

**Reflections on historical writing:  
an investigation of the application of Cicero's rules for the  
historian in Victor's *Historia Persecutionis***

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*Abstract*

Historiography is concerned with the historian's perception and account of events, the latter often being formulated to achieve a particular end. The present article attempts to explore this notion through an investigation of Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*. In his *De Oratore* II, 15, 63, Cicero, who commented on the scope of history and the task of the historian, lays down the basic rules (*fundamenta*) for the historian: (i) *ne quid falsi audeat* – the historian must speak no untruth; (ii) *ne quid veri audeat* – he must speak the whole truth; and *ne qua suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo, ne qua simultatis* – there should be no indication of prejudice or enmity in his work. In his *Historia Persecutionis*, Victor complies with the first two requirements. However, by showing prejudice he does not comply with the third, and therefore does not do justice to classical historiography. It must be borne in mind, however, that Christian ecclesiastical history is presented from a particular point of view.

**Introduction**

The accounts of the persecution of the Catholic Christians in North Africa (429–489 C.E.) are fragmentary in nature, and are written almost exclusively from an orthodox Catholic perspective.

Descriptions of the persecution of the Christians in North Africa by the Vandals appear in various sources, including Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*, Rufinus of Aquileia's translation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, Prudentius' *Liber Peristephanon*, and Gregory of Tours' *Gloria Martyrorum*. Of these, Victor's *Historia Persecutionis* makes a particularly important contribution to the

historiography of the Vandals in North Africa. In this source, however, Victor painted a grim portrait of the Vandals.

Accepting the *Historia Persecutionis* as a historical document, this study aims to determine Victor's credibility as a historian and hagiographer. This is possible only by consulting the accounts of other writers, such as those mentioned above, which makes it possible to date the *Historia Persecutionis* and evaluate the factual accuracy of this source.

### **Who was Victor of Vita?**

The stories contained in the *Historia Persecutionis* were written by Victor of Vita, a clergyman who later became a bishop and who was an eyewitness to the persecutions. The dates of his birth and death are not mentioned in the literature; all that is mentioned is that he witnessed the Vandal's invasion of North Africa, which took place from 429 to 489 C.E. (Moorhead 1992:xv).

### **Background and reasons for the persecution**

A schism occurred between the Christians and the Judeans, and it is in fact possible to view the latter as the first persecutors of the Christians; in 37 C.E. Stephen was stoned precisely because he broke with Jewish traditions. In his *Ad Nationes* 1 and 4, Tertullian considers the Judeans to be the greatest enemies of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, there is a close association between early Christianity and Judaism, and this association would later have detrimental consequences for the Christians. During the reign of Tiberius the Judeans came to lose the privileged position that they had enjoyed in the Roman Empire; in the words of Frend (1971:134), quoting from Tacitus (Ann xv:44), "the Jews were regarded as irreconcilable enemies of the rest of humanity, and this charge, the *odium generis humani*, was to be passed to the Christians."

The Christian faith reached North Africa in approximately 200 C.E. There it gained popularity, to the extent of being elevated to state religion (*Codex Theodosianus* xvi 5.52; Frend 1971:23). Consequently, the Roman Empire (the state) threw in its lot with the Christians against the Donatists. This partisanship on the part of the empire fuelled the Donatists' antagonism towards both the Catholic Church and the Roman state. In 404 C.E., the Catholic Council of North African Bishops requested oppressive measures against the Donatists. A subsequent conference in 411 C.E. culminated in a decree banishing all Donatists and stating that their properties were to be confiscated (Holme 1898:63, 74). Under Roman rule, the Donatists were also forbidden to hold meetings. Before long, the Roman government had further barred Donatist supporters from making or benefiting from wills (Holme 1898:63), and they were also declared unfit to enter into contracts. Rendered

incapable of contracting, the Donatists, Berbers, and other non-Catholic communities were driven to seek an ally; this the Donatists found in the Vandals, who invaded North Africa in 429 C.E. The Donatists therefore took the opportunity to avenge themselves on the Catholics, accepted as being responsible for the oppression of their faith: “there is little doubt that the barbarian tribes sided with the invaders” (Holme 1898:85).

When the Vandals invaded North Africa, the Donatists seized the opportunity that this presented, and attacked and plundered towns and farms. The Vandals, having been persecuted in ancient Western Europe by the Catholic Christians, harboured a deep grudge against Rome and engaged in many forms of retaliation. They viewed the Catholic clergy with suspicion, subjecting them to insults and extremely cruel treatment. The Catholic bishops were banished, the churches closed and the sacraments, such as baptism and confirmation, were banned. Liturgical books were destroyed and church property was transferred to the Vandal clergy (Frend 1971:303). The Vandals, who now had the support of the local population (sects such as the Moors, Donatists, and the Circumcelliones, who were all, for various reasons, unhappy with Roman government), also persecuted the Catholic Christians (Moorhead 1992:xii, Raven 1969:153).

#### **Dating of the *Historia Persecutionis***

Moorhead asserts that Victor wrote his *Historia Persecutionis* 60 years after the Vandals had invaded North Africa: “It is evident that this is now the sixtieth year since the cruel and savage people of the Vandal race set foot on the territory of wretched Africa” (Victor of Vita: *HP* I:1). If the Vandals invaded Africa in 429 C.E., the *Historia Persecutionis* must, according to Moorhead, date from 489 C.E.

There is, however, no consensus about this. Moorhead explains the ambiguity regarding the dating of the *Historia Persecutionis* as follows: “[Perhaps] he [Victor of Vita] was misinformed as to the date of the arrival of the Vandals in Africa, or perhaps a scribal error distorted what he originally wrote” (Moorhead 1992:xvii). Another historical reference describing the Vandal invasion apparently also written by Victor, the *Passio Beatissimorum Martyrum*, which appeared more or less simultaneously with his *Historia Persecutionis*, dates from 484 C.E.<sup>1</sup> There are therefore two sources with different dates, namely 484 C.E. and 489 C.E. respectively, describing the Vandal invasion of North Africa. If, as Moorhead points out, the sources appeared together, both would have appeared in either 484 C.E. or 489 C.E.; he contends that Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis* appears to have been written

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<sup>1</sup> Moorhead 1992:xvi, vn. 20. Courtois contests the view that Victor wrote the *Passio Beatissimorum Martyrum*.

after 484 C.E., and must therefore have been written in 489 C.E. (Moorhead 1992:xvi). Shanzer confirms the date of 489 C.E. by means of inclusive calculation.<sup>2</sup> Wynn (1990:187) concurs: “Victor of Vita’s History of Vandal Persecution, written in the *late 480’s* [emphasis added – NS], is practically our sole primary source for the internal history of the Vandal kingdom of North Africa during the fifth century.” Shanzer (2004:273) states: “The customary conclusion, namely that the work was touched up and completed shortly after the end of Huneric’s reign, seems correct.”

### **Inaccurate version of facts?**

Cain is of the view that Victor’s chronology of the succession of the Vandal kings is the most reliable.<sup>3</sup> He believes that other writers, such as Gregory of Tours, do not offer a reliable account of the Vandals’ reign in North Africa, stating that “Gregory’s account is indeed riddled with inaccuracies. His chronology for the succession of the Vandal kings is badly garbled” (Cain 2005:414). Cain does not, however, state whether Victor’s order is the correct one or not.

Correct order in

<b>Vandal succession</b>	<b>Victor’s order</b>	<b>Gregory’s order</b>
Gunderic (407–428)		Gunderic
(407–428)		
Geiseric (428–477)	Gaiseric (428–477)	
Thrasamund (496–523)		
Huneric (477–484)	Huneric (477–484)	Huneric
(477–484)		
Gunthamund (484–496)		

<sup>2</sup> Shanzer 2004:272. “The opening words of the *HP*. I.1: *sexagesimus nunc agitur annus*, must have been written in 488 (if interpreted literally as an inclusive reckoning from the Vandals’ embarkation for Africa in 429) or in a window from 487 to 489, if they are conveniently round number.”

Moorhead 1992:xvi. “As the Vandal invasion of Africa began in May 429, assuming that Victor reckons the years inclusively, this would seem to yield a date of 488/489 for the composition of his work.”

<sup>3</sup> Cain 2005:414, 416. In comparing Victor with Gregory of Tours, Cain quotes Moorhead: “the quickest reading of Gregory is enough to establish that he is not reliable for the history of the Vandal kingdom in Africa,” and further: “Gregory’s confusion over the Vandal king’s succession would appear at first glance to be a mishandling of sources.”

Cain 2005:416. Footnote 15. “Victor correctly has Gunthamund as Huneric’s successor, whereas Gregory is conspicuously silent about Gunthamund.”

Thrasamund (496–523)

Hilderic (523–530)  
(523–530)

Gelamir (530–534)  
(530–534)

Hilderic

Gelamir

According to Cain's table Gunderic was the first Vandal king, as also indicated by Gregory, which is correct. Gunderic is not mentioned in Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*, although the name Gaiseric does appear in this work.<sup>4</sup> A comparison of Victor and Gregory's sequence yields the impression that Victor's version is narrow and that Gregory offers a more extensive or complete version, as Victor omits Gunderic, Gunthamund, Thrasamund, Hilderic, and Gelamir completely. This could indicate either a narrow approach or the misuse of resources, which might undermine Victor's credibility as historian. In the prologue of the *Historia Persecutionis*, however, Victor states explicitly that he deals only with the persecution of Christians during the time or reign of Gaiseric and Huneric: "A History of the Persecution of the African province in the times of Gaiseric and Huneric, the kings of the Vandals, written by the holy Victor the bishop, whose native place was Vita" (Victor of Vita: *Prologue*: 1). Clearly, therefore, Victor in this case complied with the requirement of historiography by not speaking any untruth.

From Victor's references to Gaiseric and Huneric only, it can be concluded that it was not his intention to compile a history of the Vandals and their royal succession *per se*. His aim was rather to present a graphic, even sensationalised, description of Christian persecution, which would explain why he focused solely on the persecution of the Christians by these two kings (Cain 2005: 434). The prologue of the *Historia Persecutionis* bears out this selective and exclusive approach.

### **The *Historia Persecutionis* as historical document**

<sup>4</sup> Victor of Vita: *HP* I:1-2. "It is evident that this is now the sixtieth year since the cruel and savage people of the Vandal race set foot on the territory of wretched Africa. They made an easy passage across the straits, because the vast and broad sea becomes narrow between Spain and Africa, which are separated by only twelve miles. A large number made the crossing, and in his cunning duke Gaiseric, intending to make the reputation of his people a source of dread, ordered then and there that the entire crowd was to be counted, even those who had come from the womb into the light that very day. Including old men, young men and children, slaves and masters, there was found to be a total of 80,000. News of this has spread widely, until today those ignorant of the matter think that this is the number of their armed men, although now their number is small and feeble."

In a historical account the truth must take precedence over a literary style, in other words, the objective of the historian must be to find out what actually happened or was said at a particular event or on a particular occasion. To be evaluated from a historiographical perspective, Victor's *Historia Persecutionis* must be tested against the requirements set for the genre, and it must be ascertained whether events that actually took place are described as they occurred, but with due consideration for the contemporary prescriptions for historiography as genre.

History consists of events, protagonists, times and places. Together, these elements make up the fabric of history, and are arranged in a certain way to provide an account. The protagonists are given distinctive characteristics and are thus individualised and transformed into personalities. The mere place and the history become an artistically significant space at the level of the narrative, protagonists become characters, and the chronological storyline becomes a storyline that structurally and in content combines a wide variety of textual elements in a meaningful way (Coetzee 1993:85–87). The martyr accounts as recounted in the *Historia Persecutionis* found particular favour among the more sensationalist martyr groups, and less sensationalised accounts had to undergo a metamorphosis (Coetzee 1993:49).

The use of rhetorical techniques, such as attributing speeches to characters, as Victor indeed did in the *Historia Persecutionis*, was accepted practice. In the martyr account of Dionysia, for example, Victor attributes a speech suitable to the occasion to Dionysia, who addresses the Vandals as follows: “*minister diabolic, quod ad obprobrium meum facere computatis, ipsa laus mea est*” (You servants of the Devil, what you think you are doing to my shame is in fact my praise) (Victoris Vitensis: *Hist.* III:22). Victor also calls the Vandals tyrants and barbarians, and their king a pharaoh: “*cogitate acriora adversus ecclesiam dei*” ([The tyrant] turned his mind to more violent actions against the church of God).<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Victor terms the

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<sup>5</sup> Victoris Vitensis: *Hist.* II:38.

Victor of Vita: *HP* III:47. “Indeed, the violence of the tyrants was universal, for Vandals had been sent everywhere for the purpose of handing over people traveling along the roads to their priests so that they would be slaughtered.”

Victor also views the Vandals as barbarians: Victor of Vita: *HP* II:6. “The Catholic multitude rejoiced that they had been given the right to ordain a bishop again while the barbarians held power.”

Fahey 1999:229. Victor does not make an explicit comparison between the Vandal kings and Pharaoh. The deduction can be made from the text, since the Christians viewed themselves as the new Israelites. The Exodus account can be dramatically associated with the oppressed Christians in North Africa.

Victor of Vita: *HP* III:62. “Surely there is no name by which they could be appropriately called other than ‘barbarian.’”

They are further represented as evil: Victor of Vita: Book I:51. “But let this now be the end of the persecution waged against us by Gaiseric, with as much pride as cruelty.”

Christians the nation of God, referring to them as *dei exercitum*<sup>6</sup> and the banished clergymen as *dei exercitu comitantes* (the crack troops of God's army).<sup>7</sup>

Victor terms the Vandals "*minister erroris*" (servants of falsehood) (Victor Vitensis: *Hist.* III:36) and "*animarum praedones*" (robbers of souls) (Victor Vitensis: *Hist.* III:48), and describes them as "*serpentia proles*" (serpent-like) (Victor Vitensis: *Hist.* III:63). On the basis of these hostile references it is possible to conclude that Victor felt animosity towards them. However, one of the basic requirements of historiography is that there should be no indication of prejudice or enmity in a writer's work.<sup>8</sup>

### The *Historia Persecutionis* as didactic document

As a historiographical (and hagiographical) work, the *Historia Persecutionis* serves both a didactic and a propagandistic function. In terms of the latter, the *Historia Persecutionis* is aimed at an Eastern readership. But, according to Shanzer, the Latin used in the *Historia Persecutionis* is not an effective medium for Victor's propaganda campaign: "There is ... internal evidence that the *Historia Persecutionis* ... its language, Latin, must be taken into consideration in evaluating its efficiency as propaganda" (Shanzer 2004:279). If intended for an Oriental readership, the *Historia Persecutionis* would not, then, have succeeded as a didactic work, nor would it have been suitable as a propaganda medium, a fact that Victor overlooked; however, if intended to be read by the local population in North Africa (who could speak Latin), the *Historia Persecutionis* would have been successful as a work of propaganda.

Victor's aim was to use the *Historia Persecutionis* to elicit Oriental intervention against the Vandals in North Africa (Shanzer 2004:279); as Shanzer observes, the Orientals were in fact his target audience (Shanzer 2004:280). Victor therefore aimed his martyr accounts at a wider readership consisting of both Christians and non-Christians; as Fahey (1999:225) states: "[Victor] wrote for a wide audience, both in Africa and abroad." Since the *Historia Persecutionis* was meant to transcend cultural boundaries to reach both Christian and non-Christian readers, it is unfortunate that there is clear evidence of prejudice and enmity in the work.

To convey his message to the Orientals effectively, in the *Historia Persecutionis* Victor painted a dark picture of the Vandals (Shanzer 2004:272), presenting graphic and even sensationalised descriptions of Christian persecution in North Africa in an endeavour to lay the blame for the

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Victor of Vita: *HP* III:71. "The most wicked Huniric held dominion in his kingdom for seven years and ten months."

<sup>6</sup> Victor Vitensis: *Hist.* II:31. "the army of God"

<sup>7</sup> Victor Vitensis: *Hist.* III:60.

<sup>8</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* ii 15:63. "*ne qua suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo, ne qua similitatis.*"

persecution of the Christians at the door of the Vandal dynasty.<sup>9</sup> Thus it would appear that Victor not only railed against the suffering the martyrs had to endure, but also attempted to seek Oriental intervention to prevent the Vandals from completely annihilating the Catholic Christians in North Africa (Fahey 1999:235–236). Of Huneric, Victor writes: “How is a man who has come to be so cruel towards his own bishop going to spare our religion and us?” (Victor of Vita: *HP* II:13). In Victor’s eyes, the fact that Huneric treated his own family badly was an indication that he would treat the Christians in an even worse way.<sup>10</sup>

### Comparison of other writings and Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis*

A study of Rufinus of Aquileia’s translation of Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Lactantius’ *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, Prudentius’ *Liber Peristephanon*, and Gregory of Tours’ *Gloria Martyrorum* reveals that these writers did not rely on Victor for information. Gregory’s *Gloria Martyrorum*, however, which is closest to Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis*, falls into a different category, since he appears to have been unaware of Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis*: “the entire first book of *Historia Persecutionis* covers Gaiseric’s reign, but Gregory never once mentions him” (Cain 2005:416).

Shanzer, however, claims that Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis* was influenced by both Rufinus’ translation of Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Lactantius’ *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (2004:278–279). Victor’s historical work would then in turn have contributed to Gregory of Tours’ second book, *Martyrs or Confessors* (Shanzer 2004:278–279). On the one hand, therefore, Victor’s work was influenced by the works of his predecessors, while on the other it influenced those that followed. A comparison of Victor’s *Historia Persecutionis* with the work of the above writers is useful, and reveals that he had both critics and supporters.

### Rufinus’ translation of Eusebius’ *Historia Ecclesiastica*

<sup>9</sup> Holme 1898: 84. “Neither Moors nor Donatists had much cause to love the Roman régime, and there is no prima facie improbability in assuming that they threw in their lot with Gaiseric.”

<sup>10</sup> Victor of Vita: *HP* II:14. An indication of how badly Huneric treated his family can be seen in a translation by Moorhead of Victor of Vita’s *HP*: “Then he sent into exile Godagis, the eldest son of Genton, together with his wife, without a slave or handmaid to help them. In the same way he exiled his brother Theoderic, naked and in want, after his wife and son had been murdered. After Theoderic died he drove far away in affliction his surviving little son and his own two grown-up daughters, seated on asses. But he also harassed very many counts and nobles of his race with false charges, because they were supporters of his brother. He had some burned, and he cut the throat of others, showing himself an imitator of his father Gaiseric, who drowned the wife of his brother by throwing her, tied to heavy stones, into the well-known Amsaga River at Cirta (Constantine), and went on to kill the children after the death of their mother.”



Tyrannius Rufinus, or Rufinus of Aquileia (c.344/345–410 C.E.), born in the Roman city of Julia Concordia (today Concordia Sagittaria), near Aquileia in what is now Italy, was a monk, historian, and theologian (Wikipedia: Tyrannius Rufinus).

Wynn (1990:187) differs from Cain in asserting that Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*, written in the late 480's, is the only fifth-century reference to deal with the Vandal dynasty in North Africa. Wynn notes, however, that Victor relied on Rufinus to a considerable extent. Accounts of the Roman siege of Jerusalem of 70 C.E. (excerpt by Eusebius from Josephus' *Bellum Iudaicum*) and of the famine and plague of 484 C.E. are to be found in Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*, and there are a number of parallels between the description of the siege of Jerusalem in Rufinus' *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*.<sup>11</sup> Wynn (1990:189) remarks that "Josephus' account of the excesses committed by the Jewish factions in Jerusalem in the course of the famine occasioned by the siege in particular bears a close similarity to Victor's account of the atrocities perpetrated by the Vandals during their invasion of North Africa".

Wynn (1990:193–194) recognises definite similarities between Victor's version and that of Rufinus:

First, it is very likely that Victor used as a model for his account of the Vandal invasion Josephus' description of the Roman siege of Jerusalem excerpted in the *Ecclesiastical History* because that event had become in Christian literature a vivid and well-known example of God's judgment against a believing people for transgressions against Christ, an

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<sup>11</sup> Wynn 1990:189. Victor's version of the persecution by the Vandals in North Africa displays a number of parallels with Rufinus' *Historia Ecclesiastica* regarding the atrocities and siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. According to Wynn, the famine occurred as a result of the siege of Jerusalem. This is similar to Victor's version of the atrocities committed by the Vandals during their invasion of North Africa. Victor's version reads as follows: "*et dum quae errant urgentibus poenis facilius ederentur, iterum crudelibus tormentis oblatores urgebant, autumantes quondam partem, non totum oblatum: et quanto plus dabatur, tanto amplius quempiam habere credebant ... non infirmior sexus, non consideratio nobilitatis, non reverentia sacerdotalis crudeles animos mitigabat ... senilis maturitas atque veneranda canities ... nullam sibi ab hospitibus misericordiam vindicabat. Sed etiam parvulos ab uberibus maternis rapines barbarus furor insontem infantiam elidebat ad terram* (HP 3:5–7, 11–13, 16–17, 18–19).

Rufinus' version reads as follows: "*inruentes urbis praedones perscrutabantur domos, et siquidem invenissent, tamquam de his, qui fefellerant, poenas sumebant, si vero non invenissent, nihilominus tamquam eos, qui occultius et diligentius absconderint, cruciabant ... nulla senibus pro canitie reverentia, nulla erga parvulos miseratio, sed in exiguo panis fragmento parvulos inhaerentes et ex ipso, cui inhaeserant, suspensos elidebant in terram.*" (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, c. 2. 201:1–4, 203:2–4).

interpretation of Jerusalem's fall that dates from the Synoptic Gospels themselves. That the Jews were punished by God through the Romans for rejecting Christ and persecuting his followers is a point repeatedly pressed by Eusebius/Rufinus and by Victor's time had become an exegetical commonplace.

Wynn therefore views the Vandal invasion into North Africa in terms of the theological concept of divine punishment: "the drought and famine that ensued upon Huniric's (*sic*) persecution was a divine judgment concentrated upon those who had apostasized from Catholicism and submitted to Arian rebaptism" (Wynn 1990:195). Victor, however, was unwilling to attribute the Vandal invasion to the shortcomings of the Christians in North Africa. The impression is given that the Christians in North Africa were not so very wayward, and that their punishment was disproportionate to their transgressions. According to Christensen, Wynn is ambiguous in asserting that Victor claims that the transgressions of the Church in Africa deserve God's wrath (Christensen 1989:52). In Book III of the *Historia Persecutionis*, which also bears similarities to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, Victor depicts the God of the Old Testament as vengeful, a quality attributed by the inhabitants of North Africa to the god Saturn (Wynn 1990:195; *HP* III:66–68).

Wynn (1990:196) is furthermore of the opinion that the *Historia Ecclesiastica* conditioned Victor's perception of Christian historiography, and that he considered it to be the "ultimate triumph throughout the Roman world and beyond of Christianity over paganism and of orthodoxy over heresy". These features not only help to place the history of the Vandal persecution within the domain of ecclesiastical history, "but also link that work with the later and more secular narrative histories of the earlier Middle Ages" (Wynn 1990:196–197).

### **Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum***

Lactantius was probably born in 250 C.E. in Africa. He converted to Christianity in Nicomedia. Although Eusebius discusses the persecution of the Christians by the Roman emperors in general, Lactantius is more selective and limits himself to only five Roman emperors who persecuted Christians, namely Nero, Domitian, Decius, Valerian, and Aurelian (Creed 1984:xxxvi). Lactantius also discusses the fate of each emperor who persecuted the Christians. Just as Victor of Vita used a selective approach in the *Historia Persecutionis*, limiting his account of the persecution of the Catholic Christians to the reign of just two Vandal kings, Lactantius does the same in the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, limiting his account of the persecution of the Christians to the reign of five Roman emperors.

Lactantius begins his *De Mortibus Persecutorum* with the crucifixion of Jesus in the time of Tiberius Caesar.<sup>12</sup> He then discusses Nero, who was already Caesar when Peter arrived in Rome.<sup>13</sup> After Peter had performed certain miracles, Nero had him nailed to a wooden cross, and also had Paul killed. When a large number of people turned away from idol veneration and abandoned the practices of the past to accept the new Christian faith, Nero destroyed the temple and persecuted the righteous ones (*MP*, c. 6). There are definite similarities between Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum* and Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*. Just as Nero, in the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, persecuted the Christians and destroyed the temples, Gaiseric and Huneric in the *Historia Persecutionis* also persecuted the Catholic Christians and destroyed the temples.

Several years later, a new emperor, Domitian, who was no less of a tyrant, was crowned.<sup>14</sup> He ruled well until he began to rebel against the Lord. Gaiseric displayed the same characteristics. He initially left the Catholic Christians in peace, and simply wanted residence for his populace. However, because the Catholic Christians were wealthy and wanted to convert Arians to Christianity, he began to persecute them. More than a century later, Decius also engaged in persecution of the Christians.<sup>15</sup>

Valerian (Lactantius, *MP*, c. 5) also lifted his hands against God, and Aurelian was by nature wayward, and by his cruelty he made God wrathful (*MP*, c. 6). Diocletian, the inventor of crime and perpetrator of evil deeds, could not, after he had destroyed everything else, keep his hands off the Church.<sup>16</sup>

### Prudentius' *Liber Peristephanon*

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, a Roman poet, was born in the province of Tarraconensis (modern Northern Spain) in 348 C.E., and died in Spain around 413 C.E. (Wikipedia: Prudentius).

In his *Liber Peristephanon*, Prudentius discusses five martyrs, namely Fructuosus, Cyprian, Lawrence of Rome, Emeterius and Celedonius. Only

<sup>12</sup> Lactantius, *De Mortibus Persecutorum*: c. 2. "Extremis temporibus Tiberii Caesaris, ut scriptum legimus, dominus noster Iesus Christus a Iudaeis cruciatus est post diem decimum kalendas apriles duobus Geminis consulibus."

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. c. 5. "Cumque iam Nero imperaret, Petrus Romam advenit et editis quibusdam miraculis, quae virtute ipsius dei data sibi ab eo potestate faciebat, convertit multos ad iustitiam deoque templum fidele ac stabile collocavit."

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. c. 3: "Post hunc interiectis aliquot annis alter minor tyrannus Domitianus ortus est."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. c. 4: "Extitit enim post annos plurimos execrabile animal Decius, qui vexaret ecclesiam..."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. c. 7: "Diocletianus, qui scelerum inventor et malorum machinator fuit, cum disperderet omnia, ne a deo quidem manus potuit abstinere."

Cyprian appears in both Prudentius' *Liber Peristephanon* and Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*.

In this account the pain experienced in the present is offset by the eternal joy that lies ahead. Although Victor also deals with the martyrdom of Cyprian, his version in the *Historia Persecutionis* is not as complete as that of Prudentius. Unlike Prudentius, Victor makes no mention of the court proceedings to which Cyprian was subjected.

There are, however, similarities between the versions of Victor and of Prudentius. Both include a prayer in which Cyprian asks that none of the flock entrusted to him should shrink from suffering. Cyprian asks them to follow his example: "An excellent comforter, he encouraged them individually with an affectionate and fatherly kindness, not without rivers of flowing tears, prepared to lay down his life for the brothers and of his own accord to deliver himself up to like sufferings, if he were allowed" (*HP* I:33; Coetzee 1993:170).

Nowhere else in the works by the historians and hagiographers discussed above are the four martyrs identified by Victor mentioned, and there are similarities between Victor and Prudentius with regard to Cyprian only. However, Victor views Cyprian as a witness, while Prudentius believes him to be a martyr. To Victor, Cyprian is "[a] confessor himself in spirit and virtue" (*HP* II:33). Prudentius believes Cyprian to have died following the suffering he experienced: *Est proprius patriae martyr, sed amore et ore noster; incubat in Libya sanguis, sed ubique lingua pollet, sola superstes agit de corpore, sola obire nescit, dum genus esse hominum Christus sinet et uigere mundum* (in this prayer Cyprian asks that the members of his Church should, like those of Christ, cleanse the world) (Prudentius, *Passio Cypriani*: 3–6).

### **Gregory's *Gloria Martyrorum***

Georgius Florentius Gregorius, a Gallo-Roman historian and bishop of Tours, was born in 538 and died in 594 C.E. His writing style, presumably cultivated so as to appeal to a wider readership, has been described as ungrammatical. His most notable work is the *Decem Libri Historiarum* (Ten Books of Histories), better known as the *Historia Francorum* (History of the Franks) (Wikipedia: Gregory of Tours).

There are points of similarity between Victor's *Historia Persecutionis* and Gregory of Tours' *Gloria Martyrorum*. Indeed, it would appear that of all the sources mentioned here, the *Gloria Martyrorum* is the closest to Victor's *Historia Persecutionis* in terms of information. This source appears to be the only true yardstick against which Victor's martyr accounts can be judged. The two works display both similarities and differences.

Very few sources cover the period of the Vandal invasion, and, according to Cain, Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*, which was written in approximately 485 C.E., is the only contemporary source; Gregory's account of the Vandal invasion was written in the early 570s (Cain 2005:416). It is therefore possible that no unbiased account of the Vandal invasion exists. The favourable references to Eugenius for one, and the antagonistic references to Cyrola for another, bear this out: "On the one hand there is Eugenius, the archetypal orthodox bishop representing all that is good and holy (*sanctum ... episcopum, verum inenarrabili sanctitate, qui tunc ferebatur magnae prudentiae esse*), and on the other hand there is Cyrola, the quintessential heretical pseudo-bishop who embodies all that is evil and dishonest (*falso vocatus episcopus, heretocorum tunc maximus habebatur assertor*)" (Cain 2005:417–418). Cyrola is referred to as *elatus vanitate atque superbia* (Cain 2005:418).

Cain further states: "The sources for this period of the Vandal hegemony are both few and biased" (Cain 2005:412). Gregory, who wrote some 100 years after Victor, merely gives a brief review of the Vandal hegemony: Gregory's discussion of the Vandal kingdom "is intended merely as a brief preface to explain and contextualize the rise of the Franks" (Cain 2005:413). His martyr accounts focus mainly on a miracle performed by the Catholic bishop Eugenius during the reign of Huneric, as can be seen in the *Gloria Martyrorum* (Cain 2005:114, 413). Victor, in his *Historia Persecutionis*, also mentions a miracle by Eugenius (*HP* II:47–51).

However, Gregory is not viewed as a reliable source on the subject of the Vandals in Africa: "Gregory's account is indeed riddled with inaccuracies" (Cain 2005:414). Gregory's version of the martyrdom of Anonyma during the reign of Thrasamund is anachronistic, since Gunderic, and not Thrasamund, was in power at that time. According to Victor's chronology, Gunderic's term of office in Spain expired before the arrival of the Vandals in Africa. Gregory does not mention Gaiseric at all: it is as though Gaiseric never existed (Cain 2005:415). Gregory's version of the reign of Huneric, however, is accurate, because: "his Vandal account revolves around Eugenius, who became bishop of Carthage during Huneric's reign. Huneric's Arian sympathies and his persecution of Catholics would naturally have piqued Gregory's interest and even aroused his ire" (Cain 2005:415).

There are both similarities and differences between Victor and Gregory's accounts of Eugenius. The healing of a blind man by Eugenius is documented in both the *Gloria Martyrorum* and the *Historia Persecutionis*, for instance. However, they differ in that Gregory identifies the blind man as

an Arian, whereas Victor identifies him as Felix, a well-known person in Carthage (*civibus civitatisque notissimus*).<sup>17</sup>

Cain (2005:422) observes that Gregory's version also contains additional information absent from the *Historia Persecutionis*. For instance, he mentions two bishops, Vindimialis and Longinus, both known for their miracles, while Victor does not discuss either of them. Moreover, Gregory also refers to two other persons, Octavian and Revocatus, not mentioned in the *Historia Persecutionis*.

Gregory mentions a letter sent by Eugenius on the eve of his exile early in July 484 C.E. to his congregation, in which he pleads that they remain steadfast in their faith, despite his absence. This letter is not referred to in other references. Victor, on the other hand, produces another letter written by Eugenius, which in turn does not appear in any other reference. It is generally assumed that both letters are genuine, and stylistic similarities indicate that they were written by the same person (Cain 2005:423). The fact that the letter in the *Historia Persecutionis* is not the one that Gregory mentions implies that Gregory obtained this letter from another source: "Gregory's story has no discernible genetic relationship with Victor's" (Cain 2005:424).

No *Passio Eugenii* existed, although there is a Medieval *Passio S. Eugenii episcopi et martyris*, which was included in twelfth-century codices containing several martyr accounts. Gregory did not necessarily base his account of the Vandal invasion and his martyr accounts on a strictly hagiographic tradition, appearing to have obtained his information from a lost source, the *Historia persecutionis sub Hunerico rege*: "This *Historia* may have resembled Victor's *HP* in its basic structural format, enshrining for posterity the tragedies and triumphs of Catholic Christians under Huneric" (Cain 2005:432). It can therefore be inferred that Gregory obtained his information from a source that was similar to the *Historia Persecutionis*, and it is therefore conjectured that this source was a follow-on from Victor's *Historia Persecutionis* (Cain 2005:432).

The (lost) *Historia persecutionis sub Hunerico rege* was compiled in North Africa during the concluding months of Huneric's reign. Like Victor, Gregory was not interested in writing just a history of the Vandals and their dynastic succession, but was also selective, discussing only Gaiseric and Huneric, and of the two, primarily Huneric. Regarding the *Historia persecutionis sub Hunerico rege* it has been said: "This *Historia* is a ghost source whose shadowy contours are discernible only by indirect traces left behind in Gregory's narrative. Its footprints are faded, but they are not completely washed away" (Cain 2005:436). The hypothesis is that this source

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<sup>17</sup> Cain (2005:421–422) claims that the blind man in Gregory's *Decem libri historiarum* is an Arian conspirator hired by Cyrola. Felix, named in Victor's *HP*, was in fact blind.

would later have far-reaching consequences for future critical studies of the *Gloria Martyrorum*. It therefore appears that Victor may not have been the only Catholic writer to write an apologetic history during Huneric's persecution of the Christians.

### The relationship between the various martyr histories

In conclusion, Gregory's versions of the martyr accounts on the one hand and Rufinus' translation of Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* on the other display no parallels with Victor of Vita's martyr accounts in the *Historia Persecutionis*, and in fact make not even a single reference to them. Eusebius suggests that he discussed only those whose martyrdom he witnessed in person (Christensen 1989:58), and Rufinus did what he saw fit with Eusebius' original material, on occasion rearranging the information with the intention of creating a continuous and comprehensive text. Rufinus' translation is therefore inconsistent (Christensen 1989:70), although its broken and sketchy nature can be attributed to the crudely constructed texts of Eusebius: in Christensen's words, "Rufinus works with an original text which simply is a 'patchwork'" (1989:336). It is also possible that Rufinus drew on other sources as well.

Rufinus does not accept any classifications of martyrs (Christensen 1989:71). Concerning the irreconcilability of Rufinus/Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica* and Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*, Christensen (1989:333) asserts: "Eusebius' work is in actual fact an independent piece of work"; this is supported by the fact that Eusebius lived a century before Victor.

On the occasion of the Great Persecution in 303 C.E., Lactantius wrote in defence of the Christian doctrine (Creed 1984:xxvi). His *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, like Rufinus/Eusebius' *Historia Ecclesiastica*, bears no relation to Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*; in fact, the *De Mortibus Persecutorum* differs completely from the martyr accounts of Victor and Rufinus/Eusebius. Lactantius does not discuss individual martyrs, which Rufinus/Eusebius and Victor do, and his interest lies in the actions of the various emperors (Creed 1984:xxxiii, xxxv). He concentrates on the community rather than the individual, except in the case of Peter and Paul, whom he mentions no more than cursorily.<sup>18</sup> He therefore discusses the

<sup>18</sup> Lactantius: *De Mortibus Persecutorum*. In Creed 1984:6. "Cumque iam Nero imperaret, Petrus Romam advenit et editis quibusdam miraculis, quae virtute ipsius dei data sibi ab eo potestate faciebat, convertit multos ad iustitiam deoque templum fidele ac stabile collocavit. Qua re ad Neronem delata cum animadverteret non modo Romae, sed ubique cotidie magnam multitudinem deficere a cultu idolorum et ad religionem novam damnata vetusta transire, ut erat execrabilis ac nocens tyrannus, prosilivit ad excidendum caeleste templum

persecution of Christians by the emperors Nero,<sup>19</sup> Domitian,<sup>20</sup> Decius,<sup>21</sup> Valerian,<sup>22</sup> Aurelius<sup>23</sup>, and Diocletian.<sup>24</sup> According to Creed, Lactantius considered Constantine (who is not dealt with in the text, since he neither persecuted nor martyred anyone) different from the other emperors, and worthy to rule the entire world.<sup>25</sup> Lactantius' work is rather a history of the Roman Empire, and appears not to be a hagiographic work in the strictest sense of the word (Creed 1984:xxxvi). In the *De Mortibus Persecutorum*, the persecution of Christians is viewed as government policy, in terms of which the Christians were characterised as enemies of the state (Creed 1984:21). The persecution of individual Christians, which receives extensive attention in Victor's *Historia Persecutionis*, is therefore considered less important in Lactantius' *De Mortibus Persecutorum*.

### Conclusion

Since the *Historia Persecutionis* was intended to transcend cultural boundaries, it is unfortunate that this work contains clear evidence of prejudice and enmity: to convey his message to the Orientals effectively, in the *Historia Persecutionis* Victor painted a grim portrait of the Vandals, in that way attempting to lay the blame for the persecution of the Christians at the door of the Vandal dynasty. In so doing, Victor discredited himself. He dictated the historiography in order to achieve a certain outcome (to elicit the intervention of the Oriental dynasty and lay the blame for the persecution of the Christians at the door of the Vandal dynasty). However, this study stresses that Victor's historical accounts appear to be accurate. In the prologue of the *Historia Persecutionis* Victor states that he will write only about the reigns of Huneric and Gaiseric. With regard to the first two principles articulated in Cicero's *De Oratore*, namely that the historian must

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*delendamque iustitiam et primus omnium persecutus dei servos Petrum cruci adfixit, Paulum interfecit.*"

<sup>19</sup> Creed 1984:6–7. Nero was the first persecutor of the Christians. He had Peter crucified upside-down, and had Paul murdered: "*primus omnium persecutus dei servos Petrum cruci adfixit, Paulum interfecit.*"

<sup>20</sup> Creed 1984:8–9. Domitian, Nero's successor, was no less of a tyrant: "*Post hunc interiectis aliquot annis alter non minor tyrannus Domitianus ortus est.*"

<sup>21</sup> Creed 1984:8–9. Decius persecuted the Church: "*Exstitit enim post annos plurimos execrabile animal Decius, qui vexaret ecclesiam.*"

<sup>22</sup> Creed 1984:8–9. Valerian, like Decius, rejected God: "*Non multo post Valerianus quoque non dissimili furore correptus impias manus in deum.*"

<sup>23</sup> Creed 1984:10–11. Aurelius was wayward and also opposed God: "*Aurelius, qui esset natura vesanus et praeceps ... iram dei crudelibus factis lacessivit.*"

<sup>24</sup> Creed 1984:10–11. Diocletian committed offences and performed evil deeds. He also could not keep his hands off God: "*Diocletianus, qui scelerum inventor et malorum machinator fuit, cum disperderet omnia, ne a deo quidem manus potuit abstinere.*"

<sup>25</sup> Creed 1984:15. "*Constantium dissimilis ceterorum fuit dignusque qui solus orbem teneret.*"



speaking nothing untrue and that he must tell the whole truth, Victor complied with the requirements of historiography. With regard to the final principle, however, namely that there should be no indication of prejudice or enmity in his work, he failed the test. It must be remembered, though, that Christian ecclesiastical history is told from the winner's point of view: understandably, then, the views of the Vandals (and this includes the Donatists) were suppressed or misrepresented. Nevertheless, it is important for the interpreter to try to get behind the façade by reading between the lines with an eye to the different readerships of a work such as the *Historia Persecutionis*.

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