

WHAT MAKES A NARRATIVE?  
UNDERSTANDING THE PORTRAYALS OF HERMENEGILD'S REBELLION

Thesis by  
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## INTRODUCTION

When one studies an event through the perspectives of multiple accounts, one's first instinct might be to reconcile the sources into a single cohesive narrative. One can try to assign a likelihood that various portions of each story are factually correct, and then reconstruct what happened based upon which parts seem the most trustworthy. For example, if one were faced with three accounts of a single event, two of which independently said the same thing while the third said something radically different, one might be inclined to believe the first two and discount the divergent information from the third source entirely. However, in doing so, one cannot be certain of the results. Each of us has our own subjectivity and biases, as our experiences can implicitly shape the decisions we make about what is reliable or plausible and what is not. Moreover, when one tries to compile the "truth" of an event from multiple sources, such "truth" comes at the cost of understanding what made the sources different in the first place. An account is not written in a vacuum, and the way that an author chooses to portray an event is determined by their own personal background, circumstances, and purposes for crafting their narratives. In condensing a host of different accounts into a single internally consistent version, one loses sight of how the authors themselves viewed the events. Keeping different accounts of the same event separate, and investigating each individually in its own context, may not provide a simple solution to the question of "what happened?", but it will teach us more about the authors' motivations and what they understood to be important about an event. Such an understanding provides more substantial and reliable information than trying to reconcile the accounts would be able to provide.

One such example of an event where the disagreements of authors' portrayals can lead to a better understanding of their motivations and contexts is in Hermenegild's rebellion, which occurred in 579 in the southern region of Visigothic Spain. Hermenegild (d. 585) was the eldest

son of King Leovigild (r. 568-586) of the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo and, alongside his younger brother, Reccared (r. 586-601), was coregent of the kingdom with their father. Hermenegild, from the seat of his authority in Seville, rebelled against King Leovigild. His rebellion lasted for only five years, with Hermenegild being defeated and captured in 584 and put to death in the following year.<sup>1</sup> Everything that is known about the rebellion and its aftermath is derived from four separate accounts written by bishops at various times in the forty years following the rebellion.

Gregory of Tours, a Frankish bishop and chronicler, wrote parts of his *Decem Libri Historiarum* contemporaneously with the rebellion, and thus his account follows the evolution of the rebellion over time. Pope Gregory the Great wrote his *Dialogues* in the late 590s from his seat in Rome, and included the rebellion within his account, an event which occurred a decade before the beginning his papacy. John of Biclaro, a Hispano-Roman bishop from Lusitania, was the first author of Spanish origin, writing his *Chronicon* in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, nearly 30 years after the rebellion. Finally, Isidore, the Visigothic bishop of Seville, wrote his *History of the Goths* in 619, later revising and adding to it in 624, 40 years after the following the conclusion of the rebellion.

While the four accounts agree on many parts of the rebellion, such as the general timeline and its outcome, they differ greatly in the details of the rebellion itself. One account may see religion as the primary motivation for Hermenegild's rebellion, while another may make no reference to religion at all, instead assigning his motivation to internal or external politics. It is at this point when one may attempt discover which author wrote the "true history" of the rebellion by examining their credibility. However, instead of contrasting the differences present in the

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph F. O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 44.

accounts in an attempt reconcile the portrayals and establish veracity, using the differences as a point of comparison adds another dimension to the story, as one is able to better understand which aspects of the rebellion were important to each author, and how they sought to advance their narratives through the use of the rebellion.

## THESIS

The four authors each independently decided that the story of Hermenegild's rebellion was significant enough to include within their accounts. The accounts contain numerous revolts and there were likely many more that were deemed inconsequential and thus neglected. However, something in the events and nature of Hermenegild's rebellion warranted its inclusion and utilization by each of these authors for the purposes of advancing their narratives.

The chief focus of the *Decem Libri Historiarum* of Gregory of Tours in the period of Hermenegild's rebellion is the Merovingian Franks, namely the rulers of the kingdoms of Austrasia, Burgundy, and Neustria. As a result, Hermenegild's part in these stories was as the son-in-law of the Queen of Austrasia. Gregory of Tours, writing from a pro-Austrasian and Burgundian perspective, portrayed Hermenegild and his rebellion in a positive light. While his account did summarize the events of the rebellion, Gregory of Tours' real aim was to present the machinations of Merovingian court politics, specifically the evils of the Neustrian King Chilperic.

In addition to court politics aspect, Gregory also utilized Hermenegild's rebellion to advance one of his other narratives, namely the role of women, especially widows, in society. Gregory believed that widows should retire from public life upon the deaths of their husband, and instead devote themselves to living a spiritual life. Gregory's primary method for advancing his theses is through comparison, and for the role of widows, he compared the virtue of his own mother to the evils of Leovigild's wife, Queen Gosuintha.<sup>2</sup> In order to help emphasize this comparison,

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<sup>2</sup> E. T. Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 18-19.

he assigned much of the blame for the rebellion squarely onto Gosuintha, and her actions against Hermenegild.

Gregory the Great's portrayal of Hermenegild is that of a hagiography, entirely focused upon the religious elements present within the rebellion. Instead of writing about the rebellion itself, Gregory was focused on the motivations and aftermath of the rebellion, with an emphasis on Hermenegild's role in the eventual conversion of the kingdom. Gregory painted a picture of Hermenegild as a martyr for his faith, of his Hermenegild's rebellion as a holy war, and used this story of a Catholic fighting against an Arian to bolster the anti-Arian sentiment present in the third book of his *Dialogues*. Gregory's purpose in including Hermenegild's rebellion within his *Dialogues* was to encourage his followers to resist the Arian Lombards, who at the time were invading northern Italy. As a result, Gregory's *Dialogues* contain a substantial section dedicated to Italian martyrs who resisted the Arian faith, and includes Hermenegild as an example of an ideal ruler, who was willing to forfeit his life for his faith, and in doing so brought about the conversion of the entire kingdom.

John of Biclaro wrote his *Chronicon* in the decade following one of the most important events in Spanish history, which defined the Catholic legacy of its people and was later used as a point of succession for the Spanish Christian kingdoms, namely the Third Council of Toledo. Held in 589, this council under King Reccared formally converted the Kingdom of Toledo to Catholic Christianity.<sup>3</sup> John's goal for his writing was to portray the Kingdom of Toledo as the successor of the Western Roman Empire, and a peer to the surviving Roman Empire in the East, the Byzantine Empire.<sup>4</sup> John portrayed the new Catholic Visigothic Kingdom as the culmination of

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<sup>3</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, in Kenneth Baxter Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), 61-80, here c. 92, 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 7-11.



the Council of Nicaea, which in 325, under the supervision of the Roman Emperor Constantine I, condemned Arianism and proclaimed the tenets of Catholic orthodoxy in the Nicene Creed. John directly paralleled the Kingdom of Toledo to Rome, with Reccared leading as the new Constantine. As a result of Leovigild's success in unifying Hispania under the Kingdom of Toledo, John sought to emphasize the positive aspects of Leovigild's rule, namely his victories against tyrants and invaders of the peninsula and the establishment of peace within his own kingdom. Thus, to John, anything that might disturb this peace was undesirable, including Hermenegild's rebellion. John included the rebellion in his writing as an event that disturbs the peace of the kingdom.

While John was writing during a time of relative peace and stability within the Kingdom of Toledo, Isidore of Seville, on the other hand, was writing approximately 30 years later and following a period of instability. Following several usurpations and failed rebellions, Isidore wrote his *History* in 619 during the reign of Sisebut (r. 612-621) and rewrote his account in 624, during the reign of Suinthila (r. 621-631) after he usurps the throne from Sisebut's son.<sup>5,6</sup> As a result of this political instability stemming from several usurpations, Isidore's writing strongly condemned rebellion in any circumstances, and emphasizes familial bonds. To Isidore, any rebellion against the king was unjustified. Thus within Isidore's writing, Hermenegild's rebellion was barely mentioned. More important than what Isidore said about the rebellion is the fact that he neglected it within his writing. Given the proximity of Isidore to the rebellion, as his brother, Leander of Seville, was directly involved, one would have expected Isidore to write more about the rebellion, and from a positive perspective. Instead Isidore avoided writing about the rebellion, dedicating only a single line to it. This was likely a result of Hermenegild's rebellion going against his

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, in Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 81-110, here c. 56-62, 105-107.

portrayal of rebellions as negative for the kingdom. Rather than attempt to explain Hermenegild's rebellion within the context of his overall thesis, Isidore instead chose to avoid it.

Treating each of these stories as independent allows for one to compare the details within each account. In doing so, one can better understand how the authors chose to portray the rebellion in their writings as well as why they chose to include it in the first place and what role it fills in the narratives they seek to construct. Each author found something within the events of this rebellion that made it worth recording (or not recording) within their writing. From their choices we might find out what it was about the rebellion that made it important to them, and led them to write about it.

## BACKGROUND

In order to understand why these accounts chose to include Hermenegild's rebellion, we first need to understand the societal and religious contexts that led to the rebellion. Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Hispania was settled by successive waves of barbarian groups. The Iberian Peninsula was eventually conquered by the Visigoths, who established themselves at the top of the old Roman political power structure which had remained relatively intact. As a result, the population of the Visigothic Kingdom was divided between a minority ruling class of Visigoths and the majority Hispano-Roman population of the kingdom.<sup>7</sup>

One of the major divisions in Spanish society between the Visigoths and their Roman subjects was religion. In order to understand the religious context of the rebellion, one must first understand the distinctions between Arianism and Catholicism and the history between these two Christian branches. The Visigoths practiced Arianism, a sect of Christianity first preached by Arius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Alexandria, Egypt. Arian Christians believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as the incarnation of Jesus, and his death and resurrection. The key aspect of Arianism which separates it from Catholicism is their belief that Jesus Christ is distinct and subordinate to the Father. In this sense, the Father is superior to both the Son and the Holy Spirit, and thus Arian doctrine is nontrinitarian in nature.<sup>8</sup>

Catholic Christianity, on the other hand is fundamentally Trinitarian in nature. The Nicaeans also believe in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, however unlike the Arians, they believe that the nature of God consists of three distinct Persons. In this sense, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all distinct Persons of God, but are consubstantial in nature and

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<sup>7</sup> O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain*, 37-38.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Collins, *Visigothic Spain, 409-711* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 64.

essence. Nicæan Christianity proper arises from the First Council of Nicæa, an ecumenical council led by Constantine in 325. It was in this council when the Nicæan Creed was developed, professing the Trinitarian nature of God, and the beliefs of Arianism were denounced as heresy. Despite its denunciation, Arianism remained relatively strong, and continued to compete with Catholicism throughout the Eastern Roman Empire. Arius was exonerated ten years later at the Council of Tyre, and Constantine himself was baptized by an Arian bishop. In 376, an Arian missionary by the name of Ulphilas converted the Goths, who at this time were residing north of the Danube.

In the same year, the Arian Emperor Valens denied their request to settle within the Empire, and the Goths invaded seeking refuge from the Huns. The war between the Romans and Goths ended under the reign of Theodosius I, who also declares Arianism to once again be anathema at the First Council of Constantinople in 381, and Catholicism firmly established itself as the religion of Rome. Following the death of Theodosius I, the peace between Rome and the Goths was eventually broken, and Rome was sacked in 410. In 409, Theodosius's son, the Western Roman Emperor Honorius, enlisted the help of one group of Goths, the Visigoths, in defeating the Vandals in Southern Gaul, granting them their own territory which eventually became an independent kingdom by 418 with its capital in Toulouse.<sup>9</sup>

Arianism was the majority religion of the two Gothic kingdoms, the Visigoths and their eastern cousins the Ostrogoths, as well as the Lombards, another Germanic barbarian group which had established a kingdom for itself in Northern Italy by the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century. Opposing them religiously were the Catholic Franks, the Germanic tribe which came to dominate Gaul. Over time,

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400-1000* (La Vergne, TN USA: St Martin's Press, 2010), 1-3.

Arianism began to lose ground to Catholicism, as various barbarian tribes began to convert. Eventually Arianism fell out of favor, and by the 7<sup>th</sup> century only the Kingdom of the Lombards remained Arian. King Grimoald of Lombardy and his young son King Garibald were the last Arian kings in Europe, and in 671 Garibald was deposed by a Catholic, ending state-sponsored Arianism in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

With the religious and political background of the Visigothic Kingdom established, we can now turn to the immediate political history prior to the rebellion. After its establishment in 418, the Visigothic Kingdom of Toulouse began to expand into Hispania, controlling most of the peninsula, save for the Kingdom of the Suevi in Galicia and Byzantine territory in the south. The Visigoths also lost their Gallic territory to the Franks, retaining only the region of Narbonensis on the Mediterranean coast by the time of Leovigild.<sup>11</sup> During the reign of King Agila (r. 549-552) the southern regions of the Visigothic Kingdom rebelled, supporting Athanagild (r. 552-567).<sup>12</sup> The Byzantines capitalized on the instability caused by the rebellion to launch an invasion of southern Hispania, recapturing formerly Roman territory from the Visigoths. The civil war was a success, and Athanagild usurped Agila to become King of the Visigoths in 552, but he was left in an unstable situation. The southern provinces that had supported him in his rebellion had done so for the purpose of weakening the central authority of the kingdom, and now that Athanagild sought to assert his authority over them, they once again began to rebel. Athanagild's reign was marked with instability, continued territorial losses to the Byzantines, and a weakening of the crown authority to the point where many cities were effectively autonomous, only nominally a part of the

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<sup>10</sup> Paul, Dudley Foulke, and Edward Peters. *History of the Lombards* (Philadelphia, PN USA: Univ. of Philadelphia Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 47.

kingdom if at all.<sup>13</sup> Athanagild's death was followed by a five months interregnum before Liuva (r. 568-573) was crowned as his successor in Narbonne.<sup>14</sup> In order to aid in ruling, Liuva appointed his brother, Leovigild, as his co-regent.<sup>15</sup> Following the death of his brother, Leovigild himself assumed control of the entire kingdom and began a series of campaigns to reunite the kingdom.<sup>16</sup> In order to further his legitimacy as king, he married Gosuintha, the widow of Athanagild.<sup>14</sup> Leovigild began to expand the kingdom at the expense of the Suevi and the Byzantines and subjugated the rebellious regions of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

In order to cement his power over the regions most at risk in his kingdom, as well as to establish a political dynasty, Leovigild appointed his two sons, Hermenegild and Reccared, as his co-regents, with the former ruling from Seville and the latter north of the Pyrenees. Additionally, Leovigild sought to establish ties with the Frankish Merovingian kingdoms to the north, marrying his son Hermenegild to the Austrasian princess Ingundis. Ingundis was the daughter of King Sigebert and Queen Brunhild of Austrasia. Brunhild herself was the daughter of Queen Gosuintha and King Athanagild. It was from his seat of power in Seville that Hermenegild declared his rebellion, and while the specifics of each author's account will be discussed below, they all agreed on a general timeline of the events.<sup>17</sup>

Hermenegild declared his rebellion against Leovigild from Seville in 579, while his father was campaigning against the Kingdom of the Suevi in the north. At some point either before or during the rebellion, Hermenegild converted to Catholicism under the influence of Bishop Leander of Seville. He sent Leander to Constantinople to petition Emperor Tiberius II for aid in his

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<sup>13</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 50.

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 44-45.

<sup>17</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 45.

rebellion.<sup>18</sup> The Byzantine Empire was unable to aid him, as were the Merovingian kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy.<sup>19</sup> Upon the conclusion of his campaign in the north, Leovigild turned his attention towards his rebellious son in the south and began to reconquer the rebellious territory. Hermenegild was eventually defeated in 584 and imprisoned by his father, who attempted to convert him back to Arianism. Hermenegild refused, and at this point the sources are divided with respect to outcome. In some, Leovigild ordered the execution of his son, while in others Hermenegild was murdered out of frustration by the zealous Arian priest tasked with converting him.<sup>20</sup> After Hermenegild's death in 585, Reccared became Leovigild's sole coregent and heir, and upon his father's death in 586, inherited the Kingdom of Toledo. Reccared himself then converted to Catholicism in 587, and sought to unite the Visigothic, Roman, and Suevic groups of the kingdom into a single people. He called the Third Council of Toledo in 589 to formally adopt Catholicism as the official state religion, and to condemn Arianism as heresy.<sup>21</sup> Aside from a handful of small revolts, Reccared was successful in his mission to unite the kingdom under a single faith, and the Kingdom of Toledo enjoyed relative peace until his death in 601.<sup>22</sup>

Compared to the two events which bookend Hermenegild's rebellion, namely the unification of Hispania under Leovigild and the conversion of the Kingdom of Toledo to Catholicism under Reccared, the rebellion itself is often overlooked by the historiography on early medieval Spain. Often it is simply mentioned in passing, such as in Joseph O'Callaghan's *A History of Medieval Spain*, which simply refers to the rebellion as having happened.<sup>23</sup> Kenneth

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<sup>18</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Goffart, "Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius II and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)." (*Traditio Traditio* 13, 1957), 89-91.

<sup>20</sup> O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain*, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 54-55.

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> O'Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain*, 44.

Baxter Wolf in his monograph, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, notes Hermenegild when writing about the religious motivations of John of Biclaro, but only going so far as to note that John does not include religion in his narrative of the rebellion, despite it being such a prevalent theme throughout the remainder of his writing.<sup>24</sup> Wolf does not explore the theme of religion in Hermenegild's rebellion any further. He does not question why John and Isidore do not include religion as a factor in Hermenegild's rebellion, simply accepting its absence as a fact and instead moving on to what John and Isidore write elsewhere about religion and the Arian vs Catholic conflict.

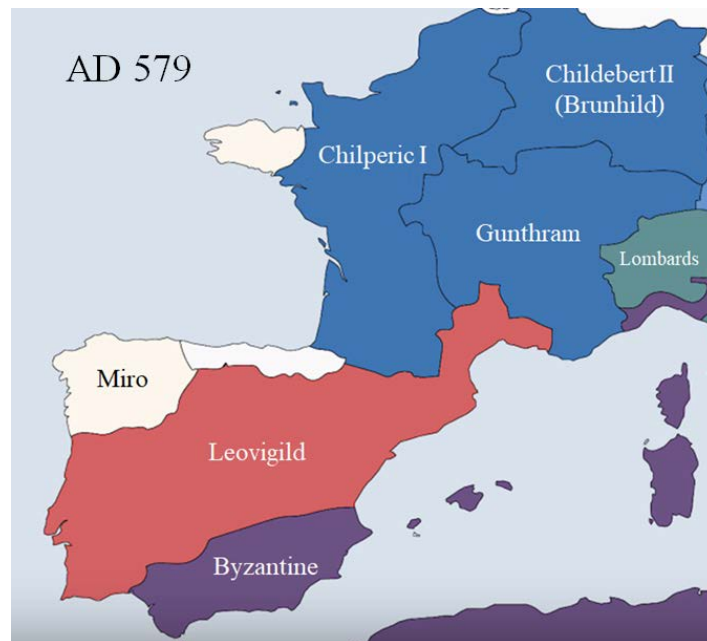


Figure 1. Hispania and Gaul in 579 at the beginning of Hermenegild's rebellion. The Kingdom of Toledo under Leovigild (red) controlled territory from Lusitania in the southwest to Narbonensis in the northeast. The Merovingian kingdoms are in blue and going clockwise are Austrasia (under Childebert II and his mother and regent Brunhild), Burgundy (under Gunthram), and Neustria (under Chilperic I). The Kingdom of Galicia (under Miro) is in the northwestern corner of Hispania and the Byzantine territory is the southeastern portion of the peninsula.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars do study the motivations behind the writings of Gregory of Tours, but often do so broadly, and not with an eye specifically on Hermenegild's rebellion. Martin Heinzelmann broadly examines Gregory's motives for writing the books of his *Historiarum* which include the various

<sup>24</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Cottureau, "The Rulers of Europe: Every Year" (YouTube, 2018).



snapshots of Hermenegild's rebellion, but never really touches on the rebellion itself. He focuses instead on the overall comparison that Gregory is trying to make between Chilperic and his wife Fredegund and the Old Testament figures of Ahab and Jezebel.<sup>26</sup> He is comparing the evil of the Neustrian king and queen to the good that he himself represents in the same way as the Old Testament compared Ahab and Jezebel to the prophet Elijah. E. T. Dailey approaches the motives of Gregory's writings from a different perspective in his book *Queens Consorts and Concubines: Gregory of Tours and Women of the Merovingian Elite*. Dailey focuses on Gregory's portrayal of women, and the comparisons of good and evil that he makes in his descriptions of their behavior.<sup>27</sup> This style of comparing people for the purpose of emphasizing good and evil extends into Gregory's account of Hermenegild's rebellion, as Gregory pulls examples in the form of Gosuintha and Leovigild to support his parallels.

Edward James also explores the theme of comparisons in Gregory of Tours in the context of identity. James makes the argument that Gregory uses the Visigoths in his writing to serve as a foil to the righteous Franks, and that Spain serves to be an enemy and a contender with the Franks. James does not, however, explore the role of Hermenegild's rebellion in the context of this contention between the Franks and Visigoths. He instead uses the rebellion and the accounts of the Spanish authors and how they contradict the writing of Gregory to make the argument that Gregory's writings on the rebellion are either ignorant or could be intentionally manipulating the facts to suit his own purposes. However, he does not explore why Gregory chose to recount the rebellion, using it only for the purposes of comparing it to the Spanish authors, judging their

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Heinzelmann, and Christopher Carroll, *Gregory of Tours: history and society in the sixth century*. (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, and Concubines: Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian Elite*, 22.

accounts to be more accurate, and thus calling Gregory's account into question, rather than comparing the three sources and understanding possible origins of this difference in recording.

Roger Collins, in *Early Medieval Spain, Visigothic Spain, and Merida and Toledo 550-585*, speculates about the events of Hermenegild's rebellion, and tries to draw conclusions about when Hermenegild converted, and what his motivations were for rebelling in the first place.<sup>28</sup> He, like James, focuses less on understanding why the authors portrayed the rebellion the way that they did and more on seeking the truth of the event, and distilling the narratives into the elements which can be argued as factual. While Collins does note the political instability of rebellion likely prevented Isidore and John from portraying Hermenegild in a positive light or as a Catholic martyr, he does not explore the topic any further. Walter Goffart in his book *Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)* writes specifically about Hermenegild's rebellion as it intersected with the politics of the Byzantine Empire and the Merovingian kingdoms.<sup>29</sup> This book, while offering a different perspective than Collins and O'Callaghan, again only explores the facts of the rebellion, rather than attempting to understand the motivations of the authors and their reasons for portraying certain issues in specific ways.

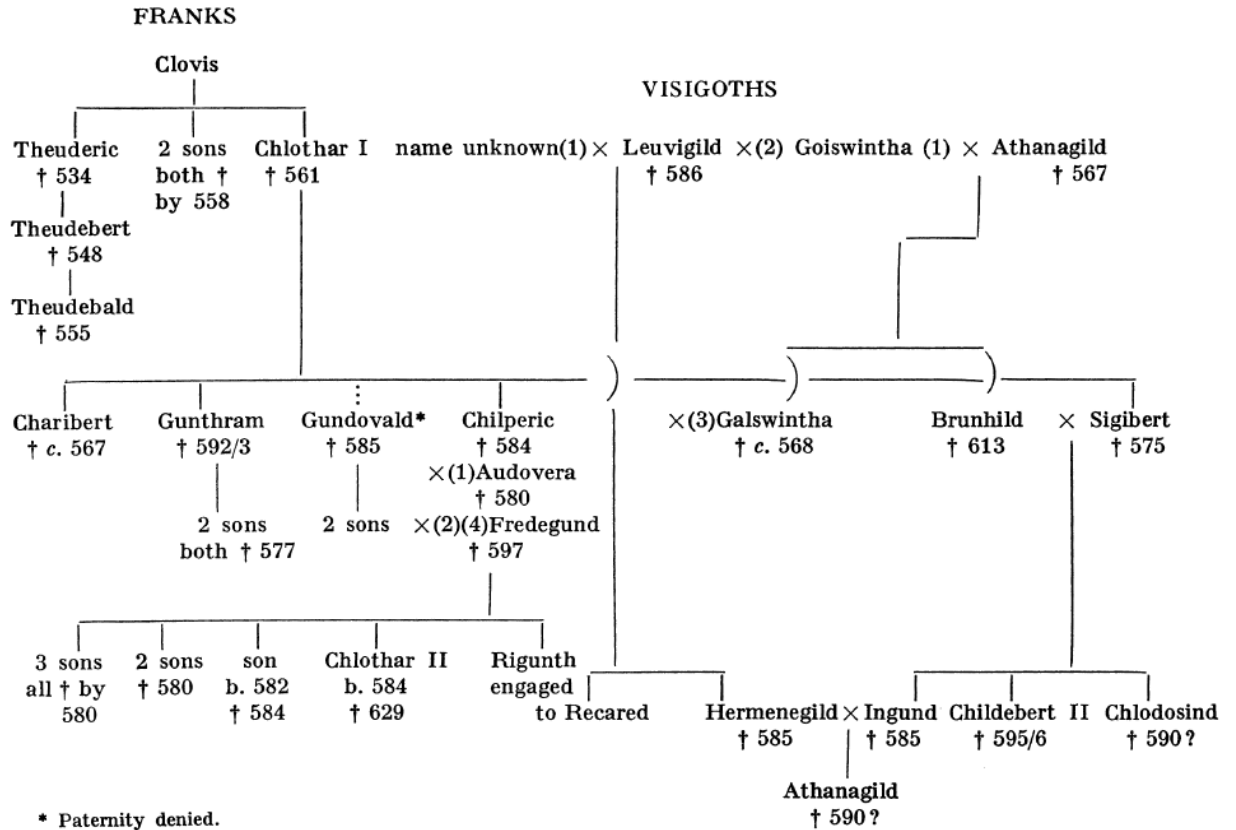
Rather than speculate about the likely course of events in the rebellion, this paper seeks to analyze why the authors choose to portray the rebellion the way that they do. While it will build on the work of others about why our four authors wrote the texts we will be looking at, it seeks to understand why they wrote about Hermenegild's rebellion in particular in the way that they did, and why they chose to incorporate what details of the rebellion into their accounts. This in turn

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<sup>28</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 57-59.

<sup>29</sup> Goffart, *Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)*, 87-91.

will perhaps help us see why this rebellion shows up in such a diverse set of texts, and why it is so difficult to say precisely what happened and why.



SIMPLIFIED GENEALOGICAL CHART OF THE MEROVINGIAN AND VISIGOTHIC DYNASTIES,  
 TO ILLUSTRATE BYZANTINE-FRANKISH RELATIONS BETWEEN 579 AND 585.

Figure 1. Genealogy of the Merovingian and Visigothic Kings.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Goffart, *Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)*, 83.

## GREGORY OF TOURS

Chronologically, the first author to recount the events of Hermenegild's rebellion is Gregory of Tours. Gregory was born around 538, and by the time of the events of the rebellion had become the Bishop of Tours. Gregory wrote his *Decem Libri Historiarum* over the course of roughly twenty years, beginning around 575 and ending in 591, just before his death in 594. While Gregory's chief focus in his account is on the Franks, namely the Merovingian kingdoms of Austrasia, Burgundy, and Neustria, he also wrote chapters about Visigothic Spain. The close proximity of Spain to Francia and the political ties between the Visigothic and Frankish kings mean that while the Franks are the primary focus of his account, there is still information about the affairs of the Visigoths. As a result of his writing at multiple different times, we are given several snapshots of the Visigothic Kingdom.

The depiction of Hermenegild's rebellion in Gregory's *Historiarum* revolves primarily around the exchange of envoys between the Merovingian kingdoms and the Kingdom of Toledo. These envoys would negotiate marriages, engage in political debate, and arrange alliances between the Visigoths and Merovingians.<sup>31-36</sup> As a result, much of Gregory's information about the rebellion likely came from these envoys from the south. There are two main parts within Gregory's account where he summarizes the events of Hermenegild's rebellion. The first was likely written immediately following the conclusion of the rebellion, after Hermenegild had been taken prisoner but before he was executed.<sup>37</sup> Gregory describes the motivation of the rebellion as religious in

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Tours, and Ormonde Maddock Dalton. *The History of the Franks*. 2 2. (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1927), c.V(40), 212.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(43), 214-217.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(18), 251-252.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(29), 258-259.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(34), 265.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(40), 271-274.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(38), 209-210.

nature, as Leovigild persecuted Catholics in his kingdom. The source of this persecution, according to Gregory, was the wicked “Goiswinth, whom king Leovigild espoused as widow of King Athanagild.”<sup>38</sup> Hermenegild comes into the story as a result of the conflict between Gosuintha and her Catholic granddaughter Ingundis over her refusal to convert to Arianism. Following Ingundis’s rejection of Arianism, “the queen, aflame with fury of wrath, seized the girl by the hair of her head and dashed her to the ground; there she spurned her for a long time with her feet, and, all bleeding as she was, had her stripped and plunged into the [baptismal font].”<sup>39</sup> As a result of this animosity between his wife and his daughter-in-law, Leovigild sought to separate the two, sending Hermenegild and his wife to rule in Seville. It is here where Hermenegild was persuaded by his wife to convert to Catholicism. According to Gregory, “[w]hen Leovigild heard this, he began to seek occasion to bring his son to ruin.”<sup>40</sup> However, Hermenegild discovered Leovigild’s plot and sought the protection of the Byzantine Emperor Tiberius II. When Leovigild began his campaign against his son, he bribed the Byzantine prefect to abandon Hermenegild, and as a result Hermenegild fled to seek shelter in a church. Reccared was then sent to convince his brother to leave the church and return home with them, and Leovigild swore an oath to his son that he would not be harmed. Instead, Leovigild violated his oath and had Hermenegild arrested, stripped of his titles, and exiled. Later in book VI, Gregory goes into further detail about Hermenegild’s support in the rebellion, detailing how he was also supported by Miro (r. 570-583), the Catholic King of the Suevi in Galicia, who was defeated by Leovigild while trying to assist the rebellion militarily.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in Book VIII, written after the conclusion of the rebellion, we get a glimpse of the end of Hermenegild and the Merovingian reaction to the events. We discover that Ingundis

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(38), 209-210.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(38), 209-210.

<sup>40</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(38), 209-210.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(29), 258-259.

remained with the Byzantines, presumably as a result of her connection to mother Brunhild and value as a hostage as the sister of the King of Austrasia, Childebert II (r. 575-595).<sup>42</sup> However, she and her young son died in Africa as she was being conducted to Constantinople.<sup>43</sup> After Hermenegild was murdered by his father, King Gunthram prepared his army to invade Spain in retaliation. However, in order to prevent Burgundy and Austrasia from exacting vengeance, Leovigild sent envoys to Queen Fredegund of Neustria asking her to prevent the other Merovingian kingdoms from marching into Spain. His letter reads “Be thou quick to slay our enemies, which is to say, Childebert [III] and his mother; and make peace with King Guntram; buy it at any price you will. If perchance money be lacking to thee, we will send it thee in secret; do only what we ask.”<sup>44</sup> Neustria managed to fend off a Burgundian invasion of Spain for a time, but King Gunthram’s invasion eventually did come, but his army was met by the Visigoths near Toulouse, commanded by Reccared.<sup>45</sup> Gunthram’s army was repelled by Reccared, and Leovigild repeatedly sent envoys to Gunthram to unsuccessfully sue for peace.<sup>46</sup> The war continued, and Reccared succeeded his father upon his death. Book IX recounts how Reccared continued to try to broker peace with the Merovingians, sending envoys to Gunthram and Childebert. Reccared’s attempts at peace only increased the enmity between Toledo and Burgundy.<sup>47</sup> Finally, Reccared converted to Catholicism himself and held the Third Council of Toledo, formally renouncing Arianism throughout the kingdom.<sup>48</sup> Following his conversion, Reccared again sought peace with the Merovingians. Gunthram replied, “What faith can they promise, or how can they look to be believed, when they

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<sup>42</sup> Goffart, *Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)*, 107-108.

<sup>43</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(28), 348-349.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(28), 348-349.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(31), 353-356.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(45), 365-366.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IX(1), 371.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IX(15), 383-384.

delivered my niece Ingund into captivity, and treacherously let slay her spouse, while she herself died during her journey? I therefore receive no embassy from Reccared until God hath granted me revenge upon my enemies.”<sup>49</sup> While Gunthram continued to seek territorial gains against the Visigoths, Childebert and Brunhild were willing to pledge peace and friendship with Reccared, and were willing to approve Reccared’s betrothal to Childebert’s other sister, Chlodosind, provided that Gunthram was also willing to give his blessing to the marriage. Childebert attempted to mediate between Reccared and Gunthram, and while Gunthram was initially against allowing his niece’s death go unavenged, eventually was persuaded to accept peace and consent to Chlodosind’s marriage.<sup>50</sup> However, Gunthram still raised his army to invade Septimania, and was caught in an ambush and devastated by the Visigoths. Outraged, Gunthram blamed the loss of his army on Childebert’s peace with Reccared and forbade any communication from passing through Burgundy between the two kingdoms.<sup>51</sup> As we can clearly see from the political aftermath of Hermenegild’s rebellion, the Merovingian kingdoms were tightly connected politically with the Visigoths to the south.

The political world of Merovingian Gaul in the time of Gregory of Tours was dominated by the sons of Chlothar I. In the East was Chilperic and the kingdom of Neustria, while Sigebert and his wife Brunhild ruled Austrasia in the northeast and Gunthram ruled Burgundy in the southwest. Following Sigebert’s assassination in 575, Queen Brunhild, serving as regent for her young son Chilperic II, placed themselves under the protection of King Gunthram of Burgundy.

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<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IX(16), 385.

<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IX(20), 388-394.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IX(31), 401-402.

By the time of Hermenegild's rebellion, the kingdoms of Austrasia and Burgundy were close allies, and opposed to Neustria politically.<sup>52</sup>

In this same time period, the Franks and Visigoths also interact politically, from waging war with one another over southern Gaul to forming alliances and bonds through marriage. The Franks under Clovis pushed the Visigoths out of Aquitaine, leaving them with only Narbonensis as their only holding north of the Pyrenees.<sup>53</sup> The Visigoths also had ties to the Merovingians through marriage, as Queen Brunhild of Austrasia was the daughter of Athanagild and Gosuintha (fig. 2). Thus while the Visigoths and Franks may have been rivals politically, they still exchanged envoys and arranged alliances with one another. It is in this type of political structure that Gregory of Tours is writing. To Gregory, Hermenegild's rebellion served as a set piece within the world of Merovingian social politics. Hermenegild became a proxy of the competition between Neustria and Austrasia/Burgundy. In an effort to strengthen his political ties with his northern neighbors, Leovigild arranged a marriage between Hermenegild and the Austrasian princess Ingundis, the granddaughter of his own wife Gosuintha.<sup>54</sup> As a result, Hermenegild looked north to Burgundy and Austrasia for support when he declared his rebellion. Additionally, Leovigild sent envoys to arrange a marriage between Reccared and Rigunth, the daughter of Chilperic, although this arrangement does not seem to have succeeded.<sup>55</sup> These negotiations between Chilperic and Leovigild continue during Hermenegild's rebellion, and help to demonstrate the close ties that the Visigothic rulers had with their respective Merovingians.

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<sup>52</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(28), 348-349.

<sup>53</sup> Collins, *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, 36-37.

<sup>54</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IV(38), 265.

<sup>55</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VI(34), 142-144.



Gregory's primary motivation in writing book V of his *Decem Libri Historiarum* is to portray Chilperic as a cruel and evil ruler, and by comparison, to portray himself as the good and wise prophet. Gregory has a strong anti-Neustrian bend in his writings, likely stemming from when Chilperic invaded Tours, which had previously been part of Sigebert's realm of Austrasia under the division following Chlothar's death in 561.<sup>56</sup> Book V begins immediately following the murder of King Sigebert of Austrasia, which was orchestrated by Chilperic's Queen Fredegund. As Heinzelmann writes, the organization of books V and VI revolve around the theme of a "godless king".<sup>57</sup> Gregory sought to portray Chilperic and Fredegund as a modern Ahab and Jezebel, rulers led astray and persecuting the innocent. Opposite to the characters of Ahab and Jezebel is the prophet Elijah, who points to the true path and is saved from danger posed by their plots. Gregory's writings portray himself as this new Elijah, seeking to illuminate the correct path and being saved from danger such as when Chilperic unlawfully seized Tours from Austrasia. In order to help advance his narrative against Chilperic, Gregory utilized Hermenegild's rebellion, especially the interactions between Leovigild and Chilperic. When Hermenegild sought support for his rebellion, Burgundy and Austrasia wanted to come to his aid. Leovigild sought to prevent an intervention on the part of Burgundy and Austrasia. In order to accomplish this, Leovigild worked with Chilperic to prevent Brunhild and Gunthram from mounting any support and to delay any potential aid that they would send to Hermenegild.<sup>58</sup> Thus the rebellion served to advance Gregory's narrative against Chilperic and his analogy to Ahab, as Chilperic was willing to work with Arians against Catholics in order to prevent Hermenegild from succeeding and the Burgundians from gaining an ally in the south. Leovigild and Chilperic were willing to cooperate in order to accomplish their

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<sup>56</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IV(45), 154.

<sup>57</sup> Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> Goffart, *Byzantine Policy in the West under Tiberius and Maurice: The Pretenders Hermenegild and Gundovald (579-585)*, 109.

mutual goal of ending the rebellion, as Leovigild sought to maintain his authority over his kingdom, and Chilperic sought to prevent the rise of potential allies to his enemies.

Gregory of Tours also uses Hermenegild's rebellion, however, to promote one of his key messages in his *Decem Libri Historiarum*, namely about the behavior of women. Throughout his writings, one of the core themes of Gregory's *Historiarum* is comparing the wicked to the holy. In the same manner as he did in juxtaposing the comparison of Chilperic and himself to Ahab and Elijah, he also makes several comparisons regarding how women ought to behave following widowhood.<sup>59</sup> To Gregory, the most holy and preferred thing a widow could do was to shut herself off from the material world, cloister herself in a monastery and live out the rest of her life in the service of God.<sup>60</sup> As an example of ideal behavior in a widow, Gregory used his own mother as the shining example. Following the death of his father, Gregory's mother dedicated her life to the church and because of this he regards her as a saint.<sup>61</sup> In the same way as he compared the good in himself with the evil in Chilperic, so too did he do so between his mother and Gosuintha. To Gregory, Gosuintha was the antithesis of ideal widowhood. Rather than being content with her life and dedicating herself to God following the death of her husband Athanagild, Gosuintha instead chose to remain in the political world.<sup>62</sup> Not only does she continue to participate in Visigothic politics, but she even went so far as to marry the new king, Leovigild. As a result of his negative opinion of Gosuintha, Gregory assigned much of the blame for the instigation of the rebellion to her. According to him, Gosuintha abused her granddaughter and stepdaughter-in-law for her Catholic faith, resulting in a rift between her and her stepson, Hermenegild.<sup>63</sup> In an effort to

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<sup>59</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.IV(27), .137

<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.VIII(32), 356.

<sup>61</sup> Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, and Concubines: Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian Elite*, 18-19.

<sup>62</sup> Dailey, *Queens, Consorts, and Concubines: Gregory of Tours and the Merovingian Elite*, 26-27.

<sup>63</sup> Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, c.V(38), 209-210.

circumvent this, Leovigild sent Hermenegild and Ingundis to Seville, where Hermenegild was converted to Catholicism by his wife and Bishop Leander and declared his rebellion against his father and wicked step-mother.

## POPE GREGORY THE GREAT

In addition to Gregory of Tours, there is one other source from outside of Spain that includes an account of Hermenegild's rebellion. Pope Gregory the Great was writing his account from Rome, as part of his *Dialogues*, a collection of hagiographies and miracles. To Pope Gregory, Hermenegild's rebellion took on a religious nature, portrayed by the Pope as a struggle against the perfidy of Arianism. Ultimately Hermenegild was martyred for his conviction to Catholicism and became a saint, also becoming the chief reason for the eventual conversion of Spain under Reccared.<sup>64</sup>

Focusing less on the rebellion itself, Gregory was more interested in the religious conflict immediately following the war, with Hermenegild having been captured by his father and being pressed to reconvert to Arianism. Gregory described Hermenegild as "King Hermangild... recently converted to the Catholic faith from Arianism."<sup>65</sup> Gregory recognized Hermenegild as a king in his own right, and still referred to Leovigild as a king as well, likely stemming from the coregency. As a result of his refusal to abandon Catholicism, Leovigild "deposed him as king and deprived him of everything he possessed... [and] he was cast into prison."<sup>66</sup> According to Gregory, Hermenegild was then tortured in prison before finally being executed on his father's orders the night before Easter for refusing to accept the Sacrament of Communion from an Arian bishop. However, Gregory's account of Hermenegild did not end with his death. Instead, to Gregory, Hermenegild's death was merely the beginning of a miraculous conversion. After his death, "[h]is father, an Arian and a murderer, came to regret what he had done, yet his regret did not bring him

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<sup>64</sup> Gregory, and John Zimmerman. *Saint Gregory the Great, Dialogues* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), c.III(31), 166-169.

<sup>65</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(31), 166-169.

<sup>66</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(31), 166-169.

to salvation...When he was lying on his deathbed, he took care to recommend his son, King Reccared... to Bishop Leander.”<sup>67</sup> Following Leovigild’s death and his ascension as the sole King of Toledo, “Reccared gave up the heretical ways of his father to follow the example of his martyr brother.”<sup>68</sup> Thus Reccared’s conversion and the subsequent Third Council of Toledo and its effects were the direct result of the martyrdom of Hermenegild. Gregory ended his vignette of Hermenegild’s martyrdom by explaining the lesson he sought to impart on his writer, as his *Dialogues* is styled as a conversation between himself and a chronicler. He compared the martyrdom to the planting of a seed in that, when the seed is planted and dies, it grows an abundant harvest. In this same way, “[o]ne grain died as a faithful witness, and an abundant harvest of souls sprang up to embrace the true faith.”<sup>69</sup>

In order to understand Gregory’s purposes for the story of Hermenegild’s rebellion, one must examine it in the context of the group of stories it is included with in *Dialogues*. This particular section that includes Hermenegild’s hagiography concerns the Lombards, and lists the many miracles and martyrs pertaining to the Lombard persecution of Catholics in Northern Italy. In each of these stories Gregory praised those men and women who refuse to submit to the Arian Lombards, even under pain of death. The accompanying miracles helped to assert the status of Arianism as a heresy and the rightfulness of Catholicism as the true faith.<sup>70</sup> Gregory was so explicit in his motivations for including Hermenegild in this list of martyrs and the conversion of the Visigoths in the list of miracles that he outright stated as much just before recounting Hermenegild’s story. In his writing style of the conversation between a narrator and a scribe,

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<sup>67</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(31), 166-169.

<sup>68</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(31), 166-169.

<sup>69</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(31), 166-169.

<sup>70</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(30), 164-166.

Gregory wrote as the narrator “I will now look at other places outside of Italy to show how they’ve dealt with Arianism.”<sup>71</sup>

The reasoning for Gregory’s choice of this particular story was likely twofold. Firstly, the conversion of the Kingdom of Toledo was one of the most significant shifts in religious power in decades, as it realigned the Visigoths with the Franks and Byzantines and effectively left the Lombards on their own in terms of Arian kingdoms. Thus Gregory could likely draw the conclusion that the rebellion of the Catholic Hermenegild only years before his brother’s ascension and conversion must have played some pivotal role in the conversion. Gregory was also getting most of his information from Spanish travelers in Rome, mainly clerics, and thus was receiving a secondhand account of the events, likely also colored by the general clergy’s opinion of the events and their relationship. The second reason for Gregory choosing this event could have been because of his relationship with Bishop Leander of Seville, a major player within the rebellion. Leander was sent to Constantinople to seek aid from Emperor Tiberius for Hermenegild at the same time that Gregory was in Constantinople as a papal legate to the emperor.<sup>72</sup> During their time in Constantinople, Gregory and Leander became friends, and maintained their friendship throughout their lives. Thus it is possible that Gregory would have known more of the situation in Spain through Leander and thus would be better equipped to include it within his writings.

Pope Gregory used Hermenegild’s rebellion as an example for the Italian people to emulate. Hermenegild embodied all of the characteristics that Gregory was seeking to instill on the people of Italy in their resistance against the Lombard invasions. By including the story of Hermenegild, Gregory was hoping that the Italians would emulate Hermenegild’s behavior and

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<sup>71</sup> Gregory, *Dialogues*, c.III(30), 164-166.

<sup>72</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 47.

restore Catholicism to the parts of Italy held by the Arian Lombards. Hermenegild's rebellion was the seed that once planted, resulted in the growth and blossoming of Catholicism in the Kingdom of Toledo, and Gregory was hoping that similar would happen in Lombardy.

## JOHN OF BICLARO

Moving closer to the events geographically, and a few years after Gregory the Great's writing, John of Biclaro included a version of Hermenegild's rebellion in his account of Visigothic history. John was a Spanish Goth as well as a Catholic. He was born in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century in Lusitania, and spent a significant portion of his early life studying in Constantinople. Upon returning to Spain, he was exiled by Leovigild to Barcelona, where he stayed for roughly ten years, during the entirety of the rebellion.<sup>73</sup> Two possible explanations for John's exile are his prominence as a Catholic Goth in a time when Leovigild was promoting Arianism, or a mistrust on the part of the Visigoths of the Byzantine Empire, and by extension John. Following the end of the rebellion, Leovigild's death, and Reccared's conversion of the kingdom to Nicaean Christianity, John returned from exile. Following his return, John established a monastery in Biclaro and became Bishop of Girona. As a bishop, John attended the synods and ecumenical councils of Spain until his death in 621.<sup>74</sup> In addition to his contributions as a bishop, John also wrote his *Chronicle*, a history of the Visigoths, which recounts through the reign of Reccared, ending in the year 590. While the account ends in 590, it was likely written in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, as he refers to the deaths of Emperor Maurice and Pope Gregory the Great in 602 and 604 respectively. This makes John the closest chronologically of the Spanish sources, and also the source upon which Isidore will refer to for portions of his own account.

John wrote his chronicle as a continuation of the chronicle of Victor of Tunnuna, who himself was continuing in a greater tradition of continuing the chronicle of Sextus Julius Africanus, which was written in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD.<sup>75</sup> The purpose of the chronicle was to create a world

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<sup>73</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 2-3.



chronicle from the time of Moses through the present day, and the work of has been supplemented by numerous authors over time. Each subsequent author builds upon the previous, and John is no exception. John's primary purpose for writing his portion of the chronicle was a metaphorical passing of the torch of Christianity from the Byzantine Empire to the then still newly formed Catholic Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo. Likely as a result of his studies in Constantinople, John's chronicle was quite biased in favor of the Byzantines and the Visigoths. A major theme of his writing was the portrayal of the Kingdom of Toledo as the revival of the Western Roman Empire, and a peer of the Byzantines in the East. As a result, John's account sought to portray the Visigoths and the Byzantines in the most favorable light, going so far as to neglect the conquests of Byzantine territory in southern Hispania by the Visigoths, as he never portrays his two subjects as in conflict.<sup>76</sup>

As for Hermenegild's rebellion, John himself provided rather little information about the details, but from what he chose to include in his chronicle, together with the information he provides on the reigns of Leovigild and Reccared, we can begin to understand why he chose to portray the rebellion in the way that he does. John first mentions Hermenegild in his narrative when Leovigild elevated his two sons to become his "associates in his rule."<sup>77</sup> He then mentioned Hermenegild's marriage to Ingundis, the daughter of King Sigebert of Austrasia, and the appointment of Hermenegild to his own province within the kingdom.<sup>78</sup> His next mention is when "Leovigild raised an army to subdue his rebel son."<sup>79</sup> He then besieged Seville and defeated King Mir of Galicia who had sought to relieve Hermenegild. Leovigild managed to take Seville, but Hermenegild fled to Cordoba, a city in Byzantine territory, where he was finally apprehended,

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<sup>76</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 7-11.

<sup>77</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.27, 67.

<sup>78</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.54, 71.

<sup>79</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.66, 73.

presumably as a result of bribery. Hermenegild was then sent into exile in Valencia and stripped of his title as coregent.<sup>80</sup> Finally, Hermenegild was murdered by the Arian bishop Sisbert<sup>81</sup> in Tarragona, who then himself died “a disgraceful death.”<sup>82</sup>

In John’s account, Hermenegild’s rebellion against his father was an unjustified one. John portrayed the rebellion as illegitimate because it was a case of a son rebelling against his father. Additionally, John made no mention of any potential religious motivations in the rebellion, only stating that it was spurred by Gosuintha, but neglecting to elaborate on her role in the rebellion or even which side she had taken. The common interpretation of this is that Gosuintha encouraged Hermenegild to rebel against his father, and thus took his side in the conflict, but as we saw in Gregory of Tours, her role in the conflict is just as confusing and unknown as any other possible motivation.<sup>83</sup>

Most interestingly about John’s account of Hermenegild’s rebellion is the role of religion, in that it plays no role whatsoever in the rebellion. John made no explicit mention of religious conflict in the rebellion, which is quite striking given that John himself was extremely anti-Arian, and possibly suffered exile himself under Leovigild as a result of his faith. The common interpretation of this lack of a religious element in John’s account is that the rebellion itself had no religious motivation.<sup>84</sup> As a result, the rebellion was a purely political conflict and Hermenegild’s Catholic conversion had no effect on the motives of the rebellion.

However, there is another way of potentially understanding John’s failure to mention religion as a factor in the rebellion. It is possible that, while there were some religious undertones

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<sup>80</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.69, 74.

<sup>81</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.74, 74.

<sup>82</sup> John of Biclaro, *Chronicon*, c.84, 76.

<sup>83</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Spain, Unity in Diversity, 400-1000*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> O’Callaghan, *A History of Medieval Spain*, 44.

to the rebellion, John himself simply did not wish to portray the conflict as such, as it did not fit into the narrative and message he was creating with his account. John sought to portray Spain not only as the new Western Roman Empire, but also as the superior of the Byzantine Empire. As a result, when John wrote about Reccared and the Third Council of Toledo, he made direct comparisons to the Council of Nicaea, claiming that Toledo had managed to accomplish that which Nicaea had begun, namely eliminating Arianism. The Third Council of Toledo under Reccared represented the culmination of the work first started by the Byzantines to combat the heresy of Arianism, and in his description of the council he makes it apparent that the Visigoths were able to succeed and accomplish what the Byzantines had begun. John saw Reccared as a new Constantine, leading the Kingdom of Toledo forward as a shining beacon of Nicaean Christianity, and creating this identity required a different perspective on the events immediately preceding its founding.<sup>85</sup>

In order to portray the new united and Catholic kingdom of Reccared as a new Western Roman Empire John needed to justify the conquests of Leovigild immediately prior to Reccared's reign. John does so by portraying Leovigild as a good king and a talented military strategist, and claiming that in spite of his Arian faith, his efforts to unify the kingdom and expand it to incorporate the Suevi as well as territory in southern Hispania (but he will not mention that the territory came at the expense of the Byzantines) were commendable and allowed for the conversion and unification under Reccared. As a result of this interpretation of Leovigild's actions, any potential challenge to Leovigild's authority as the sole ruler of the Kingdom needed to be dealt with swiftly and appropriately on John's part. In most instances he did so in only a few words, making note that Leovigild was able to quell several rebellions in the southern portions of

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<sup>85</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 11.

Hispania, but there was one rebellion he could not as easily dismiss. As a result, John avoided any mention of religious conflict or Byzantine support, as these details on the rebellion would have served to undermine his narrative, and instead took hold of what he saw as the most significant aspect of the rebellion, the father-son dynamic. John drew upon the old notions of familial bonds to make the claim that the rebellion in its entirety is rendered illegitimate as a result of its nature as a son rebelling against his father. Regardless of any potential religious conflict or political motivations, John was able to reject the rebellion wholesale as it directly challenges the established nature of the father-son relationship. As a result of these familial bonds, any rebellion, regardless of its motivations, if conducted by a son against his own father, was at face value immoral.

## ISIDORE OF SEVILLE

The final author to write about Hermenegild's rebellion was Isidore of Seville. He was the younger brother of Leander of Seville, and eventually succeeded him to the Bishopric of Seville. As a result, Isidore was intimately connected to the major characters in the event, namely through his older brother Leander, the very bishop who oversaw Hermenegild's conversion and was sent by Hermenegild to Constantinople to seek aid from the Byzantines.<sup>86</sup>

In spite of his proximity to events which involved his brother, as well as his position as Bishop of Seville following his brother's death and his prominent role in later Spanish church synods, Isidore did not actually say much in his *History* when it came to Hermenegild's rebellion. In a single sentence, Isidore notes "Then [Leovigild] laid siege to his son Hermenegild, who was in revolt against his dominion, and defeated him."<sup>87</sup>

Isidore was writing his account roughly forty years after the events have occurred, and from circumstances quite different from John, who wrote roughly 15 years earlier.<sup>88</sup> In order to better understand the difference in context between John and Isidore, one must understand the instability in the kingdom of the Visigoths that arose following the death of Reccared. When Reccared died in 601, he was succeeded by his son Liuva II. Only two years later in 603, Liuva was deposed and executed, leading to Witteric claiming the throne.<sup>89</sup> Witteric was then himself deposed by a group of nobles in 610, who then elected Gundemar, Duke of Narbonne, as their king. Gundemar only reigned for two years, though, and died of natural causes in 612, being succeeded by Sisebut. It was during the reign of Sisebut that Isidore wrote his first copy of his

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<sup>86</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 14.

<sup>87</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.49, 102.

<sup>88</sup> Wolf, *Conquerors and Chroniclers of Early Medieval Spain*, 12-13.

<sup>89</sup> *Visigothic Spain 409-711*, Collins, 73.

*History of the Goths* in 619. Sisebut died in 621 and was succeeded by his infant son Reccared II. That same year his son was overthrown by nobles who elected his uncle Suinthila as king. It was during the reign of Suinthila that the revised version of Isidore's *History* was written. Over the 20 year period following the death of Reccared, the Kingdom of Toledo had seven rulers, with reigns anywhere from less than a year to nine years long.<sup>90</sup> When compared to the 18 and 15 year rules of Leovigild and Reccared, the early 7<sup>th</sup> century was far less stable, with numerous depositions and elections. Specifically, several of the rulers attempted to establish dynastic succession in the kingdom, which went against the traditional Visigothic practice of electing kings. This issue was likely a particularly important point, as Isidore bore witness to two noble revolts which sought to remove a dynastic successor from office, namely Liuva II and Reccared II. Thus it made sense that in Isidore's 624 version of his *History*, he hardly mentioned many of the kings following Reccared, and up to Sisebut. He wrote half a chapter about Liuva II,<sup>91</sup> one on Witteric,<sup>92</sup> three sentences for Gundemar,<sup>93</sup> two paragraphs on Sisebut,<sup>94</sup> and a single sentence for Reccared II.<sup>95</sup> It was here where can begin to understand why Isidore chose to portray Hermenegild's rebellion the way he does.

Despite his status as a Catholic bishop, the younger brother of one of the major players in the rebellion, and vehemently anti-Arian,<sup>96</sup> Isidore himself did not use religious language to

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<sup>90</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.56-62, 105-107.

<sup>91</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.57, 105.

<sup>92</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.58, 105-106.

<sup>93</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.59, 106.

<sup>94</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.60-61, 106-107.

<sup>95</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.61, 107. "He left a small son, Reccared, who was regarded as the king for a few days after the death of his father until his own death intervened."

<sup>96</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.7, 85-86. In describing the initial conversion of the Visigoths, "Valens, however, had deviated from the truth of the Catholic faith and was caught up in the perversity of the Arian heresy. Thus he sent heretical priests and, with evil persuasion, added the Goths to the error of his doctrine. With this pernicious seed, he infused a deadly poison into this excellent people, who thus held and maintained for a long time the error which they had trustingly accepted."

describe Hermenegild's rebellion, in fact he hardly used any language at all to describe it. Throughout the chapter containing Hermenegild's rebellion, Isidore praised Leovigild's military prowess and success in expanding the kingdom, and even ended the chapter with "But the error of impiety tarnished in him the glory of such success".<sup>97</sup> He then went on for two chapters to describe Leovigild in negative terms, about how he persecuted non-Arians within the kingdom and supplemented the royal treasury by robbing his own citizens.<sup>98</sup> What Isidore did with this description, however, was set up Leovigild to be a foil to his son Reccared. Where Leovigild was wild and warlike, his son was regal and pious. He noted that the territory conquered by Leovigild was held together peacefully and ruled well by Reccared.<sup>99</sup> Thus Isidore played a balancing game with Leovigild and his Arian beliefs. He acknowledged Leovigild's conquests as a positive for the kingdom, especially when they are ruled by a good Catholic monarch such as Reccared, while at the same time denounced his heresy as a poison. His negative portrayals of those that rose up in rebellion, either against Leovigild or the later rulers reflects Isidore's message against rebellion. Thus, rather than possibly undermine his own messages about the unification of Spain by including a rebellion by a Catholic prince that would have been hard to argue against from his perspective, he instead chose to neglect it, relegating it to a single sentence.

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<sup>97</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.49, 102.

<sup>98</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.50-51, 103.

<sup>99</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia de regibus Gothorum, Vandalorum et Suevorum*, c.55, 104-105.

## CONCLUSION

Each of these four authors found something within Hermenegild's rebellion worth writing about. While their accounts may be different in content and message, they each were able to take the event as it played out and adapt it to suit their own narratives. For some of the authors, the religious aspects present in the rebellion and its aftermath helped them to advance their arguments from a religious perspective. Such was the case with Gregory the Great, who used the tone of religious conflict which is prevalent especially following the defeat of Hermenegild to promote his anti-Arian message in his *Dialogues*. His third book in the series in particular was an encouragement to the people of Italy to resist the Arian Lombards who were invading Catholic northern Italy. To Gregory, Hermenegild was a martyr and an example of a good Catholic ruler, willing to die for his faith before succumbing to heresy. In portraying Hermenegild's story as a hagiography, Gregory was hoping to inspire the same level of zeal and fidelity in the people of Italy so that they would be encouraged to continue to resist the Lombards, knowing that such a miracle as the conversion of an entire kingdom through one man was possible.

Gregory of Tours' account is another example of utilizing the religious nature of the rebellion, as he was accustomed to portraying the Visigoths as the adversaries of the Franks. In this way, Hermenegild's rebellion was seen as a positive, as he was closely aligned with the Austrasians and Burgundians through his marriage to Ingundis. Gregory of Tours found the political and religious connections within Hermenegild's rebellion to be the most significant and important to his writing, as they allowed Gregory to place Hermenegild's rebellion directly into the grand story of Merovingian politics. They gave him another example of the wickedness of the Neustrians, who allied themselves with Leovigild in an attempt to maintain the balance of power within the kingdoms during the rebellion. In addition to his narrative of the wickedness of Chilperic



and Fredegund, Gregory of Tours also had another angle within his *Historiarum* that Hermenegild's rebellion served to advance, the role of widows in society. Hermenegild's rebellion featured one of the most prominent widows of the time, Queen Gosuintha, the widow of the former king, the wife of the current king, the mother of an Austrasian queen, and the grandmother of Hermenegild's wife. Gosuintha served as a perfect example for Gregory of Tours to use as a wicked queen and the improperly-behaved widow following the death of her husband. Gosuintha not only remained politically active and powerful, but went so far as to marry the new king and, according to Gregory, to torment her subjects as a result of her Arian faith. Thus Gregory found the close connections between the Merovingians and the Visigothic rulers to be useful for advancing his writing about the comparison between good and evil.

John and Isidore are different from the other two authors in that they include Hermenegild's rebellion almost out of necessity, rather than by choice. As a result of their Spanish heritage, and the fact that the rebellion itself was so significant and devastating to the kingdom, they are both obligated to include it within their accounts. For John, the rebellion represented a setback in Leovigild's unification of the Kingdom of Toledo. John's goal in his writing was to establish the Kingdom of Toledo as the successor to West Rome and an equal of the Byzantine Empire, and as a result any events that would interfere with this presentation were downplayed. This included the fighting between the Visigoths and Byzantines which John neglected to mention in his account as well as the religious aspects of Hermenegild's rebellion and the support he received from the Byzantines.

Isidore was in much the same predicament as John, writing in a time of political strife and usurpations. Isidore's portrayal of the glory of the Kingdom of Toledo served to emphasize loyalty to the crown and discourage rebellion, yet there was one major rebellion that Isidore could not

reconcile to this narrative. Isidore's older brother, Leander, who raised him as a child, was a close advisor of Hermenegild, and his representative to the Byzantine Empire. As a result, Isidore himself was directly involved in the events of the rebellion by his familial connections. Rather than allow the rebellion to undermine his writing, as he would have been discouraging rebellion while including one which his older brother (and quite probably he himself) supported, he instead chose to gloss over the rebellion and included it in a single line.

Thus each author was able to pull different aspects of the rebellion to suit their own needs. One loses this understanding when doing a direct comparison of the four accounts in the search for factual information, as the events of the rebellion itself become more important than which facts are included in which sources. Synthesizing a "truthful" narrative of Hermenegild's rebellion will remain impossible because each of the four authors portray it so differently. But rather than speculating on which portions of the authors' narratives are correct, we can instead investigate the authors themselves and thus gain a better understanding of why they each chose this particular rebellion in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century of Visigothic Spain and found it suitable for their needs.

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