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1 Introduction

The early Middle Ages, generally categorized as that time between the Fall of Rome and the coronation of Charlemagne, are a period often overlooked not only by students but also teachers. While we are all well versed in the philosophers of antiquity, the knights who went to fight the crusades and the history of World War II, the early Middle Ages are often curiously absent from our collective minds. The earliest events after the fall of Rome we learn about in school are generally about the time of Charlemagne, sometimes maybe that of his father and grandfather. This is already a few hundred years past what is classified by many scholars as the early Middle Ages.¹

When it comes to gender studies or dealing with women in whatever period in history, it is not a rare occasion that people, among them even trained historians, put on a vague look and decide to change the subject. Fortunately, gender studies have become more and more part of the everyday curriculum of almost any liberal arts university, while the early Middle Ages studies are still somewhat behind in that regard.

The core piece of my research will be the *Histories* by Gregory of Tours, the bishop, saint and historiographer of the Merovingian Franks during the 6th century. This for the time very rare narrative source has been under the scrutiny of many scholars since it was written in the 6th century, and many have found flaws as well as merit in the writings of Gregory of Tours. He has been used as a face-value account of the royal Merovingians, studied for his historiographical significance, and dissected by scholars for the numerous elements of his writings.

There have been various studies dealing with the role of women during the early Middle Ages, most prominent that by Suzanne F. Wemple.² She attempted to connect various sources of the early Middle

1 For a discussion on the dates which try to put the early Middle Ages into a temporal framework see Chris Wickham. *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005, pp.1-6.

2 Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister, 500 to 900*.

Ages and create a picture of women's situation, their status and the most important discrepancies between legal documents and the actual perceived reality as depicted in narrative sources like the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours. For this thesis, the circumstances of a woman's life in these times, that is the day-to-day struggle or hardships, are of interest as well. As with all accounts, evaluating these demands from the reader a certain distance, which of course cannot guarantee total objectivity, but help clear one's vision regarding positions taken rather obviously through one or another sort of bias.

In the case of Gregory, these issues of how to process and dissect an historical text are even more complex considering the differing perceptions of Gregory's writings ranging from ridicule as a pious annalist of the Franks to the conduct of serious scholarly research into his merits as a historiographer. Even though today Gregory is mostly regarded as an actual historiographer of his time, reading his work has not become easier. I would rather argue that a reading of the *Histories* demands a kind of discipline of keeping in mind this anecdotal character of his writings not necessary when it comes to historiographers who at their time of writing had already been regarded as such. This is owed to Gregory's anecdotal writing most obvious in his *Histories* which needs to be seen as a *pars pro toto* at times, but then sometimes simply left as what it is, namely anecdotes which might or might not have been of core significance in the greater scheme of things.

While in scientific writing anecdotal evidence is frowned upon, in certain chapters it won't be possible to avoid using it, especially in the ones dealing with the language of Gregory's depictions of certain people and events. These chapters will be focusing on how Gregory portrays certain people he obviously held in great esteem and the ones he also quite obviously held to be responsible for treacherous and murderous events in the Merovingian period. The single episodes of either their benevolence or malevolence are examined, more or less free of other

University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1981.

context, in order to distill how the language Gregory uses is already giving away his misgivings about or his admiration for either of the persons described. The following chapters will give an overview of gender and the early Middle Ages and a concise description of Gregory's life and impact.

2 Theory

2.1 Current State of Research

2.1.1 Gregory of Tours

The writings of Gregory of Tours have been widely circulated since their creation, and been read and used from wildly differing vantage points. The *Histories*, actually devised as chronicles of the world, were soon after his death read as not much more than a witness-report depicting the Merovingian kingdoms. Even as early as the tenth century, his *Histories* had had attached the name *The History of the Franks* and were perceived merely as such, ignoring the actual intent of creating a chronicle of the world.³

Today, as established above, Gregory of Tours is discussed, studied and read by numerous scholars for many different reasons. Since the 1980s, his writings have seen a revival in interest, even though it was his hagiographic writings that garnered most of the attention. Considering how all of his writings are interlinked, it is not difficult to see why the *Histories* have undergone new scrutiny by many scholars⁴.

Nevertheless, the road Gregory's writings have taken is winding and one of many ups and downs. During the Age of Enlightenment, he was discredited for his writing style and his overt piousness, was called a gullible writer and deemed disorganized. His Latin, rooted not in the classical Latin of antiquity but rather in his contemporary language, was reason enough for scholars of the Enlightenment to ridicule his work. Thus, his writings were regarded with similar disdain as they were

3 See Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: history and society in the sixth century*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2001, p.2.

4 See for example Helmut Reimitz: "Geschlechterrollen und Genealogie in der fränkischen Historiographie" in: *Frauenbild und Geschlechterrollen bei antiken Autoren an der Wende von der Spätantike zum Mittelalter*, eds. Christoph Ulf and Robert Rollinger (Studienverlag: Innsbruck 2006): 335-354.

during the above mentioned tenth century, where his choice of language was seen as a reflection of the age of barbarism he supposedly lived in.⁵

As Peter Brown puts it:

There was a time, and not so very long ago, when we thought that we knew all that we needed to know about Gregory of Tours. He was the unembarrassed chronicler of a brutish age, whose cultural disarray – even among those like himself who affected Roman descent and were aware of former standards of Latinity – he himself represented only too faithfully.⁶

What is prevalent throughout the works that deal with Gregory is the way his thoughts and ideas are rarely questioned, but taken at face value. Today, the meta-questions are the main themes of scholars dealing with Gregory in general and the *Histories* in particular. Starting with Goffart and Mitchell, there can be seen a rehabilitation of Gregory as a historiographer whose Latin was in fact not inferior and whose ways of organizing his writings were not due to a lack of understanding of formal organizational patterns, but rather due to his own, internal preferences of structure.⁷

Today, Gregory's writings are scrutinized by scholars under various different viewpoints, and while they, as Peter Brown points out, are not at all papers praising Gregory, they do remove the stain that earlier historians tarnished Gregory's reputation with by deeming him the mere and lowly chronicler of the barbarian age of Merovingian kingdoms.⁸

2.1.2 Gender in the early Middle Ages

Suzanne Fonay Wemple's study "Women in Frankish Society" is considered a landmark in the field. In her book, published in 1981, she showcases the roles of women in Merovingian and Carolingian Gaul between 500 and 900 AC, portraying their social status and their

5 See Heinzelmänn, "Gregory of Tours", p.3.

6 See Peter Brown, "Gregory of Tours: Introduction" in: *The World of Gregory of Tours, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples*, eds. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Brill: Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002): 1-28, p.1.

7 See Heinzelmänn, "Gregory of Tours", p.5.

8 See Brown, p.1.

activities ranging from their position in the family in general, in the royal families and to that in the church.⁹

In her introduction, Wemple cites a list of authors that have dealt with women in the early Middle Ages. Nevertheless she comes to the conclusion that what we can infer from the laws of any given period, especially when it comes to women, is not always a reflection of the realities of these times, as taken from various narrative sources:

The purpose of this book is to explain the gap between the ideals and laws on the one hand and the social reality on the other.[...]Of greater interest outside scholarly circles is the debate concerning women's position in the early church.[...] In searching for answers to these and other questions in primary sources, I have sought not merely to settle controversies but also to gain an understanding of the relationship between men and women and to provide insights into women's experiences in this formative period of European history.¹⁰

In 1985, Brigitte Merta wrote a study on the depiction of women of the Merovingian kingdoms in early medieval sources. As she puts it in her introduction, these portrayals of women connected to the Merovingian kingdoms are scarce and more often than not, it is plenty of interpretative work that needs to be applied to these depictions.¹¹

As the following chapters will show, the 25 years since these works were written have produced a number of studies by many notable scholars focusing on gender and the early middle ages.

2.2 Gender and History

Women and history is a topic that has seen a surge in publications, studies and research during the last thirty years. The issues at hand are obvious. Women's studies only emerged in earnest after the second women's movements in the 60s and 70s of the twentieth century. Women in medieval history were tightly linked to said

⁹ See Wemple, "Women in Frankish Society".

¹⁰ See Wemple, "Women in Frankish Society", p.6.

¹¹ See Brigitte Merta, *Darstellung von Frauen des merowingischen Hauses in frühmittelalterlichen Quellen*, Wien, 1985.

emergence of women's studies. Even though there were efforts during the turn of the twentieth century to study the contribution of women in historiography and the role of women in history, these efforts were mainly limited to the outer-academic domain. Still, the works produced were of high quality, these authors being largely self-trained but astute amateur-historians. Among those should be named Lina Eckenstein¹², who authored several books about convent life in the Middle Ages, or Mary Bateson¹³, who provided ground-breaking studies on double monasteries. While aimed at a general rather than a scientific audience, these works are nowadays included in the scholarly literature on women in history.¹⁴

2.2.1 Gender and the Middle Ages

The taking into account of gender, that is the social concept of sex, didn't happen in medieval studies up until the 1970s. The term gender itself is applied in two different ways: one is the way interactions between members of the opposite sex are perceived, whereas the other is a discourse of power relations. The fact that the term gender is often interchangeably used with the terms sex, women, feminism or sexual orientation adds some confusion to the whole discourse.¹⁵

Nowadays, there exist multiple studies on gender in the Middle Ages, and even though they comprise a number of various topics within the early Middle Ages and gender, e.g. ethnicity and gender in Walter Pohl's "Gender and ethnicity in the early middle ages"¹⁶, there is still no real consensus as to what the fixed meaning for the term gender should be.

12 As an example see Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under monasticism*. CUP Archive, 1972.

13 As an example see Mary Bateson, "Origin and early history of double monasteries." in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 13.1 (1899): 137-198.

14 See Susan Mosher Stuard, *Women in medieval history & historiography*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 1987, pp.5-6.

15 See Lisa Bitel, "Gender in History" in: *Women and gender in medieval Europe: an encyclopedia*. Vol. 14., ed. Margret Schaus, (Routledge: New York 2006): 311-315, pp.312ff.

16 See Walter Pohl, "Gender and ethnicity in the early middle ages" in: *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms*, ed. Thomas F.X. Noble (Routledge: New York 2006): 168-88.

In this paper, my use of the word gender will be a hybrid of above described terms. While I will be looking into the way interactions between men and women are perceived by Gregory, I will also look at how Gregory's depictions differ in a woman's case as opposed to a man of the same or similar levels.

2.2.2 Gender in the Middle Ages

There is one telling episode told in the *Histories*, that shows that even during the time of Gregory of Tours, the issue of how to deal with the idea of gender was discussed:

Exstetit enim in hac synodo quidam ex episcopis qui dicebat mulierem hominem non posse vocitari. sed tamen ab episcopis ratione accepta quievit: eo quod sacer veteris testamenti liber edoceat, quod in principio deo hominem creante ait, "masculum et feminam creavit eos: vocavitque nomen eorum Adam" (Gen. 5.2), quod est 'homo terrenus'; sic utique vocans mulierem ceu virum: utrumque enim hominem dixit. sed et dominus Iesus Christus ob hoc vocitatur filius hominis, quod sit filius virginis, id est mulieris. ad quam cum aquas in vina transferre pararet, ait: "Quid mihi et tibi est, mulier?" (John 2.4) et reliqua. multisque et aliis testimoniis haec causa convicta quievit.¹⁷

The rather simple explanation of how woman and man are both named "man" in the bible rivals certain contemporary explanations of why gender-sensitive language ought not be employed. In comparison, the explanation of the bishop in Merovingian Gaul seems rather level-headed and plausible.

As for the idea of gender, there was no fixed gender ideology in

¹⁷ *Liber Historiae Francorum*, Book 4, Chapter 28. The Latin texts of Gregory's *Histories* are taken from Krusch, Bruno, ed. *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Historiarum*. MGH: SRM 1. Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani: Hannover, 1951. (digital). 'There came forward at this Council a certain bishop who maintained that woman could not be included under the term "man." However, he accepted the reasoning of the other bishops and did not press his case for the holy book of the Old Testament tells us that in the beginning, when God created man, "Male and female he created them and called their name Adam," which means earthly man; even so, he called the woman Eve, yet of both he used the word "man." And our Lord Jesus Christ is called "Son of man", but is the son of a virgin, who is a woman.' translation from Gregory of Tours. *The History of the Franks*. Ed. L. Thorpe. Penguin Books: London, 1974, p.452.

the Middle Ages. With the majority of narrative sources for the Middle Ages composed by clerical writers, it is difficult to glean real gender ideologies from these writings. The ideologies of non-members of the clergy are nearly impossible to tell, since of course most hagiographic and biographical writings were written by members of the educated clergy.¹⁸

The above-cited example from Gregory of Tours' *Histories* reflects how what we subsume under "gender" was an issue during the early medieval period too, much of it owing to the structures that had seeped into this period from Roman and Greek times. With the geographic and temporal proximity to the Roman Empire, Roman law was still dominant and thus profoundly shaping the status of women and the perception of gender.¹⁹

Jo Ann MacNamara adds that gender was indeed a convenient way of organizing the structure of societies during the times of Gregory of Tours but compared by today's standards, these categorizations were based on an even more complex and unstable system.²⁰ One might add that this has only slightly improved in current times.

Dick Harrison also stresses a point about misogyny purportedly being prevalent in antiquity and the middle ages:

I do not dispute that many of these stereotypical images did exist in the minds of ancient and medieval men, but there is more to it. The real stereotypes exist in the minds of the historians themselves. We like to build systems, construct images of the past and make bold interpretations. In doing so we often oversimplify the past to a degree that turns it into something that never was.²¹

18 See Jacqueline Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?" in: *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives* (2008): 34-51, p.35.

19 See Wood, "Merovingian Kingdoms", pp.102-104.

20 See Jo-Ann MacNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours." in: *The World of Gregory of Tours, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples*, eds. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Brill: Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002): 199-209., p.199.

21 See Dick Harrison, *The age of abbesses and queens: gender and political culture in early medieval Europe*. Nordic Academic Press: Lund, 1998, p.34.

While his criticism is directed towards historians of the renaissance, he also includes modern historians and their reading of texts. In this paper, it shall be kept in mind that the creation of these systems, images and interpretations is influenced by how the world is experienced by the observer.²²

²² See Dick Harrison, *The age of abbesses and queens: gender and political culture in early medieval Europe*. Nordic Academic Press: Lund, 1998, pp.34ff.

2.3 Gregory of Tours

2.3.1 Life

Gregory of Tours, or Georgius Florentius Gregorius²³, was probably born on the 30th of November in the year 538 or 539. It is impossible to declare an exact date, and even the date-range given above is based upon some rather speculative interpretations of various of Gregory's works.²⁴

He was a descendant of a venerable Gallo-Roman family, but, as Heinzelmann points out, regarded this as not much more than a personal requirement for achieving his position in the world and for exercise of episcopal office. It was, after all, a background he had in common with most of his colleagues.²⁵ As Wood points out:

Again, the absence of any direct statement is symptomatic of Gregory's reticence about himself and his family connections. He often talks of relatives without stating that they were related to him.²⁶

Gregory's father died probably in the year 548, before Gregory had reached his teens. The years between 548 and 551, Gregory lived with his mother in Clermont. There he was visited regularly by his uncle Gallus, who had by then been bishop of Clermont for some years already.²⁷

It was around that time that Gregory contracted a serious illness, which led to him being taken to the grave of St. Illidius in hope of a cure. He there promised to enter the church if he was to survive his illness. This short anecdote is important, as it could be a sign that Gregory was not initially meant to become a cleric. With Gregory's brother, who had entered the Church of Langres, there already was a

23 See Walter A. Goffart, *The narrators of barbarian history (AD 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1988, p. 112.

24 See Wood, "Gregory of Tours", pp. 4-5.

25 See Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours", p.11.

26 See Wood, "Gregory of Tours", p.6.

27 See Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours", p.29.

cleric in the immediate family, which for Gregory might rather have pointed towards the pursuit of a secular career. What's more, Gregory's grandfather, Gregory of Langres, was the only direct ancestor who had entered the church before them, and as a late convert even.²⁸

In his later teens, after the death of Gallus in the year 551, Gregory moved to Lyon with his mother. There his education was resumed in the household of Nicetius, who later went on to be elected the bishop of Lyon.²⁹ Gregory soon became a deacon there as well.³⁰

That Gregory later became the bishop of Tours was not exactly surprising, as it was more or less a family see. Gregory's predecessor, Eufronius, was related to Gregory. He was a close relative of Gregory's mother, and quite probably even her brother. As can be gathered from Gregory's *Histories*, at least five of his predecessors as bishop of Tours were quite probably related to Gregory as well.³¹ While this may have been proof that Tours was in the hands of Gregory's family, it was, as mentioned above, not mandatory for Gregory to become bishop of Tours as well. It took grave illness for Gregory to vow to become a cleric, and having a lot of bishops in his lineage might not have been more than a fact brought about by senatorial ancestry.³²

Gregory's appointment wasn't without dispute. According to Venantius Fortunatus, the bishop of Poitiers, Gregory was appointed bishop by King Sigibert and his wife Brunhild. This special relationship between the royal court and Gregory may explain the fact that Gregory was not, as canonical rules would demand, consecrated in Tours but by bishop Egidius in Reims, the Austrasian seat of King Sigibert.³³

As Ian Wood notes: "Perhaps significantly these three backers were to receive discreet treatment in Gregory's *Histories*."³⁴

28 See Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours", p.30.

29 See Goffart, "Narrators of Barbarian history", p.112.

30 See Wood, "Gregory of Tours", pp. 7-8.

31 Ibid., p.24.

32 Ibid., p.30.

33 Ibid., p.33.

34 See Wood, "Gregory of Tours", p.11

That Gregory's episcopacy would not be an easy one taken the political implications such an office entails, must have been clear to him. When he moved to Tours, he soon grew ill, but was purportedly shortly after cured by visiting the tomb of the patron saint of Tours, Martin. Incidentally, this occurred only a short while after Gregory's mother was cured of an affliction at the tomb as well.³⁵

It can be assumed that there is a relation to these incidents as to why Gregory began collecting stories of miracles pertaining to Martin of Tours.

2.3.2 Gregory's Family

As pointed out by Heinzelmann, when it comes to the work of any given author there is always a connection between their historical background and the writings they have produced.³⁶ In the case of Gregory of Tours, this holds true due to several aspects. As for Gregory's hagiographic writings, which I will talk about later in this chapter, the logical background is his being a member of the clergy. For the *Histories*, Gregory's social background is just as important as his involvement with the clergy. It is especially important to look at Gregory's family, and even though he is the only remaining source when it comes to his relatives, the things he writes and those he does not give us clues as to how his family shaped his writings. Heinzelmann, in his monograph about Gregory of Tours, presents a prosopography of Gregory³⁷, which in itself is interesting already, but which can, in light of this paper's topic, give a certain insight into the perception of women as presented in Gregory of Tours' writings.

It is interesting to note that Gregory did not mention many of his relatives in his work or did fail to mention his relation to people

³⁵ Ibid., p.12.

³⁶ See Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours", p.7.

³⁷ Ibid., pp.11-28.

appearing in his writings. One of these rather prominent relatives is his uncle Gallus, bishop of Clermont, who is of course mentioned, but whose relation to himself is never disclosed by Gregory. Neither is Eufronius, his predecessor in Tours, revealed as a relation of Gregory's.³⁸

Armentaria II was the mother of Gregory. She is mentioned twelve times in Gregory's hagiographic writings, and obviously influenced him in many matters, especially religious ones. Gregory held her visionary abilities in high esteem, both due to her apparently being able to interpret one of his visions aptly, as well as for her being a visionary herself. Since she was a devout follower of the saints, Gregory was heavily influenced in his own devotion to the saints, especially St. Martin of Tours. It was also her who supported him in writing, even when he most objected.³⁹

Another female relative of note was Gregory's sister, whose name is not known, but who is mentioned as the wife of Justinus. She was probably older than Gregory and had two daughters, thereby nieces to Gregory, who went on to become prioress of a monastery and wife of a governor of the Provence.⁴⁰ Gregory's paternal grandmother was Leocadia⁴¹, and Armentaria I was the grandmother of Gregory's mother⁴², from whom she got her name. There is not much known about either woman. Gregory's great-grandmother, Artemia, is a bit better known, as she was the mother of Nicetius, and Gregory mentions Nicetius' obedience to his mother in one of his writings. At the time, Gregory was eight years old and presumably at the actual place of Nicetius' demonstration of obedience.⁴³

It is interesting to note that Gregory's style invites the assumption

38 See Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours", p.8.

39 Ibid., pp.14-15.

40 Ibid., pp.11-12.

41 Ibid., p.13.

42 Ibid., p.19.

43 Ibid., p.22.

that he wasn't interested in putting too much importance on his family's position. As Helmut Reimitz remarked⁴⁴, if it weren't for certain details in Gregory's writings, we would nowadays not be able to identify various relatives of Gregory. Furthermore, the way Gregory linked his remarks about his family in both the *Histories* and his hagiographic writings, creates, as Reimitz calls it, a "history of a spiritual network centred on his family".⁴⁵

2.3.3 Gregory, Bishop of Tours

The political situation in Gaul at the time of Gregory's consecration as bishop of Tours was more than precarious. The kingdom had been divided into sub-kingdoms more than once, and the respective lands in the north-east were complimented by territories in the south and south-west. This habit of dividing kingdoms into smaller parts, initially to avoid conflict among its heirs, was practiced up to the 9th century. These divisions found a constant in the creation of the three sub-kingdoms Austrasia, Neustria and Burgundy.⁴⁶

However, there was a constant battle over the territories in the south. With Tours being part of Austrasia, the kingdom of Reims/Metz, Gregory's superior was the king of Reims/Metz, Sigibert I. But, as a metropolitan bishop, which Gregory was as the clerical head of the city of Tours, he was the superior of several other bishops who, due to their geographic location, were subject not to Sigibert but to Chilperic, the king of Soissons.⁴⁷

During Gregory's twenty years as bishop of Tours, the territorial bickering over Tours was constant. The kings among whom the

44 See Helmut Reimitz, „Social networks and identities in Frankish historiography. New aspects of the textual history of Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*“ in: *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages – Texts, Resources and Artifacts*, eds. Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Boston 2002): 229-268., p.246.

45 Reimitz, „Networks and Identities“, p.246.

46 See Ian N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751*. Longman: London, New York, 1994, pp.55-58.

47 See Wood, „Kingdoms“, p.12.

Merovingian kingdom had been divided were Chilperic, Sigibert, Guntram and Charibert, the sons of Chlothar I. Charibert died six years after the kingdom had been divided, leaving a territory that was up for redistribution between his remaining three brothers. As if this new situation wasn't enough to create tension between the brothers, there was also the feud between Sigibert's wife Brunhild and Chilperic's wife Fredegund.⁴⁸

Thus, the battle for territory, including the city of Tours, would be mainly between these two brothers. Guntram, who of course could not escape the violent feuds between his brothers, was more inclined to keep his reign similar to the Christian-Roman tradition. This was not least due to the fact that his part of the Merovingian territory was more Roman than the two other parts. Thus, his kingdom was administered close to the Roman jurisdiction and he saw his duties as as those a Christian king was supposed to fulfill. As Guntram was depicted quite favorably by Gregory of Tours, it is to be assumed that Guntram was a very religious man. Even though, as Geary presents in a graphic anecdote⁴⁹, this didn't mean in the least that Guntram wasn't sometimes given to violence, he was prone to later on repent his wrongdoings.

With these three kings and their heirs trying to gain control over Tours, Gregory was forced to be not only a suitable bishop, but also a cunning diplomat.

48 The feud between the two queens was rooted in the murder of Brunhild's sister Galsvinth, who was then married to Chilperic. It can be assumed that Fredegund, then lower-ranking additional wife to Chilperic, had urged him to kill Galsvinth. For a more detailed account, see Patrick J. Geary, *Before France and Germany. The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*, Oxford University Press: New York. Oxford, 1988, pp.120-121.

49 Geary, "Transformation", p.126.

This problematic situation is aptly described by Alexander Murray:

Canon law provided for the participation of various sectors of the community in the selection of the bishop, but its norms, which had developed in political circumstances increasingly distant from those of Gallic communities and kingdoms, were imprecise or variously interpreted. Divergent and genuine interests intersected, not always harmoniously, when a new bishop needed to be appointed. Such circumstances, combined with many of the less wholesome characteristics of human society, made the process of episcopal appointment a disruptive feature of political life in the Gallic cities. Yet for all the discord, episcopal appointment in the sixth century was still a process marked with very distinct institutional continuities with the preceding century – and the impending seventh, just on the horizon at the time of Gregory's death.⁵⁰

This “disruptive feature” of political life would hold true for Gregory, especially after the death of his patron Sigibert. Sigibert was murdered in the year 575, two years after Gregory was consecrated as bishop of Tours.⁵¹

With the death of the king, his brother Chilperic, ignoring that Tours was bequeathed to Sigibert's underage son Childebert II., seized the city of Tours. Thus, a critical phase for Gregory began. First, one of Sigibert's generals, Guntram Boso, sought refuge in Tours. It was assumed then that Boso was responsible for the death of Chilperic's son Theudebert, so Chilperic sent Roccolen to retrieve Boso from Tours, but Roccolen failed. Another refugee in Tours was Chilperic's own son, Merovech, who, as will be shown in a later part of this paper, had stirred his father's anger by marrying Sigibert's widow Brunhild. Gregory did not refuse asylum for either of the men, thus angering Chilperic. The result was that an army was sent by Chilperic that ransacked the countryside around Tours, the Touraine. Merovech's unfortunate marriage to Brunhild entailed yet another rather delicate situation for Gregory. The priest who had married Merovech and Brunhild, Praetextatus, was to be tried for sanctioning a marriage that was not canonical. Gregory supported the cleric, despite threats by Chilperic

⁵⁰ Alexander C. Murray, “Gregory of Tours”, p.239.

⁵¹ See Goffart, “Narrators of Barbarian History”, p.112.

against him directly. Still, Praetextatus was found guilty by a ruse and was consequently sent into exile.⁵²

Even though Chilperic seems like Gregory's nemesis in these episodes, he was actually strangely supportive of him during the following years, partly in matters that could well have threatened Gregory's career and his life.⁵³

One of those events was brought about by Leudast, who proved to be a rather insidious enemy to Gregory. Leudast had been the *comes* of Tours under Charibert, and after the death of the king was keen to see Tours become part of Chilperic's kingdom. As already mentioned above, it went on to be controlled by Sigibert, with the result of Leudast losing his office. After Chilperic gained control of the city, Leudast was reinstated. Two Riculfs, friends of Leudast, then accused Gregory of slandering Chilperic's wife Fredegund. In the course of this affair, Gregory was tried at the palace in Berny-Rivière, but acquitted. Luckily, there seemed to be support for Gregory in the royal household and, which was even more important, the other bishops refused an accusation against one of their own. In the aftermath of the affair it came to light that, according to one of the accused Riculfs, the original intent behind the accusations was to get rid of Fredegund, in order to elevate her stepson Clovis to the throne.⁵⁴

There can be found a reason for Chilperic to give Gregory the abovementioned support: Childebert II., the son of Gregory's royal patron Sigibert, had turned from his uncle Guntram to his other uncle Chilperic. The man responsible for this change of tune was Egidius, who, as mentioned above, had been the one to consecrate Gregory. In the light of these new circumstances, Gregory was an important person for Chilperic. Endorsing the new alliance between Chilperic and Childebert meant to alienate Guntram. Fortunately for Gregory, Chilperic's murder

⁵² Wood, "Gregory of Tours", p.13.

⁵³ See Wood, "Gregory of Tours", pp.14-16 for accounts of one attempt, among others, to try Gregory for libel.

⁵⁴ Wood, "Kingdoms", p.86.

in 584 eased the tension. Still, Guntram, who until then had shown restraint when it had come to territorial ambitions, now claimed Tours to himself, even though it had once belonged to Childebert's father Sigibert. And Egidius, who as Guntram claimed had been the driving force behind a plot to dethrone him, was tried. Gregory, who had played a certain part in the alliance between Childebert and Chilperic, did not dare to speak out openly for his old colleague.⁵⁵

As for religious matters, there were still a few problems Gregory had to deal with. These included for example strained relations between himself and the convent of the Holy Cross, founded by Radegund.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Wood, "Gregory of Tours", pp.20-21.

⁵⁶ Wood, "Gregory of Tours", p.21.

2.3.4 Works

2.3.4.1 The Histories

The *Histories*, as they are commonly called, and which are indispensable as the most prominent source of 6th century Frankish history, were originally devised as chronicles of the world, titled the *Decem libri historiarum*. The first book opens with the creation of the earth and ends with the death of St. Martin of Tours. The following three books then concentrate on the history of Gaul and its dominating political powers, which then of course were the Merovingian Franks. Book IV ends with the death of King Sigibert in 575. Starting with Book V, Gregory changes the pace by giving year by year accounts of contemporary history, to which Gregory was enabled by having access to the higher echelons of the ruling class.⁵⁷ Thus, he was able to present events shortly after their occurrence, creating actual contemporary historical accounts. The end of Book X sees an overview of the history of the bishops of Tours, an autobiography and a calculation of the years spanning the origin of the world up to the year 593/594.⁵⁸

While Books V to X are written from the viewpoint of a contemporary observer, there remains the question which sources of information Gregory used to compile the first four Books. It is rather difficult to discern the *Histories'* various sources. In the beginning, he bases his writings on the Bible, Jerome, and for his treatment of the fourth century the works of Orosius⁵⁹ and Sulpicius Severus.⁶⁰ Then, starting with Book II, sources are not as transparent anymore. He mentions collections of letters by Sidonius Apollinaris⁶¹, Avitus of Vienne⁶², Remigius of Rheims⁶³ and others. Other historiographs he mentions as

⁵⁷ See Thorpe, p.24.

⁵⁸ See Goffart, "Narrators of Barbarian history", pp.124-125.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.14.

⁶⁰ See Thorpe, p.25.

⁶¹ See Goffart, "Narrators of Barbarian history", p.193ff.

⁶² See HF, 2.34.

⁶³ See HF, 2.31.

influential were Sulpicius Alexander⁶⁴ and Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus⁶⁵. In addition to these sources, Gregory used Frankish oral history in both the *Histories* and his hagiographies.⁶⁶

2.3.4.2 Other writings

Even though this thesis is concerned mainly with the depiction of women in Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, which might be his work of greatest historical merit, there are of course other works by the bishop of Tours worth mentioning.

Gregory didn't leave one compilation of what he had written, but two. Even so, there are still hints that there existed other writings which did not survive.⁶⁷

Theological writings comprise only a small part of Gregory's corpus, among which are compilations of psalms like *De cursu stellarum ratio* and *Passio septem dormientium*. Apart from the *Histories*, Gregory's other hagiographic writings are the most significant items of his works. They are named by Gregory himself, at the end of the *Histories*, as the *libri miraculorum*⁶⁸, which comprise the vitae and miracles of St. Julian and St. Martin, the *Liber in gloria confessorum* and the *Liber vitae patrum*, which are the vitae of several Gallic bishops since the 4th century, predominantly of Clermont and Tours.⁶⁹

Gregory's writings are heavily cross-referenced in all of his works, indicating that Gregory regarded his writings not as separate pieces, but as a whole. These references luckily enable historians to date Gregory's writings. Ian Wood has, based on these hints, compiled a chronological list of the writings, which starts off with the *Miracles of St. Martin* and ends with the Prologue to *Liber in gloria confessorum*.⁷⁰

64 HF, 2.9.

65 HF, 2.8.

66 See Ian N. Wood, "Gregory of Tours and Clovis" in: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63.2 (1985): 249-272, p.252.

67 Wood, "Kingdoms", p.1.

68 Goffart, "Narrators of Barbarian history", p.127.

69 See Thorpe, pp.22-23.

70 See Ian Wood, "Kingdoms", p.3.

As Wood states, this chronology cannot be taken at face value, since it is very likely that Gregory revised some of his writings at some later time. Therefore, cross-references to earlier works might have been inserted into older writings than the cited ones. Still, as Wood points out, there is enough evidence to suggest that certain events in Gregory's life might have been influencing factors in the creation of his writings.⁷¹

⁷¹ Wood, "Kingdoms", p.4.

2.3.5 Historiographic Significance

Whereas Gregory's hagiographic writings are an indispensable source for certain specific aspects of Gregory's time, it is still the *Histories* that have the power to actually convey much more: not only dates and names, but also the mindset of Gregory and the people around him.⁷²

However, there is, as is probably quite common in any scientific community, no wide-spread consensus as to the actual historiographic significance of Gregory's writings. Too numerous are the reasons why the writings of Gregory might not be considered a reliable source for his time, or at least not a reliable source for the general age he describes. As Ian Wood notes in his essay on the individuality of Gregory of Tours, the role that Gregory fulfilled in his part of the world was less that of an outside commentator, than that of a person fully immersed in the political situation of the time:

However much Gregory presents himself as a detached commentator, subjecting Francia to the scrutiny of a universal historian, it is not clear that this detachment was genuine. That is the bishop of Tours was *parti pris* on a host of political and religious issues. [...] Rather than looking consistently at the world of sixth-century Gaul through Gregory's eyes, it is worth occasionally trying to understand some of the moments when his detachment slips, in order to question his position as commentator, and, additionally, to consider the extent to which some of the places, or rather cult-sites, which he privileges may not be representative of the Merovingian kingdom.⁷³

This ambiguity in the reception of Gregory is also illustrated in an example from the *Histories* examined by Guy Halsall. In his paper on Gregory's depiction of King Chilperic's death, he outlines how Chilperic, originally presented as Gregory's arch-enemy, is in fact not the one king Gregory feared and loathed. It is rather Guntram, the favourably depicted king in Gregory's *Histories*. Obviously, his fear of Guntram might have caused Gregory to write favorably about him, while doing

⁷² See Goffart, "Narrators of Barbarian history", pp.114-116.

⁷³ See Ian N. Wood, "The individuality of Gregory of Tours" in: *The World of Gregory of Tours, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples*, eds. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Brill: Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002): 29-46, p.31.

the opposite about Chilperic. The passage in question is found in Book IV of the *Histories*, where Gregory names Chilperic, among other things, the "Nero and Herod of our times"⁷⁴, which phrase is also the namesake of said paper by Halsall.⁷⁵ The cited passage was written shortly after Chilperic's death, and maybe not entirely incidentally just when Guntram had taken possession of Tours. The reason for Gregory's diatribe against Chilperic was not least his late involvement with the alliance between Chilperic and Childebert II., the son of the late King Sigibert. Guntram, as Halsall notes, was an unforgiving king:

Guntram, for all his piety, was not an easy king to live with. He was dangerously, sometimes, murderously, paranoid, short-tempered, inconsistent and thus, above all, unpredictable. He was, moreover, implacable in his pursuit of those whom he felt had opposed him; one had to tread very carefully with the king of Burgundy. From now on Gregory really did have to watch what he wrote. This conclusion stands in direct opposition to usual interpretations of *Histories*.⁷⁶

This exemplifies the danger that lies in relying on a single source - like Gregory's *Histories*.

However, there can also be found some merit in the discovery that Gregory of Tours cannot be gullibly trusted as the historiographer of the Merovingian kingdom. As Peter Brown mentions, the fact that scholars have now found a new sort of self-esteem in regarding Gregory not as a steadfast source for his time, but rather the historiographer held by very real political and religious constraints, is resulting in different kinds of research in new fields:

Less cramped than previously by the need to find, in Gregory, a "representative" writer and a faithful "mirror" of his age, we have learned to be less intolerant of his stony silence on so many issues which concern us.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ HF, 6.46.

⁷⁵ See Guy Halsall, "Nero and Herod? The death of Chilperic and Gregory's writing of history" in: *The World of Gregory of Tours, Cultures, Beliefs and Traditions. Medieval and Early Modern Peoples*, eds. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Brill: Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002): 29-46, p.337-50.

⁷⁶ Ibid., "Nero and Herod", p.347.

⁷⁷ See Brown, p.5.

The “stony silence” Brown notes can be seen as fruitful regarding the things that are neither implied nor said. Knowing the circumstances of Gregory's position, or any other historiographer for that matter, allows us to find clues in places the author may have had no desire to put them.

However numerous the qualms about Gregory's faultiness as a proper historiographer might be, there is no doubt about his importance as a written source for the scarce information on social, political and religious history of the sixth century. That, for various scholars, he was also a propagandist, a key witness to the cult of the saints, a poet, an expert religious commentator and a theologian, is, considering the corpus of writings, not surprising.⁷⁸ This holds true not only for the *Histories*, but for his religious writings as well. Were it not for Gregory's hagiographic writings, there would be much less understanding of the religious development of the post-Roman period⁷⁹. Historians have only recently found merit in the study of such sources.⁸⁰

78 See Wood, “Gregory of Tours”, iii.

79 For a discussion of these merits, see for example Goffart, “Narrators of Barbarian History”, pp. 136-146.

80 See Wood, “Gregory of Tours”, ii.

3 A Woman's Life in Gregory of Tours' *Histories*

3.1 *Good vs. Evil*

As the most prominent narrative source for the Merovingians, Gregory's position is both that of a historiographer, but also that of a high cleric whose writing sheds light on the predominant position of the church in all matters. As is the case with any historiographer, his writings are not free of bias. Considering the role of Gregory as one of the most powerful bishops of his time, it becomes clear that such a position would only come about by adhering to certain principles and standards of this social position and what was to be made public about it. This of course leads to situations where the absolutely accurate depiction of past events is more or less impossible if one is not to become subject to the ire of one or another ruling monarch.

Hence, some of Gregory's depictions contain negative information about persons so egregiously biased that it becomes apparent that then currently ruling powers must have loomed large on his mind. To put it bluntly, even for a man in a position as high as Gregory's, there was always someone watching his very step.

With the following chapter I have two things in mind: I will take two examples of prominent figures in Gregory's *Histories* who were portrayed in a rather harsh light and juxtapose them with two persons Gregory depicted very favourably, respectively two men and two women.. The first sub-chapter will deal with Fredegund as the exponent of the "evil" faction and Brunhild as that of the favoured one. The second sub-chapter will exemplify episodes about the adversely perceived king, Chilperic, and depict examples of those about the "good" king, Guntram. My focus will be on the wording of Gregory's writings, but also on the actions he decided to feature in his text.

In the case of Fredegund and Brunhild I will also add a short sub-chapter pertaining to a different viewpoint on both queens from the source of the Fredegar chronicle.

I will finally conclude this chapter by comparing how the description of the male and the female protagonists differ to examine whether one can speak of conclusive evidence of bias toward one gender.

3.1.1 Fredegund as seen by Gregory

In Gregory's account of the power-struggles within the Merovingian kingdom, one woman is repeatedly depicted as the wretched embodiment of evil: Fredegund. Of unfree origins, Fredegund was Chilperic's mistress, for whom Chilperic left his then wife Audovera. When Chilperic married Galsvinth, the sister of his brother's wife Brunichild, Fredegund wanted the woman removed and, according to Gregory, convinced Chilperic to have her killed. This was one of the reasons for the bitter enmity between Chilperic and his brother Sigibert.⁸¹

Gregory's recounts of Fredegund's cruelty, deceits or general evilness are abundant. His first mention of Fredegund is as the wife of Chilperic when he has Galsvinth killed⁸², when we next read of her, it is near the end of Book IV, when King Sigibert is murdered at the behest of Fredegund⁸³.

In this chapter, I will be looking at the characteristics of Gregory's depictions of Fredegund and her alleged aberrations, including the language employed in his description and the recurring motifs of her actions.

⁸¹ See Geary, "Transformation", pp.120-121.

⁸² HF 4.28.

⁸³ HF 4.51.

3.1.1.1 The rise of Fredegund

3.1.1.1.1 Getting rid of competition

When King Chilperic decided he needed to be married to a Visigothic princess, just like his hated brother Sigibert was, he was still married to another woman, Audovera. Breaking up this marriage did not pose a problem for Chilperic and so he was free to marry Galsvinth, the sister of his brother's wife Brunichild. But as was the case during Chilperic's and Audovera's marriage, there was still another woman close to Chilperic's heart. That woman was of course Fredegund. Born of low descent, she originally served at court but soon became Chilperic's mistress.

In various works describing Fredegund and her role in the death of Galsvinth, it has been suggested that the Visigothic princess was killed at the behest of Fredegund. While this may easily have been the case, there is only one source that actually references Fredegund as having had a part in the murder of Galsvinth. Only in Regino of Prüm's chronicles, the murder of Galsvinth is credited in part as Fredegund's work:

Hilpericus Geilsuindam sororem Brunichildis in coniugium accepit, quam paucis interiecto tempore suggerente Fredegunde in lecto strangulavit. Deinde Audoveram reginam a se repulit, eo quod adhortante Fredegunde filiam propriam a sacro fonte suscepisset, et eandem Fredegundem sibi in matrimonium iungit.⁸⁴

Gregory of Tours described the circumstances of Galsvinth's death in a much less sombre way, but it has to be noted that Regino of Prüm's text was written around 900, roughly 300 years after Gregory wrote his. Gregory states no direct intervention by Fredegund and in contrast to what can be read in Regino's text, Gregory depicts Chilperic as

⁸⁴ Regino von Prüm, 498, taken from Kurze Friedrich, ed. *Reginonis Abbatis Prumiensis Chronicon*. MGH: SRG. Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani: Hannover, 1890. (digital).

delegating the deed instead of committing it himself. Of course, it can easily be inferred that Fredegund wanted Chilperic to get rid of Galsvinth, considering that the Visigothic princess was allegedly not at all happy about the fact that Chilperic obviously was not willing to remove Fredegund from either court or his bed-chamber. As Gregory writes:

Sed per amorem Fredegundis, quam prius habuerat, ortum est inter eos grande scandalum. Iam enim in lege catholica conversa fuerat et chrismata. Cumque se regi quaereretur assiduae iniurias, perferre diceretque, nullam se dignitatem cum eodem habere, petiit, ut, relictis thesauris quos secum detulerat, libera redire permetteretur ad patriam. Quod ille per ingenia dissimulans, verbis eam lenibus demulsit. Ad extremum enim suggillari iussit a puero, mortuamque repperit in strato.⁸⁵

Here it is the love Chilperic feels for Fredegund that bothers Galsvinth. In Gregory's account, Galsvinth is the one that can't live with the fact that she may be married to the king but can't enjoy the status of first wife. Being a recent convert to the Catholic faith, she believed in monogamy as the basis of marriage, a notion Chilperic had only half-heartedly respected by separating from his earlier wife Audovera in order to be able to marry Galsvinth.

One can understand how commentators expected to see more of Fredegund's pushing for Galsvinth's death when looking at what happened after the death of the Visigothic princess. As Gregory writes:

Rex autem cum eam mortuam deflessit, post paucos dies Fredegundem recepit in matrimonio. Post quod factum reputantes ei fratres, quod sua emissionem antedicta regina fuerit interfecta, eum a regno deieciunt.⁸⁶

85 See HF 4.28. "But because of his love for Fredegund, whom he had before, a disgraceful conflict arose to divide them. Galsvinth had already been converted to the Catholic creed and received the chrism. She complained to the king of the wrongs she constantly had to endure and told him that he had no respect for her. Finally she asked him to give her freedom to return to her native land, of she left the treasures that she had brought with her. But he made up various excuses and mollified her with sweet words. In the end, he had her strangled by a slave, and he himself found the corpse on the bed." translation from Saint Gregory (Bishop of Tours). *The Merovingians*. Ed. Alexander C. Murray. Broadview Press: Peterboro, Ontario. 2006, pp.59-61.

86 HF 4.28. "The king wept over the body and then, after a few days, took Fredegund back again as his wife. When he did this, his brothers attributed Galswinth's killing to his orders and toppled him from power." Murry, p.61.

Chilperic apparently didn't waste too much time grieving after his murdered wife and took, as Gregory states, Fredegund back as his wife. It is interesting to see, that Chilperic not only took Fredegund as his wife, but did so again. Considering that Chilperic never officially married Fredegund before the episode with unlucky Galsvinth, Gregory's wording seems slightly odd and leaves on to wonder how it came about.

3.1.1.1.2 Getting rid of opposition

The next mention of Fredegund is found in Book IV of the *Histories*. Here, Gregory openly calls Fredegund the instigator of King Sigibert's murder:

Tunc duo pueri cum cultris validis, quos vulgo scramasaxos vocant, infectis vinino, malificati a Fredegundae regina, cum aliam causam suggerire simularent, utraque ei latera feriunt. At ille vociferans atque congruens, non post multo spatio emisit spiritum.⁸⁷

This second mention of Fredegund can be regarded as the start of Gregory's thorough condemnation of the queen. While the first mention is still somewhat tame, only insinuating the role Fredegund might have played in the murder of her adversary Galsvinth, the above passage is a clear display of Gregory's opinion of Fredegund.

Notable also is the fact that the two men not only killed Sigibert by stabbing him, but also by previously dipping their swords in poison, the latter a form of murder usually mostly attributed to women. Considering

⁸⁷ HF 4.51 What strikes me as odd is how the translators shied away from the word "malificati". In Lewis Thorpe's translation, the passage reads like this: "Two young men who had been suborned by Queen Fredegund then came up to Sigibert, carrying the strong knives which are commonly called scramasaxes, and which they had smeared with poison. They pretended that they had something to discuss with him, but they struck him on both sides. He gave a loud cry and fell to the ground. He died soon afterwards." Thorpe, p. 248.

Alexander C. Murray in his work on Gregory of Tours' *Histories* translates quite differently: "At this time two slaves bewitched by Queen Fredegund, carrying sturdy knives, commonly called scramasaxes, smeared with poison, pretended to bring forward a request and stabbed him from both sides. He shouted out and collapsed. He gave up his spirit not long afterwards." Murray, p.70.

It is only owed to Murray's very literal translation, that this display of Fredegund's bloodlust is not only very obvious in the action described, but also in the wording Gregory gave his account.

that Fredegund was the one who “bewitched” the two men, it may well be that Gregory decided to emphasize Fredegund's role by changing the killing setup from a “male” to a “female” one by adding poison as part of the actual cause of death.

In Book V, chapter 18, Merovech, son of Chilperic, finds his death. While it is described as suicide by the hands of his servant Gailen after having fallen into a trap by the townspeople of Théroutanne, Gregory hints at murder. He employs a stylistic device that at the same time is supposed to make him seem like an objective chronicler of events and give him the opportunity to blame Fredegund as the instigator of a murder. After the description of Gailen stabbing Merovech at his behest, Gregory notes:

Extetirunt tunc qui adsererent, verba Merovechi, quae superius diximus, a regina fuisse conficta, Merovechum vero eius fuisse iussu clam interemptum.⁸⁸

While it is feasible that there were indeed some people at the time who thought that it was the queen who had secretly plotted and funded the death of Merovech, son of Chilperic and his first wife Audovera, it is quite possible that the one person who definitely thought so was Gregory. Gregory's assuming goes on. After detailing how the men who had been entrapped with Merovech were cruelly tortured and killed, Gregory adds that some people back then suspected Guntram Boso and Bishop Egidius had been the ones designing and executing the whole massacre. According to Gregory, Boso had been in a good position with Fredegund for killing Theudebert, while Egidius had been her friend all along. The reasons for Gregory's reservation in that regard might have been – as was the case so often for those depending on the goodwill of royalty – the unstable situation when it came to the question of royal dominance over Tours.

⁸⁸ HF 5.18 With the referenced “regina” being of course Fredegund, the translation reads as follows: “There were some at the time who claimed that Merovech's words, which we have just given, were an invention of the queen, and that Merovech had been secretly killed on her orders.” Murray, p.95.

Even though Gregory does not distinctly say so, the above described actions by Fredegund must of course be seen in regard to her position of power. Every murderous plan she hatched can be seen as a reaction to forces from the out- or inside, threatening her position as a powerful queen. Another one of these episodes in which Fredegund strives to strengthen her position can be found in Book V.⁸⁹ There, Clovis, one of her husband Chilperic's sons, is boasting about his status as the sole heir of Gaul, and - according to Gregory - thereby uttering some slander about his step-mother Fredegund. Fredegund is terrified for her future once her husband would have ceased to be. Adding to her terror, an unnamed person visits her and warns her of the danger Clovis could pose. Considering that a short time earlier Fredegund's children had died of disease, what this person had to say must have sounded very probable to the ears of disconcerted Fredegund. According to her visitor, Clovis had killed her sons, aided by one of her maids, with whose daughter he also entertained a relationship:

'Ut urbata de filiis sedeas, dolum id Chlodovechi est operatum. Nam ipsi concupiscens unius ancillarum tuarum filia, maleficiis tuos per matrem eius filios interficit, ideoque moneo, ne speres de te melius, cum tibi spes per quam regnare debueras sit ablata'⁹⁰

Fredegund's revenge is harsh and swift. She apprehends the girl, has her tortured, shaved and placed outside Clovis's abode. The mother she has also apprehended and subjected to the same torture and finally manages to get her to confess. These findings Fredegund then tells to the king, asking for retribution, namely Clovis's death. The fact that her husband allegedly tried to get rid of Clovis unsuccessfully by sending him to an area where he was prone to be infected with the same disease his step-brothers came down with may have also been due partly to Fredegund's rage against Clovis. Clovis finally dies in a

⁸⁹ See HF 5.39.

⁹⁰ "That you are sitting bereft of your children is the work of Clovis's treachery. He has a passion for the daughter of one of your female slaves and has killed your sons by the magic arts of the girl's mother. So I warn you, you can hope for no better yourself, now that the hope by which you would have ruled has been taken from you." Murray p.109.

dungeon, after which his mother is killed, his sister sent to a cloister and all his riches given to the queen. The woman who confessed to have helped Clovis kill his brothers is sentenced to be burned at the stake, on which she cries that everything to which she confessed was fabricated - of course to no avail.

Again Fredegund is depicted as a woman who in the face of adversity doesn't hesitate to rid herself of competition or menace.

Finally, Gregory shows lack of subtlety by naming chapter 15 in Book VII "De malitia Fredegunde".⁹¹ Fredegund, now widow of the murdered Chilperic, is still in the church in Paris, when she hears of how her daughter Rigunth was mistreated in the city of Toulouse. Not very surprisingly for Fredegund, she is enraged beyond control and strips naked the man unable to prevent it. She also apprehends others who had come back from the journey in which Rigunth was so maltreated and has them tortured and bound. Rather suddenly, Gregory also details how Fredegund starts to go after Nectarius, the brother of bishop Badegisil, whom she would like to see rotting in the dungeons. According to Gregory, she also did "many foolish things and showed no fear of God in whose church she was seeking help"⁹². The church was refuge for Fredegund after having been expelled from her own court as a consequence of her husband Chilperic's death.⁹³ The chapter closes with descriptions of a judge named Audo, who according to Gregory was one of Fredegund's most loyal henchmen and who, due to the death of his protector Chilperic, possessed now not much more than the clothes he was wearing and the loyalty to his Queen Fredegund.

While the title of the chapter may have sounded like Gregory was losing his composure, the actual content is rather tame, compared to what he had already had to say about the queen. It is only when Fredegund has been sent into a sort of exile to the territory of Rueil,

91 See HF 7.15

92 Murray, p.154.

93 See HF 7.4.

near Rouen,⁹⁴ that she again offers occasion for Gregory's appetite for depictions of the woman fearless of God. Angered by the fact that she had lost most of her power while at the same time her nemesis Brunhild gained a lot of it, she sends out a man to kill her. The man, a cleric, pretends to have escaped from the hands of Fredegund and manages to gain Brunhild's trust. But as seems to be the case with attempts to assassinate Brunhild, the plan goes awry. As Gregory writes:

Coepit se etiam omnibus reddere humilem, carum, oboedientem ac reginae privatum. Sed non longo tempore interposito, intellexerunt eum dolosae transmissum; vinctusque ac caesus, cum rem patifecisset occultam, redire permissus est ad patronam. Reseransque quae acta fuerant, effatus, quod iussa patrari non potuisset, manuum ac pedum abscisione multatur.⁹⁵

The man's ruse is found out sooner than later and after beating and binding the man, he confesses to the plan of assassinating Brunhild. He is let go to run back to Fredegund, where, of course, he is welcomed in the typical Fredegundian way. As punishment for his failing to execute Fredegund's plan, he is having his hands and feet cut off.

Fredegund seemingly does not tire of plans to assassinate her enemies. In Book VIII, chapter 29, she again sends out clerics who are supposed to kill Childebert II., the young boy who in the eyes of Fredegund is the only reason her nemesis Brunhild still holds power⁹⁶. But again, blades alone are not enough. In order to ensure that everything is executed according to her will, she also smears the blades with poison, so that "if a mortal stroke failed to strike vital organs, the effect of the poison could quickly bring on death."⁹⁷

94 See HF 7.19.

95 HF 7.20. "He tried to pretend to everyone that he was humble, valuable and obedient, and devoted to the queen. But it was not long before they realized that he had been sent under false pretenses. He was bound and beaten and, once he had confessed the secret mission, was permitted to return to his patroness. When he disclosed to her what had happened and told how he could not carry out her orders, he was punished by having his hands and feet cut off." Murray, p.157.

96 See Wood, "Merovingian Kingdoms", pp.97ff for a detailed description of how the death of Childebert would have meant a total loss of power for Brunhild as well.

97 Murray, p.186.

Fredegund gives exact instructions on how to carry out the deed:

'Accipite hos gladius et quantocius pergite ad Childeberthum regem, adsimilantes vos esse mendicos. Cumque pedibus eius fueritis strati, quasi stipem postulantes, latera eius utraque perfodite, ut tandem Brunichildis, quae ab illo adrogantiam sumit, eo cadente conruat mihi que subdatur. Quod si tanta est custodia circa puerum, ut accedere nequeatis, vel ipsam interemite inimicam. Mercis quoque operis vestri haec erit, ut, si mortui in hoc opere fueritis, parentibus vestris bona tribuam, ipsosque muneribus ditans primus in regnum meum constituam. Interim vos timorem omnem omittite, nec sit trepidatio mortis in pectore. Noveritis enim, quod cunctos homines haec causa continet.'⁹⁸

Pretending to be beggars, they were supposed to kneel by the feet of Childebert, who at the time was a mere fifteen years old, and then stab him from both sides. If that proved to be impossible for reasons of too many guards surrounding the young king, they should instead try to kill Brunhild herself. Considering that according to Gregory Fredegund was planning to have the king assassinated in order to rid Brunhild of the power she still yielded, it is odd that she didn't order the clerics to kill her in the first place. After these instructions, she gives a small speech to boost the morale. The men are told to consider that what they were about to do would be for the greater good, and in case of their death, their relations would be rewarded and looked after. She then goes on to say something which, in light of her position as a former queen, is interesting:

'Armata virilem animus et considerate saepius fortes viros in bello conruere, unde nunc parentes eorum nobilis effecti opibus inmensis cunctis supereminet cunctisque praecellunt'.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ HF 8.29. "Take these swords," she said, "and go as quickly as possible to King Childebert pretending you are beggars. Throw yourselves at his feet as if asking for alms and stab him on both sides, so that at last Brunhild, who gets her presumption from him, shall be brought down with his death and set beneath me. But if he is so well guarded by retainers that you cannot approach, then kill Brunhild, my enemy. This shall be the reward for your action: if you die in this enterprise, I shall confer on your relations benefits, and enriching them with gifts, make them pre-eminent in my kingdom. Meanwhile banish every fear and be not concerned about death. You know that this touches all people." Murray p.186.

⁹⁹ HF 8.29.

As Murray translates:

Strengthen your hearts like men and reflect that fighting men constantly fall in battle, and as a result their families, made noble and surpassing all with infinite riches, are superior to everyone.¹⁰⁰

Here is a woman telling two clerics how they should “strengthen their hearts like men” and lecturing them on the virtues and advantages for their relatives of dying in battle. By doing this, she elevates herself above these men when it comes to virility. Considering that Fredegund in the above episode already used a cleric as an assassin, it may well be that her choice for this sort of men was deliberate. Stripped of their function as members of society who could hold their own in armed battle, they proved to be of advantage and disadvantage at the same time. Provided they would be recognized as clerics, enemies would surely be less suspicious of foul play. But, and this is reflected in above cited examples, they also proved to be unsuccessful assassins.

In Gregory's depiction of events, Fredegund makes use of yet another weapon he happily attributes to her armory: witchcraft.

Cumque haec mulier loqueretur, clerici tremere coeperunt, difficile potantes, haec iussa posse complere. At illa dubius cernens, medicatus potione direxit, quo ire praecepit; statimque robor animorum adcrevit, promiseruntque se omnia quae praeceperat impleturus. Nihil minus vasculum ab haec potione repletum ipsos levare iubet, dicens: 'In die illa, cum haec quae praecipio facietis, mane, priusquam opus incipiat, hunc potum sumite. Erit vobis magna constantia ad haec peragenda'.¹⁰¹¹⁰²

Fredegund drugs the men with a potion, which seems to bestow courage upon them and they are ready to do the deed. But Fredegund wants to make sure her orders are carried out and hands them another potion which she instructs them to drink on the day of the deed, so

¹⁰⁰ Murray, p.186.

¹⁰¹ HF 8.29.

¹⁰² “When the woman had spoken, the clerics began to shake, thinking it a difficult matter to carry out this order. Seeing the waver, she drugged them with a potion and instructed them on their mission. Immediately their courage increased and they promised to fulfill all her commands. Nonetheless she ordered them to carry a small container filled with the drug.” Murray, p.186.

their courage would not leave them again, then sends them on their way.

Again there is the element of what one would describe as witchcraft nowadays, and what Gregory simply called heresy. The same way he described how King Sigibert's assassins were killed by men "bewitched" by Fredegund. In the eyes of a bishop, this must have been the ultimate sign of wickedness in a person.

In the end, Fredegund's potions don't work as intended, because by the time she sends the two men on their way, the plan has already been uncovered¹⁰³ and before reaching the king, the clerics are taken in by Lord Rauching. A couple of days later, Fredegund sends a man to investigate whether the plan had succeeded, who happens to be arrested upon arrival as well. After being sent to King Childebert, they all confess to the plan and are subsequently tortured, maimed and killed.¹⁰⁴

103 Murray, p.186.

104 HF 8.29.

3.1.2 Brunhild or Beauty lies in the Eyes of the Beholder

In contrast it is interesting to look at Gregory's depictions of Brunhild, the wife of Chilperic's brother Sigibert. Even though her main political motivation during her early years as queen may have been revenge for the death of her sister Galsvinth¹⁰⁵, Gregory seems not to hold this against her.

The first mention of Brunhild is found in Book V, chapter 27, where Gregory details Sigibert's courtship for Brunhild. In his description of this Visigothic princess, Gregory is not shy to use ample words of praise for her: *Erat enim puella elegans opere, venusta aspectu, honesta moribus atque decora, prudens consilio et blanda colloquio.*¹⁰⁶

Sigibert of course manages to convince her father, the Visigothic King Athanagild, to give him his daughter as his wife, who is then sent to Sigibert, laden with treasure. Gregory also notes – satisfied quite probably – that Brunhild converted from Arianism to Catholicism. For a bishop, this might also have laid the foundation for his favourable reviews of her deeds.

In Book VI, chapter 4, Brunhild, then already widow after the murder of Sigibert, manages to rescue Lupus, duke of Champagne, by rushing in between the two armies of Lupus and his adversaries:

¹⁰⁵ See MacNamara, "Chastity, pp.202-204.

¹⁰⁶ HF 4.28, Murray's translation, in its nonchalance, frees Gregory's description of most of its praise: "She was a well-mannered, good-looking girl, decent and well behaved, with good judgement and a persuasive manner." p.58.

Quod cernens Brunichildis regina, condolens fidelis sui insecutiones iniustas, praecingens se viriliter, inrupit medios hostium cuneos, dicens: 'Nolite, o viri, nolite malum hoc facere, nolite perseguere innocentem; nolite pro uno hominem committere proelium, quo solatium regionis intereat'. Haec illa loquente, respondit Ursio: 'Recede a nobis, o mulier. Sufficiat tibi sub viro tenuisse regnum; nunc autem filius tuus regnat, regnumque eius non tua, sed nostra tuitione salvatur. Tu vero recede a nobis, ne te ungulae equorum nostrorum cum terra confodiant'. Haec et alia cum diutissime inter se protulissent, obtenuit reginae industria, ne pugnarent.¹⁰⁷

That Brunhild “girds herself like a man” does not seem to bother Gregory. On the contrary, the heroic act of saving this one man's life is much more important to Gregory than the idea that a woman is taking a man's place in an armed conflict. In the end Brunhild does not manage to keep the men from plundering Lupus' house, but at least Lupus manages to escape to King Guntram, where he would be “waiting for Childebert to come of age”¹⁰⁸.

While Gregory is fervent in detailing how Fredegund kills off friend and foe, his silence in regard to Brunhild's reactions is telling. In above described attempt to kill Brunhild, Fredegund's reaction to the failed plot is to maim the man who was unable to execute the plan. Brunhild on the other hand simply beats him to coax a confession out of him but then lets him return to Fredegund.¹⁰⁹ It may of course be speculated that Brunhild was well aware of the way Fredegund was going to react

107 HF 6.4. “Queen Brunhild found out about it, and distressed at the unjust attacks on her loyal supporter, girded herself like a man and rushed in between the opposing battle lines. ‘Men, don't do this evil,’ she cried. ‘Don't persecute the innocent; for the sake of one man, don't engage in a battle that will destroy the forces of the region.’ This brought a response from Ursio. ‘Get back, woman,’ said he. ‘It's enough for you to have held power under your husband. Now your son rules. We preserve his kingdom as its guardians, not you. Get back, or our horses' hooves will trample you into the ground.’ After many more exchanges of this kind, the queen's determination that they should not fight prevailed.” Murray, p.122-123.

108 Murray, p.123.

109 Compare Fouracre, Paul. “The nature of Frankish political institutions in the seventh century.” in: *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period. An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Ian N. Wood (Boydell Press: Woodbridge 1998): 285-301, p.295 and Fouracre, Paul. “Attitudes towards violence in seventh- and eighth-century Francia” in: *Violence and society in the early medieval west*. Ed. by Guy Halsall, (Boydell Press: Woodbridge 1998): 60-75, pp.60-71, where Fouracre expounds the role of violence, not only in political maneuverings, but also low-level punishment for criminals. Generally, the notion of violence and torture in Merovingian society was accepted. The rather impassive way of Gregory describing these acts of torture is an indicator for that acceptance.

to the foiled plan, thus knowing that the man would not have too much time left to enjoy the freedom she had given him. Whatever her motivations were, the results of her actions are well reflected in Gregory's reception of them.

Compared to the powers Fredegund yields, namely something resembling dark magic that enables her to bewitch men so as to assassinate their enemies, Brunhild seems to possess the powers of gratitude and friendliness. At the end of Book VII, Gregory mentions how one Waddo, the former mayor of the palace to Rigunth, went to Queen Brunhild to be welcomed in a very friendly manner:

Waddo maior domus Rigundis ad Brunichildem reginam transiit,
et ab ea susceptus, cum muneribus et gratia est demissus.¹¹⁰

As to the question of what were the reasons for that amicability and why it was not questioned by Gregory, considering that Rigunth was the daughter of Brunhild's nemesis Fredegund, it should be noted that it was probably not the worst of ideas for a queen to become friendly with former allies of their enemies.

Another instance of Brunhild's generosity is described in Book IX, where she gives Bertefred, a man for whose daughter she was a godmother but who was now part of a pact which aimed to kill both Brunhild and her son Childebert¹¹¹, the option of defecting, granting him his life:

Sed Brunichildis regina mandatum misit Berthefredo, dicens:
'Disiungere ab homine inimico, et habebis vitam. Alioquin cum
eodem interibis'. Filia enim eius ex lavacro regina susceperat et
ob hoc misericordiam de eo habere voluit. Qui ait: 'Nisi morte
decellar ab eo, numquam a me relinquitur'.¹¹²

Bertefred does not take her up on the offer, and Gregory is once more emphasizing the difference of character between Brunhild and

¹¹⁰ HF 7.43, "Waddo, former mayor of the palace to Rigunth, went over to Queen Brunhild; she welcomed him, gave him gifts, and sent him away with her favor." Murray, p.173.

¹¹¹ HF 9.08-11.

¹¹² HF 9.09.

Fredegund. Where Fredegund is ruthless even when it comes to her own subordinates, Brunhild extends her hand to enemies on the basis of past connections.

3.1.3 The Beauty versus the Beast

As I have established in above examples of Fredegund's and Brunhild's deeds, Gregory's opinions about both Fredegund and Brunhild were quite distinct. Apart from the actual contents of the narratives he crafted about the women – not considering whether they actually happened in all the details he chose to embellish them with – Gregory also had his own vocabulary for each of the two women.

Introducing Brunhild, she is described as beautiful, intelligent and eloquent, whereas Fredegund's first appearance is marked by her alleged part in the murder of her rival Galsvinth. In the course of Gregory's narrative, Fredegund's and Brunhild's deeds speak for themselves, but are additionally adorned with Gregory's remarks. As an example, his wrath descends on Fredegund after she has sought refuge in church but doesn't, in his view, behave accordingly. Or Brunhild, who happens to not only show loyalty for long-past favours or connections but even forgives enemies at times. Especially in the case of Fredegund, apart from the fact that there was an animosity brought about by loyalty to another faction, Gregory does what Walter Pohl describes thus:

Often, women were the objects of textual strategies directed against the blurring of gender roles. In the case of the Amazons, defining fighting women as belonging to a distinct ethnic group was also a way of containing them, confining them to a country distant in space and time. Similarly, many powerful queens were depicted as Jezebels.¹¹³

113 Pohl, "Gender and ethnicity", p.181.

3.1.4 Contrast: Fredegar

Considering how Gregory of Tours was quite possibly biased when it came to the reception of Fredegund's deeds, it is interesting to take a close look at how the chronicle of Fredegar fares in that regard. Fredegar's chronicle, in contrast to Gregory's, only starts his original content, the fourth book, with the detailing of the year 583 AD, whereas Gregory's *Decem Libri* end with the year 591.¹¹⁴ Still, there are quite a few references to both Brunhild and Fredegund in Fredegar's chronicle to warrant a comparison to Gregory's text. One aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that Fredegund died quite some years before Brunhild, which of course leaves more room for mentions of Brunhild in the chronicle of Fredegar. Nevertheless, especially in light of Gregory's favourable view of Brunhild, it is interesting to see whether Brunhild fares similarly well in Fredegar's accounts. The first mention of Brunhild by Fredegar is in his account of the year 598: "Anno tercio regni Teudeberti Wintrio dux, instigante Brunechilde, interficetur."¹¹⁵

Incidentally, the accusation of Brunhild as the instigator of a murder is the first we see of her in Fredegar's chronicle. And in chapter 19, the murderous queen is, one might say in a logical turn of events, expelled from Austrasia:

114 Even though Fredegar's Chronicle does of course cover the time before the year 853, considering it was constructed as a world chronicle, the content was lifted from earlier sources, not least Gregory's own *Decem Libri*. For reference see Ian N. Wood, "Fredegar's Fables" in: *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (Oldenbourg: Köln 1994): 359 – 366, pp.359-361.

115 "In the third year, count Quintrio was murdered at the behest of Brunhild". Chronicle of Fredegar, chapter 18. Latin text from Krusch, Bruno, ed. *Fredegarii et aliorum Chronica: Vitae sanctorum*. In MGH: SRM 2. Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani: Hannover, 1888. (digital). English translations mine, from the German translation taken from *Die Chronik Fredegars und der Frankenkönige, die Lebensbeschreibungen des Abts Columban, der Bischöfe Arnulf und Leodegar, der Königin Balthilde*. Otto Abel, Trans. In *Geschichtschreiber der deutschen Vorzeit*. VII. Jahrhundert. Vol 2. Dyksche Buchhandlung: Leipzig, 1888. (digital)

Eo anno Brunechildis ab Austrasies eiecta est et in Arciacinsem campaniam a quidam homini paupero singula reperitur. Secundum eius petitionem ipsam ad Teuderico perduxit. Teudericus aviam suam Brunechildem libenter recipiens, gloriose honorat. Huius vicissitudine meretum episcopatum Audicioderinsem, faciente Brunechilde, adsumpsit. Anno 5. regni Teuderici iterum signa, que anno superiore visa fuerant, globae igneae per caelum currentes et ad instar multitudinem astarum igneum, ad occidentem apparuerunt.¹¹⁶

Apparently, Brunhild's actions have made her rather unpopular with the populace of Austrasia, but her grandson Theuderic is still happy to give her shelter. And as Fredegar goes on to write, probably through powers bestowed upon her by Theuderic, then King of Burgundy and merely twelve years old, Brunhild simply gives a diocese to the man who obviously rescued her and brought her to Theuderic. Then, in chapter 21, Brunhild is again mentioned as the one responsible for the murder of a nobleman:

Anno 7. regni Theuderici de concubina filius nascitur nomen Sigybertus, et Aegyla patricius, nullis culpis extantibus, instigante Brunechilde, legatus interficetur, nisi tantum cupiditatis instincto, ut facultatem eius fiscus adsumerit.¹¹⁷

So apparently Brunhild, in Fredegar's eyes, is just as murderous as Fredegund in Gregory's. In chapter 25, in addition to actions that again are supposed to facilitate the death of a man she wants to get rid of, she is also described as committing fornication:

Cum iam Protadius genere Romanus vehementer in palacium ab omnibus veneraretur, et Brunechildis stubre gratiam eum vellit honoribus exaltare, defuncto Wandalmaro duci, in pago Ultraiorano et Scotingorum Protadius patricius ordenatur instigatione Brunechilde. Ut Bertoaldus pocius interiret, eum ripa Segona usque Ocianum mare per pagus et civitates fiscum inquerendum dirigunt.¹¹⁸

116 "In the very same year Brunhild was expelled by the Austrasians and found by a poor man near Arcis in Campagna, who at her behest brought her to Theuderic. Theuderic was happy to take up his grandmother and held her in high regards. The man who found Brunhild was rewarded by her with the diocese of Autisiodorum." See CF, ch.19.

117 "In the 7th year, Sigibert was born to Theuderic and his wife, and Aegyla Patricius, was bound and killed at the behest of Brunhild, for no other reason than her greed invoked by his wealth." See CF, ch. 21.

118 "Protadius, who was of a Roman family and who was in regard with everyone in the palace and who was supposed to be lifted to honourable positions by Brunhild, who was also living in fornication with him, was, after the death of count Waldemar, made Patricius of the district

Here, the chronicle adds impudent behavior to the accusations of instigated murder. This, considering the power the church held over the view on morals and people's lives and the rate at which people were killed for political and financial gain, might have been the more shocking revelation to readers of that passage. The fact that Protadius, the man Brunhild is supposedly living in fornication with, is in chapter 27 killed by the army he keeps egging on to attack Theuderic's brother's army, might then be seen as some sort of poetic justice to the author of the chronicle and its readers.¹¹⁹

While these images portrayed of Brunhild aren't the most favourable ones, the author of Fredegar's chronicle does not show much sympathy for Fredegund either. In a chapter entitled "About Fredegund", the following is noted:

Eo anno Fredegundis cum filio Clothario regi Parisius vel reliquas civitates rito barbaro occupavit et contra filius Childeberti regis Teudeberto et Teudericum movit exercitum loco nominante Latofao. Castra uterque ex adverso ponentes, Chlotharius cum suis super Theudebertum et Teudericum inruens, eorumque exercito graviter trucidavit. Anno secundo regni Teuderici Fredegundis moritur.¹²⁰

Apparently, in the eyes of the chronicle's author, Fredegund was also doing things the way it was custom for the Merovingian Franks, namely to occupy cities violently. Unfortunately for this thesis and of course owing to the above mentioned circumstance that Fredegund died shortly after Fredegar's chronicle was penned, there are not many more mentions of Fredegund in the chronicle. Therefore, the conclusion that can be drawn from what we have seen in Fredegar's depiction of the two women, is that Brunhild was not necessarily this near-saintly figure

of the Scotingsians near Jura. But Bertoald, in order to bring about his death, was sent along the Sigona down to the sea in order to investigate fiscal claims." CF, ch.24.

119 See CF, ch.27.

120 CF, ch.17: "In the same year, Fredegund, together with her son, king Chlothar, violently took possession of Paris and other cities, and moved with her army toward both sons of king Childebert up to Latofaum, where Theuderic and Theudebert were defeated and suffered great losses. In the second year of Theuderic's reign Fredegund died."

Gregory made her out to be. It gives no answers as to whether Fredegund was the evil, treacherous woman Gregory depicted her as, but it also cannot be corroborated.

3.1.5 Chilperic and Guntram as seen by Gregory

In the last chapter, it was examined how Gregory depicted Fredegund and her antagonist Brunhild. It was shown how Gregory used certain vocabulary to describe both women and how the difference in perception was reflected not only in the actions described, but also in the words employed to narrate these very actions. At this point the question arises, whether this disparity in vocabulary used can also be found in the depiction of their male counterparts, so to speak.

Choosing these male counterparts is fairly easy, considering for example what I wrote in the chapter on Gregory's life. Chilperic, husband of Fredegund, is regarded by Gregory as a destructive, malevolent king, whereas Guntram, the oldest of the four brothers, is held in high esteem by Gregory, not only, but also because of the alleged role he plays as mediator between his remaining two brothers. That Gregory was very likely biased towards Guntram due to his position in the power-system of the Merovingian kingdoms, is an aspect that needs to be stressed again and should not be forgotten when discussing the roles of these kings in Gregory's text.

In this chapter, I will be detailing how Gregory uses his power shaping a narrative of a supposedly good and a supposedly bad king. According to the overall theme of my paper, namely how Gregory dealt with the portrayal of women in his text, these findings will be contrasted with the findings of the last chapter.

While I won't claim that this is a definite way of finding out bias toward one gender or another, I do suppose that it is a way of showing whether the alleged evilness of a character in Gregory's text is enhanced or diminished by their gender.

3.1.6 Chilperic

The first time Chilperic is mentioned as an active participant of the fates of the Merovingian kingdoms, is in book IV of Gregory's *Histories*¹²¹, where Gregory details Chilperic's attempts at strengthening his position after the death of his father King Chlothar I., who had at the end of his reign consolidated the Merovingian kingdoms into one.¹²²

Chilpericus vero post patris funera thesaurus, qui in villa Brannacum erant congregati, accepit et ad Francos utiliores petiit ipsusque muneribus mollitus sibi subdidit. Et mox Parisius ingreditur sedemque Childeberthi regis occupat; sed non diu ei hoc licuit possidere; nam coniuncti fratres eius eum exinde repulerunt, et sic inter se hii quattuor, id est Chariberthus, Gunthramnus, Chilpericus atque Sigiberthus, divisionem legitimam faciunt.¹²³

In this short paragraph, Gregory manages to include several offences Chilperic allegedly committed. The first and most grave is the quest to seize as much power and territory as possible, so shortly after his father's death¹²⁴. The second offence, albeit not worded in the original as strongly as in some translations¹²⁵, is the „softening up“ of high-ranking Franks to assure himself of their solidarity in an apparently anticipated struggle for territory and power. The final offence is Chilperic's subsequent sacking of Paris, which Gregory words rather laconically as an occupation.

121 HF 4.22.

122 See Geary, "Transformation", p.119.

123 „After the funeral of his father, Chilperic took possession of the treasures that were stored in the royal villa of Berny. He then looked around for the most powerful Franks, softened them up with gifts, and brought them under his authority. He soon entered Paris and took over the residence of King Childebert, but he was not allowed to hold it for long. His brothers joined forces and drove him from there. This is how the four kings, that is, Charibert, Guntram, Chilperic, and Sigibert, came to make a lawful division among themselves.“ Murray, pp.55-56.

124 An offence which in reality was part of what was expected of Chilperic as a king: to add more territory to his kingdom.

125 For example in Lewis Thorpe's translation, which is not as literal as Murray's, where Murray translates the action of giving money to high-ranking Franks as „softening them up“, very close to the original text, Thorpe interprets it very directly as „bribes“. See Thorpe, p.217.

Even though Gregory's wording in this passage is not harsh, the various offences details already give us an idea on which side Gregory's loyalty lies.

It doesn't take long to find mention of Chilperic where Gregory is not as subtle as before. In the next chapter already, namely chapter 23 in Book IV, Chilperic's alleged tendency to abuse weaknesses of others is pointed out by Gregory:

Nam post mortem Chlothari regis Chuni Gallias appetunt, contra quos Sigyberthus exercitum dirigit, et gestum contra eos bellum, vicit atque fugavit. Sed postea rex eorum amicitias cum eodem per legatus meruit. Dum autem cum eis esset turbatus Sigyberthus, Chilpericus, frater eius, Remus pervadit et alias civitates, quae ad eum pertenebant, abstulit. Ex hoc enim inter eos, quod peius est, bellum civile surrexit. Rediens autem Sigyberthus victur a Chunis, Sessionas civitatem occupat, ibique inventum Theodoberthum, Chilperici regis filium, adpraehendit et in exilio transmittit. Accedens autem contra Chilpericum, bellum commovit; quo victo atque fugato, civitatis suas in sua dominatione restituit. Theodoberthum vero, filium eius, apud Ponticonem villam custodire iussit per annum integrum; quem postea, ut erat clemens, muneribus ditatum patri reddidit sanum, data tamen sibi sacramenta, ne umquam contra eum agere deberet. Quod postea, peccatis facientibus, est inruptum.¹²⁶

Chilperic, using his brother Sigibert's occupation with what Gregory calls the Huns¹²⁷, again takes over part of his brother's territory.

Gregory doesn't hesitate to call Chilperic the instigator of a civil war, thereby putting all blame on him for the events that are about to unfold.

126 „After the death of King Chlothar, the Huns attacked Gaul. Sigibert led his forces against them, and in the campaign, defeated them and put them to flight. Afterwards, their king sent envoys and gained friendly relations with Sigibert. But while he was having troubles with the Huns, his brother Chilperic overran Rheims and took away other cities that belonged to him. What is worse, civil war broke out between them for this reason. Returning as victor over the Huns, Sigibert took Soissons, where he discovered Theudebert, King Chilperic's son. He took him into custody and sent him into exile. He brought his forces against Chilperic, whom he defeated and put to flight, and re-established his authority over his cities. He ordered Chilperic's son Theudebert to be kept for a whole year under guard at the villa at Ponthion; but as he was merciful, he afterwards loaded him with gifts and sent him back safe and sound to his father. He did this on the condition that Theudebert swear never again to act against him. The oath was afterwards broken, due to sin.“ Murray, p.56.

127 Here Gregory uses the term „huns“ for what were actually the „Avars“, another nomadic people that by then was already a military force to be reckoned with. See Walter Walter. *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk im Mitteleuropa, 567-822 n. Chr.* CH Beck: Munich, 2002, p.4.

Of note is Gregory's portrayal of Sigibert. After the king manages to recapture his cities and territory, he puts Chilperic's captured son, Theudebert, under house arrest. After a year of arrest, Sigibert releases Theudebert, and as Gregory notes, he even bestows gifts on him before sending him back to his father. While not exactly a pattern, this behaviour is very similar to how Gregory depicted that of. Whereas Fredegund was quick to punish both friends and foes, Brunhild seemed to hold no grudge even against persons trying to do her harm, and neither does the "good" king Sigibert.¹²⁸

The next chapter where Gregory mentions Chilperic is number 28 in Book IV. It is titled „About King Chilperic's wives“ and details Chilperic's plan of marrying a Visigothic princess, just as his brother Sigibert had done.¹²⁹

Gregory goes on to make a pattern of Chilperic's thirst for territorial war-mongering. In chapter 45 of Book IV¹³⁰, he notes how Chilperic seizes the cities of Tours and Poitiers after the death of his brother Charibert:

Nam post mortem Chariberthi, cum Chilpericus Toronus ac Pectavis pervasissit, quae Sigybertho regi per pactum in partem venerant, coniunctus rex ipse cum Gunthchramno fratre suo, Mummolum elegunt, qui has urbes ad verum dominium revocare deberet.¹³¹

Only after the two brothers Sigibert and Guntram join forces again, can Chilperic be removed from the cities by the appointed Mummolus. As Gregory notes, the two cities were rightfully part of Sigibert's territory. Also, Gregory's wording becomes more direct. Where earlier he was writing about the occupation of cities, now cities are „overrun“ by Chilperic.

¹²⁸ See the chapter in this paper, "Fredegund vs. Brunhild".

¹²⁹ See Wood, "Kingdoms", p.89.

¹³⁰ HF 4.45.

¹³¹ „When, after the death of Charibert, Chilperic had overrun Tours and Poitiers, which by agreement had been allotted to King Sigibert, this king joined up with his brother Guntram, and they chose Mummolus to restore these cities to their rightful authority.“ Murray, p.67.

Gregory goes on. In chapter 47 of Book IV¹³², Chilperic sends out his son Theudebert, the same who before being released by King Sigibert after his house arrest promised to never attack him again¹³³, to recapture the cities of Tours and Poitiers from Sigibert:

Chilpericus autem in ira commotus, per Theodoberthum filium suum seniores, qui a Sigybertho quondam adpraehensus sacramentum dederat, ut ei fidelis esset, civitates eius pervadit, id est Toronus, Pectavus vel reliquas citra Legere sitas. Qui Pectavus veniens, contra Gundovaldum ducem pugnavit. Terga autem vertente exercitu partis Gundovaldi, magnam ibi stragem de populo illo fecit. Sed et de Toronicam regionem maximam partem incendit et, nisi ad tempus manus dedissent, totam continuo debellasset. Cummotu autem exercitu, Lemovicinum, Cadurcinum vel reliquas illarum propinquas pervadit, vastat, evertit; ecclesias incendit, ministeria detrahit, clericus interficit, monasteria virorum deicit, puellarum deludit et cuncta devastat. Fuitque tempore illo peior in ecclesiis gemitus quam tempore persecutionis Diocliciani.¹³⁴

And Theuderich doesn't disappoint Chilperic. Nor, presumably, does Gregory in his depiction of the destruction caused by Theuderich and his army. In colourful terms he describes how Theuderich lays waste to the countryside and slaughters innocent people. The offences described are grave, not simply in a militaristic matter. According to Gregory, Theuderich lays waste to churches as well, robbing them of their „sacred vessels“ and mistreating monks and nuns alike. Gregory ends the paragraph even with a comparison to the persecution of Christians during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian¹³⁵.

132 HF 4.47.

133 HF 4.23.

134 „In anger Chilperic sent his eldest son Theudebert to overrun Sigibert's cities, Tours, Poitiers, and other places lying on this side of the Loire. Theudebert had once been captured by Sigibert and taken an oath to be loyal to him. Theudebert came to Poitiers and fought against Duke Gundovald. His forces retreated and Theudebert slaughtered a great many people there. He also burned most of the district of Tours, and would have destroyed all of it, had not the inhabitants surrendered in time. Gathering his forces, he overran, laid waste, and demolished the territories of Limoges, Cahors, and other regions round about them. He burned the churches, took away the sacred vessels, killed clerics, drove monks from the monasteries and treated the nuns shamefully, and everything waste. At that time, the sorrow in the churches was greater than in the time of Diocletian's persecution.“ Murray, p.67.

135 Diocletian had issued four edicts that, among other things, even saw death as a penalty for Christians. See Cynthia White, *The Emergence of Christianity: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 2010, pp.83 – 88.

While it was Chilperic's son Theuderbert and his army that committed these offences, it's very probable that Gregory saw blame with Chilperic; both for making Theudebert break the oath he gave to Sigibert and for the destruction of the cities, countryside and churches he caused. That one of the areas destroyed was Tours, Gregory's own residence, might have been another reason for Gregory's rather extensive description of the events.

The woes of civil war go on and after the violent death of Sigibert, Brunhild is on her own. Chilperic makes use of her vulnerability, and during the first year of Childebert, Sigibert's son, he goes to Paris where he apprehends Brunhild and her daughters:¹³⁶

Anno igitur primo regni eius Chilpericus rex Parisius venit adpraehensamque Brunichildem apud Rodomaginsem civitatem in exilio trusit thesaurisque eius, quos Parisius detulerat, abstulit; filias vero eius Meledus urbe tenere praecipit.¹³⁷

Brunhild is sent into exile and her daughters are detained in Meaux, near Paris. While it is not surprising that Chilperic wanted to consolidate his power by trying to get rid of yet another disrupting force in the person of Brunhild, it seems quite telling that Gregory puts so much emphasis on the way Chilperic treats Brunhild and her daughters.

That Chilperic was prone to act irreverently towards churches, monasteries and the clergy can already be derived from Gregory's recount of the destruction and defilement I mentioned above. In chapter 26 of Book V¹³⁸, Gregory also recounts how Chilperic wanted to fine clergy and the poor of the city of Tours, even though it wasn't custom for clergy to be drafted into an army:

136 HF 5.1.

137 „In the first year of Childeberth's reign, King Chilperic came to Paris, seized Brunhild and sent her to Rouen in exile. He took away the treasures that she had brought to Paris and ordered her daughters detained at Meaux.“ Murray, p.76.

138 HF 5.26.

Post haec Chilpericus rex de pauperibus et iunioribus ecclesiae vel basilicae bannos iussit exigi, pro eo quod in exercitu non ambulassent. Non enim erat consuetudo, ut hi ullam exsolverent publicam functionem. Post haec Varochus obliviscens promissionis suae, volens inrumpere quod fecerat, Eunium episcopum Veneticae urbis ad Chilpericum regem dirigit. At ille ira commotus, obiurgatum eum exilio damnare praecipit.¹³⁹

When, as a direct result of this insult, a bishop is sent to Chilperic about the matter, Chilperic becomes irate and simply sends him into exile.¹⁴⁰

Then, in tune with the purported greed described by Gregory in above chapter, he begins chapter 28 of Book V with the note that Chilperic's imposing of new taxes had led many people to leave his kingdom. He then goes on to narrate of a revolt that culminates in the burning of the assessment register, the death of the referendary allegedly only saved by brave clergymen. Nevertheless, according to Gregory, Chilperic's ire over the revolt causes him to punish the people by torturing them; even the clergymen are – supposedly falsely – accused of being part of the mob and subsequently tortured. In the end, Gregory notes laconically, Chilperic imposes even harsher taxes.¹⁴¹

That Chilperic was not only prone to waging war, torturing and greed, Gregory shows in chapter 44 of Book V.¹⁴² He describes how Chilperic has written a circular that proscribes how the holy trinity should be viewed, namely not as three separate entities but rather as just one. He tells Gregory about it, who goes on to tell him of the wrongness of his assumptions. After a dispute with another bishop, the king decides to abandon his plan.

139 „Afterward Chilperic ordered that the ban be extracted from the poor and servants of the cathedral [of Tours] and basilica [of Saint Martin] because they had not served in the army. But it was not custom for them to carry out any public service. After these events, Waroch, forgetting about his promise and wishing to break his agreement, sent Eunius, bishop of Vannes, to King Chilperic. But the king became angry and, after scolding the bishop, ordered him to be exiled.” Murray, p.101.

140 In Book VII, chapter 42, Gregory also writes in more detail about a decree which saw fines for not joining the military. In this chapter he also stresses how he refused to pay.

141 HF 5.28.

142 HF 5.44.

Gregory, in a rather obvious attempt of ridiculing the literary ambitions of the king, finishes the chapter by noting Chilperic's other writings:

Scripsit alios libros idem rex versibus, quasi Sedulium secutus; sed versiculi illi nulla paenitus metricae conveniunt ratione. Addit autem et litteras litteris nostris, id est w, sicut Graeci habent, ae, the, uui, quarum characteres hi sunt:

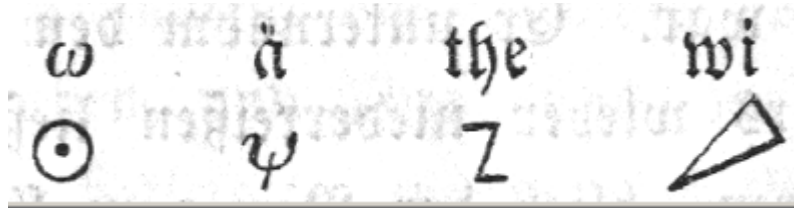


Image 1

Et misit epistulas in universis civitatibus regni sui, ut sic pueri docerentur ac libri antiquitus scripti, planati pomice, rescriberentur.¹⁴³

The scorn for Chilperic's writing abilities is evident, even though Gregory seems to show at least recognition for Chilperic's ambitions to enhance the language with new letters.

The final mention of the alive Chilperic is in book VI, where Gregory details the circumstances leading to his death. I will quote the whole of the chapter 46 here, in order to then break it down into what Gregory created as a summary of the worst deeds of Chilperic:

His itaque cum haec praeda pergentibus, Chilpericus, Nero nostri temporis et Herodis, ad villam Calensim, quae distat ab urbe Parisiaca quasi centum stadiis, accedit ibique venationes exercit. Quadam vero die regressus de venatione iam sub obscura nocte, dum de equo susceperitur et unam manu super scapulam pueri reteniret, adveniens quidam eum cultro percutit sub ascellam iteratoque ictu ventrem eius perforat; statimque profluente cupia sanguinis tam per os quam per aditum vulneris, iniquum fudit spiritum. Quam vero malitiam gesserit, superior lectio docet. Nam regiones plurimas sepius devastavit atque succendit; de quibus nihil doloris, sed letitia magis

¹⁴³ „The King also wrote other books in imitation of Sedulius. But those poor verses follow no acceptable form of meter at all. He also added letters to our alphabet, namely w as in greek, ae, the, and wi, which are written by the following characters: [see above graphic]. And he sent letters to all the cities of his kingdom, telling them that boys should be taught these letters and that books written in ancient times should be erased with pumice and rewritten.” Murray, p.112.

habebat, sicut quondam Nero, cum inter incendia palatii tragidias decantaret. Persaepe hominis pro facultatibus eorum iniuste punivit. In cuius tempore pauci quodammodo episcopatum clerici meruerunt. Erat enim gulae deditus, cuius deus venter fuit. Nullumque sibi adserebat esse prudentiorem. Conficitque duos libros, quasi Sidulium meditatus, quorum versiculi debilis nullis pedibus subsistere possunt, in quibus, dum non intellegebat, pro longis sillabas breves posuit et pro breves longas statuebat, et alia opuscula vel ymnus sive missas, quae nulla ratione suscipi possunt. Causas pauperum exosas habebat. Sacerdotes Domini assidue blasphemabat, nec aliunde magis, dum secrius esset, exercebat ridicula vel iocos quam de ecclesiarum episcopis. Illum ferebat levem, alium superbum, illum habundantem, istum luxoriosum; illum adserebat elatum, hunc tumidum, nullum plus odio quam ecclesias habens. Aiebat enim plerumque: 'Ecce pauper remansit fiscus noster, ecce divitiae nostrae ad ecclesias sunt translatae; nulli penitus nisi soli episcopi regnant; periet honor noster et translatus est ad episcopos civitatum'. Haec agens, adsidue testamenta, quae in ecclesias conscripta erant, plerumque disruptit, ipsasque patris sui praeceptiones, potans, quod non remaneret qui voluntatem eius servaret, saepe calcavit. Iam de libidine atque luxoria non potest repperire in cogitatione, quod non perpetrasset in opere, novaquae semper ad ledendum populum ingenia perquaerebat; nam, si quos hoc tempore culpabilis repperisset, oculos eis iobebat erui. Et in praeceptionibus, quas ad iudicis pro suis utilitatibus dirigebat, haec addebat: 'Si quis praecepta nostra contempserit, oculorum avulsione multetur'. Nullum umquam pure dilexit, a nullo dilectus est, ideoque, cum spiritum exalasset, omnes eum reliquerunt sui. Mallulfus autem Silvanectensis episcopus, qui iam tertia die in tenturio resedebat et ipsum videre non poterat, ut eum interemptum audivit, advenit; ablutumque vestimentis melioribus induit, noctem in hymnis deductam, in nave levavit et in basilica sancti Vincenti, quae est Parisius, sepelivit, Fredegunde regina in ecclesia derelicta.¹⁴⁴

144 HF 6.46. „While they continued on their way with this plunder, Chilperic, the Nero and Herod of our time, went to his villa of Chelles about one hundred stades distant from Paris and there went hunting. One day, returning from the hunt after dusk, he was being helped down from his horse and had one hand on a retainer's shoulder, when a man came up and stabbed him with a knife under the armpit and with a second stroke pierced his stomach. As a flood of blood poured from the king's mouth and the open wound, his wicked life at once came to an end.

The text above shows the evil that he did. For he frequently laid waste and burned many districts; and he had no feeling of anguish in doing this but rather joy, like Nero before him, when he recited tragedies as the palace burned. He often punished men unjustly to get their wealth. In his time few clerics were promoted to episcopal office. He was a glutton and his god was his belly. He used to claim that no one was wiser than he. He wrote two books on the model of Sedulius, but their feeble little verses cannot stand on their own feet at all, for in his ignorance he put short syllables for long, and long syllables for short. He wrote small pieces also, hymns and masses, which cannot reasonably be used. He hated the interests of the poor. He was constantly blaspheming the priests of the Lord, and when he was in private, he derided and ridiculed no one more than the bishops of churches. He called this one a lightweight, that one arrogant, another was a spendthrift, and this one a lecher. He would

This final account of Chilperic by Gregory is fascinating in its thoroughness. Not only does he detail the wrongful deeds of the king, he also asserts a few things that, even with all the connections he had to the court, he was quite certainly unable to have known. At the beginning Gregory calls Chilperic the Nero and Herod of his time. Of all the accounts about Chilperic devised by Gregory, this is by far the most memorable one. An example for his infamy is the very fact that the chapter on him exists. Were it not for these words and the strength with which Gregory asserts Chilperic's malevolence, it would be buried in the main body of the text and much less blatant.

The act of Chilperic's murder is described matter-of-factly, only to be ended with the mention of Chilperic's „wicked life“ coming to an end with that act. After this description, Gregory starts his final summary of what he deems as Chilperic's legacy to the world. Next to his criticism of Chilperic's hesitance to promote clerics to episcopacy, he chides the king for his gluttony, claiming that „his god was his belly“.

He then derides Chilperic for his inability to create proper poetry. His syllables are either too short or too long. It is interesting to note here that in contrast to the chapter described above, in which Gregory mentions Chilperic's literary ambitions, he now finds fault with his writing which he didn't find earlier. This and what follows now leads to

claim that this or that bishop was proud or haughty, because he hated nothing more than churches.

„Look! Our fisc has been left poor,“ he often used to say, „and our wealth has been transferred to the churches. No one rules at all except the bishops; our office will perish and has been ceded to the bishops of the cities.“

This being his view, he would constantly invalidate wills made in favor of churches, and he trampled underfoot the dispositions of his own father, thinking that one was left to preserve his wishes. As to lust and debauchery, nothing can be thought of that he did not realize in deed. He was always looking for new means to injure people; at this time, if he found any one guilty, he would order his eyes torn out. In the directions he sent to his judges on matters touching his interests, he would add, „if anyone disregards our orders, let his eyes be torn out as punishment.“

He never loved anyone sincerely and was loved by no one, with the result that, when he breathed his last, all his followers abandoned him. Mallulf, bishop of Senlis, who had been sitting in his tent for three days, unable to see him, came when he heard of his death. He washed him and clothed him in better garments. After spending the night singing hymns, he took him by boat to Paris and buried him in the basilica of Saint Vincent. Queen Fredegund was left in the cathedral church.“ Murray, pp.145-146.

the assumption that Gregory's text about the dead king was not really based on observances, but rather on Gregory's annoyances with the king, something which Guy Halsall calls the a standardized image of "der schlechte König"¹⁴⁵.

Gregory even adorns his text with direct speech, claiming that Chilperic used to ridicule the church and the bishops. One wants to speculate whether Gregory had this information beforehand, saving it for when it was time to write this sort of obituary, or whether he really just made this up as he went along.

One gets the same impression when reading what Gregory has to say about the king's love life. Not only does Gregory state that the king has never loved anyone, a notion which may still be quite understandable when looking at the various deeds Chilperic allegedly did. But Gregory also claims that Chilperic was not loved by anyone. This is an assertion which is obviously difficult for anyone to ascertain.

Gregory claims that in regard to „lust and debauchery“, Chilperic has done everything that can be thought of. Now, while it's still a far stretch for a cleric to claim he would be able to think of the same things that pertain to lust and debauchery a king would, it can be fairly assumed that Gregory would have no absolute knowledge of how far Chilperic actually went through with every lustful and debaucherous thing he had ever dreamt of. Again, this goes to show that Gregory simply added this to an obituary he wrote in order to drive home a certain point.

Why exactly Gregory saw the need to do this at this very juncture in his text will be explained in the second part of this chapter, in which I will examine the depiction of Guntram in Gregory's tale, but, as Guy Halsall mentions, whatever praise and condemnation Gregory gave in his *Histories* was always part of an act of self-preservation regarding his position as the bishop of Tours.¹⁴⁶

145 See Halsall, "Nero and Herod", pp.338.

146 See Halsall, "Hero and Nerod", p.350.

3.1.7 Guntram

As seen in the above part of this chapter, Gregory's description of Chilperic was far from positive. On the contrary: especially after Chilperic is violently murdered, Gregory reiterates the things Chilperic allegedly had done to deserve the title of, among other things, „Nero of our time“.

As antagonistically as Chilperic is portrayed, as favourably he portrays Guntram, the oldest of the four main brothers. In this part of the chapter I will look at the portrayal of Guntram in detail, citing various passages that emphasise how Gregory wanted Guntram to be viewed by the readers of his text.

As one of the five brothers he received part of the Merovingian kingdom after the death of his father Chlothar, and made Orléans his capital.¹⁴⁷

He is first mentioned by Gregory in Book IV of the *Histories*, when telling about the children of King Chlothar, and later when he describes how the kingdom is divided among the then five sons of the late King Chlothar. The first mention that shows a positive leaning towards Guntram is in chapter 25 of book IV. As was Gregory's custom, he includes an account of the women of the king:

Gunthchramnus autem rex bonus primo Venerandam, cuiusdam suorum ancillam, pro concubina toro subiunxit; de qua Gundobadum filium suscepit. Postea vero Marcatrudem, filiam Magnarii, in matrimonium accepit. Gundobadum vero filium suum Aurilianis transmisit. Aemula autem Marcatrudis post habitum filium in huius morte crassatur; transmissum, ut aiunt, venenum in potu maedificavit. Quo mortuo, ipsa iudicio Dei filium, quem habebat, perdidit et odium regis incurrit, demissaque ab eodem, ne multo post tempore mortua est. Postquam Austerchilde cognomento Bobillam accepit, de qua iterum duos filios habuit, duorum senior Chlotharius, minor Chlodomeris dicebatur.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ HF 4.21.

¹⁴⁸ „Good King Guntram at first took to bed as a concubine Veneranda, a slave of his followers; by her he had a son Gundobald. Afterwards he married Marcatrude, daughter of Magnachar.

What is interesting here is that the first standalone mention of the king includes the adjective „good“. While they were mainly in connection with the way Chilperic had tried to take advantage of the demise of his father Chlothar, there is no real reason for Gregory to attest to Guntram any sort of benevolence.

The chapter goes on detailing the various wives and concubines of Guntram. While it may be a coincidence, it seems telling that Gregory recounts the tale of Marcatrude, the first wife of Guntram, who allegedly poisoned his son Gundobald, son of Guntram's concubine Veneranda. As Gregory even mentions in his text, the poisoning is not a fact but rather based on hearsay, as is obviously emphasized by the inclusion of „so they say“ in the text.

Then, not surprisingly in the context of the vengeful God Gregory prayed to, the son Guntram had with Marcatrude was killed. Gregory doesn't say how, but the lack of any description lets one assume that it was indeed natural causes that ended the boy's life.

Depicting Guntram as an extension of God's wrath, the king suddenly hates Marcatrude and drives her away. As Gregory then goes on, she died not long after.

It is interesting to observe how Gregory, in a chapter of about twenty lines, creates a first impression of Guntram by employing a few simple narrative techniques: First, without any apparent reason, Guntram is named the „good king“. Then, there is a woman who makes use of what I have described in earlier chapters already as a “female” way of murdering, that is, poisoning the victim. And finally, after „the

He sent his son Gundobald to Orleans. After Marcatrude had a son, she jealously set out to bring about Gundobald's death, poisoning him with a doctored drink, so they say. Following his death, by the judgement of God, she lost the son she had and incurred the hatred of the king. Sent away by him, she died not long after. After her Guntram took Austrechild, also named Bobilla. By her he again had two sons; the older of them was called Chlothar and the younger Chlodomer.” Murray, pp.56-57.

judgement of God" that includes a sentence of killing that woman's son in return, Guntram is depicted as the direct extension of this god by driving her away, leaving her to her own fate, which, ultimately, is death.

One chapter later, Gregory goes on to detail the wives of King Charibert, the unlucky fifth brother, whose early demise – also described in this chapter – should be the cause of yet another war between the remaining four brothers.¹⁴⁹ After the death of Charibert, one of his wives, Theudogild, sends a messenger to Guntram, offering herself as a wife to the king. Guntram seems to like the idea:

Quibus rex hoc reddidit in responsis: 'Accedere ad me ei non pigeat cum thesauris suis. Ego enim accipiam eam faciamque magnam in populis, ut scilicet maiorem mecum honorem quam cum germano meo, qui nuper defunctus est, potiatur'. At illa gavis, collectis omnibus, ad eum profecta est. Quod cernens rex, ait: 'Rectius est enim, ut hi thesauri penes me habeantur, quam post hanc, quae indigne germani mei torum adivit'. Tunc, ablatis multis, paucis relictis, Arelatinsi eam monastirio destinavit.¹⁵⁰

While seemingly willing to take in the woman and marry her at first, it turns out that Guntram is simply playing a ruse. As soon as he sees the treasure she has brought, he relieves her of most of her possessions and simply sends her off to a monastery. The rest of the chapter describes Theudogild's efforts to escape from the monastery by marrying a Goth. A plan that is ultimately thwarted by the abbess. Theudogild is sent to prison, where, according to Gregory, she dies after a while after suffering considerably.¹⁵¹

What is interesting in this chapter is the total and utter lack of

149 Even though Charibert apparently died of a natural cause, Gregory sees it as yet another revenge of God, who apparently was angered by the fact that Charibert had had the gall to marry the sister of Merofred, one of his earlier wives. See HF 4.26.

150 „The king gave them this response, „Let her have no worry about coming to me with her treasure. For I will marry her and make her a great woman in everyone's eyes. Rest assured she will have greater honor with me than with my brother who has just died.“ Very pleased, she gathered up everything and went to him. When the king saw what she brought, he said, „It's better for this treasure to be in my hands than under the control of this woman who was unworthy to lie in my brother's bed.“ Then, having taken away much and left little, he sent her to a monastery at Arles.“ Murray, p.57.

151 See HF 4.26.

compassion shown by Gregory for the fate of the woman. Likewise, there is no attempt by Gregory to depict the actions of Guntram in any sort of moral way. Instead, the recount of Theudogild's fate seems like a mere chronicle. The implications of this are difficult to interpret. It could of course mean that Gregory simply described the usual fate of the wife of a dead king during the Merovingian era. As was I pointed out in my earlier chapter on Fredegund and Brunhild, it seemed to have been imperative to a queen whose king had died to find alliances among powerful Franks or other kings in order to keep her status or, as in this case, even her freedom and ultimately her life.

Theudogild had tried to do just that, but had overestimated the benevolence of Guntram. This opposes the notion of the „good king“ described in the chapter above, but Gregory does not seem to notice.

Gregory seems to put Guntram above doubt in these matters. Even when he is detailing the civil war between the brothers, Guntram's actions seem to be above reproach. As it so happens in chapter thirty of Book IV, Guntram's brother Sigibert seeks to seize control of the city of Arles. As Guntram hears of this, he sends his own troops who, with the aid of a ruse by the bishop of Arles, manage to defeat the troops of Sigibert. Gregory ends the chapter with the following sentence: „Ac sic Gunthchramnus rex, recepta urbe illa, iuxta consuetudinem bonitatis suae Avennicam ditionibus fratres sui restituit.“¹⁵² Apparently, Guntram's „usual good will“ extended to the fates of cities more than to the fates of women.

It should also be mentioned that a few chapters later, in Book IV, chapter 45¹⁵³, Guntram joined up with his brother Sigibert against their brother Chilperic, who after the death of Charibert tries to annex Tours and Poitiers.¹⁵⁴

152 See HF 4.30 „And so King Guntram, having recovered Arles, with his usual good will, restored Avignon to his brother's authority.“ Murray, p.62.

153 See HF 4.45.

154 In order to give a picture of how brittle these alliances were, it should also be mentioned that a mere two chapters later, Guntram again seemed to have had a falling out with Sigibert. Even later, the alliances between Guntram, Chilperic and Sigibert changed again in

In chapter 17 of Book IV, Guntram is again portrayed as a just, albeit brutal, defender of women. At the beginning of this chapter, Gregory simply states that Guntram killed the sons of Magnachar after they had said hurtful and disrespectful things against Guntram's wife at the time, Austrechild.¹⁵⁵ The context of this deed is quite complicated, something that Gregory – maybe conveniently – does not care to elaborate on. Because as a matter of fact said Magnachar was the father of Guntram's first wife, Marcatrude, whose alleged poisoning of Guntram's son I described above. Magnachar, at the time of the slaying of his sons, was already dead.

In the same chapter, Guntram also loses his two sons. Therefore, when a few lines down there is the question who will take in the son of his then murdered brother Sigibert, Childebert, does the following:

Gunthchramnus rex ait: 'Evenit in pulso peccatorum meorum, ut absque liberis remanerem, et ideo peto, ut hic nepus meus mihi sit filius'. Et inponens eum super cathedram suam, cunctum ei regnum tradedit, dicens: 'Una nos parma protegat unaque asta defendat. Quod si filius habuero, te nihilominus tamquam unum ex his reputabo, ut illa cum eis tecumque permaneat caretas, quam tibi hodie ego pollicior, teste Deo'.¹⁵⁶

Apparently, Guntram does feel the need to repent, or at least Gregory has that impression, thus adopting his nephew. Contrary to how Gregory usually elaborates on the sins that lead to such a decision, he does not mention anything here. Apparently, he is content with the King's admission that he indeed is not without sin.

In chapter 35 of Book V, Guntram becomes – as Gregory sees it – the victim of his ruthless wife Austrechild. The wife of King Guntram is nearing her life's end after illness, and according to Gregory, she asks of

a rather volatile period of the civil war. See e.g. HF 4.49-4.50.

155 See HF 5.17.

156 „King Guntram said, „It has happened that through my sins I have been left without children, and so I ask that this nephew of mine be my son.“ And setting him upon his own seat, Guntram handed over to him his while kingdom. „Let a single shield protect us,“ he said, „and a single spear defend us. Should I have sons, I will nevertheless regard you as one of them, so that, God as my witness, you will keep the love I promise you today, sharing it with them.“ see Murray, p.88-89.

the King to slay the doctors who had tended to her, claiming it was their tinctures that killed her. After she has died, Guntram fulfills her wish¹⁵⁷:

Rex vero, peracto ex more iusticio, oppressus iniquae coniugis iuramento, implevit praeceptum iniquitatis. Nam duos medicos, qui ei studium adhibuerant, gladio ferire praecepit; quod non sine peccato facto fuisse, multorum censit prudentia.¹⁵⁸

So even though Guntram committed an obvious sin, Gregory more or less exonerates him, because he was only fulfilling the wish of a woman Gregory repeatedly calls „wicked“, „unhappy“ and „evil“¹⁵⁹. The oath that his wife took from him while on her deathbed is what binds him, thus he is unable to not grant her the wish of killing two of the physicians who tended to her when she was dying.

Additional signs of Guntram's general benevolence can be found in Book VI, chapter 4 („A quo benigne susceptus, cum eo latuit, expectans, ut Childeberthus ad legitimam perveniret aetatem.“¹⁶⁰) or in book VI, chapter 36:

„Tunc rex Guntchramnus, ut erat benignus et profluus ad miserandum, multa ei munera contulit, dans etiam epistolas per omnes episcopos regni sui, ut peregrinum aliquid pro Dei intuitu consolarentur.“¹⁶¹

One intriguing remark by Gregory stands out in Book VII, chapter 5. In this very short chapter, Gregory explains how Guntram went to Paris after the murder of his brother Chilperic, after Chilperic's widow Fredegund sent him a message, begging of him to do so:

157 See HF 5.35.

158 „When the usual period of mourning was over, the king, forced by the oath to his wicked wife, complied with her evil instructions. He ordered the two physicians who had attended her to be executed. In the considered opinion of many, this was not done without sin.“ Murray, p.107.

159 See HF 5.35.

160 „[...] fled to King Guntram, who welcomed him. He remained with the king in hiding, waiting for Childebert to come of age.“ Murray, p.123.

161 „Thereupon King Guntram kindly as ever, and swift to pity, loaded the Bishop with presents. At the same time he wrote round to all the bishops in his kingdom, telling them for the love of God to do what they could for this exile.“ Thorpe, p.369.

Fredegundis igitur regina, accepto consilio, legatos ad Gunthchramnum regem mittit, dicens: 'Veniat dominus meus et suscipiat regnum fratris sui. Est', inquit, 'mihi infans parvulus, quem in eius ulnis ponere desiderans, me ipsam eius humilio dicioni'. Conperto autem Gunthchramnus rex de fratris excessu amarissime fleuit. Moderato quoque planctu, conmoto exercitu, Parisius dirigit. Cumque ille infra muros susceptus fuisset, Childeberthus rex, nepus eius, ab alia advenit parte.¹⁶²

The passage that catches the eye is the one about Guntram weeping upon receiving the message from Fredegund. Gregory seems intent upon portraying Guntram not only as a just king, but also as a man capable of feeling remorse for the death of a brother, whose latest quest in life had been to defeat him for the sake of more power and a larger kingdom. Then, in order to show that even though Guntram was a sensitive man, he did not lack the necessary sensibility as well, he describes how Guntram assembles an army and marches toward Paris, to make the best of his brother's early demise.

But Gregory's greatest endorsement of the king comes in Book IX, chapter 21, aptly named: „Of the benevolence and kindheartedness of the king“¹⁶³. The chapter starts off with the following sentence: „Ipse autem rex, ut saepe diximus, in elymosinis magnus, in vigiliis atque ieiuniis prumptus erat.“¹⁶⁴ This praise of the king seems almost routine at this point of Gregory' narration. But the story he tells goes on to display even more of Guntrams almost unbelievable spiritual impact. When Marseilles is struck by an especially virulent case of the plague, Guntram not only prays and gives to charity but also – inadvertently – manages to cure a woman with a piece of his garment. The story is told by Gregory as hear-say. A woman manages to get hold of a piece of the

162 „Queen Fredegund took advice and sent envoys to King Guntram with this message: „Let my lord come and take the kingdom of his brother. I have a small infant, whom I wish to place in his arms; as for myself, I bow to his authority.“ When Gruntram learned of his brother's passing, he wept quite bitterly, but when his grief subsided, he mustered an army and marched to Paris. He had already been received within the walls when his nephew King Childbert arrive from another direction.“ Murray, p.148.

163 See HF 9.21.

164 „King Guntram, as we have frequently said, was generous in almsgiving and disposed to vigils and fasting.“ Murray, p.209.

kings garment when following the throng of people he is in, and, after soaking it in hot water gives that water to her son to drink. The boy, who had been lying in bed sick with a fever, is miraculously cured. Gregory, even though he does not have proof for the story, apparently believes it, or at least wanted to convey in his text that he believed it:

[...] Quod non habetur a me dubium, cum ego ipse saepius
larvas inergia famulante nomen eius invocantes audieram ac
criminum propriorum gesta, virtute ipsius discernente,
fatere.¹⁶⁵

Even if at this point there were some doubt as to how Gregory wants this king to be seen, it would have all but dissolved by now. Not only is the king benevolent, kind and wise, he is also such a near-saintly figure that parts of his garment alone seem to be enough to cure people.

¹⁶⁵ „I do not doubt this story, since I myself have heard the demons of those possessed being compelled by the wonderful power of this man to call out his name and confess their own crimes.“ Murray, p.214

3.1.8 Conclusion

My intention in the above chapters was to compare not only the difference in wording and description when it came to good versus evil, but also how these differences again compare to each other when put towards male or female protagonists.

What is obvious is the very direct animosity towards Chilperic and Fredegund, whereas Guntram and Brunhild are described mostly by the virtues, not their vices. Of course, as Ian Wood points out in his essay "The Secret Histories of Gregory of Tours", Gregory is also critical of Guntram at times¹⁶⁶, but it pales next to the criticism Gregory pours out over Chilperic.

As Dick Harrison points out, Gregory employs with the depiction of Fredegund the stereotype of the "bad girl": one murderous plot follows the next, and many people suffer under the cruel rule of Fredegund.¹⁶⁷ As shown in the subchapter about Brunhild, Gregory also employs the stereotype of the "good girl", where for example beauty is used as one identifying aspect of this kind of woman.

In looking at the way he portrays the kings instead, it's clear that there are no such stereotypes with which to actually portray these men. They are, by and large, described by actions and deeds usually attributed to men anyway. Murdering, waging war or torture seemed to perturb Gregory not half as much when done by Chilperic than when done by Fredegund. This can be observed by looking at the number of times Gregory concentrates on writing about these acts, as compared to the instances of cruelty perpetrated by the kings.

166 Ian N. Wood, "The secret histories of Gregory of Tours" in: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 71.2 (1993): pp.253-270, pp. 260f.

167 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.343.

3.2 Rights

3.2.1 Division between legal positions

The division between the various legal positions – of which free, unfree, half-free are just some – is not entirely clear-cut. Especially when it comes to the definition of freemen and freewomen pertaining to Romans and Franks, there exist exhaustive studies.¹⁶⁸

Whether a member of the Merovingian society can actually be called aristocratic or not is still a matter of dispute. According to Reinhold Kaiser's examination of a multitude of various, sometimes conflicting studies, aristocratic attributes could be the absence of taxation, status by birth, a proximity to kings and a proclivity to holding an office.¹⁶⁹

As Kaiser goes on, the differentiation between and sometimes within the statuses of free and unfree is similarly difficult to grasp. In this chapter I will follow their characterization in Gregory of Tours' works as observed by Margarete Weidemann.¹⁷⁰

168 See Guy Halsall, *Settlement and social organization: the Merovingian region of Metz*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2002, pp.21-32.

169 See Reinhold Kaiser, *Das römische Erbe und das Merowingerreich*. Vol. 26. Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag: Oldenbourg, 2004, pp.96-100.

170 She thusly differentiates between frees who own land which includes people, taxation and war-duty, jurisdiction at a county-court and finally people who work with their own hands, not having anyone to do this kind of work for them. As for unfrees, she describes them as property of a master, without legal jurisdiction, meaning they can't be tried by and can't go to court. See Margarete Weidemann, *Kulturgeschichte der Merowingerzeit nach den Werken Gregors von Tours*. Habelt, 1982, pp.295-306.

3.2.2 Royalty and Aristocracy

Due to the nature of a history of events in a kingdom, the most prominent depictions are those of members of either royal families or aristocracy. This holds true for Gregory's narrative as well. Apart from the queens and the women married to ruling parties, Gregory also portrays events that were influenced largely by Merovingian, or in the case of Brunhild and Galsvinth, Visigothic princesses.¹⁷¹ This chapter will see various examples of aristocratic and royal women's rights, divided into married, divorced and unwed women.

3.2.2.1 Marriage

There is one issue pertaining to marriage, which must be addressed before delving deeper into the subject matter. That issue is the division of marriage into *Muntehe* and *Friedelehe*. Wemple defines marriages which were unofficial as *Friedelehe* and supports the thesis that these types of marriage were an established institution during the Merovingian and Carolingian era. But as Ruth Mazo Karras points out quite convincingly, these divisions are the product of later scholars and based only on circumstantial evidence which under closer scrutiny does not hold up.¹⁷²

Before detailing the depictions of the wives of aristocratic men in Gregory's *Histories*, an obstacle, as observed by Ian Wood should be mentioned: the wives and relations of Merovingian kings were sometimes named in sources, but apart from these, not a lot is known about them.¹⁷³ Of course, as can be gleaned from my earlier chapters, Gregory wrote in quite some detail about certain queens like Brunhild and Fredegund. Other queens are also named throughout his *Histories*,

¹⁷¹ Wood, "Kingdoms", p.120.

¹⁷² See Ruth Mazo Karras, "The history of marriage and the myth of *Friedelehe*" in: *Early Medieval Europe* 14.2 (2006): 119-151. for a detailed analysis of the evidence that pointed to a division and her refuting of these claims.

¹⁷³ Wood, "Kingdoms", p.121.

but their roles - at least according to Gregory - are secondary. Only anecdotal evidence of their actual existence ensured their place on the family trees of the Merovingians. Some of these anecdotes will be called upon here to give not a thorough picture of the role of married women in the aristocracy, but serve to show how Gregory decided to portray their roles.

Women in Merovingian society played a major role in marriage alliances. Though maybe sounding like a truism, but it has to be noted that women were pivotal when it came to instilling loyalty with the family - a loyalty that often had a slant to the maternal side of the family.¹⁷⁴

While many of these alliances served their purpose well, Gregory's *Histories* are filled with episodes where things went terribly wrong. An example of such a bond gone wrong is that of Ingund and her marriage to the son of Leuvigild, Hermenegild. Initially welcomed by Hermenegild's mother Goiswinth, her Arian mother-in-law was bent on having Ingund converted to Arianism. Ingund refused, but, as Gregory describes it, was simply thrown into the baptizing pool by her irate mother-in-law. Still, Ingund does not forsake her beliefs, and when she takes court at a town her father-in-law has given the couple, she even convinces her husband Hermenegild to convert to catholicism. The subsequent events, mired by personal and political animosities, result in Hermenegild being thrown into prison by his own father.¹⁷⁵ Ingund, protected by the imperial guard, dies of a natural death with her small son in Carthage, on the way to the emperor, while her husband is murdered in prison.¹⁷⁶

In this episode, it becomes clear that women were not only married in order to secure the family lines, but were also, as Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg puts it, "emissaries for the church".¹⁷⁷ The way Gregory

¹⁷⁴ Wemple, p.52.

¹⁷⁵ HF 5.38.

¹⁷⁶ HF 8.28.

¹⁷⁷ See Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their sex: female sanctity and society, ca. 500-*

describes it, it is also apparent that he commends the woman for standing up for her faith. Hence, the death of her husband he also described as that of a martyr.

Another account of marriage alliances gone wrong is found in Book IX, chapter 25, and exemplifies how the fate of a princess relied solely on her family's decisions. Here¹⁷⁸, the fate of Chlodosind, King Childebert's sister, and the defeat of the Austrasian kingdom by the Lombards, are depicted. According to Gregory, Chlodosind was promised to the Lombards, but King Childebert changed his mind after learning that the Visigoths had converted to Catholicism. So, instead of giving Chlodosind to the Lombards, he decided to wage war on them. This was a decision that proved to be fatal for the Frankish forces, which were, according to Gregory, utterly destroyed.

Gregory describes this episode in his usual detached way, the focus being on the defeat of the Franks by the Lombards. Chlodosind was later married to the Visigothic King Reccared.¹⁷⁹

The way Gregory chronicles the fates of the various princesses of the Merovingian kingdoms is a reflection of that notion. While, for example, the marriage of an unfree with a free was more than just frowned upon, the use of princesses as mere pawns in geo-political schemings was not.

The aforementioned unfortunate nature of Galsvinth's marriage to Chilperic and its violent end¹⁸⁰ demonstrates the volatile nature of a woman's position at the court of a Merovingian king very well.

How fragile marriages were and what dangers lurked whenever a woman had gained power through marriage is also displayed well by Gregory in book IX, chapter 28. There Gregory recounts the story of Faileuba, wife of Childebert II. A plot was discovered by the woman

¹¹⁰⁰. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2001, p.191.

¹⁷⁸ HF 9.25.

¹⁷⁹ HF 9.16-9.20.

¹⁸⁰ See the chapter in this paper on "Fredegund".

herself, which as its main goal had to removal of Brunhild and Faileuba, in order to also remove their influence from Childebert and his heirs.¹⁸¹ Had Faileuba, according to Gregory, not discovered the plot herself, she might have been driven out of court, and even lost control over her own son, as Dick Harrison notes.¹⁸²

For my purpose here, this chapter contains something else that is noteworthy. When it is uncovered that the plot to remove Faileuba was instigated by the nurse Septimima and one Droctulf, both are swiftly bound and beaten. Then comes the confession by Septimia:

Nec mora, extensi inter stipites cum vehementius caederentur,
profititur Septimina, virum suum Iovium maleficiis interfecisse
ob amorem Droctulfi ipsumque secum scorto miscere.¹⁸³

The woman, as she is confessing to the plot, also confesses to having killed her husband. The manner of how she killed him – witchcraft – is telling again. We saw this way of murdering in the chapter above with Fredegund before. So the question arises, why she would confess to such a crime. Was it the torturing device which led her to tell them not only what they wanted to hear about the plot but also whatever their interlocutors wanted to hear in addition to it? Or was it maybe just Gregory embellishing the story in order to make it more plausible for his audience. As detailed with Fredegund, bad deeds often were the result not of inherent evil with women, but mainly a byproduct of witchcraft.

As Suzanne Wemple points out, polygyny and concubinage were both factors in creating moral double standards for the sexes when it came to sexual relationships.¹⁸⁴ While women were supposed to be faithful, it was not unusual for a male member of the aristocracy to have a second, third or more wives and still other relationships with different women.¹⁸⁵ So how does Gregory, as a cleric, depict the act of a man breaking his

181 HF 9.38.

182 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.148.

183 "Without delay they were spread between posts and beaten severely. Septimina confessed that she had killed her husband Jovius by witchcraft out of love for Droctulf, with whom she played the whore." Murray, p.19.

184 A fact which, unfortunately, still holds true nowadays.

185 Wemple, p.38.

wedding vows? There is one episode in Book IX, chapter 27 in which one Duke Amalo finds his death, which rivals the most sordid of episodes in world history when it comes to betrayal and death in the course of said betrayal. The story, according to Gregory¹⁸⁶, goes as follows:

Duke Amalo sends his wife away to look into the affairs of one of his estates. Shortly after his wife has left, he develops a liking for a girl of free birth. He lets his servants bring her to his bed, in the course of which she is beaten bloody. Duke Amalo and the girl fight some more, which results in bloodshed on Amalo's part as well. For some reason, they both fall asleep. When the girl wakes up, she goes for Amalo's sword and splits his head with it. When his servants rush in to kill the girl, the dying man cries out to leave her be, as he had been the one who had done her harm. The servants comply and the girl manages to escape, not just from Amalo's house, but as far away as Chalon-sur-Saône, 35 miles from where she had been taken. There she throws herself at the king's feet and begs forgiveness, which he grants her. He also goes so far as to make it known, that the girl must not be harmed by anyone of Amalo's family. Gregory adds at the end of his account that for some reason or other God managed to save the girl's virginity throughout that whole ordeal.

It is important to note how Gregory displays seeming naivety when describing the events: "Amalo quoque dux, dum coniugem in alia villa pro exercenda utilitate dirigit, in amorem puellolae cuiusdam ingenuae ruit."¹⁸⁷

The notion that the Duke sent away his wife and only later felt the need to force himself on a young girl is rather impassively described and its face value accepted by Gregory. It was not uncommon for a wife to look after her husband's estates¹⁸⁸, but what for the modern reader

¹⁸⁶ HF 9.27.

¹⁸⁷ "Duke Amalo sent his wife away to one of his other estates to look after his affairs. Then he was seized with a desire for a young girl of free birth." Thorpe, p.513.

¹⁸⁸ See Wemple, p.99.

looks like a cunning or rather conniving setup seemed not to perturb Gregory in the slightest. Being part of Merovingian society and the upper echelons, Gregory undoubtedly had a good understanding of the above mentioned double moral standards and the lack of reflection in his wording is a sign that he simply didn't care to put a focus on the fact that there was a man who had set in motion a plan to betray his wife.

When it comes to purported or actual infidelity of women, Gregory's stance seems quite different. The laws governing adultery were clear about this: if a woman committed adultery, her husband could divorce her, if the man committed adultery, the wife could do no such thing.¹⁸⁹

In book VI, chapter 16, Gregory details an arranged marriage. A man named Pappolenus had been engaged to the niece of Felix, bishop of Nantes. For a reason not explained by Gregory, Felix had disapproved of the marriage and brought about the separation of Pappolenus and his niece to subsequently send her to a nunnery. It is not clear from Gregory's writing whether the niece sent servants for Pappolenus to rescue her while Felix was still alive, or after his death. But the result was the same: Pappolenus went to get the girl from the nunnery and married her, by then, Felix had died.¹⁹⁰ What is interesting about this arrangement is hinted at in Gregory's last sentence of the chapter:

Quod ille non abnuens, adsumptam de monastirio puellam suo coniugio copolavit, regalibusque munitus praeceptionibus, timere parentum distulit moenas.¹⁹¹

As will be detailed later in this chapter, unmarried women were basically under the power of their family. To have a king meddle in these inter-familial affairs seems fairly uncommon.

Unfortunately, Gregory gives no further insight into how this involvement by the king came about.

¹⁸⁹ See Wemple, p.42.

¹⁹⁰ HF 6.15.

¹⁹¹ HF 6.16 "He organized her escape from the nunnery, and married her. He had the King's formal approval, so that she was able to disregard the threats of her relations." Thorpe, p.347.

While men having sexual relations with a multitude of women and their unfaithfulness of men was regarded by Gregory as a minor aberration, women had to adhere to strict laws governing their faith.¹⁹²

There were other laws that governed what would happen to men who sexually assaulted (free) women. That said, women who were raped rarely pressed charges, but would rather keep still to conceal their shame or, in drastic cases, kill themselves.¹⁹³ If a woman was accused of adultery or leaving her husband, massive repression could in some cases lead to the same fate.

One episode in Gregory's *Histories* is a haunting example how even only the suspicion of adultery could drive a woman into suicide. In book V, chapter 32, Gregory recounts the story of a woman accused of leaving her husband and having relations of some sort with another man:

Apud Parisius autem mulier quaedam ruit in crimine, adserentibus multis, quasi quod, relicto viro, cum alio misceretur. Igitur parentes illius accesserunt ad patrem, dicentes: 'Aut idoneam redde filiam tuam, aut certe moriatur, ne stuprum hoc generi nostro notam infligat'. 'Novi', inquit pater, 'ego filiam meam bene idoneam; nec est verum verbum hoc, quod mali homines proloquuntur. Tamen ne crimen consurgat ulterius, innocentem eam faciam sacramento'. Et illi: 'Si', inquirunt, 'est innoxia, super tumultum hoc beati Dionisi martyris sacramentis adfirma'. 'Faciam', inquit pater.¹⁹⁴

The woman is suspected of adultery and the family of her husband wants to retaliate by killing her. Now that the woman is not with her husband anymore, the burden of protecting her is again upon her father. Her father is ready to swear an oath that his woman is innocent. The family agrees to this, but as it so happens, things get a lot messier

192 See Wemple, p.38.

193 See Wemple, p.40.

194 HF 5.32 "In Paris a woman who had left her husband was accused by a number of people of living with another man. The husband's relations went to the woman's father and said: 'Either you must prove your daughter's innocence or else let her die, for we cannot permit her adultery to bring disgrace upon our family.' 'I know that my daughter is completely innocent,' answered the father. 'There is no truth at all in this rumour which is being spread by malicious people. I will prove her innocence by an oath and so stop the accusation going any farther.' 'If she really is innocent,' they replied, 'swear an oath to that effect on the tomb of Saint Denis, the martyr.' 'I will certainly do so,' said her father." Thorpe, p.295.

afterwards. When the father does as promised, the family of the husband accuses him of perjury and start to attack him inside the church. Chaos ensues between the two feuding parties. They fight in the church, thereby desecrating it. Eventually they are sent to the court of King Chilperic, who in turn leaves it to the local bishop to try them. They pay a fine so as not to be excluded from communion. The woman in the focus of this feud however, kills herself shortly before her trial.¹⁹⁵

The title, *De basilica sancti Dionisii iniuriata per mulierem*, that is: "The desecration of the church of St.Dionysius because of a woman", is telling: its concern lies with the desecration of the church, not the woman whose fate is sealed by it. It is not as important for Gregory as the fact that the church, as he bemoans it, is not fit for service for a while due to the desecrating fight that happened between the two families.

A final example of how a woman, even if she wasn't part of the royalty, could move and decide freely, independent from her husband. Said woman was Berthegund, who, at the behest of her mother Ingitrude, left her husband to join her mother's nunnery.¹⁹⁶

While here husband does try to get her back, his actions are thwarted not least by her brother, a bishop, who claims the marriage was not even legal in the first place, as her parents had not given consent.¹⁹⁷ So he decides to leave the woman to do as she pleases, until Berthegund's brother dies. She has a change of heart, but for some reason, her husband does not take her back. As Harrison writes:

¹⁹⁵ See HF 5.32.

¹⁹⁶ See HF 9.33.

¹⁹⁷ As Gregory notes in the same line, this claim comes about thirty years too late, as Berthegund and her husband had been married for at least three decades then.

Her actions in the year 585 were dictated by her own wishes, not by the wishes of her husband and certainly not by the wishes of her mother. [...] why did her husband not attempt to reclaim her as his wife after this? We will never know the answer to the second question; he may have died or grown tired of hunting her and simply married someone else.¹⁹⁸

What he also points out is the fact that the woman only had the ability to openly disregard the wishes of her husband by having access political, economical and ecclesiastical resources.¹⁹⁹ Without these, even a woman with a will as strong as Berthegund, would usually not have been able to leave her husband to pursue her own interests the way Berthegund did.

There will be more about Berthegund and her difficult relationship with her mother in the later chapter about mother-child relationships.

3.2.2.2 Unmarried

The social protection of unmarried women was attributed to their fathers, while that of married women was their husband's duty²⁰⁰. In the absence of a father, Dick Harrison extends this protection also to the male members of the family of a woman²⁰¹.

In this chapter, I will look at two different ways this unmarried status could come about, as in the cases of divorced and widowed women. Both give us the opportunity to shed light on how the rights of women depended on and how they differed from those of men, and how this reflected in Gregory's writing.

One special case was the revolt of the nuns at Poitiers, an episode which takes up considerable space in Gregory's *Histories* and involves two princesses, Basina and Chlothild. The princesses had started a revolt at the nunnery, and after their trial and excommunication, they accused in front of the King Childebert the Abbess of Poitiers of many transgressions, amongst others with a man dressed in womens clothing

198 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.192.

199 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.194.

200 See Wemple, p.27.

201 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.205.

or of plotting to kill Fredegund. None of these accusations could be proven. Both princesses were later pardoned by the king, as detailed in Book X, chapter 20:

In hoc sinodo Basina, Chilperici regis filia, quam supra cum Chrodielde a communione remotam diximus, coram episcopis solo prostrata, veniam petiit, promittens se cum caritate abbatissae monasterium ingredi ac de regulam nihil transcendere. Chrodieldis autem obtestata est, quod, Leobovera abbatissa in hoc monasterium commorante, ibidem numquam ingrederetur. Sed utrisque rex veniam inpertire deprecatus est, et sic in communione receptae, Pectavo regredi iussae sunt, scilicet ut Basina in monasterio, ut praefati sumus, regrediretur, Chrodieldis vero in villa, quae quondam Waddonis superius memorati fuerat, sibi a rege concessa, resederet.²⁰²

3.2.2.2.1 Divorced

For men in the Merovingian period getting divorced was a simple procedure. The different laws had slightly differing views on what constituted reason for divorce, but to those who wanted it, it was a simple task to find those. While under Roman law, the only grounds there were for divorce were adultery, sorcery or procuring prostitutes, Germanic law allowed for divorce if a woman could not bear children or had committed any serious crime. Women fared far worse. Adultery by the husband was not a reason, both in Roman and Germanic law. Among the only breaches that allowed for a lawful divorce were pederasty and homicide and the, even then, rather outlandish accusation of necromancy. Unilateral divorce was possible for both men and women, but it was much more difficult to achieve and under greater sacrifice for women than for men.²⁰³

202 "At this same council Basina, the daughter of King Chilperic, who, as I have told you, had recently been excommunicated in company with Clotild, threw herself at the bishop's feet and begged for forgiveness. She promised to return to her nunnery, to live there in peace with her Abbess and to observe all the provisions of the Rule. Clotild, on the other hand, swore that she would never go back to the nunnery as long as Leubovera remained there as Abbess. The King asked that they might both be pardoned. They were received once more into communion and ordered to return to Poitiers. Basina went back into her nunnery, as I have said. The country estate which I have described as having belonged formerly to Waddo was conveyed to Clotild in gift by the King and she went to live there." Thorpe, p.580.

203 See Wemple, pp.42-43.

Looking at Gregory's *Histories*, there is only one case of a successful unilateral divorce and it is a very early one. The Saxon princess Basina, married to King Bisinus, leaves her husband and marries King Childeric instead:²⁰⁴

His ergo regnantibus, simul Basina illa, quam supra memoravimus, relicto viro suo, ad Childericum venit. Qui cum sollicite interrogaret, qua de causa ad eum de tanta regione venisset, respondisse fertur: 'Novi', inquit, 'utilitatem tuam, quod sis valde strinuus, ideoque veni, ut habitem tecum. Nam noveris, si in transmarinis partibus aliquem cognovissem utiliorem tibi, expetissem utique cohabitationem eius'. At ille gaudens eam sibi in coniugio copulavit. Quae concipiens, peperit filium vocavitque nomen eius Chlodovechum. Hic fuit magnus et pugnatur egregius.²⁰⁵

An ironic turn, as pointed out by Joe-Ann MacNamara and Suzanne Wemple, is that the above mentioned Clovis (and the rulers who followed in his footsteps) issued codes that infringed on the freedoms his mother had had.²⁰⁶

Gregory certainly didn't see the irony in his description of Basina's divorce or if he did, decided not to let his readers in on it. In fact, he describes her leaving of her husband, a king at that, as if she had gone for a simple stroll to the seaside. Of course, she was not simply marrying another man, but also humiliating her husband in the course of it. The explanation for Gregory's unperturbed attitude in this instance could simply be that these events occurred long before his time and had a near-mythical quality to it and so rendered obsolete any qualms a bishop like Gregory might have had.²⁰⁷

204 HF 2.12.

205 "During the reigns of Bisinus and Childeric, Basina, whom we mentioned above, left her husband and came to Childeric. He very carefully questioned her as to why she had come. "I know your warlike qualities," she said, "and that you are quite restless, and so I have come to live with you. And you should know that were I to find out about someone more warlike than you across the seas I would have no qualms about seeking out his companionship." He cheerfully married her. She conceived and gave birth to a son whom she called Clovis. He was a great man and an outstanding warrior." Murray, p.5.

206 See Jo-Ann MacNamara and Suzanne F. Wemple. "Marriage and divorce in the Frankish kingdom." in: *Women in Medieval Society* (1976): 95-124, p.100. With high probability, the *Pactus Legis Salicae* was issued by Clovis, and Clovis' letters to his bishops constitute the earliest piece of datable Merovingian legislature. Compare Wood, "Kingdoms", p.118.

207 This is one of the reasons why I have focused on the Books describing events during Gregory's time. It gives a much clearer picture of Gregory's mindset when the events he

An interesting case is that of Tetradia, the widow of one Desiderius. It is a complicated story of men wanting to marry Tetradia, but the core of the events is this: Tetradia was married to Count Eulalius, who happened to be a terrible husband: sleeping with the servants, beating his wife when returning from night-long bouts of excess and stealing her jewelery. The nephew of the man wants to save the woman (and marry her), but he is afraid for her life, so he sends her away to Duke Desiderius. She leaves, taking most of her husband's jewelery, as well as one of her sons. As Eulalius finds out, he kills his nephew. Desiderius hears of this and conveniently enough his wife has died as well. So he decides to marry Tetradia. It gets even more complicated then.²⁰⁸

Gregory goes on to randomly recount various misemeanours and crimes of Eulalius, before recounting how in a deal Eulalius sent off one of his sons to become a priest. Finally, Gregory explains how Eulalius sued his ex-wife Tetradia, on the basis of her stealing his possessions. Tetradia is found guilty and ordered to pay back four times the sum of what she took, but then left free to live with what she had inherited by her father (who, according to Gregory, was of "humble origin").²⁰⁹

The chapter is interesting not least for the description of how the divorce between the woman Tetradia and Count Eulalius was effected. Believing the account of Gregory, the woman simply left her husband and found shelter with another man.

describes are not meddled with by time and tradition.

208 HF 10.8.

209 See Brown, p.25 for a discussion of this episode in light of Gregory's role as a representative of God on earth, uncovering the deeds of miscreants like Eulalius.

3.2.2.2.2 Widowed

Gregory's *Histories* are spotted with widowed queens, not least due to the fact that Merovingian kings were surprisingly often murdered or dying in combat. Symptomatic for the difficult relationship with power widows had are the following two examples of Brunhild's actions.

How a widowed queen could still wield power is shown in Book VI, chapter 4 of Gregory's *Histories*.²¹⁰ This episode, detailed in the chapter about Fredegund²¹¹, displays not only Gregory's respect for the woman who fends off adversaries not unlike her late husband would have done, it also displays the sort of power a widowed queen could still enjoy.

Brunhild still stands up against the men threatening her supporter Lupus and it doesn't come to a fight. The men do plunder his house and drive him into exile, but Brunhild's intervention most probably kept him from being killed.

But Brunhild's power as a widow wasn't all-encompassing: in a later chapter Gregory mentions how at the synod of Mâcon, Brunhild lodged a complaint with King Childebert about her daughter Ingund, who was still detained in Africa. Her complaint was largely ignored.²¹² It is important to note that Ingund wasn't just Brunhild's daughter, she was also the king's sister. A few chapters later Gregory describes the death of both Ingund and her husband Hermenegild.²¹³

Of course, the real fall from power was much more obvious in 613 when Brunhild, after the death of Theuderic, her grandson, was suddenly without a supporter. Chlothar II, son of her greatest adversary Fredegund, took revenge on her by subjecting her to cruel humiliation and killing her in a most atrocious manner.²¹⁴

210 HF 6.4.

211 See the chapter "Fredegund" in this paper.

212 HF 8.21.

213 HF 8.28.

214 See Wemple, pp.66-67.

3.2.3 The People

3.2.3.1 Free

Given their much smaller importance to historic events, there are less episodes in Gregory's *Histories* pertaining to the free, but some valuable details are still to be extricated from Gregory's tales. One of these is the story of Domnola, the wife to one Nectarius and daughter of the bishop of Rennes. Domnola was in a territorial quarrel with Bobolen, Fredegund's referendary, about a vineyard, which she claimed she had inherited from her father. In the course of the dispute, Bobolen has her and her servants, man and woman, killed.

Multa enim mala hoc tempore gesta sunt. Nam Domnola, relictā quondam Burgulini, quae fuit filia Victuri Redonensis episcopi, quam Nectarius' matrimonio copulaverat, intentione de vineis cum Boboleno, referendario Fredegundis, habebat. Audiens autem ea in his vineis advenisse, misit nuntius obtestantes, ne ingredi penitus in hac possessione praesumeret. Quod illa dispiciens et res patris sui fuisse proclamans, ingressa est. Tunc ille, commota seditione, super eam cum armatis viris inruit. Qua interfecta, vineas vindecavit resque deripuit et tam viros quam mulieres qui cum ea erant interfecit gladio, nec remansit ex his, nisi qui fuga labi potuit.²¹⁵

Gregory later details in chapter 43 of the same Book how by orders of King Childebert, Bobolen and everyone involved in the slaughtering were punished.²¹⁶

This episode is interesting for a few reasons, the first of which is Domnola's inheritance of her father's vineyard. It shows that non-aristocratic women were indeed in a position to have material wealth at

²¹⁵ HF 8.32. "Many wicked deeds were done at this time. Domnola, daughter of Victor, bishop of Rennes, widow of the late Burgolen, and afterwards wife of Nectarius, had a dispute with Bobolen, Fredegund's referendary, over vineyards. When he heard she was visiting the vineyards, he sent a message objecting to her daring to enter the property. She disregarded the message, and announcing that the property had belonged to her father, entered it. Thereupon Bobolen caused a commotion, attacking her with armed men. He killed her, claimed the vineyards, and seized property. The men and women with her were put to the sword, with no survivors but those who fled." Murray, p.193.

²¹⁶ See HF 8.43.

their disposal. The second is that there is an instance of a woman in power. Nectarius does not appear in this episode, and Gregory obviously doesn't expect him to. From what we gather through Gregory's writing, Domnola is the one quarreling with Bobolen, while her husband is curiously absent. It should be mentioned that Nectarius had been the centre of Fredegund's ire before. In chapter 15 of book VII, Gregory details how Fredegund tries to have Nectarius incarcerated, which plan is thwarted by his brother Badegisil, bishop of Le Mans.²¹⁷

It is important to note that Domnola is not treated differently from a man, because of or rather, despite her gender. While in the royal echelons, an attack on a woman might have been warranted simply by the power she yields, in this case it is rather curious how unscrupulously Bobolen attacks and kills not just her, but also her servants.²¹⁸ An attempt at an explanation could be made by considering the above mentioned altercation between Fredegund and Nectarius. It is therefore possible that in absence of her husband, Domnola suffered for the unsuccessful plan of Fredegund to have her husband sent to jail. The fact that Bobolen was Fredegund's referendary suggests this.

In Book VI, chapter 36, Gregory's describing an incident of, in the modern eye, horrible injustice, serves as yet another example for the inequality in treatment of the sexes:

²¹⁷ See HF 7.16.

²¹⁸ For a discussion of the actual power of a female member of a royal Merovingian family, see Guy Halsall, "Settlement", pp.63-66.

Clericus quidam extitit ex Cinomannica urbe, luxuriosus nimis amatorque mulierum et gulae ac fornicationis omnique immunditiae valde deditus. Hic mulieri cuidam saepius scorto commixtus, comam capitis totondit, mutatoque virili habitu, secum in alia civitate deduxit, ut suspicio auferetur adulterii, cum inter incognitos devenisset. Erat enim mulier ingenua genere et de bonis orta parentibus. Conperto autem post dies multos propinqui eius quae acta fuerant, ad ulciscendam humilitatem generis sui velocius properant, repertumque clericum vinctum custodiae mancipant, mulierem vero ignem consumunt. Et, sicut cogit auri sacra famis, clericum sub pretio venundari procurant, ea videlicet ratione, ut aut esset qui redimeret, aut certe morti addiceretur obnoxius. Cumque haec Aetherio episcopo delata fuissent, misericordia motus, datis XX aureis, eum ab imminente exemit interitu.²¹⁹

The priest's immoral behaviour in this instance is referenced multiple times in this short paragraph of Gregory's narration. While the short story about this immoral priest is there to exemplify the moral status of Aetherius, the Bishop of Lisieux, it is utterly devoid of any criticism by Gregory of the family's actions against the woman. He does point out the danger for the priest, whose life was on the line, the fate of the woman – namely her being killed – is only referenced by fact: she is burned alive.

The small extent of words spent on this episode, allows us to assume that this way of reinstating the lost honour of the family was both within legal and moral bounds, in Gregory's and his contemporaries' view. It has been shown in other instances of Gregory's narrations, that he does point out lawless behaviour, so the fate of the woman in this case must have been within social, moral and legal boundaries.

219 "There lived in the town of Le Mans a certain priest, who was fond of fine living and who was always having affairs with women, a gluttonous man, much given to fornication and other forms of immorality. There was one particular woman with whom he had intercourse regularly. He persuaded her to have her hair cut short, dressed her up as a man and went off with her to another city, thinking that when he was among strangers he would not be suspected of immorality. She was a woman of free birth and she came from a good family. A long time passed, but eventually her relations came to realize what had happened. They hastened to avenge the dishonour done to their family. They laid hands on the priest, tied him up and had him thrown into prison. The woman they burned alive. The lust for gain, which afflicts us all, is so irresistible that they eventually tried to sell the priest for ransom, thinking that someone would assuredly pay something to bail him out. Had they failed, they would have had him killed. As it was the news reached Aetherius. He was moved to compassion and paid over twenty pieces of gold to save the priest from immediate execution." Thorpe, pp.366-367.

As the chapter progresses, it becomes clearer that the priest is not just a fornicator, but also lacking basic loyalty. He makes advances towards a woman whose son he teaches, but she quickly tells on him and the priest is again about to be attacked by an angry mob. Aetherius, as before, saves the priest's life. The priest's thankfulness seems limited, as he is conspiring with others to kill Aetherius, a plot which is detailed over the rest of this lengthy account and which, fortunately for its target, fails.²²⁰

3.2.3.2 Unfree

Regarding the rights and legal positions of the unfree woman, there is one very prominent story to be found in Gregory's Book V, chapter 3: Gregory recounts the tale of Rauching, who in his own right seemed to be – according to Gregory – most inclined to violence and depravity.²²¹

The story is of one of Rauching's maids, who gets married to another serf without her master's knowledge and consent.²²² As Rauching finds out about this, he is made to swear an oath that he would not do them any harm by the priest who married the maid. Rauching does so, but it is a most devious kind of oath:

At ille, cum diu ambiguus cogitatione siluisset, tandem conversus ad sacerdotem, posuit manus suas super altarium cum iuramento, dicens, quia: 'Numquam erunt a me separandi, sed potius ego faciam, ut in hac coniunctione permaneant, quia, quamquam mihi molestum fuerit, quod absque mei consilii coniventia ista sint gesta, illud tamen libens amplectur, quod nec hic ancillam alterius neque haec extranei servum acceperit'.²²³

220 HF 6.36.

221 HF 5.03.

222 As an unfree, the woman was legally speaking Rauching's property. Any change in the value – which marriage would have meant – was therefore his rightful concern.

223 "Rauching remained silent for a while, not knowing quite what to think, but at last, turning to the bishop, he placed his hand upon the altar and swore an oath. 'They will never be parted by me,' he said, 'but I shall see to it that they remain in this union, because, although I am annoyed that this was connived at without my consent, still I am happy with the fact that neither of them has married the slave of another master.'" Murray, p.78.

Rauching honours this oath, but in a very literal sense. Right after leaving the church at which he has given this oath, he has his servants cut down a tree, hollow it out and then makes his servants bury the newlywed alive inside the tree.

Et statim iussit elidere arborem truncatamque columnam eius per capita cuneo scissam praecipit excavare; effossamque in altitudine trium aut quattuor pedum humum, deponi vas iubet in foveam. Ibique puellam ut mortuam componens, puerum desuper iactare praecipit, positoque operturium, fossam humo replevit sepelivitque eos viventes, dicens, quia: 'Non frustravi iuramentum meum, ut non separarentur hi in sempiternum'.²²⁴

The priest, realizing his error of judgment in trusting the oath of Rauching, comes running but only manages to save the man. The maid has died.²²⁵ Rauching's rather horrible fate is later detailed in chapter 9 of book IX, but there is no reference to any immediate repercussions the man had to suffer for his affront. As is detailed in Margarete Weidemann's cultural history of the Merovingians, unfrees were indeed regarded as property. Hence, Gregory regards Rauching's actions as reprehensible, but rather for deceiving the priest than his taking the life of his maid²²⁶.

In contrast to that, Gregory also describes how an unfree woman could end up becoming free and in the process amass riches, which is detailed in chapter 44 of Book VII. It is of rather startling content:²²⁷

Fuit tunc temporis mulier, quae spiritum phitonis habens multum praestabat dominis divinando questum eoque in gratia proficit, ut, ab his libera facta, suis voluntatibus laxaretur. Si quis enim aut furtum aut aliquid mali perferret, statim haec, quo fur abiit, cui tradedit vel quid ex hoc fecerit, edicebat. Congregabat cotidie aurum argentumque, procedens in ornamentis, ita ut putaretur esse aliquid divinum in populis. Sed cum Agerico Veridunense episcopo haec nuntiata fuissent,

224 "He at once ordered a tree to be felled and limbed, the trunk split with wedges driven in to its ends and hollowed out. He had the hollowed trunk placed in a trench dug in the ground to a depth of three or four feet. He laid the girl out in it as if she were dead and the male slave thrown in on top. Putting the lid in tree trunk, he filled in the trench." Murray, p.78.

225 See HF 5.3.

226 See Weidemann, pp.283-289.

227 HF 7.44.

misit ad conpraehendendum eam. Quam adprehensam et ad se adductam, iuxta id quod in Actibus legimus apostolorum, cognovit in eam inmundum spiritum esse phitonis. Denique cum exorcismum super eam diceret ac frontem oleo sancto perungeret, exclamavit daemonium et quid esset prodidit sacerdoti. Sed cum per eum a puella non extruderetur, abire permissa est. Cernens vero puella, quod in loco illo habitare non possit, ad Fredegundem reginam abiit ibique et latuit.²²⁸

This episode is peculiar for a few things: first, there is a woman who allegedly possesses the power of divination and is therefore set free by her masters to go about and make a living from this power. It could be attributed to Gregory's sometimes terse style that he does not comment more on this and the fact that the woman does seem to possess supernatural powers, but it is nevertheless strange to see someone like Gregory, who as mentioned in the introductory chapters about his life, had no soft spot for the supernatural outside the realm of the Church, not writing about this further. Maybe her acceptance at Fredegund's court had something to do with Gregory's reluctance to judge her more harshly.

The second puzzling element is the failed exorcism of the woman. Here Gregory finds the time to point out that her divinations were in fact against current interpretations of the Bible, but as Ageric, the bishop of Verdun, tries to exorcise these perceived evil spirits, he is simply said to have failed. In a startling turn of events, the bishop simply lets the woman go who then finds refuge with Queen Fredegund. As Gregory's *Histories* show, exorcisms usually ended far worse, not unusually in death for the exorcised.

228 "There was, at this time, a woman who had a spirit of divination and won great gain for her owners by prophesying and she won such favor from them that she was set free and left to her own devices. And if any one suffered from theft or any wrongdoing would at once tell where the thief had gone, to whom he had given the property, or what he had done with it. She gathered together gold and silver every day and went forth in rich clothing so that she was thought among the people to be something divine But when this was reported to Ageric, bishop of Verdun, he sent to arrest her. When she was arrested and brought to him he perceived, according to that which we read in the Acts of the Apostles, that there was in her an unclean spirit of divination. And when he said a formula of exorcism over her and anointed her forehead with holy oil, the demon cried out and revealed to the bishop what it was. But since he could not drive it from the woman she was allowed to go. And the woman saw that she could not dwell in the place and she went off to queen Fredegund and remained hid." Thorpe, p. 426.

What we see in this episode is the fact that unfree women could, if so decided upon, be let free by their masters, but were still targets for other powerful people – especially those who were part of the clergy. Manumission, the act of freeing a slave, was rather rare during Merovingian times and the church did in fact prohibit the freeing of slaves working for the church, in order not to weaken their economic position.²²⁹

²²⁹ See Rachel Stone, *Morality and masculinity in the Carolingian empire*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 2011. p.185.

3.3 Relationships within families

Due to the nature of Gregory's subject matter, which focused mostly on the ruling parties of the Merovingian kingdom, the relationships detailed are often those between members of the same royal family. The following chapter will try to shed some light on the way Gregory looked at and described these relationships.

Were they mainly dominated by the social status of those involved, or did the fact that they were related play any part in their interactions with each other? How did the role of the mother determine the position of the woman, and how far was the desire to further the family lines in relation to furthering the well-being of the ones it concerned?

The first sub-chapter will be dealing with the relationship between mother and child, the second with the position of the father. The relationship through marriage has been discussed in the above chapter on rights of married women in some detail already.

3.3.1 Mother and Child

Before delving into relationships between mothers and children in Gregory's *Histories*, the following quote on studying the history of parenting in the Middle Ages should be noted:

The history of parenting and childhood confronts us with a series of questions in which notions of the natural - here understood as the biological - and the socially constructed must be raised to the forefront of the historian's consciousness. We need to define childhood, to explore the relational nature of conceptions of childhood, motherhood and father-hood. We must acknowledge the presence of other forms of parenting, such as pro-parenting and grandparenting, and utilise them in our quest to define both the limits and the interplay of the natural and the social. We must [...] face the epistemological problems which that history poses: what and how can we know?²³⁰

So while this sub-chapter is not at all intended as a thorough look into parenting during the time of the Merovingian Franks, it is important to keep remembering that what we perceive as "normal" when it comes to an area as intimate but also all-encompassing as parenthood, might not have been the norm with the Merovingian Franks. Still, some of the instances laid out below may still, even with differently applied standards, paint a seemingly bleak picture of relationships between mothers and their children. That this is mainly owed due to a lack of real data about everyday life during the period of the Merovingian Franks is laid out by Albrecht Classen:

Depending on the textual genre, we find more or less information about children, and general, absolutist statements about the status of children in the Middle Ages can hardly be formulated because much depends on the cultural framework, the historical and geographic period, the religious background, and the philosophical orientation of the chronicler. Not surprisingly, both the history of mentality and the history of everyday life of the age of the Merovingians and the Carolingians, for instance, and hence the history of childhood, continue to be serious desiderata.²³¹

230 See Pauline Stafford, "Review article: Parents and children in the early middle ages." in: *Early Medieval Europe* 10.2 (2001): 257-271, pp.257.

231 See Albrecht Classen, *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin, 2005, p.28.

That said, the following quote by Dick Harrison shows how the role of mother was in fact not just one of many, but probably the most important role for a royal woman:

As has been demonstrated many times in this study, royal motherhood was far more important than royal marriage. A king's wife could be discarded and locked up in a convent. The king's mother, on the other hand, was destined to remain a powerful individual for as long as she or her royal sons were alive, either at the royal court or (as in the case of Clovis I's widow, Chlothild) at a residence of her own.²³²

As Harrison goes on, the example of Faileuba and the plot to remove her from court, which I have described in an earlier chapter, show how her enemies saw her position as the mother of the heir of the Austrasian throne as too strong. And plots to remove mothers by force from the court weren't the only pitfalls of that position. Audovera, whom we met earlier as a wife of Chilperic, had a position at court which was promising, but after both Fredegund and Galsvinth becoming new wives of Chilperic, she'd lost not only her position of queen, but her children too lost their status as rightful heirs to the throne.

Even for a queen as powerful as Brunhild, losing control over her son, or rather the heir of her kingdom, can be a dangerous situation. In Book VI, chapter 4, she is openly threatened by Ursio as being powerless, now that her son, Childebert II, is being guarded by the aristocracy until he has come of age and is able to reign by himself (it is the year 581, six years after the murder of his father, the late King Sigibert).²³³

As with most topics in his *Histories*, when it comes to the aristocracy and royalty, Gregory's depiction of the bond between mother and child is not an entirely consistent one. It can be assumed that personal disposition played a far larger part in the relationship between child and mother than any societal boundaries or laws dictated.

²³² Harrison, "Age of Abbesses and Queens", p.351.

²³³ See HF 6.4.

One of the most glaring examples of a difficult relationship is Fredegund's und Rigunth's relationship. Rigunth, who was Fredegund's only daughter, was supposed to be married off to Spain, and sent off with a substantial dowry, but as word reaches her entourage that her father has been murdered, her dowry is stolen. A furious Fredegund manages to bring her back unharmed, which puts Rigunth back under her mother's control.²³⁴ Rigunth's subsequent behaviour reflects her displeasure with such an arrangement.

The animosity between mother and daughter culminates in a scene of attempted murder by Fredegund. Rigunth, fed up with her mother and her supposed moral superiority, ridicules her about her upbringing and they both quarrel and fight continuously. Here is Gregory's account of what happens then:

'Quid mihi molesta es, filia? Ecce res patris tui, quae penes me habentur, accipe et utere ut libet'. Et ingressa in registo, reseravit arcam monilibus ornamentisque praetiosis refertam. De qua cum diutissime res diversas extrahens filiae adstanti porregeret, ait ad eam: 'Iam enim lassata sum; inmitte tu', inquit, 'manum et eiece, quod inveneris'. Cumque illa, inmisso brachio, res de arca abstraheret, adpraehenso mater operturio arcae, super cervicem eius inlisisit. Quod cum in fortitudine praemeret atque gulam eius axis inferior ita adterreret, ut etiam oculi ad crepandum parati essent, exclamavit una puellarum, quae erat intrinsecus, voce magna, dicens: 'Currite, quaeso, currite; ecce! domina mea a genetrice sua graviter suggillatur'. Et inrumpentes cellolam, qui coram foribus eorum praestulabantur adventum, erutam ab imminente interitu puellam adduxerunt foris. Post ista vero inter easdem inimicitiae vehementius pullulantes, et non de alia causa maxime, nisi quia Rigundis adulteria sequebatur, semper cum eisdem rixae et caedes erant.²³⁵

234 See HF 7.39.

235 "Why do you annoy me so, daughter?" said her mother. "Here, take the things of your father that I have in my possession and do with them as you please." She went into the storeroom and opened a chest full of necklaces and costly jewelery. When for some time she had taken various items from the chest and handed them to her daughter, who was standing by, she said, "I am tired now. You put in your hand and take out what you find." As Rigunth thrust her arm in and was taking things from the chest, her mother seized hold of the lid and slammed it down on her daughter's neck. She forced it down and the chest's lower edge pressed against Rigunth's throat so that even her eyes were ready to burst. One of the female servants who was in the storeroom shouted out, "Please come quickly, come quickly. My mistress is being throttled to death by her mother." Those waiting for them to come out burst into the room, rescued the girl from imminent death, and took her outside. After this affair the hostility between mother and daughter increased in intensity. There were continued quarrels, and blows were exchanged between them. The main reason for the trouble was

There is no passage in Gregory's *Histories* that rivals this display of a troubling relationship between mother and daughter or even parent and child – and there are many troubling relationships in Gregory's *Histories*. The sheer enmity between Rigunth, the Visigothic bride who wasn't²³⁶, and her mother, the queen who came from the ashes and never managed to rid her image of it, is palpable in every sentence. It is also

Now Gregory's account may have been as embellished as those numerous passages mentioned earlier²³⁷, but that there was indeed bad blood between mother and daughter seem plausible enough. There is no further mention of Rigunth for the remaining one Book of Gregory's *Histories*, so we don't know what became of her. The fact that Gregory downplays the trouble within the relationship of mother and daughter by referencing alleged “adulterous relationships” as the cause is either a sign of naivety or a lack of interest in the real cause. Considering Gregory's propensity for exact analyses of situations, it is most probably a lack of interest to rouse any sort of empathy for Fredegund in his readers. She was, after all, Gregory's archetype of the bad queen.

As Ian Wood also points out in his essay “The Secret Histories of Gregory of Tours”, Fredegund's relationship to her other children wasn't unencumbered by a certain ambiguity:

Rigunth's fondness for adulterous relationships.” Murray, p.217.

236 For an analysis of this episode and the events preceding it, mainly Rigunth's marriage that failed to happen, see Julia Hörmann, “Die Historiae Gregors von Tours als Quelle für Geschlechterrollen und Geschlechterbeziehung im frühen Mittelalter dargestellt am Verhältnis der Eltern zu ihren Söhnen und Töchtern” in: *Frauen und Geschlechter. Bilder - Rollen - Realitäten in den Texten antiker Autoren zwischen Antike und Mittelalter*, eds. Robert Rollinger and Christoph Ulf (Böhlau Verlag: Wien, Köln, Weimar 2006) 245-74, pp.260-61

237 Compare the chapter in this paper on the relationship between Fredegund and Brunhild.

She appears to her best advantage in support of her children. Attempting to prevent them dying of plague by burning the tax-registers, torturing the supposed killers of her son Theuderic, helping Rigunth before and after her uncompleted journey to Spain, protecting Chlothar after Chilperic's murder, making offerings to ensure his survival, and ultimately having him baptised. Yet even in her relations with her children she is not entirely laudable; she wanted her child Samson, who had contracted dysentery to be killed, while yet unbaptised, for fear that she might be infected.²³⁸

Especially the episode about the death of Fredegund's son Theuderic, recounted by Gregory in book VI, chapter 35, is a powerful display of Fredegund's wrath and, one might argue, dedication to her son, even though what is related as grief might simply be pure blood-lust.

After her son Theuderic has died of fever, Fredegund is convinced he is the victim of witchcraft and poison, so she rounds up a few women of the town and starts torturing them:

Interea adpraehensis mulieribus urbis Parisiacae tormentis adplicat ac verberibus cogit fatere quae noverant. At ille confitentur se maleficas esse, et multos occumbere leto se fecisse testatae sunt, addentes illud, quod nulla ratione credi patior: 'Filium', aiunt, 'tuum, o regina, pro Mummoli praefecti vita donavimus'.²³⁹

Interesting in this chapter is also the fact that Gregory later on quite openly confesses to not believing what was said about Mummolus being the instigator of the murder of Theuderic. While he at times during the course of the *Histories* expresses doubt about what is relayed to him, this time it's actual incredulity. Whether he really did not believe that witchcraft or sorcery were involved, or whether his remark was meant to openly accuse the queen of justifying her torture through claims of such, is unclear. Considering how open Gregory was to claims of

²³⁸ Wood, "Secret histories", p.258.

²³⁹ "Meanwhile women were arrested in the city of Paris. The queen applied torture to them, forcing them with the beatings to confess what they knew. They admitted that they were witches and testified that they had caused many to die, adding something I cannot believe for any reason. 'Queen, we offered your son in exchange for Mummolus the prefect,' they said." Murray, p.138.

witchcraft and how unsympathetic he was towards women accused of it, it may well be that he decided to include this remark simply to spite the queen.

In one episode recounted by Gregory, the mother in fact gives away her son to the king in order to help in yet another quarrel over succession. Gregory tells the story of Gundovald, an alleged son of Chlothar I. His mother presents the boy to Childebert I. and offers him to the king, as he has no son. He does take him in, but when Chlothar hears of this, he demands from his brother to send back the boy. The boy comes back, but the fashion of the boy's hair puts off his father, who proclaims it's not his son after all. When Chlothar dies, Gundovald is sent to yet another king, ordered to cut his hair as was done by Chlothar after returning from Childebert, until he finally settles in Constantinople.²⁴⁰ The actual recount of Gundovald the usurper is not the most interesting part here, but rather the way his mother tries to turn him into an heir of one of the kings. As we've seen above, being the mother of a king or the heir of a king gave a woman a powerful position, something Gundovald's mother most possibly desired. We have no more information about Gundovald in Gregory's *Histories*, in fact, there is no information about him at all anywhere besides the *Histories*. Consequently, there is no more information about his mother either, so we are at a loss to understand whether she was someone actually intimate with the king or simply a woman who saw her chance at a position she couldn't have achieved by any other means.

Incidentally, a reference that pertains to fathers and their children can be found in another chapter concerned with Gundovald, who in an off-hand remark about his marriage states the following²⁴¹:

"iuncxit; ibique uxorem accipiens, duos filius generavi. Qua mortua, adsumptis mecum liberis, Constantinopolim abii." ²⁴²

²⁴⁰ See HF 6.24.

²⁴¹ See HF 7.36.

²⁴² "There I married and became the father of two sons. When my wife died, I took my children with me and went off to Constantinople." Murray, p.168.

According to Gundovald's tale, he married, fathered two sons, and after his wife died, took his sons with him. The way this is phrased, it is insinuated that Gundovald did not see his sons nor his wife very often. The woman was responsible for the children and only when she died did the husband take responsibility for his sons.

The most prominent mother-daughter relationship portrayed in Gregory's *Histories* is that of Ingitrude and Berthegund. It is not exactly clear whether they were related to the Merovingians at all, but as Ingitrude is referenced in Gundovald's speech, from which the above excerpt about his sons is taken, she was obviously someone who had close connections to the court.²⁴³

The story of the two women is rife with conflict, and has been summarized well by Dick Harrison before²⁴⁴: In short, the mother, Ingitrude, founder of a nunnery in Tours, wants to have her daughter come and join her, by any means necessary. But Berthegund is married and hesitant, which leads to Ingitrude employing a number of tricks to make her daughter bow to her will. Berthegund finally caves in, but over a series of bad decisions, scheming on her mother's part and intervention by her brother, a bishop, finally lands at a low point as described by herself in chapter 33 of book IX:²⁴⁵

'Vae mihi, quae audivi consilio matris meae iniquae. Ecce!
frater meus obiit; ecce! a viro derelicta sum, a filiis separata;
et quo ibo inflex, vel quid faciam?'²⁴⁶

In her quest to regain her status, she is trying to procure as much from her father's inheritance as possible, but Ingitrude gets in her way again. Only when her mother dies does Berthegund manage to collect her father's inheritance, as well as her mother's, in full. In the end, she

243 See HF 6.36.

244 See Harrison, "Age of Abbesses and Queens", pp.186-194.

245 See HF 9.33.

246 "What a fool I have been," she said, 'to listen to the advice of my stupid mother! Now my brother is dead, my husband has left me and I am cut off from my children. How unhappy I am! Where shall I go, and what shall I do?" Thorpe, p.520.

returns to Poitiers, never to be heard of again, at least in Gregory's *Histories*.

As pointed out by Harrison²⁴⁷, the relationship between Ingtrude and Berthegund was mostly based on an overpowering mother and a probable mutual propensity for greed. While Berthegund at first resists her mother's call to join her at the nunnery, she gives in later. The death of her brother then sparks her interest in the inheritance of her father, turning her against her mother. The quarrel between the two women, in the end, turned into a conflict which more resembles the conflicts between magnates of the time than a dispute between mother and daughter.

As for an actual connection between the mother and the daughter based on what we would nowadays regard as a healthy relationship, nothing of this has been noted by Gregory.

While Wemple states that it was important to be on good terms with one's relations especially for times of need, this most probably only pertained to children, siblings or cousins, but not necessarily to mothers and their children. Wemple does, for example, cite Berthegund's contact with her brother as an example for siblings helping each other out when in need.²⁴⁸ In light of how her brother was maybe more interested in helping out his mother's aim of getting Berthegund to join the convent than to help her out escaping her husband, Wemple's argument seems only slightly dubious.

Ingtrude first and foremost had the desire to set up a convent and hand down the position of abbess to one of her relatives: a hereditary convent, so to speak. As she failed to secure her daughter for this position, she put in place a niece.²⁴⁹

247 See Harrison, "Age of Abbesses and Queens", p.193.

248 See Wemple, p.58.

249 See HF 10.12. That, in the end, did not deter Berthegund from relieving the convent of all its possessions after Ingtrude's death, which is an apt example of no innate love lost between relatives during the time of the Merovingians.

An interesting display of power by a mother is described by Gregory in book X, chapter 5:

Ipsi quoque Chuppa, iterum commotis quibusdam de suis, filiam Badigysili quondam Caenomannensis episcopi diripere sibi in matrimonio voluit. Inruens autem nocte cum coneo sociorum in villam Maroialensi, ut voluntatem suam expleret, praesensit eum dolumque eius Magnatrudis matrisfamilias, genetrix scilicet puellae; egressaque cum famulis contra eum, vi reppulit, caesis plerisque ex illis, unde non sine pudore discessum est.²⁵⁰

Chuppa, a Count under the reign of the late King Chilperic, tries to steal a girl to marry her, but his plans are thwarted by the mother of the girl. Gregory's description, especially his claiming how it was a "discreditable affair", sounds slightly crushed, as if he hadn't minded a different outcome but couldn't for good reason just write so.

The reason for this could lie in the fact that the mother of said girl was Magnatrude, the widow of the late bishop Badegisil. Both bishop and wife had been responsible for ferociously cruel attacks, thievery and, according to Gregory, overall malicious deeds.²⁵¹ It could well be that Gregory saw the episode of the daughter's thwarted abduction simply as yet another instance of brutality on the part of Magnatrude, and not a motive as honorable as one would suspect.

That a mother would also simply abandon her children seemed to have happened as well. In Book IX, chapter 19, Gregory recounts the murder of Sichar, an, according to Gregory, unruly and violent man no older than twenty.²⁵² He is killed by Chramnesind, who had been in conflict with Sichar before, as detailed by Gregory earlier.²⁵³

250 "On another occasion this same Chuppa assembled some of his men and tried to carry off as his bride the daughter of Badegisil, the late Bishop of Le Mans. With a band of followers he broke into a country house at Mareil to accomplish his design, but when the girl's mother, Dame Magnatrude, came to hear of his plans, she assembled her servants and sallied forth against him. Several of Chuppa's men were killed. He himself escaped, but it was a pretty discreditable affair." Thorpe, p.553.

251 HF 8.39.

252 HF 9.19.

253 HF 7.47.

After Chramnesind has split the head of Sichar, his servants quickly take off and, according to Gregory, his wife does the same:

Tranquilla quoque, coniux Sichari, relictis filiis et rebus viri sui in Toronico sive in Pectavo, ad parentes suos Mauriopes vicum expetiit; ibique et matrimonio copulata est.²⁵⁴

What could have been the reason for her to desert her children and property? Gregory gives no hint, as he doesn't seem concerned with the outcome of this marriage, but rather with how the king deals with Chramnesind's murder. Most probably she was afraid to suffer the same fate of her husband and leaving the children behind might have been the only solution. Considering that she didn't have any advantage from having born heirs the way someone in the higher echelons of the Merovingians might have had, her decision could have been purely motivated by self-preservation.

²⁵⁴ "Tranquilla, Sichar's wife, abandoned her children and her husband's property in Tours and Poitiers, and went off to join her own relations in the village of Pont-sur-Seine. There she married again." Thorpe, p.502.

3.3.2 Women and relatives

As Harrison points out, apart from husband and children, one more aspect that allowed a woman to enjoy certain political and social advantages was a family who could provide support. For some women this support was not given, for example Fredegund who came from a poor family, and was therefore needed to be gained via other means; Others had it secured via their position.²⁵⁵

Keeping in touch with your relations if no other political allies were present was essential in order to stay strong in one's position, especially if it was one as high as that of a queen. Galsvinth and Brunhild, both Visigothic princesses, had to make sure to keep in touch with relatives, as they were far away from their core family, which in any other case would have provided safety and security.²⁵⁶

The two following examples of how brothers impacted the lives of their sisters will close this chapter.

As mentioned before when detailing the relationship of Berthegund with her mother²⁵⁷, she received support from her brother. While the good nature of this support could be discussed more thoroughly, considering he was most probably trying to make his sister subject to the will of their mother, it can be seen as an example of one pillar of support for women. Brothers, after their fathers the most powerful relatives of a woman, had a crucial role in protecting their well-being and the honour of a woman during these times. Especially for royalty, where it was very important to uphold the honour of a woman, and even more so if she was not yet married or supposed to hold any position of power.²⁵⁸

255 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.353.

256 See Harrison, "Abbesses and Queens", p.347.

257 See this thesis, chapter "Rights".

258 How important this is becomes apparent when Fredegund is accused of being an adultress by King Guntram. Threehundred members of the aristocracy have to swear an oath that the father of her, Chlothar, is indeed Chilperic and not another man. See HF 8.9.

Another example of brothers defending the honour of a woman can be found in Book V, chapter 17. Gregory there describes how King Guntram killed the two sons of Magnachar, because apparently they had made hateful remarks about his wife. Why they made hateful remarks, Gregory does not explain in this chapter, but it becomes apparent when looking at chapter 25 in Book IV. Gregory names the various wives of King Guntram, one of them being Marcatrude, the daughter of said Magnachar.²⁵⁹ Gregory also details in this chapter Marcatrude's fall from grace at the court of Guntram, due to the alleged poisoning of Guntram's son from an earlier marriage. She dies soon after being expelled from court.

The two sons of Magnachar were thus the brothers of Marcatrude, and the hateful remarks against King Guntram's wife were most probably less directed towards the other queen than against King Guntram and his treatment of Marcatrude. His killing the two men shows how harsh not only the reaction to such an affront was, but also how adamant the brothers of Marcatrude must have argued on behalf of their sister, even though she had already passed by then. What, apart from defending their sister's honour, they could have gained from this is not clear, as there is no reference about the role they had played in regard to Guntram and his kingdom. It is not beyond reason to expect that they were indeed trying to – posthumously – defend the honour of their sister, especially since the reasons for her ousting were dubious. As Murray notes, the later chronicle of Fredegar cites even more reasons for why Marcatrude was expelled from court:

Reasons for Guntram's dismissal of Marcatrude. She was too fat, but the excuse used to dismiss her was her mother's misbehavior as a slut and concocter of potions.²⁶⁰

Even though what was written in the Fredegar chronicle may have been very far from the actual reasons of why she was expelled, these additions and the reasons cited by Gregory show how relatively easy it

²⁵⁹ See HF 4.25.

²⁶⁰ See Murray, p.236.

was to get rid of a wife, if the need arose. In such an instance, it was the woman's relatives who were supposed to keep up hers and her family's honour. Whether the offences of Marcatrude's brothers were directly in relation to her ousting from the court is not discernible, but considering that Gregory never mentioned them before, it can be deduced that they were indeed killed for trying to restore the honour of their sister and therefore their family.

4 Conclusion

In the course of this paper I have looked at the way women were portrayed by Gregory of Tours: their relationships, their status at court, their means of strengthening or keeping their positions of power.

Gregory of Tours and his important role as the historiographer of the Merovingian Franks is now undisputed, but in his position as both a member of a male dominated society and someone who had not only intimate knowledge of the courts but also was directly affected by them, his writings need to be viewed in that light.

A large part of this paper is devoted to the depiction of queens and their – if we want to call them so – male counterparts in stereotyping. The example for the “bad queen” was Fredegund, as the “good queen” the obvious choice was Brunhild. To anyone familiar with the women in Gregory's *Histories*, this is a logical choice, as documented especially in Dick Harrison's monograph. The different amounts of admirations for the queens present in Gregory's writings are glaring and obvious.

As no surprise then comes the insight from this chapter that the differences in depicting the males and females were indeed based on generally assumed gender stereotypes: the evil deeds of Fredegund are almost always combined with notions of witchcraft or some sort of black magic and shine a bad light on her character. Her male counterpart in malevolence, King Chilperic, on the other hand, is characterized mainly by the violent traits of a male member of the ruling class: For them, violence to strengthen their position was a necessary evil, and did not need witchcraft in order to be justified. Neither is their character much blackened by their violent acts, since they are seen as part of the male behaviour and a necessity.

The characterization of the “good queen”, Brunhild, as compared to that of Fredegund, also focused on female traits, for example her “fair

looks" which Gregory found necessary to emphasize.

In contrast to these descriptions of the most powerful of the Merovingian queens, the overall description of women in Gregory's *Histories* is diverse and not generally along specific stereotypes.

In the examples I provided in the chapter "Rights", the women Gregory mentions or writes about are of diverse background, but share the fact that they live in a society that is undoubtedly ruled by men. Even when, as in the example of Brunhild, they can still retain power after their dominant protector, in her case her husband, is gone, usually women were almost always dependent on either male members of their own family or husbands. As for the lower classes of society, women did not easily gain power and as the example of Rauching and his maid shows, life was fraught with seemingly random violence towards unfree women.

By looking at the rights bestowed upon women through heritage or status, some of my examples showed how marriage could be a stepping stone to greater power, as for Fredegund, as well as a step towards doom, as for Galsvinth or Marcatrude.

As was marriage, bearing children was also a crucial factor in determining whether women could gain or retain power. Especially in these questions of power and heritage, Gregory's depictions show little regard for relationships between mothers and their children in the way we would expect from our modern standpoint.

Also as the final chapter shows, relatives such as brothers held the role to uphold not only a woman's position of power and status, but also to retain the family's honour by avenging her death, maltreatments or, as one of the presented examples showed, even her part in an illicit relationship.

The examples in this thesis show that Gregory of Tours' descriptions of women, and his omission of otherwise expected depictions, were influenced by his own status as a cleric, his position at court and by stereotypes prevalent in his time.

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Images used

- Image 1: Krusch, Bruno, ed. *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Historiarum*. MGH: SRM 1. Impensis bibliopolii Hahniani: Hannover, 1951, p. 254.

Abbreviations

MGH – Monumenta Germaniae Historica

SRM – Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum

SRG – Scriptores rerum Germanicarum

HF – Historiae Francorum

CF – Chronicle of Fredegar

Abstract

Gregor von Tours, Bischof und Chronist, gilt mit seinen *Decem Libri* als die wichtigste narrative Quelle für die Zeit der merowingischen Franken. Ursprünglich als Weltchronik konzipiert, sind v.a. die letzten fünf Bücher jene Quelle, die am meisten Aufschluss über die merowingischen Franken geben.

Diese Arbeit befasst sich mit Gregors Wahrnehmung von Frauen und der Art und Weise, welchen Einfluss diese Wahrnehmung auf seine Darstellungen von Frauen in den *Historien* haben könnte.

Durch seine Nähe zum königlichen Hof hatte Gregor von Tours Einsicht in die Machenschaften der herrschenden Schicht, daher nehmen in seinen *Historien* vor allem Königinnen und Vertreterinnen der aristokratischen Stände einen größeren Raum ein.

Durch die Anekdoten Gregors, welche durch sein Auge für Details und seine Erzählkunst als seine Stärke gelten, ist es aber auch möglich, teilweise Näheres über den Status der Frauen in niederen Schichten zu erfahren. So sind in dieser Arbeit Beispiele nicht nur der großen Königinnen wie Brunhild und Fredegund zu finden, sondern auch jene, die das Los unfreier Frauen exemplifizieren sollen.

Gerade auch die Position von Frauen, welche entweder durch Scheidung oder Verwitwung auf sich selbst gestellt waren, wird in dieser Arbeit untersucht. Dabei wird der Frage nachgegangen, welche Möglichkeiten sich auch für diese Frauen geboten hatten, weiterhin ihre bisherigen Machtpositionen erhalten zu können. Augenmerk wird dabei auch darauf gerichtet, wie Gregor diese Anstrengungen bewertet, beziehungsweise, ob überhaupt Wertungen vorgenommen werden.

Schließlich werden auch die Beziehungen von Frauen mit ihren Familienmitgliedern betrachtet, und welche Position Gregor gerade in Hinsicht auf ein heutiges Verständnis solcher Beziehungen bezieht.

Lebenslauf

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