

## MORE TALK OF ALEXANDER<sup>1</sup>

WHEN I wrote on the early Insular treatment of the Alexander theme,<sup>2</sup> I had in mind only the comparison of the extended narrative texts in Middle Irish<sup>3</sup> and Old English. My conclusions were that the Irish 'Imthúsa Alexandair' was essentially a macroform aggregation of three Alexander texts (*Orosius, Epistola ad Aristotelem, Colatio Alexandri cum Dindimo Rege Bragmanorum*). It is surprisingly well structured for a tenth-century macroform when compared to other Middle Irish compilations like *Táin Bó Cuailnge I* and *Sex aetates sunt mundi* (eleventh century). This Alexander triplet is the standard one in the early medieval Latin Alexander tradition. The translation is an expert one for the standards of the time, and in the compiler's original remarks, aimed at welding the separate pieces together, it also contains a modest attempt at textual integration. In contrast with the translation of the Old English Alexander texts, however, there are no signs of a moral reading of the text. Moral comments in the Orosian exemplar are not taken up and developed. The English texts, on the other hand, do reveal a moral *sensus* both explicitly, by elaborating on the interpretative phrases in Orosius, and implicitly by the very manner in which the exemplar (*Epistola ad Aristotelem*) is cut in the translation to form a story which lends itself to easy moralization. This is reinforced by its position in the Nowell Codex between the 'Marvels of the East' and 'Beowulf'. Although this taxonomy (the *sensus literalis* reading in the Irish text versus the *sensus moralis seu allegoricus* reading in the English text) may not be to everyone's liking,<sup>4</sup> it is, however, clearly borne out

<sup>1</sup>By offering this essay to the volume of *Celtica* dedicated to Brian Ó Cuív, I wish to express my sincere thanks to Professor Ó Cuív for having taken the pains to introduce me (together with Dr Katharine Simms) in the autumn of 1972 to Irish palaeography and the art of editing bardic poetry. I also wish to thank Mr Dewi Ifan and Dr Stephen N. Tranter (Freiburg) for reading through the typescript of this paper as well as correcting my English. The responsibility for the opinions voiced here lies, of course, entirely with me.

<sup>2</sup>'Der insulare Alexander', in *Kontinuität und Transformation der Antike im Mittelalter* (ed. W. Erzgräber, Sigmaringen 1989) 129–55.

<sup>3</sup>For a list of other texts on the Alexander theme see K. Meyer, 'Die Geschichte von Philipp und Alexander von Macedonien aus dem Lebar Brecc, mit deutscher Übersetzung und mit Excerpten aus dem Book of Ballymote', *Irische Texte* 2/2 (1887) 1–108, pp. 2–5.

<sup>4</sup>See Richard Kearney's reaction to Frank O'Connor's characterization of the Irish mind as 'choosing the imagination over the intellect' in the introduction to his book *The Irish mind, exploring intellectual traditions* (Dublin 1985), where it is declared to be an argument from an English colonial point of view. Frank O'Connor's phrase really reads, referring to early medieval Irish writing: 'The Irish had the choice between imagination and intellect, and they chose imagination' (*The backward look* (London 1967) 5). From my own findings in the contrastive study of the reception of Christian Latin literature in Ireland and England (*Homo octipartitus, Sex aetates mundi*, homiletics, Alexander) I can only endorse O'Connor's view. There are exceptions in the poetry, as will be argued below. This forms, however, part of the later medieval poetic internationalism.

by the evidence of the *prose* texts in the Insular Alexander tradition. But once we go outside the field of Irish prose, so much impregnated by the practice of early exegetical writing, and move further on in the Middle Ages, we find that the Irish also used the Alexander theme in *poetic* expression in a somewhat similar way to that of the Welsh tradition as Marged Haycock has demonstrated.<sup>5</sup>

In the *Book of Taliesin* (from the first quarter of the fourteenth century) there are three poems, two on Alexander himself and one on Hercules, Alexander's *figura*. They are taken by Dr Haycock to be the work of pre-twelfth-century poets.<sup>6</sup> The poems are pervaded by a positive evaluation of Alexander's exploits and a moral lesson that the poetic *ego* wishes to share with its readers or hearers (*a'r sawl a'm clyw* 'and such as hear me'). The first (acephalous) poem adds to the 35 lines praising Alexander's heroic deeds one line voicing a faint echo of Orosius's condemnation of the conqueror's brutality and disregard for human lives (*kyn no hyn bei gwell digonet* 'It would have been better had this [i.e. his death by poison] been done sooner') and then goes on to add five lines of the *ego*'s expressing the wish that it may be granted to live a life according to God's will and that the audience may be granted this as well (by listening to this poem?). A lot is left unexpressed; quite obviously the work draws on the Orosian *prae-textus* (commented upon by the editor) and on knowledge shared by the audience. The moral equivocation of the poem, hovering between positive and negative evaluation of the Alexander figure, brings about a particular sense of evasiveness and leaves much room for thought.

The second Alexander poem, *Anryuedodeu Allyxand[er]* 'Marvels of Alexander', is more straightforwardly positive and personal. It is clad in the guise of an elegy. It begins with a verb inflected for the first person singular (*ryfedaf* 'I marvel') and expresses astonishment that Heaven does not fall to earth because of the death of mighty Alexander. Here he is not so much the heroic conqueror as the great explorer of the world. He is praised for his most courageous adventures, his flight with the griffins and the underwater expedition, all this to obtain more knowledge of the world. The value of seeking knowledge for personal perfection is underlined by the proverbial phrase *A geisso keluydyt / bit oiewin y vryt* 'Whosoever may seek learning / Must be intrepid of purpose'. The poem finishes with the summarizing statement that Alexander '(won) mercy from God by his death' (*A heuyt o'e diwed / gan duw trugared*), implying that the audience should follow his example and find God's grace by seeking knowledge. The idea of obtaining grace by the personal fulfilment of one's God-given talents, and perfection of learning in

<sup>5</sup> "Some talk of Alexander and some of Hercules": three early medieval poems from the *Book of Taliesin*, *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 13 (1987) 7–38.

<sup>6</sup> The linguistic and stylistic evidence discussed in the notes to the poems suggests that these three poems were composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries, perhaps later rather than earlier' (*ibid.*, 17).

particular, is an Augustinian idea ('Imo vero et quod per hominem descendendum est, sine superbia discat', *De doctrina christiana*, Prologue 5; cf. II 40, 60). The *prae-textus* of this interpretation of the Alexander figure is the *Epistola*. There is no poem on the third text of the traditional trilogy, the *Collatio*. The *Marwnat erof* 'Elegy for Hercules' is similar in tone to the Alexander poems, but more distanced and less moralistic.

Thus both Welsh Alexander poems (which are in the *awdl* metre) draw on the well-known *prae-textus* of the early medieval Alexander canon – as, for instance, exemplified by the Middle Irish *Imthúsa Alexandair* – and both poems interpret the figure morally, but differently, following the respective evaluations of Alexander in the underlying *prae-textus*. The positive interpretation seems to outweigh the traditionally negative view of Alexander in the Orosian train of thought.

There were two main lines of evaluating the figure of Alexander in the Middle Ages, one viewing him favourably, seeing in him the positive example of the explorer and crediting him with far-reaching discoveries in the experimental sciences. This tradition ultimately goes back to oriental texts and was mediated to the medieval world by the pseudo-Kallisthenes type of texts. The negative view ultimately goes back to the Roman philosophers (Cicero, Seneca etc.) and was adopted by the Church fathers. They saw in Alexander the prime example of *superbia*. That he was recognized by the Church fathers at all is due to his mention in the Old Testament (1 Maccabees 1:1–10). St Jerome, for instance, took him to be one of the great rulers of the world according to Daniel's version of the four great kingdoms (Daniel 7). The spectrum of Alexander interpretations along these two main lines is very broad in the Middle Ages. It ranges from the negative view, that he was a representative of the sins *curiositas (oculorum)*, *cupiditas*, *vanitas*, *superbia* and the God-sent scourge of the world, to the view that he was the ideal world ruler, the model ruler of the *speculum regale* type of texts, the seeker of knowledge, the explorer of the marvels of the earth, and even the *figura Christi*.<sup>7</sup> The figure of Alexander lent itself so easily to different interpretations in the history of ideas and the course of events during the Middle Ages that one is not surprised to find it linked to the theme of transitoriness of earthly greatness in two Irish poems of the later Middle Ages, one moral and one political.

The 'sic transit gloria mundi' theme first found exemplary expression in the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 2:12–15 and Ezekiel 31). It was taken up by many medieval writers, such as Boethius, St Columbanus and Isidore setting the pattern for the later *miseria mundi* and *rota fortunae* laments and Christian consolations. One of the best-known formulations of the theme of transitoriness is in the *ubi sunt* topos, as in François Villon's famous *où sont les neiges d'antan?* ('Ballade

<sup>7</sup>See the different interpretations in the volume *Kontinuität und Transformation der Antike im Mittelalter* (note 2 above), 45–155, esp. 65–79.

des dames du temps jadis').<sup>8</sup> Another successful realization occurs in the two Irish poems which link the Alexander theme to that of the downfall of the great by visualizing a little scene where four wise or learned men, presumably representing the four corners of the world, stand at Alexander's grave and meditate upon how even this greatest of all men inevitably had to come to nothing.

The anonymous poem *Ceathrar do bhí ar uaigh an fhir* 'Four stood by the grave of a man' is found in a number of manuscripts, from the sixteenth-century Book of the Dean of Lismore, the eighteenth-century British Library MS Egerton 127 (twice, p. 90 and p. 103), the RIA MS 23 L 34 (p. 208; c.1714), to RIA MS 23 B 35 (p. 10; 1820). It was printed by Kuno Meyer<sup>9</sup> and by T. F. O'Rahilly.<sup>10</sup> The words of the poem remain remarkably unchanged in the different versions, apart from spelling variations.<sup>11</sup> This textual fixedness may be due to the fact that it only consists of six quatrains marking out a densely integrated sense unit. Other Irish school poems usually behave like multiforms.<sup>12</sup> The metre is *deibhidhe* of various popular types, usually requiring a good deal of elision in each quatrain. The rhythm is varied. The language is late medieval (fifteenth century?). The tone is that of the moralizing schoolmaster. In contrast to the Welsh poems discussed above, there is no personal *ego* relating the *Alexander exemplum* to its own feelings and desires. The voice is that of the distanced observer. The parable is so general that the moral lesson has to be inferred from the narrative, but as in the Welsh poems it draws on the shared knowledge of Alexander's fate. In the final stanza the *fíor* 'truth' of the message is emphasized.

Alexander is styled as *uaibhreach* 'proud', his usual epithet in Irish, as Meyer mentions in a footnote. Each wise man chants (*ro chansat, ar chansatar*) a quatrain over his grave. The first sage comments on the

8  
 Dictes-moy où n'en quel pays,  
 Est Flora, la belle Romaine;  
 Archipiada, ne Thais,  
 Qui fut sa cousine germaine;  
 Echo, parlant quand bruyt on maine  
 Dessus rivièrè ou sus estan,  
 Qui beauté eut trop plus qu'humaine?  
 Mais où sont les neiges d'antan? . . .

The refrain 'où sont les neiges d'antan' has become the well-known catchphrase 'where are the snows of yesteryear?' in English. The topos ultimately goes back to Isidore of Seville's *Synonyma de lamentatione animae peccatoris*, II.91.

<sup>9</sup>'Die Geschichte von Philipp und Alexander', *Irische Texte* II/2 (1887) 3-5; English translation also in K. Meyer, *Selections from ancient Irish poetry* (London 1911) 95.

<sup>10</sup>*Measgra dánta* II (Dublin and Cork 1927) 191, 230-31.

<sup>11</sup>The only major rephrasing is the change from *anaen* (three times) in Meyer's version to *iné* in O'Rahilly.

<sup>12</sup>The poem *Ádhamh athair srúith ar sluagh*, for example, of which I have collected fourteen versions so far from the thirteenth century to the eighteenth, has no canonical form. As a true multiform it varies between 60 and 112 stanzas and the words change in every variant.

fact that even he who is most attended upon by other men is in reality always alone, and more particularly so in his grave. This is a familiar elegiac theme. The essential loneliness of the individuum becomes most obvious in old age and in death. This idea is also found for instance in the much earlier *Caillech Bérrí* poem. The second wise man refers to the horseman who in his prime proudly rides upon the heavy earth. In the grave it is the earth which rides upon his neck. The third man comments on the equally familiar theme that even the richest man, who owns the whole earth, will only have seven feet of clay for himself in the grave. The fourth speech relates to the wordly ruler's *liberalitas*: all his gold is worth nothing to him after death.<sup>13</sup> Thus popularity, power over men and land, stateliness and wealth all must needs come to nought.

The antithetic formulation in the four speech stanzas, which is even more lapidary in the version printed by O'Rahilly (*iné* versus *aniugh*), brings this poem close in spirit to the roughly contemporary Middle English multiform poem 'Erþe upon erþe'.<sup>14</sup> The themes are similar, although the settings are different, that of the Irish poem being narrative, that of the Middle English being a riddle:

Erþe out of erþe is wondirly wrouzt,  
 erþe of erþr haþ gete a dignyte of nouzt,  
 erþe upon erþe haþ sett all his þouzt,  
 how þat erþe upon erþe may be hiz brouzt.

Erþe upon erþe wold he be a king;  
 but how erþe schal to erþe þenkiþ he no þing;  
 whanne þat erþe biddiþ erþe hise rentis hom bring,  
 þan schal erþe out of erþe haue a piteuous parting.

Erþe vpon erþe wynneþ castels & touris,  
 þan seiþ erþe to erþe: 'Now is þis al houris'.  
 whanne erþe upon erþe haþ biggid up his boures,  
 þanne schal erþe upon erþe suffir scharpe schouris.

Erþe gooth vpon erþe as molde upon molde,  
 so gooth erþe upon erþe al gliteringe in golde,  
 like as erþe vnto erþe neuere go schulde,  
 and zit schal erþe vnto erthe raþer þan he wolde.

(Lambeth MS 853, f. 35; c.1430-50.)

<sup>13</sup>This reminds me very strongly of the theme of the value of gold for the individual in *Beowulf*; the 'Elegy of the lone survivor' (lines 2232-70) reflects upon the uselessness of a gold hoard for someone who is not part of a social group and Beowulf himself tries to justify the value of the hoard won from the dragon for his people at the price of his own death (lines 2794-2801). See for instance E. Leisi, 'Gold und Manneswert in Beowulf', *Anglika* 71 (1953) 259-73; H. Pilch and H. L. C. Tristram, *Altenglische Literatur* (Heidelberg 1979) 49, 51.

<sup>14</sup>H. M. R. Murray (ed.), *The Middle English poem 'Erthe upon erthe'* (Early English Text Society, original series 141, London 1911) 14.

The moralistic function of both the Alexander theme and the riddling device is the same, each within its specific cultural context, namely to give memorable expression to the transitory nature of worldly achievements and merits (*sic transit gloria mundi*) and to remind the audience that death is always imminent (*memento mori*). The same ideas are also used in the late medieval international genre of the 'Everyman' dramas (ultimately of Dutch origin)<sup>15</sup> and the *danse macabre* pictures as, for instance, by Albrecht Dürer. The elementary appeal of the Alexander poem to Irish audiences is borne out by the fact that it was still considered worth copying as late as 1820. This poem must have functioned as a *prae-textus* for eight stanzas of an elegy by the Ulster poet Fearghal Óg Mhac an Bhaird on the downfall of Conn O'Donnell during the Tudor conquest.<sup>16</sup> The generic or 'Everyman' type of moral message here is turned into one of acute political relevance. Although it is Alexander who is mentioned, it is the native leader who is meant. The metre is regular bardic *deibhidhe*; the narrative setting is retained, but embedded in the more general reflexions on political loss; the phrases of the *prae-textus* are partially reformulated and put into the mouth of the lamenting poet who reports the four wise men's words (*do-ghéabhthar leam a labhra* 'their speech will be found with me') and the four speeches are introduced by the respective *inquit* formulae (as in *Ceathrar do bhí ar uaigh an fhir*: 'adubhairt an chétfher dhíobh', 'arsan tres úghdar glic', 'arsan cethramhadh fer'). Understanding Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird's speech stanzas presupposes a thorough familiarity with the *prae-textus*. The moral *sensus* of the original is thus subjected to the poet's political message. The very fact that the wise men's speech stanzas are reported in the *ego*'s words gives momentum to the poet's political commitment. So it seems that the Alexander theme did indeed assume moral *sensus* in the poetry of the Celtic tradition. The overall evaluation of the Alexander figure is positive in the Welsh instances, negative in the Irish. The moral message is that of an *exemplum* from which man is meant to learn and to amend his own life. Beyond that, the theme also assumes a political dimension in the context of the Tudor conquest of Ireland.

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. E. Strietman, 'The Middle Dutch *Elckerlijc* and the English *Everyman*', *Medium Aevum* 52 (1983) 111-14.

<sup>16</sup>Edited by E. Knott, *An introduction to Irish syllabic poetry of the period 1200-1600* 2nd ed. (Dublin 1957) 37-8, 91-2.