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## The rise of the Carolingians or the decline of the Merovingians?

by Emily Wilson

The transference of power from the Merovingians to the Carolingians in France is one of the most confusing periods of early medieval history. In coming to a conclusion about whether this transference was due more to the decline of the Merovingians, or more to the rise of the Carolingians, there are many considerations, often conflicting, and the sources are far from comprehensive. Nevertheless, this is a period which repays consideration, as it was instrumental in the formation of medieval France. Ultimately, a conclusion to the question ‘should we speak of the rise of the Carolingians or the decline of the Merovingians?’ may not be possible. This essay will argue that the terms “rise” and “decline” suggest an inevitability which is not supported by the evidence. In so doing the focus will be almost exclusively on political history for the reason that this is the area that the documentary sources shed the most light. Unfortunately, while this is the area that leads to the most certain conclusions, this will mean that the paper will have to gloss over certain aspects of ecclesiastical and economic history—both areas which have a significant impact on this question, and have largely ignored the areas of military and diplomatic history, also important in any consideration of this period. By focusing on political history however, it will be shown that this was a period characterised by a vitality and change, where the eventual victors were far from certain.

The historian examining the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties faces a problem familiar to any historian of the early medieval period: the scarcity of sources. In one respect, the sixth century is well served by the works of Gregory of Tours. Gregory’s *History of the Franks* provides much important information about the politics, both secular and ecclesiastical, of the sixth century. It must be remembered, though, that Gregory was writing from the point of view of a bishop of the Catholic Church, and with a very decided bias in favour of this institution<sup>1</sup>. He was also a member of the Gallo-Roman aristocracy, and thus may have been biased against the Franks. It cannot be denied that he is sometimes inaccurate, and that his account of events is often distorted, whether intentionally or not<sup>2</sup>. Apart from these flaws, he is, in many cases, the only source we have for events of this period, making it impossible to verify his version. His motives and audience in writing remain unclear, although J. M. Wallace-Hadrill has made some plausible suggestions<sup>3</sup>. The evidence for the seventh century is even more problematic. The main source is the *Chronicle of Fredegar*. This source provides interesting information, but has some obvious flaws, from the point of view of providing evidence. First and foremost, it is a chronicle and not a history, so it does little more than record a list of events. There are some inconsistencies in the record<sup>4</sup>. There is some confusion over the author, or authors, making it difficult to judge the

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Thorpe, tr., Gregory of Tours’ *History of the Franks*, (England: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick J. Geary, ‘Central politics: kings, their allies and opponents’, *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 757.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe 300-1000* (London: MacMillan, 1991), p. 152-3; J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West 400-1000* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, (London: Hutchinson, 1967), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, tr., *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press: 1960), p. ix-x.

aim of the *Chronicle*. It ends in 642 (it was probably completed around 660). There are, of course, the continuations of Fredegar, but these were only added in the eighth century, and were probably composed on the instructions of Charles Martel's half-brother, Count Childebrand<sup>5</sup>. This must cast great doubt on their neutrality. The *Liber Historiae Francorum* was written around 727, probably north of Paris, and relates events from a Neustrian perspective, providing an alternative point of view. However, it does date from a period when Charles Martel's power was well established, and it is possibly not very accurate<sup>6</sup>. Hagiographic works underwent a revival in the Merovingian period, and are sometimes the only sources we have for the late seventh century<sup>7</sup>. It must be kept in mind, though, that their usefulness as sources for political conflicts is limited. The *Annales Mettenses Priores* amounts to little more than Pippinid propaganda<sup>8</sup>. Charters and law codes provide other evidence – some of the earliest medieval charters available are Merovingian in origin<sup>9</sup>. However, their authority is questionable, and the nature of the information they provide is limited. It has been suggested that a decline in royal documents indicates a decline in royal power<sup>10</sup>. The main difficulty with examining the sources for this period is that a large part of the evidence we have may have been tampered with by the Carolingian dynasty after they came to power. The Carolingians retrospectively saw a great change from a Merovingian period to a Carolingian one, and were prepared to falsify the record to show this change<sup>11</sup>. The best example of Carolingian propaganda is Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, which provides some evidence about the Merovingians, but is of doubtful reliability.

Thus this period remains somewhat confused. The absence of evidence has led, in some cases, to questionable methodology, although some new methodological techniques have proved useful<sup>12</sup>. The situation has not been improved by the fact that a great deal of contemporary historiography has been undertaken with less than disinterested motives. Both French and German historians have appropriated the Franks as the ancestors of their race, and used the Merovingian period as a tool in Franco-German rivalry, especially during the 1930s<sup>13</sup>. Also, there is a tendency to see this period as a teleological progression towards a centralised state, and so to praise those who furthered this end, and condemn those who did not<sup>14</sup>. Despite these difficulties, the end of the Merovingian period is a fascinating one, and one which is instrumental in the transformation of Europe from imperial to medieval.

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<sup>5</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Paul Fouracre, 'Merovingian history and Merovingian historiography', *Past and Present* no.127 (1990): 3-4.

<sup>8</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 157, 246.

<sup>9</sup> David Ganz and Walter Goffart, 'Charters earlier than 800 from French collections', *Speculum* 65 (1990), p. 909.

<sup>10</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *Carolingian Culture: emulation and innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> Edward James, *The Origins of France: from Clovis to the Capetians, 500-1000* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 123; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, preface.

<sup>14</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 154.

To understand the difficulties faced by any rulers who would impose control over Gaul, it is first necessary to examine the nature of the area which the Franks took over. Roman Gaul was geographically open to invasion, politically isolated, socially uneasy and racially diverse<sup>15</sup>. Even the Romans had not managed a uniform conquest: the south was Romanized, but the north remained essentially Germanic, a division which was reflected in the fact that the earliest Frankish tribes settled mainly in the north and north-east<sup>16</sup>. The population of Gaul was as diverse as its geography. When the Franks arrived, they made no attempt to segregate themselves from the Gallo-Romans, and quickly assimilated themselves to a Gallo-Roman lifestyle, as their adoption of Latin in official documents indicates<sup>17</sup>. They were such a small percentage of the population of Gaul that Romanization was inevitable<sup>18</sup>. However, divisions between the two races remained into the sixth century. Gallo-Romans mainly held local and ecclesiastical power, while in Merovingian armies and courts, the positions of power were given to Franks<sup>19</sup>. The work of Gregory of Tours displays a certain degree of hostility towards the barbarous behaviour of Frankish leaders and aristocracy, for example, his hostility to Austrasian magnates is clear in Book IX.10<sup>20</sup>. Regardless of the problems, though, the success of the Franks in early medieval Europe can in large part be attributed to the wealth and centrality of Gaul<sup>21</sup>. By the seventh century, the kingdom of Francia had emerged as a unified whole, in which geographical and racial distinctions were no longer important (at least to outsiders)<sup>22</sup>. There is only one instance in the *Chronicle of Fredegar* in which “Roman” is used to signify a Gallo-Roman<sup>23</sup>. The racial, or rather geographical, distinction which has become significant in Fredegar is the use of “Franks” to mean Neustrians<sup>24</sup>. This indicates the tension which was most important in the seventh century, that is, the tension between states rather than peoples.

One of the most tenacious traditions about the Merovingians has been that of *les rois fainéants*, the “do-nothing” kings of the seventh century. The term originated in the sixteenth century, and the tradition usually takes the form that Dagobert I (d. 639) was the last Merovingian king who achieved anything<sup>25</sup>. After him, there was a progressive decline in the Merovingian royal family, slowly but inevitably leading to their usurpation<sup>26</sup>. For some, indeed, Dagobert’s reign was not the end of the line, but

<sup>15</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450-751* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), p. 55; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 153.

<sup>17</sup> Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751-987*, (London and New York: Longman, 1983), p. 16; Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-haired Kings and other studies in Frankish history* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, 8.1 identifies a distinctive Gallo-Roman speech.

<sup>21</sup> Edward James, *The Franks* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> James, *The Franks*, p. 8-9; Paul Fouracre and Richard A. Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography 640-720* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.24.

<sup>24</sup> Fouracre and Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> John J. Contreni, ‘Introduction: the Merovingian Kingdoms, 450-751’ *French Historical Studies* 19 (1996): 755.

<sup>26</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 80; *The Long-haired Kings*, p. 231.

only a temporary reversal in an inevitable decline<sup>27</sup>. The tradition of a hereditary degeneracy in the Merovingian line rests to a great extent on Einhard's description of the last Merovingian kings in his *Life of Charlemagne*: 'this dynasty ... had really lost all power years before and it no longer possessed anything at all of importance beyond the empty title of King'<sup>28</sup>. It has been acknowledged that this is little more than Carolingian propaganda. For example, Roger Collins argues that the incidence of simple-mindedness among the Merovingians has been greatly exaggerated. He identifies only three Merovingian kings as simple-minded: Theudebert II 596-612<sup>29</sup>, Charibert II 629-632<sup>30</sup>, and Clovis II 638-657<sup>31</sup>. It is impossible to know whether or not this would have been a hereditary trait, and, as Wallace-Hadrill has concluded, it is not a sufficient explanation for decline in itself<sup>32</sup>. The second part of the tradition of decline is the incidence of minorities in the seventh century. Again, Collins argues that this has been exaggerated. He can find only four: Sigibert III 634-656, Clovis II, Chlotar III 657-673, and Childeric II 662-675<sup>33</sup>. Once again, this is not sufficient to suggest any genetic weakness in the royal dynasty. The tradition of hereditary degeneracy is therefore discredited, but other aspects of the tradition deserve a more thorough examination. The periods of minorities do not indicate an irreversible trend towards decline, but the circumstances surrounding them warrant closer attention. First, though, I will examine whether or not the Merovingian kings of the seventh century were really "do-nothings".

The usual justification for the title *rois fainéants* is based on the civil wars which apparently dominated the sixth century. These weakened the power of the Merovingians, and led to seventh century rulers who could be labeled "do-nothings". The origin of the civil wars can be traced back to 511 and the death of Clovis. On his death, Clovis divided his kingdom among his four sons. The division of territory was geographically inconsistent, a fact which has been seized on to explain the weakness of the Merovingians. Several historians have attempted to explain the unusual nature of the division. Roger Collins argues that it may be because the division had begun before Clovis's death, hence its piecemeal nature<sup>34</sup>. Ian Wood believed it was based on equality of income rather than territory<sup>35</sup>. Whatever the reason, it is not certain that it would have been a major problem. From an administrative point of view, it would not necessarily have been disruptive, since most of the business of administration went on at the level of the *civitates*, and was not centralised<sup>36</sup>. It is likely, though, that

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Lasko, *The Kingdom of the Franks: north-west Europe before Charlemagne* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p. 65-6.

<sup>28</sup> Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, tr. Lewis Thorpe (England: Penguin Books, 1969): 1.1

<sup>29</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.35.

<sup>30</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.56.

<sup>31</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 1; this is in contrast to *Liber Historiae Francorum*, where he is portrayed as evil.

<sup>32</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-haired Kings*, p. 231.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 158-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>35</sup> Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> Archibald R. Lewis, 'The dukes in the *Regnum Francorum*, A.D. 550-751' *Speculum* 51 (1976), p. 408; Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-haired Kings*, p. 24.

the Gallo-Roman aristocracy disapproved strongly of the wars<sup>37</sup>. Edward James argues that partition actually lengthened the life of the Merovingian dynasty, since opposition, instead of focusing on powerful local magnates, at least was always centred on someone of royal blood<sup>38</sup>. In direct contrast, some historians have identified the division of territory in 511 as the root of all the problems of the Merovingian dynasty, since it led almost immediately to civil war<sup>39</sup>. This argument, though, implies that the decline of the Merovingians took place only one generation after their power was really established, an implication which can fairly safely be dismissed. The main importance of the division of 511 in the decline of the Merovingians was that it set a precedent for later kings<sup>40</sup>. Chlotar I was successful in unifying the kingdom, but on his death in 561, his territory was once again divided among his sons; a division which re-ignited civil war<sup>41</sup>. It was this period of civil war, not resolved until 613, which Gregory identified as ‘the real beginning of our sorrows’<sup>42</sup>.

Exactly what impact these wars had on the Merovingian dynasty is no longer certain. The main source we have for this period is Gregory of Tours, and arguments for the devastating impact of civil war on the Merovingian dynasty seem to be based on his preface to Book V. His biases, though, as a Gallo-Roman and an ecclesiastic, may have led him to give more significance to events than they in fact warranted. His vision of the sixth century as one dominated by war may consequently be distorted<sup>43</sup>. Civil wars were profitable in terms of treasure and land, although the citizens suffered<sup>44</sup>. On the other hand, civil war was indirectly responsible for an important element in the weakening of Merovingian power; that is, the loss of their land and wealth. As noted above, civil wars were profitable. But for whom? A Merovingian king’s success depended on many variables, among which his ability to command military force was one of the most important<sup>45</sup>. In turn, this ability depended on the availability of resources for rewards: loyalty had to be bought<sup>46</sup>. The money in the royal treasury came from manors, revenue and taxes, and gifts<sup>47</sup>. It seems the Merovingian dynasty let the control of these sources of wealth slip through their fingers in the late sixth and seventh centuries. Their landed wealth came from the imperial fisc in the north of Gaul, confiscated by Clovis. The dispersal of this land in gifts, although politically expedient, weakened royal power in the long term<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 73; *The Long-haired Kings*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 134.

<sup>39</sup> R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe: from Constantine to Saint Louis*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (London and New York: Longman, 1988), p. 105; Lasko, *The Kingdom of the Franks*, p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 58.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, *History of the Franks*, IV.22.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory, *History of the Franks*, V.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 134; see also Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, Chapter Six, for a detailed discussion of the benefits of civil war in the sixth century.

<sup>45</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 123.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123, 132.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133; Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 64, 66.

<sup>48</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 162, 165; Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 85.

Through their estates and the remaining Roman tax structures, the Merovingians were well able to raise taxes in the sixth century, but seemed prepared to give this power away, for example to exempt churches such as Tours and Limoges<sup>49</sup>. This brings us to the question of territorial expansion. If the nature of royal power in Merovingian Gaul was dependent on the availability of land, and if this land had to be distributed, it follows that it had to be continually replenished. The best (perhaps even the only) way to do this was through territorial expansion. Hence the statement that the royalty was only able to maintain power in 'a rapidly expanding kingdom'<sup>50</sup>. If the civil wars brought a halt to territorial expansion, a strong case can be made for their role in weakening the power of the kingship. This is the argument made by Roger Collins in *Early Medieval Europe*<sup>51</sup>. These are very complicated questions which have not been satisfactorily resolved. In view of the deficiency of sources, they may never be. In general, though, I would conclude that the civil wars of the late sixth century played some role in the decline of Merovingian power, and paved the way for developments in aristocratic power in the seventh century.

I now return to the question of minority reigns in the late sixth and seventh centuries. As noted above, they cannot be taken as evidence of hereditary decline. However, their role in the decline of Merovingian power was significant. The studies which have been undertaken on the nature of Frankish kingship, most notably by J. M. Wallace-Hadrill in various works, have illuminated this question. One of his most significant conclusions was that the status of a Frankish ruler was linked to his status in warfare<sup>52</sup>. Edward James has expanded on this theme, arguing that the authority of a Frankish king depended to a great degree on his personality, and the extent of his willingness to involve himself in the problems of his kingdom; thus the presence or absence of a strong king was the most important factor in retaining power<sup>53</sup>. It has been noted that, in many cases a rebellion follows on the death of a king<sup>54</sup>. It is in this situation that the ascendancy to the throne of an infant becomes charged with significance. The timing of the minorities was very important too. For example, the death of Dagobert I in c.639 was followed by an interregnum, and the elevation to the throne of his son, Clovis, who was still in his minority<sup>55</sup>. An infant was also placed on the throne of Austrasia<sup>56</sup>. This may not have been so significant at another time, but during a period of external threat, and following the civil wars which depleted the royalty's lands, it provided an opportunity for the aristocracy<sup>57</sup>. The vision of the eleven-year-old Sigibert III 'weeping unrestrainedly' after losing a battle is one which has done almost as much to tarnish the reputation of the Merovingian dynasty as Einhard's description<sup>58</sup>. It was during this period that the Austrasian and Neustrian

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<sup>49</sup> Gregory, *History of the Franks*, IX.30-31; James, *The Origins of France*, p. 133.

<sup>50</sup> Lasko, *The Kingdom of the Franks*, p. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 123, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 91; for example, Gregory, *History of the Franks*, VII.2.

<sup>55</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.79-80.

<sup>56</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.85.

<sup>57</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 257.

<sup>58</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.87.

magnates began to take over the appointments of Mayors of the Palace from the monarchy, and they were also the ones who appointed regents<sup>59</sup>. While the consistency with which regents were appointed can be interpreted as evidence of dynastic strength, the periods of regency allowed aristocratic power to build<sup>60</sup>.

The minority of Chlotar III, which began in 658, is another significant regency period in the history of Merovingian Gaul. After this period, very few kings exercised personal authority. For example, Childeric II, who became Neustrian king in 673, is often cited as a refutation of the argument that Merovingian kings suffered a loss of power in the seventh century. Certainly, Childeric was a forceful ruler, but he was assassinated by the aristocracy only two years after his accession to the throne<sup>61</sup>. It seems impossible not to acknowledge that there was a decline in the *power* of the Merovingian kings in the seventh century. It is noticeable in the *Chronicle of Fredegar* that after the death of Dagobert I, the focus shifts away from the monarchy, and the major actors become the Mayors of the Palace, rather than the kings. This can be explained by the fact that there were regencies both in the kingdom of Francia, and the subkingdom of Austrasia during this period, and therefore it is only natural that the Mayors of the Palace should be in the foreground<sup>62</sup>. However, this shift away from the monarchy is even more evident in the *Continuations of Fredegar*. Of course, they were written at a later period, making it difficult to know whether they indicate an irreversible trend, or are merely reflecting an outcome which only became “inevitable” in retrospect. The inescapable conclusion, though, is that the minorities also played some role in weakening the power of the Merovingian kings.

This conclusion, though, does not mean that the Merovingian dynasty’s loss of power was necessarily inevitable or irreversible; that is, it is not a “decline” in the sense in which it is usually used. Merovingian prestige and authority lasted for a considerable time after Dagobert<sup>63</sup>. This is indicated by the fact that, in the late seventh century, those who wished to find a king were forced to look in the monasteries to find someone of Merovingian blood<sup>64</sup>. That the aristocracy was prepared to go to such an effort demonstrates the continuing importance of the Merovingians. By the eighth century, the prestige of the dynasty was probably substantially more significant than their power<sup>65</sup>, but even then the deposition of the Merovingian Childeric III was not accomplished without outside authority.

Having examined the loss of power of the Merovingians, I will now turn to the aristocracy, and examine to what extent their rise in power was consequent on, and to what extent it was at the expense of, a Merovingian “decline”. The position of the nobility in the sixth century was ambiguous. The king depended on them for support,

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<sup>59</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 139; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Janet L. Nelson, ‘Queens as Jezebels: the careers of Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian history’, in Derek Baker, ed, *Medieval Women* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978): 76.

<sup>61</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.79-80, 85.

<sup>63</sup> James, *The Franks*, p. 231-232; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 30.

<sup>64</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 9, 10; *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, 92; Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 224.

but not totally, and they depended on the king's favour in return<sup>66</sup>. Aristocratic power, though, was not unified, and the aristocrats could hardly be characterized as less violent than the monarchs<sup>67</sup>. Of course, there are examples of aristocratic power being wielded in this period: in 534 Theudebert turned to his *leudes* for help in retaining his throne<sup>68</sup>. Such examples, though, are aberrations, and not indicative of a sustained aristocratic push for power. It was not until the end of the civil wars in 613, and the unification of the kingdom under Chlotar II, a period of relative peacefulness, that the aristocracy really began to increase their power.

There is a consensus that the seventh century saw a rise in aristocratic power. Chlotar II's success in unifying the kingdom of Francia was in large part due to the cooperation of Burgundian and Austrasian aristocrats, who in turn benefited from this support. For example, Warnachar and Rado were rewarded for their support by being made Mayors of the Palace for life in, respectively, Burgundy and Austrasia<sup>69</sup>. As has been noted above, kings always depended on the support of aristocrats, and for a king to reward his followers was not unusual in itself. However, by 613, the kingship had been weakened, and consequently, the balance of power in the relationship between kings and their *leudes* was beginning to change. After 613, the aristocrats built on the advantages they had gained, and the powers of the Mayors of the Palace were extended. For example, when Chlotar quarreled with his son Dagobert over the extent of Austrasian territory in 625, the quarrel was resolved by a council of twelve lords, including Bishop Arnulf of Metz, who had also been instrumental in Chlotar's accession to the throne; it was resolved in favour of increased territory for Austrasia<sup>70</sup>. This reflects a triumph for the aristocracy, particularly in view of the fact that aristocratic wealth was based almost entirely on land<sup>71</sup>.

On the other hand, it is easy to overstate the significance of this period to relations between the aristocracy and the monarchy. In particular, the Edict of Paris of c.614 is often seen as the decisive moment in transferring power from the monarchy to the aristocracy, but this is based on a misunderstanding of its context. Its real aim was to end abuses which had developed during the civil wars<sup>72</sup>. The most misunderstood clause is that which states that judges should be drawn from their own localities. This does not indicate a concession to the aristocracy, but is intended to facilitate the confiscation of property from corrupt judges<sup>73</sup>. This period is of most importance in retrospect; at the time, it probably did not seem unusual. In 627, the *Chronicle of Fredegar* records that the fear inspired by a royal order from Chlotar was sufficient to keep the Burgundians quiet<sup>74</sup>. Aristocratic power was on the rise, but this process was

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<sup>66</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 22.

<sup>67</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III.23.

<sup>69</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.40-42.

<sup>70</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.53.

<sup>71</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 132; for example, Gregory, *History of the Franks*, IX.9.

<sup>72</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 153.

<sup>73</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 140.

<sup>74</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.55.

no more inevitable than the “decline” of Merovingian power. It was a process which required constant consolidation.

The relationship between the aristocracy and the monarchy had long been one of mutual dependence. The importance of assemblies, where the king would gather together all his followers and discuss local problems, military strategy, and legal deliberations, which were then manifested in decrees, is obvious in both Gregory’s *History of the Franks* and *The Chronicle of Fredegar*<sup>75</sup>. The prologue to *Lex Salica*, probably first promulgated early in the sixth century, clearly indicates an aristocratic role in the formulation of laws<sup>76</sup>. As Edward James has argued, royal authority depended ‘at *all* times’ [my emphasis] on the co-operation of the aristocracy<sup>77</sup>. However, as he has also stated, even during the periods of strongest royal power, such as the sixth century, there were some aristocrats who chose to disregard this authority. The extent to which the defiance of authority was successful depended on the power of the monarchy, of course, but I would argue it also depended on the ambition and capacity of the aristocracy.

The power of the aristocracy at this time is best described by a passage from the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, referring to Pippin I and Arnulf: ‘Jointly and with suitable blandishments they drew the Austrasian notables into their orbit, ruled them generously, won their support and knew how to keep it’<sup>78</sup>. This description would seem more appropriate to kings than officials. On the other hand, this power may have been overestimated. After Pippin’s death his son Grimoald (appointed by his father as Austrasian Mayor of the Palace), attempted to place his own son on the Merovingian throne<sup>79</sup>. This incident is interesting, in its ambiguity. On the one hand, the fact that it occurred at all indicates royal weakness, but the eventual outcome might suggest a reinforcement of royal power. It might also suggest, however, a tension between the nobles of Austrasia and Neustria: it was the Neustrian nobles who reacted most strongly, punishing Grimoald by binding him ‘with painful chains’, a form of punishment explicitly forbidden for a freeman by *Lex Salica*<sup>80</sup>. This reaction is representative of royal prestige, but it is also representative of the tension between aristocratic factions.

The aristocracy had to fight for supremacy in much the same way as the monarchy. The Mayors of the Palace depended as much on aristocratic support as the kings did; with the difference, of course, that they were usually related, either by birth or marriage, to the same families they were relying on for support<sup>81</sup>. The struggles between the three states of Austrasia, Neustria and Burgundy dominated the seventh

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<sup>75</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 160; many examples, see especially Fredegar IV.90.

<sup>76</sup> *Laws of the Salian and Ripuarian Franks*. Tr. T. J. Rivers. New York: AMS Press, 1986, p. 39.

<sup>77</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> IV.85.

<sup>79</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 43; Eddius Stephanus, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, tr. Bertram Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), 28.

<sup>80</sup> *Lex Salica* 32.

<sup>81</sup> Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 2.

century, as the struggles between the Merovingians had dominated the sixth century<sup>82</sup>. It was the final ascendancy of the Austrasian aristocracy which led to the rise of the Carolingians.

The creation of the states of Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgundy both reflected and reinforced divisions which already existed within the kingdom<sup>83</sup>. The state of Austrasia, in the north and east of the territory, contained the area in which the initial Frankish tribes had settled, and thus remained largely Germanic in character. Neustria, in the west, was the richest area of Gaul in terms of fiscal land, Roman cities and productive population<sup>84</sup>. Burgundy was the most Romanized state. In the sixth century, Guntram depended a great deal on the support of the Roman aristocracy<sup>85</sup>. The Burgundian aristocrat Warnachar played a central role in the establishment of Chlotar II's kingdom. On his death, the Burgundian nobles requested that no new Mayor of the Palace be elected<sup>86</sup>. Patrick Geary argues that this indicates separatist tendencies on the part of the Burgundians, a conclusion which would seem to be borne out by other evidence<sup>87</sup>. The visit of Dagobert to Burgundy in 628 was said to have caused 'profound alarm ... among the Burgundian bishops, magnates and others of consequence', in contrast to the 'great joy' that it occasioned among the poor<sup>88</sup>. Later, Pippin III was forced to subdue rebellions in Burgundy<sup>89</sup>. The separatist tendencies in Burgundy were in contrast to the centralizing tendencies of Neustria and Austrasia. It was the feud between these two states which really shaped the currents of the seventh century.

Chlotar II's seat of government was in Neustria. The Austrasian nobles demanded their own king, and in response, Chlotar established his young son Dagobert as ruler of Austrasia<sup>90</sup>. After Chlotar's death, Dagobert moved his seat of government to Paris, a move which may have been intended to decrease the influence of the Austrasian aristocracy<sup>91</sup>. In the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, it is a move which signals the beginning of decadency<sup>92</sup>. On Dagobert's death, the Austrasian magnates, especially Pippin, were anxious to maintain their own king, signaling their anxiety to maintain control of their own affairs<sup>93</sup>. The feud between the Austrasians and the Neustrians came to a head with the battle of Tertry in 687<sup>94</sup>. This battle is often seen as being the decisive

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<sup>82</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 52; Eddius Stephanus, *Life of Wilfrid*, 33; *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 1-5.

<sup>83</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 17.

<sup>84</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 120.

<sup>85</sup> Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, VII.32, VIII.1

<sup>86</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.54.

<sup>87</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 155.

<sup>88</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.58.

<sup>89</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 24.

<sup>90</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.47; Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 156.

<sup>91</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 156.

<sup>92</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.60.

<sup>93</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.85.

<sup>94</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 5.

moment in Austrasian/Neustrian relations, although the truth is much more complex, as struggles for dominance continued for the next fifty years<sup>95</sup>. In retrospect, though, the battle was the beginning of the dominance of the Austrasian aristocracy<sup>96</sup>. This dominance was consolidated during the late seventh century, a period of relative peacefulness, during which kings largely ruled from Neustria. This left the Austrasian aristocracy to their own devices, allowing them to gain control of wealth and power in their own region<sup>97</sup>. Narrative sources indicate that the major political initiatives of the second half to the seventh century originated with the Austrasian Mayors of the Palace. Of course, these narrative sources are biased, but corroborating evidence is found in charters dating from this period<sup>98</sup>. By the eighth century, the Austrasian Mayors of the Palace were making conquests outside the kingdom in the name of Francia<sup>99</sup>.

The dominance of the Austrasian aristocracy can be attributed mainly to the ambition of one family, the family which was ultimately to become the Carolingians and decisively displace the authority of the Merovingians. The first appearance by this family is in the *Chronicle of Fredegar* in 613<sup>100</sup>. Bishop Arnulf of Metz and Pippin I, the aristocrats who supported Chlotar II, were the ancestors of the Carolingian family. Their power and their ambition are amply demonstrated in the *Chronicle*<sup>101</sup>. It was Pippin I who transformed this position into a hereditary one by appointing his son as his successor<sup>102</sup>. In this context, Dagobert's appointment of the member of a rival family to act as tutor to his son becomes significant<sup>103</sup>; but if his intention was to curb their power it was unsuccessful.

The appointment of Pippin II as Austrasian Mayor of the Palace was instrumental in consolidating the power of both the aristocracy and his own family. He was the right man at the right time, in effect, as the king was unimpressive and the aristocracy was disaffected<sup>104</sup>. Pippin II extended the powers of the mayor of the palace considerably, as shown by a charter of 695, which he appears to have forced the king to sign<sup>105</sup>. *The Chronicle of Fredegar* is unreservedly complimentary about Pippin. On his death, it is stated that he had 'ruled' Austrasia for twenty-seven and a half years<sup>106</sup>. However, the Arnulfings found themselves in trouble in 711, when Pippin II's appointee as Neustrian Mayor of the Palace died, and an infant was named as his successor<sup>107</sup>. The

<sup>95</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 248; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 28.

<sup>96</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 82.

<sup>97</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 159; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 23.

<sup>98</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 159.

<sup>99</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 11-21; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 18.

<sup>100</sup> IV.40.

<sup>101</sup> For example, *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.52.

<sup>102</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.86.

<sup>103</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum* 43; *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.86, 88.

<sup>104</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, IV.40; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 28.

<sup>105</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 28.

<sup>106</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 8.

<sup>107</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 53; *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 8.

irony of this situation has been nicely enunciated by Edward James: ‘a puppet mayor of the palace in theory ruling in the name of a puppet Merovingian king’<sup>108</sup>. After Pippin’s death in 714, the Neustrian nobles seized their chance and attacked the Austrasians<sup>109</sup>. This led to a period of warring aristocratic factions which was settled by Charles Martel, Pippin’s illegitimate son<sup>110</sup>.

Thus, Pippin II’s gains were not assured. A stronger case can be (and has been) made for Charles Martel as the founder of Carolingian power<sup>111</sup>. Certainly the *Continuations of the Chronicle of Fredegar* represent the extent to which he dominated politics in the early eighth century. He appointed various kings, none of whom exercised any real authority<sup>112</sup>. From 737 to his death in 741 he ruled without a king. The *Continuations* make no mention of the death of Theuderic IV in 737; it is merely stated, on Charles’ death, that he had ‘ruled’ over the Franks for twenty-five and a half years<sup>113</sup>. However, his control was not necessarily secure, as his problems with the Neustrian nobility indicate<sup>114</sup>. On his death, the gains he had made in power were challenged by revolts in various provinces<sup>115</sup>.

Charles Martel was succeeded by his two sons Pippin and Carloman. The support for the pretensions of an illegitimate son, Grifo, may indicate that, even at this stage, Carolingian power was fragile<sup>116</sup>. The fact that Pippin and Carloman felt it necessary to appoint another Merovingian to the throne has been the source of much debate. No narrative source mentions the reign of Childeric; the only evidence we have for it is charters<sup>117</sup>. These charters indicate that it was Carloman’s support, not Pippin’s which was of greatest influence in getting Childeric on the throne<sup>118</sup>. The appointment has been cited as evidence of the fragility of Carolingian control; it has even been used as evidence of a Merovingian “revival”<sup>119</sup>. The fact that it was felt necessary may indicate an admission of weakness on the part of Pippin and Carloman, but it may also indicate the survival of traditional and loyalist feeling even among the aristocracy<sup>120</sup>. It may also represent a desire on the part of Carloman to curb his brother’s power. Pippin III’s ambition cannot be questioned, and on the retreat of his brother to a monastery in 747 (with Pippin’s persuasion?), it became unstoppable<sup>121</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 152.

<sup>109</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 7-9.

<sup>110</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 53.

<sup>111</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 83; James, *The Origins of France*, p. 152.

<sup>112</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 248.

<sup>113</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 24.

<sup>114</sup> *Liber Historiae Francorum*, 53; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 250.

<sup>115</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 25-32.

<sup>116</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 33; the main evidence for any such support comes from the *Annales Mettenses Priores*, a far from unbiased source.

<sup>117</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *The Chronicle of Fredegar*, p99, n.1.

<sup>118</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 34.

<sup>119</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 91.

<sup>120</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 34.

<sup>121</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 30; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 254.

His step in requesting the permission of the papacy was given great emphasis by Einhard, and is often considered highly significant of the relationship between the Catholic church and the Frankish aristocracy<sup>122</sup>. The relationship between the church and the Frankish aristocracy did undergo a transformation in the seventh century, as indicated by the popularity of hagiography, and the type of saints depicted therein<sup>123</sup>. The Old Testament model of kingship evident in the sources also indicates this change<sup>124</sup>. However, this did not necessarily translate into increased support from the papacy, as there was poor communication between the Roman and Frankish churches, not to mention a certain distrust on each side<sup>125</sup>. Janet L. Nelson argues that the 'anointing' of Pippin has been given too much weight, and does not signify a major change in the concept of kingship<sup>126</sup>. This is a question which needs to be put in the context of a broader ecclesiastical history of the sixth and seventh centuries. It is only relevant to note here that, the step having been taken, the transformation from Merovingian to Carolingian power was complete.

The seventh century undoubtedly saw a gain in the power of the aristocracy, and in the power of the Carolingians. However, this gain was no more a progressive and inevitable rise than the loss of royal power was a progressive and inevitable decline. The genealogy of the Carolingians suggests relationships to the modern scholar which were not necessarily significant at the time. Certainly, Pippin I and Bishop Arnulf were ancestors of the Carolingians, and Pippin I was the grandfather of Pippin II in a literal sense. However, as Rosamond McKitterick has noted, sources for the period refer only to Pippin II's paternal grandfather, Arnulf, while his relationship to Pippin I is historically insignificant<sup>127</sup>. Pippin II made important gains, but these were lost on his death. Charles Martel has often been seen as the real founder of Carolingian power, but even his hold over his territory was challenged on his death. There is no sense in which the eventual usurpation of the throne by Pippin III was the result of premeditation on the part of the Arnulfings<sup>128</sup>. Certainly, the Carolingians were ambitious, but there is no evidence that their ambition was focused on taking over the throne, or at least, not in an organised sense. They were opportunists, though, and these two traits, ambition and opportunity, culminated in the action of Pippin III in taking over the title of king from the Merovingians<sup>129</sup>. This action was not the culmination of a rise in Carolingian power, but an opportunistic action which proved to be decisive in the struggle for power.

If a trend can be identified in this period, it is not the rise or decline in power of any one family, but a trend towards regional and local autonomy, and away from

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<sup>122</sup> Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 1, 3.

<sup>123</sup> Fouracre, 'Merovingian history', p. 9-12.

<sup>124</sup> Judith W. George, *Venantius Fortunatus: a Latin Poet in Merovingian Gaul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 43; *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 20.

<sup>125</sup> Peter Llewellyn, 'The popes and the constitution in the eighth century', *The English Historical Review* 101 (1986), p. 61.

<sup>126</sup> Janet L. Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1986), p. 289.

<sup>127</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 26.

<sup>128</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, *Barbarian West*, p. 81, 92; James, *The Origins of France*, p. 125.

<sup>129</sup> McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 27; Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe*, p. 108-9.

centralised authority. The centralised authority of the Roman empire had broken down in the fifth century, encouraging the growth of regionalism<sup>130</sup>. When the Franks entered Gaul, the existing administrative structures were crude<sup>131</sup>. For some, the success or failure of the Franks to maintain these structures has been a major factor in their survival. While James and Collins argue that they succeeded, Richard Hodges uses archaeology to claim that very few Merovingian leaders managed to successfully 'emulate the socio-economic institutions' of the Romans, although they wanted to<sup>132</sup>. The adoption of a late imperial style in Frankish royal charters indicate the extent to which the Merovingians appropriated Roman structures<sup>133</sup>. However, there are significant differences between Roman and Merovingian charters which are indicative of a breakdown in central authority: Roman charters assume the operation of a larger system, while Merovingian charters appear to operating independently<sup>134</sup>. Seventh century charters also provide evidence of a rise in the concept of permanent possession in land ownership, a significant change from the sixth century<sup>135</sup>. The Edict of Chlotar, usually considered representative of a rise in the power of the aristocracy, can also be interpreted as a manifestation of regionalism<sup>136</sup>. The battle of Tertry may have been the beginning of Carolingian rule, but it was also instrumental in the growth of autonomous states, as the only effective rule was left in north east Gaul<sup>137</sup>. Thus the two incidents which are given primary importance in the rise of the Carolingians are more symbolic of a different sort of change.

By the seventh century the autonomy of the various states of Francia was being asserted. The Franks had made no attempt to integrate subject peoples, but established Frankish dukes over them; these dukes, though, if they did not already have ties to their regions, quickly intermarried with local elites. It is for this reason that, when the current monarch was weak, these regions could increase their power<sup>138</sup>. In the seventh century, regions such as Bavaria, Frisia, Thuringia, Aquitaine and Provence became virtually autonomous; Pippin III's re-establishment of control was tenuous and temporary<sup>139</sup>. In fact, the general impression I have of this period is of one in which control was hard to gain and easy to lose. Therefore, an examination of this period leads to the conclusion that we cannot, with any degree of certainty, speak of the decline of the Merovingians *or* the rise of the Carolingians, or at least not in the sense in which those phrases have traditionally been used.

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<sup>130</sup> Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 75.

<sup>131</sup> Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 153.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: the origins of towns and trade A.D. 600-1000* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p. 2; James, *The Franks*, p. 3; Collins, *Early Medieval Europe*, p. 160.

<sup>133</sup> Ganz and Goffart, 'Charters earlier than 800', p. 909.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 923.

<sup>135</sup> John Moreland, 'Diversity and change in the Merovingian world', *Antiquity* 71, 271 (1997): 235.

<sup>136</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. p. 154.

<sup>137</sup> James, *The Origins of France*, p. 149; McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms*, p. 25.

<sup>138</sup> Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 119.

<sup>139</sup> *The Chronicle of Fredegar: continuations*, 25-9, 31, 32; Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. 154.

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