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WRITING ABOUT THE MEROVINGIANS IN THE EARLY UNITED STATES

by
GREGORY I. HALFOND

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING IN *THE American Merchant* in 1859 Buffalo, New York, businessman, author, civic leader, and scholarly dilettante Roswell Willson Haskins (1796–1870) ambitiously offered to readers his personal "Philosophy of History." "By nature a democrat" politically, as his biographer later noted, the lessons of the French Revolution had inspired in Haskins an entrenched scepticism of both religion and monarchy.[1] He brought these and other prejudices to bear in his undoubtedly quixotic, and ultimately ignored, efforts to set aright American historical studies. Observing among his countrymen the enormous popularity of historical writing, second only to fiction, Haskins critiqued those "standard" histories then available to American readers, claiming that they gave the false impression of history as "narratives of rule—of mere domination" rather than "what was dominated, what was governed." According to Haskins, history, when pursued properly, should focus on "the people," while also considering the ostensible divisions between races.[2]

The history of early France, for Haskins, served as an ideal case in point, despite what he perceived as a relative indifference on the part of his fellow Americans towards that nation's history: "If, from recent events in Europe, or from whatever other cause any one should be singular enough…to wish some knowledge of early France—a wish, by the way, that is not often manifested—he would of course, resort to what are known as the standard histories of that county." But these standard sources, Haskins suggested, provided only "dead and soulless" antiquarian details that ultimately told readers very little of real importance. In contrast, modern fiction and poetry by the likes of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) gave a far better impression of the national character and spirit of the French kingdom's founders. The true story of France's origins, according to Haskins, was one of diverse "races" gradually, and not without violence, congealing into a single nation.[3]

There was, needless to say, no small amount of personal hubris underlying Haskins's assumption that the bulk of his fellow citizens might not, like himself, find their interest in early French history piqued by recent and dramatic events across the Atlantic. As Haskins himself acknowledged, narratives of French history were available to interested American readers, including a number of originally Francophone works in English translation, and Haskins himself had read the writings of, among other recognized and popular European authorities, François Guizot (1787–1874), Augustin Thierry (1795–1856), and Jules Michelet (1798–1874). Unacknowledged by Haskins, however, were those American-authored narratives of French, European, and "universal" history that detailed to widely varying degrees of breadth and accuracy France's late antique origins as the *regnum Francorum* (the Kingdom of the Franks or Francia), including a rapidly expanding number of titles aimed especially at school-

1 Sellstedt, "Roswell Willson Haskins," 270.

2 Haskins, "The Philosophy of History," 257–61.

3 Haskins, "The Philosophy of History," 323–24.

age children. Frankish history, in other words, was not completely inaccessible to those Americans with the interest, education, and time to pursue it.

That even a literate citizen of the early American republic might discern meaning, even relevance, in the history of a "barbarian" kingdom might well seem surprising. Early Francia's material and literary culture seemingly paled in comparison to that of Ancient Greece and Rome, and certainly did not inspire much in the way of emulation in the post-medieval era. Nor did Francia's monarchy and political institutions offer an imitable constitutional model like that of the Roman Republic.[4] Furthermore, its brand of Christianity, from a Protestant perspective, was hopelessly awash in superstition, hypocrisy, and popery. And while the population of antebellum America certainly included persons of French descent, the self-defined "most gifted children of Anglo-Saxon forebearers," i.e. the Anglo-Americans, believed that it was their own heritage that defined the character and political institutions of the new nation.[5] While the ancient Franks were thought to have shared with their Anglo-Saxon cousins a common Germanic heritage of political freedom, to most informed Americans the Merovingian era of Frankish history—which stretched from the late-fifth through the mid-eighth century—seemed particularly devoid of any redeemable or imitable features, with bloody and near-perpetual violence as its most commented-upon characteristic. While the reign of the emperor Charlemagne (r. 768–814) in the subsequent Carolingian period might be admired as a chivalric exception to the rule, the preceding Merovingian centuries seemed to many late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Anglophone writers very much a Dark Age indeed.

Yet, those Americans of the pre-Civil War era who considered at any length the case of Merovingian Francia, for the most part did not treat it merely as a regrettable, but self-contained, historical episode, of antiquarian interest but little else. Instead, like Haskins, they shared an assumption that the history of Europe's peoples could be tracked across time over the *longue durée*, recognizing even in this distant historical

4 The adoption of classical civilization as a common frame of reference in Colonial and Early Republican America has been discussed extensively within modern scholarship. See e.g. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition*; Eadie, ed., *Classical Traditions in Early America*; Reinhold, *Classica Americana*; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*; Richard, *The Golden Age of the Classics in America*; Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*; Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity*; Shalev, *Rome Reborn on Western Shores*; Onuf and Cole, eds., *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*.

5 See Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 9–186, who traces in the decades leading up to the Civil War a gradual, European-influenced, "process by which the long-held beliefs in the superiority of early Anglo-Saxon political institutions became a belief in the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race" (quotes on 93–94 and 4 respectively). For dissenting opinions, including the alternate view of Americans as a superior, amalgamated, i.e. not wholly Anglo-Saxon, race see also 249–56 (Horsman cites in this discussion the case of the Swiss-born Democratic-Republican politician Albert Gallatin, who argued for the Franks as the equals of the Anglo-Saxons). See also Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 205–7. On Thomas Jefferson's own promotion of the study of Old English in consequence of his belief that students would imbibe along with the Anglo-Saxons' language "their free principles of government," see Hauer, "Thomas Jefferson and the Anglo-Saxon Language," 879–98 (quote on 880).

epoch an early chapter of a sustained narrative that stretched into the present day. In other words, the barbarous, incompetent, and spiritually hypocritical long-haired kings of Merovingian Gaul helped to define the political, cultural, and religious identity of a France—and, indeed, a Europe—whose present actions all Americans could agree was of immediate relevance to themselves and their young republic. Consequently, American historians, pedagogues, and media contributors alike were inclined to locate parallels between the past and the present, the ostensible roots in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages of present-day national identities and institutions, and even signs of biblical prophesies—in which the Merovingians played a role—being revealed gradually over the course of centuries.

Merovingian Francia and its Sources: A Cursory Survey

Late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Americans with an interest in early medieval history were fortunate to be living at a time when historical scholarship of this era was beginning to come into its own. It goes without saying that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians of Merovingian Francia came to its study with very different culturally conditioned assumptions and scholarly concerns than their twentieth- and twenty-first-century successors. Consequently, before examining the historiographical context with which the citizens of the young American republic engaged, it is necessary first to review briefly the broad contours of the Merovingian period in light of recent scholarship. Modern historians of Merovingian history, in comparison to their early modern predecessors, are quick to acknowledge that their knowledge of the period is filtered through sources whose narratives are anything but simple or impartial. While the quantity of surviving documentary sources from Merovingian Francia should not be understated (nor, for that matter, the availability of material evidence), at the same time modern scholars by necessity have tended to rely heavily upon a relatively narrowly defined corpus of texts, the bulk of which are contained within the Monumenta Germaniae Historica series, a long-running nationalist scholarly project that continues to publish high-quality primary source editions into the present day.[6]

The most detailed narrative of Gallo-Frankish history up through CE 591 comes from the pen of Bishop Gregory of Tours (538–594), a prolific author also responsible for eight books of miracles along with other minor works. Although Gregory's *Decem libri historiarum* (*Ten Books of Histories*) begins with Creation, over half of the work focuses on those years in which Gregory held his episcopacy, 573–594.[7] While Gregory famously denigrated his own Latinity, it is now widely agreed that the Bishop of Tours' use of a range of narrative and rhetorical devices was anything but naïve, particularly

6 On the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, see Knowles, "The *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*," 63–97.

7 Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*. Gregory's chronological narrative ends in CE 591. Specific references to medieval sources in the following pages will be to standard book and/or chapter divisions, rather than to page numbers.

when dealing with persons and events with whom he was intimately familiar. Beyond his literary skills, Gregory's sophistication as both a theologian and as a political operator now is routinely acknowledged.[8] Gregory's plea that his historical writings not be tampered with following his death was quickly ignored, however, and a heavily edited six-book version of his *Histories*, with much of its ecclesiastical content excised, circulated widely in the seventh century.[9]

Around 660 a chronicler known since at least since the sixteenth century as Fredegar affixed this abbreviated version of Gregory's *Historiae* to a "chain of chronicles," culminating in a newly authored chronological narrative detailing Gallo-Frankish history from where Gregory's had concluded through 642.[10] The Fredegar chronicle's style is notably more terse than Gregory's, and its cut-and-paste construction (while by no means unsophisticated) is frequently, and understandably, compared unfavourably to the comparatively more stylistically uniform *Decem libri historiarum*. The chronicle does, however, have a number of notable features, including—but by no means limited to—its sometimes-lengthy interpolations into Gregory's narrative, its treatment of events in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the threat posed by Muslim armies to the Eastern Roman Empire, and its incorporation of apocalyptic imagery within a narrative whose ostensible secular orientation is sometimes overstated. In some cases, Fredegar's sources are easily identifiable, such as his lengthy excerpt from Jonas of Bobbio's influential hagiography, the *Vita Columbani* (*Life of Columbanus*). In other instances, however—such as in the chronicler's treatment of eastern events—the question of sources still is not fully resolved.

Even more pithy than the Fredegar Chronicle is the anonymous *Liber historiae Francorum* (*Book of the History of the Franks*), a chronicle likely composed around 727 in Soissons, which continues the narrative of Frankish political history with a focus on the Neustrian (North-Western) sub-kingdom.[11] While the chronicle's early chapters are largely dependent on Gregory, the later chapters provide an important narrative of the years between the reigns of Dagobert I (r. 623/9–639) and Theuderic IV (r. 721–737), albeit a narrative that must be supplemented by hagiographical, diplomatic, and epistolary sources to clarify both the chronology and complex political machinations of the period. Of particular significance is the chronicle's treatment of

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8 See, for example, De Nie, *Views from a Many-Windowed Tower*; Wood, "The Secret Histories of Gregory of Tours," 253–70; Breukelaar, *Historiography and Episcopal Authority*; Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 112–234; Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*; Mitchell and Wood, eds., *The World of Gregory of Tours*; Murray, ed., *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*.

9 Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, 127–59.

10 Fredegar, *Chronica*. On the Fredegar chronicle, see Collins, *Fredegar*; Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*. On the chronicler's use of Gregory's work, see Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity*, 167–68. On the new work as a "chain of chronicles," see Wood, "Chains of Chronicles," 67–75. Goffart, "The Fredegar Problem Reconsidered," 206–41, established the single-author thesis as the *status quaestionis* along with Erikson, "The Problem of Authorship in the Chronicle of Fredegar," 47–76.

11 *Liber historiae Francorum*. On the chronicle, see Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians*; Fouracre and Gerberding, eds., *Late Merovingian France*, 79–87.

the Pippinids, an Austrasian (Eastern Frankish) aristocratic family whose influence had spread into Neustria during the period covered by the chronicle. Written while the Merovingians still held the throne, the *Liber historiae Francorum* serves a potent reminder that the subsequent Pippinid usurpation of the crown (751) was not an inevitability.[12]

These three historical works, as important as they are for tracing the political history of the *regnum Francorum* during the Merovingian era, make up only a small percentage of the surviving documentary records from the period. Legal material is notably abundant, both in the form of normative codes, royal legislation, and ecclesiastical conciliar canons, as well as charters and formularies (i.e. collections of document templates).[13] Hagiographical literature similarly flourished in the Merovingian period, although the difficulty in dating individual *vitae* (lives), as well as the genre's didactic intent, complicates its use as source material.[14] The epistolary and epigraphic corpuses are likewise of immense evidentiary value, as of course is the surviving material evidence.[15] While collectively this body of documentary and physical material does not preclude substantial gaps in scholars' knowledge of the Merovingian era, in both its quantity and its contents it belies the popular reputation of this epoch as a dark age both in its supposed barbarism and inscrutability.

While its periodization is necessarily subjective, the Merovingian epoch can be defined as a matter of convenience as the period between the reigns of Clovis I and Childeric III, i.e. 482 to 751. Clovis I was the son of King Childeric I, the latter of whom combined the functions of barbarian *rex Francorum* (King of the Franks) and Roman administrative functionary in the northern Gallic province of Belgica Secunda, and whose tomb containing an impressive array of grave goods was rediscovered in 1653.[16] It may have been during Childeric's reign that the *Pactus legis Salicae*, the first important Frankish legal code, was compiled.[17] Upon his father's death, Clovis inherited his regal title, but still was just one of a number of Frankish and non-Frankish politico-military leaders competing for regional prominence in Gaul at the time. Nevertheless, over the course of his reign Clovis managed to eliminate most of these threats,

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12 Fouracre and Gerberding, eds., *Late Merovingian France*, 79.

13 Rio, "Merovingian Legal Cultures," 489–507. *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the current scholarly *status quaestionis* of Merovingian historiography, and consequently its contents are cited a number of times below.

14 For a helpful introduction to the genre and its interpretive challenges, see Palmer, *Early Medieval Hagiography*.

15 On letters, see Tyrrell, *Merovingian Letters*; on epigraphy: Handley, *Death, Society and Culture*. On archaeology, while there is no single up-to-date overview of the full range of material evidence, a good introduction to burial archaeology specifically is Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology*. The classic, albeit outdated, survey is Salin, *La civilisation mérovingienne*. For a history of the archaeological study of Merovingian Francia, see Effros, *Uncovering the Germanic Past*.

16 Lebecq, "The Two Faces of King Childeric," 119–32; Halsall, "Childeric's Grave," 169–87.

17 As suggested by Ubl, *Sinnstiftungen eines Rechtsbuchs*.

most significantly in 507, when his victory over the Visigothic king Alaric II at Vouillé allowed him to extend his authority over many of the *civitates* (cities) of Aquitaine.[18] Clovis's most important action, as far as pious historians of later generations were concerned, was his baptism as a Nicene Christian. The timing of this baptism is not altogether certain, and it is possible that Clovis flirted with Arian Christianity prior to receiving baptism at the hands of a Nicene bishop, Remigius of Rheims.[19] Clovis himself seems to have recognized the significance of his decision, convoking not long after his victory at Vouillé a council of Nicene bishops at Orléans (511), an event that served as the initial expression of an ecclesiastical organization and identity defined in part by the political contours of the newly expanded *regnum Francorum*.[20] The king himself thus assumed the symbolic role of a *novus Constintinus* (New Constantine), an epithet more than appropriate for the ruler of a Christian *regnum* constructed on strong Roman foundations.[21]

Following Clovis's death in 511, his kingdom was partitioned among his sons, each of whom established his own royal court.[22] While the existence of multiple, and sometimes feuding, courts for much of the Merovingian era was seen by some early modern historians as evidence of the kingdom's inherent instability, the current scholarly consensus is that these courts not only were functioning centres of royal administration, but also provided opportunities for non-royal elites to enjoy the benefits of *Königsnähe* (proximity to the king), the community of their fellow *nobiles*, and the literary and cultural activity that typically centred around a court.[23] While a court followed a king as he moved among his villas, the partition of 511 identified specific *civitates* as royal seats, and it was in the territories of these that the royal courts most often could be found.[24]

Indeed, prior to the gradual emergence of more fixed royal territorial units in the seventh century—i.e. Neustria, Austrasia, and Burgundy—it was possession of individual cities that largely defined the contours of an individual Merovingian monarch's realm.[25] Most of the important urban centres in Merovingian Francia significantly predated the Frankish settlement and were connected by a complex road system constructed originally under Roman imperial auspices. In the early Merovingian era *civitates* retained their importance as both secular and ecclesiastical administrative

18 On the significance of Clovis's victory, see the contributions to Mathisen and Shanzer, eds., *The Battle of Vouillé*.

19 Shanzer, "Dating the Baptism of Clovis," 29–57.

20 Halfond, "Vouillé, Orléans (511)," 151–65.

21 The literature on *romanitas* (romanness) in the Frankish Kingdom is enormous, but a number of important studies are collected in Pohl, Gantner, Grifonii, and Pollheimer-Mohaupt, eds., *Transformations of Romanness*.

22 On this and subsequent partitions, the classic studies remain Ewig, "Die fränkischen Teilungen und Teilreiche," 1:114–71; Ewig, "Die fränkischen Teilreiche," 1:172–230.

23 Hen, "The Merovingian Polity," 217–37.

24 Hen, "The Merovingian Polity," 224.

25 Loseby, "The Role of the City," 588–89.

hubs, overseen by a *comes* (count) and an *episcopus* (bishop) respectively, two office-holders whose responsibilities nevertheless could and did overlap, sometimes leading to conflict.[26] While bishops were not unaffected by the gradual "ruralization" of secular power that caused *civitates* to lose some of their administrative importance in the seventh century, urban and provincial borders did retain their significance as markers of ecclesiastical territory.[27] The proliferation of episcopal exemptions in the seventh and early eighth century, which freed some monasteries from the direct oversight of their diocesan bishops, likewise was not necessarily indicative of a weakening of the institutional power of urban bishoprics, as prelates in considerable numbers actively participated in the granting of these exemption charters.[28]

The civic responsibilities of Gallo-Frankish bishops, in tandem with their individual and corporate *auctoritas* (authority), made them important allies from the perspective of the Merovingian monarchs. The latter, consequently, regularly involved themselves in the selection of new bishops, in some (but by no means all) cases throwing their weight behind candidates who already enjoyed links to the court.[29] While some bishops, including Gregory of Tours, could trace their lineage back to the senatorial aristocracy of the Roman era—which produced numerous secular and ecclesiastical office-holders—and men of aristocratic birth demonstrably were attracted to episcopal office, recent studies have suggested that such examples of deeply blue-blooded bishops may not necessarily be representative of the Gallo-Frankish episcopate as a whole.[30] What bishops did share was a membership in a common clerical *ordo* (order), which carried with it certain rights and responsibilities for both the administration of local churches as well as for the care of souls, including those of the monarchs themselves. Nevertheless, the power and patronage of Merovingians dissuaded some bishops from speaking truth to power, which in turn sometimes caused conflict with other members of their order.[31] In still other cases, bishops who ran afoul of the court found themselves exiled or even killed.[32]

Gregory's *Historiae* centre bishops in their narrative of mid-late sixth-century politics, regional as well as regnal. This narrative choice was not simply a reflection of historical reality, but also a means for Gregory to advocate for a personal vision of

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26 Loseby, "The Role of the City," 590–93.

27 Loseby, "Lost Cities," 223–52.

28 Halfond, "Monastic Exemption," 197–228. On exemptions in general, see the pioneering studies of Eugen Ewig collected in Ewig, *Spätantikes und fränkisches Gallien*, 2:411–583, 3:337–49, 3:519–94. See also Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*.

29 On episcopal elections, see Claude, "Die Bestellung der Bischöfe," 1–75; Wood, "The Ecclesiastical Politics of Merovingian Clermont," 34–57; Dumézil, "La royauté mérovingienne," 127–43; Loftus, "Suitable Men," 23–46.

30 Patzold, "Zur Sozialstruktur des Episkopats," 121–40; Patzold, "Bischöfe, soziale Herkunft und die Organisation," 523–43; Patzold, "Die Bischöfe im Gallien der Transformationszeit," 179–93; Patzold and Walter, "Der Episkopat im Frankenreich," 109–39.

31 Halfond, *Bishops and the Politics of Patronage*.

32 Fouracre, "Why Were So Many Bishops Killed," 13–35.

Bischofsherrschaft (episcopal lordship) in which bishops worked cooperatively with the monarchy to ensure that "the values of the eternal *ecclesia Dei* were to be applied to the social values of Merovingian society."[33] Gregory was an idealist to be sure, but he also was no naïf. While he recognized in some bishops and even monarchs a willingness to realize his collaborative ideal, many of his own contemporaries fell far short in his estimation. Gregory's episcopacy coincided with a period of tension and intermittent war between the sons of Chlothar I (r. 511–561), and the Bishop of Tours harboured a particular disdain for Chilperic I (r. 561–584), while nevertheless acknowledging that not all of his episcopal colleagues shared his animosity for the king, and that by most measures Chilperic was conventionally pious (as well as a poet of very modest talent). Gregory similarly despised Chilperic's wife, Fredegund, suspecting her of being behind multiple assassinations and assassination attempts. Nevertheless, Fredegund, like Chilperic, was by no means universally despised, and she carefully cultivated secular and ecclesiastical allies alike, who proved crucial during the period of her regency for her by-then fatherless son, Chlothar II (r. 584–629).

Gregory generally was more sympathetic to the widow of Chilperic's brother Sigibert I (r. 561–575), the Visigothic princess Brunhild. Similar to Fredegund, Brunhild struggled to retain her political influence following her husband's death, yet ultimately she was the last surviving member of her generation of Merovingian monarchs. However, her posthumous reputation would be irrevocably tarnished following her rapid fall from power and execution in 613. Not only did her vanquisher, Chlothar II, unite the Merovingian *sub-regna* for the first time since the death of his grandfather and namesake, his victory led rapidly to a literary demonization of his dynastic rivals, Brunhild above all.[34] Consequently, for historians of later centuries the alleged bloodthirstiness of the queens of Merovingian Francia was the ultimate proof of the royal dynasty's barbarism. Chlothar, in contrast, was the subject of a far more positive literary portrayal by both early medieval and modern chroniclers alike, who noted both his capability as well as his respect for holy men.[35]

Nevertheless, while recognizing that after 614 Chlothar did not face any serious domestic threats to his power, some early modern and even modern scholars identified his reign as a turning-point in Merovingian dynastic history, when the monarchy began to cede its authority to the nobility, a process that in their view only accelerated after the death of his capable son Dagobert I. As evidence, they frequently pointed to Chlothar's Edict of Paris (614), in which the king rewarded those nobles who had supported him against Brunhild ostensibly by giving up his right to appoint outsiders as local officials, and consequently relinquishing his control over them. In fact, this arguably constitutes a misreading of the *edictum*, which more often now is recognized as at best a "moderate concession," and which reflected royal strength rather than weakness.[36]

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33 Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 181–91 (quote on 189).

34 Nelson, "Queens as Jezebels," 1–48

35 Savoye, "Clotaire II," 316–51.

36 Murray, "Immunity, Nobility, and the Edict of Paris," 18–39.

The readiness of post-medieval historians to identify a progressive ineptitude and weakness among the seventh-century Merovingians has been due in part to these scholars' awareness of the eventual—but still chronologically distant—Pippinid usurpation of the monarchy. But an important secondary factor was the demonization of the Merovingians in those texts produced under the auspices of the successor dynasty. Perhaps the most influential from a historiographical perspective, but by no means unique, is the treatment of the Merovingians by the Carolingian courtier Einhard in his *Vita Karoli* (*Life of Charlemagne*). Einhard began his biography of Charlemagne by claiming that the Merovingian dynasty lost power long before the deposition of Childeric III in 751. It is instructive to quote this famous passage in its entirety:

> Although it might seem that the [Merovingian] family ended with him [Childeric], it had in fact been without vitality for a long time, and [had] demonstrated that there was nothing of any worth in it except the empty name of "king." For both the [real] riches and power of the kingdom were in the possession of the prefects of the palace, who were called the mayors of the palace [*maiores domus*], and to them fell the highest command. Nothing was left for the king [to do] except sit on his throne with his hair long and his beard uncut, satisfied [to hold] the name of king only and pretending to rule. [Thus] he listened to representatives who came from various lands and, as they departed, he seemed to give them decisions of his own, which had [in fact] been taught or rather ordered [to pronounce]. Except for the empty name of "king" and a meager living allowance, which the prefect of the court extended to him as it suited him, he possessed nothing else of his own but one estate and a very small income. On that estate, he had a house and servants who ministered to his needs and obeyed him, but there were few of them. He traveled about on a cart that was pulled by yoked oxen and led, as happens in the countryside, by a herdsman to wherever he needed to go. In this way he used to go to the palace and so also to the public assembly of his people, which was held annually, for the good of the kingdom, and in this manner he also returned home. But it was the prefect of the court [the mayor of the palace] who took care of everything, either at home or abroad, that needed to be done, and arranged for the administration of the kingdom.[37]

Einhard's readiness to see the later Merovingians as little more than puppet kings is less reflective of historical reality than of his desire to defend the legitimacy of the current royal dynasty, which had begun its slow and intermittent rise to power through its members' possession of the mayoral office. Consequently, in more recent decades, scholars not only have been more cautious in their choice and reading of sources for the later Merovingian era, they have not simply assumed that all Merovingians after Dagobert I were little more than *rois fainéants* (i.e. do-nothing kings).

Without a doubt, aristocratic factions did play increasingly influential roles in the court politics of mid-to-late seventh century. Yet, for the most part, even the most ambitious Frankish nobles recognized that the preservation of the current political system was to their advantage. So, in those instances when the Merovingian kings themselves were ineffective, the fundamental mechanisms of royal governance remained func-

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37 Einhard, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, trans Paul Dutton, 16–17.