

## Introduction

---

*Stefan Esders and Yitzhak Hen*

In the autumn of 1879, a young law student, Henri Pirenne (1862–1935), joined the history class of the promising Liège professor Godefroid Kurth (1847–1916). Pirenne was captivated by Kurth’s teaching, especially by his advanced medieval-history classes, which were closely modelled on the Berlin seminars of Leopold von Ranke. An enduring friendship that was nourished by mutual respect and cultivated by a lively exchange of letters developed between the master and his student, although academically they parted ways. Kurth, the romantic Catholic, became the doyen of medieval history in Belgium and one of the founding fathers of Merovingian history in Europe. Pirenne, on the other hand, became one of the most discussed historians in modern times, whose thesis, although constantly debated, changed dramatically the ways we perceive the passage from late antiquity to the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> The work of Kurth and Pirenne has been subject to endless criticism and revision in the past century or so. Yet, the influence of both on many a generation of historians was immense, not least because they had established the terms of reference for the debate about the transformation of the Mediterranean world in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, and the role that the Merovingian kingdoms had played within that process. This volume reunites Kurth and Pirenne once again.

It should come as no surprise that Pirenne was the most eloquent advocate of the late Merovingian period as the rupture between antiquity and the Middle Ages. His posthumously published work *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, which exhibits his vision in exquisite clarity and simplicity, is a classical study, particularly if one defines as ‘classic’ a book that one reads and admires, realising throughout that the author is

<sup>1</sup> On Godefoid Kurth and Hénri Pirenne, see L.-E. Halkin, ‘Godefoid Kurth et Henri Pirenne’, *La Revue Nouvelle*, 32 (1960): 385–90; J.-L. Kupper, ‘Godefroid Kurth and Henri Pirenne: An Improbable Friendship’, *Journal of Belgian History*, 42 (2011): 411–26; I. N. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 223–9.

wrong.<sup>2</sup> Pirenne's picture of a deep rupture that was caused by the Arab conquests and subsequently 'put an end to the Mediterranean commonwealth' has been questioned almost immediately after its first publication, by scholars such as Maurice Lombard, to mention only one of the most prominent ones.<sup>3</sup> It is a commonplace nowadays that economic decline in the West started well before the seventh century, as has been shown by David Whitehouse and Richard Hodges in their 1983 book *Mohammed and Charlemagne: The Origins of Europe*, which made ample use of archaeological evidence, scarcely known to Pirenne.<sup>4</sup> Two important volumes that originated in the ESF-funded 'Transformation of the Roman World' project, one on the sixth and one of the eighth century, took this discussion further and painted a much more nuanced picture of regional differences as well as of short- and long-term developments.<sup>5</sup> More detailed studies followed suit. In his wide-ranging book *Origins of European Economy*, Michael McCormick not only advocated for an economic recovery as early as the eighth century but also introduced the slave-trade into our economic paradigm.<sup>6</sup> Slaves as luxury goods calls for a reassessment of the Mediterranean exchange systems and the role played by the Arabs, who bought slaves and enslaved people in a considerable number. Pirenne, on the other hand, had focused on gold, papyrus, spices and silk as the four luxury goods that signify long-distance trade, dismissing the slave trade as insignificant for Merovingian economic activity. Similarly, Chris Wickham, in his monumental book *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, reminds us that the four luxury commodities mentioned by Pirenne 'are not reliable guides to the scale of economic activity in our period, simply because they tell us about the wrong things; indeed, historians who focus their attention on luxuries are mostly not writing economic history at all'.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Wickham calls for a more down-to-earth approach of investigation that considers the very foundations of economic activity – production and surplus – framing the

<sup>2</sup> H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, ed. J. Pirenne and F. Vercauteren (Paris, 1937); English trans. *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London, 1939).

<sup>3</sup> H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, trans. F. H. Halsey with a new introduction by M. McCormick (Princeton, NJ, 2014), p. 14. (Originally published in 1925.)

<sup>4</sup> R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed and Charlemagne: The Origins of Europe* (London, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> *The Sixth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. R. Hodges and W. Bowden (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 1998); *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> M. McCormick, *Origins of European Economy: Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge 2001).

<sup>7</sup> C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), p. 701.

question of short- and long-distance exchange in a different way. Finally, in a stimulating paper that was published recently, Bonnie Effros points at ‘the enduring attraction of the Pirenne thesis’, which, she argues, was fuelled by political ideology.<sup>8</sup> Whereas for Pirenne the Arabs were just instrumental in the destruction of Mediterranean economy, those who adhered to his thesis stressed the disrupting force not only of the Arab conquests but also of Islam as a religion. She also draws attention to Pirenne’s ‘Orientalism’, which was rooted in the colonial discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the modern conquest of Islamic territories was perceived as part of a civilising mission to those areas which previously had been part of the Roman Empire.

Against this background, when dealing with the early medieval Mediterranean, one should perhaps be less interested in modifying Pirenne’s thesis, while, at the same time, keeping in mind how influential it has been. One should try to expand one’s source material and find new ways to approach the passage from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages in and around the Mediterranean. This is precisely what the various papers collected in this volume do. Their aim is to study the Merovingian kingdoms of the early Middle Ages in a broader Mediterranean context. The working hypothesis behind this enterprise is that apart from being post-Roman barbarian kingdoms, deeply rooted in the traditions and practices of the western Roman Empire, the Merovingian kingdoms had complicated and multilayered social, cultural and political relations with their eastern Mediterranean counterparts, that is, the Byzantine Empire and the Umayyad Caliphate. Not only were the Merovingians aware of the politics and culture of Byzantium and its relations with the Persians, they also had a fair amount of knowledge on the ins and outs of the Muslim East from the seventh century onwards. By analysing written accounts, as well as various archaeological findings and artefacts, the various studies in this volume offer a new perspective on the history of Merovingian Francia and its relations with the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and Spain.

The Merovingian kingdoms were, perhaps, the most powerful and long-lasting political entities of the post-Roman world.<sup>9</sup> The politics of turmoil that characterised Merovingian history from the death of Clovis (d. 511) onwards led to the consolidation of three Frankish subkingdoms

<sup>8</sup> B. Effros, ‘The Enduring Attraction of the Pirenne Thesis’, *Speculum*, 92 (2017): 184–208.

<sup>9</sup> The amount of literature on the Merovingian kingdoms is enormous and cannot be listed here. For a comprehensive introduction, see I. N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London and New York, 1994). For further bibliography, see the various papers in this volume.

(*Teilreiche*, as the German call them): Neustria, Austrasia, and the south-eastern kingdom, which crystallised in the territories of the former kingdom of Burgundy. The local elite of each subkingdom developed its own political identity, which, in turn, boosted the bitter hostility and conflicts between the Merovingian rulers of Francia. Chlothar II, who, in 613 reunited the Merovingian kingdoms under his rule, must have realised the growing power of the local aristocracy, and hence allowed each of the Merovingian *Teilreiche* to have its own court under its own *major domus*.

When, in 629, Dagobert I succeeded his father as king of the Franks, he did not make any attempt to change the new political system established by his father but simply continued the policy of acknowledging local elites. Dagobert I has traditionally been seen as the last effective Merovingian king, succeeded by a series of degenerate ‘do-nothing’ kings (*rois fainéants*). This view, which, in the past, has poisoned the minds of many historians, was created and disseminated by the successor dynasty, the Carolingians and their advisers, who, in an attempt to justify their rise to power, developed a remarkably effective machinery of political and religious propaganda.

After the death of Dagobert I in 639, the Merovingian kingdom was indeed divided between his successors, Sigibert III and Clovis II. But this in itself must not be taken as a sign of weakness, nor is it an indication of the deteriorating authority of the Merovingian king. Dagobert was certainly not the last effective Merovingian ruler of Francia. His immediate successors, who built on their father’s and grandfather’s accomplishments, were no less effective as rulers, and as for the quality of their later successors, the Carolingian bias of our sources must always be taken with a pinch of salt.

The reign of Chlothar II and Dagobert I was indeed a crucial period in the formation of late Merovingian polity. The new political arrangements created by Chlothar II and bolstered by Dagobert I allowed local elites to preserve and further develop their own identities and acknowledged the increasing importance of these elites to the political system. Yet it also marked the Merovingian court as the unrivalled political centre, and it clearly set down the collaborative relationship between local aristocrats and their kings. Although cooperation was not always smooth, the political system, which was based on consensual power-sharing arrangements, was rather cohesive and largely successful. The fact that this basic structure, set down in the early seventh century, continued to define the *regnum Francorum* well into Charles Martel’s day, is evidence not of an atrophied political system but rather of a stable and relatively efficient model of governance.

The politics and culture of the Merovingian kingdoms in Gaul had most often been interpreted as a tapestry of local phenomena. The reasons for this are complex. In part, this view was due to certain nationalist historiographic traditions (especially in Germany and France) that understood the early Middle Ages as part of a national, ‘Germanic’ past. But it also reflects a general tendency to examine the early medieval West through a predominantly ‘Western’ prism, framing the early Middle Ages as an era of its own which had to be treated separately from ‘Roman’, that is, antique, or ‘Byzantine’ history.

Whereas the study of the early medieval West in general, and the study of the Merovingian kingdoms in particular, has witnessed an immense resurgence of interest in recent years, there is no monograph and only a handful of (mostly out-of-date) papers dedicated to the relations between the Merovingian kingdoms and their Eastern counterparts. These studies, more often than not, present a misleading image of the complicated and multilayered social, cultural and political relations between the Merovingians and their Mediterranean contemporaries. It is indeed extremely rare to find modern scholars asking questions about the place of the Merovingian kingdoms in the larger context of the Mediterranean world and especially about the ways the Merovingians perceived and understood both the Byzantine Empire, and the Umayyad Caliphate.<sup>10</sup> As the various papers in this volume demonstrate, the vibrant cultural exchanges and complex relations within the Mediterranean world render obsolete any historical interpretation that sees the Merovingian world as an isolated enclave.

The first section of this volume deals with the expanding political horizons of the Merovingian kingdoms. It begins with a survey of archaeological evidence for contact and exchange between the eastern Mediterranean and Merovingian Gaul from the end of the fifth to the eighth century (Drauschke), and it continues with an examination of the Burgundian–Merovingian relations under Sigismund and Gundobad (Fox) and the formation of a collective Frankish identity in the last decades of the sixth century vis-à-vis the rulers and elites of the Byzantine East (Reimitz).

The 580s, which witnessed a rigorous intensification in various processes that forged the vital position of the Merovingian kingdoms

<sup>10</sup> An exception in that respect is *Western Perspectives on the Mediterranean: Cultural Transformation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, 400–800*, ed. A. Fischer and I. N. Wood (London, 2014). See also *The Merovingian Kingdoms and the Mediterranean World: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. P. Bockius, S. Esders, Y. Hen, P. Lucas and T. Rotman (London, 2019).

in the Mediterranean context, is the focus of the second section of this book. From various aspects of a ‘Christianised culture of war’ that had spread from the Byzantine East to the Merovingian West (Wynn), through Frankish involvement in political and military campaigns in Visigothic Spain (Drews) and Syria (Furlas), up to the financial dimension in the relations between the Franks and Byzantium (Fischer), the papers in this section expose the wide horizons of the Merovingian Mediterranean.

An image of the popes as powerful cultural and political brokers in the early medieval Mediterranean emerges from the papers of the third section. During the murky times of the so-called Three- Chapters Controversy, the popes played a crucial role in securing the treaty between the Merovingian king, Childebert, and the Byzantine emperor, emphasising the immense political importance of this theological debate and the ability of the popes to negotiate power between East and West (Scholz). Similarly, a century later, Pope Martin I wrote to Amandus and King Sigibert III of Austrasia in an attempt to secure their support for the acts of the Lateran Council against the Monothelism of the Byzantine emperor (Mériaux). Information on what was going on in the Byzantine East (Sarti) and papal Rome (McKitterick) constantly reached the Merovingian West and consequently shaped the Merovingian perception of the Mediterranean.

The vibrant cultural exchange between the East and the West during the Merovingian period is examined in the fourth section of this book through the prism of the cults of relics (Noga-Banai), hagiography (Kreiner), patristic literature (Hen) and Holy Land itineraries (Limor). This cultural effervescence continued well into the late Merovingian period, which is the focus of the fifth and final section of this book. The influx of various treatises, such as the *Physiologus* and *Pseudo-Methodius* (Ganz and Wood) and artistic models (Nees), did not stop during the period of turmoil that characterised the late Merovingian period. On the contrary, the Merovingians and their *maiores* had close religious and economic ties with Visigothic Spain, Anglo-Saxon England, Lombard Italy, the popes and the Byzantine East (Esders), which testify to their importance in the Mediterranean scene. Their pivotal role in Mediterranean politics and culture left its marks on Arabic accounts of Merovingian affairs (Christys), and it certainly paved the way for Pippin III’s brand of global politics (Goosmann).