Commentary on
‘From Alexander of Macedonia to
Arthur of Britain’

Dennis M. Kratz

Professor Furtado here alerts us to another aspect of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s learning, skill and playful brilliance by raising a fascinating question. In constructing his portrait of Arthur, did Geoffrey use Alexander the Great as a historical model? I am convinced that the answer should indeed be yes, though not to the extent that Furtado claims.

Furtado argues that Geoffrey made use of a version of the Latin Alexander Romance when he composed his Historia Regum Britanniae. Geoffrey fails to mention his literary model, a fact that should hardly surprise anyone, since Geoffrey’s practice (as Howlett’s essay also reminds us), was to cite only authorities who did not exist.

Could Geoffrey have read the Alexander Romance, basing some or much of his portrait of Arthur on the Alexander of this enormously popular work? Of course. It was known in England in the twelfth century both in Latin and in French translation(s) and later translated/adapted into English. Furtado can establish his claim only by comparing the texts, and his argument is most effective when he establishes the apparent linkage between the two fictionalized biographies.

The general schemata of the two lives have much in common. We could explain this away, however, by pointing out how common (even inevitable) such elements as accession to the throne, a campaign against a powerful foe, marriage to a woman of noble descent and death are. Still, the overall similarity of Arthur’s life to the fictionalized life of Alexander is intriguing, and some of the specific incidents noted by Furtado are striking. I was particularly impressed by Furtado’s perceptive recognition of the role of ‘magicians’ (Merlin and Nectanebus) in the conception of the two kings. Granted, dragons could have entered the life of Arthur from a number of sources, but the appearance of the creature in a vision and accompanied by a beam of light does make Geoffrey’s conscious allusion to the Alexander Romance seem probable.

While the ‘conception’ episode provides Furtado’s strongest point, other episodes also support his claim that Geoffrey was using the Alexander Romance as a literary model. In particular, Alexander’s defeat of the Indian king Porus in single combat seems to have provided Geoffrey with some details, if not the
inspiration, for his depiction of Arthur’s defeat of Frollo. (It is too bad for Furtado’s argument that Geoffrey did not make Arthur small, like Alexander!)

Several other similarities cited by Furtado are strained. Guinevere has little in common with Roxane other than noble birth, hardly surprising in the wife of a king. And Alexander does not, like Arthur, disappear to a paradisical land. In the story known as the Iter ad Paradisum (often appended to the Alexander Romance in Latin manuscripts), Alexander does visit the Earthly Paradise. But he is sent away, frustrated, after he is given a magical gem that later is revealed to be a demonstration of the folly of his worldly ambitions. There are other linkages to support Furtado’s argument, but since his essay will be amplified in a book-length study, one assumes that more examples appear there.

Furtado’s enthusiasm sometimes dilutes the power of his discovery. It is safe to assume that Geoffrey was familiar with a Latin version of the Alexander Romance. In precisely which version we cannot say, since it was the nature of medieval authors to alter what they copied. I am far more cautious about attributing to Geoffrey such intimate knowledge of Plutarch and Diodorus, especially on the basis of one battle description. Geoffrey may have read Quintus Curtius’ history of Alexander (Walter of Chatillon based his twelfth-century Latin epic on the account given by Curtius), but Furtado must do more than assert such use based on minimal similarities.

Furtado’s enthusiasm also gets the better of him when he brings Plutarch into his argument. I am more than willing – no, delighted – to say I am convinced by Furtado’s main point: Geoffrey surely made use of the Alexander Romance in fashioning his portrait of Arthur. Such a literary game is consistent with Geoffrey’s play with sources and his learned playfulness. I am not willing to say that Geoffrey got this idea from Plutarch. Furtado’s one supposed imitatio of Plutarch springs from the fact that both Arthur and Alexander ‘were noted for their generosity.’ What ancient hero, medieval hero or good king wasn’t?

Perhaps the weakest point in Furtado’s argument is the unnecessary assertion that somehow Hesiod gave Geoffrey his inspiration for using the Alexander as a model for Arthur. Why even mention a ‘Hesiodic’ model of heroism? Or call it an ‘archetype’? Geoffrey knew nothing of Hesiod or his Greek poems.

Further studies of Geoffrey as a literary artist must, on the basis of Furtado’s work, take into account the probability that he was thinking of Alexander when he created Arthur. The exact nature of Geoffrey’s imitatio needs a more detailed examination of the Latin texts (though it is unlikely that we will ever know precisely what version of the Alexander Romance Geoffrey knew). Geoffrey’s knowledge and possible use of Curtius needs also to be investigated. The other authors cited by Furtado only confuse the issue.