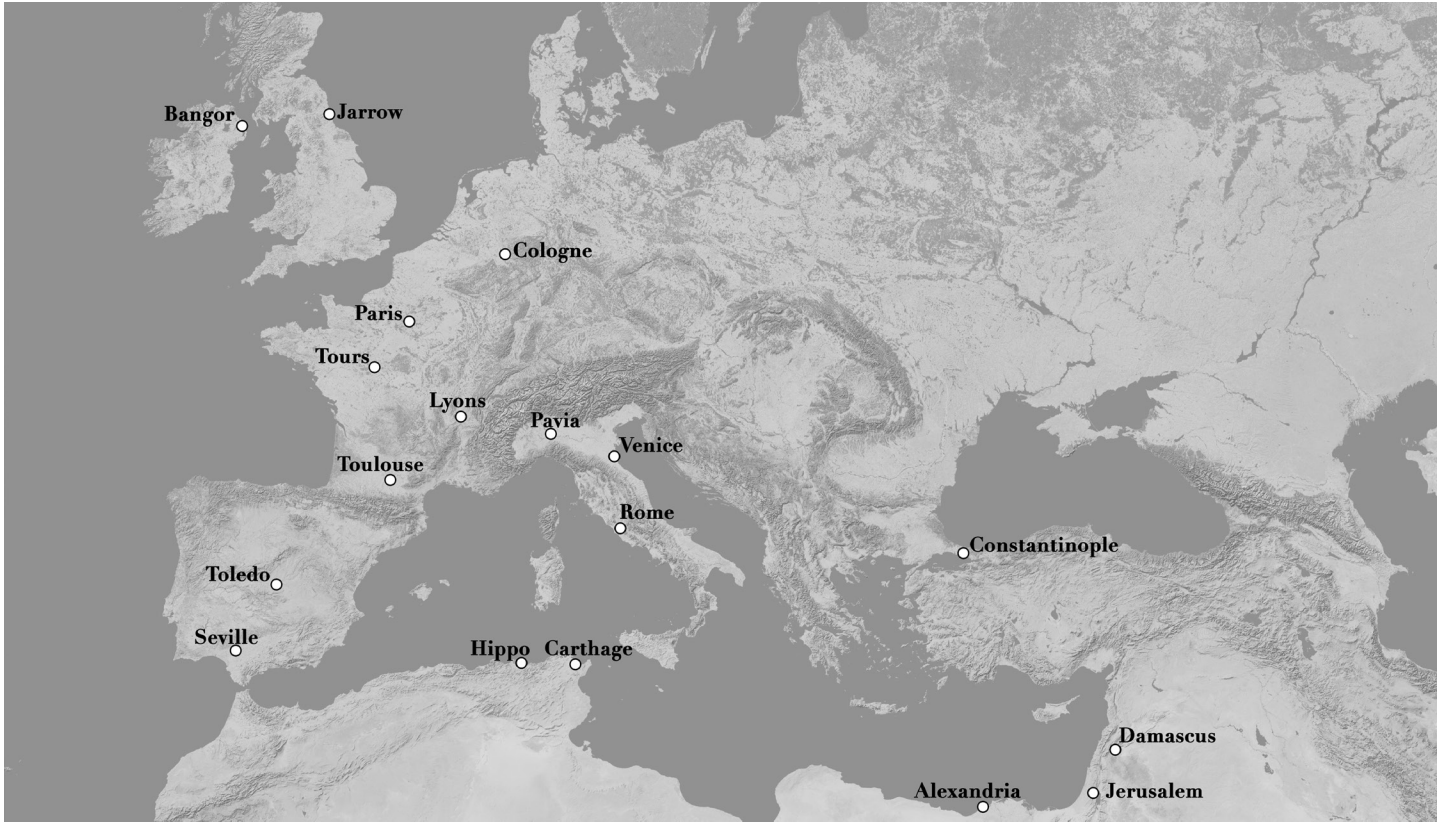
Map 1 Roman provinces and metropolitan cities at the dawn of the Merovingian Age

Map 2 Merovingian kingdoms, capitals, and centres



Map 3 The wider Merovingian world

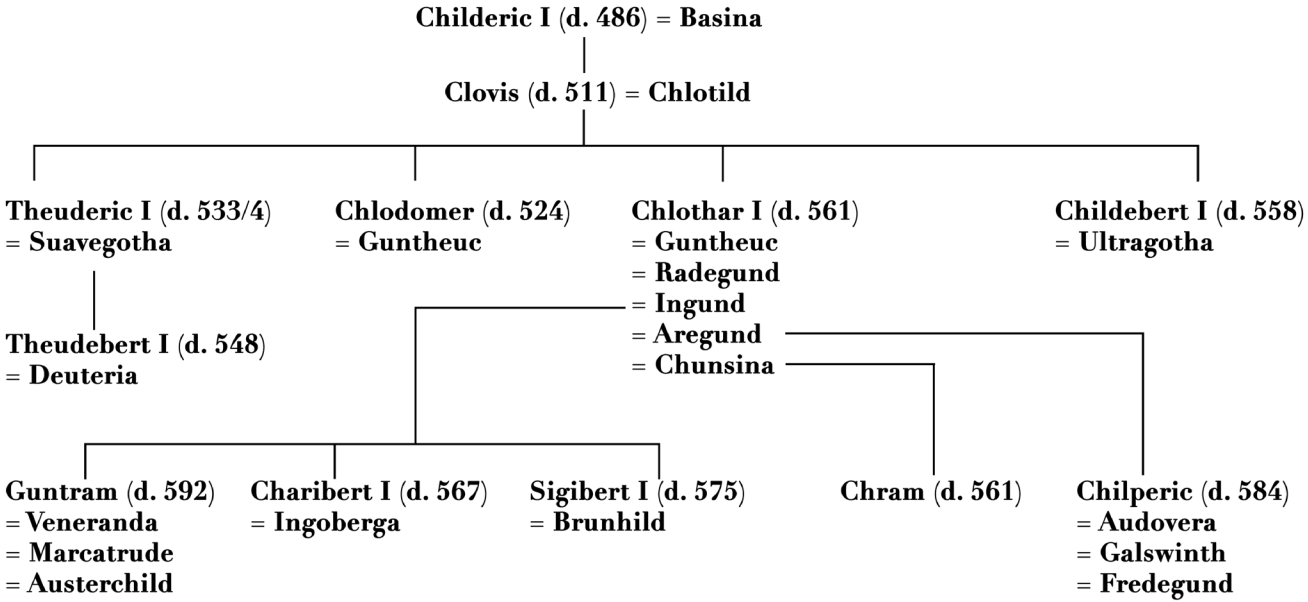


Figure I.1 The Merovingian family from Childeric I to the sons of Chlothar I

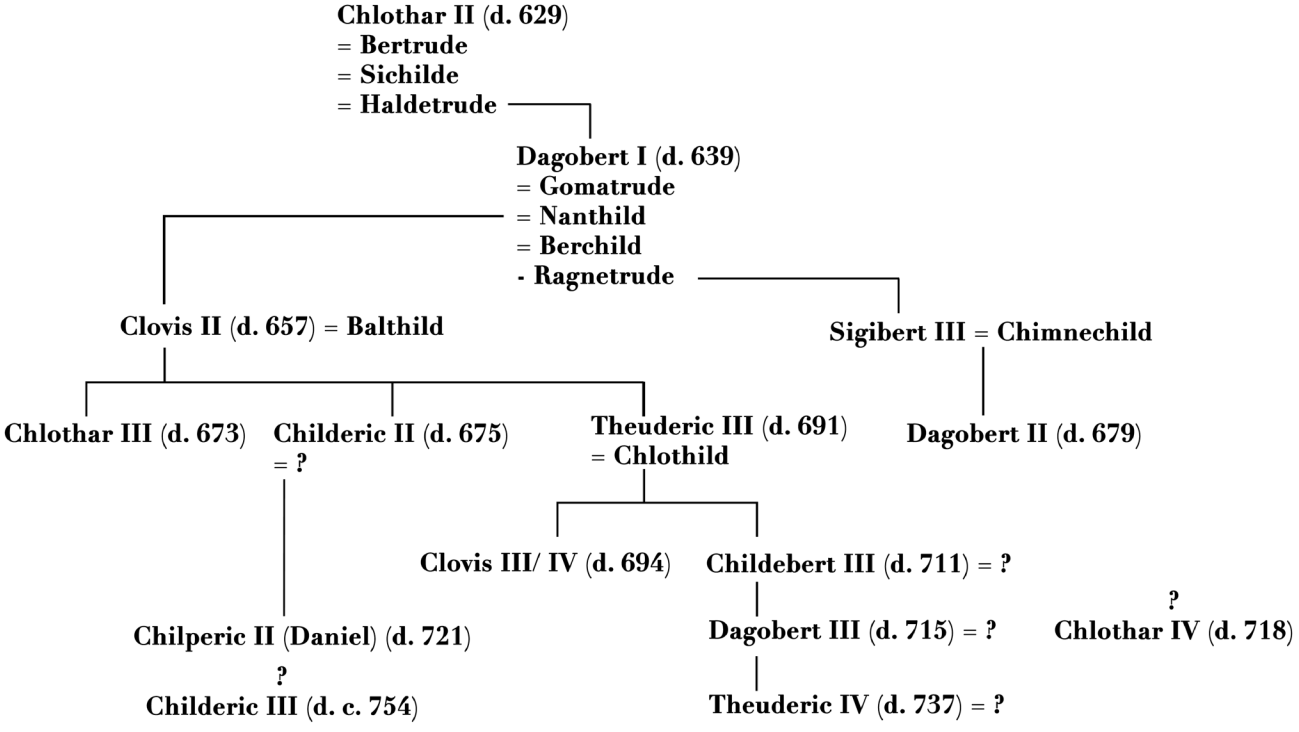


Figure I.2 The Merovingian family from Chlothar II to Childeric III

INTRODUCTION

Anarchy and Complexity

After the fall of Rome the Latin West fell into barbarism – or at least that is what the old stories told. The many crises of the fifth century paved the way for non-Roman groups to enter the empire and seize power, upended the traditional way of doing things, and inadvertently suppressed learning. In the provinces of Gaul, Belgica, and Germania, it was the Franks whose star rose the highest, led by their 'long-haired kings', drawn from the reign of Clovis I (reign c. 481–511) exclusively from the Merovingian dynasty. The sense of disorder was tangible in the pages of the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours, the period's most illustrious historian and bishop of Tours from 573 to his death in c. 594. His vivid stories detail a world of civil wars, unrestrained violence, and superstition that seems far removed from popular pastiches of classical antiquity with its sophisticated philosophy, poetry, and architecture.

In one of Gregory's most-well-known vignettes, years of often-bloody feuding in his own episcopal town – a conflict Gregory himself called a 'war' (*bellum*) – came to a head with the brutal murder of a man named Sichar. The dispute had started when a priest's servant was murdered at a party and Sichar, a friend of the priest, had sought revenge against a man called Austragisel, who counted the murderer among his men.[1] Revenge attacks followed, which included the murders of the father, brother, and uncle of one Chramnesind. When rumours circulated that Sichar had himself been murdered,

[1] Gregory, *LH* 7. 47.

Chramnesind stole all the man's valuables and burnt his house to the ground, only for it to transpire that Sichar was alive after all. Legal tribunals followed and compensation was ordered for the various offences all round, although that led to further arguments. Perhaps surprisingly, Sichar and Chramnesind became close friends after that and even shared a bed. Yet, flushed with wine one night, Sichar happened to comment that his friend had the money to entertain him only because of the compensation he had been paid on account of the conflict.[2] Chramnesind was outraged and, moved to vengeance once more by the slight on his masculine honour, he smashed Sichar's skull in. At first, Chramnesind followed the expectations hinted at in the Salic law code of the Franks: he made public what he had done and appealed to King Childebert II for mercy.[3] But the king's mother, the infamous Brunhild, stood against him, as Sichar had been loyal to her. Fearing for his life, Chramnesind fled until things calmed down. This was the precarious and violent kind of life that people today often like to imagine was typical for the 'Dark Ages'.

Gregory's storytelling is compelling and lively. At the same time, however, it stands as a good example of the challenges of Merovingian history. There is no good reason to doubt that what Gregory reported actually happened, but there is also a wealth of little details that can encourage us to read the story in different ways. For a start, it is told as a story, with a sense of rhetorical style and narrative that raises Gregory's work above the simple reportage of a naïve diarist.[4] The *Histories* are exciting, moralising literature, written by a well-educated public intellectual for an audience that he expected would be able to appreciate the layers within. There is much here for modern scholars of literature and language to dissect. Historians interested in legal process, meanwhile, might be struck by how law and custom intersect, even if it is at times quite fluid.[5] Violence may

[2] Gregory, *LH* 9. 19.

[3] *PLS* 41. 1–4 includes a much lower fine for homicide if the body is not concealed. See also *Lex Rib.* 80 (74).

[4] W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (AD 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, 1988), pp. 114–16; E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W. Trask, 2nd edn. (Princeton, 2013), pp. 87–9 (first edition published 1957) (although Auerbach thought Gregory had much to be desired as an author).

[5] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The bloodfeud of the Franks', in his *The Long-Haired Kings* (London, 1962), pp. 121–47 at pp. 139–41; W. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (London, 2011), pp. 38–41.

explode, but there is generally a move towards reconciliation and peace afterwards, assisted by kings, courts, and even legal documents. The punchline of the story, in fact, is that Chramnesind returns to the king and pleads his case, his lands are returned to him by the man who had been given possession of them, and his life returns to normal. Historians concerned with gender might note with interest how much of the story hinges not on 'barbarism' exactly but a toxic civic masculinity.[6] Before Chramnesind kills Sichar, for example, Gregory reported him thinking: 'If I don't avenge the ruin of my parents, I ought to cast aside the name of man and be called a weak woman.' There was honour here, it was gendered, and it drove people to act in certain ways.[7] Gregory also notably did not tie actions or expectations here to anything explicitly 'Frankish' or 'barbarian', despite the violence and despite the protagonists having ostensibly 'Germanic' names unlike Gregory himself whose full name – Georgius Florentius Gregorius– was unmistakably 'Roman'. The dispute, to Gregory, was very much about 'the citizens of Tours' (*cives Turonicus*) and the individual agency of particular actors. Any modern historian contemplating caricaturing non-Roman cultures of feud on the basis of Gregory's tale needs to add more than a few caveats. And so it goes on. Where once the story of Sichar and Chramnesind seemed to speak simply and clearly about societal degeneracy in what historians imagined to be a true 'Dark Age', it now seems to speak about a great deal of other things as well that complicated that picture. Neither Gregory nor his society was straightforward.

It is the purpose of this book to explore many different Merovingian worlds – political, economic, social, cultural, religious, intellectual, home and abroad.[8] It aims at a measured account and often it aims at synthesis. At the same time, however, it does not aim to be a simple 'storehouse of knowledge' that recites the

[6] Surprising most haven't but see C. Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe 400–1000* (London, 2009), p. 194 and J. Firnhaber-Baker, 'Seigneurial violence in medieval Europe', in R. Kaeuper & H. Zurndorfer (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Violence*, 2 (Cambridge, 2020), pp. 248–66 at pp. 250–1.

[7] Women could possibly use violence to restore honour: N. Gradowicz-Pancer, 'De-gendering female violence: Merovingian female honour as an "exchange of violence"', *EME*, 11. 1 (2002), 1–18.

[8] Earlier efforts – each still valuable in their own way – include: P. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Roman World* (Oxford, 1988); E. Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich*, ed. U. Nonn, 5th edn.

important facts about the past, more or less in order, in the hope that the facts speak for themselves and history is revealed. History as a discipline never works like that. Even the most self-professed objectively minded historians have to decide what they think is important and what is not on the way to producing their ostensibly sober tales. Not everyone's value judgements will necessarily be the same and certainly not their artistic ones. Sometimes this can be a matter of politics or taste, but it can also just be because different questions lead researchers in different directions. Maybe the economy was crucial to shaping particular events. Maybe it was people's beliefs. Maybe it was lust. Maybe it was expectation about gender roles. Maybe it was environmental catastrophe. What matters depends on what you are looking at, what you are seeking to explain, and what questions you are asking.

It is an important secondary purpose of this book to provide something of a guide to how and why perfectly good historians, when confronted with significantly the same body of evidence, have time and again generated different interpretations of the period. Few scholars have ever accepted that every and any interpretation is as good as any other. The field has been reshaped many times over by people questioning other people's understanding, selection, or use of evidence or the overarching coherence and logic of the arguments made with that evidence. Somebody always feels they are right and that someone else is wrong. Scholarly debate is integral to how we can view history. Sometimes these debates can be about technical matters, maybe about what Latin terms mean, what manuscripts show, or how legal process works. Sometimes they can be about how people envisage matters of nations, race, sex, civilisation, or belief. There is no simple route to defining the 'accuracy' of historical interpretations or their contemporary 'relevance'. Sometimes 'accuracy' involves a judgement call, while 'relevance' depends on making a choice someone else might not have made. This is, in many ways, the joys of the story of Sichar and Chramnesind: there are many layers to what the story 'means' for the times depending

(Stuttgart, 2006) (originally 1988) now replaced by S. Scholz, *Die Merowinger* (Stuttgart, 2015); I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (London, 1994); M. Hartmann, *Aufbruch ins Mittelalter: Die Zeit der Merowinger* (Darmstadt, 2003); and the two essays R. Van Dam, 'Merovingian Gaul and the Frankish conquests', in Fouracre (ed.), *NCMH*, 1, pp. 193–231 and P. Fouracre, 'Francia in the seventh century', in Fouracre (ed.), *NCMH*, 1, pp. 371–96.

on what we might look for and how. Each layer might invite us to consider the Merovingian world differently.

Merovingian Worlds is structured around key themes: how people exerted power in different ways; how the Merovingian kingdoms fitted into the world around them, how people in the kingdom defined themselves and each other, how they wrote history, how cultural production was structured, and how religion shaped the kingdoms. It is, as such, an exercise in introducing and explaining Merovingian history as an exploration of its culture rather than just its narrative progressions from the first Merovingian kings in the fifth century until the last one was deposed in 751. Emphasis is intended to be on structures, practices, beliefs, and interpretations – on 'how it worked' more than 'what happened'. In practice, of course, these are two intimately related issues because what happened depended on how things worked and vice versa (and indeed on how things did not work and what did not happen). Change over time is also frequently crucial. To prepare readers for exploring Merovingian history, the rest of the introduction will provide a brief 'narrative' to help give some chronological structure to underpin matters and then outline key debates and how the period has been discussed. The issues involved will be discussed in much more detail in the main body of the book.

A BRIEF NARRATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Frankish kingdoms under the Merovingians developed in a dramatic and unsettled period of the history of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East.[9] In the fourth century, the Roman Empire had dominated these regions, defining state structures, social organisation, economic activity, and religion (which only over the course of that century meant Christianity). Like many empires, the sense of unity meant that diverse peoples and regions had common ground to work together. The strength of that corporate purpose, however, was sorely tested by a run of events that unsettled the

[9] There is a voluminous literature on the changes of this period. Useful guides include P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971); P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2013) (originally 1996); G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007); P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam* (Cambridge, 2008); Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome*.

empire and ultimately led to its 'end' in the Latin-speaking west. A crucial turning point occurred in 376 when large numbers of Goths entered the empire across the Danube and Roman mismanagement of the migration led to conflict. The conflict was swiftly resolved, but it proved to be just the first round in a series which saw 'barbarian' groups move into imperial territory and tensions between Romans and non-Romans mount. By the second half of the fifth century, when Franks started to solidify their power in places such as Trier and Tournai, Goths were already in charge of southern Gaul and extending their power within Iberia, while Burgundians controlled areas along the Rhône. The last western Roman emperor was deposed in 476. No one sought to revive the title until Charlemagne in 800. The lack of an emperor in the west mattered little. In many areas of life *romanitas*, 'Roman-ness', continued anyway, and indeed for the period under discussion there was always still an emperor – it was just that they were in Constantinople. The Merovingian kingdoms came to play a central role in how this revised political and cultural landscape might work.

Even without the Franks, Burgundians, Goths and other incomers, the Roman world was changing. Economic patterns were significantly dictated by imperial centralisation and the networks of the Mediterranean. These already showed signs of being reshaped by shifts in supply and demand for various goods plus changes in regional economic systems and the end of some Roman aristocrats owning properties across the imperial world. (For the Merovingian world, the growing energy of North Sea trade would be of particular importance, especially towards the end of the period.) Changes in production and exchange also affected social organisation, helping some people to accumulate wealth and resources to gain greater freedoms or authority, while degrading the position of others who either lost or never had freedom or relative material prosperity. Many aspects of life and status were affected by the declining centrality and efficacy of imperial state systems, which affected many things from personal advancement to military recruitment and public works. Towns and cities in many areas seemed to be in decline. All of these patterns were in place even before the sixth-century Late Antique Little Ice Age and the outbreak of the Justinianic pandemic caused major disruptions, the effects of which are still only slowly being understood.

Religious change affected the position further. As recently as the early fourth century, the Roman Empire had entertained a plurality of religions and cults. The rapid spread of Christianity, aided in no small part by imperial sponsorship, led to its almost complete dominance of imperial religion by c. 400. Conversion and Christianisation demanded reorientation of attitudes on many issues, including sex, wealth, religious tolerance, and the content of education. Churches and monasteries became new hubs of social and political activity – developments significantly aided by the extent to which they were staffed by people from powerful families and by the success they had in accumulating land and wealth. The 'Church', however, was far from being anything like the united and co-ordinated institution people often imagine. Many greyer areas of morality depended on individual taste, hierarchy was frequently impressionistic, bureaucracy was negligible, and activity was dependent on individual endeavour. There was always a time when some community was separated from another by a point of theology or ritual. There was also rarely agreement over what, if anything, to do about the people considered heretics or pagans. Religion was going to take a lot of navigating.

Into this unsettled and changing world came the Franks. They were hardly complete outsiders. Franks had lived in the empire, fought for (and against) the empire, and they shared many of their religious and cultural values. Some Frankish military confederacies, however, took advantage of crisis in fifth-century Germania and Gaul and took control of some northern towns and cities, including the former Roman capital of Trier. The Franks were far from united and there were several 'long-haired kings'. Among them, the Merovingians only slowly emerged as the most successful. The Merovingians (*Mero(v/h)ingi* in Latin, the voiced 'v' a later development) were descendants of a King Merovech, who one legend had it might have been fathered by a quinotaur, a five-horned sea beast.[10] It is a story that reminds us that the Merovingians, as a dynasty, were as much an idea as a biological family reality. It was Merovech's grandson, Clovis I, who first united the Frankish kingdoms and expanded them from northern Gaul down to the Pyrenees. He was also celebrated as the first significant Catholic 'barbarian' leader at a time when the other Roman successor states were dominated by

[10] Fred. 3. 9; *LHF* 5 (without the quinotaur story).

Arian Christians. At this point, our chief narrator for the period is Gregory of Tours, whose *Histories* provide a lively and pointed account of history in the kingdoms.

After Clovis, the story focuses on his sons, and then his grandsons (see genealogy in Figure I.1). The sons were Theuderic I (d. 533/4), Chlodomer (d. 524), Childebert I (d. 558), and Chlothar I (d. 561), with the principal royal characters of the next generation – Charibert I (d. 567), Guntram (d. 592), Sigibert I (d. 575) and Chilperic I (d. 584) – all descending from Chlothar. Their collective stories are complicated as the kings jostled for land, power, and advantage in what Gregory labelled 'civil wars' (*bella civilia*). Their 'part kingdoms' (*Teilreiche*, as they are called in German scholarship) were only loosely defined. The royal residences (*sedes regiae*) were established in Paris, Rheims, Soissons, and Orléans, with some other cities – notably Metz and Cologne – also serving at political centres as needed. The loyalty of individuals towns and cities could change depending on alliances and agreements made. The kings of this period were strong and effective as far as most contemporaries were concerned. But the reputation of the line of Sigibert I and his infamous wife Brunhild deteriorated among in-fighting and gossip until, in 613, Chilperic's son Chlothar II (d. 629) brought the line to a brutal end and reunited the kingdom. By then Gregory was long dead and our principal narrative is supplied by the *Chronicles of Fredegar* – a more taciturn compilation that built on one version of Gregory's work to take Frankish history up to around 643. It is in these times that we are supposed to find the beginnings of the dynasty's fall. After Chlothar's successes, however, his son Dagobert I (d. 639) was at least able to follow him with a period of consolidation.

The death of Dagobert is often considered a turning point. He left the kingdom to be split between his young sons Sigibert III, who was about nine, and Clovis II, who was about six. This hardened a growing division between the western kingdom of Neustria, centred on Paris, and the eastern kingdom of Austrasia, centred on Metz. Burgundy was recognised as a separate kingdom too but almost always subject to Neustria or Austrasia. Aquitaine, between the Loire and the Pyrenees, maintained its own identity but never as a kingdom. The reigns of Sigibert and Clovis were unremarkable and relatively short, with both dying with little lament in our sources sometime in the mid 650s. After that there were few kings

from the dynasty who were able to rule for any prolonged period as an adult and none who captured medieval or modern imaginations as a genuinely great king. They were, in a popular phrase in English modern histories, 'do-nothing kings'; in French, *rois fainéants* ('idle kings'); and in German, *Schattenkönige* ('shadow kings'). It perhaps did not help that the narrative of the *Chronicles of Fredegar* ends in c. 643 and its main successor, the *Liber historiae Francorum* of 726/7, is rather laconic. The last century of Merovingian rule was easy for historians – medieval and modern – to characterise as a rather unremarkable period because the narratives are unremarkable. It seemed most interesting for the slow rise of the Pippinid family. The Pippinids were an Austrasian aristocratic family descended from the powerful Pippin I (d. 640). Several of their line after Pippin – notably Grimoald I (d. 657), Pippin II (d. 714), and Charles Martel (d. 741) – served as the mayor of the palace, which was an important and honourable court position with duties to support the king in administration, diplomacy, and war. Certainly after Childebert III (d. 711), and arguably earlier, the weakness of kings meant that the mayor was the de facto key figure in the kingdom. It was another Pippinid mayor, Pippin III (d. 768), who would bring an end to Merovingian rule by deposing its last king, Childeric III, and seizing power for himself in 751.

The political headlines – and particularly the shift in perspective after Gregory – can obscure the complexity of Merovingian history. The *Chronicles of Fredegar* and the *Liber historiae Francorum* were not written with the same literary flair as Gregory's *Histories* and so can seem muted or taciturn. There are, however, a wealth of other kinds of sources that illuminate the period in other ways. Items from burials, for instance, have often been used to explore issues of war, belief, and identity in ways that no narrative source allows. From the early seventh century onwards, there are increasing volumes of legal documents that have survived, either in their original form or in copies. There are also law books and formularies. After c. 650, we start to have more surviving manuscripts too which allow glimpses of intellectual and cultural life. Throughout the period, there are hagiographical stories and compilations that show many aspects of life away from the kings. There are canon law collections and liturgical books that reveal aspects of how religious life worked. Excavations of rural sites hint at aspects of everyday life, labour, and diet that no written sources cover. The

challenge, as we shall see in the next section, is how to establish good interpretative frameworks to make sense of the rich evidence available.

CONSTRUCTING MEROVINGIAN HISTORY

The histories of Merovingian worlds have been shaped by a long list of interests and models.[11] As previously mentioned, this does not mean that all the histories are wrong. Far from it. It is instructive, however, to interrogate the underlying ideals and values that lead scholars to put forward narratives in particular ways and to reach the conclusions that they do. Over the next few pages, I will attempt a short 'history of Merovingian history' to highlight key approaches and debates. The two most dominant themes that will be evident are the importance of nations and religion. The Merovingian kingdoms have been seen as inherently interesting because they represent the first efforts after Roman dominance to establish what would become France, with implications for areas of what became Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and even Italy and Spain. People like to imagine that the distant past somehow says something about who they are now, either through affirmation or denial. It can be similar with the religious history of the period, which for a long time was shaped by Catholic interest in early institutional history, Protestant distaste for the period's religiosity, and secular impulses to sidestep issues of belief altogether. Debates throughout the early modern period, it should be stressed, frequently forced people to justify why particular sources should be read this way or that. As we shall see, moves to determine the rigorous scientific study of history lay within rather than outside these debates. This has continued in modern (i.e. post-Second World War) approaches to historical practice, which has seen Merovingianists absorb insights from gender and women's history, sociology, literary studies, and socio-economic theories.

[11] A. Graceffa, 'Writing the history of Merovingian Gaul: an historiographical survey', in Effros & Moreira (eds.), *OHMW*, pp. 52–76. Much is summarised in I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013) and B. Effros, *Uncovering the Germanic Past: Merovingian Archaeology in France, 1830–1914* (Oxford, 2012) and B. Effros, 'Two centuries of excavating Merovingian-era cemeteries in France', in Effros & Moreira (eds.), *OHMW*, pp. 77–95. See also now G. Halfond, *Writing about the Merovingians in the Early United States* (Leeds, 2023) and Y. Fox, *The Merovingians in Historiographical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2023).

A great push for more precise histories came with early modern religious polemics. Between 1559 and 1574, for example, a group of Lutheran scholars known as the Centuriators of Magdeburg produced a multi-volume ecclesiastical history that, for each century, provided a thematic overview of the failings of the Catholic Church.[12] For our Merovingian centuries, the prevalence of heresy, the rise of papal authority, and the Arab conquests ensured that the early Middle Ages were characterised as a period when the Kingdom of Antichrist was particularly strong. It was polemic designed to minimise the authority of the Catholic Church in history and one that sought to derive strength from being rooted in a critical sifting of source material as much as its heightened rhetoric. Indeed, the first printing of any version of the *Chronicles of Fredegar* was by the group's Matthias Flacius Illyricus in 1568. Unsurprisingly such work provoked responses from Catholics. The most famous was by Caesare Baronio, who wrote his monumental *Annales ecclesiastici* (1588–1607) at the request of Filippo Neri, founder of the Congregation of the Oratory, precisely to counter the Centuriators' views.[13] Baronio's methodology was simple: he delivered a year-by-year summary of events, in which he deployed long quotations from sources and went light on the theology. The scale of history for both the Centuriators and Baronio was broad but texts such as Gregory's *Histories* and the *Chronicles of Fredegar* provided invaluable material to dissect.

The seventeenth century witnessed more efforts like Baronio's in France that helped to shape Merovingian history. A notable effort was Charles Le Cointe's *Annales ecclesiastici Francorum* (8 vols, 1665–8). Le Cointe was a priest of the French Oratory and friend of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, a leading political figure, bibliophile, and manuscript collector who supported his work. His *Annales* were dedicated to Louis XIV as a celebration of Catholic history in France, with the Merovingians being prominent even in the dedicatory

[12] For the Merovingian centuries: *Sexta centuria ecclesiasticae historiae* (Basel, 1562); *Septima centuria ecclesiasticae historiae* (Basel, 1564); *Octava centuria ecclesiasticae historiae* (Basel, 1564). See H. Bollbuck, *Wahrheitszeugnis, Gottes Auftrag und Zeitkritik. Die Kirchengeschichte der Magdeburger Zenturien und ihre Arbeitstechniken* (Wiesbaden, 2014); H. Bollbuck, 'Searching for the true religion: the Church History of the Magdeburg Centuries between critical methods and confessional polemics', *Renaissance Studies*, 35. 1 (2019), 100–17.

[13] C. Pullapilly, *Caesar Baronius: Counter-Reformation Historian* (South Bend, 1975).

letter as Clovis was considered the first Catholic king of France. As he focused on France rather than Europe as a whole, Le Cointe had space to supplement the exploded year-by-year narratives of the chronicles with hagiographical and legal texts, many of which were published for the first time. He engaged critically with the texts and even caused controversy by arguing that Books VI–X of Gregory's *Histories* were not authentic.[14] He was just one of several scholars at this time who wanted to deepen the practice of history, in part motivated by a desire to expose what they felt were the essential truths of the early Middle Ages and its Catholic institutions. Others included the Jesuit priest Pierre-François Chifflet (d. 1682) and the Benedictines Luc D'Achery (d. 1685) and Jean Mabillon (d. 1707).[15] They travelled extensively to find historical materials in libraries across France, discussed findings with each other, and published their findings extensively. Chifflet contributed to the then new project of Jean Bolland (d. 1665), the *Acta Sanctorum*, which published hagiographic texts with critical historical notes.[16] Mabillon, meanwhile, developed the sciences of palaeography and diplomatics to aid scholars in separating the fraudulent from the authentic, notably in *De re diplomatica* (1681). Like Baronio and Le Cointe, all put effort into clarifying the chronology of the Merovingian period as part of their work – not least because AD dating was extensively used only in later periods, which meant it was not always obvious in many sources when something was supposed to have happened (see further Chapter 1, pp. 30–33).

The assembling of more material on the Merovingian world meant the publishing of new critical editions (printings of texts with critical notes on the manuscript witnesses and problems in the content). After Flacius Illyricus's printing of *Fredegar*, the first serious modern edition was published only in 1699 by Mabillon's disciple Thierry Ruinart. It quickly circulated widely as it was reprinted in Martin Bouquet's popular *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* – a multi-volume

[14] W. Goffart, 'From *Historiae* to *Historia Francorum* and back again: aspects of the textual history of Gregory of Tours', in his *Rome's Fall and After* (London, 1989), pp. 255–74 at p. 262.

[15] D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises: Problems in Monastic History* (London, 1962), pp. 33–51; J. Fohlen and J. Fohlen, 'Chifflet, D'Achery et Mabillon: une correspondence erudite dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIe siècle (1668–1675)', *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes*, 126. 1 (1968), 135–85.

[16] Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises*, pp. 1–15.

effort by the Maurists to bring together France's historical writings for a wider educated elite, with the first volume published in 1738. The *Liber historiae Francorum* was given new life here too with the reprinting of Marquardt Freher's 1613 edition alongside a new transcription of the text from a manuscript in Cambrai.[17] Assorted letters, poems, and other documents were included. Merovingian history was now more accessible than it had ever been before. The project had a long-lasting success and was revised and reissued under the direction of Leopold Delisle (d. 1904) over a century later.

Bouquet's collection signals the importance of national histories alongside the religious. He was explicit in his debt to the work of people such as Mabillon, but he sought to repurpose their work to benefit a history of France specifically. The Merovingians, here, were 'the first race [= lineage] of our kings'.[18] The two others were the Carolingians and the Capetians. The sense of Merovingian origins for the modern nation was, of course, nothing new by then. One can see it front and centre a century earlier in Jacques de Bie's *Les vrais portraits des rois de France* (*True Portraits of the Kings of France*), addressed to King Louis XIII as part of a renewed effort to use historical writing to glorify the regime. It was de Bie, incidentally, who first called the later Merovingians *rois fainéants*.[19] Other important assessments of the importance of the Merovingians to a specifically French history soon followed.[20] For Boulainvilliers in 1732, the military conquests of the Franks were essential for introducing liberty and vigour, although the kings would ultimately let the nobility down. This has been called the foundation of the 'Germanist' model. Du Bos, in swift response in 1735, argued that the conquest was exaggerated and that what was important was the way that the Franks were integrated within existing social structures. This has been called the 'Romanist model'.

[17] M. Freher, *Corpus Francicae historiae veteris et sincerae* (Hanover, 1613), pp. 55–85; M. Bouquet, *Receuil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, 24 vols. (Paris, 1738–1904), 2, pp. 540–72.

[18] Bouquet, *Receuil* 1, viii.

[19] J. de Bie, *Les vrais portraits des rois de France*, 2nd edn. (Paris, 1636), p. 59. On the context, see M.-C. Canova-Green, '"Du cabinet au livre d'histoire": les deux éditions de l'Histoire métallique de Jacques de Bie', *Dix-septième siècle*, 250 (2011), 157–70.

[20] Graceffa, 'Writing the history of Merovingian Gaul', pp. 56–7; Wood, *The Modern Origins*, pp. 19–36.

The French Revolution in 1789 and further popular uprisings changed the scene and Merovingian history splintered. In Augustin Thierry's *Récits des temps mérovingiens* (1840) (later translated into English as *Tales of the Early Franks*) – significantly based on his reading of Bouquet – there was a hardening of a sense in which the Franks were brutish conquerors who imposed themselves on the 'Gauls', who were coerced into being a subservient class. Such thinking directly inspired early race science. Yet there were other ways to imagine the period in this environment.[21] A striking contribution was made by the prominent bureaucrat and writer Jules Michelet early in the nineteenth century with his multi-volume *Histoire de France* (first volume published 1831). In the spirit of the age, he reimagined the nation as 'the people'. For the early period this meant consideration of how diverse peoples came together – people of different cultures, beliefs, languages, and status – to find the uneasy but powerful alliances from which the modern polity would be formed. There were still clearly defined races with readily identifiable traits in Michelet's sketches; the way they came together to create the novelty of a nation was more important to his sense of purpose.

Religious issues had, for a while, been pushed to the back because of Enlightenment sentiment and the politics of the French Revolution, both of which characterised faith as an enemy of reason. Many people shared the suspicion expressed in Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89) that Christianity had weakened the empire and that the emergence of nations was crucial to what happened next. By the mid nineteenth century, however, new narratives began to assert the positive role that the religious sphere had played in shaping the Merovingian world. Frédéric Ozanam, for instance, expressly challenged views such as Gibbon's by stressing the importance of the Church for giving balance and morality to the uneasy mix of Roman and Germanic elements in Merovingian society.[22] The Church was also important for preserving culture. He gave particular prominence to Irish and English missionaries who were influential in the seventh and eighth centuries. This emphasis was even more pronounced in the work of Ozanam's contemporary Charles Forbes René de Montalembert in the course of his

[21] Wood, *The Modern Origins*, pp. 97–104.

[22] F. Ozanam, *Études germaniques* 2, 3rd edn. (Paris, 1851). See also his *History of Civilization in the Fifth Century*, trans. A. Glyn (London, 1868).

six-volume history of monasticism.[23] Both were drawn to their conclusions by their own Catholicism but in ways that worked productively to counter the biases of their other historians of the period. A half century later this would be bolstered further by the work of Albert Hauck, whose *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands* (*Ecclesiastical History of Germany*) offered a more sociological and less overtly judgemental assessment of the early medieval Church – something made more significant by the fact that he was a Lutheran scholar writing primarily about Catholicism. Religious life was starting to be recognised afresh as an integral part of all walks of life in the period rather than just a distasteful side plot.

Hauck's work was the beneficiary of a century of consciously 'scientific' study of the Middle Ages in Germany. He was taught in Berlin by Leopold von Ranke, who was highly influential for the stress he placed on using primary sources critically for uncovering the essence of a period. Ranke's views developed shortly after the founding of the Monumenta Germaniae Historica (MGH) in 1819 as a society dedicated to understanding German history (necessarily defined relatively broadly, as Germany was not officially unified until 1871).[24] The society's scholarly work focused on publishing new editions of texts with critical apparatus detailing manuscript variants, errors, cross-references, and necessary historical and textual clarifications. The first volume, edited by Georg Heinrich Pertz, was published in Hanover in 1826 and started with the tail end of the Merovingian period as the *Annals of St Amand*, its first text, open with the Battle of Tertry in 687. Pertz began work on the *Lex Salica* shortly afterwards, although it proved so complicated that it went through several editors before an edition finally appeared in 1962. More sustained focus on Merovingian history was driven initially by Wilhelm Arndt (d. 1895), who turned to re-editing Gregory's *Histories* for the new subseries *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum* (*Writers of Merovingian Things*). To complete that work, however, he needed the help of his pupil Bruno Krusch (d. 1940), who proceeded to produce a supplementary volume of

[23] C. de Montalembert, *The Monks of the West from St Benedict to St Bernard*, trans. M. Oliphant, 6 vols. (Edinburgh, 1867).

[24] On the early years see Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises*, pp. 66–83 and for much more detail see H. Bresslau, *Geschichte der Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (Hanover, 1921).

Gregory's other works (1885), new editions of Fredegar and the *Liber historiae Francorum* (1888), and then five volumes of hagiographical texts pertaining to Merovingian history (1896–1920), for three of which he was assisted by Wilhelm Levison (d. 1947). In the course of this work, Krusch was also able to make significant progress in clarifying the chronology of Merovingian history, which was often unclear in the sources.[25] Krusch's work remains fundamental to modern Merovingian studies.

The self-conscious rigour and standards of the MGH did not leave it immune from criticism. Indeed, often its members could not agree over technical details. Some publications intended to be landmark contributions quickly died: the 1872 edition of Merovingian charters by Karl August Friedrich Pertz, Georg Heinrich's son, was so ferociously criticised it brought a crushing halt to both Pertzes editorial projects, while Arndt and Krusch's edition of Gregory was overhauled for its deficiencies by Krusch himself along with Levison after a few decades. It helped debate that, alongside the long introductions to texts, the MGH also published articles in its in-house journal.[26] Krusch's work generated over forty pieces in that publication alone. The problem was – and will always be – that data is one thing and interpretation of the data is something else. For the *Chronicles of Fredegar*, for instance, Krusch hypothesised that there must have been three authors on the basis of some structural inconsistencies. This was not accepted by Ferdinand Lot, who argued for one inconsistent author, nor Siegmund Hellmann, who argued for two. Each made a reasoned case with the same evidence available. The debate is still not resolved beyond question, but it has had the merit of forcing scholars to engage with the content, structures, and language of the text as a composition, rather than just as if it were a record of things that happened.[27]

Not that progress was all about philology. Socio-economic histories thrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century too. Particularly important contributions were made by the Austrian

[25] B. Krusch, 'Chronologica regum Francorum stirpis Merowingicae, catalogi, computationes annorum vetustae cum commentariis', in MGH SS. rer. Merov. 7 (Hanover, 1920), pp. 468–515 and pp. 850–55.

[26] Originally called *Archiv der Gesellschaft für ältere deutsche Geschichtkunde* and succeeded by *NA* (1876–1935) and then *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* (1937–present).

[27] For details of the debate see Chapter 1, pp. 42–3.

historian Alfons Dopsch (d. 1954) and the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (d. 1935).[28] Their arguments put the economy in different ways at the heart of the transformations of the late Roman world. Dopsch maintained that the end of the empire was not catastrophic and instead could be understood better in terms of continuity and gradual change throughout the period. Part of that, in his view, was the success of peoples like the Franks in integrating themselves with Roman society. Pirenne was cooler on the positive role of any barbarians. He argued that there were essentially continuities until the late seventh century when the Arab conquests in the east and south of the Mediterranean disrupted trade and forced the northern Europe to become more self-sufficient. Such studies were still significantly more rooted in textual evidence than archaeology, although more synthesis would occur over time. As part of these studies, there was also more interest in Merovingian society as a whole. It was often hard to get beyond the headline political narrative, as the Irish classicist Samuel Dill noted in his 1926 survey, but the fact that people tried and were collecting relevant snippets at least paved the way for more work in the field later.[29]

The directions of Merovingian studies were complicated by events surrounding the Second World War. One of the best-known examples is what happened to Wilhelm Levison. As a Jew, he was forced to resign from his position at the University of Bonn in 1935 under the Nuremburg Laws and then, as anti-Semitism escalated, in 1939 he fled to Durham. There he wrote *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, based on lectures given in Oxford in 1943, in which he argued that studying the past entanglements of German and English history could rebuild bridges between the two nations.[30] His former pupil Eugen Ewig felt Merovingian studies could do the same for French and German reconciliation and, while at Mainz, helped found the German Historical Institute in Paris.[31] In England, meanwhile, Michael Wallace-Hadrill's experience of the war, which saw him seconded to MI6, encouraged

[28] A. Dopsch, *The Economic and Social Foundations of European Civilization*, ed. E. Patzelt, trans. M. Beard & N Marshall, *Civilization* (London, 1937); H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, trans. B. Miall (London, 1939).

[29] S. Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London, 1926).

[30] W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946).

[31] See his collected essays *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien*, vols. 1–2 ed. H. Atsma (Munich, 1976–9), vol. 3 eds. M. Becher, T. Kölzer & U. Nonn (Ostfildern, 2009).

him on return to academic life at Oxford to reappraise 'barbarian' violence and institutions.[32] In general, pre-war antipathy towards nationalism and the emphasis on structures became more pronounced. An important rupture could be seen surrounding the idea of 'Germans' and 'Germanic culture'. These were concepts that were already being problematised before the popularisation of extreme right-wing ideas about race. Now, emphasis on race was firmly replaced by ethnicity, moving focus from biological descent to mutable culture.

Interest in culture from the 1960s onwards began to open up Merovingian studies in new ways. The influence of sociology and related disciplines, for example, began to reshape the religious history of the period. A notable contribution here came in Friedrich Prinz's 1965 dissertation *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, which used evidence for monastic foundations and patronage to reflect on matters such as aristocratic culture. The same year the Czech scholar František Graus published *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*, using then-little-used hagiographical texts to explore social values, even where such texts contained dubious pseudo-historical narratives. Peter Brown also took influence from sociology and anthropology at this time to explore the social functions of aspects of religion, particularly saints' cults, for which he frequently revisited the world of Gregory of Tours.[33] Such work helped to establish how religion was integral to Merovingian society rather than a distinct sphere of action that could be separated from politics or the economy. Concern for society as a whole, evident in works from earlier in the century, began to find more systematic expression.

In a similar way, developments in women's history and gender theory began to reconfigure how the Merovingian world was understood. Historians had hitherto hardly failed to appreciate strong female figures such as Brunhild, Fredegund, or St Radegund in the period. The power of those figures, however, needed its own investigations and conceptualisations, as the resources, rights, and

[32] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Barbarian West 400–1000* (London, 1952); J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (London, 1962).

[33] On Gregory specifically see his *Relics and Social Status in the Age of Gregory of Tours* (Reading, 1977), reprinted in his *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (London, 1982), pp. 222–50 alongside other relevant essays.

rituals involved were hardly the same as for men. A 1973 article by Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, for instance, highlighted the role of women as decisive co-ordinators of households.[34] This paved the way for both institutional studies of women and analysis of their representations in texts.[35] Such work properly calibrated had the potential to illuminate politics, religion, and socio-economic order in whole new ways, as Jinty Nelson stressed in a classic 1978 article comparing Brunhild and Balthild.[36] It has also brought much needed attention to hagiographical discourse.[37] There is still much work to be done theorising Merovingian gender but the foundations are strong.[38]

Looking at society more holistically demands more engagement with its material culture. This has not always proven straightforward. There are few scholars like Edward James, Guy Halsall, or Bonnie Effros who have had the training and methodologies to integrate textual and archaeological evidence successfully.[39] This is unfortunate as Merovingian archaeology has significantly expanded our

[34] J. A. McNamara & S. Wemple, 'The power of women through the family in Medieval Europe, 500–1100', *Feminist Studies*, 1. 3/4 (1973), 126–41. For a significantly expanded and nuanced exploration of the theme see J. Smith, 'Did women have a transformation of the Roman world?', *Gender & History*, 12. 3 (2000), 552–71.

[35] S. Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the Cloister 500–900* (Philadelphia, 1981); J. A. McNamara, *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages* (Durham, 1992).

[36] J. Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history', in *Politics and Ritual in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1986), pp. 1–48.

[37] S. Gäbe, 'Radegundis: sancta regina, ancilla. Zum Heiligkeitsideal der Radegundisviten von Fortunat und Baudonivia', *Francia*, 16 (1989), 1–30; J. Kitchen, *Saints' Lives and the Rhetoric of Gender: Male and Female in Merovingian Hagiography* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 115–23 and pp. 134–53; S. Tatum, '*Auctoritas* as *sanctitas*: Balthild's depiction as "queen-saint" in the *Vita Balthildis*', *European Review of History*, 16. 6 (2009), 809–34; L. Bailey, 'Handmaids of God: images of service in the *Lives* of Merovingian female saints', *Journal of Religious History*, 43. 3 (2019), 359–79.

[38] G. Halsall, 'Gender in Merovingian Gaul', in Effros & Moreira (eds.), *OHMW*, pp. 164–85.

[39] E. James, *The Origins of France from the Merovingians to the Capetians 500–1000* (London, 1982); E. James, *The Franks* (Oxford, 1996); G. Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization: The Merovingian Region of Metz* (Cambridge, 1995); G. Halsall (ed.), *Cemeteries and Society in Merovingian Gaul* (Leiden, 2009); B. Effros, *Caring for Body and Soul: Burial and the Afterlife in the Merovingian World* (University Park, 2002); B. Effros, *Creating Community with Food and Drink in Merovingian Gaul* (London, 2002).

understanding of the period, as exemplified by the rich assortment of essays in 2020's *Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*. The tendency, however, is for historians and archaeologists to use each other's material less critically than is ideal and usually to do little more than to make supporting points.[40] Similarly, there have been few scholars who have built on the foundations of early manuscript studies laid by Elias Lowe or Bernhard Bischoff to explore the implications for cultural production in the period.[41] Use of manuscript evidence is often limited to second-hand observations in passing and is more often dismissed as irrelevant. Yet, as with archaeology, scholars who have engaged properly with it still frequently find there are new discoveries to be made.[42] Scholars are still finding new texts or versions of texts that transform the way we understand the period. Our understanding of Merovingian history is evidently very far from complete – and with that it cannot be said that it is close to being 'settled'.

Post-war moods changed not only the content of Merovingian studies but also how scholars imagined it fitted within a wider sweep of history. Whether the Merovingians represented a rupture with Roman civilisation or its last hurrah were crucial issues for historians from Gibbon to Pirenne. The logic of such notions shifted the more people recognised multiple transformations across time and space. Imagining a distinctive world of *Late* Antiquity – as Peter Brown did in 1971 – also helped people to see the fourth to seventh centuries as a period in its own right, rather than one defined only by being stuck between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.[43] This

[40] G. Halsall, 'Archaeology and historiography', in his *Cemeteries and Society*, pp. 21–48; A. Woolf, 'A dialogue of the deaf and the dumb: archaeology, history and philology', in Z. Devlin & C. Holas-Clark (eds.), *Approaching Interdisciplinarity: Archaeology, History and the Study of Early Medieval Britain* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 10–23.

[41] On the work of Lowe and Bischoff see Chapter 6, pp. 181–3.

[42] The value of returning to the manuscripts to interrogate assumptions about Merovingian texts is evident in A. Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae c. 500–1000* (Cambridge, 2009), I. Warntjes, *The Munich Computus: Text and Translation. Irish Computistics between Isidore of Seville and the Venerable Bede and Its Reception in Carolingian Times* (Stuttgart, 2010), and H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity, and the Framing of Western Ethnicity 550–850* (Cambridge, 2014).

[43] P. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971). See also his *The Rise of Western Christendom*.

was explored in many different ways by the 'Transformation of the Roman World' project (1992–7), which brought an impressive cast of European and American researchers together, resulting in a rich collection of studies that, directly and indirectly, revised and recontextualised Merovingian history.[44] Such focused study made it easier than ever to see the period as a time of vibrant creativity rather than just a catastrophe waiting to be sorted out.[45]

With the expansion of Merovingian studies in the twenty-first century, it is hard to identify a single paradigm that dominates. It perhaps helps that most prominent Merovingian scholars at the time of writing were trained in a variety of places and had a mix of mentors. Correspondingly, as Merovingianists have moved away from the old grand narratives, many new models have come into play. There is the inescapable feeling that something important, likely multiple somethings, changed. Several pivotal changes have been proposed over the past couple of decades. For Chris Wickham, working within a Marxist socio-economic framework, it is shifts from state taxation systems to the prominence of rent.[46] For Peter Brown, more interested in cultural systems, it is the development of new ideas about post-mortem purgation for sin, as this changed how people imagined how the world worked and what they could do within it.[47] Somewhere between the two, Ian Wood has argued that the crucial structural development in the period is the massive transfer of wealth to religious institutions, establishing something of a 'temple society'.[48] Or perhaps, as Michael McCormick and Kyle Harper have proposed, change stemmed from a combination of a Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 and the ravages of the Justinianic pandemic from 541 disrupting old ways of doing

[44] Initially 14 vols. (Leiden, 1997–2004). See I. Wood, 'Report: the European Science Foundation's programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and the emergence of early medieval Europe', *EME*, 6. 2 (1997), 217–27.

[45] See among many other examples the optimistic comments of C. Bouchard, 'Images of the Merovingians and Carolingians', *History Compass*, 4. 2 (2006), 293–307 at 296–8 and Y. Fox, *Power and Religion in Merovingian Gaul: Columbanian Monasticism and the Frankish Elites* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 296–305.

[46] C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005).

[47] P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA, 2015).

[48] I. Wood, *The Christian Economy of the Early Medieval West* (Binghamton, 2022).

things.[49] These were all important in their own way but it depends very much what you are analysing if you wanted to proclaim a hierarchy of importance for them. In practice, of course, there are always many different things going on at once and not always in simple linear ways.[50] In 1988 Patrick Geary noted that 'no area of Merovingian history is free of controversy'.[51] That has not changed.

THE STRUCTURE OF *MEROVINGIAN WORLDS*

Merovingian Worlds is structured to allow for a thematic exploration of the post-Roman Frankish kingdoms. Chapter 1 provides a survey of the principal chronicles (Gregory, the *Chronicles of Fredegar*, and the *Liber historiae Francorum*, plus their relatives) and a guide to some of the hagiography – together, the main narratives through which most people encounter the Merovingians. Throughout, the emphasis is on how we might read the stories in these sources, drawing on the competing arguments that have been put forward by scholars about the nature of the texts. Chapter 2 examines the thorny question of how identities were forged and developed in the period, from the creative fiction of widespread 'Frankishness' to more personal identities defined by gender and social status. This paves the way for Chapters 3 and 4, which explore the shifting nature of power in the kingdoms – first as the kingdoms became established between 480 and 613 through conquests and civil wars and then as the kingdoms stabilised and kings and elites had to find new ways to pursue ambitions. Chapter 5 then examines the structures of society through the changing faces of estate management, agricultural production, and long-distance trade. Chapter 6 builds on all this to explore culture more broadly in the Merovingian worlds. As this is supposed to be a period of decay, it is crucial to understand the full range of evidence,

[49] K. Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease and the End of Empire* (Princeton, 2017); M. McCormick et al., 'Climate change during and after the Roman Empire: reconstructing the past from scientific and historical evidence', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 43 (2012), 169–220; M. McCormick, 'Rats, communications, and plague: towards an ecological history', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34 (2003), 259–62. For a critical review see K. Sessa, 'The new environmental fall of Rome: a methodological consideration', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, 12. 1 (2019), 211–55.

[50] This is a fundamental point in Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*.

[51] Geary, *Before France and Germany*, ix.

including the manuscript and associated palaeographical evidence, the evidence for lay literacy and bureaucratic culture, and the visual and artistic practices that facilitated communication and display. The final two chapters provide a diptych on religious life and its influences – in Chapter 7 with a survey of ecclesiastical and monastic organisations and how lay people engaged with them and then in Chapter 8 with an examination of how the Merovingian world was shaped by opposition to paganism, heresy, Judaism, and, at the end, the new Islamic world of the Arab caliphate. Across the near-three centuries of Merovingian dominance, many things happened, some of them good, some of them bad.[52] The causes of transformation can only be understood as an accumulation of multiple developments across political, socio-economic, cultural, and religious life.

[52] Gregory, *LH* pref.