

PSEUDO-PLINY, *De viris illustribus Romae* (On the Illustrious Men of Rome); PLINY THE ELDER, *Naturalis historia* (Natural History, excerpt)

In Latin, decorated manuscript on paper

Italy (Northern Italy), c. 1430-1450

*i + 28 + i*, all paper, watermarks, front flyleaf only, star with central circle and six triangular rays, same motif but different dimensions as Briquet 6039, Montréal, 1437, and Geneva, 1449, and 6040, Jeu (Indre), 1494; book block, large crown with double lines at base, three floral finials with two smaller rounded finials between them, and central finial expanded into a cross, cf. Piccard 51638-41, Innsbruck, 1491 (similar but not identical in shape, and with a different distance between the chain lines), modern foliation in pencil at top right corner, complete (collation i-iii<sup>8</sup> iv<sup>1</sup>), catchwords center lower margin, double vertical bounding lines ruled in dry point, horizontal lines ruled in light brown ink (justification 151 x 92 mm.), written in running humanistic script with cursive elements by a single hand in brown ink in 26-27 long lines, ff. 1-3 written below top line, remainder above top line, rubrics in very light brown (perhaps once red) and opening word of each section in epigraphic capitals, alternating 2-line initials in light brown (perhaps once red) and blue, 4-line initial on f. 1 outlined in red with Italian-style white vines and green infilling with tiny yellow vines, on a square ground divided into four quadrants alternating in blue and plum with tiny white vines, discoloration caused by water affecting all folios (from 25-100%) resulting in transfer of blue initials and some fading of text but no loss, except on ff. 1 and 2 where some words are illegible (these folios are much more easily read in high definition images), each quire reinforced with parchment strips, occasional inky fingerprints and other signs of use. Binding of yellow-beige parchment over thin cardboard, eighteenth(?) century, with alum-tawed endbands pulled through to front and back at head and tail of spine, very minor worming on back flyleaf and pastedown, considerable staining and spots of abrasion on front and back cover with several columns of sums in ink and pencil by modern hands. Dimensions 250 x 172 mm.

Widely read by the Italian humanists of the fifteenth century, this history of Rome is rarely available on the market. Affirming the humanist desire to resurrect a glorified Roman past, this classical text is currently undergoing its own scholarly re-birth, including a new edition and a series of extensive monographs, bringing to light its importance as a source for the history of Rome that is independent of the famous history of Rome by Livy. Our copy preserves a distinctive early version of humanist script and accompanying decoration

## PROVENANCE

1. Written in Italy, perhaps in Northern Italy in the 1430s or perhaps as late as them 1440s, based on the script and the distinctive style of the initial, an early version of a humanist white vine initial; the watermark has not been identified, but later versions are found in Innsbruck, perhaps (although conjecturally) additional evidence supporting an origin in the Northern part of Italy.

It could well have been written by the scribe for his own use; the text is written below top line on ff. 1-3, but thereafter written above top line, as though the scribe was initially uncertain about humanistic conventions. In the margins the scribe added some words he had accidentally left out while copying, including, for example, two lines in the bottom margin of f. 2. There are also several annotations meant as clarification and/or reading aids. For example: "hoc decius fecis" is found next to the opening of chapter 26 (f. 11v) where the name of Decius and the expected opening initial had been overlooked, probably in the exemplar, and next to chapters 41 and 42 (f. 16) "Finis

primum belli punici" and "2<sup>m</sup> bellum punicum" to mark the end and beginning of the First and Second Punic Wars.

## TEXT

ff. 1-28, *PLINII SECUNDI VIRI CONSULARIS DE VIRIS ILLUSTRIBUS LIBER FOELICITER INCIPIT DE PROCA*, incipit, "PROCA[s: added] REX Albanorum Amulium et Numitorum filios habuit ... [Chapter 77, Pompey the Great] ... qui non continens lacrimas illud plurimus et preciosissimis odoribus cremandum curavit";

*Liber de viris illustribus urbis Romae*, chapters 1-77; ed. Franz Pichlmayr, Leipzig, 1911; latest edition, Martin, Paris, 2016, first printed probably in Rome, Sixtus Riessinger, c. 1470, CW M50384; commonly attributed since the sixteenth century to Sextus Aurelius Victor (discussed in detail below); the text circulated widely and survives in over 150 manuscripts (Reeve and Tarrant, 1983, p. 151).

There are occasional errors, including a few incorrect two-line initials; for example, on f. 7, a blue M is crossed out, as it properly belongs to the first word of the second line, "Mucius," and E is substituted for G at the beginning of "Gaius" on f. 20. Chapter 49 of the edition about Publius Scipio, appears on f. 18v after Chapter 50. Throughout, "cum" is consistently spelled "quum." This use of the archaic form is an intentional choice on the part of the scribe of this text (or of the scribe of its exemplar) to emphasize the text's antiquity in a manner wholly in line with humanistic ideals of returning to the cultural, literary, and philosophical values of classical Rome.

ff. 28rv, *De Gaius Iulio caesare*, incipit, "ANIMI Vigore praestantissimum arbitror Gaius Caesarem dictatorem ... [f. 28v] iterum que apud Thassum Scipionis ea concremasse fide atque non legisse. FINIS. *Plinii viri consularis de viris illustribus liber explicit. Amen*".

Gaius Plinius Secundus, *Naturalis Historia*, 7.91.1-7.94.6. Copied by the same scribe, this short excerpt from Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* completes the manuscript. The choice of this excerpt is fitting as it recounts the characteristics and victories of Julius Caesar and again of Pompey the Great, Caesar's one-time accomplice, son-in-law, and eventual enemy who featured in the final chapter of the previous text.

*De viris illustribus Urbis romae* tells the story of Roman history (and pre-history) in a series of biographies. Exemplary literature intended that lives of their subjects would serve as moral examples of leadership, civic duty, and ethical conduct. This genre, popular during the classical period, was in turn adopted by early Christian writers, who used it to recount the lives and deaths of Christian martyrs. In the early Italian Renaissance classical exemplary texts were sought out by scribes and readers and emulated by authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio. This manuscript is therefore a witness to the humanist desire to resurrect a glorified Roman past. This text is currently having its own scholarly re-birth, including a new edition (Martin, 2016), and a series of extensive monographs by Joachim Fugmann, bringing to light its importance as a source for the history of Rome that is independent of the famous history of Rome by Livy (Fugmann, 1990-2003, 2016).

Since the sixteenth century, *De viris illustribus* has usually been attributed to Sextus Aurelius Victor (c. 320-90 CE), a Roman historian and politician, because it was frequently presented alongside two of his histories in the manuscript tradition. It has also been attributed to various Roman authors of similar texts, including Cornelius Nepos, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger and Elder. Our manuscript credits Pliny the Elder with *De viris illustribus* and includes a small segment from the same Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, a substantial encyclopedic volume meant to encompass all knowledge of the natural world, including some reflections on Roman history. Braccesi's argument that this text was in fact by Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) (Braccesi 1973) has not convinced other scholars (see Sage, 1975, etc.). Thus, the author of this work remains unknown, although scholars do agree that it was written in the first half of the fourth century, a time when many authors were compiling short summaries of Roman history.

There are two main textual traditions represented by the surviving manuscripts. In one (known as A), surviving in only three manuscripts, the text is transmitted alongside two similar exemplary texts by Sextus Aurelius Victor, the *Origo gentis Romanae* and *Caesares*, and contains chapters 2-86, ending with Cleopatra; the first chapter is excluded because it duplicates the narrative in Victor's *Origo gentis Romanae*. In the other, more popular tradition (B), *De viris illustribus* is transmitted independently and is usually attributed to Pliny (the Younger, if indicated), and contains chapters 1-77, beginning with the mythological King Procas and concluding with Pompey the Great (Reed and Tarrant, 1983, p. 149-50; Sage, 1980, 83-84). The manuscript described here unquestionably belongs to this latter tradition.

Manuscripts of this text very rarely appear on the market: only five are recorded since 1900, including TM 371, a contemporary Italian manuscript sold by Les Enluminures in 2012. Before that, a copy was last auctioned in 1957 (now at the University of Kansas), which is one of only five in the United States according to de Ricci's *Census and Supplement* (two copies are held by the Walters Art Museum). The availability of this manuscript therefore presents an exceptional opportunity to acquire a complete copy of an influential classical text with remarkable longevity within the genre of exemplary literature.

This manuscript is copied by an unknown scribe in a distinctive early version of a humanist script with numerous cursive elements. Humanistic script was a clear, readable script "invented" in Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century by the young humanist, Poggio Bracciolini (d. 1459). An early and enthusiastic user of this reformed script was the Florentine humanist, Niccolò Niccoli (d. 1437) (Ullman, 1960, pp. 59-77); Niccoli's distinctive hand was quicker than a formal bookhand and included numerous cursive elements, like the script found in our manuscript. Through the course of the fifteenth century, scribes across Italy embraced both formal humanistic bookhands (like Poggio's script), and quicker cursive humanist scripts (like Niccoli's), which eventually developed into its own formal bookhand, Italic script.

## LITERATURE

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Unknown [Sextus Aurelius Victor], *Liber de viris illustribus urbis Romae*, The Latin Library <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/victor.ill.html>

Corpus scriptorum latinorum, online edition of Pseudo-[Aurelius Victor](#), *De viris illustribus urbis Romae*, ed. Franz Pichlmayr, Leipzig, 1911 [http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/aurelius\\_victor/illustr.html#77](http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/aurelius_victor/illustr.html#77)

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