

The Romances of Alexander

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MEDIEVAL APPROACHES TO READING

prologue to *Historia prelis Alexandri Magni* (J3 version)

Because the teachings of both philosophers and poets proclaim to us that the lives of the ancients provide a model and source of instruction for future generations, the safest course seems to be to make available in books the histories of the ancients. Modern readers who imitate the examples of excellent accomplishments that they read in these histories can thereby be imbued with noble behavior. Moreover, through those instances of wrongful actions that they recognize on the part of the ancients they have a precedent for future generations to reject that which is unlawful while choosing and preserving that which is proper. The Greeks certainly held this opinion, and from them we have drawn as from a fountain the origin of our literature. Likewise the Romans and Jews recorded the histories of their ancestors so their descendents would remember them. Therefore, if you read in the Old Testament, you will find numerous references to the histories of the ancients. The holy fathers embraced the same opinion. We read their lives every day and use them as models for our actions.

Out of a desire to imitate the intention of those whom I have cited I decided to make the story of Alexander the Great, which is widely read in Greek, accessible to Latin readers. It is my purpose that the Latins, who flourish in the glory of warfare, will receive both enjoyment and a pleasing argument for courtly behavior as they read the accomplishments of that man who was the master of warfare and who possessed every noble quality. I have not translated this story of Alexander only for people who live in the secular world. No, a cleric or even a monk can read it profitably. While he contemplates the splendid miracles that Alexander encountered in India, the mind of the reader who is weighed down by cares is refreshed. The evil thoughts that constantly invade the minds of men are repulsed. And even if a man's heart is controlled by excessive lust, when he forgets it in the midst of his reading, his lust is extinguished and not rekindled. In addition, this story warns that the sin of pride must be rejected. It shows this in the person of Darius, who used to say that he was a god, by recounting his defeat at the hands of Alexander, who was his subject, because he responded with humility to Darius' arrogance. The same story teaches that earthly pomp must be utterly condemned, and it shows this through the example of Alexander, who mastered the entire world but was unable to protect himself from the power of death. Here begins the history of Alexander of Macedonia -- his life, deeds and birth, translated from Greek into Latin.