

Asking and Answering: An Indian Genre in Greek?

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IN PLUTARCH'S BIOGRAPHY of Alexander the Great from the early second century C.E., Alexander asks a group of Indian philosophers known as the Gymnosophists, or 'naked wise men', a series of questions.¹ Even though Alexander promises to kill anyone who answers incorrectly, the last answer is good enough to save all their lives.² A similar dialogue between Alexander and Gymnosophists is preserved by a Greek papyrus of ca. 100 B.C.E. (hereafter 'the Berlin Papyrus').³ Other versions include the Latin-language *Metz Epitome* and the multilingual traditions of the *Alexander Romance*.⁴ Despite the Gymnosophists'

¹ *Alex.* 64.1–65.1; for possible dates of Plutarch's *Alexander* see C. P. Jones, "Toward a Chronology of Plutarch's Works," *JRS* 56 (1966) 61–74, at 67–69.

² For the idea of the life-or-death riddle or *Halsrätsel*, including Indian and other parallels, see R. Stoneman, *Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend* (New Haven 2008) 93–94, and *The Greek Experience of India* (Princeton 2019) 297–298, 373; H. van Thiel, "Alexanders Gespräch mit den Gymnosophisten," *Hermes* 100 (1972) 343–358, at 345; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.26, discussed below.

³ P. Bosman, "Gymnosophist Riddle Contest (Berol. P. 13044): A Cynic Text?" *GRBS* 50 (2010) 175–192, at 175.

⁴ Van Thiel, *Hermes* 100 (1972) 354–358, does a side-by-side comparison with the Berlin Papyrus, Plutarch, and the *Metz Epitome*; Stoneman, *Alexander* 19, 236, dates the earliest version of the *Alexander Romance* to the late third century C.E., although based on earlier Hellenistic material, and the *Metz Epitome* to the fourth or fifth century; for the heterogeneity of the *Romance* see

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explicit location in India, some scholars characterize these dialogues as based more on Cynic philosophy than on anything Indian.⁵

In a 2010 article in this journal, Philip Bosman traces the Cynic label for both the Berlin Papyrus and Plutarch's Gymnosophist dialogue back to Alexander's association with the Cynic Onesicritus and to interpretations of early-twentieth-century scholars such as Wilcken.⁶ Bosman successfully argues that the connections to Cynicism are so tenuous as to be invalid. He also asserts that the solving of "difficult matters," ἄπορα, is more closely linked to Indian philosophers than to any other group, but he does not develop this assertion much further.⁷ If Cynic philosophy is not the inspiration for the Berlin Papyrus and Plutarch's dialogue, the Indian *uṇiṣad* genre offers a possible model.

As used in the *Uṇiṣads* themselves, the word *uṇiṣad* seems to mean 'connection' or 'secret', usually discovered or revealed through sermons or through dialogues of wisdom-seeking questions and answers.⁸ Given that the dialogues feature numerous

C. Jouanno, "Byzantine Views on Alexander the Great," in K. Moore (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great* (Leiden 2018) 449–476, at 455–456, 467–468.

⁵ E.g. J. R. Hamilton, *Plutarch: Alexander, A Commentary* (Oxford 1969) 179, in addition to those cited by Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 175–192.

⁶ Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 177–179, 181–185.

⁷ Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 184, cites *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 3.18.34 for support of this link, *pace* N. G. L. Hammond, who posits a Greek historical source: *Sources for Alexander the Great* (Cambridge 1993) 119–120. S. Beggiora, "Indian Ethnography in Alexandrian Sources: A Missed Opportunity?" in C. Antonetti et al. (eds.), *With Alexander in India and Central Asia* (Oxford 2017) 238–254, at 242, usefully cautions against trying to identify any Indian philosophers or *sophistai* in Greek sources with particular Indian philosophical schools or doctrines.

⁸ P. Olivelle, *Uṇiṣads: A New Translation* (Oxford 1996) lii–liii; all translations of the *Uṇiṣads* here are by Olivelle. All Sanskrit quotations from the *Uṇiṣads* follow the text of Olivelle, *Early Uṇiṣads: Annotated Text and Translation* (Oxford 1998).

different participants, they share themes and concerns, but without philosophical or theological uniformity.⁹

This genre appears first in the collection of texts known as the *Upaniṣads*, which began to be composed ca. 600 B.C.E. The dating of the *Upaniṣads* is controversial, but almost all the Sanskrit texts cited in this article, especially the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣads*, predate by centuries the Berlin Papyrus (100 B.C.E.).¹⁰ Expanding on previous work by Richard Stoneman, this article will argue that these Greek dialogues reflect the Indian genre of *upaniṣad* as a ‘genre model’.¹¹ In other words, Plutarch and the author of the Berlin Papyrus deploy the genre of *upaniṣad*, even though they do not quote directly from Sanskrit texts.¹²

Traffic in goods and ideas

The idea that both the author of the Berlin Papyrus and Plutarch could be influenced by Indian literary genres is worthy of consideration since the Mediterranean world and India were connected through trade both before and after Alexander.¹³

⁹ Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* xli–lvi.

¹⁰ Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* xxxvi–xxxvii; M. Witzel, “Tracing the Vedic Dialects,” in C. Caillat (ed.), *Dialectes dans les littératures Indo-aryennes* (Paris 1989) 27–265, at 141–151.

¹¹ Stoneman, *Alexander* 94–95, *Greek Experience* 297–298, 373. For the idea of ‘genre-model’ or ‘code-model’, see S. Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext* (Cambridge 1998) 41–42.

¹² This article is not arguing for repurposing of content between India and the Greco-Roman world, as some have tried to do with the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* and the Roman epic *Aeneid*: J. Lallemant, “Une source de l’*Énéide*: le *Mahābhārata*,” *Latomus* 18 (1959) 262–287; G. Duckworth, “Turnus and Duryodhana,” *TAPA* 92 (1961) 81–127. For a rebuttal see C. Dognini, “Alessandro Magno e la conoscenza dell’*Iliade* in India,” *Aevum* 77 (1997) 71–77, at 71–74. Similarly, F. W. Alonso, in *Mahābhārata and Greek Mythology* (New Delhi 2014), has tried to argue for the influence of Greek epic, especially the *Iliad*, upon Indian epic, but has been refuted by Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 418–426.

¹³ G. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in the East from Armenia and Mesopotamia*

Archaeology has revealed Roman trade routes to and from the southwestern coast of India, starting during the late Republic, but peaking during the Roman Imperial period.¹⁴ For example, Italic Arretine red ware has been found alongside local imitations at the site of Puduch-chère, later Anglicized to Pondicherry.¹⁵

Literary and sub-literary sources also inform us about trade, especially in spices, which are more likely than ceramics to disappear from the archaeological record.¹⁶ For example, Pliny describes pepper as a valuable import.¹⁷ Less specifically, Apuleius mentions “crops of pepper” imported from India.¹⁸ According to a papyrus of the mid-second century C.E., one ship sailing from Muziris in southwest India toward Roman Egypt carried around 550 tons of pepper.¹⁹ The South Asian epic

to Bactria and India (Berkeley 2013) 33, 36; S. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley 2011) 32–37.

¹⁴ Romano-Indian trade is noted by Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* at several places, such as 12.14–17. See M. Raschke, “New Studies in Roman Commerce with the East,” *ANRW* II.2 (1978) 604–1361, esp. 650–674, and M. Fitzpatrick, “Provincializing Rome: The Indian Ocean Trade Network and Roman Imperialism,” *Journal of World History* 22 (2011) 27–54, esp. 49–50.

¹⁵ This place is also known as Pōduke Emporion or Arikamedu: M. Wheeler, *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (London 1954) 50; L. Casson, *Periplus Erythraei Maris* (Princeton 1989) 228–229.

¹⁶ Fitzgerald, *Journal of World History* 22 (2011) 32–33, emphasizes the prominence of spices in ‘eastern’ trade with India, despite Roman Stoic critiques.

¹⁷ According to *HN* 12.14, black pepper was worth four denarii per pound, and “long pepper” fifteen.

¹⁸ *piperis messes* (*Flor.* 6.2). For Apuleius’ view of India see S. Sabnis, “*Procul a nobis*: Apuleius and India,” in B. T. Lee et al. (eds.), *Apuleius and Africa* (London 2014) 271–296. Cf. *Flor.* 6.9–12 for a Latin-language, post-Plutarchan account of *upaniṣad* sessions in India, but with topics rather than questions and answers.

¹⁹ *SB* XVIII 13167 = TM 27666; F. De Romanis, *The Indo-Roman Pepper Trade and the Muziris Papyrus* (Oxford 2020) 6.

Mahābhārata even includes Indicized versions of the names of Antioch and Rome, probably because they are trade destinations.²⁰ A complete account of Mediterranean-India trade is beyond the scope of this article, but these examples show contact through trade.

Moreover, art and ideas move along these trade routes. Types of sculpture and architectural decoration produced in India after Alexander show limited Hellenistic and Roman influence late into the first millennium C.E.²¹ A recognizably Indian statuette was found at Pompeii, buried by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 C.E.²²

In the area of religion, the Indian king Aśoka attempted to spread Buddhism to Ptolemaic Egypt and beyond in the third century B.C.E.²³ Christianity seems to have traveled from the Roman Empire to India via trade routes.²⁴ If artistic techniques

²⁰ The geographic names *rōmā* and *antākhī* appear at *Mahābhārata* 2.28.49; cf. J. Fitzgerald, “The Many Voices of the *Mahābhārata*,” *JAOs* 123 (2003) 803–818, at 812–813.

²¹ L. Nehru, “Origins of the Gandhāran Style: A Study of Contributory Influences” (Oxford 1989) 15–28, demonstrates that there were at least two waves of influence, albeit shallow, one from Hellenistic Greek sculpture and the other from Imperial Roman sculpture; Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 427–460, discusses Greek influences on Indian art across many media as well as Orientalizing and counter-Orientalizing views of these influences; M. Falser, “The Greco-Buddhist Style of Gandhara, a ‘Storia ideologica’ or: how a discourse makes a global history of art,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 13 (2015) 1–53, discusses the misuse of the concept of ‘Gandharan style’ in Orientalist and Globalizing projects.

²² C. Basu, “The Heavily Ornamented Female Figure from Pompeii,” in B. Venetucci (ed.), *Il fascino dell’ Oriente nelle collezioni e nei musei d’Italia* (Florence 2011) 59–63.

²³ Raschke, *ANRW* II.2 (1978) 658, but with skepticism about general cultural influence at 674.

²⁴ N. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture* (Cambridge 2018), argues for Christianity’s journey via Sasanian merchants traveling through the Persian Gulf and along the south Asian coastline, rather than via the Indian Ocean.

and religious movements can travel between the Mediterranean and India, why could a literary genre not make the same journey?

The Berlin Papyrus and Plutarch Alex. 64–65

The Berlin Papyrus features questions very similar to Plutarch's version. The papyrus begins where Alexander is setting the terms of debate rather than with any sort of introduction to Alexander. In contrast, Plutarch provides an extensive narrative frame of the dialogue, an entire biography of Alexander the Great.

The Gymnosophist episode in Plutarch occurs in the context of his invasion of what is now India, especially the subsequent resistance to Macedonian rule by King Sabbas, called Sabeilo in the Berlin Papyrus or Sambas in other sources.²⁵ Alexander attributes Sabbas' revolt to his advisors, the Gymnosophists or 'naked philosophers'.²⁶ In an episode set in Taxila in 326 B.C.E. Alexander interrogates the Gymnosophists whom he views as most responsible for the revolt, but for their wisdom, not simply for the rationale behind their advice, and with the high stakes of execution, as we shall see.

For reference, here are the Greek texts and my translations of the dialogues with the Gymnosophists in the Berlin Papyrus and in Plutarch.

Berlin Papyrus 16–90 (text after van Thiel):

“ὄν δ' ἂν ἐγὼ προστάξω κρίνειν, οὗτος ὑμῶν ἔσται βραβευτής, καὶ ἐὰν εἰ δόξη κεκριμέναι, οὕτως ζῶν ἀφεθήσεται μόνος.” ἠρώτησεν οὖν εἰς τῶν Γυμνοσοφιστῶν, εἰ καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν προστιθῶσιν. δοθέντος δὲ τούτου, τὸν πρῶτον ἠρώτησεν, πότερον αὐτῷ δοκοῦσιν οἱ ζῶντες ἢ οἱ τεθνήκοτες εἶναι πλείους τὸν ἀριθμὸν {ἢ τουναντίον}. τὸν δ' εἰπεῖν τοὺς ζῶντας: “οὐ δίκαιον γὰρ,” ἔφη,

²⁵ Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 187, notes the considerable variation in the name of this king.

²⁶ R. Stoneman, “Naked Philosophers: The Brahmins in the Alexander Historians and the Alexander Romance,” *JHS* 115 (1995) 99–114, at 102–103, explains a persistent confusion between this group and the caste category of Brahmanas in Greco-Roman sources.

“τῶν {οὐκ} ὄντων τοὺς {οὐκ} ὄντας εἶναι πλείους.” Μετὰ δὲ τοῦτον ἠρώτα τὸν ἐχόμενον, πότερα <τὴν γῆν νομίζει πλείονα θηρία τρέφειν ἢ τὴν θάλασσαν. τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν> τὴν γῆν. καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴν τὴν θάλασσαν. τὸν τρίτον ἤρετο, “τί πανουργότατον αὐτῷ δοκεῖ εἶναι ζῶον. Τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν, “ὃ μὴ γινώσκει μηδεὶς ἀνθρώπων.” τὸν δὲ τέταρτον ἠρώτα Σαβειλῶ ἡγούμενον αὐτῶν εἰς τί συνεβούλευσεν μάχεσθαι πρὸς αὐτόν. τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν “ὅπως ἂν αὐτῷ συμβαίη καλῶς ζῆν ἢ καλῶς ἀποθανεῖν.” τὸν πέμπτον ἐκέλευσεν λέγειν, πότερον ἡμέρα πρότερον γέγονεν ἢ νύξ. τοῦτον δ’ ἀποκριθῆναι. “νυκτὶ μῖα πρότερον ἡμέρα.” διαπορουμένου δὲ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου περὶ τούτων> νοήσαντα τὸν Ἴνδον εἰπεῖν ὅτι “τοῖς ἀποροῖς τῶν ἐρωτημάτων ἀποροὺς εἶναι καὶ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις συμβαίνει.” τὸν ἕκτον ἠρώτα, τί ποιῶν ἂν τις ὑπὸ ἀνθρώπων ἀγαπῶτο μάλιστα. τὸν δὲ εἰπεῖν. “εἰ κράτιστος ὢν μηθενὶ φοβερὸς εἶη.” τὸν δὲ ἔβδομον ἠρώτα, τί ποιῶν ἂν τις γένοιτο θεός. τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν, “ὃ μὴ δυνατόν ἐστὶν ἀνθρώπων ποιεῖν, εἰ ποιήσειεν τις.” τὸν ὄγδοον ἠρώτα πότερον ἰσχυρότερόν ἐστιν, θάνατος ἢ ζωὴ. τὸν δὲ ἀποκριθῆναι τὴν ζωὴν. τὴν μὲν γὰρ ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων ὄντας ποιεῖν, τὸν δὲ θάνατον ἐξ ὄντων οὐκ ὄντας. τὸν ἔσχατον ἐκέλευε λέγειν, πόσον τινὰ χρόνον ἂν καλῶ[ς] (...) κρίνειν τὰς ἀποκρίσεις ἠρώτησε τοῦτον, τίς αὐτῶν δοκεῖ κάκιστα ἀποκεκρίσθαι, καὶ “ὅπως μὴ δόξης” ἔφη “ἀμελεῖ[ν] χαριζό[μ]ενος.” τὸν δ[ὲ] μὴ βουλόμενον δι’ αὐτοῦ μ[ηθ]ένα ἀπο[λέσθαι] εἰπ[εῖν] τὸν ἕ[τερον] ἀ[ε]ῖ θ[α]τέρου [χ]εῖρον ἀ[πο]κεκρίθεσθαι “τοιγαροῦν” ἔφη “πάντες ἀποθανεῖσθε, σὺ δὲ πρῶτος τοιαῦτα κρίνων.” τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν, “ἀλλὰ μὴν, Ἀλεξάνδρε, <οὐ βασι>λικόν ἐστὶ [ψεύδεσθαι]. ἔφης γάρ (...) ρύ]εται γὰρ ἡμᾶς ὁ λόγος. τό γε μὴ{ν} ἀδίκως ἀποκτείνειν οὐχ ἡμῖν ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ σοὶ φυλακτέον.” τὸν δὲ Ἀλέξανδρον ἀκούσαντα κρίναι σοφοὺς εἶναι τοὺς ἄνδρας <καὶ> προστάξει δόντας ἱματισμὸν ἀφεῖναι πάντας.

[Alexander said.] “The one whom I will appoint to judge will be your referee, and if he seems to have judged well, he will be the only one let go alive.” Then one of the Gymnosophists asked whether they might also add the rationale [for the decision]. And after this request was granted, Alexander asked the first Gymnosophist whether the living or the dead were more in number, or the opposite, in his view. He replied that the living were more, “for it is not right that those who do not exist are greater than those who do exist.” And after this, Alexander went on to ask the second whether he thought the sea or the land raised larger

animals. The second replied that the land did, “since the sea itself is on top of the land.” And he asked the third which animal seemed to be the cleverest. The third said, “The one that no human knows about.” And he asked the fourth why he advised Sabeilo their leader to fight against him (Alexander). The fourth said, “So that it may turn out for him to live well rather than to die well.” He went on to order the fifth one to say which happened first, day or night. He replied, “Day happened first, by one night.” When Alexander was perplexed by this answer, the Indian said, “It turns out that the answers to the perplexing kinds of questions are also perplexing.” Alexander went on to ask the sixth what he could do to be most loved by people. The sixth said, “If he is most powerful, yet not at all terrifying.” And he went on to ask the seventh what he could do to become a god. The seventh said, “If he should do something which is not possible for a human to do.” He went on to ask the eighth whether life or death was more capable. The eighth replied that life was more capable, since life makes living beings out of not-living beings, whereas death makes not-living beings out of living beings. He went on to order the last one to say how long someone could [live] well ... after giving... He (Alexander) asked the referee to judge the answers and who seemed to have given the worst answer, “so that you may not seem to neglect anyone through playing favorites.” But the referee was unwilling to get anyone killed through his actions and said that each one had given a worse answer than the other. “Okay, then,” said Alexander. “You all will die, and you, referee, will die first for giving such judgments.” But the referee said, “Alexander, it is not royal to lie, because you said”... [Alexander said,] “Your reasoning forestalls us. It is my task not to kill you unjustly, but to protect you.” And Alexander having listened judged the men to be wise and ordered his men to give them clothing and let them all go.

Plutarch *Alex.* 64.1–65.1:

τῶν δὲ Γυμνοσοφιστῶν τοὺς μάλιστα τὸν Σάββαν ἀναπέισαντας ἀποστηναὶ καὶ κακὰ πλεῖστα τοῖς Μακεδόσι παρασχόντας λαβὼν δέκα, δεινοὺς δοκοῦντας εἶναι περὶ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις καὶ βραχυλόγους, ἐρωτήματα προὔθηκεν αὐτοῖς ἄπορα, φήσας ἀποκτενεῖν τὸν μὴ ὀρθῶς ἀποκρινάμενον πρῶτον, εἶτα ἐφεξῆς οὕτω τοὺς ἄλλους ἕνα δὲ τὸν πρεσβύτατον ἐκέλευσε κρίνειν. ὁ μὲν οὖν πρῶτος ἐρωτηθεὶς πότερον οἶεται τοὺς ζῶντας εἶναι πλείονας ἢ

τοὺς τεθνηκότας, ἔφη τοὺς ζῶντας, οὐκέτι γὰρ εἶναι τοὺς τεθνηκότας. ὁ δὲ δεύτερος, πότερον τὴν γῆν ἢ τὴν θάλατταν μείζονα τρέφειν θηρία, τὴν γῆν ἔφη, ταύτης γὰρ μέρος εἶναι τὴν θάλατταν. ὁ δὲ τρίτος, ποῖόν ἐστι ζῶον πανουργότατον, “ὁ μέχρι νῦν,” εἶπεν, “ἄνθρωπος οὐκ ἔγνωκεν.” ὁ δὲ τέταρτος ἀνακρινόμενος τίνι λογισμῷ τὸν Σάββαν ἀπέστησεν, ἀπεκρίνατο “καλῶς ζῆν βουλόμενος αὐτὸν ἢ καλῶς ἀποθανεῖν.” ὁ δὲ πέμπτος ἐρωτηθεὶς πότερον οἶεται τὴν ἡμέραν ἢ τὴν νύκτα προτέραν γεγονέναι, “τὴν ἡμέραν” εἶπεν, “ἡμέρα μίᾳ,” καὶ προσεπέειπεν οὗτος, θαυμάσαντος τοῦ βασιλέως, ὅτι “τῶν ἀπόρων ἐρωτήσεων ἀνάγκη καὶ τὰς ἀποκρίσεις ἀπόρους εἶναι.” μεταβαλὼν οὖν τὸν ἕκτον ἠρώτα πῶς ἂν τις φιληθείη μάλιστα: “ἂν κράτιστος ὢν,” ἔφη, “μὴ φοβερὸς ᾖ.” τῶν δὲ λοιπῶν τριῶν ὁ μὲν ἐρωτηθεὶς πῶς ἂν τις ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γένοιτο θεός. “εἴ τι πράξειεν,” εἶπεν, “ὁ πράξει δυνατὸν ἀνθρώπου μὴ ἐστίν.” ὁ δὲ περὶ ζῆς καὶ θανάτου, πότερον ἰσχυρότερον, ἀπεκρίνατο τὴν ζῆν, τσαυτά κακὰ φέρουσιν. ὁ δὲ τελευταῖος, μέχρι τίνος ἀνθρώπου καλῶς ἔχει ζῆν, “μέχρι οὗ μὴ νομίζει τὸ τεθνάναι τοῦ ζῆν ἄμεινον.” οὕτω δὲ τραπόμενος πρὸς τὸν δικαστὴν ἐκέλευσεν ἀποφαίνεσθαι. τοῦ δὲ ἕτερον ἕτερου χεῖρον εἰρηκέναι φήσαντος, “οὐκοῦν,” ἔφη, “σὺ πρῶτος ἀποθανῆ τοιαῦτα κρίνων.” “οὐκ ἄν γ’” εἶπεν, “ὦ βασιλεῦ, εἰ μὴ σὺ ψεύδη φήσας πρῶτον ἀποκτενεῖν τὸν ἀποκρινάμενον κάκιστα.” τούτους μὲν οὖν ἀφῆκε δωρησάμενος.

Next, Alexander captured ten of the Gymnosophists who had most strongly advised Sabbas to revolt and were offering the most troubles to the Macedonians. They seemed to be awesome at answering questions and for concise speeches. He put before them perplexing questions and said that he would kill the first one who did not answer correctly, and likewise, the others in order. Then he ordered the oldest to serve as their judge. When the first was asked whether he thought the living or the dead were more numerous, he said that the living were, because the dead no longer exist. The second was asked whether the land or the sea raised bigger animals, he said that the land did, because the sea is part of the land. The third was asked what sort of animal was most tricky. He said, “The one that a human has not come to know as of now.” When the fourth was asked by what rationale he advised Sabbas to revolt, he replied, “Because I wanted him to live well rather than die well.” When the fifth was asked whether he thought the night or the day had arisen earlier, he said “the day,

by one day.” And when the king was amazed, he added that when perplexing questions were asked, the answers had to be perplexing as well. Therefore, once the king changed his attention to the sixth Gymnosophist, he went on to ask him how someone could be loved most. He said, “If he is most powerful, but is not fearsome.” Of the three remaining ones, one (the seventh) was asked how someone from the stock of mortals could become a god. He said, “If he should do something that is not possible for a mortal to do.” The next (eighth) was asked about life or death, which was stronger, and he answered that life was stronger because it bears so many evils. The last (ninth) was asked until when it was possible for a man to live well, and he replied, “Until the moment when he does not think it better to die than to live.” So, turning to the one appointed as judge, he ordered him to reveal (the loser). But when the judge said that each was worse than the other, Alexander said, “Therefore, you, since you deliver such verdicts, will die first.” “Actually, not so, O king,” he said, “unless you were lying when you said you would kill first the one who gave the worst answers.” So, having given these men gifts, he released them.

3. *Upaniṣads: origin and deployment*

Richard Stoneman was one of the first to bring up *upaniṣad*-like parallels for the dialogue between Alexander and the Gymnosophists.²⁷ While the *upaniṣad* as a genre originates around 600 B.C.E., the question format seems to stem from earlier uses. Such works as *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Cāndogya Upaniṣad* have brief sections of question-and-answer interaction, but only the latter is even called an *upaniṣad*.²⁸

The *Upaniṣads* are impossible to pin down to a particular geographical location, but they develop in multiple regions of what

²⁷ Stoneman, *JHS* 115 (1995) 111, usefully quotes Martin West’s comment that Classical scholars are “frightened of Upanishads,” *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford 1971) 201; Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 365–374, has further expanded on possible Indian influence.

²⁸ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.11; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10.6.1; see Olivelle, *Early Upaniṣads* 11, and Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 367–369, for other early *upaniṣads* that rely on questions.

is now India.²⁹ The questions are usually short and generalizing, such as “What is our self? What is Brahman?”³⁰ Usually the answer is longer, but not necessarily philosophical. These early uses are important for comparison to the Berlin Papyrus and even more to Plutarch, which are only sections of longer works. In Plutarch, the dialogue is a little more than one chapter out of seventy-seven.

While some of the questions of Alexander and answers of the Gymnosophists in both the Berlin Papyrus and in Plutarch seem merely rhetorical, this interchange often reveals philosophical assumptions. The first question becomes unexpectedly philosophical, rather than a recapitulation of conventional wisdom (Plut. *Alex.* 64.2):

When the first [Gymnosophist] was asked whether he thought the living or the dead were more numerous, he said that the living were, because the dead no longer exist.

Alexander may have expected the answer that the dead are more numerous since a common Greek euphemism for the dead is “the majority.”³¹ As described in the *Odyssey*, the souls of the dead still exist after the loss of their bodies.³² The other possibility, prevalent in India, is reincarnation—the souls of the dead are reborn into new bodies. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, the sage Jaivali says, “Those who win heavenly worlds ... are again offered in the fire of man and then take birth in the fire of woman.”³³ In each of these possibilities, the souls of the dead

²⁹ Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* xxxvii–xl.

³⁰ *ko na ātmā, kiṃ Brahma* (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.11.1). For a definition of Brahman see Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* lvi, and “Dharmaskandhāḥ and Brahmasaṁsthaḥ: A New Translation of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.23.1,” *JAOIS* 116 (1996) 205–219, at 212–217.

³¹ LSJ s.v. πλείων I.2, citing Ar. *Eccl.* 1073.

³² For example, “The souls of the dead began to assemble from Erebus [the Underworld],” αἱ δ’ ἀγεροντο / ψυχὰι ὑπὲξ Ἑρέβου νεκῶν κατατεθνηῶτων (*Od.* 11.36–37).

³³ *ye ... lokāñjāyanti ... te punaḥ puruṣāgnau hūyante, tato yoṣāgnau jāyante*

survive, but in different states.

But the Gymnosophist assumes a third alternative, the non-survival of the personal soul, which zeroes out the category of “the dead” in comparison to the living.³⁴ The *Upaniṣads* mostly assert the soul’s immortality, but they can acknowledge the other side of the debate. For example, a student named Naciketa says in perplexity to the god of Death, “There is this doubt about a man who is dead. ‘He exists’ say some; others, ‘He exists not’.”³⁵ Moreover, the idea of non-survival of the personal soul would be already familiar to Plutarch’s readers from Democritus or Epicureanism.³⁶

The second exchange similarly hinges on a problem in natural philosophy. Alexander asks, “whether the land or the sea raised bigger animals” (Plut. *Alex.* 64.2).³⁷ Natural philosophy, as practiced by Aristotle and others, would see this question as a quantitative comparison between land animals such as elephants and sea animals such as whales, and whales are clearly larger.³⁸ With

(*Byhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.16). Compare the later *Mahābhārata*, where Krishna says, “The self, embodied, casts off worn-out bodies, moving on with new ones,” *purusaḥ ... śarīrāni vihāya jīrṇāny anyāni saṁyāti navāni dehī* (*Mahābhārata* 6.26.22, transl. A. Majumdar).

³⁴ The first Gymnosophist could be a *Cārṇāka*, a materialist skeptic: Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 334–344, 362–363.

³⁵ *Yeyam prete vicikitsā manusye astītyeke nāyamastīti caike* (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.1.20).

³⁶ J. Warren, “Democritus, the Epicureans, Death, and Dying,” *CQ* 52 (2002) 193–206, at 199, differentiates these Greek philosophies somewhat, but they agree with the first Gymnosophist on the non-existence of the dead.

³⁷ It is hard to tell whether or not the Berlin Papyrus 30–31 featured a nearly identical question; van Thiel, *Hermes* 100 (1972) 355, supplements as follows: “whether he thinks that the land raises larger animals, or the sea. And he said...,” *πότερα <τὴν γῆν νομίζει πλείονα θηρία τρέφειν ἢ τὴν θάλασσαν. τὸν δ’ εἰπεῖν>*.

³⁸ Elephants: M. Charles, “Elephants, Alexander, and the Indian Campaign,” *Museion* 10 (2010) 327–353; U. Arora, “The Fragments of Onesikritos on India: An Appraisal,” *Indian Historical Review* 23 (2005) 35–102, at 50–52; Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 254–262. Whales: L. Pearson, *Lost Histories of Alexander the Great* (Oxford 1960) 108–109; Arora 44.

the political concept of territorial waters, a king like Sabbas or Alexander could rule both elephants and whales, even if the latter cannot be sufficiently tamed to be used in warfare.

But the second Gymnosophist sees the sea and land as part of the same realm: “the land [raises larger animals], since the sea is part of the land.”³⁹ In Indian cosmology, the sea and the land are usually considered a single *loka* or realm, based on the Vedic division among earth, sky, and an intermediate realm between earth and sky.⁴⁰

Similarly, the eighth question of Alexander concerns life, ζώή, and death, θάνατος, and which is stronger or mightier, ισχύτερος (64.4). Presumably, Alexander expects the answer to be “death,” since death brings life to an end, and never the reverse. In Greek, the word ‘mortal’ or ‘capable of dying,’ θνητός, is a virtual synonym for ‘human being’.

But the eighth Gymnosophist answers that life is stronger by virtue of “enduring so many evils.” He may not even have human life in mind, since some Indian philosophies in fact offer the possibility of being reborn as a mammal or as an insect depending on *karma*, the consequence of the previous life’s behavior.⁴¹ In other words, he assumes, like the first Gymnosophist who asserts that the dead no longer exist, that the dead no longer experience anything evil and perhaps not anything at

³⁹ Berlin Papyrus 32–33 is slightly different: “the land, because the sea itself is upon the land.”

⁴⁰ Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* xlv–xlvi; see for example *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4.17.1. But another passage separates the ocean, land, sky, and intermediate zone as each a “part” (*kalā*) or “one-sixteenth” of Brahman: “One-sixteenth of it is the earth; one-sixteenth is the intermediate region; one-sixteenth is the sky; and one-sixteenth is the ocean,” *pṛthivī kalā, antarīkṣam kalā, dyauh kalā, samudraḥ kalā* (4.6.3).

⁴¹ “Those who do not know these two paths [sc. Brahman or rebirth as a human], however, become worms, insects, or snakes,” *atha ya etau panthānau na viduste kītāḥ pataṅgā yadidaṁ dandaśūkam* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2.16); see also *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.3–8; Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* 324.

all.⁴² Rather, all suffering, including disease and political oppression, occurs in this life, and so does all endurance. This reply has a possible biological dimension, but also a metaphysical one or anti-metaphysical one, similar to the dialogue between Naciketa and Death, above. This reply may also be a metaphysical assertion, that the Gymnosophists cannot be harmed in the long term by killing them, since upon death they cease to suffer.

Another answer provides a political example of a life-or-death issue. When answering Alexander's specific question about why the Gymnosophists encouraged King Sabbas to revolt against him, the fourth Gymnosophist explains his advice as, "to live well rather than to die well" (64.3).⁴³ In other words, they advised him to revolt successfully and to remain an independent king rather than to die in battle against Alexander ("die well") or to live as his vassal or satrap, a situation possibly worse than death.⁴⁴

In the *Upaniṣads*, the king within a kingdom is often an analogy for the soul or *atmān* within the body. For example, the sage Sanatkumāra says:

As the subjects of a king here in this world settle down as instructed, and whatever frontier they covet—whatever region, whatever piece of land—they make a living on it ... so ... those here in this world who depart after discovering the self and these real desires obtain complete freedom of movement in all the worlds.⁴⁵

⁴² Not only is this idea directly opposite to Plato (*Resp.* 614A–616A), it is also different from the Sanskrit texts that stress reincarnation.

⁴³ The Berlin Papyrus is identical except for the introductory phrase, "so that it may turn out for him," ὅπως ἂν αὐτῷ συμβαίῃ (39–40), rather than Plutarch's "wishing him," βουλόμενος αὐτὸν.

⁴⁴ Sabbas may have escaped after this revolt, but without his royal power, according to Diodorus (17.102.6–7).

⁴⁵ *yathā hyeveha prajā anvāśanti yathānusāsanam, yañ yamantamabhikāmā bhavanti, yañ janapadam, yañ kṣetrabhāgam, tañ tamevopajīvanti...atha ya ihāt-mānamanauvidya prajantyetāmśca saytānkāmāṃsteṣāñ sarveṣu lokeṣvakāmācāro bhavati*

Working the analogy in reverse, if a king becomes a subject, his body has lost both his soul and his freedom.

In Plutarch, Alexander's fifth question, whether day or night came first, a classic 'chicken or egg' riddle, gets a clever answer from the fifth Gymnosophist, "Night, by one day" (64.5).⁴⁶ Even though many cosmologies begin with an endless night, when days begin, measurement begins. In order for 'first' or 'next' to have meaning, the first day must have dawned.

The *Upaniṣads* have a similar concern about origins, but connected explicitly with a traditional horse-sacrifice:

The day, clearly, was born afterwards to be the sacrificial cup placed in front of the horse, and its womb is the eastern sea. The night was born afterwards to be the sacrificial cup placed behind the horse, and its womb is the western sea. The two came into being to be the sacrificial cups placed in front of and behind the horse.⁴⁷

The adverb "afterwards" confuses the issue a bit, but day is mentioned first and is identified with the cardinal direction of east, where the sun rises.

Moreover, Alexander's question sets a *kūta* or 'trap,' a typical feature of *upaniṣadic* questioning or riddles. In a dialogue between King Ajātaśatru and the sage Gargya, the King asks where the self goes when a person is asleep, and Gargya cannot answer. Ajātaśatru answers his own question:

When this man was asleep here, the person consisting of perception, having gathered the cognitive power of these vital functions (*prāṇa*) into his own cognitive power, was resting in the space

(*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.5–6); for another king-soul analogy see *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* on dreams, quoted below, or *Praśna Upaniṣad* 3.4.

⁴⁶ In the Berlin Papyrus, a slightly different answer, "day [came] earlier, by one night" (44). In other words, day also comes first, but night is the unit of measurement.

⁴⁷ *Aharvā aśvaṃ purastān mahimānvajāyata, tasyā pūrve samudre yoniḥ, rātrireṇaṃ paścān mahimānvajāyata, tasyāpare samudre yoniḥ, etau vā aśvaṃ mahimānāvabhītaḥ sambabhūvatuḥ* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.2). Cf. Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 367–368; Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* 292.

within the heart ... during that time the breath remains in the grasp of that person, as do speech, sight, hearing and mind.⁴⁸

This answer accounts for the lower levels of perception and for dreams by those who are asleep, as well as for the return of senses and cognition when they wake up.

In Plutarch, after he wriggles out of the trap or *kūta* set by Alexander's question, the fifth Gymnosophist identifies both the question and answer as "perplexing," ἄπορος. Although I translate ἄπορος as "perplexing," it can also mean "without a way forward, impassable," and is similar to Sanskrit *kūta* in meaning.⁴⁹

In another perplexing question, Alexander asks the third Gymnosophist "which animal is most tricky" (64.2).⁵⁰ For Greek philosophy, animal intelligence was a problem; for example, in a discussion of courage, Socrates considers whether "any animal is so wise as to know what few humans know because these things are difficult to know."⁵¹ Arrian calls the elephant intelligent, θυμοσοφός, since elephants can feel regret and can be taught to make music and dance to it.⁵² Given the Indian setting, Alexander may have been expecting the answer to be "elephant."

Yet the third Gymnosophist replies in a trap-eluding way, "The one that a human has not come to know as of now." In other words, the unimpeachable answer is the animal that has escaped the notice of both king and philosopher. For Indian philosophy, animal intelligence is less of a problem, since animals have souls, some of which were human in a previous

⁴⁸ *yatraiṣa etatsupto bhūdyā eṣa vijñānamayaḥ puruṣastadeśāṃ prāṇānām vijñānena vijñānamādāya ya eṣo 'ntarhṛdaya ākāśantasmicchete. tāni yadā grhṇātyatha haitatpuruṣaḥ svapiti nāma. tadgrhīta eva prāṇo bhavati, grhīta vāk, grhītaṃ cakṣuḥ, grhītaṃ śrotram, grhītaṃ manaḥ (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 2.1.17).*

⁴⁹ D. Bhagwat, *The Riddle in Indian Life, Lore, and Literature* (Mumbai 1965) 18–19.

⁵⁰ The Berlin Papyrus is only slightly different, "which animal seems to him to be the most tricky" (34–35).

⁵¹ θηρίον τι οὕτω σοφὸν εἶναι, ὥστε ἂ ὀλίγοι ἀνθρώπων ἴσασι διὰ τὸ χαλεπὰ εἶναι γινῶναι (*Lach.* 196E).

⁵² *Indica* 14.4–6; see n.38 above for more on elephants.

reincarnation: “people of foul behavior can expect to enter a foul womb, like that of a dog [or] a pig.”⁵³ Moreover, souls cannot be precisely tracked, so they could end up in animals unknown to humans.

The sixth Gymnosophist stresses the elimination of fear from kingship. Alexander asks him “how someone could be liked most” (64.4).⁵⁴ The sixth replies, “If he is most powerful, but is not fearsome.” This response is not generally applicable beyond kingship since most human beings have very limited power and are far from being “most powerful,” κρότιστος. Rather, this response is applicable to Alexander the Great in particular, since many kings competed for power in India during the 300’s B.C.E.

Similarly, freedom from fear in the self or soul is a key characteristic of the divine state of *brahman* in the *Upaniṣads*. The sage Yājñavalkya says:

And this is the immense and unborn self, unageing, undying, immortal, and free from fear—the *brahman*. *Brahman*, surely, is free from fear, and a man who knows this undoubtedly becomes brahman that is free from fear.⁵⁵

Even though this idea addresses fear from the other side, the side of the subject rather than the ruler, fear should be discarded rather than used as a means of control in order to have a better eternity.

With a similar concern for eternity, Alexander asks the seventh Gymnosophist “how a human could become a god” (64.4). This question is not as arrogant as it might seem at first glance. Greek mythology features examples of humans becoming or claiming

⁵³ *atha ya iha kapūyacaranā abhyāśo ha yatte kapūyān yonimāpadyeranśvayoninī vā sūkarayoninī vā* (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.10.7).

⁵⁴ The Berlin Papyrus (48–49) is stronger: “what he could do to be most loved (ἀγαπᾶτο) by people.” LSJ s.v. ἀγαπάω I includes the meaning “show affection for the dead.”

⁵⁵ *sa vā eṣa mahānaja ātmājaro maro mṛto bhayo brahma, abhyarī vai brahma, abhyarī hi vai brahma bhavati ya evaṇi veda* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.25).

to be gods.⁵⁶ By the late fourth century there were perhaps four Greek kings or military leaders who were posthumously elevated to the status of god, above the honors of a hero-cult, although the evidence is insecure.⁵⁷

The seventh Gymnosophist answers, “If he should do something that is not possible for a mortal to do.” This answer may reflect an Indian version of Euhemerism, the idea that humans, if they do something extraordinary, are worshiped as gods, who include even Olympian gods like Zeus.⁵⁸

Earlier in the biography, Plutarch has already linked a prophecy of world domination to the revelation of Alexander’s divine lineage during the visit to the oracle of Ammon in Egypt (27.4–6).⁵⁹ In this reading, Alexander’s feats, such as his cutting the Gordian knot or conquering a large fraction of the known world, would make him the equivalent of a god, even if he still dies.⁶⁰

But the Gymnosophist’s answer seems to be a minority view in India. Indian literature provides numerous examples of humans doing deeds impossible for ordinary mortals, yet they

⁵⁶ Heracles is a rare but prominent example, and E. Badian, “The Deification of Alexander the Great,” in E. Borza (ed.), *Collected Papers on Alexander the Great* (London 2014) 244–279, at 269–270, cites Ceyx and Alcione, who styled themselves Zeus and Hera.

⁵⁷ Chr. Habicht, *Divine Honors for Mortal Men in Greek Cities* (Ann Arbor 2017) 1–11, 179–183, and Badian, in *Collected Papers* 247–255, disagree on the value of the extant evidence.

⁵⁸ This idea existed before Euhemerus, but became prominent between Alexander’s death in 323 and the composition of the Berlin Papyrus ca. 100 B.C.E. Euhemerus was court philosopher of Alexander’s Macedonian successor Cassander: F. de Angelis and B. Garstad, “Euhemerus in Context,” *ClAnt* 25 (2006) 211–242. Euhemerus also located a utopia/dystopia in India: Stoneman, *Greek Experience* 249–250.

⁵⁹ Badian, in *Collected Papers* 255–257. Stoneman, *JHS* 115 (1995) 112, suggests that Alexander’s emphasis on his divinity increased in India, after his recognition as a son of Dionysus (Curt. 8.10.1) despite Indian theological scruples.

⁶⁰ Habicht, *Divine Honors* 25.

for the most part do not become gods in addition or as a consequence.⁶¹ In the *Upanisads*, there is a path to the divine world of *brahman*, but it is achieved through consistent, ordinary actions rather than through impossible feats:

In his own house, he does his daily vedic recitation in a clean place, rears virtuous children, draws all his sense organs into himself, and refrains from killing any creature except for a worthy person [i.e. killing an animal to feed a guest]—someone who lives this way attains the world of *brahman*, and he does not return again.⁶²

Alexander's divinity is undercut elsewhere in Plutarch's text, most prominently by his undergoing disease and death (75.3–77.2).⁶³ Moreover, many Greeks are skeptical of Alexander's claims of divinity. For example, the courtier Callisthenes protests the practice of performing προσκύνησις to Alexander (54.2), a type of worship reserved in Greek religion for gods. As a consequence, Alexander puts Callisthenes to death or lets him die of illness in prison (55.5).⁶⁴ In a neat reversal, some versions of the later *Alexander Romance* feature the Gymnosophists asking Alexander for immortality, which he can grant neither to them nor to himself.⁶⁵

⁶¹ For example, the warrior Duryodhana hides at the bottom of a lake without needing to breathe (*Mahābhārata* 9.30.4–5), but still dies.

⁶² *svādhyāyamadhīyāno dhārmikānvidadhātmani sarvendriyāṇi sanṛpratiṣṭhāpyāhimsansarabhūtānyanyatra tīrthebhaḥ sa khalvevaṃ vartyanyāvadāyusaṃ brahmalokambhisampadyate, na ca punarāvartate* (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.15.1); Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* 356.

⁶³ Habicht, *Divine Honors* 23.

⁶⁴ Plutarch leaves out longer versions of Callisthenes' arguments against προσκύνησις, in opposition to fellow courtiers Anaxarchus in Arrian and Cleon in Curtius, who argue for Alexander's divinity on the basis of achievement; see Badian, in *Collected Papers* 244–245, 257–262. In contrast, L. O'Sullivan, "Court Intrigue and the Death of Callisthenes," *GRBS* 59 (2019) 596–620, argues that the argument about προσκύνησις has been unduly emphasized over personal animosities at Alexander's court.

⁶⁵ *Alexander Romance* 3.6; Stoneman, *JHS* 115 (1995) 112. S. Asviratham,

As seen near the end, the Gymnosophist appointed as judge says, “one spoke worse than the other” (64.5) or perhaps less literally but more clearly, “each gave a worse answer than the previous one.” Thus, the last Gymnosophist gives the best and worst answer simultaneously, partly because of the criterion of truth. If the last Gymnosophist’s answer is true about all the other answers, his answer is not the worst, which makes his answer false, and if his answer is false about all the other answers, his answer is the worst, which makes his answer true, and so on.⁶⁶

Alexander tries to cut this Gordian knot of paradox by killing the last Gymnosophist, which leads to the last exchange.⁶⁷ “Actually, not so, O king,” he said, “unless you were lying when you said you would kill first the one who gave the worst answers.” Since Alexander has already established truth or correctness as the criterion for judgment, he cannot violate the criterion himself.⁶⁸

In the *Upaniṣads*, sometimes the deadly riddle has a fatal, but predictable ending. For example, the sage Vidagdha Śākalya keeps asking the sage Yājñavalkya repeated questions about the foundations of the universe. Yājñavalkya counters with a question of his own:

“Plutarch’s *Alexander*,” in K. Moore (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great* (Leiden 2018) 355–378, at 355, comments, “The *Romance* ... uses Alexander to contemplate mortality and the limits of human greatness.”

⁶⁶ Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 181; Stoneman, *Alexander* 94.

⁶⁷ The literal Gordian knot occurs at Plut. *Alex.* 18.1–2, among other versions. T. Whitmarsh, “Alexander’s Hellenism and Plutarch’s Textualism,” *CQ* 52 (2002) 174–192, at 186, offers a ‘darker’ reading of Alexander’s death threats as “violent cultural transgression.”

⁶⁸ The Gymnosophists themselves were also identified with truth-telling or even the inability to lie; Dio Chrysostom writes that they have “the single fountain of truth ... those who drink from it never lie,” μὴν πηγὴν τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ... ἧς οὐδέποτε ψεύσασθαι τοὺς ἐπιπιπλάμενους (*Or.* 35.22).

I ask you about that person providing the hidden connection (*upaniṣad*)—the one who carries off these other persons, brings them back, and rises above them? If you will not tell me that, your head will shatter apart!⁶⁹

This might seem overly harsh, but only a little earlier in the dialogue, Yājñavalkya has already given everyone the answer—the *atmān* or soul—as foundational to everything human.⁷⁰

Since Śākalya is more interested in stumping Yājñavalkya than in answering foundational questions himself, his head actually explodes: “Śākalya did not know him [*atmān*], and his head did, indeed, shatter apart.”⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, no one has any more questions, and Yājñavalkya recites a long poem with a question for his audience, “From what root does a mortal man grow, when he is cut down by death?”⁷² Again, the *atmān* seems to be the answer.

In the Berlin Papyrus, Alexander admits defeat by saying, “Your reasoning forestalls us. It is my task not to kill you unjustly, but to protect you” (84–87). He not only looks magnanimous, but also gets the last word. Plutarch does not include such an ending, but shows Alexander as silent, which is a more typical ending for a section of dialogue in the *Upaniṣads*: “Thereupon, Hoṭṛ Áśvala fell silent.”⁷³ The one who falls silent has usually lost the argument.

Alexander saves face by releasing them all with gifts, either as compensation for what he has learned from them or as an

⁶⁹ *sa yastānṣpuruṣātriruhya praṭyuhyātyakrāmat tam tvaupaniṣadam puruṣam prcchami, tam cenme na vivakṣyasi mūrdhā te vipatīsyatīti* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.26). Note that head explosions are often metaphorical; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.6.1; Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* 295; S. Insler, “The Shattered Head Split and the Tale of Śakuntalā,” *Bulletin des Études Indiennes* 7–8 (1989–1990) 97–139.

⁷⁰ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.25.

⁷¹ *tam ha na mene śākalyaḥ tasya ha mūrdha vipapāta* (3.9.26).

⁷² *martyaḥ svimṛtyunā vṛkṣaḥ kasmānmūlātprarohati* (3.9.28); P. Horsch, *Die vedische Gathā- und Śloka-Literatur* (Berne 1966) 155–160; Olivelle, *Upaniṣads* 314, views this question as having no answer.

⁷³ *tato ha hotāśvala upararāma* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.10).

attempt to persuade them to support him instead of Sabbas: “So, having given these men gifts, he released them” (65.1).⁷⁴ In the Berlin Papyrus, the gifts are described as clothing, ἱματισμός (90).⁷⁵ In later narratives of another Indian sage named Dandamis, the sage refuses Alexander’s gifts to avoid reciprocal obligations and to assert self-sufficiency.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the idea of the gift, favor, or ‘boon’ (in older English), especially in exchange for wisdom, is also a feature of the Indian *uṇiṣad*. For example, King Janaka gives the sage Yājñavalkya 1000 cows as a reward for his explanation of the difference between the mortal body and the immortal “life-breath” (*prāna*):

“As a snake’s slough, lifeless and discarded, lies on an anthill, so lies this corpse. But this non-corporeal and immortal lifebreath (*prāna*) is nothing but *brahman*, nothing but light.” “Here, sir, I’ll give you a thousand cows,” said Janaka, the king of Videha.⁷⁷

Gift-giving, whether in the form of cows, clothing, or unspecified gifts, provides an appropriate conclusion to an *uṇiṣad*.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the dialogues between Alexander and the Gymnosophists in the Berlin Papyrus and in Plutarch’s *Alexander* adapt and deploy the Indian literary genre of *uṇiṣad*, as exemplified in the Indian anthology *Uṇiṣads*. Supporting evidence for this connection can be found in documented long-distance trade and cultural contact between the Mediterranean and Indian regions. Although Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander* considered

⁷⁴ See Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 188–189, for gift-giving as an assertion of power.

⁷⁵ The Greek word does not specify a particular garment like the τρίβων, the ‘philosopher’s cloak’; Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 189–190.

⁷⁶ Bosman, *GRBS* 50 (2010) 189.

⁷⁷ *Tadyathāhi nirvayanī valmīke mṛtā pratyastā śayīta evamevedam śarīraṁ sete athāyamaśarīro ‘mṛtaḥ prāṇo brahmaiva teja eva so ‘haṁ bhagavate sahasraṁ dadāmiṭi hovāca janako vaidehaḥ* (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Uṇiṣad* 4.4.7).

in its entirety follows the very different genre of biography, the Indian genre of *upaniṣad* enriches this Greek work.⁷⁸

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