



Claudia Daniotti, *Reinventing Alexander. Myth, Legend, History in Renaissance Italian Art (Alexander redivivus, vol. 15)*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2022, pp. 348, ISBN 9782503597430, €100

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Alexander the Great is the sole historical figure from Greek antiquity whose memory survived into the medieval period. This was due to the popularity of the network of texts that are generally known as the *Alexander Romance*, a highly romanticized version of Alexander's life and career that had its origins in Alexandria in the third-century BCE, and then spread across the world, ultimately as far as Iceland and Indonesia. In it, Alexander is said to have been the son of the last Egyptian pharaoh, who was a magician, to have tamed a man-eating horse and to have travelled to the utmost east, where he flew up to the heavens on a chariot drawn by griffins, descended beneath the ocean in a diving bell and learned about his approaching death from two oracular trees, dedicated to the sun and moon. In Italy at the start of the fifteenth century, versions of this account provided the subject matter for artistic representations of Alexander in various media. Then over the course of that century, editions and translations of the surviving historical accounts of Alexander's life, originally written in Greek between 30 BCE and 150 CE, became available, and by the end of the century the repertoire of artistic representations of Alexander in art had been transformed, as episodes from these accounts supplanted the stories from the *Romance*.

In this excellent volume, Claudia Daniotti explores this transformation of the representation of Alexander through a detailed examination of a wide range of examples of domestic art and demonstrates the value of looking at material culture of this kind if we want to understand how rapidly and broadly the impact of humanist scholarly activity percolated into wider elite society. There are five chapters. The first presents an overview of the medieval tradition of representations of Alexander in art in Italy, focussing on the episodes I mentioned above. The examples include illuminated manuscripts, but also the interior decoration of the palaces of noble families. The second chapter then looks at how this tradition continued into the fifteenth

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century, exploring a range of media including tapestries and a tarot set. It then looks particularly at representations of the 'Nine Worthies' – three Jewish heroes, three heathen (Alexander, along with Caesar and Hector), three Christian. Depictions of these figures, sometimes alongside their female counterparts, can be found, in differing states of preservation, in four palaces in Piedmont, Alto Adige and Umbria.

In chapter three, Daniotti provides a clear account of the recovery of knowledge of the ancient accounts of Alexander, that is Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, Arrian's *Anabasis* and Diodorus's *Library of History*. A Latin translation of Plutarch's *Life* was made sometime before 1408. A Greek text of Arrian reached Italy in 1413, and a Latin translation appeared in the 1430s, although this had no circulation. A revised edition was made in 1461 and printed in 1508. In the middle of the century, Pope Nicholas V commissioned a translation of Diodorus, but the Latin version of Book XVII, which covers the career of Alexander, only appeared in 1516. Meanwhile there was a renewed interest in the Latin text of Quintus Curtius Rufus. Manuscripts of this work had been available throughout the medieval period, and it had influenced some accounts of Alexander written then, but it could not compete with the *Romance* in terms of popularity. In 1438, a vernacular translation was presented to Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan, and this was rapidly copied and translated into other vernacular languages, and appeared in print in 1478. But even more popular than Curtius was Justin's Latin *Epitome* of the history of Pompeius Trogus, which also began to circulate widely in vernacular translations in the fifteenth century. Thus, within the century, all the major literary texts on which modern historians of Alexander base their accounts were made available to a wide Italian readership. Significantly, knowledge of these texts led to the rapid fall from favour of the *Romance* tradition, as humanists drew a firm distinction between its *fabulae* and the *historia* that the newly revealed narratives were considered to provide. As Daniotti points out, this opposition overlooks the extent to which elements from the *Romance* tradition had found their way into the 'historical' accounts in the centuries between Alexander's death and the writing of Diodorus's history almost 300 years later. This rejection of *fabula* in favour of *historia* was already visible in fourteenth-century writing on Alexander by Petrarch, Boccaccio and others, and this is considered at the end of the chapter.

Chapter four discusses the new iconography that is drawn from these texts. The medieval subjects are replaced by new ones, and there is a particular focus on the meeting of Alexander with the family of Darius. This new iconographic repertoire is traced in the decoration of wedding chests and in the representation of Alexander in cycles of *Uomini famosi*, which replace the Nine Worthies as subjects for decorating the public rooms of ducal palaces. We also see a new interest in depicting Alexander in imitation of the portrait on his coins (although ironically the most popular image is actually one of a helmeted Athena, mistaken for the beardless Alexander). Much of the material in this chapter has not been previously examined, so this is far more than an exercise in synthesis. The final substantial chapter follows the story into the sixteenth century, where further episodes from the historical accounts (albeit ones focussed on Alexander's love life) come to prominence.

Each of the chapters discussing art is followed by well-produced black-and-white illustrations, 81 in all, and after chapter three (which has no illustrations of its own),

there are sixteen full-colour plates. All in all, the volume is beautifully produced, but more importantly it contains scholarship of the highest quality. For anyone who wants to understand Alexander's afterlife at the time of the Renaissance and how the 'historical Alexander' of modern scholarship came to be born, this is a must-read.

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