14.1  Gregory as a Source for Spanish Affairs

Gregory’s narrative about Spain and Spanish matters is focused largely on religious issues, even when these involved diplomacy and warfare. Distinctions like these, however, were not those the bishop of Tours would have made or recognized. A good example of his approach is his description of the campaign conducted in 531 by Childebert I (ca 511–558) against the Visigothic king Amalaric (a. 526–531), prompted by the latter’s ill-treatment of his wife, Chlotild, who was the Frankish monarch’s sister.1 While recording the death of Amalaric in Barcelona in a version that conflicts with Spanish accounts, Gregory gives very few details of the military events, which are almost incidental to his narrative, but instead includes precise figures for the 60 chalices, 15 patens and 20 gold and bejeweled Gospel covers that Childebert carried off as loot to distribute amongst various episcopal and monastic churches in Francia.2

Similarly, Gregory reports on how the Arian bishop of Narbonne died of despair when he failed to prevent the inhabitants of the province of Narbonensis accepting Catholicism following the conversion of the Visigothic king Reccared in 587 (Hist. 9.15). However, the Spanish hagiographic text known as the Vitas Patrum Emeretensium indicates that this episcopal bitterness took the more concrete form of a revolt, in which Bishop Athalocus joined the Narbonese counts Granista and Wildigern in a failed rising against the king – a dimension

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1 It should be noted that the name ‘Visigoth’ was not used either in Spain at the time or by Gregory, and that those whom we normally call ‘Visigoths’ referred to themselves and were called by most others just ‘Goths.’ The anachronistic terms ‘Visigoths’ and ‘Visigothic’ are retained here merely for convenience because of their undeserved familiarity.

2 Hist. 3.10; cf. Isidore, Historia Gothorum 40, (ed.) Cristóbal Rodríguez Alonso, Las Historias de los Godos, Vándalos y Suevos de Isidoro de Sevilla. Estudio, edición crítica y traducción (León, 1975), 238.
of the event entirely lacking in Gregory’s account. As this suggests, Gregory could render complex events with multiple participation as simple stories of the interaction of a few key actors, often expressed through invented dialogue, however improbable. One often unnoticed effect of this practice is to reduce much of what he reports about the society and politics of 6th-century Francia to little better than a series of thuggish ‘Game of Thrones’ scenarios, a perspective at variance with the more limited documentary evidence, but influential enough to dominate the scholarly and popular perceptions of the period.

His preference for a confined focus also manifests itself in a lack of geographical and chronological precision, which can extend to the names of people as well as of places. For example, he gives a lengthy account of how a Gallic priest was pressured by the Visigothic king Leovigild to convert from Catholicism to Arianism. Yet, although Gregory reveals that he acquired the story at first hand from the priest himself, he does not even include the man's name (gm 81). Similarly, while he sometimes is specific in his references to Spanish towns, on other occasions he locates events he describes as occurring in “a certain Spanish town,” on other occasions he locates events he describes as occurring in “a certain Spanish city.”

To be fair, Gregory can also provide very detailed information about his informants and the contexts in which he met them. Sometimes, though, statements he makes with apparent confidence can be shown to be factually erroneous. For example, he confuses the Vandal king Thrasamund (a. 496–523) with his father Geiseric (a. 428–477) in an account of that monarch’s otherwise unknown and most unlikely attempt to impose Arianism in Spain (Hist. 2.2). Likewise he refers to the Visigothic kings Athanagild (a. 554–568) and Leovigild (a. 569–586) as brothers, something that perhaps the identical suffixes of their names might have suggested to him (Hist. 4.38). In reality he is conflating two different royal dynasties: firstly that of Athanagild (a. 554–568), and secondly that of the entirely unrelated Liuva I (a. 568-572/3), who associated his own brother Leovigild as co-ruler in 569. Similarly, in one of his hagiographical works Gregory implies a reign for king Theudegisel (a. 548–549) of at least three to four years, which is greater than the reality (gm 24.). So, his evidence cannot be taken to be beyond question, even when he is the sole source for the information he provides.

4 E.g. Hist. 6.43.