Introduction:
on using literature for history

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The papers assembled in this volume were originally presented at a conference at the University of Wrocław, Poland, in October 2015. Some of the papers are shorter and focus on quite specific topics, others address more overarching themes; all have been revised and rewritten for this volume, so that they form a cohesive body of work which attempts to advance the discussion of the literary nature of the *Alexander Romance*.

The *Alexander Romance* is a difficult text to define. It has elements of history, of biography, and of novel. In an article published in 2009 I suggested that 'romance' or 'novel' is the description that accounts for the larger part of the different elements that make up the *AR* – life, sayings, philosophical and utopian elements, paradoxa – and quoted with approval Massimo Fusillo's description of the ancient novel as 'an encyclopaedic genre'. I also referred to Ružena Dostálova's characterization of the 'romanzo storico' as 'la dissoluzione della storiografia'.[1] Though Tomas Hägg denied the label of 'historical novel' to the *AR* as well as to the *Cyropaedia* and the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, there seems little doubt that the *AR*, at least, springs out of a historical narrative of a kind and presents itself, despite its lack of any preface, as a presentation of a historical career.

However, in an important article published in 1998, David Konstan discussed the *AR* as an 'open text', that is, a text susceptible of almost endless variation of incident and of narrative style, and, because of the variation of its versions over time, independent of authorial control.[2] This prompts the question whether an open text can be a historical source. Critical examination of the *AR* has revealed nuggets of history and of information, sometimes superior to that found in the other Alexander historians. Examples of this kind of approach can be found in the

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[1] Stoneman 2009, 144, 143.
[2] Konstan 1998.

contributions by Graham Oliver and Krzysztof Nawotka to this volume, as well as in the explorations of Alexander's reputation in Egypt by Ivan Ladynin and Yvona Trnka-Amrhein. But to use a text for historical purposes is not to define that text as a work of history.

Can one suppose that the author of the *AR* thought he was writing history? For me the author was a Greek living in third century BC Alexandria, while for Corinne Jouanno it is more likely that the author of the alpha recension was a compiler living in the Roman empire of the third century AD.[3] The views are incompatible but partly a matter of emphasis, since most of the elements of the *AR* show signs of origin in the third century BC.[4] The portions that go back to the third century BC thus represent the earliest surviving continuous historical testimonies about Alexander. For Krzysztof Nawotka (in his paper in this volume), the author is one who sees his work as history; he makes use of varied traditions and selects them in order to create the image of a king as well as to emphasise his own originality.

So what happens if we treat the *AR* as 'history'? Daniel Selden's contribution is an important exploration of, among other things, the way in which the rhetorical construction of the career of Alexander shapes the reader's view of the past. Even in his confrontation with Porus, Alexander finds only 'his complement, his effigy', so that the work becomes an exercise in hardening the concept of the 'hellenistic king'. India is Hellas through the looking glass. Emily Cottrell, too, makes clear that the Buyids read the *AR* as history to learn from.

I would like to explore this approach further by using the conceptual structure developed by Hayden White, whose understanding of history is Sartrean: in creating ourselves, we create our past. Any narrative about the past, to be intelligible to human beings, has to have a 'plot'. Our own lives, to be worth living, must have a narrative structure, suggests the philosopher Robin Le Poidevin.[5] Thus for White narrative is the fundamental category that encompasses all writing about the past, in such a way that narrative transforms the present into a fulfilment of a past from which we would wish to have descended.[6]

He writes

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[3] Nawotka 2017, 18 and passim, is of the same opinion as Jouanno.

[4] Stoneman 2007, xxv-xxxiv. See now Nawotka 2017, e.g. 37 and 45 (Egyptian traditions), 192 (letters), 244 (the Will).

[5] TLS Nov. 3, 2017, 11.

[6] See in general White 1987, e.g. 29, quoting Barthes: 'narrative ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted'. Similarly in White 2010, 112-125: the plot is a rational cryptogram, like perspective.

> Plot-meaning is a way of construing historical processes in the mode of a ful-
> filment or a destiny considered, not as an instance of mechanical or teleolog-
> ical causality, but as contingent on the interplay of free will (choice, motives,
> intentions), on the one hand, and historically specific limits imposed upon the
> exercise of this free will, on the other.[7]

This is a more subtle view than, for example, speaking of certain kinds of histor-
ical writing as 'propaganda'. The author (of the *AR*, or any other text) is not 'mak-
ing things up' to push a message, but 'the story told in the narrative is a mimesis
of the story lived in some region of historical reality'.[8]

Some ancient historians had an austere view of the historian's task. Thucydi-
des believed that it was possible to record events exactly as they had occurred,
and that was the ideal that Lucian apparently approved of when he wrote in 'How
to Write History' (5) that the *ktema es aei* was what every historian should aim
for: history does not admit of 'falsehood' (7).[9] The past is apparently conceived
as a 'transcendental object' which it is possible to represent directly and accu-
rately. This seems consonant with the more general Greek view of the past, which
regards the past as being 'in front of' us, while the future, which we cannot see or
anticipate, is behind us. The past is like a landscape where we can pick out every
detail, in its correct relation to the others.

But few ancient historians adhered to the Thucydidean or Lucianic ideal. Nor
was it necessarily right that they should do so. Bruce MacQueen notes, while crit-
icising Sallust for not seeing the wood for the trees,

> The ancient Greek historian could not lie, could not change the outcome of
> battles or the names of kings, but to the extent that he allowed the muddle of
> transpiring events to obscure the meaning of what is happening, he was a bad
> historian.[10]

Interpretation is unavoidable. The question of 'fiction' or 'lies' or 'falsifications'
in ancient history has been much discussed, from Polybius' criticisms of some of
his contemporaries onwards.[11] Emilio Gabba showed how rare the austere Lu-
cianic ideal was in ancient writing, and drew attention to the role of elements like
paradoxography, myths, local traditions and even utopias in many ancient

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[7] White in Doran 2013, 44-2, and also 23.
[8] White 1987, 27
[9] See Tamiolaki's discussion, 2017.
[10] MacQueen 2008, 335
[11] E.g. Polyb. 1.14.2, 2.56.2, 3.47.6. Polybius' remarks on historical principles are usefully collected in Marincola 2017, 51-119.

historians, until, for him, 'the miraculous becomes an essential element of the historical narrative': the supreme example, for Gabba, of such history is the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.[12]

There is another way of conceiving a philosophical history. Richard T. Vann draws attention to two striking examples: Keith Hopkins' *A World Full of Gods* (2000)*,* a history of Roman religion which deploys modern time-travellers as part of its structure, and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), an account of real events which rearranged journalistic reportage, interviews and scene-setting into a narrative that read like a novel.[13] The imposition of a plot in both cases makes the 'facts' more intelligible.

An account of the life of a historical individual has this problem of plot largely solved, since for a later observer a life has a clearly defined shape: a beginning, a middle, and an end; a set of achievements; and the world is in some way different when the life ends from what it was before it began. No historical actor ever knew what was going to happen, but the biographical form, in presenting this truth, re-reates, it seems, what it was like to experience the past. A narrative must have a direction, in both space and time, and space and time work together to create the meaning of Alexander's career, which becomes his 'mission' in later understanding. The career of Alexander is thus a very convenient form for creating a 'past from which we could wish to have descended'. The techniques of history are deployed to create a life with a meaning.

That meaning can of course change over time. The meaning the stories in the *AR* had for Ptolemy as he set about legitimising his rule in Egypt as a successor of Alexander is different from the meanings the story of the Romance had for, say, the hopeful Roman conqueror of the east in the third century AD, or the poet who celebrated Alexander as a glorious king of Persia, or the Christian writer who found Alexander an emblem of human limitations, or the Arab writer who deployed Alexander to reveal the wonders of the world to his readers,[14] or to present a pious philosopher-king.[15] With each of these the historical Alexander becomes more attenuated and indeed irrelevant to the meaning the text has for its readers. But at its inception the *AR* is a kind of historical text.

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[12] Gabba 1981.

[13] Vann 2013.

[14] On the latter, Chism 2016; on the Roman angle Stoneman 1999 is a slight sketch; the other angles are encompassed in Stoneman 2008.

[15] Cottrell, this volume. In a forthcoming paper I propose a similar reading of Amir Khusraw's *Mirror of Alexander* (1299), in which the king receives instruction from Plato.

The history that the *AR* offers encompasses a great many kinds of material. In its presentation of events one after the other, as the hero grows older or proceeds across the surface of the earth, it follows the method of a chronicle. It includes several kinds of historical information, such as the story that Alexander in his last hours was seeking to join the gods: this is not 'history', but it was put about as such, as Elizabeth Baynham shows. Krzysztof Nawotka finds historical detail in the account of the Battle of Gaugamela, not least in what he convincingly argues is an Iranian tale about the crossing of the River Stranga. Graham Oliver uses the decree of Alexander to the Persians as evidence for economic policies regarding the improvement of Persian prosperity, and the Will of Alexander as a document of the ambitions of Rhodes in the Hellenistic period, and as arising out of the strong connections of Egypt and Rhodes at this period. All these are tangible historical data, presented as such by the author of the *AR*. At the same time, like Gabba's 'false history', the *AR* includes paradoxographical elements as well as ethnographical ones.[16] It deploys geographical detail to bring Alexander to places he never actually went, like Rome. Ben Garstad (below) shows how this creates a past 'as it should have been': the text insists on the centrality of Egypt to Alexander's empire, but also, in later rewritings, becomes a 'pro-Roman' text, in which Alexander confronts a Carthage which Rome will later go on to subdue.

The role of Egypt in the *AR* is central to two discussions in this volume. Ivan Ladynin traces how Alexander is represented as a new Sesonchosis, and indeed a new Nectanebo. Egyptian traditions are deployed powerfully (like miracles in Bede, perhaps) to create an Alexander who is a worthy summation of Egypt's historical trajectory. He emphasises that these are pre-hellenistic traditions about Sesonchosis (already known to Herodotus, Dicaearchus), which were available for reworking in Ptolemaic circles. Yvona Trnka-Amrhein, by contrast, shows how the *AR* feeds into the further development of the Sesonchosis legend and specifically the fragmentary novel, *Sesonchosis*. She studies recently published papyri of the novel, which she sees as a work that brings super-heroes into relation with one another, as it were 'Batman meets Superman'. This move deepens the resonance of the fiction about world conquerors. Here at least the recoverable narrative has broken free from much pretence at 'history'.

An aspect of the *AR* that is not discussed in this volume is the Letters. As a component of history, letters occupy an interesting position. A modern historian would do anything to get hold of some genuine letters of Alexander, and any historian must privilege original letters among the various sources of which s/he can make use. Plutarch had access to some letters of Alexander, but he does not quote any of them. The *AR*, by contrast, quotes letters of Alexander and Darius at length.

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[16] On ethnography in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* see Harman 2008.

It is a remarkable fact that, in ancient literature, letters are a marker of fiction.[17] Historians rarely quote documents of any kind. When Herodotus quotes inscriptions made by Themistocles on rocks to encourage the Ionians to join the Greeks, it is clear that the 'quotations' are rhetorical improvements, since it would have been impossible to inscribe these long and carefully rhetorical paragraphs hastily on the rocks (and if he had, they would still be there for us to read). Polybius is exceptional in reproducing a treaty, apparently verbatim.[18] Plutarch reworks and often summarises the documentary sources he has consulted.[19] In Curtius (4.5.1-8) the diplomatic exchanges between Alexander and Darius are given in reported speech. Style trumps authenticity. For the *AR*, however, quoting the letters (which are in no case genuine documents) seems to add verisimilitude. The *AR* is very various in style, and there is thus no stylistic imperative to homogenise these letters. It is notable, however, that the exchanges with Darius differ verbally from the versions preserved on papyrus. A fuller exploration of the use of documents by ancient historians would be welcome, but I am sure it would point up the oddity of the *AR*'s use of letters. The use of sayings, incidentally (as distinct from speeches) is equally uncharacteristic of historical texts, and associated more with lives, including the Gospel lives of Jesus.

If the author of the *AR* believed that he was writing history, he could have had no inkling of the life his text was going to take on over the following millennia. More successful in survival than many histories that have been lost, and more resonant in later cultures than many that have survived, the 'open text' that is the *AR* left behind its origins as history to achieve the mythic power of a work of literature. Several papers in this volume explore the role of Alexander, as presented in the *AR*, as a culture hero. Christian Djurslev shows how the entry of the story of the enclosure of the unclean nations, Gog and Magog, into the later Greek recensions of the *AR* defines the borders of the civilized world: the text becomes an act of geographical myth-making. The unclean nations do not, in these early versions, have an apocalyptic role: they simply define a boundary. In the Jewish traditions studied by Aleksandra Klęczar, Alexander progresses from being the ruler of the civilized world to the emperor of the entire world. He is used to explore the problems of Jewish kingship. Though he fails to reach the end of the world, and his demand to enter Paradise is refused, the parable of the eye (which

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[17] Rosenmeyer 2001. Cottrell (this volume) also makes clear that the letters of Alexander known to the Buyid court were not seen as historical documents but as philosophical discourses.

[18] Polyb. 7.10: Walbank 1972, 82 f. Marincola 2017, index s.v 'inscriptions' gives several examples, in Plutarch, Polybius and others; but there is no entry for 'letters'.

[19] Pelling 2002, 91 ff. Also 144-8 on Plutarch's critical treatment of sources (e.g. letter-forms in inscriptions) and his commitment to 'getting it right'.

does not originate in the *AR*) shows him his limitations and places a question mark against Alexander's own conception of his power. The story of the Amazons who offer him a loaf of golden bread to show him the vanity of his exploration also puts him in his place. He is never going to make himself equal to God. The same parabolic act, in the form of the feast of gems offered to Alexander by Queen Nushaba in Nizami's *Iskandarnama,* is borrowed from the Jewish originators and shows that the message is equally compatible with Islam.[20]

Haila Manteghi takes a single episode of Nizami's poem about Alexander, in which Apollonius of Tyana, the first century AD sage and wonder-worker, is a companion of the king, to show how the sage's knowledge and magical wisdom enables him on one occasion to escape a dangerous whirlpool, and on another to invent the astrolabe. Her study also offers the intriguing suggestion that the four-teenth century poet of Azerbaijan was directly acquainted with literary traditions current in the neighbouring Byzantine empire, including the *Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus, which may even have found its way into Sasanian literature.

If Nizami lies at the further end of the penetration of the Alexander legend, Byzantine literature is in a direct line from the ancient Greek recensions. Corinne Jouanno shows how the *AR* feeds into Byzantine chronicles and deepens the past from which Byzantine Orthodox Christianity felt itself to have derived. In this respect it functions in some ways like a book of the Old Testament, so central to Byzantine religion. This becomes very apparent in the last rewriting of the *AR*, the seventeenth century *Phyllada tou Megalexandrou*, which concludes with the death of Alexander and comments with the words of 'Solomon' (actually Eccle-siastes): 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'.[21] The chronicles are then further rede-ployed as sources for other literary versions of the Alexander story, so that the Byzantine *Poem* explicitly claims to be 'history'. Here indeed is a case of history presenting a past from which the present could comfortably be supposed to have derived, in Hayden White's formulation.

Two papers look more specifically at literary repercussions of the *AR*. Richard Stoneman tries to develop a definition of wonder that explains the position of the *AR* in the development of Greek paradoxography. He concludes that the wonders in the *AR* are not an object of speculation; they are simply there, and thus provide source-material for later more philosophical accounts of the marvellous. Pre-sented simply as 'facts', or 'transcendental objects', they refuse the question of authorial purpose; thus the *AR* is presented as an 'innocent text' that simply rec-ords and does not interpret.

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[20] Rubanovich 2016, 133.
[21] See Stoneman 2012, largely deriving from Veloudis 1989.

Hartmut Wulfram studies the way in which the Latin translator of the *AR*, Julius Valerius, in the third century AD, makes use of Virgil to create a close relationship between Alexander and Rome. The long account of Alexandria gives the two cities the status of twin pillars of Greco-Roman civilization. Both this, and Julius' use of prodigies and portents, give the translation a resonance that recalls Virgil's interweaving of temporal levels in the *Aeneid.* This study thus chimes well with Benjamin Garstad's demonstration of the increasing Roman emphasis in the later Greek recensions, mentioned above.

The papers in this volume all face the challenge of defining the *AR*, a text which is from its earliest days an open text, and which is adapted into a variety of cultures with meanings that themselves vary, and yet seem to carry a strong undercurrent of homogeneity: Alexander is the hero who cannot become a god, and who encapsulates the desires and strivings of the host cultures. It began as a history, but only by becoming literature could it achieve such a deep penetration of east and west.

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