Abstract
This paper analyses the history of a story: the sack of Rome by Alaric in 410. It starts with the contemporary reactions in Augustine, Jerome and Orosius, following their reception both in the west (the fifth-century chroniclers, Gregory of Tours, Fredegar, Isidore and Paul the Deacon) and in the east (Olympiodorus of Thebes, Sozomen, Socrates Scholasticus, Theodoretus, Procopius and Jordanes). It aims to highlight how the story was used in different forms, and how the narrative was adapted from one chronicler to the other, in order to respond to their own views of history and society. Comparing the readings of the sack, we can perceive a shift in the perception of warfare: while the early fifth century produced a very religious historical explanation, from the sixth century on writers managed to re-insert traditional militaristic values into a Christian discourse. It is my contention in this paper that, by analyzing how later chroniclers and historians used well-known stories, such as the sack of Rome, we can better perceive their thoughts about history, their methods and their approaches to the past.

1. The aim of this article is to analyse the re-uses and re-appropriations of the sack of Rome in early medieval historiography.1 Little attention is usually given to the various attempts of early medieval historiography to report Roman history: it is generally accepted that most facts and events can be gathered from more reliable contemporary sources. For example, while the Histories of Gregory of Tours has been invaluable to our knowledge of sixth-century Gaul, its first book is a strange abridgment of Roman-cum-ecclesiastical history that adds little to our knowledge of one or the other. Nonetheless, the book presents a selection of events that compose a view of the past, and can inform us what Gregory considered

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1 Translations from Latin are my own, unless otherwise noted. I would like to thank Sasha Gorjeltchan for her help in rendering this paper into English.
worth mentioning and what he thought was unnecessary. It is well known that the bishop of Tours included and excluded facts from his writing not out of ignorance, but according to his own intentions, and many events that we would consider of utmost importance to the period received little or no attention at all.\(^2\) The sack of Rome by Alaric in 410 is an interesting example for Gregory’s selectivity: if we were to rely solely on Gregory for Roman history – what a strange history it would be! – there would be no sack of Rome at all. Not that Gregory was completely averse to reporting Roman military disasters: he was more than willing to recount Adrianople, and how the wicked heretic Valens was struck by divine vengeance (*Hist.* 1.42). Nor was he unaware of the sack: several reports of the sack survived, and at least one, Orosius’s, was definitely in Gregory’s possession.\(^3\) His choice, rather, reflects changing tastes in society, and a different use of the past. In tracing the story of that story, we can perceive not only why Gregory of Tours did not mention the sack, but also how, during the period, the past was used to legitimize the present.

2. About 1600 years ago, the rebel Roman commander Alaric conquered, probably by treason, the Eternal City. After several months of negotiations with the Roman court in Ravenna and three consecutive sieges of Rome, unable to come to terms with a regime that had become especially anti-barbarian after the execution of Stilicho, a reluctant Alaric broke through the gates of Rome, particularly concerned in minimising the damage of the action, lest any further negotiation would become impossible. Probably, he also ordered his Goths to respect the sanctuary of St Peter’s Basilica. The violence spread in the city for three days, until Alaric decided nothing could be gained there and moved south to try to cross to Africa. Meanwhile, Honorius, the emperor, was watching passive-ly from his safe position in Ravenna.\(^4\)

The Sack of Rome was the second great tragedy the Romans lived in recent history. About 30 years earlier, the Goths had inflicted a major defeat to the Eastern Roman Army close to Adrianople, and the precedents for the debate on the sack of Rome can be found in the reactions to the defeat of 378. Back in the 380s, several writers debated the famous battle, and many interpretations were put forward: it would not be possi-

\(^2\) On Gregory of Tours, see esp. Goffart (1988); Heinzelmann (2001); Murray (2008).

\(^3\) Gregory mentions Orosius more than once, e.g. *Hist.* 1, prol; 1.42.

\(^4\) Analyses of the Sack of Rome in 410 abound: the classic analyses are Courcelle (1964: 31-77); Jones (1964: 182-86); Bury (1923: 174-84). Among the more recent interpretations, of special interest is the survey in Kulikowski (2007: 1-10); von Rummel (2013: 17-34); Mathisen (2013: 87-102). For a detailed account of the traces of damage in the archaeological material, see Ghilardi and Pilara (2010); Valenziani (2013: 35-42).