GREGORY OF TOURS, THE VISIGOHTHS AND SPAIN

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Gregory, bishop of Tours from 573 to 594, mentions Visigothic Spain only a few dozen times in the course of his Ten Books of History, our major narrative source for post-Roman Gaul, but those few passages are important not only for Spanish history, but also for our own understanding of Gregory’s aims and attitudes. Even though the Visigoths of Spain had, nominally at least, converted to Catholicism two or three years before Gregory would have edited and completed the History, he seems to have done little to change the role he had devised for Visigothic Spain: that of a hostile neighbour whose manifold errors and evils helped to underline the general righteousness of the Catholic Church in Gaul.

Apart from a brief mention when talking about the evangelization of Gaul, Spain does not appear in Gregory’s narrative until he begins to discuss the “barbarian invasions”. This happens near the beginning of Book 2, which, starting as it does with the repercussions of St Martin of Tours’ death in 397 and ending with King Clovis’s death in 511, is essentially devoted to what we, but not Gregory, think of as the fifth century. The passage immediately established the dominant theme of Gregory’s account of Spain, for it described how the Vandals came into Gaul and how, not long after, the Vandal king Thrasamund “began to persecute the Christians and by tortures and all sorts of executions forced the whole of Spain to accept the heresy of the Arian rite.”

Arianism is central to Book II, which ends with the triumph of orthodoxy in Gaul and the retreat of Arianism south of the Pyrenees and the Alps. Indeed, Ian Wood has claimed that the refutation of Arianism may have been one of Gregory’s motives for the writing of the History; and certainly Gregory is able, through his references to Spanish Arianism, to keep the subject alive in his readers’ consciousness right to the end.


2 Ian Wood, Gregory of Tours (Bangor, 1994), p. 34.
of his book. Arianism made its appearance in the Preface and very first chapter of the book, although not in name, when Gregory claimed it as his aim to describe the attacks of the heretics against the Church, and vice versa, and issued his own creed, which placed considerable weight upon the equality of the persons of the Trinity (which Arius denied), and upon the decisions of the Council of Nicaea (which condemned Arius). Arius himself is not mentioned until half-way through Book II, when a wicked priest died in the lavatory: from which “we may deduce that this man was guilty of a crime no less serious than that of Arius, who in the same way emptied out his entrails through his back passage in the lavatory.”

Arianism—or, more precisely, the “perfidy of the Arian sect”, *perfidiam Arrianae sectae*—is first mentioned under that name (rather than subsumed into “heresy”) in this passage in which King Thrasamund of the Vandals forced the inhabitants of Spain into Arianism. In other words, from early on in his *History* Gregory associates Spain with this particular heresy; and, as here, is happy to give the totally false impression that all inhabitants of Spain are tainted with it.

It is difficult to know at any particular point when Gregory is just ignorant or whether he is deliberately and consciously twisting facts to suit his own ends. As we shall see, deliberate deception is not beyond him, but his whole chaotic approach to the fifth century certainly does suggest considerable ignorance. He has occasional written sources, which he makes use of as intelligently as possible, but he seems to have a very hazy idea of chronology and to be capable of major errors. To take just one example: Thrasamund, the Vandal king who supposedly forced Spain into Arianism, actually became king of the Vandals only in 496, almost seventy years after the Vandals had left Spain for North Africa. Geiseric, the great Vandal king who led his people into Spain and who ruled them (and dominated the western Mediterranean) for fifty years, from 428 to 477, is not mentioned by Gregory at all. Indeed, as Andrew Cain has shown in his recent study of Gregory and the Vandals, the only Vandal king whom Gregory does situate properly within the fifth century is Huneric (477–484), and that is because Gregory has a detailed story of the Arian persecution of Catholics which took place in that reign.

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3 Gregory, *History* 2.22; *MGH, SSRM I.1*, pp. 67–8; Thorpe, p. 135. Gregory mentions the manner of Arius’s death in two other places: the Preface to Book 3 and 9.15.

4 Andrew Cain, “Miracles, Martyrs, and Arians: Gregory of Tours’ Sources for his Account of the Vandal Kingdom”, *Vigiliae Christianae* 59 (2005), 412–437, at p. 415.