
Nawotka (N.) has written ‘A Historical Commentary’ on the oldest version, recension α, of the Alexander Romance as it appears in a single Greek manuscript, ms. A;¹ N. views this version as having «originated» (3) in the third century AD.² Interest in the Greek Alexander Romance has mostly been directed at later versions, or recensions, because later recensions are longer and contain the more fantastical episodes of the Romance, whether in the original Greek or any of the many, many descendants of this international, multilingual work of literature.³ Excluding the material of later recensions is essential to N.’s goal because the ‘historical’ in his subtitle reveals that he is in search of data on the historical Alexander: «This commentary was born out of the need to explore all possible sources of information on Alexander, which can be found almost exclusively in this earliest surviving version of the Alexander Romance» (1). The hope, however, of finding «some evidence of the life and exploits» (1) of the historical Alexander in any version of the Alexander Romance is misguided and, in the end, makes for a macédoine of a work that serves well neither the scholar of the historical or legendary Alexander.⁴

The work consists of a thirty-three page introduction; 233 pages of commentary, with comments running from two lines to just over a page, with overviews of entire chapters on occasion. The commentary relies on lemmata in Greek, so a Greek text of ms. A must be accessed to make sense of the comments.⁵ Forty pages of bibliography follow the text, thirty pages of an index of sources, and

⁴ Comparison can be made to N.’s idiosyncratic 2010 biography of ‘Alexander the Great’, issued by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.
⁵ The Greek text of ms. A/rec. α, at least the first two books, are newly printed in Stoneman’s Italian edition (along with texts of rec. β, γ, and Julius Valerius Latin version), otherwise one must have a copy of W. Kroll’s 1926 ‘Historia Alexandri Magni’, Berlin, or access to the digital version included in the TLG.
nineteen pages of ‘General Index’. Fifteen images of artifacts or sites are sprinkled through the book, which are too often of questionable relevance.¹

Certain types of details are addressed frequently in the commentary: proper names, chronology, geography, and historical comparanda directed at two very different eras, the fourth century BC and the third century AD, the era that N. views as the date of recension α. The commentary on names can be informative but can vary unpredictably in the character of that information. Of Hephaistion, we are told that «some believe, but with no sure evidence», that he was among the group studying with Alexander under Aristotle (79), yet on the next page, without any qualifier or source, Hephaistion is «an accomplished intrigue menger», among other less than fine qualities (80). Quite often lines upon lines of text are given to ancient figures whose possible relevance to the person named in the Alexander Romance is greatly strained, and given without any explanation of relevance. On Alexander’s tongue-excising henchman Leon in Book 2.2.3 – a wholly fictitious figure –, we read at length about three historical Leons and even a historical Leonnatos, who «may in fact» be the Leon in the Alexander Romance (146). If there is a «reflection» (146) of historical names in scenes like this, it is not made clear how a student of history or a student of legend are to make use of such reflections.

With regard both to the geography and chronology as they appear in ms. A, unsurprising and also obscure comparanda is presented repeatedly alongside comments like «as in many other places, here the geography of the Alexander Romance is contorted, …» (91), «this part of the Alexander Romance is presented in reverse chronological order and with an utter disregard for geography» (123), or «At any rate no chronological precision can be expected of Ps.-Callisthenes …» (190). Such scattered comments do not equate to systematic analysis, but such analysis would produce a book on the fashioning of the narrative of ms. A rather than a compilation of data that might possibly have some connection to fourth-century history.

If a non-classicist turns to N.’s commentary to learn about possible relevance of the text of ms. A for Alexander’s own day, problems can arise. For example, a five-line note on Pella (Bk 1.3.3) states that the «peak of its prosperity coincided with the reigns of Philip II and Alexander the Great» and that it corresponded «in size, if not in population, to Athens» (46); no citation is given for either claim, and the first of the two disregards the wholesale renovation and expansion of Pella started under Cassander. To hear that Aristotle was chosen to be Alexander’s tutor not merely because of his father’s service as a physician in the Macedonian court but also because of his «intellectual reputation» (72) relies on later tradition, not on any reality of the 340s BC. To be told that the historical Aeschines «was elected Athenian ambassador to Philip, most notably to conduct negotiations after the Battle of Chaironeia» (147) implies something that sounds modern but was certainly not true for the ancient Athenians, namely that they would send a solitary ambassador (both Phocion and Demades were part of this embassy to Philip).

¹ But one of definite significance, fig. 6 on p. 80, a dedicatory relief to Hephaistion is given no date, neither in the caption nor in the text, though it belongs, very significantly, to the late fourth century BC.
On other occasions N. makes historical comparison to the third century AD. For example, in Book 3.2, when Poros writes a letter ordering Alexander to flee from India, Alexander writes back and, according to N.’s note, «rejects and de-
rides Poros’ claims to divinity» (193). What, though, does Alexander actually say on this subject in his letter? ‘You write to me that you are ‹king even of the gods›, and so you are more powerful than even the gods. I wage war, rather, against a boastful and barbaric mortal, not against a god’ (Bk 3.2.10). N. adds that Alexander rejected Darius’ claim to divinity back in Book 1.38 (though he says nothing in the commentary on that passage) and suggests: «When read against the background of the official political culture of the high Empire, these words of Alexander may be understood as the voice in the debate on the divinity of em-
peror» (193). A half page is then taken up with general comments on the emperor worship and two texts, a speech in Cassius Dio, one by Maecenas before Augustus in 29 BC (52.35.3–4) and a third-century AD fragment of a speech, P.Oxy. 13.1612, are cited as evidence of «critical opinions about the divine worship of man, including emperor», and the «consistent criticisms of claims to divinity by the barbarian kings Darius and Poros voiced by Alexander, the champion of Hellenism, may mean that Ps.-Callisthenes agreed with these authors» (193). Examination of the passage in the long (incomplete) speech put in Maecenas’ mouth and the cited papyrus fragment finds slight evidence for the broad claim made here, but even slighter is the impression of any conceptual rejection of human claims to divinity in what Alexander writes to Poros or to Darius.

N.’s assumptions about source use and composition express themselves here and there throughout the commentary. When the text reports the name of Dar-i-
us’ mother as Rhodogoune, rather than Sisygambis, or Sisygambris, as preserved by «mainstream sources», Harpokration’s entry on Rhodogoune is quoted – «Rhodogoune: wife of Hystaspes, mother of Xerxes and Darius» – and the fol-
lowing suggestion is made: «The Alexander Romance possibly drew on Har-
pokration, confusing Darius I with Darius III, either from a lack of knowledge of the name Sisygambis, or in search of a novel approach to history, not wanting to repeat information transmitted by other authors» (169). It should be noted that among the «mainstream sources», only Diodorus, among Greek authors, uses her name at all. Yet a different example of N.’s insistence of linking seemingly odd names to surviving textual sources appears in his note to Book 2.17.5, where Darius offers to hand over to Alexander all the riches housed in «Minyas, Susa, and Bactria». After five lines of various possibilities that might connect ‘Minyas’ to a location in Asia, N. suggests: «Another possibility, perhaps the most obvi-
ous, is that the name of the land allegedly housing a Persian treasury had derived from the name of Minyas, the mythological founder of Orchomenos, and was therefore aptly added into this (fictitious) letter of Darius. Minyas had reportedly built a spectacular treasure house (Paus. IX 38.2)» (176). It would be appropriate, perhaps, to add that Pausanias is referring to a Mycenaean tholos tomb that he himself visited and can still be visited today, both as a monument of Mycenaean engineering and funerary practices but also of its reinvention and reuse over the centuries. It would be more relevant, however, to discuss the fact that other re-
censions here read ‘Mysia’ or ‘Media’.
A surprising number of errors mar the work. I note only a cluster of these that appears at the very beginning of the commentary and at the end of the book as a way of pointing readers to resources to supplement this new publication. At the top of page 2, where the heading of the Alexander Romance is printed in Greek, as it appears in the chief manuscript of recension β, ms. B, Paris. gr. 1685 (s. XV) f. 1r, two rhos are missing, and N.’s translation reads «this way describes the deeds of Alexander» when it should say «this one (οὗτος) describes the deeds of Alexander».

On this same page note four lists «Rubinsohn 1993», which does not appear in the bibliography. At the other end of the book, in the three most important pages of the bibliography, appears a listing of the «important editions» of the Alexander Romance, all of which are listed with ‘trans.’ or ‘translated by’, though almost none of them contain translations at all (and Rosellini’s edition of Julius Valerius Res gestae Alexandri Macedonis is listed not under ‘Iulius Valerius’ but under «Harvard (18th ed.)»; it should be noted that there is a 2004 corrected edition with addenda); on the third of those three pages appears a mere five books under the heading ‘Important Modern Translations’, but there is no annotation to tell the reader of what recension(s) these five books are translations. Readers should refer to the helpful list of editions and translations in Stoneman’s 2008 ‘Alexander the Great: A Life in Legend’ (230–45).

Scholars of Alexander’s actual life, having studied the ancient historians from Curtius Rufus to Arrian and the detailed commentaries on their texts, will not likely use this commentary. Scholars of the legendary Alexander will find an excellent introduction to the Greek and Latin recensions in the first volume of Stoneman’s Italian edition, when they happen to want fourth-century BC comparanda, will find most of it already in the works cited by N., and will find «the development of his legend» (1) presented best in models of systematic thoroughness and insight such as the large, thorough book of Jouanno or, for an exemplary, focused study, the 2016 article by Garstad, which was too new to appear in N.’s bibliography.³

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³ High-resolution, color images of this beautiful manuscript are visible on the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France; but for ms. A, sadly, only a digitized version of an old microfilm is currently available.
