

ALEXANDER AND DINDIMUS (MS BODLEY 264), LINE 537:
A NEW READING AND INTERPRETATION

Abstract: The Middle English alliterative poem *Alexander and Dindimus*, probably a poetic translation of the Latin *Collatio Alexandri per litteras facta*, tells the epistolary struggle between the representatives of two antithetical philosophies: Alexander's cynicism and materialism is opposed to Dindimus' spiritual and ascetic life. In one of Dindimus' verbal attacks, the Macedonian is accused to consider himself so astute that he would be able to put Tricerberus to sleep, if only he wanted. The description of the mythological guardian of hell made by the poet is the object of this article. Particular attention will be devoted to line 537, where the term *toþe*, 'tooth', originally found in the manuscript was (unconsciously?) interpreted as *boþe*, 'both', in both Skeat's (1878) and Magoun's (1929) editions. The analysis here proposed aims to demonstrate that *toþe* is semantically and syntactically coherent in the context of the line where it is found, thus discarding the two editors' reading.

Alexander and Dindimus, traditionally considered one of the oldest Middle English alliterative poems that have come to us,¹ is preserved in a sole copy in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 264, fols. 209r–215r. Its interpolation into a mid-fourteenth-century manuscript probably produced in Flanders and containing the *Roman d'Alexandre* together with other French Alexander texts was consciously made by the scribe of the English poem himself.²

The poem deals with the fictitious epistolary exchange between Alexander the Great and Dindimus, king of the Brahmans. Its source dates from

¹ James Parker Oakden, *Alliterative Poetry in Middle English* (Manchester: Archon, 1935) 153; Thorlak Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1977) 26. The digital images of the whole manuscript are available at <<http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msbodl264>>.

² In a blank space of fol. 67r, at the exact point where the reader should pass to the English text before completing the reading of the *Roman*, the English scribe wrote: "Here fayleth a possesse of þis rommance of Alixandre, þe wheche possesse þat fayleth 3e schulle fynde at 3e ende of þis bok ywrete in engelyche ryme; and whanne 3e han radde it to þe ende, turneþ hedur aȝen and turneþ ovyr þis lef and bygynneþ at þis reson, 'Che fu el mois de May que li tans renouele'; and so rede forþ þe rommance to þe ende whylis þe frenche lasteþ" ['Here an episode of the romance of Alexander is lacking. You may find it at the end of this book, written in English verse; and as you have read it to the end, come back, and turn this leaf and start from this sentence: 'Che fu el mois de May que li tans renouele'. And then, read the romance to the end of the French text'].

late antiquity. Known as *Collatio Alexandri cum Dindimo per litteras facta*, it circulated both independently and interpolated into Archipresbyter Leo's *Historia de Preliis*.³ Both redactions were available in mediaeval England, even though a higher number of autonomous texts of the *Collatio* are extant;⁴ the English poem derives from the autonomous version. The protagonists are representatives of two antithetical philosophies; Alexander's cynic and materialistic vision is opposed to Dindimus' ascetism and spirituality. Their epistolary struggle ends with no winner. Alexander stops his campaign of conquest of the East at the Brahmans' boundaries but he has got the last word. For his part, Dindimus wards off Alexander's occupation of the country but does not succeed in convincing him on the value of his spiritual life.

Dindimus' aversion to Alexander and to the culture he represents is clear from his first letter, a harsh attack on the Macedonian's sinful life and excessive pride. The passage on fol. 212r is revealing of the Brahman's polemical tone. In these lines (534–7), Dindimus accuses Alexander of considering himself so astute that he would even be able to put Tricerberus to sleep, if he wanted:⁵

So wis wenst þou þe be þat þou by wit mihtest
 Porou þi maistrie miche maken to slepe 535
 Tricerberus þe helle hound þat holden is kene
 Toþe wakrong *and* wikke *and* wardain of paine 537
 [‘You consider yourself so astute that you could by trick
 Through your great cunning put to sleep
 Tricerberus, the hell hound, who is believed to be cruel,
 With wakeful and fierce tooth, and guardian of pain’]⁶

The last line of the passage (l. 537) poses some problems from an editorial point of view: the manuscript reads *Toþe*, ‘tooth’, in an ablative/instrumental sense, but both Skeat's and Magoun's editions read *Boþe*, ‘both’.⁷ Although acceptable from a semantic point of view, since *boþe* may refer to the two following adjectives *wakrong* and *wikke* – ‘vigilant’ and ‘cruel’ –, this reading is not correct from a palaeographical point of view; in fact,

³ George Cary, *The Medieval Alexander* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1956) 13–14.

⁴ David J.A. Ross, “A Check-list of Manuscripts of Three Alexander Texts: the Julius Valerius *Epitome*, the *Epistola ad Aristotelem* and the *Collatio cum Dindimo*”, *Scriptorium* 10 (1956): 127–32.

⁵ The passage is taken from *The Alliterative Romance of Alexander and Dindimus*, ed. Walter William Skeat, EETS ES 31 (London: Trübner, 1878) 20–1, ll. 534–7; it is the same as found in *The Gestes of King Alexander of Macedon*, ed. Francis Peabody Magoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1929) 192, ll. 534–7. Italics are used to expand the abbreviations in the manuscript.

⁶ The translation of all the passages in this article are mine. In this specific case, a literal translation has been preferred, in order to display the original syntactic and semantic relations in the sentence.

⁷ Skeat (1878, 21); Magoun (1929, 192).

the word's initial letter clearly is a capital <T> that is very similar (if not identical) to that of *Tricerberus* in the previous line (l. 536) and clearly different from the capital found, for example, on the same folio at the beginning of line 549.

The reason why Skeat (1878) and Magoun (1929) edited *Bope* instead of *Tope* is hard to explain. Neither editor signalled *Tope* as a scribal error for *Bope*. Is this an emendation introduced, let us say, silently to try to solve a problematic point of the text? Or was it simply a typographic error? The editors' renowned competence of Middle English tends to support the hypothesis of a banal typo.

As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that *tope* is not unacceptable to the meaning of the line: it may refer to Tricerberus' tusks and, metonymically, to his jaws. Consequently, the first half line as found in the manuscript – *Tope wakrong and wikke* – may mean 'with a wakeful and fierce expression'. The noun-adjective order is not unusual in *Alexander and Dindimus: holus holwe* ('empty holes') is found in line 10, *conqueror kid* ('famous conqueror') and *contres manie* ('many places') in line 26, to cite the first verses of the poem. This interpretation finds some support in the semantic complexity of *tōþ(ē)*. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED),⁸ s.v. *tōth* n.(1), 1a. (a), the term was used in some phrases with the meaning of 'look, appearance', as in the case of *grim toþ* 'fierce expression'.⁹ Another attestation of this word deals with the semantic area of corporal desire, as in *dry toth* 'thirsty'.¹⁰ *Toþþ*, perhaps a derivation from *tōþ* as hypothesized in the MED s.v. *toth* n.(2) as well as in White (1878), is exclusively found in the *Ormulum* with the probable meaning of 'rapacity, aggression, strife'.¹¹ Tricerberus is thus described 'with a wakeful and fierce expression, and guardian of pain'. This can be considered a poet's innovation if compared to the correspondent

⁸ *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn, John Reidy & Robert E. Lewis (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1952–2001); available from <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>.

⁹ "Maketh him swithe sturne / ant went te grimme toth to" ['[He] makes himself very strong / and turns a fierce expression towards [her]']; *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Robert Hasenfratz (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan U, 2000) ch. IV, ll. 490–1; available from <<http://lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/awfrm4.htm>>.

¹⁰ MED, s.v. *tōth* n.(1), 1b (a): "Thyngke apon yowr dry toth, / Dryngke as anothyr doth" ['Think about your thirst, / drink as everybody else does']; "A Fraternity of Drinkers", ed. Albert Croll Baugh, *Philologica: The Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. Thomas Austin Kirby & Henry Bosley Woolf (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1949) 202–7, at 204.

¹¹ *The Ormulum*, ed. Robert Meadows White, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1878) 1: 249, ll. 7186–7: "On alle þa þatt lufenn toþþ" ['On all those who love rapacity']; 1: 355, ll. 10201–2: "Fra clake ȝ sake ȝ fra þatt toþþ / Þatt follȝeþþ gre-diȝnesse" ['From trouble and strife, and from all that rapacity / which follows greediness']. See also the glossary s.v. *toþþ*, 2: 351.

passage in the *Historia de preliis*, where the monster is not characterized by any physical or behavioural connotations:

Vos Tartareum custodem, id est canem Tricerberum, sopiri posse pretio confirmastis¹²

['You boast to be so valiant that you would be able to put the guardian of the Tartarus, the hound Tricerberus, to sleep']

In conclusion, the linguistic and semantic adequacy of the term in the context of the passage, as found in the manuscript, casts doubt on Skeat's and Magoun's reading – conscious or unconscious as it may be. Through this new interpretation of the passage (ll. 536–7)

Tricerberus þe helle hound þat holden is kene
 Toþe wakrong and wikke and wardain of paine
 ['Tricerberus, the hell hound, who is believed to be cruel,
 With [his] wakeful and fierce expression, and guardian of pain']

the retention of the original *toþe*, 'tooth', as well as respecting the palaeographical characteristics of the manuscript, fits its general meaning and, hopefully, affords a reading closer to the poet's communicative intention.

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¹² *Historia Alexandri Magni (Historia de preliis), Rezension J² (Orosius-Rezension)*, ed. Alfons Hilka (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1976) 88, ll. 98–9.