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Facing a Second Death: Narrating and Silencing Hell in the Works of Gregory of Tours

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of the language of the eternal damnation as applied by Gregory, bishop of Tours, writing in the 6th century in Merovingian Gaul. Instead of trying to elucidate the bishop's views of hell in the light of what late antique Christian authors prior to him had written on that subject, this paper takes the writings of Gregory as a point of departure. Various types of people (who are regrouped around their religious creeds) which Gregory explicitly sees as damned are examined and the possible causes behind the application of the language of hell are adduced. The instances where Gregory chooses to refrain from the use of the language of damnation are given equal attention and the political limits of the application of the threat of hell are explored through the example of the Merovingian king Chilperic.

Keywords

Hell; Gregory of Tours; Merovingian Gaul; historiography; hagiography; eschatology

Although it could be argued that the question of the afterlife was of minor significance for the late antique pagans,¹ the very opposite was true for their Christian contemporaries. Good Christians were supposed to shape their earthly life so as to be able to achieve salvation. However, not every human being was thought of as being able to gain everlasting life in the presence of God. The opinions of the ecclesiastical writers as to who was likely to do so varied. While Origen advocated universal reconciliation² and Jerome expressed the view that even Christians who die as grave sinners would be (in contrast to heathens and heretics) saved by the virtue of their faith,³ Augustin considered that only those faithful whose only guilt consists in having lived as mediocre Christians were capable of achieving salvation after undergoing some afterlife punishments.⁴ This variety of opinions, together with the lack of a central ecclesiastical authority that would be able to force local communities to accept its teaching on salvation, makes the study of the views on the afterlife fate of men that individual late antique authors expressed desirable.

Although scholarly research on the history of the notion of the afterlife in Christian antiquity has not been neglected in recent decades,⁵ and there are many papers touching on various aspects of the work of Gregory of Tours (539–594), no systematic attempt to gather and interpret the material connected to the infernal dimension of the afterlife in the works of the Tournonian bishop has yet been made. The valuable contribution of Moreira (2010: pp. 65–80) examines (in the context of the search for late antique

1 Pagans confronted by Paul in the anonymous *Life of Saint Thecla* are not interested in the Christian vision of the resurrection of the dead. For them, human fertility guarantees true and fully natural resurrection which consists of the ever-renewing cycle of the new generations replacing the old ones (cf. Brown 1988: pp. 5–8 commenting on *Thec.* 6; pp. 190–192 in the edition of Dagron).

2 Origen and Gregory of Nyssa saw hell as a place of *temporary* punishment (among the evidence supporting this view Trumbower 2010, pp. 33–37, adduces *C. Celsum* VIII.72 by the former and *De an. et res.*, PGM 46.86–88; 100 by the latter).

3 *Ep.* CXIX, 7 MPL 22.973. Cf. Le Goff (1981: p. 90).

4 Speaking about the possibilities of the post-mortem salvation as they were considered by Augustine, Le Goff (1981: p. 97) points to the fact that it would have had its very clear limits: *Enfin, en 426/427 dans la Cité de Dieu (XXI, XXIV), Augustin revient sur l'efficacité des prières pour les morts. Mais c'est pour en préciser clairement les limites. Les suffrages sont inutiles pour les démons, les infidèles et les impies, donc pour les damnés. Ils ne peuvent être valables que pour une certaine catégorie de pécheurs, pas très nettement définie mais malgré tout caractérisée d'une façon particulière: ceux dont la vie n'aura été ni très bonne ni très mauvaise.* When one considers the eschatology of Augustine, one sees that it is the fruit of his confrontations with the problems of his time. Consequently, his opinions about the afterlife are spread throughout many of his writings, among which *De civitate Dei* XX–XXII and *Enchiridion* offer most exhaustive descriptions of the last things. According to Augustine, neither pagans nor unbaptised children of Christian parents can enter heaven. Baptism, however, does not present a guarantee of eternal salvation, which can be undone by the audacity to perpetuate grave sins originating from the false security of salvation. The damned do not wait until the Last Judgment to receive their punishments, for they begin right after their death and become even more painful after the Second Coming of Christ. In the meantime however, some of the damned may have their torments diminished thanks to the prayers of their living relatives. After the Last Judgment this mitigatory effect will cease and, as both heaven and hell are eternal for Augustine, the Judgment will seal the fate of the dead who were predestined by God either for heaven or for hell once and for all. Many of Augustine's views concerning the last things played a vital role in later developments. (for Augustine's views on hell, see Minois 1994, pp. 143–150, and especially Bernstein 1993, pp. 314–333).

5 See for example Le Goff (1981), Moreira (2010), Moreira & Toscano (2010), Minois (1994), Bernstein (1993).

antecedents of the doctrine of the Purgatory) some aspects of Gregory's views on the afterlife. Moreira points out the fact that the author of the *Histories* feared that he would be damned and believed that he himself and some other sinful Christian should satisfy themselves with a kind of eternal salvation that would not be entirely free from suffering. De Nie (1987: pp. 146–151) observes that the sins against the Church are narrated as being castigated by the fire of hell in the work of Gregory. The sinners guilty of them descend into hell immediately after their death, without having to await the Last Judgment. Other than that, only passing references to the infernal dimension of Gregory's writing have been made so far in the scholarship on Gregory.⁶ Various scholars seem to have been more attracted to Gregory's representations of the end of the world than to his narrations about damnation. This paper tries to fill this gap by focusing on this particular aspect of personal eschatology: hell. It examines the strategies of addressing (or avoiding) the question of eternal damnation in Gregory of Tours, whose oeuvre contains rich material related to personal eschatology. The works of Gregory, a prolific author from Merovingian Gaul who exercised the office of the bishop of Tours⁷ will be studied to discern why and in which cases he addressed the eternal damnation of specific persons or groups explicitly? In which instances did he choose to be silent? Did he treat all the damned with contempt or were there exceptions? This paper, too, tries to establish how Gregory saw the afterlife fate of the deceased sinners and heretics whose eternal damnation is not explicitly mentioned by him.

It is the method of the present paper to study Gregory's views on hell in and of themselves, without inferring them from what may seem as a late antique consensus about the fate of the damned. Both evidence and research have shown that such consensus was indeed very shaky.⁸ Therefore, it would be dangerous and misleading for a student of Gregory's view on hell to imply that he took the opinions of other writers for granted. A fruitful study of the individual eschatology as it is represented in the literature of late antiquity must take individual authors as its point of departure. However, to elucidate one particular question, a point of comparison is established by evoking not the theological literature but the late antique historiography, a genre which the *Histories* of Gregory themselves represent.

When one tries to categorize people described by Gregory according to the fate in the afterlife that he accorded to them, one realises that they can be regrouped under a few categories. There are, on the one hand, the saints, who are not only saved, but also manifest the power that is the result of their salvation.⁹ Though not worshipped by the

6 The case of the literature dealing with the question of hell seems to be similar. See, for example, the index to Minois (1994). The index to Bernstein (1993) does not include references to Gregory.

7 For a short biography of Gregory see De Nie (1987: pp. 3–8). Readers interested in learning more about the life of this author would be well advised to consult the work of Pietri (1983: pp. 246–334). I have used the 1951 MGH edition by Krusch for *Historiae* and, for the other writings of Gregory, the 1969 MGH edition by Arndt and Krusch. I have used the English version of the titles of the works of Gregory throughout the text and name their Latin abbreviation when quoting from them.

8 For the variety of Christian and Old Testamental views of hell see, for example, Minois (1994: pp. 73–181). Compare also the diverging views of Christian writers cited above.

9 The most obvious examples would be saints Martin and Julian, both protagonists of Gregory's writings.

Church, individuals who Gregory presents or alludes to as saved (such as Clovis¹⁰ and the saintly boy described in the *Glory of the martyrs*¹¹) join them.

On the opposite pole, one does find individuals described as damned. Here heretics constitute a prominent subcategory. And, as it is known, Gregory devotes much attention to one particular type of heresy, namely to Arianism.¹² It is therefore hardly surprising that a man whom he sees as its originator, Arius, is described as burning in hell after having died in shameful circumstances.¹³ That he is contrasted with Hilary of Poitiers, a champion of the Catholic orthodoxy rejoicing in the presence of God after having been recompensed in the earthly life, should also serve as a lesson to Gregory's readers. Arius introduces the theme of heresy, which the bishop of Tours links to the royal theme. Gregory enumerates the Arian rulers of Visigoths and Burgundians who were punished with eternal damnation for sharing Arius's view of the Godhead in the preface to the third book of the *Histories*. It is important to observe that the fate those rulers faced after their death is not narrated immediately in the chapters that describe their action but only in retrospect in the preface opening the third book. This stresses the persuasive power of the language of condemnation by delaying its employment and giving it a very central, prominent place. This is one of the few prefaces to be found in the historiographical work of Gregory. There is yet another heretical king to inhabit hell: Theodoric of Italy, who Gregory portrays as an Arian persecuting the orthodox Christians of his kingdom and their spiritual leader, the pope of Rome. His actions against the true faith are caused by the heretical teachings he adheres to.¹⁴

In a religious dispute with an Arian, Gregory threatens his opponent indirectly with eternal damnation, equalling his unorthodox view of the Holy Spirit with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit spoken about by Jesus.¹⁵ What is interesting is the fact that the threat is formulated in a positive fashion: Gregory presupposes that his opponent wants to go to heaven. Gregory sees his Arian creed, which diminishes the role of the Holy Spirit, as detrimental to it. The conversion to the Catholic orthodoxy is therefore crucial to assure one's salvation while the choice to preserve the Arian creed excludes one from heaven.

One may ask whether for Gregory this language of eternal damnation as applied to heretics was still necessary in the late 6th century.

By the time Gregory was finishing the *Histories*, the Arian kingdoms of the West had either abandoned their heretical creed or had been conquered by the Byzantines (the exceptions being the Lombards) and the initially pagan Franks had made their choice of the Catholic orthodoxy. However, the steady disappearance of Arianism did not mean

10 For the hagiographic stylisation of Clovis found in the *Histories*, see Heinzelmann (1996: pp. 87–92).

11 *glor. mart.* 75.

12 The people Gregory calls Arian would neither have applied this term to themselves nor would they have characterised their opponents as orthodox. For the sake of consistency, this paper follows the established method of not writing such names in italics.

13 *lib. hist.* III, *Praef.*

14 *glor. mart.* 39.

15 *lib. hist.* V, 43.

that heresy ceased to be a burning issue in Gaul, at least for Gregory. The theme of (not necessarily Arian) heresy reoccurs in the writings of Gregory (Goetz 2013: p. 599)¹⁶ and he has his reasons to underline it. The Frankish King Chilperic, the villain of the *Histories* was on the verge of heresy and although he could have been persuaded to abandon it,¹⁷ Gregory seems to have thought that the additional stressing of the tragic eternal consequences of heresy was urgent, lest the path abandoned by Chilperic be followed by another ruler. Chilperic issues an edict abolishing the distinction of the three persons of the Holy Trinity as he thinks it unworthy of God, stating that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are the same. Such a view could not be accepted by the Catholic orthodoxy which stressed the unity of God while maintaining the real and distinct existence of the three persons of the Trinity. As a matter of fact, by abolishing even the names of the divine persons, Chilperic goes even further as the proponents of Sabellian modalism, who maintained that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were, to be sure, not three separate persons, but merely three manifestations of the one God. The fact that the heresy Chilperic comes up with is not a form of Arianism, but bears resemblance to what most ancient Catholic authors would have possibly classified as Sabellianism¹⁸ shows that for Gregory the contemporary threat of heresy was to some extent summed up by the name of Arianism but not reduced to it by any means. Even the clergymen for whom Gregory was responsible could fall prey to heretical speculations.¹⁹

Confronted with what he perceived as a constant threat, Gregory employed the language of hell as a part of dogmatic pastoral care.

The heretics whose eternal fate Gregory mentions in an explicit manner should lead his audience to the conclusion that a person dying as a heretic has no chance of obtaining eternal life. There is, therefore, no need to describe every deceased individual who did not happen to be Catholic as damned.²⁰ It allows Gregory to make a more nuanced use of the language concerning eternal damnation through either explicitly mentioning it or avoiding to do so in the course of narration. On the one hand, this avoidance allows Gregory to evade the boredom his readers could experience while reading his works. The hagiographical writings of Gregory are witness to the fact that he was perpetually troubled by the perspective of overwhelming his readers with chunks of (possibly repetitive) pieces of information.²¹ While it is true that many ancient authors use *fastidium* as a mere topos (Curtius 1965: p. 95), Gregory has been seen by many as an author applying the traditional language of humility to express his real concerns.²² Accordingly, one

16 See Goetz (2013: p. 599) for bibliographical references to the research on the relevancy of the heretical threat in the times of Gregory.

17 *lib. hist.* V, 44.

18 For so-called Sabellianism, see Schwöbel (2002: pp. 93–94).

19 *lib. hist.* X, 13.

20 In *lib. hist.* IX, 15 for example Gregory does not explicitly mention the eternal damnation of a deceased Arian bishop. His heresy, as well as the comparison with Arius, speak for themselves.

21 See, for example: *Mart.* II, 19; *vita patr.* VII, 6; *Andr. Praef.*

22 For the presentation of some older voices in the discussion concerning the humility topos in the works of Gregory see Thürlemann (1974: pp. 60–72).

has to be cautious in negating the meaningfulness of Gregory's literary turns.²³ On the one hand, Gregory repeats his concern by not overwhelming the reader with a frequent, somehow schematic enumeration of the miracles. In repeating that he wants to avoid boredom he, probably unconsciously,²⁴ risks causing it not by the uncountable series of hard-to-distinguish miracles, but through the frequent expressing of this concern, which confirms that it need not be dismissed as a mere literary technique. Additionally, the fact that the many mentions of *fastidium* as something to be avoided are not to be read as a merely rhetorical figure but had influenced the narrative technique of Gregory is demonstrated by his reworking of the life of Saint Andrew, a reworking that aimed at shortening the longer original text.²⁵

On the other hand, not mentioning the ultimate damnation of the deceased sinners may have other reasons behind it, such as, for example, compassion towards the damned. Unlike some early church writers, who did not exclude the possibility that virtuous pagans could enter the kingdom of heaven, Gregory sees the correct creed as a prerequisite for achieving salvation.²⁶ It is in this context that one needs to read his chapter devoted to the old, pre-Christian religious stance of the Franks. In a long chapter of the second book of his historiographical work,²⁷ Gregory deplores the fact that the Franks, prior to the conversion of Clovis had not been confronted with the message of the biblical prophets concerning idolatry. Through a series of rhetorical questions built on the scheme *Oh, when only had the Franks heard the message of the prophets and turned away from idol worship* the reader is suggested to believe that the future masters of Gaul would not have remained unimpressed by biblical monotheism. The correct faith in God being the prerequisite for eternal salvation, it becomes obvious that those pagan Franks were damned, even when this conclusion is left to the reader, who may infer it not only from intertextual references to places where Gregory is more explicit, but also from the sorrowful tone of Gregory, who deplores their damnation – a unique case in the *Histories*. The Franks, unlike Arian Visigoths who had remained in contact with the Catholics and a few of whom Gregory personally confronts with what he sees as a true religion, had simply no opportunity of accepting the orthodox version of Christianity. That they would have done it is demonstrated by their subsequent conversions narrated

23 Auerbach (2001: pp. 78–94), while admitting that the prose of Gregory departs from the norms of classical literature, sees its strength in its vividness and interest in detail. A recent study of the language and style of the bishop of Tours ends with the following conclusion: *Gregory's language is a written language, a very Latin one, highly polished as soon as what he wishes to express touches him deeply* (Bourgain 2015: p. 188).

24 It is hard to tell whether Gregory was conscious of this risk or not. If he was, he may have thought that mentioning the efforts he undertook to avoid boredom would cause less harm than leaving his readers without any comments on the matter.

25 *Andr. Praef.*

26 In *Andr.* 12, pagans have to convert in order to save themselves from the coming judgement of God. In *lib. hist.* X, 13 we read about non believers: *Iudicatus est enim, ut ad supplicium aeternum perveniat, quia non credit unigenitum Filium Dei, tamen resurrecturus in corpore, ut ipsum supplicium, in quo peccavit in corpore, patiatur.*

27 *lib. hist.* II, 10.

by Gregory. This makes their eventual condemnation resulting from non-culpable ignorance even more sorrowful.

It is at this point that Gregory needs to be compared with two other historians of the barbarian kingdoms. Religion plays only a minor role in *Getica* of Jordanes (see Gosh 2016: pp. 60–63). However, despite devoting little attention to the religion of Goths, the author of *Getica* does not ignore the question of hell.²⁸ Yet he does not associate the notion of eternal punishment with the pagan past of the Goths (as it is the case with Gregory of Tours and the Franks), which in his account does not undergo sharp criticism from the Christian perspective: Goths deifying their deceased leaders are only deceived and not wicked (Gosh 2016: p. 61). Moreover, he presents the Gothic pre-Christian tradition as capable of producing leaders who would move the *gens* towards learning and a more civilised way of life.²⁹ The almost complete lack of eschatological elements in the narrative does not encourage the reader to reflect on the afterlife fate of the valiant Gothic warriors and their families prior to their conversion to Arianism. However, the acceptance of this false doctrine changes everything in that regard. Jordanes draws on the history of the conversion of the Goths as it is to be found in the work of Orosius (Gosh 2016: p. 62, n. 92). According to the latter writer, it is the emperor Valens who is to blame for the spread of the heresy. He ends up being burned alive: an adequate punishment for a man who made Goths suffer eternally in hell.³⁰

Jordanes, too, excuses the Goths for their unfortunate conversion: Goths ask the emperor Valens for missionaries unconscious of the fact that they will preach to them a heretical version of Christianity. The Ostrogoths are even less culpable than the Visigoths, having received the Arian heresy from their already misled fellowmen.³¹ While it is true that Jordanes does not suggest that their earthly glory and military successes were diminished because of this religious choice (Gosh 2016: p. 62), the Goths do not remain unpunished for embracing Arianism. Reporting Valens's death, Jordanes states that being burned at the stake was a just punishment for a man who had answered the burning desire of Goths to learn about God by sending them to hell.³² Jordanes, for as much as he strives to present the history of the Goths in a favourable way does choose to mention the afterlife counterpart to the earthly exploits of the Gothic *gens*. One could perhaps argue that he found this notion of eternal punishment faced by the Goths in the 7th book of Orosius's work which served as his source. But it would be naïve to think that late antique historians had no other choice than to slavishly follow their sources without even making an attempt to reconcile their different shades of meaning with their own purposes. As a matter of fact, Jordanes does not quote the passage of Orosius in a mechanical way, but rather retells it with his own words, which shows that he understands its meaning with all the nuances. It could also be observed that Gregory of Tours, while

28 For the text of his work, I have used the 1882 MGH edition by Mommsen.

29 *Get.* V, 39–42.

30 *Hist. adv. pag.* VII, 33, 13–19.

31 *Get.* XXV, 131–133.

32 *Get.* XXVI, 138.

narrating the same episode and using the same sources, chose to eliminate entirely the notion of the eternal punishment of the Goths.³³ Why he missed the opportunity to tell another story revolving around the damnation of Arians is not very clear, but it is visible that this story mainly addresses the question of the divine punishment faced by Valens. Perhaps Gregory felt that mentioning the damnation of the Goths in a manner similar to Orosius would present them as mere victims worthy of compassion. And this he certainly did not want to do, given his highly critical view of the Arian Visigoths that he shares with his readers throughout the *Histories*. On the contrary, the rewording of Orosius' passage shows the very personal sympathy Jordanes has towards the Goths, who were sincere in their desire to convert to the true faith. While he does his best to excuse the Goths, the fact that he mentions the ultimate end of the barbarians who had converted to a false creed in his account of their deeds (which is very apologetic)³⁴ sheds a different light on it. From this point the history of the Goths would now develop in the shadow of eternal death. This adds another, grimmer dimension to the story of the exploits of the noble *gens*.

Isidore of Sevilla, quite in the tradition of Orosius and Jordanes, makes the emperor Valens responsible for converting the Goths to a heresy that would ultimately lead them to hell in both redactions of his *History of the Goths, Vandals and Suevi*.³⁵ Like Jordanes, he modifies the wording of Orosius by stressing the contrast between the beauty of the souls of the Goths and the terrible fate that they would face after death.

Examples taken from the works of Isidore and Jordanes show that it was not untypical for the *narrators of barbarian history* to show their sympathy towards the adherents of the *gentes* whose histories they wrote and who suffered eternal torments, having made bad religious choices. However, whereas the pagan phase of the history of the Goths did not inspire the two historians to sorrowful reflections on their damnation, it is precisely the pagan chapter in the Frankish religious development that Gregory is sympathetic to. For Isidore and Jordanes, the Goths seem to have traded their paganism for something much worse (as it may be inferred from the emotional language with which their acceptance of Arianism is described and the lack of infernal images that would accompany their paganism), a heresy. As for the Franks who did not accept Arianism, paganism, of which they were not guilty, was as low as they got. It is because of this that they received some sympathy from Gregory.

Unlike the heretical dissidents from the Catholic orthodoxy, Jews were not directly spoken about as damned in the works of Gregory. It is certainly true that Gregory could not imagine that something other than hell awaited them after their death, but it is also significant that the bishop of Tours chose to focus his attention on two other groups. While the pagan Franks enjoyed his compassion, the opposite is true of the Arian heretics, whose damnation Gregory affirms in triumphant tones. The Jewish inhabitants of hell, on the other hand, lack proper representation. This would perhaps allow for the

33 *lib. hist.* I, 41.

34 For a brief overview of scholarly opinions as to the purpose of *Getica* see Gosh (2016: p. 67, n. 112).

35 *Hist.* 9. I have used the 1894 MGH edition of Mommsen.

conclusion that Gregory saw them only as a minor evil in comparison with heretics and as an emotionally distant community when compared with the pagan Franks. As a matter of fact, even a story that would easily be used to convey the direct message of hell ends up focusing on something different. Gregory retells the story³⁶ of a Jewish boy who after having received communion is thrown into a furnace by his father. He survives, helped by the Virgin Mary, and his father is killed by Christians in the same way he envisaged killing his son.³⁷ Although he burns in flames, those flames are from this world. That the deceased Jew has nothing better awaiting him in the afterlife would be clear to most of the readers of Gregory. Still, he does not want to focus their attention on that fact. What counts are other Jews who follow in the steps of the miraculously saved boy by being baptised. Gregory's writings have to be understood in the context of his episcopal authority. The author of the *Histories* was charged with spiritual care over his flock. The examples of both heretics who had suffered damnation because of their creed and of Catholics suffering the very same fate due to their falling short of the ideal of Christian life³⁸ could serve as a lesson, since both heresy and immorality was something that Gregory perceived as a quintessentially contemporary threat to the Christian population of Gaul. But we do not hear of any Judaizers in the 6th century in the Merovingian kingdom as it is portrayed by the bishop of Tours. Gregory visibly did not consider his flock to be tempted to re-enact the religion of the Old Testament. With no threat present, there was no need for warning.

But there were other cases to be addressed, for not only people who lacked the correct faith could end up in hell. This fate awaited the orthodox Christians who continued to sin as well. As stated before, it was not a view accepted by all the Christians of late antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. In fact, one of Gregory's own priests goes so far as to deny the mere existence of everlasting life: according to him, the ultimate punishment is nothing other than the annihilation of the sinners.³⁹ It is therefore no wonder that Gregory, faced with the contestation of that teaching even in his own ranks sees himself forced to instruct his flock on the reality of hell. Gregory narrates about the end of the earthly life of many unrepentant sinners without mentioning their eternal punishment explicitly, driven either by the desire to evite *fastidium* or possibly because of the fear that the too frequent use of the language of damnation would actually diminish its persuasive force (cf. Minois 1994: p. 168). Are those the only reasons? It is therefore suitable to ask on which occasions and why he chooses to mention hell explicitly.

First, one can find general menaces aimed at deterring his audience from committing sins that would eventually lead to eternal damnation.⁴⁰ In the case of Gregory's

36 To be found in the work of Evagrius Scholasticus (*Historia ecclesiastica* IV, 26), see Arndt & Krusch (1969: p. 44, n. 1).

37 *glor. mart.* 9.

38 See below.

39 *lib. hist.* X, 13; see Minois (1994: p. 169).

40 *lib. hist.* II, 3; *lib. hist.* VII, 1; *lib. hist.* X, 31; *vita patr.* IV, *Praef.*; *glor. conf.* 110. In *glor. mart.* 57 Gregory says that the sin of avarice leads to eternal condemnation. It is in the light of these passages pointing at the

testament,⁴¹ the threat of hell is used to ensure that Gregory's successors would treat his literary oeuvre with due diligence. This usage of the threat of hell is grounded not in universal Christian moral theology but rather in the personal views of Gregory as it is the modification or destruction of his literary works that Gregory sanctions with eternal condemnation. Another tactic of Gregory, other than this purely negative kind of threat is the confidence that the invocation of saints can save a sinner from eternal torment.⁴² This takes a very personal dimension, as the sinner in question is, on some occasions, Gregory himself (Moreira 2010: pp. 76–78). Without trying to assert if those instances where the bishop of Tours seems himself as menaced by hell are to be understood as mere common places or not, one needs to ask whether the fact that Gregory portrays himself as someone confronted with the possibility of damnation could have had a negative effect on the persuasive force of the language of damnation he used to admonish his public. Were Gregory's readers embarrassed by the fact that this man of the Church seemed to be no better than many people belonging to the flock he shepherded? It is impossible to know it for sure, but from the fact that Gregory did not hesitate to write about himself in that way can be inferred that he did not think this strategy was detrimental to his ultimate goal, the salvation of those whose spiritual needs he sought to address. The pastoral effects of the emphasis on the terrible potential universality of hell from which even the bishop, a witness to many miracles and a devoted worshipper of saints was not excepted is likely to have motivated him to present himself as potentially damned.⁴³

It is noteworthy that virtually all of the orthodox inhabitants of hell whose damnation is explicitly mentioned by Gregory end up there because they sinned either against the Church (De Nie 1987: pp. 150–151; 208) or against God himself. The story of a woman faking her personal piety to collect money from the faithful⁴⁴ and another one concerning apostasy in times of persecution⁴⁵ belong to this category. But even more emphasis is given to the sins against the institutional Church, especially those consisting of seizing Church goods.⁴⁶ In one case, avarice leads to the theft of money destined for the poor, which ends up in perjury leading to the death of the sinner and his condemnation, but all this occurs in the context of alms-giving associated with the cult of Saint Martin.⁴⁷ Similarly, people trying to forge liturgical vessels are absorbed by earth and relegated to hell, the scene being followed by a very direct statement of Gregory that the appro-

consequences of this sin that Gregory's frequent rants against *auri sacra fames* (the lust for money) are to be understood.

41 *lib. hist.* X, 31.

42 See for example *Mart. IV, Praef.; Andr.* 38.

43 Gregory goes so far as to portray himself as someone partaking of the Eucharist in a manner that will lead to his eternal condemnation (*glor. mart.* 85).

44 *glor. mart.* 105.

45 *glor. mart.* 95.

46 *glor. mart.* 47 and *Jul.* 17, where Gregory deduces the condemnation of a sinner from the violent, divinely caused circumstances of his death.

47 *Mart.* I, 31.

priation of Church property would not remain unpunished by God.⁴⁸ Those examples, other than shedding light on the theological thinking of Gregory, assume the preventive function. By discouraging the theft of Church property, they point to the fact that this was, at least in the eyes of Gregory, a burning issue in 6th century Gaul (De Nie 1987: pp. 146–151). It is however not only the institutional Church that is affected. Those offences against Church property must have been implicitly understood as insulting God himself. It is especially visible where liturgical vessels connected with the very heart of God-centred Christian worship are concerned.

While leaving the afterlife fate of many sinners whose wrongdoings affected the local community and not the institutional Church, Gregory chooses to place emphasis on the latter category of delicts. The explicit language of condemnation should have addressed above all the most urgent and terrible issues. However, Gregory does not necessarily side with the institutionalised religion to the detriment of its lay practitioners. Many of the examples adduced above constitute offences against the community of lay believers as well as against the Church institution. Those who affect only lay believers do not require the explicit language of condemnation, at least for Gregory. However, laymen are better protected, be it by the threat of hell targeted at the wrongdoers, when they are considered a part of the institution, thus falling under the Church umbrella. Moreover, members of the Catholic clergy themselves are not exempted from the threat of hell either, especially when they disassociate themselves from the church institution.⁴⁹ Shepherds (Gregory himself included) and their flock travel together towards eternity, whichever dimension it may ultimately assume.

We have seen how Gregory does not refrain himself from speaking about the condemnation of heretical kings. It is very interesting, however, that he does not choose to dot the i's and cross the t's while describing the death of the king Chilperic and the visions that preceded it. Chilperic has traditionally been seen as the arch villain of the *Histoires* (Goffart 1988: p. 222; Heinzelmann 1994: pp. 42–49). Halsall (2002: pp. 337–350) challenges this view. According to him, the last chapter of the 6th book⁵⁰ (which serves as an unpleasant obituary for the deceased Merovingian, where all the wrongdoings of Chilperic and the circumstances of the death of the assassinated king are mentioned) goes against Gregory's original attitude towards Chilperic. This attitude was far from being only negative and changed, according to Halsall, to reflect the negative feelings two other surviving Merovingian kings whom Gregory feared started to have about their relative shortly before his death. Whichever view one accepts, there were certainly good reasons for Gregory to depict Chilperic as burning in hell.

However, Gregory does not say that Chilperic is damned. One could argue that the allusions in the text could only be read that way. To begin with, the deceased king is characterised as *Nero nostri temporis et Herodis*⁵¹ and thus equalled not only with Nero and

48 *glor. conf.* 62.

49 *Jul.* 17.

50 *lib. hist.* VI, 46.

51 *lib. hist.* VI, 46.

the Herod of the *Acts*, the persecutors of the Apostles, but possibly with the Herod of the infancy narrative, the persecutor of Christ himself as well. It is however noteworthy that neither Nero, nor either of the two personages named Herod that Gregory refers to in the first book of the *Histories* is assigned a place in hell in his narrative. All die a violent death⁵² and the reader is expected to believe that they all end up burning in the fires of hell, but this is not explicitly stated. It would be easy for Gregory to associate Chilperic with a person whom he described as damned, for example with one of the Arian kings. He, however, does not take this route. The visions that announced the death of Chilperic and which were seen by Gregory and the king Guntram do not speak of eternal damnation either.⁵³ They are what Guntram calls his vision: the signs, appearing before the death of Chilperic and foretelling it. The words with which Gregory precedes his vision point to the fact that it should serve as a visualisation of the crimes of Chilperic. The vision of Gregory suggests humiliation: Chilperic is tonsured and ordained a bishop in a bizarre ceremony (the tonsuration was a Merovingian way to eliminate their opponents from political life by relegating them to the status of common people; Diesenberger & Reimitz 2005: pp. 235–236). The circumstances of the ceremony, contrary to what Moreira (2000: p. 97) says, remain more of a funeral than of condemnation. The vision seen by Guntram signals the dissolution of the earthly glory of the king. Moreira (2010: pp. 204–205; 277) points out the fact that the image of Chilperic being melted in a cauldron⁵⁴ is to be interpreted as a sign of his punishment in the afterlife, and not of his post-mortem purification. She reads this image as a symbol of damnation. The vision, however, is very ambiguous as it suggests the total destruction of the sinner, a view known as annihilationism which Gregory did not share. Moreover, the wish of bishop Tetricus, who in the vision wants the king to burn in flames (which would be a more suitable image for hell) is not ultimately granted: instead of having to burn in fire, Chilperic disappears almost totally. Of course, one does not expect a vision to be very precise, but it seems that it is this ambiguous character of this image that made it suitable for Gregory to describe the fate of Chilperic. Interestingly, the scriptural passage⁵⁵ Moreira cites in the context of the vision (Moreira 2010: p. 277) says that the wrath of God boiling those whom he punishes in a cauldron shall prove to be transitory in the end. At least some of Gregory's readers would have been acquainted with such nuances.

It would have been very easy for Gregory to be explicit about the fate of Chilperic, who, in his eyes, died the violent death of an unrepentant sinner, a sinner who, perhaps most importantly, attacked the Church. There are cases in Gregory's oeuvre where even the repentance that immediately precedes death does not seem to ameliorate a person's fate in their afterlife⁵⁶ (see Moreira 2010: pp. 75–76) but Chilperic could not even invoke such a repentance in his defence in the tribunal of the eternal Judge. That is at least

52 Nero: *lib. hist.* I, 25; Herod of the infancy narrative: *lib. hist.* I, 19, Herod of the *Acts*: *lib. hist.* I, 24.

53 *lib. hist.* VIII, 5.

54 On death in a cauldron, used normally as an ordeal device, see De Nie (1987: p. 286).

55 Ezekiel 24.

56 *Mart.* I, 31.

how Gregory sees it. Still, he chooses not to speak openly about the damnation of the king although it is precisely this kind of language which would suit Gregory's portrayal of Chilperic best. Gregory saw it as a part of his mission to admonish the wicked ones, especially when they were king and to make them follow the correct path. Why abandon such a powerful tool of persuasion as the explicit statement that godless Merovingians, although correctly baptised, were not to expect a better fate than the heretical rulers of other barbarian kingdoms? It was certainly not respect for Chilperic that motivated Gregory. Had he been respectful of him, he would not have transformed large parts of his historiographical work into a very explicit enumeration of the sins of Chilperic combined with the insulting epithets he referred to the king with. If, on the other hand, as suggested by Halsall, Gregory was denigrating Chilperic to please his current royal protectors who came to despise him, why would he not go one step further and state that the deceased king ended up in hell? We can only assume that, at least for Gregory, there was a great and qualitative difference between suggesting a person ended up in hell and explicitly stating that it was the case. It seems that the language of condemnation was not something to be used on every suitable occasion. In Gregory's eyes, to relegate a Merovingian, even a wicked one, to the external darkness meant to go too far, despite all of the negative feelings the bishop of Tours or his patrons had for him. The fact that Chilperic was a *king* may have played a role here. To depict and lament the wrongdoings of a Catholic ruler was one thing, to be open about the ultimate consequences of his actions was another. It is hard to assess whether Gregory's reluctance to call things by name was a result of his own internal taboos or his fear that the public would not approve. Unlike Chilperic, Arian kings were foreign and heretical and their afterlife fate could be openly addressed.

The imagined public of Gregory of Tours would have been sensitive to the language of hell which it would have seen as the ultimate threat, a threat that could be expressed either as a peril or as a description of people actually damned. Gregory did not want that threat to lose what he saw as its persuasive force. Therefore, he chose to apply it only in cases where either the institutional Church, or God, or the community of the faithful operating under the Church umbrella were affected by sinful behaviour. The fascination with Judaism did not belong to such perils and neither did the return to paganism. On the other hand, it was the paganism of the Franks that Gregory saw as the cause of their damnation, while remaining discrete and sympathetic towards the damned Franks who went to hell only because they lacked knowledge about the true religion. The Arians, on the other hand, did not receive any sympathy and although their creed had to a large extent disappeared from the post-Roman world at the time Gregory's life was nearing its end, there were still other heresies that could threaten Gregory's audience and that, as he felt, needed to be addressed. However, this kind of pastoral care which consisted of explicitly referring to dead people as damned had its limits. It is best seen in the example of the king Chilperic. Locating him in hell would suit Gregory's purposes very well and yet he chose to refrain from that. There was clearly a limit to the use of the language of hell and a ruler from the governing dynasty who had received the correct baptism was not to be enumerated among the damned, regardless of how much Gregory or his

patrons might have despised him. As much as the use of the language of hell may have been perceived as efficient by Gregory, in this instance it remained a taboo.

Abbreviations

<i>Andr.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber de miraculis beati Andreae apostoli</i>
<i>C. Celsum</i>	Origenes, <i>Contra Celsum</i>
<i>De an. et res.</i>	Gregorius Nyssenus, <i>De anima et resurrectione</i>
<i>Ep. CXIX</i>	Hieronymus, <i>Epistola CXIX</i>
<i>Get.</i>	Jordanes, <i>Getica</i>
<i>glor. conf.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber in gloria confessorum</i>
<i>glor. mart.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber in gloria martyrum</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Isidorus Hispalensis, <i>Historia Gothorum, Vandalorum et Sueborum</i>
<i>Hist. adv. pag.</i>	Orosius, <i>Historiae adversum paganos</i>
<i>Jul.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber de virtutibus sancti Juliani</i>
<i>lib. hist.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Decem libri historiarum</i>
<i>Mart. II</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber II de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi</i>
<i>Mart. IV</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber IV de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi</i>
<i>Thec.</i>	<i>Vita et miracula sanctae Theclae (Vie et Miracles de Sainte Thècle)</i>
<i>vita patr.</i>	Gregorius Turonensis, <i>Liber vitae patrum</i>

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