



Prologue to the Book of Histories | Li prologue ou livre des estoires

Text Information

Author | Anonymous

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Transcription by Paul Meyer. Translation and Introduction by Mae Velloso-Lyons.

Introduction to the Text

This text is the prologue to a long work of history compiled in Northern France in the first third of the thirteenth century CE. The history was intended to be universal: spanning the creation of the world, through the ancient civilisations of Assyria, Greece and Rome, via the age of migrations in Europe, to the rise of powerful medieval kingdoms. However, the history was not completed and in fact only recounts as far as the Roman emperor Julius Caesar, hence the title commonly given to the work: *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César* ("Ancient History until Caesar").

Despite being unfinished, the work was immensely popular in medieval Europe, and seventy-four copies survive of the first redaction (the first version, before the text was revised). These manuscripts were produced in places as far apart as Paris, Venice, and Acre (a crusader city in what is now Israel). It is often found in combination with another work of ancient history, the *Faits des Romains* ("Deeds of the Romans"), which indicates the great interest that medieval audiences had in ancient history.

The prologue has been included in the *Global Medieval Sourcebook* because it summarises the entire work (including the unfinished parts) and shows how medieval people in Western Europe wove together Biblical stories with the histories of pre-Christian empires.

Although the prologue is in rhymed verse, the main body of the history is in prose, with interspersed sections of verse offering moral lessons drawn from the historical content. However, when the text was recopied, these verse sections (including the prologue) were often omitted. This may suggest that audience expectations about works of history were changing, preferring the voice of the author - or the moral interpretation - to be less prominent.

About this Edition

This English translation is based on the transcription by Paul Meyer of Paris Bibliothèque Nationale Française MS 20125, ff. 1r-2v (corrected using Vienna Imperial and Royal Library Lambecius MS 258). A facsimile of the Paris manuscript is available online [here](#). Meyer's transcription was published in: "Les premières compilations françaises d'histoire ancienne. I. - Les Faits des Romains. II. - Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César." *Romania*, vol 14, 1885, pp. 1-81. The transcription can be found on pp. 53-6. A digital version of this publication is available [here](#).



Prologue to the Book of Histories | Li prologue ou livre des estoires

Ci comence li prologue ou livre des estoires, et la porsivance.

Segnor, je ai oï retraire
C'on doit adès bien dire et faire
Tant con on ou siecle demore
Li hom ne vit c'une sole ore,
Ainz trespasse et va a la fin,
S'il a eü vrai cuer et fin,
Que s'uevre ait esté bone et fine;
A cel segnor qui tot afine
En a la desserte si grande
Com ses cuers le veut e demande;
Car c'est li sires qui tot rent
Quanc'on li fait si justement
Que ja ne s'en devra nus plaindre.
Por quoi ne se doit nus hom faindre
De lui servir a son pooir:
Metre i doit on sens et voloir.
Qui si le fai sauve iert sa paine,
Quar qui por bon segnor si paine
En la fin en a tel merite
Qui mout charement li profite,
Et qui siert a mauvais segnor
Il n'i a ni preu ni honor;
De ce seit sa pensée certe,
Ja ne s'en tornera sanz perte.
Li mauvais sires, c'est deables
Qui point ne nos est profitables,
Car il het raison et mesure,
Bonté, loiauté et droiture.
Mout a sergans, et nequedent
Qu'il le servent a son talent,
E! las, dolent que feront ils?
Por lor luiers avront escil,
Delor parmenable et misere.

Here begins the prologue to the book of histories, and what follows.

Lords, I have heard it said
That one must always speak and act well
For as long as one remains in the world.
A man lives but a single hour
5 Before dying and going to his end.
If he has had a true and pure heart,
And his work has been good and pure,
He has as great a reward
As his heart wants and asks for
10 from that Lord who brings everything to its end.
For the Lord returns everything
That one does for him so fairly
That one must never complain;
For this reason, one must not make a pretence
15 Of serving him to the best of one's ability:
One must put meaning and intention into it.
Whoever acts thus will have his pains guaranteed
For whoever troubles himself for the good Lord
Has such reward for it at the end
20 That it is greatly to his advantage;
And whoever serves the lord badly
Has neither profit nor honour.
May he be certain of this:
He will never get away without a loss.
25 The bad lord is the devil
Who is not useful to us at all
Because he hates truth and self-restraint¹,
Goodness, loyalty and justice².
He has many servants and yet
30 If they serve him as he desires,
Alas! what will those miserable ones do?
Their prize will be exile,
Eternal pain and misery;



Damedéu laissent, le vrai pere,
Si se tienent a l'enemi.
S[e] il ont si mauvais ami
Meaus lor venist que né ne fussent,
Car ne font pas ce qu'il deüssent.
Crestiein furent apelé
Quant il furent regeneré
Ens en sains fons, si com il devrent
E l'uile et la cresse recevrent
La orent il a Deu covenant
Qu'en lui creiroient fermement,
C'est qui'il adès le serviroient
E ces comandemens feroient.
Por Deu! segnor, s'il ne le font,
Savés quel luier en avront?
Passé avront obedience;
S'amendé n'est par penitence,
Perdu en avront la contrée
Que paradis est apellée.
Soviegne vos tostans d'Adam
Qui en dolor et en ahan
Nos mist par le mors d'une pome.
Segnor, Adan, cel premier home
Aveit nostre Sires formé,
A sa semblance et figuré,
E si l'ot mis en paradis
Ou il eüst esté toz dis
Se passé n'eüst son comant,
Dont nos somes encor dolant.
Par le comant qu'il trespasa
Ens el pas de la mort passa;
C'en fi mis ens en la paine
Dont chascuns et chascune paine.
Seignor, et puis qu'Adans fu mis
Por el fait hors du paradis,
Qu'iert il de nos qui chascun jor
Corronssons cent foiz le Segnor
Qui a Adan se corrossa
Por un comant qu'il trespasa?

They leave Lord God, the true father,
35 And hold fast to the Enemy.
If they are to have such a bad friend,
It would have been better for them that they hadn't been born,
For they are not doing what they should.
They were called Christians
40 When they were reborn
In the holy font, doing as they ought to³,
And received the oil and the chrism⁴;
There they addressed a covenant to God
That they would steadfastly believe in him
45 And that they would always serve him
And follow his commands.
By God, Lords, if they don't do it,
Do you know what reward they will have?
They will have disobeyed;
50 If this isn't amended by penitence,
They will have lost the land
Which is called Paradise.
May you always remember Adam,
Who gave us sorrow and suffering
55 With the bite of an apple.
Lords, Adam, this first man,
Had been formed and shaped by our Lord
In his image,
And then he put him in Paradise
60 **60Where** he would have been for evermore
If he hadn't ignored his command,
For which reason we suffer still.
By the command that he broke
He became mortal⁵;
65 He was made to suffer the punishment
Which every man and woman suffers.
Lords, since Adam was put
Out of Paradise because of this act,
How will it be for us, who every day
70 Anger the Lord a hundred times –
The Lord who became angry at Adam
For a single command that he disobeyed?



Bien nos en devoit sovenir,
Mès nos lessomes covenier
La choze si come puet estre:
Ne creons mès ni cler ni prestre
Tant no sachent verité dire.
Li siecles chascun jor empire;
C'est grans dolors et grans tristece.
Chascuns de bien fere a perece,
Ne nus ne redoute la mort
Que si aigrement pince et mort
Que la dolor ne puet descrire
Sains ni sainte, tant sache dire.
C'est merveille que ne cremons
Ce qu'a nos propres oïls veons:
C'est ce que la more aprochomes,
E nos cors acompaigneromes
As vers de terre sans orgoill.
N'en porteros c'un soul lensuel,
Dont nos avromes vesteüre.
Segnor, e n'esteroit mesure
Que nos nos en porpensessimes.
E nos malisses lessesimes?
Que vaut force, que vaut noblece?
Que vaut beautés, que vaut richece?
Que vaut hautesce ni parages?
Certes, li hom n'est mie sages
Qui en tout ce a sa fiance,
Car il n'i a fors trespassance.
N'en dirai plus: el ai a faire,
Car j'ai entrepris un a faire
A traitier selonc l'escriture
Ou mout avra sens et mesure.
Qui la matiere porsivra
E de cuer i entendra
Oïr porra la plus hauteovre
Qui encor pas ne si descuevre
C'onques fust en nos lenge traite.
Mès n'ai encor mension faite
Ou ne a cui comenceraï.

We ought to remember this well,
But we let things simply turn out
75 as they are wont to do.
We believe neither cleric nor priest
Although they can tell us the truth.
The world grows worse every day⁶:
It's a great misery and a great sadness.
80 Everyone is lazy about acting well
And does not fear the death
That so painfully pinches and bites
That no saint – male or female – can describe the pain,
however much they can tell us.
85 It's an extraordinary thing that we do not fear
What we see with our own eyes:
That we approach death
And will accompany our bodies
To meet the worms without pride.
90 **90**We will wear but a single shroud
As clothing.
Lords, wouldn't it be reasonable⁷
For us to reflect on ourselves
And abandon our evil ways?
95 What is strength worth? What is nobility worth?
What is beauty worth? What are riches worth?
What is high status or noble extraction worth?
Certainly the man who places his trust in all of these
Is not wise at all,
100 For there is nothing there but death.
I will say no more; I have much to do,
For I have undertaken to present a matter
Following what is written
In which there will be much meaning and good judgement. ⁸
105 Whoever follows the content
And listens from the heart
Will be able to hear the worthiest work
Ever presented in our language:
A work which is still unknown.
110 But I haven't yet mentioned
Where, or with whom, I will begin.



Or fetes pais, jel vos dirai.
De Deu est bon li comenciers:
A lui comenceraï premiers,
Coment Adan forma e fist,
Coment en paradis le mist,
E com Adans entra en paine,
Por quoi nos vestons dras de laine,
Coment Adans ot sa lignée
Dont la terre fu alignée.
N'i lairai riens que d'oïr en oïr
Ne doïe dire a mon pooir,
Trosqu'al doloive sans faillance.
Après n'iere je en doutance
De Noé ne doïe retraire
Quels hom il fu, de quel afaire,
De ses enfans, de lor lignage
Ou il out maint prodome e sage
E maint felon e maint mauvais.
Avant sera li livres fais
Coment les terres devisent
E departirent e sevrerent,
E qui funda la tor Babel,
De Babiloine et dou roi Bel,
Des autres cités renomées,
Des provinses et des contrées
E des isles qui sunt en mer.
Pou en i lairai a nomer,
S'on en doit fere mension,
Que n'en doïe dire le non,
E quel roi es terres regnerent,
Quant eles crivrent e puplerent.
Des gens de diverses figures
Vos dirai totes les natures.
Après l'estoire porsivrai
E tot en ordene vos dirai,
Coment Ninive fu fondée
E Babilonie restorée
Qui dont fu la dame dou monde;

Now be silent and I will tell you.
It is right to begin with God.
I will start with him first:
115 How he formed and made Adam,
How he put him in Paradise,
And why Adam began to suffer –
For which reason we wear wool cloth;
How Adam had descendants
120 Who covered the earth.
I will not omit anything that
I ought to tell to the best of my ability, without fault,
Going from generation to generation until the flood.
After that I will not be in any doubt;
125 I must tell of Noah:
What kind of man he was, what he did,
About his children, and their lineage,
Of which many were noble and wise
And many cruel, and many bad.
130 Before the book is done [I will tell]:
How the lands divided
And moved apart and separated,
And who built the Tower of Babel;
About Babylon and King Bel,
135 About other famous cities;
About the regions and countries
And the islands in the sea.
There is little I will refrain from saying about them
If it should be mentioned;
140 I must say the names
And which kings ruled in the lands
When they grew and became populated.
I will tell you everything about
Peoples with different appearances.
145 After that, I will continue the history
And tell you everything in order:
How Nineveh was founded
And Babylon rebuilt
Which was, at that time, mistress of the world;



De Babilonie la secunde
Qui or est Damiete dite,
Sor le flum siet qui vient d'Egypte,
E qui funda Ebbatanin.
Si com je le truis ou latin
Le vos dirai a mon pooir.
E après vos ferai savoir
De Tebes tote la devise;
Ou Jherusalem est assise
Ce dirai je e en quel terre,
Qui le funda, qui li fist guerre.
E après ce voudrai retraire
De Troies tot le grant affaire,
Qui le funda, en quel contrée
E por quoi fu Troie apelée,
Qui le destruiet et que devindrent
Cil qui la vile grant tens tindrent.
Après vos redirai la some
De la veraie estoire de Rome,
Qui les murs en funda e fist
E les lois premerains i mist.
Des haus barons, des jugeors,
Des contes et des senators
Vos sera toute l'uevre dite.
Après, n'iert pas l'uevre petite,
Quant vendra as empereors
Qui conquissent les grans honors
Par quoi la cités fu cremue
E en grant orgoill embatue,
Car, ce tesmoine le latins,
Toz li mons fu a Rome aclins,
Quant Cesar Augustus regna.
Après l'estoire porsivra
Tot si com France fu puplée
E de quel gent fu abitée;
Puis vos voudrai le tens descrire
Qu'en terre nasqui nostre Sire
E coment crucifiez fu,
Ce n'i sera mie teü;

150 Of the second Babylon
Which is now called Damiete
And lies on the river which comes from Egypt,
And who founded Ebbatanin.
I will tell it to the best of my ability
155 Just as I found it in Latin⁹.
And after I will let you know
Everything about Thebes;
I will tell you where Jerusalem is situated,
And in which land;
160 Who founded it, and who made war against it.
And after this I would like to describe
All the great events of Troy:
Who founded it, in which land,
And why it was called Troy;
165 Who destroyed it and what became
Of those who held the city for so long.
Afterwards I will tell you the whole
Of the true history of Rome:
Who founded and built the walls
170 And imposed the first laws;
I will tell you all the work
Of the great barons, the judges,
The consuls and the senators.
After that the work won't be small
175 When it comes to the emperors
Who achieved great honours,
On account of which the city was feared
And fell into great pride.
For, the Latin attests to this,
180 All the world bowed to Rome
When Caesar Augustus ruled.
Afterwards the history will continue
With how France was populated
And which people inhabited it.
185 Then I would like to describe for you the time
In which Our Lord was born on earth,
And how he was crucified –
That will not be passed over in silence –



E com au tiers jor suscita
E ses amis d'enfer geta;
E com au jor d'assension
Monta en sa grant mansion,
E coment furent doctriné
Li apostre e enluminé
Dou saint Esperit et de sa grace,
E par combien après d'espace
Il s'en partirent et sevrerent
E par trestot le munt errerent
Por anuncier la loi nouvelle,
Qui mout par est saintisme e bele.
De lors vies la verité
Dirai selonc l'auctorité,
Ou preecherent ou morurent,
Com firent bien que fere durent.
Des sains, des saintes redirai
Selonc raison e conterai
Sous quels segnors recevre[n]t mort,
As comans Deu se tindrent fort;
Onques nel laisserent par paine
Ne por cremor de mort procheine.
Tot ce fera mout bon oïr,
Si s'en devra on esjoïr
Quant on les miracles orra
Dont Deus lor fais enlumina
Segnor, dont recovendra dire
Des emperours tot a tire
Qui primes fu crestienés
E bons crestieins apelez,
Regenerés ens es sains fons;
Quant cessa la destrucions
De ceus qui la loi Deu tenoient
E lui e ses ovres amoient.
Ce covendra plenierement
Dire sanz nul delaiement.
E puis après, sans demorance,
Qui premerains fu rois de France
Fais crestieins, coment ot non,

And how on the third day he rose from the dead
190 And freed his friends from hell,
And how, on the day of Ascension
He rose to his great house,
And how the **the** apostles
Were instructed and enlightened
195 By the Holy Spirit and its grace,
And afterwards, to what distances
They departed from one another and separated
And wandered all over the world
To announce the new law
200 Which is most holy and beautiful.
I will tell you the truth of their lives
According to the source;
Where they preached, where they died,
How they did what they had to do, and did it well.
205 I will tell you truthfully about the saints - the women and the men -
And I will tell you¹⁰
Under which rulers they received their deaths.
They held fast to God's commands;
They never abandoned them because of pain
210 Or the fear of imminent death.
All of this will be very good to listen to,
And one should rejoice
When one hears the miracles
With which God glorified their actions.
215 Lords, it will be right to tell
Of the emperors, one after another:
Who was the first to be christianised
And be called a good Christian,
Reborn in the holy font¹¹;
220 When the persecutions ended
Of those who kept God's law
And loved him and his works.
It will be right to tell this fully and
Without any delays.
225 And then [to tell], without pausing,
Who the first king of France was
To be made Christian, what his name was,



E de sa generation
Quel furent, coment estorerent
Les riches glises qu'il funderent.
Après sera dit en comun
Coment le Wandele, Got e Hun
France pelfirent et guasterent,
E les iglises desrouberent;
E des Normans vos iert retrait
E lor conquete e lor fait,
Coment destruirent Germanie,
Couloigne e France la guarnie,
Angou, Poitou, Borgogne tote;
De ce ne rest il nul doute
Que Flandres Wandes n'envaïssent
E mout de maus ne lor feïssent.
De quels gens Flandres fu puplée
Vos iert l'estoire bien contée,
Com se proverent, quel il furent,
Com il fierent que fere durent,
Ce vos sera trestout retrait
Tot si a point e tot a trait,
Que, qui voudra raison entendre,
Petit i avra a reprendre.
L'uevre iert mout bone et delitable
E d'estoire, sans nulle fable,
Por ce iert plaisans et creüe
Que de verité iert creüe.
La verité fet bon entendre,
Oïr, retenir et aprendre.
Qui verité aime et retient
As comans Damedeu se tient.
Je n'i veull fors verité dire.
Longue en iert assés la matire
Qu'en pensée ai contier a plain
Por qu'il plaise le chastelain
De l'Isle Rogier, mon seignor,
Cui Deus doint santé et honor,
Joie [e] paradis en la fin.

And of his descendants:
Who they were, how they built
230 The great churches that they founded.
Afterwards, it will be told all together
How the Vandals, Goths and Huns
Pillaged and devastated France
And robbed the churches;
235 And you will have an account of the Normans
And their conquest and their deeds:
How they destroyed Germany,
Cologne and prosperous France,
Anjou, Poitou, and all of Burgundy;
240 That there is no doubt
That the Vandals invaded Flanders
And did them many wrongs.
The history of the peoples who populated Flanders
Will be well told for you:
245 How they proved themselves, who they were,
How they did what was necessary.
All of this will be described for you,
Everything at the right moment and at the right pace
So that anyone who wants to hear the truth¹²
250 Will find little to criticise.
The work will be very good and agreeable
And composed of history without any fiction¹³;
And because it has grown from truth,
It will be pleasing and will be believed.
255 The truth is good to hear,
listen to, remember and learn.
Whoever loves and keeps the truth
Is keeping the commands of God.
I do not want to say anything but truth.
260 The content will be quite long
That I have in mind to tell in full
To please the Chatelain¹⁴
Of Lille, Roger, my lord;
May God give him health and honour,
265 Joy and, in the end, Paradise.



S'il veult, en romans dou latin
 Li cuic si traire lonc la letre
 Que plus ne mains n'i sera metre,
 Por qu'envie m'en laist en pais,
 Qui a maint home kierche fais
 Segnors, envie est male choze,
 Qu'ele a petit onques repose:
 Tempre ne tart ne main ne soir
 Ni li lait il le pais avoir.
 Cuers enveious n'iert ja a eise,
 Poi voit onques qui bien li plais;
 Ne ja d'enveious plus ne mains
 Ne quier plus dire, mais lontains
 Ne soit il ja ens en sa vie.
 De parler d'eus n'ai nulle envie.
 Deus les ament qui le puet fere.
 A l'estoire me veull retere.
 Si dirai; qui voudra entendre
 Oir i porra e aprendre.

In accordance with his wishes, I plan to translate the entire text
 From Latin into the vernacular¹⁵,
 And will not put in any more or less
 So that envy,
 270 Which is a burden to many a man, leaves me in peace.
 Lords, envy is an evil thing
 That scarcely ever rests:
 Neither early nor late, neither morning nor evening
 Does it let him have peace.
 275 An envious heart will never be at ease;
 It will scarcely ever see something that truly pleases it.
 I do not intend to say
 Any more or less about the envious, but
 In one's life they are never far away¹⁶.
 280 I have no desire to speak about them.
 God reforms them, for he is able.
 I wish to turn to the history.
 So I will say, whoever would like to hear it
 Can listen and learn.

Critical Notes

Translation

- Line 27** 'Raison' can mean both what is true and what is just. 'Mesure' is an important virtue in medieval culture and can be variously translated as moderation, restraint, reason or good judgement.
- Line 28** 'Droiture' means moral or legal rectitude as well as fairness or justice.
- Line 41** This is a reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism.
- Line 42** Chrism is a consecrated oil used in the administration of certain Catholic sacraments, including baptism.
- Line 64** The text literally states that he entered into proximity of death.
- Line 78** 'Siecles' means both the world and the age; it is sometimes also used in the Middle Ages to mean 'century', following the Roman usage of 'seculum' (and in line with the modern French usage of 'siècle').
- Line 92** 'Mesure', as previously noted, is an important virtue in medieval culture and can be variously translated as moderation, restraint, reason or good judgement.
- Line 104** 'Mesure', as previously noted, is an important virtue in medieval culture and can be variously translated as moderation, restraint, reason or good judgement.
- Line 155** This is a reference to the sources used by the author to compile this history.



- Line 206* As noted above, 'raison' can mean both what is true and what is just. Here, it is translated as 'truthfully' (see l.205).
- Line 219* As above, this is a reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism.
- Line 249* As noted above, 'raison' can mean both what is true and what is just.
- Line 252* Perhaps unsurprisingly, this line has often been quoted in work on medieval historiography. The word 'fable' can mean an invention, a lie, or vain speech, and has been variously interpreted by historians.
- Line 262* 'Chatelain' is a medieval French title given to the lord of a castle or fortified place.
- Line 267* The word used is 'romans', which can refer either to the vernacular (contrasted with Latin), or to French in particular (contrasted with other vernacular languages).
- Line 279* The subject is singular in the original ('the envious man').