

Clovis and the Year AD 508

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Introduction

Clovis is the historical embodiment of France. In 1996, when the French celebrated 1500 years of national existence, what they counted forward from was the year of Clovis' baptism.¹ I think they got the year wrong (1996 - 1500 = 496), but the event they chose to celebrate was certainly right. When Clovis became Catholic, France became Catholic.

More is true. When France became Catholic, Christendom came into being; and when Christendom came into being the stage was set for the strange mix of political and religious interests that rendered the papacy beastlike. Just as the little horn starts small and becomes "exceedingly great" (Dan 8:9), so too papal political influence starts small and only later becomes exceedingly great. But all of this has a starting point, and that is Clovis' decision to accept Catholic Christianity.

There are two schools of thought as to when Clovis was baptized. One follows Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks*,² the other does not. The present paper falls in the second category. A handful of primary sources for Clovis' life exist today,³ but Gregory's *History* is not one of them. According to Danuta Shanzer this *History* is "a non-documentary literary text."⁴ It is not contemporary with its subject matter, and in those places where it is possible to check it against other sources it is not reliable.

Why Is Clovis Still Important?

Clovis is still important today because decisions he made in the fifth and sixth centuries AD set processes in motion that continue to affect our daily lives. Lord Acton (b. 1834), a Roman Catholic scholar who, with others, initiated the monumental *Cambridge Medieval History* project, summarizes the extent of papal secular influence over Europe during the middle ages in an essay titled, "The Political System of the

¹ See Susan J. Terrio, "Crucible of the Millennium?: The Clovis Affair in Contemporary France" (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41/3 [July 1999] 438-57).

² Gregory's, *History of the Franks* has been translated into English by M. Dalton (Oxford, 1927) and L. Thorpe (Penguin, 1974). It is not represented in the Loeb Classical Library.

³ Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood, *Avitus of Vienne: Letters and Selected Prose*, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 38 (Liverpool University Press, reprinted 2002). S.J.B. Barnish, *Selected Variae* by Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, Translated Texts for Historians, vol. 12 (Liverpool University Press, reprinted 2006).

⁴ "Dating the baptism of Clovis: the bishop of Vienne vs. the bishop of Tours," *Early Medieval Europe*, 7 (1998): 50.

Popes.”⁵ Although the system is no longer in force, Europe was shaped by it. What it is now is based on what it was.

The popes at one time controlled vast swaths of real estate. Starting from Naples in central Italy, we proceed to the islands of Corsica and Sardinia, Provence (southern France), the city of Tarragona (Catalona), the provinces of Aragon and Navarre (northern Spain), Portugal, the House of Anjou (western France), the kingdom of the Hohenstaufen (southern Germany), the French Norman kingdom, England and Ireland,⁶ other British islands (Isle of Man, Hebrides, and Orkneys), Norway, Pomerania, Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia (western Czech Republic), Hungary, and back to Sicily.⁷ According to Acton, all these countries came under papal protection at one time or another. Bulgaria was included briefly in the years before the fourth crusade (1204) and, starting in 1246, even parts of Ruthenia (from the Dnieper to the mouth of the Danube). It was an altogether incredible performance.

The Papal system of states gradually extended itself, till in the thirteenth century it reached its culminating point,⁸ when its great semicircle encompassed the States of the German Emperors. The Slavs and Magyars of the East had joined the Latin nations of the West, and the Sicilian Empire of the South was the connecting link between them.⁹

We have mapped these places onto space; let us now map them onto time. We do this by comparing two time slices a thousand years apart. In 1500, on the eve of the Reformation, every corner of Western Europe was Catholic. Many of its nations were ruled as papal fiefs, for which their kings paid rents.

But if we turn the clock back to AD 500, the scene is quite different. At this time Europe was either pagan, ruled by Arian Christians, or by Celtic Christians – none of them pro-papal. Muslims came a bit later. In broad strokes, the Basques were pagan until the IV/V (or XII/XIII) centuries; Bretons, Heruls, and Lombards until the VI century; Alemanni, Burgundians, and Saxons until the VII century, Frisians until the VII/VIII century; Thuringians until the VIII century. The Ostrogoths, Suebi, Vandals, Alans, and Visigoths were all Christian when they entered the Empire, but they were Arians and therefore heretics. Celtic Christianity originated in Ireland in the V century and spread to Scotland, much of Britain, and some of Gaul. The papacy didn’t oppose Celtic Christianity with the same fervor as Arianism, but considered it heretical. Sicily and some parts of southern Italy fell to Muslim invaders in the VIII century, along with Corsica, Sardinia, the Balearic Islands (Majorca, Minorca, Ibiza, Formentera), and Spain. The Muslim presence in Spain lasted almost 800 years, from 711 until 1492. So long as these places and people groups

⁵ Lord Acton, *Essays on Church and State* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968 [Apollo Edition]), pp.123-58.

⁶ Clifford, Rose Catherine, Ph.D., “England as Papal Fief: The Role of the Papal Legate in the Early Period, 1216-1241” (University of California, Los Angeles, 1972, 387 pp.).

⁷ Acton 1968, 126-39, 147, 149, 153, 157, passim.

⁸ This date is sometimes given as “the middle of the seventeenth century” (idem, p. 111).

⁹ Acton 1968, 148.

were non-Catholic, they could not be brought under papal control. One by one, all eventually converted.

There is a breathtaking difference between what we see in Western Europe in AD 500 and the corresponding situation in 1500. This change did not occur in a moment. It was a long and complex process, but this process had a starting point in time and space. The place where it started was France, because France was the first country of Europe to become Catholic. And the time when this happened was when Clovis became Catholic.¹⁰ That event was the vehicle by which both he and his kingdom came into relation with the papacy. Some place his baptism in 496; others in 508.

Clovis and Gregory

Those who accept Gregory as a historical source place the baptism of Clovis in 496; those who do not, generally place it in 508. Below I argue, first, that Gregory is not a reliable historian, and second, that 496 is not a reliable date.¹¹ In a later section I examine some reasons why it makes sense to accept 508.

Problems

One problem with taking Gregory as a source for Clovis' life has to do with the fact that he lived and worked half a century after the fact. Clovis and Gregory were not contemporaries of each other.

A second problem is that Gregory had theological reasons for wanting to tell the story a certain way. It was important to Gregory that Clovis' conversion and baptism be placed before his famous battle with the Visigoths in 507, which pushed them out of Gaul and confined them to Spain. Gregory wanted to portray Clovis as having theological motives for fighting, and more specifically anti-Arian motives.¹²

¹⁰ "The scene now passes from the Greeks to that of the Franks, in which the situation of the Pope is greatly altered; in which his temporal power receives a vast increase, but in which he is surrounded with the perils and difficulties of a new system, and commences a new contest for the freedom which his temporal sovereignty seemed rather to have imperiled than assured" (Acton, 103).

¹¹ "Moorhead notes that 'the quickest reading of Gregory is enough to establish that he is not reliable for the history of the Vandal kingdom in Africa'. Gregory's account is indeed riddled with inaccuracies. His chronology for the succession of the Vandal kings is badly garbled" (Andrew Cain, "Miracles, Martyrs, and Arians: Gregory of Tours' Sources for His Account of the Vandal Kingdom," *Vigiliae Christianae* 59/4 [November 2005] 414). This statement is germane to the present discussion, not because it has to do with the Vandal kingdom in Africa, but because it has to do with Gregory.

¹² "[H]is efforts to make Clovis' decision in favor of Christianity seem personal, and to link it to God's direct intervention in a desperate military situation, are strongly reminiscent of legendary themes" (Matthias Becher, "The Franks: Rome's Heirs in the West," in J.P. Arnason and K.A. Raaflaub, ed., *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* [Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011] 180).

A third problem is that, even on a good day, Gregory was not obsessively accurate. One indication of this is that he is inconsistent with himself. Consider the following four ways in which he dates Clovis' death:

Clovis, we are told, died five years after Vouillé, that is in 512; eleven years after Licinius became bishop of Tours, which apparently gives a date of 517 or later; and one hundred and twelve years after the death of Martin which comes to 509. Gregory's later computations on the deaths of Theudebert and Chlothar, however, and the regnal dating for the fifth council of Orleans seem to require an obit for Clovis of 511-2.¹³

We may not know when Clovis actually died (a majority think the year was 511), but can know with assurance that he only died once.

Battles

Consider two battles. One is Clovis' final battle against the Alamanni, the other is the above mentioned battle against the Visigoths.

Franks v. Alamanni. Gregory represents Clovis' final battle against the Alamanni as the only time they fought. He places this battle in 496 and makes it the occasion for Clovis' conversion from paganism. The battle goes badly, Clovis cries out to the Christian God, and on his ensuing victory he is baptized with all his troops and two of his sisters.¹⁴ This is how Gregory portrays it. But according to Cassiodorus (*Variae* 2.41), the decisive battle, which resulted in the death of the Alamannic king (identity unknown), took place several years later – only shortly before Vouillé.

Cassiodorus' *Variae* 2.41 to Clovis that must date to 506 – early 507 at the latest shows that there had been a very recent victory against the Alamanni in which their king was killed. One simply does not send diplomatic letters of congratulation to fellow-kings on battles that they won *eleven years before*. (Emphasis in original)¹⁵

The important point here is that if the battle with the Alamanni occurred in 506/507, as Cassiodorus implies, Clovis could not have been baptized in 496.

Franks v. Visigoths. Gregory also represents Clovis' final battle against the Visigoths as a singular event. But contemporary annals show that the Visigoths took Saintes from the Franks in 496, that the Franks took Bordeaux from the Visigoths two years later in 498, and that peace was not achieved until 502. Thus the battle of 507, in which Alaric II (c. 458/466-507) lost his life, was clearly the resumption of an old and extended series of conflicts. Nor did Clovis have theological reasons for fighting on this occasion.

¹³ 254 Ian N. Wood, "Gregory of Tours and Clovis" (Revue belge de

¹⁴ Actually two of Clovis' sisters converted to Arianism. We know this in the case of Lenteildis because Avitus speaks of her converting from Arianism to Catholicism. See Shanzer and Wood 364, n. 8.

¹⁵ Danuta Shantzer, "Dating the baptism of Clovis: the bishop of Vienne vs the bishop of Tours" (*Early Medieval Europe* 7/1 [1998] 53).

It is possible that Alaric agreed to pay tribute to Clovis at this time [502]; this would help explain the remark made by Avitus of Vienne that the downfall of the Visigothic kingdom had been due to the drastic debasement of the Visigothic coinage. If Alaric paid Clovis in debased coin, it is hardly surprising that Clovis invaded his kingdom.¹⁶

Clovis and Avitus

Although Avitus of Vienne was not able to attend Clovis' baptism, he is even more important to the story than Remigius, who officiated. Avitus is important because he wrote a letter congratulating the young king on his decision and excusing himself for not being able to attend. This letter makes clear that Clovis was not converted directly from paganism and offers important clues that he was not baptized until shortly after his final battle with the Visigoths.

What was Clovis converted from?

Instead of converting directly from paganism, Avitus portrays Clovis as thoughtfully weighing two alternative forms of Christianity before making his choice between them.

The chasers after various and sundry schisms, by their opinions, different in nature, many in number, but all empty of truth, have tried to conceal, under the cover of the name "Christian", the lies that have been uncovered by the keen intelligence of Your Subtlety.¹⁷

In the above statement, those called schismatics are not Pagans, nor is anyone who puts his teaching forward under cover of the name "Christian." There is nothing Christian about paganism. The people Clovis was studying with at the time of his conversion were Arians. Notice the claim is not that Clovis actually became an Arian, but that he had studied Arianism and rejected it before becoming a Catholic.

[T]his Clovis begins to look a great deal more like Gundobad. Less the rough-and-ready pagan and splitter of skulls than someone with mental *acrimonia*, someone whom Arians have worked on for a while, and someone who both receives letters from bishops, and sends them.¹⁸

When was Clovis baptized?

Commenting on the above letter of Avitus, Shanzer suggests that a *terminus post quem* for the baptism is provided by its reference to freeing captives after Clovis' war with

¹⁶ James 1988, 86.

¹⁷ Shanzer and Wood 364

¹⁸ Shanzer 1998, 54.

the Visigoths at Vouillé. You can't free captives taken in a war until after the war has been fought, and there is no question that this war took place in 507.¹⁹

According to Ian Wood Clovis' baptism is only one of many important events occurring in 508: (a) Emperor Anastasius I Dicorus (491-518) gives Clovis an honorary consulship in celebration of his victory over Alaric,²⁰ (b) Clovis asserts his status as conqueror by riding through the streets of Tours showering bystanders with coins,²¹ (c) he eliminates a number of rival Frankish kings,²² (d) he establishes his capital in Paris,²³ (e) he publishes a law code which had been in preparation earlier,²⁴ and finally (f), on Christmas day, he accepts Catholic baptism at Tours, from the aged and saintly Bishop Remigius.²⁵

Conclusion

When the citizens of France celebrated 1500 years as a nation in 1996, the best evidence is that they got the wrong year for the celebration, but choose exactly the right event to celebrate.²⁶ Clovis' baptism marks the birth of France as a Catholic nation, because it is through this event that France comes into relationship with the papacy.

In later years Clovis' successors would go on to rule not only France, but also the Holy Roman Empire.²⁷ Thus France and the papacy started their journey toward power

¹⁹ "His baptism (though not necessarily, I emphasize, his conversion) must post-date the freeing of the *populus captivus* [captive people]. If these are indeed Catholic Gallo-Romans taken prisoner by the Franks in Visigothic territory, then the baptism occurred after 507" (Shanzer 1998, 50).

²⁰ James 1988, 87. Clovis had recently formed an alliance with Emperor Anastasius. The problem was that by 508 Anastasius was at war with Theodoric, and Theodoric was married to Clovis' sister (Audofleda). It was a delicate situation. A small gift would not do.

²¹ Ibid.

²² These would include: Sigibert and his son Chlodoric who were established at Cologne; Chararic and his son, Ragnachar, plus his two brothers, Richar and Rignomer, who held power in Cambrai and Le Mans.

²³ "The emperor thus raised Clovis to the same level as Theodoric the Great and confirmed as king over formerly Roman territory. This symbolic acceptance by the legitimate heir to the Roman Caesars was probably the high point of Clovis' career" (Becher 2011, 183). Apart from the consulship, a number of things about Clovis' later years invoke a Roman model, and more specifically an association with Constantine: (a) Constantine had moved his capital to Byzantium in 330, Clovis moved his capital to Paris in 508; (b) Constantine had presided over the Council of Nicea in 325, Clovis presided over the Council of Orléans in 511; (c) Constantine had been buried at Byzantium in the Church of the Holy Apostles (which he built) in 337, Clovis was buried at Paris in the Abbey of St Genevieve (which he built) whenever. The date of Clovis' death is usually given as 511, but this is debated.

²⁴ The "Salic Law" was compiled somewhat earlier, in perhaps 500.

²⁵ "A vitus's letter, which mentions how Clovis had shown mercy to a formerly captive people, suggests that the baptism came after Clovis had liberated the Gallo-Romans of south-west Gaul from the Arian captivity, and probably after his alliance with the emperor, in 508 at the earliest" (James, p. 123).

²⁶ See "Ancient Hero Clovis Stirs French Debate" (Christian Science Monitor, September 18, 1996). The issue that stirred debate in this case was not whether the baptism of Clovis was important, but whether anything Christian should be celebrated by all of France.

²⁷ "The Rhineland Franks or Austrasians remained largely Frankish-speaking [>German], while many of the Salian Franks or Neustrians became Latin-speaking. It was from the Austrasians that the second great dynasty of Frankish kings came: the Carolingians" (James 1988, 90). The Frankish- or German-speaking

together. Kings needed a spiritual mandate; popes needed political and military muscle. This unholy alliance between church and state would last for many centuries. Establishing it initially marks the beginning of both the 1290 days and 1335 days of Dan 12 – prophecies that, in normative Seventh-day Adventist teaching, extend from 508 to 1798 and from 508 to 1843 respectively.

1798 is not only a beginning point for the time of the end; it is an ending point for papal persecution during the middle ages. This is what the time of the end is the end of. Our understanding of the dates 1798 and 1843 (along with 1844) go a long way toward defining who we are as a people. If I am correct, much of this flows from Clovis' baptismal font. And then, with wonderful symmetry, after creating an initial basis for the popes' secular power during the middle ages, France is the country that brings it to an end.

It is the nature of truth to be cohesive and symmetrical. This is something one learns to recognize over a lifetime of study. In the classic model 538 (not discussed here) marks 1798 as a beginning point for the time of the end ($538 + 1260 = 1798$), while 508 confirms the accuracy of this date ($508 + 1290 = 1798$) and also confirms the validity of the Millerites' experience in the first disappointment ($508 + 1335 = 1843$), which provides a dress rehearsal for the Great Disappointment in October of 1844. I submit that all of this goes together to make up one package. The order and balance of this system of prophecies is like a fingerprint identifying their Author. We are not through, yet, with the year 508.

Austrasians (through Theuderic) give us the Holy Roman Empire, and later Germany; the Latin-speaking Neustrians (through Clothar) give us France. Between the two surviving realms, the lineage of Clovis accounts for much of Europe. Two of his sons (Childebert, Chlodomer) died inconsequentially.