SEARCHING FOR THE SACRAL IN GREGORY OF TOURS' LONG-HAIRED KINGS

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ABSTRACT

The kings of the Frankish Merovingian dynasty, rulers of Gaul between the fifth and eighth centuries, were distinguished from their subjects by their long hair. St. Gregory, bishop of Tours (538-594), our chief source for the history of sixth-century Gaul, described their quarrels and conquests in fascinating detail, but is frustratingly vague when it comes to the symbolic power associated with their hair. Long hair was a sign of belonging to the royal family and a qualification for kingship; hence, cutting it off could be a temporary way of disqualifying a rival from political action. Some German historians of the late 19th and 20th centuries attempted to assign a sacral or magical quality to the Merovingian hair. Most such efforts suffered from severe methodological problems, in addition to being politically tainted by their authors' association with National Socialism. Nevertheless, the possibility that the Merovingian hair carried some magical connotations is an interesting one, and not entirely foreclosed by the evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Einhard's ninth-century *Life of Charlemagne* begins with a description of the last of the Merovingian kings of the Franks:

> The race of the Meroving[ians] from which the Franks were accustomed to choose their kings is reckoned as lasting to King [Ch]ilderic [III] who, by the order of Stephen, the Roman Pontiff, was deposed, tonsured, and sent into a monastery. But this race, though it may be regarded as finishing with him, had long since lost all power, and no longer possessed anything of importance except the royal title. For the wealth and power of the kingdom was in the hands of the Praefects of the Court, who were called Mayors of the Palace, and exercised entire sovereignty. The King, contented with the mere royal title, with long hair and flowing beard, used to sit upon the throne and act the part of a ruler, listening to ambassadors, whencesoever they came, and giving them at their departure, as if of his own power, answers which he had been instructed or commanded to give. But this was the only function that he performed, for besides the empty royal title and the precarious life income with the Praefect of the Court allowed him at his pleasure he had nothing of his own except one estate with a very small revenue, on which he had his house, and from which he drew the few servants who performed such services as were necessary and made him a show of deference. Wherever he had to go he travelled in a wagon, drawn in rustic style by a pair of oxen, and driven by a cowherd. In this fashion he used to go to the palace and to the general meetings of the people, which were held yearly for the affairs of the kingdom; in this fashion he returned home. But the Praefect of the Court looked after the administration of the kingdom and all that had to be done or arranged at home or abroad.[1]

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[1] Eginhard [Einhard], *The Life of Charlemagne* 1, trans. A.J. Grant (Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses Publications 1999), 4-5.

Einhard's depiction is hardly a flattering one. He is, of course, trying to promote the new, Carolingian dynasty at the expense of the old. The common picture of the last Merovingians is that of *rois fainéants*: do-nothing kings who were captives and puppets of their mayors of the palace. In the end, writes Einhard, stripped of real power by their erstwhile servants, they were left only with their empty symbolic power, manifested in their royal title and long hair.

What was this symbolic power contained in the long flowing hair of the last Merovingian? Had it once meant something more, been a more authoritative manifestation of royal authority? Many historians have attempted to answer this question, not always with the most satisfactory of results. This thesis will follow in their footsteps, in an attempt to synthesize and grapple with the historiography of the subject. It will proceed in three chapters: firstly, it is necessary to deal in some detail with our primary source for the history of sixth-century Gaul and our most eloquent witness of the long hair of the Merovingians: Gregory of Tours. Some general historiographical considerations must also be must. Secondly, I delve in some depth into primary accounts of the political role of the Merovingian hair. In the final chapter, I trace the historiographical tradition that has assigned aspects of magic and sacrality to the Merovingian hair, and question whether such concepts can still be used.

I. GREGORY OF TOURS AND THE MEROVINGIAN WORLD

I.1 Gregory of Tours' Decem Libri Historiarum

Saint Gregory of Tours (538-594, bishop of Tours from 573) is responsible for one of the most impressive literary oeuvres of 6th century Europe, including ten books of *historiae* and eight of *miracula* (saints' lives). While the *miracula* are very useful for understanding elements of Gregory's world-view and for reconstructing his own biography, they are not relevant for the subject of this thesis. Therefore, we will focus only on the ten books of *historiae*. Any discussion of Gregory's work, however, must first proceed from discussions of its form, purpose, and content, which have been the subject of important historiographical work over the past three decades. Therefore, this will be our starting point as well.

Gregory wrote ten books of *historiae*; books I-IV cover events from the beginning of creation up until Gregory's own day, while books V-X, the bulk of the work, cover events contemporaneous to Gregory's own time as bishop of Tours. This compression of time is of itself remarkable; the last six books cover a period of only about twenty years, while the first book covers the history of thousands in a few short chapters. Gregory probably wrote the first four books first, with the intention of stopping once he reached more contemporary events, but then decided to continue writing about contemporary events with a more explicitly moral and didactic purpose.[2] Gregory's primary model for writing such a history, which primarily concerned more recent events but situated them within a universal Christian history, was probably the 5th century Christian historian Orosius, whose *Historiae Adversus Paganos* follows a similar pattern. This places Gregory firmly within the genre of Christian *historia*, which addresses the universal Christian church.[3] This is important to keep in mind when reading Gregory. As an active clergyman and a quite sincerely pious individual, the ideas that shaped his entire worldview were religious in nature.

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[2] This is based on the conclusion to book IV, which shows signs being written as a general conclusion to the work; Gregory's didactic purpose will be discussed below. See Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours: History and Society in the Sixth Century*, trans. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001), 36-37.
[3] Ibid., 105-106.

Nevertheless, despite being written at different times and with different purposes, it seems Gregory intended all ten books of his *Historiae* to be taken together. In fact, in the final chapter of book X, which functions as an epilogue, he explicitly implores subsequent generations to preserve all of the books together intact, and not to edit or rearrange them.[4] Despite this, as soon as two generations after his death, subsequent copyists and editors did, indeed, butcher his work quite badly by omitting chapters or even whole books.[5] 7th century copyists apparently had a much different purpose in mind for Gregory's work. Instead of an eschatological Christian history of the universal church, subsequent generations (down to modern times) sought a history of the Merovingian Frankish kingdom. Accordingly, they omitted many chapters dealing with clergymen and saints in later manuscripts—chapters that were central to Gregory's vision.[6] The legacy of this historical mangling of Gregory's purpose is still visible in many modern editions, which, despite restoring the integrity of all ten books, do not adopt the most likely originally intended title, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, but instead opt for *Historiae Francorum* or *History of the Franks*. I will refer to the ten books throughout simply as *Historiae*.[7] The title *Historiae Francorum* is also emblematic of the 'ethnic-mindedness' of subsequent historians. Despite his work dealing primarily with the Frankish kingdom, taking Gregory's work as a whole, it becomes quite obvious that Gregory does *not* intend to write a history of the Frankish people (*gens*).[8]

I.2 Modern Reception of Gregory's Work

Emblematic of the 'classic' interpretation of Gregory's work is the great literary scholar Erich Auerbach, who in a chapter of his masterful and influential *Mimesis*[9] discusses the episode of the feud between two Frankish noblemen, Sicharius and Chramnesindus (Hist. VII, 47 and IX, 19). In

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[4] *Hist.* X.31, 603. Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum libri decem*, (hereon *Hist.*) X.31, in *MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison, (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1951). In *The History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe, (London: Penguin, 1974), 603.
[5] Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 192-93.
[6] Ibid., 199-201.
[7] This was established definitively by Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 119-127.
[8] Ibid., 126-27.
[9] Erich Auerbach, "Sicharius and Chramnesindus," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

Auerbach's interpretation, the entire episode appears extremely confused and confusing to the reader, partly owing to Gregory's rather poor and 'degenerated' Latin, partly due to the jumble of the events presented and the lack of immediate context given. In this reading, Gregory exists as a naïve reporter of the events occurring around him; he is a product of a barbaric time—the rough and violent 6th century, after the fall of Rome to the barbarians. His is an extremely violent world, in which the Frankish ruling class, only quite recently Christianized and not yet sufficiently touched by the light of Culture, feud with and murder each other constantly, while the bishop Gregory, not nearly as learned as his ecclesiastical forebears of the previous century struggles to record the chaos of these events. While his rustic writing style may hold a certain charm, 'a first early trace of the reawakening sensory apprehension of things and events'[10], Gregory is nevertheless more of a simple chronicler than the constructor of a deliberately designed literary text.

This 'old-fashioned' way of reading Gregory's work was more or less exploded by a chapter in Walter Goffart's *Narrators of Barbarian History*.[11] This chapter shows the ways in which Gregory can be a very subtle author, deliberately shaping his context to convey a certain religious-ideological message. In brief, the seeming jumble of senseless violence, backstabbing, and fratricide that make up Gregory's narrative should not be taken as evidence of the author naively reporting what is going on around him, but rather a deliberate textual strategy for conveying a certain message: do not strive after the riches of this world, where the sinful and barbarous rule, but rather seek salvation in the next.[12] Goffart's conclusion was that Gregory was writing something like a Christian satire, taking ironic distance from his subject matter in order to heap scorn upon the earthly strivings his contemporaries.[13] While his claim that Gregory may have had access to the works of pagan Roman satirists seems less plausible,[14] Gregory's use of irony to portray the brutality of the human condition is clear – consider, for example, the mutual slaughter of the Franks

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[10] Ibid., 95.
[11] Goffart, "Gregory of Tours and "The Triumph of Superstition'," in *Narrators of Barbarian History*.
[12] Ibid., 181; see also Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 91-92.
[13] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 190-200.
[14] See Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 91; I tend to agree with Heinzelmann that Gregory probably simply would never have read something like a pagan satire, and anyway it is not necessary to have read satire in order to employ irony.

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of Tournai in Hist. X, 27: the futilely kill each other until only one is left, 'for whom no slaughterer could be found.' Even if we cannot claim that Gregory read pagan satire, we can still perhaps say that his work has elements of satire in the sense that Hayden White uses the term, as a kind of emplotment, in which all action is futile, and the state of society is essentially static, tending towards some kind of (usually pessimistic) base line.[15]

If we accept that Gregory was capable of a literary move as sophisticated as satire, then we must call into question some of the other grounds upon which the 'naivety' idea was based. For instance, we must reconsider Gregory's own attestation, in the introduction to his *Historiae*, that his own language was poor, and that he was forced to take up the task of reporting current events simply because there was no one else around to do so. Gregory's 'poor' Latin (by classical standards) has, indeed, been grounds upon which earlier modern historians have based their own dismissiveness of his quality as an historian. Erich Auerbach was certainly not wrong when he remarked that Gregory's (mis)use of the connective causal particle *nam*, for instance, makes many of his narrative extremely hard to follow, causing many a headache to generations of readers and translators.[16] Nevertheless, Goffart insists that we should perhaps be a bit suspicious of Gregory's claims to be simple and uncultivated, based on his demonstrable literary skill,[17] and Martin Heinzelmann has shown that Gregory was capable of (re)producing high quality Latin in some of his introductions based on prior models, claiming that his rustic speech was perhaps a deliberate strategy to appeal to his readership, who were more familiar with such language than they would have been with 'good' classical Latin.[18] This is perhaps going too far. It seems safe to stick with the conclusion of Felix Thürlemann that while Gregory's self-admonitions about his poor speech were probably

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[15] See Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1973): 281-314
[16] Auerbach, *Mimesis,* 81-82.
[17] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History,* 200.
[18] Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 100-101.

genuine on his part, we should nonetheless take Gregory's skill as a narrator and shaper of his work seriously.[19]

There is one last aspect of Gregory's work to briefly consider: the overall plan and purpose of the *Historiae*. Martin Heinzelmann has established, through a close structural analysis of all ten books of the *Historiae* taken as a whole, a definite pattern to the work, in which historical events are prefigured by the biblical events presented in book I; these biblical events serve as *topoi* or models for understanding history.[20] This is important for understanding how Gregory made sense of the world around him. As a churchman steeped in religious language and with an entirely ecclesiastical education, Gregory viewed the world through biblical patterns. Nevertheless, his concerns were not only religious in the purely spiritual sense, but also political. As a powerful bishop, he was involved in the high politics of the Frankish kingdom, as he himself relates (in the first person, even) throughout his work, and he had a particular vision for how society should be organized. This vision involved, unsurprisingly, a large political role for bishops as both tax administrators in their own right and as spiritual and political advisors to the kings: a quasi-theocratic way of organizing society sometimes termed *Bischofsherrschaft* by historians.[21] This vision of society colors the entire organization and outlook of the *Historiae*. To give a brief plan of the ten books: books I-IV, as already mentioned, deal with events before Gregory's time, from the creation of the world up through the establishment of the Frankish kingdom; books V-VI primarily revolve around the 'bad king' Chilperic, a political enemy of Gregory's who favored royal authority over the bishops; books VII-IX form a trilogy around the 'good king' Guntramn, an ally of Gregory's who actively sought the cooperation of the bishops of his kingdom; and finally, book X, one of the messiest narratively, seems primarily eschatological in flavor, giving signs and portents of the end of the sinful world and the coming reign of the universal church.[22]

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[19] Felix Thürlemann, *Der historische Diskurs bei Gregor von Tours: Topoi und Wirklichkeit* (Zürich: Zürcher Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft 1974), 59-72.
[20] Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 149-50.
[21] Ibid., 190-91.
[22] Ibid., 37, 188.

All of these historiographical considerations bring us, in a roundabout way, to the point: one should be very careful of taking, as Auerbach did, a passage or chapter out of context and attempting to extrapolate meaning from that. Far from simply recording what he saw around him, Gregory had a certain plan and vision for his work, and a point he wanted to drive home. This point, however, only becomes clear after viewing the work as a whole (hence his admonition to preserve the integrity of the ten books and not to split them up). If the events in his narrative appear messy and confused, as they sometimes do, that is not because Gregory did not know how to organize his work, but in fact because he organized them precisely to create such an effect; yes, the political affairs of this world are violent and messy, but this is all the more reason to renounce this world and plan for the next. This world is an inherently sinful one where *everyone is both perpetrator and victim.*[23] This is demonstrated by the way Gregory deliberately arranges events, not chronologically, but thematically, inducing in the reader a certain *feeling.*[24] This is Gregory's didactic purpose, to both demonstrate the sinfulness of earthly life and to advocate for a certain arrangement of society based around the authority of the universal church, wielded by the bishops.

The other main point we should take from this historiographic discussion is that *Gregory is not necessarily interested in telling us what historians want to hear.*[25] The persistence of the title *Historia Francorum* is perhaps emblematic of what Goffart calls the stubborn 'ethnic-mindedness' of historians. However, Gregory never indicates that he intends to write a 'History of the Franks'.[26] Ethnicity certainly appears in the *Historiae*, as Gregory identifies people as belonging to different *gentes*, but it largely appears as an empty signifier devoid of content. Gregory never tells us what ethnicity *means* for the people he is describing.[27] We cannot simply mine Gregory's work for

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[23] Ibid., 59-60.
[24] Ibid., 116-17.
[25] Nor are medieval sources in general; Hans-Werner Goetz, "Einführung: Die Gegenwart des Mittelalters und die Aktualität des Mittelalterforschung," in *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz (Bochum: Dieter Winkler 2000), 7-24.
[26] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, 126-27.
[27] Ibid., 213.

meaning while ignoring the story that he is trying to tell us. This will be a primary consideration in the discussion that follows.

I.3 Recent Historiography on the Merovingian Hair

Hairstyle has several properties that make is unique as a social symbol. It is physical, giving it a certain inherent importance to the wearer as an appendage of their own body; it is publicly visible, and hence its wearing, or its covering up, becomes an act of public display for all to see. It is usually voluntary, although one can find many examples throughout history of attempts to proscribe hairstyle for particular groups. Its status as a physical part of the body generally grants the wearer a great amount of leeway over how it is worn. Finally, it is malleable, and hence extremely easy to change, although of course cutting hair is easier and takes less time than growing it out.[28] As a sign, it is also inherently arbitrary; there is no essential difference between long and short hair, but the difference in what is signified is shown through the dichotomy between the two. At certain historical conjunctures, long hair has signified virility, and short hair signified chastity. At others, long hair was associated with femininity, and short hair with manly restraint. Fashions have constantly evolved throughout human history, and the meaning assigned to a bodily sign such as hairstyle has never been static.[29] Moreover, sociologists and anthropologists have observed that different hairstyles are generally assumed by opposite genders and by opposing ideologies as a marker of distinction.[30] When imagining long-haired Franks and short-haired Romans, as seemingly implicitly proscribed by Salic Law,[31] these sociological and anthropological observations seem to make a good deal of sense. Hairstyle could sometimes serve as an ethnic marker as well.[32]

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[28] Anthony Synnott, "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," *The British Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 3 (Sep. 1987): 381-413.

[29] Robert Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994): 56-57.

[30] Synnott, "Shame and Glory"; see also E.R. Leach, "Magical Hair," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 88, 2 (Jul. – Dec. 1958): 147-164.

[31] Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair," 48; Max Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Social Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms," in *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources, and Artifacts,* ed. Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 173-212.

[32] E.g. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), discusses differences in dress and hairstyle between northern and southern France around the turn of the first millennium; Robert Bartlett, 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair', also discusses the medieval Irish case.

Most work on the Merovingian hair has considered it in the context of sacrality, or as a symbol or emanation of a kind of 'sacral' or 'cultic' aura that surrounded either the institution of 'Germanic' kingship in general or the Merovingian family in particular. This sacral kingship was usually considered to be Germanic and pagan in origin. Influential historians such as March Bloch[33] and Percy-Ernst Schramm[34] all considered it in this way, as a fragment or evolution of ancient pagan beliefs that survived the Franks' conversion to Christianity. Even František Graus, generally opposed to these ideas of the sacral, attributed elements of sacrality to the Merovingian hair, failing to find a more plausible explanation.[35] More recently, however, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill distanced himself from this theory[36], and Eve Picard has shown how the discourse of sacrality is confused in its definitions and ideologically loaded.[37] Max Diesenberger[38], attempting to distance himself from interpretations based on sacrality, has taken a different approach, using the sociological categories of Pierre Bourdieu as a basis.

First, however, it is necessary to ask the question: who, exactly, were the Merovingians? Ian Wood has written about the Merovingians as perhaps constituting more of a political unit than a biological family in the strictest sense, with adoption playing a role in the constitution of the family.[39] This is an interesting and plausible idea, and one that has important implications for how we think of the Merovingian hair. It is also unclear to what extent having long hair was a prerogative reserved for the royal family, or was a common fashion among the Franks or their nobles. Gregory of Tours seemed to imply that it was a prerogative of the royal family[40], a claim explicitly made by the Byzantine historian Agathias.[41] Ian Wood, citing Frankish Salic Law which carried quite high

[33] Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Dorset Press, 1924).
[34] Percy-Ernst Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik* (Stuttgart: MGH Schriften, 1954).
[35] František Graus, "Deutsche und slawische Verfassungsgeschichte," *Historische Zeitschrift* 197 (1963): 287.
[36] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
[37] Eve Picard, *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum? Quellenkritische Studien zur Germania des Tacitus und zur altnordischen Überlieferung* (PhD diss., Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, 1991).
[38] Max Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Social Capital,"
[39] Ian Wood, "Deconstructing the Merovingian Family," in *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill 2003), 149-172.
[40] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital," 178; he cites *Hist.* VI, 24 and VIII, 10.
[41] Agathias, I.3, p. 19.18 f., in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, ed. Barthold G. Niebuhr (Bonn, 1828).

penalties for cutting someone's hair against their will, claims that it was a more widespread practice.[42] It seems obvious from the cases cited in Gregory's work alone that a bodily practice like growing one's hair long could not be so closely controlled in this period as to be associated strictly with one quite small familial group. Nevertheless, it seems that their long hair did hold a specific and special meaning for the Merovingians[43] – consider that, at the very end of their reign, in Einhard's day, their long hair was still one of the most salient symbols that authors could associate with them.

It is also important to consider that, since at least the writings of Tacitus in the first century A.D., long hair was a common *topos* associated with barbarians. Earlier Roman and Byzantine accounts of the Franks, for example those of Sidonius Apollinaris and Agathias, are full of these kinds of literary *topoi*, and so should probably not be taken quite literally as sources for something like the Frankish hairstyle.[44] In Gregory of Tours' writings on the subject, however, there is a specificity not associated with this *topos*, and one should keep in mind that Gregory was a witness to many of the events he describes as well as an acquaintance of the Merovingian kings. Nevertheless, it is a possibility that Gregory did associate long hair with barbarity.

Jean Hoyoux once made the interesting and grisly argument that the cutting of the hair of deposed Merovingians, as described in Gregory's *Historiae*, in fact implied scalping rather than a simple haircut.[45] This assertion was subsequently decisively dismantled by Ekkehard Kaufmann,[46] though it was supported by others such as Percy-Ernst Schramm.[47] Nevertheless, his argument, resting on a distinction between the Latin verbs *tondere* (usually rendered as to cut or shear) and *tundere* (to

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[42] Wood, "Deconstructing the Merovingian Family," 171.

[43] Ekkehard Kaufmann, "Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechsgeschichte: Germanische Abteilung* 72, no. 1 (Aug. 1955): 179, ft. 14. See also Averil Cameron, 'How did the Merovingian Kings wear their Hair?', *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, vol. 43, 4 (1965), 1203-1216, esp. 1208.

[44] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital," 179.

[45] Jean Hoyoux, "*Reges Criniti*: Cheveleures, tonsures et scalpes chez les Mérovingiens," *Revue belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 26, no. 3 (1948): 479-508.

[46] Kaufmann, "Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige." See also K. Sprigade, "Abschneiden des Königshaares und kirchliche Tonsur bei den Merowingern," *Die Welt als Geschichte* 22 (1962): 142-161.

[47] Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen*, 126-27.

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strike) that had acquired an interchangeable meaning by the sixth century, emphasizes the care one must take when making an interpretation of a Latin text that hinges upon a few terms.

More recently, attempts have been made to distance Merovingian kingship from any pre-historic, 'Germanic' or 'pagan' elements, in favor of more biblical and Christian models, as was the case with their Carolingian successors; this includes the attribute of their long hair. The obvious biblical parallel for a long-haired king would be the story of the judge Samson. Erik Goosmann[48] has suggested just such a model for the Merovingian kings. While such a parallel may seems obvious, however, it is far from clear that the Merovingians saw themselves in such a way; there are only two known occurrences in the primary sources explicitly connecting the Merovingians with Samson. The first comes from Gregory of Tours; he relates that the Merovingian King Chilperic had a son named Samson, who died in infancy, while his father was besieged in the city of Tournai.[49] The fact that Chilperic would give his son such a name does seem to imply that the connection was made in the king's mind (it is, in fact, a very unusual name for a Merovingian, who generally drew from quite a small pool of Germanic names). Nevertheless, this boy is the only known Merovingian to have carried the name Samson, which militates against it being a general connection drawn by the dynasty as a whole. The second mention comes from a ninth-century source, the Breviary of Erchanbert. Erchanbert wrote that the Merovingian monk Daniel, before leaving his monastery and assuming the throne as King Chilperic II, has to grow his hair back 'sicut antiquitus Nazaraei', to be like the Nazarites, that is, the long-haired Jewish ascetics of the Old Testament: a group that supposedly included Samson.[50]

The Breviary of Erchanbert is indeed an interesting source, neither widely read by modern historians nor, apparently, but the author's own contemporaries.[51] Nevertheless, it does not seem

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[48] Erik Goosmann, "The long-haired Kings of the Franks: 'like so many Samsons?" *Early Medieval Europe* 20, no. 3 (2012): 233-259.
[49] *Hist.* V.22, 288.
[50] Goosmann, "Like so many Samsons?", 249.
[51] Ibid.

possible to use a ninth-century source in order to uncover how the sixth-century Merovingians saw themselves. While it certainly does seem that Merovingian kingship acquired strong Old Testament biblical connotations, similar to their Carolingian followers, by the later sixth century at least,[52] it does not follow that the custom of the Merovingian hair always carried this connotation, still less that it originated with this connotation. In the absence of more than one contemporary reference, the role of Samson as a model in the sixth century must remain a peripheral one at best.

There are two other attested traditions current in sixth-century involving hair: the Roman and Greek custom of the ritual first haircut and the custom of tonsuring in preparation for entrance in to a monastic life. There is no clear-cut categorical distinction to be made between these two customs and the Merovingian hair which, in Gregory's accounts, is almost always mentioned in the context of *being cut off.* As Diesenberger notes, the existence of the Roman hair-cutting ritual points towards the possibility that the custom of long hair, and the penalties against the cutting of hair contained in the Salic Law, were not necessarily Germanic and pagan in origin.[53] It is possible to a relationship with this Roman ritual. But it is more likely that this ritual had a different connotation. Far from being a humiliation, a boy's first haircut could be a moment of great solemnity and prestige. To use a slightly later example, when Charles Martel sent his son to the Lombard King Liutprand to have his hair cut by him, Liutprand then became 'like a father' to the boy.[54]

At times Gregory explicitly mentions the cutting of hair as specifically indicating entrance to a monastic life in the form of a tonsure,[55] at other times not. Bede, who thought a great deal about the 'tonsure question', identified two functions of the monastic tonsure: it marked the change from lay to clerical status, and it was the distinguishing mark of the monk, delineating him as belong to a different part of society with a special role.[56] Tonsuring was a gender transformation as well,

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[52] Yitzhak Hen, "The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul," *Early Medieval Europe* 7, no. 3 (1998): 283-84.
[53] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Social Capital," 184-87; Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair," 47, agrees.
[54] Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair," 48.
[55] For example in the story of Chararic and his son in *Hist.* II, 41.
[56] Edward James, "Bede and the Tonsure Question," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 86.

marking one as dropping 'out of the potent class'; it was the 'ultimate act of gender transformation… confined to the clergy'.[57] Short hair in this period was perceived as a mark of chastity and humility; it was commonly required for nuns as well, as in the contemporary Rule of Caesarius of Arles.[58] Tonsuring could accompany the deposition of kings other than the Merovingians as well;[59] nevertheless, because there are cases in which Gregory makes clear that the cutting of hair was not accompanied by a change from lay to clerical status or by a tonsure in the monastic sense, we must assume that there was a different, though perhaps parallel, function to hair-cutting among the Merovingians. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

All of the studies thus far discussed have attempted to assign or uncover a single meaning or origin for the Merovingian hair, or, in the case of Goosmann, at least imply a shift from one association to another over time. Phillipe Buc, writing on the 'dangers of ritual',[60] has warned against assigning a single meaning to political rituals, pointing out that a ritual can be perceived in a radically different way depending on one's point of view, and that different authors' interpretations of the same event can completely diverge in their judgments depending on the author's relation to the actors.[61] For most medieval events, we only have access to the author's point of view, which may differ from that of the actors taking part in the event.[62] Buc is writing on political ritual. But it seems that his ideas would apply equally to the interpretation of a symbol, such as the long hair of the Merovingians. As noted, we only have access to a single source for most of the events with which this thesis is concerned, and so cannot compare different accounts of the same person or event. Nevertheless, as will be made clear in the following chapter, long hair was clearly a symbol that

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[57] Jo Ann McNamara, "Chastity as a Third Gender in the History and Hagiography of Gregory of Tours," in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 199-209.
[58] See Conrad Leyser, "Long-haired Kings and Short-haired Nuns: Writings on the Body in Caesarius of Arles," *Studia Patristica* 24 (1993): 143-50.
[59] For example, the deposed Visigothic king Wamba was tonsured; see ibid., 89-90.
[60] Phillipe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); see also idem., "Political Ritual: Medieval and Modern Interpretations," in *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz (Bochum: Dieter Winkler, 2000), 255-272.
[61] Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual,* 8-9.
[62] Ibid., 12; even more radically he says, 'For the early Middle Ages and most of late antiquity, simple access to a ritual as historical fact is impossible, if by "fact" one understands "event"', 248.

could be contested, challenged, and open to multiple interpretations. One cannot limit oneself to searching for only one source of meaning for symbol in the sources. Instead, one should be open to the possibility of alternative meanings, or to a plurality of meanings.

In an highly polemical article, Eduardo Fabbro[63] has engaged in a wide-ranging attack on scholarship suggesting a sacral meaning for the Merovingian hair or a pagan origin for Merovingian kingship. Long hair, he writes, did not have any sacral meaning for the Merovingian kings, but was simply the fashion of a 'barbarized' military aristocracy, which had been current since the fourth century.[64] In using the sociological language of Pierre Bourdieu, scholars such as Max Diesenberger, according to Fabbro, are simply hiding old and discredited ideas of sacral kingship behind a post-modern façade.[65] The real problem with these 'old ideas' and their potential survival, as revealed by Fabbro's polemical tone, is not merely academic, but *political*. Nevertheless, it seems that, in their desire to struggle against politically problematic ideas, scholars including Fabbro have been too quick to 'explain away' the Merovingian hair as a mere curiosity, the projection of later historians.

These 'old ideas' of the sacral quality of the Merovingian hair, their origins, and their unsavory political flavor will be the subject of chapter 3. First, however, it is necessary to engage more closely with the written primary sources to discover just what it is possible to know about the Merovingian hair.

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[63] Eduardo Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence: Long-Haired Kings, Symbolic Capital, Sacred Kingship and other Contemporary Myths," *Revista Signum* 13, no. 1 (2012): 22-45.
[64] Ibid., 36; the argument is taken, in part, from Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47-50.
[65] Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 33.

II. THE LONG-HAIRED KINGS OF THE FRANKS

II.1 The *reges criniti*: Gregory of Tours' long-haired kings

In the interests of completeness, it is useful to enumerate, in a systematic fashion, all of the occurrences of the motif of long hair and the shearing of the hair in the *Historiae*. As discussed above, it is potentially dangerous for our understanding to take individual episodes from the *Historiae* out of context. Therefore, where necessary, some further contextualization is provided.

Chapter 9 of book II contains the famous first arrival of the 'long-haired kings' (*reges criniti*) in to Gaul at the advent of the Frankish kingdom.[66] Besides serving as the title for Wallace-Hadrill's famous book on the subject, the arrival of the long-haired kings on the stage of history is contained in a rather vague narrative, part of Gregory's own frustrated search for the origins of the Franks. Gregory spends most of the chapter speculating on the origins of Frankish kingship, quoting the lost history of Sulpicius Alexander (Gregory's quotations are the only surviving fragments of this work). Gregory searches for the origins and names of the earliest Frankish kings, but in vain, as apparently Sulpicius Alexander did not provide such details, and discussed the early Frankish leaders only in vague terms. As Gregory comments, '[w]hen he (Sulpicius Alexander) says 'regales' or royal leaders, it is not clear if they were kings or merely exercised a kingly function'.[67] Gregory quotes Frigeridus and Orosius as well, but is similarly unable to come up with a name or origin for the first of the Frankish kings. Apparently giving up his search, he goes with what is 'commonly' said (or 'by many', *tradunt enim multi*), that the Franks came first from Pannonia and crossed the Rhine, placing long-haired kings from their best families over the land.[68] This term, 'long-haired kings' or 'reges criniti', has come to be widely used among modern historians to describe the

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[66] *...ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia. Hist.* II.9, 125.

[67] *Cum autem eos regales vocet, nescimus, utrum reges fuerint, an in vices tenuerunt regnum.* Ibid., 122. By using the diminutive form 'regales', it seems Sulpicius Alexander was indeed saying that they were not kings, but rather some kind of minor 'kinglets', cf. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 36. It is ironic and somehow satisfying to the historian to see Gregory, himself so frequently vague and opaque, frustrated with his own source's vagueness.

[68] *Tradunt enim multi, eosdem de Pannonia fuisse degressus, et primum quidem litora Rheni amnes incoluisse, dehinc, transacto Rheno, Thoringiam transmeasse, ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia.* Ibid.

Merovingian kings; while it is not exactly common in the sources, and should not be thought of as an official royal title, it does seem to have been an epithet reserved for the Merovingian kings.[69]

Later in book II, in the midst of the deeds of Clovis, the first Christian Frankish king, occurs a first paradigmatic episode dealing with the cutting of hair with political implications. In *Hist.* II.40, Clovis, through the grace of God, defeats his rival Sigibert, and is declared ruler by his soldiers. In the next chapter, he marches against his other rival, Chararic, king of the Salian Franks. After defeating him in battle and capturing him, Clovis cuts off the hair (*totondit*) of Chararic and his son, and orders them ordained as priest and deacon, respectively;. This is such an abject humiliation that Chararic bursts in to tears (*conquireret et fleret)*. Chararic's son then says, 'These leaves have been cut from wood which is still green and not lacking in sap. They will soon grow again and be larger than ever; and may the man who has done this deed perish equally quickly.'[70] Clovis hears of this; as it was apparently obvious that by this they meant to grow their hair again and overthrow him (*quod scilicet minarentur sibi caesariem ad crescendum laxare ipsumque interficere*), Clovis has them killed and takes their lands.

In this example, hair cutting is explicitly associated with entry into a religious life. What is doubly interesting is that it is not clear whether Chararic and his son were in fact already Christians, or whether they were still pagans. Considering that Clovis's own conversion to Christianity was quite recent, it seems at least plausible that they were still pagans. In fact, it is perhaps even likely; as Ian Wood has written, '[t]he majority of the Franks are unlikely to have been affected as yet by Christianity' by the time of Clovis's conversion.[71] This episode then takes on a double meaning of forced conversion as well as the humiliation of a defeated enemy.[72] Even more strongly, Clovis

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[69] Kaufmann, "Über das Scheren," 179, ft. 14; Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings Wear their Hair?", 1208. Jean Hoyoux, "Reges criniti," argued that the Latin 'reges criniti' should be read as 'hairy' instead of 'long-haired', an opinion supported by Fabbro, 'Conspicuously by their Absence', 44, ft. 107. This, however, is far from clear, and most scholars maintain that 'long-haired kings' is a proper rendering.
[70] *'In viridi', inquid, 'lignum hae frondis succisae sunt nec omnino ariscunt, sed velociter emergent, ut crescere queant; utinam tam velociter qui haec fecit intereat!',* *Hist.* II.40, 156.
[71] Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 48.
[72] Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 40, ft. 81.

does not only potentially force the two to convert and be tonsured, but to become quite high-ranking clerics, a priest and a deacon; it is possible that here Gregory is projecting a practice contemporary to his own day back onto Clovis's time, however. The source does not allow for a judgment of how likely this is.[73]

This type of event, the tonsuring or cutting off of the long locks of hair, with or without an attendant commitment to a religious or monastic life, is repeated several more times throughout Gregory's text. Its next appearance, in chapter 18 of book III, is among the most moving and pathos-laden episodes in the *Historiae*. Childebert and Chlothar, two of the four sons and successors of Clovis, have become jealous of their nephews, the children of Chlodomer, who are being showered with affection by their grandmother, the widowed Queen Clotild. Fearing that their mother will favor her grandchildren over them in the line of succession, Childebert and Chlothar conspire (the latter somewhat more enthusiastically) to remove them from the succession, either by killing them or by having their hair cut, to 'so reduce them to the status of ordinary individuals[.]', or plebs.[74] Through trickery, they kidnap the boys, and then send their man Arcadius to the queen, 'with a pair of scissors in one hand and a naked sword in the other' (*cum forcipe evaginatoque gladio*).[75] He then gives her the question: 'Do you wish them to live with their hair cut short? Or would you rather see them killed?'[76]

> Clotild was terrified by what he had said, and very angry indeed, especially when she saw the drawn sword and the scissors. Beside herself with bitter grief and hardly knowing what she was saying in her anguish, she answered, 'If they are not to ascend to the throne, I would rather see them dead than with their hair cut short.' Arcadius took no notice of her duress, and he certainly had no wish to see if on due reflection she would change her mind.

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[73] See Ian Wood, "Gregory of Tours and Clovis," *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 63, no. 2 (1985): 249-272.
[74] *Hist.* III.18, 180; '*utrum incisa caesariae ut reliqua plebs habeantur.*'
[75] Ibid., 180-81.
[76] Ibid., 181; '*utrum incisis crinibus eos vivere iubeas, an utrumque iugulare*'.

He hurried back to the two Kings. 'You can finish the job,' said he, 'for the Queen agrees. It is her wish that you should do what you have planned.'[77]

Chlothar then goes ahead with the deed, brutally murdering the two boys, against the last-minute protestations of Childebert.[78]

The story just related reveals, in a striking way, one of the strangest (to the eyes of a modern reader as least) aspects of the Merovingians' long hair: the tremendous affective power it apparently held. Why would Clotild rather have her grandsons brutally murdered than have their hair cut short? Of course, Gregory took care to note that this was not a rational decision on her part, but rather one made under duress. She was '[b]eside herself with bitter grief' and 'hardly knowing what she was saying.' Clotild's decision should perhaps not seem so strange, then, since Gregory explains that it was an emotional reaction to being presented with the sight of Arcadius holding the naked sword and scissors.[79] Hair, after all, can grow back, and it was precisely the threat of growing their hair back that lead Clovis to put Chararic and his son to death. Max Diesenberger has argued that the intense emotional response exhibited by Clotild indicates the particular importance of the long hair as a status symbol for the Merovingians or those with 'royal blood.'[80] Others, however, have disagreed; the phrase 'ut relique plebs' suggests rather a more straightforward loss of social station and reduction in status associated with the tonsuring.[81] Moreover, it indicates that what was meant by 'tonsuratus' was not clerical tonsure, as in this period 'plebs' was usually used to indicate the rest of the population *as opposed to* the clergy.[82]

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[77] Ibid.; '*At illa exterrita nuntio et nimium felle commota, praecipue cum gladium cerneret evaginatum ac forcipem, amaritudinem praeventa, ignorans in ipso dolore quid diceret, ait simpliciter: 'Satius mihi enim est, si ad regnum non ereguntur, mortuos eos videre quam tonsus'. At ille parum admirans dolorem eius, nec scrutans, quid deinceps plenius pertractaret, venit celeriter, nuntians ac dicens: 'Favente regina opus coeptum perficite; ipsa enim vult explere consilium vestrum''*.

[78] Interestingly enough, there was a third boy, who Gregory neglects to mention until the end of the chapter, who they could not manage to catch; this Chlodovald escaped, personally cut his hair short (*sibi manu propria capillos incidens*), became a priest and devoted himself to religious life, later being canonized and becoming known in France as St. Cloud. From Gregory's point of view, this would be certainly the best outcome from the story: an escape from the untrammeled violence of secular politics into the church. *Hist.* III.18, 181-82.

[79] Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings Wear their Hair?," 1211-12.

[80] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital," 193.

[81] Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 43-44.

[82] Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings Wear their Hair?," 1211-12; see also Graus, *Nationenbildung*, 13.

In *Hist.* IV.4 there occurs another instance of tonsuring and hair growing as part of a power struggle, this time not among the Merovingians, but among their subjects, the counts of Brittany. The Breton count, Chanao, has three of his brothers killed (presumably to eliminate potential political competitors), but cannot bring himself to kill the fourth brother, Macliaw, who escapes into hiding, then has himself tonsured and becomes a bishop (*tonsoratus et episcopus ordinatus est*).[83] After Chanao dies, however, Macliaw revokes his vows, grows his hair again, and assumes his brother's position as king (or count), for which he is excommunicated.[84]

This episode, though interesting in its own right, is usually left out of discussions of the topic of royal hair, for obvious reasons. First of all, it does not deal with the Merovingian family, for whom the long hair is usually assumed to be a prerogative; though this assumption is problematic in itself, there are other reasons to leave this story aside. It deals explicitly with tonsuring (*tonsoratus*) and commitment to a religious life; Macliaw's self-disqualification for rulership is connected with his devotion to a religious life, not with the removal of his hair (which is never specified as being particularly long, either). Obviously, tonsuring and entry to a religious life also disqualified one from holding 'profane' political positions; nevertheless, it seems necessary to make a distinction between tonsuring for the purpose of entering in to religious life, and the *purely* political act of cutting the hair without an attendant religious vocation. Forcible entry into a religious life could carry further sanctions for breaking religious vows and attempting to return to political life. Macliaw's later excommunication is specifically tied to his decision to revoke the religious life and return to his former position. Though Gregory specifically mentions growing back his hair as a requirement to return to political life, the context is also one of the breaking of a religious vow, and of the growing hair 'replacing' the monastic marker of the tonsure.

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[83] *Hist.* IV.4, 198-99.

[84] *Mortuo autem Chanaone, hic apostatavit, et dimissis capillis, uxorem, quam post clericatum reliquerat, cum regno fratris simul accepit, sed ab episcopis excommunicatus est.* Ibid.

Another seemingly minor, though interesting, episode occurs later in *Hist.* IV.16. Chramn, the son of King Chlothar, as a kind of divine punishment for a long series of sins and insults against the Church he committed (detailed *Hist.* IV.13), becomes very sick, and his hair falls out (*Eo tempore graviter egrotavit, ita ut capilli eius a nimia febre decederent*).[85] This detail is not mentioned again in the text. It would perhaps be tempting to dismiss this as a minor detail, but given the already established symbolic importance of their hair for the Merovingian kings, it is definitely possible to draw an implication; if having one's hair cut off disqualifies one from rulership, what does it mean to have one's hair fall out, as an apparent act of punishment from God? Chramn's utter debasement is soon revealed in the same chapter, as he conspires with his uncle Childebert against his own father (Childebert's brother), Chlothar. That conspiracy fails, but later, after the death of Childebert, Chramn once again conspires against his father, this time with the aforementioned Chanao, count of Brittany (himself guilty of fratricide). He has 'no compunction about fighting against his own father' (*Sed nec ille contra patrem egredi timuit*).[86] Even Chanao thinks it would be a bad idea for Chramn to fight his own father, and proposes attacking Chlothar himself during the night, so that Chramn would not have to participate. However, Chramn refuses this, and according to Gregory, it was 'God's miraculous power which stopped him' from agreeing to the plan (*Quod Chramnus, ut credo virtute Dei praeventus, fieri non permisit*).[87] The two armies do battle, and father fights son, 'like some new David advancing against Absalom' (*Ibatque Chlotharius rex tamquam novus David contra Absolonem filium pugnaturus*).[88] Chlothar wins the battle, and Chramn is captured and burned alive, along with his wife and daughters.

In the light of Chramn's later ignominious and nearly patricidal career, the implications of his earlier hair loss can be fully drawn out. If by losing one's hair, one is disqualified from rulership, Chramn's loss of hair by natural-divine causes prefigures his later fate; it serves a function of prolepsis in the

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[85] *Hist.* IV.16, 211.
[86] *Hist.* IV.20, 216.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.; see Yitzhak Hen, "Uses of the Bible," 278.

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narrative, hinting to us now about the outcome of later events. The reader can guess, from Chramn's bad and sinful behavior, that the outcome of his scheming will not be good. His hair loss pre-emptively seals his fate in the narrative. If the possession of this particular symbol – long hair – is a pre-requisite for kingship, then his own horrible fate in *Hist.* IV.20 does not come as a surprise, because the reader was already informed, *symbolically*, that Chramn could not be king, and hence his rebellion against his father could not succeed. This is a seemingly minor detail, but, considering the symbolic importance of hair for the Merovingians, and Gregory's demonstrated nuance as a writer, it could refer to long hair as a necessary marker of kingship.[89]

The longest narrative thread in the *Historiae* that reveals much about the Merovingian hair is the story of the pretender Gundovald, narrated over the course of books VI and VII. Gundovald first appears in *Hist.* VI.24, where Gregory relates his background and that he claimed to be a son of King Chlothar, who had arrived from Constantinople in Marseille:

> Gundovald was born in Gaul and educated with great care. He wore his hair long and down his back, as is the custom of the Frankish kings. He was taught to read and write. His mother presented him to King Childebert I. 'This is your nephew,' said she, 'the son of King Lothar [or Chlothar]. He is hated by his father, so you take him, for he is of your blood.' King Childebert had no sons of his own, so he took the boy and kept him at his side. When King Lothar heard the news, he sent messengers to his brother to say: 'Let my boy go, and send him to me.' Childebert immediately sent the boy to Lothar, who took one look at him and ordered him to have his hair cut. 'This is no son of mine,' he said. After the death of King Lothar, Gundovald was taken up by King Charibert. Later on Sigibert

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[89] An intermediate episode in *Hist.* V,15 need not be included in this discussion. A group of Saxons, after losing a battle to a rival group of Swabians, vow never to cut their hair or beards until they have taken their vengeance (*Illi quoque qui ex Saxonibus remanserant detestati sunt, nullus se eorum barbam neque capillos incisurum, nisi prius se de adversariis ulciscerent. Hist.* V.14, 273). They are promptly defeated in battle once more, and the war ends, Gregory having already indicated earlier in that chapter that this would be the case by the will of God. This case seems to contain an entirely different topos, dealing not with elites or rulership, but with an entire army (it is apparently all the surviving defeated Saxons who take the oath).

summoned him and had his hair cut off a second time, sending him to… [Cologne]. Gundovald escaped from there, let his hair grow long again and made his way to Narses, who was at that time in charge of Italy. There he married, became the father of sons and moved to Constantinople. Many years later he was invited by a person who shall be nameless[90] to return to Gaul. [91]

This passage is revealing from several perspectives. Gundovald was apparently groomed from a young age to be a possible contender for royal power. He was educated, and wore his hair in the appropriate way, in the style of the Merovingian kings. This has implications for how the Merovingian family functioned. Did it resemble more a biological family, or something like an adoptive political unit? The role of adoption, fraternal feuds, and 'illegitimate' children in the Merovingian succession has been posed by Ian Wood.[92] It seems that, to those who raised Gundovald, it was at least plausible that by adopting certain manners of grooming and habitus, it would conceivably be possible for him to pose as, and be accepted as, a Merovingian, the son of Chlothar, whether he actually was biologically or not. Indeed, he apparently so resembled a Merovingian that he was seen as a potential political asset by many different actors. He bounced around from the court of King Childebert, to that of Chlothar, to that of Sigibert, and finally to the Byzantine general Narses, from whom he received asylum in Constantinople until his return to Gaul. All of these powerful actors must have considered this potential pretender useful enough to keep him around. He had his hair cut at least twice, first by Chlothar and then by Sigibert. This must have temporarily nullified him as a political threat, until such a time as he could be made

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[90] Usually assumed to be the powerful and wily Frankish count, Guntram Boso, but possibly not; see Wood, "Secret Histories," 265.

[91] *Hic cum natus esset in Galliis et diligenti cura nutritus, ut regum istorum mos est, crinium flagellis per terga dimissis, litteris eruditus, Childebertho rege a matre repraesentatur, dicente ea: 'Ecce', inquid, nepotem tuum, Chlothari regis filium; et quia invisus habetur patri, suscipe eum, quia caro tua est'. Quem ille, eo quod ei fili non essent, accipiens, retenibat secum. Nuntiantur haec regi Chlothario, misitquae fratri nuntius, dicens: 'Dimitte puerum, ut veniat ad me'. Ne moratus ille iuvenem fratri direxit. Quo viso, Chlotharius iussit tundi comam capitis eius, dicens: 'Hunc ego non generavi'. Igitur post Chlothari regis obitum a Charibertho rege susceptus est. Quem Sigyberthus arcessitum iterum amputavit comam capitis eius et misit eum in Agripinensim civitatem, quae nunc Colonia dicitur. Ille quoque ab eo loco dilapsus, dimissis iterum capillis, ad Narsitem abiit, qui tunc Aetaliae praeerat. Ibi accepta uxore, filios procreavit et ad Constantinopolim accessit. Inde, ut ferunt, post multa tempora a quodam invitatus, ut veniret in Galliis… Hist.* VI.24, 352.

[92] Ian Wood, "Deconstructing the Merovingian family," *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources, and Artefacts*, ed. Richard Corradini, Max Diesenberger, Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 149- 172.

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useful as a pretend Merovingian. Once he escaped from Sigibert, however, he grew his hair long again before going to Narses. Tthe Byzantine general must have at least considered it plausible that his claim to be a Merovingian could be taken as legitimate.

Hair is inherently malleable as a social marker. It could apparently mark someone out as a potential political actor, but also, by its removal, temporarily disqualify them from consideration for a political role. Of course, because hair grows back, cutting it off could not permanently remove one from political consideration. Consider Clovis's violent response to the threat of Chararic's son to grow his hair back; the only way to ensure with certainty that he could not make a bid to return to power was to kill him. If hair marked a certain status, it could also, in Gundovald's case, function as a disguise.[93] Regardless of whether Gundovald was an actual Merovingian or not,[94] he managed to pass himself off as one at the Constantinopolitan court and among his various noble and ecclesiastic supporters in southern Gaul, many of whom were left without a royal patron following the murder of King Chilperic in 584.[95] In any case, it seems at least highly plausible that Gundovald was in fact a son of the philandering King Chlothar by a different wife (he is known to have had several concurrently).[96] If he was indeed a son of Chlothar, it was perhaps especially important for Gundovald to lay claim to the symbol of the Merovingian hair, and for his half-brothers to deprive him of it.

Not all instances of hair-cutting had to do with royals or potential royals, however; there is the case of the Syrian merchant Eufronius, living in Bordeaux. The local bishop 'had once had him tonsured against his will, hoping to obtain control of his possessions, but Eufronius had treated the whole matter with ridicule, going off to live in another town until his hair grew, and then returning.'[97] Clearly, forced tonsuring was not only potential source of humiliation and loss of status for royals.

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[93] Bartlett, "Symbolic Meanings of Hair," 59.
[94] Gregory seemed at least open to the possibility that he was, cf. Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 51, ft. 30.
[95] Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 91; cf. *Hist.* VI.24 and VII.10.
[96] Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 92-94; see also idem., "Secret Histories."
[97] *Interea proditur ab episcopo Berthramno Eufron neguciator per inimicitiam, quia invitum aliquando eum totunderat, inhians facultatem eius. Quod ille dispiciens, ad aliam urbem transiens, caesariae crescente, regreditur.* Hist. VII.31, 413.

Moreover, though Eufronius was tonsured, there is no indication that he was confined to a monastery; he merely moved to another town until his hair grew out again, then returned to Bordeaux and resumed his position as before.[98]

The story of Gundovald's return and bid for power is the subject of much of the political drama for Gregory's next two books. Near the end of book VII (*Hist.* VII.31-36) events come to a head. The political details are less important, but in the end Gundovald ends up besieged in the town of Comminges with his supporters by the forces of King Guntram. The besieging troops hurl insults at Gundovald, including the following: 'Surely it is you who, because of the fairy-tales which you keep telling about yourself, had your hair cut short every now and again by the Frankish kings, and were sent into exile?'.[99] Gundovald responds: ''Everybody knows that my father Lothar hated me,' he answered. 'It is common knowledge that I had my hair cut short on a number of occasions both by him and by my brothers. That is why I went over to Narses, the military leader in Italy…''[100]

Having his hair cut was such a humiliation for Gundovald that it is the subject of taunts from the besieging troops. Gundovald, still maintaining that he is the son of Chlothar, defends himself by saying that it was indeed because of these repeated humiliations at the hands of his 'brothers' that he went over to the Byzantine general Narses. Repeatedly cutting his hair kept him away from his birthright of sharing in the royal power with his 'brothers.' This was reason enough, for him, to seek the help of a foreign power. Gundovald is subsequently killed, in the most brutal fashion, by the besieging troops (who indeed 'pull… out his hair and beard')[101], and the town of Comminges sacked.

In *Hist.* VIII.5, as Gregory and King Guntram meet in Orleans, Gregory relates a vision he had to the king regarding his recently murdered brother Chilperic. In his vision, Gregory 'saw Chilperic

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[98] Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 40.

[99] '*Tune es ille, qui plerumque a regibus Francorum propter has praesumptiones quas proferis tunsoratus et exilio datus es?', Hist.* VII.36, 419.

[100] '*Quod me Chlothacharius pater meus exosum habuerit, habetur incognitum nulli; quod autem ab eo vel deinceps a fratribus sim tonsoratus, manifestum est omnibus. Et haec me causa Narsiti praefecto Italiae iuncxit…'*, Ibid.

[101] '*evellentesque caesariem ac barbam eius', Hist.* VII.38, 423.

with his head tonsured, as if he were being ordained as a bishop.'[102] Guntram responds with a similar vision of his own, in which he saw his brother in chains and led by three bishops, who dispute what should be done with him while, behind them, his limbs are broken and he is thrown into a boiling cauldron. The purpose of this episode is clear, as Gregory takes another opportunity to cast opprobrium and divine punishment on his deadly enemy Chilperic, 'the Nero and Herod of our time',[103] while putting into the mouth of his favored King Guntram a vision similar to his own, in which Chilperic meets with divine punishment. Guntram is given a power of vision normally only accorded by Gregory to bishops and saints, thus marking him out as an ally of the Church, while also emphasizing the personal connection between the two. Their two visions form a kind of combined narrative.[104] Chilperic's tonsure is a minor detail; nevertheless, the removal of his (presumably long) hair signifies his debasement from his once-high office, while his tonsuring *quasi episcopum ordinari* makes for a wryly grim contrast with his grisly punishment.[105]

Gregory's final mention of the Merovingian hair is in *Hist*. VIII.10. King Guntram mourns the deaths of his nephews Clovis and Merovech at the hands of the wicked Queen Fredegund, particularly that they were never buried and their bodies never found. One day, however, a fisherman comes to him, telling him that he found the body of Clovis in his fish trap, and buried him: '[a]t first I was not sure who it was, but when I saw the long hair I knew that it was Clovis'.[106] Guntram then goes and finds the grave where he was buried: '[p]art of the hair, which was underneath the head, had disintegrated, but the rest of the corpse, with its long flowing locks, remained untouched. It was obvious enough that this was the man whom King Guntram had sought so intently.'[107] It is remarkable that in this case it is one singular detail, the long hair, which

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[102] '…*ante tonsorato capite, quasi episcopum ordinari'*, *Hist*. VIII.5, 437.

[103] *Hist*. VI.46, 379.

[104] Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*, 116. See also Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 70. Guntram's supernatural abilities are a result of his own *virtus*, not the function of any kind of sacral power associated with his position as king.

[105] Cf. Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 91-92, on Gregory's use of grim irony.

[106] '*Sed cum ignorarem, quisnam esset, a caesariae prolixa cognovi Chlodovechum esse…'*, *Hist*. VIII.10, 441.

[107] '*Una tantum pars capillorum, quae subter fuerat, iam defluxerat, alia vero cum ipsis crinium flagellis intacta durabat. Cognitumque est, hunc esse, quem rex intento animo requirebat.'*, Ibid. The body of Merovech was then found as well, apparently in Chartres, but under what circumstances Gregory does not say.

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allows for the positive identification of a corpse as belonging to the royal family. This passage provides the clearest justification for identifying the long hair with one singular group, the Merovingian royal family, rather than being a more generalizable social symbol or fashion statement. Nevertheless, the story begs the question: how was the long-haired corpse to be identified specifically as a Merovingian, and not that of any other long-haired young man?

II.2 Other sources

Although Gregory's *Historiae* is by far the richest source on the subject, a couple of other mentions of the long-haired kings of the Franks from other sources should be taken into account in order to build a more complete picture. The first is from the sixth-century Byzantine historian Agathias, who provided an account of the Frankish king Chlodomer (father of the murdered boys from *Hist.* III.18), killed in battle by the Burgundians in 524:

> And when he fell, the Burgundians, seeing his hair flowing and abundant, loose down to his back, at once realized that they had killed the enemy leader. For it is the rule for Frankish kings never to be shorn; instead, their hair is never cut from childhood on, and hangs down in abundance on their shoulders. Their front hair, is parted on the forehead and falls down on either side. Their hair is not uncombed and dry and dirty and braided up in a messy knot like that of the Turks and Avars; instead, they anoint it with unguents of different sorts, and carefully comb it. Now this it is their custom to set apart as a *distinguishing mark and special prerogative for the royal house*. For their subjects have their hair cut all round, and are not permitted to grow it futher.[108]

This is the clearest surviving description of the hair of the Merovingian kings, as well as the only source to explicitly state that long hair was the exclusive prerogative of the royal house. Nevertheless, there are several reasons to be cautious of taking this story at face value. Agathias

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[108] Agathias, I.3, 19.18 f., in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, ed. Barthold G. Niebuhr (Bonn, 1828). Quoted from Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings Wear their Hair?," 1209. Translation and italics are Cameron's. Gregory recounts the same episode in *Hist.* III.6, 166-67, but neglects to mention anything regarding Chlodomer's hair.

was a Greek historian writing in the 580s, roughly contemporaneously to Gregory; he was, however, deeply steeped in and affectionate toward the classical tradition.[109] As such, he likely would have been well aware of the classical ethnographic tradition, and made use of its archetypes.[110] Because of this, as well as his chronological and geographical distance from the events and people described (writing in Constantinople roughly five decades after the fact), caution is called for in using Agathias's account as a source for the actual practices of the sixth-century Merovingian kings. Similarly, caution is called for when attempting to use Tacitus's account to describe the actual practices of contemporary Germanic tribes.

Two other later Merovingian sources detailing intrigues involving royal tonsuring should also be considered. The first is from the *Passion of St. Leudegar*; after being deposed, tonsured, and confined to a monastery by his mayor of the palace Ebroin, King Theuderic III is invited back to the throne by his gathered noblemen two years later, but only after he has grown his hair back.[111] This case highlights the impermanence of tonsuring or hair-cutting as a disqualification for kingship.[112] After a change in the political constellation, Theuderic managed to grow his hair out again, return, and reassume the throne, just as Chararic's son had threatened to Clovis.

Another case, from the anonymous *Liber Historiae Francorum*, is that of the monk-king Daniel, who was taken out of a monastery after 40 years and crowned as King Chilperic II when the Merovingian line was in need of a successor.[113] One prerequisite for assuming the throne was, naturally, that he grow out his hair. Although these stories are from the seventh and early eighth centuries, when the Merovingian hair had perhaps acquired a somewhat different, more biblical meaning than in Gregory's time,[114] they are both indicative of a similar function for the

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[109] Anthony Kaldellis, "Things are not what they are: Agathias "Mythistoricus" and the Last Laugh of Classical Culture," *The Classical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (May, 2003): 295-300.

[110] Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 39.

[111] Anonymous. *Passio Leudegarii*, in *Late Merovingian France: History and Hagiography, 640-720*, trans. and ed. Paul Foracre and Richard Gerberding (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 223.

[112] Goosmann, "Like so many Samsons?," 244.

[113] *Liber historiae Francorum*, c. 43, in *MGH SRM 2*, ed. Bruno Krusch (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1888), 315.

[114] As argued by Goosmann, "Like so many Samsons?"

Merovingian hair to that which obtained in the sixth century. Long hair was a symbolic prerequisite for kingship; tonsuring and confinement to a monastery, meanwhile, while temporarily disqualifying one from kingship, was far from permanent.

II.3 Meanings of hair cutting and tonsuring

	Chararic and son	Chlodomer's sons	Macliaw	Gundovald	Eufronius	Theuderic III	Daniel/Chilperic II
Merovingian?	No	Yes	No	Maybe?	No	Yes	Yes
Monastic tonsure?	Yes	Probably no	Yes	No	Yes, but not sent to monastery	Yes	Yes
Grew hair again/killed?	Killed	Killed	Grew again	Grew again, then killed	Grew again	Grew again	Grew again

Fig. 2.1 – Involuntary tonsuring/hair cutting in Merovingian Gaul

Figure 2.1 collects some of the parameters of the instances of tonsuring or hair-cutting thus far discussed. Some of the instances discussed will be left out of this comparison; Chramn, for example, will not be considered here, as he lost his hair as a result of divine punishment rather than human agency, and the function of this detail in his story rests on conjecture and is far from clear.

What is immediately apparent is how poor of a tactic forced tonsuring really was for keeping someone away from power. In all of the cases cited where the tonsured was not killed, they returned to cause trouble for the tonsurer. Clovis, it would seem, was quite correct in his political instincts to murder Chararic and his son rather than trust that they would remain bound by a religious life. There are two cases in the sources where the cutting of the hair explicitly does not have the religious

connotation of the tonsure, those of the sons of Chlodomer[115] and of Gundovald, who is never said to have been tonsured in a clerical fashion or placed in a monastery.[116] In both of these cases the victims were at least plausibly members of the Merovingian family, and the explicit purpose of the hair cut was to disqualify them from kingship. Both are also taken from Gregory of Tours, and occurred in the sixth century. The other two cases of Merovingian tonsuring, those of Theuderic III and Daniel/Chilperic II, are from the later seventh and early eighth centuries. Both deal explicitly with tonsuring and an attendant monastic commitment.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the composition of the Merovingian family itself. Ian Wood has convincingly made the case that the biological relationship of many of the Merovingians is ambiguous at best.[117] This is most apposite in the case of Chlothar II, who briefly united the Merovingian kingdoms shortly after Gregory's time; it is at least plausible that he was not, in fact, the son of Chilperic as he claimed, but rather the son of Chilperic's Queen Fredegund and a Frankish nobleman. [118] If this was the case, it carries interesting consequences. Since the Merovingian family continued subsequently only through the progeny of Chlothar II, if he was indeed not the son of Chilperic, then is follows that the biological Merovingian family, as opposed to the political dynasty, died out much earlier than is usually supposed.

The role of royal uncles in excluding their nephews from kingship has already been seen in the case of the sons of Chlodomer. It is reasonable to assume that the same could apply for royal brothers as well, making it seem quite plausible that Gundovald was, in fact, a son of Chlothar I (presumably by a different woman; Chlothar was notoriously polyamorous), who fell out of favor with his father and brothers for whatever reason, and hence denied Merovingian status.[119] Others claimed to be

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[115] Assuming Cameron, "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their Hair?," 1211-12, was correct when she asserted that 'ut relique plebs' indicated that what was proposed for the boys was *not* a clerical tonsure.
[116] Goosmann, "Like so many Samsons?," 243, seems to have ignored this when he says that all tonsured Merovingians were sent to monasteries.
[117] Wood, "Deconstructing the Merovingian Family," 161.
[118] Ibid., 164.
[119] See Ian Wood, "Usurpers and Merovingian Kinship," in *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung,* ed. Matthias Becher and Jörn Jarnut (Münster: Scriptorium, 2004), 15-32.

Merovingians as well. For instance, there was the nobleman Rauching, leader of a plot against Chlothar II, who claimed that he was a son of Chlothar I.[120] According to Gregory at least, no one seems to have taken his claim to Merovingian blood very seriously, but in the uncertain political circumstances surrounding the accession of the possibly illegitimate Chlothar II, he was able to secure a good deal of support and mount a formidable bid for kingship. Considering all this, one is left to wonder about the later Merovingians of the seventh and eighth centuries. The monk Daniel, for instance, appears as a particularly mysterious figure. In the twilight of Merovingian power, when the royal bloodline was apparently dying out (if indeed it still existed at all!), was it possible to simply take an obscure monk, proclaim him as a Merovingian, have him grow out his hair, and put him on the throne?

From these observations, two further considerations follow. The first is that it is not possible to speak of any power the Merovingians might have held as residing in their 'royal blood.' Royal blood was certainly not the only require to be considered a member of the family and an eligible king, and it may not even have been a necessary one. Eligibility for kingship rested more on political considerations and, quite often, pure force, more than any respect reserved for Merovingian blood as such. Secondly, it is conceivable that, in this situation, performative symbolic attributes, such as the Merovingian hairstyle, could have taken on a more important role for aspiring kings. Gregory does not tell us how Rauching wore his hair. But for Gundovald, the cutting and growing of his hair, as we have seen, played a large role in his bid for recognition. It was not enough, perhaps, to be a Merovingian by blood; one had also to act like a Merovingian, and that probably included adopting the royal hairstyle.

Subsequently, through the later period of Merovingian rulership, a pattern can be seen that coheres around the gradual Christianization of Merovingian kingship. As Yitzhak Hen has noted, there was a shift in the later Merovingian period towards a more biblical model of kingship, drawing on the

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[120] *Hist.* IX.9, 489-90.

Old Testament for examples.[121] If, in the sixth century, a simple haircut could disqualify a Merovingian from exercising political power, in the seventh and eighth such an act perhaps did not make sense outside of the context of tonsuring and monasticism. This posits a transition from a type of kingship that was either in some way pagan,[122] or essentially 'secular' or profane,[123] to the sanctified Christian kingship more associated with the Carolingian period. But is it possible to think of Merovingian kingship as having essentially pagan qualities, given the sources? Such will be the subject of the next chapter.

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[121] Yitzhak Hen, "The Christianization of Kingship,", in *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung,* ed. Matthias Becher and Jörn Jarnut (Münster: Scriptorium, 2004), 163-78.
[121] *Hist.* IX.9, 489-90. also idem., "Uses of the Bible," 283-84.
[122] A position supported by i.e. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 38-48.
[123] Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours*, 190-91; this may have been how Gregory, in fact, viewed Merovingian kingship, at least in its early days.

III. SACRAL KINGSHIP AND THE MEROVINGIANS

The seventh-century Chronicle of Fredegar contains a curious episode concerning the fifth-century Frankish king Chlodio:

> It is said that while Chlodio was staying at the seaside with his wife one summer, his wife went into the sea at midday to bathe, and a beast of Neptune rather like a Quinotaur found her. In the event she was made pregnant, either by the beast or by her husband, and she gave birth to a son called Merovech, from whom the kings of the Franks have subsequently been called Merovingians.[124]

Up until quite recently, this passage has been taken as evidence of the mythical origins of the Merovingian family,[125] although this view has been successfully challenged.[126] Far from describing a remnant of oral culture, out of the pre-historic Germanic past, this passage in fact gives a fairly late fifth century date for the mythological origin of the Merovingian family; more likely, it is the product of influences from Latin literary culture, and the sixth and seventh century interest in the etymological origins of *gentes* and dynasties.[127] Some 20th century, particularly German, scholars have however insisted that the author of the Chronicle of Fredegar was imputing onto the fifth century Merovech a legend that in fact originally concerned the 'real' mythical founder of the Merovingian dynasty, Mero. From whence comes this insistence on the mythical origins of the Merovingians and the sacral character of their kings?

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[124] *Fertur, super litore maris aestatis tempore Chlodeo cum uxore resedens, meridiae uxor ad mare labandum vadens, bistea Neptuni Quinotauri similis eam adpetisset. Cumque in continuo aut a bistea aut a viro fuisset concepta, peperit filium nomen Meroveum, per co regia Francorum post vocantur Merohingii.* Fredegar, *Chronicae* III, 9, In MGH SS rerum Merovingicarum 2, ed. Bruno Krusch. (Hanover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1888), 95. The translation is Wood's, "Deconstructing the Merovingian Family," 147.

[125] By i.e. Karl Hauck, "Lebensnormen und Kultmythen in germanischen Stammes- und Herrschergenealogien," *Saeculum* 6 (1955): 196.

[126] E.g. by Alexander Callander Murray, "Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship','"in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 121-152.

[127] In this reading, Mero-vechus becomes 'sea-bull' in the eyes of later interpreters; see ibid., 138-144; František Graus had already suggested an etymological interpretation of this story in *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger*, 319-20.

III.1 Sacral Kingship in German Historiography

The story of the search for the mythical origins of Germanic kingship does not start in the 1930s or even in the 19th century, but, in fact, with the 15th century rediscovery of Tacitus's *Germania*.[128] It is a long history, which for the most part falls outside the scope of this thesis;[129] for the purposes of the present discussion, it will serve to begin in the 19th century.

Jacob Grimm, in the *Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer*, was the first to reclaim long hair and beard, as described among the *Germani* by Tacitus, as a specifically German cultural trait, part of the unified Germanic cultural bedrock of the modern German nation.[130] Following him, Georg Waitz, the disciple of Ranke, in the first volume of his monumental eight-volume *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte*, associated long hair with the royal blood of the Merovingian family, though pretenders such as Gundovald could make a claim to such blood by growing their hair long.*[131]* While for Waitz, Merovingian kingship had a particular Germanic character, being based on oaths and personal loyalty to the king (*Eide und Treue*), there was nothing necessarily pagan about it, and the influence of Christianity upon the Merovingians was in fact great.[132] While these 19th century historians saw a uniquely German quality in Frankish kingship, it did not seem to them to have any sacral qualities. Rather, extrapolating from Tacitus, most historians of this period identified a democratic, or at least consensual, quality in early Germanic kingship, in which the king was held responsible to something resembling 'popular assemblies'. The model for this kind of society was the *Genossenschaft*, a cooperative association of free equals.[133] Early Germanic kingship to these historians resembled a 19th-century liberal constitutional monarchy more than anything else.

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[128] Susan Reynolds, "Our Forefathers?", in *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 17-36; a good general treatment of the modern German reception of Tacitus is Michael Werner, "Die 'Germania'," in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte III*, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2009), 569-586.

[129] A very thorough overview is contained in Ian Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[130] Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Rechtsaltertümer*, 4th ed. (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1899), 201-204.

[131] Georg Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte*, vol. 1, *Die Verfassung des Fränkischen Reichs*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1882), 163-65.

[132] Ibid., 205-06.

[133] For example, see Otto Gierke, *Das deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, vol. 1, *Rechtsgeschichte der Deutschen Genossenschaft* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1868).

Religion seemed to play little role.[134] German *Verfassungsgeschichte* of this period, if it romanticized to a certain extent the pre-historic pagan past, saw reflected in this past rather the rather liberal values of bourgeois German historians.[135]

This began to change in the 1920s and 30s, with the rise of what Walter Goffart has termed the 'New German Constitutional History'.[136] Central to this 'new school' was a posited Germanic *Sakralkönigtum*, 'sacred kingship', described by Eve Picard as containing three central elements: the dominance of pagan religion in pre-Christian Germanic life; a ruler considered to be either descended directly from the gods or else divinely ordained in some way; and an attendant notion of kingship that was essentially pagan in origin.[137] This new strain drew less upon the *Verfassungsgeschichte* of the 19th century than upon notions developed from the study of religion.[138]

A bridge between the old *Verfassungsgeschichte* and the new theory of *Sakralkönigtum* can be found in the scholarly work of Felix Dahn, whose hugely popular novel *Ein Kampf um Rom* ensured his place in the development of German nationalism.[139] Dahn's 11-volume work on *Die Könige der Germanen* set out a full theory of ancient and Early Medieval Germanic kingship that, while based on the older *Verfassungsgeschichte*, also acknowledged a religious and cultic role for the Germanic kings, including the Merovingians. For Dahn, while authority ultimately rested with the assembled people of the *gens*, the king had a religious role to play that granted him a great amount of moral authority, passed down through the royal bloodline.[140] This religious role of the king remained as yet vague, and within the projected constitutional framework of the Germanic *Stämme* (tribes). Yet it set the groundwork for the later, more all-encompassing conception of sacral kingship.

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[134] Picard, "Germanisches Sakralkönigtum," 15.
[135] Walter Goffart, "Two Notes on German Antiquity Today," *Traditio* 50 (1995): 9-30.
[136] Ibid., 10.
[137] Picard, "Germanisches Sakralkönigtum?," 31-33.
[138] Ibid., 11-12.
[139] See Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, 191-98.
[140] Felix Dahn, *Die Könige der Germanen: Das Wesen des ältesten Königthums der Germanischen Stämme und seine Geschichte bus zur Auflösung des karolingischen Reiches*, vol. 7, *Die Franken unter den Merovingen*, 1. Abteilung (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1894), 25-50.

Foundational to the new conception of Germanic *Sakralkönigtum* were the German historian Otto Höfler[141] and the Dane Vilhelm Grønbech.[142] For these authors, Germanic kingship was based on the king's sacrality, his *Königsheil*; and one symbol of this *Königsheil* among the Merovingians was their long hair. The king embodied the *Heil*, or 'luck' (understood in a cultic and charismatic manner) of his people. Grønbech drew his conception of *Heil* from ethnographic work done in Polynesia. *Heil* was understood as a sacred wholeness of the community embodied in the person of the king.[143] In this framework, the cutting of a Merovingian's hair took on a cultic significance; it deprived the king of the wholeness of his *Heil*, and therefore of his right to rule.

Höfler and Grønbech wrote in Germany under National Socialism, and their works are clearly in tune with the times. Höfler's *Kultische Geheimbünde*, in fact, fascinated Heinrich Himmler,[144] while a translation Grønbech's work was translated under commission from Alfred Rosenberg.[145] Surprisingly or not, these scholars and their ideas were not discredited after the end of the Second World War; despite his cooperation with the SS, Höfler continued to write and teach after the war.[146] In 1956, Höfler could still propagate his ideas on *Sakralkönigtum*, insisting that the mythic origins recorded for many Germanic royal families, including the aforementioned story of the birth of Merovech from a 'Quinotaur', indicated the centrality of sacrality for these royal families and for Germanic political culture in general.[147] Behind this story, as behind many others, Höfler saw the timeless cult of the Germanic death god Wodan (or Odin), for him the central deity of Germanic paganism and the legitimating deity for Germanic kingship.[148] The royal cult of Wodan

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[141] Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1934); idem., "Das germanische Kontinuitätsproblem," *Historische Zeitschrift* 157, no. 1 (1938): 1-26.
[142] Vilhelm Grønbech, *Kultur und Religion der Germanen,* vol. 2 (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937).
[143] Ibid., 169-177.
[144] Bernard Mees, *The Science of the Swastika* (Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2008), 90-91.
[145] Ibid., 122-23.
[146] On Höfler's cooperation with the SS, see Wolfgang Behringer, "Das "Ahnenerbe" der Buchgesellschaft: Zum Neudruck einer Germanen-Edition des NS-Ideologen Otto Höfler," *Sozialwissenchaftliche Information. Geschichte – Politik – Wirtschaft*, no. 49 (1998): 664-685.
[147] Otto Höfler, "Der Sakralcharakter des germanischen Königtums," in *Vorträge und Forschungen: Das Königtum. Seine geistigen und rechtlichen Grundlagen,* 2nd ed. (Konstanz/Stuttgart: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1965), 75-104.
[148] Ibid., 102.

was the central carrier of continuity in Germanic culture, from the Germans of Tacitus to the Vikings ten centuries later. Höfler also did away with the relatively egalitarian constitution of the ancient Germans posited by 19th century historiography; instead, religious feeling directed towards the cult of Wodan, and loyalty to the sacral king or war-leader, became the glue holding together the early Germanic *gentes* or *Stämme*.[149]

Sacral kingship theory survived after 1945, albeit in modified form. Karl Hauck, a scholar not as tainted by association with National Socialism, carried these theories into the 1950s,[150] although, as mentioned, even Otto Höfler could still find an audience for his ideas after the end of the war. Percy-Ernst Schramm, in his study of symbols and signs of rulership, associated the Merovingian hair with a 'primitive-magical' power, positing a survival of pre-Christian, pagan royal symbology.[151] Reinhard Wenskus's highly influential *Stammesbildung und Verfassung* reinvented in many ways the conception of the Early Medieval Germanic *gentes* by de-essentializing ethnicity, introducing the concept of the *Traditionskern*, a tradition-carrying aristocratic ethnic core to which other populations could adhere or fall away from; nevertheless, Wenskus imported many elements of sacral kingship, which he considered an essential part of early Germanic *Stammesbildung*, the creation of identity.[152]

Not only German historians associated early Germanic kingship with sacral power. Marc Bloch, for example, in his masterful study of the royal touch, attributed magical power to the long hair of the Merovingians.[153] Nevertheless, while his own study was wide-ranging and eager enough to draw comparisons between very different cultural and temporal milieus, Bloch acknowledged the limited nature of the source material and the problems posed by drawing broad conclusions from the study of comparative religions, as others had done. For him, it was enough to establish that the Merovingians with their long hair had had some kind of magical significance; such a conclusion

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[149] See Höfler, "Das germanische Kontinuitätsproblem"; see also Picard, "Germanisches Sakralkönigtum?," 19-21.
[150] See i.e. Hauck, "Lebensnormen."
[151] 'primitiv-magischer Königsheil', 'primitiv-magischer… Vorstellung';Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen* I, 118-27.
[152] Reinhard Wenskus, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes* (Cologne: Böhlan Verlag, 1961), 185.
[153] Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, 32-34.

did not require then drawing any strict structural parallels to the *Germani* of Tacitus or to 10th century Scandinavians. Although royalty may have been 'surrounded… with a quasi-religious atmosphere of veneration… there was no regular institution to embody this vague sentiment.'[154]

The idea of sacral kingship came under heavy attack, first by the Czech historian František Graus,[155] and is more or less universally rejected today. The problems with it are obvious and manifold. Firstly, it relies on an a-synchronic usage of sources, freely taking evidence from Tacitus to medieval Scandinavian material (especially the Eddas) to try and describe the religious and cultic traditions of fifth- and sixth-century peoples.[156] It is an example of what Carlo Ginzburg calls 'ventriloquism' in historical writing: taking the categories of modern researchers (in this case, largely scholars of comparative religion) and putting them into the mouths of people to whom those categories would have been alien and nonsensical.[157]

Nevertheless, certain elements of sacral kingship theory have persisted, and the Merovingian hair is one subject that continued to draw references to pagan sacrality long after sacral kingship had been largely rejected by scholars. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, while generally wary of ideas of sacrality,[158] could still write that '[t]he *fortuna* of the dynasty… rested in its blood and was shared by all who were of that blood.'[159] Even František Graus saw some kind of magical power in the Merovingian hair.[160] Even more recently, Valerie Flint has written about the Merovingians as wielding some kind of 'blood magic', a magical power inherent in their royal blood.[161] This 'barbarian magical blood kingship'[162] was only gradually tamed over the course of the early Middle Ages by the concerted

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[154] Ibid, 36.

[155] František Graus, *Volk, Herrscher, und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger: Studien zur Hagiographie der Merowingerzeit* (Prage: Tschechoslowakische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1965).

[156] Picard, "Germanisches Sakralkönigtum?," 14 and following; see also Goffart, "Two Notes," 18.

[157] Carlo Ginzburg, "Our Words, and Theirs: Reflection on the Historian's Craft, Today," *Cromohs: Cyber Review of Modern Hisoriography,* no. 18 (2013): 106-07.

[158] 'Even allowing for some residual sacral element in Frankish kingship, *reges* of the Later Empire must surely be something else.', Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, 154.

[159] Ibid., 204.

[160] Graus, "Deutsche und slawische Verfassungsgeschichte," 287.

[161] Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 350-54 and 381-86.

[162] Ibid, 381.

efforts of the church, who offered the Christian sacral king as a replacement. While Ian Wood's aforementioned deconstruction of the Merovingian family makes any reference to magic inherent in 'royal blood' questionable, Flint's study does have the advantageous approach of situating the question of the magical power of the ruler within a wider context of changing magical practice, as opposed to considering it a culturally inherent survival of paganism.

As shown in the first chapter, more recent scholarship has tended to deny any sacral or religious elements to Merovingian kingship, and instead to look at the Christian legitimation strategies employed by the Merovingians, about which our sources are much better able to tell us. Certainly, by the later sixth century at least, any sacral or religious elements associated with the Merovingian rulers were Christian in nature, as shown by the emergence of the figure of the royal saint (though not yet kingly saints). [163] Any thaumaturgic powers that King Guntramn might have had were the result of his own personal virtue, rather than any remaining sacral power inherent to his family.[164] This, however, has largely left out discussion of the Merovingian hair, about which our sources, as seen in the second chapter, tell us tantalizingly little.

III.2 Symbolic Capital or Magic?

One more recent intervention, however, is of particular interest, as it purports to offer a new theoretical framework for thinking about the Merovingian hair without resorting to discredited notions of sacrality. Max Diesenberger's chapter on 'Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms' attempts to use the sociological categories of Pierre Bourdieu to make sense of the Merovingian hair. In particular, Diesenberger makes use of the concepts of 'la distinction', that is, a physical symbol that marks out the wearer as belonging to a particular social group vis-à-vis those who lack the symbol (in this case, the Merovingian kings vis-à-vis the rest of the

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[163] See Gábor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*. Trans. Éva Pálmai, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 62-78.
[164] Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, 199; see also Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, 33-36. However, for a different and interesting view of Guntramn and Gregory's relationship with him, see Guy Halsall, "Nero and Herod? The Death of Chilperic and Gregory's Writings on History," in *The World of Gregory of Tours,* ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 337-350.

population);[165] and symbolic capital, the symbols upon which a ruler legitimized his rulership.[166] The Merovingian hair, Diesenberger argues, fell under both of these categories: it set the Merovingian family apart from others over which they ruled, and it served as a symbol of the family to legitimize their rulership.

Diesenberger's chapter stands as part of a larger project by some historians to make use of Bourdieu's sociological theories for making sense of Early Medieval ethnicity.[167] Behind this effort seems to be an attempt to replace old and in many cases politically compromised or questionable ways of thinking about Early Medieval ethnicity with a more 'modern' conceptual toolbox and vocabulary. Commendable though this effort may be, it also carries with it certain difficulties. For one, it is not clear in what way 'symbolic capital', as made use of by Diesenberger, functions any differently in practice from 'sacrality'. While jettisoning any fantastic projections of a 'Woden-cult' or the supposed divine origins of the Merovingian kings, in Diesenberger's account, the Merovingians rule by appeal to their 'symbolic capital', embodied in their long hair, which is lost when it is cut short; just as in older accounts, the Merovingians ruled by appeal to their divine blood, embodied in their long hair, which is lost when cut short. In this way, Diesenberger opens himself up to the accusation that he is simply dressing up old ideas in a new vocabulary, 'de-sacralizing' the Merovingians while preserving the core of the old interpretation.[168]

Moreover, it is not clear that Diesenberger is using 'symbolic capital' in the same sense that Bourdieu developed it. Bourdieu developed his ideas of symbolic capital studying the Berber Kabyle people of Algeria. Thus, applying these ideas to sixth-century Frankish kings potentially opens one up just as much to the accusation of 'ventriloquism' as applying ideas gathered from

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[165] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Social Capital," 176; on 'la distinction', see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1992).

[166] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Social Capital," 196; Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

[167] Walter Pohl, "Telling the difference: Signs of ethnic identity," in *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300 – 800*, ed. Walter Pohl and Helmut Reimitz (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 17-69, stands as the opening volley of this effort and provides an overview.

[168] An accusation made, for example, by Fabbro, "Conspicuously by their Absence," 33.

later medieval Scandinavian material.[169] In Bourdieu's conception of the term, symbolic capital is connected to economies of gift-exchange. It accrues to an individual through these exchanges, part of a complex of rites and traditions that obfuscates the 'pure' economic character of these exchanges, thereby rendering acceptable to the community exchanges of goods and labor that would otherwise be subjected to the 'vulgar' practices of buying and selling and setting prices.[170] Bourdieu's conception seems far removed from the way in which Diesenberger uses the term. Diesenberger's appears to gesture towards this conception by referring to the episode of Clovis and the vase at Soissons in Gregory's *Historiae*.[171]

In this episode, the still-pagan Clovis is asked by some clergymen to return to their church a vase (*urceus*) that had been taken from them by his soldiers as war-booty. Clovis agrees, but when he gathers his soldiers together at Soissons to ask them to allow him to return the vase, one of them insolently strikes it with his axe, declaring that the king shall only get his fair share of the booty. The king is outraged, but must wait until the next annual gathering of the troops to take his revenge, where he splits open the skull of the offending soldier with his axe, declaring, 'That is what you did to my ewer in Soissons.'[172]

At first glance, this episode does superficially have something to do with Bourdieu's conception of social capital. It deals with a complex web of relations and prerogatives governing was is essentially an economic activity: in this case, the splitting up of war-booty. By successfully and forcefully negotiating his prerogative as king, Clovis successfully acquired the symbolic capital needed to maintain his position. Yet it is not at all clear how, from this, it is possible to accept that 'the hairstyle of the Merovingians represented part of the symbolic capital of the family.'[173] Their long hair was certainly important for the Merovingian family, as has been demonstrated in chapter two.

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[169] Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*, 226-238, has useful things to say on the dangers of applying modern sociological models onto past societies.
[170] Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 171-182.
[171] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital," 194-96.
[172] *'Sic', inquid, 'tu Sexonas in urceo illo fecisti'. Hist.* II. 27, 139-40.
[173] Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality, and Symbolic Capital," 196.

Yet it seems that this effort to describe the hairstyle as embodying 'symbolic capital' demonstrates, more than anything, the dangers of applying modern sociological concepts to the distant past in an unsubtle way. Behind this use of 'symbolic capital' there is indeed, it seems, an older argument.

Central to this ongoing debate it seems in the question of the survival of pagan or magical practices into the sixth century. It is important to separate these two. As can be seen clearly in Gregory's *Historiae*, while pagan practices do not seem to have survived in his day, magic certainly did, and could even take on a Christianized form; consider, for example, the consultation of the *Sortes Biblicae*, a kind of Christian fortune-telling in which three books of the bible would be set upon the altar, to be opened to a random verse that would hold portents for the future.[174] People of the sixth century may have had magical beliefs, but this does not imply that they were pagans, or that any form of organized paganism persisted.[175] Indeed, it seems that paganism was eradicated by the later sixth century at the latest. References to paganism die out at around then in the written sources, and in fact appear more often in later Carolingian sources, the writers of which perhaps wanted to show the Merovingian era in a more 'heathen' light.[176] Nevertheless, absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence; while jettisoning any fantasies about Wodan-cults, is it potentially plausible that the Merovingian hair was a remnant of a pre-Christian practice, and/or had magical connotations?

This was an assumption earlier historians held for a long time. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill wrote with great sense that Clovis's conversion to Christianity need not have been complete or immediate, and that '[a] people is not converted in a generation.'[177] 'At least for a time,' he wrote, 'the core of Merovingian kingship [after Clovis's conversion] remained heathen in some indefinable way.'[178]

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[174] *Hist.* IV.16, 212-13, as well as V.14, 271-72.

[175] Yitzhak Hen, "Paganism and Superstitions in the Time of Gregory of Tours: Une Question Mal Posée!" in *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell and Ian Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 230-231.

[176] Ibid., 236-38; Hen, arguing against the survival of paganism in any form, has interestingly enough shown himself open to the idea of symbolic capital to explain the Merovingian hair; see idem, "The Christianization of Kingship," 168, ft. 31.

[177] Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*, 169-70.

[178] Ibid., 173.

Marc Bloch had come to the same conclusion; he wrote that 'No doubt the old ideas [about the magical power of kings] did not die out all at once. They probably continued to live on more or less obscurely in the popular consciousness.' 'The long hair,' he continues, 'constituting the traditional attribute of the Frankish dynasty… had certainly been at the beginning a symbol of a supernatural nature.'[179] More recently, Ian Wood has supported 'pagan overtones' for Merovingian kingship,[180] and written that, at Clovis's conversion, '[t]he majority of the Franks are unlikely to have been affected as yet by Christianity'.[181] These are sensible enough conclusions; wholesale conversion of an entire people does not, after all, occur in only one generation. Moreover, we can deduce from the story of Chararic and his son in *Hist.* II.41 that hair had a great importance for Frankish kings before (or at least right after) conversion to Christianity.[182] As discussed in the first chapter, attempts to explain the Merovingian hair in a purely Christian context, related to the Samson story, seem far-fetched, resting upon much later evidence.[183] It seems safe to conclude that the long hair had some kind of cultural significance that was probably pre-Christian. More than that, the sources do not allow us to say.

III.3 Hairs in the Wax

A recent discovery made in the National Archives of Paris is of great interest to the current discussion. A team of researchers has discovered hair fibers embedded into the wax seals of several Merovingian and Carolingian kings (Childebert III, Chilperic II, Pippin the Short, Charlemagne, Carloman, and Pippin of Aquitaine), apparently purposefully placed there.[184]

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[179] Bloch, *The Royal Touch,* 33.
[180] Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, 38.
[181] Ibid, 48.
[182] Assuming that Gregory is not projecting contemporary practices of hair-cutting and tonsuring onto an earlier episode; given the detail related, however, it seems unlikely that it was an invention. On the dating of this episode see Wood, "Gregory of Tours and Clovis."
[183] E.g. Goosmann, "Like so many Samsons?"
[184] Phillipe Charlier et al., "Into the Wax: Forensic and Anthropological Analysis of Human Hairs in Merovingian and Carolingian Royal Seals," *Forensic science, medicine, and pathology* 12, no. 2 (June 2016): 220-25.

Fig. 2: Copy of ring of Childeric I, Tournai (481 C.E.) Photographer Marco Prins, Mainz: Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum.

This discovery raises several questions. Seal rings are the only surviving contemporary visual depictions we have of the Merovingian kings, that of Childeric I, discovered at Tournai in 1653 and subsequently lost, being the most famous one (see Figure 2). All of the extant Merovingian seals, indeed, depict the king with long hair parted in the middle. While Childeric I was depicted on his ring as a Roman officer, subsequent seals eschew late imperial imagery; the frontal view emphasizes the centrality of the person of the monarch and his charisma.[185] Affixing documents with the royal seal was a continuation of imperial practice, but took on a new character in the Merovingian kingdom. The function of the seal was not so much to authenticate the veracity of a document, but rather to embody the personal power and presence of the king; '[t]o seal was, for

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[185] Andrea Stieldorf, "Gestalt und Funktion der Siegel auf den merowingischen Königsurkunden," *Archiv für Diplomatik* 47-48 (2002): 133-66.

the Merovingian kings, to behave as a ruler, literally to inscribe oneself within the imperial tradition'.[186] Later, under the Carolingians, royal and then imperial seals were to acquire the connotation more conventionally associated with them, that of authenticating official documents, in the context of a growing and 'bureaucratizing' imperial chancery.[187]

It is, of course, impossible to know with any certainty whether the hair fibers found in the seals in the French National Archives are those of the associated kings or of, perhaps, some notary or functionary of their respective chanceries. Nevertheless, in the absence of any other reasonable explanation for such a practice, is seems sensible to assume for the time being that they are, indeed, the hairs of their respective kings. If the purpose of the seal was to embody the presence of the king, the presence of a physical 'artifact' from the king's body within the wax of the seal itself seems to be a logical extension. As a symbolic practice, inclusion of hairs in the seal wax added the actual physical presence of the king to the representational presence of the seal.

In addition to purely symbolic meaning, however, this discovery inevitably brings to mind thoughts of magic. Hair fibers were certainly used in non-Christian magical practices.[188] Hairs were also viable as relics of saints; Charlemagne, for example, is said to have had hairs from the head of the Virgin Mary contained in the reliquary amulet he wore around his neck.[189] If, however, we accept the possibility that the Merovingian hair may have had a magical quality in itself, this discovery takes on a different quality. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, for one, explicitly associated the Merovingian seals with 'a kind of magic'; for him, the representation of the king via the seal has a magical quality to it, 'as if he were there to speak for himself'.[190] Adding strands of the hair, the king's magical attribute, to the wax of the seal, may then have enhanced its representational power via a kind of magical transference.

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[186] Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego was Imago: Signs of Identity in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 76-77.
[187] Ibid., 78-80.
[188] See Flint, *The Rise of Magic*, 64.
[189] Ibid., 304; see also Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen* I, 309-11.
[190] Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings,* 209.

It is interesting to note that the practice apparently continued into the Carolingian period. It has recently been argues by Yitzhak Hen that the transition from Merovingian to Carolingian rulership did not involve as radical of a break as has often been supposed;[191] this finding indeed supports continuity rather than rupture. We know of no special meaning attached to the hair of the Carolingians; it is likely that the symbol had become too closely associated with their Merovingian predecessors for the Carolingians to successfully appropriate it. Rather than any magical power manifested in their hair, the Carolingians received any sacral power that they had, purely Christian in nature, via the anointing by priests which was the hallmark of Carolingian rulership.[192] It is puzzling, then, that the Carolingians would continue a practice that seemingly lends itself so closely to association with one of the most potent symbols of the Merovingian family, their hair. The scientific study by Charlier et al. only analyzed the seals of two of the last Merovingians. In the absence of evidence for the same practice from earlier kings, it is impossible to say with any certainty that placing hair fibers in the wax seals was in any way associated specifically with the Merovingians and their hair; in any case, the practice of affixing seals was likely more the purview of the office of the royal chancery than of the king himself.[193] As with so much else of the Merovingian age, it is likely that the meaning of this curious finding will remain a mystery.

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[191] Hen, "The Christianization of Kingship,"176.

[192] Such is the argument of Bloch, *The Royal Touch*, 37-41.

[193] See Ildar H. Garipzanov, *The Symbolic Language of Royal Authority in the Carolingian World (c. 751-877)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 161-172.

CONCLUSION

The long hair of the Merovingian kings was a symbol of their house, associated with the family and seemingly required in order to be considered a fully-fledged member of it, and thus eligible to rule. Because it was so associated with the Merovingian house and with rulership, it could serve as a locus or tool of conflict among those with competing political claims. Hair-cutting or tonsuring, often with an attendant forced confinement in a monastery, was thus a weapon often used to remove a real or suspected rival from consideration as an active and potent political player. Because of hair's inherent malleability, however, such an act of symbolic violence could sometimes backfire. At any rate, tonsuring or hair-cutting was frequently a merely impermanent impediment to participation in political life – hair usually grows back, after all, and with it the possibility of re-staking one's claim to political potency.

Because it was associated with the Merovingian family, hair could become a site of conflict when it came to defining the boundaries of that family. As we have seen, membership of the Merovingian family was perhaps less a biological than a political fact. In the case of Gundovald, likely a biological member of the Merovingian family, but excluded from political membership in it and therefore a kingship of his own, his long hair could be a key symbolic element of his claim to royal legitimacy, and hence to political power. Keeping his hair cut short, as his brothers had done, was a way of denying him this legitimacy, and thus eliminating another rival for power. For some of the later Merovingians, perhaps less related to their predecessors by blood than by political expediency, their long hair may have been one of the last reservoirs of symbolic legitimacy left to them as they increasingly saw power slip out of their hands and into those of the mayors of the palace, their soon-to-be Carolingian successors.

This much is reasonably clear from our rather sparse sources for the Merovingian period, and making allowances for the difficulties often associated with interpreting those sources. What we crucially lack, however, is a sense of what their long hair meant to the Merovingians themselves, and to their subjects. Because of the scarcity of written evidence from different perspectives in this

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period, the historian has difficulty moving from the 'etic' level, that of the questions posed by the historian using their own categories, to the 'emic' level, that of the experiential categories of those under study.[194]

German historiography of the 1920s and 30s, as part of a larger project of seeking an essential Germanic cultural continuity from antiquity through to the modern period, attempted to assign a sacral meaning to the Merovingian hair. In this interpretation, the Merovingian hair was an emanation of Germanic paganism, part of a Germanic sacral kingship that was an inherent cultural trait of all of the Germanic peoples. Sacral kings, including the Merovingians supposedly traced their genealogies from Woden, the chief death-god of Germanic paganism. The Merovingian hair, then, held a kind of magical power. It was the embodiment of the king's *Heil* or *fortuna*, his 'royal luck' that ensured the continuing prosperity of his people. Cutting off a Merovingian's hair, then, amounted to depriving him of this sacral power. More than merely symbolic, the Merovingian hair in this interpretation took on an essentially religious quality.

This interpretation managed to survive after the end of the Second World War, but gradually came under increasing criticism. Such primary evidence from the period as we have simply cannot support it, and those scholars who forwarded it freely drew evidence from very different spatial and temporal contexts, unifying them under one, monistic 'Germanic antiquity'. Though discussions over these issues, even down until the present time, could become very heated and contentious, this has more to do with the history of the 20th century than with that of the fifth – the involvement of supporters of sacral kingship theory such as Otto Höfler with the academic establishment of National Socialism has cast a long shadow over 'Germanic antiquity'.

More recent attempts to explain the Merovingian hair through the lens of 'symbolic capital' have suffered from perhaps rather similar problems – the attempt to apply modern social scientific theory (our own 'etic' questions) onto the past in a way that is not sufficiently self-reflective. It is

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[194] See Ginzburg, "Our Words and Theirs," 104-05.

perhaps time to move out of the long shadow cast by poor historiography of the 20th century with unsavory associations. The recent discovery of hair fibers in the wax seals of Merovingian and Carolingian kings in the National Archives of Paris puts the question of the magical power of the Merovingian hair back onto the table. While certainly not conclusive evidence, it inevitably suggests the question of some kind of magical thinking. While we will likely never be able to determine with any certainty how the Merovingians and their subjects perceived the long hair of the kings, and whether for them it held any magical or religious connotations, I believe we should at least be open to the possibility that magical thinking, in addition to political symbolism, played a role.

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