

Interpreting the Merovingian historian Gregory of Tours in early nineteenth-century France

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Introduction

Bishop Gregory of Tours (d. 594) is a historian who cannot be ignored when considering the Merovingian period (c. 490–750). His *Decem libri historiarum*, or *Ten Books of Histories*,¹ is by far the most important source for the Merovingian kingdom, especially for the sixth century. Much has been written on his chronicles and the context they were written in. Yet modern interpretations that are upheld in the twenty-first century have not been created *ex nihilo* but contain accumulations of interpretations made by earlier historians from the sixteenth century on. Even though the history of the manuscripts of Gregory of Tours has been thoroughly examined there is one period overlooked by these studies: the early nineteenth century.²

The focus of this article lies in these tumultuous years after the reign of Napoleon and before the Second Republic, which constitute an important era for historiography as new fascination in the Middle Ages and new standards of studying sources were born. The new standards are especially visible in the studies of Gregory of Tours's *Histories*, as I will show in this article. Overall, the early nineteenth century was a period when historiography was being transformed from a form of literature to scientific research, and modern ideas of studying history started to evolve. In addition, the decades from 1815 to 1848 saw both the return and fall of the French monarchy, and many historians reflected the political events in their historiographical writings.

The history of the French monarchy was a popular theme among early nineteenth-century historians. One major event related to French monarchy was the conversion of the first king, Clovis I, who united the scattered Frankish

¹ I shall use this name, along with an abbreviation *Histories*, in my article as being the most neutral title.

² Currently the most influential study is Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*. Transl. from German by Christopher Carroll. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001. Other studies include Jean Verdon, *Grégoire de Tours «le père de l'histoire de France»*. Horvath, Le Coteau 1989. Walter A Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*. Princeton University Press 1988. On Gregory of Tours and Merovingian women see Nira Pancer, *Sans peur et sans vergogne: de l'honneur et des femmes aux premiers temps mérovingiens, VI^e–VII^e siècles*. Albin Michel, Paris 2001. Bruno Dumézil, *La reine Brunehaut*. Fayard, Paris 2008. On recent studies concerning Gregory of Tours, his work and the context, see Guy Halsall, "The Preface to Book V of Gregory of Tours' *Histories*: Its Form, Context and Significance", *English Historical Review*, 122 (2007), 297–317, at 297.

kingdoms in the 490s. Gregory of Tours's *Histories* was the most important source for the first dynasty, the Merovingians, and especially for the first Catholic king, Clovis I. This period of Merovingian rule was seen in the early nineteenth century as the starting point for French history, for the French monarchy and for the French nation. Taking this context into consideration, I will examine how Gregory of Tours was used and interpreted during the French Restoration and July Monarchy and how the image later historians had of him affected the way his texts were perceived.³

In addition to these issues I will consider how Gregory of Tours as a person and as a historian was studied in historiography published during the Restoration and July Monarchy. The aim is to cast light on the genesis of modern methods of studying early medieval sources and to examine how the sources were used in various genres of historiography during the early decades of the nineteenth century. The category of historiography is understood here very widely and includes popular historical texts.

I will start, however, by briefly presenting Gregory of Tours and some general reflections on the multiple French translations and editions made of his *Histories* since the sixteenth century. I shall mention representative examples of early nineteenth-century French historians who wrote about Gregory of Tours in order to demonstrate how the interpretations changed during the years 1815–1848. I shall introduce several historians who published their works during the first half of the nineteenth century. Among these are Philippe le Bas (1794–1860), Francois Guizot (1787–1874), Paulin Paris (1800–1881) and Augustin Thierry (1795–1856). Guizot, also known for being a prime minister of France in the late 1840s, and Thierry, famous for his theories on social classes and writings about past revolutions, have been examined in this context before. Contrasting their works with the works written by other, lesser-known historians such as le Bas and Paris will achieve a better understanding of the contradictions attached to the interpretations made of Gregory of Tours's *Histories* and to his position as a Merovingian historian in early nineteenth-century historiography.

A brief history of Gregory of Tours and of his works

Gregory of Tours was born around 538 or 539 in Arverni, which is situated in the modern French Clermont-Ferrand. He was from a noble Gallo-Roman family and he received a good education initiated by his uncle, the bishop of Clermont. In Gregory's family there were and had been several bishops so the career was open to him. He was made the bishop of Tours around the year 573 and was very popular among the people of the city. He lived in Tours until his death around the year 594. Gregory started to write the *Histories* approximately at the same time as he became a bishop. The *Histories* consisted of ten books, which cover a time period from the creation of the world to the author's own death. The first four books deal with history before Gregory's own time and the last six books with

³ There were also new nationalistic ideas about the history of France that affected the interpretations of Gregory's *Histories* but my primary focus lies in the transformation of historiographical research.

issues of Gregory's contemporary society.⁴ Gregory was later sanctified; his biography was written in the tenth century by Odo of Cluny.⁵

Gregory of Tours's *Histories* has had several titles in French, which all include a slightly varying perspective on the work's theme. The work is often known in French by the title *Historia Francorum*, which has often been translated as *The History of the Franks*. The title *Histoire ecclésiastique des Francs* was also in use during the nineteenth century.⁶ Interestingly, both titles indicate that the focus of the *Histories* was on the Franks or, in the latter version, on the ecclesiastical history of the Franks. The choice of title, originating from the Carolingian era, tells more about the historians naming the work than about the *Histories*. Early nineteenth-century historians were interested in the actions and politics of the Franks, which makes the choice of title understandable, as most readers were not interested in Gregory's religious views.

The *Histories* was not, however, Gregory's only work, even though it is the best known. He also wrote many other works, mostly focusing on themes such as miracles. His best-known work on this theme is the collection now often entitled *Eight Books of Miracles*;⁷ this was rarely used during the Restoration and July Monarchy as it was not perceived to have comparable "factual" value to the *Histories*. *Eight Books of Miracles* did not relate so much about politics, wars or other issues the historians were interested in, but focused on martyrs, their cults and their lives.⁸

One reason why Gregory's *Ten Books of Histories* has been so popular through the centuries is the lack of rivals. There are very few sources left concerning the Merovingian period, and Gregory's work has been deemed the most trustworthy, and it is one of the most comprehensive chronicles left from the period in general. Many historians have or had no choice but to use it. According to the Swiss historian Simonde de Sismondi, "He [Gregory of Tours] was copied by all old writers and commented by all modern ones".⁹ This is as true today among modern researchers as it was in 1821 when Sismondi published his major work, *Histoire des Français*. This was especially true among the contemporaries of Sismondi. Indeed, almost all his contemporary historians had something to say about the early medieval period, as it was seen as the moment of

4 Dominique Alibert, "Grégoire de Tours", in Christian Amalvi, ed., *Dictionnaire biographique des historiens français et francophones. De Grégoire de Tours à Georges Duby*. La Boutique de l'Histoire, Paris 2004, 135–6. See also on Gregory's life Richard A. Gerberding, "Gregory of Tours", in William W. Kibler & Grover A. Zinn, ed., *Medieval France: An Encyclopedia*. Garland Publishing, New York 1995, 419.

5 Heinzelmann 2001, 33.

6 There is no unanimity about the title even among twentieth-century scholars: Jean Verdon calls it the *Histoire des Francs*, Guy Halsall writes about the *Histories* and Andrew Cain *Decem libri historiarum*; despite the language differences there is no clear logic in the choice of title. Andrew Cain, "Miracles, Martyrs, and Arians: Gregory of Tours' Sources for his Account of the Vandal Kingdom", *Vigiliae Christianae*, 59 (2005), 412–437.

7 Raymond van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*. Princeton University Press 1993, 50. See also Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Martyrs*. Raymond van Dam, transl. and introduction, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool 1988.

8 See Raymond van Dam, "Introduction", in *The Glory of the Martyrs* by Gregory of Tours, ed. van Dam, 3.

9 Simonde de Sismondi, *Histoire des Français* (I). Treuttel et Wûrtz, Paris 1821, 177.

the genesis of the French monarchy. Therefore almost all historians knew about the writings of the “father of French history”,¹⁰ Gregory of Tours.

More than one manuscript of Gregory’s *Histories* exist and the contents are not identical.¹¹ Some nineteenth-century historians such as Philippe le Bas and François Guizot pondered the issue of multiple versions of Gregory’s manuscripts but in general the problems concerning the origins, or traditions, of the manuscripts did not arouse much discussion among historians. According to Walter A. Goffart there are two possible “original” versions left of the *Histories*, one with six books and one with ten. It was long thought that the shorter version is the older, but already in the last years of the seventeenth century the French historian Thierry Ruinart argued against this hypothesis.¹² Ruinart is also worth mentioning for his publication of the first critical edition of Gregory’s *Histories*. Ruinart’s edition was later included in the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* started by Dom Martin Bouquet during the first half of the eighteenth century.¹³ The *Recueil* gathered all the most important sources on the history of France, and during the first half of the nineteenth century it was still the most important collection of early medieval sources.

A good example of the *Recueil*’s importance comes from a massive work entitled *Histoire générale du moyen âge* (1835) written by Chrysanthe Ovide des Michels, who was better known as the author of popular history textbooks about the French Middle Ages. In the section concerning the Merovingian period des Michels almost uniquely used sources gathered in the *Recueil*, including Gregory’s *Historia Francorum*, as he called the *Histories*.¹⁴ Besides demonstrating the use of the *Recueil* in nineteenth-century France, des Michels’s work indicates how popular the history of the Middle Ages was among historians, given that an entire history textbook was dedicated to it.

Using and producing translations of the *Histories* in the early nineteenth century

Gregory’s *Histories* was translated several times into French during the nineteenth century, and the growing number of translations correlated well with the growing number of historiographical works in general. The number of books, particularly about French history, grew throughout the nineteenth century, reflecting the general interest in history and the Middle Ages specifically.¹⁵ The earliest translation to be widely used by historians and writers was published by François Guizot in the early 1820s.¹⁶ The translation of the *Histories* (or according to Guizot, *Histoire des Francs*) inaugurated a collection of

¹⁰ Alibert 2004, 136.

¹¹ See Heinzelmann 2001, 192–201.

¹² Goffart 1988, 121–122.

¹³ See Sancti Georgii Florentii Gregorii episcopi Turonensis, *Historiae ecclesiasticae Francorum* (*Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* 2, ed. Dom Martin Bouquet). Palmé, Paris 1869. Gregory’s *Histories* starts on p. 75.

¹⁴ See Chrysanthe Ovide des Michels, *Histoire général du moyen âge* (tom. I). Louis Colas, Paris 1835, 71. See also Christian Amalvi, *Répertoire des auteurs des manuels scolaires et de livres de vulgarisation historique de la langue française: de 1660 à 1960*. La Boutique de l’Histoire, Paris 2001, 87.

¹⁵ On the number of historical works in the nineteenth century, see Pim den Boer, *History as a Profession: The Study of History in France, 1818–1914*. Princeton University Press, Princeton 1998, 5–8.

¹⁶ Walter Goffart, *Rome’s Fall and After*. The Hambledon Press, London 1989, 261–262.

historiographical works entitled “Collection des mémoires relatifs à l’histoire de France, depuis la fondation de la monarchie jusqu’au 13^e siècle, avec une introduction, des suppléments, des notices et des notes”, which included thirty volumes published between 1823 and 1835. The collection almost uniquely included medieval and especially early medieval texts that were seen as being of importance to the history of France. The translation of Gregory’s *Histories* was thus not an isolated case of interest in the Middle Ages but the beginning of an extensive collection of translated sources. The title of the collection also reveals the importance attached to Gregory’s *Histories*, which was seen as the earliest source relating to the birth of the French monarchy in the first years of the sixth century.

François Guizot, who was not the actual translator of the *Histories*, even though only his name was placed in the publication, mentions in the introduction that two other translations had been published before. The first translation was made by Claude Bonnet in 1610 and the second in 1688 by the *abbé* de Marolles. Guizot did not seem to value these translations very highly and indeed he wrote that they were “extrêmement fautives”.¹⁷ The translation ascribed to Guizot was probably made by his students and by his wife, Pauline de Meulan.¹⁸ It was quite common during the nineteenth century for whole families to participate in writing and editing historiographical and other scientific works.¹⁹

There are no exact records as to how many French translations were made of the *Histories* because some of the translations were very rare. For example, two nineteenth-century historians, Jules Belin de Launay and Théodose Burette, both history professors in colleges, referred to a translation made in 1610 by one Hémery d’Ambroise but no other information is extant on this version; not even Guizot mentioned it.²⁰ In fact it seems that Hémery d’Ambroise did not translate the *Histories* but only wrote an introduction to Claude Bonnet’s translation published the same year.²¹ In the late eighteenth century Edme Louis Billardon de Sauvigny (1736/38–1812) composed a version which has only rarely been mentioned and therefore most probably was not often used by later historians.²² According to Goffart there were four French translations made of Gregory’s *Histories* between the 1820s and 1860s. In addition to the one ascribed to Guizot,

17 François Guizot, “Notice sur Grégoire de Tours”, in Grégoire de Tours, *Histoire des Francs* (I), ed. François Guizot (Collection des mémoires relatifs à l’histoire de France, II), J.-L.-L. Brière, Paris 1823, XXI.

18 Explicitly no translator was noted on the title page of the translation but it is known Guizot’s wife helped with his works. See Antoinette Sol, “Genre et historiographie. Quelques réflexions sur Elisabeth-Pauline de Meulan Guizot, romancière, journaliste et historienne (1773–1827)”, in Nicole Pellegrin, ed., *Histoire d’historiennes*. Publication de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, Saint-Etienne, 2006, 265–283.

19 Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History. Men, Women, and Historical Practice*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA, 1998, 83.

20 See Jules Belin de Launay, *Du traité d’Andelot*. L. Hachette, Paris 1843, 26-17. Théodose Burette, *Histoire de France* (I), Chamerot, Paris 1843.

21 See Paul Oskar Kristeller, ed., *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum: Medieval and Renaissance Latin Translations and Commentaries. Annotated Lists and Guides* (IX). The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC, 2011, 69.

22 I have found only two references. See Antoine Bailly, *Histoire financière de la France, depuis l’origine de la monarchie jusqu’à la fin de 1786*. Moutardier, Paris 1830, 13. See also Henri Leonard Bordier, “Avertissement”, in Gregory of Tours, *Histoire ecclésiastique des Franks* (I), transl. Henri Leonard Bordier. Firmin Didot frères, fils et co., Paris 1859, I–XI.

there is another published by Alfred Jacob in 1862, one by Henri Leonard Bordier in 1859 and one published by Joseph Guadet and Nicolas Rodolphe Taranne in 1836–1838.²³

Even though Guizot's French translation was perhaps the best known during the early nineteenth century, it did not escape criticism. The archaeologist and president of the Institut de France, Philippe le Bas, who wrote several encyclopaedias and dictionaries on the history of France, gave credit to Guizot's research on Gregory's manuscripts but he did not value his translation highly. Le Bas preferred the translation made by Guadet and Taranne in the 1830s, even though he did not specify the reasons for this judgement other than saying Guizot had been "unfaithful" to the original manuscript.²⁴ Despite the criticism, le Bas wrote that the version with only six books was earlier and the version with ten books a later production, even though he saw them as equally authentic.²⁵ This interpretation of the *Histories'* production had also been accepted by Guizot in 1823 and as Goffart has stated, this interpretation was the most popular one concerning the order of creation of the *Histories* during the early nineteenth century.

It is impossible to say indisputably how much this type of criticism affected the use of Guizot's translation or how accessible the other translations were during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Guizot was by far the most famous person involved in translating Gregory's works, as he became the prime minister of France during the late 1840s. His position in politics most probably affected the visibility of his works and made them more accessible to larger audiences. Presumably this translation was in frequent use because not all historians could read Latin and early medieval Vulgar Latin, even though Latin was still an important subject in the French educational system. The translation published by Guizot thus made the text available for writers who could not read Vulgar Latin and for those who could not access the earlier editions of the *Histories*, even if only a few explicit references to Guizot's translation can be found.²⁶

It is easy to find references to Gregory of Tours in all kinds of works, from historical fiction to academic historiography, but in most cases there is no

23 Goffart 1989, 261. Goffart does not name the translations but I can infer these possibilities from his study. The one made by Alfred Jacob was revised based on Guizot's edition. The fourth translation is most like a translation made by Henri Leonard Bordier (1817–1888) in 1859–1861. Goffart only briefly mentions Bordier in his work but Bordier himself wrote that he was the third translator of Gregory's *Histoire ecclésiastique des Francs* since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Bordier 1859, IX. On French translations and the editions used by twentieth-century historians, see Lewis Thorpe, Introduction, in Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, transl. and ed. Lewis Thorpe. Penguin Books, London 1974, 7–59, at 54 and 56–57.

24 The criticism did not stop him using the translation in one of his other works. See Philippe le Bas, *Allemagne* (I). Firmin-Didot, Paris 1839, 111. Interestingly, however, he used *only* the translation of Gregory's *Histories*. When citing Fredegaire's Chronicle, he used the edition made by Dom Bouquet even though Fredegaire's Chronicle was also translated in 1823.

25 Philippe le Bas, *L'univers. France: dictionnaire encyclopédique* (IX). Firmin Didot frères, Paris 1843, 115–117. The translation made by Guadet and Taranne is not available in Finland or online; the Bibliothèque Nationale de France holds one version.

26 See, for example, Amable Tastu, *Chronique de France*. Delangle Frères, Paris 1829, 366–368. She also most probably used the same translation in her other work, *Cours d'histoire de France* (I). Lavigne, Paris 1836, 5–9. See also Belin de Launay 1843, 16.

information about the edition or translation of Gregory's *Histories* the author used. One must take into consideration that not all nineteenth-century authors noted the sources they had studied. As examples of the various genres, in the second decade of the nineteenth century Louis Antoine Marchangy used the early medieval chronicler's writings as a source in his work *La Gaule poétique*, which has often been defined as poetic history – a historiographical genre between historical research and the historical novel.²⁷ In 1828 Émile André used Gregory of Tours as a source in his historical novel *Le chef du mont*, set in the sixth century, and in 1834 the popular historian Henri Martin used Gregory's works as the main source for the fifth and the sixth centuries in his *Histoire de France*.²⁸ None of the authors mentioned here detailed which edition or translation of Gregory's *Histories* he was using, and therefore it is not even clear that they used the *Ten Books of Histories*. Multiple references, even if very general, to Gregory of Tours in various historiographical genres signify clearly that he was a known historical personage among the reading audience.

Despite the popularity of Gregory's *Histories* prior to the 1850s, there are no entire studies or other literary works dedicated to the *Histories* except the translations. Even François Guizot only briefly presented the author and the *Histories* before moving on to the translation. From the last decades of the French monarchy, we find, however, several other works from different literary genres dedicated to individuals from the Merovingian family, such as St Bathilde, St Clotilde, St Radegonde, Clovis and Brunehilde.²⁹ This is interesting and contradictory as, besides the founding father Clovis and his saintly wife Clotilde, Gregory of Tours was one of the best known characters from the Merovingian period during the early nineteenth century, as is established by the number of references to his works. In the nineteenth century, when history was still partly perceived as a narrative of events and actions “worth” remembering, Gregory of Tours was clearly seen as a person “worth” remembering, despite the lack of works dedicated uniquely to him. Through his writings he was omnipresent in all narratives about the Merovingian period and therefore perhaps no historian saw the necessity of dedicating an entire work to him.

Gregory of Tours as a naive historian

The importance of Gregory of Tours in early nineteenth-century French historiography cannot be detached from historians' interest in the Merovingian period and its individuals. More generally the importance of Gregory was related to the interest in the Middle Ages and in the history of the French “nation”. The interest in the Middle Ages, already evident before the French Revolution and

27 Louis Antoine Marchangy, *La Gaule poétique* (II). Chaumerot, Paris 1819, 67.

28 Emile André, *Le chef du mont* (I). Charles Gosselin, Paris 1828, 25. Henri Martin, *Histoire de France* (I). L. Mame, Paris 1834, 161.

29 J. M. E. Renaud de Rouvray, *Histoire de sainte Clotilde, reine de France*. Société de Saint-Nicolas, Paris 1841; A. Nougarede de Fayet, *De la conquête de Clovis*. C. Gosselin, Paris 1843; Édouard de Fleury, *Histoire de sainte Radegonde, reine de France au VI^e siècle et patronne de Poitiers*. H. Oudin, Poitiers 1843; Élisabeth Brun, *Vie de sainte Bathilde, reine de France*. L. Lefort, Lille 1847; Paulin Paris, *Brunehauld*, Imprimerie de Crapelet s.a.

strengthened in France by the highly popular historical novels written by Walter Scott, resulted in the Middle Ages becoming one of the most popular themes in historiography.³⁰ Even though for most historians the Middle Ages as a research theme were only associated with the late medieval period, the Merovingian age also gained popularity through its perceived role in the birth of the French nation.

The importance of Gregory's *Histories* in historiography had increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the general interest in the Merovingians started to blossom during the revolutionary years even though the interest was at first negative. The Merovingians were lumped together with all later French royal persons and defined as "bad" and "oppressive" in order to justify the Revolution and dethroning of the king. This, however, soon changed and by the 1820s Clovis I was again, as before the Revolution, venerated as the nation's forefather. The historian Edgar Quinet, born in 1803, even went so far as to compare the years 1814–1815 with the fifth and sixth centuries, and found analogies in the events that occurred during the two very different periods in history. He used these similarities to justify his writings about the Merovingian period.³¹ Alongside Clovis's rehabilitation the new source-based focus started to grow, showing its first fruits in the case of Guizot's translations.

In 1825 France saw its first historiographical study focusing solely on the early Middle Ages, and it was followed by more specialised studies.³² Philippe le Bas, a polyvalent linguistic, in his *L'univers. France: dictionnaire encyclopédique* (1843) discussed contemporary studies where Gregory of Tours was examined, and he especially highlighted one work, the *Histoire littéraire de France* by Jean Jacques Ampère (1800–1864) from 1839. Ampère was a historian and a philologist who focused on European literature and mythologies in his studies. The *Histoire littéraire* concentrated entirely on the early medieval period, and there Ampère wrote that Gregory of Tours was "the most polite, the most civilised man of his time".³³ The description stemmed from the fact that he had left behind written sources, and literature was perceived by many as a mark of civilisation.

During the early nineteenth century there was, however, one adjective that was used more than any other to describe Gregory of Tours: *naïve*. The term was used by almost all Ampère's contemporary historians, himself included, but no author explicitly defined what naivety signified.³⁴ The historian and textbook writer Théodose Burette even went so far as to use the translation made in 1610 in order to "conserve" the naïve language. He saw that the seventeenth-century translator had done a better job in capturing the naivety of Gregory's language.³⁵ It is noteworthy that the adjective referred both to Gregory's character and to his

30 Max Milner, "Liminaire". In Simone Bernard-Griffits *et al.* (under the direction of), *La fabrique du moyen âge au XIX^e siècle*. Éditions Champion, Paris 2006, 10–11.

31 Simone Bernard-Griffits, "Edgar Quinet", in Simone Bernard-Griffits *et al.* 2006, 398–399.

32 This study was by Jean Marie Félicité Frantin, *Annales du moyen âge*, Lagier 1825.

33 Jean Jacques Ampère, *Histoire littéraire de la France avant le douzième siècle* (II). L. Hachette, Paris 1839, 285. Ampère referred to Guadet on p. 295.

34 Ampère 1839, 300; le Bas 1840–1845, 116; Guizot 1823, XIX. Also on naivety, see Goffart 1988, 114–115. On how medieval chronicles were perceived as naïve, see François Hartog, *Évidence de l'histoire*. Gallimard, Paris 2005, 203.

35 Burette 1843, 62.

Latin language, which was perceived as vulgar compared to classical Latin. His language was seen as impure, just as children's language is undeveloped.

Naivety seemed to signify a child-like figure also in the sense that Gregory was not perceived as recognising the evil or barbarism in the world around him, which the early nineteenth-century historians so clearly found in all dimensions of the Merovingian period. Indeed the chronicler's fault seemed to have been that he did not interpret the world the same way as Ampère and his contemporary authors did some 1200 years later. Perhaps the image of naivety was also due to a lack of explicit value judgement on the chronicler's part.³⁶

Even if most early nineteenth-century historians advocated impartial interpretations in historiography, none of them avoided making judgements on history, especially on the early Middle Ages, and perhaps the same partiality was expected from the bishop of Tours himself. His position was thus dual. He was expected to see history and his contemporary society the same way as Ampère and his colleagues did, that is as a progressive system where some periods and societies had evolved further towards "civilisation" than others. At the same time, however, Gregory of Tours was perceived as a person of his own time, a part of barbaric society.

Gregory of Tours and objectivity

Gregory of Tours was more often criticised for what he did *not* write and for an anecdotal style than for being untruthful or intentionally biased.³⁷ For example, Ampère did not discuss how Gregory's manuscripts were edited or translated or any questions related to the truthfulness of his narratives.³⁸ Nor did Burette, who preferred a translation where Gregory was made to use the term "French" to refer to the inhabitants of fifth-century Frankish kingdoms.³⁹ Nevertheless, some authors such as Louis Marie Prudhomme, who published biographies in the 1820s about famous women, acknowledged that Gregory intentionally created a highly negative image of Queen Fredegonde (d. 597) because they had been enemies.⁴⁰ Prudhomme was not a completely unbiased author himself either, as

36 Ampère 1839, 304. On value judgements, see also Harry Ritter, *Dictionary of Concepts in History* (Reference Sources for the Social Sciences and Humanities 3). Greenwood Press, New York 1986, 447–454.

37 See for example Bourdon de Sigrais, *Considérations sur les Gaulois, les Francs et les Français* (Collection des mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France). Dépôt central de la librairie (J.-L.-L. Brière), Paris 1834, 422. Sigrais was not strictly a contemporary historian as he had died in 1791.

38 On nineteenth-century historians interpreting Gregory as a historian, see Goffart 1988, 115 and 121.

39 Belin de Launay viewed the 1610 translation with complete ridicule and made fun of it in his work. See Belin de Launay 1843, 26.

40 Louis Marie Prudhomme, ed., *Biographie universelle et historique des femmes célèbres mortes ou vivantes* (II), Lebigre, Paris 1830, 427–429. Also for example François René de Chateaubriand wrote that one should not believe everything Gregory of Tours wrote about Brunehilde (d. 613) and even though he did not specify his reasons, he most likely had in mind that Gregory was Brunehilde's friend and ally. This is why Gregory wrote in such a positive tone about her. See François René de Chateaubriand, *Oeuvres complètes de Chateaubriand. 10, Analyse raisonnée de l'histoire de France*. Acamédia, Paris 1861, 2. (The work is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's digital collection Gallica; the page numbers there do not match the physical book's.)

during the 1790s he had published a book defaming all “French” queens, including the Merovingian ones.⁴¹

Most historians, however, copied Gregory’s narrative about Queen Fredegonde word for word, thus making Gregory’s interpretation of her character a matter of fact repeated over and over again. Her image represented in the nineteenth century the ultimate negative figure of a woman who was “unnaturally” involved in politics, misused power and overturned gender roles in marriage. This image was not, of course, uniquely Gregory’s creation but was accumulated from features added by each historian and each period’s moral codes. In the nineteenth century she represented the negative female counterforce of French society’s ideal woman.⁴²

Yet Paulin Paris, a historian and specialist of medieval French literature and a professor of the Collège de France, took a very neutral tone in studying Gregory’s position as an observer of early medieval kings, for example refraining from calling Gregory a naive historian. Paris wrote several books about the medieval historical sources that were used in the study of the history of France, and among the nineteenth-century historians mentioned in my article Paris is the only one who can truly be called an expert on medieval sources. In 1836 he published, with Édouard Mennechet, a study entitled *Histoire de France, par les écrivains contemporains*.⁴³ The motivation for the work was to find the most original and authentic sources on the nation’s history and to make history available to larger audiences.⁴⁴

In the first volume of the work Paris and Mennechet concentrated on the *Grandes chroniques de France* and published a French translation of the *Chroniques* made by an anonymous author.⁴⁵ The work started with Paulin Paris’s preliminary dissertation, which focused on the creation of the *Chroniques*. Paris started by discussing the date of publication of the *Chroniques* and moved on then to discuss the sources used by the authors of the *Chroniques*. Paris presented the *Chronicle of Aimoin*, written around the year 1000, as the main source.⁴⁶ Reaching back in history, Paris stated that the main source about the Merovingian period for Aimoin had been Gregory’s *Ten Books of Histories*, or as Paris called it, the *Histoire ecclésiastique des Francs*. Paris did not examine what

41 *Les crimes des reines de France depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu’à Marie-Antoinette*. London 1792.

42 On the representations of Fredegonde in early nineteenth-century historiography, see Heta Aali, “Fredegonde – Great Man of the Nineteenth Century”, *Les Grandes figures historiques dans les Lettres et les Arts* 2 (2013), http://figures-historiques.revue.univ-lille3.fr/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Aali-Fredegonde-19_04-2-PDF.pdf, date of consultation 25.11.2013.

43 Paulin Paris and Édouard Mennechet, *Histoire de France, par les écrivains contemporains (Comprenant les annales de la monarchie française; depuis les grandes chroniques de Saint-Denis, jusqu’aux mémoires de la Révolution)*. Techener, Paris 1836.

44 Many historians during this period urged all readers to study the history of France in order to know “their own history” and “origins”.

45 It is not very clear when the translation was made or who made it as it was only mentioned that the translation was the first in French. Paris and Mennechet 1836, 1–4. Again we see that the historians had no real interest in explaining the history of the manuscripts they were using.

46 Aimoin de Fleury’s work *Historia Francorum* was indeed the main source for *Grandes chroniques de France* and thus indirectly a source for historians such as Anquetil. On Aimoin, see Kibler & Zinn 1995, 15.

versions of Gregory's manuscripts Aimoin had used, nor did he explain the choice of title for Gregory's work.

Aimoin was, according to Paris, only an arranger of previous chronicles, and he was mainly arranging the text of Gregory of Tours.⁴⁷ Although Paris only wrote a couple of pages on Gregory and his chronicles he was more critical towards him than his contemporaries – he explained that Gregory had no intention of exploring everything in his contemporary society but was mainly interested in giving a detailed narrative of God's miracles occurring in "France". Thus, Paris concluded, Gregory was not completely trustworthy as a historian, especially when it came to the family of Clovis, as Gregory revered him, or to the family of Clovis's grandson Chilperic (d. 584), whom he clearly did not revere.⁴⁸ Paris also mentioned Fredegaire's chronicles and pointed out that this text was not trustworthy when it came to the history of Brunehilde (d. 613), as the author clearly disliked her very much, whereas for Gregory she had been an ally.⁴⁹

Paris's criticism of Gregory was not, as we have seen in Prudhomme's *Biographie*, unheard of before even though he put it into words more clearly than his contemporaries. Paris also pointed out that Gregory did not have the "virtues of another age", thus underlining the bishop's belonging to an inferior period and therefore being inferior himself.⁵⁰ Even as a saint, Gregory of Tours could not escape the poor qualities attached to the "barbarian" Merovingian period by the early nineteenth-century historians.

Noteworthy, Paris did not always follow his own deductions. This is visible in his short work, almost a pamphlet, entitled *Brunehauld* (Brunehilde), where he went along with Gregory's views on the queen, picturing her as the greatest queen of the sixth century. Despite warning readers not to believe everything Gregory of Tours wrote about Brunehilde, Paris himself followed the bishop's narrative faithfully.⁵¹

Augustin Thierry, a historian contemporary with Paris, criticised Gregory for being too superstitious and for believing in miracles. Despite his criticism, Thierry took for granted almost everything Gregory wrote about his contemporary society.⁵² Most probably the belief in miracles referred yet again to Gregory's perceived naive character, so often emphasised by Thierry's contemporary historians.⁵³ Thierry's loyalty to Gregory's narrative is especially visible in the histories of the queens Fredegonde and Brunehilde, who were the central figures in Thierry's *Récits des temps mérovingiens*, and the queens about whom Paris criticised Gregory for creating a biased image because of his political sympathies. Paris rightfully remarked that Gregory was an ally of Brunehilde and

47 Paris 1836, XXIX.

48 Paris 1836, XXXI.

49 Paris 1836, XXXIII–XXXIV.

50 Paris 1836, XXXII.

51 Paris, *Brunehauld*, 1–20 *passim*.

52 Thierry was in this question much more critical than many of his contemporaries, and we must remember that not all saw Gregory's belief in miracles as a negative issue in early nineteenth-century France. Augustin Thierry, *Récits des temps mérovingiens* (I). J. Tessier, Paris 1842, 408–409.

53 Not all nineteenth-century authors denied the belief in miracles; there was a huge amount of religious historiography that emphasised the role of miracles in the history of France. See for example Pitre-Chevalier's introduction to Josephine Amory de Langerack's *Galerie des femmes célèbres*. Paris 1848, VII–XVI.

an enemy of Fredegonde, which is why the bishop depicted the first queen in an extremely positive manner and the second very negatively. The reasons for the pictures he painted were both political and personal, and they affected, and still do, the interpretations made about these two queens. Thierry, just like Ampère and unlike Paris, seemed to believe that Gregory perceived society the same way as he would have wanted to do, in a seemingly objective manner.

Thierry's *Récits*, originally published in a series in the 1830s in the *Revue des deux mondes* and as a book in 1840, was an immediate success among readers and colleagues.⁵⁴ For example, Ampère praised Thierry's abilities to recreate the image of people living in the sixth century and he especially praised his portrayal of Gregory of Tours.⁵⁵ Thierry, who was crippled and almost blind, is best known for his theories concerning social classes in French history and for later inspiring the writings of Karl Marx. His theories about the Franks subjugating Gallo-Romans, seen as the ancestors of the modern working class, were also evident in the *Récits*.⁵⁶

The *Récits* consist of several scenes from the Merovingian period, mostly focusing on the end of the sixth century – in other words the period when Gregory was writing his *Histories*. The *Récits* is neither a historical novel nor research but a *poetic history*, like Marchangy's *La Gaule poétique*, which brought together features from both genres. The immense success of the new historical novel influenced the way history was presented, and most works during the early nineteenth century had a narrative form, though Thierry's work was extreme in this respect. The late sixth century, on which the *Récits* focused, was the period closely described by Gregory, who also took part in the action and politics of the time.

Thierry's narrative on the sixth century adopted a peculiar construction, in which Gregory of Tours was at the same time the main source and one of the main characters. It is important to note that Gregory was seen by Thierry as a civilised Gallo-Roman, a member of a subjugated people, and thus not one of the Franks, characterised by barbarism in Thierry's historical imagination. As the American researcher Lionel Gossman has stated, Gregory was not only one of the characters or a major source along with the sixth-century poet Venantius Fortunatus in Thierry's *Récits*, he was also Thierry's own personification in the Merovingian period – an enlightened historian merely describing actions.⁵⁷

Thierry used as his source the collection *Rerum Gallicarum et Francicarum scriptores*, which is the Latin name used for *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*. He therefore did not rely on a translation but on the period's best edition of the early medieval sources.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that even though Thierry wrote much about Gregory of Tours as a person, as a bishop

54 *Récits* was previously published in parts in a journal *Revue des deux mondes*.

55 Ampère 1839, 288.

56 Thierry's ideas about French history, Franks and Gallo-Romans is in my opinion best presented in his essay "Histoire de Jacques Bonhomme". Jacques Bonhomme was not a historical person but a personification of subjugated people in various periods of history. See Augustin Thierry, *Dix ans d'études historiques* (5th edn). Just Tessier, Paris 1843, 255–264.

57 Lionel Gossman, "Augustin Thierry and Liberal Historiography", *History and Theory*, 4 (1976), 3–70, at 59–60.

58 Augustin Thierry, *Récits des temps mérovingiens* (II, 4th edn). Furne & co., Paris 1842, 2.

and as a historian, he had little to say about his *Histories* or the manuscripts. He did note the passages he had used but did not make any remarks about the history of the manuscripts. Thierry was also one of the rare historians to give in the original language in footnotes all the passages he had cited in the main text. Thus, despite perceiving Gregory of Tours as naive for the language he used and miracles he believed in, and as a superstitious chronicler, he contributed to the use of early medieval sources by detailing the passages he had used and explicitly opening them up for discussion.

Conclusion

Ever since the seventh century almost all sources about the Merovingian period have been based on the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, and thus many nineteenth-century historians relied on this work indirectly when they were using other sources depicting the early medieval period. During the early nineteenth century this accumulation of interpretations about early medieval royalty was pointed out by some historians, such as Paulin Paris in his work on the *Grandes chroniques de France*,⁵⁹ but in many cases the accumulation did not prevent historians using contemporary and non-contemporary medieval sources side by side. In fact the historians had two ways to reach the Merovingian period, directly through the *Histories* and indirectly by using sources based on the *Histories*. It remains, however, a question why some historians chose to use these indirect sources even though many of them knew these sources to be untrustworthy.

A good example of such accumulation of sources comes from one of the most reprinted historical works from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and at the same time one of the most criticised. The *Histoire de France* of Louis Pierre Anquetil (1723–1806), first published in 1805, shows well how the eighteenth-century tradition of indirectly using Gregory's *Histories* as a source persisted for several decades into the nineteenth century. Anquetil did not mention Gregory at all in his large work but only referred to historians such as François Eudes de Mezeray (1610–1683) and Paul François Velly (1690–1759).⁶⁰ Indeed, Anquetil's work splendidly illustrates how in only a few decades, from 1800 to the 1820s, the use of Gregory's chronicles as a source changed considerably and eventually, in 1834, the historian Henri Martin wrote in his *Histoire de France* that Anquetil was the last link of copyist, rather than historians, starting from the *Grandes chroniques de France*.⁶¹ Subsequent historians focused uniquely on early medieval sources – or rather, on interpreting the editions of early medieval sources, as only rarely were unedited sources used.

Yet one must recognise that the change in using sources, and Gregory's *Histories* in particular, did not happen suddenly but took several decades, or even as much as a century. The eighteenth-century method of using sources persisted at least up until the 1850s, especially in religious historiography and in popular

59 On the *Grandes chroniques de France*, see Leah Shopkow, 'Grandes chroniques de France', in Kibler & Zinn 1995, 411.

60 Louis Pierre Anquetil, *Histoire de France, depuis les Gaulois jusqu'à la fin de la monarchie* (5th edn, tome I). Ledentu, Paris 1825, XXIX.

61 Martin 1834, 4–5.

historical literature. It is clear that, for example in history textbooks, the old interpretations and methods persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century. It is interesting that Anquetil's work, which was highly criticised by historians such as Guizot and Thierry, saw many reprints in the first half of the nineteenth century.⁶² Thus one can deduce that the "copyist" interpretations lived on among readers despite the critical voices of contemporary historians. The first half of the nineteenth century represents a period when the old and new traditions of interpreting and presenting the *Histories* and other sources still lived side by side.

One can state that the impact of Gregory's *Histories* was enormous for later historiography and especially for the study of the Merovingian period in nineteenth-century France. His works and he himself as a historical personage became more visible in the historiographical narratives but simultaneously the post-revolutionary historians started to question his narratives of persons such as Clovis I, whose actions did not go uncriticised by all early nineteenth-century historians.

When examining, for example, the role of Gregory's contemporary queens Brunehilde and Fredegonde in nineteenth-century historiography, we see how their representations were guided by Gregory's words. Even the great Jules Michelet, who was one of the nineteenth century's best-known advocates of the use of unedited sources, stated that the famous Merovingian queens were better known to later historians than the kings of the period.⁶³ One can argue that the queens would not have been so well known had it not been for Gregory of Tours. Undeniably, even if originally Gregory wrote about the queens *because* he perceived them to be important in the Frankish kingdoms, later the roles were reversed. The queens became more important in the history of France *because* Gregory wrote about them in his *Histories*. Thus he made them important and simultaneously those individuals not mentioned in his *Histories* were left in oblivion.

Indeed, during the early nineteenth century Gregory was perceived as a person of his own time, but at the same time more "enlightened", even though he was seen by almost all historians as "naive" which referred to the Latin he used, to the way he saw society around him and his belief in miracles. He was not judged, as we have seen, with the same criteria as his "barbarian" contemporaries of the sixth century because judging him as a barbarian would have meant denying the value of the ten books of *Histories*. Writing an important chronicle and being "uncivilised" were hard to square in the minds of the early nineteenth-century historians because of their visions of evolving civilisations in the history of France.

The historiographical works of Thierry, Paris, Guizot, Ampère, le Bas and, to a lesser degree, Sismondi⁶⁴ show how over just a couple of decades historians and authors started to make various uses of Gregory of Tours and his chronicles in different genres of historiography. The change of historiography from

62 In the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, there are at least six new editions of the work by 1830. See <http://www.bnf.fr>, consulted 25.11.2013.

63 Jules Michelet, *Histoire de France* (I), L. Hachette, Paris 1833, 220–221.

64 On Sismondi's use of Gregory's *Histories* as a source, see also Thorpe 1974, 55.

literature to science did not occur solely during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but it was accelerated during the last decades of the French monarchy, even though we have to wait until the 1850s to see complete works dedicated to the saint bishop. It was clearly Gregory of Tours as a historian, as a recorder of the supposed origins of France and as the last defender of Roman civilisation that interested Ampère and his contemporary authors.

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