

F. Feldhofer, *Francesco Javier Alegre SJ: Alexandrias*. Herausgegeben, übersetzt und erläutert von Florian Feldhofer, Die neulateinische Bibliothek 7, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter Heidelberg, 2024, 244 pp. [ISBN: 978-3-8253-9530-8].

According to the Alexander-historians, when visiting Achilles' tomb, Alexander the Great lamented not having a capable epic poet in his entourage who could praise his heroic deeds as Homer did for his ancestor.¹ However, four epic poets did accompany the Macedonian king on his campaign: Choerilos of Iasos, Aeschrio of Samos, Agis of Argos, and Anaximenes of Lampsacos. As I argued elsewhere,² they are (unjustly?) remembered as bad poets and *kolakes* (flatterers) due to their chosen subject—the glorification of a Macedonian king who not only 'abandoned' his homeland to wage an endless war in the East, but also became increasingly despotic toward the end of his reign. Moreover, their works likely diverged too much from Homeric epics, the paradigm of all epic poetry, and were criticized for failing to meet the refined and erudite standards of Hellenistic poetry.³ Although Alexander-epics did not survive, already in antiquity the Macedonian's deeds became widely known and were surely sung in Pseudo-Callisthenes' *Alexander Romance*, Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* and *Alexandri Magni Fortuna aut Virtute*, and Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandrou*, which collectively provide us with a positive image of Alexander as a charismatic and witty ruler as well as an unparalleled general. During the Middle Ages, Alexander's legend continued to grow both in the East and in the West:⁴ he appears as a hero on a quest and a prophet in Nizami's *Iskandarnamah*,⁵ as a wise king in the Arabic⁶ and Jewish tradition,⁷ as a Christian world ruler in the Byzantine tradition,⁸ and as a chivalrous king in epic poems,⁹ such as the twelfth-century *Alexandreis*, a classicising epic poem in ten books composed by the French theologian Walter of Châtillon. The *Alexandreis* narrates Alexander's campaign from his victories in Asia Minor and his conquest of Persia, to his subjugation of India and eventual decline and death. The narrative, based on Quintus Curtius Rufus' *Historia Alexandri Magni*, celebrates Alexander's military

¹ Plu. *Alex.* 15.8; Arr. *An.* 1.12.1; Ps-Call. *AR*(α) 1.42.

² G. D. M. TAIETTI (forthcoming), "The Epic Poets at Alexander's Court: How Flat is Flattery?", in M. PERALE – J. KWAPISZ – G. D. M. TAIETTI – B. CARLIDGE (eds.), *Hellenistic Poetry before Callimachus*.

³ See, e.g., the famous maxim of Callimachus (fr. 465 Pfeiffer) that a big book is a big evil.

⁴ See R. STONEMAN (2012), *Legends of Alexander the Great*, New York: vii-75.

⁵ F. de BLOIS (1998), "Eskandar-Nāma of Nezāmī", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* VIII, Fasc. 6: 612-614. On the Persian and Eastern traditions, cf. R. STONEMAN – K. ERICKSON – I. R. NETTON (eds.) (2012), *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*, Groningen.

⁶ F. DUFIKAR-AERTS (2010), *Alexander Magnus Arabicus: A Survey of Alexander Tradition through seven centuries, from Pseudo-Callisthenes to Šūrī*, Paris–Leuven; Z. D. ZUWIYYA (2011), "The Alexander Romance in the Arabic Tradition", in Z. D. ZUWIYYA (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Leiden–Boston: 73-112.

⁷ O. AMITAY (2010), *From Alexander to Jesus*, Berkeley; S. DÖNITZ (2011), "Jewish Traditions of Alexander", in Z. D. ZUWIYYA (ed.), *A Companion to Alexander Literature in the Middle Ages*, Leiden–Boston: 21-40; A. KLEČZAR (2019), *Ha-Makedoni. Images of Alexander the Great in Ancient and Medieval Jewish Literature*, Kraków.

⁸ A. VASILIKOPOULOU (1999), "Ο Μέγας Αλέξανδρος των Βυζαντινών. Οι Βυζαντινοί Επίγονοι του Μεγάλου Αλεξάνδρου", *Ancient Macedonia* 6.2: 1303-1315; D. KOUGIOUMTZOGLOU (2024), *Ο Βυζαντινός Μέγας Αλέξανδρος*, Athens.

⁹ G. CARY (1967), *Medieval Alexander*, Cambridge: 201-225.

prowess as a classical hero, while also engaging with themes central to medieval thought, such as excessive ambition, moral decay, and the transient nature of power.

Francisco Javier Alegre (1729–1788)’s *Alexandrias* is a Neo-Latin epic poem recounting Alexander the Great’s siege and conquest of the Phoenician city of Tyre; it finds its roots in the medieval fascination with the Macedonian as a hero on a quest and in the Renaissance Neo-Latin revival of the epic tradition.¹⁰ Alegre was a Jesuit scholar, historian, and translator from New Spain (modern-day Mexico). He was a prolific author, and *Alexandrias* is among his notable works. *Alexandrias* consists of four books in Latin exameters which reflect Alegre’s deep engagement with classical sources and his mastery of Latin literature: not only did Alegre draw historical details from Quintus Curtius Rufus and Flavius Josephus, but he also emulated the poetic styles of Virgil and Homer. The epic poem was first published in Forlì (Italy) in 1773. In addition to his admiration for Alexander as a classical hero, an unparalleled conqueror, and a just king, in the poem Alegre addresses themes that align with his Jesuit background. Some scholars have suggested that Alegre’s depiction of Alexander’s capture of Tyre serves as an analogue to Hernán Cortés’ conquest of the Aztec Empire and the fall of Tenochtitlán,¹¹ drawing parallels between ancient conquests and contemporary events in New Spain.

Florian Feldhofer’s *Francesco Javier Alegre SJ: Alexandrias* is an enjoyable and informative read. The book is well-structured and can be divided into two sections: the first provides an introduction to Alegre’s life and works, with a focus on *Alexandrias*—its sources, literary models, language, historical background, and its place within the tradition of Neo-Latin Epic and Neo-Latin Literature in Mexico. The second section presents the Latin text of *Alexandrias* as provided by Torres in his 1996 critical edition,¹² accompanied by Feldhofer’s German prose translation and a brief commentary in the endnotes. The book concludes with a bibliographical list and an index of places and names.

The first section is commendable, as Feldhofer concisely addresses key topics that help the reader better understand Alegre, such as the suppression of the Jesuit order by Charles III in 1767, after which all Jesuits living in Spanish colonies had to leave immediately and resettle in Europe, where they developed an astonishing literary production. The author explains that Alegre established himself in Italy, but the *Alexandrias* was probably a work of his youth, given his early admiration for Alexander the Great and the popularity of Quintus Curtius Rufus among the Jesuits. In this section Feldhofer makes compelling points about *Alexandrias*’ background and models, though I would have liked to see a more in-depth discussion of the parallels between Alegre and Walter of Châtillon, the most successful medieval Alexander epicist whose source was also Quintus Curtius Rufus (see, e.g. the story of Jaddo appearing in a dream, only briefly discussed in endnote 33). In Alegre’s eyes, Alexander is a courageous hero who bridges both the pagan Classical tradition and the Jewish-Christian one; he is a beloved, successful son of Zeus, while also receiving the support of the Jewish high priest Jaddo during the siege of Tyre (a tradition which Alegre takes from Joseph Flavius *Ant. Iud.* 11.317–345 and Walter of Châtillon 1.493–538). Feldhofer also notes that, in the period

¹⁰ For Neo-Latin epic, see P. GWYNNE (2017), “Epic”, in V. MOUL (ed.), *A Guide to Neo-Latin Literature*, Cambridge: 200–220.

¹¹ A. LAIRD (2003), “La Alexandriada de Francisco Xavier Alegre: arcanis sua sensa figuris”, *Noua Tellus* 21.2: 165–175.

¹² R. TORRES (1996), *Francisco Javier Alegres Alexandrias. Ansätze zu einer kritischen Ausgabe*, Eichstätt. Cf. also M. E. B. SERRANO (1991), *La Alexandriada, o la toma de Tiro por Aeljandro de Macedonia de Francesco Xavier Alegre*, Mexico City.

of European expansion, Alexander the Great became a reference figure for many conquerors and colonisers; while he suggests that Alegre's Alexander may serve as a parallel to Cortés, he remains cautious in fully endorsing Laird's thesis.

In the bibliographical section, authors are listed alphabetically with their most recent publication at the top rather than in chronological order from the oldest; I noticed only one minor error in the list, which is otherwise complete and includes all the most relevant works.

Feldhofer's book is a clear and succinct introduction to the study of Alegre's *Alexandrias*; it is well-suited for readers approaching Alegre's work for the first time, whereas specialists may want to consult the author's expanded study, entitled *Die Alexandrias des Francisco Javier Alegre SJ (1729–1788). Ein Epos zwischen Curtius Rufus und Vergil* (Noctes Neolatinae VOL. 40 Georg Olms Verlag, 1. Edition 2024, 589 Pages). This more comprehensive work offers an in-depth textual analysis and was published just a few months after the book here under review.

Overall, Feldhofer's book is a most welcome contribution, as it sheds light on Alegre's *Alexandrias*, which is an interesting representation and an original interpretation of Alexander's siege of Tyre. *Alexandrias* is also a remarkable piece of Neo-Latin epic, and a testament to the high-quality literary levels of eighteenth-century Mexico and the importance of Classics in a colonial setting.

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