



The building projects and the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours

JOHN MERRINGTON

This article offers a fresh perspective on the life and works of the sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours by analysing Gregory's magnum opus, the Histories, alongside a frequently overlooked aspect of his episcopal career: his restoration of the cathedral church of Tours and St Martin's basilica following their devastation by fire in the time of his predecessor, Eufronius. Drawing on the conceptual insights of memory studies, I argue that Gregory's writings and building projects formed part of a single project which he pursued throughout his time in office to restore and rearticulate the relationship of the episcopate of Tours with its past.

Introduction

From 573 until his death in 594, Georgius Florentius Gregorius served as bishop of Tours. Today, Gregory is best known as a writer: although interest in his hagiographic writings has burgeoned in recent years, he is still remembered primarily as the author of the ten books of

* I would like to express my gratitude to Julia Smith, Peregrine Horden and Dave Addison for commenting on drafts of this manuscript, as well as to John Nightingale with whom I had the privilege of co-teaching a special subject on Francia. I am also deeply indebted to two anonymous reviewers for their generous and thoughtful feedback.

Histories.¹ The first three and a half books of the *Histories* offer an account of events from creation up to Gregory's appointment as bishop, while the remaining six and a half cover the period from 573 to 591. A sizeable subfield in the historiography of sixth-century Gaul in the past four decades has been devoted to drawing out the complex literary strategies contained within this magnum opus. In the scholarly imagination, Gregory the chronicler has decisively given way to Gregory the *author*: the established consensus is that the bishop of Tours was an ingenious manipulator of the events he narrated. And yet, when at the end of his life Gregory decided to pen a brief account of his time in office, it was not his writings which took pride of place:

I, Gregory, undeservingly its nineteenth bishop, found the cathedral of Tours where blessed Martin and the other bishops had been consecrated to the episcopal office collapsed and torn apart by fire; I rebuilt it with a wider and higher gable and dedicated it in the seventeenth year of my episcopate.²

When Gregory looked back over his episcopate, the achievement that he chose to list first was his renovation of the cathedral church from the parlous state in which he had inherited it. The autobiographical epilogue goes on to recount the translation of a set of relics into the cathedral upon its rededication in 589/90, and then to describe Gregory's restoration of the wall paintings in St Martin's basilica, which were still charred by fire at the time of his taking office. Only once he has listed his other building works does Gregory turn to his writings. Contrary to the modern consensus, the

¹ Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum libri X* [hereafter *Hist.*], ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, *MGH SRM* 1.1 (Hanover, 1937–51), pp. 1–537; trans. L. Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours: The History of the Franks* (London, 1974). Gregory's other works cited here: *Liber in Gloria Confessorum* [GC], ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 744–820; trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Confessors* (Liverpool, 1988). *Liber in Gloria Martyrum* [GM], ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 484–561; trans. R. Van Dam, *Gregory of Tours: Glory of the Martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988). *Liber de Passione et Virtutibus Iuliani Martyris* [VJ], ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 562–84; trans. R. Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, 1993), pp. 139–64. *De Virtutibus Sancti Martini Episcopi* [VM], ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 584–661; trans. Van Dam, *Saints*, pp. 168–262. *Liber de Vita Patrum* [VP], ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1.2 (Hanover, 1885), pp. 661–744; trans. E. James, *Gregory of Tours: Life of the Fathers* (Liverpool, 1991). All translations my own, but gratefully guided by the editions cited.

² *Hist.* X.31: 'Nonus decimus Gregorius ego indignus ecclesiam urbis Turonicae, in qua beatus Martinus vel ceteri sacerdotes Domini ad pontificatus officium consecrati sunt, ab incendio dissolutam dirutamque nactus sum, quam reaedificatam in ampliori altiorique fastigio septimo decimo ordinationis meae anno dedicavi.'

bishop of Tours presented himself as a builder at least as much as a writer.³

Other sixth-century bishops shared Gregory's belief that the material maintenance and aggrandizement of the churches were central to good pastoral governance. In his panegyrics for Leontius II of Bordeaux, the poet Venantius Fortunatus (d. c.600) counted that bishop's numerous construction projects among the most laudable of his episcopal activities.⁴ Fortunatus also received commissions to write epigrams to be inscribed on church walls and ornaments, usually in honour of the bishops who had them made.⁵ In Gregory's writings we glimpse contemporaries such as Bishop Agricola of Chalons-sur-Saône, who, after constructing a new cathedral adorned with marble and mosaics, translated the body of a nearby confessor into the church in a ceremony attended by the local priests and abbots.⁶ In fifth-century Clermont, we read that Bishop Namatius constructed a new cathedral and had relics brought from Italy in order to honour the new site; Namatius' unnamed wife, meanwhile, had constructed a church dedicated to St Stephen and narrated to the craftsmen those stories that she wanted depicted on its walls.⁷ Gregory's works at Tours can hence be located within a wider account of episcopal construction and decoration projects in early medieval Gaul.

That Gregory's personality as a builder has suffered neglect is unsurprising. After all, his writings have survived, where his cathedral has not. But in what ways has this one-sidedly textual approach inhibited our capacity to understand Gregory – including the texts he composed – in the context of his own time? In situating Gregory's writings alongside the built environment of Tours, I intend here to shed light on two interwoven problems. First, in what ways did this environment constitute a historical archive? The churches of Tours contained documents, inscriptions, murals, relics and various other objects which functioned as mechanisms for storing socially salient memories relating to the diocese of Tours. The integrity of this institutional memory had been threatened during the episcopate

³ Studies on Gregory as builder include L. Pietri, *La Ville de Tours du IV^e au VI^e siècle: naissance d'une cité chrétienne* (Paris, 1983); H. Galinié, 'Tours de Grégoire, Tours des archives du sol', *Supplément à la Revue archéologique du centre de la France* 13 (1997), pp. 65–80; and H.L. Kessler, 'Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul', in H.L. Kessler and M.S. Simpson (eds), *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Washington, 1985), pp. 75–91.

⁴ Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina* [*Carm.*], ed. and trans. M. Roberts (Cambridge, MA, 2017), I.6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13; especially I.15, vv. 39–45.

⁵ *Carm.* I.2, 6; II.3, 4, 5; III.20; X.6, 10.

⁶ *Hist.* V.45; *GC*, c. 84.

⁷ *Hist.* II.16, 17.

of Gregory's predecessor, Eufronius, when two fires had devastated respectively the intramural city of Tours – containing the cathedral church – and the extramural basilica of St Martin. It fell to Gregory to restore these two major spiritual centres. The implications of this analysis will provide a framework for engaging with a second problem, which has been the subject of fierce debate: how and why did Gregory compose his *Histories*? Viewed through the materialist lens which I adopt here, the *Histories* emerge at one end of a spectrum of activities that Gregory undertook throughout his time in office to restore institutional memory following a period of crisis. Placing Gregory's career as a builder and writer within the same analytic grid can hence offer a fresh insight into the processes and motivations behind the composition of the *Histories*.

Memory

The argument elaborated here rests fundamentally on the assertion that writings and building projects are analogous insofar as they each constitute mechanisms for entrusting information, which is otherwise immaterial and evanescent, in physical objects. In this sense, it operates conceptually within the transdisciplinary terrain of memory studies. Recent perspectives on the *Histories* have focused on the ways in which Gregory manipulated his source-material – both structurally and substantively – so as to reinforce his personal or political agendas.⁸ This focus on authorial intentionality has without doubt granted valuable critical purchase on a text which was once considered an unreflective record of events.⁹ Nonetheless, in respect to the study of historical writings – that is, those which were thought by their author to recount a true past – these approaches run the risk of downplaying the degree to which textual narrative is formed by agencies other than that of the author. The tendency to dislocate Gregory from the events described in his text has perhaps been an unfortunate legacy of Walter Goffart's influential depiction of the bishop of Tours as a writer who observed that world from a

⁸ Structural: A.C. Murray, 'Chronology and the Composition of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.1 (2008), pp. 157–96; M. Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. C. Carroll (Cambridge, 2001); and F. Thürlmann, *Der historische Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours: Topoi und Wirklichkeit* (Bern, 1974). Substantive: I.N. Wood, 'Gregory of Tours and Clovis', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63.2 (1985), pp. 249–72. For debates over Gregory's 'unifying agenda', see nn. 99–100 below.

⁹ See E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W.R. Trask (Princeton, 2013), pp. 99–115.

safe, satirical distance.¹⁰ I intend here to offer a corrective against such approaches by placing Gregory in the material environment of Tours, thereby shedding light on the archival infrastructures that underpinned his writings. This essay hence seeks to complement the recent work of Helmut Reimitz in further mapping the ‘circuits of communication’ which connected Gregory to his social world.¹¹ Gregory’s sense of custodianship of his episcopate’s memory – encoded in documents, inscriptions and images kept in the churches of the diocese – was a role that he performed in his capacity both as author and as bishop.¹² Indeed, the promotion of a historically nested Gallic spiritual topography, which Reimitz has identified as one of Gregory’s main concerns, necessarily depended on archival practices which ensured that information relating to the episcopal past was kept intact.¹³

Suggesting that we can better understand sixth-century Gaul through the framework of memory by no means entails positing that Gregory lived in an ‘oral’ world.¹⁴ Where memory scholarship once operated on the basis of a sharp dichotomy between literate and oral modes of thought, there has since been a wholesale shift away from this deterministic framework.¹⁵ It is now recognized first that the effects of literacy and documentation must be investigated within specific historical contexts, and secondly that all societies remember (and think) through reference to material things.¹⁶ This study is hence informed by a ‘new’ memory studies, inflected by the recent material turn, which considers texts as *objects* whose meaning is framed by their material medium. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann, for example, has argued that

¹⁰ W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 112–234, at pp. 197–203.

¹¹ H. Reimitz, ‘Genre and Identity in Merovingian Historiography’, in G. Heydemann and H. Reimitz (ed.), *Historiography and Identity II: Post-Roman Multiplicity and New Political Identities* (Turnhout, 2020), pp. 161–211, at p. 196. One scholar who has considered Gregory’s use of evidence is Ian Wood: see ‘Clermont and Burgundy: 511–534’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 32 (1988), pp. 119–25.

¹² On *actor, auctor and auctoritas*: H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 32–9.

¹³ Reimitz, *History*, pp. 44–50.

¹⁴ For an overestimation of Gregory’s orality, see C. Wickham and J. Fentress, *Social Memory* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 146–54. M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London, 1977) placed the early Middle Ages on the wrong side of his oral/literate divide.

¹⁵ For a thoughtful consideration of these issues, see M. Innes, ‘Memory, Orality and Literacy in Early Medieval Society’, *Past and Present* 158 (1998), pp. 3–36. For a ‘memory’ study which places texts-as-objects at its core, see P.J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).

¹⁶ See A. Riles (ed.), *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* (Michigan, 2006); see also the influential (but controversial) essay by A. Clark and D. Chalmers, ‘The Extended Mind’, *Analysis* 58.1 (1998), pp. 7–19.

writing offers communities special potentialities to establish 'enhanced' forms of identity through strengthening their sense of shared history, but stresses the diverse uses to which writing was put in ancient societies.¹⁷ Furthermore, he insists that writing was merely one means – albeit an especially potent one – by which communities could construct a canon of shared memory.¹⁸ In Gregory's world – as in the ancient societies Assmann considers – images, mementoes and landscapes could also serve to objectify socially salient information. Nonetheless, documents and inscriptions were special insofar as Gregory regarded them as the most reliable evidence through which to piece together events that preceded his own time. These kinds of objects granted the bishops of Tours a sense of institutional memory and in turn provided a basis for an episcopal identity.¹⁹ It is justifiable to speak of an 'institutional memory' because Gregory himself thought in such terms: his inclusion of a short set of biographies of the bishops of Tours in the epilogue to the *Histories* and his final dedication of the work to his episcopal successors (both of which will be discussed in greater detail below), lend credence to the notion that Gregory had imbibed with his office a sense of custodianship of his bishopric's memory, an obligation he fulfilled through his writings and his building projects alike.

The way in which Gregory's sense of the past was anchored through material markers of memory can be demonstrated through reference to an example contained within the *Histories*. Many of the objects located in the churches of Tours arrived as gifts in the time of Gregory's predecessors, and hence would go on to serve as institutionalized reminders of the historic web of social relations within which Tours was embedded.²⁰ When Bishop Perpetuus of Tours (d. 491) had built a new basilica dedicated to St Martin – and relocated Martin's tomb so that it could be placed at the apse – the priest Eufronius of Autun had sent a marble lid to enclose the sarcophagus.²¹ Perpetuus in turn reciprocated that gift by celebrating the feast day of St Symphorian – the local saint of Autun to whom Eufronius himself, after being appointed bishop of that diocese, dedicated a new cathedral church –

¹⁷ J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*, trans. D.H. Wilson (Cambridge, 2011). The foundational work is M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris, 1925).

¹⁸ Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, pp. 34–45, 156–74.

¹⁹ The link between identity and possession of a long-term shared memory is Assmann's (*Cultural Memory*). Note that I do not here follow Assmann's distinction (tabulated on p. 41) between 'communicative' (primarily oral, lasting 80–100 years) and 'cultural' (longer-term) memory.

²⁰ Classically, M. Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. J.I. Guyer (Chicago, 2016). See now W. Davies and P. Fouracre (ed.), *Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010).

²¹ *Hist.* II.15. On Perpetuus' *translatio*: Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 376–8.

in St Martin's basilica, and institutionalized that gesture by writing it into the liturgical calendar.²² In Gregory's own time, the marble lid – which was almost certainly inscribed with Eufronius' name – served as a persistent reminder of the cultic bonds that bound together the two bishoprics. The *Histories*, into which all this information was embedded, would serve as an admonition to future bishops of Tours to maintain the networks of obligation established by their predecessors.

We can hence see that the written word – on marble, in Perpetuus' liturgical calendar, in the *Histories* – shaped Gregory's sense of the past, whilst also providing a medium through which he, as both historian and builder, hoped to shape the memories of the congregants, clergy and future bishops of Tours. It is important therefore to recognize that shared memory is here understood as a process, a phenomenon continuously emerging out of individual attempts – which may be successful to varying degrees – at giving form to the personal memories of others.²³ It is from these points of departure that the remainder of this essay will proceed.

Archives and archival mentalities

Recent scholarship, drawing especially on the evidence of the formularies (collections of procedural models for legal actions preserved in ecclesiastical archives in early medieval Gaul), has stressed the penetration of documentary culture within Merovingian elite society.²⁴ Gregory's account of the trial of Bishop Egidius of Reims in 590 richly attests to the centrality of archives to sixth-century political culture. The trial pivoted over the question of whether Egidius – who now served Childebert II (reigned 575–96), the Austrasian king at whose behest the trial was being conducted – had acted treasonously towards his current ruler in previously cultivating a friendship with Childebert's now-dead uncle, Chilperic (reigned 561–84).

²² *Hist.* X.31.

²³ On reception, see W. Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41.2 (2000), pp. 179–97. For 'emergent' collective memory, see S. Ranković, 'Communal Memory of the Distributed Author: Applicability of the Connectionist Model of Memory to the Study of Traditional Narratives', in L. Doležalová (ed.), *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages* (Leiden 2010), pp. 9–26.

²⁴ A. Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000* (Cambridge, 2009); W.C. Brown, 'The Gesta Municipalia and the Public Validation of Documents in Frankish Europe' and *idem*, 'Laypeople and Documents in the Frankish Formula Collections', in *idem* (ed.), *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 95–124 and pp. 125–51; J. Barbier, *Archives oubliées du haut Moyen Âge: les gesta municipalia en Gaule franque (VIe–IXe siècle)* (Paris, 2014); I.N. Wood, 'Administration, Law and Culture in Merovingian Gaul', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 63–81.

The agents of Childebert accused Egidius of having held an alliance with King Chilperic to the disadvantage of his own king.²⁵ Egidius protested that his friendship with Chilperic was not treasonous, a claim he supported by producing documentary evidence: Childebert had signed off with his own personal signature (*subscriptio meditata*) deeds for land that Egidius had received from Chilperic. It is notable that the prosecutors did not attack the *basis* of Egidius' argument – that Childebert's signature effectively constituted his assent. Instead they invalidated his evidence by having Egidius' referendary testify that Egidius himself had forged the king's signature. Next, the royal prosecutors brought forth letters Egidius had sent to Chilperic that implicated the bishop in plotting against Childebert and Brunhild. Egidius denied that he had ever sent such letters – but this defence was invalidated when summaries (*tituli notarum*) of the letters were extracted from his own records (*per thomus chartarum*). Treaties were also brought forth in the names of Chilperic and Childebert drawn from one of Chilperic's record chests: Childebert denied that he had ever approved these treaties, a case that was presumably easier to make because he appears not to have signed them.²⁶ Egidius was ultimately forced to confess his own guilt, stripped of his priesthood and sent into exile.

The royal agents had constructed their case using both Chilperic's treasury (*thesaurus*) at Chelles, which Childebert had acquired upon his uncle's death, and the archive at Reims. Egidius' demise offers a case study of a bishop being entangled and hoisted in their own documentary residue. While Egidius' defence banked on the notion that Childebert's signature would be deemed legitimate evidence of the king's assent, his prosecutors in turn operated on the assumption that documents drawn from Egidius' personal archive could be treated as inculpatory evidence. A bishop could hence be deposed on the basis of what writings he kept. The story of Egidius is revealing for several reasons: it demonstrates on the one hand that political pressures could be brought to bear to invalidate a document's legal efficacy, but on the other that the authority of documents was a widely shared assumption, affirming the degree to which documents and the infrastructures of archives and notaries that facilitated them underpinned Merovingian political life. This was an elite culture suffused with an 'archival mentality', one that undertook significant efforts to maintain the texts in which were entrusted its socially salient memories.²⁷

²⁵ *Hist.* X.19.

²⁶ The treaties were only 'ex nomine Childeberthi ac Chilperici regis'.

²⁷ F. Bora, *Writing History in the Medieval Islamic World: The Value of Chronicles as Archives* (London, 2019).

Gregory, too, was an exponent of this archival mentality. When writing about events that occurred before he reached full maturity, Gregory preferred where possible to refer to textual sources. This tendency should be considered not only within a Merovingian intellectual context, but also in terms of Gregory's aspiration to imitate and adapt Eusebius of Caesarea's model for writing ecclesiastical history, which involved the verbatim citation of archival documents.²⁸ In Books I and II of the *Histories*, Gregory quotes extensively from a variety of sources: among historians, he quotes Orosius, Renatus Frigeridus, Sulpicius Alexander and a certain Paulinus.²⁹ Particularly remarkable in this regard is the patchwork of historical quotations that he gathered in order to support his assertions about the early origins of the Franks.³⁰ Gregory draws on epistolary evidence too: he quotes an entire letter from Bishop Eugenius of Carthage and cites a sentence from a letter of St Remigius to King Clovis.³¹ When we reach Book III, however, Gregory ceases to cite written sources. In Books IX and X we are again reminded of Gregory's proclivity towards integrating documents into his narrative: his description of the Treaty of Andelot, the rebellion at the monastery of the Holy Cross in Poitiers, and the election of Pope Gregory the Great all include extensive quotations from official writings.³²

Even when he was not quoting verbatim, Gregory liked to refer explicitly to authoritative texts so as to lend credibility to his early narrative. In Book I, as well as drawing extensively on the authority of Scripture, he stresses his dependence upon Jerome and Orosius for his account of Christian and Roman history, and uses a *passio* of St Saturninus as a source on the origins of the Gallic episcopates.³³ As for Book II: Gregory three times cites letters by Sidonius Apollinaris in his account of the Gothic occupation of Gaul and refers to a lost book of Sidonius' masses in his account of that bishop's character; he appears to cite a lost consular list in his study of the Franks' early origins; stories from Clovis's kingship were drawn from lost early Lives of St Remigius and St Maxentius; Avitus of Vienne's theological positions were pieced together from his letters and homilies; and the *Lex Gundobada* was used as a source on Burgundian history.³⁴ In Book IX Gregory cites

²⁸ See now Reimitz, 'Genre and Identity' and *idem*, *History*, pp. 44–50. Classically, A. Momigliano, 'The Origins of Ecclesiastical Historiography', in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 132–52.

²⁹ Orosius: I.6, II.9; Frigeridus: II.8 and II.9; Sulpicius Alexander: II.9; Paulinus: II.13.

³⁰ *Hist.* II.9. Although Gregory was surely selective here, see Reimitz, *History*, pp. 52–7.

³¹ *Hist.* II.3, II.31.

³² *Hist.* IX.20, IX.39, IX.41, IX.42, X.1.

³³ Jerome and Orosius: *Hist.* I.pr, I.6, I.41; Saturninus: I.30.

³⁴ Sidonius: *Hist.* II.24, II.25 and II.22; *consolaria*: I.9; *vitae* of Remigius and Maxentius: II.31 and II.37; Avitus of Vienne: II.34; *Lex Gundobada*: II.33.

Eusebius of Caesarea as his source for the ignominious death of Arius (although he is, in fact, drawing on Rufinus' Latin version of the *Ecclesiastical History*).³⁵

The archival lacuna of Book III – which covers the period 511 until 548 – is suggestive. Book III is significantly shorter than Books II and IV, and presents a host of problems due to its apparent chronological incoherence and its muddled account of the events surrounding King Theuderic's sack of the Auvergne.³⁶ Ian Wood has argued plausibly that these confusions arose out of Gregory's reliance on oral accounts, especially those of family members, to piece together these events.³⁷ Gregory, like many of his contemporaries, believed that information was most reliably stored in material media, especially writings. When writings were missing, oral testimony evidently constituted a fall-back option, and one which – as Gregory probably knew as well as we do – was fraught with problems. It is plausible, though unprovable, that some of the evidence on which Gregory would like to have drawn for Book III was lost during the fires of 558 and 559.

The fires of 558 and 559

In his brief biography of Bishop Eufronius of Tours (d. 573) in the epilogue to the *Histories*, Gregory foregrounds the fires which engulfed the city early in his predecessor's episcopate: 'At this time [558] the city of Tours, along with all its churches, was completely consumed in a great fire; of these churches he [Eufronius] subsequently repaired two, the third and oldest being left derelict.'³⁸ He goes on to recount that St Martin's basilica, too, was 'scorched' (*adusta*) the following year, 559, through the action of Wiliachar, an ally of King Chlothar's rebellious son Chramn, while he was taking refuge there along with his wife.³⁹ Gregory also describes the fires during his account of Chramn's rebellion at *Hist.* IV.20. This time he begins by recounting the second fire, 'something we remember not without a heavy sigh'.⁴⁰ Gregory then adds: 'But also the year before the city of Tours had been

³⁵ *Hist.* IX.15. Reimitz, *History*, pp. 44–5.

³⁶ *Hist.* III.6–7, 9–13. That Gregory was genuinely confused about these events is evident from *VJ*, c. 23; see Van Dam, *Saints*, pp. 179–80 n. 17.

³⁷ Wood, 'Clermont and Burgundy'. For an alternative view, see A. Smith, 'The "Prehistory" of Gregory of Tours: An Analysis of Books I–IV of Gregory's *Histories*', M.Phil. thesis, University of York (2010).

³⁸ *Hist.* X.31: 'Huius tempore civitas Turonica cum omnibus ecclesiis magno incendio concremata est; de quibus ipse postea duas reparavit, tertiam seniore relinquens desertam.'

³⁹ If the Wiliachar of *Hist.* IV.17, IV.20 is the same as that of VII.13, X.9, he subsequently became count of Orleans and Tours.

⁴⁰ *Hist.* IV.20: 'quod non sine gravi suspirio memoramus'.

consumed by fire, and all the churches that had been built in the city were left desolate.’⁴¹

When Gregory spoke of the fire of 558 destroying ‘all the churches’ in the *civitas Turonica*, he was undoubtedly referring to the walled city of Tours which around this time contained the cathedral church, along with the bishop’s quarters, and two other minor churches (see Fig. 1).⁴² This would be consistent with Gregory’s assertion that Eufronius successfully restored two out of three, leaving only the oldest – the cathedral – still ruined. Most of what we know about sixth-century Tours must be gleaned from our written sources, especially Gregory’s own writings; the archaeological findings do confirm, nonetheless, that the walled city was relatively small, even by early medieval standards, so it is not hard to imagine a single conflagration engulfing all three churches.⁴³ While two of the intramural churches were therefore up and running by the time of Gregory’s accession, the cathedral itself remained derelict.⁴⁴ The basilica was probably functional, but it was by no means in a good condition: at the time of writing *Hist.* IV.20 Gregory still sighed with anguish when he remembered the fire of 559, and he mentions in the epilogue that the murals at St Martin’s basilica were still ‘scorched by fire’ (*adustos incendio*) when he took office. The fact that King Chlothar (reigned 511–61) had seen fit to finance the construction of a whole new tin roof would also suggest significant devastation.⁴⁵ We read in the epilogue that Gregory ordered the murals ‘to be painted and embellished, so that they gleamed as they had before’, and also added a baptistry next to the basilica.⁴⁶

In view of the evidence considered here, it is unsurprising that Gregory would later characterize the physical state of the churches of Tours as his first concern upon taking office. Gregory seems to have begun his restoration projects very early in his episcopate: we read elsewhere that he converted one of Eufronius’ old storerooms, close to or perhaps adjoining the cathedral – and hence almost certainly

⁴¹ ‘Sed et civitas Toronica ante annum iam igne consumpta fuerat, et totae ecclesiae in eadem constructae desertae relictae sunt.’

⁴² Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 351–67. At *Hist.* X.31 and IV.20 Gregory uses the terms *ecclesia* and *basilica* consistently to refer to the cathedral and to St Martin’s respectively.

⁴³ Galinić, ‘Tours de Grégoire’; I.N. Wood, ‘Topographies of Holy Power in Sixth-Century Gaul’, in F. Theuvs, M. De Jong and M. Rhijn, *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 137–54. For the most up-to-date archaeological account, see H. Galinić (ed.), *Tours antique et medieval: lieux de vie, temps de la ville: 40 ans d’archéologie urbaine* (Tours, 2007).

⁴⁴ Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 355, 358, 375.

⁴⁵ *Hist.* IV.20. Pace Pietri (see n. 42 above), who argues that the basilica was not severely damaged.

⁴⁶ *Hist.* X.31: ‘In illo nitore vel pingi vel exornari, ut prius fuerant’.

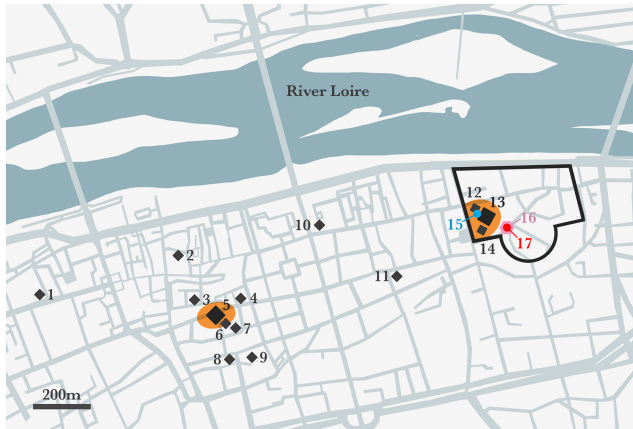


Fig. 1 The churches of Tours in Gregory's time. 1: basilica of St Litorius; 2: church of St Monegundis; 3: monastery of Radegund; 4: monastery of Ingitruide; 5: basilica of St Martin; 6: baptistry which Gregory built; 7: baptistry which Perpetuus built; 8: church of Sts Peter and Paul; 9: church of St Venantius; 10: church of St Julian; 11: church of St Vincent; 12: church of Sts Gervasius and Protasius; 13: cathedral; 14: church of Sts Mary and John the Baptist; 15: cell of St Martin; 16: episcopal residence; 17: the oratory within the episcopal residence. (Map after Wood, 'Topographies of Holy Power', p. 141. The positions of sites 6, 15 and 17 are my own conjectures based on Gregory's descriptions. Illustration by Dominique Vassie.) [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

damaged by the fire – into an oratory in 573/4.⁴⁷ It was seventeen years before the cathedral was considered fit for rededication. In the next section, I shall consider in greater detail the damage which these fires had inflicted on the built environment of Tours.

Counting the cost of the fires of 558 and 559

I shall argue that the fires of 558 and 559 damaged two kinds of objects that together gave substance to the diocesan memory of Tours: the documents kept in the archives of the cathedral and basilica; and the inscriptions, murals and other objects contained within the churches themselves. Considering each in turn, I shall examine the steps which Gregory took to alleviate the losses that Tours had suffered.

⁴⁷ VP II.3; GC, c. 20. The storeroom was part of the episcopal residence, which Pietri (*Ville de Tours*, pp. 363–7) and Galinié ('Tours de Gregoire', p. 70, Fig. 2) place next to the cathedral.

The archives

As we have seen, recent scholarship has emphasized the pervasiveness of archival culture among Merovingian political elites. Laypeople of various statuses would have needed to store documents somewhere, and it is possible, though not certain, that episcopal archives performed this function.⁴⁸ Indeed, there are clues which suggest that bishoprics were among the most diligent record-keepers in sixth-century Gaul. In addition to the evidence for record-keeping at the diocese of Reims from Egidius' trial considered above, it seems that another of Gregory's contemporaries, Bishop Aunarius of Auxerre, was a keen archivist. When the ninth-century author of the *Gesta Pontificum Autissiodorensium* turned to writing Aunarius' *vita*, he was able to quote verbatim three of the sixth-century bishop's letters (two that he received, one that he sent); a liturgical calendar; the lists of participants at two synods which Aunarius attended along with precise references to the canons they issued; and an account of Aunarius' personal land-donations retrieved from his will.⁴⁹ The survival of the so-called 'Austrasian Letters', meanwhile, is largely attributable to episcopal record-keeping practices at Merovingian Trier.⁵⁰ Gregory clearly had access to documents when he composed the *Histories*, but the evidence from Trier would indicate that the Tours archive was more likely distributed across multiple locations, rather than being a single-site entity.⁵¹ St Martin's certainly had a *thesaurus* ('treasury') – a term Gregory uses elsewhere to refer to documentary archives – where Gregory discovered the relics of the Agaune Martyrs in 589/90.⁵² Gregory knew that Bishop Perpetuus kept notes of Martin's miracles, which were presumably stored there.⁵³ It was by no means unusual for documents and relics to be stored together: when the monks at Baumes-les-Messieurs opened an aged pouch stored in their abbey's treasury in the sixteenth century, they found not only a set of relics (along with Merovingian and Carolingian authenticating labels), but also a charter fragment which has been dated to the late Merovingian

⁴⁸ See Rio, *Legal Practice*, pp. 22–6. On the debate over the *Gesta Municipalia* see *ibid.*, pp. 177–82 but also Brown, '*Gesta Municipalia*'.

⁴⁹ *Les gestes des évêques d'Auxerre*, ed. and tr. M. Sot *et. al.*, vol. 1 (Paris, 2002), pp. 62–84.

⁵⁰ G. Barrett and G. Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Austrasian Letters at Trier and Lorsch', *EME* 24.1 (2016), pp. 3–57, esp. at p. 39.

⁵¹ Barrett and Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Austrasian Letters', pp. 45–7.

⁵² *Hist. X.31*; see Chilperic's *thesaurus* at X.19. Pietri (*Ville de Tours*, pp. 394–5) speculatively places the treasury within the annexe surrounding St Martin's.

⁵³ The *indiculus* or *carta indiculi* of VM I.2. See M. Heinzlmann, 'Une source de base de la littérature hagiographique latine: le recueil de miracles', in *Hagiographie, cultures et sociétés: Ixe–XIIe siècles: actes du colloque organisé à Nanterre et à Paris, 2–5 mai 1979* (Paris, 1981), pp. 235–59, at p. 236.

era.⁵⁴ The cathedral church at Tours, or else the episcopal residence attached, probably possessed an archive too: one wonders whether Eufronius' old storeroom had served this purpose.

Given the scale of the fires of 558 and 559, it is plausible that the archives of the cathedral church and basilica were damaged. Such archival loss was certainly not without precedent according to the formularies surviving from this era. The late sixth-century formulary of Angers provides procedural models (*appennes*) for using witnesses to re-confirm a whole host of transactions recorded in documents that have been lost or destroyed; the later Marculf and Tours formularies, meanwhile, each include models for producing new copies of documents that have been lost in fires.⁵⁵ Clearly, there was demand in this era for procedures which enabled institutions or persons to overcome the existential threat that the destruction of an archive could present to their legal security.

Positing that archives were damaged during the fires of Eufronius' episcopate might account not only for the problems relating to Book III, but also for some of the details which Gregory records in the *Histories*, particularly in the chapters relating directly to the episcopal governance of Tours. For a bishopric to lose a grip on its past would constitute a threat to religious orthodoxy and political-pastoral authority: Gregory was keen to assert both through his *Histories*.⁵⁶ Bishop Perpetuus' liturgical calendar is copied solicitously into the epilogue. Gregory's description of Perpetuus' basilica – probably copied from a pre-existing text – both lists the dates of Martin's two feast days and explains to the future reader (addressed in the second-person singular) what precisely they are commemorating on the July feast day.⁵⁷ Gregory's concern to establish the proper dating of Easter, meanwhile, may have been necessitated by the loss of astronomical tables which Perpetuus would have produced to go alongside his calendar. In any case, he felt the need to prove to future bishops that the Gallic rather than the Spanish dating was correct.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ *Chartae Latinae Antiquiores*, ed. A. Bruckner and R. Marichal (Olten, 1954–), vol. 18, nos. 665–6. Evidence from Rome may suggest that the charter had been recycled as a relic-wrapper: see J.M.H. Smith, 'Care of Relics in Early Medieval Rome', in V.L. Garver and O. M. Phelan (eds), *Rome and Religion in the Medieval World: Studies in Honor of Thomas F.X. Noble* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 179–204, at p. 199.

⁵⁵ Angers nos. 31–3; Marculf I nos. 33–4; Tours no. 27, ed. K. Zeumer, *MGH Formulae merowingici et karolini aevi* (Hanover, 1886), pp. 14–15, 63–5, 150–1. See W. Brown, 'When Documents are Destroyed or Lost: Lay People and Archives in the Early Middle Ages', *EME* 11.4 (2002), pp. 337–66.

⁵⁶ Reimitz, *History*, pp. 27–43.

⁵⁷ *Hist.* II.14. This section resembles an appendix found in several manuscripts of the *Martinellus* (but with important differences). Gregory may therefore have copied it from a prior manuscript or inscription. See Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 381–90; Van Dam, *Saints*, p. 308.

⁵⁸ *Hist.* V.17, X.23.

From a more pragmatic perspective, Gregory used his writings to keep a record of his bishopric's legal privileges. An anecdote located in the *Histories* offers a window into the competitive nature of sixth-century archival culture. When in 589 King Childebert's tax collectors arrived at Tours, Gregory told them that Kings Chlothar and Charibert (reigned 561–7) had both sworn oaths exempting the city from taxation in recent years.⁵⁹ Gregory does not say whether he was able to show any document to prove it; he may have presented a draft of the *Histories* as evidence in the course of the dispute. Gregory told the tax collectors that their tax book had not come from the king's treasury (*thesauro*), and so held no authority; he suggested instead that it had probably been kept in someone's home out of spite towards the people of Tours. Documents were essential to the defence of one's institutional interests, and evidently Tours could not trust others to keep faithful records on its behalf. After St Martin offered a sign of his disapproval by striking down one of the tax collectors, Childebert duly sent Gregory an official letter confirming Tours's immunity from taxation, which was no doubt deposited in the episcopal archive. The *Histories* in turn might have been used to provide either a narrative accompaniment to this letter, or else the all-important evidence to secure its renewal should it be lost or destroyed.

This set of examples gives some indication of the value that the *Histories* may have served in reinstating important documents that had been lost in the fires of Eufronius' episcopate. Gregory evidently understood the value that such a record might have for his successors. It served not only the practical purposes discussed above, but in a broader sense granted the city of Tours a sense of its place within the scheme of Christian history. This is particularly evident in the epilogue, where Gregory provides an account of the names, accomplishments and construction projects of each bishop of Tours, the most likely sources for which were epitaphs and dedications inscribed on churches. In doing so, he bequeathed a useable past from which an enduring urban identity could be built based on episcopal leadership. Gregory's portrayal of the bishop and his archives as the keepers of the city's memory undoubtedly formed part of his broader moral vision of a Christian community guided by pastoral authority. It is to these themes that I shall return in my discussion of the composition of the *Histories* below.

⁵⁹ *Hist.* IX.30.

Murals, inscriptions and relics

Documents were not the only objects that functioned as repositories of memory in the cathedral and basilica of Tours. Memory was in a very real sense etched into the walls of these buildings. As we have already seen, the basilica's murals, which had been painted in Perpetuus' era, were significantly damaged in Wiliachar's fire. We know a great deal about these pictures thanks to seventeen verse inscriptions, most of which were engraved alongside them, that survive within some manuscripts of the so-called *Martinellus*, an early medieval dossier of texts containing materials relating to the cult of St Martin.⁶⁰ Besides two miracles from the life of Christ and an image of the heavenly church, the murals seem primarily to have depicted the miracles of Martin.⁶¹ Paulinus of Périgueux and Sidonius Apollinaris, both correspondents of Perpetuus, each contributed an epigram. Paulinus' urged visitors to marvel at the miracles of Martin depicted before them, and listed some of the cures that the saint had previously offered to pilgrims.⁶² Sidonius', located near the apse, praised Perpetuus for transforming a humble chapel, which had ill befitted a saint of Martin's stature, into a wonderful basilica: 'with that strong patron's help the temple grew in size and its founder [Perpetuus] in merit'.⁶³ Sidonius insisted that Perpetuus' work be left intact: 'let babbling posterity alter or add nothing . . . may the walls of Perpetuus endure perpetually'.⁶⁴

The walls of the basilica thus underwrote both Martin's claim to near-apostolic status and the reputation of the bishop who had built the church.⁶⁵ In the *Histories* Gregory marvels at Perpetuus' construction projects, especially the basilica, which still stood up to his own day as testament to the bishop's legacy.⁶⁶ Gregory would have known the inscriptions either from the *Martinellus*, whose initial compilation may have pre-dated his episcopate, or from the charred walls themselves, and no doubt took inspiration from Perpetuus both in his restoration of the cathedral and in the rededication ceremony of

⁶⁰ *Martinellus*, ed. and trans. Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 800–12 and trans. Van Dam, *Saints*, pp. 308–17. *Martinellus* 1–4 were inscribed at Marmoutiers; 5–16 in the basilica; 17 was possibly inscribed in one of the smaller devotional buildings adjoining the basilica. Gregory notes the basilica murals at *Hist.* VII.22.

⁶¹ *Martinellus* 8 and 9 describe images from the Gospels; 10 the heavenly church.

⁶² *Martinellus* II, vv. 13–23.

⁶³ *Martinellus* 16, vv. 11–12: 'Creveruntque simul valido tribuente patrono / In spatiis aedis, conditor in meritis.'

⁶⁴ *Martinellus* 16, vv. 18–20: 'Nil novet aut adat garrula posteritas; . . . / Perpetuo durent culmina Perpetui.'

⁶⁵ On Martin as apostle, see *VM* I.1.

⁶⁶ *Hist.* II.14.

589/90.⁶⁷ Upon completing the basilica, Perpetuus had conducted a carefully choreographed dedication ceremony to which the local bishops and abbots had been invited. The climax of the liturgical drama was Perpetuus' translation of Martin's body a few feet so that it could be placed under the new altar. Initially, Martin refused to move. It was only after three days of fasting that the translation could be completed.⁶⁸

It need hardly be said, of course, that the damage to the basilica at Tours would have amounted to a real threat to Perpetuus' legacy to the diocese, a legacy of which Gregory – governing Tours the best part of a century later – regarded himself as custodian. Nonetheless, the destruction wrought by the fires also granted him an opportunity to make his own mark on the built environment of Tours. Besides restoring the murals, Gregory also had Martin of Braga (d. 580) compose verses for the south portal, perhaps indicating that some of the original inscriptions had been effaced.⁶⁹ Gregory also appears to have commissioned Fortunatus to write two sets of inscriptions in the intramural city: the first was a poem inscribed in Martin's cell which probably adjoined the cathedral; the second was a set of epigrams – each describing a miracle which Martin had performed – engraved on the walls of the cathedral, which survive as an appendix to Fortunatus' poem on the rededication ceremony.⁷⁰ Given that Fortunatus' verse praises the 'parade of pictures' that adorns the restored building, we can safely assume that these inscriptions accompanied a cycle of Martin's miracles which Gregory had commissioned to be depicted on the cathedral walls.⁷¹ The restoration projects hence enabled Gregory, like Perpetuus before him, to imprint on the built environment of Tours physical markers of those individuals and institutions which he deemed worthy of remembrance.

The fires would also likely have threatened to obliterate many of the gift-objects – such as Eufronius of Autun's marble lid at the basilica, which presumably survived intact – that functioned as a reminder of

⁶⁷ The earliest *Martinellus* manuscript is ninth century; for a tentative fifth-century dating, see F. J. Gilardi, 'The Sylloge Epigraphica Turonensis de S. Martino', Ph.D. thesis, Catholic University of America (1983), pp. 146–7. A marble fragment has been excavated at Tours containing part of one of the epigrams: Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 812–15.

⁶⁸ VM I.6. On Perpetuus' role in institutionalizing Martin's cult, see A.S. McKinley, 'The First Two Centuries of Saint Martin of Tours', *EME* 14.2 (2006), pp. 173–200, at pp. 185–9.

⁶⁹ *Hist* V.37. Pace Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, p. 17 n. 33.

⁷⁰ On the *cellula*, see *Carm.* I.5 and Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 363–5; *Carm.* X.6.

⁷¹ *Carm.* X.6, vv. 90–1: *picturae pompa*. See Pietri, *Ville de Tours*, pp. 828–30 and Kessler, 'Pictorial Narrative'. For an attempt to trace copies of these murals, T. Sauvel, 'Les Miracles de Saint-Martin: recherches sur les peintures murales de Tours au Ve et au Vie siècle', *Bulletin Monumental* 114.3 (1956), pp. 153–79.

the web of connections in which the bishopric of Tours was embedded. It seems likely that relics – whose trajectories across Gaul in this era connected religious establishments in a patchwork of cultic reciprocity – would have been lost. Gregory's zealous collection and distribution of relics during his time in office should therefore be interpreted as an attempt to rearticulate Tours's cultic relations.⁷² Julia Smith's recent study of the fourteen early medieval relic-labels that survive bearing St Martin's name suggests that the production and maintenance of such labels was another quasi-archival activity with which the Merovingian bishops of Tours were concerned.⁷³ In any case, the construction of a new oratory, near the cathedral, and baptistry, next to the basilica, granted Gregory spaces in which to cultivate his own spiritual projects. The oratory was dedicated to the Holy Cross – of which a fellow devotee was Radegund of Poitiers, who had supported Gregory's ordination in 573 – and contained relics of Julian of Brioude and Illidius of Clermont, two Auvergnat saints with whom Gregory's family claimed a special bond, as well as relics of Martin of Tours and the martyr Saturninus.⁷⁴ The baptistry, meanwhile, contained relics of John the Baptist and St Sergius.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Gregory translated into an existing baptistry (also next to the basilica and perhaps damaged by fire) relics of the martyr Benignus of Dijon, a cult which his great-grandfather had established.⁷⁶

The notion that Gregory regarded the restoration of the churches as a form of spiritual duty is strongly suggested by a story he records in the *Glory of the Confessors*. The church of St Venerandus in Clermont, where Gregory had grown up, possessed a vaulted chamber containing numerous sarcophagi about which little was known. Still, Gregory records that the people contained in the sarcophagi were certainly Christian, on account of the biblical images engraved on them.⁷⁷ While Gregory was living in Clermont, some of the vaulting had collapsed due to 'the neglect of long-term lack of care' (*per longinquae incuriae negligentiam*), shattering the lid of one of the sarcophagi to reveal a

⁷² See R. Vam Dam, *Leadership and Community in Late Antique Gaul* (Berkeley, 1985), pp. 177–229; P.R.L. Brown, 'Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours', in *idem*, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982), pp. 222–50.

⁷³ J.M.H. Smith, 'The Remains of the Saints: The Evidence of Early Medieval Relic Collections', *EME* 28.3 (2020), pp. 388–424, at pp. 393–407. Smith attributes four surviving Martinian relic-labels to the Tours scriptorium (pp. 399–400).

⁷⁴ Oratory: *Carm.* II.3, *VP* II.3, *GC*, c. 20. On Gregory's family and Julian, see *VJ*, cc. 24–5; for Illidius see *VP* II.2.

⁷⁵ *Hist.* X.31.

⁷⁶ *Hist* X.31: Perpetuus' calendar tells us the location of this baptistry, which Gregory calls *prior* so as to differentiate it from his own. On Benignus, *GM*, c. 50.

⁷⁷ *GC*, c. 34: I follow Van Dam in considering the *historiae* to be images.

female saint, who subsequently carried out a healing miracle. Gregory laments that ‘nonetheless no one from our current generation knew, either from talk or writings, of her character, origin or name’.⁷⁸ In the next chapter, Gregory describes another of the sarcophagi found in the vault: this one was inscribed ‘IN MEMORY OF SAINT GALLA’ (*SANCTAE MEMORIAE GALLAE*). He then mentions a third tomb, ‘in which *they say* a certain religious Alexander was buried’.⁷⁹ It seems that when dealing with the distant past, Gregory had a hierarchy of source material which placed documents, inscriptions and images ahead of hearsay. Gregory concludes the two-chapter story by noting that the identities of the vast majority of those buried in the crypt are unknown, but their names, so he believes, ‘have been written up and are stored away in heaven’.⁸⁰

The young Gregory was hence offered a lesson in how quickly oblivion could set in if a bishop failed to maintain the physical markers of memory which adorned the churches.⁸¹ The effect, in this case, had been that the very names of a set of saints had been irretrievably forgotten. But it could have been worse: were it not for the images depicted on the tombs, these servants of God would be indistinguishable from heathens. In a world that tended towards material decay, Gregory’s new murals, inscriptions and relics promised to rescue the treasured saints from oblivion.

Memory restored: the rededication of the cathedral

Given the manifold ways in which memory was threatened by the fires of Eufronius’ episcopate, it is unsurprising that Gregory laid such emphasis on the rededication of the cathedral church in 589/90 in his epilogue to the *Histories*. Supervising these building works must have required a great deal of personal attention over the course of seventeen years, and he no doubt felt both pride and relief at bringing the project to completion. We can imagine that there were moments when the projects exerted a considerable strain on him: Gregory knew of one renovation work that would have ended in disaster had it not been for a miracle. His childhood mentor Avitus, bishop of Clermont, had undertaken to restore the crumbling church of St Antolianus; while the workers were away from the scaffolding eating their lunch, several

⁷⁸ ‘Nulla tamen aetas temporis nostri, cuius meriti generisque aut nominis fuerit, aut opinione aut lectione cognovit.’

⁷⁹ ‘In quo ferunt Alexandrum quendam religiosum fuisse sepultum’.

⁸⁰ *GC*, c. 35: ‘scripta . . . retinentur in caelis’.

⁸¹ On dating this story, Van Dam, *Glory of the Confessors*, p. 28 n. 39.

columns collapsed, leaving an enormous cloud of dust which took two hours to dissipate. Avitus was greatly relieved to find the marble undamaged and no one crushed beneath the columns.⁸²

Gregory added lustre to the rededication proceedings by translating a set of relics into the newly inaugurated church. In a description which echoes Ambrose of Milan's discovery of Gervasius and Protasius – a story which Gregory knew well – the epilogue of the *Histories* describes how certain elderly priests had put it about that relics pertaining to the Agaune Martyrs were hidden somewhere in the cathedral.⁸³ Gregory eventually found these relics (as well as various others) covered in mould in an unmarked box, not in the cathedral but in the basilica treasury.⁸⁴ These forgotten relics call to mind the sarcophagi of St Venerandus in Clermont: perhaps owing to the fire the treasury had not been explored for some time, and so not all its contents could any longer be verified. Vigils and masses were held to mark the relics' translation from the basilica to the cathedral, a ceremony which effectively drew together the two key nodes of spiritual power in Tours. It is significant too that the Agaune Martyrs were the focus for this celebration: Gregory knew that the monastery of Agaune had been established with the support of the Burgundian king Sigismund (reigned 516–24), and that King Guntram (reigned 561–92) – the Merovingian who now ruled over Burgundy – had also recently taken steps to patronize the foundation.⁸⁵ The cult of the Theban Legion seems to have been the most significant royal cult of the sixth century, and given that Gregory resided in the Austrasian kingdom of Childebert II, we are justified in wondering whether the translation of these relics in 589/90 was a mode of signalling to contemporaries and future bishops his inclination towards Guntram and Burgundy.⁸⁶

Venantius Fortunatus' panegyric, delivered in the cathedral in front of the new murals which Gregory had commissioned, survives as a further

⁸² *GM*, c. 64.

⁸³ Gervasius and Protasius: *GM*, c. 46.

⁸⁴ Gregory also found relics of Cosmas and Damian, which he placed in Martin's cell adjoining the cathedral.

⁸⁵ *Hist.* III.5; *GM*, c. 74; *GM*, c. 75; *VM*, c. 61. On the problems with Gregory's account, see J.-M. Theurillat, *L'Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d'Agaune: Des origines à la réforme canoniale* (Saint-Maurice, 1954), pp. 43–5. On early medieval Agaune, see A.-M. Helvétius, 'L'Abbaye de Saint-Maurice d'Agaune dans le haut Moyen Âge', in N. Brocard, F. Vannotti and A. Wagner (eds), *Autour de Saint Maurice* (Besançon, 2011), pp. 113–31. On Agaune's cultic network, see J.M.H. Smith, 'One Site, Many More Meanings: The Community of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune and its Relic Collection', in M.C. Miller and E. Wheatley (eds), *Emotions, Communities and Difference in Early Medieval Europe: Essays in Honour of Barbara H. Rosenwein* (London, 2017), pp. 59–76.

⁸⁶ On Guntram as ideal king, Heinzelmänn, *Gregory*, pp. 51–60. But see G. Halsall, 'Nero and Herod? The Death of Chilperic and Gregory of Tours' Writing of History', in K. Mitchell and I.N. Wood (eds), *The World of Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2002), pp. 337–50.

indication of the tenor of the ceremony. Fortunatus playfully juxtaposes Martin and Gregory so as to stress the glory these two bishops bestow on one another through the completion of this project: 'With Martin's help Gregory has restored this church, the new man has restored what the old man was.'⁸⁷ The cathedral, once a ruin (*diruta*), is now 'more firmly in place' (*firmitus . . . situ*) than ever. The project itself is characterized as an exemplary act of pastoral care, securing Tours against the existential threat presented by the ravages of time.⁸⁸ Gregory was intent on transforming the cathedral into a second centre of Martinian cult to match Perpetuus' extramural basilica. The walls now shone with Martin's miracles and a new set of epigrams to accompany them. Its devastation granted Gregory the opportunity to inscribe a new set of memories on the physical topography of Tours, and to locate himself prominently alongside his illustrious patron.⁸⁹

The *Histories* as building project

I have thus far outlined a fresh perspective on Gregory's episcopate which places at its core the construction projects that he undertook in order to ensure that the built environment which he inhabited gave substance to a specific vision of the memory of Tours with pastoral authority at its centre. I shall now turn towards the second question which I outlined in my introduction, and consider to what extent these insights can aid us in understanding how and why Gregory composed his *Histories*.

Mode of composition

It is generally agreed that Books I–IV of the *Histories* were composed sometime after the events described in them occurred.⁹⁰ Heated debate, however, has centred around Books V–X, which detail the events of Gregory's period in office. The traditional dating of these books holds that they were composed roughly in step with the events they describe in the order they are presented to us, albeit allowing for

⁸⁷ *Carm.* X.6, vv. 17–18: 'Martini auxiliis operando Gregorius aedem / reddidit iste novus quod fuit ille vetus.'

⁸⁸ *Carm.* X.6, vv. 22–4.

⁸⁹ Martin's cult may not have been as widespread as Gregory would have us believe: see McKinley, 'Martin', esp. at pp. 197–200.

⁹⁰ Murray, 'Chronology and the Composition', argues post-585; I.N. Wood, *Gregory of Tours* (Bangor, 1994), p. 3 argues 573–80. G. Halsall, 'The Preface to Book V of Gregory of Tours' *Histories*: Its Form, Context and Significance', *EHR* 122.496 (2007), pp. 297–317 argues Gregory wrote V.pr first in Easter 576, and composed Books I–IV immediately after. G. Monod, *Études critiques sur les sources de l'histoire mérovingienne* (Paris, 1872–85), vol. I, p. 45, and B. Krusch, 'Praefatio', in Krusch and Levison (eds), *MGH SRM* 1.1, pp. XXI–XXII thought Gregory wrote I–IV immediately after Sigibert's death.

the fact that Gregory must have done some editing at the end of his life.⁹¹ Nevertheless, since Walter Goffart decisively debunked the theory that Gregory published the *Histories* in two separate recensions, a school of thought has developed – led by Alexander Callander Murray – which considers the text structurally and politically coherent enough to have been composed in one unified project in the early 590s.⁹² Scholars embroiled in debates over the composition of the *Histories* have (for well over a century) focused on textual inconsistencies and stylistic or structural patterns to authenticate their positions. The approach which I shall sketch here, however, suggests a way out of this overdrawn dichotomy between ‘synchronic’ and ‘programmatic’ modes of composition.⁹³

I have already noted Gregory’s preference for using textual sources in the early books of the *Histories*. Nonetheless, it seems that even when piecing together events in his own time he liked to entrust things to writing. In the *Miracles of Martin*, Gregory describes his mode of collecting data: upon hearing that a miracle had been enacted, he generally called the custodians of the shrine and had them relate to him what had happened. Gregory in turn would note down the significant details including, most of the time, the names of those involved.⁹⁴ Even when conducting interviews, then, Gregory was keen where possible to make aide-mémoires. Richard Shaw, in fact, has argued that Gregory’s method of composing his hagiographic writings was a process of pasting together and rewriting these microtexts which he or his assistants had made.⁹⁵ Shaw’s textual analysis indicates strongly that Gregory worked on his miracle-writings simultaneously and over a long period of time, inserting individual stories at the position within his texts that best suited them from a narrative or thematic perspective.⁹⁶ So there were no distinct moments of composition and subsequent retrospective revision, rather a continuous process which was, it seems, still incomplete at the time of his death.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Krusch, ‘Praefatio’, pp. XXI–XXII; R. Buchner, *Zehn Bücher Geschichten* (Darmstadt, 1967), pp. XX–XXV; Monod, *Études Critiques*, pp. 45–8. Krusch and Monod proposed that Gregory paused between Books VI and VII; Buchner argued for continuous composition. All three posited that Gregory had started redacting the text before he died.

⁹² W. Goffart, ‘From Historiae to Historia Francorum and Back Again: Aspects of the Textual History of Gregory of Tours’, repr. *idem*, *Rome’s Fall and After* (London, 1989), pp. 255–74; Murray, ‘Chronology and the Composition’, esp. at pp. 195–6.

⁹³ These terms belong to Murray, ‘Chronology and the Composition’.

⁹⁴ *VM* III.45.

⁹⁵ R. Shaw, ‘Chronology, Composition, and Authorial Conception in the Miracula’, in A.C. Murray (ed.), *A Companion to Gregory of Tours* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 102–40.

⁹⁶ For examples, see Shaw, ‘Chronology, Composition’, pp. 120–3.

⁹⁷ Shaw, ‘Chronology, Composition’, pp. 107–10 notes that *VM* I–III, however, were finished.

It appears, then, that Gregory composed his hagiographic writings in a fashion that can be called *both* synchronic and programmatic. The *Histories*, like the hagiographic texts, is composed of free-standing, chronologically layered chapters which Gregory undoubtedly took great care to position at moments which adhered to the demands of his overarching narrative. It, too, therefore might be characterized as an archive of microtexts. According to this interpretation, the *Histories* is marked throughout by layers of incision and constant reworking: Gregory pieced together his work using textual fragments that he himself had composed, or that he or one of his assistants – such as the deacon Agiulf, who brought the text of Pope Gregory's inauguration ceremony back from Rome in 590 – had copied from pre-existing documents.⁹⁸ This proposition supports rather than undermines the argument that its author was a reflective narrator of history.

Reasons for composition

The historiographic debate concerning the purposes behind the *Histories* is rather less contentious. Perhaps the most dominant perspective on this question, on which there have been numerous important elaborations, remains that of Walter Goffart: that Gregory sought to demonstrate through the examples he presented in the *Histories* the rewards visited on those who respect the saints and bishops of the church, and the misguidedness of those who prioritize worldly interests.⁹⁹ Scholars have hence characterized the text as Christian pedagogy aimed at the clergy of Tours or the Frankish kings.¹⁰⁰ It is my intention here to offer an interpretation which is essentially complementary, rather than inimical, to the Goffart thesis.

The evidence that I have outlined thus far would indicate strongly that the desire to stabilize and rearticulate institutional memory in the face of potential oblivion should be counted among Gregory's chief motivations in composing the text. Since no evidence survives that the *Histories* ever circulated during Gregory's lifetime, it seems likely that this aspect of his project was aimed primarily at future priests and bishops of Tours rather

⁹⁸ That Gregory revised his earlier books late in life has long been argued: see Monod, *Études Critiques*, p. 46 and Buchner, *Zehn Bücher*, p. XXIII. On Agiulf, *Hist.* X.1, VP VIII.6.

⁹⁹ Goffart, *Narrators*. On the *Histories* as Christian pedagogy, Goffart was partly anticipated by Auerbach, *Mimesis*, esp. pp. 91–2; and H. Beumann, 'Gregor von Tours und der sermo rusticus', in K. Repgen and S. Skalweit (eds), *Spiegel der Geschichte: Festschrift für Max Braubach zum 10. April 1964* (Münster, 1964), pp. 69–98, esp. pp. 91–3.

¹⁰⁰ Heinzelmann (*Gregory*, pp. 113–14, 191) argues for a royal audience; Halsall, 'Preface to Book V', argues that V.pr was a sermon delivered at St Martin's, possibly to Prince Merovech, while the rest of the text was aimed at the clergy of Tours. For a different view, see Murray, 'Chronology and the Composition', pp. 194–6.

than a contemporary reading public. After all, in the epilogue, it is the future bishops of Tours to whom he bequeaths the *Histories*. He begs that you ‘do not erase what I have written’ (*nec . . . avellas quae scripsi*), echoing the sentiments expressed in the closing words of Sidonius Apollinaris’ epigram, etched into the walls of St Martin’s basilica: ‘let babbling posterity alter or add nothing . . . may the walls of Perpetuus endure perpetually’.¹⁰¹ Gregory’s words, like Perpetuus’ walls, needed to remain intact as witness to his legacy to Tours. Gregory assembled within the *Histories* a range of information which he regarded as important for future bishops of Tours to know about their office: when the diocese and neighbouring dioceses were founded; the achievements of previous bishops; its Catholic orthodoxy; and the kings, queens and other notables who had cultivated or neglected St Martin. The *Histories* contained an episcopal archive.

The concern that those who succeed him should have a faithful account of the city’s history is present from the very first preface. Here Gregory reviews the ills of his age, ranking high among them the tendency of heretics to attack churches and the faithless to strip them bare. The common people had implored him to set down recent events in writing (*in paginis*). Amidst all this suffering, Gregory felt a sense of duty to ensure that the memory of those who came before him should be brought to the attention of those still to come (*pro commemoratione praeteritorum, ut notitiam adtingerint venientum*). This sentiment can be found, too, in his preface to the *Miracles of Martin*: Martin’s wondrous acts needed to be recorded so that they could be entrusted to the ‘memory of posterity’ (*memoriae in posterum*); Gregory dedicates the *Miracles* to his successors and colleagues at the cathedral of Tours. This was a project, like the *Histories*, purposed towards building up the church (*ad aedificationem ecclesiae*).¹⁰²

The urgency of this task has classically been explained in terms of the claim – supported through reference to Gregory’s frequent (and conventional) apologies for his own lack of eloquence – that he understood himself to live in an era in which literate culture was vanishing.¹⁰³ Based on the evidence considered here, it seems more plausible that the lesson which Gregory sought to impart to his successors when he spoke of *cultura litterarum* and *studium litterarum* disappearing from Gallic cities was that bishops ought to take care of

¹⁰¹ See n. 64 above.

¹⁰² *VM* II.19.

¹⁰³ See P. Riché, *Education et culture dans l'occident médiéval: VIe–VIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1962), p. 251. On Gregory’s modesty topos, see *Hist.* I.pr, X.31; *VM*.pr; *GC*.pr; *VP*.pr and *VP* II.pr. See also Halsall, ‘Preface to Book V’.

the writings under their custodianship. The image of the farmer's constant and renewed attention (*cultura*) towards their fields is perhaps instructive in this regard.¹⁰⁴ The preface to the *Miracles of Martin* supports this interpretation. Gregory here characterizes his project as a continuation of those accounts of Martin's miracles provided by Sulpicius Severus and Paulinus of Périgueux, the sixth book of whose verse narrative was composed from notes Perpetuus had given him.¹⁰⁵ Although Gregory laments that his lack of rhetorical skill renders him ill equipped for this undertaking, he justifies taking up his pen on the basis that he has struggled to find records of the miracles Martin enacted under his more immediate predecessors.¹⁰⁶ The archiving of Martin's miracles had fallen into neglect, and so a major writing project was necessary in order to keep the memory of Martin's powers alive. The crisis which Gregory sought to address in his writings was not the dawn of a Dark Age, but one occasioned by the material damage inflicted on the city's churches under his predecessor. Gregory's writings – especially the *Histories* – hence worked in concert with his building works by providing a narrative and chronological framework for experiencing the city's spiritual topography. They formed complementary aspects of Gregory's career-long efforts 'to write and to say those things which build up the church of God'.¹⁰⁷

Recently, Helmut Reimitz has argued that the *Histories* constituted a radical, post-Roman variant of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.¹⁰⁸ But the line of argument I have presented here would suggest that Gregory may also have been influenced by the genre of episcopal history that was emerging at this time. The first instalment of the *Liber Pontificalis*, a set of short biographies of the popes, was written in Rome shortly after 536.¹⁰⁹ Its composition can be understood in the context of broader practices of record-keeping within the papal bureaucracy, while its purpose as a narrative history has been described as 'the invention of the papacy' – in the eyes of both papal administrators and a wider readership beyond the Vatican – through the official canonization of its spiritual and political past.¹¹⁰ Rosamond McKitterick thinks it likely that Gregory was familiar with the *Liber Pontificalis* through his contacts with Rome, and used it as a model for his biographies of the

¹⁰⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies* XVII.2.1, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), pp. 228–9.

¹⁰⁵ See n. 53 above.

¹⁰⁶ *VM*.pr: 'tantae virtutes, quae sub antecessoribus nostris factae sunt, non sunt scriptae'.

¹⁰⁷ *VM*.pr: 'scribere atque loqui, quae ecclesiam Dei aedificent'.

¹⁰⁸ See n. 28 above.

¹⁰⁹ R. McKitterick, *Rome and the Invention of the Papacy: The Liber Pontificalis* (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 25–35.

¹¹⁰ Archives: McKitterick, *Rome*, p. 13; production of a spiritual past: *ibid.*, pp. 68–96.

bishops of Tours in his epilogue.¹¹¹ As well as the epilogue, those parts of the *Histories* which, I have argued, served a local archival function might also be said to draw more naturally on the genre of episcopal than universal church history. Gregory's hybridization of these two genres may offer yet further proof, then, of his innovativeness as a post-Roman narrator of history.

Conclusion

Consideration of Gregory's building projects and writings alongside one another has offered us a new insight into his activities and motivations. Gregory regarded himself as the caretaker of the city's memory, and pursued a range of activities throughout his episcopate in order to alleviate the risk of oblivion presented by the losses of Eufronius' episcopate. Furthermore, conceiving the composition of the *Histories* as an archival building project has invited us to move beyond discursive approaches, and instead to glimpse the social and material substrate which made up that text, whilst shedding new light on Gregory's method of composition. Gregory's concern to provide the city of Tours with a secure memory – with pastoral authority at its core – should hence be counted among his primary reasons for composing the *Histories*. Drawing on what fragments and foundations he could find, Gregory created a new expression of his city's past which reconfigured his relations with his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors.

University of Oxford

¹¹¹ McKitterick, *Rome*, p. 185.