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**“HOW THE ERDE IS OF A FIGURE ROUND”:
MAPPING SPACE IN THE *BUIK OF
ALEXANDER THE CONQUEROR***

Katherine H. Terrell

Towards the end of the *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, a late-medieval poem in Older Scots often attributed to Sir Gilbert Hay, Alexander takes to the skies. Harnessing four well-trained griffins to a chariot, he flies up high enough to view “all þe warld” (15496), “Baith se and land and cuntreis everie dele” (15524).¹ As Alexander looks down, he turns his gaze to the east and sees Paradise itself. Then, in a detail unique to the *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, upon his return to earth Alexander puts pen to parchment and draws what he has seen, “And thus was first payntit þe mappamond,” or map of the world (15622). Alexander’s cartography, like his military campaigns, reconfigures space as territory that is amenable to exploitation. Yet once Alexander has figuratively claimed the world through his painting, the poem begins to question the advisability of his physical conquests. Depicting an Alexander torn between perceiving unity and division in the world, the poem progressively stresses the limits of Alexander’s power to unify territory, but also hints at a future in which Britain will no longer be marginalized on the world stage.

The *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror* survives in two manuscripts. Neither contains its prologue, which has been lost; an epilogue, however, tells us that it was translated from the French by Sir Gilbert Hay at the urging of his patron Lord Erskin—probably Thomas, second Lord Erskine (d. 1493). Hay’s composition was probably written c. 1460; prior to that, Hay completed three prose works: the *Buke of the Law of Armys*, the *Buik of the Order of Knighthood*, and the *Governance of Princes*, for another patron, Lord William, earl of Orkney and Caithness. However, in both of the surviving manuscripts Hay’s poem has been edited by an unnamed redactor, who tells us that “now neirhand I haue endit / This noble buike, and pairt of faltis mendit” (19341-2), in the year 1499. While some of the themes of the

¹ Gilbert Hay, *The Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*, ed. John Cartwright, 2 vols, Scottish Text Society, 4th series 16 and 18 (Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1986-90).

Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror are reminiscent of Hay's earlier concerns with chivalry, knighthood, and the proper conduct of rulers, it is impossible to know to what degree the redactor has altered Hay's original text.² Accordingly, the tendency in recent scholarship has been to move away from attributing the poem to Hay: Anna Caughey believes that "it is likely that this process of recopying changed the text significantly," and Joanna Martin prefers to refer to the author as "an anonymous Scottish poet."³ Thus the poem spans the reigns of two monarchs, James III and James IV, and may reflect the interests of two different patrons—although it may be impossible to untangle Hay's original composition from the redactor's emendations.

However, a notable feature of the Alexander legend is its adaptiveness, allowing its popularity to span centuries and continents, speaking both to philosophical questions of broad interest and to local and national negotiations of identity. The *Buik of Alexander the Conqueror* is not only the most fully developed version of the Alexander legend in English or in Scots, but is also one of only two versions of the story (the other being the Spanish *Libro de Alexander*) that has its hero use his aerial exploration as a scouting mission to plan his conquest of Paradise; the only English or Scots version to develop the episode of Alexander's journey to the earthly paradise; the only one in which Alexander creates a mappa mundi; and the only one to incorporate Britain into the poem's final scenes. It is also considerably less critical of Alexander than most other treatments of the story: in keeping with a longstanding Scottish literary focus on governance—and with Hay's earlier works on the theme—the poem takes pains to portray Alexander as an exemplary model of chivalry and good governance, at least until the final, tragic act renders moralizing inevitable.

Alexander constantly pushes boundaries as he moves through the poem and the course of his career. Much of the nearly 20,000 line poem recounts the establishment of Alexander's empire: by the time he ascends in his griffin-borne chariot, his trajectory has taken him from Macedonia through the outer reaches of India. Having extended his boundaries over most of the known world and its human inhabitants, Alexander decides to conquer the

² Emily Wingfield, "Ex Libris domini duncani / Campbell de glenwrquhay / miles': *The Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror* in the household of Sir Duncan Campbell, seventh laird of Glenorchy," in *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts*, eds. Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon, 161-74 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011).

³ Anna Caughey, "Als for the worthynes of þe romance': Exploitation of Genre in the *Buik of King Alexander the Conqueror*," in *The Exploitations of Medieval Romance*, eds. Laura Ashe, Ivana Djordjević, and Judith Weiss, 139-58 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 140; Joanna Martin, *Kingship and Love in Scottish Poetry, 1424-1540* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 63.

skies, and the birds and beasts: “best and man boith sall me loif and lout, / And foule and fische sall me baith serue and dout” (15475-76). Once aloft, Alexander looks down upon a world united:

Him tocht the sey inviround all þe erde,
 The quhilk of all þis warld is nocht þe ferd,
 Bot as a mote was sett into þe sey,
 And litill yneuch till a king till obey—
 It semyt thareof litill quantetie,
 With mony riveris rynnand in þe sey (15499-504).

The land—less than a fourth part of the earth, circled with the sea and divided by rivers—appears, from Alexander’s great height, to be merely an insignificant speck. Political boundaries vanish, both because of the great height from which he views it, and because he has already united it under his rule. The extent of his conquest almost seems to disappoint Alexander: it is “litill yneuch.”

But if Alexander momentarily seems able to rise above the world figuratively as well as literally, his apprehension of the world’s insignificance and his appreciation of its unity both prove to be fleeting: immediately after Alexander describes the world as a “mote. . . sett into þe sey,” he reasserts political boundaries. Gazing earthward again, “he lukit doun to Macedone, / And syne to Grece, and syne to Babillone; and syne he lukit est to Parradise” (15505-7). Reinscribing the names of his kingdoms upon the singular earth draws Alexander’s attention to one territory he does not yet possess: Paradise itself. Furthermore, to the south of Paradise he sees a “hill of gold,” called “Mons Auri” (15510; 15513), inaccessible to living men, but from which the last judgment will come. Alexander’s acquisitiveness having been revived by the sight of unconquered territory, he puts his vantage point in the sky to good use:

he beheld the way quho he mycht pas
 To Paradise, to se þat haly place,
 For be goddis he had sum knowlege
 That he sould be þare anys and tak trewage [tribute] (15519-22).

Thus what began as a voyage of discovery becomes a prelude to further conquest: from pushing the boundaries of knowledge, to pushing the boundaries of empire.

Alexander’s thoughts then turn to the physical and cultural boundaries between different regions of earth. Observing the “grete desertis” (15531) of India and Arabia, and the “hiddouus forrest and . . . wildernes” between Greece and Tartary, and between Egypt and Babylon,

. . . him semyt þat half þe cuntre was
 Bot craggis and hillis, woddis and wildernes,
 Consedering þat fra Ynde to Paradise

Be the maist parte inhabitabill all is (15541-44).

“Inhabitabill” here means “uninhabitable.” Alexander’s world is simultaneously vast and tiny; the inhabitable portion of the quarter of the earth that is dry land comes to seem almost vanishingly small. Yet this part nevertheless harbors an astonishing diversity of inhabitants:

And everie land a sindry kynd of men,
 Quhilkis be thare fassouns eith ar for to ken,
 And by thare liffe, þare langage and thare law,
 Quhilk till wtheris, as every man may know,
 Off mervellus mak of corsage and vissage,
 And fer mare mervellus of þare curage;
 And almasit all standis be diuersite,
 Off mak, of maner, of law and propirtie (15545-52).

Just as he earlier reinscribed the political boundaries of this “mote set into the se,” here he focuses on the cultural differences that separate humanity. Alexander notes that every populated land has its own people, who are both physically and culturally distinct from any other.

At first, Alexander’s contemplation of human diversity may seem appreciative, but his wonder does not imply approval. Alexander’s censure of many of the earth’s inhabitants is seen earlier in the romance, where anachronistically he sees a “tempill of Mahovin,”

Off quhilk King Alexander had na plesance,
 For in Mahovin he had nocht his creance;
 But in the mekill God þat governis all
 His trest was first, and syne in goddis small,
 Subordinate quhilk vnder God gouernis,
 Quhilkis rewlis all the planetis and þe sternis (11356-62).

This proto-Christian Alexander, whose faith in “the mekill God” is as perfect as possible for a pantheistic pagan, wars against Muslims in true crusading spirit. So it comes as little surprise when his apparent appreciation of cultural diversity turns to a hierarchical division into self and other: these peoples “mare like besteis war in thare liffing / For-be the Grekis war, in mekill thing” (15553-54). Having unified the world under his rule, Alexander divides it once more by establishing hierarchy among his subjects. Making note again of “his passage to Paradise,” Alexander directs his griffins back to earth, intent on completing his conquest.

Upon Alexander’s return to his people, he relates his vision in terms that echo his initial wonder at the world’s simultaneous vastness and smallness:

How he had sene the erde to Paradise,
 And all the regiouns and the wildernis,
 The reallmis, regiouns, and the grettest place,
 And how this erde is bot ane litill thing,

And that it was bot liffig for a king (15614-18).

The final line in this quotation, however, changes wonder to something else. The *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* defines “liffig” as “means of living; provender, provision, food and clothing; livelihood, maintenance”: the entire world seems, to Alexander, as just sufficient to provide for his own livelihood. Alexander’s outward gaze ultimately turns inward, as he looks upon the world (simultaneously “the gretest place” and “ane litill thing”) and makes it all about himself, and his desires for sustenance, conquest, and power.

Alexander’s perception of land as territory finds its fullest expression in his creation of the first world-map, based on his aerial reconnaissance:

And in his hart he copyit þe figure,
 And syne gart draw it into portratoure,
 And how the erde is of a figure round—
 And thus was first payntit þe mappamond (15619-22).

Note that Alexander first copies “þe figure” of the world “in his hart,” and only later does he “draw it into portratoure.” (15619-20). This copying is in line with classical and medieval apprehensions of memory as a process of visualization and writing, as depicted in Proverbs 3:3: “Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the tablet of thine heart.” As Mary Carruthers notes,

The Hebrew words contain the metaphor, but of course it was the Latin that was known to the Middle Ages: *describere*, ‘write upon’ or ‘incise,’ and *tabulae*, ‘wax tablets’ of the sort used until paper tablets fully supplanted them in Europe sometime in the fifteenth century.⁴

In what could be seen as the ultimate act of possession, Alexander literally internalizes the world, inscribing it upon his heart before creating a written map. This doubled act of copying blurs the boundaries between inner and outer, memory and record. The external world enters Alexander’s heart through his vision, then emerges onto the page, having transformed from land into territory *en route* through Alexander’s consciousness.

The poem gives no other information about Alexander’s map, but presumably the poet was familiar with other examples of mappaemundi, some 1100 of which survive, but sadly none from medieval Scotland. Their primary function “was to instruct the faithful about the significant events in Christian history rather than to record their precise locations.”⁵ As such, they

⁴ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33.

⁵ David Woodward, “Medieval Mappaemundi,” in *The History of Cartography, Volume One: Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the*

overlay physical space with spiritual space, and tend to privilege religious sites and iconography: for example, the three known continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe are frequently labeled for their association with the three sons of Noah. Like Alexander's vision of the world, Suzanne Akbari has noted that "mappaemundi depict the world as simultaneously whole and divided. It is whole because the known world is linked genealogically, due to mankind's common descent from Shem, Ham, and Japheth [. . .] At the same time, however, these sons of Noah epitomize the division of mankind into separate lineages following the Great Flood."⁶ *Mappaemundi* tend to be oriented with the east at the top, crowned (as in Alexander's vision) by the Early Paradise, from which four rivers flow westward, subdividing the earth. They can also be imbued with secular narrative: for example, the Hereford Mappa Mundi contains "69 inscriptions that have relevance to Alexander's histories and romances."⁷ Alexander's map, too, functions as an instructional text, but in place of the spiritual context that would come to typify medieval *mappamundi*, it instructs its viewers in empire. Alexander stands in place of God as the organizing principle of the map, with his geographical vision centered around himself; in place of historical representation, his map depicts a moment in time: the state of the world at the moment of Alexander's descent from the heavens. Thus Alexander's map becomes a potent symbol for his attempted ownership of the world, echoing his aerial journey in the way that it both visualizes his empire and points the way to additional conquests.

Yet this is also the point when the poem most clearly begins to cast doubt upon Alexander's project of world domination. While most of the poem portrays Alexander in exemplary terms, Caughey has rightly noted that throughout this section of the romance, "Alexander's position as conquering hero is increasingly challenged."⁸ Alexander's desire to conquer all of the world first begins to seem a little maniacal when he declares war on the fish: He "tocht in-till his hart how mycht he be / Lord of the world bot he war of þe sey, / And tocht how he nicht to þe fische mak were" (15829-31). So, in an inverse echo of his aerial voyage, he has a great glass barrel made, and clambers in "to perssaue the secretis of þe sey, . . . For he wist wele þare suld na dede him dere . . . Quhill of þis erde he had þe hale maistrye" (15860-64).

Mediterranean, eds. J. B. Harley and David Woodward, 286-370 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 286.

⁶ Suzanne Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 37.

⁷ Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2003), 175.

⁸ Caughey, 153.

The lesson that he takes from his explorations of the sky and sea boils down to might makes right: bigger fish eat smaller fish, larger birds eat the small,

And euer the mare has maistry of þe les.
 Als in þis erde sa is it of riches:
 Quhat ferly is than þat riche man wald be
 Maister of þe laif þat ar in law degre,
 Sen God and Nature ordand has it sua.
 Him tocht that men þarte suld to thame ta,
 Giff that thai mycht be maisteris oure þe laid—
 Thay ar worth lordschip þat lordschip sa can haue (15895-902).

Alexander “held him wele appayit” (15916) of his voyage. Yet this episode is bookended by passages that highlight Alexander’s growing anxiety about rebellion: he puts down one uprising immediately before his deep dive, and immediately after, he “Turnit vp agane in the mane-land, / To se gif ony ma was rebelland” (15917-18). Holding together an empire that occupies the entirety of the earth, air, and sea begins to seem a bit much.

Alexander finally meets his match when he reaches Paradise.⁹ His resolve is unabated:

For sen it was in erde and on dry land,
 Bot gif it war till his crovn obeysand
 He nicht nocht call him maister of all þis erde,
 Quhilk war a want of filling of his werde (15939-42).

The road to paradise—the same one that Adam took on his way out (16122)—is long: it takes Alexander forty days (16178) of traveling through a veritable catalogue of wonders of the east. Alexander’s status as a proto-Christian comes under pressure here: on the one hand he’s instructed in his sleep by Ammon, the pagan god to whom his human father attributed Alexander’s paternity; on the other hand, approaching Paradise requires “the grace of God almycht” (16239). Ammon instructs him to build a ship at a certain spot and continue by water, and in the end, Alexander is only able to reach Paradise because the water lifts him—boat and all—and bears him up to the walls. In a detail unique to this version, Alexander is actually able to see over the walls, and get a good look at Paradise, which is impressive in all the usual ways. It also closely follows *mappaemundi* conventions:

He saw the cirkill of Paradise about,
 Quhilk closit is all with þe sey, withouten dout,
 All but ane threid þat ansueris to þe land
 Quhare that the fludis four ar out flowand (16264-67).

⁹ John Cartwright, “Sir Gilbert Hay’s ‘Alexander’: A Study in Transformations,” *Medium Ævum* 60 (1991): 61-72, discusses the relationship of this episode to its sources.

At this point Alexander still regards Paradise as yet another territory to be conquered, and the sight of its many beauties does nothing to dissuade him. He calls out, and demands that the inhabitants render “tribute to þe emprioure / Quhilk of þis erde all-hale is conquerioure” (16294-95), a move that seems even more ludicrous than challenging the fish to battle.

The real surprise here is that he gets his tribute, although it turns out to be of a highly ambiguous sort. An angel (this is another change from the poet’s sources) comes out, bids him welcome, and then says, “For thai tribute ane apill here I the gif” (16297). Alexander’s tribute is an apple that will predict his death by changing color when he is about to die. And then the angel briskly tells him, “Thow sall nowther cum into þis place, na luke. / Fare wele” (16302-3). Upon his return, Alexander allows his men to celebrate what they see as his victory: “Now may we say þow art hale emprioure / Off all þis erde, sen we haue suth knowlege / That Paradise hes 3eldit þe trewage” (16313-15). But in truth, Alexander has finally met a boundary he cannot cross.

Alexander still aspires to unite the world under his leadership, but he remains torn between envisioning unity and stoking division. Upon passing through a land of giants (of whom he kills as many as he can find), he muses that “þis is a mervell to me, / That sic ane pepill in þis gude land suld be, / For gude men suld be ay quhare the gude land is, [. . .] and ill pepill suld be in ill cuntre” (16334-39). He pledges to redistribute land according to the quality of his subjects once he abolishes other kings: “Off all this erde þare suld be bot a king, / That all mycht ansure to a gouernyng [. . .] war thare a king þat war kyndly wise, / He mycht þis warld all gouerne be justice” (16350-51; 16358-59). The fact that Alexander is still dreaming of what he will do once he conquers the world implies that his men are wrong, and he has not already done it.

The end of the poem reinforces this sense of an expansive world that is out of Alexander’s control, partly through the introduction of a new focus on Britain. After Antepater poisons Alexander, he murders Alexander’s mother and then flees to Britain, a territory not mentioned by Alexander in his deathbed speech cataloging his possessions. Britain’s conspicuous appearance at the end of the poem—a detail unique to the *Buik of King Alexander*—undermines Alexander’s claim to be “monarch and empriour / Off all this warld,” (18301-2), “Fra paradice to þe Pilleris of Hercules” (18304). Britain does not fall between these poles: on mappaemundi, Paradise and the Pillars of Hercules are generally directly opposite one another in the far East and far West (the top and bottom of the map, respectively); Britain is off to the left, on the edge of the world—on the Hereford map, opposite the dragons of India. It is a marginalized position, removed both from the center and the poles, and—usually—from any

mention in connection with Alexander. As Mittman avers, “The edge of the world was the space of the ‘outcasts of society,’ the uncivilized and barbarous, but time and again, this is where the medieval English placed themselves and their land.”¹⁰ In the absence of any surviving medieval world maps of Scotland, we can only assume that the Scots regarded their geographical position similarly.

Strikingly, however, Scotland makes an earlier appearance in the romance, thus bringing not only Britain as a whole but also Scotland, in particular, into dialogue with Alexander’s empire. Following Alexander’s sea journey, the narrator counts up the number of kings in Christendom and contrasts these with the greater number of kings in India: “In Scotland, England and till Irelandis, / Thre kingis war, as men vnderstandis” (15961-62). This detail establishes the poet’s frame of reference as wider than Alexander’s, and contextualizes his conquests within a broader historical and geographical scope. As far as I know, this is the only mention of Scotland in any Alexander romance, and its initial position among the British Isles suggests more importance than its geographical marginality might imply. As Anna Caughey and Emily Wingfield have noted, “the Scots implicitly claimed a shared ancestry with Alexander the Great” through the myth by which Scottish historians traced Scottish origins to the union of a Greek prince and Egyptian princess.¹¹ Scottish literature is rife with allusions to Alexander,¹² and this mention of Scotland within the *Buik of King Alexander* suggests that the connection goes both ways.

Inserting Britain into the romance, the poet paints it as a far-flung outpost of violence and the refuge of traitors, but he may also be staking a claim to its future importance. As Su Fang Ng observes, the poem “portrays Britain as both remote and connected to the Greek-Macedonian center, and thus incorporates Britain into world history.”¹³ For the villainous Antepater, Britain is as far as it is possible to flee, and seems to be a point of no return: “Bot Antepater was passit into Britane, / And thoct nocht to cum in Massedone againe” (19047-48). Yet its remoteness is mitigated by family ties: Antepater goes to stay with King Pensionas, his “covsing german” (19052), and Alexander’s son Aleor soon follows, intent upon vengeance. In contrast to the many thousands of lines that recount his father’s voyages,

¹⁰ Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41.

¹¹ Anna Caughey and Emily Wingfield, “Conquest and Imperialism: Medieval Scottish Contexts for Alexander’s ‘Journey to Paradise,’” in *Les voyages d’Alexandre au paradis Orient et Occident, regards croisés*, eds. Catherine Gaullier-Bougassas and Margaret Bridges, 463-84 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013), 463.

¹² Caughey and Wingfield, 464-66.

¹³ Su Fang Ng, *Alexander the Great from Britain to Southeast Asia: Peripheral Empires in the Global Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 134.

Aleor makes the journey in only four lines: suddenly Britain seems to be right next door, and while Britain seems to have escaped Alexander's control, it is well within his son's grasp. This two-way movement between the center and periphery serves to tie them together into parts of a singular, yet divided world—one whose divisions are destined to increase. Towards the end of the romance, once Alexander's empire begins to disintegrate during the minority of his young son, the poet notes that:

... thus the world rais in divisoun,
 And wald not be all governit be ane croune,
 Quill eftirwart that Iulius Sesar come,
 The quhilk gart monie realmeis obey to Rome (19263-66).

This historical vision is reminiscent of Walter Bower's in his fifteenth-century *Scotichronicon*, in which he identifies the center of world power shifting from Alexander to Caesar;¹⁴ as Ng observes, "the *Buik* ends not with Alexander's death but instead with the rebirth of his empire in the West."¹⁵ Since we know that Gilbert Hay, the *Buik*'s original author, was a careful reader and annotator of the *Scotichronicon*, it is perhaps unsurprising to see echoes of Bower's historical vision here. Accordingly, the transition of power from Alexander's empire to that of Caesar—one-time conqueror of Britain—suggests the tradition of *translatio imperii* which, as I have argued elsewhere, Bower audaciously claims will culminate in Scotland.¹⁶ Perhaps we are meant to see this foretold shift in power as the beginning of the process of *translatio*: a process that will eventually circle back around to a Britain (and a Scotland) no longer imbued with treachery, but ready to assume power.

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¹⁴ Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. D. E. R. Watt, 9 vols (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987-1995), II.18.

¹⁵ Ng, 135.

¹⁶ Katherine H. Terrell, *Scripting the Nation: Court Poetry and the Authority of History in Late Medieval Scotland* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2021).