MIRACLES, MARTYRS, AND ARIANS:
GREGORY OF TOURS’ SOURCES FOR HIS ACCOUNT OF THE VANDAL KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates Gregory of Tours’ sources for his account of the Vandal kingdom (DLH 2.2-3). The account revolves around a healing miracle by Eugenius, the Nicene bishop of Carthage during the Vandal Arian Huneric’s persecution of Catholics in 484. Victor of Vita’s Historia persecutionis is the only extant contemporaneous African source that spotlights Huneric’s reign and gives a version of Eugenius’ miracle story, albeit vastly different from Gregory’s. After demonstrating that Gregory could not have relied on Victor for his information, the author argues that Gregory had access instead to a lost Historia persecutionis written in Africa around the same time as Victor’s, and that he retrieved from it circumstantial details not reported by Victor, such as names of several Nicene bishops and confessors, and a letter by Eugenius not attested elsewhere.

On 25 February 484, the Vandal Arian king Huneric issued an edict of persecution against all Nicene Christians in North Africa who refused to be rebaptized and convert to Arianism. They saw their churches closed, their bishops exiled, their holy books burned, and their land confiscated. One scholar has dubbed this ‘la répression la plus dure qu’ait subie le catholicisme africain’.1 The sources for this period of the Vandal hegemony are both few and biased.2 Victor of Vita’s Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae

2 The three principal sources are: Victor of Vita, Historia persecutionis Africanae provinciae. M. Petschenig ed., CSEL 7 (1881), from which edition all citations from the HP are taken in this paper; the Vita sancti Fulgentii episcopi Ruspensis: PL 65, 117-50; and Procopius, Bellum Vandalicum: O. Veh ed., Prokop: Werke (Munich, 1961), vol. 4. Two minor contemporary sources are the Passio septem monachorum (Petschenig, 108-14) and the Notitia provinciarum et civilitatum Africæ (Petschenig, 117-34), both of which are appended to HP in the manuscript tradition; quotations from each are taken from Petschenig’s above-cited edition. For
[HP], written ca. 485, is the only surviving eyewitness account, which Pierre de Labriolle poignantly called 'le tour d’une longue et douloureuse Passio martyrum'.

Gregory of Tours, writing some one hundred years after Victor, gave a brief overview of the Vandal kingdom at the beginning of the second book of his Decem libri historiarum [DLH].

Gregory’s account revolves around a healing miracle performed by Eugenius, the Catholic bishop of Carthage during Huneric’s reign. Victor gave the only other known account of this miracle, but his version could not be more different in nearly every detail. Gregory also reproduced an original letter of Eugenius not attested in HP or anywhere else. In this study I shall compare the two accounts closely to see what light can be shed first on Gregory’s sources and second on connections and communication between the Vandal kingdom and Gaul in and after the Vandal period.

Structure of Gregory’s Vandal account

The second book of Gregory’s DLH opens with an anecdotal story about St. Martin and Brictius, Martin’s successor as bishop of Tours. The second and third chapters cover the Vandal kingdom. The fourth contains a short story about the Visigothic king Athanaric, while the three subsequent chapters touch upon the Hunnic kingdom. The eighth chapter leads into a discussion about the origins of the Frankish kingdom, and the remaining thirty-five chapters are a continuation of this theme, spotlighting the first kings of the Franks. Gregory’s discussion of other barbarian kingdoms—Vandal, Visigothic, and Hunnic—is intended merely as a brief preface to explain and contextualize the rise of the Franks.

Citations from the DLH are taken from the edition of B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, SRM 1.1 (Hannover, 1937-51). Citations from Gregory’s various hagiographical works come from B. Krusch ed., MGH, SRM 1.2 (Hannover, 1885).