

Alexander Nequam

Nequam is a Latin nickname, meaning 'worthless'. When or how he acquired this sobriquet is not clear. Alexander was born at St Albans in early September 1157, around the same time that the infant Richard the Lionheart was born at Oxford. Alexander's mother fostered both children, being nurse and probably wet nurse to the prince.

The name of the prince's nurse was Hodierna, the same as Alexander's mother's name. Richard gave his nurse £7 in pension per year from the start of his reign. This sum was also paid to her into the beginning of King John's reign. Her family apparently lived near Chippenham.

Alexander went to school in St. Albans. This was the town school and not in the one in the abbey. He studied canon and civil law, theology and medicine in Paris, c1175-82. In 1178 he spent some time in Holborn, which was full of gardens and trees. Alexander wrote copiously on many subjects during his adult life, in both prose and poetry. His earliest writings date from about 1177. After this, he became master of the school at Dunstable.

In the late 1180s, Alexander requested abbot Garinus of St Albans for the mastership of the school there but was wittily rebuffed with a joke about his nickname along the lines of, 'If you are worth it, come; if you are worthless, don't.' Garinus became abbot of St Albans in 1183. Alexander was still at the St Albans school in 1185 but was teaching at Oxford by 1190. He was the university's first known scholastic theologian.

He recounts that he regularly gave a lecture on the 'Feast of the Conception of the Virgin' but for several years was afflicted with illness on that day. When he ceased to give the lecture on that day, his illness stopped.

Later, he turned his back on teaching and money and entered the Augustinian abbey at Cirencester in 1197. He thought the University teachers were too concerned with status and money. Friends told him that monastic life was also corrupt. He may have been attracted by the abbey's school and library. His monastic rule was 'moderation in all things'. He was not in holy orders before he arrived at Cirencester but was a canon by 1198.

In 1203 Alexander received a mandate from the legate to act as a judge. The abbey was in a parlous state financially by 1205. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of Worcester appointed a triumvirate headed by Alexander to supervise the abbey's finances. Alexander was sent on royal and papal business and elected abbot of Cirencester in 1213. The royal licence to elect was dated 24.7.1213. On 30th August, Alexander and two other abbots were sent to enquire into royal rights at Kenilworth.

He may have sided with King John during the Interdict, March 1208-July 1214, and even during the ex-communication, November 1209-July 1213. He was undoubtedly the best man for the job. The abbey was spared the worst effects of

King John's confiscations, as he had a great respect for Alexander. It was Alexander who negotiated the return of the Cirencester property and revenues. Cirencester was granted an annual Autumn Fair during his time as abbot and he oversaw the completion of the last range of cloisters.

Alexander attended the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. King John ordered a ship to take him and Walter Grey, bishop of Worcester across the Channel so that he could attend. Most of his surviving works date from his time at Cirencester. They were commentaries on books of the bible, including the Psalms and the Creeds.

He was a grammarian and wrote descriptions of items of everyday use. He also wrote poetry, favouring the elegiac couplet and rhetorical questions. Alexander was one of the first in Europe to study Aristotle in both Greek and Arabic. He was interested in astronomy, but was cautious on the subject of astrology. He and his contemporaries reasoned that the planets were given their influence by God. They did not drive the free will, because if they did, sin would not be imputed to humans but to the planets.

He subscribed to the thesis that planet earth was made up of three parts - Europe, Libya and Asia. He comments on the habits of birds, trees, herbs and mammals. In his treatise, 'De Utensibilis', he listed the equipment that a peasant ought to have. These included long bladed knives, a spade, and shovel, a seed box, a billhook for brambles, two baskets, a mouse trap and a snare for wolves. It includes one of the first references to a wheelbarrow in England. His prose book 'De Naturis Rerum', chapter 166, lists plants which should be found in 'noble' gardens. He included exotics such as hyssop, mandrake, pomegranates and dates besides traditional flowers and herbs. In his poem 'De Laudibus Divinae Sapientine' the 7th chapter is devoted to plants and the 8th to trees and crops. Altogether, 140 specimens are mentioned. These were the most used encyclopaedia on plants and gardening for the rest of the Middle Ages.

Alexander believed that gardens should be adorned with plants that were not grown purely for commercial purposes. He encouraged gardeners to 'see if you can get them to grow.' He also dabbled in philosophy. He did not write for the laity but as a canon for his fellow religious. The surviving sermons are mostly from his Oxford period, for clergy and the laity. They start with a bible text, followed by a simple meditation. As an abbot, he led his brothers by setting them a good example in his own life. He wrote mostly in Latin, but did use some French or English for the laity. In school he taught both *Lectio* and *Disputatio*. In *Lectio* he used passages from the bible and other learned books. He would read it to his pupils and interject his own thoughts on the text. *Disputatio* is similar to *Lectio* but with questions inserted for responses, either from himself or his pupils. Alexander could also read Hebrew.

He wrote in great detail about the nature of free will and on 'synderesis' an assumption that people have a natural inclination towards doing good. He was one of the first to write on psychology and was aware that it was a new area of study.

Alexander may have been in bad health towards the end of his life, as he died on the 13th of March 1217, at Kempsey, a manor of the bishop of Worcester. He is buried in Worcester cathedral. His tomb, or what is left of it, is in the north aisle and was described as a cumbent statue of a priest with large tonsure, vested for the altar, his beard was bushy, a thing not universal in these latter days. In his right hand was a staff of authority and in his left a book. There were also 4 lines of Latin inscription. The effigy is much mutilated but the epitaph remains. It translates as: - Wisdom suffers an eclipse. A sun is buried, which, while it lived, every branch of learning flourished. Nequam is dissolved into ashes. Had he one heir on this earth, his death would be less cause for tears.'

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