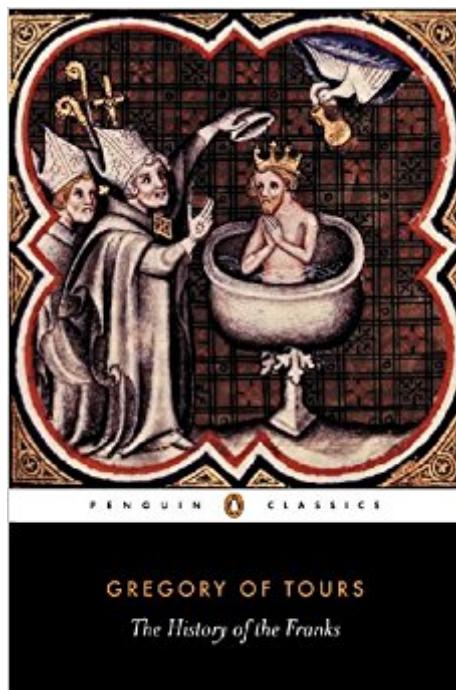


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A History Of The Franks (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

This colorful narrative of French history in the sixth century is a dramatic and detailed portrait of a period of political and religious turmoil. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

[Note to readers, December 2013: This is a review of the Penguin Classics translation; however, has also linked it to an edition of the old Ernest Brehaut translation of selections (described below). Take care to be sure which you are ordering.][Note to readers, December 2014: has now linked the paperback edition to an actual Kindle edition (from Penguin) of Thorpe's translation. The Brehaut translation of excerpts is still available as a separately listed Kindle Book. As always, take care to be sure what you are ordering.]Gregory, Bishop of Tours from 573 to 594, was a member of a prominent Gallo-Roman family of aristocrats, and, like some of his relatives, was eventually canonized. His accounts of holy men, martyrs, and miracles are still extant; a work on liturgy is lost. He is best remembered, however, for a long work (which he called just "Ten Books of History") on how Gaul was conquered by the Franks, and ruled (after a fashion) by their royal dynasty, the

Merovingians; with their relationships with neighboring kingdoms. It is commonly known as "The History of the Franks," although modern scholars tend to disapprove of the title. Gregory generally tells us about what involved members of the dynasty and their followers, or the Church, not the Franks in general. The various rival "Kingdoms of the Franks" corresponded very roughly to modern France and western Germany, and Gregory clearly did not have later political units in mind. The Franks were Germanic warriors -- probably from a variety of tribes mentioned by Roman historians -- who entered Roman territory as (at least mainly) pagans.

I first ran across Gregory of Tours years ago in an Early Medieval History course at the University of Houston (Go Haskins Society!). Under the tutelage of a great instructor (Dr. V~) the class read primary texts instead of the usual dry drivel that history teachers resort to. The History of the Franks was one of these. And it's a great book no matter how you approach it. First, if it was not for Gregory's tome we fans of barbarians would have to resort to the rather sketchy coda (or laws) and archaeological data of that era to ascertain what was going on. (Okay there were those dry church records too.) With Gregory of Tours we get sort of an "Examiner" newspaper view of earthly events. For example, about the Bishop Cautinus: Once he had taken possession of his bishopric, Cautinus began to behave so badly that he was soon loathed by everybody. He began to drink heavily. He was often so completely fuddled with wine that it would take four men to carry him from the table. For example, mother-daughter relations: Rigunth, Chilperic's daughter, was always attacking her mother (Fredegund), and saying that she herself was the real mistress, whereas her mother ought to revert to her original rank of serving-woman. She would often insult her mother to her face, and they frequently exchanged slaps and punches. 'Why do you hate me so, daughter?' Fredegund asked her one day. 'You can take all your father's things which are still in my possession, and do what you like with them.' She led the way into a strong-room and opened a chest which was full of jewels and precious ornaments.

The chronicles of Bishop Gregory of Tours are a rich piece of source material from a time and place whence such material is scarce. He seems to know all that was going on and he doesn't hesitate to tell it all. The political and social chaos left in the wake of the collapse of Rome's secular authority in the west is described in a vivid and readable style. Petty chieftains ruled over their local territories with little restraint, often inflicting cruel fates on those who crossed their paths. Order was precarious. Life was dangerous and often cut short arbitrarily. In the midst of all this upheaval, Gregory shines forth like a sixth century gossip columnist. What I found most intriguing in Gregory's

account is the way that the local Roman aristocracy used the structure of the church to maintain whatever degree of order and restraint they could manage. Gregory doesn't make this point explicitly, but it is clear from his account of events and people. Bishops routinely came from families of senatorial rank, and were often men who had already raised families themselves. By holding positions as abbots, bishops, etc., the remnants of the old order were able to exert influence over the barbarian chiefs who now controlled secular life, encouraging moderation and the rule of law over personal whim. They were also able to maintain a certain degree of moral and, in a limited sense, secular authority for Rome. Though imperial authority was gone, the bishops of Rome were able to step into the void in a limited way. The modern Popes can be seen as direct descendants of the Caesars in an institutional sense. Despite his gossipy style, Gregory isn't for everyone. He clearly doesn't have the formal training of the classical Roman historians. His narrative is not only gossipy, but somewhat jumbled.

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