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# A New Manuscript Fragment of the Old French Romance *Meliacin*

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&

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*Meliacin* is one of those romances in Old French that are difficult to situate in literary history. At a time when most romances had become prose writings, in the late thirteenth century, the writer of *Meliacin* chose to write in octosyllables with couplet rhymes, following the tradition of Chrétien de Troyes.<sup>1</sup> He also borrowed formal elements from another ancient tradition, that of romances with lyrical interludes. Thus *Meliacin* is one of the last narratives in verse interspersed with songs, rondeaux and motets. But its specific quality mainly comes from two other elements: first it forms a pair with *Cleomadès* by Adenet le Roi, which tells exactly the same story at the same time; second, it borrows from an unusual source, that of the arab tales of the Arabian Nights.<sup>2</sup> The motif of the mechanical flying horse was introduced into western literature through *Meliacin* and *Cleomadès*, before appearing, combined with Pegasus, from the pen of Ludovico Ariosto.<sup>3</sup>

The story goes as follows: A wizard, Clamazart, offers the King of Armenia an ebony magic horse, in return for whatever he might wish himself. The king foolishly agrees, but the wizard then asks for the hand of the king's daughter, Gloriande, in marriage, which she abhors. She is saved from her fate by her brother, Meliacin. Infuriated, the wizard sends the hero into the air on the flying horse, without telling him how to direct it. But clever Meliacin learns how to lead the horse and finds love in a faraway country. Then Clamazart abducts Celine, Meliacin's *amie*, and the lovers must go through numerous trials before meeting again and escaping on the flying horse.

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<sup>1</sup> In the early fourteenth century Jean Maillart wrote another romance of this type, *Le Roman du Conte d'Anjou*, but the tradition died with him. The practice of lyrical quotations is of a very different nature with Machaut.

<sup>2</sup> Other medieval texts are inspired by oriental sources, but *Meliacin* and *Cleomadès*, like *Floire et Blanchefleur*, are not **moral** tales; they are unusual borrowings from the love tales of arabic literature.

<sup>3</sup> The hippogriff of Orlando Furioso combines the two streams of classical and oriental traditions. On the way in which the motif of the wooden horse was exploited after *Meliacin* and *Cleomadès*, see A. HOUDEBERT, 'Les ailes du désir: variations romanesques sur le thème de la chevauchée aérienne', *Dialogue des cultures courtoises*, International Section of Courtly literature, Budapest, 2012, p. 129-148.

The origin of the present article is the recent discovery of a new fragment of the manuscript of *Meliacin*.<sup>4</sup> Dáibhí Ó Cróinín presents his discovery as well as the facsimile reproductions of the two sides of the binding fragment, with a tentative transcription of the text. Aurélie Houdebert then sets the new discovery in context, with an assessment of the date of the script (late thirteenth century) and a discussion of the importance of the new fragment in relation to the earliest known manuscripts.

Girart d'Amiens was a court poet in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and the opening years of the fourteenth, and author of three Old French verse romances, *Escanor*, *Meliacin*, and *L'histoire de Charlemagne*. Around 1280, while he was resident at the court of the English king, Edward I, he was commissioned by Edward's wife, Eleanor of Castille, to compose an Arthurian epic (in 25938 rhyming verses), set in Northumbria, entitled *Escanor*.<sup>5</sup> The poem survives in a single copy (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 24374) and in two other fragments. Girart's second composition, *Meliacin* (or *Meliacin ou le cheval de fust*, to give it its full title), in 19159 octosyllables,<sup>6</sup> was thought to have been composed in 1285, but the author of the most recent study of the text (and co-author of this article) has come to the conclusion that the poem was the result of a sort of literary contest, initiated by Queen Mary of Brabant, between Girart and a rival poet, Adenet le Roi, that played out during the years 1280-1285.<sup>7</sup> Aurélie Houdebert's conclusion is that Queen Marie commissioned not only the poems but also the earliest manuscript copies of *Meliacin* (Paris, BnF fr. 1633 and 1589), which share features of script and decoration, and the Florentine codex (Biblioteca Riccardiana 2747), all of which have indications that they were written at the end of 1285 or at the beginning of 1286.<sup>8</sup> This means that the surviving text of *Meliacin* was very likely first written down under the supervision of the poet himself, or his patron. After that date, only two other manuscript copies survive from the early fourteenth century,<sup>9</sup> and in both those codices the text is hybrid (due to the loss of the first fourteen folios in their exemplar); the scribes used the opening section of *Cleomadès* to fill the resulting gap in the story of *Meliacin*.

Girart's third epic, *Charlemagne* (in 23000 verses), was commissioned during the reign of Philip the Fair by his brother, Charles of Valois, who held an imperial title (acquired by his marriage to Catherine de Courtenay, heiress to the Latin kingdom of Constantinople) during the years 1301-1306, though he failed to realise the ambitions that went with it. Antoinette Saly has set the writing of the poem during the years 1303-1306;<sup>10</sup> the text's most recent editor, Daniel Métraux, preferred the years 1301-1303,<sup>11</sup> when French politics centred around the revolts in Flanders and in Aragon. The work is less relevant to our purpose, as it belongs to an earlier phase in the history of French romances, when their concerns centred exclusively on Arthurian and Carolingian themes.

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<sup>4</sup> The study is offered here in honour of Rita Beyers and her contribution over the years to the history of manuscript and textual transmission.

<sup>5</sup> GIRART D'AMIENS, *Escanor, roman arthurien en vers de la fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. by R. TRACHSLER, Geneva, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> GIRART D'AMIENS, *Meliacin ou le Cheval de fust*, ed. by A. SALY, *Senefiance* 27, Aix-en-Provence, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> A. HOUBEDEBERT, *Le Cheval d'èbène à la cour de France*, Ph.D., Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> See the important study by R. & M. E. ROUSE, 'The constable and the flying horse: emerging commercial production of vernacular romance in late thirteenth-century Paris', in *Manuscripts and their Makers. Commercial Book-Producers in Medieval Paris, 1200-1500*, Turnhout, 2000, 1, p. 99-114. For a conspectus of the manuscripts, see HOUBEDEBERT, *op. cit.* (n. 3), esp. p. 378-404.

<sup>9</sup> Paris BnF fr. 1455 (c. 1320) and Bruxelles BR IV 319 (c. 1325-1330). See A. SALY, 'Les Manuscrits du *Meliacin* de Girart d'Amiens', *Travaux de linguistique et de littérature*, 18/2 (1980), p. 23-35.

<sup>10</sup> A. SALY, 'La date du *Charlemagne* de Girart d'Amiens', in *Au carrefour des routes d'Europe: la chanson de geste*, *Senefiance* 21 (1987), p. 975-981.

<sup>11</sup> D. METRAUX (ed.), *A critical edition of Girart d'Amiens's L'histoire le Roy Charlemaine* (Lewiston – Queenston – Lampeter 2003), 1, p. xv-xxvii.

*Meliacin*, by contrast, represents a new departure in the history of French literature. The most striking feature of the poem, by contrast with other early romances, is its use of motifs drawn from oriental tales (in this case, a magic flying horse).<sup>12</sup> The choice of the topic is due to a special occasion: Princess Blanche de France, widowed from the Infant of Castille in 1275, came back to Paris to obtain protection from her brother, King Philip the Bold. She told the court an Arabic tale she had heard or read in Spain, quite similar to the tale of ‘the ebony Horse’ in the *Arabian Nights*. Thus the Queen of France had an opportunity to commission an original literary work, both entertaining and delivering a political message.<sup>13</sup>

It is all the more intriguing, therefore, in light of the chequered early history of *Meliacin* and its very limited manuscript transmission, to discover that a new manuscript witness to the poem has come to light, in the most unexpected of circumstances. In the binding of a book printed in Paris in 1699, a precious early fragment has been preserved.<sup>14</sup> The title-page (see pl. 1) reads as follows: JOB | TRADUIT EN FRANÇOIS | avec | UNE EXPLICATION | Tirée des Saints Peres, & des Auteurs | Ecclesiastiques. | TROISIEME EDITION. | {shield containing figure supported by anchor, with motto: ARDET. AMANS SPE. NIXA. FIDES} *Jouxte la Copie imprimée* | A PARIS, | Chez GUILLAUME DESPREZ. Imprimeur & Li-braire ordinaire du Roy, ruë S. Jacques, à S.P rospier [sic] | & aux trois Vertus, au dessus des Mathurins. | M. DC. XCIX. | Avec Approbation & Privilege du Roy.<sup>15</sup>

The dimensions of the book are as follows: cover: 205 × 120 mm; page-size: 185 × 115 mm. There are (36) + 568 + (11) pages in all, the opening 36 pages comprising a ‘Preface’ and the final 11 comprising an index (*Tables des principales choses contenues dans ce Livre*). The binding fragment measures approx. 195 × 45 mm. A second, unrelated, binding fragment (similar dimensions) contains a Latin text, which I have not been able to identify. Visible words are *fragilitate, postulaverint, uice maledicta, ut os(tendit ?) qui*. The text may be from a liturgical manuscript: there are traces of red ink and the roman numeral .xx. appears in red above *ut os(tendit) qui*. There is a pencilled shelf-mark on the fly-leaf above a modern library *ex libris* stamp (see pl. 2).

The surviving French text corresponds to verses 17267-17287 and 17296-17317 of *Meliacin* in the standard modern edition of Antoinette Saly.<sup>16</sup> The passage that is preserved in the new manuscript fragment here published for the first time is the moment in the tale when the two African astrologers who are supposed to marry Meliacin’s sisters begin their quest to find the hero, reading the destiny of the two lovers in the stars. Meliacin and Celine are

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<sup>12</sup> The eastern origin of the tale, claimed by Tressan in the eighteenth century, was definitively established by Victor Chauvin in 1898; see V. CHAUVIN, *op. cit.* (n. 11), and G. PARIS, ‘Girard d’Amiens’, in *Histoire littéraire de la France*, 31, Paris, 1893.

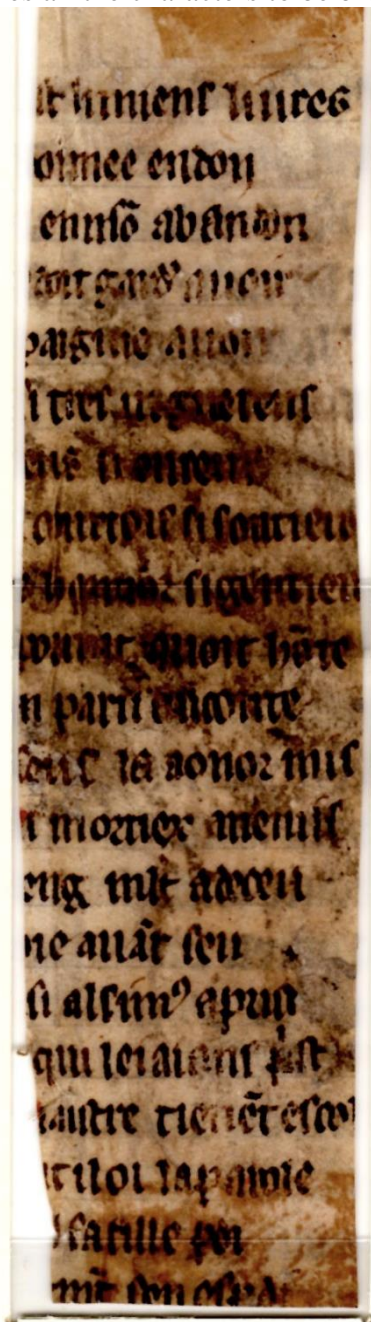
<sup>13</sup> The queen’s purpose was clearly to offer a brilliant entertainment to her relatives at the court of France. The story related by Blanche, as the romances declaimed by the rival poets, with musical interludes, were opportunities of spectacular recreations. But the political aspects of this literary contest are also obvious: compromised by Pierre de la Brosse’s death, Mary of Brabant wants to appear as a powerful queen, by sponsoring two romances that glorify the French Kingdom and claim its influence in Spain (see A. HENRY, *Les Œuvres d’Adenet le Roi*, Slatkine reprints, Geneva, 1996, 5, p. 559-567).

<sup>14</sup> I am very grateful to John Gillis, Conservation Department, Trinity College Dublin Library, for expertly detaching the fragment and placing it in a protective mounting. I am grateful also to Dr Tim O’Neill for arranging the process. Special thanks to Dr Eleanor Roach (Philadelphia), who first identified the *Meliacin* text, and to Dr Evelyn Mullally (Belfast) and Prof. William Sayers (New York) for help along the way.

<sup>15</sup> The book formed part of a library purchased from St John’s College, Waterford, which is a secondary school run by the De La Salle order. I am grateful to Seán Day, proprietor of *Carraig Books*, Blackrock, Dublin, for searching through the other volumes acquired in the collection; unfortunately, his search failed to turn up any other book with a related binding.

<sup>16</sup> *Meliacin ou le Cheval de fust*, ed. by A. SALY, *op. cit.*, p. 576-578.

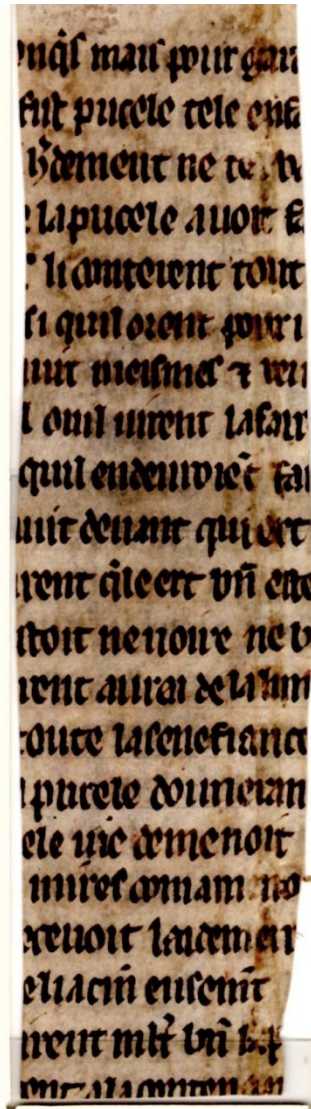
already back in Armenia at that stage of the tale; the brief analepsis about the astrologers enables all the characters to be brought together again at the end of the story.



- a.)t li miens livres |
- b. onnee en don|
- c. enn son abandon|
- d. doit garder avoir |
- e.)paignie auoir |
- f. i tres uiguereus |
- g. e)u(z?) si eureus(?) |
- h. courtois si soutieu|
- i. (?) onnor si gentieu|
- j. porr(?)it auoir honte |
- k. en paru au conte
- l. s)eus l a a onor mis |
- m. i mortieus anemis |
- n. eng moult a deceu |
- o. ne auant seu |
- p. si alsimus aprist |
- q. qui le íaians prist |
- r.)autre tienent esco[le] |
- s.)t il oi la parole |
- t.) sa fille perdi |
- u. ment sen esperdi |

vv. 17267-17287 (ed. A. Saly)

1. (o)nques mais pour gar|
  2. fist pucele tele enf|
  3. hardement ne te(?) v|
  4. (e) la pucele auoit fa|
  5. (s) li conterent tout |
  6. si qui l orent pour(|
  7. nuit meismes et ueu|
  8. l ou il uírent l affair|
  9. qu il en deuroient fai|
  - 10.)uit deuant qui ert |
  - 11.)rent qu ele ert bien est(e|
  12. stoit ne noire ne b|
  13. irent au rai de la lun(|
  14. t)oute la senefiance|
  - 15.) pucele d ouneran|
  16. ele uíe demenoít |
  17. míres com am(e?)no |
  - 18.)eceuoit laidemen(|
  19. [M]eliacin ensement |
  20. írent moult bien l ap|
  21. ent a la contenan
- vv. 17297-17317 (ed. A. Saly)



This fragment comes from no identified manuscript, whole or partial. It is the only trace of an otherwise unknown codex, and this major discovery opens new perspectives for the study of *Meliacin*. It was long thought that the romance of Girart d'Amiens was less read in the Middle Ages than that of his rival, Adenet le Roi; it was apparently no longer copied after the mid fourteenth century. Thus while *Cleomadès* appears in seven codices from the period 1330 to the end of the fifteenth century, the course of *Meliacin*'s history came to an end with those hybrid manuscripts mentioned above (n. 9).<sup>17</sup> That fact, added to the lack of consideration for *Meliacin* before Victor Chauvin conclusively proved that it was no plagiarism,<sup>18</sup> has distorted our global perception of the romances' reception in the Middle Ages. However, *Meliacin* did not fall into oblivion as rapidly as was previously thought: in the fifteenth century, several manuscripts were still kept in the Royal Library in Paris. In addition, the romance and its author were even mentioned by Bucarius in *Le Pastoralet*,

<sup>17</sup> Moreover *Cleomadès* became a prose narrative in the second half of the fifteenth century, which greatly helped spread its version of the story, eclipsing permanently that of *Meliacin* (*Le Cheval volant en bois, édition de deux mises en prose du Cléomadès, d'après le manuscrit Paris, Bnf fr. 12561 et l'imprimé de Guillaume Leroy* (Lyon, c. 1480), ed. by F. MAILLET and R. TRACHSLER, Paris, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> V. CHAUVIN, 'Pacolet et les Mille et une Nuits', *Wallonia*, VI (1898), Bruxelles, p. 5-19.

written between 1422 and 1425.<sup>19</sup> Most of all, it appears that *Meliacin* enjoyed some initial prestige, equal to that of *Cléomadès*: the commission from the royal circle stipulated that the two poems should be written and recorded in three illuminated manuscripts each.<sup>20</sup> Besides those complete manuscripts, which can be accurately dated, we have two early fragments of *Cleomadès*.<sup>21</sup> If the new fragment of *Meliacin* is contemporary with the *Cleomadès* fragments, it would confirm that, at least in the decades after they were written, the two romances of *le cheval de fust* were similarly distributed.<sup>22</sup>

In order to situate the new fragment in the manuscript tradition, I compared it with one of the oldest manuscripts (BnF fr. 1633 and BnF fr. 1589, copied in Paris in late 1285 or early 1286, MSS A and B) and one of the hybrid manuscripts (BnF fr. 1455, copied in Paris c. 1320, MS D).<sup>23</sup> I use therefore two witnesses from the late thirteenth century (A and B) and one from the early fourteenth century (D). To get an exhaustive view of the variants, a third manuscript given to the Parisian book-maker in the late 1280s (Biblioteca Riccardiana 2747, MS C) could also be taken into account. But Antoinette Saly, who lists the readings of these manuscripts in her textual notes, did not identify any variants for the passage that interests us: the text of C is completely identical with the text of A,<sup>24</sup> on which her edition is based.

Examination of the text and the script confirms that the fragment dates from the late thirteenth century rather than the early fourteenth. The comparison with the other manuscripts also reveals its great similarity with the A, B and C manuscripts. This is what can be observed:

From a paleographic point of view, we can see typical features of this period at the turn of the century: the stem of the *t* remains discreet but rises slightly above the line in places. The *a* almost always appears with a double bulge, just as with the scribe of A (the scribe of B alternates the two types of *a*). The long *s* is preferred at the end of words (m. *anemiſ*) but the short *s* (a. *livres*) can also be found sometimes. The accents on the *i* are rather frequent and used in a seemingly random way. These characteristics can be found more or less frequently with the copyists of the complete manuscripts of the thirteenth century, but also with the copyist of D.<sup>25</sup> Yet some differences appear on some points. The copyists of manuscripts A and B, as well as the copyist of the fragment, make a scrupulous use of *z* (which always corresponds to [ts]), whereas the copyist of D, later in date, often uses *z* for *s*.

As regards the text, we can establish that the divergent readings offered by the fragment are very few. The language of the copyist, insofar as we can know it from such a short fragment, makes it likely that the manuscript was copied in a Parisian milieu, like all the known manuscripts of *Meliacin*, or at least that the scribe followed its pattern very closely. We will first consider the cases where the readings of the fragment are opposed to all the other witnesses. Only one passage contains a blatant copyist mistake: in line q. the fragment gives ‘qui le jaians’ whereas all the manuscripts give ‘que li jaians’, the latter being the

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<sup>19</sup> BUCARIUS, *Le Pastoralet*, ed. by J. BLANCHARD (*Publications de l'Université de Rouen*, 1983), vv. 7435-7439.

<sup>20</sup> See ROUSE & ROUSE, *op. cit.* (n. 4), p. 99-114.

<sup>21</sup> Krakow, Biblioteka Jagiellonska gall. 4°142; Paris, BnF n.a.f. 5094.

<sup>22</sup> The manuscripts commissioned by the royal court are the following: three illuminated manuscripts of *Cleomadès* (Paris, BnF Arsenal 3142; BnF fr. 24404; Cologny-Genève, Biblioteca Bodmeriana cod.1) and three illuminated manuscripts for *Meliacin* (Paris, BnF fr. 1633; BnF fr. 1589; Firenze, Biblioteca Riccardiana 2747).

<sup>23</sup> The passage that interests us can be found at fol. 141<sup>r</sup> in A, fol. 150<sup>r</sup> in B, and fol. 118<sup>r-v</sup> in D. MSS D is the oldest hybrid manuscript. The second one is MSS E (Brussels BR IV 319). Certainly based on D, it has minimal variants from its pattern.

<sup>24</sup> The Florentine manuscript has some interesting variants in places. For example, only in this manuscript do we discover what happens to the prince's mother. C is thus a witness to a distinct version of the romance, although the variants are few. But for the astrologers' journey, especially verses 17267-17317, there is no textual difference between C and A.

<sup>25</sup> See HOUDEBERT, *op. cit.* (n. 3), Annexe 12, p. 618-619.

correct one. Two other passages appear as variants unique to the fragment itself, but it is not certain because of the difficulty in deciphering the text: in line l, the copyist may have substituted 'tens' for 'jors'. He also seems to have chosen the subjective case for the possessive 'si' rather than the objective case 'ses' in line m. ('[s]i mortie<sup>x</sup> anemis' vs 'ses mortie<sup>x</sup> anemis'). Ultimately, these are insignificant variants. By comparison, the D manuscript has many more mistaken readings. It differs from all the other witnesses in four passages: we notice a mistake in the rhymes (*b.* 'donné' instead of 'donnée'), a lexical substitution (*g.* "purs" instead of 'preux'), a change in verbal tense (9. "devoient" instead of 'devroient'), and a syntax mistake (10. "qu'ele ert" instead of ' qui ert'). Manuscript B has only one variant of its own (*o.* "que je ne l'avoie seu" instead of 'que ne l'avoie avant seu'), whereas manuscript A has none. As for the text, the new fragment is thus closer to A and B than to D.

If we consider now the minimal graphical variants, which affect neither the meaning nor the syntax, we see that the fragment is more similar to A. Concerning the graphical features of *onor* and its derivatives, all the manuscripts show differences between them, but also within the copy itself, so this criterion of comparison is not significant. As regards *maistre* (*r.* '[m]aistres tienent escol[e]'), it appears that B and D choose 'maistre', A and the fragment choose 'mestre'. Here again, it is difficult to draw any conclusion. However, it is obvious that B and D show more graphical variants than the fragment and manuscript A. The copyist of B has his own way of writing word-endings in *els,ils/eus,ieus* (*f.* 'viguereuz', *g.* 'eureuz', *h.* 'soutiz', *i.* 'gentiz'). The copyist of D is the only one who systematically uses double consonants ('pucelle', 'telle', 'onnorance') and who writes *z* or *s* indifferently at the ends of words : overall, D has nine graphical variants from all the other manuscripts. By contrast, manuscript A and the fragment have only one graphical variant: *q.* "gaians" instead of 'jaians' in A; *c.* 'enn son abandon' in the fragment. In this case it seems the double *-n* is only a careless mistake of the copyist.

Finally, concerning the layout of the text, it appears that the manuscript from which the fragment comes had the same number of lines per page as the three manuscripts of the Parisian book-maker. The parchment strip used to reinforce the binding was cut from the top of a page along twenty-one lines. Nine lines are missing between the end of the recto and the beginning of the verso, which leads us to conclude that the text was written in columns of thirty lines. This is exactly the case for the A, B, and C manuscripts (manuscripts D and E have forty lines).

We can thus conclude that the new fragment discovered by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín is likely to have come from a manuscript of the late thirteenth century, copied in the same manner as the earliest known manuscripts of *Meliacin*. Could it be a codex emanating directly from the same workshop? It is quite possible, considering the unusual quantity of manuscripts commissioned by the French Court from the Parisian book-maker Robert de l'Isle-Adam. If the manuscript from which the new fragment is taken was not part of the royal commission, it was written according to the same text-pattern as manuscript A. This pattern may have circulated very early outside Robert's workshop. However, the precious new fragment confirms that the twin romances had met the same fate when they first appeared. *Cleomadès* finally eliminated its rival only two centuries later, probably because of chance events in the conservation and the circulation of the texts.



# Appendix

Placeholder for edition

[Pl. 1. Title-page of Job translation.]

[Pl. 2. Inside-cover of book, showing binding-fragment in place, early (?) pencilled shelf-mark and modern *ex-libris*.]