CHAPTER 3

Kings of the Empire

The Merovingian rulers maintained varied and shifting relationships with the empire, marked by both competition and collaboration. Diplomatic exchanges and military alliances reflected the Franks' attempts to balance autonomy with strategic connections to the East. This chapter offers a fresh look on their ties by reassessing the position of key figures such as Clovis, his grandson Theudebert I († 547/8), and the former's great-grandson Childebert II († 596). In contrast to the Italian rulers Odoacer and Theodoric, discussed in the previous chapter and widely acknowledged for their allegiance to the empire, Clovis and his successors are generally perceived as mere 'barbarian' rulers with, at best, loose ties to what remained of the Roman *imperium*. Consequently, Roman imperial features attested in connection with the Merovingian kingdoms are interpreted as attempts to emulate the empire's prestigious traditions.[1] The present chapter focuses on the sixth-century political and cultural interconnections between the empire and the Merovingians and examines pivotal events and the varied exchanges attested in the sources in order to challenge traditional interpretations of a more rigid antagonism between Franks and Romans.

The chapter argues for a gradual detachment of the Merovingian realm from the empire, whose relationship had remained unaffected by the end of western emperorship. The Franks, who had settled in imperial territory for generations, had been largely integrated into its border society and administrative structures until the early sixth century. However, they gradually sought their own advantages through a more autonomous approach, a process well attested by King Theudebert I's imperial demeanour. The underlying process of alienation became more evident in the 580s, when conflicts arising from the empire's inability to resist the Lombards in Italy accelerated a rupture in diplomatic relations. By the late sixth century, relations between the Franks and the empire had significantly deteriorated, culminating in the kingdoms' emancipation.

1 E.g., Fletcher, *The barbarian conversion* (1999), pp. 206–7; Driscoll, 'The conversion of the nations' (2006), p. 178; Hen, *Roman barbarians* (2007), p. 97; Halfond, *The Archaeology* (2010), p. 187; Becher, *Chlodwig I.* (2011), p. 262; Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), pp. 637–8.

The following reassessment of the processes leading to the gradual disentanglement of the Frankish kingdom from the empire first discusses the imperial relationship of the early Merovingians at the time of Clovis and Theudebert I. It then takes a look back by focussing on the relation between the Franks and the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries and the significance of Roman identities in Merovingian society. The subsequent section studies evidence suggesting that the Franks were considered part of the wider empire until the early sixth century, followed by a discussion of the various political and cultural connections and exchanges in the mid-sixth century. The last section then examines the events since the 580s that led to a gradual estrangement between the Frankish West and the empire.

3.1 Clovis and Theudebert I

In the sixth century, the Roman empire faced significant challenges both internally and from external forces. The gradual alienation from the empire of Odoacer and the Goths, who had started their rule in Italy as what could be termed viceroys, resulted in a significant reduction of imperial authority in the peninsula. From the mid-530s, the emperor Justinian sought to reverse this trend through the reconquest of Italy by Roman troops and the restoration of imperial control over the region. His ambitions soon led him to seek the help of the Franks. The Merovingian king Theudebert I ruled over what soon would be Austrasia, the largest sub-kingdom of the Frankish realm, encompassing large parts of what is now south-eastern France, with parts of Provence and Aquitaine, as well as western Germany and the Low Countries. Other Frankish kingdoms that would emerge until the late sixth century included Neustria in the North-West and Burgundy in the South-East, with authority over the remaining parts of Aquitaine. Austrasia's proximity to northern Italy made Theudebert's reign particularly relevant to the shifting power dynamics in the region. For Justinian, the Frankish king was an ideal ally. In the late 530s, Justinian sent a now lost letter mentioned by the Byzantine historian Procopius, in which the emperor urged Theudebert I to join the Roman fight against the Arian Goths in Italy. Arianism was a theological doctrine initiated by the priest Arius in the early fourth century, considered heretical as it denied the full divinity of Christ. While the Goths, like most other 'non-Roman' peoples, adhered to Arianism, the Franks had embraced Orthodox or Catholic Christianity at the time of Clovis I's baptism in 508. Justinian thus used this circumstance to persuade the Merovingian to comply with his request by

emphasising their shared Catholic faith.[2] Although Theudebert agreed, he ultimately used the Gothic Wars (535–540) to expand Frankish territory into northern Italy, to the detriment of both conflicting parties. In 540, the emperor hastily withdrew from Italy due to an emerging Persian threat in the East, a situation further exacerbated by a Slavic push on the Danube that had already begun shortly before 534.[3] Theudebert's letter to Justinian was written during this period of imperial weakness.[4] He wrote:

> Your charge assists us in extending the loving friendship of God to many races and in some provinces but now our enemies with the help of God have submitted to our authority. By the wish of the Lord, the Thuringians were controlled and their territories acquired, then in time their kings were abolished; next the North Sueves were subjugated, the Visigoths declared subdued and, by the grace of God, now Gaul is safe. As well, in the North region of Italy and then Pannonia the Saxons and Eucii delivered themselves to us by particular choice. Our rule extends from the Danube and the limits of Pannonia to the shores of the ocean through the protection of God. As confirmed by your letter, your August Highness, we are certain of the progress of the Catholics and rejoice in complete delight of spirit. Thus complying to your wish, which God has granted to us, we offer earnest returns, sincerely desiring to the aspired spirit so that your felicitous glory shall be prosperous, that the friendship and grace of the emperors of the ancient past which you often promise is maintained, to unite in [our] common interest.[5]

2 Procopius, *Goth.* 5.5.8–10. On Theudebert I, see Collins, 'Theudebert I' (1983), pp. 7–33; Beisel, *Theudebertus magnus rex Francorum* (1993). On the relations of the Merovingians to Italy, see Arnold, 'The Merovingians and Italy' (2020), pp. 442–60.

3 Pitz, *Die griechisch-römische Ökumene* (2001), p. 236; Börm, 'Das weströmische Kaisertum' (2008), p. 59. On Merovingian Italy, see Lin, 'The fall of Merovingian Italy' (2023), pp. 543–62, suggesting it ended around 565.

4 On Theudebert I's double-deal, see Procopius, *Goth.* 5.13.26–29; Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), p. 249.

5 *Epist. Austras.* 20, p. 133: 'Id vero, quod dignamini esse solliciti, in quibus provinciis habitemus aut quae gentes nostrae sint, Deo adiutore, dicione subiecte: Dei nostri miscericordiam feliciter subactis Thoringiis et eorum provinciis adquisitis, extinctis ipsorum tunc tempore regibus, Norsavorum itaque gentem nobis placata maiestate, colla subdentibus edictis ideoque, Deo propitio, Wesigotis, incolomes Franciae, septentrionalem plagam Italiaeque Pannoniae cum Saxonibus, Euciis, qui se nobis voluntate propria, tradiderunt, per Danubium et limitem Pannoniae usque in oceanis litoribus custodiente Deo dominatio nostra porrigetur. Et quia scimus, augustam celsitudinem vestram de profectu cathalicorum, sicut etiam littere vestrae

This noteworthy letter survived in a single early-ninth-century manuscript from the Lorsch Abbey as part of the so-called *Austrasian Letters* (*Epistulae Austrasicae*) collection.[6] The *Austrasian Letters* include 48 mainly political and diplomatic correspondences from the period between the 470s and 590s, attributed to the early Merovingian kings, primarily from the Austrasian sub-kingdom.[7] These letters are complemented by rare contemporary evidence, providing significant insights that help situate the historiographic accounts of Gregory of Tours, our main testimony for sixth-century Merovingian Gaul. According to the French historian Bruno Dumézil, it was compiled in the late sixth century.[8] The exact date and context of Theudebert's letter, which was sent near the end of the first phase of the Gothic Wars, however, remain subjects of debate.[9] Maybe it was handed over by a very young Mummolus, a Gallo-Roman aristocrat who later became a major Frankish general and,

testantur, plena animi iucunditate gaudere, ideo est. quod secundum voluntatem vestram, quae Deus nobis concesserit, simplici relatione mandamus, desiderantibus animis exoptantes, ut felicibus gloria vestra ita valeat, ut antiquam retroactorum principum amicitiam conservetis et gratiam, quam sepius promittitis, in communi utilitate iungamur.' Trans. Hancock, *Studies in Austrasian politics* (1990), p. 86, with the exception of the last – rather difficult – phrase, which I have retranslated to better render the original meaning.

6 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Pal. lat. 869, fol. 17$^{r–v}$, access bibliotheca-laureshamensis-digital.de/bav/bav_pal_lat_869/0039/image (13/11/2020). A modern-time scribe obviously already recognised the significance of this particular letter: he wrote *nota* on the right side of the *intitulatio* and drew a pink line alongside its second part.

7 On this collection, see Malaspina, *Il Liber epistolarum* (2001); Dumézil and Lienhard, 'Les "Lettres austrasiennes"' (2011), pp. 69–80; Williard, 'Letter-writing' (2014), pp. 691–710; Barrett/Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Austrasian' (2016), pp. 3–57; Fox, 'The language' (2019), pp. 63–78; Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian' (2019), pp. 161–94; Dumézil, 'Private Records' (2019), pp. 55–62.

8 Dumézil, 'Private records' (2019), pp. 55–62. Barrett/Woudhuysen, 'Assembling the Letters' (2016), pp. 3–57, suggesting that the collection was only assembled in the early ninth century.

9 The edition dates the letter to the time between 534 and 547, while Malaspina (ed.), *Il Liber* (2001) suggested a date between 540 and 545. Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 19, argued that it was written around 536/8. Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), p. 250, roughly dated the letter before 545. Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian' (2019), pp. 161–94, assumed that the letters 18 to 20 are chronologically reversed, meaning that letter 20 would be earlier. He only vaguely dated letter 20 to the time between the years 539 and 547 (p. 182). In *Epist. Austras.* 19, Theudebert already promised military support to Justinian. On the political background, see the summaries in Wood, 'The frontiers of western Europe' (1998), p 241–242; Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), pp. 248–51.

according to Gregory of Tours, visited the capital of Constantinople at the time of Theudebert's reign.[10]

The letter stands out for several reasons. It appears to demonstrate the assertiveness of a Merovingian king willing to express his desire for friendship and alignment with the Roman cause. This demeanour is evident not only in Theudebert's portrayal as a champion of the Catholic faith but also in the quasi-imperial representation of his own authority. By listing different ethnic groups under his rule, such as the Thuringians, the Sueves, the Visigoths, or the Saxons, together with territories like northern Italy or Pannonia, he underlined his sovereignty over a domain comparable in size to that of the empire.[11] Gregory of Tours' *Histories* echo Theudebert's position of power by exaggerating the success of his 539 campaign in Italy and suggesting that the Franks conquered the entire peninsula, including Sicily.[12]

The actual tone of the letter is not particularly confrontational.[13] Its contents rather indicate a relationship based on mutual trust and cooperation rooted in shared interests. This is reinforced by the *intitulatio*, which addressed Justinian as Theudebert's 'lord' (*dominus*) and 'father' (*pater*),[14] a terminology that persisted beyond this specific correspondence. The historian Andrew Gillett even suggested that the enumeration of the people and regions under Frankish control may have been provided at the emperor's request, and thus

10 He is mentioned in Gregory, *Gloria Mart.* 30, eds. Arndt/Krusch, p. 56. Callu, 'Pax et libertas' (1980), p. 197, assumed that Mummolus was the bearer of *Epist. Austras.* 19, dating his journey to Constantinople around 540–2. Ewig, *Die Merowinger* (1983), p. 20, suggested that Mummolus was the bearer of *Epist. Austras.* 20, and this around 546/7. Both assumptions are incompatible with the chronology proposed above. See also Selle-Hosbach, *Prosopographie* (1974), pp. 133–6.

11 See Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian' (2019), pp. 182–3. Although Theuderic could claim sovereignty over several different people, this alone does not suffice to conclude, as Fanning, 'Clovis Augustus' (2002) does, that 'Theudebert deserved imperial attributes because he exercised imperial power' (p. 332). Not only was imperial power conceived as being exclusive, it would also have been impossible – then and now – to distinguish kingdom and emperordom on the ground of this single criterion. The same applies to Fanning's argumentation that the term *imperium* would have been justified in reference to Clovis (p. 329).

12 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 3.32.

13 In opposition to the majority of historians stressing the letter's confrontational tone, Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 20, and Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian' (2019), pp. 182–7, already noted that this was not the case.

14 *Epist. Austras.* 20, p. 133: 'Domino inlustro et praecellentissimo domno et patri, Iustiniano imperatore, Theodebertus rex'. Same already in *ibid.* 19.

was not meant to be provocative but to offer an overview of the political landscape in light of a collective intervention in Italy.[15]

There is further evidence suggesting that the relationship between the Franks under Theudebert and Justinian's empire was considerably more complex. Despite the emperor's temporary withdrawal from Italy in 540, Byzantine sources like the *On the Magistracies of the Roman Constitution* by the Byzantine administrator John Lydos († *c.*565) claim that Justinian initially planned to confront the Franks once he had regained control over Italy.[16] Conversely, the *History* by the Byzantine Agathias, written in the 570s, claims that Theudebert, on his part, intended to exploit the Roman-Gothic conflict in Italy to further attack Thrace and Constantinople. For his advance on the Roman capital, Theudebert would have even sought support from the Lombards and Gepids.[17] Agathias also provided a motive: he explained that the Frankish king 'found it intolerable that the emperor Justinian should announce himself in his imperial edicts by the titles *Francicus, Alamannicus, Gepidicus, Lombardicus* and so forth, as though these people had all become his subjects.'[18] The preface of the second edition of Justinian's law code from 534 confirms that the emperor did refer to the Franks and Alamans within his triumphal names, which lends some credibility to Agathias' account.[19] Theudebert's letter likewise seems to align with Agathias' assertion about the king's motive, as his description of subjected people and territory may be interpreted as an attempt to counterbalance Justinian's triumphal designations. In addition, Theudebert's claim of authority over Byzantine Pannonia, mentioned twice in his letter, may have been in response to the emperor's allegedly false claim of power over the

15 Gillett, 'Telling off Justinian' (2019), p. 186. Similar already Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), p. 550.

16 John Lyd., *De mag.* 3.56, ed. Wünsch (1903), p. 145: "Ὡς δὲ καὶ Συγάμβροις ἐπαγρυπνεῖν ἠπείλει – Φράγγους αὐτὺς ἐξ ἠγενόνος καλοῦσιν ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος οἱ περὶ Ῥῆνον καὶ Ῥοδανόν.'

17 Agathias, *Hist.* 1.4, ed. Keydell (1967), pp. 13–15. Given Justinian's withdrawal in 540, this plan, if it ever was Theudebert's intention, must date to the time before. On the source, see Cameron, 'Agathias on the early Merovingians' (1968), pp. 95–140.

18 Agathias, *Hist.* 1.4.3, p. 14: 'οὐ γὰρ ᾤετο ἀνεκτὰ εἶναι, ὅτι δὴ βασιλεὺς Ἰουστινιανὸς ἐν τοῖς προγράμμασι τοῖς βασιλείοις Φραγγικός τε καὶ Ἀλαμανικός, ἔτι δὲ Γηπαιδικός τε καὶ Λαγγοβαρδικὸς καὶ ἑτέροις τοιοῖσδε ὀνόμασιν ἀνεκηρύττετο, ὡς δὴ τούτων αὐτῷ τῶν ἐθνῶν ἁπάντων δεδουλωμένων. αὐτός τε δὴ οὖν χαλεπῶς ἔφερε τὴν ὕβριν καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ξυγχαλεπαίνειν ἠξίου, ἅτε δὴ καὶ ξυνυβρισμένους.' Trans. Frendo (1975), p. 12. Pitz, *Die griechisch-römische Ökumene* (2001), pp. 233–4, assumed that Theudebert's intention was to conquer northern Italy.

19 *Codex Iustinianus, praef.* [*De emendatione codicis Iustiniani*], ed. Krüger, vol. 1 (1877), p. 4: 'Imperator Caesar Flavius Iustinianus Alamannicus Gothicus Francicus Germanicus Anticus Alanicus Vandalicus Africanus Pius Felix Inclitus Victor ac Triumphator semper Augustus.'

Franks. The evidence thus suggests that shortly before 540, both the emperor and the Frankish king not only sought friendship and assistance but also made preparations for a possible confrontation.

None of the above plans were realised.[20] The fact that Justinian had his troops withdrawn from Italy also implied the abandonment of any possible project mentioned by John Lydos to move his army further North towards Frankish territory. The same also involved the relinquishment of any possible Frankish plan, noted by Agathias, to expand Theudebert's influence towards Constantinople, as he could no longer hope to be successful in Thrace after the imperial army had been sent back from Italy to the eastern regions.

Theudebert did not relinquish his imperial aspirations, however. In 544, the king decreed the minting of gold coins bearing what appears to be his own portrait on the obverse, as his name in the inscription suggests. The image itself was rendered in the style of emperors (see figure 3).[21] The best-known example used iconography from the early days of Justinian I, depicting the emperor with a cuirass and a spear. The reverse featured an angel holding the *globus cruciger* and a long cross.[22] While earlier coins with the name of Theudebert referred to the king as *VIC*[*TOR*], later examples characterised him as *INC*[*LITVS*] which, according to Jörg Drauschke, would have indicated a quasi-imperial position.[23] Four of the latest *solidi*, which were apparently minted in Marseille, even bear the explicitly imperial inscription 'D[OMINUS] N[OSTER] THEODEBERTVS P[ER]P[ERTUUS] AVG[USTUS]' ('Our Lord Theudebert Ever Augustus').[24] All

20 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 3.32, only mentioned that Theudebert had reached Pavia when his troops suffered from plague and were forced to retreat, but claimed that the same king later sent his *dux* Buccelen back to Italy, where he supposedly managed to subdue all of Italy, including Sicily. Although a swift retreat would match the relevant description in Jordanes, *Romania* 375, p. 49, the remaining parts of this report appear particularly unreliable, given that not only did the Alamannic *dux* Buccelen primarily fight in Italy under Theudebert's son Theudebald in the 550s, but also considering that Gregory's account of this military success is strongly exaggerated. On Buccelen, see Selle-Hosbach, *Prosopographie* (1974), nr. 47, pp. 64–5. Theudebert I was not portrayed in a positive light in Gregory's *miraculae*, see *Vita Patr.* 17.2, pp. 279–80; *Gloria Mart.* 83, ends the third book of his *Histories* with the king's death.

21 On this coin and its historical context, see Callu, 'Pax et libertas' (1980). See also the comments in Fanning, 'Clovis Augustus' (2002), p. 329; Börm, 'Das weströmische Kaisertum' (2008), p. 59.

22 See Sommer, *Die Münzen des Byzantinischen Reiches* (2010), p. 39, nr. 2.2.

23 Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), pp. 249–50.

24 See López Sánchez, 'Theodebert Ier à Marseille' (2019), pp. 108–10. The author argued that Theudebert I sought to present himself as the true successor of the Ostrogothic king Vitigis in Italy and the entire West, although his aim was more about expanding his influence in Italy after the fall of the Gothic dynasty of the Amali, while simultaneously

FIGURE 3 Gold *tremissis* with portrait of Theudebert I, minted *c.*540/8 in Bonn, Germany. Weight, 4.41 g, diameter: 21 mm. Avers: Bust facing, spear on the right shoulder. Inscription: 'D N THEODEBERTVS VICTOR'. Reverse: Victory standing facing, holding a long cross and a cruciger globe. Inscription: 'VICTORIA AVCCCCI BO COM OB'. With the kind permission of Patrick Guillard
SOURCE: EN.NUMISTA.COM/CATALOGUE/PIECES346961.HTML

in all, thus, there is no reason to assume that Theudebert's advances were unintentional, as Donald A. Bullough argued. In fact, his actions were altogether exceptional and challenging, as is confirmed by the fact that they were noted in the imperial East: the historian Procopius reported that the Franks issued golden coins with the portraits of their own kings, rather than that of the emperor, and he explicitly emphasised that this was wrong – especially on a golden coin.[25]

Theudebert I's self-representation as a ruler seeking equality with the emperor was indeed far from ordinary. Although the king maintained an

maintaining friendly diplomatic relations with Justinian (pp. 110–11). However, the evidence does not suffice to prove that 'the city of Marseille [...] seems to have recognised as early as 536–7 Theudebert's right to seize the title of *REX* first and subsequently that of emperor *PERPETVVS AVGVSTVS*. It should therefore be considered that Theudebert I was proclaimed king of Italy first, then emperor of the West by the city of Marseille' (trans. form French, p. 112).

25 Procopius, *Goth.* 7.33.5–6. I do not think Bullough, 'Empire and emperordom' (2004), p. 379, is right when assuming, in reference to Procopius' reaction and Theudebert's portrait on his coins, that 'it is unlikely that Theudebert, who had previously acquired a great deal of gold, had any such conscious intention.' See also Cristini, '*Rex magnus*' (2021), pp. 325–8, arguing that the term *rex magnus* used by Marius of Avenches in reference to King Theodebert I was modelled on the Greek expression *megas basileus* used by sixth-century sources to refer to Justinian, which Cristini interprets in the context of an *imitatio imperii*. See also Collins, 'Theudebert I' (1983), pp. 27–30.

amicable tone in his correspondence with the emperor, it was clearly important to him to assert the independence of his authority from the empire, an ambition that entailed a break with prevailing conventions and hierarchies.[26] However, he avoided cutting the ties that bound together what remained of the *orbis Romanus*: the address *pater* (i.e., father), which he chose for the emperor, attests to the Frank's own perception of participating in the imperial hierarchy of power, as Karl Hauck already argued.[27] The same address does not prove, however, in any way that a king was adopted by an emperor, as Fred Haenssler suggested.[28] This type of address is still attested in 584 in a correspondence between the young king Childebert II and the emperor Maurikios, which will be discussed in further detail below.[29]

The earliest explicit reference to the notion of a paternal relationship between the emperor and a Merovingian king is found in a letter addressed by Pope Pelagius I († 561) to the Frankish king ChildebertI († 558). The fact that in this correspondence the pope referred to the emperor as the kings' 'father'[30] indicates that the Franks must have already entered this relationship at a time prior to Justinian. Theudebert clearly did not intend to challenge this particular hierarchy between emperor and king at this point. Related notions are already attested for the time of King Clovis I. Referring to the year 508, shortly after Clovis' victory over the Visigoths at the Battle of Vouillé, which enabled the Franks to secure control over much of Gaul, the historian Gregory of Tours reported:

26 Similar Steiger, *Die Ordnung der Welt* (2010), p. 110. See also Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), p. 74, stressing that this episode should neither be overestimated.

27 Hauck, 'Von einer spätantiken Randkultur' (1967), p. 43. Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), added that this hierarchy was based on a Byzantine power that was 'purely fictitious. Through their sonship, the Franks expressed a spiritual bond to the empire, not a submission to imperial rule' (trans. From German, p. 73). Similar Bętkowski, 'Obraz stosunków' (2014), pp. 599–617. The concept of a paternal hierarchy was vehemently challenged by Brandes, 'Die "Familie der Könige"' (2013), pp. 262–84. Although it is correct that related statements should not be overinterpreted, his challenge of the concept itself is excessive and unconvincing.

28 Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), pp. 54–55 and 73. See also Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee* (1956), pp. 270–1.

29 *Epist. Austras.* 25, p. 138: 'Domino glorioso, pio, perpetuo, inclito, triumphatore ac semper Augusto, patri, Mauricio imperatore, Childebertus rex'. Childebertt II also used *dominus* alone, see *ibid.* 47.

30 *Epist. Arelat.* 48, p. 71: 'Quoniam haec ipsa ita contigerunt, ut, cum pater vester, clementissimus imperator, omnium heresum quae Constantinopoli episcopos suos et ecclesias cum magnis reditibus et vasorum diversitate usque ad tempora imperii eius habuerunt, [...]'.

> Clovis received letters on the consulate from the emperor Anastasius I, and in the church of St. Martin [at the outskirts of Tours] he put on a purple tunic and chlamys [a military mantle], and a diadem on his head. Then he mounted on horseback, [and] on his way, which was between the portico of the atrium [of the church of St. Martin] and the church of the city, he scattered with his own hands gold and silver among the attendant populace, spending money with the will to do charity. And from that day on, he was called as if [*tamquam*] he were a consul or emperor [*consul aut augustus est vocitatus*].[31]

This short account portrays the Frankish king Clovis as a member of the *imperium* being rewarded with the title of consul: the king's attire, a purple tunic and military mantle (*chlamys*), symbolised him as a Roman functionary. The lavish distribution of gold and silver coins mirrored Roman victory parades. Gregory further added that Clovis crowned himself with a diadem and that he was referred to in the manner of emperors. Unsurprisingly, this short account has generated considerable controversy. Was this an act of *imitatio imperii*?[32] The debate on the account's interpretation and what it can tell us about Clovis' status in relation to the *imperium* will likely remain open. The prevailing thesis appears to be that the king received an honorary consulate, a title granted by the Roman emperor symbolising the recognition of the king's authority and alignment with the Roman imperial system, which did not involve specific functions or administrative duties. Other interpretations propose that Clovis was awarded the Byzantine patriciate, the rank of patrician, that of a proconsul, an augustal prefect, or that of a quasi *augustus*. Among further alternative combinations, the German scholar Bruno Krusch even suggested that the event in Tours should be regarded as the 'first imperial coronation in Tours' (Germ. 'die erste Kaiserkrönung in Tours').[33] A detailed examination of these

31 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.38, pp. 88–9: 'Igitur ab Anastasio imperatore codecillos de consolato accepit, et in basilica beati Martini tunica blattea indutus et clamide, inponens vertice diademam. Tunc ascenso equite, aurum argentumque in itinere illo, quod inter portam atrii et eclesiam civitatis est, praesentibus populis manu propria spargens, voluntate benignissima erogavit, et ab ea die tamquam consul aut augustus est vocitatus.' Cf. trans. Thorpe, p. 154; McCormick, 'Clovis at Tours' (1989), p. 157, and Mathisen, 'Clovis' (2012), p. 79.

32 E.g. Chrysos, 'Byzantine diplomacy' (1992), p. 34; Fanning, 'Clovis Augustus' (2002). Ralph Mathisen argued that Clovis' ceremony should not be considered an *imitatio imperii*, as such a ceremony held in a church would have anticipated the Byzantine tradition by nearly one hundred years. Mathisen, 'Clovis' (2012), pp. 105–6.

33 Brusch, *Die erste deutsche Kaiserkrönung* (1933). For the above, see the impressive list of related studies in Mathisen, 'Clovis' (2012), pp. 80–81, n. 5.

theories would go beyond the scope of this section. Therefore, a discussion of a selection of relevant studies must suffice.

Scholars such as Heinrich Günter soon refuted the thesis put forward by Bruno Krusch, prominent for his role as the editor of Gregory of Tours' work. Günter emphasised that Gregory's table of contents, which precedes the second book of his *Histories*, refers to the above description of the Turonian events as 'On the Patriciate of King Clovis' ('De patriciato Chlodovechi regis', p. 35), meaning that it does not relate to Clovis' alleged status of 'Consul' or 'Augustus', but to that of a 'Patrician'. This allowed Günter to argue that Clovis was indeed bestowed the title of Patrician, a Roman eastern title used to honour a person of merit, including some 'barbarian' military leaders in the West.[34] Günter's thesis was challenged by Karl Hauck in 1967, who argued in favour of the current standard thesis of an honorary consulate. Hauck pointed to the term *vocitare* ('to acclaim') to suggest that what Gregory had in mind is to say that Clovis was acclaimed like a (regular) consul or emperor. He also argued that before the king, the emperor was acclaimed, following Roman tradition, implying mutual recognition. According to Hauck, Gregory's report does not mean that Clovis was called Augustus, as most scholars had assumed before him, but rather that he was applauded in the manner of a consul or emperor.[35] This interpretation appears to align well with a close reading of Gregory's original text, as reflected in the translation provided above.

A compelling analysis by Helmut Castritius published in 2010 opposes the thesis that Clovis only received an honorary consulship. Castritius argued that Clovis was granted the status of patricius and consul in the emperor's recognition of his status as the highest Roman official in his realm, considering these titles not as honorary but as legitimate.[36] Although some scholars have rightly put forward that Clovis can not have been elevated to the rank of consul given that his name neither appears on the official list nor on any other relevant

34 Günter, 'Der Patriziat Chlodwigs' (1934), pp. 468–75. Similar Schmidt, 'Die angebliche erste deutsche Kaiserkrönung' (1934), 221–2.

35 Hauck, 'Von einer spätantiken Randkultur' (1967), pp. 30–2 and 43–4. Sarris, *Empires of faith* (2011), p. 123, suggests a confusion between the terms *augustus* and the adjective *augustalis* ('imperial') – a common term used in reference to high ranking officials of the empire – to argue that Clovis never used the imperial designation *augustus*. See also Isidore, *Etym*. 7.6.43.

36 Castritius, 'Chlodwig' (2010), pp. 113–20. Similar Zingg, 'Fränkisches Königtum' (2019), pp. 499–512. See also Wood, 'A Byzantine Commonwealth' (2018), pp. 68–9, comparing the case of Clovis to that of the Burgundian ruler Gundobad.

piece of evidence,[37] there is room for such a thesis: the official consular list lacks a second consul for the year 509,[38] and the Franks did not customarily date events by referring to the current consuls.[39] Besides, according to Castritius, the rank of patrician had remained limited to the uppermost ranks in the West, in contrast to the East, and the king's procession and acclamations in Tours conformed to the ancient procedure of the *adventus* or *ingressus* of consuls. This entailed the reception of the *vestis regia* along with items such as the purple tunic and diadem (*tiara*). In the context of such a ceremony, the consul was to be hailed in an imperial manner by the attending populace.[40] This demonstration of imperial acknowledgement must have significantly bolstered Clovis' authority in the face of the Roman population of Gaul.

Castritius thus argued that Clovis was acclaimed in an imperial manner, similar to Hauck. Both scholars suggested that Clovis was never called *augustus* himself. Castritius further contended that the grant of the status of *patricius*, mentioned in Gregory's table of contents, and the consulate, referenced in the section quoted above, belonged together. He did so by referring to an anonymous source from the sixth century, according to which the Ostrogoth king Theodoric was elevated both as patrician and consul, and other comparable procedures. Castritius added that there is also evidence for other imperial letters of appointment, similar to the one mentioned in Gregory's report, including an image discovered in an eleventh-century manuscript fragment of the *Annals of Ravenna*.[41] It is a line drawing showing the delivery of such a letter, accompanied by an inscription referring to the elevation of the Roman army general (*magister militum*) Aetius († 454) to the rank of *patricius* during the reign of Valentinian III († 455).[42] Castritius' thesis of a connection between the

37 Most recently Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), pp. 621–3, therefore resorting to the thesis of a honorary Consulate.

38 See Cooley, *The Cambridge handbook* (2012), p. 486, only mentioning in the list found in the appendix 'Fl. Inportunus' as a consul for 509. See also Wood, 'A Byzantine Commonwealth' (2018), pp. 69–70, suggesting that Theodoric would have been in charge to nominate a western consul, and that the intention behind Anastasius' grant was to go over the Goth's head.

39 Castritius, 'Chlodwig' (2010), p. 120. See, however, Marius of Avenches' *Chronicle*, which does use the consular list for this purpose, but already only knows of Inportunus at Marius, *Chron.* A. 509.

40 Castritius, 'Chlodwig' (2010), pp. 113–20.

41 Castritius, 'Chlodwig' (2010), pp. 117–20. See *Anonym. Val. post.* 49, ed. I. König, p. 76: 'Zeno itaque recompensans beneficiis Theodoricum, quem fecit patricium et consulem, donans ei multum et mittens eum ad Italiam.'

42 Merseburg, Domstiftsbibliothek Cod. 202, with low-quality images, access mgh-bibliothek.de/merseburg/doku/raven.html (31/03/2021).

consulate and the rank of *patricius* would help explain why Gregory referred to the patriciate in his table of contents, while in his report, he mentioned the grant of the consulate.[43]

We will never know with certainty what title was bestowed onto Clovis to affirm the Franks' participation in the *imperium Romanum*. There is no reason to assume, however, as Bernard S. Bachrach did, that the event indicates that Clovis was a Byzantine general acting on behalf of the emperor, or that its aim was to reward the king for his loyalty to the emperor.[44] Nor does the evidence support the claim that, in contrast, Clovis aimed to use imperial procedures and the status granted by the emperor to establish something akin to 'an independent Merovingian or Frankish tradition of imperial concepts' (p. 332) and thus to make a 'statement of independence from the Roman empire' (p. 321), as Steven Fanning suggested.[45] This would at least require the existence of further evidence supporting that Clovis subsequently employed something that could be termed imperial self-representation, which is not the case.

The truth seems to lie somewhere between these two extreme positions. The evidence does not allow defining the basis on which any mutual recognition or affiliation between the empire and the Franks took place. The imperial grant could have been motivated by the desire for Frankish support in military matters, particularly against the Arian Goths,[46] while the honours received must have been welcome to the Frankish king, as they significantly strengthened his authority towards the Gallo-Roman population and the senatorial aristocracy, in particular, as Yitzhak Hen argued.[47] This does not contradict the

43 Castritius, 'Chlodwig' (2010). Castritius added that the rank of Consul was considered identical in rank to that of the *magister militum*, a rank held by the Burgundian king Gundobad, which is why Clovis could not be elevated to this status and received the consulate instead.

44 Bachrach, 'Quelques observations' (1997), pp. 690–1: 'Clovis était un général Romain. La bataille de Vouillé a probablement été entrepris à l'instigation de l'empereur, qui lui décerna un triomphe à Tours et le consulat.'

45 Fanning, 'Clovis Augustus' (2002), p. 321 and 332. Fanning (p. 323) rightly stressed, however, the importance of the Roman characterisation of his successors, Charibert and Chilperic, in the panegyrics of Venantius Fortunatus.

46 It appears unlikely that the news of the successful battle in Vouillé against the Visigoths had already reached Constantinople before the Byzantine embassy departed from there to head towards Gaul. As the legates found Clovis in Tours near Poitiers, they may have reached him only shortly after the successful battle. Cf. Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 10, whose reconstruction would leave a very short potential but unlikely time gap.

47 Hen, 'Clovis' (1993), p. 273. Hen, who interpreted the entire ceremony as an act of pro-Merovingian propaganda, added that for this Roman population, it was of secondary importance whether the ceremony of Tours was only meant to be what modern

assumption that the ceremony in Tours involved genuine imperial acknowledgment of Clovis' authority in Gaul and, consequently, the king's recognition of the emperor's supremacy.

3.2 Romans and Franks in Gaul

The evidence suggests that Clovis, like his father Childeric before him, was not only king of the Franks but also an imperial officer. This means that his authority emanated from both his recognition by the people of the Franks and the emperor. To understand the relationship between these two functions, we shall now take a look at earlier developments. Since the late third century, different groups identified by the sources as 'Franks' entered Roman territory. Their exact status will remain open to debate, given that explicit evidence is lacking. The majority was probably connected to the empire as *foederati*,[48] i.e. allied groups meant to provide military support in exchange for land and protection. However, other groups may have been *laeti*, i.e. freedmen who settled in the empire under specific conditions, and further groups or individuals may have held other statuses related to various agreements with Roman authorities. Still, there is no reason to assume that the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, known from the famous Greek *Papyrus Gissensis 40* and issued in 212 by the emperor Caracalla to grant Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire, was later extended to these Franks, who probably would rather have been considered as belonging to the group of *dediticii* ('subdued', 'δεδειτικίων').

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scholars call an *imitatio imperii*, given that it 'combined elements from various Roman and Byzantine ceremonies in an attempt to create the feeling of a Roman scene' (p. 273), or whether it represented a more specific and consciously designed ritual, which lacked a better transmission that would have allowed historians to recognise it as such (particularly pp. 271–4). Similar Börm, 'Das weströmische Kaisertum' (2008), p. 52: 'Ein Augustus, der am Bosporus residierte, war für die *reges* des Westens daher nachgerade ideal. Seine Autorität war real genug, um ihre Stellung im Kontext des Imperium Romanum zusätzlich zu legitimieren, und zugleich schien er kaum in der Lage zu sein, selbst wirksam in die Geschicke des Westens einzugreifen. Die Oberhoheit des oströmischen Kaisers anzuerkennen, war unter diesen Umständen mit geringem Risiko und großen Vorteilen verbunden.' See also the comments in Meier, 'Nachdenken über "Herrschaft"' (2014), pp. 189 and 212; Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), p. 109.

48 The notion of *foedus* occurs in Sokrates, *Hist.* 2.13.4, pp. 203–4: 'καθ' ὃν χρόνον Κώνστας μὲν Φράγκων ἔθνος νικήσας ὑποσπόνδους 'Ρωμαίοις ἐποίησε', and its sixth-century Latin translation: 'Quo quidem tempore Constans Francos bello superatos, socios ac foederatos populi Romani effecit.' See also the discussion in Reichmann, 'Zur Ansiedlung der Salfranken' (2013), pp. 3–15, dating this agreement to 342.

This group, which may have included foreign auxiliary soldiers, was explicitly excluded from the *Constitutio*.[49] This does not mean, of course, that individual 'Franks' could not have held Roman citizenship, which could be granted for their services in the army,[50] even if the majority was merely subordinated to a client war leader. In any event, it appears that a large majority of the Franks owned land, a possession usually associated with military obligation. Thus, not every 'Frank' settling inside the empire necessarily had the same legal status. They settled rather peacefully over several generations in the Toxandrian and Rhine regions,[51] which means that by the late fifth century, 'Franks' and 'Romans' were not strangers to one another but represented two major components of a mixed population living in northern Gaul under Roman authority.[52]

Gaul was the home of Romans and Franks since late Antiquity. The Roman identity that characterised this population was genuinely inclusive.[53] From Rome's earliest days, its history was defined by an ethnically diverse populace.[54] As the historian Dariusz Brodka has shown, an ideology emerged during the Roman Republic in which the Roman *populus* was seen as chosen by the gods to rule the world due to their exceptional *virtus* and *pietas*. This notion allowed the subsequent empire to envision encompassing the entire world by spreading its culture, law, justice, and peace.[55] The *Constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 extended civil rights, previously restricted to a select group within imperial territory, to all free inhabitants, a regulation that diluted the exclusivity of Roman identity and ultimately led to its devaluation.[56]

The concept of Romanness evolved significantly after the end of Antiquity. Late Roman authors like Themistios († after 388) continued to portray

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49 *Constitutio Antoniana*, col. 1, ed. Heichelheim, p. 10: 'Δίδωμι τοί[ν]υν ἅπα[σι τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαϊκ]ῆν οἰκουμένην πο[λειτ]είαν Ῥωμαίων [μ]ένοντος [δε ξένου οὐδενὸς τῶν] {[δε]}δειτικίων', and referring to the *dediticii* at p. 16. See also the recent treatment by Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution* (2018), and the earlier assessment by Schmidt, 'Das Ende der Römerherrschaft' (1928), pp. 612–13.

50 See the prominent inscription CIL III 03576: 'Francus ego cives Romanus miles in armis / egregia virtute tuli bello mea dextera (!) sem(p)er', access lupa.at/3035 (02.11.2024).

51 See Reichmann, 'Zur Ansiedlung der Salfranken' (2013), pp. 1–16.

52 See the discussion and evidence provided by Popescu, *Die Franken und das Römische Militär* (2017), pp. 29–47; Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), pp. 591–6.

53 See e.g. Augustine, *Enarrationes* 58.1, eds. Fraipon/Dekker, p. 744: 'Quis iam cognascit gentes in imperio Romano quae quid erant, quando omnes Romani facti sunt, et omnes Romani dicuntur?' See also the definitions of 'Romans' in Isidore, *Etym*. 9.2.84–6, ed. Lindsay.

54 Cf. Pohl, 'Romanness' (2014), p. 411.

55 Brodka, *Die Romideologie* (1998), pp. 9–10.

56 See Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution* (2018).

'Romans' as civilised and loyal to Rome,[57] thus retaining a genuinely civil concept of Romanness. A similar notion of Roman identity is still attested in the seventh-century work of the Hispanic scholar Isidor of Seville († 636). He defined 'barbarism' as ignorance of Latin, adding that individuals could 'become Romans' by learning Latin, even though this would entail importing inaccuracies and foreign customs.[58] He thus maintained the idea that Romanness was tied to aspects of civilisation, now limited to education, particularly in relation to the Latin language and culture. Still, although Roman identity may have been important for members of the elite in Gaul and elsewhere, regional identities as Gauls, Greeks, Syrians, or even Aquitanians and Belgae may have held greater significance for those in lower societal ranks.[59] The situation in Gaul could thus have been comparable to that which Ioannis Stouraitis has elaborated upon for the later context in Byzantium.[60]

The Merovingian sources continued, at least occasionally, to employ the term *Romanus* to relate to the empire. Referring to the year 556, for example, the late sixth-century annalist Marius of Avenches reported that 'this year the Frankish army devastated the army of the Roman republic'.[61] The *Chronicle of Fredegar* presents a more complex notion of Romanness. As I argued elsewhere, it appears to relate to the empire's Romanness only when referring to its remaining territories in the West, which may imply an early Frankish notion of a 'Roman' West in opposition to a 'Greek' East.[62] It only associates Greekness with the empire on one occasion where its text depends on a statement penned by Gregory of Tours.[63] The late-seventh-century *Life of Eligius*, who was bishop of Noyon († 660), contains a digression on the apostate Pope Martin I († 655), to be further discussed in chapter 4, that provides one of the last Merovingian examples where *Romanus* still referred to the empire. It reports about the spreading of the alleged Monothelete heresy 'in the eastern

57 Palm, *Rom, Römertum und Imperium* (1959), p. 103, with further references.

58 Isidore, *Etym.* 1.32.1: 'Appellatus autem barbarismus a barbaris gentibus, dum latinae orationis integritatem nescirent. Vnaquaeque enim gens facta Romanorum cum opibus suis vitia quoque et verborum et morum Romam transmisit.'

59 Mattingly, *Imperialism, power, and identity* (2010), pp. 203–4.

60 Stouraitis, 'Byzantine Romanness' (2018); Stouraitis, 'Roman identity' (2014).

61 Marius, *Chron.* a. 556.4, p. 237: 'Eo anno exercitus Francorum rei publicae Romanae exercitum vastavit'. Further examples in Marius, *Chron.* a. 534.2, a. 535, a. 547.3, a. 555.4. There is one exception where he used *Romanus* to characterise the Roman bishop Vigilius, see ibid. a. 547.1.

62 *Fredegar* 2.56, 4.33, 4.45, 4.58, 4.63, 4.64, 4.66, 4.69. See Sarti, 'Charlemagne's empire' (2016), pp. 1047–8. Similar Goetz, 'Unsichtbares oder sichtbares Imperium Romanum?' (2021), p. 214.

63 *Fredegar* 3.87.

regions, with Constantine governing the pinnacle of the Roman empire'.[64] The *Life* also contains more ambiguous statements, as when it explains that Eligius 'had freed alike, Romans, Gauls, and Britons as well as Moors, but particularly people of Saxon descent', who at that time would have been 'abundant like sheep'.[65] Here, the context suggests that *Romanus* referred to people within the Frankish kingdoms, although an interpretation as relating to people from Rome or even Byzantium cannot be excluded given the subsequent reference to 'Gauls'. Another very late reference is contained in the late seventh-century *De locis sanctis*, a work attributed to Adomnán of Iona († 704). This text describes the pilgrimage of a certain Arculf and the holy sites he visited in the Holy land, providing valuable insights into the geography and significance of these locations during the period. When the author speaks of Constantinople he does so by emphasising how closely the city resembled the capital of the 'Roman empire'.[66]

From the sixth century, however, western notions of Romanness further evolved by incorporating concepts implied in ethnic designations. The topic has a long history of research and has recently received renewed attention.[67] As we will see, the Frankish kingdoms gradually distanced themselves from the Roman empire, an evolution that can only be reconstructed to a limited extent. In this process, Roman citizenship, as the primary criterion for Romanness, fragmented into various components: identity based on birth, legal identity, Christian identity, urban identity associated with the city of Rome, and the Roman identity of the empire itself. The Merovingian evidence comprises terminology related to all these notions.[68]

The narrative sources still use the term *Romanus* to refer to the native inhabitants of the Merovingian kingdoms, who represented the large majority

64 *Vita Eligii* 1.33, p. 689: 'nefada heresis partibus Orientis coeperat pullulare, Constantino tunc Romani imperii apicem gubernante'.

65 *Vita Eligii* 1.10, p. 677: 'pariter liberabat, Romanorum scilicet, Gallorum atque Brittanorum necnon Maurorum, sed praecipuae ex genere Saxonorum, qui abunde eo tempore veluti greges'. Less ambigious ibid. 1.10 p. 676: 'Flagrabat eius ubique fama in tantum, ut si qui ex Romana vel Italica aut Gothica vel qualecumque provintia legationis foedere aut alia quacumque ex causa palatium regis Francorum adire pararent'. Cubitt, 'The impact of the Lateran Council' (2020), p. 94, seems to have a preference here of *Romana* referring to the empire.

66 Adamnán, *De locis sanctis* 3.1.2, p. 106: 'Quae proculdubio Romani est metropolis imperii'.

67 See, in particular, the Vienna publications, e.g., the volume Pohl et al. (eds.), *Transformations of Romanness* (2018).

68 See Sarti, 'Frankish Romanness' (2016), 1047–9 and 1053; Sarti, 'From *Romanus* to *Graecus*' (2018), 131–1. See also Conant, *Staying Roman* (2012), describing a similar process for northern Africa, e.g., pp. 373–4.

of the realm's population. Their native language was (vulgar) Latin, which since the eighth century had gradually transited towards Old French. A reminiscence of their existence is preserved in the designation 'Francia Romana' attested in the tenth century, and beyond.[69] German scholarship usually terms them as 'Romanen', in opposition to the 'Römer' (meaning 'ancient Romans'), while French scholars use the word 'Romans', in opposition to 'Romains' (also meaning 'ancient Romans'). The English language does not permit such a distinction,[70] similar to the Latin original. The majority of the evidence for a quasi-ethnic notion of the term *Romanus* is contained in the third and fourth books of the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, which focus on the events from the sixth and seventh centuries. In a list, for example, which enumerates the *duces* who participated in a royal campaign against the Basques, the chronicle mentions 'Chairardus of Frankish descent, Chramnelenus with Roman ancestry, the Patrician Willibadus of Burgundian origin, and Aigyna of Saxon birth'.[71] The term *Romanus* here thus lacks inclusive notions and is employed merely to distinguish one individual from others associated with different ethnic groups. Such a quasi-ethnic notion of the term 'Roman' was not a unique western feature, as Evangelos K. Chrysos noted by pointing to expressions like 'γένος τῶν Ρωμαίων' ('race of the Romans') attested in various Byzantine sources to convey a 'feeling of community of the citizens of the Roman empire' and this 'regardless of regional, cultural and linguistic differences', adding that they 'all demonstrate a sense of some sort of "ethnic" identity and solidarity of all the citizens of the entire empire'.[72] The Merovingian bishop Gregory of Tours more regularly employed the Latin *Romanus* to refer to the city of Rome and its Church,

69 See e.g. Liutprand, *Antapodosis* 1.14, ed. Chiesa, pp. 17–18: 'Wido quam Romanam dicunt Franciam, Berengarius optineret Italiam'; ibid. 1.16, p. 18: 'transiens Franciam quam Romanam dicunt'.

70 Pohl, 'Romanness' (2014), p. 408, stressing that the term German *Romanen* does not necessarily imply that the people referred to regarded themselves as 'Romans'.

71 *Fredegar* 4.78, p. 160: 'Chairaardus ex genere Francorum, Chramnelenus ex genere Romanus, Willibadus patricius genere Burgundionum, Aigyna genere Saxsonum'. Similar *Fredegar* 3.18, 3.38, 4.24, 4.28, 4.29. For a different approach, see Fischer, 'Reflecting Romanness' (2014), pp. 433–45.

72 Chrysos, 'The Roman political identity' (1996), p. 8. See e.g. Photios, *Epist.* 98, ed. Laourdas/Westerink vol. 1, p. 137: 'φιλανθρωποτάτου γένους τῶν 'Ρωμαίων'. See also further examples in Greatrex, 'Roman identity' (2000), p. 269, and Pohl, 'Romanness' (2014), p. 412, quoting Aelius Aristides with a statement that already attests to a comparable notion for the second century, and the comprehensive discussion of Roman and ethnic identities in Antiquity in Mitthof, 'Zur Neustiftung von Identität' (2012), pp. 61–72. Stouraitis, 'Byzantine Romanness' (2018), pp. 138–9, argues for a growing ethnic understanding of Byzantine Romanness in the sense of 'being Roman by birth' since the ninth and until the twelfth century.

but also occasionally used it to refer to contemporary 'non-barbarian' inhabitants of Gaul in a similar manner.[73] Relevant examples are also attested in lyrical evidence: in his composition to the 'Roman' dux Lupus of Champagne, for example, the author Venantius Fortunatus underlined that his addressee was 'maintaining the ancient spirits of the Roman stirps'.[74] A more classical notion is echoed in his panegyric on King Charibert, where the same poet underlined that 'here is Barbaria, there is Romania that applauds'.[75] It draws a picture of Merovingian Gaul allying Romans and other 'non-Roman' peoples on equal terms. Roman identities, however, had ceased to be ubiquitous. Focusing on a selection of seventh-century Merovingian lives, Jamie Kreiner showed that Roman descent was only occasionally mentioned in hagiography to characterise the respective protagonist, and thus less frequent than expected.[76] Although this finding might reflect the commonness of such descent, the only occasional occurrence of references to Romanness to characterise a saint could also be interpreted as an indication of a decreasing prominence of Roman identities, as reflected in the Frankish laws,[77] which means that it is difficult to draw any more reliable conclusions from this particular finding.

Overall, the evidence attests to a gradual transformation in the notion of Romanness, shifting from an emphasis on an individual's participation in the empire to a more ethnic interpretation that reflects the diverse identities within the post-imperial landscape. This terminology mirrors the changes that occurred in Gaul, where the Romans were one among many ethnic groups living under Frankish authority. Clovis thus was not only king of the Franks, but head of all other ethnic groups inhabiting the territories under his authority.

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73 Refering to ethnic identity, Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.11, 2.33; to Rome and its Church, ibid. 1.25, 1.30, 1.40, 2.1, 2.5, 4.26. The term *Romanus* was only used to refer to the Roman empire when quoting a Byzantine inscription, see ibid. 6.2. See also Rouche, 'Francs et Gallo-Romains' (1977), pp. 141–69, arguing for a lasting significance of ethnic distinction. Reimitz, 'Histories of Romanness' (2018), pp. 289–308, at p. 297, argues that 'Gregory feared Roman history and identity' and that he 'tried to undermine […] the vision of a common Frankish identity.'

74 Fortunatus, *Carm.* 7.7, l. 45, p. 160: 'antiquos animos Romanae stirpis adeptus'.

75 Fortunatus, *Carmen* 6.2, l. 7, p. 131: 'hinc cui barbaries, illinc Romania plaudit'. Trans. J.W. George (1995), p. 115. Similar ibid. l. 15; 2.8, ll. 22–3; 7.8, ll. 63–4. See also ibid. 4.26, ll. 13–14, p. 95, on a certain Vilithuta: 'sanguine nobilium generata Parisius urbe/ Romana studio, barbara prole fuit'; ibid. 9.16, l. 19, p. 220: 'gentibus adstrictus, Romanus carus haberis'; Fortunatus, *Carmen appendix* 2, ll. 83–4, p. 277: 'illinc Romanus, hinc laudes barbarus ipse,/ Germanus Batavus Vasco Britannus agit'. For a more detailed discussion, see Szövérffy, 'À la source de l'humanisme' (1971), pp. 1–86; Buchberger, 'Romans, barbarians, and Franks' (2016), pp. 293–307.

76 Kreiner, 'Romanness' (2018), pp. 309–24.

77 See Sarti, 'Der fränkische *miles*' (2018), pp. 104–6.

The meaning of the designation *Francus* itself only much later reflected this circumstance: by the late seventh century, it had evolved to become so inclusive that it applied to all subjects of the Frankish kings, regardless of their individual ethnic affiliation.[78] The question to be discussed in further detail is how the Frankish kingdoms, as realms inhabited by a majority of Romans by birth and ruled by authorities of Frankish descent and with a long history within imperial territory, related to what had remained of the empire.

3.3 The Empire's Kingdom

We saw above that although the Franks and the empire were closely related by the end of Antiquity, the exact nature of their relationship can not be defined with certainty. The Frankish king Clovis, who was acknowledged by the emperor Anastasius I through the granting of various titles, was no newcomer in the Roman world. His father, Childeric I, was a minor king in the Toxandrian region, residing in the city of Tournai. Childeric was also a Roman officer, as a congratulatory letter attests. It was written by the bishop Remigius of Reims († 533) and addressed to Clovis at the time of his accession to power. It is significant that the letter does not address him as king (*rex*) but refers to him as imperial functionary in charge of the administration of the Roman province *Belgica II*, a role he would have inherited from his father Childeric.[79]

78 See Goetz, 'Zur Wandlung des Frankennamens' (2002), pp. 133–50; Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages* (2005), pp. 176–7.

79 *Epist. Austras.* 2, p. 113: 'Rumor ad nos magnum pervenit, administrationem vos Secundum Belgice suscepisse. Non est novum, ut coeperis esse, sicut parentes tui semper fuerunt.' Reference to his regal power can only be found in the address, implying that Clovis gained his administrative position only after his accession to the throne, provided the address is authentic. Barret/Woudhuysen, 'Remigius' (2016), pp. 471–500, argued that 'the letter is unchained from Roman administrative continuity, its importance no longer a demonstration that Belgica Secunda survived or that Clovis derived his legal authority from a grant of office. Instead it records a more subtle survival: of Roman political idiom after Rome' (p. 491), although unconvincingly. Similar Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), p. 624: 'Wenn Remigius von Reims Chlodwig als Vertreter der *Belgica II* anspricht, dann schwingt in dieser Aussage vermutlich auch das Bemühen mit, eine faktische Regionalherrschaft wieder in römische Kategorien zurückzuübersetzen'. For additional evidence supporting that Clovis was understood to be closely tied to the empire, see Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), pp. 539–41 and 545–50, suggesting that Clovis may have somewhat inherited his father's status of a *magister militum*, although his reading of Avitus, *Epist.* 41, ed. Peiper, p. 75: 'Gaudeat equidem Graecia principem legisse nostrum' was challenged with good reasoning by Shanzer, 'Dating the baptism' (1998), pp. 37–42. On the sources related to Childeric, see Hardt, 'Childerich I.' (2015), pp. 217–24.

Obviously, this was the function that was relevant for Remigius, and it appears that the Frank accessed both his royal and imperial capacities at the same time. The precise title of his imperial office remains uncertain, whether it was that of a *procurator*, *praefectus*, *dux*, or another designation

The early Merovingian kingdom was closely related to the empire, although, again, the exact nature of this relationship cannot be precisely defined. Procopius' *Wars* contains a well-known section on late fifth-century Gaul, explaining that the *Arborychoi* (possibly a corruption of the Latin name *Armoricani*) along with the remaining parts of Gaul and Spain had 'formerly been subjects' ('κατήκοοι') to the Romans.[80] The implicit claim that Gaul had already ceased to belong to the empire by the late fifth century is indeed remarkable. It is contradicted by more substantial evidence, including information provided by Procopius himself.[81] A fragment by the early Byzantine historian Candidus reports that when Odoacer deposed the western emperor Romulus Augustus the Gauls (Γαλάται) revolted against him and sent a legation to Zeno.[82] It appears that their intention was to offer or renew their subordination to the emperor in Constantinople.[83] The term Γαλάται in this context is ambiguous. It may refer to the Romans under the authority of Syagrius, the son of the Roman *magister militum* Aegidius ruling the region of Soissons and termed by Gregory of Tours as 'king of the Romans' (*rex Romanorum*). However, it could also denote the Frankish kingdoms, or the two of them. The close connection between the Franks of Tournai and the so-called Kingdom of Soissons is demonstrated by a detail in Gregory of Tours' well-known *Histories* that has

80 Procopius, *Goth*. 5.12.8–9, p. 94: 'τούτων ἐχόμενοι Ἀρβόρυχοι ᾤκουν, οἳ ξὺν πάσῃ τῇ ἄλλῃ Γαλλίᾳ καὶ μὴν καὶ Ἱσπανίᾳ Ῥωμαίων κατήκοοι ἐκ παλαιοῦ ἦσαν'. See also Zosimos, *Historia* 6.5–6, ed. Menselssohn, pp. 286–8, reporting a revolt of the inhabitants of Britain and Gaul against the empire in the early fifth century. On the *Arborychoi*, see e.g. Halsall, *Barbarian migrations* (2007), p. 305. It is also noteworthy that Procopius, in this chapter, claimed, that the remaining Roman soldiers in Gaul were prevented from heading home to Rome and therefore would have sought to connect with the Franks. However, the late Roman soldiers from Gaul were largely recruited in Gaul and the border regions, and certainly not in Rome, which means that we should also be cautious when referring to other details in his report, see e.g. Meier, *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung* (2019), pp. 599–600.

81 E.g. Procopius, *Goth.* 8.20.10, to be discussed below. Cf. Starostin, 'Захват франками Галлии' (2016), pp. 153–74, argued that Procopius was much more interested in emphasising that the Franks belonged to the imperial world than Gregory of Tours.

82 Candidus, *Fragmentum*, ed. Muller, p. 136: 'Καὶ στασιασάντων αὐτῷ τῶν δυσμικῶν Γαλατῶν, διαπρεσβευσαμένων τε αὐτῶν καὶ Ὀδοάκρου πρὸς Ζήνωνα, Ὀδοάκρῳ μᾶλλον ὁ Ζήνων ἀπέκλινεν.'

83 Similar Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), suggesting on the basis of earlier works that the Gauls sent legates to Constantinople 'mit der Bitte, nicht der Herrschaft des Odoaker unterstellt zu werden' (p. 246).

so far been overlooked: Chlodwig's father, Childeric, was reportedly exiled to the kingdom of Thuringia due to misconduct. During his absence, Aegidius, the mentioned Roman *magister militum*, was chosen to be king of the Franks in his place, a role he would have held for eight years.[84] This was the same Aegidius who is attested around Soissons, further South, as *rex Romanorum*.[85] Even if this episode was merely fictitious, it shows that the role of king of the Franks was not necessarily restricted to an ethnic Frank or even a Merovingian. The fact that, according to Gregory, this function could be delegated to an authority who already held the function of *rex* over a Roman population confirms that the Frankish rulers were more than merely 'barbarian' kings occupying Roman territory; they were closely integrated into the imperial landscape of their time.

Although there were overlaps between the empire and the Frankish kingdom, the two domains never fully coincided. This is well-attested by the existence of the *Salian Law*, a legal code that encompassed a wide range of what appears to be traditionally Frankish customary law. It demonstrates that the Frankish kingdom could never have been fully integrated into the empire from a legal perspective. It was issued between 475 and 486/7, if Karl Ubl is right with his assessment.[86] It is not only an important testimony to the Franks' partial independence from the empire; the law also grants a privileged position to those termed 'Franks', revealing a notable sense of Frankish identity and a potential Roman discrimination. Although the existence of a genuinely Frankish law confirms that the Franks were never fully subject to Roman jurisdiction, the law applied exclusively to the 'Franks' and was not meant to replace imperial Roman legislation, which continued to govern the vast majority of Gaul's inhabitants.[87] Besides, there is no evidence of the realm's payment of imperial taxes.[88] Both circumstances align with the thesis that most Franks were tied to the empire as *foederati*, a connection unaffected by the events of 476/80 in Italy or Dalmatia.

84 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.12.

85 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.18, 2.27.

86 Ubl, *Sinnstiftungen eines Rechtsbuchs* (2017), pp. 53–97, in particular p. 96, stressing that the law implies 'ein akzentuierter Bruch mit Rom und seiner Jurisprudenz' (p. 94).

87 See Sarti, '*Romani* in den fränkischen *leges*' (2025).

88 Evidence for the payment of taxes is very scarce throughout Roman history and is already lacking for the time before 476, at least in Gaul. This makes it impossible to determine when payments were last made, particularly as Childeric and Clovis may have been responsible for the collection, administration, and local redistribution of taxes.

In the early sixth century, this Frankish-imperial relation was still significantly more substantial than a mere ideological subordination.[89] Several pieces of evidence indicate that the Merovingian kingdoms also retained close connections with the Roman empire beyond the time of Clovis. A letter in the *Austrasian Letters* reveals that Clovis' great-grandson Theudebald I († 555) informed Justinian of his succession to his father's throne in 548, a procedure reminiscent of the late Roman tradition of emperors sending their portrait to their respective co-emperor to announce their accession and seek acknowledgment of their new position.[90] In his study on Frankish hegemony in Britain, the medievalist Ian N. Wood pointed to another notable reference contained in Procopius' *Wars*. It concerns a Frankish embassy transporting some captive Angles from Britain to the emperor Justinian in Constantinople, and this to support their claim to be recognised as rulers over the southern parts of the British island.[91] This unusual statement presumes that the Franks considered themselves subjects of the emperor and that any further territorial authority required imperial acknowledgement.

Another notable mention is contained in the *Vita S. Treverii monachi*, a *Life* edited solely within the framework of the seventeenth-century *Acta*

89 Cf. the comments in Erdmann, 'Das ottonische Reich' (1943), p. 416.

90 *Epist. Austras.* 18, p. 131: 'Ideoque tam pro largitate muneris quam pro delectatione animorum, quam indicastis vobis praestitam pro eo, quod nos in solium genitoris nostri, ut dignum erat.' Cf. Barnwell, 'War and peace' (1997), pp. 136–7, suggesting that such exchanges between the Byzantine and the western realm were common, comparable to information available about new Persian rulers, for example, although assuming that 'It must at once be recognised that there is no evidence for anything of the kind'. On the procedure to exchange images of the emperor, see Hack, 'Bildaussendung und Bildeinholung' (2003), pp. 147–78.

91 Procopius, *Goth.* 8.20.10, p. 864: 'ὥστε ἀμέλει οὐ πολλῷ πρότερον ὁ Φράγγων βασιλεύς ἐπὶ πρεσβείᾳ τῶν οἱ ἐπιτηδείων τινὰς παρὰ βασιλέα Ἰουστινιανὸν ἐς Βυζάντιον στείλας ἄνδρας αὐτοῖς ἐκ τῶν Ἀγγίλων ξυνέπεμφε, φιλοτιμούμενος ὡς καὶ ἡ νῆσος ἥδε πρὸς αὐτοῦ ἄρχεται.' See Wood, 'Frankish hegemony in England' (1999), p. 235. Less conclusive is Haenssler's ascertainment that Gregory of Tours and the *Chronicle of Fredegar* only use the term *imperium* in connection with Byzantium, and that the term *res publica* remained in use throughout the Frankish era. Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), pp. 64–8. Adopted by Ohnsorge, 'Das abendländische Kaisertum' (1983), p. 3. Haenssler adds, that the use of the term *res publica* in the eighth century *Continuations* of the *Chronicle of Fredegar* might already refer to Papal Rome (p. 65). For further evidence supporting a persistent (even though undefined) authority of the emperor in southern Gaul, see Procopius, *Goth.* 7.33.4, pp. 652–4: 'οὐ γάρ ποτε ᾤοντο Γαλλίας ξὺν τῷ ὑσφαλεῖ κεκτῆσθαι Φράγγοι, μὴ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος τὸ ἔργοι ἐπισφραγίσαντος τοῦτό γε', also discussed in Wood, 'A Byzantine Commonwealth' (2018), pp. 73–4. On the relations between Franks and Anglo-Saxons, see Bavuso, 'Balance of power across the Channel' (2021), pp. 283–304, also on this particular source at p. 288.

Sanctorum.[92] It asserts that during the 'consulship of Justin', Gaul was still under imperial jurisdiction. There are two consulships attested for the emperor Justin I († 527), in 519 and 524, two options among which Julien Marie Lehuërou in 1842 had a preference for the latter. The *Vita S. Treverii* adds that Theudebert I's campaign in Italy in 539 was a consequence of a Frankish struggle for independence from this very overlordship.[93] While early modern scholarship assumed the *Life* belonged to the sixth century,[94] it probably dates no earlier than the mid-seventh century, as the same statement on Theudebert I's campaign is also contained in Jonas of Bobbio's († after 659) *Life of John of Réôme* († 539).[95] Still, the *Vita S. Treverii* does reflect the opinion that the early Frankish kingdoms still belonged to the empire. The mentioned *Life of John* further confirms the significance of Theudebert I's pursuit of a more autonomous position of power in this regard. A statement similar in tone but opposite in meaning may be found in the anonymous *Life of the Jura Fathers* (*Vita*

92 *Vita S. Treverii*, ed. Bollandus. The edition only mentions that the *Life* was based on 'ex veteri MS. Prioratus S. Treverii' discovered by the Jesuit Pierre-Francois Chifflet († 1682). Till Stüber suggested that 'Prioratus S. Treverii' may refer to the community of Saint-Trivier-sur-Moignans (personal communication).

93 *Vita S. Treverii* 1.2–3, p. 399: 'Erat enim eo tempore, quo Gallia sub imperii jure (f) Justini consulis [i.e. 519 or 524] extitit [...]. Cumque jam Galliarum, Francorumque Rege sua ditioni, sublato Imperii jure, gubernacula ponerent, et post posita Reipublicae dominatione, propria fruerentur potestate; evenit ut (i) Theudebertus filius Theuderici. Chlodovei quondam filii, bellum Italiae inferret.' See the discussion in Lehuërou, *Histoire des institutions mérovingiennes* (1842), pp. 229–31, associating this piece of evidence with Procopius, *Goth.* 7.33.4, and Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), pp. 551–2, who also opted for 524. However, given the existence of several Frankish kings after Clovis' death, none of these references relate to the entire Frankish kingdom, which means that even if these statements were truthful, they may only apply to a fraction of the Frankish realm. A noteworthy coincidence: the only inscription with a consular date from sixth-century Britain, which has been found on an early Christian stone in Penmachno (Wales), appears to mention the same consul: FILI AVITORI || INTEPO[--] | IUSTI[--] | CON[--]]. See Worp et al., *Consuls* (1987), p. 696, nr. 540. The second part of the inscription has been interpreted as 'In te(m)po[re] Iusti[ni] con[sulis].'

94 The century is mentioned in *Speculum carmelitanvm* (1680), p. 986, although without explanation.

95 See Jonas, *Vita Johannis* 15, ed. Krusch, pp. 337–8: 'Cumque iam Gallias Francorum regis sue dictione, sublato imperii iure, gubernacula ponerent et, postposita rei publice dominatione, propria fruerentur potestate.' I would like to thank Sihong Lin for pointing me to the similarities between these two *Lives*. The *Life* contains a comparable statement related to the fifth century consulate of John, *Vita Johannis* 2, ed. Krusch, p. 329: 'Agebat enim hoc eo tempore, quo Gallias sub imperii iure Iohannes consul regebat.' Meriaux, 'Thérouanne et son diocèse' (2000), p. 386, n. 31, points to further dependencies of the *Vita S. Treverii* on Gregory of Tours' *Histories* 3.32, and chronological inconsistencies.

patrum Iurensium) concerning the late-fifth-century abbots of the Jura monasteries, composed around 520. It relates to the time of the Burgundian king Chilperic († *c.*480), referring to him as 'patrician of Gaul' and adding that at that time 'public law was reduced to royal authority',[96] attesting to the concurrent growing significance of kingly power in Gaul.

A more noteworthy piece of evidence is a little-studied manuscript fragment from the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (lat. reg. 1050), dated around the year 1000. It contains what Max Conrat characterised in 1908 as a 'Merovingian treatise on Roman-Frankish officialdom'.[97] Under the title *Decurio de gradibus*, starting at folio 157^{v}, column 2, and continuing until folio 158^{r}, column 2, it enumerates the offices of *decanus, centurio, tribunus, vicarius, comes, dux*, and *patricius*, titles well attested in the Merovingian evidence. While the lowest rank of *decanus* is only occasionally used in the sources to refer to various minor local offices and authorities, the *centurio* may be related to the Frankish *centena* and the *centenarii*, an office with police and judicial functions attested, among others, in the *Salian Law* (e.g. § 44).[98] The fragment explains that the *decanus*, 'with authority over ten', is of the lowest and the *patricius*, characterised as 'who sits next to the king and makes his own decisions', is of the highest rank. The king's rule is defined as heading either over one or several peoples (*gentes*), while the emperor has authority over the entire world 'in which he excels and that excels through him'. After another summary enumeration of the same titles, the text explains that the *dux* is subordinated to the *patricius*, ranking either below the king or (*vel*) the emperor, as Caesar would report to Augustus.[99]

96 *Vita partum Iur.* 92, ed. Martine, p. 336: 'coram uiro inlustri Galliae quondam patricio Hilperico – sub condicione regia ius publicum tempore illo redactum est'. I owe Yaniv Fox for pointing me to this reference.

97 *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, lat. reg. 1050, access digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.1050 (21/08/2020), altogether consisting of 165 sheets. See the discussion in Conrat, 'Traktat' (1908), pp. 239–60; Beyerle, 'Das frühmittelalterliche Schulheft' (1952), pp. 1–23. The mysterious *Decurio de gradibus* at cap. 2 also mentions the Consul: 'Consules et proconsules. sed consules qui dona regis consulant et donant, cui voluerit rex. interdum consul coram rege munutos arguenteos super planam terram spargit, ut certatim pauperes propriis et velocissimis manibus sibi, ut valuerint, rapiant, ut letus rex aspiciat subridens.' See Conrat, pp. 258–60.

98 Murray, 'From Roman to Frankish Gaul' (1988), pp. 59–100. See also, e.g., *Vita Eligii* 1.15.

99 *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, lat. reg. 1050, fol. 157^{v} col. 2–158^{r} col. 1; cap. 1 of the treatise, according to the structure suggested by Conrat, 'Traktat' (1904), p. 248: 'Decanus qui super decim est. Centurio qui super centum est. Tribunus qui super duos vel tres pagos vel super mille. Vicarius qui, quando comes ad regem vadit ad causas civitatis sue discutiendas,

Conrat interpreted the role of the *patricius* as that of a royal delegate, which seems to fit the comparison between *caesar* and *augustus* at the time of the Diocletian Tetrarchy.[100] The explanation by the unknown manuscript author that the different offices all rank below the 'king or emperor' ('rege vel imperatore') may reflect the opinion that a *regnum* is always governed either by an emperor or by a king. However, it is more likely that it expressed the awareness that, although the emperor was still conceived as the supreme authority over the Frankish kingdoms, the king was the person who actually exercised this power in Gaul.[101] This latter interpretation accords with the panegyric by Venantius Fortunatus quoted in the introduction to this study, which was addressed to the emperor Justin II in the late 560s and also contained the following statement: 'Greatest glory to you, father and redeemer of [all] things, who justly installs Justin as head of the world. He rightfully claims domination over kings'.[102] Also worth mentioning in this context is the fact that the *Chronicle* of Marius of Avenches, which ends in 581, was consistently dated in reference to the current eastern consulate.[103] Some Frankish historiographers also continued to reference the current emperor in dating their accounts long after this, as the *Chronicon Moissiacense*, established around 818 in the

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vicem ipsius tenet. et ideo vicarious nominatur. Comes qui super unam civitatem vel super t.....a milia. Dux super duodecim civitates. Patricius qui ad latus regis sedet et, ne molestias rex accipiat, ipse dispensat quicquid ad imperatorem vel ad regem adlatur causarum provindentiarum et populorum. rex qui super unam gentem vel multas. imperator qui super totum mundum aut qui precellit totum mundum aut qui precellit in eo. Et hac supputatione constat, quod sit decanus aut centurione, centurio sub tribune, tribunus sub comite, comes sub duce, dux sub patricio sub rege vel imperatore fit Caesar sub Augustus.'

100 Conrat, 'Traktat' (1908), p. 252.

101 Cf. the interpretation in Beyerle, 'Das frühmittelalterliche Schulheft' (1952), pp. 18–19.

102 Fortunatus, Carm. app. 2, pp. 275–6, ll. 11–13: 'gloria summa tibi, rerum sator atque redemptor,/ qui das Iustinum iustus in orbe caput. rite super reges dominantem vindicat'. Cf. trans. by George, *Venantius Fortunatus* (1995), p. 112: 'May the highest glory be to Thee, Creator and Redemer of the world, Who in Your justice establish Justin as head over the world.' Unfortunately, nothing is known about whether and how this poem reached the emperor, although a letter appears the most likely option. See also the assessments in Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), pp. 541–2; Drauschke, 'Diplomatie und Wahrnehmung' (2011), p. 252. Brennan, 'The disputed authorship' (1996), pp. 335–45, convincingly refutes Karen Cherewatuk's thesis that this and other poems addressed to individuals in the Byzantine East and/or written on behalf of the former queen and abbess Radegund were composed by the abbess herself.

103 E.g. Marius, *Chron.* a. 581, ed. Mommsen, p. 239: 'An. II cons. Tiberii Constantini Aug. Ind. XIIII'.

monastery of Moissac. It only ceased to reference the current emperor after 717, the year Leo III († 741) ascended the throne.[104]

The *Decurio de gradibus* likely goes back to a Merovingian original. As argued above, the enumerated titles correspond pretty well with the titles known from this time and region, particularly in the sixth century.[105] In the relevant manuscript, this particular text also comes together with other Frankish legal texts. Following Visigothic sources like extracts from the work by Isidor of Seville or the *Lex Romana Wisigothorum* (fols. 5^{r}–118^{v}) and the *Lex Romana Burgundionum* (fols. 118^{v}–124^{v}), lat. reg. 1050 contains the Frankish *Lex Ribuaria* (fols. 125^{r}–134^{r}), the *Lex Alamannorum* (134^{r}–139^{v}), and the Frankish *Lex Salica emendata* (fols. 140^{r}–147^{v}). The *Decurio de gradibus* is located, at fols. 157^{v}–158^{r} and is followed by *capitula* issued under Charlemagne (fols. 160^{v}–162^{v}). They are succeeded by the prologues of the *Lex Bavariorum*, extracts from the *Lex Salica* (fols. 162^{v}–163^{r}), and the *Formulae Turonenses* (fols. 164$^{r–v}$). The *Decurio de gradibus* thus was collected among other Frankish legal texts. Although it should not be overinterpreted, given its uncertain provenance and date, it is another jigsaw piece supporting the impression that the emperor was considered a rightful authority in the Frankish West beyond the fifth century.

The evidence discussed thus far suggests that the emperor at least gave formal approval to Frankish rule in Gaul.[106] The plausibility that the Frankish kingdom in the sixth century could still be understood as somewhat subordinate to the empire is further supported by additional evidence: Gregory of

104 The *Chronicon Moissiacense* only survives in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, lat. 4886 access gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10540997j (08/08/2022), emerging from the research MA thesis of J.M.J.G. Kats, prepared and revised by Classen (2012), access openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/20005 (03/09/2022). Theodosius III is mentioned on fol. 45^{v}. The text in ed. Pertz, MGH SS 1 (1826), pp. 282–313 does not correspond to the text of the manuscript, despite the fact that the references to the Byzantine emperors are identical, except that Anastasius II († 715) is the last to be mentioned on p. 290. Herrin, 'Constantinople' (1992), p. 99, claims that the chronicle ceases to refer to the Byzantine emperors in 715.

105 Still, there are inconsistencies. The *dux*, for example, was not a subordinate of the *patricius*, although the *patricius* is likely to have ranked higher in status, see Lewis, 'The dukes' (1976), pp. 381–410; Sarti, 'Eine Militärelite' (2016), pp. 281–3. Beyerle, 'Das frühmittelalterliche Schulheft' (1952), at pp. 20–1, likewise dates it to the time before 550, but argues at pp. 19–21 for an Ostrogothic original. The author, however, primarily concentrated on the subordination of the *patricius* and the concurrent authority of a king and emperor, and fails to match the remaining titles to the Ostrogothic kingdom. See also the evidence in Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 15, n. 53.

106 Cf. Hauck, 'Von einer spätantiken Randkultur' (1967), p. 44, argues that the consulate was granted to encourage mutual recognition.

Tours, for example, still referred to the empire as the sole *imperium*,[107] and there is evidence suggesting the Franks continued to incorporate the empire into their official liturgy and prayers well beyond the eighth century.[108] This Franco-imperial relation raises the question of its subsequent evolution and whether there was a moment when this connection ended, i.e. when the Frankish kingdoms ceased to belong to the imperial sphere of authority. The sources lack any indication of such an event, suggesting that there was never an official termination of the Frankish connection to the empire. Any separation, therefore, must have occurred as part of a more gradual process. Fred Haenssler's question of 1960 regarding when the idea of a universal Roman empire had disappeared in the West and when Byzantine claims had become mere fiction[109] thus remains difficult to answer. Before we attempt to address this question in further detail, we should take a closer look at the mid-sixth-century exchanges.

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107 As Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), p. 68, has put forward. See e.g. Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.18, p. 384: 'Childebertus vero rex, inpellentibus missis imperialibus, qui aurum, quod anno superior datum fuerat, requirebat, exercitum in Italia diregit.' Although Gregory regularly used terms like *regis imperium* to refer to the Frankish kings, e.g. ibid. 9.33, p. 454: 'In qua causa Theutharius presbiter […] praesbiterii honorem accepit, accessit, ut hanc divisionem iuxta regis imperium celebraret.' A comparable terminology is attested in the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, e.g. *Fredegar* 4.33, p. 133: 'sed cum parte imperiae fuerat Cantabria revocata'. For further relevant evidence and thoughts, see Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), pp. 542–4.

108 See Tellenbach, *Römischer und christlicher Reichsgedanke* (1934), pp. 30–1, and the appendix; Hirsch, 'Der mittelalterliche Kaisergedanke' (1965), pp. 5–6. See also the evidence discussed in Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 15, n. 53.

109 Haenssler, *Byzanz und Byzantiner* (1960), p. 109: 'fragt es sich, wann denn die Vorstellung der universalen Geltung des byzantinischen Reiches im Westen verschwand, wann die Ansprüche des Ostens reine Fiktion wurden'. He assessed that 'das Verschwinden des Gedankens des byzantinischen Vorrangs' predated Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800, assuming that '[d]ie beiden genannten Linien [the end of the claim to universal rulership and the emergence of a new assessment of the political situation] in der politischen Ideenwelt […] wohl eine Zeitlang nebeneinander her [liefen], die eine im Abklingen, die an der im Wachsen.' See also Reitter, *Der Glaube an die Fortdauer* (1900), p. 17, arguing that 'nirgends treten bei ihnen [den weströmischen Chroniken des 5. und 6. Jahrhunderts] die germanischen Herrscher mit den Titeln und Prärogativen des Kaisertums auf, die auf eine rechtlich unumschränkte Herrschaft in Italien hindeuten könnten, vielmehr wird derselben nur mit der affectlosesten Rückhaltung Erwähnung gethan: alle diese Thatsachen weisen darauf hin, dass diejenigen, die sich unter der Fremdherrschaft mit geschichtlichen Aufzeichnungen befassten, in der alten Idee lebten, dass das römische Reich selbst im Westen noch fortdauere und es trotz aller staatlichen Umwälzungen noch nicht aufzugeben sei.' On this, see also my discussion of this broad topic with regard to the Carolingian era in *Orbis Romanus* (2024).

3.4 Franko-Byzantine Exchanges

The sixth century was a time of comparably intense Mediterranean exchange. Gregory of Tours, our prime testimony, regularly referred to official embassies exchanged with the emperor, as well as ship traffic and specific objects reaching Gaul from the East. Averil Cameron has shown that the bishop's reports on the emperors in Constantinople reflect narratives on the same topics and people also attested in the Byzantine sources, suggesting that Gregory had access to either ambassadors, other people who had travelled to Constantinople, or maybe even written sources from the East.[110] This applies, in particular, to Gregory's report on the emperor Justin, who, according to Gregory, lapsed into the 'Pelagian heresy' and became insane, soon resulting in Tiberius becoming his Caesar – an emperor who received an incomparably more positive portrait. Gregory also reported on several embassies, including one dated around 574 that was commissioned by King Sigibert I to 'seek peace' (*pacem petens*). The embassy was headed by the Frank Warnar and a certain Firminus from Clermont who travelled by sea and returned the following year.[111] Cameron's thesis that such embassies were important for the transmission of knowledge on the East is further confirmed by the fact that relevant information is regularly associated with them.[112] In the context of the embassy of 574, for example, Gregory mentioned, among other things, the burning of the church of the Antiochian martyr Julian, Persian invasions in Egypt and Syria, and he added a notable reference to their Zoroastrian creed.[113] The detailed information related to the death of the emperor Justin II in 578, followed by Tiberius being acclaimed in the hippodrome, invested in purple, and crowned with the diadem, alongside other local events,[114] probably reached Gregory with Chilperic's embassy sent to Constantinople in 578, which only returned to Gaul in 581.[115] Another detailed report, on how Maurikios was chosen as Tiberius's successor in August 582,[116] may have come to the Frankish kingdom with the pretender

110 Cameron, 'The Byzantine Sources' (1975), pp. 421–6.

111 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.40.

112 The same is true for the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, see Sarti, 'Byzantine history and stories' (2021), pp. 8–12.

113 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.40.

114 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 5.30. See also Hardt, *Gold und Herrschaft* (2004), pp. 48–9, on this section, stressing that this episode, revolving around a treasure and the emperor's wife, was popular enough in the West to be included to subsequent sources.

115 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.2.

116 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24, 6.30.

Gundovald – to be further discussed below – or an embassy sent in 583 by King Childebert II.[117]

A sixth-century embassy described in further detail was led by the Frank Gripo around 589 – whose report served as the basis for Gregory's account – along with a certain Bodegisil from Soissons and Evantius from Arles. They were sent to the emperor Maurikios via Carthage. Here, they were delayed while awaiting the prefect's permission to continue the journey. During this stay, a servant of Evantius stole from a local shopkeeper – a matter allegedly unknown to his lord – which resulted in a quarrel when the servant killed the angry victim. This led the local authorities to seek out the embassy at their lodging, causing an incident during which Bodegisil and Evantius were killed even before they could learn what had happened. Gripo was eventually permitted to proceed to Constantinople, where the emperor expressed his regrets for the incident.[118] The episode attests to the continued normality of such journeys, which, as in this case, could still involve high sea travel, and it confirms that relevant travel procedures were still in place. Michael McCormick even suggested that this episode indicates that Justinian had reestablished the state shipping service associated with tax transport to the capital, enabling such sea journeys.[119] The same sea route to Constantinople via Carthage is also documented for a Byzantine ship carrying the Visigothic princess Ingund and her son Athanagild, whom we will encounter in the next section.[120]

Italy, the only region where the Franks and the empire occasionally shared boundaries, remained a setting for conflicts arising from the shifting relations between the Byzantines, the Goths, and the Franks even after the death of the Merovingian king Theudebert in 548.[121] Justinian used the occasion of the accession to the throne of Theudebald I, Theudebert's son, to send a legation led by John and Missurius to improve relations with the Austrasian king. This was responded to by another Frankish embassy, dated around 548/9.[122] However, maybe in consequence of a Frankish defeat against the empire in

117 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.42.

118 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 10.2.

119 See McCormick, *Origins of the European economy* (2001), p. 74 and n. 36.

120 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.28.

121 Procopius, *Goth*. 4.24, 4.34; Marius, *Chron*. a. 539, 548, 556; Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.9. For detailed discussions of the Franko-Byzantine relations and exchanges as well as relevant conflicts and alliances in Italy during the long mid-sixth century, see Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), pp. 12–33; Lin, 'Justinian's Frankish war' (2021), pp. 403–31; Lin, 'The fall of Merovingian Italy' (2023), pp. 543–62; Marazzi, 'The geography of war' (2024), pp. 25–76.

122 *Epist. Austras.* 18; Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), pp. 21–2. Cf. Stüber, 'The fifth Council of Orléans' (2019), p. 98.

Italy around that time,[123] Theudebald I entered into a treaty with King Totila († 552) and his Goths, whereupon Justinian sent the legate Leontius to express imperial disappointment and to urge the Franks to realign and renew their friendship with the empire,[124] a legation Eugen Ewig dated to 550/2.[125] It was responded to by a Frankish embassy led by a certain Leudardus and three companions, which, according to Procopius, was successful, though it remains unclear in what sense.[126] The matter was not yet settled, however. The treaty was followed by another campaign led between early 553 and late 554 by the brothers Butilinus and Leutharis, two Alamannic *duces* under Austrasian authority, who according to the extensive account by the Byzantine historian Agathias fought the empire on the side of the Goths in Italy against their king's wishes.[127] It was not the final chapter of the Frankish wars in Italy, which, according to Sihong Lin, concluded only around 565 – shortly before the arrival of the Lombards – when the rival Franks once more emerged as allies of the empire.[128] Lin emphasises that these Franko-Byzantine disputes were significant events in their own right, which also influenced the domestic priorities of the Frankish kings in Gaul.[129]

The Merovingian world retained numerous imperial structures, including Roman roads linking cities with decreasing populations, which primarily used the existing infrastructure while also incorporating notably less sophisticated wooden buildings and new churches, built either within or outside their largely late Roman walls.[130] The rural landscape was characterised by large fortified and unfortified estates, including *villae rusticae*, which were increasingly abandoned until the seventh century, alongside small villages (*vici*) marked by more recent and significantly more modest buildings.[131] Newer studies of its religious architecture reveal a landscape characterised by a smooth

123 See Marius, *Chron*. a. 548.2, p. 236: 'Eo anno Lanthacarius dux Francorum in bello Romano transfossus obiit.'

124 Procopius, *Goth*. 4.24.11–24. Leontios was a senator's son-in-law, not that of the emperor, as Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 22, erroneously assumes.

125 Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 22.

126 Procopius, *Goth*. 4.24.29–30.

127 Agathias, *Hist*. 1.7–1.22, 2.1–2.10. See also Marius, *Chron*. a. 555.5; Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.9; Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 24; Lin, 'Justinian's Frankish war' (2021), pp. 409–10.

128 Lin, 'The fall of Merovingian Italy' (2023), pp. 543–62.

129 Lin, 'Justinian's Frankish war' (2021), pp. 403–31.

130 Périn, P., 'Landscape and material culture of Gaul' (2015), pp. 256–67; Theuws, 'Burial archaeology' (2019), pp. 125–50.

131 Lorren/Périn, 'Images de la Gaule rurale' (1997), pp. 101–4; Ripoll/Arce, 'The transformation' (2000), pp. 63–114; Périn, 'Landscape and material culture of Gaul' (2015), pp. 267–72; Chavarría Arnau, 'The fate of late-Roman villas' (2020), pp. 640–56.

transition from ancient Roman to Merovingian infrastructure and styles.[132] Here, the inhabitants of the Merovingian world adopted art they could most relate to, with a preference for religious themes like Daniel in the Lion's Den, as well as depictions of riding warriors fighting a snake, motifs that trace back to Syria and North Africa.[133] The material evidence for this period also attests to specific exchanges of goods between the Merovingian West and the Byzantine East. Amphorae, which are preserved much less frequently in northern Gaul compared to the South, including Bordeaux,[134] are easily associated with the flow of trade. They disappeared from northern Gaul and the region East of the Rhine from the early sixth century but remain attested thereafter in southern ports like Marseille,[135] whose economic significance rose in the sixth century.[136] An item regularly found in late fifth to mid-seventh century burials is the so-called *menas* flask, i.e., small containers meant to hold holy water or oil collected by pilgrims when travelling to the grave of St. Menas (Abu Mena, Egypt).[137] They are significant as they were usually taken home by pilgrims and may therefore be considered evidence of travellers, particularly pilgrims, who undertook the journey. As we shall see in section 5.2, pilgrimages and other travels to the Holy Land appear to have been undertaken comparably frequently until the late sixth century. William Anderson suggests that the *menas* flasks may also testify to trade and gift exchange.[138] Silk was also regularly imported from the Byzantine East,[139] where it was used, for example, to wrap relics or to decorate church altars, as in the case of a silk mantle mentioned in a document quoted by Gregory of Tours, which reportedly stemmed from the East.[140]

More explicit information on an object's provenance is rare in the written evidence. A prominent example is when Gregory of Tours reported how legates previously sent by King Chilperic to the court of Emperor Tiberius arrived at the Visigothic port of Agde after a difficult three-years journey by ship. There, the ship was destroyed near the shore, and most goods it carried were stolen

132 Chevalier, 'Merovingian religious architecture' (2020), pp. 656–92.
133 Feist, 'Byzanz und die figurale Kunst' (1964), pp. 402–3.
134 Bonifay/Pieri, 'Merovingian Gaul' (2020), p. 872.
135 Drauschke, '"Byzantine"and "Oriental" imports' (2007), p. 61, fig. 7; Drauschke, 'Archaeological perspectives' (2019), pp. 16–17, and the map of distribution in Loseby, 'The Mediterranean economy' (2005), p. 609, lacking Marseille not discussed in the study.
136 Bonifay/Pieri, 'Merovingian Gaul' (2020), pp. pp. 870–2.
137 Caillet, 'Die Franken und der östliche Mittelmeerraum' (1997), p. 805.
138 Anderson, 'Menas flasks' (2007), pp. 235–6.
139 Caillet, 'Die Franken und der östliche Mittelmeerraum' (1997), pp. 802–3.
140 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 10.16.

by the local inhabitants. Some particularly precious objects were saved, however, and handed to Chilperic, who was later visited by Gregory of Tours at his manor in Nogent-sur-Marne. There, Chilperic showed Gregory a large gold salver encrusted with gems weighing fifty pounds, made at his request, along with gold medallions weighing one pound each, and many other precious items taken by the ambassadors. The gold medallions reportedly bore the imperial bust and the inscription 'TYBERII CONSTANTINI PERPETVI AVGVSTI' on the obverse, and, on the reverse, a quadriga with a rider accompanied by the legend 'GLORIA ROMANORVM'.[141] In his study on the functions of treasuries, Matthias Hardt interpreted the gift of these medallions as an act of imperial image dissemination (German 'Bildaussendung'), intended to symbolically represent the emperor before the Franks.[142]

There is further evidence for lavish goods travelling from the Byzantine East to Merovingian Gaul as precious gifts in the context of diplomatic exchange. A prominent Byzantine import is the Barberini ivory, now in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. It appears to be the product of a workshop in Constantinople and was initially made of five pieces, adding up to a total surface of approximately 33.5 × 25.5 cm.[143] In late Antiquity, such decorated ivory plates were used for writing, with the back covered in wax for this purpose. They were popular as particularly lavish gifts presented by consuls to their peers upon their elevation to office, sometimes inscribed with an updated consular list. Beyond this, they were increasingly used in an ecclesiastical context, for example, to record the names of living or deceased members of the community, to keep track of those baptised, or to list the bishops of a particular place.[144] The Barberini ivory is an exceptionally fine piece dated to the sixth century. It has been associated with emperors such as Anastasius I or Justinian I, though the identity of the donor remains unknown. While there is evidence that the ivory was presented to a Frankish king as part of sixth-century diplomatic exchanges, it is unclear whether it was specifically commissioned for this particular purpose. The reverse side of the Barberini ivory is inscribed with approximately 350 names under the title 'Commemoration for the deceased'

141 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.2.

142 Hardt, *Gold und Herrschaft* (2004), p. 61, with images of similar earlier findings at p. 62. See also Hack, 'Bildaussendung' (2003), pp. 147–78.

143 See, e.g., Gustave, 'L'ivoire Barberini' (1900), pp. 79–94.

144 It is in the Louvre since 1899 as part of the Département des objets d'art du Moyen Age, de la Renaissance et des temps modernes, Inv. No. OA 9063; MND 21,1 see collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010114082 (14.01.2025). See Feist, 'Byzanz und die figurale Kunst' (1964), p. 405; Bowes, 'Ivory lists' (2001), pp. 339 and 353; Wittenkind, 'Die mittelalterliche Verwendung spätantiker Elfenbeine' (2008), pp. 289–90.

('Commemoratio pro defunctis'), ending with the word 'memor'. The entire record is written in ink in a Merovingian hand, arranged in six rows: the first five list men, while the sixth contains the names of women. The end of the fifth row appears to include a list of late sixth-century kings of Austrasia and some of their family members: 'Childebert, Theudebert, Theuderic, Chlothar, Sigibert, Childebert, Athanagild, Faileuba and Ingund'.[145] These names may be related to kings who were considered particularly significant in Austrasia. The fact that King Chlodomer († 524), who ruled large parts of greater Aquitaine from 511 to 524, is missing alongside his brothers Childebert I, Theuderic I († 533), and Chlothar I may be explained by the fact that Chlodomer died relatively early. The names of Theudebert I, Sigibert I, and Childebert II represent a direct succession of the most important Austrasian kings. With Childebert's wife Faileuba, Ingund, and her son Athanagild, three family members were included who must have been particularly dear to Sigibert's wife, the queen Brunhild († 613). Brunhild was born a Visigothic princess and played a significant role in the politics of the Merovingian kingdom after her marriage to Sigibert in 575, after which she gave birth to Childebert and Ingund – all of whom we will encounter in further detail in the next section.

Scholars like Heinz Thomas suggested that the last list of names at the back of the Barberini ivory was related to the much later coup d'état of the mayor of the palace Grimoald († *c.*657) and his son, the so-called Childebert the Adopted († *c.*662), and that it was compiled shortly after King Childeric II († 675) had died.[146] As emerges from the above, however, it appears much more likely that the list was already added shortly after 596, the year when both Childebert II and his wife Faileuba died. By that time, they had outlived all those remaining on the list, a moment that must have been particularly painful for the king's mother, Brunhild. Ian N. Wood, therefore, appears to be correct in suggesting

145 See Vezin, 'Une nouvelle lecture' (1971), pp. 73–5, the royal names being at pp. 74–5, nr. 42–51: 'Heldeberti, Theudeberti, Theuderici, Clothari, Sygisberti, Childeberti, Atanagildi, Fachileuvae, Ingundae'. See also Gustave, 'L'ivoire Barberini' (1900), pp. 92–3, adding that the list also includes several names that correspond to the bishops of Trier and Metz since the fourth century. Caillet, 'Die Franken und der östliche Mittelmeerraum' (1997), p. 802, suggests that the preponderance of Latin names points to the origin of the list in southern Gaul, most of which was under Austrasian authority, and he refers to a similar diptych from around 517, with a name list originating from northern Gaul in the early seventh century. Vezin does not mention the title 'Commemoratio pro defunctis', which according to Wittenkind, 'Die mittelalterliche Verwendung spätantiker Elfenbeine' (2008), p. 291, precedes the list.

146 Thomas, 'Die Namenliste' (1951), pp. 17–63. Similar Vezin, 'Une nouvelle lecture' (1971), p. 77. On the historical context, see Becher, 'Der sogenannte Staatsstreich Grimoalds' (1994), pp. 119–48; Hamann, 'Zur Chronologie' (2003), pp. 49–96.

that the list was related to the Austrasian queen.[147] It seems conceivable that Brunhild commissioned the commemoration of her family members around that period. What potentially speaks against this assumption is an additional name in the royal list of the fifth row, which has obviously been overlooked by most modern scholars, probably because the letters are only partially legible. Jean Vezin rendered the readable parts as 'B … ae' (nr. 52). These letters likely referred to Brunhild herself. If so, the list must either have been created after her death in 613, or her name was added at a later point, which could easily have been done since her name was the last in that line. A later addition would also explain why her name is now less legible than the others on the list, as the person adding it may have inscribed it in a way that made the inscription more ephemeral than the others. Ian N. Wood preferred to relate the names 'Theuderic' and 'Theudebert' to Brunhild's grandsons, implying that the list was written shortly after 613, although he does acknowledged that this interpretation does not match the actual sequence of the list.[148] Assuming that the list referred to Theuderic I and Theudebert I, as suggested above, is less problematic, and it also aligns well with the thesis that only Brunhild's name is a later addition. By 613, all of Brunhild's kin had died, including herself, so no one was left to commission their commemoration. It thus seems more likely that Brunhild had the list commissioned already shortly after 596, and that someone with access to the list added her name in or shortly after 613.

Ongoing exchanges with the empire are further confirmed by archaeology. One of the earliest and a most significant material proof of Frankish connections with the imperial East is the sepulchre of Childeric I in Tournai, a burial probably staged by his son Clovis.[149] His grave contained around 100 mainly eastern golden *solidi* and about 200 silver coins, as well as a signet ring (see figure 1). This ring bore his royal title, name, and portrait, depicting him with long hair and dressed in a Roman cuirass. The ring thus appears to merge imperial elements (i.e., the attire and use of signet rings) with Frankish characteristics (i.e., long hair and royal status) in both function and design. The same burial also contained numerous brooches, belt buckles, weapons such as a *sax*, and other items of either eastern origin or imperial association, including a substantial collection of imperial coins, underscoring Childeric's Franco-imperial identity.[150] It also included gold cruciform fibulae, usually carried by imperial

147 Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms* (1994), p. 175.

148 Ibid., p. 175.

149 Theuws, 'Burial archaeology' (2019), pp. 140–2, also discussing related history of research.

150 Cf. the unconvincing thesis of Frans Theuws, according to which Childeric was purposely buried in his role as an imperial general, understood as a figure of the past located within

administrative and military officials to fasten their mantle (*paludamentum*) over the cuirass, as is also depicted on Childeric's signet ring.[151] The technique used to produce cloisonné enamel, which decorates many of these objects, appears to be first attested in the West, potentially providing evidence for the transfer of knowledge and craftsmanship from West to East.[152] Objects similar to those in Childeric's burial are found in many richly furnished Merovingian burials.[153] Among the potential Byzantine goods found in Gaul are cloisonné-decorated swords, Spangenhelm-type helmets, scramasaxes, cloisonné-decorated belt fittings, and cruciform brooches. The Mediterranean influences they attest to were not limited to exchanges with the East but rooted in late Roman traditions sustained by dominant Roman populations, which were not limited to western aristocratic cultures but permeated all levels of Merovingian society.[154] The lavish Spangenhelm-type helmets, for example, made from metal strips ('Spangen') and decorated with Christian symbols such as crosses, have been discovered in Merovingian burials dating from the late fifth to the early seventh century (see figure 4). While some may have been imported from the Byzantine world, others could have been Frankish productions, all dating rather closer to the early sixth than to the seventh century.[155]

The gemstones used to decorate these objects represent another important piece of evidence. A popular gemstone in cloisonné production, used to decorate, for example, swords and scabbards, was garnet.[156] Chemical analyses of these stones have shown that those found on objects dated to the sixth century display particular similarities with gems typically found in India and Sri Lanka, suggesting that they were imported from these regions via Persian and Byzantine trade routes up to the late seventh century.[157] Frans Theuws

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the empire, to contrast with and emphasise Clovis' position as a Christian king outside the empire. Theuws, 'Burial archaeology' (2019), pp. 141–4.

151 See Brulet/Coulon/Ghenne-Dubois/Vilvorder, 'Nouvelles recherches à Tournai' (1988), pp. 39–41; Périn/ Kazanski, 'Le mobilier funéraire' (1988), pp. 21–3; Müller-Wille, *Zwei religiöse Welten* (1998); Quast (ed.), *Das Grab des fränkischen Königs Childerich* (2015); Sarti, 'Bearded and long-haired kings' (forthcoming). On early medieval signet rings more in general, see Weber, *Der Childebert-Ring* (2014).

152 Buckton, 'Byzantine enamel' (1988), pp. 235–44. See also Kazanski/Mastykova/Périn, 'Byzance et les royaumes barbares' (2002), pp. 159–60.

153 Caillet, 'Die Franken und der östliche Mittelmeerraum' (1997), pp. 803–5. See also Theuws, 'Burial archaeology' (2019), pp. 134–40, suggesting that these burials were related to the kings, explaining why they mainly appear in the North.

154 Kazanski/Mastykova/Périn, 'Byzance et les royaumes barbares' (2002), pp. 159–88.

155 Steuer, 'Helm und Ringschwert' (1987), pp. 191–7. See also Vogt, *Spangenhelme* (2006).

156 Theuws/Alkemade, 'A kind of mirror for men' (2000), pp. 435–7.

157 Quast/Schüssler, 'Mineralogische Untersuchungen' (2000), pp. 75–96; Pion/Gratuze/Périn/Calligaro, 'Bead and garnet trade' (2020), pp. 819–59.

FIGURE 4 Byzantine Spangenhelm from a lavish burial in Planig, with silver plates and gilded bronze bands and Christian symbols. Location: Landesmuseum Mainz, Inv. Nr. 39/9. With the kind permission of the Landesmuseum Mainz
SOURCE: RLP.MUSEUM-DIGITAL.DE/SINGLEIMAGE?IMAGENR=77

suggested that even the rural communities of northern Gaul had access to such objects, which arrived through long-distance trade within a bottom-up economy not controlled by the royal authorities,[158] regardless of the fact that these

158 Theuws, 'Long-distance trade' (2020), pp. 883–915. The assessment of trade routes by Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages* (2005), pp. 799–800, is more plausible.

objects were found almost exclusively in particularly rich graves. The wooden sarcophagus of a lavish female burial from the early sixth century, discovered in Cologne, for example, was covered with a cloth identified as originating in the southeastern Mediterranean,[159] and it bore several (near) contemporary imperial coins.[160]

The Justinianic plague is another element related to the connections between Gaul and the eastern Mediterranean. It is first attested around 543/7, although the exact point of entry remains unknown. Since it first appeared in the southern regions, particularly Arles, it was likely imported via ship on one of the trade vessels. Further epidemic waves followed, with a first better attested pandemic being documented by Gregory of Tours, who serves as the main source for sixth-century Gaul. He suggested that the disease typically spread inland along the Rhône Valley, affecting cities such as Lyon and Dijon during the later outbreaks of the 570s and beyond. The arrival of Yersinia pestis DNA is also confirmed by biomolecular studies using archaeological material.[161]

Gregory of Tours' works provide further evidence for exchanges unrelated to the king's diplomatic exchanges. The flow of information from the East enabled him to include a wealth of details about eastern saints, their relics, and miracles, some of which reached Gaul, where Gregory integrated related information and stories to his historiographical and/or hagiographical writings.[162] These accounts occasionally also provide additional information on diplomatic exchanges. For example, a miracle story connected to the city of Patras, Greece, includes details of another event in the same city, alongside a passing mention of an embassy led by a certain Mummolus, sent by Theudebert I to Justinian around 540, which also stayed there.[163] A prominent religious figure in Gregory's narratives is the Merovingian queen and abbess Radegund († 587), who, around 568/9, requested and received a fragment of the True Cross from the emperor Justin II. Her demand was endorsed by King Sigibert, who appears to have sent a joint embassy to the emperor. The embassy returned with the sacred object she sought, adorned with gold and gems, along with other treasures from the East. Additionally, he sent messengers bearing a lavishly decorated version of the Gospels.[164] In response, Radegund had her

159 Ristow, 'Prunkgräber' (2012), p. 86.

160 Hardt, *Gold und Herrschaft* (2004), p. 64.

161 See the excellent study by McCormick, 'Gregory of Tours' (2021), pp. 38–96. For further sources, see Marius, *Chron.* a. 570 and 571; *Fredegar* 4.18; Desiderius, *Epist.* 2.20.

162 For a comprehensive discussion, see Rotman, *Hagiography* (2022), pp. 47–100.

163 Gregory, *Gloria Mart.* 30.

164 Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis* 2.16, p. 388: 'Et quia sine consilio, in mundo dum vixit, nihil facere voluit, transmisit litteras ad praecellentissimum domnum Sigibertums regem,

friend Venantius Fortunatus, the poet and later bishop of Poitiers, compose a lyric to express her gratitude to the emperor and his wife Sophia, a text already partially quoted in this study.[165] The letter was probably delivered by an embassy Radegund sent, composed of several priests and her servant Banisaiosa, whose journey lasted forty days. It was fraught with storms and other perils, during which Radegund allegedly miraculously saved the travellers from drowning.[166] Her posthumous biographer, the nun Baudonivia, in the early seventh century compared Radegund with Helena, the mother of Constantine I, who was famed for allegedly discovering the True Cross and for sending its remains to Constantinople.[167]

The True Cross was not Radegund's only connection to the Byzantine world. During the Thuringian defeat against the Merovingians in 531, she was one of very few surviving members of the Thuringian royal family, as she had been taken to the Merovingian realm as a captive before she became King Chlothar I's wife and queen.[168] Her sole known remaining relatives had escaped to Italy and Constantinople: Her cousin Amalfrid, the son of the last Thuringian king Herminfred, subsequently became a Byzantine army leader and fought in Italy. Amalfrid's son Artachis at a later time sent silks to Radegund, a gift for which she expressed her gratitude in another poem written by Venantius Fortunatus.[169] It is possible that these connections to the imperial East also proved helpful when Radegund sent her request for a fragment of the True Cross. In her mid-twenties, Radegund left her husband Chlothar and, in the 550s, founded a convent in Poitiers, which she named Holy Cross after its most prominent relic.[170] According to Erin T. Daily's assessment, Radegund's

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cuius imperio patria ista regebatur, ut ei permitteret pro totius patriae salute et eius regni stabilitate lignum crucis Domni ab imperatore expetere. […] sed, oratione obtinente, comitatu sanctorum, quos incessabiliter invocabat, missos suos direxit.' It is unexpected that the *Vita Radegundis* by Venantius Fortunatus does not refer to the True Cross. On the political significance of this gift exchange, see Cristini, 'Exotic gifts' (2025), pp. 21–3.

165 Fortunatus, *Carmen appendix* 2. On the relic's significance, cult and reception, see Jones, 'Perceptions of Byzantium' (2016), pp. 105–24; Klein, *Byzanz* (2004). pp. 77–89, 162–70, and 180–2.

166 Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis* 2.17.

167 Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis* 2.16; see also Hillner, *Helena Augusta* (2023), pp. 204–246, with a short discussion of how Radegund related to Helena at pp. 339–345, and Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), p. 101. Similar comparisons for Justin II and Sophia in Fortunatus, *Carm.* appendix 2, ll. 67–70.

168 See Fortunatus, *Carm.* appendix 1; Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), pp. 11–32.

169 On Amalfrid, see Procopius, *Goth.* 4.25.11–13, on Artachis, see Fortunatus, *Carm.* appendix 3, in particular, l. 17, p. 279: 'dirigis ista meo nunc serica vellera penso'; Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), pp. 13 and 117.

170 On Radegund, see the comprehensive biography by Dailey, *Radegund* (2023).

convent retained all major features of a royal court: We have already encountered the poet Venantius Fortunatus, who wrote several poems on her behalf, and the evidence also attests, at times, to lavish feasts, table games, prominent guests, slaves, and even a chair whose designation could also refer to a throne. There is also evidence of a eunuch and a chief physician with some connections to Constantinople. Daily argued that the combination of secular and sacred elements had precedents in the imperial palace of Constantinople.[171] However, most of the relevant information was transmitted by Gregory of Tours, who reported accusations made in 590 against Radegund and the current abbess, Leubovera, during a revolt instigated by several discontented princesses who had been forced to enter the convent against their will. Radegund was posthumously accused of 'making men eunuchs and ordering them to live with her in imperial fashion', and Gregory confirmed that the abbess had a medical physician in her service, named Reovalis. He had once castrated a young boy to cure him of severe groin pain, an operation Reovalis reportedly was able to perform because he had observed doctors in Constantinople carrying out the same procedure.[172] The allegation that Reovalis travelled to the Byzantine East is confirmed by Baudonivia's *Vita Radegundis*, mentioning that he had been sent by Radegund to the Patriarch of Jerusalem to receive relics of the martyr Mammetus.[173] It is unclear, however, whether this journey was combined with the travels of the legation sent to Constantinople by Radegund to collect the fragment of the True Cross[174] or whether this was undertaken by a different and earlier embassy. Daily suggested that this legation may have already taken place shortly after Charibert's death in 567.[175]

Daily argued that 'Reovalis had himself studied medicine in Constantinople' and that 'he therefore must have known Greek'.[176] However, although Gregory

171 Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), pp. 114–22. Daily at p. 88, also points to a coin with a double-barred cross inspired by Byzantine coinage that would appear to symbolise the True Cross, by referring to Grierson and Blackburn, *Medieval European coinage* (1986), p. 117. Since the cross was quite common in both regions at that time, I am unsure whether its introduction in Gaul should indeed be connected to the arrival of the True Cross in Poitiers.

172 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 10.15, p. 504: 'Quae enim sanctitas in hac abbatissa versatur, quae viros eunuchus facit et secum habitare imperiali ordine praecipit?' and 'Tunc ego, sicut quondam apud urbem Constantinopolitanam medicos agere conspexeram, incisis testicolis, puerum sanum genetrici maestae restitui.'

173 Baudonivia, *Vita Radegundis* 2.14, p. 386: 'Transmisit virum venerabilem Reovalem presbiterum, qui tunc saecularis erat et adhuc superstes est corpore, ad patriarcham Hierosolimitanum, poscens de beati Mammetis pignore.'

174 Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), p. 98.

175 Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), p. 78.

176 Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), p. 98.

used the term *archiatrus* to describe Reovalis, a term Daily correctly derived from the Greek *arkhiatrós* (ἀρχίατρος), as a reference to chief physicians at regal courts,[177] the Latin equivalent *archiatrus* is already attested in the West long before Gregory's time.[178] Hence, the fact that he used it does not prove any remaining knowledge of Greek in late sixth-century Gaul.[179] Moreover, a single trip to the Byzantine East, like the one attested for Reovalis, would not have sufficed for such studies. It therefore seems more likely that Reovalis had already received some medical training in the West and that this prior knowledge enabled him to understand the operation he had been able to observe in the East and to perform the same procedure in Poitiers when it was needed. Thus, Radegund did have notable connections to the Byzantine East, but their combination does not necessarily need to be understood as constituting a regal court within the convent of Poitiers.

The evidence shows that in the sixth century the Frankish West maintained enduring connections to the Byzantine East across various domains, including diplomatic relations, trade, and cultural exchanges. The interactions between the Frankish kingdoms and the empire reflect a continuous flow of information and goods. This began to change gradually from the late sixth century onwards. The following section discusses possible reasons for this shift.

3.5 Factors of Alienation

The previous section showed that exchanges between the Franks and the empire remained intense throughout most of the sixth century, with relations significantly influenced by the constantly changing situation in Italy and the Byzantine struggles to establish more permanent control over the region.[180] This is further confirmed by the mentioned Merovingian *Austrasian Letters* collection. Among the 48 letters, ten were exchanged with the contemporary emperor, another eleven were addressed to other residents of Constantinople,

177 Dailey, *Radegund* (2023), pp. 98, 118 and 151. Although this term is attested in Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 10.15, p. 504: 'Interea cum haec nomen pueri eunuchi protulisset, adfuit Reovalis archiater', I could not find any such reference, as suggested by Daily, in Baudonivia's *Vita Radegundis*.

178 See, e.g., *CTh*. 13.3.2 or 6.16.0.

179 The term *archiatrus* also appears, for example, in Gregory, *Virt. Martini* 2.1, p. 159, referring to an Armentarius *archiatrus* who allegedly saved Gregory in his early episcopacy from sickness by using dust from the tomb of Saint Martin.

180 See Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), pp. 12–33.

and six to representatives of the empire in the West.[181] These letters attest to varying Franco-Byzantine relationships in which Merovingian loyalty was neither selfless nor sustained.[182]

A notable epistle was authored by the Frank Gogo († 581), the *maior domus* of the Austrasian court. Gogo's letter was addressed to the Lombard Grasulf I († after 580), who may have held the position of *dux* of Friuli in northern Italy at that time. The letter is significant as Gogo spoke on behalf of the emperor, aiming to secure Grasulf's alignment with the Franks and the *imperium* against unspecified 'aggressors' (*infestantes*). This term may, though does not necessarily, refer to other Lombard groups. The negotiations were intended to 'establish an agreement' and to 'strive, with Christ as our guide, to avenge the offence against God and the blood of our Roman forefathers' in order to secure 'perpetual peace'.[183] The proposed agreement included provisions for the right of passage for imperial envoys of 'our lord emperor' (*domnus imperator noster*) through Friulian territory on their way to Merovingian lands.[184] Gogo further added that 'we are ready to rise with you against our adversaries in vengeance, seeking a place and aspiring to show through our deeds, how the most pious emperor graciously accepts us, receiving us among the ranks of his sons'.[185] The letter thus attests to a situation in which the Franks viewed themselves as affiliated with the empire as its sons, entitled to speak with a unified voice to seek new allies against common enemies in Italy.

This is not the only example of a letter employing similarly inclusive language in reference to both the empire and the Franks. Comparable expressions are also attested in the exchanges between the Merovingian king Theudebert I

181 Correspondence with the emperors, *Epist. Austras.* 7, 18, 19, 20, 25, 26, 29, 42, 44, 47, and other residents of Constantinople, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 43. Letters exchanged with representants in Italy: 38, 39, 40, 41, 46, and Istria: 48.

182 See *Epist. Austras.* 19, 20, 40, 41, 42.

183 *Epist. Austras.* 48, p. 152: 'His itaque omnibus adimpletis, instituite placito, et temptemus pariter Dei iniuria et sanguine parentibus nostris Romanis, Christo praesule, vindicare, ita ut in perpetuae pacis securitatem vel de reliquis capitulis, utriusque partibus oportunis intercurrentibus, in posterum terminetur.' For a discussion of its date, see Ewig, *Die Merowinger und das Imperium* (1983), p. 28, n. 111.

184 *Epist. Austras.* 48, p. 153: 'et, quatenus hiemalis tempus cursum navium serrat, per vos facile, si fuerit directa ligatio, in finibus nostris transponitur, ubi in ipsorum exceptions, sicut dignum est, praeparatur, ut nec in veniendo sit tarditas et celerius inter partes figantur placita oportuna, rogamus, ut talis eveniant, quibus sit potestas iuxta illa manu vel sensu, quod domnus imperator nostris ligatariis reddidit in responsis, cuncta placiscere vel finire.'

185 *Epist. Austras.* 48, p. 153: 'vobiscum contra adversus insurgere in vindicta, et locum requiremus et actibus cupimus ostendere, qualiter nos piissimus imperator se dignanter admittit, in numero recipiat filiorum.'

and the emperor Justinian, already discussed above.[186] Relevant references are also found in correspondence addressed to the young Merovingian king Childebert II of Austrasia by the emperor Maurikios in the 580s. One letter by the emperor emphasised Frankish affection towards 'us' (*nos*) and 'our' (*nostra*) empire (*respublica*) in a similar tone.[187] A letter by Childebert II to the Patriarch of Constantinople expresses a more pronounced distance between the Franks and the Byzantines by referring to a lasting peace between 'us' (*nos*) and the Roman empire.[188]

Although diplomatic in character, these letters do not reveal exactly how the Frankish kingdoms were related to the empire. References to the establishment of 'peace' between these two domains suggest that both realms were understood as separate entities. However, they are difficult to interpret. Most of the appropriate epistolary evidence was written in the context of negotiations between Maurikios and the Austrasian court concerning issues from the early 580s and seemingly intended to convey the desire to reach an agreement in this specific context.[189] A letter by Maurikios written around 585 characterised the empire's relation to the Franks as 'friendship' (*amicitia*), a term already used by Theudebert I and Theudebald I in their correspondence with Justinian.[190] More specific are references to treaties, as they imply that the two parties involved were considered two separate entities. Relevant evidence can be found on further occasions in the *Austrasian Letters*, although the evidence

186 E.g. *Epist. Austras.* 19, p. 132: et 'omnia pro utilitate communi a nostris partibus, Deo auspice, fuerint confirmata, rebus evidentibus, quomodo vos diligamus, adprobatur.' Ibid. 20, p. 133: 'quam sepius promittitis, in communi utilitate iungamur.'

187 *Epist. Austras.* 42, p. 148: 'paternum affectum circa nos atque sacratissimam rempublicam nostram'.

188 *Epist. Austras.* 45, p. 151: 'et per hoc inter nos et Romanam rempublicam sit diuturnae pacis et quietis fructus, non terminus.'

189 In 585, for example, Childebert addressed a letter to Maurikios' eldest son where he explained that he aimed at an eternally lasting peace, adding his request for help to have his nephew safely returned to his family, see below, in *Epist. Austras.* 43. The relation between this lasting peace and the freeing of Athanagild was also clearly expressed in a letter addressed that same year to Patriarch John: *Epist. Austras.* 45, p. 151: 'vobis obtinentibus, meruerit patriae vel parentibus reddi, peregrinationis necessitatibus absolutus, ad liberandum obnoxium facias, quod Christi vecarius, et per hoc inter nos et Romanum rempublicam sit diuturnae pacis et quietis fructus, non terminus.' See also *Epist. Austras.* 25, p. 138: 'quod proficisset communiter utrisque partibus expeditum pacis conpendium'; Gillett, 'Love and grief' (2010), pp. 127–65.

190 *Epist. Austras.* 42, p. 148: 'Et mirum nobis videtur, si, rectam habere mentem atque priscam gentis Francorum et dicioni Romanae unitatem esse conprobatum adfirmans, nihil operisusque adhuc amicitiae congruum eminentia tua ostendens visaest'. Cf. *Epist. Austras.* 18, 20.

itself remains ambiguous. Childebert II, for example, in a letter addressed in 584 to his *pater* Maurikios, claimed that he wanted to be 'united by a treaty (*foedus*) to maintain peace',[191] while a letter to his nephew Athanagild – as we shall see Athanagild was at that time kept in Constantinople – suggests that this 'peace' was primarily aimed at securing his addressee's safe return to Gaul.[192] Considering that the Merovingian terminology did not always adhere to its classical meaning and given that the relevant term *foedus* was also used to refer to agreements more generally, this evidence is a weak basis for making further assumptions.[193]

The 580s, when a majority of the letters to and from the empire contained in the *Austrasian Letters* collection was written, are of particular importance. Although the geographical distance between the Frankish and Byzantine domains notably impeded any substantial Byzantine military intervention in Gaul, the emperor seized a promising opportunity to engage on a more diplomatic level. In the mid-sixth century, Gundovald († 585), an unrecognised son of the Merovingian king Chlothar I (see figure 5), fled to Italy and finally sought refuge at the court of the emperor in Constantinople.[194] In 581, the Neustrian king Chilperic († 584) and his half-brother, the Burgundian king Guntram

191 *Epist. Austras.* 25, p. 138: 'Clementissime serenitati vestrae elegimus aduniri per foedera et illum, qui placet Domino, inpendere vobis affectum pacate gentis ex vinculo, quod proficisset communiter utrisque partibus expeditum pacis compendium.' Also in his mother's letter to the same emperor, *Epist. Austras.* 26, p. 139: 'significamus nos pacis dedisse consilium. […] quod prosit rebus omnibus foederatis.'

192 *Epist. Austras.* 28, p. 140: 'praesentatis poteritis sollicite requirentes agnoscere, quid pro vestris condicionibus deliberate nos certum est et optare. Superest, ut effectum pacificatis partibus tribuat, humana consilia et rerum condita qui gubernat.'

193 Gregory of Tours used the term *foedus* to refer to agreements between the kings Childebert and Guntram, Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.11, p. 282: 'Ex hoc enim gravis inimicitia inter Guntchramnum regem et Childeberthum nepotem suum exoritur, disruptumque foedus, sibi invicem insidiabantur', the kings Theuderic and Childebert, ibid. 3.15, Mummolus and Desiderius, ibid. 7.10, between other family members, ibid. 9.1. See also the ambiguous use in *Epist. Austras.* 18, p. 132: 'Amicitias nostras, quas delectabiliter requiritis, stabiliter, rogamus, studeatis, et, quod melius foedere inviolabili permaneant, ab animis vestris, nullis intercedentibus causis, assistant'. For another example, where the Merovingian terminology diverged from the classical meaning, see Sarti, 'Der fränkische *miles*' (2018), pp. 99–117.

194 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24. For further references on the usurpation, see ibid. 7.26–38. On Gregory's Byzantine sources, see Cameron, 'The Byzantine sources' (1975), pp. 421–6. On the Gundovald affair, see in particular Goffart, 'Byzantine policy' (1957), pp. 73–118; Nonn, 'Ballomeris quidam' (1990), pp. 35–39; Bachrach, *The anatomy* (1994); Zuckerman, 'Qui a rappelé' (1999), pp. 1–18; Wood, 'The secret histories' (1993), pp. 263–6, arguing that Gregor of Tours probably considered Gundovald's claims legitimate; Widdowson, 'Gundovald' (2008), pp. 607–22; Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender' (2012), pp. 1–27;

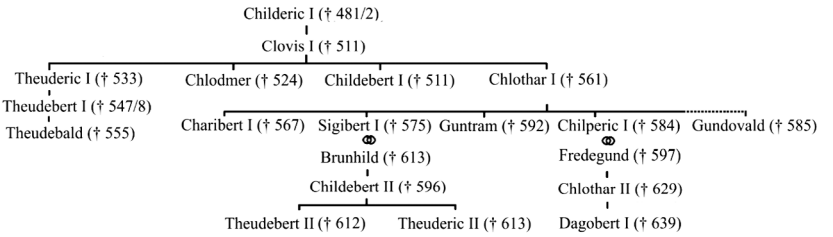

FIGURE 5 Simplified family tree of the Merovingian dynasty from Childeric I to Dagobert I

(† 592), were both without heirs, and the only remaining successor to the Merovingian throne, the Austrasian king Childebert II, was still a child. At this time, Gundovald was recalled by certain Austrasian magnates who enticed him with the promise of the crown.[195]

Gundovald arrived in Gaul in 582 with a substantial amount of riches.[196] The treasury was offered by the emperor, probably Tiberius II († 582), who expected that the recipient would act in favour of the empire.[197] Gundovald reached Gaul via Marseille, where he was received by the local bishop, Theodore.[198] However, the plan was abandoned almost immediately after Gundovald's arrival, obviously because some among his Frankish supporters had made up their minds. Guntram Boso († 587), the same *dux* who had in all likelihood invited Gundovald in Constantinople, now arrested Bishop Theodore for allowing a 'foreigner' (*homo extraneus*) into Gaul. The bishop remained in custody even after presenting a letter from the Austrasian magnates proving that he had accommodated Gundovald at their request.[199] Goffart suggested that the reason was their receipt of the news that Chilperic's

Schwedler, *Vergessen, Verändern, Verschweigen* (2017), pp. 151–60, emphasising the parallels between Gundovald's case and that of Munderic.

195 Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), pp. 92, 96, and 100, assumed that the intention was to eliminate King Guntram.

196 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24, p. 292: 'res Gundovaldi divisit et sicum Arverno detulit inmensum, ut fuerunt, argenti pondus et auri vel reliquarum rerum.'

197 See the elaborate discussion in Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), in particular p. 102. On the political function and significance of treasures, see Hardt, *Gold und Herrschaft* (2004), also alluding at several occasions to this particular *thesaurus*, e.g., pp. 20–1.

198 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24, p. 291: 'Inde, ut ferunt, post multa tempora a quodam invitatus, ut veniret in Galliis, Massilia adpulsus, a Theodoro episcopo susceptus est'; Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), pp. 101–2.

199 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24.

wife, Fredegund († 597), had given birth to a son († 584).[200] Another possibility would be that, as we shall see, the Austrasian royal family had become aware of the conspiracy and had intervened. When Gundovald realised that he had lost his host's support, he fled to an unspecified Mediterranean island.[201]

In early autumn 584, the Neustrian king Chilperic was killed, and his newly born son had died. It is possible that the magnates supporting the Gundovald plot were responsible for the king's death, which would imply that some were eager to give it a second chance. Given the imperial subvention, it is also conceivable that the emperor Maurikios, who in August 582 had succeeded Tiberius II, insisted that another attempt to install Gundovald as king of the Franks should be made. The undertaking this time was funded – rather involuntarily – by the Neustrian family and its subjects. In September 584, Chilperic's daughter Rigunth was on her way with a major treasury collected for her planned marriage to the Visigothic prince Reccared († 601), the son of King Leovigild († 586).[202] The news of her father's death reached the cortege during its stay in Toulouse and appears to have signalled to some of the bride's escorts the initiation of the second attempt at the Gundovald usurpation: as soon as they learned of the king's passing, the Neustrian general (*dux*) Desiderius († 587) secured Rigunth's treasury and joined another major conspirator, Mummolus († 585). We may have already encountered Mummolus above, if he was identical to the young Gallo-Roman aristocrat who carried Theudebert I's letter to Constantinople in the 530s. He was the patrician and major general of the Burgundian King Guntram. Desiderius joined Mummolus in Avignon, together with Gundovald, who had meanwhile been recalled from his island refuge.[203] They jointly travelled to Brives in Aquitaine where Gundovald was crowned king.[204] This success, however, was once again only short-lived: in March 585, Gundovald was abandoned by his trusted followers and killed by King Guntram's men after a siege of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges.

There are strong indications that Gundovald had not aimed at a specific kingdom or at creating a kingdom of Aquitaine, as his coronation in Brives might suggest. His intention appears to have been to become king of a reunited Frankish realm. According to Gregory of Tours, Gundovald had planned to make Paris the capital of his kingdom,[205] the city King Clovis had chosen

200 Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), p. 9.

201 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24.

202 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.45.

203 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.26; 7.10.

204 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 7.9–10. The treasure is also mentioned in ibid. 7.35.

205 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 7.27, pp. 345–6: 'At ille ait: "Ego regis Chlothacharii sum filius et partem regni de praesenti sum percepturus; et usque Parisius velociter accedam et ibi

as his seat and which, after the death of Charibert I († 567), was restricted to those kings holding the entire realm.[206] Thirteen bishops belonging to the different Frankish kingdoms, including those from the *regnum* of Chilperic and Aquitaine, had joined the conspiracy.[207] Even more noteworthy, the plot included some of the most important magnates from each kingdom, two of whom were already mentioned above: the Neustrian *dux* Desiderius, Chilperic's foremost military commander; the Burgundian patrician Mummolus; and the Austrasian *dux* Guntram Boso († 587). It was Guntram Boso who in all likelihood travelled to Constantinople in 581 to invite Gundovald back to Gaul. Mummolus, on this part, was renowned for successfully fighting the Lombards when they attempted to enter Gaul in the early 570s.[208] And this was precisely what the emperor hoped Gundovald would do for him concerning the Lombards in Italy.[209]

In 568, the Lombards entered Italy, and the Byzantine emperors had struggled to expel them since.[210] The last attempt to do so failed around 575/6 when, according to the Visigothic chronicle of John of Biclaro († *c*.621), a Roman army led by Justinian's son-in-law Baduarius was defeated by the Lombards in Italy.[211] After this, the empire could no longer afford such undertakings due to significant Avar, Sasanian, Slav, and Visigothic threats in the East,[212] which is why the Franks became the most promising means to have the Lombards expelled from Italy. Around 580, Pope Pelagius II († 590) addressed a letter to bishop Aunarius of Autun († *c*.603) expressing his hope that, given that the Frankish kings shared the orthodox faith with the 'Roman empire', they may help to save

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sedem regni statuam". Cui episcopus ait: "Verumne est ergo, quod nullus de stirpe regum Francorum remansit, si tu haec quae dicis impleberis?" [...].'

206 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.38; 4.22; 6.27; 7.6.

207 See Halfond, 'Corporate solidarity' (2020), pp. 284–6. Hans-Werner Goetz pointed out to me that a large number were from Aquitaine.

208 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.41–2 and 4.44. Similar Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), pp. 9, 11, and 26, with n. 31. See also the discussion in Wood, 'The secret histories of Gregory of Tours' (1993), stressing at pp. 264–5, the disparity and different origins of Gundovald's supporters.

209 Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), pp. 95 and 98.

210 The statment in Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 4.9, pp. 140–1: 'Italiam ad partem imperatoris captam, nec fuit qui eam ultra reciperet', clearly was unjustified. On the Franko-Lombard-Byzantine interactions that followed, see Marazzi, 'The geography of war' (2024), in particular pp. 47–64.

211 John Biclaro, *Chron*. a. 576, p. 214: 'Baduarius gener Iustini principis in Italia a Longobardis proelio vincitur et non multo plus post inibi vitae finem accipit.'

212 Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), pp. 80–1. A few Byzantine armies were still operating in Italy, as attested in *Epist. Austras.* 40, 41, 48.

Italy from the pagans.[213] As the Gundovald undertaking seemed to have failed even before it had started, in 582, the emperor Maurikios addressed the young king Childebert II, whose Austrasian kingdom already had a long history of military interventions in Italy. Around 583, the young king apparently agreed to assist in expelling the Lombards from Italy in exchange for a subvention of 50,000 *solidi*.[214] A first attack was made in 584, although not with the outcome expected by the emperor. According to Gregory, the Lombards freely surrendered to the Franks, to whom they swore loyalty, and a contemporary letter by the exarch complained that, as a consequence, the Franks had retreated prematurely.[215]

The continued efforts by the Austrasian army to fight the Lombards in Italy, to be further discussed below, suggest that this part of the Merovingian military force alone was not strong enough to successfully fight and expel the newcomers from Italy. A joint military operation involving cooperation among all three kingdoms would have been more effective. However, neither the Neustrian nor the Burgundian kingdom had a strong history of conducting campaigns against armies in Italy, and doing so to help the empire expel the Lombards from there was not a priority for either.[216] The fact that key magnates from these kingdoms had joined the conspiracy around Gundovald, clearly willing to follow a new king of likely Merovingian blood, and that Paris was meant to become the new capital, suggests that their aim was the creation of a unified kingdom. The Frankish army leaders must have been aware that an attack against the Lombards by a single kingdom would probably be unsuccessful if the goal was to expel them from Italy. A unified kingdom would have significantly enhanced the probability of success. A majority of the Austrasian

213 *Epist. coll.* 9, p. 449: 'vestri regis Romano imperio in orthodoxae fidei confessione sunt similis: ut huic urbi, ex quo fuerat oriundum, vel universae Italiae finitimos adiutoresque praestaret.'

214 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.42. Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), pp. 110–12, and Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), pp. 12–17, argued that not Maurikios, as Gregory and other sources claim, but Tiberius II had sponsored this sum. This, however, is refuted by *Epist. Austras.* 46, p. 151: 'iuxta votum Romanae reipublicae vel sacratissimi patris nostri imperatoris in Italiam direximus adversum gentem Langobardorum relegioni ac fidei iniquissimae perfidam', which leaves no doubt that the agreement concerning the Lombards had been made with the current emperor Maurikios. The same amount of 50,000 *solidi* was also mentioned in the context of a penance paid to the Franks for the death of a princess, see Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 3.31.

215 *Epist. Austras.* 40; Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.42. Another report is contained in ibid. 41, which likely relates to the campaign of 585 mentioned in Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.18. The edition dates both letters to 585 or 590.

216 Similar Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), p. 100.

magnates must have been in favour of campaigning against the Lombards in Italy, whether for riches or land, and they obviously agreed to join such an endeavour even if it were conducted under the leadership of another king – provided this would increase the chances of success and booty. The plan for a reunited kingdom behind the Gundovald plot thus presents a likely motive for these magnates to join the usurper. The realisation of this plan would have required the elimination of up to three kings: Chilperic, Guntram, and maybe also the young Childebert.[217] As we have seen, Childeric had already met his fate in 584, and Gregory of Tours confirmed that the Burgundian king Guntram also expected an assault on his life.[218]

The exact role of the Austrasian court in this plot remains difficult to grasp, however. The Austrasians never refused to campaign against the Lombards, although they regularly contented themselves with a peace treaty that conflicted with Byzantine expectations. As mentioned, there is evidence suggesting that Austrasian magnates were involved in the Gundovald plot. Besides evidence suggesting that he was invited by the Austrasian *dux* Guntram Boso,[219] it is significant that after his elevation as king in Brives, the usurper had inhabitants of his new realm swear fidelity not only to himself, but also to the young Austrasian king Childebert II. This was the case in those cities that, until 575, had been under the authority of the king's late father Sigibert I († 575).[220] Constantine Zuckerman therefore argued that it was the Austrasian queen Brunhild who had called for Gundovald, as she would have planned to align with him through marriage to strengthen her own position.[221] However, Gundovald had two sons of his own, who must have expected to succeed their father once he had become king. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine that the Austrasian royals were the initiators of the conspiracy: queen Brunhild would have jeopardised the prospects of her own son and the security his accession would have brought her. Moreover, the queen and her son Childebert II could hardly have expected Gundovald to willingly cede the Austrasian kingdom

217 This also helps to explain the significance attributed to a potential heir in Neustria, as Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), p. 11, stressed.

218 E.g. Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.28.

219 Gregory. *Libri historiarum* 6.26, 7.14, 7.36.

220 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 7.26. I would like to thank Till Stüber for pointing me to this not insignificant detail.

221 Zuckerman, 'Qui a rappelé' (1999), in particular p. 18. Further developed by Stüber, *Der inkriminierte Bischof* (2020), pp. 273–85.

to the young king upon his maturity, not least as this was already declared in 585.[222]

Although Zuckerman's thesis that Brunhild had called for Gundovald to become her royal husband appears unlikely for the reasons just stated, Gregory of Tours did mention that King Guntram suspected the existence of such an arrangement.[223] The king does not need to be entirely wrong in this suspicion. While the conspiracy appears to have been initiated by a group of Austrasian magnates independent of the Austrasian royal family, it is conceivable that Childebert and his mother became aware of it sometime after Gundovald's arrival in Gaul. Perhaps this occurred soon after his arrival in Marseille in 582, which might explain, as indicated above, why the Austrasian *dux* Guntram Boso acted as a traitor shortly thereafter by suddenly pretending to take action against the conspirators.[224] Perhaps Brunhild agreed to, or suggested, marrying Gundovald once his success appeared likely, which was the case shortly after Chilperic's death in 584. This would have been a strategic decision to secure her own and her son's position under the new circumstances. Such an alliance would not only have significantly strengthened Gundovald's entitlement to the Merovingian throne but also allowed Brunhild to retain enough influence to ensure that Childebert would be spared and to have the means to help him secure his own share once Gundovald's kingdom was divided among his sons. The oaths Gundovald had the population of Aquitaine swear to Childebert II align very well with this assumption and correspond to what a prudent and experienced negotiator queen would have pursued. In sum, it appears that while the initial plot involved only a significant faction of Austrasian magnates and was directed against Childebert and his mother, considered too weak to pose a real threat, the Austrasian royals sought to amend their fate once they had discovered the plot by engaging in negotiations with the usurper.

The plan to reunite the Frankish kingdoms under King Gundovald had failed with his death in Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges. For the emperor in Constantinople, this meant that he now had to resort to trying to eliminate the Lombards with the assistance of the Austrasians. A compromise with the

222 See *Epist. Austras*. 44. Zuckerman, 'Qui a rappelé' (1999), already noted that 'en faisant appel à Godovald, on sacrifiait Childebert' (p. 16), an attitude that does not seem to align with Brunhild's strong sense of family, although Zuckerman lends some plausibility by suggesting that the king may have been in poor health.

223 See the excellent summary in Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), pp. 23–4. The thesis is nourished by Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 7.33, 7.34, 9.28, and a reference related to Gundovald's sons in ibid. 9.32. See also the summary on related research in Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), n. 74.

224 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24.

Lombards appears to have been everything King Childebert could offer, however. A comment by Gregory of Tours is noteworthy in this context: he mentioned that following the 584 campaign, Childebert returned home after 'he had achieved all that he had wished'. This suggests that the king did not intend to comply with the emperor's wishes. This impression is backed by the fact that Gregory only referred to the mentioned grant of 50,000 *solidi* – the subvention offered to the Austrasian king by Maurikios to assist the empire in expelling the Lombards from Italy – after reporting Childebert's mediocre outcome of his campaign, thus disguising the relation between the subsidy and the military intervention. Likewise noteworthy is the final remark in the relevant chapter: Gregory stressed that Childebert was confident enough that when Maurikios requested a refund, the Frank did not even send the emperor an answer.[225] It appears that Childebert accepted the subsidy without ever intending to expel the Lombards from Italy, as requested.

Childebert soon had to change his attitude. The Byzantines seized an occasion emerging in March 584 – that is, before Childebert's first campaign against the Lombard and the end of the Gundovald affair – from the failed rebellion of the young Visigoth king Hermenegild († 585), Reccared's brother, to capture Ingund, Hermenegild's wife, who also was the sister of the Austrasian King Childebert II. She was taken together with her infant son Athanagild; Ingund died on their way to Constantinople, in Carthage.[226] Until 585, the emperor Maurikios clearly backed two different horses: the Gundovald plot and the coercive power provided by his remaining captive. Although Maurikios was also the sponsor of Childebert II's campaign of 584, it is possible that he was informed about its outcome only in spring 585.

As we have seen, Maurikios was dissatisfied with the results of the Austrasian 584 campaign against the Lombards. The capture of Athanagild now allowed him to apply additional pressure on the Austrasian royal family to improve their efforts.[227] Childebert and his mother were indeed concerned about the condition of the hostage and wrote several letters to the emperor

225 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.42, p. 314: 'Patratisque cum his omnibus quae voluit, rex in Galliis est regressus atque exercitu commovere praecepit, quem in Hispania dirige iussit; sed quievit. Ab imperatore autem Mauricio ante hos annos quinquagintae milia soledorumt acceperat, ut Langobardus de Italia extruderiti. Auditor autem imperator, quod cum his in pace coniunctus est, pecuniam repetibat; sed hic fidus a solatiis nec responsum quidem pro hac re voluit reddere.'

226 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.28. This still was a usual route at that time, see McCormick, *Origins of the European economy* (2001), p. 74.

227 *Epist. Austras.* 40, p. 146: 'Exposuit ergo nobis, quam prumptissimo animo vel devotione integra florentissimum Francorum exercitum ad liberationem Italie gloria vestra

and his entourage, requesting the child's release and return to his family. Although their letters to the imperial family do not establish a connection between the abduction of the boy and the Byzantine demand to successfully confront the Lombards, there is no doubt that the Franks were aware that the two were related.[228]

The coercion was successful. As soon as the news of Ingund's abduction reached the Austrasian court, another campaign was launched against the Lombards; however, this time it was unsuccessful due to conflicts among the leading *duces*.[229] The young king subsequently sent his Austrasian army to Italy, in 588, 589, and 590 – though never with the anticipated success.[230]

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direxerat'; ibid. 46; Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.42, 8.18. See also Childebert's assurance in Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.25 and confirmation in *Epist. Austras.* 46.

228 *Epist. Austras.* 40, 43, 44 45. *Epist. Austras.* 27 and 28 were addressed to Athanagild himself. None of these letters explicitly referred to the Austrasian campaigns against the Lombards to argue that, although unsuccessful in expelling the Lombards from Italy, the Franks had honoured their pledge and that there was no need to keep Athanagild away from his family any longer. As the *Austrasian Letters* seem to comprise a complete set of letters exchanged within the framework of the 584 and 585 embassies, including a total of 15 letters sent during the first of these two exchanges – with Childebert and Brunhild addressing personal letters to Maurikios, his wife, Athanagild, and other court representatives, including the patriarch (see *Epist. Austras*. 25–39) – it seems unlikely, as Goffart suggested, that the pertinent letter is missing. Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), p. 113. More explicit mentions of the imperial expectation in the Frankish correspondence are only found in letters not sent to the emperor and his family, e.g., one dispatched in 584 to the patrician of Italy in Constantinople. In this letter, the young Childebert wrote that his regions would benefit from the proposed agreement. *Epist. Austras*. 38, p. 144: 'pacificatis utrisque gentibus, prosit regionibus pariter atque regnantibus.' Another example is *Epist. Austras*. 46. The repeated mention in the letters addressed to the imperial family that any agreement should be to the advantage of both parties may be related implicitly to the Byzantine request to expel the Lombards from Italy, e.g. *Epist. Austras.* 29, p. 140: 'inter utramque gentem pacis causa conectitur, coniuncta gratia principum subiectarum generent beneficia regionum'; *Epist. Austras.* 30, p. 141: 'quod utrisque gentibus pacis gratis sociatas proficiat partibus'. It is possible that some of these mentions refer to other aspects, such as additional funds that would have helped the Franks establish a large army, as indicated by the insistence on the profit for the people on both sides in *Epist. Austras.* 31, p. 141: 'qualiter proficiat populis et prosit regionibus utrisque gentibus perpetualiter, praestante Domino, foederatis'. Connecting the exaction and the abduction, even implicitly, would certainly have been considered most impolite and thus would not have been helpful in securing the boy's return to his family. On the other hand, references to the requested campaigns and Ingund are found in a letter written in the name of the emperor in Italy and addressed to Childebert in 585, see *Epist. Austras.* 40.

229 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.18.

230 *Epist. Austras.* 40, 41, 46; Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 8.18, 9.25, 9.29, 10.3. Cf. Marazzi, 'The geography of war' (2024), p. 60, assuming that it was the Gundovald affair that led to this increased cooperation of the Franks with the Byzantines.

In 588, according to Gregory, Childebert II requested his uncle Guntram 'to grant him aid against the Lombards, so that, having been driven out of Italy, that part which his father [Sigibert I] had reclaimed during his lifetime may be restored to him, while the remaining part may be returned to imperial control through your and his support.'[231] Although his request was denied, Childebert sent another expedition to Italy, and this although the Franks had already made peace with the Lombards in 589,[232] i.e., shortly after an embassy led by the Frank Gripo to Constantinople had returned to Metz. According to Gregory of Tours, the campaign ended with a Lombard surrender to Guntram and Childebert.[233] Although the Franks were able to exert some influence – albeit not as successfully as Gregory claimed – it remained impossible for the Austrasian army to expel the Lombards from Italy.

The evidence does not allow for certainty regarding a number of details concerning the events surrounding the Byzantine attempts to have the Franks expel the Lombards from Italy. The question of the role of the Austrasian royal family is not the only loose end in this episode. As Goffart showed, the empire was able and willing to provide much higher funds than the mentioned 50,000 *solidi* if the result would be that the Lombards left Italy. With this in mind, it appears particularly improbable that Maurikios could have expected the Austrasian Franks, in the unlikely case of success, to leave Italy to the Byzantines. The comparably low subsidy granted to Childebert may thus indicate that Maurikios anticipated the Austrasians would not be successful, and that his main intention was to weaken the Lombards – and perhaps also the Franks – even though no subsequent Byzantine campaign followed that would have benefited from such enfeeblement. It is also possible that the mentioned subsidy was only intended as an advance.

Besides, the Byzantines could hardly have aimed to see Italy in Frankish hands. This option was likely not preferred even in comparison to a Lombard occupant.[234] The Franks had much stronger ties in the western Mediterranean, and the Byzantines would have faced even greater difficulties in defeating them

231 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.20, p. 440: 'Deprecatur etiam pietatem vestram, ut ei solacium contra Langobardus tribuatis, qualiter expulsi de Italia, pars illa, quam genitur suus vindicavit vivens, ad eum revertatur, reliqua vero pars per vestrum suumque solacium imperatoris dicionibus restituatur'. See also Lin, 'The fall of Merovingian Italy' (2023), p. 552.

232 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.29.

233 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 10.3. Note also the causal incongruity between this and the previous chapter. Goffart, 'Byzantine policy in the West' (1957), p. 117, assumes that Athanagild was dead at that time.

234 See Marazzi, 'The geography of war' (2024), pp. 25–6 and 55–8, suggesting that the Lombards were initially allowed to enter Italy as a buffer against the Franks, and that

to free Italy. It is also unlikely that their Catholic creed would have sufficed to encourage Byzantine tolerance of them as rulers of (northern) Italy. Thus, what the Byzantine emperor really needed was a ruler on the Frankish throne whom he could trust and who, in a perfect world, would be willing to cede Italy to the empire. Still, it seems inconceivable that Maurikios or his advisors could have believed that a man like Gundovald would actually do so once king in Italy, whatever he might have claimed while still in Constantinople.[235] The only conceivable explanations are that Maurikios either considered the Franks subjects of or in some way connected to the empire, implying that the *imperium* somehow benefited from a Frankish gain, or that Gundovald had sworn fidelity to the emperor and that a kingdom under his authority – ideally in Gaul and Italy – would therefore have been regarded as reattached to the empire. The latter scenario would indeed correspond to the allegations made by Guntram Boso against Bishop Theodore of Marseille – considered by most modern historians to be false – that by accommodating Gundovald the bishop had supported the 'imperial plan to subdue the Frankish kingdom.'[236]

The Gundovald affair bore the potential to have major implications for the Frankish kingdoms, particularly for the ruling Merovingians. Gregory of Tours already recognised the significance of the years 584/5, as is well attested by his lengthy treatment in his seventh book. There are further indications that people continued to talk about the events around Gundovald and the belief that the empire was involved in what had happened. These indications are found in a revised version of Gregory's account of the mentioned Thuringian exile of the late fifth-century king Childeric in chapter eleven of the third book of the *Chronicle of Fredegar*.[237] The *Chronicle* reports that Childeric's replacement Aegidius installed Wiomad as a subordinated king (*subregulus*) and that the latter tormented the Franks until they wanted Childeric back as their ruler. This is when the story takes an unexpected turn: it claims that Childeric

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Childebert therewith intended to restore the situation as known in the late 530s, with the Frankish North of the River Po considered 'lawful' by the Byzantines, see pp. 46–7.

235 See the assessment about the Franks in Procopius, *Goth.* 4.34.18.

236 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24, p. 291: 'Gunthchramnus vero dux adpraehensum Theodorum episcopum in custodia pro hac causa detrusit, reportans, cur hominem extraneum intromisissit in Galliis voluissetque Francorum regnum imperalibus per haec subdere ditionibus.' Cf. the assessment in Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), p. 18. Procopius, *Goth.* 4.24.12–23, rather speaks against the above reading, although it does not refer to the 580s but to the time of Theudebald.

237 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.12, revised in *Fredegar* 3.11. I would like to thank Yaniv Fox for pointing me to the significance of this chapter. See also Sarti, 'Byzantine history' (2021), pp. 3–22.

resided in Constantinople at Maurikios' court, and that an embassy was sent to inform him about the change in the prevailing mood among the Franks, indicating that it was time for him to return. The envoy would have advised the emperor to send 50,000 *solidi* to have the 'neighbouring gentes' (*gentes que vicinas erant*) subdued to his empire,[238] whereupon Maurikios sent Childeric and rich presents back to Gaul.

The sudden change in the narrative and the similarities between the second part of the Fredegarian story and the life of Gundovald are striking: like 'Childeric', Gundovald returned from Constantinople to Gaul with a treasury granted by the emperor, and, like 'Childeric', he did so because he had been invited to become king of the Franks.[239] The sums to be paid to the Franks by the emperor are likewise striking: the 50,000 *solidi* and the 'rich presents,' which may be interpreted as a treasury. As Childeric never set foot in Constantinople, as far as we know, the second part of the narrative must belong to a tale about Gundovald. The potentially false reference to Maurikios as the sponsor of the first treasury is easy to explain, given that the Gundovald uprising mostly fell within his reign, as we have seen, and the seventh-century chronicler may have been aware of the embassies exchanged in the 580s with Maurikios' court.[240] Besides, we already discussed that according to Gregory of Tours, the emperor Maurikios had offered 50,000 *solidi* to Childebert II in exchange for a substantial military force in Italy. The connection drawn here between the two imperial payments, related to the Gundovald affair and the request to have the Austrasians fight the Lombards, respectively, confirms that contemporaries were aware that both events were related. The thesis that the Childeric tale comprehends a reminiscence of the Gundovald affair is also confirmed by the fact that an explicit summary of the latter affair itself, contained in chapter 89 of the third book of the *Chronicle of Fredegar*, bears the same mistaken reference to Maurikios as the usurper's initial sponsor.[241] The seventh-century references to the Gundovald affair are of particular value, as the author of the *Chronicle* only had access to the first six books of Gregory's

238 *Fredegar* 3.11, p. 96: 'Dans idemque consilio, laegatus ad Mauricio, imperatore dirigi, gentes que vicinas erant possi adtrahi, ut vel quiquaginta milia soledorum ab imp. dirigerentur, quo pocius gentes accepto in munere se imperio subiecerint.' Schmidt, 'Das Ende der Römerherrschaft in Gallien' (1928), pp. 616, already mentioned the possibility that this chapter reflects a reminiscence of the Gundovald affair. Apart from short notes by Walter Goffart and Eugen Ewig, it has never been elaborated.

239 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24.

240 See *Epist. Austras.* 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47, ed. Gundlach, pp. 145–52, and the mention of such an exchange in *Fredegar* 4.5.

241 *Fredegar* 3.89.

Histories, which were limited to an introductory chapter on Gundovald's exile in Italy and Constantinople, but lacked information on the subsequent events until 585.[242] The *Chronicle*, however, in its summary of the Gundovald affair, relates the entire plot, including information lacking in Gregory's *Histories*: it notes the involvement of the bishops Syagrius and Flavius and claims that Gundovald was meant to replace King Guntram. It also mentions the participation of Guntram's sword bearer, Cariatto, in Gundovald's murder and states that he was rewarded for this with the episcopal see of Geneva.[243] The significance attributed to the events is further confirmed by the fact that the *Chronicle* also contains another, very short, summary in the fourth book.[244]

Likewise noteworthy is that according to the *Chronicle* the Franks paid tributes to the empire.[245] This information is significant, as it is the only reference to tax payments by the Franks for this period. Since this particular note is included in the second section of the narrative, it is difficult to ascertain whether it originally belonged to the Childeric tale, dating back to the late fifth century – where such a mention would be less unexpected – or whether it was part of the Gundovald narrative, relating to the late sixth century.

The combination of different stories, a typical feature of oral transmission, suggests that both exile tales – those of Childeric and Gundovald – circulated in the Merovingian kingdom until they merged into a single narrative. While it is plausible that the mention of 'neighbouring gentes' initially referred to Maurikios' payment and the request to expel the Lombards, the use of the term 'subduing' (*subiecerint*), rather than 'expelling' (*expulsuri*), makes the identification of those concerned being the Franks more likely. If this assumption is correct, it implies not only that 'Childeric' (i.e. Gundovald) aimed to bribe his magnates to accept his position as their king, but also suggests a hierarchy where Gundovald's kingship was intended to be subordinate to the emperor. This is striking, as it aligns with the reconstructed plan whereby Gundovald aimed to ascend to the Frankish throne by subjecting the Franks to the empire. Therefore, while this evidence is far from reliable, it is possible that it carries a seventh-century memory of the initial plan behind the Gundovald affair, or at least the rumours surrounding it.

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242 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 6.24, 6.26. On Fredegar's treatment of Gregory's *Histories*, see Schwedler, 'Lethe and Delete' (2013), pp. 83–91.

243 *Fredegar* 3.89. The fact that the *Chronicle* assumes that only Guntram was to be overthrown is easily explained by Guntram's prominence throughout the events, as he basically had to fight alone against Gundovald.

244 *Fredegar* 4.2.

245 *Fredegar* 3.11, p. 96: 'Eiegius, qui tributa publecis aerariis solvi debabat, tributa imperatori solvendum quereret.'

Merovingian coins present another noteworthy piece of evidence possibly linked to the Gundovald affair. Numismatic evidence confirms the sustained significance attributed to the empire in the Frankish West, implying a role extending beyond mere recognition. Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, the authors of a comprehensive study on early medieval coinage, with a numismatic catalogue, at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, identified three phases in the Merovingian production of coins. The first, lasting until around 587, was characterised by mainly pseudo-imperial coins, that is, gold *solidi* and *tremisses* struck following the Byzantine model. The second phase, until around 670, featured mainly 'national' *tremisses*, often bearing the name of the respective mint or moneyer, and included some quasi-imperial coinage in Provence until around 615. The third, from 670 onwards, saw the prevalence of silver deniers.[246]

Coins struck in Gaul until the late sixth century thus largely resembled contemporary Byzantine coinage. Roman emperors used the minting and distribution of coins to disseminate their portraits and agendas.[247] Significantly, this tradition was maintained in the Merovingian kingdom. While this may be interpreted as merely a long-standing tradition retained across generations out of respect for the empire, the importance of imperial coinage being minted in a region like Merovingian Gaul should not be underestimated.[248] These coins carried the portraits of rulers and were among the most widely distributed images, serving as a medium through which emperors made themselves known and communicated with their subjects. They had the potential to reinforce the perception that the emperor continued to hold rightful authority.[249] Moreover,

246 Grierson and Blackburn, *Medieval European coinage* (1986), p. 90. The quasi-imperial coinage includes gold *solidi* and *tremisses*, which, although largely Byzantine imitations, were not easily confused with the originals. These coins were produced in Provence and reached their peak in the 580s under Maurikios. They were likely struck under the authority of Dynamius of Provence, see Uhalde, 'The quasi-imperial coinage' (2002), pp. 134–69. See also the survey on Merovingian coinage in Hendy, 'From public to private' (1988), pp. 59–70, focusing on questions related to their use in tax contexts and differing developments, showing that these coins can be compared to evidence from other regions. Hendy, who did not explicitly distinguish between pseudo- and quasi-imperial coinage, suggested that the quasi-imperial coinage may have represented either a neutral, unitary solution amid fluctuating and, at times, overlapping sovereignties in Marseille and related *civitates*, or originated from the 'activities of the administrator of the papal estates' (pp. 68–70). On the seventh-century coinage, see also the contributions in Jarnut and Strothmann (eds.), *Die Merowingischen Monetarmünzen* (2013).

247 E.g. Grant, *Roman history from coins* (1968); Abdy, 'Tetrachry' (2016), pp. 584–600.

248 Similar already Fischer, 'The belief in the continuity' (1925), pp. 550–1.

249 With some reservation, Hendy argued in 'From public to private' (1988), it should be noted that coins were not for everyday use, and their distribution did not compare to modern standards in any manner.

the majority of these coins bore the names of the current emperor, potentially emphasising a connection of the western realms to the *imperium*.[250]

The distribution of pseudo-imperial coins appears to have ceased shortly after Gundovald's violent death in 585. As mentioned above, Grierson and Blackburn dated the transition to national coinage to around 587. While the evidence itself only loosely supports dating this shift to the 580s, both authors argued that such a significant change in numismatic style across the entire Merovingian kingdom required a coordinated agreement – a condition that would only be evidenced after the *Treaty of Andelot* in 587.[251] Until now, no more substantial explanation for this change in Merovingian coinage has been put forward. In the 580s, the empire not only actively supported Gundovald with a substantial treasury – aid certainly not offered purely out of generosity – but also held hostage the Austrasian offspring Athanagild in Constantinople. Both actions aimed to ensure the Franks would be willing and able to fight the Lombards in Italy. The chronology of the pseudo-imperial coinage suggests that its discontinuation in Merovingian Gaul might have been a response to these events. As mentioned earlier, coins bearing the name and portrait of the current emperor could imply sustained imperial authority over the Frankish kingdom. The developments of the 580s not only implied a major peril for the royal family in Austrasia but also had the potential to prompt the at times paranoid king Guntram of Burgundy[252] to fear that pseudo-imperial coinage could bolster imperial authority by supporting the emperor's claims among the Frankish population. In addition, Guntram reportedly feared after 585 the return of Gundovald's two sons to make another attempt to overthrow him.[253] It does not seem far-fetched to assume that these developments were the reasons why both kings agreed to abandon the imperial style of coins minted under their authority.

The cessation of pseudo-imperial coinage may thus have been initiated as a logical step to prevent further interference by the emperor with regard to the Merovingian throne. Given Guntram's strong position and relatively good relations with his young nephew Childebert II since the Gundovald affair, this change in numismatic style might already have occurred before the *Treaty of*

250 These kingdoms included the Roman kingdom of Syagrius, see Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 2.27.

251 Grierson/Blackburn, *Medieval European coinage* (1986), pp. 92–93, with some examples of pseudo-imperial coinage at pp. 464–71. For the *Treaty of Andalot*, see Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.20.

252 See the assessment of his character in Halsall 'Nero and Herod?' (2002), p. 347, and the references in n. 43; Goffart, 'The Frankish pretender Gundovald' (2012), p. 24.

253 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 9.28.

Andelot, potentially as early as 585. This was when both kings renewed their treaty of 577, which confirmed Childebert's status as Guntram's heir.[254] A comparable shift away from the empire is also attested in the Merovingian royal self-representation: the Frankish kings only began to refer to themselves more consistently as *rex Francorum* during Childebert II's (584–96) early reign. Childebert's first four letters, preserved in the *Austrasian Letters* collection, do not include the addition *Francorum* (*epist.* 25),[255] confirming that this new title was introduced around the time when the Gundovald episode had come to an end.

Maurikios obviously considered Italy a key element of the empire, which he was not willing to relinquish lightly. The emperor's testament, already discussed in section 2.4, confirms the significance Maurikios attached to Italy – and perhaps also to the Frankish domain – as he planned to reinstate a second emperor in the West. Dated to Maurikios' fifteenth regnal year, i.e., around August 596/7, the testament shows that the emperor had not abandoned his efforts to reclaim the western territories.[256] His methods to ensure the restoration of the Italian territory were far from gentle. Besides, Maurikios' letters to Childebert occasionally suggest an expectation of compliance, portraying the emperor as one who understood himself entitled to make such requests of the Franks. The evidence also implies Childebert's willingness to adhere to the emperor's wishes. In fact, Maurikios and the Italian exarch, in their letters, sometimes seem condescending towards the young Frankish king, as if reproving an erring child averse to harsh treatment.[257] All this again aligns well with the above thesis that the Frankish kingdoms were not yet entirely independent of the empire until the late sixth century. Conversely, the conciliatory

254 Gregory, *Libri historiarum* 5.17, 7.33.

255 Reimitz, *History, Frankish identity* (2015), pp. 101–2, mentioning that *Epist. Austras.* 25, 28, 31 and 33 lack the term *francorum* in the title, which only appears in the letters 32, 34, 38, 37, 38, 39 and 41. While Reimitz argued that the title *rex Francorum* is unattested before, Handley, '*Gildebertus rex fr*[*ancorum*]' (2020), pp. 33–52, pointed to several earlier examples, particularly an epitaph related to Childebert I († 558), for which the thesis of a later date, as suggested by Reimitz, is refuted with sound reasoning (pp. 43–7). However, the long temporal gap between these examples and the beginning of a more regular use of this title, along with the fact that all known cases may be associated with Childebert I, suggests that its initial use was likely restricted to this king. Furthermore, its reappearance since the mid-580s seems to be unrelated to and without continuity with the earlier cases.

256 Schreiner, *Theophylactos Simokates* (1985), p. 361, n. 1143.

257 E.g. *Epist. Austras.* 42, p. 148: 'Et mirum nobis videtur, si, rectam habere mentem atque priscam gentis Francorum et dicioni Romanae unitatem esse conprobatum adfirmans, nihil operisusque adhuc amicitiae congruum eminentia tua ostendens visa est.' See also ibid. 40 and 41.

language used by Childebert and his mother in their letters to the Byzantine court, devoid of criticism, suggests an uncomfortable position of weakness for the Austrasian court in the face of the emperor.

The late 580s marked a pivotal period in the relationship between the empire and the Frankish world. For the Merovingians, the Gundovald intervention and the abduction of Ingund and Athanagild must have been painful experiences. Maurikios' role in these events appears particularly significant. The evidence suggests that the events during this time brought about a re-evaluation of the role and influence the empire should have over the Merovingian kingdom in the future. The renunciation of pseudo-imperial coinage and the adoption of the new regal title *rex Francorum* signify a deliberate shift toward enhancing Frankish identity and distancing themselves from Byzantine influence. While there is not a specific documented moment or decision that severed ties between the Franks and the empire, the culmination of events in the 580s appears to have played a crucial role in this gradual process of detachment. Prior to this period, the sources attest to an intense relationship between the Franks and the empire, a situation that notably changed after the 580s. While earlier evidence suggests some affiliation with the empire, the absence of relevant hints after 590 underscores the significance of the events during that period in reshaping the relationship between the Franks and Constantinople. Thus, the Gundovald affair and the events surrounding Athanagild seem to have significantly contributed to the Frankish decision to move away from Constantinople. They appear to have presented a turning point, intensifying the Franks' desire to assert their independence and separate themselves diplomatically from the Byzantine sphere of influence.

3.6 Results

This chapter reassessed both well-known and lesser-known evidence to argue that the early Merovingian world had remained somewhat connected to the empire and only gradually became more autonomous from it. The majority of the relevant evidence relates to the Austrasian realm, the largest of the Merovingian kingdoms, with a strong history of relations with the empire and of leading campaigns into Italy. In contrast, the position of the Neustrian and Burgundian kings often remains obscure. Defining the legal status of the earliest Franks as a group in relation to the empire is difficult due to the largely lacking explicit writings. There is no evidence conclusively proving that the majority were federates or that a larger number obtained Roman citizenship through military service. As the western territories came under the authority

of the remaining emperor in the East, as shown in Chapter 2, the cessation of the western emperorship did not sever any existing connection between the Franks and the empire, an association left without official conclusion. During King Clovis I's reign, the Frankish kingdom maintained strong ties with the remaining empire, and the Frankish kingdoms preserved Roman identities well beyond the Merovingian period. A gradual alienation is perceptible in the sixth century, a process accompanied by a noticeable fragmentation of Roman identities. The term *Romani* gained varied connotations, with diverging meanings in the narrative and legal sources.

A first step towards more independent Frankish kingdoms is attested by the confrontational approach and imperial demeanour of the Austrasian King Theudebert I, who seemingly aimed to bolster his own authority. Subsequent sources regarding the Merovingian kings lack evidence of a similar outward representation. Concurrently, imperial coinage continued to circulate, and kings commonly addressed the emperor as 'father' (*pater*). This circumstance shifted in the 580s when the emperor coerced the Franks into providing aid to expel the Lombards from Italy. Although the gradual process of estrangement had been initiated before this, the kingdom's ties with the empire only notably deteriorated due to increased imperial pressure on the Frankish kings, particularly the Austrasian court. The hostile imperial interventions occurring within the framework of the Gundovald affair and the abduction of the Austrasian royals from Visigothic Spain likely encouraged the Frankish kingdoms to seek independence from the empire. The 580s thus represented a pivotal moment, leading to a distinct rupture in relations between the Franks and the empire. While no evidence suggests that the empire attempted further intervention in the Frankish realm, suspicion may have strained their relationship. The late sixth century was thus significant in the gradual alienation of both realms, culminating in the emancipation of the Frankish kingdoms. The following chapter will examine how the Franks and the empire related to each other from a religious perspective, while the fourth and final chapter will explore the evolution of these relations in the seventh and early eighth centuries across various political and social levels.