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#### ALEXANDERROMANCE: THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION

#### By BETTY HILL

Our national treasures in the British Museum include, as Exhibit 10 in the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, a great granite sarcophagus, rounded at one end and inscribed with scenes and texts from the Book of what is in the Underworld. This empty sarcophagus, intended for Nectanebo II of the XXXth Dynasty, is significant for a study of the first Romance accretion in English to the historical Alexander the Great - the question of Alexander's paternity. I shall first sketch the Egyptian background, secondly, refer to and summarize the main points of the narrative from two English histories and thirdly, indicate some divergent treatments of the theme in four Middle English poems.

### 1. The Egyptian background

The source of Alexanderromance is the Greek Pseudo-Callisthenes, a combination of material from various sources, including local Egyptian legend. This work, once attributed to Aristotle's nephew Callisthenes who accompanied Alexander on the march, was probably compiled by an Alexandrian about the third century AD. 2 In the Pseudo-Callisthenes the romance elements, the conception of Alexander and death of Nectanabus, and the historical material, Alexander's avenging of his parents Olympias and Philip and his visit to the shrine of the God Amun in Libya, where he was given an oracle that he was Amun's son, form part of a connected account. In my opinion, the narrative of his conception and son-ship of Amun is an amalgam of two historical events. First, in 343 BC, Nectanebo II, the last native Pharaoh of Egypt, fled with his treasure to Nubia from Memphis, the ancient capital of the Pharaohs, before the advancing Persians. Secondly, when Alexander had routed the Persians from Egypt, in 331 BC he visited the oracle of Amun, the chief Egyptian God, at Siwah, where Amun was depicted with a ram's head, and was welcomed by the officiating priest as "son of Amun".

Much discussion has been given to Alexander's motives in making this long expedition to the Libyan oasis of Siwah, partly because the affair attracted an aura of mystique, but chiefly because it is relevant to his subsequent claim to deification. But I think that the explanation lies in complicated Egyptian rite. With reference to the Pharaoh's place in the religious establishment, two acts were required for his deification. First, the national God visited the consort of the reigning Pharaoh, in the guise of her husband, to generate the divine nature of the future Pharaoh; and her husband generated the human form. This idea of the Pharaoh's two bodies,

the distinction between the divine character of the royal office and the human nature of the person holding it, is traceable from the IVth Dynasty. Secondly, the ceremonial act of coronation effected the transition of the Pharaoh from man to king as bearer of the divine office, responsible in his son-ship to his divine father, the visible incarnation of the deity and the agent of his wishes, since the reigning Pharoah was the medium by which the Egyptian God gained victories.

In Alexander's case these events, of necessity, took place in a different order. His coronation at Memphis by the priesthood was followed by his visit to the oracle, where as reigning Pharoah he was lawfully greeted as "son of Amun" and recognized as the agent of the God's wishes. Alexander's choice of Siwah for these traditional rites can be adequately explained by that oracle's long reputation for infallibility in the Greek world. But, further, Alexander, the deliverer and avenger of several years of Persian desecration of Egyptian Gods and temples, assured his popularity by immediately sacrificing to their Gods. So the Egyptians affirmed his sacrosanct kingship as the divine son of Amun by making him in their popular legends the natural son of Nectanebo II, the last native Pharaoh he Egypt. Thus, in the Pseudo-Callisthenes, Nectanabus fled much earlier than his historical counterpart, travelled beyond Nubia to Macedon and made the comparatively simple conception of a Macedonian heir extremely complicated.

#### 2. The English histories

The anonymous Old English translator of Orosius's Historia adversum paganos, in recounting Alexander's visit to the shrine of Amun, makes the first known reference in English to Alexander's dubious paternity and his reputed father, Nectanabus the sorcerer. This isolated comment next appears in English as part of a fully-developed account in John of Trevisa's fourteenth-century translation of Ranulph Higden's Polychronicon, which I summarize. The enumeration and titles of the sections are mine.

- The conception of Alexander: when Philip of Macedon had reigned for twelve years and Nectanabus, King of Egypt, for seventeen, Nectanabus, who feared fighting, was victorious in war; for he secretly made apparently living and moving men and ships of wax in a basin of clear water. After invoking the Powers above and below through a hollow pipe, he sunk the wax ships and thereby his approaching enemies. But one time he foresaw his defeat and the necessity for escape. So he fled, disguised, with all his treasure and became as astrologer in Macedon during Philip's absence on combat. By enchantment, appearing as horned Jupiter, he fathered Alexander on Philip's wife, Olympias. A bird lay an egg in Philip's lap. It rolled off and broke, and a little dragon emerged from the shell, circumvented it, but died before it could manage to re-enter. Philip's chief soothsayer prophesied for Philip a son who would traverse all the world but die before he could return home. Alexander's birth is accompanied by suitable portents.
- (2) The death of Nectanabus: later, during Philip's absence, Alexander asked Nectanabus to teach him his astrological skill.

He then threw the sorcerer into a convenient pit full of water, explaining that Nectanabus's astrology was faulty since it had not enabled him to divine his own future. Nectanabus then first revealed that he knew by his art that his own son would kill him, told Alexander all and died. The boy revealed this to Olympias.

- (3) Alexander's avenging of his parents: after he had repudiated Olympias, Philip honoured Attalus, his new brother-in-law. So, at the bridal, Pausanius murdered Philip who had refused to right the wrongs Attalus had done Pausanius. Both Olympias and Alexander were suspect in Philip's death. She had been repudiated; and Philip had often reproved Alexander for his mother's conduct, and had behaved so threateningly to Alexander that for a time the boy lived in exile with Olympias's brother. Alexander hanged Pausanius, though Olympias afterwards set a gold crown on Pausanius's head.
- (4) Alexander's visit to Amun: after his conquest of Egypt Alexander visited Jupiter Ammon for information about his future and his birth. For Olympias had confessed to Philip that Alexander's father was a great serpent, and Philip had publicly denied his own paternity. Alexander wished to be assured of his divinity and to clear his mother of slander. He bribed the bishops to give him the right answer and, on entering the temple, he was worshipped as though he were the God's son.

#### 3. The poetic treatments

The four poems, which present extended accounts of the conception of Alexander and death of Nectanabus, and show different treatments of Alexander's avenging of his parents and his visit to Amun, form two distinct groups. The two alliterative works, Alexander A and The Wars of Alexander, derive from different recensions of Leo of Naples's tenth-century Latin translation8 of the Pseudo-Callisthenes. The two versions in rhyming couplets, Kyng Alisaunder and Gower's Confessio Amantis, Book VI, 10 draw on the Roman de Toute Chevalerie, 11 based on the ninth-century Zacher Epitome, an abridged version of Julius Valerius's fourth-century Latin translation 12 of the Pseudo-Callisthenes, though Gower used some material from the first recension of Leo's work. I take as my base text for this selective discussion the fragmentary Alexander A, which shows some unique features, supplemented by the Wars; and I indicate notable differences of treatment in the couplet versions. All four poems represent individual treatments, and they differ in their inclusion, omission and modification of material even when their different Latin sources are identical at specific points in the narrative.

(1) The conception of Alexander: in Alexander A, 453-65, the poet gives a unique introduction to a famous king of Egypt, of whose pedigree he can find no record, and stresses his magic arts by stating that Nectanabus did not inherit Egypt but conquered it by witchcraft. The narrative continues, 466-554, as in the Wars, which in its introduction adheres more closely to the source material, with an account of his sure defeat by the Persian king, since the God of Egypt could not help him, and his flight to Ethiopia with his astrological gadgets, unknown to be a king. The prayers of his

subjects to their God Serapis, on finding him gone, 555-66, are answered by the oracle that though their king has fled he will hurry back and avenge them against their enemies. In thanksgiving for a speedy answer, "pei . . . graveden a greate ston, a god as it were,/ Icorve after a kyng, full craftie of werk", 568-9, and inscribed the oracle at its feet. Meantime, 574 ff., Nectanabus hurries to the Macedonian court to gaze on Olympias's famed beauty. His motive at this point may be implied from an interpolated conventional description of her, 177-99, before she married Philip. The Wars is more explicit here: "Hire bewte bitis in his brest & his bodi thrillis, /And drifes thur3e his depe hert as he ware dart-wondid", 224-5.

In both poems, the affair between them progresses by a technique of questions and answers relating to the Egyptian prophet's astrological skills. In Alexander A, 607-13, in reply to Olympias's question as to what he thought of when he first saw her, Nectanabus reveals that a bright God sent him to defend her from grief. produces his astrological gadgets, 615-37, including the signs of the zodiac which the poet is reluctant to describe: "If any wight in this wonne wilnes pem knowe, / Kairus to be Kalender and kenne yee may''/, 622-3.When Nectanabus has demonstrated his skill, Olympias reveals the motive for her interest in him. Prophets have told her, 651-5, that when Philip returns he will repudiate her and remarry. The poet then, in a unique interpolation, 656-70, explains Philip's motive and introduces Amun in a powerful aspect. Philip, on visiting the temple of his great God Amun, received an oracle that Olympias would have a child, the greatest in the world, but it would not be his. Nectanabus, 675 ff., assures her that though she will be repudiated later, Philip will take her back and a God will bring this about: "Hee hath hye on his hed hornes of sylver, / With a golde gailye begonne glisiing bright,"/ 697-8. He will visit her that night. Olympias assures Nectanabus that if this happens she will not merely revere him as a prophet, but regard him as an infallible

Nectanabus, 707 ff., secretly extracts herb juice to work a spell, which in the other three poems merely induces a dream of the God's visit, as prophesied. Only in *Alexander A* is this devilish magic double-strength and effects first, 719 ff., a transformation of Nectanabus into the God who visits her, and secondly, 726-9, a midnight dream of Amun's visit. Another unique interpolation stresses Amun's power, explains how Olympias recognizes him, and recalls the ram-headed Amun at Siwah:

Pen was Amon ywis of worship alosed
And igrett for a god, gretest in lond.
Hee was ishape as a sheepe, shinand bright,
Ipainted full prisely, and precious stones
Wer sticked on pat stock, stoute too beholde.
All pe ludes of pe lond, lordes and eles,
Set hym for soveraine peir sokour too beene
And saide pere sacrifice in selkouth times.

(730-7)

In Olympias's dream, she is told that she has conceived her defender

from sorrow, and the rôle of the child is established as his mother's avenger. Since, as Olympias explains, 753 ff., she does not know whether it was real or not, because while she was dreaming she was asleep, Nectanabus arranges to watch. His prophecy that the God will visit her again, first as a dragon, then as Nectanabus himself, is fulfilled, and the prophecy is given that her son will be honoured by all the world. But deluded Olympias believed that she had embraced a God, not a human, 779-90.

After this event, Nectanabus assures the Queen of Amun's protection against her husband, 804-6; and then deludes Philip by three successive manoeuvres. First, 807-74, by his enchantment, Philip dreams that Amun visits Olympias and prophesies that the child will defend herself and Philip from their enemies; and so the idea is established that Alexander will avenge both his parents. Secondly, 881-99, and this appears first as a separate incident in the second recension of Leo's Latin text, Nectanabus transforms himself into a dragon and fights successfully in the field on Philip's side. Thirdly, 974-98, during a great feast after Philip's return, Nectanabus, by fresh magic, gatecrashes as a dragon, terrifying all the men. But Olympias, recognizing her lover, returns the dragon's embrace, and Philip publicly recognizes his old army friend. After the episode of Philip and the bird's egg, Alexander A has a lacuna covering Alexander's birth and early years. The main points of interest of the account in the Wars, 525-656, are that Nectanabus ensures that Alexander is born with an auspicious horoscope, the portents at his birth ensure Philip's special care of him, and Alexander's school-days, despite his aggressive nature, ensure superb scholastic attainment and martial prowess. In Kyng Alisaunder, however, 638-48, the portents at Alexander's birth convince Philip that the child is evil, and, 651-80, Nectanabus raises the boy as a little gentleman with two dozen private tutors.

Both the couplet versions differ in content and attitude also in dealing with the affair between Olympias and Nectanabus. In the fuller treatment in Kyng Alisaunder, 71-456, the magician's initial motive for seduction is not attraction but revenge, for his hasty exile has resulted from Philip's destruction of his country, 129-32. Olympias, 156-247, immodestly flaunts herself for popular approbation on her birthday, approaches Nectanabus among the crowds and later sends for him. His process of inducing Olympias's dream of Amun, 331-42, is much clearer here, but the dream includes no oracle. The actual sequent nocturnal visits are extravagant and the whole affair is conducted in fabliau-style, with Nectanabus as the go-between for Olympias and the supposed God, 379-451. Although Olympias is not sympathetically presented in either of the couplet versions, the conclusions are individual. The author of Kyng Alisaunder inserts his own sententia on the Queen's behaviour:

Olympias stant tofore Neptanabus Of her nywe loue wel desirous. So doop womman after mysdoyng, Ne can no shame ne no repentyng, Er she be laugtte in her folye So in be lyme is be fleige. (415-20) Gower, however, who presents Olympias in a more passive, naïve rôle, censures such a villainous gentleman of the bedchamber:

Nectanabus hath that he wolde;
With guile he hath his love sped,
With guile he cam into the bed,
With guile he goth him out ayein:
He was a schrewed chamberlein,
So to beguile a worthi queene,
And that on him was after seene. (2094-2100)

Thus, whereas in Egyptian belief Amun assumed the form of the reigning Pharaoh in his divine nature to father the future Pharaoh, in the Middle English poems an exiled Pharaoh, no longer the divine office-bearer, assumes the form of the God to father Alexander, the future Pharaoh of Egypt.

- The death of Nectanabus: this is a self-contained episode in the couplet versions. In the alliterative poems, Alexander A, 1036-1106, and the Wars, 665-92, Olympias's dismay at Philip's open displeasure that Alexander does not resemble him causes Nectanabus to go out at night, accompanied by the boy, to compute the stars. In both poems, the immediate events leading up to the death of Nectanabus are treated, like those leading up to the seduction of Olympias, by a technique of questions and answers centering on Nectanabus's astrological skills. In Alexander A, 1084-91, the Wars, 713-16, and Gower's account, 2306-16, Alexander's motive in murdering the astrologer is to prove false his prediction that he would be killed by his own son. In Kyng Alisaunder, 725-36, he wishes to absolve his mother from slander as well as to belittle his tutor's art. In the couplet versions, Kyng Alisaunder, 740-2, and Gower, 2321-2, Nectanabus, before dying, discloses everything to Alexander; in the Wars, 724\*, he simply reveals his paternity. Olympias, on hearing this, in Kyng Alisaunder, 747, cannot deny it, in Gower, 2328-30, is stunned by the deceit, and in the Wars, 736, is reproved by her son. In Alexander A, Nectanabus simply states: "Truthe have I bee tolde in tymes ypassed", 1093, and Alexander silences his sorrowful mother. Gower's account and Alexander A terminate here; in Kyng Alisaunder and the Wars the prophecies of vengeance and earthly conquest are fulfilled.
- (3) Alexander's avenging of his parents: in the poems these are independent episodes. 13 The anti-feminine attitude prevails in both in Kyng Alisaunder. After public slander inimical to Olympias and Alexander, 993-1106, Philip, by decree of his nobles, repudiates Olympias, disinherits Alexander and remarries. Although Alexander, on returning from combat, reconciles his parents, he consigns his mother to silence since he knows the truth. In the avenging of Philip, 1331-58, Olympias and her lover Pausanius connive in her husband's murder. Alexander, returning from strenuous warfare, sees that Pausanius is despatched and is thanked by Philip. In the Wars the treatment of both episodes evinces a sympathetic relationship between Philip and Alexander. Alexander, 821-80, kills a wedding guest who grossly provokes him, avoids Philip's attempted retaliation and angrily avenges the repudiation of his mother by dragging the new

bride out of the hall by the hair. But, afterwards, he visits Philip's sick-bed as a friend, chastises him for his conduct and reduces him to tears. He then consoles his mother and effects a lasting reconciliation between his parents. In 913-75, Alexander avenges Philip by putting to the sword Pausanius, the would-be abductor of an innocent Queen and the murderer of Philip; and he grives bitterly for Philip's death. In this episode both Olympias, 949-51, and Philip with his words: "Pou has baldly on my bane & bremely me vengid", 969, emphasise Alexander's avenging rôle.

(4) Alexander's visit to Amun: in their treatment of this episode the poems differ significantly from Trevisa and from each other. In Kyng Alisaunder, 1511-72, Alexander discovers in the temple at Tripoli a statue in honour of Jupiter Ammon. He is told that it was erected by their former king Nectanabus, of whom they can get no news. Alexander consults the bishop about his birth and rejoices at the answer that he is Philip's son. In 1056-75 of the Wars, Alexander travels from Africa to the oracle of Amun, sacrifices a hart and asks the God for guidance.

As regards Alexander's arrival in Egypt, the interest of the Wars lies in its inclusion of the idea, first found as a literary motif in the Pseudo-Callisthenes, 14 that a hero-God who has vanished will return, renewed, avenge his nation's wrongs and give them victory over their enemies. After Nectanabus has fled from Egypt, 135 ff., the oracle of Serapis, which adheres closely to the Latin source, states:

"3our king sall in a nobire kithe kast out his elde,
And come agayn eft 3onge man 3it to his rewme.
Pan sall bat victoure 3ow venge on 3our vile fais
And be province of Persee purely distruye,
And gett agayn his avyn gronde at he forgais nowe,
And ane of be oddist Emperours of be werde worthe." (184-9)

This oracle was inscribed in gold letters on the black stone statue of Nectanabus, fashioned in the likeness of a king, 190-205. It is fulfilled, 1121-36, when Alexander arrives in Egypt, welcomed as a God, and finds the statue. He acknowledges Nectanabus as his father, kisses the feet and grieves. It is generally accepted that Geoffrey of Monmouth's presentation of Arthur was influenced by Alexanderromance. In treating of his death, Geoffrey ambiguously wrote in his Historia regum Britanniae that the excellent King Arthur was mortally wounded and was taken to the isle of Avalon to be healed of his wounds, 15 a statement to which, in his derivative French poem, Wace added: "Ancor i est, Breton l'atandent, / Si com il dient et antandent; / De la vanra, ancor puet vivre."/16 In Lagamon's Brut, the first vernacular expression of Arthurian material about 1200, Arthur himself prophesies, and it is still believed, that when he has been healed: " . . . seoŏe ich cumen wulle  $\cdot$  to mine kineriche./ and wunien mid Brutten: mid muchelere wunne."/ $^{17}$  The next vernacular reference to Arthur's hoped-for return is made by Malory in the fifteenth century. 18 In the stanzaic Le Mort Arthur and more pertinently in the alliterative Morte Arthure, which, as W. Matthews 19 has shown, is so widely indebted to Alexanderromance, Arthur is

decisively buried in Glastonbury.<sup>20</sup> Only the Wars transmits this important motif, and the return of the victorious warrior-king is not merely prophesied, but fulfilled.

After Alexander's death in Babylon in 323 BC, Ptolemy diverted his funeral cortège to Alexandria in Egypt, where he was entombed. 21 The so-called "sarcophage d' Alexandre", discovered at Saïda in 1887-8 and shipped to Constantinople, was soon identified as that commissioned about 320 BC by King Abdelonymus of Sidon, who succeeded the deposed Persian favourite Straton in 332 BC at Alexander's command. 22 But the question 33 as to whether the sarcophagus of Nectanebo in the British Museum was ever used for Alexander, the returning king, cannot be answered; and the fate of the remains of Alexander, divine son of Amun whose name means 'hidden', is not recorded in our chronicles.

#### NOTES

This study is modified from my paper on Alexander-Amūn in Middle English Literature, read at the Alexander Colloquium of the London Medieval Society in 1974.

- See T.G.H. James, An introduction to ancient Egypt (London, 1979), pp.78, 166.
- D.J.A. Ross, Alexander historiatus. A guide to medieval illustrated Alexander literature. Warburg Institute Survey, I (London, 1963), pp.5-6 and nn.1-8. MS A, ed. W. Kroll, Historia Alexandri Magni (Pseudo-Callisthenes, I. Recensio Vetusta (Berlin, 1926); transl. and ed. E.H. Haight, The life of Alexander of Macedon by Pseudo-Callisthenes (New York, 1955).
- On the following material in this section, see, for the history, Cambridge Ancient History, VI (1927), pp.152-4; R.D. Milns, Alexander the Great (London, 1968), pp.104-107; R. Lane Fox, Alexander the Great (London, 1973; reprint 1974), pp.200-18 and nn.522-4; and, for the ritual, CAH, VII (1928), p.18; S. Morenz, Egyptian religion (Stuttgart, 1960), transl. A.E. Keep (CUP, 1973), pp.36, 273, 37-8, 35, 41, 50.
- For detail see N & Q, 225 (1980), 5.
- Ed. J.R. Lumby, Rolls series, III (London, 1871), pp.393-403, 389-90, 421.
- The Gests of King Alexander of Macedon, ed. F.P. Magoun (Cambridge, Mass., 1929).
- <sup>7</sup> Ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, ES, 47 (1886).
- The original translation Nativitas et Victoria Alexandri Magni survives only in the derivative Historia de Preliis, ed. F. Pfister, Der Alexanderroman des Archipresbyters Leo (Heidelberg, 1913). On the relationship of the English poems to this and the Latin texts given in n.12 below, see G. Cary, The medieval Alexander, ed. D.J.A. Ross (Cambridge, 1956), pp.48, 57, 37, 253 and n.4, and G.L. Hamilton, "Studies in the sources of Gower", JEGP, 26 (1927), 504-16.
- Ed. G.V. Smithers, 2 vols., EETS 227, 237 (1952, 1957).
- The English Works of John Gower, vol. II, ed. G.C. Macaulay, EETS, ES, 82 (1901; reprint 1969), 11.1789-2366.
- The Anglo-Norman Alexander (Le Roman de Toute Chevalerie), ed. B. Foster and I. Short, 2 vols., ANTS, 29-33 (London, 1976-7).
- 12 Iulii Valerii Epitome, ed. J. Zacher (Halle, 1867) and Juli Valerii Alexandri Polemi res gestae Alexandri Macedonis, ed. B. Kuebler. Bibliotheca scriptorum graecorum et romanorum Teubneriana (Leipsig, 1888). I have excluded discussion of the treatment of Nectanabus, Olympias and Alexander in John Lydgate, Fall of Princes, ed. H. Bergen (Washington, 1923), II, Book IV, 11.687-728, 2332-569, 1863-83. The prose life of Alexander, which shares the source of the Wars, is incomplete. Ed. J.S. Westlake, EETS, 143 (1913).

- 13 As in history. See Milns, Alexander, pp.27-8, 30-31, 33-4.
- N.H. Clement, "An aspect of the world-conquest motif in literature", MP, 24 (1926), 129-32.
- 15 Ed. A. Griscom (London, 1929), p.501.
- La partie Arthurienne du Roman de Brut, ed. I.D.O. Arnold and M.M. Pelan (Paris, 1962), 11.4709-11.
- Ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, vol.II, EETS, 277 (1978), 11.14281-2, 14290-2; Merlin's prophecy is also given in 11.14295-7.
- The Works of Thomas Malory, ed. E. Vinaver (OUP, 1954), p.873: "... and men say that he shall com agayne, and he shall wynne the Holy Crosse."
- The tragedy of Arthur. A study of the alliterative Morte Arthure (U. of California Press, 1960), pp.34-67.
- Le Mort Arthur, ed. J.D. Bruce, EETS, 88 (1903), 1.3964; The alliterative Mort Arthure, ed. V. Krishna (New York, 1976), 11.4328-31.
- Milns, Alexander, pp.255-8, 270; E.J. Chinnock, "The burial-place of Alexander the Great at Alexandria", Classical Review, 7 (1893), 245-6.
- O. bey Hâmdi and T. Reinach, Une nécropole royale a Sidon (Paris, 1892), pp.121, 316, n.1, 392, n.6; described pp.272-342. Alexander is depicted in several illustrations but in none is he the central figure. P. Green, Alexander the Great (London, 1971), pp.189, 224, 245, 259, conveniently includes some plates of the sarcophagus, but they are no substitute for plates XXIV-XXXVII of the Hâmdi-Reinach publication.
- See Haight, Life of Alexander, p.143 and references. I have not consulted these.