Royal MS. 20 B. XX: Alexander the Great and the Voice of the Master. Interpretation and Astrology in a Medieval Manuscript

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Royal MS. 20 B. XX stands out in the manuscript tradition of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose for its lavishness, for its unusually small size 285 x 197mm, and especially for the creative blend of both faithfulness and inventiveness which its miniaturist demonstrates in his re-appropriation of the iconographic programme characteristic of the ensemble. Most recently, Catherine Reynolds has pointed out that the Master of the Harvard Hannibal – to whom this manuscript has been attributed – brings together two aesthetic personalities, the younger of whom should be named the Master of the Royal Alexander (Royal MS. 20 B. XX) as this manuscript marks the starting point of his identification. The subject of this article is the reading of the Roman which is suggested by his own particular choice of illustrations.

The starting point for this study was a perplexing illumination I noticed whilst first examining Royal MS. 20 B. XX (f. 86v, fig. 1). It was curious to me how inconsistent it was with the Maître du Royal Alexandre’s other work in this manuscript. As I shall explain shortly, the illuminator paid great attention to the text when illustrating this story, including many details that served as textual markers otherwise absent in other manuscripts. It was, therefore, surprising to come upon folio 86v’s rather programmatic and – for our illuminator – inaccurate miniature, while at the same time puzzling to find what otherwise appears to be an incoherence or casual detail in it: the miniature illustrating the episode of the ‘Stillbirth of a Monstrous Child’ is the standard, conventional medieval representation of a birth; and though our maître’s skill for details is evident – such as the inclusion of a shining copper basin, a half-burnt candle and various pieces of pewter ware – he chose to not represent the newborn as creatively as the story describes him: ‘This child was a wonder since he had the figure of a man from head to navel, and this part was dead. And from navel down, he had the shape of many beasts [fighting each other].’ As an astrologer

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3 ‘Cil enfant estoit moult merveilleux car il avoit fourme d’omme depuis la teste jusques au nombril et estoit celle semblance morte. Et depuis le nombril en aval avoit fourme de plusieurs bestes’ (f. 86v).
Fig. 1. Royal MS. 20 B. XX, f. 86v. Stillbirth of a Monstrous Child.
subsequently explains in the text, the dead human part signifies Alexander’s imminent death and the lower part the bloody battles that will divide his heirs. In this illustration however, Alexander’s mother is lying in her bed, while the midwife is looking after a very normal-looking newborn. The puzzling presence of a dog gnawing on a bone — not to be expected in the bedroom of a noblewoman giving birth — watching the scene attentively from the doorway, further puzzled me. And so began my search for the voice of the Master.

Royal 20 B. XX is one of eleven illustrated manuscripts of the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* tradition. It was written and illustrated in France sometime in the 1420s, most likely in Paris, yet we know almost nothing else about its provenance or the manuscript’s sponsor. We can, however, observe that its relatively small format makes it rather portable. Furthermore, its 86 images follow the iconographic programme shared by most of the other illustrated *Roman* manuscripts though there are small — and I argue, important — changes.

Our maître followed the traditional picture cycle, both quantitatively and qualitatively. There are only four images in this manuscript that are unique within the traditional programme and involve small but important changes. Overall, image composition remains faithful to his predecessors’ choices throughout the manuscript. As a means of comparison, MS. Condé 651, a manuscript close in date that contains nearly as many images in total, has forty-seven illustrations that differ from the established cycle, and thirteen of these are unique in the entire iconographic tradition. Royal 20 B. XX is, therefore, a study in textual and iconographic stability.

It has been established that Royal 20 B. XX had two illuminators, a master who painted the larger part of the manuscript, and a colleague who executed seven of the miniatures. I would like briefly to focus on the latter, not only because Reynolds’s elegant demonstration of the Maître du Royal Alexandre’s authorship has drawn most attention in the study of this manuscript, but perhaps also because I think that in the future our ‘assistant’ illuminator may prove to be further corroborating evidence in proving authorship for the Maître du Royal Alexandre in other medieval works. At the very least, it is worth mentioning his contribution to this manuscript as it works within the coherence of the reading I am about to propose. Though less refined than the maître’s illustrations, the schematic ‘monster battle’ miniatures (and one dealing with construction of a city) assigned to the assistant illuminator helped me focus my attention on the illustrations chosen by the Master since this narrowed the focus away from specifically mythical or military readings of Alexander’s life. Furthermore, by assigning the illustration of the bestiary to an assistant, our maître’s curious inclusion of a dog in the previously discussed illumination takes on added importance.

As I searched for the narrative threads our maître had chosen to privilege in his miniatures, I noted that among the four illustrations unique to this manuscript, the idea of divination by means of astrology was present inconspicuously. I also observed that even the few images that differed in details, but still respected the overall composition of the pictorial programme, gave importance to the interpretation of signs and symbols. Upon closer examination, it appeared that the text-image relationship did indeed highlight the role played by diviners and portents. I was then able to group images into two categories: those dealing with the interpretation of signs (conveying of meaning), and those addressing the understanding of the message distilled from these very signs (reception of meaning).

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5 f. 3r, Egyptian Astronomers (fig. 2); f. 8v, Nectanebus Sealing Olympias’s Sex (fig. 5); f. 9v, Interpretation of Philippe’s Dream of Egg Hatching (fig. 6); f. 10v, Alexander among his Classmates.
7 Folios 21v, 24r, 56r, 57r, 73rv and 80rv.
8 Let us, for example, note that the illustration of Alexander killing Nectanebus (f. 10r) is accompanied by — and the passage is contextualized with — the representation of a conversation between Alexander and Nectanebus about reading the stars which is not present in any other manuscript.
Let us begin, then, by considering a first group of illustrations that deal with the skill of interpreting signs. In the ‘Egyptian Astronomers’ miniature (f. 3r, fig. 2) we see a group of astrologers and their instruments. The technical and intellectual requirements of their craft are clearly and effectively represented by the illustrator: an armillary sphere, a trisquare, a staff and dividers.7 The prologue of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose stresses the culture and intelligence of the Egyptians, to whom God gave a particular understanding of things past, present and future. In conjunction with the prologue and subsequent images of divination in the manuscript, I submit that this miniature is the first building block of a rhetoric of knowledge based on foretelling and hindsight. This image is unique in the entire Roman d’Alexandre tradition.

The following image (f. 4v, fig. 3) foregrounds the important role played by divination in the life of Alexander: his mythological father, King Nectanebus, last pharaoh of Egypt, is shown divining his own immediate future by means of magic. By observing the way some miniature ships interact in a basin of water he discovers that he will lose a major battle and decides to flee Egypt for Philip of Macedon’s court, where he takes on the role of sage and astrologer. Though the ships are clearly the key to the divination, this is the first and earliest manuscript in which they are explicitly illustrated. Our Master, again, made a point of giving us a visual referent to the narrative plot. In most of the manuscripts, this scene is part of a tripartite composition featuring also Nectanebus having his head shaved in order to be able to escape anonymously, and then riding a horse.8 By limiting this illustration to the sole image of Nectanebus performing magic, the miniaturist removes the negative image of the coward king and establishes Nectanebus’s role as diviner and magician from the very beginning of the Alexandrian saga.9 He therefore strengthens the storyline on divination and reading the signs.

A few folios later (f. 7r, fig. 4), in the scene of ‘Nectanebus Reading the Stars to Olympias’, we explicitly see the role astrological sciences played in Alexander’s life story. The sage Nectanebus tells the queen that the stars speak of her imminent union with a god, from which she will become pregnant with Alexander. Only in this manuscript is Nectanebus explicitly depicted holding an astrological tablet with representations of the sun, the moon and the stars. He is also clearly represented as the astrologer of the court since he is shown in audience with the Macedonian queen and her court of ladies. It turns out, however, that this prophecy is an act of simple deceit. In truth, the Egyptian sorcerer will transform himself into a dragon in order to have sex with the Queen. Nectanebus is shown to be aware of the power of signs, of being able to interpret them as one wishes. This is, then, one of the first building blocks in establishing the political and real power of astronomy.

Following this is a miniature unique to this manuscript: ‘Nectanebus Sealing Olympias’s Sex’ (f. 8v, fig. 5), where the magus is shown as both dragon and human. Normally, the miniature associated with this episode represents the conception of Alexander, through an enchantment by Nectanebus. A man and a woman can be seen in a bed, while a dragon flies in the room.10 In Royal 20 B. XX however, Nectanebus stands by the bed, bending over Olympia’s naked body, a ring in

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7 ‘As fanciful as it may be, it is significant to note that the illuminator of this particular copy […] saw fit to supplement the talk about Egyptian competence in geometry and astronomy by including a few of the implements of these sciences which were, by then, well-known symbols of these disciplines. The belief that geometry in particular had its origins in Egypt can be found in numerous ancient Greek sources, going back to Herodotus at least’: John E. Murdoch, Album of Science. Antiquity and the Middle Ages (New York, 1984), p. 180.

8 This tripartite composition is the keystone of Ross’s argument to prove the filiation between most of the manuscripts of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose. David J. A. Ross, ‘Olympia and the Serpent’, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, vol. xxvi (1963), pp. 1–21. One such image can be seen in Royal MS. 15 E. VI, in the lower part of f. 5 (http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/ILLUMIN.ASP?Size=mid&IllID=38768).

9 Let us also note that the miniaturist does not make use of images divided into compartments, conforming therefore to modern aesthetics, based on geometrical perspective, which makes the illustrations look more realistic.

10 See for example Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, 78 C. 1, f. 8v in A. Rieger (ed.), L’Ystoire du bon roi Alexandre. Der Berliner Alexanderroman. Handschrift 78 C 1 des Kupferstichkabinett Preussischer Kulturbesitz Berlin, ‘Comment
Fig. 2. f. 3r. Egyptian Astronomers.
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Fig. 3. f. 4v. Divination Scene (Wax Boats in a Water Basin).
Fig. 4. f. 7r. Nectanebus Telling Olympias her Horoscope.
Fig. 5. f. 8v. Nectanebus Sealing Olympias's Sex.
his hand. This image is a rendering of the dream Nectanebus sent to King Philip after the magician made Olympias pregnant, showing Nectanebus under the guise of Amon sealing Olympia’s sex with a ring engraved with a lion’s head, a sword and a horse-drawn carriage. The dream is meant to force Philip to accept the pregnancy of his wife by making him believe she had been elected by a god to give birth to a remarkable child. The ring, says the astrologer called to interpret the dream of the puzzled king Philip, is foretelling of Alexander’s future military successes. The telling of the dream by Philip to his astrologer works as an analepsis in the text. Philip sees what already happened and it tells him something about the future. We have here, then, a combination of past, present and future around both the figure of the sage Nectanebus and the birth of our hero, Alexander. This altogether exceptional scene is all the more so when we consider that the illuminator specifically chose to replace the expected miniature with this very unexpected one. Besides demonstrating a close reading and a clear understanding of the narrative, our illuminator meant to create new meaning with such a semantically dense illustration.

There is a second group of images associated with understanding the message of divinations. They begin with the illustration (f. 9v, fig. 6) of a scene where King Philip’s oracles interpret a strange occurrence at the court. One day a mysterious bird appears and lays an egg in the king’s lap while he is sitting on his throne, the egg breaks open and a dragon springs forth. The egg closes again, and as the dragon tries and fails to get back inside, it dies. The Macedonian King asks his advisers to decipher this riddle and they foretell that his son will conquer the world but will die before returning home to consolidate his throne. Curiously, this is not the image called for by the rubric (‘How Nectanebus transformed himself into a dragon and kissed Olympias in front of her husband’). The image normally depicts Olympias and Philip eating at a banquet table being visited by a dragon. It represents the moment when all doubt is lifted of Alexander’s divine origins. After his return from war Philip had accepted Olympia’s new pregnancy as coming from a god, but each passing day made him more suspicious of treachery, until one day Nectanebus (the court magician and Alexander’s true begetter) takes the decision to transform himself into a dragon again and publicly signal the divine nature of the pregnancy. This illustration – like the image of Nectanebus’s flight from Egypt – is one of the most constant in the entire iconographic programme and is one of the cornerstones of Ross’s demonstration of the stability of a single iconographic programme from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in the Alexandrian saga. It is represented without fail in all other manuscripts. Our manuscript replaces it with a rare image that appears only in a manuscript of the Historia de Preliis, the Latin source of our Roman. This important modification in the iconographic programme is therefore unique to this manuscript and to the Alexandre en prose tradition and underlines a conscious adjustment in the visual narrative on the part of the illustrator whose intent here, it seems, is to privilege a storyline dealing with the interpretation of signs, foretelling the future, and the power that this hidden knowledge contains for both the reader and the receiver. Much later in the text (f. 66r, fig. 7), Alexander climbs a mountain of sapphire to reach to prophetic Trees of the Moon and the Sun. With the help of the priest who guards the trees, he learns that he will conquer the world, but die soon thereafter, by poisoning. This scene gives us a very interesting insight into the problematic nature of prophecy-making. When Alexander asks the name of his murderer, the trees reply: ‘If you knew [...] you would kill him and what has been decided for you would not come to be and the three sisters of fate, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, would be angry with me for having placed an impediment in the way of their prophecy’.

However, the image stresses an earlier moment of this event. We see the part when the priest,  

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13 ‘Comment Nectanebus se transfigura en guise de dragon et baisa la royne Olimpias devant son mari’ (f. 9r).
14 See n. 7.
15 Vatican, Vat. lat. 7190. A paper manuscript of the early fifteenth century, probably made in North Italy. Ross, Alexander Historiatus, p. 53.
16 ‘se tu le savoies, dist li arbres, tu l’ochiroies et ensi ne seroient mie les ordenemens qui sunt de toi ordenés, et si coroceroient les III. serors deesse d’aventurre, c’est a savoir Cloto, Lachesis et Atnropos por ce que je averoie mis enmpeecement en ce que elles ont etabli’, Roman d’Alexandre en prose, pp. 206-7.
Fig. 6. f. 9v. Interpretation of Philip's Dream of Egg Hatching.
Fig. 7. f. 66r. The Priest of the Prophetic Trees of the Moon and the Sun.
rising to walk Alexander and his companion to the trees, asks them to take off their clothes as a sign of humility and cleansing. This is a most unusual representation as Alexander is always represented in front of the Trees of the Moon and the Sun. The stress is, thus, placed on the rite of purification and not the prophecy itself. It underscores the Macedonian king’s inadequacy in reading (and ultimately foreshadows his inability to understand) the prophecy. The mediation of the priest— as essential to the knowledge gathering process — is also emphasized. Of note is the fact that behind the priest there is a phoenix perched on a dead tree, a magic symbol throughout the Middle Ages of immortality. This could allude to a two-fold equivalence between the mythical bird and the Macedonian king: firstly to the fact that, had Alexander known how to interpret the prophecy of his death — regardless of knowing who was going to murder him — he could have avoided it, and secondly — and more interestingly—, like the phoenix, he could have accepted death as inevitable (and the priest stated as much) and prepared the rebirth of his reign after his passing by planning for the empire’s expansion and governance.

Almost near the end (f. 83r, fig. 8), after a long series of battles, conquests and travels, we come upon a new scene of prophecy at court. It is once again related to Alexander himself: as he enters King Xerxes’s castle he sees a flock of caladrius birds. According to mythology, the caladrius refuses to look at a sick person directly if he is not going to heal, and thus can foretell life or death. In the manuscripts illustrating this passage, we can see two sick men in their beds, a caladrius at the end of each bed: one looks at the patient, the other one turns his head away.17 The illustration of this mythical trope is used in Royal 20 B. XX not in a symbolic but in a narrative way: in the courtroom, the astrologer, watching the birds, tells of their power to the king who, very interested by them, bends down as if to touch one of them. The maître illuminator has chosen to represent an intervention by the narrator in the story — who merely recounts the predictive power of these birds as in a bestiary — as a real scene of Alexander asking his magicians to interpret the birds. I argue that the illustration foreshadows the signs to be interpreted not the explanation itself, as both Alexander and his advisors seem to be pointing to the importance of the animals in fortune-telling.

Lastly, we have the illustration on 86v (fig. 1), ‘The Stillbirth of a Monstrous Child’, which ought to have offered an opportunity to illustrate the prediction of both the end of Alexander’s reign and its aftermath. As mentioned before, the normal iconographic cycle depicts the stillbirth of a hybrid child. It is the monstrosity that primarily elicits the need for interpretation. Here, in this illumination, the child is all but normal in appearance. He does not even seem to be dead as the midwife is wrapping him in swaddling clothes. At first glance, the absence of any unnatural physical manifestation calls into question the first part of the interpretation narrated by the text (the stillbirth addresses Alexander’s imminent death) as well as the second part related to the monsters that were trying to kill each other (representing the future bloody battles that the king’s descendants would fight after his untimely death). However, we shall see that this very incongruous image — conventional by most standards — contains as much meaning as the text narrates, and more.

So far, the Maître du Royal Alexandre has demonstrated a marked interest in underscoring, firstly, the importance of both the skill and the power of interpreting symbols in order to anticipate and avoid negative future events, and secondly, the various moments in Alexander’s life when the message was transmitted but their meaning ignored or disregarded. The obvious political lessons to be learned from an interested reading of Alexander’s life are present in the mise en forme of this manuscript and the close reading of the text evident in our illuminator’s work, and yet, he withholds significant visual referents from what is arguably one of the most important lessons to be gained from reading the Macedonian king’s story: that good political governance is also planning for one’s succession. By not properly heeding the warning of his endangered legacy in this passage, and thus meeting his end without explicitly choosing a successor, the king made his life’s achievements vanish and his kingdom implode. Given

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17 ‘s’il advenoit chose que on en meist un aux prés d’un malade et il le regardoit que c’estoit signe qu’il devoit vivre et s’il se tornoit de l’autre part que c’estoit signe qu’il devoit mourir’, f. 83r.
Fig. 8. f. 83r. Presentation of the Caladrius Birds to Alexander.
the Maître du Royal Alexandre’s preoccupation with visually foregrounding mythical signs and their interpretation, this important and obvious iconographic omission begs the question why.

As stated previously, Royal 20 B. XX is a relatively faithful reproduction of the source manuscript both textually and iconographically. Thus far we have primarily discussed the illustrative variants and their importance in the reception of this Alexander saga. In order to explain the final component of my argument, I would now like to turn to two interesting components of all Roman d’Alexandre en prose manuscripts: the prologue and the epilogue. These important addenda to the Latin source are quite fascinating. And yet, until this very manuscript, no illuminator had directly addressed them in his work. The prologue essentially speaks of the origins of Alexander’s lineage and specifically addresses the pseudo-science of astronomy,\(^\text{18}\) first by assigning divine transference of knowledge to Adam and eventually projecting on to the Egyptians these same analeptic and proleptic aptitudes (not unlike those associated with authors at that time);\(^\text{19}\) and ultimately going so far as to assign great respect and admiration to the noblest of all Egyptians, Nectanebus, for understanding this craft. The epilogue deals primarily with the wars of succession after Alexander’s death. These paratexts insert a narrative frame that concerns itself with the past (the preface) and the future (the afterword) of Alexander’s life, giving this text historical depth and reinforcing political meanings, among other things.

It appears that in Royal 20 B. XX our maître illustrator chose to distinctly focus on the role played by portents in Alexander the Great’s life. This, in itself, is significant. However, what is much more remarkable is the semantic jump he makes from the onset. Starting with the first image (f. 1r, fig. 9, ‘Author Working’), and continuing with the second one (fig. 2, f. 3v, ‘Egyptian Astronomers’), there is an obvious interrelation between text, authorship and authority using the idea of divination. Furthermore, the prologue states that wise and learned persons are those who can master time and can bring together past and present, and thus foretell the future. It is stated that as Adam received from God the knowledge to tell right from wrong – and thus avoid bad things –, so have astrologers, Egyptians being the first, and Nectanebus the best among them. We are eventually to understand, through reading the text, that Alexander, as the Pharaoh’s son, is a direct receiver of this knowledge.\(^\text{20}\)

We must note the fact that two of the aforementioned illustrations original to this manuscript appear at the very beginning of Royal 20 B. XX, on f. 1r and f. 3r. The latter, representing the Egyptian astronomers with their instruments (fig. 2), has the title ‘How Our Lord Gave Alexander the Ability to Tell Right from Wrong’.\(^\text{21}\) This is both textually inaccurate, and wonderfully appropriate. Not only is it unique to this manuscript, it is also a paraphrase of a section of the prologue, and thus a deliberate reading of the text. This miniature clearly associates the reading of signs as a major theme in the manuscript through the textual evocation (and visual absence) of Alexander. The image on f. 1r (fig. 9), on the other hand, shows a person reading. This is a typical author-at-work image and is usually found in most frontispieces of the era, yet up to this point completely absent from the entire Roman d’Alexandre en prose tradition. We can observe that through the complicity and cooperation of these two images, the author’s work – the text we are about to read – is thus immediately associated with divine knowledge, to the understanding of right and wrong, and most importantly it is given authority. The iconographic narrative suggests a bond between writing and astrology (by way of the book and of the bedspread decorated with suns)\(^\text{22}\) and between the author and the prince (by means of the image and the rubric mentioning

\(^{18}\) Redaction I, to which Royal 20 B. XX belongs, has this introduction. A different prologue was added after 1250 and belongs to Redaction II.


\(^{20}\) Le Roman d’Alexandre en prose, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

\(^{21}\) ‘Comment Nostre Seigneur donna connaissance a Alexandre de trier le bien du mal’, f. 1r.

\(^{22}\) Let us also remark that one of the astrologers, the one holding the armillary sphere, is clearly associated by the shape and the colour of his clothing with the author figure, positing equivalence between the two.
Fig. 9. f. 1r. The Author at Work.
Alexander); the result is an unfolding of meaning that ultimately gives both authorship and authority to the text and the illuminations. This is, in my opinion, the beginning of a search for semantic confluence between text and image in Royal 20 B. XX by the Maître du Royal Alexandre.

Reinforcing this is the added innovation of what lies immediately below this first image: a table of rubrics. Curiously, in a prologue of a fourteenth-century version of the Historia de Preliis (therefore, a Latin version of the Alexander saga) there is a specific plea for including a list of illustrations in subsequent manuscripts since it will make what is in the text clearer: without it, the prologue argues, the text is like a locked treasure buried in the ground, its content and meaning essentially inaccessible and hidden. It continues on to say that the lack of a table of contents in a manuscript is due specifically to a lazy writer. We have already discussed the fact that this manuscript is inscribed in a collective project of knowledge transfer. I argue that presenting the Roman d’Alexandre en prose as an erudite work, thanks to the table of contents and especially in light of all of the previously mentioned modifications, makes this document a work of reference, something meant to be consulted; and indeed, the Roman d’Alexandre en prose has often been referred to as a mirror of princes. Therefore, the incorporation of a list of rubrics is akin to creating a table of contents, more than simply a table of illustrations, since besides marking the location of an image, the list allows for easy consultation of a specific passage. Consequently and importantly, both the list and the individual rubrics add further authority to the illuminator, and underline his authorship, especially so far as giving meaning to a specific reading of the story is concerned.

Let us now return to our mysterious image on f. 86v (fig. 1). The text tells us that on observing the stillbirth of this monstrous child Alexander saw it as a sign and asked his astrologers for its meaning. I believe that here the miniaturist, on the one hand, reduces the event to a purely natural and universal occurrence (the birth), and on the other hand (by effacing the mythical component from the scene as a marker of meaning) empties this very symbol (the otherwise normal child) of the allegorical meaning attributed to it by the narrator. The illuminator, thus, chooses to disturb the powerful text-image relationship thus far established and appears to unexpectedly break the hermeneutic circle at a stroke. And yet, the programmatic image was not replaced (as was the case in some of the examples discussed previously) nor was it ‘misread’ (as is the case in other manuscripts). This unexpected modification becomes logical only if we take into account all of the previous visual narrative strategies, and the sense that they gave to the text-image relationship all through the manuscript:

– The Maître du Royal Alexandre was part of a seemingly innovative editorial project: a conscious effort to organize the mise en forme of the manuscript so as to give meaning to the illuminations.
– Our illustrator worked within the authorial space provided by the manuscript, first by choosing to follow the pre-established iconographic programme, then by being faithful to the textual narrative in as much detail as his artistic skills would achieve (sometimes correcting, sometimes condensing images).
– Furthermore, he asserted both illustrative and editorial authority by selecting how to represent specific key passages, and by gradually and systematically foreshadowing the narrative, thus giving us the tools to decipher and to understand the most important, unambiguous message of the Alexander saga: that whether one reads the life of

24 Let us recall that this is the only manuscript of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose to offer a table of contents.
25 Royal MS. 19 D. I of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose contains such errors. See Richard H. and Mary A. Rouse, Manuscripts and their Makers, Commercial Book Producers in Medieval Paris 1200-1500, 2 vols (Turnhout, 2000), vol. i, p. 257 ss. and vol. ii, fig. 156. See also Pérez-Simon, Mise en roman et mise en images, chapter IV, A, 1.
the Macedonian king and emperor as a model of wisdom, courage or ambition, any lesson taken by an interested reader (i.e. a present or future ruler) would be all for nought if one did not plan for an orderly succession after one’s demise.

– Lastly (and this is the crux of my argument), he insists throughout the manuscript on the importance of being able to not only see and read signs but to learn from them. The modifications to the subject matter of ‘Stillbirth of a Monstrous Child’ are thus charged with both aesthetic and semantic meaning. The programmatic birth scene illustrating f. 86v is so uncharacteristically monotonous as to become remarkable, especially if compared to the rest of the miniatures in the manuscript. I believe that it means to elicit the interest of the attentive reader, who, undoubtedly – like myself – will try to make sense of this incongruous scene. All attention turns, then, to the dog gnawing a bone. The ensuing paradox can be understood by reading the passage associated with this illustration.26 We see that the missing visual portent (the struggling beasts) is meant to evoke the in-fighting that will result from Alexander’s untimely death. And it is explained through the metaphor given at the end of the prophecy: ‘They will brawl with one another trying to get their share of the kingdom, just like dogs fighting over a bone’. The illustrated textual metaphor is logically encoded in the dog.27 The reader must go through two or three metatextual strata before he can seize the full meaning of the image, and thus re-seal the hermeneutic circle. The Maître du Royal Alexandre concentrates his full authorship and authority on this last image so that the meaning of his reading of the Roman should be unambiguous: Alexander the Great’s life was an example to emulate, but his death a warning to confront. By not following the signs, Alexander dooms his kingdom, reduced to no more than a bone for dogs. By interpreting the coded image, the reader becomes, like Adam and the Egyptians, able to interpret the past and to tell right from wrong. For our illuminator, the responsibility of the reader is to be an exegete of the text, and his is to provide a visual matrix of meaning and intellectual pleasure.

I believe that the hermeneutic path we have followed throughout the illumination of our manuscript, from the Egyptian Astronomers to the prophetic birth of a monstrous child, points to both the recognition/reading of signs and the understanding of them as the main narrative threads exploited by the iconography of this manuscript.

This has to be understood primarily, from a historical context. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, during the reign of Charles V, astrology entered the political sphere of governance, most evidently during the crisis of 1356-1357. The many books of astrology in his library (there were more than in any other royal collection in western Europe at that time) certainly influenced the young Charles VI and the court in general, but astrology as a way to tell the future did not really acquire a public dimension.28 Nonetheless, of particular interest to us is the recrudescence of the importance of astrology as a political science during the reign of Charles VII (1422-1461). We also know that as early as 1419, Jean Gerson wrote an essay addressed to the young prince warning him about relying too much on this art, entitled Trilogium astrologie theologizate.29 Furthermore, we also know that he had at least seven astrologers attached to his service.30 Lastly, shortly after becoming king, in 1427, he promulgated a royal order that instructed the distribution of an

26 The complete citation addresses, specifically, the succession wars after Alexander’s death; the passage cited above is indicated by my italics: ‘Les bestes qui sont dessoube signifient les barons qui sont comme bestes [...] au regart de vous lesquelx par la grant emue qu’ilz ont les unz sur les autres ja soit ce qu’ilz n’en ozent monstrer semblant pour vous qui estes segneur ou monde. Et quant vous serez trespassez, le monde sera sans seigneur. Et pour ce se combattront les unz contre les autres afin que chascun ait sa partie si comme les chiens font a charogne’, f. 87r.

27 For an example of the use of dogs in ‘nigromance’ [clerical magic] see J.-P. Boudet, Entre Science et nigromance (Paris, 2006), p. 393 and n. 144 (on baptism of dogs). Medieval readers could have, therefore, understood this reference, although further study is required to be certain.


29 Ibid., p. 275.

almanac, based on astrological projections, that indicated the most favourable days for bleeding patients to the kingdom’s barber-surgeons.31

Our manuscript belongs to a period when astrology is reaffirming itself as an important element in political power relations between competing kingdoms and princes. Though both the patron and the intended receiver of the manuscript remain unknown, I put forth two historical facts that both contextualize and inform the iconographic reading I have made.

To begin with, besides the previously mentioned interest for astrology, we must consider the fact that Charles the VII created, in 1451, the official function of Royal Astrologer. Before this, this person’s title was deceptively referred to as the Royal [Medical] Doctor. Of note is the fact that, that same year, Charles VII had his birth chart written down. This is remarkable because it is the only one of a medieval king extant today.33 Subsequently, it can be said that the King’s preoccupation with both knowing his future and using this knowledge in the political sphere resemble the aforementioned attention to births, recognition of signs and prophecy-making that the Roman d’Alexandre can nourish (figs 1, 4, 5, 6).

Moreover, we also know that the Master of the Royal Alexander worked for the English market as well as the fact that the King’s interest in astrology was shared on a large scale by the nobility of his time particularly in the Anglo-Burgundian part of France. That is to say, other notable individuals from the English nobility could have sponsored Royal MS. 20 B. XX as well. One such nobleman was the Duke of Bedford – a reputed bibliophile – who recovered a large part of Charles V’s and VI’s library, who was the probable addressee of an astrologico-political consultation dated 1427,35 and who had a French translation of the De judiciis astrorum dedicated to him.36

Regardless of who the actual patron of our manuscript was, given our reading of the text-image narration we can be certain that he was part of the nobility of the time who shared an interest for the role of astrology in politics. A role that made astrology an intricate part of, and a means of increasing, political power. Our Roman d’Alexandre en prose addresses this very point, iconographically, in a nearly pedagogical way. As such, we consider the relatively small format of the book, and – most importantly – the table of contents as further elements attesting to the fact that our manuscript was likely both a book for personal use and a book meant to be consulted, not just put on display or archived in a royal library.

In closing, our study of the text-image relationship in this manuscript should have highlighted the importance of considering both the narration and the illustration of medieval manuscripts in how they may work together in affecting the reception of the story they contain.37 In the case of Royal 20 B. XX, the images provide information that was only implicit in the text, giving

31 The Bibliothèque nationale de France holds an copy probably meant for an important nobleman such as the Duke de Bourgogne, the Duke of Bedford or a young Charles VII. Its contents include charts of the phases of the moon, the daily position of the planets, comments on the interaction between heavenly bodies, indication of the best days to send messages, for getting revenge from enemies, take office, lay siege to a city, sign treaties and peace accords, travel, etc. (BnF, lat. 7300 A, ff. 75v-87); Jean-Patrice Boudet, Le Recueil des plus célèbres astrologues, p. 283.

32 This can also be linked to the creation in 1437 of the position of Royal Historiographer.


36 Jean-Patrice Boudet, Le Recueil des plus célèbres astrologues, p. 270.

37 We have shown in other studies that the Roman d’Alexandre en prose had other possible medieval receptions, depending on the manuscript and the text-image relationship in it. In the case of Stockholm, K.B., MS. Vu 20, we demonstrated a scientifically oriented reading of the story, while in Royal MS. 15 E. VI and BnF, fr. 10468 the narrative-iconography correlation expressed much more military and politically ambitious readings (see Maud Pérez-Simon, Mise en roman et mise en image, chapter VI).
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us a focal point of analysis for the reception of this classic story at a specific medieval time and place. We have explored a manuscript that proposes a hermeneutic journey where both the text and the illustrations work around the question of deciphering signs and symbols, an exercise in consolidating meaning that ultimately demands the participation of the reader. The illuminator chose to foreground and organize the various prophecies in the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* into two groups: those dealing with the ability to control the signs from which predictions are harvested, and those insisting on the importance of understanding the political nuances and implications of these very divinations. As we have discussed, and we hope to have demonstrated, the *Maître du Royal Alexandre* not only reproduced the long-standing iconographic programme of the roman tradition, but whilst working within these very aesthetic imperatives he also explored new semantic possibilities through a detailed reading and understanding of the story. He both participated in and echoed a specific historical context, and used the essence of the Macedonian King’s life story – as retold in the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* – to put forward a specific political reading of the epic. Ultimately, we hope to have shown the semantic richness of the relationship between text and image, a hermeneutic connection that may appear at first to destabilize the narrative thread but that will eventually coalesce around an enriched understanding of the cultural and historical meaning of medieval manuscripts.