

Walter of Châtillon, *Alexandreis*



Purpose? (debated!)

- Alexander as ideal hero?

“godlike hero” and “the ideal of what a warrior should be” (Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* 1956)

- Dennis Kratz (*Mocking Epic* 1980) argues that the *Alexandreis* was intended to satirize the heroes of ancient epic:

“attacks the pursuit of worldly fame”

Purpose

- mapped onto contemporary figures? Wiener argues Alexander was a typological model for Philip Augustus (Phillip II, king of France 1180-1223). (2001. *Proles vaesana Philippi totius malleus orbis: die Alexandreis des Walter von Chatillon und ihre Neudeutung von Lucans Pharsalia im Sinne des typologischen Geschichtsverständnisses*). Role model?

“Linked with this role is that of Alexander as a strong ruler, whom Walter can offer as a model to his own King of France.” (Wright p26)



purpose

“If pious prayers and tearful lamentation / moved mercy from on high to grant the Franks / a king like this, the True Faith would shine forth / unhindered through the earth, and Parthia,/ broken by our arms, would beg unbidden / for baptism’s renewal, while high Carthage, / which long lay ruined, soon would rise again / at mention of Christ’s name. The penalties / that Spain deserved to pay under great Charles / would be exacted by the cross’s banners, / and every race and tongue would sing of Jesus, / and freely would approach the holy font / under Reims’ holy bishop’s tutelage.” (*Alex.* 5.510-20)

purpose

“Parthia, Carthage, and Spain represent points of the compass and also, of course, Islam. France’s Alexander would be no ordinary Crusader setting out to rescue the Holy Places; his aim would be no less than a new world empire to be the guardian of the Christian faith, in defiance of the established scheme of universal history, which allotted that rule to Rome. Moreover, ‘Parthia’ and ‘Carthage’ are no idle poetic archaisms. The new French empire would undo Roman history ancient and modern: it would vanquish Rome’s own unvanquished enemy, and resuscitate the enemy that Rome had destroyed, as well as avenge the defeat of Rome’s second founder, Charlemagne” (Dionisotti 87, who has early dating of poem)

Purpose

- Alexander as agent of god/proto-crusader?

“At this point in the poem, three books from its conclusion, Alexander has already served his purpose in God’s divine plan: once the Persian Empire has fallen, and its power been transferred to the Greeks, Alexander’s role in world history is over” (Lafferty 1994, 81)

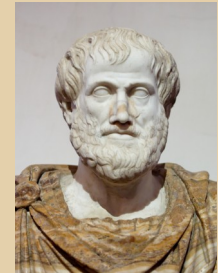
"The tomb of Darius, which Walter describes in an *ekphrasis* in *Alexandreis* 7, questions the relevance of history, even salvation history, to secular kings in their wordly concerns" (Lafferty p. 126)

Purpose

“By means of Biblical parallels, Walter also makes it clear that Alexander has a part to play in the history of salvation, and hence that he can often legitimately be viewed as God’s agent punishing the wicked on earth. Moreover, Alexander’s campaigns in the East had a special significance for Walter’s twelfth-century audience. The poem was written less than eighty years after the successful conclusion of the First Crusade, and in the decade before the Third Crusade was to set off. Alexander, then, can be seen as a kind of proto-crusader whose campaigns justify the West’s assaults on the East. (Wright p26)

Purpose

- anti-Roman slant? (due to rise of Greek philosophy? Nb figure of Aristotle in book 1)
- "the secular and anti-Roman character ... might .. be seen as a literary concomitant to the increasingly secular, and increasingly Greek, philosophy burgeoning in the schools of Paris."
(Dionisotti)



- link to politics? Nb Pope Alexander III (pope 1159-81) who spent much of his time as pope outside Rome because Barbarossa had a preferred candidate.

Purpose

- contrary to tradition, Alexander conquers whole world (Europe surrenders at Babylon)

“How generously the Duke of Macedon / dispensed his wealth, with what a splendid host / he conquered Darius’ and Porus’ lands, / tell us, Muse; how Greece laughed in her triumph, / and once again to Corinth tribute came / home from the Persians- these are deeds well known / through all the earth. Had sufferance of the Fates / allowed this man to live till our own day, / unbroken by the ravages of age, Fame would never have sung the victory-song / for Caesar, and all glory of Rome’s race / would lie abject, the great blaze of his worth / engulfing that pale flame. The Wain’s slow stars / would grow more languid still, and /Lucifer would turn pale at the rising of his sun. (*Alex.* 1.1-11)

Anti-Rome?



“The Eusebian doctrine, that the Roman Empire had been ordained by God to further and maintain Christianity, was the common ground underlying even the most divergent theories of papal versus imperial power: it is excluded from Walter’s vision” (Dionisotti)



Anti-Rome



“never did boastful Rome receive her victor / with adulation of so fine a triumph, ... /

...And rightly: / for if you recollect the wondrous deeds / of kings, and praise them justly by their titles; / if you recall with what a meagre host / the Macedonian approached such deeds, / in flower of tender youth, against world conquerors, / and in how brief a time the whole world lay/ before the knees of Alexander – then / that whole array of dukes will seem mere rabble, /whether the men the Spanish poet sings / with high-flown melody, or those whom Claudian / distinguishes by his lofty verses’ strains. / Lucan would blush to sing his victory song / for Caesar and the fall of Rome; Honorius / would yield to Macedonia’s bright arms.” (*Alex.* 5.491-9)



purpose



- aim of musing on poetry and gaining poetic glory

“But you ... / ... receive, O great / prelate, the zealous labor of your Walter./ Do not disdain to join around your brow / the poet’s ivy to the sacred mitre. / For though this song may be unworthy of / so great a bishop, yet when spirit passes / from mortal limbs, **together we shall live.** / **Surviving with his poet, William’s glory / shall live undying** through all time to come.”
(*Alex.* 10. 461-9)



purpose

- morality? Alexander as *exemplum*?

“a man who was born to teach this bad lesson to the world, that so many lands may obey one lord”
(literally “as a not useful example [exemplum] to the world”, Lucan 10.26-7)

characterization of Alexander:



e.g.

- lonely
- single-minded pursuit of his aims

“I’ll not be dragged away from the arms and chariots of Darius, not even if the true messenger Mercury swoops down despatched from on high to tell me that my own mother and sisters have been raped by the Persians.” (*Alex.* 5.243-6: rejects Bellona’s advice to stop chasing Darius)



characterization of Alexander:

- pious and impious

“I am summoned, though resistant and unwilling .. to a new realm” (*Alex.* 10.416-7, Alexander’s last words: thinks he is being summoned to lead forces of heaven against the giants)

“[these words] constitute, in the context of Christian Latin epic, the very apotheosis of blasphemous megalomania.” (Wright)

god-fighting giant (single-handedly climbs walls, like Statius’ blasphemous Capaneus in the epic *Thebaid*)

Megalomaniac; crosses limits

- moral ambiguity

moralizing

“Thus will the Great One serve / as an example. Five feet of carved stone / sufficed for his abode
in tunneled earth, / for whom the world held insufficient space” (*Alex.* 10.448-50)

Fickle/transient fortune (which is shown supporting Alexander for most of his life)

moralizing



“when the royal pleasure of the Persians / fell in his grasp and drew him to their ways, / and opulence, the mother of excess, / convinced him all was lawful, Fortune spoiled / his prior nature / His earlier piety towards his foes / gave way to murderous hatred of his friends; / he turned at last to war within his house” (*Alex.* 3.245-52) (remember Curtius and corruption of Alexander) BUT not really developed

“The schooling that impressed once-tender youth / had taught the true adornment of the soul, / the lineaments of life’s perfection. Yet / the wealth of Babylon, the slothful pleasures / its populace enjoyed, made slack the workings / of inborn virtue’s rigor. Vile corruption / stained all that city’s customs; unmixed wine / warmed every heart to Venus’ venal evils.” (*Alex.* 6.16-23); men shown corrupted



Alexander



“The upshot is a poem not so much about Alexander the Great but ... about political and military power; power that requires a combination of passion and skill, and extremes of both self-obsession and self-denial” (Dionisotti p84)

- mixed character
- limited knowledge



Alexander



"Alexander assumes that he knows his role in history and that his knowledge gives him the power to control his fate. This assumption, however, is shown to be flawed when set against the Christ-centered history of Walter and his contemporaries. His limited knowledge of the future only blinds him." (Lafferty p. 63)

"The readers share with the narrator the ability to incorporate the repeated patterns perceived by the pagans into the larger framework of salvation history." (Lafferty p. 62)

"Christian historiography offers a unified understanding of time." (Lafferty p. 63)

