Tenebrae Refulgeant: Celestial Signa in Gregory of Tours

Gregory Halfond, Ph.D.
Framingham State University

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Abstract: Celestial portents appear frequently in the Historiae of Bishop Gregory of Tours (ca. 539–94). Gregory carefully distinguished between the interpretation of celestial signs and horoscopic astrology by describing signs as natural, albeit miraculous, elements of God's Creation.

§1. In October 585, Gregory of Tours (ca. 539–94) took a brief sojourn in Carignan, taking lodging at a monastery located several miles from the castrum. During his stay, Gregory was awoken at night on three separate occasions by strange illuminations in the sky. On the first two nights, bright rays of light (radii) appeared in the North, while blood-red clouds appeared in the East and in the West. On the third night, the rays appeared again, and were joined by still others issuing forth from all directions, all directed towards a huge cloud (nubis) in the middle of the night-sky. Gregory, watching from his window, could only assume that these strange signs (signa) presaged some future disaster (Gregory of Tours Historiae 8.17). Upon his return to Tours, Gregory learned that two islands had been destroyed by heavenly fire at the very time he had witnessed the celestial phenomena and that a pond located on another island near Vannes had turned to blood (Gregory of Tours Historiae 8.24–5).

Signa in the Sky

§2. The pages of Gregory's Historiae are full of similar descriptions of bizarre natural phenomena of the sort customarily interpreted in Antiquity as portents of future events (Wallis 1918; Bloch 1963; Berger 1980; Rasmussen 2003). Portents (signa or prodigia), both explicitly and implicitly identified as such, appear in every book of the Historiae save one (Book 3). The overwhelming majority of these signs are astronomical in nature. The highest concentration of celestial portents appears in Books 4–6 and 8, which collectively cover the years AD 544–586. Gregory himself was born ca. AD 539 in Clermont-Ferrand and became bishop of Tours in 573. Thus, the bulk of portents recorded in the Historiae are ones that Gregory, in theory, would have been able to observe with his own eyes. Nevertheless, some interpreters have dismissed Gregory's signa as mere literary devices that mark narrative divisions in his text, provide narrative foreshadowing, and offer implicit moral commentary (e.g. Riché 1976, 204). However, others follow Giselle de Nie in accepting their deep theological importance for Gregory and his contemporaries. In De Nie's understanding, natural wonders for Gregory are proof of God's active and ongoing participation in Creation. They are indicative of both God's power and generosity through their revelation of otherwise-concealed truths to mankind (De Nie 1987, 73–5). At their most dire, they portend no less than apocalypse (De Nie 1987, 46–55; Heinzelmann 2001, 82). They are unexpected and often frightening. And most, like the phenomena Gregory observed in 585, are celestial in nature.

§3. If we follow De Nie in accepting Gregory's belief in the revelatory significance of astronomical phenomena, it is worth considering whether this belief stemmed, at least in part, from personal observation of their physical reality. The evidence suggests that the Bishop of Tours was as careful an observer of celestial as he was of human phenomena, as a number of his descriptions appear to accord with verifiable astronomical events (Bergmann and Schlosser 1987, 51–55; McCluskey 2000, 108–110). For example, on October 3, 563, a solar eclipse was visible in Gaul. In the Historiae, describing the various portents that preceded the arrival of an epidemic in Clermont, Gregory reports a solar eclipse on the Kalends of October of that same year (Gregory of Tours Historiae 4.31). Thus, Gregory's description of the eclipse would appear to accord with the real astronomical event (Schove and Fletcher 1988, 100). Similarly, Gregory records the appearance of a lunar eclipse in 577 during the same month as the vigil of St. Martin, which occurs annually on November 11 (Gregory of Tours Historiae 5.23). Such an event was visible from Tours on December 11, 577 (Meeus and...
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§4. Besides eclipses, Gregory’s works include numerous references to other types of astronomical phenomena more real than fantastic, including comets (cometes), auroras (radii, columnae igneae, etc.), and meteor showers (globi ignei, fulgores, splendores, etc.). To be certain, Gregory’s interpretations of these phenomena sometimes lack the accuracy of his observations, but it would be disingenuous to criticize the Bishop of Tours for his lack of formal astronomical training. Gregory’s lone astronomical treatise, *De cursu stellarum ratio*, a guide to astronomical timekeeping for monks, is, in the words of Stephen McCluskey, “practical astronomy . . . reduced to its barest elements,” but it too reflects his observational diligence through its discussion of the movement and visibility of the constellations over the course of the year (McCluskey 2000, 101).

§5. There is little reason, then, to doubt Gregory’s belief in the physical reality of celestial signa. But this belief, in turn, raises another question that has not been adequately addressed by scholars. In *De cursu stellarum ratio*, Gregory explicitly rejects the practice of mathesis, or astrology, and elsewhere expresses a general mistrust of practicing diviners (Gregory of Tours *De Cursu*). In the *Historiae*, for example, he more than once repeats Christ’s warning to beware of false prophets who reveal signa et portenta, particularly emphasizing those phenomena that appear in caelo (Mark 13:22; Matthew 24:24). Gregory’s concern was that such false prophets would sway uneducated Christians away from the leadership of the ecclesiastical hierarchy at a time when the latter’s guidance was most sorely needed. On several occasions, Gregory personally sought to convince the imposters of the error of their ways. Tellingly, he took for granted the dubiousness of their prognostications, even when the methods by which they were produced remained mysterious to the well-educated Bishop of Tours. In the case of one self-proclaimed prophet who claimed to be able to foretell future events, Gregory dismisses the man’s abilities as the product of “devilish tricks and illusions which I could not understand” (Gregory of Tours *Historiae* 10.25).

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§6. Gregory’s hostility towards soothsayers was due more to their challenge to the Church’s claims of a monopoly over supernatural power than to his own ignorance of their methods (Jones 2009, 310–332). From his perspective it stood to reason that their divinatory methods, whatever they were, had to be dubious. Nevertheless, it is still ironic that the Bishop of Tours proved willing to try his own hand, on more than one occasion, at celestial prophecy. In his discussion of comets in *De cursu*, for instance, Gregory credits these objects with the ability to foretell future events—specifically the deaths of kings and mass devastation (Gregory of Tours *De Cursu* 34). His belief in the prognosticative power of comets is confirmed several times in the *Historiae*, when their appearance precedes the arrival of epidemics in 563, 580, and 582 (Gregory of Tours *Historiae* 4.31, 5.41, and 6.14). Similarly, Gregory interpreted the celestial rays of light (radii) that he observed in 577 as presaging the assassination of the Merovingian prince Merovech (Gregory of Tours *Historiae* 5.18). Elsewhere in his *Historiae* he notes that similar displays of heavenly light, including comets, also appeared in the sky prior to the deaths of other members of the royal dynasty (Gregory of Tours *Historiae* 4.51).

§7. How did Gregory reconcile his belief in astronomical portents with his clearly-stated opposition to astrology? Certainly, Gregory was not the only Christian historian to report celestial portents, which had been an acceptable practice since the very inception of Christian historiography (De Nie 1987, 30–1), and in pagan historiography before that (Rawson 1991, 1–15; Meslin 1974, 353–63). Gregory’s contemporary, the Gallic chronicler Marius of Avenches, for example, cites portents on several occasions (*Chronica* an. 560 and 566). Writing in the seventh century, the Frankish chronicler known as Fredegar likewise reports a number of signa in his *Chronica*, including a meteor shower which may have presaged the death of the Visigothic king Leovigild (Fredegar *Chronica* 4.5–6). There was thus a perfectly sound literary justification for Gregory’s seemingly contradictory stance. It is also true that the Bishop of Tours made a firm distinction between celestial forecasting and celestial determinism (McCluskey 2000, 104). In other words, while Gregory believed that God might reveal information about future events through natural portents, he firmly rejected the possibility that signa could be independent of God. Stars might foretell events, but they could not cause them. This was a very old distinction by Gregory’s time, found in, among other astrological skeptics, Plotinus (fl. 205–270 AD) (*Enneads* 2.3 and 3.1.5–6), Calcidius (fl. 4th century AD) (*In Timaeum* 125), and Macrobius (fl. 5th century AD) (*Commentarii* 1.19). It was also a position adopted implicitly by the Christian poet Prudentius (ca. 348–410), whose verses Gregory quotes in *De cursu stellarum ratio* (34). For a Catholic bishop like Gregory, such a distinction might have provided justification for a belief in celestial signa.

§8. But there is another intriguing feature of Gregory’s *signa* that might explain his readiness to accept their orthodoxy. Among the nearly thirty identifiable portents that appear in the pages of his *Historiae*, there are eclipses, terrifying rays of light, meteor showers, the appearance of new planetary bodies, and fires in the heavens. But eclipses aside, Gregory does not once look to the permanent celestial objects, fixed or wandering, for signs of divine displeasure. Thus, while heavenly fire qualified as a portent, solar, lunar, and planetary positions did not. These, of course, were the basic data from which ancient and medieval astrologers traditionally made their calculations (Testor 1987, 11–29; Barton 1994, 86–113). Simply put, astrologers employed astronomical data relative to a particular moment in time to diagram the position of the sun, moon, and five planets against the zodiac. The location of the planets within the horoscopic chart relative to the zodiacal signs and to each other determined their influence. Was the absence of descriptions of permanent celestial objects a conscious choice on Gregory’s part? And, if so, was this choice primarily a literary one? Did Gregory limit himself to those astronomical events simply because they were traditionally used by Christian historians and chroniclers to foreshadow future events and served him as narrative transition-markers? Did Gregory fear that by acknowledging horoscopic astrology he was leaving himself open to accusations of celestial determinism, a concept which he adamantly rejected? Is it possible that the Bishop of Tours was simply ignorant of the astrological sciences altogether?
§9. We might begin to look for answers to these questions in an observation by Walter Goffart in his discussion of Gregory's signa. Goffart notes that Gregory's portents commemorate occasions "when nature departs markedly from its ordinary course" (Goffart 2005, 187). Goffart's observation is similar to De Nie's that Gregory is most likely to interpret irregular and unexpected phenomena as portents (De Nie 1987, 36). But besides irregular, Gregory's portents are, most importantly, dynamic: they are transient, moveable, and transformative. In the understanding of ancient astronomers, celestial objects above the moon were unchanging, while those below, such as comets, shooting stars, or meteorites, were, by their very nature, ephemeral (Tester 1987, 67). The movements of all of these bodies were "natural," however, in the sense that they were part of the celestial order. Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century, would define portenta, following Varro, as "beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature, but ... are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will" (Etymologiae 11.3.1).

§10. Gregory too recognized the instructive value of observing all natural heavenly bodies: the constellations of fixed stars could aid monks in calculating the proper hours for their nocturnal prayers, while sub-lunar phenomena could convey warnings of divine anger or future disaster. But Gregory's attention seems to have been far more focused on the lower heavens. In this, he was not alone among orthodox believers in early medieval Europe. Paul Dutton, writing of Charlemagne, suggested that the Frankish King "may have been somewhat impatient with the static picture of the painted heavens Alcuin conjured up for him, for what caught his attention when he gazed into the night's dark pool of scattered light was change and motion, not the fixed stars, but the moving ones" (Dutton 2004, 95). The Bishop of Tours and the Carolingian king seem to have shared a similar prejudice, for a sub-lunar phenomenon could be dramatic in both its appearance and in its worldly significance. Nevertheless, in his explicit identification of portents, Gregory was treading a careful line between two contradictory astronomical traditions inherited from the classical past: belief in the astrological significance of planetary motion on the one hand and animosity towards that belief on the other.

§11. These conflicting positions, rather surprisingly, cannot neatly be correlated with respective "Christian" or "pagan" belief systems. Pagan philosophers had long expressed doubt in the ability of the stars to forecast the future (Tester 1987, 49–50; Barton 1994, 52–7; Rasmussen 2003, 183–98). Christianity, on the other hand, had never succeeded in establishing a universally accepted position on astrology (McCluskey 2000, 38; Tester 1987, 55; Seznec 1981, 42–46; Stuckrad 2000, 33). Astrology was not even singled out by conciliar legislators for condemnation until the Council of Laodicea ca. 363/4 (Tester 1987, 55). Theologians too had difficulty reaching a consensus on the astrological sciences beyond their general agreement that the stars could not cause earthly events (Wedel 1920, 15–16; Laistner 1941, 254–256). Early Christian apologists such as Ignatius of Antioch (d. early 2nd century) and Tertullian (ca. 155–220), for example, were aware of the role astral signs had played in the nativity story as related in the synoptic gospels and acknowledged the legitimacy of horoscopic astrology prior to the incarnation of Christ, but rejected the practice as impermissible in their own time (Ignatius Epistola ad Ephesios 19; Tertullian De Idolatria 9).15

§12. The argument that Christ's nativity rendered astrology moot proved popular in both the East and in the West, and among the many writers to adopt it was Prudentius.16 In his poem Apotheosis, Prudentius describes the fear of the Chaldean astrologers witnessing the flight of the constellations upon the birth of Christ (Prudentius Apotheosis 608–30).17 Similarly, in Prudentius' Hymnus Epiphaniae, the poem that Gregory quotes in De cursu, the poet lauds the appearance of the star that announced Christ's birth to the Magi, as a star that overcame the power of those that preceded it in the initial act of Creation: both fixed stars and transient comets portending misfortune (Prudentius Cathemerinon 12.16–24).18

§13. But some Christians were not content to let the matter rest there. Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), for example, spent a great deal of ink undermining the legitimacy of astrology, which one recent scholar has called, half jokingly, the Bishop of Hippo's "favorite divinatory science" (Klingshirn 2005b, 131).19 Augustine recognized the weakness of the Tertullianic argument, in particular its admission that astrology enjoyed priori _priori_ to Christ's incarnation. He therefore decided to set matters straight. He argued that the Star of Bethlehem was not a normal star (sidus) in the sense that it followed a regular course established at the time of Creation. Rather, it was a _novum sidus_, which "went before" (praeire) the faces of the magi (Contra Faustum Manichaeum 2.5). In other words, what made this star unique was its novelty and unpredictability. It was a sign, to be sure, but a unique one, and not part of the ordinary supra-lunar celestial order to which astrologers look in vain for hints of future events. The Star of Bethlehem was an ephemeral addition to the natural order, but no less a part of God's Creation.

§14. The Bishop of Tours, so far as we can tell, was unfamiliar with Augustine's revision of the Tertullianic argument.20 Nevertheless, Augustine's argument accords well with Goffart's definition of Gregory's portents and with the point that I made above that these signs are dynamic objects, not static, and that they break with the regular pattern of the fixed celestial order. Gregory's designation of certain celestial phenomena as legitimate portents was influenced by authorities other than Augustine that included, perhaps, Orosius, who was familiar with the writings of the North African bishop.21 Orosius was frank in his condemnation of astrology, associating it with the heresy of Priscillianism (Chadwick 1976, 191–201). Nevertheless, he followed in the tradition of earlier Christian historians in including _portenta_ in his Historiarum Adversum Paganos.22 De Nie has noted the debt Gregory of Tours owed to his fifth-century predecessor in developing his own theology of omens (De Nie 1987, 31–33, 37–38). By providing Gregory with an idea of what sort of events could be considered omens, Orosius even supplied Gregory with the terminology to describe them. In Book Seven of his Historiae, for example, Gregory describes a column of fire emanating a _parte septentrionali_ (Gregory of Tours Historiae 7.11). Orosius uses this same phrase to describe a similar celestial phenomenon (Orosius Historiarum adversus paganos 5.18).23 Like Gregory, Orosius rejected horoscopic divination, but made an exception for "natural," but ephemeral, celestial objects and phenomena distinct from the regular order of the universe.

§15. Eusebius and his Latin contemporaries likewise offered the Bishop of Tours a model for the Christianization of astrological phenomena.24 In Jerome's Latin edition of Eusebius' Chronicle, for example, it is reported that a solar eclipse preceded the death of the Roman emperor Augustus, while many _signa atque portenta_ appeared immediately prior to the death of the emperor Domitian (Jerome Chronicon an. 13 and 96). Similarly, an eclipse and an earthquake are said to have accompanied Christ's crucifixion (Jerome Chronicon 256–257). Gregory on several occasions, as noted above, interpreted celestial phenomena as presaging the death of an
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§16. There is the possibility, however, that Gregory's awareness of the difficulties in reconciling orthodox and heretical beliefs regarding the stars was influenced by more than just the volumes in his library. Recent scholarship has questioned the traditional orthodoxy that scientific astrology died with the Roman Empire. This orthodoxy was first challenged seriously by Valerie Flint, who argued that while technical astrological textbooks might have been rare or unavailable in the early medieval West, simple astronomical charts and tables that no longer survive could have sufficed for the casting of horoscopes (Flint 1990a, 92–101; Flint 1990b, 1–27). In fact, documents of this sort are now known to have been copied in post-Roman Europe. A Latin translation of Ptolemy's Handy Tables (the Preceptum canonis Ptolomei), for instance, was produced in sixth-century Rome, and it has been suggested that its intended audience consisted of practicing astrologers, even though its use of transliterated Greek terminology made it a difficult text to utilize (Pingree 1990, 355–375). Similarly, in ninth-century Francia, a text known as In quo signo versetur Mars provided directions for calculating planetary positions, necessary data from which horoscopes could be calculated (Juste 2004). The accessibility, let alone the widespread use, of these documents is debatable. Certainly they do not prove the availability of similar texts in late sixth-century Francia. Nevertheless, their existence increases the probability that Christian theologians attacking astrology in the early medieval West were not merely jousting with a straw man.

§17. Additionally, new copies of late antique scientific and encyclopedic texts containing astronomical and astrological data and descriptions were produced in Frankish Gaul, including the works of Pliny the Elder, Calcidius, Macrobius, and Martianus Capella. These works were relatively worthless as practical astrological handbooks, and indeed were not intended as such. Nevertheless, at the very least they provided readers such as Gregory, who apparently was familiar with Capella's De nuptiis philologiae et mercurii with an understanding of basic astronomical and astrological concepts. From Martianus, Gregory would have learned, for example, to distinguish between the fixed stars, which were organized into permanent constellations, and the planentes, or the "confusing bodies," to which astrologers had long looked for clues of future events (Martianus Capella De nuptiis 8.850).

§18. The question of astrology's survival in the early medieval West is further complicated by the traditional scholarly distinction between "scientific" (or "horoscopic") and "popular" astrology, i.e. between astronomical forecasts derived from mathematical calculation and astronomical observation and those produced by uneducated soothsayers. It is not at all clear whether such a distinction is even valid in early medieval Europe. Certainly, the possible eclipse of the former does not necessitate the disappearance of the latter (Filotas 2005, 134–135). The likely ignorance of most twenty-first century newspaper horoscopists of Ptolemy of Alexandria's Tetrabiblos certainly has not prevented them from offering advice to their daily readers and it would be disingenuous to hold early medieval soothsayers to a different set of standards. Technical horoscopic literature quite likely was rare in Merovingian Gaul—certainly it leaves few traces in the sources—but it never had been particularly accessible to a wide readership on account of its mathematical and astronomical complexity. We simply have no way of knowing whether fewer soothsayers consulted technical astrological treatises in the sixth century than in the fifth, when Bishop Sidonius Apollinaris of Clermont-Ferrand acknowledged their continuing appeal (Sidonius Carm. 22.2; Ep. 4.3.5, 5.2.1, 8.11.9–10).

§19. But even if we disregard the distinction between scientific and popular astrology, it is still necessary to be cautious in evaluating the sparse evidence we do possess from the Merovingian era for astrological activity. Some of this apparent evidence, in fact, may be later Carolingian propaganda intended to exaggerate the vitality of paganism under the previous royal dynasty. For example, in a famous sermon included in the Vita Eligii (originally composed in the mid-seventh century), St. Eligius of Noyon (d. 660) urges the common people to avoid divini, and to reject the notion that the sun and moon can predict a man's fate (Vita Eligii 2.16). However, it has been argued fairly convincingly that Eligius's warnings about pagan rituals and beliefs were anachronistic interpolations by later Carolingian-era editors of the vita (Hen 2002, 238–9; McCune 2008, 445–446). Additionally, it is also true that Merovingian-era royal and ecclesiastical legislators showed little interest in singling out astrology for condemnation, despite frequently targeting divinatory practices in their prescriptions.

§20. Still, it does not necessarily follow that Gregory of Tours and his contemporaries (or near-contemporaries) despised astrology more out of ignorance than familiarity. To begin with, it is clear that divination as a general phenomenon did not disappear in Gaul with the pagan religion with which it was so often associated, and that it was just one of many forms of "folk magic" performed by Merovingian-era incantatores or "enchancers." (Jones 2009, 293–335). The evidence of contemporary sermons, particularly those of Caesarius of Arles, for example, reveals that consultation of the stars was only one of many forms of divinatory practice targeted by Christian preachers in the sixth century, and not necessarily among the most popular (Caesarius of Arles Sermones 18.4 and 59.2). Forms of sortes divination (divination by lot), for example, were practiced in Merovingian Gaul by sortilegi and sorticularii, including, perhaps, clerics (Kingshirn 2005a). Gregory himself engaged, on at least one occasion, in sortes biblicae, a method of divination in which a book of scripture is opened to a random page whose contents are interpreted as conveying the divine will. In his Historiae, Gregory acknowledges performing such an act at the request of the royal prince Merovech, his dining companion. Gregory recalls opening the Book of Solomon at random and reading aloud the first passage that caught his eye. He admits that at the time he "considered this verse to have been provided by the Lord" (Gregory of Tours Historiae 5.14). Certainly, the prevalence of alternate methods of divination does not prove the practice of astrology in late sixth-century Gaul, but it does suggest efforts by churchmen to reconcile their Christian faith with contemporary divinatory practices supposedly tainted by paganism.

§21. Astrology, however, was tainted not only by its connection to paganism, but also by its association with Christian heresy. Was this latter association simply a fiction concocted by heterodox believers as the grounds for one further epithet to hurl at opponents? As I have argued above, elements of astrological belief had always coexisted with orthodox tenets of faith, sometimes subtly, and often uncomfortably. Therefore, it is not at all surprising that astrology became yet one more accusation leveled against those who too
obviously fell outside the norm of acceptable Christian behavior. Astrology, during this period, was most often conflated with the heresy of Priscillianism, which became a common charge laid against practicing astrologers, regardless of whether they were, strictly speaking, adherents of this heresy (Flint 1990b, 10). It was not coincidental that the sixth-century Iberian Council of Braga (561), which targeted Priscillianism during its sessions, explicitly condemned the practice of astrology in two of its canons (9 and 10). Although there is no reason to believe that a Priscillianist cult as such flourished in contemporary Francia, the connection between astrology and this heresy was well-established by the late sixth century, and certainly would have been known to Gregory through his reading of Orosius.

§22. What is remarkable is that even associations with paganism and Christian heresy apparently still did not irrevocably taint astrology for all early medieval Christians. The seventh-century Frankish *Chronica* of Fredegar, for example, reports, without any critical commentary, that King Dagobert I (r. 623–638) ordered the Jews of Francia to be converted to Christianity on the request of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius, who supposedly learned through astrological forecast that a circumcised people posed a danger to his empire (Fredegar *Chronica* 4.65). The veracity of this probably dubious anecdote aside, what is remarkable is the chronicler’s willingness to present astrology as an effective means of divination, although the circumcised people whose coming Heraclius forecasted were Muslims, not Jews. But this is less surprising when we consider that divination in general appears to have maintained considerable credibility with the long-Christianized Gallic population, including Gregory himself. Thus, for Gregory, the question was not whether divination was pagan or heretical, but what types of divinatory acts were appropriate for a Christian to practice without fear of censure. When it came to the stars, the line between orthodox and heterodox was dangerously blurred. If only for the sake of appearance, Gregory had to tread carefully so as not to appear to condone horoscopic astrology while asserting the legitimacy of celestial *signa*.

### Natural Signa

§23. We can never hope to be able to quantify the number of astrologers actively pursuing their craft in Western Europe in the later decades of the sixth century. But their number, significant or miniscule, is less important than astrology’s survival as an intellectual menace, phantom or not, that could coexist only uncomfortably with Catholic Christianity. The position of Gregory of Tours might have not been dissimilar from that of Sidonius a century earlier: both were orthodox Christians coping with an ambiguous Roman inheritance regarding astrology. For Gregory, the challenge was to assert the orthodoxy of portents, which he sought to do by emphasizing on the one hand their impermanency and dynamism and on the other their very real and natural existence in Creation.

In doing so, he certainly was following the example of earlier Christian theologians and chroniclers. But in his *Historiae* and in *De cursu stellarum ratio*, Gregory also had to justify to himself and his readers his belief in astrological portents at the same time that he rejected astrology. Gregory’s solution to this dilemma necessitated bringing celestial signs into the realm of the miraculous as he understood it. The heavens, like the saints, bore the clarifying light of the divine. They were communicative instruments that connected God to His Creation. As such, they existed within, and as part of, the natural universe: miraculous to be sure, but no less a part of Creation on account of their unique, and sometimes ephemeral, nature. Saint Martin, the personal patron of the bishop of Tours, was himself, in Gregory’s words, an “immense star,” who illuminated the realities, spiritual and temporal, of the world (*Gregory of Tours De Virtutibus S. Martini* 1.12). And, to a lesser extent, so did the lights of the sub-lunar heavens.

### Notes

1. On portents as a literary device, see Ashley (1994). [Back]

2. Astrological portents of the apocalypse are noted also by Lactantius *Divinarum Institutionum* 7.16.8–10. Like Gregory, Lactantius saw no contradiction in crediting celestial omens while rejecting astrology (*Divinarum Institutionum* 2.16.1). [Back]

3. On classical and medieval astronomical terminology, see Dall’Olmo (1980). For references to comets in the *Historiae*, see e.g. 4.31, 5.41, and 6.14. For references to auroras, see e.g. 5.18, 6.33, 7.11, 8.17, and 9.5. For references to meteors, see e.g. 5.23, 6.25, and 10.23. [Back]

4. Gregory distinguished *signa* from *auspicia*, which he considered to be pagan; see De Nie (1987, 43–44). [Back]

5. “Quia non ego in his mathesim doceo neque future perscrutare praemoneo.” For other criticisms of diviners and soothsayers, see e.g. *Gregory of Tours Historiae* 5.14, 7.44, 9.6, 10.25; *Gregory of Tours Passione S. Iuliani* 46A. [Back]

6. “Sed haec omnia diabolicis artibus et praestigiis nescio quibus agebat.” [Back]


8. “Cum autem apud Parisium moraremur, signa in caelo apparuerint, id est viginti radii a parte aquilonis, qui ab oriente surgentes, ad occidentem properabant; ex quibus unus prolixior et alius supereminens, ut est in sublime elevatus, mox defecit, et sic reliqui qui secuti fuerant evanuerunt. Credo, interitum Merovechi pronuntiassent.” [Back]

9. “In eo anno fulgor per caelum discurrisset visus est, sicut quondam ante mortem Chlothari factum vidimus.” Gregory is referring here to the year of the death of Sigibert I in AD 575. [Back]

10. De Nie (1987) notes portents in the historical works of Eusebius, Jerome, and Orosius. Several fifth, sixth, and seventh century chronicles also contain portents, e.g. *Chronica Gallica a CCCCLII an.* 388 and 395; *Hydatius Chronica an.* 451 and 453–4; Marius of


13. Gregory believed that comets were a type of *stella* (star), a term that does not necessarily distinguish between upper and lower celestial objects. A planet, for example, was sometimes referred to as a *stella errans* (a wandering star). See Gregory of Tours De Cursu 34. [Back]


15. See also Wedel (1920, 17–18); Tester (1987, 112). [Back]

16. Cf. Chadwick (1976, 200–1), who, in contrast to Tester (1987, 112), argues that Western Christians rarely employed this argument. Tester notes that, among others, Bede, Alcuin, and Ivo of Chartres employed it. [Back]

17. "Dirigit trepidans Chaldaeo in vertice pernox astrologus, cessisse Anguem, fugisse Leonem, contraxisse pedes lateris manco ordine Cancrum, cornibus infractis domitum mugire Iuvencum, sidus et Hirquinum laceris villis. Etc." [Back]


19. On Augustine's pre-conversion attitude towards astrology, see *Confessions* 4.3, and 7.6. For his post-conversion attitude, see, among other works, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.21 and 2.29; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* pp. 58; *De Civitate Dei* 5.1–7; *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* 2.5; *De Genesi ad Litteram* 2.17. On Augustine's views on astrology, see De Vreese (1933). [Back]

20. While Gregory may have been familiar with several of the theological works of Prosper of Aquitaine (e.g. the *Librum Sententiarum*), who, in contrast to Tester (1987, 112), argues that Western Christians rarely employed this argument, there is no evidence to suggest any direct influence. See De Nie (1987, 74, note 11). In *De Providentia Dei* 9, sometimes credited to Prosper, astrology is singled out for ridicule. [Back]

21. On Gregory's knowledge of Orosius, see Bonnet (1890, 64); De Nie (1987, 30); Hillgarth (1992, 165–166); Heinzelmann (2001, 104–106). [Back]

22. E.g. Orosius *Historiarum Adversus Paganos* 3.5, 4.4, 4.13, 5.4, 5.18, and 6.20. [Back]


24. On Gregory's knowledge of Eusebius-Jerome's *Chronicle*, see Bonnet (1890, 64). [Back]

25. For articulations of the old orthodoxy, see e.g. Mirmont (1904), Bonnaud (1913); Wedel (1920, 25); Laistner (1941, 275); Tester (1987, 113); and Barton (1994, 78–9). A more nuanced view is offered by Eastwood (2007, 157–158), who takes account of the new evidence, but notes that there is no evidence for the computation of horoscopes in the Carolingian West. On the situation in the contemporary Byzantine East, see Dagnon (1981). [Back]


27. On the copying and use of late antique astronomical treatises in the Carolingian era, see Eastwood (2007). As for encyclopedic texts, the debate continues regarding Gregory of Tours's familiarity with Martianus Capella. In regards to the latter's astronomical writings, Eastwood (2007, 20) argues that Gregory's own work on the stars does not rely on Capella's. In contrast, McCluskey (2000, 101) has suggested that Gregory derived his understanding of solar cycles from Capella. Bergmann and Schlosser (1987, 56–57) likewise see Capella's astronomical influence. Regardless, as Tester (1987, 115–117) notes, there is little "hard" astrology in Martianus's *De Nuptiis*. [Back]


29. "Nullus sibi proponat fatum vel fortunam aut genesim, quod vulgo nascentia dicitur, ut dicat, qualem nascentia attulit, taliter erit: quia Deus omnes homines vult salvos fieri et ad agnitionem veritatis venire adque omnia in sapientia dispensat, sicut dispositum ante constitutionem mundi." [Back]

30. E.g. Council of Orléans (511), c. 30; Council of Orléans (541), c. 15; Council of Eauze (551), c. 3; and Council of Auxerre (585/605), c. 4. Cf. Council of Agde (506), c. 42. [Back]

31. On Gregory's supposed "ignorance" of astrology, see Fontaine (1994, 219–221). Cf. Laistner (1941, 265–266), who argues that Caesarius did not understand the technical meaning of the term *mathematicus*. [Back]
33. Klingshirn notes the practice of sortes sanctorum, sortes biblicae, and lunaria (divination based on calendar dates) in the fifth and sixth-century by sortilegi and sorticularii, including, perhaps, clerics (especially in the earlier period). He also notes the practice of divination by "wood or bread" and by dreams. [Back]

34. "Ego vero, reserato Salomonis libro, versiculum qui primus occurrit arripui, qui haec contenebat: Oculum, qui aversus aspexerit patrem, effodiant eum corvi de convallibus. Illo quoque non intellegente, consideravi hunc versiculum ad Dominum praeparatum." [Back]

35. "Sed super omnia conlaudatur Deus noster, qui tantam virtutem praestat sanctis suis, ut per eos talia operari dignetur, tale inter reliqua luminaria huic mundo in beatum Martinum inmensum sidus adtribuens, per quem eius tenebrae refugereant." [Back]

### Works Cited


