The many scholarly treasures of the Harley collection include a large number of illuminated medieval manuscripts, amongst which MS. 4979, the Roman d’Alexandre en prose, is of special interest, not only because it is one of the original corpus with which the collection was established in 1704 but also because of the importance of its illustrations for enriching the reading of the text contained therein. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the many unique features and innovations that the illustrators of Harley MS. 4979 incorporated into the long-standing iconographic programme of the Alexander the Great tradition which dates back to late Antiquity.¹

The history of the medieval Roman d’Alexandre en prose is long and complicated. Its origins lie in a second-century AD Greek language collection of narratives which fictionalized Alexander the Great’s voyages and adventures.² These were later translated into Latin. One of these Latin translations, combined with Orosius’s Historia adversum paganos – a fifth-century AD compilation of historical accounts of the Macedonian king’s campaigns toward Eastern Europe and Asia – dates from the twelfth century and is known as the Historia de Preliis J².³ The Roman d’Alexandre en prose was translated from this Latin prose version into Old French at the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁴ The anonymous novel is a blend of historical and fictional events which exploits the Alexander legend and cultivates his mythic status as king. He is made to be the son of a dragon, to have explored India, to have reached the end of the world and to have travelled beyond – to the sky and under the ocean – and discovered a menagerie of monsters and fantastical creatures, and furthermore he is shown to encounter and befriend a tribe of Jewish people and to pay tribute to their monotheistic beliefs, all the while battling and conquering an empire.

In all, fifteen manuscripts of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose have come down to us today and all were made in Europe between the end of the thirteenth and the latter part of the fifteenth century.⁵ Of these, only ten are illustrated. Furthermore, all but one of these manuscripts follow

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¹ Kurt Weitzmann and later David Ross have worked on the notion of iconographic programme and on the transmission of models from later Antiquity to the Middle Ages. They have shown the durability of visual prototypes, especially in the Alexander the Great tradition. K. Weitzmann, Illustration in Roll and Codex (Princeton, 1947), pp. 145ff, 188, and figs 133-4; see also Greek Mythology in Byzantine Art (Princeton, 1951) pp. 102-6 and figs 108-9; David J. A. Ross, Alexander historiatus: A Guide to Medieval Illustrated Alexander Literature (London, 1963; Frankfurt, 1986) and ‘Olympia and the Serpent’, Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, xxvi (1963), pp. 1-21.


³ Historia Alexandri Magni, Historia de Preliis Rezension J² (Orosius-Rezension), Erster Teil, ed. A. Hilka (Meisenheim am Glan, 1970) and Historia Alexandri Magni, Historia de Preliis Rezension J² (Orosius-Rezension), Zweiter Teil, ed. A. Hilka (Meisenheim am Glan, 1977).

⁴ Der altfranzösische Prosa–Alexanderroman, ed. A. Hilka (Halle, 1920; Geneva, 1974).

⁵ Ross, Alexander historiatus.
the entire aforementioned iconographic cycle which consists of between 82 and 102 illuminations of similar content. Let us point out that the Roman d’Alexandre en prose exists in two redactions, both written in the thirteenth century. Harley MS. 4979 is part of the second version, called Redaction II. This latter account is distinguished from the first by the inclusion of a new prologue, an abbreviated epilogue and a new episode in which Daniel prophesies Alexander’s impending death. There are three surviving manuscripts of this second redaction, and they are – interestingly – the most faithful to the iconographic programme.

All three manuscripts were likely made in Flanders or the Netherlands between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century. Despite the striking textual and iconographic similarities, they are not copies of one another but rather derive from the same text though no hierarchy or chronology can be established between them. In any case, it is plausible that they all come from the same illuminator’s workshop, as the variants in content, image arrangement and organization, and size are few. By acknowledging and privileging the iconographic cycle, that is the affinities and contrasts that these three manuscripts of the second redaction contain, it will become evident that a closer examination of the iconographic permutations can prove a fruitful and worthwhile exercise in the reading process of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose.

It is important to understand the strength of the iconographic programme to fully appreciate the significance of variants, contradictions or effacement of illuminations within any single manuscript of the Alexander tradition. The cataloguing and descriptive work of English art historians Ross and Stones is fundamental in this area as they have shown that a consistent system of illustration existed in the manuscript tradition. Upon closer observation, it becomes evident that (1) the episodes chosen for illustration are, by and large, the same in all illuminated manuscripts; that (2) images are arranged in a similar disposition within the text; and that (3) the rubrics for each image employ similar wording regardless of the caption's or the image's positioning within the page. Additionally (4), the basic configuration and layout of individual scenes is copied between manuscripts in the choice of objects represented (fig. 1), the position

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6 Reference to Redaction II is to Der altfranzösische Prosa-Alexanderroman. Redaction I has been recently edited: Le Roman d’Alexandre en prose du manuscrit Royal 15.E.vi de la British Library, ed. Ch. Ferlampin Acher and Y. Oraka (Osaka, 2003).


8 Paradoxically, it appears that these second redaction manuscripts are older than those of the first.


11 See above.

12 Compare, for example, the three images of the entrance of Alexander into Jerusalem (MS. B, f. 22v; MS. Br, f. 23r and MS. H, f. 27v). The priest of Jerusalem wears the same clothes and hands a book to Alexander, which is not always the case in the manuscripts of Redaction I.
Fig. 1. H, f. 27v: Entrance of Alexander into Jerusalem.
of figures (fig. 2)\textsuperscript{13} or the division of the narrative space (fig. 3).\textsuperscript{14} There are further consistencies in the illuminations of the manuscripts but these main characteristics suffice to define the idea of the transmission of a stable and uniform iconographic tradition.

Harley MS. 4979 contains fewer images than either of its two counterparts: eighty–one in the Harley MS., while the Brussels MS. has ninety–four and Berlin one hundred and three. The reason is twofold: an entire quire is missing, and four folios have been torn out. Relying on the consistency of the iconographic programme and the indubitable sameness of all Redaction II manuscripts, we can ascertain that at least eighteen miniatures have been lost within the twenty–four missing leaves in Harley MS. 4979.\textsuperscript{15} Of the eighty–one remaining illustrations in Harley MS. 4979, sixty–six are common to both of its twin manuscripts, seven are common to either one of them and eight are entirely unique within Redaction II. We will first examine overall variants, or small shifts, in iconographic representations so as to establish our primary argument of a close reading of the text by the illustrators and of a strong relation between text and image before studying those unique illuminations that will give substance to our final supposition of a specific reading of Harley MS. 4979.

Although the aesthetic value and craftsmanship of the other two Redaction II manuscripts are appreciably more sophisticated than those of Harley MS. 4979, it can be argued that this richness in details is principally decorative and that it even obfuscates the understanding of the image. Consequently, the apparent simplicity and evident clarity of the illustrations in our manuscript render the reading of its text richer and more complex as the interaction between one and the other is overtly perceptible. In addition, there are shifts in representation and rare but well-chosen added details that are not to be found in either the Berlin or Brussels manuscripts, or in any of the Redaction I manuscripts, a fact that further highlights the singularity of Harley MS. 4979 and the intentionality of its illuminations. The lack of inessential adornment in Harley MS. 4979 and its deviation from the iconographic programme afford an immediacy to the text–image relationship that has consequential importance in constructing a new and particular reading of the Alexander story.

Let us first consider some instances that show a close and accurate reading of the text by the illustrators, where the pertinence of the image to the text it describes is patent. Folio 60r depicts the scene of Alexander’s encounter with a wild man (fig. 4). In this episode the Macedonian king has a naked woman brought forth in order to test the rationality of this being, who should react wantonly at the sight of a vulnerable and naked maiden. Instead, the savage is unresponsive and only reacts when the woman tries to flee. Alexander, surprised by its lack of logic and hence its inhumanity, has the wild man burnt. Harley MS. 4979 is the only manuscript that represents the unclothed woman next to the immolated wild man (fig. 5).\textsuperscript{16} It is in this image, and only in this manuscript, that the woman as cause of the savage man’s demise is clearly represented.

In another episode, the illustration is conceived to highlight not the cause but the consequence of an action. This concerns a quarrel between brothers, one of whom wants to kill Alexander’s lieutenant (who is in fact, as the reader knows, Alexander himself in disguise), while the other wants to protect him. Their mother, Queen Candace, who has recognized Alexander from the

\textsuperscript{13} Consider the various images of Olympia’s death and note the strange way the soldier holds the beheaded body, half bent, in front of him (MS. B, f. 82r ; MS. Br, f. 86v and MS. H, f. 86r).

\textsuperscript{14} It is interesting to see how architecture is used to show three episodes in chronological order, the first one being on the roof of the palace (MS. B, f. 5v ; MS. Br, f. 5v ; MS. H, f. 6v).

\textsuperscript{15} It is curious to note that the missing quire contains a series of gilded, lavishly adorned burial scenes (of the death of Darius, Porus and Alexander) and that the ripped pages most likely contained full-page, intricately and richly decorated scenes of Alexander’s most marvellous moments of self-discovery (of his ascent of Mount Damastice and of his voyage under the sea).

\textsuperscript{16} Compare MS. B, f. 56v and MS. Br, f. 59v.
Fig. 2. H, f. 86r: Olympias beheaded, eaten by birds and dogs.
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose in Harley MS. 4979

Fig. 3. H, f. 6v: Nectanebus (Alexander’s father) reading the stars, being shaved and escaping.
Fig. 4. H, f. 56v: The wild savage is burnt.
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* in Harley MS. 4979

Fig. 5. Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale MS. 11040. Br, f. 59v: The wild savage is burnt.
© Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique
outset, asks him to mediate the dispute. Once he has settled the quarrel thanks to a clever play on words, she takes him aside and gives him a precious crown as thanks. Normally, the episode of Queen Candace is represented in a bipartite scene with Alexander and the sons on one side, and the queen on the other.\textsuperscript{17} This is the case also with Harley MS. 4979 (fig. 6). However, whereas in both the Berlin and Brussels manuscripts we see Alexander between the two brothers in one half of the miniature, and Queen Candace expressing worry and concern for the outcome of the dispute, in Harley MS. 4979 we have Alexander addressing both young men face-on on the left and the queen giving Alexander a golden jewel-encrusted crown on the right. The Harley MS. is, again, the only manuscript to attempt to represent more than one part of the episode. This illumination, by showing the reward scene, highlights Alexander’s wit and wisdom.

Along the same lines – and ultimately pointing toward the same intentionality – is the example of the addition of a small detail in the illustration that retells the episode in which Alexander approaches the city where King Darius is hiding, and the latter flees in cowardly fashion to safety. Harley MS. 4979 is the only manuscript in the entire Alexander tradition to show palm branches attached to the tails of the horses in the Macedonian king’s army (fig. 7). It is a logical and elegant way to represent an aspect of the text not found elsewhere in the illuminations:\textsuperscript{18} how Alexander made the enemy believe that his military force was bigger than it really was. The palm branches and the resulting dust are shown as the cause of Darius’s retreat, not just the advancing army as in the other manuscripts. Again, the Harley illuminators’ modification of the iconographic programme – all the while following the overall scheme – underscores Alexander’s shrewdness and sagacity.

The previous examples illustrate primarily the pertinence of the image to the text surrounding it. There is one more case of close reading by the illuminators, however this illustration represents a condensing of the story line. We are referring to the passage dealing with the reception of gifts by Alexander from King Darius, and the former’s subsequent interpretation of their meaning. In this instance, the illumination normally shows Alexander receiving a message, as the actual content of Darius’s offering is not evident until much later in the text, in Alexander’s reply – almost two full folios later. Harley MS. 4979 is, once more, the only manuscript to show something which will be revealed later on in the episode: that King Darius sent a ball, a flail, and wooden club (fig. 8).\textsuperscript{19} This image guides the reading of the folios that follow. We are led to expect a show of inventiveness and good judgement from Alexander, and this is exactly what the text reveals: the Macedonian ruler outsmarts the Persian king and wins a first symbolic battle by transforming objects meant to show disrespect into symbols of power.\textsuperscript{20} The episode itself serves to prefigure Alexander’s impending victory over Darius. Wit and wisdom are shown to carry more weight than experience and might.

A second type of intent can be deduced from illustrations that try to reconcile diverging or contradictory translations of the story. As previously mentioned, Redaction II of the \textit{Roman d’Alexandre en prose} is derived from previous medieval and classical prose texts. It is also partly derived from a verse version of the story. The episode in question recounts how Alexander proclaimed that if the murderers of the tyrannical King Darius identified themselves he would ‘raise them above all others’: in fact he punished them. In the Latin version, Alexander has them beheaded; in the Old French verse version the sentence meted out by Alexander is death by hanging – thus, a play on words. The \textit{Roman d’Alexandre en prose} incongruously combines both punishments: the murderers are first beheaded and then hanged. The other manuscripts belonging to Redaction II choose one of the two punishments as carrying one of them out makes the other impossible.\textsuperscript{21} Harley MS. 4979 resolves this impasse by showing the men hung by a

\textsuperscript{17} See MS. B, f. 62v and MS. Br, f. 62v.
\textsuperscript{18} Compare MS. B, f. 35r and MS. Br, f. 36v.
\textsuperscript{19} Compare MS. B, f. 23r and MS. Br, f. 24r.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Der altfranzösische Prosa-Alexanderroman}, pp. 71-6.
\textsuperscript{21} King Darius’ murderers are hanged in MS. B, f. 37v and beheaded in MS. Br, f. 39v.
Fig. 6. H, f. 66r: Alexander reconciles Candace’s sons.
Fig. 7. H, f. 44r: Alexander attacks the city in which Darius is hidden.
Fig. 8. H, f. 28v: Darius’s message is presented to Alexander.
cordon around their torso and armpits, and beheaded (their heads are shown on the ground, beneath their respective corpses) (fig. 9). This illumination shows the intention of the illustrators to adapt the images to best fit a particular reading of the text; it also renders the text coherent.

A third sort of example makes explicit something that is at best implicit in the narrative. The image dealing with the imprisonment of Gog and Magog makes clear reference to a biblical scene of banishment. In all three Redaction II manuscripts, the illuminations depict Alexander, a soldier holding a bludgeon, and Gog and Magog imprisoned within a walled enclosure (fig. 10). The Harley MS. miniature is composed in such a way as to recall quite explicitly the scene of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden (fig. 11). Alexander is on foot (not astride his horse as in other illuminations of this same scene), and the accompanying soldier has been moved slightly off-centre. This allows for the insertion of a couple into the centre of the image. On the right, a group of naked people can be seen gathered in fear and confusion. The illustration echoes classic representations of God giving the Archangel Gabriel the order to chase Adam and Eve from Paradise. Besides the visual similarity, the reasons and implications of the banishment by Alexander of Gog and Magog are also similar to the biblical ones: the couple have eaten a forbidden food (in this case, human flesh – a character can be seen on the right side of the image, eating a human hand) and must be expelled from the presence of their Lord (here, Alexander). To a lesser degree, but in similar fashion, this episode is illustrated to emphasize the Macedonian King’s grandeur.

These initiatives can be linked to a global view of the iconographic programme. Furthermore, it is apparent that their layout and small details have been carefully chosen to reflect a particular reading of the text. Additionally, while remaining faithful to the cycle of images in the Alexander tradition, the illustrations have been slightly modified not only for their narrative content but also in their mise en page or place of insertion within the text, as in the case of the episodes of the building of Alexandria and of the destruction of Tyre. In Harley MS. 4979, the former has been inserted much later in the story than in the other manuscripts so that it can enter into dialogue on the same page as the latter image (fig. 12). From the counterpoint of these two very similar images – one of construction and one of destruction – an idea that has been germinating throughout the narrative springs forth: that Alexander is not only a model figure of wit and wisdom, but a very human embodiment of sovereign ambiguity capable of wielding his power to build and destroy.

By way of a conclusion, let us return to the most original iconographic aspect of Harley MS. 4979: the eight non-programmatic illuminations. In them we are presented with a very specific sort of Alexander: he is a chevalier who is patently updated to embody the qualities of a medieval king. Harley MS. 4979 is the only Redaction II manuscript, and the earliest of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose, to iconographically nuance the character of Alexander to conform more closely to the heroes of the contemporary roman de chevalerie tradition.

One such image portrays the dubbing of Alexander (f. 14v). This illumination serves to build the image of Alexander as a knight with a mission to pacify and conquer, moving him away from antiquity and into medieval times. A second image from this group depicts the murder of King Lysias by Alexander (f. 17v). Alexander is, actually, defending his and his mother’s honour as Lysias publicly mocks his wrath toward his father’s remarriage and insinuates that he is an illegitimate child of King Philip. Another such illumination represents Alexander’s encounter with the Jewish High Priest of Jerusalem (f. 28r). This very particular image is unique in the entire iconographic programme and ultimately shows Alexander’s recognition of monotheism.

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22 To see the three images side by side, see Stones, ‘Notes on Three Illuminated Alexander Manuscripts’.  
23 MS. B, f. 38v and MS. Br, f. 40v.  
24 See for example Loches, B.M., MS. 0002, f. 67r (Antiphonaire à l’usage de la Chartreuse du Liget). The image can be seen at: www.enluminures.culture.fr/documentation/enlumine/fr/BM/loches_009-01.htm
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* in Harley MS. 4979

Fig. 9. H, f. 4r: Darius’s murderers are beheaded and hanged.
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the *Roman d'Alexandre en prose* in Harley MS. 4979

Fig. 10. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett MS. 78 C. f. 38v. Gog and Magog are imprisoned behind walls on Alexander’s orders.

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Fig. 11. H. f. 47r: Gog and Magog are imprisoned behind walls on Alexander’s orders.
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the Roman d’Alexandre en prose in Harley MS. 4979

Fig. 12. H, f. 25v: On Alexander’s orders, Alexandria is built.
Fig. 13. H, f. 26r: On Alexander’s orders, Tyre is destroyed.
Beyond the Template: Aesthetics and Meaning in the Images of the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* in Harley MS. 4979

and kingly largesse toward a religious community. Of these emblematic images, the most symbolic is the one that illustrates the dictation of Alexander’s last will and testament (f. 79v). This miniature evokes the most important attributes of a wise ruler who must watch over and protect his kingdom and his subjects: the settling of his affairs, the distribution of his realm and the order of succession.  

The Harley MS. 4979 *Roman d’Alexandre en prose* is thus both faithful and innovative. It is evident that the illustrators had a very clear understanding of the text and not just a general familiarity with the legend of the *roman*. The illuminations in it play a greater role in that they go beyond merely illustrating the story to actually clarify incoherencies and to make explicit meanings emerge at ambiguous moments in the text. The coherence within the visual and descriptive changes effect a subtle re-imaging of the figure of Alexander that underscores his exemplarity and ultimately transforms him, and our manuscript, into a medieval mirror of princes.

25 The four remaining images (Alexander fighting the Mardi and Subagre, the building of a vessel to visit the sky, the tribute of elephants offered to Alexander, the murder of Perdiccas by Ptolemy, respectively ff. 69, 70, 74 and 84) are less demonstrative than the aforementioned ones although participatory in this effort to re- situate Alexander.

26 I would like to thank Berlin Kupferstichkabinett and Brussels Royal Library for granting me permission to reproduce images here.