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### Perceptions of the Past in Merovingian Historiography: The case of Gregory of Tours' "*Historia Francorum*"<sup>2</sup>

Percepciones del pasado en la Historiografía merovingia:  
el caso de la "*Historia Francorum*" de Gregorio de Tours

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**Abstract:**

In this article we are concerned with Gregory of Tours' historiographical work widely known as "*Historia Francorum*" or "*History of the Franks*". More specifically we try to record Gregory's attitude toward Frankish past in his edition of Frankish history. Fundamental in our examination is the question whether Gregory of Tours had intentionally omitted information from his "*Historia Francorum*" referring to a pre-Christian Frankish past or simply didn't record them, because the author himself was not particularly interested in them, as they didn't serve the aims of the composition of his work. If the above question can be clearly answered it might lead us to new approaches to Gregory's wider intentions in the composition of his "*Historia Francorum*", and certainly to a wider and deeper understanding of the Merovingian society of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

**Keywords:**

Merovingians; Gregory of Tours; Historiography; Frankish past; Frankish history; *Historia Francorum*

**Resumen:**

En este artículo nos ocupamos de Gregorio de Tours, trabajó ampliamente conocido como "*Historia Francorum*" o "*Historia de los francos*". Más específicamente tratamos de recalcar la actitud de Gregorio hacia el pasado en la historia de los Francos. Fundamental en nuestro examen es la pregunta si Gregorio de Tours intencionalmente omitió información sobre su "*Historia Francorum*", refiriéndose a un pasado pre-Christiano de los Francos o simplemente no los registró debido a que el mismo autor no estaba particularmente interesado en ellos ya que no contribuían con los objetivos de la composición de su trabajo. Si la pregunta arriba mencionada pudiera ser claramente respondida podría conducirnos hacia nuevos y más amplio enfoques sobre las intenciones de Gregorio en la composición de su "*Historia Francorum*" y desde luego a una mayor y profunda comprensión de la sociedad Merovingia del siglo 6.

**Palabras-claves:** Merovingios; Gregorio de Tours; Historiografía; Pasado de los francos; La historia de los francos; *Historia Francorum*

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<sup>3</sup> Although not dealing particularly with any of Gregory of Tours' historiographical works, much of the aspects dealt with in this article can be generally found in Hen & Innes, 2000; see especially introduction pp. 1-8.

## 1. Introduction

As far as the history of the Franks is concerned, and especially the history of the Merovingians, one has to start with the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, which is essentially the only narrative source for our knowledge of the Merovingian kingdom of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The term *Histories* in describing Gregory's *ten books of histories*, as the author himself states in his description for his work, "Decem libros Historiarum.....scripsi" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, X 31, 535), started to be used widely only three decades ago, replacing the more widely used, but false title in the description of Gregory's work, as "*Historia Francorum*" or "*History of the Franks*"; it was Bruno Krusch, who first introduced the general title "*Historiae*" in 1937, in his edition of Gregory's text for the series of Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Goffart, 1988: 120)<sup>4</sup>.

To what extent Gregory's *Histories* could be described literally as "*History of the Franks*" has been an issue with which many scholars have dealt in the past three decades. Today it is widely recognized that Gregory's interests in his *ten books of histories* exceeds by far a history of the Franks in the conventional sense of the term (for Gregory's interests in the narration of his text see especially Breukelaar, 1987: 321-337). As Peter Brown has suggested: "To call Gregory's book a *History of the Franks* is seriously misleading. Sin and retribution for sin, not ethnicity, was Gregory's all-consuming interest" (Brown, 2003: 160); while Martin Heinzelmann stresses aptly:

"Gregory of Tours' description of the society of the *regnum Francorum* can not be identified with the History of a *gens*.....His interest is not intended for ethnic-pagan categories, but mainly is oriented to kingship, to its relation with the representatives of the Church and possibly to the nature of the moral quality of the people" (Heinzelmann, 1994: 334), (My translation)<sup>5</sup>.

That Gregory of Tours' "*Historia Francorum*" has been composed under the light of a Christian-ecclesiastical perspective needs no further elaboration. Already from the late 1950s Wallace-Hadrill has argued that the ten books of the history of the Franks by Gregory of Tours concern the history of the establishment of a

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<sup>4</sup> In my view the title *ten books of histories* is the most correct term for the description of Gregory's work, since the author himself names his work as such. However, the term *Histories* or *Historiae* it seems to me more practical, when it is used within a textual context.

<sup>5</sup> "Seine Beschreibung (Gregory of Tours) der Gesellschaft des *regnum Francorum* kann nicht mit der Geschichte einer *gens* gleichgesetzt werden.....Sein Interesse gilt nicht ethnisch-gentilen Kategorien, sondern richtet sich in erster Linie auf das Königtum, auf dessen Verhältnis zu den Vertretern der Kirchen und eventuell auf die Beschaffenheit der moralischen Qualitäten des Volkes".

barbaric kingdom, which is examined under a Catholic-Christian perspective (Wallace-Hadrill, 1982: 70). But it was after the late 1950s and the two following decades that historians started to working more intensively on this idea. Alexander C. Murray has pointed out emphatically: "Gregory of Tours is recognized no longer as an innocent transmitter of sixth century reality but as an artful shaper of its representation" (Murray, 2008: 187). This representation of reality as it is recorded in Gregory's text was for the first time stressed by Walter Goffart, who highlighted the anecdotal character of Gregory's *ten books of histories* and the didactic nature of their composition, which had been inspired much by the author's own status as a bishop in 6<sup>th</sup> century Merovingian Gaul (Goffart, 1988: 112-234).

In my opinion, Walter Goffart paved the way for modern scholars of Gregory of Tours and his "*Historia Francorum*" in particular, to take more seriously into account the political and social status of the bishops of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Gaul, one of whom was Gregory of Tours himself, which in turn would have great impact on the composition of the "*History of the Franks*". What really meant for someone to be a bishop in 6<sup>th</sup> century Gaul has been brilliantly described by Peter Brown:

"The 110 bishops of Gaul had changed over the years. From being the upholders of the morale of beleaguered Roman populations, in the dangerous fifth century, they had settled down to become crucial figures within the new Frankish kingdom. The local aristocracies needed them. They were constantly appealed to as arbiters, as peacemakers, and as diplomats. Each, in his own city, was law and order personified. This was not simply because many bishops had been aristocrats. They were sincerely looked up to as the "high priests" of their region. When consecrated, the bishop would be carried into his city on a high sedan chair, in a ceremony once reserved for Roman consuls. His actions as judge and peacemaker were thought to make real on earth the justice of God and of the saints. He was responsible for orchestrating the solemn ceremonies which brought down the blessing of God on the community as a whole. Whether they came from old "Roman" families (as Gregory did) or had risen to the top as royal servants, many of these bishops were fabulously rich" (Brown, 2003: 157).

In sum, the bishop in sixth century Merovingian Gaul could exercise spiritual as well as political authority originating from his status, which gave him the advantage to be recognized as the highest priest and the true spiritual leader of the Christian society. But in my view, what is of more importance here is the fact that this spirituality that accompanied the bishop's social status was used to describe society within a Christian-ecclesiastical context in an era that churchmen were mostly, if not exclusively, able and responsible for literary production. Moreover, as Martin Heinzelmann has suggested Gregory of Tours was conscious about his status and the bishop's role in society as a spiritual and ideological leader, and it is because of that, that he composed his "*History of the Franks*":

“Contrary to common opinion, Gregory of Tours’ historiographical impulses are not only to be found in his wish to represent and record history ‘as it was’. This was only the secondary motive for his distinctive structure; the primary aim was the appropriate, pedagogic and didactic presentation of historical events. This was achieved by artfully drawing together selected episodes from social and communal life. The selection and composition of these ‘historical’ events was made from Gregory’s conscious perspective as a bishop – that is, as an ideological leader of Christian society in the early middle ages” (Heinzelmann, 2001: 36).

All the above aspects concerning Gregory of Tours’ historiographical work are of high importance when the author’s own attitude toward the Frankish past or what could be described as pre-Christian Frankish history is being considered.

## 2. Aspects of Gregory’s attitude toward Frankish past

Gregory of Tours does not really concern himself with Frankish history or more specifically with the Frankish past, as some other narrators of the barbarian history have done, to use Walter Goffart’s very famous expression, and especially Paul the Deacon. Gregory’s *ten books of histories* do not concern the description of an *origo gentis* for the Franks, as can be said about Paul the Deacon and his Lombards. The latter, although he lived almost two centuries after Gregory’s death in 594, shows great interest for the origins of his people. The monk from Italy, who had worked in the Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne, during the period of the Carolingian Renaissance, composed a history of the Lombards, which could be clearly defined as an *origo gentis*<sup>6</sup>, regardless its not always specific and genuine information. But for Paul the Deacon there is no doubt about the origins of his people and their pagan past. He clearly states that his people originated from Scandinavia before their installation first in Pannonia and later in Italy (Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, I 1, 48, I 22, 60, II 7, 76, II 8, 76-77, and II 9, 77-78).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Patrick Geary, with whom we totally agree, the term *origo gentis* has been given with some looseness by modern historiography: “From the start, the barbarian peoples across the Rhine and the Danube were never homogenous language and cultural groups, bound together by ancestry or even by common tradition. Instead, they were every bit as complex as the Roman people itself. As the boundaries between Roman and Barbarians dissolved, what today is called “identity politics” became one means of organizing and motivating followers: New constellations claimed names of “ancient” peoples. Old politics vanished into the melting pot of Gothic, Hunnic, or Frankish lordship. Some were never to reappear. Heterogeneous groups of adventurers and defeated enemies agreed to accept a common leader and, in time, a common identity. In other circumstances, opposition leaders, claiming to embody the ancient tradition of a people, might lead their followers to conquest and a new future or else to annihilation” (Geary, 2003: 173-714).

Moreover, the author of the *Historia Langobardorum* beyond the description of the pagan past of his people never denies the Arianism of the Lombards<sup>7</sup>.

None of these features can be found in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours in his description for his people. We don't really learn anything specific about the exact origins of the Franks in Gregory's "*Historia Francorum*", and their pagan past is being described within generalities and in a fleeting way without giving any specific detail about pagan worship:

"The people of the Franks seem to have always followed pagan religious practices, they completely ignored the God, and they were constructing images of birds and beasts from the forests and the waters and from other elements of the nature, and these they worshiped as their God and to these used to offer their sacrifices" (My translation)<sup>8</sup>.

Nothing here seems to agree with the inspirations of Paul the Deacon in his composition of the *Historia Langobardorum*, which includes a detailed description of those long distant Winnili to which the Longobards ought their name (Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, I 8, 52, and I 9, 52-53).

Gregory of Tours also faces difficulties in finding the first king of the Franks; by quoting what his main sources, namely Alexandrus Sulpicius and Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus, the works of whom have both been lost, have to say about the Franks, the author confirms the fact that the name of the first king of the Franks cannot be identified: "Who was the first king of the Franks, it is ignored by many. While the history of Sulpicius Alexander narrates a lot about them, on the other hand Vallentinus does not name their first king, but says that they were ruled by duces" (My translation)<sup>9</sup>. This confirmation is repeated later in another passage of Gregory's narration: "Hanc nobis notitiam de Francis memorati historici reliquere, regibus non nominatis" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 9, 57). Gregory apparently accepts the fact that the name of the first Frankish king will remain for ever unknown.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Paul the Deacon's reference to king's Rothar Arianism (Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, IV 42, 134).

<sup>8</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 10, 58-59: "Sed haec generatio fanaticis semper cultibus visa est obsequium praebuisse, nec prorsus agnovere Deum, sibique silvarum atque aquarum, avium bestiarumque et aliorum quoque elementorum finxere formas, ipasque ut Deum colere eisque sacrificium delibare consueti".

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 9, 52: "De Francorum vero regibus, quis fuerit primus, a multis ignoratur. Nam cum multa de eis Sulpici Alexandri narret historia, non tamen regem primum eorum ullatinus nominat, sed duces eos habuisse dicit".

That Gregory was a cautious, elaborated and skilful writer in using his sources for describing past convictions can be considered as true (for this see Mitchell, 2002: 300), but on the other hand, it seems obvious to me that Gregory didn't really had the willingness to trace the origins of his people by searching for their first king; so the author himself was satisfied by simply quoting what his main sources had to say on this subject. Gregory's second book of *Histories* and particularly the parts describing the origins of the Franks and their first kings, was mostly used to bridge the gap between Frankish distant past and contemporary or near contemporary Frankish history<sup>10</sup>.

When Fredegar later (around 660 AD)<sup>11</sup> in his chronicle wanted to trace the origins of his people and tried to detect the first king of the Franks, he was more than sure that the Franks originated from Troy and had Priam as their first king, while their second undisputed king was bearing the name of Friga: "Priamo primo regi habuerunt; postea per historiarum libros scriptum est, qualiter habuerunt regi Friga" (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, II 4, 45). That the Trojan origin myth of the Franks derives from Roman cultural tradition is obvious and needs no further elaboration<sup>12</sup>, but what is of importance here is that Fredegar wanted to create in his text a successive genealogy for his people in order to give them some kind of endurance and stability in the space and time of universal history, under more secular-political terms, something with which Gregory of Tours was not concerned himself at all. For Gregory of Tours, what could be defined as politics cannot be separated from his ideas about the organization of society under the aegis of the Christian Catholic faith<sup>13</sup>. Kathleen Mitchell recording Gregory's attitude about the past in his text has stressed out characteristically:

"The Christian Church, as a community more than as an institution, was at the heart of all of Gregory's historical concerns. His pasts were Christian, as were his heroes.....Only the chosen people<sup>14</sup> were provided a political context. Gregory's one attempt to demonstrate that he was aware of secular ancient history serves to underscore his concern with the distinctive, divinely ordained community: Babylonians, Assyrians, Egyptians and Greeks are mere ciphers. His single-minded approach can

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<sup>10</sup> For some ideas about this subject see especially Breukelaar, 1987: 321-337.

<sup>11</sup> For the chronology of the composition of Fredegar's chronicle see Erikson, 1965: 47-76 and Goffart, 1963: 206-241. For a different perspective about Fredegar's chronicle, which transfers its chronology of composition in the year of 662 see Wood, 1994: 359-366.

<sup>12</sup> On this subject the modern bibliography is quite extensive, see especially Ghosh, 2009: 85-97.

<sup>13</sup> For Gregory's role and status as a cleric and politician in Merovingian kingdom see especially Heinzlmann, 2001 and Breukelaar, 1994, see also Wood, 2002: 29-46, particularly 32-33 and 43-46, see also Mathisen, 1984: 83-95, generally for the bishop in Merovingian Gaul see Fouracre, 2003: 13-35.

<sup>14</sup> The Hebrews or Christians (Mitchell, 2002: 296).

be seen especially in his treatment of the Romans. Among the ancients, they were given a relatively large presence, but not in terms of their own history.....The Romans appear, rather, almost solely as persecutors and killers of Christians. Gregory used them, in fact, to dramatize the isolation—or the liberation—of the sacral community from an external context” (Mitchell, 2002: 295-297).

In my opinion, Gregory's main motivation in composing his "*Historia Francorum*" was the protection of his people, and his people were the Christian inhabitants of Gaul, for whom responsible were the bishops, the spiritual leaders of the Christian society. This can be detected in a phrase, which can be found in the middle of his second book of *Histories* in the description of the beginning of Clovis' reign 481-511, the champion, later, of the Catholic faith of his text: "Eo tempore multae aeclesiae a Chlodovecho exercitu depraedatae sunt, quia erat ille adhuc fanaticis erroribus involutus" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 27, 72), "Many churches had been plundered that time by Clovis' army, because the king himself was covered up to that point by religious errors" (My translation).

Gregory of Tours does not clarify what these *fanaticis erroribus* in which the Frankish king had lapsed really were. Some historians have suggested, as we shall see more thoroughly later in this paper, that Clovis had converted first to Arianism before his conversion to Catholic Christianity. If this proves true, then the composition of Gregory's "*Historia Francorum*" may have been much more programmatic and targeted than we believe until today. Further, when bishop Nicetius of Trier wrote to Clovis' sister Chlodosuinda, who had married the Lombard king Alboin, in order to convince her to try to convert her Arian husband into the Orthodox faith, used that same term "*error*", as Gregory did, in his description of Alboin's Arianism<sup>15</sup>. But what is of importance here, is that we can detect an intimate fear of Gregory about the future of the Church in Gaul that must have compelled somehow the Gallo-Roman bishop to compose his "*History of the Franks*".

This fear of Gregory about the future state of the Roman Church in Gaul is also expressed in the end of his fourth book of *Histories*, where the author describes the situation in which the Merovingian kingdom has come under the leadership of his contemporary kings:

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<sup>15</sup> Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini Aevi I, *Epistolae Austrasicae*, Epistola 8, 122: "Audisti dictum: 'Salvabitur vir infidelis per mulierem fidelem'. Nam scias: prima salus, prima remissio est, qui converti fecerit peccatorem ab errore suo", "You have heard the dictum: 'Let be saved an unfaithful husband through a faithful wife', because you know the most important salvation and the most important relief is that, if only a sinner have been converted from his error" (My translation). The underline in the text is mine.

“But let us recur to what their fathers have done and to what these are now doing. They (the previous generations of the Merovingian kings), after the preaching of the priests, abandoned their pagan temples and turned to the churches. Now these (Gregory’s contemporary Merovingian kings, that is Sigibert I of Austrasia 561-575, Guntram of Burgundy 561-592 and Chilperich I of Neustria 561-584) plunder each day the churches. Those, venerated the priests of God with all their hearts and they listened to them. Now these, not only they do not listen to the priests, but they are also persecuting them. They, were enriching the monasteries and the churches; now these, they are looting and destroying them” (My translation)<sup>16</sup>.

Equally, Gregory’s requests at the end of his work, addressed to his future successors in the diocese of Tours, not to alterate, omit or rewrite parts of his *decem libri historiarum*, but to preserve them intact and intangible, as they were delivered by him<sup>17</sup>, are revealing of the programmatic nature of his work, but also of the audience to whom they were mostly addressed. The Gallo-Roman bishop composed his *Histories* for specific reasons and for a very targeted audience, and certainly as a guidance on specific occasions. Gregory of Tours had something to say with his work, with which many might disagree, but the author’s desire for his book was to be distributed intact.

According to Gregory of Tours, the transition from paganism to Christianity for the Franks was achieved directly, without a stopover in Arianism, something that only the Franks were able to achieve, since no other “barbaric” people converted directly to Catholic Christianity without a previous stopover in Arianism.

Gregory of Tours wanted perhaps to mitigate the sinful past of his Franks by not referring to their overall slipping in Arianism before their conversion to Catholic Christianity. That this suggestion is more than possible is reinforced by the fact that before king Clovis’ baptism in 507 or 508<sup>18</sup>, one of the Frankish king’s sisters, Lantechild, had converted to Arianism, an information that is recorded by Gregory of Tours himself: “Along with king Clovis was converted and another sister of the Frankish king, who her name was Lantechild, and who previously had lapsed in the Arian sect, and after she had confessed the equality of the Son, the

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, IV 48, 184: “Sed recurramus ad illud quod parentes eorum egerunt et isti perpetrant. Illi post praedicationem sacerdotum de fanis ad ecclesias sunt conversi; isti cotidie de ecclesiis praedas detrahunt. Illi sacerdotes Domini ex toto corde venerati sunt et audierunt; isti non solum non audiunt, sed etiam persecuntur. Illi monasteria et ecclesias ditaverunt; isti eas diruunt ac subvertunt”.

<sup>17</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, X 31, 536: “.....Tamen coniuro omnes sacerdotes Domini, qui post me humilem ecclesiam Turonicam sunt rectori.....ut numquam libros hos aboleri faciat aut rescribi, quasi quaedam eligentes et quaedam praetermittentes, sed ita omnia vobiscum integra inlibataque permaneant, sicut a nobis relictas sunt”.

<sup>18</sup> For the Chronology of Clovis’ Baptism see especially Shanzer, 1998: 29-57, Spencer, 1994: 97-116, Daly, 1994: 619-664, Moorhead, 1985: 329-339, and Wood, 1985: 249-272.

Father and the Holy Spirit, she took the chrism" (My translation)<sup>19</sup>. There is no reason for not believing that Lantechild's example was followed by many other Franks.

Moreover, scholars have argued with more intensity quite recently that in bishop's Avitus of Vienne letter to king Clovis, where the former is celebrating the Frankish king's decision to convert to the Catholic Christian faith by his baptism, there is an indirect reference made by the bishop, indicating that Clovis was an Arian before his conversion to Catholic Christianity. The above reference can be found in the opening of bishop Avitus's of Vienne letter to the Frankish king: "Vestrae subtilitatis acrimoniam quorumcumque scismatum sectatores sententiis suis variis opinione, diversis multitudine, vacuis veritate Christiani nominis visi sunt obumbratione velare" (Avitus of Vienne, *Epistularum ad Diversos*, *Epistula* 46, 75) "In contrast with the cleverness of your accuracy the adherents of the schisms, according to their beliefs, varied in opinions, different in their multitude, devoid of the truth of the Christian name, they seem to be covered in obscurity" (My translation). This phrase depicts for Ian Wood a very polite way of saying that Clovis had been converted to heresy before his decision to be baptized as a Catholic (Wood, 1985: 267)<sup>20</sup>.

Whether the above suggestion is true or not, Gregory of Tours for sure wouldn't have wanted to include such an information in the description of the period of Clovis' reign 481-511, his Christian hero and one of the protagonists of his *Histories*. For Gregory of Tours the Franks become important after their meeting with Catholic Christianity, and in reality the author's "Frankish history" begins with the reign of king Clovis 481-511, one of his, and perhaps the most important, Christian heroes of his text.

There is also the possibility that Gregory might have not known anything about Clovis' flirtation, or even his factual conversion, with Arianism before his decision to convert to Catholicism. But this suggestion does not coincide with the importance of the reign of king Clovis, for whom even an oral tradition would be so vivid in the time of the composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours. Considering this, then the Gallo-Roman bishop certainly had omitted information in his text, that would have allowed us to make some reconstructions concerning the Merovingian past. Further, as Ian Wood has shown king Clovis in Gregory's text

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 31, 78: "Conversa est enim et alia soror eius (Clovis) Lantechildis nomen, quae in haeresim Arrianorum dilapsa fuerat, quae confessa aequalem Filium Patri et Spiritum sanctum, crismata est." See also Krusch's note in Gregory's text, where he is referring that bishop Avitus of Vienne had written a sermon about the conversion of Clovis' sister Lantechild, which now has been lost, and which probably was available to Gregory of Tours and was used as a source in the composition of this part of his *Histories*.

<sup>20</sup> On the flirtation of king Clovis with Arianism before his decision to be converted in a Catholic Christian see especially Shanzer and Wood, 2002: 363-364.

does not correspond to the historical Clovis, but to an artfully created image of the king of the Franks, for which responsible was the author of the *Histories* (Wood, 1985: 249-272). If on the other hand, Gregory truly didn't know anything about Clovis' "factual" conversion to Arianism, before his baptism to a Catholic Christian, then perhaps, somebody else wanted to erase this "actual fact" from the period of king Clovis' reign, the champion of the Catholic Faith<sup>21</sup>.

What really Gregory of Tours created by composing his "*Historia Francorum*" was a new Frankish past within an ecclesiastical-Christian context and, what is of more importance, deprived from its ethnic paganism and from any possible affiliation of his Franks with heresies and in particular with the heresy of Arianism. It has not yet been clearly defined by scholars if Gregory of Tours had intentionally omitted information referring to a Frankish pre-Christian past, or if just such information is not included in his work simply because the author himself was not interested in recording them in his text as long as they did not serve the objectives of the composition of his *Histories*<sup>22</sup>.

### 3. Gregory of Tours and the Trojan origin myth of the Franks

A further proof that Gregory of Tours might have known a lot more about Frankish pagan past or pagan practices, whether Roman or Germanic, surviving in 6<sup>th</sup> century Merovingian Gaul than his work allow us to deduce, can be inferred also by the suggestion that Gregory of Tours knew about the myth of the Trojan origins of the Franks (For this see especially Barlow, 1995: 86-95). According to Jonathan Barlow Gregory of Tours knew about the myth of the Trojan origins of the Franks, which is recorded for the first time in Fredegar's chronicle, but did not include it in his *ten books of histories*, because it was considered by him both as pagan and as a deceitful myth hostile to God, as his prologue in another of his works, namely his *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*, proves (Barlow, 1995: 94).

That the above suggestion might be possible can be deduced by the fact that Gregory himself was well informed about Greek-Roman cultural tradition, as he was

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<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Hen has argued that long before the composition of Gregory of Tours' "*Historia Francorum*" there existed a pro-Merovingian propaganda aiming at legitimizing the Merovingian rule in Gaul. Inspirators of this pro-Merovingian propaganda, according to Hen, were probably the bishops Remigius of Rheims and Avitus of Vienne, who wished also to portray king Clovis in the light of a Catholic Christian perspective. Moreover, Yitzhak Hen has argued that in the writings of Gregory of Tours can be found only scanty evidence of this pro-Merovingian propaganda, which ceased to exist after Clovis accession to power and his conversion to Catholicism. (Hen, 1993: 271-276). If Hen's hypothesis is correct, then it is possible that Merovingian ecclesiastical circles predating Gregory of Tours have deliberately avoided to mention the fact that Clovis had converted to Arianism before his decision to be baptized a Catholic Christian.

<sup>22</sup> About the uses of the past in early medieval historiography for the needs of the present see especially Hen, 2000: 175-190. See also Hen & Innes, 2000: 1-8.

particularly familiar with Virgil's *Aeneid*, which formed the fundamental basis for the spread of the Trojan origin myth among the Franks (Barlow, 1995: 86-95), something that can be widely viewed in the context of the prologue of his *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*:

“.....Hence it is proper for me to follow this advice by writing and proclaiming what edifies the church of God and what enriches barren minds to recognition of perfect faith by means of holy teaching. For it is not proper either to recall deceitful myths or to follow the wisdom of philosophers that is hostile to God, lest we slip into the penalty of eternal death when the lord passes judgement. I am afraid of this result. And since I desire to publicize some of the miracles of saints that have until now been hidden, I do not wish myself to be overcome by or entangled in these snares. I do not commemorate the flight of Saturn, the wrath of Juno, the debaucheries of Jupiter, the insult of Neptune, the scepter of Aeolus, or the wars, shipwreck, and kingdoms of Aeneas. I say nothing about the mission of Cupid, the love for Ascanius and the wedding, tears, and fearsome destruction of Dido, the gloomy entrance court of Pluto, the debauched rape of Persephone, or the triple heads of Cerberus; nor will I repeat the conversations of Anchises, the trickeries of the man (Odysseus) from Ithaca, the cunning of Achilles, or the deceptions of Sinon. I will not recount the advice of Laocoon, the strength of Amphitryon's son (Hercules), or the contests, exiles, and fatal death of Janus. I will not describe the shapes of the Eumenides or of different monsters, nor the contrivances of the other myths that this author [Virgil] has either deceitfully fabricated or depicted in heroic verse” (Van Dam, 1988: 19).

According to Barlow the Trojan origin myth was widely spread among the Franks in the era of Gregory of Tours, (Barlow, 1995: 94). Barlow reinforces his argument by the fact that already from the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD the tribe of Arverni believed that they were descended from Troy (Barlow, 1995: 87-88), but this myth was not connected only with the Arverni, according to Barlow; it concerned also the Franks of the Lower Rhine and was introduced to them already between the late third and the middle of the fourth century, long before their Christianization (Barlow, 1995: 90). Barlow went even further with his argument by suggesting that it was perhaps king Theudebert I 534-547/8, who was largely responsible for a wider dissemination of the Trojan origin myth, already incorporated in Frankish cultural tradition, among the Franks, something that is in accord with that same king's wider interests (Barlow, 1995: 93). Moreover, when Gregory of Tours records in his text that the Franks originated from Pannonia, in fact betrays his knowledge of the Trojan origin myth for the Franks, but the bishop rejects this story, because in his view it is both pagan and deceitful myth hostile to God (Barlow, 1995: 93-94), as we have already seen.

Whether Barlow's suggestions tend to be true or not, the fact is that in Gregory's writings we can find traces, although very scanty, revealing the Gallo-Roman bishop's own attitude about pagan practices, whether Germanic or Roman, for which the author made no room in his text. Such is the case for example of Gregory's disapproval of King Chilperich of Neustria 561-584, which is expressed in a sarcastic tone, when the Neustrian king does not pay particular attention to king Childebert II's 575-595 emissaries, because he was preoccupied with the construction of circuses and rings in Paris and in Soissons in order to provide the people with spectacles: "Quod (what Childebert's emissaries were telling to the king) ille (Chilperich) dispiciens, apud Sessionas atque Parisiis circus aedificare praecepit, eosque populis spectaculum praebens" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, V 17, 216).

#### 4. Gregory's account on Merovech's "fable"

In a recent article, written by an Italian scholar, the very famous myth of Merovech from whom the Merovingian dynasty originated and to whom the Merovingians ought their name, according to Fredegar's chronicle, is being treated in a similar manner to that of Barlow's suggestion about Gregory's knowledge of the Trojan origin myth for the Franks (Donà, 2014: 42-85, for Barlow's suggestion about the Trojan origin myth for the Franks see above pp. 9-10). The story of Merovech, as it is recorded by Fredegar in his chronicle interpolating Gregory's text, is conceived by most scholars of the Merovingian period as a worthless fable. This is in accord with the general view among most modern scholars about Fredegar's favorite techniques of composition of his chronicle, one of which was his arbitrary giving of names in order to justify somehow his historical records in his narrative<sup>23</sup>. Characteristic examples of this aspect, apart from the designation of the Merovingians by Merovech, who was divinely or semi-divinely conceived by king Chlodio's wife after the latter had intercourse with a bull-headed sea creature (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, III 9, 95), are that the Franks are named Franks after their king Francio "electum a se (the Franks) regi Francione nomen, per quem Franci vocantur" (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, II 5, 46), Macedonians, because of their establishment in Macedonia "Una pars (of the Franks) perrexit in Macedoniam, vocati sunt Macedonis" (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, II 4, 45), and Turks as well, receiving

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<sup>23</sup> On this subject the modern bibliography is extremely rich, see for example Wood, 2003: 149-171, Ibid, 1994: 359-366, Murray, 1998: 121-152, Scheibelreiter, 1994: 26-40, Most scholars believe that the myth of Merovech was possibly inspired by the Greek-Roman cultural tradition and was introduced in Fredegar's chronicle as an ex post inventive effort to give prestige to an already declining dynasty. There are also those who believe, that the myth of Merovech, as it is recorded in Fredegar's chronicle, is a reminiscence or a remnant of a Germanic pagan-oral tradition that had survived among the Franks; on this see for example Woodruff, 1988, and Breukelaar, 1987: 321-337. On the survival of Germanic oral traditions among the Germanic people after their establishment in the former western provinces of the Roman Sate see especially Wolfram, 1994: 19-38.

this name by their king Torcoth, "electum a se (the Franks) utique regem nomen Torquoto, per quod gens Turquorum nomen accepit" (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, III 6, 46).

According to Carlo Donà Merovech's "fable" was not an invention of Fredegar's imagination in order to justify somehow the designation of the Merovingian dynasty as most modern scholars tend to believe. The story about Merovech located in its possible historical context tends to prove that it concerns an ancient-genealogical pagan Germanic myth, as it was believed by scholars in the past (Donà, 2014: 47), belonging probably to the Frankish folklore (Donà, 2014: 57-59)<sup>24</sup>, and had survived among the Franks in the era of Gregory of Tours. That Gregory of Tours didn't record anything of Merovech's mythical conception and subsequently the designation of the Merovingian dynasty after him in his text, had to do exactly with the Gallo-Roman bishop's attitude in recording information about Frankish pre-Christian pagan past in his work. According to Carlo Donà Gregory of Tours knew about the myth of Merovech, but a possible connection between Merovech and some unspeakable worship of a bull provoked Gregory's rage, and this was probably the main reason that drove the bishop to exclude the story of Merovech from his text (Donà, 2014: 44).

In my opinion, what makes Merovech's "fable", as it is recorded in Fredegar's chronicle, even more interesting is that it puts the Merovingian dynasty in a different frame, within which the Merovingians can be viewed in a more secularized or non-Christian context. Gregory of Tours wanted his Franks to owe their power and their successes in the battlefield to their contact with the Christian Catholic God. In contrast, for Fredegar the Merovingians were successful not only due to their contact with the Christian Catholic God, but also because their dynasty owed its existence in a divine or a semi-divine procreation; and consequently the power, which later the Merovingians exercised, was not due to a gift-giving by the Christian God, but to the fact that they were the descendants of their divinely or semi-divinely conceived first king.

Gregory of Tours for sure wouldn't desire such information, whether these had survived in an oral or a written context, to be included in his text. So the author of the *Histories* knows about Merovech, king Chluderich's father, but he is not sure about the connection between Chlodio and Merovech. The Gallo-Roman bishop is satisfied by simply quoting that king Childerich, Clovis' father, was a descendant of Merovech; apart from this, nothing extraordinary, whether magic or mythical, accompanies Gregory's reference to Merovech. Further, the indefinite pronoun, *quidam*, used to describe the connection of Merovech with Chlodio in Gregory's text, literally translated as "someone", not only indicates that Gregory didn't really had the willingness to pay particular attention to this Merovech, but shows also that the author wanted to undervalue somehow any relation that those two might have

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<sup>24</sup> For some different aspects about Fredegar's chronicle in modern bibliography see also Schwedler, 2013: 71-96.

had between themselves. Additionally, the use of the verb *adserunt* in describing the connection between Chlodio and Merovech indicates that Gregory must have heard something more about this Merovech, but didn't really want to include it in his work: "De huius stirpe (Chlodio's) quidam Merovechum regem fuisse adserunt, cuius fuit filius Childericus" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, II 9, 58).

That something magic or mythical, divine or semi-divine accompanied the dynasty of the Merovingians can be inferred also by a seemingly insignificant and almost hardly detectable reference in a text composed by a bishop named Aurelian of Arles. The aforesaid bishop composed a letter, which was addressed to the Merovingian king Theudebert I 534-547/8 (*Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi* I, *Epistolae Austrasicae*, *Epistola* 10, 124-126). The style of the letter has been characterized as advisory and consultative. The young king Theudebert is being informed by the bishop about the duties that must exercise as a king and the qualities that a good king must possess<sup>25</sup>, but at some point of the letter the bishop proceeds to the following citation: "Praetero generis tui stimma sidereum" (*Epistolae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi* I, *Epistolae Austrasicae*, *Epistola* 10, 125) "I will omit to refer to your celestial or divine descent" (My translation).

Metaphorically speaking the bishop might have meant glorious in the sense of a rhetorical topos, with which he wants to glorify and honor Theudebert's royal status, but even this interpretation, requiring the adjective *sidereum* to be translated as a merely honorary term cannot exclude the possibility to constitute an indirect reference to Theudebert's extraordinary descent. Moreover, this passage alludes according to Roger Collins in a complimentary way to the king's distinction of birth, which nevertheless the author wishes to minimize as the source of royal authority in his letter (Collins, 1983: 20). What makes bishop Aurelian's reference even more important is the fact that the letter is placed chronologically in the early Merovingian period; the letter cannot be dated after the years between 546-548 at the latest, or, according to an alternative view, even more earlier, possibly at the end of the decade of 530's (Collins, 1983: 19-20).

## 5. A further comparison between Gregory's "*Historia Francorum*" and Fredegar's chronicle: The case of duke Chrodinus

That Gregory of Tours might have deliberately omitted information from his text referring to Frankish paganism or to a non-Christian cultural environment, whether these were concerning the past or even the present, can be also deduced by his reference to duke Chrodinus. Gregory's quotations about duke Chrodinus could correspond absolutely to an ideal model of a good Christian by ecclesiastical

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<sup>25</sup> For further details about this letter see Collins, 1983: 7-33, especially 18-22.

standards. According to Gregory Chrodinus was: "A man of great goodness and reverence, very charitable, he was supporting the poor, he was largely donating the churches and he was taking care of the priests" (My translation)<sup>26</sup>. But at the end of his description of Chrodinus Gregory of Tours states: "I have heard many more good things about this duke Chrodinus, but I don't have enough space and time to narrate them" (My translation)<sup>27</sup>.

Fredegar, although posterior at least sixty five years to Gregory of Tours, in his description of this same duke Chrodinus is much more detailed. Primarily, Fredegar is referring in detail to the attempts of the Austrasian aristocracy to elevate Chrodinus in the office of the mayor of the palace and the latter's refusal to accept this position, interpolating Gregory's text (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, III 58, 109)<sup>28</sup>. Secondly, Fredegar is recording in his chronicle a strange story about the discovery of a great treasure attributed to duke Chrodinus, for which Gregory of Tours says nothing at all, while reproducing simultaneously in his text the image of a good Christian about the Austrasian duke as he has found it in Gregory's *Histories* (Fredegar, *Chronicle*, III 88, 117).

What really mattered for Gregory of Tours were the detailed descriptions of the stories about the great treasures found, with God's assistance, by the Roman Emperor Tiberius II 578-582, wherein an ideal model of kingship is outlined in an absolute Christian context (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, V 19, 226-227)<sup>29</sup>. In contrast with his reference to duke Chrodinus, these stories about the discovery of the treasures by Tiberius II formed for Gregory of Tours an essential part of his narrative, as the author clearly states that he must not omit to refer to them: "Quid ei (Tiberius) in posterum Dominus transmiserit, non omittam" (Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, V 19, 226). By referring to the discovery of the treasures from the Emperor Tiberius in a Christian framework, Gregory of Tours seems to equate Fredegar's later description about the discovery of the treasure by duke Chrodinus, which is omitted from his text. If this information was included in Gregory's statement that he had heard many more good things about the Austrasian duke we will never be able to know with certainty. But what is of importance here is the fact,

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, VI 20, 288: "...Vir magnifice bonitatis et pietatis, aelimosinarius valde pauperumque rector, proflus ditatur eclesiarum, clericorum nutritur".

<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, VI 20, 289: "Multa enim et alia bona de hoc viro audivimus, quae insequi longum est".

<sup>28</sup> For Fredegar's interpolations in Gregory's text see especially Woodruff, 1988. On this specific interpolation see pp. 143-146.

<sup>29</sup> For Gregory's depiction of the Roman emperor Tiberius II as an ideal model of Christian kingship see especially Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, IV 40, 172, where Tiberius II is described as a verissimus christianus.

according to Ellen Jane Woodruff, that "hidden treasure troves and their discovery were a common motif in Germanic heroic sagas" (Woodruff, 1988: 163).

Whether Gregory has deliberately excluded such information from his text, or simply didn't record them, because he didn't really know anything more about them, or he was not very sure or well informed about them, cannot be easily answered. But in my view, even the case of duke Chrodinus, as it is recorded in Gregory's text in comparison with Fredegar's, is revealing of the Gallo-Roman's attitude in recording information in his text that probably didn't concern a Christian cultural environment and the Gallo-Roman bishop didn't wish to reproduce such information in his work. Further, when the author states that he has heard many more good things about this duke Chrodinus, who was also his contemporary, but has not enough space and time to record them in his text, it is more than clear that there must have been a more specific and serious reason justifying their exclusion from his "*Historia Francorum*", than simply because the author himself was not interested in recording such *ridicula fabula* in his text, as Paul the Deacon did (on this see especially Scheibelreiter, 1994: 35). Gregory of Tours was hostile to any information in his text, that would have enabled later authors to proceed in reconstructing the Merovingian pre-Christian past, or even more in restructuring Merovingian history.

## Conclusion

Gregory of Tours by composing his "*Historia Francorum*" created in reality a new Frankish past by eliminating, deliberately or not, even the last traces of what could be described as pre-Christian or pagan pre-Christian Frankish past. In other words, the author of the "*Historia Francorum*" erases a collective memory that had survived among the Franks of his age mostly, if not exclusively, in an oral environment. If this had been done on purpose by the author himself, then Gregory's "*Historia Francorum*" must be viewed as a much more programmatic and targeted work than we believe until today. If on the other hand, this was simply the result of Gregory's lack of interest in recording information concerning a pagan Frankish past, then the process of Christianizing the Merovingian society was far advanced, and Gregory's *decem libri historiarum* cannot be viewed as a further attempt to Christianize Merovingian society in order to create an ideal Christian world.

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