

Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis*



Alexandreis: background

- *Alexandreis*, a Latin epic in ten books
- dating (composed over five years according to the poem): composition 1178-82? (Christensen); or largely written before 1176 and published in 1176 with some additions e.g. reference to Rheims? (Dionisotti)
- patron= Archbishop William of Rheims, nephew of ousted King Stephen of England and brother of Queen of France: became Archbishop in 1176



William



- honoured by e.g. having first letters of each book form his name and by address:

“But you, whose royal forebears Britain vaunts, / be with me now, you who as bishop brought / to
Sens no less praise than when Brennius / broke Rome with arms of Sens [=Senones, Gauls],
and would have made / Tarpeius' citadel his own, had not / the silver goose roused those who
should have watched. / When you at last had gained the see of Reims, / the warlike land lost
any earlier name / for harshness. From the moment of your birth, / Philosophy took you as
foster child: she gave you milk of Helicon to drink, / laid bare the holy teaching of her heart,
and granted, scattering the veiling / clouds, that you who were long purged by study's fire /
should penetrate the hidden cause of things.” (*Alex.* 1.12-23)

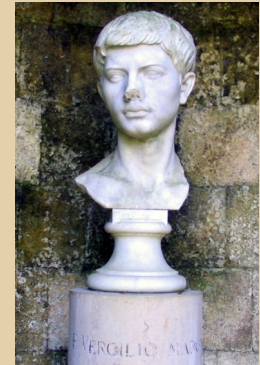


Epic tradition (esp. Vergil and Lucan; also Claudian)

“I hardly think myself superior to the bard of Mantua [Vergil]” (*Alex.*, prologue)

“Stay with me as I steer for open sea; / pour out the holy waters, and upon / your head set laurel—
grant I may ascribe to you the inspiration of my song.” (*Alex.* 1.24-6, to patron)

- shield of the Persian king, Darius at *Alex.* 2.494-544> compare/ contrast with the shield of Aeneas in the *Aeneid* (see Wright)



sources

- freedom in creating material (e.g. tombs of Darius' wife and Darius; individuals fighting)



- mostly draws on Quintus Curtius Rufus (popular); not heavily drawing on the fantastical stories available in Romance etc (>keeps Alexander's humanity in view?)

Fantastical traditions

- aware of and alludes to fantastical traditions e.g. Nectanebus, *Alex.* 1.46-7; monsters; journey to Paradise

When Alexander sees Porus and elephants:

“Here, at last, /

is danger worthy of amazement, and /

my spirit’s match. One deed I must achieve /
against both monsters and illustrious men”

(*Alex.* 9.203-5)



Allusion to journey of paradise tradition

“And if the Fates / should lend his sails kind winds, he plans to seek / the Nile’s source, and lay siege to Paradise... / Go then and smite our mutual pestilence.” (*Alex.*10.95-8, Nature to Leviathan/Satan)

“What praise is yours, serpent, what glory, that / you cast the first man out, if such a garden / should yield its honours up to Alexander?” (*Alex.*10.102-4)



Christian angle

- inclusion of Christian material: e.g. appearance of Christ and his future victory over Hell; Jewish / Christian tradition with material from the Old Testament on Darius' shield in Book 2; decorations of Darius' wife's tomb include pictures of the Creation on, based on the Old Testament (like fall of Man, Noah, the history of the Jews as God's own people)
- Alexander = pagan, no chance for enlightenment

