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The
**MEROVINGIAN
KINGDOMS**

450-751

Ian Wood

The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751

Amicis et proximis

The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751

Ian Wood

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List of Abbreviations

AASS	<i>Acta Sanctorum.</i>
CSEL	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> (Vienna).
MGH	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i>
AA	<i>Auctores Antiquissimi</i> (Berlin, 1877–1919).
<i>Epistolae</i>	(Berlin, 1887–).
<i>Formulae</i>	<i>Formulae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi</i> (Hannover, 1886).
<i>Leges</i>	<i>Leges Nationum Germanicarum</i> (Hannover/Leipzig, 1892–).
<i>SRG in usum scholarum</i>	<i>Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum seperatim editi</i> (Hannover/Leipzig, 1871–).
SRM	<i>Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum</i> (Hannover/Leipzig, 1885–1951).
SS	<i>Scriptores</i> (Hannover/Leipzig, 1826–1934).
Pardessus, <i>Diplomata</i>	J.M. Pardessus, <i>Diplomata Chartae, Epistolae, Leges ad res Gallo-Francicas spectantia</i> (Paris, 1843–9).
Pertz, <i>Diplomata</i>	G.H. Pertz, <i>Diplomata regum Francorum e stirpe Merovingica</i> , <i>MGH, Diplomatum Imperii 1</i> (Hannover, 1872).
Pertz, <i>Diplomata Spuria</i>	G.H. Pertz, <i>Diplomata regum Francorum e stirpe Merovingica</i> , <i>MGH, Diplomatum Imperii 1</i> (Hannover, 1872).
Pertz, <i>Diplomata Arnulforum</i>	G.H. Pertz, <i>Diplomata maiorum, domus e stirpe Arnulforum</i> , <i>MGH, Diplomatum Imperii 1</i> (Hannover, 1872) <i>Patrologia Latina.</i>

Preface

This book has been a very long time in the making. That it should have taken so long to write has much to do with the pressure placed on British universities in the 1980s. This background has doubtless also had its impact on the emphasis placed here on the political power of women.

There have, however, been other gains from the long delays in this book's completion. I have benefited from the advice of European and American friends whom I knew scarcely, if at all, ten years ago. In particular I have learnt much from Hartmut Atsma, Evangelos Chrysos, Alain Dierkens, Martin Heinzelmann, Stephane Lebecq, Patrick Périn and Herwig Wolfram on this side of the Atlantic, and from Dick Gerberding, Kathleen Mitchell, Tom Noble, Barbara Rosenwein and Walter Goffart in the United States and Canada. Dick, Tom and Barbara read the whole text in draft, and generously offered advice on how to improve what I had written. I have been equally fortunate in my friends in Britain. All who have worked at the weekends arranged by Wendy Davies at her house in Bucknell have helped in one way or another. Most especially, Patrick Wormald offered generous and searching criticism of my views of Merovingian law, while Paul Fouracre and Jinty Nelson scrutinized every chapter, improving the whole immeasurably. So thorough were Jinty's comments that her daughter once concluded that I was a student having an essay returned!

Inevitably there are more general debts, to friends, colleagues and teachers who have influenced my work; among them Peter Brown, Thomas Charles-Edwards, David Farmer, Edward James, John Le Patourel, Robert Markus, John Matthews, Sabine McCormack, Peter Sawyer and Michael Wallace-Hadrill; to students who have asked awkward questions; also to numerous librarians, in Oxford, London, especially at the Institute of Historical Research, and the Brotherton Library, Leeds, who have made the task of research easier than it might have been.

Finally, in the long course of working on Merovingian history I have incurred many personal debts; especially to Romaine and Timmy, who

thought I would be better off working on a different kind of Burgundy than that of Avitus of Vienne, and above all to my parents. As a child, every summer holiday included a trip to the south of France, and on the drive down and back each year my mother had the task of reading a child's history of France from cover to cover. The origins of this book go back to those journeys.

INW

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Introduction: Constructing Merovingian History

In the history of Europe the period between the end of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the cessation of Viking raids in the eleventh is one of particular importance. It was a time of transition, or rather transitions, from a Mediterranean-based empire to a world of states which were to develop into those of modern Europe. Within these six centuries of transition, the earliest saw the greatest changes: the collapse of the Empire and the first emergence of what might be called the Nation State. It was the fifth century that saw the origins of France and the sixth that saw those of England. And if the lines of development from Visigothic Spain and from Ostrogothic and Lombard Italy to their modern counterparts were not to be so direct, they nevertheless marked major developments in the transformation of the Roman World.

Within the first three centuries which followed the end of Roman rule the kingdom which emerged in France, Belgium, the Rhineland and Switzerland holds a preeminent place. Of the states which succeeded the Roman Empire it was the longest lasting. It was also, for much of the time, the most powerful. Nevertheless it has had a bad press. The reasons for this are complex, but two stand out. First the dynasty which ruled the Frankish kingdom from 481 to 751, the Merovingian dynasty, was subject to a *damnatio memoriae* by the family which usurped its power, the Carolingians. Nor was this *damnatio memoriae* difficult to effect. Despite their achievements the Merovingians themselves had been the subject of hostile comment from the late sixth century onwards. The historian Gregory of Tours thought that the Merovingians failed for the most part to live up to the example of their great forebear Clovis I (481–511). The next major historian to write about the Franks, the seventh-century chronicler Fredegar, implicitly compared Clovis's sons to bears and wolves and his grandsons to dogs.¹ The second reason for the bad press which has greeted the Merovingian Age is its lack of great cultural figures. The kingdom of the Franks produced no equivalent to

1. Fredegar, III 12.

pope Gregory the Great, to the Visigothic writer Isidore of Seville, or to the English theologian and historian Bede. For this reason the development of European culture is usually seen as running from the Mediterranean to Northumbria, returning to the kingdom of the Franks only in the eighth century when English missionaries crossed the Channel to work on the continent.² At the most schematic of levels this reading may have some sense, but it is so much of a simplification of the cultural history of the period that it amounts to no more than a travesty. The Merovingian kingdom was not the cultural backwater it is often represented as having been; nor is its failure to produce a scholar of the stature of Gregory I, Isidore and Bede enough to eclipse its importance as the greatest state in western Europe.

Yet, although the kingdom of the Franks was important, its history, like all early medieval history, is difficult to reconstruct. And here lies a further reason for the comparative underestimation of its importance. For the reconstruction of the narrative history of early medieval Europe we are never lavishly equipped. There are historical narratives, including those of Isidore for the Visigoths, Paul the Deacon for the Lombards and Bede for the Anglo-Saxons. To some extent the kingdom of the Franks is well served, with Gregory of Tours, Fredegar and his continuators, the early-eighth-century *Liber Historiae Francorum* and the Carolingian *Annales Mettenses Priores*. None of these, however, provide a detailed account of the later seventh century. There is, therefore, a crucial lacuna in the narrative of Merovingian history which is not easily filled.

There is a further problem. Although the seventh century poses particular difficulties of reconstruction, it is an act of delusion to think that Gregory of Tours, any more than the other early medieval historians, is an accurate witness. Certainly he is not as obviously biased and suspect as the *Annales Mettenses Priores*. Nevertheless he has his own axes to grind, and at times this unquestionably led him to falsify evidence.³ Our sources have the limitations of any source: even allowing for their inadequate knowledge, they each present an incomplete account of events, by means of interpretation, falsification and omission, depending on their form and intentions. For periods where the documentation is extensive it is possible to some extent to counteract the problems posed by suspect evidence by comparing accounts of the same event, and by overlaying the information so as to limit, though never to remove entirely, the danger of being hoodwinked by a rogue document. There is rarely enough contiguous evidence in the early medieval period to make this possible. It is often impossible to be absolutely certain of what took place or when it happened.

One result of this is that a valid narrative of the Frankish, or any early medieval kingdom, is scarcely possible. At the same time, given the established traditions of historical writing, a non-narrative history of the

2. e.g. C. Dawson, *The Making of Europe*.

3. e.g. I.N. Wood, 'Gregory of Tours and Clovis', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 63 (1985), p. 257.

Merovingians would not make easy reading for anyone unfamiliar with the range of documentation. For this reason I have attempted to offer a narrative of sorts within this book, while at the same time trying to indicate the difficulties in constructing that narrative. In order to do so I have tended to set out in each chapter an account of events as provided by one or more sources, and also to analyse the account and the events.

This book is a narrative history only in so far as narrative is an aid to comprehension. Each chapter is more concerned with a theme or issue than with a reconstruction of what happened. The themes have, however, been set out in a roughly chronological order. Thus the sixth century has been divided up into chapters on the creation of the Merovingian State, its structure, the power of the Church, the problem of civil war, the position of the queen and the importance of legislation. This order is intended to reflect the coming to the fore of certain problems in the development of the kingdom. Almost every chapter, therefore, is intended both to move the narrative forward as well as to analyse an issue.

The issues I have chosen to analyse have most often been determined by the sources. My approach has not been determined by established historical debates. This is a natural concomitant of my emphasis on the problems of narrative and documentation. For many of the historical debates which have raged about the early Middle Ages there is simply not the evidence to solve them one way or the other, however vital we may think the issue in question. In time new ways may be found to approach the problems of the Frankish aristocracy, of Merovingian and early Carolingian armies, or that of royal land. As yet, however, there are many questions which can be answered, but which have not received due attention. By concentrating on some of these it may be possible to construct some foundations for a future, more adventurous, and problem-based reading of Merovingian history.

As it stands this book is primarily an account of the politics, in the widest sense of the word, of the Merovingian period. This may seem odd in the light of problems of accuracy posed by the sources. It is, however, precisely these problems which have prompted the political nature of my reconstruction. The sources may not provide an accurate account of political events. On the other hand no early medieval writer set pen to papyrus or parchment without good reason: the reasons usually involved power or land. More often than not, therefore, an understanding of our sources involves an understanding of the politics of the early Middle Ages, even if that understanding is sometimes limited to an appreciation of the aims of the author, rather than an acceptance of his or her information.

If, in certain respects, a largely political history of the Merovingian period may seem limited, it has a particular value. Although the Merovingian kingdom in the seventh century had no historian to compare with Bede, it produced a comparatively large amount of other evidence, including a number of early saints' *Lives* and also charters. As a result, despite the difficulties of providing a coherent narrative, it is possible to reconstruct the political structures of the Merovingian kingdom in more detail than is possible

for those of other contemporary states. In this way the Merovingian kingdom may provide a model for understanding the politics of the Visigothic, Lombard and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Indeed there are a number of ways in which Merovingian political history sheds light on and is linked to that of its neighbours. A history of the kingdom of the Franks is thus more than an account of one successor state; it is more even than the account of the greatest of those states, with all the implications that that may have for the first three centuries following the collapse of Roman in the west. It is also an analysis of early medieval politics.

Chapter One

The Barbarians in Gaul

In 476 the west Roman Empire came to an end with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus. It was replaced by a number of states ruled by barbarian kings. By the early sixth century Italy was in the hands of the Ostrogoths; France was divided between the Franks, the Burgundians and the Visigoths, who also controlled Spain; what had been the Roman province of Africa had been transformed into the Vandal kingdom. A century later the map had been slightly redrawn, with the Lombards controlling northern Italy, the Franks unchallenged in France, and peoples known variously as Angles and Saxons dominant in much of the old diocese of *Britannia*. It was the kingdom of the Franks which was to exercise most influence for the longest period of time. For the first three centuries of its existence, until 751, it was ruled over by a single family, that of the Merovingians. Merovingian history deserves detailed study in its own right, but it also needs to be understood in the broader context of Late Antique and early medieval history. This broader context is particularly important for an understanding of the earliest stages of the creation of the Frankish kingdom, for the Franks and the Merovingians were relatively late participants in the crisis which saw the collapse of the western Empire and the establishment of the successor states. The collapse of imperial power in Gaul and Germany, and the activities of the Visigoths and Burgundians provide a necessary background for early Merovingian history.

The coming of the barbarians

The Roman dioceses of Gaul and the Seven Provinces, which were to constitute most of the Frankish kingdom, essentially covered what is now France, Belgium, Germany west of the Rhine, and most of Switzerland. Geographically this territory is extremely varied, including Mediterranean, Atlantic and Channel coasts, the river valleys of northern France, of western Germany and of Burgundy, together with the western Alps and the

mountains of central France. Culturally it was equally diverse. To a large extent the areas nearest to the Mediterranean were the most civilized, but there were cities further north with important cultural traditions, including Lyons, Bordeaux and Autun, and there were other cities, including Trier and Paris, which had at times been the residences of emperors. Taken as a whole, by the late fourth century the two dioceses had gained much from four centuries of Roman rule. Not that those centuries had been times of uninterrupted peace. There had been civil wars in plenty, and major barbarian incursions, particularly in the north-eastern provinces of Germany and *Belgica*. Even in times of peace it required constant vigilance to keep the peoples across the Rhine in check. But for the most part the frontier troops had succeeded in their task of keeping the barbarians at bay.

Then, on the last night of the year 406, or so one of our sources claims,¹ the frozen Rhine was crossed by a number of barbarian groups, including Vandals, Alans and Sueves. As a result the German frontier was broken, and for the next two years the provinces of Germany and Gaul were plundered by the invaders. Although the majority of these barbarians moved on to Spain in 409, some stayed behind: there were Alans active in Gaul under their leader Goar for the next thirty years; they were to be settled in *Gallia Ulterior*, that is on land to the north of the Loire, in the 440s.² Elsewhere, any respite that was felt in 409 was short lived; in 412 another barbarian people, the Visigoths, crossed to Gaul from Italy, where they had sacked the city of Rome in 410. They established themselves in the south-west, and their king, Athaulf, held court in Narbonne.³

The Visigoths

The Visigoths had been a sedentary people living north of the Danube. In the sixth century they were said to have come originally from the island of Scandza, to have migrated to the Black Sea, and thence to have come into contact with the Roman Empire. The historical value of their origin legend is open to question; a national migration from the Baltic is unlikely, but the story may have been built out of traditions relating to specific groups which had played a part in the formation of the Gothic nation at various stages in its history.⁴ From the mid-third century the Goths certainly impinged on the Empire, launching raids against the Balkans and Asia Minor. Subsequently relations between the Romans and Visigoths improved and the latter were relatively peaceful. In 376, however, the Visigoths found themselves under extreme pressure from the Huns, an Asiatic people from the steppes. The majority of them negotiated entry into the Roman Empire under the

1. Prosper, *Chronicle*, 1230

2. *Chronicle of 452*, 127; Constantius, *Vita Germani* VI 28.

3. H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 161–3.

4. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 12.

leadership of Fritigern. Harsh treatment by the Romans over the next two years transformed the refugees into a people fighting for survival, and in 378 they defeated and killed the Roman Emperor, Valens, at the battle of Adrianople. Thereafter they moved around the Balkans, sometimes in open war with the Romans, sometimes bound by treaty. In 401 they entered the western part of the Empire, under the leadership of Alaric I. Once again they oscillated between friendship with the Romans and outright hostility, depending on the possibility of imperial recognition and acceptance. The sack of Rome in 410 marked the most hostile period in the relations between Alaric and the imperial court. Within a year of the sack Alaric died and in 412 his brother-in-law, Athaulf, led his people out of Italy and into Gaul.⁵

At first Athaulf joined a confederacy of Burgundians and Alans, which had established the usurping emperor Jovinus in power, but he soon abandoned the usurper and his brother for an alliance with the legitimate emperor, Honorius. What he wanted was a position within the Empire – according to the historian Orosius, he wished to support Rome with barbarian arms.⁶ When negotiations with Honorius failed to bring rewards Athaulf showed both his anger and his desire to be associated with the Empire by marrying the emperor's sister, Galla Placidia, who had been a captive since 410. Then, in 415, he moved to Spain, where he was murdered. His successor but one, Wallia, made an attempt to lead his people across to Africa, but failed, and instead came to terms with the Roman leader Constantius, for whom he campaigned against the Vandals and Alans in Spain. Subsequently, perhaps in 418, perhaps in 419, a new treaty brought the Visigoths back to Aquitaine.⁷

After they had been settled in Aquitaine the Visigoths were relatively loyal to the Roman state, although in 422 they deserted the Romans during a campaign against the Vandals in Spain. At the same time, the conflict between competing factions among the Romans themselves meant that the Visigoths could intervene against one or other party, or try to exploit the situation for their own gain. Thus, they took advantage of the confusion surrounding the usurpation of the emperor Joannes in 423, and the subsequent establishment of Valentinian III, to attack Arles in 425. They did the same in 430 when trouble was brewing between the two Roman generals, Aëtius and Boniface, and in 433 they supported Galla Placidia against Aëtius. In 436 the Visigothic king Theoderid tried to expand his territory towards the Rhône valley, but was checked by Aëtius and his general Litorius. In 438, however, Litorius was captured and killed when he attacked the Visigoths at Toulouse. Nevertheless, Theoderid did fight for the Romans against the Sueves in Spain in 446, and in 451 he provided the most substantial portion of the confederacy which

5. Wolfram, *History of the Goths* pp. 161–2; P. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332–489*, pp. 219–20.

6. Orosius, *Historia adversos Paganos*, VII 43, 4–7.

7. Wolfram, *History of Goths*, pp. 170–4; Heather, *Goths and Romans*, pp. 220–1; I. N. Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models', in J. Drinkwater and H. Elton, eds, *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity*, p. 15.

faced Attila and the Huns at the battle of the Catalaunian Plains. The battle saw the defeat of Attila, and the end of his invasion of Gaul. It also saw the death of Theoderid.⁸

The causes of Attila's decision to attack Gaul in 451 are obscure, although legends explaining it circulated from very early on. Some thought that he had been paid to attack the Visigoths by Gaiseric, king of the Vandals, who were now settled in North Africa; others that he was making good a claim to be the husband of princess Honoria, daughter of Valentinian III, or that he was intervening in a dispute over the succession to the kingship of the Franks.⁹ What is certain is that Attila's decision to invade Gaul marked the failure of Aëtius's policies, which had depended on using the Huns to further his own career in Italy, and to keep the barbarians in check in Gaul. Having been a hostage among the Huns himself, he had called in Hunnic troops to support the usurper Joannes in 425; he fled to them after his defeat at the hands of Boniface in 432; and he was probably behind their destruction of the Burgundian kingdom in the mid-430s.¹⁰ Granted this set of policies, Aëtius can scarcely have been well placed to gather the confederacy which kept Attila in check at the Catalaunian Plains. A man better placed to gain the support of the Visigoths was Avitus, praetorian prefect of Gaul from 439. In 455 the Goths were to be the prime movers in his elevation to imperial office.¹¹

The Burgundians

The Visigoths were the first of the barbarian peoples to be formally settled within Gaul. The Alans, who were given land around Valence in *c.* 440, and in *Gallia Ulterior* two years later, were the second.¹² The third major group to be settled were the Burgundians, who were apparently given *Sapaudia* a year after the grant of *Gallia Ulterior* to the Alans. Although the name Savoy later developed out of *Sapaudia*, the area in question seems to have lain to the north of Geneva.¹³

By the ninth century the Burgundians were thought to have come from Scandinavia. This legend was probably developed in emulation of those relating to the early years of the Goths. In reality, like the Visigoths, they had long been neighbours of the Romans. Pliny knew of the Burgundians, and

8. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 173–8.

9. John of Antioch, fr. 199 (2); Priscus, fr. 15, 16; cited in C.D. Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 104–6.

10. Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 45–50.

11. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 179.

12. *Chronicle of 452*, 124, 127.

13. *Chronicle of 452*, 128; on the difficulties of this entry, see Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models', p. 15; on the region, see P. Duparc, 'La Sapaudia', *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1958), pp. 371–83.

Orosius thought that they had reached the Rhineland in the days of the emperor Tiberius, receiving their name because they lived in settlements called *burgi*. His account of their arrival and his etymology for their name cannot be trusted. The Burgundians first come fully into view in the pages of Ammianus Marcellinus, where they are to be found to the east of the Rhine. The emperor Valentinian I enlisted their support against the Alamans in 369. Ammianus also thought that they were descended from the Romans. Biologically this cannot be true, but it may be an assertion of political friendship and thus relate to Valentinian's diplomacy.¹⁴

Burgundians may have been involved in the crossing of the Rhine in 406. Six years later their ruler Guntiarius joined Goar, ruler of the Alans, to set up Jovinus as emperor.¹⁵ Guntiarius appears again as ruler of a Burgundian kingdom in the Rhineland which was destroyed by the Huns in c. 435.¹⁶ Shortly after, at a date given both as 443 and 447 by the same chronicle source, they were settled in *Sapaudia*.¹⁷ The seventh-century chronicler Fredegar thought that they were given lands by the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, who thereby gained tax exemption in the days of Valentinian I.¹⁸ It may be that this information actually relates to the reign of Valentinian III, and therefore that it is the same as the grant of *Sapaudia*, but this is by no means certain. More than one treaty is known to have been made with the Burgundians, although some may not have had imperial approval. Thus, Marius of Avenches records a land division made with Gallo-Roman senators, under the year 456, that is at the time of the fall of the emperor Avitus.¹⁹ His successor, Majorian, apparently overthrew this arrangement, pushing the Burgundians out of the environs of Lyons in 458.²⁰

The behaviour of those Burgundians who settled within the Empire is similar to that of the Visigoths. They campaigned for the Romans, for instance at the battle of the Catalaunian Plains.²¹ At the same time they also exploited the current political situation for their own ends. In 455, the year after Aëtius's murder, and the year in which Valentinian III was assassinated, they were clearly extending their territory, since they are recorded as being driven back by the Gepids.²² The expansion recorded by Marius under the following year was probably made with the connivance of Avitus, or in the aftermath of his deposition. For the most part, from the reign of Valentinian I through to the early fifth century, the Burgundians were among the most

14. I. N. Wood, 'Ethnicity and the ethnogenesis of the Burgundians', in H. Wolfram and W. Pohl, eds, *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern*, 1, p. 58.

15. Olympiodorus, fr. 17, cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, p. 39.

16. Prosper, *Chronicle* 1322; Hydatius, *Chronicle*, 108; *Chronicle of 452*, 118.

17. *Chronicle of 452*, 128.

18. Fredegar, II 46.

19. Marius of Avenches, *Chronicle*, s.a. 456; *Auctarium Havniense*, s.a. 457, 2.

20. Sidonius Apollinaris, *carm.*, V, II. 564–7.

21. Jordanes, *Getica* XXXVI 191.

22. *Auctarium Havniense*, s.a. 455, 5.

loyal federates of the Empire, and they were proud of their connections with the Romans. The conflict with Majorian was caused by his reversal of the policies of Avitus, rather than any hostility towards the Empire held by the Burgundians themselves.

The settlement of the barbarians

An outline of the settlement of the barbarians in Gaul up until the 450s is necessarily made up of fragments from a variety of sources, not all of which are in agreement. Thus, according to the Spanish chronicler Hydatius the settlement of the Visigoths in Aquitaine took place in 418; according to the Gallo-Roman Prosper, it happened a year later.²³ The difference may seem slight, but it could affect interpretation of the event, since the most important assembly of the Gallic provinces, the Council of the Gauls, was re-established in the former year.²⁴ The Council may have played a major role in planning the transfer of the Visigoths to Aquitaine. A third source, the *Chronicle of 452*, gives a date of 415, which is plainly wrong, although the error may result from confusion of Athaulf's period of rule in Narbonne with the later settlement.²⁵ Subsequently, however, the *Chronicle of 452* complicates matters more seriously, not only by being in conflict with other sources over the dating of events, but also by itself providing two alternative dating systems, wrongly correlated. This would be of little significance if the Chronicle in question were not the only source to record some important episodes. The grants of Valence and *Gallia Ulterior* to the Alans, and that of *Sapaudia* to the Burgundians are not attested elsewhere. Any narrative of the settlements in Gaul, therefore, is inevitably tentative.²⁶

So too is any interpretation of the nature of the settlements. It used to be assumed that the barbarians were settled according to the Roman practice of billeting, whereby a soldier was given one-third of a house. Recently this has been challenged, and it has been suggested that the third which was allocated was one-third of the taxation due on a property.²⁷ The evidence is not detailed enough to sustain either argument. The chronicles, which provide our only evidence on the first phases of the settlements, speak about grants of land to live in, of seats of habitation, and about the division of territory. Visigothic and Burgundian law-codes are more precise, but they date from later generations. Thus the Burgundian Code, or *Liber Constitutionum*, was issued in 517. It contains an important law on settlement, which is likely to predate the promulgation of the code itself, although by how much is

23. Hydatius, *Chronicle*, 69; Prosper, *Chronicle*, 1271.

24. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 173.

25. *Chronicle of 452*, 73; see Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models', p. 15.

26. Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models', p. 15.

27. esp. W. Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans: Techniques of Accommodation*, passim.

unclear. The law itself envisages a number of phases in the settlement of the Burgundians. Some barbarians had already received land from the king who issued the law, others had been endowed by his predecessors; those who had not benefited in this way were to receive two-thirds of a property, one-third of the slaves and half the woodland. This implies grants stretching over at least two generations. A later law dealing with landless newcomers, specifies that they should receive half the property, and not two-thirds.²⁸ Although the references to property could imply tax yield rather than real estate, related laws which deal with land clearance make this unlikely. The Burgundian legal evidence, therefore, suggests that land rather than tax revenue was granted. At the same time, it reveals a succession of different grants, none of which can be shown to be associated with the original concession of Sapaudia.

Just as the barbarians themselves seem to have changed their policies about settlement, so too the Romans are unlikely to have had a monolithic system for settling the barbarians within the Roman Empire. At times taxation may have been a significant factor, either because the barbarians were simply allocated revenue, or, as in the case misrecorded by Fredegar, because Romans gained tax exemption as a result of conceding land to the barbarians. In addition the practice of billeting was used on occasion; it is described plainly in a poem written by a Gallo-Roman landowner, Paulinus of Pella, who originally thought himself lucky not to have had Visigoths billeted on him, but afterwards regretted not having them to protect his estates.²⁹ Later, another Gallic aristocrat, Sidonius Apollinaris, objected to the smell and the noise of a group of Burgundians who were established on his estate.³⁰ The settlement of the barbarians was plainly varied, and our sources provide only a hint of its complexities.

The same holds true when it comes to a consideration of the reasons for the individual grants made by the Romans. The Visigothic settlement in Aquitaine is usually seen as proof of the success of the Roman general Constantius, in blockading Wallia and his people when they were in Spain. The choice of Aquitaine is then linked variously to the ability of the people of that part of Gaul to pay, the possibility that they may have backed the wrong side in the recent usurpations against the emperor Honorius, and the threat from separatist groups north of the Loire, who were known as *Bacaudae*.³¹ The evidence is not good enough to support any one of these interpretations to the total exclusion of either of the others. Moreover, it is possible that they underestimate the position of the Visigoths at the time of the transfer. Although Wallia had come to terms with Constantius in 416, he

28. *Liber Constitutionum*, 54, 55, *constitutio extravaganans* 21; Wood, 'Ethnicity and the ethnogenesis of the Burgundians', pp. 66–7.

29. Paulinus, *Eucharisticon*, 11. 281–90.

30. Sidonius Apollinaris, *carm.* XII.

31. E.A. Thompson, 'The settlement of the barbarians in southern Gaul', *Journal of Roman Studies* 46 (1956), pp. 65–75; see also E.A. Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, pp. 251–5; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Gothia and Romania', in Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, pp. 25–48.

had subsequently campaigned on the emperor's behalf, against other barbarian groups in Spain. The settlement, therefore, was not the direct result of any capitulation. Further, when the Visigoths did return to Gaul, it was to an area where Athaulf had once established his court. Wallia may have had some say in the grant made to his people.

In the case of the Alans, the extent of the deserted countryside round Valence is unknown; so too are the circumstances of the concession. The fact that the land was deserted, however, may have been significant. The settlement of the Alans near Valence may have more in common with imperial attempts to solve the problem of abandoned land, *agri deserti*, than with other grants to the barbarians. It is possible to reconstruct the circumstances of the second concession to the Alans, of land in *Gallia Ulterior*, with rather greater certainty. Here the *Bacaudae* were unquestionably a factor. At about the time of the settlement of the Visigoths in Aquitaine there had been unrest north of the Loire, which had been suppressed. This unrest is sometimes seen in terms of the class war, but strictly speaking this is unlikely to have been the case, since the rebels appear to have included dispossessed aristocrats. Problems flared up again in the 430s, when the *Bacaudae* gained a leader called Tibatto. Aëtius sent the Alans under Goar against Tibatto and his followers. This mission was briefly halted by Germanus, bishop of Auxerre, but Tibatto was subsequently captured and the *Bacaudae* suppressed.³² The area of *Gallia Ulterior* conceded to the Alans may well have been that area which had supported Tibatto, and the grant may well have been a means of punishing the rebels and keeping them under surveillance, as well as being a reward for the followers of Goar. The Alans certainly treated the inhabitants of the region ruthlessly. Although the land was meant to be divided between Romans and barbarians, many of the former were forcibly ejected, and there was a further uprising, led by a doctor called Eudoxius.³³

The settlement of Sapaudia is less easy to understand. A Burgundian kingdom on the Rhine ruled by Guntiarus had been destroyed by the Huns not long before.³⁴ The survivors can scarcely have been in a strong position to demand territory from the Romans. Nor can they have been substantial enough to have provided defence against further attacks from the Huns or from the Alamans. Nevertheless, Sapaudia was divided up between the Burgundians and the native population. Moreover, a few years later, the Burgundians did provide troops to fight against Attila at the Catalaunian Plains. Aëtius certainly gained manpower through his grants to the Visigoths, Burgundians and Alans.

32. *Chronicle of 452*, 117, 119, 127; Constantius, *Vita Germani* VI 28.

33. *Chronicle of 452*, 133.

34. Prosper, *Chronicle*, 1322; Hydatius, *Chronicle*, 108; *Chronicle of 452*, 118.

Imperial weakness

Manpower may hold a key to many of the policies adopted by the Romans in dealing with the barbarians. The successes first of Constantius and then of Aëtius in dealing with the Germanic invaders obscure the real weakness of the Roman position. Had they been stronger, the Romans would doubtless have dealt more forcefully with the barbarian threat. In fact the western Empire was probably in a much weaker position after 406 than the sources suggest. From 395 onwards the rivalry between the advisers of Honorius in the west and Arcadius in the east had ensured a lack of cooperation, if not downright hostility, between the two halves of the Roman Empire. It was in this context that the Visigoths moved from the Balkans into Italy. The subsequent breaking of the Rhine further exacerbated matters. When Honorius failed to respond to the new problem, a usurper, Constantine III, decided to deal with the defence of Gaul himself. In this way the barbarians encouraged usurpation, and the usurpers drew attention away from the barbarians.³⁵ Indeed, the *Ravenna Annals* seem to suggest that the court did not recognize the barbarians as a significant problem; they concentrate on recording and depicting the failures and executions of usurpers.³⁶ To some extent the priorities of Honorius and his advisers may have been justified. However, the result of the civil wars caused by the usurpations of the first two decades of the fifth century appears to have led to a considerable decline in the Roman, as opposed to a federate, army. Roman troops as such scarcely appear after the first decade of the fifth century in any source, except the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which appears to be an idealized list drawn up in the 420s, and not a statement of the reality of the imperial fighting forces.³⁷ Writing in the sixth century the Gothic historian Jordanes knew of only one Roman squadron at the battle of the Catalaunian Plains.³⁸ In the light of this Constantius is perhaps unlikely to have been in a position to destroy Wallia completely in 416: Stilicho, who had been in a position at least as strong, had failed to destroy Alaric. Besides, there was the possibility that the Visigoths could be used to shore up the Empire. The same was true of the Alans and the Burgundians in the 430s and 440s. To survive, the western Empire depended on federates, and the early barbarian settlements were a way of ensuring a supply of federate forces. Athaulf's wish, to support the Empire with Visigothic troops, had effectively been granted.

35. J.F. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425*, pp. 308–10.

36. *Ravenna Annals*, ed. B. Bischoff and W. Kochler, 'Eine illustrierte Ausgabe der spätantiken Ravennater Annalen', in W.R.W. Koehler, ed., *Studies in Memory of A. Kingsley Porter*, pp. 125–38.

37. P. Salway, *Roman Britain*, p. 476, n. 2.

38. Jordanes, *Getica*, XXXVI 191.

The last emperors

The battle of the Catalaunian Plains was proof that the imperial policy could work, if only for a limited period of time. The events of the next decade were to show just how weak was the western Empire. In 454 Valentinian killed Aëtius, supposedly with his own hand, accusing the general of treachery.³⁹ Although this has been seen as a crucial error on the emperor's part, he may not have been wrong in his assessment of his *magister militum*. Besides, it was not the general's assassination so much as that of the emperor a year later which was vital. Some of the barbarian federates are known to have understood their loyalty as being to Valentinian; his death, therefore, absolved them from any treaty with the Empire.⁴⁰ Further, with the murder of Valentinian the house of Theodosius came to an end in the West; as a result there was no clear heir to the imperial throne, which was open to competition. Inevitably the confusion that followed tested even the most loyal barbarians, who could suddenly discover that the emperor they supported had been overthrown by a palace coup, and that there was a hostile ruler in his place.

Valentinian's immediate successor, Petronius Maximus, was killed in the commotion preceding the Vandal sack of Rome in 455. In response the Visigoths raised the Gallic aristocrat Avitus to the imperial office. He, however, was unpopular in Italy, and was soon opposed by his own general, Ricimer, who sided instead with Majorian.⁴¹ Ricimer more than anyone else dominated the politics of the last twenty years of the Roman Empire in the west. A soldier of mixed Visigothic and Suevic extraction, he came to power under Avitus, was responsible for his fall, and was effectively involved in the appointment of all the western emperors to hold office between 457 and his own death in 472.⁴²

Avitus's fall alienated the Visigoths. His successor, Majorian, is unlikely to have gained the support of the Burgundians in 458, when he drove them out of the lands which they had received with the approval of the Gallo-Roman senators. Nor was he immediately popular with large sections of the Gallic aristocracy from whom Avitus himself had come. Nevertheless he managed to establish his authority over Gaul and its barbarian settlers, until he fell foul of Ricimer, who had him executed in 461.⁴³ The emperor's death in its turn alienated his supporters, most notably the Gallo-Roman Aegidius,⁴⁴ who

39. John of Antioch, fr. 200 (1), 201 (1, 2), cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 50–2.

40. John of Antioch, fr. 201 (6), cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 113–14.

41. John of Antioch, fr. 201 (6), 202, cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 113–16.

42. *Fasti Vindobonenses Priores*, s.a. 461; Cassiodorus, *Chronicle* s.a. 461; *Chronicle of 511*, 635–6; John of Antioch, fr. 202, 207, 209 (1, 2), cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 116–17, 120, 122–3.

43. John of Antioch, fr. 203, cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila* p. 117.

44. Priscus, fr. 30, cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 118–19.

began an independent career in Soissons, in the north of Gaul, which was to hold some significance for the early history of the Franks.

After the execution of Majorian, Ricimer appointed Severus as emperor; four years later he agreed to the elevation of Anthemius, but in 472 he had Anthemius executed and replaced him with Olybrius. The appointment and overthrow of individual emperors were largely matters of Italian politics, but they had significant repercussions in Gaul, not least because of the close personal connections between Ricimer and the Burgundian royal family, the Gibichungs. One of Ricimer's brothers-in-law, Gundioc, appears as the leading military official, the *magister militum*, in Gaul during the reign of Severus (461–5).⁴⁵ The family connection was enhanced when Gundioc's son, Gundobad, became Ricimer's right-hand man, and as such he was responsible for the execution of Anthemius. Gundobad's importance was further enhanced when Ricimer died, for he took over his mentor's position at court. After Olybrius's death in 472 it was he who appointed Glycerius as emperor. Meanwhile other members of the family benefited from his position. During Glycerius's reign Gundobad's uncle, Chilperic I, became *magister militum*, and was to be found exercising authority in Lyons and Geneva.⁴⁶ When Glycerius died in 474, however, Gundobad seems to have returned to Gaul. The move may have been connected with the fact that the new emperor, Julius Nepos, was an eastern appointment. Certainly his authority was not recognized by Gundobad's uncle, Chilperic, who appears to have regarded support for him as treasonable.⁴⁷

Chilperic's rule in the Rhône valley and the region to the east provides a rare insight into the complexities of provincial government in the 470s. Although his authority was undoubtedly derived from the Roman office which he held, the area over which he exercised control seems not to have been determined by any Roman administrative division, but rather by the presence of the Visigoths to the west and by other smaller groups, including Aegidius and his followers, to the north. The Roman poet and letter-writer Sidonius Apollinaris coined the phrase *Lugdunensis Germania* to describe it.⁴⁸ In some respects Chilperic seems to have been well regarded. Relations between him, his wife and bishop Patiens of Lyons were particularly cordial, according to Sidonius in a letter which provides the only depiction of the Burgundian ruler's cultural and religious connections: Chilperic admired the banquets provided by Patiens and his wife admired the bishop's fasts.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Sidonius did fear for the safety of his own family in the aftermath of the accession of Nepos.⁵⁰ And there were others who saw Chilperic's rule as something new. According to the early-sixth-century *Life of*

45. John of Antioch, fr. 209, cited in Gordon, *The Age of Attila*, pp. 122–3.

46. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. V 6; V 7; VI 12, 3; *Vita Patrum Iurensium*, II 10 (92), II 11 (96).

47. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. V 6; V 7.

48. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. V 7, 7.

49. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VI 12, 3.

50. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. V 6; V 7.

the *Jura Fathers*, abbot Lupicinus attacked Chilperic's power as being a type of kingship (*condicio regia*) rather than an exercise of public justice (*ius publicum*).⁵¹ That it was something new is further indicated by Sidonius's extraordinary description of Syagrius as 'a new Solon of the Burgundians in interpreting law', implying that a Roman aristocrat had devoted himself to drafting edicts for Chilperic and his Burgundians.⁵² Nevertheless, the Gibichung family remained attached to the idea of the Roman Empire. Gundobad and his son Sigismund both wanted the title of *magister militum* in the sixth century, long after the last emperor in the west had been deposed.⁵³

The creation of the Visigothic kingdom

By 476 the Visigothic position was very different. The immediate result of the battle of the Catalaunian Plains in 451 had been the succession of Theoderic's eldest son, Thorismund. His policies looked back to the more aggressive activities of his father; he fought the Alans, and he attacked Arles.⁵⁴ His reign, however, was short-lived, and his brother and successor, Theodoric II, cooperated rather more closely with the Empire, sending a third brother Frideric against the Spanish *Bacaudae* in 454 and appointing Avitus emperor in the following year.⁵⁵ Sidonius describes the Visigothic court in a letter of this period. He paints a picture of the king's day, starting with his religious observance, and running through his holding court, surrounded by barbarian troops and approached by foreign legates, his tour of the royal stables, his restrained lunch, followed by a game of dice, his hearing of litigants, and dinner.⁵⁶ Sidonius, perhaps for political reasons, is concerned to portray a restrained and civilized man, with a good deal of power and authority.

After the overthrow of Avitus in 456 Majorian had to use force to bring the Visigoths into line, but thereafter they fought for him against the Sueves in Spain. In the confusion following Majorian's death in 461, however, they found themselves fighting against one of his closest supporters, Aegidius, first in the south, and subsequently in the Loire valley, where Frideric was killed in 463.⁵⁷ Two years later Aegidius himself died, providing opportunity for Visigothic expansion in the Loire valley.⁵⁸ Despite this territorial expansion Theodoric was still technically a federate of the Roman Empire, working in the service first of Severus and then of Anthemius. This relationship between the Visigoths and the Romans was broken by Euric, who murdered his brother Theodoric in 466 and seized the Visigothic throne.⁵⁹

51. *Vita Patrum Iuensisium*, 92 (II, 10).

52. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. V 5, 3.

53. Avitus, cpp. 78, 93, 94.

54. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 178.

55. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 178–9.

56. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. I 2.

57. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 180.

58. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 181.

59. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, p. 181.

The first clear indication of a real shift in attitude towards the Roman Empire comes not from evidence relating to Euric himself, but rather from a letter of Sidonius discussing the accusations levelled against the prefect of Gaul, Arvandus, in 468. The latter was accused of treason on account of a letter he had sent to Euric, advising him not to make peace with the Greek emperor, that is Anthemius, but rather to attack the Britons who were stationed on the Loire, and to divide Gaul with the Burgundians. Sidonius depicts the scheme as madness; nevertheless he maintained his friendship for Arvandus, and he may even have given up his office of prefect of the City of Rome in order not to be involved in sentencing his friend.⁶⁰ Arvandus's scheme was premature. But Euric did take some of the advice offered. He attacked and defeated the British forces which Ríothamus had brought to the Loire in support of the emperor.

The events of the next few years are recorded in considerable detail by Sidonius. Having returned from Rome at the end of 468, he was suddenly consecrated bishop of Clermont in 470. Since the Auvergne was central to Euric's strategy between 469 and 475, Sidonius is a well-informed, and involved, witness. Already at the start of the period Euric moved to isolate the Auvergne, by annexing the territories to the south and west. In so doing he seems to have been acting in concert with a Roman official called Seronatus. Despite his determination to maintain his friendship with Arvandus, Sidonius shows nothing but hostility towards Seronatus, whose plans impinged too closely on his own life.⁶¹ In 471 Euric launched his first onslaught against Clermont. Military resistance was organized by Sidonius's brother-in-law, Ecdicius, son of the emperor Avitus. In response, Anthemius sent an army from Italy under the command of his son, but Euric's forces crossed the Rhône, destroying it and killing its general. The Burgundians then intervened, pushing the Visigoths back across the river.⁶²

The following year Euric attacked Clermont again; once more Ecdicius organized the defence, probably using Burgundian troops. Anthemius intended to acknowledge his achievements by giving him the title of *patricius*, but the emperor was himself killed by Gundobad. Under his successor, Olybrius, the Burgundians seem to have continued to defend the Auvergne against the Visigoths. Sidonius, suspected by the Burgundians, and threatened by the Visigoths, thought the situation intolerable; but worse was to follow. With the death of Olybrius and the appointment of Julius Nepos the Burgundians under Chilperic found themselves in opposition to the emperor; presumably they withdrew from any involvement in the defence of the

60. Sidonius Apollinarius, ep. I 7; on this see J.D. Harries, 'Sidonius Apollinarius, Rome and the barbarians: a climate of treason?', in Drinkwater and Elton, eds, *Fifth-Century Gaul*, pp. 298–308; H.C. Teitler, 'Un-Roman activities in late antique Gaul: the cases of Arvandus and Seronatus', *ibid.* pp. 309–17.

61. Sidonius Apollinarius, epp. II 1; V 13; VII 7, 2; Teitler, 'Un-Roman activities in late antique Gaul'.

62. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 181–4.

Auvergne. Nepos at first delighted Sidonius by conferring on Ecdicius the patriariate which Anthemius had promised. Shortly afterwards, however, in 475 the emperor conceded the Auvergne to Euric in return for Provence, which the Visigoths had apparently overrun two years previously. Clermont was taken over by the *dux* Victorius, a Gallo-Roman whom Euric had appointed as governor of *Aquitania Prima*; Sidonius was sent into exile. The treaty agreed between Euric and Julius Nepos was one of the last imperial acts to affect Gaul. The deposition of Nepos and then that of Romulus Augustulus in 476 saw the end of the line of western Roman emperors. Euric moved to reconquer Provence, which he did, despite the opposition of the Burgundians.⁶³

In the immediate aftermath of annexation or conquest Euric's rule was far from pleasant. Laymen who had opposed the Visigoths are likely to have suffered; so too did ecclesiastics. Here there was an additional complication in that Euric and his people were arian Christians, who believed that the Holy Trinity was a hierarchy, in which the Father, Son and Holy Ghost were not equal, while the majority of the Gallo-Romans, including Sidonius, were catholics, and insisted on the equality of the three persons in the Godhead. Euric, therefore, was able to combine politics and religion, in persecuting the catholic Church. Just before his own exile Sidonius described to bishop Basil of Aix-en-Provence the state of the Church in the areas under Visigothic rule: Bordeaux, Perigueux, Rodez, Limoges, Javols, Eauze, Bazas, Comminges and Auch were all without bishops, and it was impossible to enter basilicas because their doorways were overgrown with brambles.⁶⁴ A century later Gregory of Tours treated this description as representing the normal state of the catholic Church under Euric.⁶⁵ In fact there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the oppression was merely temporary, being imposed while the king established his grip on the country.⁶⁶ Thereafter the sees were filled; Sidonius himself returned to Clermont, where the chief opposition to him came from his own clergy.⁶⁷

The kingdom which Euric created was substantial. It occupied most of the land of France south of the Loire and west of the Rhône. In addition, regular campaigns within Spain had brought much of the area to the south of the Pyrenees under Visigothic control, even if as yet there were few Gothic settlements in the region. Further, Euric's court was clearly a place of far-reaching importance. In a somewhat panegyric poem Sidonius described some of those in attendance on the king; Saxons, a Frank, a Herule and a Burgundian; Ostrogoths seeking help and Roman protection.⁶⁸ Elsewhere he refers to a treaty imposed by the king on the peoples who lived on the river

63. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 184–9.

64. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VII 6.

65. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, II 25.

66. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 199–200.

67. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, II 22–3.

68. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VIII 9, 5.

Wahal, that is the Franks.⁶⁹ Whether Euric really could enforce a settlement so far away is open to question, but clearly he tried to exert influence considerably to the north-east of his own territories.

The Gallo-Romans quickly reached accommodation with the new rulers, despite differences in culture and religion. Some like Seronatus and Victorius moved to do so even before 476. Numerous others must have done so as well. Sidonius wrote to a number of Romans who achieved eminent positions under Euric, including Leo, who became one of the king's leading advisers. In a letter addressed to him in 476 or 477, Sidonius talks of Euric restraining weapons with laws.⁷⁰ If the laws in question were the great legal compilation known as the *Codex Euricianus*, then the king must have had the support of numerous Roman lawyers from relatively early in his reign.⁷¹ Syagrius likewise collaborated with the Burgundians in legal matters before 469.⁷² Within a mere twenty years of the murder of Valentinian III the Romans had accustomed themselves to new political circumstances, and the barbarian rulers had taken over many of the duties which had formerly been exercised by provincial governors as well as military leaders. The new establishment was to be more durable than the experiment envisaged by Athaulf and attempted by Constantius and Aëtius, where a traditional Roman government was supported by barbarian arms.

69. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VIII 3, 3.

70. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VIII 3, 3.

71. On the *Codex Euricianus*, see Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, pp. 194–5.

72. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. V 5, 3.

Literary Continuity and Discontinuity: Late-Fifth- and Sixth-Century Culture

The impact of the barbarian invasions and settlements in Gaul can be seen in the substantial literary output of the fifth century. This literature, however, presents considerable problems for the historian. First, it is geographically confined: it almost all comes from southern and central Gaul. Very little of it relates to the north and north-east, although Salvian does describe the sack of Trier.¹ It is also the product of a single class. Indeed the majority of fifth- and early-sixth-century writers whose works have survived were related to each other.² Despite these limitations the surviving evidence for the fifth century depicts the period in two radically different ways. Most of the works produced in the first half of the century portray a period of social and religious cataclysm, which is arguably compatible with the archaeology of the north-eastern provinces, where evidence for decline in the cities, towns and villas, and dramatic changes in burial practices, gives a picture of disruption. By contrast Sidonius Apollinaris, the most prolific writer of the second half of the century, implies almost total continuity with the imperial past. This discrepancy makes any assessment of the extent of dislocation caused by the barbarian invasions extremely difficult. It also points to a third limitation within the sources; that of genre. To a very large extent the sources of the first part of the period which suggest calamity are moralizing tracts intended to prompt spiritual and social reform. Sidonius's writings are verse panegyrics addressed to emperors, and letters: both literary forms which tend to emphasize the traditional values of the senatorial aristocracy and imperial court.³

Although this poses a very particular problem for understanding the history of Gaul in the fifth century, similar evidential difficulties continue into the Merovingian period. The contemporary evidence for the generation after Sidonius, that is the last decades of fifth- and the first of sixth-century Gaul, is

1. Salvian, *De Gubernatione Dei* VI 39, 72–7, 82, 85–9.
2. Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models', pp. 10–11.
3. Wood, 'Continuity or calamity?: the constraints of literary models'.

largely made up of letter collections. These again imply considerable social and cultural continuity at a senatorial level. They impose a particular perspective on the period, albeit one that is often ignored, because it does not provide a narrative framework for understanding late Roman and early Merovingian history. Such a framework is provided only by sources written towards the end of the sixth century, by the short chronicle of Marius of Avenches and, above all, by the *Decem Libri Historiarum*, or *Ten Books of Histories*, of Gregory of Tours.

The *Ten Books of Histories* have determined the outlines of early Merovingian history. They are, nevertheless, unique. Indeed in the preface to his work Gregory appears to proclaim their uniqueness. Inevitably there is a danger of relying too much on Gregory. Despite their importance, for much of the period for which they provide the chief narrative, the *Decem Libri Historiarum* are not strictly speaking contemporary. Moreover, they are not representative of the culture of early Merovingian Gaul. It is, therefore, important to be aware of the changing nature of the evidence for the period, before turning to the narrative of early Merovingian history. At the same time the cultural history of the late fifth and sixth centuries is worthy of attention in its own right.

Sidonius Apollinaris and the last days of the Empire

Sidonius Apollinaris was born into one of the leading senatorial families in Gaul in the early 430s. He was well educated at Lyons and Arles. He married the daughter of Avitus, then praetorian prefect of the Gauls. When in 455 his father-in-law became emperor, Sidonius accompanied him to Italy and delivered a panegyric in his honour in 456. Shortly afterwards Avitus was overthrown, and Sidonius, back in Lyons, had the problem of welcoming the new emperor Majorian, again with a verse panegyric. Subsequently Sidonius seems to have retired from the limelight until the fall of Majorian, and the elevation of Anthemius, for whose first consulship in 468 he also delivered a panegyric. In recompense Anthemius created Sidonius prefect of the city of Rome. Within a year, however, the latter had returned to Gaul, and in somewhat mysterious circumstances he became bishop of Clermont in 471. Thereafter he was one of the prime figures in the resistance to Euric, until Nepos conceded the Auvergne to the Visigoths. For Sidonius the immediate result was exile, but after one or two years he did return, and lived out his life as bishop, albeit harassed by his own clergy, until the late 480s.⁴

Granted his education and career it is not surprising that Sidonius, both in his panegyrics and also in his letter-collection, was able to see the last days of the imperial court within a traditional perspective. It is difficult, nevertheless, to assess the extent to which this perspective is actually appropriate to the reigns of Avitus, Majorian and Anthemius. The confused events of the 450s

4. For the narrative of Sidonius's life, see C.E. Stevens, *Sidonius Apollinaris*.

and 460s are not easily squared with the literary image of the period purveyed by Sidonius. Equally problematic is the validity of Sidonius's very cultured presentation of the barbarian courts of Theodoric II, Euric and Chilperic I.⁵ Here, the author might have had political reasons to present the barbarians in as positive a light as possible. Except in very specific cases Sidonius's attitudes and style encourage the reader to see continuity where there may have been disruption. Thus his writings give the opposite impression to those of the earlier moralists like Salvian, and even of that conveyed by Paulinus of Pella, a member of the senatorial aristocracy who collaborated with the Visigoths in the early years of their settlement in Aquitaine, but eventually lost the majority of his property, as he relates in his autobiographical poem, the *Eucharisticon*.⁶

Asceticism and culture in the fifth and sixth centuries

The question of the dislocation in the literary evidence for the fifth century can be approached from a different angle. Paulinus of Pella provides an unusual example of a member of the senatorial aristocracy known to have been bankrupted by the barbarian invasions. A number of his contemporaries, however, willingly gave up their wealth during the opening decades of the fifth century. One of the most notable features of the first years of the invasions was the development of monasticism in southern Gaul. The patrons of this monastic movement were largely members of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy. Of these the most influential was Honoratus, the founder of the island monastery of Lérins, just off the southern coast of Gaul. Lérins itself was important in two ways; first it played a major part in the promotion of monastic ideals in Gaul, and second it trained a succession of bishops who made a substantial impact on the Gallo-Roman, and later Frankish, Church.⁷ It was not the only important monastic centre in Gaul; already Martin, bishop of Tours at the end of the fourth century, had established an ascetic tradition in the Touraine and Poitou,⁸ and in Marseilles John Cassian, an easterner with first-hand knowledge of Egyptian asceticism, wrote two of the classics of monastic literature, the *Institutes* and the *Conferences*.⁹ Cassian, however, was associated with Lérins, as was Salvian, himself a priest of Marseilles.¹⁰

5. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. I 2; VI 12, 3; VIII 9, 5.

6. Paulinus, *Eucharisticon*, 11. 291–405.

7. The classic account is to be found in F. Prinz, *Frühes Mönchtum im Frankenreich*, pp. 47–87; on the position of Lérins in the ecclesiastical politics, see R. W. Mathisen, *Ecclesiastical Factionalism and Religious Controversy in Fifth-Century Gaul*, pp. 69–205.

8. C. Stancliffe, *St Martin and his Hagiographer*, passim; P. Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church*, pp. 143–65.

9. O. Chadwick, *John Cassian*, passim; Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church*, pp. 169–234.

10. R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity*, pp. 164, 168.

This tradition of aristocratic asceticism spread through Gaul largely as a result of the episcopal careers of certain Lérinian monks. One of the most influential of these was the Briton Faustus, bishop of Riez. Among those who regarded Faustus as their spiritual master was Sidonius, whose brother had been in some way saved by the bishop.¹¹ The religious culture of Lérins and of Faustus in particular seem at first sight to be at odds with the rhetorical culture of Sidonius's own writings. Even when the latter does raise religious matters, he seems to deal with them from a different perspective than that of the ascetic theology of Faustus or the spiritual philosophy of another great writer and friend, Claudianus Mamertus. Again, however, the problem is a matter of style as much as one of substance. On the one hand the theologians of the fifth century were also experts in rhetoric, even if the style they chose as being appropriate to their religious works was different from that used by Sidonius in his letters and poems; on the other, Sidonius is known to have composed some ecclesiastical works including an epitaph for the ascetic Abraham, poems for various churches, as well as a version of the Mass which appears not to have survived.¹²

Sidonius's letters and poems portray a world in which imperial values and late Roman rhetorical culture flourish. The relationship of this picture with that provided by Salvian and his fellow moralists, who saw the early fifth century as a period of destruction, is not immediately apparent. Yet Sidonius belonged to the same aristocratic class as Salvian and the early ascetics of Lérins, although he belonged to a younger generation. He was also closely connected with some of those bishops who had spent time in the island monastery. Taken together, this evidence indicates some of the complexity of cultural responses to the developments of the fifth century, even though it relates to only one particular section of society.

The ascetic culture of Lérins was to continue to be of significance. One of the island's greatest pupils was Caesarius, bishop of Arles from 503 to 543. Born of noble family in territory controlled by the Burgundians, he left his parents and went to Lérins, where his asceticism was too severe for his health. As a result he was sent to Arles, where he came into contact with the rhetorician Julianus Pomerius. Meanwhile he attracted the attention of bishop Aeonius of Arles, who negotiated his release from the community of Lérins, and ordained him. Thereafter he became abbot of one of the city's suburban monasteries, and then bishop. In that office he had to deal first with the Visigothic king Alaric II and then with the Ostrogoth Theodoric I. He was twice accused of treason, but was exonerated on both occasions. Subsequently he witnessed the transfer of Provence to the Franks. His writings include two monastic rules and a large number of sermons, notable for the simplicity of their style as well as their message. Despite his connections with Julianus Pomerius, whom he influenced greatly, Caesarius was able to disregard the

11. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. VI 3; VI 9; carm. XVI.

12. Sidonius Apollinaris, epp. II 10, 4; VII 17, 2; Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum* II 22.

rhetorical traditions of his own class. As a preacher who cultivated an accessible style of preaching, as a monastic legislator, and as the convenor of a number of major church councils, he was perhaps the most influential product of Lérins.¹³

Letter-writing in the sixth century

In the literature to have survived from the sixth century, however, the legacy of Sidonius is as significant as that of Lérins. Indeed, Caesarius apart, the major writers of the next generation looked back to Sidonius as their model. In so doing they extended the problem of determining the relationship between rhetoric and reality into the early barbarian period. Two writers whose letter-collections survive, Ruricius of Limoges and Avitus of Vienne, openly revered the style of Sidonius,¹⁴ and a third, Ferreolus of Uzès, is known to have modelled his own writings on those of the bishop of Clermont.¹⁵ Ennodius of Pavia, whose career took him to Italy, but whose family came from Provence, wrote in a similar style. Among the writings of Ruricius, Avitus and Ennodius are numerous letters of friendship, or *amicitia*, which were one of the traditional means of cultivating and maintaining contact with one's peer group. Sidonius, like the Late Antique authors on whom he modelled himself, had written such letters to ensure the existence of a pool of friends on whom he could count in times of need. The writers of the next generation did the same.¹⁶

Both Ruricius and Avitus were close relatives of Sidonius, as well as literary followers.¹⁷ Avitus was also related, if only as godson, to bishop Mamertus, brother of the theologian Claudianus.¹⁸ He succeeded his father, Hesychius, as bishop of Vienne, in or about 490.¹⁹ His cathedral city was one of the favourite centres of the Burgundian kings, and he therefore had much to do with both Gundobad and his son Sigismund. With the former, who like Euric was an arian, he corresponded at length over questions of doctrine.²⁰ Sigismund converted to catholicism before becoming king in 516. The bishop of Vienne was probably not responsible for his conversion, but he undoubtedly exercised considerable influence at the start of the new reign. He even seems to have been responsible for Sigismund's most formal letters, those

13. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church.*, pp. 13–16, 55–7, 97–9.

14. Ruricius, ep. II 26; Avitus, epp. 43, 51.

15. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, VI 7.

16. I. N. Wood, 'Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul', in R. McKitterick, ed., *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, pp. 67–71.

17. On the family connections of this group, see R.W. Mathisen, 'Epistolography, literary circles and family ties in Late Roman Gaul', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 111 (1981), pp. 95–109.

18. Avitus, hom. 6.

19. Avitus, hom. 6.

20. c.g. Avitus, epp. 1–4, 21–2, 30.

addressed to the eastern emperor.²¹ He was not, however, simply a political figure. In his letters to Gundobad, in some of his sermons, and in his versification of the first two books of the Bible, he showed himself to be a reasonable theologian. And in his lengthy poem on virginity, the *Consolatoria de castitatis laude*, he revealed the commitment of himself and his family to the ascetic life.

A comparison of Sidonius and Avitus reveals something of the continuities and discontinuities of the late fifth and early sixth centuries, and thus of the period which saw the transformation of the barbarian settlements into fully fledged kingdoms. Avitus, like Sidonius, was a master of rhetoric; if anything his style is more complex than that of his model, although his grammar is less classical. Also like Sidonius he found a career in the Church, although this seems to have been a matter of choice at a relatively early age, whereas Sidonius became bishop after a major secular career, without any obvious preparation. Avitus's father, who was perhaps a tribune in 456, experienced the same shift from secular to ecclesiastical office as Sidonius.²² A generation later the political opportunities which had been available in the middle of the fifth century were closed, but equally the restrictions of the 470s had lifted. As bishop of a major city Avitus was involved in court politics to an extent that Sidonius, cut off from the centre of Visigothic power in Clermont, was not. He was also more adept at using his rhetorical skills in the service of theology and asceticism. In so doing he combined the religious culture of Lérins and the rhetorical culture of Late Antiquity more successfully than had Sidonius.

Avitus's generation is the last for which a full Roman education in the schools of Gaul can be assumed. Nevertheless the culture of Sidonius and his followers was preserved among the surviving Gallo-Roman aristocracy. Ferrucolus of Uzès, who died in 581, was the author of a letter-collection in the manner of Sidonius.²³ His name suggests that he was the scion of one of the great families of fifth-century Gaul, a family, indeed, which Sidonius held in great esteem.²⁴ Like Avitus, he appears to have combined rhetoric and asceticism. Although his letters have not survived, a monastic Rule which he composed is still extant. In addition, Parthenius, nephew of Ennodius of Pavia, and husband of a granddaughter of Ruricius, was highly regarded by his contemporaries for his skill in rhetoric. How he obtained this skill is not recorded, but it may be significant that he visited Ravenna, where he befriended the poet Arator.²⁵ He was to become one of the leading advisers of the Merovingian king Theudebert I, and was lynched after the king's death as being responsible for taxing the Franks.²⁶ Another family to boast a continuing literary tradition was that of the late-sixth-century patrician,

21. Avitus, epp. 78, 93–4.

22. Mathisen, 'Epistolography, literary circles and family ties', p. 100.

23. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, VI 7.

24. Sidonius Apollinaris, ep. VII 12.

25. Mathisen, 'Epistolography, literary circles and family ties', p. 103.

26. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, III 36.

Dynamius, who numbered Venantius Fortunatus, the greatest poet of the period, and pope Gregory the Great among his correspondents.²⁷

The esteem in which the literary ability of these men was held can be seen in a collection known as the *Epistulae Austrasiacae*, which contains two of Dynamius's letters and also a passing reference to the skills of Parthenius.²⁸ The *Epistulae Austrasiacae* is made up of forty-eight letters, the earliest of which is a verse epistle of the 460s, and the latest is to be dated to c. 590. It is thought to have been put together shortly thereafter, perhaps at the Austrasian, that is the east Frankish, court, hence the title by which the collection is known.²⁹ A number of the letters relate to diplomatic missions between Austrasia and Byzantium, but the collection cannot have had a purely political purpose. Some letters might have been regarded even in the late sixth century as being historically important; the first two, which are among the earliest in the collection, are letters from Remigius, bishop of Rheims, to Clovis, the first Christian king of the Franks. But several of the *Epistulae Austrasiacae* have no such importance, being expressions of friendship, like the *amicitia* letters of Sidonius and his followers, sent from one member of the court to another. The compilation, therefore, might be seen as a collection of model letters, appropriate to all sorts of circumstances, formal and informal. If this is the case, it is testimony to the continuing importance of a literary tradition within the Frankish court in the late sixth century. Moreover, since letters had a considerable social function in creating and maintaining bonds of friendship, which could be exploited for political ends, the continuity of this literary tradition may also imply the continuity of patterns of political influence.³⁰

That the exchange of letters continued to be significant into the seventh century is clear from the collection of Desiderius of Cahors. Desiderius was an aristocrat from Aquitaine, where he seems to have been educated. He joined the court of Chlothar II after 614, and there he formed a number of close friendships. However, when one brother who was governor of Marseilles died, he was sent to replace him, and he was later elected bishop of Cahors in place of another brother, who had been killed.³¹ As bishop, Desiderius had occasion to write about numerous specific issues, but he also took time to maintain the friendships he had made at court. In so doing he was continuing a tradition which looked back to Sidonius, and to the social traditions of the late Roman aristocracy.³²

The greatest collection of letters to have survived from post-Roman Gaul, however, is made up of the poems of Venantius Fortunatus, many of which are verse epistles. Fortunatus was not a Gallo-Roman, but an Italian. Having

27. Venantius Fortunatus, *carm.* VI 9–10; Gregory I, *Register*, III 33; VII 33; see also IV 37.

28. *Epistulae Austrasiacae*, 12, 16, 17.

29. P. Goubert, *Byzance avant l'Islam*, 2, *Byzance et l'Occident*, pp. 95–6.

30. Wood, 'Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul', pp. 67–9.

31. For his life, see *Vita Desiderii Cadurcensis*.

32. Wood, 'Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul', pp. 70–1.

been cured of an eye infection through the agency of St Martin, in 565 he decided to visit the saint's shrine at Tours. His journey took him through Austrasia, where he was hospitably received by members of the aristocracy. In return he composed short poems of thanks.³³ Throughout his career he continued to write occasional pieces for friends and patrons, among them Leontius bishop of Bordeaux, the husband of one of Sidonius's descendants.³⁴ He also composed more formal poems, including an *epithalamium* on the marriage of king Sigibert and the Visigothic princess Brunhild as well as panegyrics and poems for the courts of Charibert and Chilperic I. These public poems provide what is perhaps the best evidence for the ideology of the Merovingian court in the second half of the sixth century.³⁵ After Fortunatus left the Austrasian kingdom he travelled to Tours and ultimately to Poitiers, where he became bishop in the last years of his life. Once he reached Poitiers his literary output became increasingly religious, and included a number of prose saints' *Lives*. During his early days in Poitiers a substantial number of his poems were written for Radegund, sometime wife of the Merovingian king Chlothar I, and founder and inmate of the abbey of the Holy Cross in Poitiers. For her he composed his most important devotional works, including several hymns and a poem in praise of virginity.³⁶ Comparison between this last work, with its highly charged and colourful imagery, and Avitus of Vienne's work on chastity, which approaches the same subject through an examination of his own family, reveals a vast difference in the imagination of the two writers, and does suggest that despite the continuities, there had been a sharp change of taste in the first half of the sixth century. On the one hand chastity is understood as an aspect of the piety of a senatorial family, while on the other it becomes the centre of a vision of the kingdom of heaven and its saintly inhabitants.

Although Fortunatus was an Italian, and although there is nothing comparable to his books of poetry in the sixth-century west, in many respects his writings can be placed in the same tradition as those of Sidonius and Avitus. While the latter left no verse epistles, Sidonius did, as did other writers whose works are preserved in the *Epistulae Austrasiacae*. As for the content of the verse epistles of Fortunatus, like that of many fifth- and sixth-century letters, it is often concerned simply with expressions of friendship, here called *dulcedo* rather than *amicitia*, and thanks. In addition, Fortunatus's panegyrics are a revival, if not a continuation, of the form in which Sidonius had excelled. His career is further proof of the esteem in which the sixth-century aristocracy and the courts of the Merovingian kings continued to hold literary skill.

33. For his career, see J. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, pp. 18–34.

34. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, pp. 70–4.

35. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, pp. 35–61; M. Reydellet, *La Royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Seville*, pp. 297–344.

36. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: A Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul*, pp. 32–4, 161–77.

Gregory of Tours and the decline of culture

It is against this background that the writings of Fortunatus's friend, Gregory of Tours, need to be considered. All too often Gregory's greatest work, the *Ten Books of Histories*, which are unquestionably the most substantial and important single source for the history of sixth-century Gaul, are considered in isolation. Despite their significance, it is necessary to place them within their historical and literary context, in order to appreciate the complexity of Gregory's achievement, and so as to avoid being hoodwinked into taking his work at face value.

Gregory was born in 538 or 539.³⁷ His family as he depicts it was one of the greatest senatorial families in Gaul. It was certainly of considerable importance in the sixth-century Gallic Church. Among his close relatives, Gregory numbered bishops of Lyons, Clermont and Langres, and he claimed that all except for five bishops of Tours were related to him.³⁸ Moreover, the family was also said to have included Vettius Epagathus, one of the Lyons martyrs of 177.³⁹ Gregory's father died when he was still a boy, and he was brought up first by his great-uncle, Nicetius, then a priest in Chalon-sur-Saône, but later bishop of Lyons, and afterwards by Avitus, archdeacon of Clermont, where his uncle Gallus was bishop. Avitus was later to become bishop of the same see. Gallus died in 551, and by 552 Gregory was a deacon in Lyons, where Nicetius was then bishop. Subsequently he seems to have served the martyrial church of St Julian at Brioude, in the Auvergne. In 573, however, he was elected bishop of Tours. He died in 594 or perhaps a year later.

Gregory records that he wrote ten books of histories, seven of miracles and one of the *Life of the Fathers*, together with a commentary on the Psalter, and a work on the offices of the Church, each in one book. He also mentions a preface to the Masses of Sidonius.⁴⁰ All of these survive, except for the commentary on the Psalter and the preface. The seven books of miracles are made up of one on the *Glory of the Martyrs*, another on the passion and miracles of St Julian of Brioude, four on the miracles of St Martin, and one on the *Glory of the Confessors*. In addition an account of the miracles of St Andrew and a version of the *Passion of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus* have been attributed to Gregory. The composition of these works stretched over a considerable period of time. The *Histories* were begun in the mid-570s and not completed until shortly before Gregory's death; the four books on the miracles of St Martin were started slightly earlier and the last of them was still

37. For a narrative of Gregory's life, see J. Verdon, *Grégoire de Tours*.

38. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, V 49; R.W. Mathisen, 'The family of Georgius Florentius Gregorius and the Bishops of Tours', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 12 (1984), pp. 83–95.

39. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, I 29, 31; Gregory, *Liber Vitae Patrum*, 6, 1.

40. Gregory, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, X 31.