

Introduction

In 1274, a monk by the name of Primat from the Parisian monastery of Saint-Denis completed his *magnum opus*, a chronicle in Old French titled the *Roman des rois*. As its name suggests, this composition dealt with Frankish and French history from the perspective of its kings. It worked its way from the Franks' earliest origins in ancient Troy, through three royal dynasties, concluding with the reign of the great Capetian monarch, Philip Augustus (d. 1223). One of its earlier chapters contains this unusual story about the Merovingian king Childeric I (d. ca. 481) and his new wife, Basina:

When Queen Basina, wife of Bissinus king of Thuringia to whom the king [i.e., Childeric] escaped, learned that Childeric was reconciled with his barons and that he was accepted in his realm, she left her master, and came after Childeric to France, because it was said that he had known her when he lived with her lord.¹

He asked her why she had followed him and left her lord. She responded to him: "I came to you", said she, "because I had known you and recognized your temperance and your virtue, and if I thought I could find someone better than you in any part of the world, neither the hardships of the road, nor any torture of the body could prevent me from going to search for him." When the king heard this response, he took her in marriage like the pagan that he was; indeed, he did not remember the presents and benefices that Bissinus, the king of Thuringia, her first husband, gave to him when he was chased out of France.

When they were lying down together at night and were in the privacy of the bed, the queen admonished him to refrain that night from approaching her. Then she said to him that he should get up and go in front of the palace door and should know to tell her what he sees. The king got up and obeyed her command. When he was in front of the exit, it seemed to him that he saw large forms of beasts, such as unicorns, leopards, and lions,

¹ On Philip Augustus and his magnates, echoing scenes reminiscent of those in which Primat placed Childeric and his "barons," see J. Bradbury, *Philip Augustus: King of France, 1180–1223* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 226–234; J.W. Baldwin, *The Government of Philip Augustus: Foundations of French Royal Power in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 28–36; C.W. Hollister and J.W. Baldwin, "The Rise of Administrative Kingship: Henry I and Philip Augustus," *The American Historical Review* 83, 4 (1978), pp. 867–905; R.H. Bautier, ed., *La France de Philippe-Auguste: Le temps des mutations* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1982).

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which came and went in front of the palace. He returned very frightened and told the queen what he had seen. She told him that he should not be afraid, and that he should go back. When he did come back, he saw large forms of bears and wolves, as though they wanted to run one towards the other. He came back to the queen's bed and told her the second vision. She said to him again that he should go back once more. When he did return, he saw figures of dogs and small beasts that were all tearing each other to pieces.

When he returned to the queen and told her all that he had seen, he requested from her to make him understand what the meaning of these three visions was, because he knew well that she did not send him for nothing. She told him that they should remain chaste that night, and that she would explain to him in the morning the meaning of the three visions.

So they were, until morning, when the queen called the king, who, she saw, was very deep in thought. Thus, she said the following: "My lord, leave the thoughts of your heart, and hear what I am about to say. You should know with certainty that these visions are not so much signs of present things as harbingers of things to come.

So, you should not pay attention to the form of the beasts you saw, but to the deeds and the habits of the lineage that will issue from us. Because the first heir that will be born to us will be a man of noble prowess and of great power; and this is signified by the form of the unicorn and the lion, which are the most noble and the most courageous beasts there are. The meaning of the second vision is the following, that in the form of the bear and the wolf are signified those that will issue forth from our son, who will be as rapacious as those beasts are. The meaning of the third vision is the following, that in the form of the dog, a lecherous beast of no virtue that can do nothing without man's help, is signified the wickedness and idleness of those who, towards the end of the era, will hold the scepter and the crown of this kingdom.

In the rabble of the small beasts who were fighting each other are signified the common people who will kill each other because they will be without fear of a prince. My lord," said the queen, "understand that this is the explanation of the three visions, which is the certain demonstration of the things to come." So, this is how the king let go of the mood brought about by these visions, and he was elated by the noble line and by the great number of worthy men that were to issue from him.²

² *Grandes Chroniques de France*, ed. J. Viard, 3 vols. (Paris: Société de l'histoire de France, 1920), 1, ch. 10, pp. 34–37: "Quant le roine Basine, fame Bissine le roi de Toringe à cui li rois s'enfui, sout que Childeris se fu acordez à ses barons et que il fu receuz en son regne, ele guerpi son seigneur, et s'en vint après Childeric en France, car l'on disoit que, il l'avoit cogneue tandis com il demoiroit avec son seigneur. Il li demanda pourquoi ele l'avoit sui et son seigneur guerpi; ele li respondi: 'Je sui, dist ele, à toi venue pour ce que je ai cogneue et esprovée ta temprance et ta vertu, et se je cuidasse meilleur de toi trouver en nules des partie dou monde, nus griés de voie ne nus travaus de cors ne me tenist que je ne l'alasse requerre.' Quant li rois oï ceste response, il la prist par mariage comme païens que il estoit; si ne li sovint pas des bontez et des benefices que Bissines, li rois de Toringe, ses premiers mariz, li out fez quant il out esté chaciez de France.

Quant il furent le soir couchié ensemble et il furent ou secré dou lit, la roine l'amonesta que il se tenist cele nuit d'abiter à li, puis li dist que il se levast et alast devant la porte dou palais, et li seust à dire ce que il auroit veu. Li rois se leva, et fist son commandement. Quant il fu devant la sale, il li sembla que il veist granz forms de bestes, ausi comme d'unicornes, de lieparz et de lyons, qui aloient et venoient par devant le palais. Il retorna touz espoentez et raconta à la roine ce que il avoit veu. Ele li dist que il n'eust pas paor,

By Primat's day, the Merovingians and their Carolingian successors had long since come and gone, having supplied material for countless histories, songs, and legends. Writing during the zenith of the Capetians, Primat was doubtless sensitive to the ups and downs of dynastic fortune. In this, of course, he was not alone. The waxing and waning of dynastic fortune was a central motif of Frankish and French historiography. For chroniclers interested in the Merovingians, Basina's prophecy proved especially alluring. We might imagine them peering over Childeric's shoulder at the scenes unfolding outside the palace window, offering their own appraisals and justifications for how and why the Merovingians fared as they did. In a way, it is even possible to detect in their own periodizations traces of Basina's three-part schema. To paraphrase Patrick Geary, "These differing tripartite visions of the past provided the frames within which to place the past, a past remembered through texts, through people [. . .]."³ The various interpretations, explanations, and narrative solutions they provided are the subject of this book. It will follow the parable through its three distinct phases—lions and unicorns, bears and wolves, and finally, dogs and lesser beasts—tracing the narration of Merovingian history from its murky beginnings to its conclusion in 751 in a select group of histories and chronicles.

et que il retornast arrieres. Quant retournez fu, il vit grandes ymages d'ours et de leus ausi com s'il voisissent courre sus li uns l'autre. Il retorna au lit la roine, et li raconta la seconde avision. Ele li redist que il retornast encore une foiz. Quant retournez fu, il vit figures de chiens et de petites bestes qui s'entredepeçoient toutes.

Quant il fu retournez à la roine et il li out tout raconté quanque il out veu, il li request que ele li feist entendre que ces III avisions senefioient, car il savoit bien que ele ne l'i avoit pas envoié pour noient. Ele li dist que il se tenist chastement cele nuit, et ele li feroit au matin entendre la signification des III avisions.

Ensi furent jusques au matin, que la roine apela le roi, que ele vit moult pensif. Puis li dist ensi: 'Sire, ostez ces pensées de ton cuer, et entent ce que je dirai. Si saches certainement que ces avisions ne sont pas tant significacions des choses presents comme de celes qui à avenir sont.

Si ne pren pas garde aus forms des bestes que tu as veues, mais aus faiz et aus mours de la lignie qui de nous doit eissir. Car li premiers hoirs qui de nous naistra sera hons de noble proëce et de haut puissance; et ceste senefie en la forme de l'unicorne et dou lyon, qui sont les plus nobles bestes et les plus hardies qui soient. La signification de la seconde avision se est tele, car en la forme de l'ours et dou leu sont segnefié cil qui de nostre fil istront, qui seront rapineus ausi com les bestes sont. La segnefiance de la tierce avision se rest tele, que en la forme dou chien, qui est beste lecherresse et de nule vertu, ne ne puet sanz l'aide d'ome, est segnefié la mauvestié et la parece de ceus qui vers la fin dou siècle tendront le ceptre et la corone de cest roiaume. En la torbe des petites bestes qui s'entrabatoient est senefiez li menuz poples qui s'entrociront, pour ce que il seront sanz paor de prince. Sire, dist la roine, vez ci l'exposition des III avision qui est certaine demonstrerresse des choses qui sont à avenir.' Ensi fu li rois hors de la pensée en quoi il estoit chaüz pour les avisions, et fu liez de la noble lignie et dou grant nombre des pseudomes qui de lui devoient eissir."

³ P.J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 123, speaking here about the chronologies of foundation and destruction of the monastic communities of Novalesa and Benediktbeuern.

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Childeric's vision and Basina's prognostication, related so vividly in the *Roman des rois*, were not the invention of Primat. The scene was a rendition of a tale first told in the third book of the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, composed ca. 660.⁴ There, we find a similar, albeit less elaborate, version of the one found in the *Roman des rois*. The *Chronicle of Fredegar* was a composite text, made up of several earlier works, interpolated and reworked by an anonymous chronicler. The result was a new history, a "chain chronicle," whose main emphasis was on events taking place in Merovingian Gaul.⁵

Book III of *Fredegar*, in which we meet Childeric and Basina, was adapted from the work of Gregory of Tours. The bishop completed his *Ten Books of History* in the early 590s, some seventy years before the *Fredegar* chronicler put down his pen.⁶ After Gregory's death and against his express wishes,⁷ his work was re-edited and revised to produce a six-book abridgement, which formed the kernel of *Fredegar's* Book III. The fourth and final book of the *Fredegar* chronicle was an original addition, composed as a continuation, until ca. 642, of the events covered in Book III. The *Fredegar* chronicler built on Gregory, but he was not committed to the bishop's style, nor to his narrative interests and overall agenda. Indeed, the *Fredegar* chronicler gazed on his world from a very different perch.⁸

Childeric's visions and Basina's prophetic interpretations, absent from Gregory,⁹ were novel elements introduced by the *Fredegar* chronicler. At various points in the text, the chronicler would interrupt Gregory's prose

⁴ *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus*, MGH (*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*) SRM 2, ed. B. Krusch (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1888), III.12, pp. 97–98 [hereafter, *Fredegar*]. For a recent treatment of *Fredegar's origo* rendition, see H. Reimitz, "The Early History of Frankish Origin Legends, c.500–800 c.e.," in *Origin Legends in Early Medieval Western Europe*, eds. L. Brady and P. Wadden (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), pp. 156–183.

⁵ On the structure of *Fredegar*, see R. Collins, *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, MGH Studien und Texte 44 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2007), pp. 8–81. On chain chronicles, see I. N. Wood, "Chains of Chronicles: The Example of London, British Library ms. add. 16794," in *Zwischen Niederschrift und Wiederschrift: Hagiographie und Historiographie im Spannungsfeld von Kompendienüberlieferung und Editionstechnik*, eds. R. Corradini and M. Diesenberger (Vienna: Verlag der österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften 2010), pp. 67–78.

⁶ On the six-book version of the *Histories*, see H. Reimitz, "The Early Medieval Editions of Gregory of Tours' *Histories*," in *A Companion to Gregory of Tours*, ed. A.C. Murray (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), pp. 519–565.

⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum X*, MGH SRM 1.1, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1951), X.31, p. 536 [hereafter, Gregory of Tours, *Histories*].

⁸ H. Reimitz, *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 166–239; S. Esders and H. Reimitz, "Legalizing Ethnicity: The Remaking of Citizenship in Post-Roman Gaul (Sixth–Seventh Centuries)," in *Civic Identity and Civic Participation in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. C. Brélaz and E. Rose (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), pp. 295–329, at pp. 301–302.

⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Histories*, II.12, pp. 61–62.

to present the reader with relevant information. These interpolations had the effect of recontextualizing the actions of the *dramatis personae*. *Fredegar's* Book III was also drastically reduced in size compared with the six-book version. In a very real sense, then, Book III was no longer Gregory's creation. It was something new. In the late eighth century, *Fredegar* was continued and reworked, and in this form—commonly known as the *Historia vel gesta Francorum*—it became a staple of Carolingian historiography.¹⁰ Carolingian chroniclers also relied on *Fredegar* for information about the sixth and seventh centuries when writing their own compositions. Here, too, the material *Fredegar* supplied was modified to meet the needs of new ideologies.

Another chapter in the story of Basina's prophecy was ushered in with the *Gesta Francorum* by Aimoin of Fleury, a monk and historian working in the late tenth century.¹¹ In terms of its breadth and innovativeness, the historiographical composition produced in the monastery, famous in Francia for housing the remains of St. Benedict lifted by its monks from the temporarily abandoned Monte Cassino,¹² was the institutional forbear of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Saint-Denis.¹³ The views expressed in Aimoin's work were none other than those of his abbot, Abbo of Fleury, and were, it seems, the product of a cumulative effort by a team of monks, compiling and reworking the material for a chronicle at Abbo's behest.¹⁴

Abbo's career began under the last Carolingian ruler of West Francia, Louis V, also known as Louis le fainéant.¹⁵ In 987 Louis was killed in a riding accident and was replaced by Hugh Capet, whose reign signaled the beginning of the centuries-long Capetian hold on the French throne. Abbo ruled from 987 until his own murder in 1004 by a group of rebellious monks at Fleury's Gascon priory of La Réole.¹⁶ This traumatic event brought to an unexpected end Aimoin's work on the *Gesta Francorum*,

¹⁰ Reimitz, *History*, pp. 295–334.

¹¹ Aimoin of Fleury, *Historia Francorum libri quattuor*, PL 139, cols. 627–802 [hereafter, Aimoin of Fleury, *Gesta Francorum*].

¹² See P.J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 120–122.

¹³ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, p. 26.

¹⁴ K.F. Werner, "Die literarischen Vorbilder des Aimoin von Fleury und die Entstehung seiner *Gesta Francorum*," *Francia* 45 (1999), pp. 192–226, at pp. 209–210.

¹⁵ E. Dachowski, *First Among Abbots: The Career of Abbo of Fleury* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), pp. 15–16. For historiography linking Louis's *fainéance* to that of the late Merovingians, see Bernard de Girard du Haillan's 1615 *Histoire générale des Roys de France* (Paris: Sebastien Cramoisy, 1615), pp. 283–286; E.M. Peters, "Roi fainéant: The Origins of an Historians' Commonplace," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 30, 3 (1968), pp. 537–547, at pp. 542–543.

¹⁶ Aimoin of Fleury, *Vita sancti Abbonis*, in *L'Abbaye de Fleury en l'an mil*, ed. and trans. R.-H. Bautier and G. Labory (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 2004), ch. 20, pp. 118–126; Dachowski, *First Among Abbots*, p. 2.

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prompting him to divert his attention to the composition of the *Life of St Abbo*, a hagiographical piece dedicated to his abbot,¹⁷ whom Aimoin accompanied on the fateful trip to Gascony. Aimoin also added his own chapters to the corpus of miracles attributed to St. Benedict that was being recorded at Fleury.¹⁸ Abbo's sudden death was thus the reason Aimoin's *Historia* cut off at 654, although it was doubtless meant to continue until his own day. As it stands, it already bears the traces of Abbo's complex views on institutional power, developed through his dealings with the late Carolingians, the early Capetians, and their regional representatives, both lay and ecclesiastical. Most of the Merovingian period was nevertheless covered in Aimoin's work, and with it the story of Childeric and Basina.¹⁹ Since the work was not beholden to the tenets of Carolingian historiography, the Merovingian material could be revisited and reframed to suit Abbo's views on royal power and its relationship with the Church and particularly with Fleury. From Aimoin, the story made its way to the *Roman des rois* and then on to its countless medieval variations.²⁰

This extensive borrowing from previous works was, by no means, an anomalous phenomenon in the historiographical treatment of Merovingian history up to the sixteenth century, when the present study terminates. As successive generations of chroniclers and historians turned their attention to the first royal dynasty of the Franks, each shaded the story to reflect a unique set of priorities. Some changes were semantic or stylistic; others, more comprehensive, still conserved the narrative core; still others opted to forgo entire blocks of plot that did not fit the authorial aims of the new composition.

Paolo Emilio, a humanist historian working in the sixteenth century, turned to Gregory's *Histories* as his guide to the affairs of fifth- and sixth-century Gaul when he wrote his great history, *De rebus gestis Francorum*.²¹ So, while he probably knew the Childeric story from Aimoin and Primat,

¹⁷ For the *Vita sancti Abbonis* as a martyrology, see Dachowski, *First Among Abbots*, p. 4.

¹⁸ See E. de Certain, *Les miracles de Saint Benoît écrits par Adrevald, Aimoin, André, Raoul Tortaire et Hugues de Sainte Marie, moines de Fleury* (Paris: Mme. Ve. Jules Renouard, 1858).

¹⁹ Aimoin of Fleury, *Gesta Francorum*, ch. 8, cols. 643–644; B. Guenée, “Chanceries and Monasteries,” in *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire, vol. 4: Histories and Memories*, ed. P. Nora (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 1–26, at pp. 12–14.

²⁰ Werner, “Die literarischen Vorbilder,” p. 224; G. Spiegel, *The Chronicle Tradition of Saint-Denis: A Survey* (Brookline, MA, and Leiden: Brill, 1978), esp. pp. 103–126.

²¹ P. Emilio, *De rebus gestis Francorum ad christianissimum Galliarum regem Franciscum Valesium, eius nominis primum, libri decem, ex postrema authoris recognitione. Additum est de regibus item Francorum Chronicon, ad hæc usque tempora studiosissime deductum, cum rerum maxime insignium indice copiosissimo* (Paris: M. Vasconsanus, 1550).

his reliance on Gregory dictated that he omit it. *The Merovingians in Historiographical Tradition: From the Sixth to the Sixteenth Centuries* engages with stories like this and with the authorial choices that governed their transmission, reception, and adaptation. It charts the evolution of Merovingian storylines from almost a millennium of historiography, tracing the often intriguing, sometimes serpentine, ways in which the narratives were adjusted to reflect new ideas and attract new audiences.

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In medieval chronicles, prophecies have a way of becoming reality, and Basina's was no exception. The trajectory of her royal descendants over the course of the next three centuries was one of meteoric rise to power, then of stasis and internal conflict, and finally of decline and infamy. Or at least, that is how the story was conventionally told. Basina's explosive admonition was realized not so much by the historical Merovingians, which, it seems, were much more impressive than her vision foretold.²² Rather, it became the canon of their portrayal in the compositions that set out to cover early Frankish history. The *Fredegar* chronicler, writing 100 years before the Merovingians were unceremoniously ushered offstage, could scarcely have foreseen how exquisitely useful his metaphor of decline would be. In the centuries to come, it informed, however indirectly, the process of retelling the history of the Merovingian era as a play in three acts, embodied in the three categories of beasts laid out in Basina's prophecy.

That this process received a major push under the Carolingians comes as no surprise. The Carolingians were preoccupied with legitimation and one way to allay their status anxiety was to denigrate their predecessors. This strategy is neither new nor disputed. The critical appraisal of the recent past in Carolingian historiography has been widely noted in the literature.²³ That does not mean, however, that ninth-century authors

²² For recent assessments of the Merovingians and their world, see S. Esders et al., eds., *East and West in the Early Middle Ages: The Merovingian Kingdoms in Mediterranean Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); B. Effros and I. Moreira, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²³ For a very partial sampling, see P.J. Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 221–231; R. McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); R. McKitterick, "Paul the Deacon and the Franks," *Early Medieval Europe* 8, 3 (1999), pp. 319–339; Y. Hen and M. Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); C.B. Bouchard, "Images of the Merovingians and Carolingians," *History Compass* 4, 2 (2006), pp. 293–307; C.B. Bouchard, "The Carolingian Creation of a Model of Patrilineage," in *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*, eds. C. Chazelle and F. Lifshitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 135–152; P. Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 6; D. Kempf,

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agreed on how to scapegoat the Merovingians or whether they even should do so. The truth is that the Carolingian response to the Merovingian past was neither orderly nor uniform. Instead, it was an ongoing literary experiment with a wide range of results.

When evaluating the nature of this experiment, for the Carolingian centuries and after, there is a tendency to focus on the changes in content, style, and emphasis introduced by a new author working with older material. Interpolations, omissions, and other interventions in the text are what made it a new creation, worthy of our attention. Yet it is equally important to appreciate the profound conservatism that underlay the medieval practice of writing history. We can only recognize the changes because they are embedded in familiar storylines.²⁴ There is certainly a long tradition of perceiving the repetitive and “derivative” nature of medieval historiography as an obstacle, limiting its usefulness.²⁵ Recent scholarship on the innovativeness of medieval chronicles has convinced us to rethink this notion, undoubtedly correctly. It is then worth reiterating that change can be appreciated only against the backdrop of what was conserved. This is an important point, because it demonstrates that authors were sensitive not only to the need to substantiate a range of proprietary or political claims by intervening in the plot. Pressure to conform to stylistic traditions, ideas about what the craft of writing history entailed, and even good storytelling might well have pushed the author to conserve components that otherwise might have changed, and *vice versa*.

Finally, we should bear in mind that, like us, medieval chroniclers and early modern historians were working with texts composed at considerable chronological remove from their own time. Their ability to understand their sources fully might thus be called into question. Geary has famously raised the possibility that eleventh-century historiography was forced to piece together its version of the past from “disjointed and

“Introduction,” in Paul the Deacon, *Liber de episcopis Mettensibus*, ed. and trans. D. Kempf (Paris, Leuven, and Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2013), pp. 10–21; P.S. Barnwell, “Einhard, Louis the Pious and Childeric III,” *Historical Research* 78, 200 (2005), pp. 129–139; T. Kölzer, “Die letzten Merowingerkönige: rois fainéants?,” in *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751: Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung*, eds. M. Becher and J. Jarnut (Münster: Scriptorium, 2004), pp. 33–60; R. Collins, “Frankish Past and Carolingian Present in the Age of Charlemagne,” in *Am Vorabend der Kaiserkrönung: Das Epos “Karolus Magnus et Leo papa” und der Papstbesuch in Paderborn 799*, eds. P. Godman, J. Jarnut, and P. Johanek (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), pp. 301–322.

²⁴ On the conservatism of royal French histories, see O. Ranum, *Artisans of Glory: Writers and Historical Thought in Seventeenth-Century France* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp. 15–16.

²⁵ On this see W. Pohl, “History in Fragments: Montecassino’s Politics of Memory,” *Early Medieval Europe* 10, 3 (2001), pp. 343–374; J. Lake, “Authorial Intention in Medieval Historiography,” *History Compass* 12, 4 (2014), pp. 344–360, at p. 345, cites the different text sizes common to MGH editions.

isolated” vignettes, on which it looked as one would on a foreign landscape.²⁶ All of these considerations directly affect the dynamics of change and conservation. Deciphering them becomes especially pressing when the editorial choices seem at odds with the stated purposes of the composition.

In this context it is useful to mention the concept of “literary shards,” which Scott Bruce has recently coined to describe textual bundles that traverse time and genre, having been adapted for purposes “far removed from their ancient source.”²⁷ The Byzantine emperor Heraclius’s (d. 641) forced conversion of the Jews is one such example.²⁸ Echoes of the story are found in a variety of western and eastern sources, aimed at Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readers. The sources that report this event are diverse and cannot be traced to one original text. Their independence from each other should even encourage us to reconsider its historicity.²⁹ At least for the western material, however, there seems to have been a clear channel of transmission, which ran through key texts such as *Fredegar*, Aimoin of Fleury’s *Gesta Francorum*, and the *Roman des rois*. When, in the sixteenth century, Yosef Ha-Kohen turned the story into a scathing indictment of the emperor’s anti-Jewish policies, he was using it in a way that ran counter to its previous iterations. As instructive as such examples may be, in most of the works examined in this book we find more than the occasional shard. Thematic fragments could indeed be usefully cut and pasted into new historiographical works. Nonetheless, the composite result was always more than the sum of its parts. Each of the works I will discuss used the Merovingian period to make a historical claim about legitimacy, or power, or the vagaries of human affairs. Whatever the argument, the framing of the Merovingian period was part of it. We see this in the ways authors chose to begin and to end the Merovingian story, and in the thematic subdivisions they imposed on it to make it more clearly understood.

That the Merovingians were used to make such claims is hardly surprising given the foundational nature of their rule. The legitimacy of medieval

²⁶ Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance*, p. 9.

²⁷ S. Bruce, “The Dark Age of Herodotus: Shards of a Fugitive History in Early Medieval Europe,” *Speculum* 94, 1 (2019), pp. 47–67, at p. 49.

²⁸ For a discussion of this story, see Chapters 4 and 5.

²⁹ On this see S. Esders, “The Prophesied Rule of a ‘Circumcised People’: A Travelling Tradition from the Seventh-Century Mediterranean,” in *Barbarians and Jews: Jews and Judaism in the Early Medieval West*, eds. Y. Hen and T.F.X. Noble (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018), pp. 119–154; T.J. MacMaster, “The Pogrom that Time Forgot: The Ecumenical anti-Jewish Campaign of 632 and Its Impact,” in *Inclusion and Exclusion in Mediterranean Christianities, 400–800*, eds. Y. Fox and E. Buchberger (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), pp. 217–235.

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institutions and traditions of governance rested, to a large degree, on their antiquity. And indeed, many of the columns on which the organization of the Frankish and French state rested were erected under the Merovingians, while many others were expediently retro-projected onto this earlier period. The concept of reform, applied especially but not exclusively in an ecclesiastical context, made use of the corresponding notions of a pristine remote past and a deficient recent one to push ambitious social agendas, introducing innovation under the guise of traditionalism. Here, too, creatively reimagining Merovingian history proved uniquely advantageous. We immediately think of the Carolingians,³⁰ but this trope was used to great effect already in 643, when Jonas of Bobbio described Columbanus's underwhelming encounter with the religious life of Gaul: "Leaving the coast of Brittany behind them they enter Gaul. At that time, whether due to the numerous foreign enemies or through the negligence of the bishops, the fervor of the religious life had almost been extinguished there. All that remained was the Christian faith."³¹ Themes of ascent, stasis, decline, and *renovatio* are integral to this type of treatment. They are commonly presented in a way that divides historical durations along reformational lines to highlight the need for change, in response to culturally deferential attitudes toward conservatism.

Periodization thus plays an important role in this book. As we shall see, the Merovingian period was perceived as a distinct historical moment by those who wrote about it. Some authors also broke it up into smaller thematic blocks, which corresponded to what they perceived as important shifts or junctures in Merovingian history. Certainly, these divisions were not uniformly accepted by all the authors considered in this book. Some were explicit about their rationale for dividing the period as they had, while others were more subtle, hinting about their intentions by introducing suggestive pauses into the narrative or by changing their tone. Identifying these *caesurae* is hardly straightforward and, admittedly, this is where much of what I say is speculative. Still, we are not dealing here only with remote hypotheticals. The reigns of Clovis I and Dagobert I were regularly regarded as zeniths of royal power, followed by an abrupt

³⁰ Particularly the activities and rhetoric of Boniface. On this, see M. Glatthaar, "Boniface and the Reform Councils," in *A Companion to Boniface*, eds. M. Aaij and S. Godlove (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 219–246.

³¹ Jonas of Bobbio, *Vita Columbani abbatis discipulorumque eius libri II*, MGH SRG 37, ed. B. Krusch (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1905), I.5, p. 161: "A Britannicis ergo sinibus progressi, ad Gallias tendunt, ubi tunc vel ob frequentia hostium externorum vel neglegentia praesulum religionis virtus pene abolita habebatur. Fides tantum manebat Christiana . . ." Trans. in Jonas of Bobbio, *Life of Columbanus, Life of John of Réomé, and Life of Vedast*, trans. A. O'Hara and I. Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 105–106.