

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# INTRODUCTION: BARBARIAN GAUL

## CHAPTER ONE



The historian is generally occupied far more with great events and imposing characters than with the quiet, dim life which flows on in silent, monotonous toil beneath the glare and tumult of great tragedies and triumphs. It is natural that it should be so.

SAMUEL DILL, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age*<sup>1</sup>

Late Antiquity, stretching roughly from the late third through seventh centuries, was an age characterized by transition.<sup>2</sup> In that period, Europe experienced dramatic political and social changes: Western imperial rule disappeared, replaced by smaller kingdoms, trade and taxation declined, aristocrats concentrated on more proximate interests,

1. Samuel Dill, *Roman Society in Gaul in the Merovingian Age* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 235.
2. The theme of “transition” is emphasized in a continuing series of interdisciplinary conferences in the U. S. called “Shifting Frontiers” and also in a recent interdisciplinary and collaborative effort among international (mostly European) scholars called the Transformation of the Roman World Project. Editors of the latter expect seventeen publications to result; Ian Wood, “Report: The European Science Foundation’s Programme on the Transformation of the Roman World and Emergence of Early Medieval Europe,” *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997): 217–27. Initial publications of the two projects are, respectively, Ralph W. Mathisen and Hagith Sivan, eds., *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1996); and Leslie Webster and Michelle Brown, eds., *The Transformation of the Roman World, AD 400–900* (London and Berkeley: British Museum and University of California Press, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

and Roman and indigenous cultures merged.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Christian thought and practice increasingly infiltrated and influenced European politics, society, and culture.<sup>4</sup> Inhabitants of Gaul were in the forefront in experiencing these important societal shifts.<sup>5</sup> Gallic society forever changed with the introduction of peoples whom the sources label “barbarians.” Sizeable migrating groups passed through and/or settled in Gaul from the first decade of the fifth century.<sup>6</sup> According to the chronicle tradition, bands of Vandals, Sueves, and Alans moved westward over the Rhine River from December 406. By 409, some had proceeded to Spain and North Africa, while others stayed. The Empire responded to these movements by expanding a policy of settling the “barbarians” as *foederati*, federate soldiers. In 413, the Western government settled Burgundians along the upper Rhine, and in 418 it placed Visigothic *foederati* in the province of Aquitania Secunda. By then, Franks had long been serving a similar purpose in northern Gaul. But even before the death of the last legitimate Western emperor, barbarian military leaders donning Roman military titles had begun treating parts of Gaul as if they were their own.<sup>7</sup> Between 465 and 480, King Childeric, leader of Salian Frankish federates stationed in Belgica, took territory in

3. General narrative histories include J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1958); Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395–600* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); and Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284–641: The Transformation of the Ancient World* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2007). For broad approaches to the era, see Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14, *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Paul Fouracre, ed., *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 1, c. 500–c. 700 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
4. Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom, Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (2nd ed., Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
5. John F. Drinkwater and Hugh Elton, eds., *Fifth-Century Gaul: A Crisis of Identity?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer, eds., *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).
6. In general see J. B. Bury, *The Invasion of Europe by the Barbarians* (London: Macmillan, 1928); Lucien Musset, *The Germanic Invasions: The Making of Europe, A.D. 400–600*, trans. by E. and C. James (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975); Walter Pohl, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*, TRW 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Matthew Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300–900: The Sword, the Plough and the Book* (London: Routledge, 2007), 63–137.
7. When the exiled emperor Julius Nepos died in 480, the barbarian Odovacar, who was already ruling Italy as *rex*, ended any pretense of imperial rule in the West; Cassiodorus, *Chron.*, s. a., 476.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Seine basin.<sup>8</sup> After 480, Childeric's son, the warrior-king Clovis (reigned ca. 481–511), enjoyed more military successes than failures and thereby consolidated power in northern Gaul and expanded his authority south of the Loire River.<sup>9</sup> Following up on these advances, Clovis's sons and grandsons established complete Frankish control over the southern Gallic regions previously held by Burgundians, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths.<sup>10</sup>

This familiar story of “Germanic” conquest of “Roman” Gaul has undergone considerable scholarly revision in recent decades. To begin, modern studies of ethnogenesis dismiss biological distinctions between “Romans” and “barbarians” and among the separate so-called “Germanic” groups. New models tend to abandon credence in ethnographic concepts that had been proposed by late ancient writers themselves, such as Jordanes, who culled ancient Greek and Roman texts and then identified contemporary sixth-century Goths with the ancient *Getae*, about whom he had read. In place of discarded theories, recent analyses in general explain how a “barbarian people” could result from a lasting coalescing of troops around the nucleus of a successful warlord, to which group institutions (e.g., laws) and traditions (e.g., legendary origins) might attach themselves.<sup>11</sup>

This critical mass of warriors under a successful commander is converted into a people through the imposition of a legal system. Peoplehood is the end of a political process through which individuals with diverse backgrounds are united by law. So conceived, a people

8. Edward James, *The Franks* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1988), 64–77.

9. *Ibid.*, 78–91. For an alternative to traditional interpretations of Childeric and Clovis advancing out of Belgica, see Guy Halsall, “Childeric's Grave, Clovis' Succession, and the Origin of the Merovingian Kingdom,” in *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 116–33.

10. On specific barbarian peoples, for the Burgundians, see Justin Favrod, *Histoire politique du royaume burgonde, 443–534* (Lausanne: Bibliothèque historique vaudoise, 1997). On the Goths, see Peter Heather, *The Goths* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For the Franks, see Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Edward James, *The Franks* (op. cit.); John M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962); and Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (New York: Longman, 1994).

11. Patrick J. Geary, “Barbarians and Ethnicity,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 108.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

is constitutional, not biological, and yet the very imposition of law makes the opposite appeal: it is the law of the ancestors. The leader projects an antiquity and a genealogy onto this new creation.<sup>12</sup>

For illustration, considering the Franks, even before Clovis's reign his father Childeric had become a dominant politico-military figure around Tournai. The presence of a sizeable amount of Byzantine coinage in Childeric's grave, discovered in 1653, suggests that one reason Childeric could sustain his position was Byzantine financial support; soldiers latched onto Childeric not only because of the likelihood of his succeeding in battle but also to partake in his lucre.<sup>13</sup> A factor that contributed to the lasting prominence of the warlord's family was cooperation with members of local power structures, including ecclesiastical aristocrats such as Bishop Remigius of Reims.<sup>14</sup> When Clovis inherited his father's position, sufficient numbers of aristocrats such as Remigius apparently were willing to accept the king's authority so long as he continued to heed their advice. Clovis did not intend to establish or maintain separate identities for Franks and Romans. While the Frankish royal family – the Merovingians – perhaps distinguished themselves from others by wearing long hair and claiming descent from a sea monster called the quinotaur, Frankish people at large adopted a legendary Trojan ancestry.<sup>15</sup> The latter claim actually linked Franks and Romans, for people identifying themselves as the latter had been touting the same ancestry for centuries.<sup>16</sup> Another potential difference between Franks and Romans disappeared when Clovis and many of his soldiers famously converted to the brand of Christianity prevalent among the Gallic populace at large – Catholicism.<sup>17</sup> So for inhabitants of the Frankish sub-kingdoms of the sixth century, as already for residents of the Gothic

12. Ibid.

13. James, *The Franks*, 58–63.

14. Greg. Tur., *Hist.* 2.31; *Epistulae Austrasicae* 2.

15. Fredegar, *Chron.* 2.4–6, 3.2, 9.

16. For Frankish legends, see Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, 33–38; Geary, “Barbarians and Ethnicity,” 124–25.

17. Avitus of Vienne, *Ep.* 46; Greg. Tur., *Hist.* 2.31. For dating Clovis's baptism, it is advisable to rely on contemporary sources rather than on Gregory. See Danuta Shanzer, “Dating the Baptism of Clovis: The Bishop of Vienne vs the Bishop of Tours,” *Early Medieval Europe* 7 (1998): 29–57.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

and Burgundian realms in the late fifth, one cannot speak properly of ethnically distinct Romans and “barbarians.”

According to new models of ethnogenesis, ethnicity becomes less a matter of biology than one of selected identity.<sup>18</sup> For example, small-scale farmers from late fifth-century Pannonia and Moesia who tossed fortune to the wind and joined Theodoric the Great on his campaigns into Italy by 493 would have changed identity from “Roman” to “Goth.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, mentions of ethnicity in legal sources such as the word “Burgundian” in the Burgundian law code would pertain not to a culture distinguishable from the “Romans” but rather to individuals participating in the military.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, litterateurs could use the term “barbarian” rhetorically to denote a person with a “barbaric” penchant for violence, or a “barbaric” persistence in heresy, or even one who used “barbarous” speech.<sup>21</sup>

So why maintain the term “barbarian,” as I do in the subtitle of this chapter? In something of a nostalgic spirit akin to that sometimes expressed in the rhetoric of our sources, the present study will use “barbarian” (e.g., preceding “era” or “Gaul”) to connote a century-and-a-half long period when Western kings were supplanting imperial rule and replacing each other. Some have used the term “sub-Roman” to denote these years, but that term even more than “barbarian” may be read to suggest a concept of cultural “decline and fall,” which many scholars have abandoned for the aforementioned notion of “transition.”<sup>22</sup>

18. Walter Pohl with Helmut Reimitz, eds., *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, TRW 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

19. Patrick Amory, “Names, Ethnic Identity, and Community in Fifth- and Sixth-Century Burgundy,” *Viator* 25 (1994), 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 3.

21. Patrick Amory, “Ethnographic Rhetoric, Aristocratic Attitudes and Political Allegiance in Post-Roman Gaul,” *Klio* 76 (1994), 440–47.

22. See Glen W. Bowersock, “The Vanishing Paradigm of the Fall of Rome,” in *idem, Select Papers on Late Antiquity* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2000), 187–97; and Richard Gerberding, “The Later Roman Empire,” in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. I, c. 500–c. 700, ed. Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 25–26. However, for arguments in favor of maintaining the “fall,” one relying principally upon archaeology and a second upon military narrative, see respectively, Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Likewise, see Peter Heather, “The Western Empire, 425–476,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14, *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600*, ed.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

Others prefer “late ancient,” but that term properly refers to a more extensive period stretching further back than the fifth century. More than a decade ago, when the scholarly notion of Late Antiquity still was “in the making,” one study offered the adjective “barbarian” to demarcate Gallic society in the fifth century, with forays into adjacent decades.<sup>23</sup> The present work likewise maintains the designation, but it will focus upon a later range of years, the latter fifth through the end of the sixth centuries. These years constitute a period of foundation and stabilization of Western realms, which it is perhaps more appropriate to call “barbarian” rather than “Germanic.”<sup>24</sup> One cohesive feature for the time frame under review is a prolonged effort on the part of Gallic aristocrats to increase their control over local society. Even before the establishment of independent kingdoms, Gallic landed nobles had begun to concentrate their efforts on improving their local position. Disruption caused by migrations and subsequent creation of smaller political units with regularly “shifting frontiers” denied Gallic magnates the benefit of participating in Roman imperial service. Aristocrats, particularly to the south, clung tenaciously to traditional “defining” practices such as land management and literary pursuits.<sup>25</sup> For example, after his homeland came under the control of Burgundians and then Visigoths, the aristocrat and former imperial office holder Sidonius Apollinaris continued to communicate with fellow nobles and impress them by publishing books of letters and poetry in an elegant Latin style. A century later, the Italian-born poet Venantius Fortunatus composed books of verse extolling the nobility of fellow socially prominent Gauls. The careers of Sidonius and Fortunatus represent another grand feature of the Barbarian era, the preeminence of Christian leadership. Like many

A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–32, esp. at 18–30.

23. Ralph W. Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul: Strategies for Survival in an Age of Transition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
24. On the inadequacy of terms such as “Germans” or “Germanic” for describing barbarians of the Migration Age, see Walter Goffart, *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1–12.
25. For aristocratic survival strategies, see Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans (A.D. 418–584): The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983); and especially Mathisen, *Roman Aristocrats in Barbarian Gaul* (op. cit.).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION: BARBARIAN GAUL 7

other ambitious men they became bishops. From the fifth century on, acquiring episcopal office became a principal means by which aristocrats maintained and augmented local influence.<sup>26</sup> Sidonius, Fortunatus, and others used their literary talents to promote fellow ecclesiastical aristocrats' efforts at social empowerment. Not only did Fortunatus pen songs extolling episcopal virtues; he also composed books to convince fellow Christians that God preordained saintly bishops to hold their influential posts. Even more profuse in hagiographical output was Fortunatus's patron and friend, Bishop Gregory of Tours, who wrote multiple tomes that presented the miraculous deeds and extolled the dedication and faith of dozens of Christian martyrs and confessors, most of them from Gaul. Presiding over a diocese in the Loire valley and writing toward the end of the sixth century, Gregory's depiction of a Gaul overrun with Christian shrines does not constitute the wishful thinking of a bishop living on some cultural periphery; instead, it rather accurately attests to the virtual completion of a process of widespread Christian saturation that had been largely accomplished a century earlier.<sup>27</sup> Thus, mine is not the Barbarian Gaul of those who once perceived the region divided into two culturally distinct zones – a southern “Roman” and northern “Frankish” Gaul.<sup>28</sup> Neither is it a “frontier” land brimming with

26. Claudia Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 194.

27. See Yitzhak Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul, A.D. 481–751* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1995), 7–18. Recent critical analyses of funerary inscriptions, including graffiti, indicate that Gallic and Spanish saints cults were likely even more numerous and varied than previously imagined; Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300–750*, BAR International Series 1135 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2003), 164. Likewise, archaeology on remains of edifices such as the early fourth-century basilica of Saint Peter outside Autun attests to the early presence of Christian sacred spaces distinct from pagan topography, and calls into question the survival of large pagan shrines beyond the third century; Bailey Young, “Sacred Topography: The Impact of the Funerary Basilica in Late Antique Gaul,” in *Society and Culture in Late Antique Gaul: Revisiting the Sources*, ed. Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 169–86.

28. Pierre Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West, Sixth through Eighth Centuries*, trans. by John J. Contreni (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1976), 177–83. This is not to deny that differences, most subtle but some pronounced, between north and south persisted, such as a greater degree of stability for southern aristocrats than for northern ones in the fifth and sixth centuries; Guy Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization: The Merovingian Region of Metz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 33–39. Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181, while acknowledging the greater strength of southern aristocracies, downplays any notion of a



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

prominent pagans stalwartly persevering among masses of “half-Christian” peasants.<sup>29</sup> Rather, this Barbarian Gaul is a thoroughly Christianized social entity suitable for investigation as such. Analysis will prejudice sources pertaining to a Gallic “heartland” consisting of Neustria, Burgundy, Aquitaine, Provence, and western Austrasia. It will not rely on evidence from peripheral zones such as Thuringia and Frisia.<sup>30</sup> While I acknowledge the merits of regional studies that have highlighted local distinctions and emphasized societal shifts in different places at different moments, nevertheless, I contend that Gaul, from Arles to Vienne to Trier to Nantes, constitutes a region viable for scholarly analysis by virtue of its deep-seated cultural unity.<sup>31</sup> This viability applies especially for the topic upon which the present study will focus: the *milieux* of non-elites.

I propose to investigate how participants in diverse groups mostly ranking below aristocrats fared in affecting their own strategies to survive and even prosper. While the study takes into account recent literature pertaining to archaeological and material evidence, the sources upon which it chiefly relies are narrative texts, especially history and saints’ lives. Scarcely any modern analysis of Gallic society could stand without reference to hagiographical works, for saints’ lives make up

serious north-south socio-political disparity, opposing what he calls “the north Frankish meltdown theory.” Wickham, *ibid.*, 43–44, 675–76, divides Gaul ecologically into a Mediterranean zone reaching up to around Lyons, and a northern zone with economic activity akin to that for England and northern Germany. Still, he estimates that Gallic physical topography never seriously impeded communications or an ability to establish political control over “the whole territory from the Rhine to the Pyrenees”; *ibid.*, 43.

29. Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 47; and see Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism from the Fourth to Eighth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997). Once widespread interpretations of the interment of burial objects as evidence for the presence of pagan “Germans” fearful of death being active in Gaul through the sixth century have been soundly rejected; Bonnie Effros, *Merovingian Mortuary Archaeology and the Making of the Early Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2003), 80–85, 133, 147.
30. Even Gaul’s peripheral zones, however, are suspected of having been Christianized earlier than what once was believed – e. g., Thuringia in the sixth century; Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2001), 9.
31. Excellent regional studies include Patrick Geary, *Aristocracy in Provence: The Rhone Basin at the Dawn of the Carolingian Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Halsall, *Settlement and Social Organization: The Merovingian Region of Metz*; Matthew Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

much of the surviving literature for the age.<sup>32</sup> They also contain many references to people from the lower social echelons. It is therefore most fortunate that recent generations of scholars have reaffirmed hagiography's worth as a historical source. Into the mid-twentieth century, many historians valued saints' lives only to the extent that they might squeeze from such texts a few facts that might be added to some grand narrative. An earlier scholarly willingness to dismiss literature about saints stemmed in part from an elitist presupposition that powerful late ancient people only wrote miracle stories to appease a superstitious *populus*. But a modern revolution of sorts in interpreting late ancient hagiography has turned this assumption on its head, emphasizing instead how upper-class persons fostered saints' cults and composed saints' lives partly to improve their control over society. Two features that scholars following Peter Brown have accepted as fundamental to late ancient society are "the predominance of the holy man" and the establishment of episcopal *potentia*.<sup>33</sup> Regarding the latter, analysis of Gallic saints' lives, notably those from Gregory of Tours' corpus, reveals how bishops did not simply inherit power from absentee Western emperors; rather, ecclesiastical prelates worked hard to establish their authority.<sup>34</sup> One element in the augmentation of episcopal power was control of saints' cults, which became formidable institutions in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>35</sup> By then, the *locus* of divine power in the Mediterranean world had shifted from average people, objects, and institutions to a few exceptional humans – especially martyrs, bishops, and anchorites.<sup>36</sup> The ascetic

32. See Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head, *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1–50.

33. Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1982), 103–52. On Brown's influence and impact, see, e.g., the dozen essays contained in James Howard-Johnston and Paul Anthony Hayward, eds., *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). While all of the contributors say how they have benefited from Brown's work and a few of the articles are panegyric, several articles offer poignant criticisms of the scholar's methods and conclusions.

34. *Ibid.*, 246.

35. For the rising importance of saints' cults selected from sample cities spread about all Gaul, see Hen, *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*, 82–120.

36. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 11–12.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76239-7 - Social Mobility in Late Antique Gaul: Strategies and Opportunities for the Non-Elite

Allen E. Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 SOCIAL MOBILITY IN LATE ANTIQUE GAUL

lifestyle of the anchorite, and afterward the monk, was so distinct that he became the “friend of God” *par excellence*.<sup>37</sup> In the West, deceased saints assumed the dominant position among Christian guardian angels and spirits.<sup>38</sup> It was asserted that a martyr’s *praesentia* was to be found in his or her corpse or remains.<sup>39</sup> Martyrs’ relics were argued to contain divine power – *potentia* – and prominent ecclesiastics who possessed them wielded this *potentia* too.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, should anyone receive some benefit from this power – for example, should one be cured of some illness at a saint’s tomb – he would become indebted to the saint in terms of a patron–client relationship.<sup>41</sup>

It is analyses of changes to the social ordering in the late ancient West that have inspired the present study. Part and parcel of Peter Brown’s realization of the value of saints’ lives as a source was the denial of a once-common assumption that Christian reverence for grave and corpse was the creation of credulous and superstitious masses, which ecclesiastical elites reluctantly accepted. Brown’s contrary view, that socially prominent Christians introduced the cult of saints “from above” to dominate their communities, caused questioning of another assumption, that late ancient Western societies possessed “two tiers,” one a “learned elite” and the other “popular.”<sup>42</sup> Brown’s theory was met with widespread support and complaint.<sup>43</sup> One appeal for maintaining a “two-tiered” model points out how ancient and medieval authors themselves, from Cicero to Origen to Guibert of Nogent, recognized two

37. *Ibid.*, 81–101.

38. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 56; *idem*, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*, 166–95. While Western reverence for dead saints was dominant, it was not complete. On the perseverance of Western “living saints,” see Joan M. Petersen, “Dead or Alive? The Holy Man as Healer in East and West in the Late Sixth Century,” *Journal of Medieval History* 9 (1983): 91–98.

39. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 86–105.

40. *Ibid.*, 106–27.

41. *Ibid.*, 113; John H. Corbett, “The Saint as Patron in the Work of Gregory of Tours,” *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981), 1–13.

42. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 12–22, 121.

43. For support, see, e. g., Luce Pietri, *La ville de Tours du IV<sup>e</sup> au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle: Naissance d’une cité chrétienne* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1983), 485–86; and J.-M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 78. For criticism, see especially Jacques Fontaine, “La culte des saints et ses implications sociologiques. Réflexions sur un récent essai de Peter Brown,” *Analecta Bollandiana* 100 (1982), 37–38.