Accounts of the Conversion of Clovis

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Davis Introduction: In 496 A.D. Chlodovocar (Clovis, or Louis), the founder of the Frankish power which was to develop into modern France and Germany, was converted to Catholic Christianity from heathenism. This was an event of high historical importance. If, like other Germanic kings, he had become an Arian heretic, he would have been hopelessly estranged from his subject Roman population. As it was, the Franks and the provincials coalesced as in none other of the new barbarian kingdoms. The story of Chlodovocar's conversion, of course, gave the pious chroniclers an opening for many edifying anecdotes.

At this time the King was yet in the errors of his idolatry and went to war with the Alemanni, since he wished to render them tributary. Long was the battle, many were slain on one side or the other, for the Franks fought to win glory and renown, the Alemanni to save life and freedom. When the King at length saw the slaughter of his people and the boldness of his foes, he had greater expectation of disaster than of victory. He looked up to heaven humbly, and spoke thus: "Most mighty God, whom my queen Clothilde worships and adores with heart and soul, I pledge you perpetual service unto your faith, if only you give me now the victory over my enemies."

Instantly when he had said this, his men were filled with burning valor, and a great fear smote his enemies, so that they turned their backs and fled the battle; and victory remained with the King and with the Franks. The king of the Alemanni were slain; and as for the Alemanni, seeing themselves discomfited, and that their king had fallen, they yielded themselves to Chlodovocar and his Franks and became his tributaries.

The King returned after this victory into Frankland. He went to Rheims, and told the Queen what had befallen; and they together gave thanks unto Our Lord. The King made his confession of faith from his heart, and with right good will. The Queen, who was wondrously overjoyed at the conversion of her lord, went at once to St. Remi, at that time archbishop of the city. Straightway he hastened to the palace to teach the King the way by which he could come unto God, for his mind was still in doubt about it. He presented himself boldly before his face, although a little while before he [the bishop] had not dared to come before him.

When St. Remi had preached to the King the Christian faith and taught him the way of the Cross, and when the king had known what the faith was, Chlodovocar promised fervently that he would henceforth never serve any save the all-powerful God. After that he said he would put to the test and try the hearts and wills of his chieftains and lesser
people: for he would convert them more easily if they were converted by pleasant means and by mild words, than if they were driven to it by force; and this method seemed best to St. Remi. The folk and the chieftains were assembled by the command of the King. He arose in the midst of them, and spoke to this effect: "Lords of the Franks, it seems to me highly profitable that you should know first of all what are those gods which you worship. For we are certain of their falsity: and we come right freely into the knowledge of Him who is the true God. Know of a surety that this same God which I preach to you has given victory over your enemies in the recent battle against the Alemanni. Lift, therefore, your hearts in just hope; and ask the Sovereign Defender, that He give to you all, that which you desire—that He save our souls and give us victory over our enemies." When the King full of faith had thus preached to and admonished his people, one and all banished from their hearts all unbelief, and recognized their Creator.

When shortly afterward Chlodovocar set out for the church for baptism, St. Remi prepared a great procession. The streets of Rheims were hung with banners and tapestry. The church was decorated. The baptistry was covered with balsams and all sorts of perfumes. The people believed they were already breathing the delights of paradise. The cortege set out from the palace, the clergy led the way bearing the holy Gospels, the cross and banners, chanting hymns and psalms. Then came the bishop leading the King by the hand, next the Queen with the multitude. Whilst on the way the King asked of the bishop, "If this was the Kingdom of Heaven which he had promised him." "Not so," replied the prelate; "it is the road that leads to it."

When in the church, in the act of bestowing baptism the holy pontiff lifted his eyes to heaven in silent prayer and wept. Straightway a dove, white as snow, descended bearing in his beak a vial of holy oil. A delicious odor exhaled from it: which intoxicated those near by with an inexpressible delight. The holy bishop took the vial, and suddenly the dove vanished. Transported with joy at the sight of this notable miracle, the King renounced Satan, his pomps and his works; and demanded with earnestness the baptism; at the moment when he bent his head over the fountain of life, the eloquent pontiff cried, "Bow down thine head, fierce Sicambrian! Adore that which once thou hast burned: burn that which thou hast adored!"

After having made his profession of the orthodox faith, the King is plunged thrice in the waters of baptism. Then in the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—the prelate consecrated him with the divine unction. Two sisters of the king and 3000 fighting men of the Franks and a great number of women and children were likewise baptized. Thus we may well believe that day was a day of joy in heaven for the holy angels; likewise of rejoicing on earth for devout and faithful men!

The King showed vast zeal for his new faith. He built a splendid church at Paris, called St. Genevieve, where later he and Clothilde were buried. Faith and religion and zeal for justice were pursued by him all the days of his life. Certain Franks still held to paganism, and found a leader in Prince Ragnachairus but he was presently delivered up in fetters to Chlodovocar who put him to death. Thus all the Frankish people were converted and baptized by the merits of St. Remi....
At this time there came to Chlodovocar messengers from Anastasius, the Emperor of Constantinople, who brought him presents from their master, and letters whereof the effect was, that it pleased the Emperor and the Senators that he [Chlodovocar] be made a "Friend of the Emperor," and a "Patrician" and "Councilor" of the Romans. When the King had read these letters, he arrayed himself in the robe of a senator, which the Emperor had sent to him. He mounted upon his charger; and thus he went to the public square before the church of St. Martin; and then he gave great gifts to the people. From this day he was always called "Councilor" and "Augustus."

**Gregory of Tours: History of the Franks, Book II (Extracts)**


28.
Now the king of the Burgundians was Gundevech, of the family of king Athanaric the persecutor, whom we have mentioned before. He had four sons; Gundobad, Godegisel, Chilperic and Godomar. Gundobad killed his brother Chilperic with the sword, and sank his wife in water with a stone tied to her neck. His two daughters he condemned to exile; the older of these, who became a nun, was called Chrona, and the younger Clotilda. And as Clovis often sent embassies to Burgundy, the maiden Clotilda was found by his envoys. And when they saw that she was of good bearing and wise, and learned that she was of the family of the king, they reported this to King Clovis, and he sent an embassy to Gundobad without delay asking her in marriage. And Gundobad was afraid to refuse, and surrendered her to the men, and they took the girl and brought her swiftly to the king. The king was very glad when he saw her, and married her, having already by a concubine a son named Theodoric.

29.
He had a first-born son by queen Clotilda, and as his wife wished to consecrate him in baptism, she tried unceasingly to persuade her husband, saying: "The gods you worship are nothing, and they will be unable to help themselves or any one else. For they are graven out of stone or wood or some metal. And the names you have given them are names of men and not of gods, as Saturn, who is declared to have fled in fear of being banished from his kingdom by his son; as Jove himself; the foul perpetrator of all shameful crimes, committing incest with men, mocking at his kinswomen, not able to refrain from intercourse with his own sister as she herself says: Jovisque et soror et conjunx. What could Mars or Mercury do? They are endowed rather with the magic arts than with the power of the divine name. But he ought rather to be worshipped who created by his word heaven and earth, the sea and all that in them is out of a state of nothingness, who made the sun shine, and adorned the heavens with stars, who filled the waters with creeping things, the earth with living things and the air with creatures that
fly, at whose nod the earth is decked with growing crops, the trees with fruit, the vines with grapes, by whose hand mankind was created, by whose generosity all that creation serves and helps man whom he created as his own." But though the queen said this the spirit of the king was by no means moved to belief, and he said: "It was at the command of our gods that all things were created and came forth, and it is plain that your God has no power and, what is more, he is proven not to belong to the family of the gods." Meantime the faithful queen made her son ready for baptism; she gave command to adorn the church with hangings and curtains, in order that he who could not moved by persuasion might be urged to belief by this mystery. The boy, whom they named Ingomer, died after being baptized, still wearing the white garments in which he became regenerate. At this the king was violently angry, and reproached the queen harshly, saying: "If the boy had been dedicated in the name of my gods he would certainly have lived; but as it is, since he was baptized in the name of your God, he could not live at all." To this the queen said: "I give thanks to the omnipotent God, creator of all, who has judged me not wholly unworthy, that he should deign to take to his kingdom one born from my womb. My soul is not stricken with grief for his sake, because I know that, summoned from this world as he was in his baptismal garments, he will be fed by the vision of God."

After this she bore another son, whom she named Chlodomer at baptism; and when he fell sick, the king said: "It is impossible that anything else should happen to him than happened to his brother, namely, that being baptized in the name of your Christ, should die at once." But through the prayers of his mother, and the Lord's command, he became well.

30.

The queen did not cease to urge him to recognize the true God and cease worshipping idols. But he could not be influenced in any way to this belief, until at last a war arose with the Alamanni, in which he was driven by necessity to confess what before he had of his free will denied. It came about that as the two armies were fighting fiercely, there was much slaughter, and Clovis's army began to be in danger of destruction. He saw it and raised his eyes to heaven, and with remorse in his heart he burst into tears and cried: "Jesus Christ, whom Clotilda asserts to be the son of the living God, who art said to give aid to those in distress, and to bestow victory on those who hope in thee, I beseech the glory of thy aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies, and I shall know that power which she says that people dedicated in thy name have had from thee, I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods but, as I find, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them. I now call upon thee, I desire to believe thee only let me be rescued from my adversaries." And when he said thus, the Alamanni turned their backs, and began to disperse in flight. And when they saw that their king was killed, they submitted to the dominion of Clovis, saying: "Let not the people perish further, we pray; we are yours now." And he stopped the fighting, and after encouraging his men, retired in peace and told the queen how he had had merit to win the victory by calling on the name of Christ. This happened in the fifteenth year of his reign.
Then the queen asked saint Remi, bishop of Rheims, to summon Clovis secretly, urging him to introduce the king to the word of salvation. And the bishop sent for him secretly and began to urge him to believe in the true God, maker of heaven and earth, and to cease worshipping idols, which could help neither themselves nor any one else. But the king said: "I gladly hear you, most holy father; but there remains one thing: the people who follow me cannot endure to abandon their gods; but I shall go and speak to them according to your words." He met with his followers, but before he could speak the power of God anticipated him, and all the people cried out together: "O pious king, we reject our mortal gods, and we are ready to follow the immortal God whom Remi preaches." This was reported to the bishop, who was greatly rejoiced, and bade them get ready the baptismal font. The squares were shaded with tapestried canopies, the churches adorned with white curtains, the baptistery set in order, the aroma of incense spread, candles of fragrant odor burned brightly, and the whole shrine of the baptistery was filled with a divine fragrance: and the Lord gave such grace to those who stood by that they thought they were placed amid the odors of paradise. And the king was the first to ask to be baptized by the bishop. Another Constantine advanced to the baptismal font, to terminate the disease of ancient leprosy and wash away with fresh water the foul spots that had long been borne. And when he entered to be baptized, the saint of God began with ready speech: "Gently bend your neck, Sigamber; worship what you burned; burn what you worshipped." The holy bishop Remi was a man of excellent wisdom and especially trained in rhetorical studies, and of such surpassing holiness that he equalled the miracles of Silvester. For there is extant a book of his life which tells that he raised a dead man. And so the king confessed all-powerful God in the Trinity, and was baptized in the name of the Father, Son and holy Spirit, and was anointed with the holy ointment with the sign of the cross of Christ. And of his army more than 3000 were baptized. His sister also, Albofled, was baptized, who not long after passed to the Lord. And when the king was in mourning for her, the holy Remi sent a letter of consolation which began in this way: "The reason of your mourning pains me, and pains me greatly, that Albofled your sister, of good memory, has passed away. But I can give you this comfort, that her departure from the world was such that she ought to be envied rather than e mourned." Another sister also was converted, Lanthechild by name, who had fallen into the heresy of the Arians, and she confessed that the Son and the holy Spirit were equal to the Father, and was anointed.

Now Clovis the king said to his people: "I take it very hard that these Arians hold part of the Gauls. Let us go with God's help and conquer them and bring the land under our control. Since these words pleased all, he set his army in motion and made for Poitiers where Alaric was at that time. But since part of the host was passing through Touraine, he issued an edict out of respect to the blessed Martin that no one should take anything from that country except grass for fodder, and water. But one from the army found a poor man's hay and said: "Did not the king order grass only to be taken, nothing else? And
this," said he, "is grass. We shall not be transgressing his command if we take it." And when he had done violence to the poor man and taken his hay by force, the deed came to the king. And quicker than speech the offender was slain by the sword, and the king said: "And where shall our hope of victory be if we offend the blessed Martin? It would be better for the army to take nothing else from this country." The king himself sent envoys to the blessed church saying: "Go, and perhaps you will receive some omen of victory from the holy temple." Then giving them gifts to set up in the holy place, he said: "If thou, O Lord, art my helper, and hast determined to surrender this unbelieving nation, always striving against thee, into my hands, consent to reveal it propitiously at the entrance to the church of St. Martin, so that I may know that thou wilt deign to be favorable to thy servant." Clovis' servants went on their way according to the king's command, and drew near to the place, and when they were about to enter the holy church, the first singer, without any pre-arrangement, sang this response: "Thou hast girded me, O Lord, with strength unto the battle; thou hast subdued under me those that rose up against me, and hast made mine enemies turn their backs unto me, and thou hast utterly destroyed them that hated me." On hearing this singing they thanked the Lord, and paying their vow to the blessed confessor they joyfully made their report to the king. Moreover, when he came to the river Vienne with his army, he did not know where he ought to cross. For the river had swollen from the rains. When he had prayed to the Lord in the night to show him a ford where he could cross, in the morning by God's will a hind of wonderful size entered the river before them, and when it passed over the people saw where they could cross. When the king came to the neighborhood of Poitiers and was encamped some distance off, he saw a ball of fire come out of the church of Saint Hilarius and pass, as it were, over him, to show that, aided by the light of the blessed confessor Hilarius, he should more boldly conquer the heretic armies, against which the same bishop had often fought for the faith. And he made it known to all the army that neither there nor on the way should they spoil any one or take any one's property.

There was in these days a man of praiseworthy holiness, the abbot Maxentius, who had become a recluse in his own monastery in Poitou because of his fear of God. We have not put the name of the monastery in this account because the place is called to the present day Cellula sancti Maxentii. And when his monks saw a division of the host approaching the monastery, they prayed to the abbot to come forth from his cell to consult with them. And as he stayed, they were panic-stricken and opened the door and dragged him from his cell. And he hastened boldly to meet the enemy to ask for peace. And one of them drew out his sword to launch a stroke at his head, and when he had raised his hand to his ear it became rigid and the sword fell. And he threw himself at the feet of the blessed man, asking pardon. And the rest of them seeing this returned in great fear to the army, afraid that they should all perish together. The man's arm the holy confessor rubbed with consecrated oil, and made over it the sign of the cross and restored it to soundness. And owing to his protection the monastery remained uninjured. He worked many other miracles also, and if any one diligently seeks for them he will find them all in reading the book of his Life. In the twenty-fifth year of Clovis.

Meantime king Clovis met with Alaric, king of the Goths, in the plain of Vouillé at the tenth milestone from Poitiers, and while the one army was for fighting at a distance the
other tried to come to close combat. And when the Goths had fled as was their custom, king Clovis won the victory by God's aid. He had to help him the son of Sigibert the lame, named Chloderic. This Sigibert was lame from a wound in the leg, received in a battle with the Alemanni near the town of Zulpich. Now when the king had put the Goths to flight and slain king Alaric, two of the enemy suddenly appeared and struck at him with their lances, one on each side. But he was saved from death by the help of his coat of mail as well as by his fast horse. At that time there perished a great number of the people of Auvergne, who had come with Apollinaris and the leading senators. From this battle Amalaric, son of Alaric, fled to Spain and wisely seized his father's kingdom. Clovis sent his son Theodoric to Clermont by way of Albi and Rodez. He went, and brought under his father's dominion the cities from the boundaries of the Goths to the limit of the Burgundians. Alaric reigned twenty-two years. When Clovis had spent the winter in Bordeaux and taken all the treasures of Alaric at Toulouse, he went to Angoulême. And the Lord gave him such grace that the walls fell down of their own accord when he gazed at them. Then he drove the Goths out and brought the city under his own dominion. Thereupon after completing his victory he returned to Tours, bringing many gifts to the holy church of the blessed Martin.

38.

Clovis received an appointment to the consulship from the emperor Anastasius, and in the church of the blessed Martin he clad himself in the purple tunic and chlamys, and placed a diadem on his head. Then he mounted his horse, and in the most generous manner he gave gold and silver as he passed along the way which is between the gate of the entrance [of the church of St. Martin] and the church of the city, scattering it among the people who were there with his own hand, and from that day he was called consul or Augustus. Leaving Tours he went to Paris and there he established the seat of his kingdom. There also Theodoric came to him.

42.

Ragnachar was then king at Cambrai, a man so unrestrained in his wantonness that he scarcely had mercy for his own near relatives. He had a counselor Farro, who defiled himself with a like vileness. And it was said that when food, or a gift, or anything whatever was brought to the king, he was wont to say that: it was enough for him and his Farro. And at this thing the Franks were in a great rage. And so it happened that Clovis gave golden armlets and belts, but all only made to resemble gold-for it was bronze gilded so as to deceive-these he gave to Ragnachar's leudes to be invited to attack him. Moreover, when Clovis had set his army in motion against him, and Ragnachar was continually sending spies to get information, on the return of his messengers, he used to ask how strong the force was. And they would answer: is a great sufficiency for you and your Farro." Clovis came and made war on him, and he saw that his army was beaten and prepared to slip away in flight, but was seized by his army, and with his hands tied behind his back, he was taken with Ricchar his brother before Clovis. And Clovis said to him: "Why have you humiliated our family in permitting yourself to be bound? It would have been better for you to die." And raising his ax he dashed it against his head, and he
turned to his brother and said: "If you had aided your brother, he would not have been bound." And in the same way he smote him with his ax and killed him. After their death their betrayers perceived that the gold which they had received from the king was false. When they told the king of this, it is said that he answered: "Rightly," said he, "does he receive this kind of gold, who of his own will brings his own master to death;" it ought to suffice them that they were alive and were not put to death, to mourn amid torments the wicked betrayal of their masters. When they heard this, they prayed for mercy, saying it was enough for them if they were allowed to live. The kings named above were kinsmen of Clovis, and their brother Rignomer by name, was slain by Clovis' order at the city of Mans. When they were dead Clovis received all their kingdom and treasures. And having killed many other kings and his nearest relatives, of whom he was jealous lest they take the kingdom from him, he extended his rule over all the Gauls. However he gathered his people together at one time, it is said, and spoke of the kinsmen whom he had himself destroyed. "Woe to me, who have remained as a stranger among foreigners, and have none of my kinsmen to give me aid if adversity comes." But he said this not because of grief at their death but by way of a ruse, if perchance he should be able to find some one still to kill.

43.

After all this he died at Paris, and was buried in the church of the holy apostles, which he himself had built together with his queen Clotilda. He passed away in the fifth year after the battle; of Vouillé, and all the days of his reign were thirty years, and his age was forty-five. From the death of St. Martin to the death of king Clovis, which happened in the eleventh year of the episcopate of Licinius, bishop of Tours, one hundred and twelve years are reckoned. Queen Clotilda came to Tours after the death of her husband and dwelt in the church of St. Martin, and dwelt in the place with the greatest chastity and kindness all the days of her life, rarely visiting Paris.