

A Carefully Constructed History: Gregory of Tours and the Observation of Societal Shift in Merovingian Gaul

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*Gregory of Tours, a powerful sixth century French bishop, was also an influential historian. His major work, *The History of the Franks*, provided a detailed account of politics and society in fifth and sixth century France. By focusing on several key passages of this text, I argue that Gregory used his position as an historian to argue for a complementary religious and political order where secular, Merovingian rulers and religious leaders worked in concert. Gregory believed that this combined order was necessary to provide security and stability in the tumultuous aftermath of the fall of Rome.*

IN GREGORY OF TOURS' INFLUENTIAL WORK *THE HISTORY OF THE FRANKS*, numerous passages detail both the subtle and overt changes coming into effect as Roman Gaul faded into the past and a new Merovingian Gaul emerged. These changes occurred in many separate yet overlapping spheres, including the economy, political systems, religious influence, and the geography of urban centers. Gregory, who wrote between 574 CE and 594 CE, chronicled the aftermath of the Fall of Rome with remarkable clarity and dexterous skill. The Fall of Rome, traditionally defined as the piecemeal dissolution of the Western Roman Empire, carried vast consequences for the Merovingian world. As the episodes related by Gregory clearly illustrate, a distinct transformation of Gaul occurred during the 400s and 500s as Roman-influenced societal structures were transformed, and in some cases superseded, by militaristic, heavily Christian, Merovingian societal structures. Furthermore, Gregory's writings provide insight and clarity into how he, a prominent bishop, a prolific writer, and an astute historian, viewed the quickly changing world around him. This research paper shall examine six specific passages in *The History of the Franks*, and analyze how and why Gregory of Tours portrayed the increasing militarization of Merovingian society, the gradual blurring and reorganization of ethnic identities between Gallo-Romans and other ethnic groups, the reworking of the urban sphere as a unity of religious and secular power, and the development of small-scale political units conjoined with localized economic networks. Gregory's observations on these

trends were purposeful. In the six passages, which I am entitling *The resting place of Saint Martin*, *The imperial entrance of Clovis*, *The judicial process of Marseille*, *Gondovald gathers oaths*, *The armies of Gontran pursue Gondovald*, and *Gontran attacks the Goths*, we shall see how Gregory advocated for a combined and complementary religious and political order in which Merovingian rulers and religious leaders to worked in concert.

Gregory of Tours was born in the year 538 CE and died in the year 594 CE. He was born to an aristocratic Gallo-Roman family, and many of his direct ancestors had served as bishops.¹ He served as the Bishop of Tours between the years 574 CE and his death in 594 CE, during which time he wrote prodigiously and produced his seminal work *The History of the Franks*. In addition to *The History of the Franks*, he wrote extensively on miracles performed by holy men, the lives of early Christian saints, and other Christian topics.²

The History of the Franks is divided into ten books, organized chronologically. The historian Walter Goffart accurately summarizes the subjects of the papers, noting: “[t]he first book hastens from the Creation to about A.D. 400; the next three proceed briskly to 575; and the last six, at a comparatively different, leisurely pace, span a mere fifteen years.”³ The series provides a compelling history of Gaul, with a very heavy focus on events that took place during Gregory’s lifetime. However, it must be noted that Gregory’s chronology was not particularly precise. He typically preferred rounded figures for dates, often using *lustra*, or five-year periods, as his timekeeping unit.⁴ Interestingly, while the modern translation of Gregory’s works is *The History of the Franks*, this title is based off the translated Latin title, *Historia Francorum*. In fact, Gregory refers to his own work as *Historiae*, which is better translated as *Histories*.⁵ In this sense, it becomes clear that Gregory’s intention was not to crystallize an ethno-cultural origin for the Franks, but rather to create a wide-ranging history of Gaul. The broad scope of *The History of the Franks* allows Gregory to chronicle a variety of disparate events, including the violent wars between Merovingian kings, the increasing Christianity influence in daily life, and the complex social and political relations between Franks, Gallo-Romans, Goths, and Burgundians.⁶ As a result of this, *The History of the Franks* can be viewed as a composite of the principal events and trends shaping Merovingian society, allowing for a complex and comprehensive analysis of the Merovingian world.

Although Gregory’s account is generally accepted as accurate by historians, it is not without errors. Notably, there are chronological omissions and oversimplified hagiographic and religious explanations found throughout.⁷ In his capacity as bishop and historian, Gregory was interested in explicitly demonstrating divine influence in Merovingian society. If at times *The History of the Franks* includes explicit religious zeal and oversimplification, this is not simply a function of Gregory’s naïveté as a historian or religious occupation.⁸ Indeed, Gregory was a powerful actor in the sixth century Merovingian world, consciously shaping the political perceptions of others with his representations of Merovingian society.⁹ In his volumes, Gregory forcefully advocates for the need for secular and religious leaders to work together to create an ordered, religious society. Gregory was perhaps motivated to construct this narrative because of the difficulties he faced as the Bishop of Tours.¹⁰

This society that Gregory portrays with such detail, dedication, and craft is the world of Merovingian rule. The Merovingians were a Frankish dynasty established in the aftermath of the gradual dissolution of the western Roman Empire that came into prominence with the reigns of Childeric I and the Clovis in the late 400s and early 500s.¹¹ The Merovingian kings gradually established a loose hold on the power vacuum created by the decline of Roman authority.¹²

Several key trends emerged and developed during the tail end of the Roman Empire during the second half of the fifth century, and continued through the heyday of the Merovingian dynasty in the sixth century. As previously mentioned, these trends included an increasing militarization of society,¹³ the gradual blurring and reorganization of ethnic identities replacing the outdated dichotomy of Romans and barbarians,¹⁴ the evolution of cities as centers of combined religious and secular power,¹⁵ and the development of small-scale states conjoined with localized economic networks.¹⁶ These four intertwined phenomena actively reinforced each other.



The disintegration of Roman bureaucracy resulted in new political and economic systems based around local landholding elites.

This pattern is exemplified in the development of localized autonomous political units. The disintegration of Roman bureaucracy resulted in new political and economic systems based around local landholding elites.¹⁷ The new, increasingly self-dependent, landholding elite hired their own military protection, often consisting of migrating barbarian groups, and thus were not dependent upon the Roman army for military protection.¹⁸ This propensity for small landholders to build their own military might and source of power allowed for a gradual balkanization in late Roman and Merovingian Gaul.¹⁹ Smaller economic and political units, typically concentrated around an urban center, sprang up throughout Gaul. These independent political units, governed by a local aristocracy, engaged in frequent warfare on behalf of opposing factions of the Merovingian dynasty.²⁰

Another essential component of the societal change of Merovingian Gaul was the rise to prominence of bishops, and the resulting delicate balance between secular and religious sources of power.²¹ As Christianity spread and flourished throughout Gaul, bishops assumed more prominence, and they became powerful political actors who often struggled against or worked with Merovingian kings.²² The episcopate began to fill a power void left by the dissolution of the Roman city council, and gradually became an influential voice in city government. Thus the city became the tool by which the growing religious power of the episcopate and the secular power of the Merovingian kings and their vassals came together.²³

Additionally, as the Merovingian kings asserted their authority throughout Gaul, their efforts at unification led to a continuation of the late Roman reconfiguration of identities and

border zones.²⁴ During the late Roman Empire, various ethnic groups had been settled within the empire as *federates*. These groups included the Franks in Northern Gaul, the Burgundians in Eastern Gaul, and the Visigoths in Aquitaine. These groups adapted, with differing levels of success, to the encompassing Gallo-Roman society.²⁵ During the Merovingian era, this gradual blurring of the peoples of the *federates* with the vastly larger Gallo-Roman population continued, particularly amongst the Franks, who both assumed positions of power and cultural influence throughout Merovingian Gaul.²⁶ The political and military emergence of the Franks led to the simultaneous development of Frankish identity, which asserted itself throughout Northern Gaul and was an amalgamation of Frankish ethno-identity, Gallo-Roman identity, and late Roman constructs of the barbarian world.²⁷

Recent literature has placed new emphasis on the agency of Gregory, taking his account as a reference and critically examining his viewpoints and motivations. Gregory did not just naively observe the world around him, but consciously analyzed and described events as a historian with a “far wider frame of reference than the Merovingian age.”²⁸ Goffart argues that Gregory explicitly portrayed the failings, weaknesses, and violence of Merovingian society, as well as the miracles and virtuous actions of famous saints, in order to show how true history had an objective character.²⁹ Innes disagrees, postulating that “Gregory’s own view of history” was “a manifestation of God’s will.”³⁰ This research essay builds off previous critiques by taking the view of Gregory as a religiously motivated historian with agency. However, this paper counters the notion that Gregory simply strove to show how God controlled and acted in Merovingian society or the objective nature of history. Instead, I argue that Gregory’s main motivation to write *The History of the Franks* was much more specific and political. In short, Gregory used the text to argue for a combined and complementary religious and political order where Merovingian rulers and religious leaders worked in concert with one another. By clarifying Gregory’s motivation and overarching moral and detailing how Gregory advocates and supports this moral in *The History of the Franks*, this research essay breaks new ground by examining how Gregory used his position as a historian, to selectively portray and argue for a restructuring of Merovingian society.

Gregory’s intended audience for *The History of the Franks* further supports the notion that he wrote to affect temporal and political change. In the preface to *The History of the Franks*, Gregory recognizes his audience, noting “in order for the memory of the past to be conserved, it must come to the knowledge of men to come.”³¹ However, considering the limited knowledge of Latin in Gregory’s period, Gregory must have known *The History of the Franks* would be only accessible to a select group of literate bishops, ecclesiastics, and advisors. Thus, Gregory was consciously directing the carefully cultivated history found in *The History of the Franks* to this small and powerful group, which largely determined the political agendas of secular and ecclesiastic rulers. In this sense, *The History of the Franks* served as a political and societal template for the powerbrokers of Merovingian society.

Book I, Chapter XLVIII, The resting place of Saint Martin

Among the many passages in *The History of the Franks* which demonstrate the changing

structure of Merovingian society, one of the most informative is Gregory's narration of the imbroglio over the burial of the body of Saint Martin of Tours. Martin was a predecessor to Gregory as Bishop of Tours and a renowned performer of miracles in late Roman Gaul.³² Martin held tremendous power while he lived and after he died his body remained a prized relic for Christians, particularly for those of Merovingian Gaul.³³

The episode begins when Gregory recounts the aftermath of the death of Martin in 397 CE. First Gregory establishes the saintliness and thus legitimacy of Saint Martin of Tours by noting, "Saint Martin, Bishop of Tours, full of saintly miracles, great benefactor of the weak, passed away in the eighty-first year of his life."³⁴ Although it must be admitted that Gregory, a devout bishop himself, was keen to accentuate and moralize other prominent Christian figures, this description nonetheless provides an interesting look at how Gregory conceptualized bishops as persons of power, particularly in a religious sense. Gregory describes bishops playing an active role in administering justice and being a direct link between God's power and society.³⁵ Here and throughout *The History of the Franks* Gregory remarks upon the saintliness, miraculous abilities, and generosity of Christian figures, especially of bishops, as a way to establish their connection with God's power.

Gregory's demonstration of the temporal power and virtue of bishops touches upon the broader theme of the presence of bishops, and more generally ecclesiastic authority in Merovingian power structures. In practice these power structures were often most clearly manifest in urban centers where bishops occupied roles of power and prestige, and churches or other religious structures dominated the urban space both in terms of spatial prominence and grandeur.³⁶

Gregory then writes about how the different provincials of Gaul, the Poitevins (in Latin *Pectavi*), the people of Poitou, and the Tourangeaux (in Latin *Toronici*), the people of Touraine, fought over possession of the body of Martin.³⁷ Gregory concludes by describing how the Tourangeaux "apprehended the burden of the saintly body, some threw it from the window, others collected it outside, and placing it on a boat the whole group sailed went down the river."³⁸

This episode illustrates the increasing militarization and factionalism present within late Roman and early Frankish Gaul. While it would be a stretch ever to have considered Gallo-Roman a homogeneous identity, the dispute between the Poitevins and the Tourangeaux shows how divisions within Merovingian Gaul reflected the prevalence of provincialism within political maneuverings rather than larger ethnic or cultural differences. This pattern certainly reflected the increasingly localized political structures that developed during Merovingian rule. It is interesting to note that the designations Tourangeaux and the Poitevins, although representative of groups of people from particular provinces in Merovingian Gaul, also connotes division between the provinces' eponymous urban centers: the cities of Tours and Poitiers respectively. This shows how groups in Merovingian Gaul defined their identity in smaller political units based around local urban centers. By emphasizing the temporal



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prestige of bishops, and how secular political entities revered bishops and fought over religious reliquaries, Gregory implicitly argues for the need to coordinate and consolidate religious and secular temporal power structures, so disputes such as the one over the body of Martin need not take place.

Book II, Chapter XXXVIII, The imperial entrance of Clovis

In Book II of *The History of the Franks*, Gregory of Tours describes how Clovis, King of the Franks, received the Eastern Roman Emperor, Anastasius, in the city of Tours. To greet the emperor and to make an impression on his subjects in Tours, Clovis flaunted his extravagant wealth, and “mounted on horseback, he generously distributed gold and silver on the road between the gate of the vestibule (of the Basilica) and the church of the city.”³⁹ This ostentatious display served to remind the populace that wealth in Merovingian Gaul was heavily concentrated within its ruling elite.



Urban centers played a crucial role in edifying and preserving the fragile equilibrium between secular and religious forces and the continued functioning of local economies.

Additionally, this passage reveals quite a lot about how the structure of the Merovingian city reinforced hierarchical power relations. By analyzing this passage and the architecture of Merovingian Tours, the urban historian Hendrik Dey observed that “the three preeminent loci of spiritual and temporal prestige in Tours, the places where distinguished residents and visitors alike would congregate from the sixth century through the Carolingian period, were all arrayed along the stretch of road that began with St. Martin [the church of St. Martin] and led, via the city gate, to the cathedral/*episcopium* and royal palace.”⁴⁰ This highly explicit physical connection, a single road between the bases of spiritual and temporal power in Tours, demonstrates the interaction between secular and religious sources of power in Merovingian Gaul. The rule of the Merovingian kings such as Clovis depended heavily upon support from the Church and especially local bishops. The relationship the kings and ecclesiastic leaders developed also benefited the Church because the prestige of the Church depended upon the patronage and protection of the Merovingian kings. Urban centers played a crucial role in edifying and preserving the fragile equilibrium between secular and religious forces and the continued functioning of local economies.⁴¹

Later, Gregory notes how “from that day onwards [Clovis] was called consul or *Augustus*.”⁴² This phrase demonstrates the pretensions upon imperial power that the Merovingian kings, and particularly Clovis, still held on to. Clovis not only met with the Eastern Roman Emperor, but he chose to adopt an imperial Roman title. In doing so, Clovis hoped to emulate Roman traditions such as the triumphal entrance of the emperor and the cult of imperial victory.⁴³ As Clovis’ behaviors demonstrate, even if Roman power had long since disappeared in Gaul, new

power structures attempted, at least in name, to emulate the highly ordered power structure of the Roman Empire. Nonetheless, it should be observed that while Clovis did adopt some imperial pretensions, he did so on a much smaller political scale; the Merovingian kingdom never controlled more than a portion of Roman Gaul.

Finally, this passage presents an indication to the later urban structure of medieval France. Gregory relates how Clovis “left Tours in order to come to Paris where he established the seat of his kingdom.”⁴⁴ The establishment of the center of Merovingian and later Carolingian power in Paris allowed the city to quickly become the dominant urban center in medieval France. It is interesting to note that Paris, the center of political and religious power, and not Tours, another center of religious power, became the dominant urban center of medieval Gaul. This demonstrates how the most successful urban centers in Merovingian Gaul integrated both religious and secular power structures. Agathias, when describing the prosperity of Merovingian society, notes that the Franks “have magistrates in their cities and priests and celebrate the feasts.”⁴⁵ Here, by accentuating the benefits of the physical integration of religious and secular power structures in urban spaces, Gregory makes the case for a combined religious and secular political order.

Book IV, Chapter XLIII, The judicial process of Marseille

In chapter XLIII of Book IV of *The History of the Franks*, Gregory of Tours recounts an economic affair that sheds light on the reformed economic, political, and legal systems that were gradually taking root throughout Gaul. In this episode, Gregory describes the efforts of a certain merchant of Marseille to recover his goods, which had been stolen by “the men of the archdeacon Vigile who stole without the knowledge of their master.”⁴⁶ As a result of this theft, the merchant investigated the theft and eventually the governor of the Provence, Albin, arrested the archdeacon Vigile on the holy day of the nativity. Vigile’s arrest was evidently unpopular with the local citizens and “the population unanimously exclaimed that the archdeacon be permitted, after having given his guarantee, to celebrate the holy day with the other and that the accusation which was the object of the inquiry be discussed afterwards.”⁴⁷ However, Albin paid no heed to this outcry and instead kept the archdeacon prisoner before eventually fining him four thousand *sous*.⁴⁸

This episode is informative primarily with regard to the tension between religious and secular power in Merovingian Gaul. Whereas in Roman times, urban power was located in the city council, Gregory relates how power had become increasingly more associated with religious authority. As Geary relates “[t]he only potential rival that bishops faced for authority in the city was the count, but with the disappearance of civil government the rivalry was no equal contest,” and furthermore that the “office of count lost progressively in prestige and power to that of bishop in the sixth century, partly due to the higher social background bishops tended to have.”⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours himself is a prominent example of this shift. In this episode there is a clear conflict of power between the archdeacon Virgile, a religious authority just below the rank of bishop, and Albin, the secular governor of Provence. Gregory states that “the unanimous voice”⁵⁰ of the local population supported freeing the bishop

during the holy day, and that therefore Albin acted rashly and unwisely when he arrested the archdeacon. However, Gregory does not go so far as to defend the archdeacon; in fact, he seems to support the evenhanded legal conclusion of the incident. Gregory understood the need for delicate balance between religious and secular forces in Merovingian cities and his historical account actively advances this viewpoint.

Additionally, this episode reveals much about the larger societal context of Merovingian Gaul. Gregory relates that this episode took place in the port city of Marseille, under the Frankish king Sigebert, who ruled from 561 CE to 575 CE.⁵¹ Although Marseille and Provence were heavily Romanized under the Empire, there is no mention of Roman identity in this passage. This episode shows how Merovingian kings had established direct rule over the previously Roman-dominated regions of Southern Gaul by the mid sixth century, and co-opted the power structures of their Roman predecessors. Agathias records how the Merovingian “system of government, administration and laws are modelled more or less on the Roman pattern, apart from which they uphold similar standards with regard to contracts, marriage and religious observance.”⁵² Thus Roman Gaul, at least in political terms, had ceased to hold a distinct identity from the largely Frankish regions of Merovingian Northern Gaul. This broad trend is symptomatic of the gradual reconfiguration of Frankish, Burgundian, and Gallo-Roman political identities.

Lastly, this episode attests to the relative durability of certain regional trade networks. In one passage, Gregory refers to shipments of incoming oils into Marseille.⁵³ This shows how trade networks retained a larger scale in Southern Merovingian Gaul. As Patrick Geary notes, “reduced in size as the population of Frankish cities was, a diverse population of merchants continued to exist.”⁵⁴ Trade continued in Merovingian Gaul, and networks that had existed in Roman days continued to exist, although on a smaller scale. By detailing how trade networks and political stability depended upon a reasonable balance of power between secular and religious authorities in Marseille, Gregory again stresses the importance of a combined and coordinated religious and secular political order.

Book VII, Chapter XXVI, Gondovald gathers oaths

In Book VII of *The History of the Franks*, Gregory relates how a Frankish usurper, Gondovald, tried to strengthen his support and tighten his hold on political authority. Gondovald travelled around the region of Poitiers forcing the prominent citizens of each of the major urban centers to swear loyalty to him. However, “in the towns which had belonged to King Sigebert, he gathered oaths (of loyalty) in the name of King Chilbert,” while “in the towns which had belonged to Gontran or Chilpéric it was to his own name that one swore loyalty.”⁵⁵ This passage depicts how claims to power in Merovingian Gaul depended largely on how well a single ruler, in this case Gondovald, could unite and hold sway over separate urban centers. Here Gondovald reaffirms his authority over cities that had been controlled by his predecessors, Sigebert and Chilpéric, while attempting to weaken support for his rival to the Frankish crown, Gontran.

Furthermore, in each of these separate urban centers a set of prominent citizens, both secular and religious, controlled affairs. This notion of a prominent group of citizens harkens back to the Roman institutionalization of the city council. Gregory later notes how Gondoald first plied these prominent citizens with gifts in an attempt to curry their favor and loyalty. This informal power structure shows the importance of cities as nodes of personal connection and power in Merovingian Gaul, and how society was fractured into small city-state units, which had to be bound together through oaths and largesse or by force.

The passage continues by describing how Gondoald, after gathering oaths from the other prominent members of the town of Angoulême, specifically went to the town's bishop. Gondoald "only left the bishop after grievously injuring him because the bishop had not welcomed him honorably."⁵⁶ This fascinating passage provides insight into the difficulty secular rulers had in maintaining their distinction and position above others, particularly bishops. Evidently there existed rather strict hospitality norms for those of different ranks and when the bishop did not comply with these norms, Gondoald reaffirmed his power and superiority over the local bishop. Once again Gregory advocates for a delicate balance between secular and religious power.

This episode also shows how easy it was for usurpers, like Gondoald, to gain a foothold in Merovingian Gaul. Additionally, throughout *The History of the Franks*, Gregory often describes the many violent uprisings and civil wars that occurred between claimants to the Merovingian crown. This political instability added to the factional conflicts that engulfed Merovingian Gaul.⁵⁷ Here, by demonstrating how religious and secular power structures could both reinforce and harm each other, Gregory forcefully advocates for a combined and coordinated power structure that could constrain violent civil wars and political uprisings.

Book VII, Chapter XXXV, The armies of Gontran pursue Gondoald

In this informative episode in the seventh book of *The History of the Franks*, Gregory details the armed struggle between the Frankish usurper Gondoald and the Burgundian and Frankish king Gontran. In this passage, the dukes of Gontran cross the Garonne River with their armies in pursuit of Gondoald. They pursue Gondoald and manage to entrap him in the city of Comminges. However, while en route the armies of Gontran discover the Basilica of Saint-Vincent, and "they found it full of various treasures belonging to the inhabitants; since it was the hope of the inhabitants that the Basilica of such a venerable Saint would not be sacked by Christians."⁵⁸ Unfortunately for the inhabitants of the town, the troops did pillage the Basilica, taking away large amounts of its treasure. However, Gregory is keen to stress that "divine vengeance stuck the same place, since a great number of the troops' hands were miraculously burned."⁵⁹

This episode is extraordinarily compelling, and it clearly details the increasing militarization of Merovingian Gaul and the influential role of Christianity in society. Throughout *The History of the Franks*, a large number of active military groups were constantly moving against each other, fighting and killing each other and civilians, and pillaging

surrounding towns and fields. As noted before, political instability and smaller political factions undoubtedly contributed to this trend. The fact that the people of the town put their wealth and their hope in the religious protection of the Basilica, and not in secular protective measures, demonstrates the powerful influence Christianity had over the diverse warring factions of Merovingian Gaul. However, the fact that the Basilica was ultimately plundered and that citizens were harmed shows the lack of monopoly on violence that any one faction, even the Church, possessed in Merovingian Gaul.

In this episode the troops destroyed a revered Christian site, the Basilica of Saint-Vincent, where the wealth of the urban center was concentrated.⁶⁰ Regardless of Gregory's assertion that the raid was an unwise choice that was duly and divinely punished, the disregard of Frankish troops for Christian holy sites points to a sense of lawlessness within Merovingian Gaul, and to the lack of political and military influence that the Church possessed. By referring to divine retribution, Gregory again stresses the need for the Merovingian troops to respect the temporal power of the Church.

At the conclusion of the passage, the armies of Gontran lay siege to the town of Comminges, and "all the surrounding region was pillaged; but some men of the army, pricked by the powerful sting of greed, having strayed too far, were then killed by the local inhabitants."⁶¹ This passage again attests to the terrible effects that local wars had on the peasantry of Merovingian Gaul. Additionally, the lack of central authority in Merovingian Gaul is thrown into sharp relief. Gondovald was a usurper against Gontran, and he conducted his campaign within Merovingian Gaul. The actions of Gontran's troops show that even the subjects of the Merovingian kings were not safe from being pillaged by the Merovingian armies. The lack of a single political authority with a monopoly on force, along with the everyday danger that threatened Merovingian peasant life, demonstrates the increasing factionalism of Merovingian society. In this passage, Gregory critiques the violent and unstable political climate of Merovingian Gaul and argues for the creation of a new, stable political order that respected and incorporated religious authority.

Book VIII, Chapter XLV, Gontran attacks the Goths

In Book VIII of *The History of the Franks*, Gregory relates a rather long history concerning diplomacy between Spain and the Frankish king Gontran, along with an account of an expedition Gontran led against the Goths. Gregory begins by analyzing how "ambassadors came frequently from Spain to meet with Gontran and being able to obtain the mercy of any peace, the hostility only grew."⁶² This observation demonstrates how larger scale political networks continued to exist in some form in Western Europe and how diplomacy was utilized as a tool to establish alliances. Gontran had evidently succeeded in establishing a state that was powerful enough to be recognized outside of Gaul. Nonetheless, this Merovingian state had many interior weaknesses and was quite susceptible to civil war or rebellions within its borders, as seen by the many battle testimonies and war descriptions provided by Gregory in *The History of the Franks*. However, the fact that diplomacy did exist between Gontran and the Spanish shows that even during an era of increasing factionalization and smaller political

subunits, larger political entities could exist by binding together these smaller political divisions.

In this passage, Gregory also discusses reconfiguring and blending ethnic identities. Gontran, perhaps influenced by the ultimately detrimental efforts of diplomacy by the Spanish, decided to lead an expedition against the Goths, more particularly the Visigoths, in their southern kingdom of Toulouse. Gontran, “with all his possessions, mobilized an army and positioned himself to march against the Goths.”⁶⁵ This passage is interesting because it provides an example of ethnic strife in post-Rome Western Europe. During the later stages of the Roman Empire there existed a large amount of conflict between the Empire, and the many different groups at the Empires’ borders and within the Empire. These groups, the Franks, the Burgundians, and the Goths among them, all held different identities. However, these identities were not clearly defined and were comprised of a number of qualities, including language, ethnicity, and the practices of its elite. Identities were also heavily reinforced by Roman interactions and Roman construction of barbarian identities.⁶⁴



By late 1916 and early 1917 Germany’s attempt to bring stability to the East through cultural and economic imperialism would collapse spectacularly - with dire consequences for all involved.

When these different groups were settled in Gaul, typically as *federate*, they claimed their own political independence and ethno-cultural identity. For example, the Visigoths established a Gothic kingdom around Toulouse in Aquitaine, while the Burgundians established Burgundian kingdom in eastern Gaul and the Franks established a kingdom, the Merovingian dynasty, originally in Northern Gaul.⁶⁵ However, it is important to note that these kingdoms were not ethnically homogeneous and were in fact much more nuanced, complex, and diverse political organizations.⁶⁶

However, after the gradual withdrawal of the Roman military and direct Roman interference in Southern Gaul, new identities began to form. The success of the Merovingian kings led to a gradual mixing, particularly among the elite, of Gallo-Romans (the Roman citizens who inhabited Gaul throughout Roman times and who constituted a vast majority of the population), together with the Burgundians and the Franks.⁶⁷ Agnès Graceffa notes how “according to Gregory” there existed “the quasi-absence of any real attention to terms pertaining to nationalities (at least in an ethnic sense).”⁶⁸ The old ethnic dichotomy between groups of barbarians and the civilized Romans was replaced by a much less clear amalgamation of identities.⁶⁹ This ethnic blurring in Merovingian Gaul started largely with alliances of marriage between elites, but also resulted from mixing simply due to proximity and cultural exchange. The pursuit and eventual defeat of the Goths by the Merovingian

rulers show how the Merovingian rulers reorganized ethnic divisions in Roman Gaul through conquest and expansion.

Finally, this episode again illustrates important characteristics of the early medieval city. Gregory describes in detail how the Duke Didier, one of the followers of Gontran, pursued the Goths to a fortified town, and having “reached the gates of the town, he was pinned down by the inhabitants who were inside the walls, and killed along with all who had followed him.”⁷⁰ This passage illustrates how the increasing militarization of Merovingian society influenced developments in the urban sphere, principally in the construction of walls and other fortifications surrounding cities. These walls proved successful in defending cities from attack, as in this case, and deterred other possible assaults. By noting the violence of the Merovingian political order and the role identities played in Merovingian politics, Gregory advocates for a more stable political order that eschews ethnic divisions.

Conclusion

Throughout *The History of the Franks*, Gregory of Tours carefully chronicles the general trends that were influencing society in Merovingian Gaul. Gregory of Tours describes both indirectly and directly the increasing militarization of society, the gradual blurring and reorganization of ethnic identities between the outdated dichotomy of Roman and barbarian, the reworking of the urban sphere as a unity of religious and secular power, and the development of small-scale political units conjoined with localized economic networks.

Along with this, Gregory’s opinions on these trends demonstrate how he viewed and hoped to shape Merovingian Gaul. Gregory was an active historian who possessed political and religious motivation. When Gregory wrote *The History of the Franks* it was not just to record the happenings of Merovingian society but also to mold Merovingian society to his worldview. In sum, by writing *The History of the Franks*, Gregory stresses the need for Merovingian rulers and religious leaders to work together to implement a combined and complementary religious and political order in Merovingian society. This overarching moral is manifest in Gregory’s observations and descriptions of the trends, such as redefined urbanism and changing identities, and events, such as military encounters and political instability, shaping the Merovingian world. By clarifying Gregory’s motivation and overarching moral, and detailing how Gregory advocates and supports this moral in *The History of the Franks*, this research essay breaks new ground by examining how Gregory used his position as a historian, to attempt to influence and selectively portray Merovingian society. Modern historians can draw parallels from this study of Gregory in order to better critique their own work’s relation to surrounding society and how their position as a historian influences their writing.

NOTES

1. Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D.550-800)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 112.
2. Ralph Mathisen, *People, Personal Expression, and Social Relations in Late Antiquity, Volume I* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 9.
3. Goffart, *The Narrators*, 124.
4. Guy Halsall, *Cemeteries and Societies in Merovingian Gaul: Selected Studies in History and Archaeology, 1992-2009* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 171.
5. Ralph Mathisen, *People, Personal Expression, and Social Relations in Late Antiquity, Volume II* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3.
6. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, trans. Robert Latouche (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995), Introduction 8-9.
7. Goffart, *The Narrators*, 113.
8. *Ibid.*, 151.
9. Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 132.
10. Paul Fouracre, *Frankish History: Studies in the Construction of Power* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 147.
11. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 83.
12. Matthew Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300-900: The sword, the plough, and the book* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 271.
13. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 117.
14. Ian Wood, "Missionaries and the Christian Frontier," in *The Transformation of Frontiers; From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, ed. Pohl, Walter, Ian Wood, and Helmut Reimitz, (Boston: Brill, 2001), 217.
15. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 132-133.
16. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 277-278*.
17. *Ibid.*, 111.
18. *Ibid.*, 125.
19. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity AD150-750* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1971), 43.
20. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 277*.
21. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 132-133.
22. *Ibid.*, 134.
23. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 278-279*.
24. *Ibid.*, 285.
25. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 125.
26. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 115.
27. *Ibid.*, 79.
28. Goffart, *The Narrators*, 119.
29. *Ibid.*, 173.
30. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 271*.
31. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs* Book I, Preface, "je me suis dit que pour que le souvenir du passé se conservât, il devait parvenir à la connaissance des hommes à venir."
32. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs* Book I, XLVIII.
33. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs* Book I, XLVIII. "saint Martin, évêque de Tours, plein de miracles de sainteté, grand bienfaiteur des faibles, décéda dans la quatre-vingt-unième année de son âge."
34. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs* Book I, XLVIII.
35. Mathisen, *People Volume I*, 9.
36. Hendrik W. Dey, *The Afterlife of the Roman City: Architecture and Ceremony in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 11.
37. Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum*, Book I, XLVIII.
38. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book I, XLVIII, "appréhendent le fardeau du corps très saint; les uns le jettent par la fenêtre; d'autres le recueillent du dehors, il est déposé sur un bateau et avec toute la population on descend la fleuve."
39. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book II, XXXVIII, "monté à cheval, il a destribua avec une très grandes générosité de l'or et de l'argent sur le chemin qui se trouve entre la porte du vestibule (de la basilique) et l'église de la cité."
40. Dey, *The Afterlife of the Roman City*, 163.
41. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 279.
42. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book II, XXXVIII, "à partir de ce jour il fut appelé consul ou auguste."
43. Michel Rouche, *Clovis histoire et mémoire: Le baptême de Clovis, l'événement*, (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1997), XIV.
44. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book II, XXXVIII, "quitta Tours pour venir à Paris et y fixa le siège du royaume."
45. Agathias, *The Histories*, trans. Joseph Frendo (New York: De Gruyter, 1975), Book I, 2, 4.
46. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book IV, XLIII, "des hommes de l'archidiacre Vigile volèrent à l'insu de leur maître."
47. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book IV, XLIII, "la population dont la voix unanime réclamait qu'il fût permis à l'archidiacre, après avoir donné des cautions, de célébrer le jour saint avec les autres et que l'accusation qui était l'objet de l'affaire fût discuté postérieurement."
48. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book IV, XLIII.
49. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 131-132.
50. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book IV, XLIII, "la voix unanime."
51. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 120.
52. Agathias, *The Histories*, Book I, 2, 3.
53. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book IV, XLIII.
54. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 101.
55. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXVI, "dans les cités qui avaient appartenu au roi

A Carefully Constructed History

- Sigebert, il recueillait les serments (de fidélité) au nom du roi Childeburt, mais dans les autres qui avaient appartenu soit à Gontran, soit à Chilpéric c'est en son nom qu'on jurait qu'on lui resterait fidèle."
56. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXVI, "ne quitta l'évêque qu'après l'avoir gravement injurié parce qu'il n'avait pas été accueilli par lui honorablement."
 57. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 285.
 58. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXXV, "ils la trouvèrent remplie de divers trésors appartenant aux habitants, car c'était l'espoir des habitants que la basilique d'un si grand saint ne pourrait être violée par des Chrétiens."
 59. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXXV, "a vengeance divine en écrasa sur le lieu même, car le plus grand nombre eurent les mains miraculeusement brûlées."
 60. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXXV.
 61. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VII, XXXV, "[t]oute la région alentour fut pillée; mais quelque hommes de l'armée, que l'aiguillon puissant de la cupidité avait piqués, s'étant égarés trop loin, furent assassinés par des indigènes."
 62. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VIII, XLV, "des ambassadeurs étaient venus fréquemment d'Espagne auprès du roi Gontran sans pouvoir obtenir la grâce d'aucune paix, mais qu'au contraire l'inimitié grandissait."
 63. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VIII, XLV, "avec tous ses biens, il mobilise une armée et se dispose à marcher contre les Goths."
 64. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, 78.
 65. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 290.
 66. Ian Wood, "Conclusion: Strategies of Distinction" in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*, ed. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz, (Boston: Brill, 1998), 302.
 67. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 285.
 68. gnès Graceffa, *Les Historiens et la Question Franque: Le peuplement franc et les Mérovingiens dan l'hisoriographie française et l'allemande des XIXe-XXe siècles* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2009), 19, "la quasi-absence d'une réelle attention aux termes relatifs aux nationalités (tout au moins dans un sens ethnique."
 69. Ian Wood, "Missionaries," 217.
 70. Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs*, Book VIII, XLV, "[p]arvenant alors à la porte de la ville, et cerné par les habitants qui étaient à l'intérieur des murs, il fut tué avec tous ceux qui l'avaient suivi."

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OLIVER LUCIER

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