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Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César

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Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César

Ca. 1208-1214 or slightly later (before 1230). Flanders. The *Histoire ancienne* is the first surviving universal chronicle in French and an early example of French literary prose. In two manuscripts, Paris, BNF fr. 20125 (produced in Acre in the second half of the 13th century) and Vienna, ÖNB, 2576, (produced in Venice, c. 1350), the verse prologue contains approximately twenty moralizations. These versified reflections discuss subjects as loyalty, jealousy, generosity, greed, and death, and generally exhort the aristocratic audience to lead a virtuous lifestyle. The prologue contains a sort of table of contents, which seems to suggest that the text was never completed. The plan laid out in the first section starts at Creation and ends with the rise of Flanders. However, in extant manuscripts the text halts at Caesar's expedition in Gaul (57 BCE). Even so, the narrative, with its 375 folios written in two columns of 39 lines each in the BNF fr. 20125, is monumental in scope. Using a wide variety of sources in Latin (such as Virgil, Flavius Josephus, Orosius, Julius Valerius, Eusebius and Jerome, Dares Phrygius, Lambert of St. Omer's *Liber floridus*) and the vernacular (*romans d'antiquité* such as the *Roman de Thèbes* and *Roman d'Alexandre*), the *Histoire* encompasses biblical history, classical myth, and the history of the major Eastern and Western empires. Topics such as the foundation of Flanders, portrayed as the endpoint of the *translatio imperii*, and the election of Baldwin of Flanders as Latin emperor in 1204, must have presented a great appeal to contemporary audiences, composed primarily of Flemish aristocrats.

While it has been argued that most of the *Histoire ancienne* was written before the Anglo-Flemish defeat at Bouvines (27 July 1214), a slightly later date, around 1219, for at least part of the text remains a possibility. In the verse prologue, the text is dedicated to Roger IV, Castellan of Lille, who came of age in 1208 and died in 1230. Roger of Lille was actively invested in the conceptual design of the *Histoire* and, according to the chronicler, had a clear preference for pagan history over religious matters. Based on stylistic considerations, the *Histoire ancienne* has been attributed to Wauchier de Denain, who is otherwise known for numerous French translations of patristic texts (*Vie des sainz peres*) and saints' lives (*Vie de sainte Marthe*), written for patrons from the court of Flanders-Hainaut (Joan of Constantinople and Philip of Namur). Additionally, it has been suggested that Wauchier de Denain was also the author of the Second Continuation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Conte du Graal*. Although accepted by many, his authorship of the *Histoire ancienne* remains speculative.

It has been surmised that the prologue and verse sections of the *Histoire ancienne* were removed almost entirely from the main prose text shortly after its composition. However, it is clear that the extent to which the moralizing verse interludes have survived is more substantial than previously assumed. Apart from the aforementioned manuscripts, BNF fr. 20125 and Vienna, ÖNB 2576, the verse sections in the final segments of the text have been preserved in their entirety in the BNF fr. 686 (produced in Bologna, c. 1330). Additionally, remnants of significant portions of these moralizations appear in manuscripts belonging to all three redactions, either in verse form or in prose.

The *Histoire ancienne* survives in some ninety known manuscripts, which are often lavishly decorated and illustrated. The production of manuscripts in Flanders, France, Italy, and Acre

is proof of the wide dissemination of the chronicle. Scholars have identified three redactions of the text. In spite of textual variation, omissions and interpolations, the first redaction comprises some seventy extant manuscripts, among which are the two manuscripts with a verse prologue and moralizations. The earliest extant copies of this group are dated to c. 1250-60 and were produced in workshops in Acre (the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem) and Northern France. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, centers of production also appear in Northern Italy and Paris. The first redaction presents the *Histoire ancienne* together with *Li Faits des romains* (1213-1214) in over twenty manuscripts. In these manuscripts, the final section of the *Histoire* is usually dropped in favour of Julius Caesar's more elaborate biography from the *Faits*.

A second redaction was compiled in Naples in the 1330s during the reign of Robert of Anjou and is known from eleven extant manuscripts. This version is a response to contemporary Angevin interests in the Byzantine East. It omits the sections on Genesis and the Macedonians and presents Roman imperial history in a less fragmented way. More importantly, the French rendering of Dares Phrygian's *De excidio Trojae* is replaced with the much longer Prose Five version of the *Roman de Troie*, interpolated with the Ovidian *Heroides* in French. There is evidence to suggest that all extant second-redaction manuscripts were ultimately derived from London, BL, Royal 20 D I, produced in Naples circa 1340.

Finally, the text that can be found in a limited group of fifteenth-century manuscripts and is referred to as the third redaction, presents a mixed version of Trojan history and incorporates material from other sources, most notably the *Chronique dite de Baudoin d'Avesnes*. Manuscripts containing the *Histoire ancienne* were produced well into the fifteenth and even sixteenth centuries. A heavily rewritten version of the *Histoire* was printed in Paris in 1491 by Pierre le Rouge for Antoine Vérard. Reprints of this two-volume edition titled *Orose en François* followed in 1504 and 1509 (both by Vérard), 1515 (Michel Le Noir), and 1526 (Philippe Le Noir).

Parts of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* were also translated in several Italian dialects, notably Tuscan and Venetian, starting in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. In French, its influence is apparent in the *Chronique dite de Baudoin d'Avesnes*, Christine de Pizan's *Mutacion de Fortune* and *Epître d'Othéa* as well as Jean de Courcy's *La Boucquechardière*.

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