

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Creating Holy Kings in Merovingian Gaul:
Piety as a Prerequisite for Ideal Kingship in
Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*

By

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August 2023

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to my thesis advisor, Dr. Erin Galgay Walsh, for her continual support over the course of the project and her help with correcting and refining the paper. I would also like to thank my preceptor, Dr. David Cantor-Echols, for his guidance during my coursework and his help in the initial stages of my research.

Many thanks go out to my professors and friends who acted as sounding boards or pointed me to potential sources to consider in my research. Their willingness to discuss the questions of late antiquity (often over a meal) is greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank my parents, Thom and Sarah, for their enduring support, for all the museums they took me to when I was little, and their continued encouragement ever since. Above all I would like to thank my wife, Hannah, for her love and constant support through all the late nights and early mornings, and for making the days move easy. This would not have been possible without you.

I. Introduction

Gregory of Tours stands as a pivotal but enigmatic figure within the history of late antique Gaul. The Gallo-Roman bishop, during his tenure in the episcopate of Tours, straddled the realms of ecclesial and political authority as he frequented the Frankish courts of the Merovingian kings. Gregory, in addition to his ecclesial seat at Tours, also served in the courts of Sigebert I, Chilperic I, Guntram of Burgundy, and Childebert II. Gregory of Tours left behind his *Historiae*, a book of histories on the Merovingian world and politics. A critical literary archive for studying the Merovingian world, the *Historiae* provides a highly crafted and rhetorical account. As a writer, Gregory crafted his portraits of political leaders to communicate religious ideals and aspirations that aligned with his conception of a model ruler.

Gregory of Tours' *Historiae* illuminates the contours of Merovingian politics along with compelling portraits of its principal figures. For a modern scholar, the *Historiae* encompasses the main surviving literary material describing the Frankish kingdoms in the pre-Carolingian era. While previous scholarship has focused on the influence of the bishops within the Merovingian court, examining the relationship between bishops and rulers and how bishops such as Gregory understood the monarchs of Francia is still needed. This is especially true following the conversion of Clovis to Christianity in 496 AD. Within the text, Gregory of Tours (as a bishop and therefore connected politically with the kings of the Merovingians) presents the model of Merovingian kingship as one deeply integrated with notions of piety. Furthermore, Gregory depicts a model king is not only personally pious but also able to shape public perception of piety through their own actions. Gregory of Tours crafts these literary portraits of piety as integral to the role of a 'good' king in several ways: Gregory constructs righteous kingship through descriptions of piety within the Merovingian kings and descriptions of certain rulers as

proper kings, such as in his treatment of Clovis and Theudebert. After establishing the personal piety of a king that Gregory views favorably, he draws connections between those kings and their constituents, emphasizing the character of a proper king as both inwardly and outwardly pious as demonstrated through either miraculous circumstances within their lives as well as their patronage of ecclesial organizations. Additionally, Gregory emphasizes the imagery of righteous Merovingian kings by creating connections between contemporary rulers and earlier exemplars of piety such as Constantine or Martin of Tours. By tying Merovingian leaders to saints or other holy exemplars, Gregory further legitimizes their authority by crafting portraits of personally pious rulers, rendering piety as a qualification of legitimate rule. Viewing the world through his perspective as a bishop, Gregory constructs model kingship through Christian theological ideals projected upon Merovingian rulers, elevating ‘good’ kings into near saint-like figures and demonizing ‘poor’ kings into near-caricatures of religious heathens.

The purpose of this paper is to explore Gregory's understanding of ideal kingship within the Merovingian court, further expanding upon the connection between the bishops and the Merovingian state. Rather than examining the administrative positions that bishops held, such as in Martin Heinzelmann's *Bischofsherrschaft*,¹ debating the self-identity of Frankish groups in the style of Helmut Reimitz,² or discussing the intricacies of Clovis' conversion to Christianity or the Merovingian church (such as work conducted by Yitzhak Hen),³ this paper seeks to examine

¹ Martin Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien: Zur Kontinuität römischer Führungsschichten vom 4. bis zum 7. Jahrhundert. Soziale, prosopographische und bildungsgeschichtliche Aspekte*, Beihefte der Francia : Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte 5 (München, DE: Artemis Verlag, 1976).

² Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Fourth Series, Book 101 (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Helmut Reimitz, “*Pax Inter Utramque Gentem: The Merovingians, Byzantium and the History of Frankish Identity*,” in *East and West in the Early Middle Ages: The Merovingian Kingdoms in Mediterranean Perspective*, ed. Stefan Esders et al. (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 45–63.

³ Yitzhak Hen, “The Church in Sixth-Century Gaul,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 232–56; Yitzhak Hen,

how Gregory of Tours, writing from a position of episcopal authority, understood the role of the monarch within Merovingian Gaul and what characteristics Gregory understood as prerequisites to properly reign. This approach expands the modern image of Merovingian Gaul, helping to illustrate Gregory's view of piety as a central notion to proper rule. Rather than solely focusing on the office of bishop, this paper will help shed light on the office of king and how Gregory of Tours, as one of the main surviving literary sources for the period and an influential seat of ecclesiastical authority, understood the role of the Merovingian kings during a period of great religious and geopolitical change in western Europe.

Essential biographical background on Gregory of Tours must first be covered before discussing Gregory's *Historiae*, detailing his ascendancy to the episcopate and expanding upon some familial details that would likely later inform how Gregory came to the office of bishop. The state of Frankish politics, in particular the kingdom after the death of King Chlothar in 561 AD is equally essential in understanding Gregory's treatment of kings and piety, and will be addressed alongside some consideration of Gregory as a writer and his authorial mindset for the *Historiae* — this will all be considered in conjunction with prior historical research that makes note of previous interpretations of Gregory, ecclesial-political ties, and religious conversion before distinguishing the current project from previous forays into Merovingian history.

Following the section of historiography, the three forms of piety that Gregory saw as the conditions for proper rule by a monarch will be articulated— that of personal piety, public piety, and connections to past holy exemplars. Gregory's model for ideal kingship focuses on these aspects of piety, and selections from the *Historiae* (predominantly the first half of the *Historiae*, which focuses on earlier Frankish kings) will illustrate Gregory's differing treatment of these

Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481-751, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1995).

kings based on their respective piety. One last note of consideration will be made regarding Gregory favoring the kings who had a connection to his family and Austrasian background, before final conclusions are given at the end of the paper.

II. Background and Historiography

Gregory of Tours was born Georgius Florentius Gregorius on the 30th of November, 538 AD (the feast day of St. Andrew, which Gregory references in his *Liber de miraculis beati Andreae apostoli*).⁴ The youngest child of an Auvergnat senatorial aristocrat named Florentius and a woman named Armentaria (whose grandfather was Bishop Gregory of Langres, and was also related to Bishop Eufronius of Tours, Gregory's predecessor), Gregory enjoyed a position in a family of lower nobility that was also incredibly involved within the church. His mother's side had been described by King Chlothar as "a noble and great lineage," and his father came from a similarly distinguished family.⁵ Gregory ascended to the episcopate in August of 573 AD, at the age of 34, and held the role until his death in 594 AD.

Gregory himself seems to have been viewed relatively favorably by his contemporaries: after Gregory gained the friendship of Venantius Fortunatus in 565/7 AD, Fortunatus wrote favorably of Gregory, describing him as a *beate pater* (rather than the typical *alme pater*).⁶ Fortunatus also used *sacre acre* ('sacred in eminence') to describe Gregory in his poetry, and Gregory alone earns that illustrious description from Fortunatus. Furthermore, Fortunatus employs the metaphor of a bishop as a lighthouse, in which Gregory is "illuminating the people

⁴ Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 29.

⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, n.d., IV.15, see also III.19, where Gregory of Langres is described.

⁶ Michael Roberts, "Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours: Poetry and Patronage," in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 41; Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 33.

with the beam of his countenance” — high praise indeed, considering Saint Martin of Tours, the patron saint of France, is the only other person that Fortunatus compares to a lighthouse!⁷

Fortunatus was well received within the court of King Sigebert of Austrasia and his wife Brunhild and served as the court poet, in whose court Gregory also resided for a time.

Gregory’s family position likely helped with his achievements, regardless of Fortunatus’ favorable depictions. Gregory’s family connections would have helped him acquire favor from Sigebert, in addition to positive views from Fortunatus. The combination of Gregory’s noble familial ties in addition to his friendship with members of the court probably influenced his appointment to Tours by Sigebert’s hand. He had, after all, a strong legacy on both sides of his family. His mother Armentaria descended from a senatorial family, but one that had also held a number of episcopal positions: at least four members of Gregory’s maternal side had served as bishops, with that number expanding to eight bishops if including probable but unconfirmed kin-ties to Gregory’s family.⁸ Gregory’s position within the Gallo-Roman nobility, in addition to his family’s proven track record for episcopal appointments, combined with the favor he had carried with Sigebert and Brunhild, made him an obvious choice for the seat in Tours once his predecessor Eufronius passed.

Gregory’s paternal side was equally notable — his paternal grandfather, Georgius, had served as a senator, and was likely descended from the Aviti/Apollinares.⁹ The more notable member of Gregory’s paternal side falls to Gallus, his paternal uncle, and the Bishop of

⁷ Roberts, “Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours: Poetry and Patronage,” 42.

⁸ See Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 10. Heinzelmann has a wonderful family tree of Gregory that features titles with the relatives, along with confirmed, probable, and mentioned kin-ties/relationships for Gregory’s family.

⁹ The Aviti/Apollinares connection denotes a possible tie to figures such as Roman Emperor Avitus of the West and his son-in-law, Saint Gaius Sollius Modestus Appollinaris Sidonius, better known as Saint Apollinaris Sidonius.

Auvergne from 525–551 AD.¹⁰ After the death of Gregory’s father when Gregory was a child, Gregory was remitted into the care of his uncle. Gallus, “no doubt the first bishop of the family in the service of a Frankish king,” likely helped Gregory’s chances later when he was appointed to Tours. Gallus was in close contact with Theuderic I, the king of Rheims (which would later be reorganized into the kingdom of Austrasia); this level of connection between Gregory’s family and the Auvergne region likely helped Gregory’s ascension to the episcopacy and influenced his view of the Austrasians.¹¹

Gregory came from strong lines of episcopal, and therefore political, influence. Yitzhak Hen argues that as Roman central governance collapsed in the late fourth and early fifth century, the bishops of the Gallo-Roman church stepped into the roles of local governors, and the episcopate became an attractive position for members of the senatorial elite. This shift in dynamic of the bishops as members of state authority, or *Bischofsherrschaft* ‘rule by bishops,’ is essential for analysis of late antique Merovingian Gaul, with the relationship of power between the Gallo-Roman bishops and the Merovingian kings often playing a central role. The growth of *Bischofsherrschaft* led to “episcopal dynasties,” in which certain families were heavily involved in the church for multiple generations, and specific sees within the church tended to be held by a certain family, becoming ‘familial sees.’¹² The Bishopric of Tours was one such episcopate; Gregory himself states that “with the exception of five bishops, all the others who had held the

¹⁰ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 10,12-13. Gallus would also be sainted after his death.

¹¹ Martin Heinzelmann, “Gregory of Tours: The Elements of a Biography,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 13.

¹² Hen, “The Church in Sixth-Century Gaul,” 240; See also Heinzelmann, *Bischofsherrschaft in Gallien*; For discussions on the dynamic between bishops and the royal court, see the following sources: Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: AD 150-750*, History of European Civilization Library (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 124f; Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86, 125f; Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751* (London, UK: Longman, 1994), chap. 5; for Wood, the entirety of chapter 5 discusses ecclesiastical power, but pgs. 71, 75-77 are the most explicit in discussing the influence of bishops on the Merovingian court.

Bishopric of Tours were descendants of my ancestors.”¹³ Gregory utilized his lineage of episcopal and political influence in his writing of the *Historiae* to delineate the core tenets of a just ruler, which, due to his political and familial ties, likely would have been intended for the royal court to read and emulate.

Divided into ten books (the title is sometimes given as *Decem Libri Historiarum* ‘Ten Books of Histories’), the *Historiae* acts as a compiled history of the world; beginning with the Creation narrative of Genesis, each book covers an increasingly limited span of history up to Gregory of Tours’ life, with the final six books becoming annals of the Merovingian court. As such, Book I covers 5,596 years from Creation to the death of Saint Martin of Tours in 397 AD. Book II stretches 114 years, from Martin’s death to the death of Clovis in 511 AD, after the foundation of the Frankish kingdoms under Clovis. Books III & IV cover 37 and 27 years respectively, ending in 575 AD with the death of the Austrasian king Sigebert II. Books V to X, in total, cover only 16 years, from 575 AD to 591 AD, and are composed in annal form.¹⁴ The shift from long stretches of historical coverage to year-by-year entries speaks to Gregory’s change in the reasoning behind the *Historiae* — where earlier books of the *Historiae* deal with idealized leaders and miraculous events, acting as a more surveying approach to world history through a Gallic lens, the later books allow for a contemporary and exacting view of the Merovingian court, as well as allowing Gregory to reflect on his verisimilar portrayals of both the virtues and vices of Merovingian kings.

The *Historiae* has an extensive manuscript tradition, with the most frequent manuscript family dating back to the 8th century, but with many well-documented and more complete

¹³ Hen, “The Church in Sixth-Century Gaul,” 240; *Hist.*, V.49.

¹⁴ Alexander Callander Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours and Its Bearing on the Political Narrative,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 64.

descendants from the 11th century onward.¹⁵ Due to this later Medieval study of the 6th century work, the focus of the *Historiae* was placed on the Franks rather than a more general history of the world, as Medieval editors and scribes referred to the text as *Historia Francorum*.¹⁶ The text was commonly referred to as the *Historia Francorum* but has increasingly been referred to as the *Histories* or the *Historiae*, a shortening of the *Decem Libri Historiarum* ('Ten Books of Histories') that Gregory uses himself to describe the work.¹⁷ However, recent scholarship has shifted from viewing the text as a history of the Frankish people, and instead as a wider collection of history. Medieval readers of the work gained the impression that the Frankish kingdom "was the proper subject of a work wrongly called *Historia Francorum*" when it should be understood as a more general book of *Histories*, thus the Latin *Historiae*, reflecting the original desire of the author, rather than as a *Historia ecclesiastica* or a *Historia Francorum*.¹⁸ Although Gregory was certainly inspired in part by Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, this distinction of Gregory's work as focused on global history through the lens of the Franks and the church stands apart from Eusebius' focus on ecclesial history. Nonetheless, Gregory certainly utilized Eusebian models in his *Historiae* and his treatment of the Merovingian

¹⁵ See Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 192–201 for discussion on the diffusion of manuscripts and the evolution of different manuscript families in Gregory's work.

¹⁶ For work on the literary stylings of Gregory, see Pascale Bourgain, "The Works of Gregory of Tours: Manuscripts, Language, and Style," in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 141–58; Pascale Bourgain and Martin Heinzlmann, "L'œuvre de Grégoire de Tours : la diffusion des manuscrits," *Supplément à la Revue archéologique du centre de la France* 13, no. 1 (1997): 273–317 speaks to the evolving Medieval understanding of the Franks as the main subjects in Gregory's work. It also contains a good overview of manuscript diffusion; Much of this builds off Bruno Krusch's work, *Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Libri Historiarum X*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, trans. Bruno Krusch, Monumenta Germaniae Historiae (Hannover, DE: Hahn, 1965); Krusch was the editor of the Monumenta Germaniae Historiae (MGH), who in the early twentieth century compiled the many Latin manuscripts of the *Historiae* into a single document with footnotes denoting differences across traditions regarding spelling, grammar, and other inclusions.

¹⁷ Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 106; *Hist.*, X.31.

¹⁸ Martin Heinzlmann, "The Works of Gregory of Tours and Patristic Tradition," in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 299; Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 106; Walter A. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (a.d. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1988), 119–27.

kings as pious figures, an inspiration that will be discussed later in this paper. This new poststructuralist focus on the *Historiae* has led to a number of literary analyses of the various literary, linguistic, and poetic structures it contains.¹⁹

Despite more traditional views of the *Historiae* as the recording of a naïve diarist, Gregory's work acts as an intentional religious and political commentary on the world, and specifically on the Frankish kingdom in which he resided.²⁰ Otherwise, if Gregory is merely a naïve diarist then his works become little more than an oddity, a more irrelevant lens filled with “non-rational element[s]” by an “unconscious poet” into the world of the Merovingians.²¹ Rather, Gregory's writings are a “conscious structuring [of the *Historiae*] on the part of a historian, not the ad hoc recording of ephemera by a diarist,” the work of a savvy political writer whose words were primarily intended for his contemporaries.²² The view of Gregory as an influential writer who played a larger role in understanding Merovingian society ought to then be applied, albeit with consideration of the lack of other sources and the position of the *Historiae* (and other writings by Gregory of Tours) as the main surviving sources of the Merovingian era and the potential bias they may bring.²³ Gregory's role in the modern understanding of

¹⁹ G. Halsall, “The Preface to Book V of Gregory of Tours' Histories: Its Form, Context and Significance,” *The English Historical Review* CXXII, no. 496 (April 1, 2007): 297–317; Bourgain, “The Works of Gregory of Tours: Manuscripts, Language, and Style”; Bourgain and Heinzlmann, “L'œuvre de Grégoire de Tours”; Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 115–46.

²⁰ See Walter A. Goffart, “From *Historiae* to *Historia Francorum* and Back Again: Aspects of the Textual History of Gregory of Tours,” in *Religion, Culture and Society in the Early Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of R.E. Sullivan*, ed. Thomas F.X. Noble and J.J. Contreni, Studies in Medieval Culture (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1987), 55–76 for the now widely-held view of Gregory as a rational writer.

²¹ Giselle de Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower: Studies of Imagination in the Works of Gregory of Tours*, Studies in Classical Antiquity, Bd. 7 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 8, see also p. 23 for view of Gregory as a naïve diarist.

²² Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,” 71, see also n. 16; Alexander C. Murray, “The Merovingian State and Administration in the Times of Gregory of Tours,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 194.

²³ Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (a.d. 550-800)*, 177, 197 praised Gregory his use of irony and satire in his narrative on the Merovingians. See also the following sources for other major works that support a more articulate image of Gregory: Heinzlmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 5; Murray,

Merovingian society cannot be understated, with modern scholarship being innately colored by Gregory's perspective.²⁴

Gregory was certainly concerned with contemporary politics within Gaul and held a unique position as “better informed about northern affairs than his predecessors” within the Tours episcopate, along with being far more interested in the actions of kings and queens in Francia than even the popes of his day.²⁵ Viewing Gregory as writing equally from a position of ecclesiastical authority and as a political writer commenting on contemporary issues allows a greater picture to emerge of Gregory's intentions with his *Historiae*. In writing for his contemporaries, Gregory's detailing of moral failings cannot be understood as emblematic of the Merovingians as a whole, but rather his dealing with specific leaders within the Merovingian court. Gregory's writings, and especially his *Historiae*, must be read carefully to avoid Gregory's ideas becoming the ‘standard’ to which the Merovingians are understood in their entirety.²⁶

Considering the treatment of Gregory as an intentional commentator, the intended audience of the *Historiae* should then be understood as that of nobility in Gregory's day, and

“The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours”; Joaquín Martínex Pizarro, “Gregory of Tours and the Literary Imagination: Genre, Narrative Style, Sources, and Models in the *Histories*,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 337–74; Stefan Esders, “Gallic Politics in the Sixth Century,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 429–61; Stefan Esders et al., eds., *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, Studies in Early Medieval History (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

²⁴ Murray, “The Merovingian State and Administration,” 192; See Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), chaps. 8, “History, Theory, and Premodern Texts,” especially pgs.165-69 for discussion on the linguistic turn and the poststructuralist approach to historical research. Clark's distinctions between ancient and modern historiography speaks well to reinterpreting ancient sources such as the *Historiae*, especially in light of changing views on Gregory as an articulate versus a naïve writer.

²⁵ Thomas F.X. Noble, “Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church,” in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and I. N. Wood, Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions, v. 8 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2002), 156–57.

²⁶ Murray, “The Merovingian State and Administration,” 194–95.

more specifically, Gregory writing for the kings of the near future.²⁷ When one considers Gregory of Tours' family connections and ancestral ties to the Austrasian heartland in eastern Gaul, whether Gregory of Tours was writing for future authorities becomes far more relevant to his intended purpose in writing his *Historiae*, and specifically him writing for future Austrasian kings in Gaul.

Gregory's ties to the Austrasian regions appear in multiple forms over the course of his life, both in his rise to the Bishopric of Tours and in his writing of the *Historiae*. Following the death of King Chlothar in 561 AD, the greater Frankish kingdom was fractured into a set of smaller sub-kingdoms, with Gregory's family primarily located within the eastern portion of Gaul, in the sub-kingdom surrounding the city of Rheims. The kingdom of Rheims would later expand into the sub-kingdom of Austrasia which covered large swaths of northeast Gaul — with exclaves in the central and southwest sections of Gaul, such as the cities (*civitates*) of Poitiers, Tours, Bordeaux, and others — in the mid-sixth century under the reigns of various Austrasian kings.²⁸ At its height of Frankish control, the Austrasian kingdom covered the majority of modern France, and the kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy were united under Sigebert II (r. 613 AD), with the territories of Burgundy and Neustria (modern southern and northwest France) subordinating to the Austrasian crown.²⁹ Gregory's family, as nobility of senatorial descent, held

²⁷ Murray, 192–93; Noble, “Gregory of Tours and the Roman Church,” 156; Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,” 81; Although Heinzelmann gestures towards a potential audience, he is not as explicit as Murray or Noble, but still acknowledges Gregory's writing for his contemporaries and potential readers in the near future. Still, see Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 104–14 for a broader consideration of the purpose and intended audience.

²⁸ Namely, Theudebald (King of Rheims, r. 548–555 AD), Sigebert I (King of Austrasia, r. 561–575 AD), Childebert II (King of Austrasia, r. 570–595 AD), and Theudebert II (King of Austrasia, r. 595–612 AD).

²⁹ In 613 AD, Sigebert II would be overthrown by Chlothar II of Neustria, who maintained control by ceding out more power to his allies, notably the Mayors of the Palaces within his realm. This helped lay the groundwork for the eventual overthrow of the Merovingian dynasty by the Carolingians, who originally gained their influence as Mayors of the Palace with the Merovingian court. The erosion of royal power under Chlothar II was one of the reasons for Merovingian overthrow by Pepin the Short and the other Carolingians in 751 AD. See Charles William Previté-Orton and Philip Grierson, eds., *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History: In 2 Volumes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 155 for a basic overview.

a level of familiarity with other Frankish elites within the Austrasian court. Gregory's paternal uncle and former guardian (Saint Gallus, Bishop of Auvergne) was elevated to bishop in part due to his allegiance to the Austrasian kings, with Gallus enjoying close contact with Theuderic I, King of Rheims (r. 511–534 AD) and with Childebert I, the King of Paris and Orléans in the mid-sixth century.³⁰ When Gregory was appointed to the bishopric in 573 AD, Tours (despite its relatively western location within Gaul) was under Austrasian control, and Gregory was appointed to the position by Sigebert I of Austrasia. Gregory's consecration in Rheims to his new office rather than within Tours (as canonical rules demanded) similarly points to Gregory's connections within both the clergy and monarchy of the Austrasian Clermont than elsewhere within the greater Frankish kingdom.³¹

With this connection to the Austrasian nobility in mind, and that Tours was within Austrasian control by the time Gregory was writing his *Historiae*, it further points toward the text being written for the use of future Austrasian kings, and thus Gregory's treatment of the Austrasian kings in particular in his analysis of 'good kingship' becomes quite apropos.³² Gregory may have not only been writing a history of the region and a description of

³⁰ Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours: The Elements of a Biography," 13.

³¹ Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 33; Heinzelmann, "Gregory of Tours: The Elements of a Biography," 24.

³² Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550-850* has written on the subject of Frankish ethnogenesis and when the Franks began seeing themselves as their own ethnic group, rather than as Romans. Whether Gregory viewed himself as primarily an "Austrasian" foremost or as a "Frank" foremost is still discussed. ; Reimitz, "*Pax Inter Utramque Gentem*" also discusses the development of Frankish identity in relation to Merovingian politics. Walter A. Goffart, "Foreigners in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours," *Florilegium* 4 (1982): 80–99 has discussed the appearance of foreigners within the *Historiae* and how Gregory self-identified as neither Roman nor Gallic, and thus in a liminal state between the two main ethnicities present in Merovingian Gaul, and how this may have affected his self-identification in regard to his ethnicity. Edward James, "Gregory of Tours and the Franks," in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander C. Murray and Walter A. Goffart (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 66 argues Gregory only ethnically identifies people within his works if they are foreigners, and that Gregory is specifically eradicating "ethnic difference within the Frankish kingdom" by viewing all inhabitants of Gaul as subjects of the 'king of the Franks,' regardless of ethnicity. Gregory's birth as an Arvenian is superseded by his position as a Frankish subject, regardless of him being a bishop, politician, and writer. 'Frank' is thus a term of

what ‘proper’ kingship was, but also positively skewing his portrayal of Austrasian kings in light of his contemporary and near-future readers of the Austrasian nobility. Not only would he then be creating the exemplar of ‘good kingship,’ but also presenting that model to Austrasian kings who could look upon their ancestors proudly, while also allowing Gregory to curry favor with the current political elites. However, with the rule of Tours shifting to the Burgundian branch of the Merovingians partway through Gregory’s episcopate, his portrayal of who constitutes a ‘good king’ shifts slightly to include certain Burgundian kings, such as Guntram of Burgundy. This, however, will be dealt with in more detail later in this paper.

Gregory presents himself as an active and intentional observer of the Merovingian world, articulating the need for piety within the monarchy with deft precision and not with the ramblings of a naïve diarist. Gregory of Tours’ work within the *Historiae* brings an important lens into the study of the Merovingians, due to Gregory’s emphasis on piety within the Merovingian kings, in addition to his favoritism toward the Austrasians and his treatment of the character and moral failings within Merovingian society which are still under scrutiny into the modern day. Prior research into Merovingian kings has largely been done through the lens of Clovis’ religious conversion and its aftereffects,³³ or through the lens of characterization³³ of the

convenience to denote the political bounds of the Merovingian kingdom, regardless of the individual ethnicity of the subjects within the realm. Although ethnogenesis and ethnic identity aren’t entirely relevant to this paper, these discussions are worth mentioning in light of Gregory’s Austrasian background and his favorable view of the Austrasian kings.

³³ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 10th anniversary rev. ed, The Making of Europe (Chichester, West Sussex ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 133–38 discusses the rise of the Franks, but largely through the lens of Clovis’ conversion. It does reference Gregory’s *Historiae*, but largely in focusing on late antique hagiography and Gregory’s understanding of the cult of the saints. While the cult of the saints will be discussed later on, Brown’s work doesn’t speak at any great level to the connection between the saints and ideal kingship. Even Martin Heinzelmann’s discussion of heresy in Books I and II of the *Historiae*, “Heresy in Books I and II of Gregory of Tours’ *Historiae*,” in *After Rome’s Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander C. Murray and Walter A. Goffart (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 67–70, opens with the relevance of Clovis’ conversion to the modern historian and its relevance to Gregory’s works!

Franks as ‘barbarians,’³⁴ but precious few have emphasized any enduring *habitus* of piety among the kings.³⁵ Discussions that do entertain the religious aspects of kings fail to highlight piety as a condition for ideal kingship, or instead view the notion of ‘pious kings’ only in light of the pre-Christian, pagan Merovingian dynasty.³⁶ In addition to works that are more focused on the *Historiae*, there are many strong introductions to religious conversion within late antique Gaul, and its relevance for future Christian development in western Europe.³⁷

In summation, while there have been many works on Gregory of Tours and his various writings, a focus on the episcopal realms of Gaul or on the conversion of Clovis is prevalent throughout. Mentions of Merovingian kings are present, but discussions on the qualities of kingship or of Gregory of Tours’ perception of kingship is remarkably limited and is often included in little more than a passing reference. While much of this work is relevant to the research conducted in this paper, more work must be done on Gregory’s perception of rule and

³⁴ See Clifford Ando, “Narrating Decline and Fall,” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau and Jutta Raithel, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 59–76 for the characterization of post-Roman provinces as “barbarian”; Guy Halsall, “Beyond the Northern Frontiers,” in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau and Jutta Raithel, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 409–25 also speaks to the “barbarian” motif.

³⁵ One of the most explicit is J. H. Wallace-Hadrill, “Gregory of Tours and Bede: Their Views on the Personal Qualities of Kings,” *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 2, no. 1 (December 31, 1968): 31–44, who compared Gregory’s portrayal of kings with that of Bede, but in a wide-sweeping manner. As a result, depictions of “good kingship” largely boil down to whatever positive personal traits a king happened to have. Good kings were ‘kind and merciful, tolerant and affable and charitable’ (p. 36), but there is no overarching schema to how Gregory constructs idealized kingship, despite acknowledgement of those kings as literary creations.

³⁶ Alexander Callander Murray, “*Post Vocantur Merovingii*: Fredegar, Merovech, and ‘Sacral Kingship,’” in *After Rome’s Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander C. Murray and Walter A. Goffart (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998), for example, has written on the notion of sacral kingship, but through the lens of whether the Merovingians believed themselves to be descendants from a divine sea creature — “sacral kingship” is thus not a focus on the relationship between a monarch and the divine, but whether they could claim divine descent. As such, there is a dearth of research on the Merovingians and their constructs of kingship, and especially so regarding Gregory of Tours’ writings.

³⁷ Unfortunately, this topic is slightly outside the bounds of this paper. However, for those interested, the following sources are a good place to begin: James Muldoon, ed., *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); R. A. (Richard A.) Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity*, Array (New York: H. Holt and Co., 1998); Carole M. Cusack, *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples*, Cassell Religious Studies (London ; New York: Cassell, 1998); Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton, eds., *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, Studies in Comparative History (Rochester, N.Y. : Suffolk, UK: University of Rochester Press ; Boydell & Brewer, 2003).

kingship, especially within Merovingian Gaul, given his status as one of the few surviving authors of the period. It is this prospect that the current paper hopes to attempt, with recognition that future work will always expand upon present arguments.

III. Piety as a Prerequisite for Kingship

Gregory's *Historiae*, as the main surviving literary material that describes the Merovingian kingdom and its various rulers, grants modern historians a rarified view into the world of Gallic politics and the relationship to the hierarchy of the Catholic³⁸ Church during the period of late antiquity. Where previous scholarship, such as Heinzelmann's *Bischofsherrschaft* has focused on the power of the Gallo-Roman bishops within the Merovingian court, I shift perspective to how those bishops understood the role of the Merovingian rulers to highlight the relationship between ecclesiastical and temporal authority at the time. While Eusebius also utilized propagandistic tools to legitimize rulers such as Constantine, Gregory applies the techniques to Frankish rulers and centers the role of piety within his legitimizing efforts. Gregory's use of Christian piety as a criterion for ideal kingship echoes Eusebius' work while also furthering it by drawing connections between an idealized king and an idealized perception of earlier holy figures. Gregory presents a model of kingship that is centered on notions of piety — the ideal king is personally pious, but also extends his piety into the public sphere through various public acts such as almsgiving or construction of churches, while also maintaining a distinct association to previous exemplars of holiness with biblical allusions or connections to

³⁸ This is before the schisms that ruptured the Eastern and Western Churches into their modern distinctions of Orthodox and Catholic, and so the term 'catholic' here can apply in its original sense of 'universal,' but it also emphasizes Gregory's connection as a bishop to the Patriarchate of the West housed in Rome. 'Catholic' is used to denote the connection between Gregory and the western church and to distinguish the mainline Christian faith in late antiquity from other Christian movements that were declared heretical (such as Arianism) and includes Chalcedonian views of Christology. To ease reading, 'Catholic' has been employed, although the reader should recognize variations in Christological views in late antiquity even if they are not wholly relevant to this paper.

influential saints in Gaul. This three-fold approach to piety as a basis of righteous kingship can be seen throughout Gregory's depictions of the Merovingian kings and presents a novel way of interpreting both Gregory's *Historiae* and the views of Gregory himself.

a. Descriptions of Piety Within Righteous Kings

Within Gregory's *Historiae*, many descriptions of rulers are used, varying largely due to several different factors, such as their religious inclinations (whether pagan, Arian Christian, or Catholic Christian), their motivations, actions, and, most importantly, their individual character as portrayed by Gregory in his writings. For the Merovingians in particular, Gregory acts as a relatively fair author, willing to criticize the Merovingian authorities when he deems necessary so he might further the understanding of his writing, but also never fully crossing into the territory of either complete adulation or degradation of his subjects in the *Historiae*. Gregory's ecclesial role allows him to assume authority in judging the characteristics of his subjects in the *Historiae* by viewing them through a lens of piety and religion. It must be said, however, that throughout Gregory's writings very few rulers could be truly stated to be viewed as overwhelmingly positive within the *Historiae*. Gregory seems content to describe most of his subjects as balanced between their flaws and their virtues, with only a few figures being able to rise above the 'standard' level of virtue he ascribes to many of the characters throughout his writing. Monroe, in his analysis of Gregory of Tours' use of biblical sources and his conception of justice within the *Historiae*, simply stated that "[a]mong secular rulers, there are very few whom Gregory considers just or loving justice," with Monroe only including "the otherwise unknown King Chararis of Galicia, King Theudebert, Tiberius II, the co-emperor of Justin, and

possibly the kings Guntram, Childebert I, and Clovis.”³⁹ For Monroe, the mark of a righteous king is their willingness to enact justice, or the broader concept of following the *via iustitia*, which Monroe argues is a central piece of Gregory’s construction of righteous kingship. Monroe defines his *via iustitia* as “[living] a life in proper relation to God and one’s neighbors.”⁴⁰ Despite Monroe’s more vague definition of what constitutes the *via iustitia*, his portrayal of justice as the centerpiece for righteous kingship lacks the emphasis on personal piety, rather than personal justice, that Gregory seems to have his righteous kings emulate in the *Historiae*.

Gregory’s understanding of prerequisite qualities for kingship still ultimately resorts to the relationship of piety and the king, despite scholars that have accentuated other qualities such as justice. Like Wallace-Hadrill’s assessment of Gregory’s ideal of kingship, Monroe focuses on the individual qualities of kings as prerequisites of whether they can be considered ‘righteous’. Gregory, to Monroe, eschews the idea of secular institutions as inherently good, and “rarely ascribes justice to any secular power, and then only to a few individuals.”⁴¹ But Monroe’s paradigm of a righteous king who emulates *iustitia* still ultimately falls back to descriptions of those individuals as whether they could be described as ‘pious.’ Monroe notes that of the two Frankish kings Gregory treats positively, he is unsure if Gregory considered them just, instead acknowledging how both the kings Guntram and Clovis are described as *rex pius*, with Chilperic, a king utilized by Gregory as a negative foil to his more favorable kings, described as *impius rex* — and while *impius* can act as an antonym for Monroe’s *iustus*, one cannot make the same assumption that the inverse correlates, and *pius* automatically connotes *iustus*.⁴²

³⁹ William Monroe, “*Via Iustitiae*: The Biblical Sources of Justice in Gregory of Tours,” in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and I. N. Wood, *Cultures, Beliefs, and Traditions*, v. 8 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2002), 102.

⁴⁰ Monroe, 103.

⁴¹ Monroe, 108.

⁴² Monroe, 109–10.

Murray, in his work on Merovingian administration, also points to a successful Merovingian royal ideology as inherently tied to piety and divine favor: “Peacekeeping and justice in royal ideology were tied, not disingenuously, to the retention of God’s favour and were seen as the prerequisites of successful kingship.”⁴³ While the peacekeeping aspect of Murray’s structure speaks to the relationship between the Merovingian kings and the public, his connection between the favor of God and the ability to succeed as a ‘righteous’ king does not expand upon the notion of piety, only on maintaining divine favor while neglecting mention of individual belief. While *iustitia* may be an essential part of righteous kingship, it must also be viewed alongside the piety of the leader being analyzed.

But both the sincerity and the exclusivity of the Merovingian conversion to Christianity must be taken into account — specifically, whether the Merovingian kings understood their new religion and were genuine in their conversion or if they recognized it alongside whatever pagan practices they had previously. Patrick Geary argues that the Roman provincial world slowly transitioned into the Merovingian world, and thus, when Clovis and the other Germanic tribes converted to Christianity, they were converting from a ‘true’ Roman paganism.⁴⁴ Clovis would thus be converting from a polytheistic religious practice that was quite different from the monotheistic beliefs of Christianity; this contrasts with other suggestions, such as those by Wood and Prinz, that the Merovingians were converting from a quasi-Arianism, which may have affected their understanding of what constitutes ‘personal piety’ if their recognition of “Christian” belief was different from the Catholic understanding.⁴⁵ It is worth considering, although arguing that a variance in Christology would make that great a difference in the

⁴³ Murray, “The Merovingian State and Administration,” 224.

⁴⁴ Geary, *Before France and Germany*, vii.

⁴⁵ Geary, 84.

understanding of ‘piety’ seems a stretch — still, whatever Clovis’ previous religious practice was, it would have bearing on Clovis’ (and thus Gregory’s) understanding of piety. Nevertheless, Geary suggests a Merovingian view of Christ as a powerful war-god, leaning into the syncretistic aspects of late antique religion. In this understanding, Clovis adopted Christianity alongside traditional beliefs, with Christ as a triumphant war-god who granted a convenient military victory.⁴⁶ The original text does nothing to dissuade against this possibility; Clovis’ cry at the Battle of Tolbiac simply states: “if you grant me victory over these enemies, and your virtue is proven, as the people in your name proclaim to have made known, I will believe in you, and be baptized in your name.”⁴⁷ There is no exclusivity in Clovis’ statement toward Christianity, or that a syncretistic belief system was impossible for Merovingian leaders.

There is no inclination, however, of a syncretistic Christianity within the Merovingian dynasty. There was simply “nothing pagan about Merovingian kingship” — it was “deeply connected to the Christian church... with the teachings of Christian rulership” imbued within the kingdom itself.⁴⁸ At least, in Gregory’s portrayal of the Merovingians, it was a genuine change away from paganism and toward Christianity. Ultimately, Merovingian kingship reflected Christian sensibilities such as the admonition for personal piety. Gregory does fully acknowledge the pagan practices of the pre-Clovis rulers, such as the eponymous ruler of the dynasty, Merovech, and his people described as those who “always seemed to have followed the idolatrous practices, nor did they acknowledge the true God,” but Gregory’s portrayal of the

⁴⁶ Geary, 84–85.

⁴⁷ *Hist.*, II.30; “si mihi victoriam super hos hostes induleris, et expertus fuero illam vitutem, quam de te populus tuo nomini dicatus probasse se praedicat, credam tibi, et in nomine tuo baptizer.”; Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. O.M. Dalton, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1927) was consulted alongside original Latin, but all translations present in this paper are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁸ Murray, “The Merovingian State and Administration,” 205; Murray also references “*Post Vocantur Merohingii*” and argues that the notion of sacral kingship is a scholarly construct, where searching for pagan origins or divine descent allows for later historians to imbue the sources with a narrative that wasn’t present in its original form.

Merovingians describes a dynasty that was ardently Christian following Clovis' conversion.⁴⁹

Gregory's portrayal of Clovis and the rest of the 'good' Merovingian kings likely comes in part from Eusebius' depiction of Constantine as "pious and sprung from a most pious... father" and as "one possessed of a natural piety toward God" — the very image of an idealized ruler worthy of emulation.⁵⁰ Gregory's choice to tie personal piety to kings as an admirable quality can certainly be traced to Eusebius' treatment of Constantine, and Gregory's emulation of Eusebius similarly speaks to his desire to connect Christian piety with the kings he is biographing.

Within the *Historiae*, there are multiple instances of the kings that Gregory treats more favorably as personally pious, especially in comparison to the 'poorer' kings that were not understood as pious. This is especially prevalent in Book II, with Gregory employing various positive descriptions of Clovis to portray him as the virtuous progenitor of a Christian Merovingian dynasty. At the end of his conversion narrative at the Battle of Tolbiac, Clovis describes his conversion to his queen Clotilde, and how he, "through the invocation of the name of Christ, had found the merit to earn the victory," conveying a sense of personal value and connection to God.⁵¹ Clovis, by personally acting out specific practices, allows for divine intervention to take place within his life. This is, admittedly, a more extreme example of a personal piety within Clovis but given its overall importance to the narrative of Christian rulers in Gaul, it is worth mentioning.

Elsewhere, Clovis and his personal piety (at least, according to Gregory), are marked more explicitly to show a connection to the divine and to establish Clovis as a 'pious king.' In

⁴⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Hist.*, II.10; "fanaticis semper cultibus visa est obsequium praebuisse, nec prorsus agnovere Deum."

⁵⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, trans. Hugh Jackson Lawlor and John Ernest Leonard Oulton (London : New York and Toronto: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Macmillan, 1927), IX.9.1, IX.9.10.

⁵¹ *Hist.*, II.30; "per invocationem nominis Christi, victoriam meruit obtinere."

the scene following his conversion and military victory, Clovis stood before his assembly of troops, and Gregory describes the “power of God preceding before him [Clovis],”⁵² as another minor miracle in the king’s life. The person of Clovis is transformed into a vessel for divine intervention and is clearly tied to his previous choice to convert and believe in the Christian deity; thus, a sense of personal or individual piety seems to be important for Gregory, and especially so in Clovis’ conversion, his subsequent military victory, and the Christian dynasty that Clovis establishes. Following the divine power emanating from Clovis, the crowd addresses Clovis as *pie rex*, or ‘pious king.’⁵³ Dalton translates this as “gracious king,” but the Latin is different; Gregory doesn’t label Clovis as a *gratiose rex* or even *clemens rex*, but rather *pie rex*.⁵⁴ Clovis is portrayed as pious, and even enacts some saintly powers with the emanation of the *potentia Dei*.

Following his baptism by Remigius, Clovis begins a military campaign against the Arian brother-kings, Gundobad and Godigisel. Gundobad was betrayed by Godigisel (who had switched sides to Clovis’ support in the moments before the battle) and sent Aridius, one of his men, to feign desertion from Gundobad’s court and curry favor with Clovis to convince him of lighter treatment toward Gundobad. In Gregory’s portrayal, Aridius addresses Clovis and twice mentions the piety of the newly-baptized Frank: “Behold, I am your humble slave, most pious king, who has forsaken the miserable Gundobad to serve your power. If your piety would deign to look upon me, you and your posterity would find in me an untouched and faithful servant.”⁵⁵ These are the words of a spy within Clovis’ court, but the choice of Aridius to address Clovis

⁵² II.31; “praecurrente potentia Dei.”

⁵³ II.31.

⁵⁴ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, 2:69.

⁵⁵ *Hist.*, II.32; “Ecce ego humilis servus tuus, piissime rex, ad tuam potentiam venio, relinquens illum miserrimum Gundobadum. Quod si me pietas tua respicere dignatur, integrum in me famulum atque fidelem, et tu et posterit tui habebitis.”

through the lens of this specific attribute is distinctive: Aridius' declaration of Clovis as the most pious king, rather than emphasizing another relevant quality (such as a *victor rex*) speak to, at the least, what Gregory understood as the most relevant descriptors for Clovis, and even more, how Clovis may have understood himself. Furthermore, Aridius' choice in personifying the piety of Clovis (*quod si me pietas tua respicere dignatur*) further speaks to the individual role of piety in Clovis' life, and at minimum adds to Gregory's understanding of the primary descriptors used for a favorable king.

Clovis is elsewhere described as having "walked before Him [God] with an upright heart, and did that which was pleasing in His sight."⁵⁶ This combines multiple biblical allusions on Gregory's part into a singular statement on Clovis' piety. 'Walking before God' certainly emulates the beginning of Genesis 17, with the commandment "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless."⁵⁷ Gregory was likely referencing 1 Kings 9:4-5 as well, in which Solomon is promised a stable rule over Israel if he "walk[s] before [God], as David [his] father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness."⁵⁸ Furthermore, David in Psalm 19:14 speaks to desiring his actions to be "acceptable in your sight, O LORD," and Psalm 119:7 mentions praising God "with an upright heart."⁵⁹ Gregory's description of Clovis thus utilized intentional allusions to biblical texts, but Gregory is likely also building at least in part from Eusebius' trope of Constantine as a holy ruler, with Gregory applying that model to his Merovingian subjects.⁶⁰ The introduction to Book III of Gregory's work similarly qualifies the individual piety of Clovis and his success as a king: "The king Clovis, confessing [the faith], by its aid oppressed the

⁵⁶ II.40; "eo quod ambularent recto corde coram eo, et faceret quae placita erant in oculis eius."

⁵⁷ Genesis 17:1 ESV

⁵⁸ 1 Kings 9:4-5 ESV

⁵⁹ Psalm 19:14 ESV, Psalm 119:7 ESV

⁶⁰ Notions of 'uprightness' appear throughout the Bible, and many more allusions could be made than I have done here. Still, Gregory's description of Clovis in the final moments of Book II portray him as a figure with great devotion to God and a strong personal piety as a figure that is described in the same manner as David and Solomon.

heretics and expended his kingdom over all of Gaul.”⁶¹ Gregory certainly paints a connection between the piety of the Merovingians and their imminent success as a ruler, which for Clovis is largely localized to military victories.

This use of legitimizing rhetoric was not only limited to Clovis, and Gregory extended his rendering of piety in the Merovingian kings to others within the royal family. Clovis’ grandson, Theudebert I, King of Rheims (c. 500–548 AD, r. 534–548 AD) by way of Theuderic I, King of Metz, is another character that Gregory views with great esteem, and one Monroe points to as a just figure within Gregory’s writing.⁶² While Theudebert was still a prince in his father’s kingdom, he was sent by Theuderic to deal with the various Gothic tribes that were a nuisance to the area. Upon Theudebert’s arrival to the town of Cabrières, in the Clermont region of south-central France, Gregory describes messengers greeting the young prince with the acclamation of *domine piissime* — given that Theudebert lived well before Gregory, it may be that Gregory knew of Theudebert’s character and decided to emphasize this point of piety from Theudebert’s princely days to highlight his later position as King of Rheims.⁶³ Regardless, the messengers’ description of Theudebert as a “most pious lord” speaks again to Gregory’s understanding of the central qualities of favorable kings. Upon Theudebert’s ascension to the throne, he is described positively as “a great king and distinguished in all excellence.”⁶⁴ Theudebert held the traits that were “particularly fundamental” for a good Christian ruler.⁶⁵ Similar to Clovis, Theudebert’s piety is granted agency when the Bishop of Verdun asks “if your

⁶¹ *Hist.*, III.pro.; “Hanc Chlodovechus rex confessus, ipsos haereticos adiutorio eius oppressit, regnumque suum per total Gallias dilatavit.”

⁶² Monroe, “*Via Iustitiae*,” 102.

⁶³ *Hist.*, III.21.

⁶⁴ III.25; “magnum se atque in omni bonitate praecipuum reddidit.”

⁶⁵ Pia Lucas, “*Magnus et Verus Christianus*: The Portrayal of Emperor Tiberius II in Gregory of Tours,” in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. Stefan Esders et al., Studies in Early Medieval History (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 138.

[Theudebert's] piety can spare [them] some money."⁶⁶ Furthermore, when Theudebert grants their request, Gregory describes the event as Theudebert's piety being affected — *tunc ille pietate commotus*.⁶⁷

Pia Lucas has also analyzed how Gregory viewed the Eastern Roman Emperor Tiberius II and points to a highly favorable view of the distant emperor, with Gregory going so far as to call him a *magnus et verus Christianus*.⁶⁸ However, due to Tiberius' distance (both physically and politically) from Gaul, Gregory only paints a mono-dimensional vignette of Tiberius to use as a reference point in his treatment of the Merovingian kings.⁶⁹ Tiberius is the caricature of a perfect ruler in Gregory's construction, a true Christian leader whose personal piety even extends to Tiberius quoting a passage from Matthew on treasures in heaven in response to questions concerning the extent of his almsgiving.⁷⁰

Still, Lucas' treatment of Tiberius II as an idealized king helps to highlight Merovingian rulers who had their own personal piety. Guntram, the King of Burgundy (r. 561–592 AD) is attributed with qualities that are “essential in a good Christian ruler, such as benevolence, fear of God, love for the church, reverence for the bishops, and generosity towards the poor.”⁷¹ Guntram's elements of personal piety, such as fear of God, are essential parts of his kingly disposition, alongside public aspects of piety (dispensations toward the church and the poor) which will also be discussed as core elements of public piety alongside personal piety. Tiberius, named a great and true Christian, is used as a vignette to compare the Merovingian kings who could similarly be seen so favorably; with Gregory personally knowing the Merovingian kings

⁶⁶ *Hist.*, III.34; “si pietas tua habet aliquid de pecunia.”

⁶⁷ III.34.

⁶⁸ Lucas, “*Magnus et Verus Christianus*,” 134.

⁶⁹ Lucas, 139.

⁷⁰ Lucas, 136; *Hist.*, V.19.

⁷¹ Lucas, “*Magnus et Verus Christianus*,” 138.

and their limitations, comparisons to Tiberius are meant to highlight Merovingian virtues, even in recognition of their faults. Tiberius is thus a distant model of a good king, and his co-emperor Justin II acts as a negative foil to Tiberius, and is portrayed as the caricature of a poor ruler with whom ill-performing Merovingian kings like Chilperic could be compared.⁷² Although Lucas' focus lies on an Eastern Emperor, Gregory's positive portrayal of Tiberius is worth mentioning in relation to the Merovingian kings, even if the scope of Lucas' work is largely outside the bounds of this paper. Regardless, Gregory's focus on piety considering Tiberius II is still present throughout Lucas' work and contextualizes Gregory's view of piety within the wider Mediterranean world.

Within Gregory's construction of praiseworthy kingship, the kings that could be considered as personally pious were favored by God and could truly be hailed as the righteous kings of the Merovingians. Gregory did not only limit righteousness to individual piety, but still emphasized the roles between kings and their constituents, as well as kings and earlier exemplars in his effort to construct the model image of an idealized 'righteous' king.

b. Kings and the Public

For Gregory, a personal sense of piety within kings was further articulated by a piety that connected these pious kings with their constituents, showing that although individual piety was a concern for Gregory, the public role of the king similarly demanded a public level of piety.⁷³

⁷² Lucas, 134–35, 139.

⁷³ Gregory is likely influenced as well by Eusebius' portrayal of Constantine as a figure whose piety had specific public aspects in his mission to Christianize the Roman Empire, in his *The Ecclesiastical History and the Martyrs of Palestine*, IX.9.10, such as Constantine's installing a "memorial of the Saviour's Passion" in the center of Rome, with the inscription "BY THIS SALUTARY SIGN, THE TRUE PROOF OF BRAVERY, I SAVED AND DELIVERED YOUR CITY FROM THE YOKE OF THE TYRANT [Maxentius]; AND MOREOVER I FREE AND RESTORED TO THEIR ANCIENT FAME AND SPLENDOUR BOTH THE SENATE AND THE PEOPLE OF THE ROMANS."

This public aspect of piety fits neatly with several figures within the *Historiae*. Interestingly, when Gundobad, King of the Burgundians, converts to Christianity after his encounter with Clovis, he initially fears the public consequences of his new faith, and desires his baptism be a secret one; Gregory, emphasizing the need for public piety, writes that the bishop Avitus scolds Gundobad for his cowardice in the face of his people. Avitus reminds Gundobad that if he “truly is a king,” he ought not fear the revolt of his people, and encourages him to “that which you say you believe in your heart, profess with your mouth before the people.”⁷⁴ Similarly, the section describing Clovis as having “walked before Him [God] with an upright heart, and did that which was pleasing in His sight,” remarks on his submission of the public to himself and how his people recognized him as their king, before then stating the piety of his character in the sight of God.⁷⁵

In many cases, this public aspect of piety took the form of almsgiving in connection to the piety of the king. Monroe’s structure of *iustitia* has a similar component, where he remarks that following the *via iustitiae* “imposes certain duties on the just, which lead to a second meaning of justice: the duty to support the needy, especially widows, orphans, and the poor.”⁷⁶ For Gregory, the *Historiae* do emphasize the cause of the destitute, but Gregory also notes the need to give to the churches as a form of piety. This monetary support of the needy and of the church extends the acts of the pious outward into the community around them. Occasionally, public piety would also manifest in miracles, such as when a thread of Guntram’s cloak cured a

⁷⁴ *Hist.*, II.34; “Tu vero cum sis rex, et a nullo adprehendi formides, seditionem pavescis populi, ne Creatorem omnium in publico fatearis. Relinque hanc stultitiam, et quod corde te dicis credere, ore prefor in plebe.”

⁷⁵ II.40, see above for Latin.

⁷⁶ Monroe, “*Via Iustitiae*,” 105.

child with the plague, emulating the bleeding woman of Luke 8.⁷⁷ However, almsgiving and monetary support is more prevalent.

Monetary support is central in several locations across the opening books of the *Historiae*, particularly by kings who use their patronage to garner religious and communal support of their rule, or to illustrate the religious devotion of the king.⁷⁸ Clovis, after succeeding in battle against Alaric II, King of the Visigoths, in the early 500s AD, absconded with Alaric's treasures and returned to the city of Tours, where he "made many offerings to the holy shrine of the blessed [Saint] Martin [of Tours]."⁷⁹ Following these gifts to the church, Clovis continued in both his charity and in the public aspects of his kingship. Receiving commissions from the emperor Anastasius for the office of consul, Clovis, *within the church of St. Martin*, was vested in a purple tunic, a mantle, and a diadem denoting his new position.⁸⁰ This investment of a political office within the space of the church is an intentional choice — Clovis' establishment of his government in Paris, and not Tours, should point to the fact that conferring the title and pomp of consul within the realm of Gaul's (and Gregory's) most beloved saint denotes a strong connection between public aspects of piety and the office of ruler. Indeed, immediately after leaving the church of St. Martin, Clovis mounts his horse and scatters gold and silver to the people on the road back into the city, dispersing the money "from his most favorable desire."⁸¹

⁷⁷ Lucas, "Magnus et Verus Christianus," 138; *Hist.*, IX.21; Luke 8:43-48.

⁷⁸ See Daniel Caner, *The Rich and the Pure: Philanthropy and the Making of Christian Society in Early Byzantium*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage, LXII (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 48–50 for discussion Christian philanthropy after Constantine. Although Caner focuses on Byzantine charity, he still presents a strong overview of Christian charity and its function in the late antique period. See Chapter 3 "Bend Your Heart to Mercy," for discussion on almsgiving and its role within lay members; Chapter 7 "Imperishable Remembrance in Heaven and Earth" discusses patronage as well.

⁷⁹ *Hist.*, II.37; "multa sanctae basilicae beati Martini munera offerens."

⁸⁰ II.38; "Igitur Chlodovechus ab Anastasio imperatore codicillos de consulatu accepit, et in basilica beati Martini tunica blatea indutus est et chlamyde, imponens vertici diadema... et ab ea die tamquam consul aut augustus est vocitatus."

⁸¹ II.38; "Tunc ascenso equite aurum argentumque in itinere illo, quod inter portam atrii basilicae beati Martini et ecclesiam civitatis est, praesentibus populis manu propria spargens, voluntate benignissima erogavit."

Theudebert similarly depicted great charity to Desiderius, the Bishop of Verdun, who pleaded with Theudebert for money to aid the destitute in his city. Desiderius' request for aid from Theudebert was not expected to be a gift, with Desiderius promising to return the loan "with lawful interest."⁸² The king, his piety moved, is described as having "lent him seven thousand pieces of gold," which was distributed among the citizens of Verdun. When Desiderius later offered to return the promised amount of money with its lawful interest, Theudebert refused, replying: "I have no need of it to be returned; it is sufficient to me that under your dispensation the poor, oppressed by their need, by your suggestion and even by my abundance, have been relieved."⁸³ This extraordinary level of charity acts as a highlight in Gregory's portrayal of Theudebert's character. It is but one specific example of the description Gregory had already granted Theudebert: that "he ruled his kingdom with justice, venerated the bishops, gave to the churches, relieved the poor, and distributed many benefits to all with piety and the most pleasant goodwill. He mercifully returned to the churches in Auvergne the tribute which they had paid to him."⁸⁴

This level of charity to the poor and to the church is a vital part of Gregory's depiction of piety, but even more so, the public aspect of those donations is stressed within Gregory's writings. Outside the realm of kings, Gregory emphasizes the role of officials to behave properly in public settings and makes implicit connections between public action and legitimacy of the office. In the case of Cautinus, a priest elevated to the role of bishop, it becomes quite apparent: Cautinus, previously held in good esteem, after investiture to the episcopacy, demeaned himself

⁸² III.34; "cum usuris legitimis reddemus."

⁸³ III.34; "Non habeo necessarium hoc recipere; illud mihi sufficit, si dispensatione tua pauperes, qui opprimebantur inopia, per tuam suggestionem, vel per meam largitatem sunt relevati."

⁸⁴ III.25; "Erat enim regnum cum justitia regens, sacerdotes venerans, ecclesias munerans, pauperes relevans, et multa multis beneficia pia ac dulcissima accommodans voluntate. Omne tributum, quod fisco suo ab ecclesiis in Arverno sitis reddebatur, clementer indulsit."

with frequent drunkenness, to the extent that four men were needed to carry him from the table!⁸⁵ Cautinus, despite being previously referred to as a *domine piissime* in IV.7, falls into his vices, and when he does so, Gregory is sure to mention that his indulgences “frequently manifested in public view.”⁸⁶ In his public failing, Cautinus illegitimated his position in the episcopal office.

It should also be noted that women were involved in the public aspects of piety and rule, and this is especially true given their social status as individuals who were unable to exercise other forms of individual control. Women, limited in their ability to hold titles or wage war, used their wealth and willingness to enact public piety and charity as a form of independent action. As Erin Dailey has noted, women were also utilized by Gregory to denote the virtue of the men they married, as Gregory praises kings who marry virtuous women and links poor marriages with “political and social discord.”⁸⁷ This prospect is most easily seen in figures such as Queen Clotilde, Clovis’ wife, who was renowned for her abundant generosity and willingness to support the churches.⁸⁸ She is given the following description in *Hist.* III.18:

Truly, the queen Clotilde exhibited herself in so excellent a way that all honored her. Unremitting in almsgiving, or in vigils through the night; in chastity and all honor she showed herself pure; to the churches, monasteries, and even other sacred places she provided whatever estates were necessary, which she distributed with such a generous and ready will that she was in her time held not as a queen, but as God’s own handmaid, devoted to his service; neither the kingdom of her sons, nor riches, nor ambition carried her off to destruction, but humility instead brought her to grace.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ IV.27; “Denique Cautinus, adsumto episcopatu, talem se reddidit, ut ab omnibus execraretur, vino ultra modum deditus. Nam plerumque in tantum infundebatur potu, ut de convivio vix a quatuor portaretur.”

⁸⁶ IV.7, IV.27; ‘quod saepius populis manifestatum fuit.’

⁸⁷ E. T. Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite*, Mnemosyne Supplements. Late Antique Literature, Volume 381 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 86.

⁸⁸ See Dailey, chap. 1 for work on female patronage and political influence, especially pages 16 and 39-44 for Clotilde’s patronage as political involvement during her widowhood.

⁸⁹ *Hist.*, III.18; “Chrotechildis vero regina talem se tantamque exhibuit, ut ab omnibus honoraretur: assidua in eleemosynis, pernox in vigiliis; in castitate atque omni honestate puram se semper exhibuit; praedia ecclesiis, monasteriis, vel quibuscumque locis sanctis necessaria providit, larga ac prona voluntate distribuit, ut putaretur eo tempore non regina, sed propria Dei ancilla ipsi sedulo deservire; quam non regnum filiorum, non ambitio saeculi, nec facultas extulit ad ruinam, sed humilitas evexit ad gratiam.”

This passage within Book III, and the subsequent opening to Book IV, recalls the qualities of Clotilde in her marriage to Clovis and their favorable rule. The presence of women in late antiquity as actors that were unable to exhibit much influence outside the realm of patronage is not a new revelation, but, given the role of Merovingian kings in their giving to the local churches as motifs of public piety, it is necessary to acknowledge the instances Gregory recognizes women of Christian character within the ruling class; even if he does not explicitly use the word *pious* in detailing their lives, the character of the Merovingian queens is relevant when discussing Gregory's idealized form of pious kingship.⁹⁰ Furthermore, Gregory connected the quality of the royal marriage to the health of the kingdom, where a poor royal marriage led to political conflict.⁹¹ The Merovingian queens, although not able to exercise the same powers and privileges as the kings, were still agents in shaping the Merovingian throne, even if more explicit political control and agency remained in the hands of the kings.⁹²

In summation, Gregory's construction of piety among the ruling elite of Merovingian Gaul has a strong public aspect present throughout his writing, extending even to those who were not in the same classification of 'temporal' rulers as the Merovingian kings such as the bishop Cautinus. In general, though, the idealized Merovingian king not only held a sense of personal piety and sincerity for their actions, but also emulated the Christian sense of public charity whenever possible. Both qualities are required for a 'righteous' king in Gregory's schema. But it is not only a personal piety and a connection to the contemporary peoples that helps to legitimize

⁹⁰ For a great introduction to women as patrons in the late antique world, see Elizabeth Clark, "Patrons, Not Priests: Women and Power in Late Ancient Christianity," *Gender and History* 2 (1990): 253–73. Unfortunately, the role of female patrons does not intersect with my research much more than this current aspect, and indeed, the role of queens and patronage within the Merovingian world is something that requires further study.

⁹¹ Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines*, 86.

⁹² See Dailey, chap. 4 "Brides and Social Status" for discussion on Merovingian royal marriages as emblematic of the health of the kingdom. Chapter 5, "Merovingian Marital Practice," is an insightful analysis of Merovingian royal marriages as a tool for consolidation of political power amid changing political circumstances.

a ‘good’ ruler, but also whether Gregory portrays the ruler as one able to emulate the great figures of the Merovingian and biblical past as a seal of approval upon their rule.

c. Kings and Earlier Exemplars

Gregory of Tours’ model of pious kingship incorporated aspects of both an individual and a public piety, but Gregory also employed connections between contemporary Merovingian kings and earlier pious exemplars in his construction of idealized kingship. Thus, by drawing a connection between contemporary figures and earlier exemplars, Gregory crafted stronger portrayals of contemporary leaders as pious figures, legitimizing their authority by constructing similarities to saints and leaders who emphasized the qualities Gregory desired.

Gregory’s use of earlier exemplars for ideal kingship appears most explicitly in his parallels to earlier figures during Clovis’ baptismal sequence in Book II. In the climax of Book II, during the conversion of Clovis, the descriptions that surround the baptismal font and the church are quite vivid. The streets feature colored decorations, the churches are adorned with white, and the scent of balsam is diffused throughout the area, with many different scents and colors present; so great were the scents and the space was filled with such a favor of God that Gregory describes the church as though it was filled with the fragrance of paradise itself!⁹³ Following a litany of descriptors of the space surrounding Clovis, Gregory finally turns his attention to the main figure in the story. But Gregory refuses to address Clovis by name, as he had before, instead referring to him as the *novus Constantinus* — stripped of his name, and more than just a simple renaming, Clovis is seen as a ‘new Constantine.’ Gregory continues with grand

⁹³ *Hist.*, II.31; “Velis depictis adumbrantur plateae, ecclesiae cortinis albetibus adornantur, baptisterium componitur, balsama diffunduntur, micant flagrantis odore cerei, totumque templum baptisterii divino respergitur ab odore; talemque ibi gratiam adstantibus Deus tribuit, ut aestimarent se paradisi odoribus conlocari.”

comparisons, with Clovis proceeding to the baptistry to “expunge the old sickness of leprosy [that is, his paganism], and to wash out the soiled stains of his former days with fresh water.”⁹⁴ The bishop Remigius addresses the king in as poetic a manner as the surrounding descriptors, naming Clovis a ‘Sicamber,’ another name for the Franks. This may be a literary fiction crafted by Gregory to emphasize what he sees as a central part to the story of the Franks, or Remigius perhaps chose to address Clovis as ‘Sicamber’ to remind him how far he had come in his journey to Christianity. In portraying Clovis as a *novus Constantinus*, Gregory paints him as the new archetype of the ‘convert-king,’ the once-pagan ruler before a miraculous event (in the cases of Constantine and Clovis, the need to win a specific battle) brought them into the Christian fold, where they then (at least, in the eyes of Gregory) enacted positive change for the faith. Here Gregory exhibits some of his Eusebian influence, viewing Clovis as a figure for positive Christian change much like Eusebius’ portrayal of Constantine as a champion of Christianity. Gregory’s political aspirations and portrayal of a Christian king mirrors Eusebius’ construction of Constantine as a great Christian figure amid a still largely pagan world.⁹⁵ The portrayal of Clovis as Constantine extends the parallel outward as well and portrays the bishop Remigius, who baptized Clovis, as analogous to the Pope Sylvester that baptized Constantine — for Gregory, an inauguration of a Christian kingdom demands a bishop alongside the king, while also allowing him to elevate the bishop Remigius into another example of a saintly Gallic figure in tandem with Clovis.

⁹⁴ II.31“Rex ergo prior poposcit se a pontifice baptizari. Procedit novus Constantinus ad lavacrum, deleturus leprae veteris morbum, sordentesque maculas gestas antiquitus recenti latice deleturus. Cui ingresso ad baptismum sanctus Dei sic inquit ore facundo: «Mitis depone colla, Sicamber: adora quod incendisti, incende quod adorasti.»”

⁹⁵ See Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), chap. 15 "Eusebius and Constantine" and the epilogue for details and examples of Eusebius propagandizing Constantine as an ideal Christian ruler.

Clovis is not only compared to the figure of Constantine, but also more indirect allusions are made to biblical figures to solidify a portrayal of Clovis as a pious king. Clovis is compared to Solomon, albeit indirectly, through allusions to Solomon's writings. When Gregory describes Clovis as one who walks with an "upright heart," he is utilizing an intentional connection between Clovis and the figure of Solomon; after Solomon finishes building his temple, God appears before him and admonishes Solomon: "[I]f you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness... then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever."⁹⁶ By describing Clovis with similar qualities as Solomon, Gregory emulates the positive imagery of Solomon in the Bible while also making an implicit claim that the Merovingian kingdom, led by a king with an upright heart, both retains divine favor in the same way Israel did in 1 Kings and that the Merovingian throne will be similarly everlasting.⁹⁷ The inclusion of Clovis doing what was "pleasing in His sight" — *faceret quae placita erant in oculis eius*⁹⁸ — could be considered an allusion to the words of Psalm 19:14: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord."⁹⁹ If this is the case, Gregory is alluding to David, pulling out the Davidic qualities he sees as foundational for kingship: being in alignment with divine favor.¹⁰⁰

Gregory saw the need for kings to emulate past figures through his own literary constructions. Indeed, for Gregory, the saints and priests of old were still an active and present

⁹⁶ 1 Kings 9:4-5 ESV

⁹⁷ Gregory is not the first to do such a thing, but his treatment of the righteous Merovingian kings is quite explicit and Gregory's position as the main historical narrator for Merovingian Gaul mirrors the influence and creation of a 'holy king' narrative that Eusebius originated in his history of Roman Christianization.

⁹⁸ *Hist.*, II.42.

⁹⁹ Psalm 19:14 ESV

¹⁰⁰ However, it may be surer ground to consider Gregory's word choice as the employment of biblical idiom to describe Clovis as a righteous king rather than a more explicit allusion since notions of 'uprightness' and 'walking before God' are so prevalent throughout the Bible — while Gregory may be making unconscious allusions to these verses, we cannot definitively know if he was reminded of these verses rather than him simply utilizing a grander biblical trope of a 'righteous king' in his treatment of Clovis.

force within his world.¹⁰¹ If the Frankish kings wished to be true kings, they needed to “emulate the great figures of the Hebrew scriptures and the saints and martyrs of the Church.”¹⁰² Gregory himself was a figure totally enraptured within the world of the saints, who saw the cult of the saints as an active force which maintained its power in the world of late antiquity. Gregory’s saints “have the power to keep society stable and unified,” and their presence in his contemporary world presents an understanding of the world that is “marked by the permanence, continuity and justice that hark back to biblical models, the apostles, the martyrs,” and other essential figures within Gregory’s *Historiae* and the Christian milieu of late antiquity.¹⁰³ The invocation of the saints shows Gregory as a writer who views both the biblical world and the world of the saints as forces still incredibly present in his writing, in which the past holy figures of Christianity can actively approve of leadership within the contemporary world. Amid the “violence of Frankish warlords and the perils and uncertainty of Gregory’s era,” the saints, and their invocation, provided a sense of continuity between the world of the Bible and the world of Gregory of Tours.¹⁰⁴

The most prevalent saint within Gregory’s work is Saint Martin of Tours (316 or 336–397 AD); considered to be the patron saint of Gaul, Saint Martin’s story is one that was especially relevant for Gregory. Not only did Saint Martin hold the Bishopric of Tours, as Gregory had (and thus Gregory likely felt some personal connection to the saint), but Saint Martin’s anti-Arian position would have aligned with Gregory’s personal Christological

¹⁰¹ For a good overview on the cult of the saints in Gregory’s time, see Brown, *Rise of Western Christendom*, 157–59.

¹⁰² Monroe, “*Via Iustitiae*,” 112.

¹⁰³ J.K. Kitchen, “Gregory of Tours, Hagiography, and the Cult of the Saints in the Sixth Century,” in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Alexander C. Murray, vol. 63, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016), 421–22.

¹⁰⁴ Kitchen, 421.

views.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, Martin had served a portion of his life as an officer in the Roman army, and his later fervor for quelling paganism during his bishopric at Tours aligns well with Gregory's narrative of a Christian Merovingian kingdom that stood apart from the pagan and Arian tribes that surrounded them, often through the use of military might. Additionally, Martin was an influential and foundational saint within Gaul, essentially the patron saint of the region, and thus a pivotal figure for Gregory to tie the king to as a part of his legitimizing discourse.

Saint Martin appears throughout the text of the *Historiae*, given his role as the prominent saint of Gaul. A miniature biography of Saint Martin appears in Book I of the *Historiae* chronicling the different miracles of the holy figure.¹⁰⁶ But Saint Martin also appears elsewhere in the *Historiae* and is portrayed as an active figure within the text. Maintaining the favor of Saint Martin is important for Gregory's ideal king, as shown within the *Historiae*. When Clovis fought against the Arian kingdoms of Gaul, he "issued an edict out of reverence to the blessed Martin that no man should take anything from the region [Martin's historical domain as Bishop of Tours] but water and grass."¹⁰⁷ Clovis, the great Frankish warlord, saw Martin as an active enough force that he "doubted their hope of victory if they offended the blessed Martin."¹⁰⁸ After acquiring a blessing from the church of Saint Martin, Gregory of Tours invokes another famous Gallic saint's approval of Clovis: Saint Hilary of Poitiers. Not only does Clovis receive the blessing of Saint Martin, but as his army comes upon Poitiers, a fiery beacon issues from the Church of Saint Hilary and rests over Clovis, mirroring the fiery tongues of Pentecost in the

¹⁰⁵ See *Hist.*, III.prologue for a scathing indictment of Arius and his beliefs.

¹⁰⁶ I.36, I.39, I.48.

¹⁰⁷ II.37; "pro reverentia beati Martini dedit edictum, ut nullus de regione illa aliud, quam herbarum alimenta aquamque praesumeret."

¹⁰⁸ II.37; "'et ubi erit spes victoriae, si beatus Martinus offenditur?'"

second chapter of Acts.¹⁰⁹ In Book III of the *Historiae* a divine hailstorm, which Gregory describes as accompanied with fire and lightning, mirrors the seventh plague of the Exodus narrative and is attributed to the “power of the blessed Martin” through the virtuous intercession of the queen Clotilde.¹¹⁰ King Chlothar (King of the Franks, son of Clovis, r. 511–561 AD) is described as one who “feared the virtue of the blessed Martin” and sent gifts to the Bishop of Tours “so that he might win over the power of the blessed Martin.”¹¹¹ And when Eufronius, Gregory’s uncle and predecessor to the Bishopric of Tours, was invested into his seat, Chlothar “let the will of God and the blessed Martin be done,” showing that the saints still had power regarding the placement of bishops to their seats in the mid-sixth century.¹¹² Gregory attributes the saints with agency, but their status as saints still ultimately traces their agency and power back onto God, whose divine power works through the saints and into Gregory’s world. By reaffirming the saints, Gregory advocates for an active God who is invested in his idealized and pious Merovingian subjects.

By referring to the saints, Gregory simultaneously ascribes power in his own time to these holy exemplars while also legitimizing the kings he is biographing. Rulers that maintain the cult of the saints through sacrifices or referential acts are rewarded with miraculous circumstances that both speak to their individual piety (as well as their public relationships with Christianity and their own piety) and cement the power of the saint within the sixth century and beyond.

¹⁰⁹ II.37; “Veniente autem rege apud Pictavis, dum eminus in tentoriis commoraretur, pharus ignea de basilica sancti Hilarii egress, visa est ei tanquam super se advenire, scilicet ut lumine beati confessoris adiutus Hilarii, liberius haereticas acies, contra quas saepe idem sacerdos pro fide conflixerat, debellaret.”

¹¹⁰ III.28; “Quod nullus ambigat hanc per obtentum reginae beati Martini fuisse virtutem.”

¹¹¹ IV.2; “ut pro se vitutem beati Martini antistitis exoraret.”

¹¹² IV.15; “Fiat voluntas Dei, et beati Martini.”

IV. The Austrasian Connection

A final note on the geopolitical aspects of late antique Gaul must be said in relation to Gregory's construction of an idealized kingship and his partiality of which kings he chose to portray as pious. As mentioned previously, Gregory's family originally hailed from the eastern portion of Gaul, under the domain of the Austrasian kings. From this, a potential preference of Gregory within his telling of the Merovingian dynasty quickly emerges. Despite crafting a narrative that includes the swath of Clovis and his descendants, the Merovingian state was still fractured between several territories (the Austrasians, Burgundians, and the Neustrians, among other smaller regions) and both Gregory's background and his bias toward one part of Gaul is hinted at in the *Historiae*.

In the midst of infighting between Gallic territories, Gregory seems willing to prefer certain sides, and the timeline of Austrasian geopolitics likely influenced portions of the *Historiae*, as recent work has revealed.¹¹³ While Gregory attributes the Merovingian kings as good Christian rulers over Gaul, there was still a prevalence of civil war within the Merovingian dynasty throughout late antiquity, and certainly during Gregory's life. Gregory's Austrasian background manifests through a favorable approach to Austrasian kings and their descendants during the first portions of his *Historiae*, before changing geopolitical situations forcibly expelled Gregory's Austrasian bias in favor of a more reserved outlook that was sympathetic to members of the Burgundian line of the Merovingians who had treated the Austrasian line favorably. The timeline for the composition of the *Historiae* must be considered, although is not known (nor can it ever be precisely determined) when exactly Gregory worked on the *Historiae* within his life, or in what stages the *Historiae* was composed. Murray posits that the formal

¹¹³ Esders, "Gallic Politics in the Sixth Century"; Murray, "The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours."

dating of the *Historiae* can be limited to 585 AD onward, after the city of Tours was restored to Austrasian control under the Austrasian King Childebert II.¹¹⁴ Tours had previously been under the rule of Charibert I, the King of Paris, whose death in 567 AD caused his brothers Sigebert I (King of Austrasia, r. 561–c. 575 AD) and Guntram (King of Burgundy, r. 561–592 AD) to divide Charibert’s territory between themselves. Tours, originally under Parisian rule, fell under the domain of Sigebert I, like Gregory’s homeland of the Auvergne, which had long been under Austrasian control. Consequently, Gregory (who was appointed to Tours by Sigebert I in 573 AD), regarded Sigebert I and his son Childebert II (r. 575–595 AD) as the legitimate rulers over Tours, despite outside attempts by Chilperic, King of Neustria (r. 561–584 AD) and half-brother to Guntram and Sigebert I, to subdue Tours and the surrounding cities under Neustrian rule.¹¹⁵

Following Murray’s assumption that Gregory began officially writing and compiling his *Historiae* after 585 AD (or at least, completing most of the work after 585 AD), when Childebert II regained rule over Tours following a period of unrest and foreign rule by Chilperic, then the work was done over the course of nine years, with Gregory dying in 594 AD.¹¹⁶ While Guntram, the King of Burgundy, did control Tours for a time, he only did so for a brief window in late 584 AD and the beginning of 585 AD before control of Tours was remitted to the Austrasian line.¹¹⁷ This may explain why Gregory, who favored the Austrasian line of the Merovingians in the first portions of his *Historiae*, was willing to view Guntram, a Burgundian, in a relatively favorable

¹¹⁴ Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,” 91.

¹¹⁵ Esders, “Gallic Politics in the Sixth Century,” 436–37.

¹¹⁶ This assumption comes from Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,” 91, and is generally accepted among modern research. Some other sources argue for Gregory beginning his writing earlier, but still point to 585 AD as when Gregory largely switched to writing contemporary history. Although the author agrees with Murray’s opinion of a 585 AD start date, it cannot be truly known for sure. Regardless, the entire article, but esp. 77-92, addresses the dating issue quite well. Even if work was done before the 585 AD date, only Books I-VI can be argued as such, and the contemporary issues of Gregory’s day are still dated to a post-585 AD composition. For more detail, see pg. 77-78.

¹¹⁷ Murray, 92.

light. Although Guntram was not an Austrasian king, he did rule Tours after the Neustrian king Chilperic, who Gregory viewed as an exceedingly poor king. In comparison, despite his flaws (such as his paranoia and impulsive outbursts) Guntram is admired for his piety and treatment of the church.¹¹⁸ Following such poor kingly behavior from Chilperic, Gregory may have seen Guntram as a pious improvement, even if not to the standard of his beloved Austrasian kings such as Theudebert I and Sigebert I.¹¹⁹ Both Guntram of Burgundy and Childebert II of Austrasia (his nephew, and the son of Sigebert I) agreed in the Treaty of Andelot to designate each other as mutual heirs to their respective kingdoms, forming an uneasy but promising Austrasian-Burgundian alliance that lasted until Guntram's death in 592 AD. Guntram even accepted Childebert II's sons — Theudebert II and Theuderic II — as their father's heirs, consolidating both the thrones of Austrasia and Burgundy into the control of the Austrasian line.¹²⁰ This may also help to explain Gregory's apparent favor toward Guntram in the light of his Austrasian bias, and especially if his works were intended to be read by Austrasian kings of the near future, since the throne of Burgundy had passed into the Austrasians by the time of Gregory's death. While it cannot be known whether Gregory truly held a predisposition toward the kings that controlled Austrasian territories and their ancestors (such as Theudebert I, Sigebert I, Guntram, Chlothar I, and, of course, Clovis), it is an interesting note that must be made when discussing Gregory's understanding of piety in relation to righteous kingship. Gregory's familial bias toward the Austrasian heartland may affect who he treated favorably. Even Murray acknowledges that "Gregory could combine harsh judgements of individuals in one place with neutral reporting of

¹¹⁸ *Hist.*, VIII.1, IX.21.

¹¹⁹ See Lucas, "*Magnus et Verus Christianus*," 138–39 for discussion on Chilperic as a negative foil for Guntram.

¹²⁰ Esders, "Gallic Politics in the Sixth Century," 444–46.

their actions in another,” and shifting alliances or circumstances may have proved influential on Gregory’s portrayal of ‘righteous’ kings amid a changing political landscape.¹²¹

V. Conclusion

Gregory of Tours’ *Historiae* constructs a strong model of ideal kingship and its relation to piety as a prerequisite factor of an ‘ideal king.’ This schema of constructed kingship, with piety at its center, speaks volumes to the modern historian in furthering understanding of the enigmatic Merovingian state. Gregory, in his treatment of the Merovingian kings throughout his *Historiae*, clearly emphasized the role of piety within the monarchy and favorably viewed kings that could be viewed as ‘pious.’ For Gregory, the model for pious kingship was emulated in three ways, with the kings that portrayed the three forms of piety being classified as pious kings, and therefore worthy of emulation and praise. Personal piety, portrayal of public-facing piety or piety that regularly interacted with the public, and a piety that was connected to previous holy figures or relied on the power of the saints all coalesced into Gregory’s model for an ideal kingship.

Gregory utilized personal piety in his descriptions of characters within his *Historiae*, with ‘good’ kings being given descriptions that emphasized their titles as a *pie rex* or portrayed them as aligned with divine will and thus as pious. Kings such as Clovis and Theudebert are directly addressed as pious figures but are also portrayed piously in their general descriptions in the *Historiae*. However, the kings Gregory lauded were not only personally pious, but also publicly so: they gave money freely to the poor and the destitute, upheld the churches, had good relationships with bishops, and maintained their pious actions in public. Those who were unwilling to publicly portray their piety (such as the Burgundian king Gundobad) were scorned,

¹²¹ Murray, “The Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,” 88.

alongside those who failed to maintain an appropriately public piety, such as the bishop Cautinus. In addition to the personal and public aspects of piety Gregory desired in the Merovingian kings, Gregory crafted connections to pious exemplars from antiquity through biblical allusions or more direct links to influential saints, namely Martin of Tours and Hilary of Poitiers. Gregory's belief in the saints as active figures within his world portrays the Merovingian kings as rulers connected to the holy exemplars of the past. Utilizing this three-fold model of ideal kingship, Gregory's portraiture of the various Merovingian leaders in his *Historiae* becomes clearer, while also illuminating Gregory and what he prioritized as prerequisites for a model king within the Merovingian world. For Gregory, an ideal king was one who maintained a personal piety, strong public relations with the church and other forms of public piety, and of whom the saints approved (in addition to emulating strong biblical figures).

Although many scholars have approached the *Historiae* with different foci, this paper hopes to highlight the connections between the Merovingians and their piety while adding to the understanding of Gaul in the time of Gregory of Tours. Gregory's work not only stands apart from others as one of the main surviving literary sources from the Merovingian period which speaks to the kings of Gaul, but also addresses the role of piety in a world incredibly concerned with legitimacy of dynasties. Additionally, this research helps fill a more complete biography of Gregory, whose childhood connections to the Austrasian territory affect his portrayal of Merovingian history equally as much as his investiture in the episcopacy of Tours. While the world of the Merovingians will always remain enigmatic at some level, Gregory's *Historiae* crafts a complex portrait on kingship and piety that adds to an ever-expanding wealth of knowledge surrounding the Bishop of Tours and the Merovingian dynasty on which he wrote.

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