MORE TALK OF ALEXANDER\(^1\)

WHEN I wrote on the early Insular treatment of the Alexander theme,\(^2\) I had in mind only the comparison of the extended narrative texts in Middle Irish\(^3\) and Old English. My conclusions were that the Irish 'Imthusa Alexandair' was essentially a macroform aggregation of three Alexander texts (Orosius, Epistola ad Aristotelem, Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo Rege Bragmanorum). It is surprisingly well structured for a tenth-century macroform when compared to other Middle Irish compilations like Tain Bó Cuáin Ge 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,\(^4\) it is, however, clearly borne out

\(^1\)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.


\(^4\)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 1988), 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 octupartitus, Sex aetates mundi, homiletica, 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.

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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.\(^5\)

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 *figurum*. They are taken by Dr Haycock to be the work of pre-twelfth-century poets.\(^6\) The poems are persuaded by a positive evaluation of Alexander’s exploits and a moral lesson that the poetic *ego* wishes to share with its readers or hearers (‘*wr se w a * i * dyw * 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 kyn bei gwel 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 *praetextus* (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, *Aryuedodeu 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 uryt* ‘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 keuyd o’e diwed / gan dww trugarad*), 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

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\(^6\) 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 descendum 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 Marwes 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 Imthusa Alexander – 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. 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 Francois Villon’s famous où sont les neiges d’antan? (‘Ballade

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7 See the different interpretations in the volume Kontinuität und Transformation der Antike im Mittelalter (note 2 above), 45–115, esp. 63–70.
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 fhíor* ‘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 and by T. F. O’Rahilly. The words of the poem remain remarkably unchanged in the different versions, apart from spelling variations. 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. 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 *fior* ‘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 chansat) a quatrain over his grave. The first sage comments on the

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8 Dictes-moy où n’en quel pays,
   Est Flora, la belle Romaine;
   Archipiada, ne Thais,
   Qui fut sa cousine germanne;
   Echo, parlant quand bruyt on maine
   Dessus rivi ère 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.


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

12 The poem *Adhamh aithr 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 Cailech Bèrri 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 worldly ruler’s libertas: all his gold is worth nothing to him after death. 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 (in versus aminsh), brings this poem close in spirit to the roughly contemporary Middle English multiform poem ‘Erthe upon erthe’. The themes are similar, although the settings are different, that of the Irish poem being narrative, that of the Middle English being a riddle:

Erthe out of erthe is wondirly wroght,
erpe of erpe hāp gete a dignyte of nought,
erpe upon erpe hāp sett all his pōug,
how Ḥat erpe upon erpe may be his brougt.

Erpe upon erpe wold he be a king;
but how erpe schal to erpe ūnkīp he no ūng;
whanne Ḥat erpe biddīp erpe hīse renlīs hom bring,
 прогн schal erpe out of erpe baue a pīlenous parting.

Erpe vpon erpe wyynŝ castels & touris,
不克不及 erpe to erpe: ‘Now is þis al housis’.
whanne erpe upon erpe hāp biggid up his bōures,
 trầnne schal erpe upon erpe suffir scharpe schouris.

Erpe gooth vpon erpe as molde upon molde,
so gooth erpe upon erpe al gladeringe in golde,
like as erpe vnto erpe neuere go schulde,
and ŧit schal erpe vnto erthe raþer þan he wolde.

(Lambeth ms 853, f. 35; c.1430–50.)

13 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 2233–70) 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’, Anglia 71 (1953) 259–73; H. Pilch and H. L. C. Tristram, Altenglische Literatur (Heidelberg 1979) 49, 51.

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) 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 praecextus for eight stanzas of an elegy by the Ulster poet Fearghal Óg Mhic an Bhaird on the downfall of Conn O’Donnell during the Tudor conquest. 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 reflections on political loss; the phrases of the praecextus are partially reformulated and put into the mouth of the lamenting poet who reports the four wise men’s words (do-gheabhthar leam a labhra ‘their speech will be found with me’) and the four speeches are introduced by the respective inquit formulae (as in Cethrar do bhí ar uaigh an fir: ‘adubháirt an chéitfhír dhiobh’, ‘arsan tres úghdar glic’, ‘arsan cethramhadh fer’). Understanding Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird’s speech stanzas presupposes a thorough familiarity with the praecextus. 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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