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Narrative tenses in Merovingian hagiographic texts

In this paper I will examine the use of the narrative tenses in four hagiographic texts from the Merovingian period.¹ Saints' Lives were a popular genre in the Middle Ages. They were read at the saint's name day (*recitare, Vita Landib.* 354.5). They consist of a series of episodes and most of them are written in a simple style, more or less aiming at or capable of conforming to classical standards. The authors sometimes apologize explicitly for their ignorance or stylistic level (*simplicitatem nostri sermonis, V. Landib.* 384.1 and also *imbecillitas ingenii mei*, in the sometimes rather bombastic *V. Trud.* 274.32).² Given these characteristics it may be interesting to see whether these texts show a change in the use of the tenses in comparison with their use in Classical Latin.

As for the forms of the tenses, morphological mistakes are remarkably few. There are orthographic and phonological deviant forms, especially in the *V. Landib.* In the *V. Landib.* there are also occasional active forms instead of deponent forms (e.g. *utebat*,³ 374.2). A mistake as in (1), however, is rare. Verbal morphology is generally speaking OK.

- (1) Deinde progressus in aliam basilicam ... orando *visitaret* (*v.l. visitavit*) (*V. Hugb.* 488.26)

In the *V. Hugb.* we encounter many examples of independently used participles, with sometimes variation in the manuscripts. An example of a perfect participle, where one manuscript supplies *est*, is (2):

- (2) Hoc audito pontifex magno repletus (*v.l. repletus est*) gaudio et cum omni diligentia perscrutans si divina fieret voluntas (*V. Hugb.* 484. 4-6)

The omission of forms of *esse* in such cases is not remarkable from the point of view of Classical Latin.⁴ Much more remarkable about (2) is the coordination of *repletus* with the present participle *perscrutans*. Another example of an independent participial (present) clause is (3):

- (3) Qui cum lacrimis altare osculans et omnes fratres se in oratione commendans, pro se orare postulans (*v.l. postulavit*) (*V. Hugb.* 488.23-25)

¹ The texts involved are: (i) *Vita Wandregiseli*, *MGH Scrip.rer.mer.* V, 13-24, ca AD 700; (ii) *Vita Hugberti*, *MGH Scrip.rer.mer.* VI, 482-46, ca AD 750; (iii) *Vita Trudonis*, *MGH Scrip.rer.mer.* VI, 273-298, ca 780; (iv) *Vita Landiberti Vetustissima*, *MGH Scrip.rer.mer.* VI, 353-384, early VIII. I also checked my findings with Gregory of Tours' *Iul.*, *MGH Scrip.rer.mer.* I,2, 113-134.

² This is a topical feature, cf. Greg. Tur. *Iul.* 116.9-12 *me minus vel idoneum vel peritum ad haec narranda cognosco, nec imbutum grammaticis artibus nec litteris liberalibus eruditum.*

³ These forms are often corrected or paralleled by correct forms in other manuscripts.

⁴ Other instances are *contractae (sunt)* (*V. Hugb.* 485.9), *deceptus* (486.17-18).

There is some manuscript variation between present participles and finite forms, as in (3) and in (5) below. Examples of this usage have been discussed by Eklund 1970, 119ff. They occur from the fourth or fifth century onwards and should not be explained as periphrastic expressions with a form of *esse* omitted or missing. They are typical of low stylistic levels of text.

There are some representatives of new, alternative constructions, such as (4)-(7):

- (4) In vico Gabelio *habebat* ipse domnus tabernaculum *stabilitum*, ut ... (V. Hugb. 485.18)

(4) may be a representative of the increasing use of *habere* in the perfect system (Pinkster 1987; Jacob 1995). The author of the *Vita Hugberti* has also several instances of a periphrastic construction consisting of a present participle and a form of *esse*, as in (5) – (6). This expression type is clearly non-classical and rare until Late Latin (Eklund 1970, 74).

- (5) *Idola plurima et sculptilia quae colentes erant* (v.l. *colebantur*) in Ardoinna, destruxit (V. Hugb. 484.25-26)
 (6) *Ipse vero domnus egrediens erat* ab ecclesia, circumdatus plebe (V. Hugb. 485.12).⁵

There are also a few examples of 'shifted' use of forms of *esse*, such as (7):

- (7) *Venerabilis igitur Trudo ... ortus fuit* (V. Trud. 276.6).⁶

However, an examination of possible morphological renewal does not yield much because of the low number of deviant forms and the unequal distribution over the texts.

The quantitative data on the use of the tenses in the four texts involved are the following.⁷

Table 1: use of narrative tenses in four Merovingian Latin texts

LOCUS:	V. Wandr.	V. Hugb.	V. Trud.	V. Landib.
VERBAL FORMS:				
perfect	91	96	302	141
imperfect	78	47	51	106
present	5	20	1 (?)	14*
pluperfect	—	2	—	2
total	174	165	353	263

* In 9 instances there is manuscript variation between present and perfect forms. I follow the MGH text.⁸

⁵ Other examples are *praestolantes eramus* (V. Hugb. 491.14), *dolentes erant* (492.17), *adstantes eramus* (493.16), *vir Dei fuit non loquens* (V. Wandr. 22.33).

⁶ Cf. *rixati fuerunt* (V. Trud. 296.39), *iussus fuerat* (V. Hugb. 484.7). There are also several examples in the *Vita Landib.*: *oriundus fuit* (sic 354.10), *fuerat iussus* (359.3), *fuit ingressus* (363.12), *ingressi fuerunt* (368.8), *fuerunt ausi* (372.1), *amonitus fuit* (374.9), *fuit concessa* (378.9), *revelatum fuit* (379.2). Greg. Tur. has shifted forms as well (for example, *Iul.* 114.29, 117.24 and 118.31).

⁷ Recorded are only tenses in independent clauses. Direct discourse is not included. For Greg. Tur. *Iul.* the figures are: perfect 217, present 144, imperfect 57, plusqpf 12, total 440.

⁸ In several cases where the MGH text prefers the present the resulting use of the historical present is

In these Lives the perfect is the most frequent narrative tense. The frequency of the imperfect and pluperfect depends on the amount of detail the author is able to or wants to give. The use of the historical present is limited and varies, which has to do with the stylistic ambitions of the authors. These texts show a markedly lower frequency of historical presents than Greg. Tur. *Iul.*, where historical presents constitute one third of the narrative tenses. There are no instances of the historical infinitive.⁹

In the *Vita Hugberti* the perfect is also the most frequent tense. It is used both as a narrative tense in sentences and clauses referring to successive past events and situations and as retrospective tense in authorial (summarizing and evaluating) statements. In the latter function we find it, for example, in a sentence containing *igitur*.¹⁰

- (8) (Hugbertus) *nitebatur* sanctorum imitare vestigiis. *Fuit igitur* largitor indigencium ... (V. Hugb. 483.13)

In some episodes in this Life the main events are straightforwardly expressed in perfect forms (imperfect forms marking background information – see also below). This is the case, for example, in the episodes on the woman who sinned on Sunday and whose hands were contracted (§ 4) and on the woman who was bedevilled (§ 6).

In other episodes we also find historical presents, used with more or less affinity to the 'classical norm' (Pinkster 1997) and with more or less success. The classical norm for using the present to refer to past events, at least in texts with an oral basis like Plautus and Cicero (in his orations), is, of course, that the present tense may optionally be used to present past events as if they were reported by an eye witness. This is especially attractive in salient 'peaks' (Labov 1972, 354-396; Longacre 1983, 25-38) in the narrative or notable advances in the progression of the narrative (Klug 1992). The use of the historical present is usually part of a number of textual properties, such as sentence length, asyndeton, verb initial word order, deictic elements like *ecce*, and, undoubtedly, intonation. Greg. Tur. has several excellent instances, e.g. *Iul.* 117.21-26:

- (9) *Confestim ad eius oratione commoventur* tonitrua, *resident* fulgura, *descendit* imber igne mixtus et grandine, *turbantur* omnia. *Concurrit* vulgus ad cellulam, *prosternitur* coram sacerdote ...

The author of the *Vita Hugberti* is aware that this is the way a historical present should be used. So, for example, in the episode on a period of drought (§ 5). Hugbertus is successful in changing the weather:

- (10) *Mox diurna lux clauditur* et tetro noctis *inchoat* (V. Hugb. 486.6).¹¹

awkward. So for example *V. Landib.* 381.6 *contingit ibi advenire pauperum cecum*. Similar expressions in Greg. Tur. *Iul.* are in the perfect tense (*factum est*, *accidit*, *contigit*). Cf. also *V. Trud.* 293.26 *contigit autem*.

⁹ Unless *venire et videre* (V. Hugb. 495.23-24) have to be taken as such. There are no instances in Greg. Tur. *Iul.* either.

¹⁰ On *igitur* see Kroon 1989. A count in Livy yields the following results: in narrative sections *igitur* is used in clauses with a perfect tense three times as often as in clauses with a present tense (Mathieu de Bakker, pc).

¹¹ See also below on the following imperfect.

Less felicitous, however, is his continuation of this change of the weather by the concluding statement:

- (11) Et opus suum letus cum prosperitate *invindicat* (*V. Hugb.* 486.8).

An authorial perfect would be required in Classical Latin.

Another episode in which it is not difficult to establish the peak in the narrative is the passage on Hugbertus' death (§ 14). The culmination point is his departure to Heaven:

- (12) Ista dicendo usque ad finem ad caelum emisit spiritum; beatus inter angelos aethera *migratur* (v.l. *migravit*) protinus. *Fit* autem ilico gaudium magnum procul dubio supernarum virtutum in caelo ... *Adest* mox iuxta morem ... (*V. Hugb.* 491.23-26).

Especially *fit* and *adest* in sentence initial position are quite successful.

Less convincing are the episodes of the reburial of Hugbertus' predecessor Landibertus (§ 2), with the verb *pergunt* (484.10) in a very long sentence, and the gathering of the people after Hugbertus' death (§ 15) (*exeunt* 492.2) and the burial activities (§ 16) (*induunt*, 492.26; *osculantur*, 493.5; *deferunt* 493.10).¹² It may be the emotional content of this passage which induces the author to select the historical present.¹³

The author could have used the present in the bedevilled woman's episode after *ecce*, but *coepit* fulfills the same function:

- (13) ecce ex dimediis catervis femina arrepta demonio clamare coepit (*V. Hugb.* 486.18).¹⁴

In quite a few instances the present can hardly be accounted for. So, for example, in the following instances:

- (14) Quo comperto tunc electus Dei et sacratissimus pontifex ... *diutissime* ad orationem ad eius tumulum *immoratur* (*V. Hugb.* 488.23)¹⁵
 (15) Deinde *cotidie* ad illius sancti sepulchro miracula *coruscant* celitus (*V. Hugb.* 493.14).¹⁶

I will now turn to the use of the imperfect. The use of the imperfect in describing situations existing in the past is one of the most common in Classical Latin. Examples of this usage are frequent in these texts as well, so, for example (16):

- (16) (After his election Hugbertus) *nitebatur* sanctorum imitare vestigiis ... nec immemor *erat* ma-

¹² In 492.10 the text reads *pergebant*, with a v.l. *pergunt*. The imperfect can be understood as an elaboration of *exeunt*. The present form would be difficult to explain.

¹³ In a similar way the reported actions of the angels after Landibertus' death are in the present tense (*V. Landib.* 370.14-15). Four out of five historical presents in the *V. Wandr.* occur in the death episode at the very end of the story.

¹⁴ In the *V. Wandr.* and in Greg. Tur. *Iul.* expressions of suddenness are preferably followed by a historical present, for example after *confestim*, *continuo*, *nec mora*, *statim*, *subito*.

¹⁵ There is an interesting parallel *diutius immoratur* in *V. Landib.* 366.11.

¹⁶ Other difficult instances can be found in § 12, especially *facit* (490.10). Difficult is also *ducunt* (492.24), followed by the perfect *egerunt*. Also *clamant* (494.27) is unexpected.

gistri sui ... *ingerebat* suspiria (*V. Hugb.* 483.10-22).

In this example a situation is characterized which lasted for many years. However, this need not be the case. In example (6) above *egrediens erat* is in the imperfect tense in order to indicate that when the woman approached the saint and asked him to help her he was just leaving the church. The action of *egredi* is simultaneous with the main storyline consisting of the perfects *perrexit (femina) ... dixit Hugbertus*. Instead of using an independent sentence with a finite verb a participial construction (participium coniunctum or ablative absolute) could serve the same purpose. A more conspicuous example is (17):

- (17) poculum ... reddidit ... oravit ... eulogiis (v.l. eulogias) dedit omnibus *sed* ipse parum edens semper ad caelos defixos *habebat* oculos (*V. Hugb.* 490.8-10)

Coordination of an imperfect and a perfect or historical present by means of *sed* is unusual. However, the relationship between the perfect clauses and the imperfect clause in (17) can be interpreted as one of simultaneity: Hugbertus did all this while keeping his eyes fixed towards heaven. The imperfect is therefore understandable in this context.¹⁷

The imperfect is also used in an elaboration of a general introduction in the perfect (cf. Pinkster 1983, 305). Examples of this usage are (18) and (19):

- (18) *Postea igitur* Hugbertus ... amplius se in certaminam *dedit*. *docebat* ... *monstrabat* ... *praedicabat*. Et multos *eradicabat* ab errore gentilium et cessare fecit (v.l. *faciebat*)¹⁸ et ... *corroborabat*. *Revocabat* (*V. Hugb.* 484.18-25)
 (19) Tunc beatus Hugbertus ... ab hora tertia usque sexta predicando *perduxit* de evangelio. *Agebat* apud illos: « ... » (*V. Hugb.* 489.11-16)

Much less common, at least in Republican prose, is the use of the imperfect in describing successive situations and events. There are several examples in the *V. Hugb.*:

- (20) At *ubi* nos introgressi navicula ... *subito* navis *periclitabatur* ... Qua ipsa mergente cuncti ... in aqua cecidimus (*V. Hugb.* 487.18-20)
 (21) nuntius Dei apparuit illi ... ostendit ... praedixit. Tunc sacerdos ilico *expergefactus* a somno *considerabat* quod viderat ... Et ... discipulis suis exposuit (*V. Hugb.* 488.10-17)
 (22) Sanctus vir respondit: « ... ». *His ita factis* oratio eius sine intermissione *fiebat* a (i.e. ad) Domino (*V. Hugb.* 491.7-10).¹⁹

The context clearly shows that the events expressed in the imperfect are the next steps in a succession of events. There are also several comparable instances of coordinated clauses with an imperfect and a perfect or historical present, where the events are successive as well. From the *V. Hugb.* I quote (23) and (24).

¹⁷ Comparable examples from the *V. Wandr.* are *volebat* ... *et iussit* (16.9) and *iacebat et translatus est* (17.22).

¹⁸ I definitely prefer the *varia lectio*.

¹⁹ Cf. also *hoc audito* ... *protinus econtra orabat* (*V. Hugb.* 490.27).

- (23) Et prae gaudio lacrimati sunt omnes et *quaerebant* faciem eius videre et osculati sunt manus et pedes eius (V. Hugb. 495.29-30)
- (24) Mox diurna lux clauditur et tetro noctis inchoat, statim minutatim incipiens pluvia, et tantum erat diffundens ut ... (V. Hugb. 486.6-7).²⁰

This so-called 'narrative' or 'pictural' (Kroon/Rose 1996, 75) use of the imperfect is found with non-terminative, non-momentaneous States of Affairs (Pinkster 1990, 16-19). In passages in which perfects and imperfects alternate, clauses in the perfect describe short, punctual events or are summarizing and totalizing statements. Clauses in the imperfect describe long lasting, durative events and situations. An illustration is (25):

- (25) per suam dulcedinem multorum amaricionis in licorem *vertebat*, per suam humilitatem multi superbi confusi in humilitatem *revertebantur*, per suam doctrinam multus *adgregavit* in regno Dei. *Erat enim* doctus scriba, proferens de thesauro suo nova et vetera. Dubius *confortabat*, inbeciles *corroberabat*, infirmos auxilium *prebebat* adque contra diabulum pro eis fortissimo proelio *demicabat*. Plurimas predae de ore leonis rugientis *abstulit* adque ad ovilem dominicum ut bonus pastor *reduxit* seo vulneratam verbi gracia *curavit*. Et *instruebat* filios suos ...

Such instances of the imperfect often occur in sentences with a time locating expression, which makes them resemble the 'imparfait narratif' (or: 'historique') in French (Grevisse/Goosse 1993, 1251).²¹

Conclusion

We have seen that of the two main narrative past tenses the perfect is used more or less in the classical way, as a retrospective tense indicating events and situations that were finished or ended 'before now'. The imperfect is still used in the classical way as a past tense indicating what was going on 'then', but also with some frequency as a competitor of the perfect used for marking durative events and situations. The periphrastic expression with *esse* in the *Vita Hugberti* may be seen as an experimental substitute of the simultaneity function.

²⁰ The *V. Wandr.* has several instances: 16.24 *pervenit et stabat*; 17.17 *porrexit et subiugabat*; 17.30 *exivit et ambulabat*. There is one remarkable instance in Greg. Tur. *Iul.* 131.5-7 *Qui cum ante ipsam basilicam ... iaceret, videt eam subito magno splendore fulgente vocesque in ea psallentium quasi multorum hominum audiebat*.

²¹ This use of the imparfait existed already on Old French (Fleischman 1990, 27-29; Grevisse/Goosse 1993, 1251).

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