Vorstenschool. Vier geschiedenisschrijvers over Alexander en hun visie op het keizerschap
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Alexander the Great has been renowned both in the middle ages and at other times as one of the most celebrated heroes. Stories of his deeds have been handed down in almost every language and civilization. He was known everywhere, loved by everyone. He was world famous. This very fact diminishes his attractiveness in the eyes of modern historians. They pay him scant attention. For what is there that is new and interesting to be told about his tradition in the middle ages?

In this study nevertheless the medieval Alexander is given a central position in a piece of historical research to show that the tradition was not only old and venerable but also living and changing, and that it can open our eyes to more fundamental problems concealed by these apparently superficial stories. Central to my studies are four twelfth-century historians, all living in German court circles, and, with the probable exception of Frutolf, actively engaged in imperial politics. These are Frutolf of Michelsberg (1102), Ekkehard of Aura (after 1125), Otto of Freising (1158), and Godfrey of Viterbo (after 1181).

As far as the Latin world was concerned, the collection of stories about Alexander was put together in late antiquity. In the early middle ages authors, whether of world chronicles, theological tracts or literary works used only a limited part of the available material, and it was always broadly the same part. They must have known the other material, the stories that Pseudo-Callisthenes collected in his Alexander romance, the letters that were attributed to Alexander himself, the prophecies and the legends. They were compiled, written down and handed down everywhere. But they were certainly not quoted in other works. Why not? Was this by chance or by deliberate decision?

Frutolf of Michelsberg, writing in the German cathedral city of Bamberg in about 1100, was the first to use parts of this romantic material in his world chronicle. He devoted an excessive amount of attention to Alexander, to the extent of almost one tenth of his world history. Frutolf lived in the Holy Roman Empire during a period when the emperors were passionately trying to establish a well-organized realm with a strong central government. They
strove for peace and quiet for their subjects and the well-being of all. Their concepts of imperial and regal power (still partly mythical) were pressed into service to this end. Their principal opponents were militant nobles, princes and bishops, who valued their freedom, and to whom honour, glory and booty meant more than a well-ordered domain. They were supported by groups of clergy not only out of self-interested motives, but also by conviction. Certain clergymen, amongst whom Meinhard of Bamberg was the most important, accused them of ravaging the peasants, destroying churches and properties, but also, interestingly, of succumbing to the influence of the old German heroes. They considered the portrait that these songs depict of "pride, hot temper, a perilous rashness, a habit of taking ruthlessly what he wants" (Bolgar) as clearly detestable, because it forced the nobility to stick to their old way of life instead of resigning themselves to the king's authority.

Frutolf offered an alternative royal image based on Alexander. He used part of the romantic material to give an ideal portrait of a king as the Empire of his time lacked most.

On the whole, Frutolf achieved his effect without exhaustive modification of the texts of his sources. He copied them faithfully and literally. Here and there he altered a word, left out some passages or compiled sections of text from different authors into a composite whole. He never pronounced his opinion in his own words. We must read between the lines, searching for the meaning of an, at first glance, meaningless and vague text.

Some years after Frutolf's death Ekkehard of Aura came across the working manuscript of his chronicle in Michelsberg. He continued it and altered it, in different versions. In his adaptation he demonstrated a quite different concept of history than that of Frutolf. Nevertheless he maintained in his last version, that of 1125, the verbal text of Frutolf's Alexander-passage and incorporated it in his own ideas.

In the course of the twelfth century the attitude of authors with regard to the material changed. Anyone who maps out the scattered references to Alexander in this period, studies the world chronicles and the earliest literature in the vernacular, can see how authors repeatedly incorporate bold alterations into their texts: they increasingly express their opinions without hesitation. At the same time they begin to work up the material which till then, apart from the patristic tradition, had been handed down in sepe-
rate texts: the prophecies of the Pseudo-Methodius and others, texts about the last emperor, the legends that were told in Jewish circles. By studying these authors we can trace the passages that lent themselves for a medievalization and search in which sense they were interpreted. They are crucial for a better understanding of the tradition.

Of these Godfrey of Viterbo contributes the more striking material. He created a completely different picture of Alexander than that of Frutolf, although he used the same material, by way of Otto. He attached importance to the Sybil’s prophecy which had placed Alexander in the line of the emperors till the end of time and almost made him the prototype of the last emperor. Indeed, in the opinion of some scholars, the picture of the world ruler at the end of time was modelled on the portrait of the first world ruler, Alexander. His leadership or his journey through the Far East now became less interesting than his apocryphal entry into Jerusalem, his imprisonment of Gog and Magog, or his meeting with the Brachmen.

Anyone who reads this and then turns to Otto’s Alexander text, and again to the texts of previous times, will see that Otto and others certainly held firmly to the letter of the tradition, often expressly stating that they wished to do this, but also that through the seams of their work another vision filters through. Evidently they were familiar with the other ideas, at least with some of them, and if one re-reads the texts with the above-mentioned judgement in mind, one gets the impression that much of it is capable of a different interpretation than one previously entertained. The words which are there are those of the patristic tradition; they are, however, capable of more than one interpretation. As far as Otto is concerned, it is known that he understood the words he cited from Augustine or Orosius often differently from the intentions of the original authors, even though much has been written about the putative Augustinianism of Otto. It is also known from his later work, that he admitted he had been inspired by prophecies like the Pseudo-Methodius’ - so can we see there the source of inspiration of his Alexander text too?

It is obvious that authors in the circle of a hegemonial ruler - a ruler of more than one realm and more than one people, a ruler who owed his position not to hereditary right or to the mythical Königsheil, but to his own qualities his fortuna atque mores (Widukind of Corvey) and his own conquests - often referred to Alexander. In these circles he developed into the personification
of the ideal ruler: a sacral king, an emperor elected by God, owing his divine hallowing not to a papal sacring and crowning, or to any other ecclesiastical authority. His sacrality was based on his fortuna atque mores, resulted from his conquest of an empire.

Rulers and nations who owed their position to a similar fortuna atque mores, legitimated themselves, as it were, by referring to Alexander, and even more: they traced back their origin not to the heroes of long ago but to Alexander and Macedonia. The Francs first, the scholars around Ludwig the German and the Saxons next and even the Swabians of Frederick Barbarossa, saw their land of origin in Macedonia and their ancestor in Alexander, literally or metaphorically. He passed for the prototype of a ruler who owed his heavenly support and sanction to his own action. Thanks to this he was the bearer of salvation, he brought civilization and culture, he guaranteed peace and order. The dream of a world ruler having the whole world in his hand, taking care for peace and right, the saviour, the redeemer, a Lord's anointed, was attached to him and to all emperors after him who mirrored themselves on his example; even until the emperor of the end of time, the last emperor, who, as Alexander, would advance to Jerusalem to surrender his dominion together with his crown, to God the Father, from Whom they had all accepted it.