



Gregory of Tours, Political Criticism and Lower-Class Violence
Gregorio de Tours: crítica política y violencia de las clases bajas
Gregório de Tours: crítica política e violência das classes baixas

Michael BURROWS¹

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to add to the growing scholarship on Gregory of Tours' *Histories* by investigating a series of episodes of lower class violence that occurred in Book VII of that work. It is hoped that this study will demonstrate an additional layer to Gregory's work, and add to our understanding of his perception of authority in contemporary Merovingian society. It is also hoped that, in addition to investigation Gregory's agenda, some light will be cast on the lower classes of Merovingian Gaul and their potential for 'independent' acts of violence.

Resumo: O objetivo deste trabalho é contribuir com o crescente estudo sobre as *Histórias* de Gregório de Tours através de uma série de episódios de violência na classe baixa que ocorrem no Livro VII desta obra. Espera-se que o estudo demonstre uma camada adicional ao trabalho de Gregório, e contribua com nosso entendimento de sua percepção de autoridade na sociedade merovíngia de então. Espera-se também, em acréscimo a investigação da agenda política de Gregório, lançar luz sobre as classes baixas da Gália merovíngia e seu potencial para atos de violência 'independentes'.

Keywords: Gregory of Tours – Merovingian Gaul – Class – Political Critique – Authority.

Palavras-chave: Gregório de Tours – Gália merovíngia – Classe – Crítica política – Autoridade.

¹ PhD Candidate, School of History, University of Leeds, United Kingdom. E-mail: hy08mb@leeds.ac.uk



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia 18* (2014/1)
2013 Leeds Congress
Congreso de Leeds 2013
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

ENVIADO: 07.11.2013

ACEITO: 08.12.2013

The complexities within Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, that were once unknown, are today well explored, yet such is the value of this particular resource that new intricacies continue to emerge.² One aspect of the work that remains somewhat unexplored is Gregory's assessment of class interaction. Sir Samuel Dill once dismissed Gregory as disinterested in social matters, whilst more modern historians have lamented the condition of the lower classes as being impotent, passive recipients of violence.³ I hope to demonstrate that such generalising perceptions, though often relevant, are not always accurate.

Before addressing the main issue of this title however, it is perhaps worthwhile to justify the use of the somewhat loaded terms 'class' and 'legitimacy' in the context of Merovingian Gaul. In his article on Late Roman Social Relations in the *New Cambridge Ancient History*, Arnaldo Marcone notes that, in contrast to the privileged classes, exact terminology for the lower social orders is inexact and somewhat scarce. As a result, he regards it as too broad and heterogeneous to be considered a class.⁴

Nevertheless, the use of the idea of social class as a tool to understand status in the ancient world is a common and relatively acceptable technique.⁵ 'Lower class' will be used in this study simply as a label to indicate those who were

² For a brief overview of the major historiography, see WOOD, Ian N. *Gregory of Tours*. Bangor: Headstart History, 1994, p. iii. For a relevant bibliography, see HALSALL, Guy. 'Nero and Herod? The Death of Chilperic and Gregory's Writings of History'. In: MITCHELL, K. and WOOD, Ian N. (eds.), *The World of Gregory of Tours*. Leiden: Brill, 2002, pp. 337-50.

³ DILL, Samuel. *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age*. London: Macmillan, 1926, p. 235. For an example of the poor as only those who receive violence, see BACHRACH, B. *Merovingian Military Organisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972, p. 30.

⁴ MARCONE, Arnaldo. 'Late Roman Social Relations'. In: CAMERON, Averil and GARNSEY, Peter (eds.), *The New Cambridge Ancient History XIII*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 338-70 (p. 339).

⁵ For example, HALSALL, Guy. 'Violence and Society: An Introductory Survey'. In: HALSALL, Guy (ed.), *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998, pp. 1-45 (p. 21) and BROWN, Peter. *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 47.



not privileged. Where the details within the sources allow and where it is valuable for analysis, further enquiry into the particular status of the individual or group will be undertaken.⁶

Of course, this is but one interpretation of ‘class’. In the classical Marxist sense, it implies conscious competition between orders over the means of production.⁷ This assumption of class-consciousness, with regard to Late Antiquity, is more contentious. To reiterate, the use of ‘class’ as a label to denote social status and wealth will generally suffice for our purposes.

However, since the agency of lower-class individuals and communities to act in their own interests is of some significance to this paper, it is worthwhile to note that there is some evidence of class consciousness in late antique Gaul. Ralph Mathisen has shown that, though the *honestiores* may have comprised of a ‘motley’ group ranging from the curial even municipal to senatorial classes, they differentiated themselves from *humiliores* through social gatherings, letter writing and the fostering of the notion of *amici* (comradeship and unity).⁸

There were also legal differences; the testimony of a rich man was to be taken as more trustworthy than that of a poor man, and the poor could also expect punishment to be both more severe and more public.⁹ It is much more difficult to demonstrate lower class association across the heterogeneous varieties of un-privileged statuses in Roman society. Fortunately however, it is more significant here to emphasise that Gregory, as a member of the privileged minority in Gallic society, probably differentiated between his peers and those of lesser means.

Legitimacy is a similarly complex issue. The classic Weberian model of legitimacy of violence – that the state attempts to monopolise violence in order to safeguard its authority – superficially fits our purposes reasonably well in that the Roman State tried to isolate violence to the military and

⁶ For a discussion of the spectrum of wealth and privilege, see BROWN, Peter. *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, especially pp. 77-80 and 179 for poverty as the absence of wealth in Late Antiquity.

⁷ MARCONE. ‘Late Roman Social Relations’, p. 339.

⁸ MATHISEN, R. W. *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p. 15.

⁹ THOMPSON, E. A. *The Goths in Spain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 135.



judicial spheres.¹⁰ Thus legitimate violence could be considered that which the state sanctioned. However in Merovingian Gaul, as a result of the transition of power away from the Roman state, the issue of legitimacy was problematised. States were weaker and more numerous in sixth-century Gaul as the hegemony of Rome fractured into more fluid, regional domains, whilst the secular authority of the Church grew and aristocratic potentates wielded power in localities.

Because there were more authorities that might claim to wield violence legitimately, the definition of Charles Tilly will be adopted in this context: 'Legitimacy is the probability that other authorities will act to confirm the decisions of a given authority.'¹¹

It is again worthwhile to note that we only view legitimacy through the perspective of our sources. Again however, this does not severely affect the conclusions of this paper since Gregory's perception of the legitimacy of violence is what is under consideration here, rather than that of the parties directly involved.

With these definitions in mind, a series of episodes of illegitimate lower-class violence described in Book VII of Gregory of Tours *Histories* can be considered. This book covers a chronological period of little more than twelve months during the years 584 and 585 AD, and it details the events that followed the assassination of the Merovingian King Chilperic in late 584. Generally Book VII is seen as designed to contrast the flaws of Chilperic with the virtues his brother, Guntram, who was king of Burgundy.¹²

Guntram was quick to take advantage of the death of Chilperic by seizing various territories that had belonged to him, including Gregory's see; the city of Tours. This acquisition was not without violence, and Guntram imposed one of his allies, Willachar, the Count of Orleans as concurrently the Count of

¹⁰ WEBER, Max. *Politics as a Vocation*, Lecture. 1919.

¹¹ TILLY, Charles. 'War Making and State Making as Organized Crime'. In: EVANS, P., RUESCHEMEYER, D. and SKOCPOL, Th. (eds.), *Bringing the State Back In*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 169–91 (p. 171).

¹² HEINZELMANN, Martin. *Gregory of Tours*, CARROLL, Christopher (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 51-60.



Tours.¹³ It is in this context that we encounter the first two episodes of illegitimate Lower-Class violence in Book VII. A certain aristocrat named Eberulf had sought refuge in the Cathedral of St. Martin in Tours because he had been accused of assassinating King Chilperic. In Merovingian Gaul, churches were considered inviolate, and therefore were supposed to be places where even the most heinous criminals could claim sanctuary.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Guntram attempted to capture Eberulf by sending some soldiers from the city of Orleans, and also from Blois, to maintain a watch over him. These soldiers failed in this task, since they stayed a mere fifteen days and appear to have done little more than loot property within the city.

They then set off home with their plunder on stolen pack-animals, but quickly quarrelled. Some men seem to have died and the soldiers dispersed. Gregory records that two of these ill-disciplined men came to an isolated house (*domus*) in the countryside and demanded a drink from the man sat outside it. The man replied that he had none, so the soldiers lifted their spears to attack him. Despite the intimidating situation, the man resisted vigorously and was able to kill both his assailants.¹⁵

Guntram, who was severely frustrated by the failure of this expedition, despatched a certain Claudius to kill or capture Eberulf by whatever means were necessary. Claudius gathered a retinue of three hundred men from the city of Chateaudun – a city which had been at war with Count Willachar and Orleans only months before, and so probably would have been willing to undertake extreme actions in the new city of their erstwhile enemy. Claudius travelled to Tours, where he swore by the relics of Martin that he meant to support Eberulf in his case. Eberulf accepted this, and they adjourned to drink together in the church vestibule where he had been lodged. Having separated

¹³ GREGORY OF TOURS, *Libri Historiarum*, VII. 13. Henceforth *LH*. All extracts in Latin are from the edition of KRUSCH, B. (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum* I. Hanover: Hahn, 1951. English translations derive from the edition of *Gregory of Tours. The History of the Franks*, THORPE, Lewis (trans.). London: Penguin, 1974.

¹⁴ JONES, Allen E. *Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 203. Gregory himself had already had to shelter some distasteful figures from royal authority and, despite his intense dislike of Eberulf, he apparently attempted to maintain his sanctuary.

¹⁵ *LH*, VII. 21: ‘Duo, qui mulas diripiebant, ad domum vicini cuiusdam accedentes, potum rogare coeperunt. Cumque ille se habere negarit, elevatis lanceis ut eum transfoderent, hic extracto gladio utrumque perfodit, cecideruntque ambo et mortui sunt.’



him from his retinue, Claudius and some of his men killed Eberulf and violence broke out between their retinues in the church when Eberulf's men realised this.

Even the Abbot (who seems to have been in charge whilst Gregory was absent from the city) was injured. As a result, a group of *matricularii* – those registered poor of the church who were entitled to alms – as well as other *pauperes*, armed themselves with sticks and stones and rushed to avenge the insult. The soldiers within the church were overwhelmed and beaten to death.¹⁶

In both of these episodes apparently lower-class individuals perform acts of violence against people who were not only those whose social status meant that they were legitimate wielders of violence, but were also agents of the king.¹⁷ We might expect Gregory to condemn them for this, but instead he focuses on the justice in the events. Both have miraculous elements; in the first episode Gregory humorously stresses the divine power which brought the pilfered church mules back to the Church of St. Martin, whilst in the second he declares that: "The vengeance of God was not slow to fall on those who had defiled His holy house with blood."¹⁸

This statement displays Gregory's approval of the ends, if not the means, of these episodes. But it is important to note that the lower-class individuals who meted out justice in these events were not divinely inspired automatons; they had tangible, emotional concerns for their property, community and livelihoods, and as we have seen, Gregory acknowledged this in his account.

We must be mindful of the intensely personal circumstances of these episodes. Gregory seems to have written Book VII more or less at the same time as the events occurred; or at least within the same year.¹⁹ Since they were

¹⁶ *LH*, VII. 29.

¹⁷ It is important to note that, unlike the *matricularii* and *pauperes*, the man of *domus* is not explicitly described as lower class. Nevertheless the rural setting and lack of a given name or status indicates a lack of privilege, or at least that ascribing social status to the individual was not significant to Gregory – especially since he resided in Touraine and Gregory surely could have included more information if he had felt it necessary.

¹⁸ *LH*, VII. 29, pp. 409-12.

¹⁹ WOOD. *Gregory of Tours*, p. 3, however it is worthwhile to note that some have argued that the chronological indicators in Gregory's works were fraudulently contrived during a



so close to both Gregory and his audience, we can probably consider the details reasonably accurate, both because Gregory presumably interviewed eyewitnesses and because his version of events must have been credible to other contemporaries.

If so, then here we have good evidence that the lower classes in Late Antiquity were not merely passive onlookers to or recipients of violence, but were in fact willing and able to defend themselves or what they valued if pressured. We must consider the details of these events: in VII. 21 a single man overcame two soldiers – a formidable feat that demonstrated his strength in a desperate situation. In VII. 29 the situation for the poor was not desperate. The *matricularii* were the recipients of alms from the church, and their lives would have been harder if the soldiers plundered it, but they were not directly threatened.

Nevertheless, they rose up with nothing but makeshift weapons to defeat the retinues of two potent military leaders, one of which apparently numbered in the hundreds. Such actions demanded not only immediate bravery, but a willingness to subvert accepted social roles and the intentions of authority figures. It is very possible that the violence of this episode was not inspired only by the violation of the Church of St. Martin, but also in protest against the violent actions of foreign soldiers in the district of Tours since the annexation of the city by Guntram a few months previously.

Certainly the people of Tours were, at this time, still somewhat hostile to Guntram's control; the city was beset by internal dispute and the militia, which Guntram raised for campaigns in Aquitaine, was reluctant and demoralised.²⁰ It is probable then that the actions of the poor of St. Martin's were political: not simply a feral response to desecration, but fuelled by grievances toward a newly imposed ruler and the unruly soldiers in his employ. With these events in mind it seems clear that, in certain circumstances, the lower-classes had considerable potential for violence;

late composition or revision. For this, see HEINZELMANN, *Gregory of Tours* and GOFFART, Walter. *Narrators of Barbarian History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

²⁰ For internal dispute, see *LH*, VII. 47; for the actions of the militia, see *LH*, VII. 28. In addition, Gregory gives a sympathetic account of the people of Poitiers who were annexed by Guntram at the same time as Tours, but repeatedly rebelled thereafter and from whom the usurper, Gundovald expected support, *LH*, VII. 12, 13, 24, 26, 28.



enough to defeat serious opposition and to be considered, by Gregory, the agents of divine justice.

It could be argued that Gregory's satisfaction with the outcome of these episodes of violence was born from the same resentment that the poor seem to have felt toward outside military involvement, since mere months had passed since these personal and traumatic events. This is the picture derived from the text: the perpetrators of crimes against the people and property of St. Martin's holy city were briskly punished for their sins. However, Gregory records several other episodes of illegitimate lower-class violence in a different context that seem to add complexity to the issue. Some years earlier, in 582, a Frank called Gundovald had arrived in Gaul, claiming to be of royal blood and a half-brother of Chilperic and Guntram.

His arrival caused little interest, and Gundovald seems to have spent some time waiting on an island off the south coast of Gaul. But in 584, in the aftermath of Chilperic's death, Gundovald gathered considerable support from various cities and disillusioned magnates.²¹ Guntram was infuriated by the man he considered to be an imposter, and raised a huge army which included contingents from Orleans and Bourges to attack him. Gundovald retreated to a fortified hilltop town, probably St. Bertrand de Comminges in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Guntram's army moved to besiege him there and ravaged the countryside of the Garonne valley.

Gregory describes a particular incident where troops broke into the Church of St. Vincent in Agen, where the locals had stored their property for safe keeping. The soldiers burnt the locked doors and looted the church but, in punishment for their greed, were apparently possessed by demons and fought each other over the spoils. The army then came to Gundovald's fortress,

²¹ It seems relevant to point out that certain elements within Tours may have numbered among the disgruntled population who supported Gundovald; certainly Gregory is coy on the issue of his legitimacy and does not portray him especially negatively; see WOOD, Ian N. 'The Secret Histories of Gregory of Tours'. In: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 71. 2, 1993, pp. 253-70 (p. 263). Though it is not necessary to investigate the story of Gundovald in great detail in this paper, it is worth mentioning that Bernard Bachrach has argued, somewhat problematically, that Gundovald's career and return to Gaul were the result of a web of numerous and almost indecipherable plots and intrigues. For further details, see BACHRACH, B. *The Anatomy of a Little War: A Diplomatic and Military History of the Gundovald Affair*. Oxford: Westview, 1994.



pitched camp around it, and began to ravage the whole region. But many of them, Gregory tells us, were more avid for plunder than their fellows and wandered too far. Once isolated from the army they were set upon by the local peasants and killed.²²

Gundovald was eventually defeated and King Guntram ordered that those places which had failed to provide soldiers for the campaign should be fined. Ullo, the Count of Bourges, who had been one of the leaders of the campaign, attempted to impose the fine on a house of St. Martin within his territory. They had refused to provide men, so Ullo sent representatives to enforce the royal decree. These representatives were met by the *agens* of the house, whose secular office is probably best understood as that of a steward. He argued that it was not proper for a religious house to provide soldiers and refused to pay the fine.

The leader of Ullo's representatives entered the courtyard of the house to forcefully seize the payment, where he apparently collapsed in great pain, pleaded with the *agens* and his men for his well-being and was promptly thrown out the door. The rest of the count's representatives picked up their stricken leader and left.²³ Gregory attributes this violence to the action St. Martin but it seems more likely that the *agens* and his men were responsible, especially since the house clearly included individuals who were deemed capable of military service.²⁴

So, here we have two episodes of illegitimate violence from either the lower classes, or those for whom violence was not a part of their normal social role. Furthermore, these episodes are in less immediately personal circumstances: the first in rural southern Aquitaine, the second in the lands of the count of Bourges. Gregory had less reason to portray the soldiery as deserving of violence, yet he continued to do so. The immediate reasons for this are given; the men disrespected the church, either by theft and desecration or by attempts to impose laws that Gregory himself thought were unjust.

²² Lewis Thorpe's translation of *incolae* as peasants has been maintained here as it seems to accurately represent the remote, rural location implied in this passage: 'Vastabatur in circuitu tota regio; nonnulli autem ab exercitu, quos fortior avaritiae aculeus terebrabat, longius evacantes, peremebantur ab incolis.'

²³ *LH*, VII. 42.

²⁴ For discussion of attributing violent actions to the actions of the divine, see JONES, Allen. *Social Mobility*, pp. 234-37, 243-44.



Given that all these episodes of illegitimate violence against ill-disciplined soldiery occur within just 21 chapters of Book VII it seems likely that their theme was intentionally emphasised. One clear purpose was to stress the fairly self-evident immorality of persecuting the Church. However, it seems that Gregory had a second, and less obvious agenda in presenting these events; a subtle critique of secular authority. It is a widely accepted theory that Gregory intended to contrast the rule of 'good' King Guntram with the 'latter-day Nero' Chilperic.²⁵ However, Guntram was not so good that he was above criticism; Ian Wood noticed that Gregory had occasion to denounce him for suspiciousness, anger, cowardice, and the ill-treatment of envoys.²⁶

However most of his criticism of Guntram comes in the Books that were written prior to Chilperic's death and Guntram's annexation of Tours. Guy Halsall has proposed that Gregory did not cease to critique Guntram after this event, but rather used 'ironic juxtaposition, reported speech and other strategies' to allow his judgement – whether positive or negative – to reflect his judgement in the narrative.²⁷ In this tense context of the immediate aftermath of this annexation, it seemed that Gregory emphasised the bad behaviour of the soldiers – all of them agents of Guntram – as a gentle means of criticising his new overlord without appearing seditious.

However, it is important to see this critique as a serious issue, not a spur of the moment reaction to the seizure of Tours. In Book VIII, probably written over a year later, Gregory describes a similar episode of illegitimate lower-class violence: some of Guntram's soldiers, who were returning from a disastrous campaign against the Visigoths in Septimania, plundered their own lands, and as a result the soldiers of the Count of Clermont were attacked by the peasants of their own territory. Gregory has Guntram recount a long speech in reaction to this episode, in which he lays the blame for the failure of Frankish external wars at the feet of Gaul's rebellious people.²⁸ But Gregory seems to have intended this speech to sound rather hollow, since it is preceded by various accounts of how Guntram's ill-disciplined soldiers caused the very rebellious behaviour that he criticised.

²⁵ HEINZELMANN. *Gregory of Tours*, pp. 57-58.

²⁶ WOOD. 'The Secret Histories', p. 260.

²⁷ HALSALL. 'Nero and Herod?', pp. 348-49.

²⁸ *LH*, VIII. 30.



We have seen that Gregory intended these episodes to be read as criticisms of Guntram's soldiers, and especially those of Orleans and Bourges. Both of these cities had recently attacked Tours and ravaged its territory, but Orleans has particular significance since the new Count of Tours, Willachar, was directly responsible for that city's soldiers. It is clear that Gregory had serious misgivings about the military actions of both local and regional secular authorities. This distaste for martial affairs can be shown most effectively by contrast with the behaviour of the army of Clovis as it marched to meet the Visigoths in battle at Vouillé. Like Guntram, Clovis is described as *rex pius*, but Clovis was apparently far more able to assert discipline.²⁹

As his army marched through Touraine Clovis ordered that his men requisition nothing but fodder and water out of respect for St. Martin. One of the soldiers took this as justification for the use of force and seized hay from a poor man against his wishes. This instance recalls the similar episode in Book VII. 21, described above, where two men from Orleans or Blois violently demanded a drink from a householder in Touraine and were slain by him.

However, in this case no violent reaction was required from the lower class individual who was wronged; the event was reported to the legitimate authority and Clovis killed the soldier on the spot, whilst declaring that they could expect no success in the coming campaign against the Visigoths if they failed to respect St. Martin. Clovis also sent messengers and gifts to the Church of St. Martin in Tours in order to obtain the goodwill of the saint. Thereafter his campaign was blessed; the soldiers remained disciplined, safe passage across the Vienne River was miraculously shown to them, they defeated the Visigoths and Clovis's own life was saved. Victorious, Clovis retired to Tours after the battle and showered gifts upon the Church.³⁰

Gregory alludes to the potential for lower-class violence in this episode, but royal authority and piety maintained discipline and divine goodwill. Guntram lacked that kind of control over his army, and his parallel campaign against the Visigoths in Septimania was plagued with sedition and its defeat provoked him into almost petulant lamentation.³¹

²⁹ MUNROE, William. 'Via Iustitiae: The Biblical Sources of Justice in Gregory of Tours'. In: MITCHELL, K. and WOOD, Ian N. (eds.), *The World of Gregory of Tours*, pp. 99-112 (p. 110).

³⁰ *LH*, II. 37.

³¹ *LH*, VIII. 30.



Finally, it is important to consider why Gregory chose to have episodes of illegitimate, and apparently lower class, violence redress his grievances against the errant soldiers. This was clearly not the only possible option; in the episodes described here, the soldiers are also punished by their enemies, divine intervention and their own violent quarrels. But none of these alternate sources of justice are emphasised to the same degree. It is probable that Gregory chose to stress the justice of these episodes of illegitimate violence in order to demonstrate that the military legitimacy of soldiers and even counts and kings was not unlimited; they still ought to behave in a disciplined manner and refrain from despoiling churches, and the lands of their allies. If they did not, they risked alienating both their own people and God.

When Gregory detailed four events of this kind in just twenty-one chapters of Book VII it seems probable that he was depicting a genuine trend, and wanted to attribute these outbursts to poor rulership, rather than some inherent rebelliousness among the people of Gaul. Given that the people of Tours had been active in illegitimate violence, this seems a sensible conclusion for Gregory to make, since it absolved the people of his city from the guilt of their actions against their new count and king. As such, in the context of Book VII we can interpret Gregory's portrayal of lower-class violence as affirming the hypotheses of Wood and Halsall, which stress the subtleties of political criticism in the *Histories*.³²

If that hypothesis is accepted, one could argue that these episodes were fabricated by Gregory in order to contrast the injustice of some supposedly legitimate military actions, with the justice of the illegitimate violent responses to them. If so, then these episodes might not represent the realistic responses of the people of sixth-century Gaul to violence.

However, such an argument would deny the lower classes agency in much the same way as dismissive labels of passivity. More importantly, there are similar examples of violent lower-class responses to difficult circumstances throughout Gregory's *Histories*; some he presents as just, others as ambiguous, and some he attributes to maliciousness or demonic inspiration.³³ Gregory was not partisan in his depiction of such actions. Therefore, it seems probable that he was picking up on a genuine phenomenon: that the poor people of

³² WOOD. 'The Secret Histories', and HALSALL. 'Nero and Herod?'

³³ For example, *LH*, IV, 46, VII. 46, 47, IX. 6, X. 25. This list is far from exhaustive.



WOODS, Ian, *et alii* (org.). *Mirabilia* 18 (2014/1)
2013 Leeds Congress
Congreso de Leeds 2013
Congresso de Leeds 2013

Jan-Jun 2014/ISSN 1676-5818

sixth-century Gaul were not simply the passive recipients of violence, but rather that, given the right circumstances, they were quite capable of violence themselves.

In the specific context of the turbulent aftermath of Chilperic's assassination, the circumstances that brought about illegitimate lower-class violence seem to have been particularly common. Finally, the very choice of Gregory to utilise this phenomenon to stress deplorable aspects of Guntram's rule emphasises the likelihood of 'real' events of this kind, even if he might well have constructed or altered the given examples so as to fit his narrative purpose.

As such, it seems reasonable to maintain that, in certain circumstances, the lower classes in sixth-century Gaul could be neither passive nor impotent, but instead were willing and able to fight against their military and social superiors. Furthermore, the illegitimate violent activities of the lower classes were clearly not condemned off-hand by all aristocratic or ecclesiastical observers: Guntram clearly disapproved, but Gregory not only accepted the justice of these supposedly illegitimate actions, but seems to have incorporated them into a subtle critique of Merovingian authority.