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Gregory of Tours, the Eastern Emperor, and Merovingian Gaul

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Abstract

Gregory of Tours (538-594) was a historian of his time and place. His primary concerns were shaped by his theological, ecclesiastical, and political commitments: western orthodoxy, the Roman Catholic Church, and Merovingian Gaul. It thus is surprising that in his famous *Ten Books of Histories* he takes a more than passing interest in the eastern Roman Emperor and empire. This article explores Gregory's passages on imperial Rome and argues that they were intended to highlight the virtues and vices of particular Merovingian kings in comparison with particular Roman emperors. Also, Gregory meant to subtly point to the dangers of Merovingian and imperial entanglements.

About the Author

Robert Winn earned his Ph.D. in the Early Christian Studies program at the Catholic University of America, and his degree focused on two examination areas: late antique history and Greek and Latin patristics. His research interests include religious and intellectual history in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Prior to joining Northwestern's faculty, he was a visiting professor at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. Dr. Winn is the author of *Eusebius of Emesa: Church and Theology in the Mid-Fourth Century*, which was published by The Catholic University of America Press in 2011. His published articles have appeared in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies* and *Vigiliae Christianae*, and he has presented papers at the International Conference on Patristic Studies at Oxford University. His most recent conference papers, both read at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (2011 and 2012), were entitled "Lessons from Lesser Kings: Books IV and V of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*" and "On Avarice: Eusebius of Emesa and John Chrysostom."

Winn currently has two long term research projects: (1) a study of Bede as an exegete and historian in the context of early medieval historiography and (2) a book intended for an undergraduate audience that surveys the political and religious history of the late Roman Empire and early Middle Ages. It is tentatively titled *Empire and Church from Constantine to Charlemagne*.

Gregory of Tours, the Eastern Emperor, and Merovingian Gaul

by Robert Winn, Ph.D.

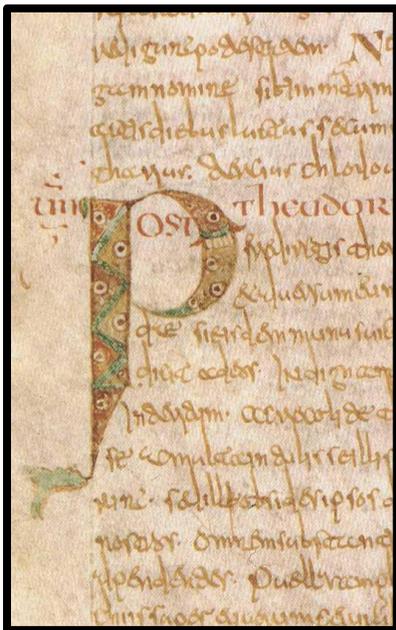
Gregory of Tours (538-594) indicated throughout his *Ten Books of Histories* that his primary concern was the activities and wars, often civil wars, of the sixth-century Merovingian kings.¹ At several points in his text, however, Gregory superseded this parochial perspective and reminded his audience of the eastern Roman Emperor and empire. Modern scholarship has confirmed that Gaul was not isolated from the world of the eastern Mediterranean during the sixth century, and historians interested in the connections between Constantinople and late antique Gaul often turn to Gregory’s writings as a contemporary witness on the nature of this relationship.² In fact, Gregory glances east enough times in his narrative that it seems to be more

¹ Text: *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelmus Levison, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum I.1 (Hanover, 1951). Cited hereafter as follows: *Hist.* book/preface number. chapter number (Krusch page number) in the notes and as *Histories* in the narrative. All English translations are my own or follow Lewis Thorpe’s translation [Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin, 1974)], and where I quote from Thorpe’s translation I cite it as follows: Thorpe, page number. Gregory’s primary interest in Merovingian affairs: *Hist.* Praefatio I (3), Praefatio II (36), and Praefatio V (193).

² The following list is representative and not exhaustive. Averil Cameron, “The Early Religious Policies of Justin II,” in *Orthodox Churches and the West*, Studies on Church History 13 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 51-67 [Gregory on the imperial gift of the relic of the cross to Radegund]. Eugen Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (Düsseldorf: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1983). Walter Goffart, “Byzantine Policy and the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald,” *Traditio* 13 (1957), 73-118; Ingrid Heidrich, “Syrische Kirchengemeinden im Frankenreich des 6. Jahrhunderts,” *Aus Archiven und Bibliotheken: Festschrift für Raymund Kottje zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Hubert Mordek (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992), 20-32; Isabel Moreira, “*Provisatrix optima*: St. Radegund of Poitiers’ Relic petitions to the East,” *Journal of Medieval History* 19 (1993),

than a passing interest to him even if he most often directs his audience’s attention to the region of the world he knew best in northern Gaul.

Gregory was not writing for an audience of contemporary scholars who might appreciate



Initial from a 7th century manuscript of Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks*.
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the eastern material in his history, and, given that he was not simply intending to provide information on the east, it is often, at first reading, puzzling to determine how his vignettes about the eastern empire relate to the various narrative threads Gregory unraveled about the Merovingian kings. In fact, the seemingly episodic nature of these passages on the eastern emperor is apiece with the character of the book as a whole: it often appears to be little more than a random and untamed series of anecdotes. It may be that this simply represents Gregory’s understanding of history: a narrative comprising both regal history and miracle tales.³ Giselle de Nie and Walter Goffart, however, have shown persuasively that there

285-305.

³ In his preface to Book II of the *Histories*, Gregory claims that, by weaving together an account of the wars of kings and the miracles of saints, he is following the precedent of the late antique historians Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, and Sulpicius Severus. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill gave priority to this statement as an explanation for how Gregory proceeded in his history [Wallace-Hadrill, “Gregory of Tours and Bede: Their Views on the Personal Qualities of Kings,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2 (1968), 32].

is more at work in Gregory’s *Histories* than a binary composition of wars and miracles. An inner logic and organizational structure shapes the *Histories*, and their arguments only follow from Gregory’s own authorial comments in the later books of the *Histories* reminding his readers what they read in earlier books and thus inviting them to make narrative connections.⁴ There is, in other words, purpose and design to the *Histories*. Gregory purposefully selected and arranged the material in his composition, and, expecting much from his readers in this respect, he anticipated that his audience would keep up with the various narrative threads and presumably appreciate how they together constituted his primary narrative about the activities and wars of the Merovingian kings.

Assuming, therefore, that Gregory has incorporated material about the eastern emperor purposefully and that this material has some relevance to his primary narrative, the question the present article will explore is how these passages function in the *Histories*. Two useful angles from which one can address these questions are the instances when Gregory paired an emperor

⁴ Giselle de Nie, *View from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours* (Amsterdam, 1987), 69. Her concern is primarily the inner-logic governing the passages on prodigies in Gregory’s narrative, but her theory has wide application in Gregory’s *Histories*. Walter Goffart has argued that one of the organizing principles of Gregory’s history is irony, and it is therefore just as important to observe how Gregory arranges his text as it is to note what the text says [Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 174-83]. On Gregory’s authorial comments to his readers, see, for example, the outset of book seven where he comments that he will resume various stories he had started in the previous book [*Hist.* VII.1 (323)]. Thus, he refers the reader to a previous passage when he mentions Rigunth at *Hist.* VII.9 (331). For a similar example, see his account of Hermenegild in Book VI where he mentions that he had already discussed him once before and would now resume his story [*Hist.* VI.43 (314)].

with a Merovingian king and episodes Gregory discussed that represent imperial involvement in the Merovingian kingdoms. Reading Gregory’s *Histories* along these lines suggests that he included eastern Roman material in his history for two reasons. Pairing a Merovingian king with an emperor provided him with an opportunity to highlight the virtues that he thought must accompany royal authority while indicating the usually disastrous results that follow from rulers who exhibit vices instead. At this level, the inclusion of material about the emperor constituted part of his larger agenda to express moral outrage at or approval of the activities of the Merovingians. On the other hand, discussing episodes such as the Gundavold affair and Childebert’s agreement with Maurice II allowed him to comment, often subtly, on imperial involvement in Merovingian affairs or the Merovingian kings getting involved with imperial affairs.

Our interest, therefore, is not so much the factual information Gregory knew about particular emperors, or even its accuracy, as it is how he used this information in his narrative. Of equal importance to this project are cases where it is certain that he has suppressed information about particular emperors or events in the east. The world-view of Gregory himself is the focus, and the value of this approach lies in the extent to which it illuminates one western, Gallic bishop’s perspective on the eastern emperor at the end of the sixth century.

Prologue: Justinian, Theudebert, and Theudebald

Gregory reached his mid-twenties when the Emperor Justinian died (565), and, in many ways, Gregory and Justinian belong to two different generations. This may explain, although not adequately, one of the “obvious gaps” in the *Histories*: Gregory largely passed over Justinian in silence and only mentioned him by name in his one sentence obituary.⁵ The one passage where he received more than a passing, albeit anonymous, reference was in Gregory’s treatment of the sequence of events involving the incursion of King Theudebert into Italy and his son Theudebald’s losses in the same region.

At this point in the *Histories* Gregory has already provided important details about this king. First, Theudebert is a successful military leader and had demonstrated his prowess from his youth. He protected Gaul from the Danes, he overcame the Thuringians to revenge what Gregory has Theudebert’s father Theuderic describe as the treacherous torture and slaughter of hostages exchanged in the hopes of establishing peace, and he subdued the Goths in territory that Clovis had conquered and the Merovingians considered their own.⁶ Although Gregory disparaged the carnage resulting from civil warfare among the Merovingians, he took a more positive view of military success over groups that were hostile to the Catholic Merovingian

⁵ “obvious gaps”: Goffart, *Narrators*, 160. Goffart observes that, in light of his discussion of Justinian in one of his other books, the *Glory of the Martyrs* (*Liber in Gloria Martyrum* 102), Gregory obviously knew more about Justinian than he was inclined to mention in the *Histories*. Justinian’s obituary: *Hist.* IV.40 (171).

⁶ *Hist.* III.3, 7, 21 (99, 103-05, 121).

kingdoms.⁷ Thus Gregory made no indictment of Theudebert for his victories over the Danes, the Thuringians, or the Goths.

Second, Theudebert refused to partake in the Merovingian fratricide that Gregory found so repugnant. The father of Theudebert, Theuderic, killed his relative Sigivald and then sent a message to Theudebert that he ought to do the same to Sigivald’s son Sigivald.⁸ Gregory has already informed his readers that Theuderic repeatedly engaged in this kind of activity. He made plans to assassinate his brother Chlothar and devastated Clermont. Sigivald had assisted him in these activities and Theuderic left him behind in Clermont where, as Gregory described it, he continually attacked the population.⁹ Gregory gave no apparent rationale for the murder of his ally and relative, and this makes Theuderic appear all the more arbitrary and ruthless. Theudebert not only refused to partake in this crime, but he also informed Sigivald what his father had commanded, sent him away to safety, and then received him with great generosity when Theudebert secured his father’s throne after Theuderic’s death.¹⁰ Gregory made a point of noting other instances as well where Theudebert redressed his father’s wrongs.¹¹

⁷ The Merovingian paradigm is, of course, Clovis whom Gregory, with approval, depicts as receiving divine guidance in the form of a fiery pillar (*pharus ignea*) when he was engaging the Goths, the army of heretics (*hereticas acies*). *Hist.* II.36 (86).

⁸ *Hist.* III.23 (122-23).

⁹ *Hist.* III.7, 12, 16 (99, 108, 116-17).

¹⁰ *Hist.* III.23-24 (122-23).

¹¹ Theudebert remitted the funds the church of Clermont had paid into the royal treasury presumably in response to his father’s devastation of the region [*Hist.* III.25 (123)]. He also gave assistance to Desideratus, the bishop of Verdun, whom Theuderic had tormented [*Hist.* III.34 (129-130)].

Gregory’s assessment of Theudebert’s reign is very positive and it is no surprise, therefore, to find him suggesting the legitimacy of Theudebert’s campaigns in Italy. In fact, he appeared to want his readers to understand Theudebert as a virtuous parallel and worthy successor to Clovis. Just as Gregory suggested a pretext for Clovis’s decision to go to war against the Arian Goths under Alaric II by describing immediately before his account of this conflict the Goth’s persecution of the bishop Quintianus, so here Gregory narrated Theudebert’s campaigns in Italy directly after discussing the mistreatment of the Catholic and Merovingian Amalasantha at the hands of the Arian Ostrogoths in Italy.¹² Justified in this way to punish those who torment Catholics, Theudebert’s military campaigns against the Arians were a complete success. Gregory reported two different campaigns. Theudebert himself led one that encountered problems but nevertheless returned to Gaul with great riches while Buccelin, Theudebert’s general, led a second incursion and achieved an overwhelming victory. According to Gregory, Buccelin conquered all of northern Italy, southern Italy, and eventually invaded Sicily sending vast amounts of treasure back to Theudebert.¹³ Gregory also made a point of informing his readers that this overwhelming success was at the expense of the emperor. Both of his generals, Belesarius and Narses, were incompetent, and Justinian’s efforts at raising an army of

¹² Bishop Quintianus and the war with Alaric: *Hist.* II.35-37 (84-88). Amalasantha in Italy: *Hist.* III.31 (126-28).

¹³ *Hist.* III. 32 (128).

mercenaries was ineffectual as well.¹⁴ In the end, the reader could only conclude that, placed side by side, Theudebert was the superior monarch to Justinian.

If it is not surprising that Gregory has structured the story as he has to highlight the victories of a king he considers a paragon of royal virtues over the enemies of the church, there are nevertheless some oddities in Gregory’s account that require attention. First, in one of his earlier works Gregory had already passed judgment on Justinian as deceptive and avaricious, a vice that Gregory found contemptible in monarchs, but there is no hint of this in the *Histories*.¹⁵ His decision to suppress this in the *Histories* requires attention since it was material that Gregory could have inserted to enhance further the contrast he was making between the victorious king and the defeated emperor. Second, there are three historical factors pertinent to this episode that may reflect Gregory’s ignorance but more likely reflect once again Gregory’s editorial suppression: Buccelin’s successful campaigns in Italy occurred during the reign of Theudebald, Theudebert’s son; Theudebert himself had imperial pretensions as evidenced in his minting *solidi* with his own inscription; and Theudebert had an agreement with Justinian, for which he had

¹⁴ *Hist.* III.32 (128).

¹⁵ He cited with approval the matron Juliana’s exchange with this emperor in his *Glory of the Martyrs*. The woman planned to keep resources dedicated to the shrine of Polyeuctus away from the “hand of the greedy emperor (*avari imperatoris manus*),” who had lied about his need for her money to protect the empire [*Liber in Gloria Martyrum* 102, in *Miracula et Opera Minora*, ed. Bruno Krusch, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* I.2 (Hanover, 1885), 106]. On Gregory’s contempt for avarice and insistence on generosity as a necessary royal attribute see Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge, 2001), 178-181. As Heinzelmann notes, this is particularly apparent in Gregory’s treatment of Chilperic and his contrasting monarch the Emperor Tiberius II which I discuss in what follows.

received payment, to attack the Goths and drive them out of Italy.¹⁶

Addressing these oddities in Gregory’s account requires looking past this narrative to the losses of Theudebald, Theudebert’s son, in Italy when Justinian was finally successful at reconquering it. First, Theudebald does not have any of the virtues Gregory praised in his father; in fact, Gregory characterized him as a king possessing an “evil temperament” (*ingenium malum*). It is no surprise, therefore, that Theudebald should lose all of Italy and that his general, Buccelin once again, would die in battle. The parable put in the mouth of Theudebald, a noteworthy example of Gregory at his ironic best, however, indicated that judging the vices of a Merovingian was not his only concern. The entire episode is worth quoting:

One day when he was upbraiding a man whom he suspected of robbing him, he told him the following fable: A snake came across a jar full of wine. It slid in through the mouth of the jar and greedily drank all the wine. The wine swelled the snake up so that it could not get out again through the neck of the jar. As it was struggling to squeeze its way out, without any success at all, the owner of the wine came up. “Spew up what you have swallowed,” he said to the snake, “and then you will get out easily enough.” This story made the man fear Theudebald and hate him too. During his reign Buccelin who had brought all of Italy under Frankish domination was killed by Narses. Italy now came under the rule of the emperor, and from this time on no one was able to wrest it free.¹⁷

¹⁶ Buccelin’s campaigns ought to be associated with Theudebald: see Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (London: Longman, 1994), 67. Theudebert’s imperial aspirations: Theudebert minted *solidi* with his own inscription on them. Furthermore, Theudebert’s letter to Justinian in the *Epistolae Austrasicae* collection does not give the impression that he thought of himself as a client king of the emperor; rather, he is deferentially addressing Justinian as one monarch to another [*MGH*, *Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi I* (Munich, 1978), 133]. On both issues see Roger Collins, “Theudebert I, Rex Magnus Francorum,” in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 8-12, 27-30; and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (London: Meuthen and Co., 1962. Reprint: Toronto, 1982), 190-92. Theudebert’s agreement with Justinian: see Procopius, *De Bello Gothico* VIII.xxiv.13-17.

¹⁷ *Hist.* IV.9 (140-41). *Hunc Theodovaldum ferunt mali fuisse ingenii, ita ut iratus cuidam, quem suspectum de*

Gregory has implied here that Italy is an imperial province that Theudebald, like the thief he has accused, is unlawfully possessing. Of course Gregory has already told his readers that it was Theudebert and not Theudebald who successfully invaded Italy and defeated the imperial forces in it; in fact, in view of the parable, the former king is even more like the snake than the latter. Gregory’s solution to this dilemma of competing sentiments, that spectacular military success is evidence of virtuous monarchy and that the Merovingians have no business meddling in an imperial province like Italy, was to suppress the latter sentiment until a Merovingian on the throne exhibited character flaws that logically lead to a military defeat.

Gregory adumbrated here the two ways he would include the eastern emperor into his narrative in the books of his *Histories* that follow. First, while Gregory is not explicitly presenting Justinian as a foil for Theudebert here, this is an inescapable conclusion of his narrative. He is, at any rate, certainly making a point about the importance of virtuous political leadership. Second, this episode also allowed him to comment on to what extent the Merovingians ought to be involved within the imperial sphere of influence. His answer was

rebus suis habebat, fabulam fingeret, dicens: “Serpens ampullam vino plenam repperit. Per huius enim os ingressus, quod intus habebatur avidus hausit. A quo inflatus vino, exire per aditum, quo ingressus fuerat, non valebat. Veniens vero vini dominus, cum ille exire niteretur nec possit, ait ad serpentem: ‘Evome prius quod ingluttisti, et tunc poteris abscidere liber.’” Quae fabula magnum ei timorem atque odium praeparavit. Sub eo enim et Buccelenus, cum totam Italiam in Francorum regne redigisset, a Narsite interfectus est, Italiam ad partem imperatoris captam, nec fuit qui eam ultra reciperet [English: Thorpe, 202-203].

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clearly not at all, and this answer implied that there was a clear distinction in Gregory’s mind between imperial concerns and the concerns that ought to occupy the Merovingian kings.

Justin II and Guntram

Gregory suppressed his true assessment of Justinian because of the complex role his reign played in his narrative – aggrandizing a virtuous Merovingian and condemning a vicious one while at the same time establishing Italy as an imperial province. Unfortunately for Justinian’s successor, Justin, Gregory did not require him to appear so neutral, and consequently, Justin receives in Gregory’s *Histories* the same negative portrayal that one finds of him in eastern writers.¹⁸ His assessment of Justin is quite damning. His primary characteristics are his lust (*cupiditas*) and his greed (*avaritia*), both of which manifest themselves in his disregard of the poor (*contemptor pauperorum*). Furthermore, Gregory believed that Justin was a Pelagian heretic.¹⁹

Besides this direct analysis of Justin’s character, Gregory also incriminated him in a more subtle fashion. Mentioning his insanity and thus his need to rely on a caesar, following as it does directly on Gregory’s comment on his heresy, was apparently in Gregory’s mind a

¹⁸ See Averil Cameron on the striking similarities between Gregory and the eastern historians Evagrius Scholasticus and John of Ephesus in their assessments of Justin II and Tiberius II [Cameron, “The Byzantine Sources of Gregory of Tours,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. XXVI (1975), 421-426].

¹⁹ *Hist.* IV.40 (172).

consequence of his general character. While Gregory was surely aware that the tradition of an emperor relying on a caesar was not definitively a sign of weakness, he here led the reader to this conclusion and, once he has introduced the Caesar Tiberius, he took the opportunity to undermine the character of Justin further by contrasting the caesar and the emperor. Tiberius is just (*iustum*), compassionate (*elimosinarium*), equitable in judgement (*aequiter discernentem*), and, compared to Justin’s heresy, a most orthodox Christian (*verissimum Christianum*).²⁰

The military defeats of Justin which Gregory narrates in what follows are a logical consequence of the emperor’s character. It is not simply that Justin lost the important cities of Antioch and Apamea, but he was also unable to prevent the destruction of an important Christian shrine. In fact, it was the religious implications of the defeat rather than the political consequences that interested Gregory. Thus he was careful to indicate what kind of people created havoc in imperial territory by concluding with the seemingly episodic story about the visit of the Armenian legates to Justin. Allowing these legates to speak for themselves, Gregory informed the reader that the king of the Persians (*imperator Persarum*), Justin’s counterpart, is a fire worshiper and his minions physically abuse bishops.²¹ Thus Justin’s military failure has left the church at the mercy of its enemies.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Reading *verissimum* with the apparatus.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Not only did he fail to protect his empire in the East from the ravaging of the enemies of the church, but, more importantly for Gregory and his readers, he similarly failed in the West. Immediately after this chapter on Justin, Gregory introduced the Lombards who were a menace both to Gaul and Italy. He has already indicated earlier in the *Histories* that Italy, in his view, is an imperial province, but just as Justin lost Antioch and Apamea and could not protect its holy sites, so too Justin could not defend his western provinces or protect the church in it. Intending to inhabit this province (*illuc commanere deliberantes*), the Lombards invaded Italy and, while ravaging the province for seven years in their effort to establish their dominion, they killed bishops and robbed churches.²² Gregory has already established that against such threats a virtuous monarch, like Theudebert or Clovis, would have been able to protect his realm and especially its churches, and he extends this contrast in what follows. His brief account of Justin’s flawed character, his military defeats, and his consequent failure to protect the churches, sets up his discussion of Guntram, a monarch who succeeds where Justin failed.

Although the chapters that follow the discussion of Justin are largely about the success of Mummolus, there is little doubt that Gregory intended his reader to take Justin and the Merovingian king Guntram, whom Mummolus served, as a comparative doublet. It is Guntram who appointed Mummolus as his patrician, and in the world-view governing the *Histories*, a

²² *Hist.* IV.41 (174).

“good king” (*rex bonus*) like Guntram, or Theudebert, will naturally possess successful military commanders.²³ Gregory has up to this point said little about Guntram, but both his silence and his few statements reflect positively on the king. Between chapter twenty one, where he described the death of Chlothar I, one of Clovis’s sons, and chapter forty in book four, Gregory began to discuss the careers of Chlothar’s sons – Guntram, Sigibert, and Chilperic. While he depicted both Sigibert and Chilperic initiating the fratricidal civil war Gregory found so detestable, Guntram’s name is notably absent, and when Gregory introduced him into his narrative, he cast him in a positive light.²⁴ Before Mummolus, Guntram had a patrician named Celsus who successfully recaptured Arles from Sigibert’s forces and took Avignon from the same king. Gregory concluded the passage with a reminder of the qualities that made Guntram a *rex bonus*. Once Celsus had secured Arles in Guntram’s kingdom again, the king, “out of his customary goodness,” returned Avignon to his brother’s dominion.²⁵

As with his former patrician Celsus, in the person of Mummolus Guntram once again acquired a successful general able to protect his king’s realm. Not only did he drive back the Lombards from Gaul but he also successfully demanded recompense from the Saxons for looting villages and stealing the harvest of the subjects of Guntram. The contrast with Justin is obvious.

²³ Guntram as a *rex bonus*: *Hist.* IV.25 (156). Guntram appoints Mummolus as patrician: *Hist.* IV.42 (174).

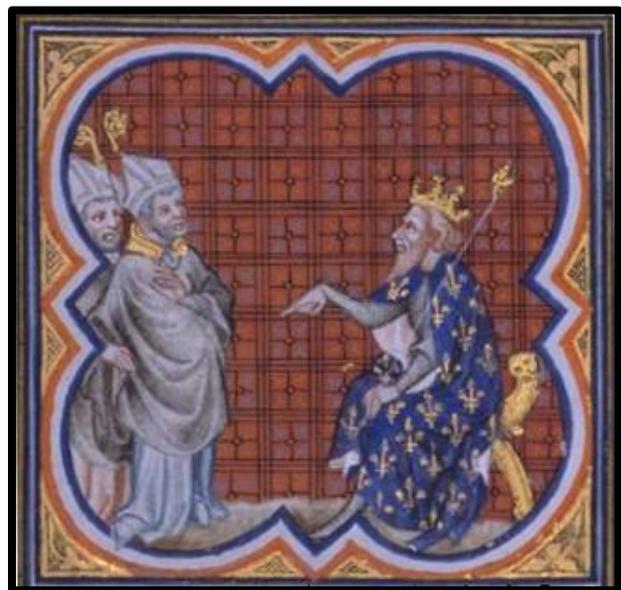
²⁴ Chilperic invades Sigibert’s realm, and Sigibert invades his: *Hist.* IV.23 (155-56).

²⁵ *Hist.* IV.30 (163). *Iuxta consuetudinem bonitatis suae Avennicam ditionibus fratres sui restituit.*

By pairing the king and the emperor in this way Gregory was able to increase the prestige of Guntram through the foil of a greedy and heretical emperor who cannot maintain control over his own territory and protect its people and churches.

Tiberius II and Chilperic

Gregory effectively framed book six of his *Histories* by pairing and contrasting the Emperor Tiberius and Chilperic, and what made this contrast effective in book six was that he had already prepared his readers with his own judgment on both emperor and king in prior books. The depiction of Chilperic he developed in book six, therefore, should come as no surprise to the reader. Gregory had already indicated that Chilperic is someone who instigates the civil



Saint Gregory, archbishop of Tours, and Saint Salve, bishop of Albi, before Chilperic I, illustrating a 14th century chronicle.

Image from Wikimedia Commons.

wars between the Merovingians by his frequent invasions Sigibert’s kingdom.²⁶ Furthermore, to

²⁶ *Hist.* IV.23 (155-56); *Hist.* IV.45 (180); *Hist.* IV.47 (184); *Hist.* IV.50 (187). For Wallace-Hadrill, Gregory’s

prepare his readers to think of Chilperic in comparison with an imperial figure, Gregory had also already highlighted episodes where Chilperic aped imperial activities: he built amphitheaters, sponsored games, and got involved in theological disputations. Gregory, however, always depicted these activities in a negative light through an ironic conjunction of passages.

Chilperic ignored with contempt (*despiciens*) the peace that Guntram and Childebert forged, a peace that emerged in part from the contrition of Guntram over his murder of his brothers-in-law and the consequent untimely death of his own sons. Instead of imitating the virtue evident in Guntram’s magnanimity to Childebert and in his contrition by returning the cities he has wrested from his brothers, as Guntram and Childebert requested, Chilperic, Gregory noted with his ironic touch, busied himself building amphitheaters in Paris and Soissons.²⁷ Similarly, Gregory situated his narrative of Chilperic’s decision to advance a form of Sabellianism immediately after he described his own debate with the Visigothic ambassador Agilan.²⁸ Agilan, an unrepentant Arian, refused to heed Gregory’s arguments for orthodoxy and

depiction of Chilperic’s destructive military adventures, his misplaced military prowess and aggressive energies, represents the heart of his critique of the king. Chilperic’s grandfather Clovis directed his passion for conquest properly; Chilperic did not [“Gregory of Tours and Bede,” 34-35].

²⁷*Hist.*, V.17 (216). Reading *despiciens* with the apparatus.

²⁸ *Hist.* V.44 (253). According to Gregory, Chilperic decreed that the bishops of his kingdom, including Gregory, must teach that there was no difference between the persons of the Trinity, that the Father, Son and Spirit were the same person. A Christian heresy of the third century, Sabellianism, named after its putative author, Sabellius, conceived of God as a single person who expressed himself in different “modes” at different points in human history.

in the end simply lost his temper and “gnashed his teeth” at Gregory.²⁹ Chilperic’s response to Gregory and to bishop Salvius of Albi, who both rejected his theological pronouncement, was practically the same as the Arian Gregory had remonstrated. Chilperic “gnashed his teeth.”³⁰ Neatly associating the heresy of Chilperic with that of the Arians, Gregory’s theological nemesis in the *Histories*, Gregory further tarnished the king’s image and thus prepares his audience for the condemnation that follows.

Gregory has also already commented on Tiberius II at three different points prior to book six in the *Histories* and has prepared the reader to think of Tiberius and Chilperic as a doublet. As already discussed, he praised him initially in book four to further highlight the vice of Justin II. At two different points in book five he expanded on this initial praise. In the first passage Gregory commended Tiberius’s generosity to the poor through his liberal distribution of imperial funds such that the Empress Sophia questioned him on his actions. At this point Gregory addressed his readers personally to drive home his approval of Tiberius. “As I have told you, he was a great Christian and a faithful one: as long as he continued to take pleasure in distributing alms to the poor our Lord went on providing him with more and more to give.”³¹ If his readers did not catch it the first time, he repeated this praise for his charity several lines later and recalled

²⁹ *Hist.* V.43 (252). *furore commotus ... quasi insanus frendens.*

³⁰ *Hist.* V.44 (253). *commotus ... ad haec ille frendens.*

³¹ *Hist.* V.19 (225). *Et quia, ut diximus, magnus et verus christianus erat, dum hilare distributione pauperibus opem praestat, magis ac magis ei Dominus subministrat.* [English: Thorpe, 283].

the consequent divine provision that never left him in need of funds.³² In the second passage, a few chapters after he had praised his generosity, Gregory underscored the mercy of Tiberius with the usurper Justinian and his accomplice the Empress Sophia and then linked this positive portrayal of Tiberius with the logical consequence of his virtue. Tiberius accomplished a significant military victory over the Persians that provided him with a huge draw of treasure (*tantam molem praedae*).³³

Between these passages on Tiberius in book five, Gregory situated two episodes involving Chilperic that suggest he intended the reader to think of the two in comparison and was therefore already preparing his reader for book six. First, a few chapters after Gregory has applauded Tiberius’s generosity with imperial funds, he mentioned the harsh taxes Chilperic determined to levy throughout his kingdom and his brutal response to those who protested it.³⁴ Second, immediately before Gregory’s description of Tiberius’s defeat of the Persians, Gregory recorded the devastating and unchecked attacks of the Bretons on Rennes, a city in Chilperic’s kingdom. In order to make sure his readers caught this juxtaposition, he inserted a remarkably similar account immediately after the chapter on Tiberius’s defeat of the Persians. The Bretons once again attacked the region around Rennes and Nantes and captured, Gregory reported, “a

³² *Hist.* V.19 (226). “Because of his charity, the Lord did not suffer Tiberius to ever be in want” [Thorpe, 284].

³³ *Hist.* V.30 (235).

³⁴ *Hist.* V.28 (233-34). As Ian Wood has noted, Gregory was consistently critical of the harsh tax regimes of the Merovingian kings [Wood, *Gregory of Tours* (Bangor, Gwynedd: Headstart History), 46].

vast amount of treasure” (*immensam praedam*).³⁵

The comparison between the virtues of Tiberius and the vices of Chilperic and the consequent military successes and failures that follow from their character, which Gregory prodded the reader to notice in book five, he made explicit and obvious at two different points in books six. In fact, book six juxtaposes the two rulers in a way that underscores the point Gregory had been hinting at through his insertion of material about Tiberius in his narrative in book five: Chilperic, with his imperial intentions, falls far short of the majesty and charity of the emperor in Constantinople.

Gregory began book six with a brief account that, at this point in the history, should not have surprised his readers. Chilperic has aligned himself with Childebert against the good king Guntram. While the war that begins between Guntram and Chilperic, therefore, serves in part to remind his readers at the beginning of the book what he found offensive about Chilperic, it also serves to highlight the juxtaposition Gregory was about to make between the king and emperor. Chilperic had sent legates to Tiberius, and, returning after three years, these legates could not find a safe harbor at Marseilles because of the war between Chilperic and Guntram. Consequently their ship was lost off the coast of Agde with much of the ship’s cargo, including

³⁵ *Hist.* V.29, 31 (234-36).

some of the most valuable objects, pilfered from the shipwreck by the local inhabitants.³⁶

At this point, Gregory inserted himself into the story. While visiting Chilperic after this shipwreck, Gregory reported that the king showed him two different objects. First, Chilperic brought out a golden paten that he claimed he had commissioned for the “renown and adornment of the Franks”.³⁷ He then produced a series of medallions that had been salvaged from the wreckage of his ambassadors’ ship. Gregory simply described the gold medallions, gifts from the emperor, that Chilperic showed him: “On the obverse side was portrayed the emperor’s bust with *Tiberii Constantini Perpetui Augusti* in relief around the edge and on the reverse there was a chariot with a charioteer with the legend *Gloria Romanorum*.”³⁸ Gregory did not need to insert an authorial opinion here; he has already prepared his readers to understand the ironic significance of this episode. Chilperic, whom Gregory has depicted as eager to assume an imperial persona, apparently thought that the prestige of Tiberius’s generosity and the aura of the “Glory of the Romans” would somehow bolster his own stature. In fact, by proudly displaying the emblems of the eastern emperor he was only condemning himself.

The second juxtaposition between the king and the emperor in book six occurs by means

³⁶ *Hist.* VI.1-2.

³⁷ *Hist.* VI.2 (266). *exornandam atque nobilitandam Francorum gentem*

³⁸ *Hist.* VI.1-2 (265-67): *habentes ab una parte iconicam imperatoris pictam et scriptum in circulo: TIBERII CONSTANTINI PERPETUI AUGUSTI; ab alia vero parte habentes quadrigam et ascensorem contententesque scriptum: GLORIAM ROMANORUM* [English: Thorpe, 328].

of the emperor’s and the king’s obituaries. Although Gregory was in the habit of recording imperial deaths in his *Histories*, his obituary of Tiberius is clearly intended as another indictment of Chilperic. Once again, Gregory employed his favorite device of ironic juxtaposition to emphasize the contrast between Tiberius’s virtues and Chilperic’s vices. Thus, immediately after praising the emperor for his life of superlative goodness, his benevolence, his justice, and his charity, Gregory launched into an extended narration of the devastation and carnage that followed Chilperic’s invasion of Paris and Bourges.³⁹ Similarly, at the end of book six, Gregory’s scathing obituary of Chilperic emphasizes all the vices opposite Tiberius’s virtues. Like Justin, who hated the poor (*contemptor pauperum*), and unlike Tiberius who possessed the virtue of generosity (*elimosinarium*) and was constantly giving money away, Chilperic maintained “an extreme hatred for the interests of the poor.”⁴⁰ Complaining about the state of his treasury, he also made an effort to steal from the churches and deprive them of their property whenever possible; the poverty he was concerned about was the state of his own finances.⁴¹

In the cases of the three emperors discussed above, Gregory’s view of imperial authority was not uniform. From his silence on Justinian to his condemnation of Justin II and his praise of

³⁹ Tiberius obituary: *Hist.* VI.30 (298). *Erat enim summe bonitatis, in aelimosinis prumptus, in iudiciis iustus, in iudicando cautissimus; nullum dispiciens, sed omnes in bona voluntate coplectens.* Chilperic’s attack on Paris and Bourges: *Hist.* V.31 (299-301).

⁴⁰ *Hist.* VI.46 (320). *Causas pauperum exosas habebat.*

⁴¹ *Hist.* V.46 (320).

Tiberius II, Gregory does not communicate a unilateral approval or disapproval for imperial authority as an institution. In the cases where he is pairing an emperor with a king, his interest in the emperor is chiefly as a model or type of good or bad monarchy. If as a bad type, the foil of an emperor increases the approbation of the Merovingian king. If as a good example for a bad king, however, as in the case of Chilperic, it increases the sense of moral failure evident in this king’s life. While this provides a sense of how Gregory would use the emperor to furnish material for his moral analysis of Merovingian kings, it does not indicate his own perspective on the emperor and his imperium as it related to Gaul. This becomes clearer in his account of the Gundavald affair and the pact between Childebert II and the Emperor Maurice.

The Gundavald Affair

Gregory’s account of Gundavald’s bid for power and recognition in Merovingian Gaul winds its way through several books of the *Histories*. Assessing this event for evidence of Gregory’s perspective on the emperor is complicated not only by this disjointed narration of the episode but also by his unusual reticence to express any judgement on the entire affair. Gregory’s account is very circumspect: He places all the claims and denials of Gundavald’s legitimacy in direct or indirect speech and silences his own authorial voice. There is, nevertheless, good reason to think that Gregory actually believed that Gundavald was a legitimate Merovingian and had a

claim to the throne. If Gregory questioned Gundovald’s legitimacy, he could have given an abbreviated account of events with *a suitable condemnation* at the end.⁴² His non-committal reticence may have arisen from observation of how bishops, such as Theodore of Marseilles, fared who openly supported Gundovald.⁴³

Although Gregory does not pass judgment on Gundovald’s claims and the reaction of the Merovingian elite to them, he nevertheless indicates that Gundovald’s mother and Gundovald himself claimed that he was a Merovingian, the son of Chlothar and grandson of Clovis, in the face of rejection from the Merovingian kings. He also reports, however, that Gundovald lived outside of Gaul for many years in both Italy and Constantinople.⁴⁴ He makes this claim not only in his own voice but also through the voices of others involved in the story of Gundovald. Bishop Magnulf of Toulouse, who receives Gundovald and his supporters against his will, makes Gundovald’s arrival in Gaul from elsewhere an argument against him. “We know that Guntram and his nephews are kings. Where this man comes from we have no idea.” Magnulf continues: His death “will be an example to all men that no foreigner must dare to violate the Frankish realm.”⁴⁵ Gundovald himself affirms that he came from Constantinople and the eastern emperor.

⁴² Suggested by Ian Wood, “The Secret Histories of Gregory of Tours,” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’ Histoire* 71 (1993), 264. He reaffirmed it in Wood, *Gregory of Tours*, 50.

⁴³ Theodore of Marseilles: *Hist.* VI.24 (291-92).

⁴⁴ *Hist.* VI.24 (291).

⁴⁵ *Hist.* VII.27 (345). *Scimus enim, reges esse Gunthchramnum ac nepotem eius; hunc autem nescimus unde sit. ... sitque omnibus exemplum, ne quis extraneorum Francorum regnum audeat violare.* Reading *reges* with the

Having fled Gaul, Gundovald lived in Italy for many years and eventually, he claimed, he “went to Constantinople. I was most kindly received by the emperors, and I lived there until the present.”⁴⁶ Finally, Guntram repeatedly views Gundovald as someone who is from Constantinople, from the East, who is a menace from outside of Gaul (*pestem extraneam*) and a threat to his kingdom.⁴⁷

Gregory gives no good reason for his readers to think that Gundovald was lying about his ancestry; he seems to accept his claim to be part of the Merovingian ruling elite. He does want to emphasize, however, that Gundovald has reappeared in Gaul from the eastern empire and was a beneficiary of imperial patronage. In Gregory’s version, therefore, the story of Gundovald is the account of a Merovingian operating in Gaul with close connections and financial assistance from the emperor.

A useful way to examine this episode is to observe carefully any comments Gregory makes about individuals involved in the affair or any individuals about whom Gregory is surprisingly silent. One figure that well exemplifies the latter category is Tiberius II. Although it is this emperor that provided Gundovald with all his resources when he landed in Gaul, Gregory

apparatus [English: Thorpe, 408].

⁴⁶ *Hist.* VII.36 (357-58). *Constantinopolim abii. Ab imperatoribus vero susceptus benignissime, usque hoc tempore vixi.*

⁴⁷ *Hist.* VI.26 (293). *Hist.* VII.14 (335). *Hist.* VIII.2 (372).

has nothing to say about his favorite emperor’s involvement.⁴⁸ This is significant. Gregory’s attentive readers would already know that obfuscation and disassociation were rhetorical tools he sometimes employed to communicate his point: concealing his sentiment about the imperial prerogatives in Italy when discussing Theudebert’s campaigns and disassociating the same king from an implication of theft are noteworthy examples. Given his encomiastic appreciation of Tiberius’s virtues, we would expect Gregory to involve the emperor if he looked favorably on Gundovald’s venture. If, however, he had a less favorable view of the affair, then we would expect him to disassociate Tiberius from the event. The latter, of course, is what he does.

While Gregory was very careful to avoid making explicit judgments on Gundovald, he does give indications of what he thought of him. On the one hand, Gregory seems to regard Gundovald as a noble and tragic figure. Gundovald never answers the abuse of his opponents in kind, and Gregory even allows him to connect his integrity with Radegund of Poitiers and Ingeltrude of Tours, both of whom Gregory viewed favorably.⁴⁹ Gundavold’s valedictorian in which he denounces the injustice of his circumstances and calls on God’s justice to avenge him is suggestive of Gregory’s own perspective on him. Gregory also depicts him as a tragic figure,

⁴⁸ Goffart confirms that Tiberius was Gundovald’s patron [Goffart, “Byzantine Policy in the West,” 101-02].

⁴⁹ *Hist.* VII.36. On this point see Wood, “Secret Histories,” 264. Radegund was the abbess of the convent of the Holy Cross in Poitiers, a position she took after abandoning her marriage to the Merovingian king Chlothar. Gregory knew her personally and revered her. Gregory also knew personally and respected Ingeltrude, the abbess of a convent connected to the church of St. Martin in Tours.

however, with an obvious fatal flaw of naiveté. Gregory’s readers know what Gundovald should have suspected: Guntram feared and despised him and there was no chance that he would ever accept him as a brother or let him leave Gaul alive.⁵⁰ At least one of his attempts to act in a royal manner, installing Faustianus as bishop of Bourdeaux, Gregory regarded as a foolish move.⁵¹ Furthermore, Gundovald made poor decisions about whom he would trust and take on as his associates. Gregory is careful to record Guntram Boso’s flagrant betrayal of Gundovald, Mummolus’s and Desidarius’s contempt for Bishop Magnulf, the disrespect Mummolus showed to the relic of St. Sergius, and the reckless (*incauti*) ambassadors Gundovald sent to Guntram.⁵² Gregory dismisses his supporters at one point for poor planning and a lack of boldness (*viriliter*), and he had already expressed his disgust with another of Gundovald’s supporters, Bishop Sagittarius.⁵³

The one individual whose actions Gregory reports in a positive fashion is King Guntram. With Gregory’s encouragement, he is willing to forgive some of the bishops who gave support to

⁵⁰ *Hist.* VII.36 (358). Gundovald proposed a meeting with Guntram to settle his claim once and for all: “[T]ake me to your king and, if only he will accept me as his brother, he may do with me what he will” [English: Thorpe, 420].

⁵¹ *Hist.* VIII.2 (371).

⁵² Guntram Boso had dealings with several Merovingian kings and was, in Gregory’s words, “an unprincipled sort of man, greedy and avaricious” [*Hist.* IX.10; English: Thorpe, 493]. He originally had invited Gundovald to return to Gaul from Constantinople and claim his rightful position as a Merovingian prince [*Hist.* VI.24]. Originally associated with Guntram, Mummolus joined Gundovald’s cause until, in the end, he betrayed him [*Hist.* VII.38]; Desidarius was originally a military commander of Chilperic who supported and then abandoned Gundovald [*Hist.* VII.34]. Bishop Magnulf of Toulouse was forced to receive Gundovald and his supporters against his will and was poorly treated by them [*Hist.* VII.27]. Gundovald’s ambassadors: *Hist.* VII.32.

⁵³ *Hist.* VII.34 (355). Gregory’s disapproval of Sagittarius: *Hist.* V.20.

Gundovald in some way. Furthermore, Gregory makes a point of remarking on Guntram’s generosity in the aftermath of the revolt. Guntram distributed the vast treasures of Mummolus to the poor and the churches.⁵⁴ Although he once attacks his parentage, it is important to note that Guntram’s usual complaint about Gundovald is that he is a foreigner with imperial connections.⁵⁵ If Gregory was able to praise Guntram in this affair, it is likely that Guntram’s complaints also serve to express Gregory’s views as well.

The Gundovald affair was at its most basic level yet another round of Merovingian fratricidal warfare. For this reason alone we would expect him to have a negative view of the events that unfolded, particularly because of the disrespect showed to clergy such as Magnulf and Theodore of Marseilles, the loss of life, and the destruction of property.⁵⁶ Gregory cannot have found it an encouraging sign that this round of civil strife occurred under the aegis of imperial patronage. That he held a negative view of such imperial involvement with the Franks is evident in his depiction of Childebert II’s pact with the Emperor Maurice.

Childebert II and Maurice

Gregory was firmly convinced that the Merovingian king Childebert II was in contact

⁵⁴ *Hist.* VII.40 (363).

⁵⁵ See note 47 above.

⁵⁶ Clergy: *Hist.* VI.24 (291-92). *Hist.* VII.27 (346). Loss of life and property: *Hist.* VII.35, 38 (357, 361-62).

with the Emperor Maurice and had an agreement with him. In short, Childebert had agreed to act as an imperial agent and remove the Lombards from Italy for the price of 50,000 *solidi*.⁵⁷ The king was not scrupulous in his efforts to keep his side of the bargain. Initially he simply made a pretense of invading, but he quickly made peace with the Lombards much to the annoyance of the imperial authorities.⁵⁸ Under imperial pressure, Childebert eventually does invade Italy again, and both instances are failures for the Merovingian forces. One of the raids ends with the Gallic dukes arguing amongst themselves and is ineffectual; the other is a complete disaster.⁵⁹ Gregory’s cursory rendition of the latter campaign hints at his own perspective. When Childerbert’s army invaded Italy the first time, “[O]ur people were cut to pieces; quite a few were slain, some were captured, the remainder turned in flight and made their way home, but not without difficulty. The slaughter of the Frankish army was such that nothing like it could be remembered.”⁶⁰ Childebert apparently anticipated receiving imperial assistance that never materialized. The final incursion is also a debacle for the Franks, and Gregory gives greater detail on this invasion. First, he indicates that the generals leading the operation thoroughly ravaged their regions of Gaul before moving on to attack the intended enemy. Then he narrates

⁵⁷ *Hist.* VI.42 (314).

⁵⁸ *Hist.* VI.42 (314).

⁵⁹ *Hist.* VIII.18 (384).

⁶⁰ *Hist.* IX.25 (444-45). *Sed nostris valde caesis, multi prostrati, nonnulli capti, plurimi etiam per fugam lapsi, vix patriae redierunt. Tantaque ibi fuit stragis de Francorum exercitu, ut olim simile non recolatur* [English: Thorpe, 512-513].

the failure of the Franks to accomplish their objectives, the failure of the imperial authorities to show up with promised aid, and the suffering of the Merovingian army that barely made it back to Gaul alive.⁶¹

Gregory’s account of Grippo’s embassy to Constantinople by way of Carthage seems to be emblematic for Gregory of all the problems that result from involvement in imperial affairs. The Gallic legates bring trouble in Carthage on themselves through a wayward servant and are then unable to protect themselves from the local population. They cannot rely on the imperial authorities to bring assistance or keep order.⁶² The speech Gregory places in Grippo’s mouth is very illuminating and perhaps expresses Gregory’s own position. Speaking to the Carthaginians, Grippo contrasts “your emperor” (*imperatorem vestrum*) with “our kings” (*reges nostros*), a phrase that recalls Gregory’s own description of the defeated Merovingian army as “our fallen” (*nostris caesis*). Peace, something that Gregory values so highly and despairs at its absence in Gaul, is what Grippo says cannot follow from actions like those in Carthage. It is, of course, the imperial authorities that are always inciting the Franks to attack the Lombards, resist efforts to make peace or provide assistance, and are thus implicated in the defeat of Merovingian armies.⁶³

At this point in the *Histories*, Gregory has already passed judgment on Merovingians

⁶¹ *Hist.* X.3 (483-85).

⁶² *Hist.* X.2 (482-83).

⁶³ *Hist.* X.2 (483). Reading *reges* with the apparatus.

invading Italy. Even if Childebert is invading ostensibly to restore Italy as an imperial province, nevertheless, Gregory’s vivid description of Merovingian losses and the events at Carthage strongly suggest that Gregory took a dim view of Childebert’s enterprise. It is Guntram, once again, who has a positive profile in this episode, and it is perhaps this king’s position that represents Gregory’s view of the situation. Guntram refuses on one occasion to get involved in Childebert’s Italian war; he has no interest in becoming an imperial agent.⁶⁴ Furthermore, after the debacle Gregory describes in book ten, Guntram emerges as the peace maker who encourages his nephew to accept the Lombard’s peace proposal. More importantly, the Lombard king Aptachar offers “peace and harmony” (*pax et concordia*) to the Franks, and it is *concordia* that Gregory, in his preface to book five, desires the Merovingian kings to maintain amongst themselves.⁶⁵

Epilogue: Spain, the Emperor and the Merovingians

The other field of operation for imperial intrigue in Gregory’s *Histories* is Spain. While

⁶⁴ *Hist.* IX.20 (440).

⁶⁵ *Hist.* X.2 (486). *Hist.* “Praefatio V,” (194). Behind this offer of *pax et concordia* is the tradition of Merovingian and Lombard marriages. Both Theudebert and Theudebald had married Lombard women, the daughters of King Waccho. It may be significant that Childebert, who agreed to go to war with the Lombards, had at one point considered marrying Theudelina, a Lombard princess. In the end he opted not to marry her and she became the wife of the Lombard king. It is Fredegar, a seventh-century historian of Merovingian Gaul, and not Gregory who reported Childebert’s decision not to marry Theudelina [Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 165-167].

unwinding the narrative thread about Gundovald Gregory would also on occasion draw his readers’ attention to Spain and the involvement of two Merovingian kings in Spanish affairs. Although there is no direct contact between imperial officials and the Merovingian kings in this episode, there are apparently several reasons why Gregory included this episode in his text and in fact one of them did relate to his negative view of imperial action in the west. First, he had an ecclesiastical interest in the uprising of Hermenegild against Leuwigild, an uprising that attracted imperial attention and a promise of imperial support. Hermenegild was a Catholic fighting against an Arian regime which, according to Gregory, persecuted Catholics. Furthermore, Hermenegild’s wife, Ingund, was a Merovingian, was herself a victim of persecution at the hands of Leuwigild’s wife Goiswinth, and was the means by which her husband became Catholic.⁶⁶ Gregory reported that Hermenegild sought and received a promise of aid from the imperial army in Spain, but the army turned its back on him as he was taking the field against his father. The imperial army found the thirty thousand *solidi* Leuwigild gave them a better offer.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Gregory indicated that Ingund was in the company of the imperial officials when her husband was killed and that she died in Carthage while on her way to Constantinople.⁶⁸

Second, two kings, Chilperic and Guntram, become entangled in events surrounding the

⁶⁶ *Hist.* V.38 (244).

⁶⁷ *Hist.* V.38 (244-245).

⁶⁸ *Hist.* VIII.28 (390).

revolt of Hermenegild. Gregory’s discussion of their activities suggests that one of his primary interests in this event was that it provided him with another opportunity to put on display the worst and the best of the Merovingian kings for his readers. In particular, narrating these two kings’ involvement in the events in Spain allowed Gregory to express his parochialism: The involvement of both kings led to disaster for the Gallic countryside.

Chilperic became involved in the Hermenegild affair because this war between father and son was preventing him from solidifying his plans to marry his daughter Rigunth to Leuwigild’s son Recared. Presumably narrating Chilperic’s involvement because it provided further evidence of the king’s degeneracy, Gregory constantly reminded his readers that Chilperic was negotiating with an Arian king who was in the process of fighting against Hermenegild, a Catholic.⁶⁹ What followed from Chilperic’s negotiations should have not surprised his readers at all. When the plans were finally laid and Rigunth was to be sent to the Visigoths, Gregory detailed the large number of people required to escort her on her trip, many against their will, as well as the army sent along to protect her. This large expedition stole from the poor and devastated the countryside as the soldiers passed through it on the way to Spain. Some abandoned the venture all together and took with them whatever treasure they could carry from the princess’s dowry.

⁶⁹ *Hist.* VI.18 (287-88). *Hist.* VI.29 (295). *Hist.* VI.33 (304). In *Hist.* VI.40 (310), Gregory recounts his meeting with the Visigothic legate Oppila who is an unrepentant Arian.

Chilperic’s involvement in this episode, therefore, reflected the poor judgement of a king whose indifference about heresy and generally vicious character consistently led to a disaster for his kingdom.

According to Gregory, Guntram planned to invade Spain when he learned about the death of Ingund.⁷⁰ His apparent wish to take revenge on the Visigothic king for the treatment of his sister failed miserably. Rather than a war on the Arians, Guntram’s army prosecuted a war on the Gallic countryside. “They killed many men, burned buildings and seized treasure even in their own territory, stripping the churches and slaughtering the clergy, with their bishops and the civil population, before the altars consecrated to God.”⁷¹ Gregory had Guntram provide an analysis of this catastrophe, and the king did not blame himself for any misguided desire to interject himself into a situation fraught with imperial intrigue. On the contrary, he blamed the losses the Merovingian armies suffered on their lack of respect for the sanctity of the clergy and the churches of Gaul.⁷² While the death of Ingund provided a context for Guntram’s expedition, there is little doubt, as Goffart has observed, that Gregory’s real intention for discussing this episode was to allow Guntram to make this speech about the historic relationship between the

⁷⁰ *Hist.* VIII.28 (391).

⁷¹ *Hist.* VIII.30 (393). *Multa homicidia, incendia praedens quae in regione propria facientes, sed et aeclesias denudantes clericos ipsos sacerdotibus ac reliquo populo ad ipsas sacratas Deo aras intermentes, usque ad urbem Nemausus processerunt* [English: Thorpe, 459].

⁷² *Hist.* VIII.30 (395).

Merovingians and the Gallic church that ensured the well-being of both groups.⁷³ Gregory himself provided no other explanation for the disastrous results of this campaign, and there is every reason to think that Guntram’s explanation was his own.

Running parallel as it does with the Gundovald story and anticipating as it does the account of the agreement between Childebert and Maurice, it seems likely that Gregory included this story in order to comment in a subtle way on imperial intrigue. If Gregory’s primary interest in Visigothic Spain was its enmity toward the Catholic Church, nevertheless in his representation of Hermenegild’s uprising there are echoes of his view on the problems with getting involved with imperial affairs. The story usefully adumbrated for his readers one of the main points he would make in his extended discussion of the pact between Childebert and Maurice; namely, that western Catholic leaders cannot trust promises of imperial assistance in battle. As Hermenegild learned, and as Childebert would discover as well, the imperial army was unreliable.

Conclusion

There can be no argument that Gregory “deliberately structured his narrative to protect himself from any political attacks” and that it was the political circumstances around him that

⁷³ Goffart, *Narrators*, 171.

governed what he could and could not write.⁷⁴ Thus it is clear that Gregory felt far more comfortable barely concealing his criticism of Chilperic than he did raising concerns about Guntram, whom, although he often praises, he could very circumspectly criticize for his failings.⁷⁵ Thus his use of the eastern emperor as a foil for the Merovingian kings could simultaneously and paradoxically both blunt and sharpen his criticism by means of an always carefully and sometimes brilliantly structured narrative. As we have seen, strategically placed praise or condemnation of an emperor in his history could speak volumes on his views of a specific Merovingian king beyond his general despair at their constant warfare.

His use of the eastern emperor in his narrative also tells us something about Gregory himself: he was not at all pro-imperialist in his world-view. His perspective on the emperor was more often negative than positive, and when it was positive it served simply to model monarchical virtues. If he did have any sense that the emperor might have had prerogatives in the West, they stopped at the border between the Merovingian kingdoms and Italy. Imperial involvement in the Visigothic kingdom was of little consequence to him; Spain interested him only in so far as it was a bastion of persecuting Arians. Thus, the Merovingian kings should not encroach into territory beyond Catholic Gaul. Rather than increasing their territory, Gregory would prefer them

⁷⁴ Ian Wood, *Gregory of Tours*, 51, 54.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 52-53. Wood highlights the way Gregory narrates the complicated politics involving Guntram’s marriages to his second and third wife in Book V of the *Histories*.

to increase their virtue.

It is possible that one of the many reasons Gregory esteemed Guntram so highly was that he shared with Gregory this parochial view of the world. Just as he recognized in Gundovald the threat of imperial intrigue in Gaul, so he also resolutely refused Childebert’s appeals to become with him an imperial agent. Gregory, it seems, preferred a king who was pious, generous, and occasionally miraculous, with an “enduring quality of innocence,” even with all of his imperfections, to a distant emperor whose resources and intrigue only increased the devastation of Gaul and its people.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Guntram as a miracle worker: *Hist.* IX.21 (442). “Enduring quality of innocence”: Goffart, *Narrators*, 225.