Magzhan Zhumbaiuly's poem "Eskendir's two Horns" also tells this folk legend. The content of Magzhan's poem is as follows:

At one time, Eskendir

Ruled seven worlds.  
Great and holy,  
Not burning in fire.

Giants like Eskendir  
Will they be born twice?  
Giant human body  
Can it be criticized? (Zhumabaiuly, 2013, pp. 103–104)

Eskendir Zulkarnaiyn, who ruled the world, had two horns. The ruler did not show his horn to the public, covering it with his crown, and according to some legends, with his helmet.

On the head of Eskendir  
There were two horns.  
The two horns,  
Which he always hid.

On the head of Eskendir  
Two horns were a target!  
If it is shown to wild people  
Will it be sacred?

Hiding two horns,  
from a young age  
Eskendir never took  
His helmet off his head.

One day he decided to cut his hair:  
So many things Eskendir  
Experienced in his life.  
Like a lion's mane  
His hair overgrew. (Zhumabaiuly, 2013, pp. 103–104)

In this poem, Eskendir instructs the barber not to tell anyone about the horn on his head, otherwise the barber will die. The barber, unable to keep this secret in himself, whispers about it to the reeds growing in the desert. The noisy reeds spread the secret to everyone. The barber was beheaded the next day.

Thus, the legend of Eskendir in Kazakh folklore became the basis of three literary works.

Many works portray Yeskendir's campaigns and character; among them, Peter Green's *Alexander the Great. King of the World* offers a sweeping account and notes how Alexander sought deification, was later mythologized, and, by the Augustan era, approached demigod status. While scholarship cannot fully resolve whether a world-ruler's repeated luck is "deserved," it affirms a core truth: Yeskendir was both exceptional commander and flawed human, and these contradictions fuel his literary image. Though his earthly career ended, his "literary campaign" endures in Firdousi, Nizami, Dehlavi, Jami, Navoi, and Abay. Plutarch provides historical data; the *Alexander Romance* (Callisthenes) shaped the Western legend. Despite debates that separate the historical and legendary figures, Eastern poetry effectively unites Zulkarnaiyn and the Macedonian into one composite archetype—an "eternal image" capable of entering diverse plots.

As an eternal image, Yeskendir appears variously: in Nizami, the seeker of eternal life and subduer of Yajuj; in Navoi, a just warrior-king with mystical knowledge; in Abay, a vainglorious, envious ruler who is ethically tested yet ultimately returns to his legendary essence. These texts exemplify the image's high spiritual value, breadth of meaning, transhistorical reach, and adaptability. Kazakh folklore—especially the "two horns" cycle about the barber's secret—underscores his fame and fate, revealing the hero's powerlessness before destiny. Not all campaigns were glorious, and legends cannot preserve every historical detail; nevertheless, Yeskendir's lasting "campaign" in literature and folklore offers a moral lesson of enduring relevance.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Yeskendir Zulkarnaiyn functions not merely as a historical protagonist but as an "eternal image" whose semantic core victory, wisdom, hubris, and moral testing travels across eras, languages, and genres. By triangulating Eastern epics (Firdousi, Nizami, Jami, Navoi), Qur'anic narrative, Western historiography (Plutarch, Arrian) and the *Alexander Romance*, as well as Kazakh folklore and Abay Kunanbayuly's poem, we demonstrated how mythic amplification both preserves historical memory and recasts it into culturally resonant symbols. Recurrent motifs the quest for living water, the closed gate, the two horns, and the presence of a wise counselor stabilize a shared typology that enables Yeskendir to embody a composite archetype of ruler, conqueror, and seeker.

Abay's "Yeskendir" intensifies this transhistorical dialogue by shifting emphasis from external triumphs to inner measure: the scales scene and the "gate to the Almighty" translate imperial ambition into an ethical test, reframing

greatness as mastery over desire. In Abay's humanistic optics, the legendary figure is simultaneously exalted and demystified: the hero's glory is acknowledged, yet his insufficiencies are laid bare to reveal the primacy of conscience over conquest. This double focus on grandeur and limitation positions Abay's text as a critical hinge between folklore's celebratory impulse and modern literature's moral introspection.

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