

Interest of Greeks (Alexander/Achilles) to Romans /West



why interest in Greek Alexander for Romans (and medieval West)?



- Alexander and the East
 - world mastery inc way to think about Rome's relationship with/conquest of East: nb Pompey, who had victories in East
- “But it concerns the glory of the Roman Empire, and not that of one man, to mention in this place all the records of the victories of Pompey the Great and all his triumphs, which equal the brilliance of the exploits not only of Alexander the Great but even almost of Hercules and Father Liber.”
(Elder Pliny *Natural History* 7.95)



why interest in Greek Alexander for Romans

- conquests at edge of the world:

Pompey to people: “The crowning pinnacle of this glorious record was (as he himself declared in assembly when discoursing on his achievements) to have found Asia the remotest of the provinces and then to have made her a central dominion of his country. If anybody on the other side desires to review in similar manner the achievements of Caesar, who showed himself greater than Pompey, he must assuredly roll off the entire world, and this it will be agreed is a task without limit.” (Elder Pliny *Natural History* 7.99)

why interest in Greek Alexander for Romans

“it was with Pompey that the idea of Roman rule stretching right across the known world took on a coherent form. Rome’s horizons at this period were of unprecedented breadth” (Clarke, *Between Geography and History* 1999: 308)

why interest in Greek Alexander/Achilles for Romans (and medieval West)?



Belief fostered by Alexander and his successors that he had changed the Greek world.

Hellenization > spread of Greek culture

Greek historiography interests in perceiving set of kingdoms/empires:

Assyrians > Medes > Persians > Greeks (Macedonians)

Transfer of rule (*translatio imperii*) (= fall of empire)

Romans (5th/everlasting) after Greeks (see Polybius: 146 BC for start of Roman era)



why interest in Greek Alexander/Achilles to Romans (and medieval West)?



“To conclude, the topos of four eastern empires and Rome the fifth emerges in the last half of the first century B.C. in Greek and Roman literature, and from then on is commonly used in this and similar forms by Rome's flatterers and enemies, in different interpretations, all over the empire. I should like to suggest that the stimulus to turn the theory into a propagandistic topos could have arisen when Rome started to interfere intensively in the regions which belonged to the first three empires of the topos, namely in the first century” (Mendels 1981: 337)

Exploited by Augustus: defeat of Cleopatra, last of Hellenistic dynasts



Translatio imperii



“he, in his treatise on Fortune, wishing to give men a striking instance of her mutability asks them to remember the times when Alexander overthrew the Persian empire, and speaks as follows: "For if you consider ... merely these last fifty years, you will read in them the cruelty of Fortune. I ask you, do you think that fifty years ago either the Persians and the Persian king or the Macedonians and the king of Macedon, if some god had foretold the future to them, would ever have believed that at the time when we live, the very name of the Persians would have perished utterly — the Persians who were masters of almost the whole world — and that the Macedonians, whose name was formerly almost unknown, would now be the lords of it all” (Polybius 29.2-4 citing Demetrius of Phaleron, late-fourth/ early-third century BC Greek orator)



Translatio imperii: *Alexandreis*



poem making use of biblical material: e.g. prophecy in Daniel 8 supposedly prophesying Alexander's coming and destruction of Persian empire- where male goat from West (Alexander) would conquer ram (i.e. Darius)

Evoked in tomb built by Alexander (using Apelles) for Darius

“here is placed the figurative ram, whose two horns Alexander, the whole world's hammer, crushed” (*Alex.* 7.423-4)

Underlines Alexander's limited (pagan, chronologically limited) knowledge



Translatio imperii: *Alexandreis*



“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)

“Even though he acts as founder and patron, Alexander is excluded from the biblical knowledge displayed on the sepulchral monument, according to which the third empire has just begun with Alexander’s succession from Darius. Medieval readers, however, must have easily grasped the meaning through the textual allusions and their knowledge of the four kingdoms of Daniel.” (Velte 2019: 327)



Translatio imperii: *Alexandreis*



“The tomb thus does not act primarily as an exhibition space for the deeds of Darius, but as a representation of him as the last ruler of a dynasty terminated by Alexander. Therefore, the function of the monument vacillates between being a grave and a victory monument, designating the historical moment of the *translatio imperii* and, simultaneously, the climax of Alexander’s own life. The epitomisation of the history of salvation, which gradually unfolds on the gravestones, is a reminder that it is not the worldly fame of a hero that is at the heart of the memorial visualisation, but the hero’s role in the course of universal history.” (Velte 2019: 327)



Translatio imperii: *Alexandreis*



New Christian empire... (inc. new Alexander in imminent future?)



Threat to Rome?

- *Alexandreis*: Europe (including Italy) voluntarily surrenders at Babylon by sending a tribute shortly before Alexander's death
- Alexander Romance had Alexander go to Rome, get submission of Romans (they provided money/troops for campaign v Persians)

Threat to Rome?

“Romans in Alexander's empire seems to have its basis in a number of rhetorical and historical traditions: reports of Roman diplomatic contacts with Alexander, rumors about Alexander's plans for the future, the invasion of Italy by Alexander Molossus at the same time to Asia as his nephew's expedition to Asia, and Roman counterfactual speculation about what would have happened if Alexander had made war on Rome.” (Garstad, B. 2015 *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* Vol. 108, pp. 467-507 at 467)

Threat to Rome?

“There was a report in circulation in antiquity that the Romans had sent envoys to Alexander, not as he marched through Italy before setting out against the Persians, but to Babylon in the last year of his life. Arrian offers us the fullest account of the Roman embassy and is almost alone in offering us any account at all, although he does ascribe the story to two predecessors, now lost, Aristus and Asclepiades” (Garstad 2015: 473)

“What if” history



“Later Philip fell victim to a conspiracy; but Alexander, who succeeded him, crossed over into Asia and the Orient, to subdue the Persians. But another Alexander, surnamed Molossus, came into Italy intending to make war on the Roman people—for already the fame of Roman valour and success was beginning to be conspicuous among foreign nations—but he died before beginning the war. We have learned that on his way to Italy that Molossus said that he was going against the Romans as a nation of men, but the Macedonian was going against the Persians as one of women.

Later, the Macedonian Alexander, having subdued the greater part of the east, died after a reign of eleven years. Not long after this the philosopher Aristotle ended his life, and a little later, Demosthenes; at about that same time the Roman people engaged in a dangerous and protracted war with the Samites ...” (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 17.21, C2nd CE)



“What if” history

Aulus Gellius 32-3: Alexander’s uncle, Alexander Molossus, the king of Epirus: invades Italy
same time Alexander invading Asia

“what might have been: if Alexander Molossus had not first killed in a skirmish in South Italy, he might actually have been the one to bring Rome into the orbit of world history by carrying out his plan of attacking Rome, whose reputation was just then beginning to be known abroad...

he reinforces once more his theme of Rome as a comparatively minor player in the world by stressing that within two years of the death of Alexander the Great, Rome was still being forced into humiliating defeats by the Samnites (36)” (Feeney *Caesar’s Calendar* 2007: 39)
what might have happened if he had gone north at this time?

“What if” history: Livy 9.18.1-7



“And we are speaking of an Alexander not yet overwhelmed with prosperity... For viewing him in the light of his new fortune and of the new character—if I may use the expression—which he had assumed as conqueror, he would evidently have come to Italy more like Darius than like Alexander, at the head of an army that had forgotten Macedonia and was already adopting the degenerate customs of the Persians.

I am loath, in writing of so great a prince, to remind the reader of the ostentatious alteration in his dress, and of his desire that men should prostrate themselves in adulation, a thing which even conquered Macedonians would have found oppressive, much more than those who had been victorious; of his cruel punishments and the murder of his friends as they drank and feasted; of the boastful lie about his origin.”



“What if” history: Livy 9.18.1-7



What if his love of wine had every day grown stronger? and his truculent and fiery anger? I mention only things which historians regard as certain. Can we deem such vices to be no detraction from a general's good qualities? But there was forsooth the danger—as the silliest of the Greeks who exalt the reputation even of the Parthians against the Romans, are fond of alleging—that the Roman People would have been unable to withstand the majesty of Alexander's name, though I think that they had not so much as heard of him; and that out of all the Roman nobles not one would have dared to lift up his voice against him, although in Athens, a city crushed by the arms of Macedonia, at the very moment when men had before their eyes the reeking ruins of the neighbouring Thebes, they dared inveigh against him freely, as witness the records of their speeches



Hannibal: actual threat to Rome



Hannibal: was threat; Alexander wasn't (though could have been)

Alexander wannabee?

slippage between Hannibal and Alexander (nb Juvenal moves from one to other)

Alexander's heir. Seduced by luxuries of Campania

Punic wars start of luxury and moral decline

East: story that Greeks (Alexander) corrupted by East (Persians) / Romans threatened by corruption from e.g. Greece; Roman province of Asia



Rome and the East



“Those who knew said that the equipment of the soldiers gleamed with gold and ivory; consequently Alexander, not to be outdone in anything, since he surpassed all other men, added silver plates to the shields and put golden bits on his horses, and adorned the cuirasses also, some with gold, others with silver.” (Curt. 8.5.4)

“Curtius articulates the idea that the adornment of arms and armour was an Oriental, unwarlike folly, and one which could potentially infect those exposed to Eastern attitudes.” (McAvoy 2017: 205)



Rome and the East



“The idea of the ‘Persianisation’ of Alexander and the Macedonians was clearly resonant for Roman authors, probably due to their own constructions of the ‘ineffectiveness’ of Eastern attitudes.” (McAvoy 2017: 205):

cf. Livy: “the more our empire expands—we are now crossing into Greece and Asia, which are replete with all manner of seductive pleasures, and we are even laying hands on the treasures of kings—the more I shudder at the thought that these things may have captured us rather than we them.” (Livy 34.4.4-5)



Why use Greek heroes? What do they allow?



Greek > not Roman

distance if treating politically sensitive stuff

Ability to engage with Greek texts (including foundational work of Homer: Achilles) and Greek heroic world

Greek- cultural cachet



Why use Greek heroes? What do they allow?



Complications:

Barchiesi 2005 on the *Achilleid* and Greece “Firstly, the location can suggest conflicting perspectives. This is a Latin poem whose location is Greece not Rome; yet it is heroic Greece not decadent Greece, yet even heroic Greece is not Rome... This narrative place, insofar it is a cultural context for the action, could be imagined by a Roman audience as not vulnerable since heroic Greece or as naturally decadent qua Greece. Potentially the Homeric plot is an encyclopedia of virtue, a source of moral teaching, and yet, if one is a malicious reader, this plot accommodates all the traits which modern historians recognise as ‘the bad Greek; in Tacitus and the younger Pliny, that is internal strife, mean squabbling over prizes and distinctions, and unpredictable restless sexuality - except that this is, let us repeat, heroic Greece.”

