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Martin Heinzelmann

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

*The state of research into Gregory of Tours in 1992*

Some years ago I reached an agreement with the *Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft* to produce a review of the literature on Gregory of Tours for the series 'Erträge der Forschung'. A long time then passed in which a great deal of work was done, but I realized that a review of the literature was needed far less than first thought. At the same time, however, the publishers encouraged me to produce an entirely new interpretation of Gregory's principal work.

I held back on the literature review because there was in fact only a small amount of literature dealing with the form of Gregory's work in a fundamental way, while the great number of general studies on Merovingian history usually only mentioned the author of the period's principal source in passing. The various problems caused by the traditional points of view concerning Gregory of Tours, his work and his so-called 'dark', 'archaic' or 'barbaric' time, are certainly of scholarly interest, but they require specific studies which cannot be entered into without first undertaking a full analysis of Gregory's main work itself. Yet an expert on Merovingian history such as Karl Ferdinand Werner, when preparing a conference on the theme of Merovingian Neustria, was able to organize the sessions *without* including Gregory. He even wrote in the published abstracts of the conference, 'this was a conscious attempt, dare I say it, to free Merovingian history from the troublesome influence of Gregory of Tours'.<sup>1</sup>

Gregory does indeed appear to be a 'troublesome influence', providing us with a large and vital text, the importance and significance of which has yet to be fully explored. This is the problem that lies at the heart of research into both Gregory and the Merovingian period as a whole. In other words, our understanding of Merovingian history

<sup>1</sup> Werner 1989: xv.

appears to rely on exemplary episodes from Gregory and we regularly avail ourselves of them without questioning their special function within his work as a whole. Our ignorance of the actual, didactic intentions of this author, who as we now know had selected and edited his material in some quite extreme ways, means that his apparently naively presented exemplars have not been adequately exploited. Gregory's *Histories* were used but were neither understood nor made understandable.

John Michael Wallace-Hadrill, another great scholar of the Merovingian period, characterized this situation with regard to Gregory (and Bede) as follows: 'We use them so often as *storehouses of information* that we forget they are historians' (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> The fate hinted at here for the historian of Tours is not exploitation proper, but rather a very particular mistreatment of his work. This began with really quite extensive manipulation of his work in the seventh century, scarcely two generations after the death of the bishop (see Chapter 4, pp. 192–201), when there was already a tendency to reduce Gregory simply to a witness of the glorious Frankish past. This approach is also found in the numerous D-family manuscripts, which from the tenth century onwards regularly assigned the work the title *The History of the Franks*.<sup>3</sup> The tradition was revived during the rise of the French monarchy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the course of this renaissance of interest in Gregory, the bishop of Tours became the official historian of France and its monarchy, of 'histoire française' or 'historia nostra'.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly Maurist Dom Ruinart, in the introduction to his ground-

<sup>2</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1975: 96f.; see also Wallace-Hadrill 1962b.

<sup>3</sup> See B. Krusch's introduction to *Greg. Hist.* ix, as well as 3, 31–8. The oldest manuscript containing this title ('liber historiarum gesta Francorum') is C2 from Namur, certainly written at St Hubert – contrary to Krusch's opinion (*ibid.*: xxviii) – in the middle of the ninth century (information from Bernhard Bischoff, see p. 196, n. 123 below). The earliest reference to the *Historia Francorum* is in Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum* (MGH SRL III: 34, 112), although it is not certain that this was actually a reference to Gregory's work; however, the work is alluded to vaguely in *ibid.* III 1: 93, 9f.: 'in the books of that venerable man Bishop Gregory of Tours'. On the question of the actual title of the work see the citations in ninth- and tenth-century sources which have been listed by Bordier 1864: 265ff. and in descriptions of medieval library catalogues in Manitius 1906: 657f.; 1910: 759).

<sup>4</sup> See the statements by Nikolaus Faber, Jerome Bignon ('digniorem historicum non habemus') and others in Bordier 1864: 274f. The numerous editions, beginning with the early sixteenth century, are also informative, *ibid.*: 281ff. As well as that of Faber, who had been the teacher of Louis XIII, there were also other editions produced in court circles: the editions of Jodocus Badius and Joannes Parvus (Petit) from 1512 (Bordier 1864: 283f.), produced at the instigation of Guillaume Petit, the confessor of Louis XII since 1509, as well as 'L'Histoire française de S. Grégoire de Tours...' of C[laude] B[onnet] D[auphinois] from 1610, see Bordier 1864: 292. The important manuscript collection of Philippe Hurault, including Gregory's *Historia Francorum*, was taken to the royal library in 1622 at the order of the Conseil d'Etat: McKitterick 1980: 570. The special interest in Gregory in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is still to be documented comprehensively, as McKitterick's contribution shows. For references see Voss 1972: 107 n. 15 (on E. Pasquier), 115 (J. Bodin), 143 (La Mothe le Vayer).

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breaking edition of 1699, claimed that Gregory's work represented the earliest history of the 'kingdom of France'.<sup>5</sup>

The categorization of the historian was finally completed during the Enlightenment. The basic thrust of this judgement, articulated in the third volume of the *Histoire littéraire de la France* in 1735 and repeated later in the *Histoire littéraire de la France* of Jean-Jacques Ampère (1839), has endured right up to the present day.<sup>6</sup> Already in 1735 one could find listed under Gregory's positive qualities, 'his sincerity and *naïveté* in the narration of facts, and his piety in handling their relationship to religion' (p. 392); with reference to his negative qualities, Gregory was described as, 'An incredibly gullible writer' ('*crédule*'), who 'did not select or organize his material' (p. 391). As early as 1699 Ruinart was attempting to challenge the negative impression which Gregory's non-classical Latin had made on scholars of the early-modern age, but he was unsuccessful (see the quotation in n. 5, above).

This categorization of Gregory's positive and negative qualities, which in retrospect clearly marked the beginning of an extraordinarily successful character assassination of a Merovingian author and his time, paralleled the distortions to which his work had been subject in the seventh century. Consequently, Gregory's language seemed to reflect in an ideal way the barbarism of his time (see n. 44 in Chapter 2 on Erich Auerbach, below). Also, since 1735, Gregory's apparent inability to follow a purposeful structure in his *Histories* became the accepted view, while his obsession with piety and his excessive veneration of saints was explained by his *naïveté* and limitations.<sup>7</sup> This cliché was repeated *ad nauseam* and the only exceptions apparently deviating from this school of thought were presented by those who could show that this sixth-century historian had made some historical mistakes. The picture of our author was thus 'enriched' by Siegmund Hellmann's description of Gregory as malicious and tendentious (1911) and Louis Halphen's view that Gregory was prone to literary fabrication (1925).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See, in Migne's reprint, PL 71: 15: 'It is fortunate for our Gregory, even though he wrote in rustic language, that no one writing about the nascent Frankish kingdom can do so without his support.' See also the *Histoire littéraire [sic] de la France*: 392, where Gregory is praised: '... there is no equal to Gregory as far as the origins of our history are concerned'. German scholarship held a similar view, as Krusch stated in the first sentence of his new edition in *Greg. Hist.*: ix: 'Gregory's *libri Historiarum* ought to have the first place in the historical monuments of Germany as the oldest and richest of all the sources...'

<sup>6</sup> *Histoire littéraire [sic] de la France*: 391f.. See also Ampère 1839: 294ff. and de Nie 1987: 1 and 10f.

<sup>7</sup> On the 'limitations' see Krusch 1912: 332. Krusch also writes here of Gregory's 'carelessness' and detects 'many kind touches of his [Gregory's] modesty, open-heartedness and childish piety'.

<sup>8</sup> Hellmann 1911: 77: 'Gregory is neither artless, nor is he the true-hearted and naive barbarian.' Hellmann also recognized direct speech as an artistic medium used by Gregory (*ibid.*: 72ff.); see also Halphen 1925. In his review of Hellmann (Krusch 1912), Krusch took up Gregory's defence,

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While the bishop's thoughts about his historical subject-matter were not even questioned (despite Gustavo Vinay's intelligent but ultimately unsuccessful attempt at interpreting Gregory<sup>9</sup>), immense progress was being made in providing a practical version of his work. A major part of this progress was the MGH edition of the *Histories* produced by Bruno Krusch, assisted by Wilhelm Levison and, after their deaths, completed by Walther Holtzmann. In 1955 a German translation of the text was produced by Rudolf Buchner, one of the best scholars of textual criticism.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the English translations of O. M. Dalton (1927) and Lewis Thorpe (1974), the French translation of Robert Latouche (1963 and 1965), and the Italian translation of Maximo Oldoni (1981),<sup>11</sup> Rudolf Buchner had the considerable advantage of having at his disposal the best available Latin text – that is, the version produced by the Monumenta.

Alongside these fundamental works, which through their scholarly apparatus and indices achieved the highest standards of presentation for this historical text, further impetus was provided for my own work by two less well-known publications. Felix Thürlemann's study of Gregory's historical discourse, and his formal analysis of the structure of the text, seems to me to be very important. Its merits lie not only in the demonstration of 'speech' (*Eigenrede*/'speech of the author' and *Fremdrede*/'the speech of others') as a regularly employed medium for Gregory's interpretation of history, but also in the hitherto unappreciated significance of typological references in the work of the bishop of Tours.<sup>12</sup> More modest in its claims, but scarcely less important, is the word-concordance for the *Histories* published in 1979, which arranges alphabetically and statistically the 119,904 words in the text. The fact that this statistical analysis used Arndt's 1884 edition of the *Histories* detracts only slightly from its importance.<sup>13</sup>

but later launched his own attack on Gregory's work: Krusch 1931. K. F. Werner wrote, in the tradition of Halphen (Werner 1989: xv), 'This author has immense talent as both a story-teller and as an inventor of histories. . .'

<sup>9</sup> Vinay 1940; for him, see Goffart 1988, as well as Chapter 4 below. For further independent work on Gregory, see Ganshof 1966, who was interested exclusively in the value of the *Histories* as a source of historical information.

<sup>10</sup> See p. 162, n. 116 below on the work of Buchner, as well as the introduction in Buchner 1955. I regularly use Buchner's translation, except when I have changed or improved a quotation, but this has not been especially noted in all cases; the other translations named were consulted occasionally.

<sup>11</sup> For the editions, translations and secondary literature see the detailed bibliography of the *Repertorium fontium* 1984: 233–8. Other good bibliographies are provided by Vollmann 1983: 928–30; Pietri 1983: xx–xxxvii; and de Nie 1987: 301–30.

<sup>12</sup> On Thürlemann 1974, see especially pp. 148–52 and n. 112, below. Thürlemann's absolute division between historical and hagiographical discourse is criticized in Heinzelmann 1991b: 241–2.

<sup>13</sup> *Concordance* 1979. The two volumes appear as the first part of the series 'Collectum: la collection de listes de mots en concordances'. I am indebted to Dr Setz of the MGH, who made available to

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Literature on Gregory has experienced a 'boom' since the 1980s, but the interest in this Merovingian author frequently revolved round a history of mentalities and, thus, focused more on the hagiographical part of Gregory's work.<sup>14</sup> This general occupation with the Merovingian period has occasioned further work on Gregory, especially in terms of corrections to his historical text, but these studies were not really concerned with Gregory's overall ideas.<sup>15</sup> However, the focus on the internal exploitation of Gregory's work has continued. This has ranged from the textbook-type studies of Pietri and Weidemann (supplementing the work of May Vieillard-Troïekouff) to a number of good Lexikon entries, especially the contribution of Benedikt K. Vollmann, all of which provide a good summary of the literature.<sup>16</sup>

A real breakthrough in research on Gregory came first, I believe, with the work of Kathleen Mitchell and, even more so, Walter Goffart. Both scholars provided good counter-arguments to the long-accepted classification of Gregory by the 1735 *Histoire littéraire de la France* as gullible and incapable of any spiritual order.<sup>17</sup> Other scholars, such as Giselle de Nie, returned to a 'non-rational element in Gregory's writings', viewing his work as that of an 'unconscious poet'.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile Mitchell, like Goffart, emphasized the structured use of 'sanctity' and 'saints' in Gregory's most antithetical statements. Walter Goffart expressed this in the stimulating and provocative comment: 'Gregory was no more superstitious than Augustine had been.'<sup>19</sup>

If I were to choose a device for my own book, it would surely be this sentence. Miracles and saints, or 'miracles and slaughters' (Goffart 1987: 174), not only represent a key part of Gregory's philosophy of history, but could also be used to organize a society and its history. Mitchell appreciated this and therefore recognized and described the role of the saints as both exponents and instruments of Gregory's social ideas.

me a partial exemplar of Arndt's version.

<sup>14</sup> See the relevant bibliographies (n. 11, above), as well as Mitchell 1987: n. 1 for Peter Brown, John Corbett, etc.

<sup>15</sup> See, among others, the criticism by Wood 1985 and 1986a (on Book III of the *Histories*); and p. 133, n. 83 below, on Breukelaar, McCormick and Carozzi.

<sup>16</sup> See Weidemann 1982a, b and c and Pietri 1983 and 1982 on Gregory's chronological methods. The latter contribution was supplemented in some ways by Sonntag 1987 and Vollmann 1983. Another good article is Maaz 1988, which should be compared with the rather more conventional contributions of Pietri (1984) and Anton (1989).

<sup>17</sup> See Goffart 1987 and 1988, Mitchell 1983 and 1987.

<sup>18</sup> de Nie 1987: 8; see also *ibid.*: 23, and see my review: Heinzelmann 1991a. de Nie's recognition of the significance for Gregory of 'typological or "figural" thinking' (de Nie 1987: 12) is absolutely correct and quite thought-provoking. By this she understands freely associated thoughts in the context of images and symbols, but not the normal patterns of thought one might have expected from a bishop educated in patristic and biblical works; see pp. 146–52, below.

<sup>19</sup> Goffart 1988: 142; also *ibid.*: 135: 'Gregory's determination to multiply the holy'.

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While, for Goffart, Gregory's central theme was the contrast between human failings and the exemplary existence of the saints, Mitchell has rightly argued for the presence of an 'overarching message of redemption and reformation' as a factor in the unity and arrangement of this historical work (Mitchell 1983: 129). However, Mitchell failed to make the decisive step in her explanation of the literary and spiritual structure of the *Libri historiarum decem* because she did not see the link Gregory made between sixth-century society and the Christological society of all true believers. This Christological society is the 'ecclesia Christi'.

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## CHAPTER I

*Gregory of Tours and his family*

## PREFACE: THE AUTHOR'S STATEMENTS ABOUT HIMSELF

When dealing with individual authors it seems rather banal to point out the interdependence between their literary work and their historical background. The study of Gregory of Tours is no exception: his literary activity is best understood with reference to his quality as a bishop, a leader of society. As far as his hagiographical work is concerned, this context requires no explanation, yet it is just as relevant for our interpretation of the *Histories* as a specifically Christian and authoritarian episcopal view of history and society in the sixth century. The social and prosopographical traditions to which Gregory was duty-bound, or to which he felt consciously tied, are also an important part of understanding his role as both an interpreter of history, as well as an exemplary character within history. It is therefore necessary to document Gregory's social and prosopographical background in some detail. I shall return to the problems of Gregory's 'biographical' statements in Chapter 2, but first of all it is necessary to explore the function and significance of these statements.

One of the many comments frequently found in literature on Gregory is the assumption that he constantly expressed pride in his origins from a prominent Gallo-Roman family. Most recently Walter Goffart dedicated a few well-chosen words to this subject (Goffart 1988: 192, with reference to Stroheker 1948: 112, Pietri 1983: 251 and Kurth 1919c: 104), yet Gregory makes direct reference to his family in only three of the *Histories*' 443 chapters:

- Hist. v 5: An incident involving the Burgundian branch of Gregory's family in which the major roles are played by Gregory's brother Peter, a relative called Silvester (probably his uncle) and Silvester's unnamed son. Small roles were played by Bishop Gregory of Langres ('my great-grandfather'), his son Tetricus, and Bishop Nicetius of Lyons ('the uncle of my mother').

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- Hist. v 11: A reference to a certain Gundulf as ‘the uncle of my mother’. Gregory refers to his mother fourteen times in his works – twice in the *Histories*. No other relative is mentioned so often, but Gregory still only gives her name once. If we did not have Venantius Fortunatus’ Fort.Carm. x 15, then Gregory’s identification of his mother with the Armentaria who was the granddaughter of Gregory of Langres (VP vii, the biography of the older Gregory) would have remained purely hypothetical.
- Hist. v 14: A reference to Nicetius as ‘the husband of my niece’. The niece is not named, but she has been identified with the known niece of Gregory, Eusthenia, who is mentioned in the VM (iv 36). The name of her mother, Gregory’s own sister, is not known.

On the other hand, the series of family members that Gregory did *not* identify as such is far more impressive. At no point in the *Histories* does Gregory mention his relationship with his uncle, Gallus, bishop of Clermont, and he says just as little about his immediate predecessor at Tours, Eufronius, who was his mother’s cousin, or possibly even her brother. The same is true of the martyr Vettius Epagatus, the senator Leocadius of Bourges, Bishop Sacerdos of Lyons and many more. For example, the Justina mentioned by Gregory in Hist. x 15 can only be identified as his niece from Fort.Carm. viii 13 and ix 7 (verses 8iff.) (Goffart 1988: 192). Expressions of family pride, when they do appear, are usually indirect: the ‘first senator of Gaul’, Leocadius, was related to the Lyons martyr Vettius Epagatus (Hist. i 31), as was Gregory’s great-grandmother who is characterized as ‘from the family of Vettius Epagatus’, and who, together with her husband, is also described as being ‘from among the first senators’. Leocadia only appears in Gregory’s biography of his uncle, Gallus (VP vi 1), and again there is no direct reference to her connection to Gregory. The same applies to King Chlothar’s description of Gregory of Langres’ family as ‘a great lineage of the first order’ (Hist. iv 15). Gregory of Langres’ grandson, Eufronius, was elevated to the bishopric of Tours as a result of this distinction, which otherwise concerned Gregory of Tours only indirectly. No one could deny that the author of the *Histories* had a measure of pride in his family – the most important statement with reference to this issue will be considered below (Hist. v 49 on his relatives’ connections to the bishopric of Tours) – but it is also clear that he did not wish to use the *Histories*



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to give literary expression to this pride; it was certainly not a subject of the work.

References to Gregory's familial connections are somewhat more frequent in his hagiographical works, but they often relate to the hagiographical purpose of the stories: the relatives who are named appear mostly as witnesses to miraculous events. The saintly Bishops Gallus, Gregory (of Langres) and Nicetius, whose *Lives* Gregory had written, are even the focus of such miracle stories. It is only as a result of our knowledge of all of Gregory's works, however, that we are aware of Gregory's family connection to these saints; contemporaries may have known of these connections as a result of their familiarity with the Gallic nobility. Certainly, the reference to the 'splendour of lineage' of Gallus of Clermont, Gregory's uncle, would have also reflected back on the author of the *Life* himself (VP vi prologue), but if Gregory was so proud of this connection then why did he include, as the leitmotif of this biography, the fact that Gallus considered his refined birth 'tamquam stercus', in other words, 'like excrement' (Goffart 1988: 192 n. 342)? As a demonstration of Gregory's own social prestige, the choice of another prosopographical connection would surely have been more suitable. Sacerdos of Lyons, for example, came from a patrician family and was the principal *Reichsbischof* of Childebert I (Hist. iv 36), yet his connection to Gregory is not mentioned in the *Histories* and is referred to only indirectly in Gregory's biography of Nicetius (VP viii 3). Gregory generally passes over his familial relationship with the majority of the bishops of Tours, too (Hist. v 49). Those bishops of Tours who are certainly known to be closely related to Gregory are the same prelates who were also related to the families of the Ruricii and Aviti. These families were part of the senatorial aristocracy, whose reputation reached beyond the boundaries of Gaul and out into the Roman world as a whole.

Finally, the remarks of Gregory's friend and contemporary, Venantius Fortunatus, are also relevant for understanding Gregory's attitude. This experienced writer of panegyrics knew well the weaknesses and preferences of his patron, and praise for the nobility of Gregory's family was not a major feature of the numerous poems that he dedicated to this bishop of Tours. This becomes especially clear if one compares these texts with the poems Venantius had written for Bishop Leontius of Bordeaux.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George 1987.

