Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Medieval History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmed20

Gregory of Tours And the Merovingian letter

Robert Flierman

To cite this article: Robert Flierman (2021): Gregory of Tours And the Merovingian letter, Journal of Medieval History, DOI: 10.1080/03044181.2021.1893800

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2021.1893800

Published online: 25 Feb 2021.

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2021.1893800

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Gregory of Tours And the Merovingian letter

Robert Flierman

Department of Languages, Literature and Communication, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Merovingian letter-writing is traditionally studied by calling on a dozen or so high prolife letter collections. This article turns to a different source: Gregory of Tours' *Histories*, the foremost work of history-writing to survive from sixth-century Gaul. By studying Gregory's narrative descriptions of letters this article seeks to shed new light on three aspects of Merovingian epistolary culture that have proved difficult to approach solely through the epistolary evidence: first, the typological variety of letters used in Merovingian Gaul, which extended far beyond the literary compositions dominating the letter collections; second, the complex practices surrounding letter delivery, such as the use of messengers, oral performance and strategies of secret communication; and finally, the repurposing of letters after their initial moment of delivery, which includes recirculation of old letters as sources of evidence and persuasion, but also covers the way Gregory himself came to employ letters as a narrative device.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 November 2019
Accepted 5 March 2020

KEYWORDS
Letters; letter delivery; couriers and messengers; secret communication; Merovingian kingdoms; Gregory of Tours

The *Histories* of Gregory of Tours (d. 594) are full of stories involving letters. Here is one.[1] For a dozen or so months in 576 and 577, Gregory found himself hosting two high profile asylum seekers in his episcopal church of St Martin in Tours. One of these was Guntram Boso, who had recently incurred the wrath of the Neustrian king Chilperic by killing one of the king's sons on the battlefield. Unsurprisingly, various sorts of pressure were soon brought to bear on Tours and its bishop: royal messengers arrived at Tours urging Gregory to throw Guntram out of the church, an army moved on the city and its surroundings were plundered by royal agents. None of this was to any avail: Gregory refused to hand Guntram over. At that point the king decided to change tack:

CONTACT Robert Flierman r.flierman@uu.nl Department of Languages, Literature and Communication, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University, Trans 10 Utrecht Netherlands, Utrecht 3512 JK, The Netherlands

[1] The following abbreviations are used in this article: MGH: Monumenta Germaniae Historica; SRM: Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum.

Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, eds. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison. MGH SRM 1, part 1 (Hanover: Hahn, 1951), [references with book and chapter number], V.4 and V.14. A shorter version can be found in Gregory of Tours, *Virtutes Martini*, ed. Bruno Krusch. MGH SRM 1, part 2 (Hanover: Hahn, 1885), II.27. See Martin Heinzelman, 'Hagiographiser und historischer Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours', in *Aevum inter utrumque. Mélanges offerts à Gabriel Sanders, professeur émérite à l'Université de Gand*, eds. Marc van Uytfanghe and Roland Demeulenaere (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 252–5, for a comparative analysis of the two narratives.

> King Chilperic sent a letter addressed to the tomb of St Martin. The message it contained was that the blessed Martin should write back to him whether or not it was permitted to extract Guntram forcibly from the basilica. The deacon Baudegysel, who delivered this letter, added a blank sheet to the letter he had deposited at the saint's tomb. Yet after waiting for three days without receiving any response, he returned to Chilperic. The latter then sent other messengers, to demand from Guntram an oath that he would not leave the basilica without the king knowing it. Guntram swore to this eagerly, pledging on the cloth of the altar that he would never depart from that place without the king's permission.[2]

The agreement thus brokered did not last. Guntram soon fled Tours without the king's consent, upon which Chilperic laid waste to Tours' surroundings once more, explicitly targeting property belonging to the church of St Martin.

Much can be said about this story. On one level, it shows off Gregory's well-known ingenuity as a narrator.[3] Chilperic's audacious attempt to bypass the right of church asylum by petitioning the church's saintly protector was clearly meant to reflect negatively on the Neustrian king, whose person and rulership are routinely censured in the *Histories*.[4] The saint's failure to write back to Chilperic must have appeared particularly damning in this regard, the suggestion being that the saint could well have responded, but that for this particular petitioner he had refused to do so.[5] Yet the very ease with which Gregory was able to spin the saint's silence into a sign of holy condemnation also makes one wonder: what had the king been hoping to achieve in the first place by having a letter delivered to the tomb of a long dead saint? And did his attempt to force a breakthrough using the medium of the letter really fall as flat as Gregory wants us to believe? Such questions cut to the heart of the present article, which studies the practices surrounding letter-writing in sixth-century Merovingian Gaul.[6] It studies

[2] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.14: 'Misit Chilpericus rex epistulam scriptam ad sepulchrum sancti Martini, quae habebat insertum, ut ei beatus Martinus rescriberet, utrum liceret extrahi Gunthchramnum de basilica eius an non. Sed Baudegyselus diaconus, qui hanc epistulam exhibuit, cartam puram cum eadem quam detulerat ad sanctum tumolum misit. Cumque per triduum expectasset et nihil rescripti reciperet, redivit ad Chilpericum. Ille vero misit alios, qui Gunthchramno sacramenta exigerent, ut sine eius scientiam basilicam non relinqueret. Qui ambienter iurans, pallam altaris fideiussorem dedit, numquam se exinde sine iussione rege egressurum.'

[3] The literature on Gregory's narrative ambitions is vast. Key publications include Helmut Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 25–124; Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History: A.D. 550–800. Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon*. 2nd edn. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 112–234; Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours: Zehn Bücher Geschichte: Historiographie und Gesellschaftskonzept im 6. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993). See also the contributions by Alexander Callander Murray, Richard Shaw and Pascale Bourgain in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. A. Callander Murray (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[4] Guy Halsall, 'Nero and Herod? The Death of Chilperic and Gregory's Writing of History', in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, eds. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 337–50.

[5] Compare the popular story circulating at this time about Pope Leo the Great, who was said to have placed a theological pamphlet on the tomb of St Peter, which the apostle then 'read' and 'amended'. The story is recounted by the sixth-century Byzantine monk Johannes Moschus, *Pratum spirituale*, in *Procopii Gazaei, Christiani rhetoris et hermeneutae, Opera … omnia, … accedunt Joannis Mosci … scripta*, vol. 3, ed. J.-P. Migne. Patrologia cursus completus, series Graeca, 87 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1863), cols. 3011–12B.

[6] Most recently on Merovingian letters, see V. Alice Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters and Letter-Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and Andrew Gillett, 'Letters and Communicating Networks in Merovingian Gaul', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, eds. Bonnie Effros and Isabel Moreira (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 531–55. On the late antique and early medieval letter in general, Thomas Deswarte, Klaus Herbers and Hélène Sirantoine, eds., *Epistola. 1, Écriture et genre épistolaires, IVe–XIe siècle* (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2018); Gernot Michael Müller, ed., *Zwischen Alltagskommunikation und literarischer Identitätsbildung. Studien zur lateinischen Epistolographie in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2018); Thomas Deswarte, Klaus Herbers and Cornelia Scherer, eds., *Frühmittelalterliche Briefe: Übermittlung und Überlieferung (4.–11. Jahrhundert). La lettre au haut moyen âge: transmission et tradition épistolaires (IVe–XIe siècles)* (Cologne: Böhlau,

these practices not by looking at letters and letter collections, but by considering narrative descriptions like the one above, taking Gregory of Tours' *Histories* as a central source.

Why should we want to use a work of history to study letters? An important part of the answer is that the direct epistolary evidence is in several ways insufficient. Vida Alice Tyrrell's recent study of the Merovingian letter collections puts the surviving epistolary corpus for the period *c*.500–750 at just over 600 letters.[7] This seems a lot, certainly when compared to many of the other post-Roman kingdoms, but it must have been only a small sample of what was actually written, and an unrepresentative sample at that, consisting almost exclusively of letters that were intentionally copied and preserved.[8] None of these letters survives in their original form.[9] The vast majority derives from one of 14 letter collections, with the verse epistles of Venantius Fortunatus alone making up a quarter of the corpus.[10] The resulting evidence is heavily slanted towards the efforts of elite men, especially those connected to the Church.[11] It is also typologically narrow, consisting predominantly of the literary showpieces and friendship letters of a select number of prominent ecclesiastics and literati, with some high-end diplomatic correspondence added to the mix. A more fundamental limitation is that the letter collections are concerned primarily with preserving and showcasing the letters' textual contents. It is evident, however, that the text of a letter was only one part of the process of epistolary communication and not necessarily the most important one.[12] Sending a letter involved messengers,[13] public performance and the oral

2017); Neil Bronwen and Allen Pauline, eds., *Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Christian Høgel and Elisabetta Bartoli, eds., *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015). For an overview of the literature up to the early 2010s, see Marco Mostert, *A Bibliography of Works on Medieval Communication* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), and Walter Ysebaert, 'Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological Questions and Reflections and Research Perspectives (6th–14th centuries)', *Studi Medievali* 50 (2009): 41–73, with Michael Trapp, *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology, with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-collections.* Typologie des sources du moyen âge occidental 17 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), also remaining highly informative.

[7] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, xiv. Tyrrell's figure does not include political directives, capitularies and charters cast in epistolary form. It also leaves out the major episcopal letter collections of the late fifth century.

[8] On the preservation biases surrounding ancient and medieval letters, Christiana Sogno, Bradley Storin and Edward Watts, eds., *Late Antique Letter Collections. A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 4–5; and Mary Garrison, '"Send More Socks": On Mentality and the Preservation Context of Medieval Letters', in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 69–99.

[9] The earliest original letters from medieval Gaul are printed as facsimiles in Armando Petrucci, ed. *Lettere originali del medioevo latino, 7.–11.sec. 2.1: Francia. Arles, Blois, Marseille, Montauban, Tours* (Pisa: Scuola normale superiore, 2007), and Giulia Ammannati, ed., *Lettere originali del medioevo latino (VII– XI sec.). 2.2: Francia: (Parigi)* (Pisa: Scuola normale superiore, 2012).

[10] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, xxii–xxx.

[11] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 129–30, lists 20 letters written by women.

[12] Catherine Conybeare, *Paulinus Noster: Self and Symbols in the Letters of Paulinus of Nola* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19–20.

[13] For late antiquity, Pauline Allen, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Letter-Bearer in Christian Antiquity', *Studia Patristica* 62 (2013): 481–91; Andrew Gillett, *Envoys and Political Communication in the Late Antique West, 411–533* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Mathilde Caltobiano, 'I latori della corrispondenza di Agostino: tra idealizzazione e realtà', *Augustinianum* 41, no. 1 (2001): 113–48; Michel-Yves Perrin, '"Ad implendum caritatis ministerium". La place des courriers dans la correspondance de Paulin de Nole', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 104 (1992): 1025–68; Denys Gorce, *Les voyages, l'hospitalité et le port des lettres dans le monde chrétien des IVe et Ve siècles* (Paris: Picard, 1925), 193–247. For early medieval messengers, Tyrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 163–96; Volker Scior, 'Bemerkungen zum frühmittelalterlichen Boten- und Gesandtschaftswesen', in *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat – europäische Perspektiven*, eds. Walter Pohl and Veronika Wieser (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 315–30; Tina Orth-Müller, '"Gerulus, missus und transvector":

transmission of things not entrusted to writing.[14] It could involve gift-giving.[15] It also called for practical arrangements concerning travel and transportation.[16] While the Merovingian letter collections offer occasional hints of the wider circumstances surrounding a letter's delivery, it is not their main concern.[17]

In light of the above, this article aims to use Gregory's *Histories* to address three aspects of Merovingian epistolary culture that have proved difficult to study relying on letters alone. A first section explores the types of letters used and circulated in sixth-century Gaul, paying special attention to letter-like documents that fell outside the epistolary norm set by the letter collections and are rarely considered in modern scholarship on letter-writing. A second section looks at the process of delivery. Here, the focus is on the crucial role played by messengers and on the strategies used to bring a letter before a larger audience, or conversely, to keep it private or secret. A third and final section addresses the continued use of letters *after* their delivery. Taking as a case study one of the foremost scandals of late sixth-century Gaul – the revolt of the nuns of Poitiers – this section explores how those involved in a public dispute could recirculate older letters as a source of evidence and persuasion. This section also considers how Gregory himself came to reuse letters as a narrator by strategically weaving epistolary evidence into his account of the scandal.

Using Gregory as a window on Merovingian epistolary practices does not mean taking him at his word. Nor does it mean postponing questions of narrative and authorial motive until the final part of this article. Yet, as recently stressed by Helmut Reimitz, Gregory the author did not – and could not – stand apart from the society in which he wrote. He built his narrative on a 'horizon of expectations and experiences' which he hoped and believed to share with his readers.[18] This article seeks to uncover some of the Merovingian expectations and experiences of letters.

Types and terminology

That the letter could come in many shapes and forms was well known to ancient epistolary theorists. One late antique treatise famously distinguished 41 different types, ranging

Bote und Botschaft in den Briefen des Codex epistolaris Karolinus', in *Mobilità e immobilità nel medioevo europeo: atti del 2o Seminario di studio dei dottorati di ricerca di ambito medievistico delle Università di Lecce e di Erlangen: Roma, Istituto storico germanico, 1–2 aprile 2004*, eds. Hubert Houben and Benedetto Vetere (Galatina: Congedo, 2006), 125–36.

[14] For an exemplary case study, see Volker Scior, 'Stimme, Schrift und Performanz. "Übertragungen" und "Reproduktionen" durch frühmittelalterliche Boten', in *Übertragungen. Formen und Konzepte von Reproduktion in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. B. Bussmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 77–100.

[15] Joe Williams, 'Letter Writing, Materiality, and Gifts in Late Antiquity: Some Perspectives on Material Culture', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 7 (2014): 351–9; John-Henry Clay, 'Gift-Giving and Books in the Letters of St Boniface and Lul', *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009): 313–25.

[16] Gorce, *Les voyages*, 64–189; Gregory Halfond, *Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils, AD 511–768* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 66–85; idem, 'Transportation, Communication, and the Movement of Peoples in the Frankish Kingdom, ca. 500–900 C.E', *History Compass* 7, no. 6 (2009): 1554–69; Stéphane Lebecq, 'Entre antiquité tardive et très haut moyen âge: permanence et mutations des systèmes de communication dans la Gaule et ses marges', in *Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tarda antichita e alto medioevo*. Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo 45 (Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro, 1998), 461–502; W. Janssen, 'Reiten und Fahren in der Merowingerzeit', in *Der Verkehr: Verkehrswege, Verkehrsmittel, Organisation*, eds. H. Jankuhn, W. Kimmig and E. Ebel. Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1989), 184–97.

[17] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 163–96.

[18] Helmut Reimitz, 'Gregory of Tours' Account of the Council of Mâcon (585)', in *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, eds. Pia Lucas and others (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 27.

from letters of advice and command, to letters of grief and love.[19] Arriving at an overarching set of criteria for the letter has proved challenging. Isidore of Seville, never one to shy away from a good definition, highlighted one characteristic: letters are 'things sent' (*missa*).[20] Modern scholarship might tentatively add a few more: a letter is a written message set down on a tangible medium sent from one party to another over a physical distance. It usually contains a salutation and subscription and is of relatively limited length.[21] It is readily accepted, at the same time, that even such generous criteria exclude documents that might reasonably be called letters (e.g. Ovid's fictitious letters by ancient heroines) while including texts typically assigned to a different category (e.g. royal mandates or diplomas). The letter, in short, made for a diverse genre that was surrounded by a periphery of almost-letters, not-quite-letters and texts in epistolary form or with epistolary characteristics.

Gregory was not an epistolary theorist. In fact, his personal interest in letters may appear somewhat underwhelming at first. We know from letters addressed to him that he was part of an elite network in which literary correspondence continued to be regarded a valuable social practice.[22] Yet unlike the massive output of his friend, Venantius, Gregory's own correspondence does not survive. The absence of a book of letters among the works listed in his bibliographical note at the end of the *Histories* would suggest he never published his correspondence.[23] Such an absence seems puzzling when judged against the example of Venantius, who made a living out of circulating elaborate epistolary prose. But it starts to make more sense when we take as our frame of reference the epistolary culture that Gregory came himself to describe in his work. This was an elite culture, dominated by bishops, kings, queens, abbots, abbesses, royal officials and prominent citizens – the same people, indeed, one encounters in the letter collections. Yet in the *Histories* we generally find these elites engaged in a different, more practical type of letter-writing. Letters appear primarily as instruments of administration, legal settlement and political communication. On the whole, literary epistles of the sort written by Venantius play only a minor role in the *Histories*. It is the peripheral epistolary documents that stand at the centre of Gregory's narrative.

A good point of departure is to look at Gregory's epistolary terminology, which is that of an insider and ranges from the specific and technical to the general and downright vague.[24] In line with classical usage, he uses both the terms *epistula* and *litterae*, and with little difference in meaning:[25] both can denote any sort of letter in the *Histories*,

[19] Pseudo-Libanios, *De forma epistolari*, in *Greek and Latin Letters*, ed. and trans. Trapp, 190–1 (c. 4).
[20] Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. Wallace Lindsay. 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 1: 6.8.17: 'Epistolam proprie Graeci vocant, quod interpretatur Latine missa. Στόλα enim sive στόλοι missa vel missi.'
[21] Roy K. Gibson and Andrew Morrison, 'What is a Letter', in *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*, eds. Ruth Morello and Andrew Morrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.
[22] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 37–42; Michael Roberts, 'Venantius Fortunatus and Gregory of Tours: Poetry and Patronage', in *Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Murray, 35–61; Hope Willard, 'Letter-Writing and Literary Culture in Merovingian Gaul', *European Review of History* 21 (2014): 691–710.
[23] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.31. As noted by Andrew Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian: Theudebert I, the Epistolae Austrasicae, and Communication Strategies in Sixth-Century Merovingian–Byzantine relations', *Early Medieval Europe* 27 (2019): 175.
[24] See also the appendix of Gillett, 'Letters and Communication Networks', which contains a very useful list of references to letters in the *Histories*.
[25] For *epistula*, Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.3, II.24, II.25, II.31, II.34 (3×), V.14 (2×), V.20 (2×), V.44, V.49, VI.7, IV.10, VI.22, VI.24, VI.32, VI.36, VIII.2, VIII.31, IX.19, IX.30, IX.33, IX.39 (4×), IX.40, IX.41 (2×), IX.42 (3×), X.1 (2×), X.19 (3×), X.31; for *litterae* (in the sense of 'letter/message'), II.3, III.23, IV.44, V.5, VI.22 (3×), VI.32, VII.30 (2×), VII.34, VIII.13, IX.9, IX.28, IX.41, X.5. Note that Krusch's edition gives both *epistula* and *epistola* with more or

though when it comes to multiple letters, Gregory prefers the plural *epistulae* over the more ambiguous *litterae* (which could indicate one or several letters).[26] He also favours *epistula* (in the singular or plural) for the letters of the famous bishops eulogised in the course of the *Histories*, which constitute the only context in which he refers to letter collections.[27] One way Gregory came to distinguish between different types of letters was by adding an adjective, noun or clause. We thus encounter letters of consolation (*consolaturia epistula*),[28] secret letters (*occultae litterae*)[29] and letters of petition (*epistolam precationis*; *epistolam petitionis*).[30] He was able in a similar manner to describe epistolary documents conveying a command or legal authority: a ducal letter protecting a murderer from further prosecution (*epistola ut a nullo contingeretur*),[31] a royal diploma sent to the people of Tours confirming their tax exemption (*epistula cum auctoritate*)[32] and other 'signed' letters (*epistolam subscriptam*).[33] These last three categories, in particular, suggest that, for Gregory at least, the functional difference between a letter and an edict or diploma could be marginal, even non-existent.[34] Some documents clearly functioned as both.[35]

This is further evinced when we turn to Gregory's more technical vocabulary, which he used to denote specific types of administrative and legal texts.[36] This includes *praeceptio* (or *praeceptum*), denoting a royal command as well as the physical document conveying or confirming such a command;[37] *codicilli*, a wide-ranging legal term which in the *Histories* came to refer specifically to an imperial diploma sent to confirm an administrative appointment;[38] and *indiculus*, which could denote an official mandate of some sort, but was used pejoratively by Gregory to describe a range of shady communications, from

less equal frequency. Individual manuscripts typically favour one orthographical variant over the other, but not consistently so. See for instance Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. Pal. Lat. 864 (Krusch's C1), which tends to favour *epistula* but occasionally reads *epistola*. For Gregory's wider tendency to write 'o' for a short 'u', see Max Bonnet, *Le latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1890), 132–5.

[26] From the time of Cicero there was no real distinction in meaning between the two terms, the choice of one over the other stemming mostly from stylistic considerations and a desire to avoid ambiguity: see J.N. Adams, 'The Language of the Later Books of Tacitus' Annals', *Classical Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1972): 357.

[27] A substantial number of such letters were apparently accessible at Tours in Gregory's day and he made a point of citing them or mentioning their availability: Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.3 (cites in full a letter by Eugenius of Carthage not otherwise attested); II.24–5 (refers to two letters by Sidonius Apollinaris still in Tours); II.31 (cites the *exordium* of a letter by Remigius of Rheims); II.34 (refers to several 'admirable letters' by Avitus of Vienne still in Tours); VI.7 (mentions 'several books of letters in the style of Sidonius' written by Ferreolus of Uzès, presumably in Tours, now lost).

[28] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.31.

[29] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.28.

[30] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, VI.10, IX.39.

[31] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.19.

[32] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.30.

[33] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.49, IV.24, VI.32.

[34] The terminology overlapped. Theo Kölzer, ed., *Die Urkunden der Merowinger*. 2 vols. (Hanover: Hahn, 2001), 2: 490, mentions the following 14 terms used by Frankish historians for diplomas: *auctoritas, c(h)arta, cessio, decretum, donatio, edictum, epistola, instrumentum, litterae, mandatum, praeceptum, privilegium, testamentum, tomus.*

[35] One of the two main types of Merovingian royal diploma – the royal order or directive – was based on the late Roman imperial rescript and thus maintained an epistolary form. In other words, these diplomas *were* letters. The epistolary nature of the other type of diploma – the judicial decision or *placitum* – remains debated. See Alexander Callander Murray, 'The New MGH Edition of the Charters of the Merovingian Kings', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 15 (2005): 251–2; David Ganz and Walter Goffart, 'Charters Earlier than 800 from French Collections', *Speculum* 65 (1990): 909, 915.

[36] For the written documents used in the Merovingian administration, Alexander Callander Murray, 'The Merovingian State and Administration', in *Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. Murray, 224–6.

[37] See, for instance, Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.12, IX.8, X.12; for *praeceptio* as the royal diploma issued in response to a *consensus*, IV.15, VII.31, VIII.22, X.1; further, IV.15, for a *praeceptio* issued by a local judge.

[38] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.9, II.38.

a heterodox tractate on the Trinity which King Chilperic forced upon his bishops, to a secret correspondence, possibly fabricated, between the Visigothic King Leovigild and the Neustrian Queen Fredegunde.[39] Yet another conspicuous technical term used by Gregory was *consensus*, which tends to surface in the context of episcopal elections. There was in Gregory's time no single procedure through which bishops were raised to their see: some were royal appointees, others were elected by an episcopal synod, and yet others were put forward by the citizens of their future diocese.[40] The term *consensus*, now, could denote either the procedure through which an urban community or episcopal synod elected a new bishop or the official document by which they would subsequently inform a king of the election and ask for his confirmation.[41]

We can get a general sense of what some of these documents would have looked like from the *Formulary of Marculf*, a late seventh-century Frankish collection of *formulae* or templates for legal texts.[42] The *Formulary of Marculf* is unusual, in that unlike many other formularies from this period, it contains a large section of documents intended for royal use. These include, for instance, a model of the *consensus*, by which the citizens of an urban community petitioned a king to confirm their choice for a new bishop, as well as several examples of royal *praecepta* (or *indicula*) arranging and confirming an episcopal consecration.[43] Such models reinforce the suggestion that Merovingian legal texts could look and function like letters: the texts outlined in the *Formulary* were messages of limited length to be set down on a physical medium and sent by one party to another over a considerable distance. They were expected to contain both a salutation and subscription. Lastly, they would have relied on typically epistolary channels of delivery and performance, the workings and failings of which Gregory came to capture in some detail and will be further explored in the next section.

Another special type of letter, though Gregory does not distinguish it by his terminology, was the circular letter or the letter addressed to multiple recipients. We encounter such letters in two contexts. One is that of royal administration: kings sending out orders to their officials or summoning the bishops of their realm to a synod or trial.[44]

[39] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.44, VIII.2.

[40] Royal involvement in episcopal appointments was strictly speaking against canon law, though Gregory seems to have considered it a ubiquitous phenomenon and censured it only in specific cases. See Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 77–9; Bruno Dumézil, 'La royauté mérovingienne et les élections épiscopales au VIe siècle', in *Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity*, eds. Johan Leemans and others (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 127–44; and Susan Loftus, 'Episcopal Elections in Gaul: The Normative View of the Concilia Galliae versus the Narrative Accounts', in *Episcopal Elections*, eds. Leemans and others, 423–36.

[41] Gregory, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.15, IV.26, IV.35, VI.15, VIII.22, IX.23, X.1. On the meanings of *consensus* in the Merovingian period, see Steffen Patzold, '"Konsens" und "consensus" im Merowingerreich', in *Recht und Konsens im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. Verena Epp and Christoph Meyer (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2017), 265–97, with 275 on Gregory's uses of the term.

[42] Karl Zeumer, ed., *Marculfi Formulae*. MGH Formulae Merowingici et Karolini aevi (Hanover: Hahn, 1882–6), 32–127, with an English translation and commentary by Alice Rio, *The Formularies of Angers and Marculf: Two Merovingian Legal Handbooks* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 103–247.

[43] Zeumer, ed., *Marculfi Formulae*, Lib. I, no. 5 and no. 6, offer examples of a royal entreaty to a bishop to consecrate a new colleague; no. 7 is a request of a city for a royal confirmation of their choice, with Supplementum, no. 6, containing a model for an official royal confirmation sent to the new bishop. It is unclear whether the compiler arranged the documents to reflect what he thought to be the actual sequence of the appointment procedure (as suggested by Rio, *Formularies*, 139).

[44] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.44, at 254: 'Et misit [Chilpericus] epistulas in universis civitatibus regni sui'; VI.36, at 308: 'Tunc rex Guntchramnus … dans etiam epistolas per omnes episcopos regni sui'; IX.33, at 454: 'Sed cum, saepius ego vel frater noster Maroveus episcopus acceptis regalibus epistulis … '; X.19, at 510: 'dirigens epistulas … ad omnis regni sui pontifices, ut medio mense nono ad discutiendum in urbe supradicta adesse deberent'.

A royal letter of introduction composed for multiple recipients can also be placed in this category.[45] The other context concerns non-royal letters sent to or within an episcopal network, such as the various circular letters included in Gregory's dossier about the rebellious nuns of Poitiers.[46] Communications of this sort could pose a special challenge in terms of production and delivery, and it is not always clear from the *Histories* how this challenge was met. Presumably, the royal chanceries had enough resources to produce many copies of a letter and have it delivered by separate messengers.[47] When a king addressed an episcopal audience, however, it was common practice to address the metropolitans, who would then be responsible for passing on the letter to their suffragans.[48] Letters sent within an episcopal network could presumably rely on this same metropolitan system. An interesting variation on the problem was when a letter had a single addressee but many authors, each of whom was expected to validate the document with their signature. The *consensus* by which an episcopal synod informed a king of their choice of bishop was one such document. If one was fortunate, all the bishops whose signature was required were present at the synod and could sign the document on the spot. But Gregory also describes several instances of a *consensus* sent from city to city to collect signatures.[49]

Finally, there are a few tantalising instances scattered throughout the *Histories* in which a letter is referred to by its shape or physical attributes. One passage describes a sensitive letter that was hidden from prying royal eyes under the wax layer of a writing tablet ('cavatam cudicis tabulam, sub cera recondidit').[50] Another passage alludes to a series of incriminating letters written by Egidius of Rheims that survived in shorthand (*titulis notarum*) in a notary's letter book (*thomus chartarum*).[51] Incidentally, this is one of the few explicit references in the *Histories* to the archival preservation of letters.[52] Most of Gregory's references to materiality, however, have to do with his recurring use of the term papyrus (*carta* or *charta*) to denote written documents, especially charters and letters.[53] It is generally accepted that the Merovingian chanceries continued to rely on papyrus until the second half of the seventh century, when

[45] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.20, at 227: 'Rex vero annuens petitionibus eorum, datis epistolis, eos abire permisit.'
[46] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.49, at 261: 'Unde et epistolam subscriptam aliis episcopis qui non adfuerant transmiserunt'; VIII.31, at 399: 'Leudovaldus episcopus epistolas per omnes sacerdotes direxit et accepto consilio … '; IX.41, at 467: 'Gundigisilus … conscripsit ad sacerdotes illos, qui tunc cum rege Gunthchramno fuerant'; IX.42, at 470: 'ipsa abbatissa exemplaria ad vicinarum urbium sacerdotes direxit.'
[47] Gillett, 'Letters and Communication Networks'.
[48] The process is described in detail by Halfond, *Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils*, 66–85.
[49] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.26; VI.15.
[50] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VII.30.
[51] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.19. On the use of shorthand in this period, David Ganz, 'Bureaucratic Shorthand and Merovingian Learning', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill*, eds. Patrick Wormald Patrick, Donald Bullough and Roger Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 58–75.
[52] The episode is usually taken as evidence for a more widespread existence of episcopal archives in sixth-century Gaul: Andrew Gillett, 'Communication in Late Antiquity: Use and Reuse', in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. Scott Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 821–3; Ian Wood, 'Letters and Letter-Collections from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: The Prose Works of Avitus of Vienne', in *The Culture of Christendom. Essays in Medieval History in Commemoration of Denis L.T. Bethell*, ed. Marc Anthony Meyer (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), 41; Ganz and Goffart, 'Charters', 912. But see for a more cautious evaluation, Graham Barrett and George Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Austrasian Letters at Trier and Lorsch', *Early Medieval Europe* 24 (2016): 13.
[53] Referring to letters: Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.5, V.14, X.19; to diplomas or charters: IV.12, IX.26, IX.42, X.16, X.19; to other types of writing IV.46, V.44.

disruption of the transalpine supply routes initiated a shift to parchment.[54] Whether this meant that letters were in general written on papyrus in sixth-century Gaul is less easy to ascertain. There is Gregory's witty response to the letter of vituperation he received from his suffragan Felix of Nantes, that if only Felix would have been bishop of Marseilles his verbosity would not have been cut short by a scarcity of papyrus (*paupertas cartae*).[55] This suggests that papyrus was the preferred material for letters, but also indicates that availability could be an issue away from the Mediterranean ports.[56] Turning to such ancient letters as have survived in their original material form we in fact encounter a great variety of writing surfaces: papyrus, parchment, wooden tablets, lead sheets and ostraca (pottery shards) all saw wide use.[57] The choice for a given material was dictated by a combination of availability, cost, convention and the literary register of the intended communication. In this sense, Gregory's recurring references to papyrus must have indicated a norm at best and one that was frequently set aside for alternative writing surfaces, even by the literary minded. A shortage of papyrus need not have spelled the end of Felix of Nantes' *verbositas*.

It should be underlined that the above cannot be said to constitute an exhaustive overview of Gregory's references to letters, for there are many instances of communication in the *Histories* where the use of a letter seems implied or possible, but is not explicitly mentioned. Kings, in particular, are sending out orders and messages all the time in Gregory's narrative. More often than not, such actions are described by a simple verb denoting 'to order', 'to send', 'to respond' or 'to write' (*iubere*, *mandare*, *mittere*, *dirigere*, *nuntiare*, *respondere*, *scribere*) or by a related noun (*iussio*, *mandatum*, *nuntius*, *responsum*, *scripta*). Gregory has a penchant for the phrase *rex nuntius* [*sic*] *misit, dicens*; ambiguity can easily ensue here, as *nuntius* can mean both a message and a messenger and it is not always clear from the wider context which of the two is implied.[58] Rather than take this for an unintentional lack of clarity on Gregory's part, we might deduce from it something essential about how Gregory and his readers would have expected (royal) communication to work in sixth-century Gaul: a message could be entrusted to writing or transmitted orally, but it was always delivered by a messenger. Message and messenger were thus inherently linked and from a practical viewpoint a king sending a *nuntius* would

[54] See Ganz and Goffart, 'Charters', 909. On the economic side of things, the classical study is Henri Pirenne, 'Le commerce du papyrus dans la Gaule mérovingienne', *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 72, no. 2 (1928): 178–91, with Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 704–8, offering a more recent appraisal.

[55] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.5, at 200: 'O si te habuisset Massilia sacerdotem! Numquam naves oleum aut reliquas species detulissent, nisi cartam tantum, quo maiorem oportunitatem scribendi ad bonos infamandos haberes. Sed paupertas cartae finem inponit verbositati.' See also Reimitz, *Frankish Identity*, 131.

[56] That this was neither a new problem nor one limited to the transalpine regions can be deduced from the correspondence of Augustine, who once excused himself to one of his correspondents for having written his letter on parchment rather than papyrus, due to the latter being in short supply: Augustine, *Epistulae*, ed. Alois Goldbacher. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 34.1 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1895), I.15, (ad Romanianum).

[57] Antonia Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter-Writing in the Graeco-Roman World: 500 BC–300 AD* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 72–86; Mark Mersiowsky, 'Papyrus, Pergament, Papier: zur Materialität mittelalterlicher Briefe', in *Das Wasserzeichen-Informationssystem (WZIS). Bilanz und Perspektiven*, eds. Erwin Frauenknecht, Gerald Maier and Peter Rückert (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017), 175–215; Carlo Bertelli, 'The Production and Distribution of Books in Late Antiquity', in *The Sixth Century. Production, Distribution and Demand*, eds. Richard Hodges and William Bowden (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 41–60.

[58] For example, Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.14 and VI.31 seem to use *nuntius* as a message, whereas in VIII. 30 it appears to indicate the messenger. Note also II.37, where the phrase 'rex direxit nuntius ad beatam basilicam, dicens' is followed by instructions to the messenger(s).

have involved both. The next section expands our exploration from the letters themselves to the wider process surrounding their transmission.

Delivery and performance

The ancient and medieval letter was a more public medium than it is today. Letters were not written solely for their direct addressees. They were expected to be read out aloud, in the presence of many, and to be passed around and circulated thereafter. The letter functioned in tandem with the messenger or letter carrier, who could be instructed not just to read out the letter publicly, but also to provide commentary, conduct negotiations and confer gifts. Some letters were no more than preambles to a message delivered orally. The letter, in short, cannot properly be understood without situating it in a wider process of epistolary communication and delivery. This section highlights three features of this process: the figure of the messenger, the public performance of letters and strategies of secret communication.

Messengers

As noted by Giles Constable, selecting a messenger tended to involve two potentially opposite considerations.[59] On the one hand, it was considered important to use a reliable individual, someone whose status and skills suited the occasion, and who could be expected to make a good impression on the recipient. On the other hand, finding a messenger at all could be a difficult and time-consuming business, and many ancient and medieval letters were written simply because an opportunity for transmission presented itself.[60] In her recent study on the Merovingian letter collections, Tyrrell confirmed that the messengers used in early medieval Gaul did not conform to a single profile. The most consistent picture emerges from the episcopal letters, whose carriers (when mentioned) always held ecclesiastical office and were typically introduced by name and rank, suggesting bishops had a tendency to select messengers from their own clerical retinue.[61] Merovingian royal letters contain few references to carriers, but the handful that do mention them show a mixed use of lay and ecclesiastical dignitaries, depending on the occasion.[62] In the letters of Venantius Fortunatus, finally, a more motley crew of letter carriers appears: the *famulus* or lay member of the household, the petitioner carrying a letter of recommendation and the passer-by who just happened to travel in the right direction.[63] Here we witness most clearly Constable's tension between strategy and convenience.

The *Histories* allow us to expand on such patterns in several ways. Tyrrell hypothesises, for instance, that despite the lack of lay carriers in the surviving episcopal

[59] Constable, *Letters*, 53.
[60] Conybeare, *Paulinus*, 32.
[61] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 164. This preference for clerical carriers is already evident in late antique episcopal collections: Gorce, *Les voyages*, 209–13.
[62] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 165.
[63] Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina*, ed. Fredrick Leo. MGH Auctores antiquissimi 4, part 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1881), 5.8b, r. 9; 7.18, r. 5–7; 10.13, r. 5; appendix carminum, 5, r. 13; 6, r. 15. See also Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 165–7; and eadem, 'Merovingian Letters and Letter Writers' (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2012), 191–4, on petitioners.

letters, bishops may well have used their *famuli* as letter bearers.[64] This is confirmed by Gregory, though the term he uses for such carriers is not *famulus* but *puer*. Literally meaning 'boy', the term *puer* was often used in this period for a (young) person in someone's service.[65] In the *Histories*, this could mean a slave, a house servant, a bodyguard, or in the case of the *pueri regales*, a royal retainer or servant in the royal household. As letter carriers and messengers, we encounter *pueri* in the service of kings, queens, generals *and* bishops, including Gregory himself.[66] Interestingly, their duties frequently went beyond simple delivery. One bishop employed his *puer* as a scribe and letter writer.[67] The *pueri regales* often doubled as enforcers. When Childerbert II wanted to strike quickly against the overly ambitious Duke Rauching, he sent out *pueri* to confiscate the duke's property, providing them with written orders (*datis litteris*) and a travel permit (*evectione publica*) to smooth their journey.[68] On other occasions, the *pueri regales* were sent to persuade or intimidate. Queen Fredegunde once had her retainers knock on Gregory's door at night to offer him greetings and a bribe. This must have been a delicate task requiring considerable rhetorical finesse, though Gregory claims he had the better of his nightly visitors by couching his refusal in an invocation of canon law.[69]

While *pueri* were convenient messengers and were used by lay and ecclesiastical parties alike, their status as servants did not make them suitable for sensitive political communications. Here another type of messenger comes into focus: the envoy or ambassador, whom Gregory usually calls *legatus*.[70] Not every envoy mentioned in the *Histories* is also said to have carried a letter, though the presence of a written letter would have been a standard diplomatic requirement in this period, if only to introduce the envoys.[71] Andrew Gillett has already done much to illuminate the tasks and identity of such figures.[72] They typically appear in the context of royal communication: embassies travelling from one Merovingian court to another or sent on a diplomatic mission to a foreign ruler. When bishops or cities send out envoys in the *Histories*, it is either to the Merovingian kings or to their representatives.[73] As for the background of these special messengers, it appears that the legate, like the Merovingian letter carrier in general, did not conform to a clear-cut profile. Bishops tended to be selected as royal envoys because of the dignity of their office, their experience with public speaking and their usefulness as oath-takers by proxy, yet we encounter plenty of lay envoys in the *Histories* as well.[74] Ordination or lack thereof might be of secondary

[64] Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 164.
[65] On *pueri* as messengers, see Allen, 'Prolegomena', 486, and Volker Scior, '*Veritas* und *certitudo* oder: Warten auf Wissen. Boten in frühmittelalterlichen Informationsprozessen', *Das Mittelalter* 11 (2006): 121. On Gregory's use of the term, see the useful comments by Edward James, 'Childhood and Youth in the Early Middle Ages', in *Youth in the Middle Ages*, eds. P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), 16–17.
[66] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.44, V.14, V.18, V.49, VI.16, VII.40, VIII.21, IX.9, X.19.
[67] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.19.
[68] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.9.
[69] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.18.
[70] Two other terms used by Gregory, *missus* and *nuntius*, were more generic but could denote an envoy as well. Gregory does not use late antique terminology associated specifically with letter carriers (*portitores*, *geruli*, *tabellarii*, *baiuli*). See on the ancient and medieval terminology surrounding letter carriers, legates and messengers, Allen, 'Prolegomena', 490–1; and Scior, 'Bemerkungen', 315–16.
[71] Gillett, *Envoys*, 237, 246–7, 264.
[72] See the references collected in Gillett, *Envoys*, 233, n. 46; 234, n. 49; 235, n. 54; 237, n. 67.
[73] e.g. Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.27 (bishop to king), III.34 (bishop to king), VII.13 (citizens to royal representative).
[74] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, III.21, at 121: 'nomen Caprariam legatus'; V.14, at 211: 'Baudegyselus diaconus'; VI.31, at 299: 'legatus … inter quos primus erat Egidius Remensis episcopus'; VI.40, at 310: 'Legatus vero Oppila nomen'; VII.30, at 350: 'Gundovaldus duos ad amicos suos legatus derigit, clericus utique'; VIII.13, at 379:

importance to other selection criteria, such as an envoy's experience within a given region.[75] Interestingly, high social status seems not always to have been a requirement. A clandestine letter addressed to Queen Fredgunde by the Visigothic court was found in the possession of 'certain simple men' (*quibus hominibus rusticis*), who had apparently been tasked with its secret delivery to the Neustrian court.[76] Other ambassadors appear to have been selected precisely *because* their status and bearing defied social conventions: when a false prophet from Bourges advanced on the city of Le Puy with his throng of followers, he sent ahead 'naked men jumping and capering about' to announce his arrival to the local bishop.[77] Unsurprisingly, this embassy did not fare well.

In these cases, the messenger or letter carrier was selected to facilitate communication between sender and recipient. He was expected, in other words, to act as an intermediary. Not all epistolary documents described by Gregory allow for such a neat separation of roles, however. A good example are the letters of introduction or safe-conduct given out by the Merovingian kings: the individual who carried such a letter was neither its sender nor its addressee, yet he was its principal beneficiary and user.[78] The various communications surrounding episcopal appointments provide another context in which the carrier had a direct stake in the letter he carried. When a city or episcopal synod elected a new bishop, it was common practice for the bishop elect to travel personally to the royal court to deliver the *consensus* informing the king of the appointment.[79] Fittingly, the other situation in which we encounter bishops carrying their own letters was when they were deposed. Gregory provides several accounts of deposed bishops who managed to challenge their deposition at one of the Merovingian courts and then returned to their diocese carrying royal letters confirming their re-installation.[80]

Considering the contested nature of Merovingian episcopal elections, these could be dangerous documents to deliver. Early in the *Histories*, Gregory describes the tribulations of the priest Heraclius, who was elected bishop of Saintes by a metropolitan synod after that same synod had deposed the previous bishop on account of an uncanonical election.[81] The new bishop elect was then given the thankless task of acting as the messenger of his own election to the Merovingian court. Heraclius first took himself to Tours, where Gregory's saintly predecessor Eufronius absolutely refused to add his signature to the synodal *consensus* – a clear indication in the narrative that Gregory himself did not consider the appointment legitimate. Things turned worse for Heraclius when he arrived in Paris and was given an audience with King Charibert. Heraclius first managed to confuse the king by offering him greetings 'from the apostolic see', which Charibert took to mean the pope rather than the metropolitan of Bordeaux. When he subsequently handed

'Felix legatus'; IX.18, at 431: 'rex dirigit illuc legationem, id est Namatium Aurilianinsim et Bertchramnum Cinomanensim episcopum cum comitibus et aliis viris magnificis'; IX, 38, at 459: 'legatis, inter quos episcopi erant'; X.2, at 482: 'legati Bodigysilus, filius Mummolini Sessionici, et Euantius, filius Dinami Arelatensis, et hic Gripo genere Francus'. See also Gillett, *Envoys*, 232–3, 265–71.

[75] See, for instance, Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.28, which refers to Queen Brunhilde using a specific ambassador, named Ebregysil, for her diplomatic contacts with the Visigothic court.

[76] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VIII.28.

[77] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.25, at 518: 'mittens etiam ante se nuntios, homines nudo corpore saltantes adque ludentes, qui adventum eius adnuntiarent'.

[78] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.20, IX.19. See in this context also the petitioners-turned-messengers mentioned by Tyrrell, 'Merovingian Letters', 191–4.

[79] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.26, IV.35, VIII.22.

[80] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, V.15, VIII.22.

[81] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.26.

Charibert the synodal *consensus* and explained what it was about, the king became so enraged that he had Heraclius apprehended on the spot and driven into exile on an ox-cart filled with thorn bushes. The deposition of Heraclius' predecessor was annulled soon afterwards.

Performing the letter

With Heraclius, we have moved from the selection of letter carriers to their central task: the letter's delivery to the recipient. It is evident that the success of such a delivery was not guaranteed, but relied to a considerable extent on the verbal performance of the messenger, which usually took place in public and was governed by intricate norms and expectations. One of the most striking examples of a public letter delivery occurs in Book VIII of the *Histories*, when the Burgundian King Guntram sends an envoy to his nephew Childebert II, the king of Austrasia and Gregory's nominal overlord at this point (July 585).[82] The issue at stake was a joint church council set to be held in Troyes, which the Austrasian bishops refused to attend.[83] The passage is particularly interesting because Gregory was himself present when the envoy arrived at Childebert's residence at Koblenz. He captures this arrival in a short but clear sequence: the legate, who was named Felix, offered his greetings (*salutatione praemissa*), presented a letter (*ostensis litteris*) and then proceeded to address King Childebert, relaying his uncle's displeasure at the cancelling of the church council and asking for an explanation. The exact relationship between the letter and the oral message is not spelled out. Felix may have been reciting and explaining the letter's contents, but it is equally possible that the *litterae* he presented were no more than a letter of credence granting him licence to speak.[84] However this may be, it is evident that he addressed the king in front of a larger audience, for it was not Childebert who first responded to the message, but Gregory, forcefully reminding the legate and those present of the close bonds between the two kings. The proceedings reached a new stage when the king invited Felix to speak privately ('tunc vocato secretius Felice legato'). Some of what they talked about must have reached Gregory's ears, however, for he relates how Childebert impressed on the legate that he would accept no future hostilities against Bishop Theodorus of Marseilles, whom Guntram was keeping in custody at the time. After the legate received responses on other issues ('acceptoque et de aliis causis responso'), he took his leave.

There is no doubt that the above amounts to a highly selective portrayal of the actual embassy. Gregory was keen to highlight his own efforts as a peacemaker and admonisher of kings, while at the same time steering the proceedings towards the ongoing plight of Theodorus of Marseilles, 'a man of great sanctity' about whom he had already talked in the preceding chapters.[85] The passage also takes for granted much of the lead up to the embassy, leaving us to speculate why Gregory was at Koblenz in the first place (was the envoy anticipated?) and who else was there with him (the other Austrasian bishops?).

[82] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VIII.13. On Gregory's relations with Guntram and Childebert at this point, Heinzelmann, *Zehn Bücher*, 49–61.
[83] This may have had something to do with Guntram's harsh treatment of Theodorus of Marseilles, which Gregory talked about in the preceding chapters and is mentioned also in the course of the embassy.
[84] On such letters and their place in diplomatic protocol, Gillett, *Envoys*, 246–7, 264
[85] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VIII.12, at 378: 'vir egregiae sanctitatis'.

Lastly, it should be noted that the embassy as described by Gregory had something of a ritual character: it was a public performance that both he and his audience recognised had to be performed in a certain way in order to be considered 'right'. These expectations were something Gregory could play with as a narrator.[86] By emphasising, for instance, that Felix went through the proper motions upon his arrival at Koblenz – first greetings, followed by the letter, then his public address to the king – Gregory was proffering a subtle judgement: this was a legitimate embassy. We found him steering the reader in a similar way, if in an opposite direction, in the embassy of Heraclius. Beset by miscommunication from the start – Heraclius had even made a misstep over the greeting, as we have seen – and culminating in the priest's arrest and exile, Heraclius' public audience with King Charibert was presented by Gregory as a spectacular failure. A contemporary reader would have understood the judgement implicit in such a portrayal of events: Heraclius' failed performance as a messenger reflected the inherent illegitimacy of the episcopal election he came to announce.

While Gregory could thus turn his descriptions of letter deliveries into literary set-pieces, his creations were not random. They revolved around contemporary expectations regarding the public delivery of letters and what such an occasion should look like. One important point to take from Gregory's descriptions is the interconnectedness between letter and messenger, as well as the fact that the latter's significance could far outweigh that of the former.[87] They also highlight the public character of epistolary communication and the way a letter's audience could easily expand beyond the official addressee. At the same time, we are reminded that this public character was neither self-evident nor limitless. Gregory had no qualms about reporting what Childebert told his uncle's legate in private, but he clearly recognised the royal need for talking *secretius* to a messenger. Rather than think of early medieval letters as inherently public, then, we might say that epistolary communication had a potential for publicity, which those involved could seek to exploit as well as to avoid.

Such strategic use of the letter's public potential is evinced in one of Gregory's many tales surrounding the Gallo-Roman *dux* Mummolus.[88] The story commences when three Lombard leaders raid the south-eastern parts of Gaul, only to be confronted and defeated by Mummolus' army. Thereupon, one of the Lombards is seen to retreat to Susa (on the modern French-Italian border), where he and his surviving men are grudgingly received by the Byzantine general Sissinius. As they are speaking, someone pretending to be a *puer* of Mummolus arrives also to call on the general, offering him a letter and greetings in Mummolus' name and claiming the Gallo-Roman duke is soon to arrive in person. The Lombards are taken in by the *faux* messenger's public announcement: fearing the imminent arrival of the fearsome Merovingian general, they immediately flee from Susa. As with the previous stories revolving around letter delivery, one might ask who exactly is exploiting the public character of the letter here: the *puer* hoodwinking the Lombards or Gregory trying to amuse his readers with a story about trickery and Lombard gullibility? The point to take away from the story remains the same: the letter was recognised as having the ability to reach multiple and unspoken audiences.

[86] Such narrative mechanisms are extensively discussed in Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[87] Scior, 'Stimme, Schrift und Performanz', 81–2.
[88] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IV.44.

Or to put it in a slightly different manner: a letter's official audience – the person(s) to whom a letter was formally addressed – was not always its intended audience.

This difference may hold the key to King Chilperic's enigmatic letter to St Martin, the story that started this article. We do not need to question the king's faith in the efficacy of the saints to infer that in writing a letter to the tomb of St Martin, one of the most widely visited spaces in Merovingian Gaul, he was aiming for a certain amount of publicity. At the very least, the letter reached Gregory, who showed himself aware of its contents; but we can assume that the messenger delivering the letter, the deacon Baudegysel, would have approached others about the case as well during his three day stay at Tours: the asylum seeker whom Chilperic wanted out of the church, Gregory's clergy, prominent citizens of Tours, perhaps even pilgrims visiting the shrine. This turned the king's request for a saintly verdict – expressed physically through a blank sheet of papyrus placed alongside the letter on the tomb – into a highly charged invitation. One wonders, as those present at the time must have wondered, who was actually being called to action here. Was it the saint? Was it Gregory? Or was the question rather posed to all the interested parties in Tours, allowing them to arrive at a socially acceptable consensus without 'the odium of human responsibility'.[89] Whatever the king's intentions, Gregory tried to make it appear as if they came to nothing. Yet this suggestion is undermined by Gregory's own account of subsequent events: immediately after the deacon returned to Chilperic, the king sent new messengers to the church to elicit an oath from Guntram Boso, which the latter swore eagerly. After months of mounting tension in and around Tours, the conflicting parties suddenly came to an agreement. And they did so shortly after a deacon turned up at Tours with a letter to St Martin and an empty sheet of papyrus asking the saint for a resolution. The saint may not have written back, but it seems the question was not posed in vain.

Secret communication

Publicity was not always to the sender's benefit. We hear of several bishops who were in serious trouble when one of their letters caught the attention of a Merovingian ruler and its contents were deemed libellous or treasonous.[90] Evidently, having one's letters reach the wrong audience could be dangerous in Merovingian Gaul. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that a substantial part of the letters and messengers mentioned by Gregory carry the label 'secret' (*occultus*, *clam*).[91] The strategies used to attain such secrecy often remain implicit. Sometimes the key was to use special or unobtrusive messengers. In other instances the letter itself was concealed in some way. In most cases, Gregory simply brands a letter or embassy secret and leaves it at that. What is perhaps most striking, looking at such instances, is the degree to which covert communication was expected and anticipated in Gregory's world, especially in a royal context. When the usurper

[89] Peter Brown, 'Society and the Supernatural: A Medieval Change', *Daedalus* 104, no. 2 (1975): 138.
[90] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.2, X.19.
[91] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, II.32, at 78: 'misit legationem occulte'; II.40, at 89: 'misit clam'; III.4, at 100: 'occultus nuntius'; III.18, at 117–18: 'misit clam'; III.23, at 122: 'mittens occulte'; IV.16, at 148: 'occultus nuntius'; IV.26, at 159: 'occultus nuntios' [*sic*]; V.14, at 211: 'misit … oculte'; VI.16, at 286: 'occultos pueros nuntius' [*sic*]; VII.20, at 339: 'misit occulte clericum sibi familiarem'; VII.38, at 359: 'nuntios occultos'; VII.39, at 362: 'nuntios occulte diregit'; VIII.28, at 391: 'nos clam mittimus'; VIII.43, at 409: 'occultus … nuntius'; IX.9, at 422: 'missis nuntiis clam'; IX.28, at 447: 'occultae litterae'; IX.33, at 453: 'misit clam nuntius.'

Gundovald sought to get a message across to his supporters in the realm, he not only selected a high ranking cleric, the abbot of Cahors, to act as a messenger, but also had the letter hidden beneath the wax layer of a writing tablet, as noted before. It was not enough: the letter was found by royal agents and its carrier beaten and hauled off to prison.[92] Sometimes the mere rumour of a letter could result in far-reaching surveillance measures. When Queen Brunhilde dispatched one of her favourite ambassadors to deliver a precious gift to the Visigothic king, it did not take long for the Burgundian King Guntram to be informed. Suspecting Brunhilde was really trying to get in touch with his political opponents, Guntram then had all the roads of his kingdom guarded and everyone on the road searched for 'secret letters'.[93]

One interesting side effect of this fear of secret correspondence was that it could be manipulated to incriminate one's political opponents. This, at least, seems to be the point behind some of Gregory's stories involving 'forged' letters. One such story revolved around Bishop Charterius of Périgueux, who was accused of having written an incendiary letter about King Chilperic. Upon being summoned to court, Charterius managed to convince his royal accuser that he was the victim of an intricate plot by a deacon of his. The deacon was claimed to have fabricated the episcopal letter and then ensured its circulation by having the men he hired as letter carriers arrested by the local count, who had duly brought the case before the king.[94] This scheme evidently went beyond mere forgery: the deacon 'staged' a secret delivery in order to publicise a letter without seeming to do so. That is, if there actually was a plot. Charterius could also have decided to inculpate his own deacon by falsely accusing him of forgery, adding yet another layer to an already elaborate scheme. Either way, one of them was cleverly exploiting contemporary expectations surrounding secret communication.

Ultimately, of course, the principal exploiter of such expectations might well have been Gregory himself. As pointed out by Peter Brown, Gregory's stories about trickery are seldom devoid of moral judgement, even if the rationale behind such judgement escapes us at times.[95] In this story, Gregory's censure was aimed not at the bishop or the deacon (who were reconciled in the end), but at the local count who had brought the alleged forgery before the king and had thus allowed a bishop to be implicated in a scandal. The count died of a stroke two months later, driving home the point that one should not expect to trample on episcopal authority lightly. Yet it was not just about morality. Like many ancient historians, Gregory also understood that secret communication simply made for exciting historical narrative.[96] Herodotus interspersed his history of the Persian Wars with elaborate descriptions of letters hidden in the belly of a hare and tattooed onto the head of a slave.[97] Julius Caesar recounted how he once conveyed a letter to a friendly general under siege by having it tied to a javelin and thrown over the wall of the besieged camp. For good measure, he wrote the letter in Greek, which

[92] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VII.30.
[93] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.28, at 447: 'occultae litterae'.
[94] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, VI.22. See VIII.28 for another episode involving a potentially forged letter.
[95] Peter Brown, 'Gregory of Tours: Introduction', in *World of Gregory of Tours*, eds. Mitchell and Wood, 19–24.
[96] See the useful overview of ancient techniques of secret communication in Albert Leighton, 'Secret Communication Among the Greeks and Romans', *Technology and Culture* 10, no. 2 (1969): 139–54, which relies heavily on literary sources.
[97] Herodotus, *Histories*, ed. Nigel Wilson. 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.123–4; 5.35.

he did not expect the Nervian besiegers to understand.[98] The point is not that such stories are by definition false or exaggerated. The inhabitants of Merovingian Gaul probably could and did use the stratagems set out in the *Histories*, or at least some of them did. Rather, Gregory's tales of epistolary trickery throw into sharp relief an issue that underlies this section: Gregory's scenes of epistolary communication were multi-layered, reflecting Merovingian epistolary practices while at the same time manipulating them. In the following section we will explore this tension further, taking a closer look at the way letters, and especially older letters, could be repurposed as sources of evidence and persuasion.

Recycling letters

The letter's usefulness did not cease at the moment of its delivery. Letters were kept and re-read as tokens of friendship. They were collected and published in letter collections. They were used as teaching materials and served as literary models for aspiring letter writers. They were called upon as evidence in legal claims and disputes. The letter, in short, could be subjected to extensive repurposing that extended far beyond the initial act of communication between sender and recipient. This final section explores such recycling of letters in the context of one specific episode detailed in the *Histories*: the revolt of the nuns of the convent of Ste Croix in Poitiers (589–90).

A major scandal and one in which Gregory was himself involved, the events at Poitiers loomed large in the *Histories*, taking up a quarter of the text of Book IX (cc. 39–43) and only slightly less of Book X (cc. 15–17).[99] Modern scholarship has shown itself equally captivated by the scandal. Following Georg Scheibelreiter's seminal study of the events, the revolt has been interpreted in various terms: enclosed women rising up against an overly strict monastic regime, possibly imposed against their will;[100] royal nuns missing out on the land grants that followed in the wake of the Treaty of Andelot (587);[101] the tensions between a royal convent heavily dependent on that royal patronage and its nominal episcopal superior.[102] Meanwhile, Martin Heinzelmann, Kathrin Götsch and Erin Dailey have also turned to Gregory's narrative treatment of the episode, which, as with many of the contemporary controversies narrated in the *Histories*, appears to have been informed by a combination of personal and ecclesiastical concerns.[103] In her recent monograph on the community of Ste Croix, finally, Jennifer Edwards has approached the revolt from the perspective of the convent's early abbesses

[98] Julius Caesar, *De bello Gallico*, ed. Renatus Du Pontet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.48.
[99] Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours*, 72.
[100] Georg Scheibelreiter, 'Königstöchter im Kloster. Radegund (gest. 587) und der Nonnenaufstand von Poitiers (589)', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 7 (1979): 1–37; Natalia Bikeeva, 'Serente diabulo: The Revolts of the Nuns at Poitiers and Tours in the Late 6th Century', in *Ecclesia et Violentia. Violence against the Church and Violence within the Church*, eds. Radoslaw Kotecki and Jacek Maciejewski (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 72–90
[101] Kathrin Götsch, 'Der Nonnenaufstand von Poitiers: Flächenbrand oder apokalyptisches Zeichen? Zu den merowingischen Klosterfrauen in Gregors Zehn Büchern Geschichte', *Concilium Medii Aevi* 13 (2010): 1–18 (11).
[102] Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 30–40.
[103] Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours*, 70–4; Götsch, 'Der Nonnenaufstand'; Erin Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 64–79.

and the challenges they faced in their interaction with the Merovingian family and the Gallic episcopate.[104]

In outline, the convent of Ste Croix in Poitiers was founded by the Merovingian Queen Radegunde (d. 587), who spent the final decades of her life there.[105] Two years after her death, two other nuns from royal families, Clotilde and Basina, revolted against the regime of the then abbess, Leubovera.[106] They took about 40 of their sisters, departed from the convent's premises, breaking its rule of strict enclosure in the process, and walked 60 miles northwards to Tours, where they were put up for the winter by none other than Gregory. Clotilde herself continued on to the court of King Guntram at Orleans, who promised to put the nuns' grievances before an episcopal synod but apparently did not assign the matter much urgency. Tired of waiting, Clotilde and her company returned from Tours to Poitiers, where they found asylum in the church of St Hilary outside the city walls. They were eventually approached there by an episcopal embassy led by Gundegisil of Bordeaux, the region's metropolitan, who urged the nuns to return to their convent, and, upon their refusal, excommunicated them on the spot. Clotilde responded by setting her armed retainers on the bishops, violently driving them off, and then pushed her advantage by confiscating the lands and servants belonging to Ste Croix. After several months of mounting tensions and failed negotiations, Clotilde ordered a night attack on the convent, which resulted in the violent capture of abbess Leubovera and saw the convent plundered by Clotilde's retainers. In the end, it took the combined efforts of two Merovingian kings to restore order in Poitiers: the local count, Macco, was sent in to extract Clotilde and her followers from the convent, where she had since installed herself, and the whole matter was put before an episcopal tribunal, to which Gregory was also appointed. Upon hearing the two parties involved, the bishops decided to let the abbess off with a reprimand while confirming the excommunication of Clotilde and Basina. This latter sentence was soon overturned under royal pressure, after which Basina returned to Ste Croix and Clotilde retired to a royal villa.

Gregory was the only contemporary author to report on these events in any detail. He went to great lengths to underline the scandalous nature of the proceedings, to which he ascribed an eschatological importance.[107] At the same time, he did not hide the fact that the events of 589–90 had revolved as much around negotiation and persuasion as around lurid violence and social disruption. That letters played a crucial role here has been noted before, but this facet has not of itself been subjected to sustained investigation.[108] This is true in particular for the complex strategies of epistolary reuse during and in the wake of the conflict. Gregory described how those caught up in the scandal came to circulate letters that had been composed earlier in defence of their own conduct or to persuade and attack others. Yet, whilst describing such strategic reuse of letters Gregory himself

[104] Jennifer Edwards, *Superior Women: Medieval Female Authority in Poitiers' Abbey of Sainte-Croix* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77–85.
[105] Her associate Agnes was the convent's first abbess. See on the monastery's foundation, Edwards, *Superior Women*, 25–59, and Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles*, 30–40.
[106] Clotilde was a daughter of Charibert I and Basina a daughter of Chilperic I. On their background and motives, see especially Götsch, 'Der Nonnenaufstand', 11–15, and Scheibelreiter, 'Königstöchter', 27–32.
[107] Julia Smith, 'Radegundis peccatrix: Authorizations of Virginity in Late Antique Gaul', in *Transformations of Late Antiquity: Essays for Peter Brown*, eds. P. Rousseau and M. Papoutsakis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 303–26 (323): 'Seriously exaggerated, even apocalyptic, [Gregory's] account of the rebellion and its suppression is a miniature, in chiaroscuro, of his entire ecclesiology.' See further, Götsch, 'Der Nonnenaufstand', 17–18; Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours*, 73–4.
[108] e.g. Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tours*, 73–4; Edwards, *Superior Women*, 84.

engaged in a similar process, selectively incorporating into his narrative some of the epistolary material that people had called upon during the dispute.[109] We are thus witnessing two layers of epistolary reuse – by the protagonists of the story and by the storyteller himself – and these layers are not always easy to distinguish.

The first strategic reuse of a letter occurs at the onset of the narrative, when Clotilde and her fellow nuns have just left their convent and approach Gregory for shelter and aid. As stressed by Erin Dailey, this request had put Gregory in a difficult position.[110] Although Ste Croix fell outside their jurisdiction, the bishops of Tours had traditionally enjoyed a close connection to the convent and its founder Radegunde. Gregory's own consecration had been due to that queen's influence and he had presided over her funeral in 587. That Clotilde would look to Gregory for aid was thus imminently sensible. Yet it meant that she sidelined Poitiers' own bishop, Maroveus, who had recently accepted official guardianship over the monastery.[111] What is more, it involved a severe infraction of Ste Croix' monastic rule, which did not allow its nuns to leave the convent under any circumstances.[112] Gregory's response to Clotilde's plea, as he came to describe it in the *Histories* at least, was carefully measured to do justice to all these issues: he first proposed to the nuns that he return with them to Poitiers, so that they could settle things with their own bishop and not endanger the splendid work of the saintly Radegunde. When they refused, he tried to impress on them the ramifications of their flight from the convent. He did so by presenting them with a letter that the bishops of the surrounding dioceses had written to Radegunde some 20 years earlier. This letter, which Gregory came to cite in full, saw the bishops confirm Radegunde's request that no nun who had entered Ste Croix of her own volition was henceforth to leave it, on penalty of excommunication.[113] It is unclear from the Latin whether Gregory presented the letter to Clotilde alone or whether he had it read out aloud for all the nuns to hear.[114] Either way, Clotilde was not dissuaded from her purpose of bringing her grievances before the king. Gregory could thus do little more than host her company in Tours for the winter. After all, as he took care to emphasise, the weather conditions were exceedingly poor that year and the nuns had already walked 60 miles through pouring rain without food or shelter.

We should not take the above for a factual account of Gregory's interaction with the nuns of Poitiers. Gregory rather presents us with an idealised version of the proceedings: how he would have liked to have responded to Clotilde's complicated request. That a copy of the bishops' letter to Radegunde was available at Tours in Gregory's day is not in itself unlikely. While Gregory never explicitly mentions an episcopal archive in Tours, it is commonly assumed that most episcopal sees in sixth-century Gaul would

[109] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.39 (an episcopal letter to Radegunde); IX.41 (a letter from the Burgundian bishops to Gundegisil of Bordeaux and his suffragans); IX.42 (a letter by Radegunde addressed to all bishops of the realm); X.16 (a copy of the episcopal verdict on the Poitiers case as sent to the Merovingian kings).
[110] Dailey, *Queens*, 65–6, 68–72.
[111] On Maroveus' complicated relationship to Radegunde and her foundation, and his subsequent conduct during the rebellion, see Edwards, *Superior Women*, 66–77; Dailey, *Queens*, 68–70; and Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles*, 37–9.
[112] Radegunde had adopted Caesarius of Arles' *Regula virginum* for her foundation, which advocated both active and passive enclosure for the nuns. See Edwards, *Superior Women*, 40–4.
[113] The letter is thought to have been written on the final day of the Council of Tours, 18 November 567.
[114] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.39, at 463: 'Lecta igitur haec epistula, Chrodieldis dixit … '

have engaged in some form of record keeping.[115] This particular letter to Radegunde would have been a prime candidate for preservation, as its main author had been Gregory's predecessor Eufronius. That said, for Gregory to have had this 20-year-old document at his fingertips during his audience with Clotilde is more than a little serendipitous. Another striking element of the story is how fittingly the letter responded to the whole scandal, raising not just the issue of monastic seclusion, but also prefiguring issues that would only later turn into a problem, such as the seduction of nuns by outsiders and their marriage.[116] Jennifer Edwards has recently made the tantalising suggestion that Gregory could have tampered with the letters he cited or fabricated some of their contents outright.[117] This is difficult to ascertain for the letter at hand, which is found only here. The one letter cited by Gregory for which we do have independent evidence – a letter by Queen Radegunde – indeed shows a number of variant readings, but there is no indication these originated with Gregory.[118] It would have been a risky undertaking, at any rate, considering these were all letters with multiple authors and/or recipients, some of whom were still alive by the time Gregory came to circulate his *Histories*. While it seems unlikely, therefore, that Gregory actively rewrote the original documentation he cited, it is evident that his inclusion of this material was a strategic move and that he timed such inclusions for maximum effect. His citation of the letter from the bishops to Radegunde is a case in point: by citing this document right in the middle of his account of his audience with Clotilde, postponing its resolution while the reader was made to ruminate on the same evidence that Gregory claimed to have presented to the nuns, the latter's ultimate refusal to return to Poitiers was made to appear the more damning: not only did the nuns ignore an episcopal decree, they went against the explicit wishes of their founder Radegunde. A critical observer might have asked why Gregory had himself not excommunicated the nuns, if this was the line of conduct to which his predecessors had so admirably committed themselves. This he explained by inserting yet another digression, showing that historically the legal responsibility for the community of Ste Croix did not rest with him but with Poitiers' bishop,

[115] As noted above (note 51), the *locus classicus* is *Histories*, X.19, which relates how Egidius of Rheims' letters were preserved in shorthand form by his secretary. For the preservation of (literary) letter collections at Tours, see note 27. More generally on the question of episcopal archives and record keeping in the early Middle Ages, Adelheid Krah, 'Das Archiv als Schatzhaus. Zur Aufbewahrung von Verwaltungsschriftgut im frühen Mittelalter', *Francia* 43 (2016): 1–19; Barrett and Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Austrasian Letters', 45–7; Halfond, *Archaeology of Frankish Church Councils*, 96, 163–4; and Warren Brown and others, eds., *Documentary Culture and the Laity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6–7, 12–15, 367–8, 375.

[116] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.39, at 463.

[117] Edwards, *Superior Women*, 84.

[118] For Gregory's version of the letter: Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.42, at 470–4. The alternative version, based on two late medieval manuscripts from Poitiers, now lost, is collated in Jean Marie Pardessus, *Diplomata, cartae, epistolae, leges aliaque instrumenta ad res Gallo-Francicas spectantia*. 2 vols. (Paris: Ex typographeo regio, 1843–9), 1: 150–4; and Georg Heinrich Pertz, ed., *Diplomata regum Francorum e stirpe Merowingica. Diplomata maiorum domus regiae. Diplomata spuria*. MGH Diplomata in folio 1 (Hanover: Hahn, 1872), nos. 7, 8–11. As is evident from their critical apparatus, the differences between Gregory's version and the Poitiers manuscripts are generally minor, with two notable exceptions. First, the Poitiers manuscripts contained a section in which Radegunde explicitly appeals to the bishops to excommunicate anyone who might dare to violate the monastery or its possessions (Pardessus, *Diplomata*, 153, n. 2; Pertz, ed., *Diplomata*, 10, r. 23–9). This section is missing in Gregory's version. Second, the Poitiers manuscripts had Radegunde's letter signed by both the queen herself and by a number of Gallic bishops, including Gregory. As pointed out by both Pardessus, *Diplomata*, 154, n. 1, and Pertz, ed., *Diplomata*, 11, r. 49, this list of episcopal signatures must have been a later forgery, as it is riddled with factual and chronological errors (among other things, it contains the signatures of two bishops of Poitiers). While none of this exactly absolves Gregory from having intervened in the letter, the weight of the evidence suggests that these variations were the result of later interpolations originating in Poitiers.

Maroveus.[119] All Gregory had been able to do when finding the worn out and famished nuns on his doorstep was to offer them pastoral advice and show them charity.

A second episode involving letters occurs later on in the story, when the nuns have returned to Poitiers and are visited by an episcopal delegation led by the metropolitan Gundegisil. While Gregory offers no explanation for Gundegisil's involvement in the case beyond his metropolitan authority at this point, it is reasonable to assume that he was sent in fulfilment of King Guntram's promise to Clotilde to have his bishops look into the nuns' grievances.[120] The embassy did not go as planned: the nuns refused to return to Ste Croix to meet the bishops, forcing the episcopal party to visit them at the church of St Hilary.[121] Finding the nuns set upon their refusal, Gundegisil decided to excommunicate them, after which he and the rest of his party were assaulted and driven off by Clotilde's retainers. Eager to defend his conduct, Gundegisil then dispatched a letter to 'those bishops who were then assembled with King Guntram' (a further indication that Gundegisil's embassy had been arranged with wider episcopal and royal consent).[122] Gregory did not find it necessary to include this letter in his narrative. He did, however, incorporate a version of the reply (*exemplar rescripti*) that Gundegisil and his suffragans received from their colleagues.[123] This rescript confirmed the excommunication as justified, but also encouraged Gundegisil and the other bishops to continue to work and pray towards the nuns' correction, citing a range of biblical precedents for such pastoral dedication and persistence.

Martin Heinzelmann has interpreted Gregory's decision to include this letter as part of a larger concern with episcopal authority.[124] The letter would have worked in tandem with the episcopal judgement (*exemplar iudicii*) that concluded the Poitiers story and which Gregory also came to cite in full. Together, these documents would have signalled, first, that the Gallic episcopate had acted in unison when faced with a disruptive crisis within the Church, and second, that the bishops had been responsible for its eventual resolution. On the whole, this makes for a sensible reading. Gregory was indeed careful to stress the legitimacy of the sentence of excommunication imposed by his colleagues, reminding the reader that the sentence was in line with the episcopal letter to Radegunde that he himself had already presented to the nuns (*iuxta epistulam superius nominatam*).[125] Yet it is clear, at the same time, that Gregory was not entirely happy with the bishops' conduct at St Hilary's. The beating inflicted on Gundegisil and his fellow clergymen by the nuns' henchmen was disgraceful but not necessarily so to those receiving it: it was the kind of persecution saintly men had endured for centuries. Their disorderly flight from the holy place, however, was another story: the Devil, Gregory claimed, had instilled

[119] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.40.
[120] This seems to be confirmed later on the in the story, when Gundegisil's embassy is recounted during the episcopal tribunal, Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.40, at 507: 'Insuper et cum Gundegysilus pontifex cum suis provincialibus, pro ipsa causa commonitus, per praeceptionem regum Pectavis accessissent et ad audientia eas ad monasterium convocarent, dispecta communitione, ipsis occurrentibus ad beati Helari confessoris basilicam, quo ipsae commorabantur, accedentes.'
[121] Once again, the detail that the bishops first invited the nuns to Ste Croix before meeting them at St Hilary becomes evident only later on in the story; see the previous note.
[122] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.40, at 468: 'ad sacerdotes illos, qui tunc cum rege Gunthchramno fuerant adgregati'.
[123] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.41, at 468–9.
[124] Heinzelmann, *Gregor von Tour*, 73–4.
[125] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.41, at 467: 'Sed cum illae obstinatius reluctarent et hic cum reliquis iuxta epistulam superius nominatam eis excommonionem indiceret.'

fear (*pavor*) in the members of the embassy, inducing them to put their personal safety before their dignity and duty.[126] As a result, Clotilde had been confident enough to enact further violence against Ste Croix. In such a light, the episcopal letter included by Gregory could also be read as an admonition of sorts: Gundegisil and his companions might have been justified in excommunicating the nuns, but they had failed to heed the teachings of St Paul that 'whether convenient or inconvenient, we should correct those going astray with energetic preaching.'[127]

It was not just episcopal correspondence that made its way into Gregory's account of the scandal. Immediately after citing the letter to Gundegisil and his suffragans, Gregory came to insert yet another letter in his narrative, this one by none other than Queen Radegunde.[128] Originally written in or shortly after 567 to the collective bishops of Gaul, the document cited by Gregory is the sole surviving letter from Radegunde's hand.[129] The queen herself framed her writing as a 'letter of entreaty' (*suggestionis meae paginam*) directed to the bishops by a 'sinner' (*peccatrix*). Yet, as underlined by Julia Smith, the letter exudes authority, easily switching registers between episcopal humility *topoi*, biblical typology and the language of the royal chancery.[130] Radegunde commenced her letter by sketching the origins and early history of her convent in Poitiers, to which she showed kings and bishops had been committed from the start. She went on to invoke the support of Gaul's bishops against all future threats against the convent and its possessions, including – *quod absit* – threats from within the monastery itself. Radegunde then ended her plea with the request that her letter 'be preserved in the archive of the universal Church' ('ut in universalis aeclesiae archevo servetur').[131] Part of the reason, then, why Radgunde's letter made its way into the *Histories* was because she herself had ensured its inclusion into the archives of Gaul's episcopate.[132] But beyond its availability, it is not difficult to see why this letter would have appealed to Gregory and what induced him to incorporate it in his account of the Poitiers scandal. Not only did it underscore his claims about episcopal authority and duty, it also served as powerful ammunition against Clotilde and Basina, who had committed some of the very evils their monastery's founder had alluded to in her letter, such as leaving the convent against the rule and encroaching on the convent's possessions. The resulting contrast was striking and typological: a saintly queen safeguarding the community of the faithful

[126] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.41, at 467: 'Tam inmensus enim eos, ut credo, diabolo cooperante, pavor obsederat, ut, egredientes a loco sancto nec sibi vale dicentes, unusquisque per viam, quam adrepere potuit, repedaret.'

[127] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.41, at 469 (after 2 Tim. 4:2): 'Domnus Paulus apostolus indesinenter videtur monere, ut oportune inportune debeamus quoscumque excedentes sidola praedicatione corregere.'

[128] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.42.

[129] One possibility is that Radegunde addressed the bishops when they were assembled at the Council of Tours in November 567. This would also have allowed the bishops to draft collectively the reply cited earlier in IX.39. See Smith, 'Radegundis peccatrix', 307, n. 20. For two verse letters by Venantius Fortunatus written in Radegunde's voice, see Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*, 135–6, and Karen Cherewatuk, 'Radegund and the Epistolary Tradition', in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, eds. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 20–45 (who assumes that the verse letters were written by Radegunde herself).

[130] Smith, 'Radegundis peccatrix', 307–8, 323.

[131] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.42, at 474.

[132] Considering the letter was addressed to the Gallic episcopate, the phrase *universalis aeclesiae archevo* probably meant that Radegunde called upon the bishops collectively to preserve the letter in their respective archives, although see Krah, 'Das Archiv als Schatzhaus', 11–12, who takes it to refer to the cathedral archive at Poitiers. For the (changing) early medieval uses of the term *archivum*, Heinrich Fichtenau, 'Archive der Karolingerzeit', *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs* 25 (1972): 15–24.

in close co-operation with the bishops, versus two arrogant royal nuns who, inspired by the Devil, sought to undo her very work.

Interestingly, Gregory was not the first to recognise this letter's persuasive potential within the context of the Poitiers scandal. The reason, indeed, he came to cite the letter in the first place was that it had already been circulated during the events by the abbess of Ste Croix, Leubovera. Gregory's description of Leubovera's actions at the time is short and enigmatic and deserves to be cited in full:

> But the abbess also read out a letter, which the blessed Radegunde had wanted to be sent to the bishops of her time. The abbess now once again directed copies of this letter to the bishops of the nearby cities.[133]

Presumably, then, we are dealing with two separate actions. Leubovera first had the letter read out in some public setting. She then proceeded to have multiple copies (*exemplaria*) made of the letter and to circulate these among the bishops of several unspecified towns in the region, of which Tours might have been one.[134] Frustratingly, Gregory does not specify where and to whom she first 'read out' (*recitavit*) the letter. If we assume that Leubovera herself kept to the rule of enclosure during the conflict, the logical place would have been Ste Croix.[135] As for those she addressed at the occasion, the place of the passage quoted above in the narrative suggests Gregory considered Leubovera's reading of the letter to have been related somehow to Gundegisil's failed embassy and his subsequent back-and-forth with the bishops at Orleans. One option, therefore, is that she read out the letter in the presence of Gundegisil and his suffragans, possibly even at the same occasion that they received the reply from Guntram's court. This would certainly have been an opportune moment to remind the bishops of their solemn duties towards the safety of the monastery. Another option is that Leubovera aimed her public reading at Clotilde and her supporters, who had just raised the stakes in the conflict by seizing property belonging to Ste Croix and pressuring its servants into changing allegiance. Here too a letter from Ste Croix' saintly founder would have hit home, especially the queen's warnings against robbers (*praedones*) and despoilers (*spoliatores*) of the convent's landed possessions. This would mean, though, that Leubovera either left her convent to read out the letter at St Hilary's or that she commissioned someone else to read it out for her. Regardless of the precise context in which Leubovera came to read out her founder's letter, her appeal to the authority of Radegunde was not incidental, but part of a consistent strategy of persuasion that she kept up till the end.[136] When the whole case was brought before the episcopal tribunal in 590, Leubovera managed to counter many of the accusations levelled against her by

[133] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.42, at 470: 'Sed et abbatissa recitavit epistulam, quam beata Radegundis episcopis, qui suo tempore erant, diregi voluit. Cuius nunc iterum ipsa abbatissa exemplaria ad vicinarum urbium sacerdotes direxit.'

[134] For another Merovingian example of older letters being re-sent in a high profile dispute, see Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian', 181–92.

[135] Caesarius of Arles, *Regula virginum*, eds. Adalbert de Vogüé and Joël Courreau. Sources Chrétiennes 345 (Paris: Cerf, 1988), emphasises the administrative responsibilities of the abbess and presents her as the community's gateway to the outside world (cc. 25, 27, 36), yet it neither explicitly exempts her from active enclosure nor holds her to it (cc.1, 41). Active calls for the enclosure of abbesses became more widespread under the Carolingians: see Jane Tibbets Schulenburg, 'Strict Active Enclosure and Its Effects on the Female Monastic Experience (ca. 500–1100)', in *Distant Echoes. Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 1, eds. John Nichols and Lilian Shank (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 51–86 (56–7 and 69).

[136] Scheibelreiter, 'Königstöchter', 20–7.

Clotilde and Basina by invoking the precedents set by Ste Croix' mighty founder: playing dice, sharing meals with lay people, having servants use the baths, all these practices had been condoned by 'the Lady Radegunde'.[137]

Leubovera's circulation of Radegunde's letter stands as a final example to the strategic reuse of letters during the scandal at Poitiers. It underlines that such recycling of letters, and high profile epistolary communication in general, was by no means the preserve of elite men. The Poitiers scandal shows monastic women living under a rule of strict enclosure taking full advantage of the letter's potential for public persuasion. There is Radegunde, who purposely wrote a letter for posterity and circulated it among the bishops of Gaul, thus ensuring her new foundation would have episcopal support during future tribulations. There is Leubovera's republication of this letter at the height of the conflict, which involved a public reading of the document as well as the production and circulation of several new copies. Yet this must have been only the tip of the iceberg. At one point in the narrative, Gregory mentions that King Childebert II decided to send a negotiator to Poitiers because he was fed up with the 'constant vexations he suffered from both parties' ('cum assiduas de utraque parte … molestias patiretur').[138] Surely, these 'vexations' imply that both Leubovera and Clotilde were pressuring Childebert for a resolution, presumably doing so by means of embassies and letters. Ironically, the disruptive potential of the letter was already foreshadowed in the monastic rule of Ste Croix. One of its regulations explicitly forbade nuns from either sending or receiving *litteras* without the explicit consent of their abbess, and even then such communication had to be conducted through the door warden (*posticiaria*).[139] Another regulation assigned the abbess sole responsibility for official correspondence with outsiders.[140] When in 589 Clotilda and Basina left the confines of their monastery, then, they would also have left an epistolary regime.

Conclusion

This article has addressed Merovingian epistolary practices using a non-epistolary source. The underlying question was whether a narrative text like Gregory of Tours' *Histories* might help us cover some of the obscurities of the epistolary evidence, which we could not already resolve from the letter collections.

One crucial insight provided by Gregory is that it pays to use a generous definition of the letter. In part, this is a matter of comprehensiveness: why exclude legal or administrative texts that clearly looked and functioned like letters? A more compelling argument is that the documents found at the fringes of the epistolary genre tend to be among that genre's most complex and exciting, and have the potential to raise new and underexplored questions of epistolary communication. Take the *consensus* used in the context of episcopal elections. This was a multi-authored letter, that almost by default

[137] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X.16, at 505–6.
[138] Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, IX.43, at 474–5. Childebert sent the priest Theutarius to negotiate between the various factions.
[139] Caesarius of Arles, *Regula virginum*, c. 23: 'quod Deus non patiatur … ut occulte ab aliquo litteras … accipiat … Simili etiam districtioni subiaceat, si vel ipsa cuiqunque litteras, aut munuscula transmitter sacrilego ausu praesumpserit.'
[140] Caesarius of Arles, *Regula virginum*, c. 25: 'Et quia monasterii mater necesse habet … epistolis quorumque fidelium respondere.'

created complex and explosive moments of delivery. Even so, the *consensus* is not usually included in scholarly overviews of early medieval letter-writing, nor are many of the other technical documents listed in the *Histories*. It may be said that Gregory was uniquely situated to describe documents of this sort: he wrote in a comparatively literate society that had inherited many of the textual trappings of the late Roman administration. Moreover, he had a personal interest in the documents he described, especially those that concerned bishops. All this may be argued, but the larger point stands. When looking for evidence of letters in an early medieval narrative text, it is worthwhile to look beyond the usual suspects – the *epistulae*, the *litterae* – and also consider terminology relating to political communication, legal documentation and even materiality.

A second issue highlighted by Gregory is that letters functioned within a wider process of communication. This is a well trodden scholarly path and letter collections have done much to guide us on it. That said, because Gregory's understanding of the letter is so broad he brings into focus practices of letter delivery that are not usually attested in the letter collections, for example, the widespread use of *pueri* by Merovingian kings and clergy, and the tendency of bishops to deliver their own letters of appointment to the royal court. Another aspect of epistolary communication to which the *Histories* are strongly attuned is the potential discrepancy between the text of a letter and what was actually communicated during its delivery. Gregory shows that a letter's audience in Merovingian Gaul could be very flexible indeed: many letters were sent in the expectation that their contents would be known beyond the official addressee. Some letters were addressed to one person but intended for another. In yet other instances the letter was only a pretext for a public performance or message delivered orally. At the same time, the ability of senders to regulate who saw or heard their messages is shown to have been limited. They could instruct a messenger to deliver the letter in a certain way or to convey the message in secret, but they could not usually prevent their letters from being circulated further. Forgery, too, was part of the Merovingian horizon of expectations regarding letters, to the extent that those accused of incendiary writings could successfully invoke it as a defence. Ultimately, the question of authorship could thus prove as complex as that of audience when it came to Merovingian letters. The scandal at Poitiers showed bishops, abbesses and nuns recirculating letters that had been sent by their predecessors decades earlier, using extant documents to create a whole new cycle of epistolary communication, with different senders, different recipients and different agendas.

Here a final result of our historiographical approach to the Merovingian letter presents itself: the letter's use as a literary device. It is fair to say that for Gregory letters were a part of everyday life, as were the structures that facilitated epistolary communication. Some of his references have a casual feel about them: they are introduced without further comment or underlying agenda, simply as a familiar feature of Gregory's sixth-century world.[141] Yet the letter's recognisability and self-evidence also made moments of epistolary communication in the *Histories* a fruitful narrative staging ground for moral edification and entertainment. We have seen how public letter deliveries came with a clear-cut set of expectations that Gregory could manipulate as an author, crafting elaborate scenes of good, bad and failed performances by letter carriers. Where he had himself been

[141] As pointed out by Gillett, 'Letters and Communication Networks'.

involved, such scenes also allowed him to showcase his own dexterity as a political actor and communicator in the highest echelons of Merovingian society. The Poitiers case offers another vivid illustration of the letter's narrative potential. Gregory created a complex moral story in which he alternated descriptions of epistolary communication with copies of the letters themselves. The result was a highly partisan reading of the scandal, which served to exonerate Gregory from potential complicity in the nuns' rebellion, but also reiterated the more general point that episcopal and saintly authority would ultimately prevail over the disruptive forces of the Devil. Gregory's strategic use of letters in his account of the Poitiers scandal is characteristic of the *Histories* at large. Far from being a straightforward description of Merovingian epistolary practices, Gregory's history presents us with a rich and multi-layered compendium of the potential uses of letters in sixth-century Gaul.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Els Rose for her valuable comments on an early draft of this article. I thank David Rhys Cole for his insights on the Merovingian *pueri* and Andrew Gillett for generously sharing the unpublished version of his contribution to the new *Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*. Finally, I am indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for their many useful suggestions. All remaining errors are my own.

Funding

This article was written as part of the project NWO VICI-Rose 277-30-002 'Citizenship Discourses in the Early Middle Ages, 400–1100', funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

Note on contributor

Robert Flierman is a lecturer in Medieval Latin at Utrecht University and a postdoctoral researcher on the NWO VICI Project 'Citizenship Discourses in the Early Middle Ages, 400–1100'. He has published a monograph on the continental Saxons in the early Middle Ages: *Saxon Identities AD 150–900* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). He is currently developing a new research project on letter delivery in the early medieval West.