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Ekphrasis and Commentary in Walter of Chatillon's *Alexandreis*

Ekphrasis is the rendering of one form of art in another medium; most often, it refers to the representation of visual art, whether two- or three-dimensional, in vivid poetic language. Ekphrasis is found at key moments in major works of antiquity – the shield of Achilles, in Homer's *Iliad*; the Temple of Juno, in Virgil's *Aeneid* – and it appears frequently in medieval literature, where it marks a deeply intertextual point in the narrative. As a result, ekphrastic passages tend to accumulate significant commentary, whether marginal commentaries by individual readers or systematic commentaries. The following paragraphs begin with a general overview of medieval ekphrasis, the ways in which the medieval use corresponds to ancient uses of the trope and the ways in which it is distinctive, leading to an overview of its use by Walter of Châtillon in his epic poem, with a particular emphasis on the two tomb ekphrases featured in the *Alexandreis*, those of the Persian ruler Darius and his wife. Both of these tombs are monumental, but while Darius's tomb offers a synoptic view of the world in explicitly geographical terms, the tomb of Darius's wife offers a synoptic view of history in explicitly temporal terms. The article then turns to the commentary tradition that grew out of the *Alexandreis*, especially that associated with the tomb ekphrases, in an effort to do two things: first, to learn something about how commentary practices were conducted, particularly in the teaching and study of Latin epic during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries; second, to determine what the commentary can tell us about how these ekphrases were understood by the first generations of readers of the *Alexandreis*. The closing paragraphs consider how medieval writers and readers understood the relationship of vivid poetic forms that seek to make the reader stand outside of time – that is, ekphrasis – to the linear unfolding of historical narration.

1) Medieval Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis is a common feature in medieval allegory, from Dante's intaglio wall in the *Purgatorio* to Christine de Pizan's monumental castle of Fortune in the *Livre de la Mutacion de Fortune*. In ekphrasis, as in allegory, the literal surface

points the way toward a second level of meaning, as the sequence of images gestures towards a narrative. The images that Aeneas sees, for example, on the walls of the Temple of Juno in Carthage show him the historical events of the Fall of Troy; the images that Christine de Pizan's narrator sees in the ›marvelous chamber‹ in the *Mutacion de Fortune* show her the events of world history in order, following the division of ages as presented in Orosius's universal chronicle. One level is the progressive sequence of images; the second level is the narrative order of the literary or historical text. In the particular form of ekphrasis that I will refer to as ›monumental ekphrasis‹, where instead of a static two-dimensional image upon the walls of a building, we find an object (usually a tomb, temple, statue, or textile), the viewer's experience is fundamentally different. Whereas the ekphrastic images seen on the walls of the temple or the ›marvelous chamber‹ are experienced sequentially, as the eye of the viewer progresses in a linear fashion following the historical order of the textual referent, in monumental ekphrasis, the viewer's eye has greater freedom of movement.[1]

In some ways, it is tempting to align ekphrasis with that other rhetorical trope that opens itself up to an exploration of how visual experience conveys meaning, linking the literal level of the image to the figurative level of its referent. That other trope is, of course, allegory, which like ekphrasis has an intricate hermeneutic of interiority, and which shares a commitment to the power of vision to mediate knowledge. But while allegory – especially in the neoplatonic version of the genre in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries – seeks to render in language a hidden meaning that would ordinarily be inexpressible, enclosing the generative seed of meaning within the integumental veil of language, the meaning conveyed through ekphrasis is almost always a completely recognizable textual source, often a canonical work or school text. Aeneas, in the first book of the *Aeneid*, sees the history of the Fall of Troy; the narrator in Christine's *Mutacion de Fortune* sees the history of the world as told by Orosius; Chaucer's narrator in the *Book of the Duchess* sees, on the walls of the temple, the text and gloss of the *Roman de la Rose*, with the history of Troy depicted in the adjacent stained glass windows. In keeping with that ancient foundational scene of ekphrasis, Achilles' shield in the *Iliad*, many medieval scenes of ekphrasis depict – in a capacious and even encyclopedic way – the whole world. This can be seen in Baudri of Bourgueil's Latin letter describing the chamber of Adela of Blois, decorated with a world map (on the floor), the constellations (on the ceiling), plus statues of the Seven Liberal

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1 For a more detailed account of ekphrastic and narrative ekphrasis in medieval texts, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, »Ekphrasis and Stasis in the Allegories of Christine de Pizan«, in: Andrew James Johnson, Ethan Knapp, and Magritta Rouse (eds.), *The Art of Vision: Ekphrasis in Medieval Literature and Culture*, Columbus 2015, pp. 184-205.

Arts along with Philosophy and Medicine. Other works of the twelfth century similarly treat ekphrasis as an opportunity to evoke the span of world knowledge. For example, Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* features an elaborately decorated robe depicting the Seven Liberal Arts along with astronomical features. Other examples include Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, whose ekphrastic description of the Seven Liberal Arts is among the most heavily commentated parts of the manuscript tradition, and the anonymous *Roman de Thebes*, which includes an ekphrastic description of the chariot of Amphiaurus, decorated elaborately with the trivium and quadrivium.

As noted above, medieval ekphrasis differs from allegory in the immediately recognizable, even canonical – often encyclopedic, cosmological, or otherwise capacious – source of knowledge to which it gives access through the mediating power of visual experience. Ekphrasis also differs from allegory in a second way, in terms of the effect that it produces in the viewer. Vision provides a common ground for both ekphrasis and allegory, in that visual experience is the primary mediator of what lies beyond the veil of the surface, whether artistic edifice or ornate term. Ekphrasis differs strikingly from allegory, however, in the nature of what is hidden beneath the beautiful exterior: in ekphrasis, the viewer perceives not some truth concealed within the veil of language, but rather a singular, inexpressible sense of wonder. This can be seen, for example, in the »marvelous« tomb of Achilles described in Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie*, which the poet describes as both capacious and eternal: he writes, »under the heavens there had never been any sculpture or work of painting that was not included within it, depicted in such a way that it will endure forever«.[2] Similarly, in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, as we will see, the tomb of Darius is described explicitly as »wondrous« (4.226): the monumental sepulchre is itself a three-dimensional map of the world, including a complete chronicle of world history etched upon its surface. As in the *Roman de Troie*, the capaciousness of the ekphrastic object in the *Alexandreis* is accompanied by a peculiar temporal position: the wonder induced by it will »endure forever«, precisely because the object itself crystallizes all of space and all of time into a single potent locus. It both gathers together all times, in the historical account etched on its surface, and stands outside of time, placing the viewer in a state of *ek-stasis*, almost transported out of the body by the experience of wonder.

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2 Anne Marie Gauthier, Édition et étude critique du cycle des retours du Roman de Troie de Benoît de Sainte-Maure d'après le manuscrit Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana D 55 sup et six manuscrits de contrôle, Ottawa 1999, pp. 415-418.

2) Tombs and Temporality

Before turning to a closer examination of the tomb ekphrases in the *Alexandreis* and their associated commentary tradition, it is helpful to place Walter of Châtillon's epic in the context of twelfth-century literature, especially in the context of poetic narrations of history.[3] The *Alexandreis* can be described as an epic in its aspirations to emulate Virgil's *Aeneid* and Statius's *Thebaid*, but it can also be seen in the context of the twelfth-century genre of siege literature.[4] This genre, which appears both in Latin and in vernacular poetry, uses historical events of the past to recount a period of warfare and a national or imperial history that can be read in supersessionist terms, as providing a template for contemporary – that is, twelfth-century – political and social events. This is not the place to offer a full account of siege poetry[5]; it is useful, however, to point out the very special role that monumental structures – above all, tombs – play within in the genre, as markers of the passage of time. As we will see, in the *Alexandreis* – as in many other siege texts – monuments are described in intricately ekphrastic terms, and commentators were frequently drawn to add glosses (whether marginal, interlinear, or free-standing) to explicate these richly meaningful moments in the text.

Siege poetry is a genre that has a peculiar relationship to temporality. From the fall of Troy to the fall of Jerusalem, the climax of siege literature – that is, the fall of the city – marks a transitional moment in which two things happen: a nation dies and is reborn, and imperial might passes from the hands of the past into the hands of the future. As a genre, siege poetry participates in what we might call an »imaginative historiography«, in which poetic form is coupled with symbolic forms – bodies, tombs – in order to produce a coherent image of the past. For medieval readers, the main example of the city under siege was Troy – not Homer's story of Troy, which was known only indirectly, but the version told by Aeneas to Dido within book 2 of Virgil's *Aeneid*. The whole *Aeneid* takes place between the time of two empires: Troy falls prior to the action of the

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3 For an account of the ekphrases of the *Alexandreis* in the context of the trope's use in classical epic, see Maura K. Lafferty, *Walter of Châtillon's* Alexandreis*: Epic and the Problem of Historical Understanding* (Publications of *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 2), Turnhout 1998, especially Chapter 3, »History at a Glance: The Ekphraseis of the *Alexandreis*«, pp. 103-140.

4 On the epic commitments of the *Alexandreis*, see Sylvia Parsons, »Poet, Protagonist, and the Epic Alexander in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis*«, in: Markus Stock (ed.), *Alexander the Great in the Middle Ages: Transcultural Perspectives*, Toronto 2016, pp. 176-199.

5 On siege poetry, from the twelfth century to modern manifestations of the genre, see Suzanne Conklin Akbari, »Erasing the Body: History and Memory in Medieval Siege Poetry«, in: Nicholas Paul and Suzanne Yeager (eds.), *Remembering the Crusades: Myth, Image, and Identity*, Baltimore 2012, pp. 146-173.

epic, and the epic ends with the rise of Rome, in what we might call a secular supersessionist hermeneutic.

The reception of this Virgilian narrative was inflected for medieval readers by another historical model for understanding the fall and rise of empires: that of Orosius, whose universal history sketches out a four-part model of what he named, influentially, *translatio imperii* – the translation, or movement, of empire. For Orosius, imperium moves from the East, with Babylon; to the North, with Macedonia; to the South, with Carthage; and finally to the West, with Rome. Imperial might was thought to travel from place to place, anchored for a time in a great city, inevitably destined to fall and be replaced by another ruling city. This view of history was manifested not only in universal histories, which set out the whole span of the past within the scope of a single work, and in the integrated chronologies that appear in medieval manuscript miscellanies, but also broadly in medieval history-writing. The reader of a history of Alexander the Great, for example, would know that this was part of a larger narrative of *translatio imperii*, in which the Persian Darius, ruler of Babylon, relinquished his rule to the Macedonian conqueror. Readers of the histories of Troy and Thebes had a similar awareness, knowing that the work at hand was part of a bigger story, the story of »imperial translation«.

To emblematize this moment of the movement of imperial power, siege texts focus on the male body, with the microcosm of the ruler's body standing in for the macrocosm of the city, which in turn stands for the still larger cosmos of the empire. In the *Aeneid*, the body of Priam stands in this place. Following the penetration of the Greek warriors into the fortified city, Priam is dragged before the altar and slaughtered: he »lies a huge trunk upon the shore [litore], a head severed from the shoulders, a nameless corpse« (iacet ingens litore truncus, / avolsumque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus).[6] The sacred inner room of the palace at Troy is a deeply interior, hidden space; simultaneously, however, this most interior space is also a »limen«, or »threshold«, located at the center in spatial terms but on the margin in temporal terms. The body of Priam lies, metaphorically, upon the shore, the littoral space that marks the dividing line between one era of imperial might and its successor.

The *Roman de Troie*, composed by Benoît de Saint-Maure (1160 – 1170) in the twelfth century (a little before the *Alexandreis*), makes a useful point of comparison to the *Aeneid* in its use of the male body to mark turning points in time in the context of siege. In the *Roman de Troie*, instead of a single male body – that of Priam, in the *Aeneid* – marking the turning point from Troy toward Rome,

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6 Publius Vergilius Maro, *The Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fagles, introduction by Bernard Knox, New York 2006, 2.557-558.

we find a sequence of fallen male bodies that serve as temporal markers in the inevitable march toward the climax of the siege. The sequence of bodies in the *Roman de Troie* begins with that of Hector, which, after being mutilated by the Greeks, is returned to Priam and enclosed in a »precious tabernacle« (*tabernacle precios*, 16651): here, the wounded body of the king's first-born achieves the status of a martyr, his body preserved like a relic. The process is re-enacted with the body of Troilus, which (like Hector's) has been dragged around the field after death (21447), and the body of Paris, which is encased in a »costly sarcophagus« (*chier sarquel*, 23038). The bodies of the Greek warriors, too, especially that of Achilles, are placed in tombs that mark turning points in time; their ekphrastic descriptions, heightened by the experience of wonder that is emphasized in the text, slow down the narrative at crucial moments, underlining the moments of temporal rupture enacted through the experience of siege.

It would be possible to explore a whole range of other siege poems, from the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, through this interpretive lens. Here, however, we turn to the ekphrastic tombs of the *Alexandreis* of Walter of Châtillon. This epic poem both epitomizes the widespread corpus of medieval literature devoted to Alexander the Great and, in some ways, stands apart from it. The *Alexandreis* differs from the rest of the Alexander tradition in several respects, including the way it highlights the role of the body of the ruler as an emblematic or symbolic form marking the transition from one period of rule to another, in the movement of *translatio imperii*. This feature of the *Alexandreis* can only be fully appreciated in the context of siege poetry – not just the *Aeneid*, but the twelfth-century *romans antiques* – which is why the preceding paragraphs have dwelled on that genre. The *Alexandreis* stands out from other examples of twelfth-century siege poetry, both Latin and vernacular, both in the way that tombs are used to mark periods of time, and with regard to the very particular role of the tombs of Darius and his wife within the larger historical ambitions of the work.

There are two monumental tomb ekphrases in the *Alexandreis*: the first is the tomb of the wife of Darius, and the second is the tomb of Darius himself. Each of these tomb ekphrases, and particularly that of Darius's wife, in book 4, attracted a great deal of commentary, both on the page in the form of interlinear or marginal glosses and in free-standing commentaries. Walter introduces the account of the tomb of Darius's wife (who remains unnamed in the text) in this way:

> Interea Macedo condiuit aromate corpus
> Vxoris Darii tumulumque in uertice rupis
> Imperat excidi, quem structum scemate miro
> Erexit celeber digitis Hebreus Apelles.
> Nec solum reges et nomina gentis Achee
> Sed Genesis notat historias, ab origine mundi

Incipiens. aderat confusis partibus yle
Et globus informis, uario distincta colore
Quatuor inpressis pariens elementa sigillis.
Hic operum series que sex operata diebus
Est deitas: […]
(Colker, 5.176-186)[7]

That same while, Alexander wrapped the corpse
of Darius' wife in fragrant spice and bade
a tomb be cut into the rock's high summit.
There, famed of hand, the Jew Apelles limned
its finished surface with a wondrous scheme:
beside the names of Grecian kings, he set
the holy tales of Genesis, beginning
where first the world was born. There Matter lay
an unformed mass, painted in varied hue,
as it brought forth four elements, each pressed
with its own seal. Here was the chain of tasks
that Godhead worked in six days: […]
  (Townsend pp. 94-95, 4.222-233)

Here we find the national history of Greece (»the names of Grecian kings«)
matched up with »the holy tales of Genesis«, in an evocation of the integrated
chronologies we find in Orosius and later universal histories modelled on his
work. While the tomb of Darius's wife is »cut into the rock's high summit« –
that is, added into the natural landscape – Darius's own tomb will prove to be
a product of high art, with an intricate and balanced geometrical form. The
tomb of Darius's wife tells a history that emerges from chaos, with prime matter
appearing as »an unformed mass, painted in varied hue, as it brought forth four
elements«. The description of the tomb (which is over a hundred lines long)
goes on to recount biblical history from before the time of Creation to the time
of Darius himself, ending with the prophecies of Daniel and the rule of Cyrus.
The prose of the biblical history recounted in the *Alexandreis* is itself a kind of
translation, offering in the form of written, poetic language the images that
are inscribed on the tomb of Darius's wife. In other words, what we see here is

7 Quotations from the Latin text of the *Alexandreis* are from the edition of Marvin Colker and
  are cited in the text by book and line number. Marvin L. Colker (ed.), *Galteri de Castellione*,
  ›Alexandreis‹ (Bibliotheca Scriptorum Latinorum Mediæ et Recentioris Ætatis 17), Padua 1978.
  Quotations from the English translation are by David Townsend and are cited in the text by
  book and line number (which differs in text and translation). David Townsend (transl.), Walter
  of Châtillon, *The Alexandreis: A Twelfth-Century Epic*, Toronto 2007 (¹1996).

biblical history translated into image (on the tomb) and then translated back into words (in the poem). The ekphrasis of Darius's own tomb is quite different:

> Dixit, et exequiis solito de more solutis,
> Regifico sepelit corpus regale paratu
> Membraque condiri iubet et condita recondi
> Maiorum tumulis, ubi postquam condita, celsa
> Pyramis erigitur, niueo que marmore structa
> Ingenio docti superedificatur Apellis
> Coniunctos lapides infusum fusile rimis
> Alterno interius connectit amore metallum.
> Exterius, qua queque patet iunctura, figuris
> Insculptum uariis rutilans intermicat aurum.
> Quatuor ex equo distantibus arte columpnis
> Sustentatur onus, quarum iacet erea basis.
> Argento stilus erigitur, capitella recocto
> Imperitant auro fornacibus eruta binis.
> (Colker 7.379-392)

> He spoke and, having paid the wonted obsequies,
> buried with kingly care that regal body.
> He ordered the embalmed corpse laid to rest
> in Darius' ancestral tombs, and there
> a lofty pyramid was later raised.
> Apelles in his subtle craft adorned it
> with snowy marble facings. Molten metal
> was poured into the cracks, to join the stones
> in mutual love inside the monument.
> Where each joint was exposed, gold gleamed; engraved
> with varied images, its light flashed forth.
> The weight lay on four equidistant columns,
> whose base was bronze, whose shafts rose up in silver,
> while at their summit, capitals of gold
> had been drawn out of twice-refining fires.
> (Townsend pp. 156-157, 7.420-434)

There's a tremendous amount of wordplay in the Latin text: for example, the way in which the second line uses the words »regifico« and »regale«, the former describing Alexander's »kingly« action, the other describing Darius's »regal body«. Similarly, the wordplay in the second and third lines (*condiri*, *condita recondi*, *condita*) wavers back and forth between reference to the former ruler (Darius)

and the new one (Alexander), emphasising the extent to which this monumental tomb marks a turning point in time, within the overall temporal economy of *translatio imperii*.

The tomb of Darius also contrasts significantly with that of his wife, described earlier, in book 4. Her tomb is inscribed within the natural landscape, in a peripheral region, »a tomb … cut into the rock's high summit«; the other is placed among »Darius' ancestral tombs«, marked by the geometrical form of a »lofty pyramid«, in contrast to the depiction of the »unformed mass« of prime matter that decorates the tomb of the wife of Darius. The »molten metal … poured into the cracks … join[s] the stones in mutual love«, in an exquisite visual image that evokes the homosocial bond of conqueror and conquered. The geometrical form evoked by the pyramid is enhanced by the description of the structure, which features four columns whose base is bronze, shafts are silver, and capitals are gold. Atop this quadripartite form, further subdivided by the various metals at each level, the perfect form of the sphere appears, made of crystal:

> Has super exstructa est, tante fuit artis Apelles,
> Lucidior uitro, pacato purior amne,
> Crystallo similis caelique uolubilis instar,
> Concaua testudo librati ponderis, in qua
> Forma tripertiti pulchre describitur orbis.
> (Colker, 7.393-397)

> Above these rose – such was Apelles' craft –
> clearer than glass, purer than placid streams,
> a crystal image of the turning sky,
> a hollow shell of balanced weight, on which
> the tripart world lay beautifully described.
> (Townsend p. 157, 7.435-439)

The chronological scope embedded in the tomb of Darius's wife, extending from Creation to the rule of Cyrus, has its counterpart in the tomb of Darius, where geographical space is epitomized. In other words, the first tomb encapsulates time; the second tomb encapsulates space. The ekphrastic description goes on to provide a long description of all the territories of the world, named in order on the three-dimensional map, ending with the circling Ocean that marks the ultimate limit of Alexander's sprawling empire.[8] In spite of the fact that the ekphrastic tomb of Darius focuses on space – as opposed to time – it nonetheless concludes

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8 On the geographical aspects of the ekphrasis, see Alfred Hiatt, »Geography in Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* and its Medieval Reception«, in: *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 23 (2013), pp. 255-294.

with a chronological summary of all of history, extending from »creation« to the age of Alexander himself, »until the warlike Great One's victories«. In other words, this ekphrasis ends not with image, but with number, so that time and space are ultimately fused in Darius's tomb:

> In summa annorum bis milia bina leguntur
> Bisque quadringenti decies sex bisque quaterni.
> (Colker 7.429-430)

> The sum of years were read thus: twice two thousand,
> four hundred twice, six tens, and still twice four.
> (Townsend p. 159, 7.476-477)

Before turning to the commentaries on these passages, it is necessary to first consider the significance of the passages themselves. Why did they appeal so strongly to commentators? In part, this is due simply to the genre of ekphrasis, which (as noted above) tends to accrue commentary. In part, however, it is due to the very special place of the tomb within the genre of siege literature, where the wondrous edifice marks a transitional moment. The two tombs of the *Alexandreis*, as we have seen, emblematize both time and space, with the integrated history of the Greeks and the Jews recounted on the tomb of the wife of Darius, and all the territories of the world laid out on the globe that surmounts the tomb of Darius himself. The king's tomb closes with an evocation of historical time that makes it into a fully synoptic symbol of all things, marking the extreme boundaries that are surmounted by Alexander in the course of his conquests. The tomb re-members, memorializes, not just Darius himself but the moment of transition from Babylon to Macedonia, and the apotheosis of Alexander as ruler of the Orient.

Yet the *Alexandreis*, in a remarkable move, does not simply offer us one wondrous tomb, that of the warrior-king Darius; instead, it also offers the tomb of his wife, with a very different artistic program. Moreover, it is the latter tomb, that of Darius' wife, that accrues by far the greater amount of commentary – greater than any other scene in the entire work, and remarkable by any standard. Why did medieval commentators think this passage was so worthy of exposition?

3) Typological Commentary

Let us now turn to the commentaries that accrued to the tomb ekphrases of the *Alexandreis*. As noted above, it is often the case that ekphrastic passages accumulate commentary: in the *Anticlaudianus* of Alan of Lille, for example, the

ekphrasis of the chariot driven by Prudence engenders elaborate glosses, both marginal and free-standing, concerning the Seven Liberal Arts. What is perhaps most striking about the tomb ekphrases of the *Alexandreis* is that there are two of them – one for the Persian king's wife, one for Darius himself – and that they differ so significantly. The tomb of Darius fits well with the characteristic siege narrative outlined earlier, where the tomb of the ruler of an empire that is waning marks the end of an era, in an emblematic representation, even an embodiment, of *translatio imperii*. The tomb of Darius's wife, however, fits more oddly into that narrative of imperial succession, as will be shown below. Beyond this, the tombs differ significantly both in terms of form and in terms of content. The tomb of Darius is a monumental structure that inspires wonder in the one who sees it, with many-colored columns of precious metal, a crystal globe, and golden engravings. The tomb of his wife, however, is covered in what appears to be a collection of lists, sometimes simply »names« of patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets, sometimes images arranged in upper and lower »registers«.

The tomb of Darius's wife is the most abundantly glossed passage in the entire work, giving rise both to marginal and free-standing commentaries, where the commentary on her tomb is appended to the end of the glossed poem. The attention paid by commentators to this passage is often explained in terms of the subject matter, which is the biblical history of the so-called »Old Testament«, a term that invites a typological exposition of the fulfillment wrought under the New Law of Christ. In this reading, the biblical intertexts are seen as the motivation for the abundant gloss. This is certainly true, but I would argue that there is more at stake in this commentary than simply an opportunity for exegesis. Instead, I will suggest that the commentary on the tomb of Darius's wife invites the reader to consider both secular and sacred history in typological terms, especially when we put her tomb in dialogue with that of the king, which serves as an emblem of historical change in the form of *translatio imperii*.

As noted earlier, the opening lines of the tomb ekphrasis of Darius's wife state that the tomb is adorned with »the names of Grecian kings« along with »the holy tales of Genesis«, beginning with the creation of the world. The ekphrasis becomes vivid with an evocation of the moment when all things first came into being, the time when »Matter lay / an unformed mass, painted in varied hue, as it brought forth four elements«. These lines attracted the interest of commentators, as we will see in the Vienna gloss on the *Alexandreis*. Before turning to that particular gloss, it may be helpful to provide an overview of the rich commentary tradition on Walter's epic poem. Commentaries on the *Alexandreis* are often marginal or interlinear, with page layout subordinating the gloss to the text, as we would expect. At times – and this is particularly the case in the commentary on the ekphrasis of the tomb of Darius's wife – the gloss is so copious as to overwhelm the

text. The most abundant gloss of this passage is a free-standing version found in a mid-fourteenth-century manuscript (1359) written in the Benedictine abbey of St. Jacques at Liège, now in the British Library (BL Add. 18217), which has been edited by David Townsend.[9] Unusually, that gloss subordinates the text, placing the glossed line below – not above – the commentary. The following paragraphs explore a different commentary, that is, the glosses of the Vienna manuscript (Österreichische Nationalbiliothek, MS 568), dated to the late thirteenth century, which was edited by Marvin Colker as a supplement to his edition of the poem. (Colker does not reproduce any of the glossed manuscripts in full, instead just selecting noteworthy portions.)

In this commentary, we find an explication of the »four elements« that is in keeping with the high medieval preoccupation with how to reconcile Genesis and *Timaeus*. The quotation from Bernardus Silvestris that appears a bit later in the same passage affirms this, offering an account of creation that draws upon natural philosophy rather than scriptural text. The nature of prime matter or »hyle« is explained, as well as the four elements and their qualities, listed in a schematic form:

PARIENS YLE QUATVOR ELEMENTA Yle dicitur parere quatuor elementa, quod facile est uidere in singulis: terra enim est frigida et sicca, aer calidus et humidus. Accipiamus ergo frigidum de terra et humidum de aere, fit aqua, et sic de omnibus aliis:

Ignis	calidus et siccus
Aer	calidus et humidus
Aqua	frigida et humida
Terra	frigida et sicca

VARIO COLORE id est colorum uarietate. Ignis enim noscibilis est ex rubore, aer a candore, aqua a uirore, terra [a] nigredine, et quod huiusmodi colorem habeant uidere facit arcus celi, qui singulorum elementorum proprietatibus informatur. Yle interpretatur silua quia sicut ex ligno et arbore diuerse possunt fieri materie, sic ex yle diuerse et multe creature diuise sunt et separate, unde Bernhardus Siluester … (Colker 41)

FOUR ELEMENTS. *Hyle* is said to bring forth four elements, which is easily understood in its specifics: for earth is cold and dry, air hot and moist.

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9 David Townsend (ed.), *An Epitome of Biblical History: Glosses on Walter of Châtillon's Alexandreis 4.176-274*, edited from London, British Library, MS. Additional 18217, Toronto 2008.

And so taking cold from the earth and moist from the air, water is produced, and so in regard to all the rest:

Fire hot and dry
Air hot and moist
Water cold and moist
Earth cold and dry
(Townsend 95n1)

IN VARIED HUE. That is, of many colors. For we recognize fire by its redness, air by its whiteness, water by its greenness, and earth by its blackness. The fact that they have these colours makes the rainbow visible, which is informed by the properties of each of the elements. *Hyle* means ›timber‹, since just as different materials can be made from limbs of trees, so from *hyle* many creatures are divided and separated, whence Bernard Silvester … (Townsend 95n2)

The schematic, even numerical quality we see here is striking: the four elements brought forth by *hyle* are named, and then they are folded outward or expanded to reveal their interlinked and complementary qualities – fire, hot and dry; air, hot and moist; water, cold and moist; earth, cold and dry. The following gloss of »in varied hue« further elaborates this schematic system by associating each element with its color: »we recognize fire by its redness, air by its whiteness, water by its greenness, and earth by its blackness.« This diversity, in turn, leads to unity, in the form of the rainbow.

The closing lines of the ekphrasis of the tomb of Darius's wife also open themselves up to a numerical – even schematic or diagrammatic – explication in the commentary:

Ezechiel post captam a gentibus urbem
se uidisse refert clausam per secula portam,
scilicet intactae designans uirginis aluum,
›Occidetur‹ ait Daniel ›post septuaginta
ebdomadas Christus‹, uatum bissena secuntur
nomina cum titulis et in unum consona dicta.
Vltima pars regnum Cyri populisque regressum
sub duce Zorobabel habet. hic reparatio temple
pingitur. hystoria hic non pretermittitur Hester
causaque mortis Aman stolidaeque superbia Vasti.
Hic sedet in tenebris priuatus luce Tobias,
in castrisque necat Holofernem mascula Iudith,

totaque picturae series finitur in Esdra.
(Colker p. 103, 4.262-274)

      Ezechiel,
after the Gentiles take the city captive,
reveals his vision of a long-closed gate,
which signifies the virgin's untouched womb.
And Daniel prophesies Christ will be slain
after seventy weeks. Names of twelve seers
come next, inscribed each with a prophecy
his own, and yet concordant with the rest.
      The last part represents great Cyrus' kingdom
And Israel's return: Zorababel
leads them. The Temple's restoration here
is painted. Here the story of Esther
is shown forth and the cause of Haman's death
and foolish Vashti's haughtiness. Here sits
Tobias in the darkness robbed of sight.
The manly Judith strikes down Holofernes
while with Ezra the picture's sequence ends.
(Townsend p. 99, 4.326-342)

The number of weeks (70) and the number of seers (12) recalls for us the similar emphasis on number in the closing lines of the description of Darius's own tomb, which was described above: there, the »sum of years« was enumerated, broken down into its constituent parts. Here, the figures are instead in the service of a typological numerology that foreshadows the life of Christ, as Daniel foresees the »seventy weeks« preceding the Crucifixion, and the »twelve seers« foreshadow the twelve apostles. More specifically, this allusion to »seventy weeks« refers to an enigmatic prophecy that appears in chapter 9 of the book of Daniel: there, Daniel reads the passage in the book of Jeremiah where the destruction of Jerusalem is mourned (Jeremiah 29:10; 25:11-12). Lamenting, Daniel is comforted by the angel Gabriel, who reveals the hidden meaning of Jeremiah's words; Christian readers of the so-called »Old Testament« would understand this revelation as a prophetic foreshadowing of the life of Christ, with the Temple being restored in the form of the Incarnation, and the Old Law being superseded by the New Law of the enfleshed Word.

    Significantly, the prophecy of Daniel takes place under the reign of Darius, the same king of the Persians whose tomb is described later in the poem, in book 7. The closing lines of the ekphrasis of the tomb of Darius's wife thus serve as a textual nexus, where the secular history of *translatio imperii* (in which power

moves from Darius to Alexander, and from Persia to Macedonia) is matched up with the salvation history of the Old Testament. In other words, the typological relationship of Old Law and New Law, temple of stone and Temple of flesh, is lined up with the Orosian relationship of imperial passage.

This textual nexus is understood and elaborated by the commentary tradition, which amplifies the account of Old Testament history, drawing upon the cues offered by the textual ekphrases of the tomb of Darius's wife, and gestures forward toward the fulfillment of that pre-Incarnation history in the events narrated in the Gospel. In this supersessionist logic, the moment of ending – emphasized in the last line of the ekphrasis, which concludes the fifth passage on your handout – is of particular importance: »with Ezra the picture's sequence ends«. Commentaries on this line are of particular interest in the way that they use the moment to elaborate the overall structure of the gloss on the tomb. That is, the »ending« of the pictorial sequence is simultaneous with the historical ending – in the sense of fulfillment – in which type gives way to antitype. In the Vienna manuscript, the structure of the ekphrasis is described as an »ordo«, or, as Townsend translates it, a »register«:

> TOTAQVE PICTVRE etc. Hesdra, qui fuit de genere Aaron, legem succensam a Caldeis reparauit nouosque apices litterarum excogitauit, qui faciliores fuerant ad scribendum et ad pronunciandum, et postea uero propheta dictus est. Et hoc est TOTAQUE etc. quasi diceret: ordo regum et patriarcharum finem habet in Hesdra id est in illo propheta qui fuit sub Arthaxerse rege antecessore Darii … Fuit autem hec nobilis, ab Adam descendens longe per patriarchas, per iudices, per reges, et prophetas; et uniuscuiusque ordinis nomina pro racione operum subscripta sunt, primo patriarchum, secondo iudicum, tercio regum, quarto prophetarum secundum quod uisum est supra. (ed. Colker 422; Vienna MS 568, commentary on 4.474)

> Ezra, who came of the line of Aaron, restored the law burned by the Chaldeans and devised new letters which were easier to write and pronounce, and thereafter he was called a prophet. And here we read THE PICTURE'S SEQUENCE, etc., as if he were to say: the register of kings and patriarchs has its end in Ezra, that is, in the prophet who lived under King Artaxerxes, the predecessor of Darius … Moreover, this woman was noble, descending from Adam by a long line through the patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets; and the names of each order are recorded, first the patriarchs, second the judges, third the kings, fourth the prophets, as can be seen above. (Townsend 99-100n8)

Note the linear, almost diagrammatic quality of this account of »the picture's sequence«, which places the names in order, and sorts them by category – patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets. Interestingly, another manuscript (London, British Library, Add. MS 23891) glosses this passage differently, also emphasizing the orderly and diagrammatic quality of the tomb ekphrasis, but sorting it into five parts instead of four:

> The tomb was decorated in five zones. In the first was the order of the patriarchs, as we see in the passage where he says THE SEQUENCE OF THE PATRIARCHS. In the second was contained the stories which are in Exodus, as evident in the passage HERE EGYPT GRIEVES. In the third, the order of judges, as evident in the passage THE JUDGES' RULE. In the fourth zone, the order of kings, as we see in the passage A NEW DIVISION. And in the fifth and last, the order of the prophets, as we see in the passage THE PROPHETS' IMAGES. Hence the verses, »Apelles' tomb stands pictured in five bands – first patriarchs, then Exodus here stands. The third the judges' deeds, the fourth the kings; the prophets then come last of all these things.« (Townsend 100n8)

Again, we have an orderly list of names, and a series of categories, but where the Vienna manuscript offered four categories, this manuscript offers five: patriarchs, judges, kings, and prophets, as in the Vienna manuscript, but also, in the second »zone«, »the stories which are in Exodus«. What can we infer from this variation? First, we can see that these two glosses share an impulse to categorize, to stress the orderly qualities of the tomb ekphrasis. But they two do not appear to be directly related, suggesting that the impulse to emphasize the diagrammatic quality of the ekphrasis is shared across commentators, not specific to any one part of the tradition. Second, in the five zones of the second commentary, with the additional layer devoted to »the stories« of Exodus, we see an enhanced emphasis on the textual abundance called forth by ekphrasis. The reader is invited by the commentator to flesh out their understanding of the meaning of the passage by drawing upon other texts, weaving them together into a rich historical account which is both secular and sacred, vivid and memorable.

As we have seen, the commentaries on the *Alexandreis* are a rich source of information on medieval reading practices, and especially interpretive practices. They not only reveal how medieval readers unpacked the works they read, but also offer us insights into the texts they gloss. The supersessionist logic of the *Alexandreis*, which yokes together the secular history of *translatio imperii* with the typological history of scripture, is made more explicit by the glosses on the *Alexandreis*. Seemingly small details, like Walter of Châtillon's unique description of the tombs' craftsman as »the Jew Apelles«, are illuminated by this closer

look at how »Old Testament« history underlies the temporality of the text as a whole. The craftsmanship of the Jewish artist is fulfilled and superseded by the narration of the Christian author, just as the narration of Jewish history on the tomb of Darius's wife is fulfilled and surpassed by the account of empire emblematized, in word and in image, on the monumental tomb of Darius. The prophecy of Daniel, and the figure of Alexander, is what draws together these two historical timelines.

The two tombs of the *Alexandreis*, like the monuments found so often in siege poetry, serve to crystallize time in a single transformative moment, offering a pause in the temporal flow. The ekphrastic description slows down the reader, offering an overwhelming profusion of visual detail, ordered in a memorable, systematic way. The avid glossing carried out on these passages by medieval commentators offers evidence of how rich medieval readers found such ekphrastic monuments to be, and offers us, as modern readers, additional ways to discover what medieval people thought about periodization, and how they understood their own place in time.