THE STRUCTURE AND AIMS OF THE
VISIO BARONTI*

SOMETIME in the late 670s a monk named Barontus from the monastery of St Peter (later St Cyran) at Longoretus (Lonrey) near Bourges had a visionary tour of heaven and hell. One morning while returning to his cell immediately after Matins, Barontus felt dizzy and lost consciousness for twenty-four hours, during which he was attacked by demons, rescued by the Angel Raphael, brought in front of St Peter, and was given permission to continue his earthly life. Shortly after regaining consciousness, Barontus told his fellow monks what he had experienced during his visit to the other-world, and his story was recorded in what is now known as the Visio Baronti.1

The Visio Baronti has attracted much scholarly attention in the past for two different reasons. On the one hand, scholars who studied the visionary literature of the medieval West turned to the Visio Baronti as one of the earliest examples of a visionary experience, in an attempt to delineate the typology of medieval visionary literature and its development.2 On the other hand, scholars whose main interest was to study the evolution of the idea of the other-world and its various representations in medieval Europe, referred to the Visio Baronti as an early example of a visit to heaven and hell, from which a direct line to Dante's Divine

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Comedy can be traced.\textsuperscript{3} These scholarly enterprises have certainly enriched our knowledge and understanding of both medieval visionary literature, and the development of the idea of the other-world. Yet, these scholars were forcing their interpretations onto the \textit{Visio Baronti} and have been able to do so only at the cost of ignoring the most individual features of the text. Notwithstanding its importance in the development of medieval visionary literature and the idea of the other-world, the \textit{Visio Baronti} was composed with a different purpose in mind, and must be examined first and foremost against the immediate political, social, and religious backgrounds which led to its composition. This paper, therefore, is primarily an attempt to offer an alternative reading of the \textit{Visio Baronti}, focusing mainly on those individual features which Barontus and the anonymous author who recorded his account chose to insert into it.

\textbf{Barontus’ Story}

The text of the \textit{Visio Baronti} can be divided into three sections. The first, which introduces the vision story, provides some background information on Barontus himself and on the circumstances in which the vision occurred.\textsuperscript{4} Barontus, a monk of noble origin who had only recently joined the community at Longoretus, collapsed one morning on his way back to his cell. He immediately called his son Aglioaldus, who was also a monk at the same community, and the deacon Eudo, but there was nothing they could do to help him. The brethren of Longoretus assembled soon afterwards in the monastery’s church, and dividing themselves into groups to take turns in reciting Psalms, they kept a vigil around Barontus’ body. The next morning, while the monks were still chanting, Barontus suddenly woke up, exclaiming repeatedly ‘\textit{Gloria tibi, Deus! Gloria tibi, Deus! Gloria tibi, Deus!}’\textsuperscript{5}

The amazed monks who stood around his body asked Barontus to tell them in detail what had happened to him. Barontus’ account as reported to his brothers in Longoretus occupies most of the text of the \textit{Visio Baronti}.\textsuperscript{6} According to this account, immediately


\textsuperscript{4} \textit{VB} 1–2.

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{VB} 2.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{VB} 3–19.
after collapsing, he was attacked by two hideous demons, who tried to carry him off to hell. Luckily, the Angel Raphael came to his rescue, and after a bitter argument with the hideous creatures, he decided to take Barontus before the tribunal of the eternal judge. Without hesitation, Raphael plucked out Barontus' soul from his body and took it with him. On their way to heaven, Raphael and Barontus flew over the monastery of Millebeccus (Méobecq). At first they saw it from a distance, but then Raphael decided to visit the sick abbot of Millebeccus, Leodaldus, before continuing on their way to heaven.

At this point, four more demons joined the delegation, and the six of them continually harassed Barontus on the way. Shortly afterwards Raphael and Barontus arrived at the gate of Paradise, where they met some of the brethren of Longoretus waiting for Doomsday. At the second gate of Paradise there were thousands of children and virgins; at the third, saints wearing crowns and priests; just before the fourth gate they met Betoenus, a fellow monk from Longoretus, who scolded Barontus for letting the light at the church of Longoretus go out at night.

Raphael then called St Peter to the fourth gate. When he arrived, the six demons accused Barontus of various sins. St Peter replied that Barontus had given alms, confessed his sins, done penance and, moreover, become a monk. The demons were not convinced, and St Peter had to drive them away by striking their heads with the three keys he held in his hand. After the demons had left, St Peter called Barontus to ransom himself by giving the twelve solidi he kept hidden, without permission, to the poor. Two boys escorted Barontus back to the first gate of Paradise, where a joyful meeting with the deceased monks of Longoretus took place. Framnoaldus was then chosen to escort Barontus back to the monastery, and on their way they passed by the gates of hell, of which Barontus had a short glimpse. Back at the monastery, they entered the church, Barontus' soul crawled back into his

7 VB 3.
8 VB 4.
9 VB 5–6.
10 VB 7.
11 VB 8.
12 VB 9–11.
13 VB 12. Some of the manuscripts have these keys drawn. On the significance of St Peter's keys see Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 138–9, and see there for further bibliography.
14 VB 13.
15 VB 13–16.
16 VB 17.
body, and he woke up exclaiming 'Glory to you, O God!'\(^\text{17}\) The last section of the *Visio Baronti*, follows next, and consists of three concluding chapters in which the composer bluntly expresses the moral of the story.\(^\text{18}\)

**Authorship and style**

The *Visio Baronti* was written, as its author declares, ‘on the 8th Kalends of April in the sixth year of Theuderic, King of the Franks’, that is 25 March 678 or 679.\(^\text{19}\) The anonymous author explains that immediately after Barontus had regained consciousness, he recounted the vision he had had to the brethren of Longorettus.\(^\text{20}\) Later on he states that he wrote down the account ‘not by hearsay but according to what I myself have experienced up to now’.\(^\text{21}\) Thus, the author is careful to place himself as close as possible to the story and, by implication, to eliminate any intermediate stages which might damage the credibility and accuracy of his account.

The references to Barontus in the third person singular suggest that it was not he who wrote it. Yet the identity of the author remains unknown. It is obvious that the anonymous author had some connection with the monasteries of both Longorettus and Millebeccus which were closely related to each other.\(^\text{22}\) He specifically states that he had been brought up and educated by Abbot Francardus of Longorettus,\(^\text{23}\) and at various points of his account the detailed descriptions which he gives suggest that he was familiar with both monasteries.\(^\text{24}\) The various monks Barontus met in heaven were all known to the author by name, and he was present,

\(^{17}\) *VB* 18–19.

\(^{18}\) *VB* 20–22.


\(^{20}\) *VB* 1.

\(^{21}\) *VB* 20: ‘non ab alio dicta vel audita, sed per memet ipsum ad praesens probata didici’.


\(^{23}\) *VB* 10. According to this account Abbot Francardus was still alive when Barontus’ vision took place, since Barontus saw the place reserved for him in Paradise.

\(^{24}\) See for example *VB* 5–6, 19.
we must remember, when Barontus told his story at Longoretus.\textsuperscript{25} It is, then, arguable that our author was indeed a fellow monk at Barontus' monastery, although he himself does not disclose this fact. Whatever may be the case, the author's strong connection with the sister foundations—Millebeccus and Longoretus—is obvious.

The \textit{Visio Baronti} is written in a language which is, as Wilhelm Levison puts it, 'coarse and barbaric'.\textsuperscript{26} The author confuses cases and genders, and makes several mistakes in noun declinations and verb conjugations. He often uses the indicative after \textit{ut} and conjunctive instead of infinitive, and he is generally reluctant to use the passive form.\textsuperscript{27} All these are characteristics of a language which scholars often name 'rustic Latin', that is, Latin with a strong tendency towards colloquial speech, far removed from classical Latin in terms of morphology, syntax, and diction.\textsuperscript{28} Like many authors of his time, the composer of the \textit{Visio Baronti} was well aware of his deficient language. 'If anyone', he writes at the very beginning of his conclusion, 'takes up this little work that I have made and begins to read it, he may indeed accuse me of rusticity of expression, but not lying'.\textsuperscript{29} Such an apology is not uncommon among Merovingian writers, and while it may be interpreted as a mere literary \textit{topos} widespread at that time,\textsuperscript{30} it may also be regarded as a true and sincere apology. Matters of style were, after all, very important to late antique and early medieval writers. Hilary of Poitiers, for example, was unwilling to compromise on his style and, as his biographer tells us

\textsuperscript{25} VB 1 and 20.
\textsuperscript{26} Levison's edn., 370: 'sermone rudi barbaroque' .
\textsuperscript{27} For a linguistic analysis of the \textit{Visio Baronti} see Levison's edn., 370–1.
\textsuperscript{28} See M. Van Uytfanghe, 'Latin mérovingien, latin carolingien et rustica romana lingua: continuité ou discontinuité?', \textit{Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles} (1977), 65–88; \textit{idem}, 'Histoire du latin, protohistoire des langues romanes et histoire de la communication', \textit{Francia} 11 (1983), 579–613; R. Wright, \textit{Late Latin and Early Romance in Spain and Carolingian France} (Liverpool, 1982); \textit{idem} ed., \textit{Latin and Roman Languages in the Early Middle Ages} (London, 1991); M. Banniard, \textit{Viva Voce}. Communication écrit et communication orale du V\textsuperscript{e} au X\textsuperscript{e} siècle en Occident latin (Paris, 1992). See also Y. Hen, \textit{Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, AD 481–751} (Leiden, New York, and Köln, 1995), 21–42, and see there for further bibliography. It is interesting to note that none of the studies on late Latin and early Romance has made any use of the \textit{Visio Baronti}.
\textsuperscript{29} VB 20: 'Si quis aliquis hunc opusculum a me factum legendum in manibus accipierit, potest me de rusticitatem verbi reprehendere, non potest de mendacii culpam redarguere'.
if there were no cultivated people [among his audience], he nourished
the hearts of the rustics with simple language. But whenever he saw that
educated people had come, he was stirred to such an unusual degree of
grace in both speech and appearance, that he appeared larger than life. 31
A similar attitude was adopted by Avitus of Vienne, to judge from
the fragmentary sermons of his that survive. 32

Most Merovingian writers were different from the Gallo-
Roman authors. In order to be understood, they wrote in what
may be regarded as a 'lower language', sermo humilis, but which
was familiar to their audience. 33 The idea of writing in a language
which can be easily understood was first expressed by Augustine
as far as preaching was concerned, 34 and was later adopted and
propagated by Caesarius of Arles who wrote:

... even if a priest possesses fine-flowing worldly eloquence ... it is not
at all proper if he wants to speak in church in such a way that his
admonition cannot reach all the Lord's flock, as it should, but only a few
learned men. Therefore, all my priests of the Lord should preach to the
people in simple, ordinary language which all the people can grasp. 35

In a different sermon he even apologized for his language in front
of his learned audience, excusing himself by telling them that
'since inexperienced, simple souls cannot rise to the heights of
scholars, the learned should deign to bend down to their ignor-
ance. What is said to simple souls can, indeed, be understood by
the educated, but what is preached to the learned cannot be
grasped at all by the simple'. 36 The author of the Visio Baronti
was not exceptional.

31 Vita Sancti Hilarii Arelatensis ab auctore ejusdem discipulo scripta 11, PL 50,
1219-46, at 1231C: 'Si peritorem turba defuisset, simplici sermone rusticorum corda
nutriebat; at ubi instructos supervenisse vidisset, sermone ac vulto pariter in quadam
gratia insolita excitabatur, seipso celsior apparebat'.
32 See Avitus of Vienne, Opera quae supersunt, in R. Peiper (ed.), MGH AA
VI:2 (Berlin, 1883), 103-57.
33 See Van Uytfanghe, 'L'hagiographie', 54-62; Hen, Culture and Religion,
25-29.
34 Augustine, De doctrina christiana iv.x. 24, in J. Martin (ed.), CCSL 32
(Turnhout, 1962), 132-33.
35 Caesarius of Arles, Sermo 1:20, in G. Morin (ed.), CCSL 103-4 (Turnhout,
1953), 16: '... si sit in aliquo sacerdote pulchra et exuberans eloquentia saecularis ...
satis incongruum est, si ita voluerit in ecclesia logui, ut admonitio eius non ad totum,
sicut expedit, dominicum gregem, sed vix ad paucos positit scolasticos pervenire. Unde
magis simplici et pedestri sermone, quem totus populus capere possit, debent dominici
mei sacerdotes populis praedicare'. [Throughout this paper I cite the translation of
M. M. Mueller, Caesarius of Arles: Sermons, 3 vols., The Fathers of the Church,
31, 47, and 66 (Washington D.C., 1956-73).]
36 Caesarius of Arles, Sermo 86:1, 353: 'Et quia imperiti et simplices ad scolastico-
rum altitudinem non possunt ascendere, eruditi se dignetur ad illorum ignorantiam
inclinare: quia, quod simplicibus dictum fuerit, et scholastici intellegere possunt; quod
autem eruditis fuerit praedicatum, simplices omnino capere non valebunt'.

Late and colloquial as it may be, the language of the author must not be attributed to a faulty education or incompetence. In spite of his simple and uncultivated language, the author of the *Visio Baronti* managed to produce an arresting and captivating account, which points to a genuine narrative talent and a shrewd sense of humour.\(^{37}\) The extensive use of Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* and *Homilies on the Gospels*,\(^{38}\) together with some faint allusions to contemporary literature, such as the *Vita Fursei*,\(^{39}\) the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours,\(^{40}\) and the *Rule of Saint Benedict*,\(^{41}\) all point to the fact that the *Visio Baronti* is more than a simple report of the vision itself, and that a vast amount of work and scholarly effort has been invested in its composition.\(^{42}\) The author relied heavily, furthermore, on already developed Christian traditions. Barontus’ other-world, for example, is bi-partite and located in heaven. Paradise has four gates, each encloses a different group of elect, and bright light characterizes heaven, while smog and steam characterise hell.\(^{43}\) All these did not emerge *ex nihilo*, and were deeply rooted in traditional observations and ideas of the other-world, with which our author was well acquainted, and certainly absorbed into his own account.

**Transmission and audience**

The *Visio Baronti* survives in twenty manuscripts, of which six are from the ninth or early tenth century.\(^{44}\) Its circulation remained closely associated with visionary literature, for it is often transmitted with other exemplars of that literary type, such as the

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\(^{39}\) See *VB* 2, 3, 10, 12; Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 154–58.

\(^{40}\) See *VB* 10, 21; Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 153–54.

\(^{41}\) *VB* 13.

\(^{42}\) Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 150–58, especially 155.


\(^{44}\) For the list of the manuscripts see Levison’s edition, 372–73 with *MGH SRM* VII (Hanover, 1951), 846.
Visio Rotcharii, the Vita Fursei, and the Visio Wettini. From the manuscript evidence, it further seems that the Visio Baronti had a wide circulation during the Carolingian period, when many visionary texts were composed and circulated throughout the Frankish kingdoms.

Because of its peculiar transmission, the Visio Baronti has often been regarded as a piece of hagiography. This, however, is at odds with the content of the Visio itself. Indeed the way the author introduces the story of Barontus brings immediately to mind the way Tertullian (?) introduces the vision of Perpetua in the Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis, or even more obviously, the way the vision of Furseus is introduced in the Vita Fursei. Yet, the Visio Baronti does not go further than the story of the vision itself, and it does not tell a story of martyrdom or great sanctity. We hear nothing of Barontus’ life before or after he returned from his tour of the other-world, and not one miracle performed by him is even hinted at. There is no doubt that the Visio Baronti did not attempt to portray Barontus as a saint, and it is highly probable that the identification of this short and unusual treatise as hagiography has more to do with its transmission than with its generic conventions or content. Thus, although the Visio Baronti is transmitted with other hagiographic treatises, it is not a typical hagiographic piece, and therefore should not be treated as one.

According to Ciccarese, the Visio Baronti is a forerunner of a new literary genre which, from the beginning of the seventh

46 Vita Fursei, in W. Levison (ed.), MGH SRM IV (Hanover, 1902), 423–49. See also Carozzi, Le voyage, 677–92.
50 See Vita Fursei 1 ff.
century became more evident in the West. Its theme—visions of the other-world—derives from biblical and patristic traditions and especially from the visions reported in the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, 'the father of the visions of the other-world'. Such an assertion sounds feasible if one inspects the development of visionary literature as a whole. Yet, it seems that one cannot refer to visionary literature as a genre before the Carolingian period, because only a scattering of visionary accounts survive, and none of them, apart from the Visio Baronti and the Visio Fursei, is separate. In other words, visions before the Carolingian period were basically a literary device used by authors of various genres, such as history, hagiography, or exegesis. Thus, although the Visio Baronti may be regarded as one of the visionary accounts which inaugurated the new literary genre of visionary literature, at the time of its composition it had little to do with that sort of literature.

Looking closer at some of the Visio's characteristics, one can get a clearer idea of its generic affiliation. The Visio Baronti begins with two chapters of introductory remarks, which are very homiletic in style. The very first sentence of the work—"I wish to recall to you, dearly beloved brethren, what occurred recently..."—is closely related to the way Caesarius of Arles, for example, would have opened one of his sermons. The use of formulae like 'fratres karissimi' or 'dilectissimi fratres', which appear in both the Visio Baronti and the sermons of Caesarius, creates the impression that the Visio Baronti was originally written as a sermon. This notion gets further support from the last three chapters of the Visio, and especially from the very last one which reads:

May our faith, beloved brethren, warm us again to heavenly desires. Let us again bring before our eyes the sins we have committed. Let us consider how severe a judge is coming, who will judge not only our evil deeds but even our thoughts. Let us turn our minds to lamentation, our life to penance, lest, because of our love of the world, we experience eternal punishment. Rather let our good deeds raise us to the eternal region so that, when we leave the body, we may deserve to have holy

51 See Ciccarese, 'La "Visio Baronti"', 25-52. See also Carozzi, Le voyage, 185-86.
52 Ciccarese demonstrated such a dependence also in the Vita Fursei and the Vitae Patrum Emeritensium, as well as in the Visio Baronti. See Ciccarese, 'Le più antiche', especially 38-44; Morgan, Dante and the Medieval, 169-70.
54 VB 20-22.
angels as guides to the heavenly kingdom. May he deign to grant this, who, with the eternal God the father, lives and reigns for ages of ages. Amen.55

The preoccupation of this specific passage and the two that precede it with issues of penance and the forgiveness of sins, and the fear of the last judgement which it incites, are clearly homiletic in tone, and point to the admonitory purposes of the *Visio Baronti*. Whether influenced directly by the writings of Caesarius of Arles or by the tradition of preaching which characterized Gaul at that time,56 the author of the *Visio Baronti* gives his story an utterly homiletic guise. This is quite evident in the style and the language he uses throughout his account, which is very exhortative, full of biblical citations, and with an apparent resemblance to the way Caesarius of Arles, for example, used to open or conclude his sermons. Yet, as Levison has noted, a section in which the author refers his readers to a drawing of St Peter’s keys—‘habentes similitudinem hanc’—suggests that he did not intend it to be delivered as a sermon in church, but to be read by individuals.57

This brings us to the question of audience. For whose benefit was this composition written? From the text itself it seems that the *Visio Baronti* was not intended for a vast circulation when first written, and its local application is suggested by various passages. At the beginning of Barontus’ account, for example, the author incorporates a long excursus on the monastery of Millebeccus.58 This excursus, it seems, was intended to provide the monks of Millebeccus and Longoretus with important information, so as to help them to locate each other geographically, and to place the events reported in time, that is, in the last year

55 VB 22: ‘Recalescat ergo, dilectissimi fratres, fides nosta ad caelestem desideria, revocemus ante occulus nostros peccata quae fecimus; consideremus, quam distinctus index venturus est, qui non solum de malis operibus, sed etiam de cogitationibus nostris iudicare disponit. Mentem formemus ad lamenta, vita nostra amarescat in paenitentiam, ne per terrenum amorem vindicta sentiat in aeterna damnationem, sed per bona facta nos provocet ad aeternam regionem, ut, quando a corpore migraverimus, angelos sanctos duces ad caelestem regnum habere mereamur. Quod ipse prestare dignetur, qui cum aeterno Deo Patre vivit et regnat in saecula saeculorum. Amen’. This passage makes extensive use of Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, ii:8, xii:3, xiv:6, xxxii:8, PL lxxvi, 1075–1312.


57 Levison’s introduction, 368.

58 VB 5–6.
of Abbot Leodaldus. The appeal of the *Visio Baronti* to the monks of Longoretus is also suggested by the names of the dead monks Barontus meets at the first gate of Paradise. These were familiar to the monks of Longoretus, if only from the names on the graves in the monastery’s church. Could they also be familiar to the monks of Millebeccus? One simply cannot tell, but the short distance between the two monasteries, and the fact that they were sister houses, both founded by Sigirmanus in the 630s, make it more than probable that close relations developed between the two monasteries. It is clear, however, that outside the small communities of Millebeccus and Longoretus, the events and the people reported by the *Visio Baronti* had minor relevance. Thus it seems more plausible to assume that the *Visio Baronti* was written with the monks of Longoretus and Millebeccus in mind. Yet the themes which the *Visio Baronti* pursues, and the messages which it delivers, made the *Visio*’s appeal much wider, and thus account for its copying and re-copying in later periods.

**Didactic purposes, penance, and charity**

If taken at face value, the *Visio Baronti* is indeed a story of one monk’s journey to heaven and hell, and the things he experienced there. But visions, as we are told, are not to be dismissed as mere stories. There is always a message which they carry with them, and this is still to be unravelled as far as the *Visio Baronti* is concerned. The general typology of medieval visionary literature divides the visions into three groups: prophetic, didactic, and political. The *Visio Baronti*, it seems, falls within the didactic category.

Didactic visions were not uncommon in the early Middle Ages. They were identified as such already by Gregory the Great, who wrote that whenever a visionary tour of the other-world occurs, ‘a careful consideration will reveal that it was not an error, but a warning. In his unbounded mercy, the good God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell might at least teach them to fear the eternal punishments

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59 VB 6.
60 VB 8 and 11. These monks are Corbolenus, Fraudolenus, Austrulfus, Leodaldus, Ebbo, and Betolenus.
in which words alone could not make them believe'.\textsuperscript{62} The same is true with the *Visio Baronti*. Underneath the superficial layer of narrative lies a deeper didactic layer, which the *Visio Baronti* aims at propagating. From Barontus’ conversations with Raphael and St Peter a triad of interrelated issues emerges, on which the *Visio Baronti* has some sort of a message to deliver—penance, charity, and monastic life and conduct.

One first comes across the issue of penance in the *Visio Baronti* in a short digression on Abbot Leodaldus, which comes immediately after Raphael has paid him a visit. This Leodaldus recounts a great miracle, on which our author comments:

It may terrify the hearts of the unbelievers, who are not moved by compunction to do penance for their evil deeds and to beg St Raphael (whose name means ‘divine medicine’) to come and cure them, lest the devil lead them captive to eternal punishment, from which they will not be able to escape to the bodily pleasures in which they placed all their trust.\textsuperscript{63}

Later on, after the demons have accused Barontus of major sins, St Peter dismisses their accusation by arguing that he has confessed his sins and done penance.\textsuperscript{64} Finally the whole composition ends, as we have seen, with three concluding chapters, homiletic in tone, which revolve around the issues of penance and the forgiveness of sins.\textsuperscript{65} Such a theme for a didactic treatise, composed in the late seventh century, would coincide extremely well with the introduction of the so-called private penance (*paenitentia privata*) on the Continent.

Developed in the monasteries of the British Isles, private penance, or the ‘tariffed penance’ as it is sometimes called, was brought onto the Continent by Anglo-Saxon and Irish missionaries. Its main characteristics were the lack of any public rite, the


\textsuperscript{63} *VB* 6: ‘... quod terrere potest corda incredula, qui non compunguntur, ut agunt penitentiam de illorum crimina et rogent sanctum Rafael, qui interpretatur Dei medicina, ut veniat et curet illorum crimina, ne diabulus eos captos ducat ad aeterna supplica, unde non possint effugere ad eorum temporalum letiti, in qua habet totam fidicam’.

\textsuperscript{64} *VB* 12: ‘sua peccata sacerdotibus est confessus et penitentiam ex ipsa peccata aegit’.

\textsuperscript{65} *VB* 20–22.
fact that it could be administered by a priest, and the possibility of repeating the action whenever necessary. These features turned private penance into a rather flexible and easily obtainable form of penance, and thus accounts for its success throughout the West.66

This penitential system brought a new conception of sin into the Frankish kingdoms of the early Middle Ages. It emphasised the immediate need to do penance, and it re-introduced the concept of penance as medicine for the soul.67 Although these themes and analogies were widespread in the writings of several Church Fathers, such as Origen, Tertullian, and Jerome, it is in the *libri paenitentiales* that these views are developed, and it is through these small handbooks, designed to help the priests in administering penance, that such views were propagated throughout the early medieval West.68 These notions are echoed in the *Visio Baronti* as well, first when St Peter declares that 'alms free men even from death',69 then in the excursus on Ebbo,70 and finally in the exhortatory epilogue of the composition.71 It further explains

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68 On the *libri paenitentiales* see C. Vogel, *Le pécheur et la pénitence au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1969); idem, *Les libri paenitentiales*, Typologie des Sources du Moyen Âge Occidental, 27 (Turnhout, 1978), with an update by A. Frantzen (Turnhout, 1985); A. Frantzen, *The Literature*, 1—25. For the edition of most penitentials see F. W. H. Wasserschleben (ed.), *Die Bußordnungen der abendländischen Kirche nebst einer rechtgeschichtliche Einleitung* (Halle, 1851); H. J. Schmitz, *Die Bußbücher und die Bußdisziplin der Kirche* (Mainz, 1883); idem, *Die Bußbücher und das kanonische Bußverfahren* (Düsseldorf, 1898). These editions are being gradually replaced by meticulous modern ones, prepared under the supervision of Professor Raymond Kottje. For the first of these replacement volumes see *CCSL* 156 (Turnhout, 1994). For textual analysis of several of the penitentials one should refer to R. Kottje, *Die Bußbücher Halitgar von Cambrai und des Hrabanus Maurus. Ihre Überlieferung und ihre Quellen*, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Quellenkunde des Mittelalters, 8 (Berlin and New York, 1980); G. Hägeler, *Das Paenitentiale Vallicelianum I*. Ein oberitalischer Zweig der frühmittelalterlichen kontinentalen Bußbücher, Quellen und Forschungen zum Recht im Mittelealter, 3 (Sigmaringen, 1984); L. Körgten, *Studien zu den Quellen der frühmittelalterlichen Bußbücher*, Quellen und Forschungen zum Recht im Mittelealter, 7 (Sigmaringen, 1993); R. Meens, *Het tripartite boeteboek* (Amsterdam, 1994).
69 *VB* 12.
70 *VB* 15.
71 *VB* 20—22.
the choice of Raphael instead of Michael,\textsuperscript{72} since, as the author states, Raphael's name means 'God's medicine' (\textit{Dei medicina}).\textsuperscript{73} Because of this etymology he was associated with medicine, and particularly the medicine for sin.\textsuperscript{74} Against this background, and in the light of the frequent calls to do penance and to confess one's sins which appear in the \textit{Visio Baronti}, it seems that this composition was intended to promote the idea of penance among the monks of Longoretus and Millebeccus.

A different issue in which the influence of the new penitential system can be detected is the classification of sins. From the fifth century onwards, patristic authors had promulgated the belief that hell was the place where infidels and major sinners would go to after death, a notion which is clearly visible in the \textit{Visio Baronti}.\textsuperscript{75} This perception induced patristic authors, such as Augustine and Ambrose, to devote some thought to the classification of sins. It was Cassian who first composed a list of the major sins,\textsuperscript{76} which was later reformulated by Gregory the Great,\textsuperscript{77} and subsequently adopted with minor changes and variations by the authors of the penitentials.\textsuperscript{78} No wonder then, that when brought in front of St Peter, Barontus was accused by the demons for committing 'major sins'.\textsuperscript{79} Furthermore, against this background, it is obvious why the inhabitants of hell were grouped according to the sins they had committed.\textsuperscript{80} Notwithstanding the fact that such a notion had already infiltrated into the \textit{Visio Baronti}, no overall classificatory system can yet be observed in it.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{VB} 6, citing Gregory the Great, \textit{Homiliae in Evangelia} xxxiv:9.
\textsuperscript{75} See for example \textit{VB} 17.
\textsuperscript{77} Gregory the Great, \textit{Moralia in Job} 19—20, in M. Adriaen (ed.), \textit{CCL} 143A (Turnhout, 1979).
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{VB} 12: 'principalia vitia'.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{VB} 17.
\textsuperscript{81} The inhabitants of hell in the \textit{Visio Baronti} are grouped as follows: \textit{superbi, luxoriosi, periri, homicidi, invidi, detractores, and fallaces}. See \textit{VB} 17.
If the promotion of private penance was the major impetus behind the composition of the *Visio Baronti*, then the promotion of the concept of charity was a significant stimulus as well. Charity was an extremely important Christian issue, and bishops in Merovingian Gaul were striving to deliver and teach this idea to their audiences.\footnote{82 See M. Van Uytfanghe, *Stylisation biblique et condition humaine dans l'hagiographie mérovingienne* (Brussels, 1987), 83–89, 146–50.} Caesarius of Arles, for example, criticized harshly those who spent money on drinking rather than giving it to the poor,\footnote{83 Caesarius of Arles, *Sermones* 46:4, 47:7. See also Caesarius' *Sermones* 17, 21–24, 30–32, which refer to charity and almsgiving.} and Gregory of Tours did much the same.\footnote{84 Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* IV:35, in B. Krusch and W. Levison (eds.), *MGH SRM* l:i (Hanover, 1937–51), 167–68. On this issue see Hen, *Culture and Religion*, 238.} A big boost to the doctrine of charity came with the introduction of private penance, and especially with the vast circulation of the *libri paenitentiales*, which propagated the penitential qualities of almsgiving.\footnote{85 The earliest example known to me are the canons attributed to St Patrick. See *Synodus I sancti Patricii* 12–13, in L. Bieler (ed. and tr.), *The Irish Penitentials*, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, 5 (Dublin, 1963), 54–59. See also *Penitentialis Viniani* 36, ibid., 74–95; *Paenitentiale Columbani* 20, ibid., 96–107; *Paenitentiale Parisiense simplex* 19 and 34, in R. Kottje (ed.), *CCSL* 156 (Turnhout, 1994).} Yet the strong connection between charity and penance was formed even before private penance made its first steps on the Continent. Cassian in his *Conference of Abbot Pinufus* lists 'twelve fruits of penitence' through which one can gain ransom for one's sins, and places almsgiving second, after baptism.\footnote{86 Cassian, *Collationes* 20:8: 'similite etiam per elemosynarum fructum vulneribus nostris medella praestatur, "quia sicut aqua extinguit ignem, sic elemosyna extinguit peccatum"' (Eccles. 3:33').} This list was adapted and cited in the preface to the *Penitential of Cummeanus*,\footnote{87 *Paenitentiale Cummeani*, in L. Bieler (ed. and tr.), *The Irish Penitentials*, 108–35. It is also cited in a sermon, wrongly attributed to Caesarius of Arles. See *Sermo* 12, *PL* lxvii, 1075. On the wrong attribution see Morin's edn., xix.} and its basic concept, it seems, found its way into the *Visio Baronti* as well.

A disproportionate weight was placed by the author of the *Visio Baronti* on the forgiveness of sins by giving alms. It appears first in St Peter's dismissal of the demons, when he justifies Barontus' right to continue his earthly life by arguing that he had given alms, and by citing Tobias iv, 11 that 'alms free men even from death'.\footnote{88 *VB* 12: 'elemosynam fecit—elemosyna enim de morte liberat'}. The issue of charity recurs when St Peter fixes Barontus' penance for keeping twelve *solidi* without permission. Barontus was ordered to give each month one *solidus* to a poor man, begin-
ning on 1 April. Charity appears again in the short excursus on Ebbo, who gave up all his earthly possessions, following the Lord’s saying, ‘Go and sell all you have and give to the poor’ (Matt. 19:21). ‘His arms’, says the author, ‘were always ready to give alms. He traded temporal payments for eternal rewards. It was because of this and other good deeds that his fingers and arms shone with light. No one, therefore, beloved brethren, should hesitate to give alms, since by this means the gracious Lord brings his faithful to eternal life’.  

It is arguable, therefore, that the Visio Baronti was written as an admonitory dossier for the benefit of the monks of Longoretus and Millebeccus to promote, first and foremost, the idea of private penance and its particular notion of the forgiveness of sins. In addition, the author also sought to promote the idea of charity as a penitential act. Thus, it is not a mere coincidence that the Visio Baronti stresses both issues—penance and charity—as related to each other. Once again, our author is shown to be reliant on well established Christian tradition in his attempt to promote those Christian issues which he felt it necessary to emphasize.

The last didactic issue which the Visio Baronti addresses is the question of monastic conduct. The fact that Barontus was attacked and accused by the demons had nothing to do with his monastic conduct. But the accusation brought against him by St Peter shortly after the demons had left, did question his monastic conduct. Barontus kept twelve solidi to himself, without permission, and thus disobeyed the thirty-third chapter of the rule of St Benedict.

This incident, in fact, is a grave warning to all the monks, but especially to those recently recruited to monastic life, who found it hard at times to give up all the luxury to which they were accustomed. Barontus, who had only recently joined the monastic order, as the author states, kept, against the uncompromising

89 VB 13.
90 VB 15: ‘Cuius manus semper fuerunt largae ad elemosynam dandam; erogandam transitoriam mercabat aeternam. Ista et alia bona faciendo refuserunt eius digita et brachia. Nullus ergo debet, dilectissimi fratres, dubitare elemosynam donare, dum sic pius Dominus fideles suos facit in aeterna vita claros habitare’.
91 VB 13.
92 Regula sancti Benedicti 33:3, in A. de Vogüé and J. Neufville (eds. and trs), Sources Chrétiennes, 181–82 (Paris, 1972). On the fact that Longoretus followed the Benedictine rule see Vita Sigiramni 13: ‘Nam eodem in loco adiens, ibique, favente Domino, ipsique Flaucado scilicet invenit et proponi ngờorum eius, deinceps sub sancta regula a beato edita Benedicto degens, congruum inibi monachorum construxit edificium ...’.
demand of the rule of St Benedict, twelve *solidi* for himself.\(^{93}\) There is little doubt that Barontus was not the only one who acted in such a way, and the fact that the *Visio Baronti* raises the issue points to its admonitory aim. It also strengthens my suggestion concerning the audience for whom this treatise was composed in the first place, namely a monastic community.

Other points in the monastic routine of Longoretus are also criticized, such as the facts that candles are not burning in the church throughout the night,\(^ {94} \) and the tombs in the church are not cleaned.\(^ {95} \) These are, of course, minor issues, and they are secondary to the principal message of the vision, which appears to be the doctrines of penance and charity.

### The political stage

It has been suggested that medieval visionary literature became almost exclusively political in its aim, at least from the time of the Carolingians.\(^ {96} \) 'Within a century', writes Dutton, 'the Carolingians had recovered a part and reinvented other features of a tradition of political oneirocriticism that had lain largely dormant since late-antiquity'.\(^ {97} \) According to him, Carolingian scholars shaped that tradition according to their own needs, and produced visionary texts which followed the shifting flash-point of political anxiety, and which raised an urgent alarm.\(^ {98} \) However, the *Visio Baronti* also falls within the category of political visions, and it is, as Carozzi points out, one of the first political visions of the Middle Ages, preceded only by the short visions of King Gunthramn and Gregory of Tours.\(^ {99} \) Yet, when analysing the

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\(^{93}\) On the fact that Barontus was of noble origin see *VB* 1. I do not agree with Carozzi, who argues that Barontus had a special status among the monks, and therefore lived in a house, close to his son, and not with the rest of the brethren (Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 169). Carozzi cites *VB* 1 and 3 to support his point, but nowhere in these chapters does the author disclose any information of that kind. All that is said in *VB* 1 is that Barontus was on his way back to his bed (‘*ad lectum suum redivit*’), and that after collapsing he ordered his son to call Eudo. Not sleeping with the other monks in the same dormitories would have been another breach of the rule of St Benedict, and therefore, one may assume, it would have been criticized by the author as well.

\(^{94}\) *VB* 11.

\(^{95}\) *VB* 14.


\(^{98}\) Ibid., especially 252–59.

\(^{99}\) Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum* VIII:5. On these visions see Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 64–66.
political aspects of the *Visio Baronti*, one has to be extremely cautious not to read too much into it.

In an attempt to unravel the political background of the *Visio Baronti*, Carozzi noticed that Sigiramnus, the founder of Longoretus, is not mentioned as one of those who inhabit Paradise. This, suggests Carozzi, might be because of Aquitanian local patriotism. Sigiramnus, we are told, was born in Bourges, raised in Tours, and was a protégé of the Burgundian Flauchadus. On the other hand, Barontus was the son or a relative of an Aquitanian nobleman in the service of the Neustrian court. Thus, argues Carozzi, the Aquitanian Barontus and the author had no sympathy for a native of Bourges. He also supports this assertion by mentioning the fact that Dido of Poitiers, a bishop of an Austrasian city and a native of Burgundy, and Vulfoeldus of Bourges, who was identified with the Neustrian-Burgundian party, were both condemned to hell in the *Visio Baronti*.

Carozzi’s assumptions sound feasible, but they are based on shaky ground. First, we do not know that Barontus was an Aquitanian. The fact that a certain Barontus was active in the politics of Aquitaine in the 630s does not prove that our Barontus was related to him, though it is certainly a possibility as Rouche has suggested. Second, we have only superficial evidence of local patriotic feelings in seventh century Aquitaine. Rouche mentions some sort of Aquitanian opposition, and we hear from later sources that Aquitaine was indeed a stronghold of opposition to the Frankish court. Yet, it is doubtful whether these feelings were as widespread in the seventh century as they were to become in the eighth or the ninth. Finally, one should not underestimate the fact that Longoretus was founded by a native of Bourges, on a Burgundian possession, and in a region under Neustrian influence.

Carozzi also suggested that Sigiramnus is not mentioned as part of the community in Paradise because the author wished to substitute Francardus, whom he regarded as the real founder of the

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100 Carozzi, *Le voyage*, 143-44.
monastery, for him. This assertion is very odd. Why would the author introduce Francardus as the founder, when his audience knew for certain who the real founder was? Furthermore, why does Carozzi think Sigiramnus should be mentioned specifically as a dweller in Paradise? As we have seen, all those who are mentioned by name in the Visio Baronti were monks of either Longorets or Millebeccus, and were familiar to the author and his audience. No one from the remote past of these monasteries is invoked by name in the Visio Baronti, not even Sigiramnus. If one accepts Carozzi's argument, then similar questions can be asked and answered in the same way. Why is St Benedict, whose rule the monastery followed, not mentioned? Where is Gregory the Great, whom the author cites extensively? Is it because of anti-Roman or anti-papal feelings that he is omitted from among the inhabitants of Paradise?

Carozzi's attempt to identify political and Aquitanian local elements in the Visio Baronti may be reading more into the text than it warrants. The political aims of the Visio Baronti, I would argue, are more down to earth than envisaged by Carozzi. The Visio Baronti is indeed a political declaration, but it is a declaration in which the author stresses Millebeccus' and Longorets' affiliation with the Merovingian court. The strong relations between Sigiramnus' foundations and the Merovingian court started at the very beginning of their history, when in 632 King Dagobert I endowed Sigiramnus with Longorets for the building of a monastery, and Millebeccus for the construction of a basilica. These donations of land turned Millebeccus and Longorets into royal foundations in a sense; hence the Merovingian connection. Moreover, the foundation of both monasteries in the region of Brenne was part of a huge campaign, sponsored by the Merovingian kings, in which many cloisters were founded throughout Gaul as a result of the Columbanian impulse.

The affiliation of Millebeccus and Longorets with the Merovingians receives further support from one short but extremely important remark in Barontus' account. While on the way back, passing by the entrance to hell, through the 'dense fog and the amount of steam going up' Barontus recognised two

105 Carozzi, Le voyage, 170. One should note that the author does not refer to Francardus as founder even once.

106 See Vita Sigiramni 11-12; Prinz, Frühes Mönchtum, 136. See also K. Pertz (ed.), Diplomata regum Francorum e stripe Merovingica 28, MGH Diplomata imperii 1 (Hanover, 1872), 145-46.

familiar faces, Bishop Vulfoeldus of Bourges and Bishop Dido of Poitiers.\textsuperscript{108} We do not know much about these bishops and their activities, but the little we know is enough to suggest that their condemnation for suffering in hell is a strong and clear declaration of loyalty to the Merovingians.

Bishop Dido of Poitiers, uncle of the famous Leodegarius, is familiar to Merovingian historians because of the part he played in the political coup of Grimoald. After the death of Sigibert III, probably in 656, the Austrasian \textit{major domus}, Grimoald, overthrew the legitimate heir of the Merovingian throne, the infant Dagobert II, and enthroned his own son, Childebert, in his place. The young Dagobert II was tonsured, and then sent to Bishop Dido of Poitiers, who took him into exile in Ireland.\textsuperscript{109} The chronology and the exact details of this incident are complicated and almost impossible to ascertain, yet Dido’s involvement in it is far beyond any doubt.

Vulfoeldus of Bourges is rather less well documented in our sources. He was first chosen as an episcopal co-adjutant by Bishop Sulpicius of Bourges, and after Sulpicius’ death he succeeded him to the bishopric.\textsuperscript{110} Vulfoeldus attended the council of Chalon (647–53),\textsuperscript{111} and his signature appears on the charters issued on behalf of St Denis (22 June 654)\textsuperscript{112} and St Columba of Sens (26 August 660).\textsuperscript{113} From a letter sent by King Sigibert III to Bishop Desiderius of Cahors, we learn that Vulfoeldus tried to convene a Council of Bishops without either consulting or procuring the permission of King Sigibert III of Austrasia.\textsuperscript{114} Such an act might be interpreted as a subversive step against the Merovingian king, and as such it justifies Vulfoeldus’ condemna-

\textsuperscript{108} VB 17.
\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Vita Sulpicii episcopi Biturgi} 7, in B. Krusch (ed.), \textit{MGH SRM IV} (Hanover, 1902), 364–80.
\textsuperscript{112} Ph. Lauer and Ch. Samaran, \textit{Les diplômes originaux des Mérovingiens} (Paris, 1908), 6–7.
\textsuperscript{114} Desiderius of Cahors, \textit{Epistula} II:17, in D. Norberg (ed.) (Uppsala, 1961). The King is Sigibert III and not Sigibert II as thought by Carozzi, \textit{Le voyage}, 143.
tion to hell. Against this background it seems that Carozzi over-emphasised the local patriotic elements in the *Visio Baronti*, and that real acts of atrocity against the Merovingians, with whom both Longoretus and Millebeccus were affiliated, were the political justification for sending both Dido of Poitiers and Vulfoeldus of Bourges to hell.

**Conclusion**

When one reflects on the various characteristics of the *Visio Baronti* adduced above, then one is obliged to suppose that the *Visio Baronti* was composed as a didactic treatise for the benefit of the monks of Longoretus and Millebeccus. The local appeal of the composition is suggested by the people and places whom the author invokes, and the didactic aim is suggested by its homiletic tone. Furthermore, such a supposition is confirmed by the examination of the themes the *Visio Baronti* pursues—the introduction of private penance, the doctrine of charity, and the issue of monastic conduct. Indeed, many of the recurrent topics handled in the *Visio Baronti* are characteristic of preoccupations in monastic circles of the period, and they coincide extremely well with the reform campaign of Queen Balthild, who, as her biographer relates,

showered great estates and whole forests upon religious communities for the construction of their cells and monasteries. ...She would also send letters warning bishops and abbots that the monks dwelling in those places ought to live according to their holy rule and order. And that they might agree more freely, she ordered their privileges confirmed and granted immunities that it might please them all to beseech Christ the highest King to show mercy to the King and to give peace.  

Yitzhak Hen

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