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Li fait des Romains

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Faits des Romains

Ca. 1213-1214. France. The *Faits des Romains* is the oldest extant biography of Julius Caesar in French prose, written by an anonymous but learned compiler, possibly a cleric working in an academic context (Paris or Orléans). The anonymous compiler uses Suetonius' life of Caesar from the *Vita caesarum* as a general framework, to which he adds a full translation of Sallust's *De Catilinae coniuratione*, Caesar's own report of his expedition to Gaul (*Commentarii de bello gallico*), and Lucan's account of the civil war (*De bello civili libri decem*, better known as *Pharsalia*). The *Faits* ends with Suetonius' account of Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE. In regard to these four principal sources, it should be noted that the compiler was unaware of Caesar's authorship of *De bello gallico*, which, following medieval tradition, is attributed to a certain Julius Celsus. He does not attempt to imitate the individual stylistic and rhetorical specificities of the Latin authors he translates. This, however, gives his narrative a more consistent and homogeneous voice.

In the prologue, the translator underlines the moral and didactic virtues of his compilation. The emperors' deeds are slated to instruct the audience on how to do good (*bien fere*) and avoid evil (*mal eschiver*). But the *Faits* is also an erudite display of encyclopedic knowledge. While translating the classical authors into the vernacular, the compiler further elaborates and elucidates the information provided by the Roman *auctores* through a wide range of other sources including scripture, Flavius Josephus, Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae*), Petrus Comestor (*Historia scolastica*), Augustine (*De civitate dei*), Jerome (*De viris illustribus*), Eusebius, the *Alexandri magni iter ad paradisum*, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace and Arnulf of Orléans' late twelfth-century scholarly commentary on Lucan. He also references contemporary vernacular romances, such as the *Roman de Thèbes* and *Roman d'Alexandre*. In other interpolations, probably of his own finding, one can notice the influence of the *chanson de geste*, which no doubt appealed to a contemporary aristocratic lay audience. It can be inferred from the prologue that, following in the footsteps of Suetonius' *Vita caesarum*, the author originally intended to tell the history of the 'twelve Caesars', continuing his narrative up to the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE) who was *li douziemes empereres*, if we include Caesar. For unknown reasons, the work remained unfinished.

The *Faits* is one of the earliest works to move away from the focus on Greek and Trojan history found in the French *romans d'antiquité*. Caesar is placed at the very center of classical Roman history and politics. Plausibly, the focus on the Roman leader constitutes a response to the contemporary politics of centralization of the King of France, Philip II Augustus (reigned 1180-1223). The opposition between the republic and the early empire may have resonated with the anxieties of the feudal aristocracy. At least once, the anonymous author explicitly draws a parallel between Caesar and Philip Augustus: in spite of the fact that during their youth both men had a rather sloppy look, he applauds their intelligence and confirms Philip's moral standing. In light of this rather flattering view of the French king, it has been suggested that the author was a supporter of the king, as he presented Roman expansion politics as a historical precedent for Philip's move towards absolute monarchical power. Other assessments of the text and its intent have led modern scholars to interpret Caesar's figure in the *Faits* either as a positive or negative example for medieval rulers. On the one hand, like

Alexander's spirit of conquest, Caesar's autocratic ambition could be construed as the prototype for a perverse hunger for power. On the other, the translator also emphasizes Caesar's *courtoisie* at the end of the Gallic wars. The Roman general offers the defeated Gallic leaders 'riches dons' and thus represents a positive role model of chivalric generosity and monarchic rule.

If the author intended for Philip II August to take notice of the *Faits*, there is no explicit dedication. The text survives in some sixty manuscripts. Based on the manuscript evidence, it has been suggested that the *Faits* first had limited circulation either in a clerical context, possibly at the university of Paris, or, alternatively, at a feudal court in the Northern or Poitevin regions of France. From the second half of the thirteenth century, the *Faits* gained currency among aristocratic audiences in Northern France and Italy. The text may have been brought to the Italian peninsula by Charles I of Anjou (1226-1285) or someone in his retinue (possibly Guy of Monfort) during or shortly after the Angevin conquest of Sicily (1266). From the final quarter of the thirteenth century, the *Faits des romains* is found in circulation concurrently with the first redaction of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*, first in Italy, and later in manuscripts from Paris and Flanders. In these manuscripts, the original account of Caesar's conquest from the *Histoire ancienne* was usually replaced by the much more elaborate biography of Caesar taken from the *Faits*. The earliest surviving manuscript with this combination of texts is Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 726, produced in southern Italy, possibly as a gift for Charles of Anjou.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the success of the *Faits* remained intact, in spite of the fact that competing French translations of classical authors started to appear, such as those by Jean le Bègue (Sallust), Jean Duchesne and Robert Gaguin (both Caesar). Often lavishly illustrated manuscripts of the *Faits* continued to be manufactured throughout the later Middle Ages. Among these is the *Histoire ancienne-Faits des Romains* in Paris, Bnf, fr. 246 from the library of John, Duke of Berry (copied in 1364-1365). In this copy, no less than fifty miniatures illustrate the life of Caesar. In a number of other manuscripts, the history of the emperors is continued beyond Caesar's death. This is also the case in London, BL, Royal 17 FII which closes with the reign of Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Originally intended for Louis of Bruges, Lord of Gruuthuse and Earl of Winchester, this generously illustrated copy was completed in 1479 for Edward IV, King of England. The *Faits des Romains* was printed in Paris by Pierre le Rouge for Antoine Vérard in 1490 as *Lucan, Suetoine et Saluste en françois* and reprinted in 1500 (Vérard). Similarities in the layout and design of Vérard's 1490 edition of the *Faits* and the nearly simultaneous printing of the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* (1491) suggest that these texts, like in the aforementioned manuscripts, were meant to be read in tandem.

The considerable impact of the *Faits des Romains* is also evidenced by its literary influence. The *Faits* were not only copied in Italy, but were also translated in Italian several times (*Fatti dei Romani* or *Fatti di Cesare*). The text inspired Tuscan *cantari* and authors such as Niccolò of Verona, who used the Lucan section for his *Pharsale* (1348). The Florentine Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1294) turned to the *Faits* as a source for his *Livre dou trésor*, which he wrote at the French court during his banishment. At approximately the same time in Hainaut, the anonymous compiler of the *Chronique dite de Baudoin d'Avesnes* also drew inspiration from the *Faits*. Elsewhere, the text appears as an interpolation in the *Suite vulgate du Merlin* of Cologny, Fondation Martin Bodmer Cod. 147, copied at the end of the thirteenth century. Similarly, a digest of the *Faits* was inserted in the second redaction of *Renart le*

contrefait (1342). Finally, a Portuguese translation (*Vida e feitos de Júlio César*, before 1466), bears witness to the popularity of the *Faits des romains* in the Iberian Peninsula.

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