



The long-haired kings of the Franks: 'like so many Samsons?'¹

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As the paradigm of Germanic sacral kingship has lost its appeal, historians have begun to rethink the concept of Merovingian kingship. Most of the arguments once used in support of its alleged Germanic and pagan character have now been refuted. However, the meaning of their long hair has thus far proven difficult to explain. This article will argue that the Merovingian hairstyle took up Christian meaning shortly after their conversion, presenting them in the image of the biblical Samson. Consequently, their use of biblical analogies to legitimize royal power further challenges the once-held dichotomy between Merovingian and Carolingian kingship.

'At this time in Gaul, when the kings of the Franks were degenerating from their wonted courage and skill, those who were regarded as stewards of the palace began to administer the kingly power and to do whatever is the custom for kings, since it was ordained from heaven that the sovereignty of the Franks should be transferred to the race of these men.'

Paul the Deacon, *History of the Langobards*²

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¹ Based on the comment of M. Bloch: 'Les reges criniti étaient autant de Samsons'. M. Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges. Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris, 1924), p. 61.

² Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* VI.16, ed. L. Bethmann and G. Waitz, *MGH Scriptores rerum Langobardorum* 1 (Hanover, 1878), p. 170: 'Hoc tempore apud Gallias Francorum regibus a soli[ta] fortitudine et scientia degenerantibus, hi qui maiores domui regalis esse videbantur administrare regi potentiam et quicquid regibus agree mos est coeperunt; quippe cum caelitus esse[t] dispositum, ad horum progeniem Francorum transvehi regnum.'

The last Merovingian kings were a degenerate lot, or so their successors would have us believe. In the eyes of Carolingian authors, Dagobert I (d. 639) had been the last great Merovingian king, while those who followed in his wake were castigated as *reges inutiles*: weak rulers who had been unable to withstand the aristocratic encroachment upon royal authority.³ The accumulation of power by the nobility ultimately led to the famous coup of 751, during which the Merovingian king Childeric III was dethroned, tonsured, and packed off to the monastery of St-Bertin.⁴ Childeric was replaced by the Carolingian *princeps* Pippin III (d. 768), the former mayor of the palace, whose rise to the throne is thought to have constituted much more than a mere dynastic transition: it ushered in a new era, featuring a model of Christian kingship deeply inspired by the biblical kings of the Old Testament, as implied by the numerous literary allusions, both foreign and domestic,⁵ and the introduction of anointing as the new ritual for royal inauguration.⁶

In this respect, modern scholarship has long considered Carolingian kingship an antithesis to the Merovingian model: where the former came to be viewed as inherently Christian and institutionalized, the latter was perceived as the embodiment of an archaic *Sakralkönigtum*, rooted in Germanic and pagan traditions.⁷ Although this view has been successfully challenged and finds few adherents today, some of its features prove to be tenacious. In line herewith, the present article shall focus on the characteristic long hair of the Merovingian kings, traditionally held to be an iconic symbol of their purported Germanic identity, and argue instead that the royal hairstyle had acquired a Christian symbolism at a relatively

³ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*; Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 1, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *MGH SRM* 25 (Hanover, 1911), pp. 2–4; *Annales regni Francorum unde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur annales laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, s.a. 749, ed. F. Kurze, *MGH SRG* 6 (Hanover, 1895), pp. 8–9; *Annales Mettenses priores*, s.a. 692, ed. B. von Simson, *MGH SRG* 10 (Hanover, 1905), p. 14. Attempts to rehabilitate some of the later Merovingian kings on the basis of extant charters have been made by: R.A. Gerberding, *The Rise of the Carolingians and the Liber historiae Francorum* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 109–13 and 158–9; I.N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (Harlow, 1994), pp. 261–3 and 322–4; P. Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow, 2000), pp. 77–8. Cf. T. Kölzer, ‘Die letzten Merowingerkönige: rois fainéants’, in M. Becher and J. Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751. Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung* (Münster, 2004), pp. 33–60.

⁴ K.H. Krüger, ‘Sithiu/Saint Bertin als Grablege Childerichs III und der Grafen von Flandern’, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien: Jahrbuch des Instituts für Frühmittelalterforschung der Universität Münster* 8 (1974), pp. 71–80.

⁵ M. Garrison, ‘The Franks as the New Israel? Education for an Identity from Pippin to Charlemagne’, in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 114–61, at pp. 119–20 and 123.

⁶ J.L. Nelson, ‘The Lord’s Anointed and the People’s Choice: Carolingian Royal Ritual’, in J.L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London and Rio Grande, 1996), pp. 99–132, at p. 102.

⁷ W. Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship*, The Birbeck Lectures, 1968–9 (London, 1969), pp. 53–5; W. Kienast, ‘Germanische Treue und “Königshel”’, *Historische Zeitschrift* 227 (1978), pp. 265–324, at pp. 292 and 305.

early date, thus further rendering void any sharp distinction between Merovingian and Carolingian kingship.

The theory of *germanisches Sakralkönigtum* originated in nineteenth-century Germanic antiquity studies (*germanisches Altertumskunde*) and religious studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), which, betraying their nationalistic undertones, sought to disclose Germany's earliest history as distinctively Germanic, i.e. culturally distinct from Roman or Christian influences.⁸ Ironically, this Germanic perception of the German past rested mainly on the works of classical Roman authors. Tacitus' *Germania* especially came to be viewed as the blueprint for the modern perception of early Germanic society – something a later generation of scholars began to regard as methodologically askew.⁹

The traditional scholarly perception of Germanic sacral kingship, using Eve Picard's definition, was based on three main premises.¹⁰ First, Germanic society was religiously ordered: religion dominated every aspect of life, including politics. Second, the ruler was recognized by his followers as a descendant of the gods, who possessed divine qualities, and who mediated between the realm of men and that of the gods (i.e. he acted as priest). It was this religious aspect that formed the basis of the ruler's charismatic embodiment of the people's fortune and the main source of legitimation for his royal power.¹¹ A third premise underlying the previous two, was the idea that Frankish kingship was intrinsically

⁸ For example: J. Grimm, *Deutsche Rechts Alterthümer* (Göttingen, 1828). For an overview of the discussion and literature, see H.H. Anton *et al.*, 'Sakralkönigtum', in J. Hoops and R. Müller (eds), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 2nd edn (Berlin and New York, 2004), pp. 179–320. On the concept of 'archaic early Middle Ages', see W. Pohl, 'Ursprungserzählungen und Gegenbilder. Das archaische Frühmittelalter', in F. Rexroth (ed.), *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter. Epochenimaginationen und Verlaufsmuster in der Praxis mediävistischer Disziplinen*, *Historische Zeitschrift, Beihefte* (Munich, 2007), pp. 23–42, at pp. 23–9.

⁹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970 (Oxford, 1971), pp. 1–2; E. Picard, *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum? Quellenkritische Studien zur Germania des Tacitus und zur altnordischen Überlieferung, Skandinavische Arbeiten* (Heidelberg, 1991), p. 38.

¹⁰ Picard, *Germanisches Sakralkönigtum?*, pp. 31–3. Picard's attempt at a broad definition is a reaction to the widely held critique that the definition of sacralty, charismatic kingship, *Königsheil* etc. has become increasingly imprecise: H. Wolfram, 'Methodische Fragen zur Kritik am "sakralen" Königtum germanischer Stämme', in I. Hansberger-Wilflinger (ed.), *Festschrift für Otto Höfler zum 65. Geburtstag*, 2 vols (Vienna, 1968), II, pp. 473–90, at p. 476; M.J. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons. The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin and New York, 1985), p. 109, n. 7; I.N. Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family', in R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger and H. Reimitz (eds), *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts* (Leiden and Boston, 2003), pp. 149–71, at pp. 153–4; Y. Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', in Becher and Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751*, pp. 163–77, at pp. 164–5; F.-R. Erkens, 'Sakralkönigtum und sakrales Königtum. Anmerkungen und Hinweise', in F.-R. Erkens (ed.), *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum. Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen* (Berlin and New York, 2005), pp. 1–7, at pp. 4–7.

¹¹ On the functioning of *Königsheil*, see M. Blattmann, '“Ein Unglück für sein Volk”. Der Zusammenhang zwischen Fehlverhalten des Königs und Volkswohl in Quellen des 7.–12. Jahrhunderts', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 30 (1996), pp. 80–102.

pagan in origin. This becomes problematic, however, if the ‘indigenous’ Germanic belief system is held to be categorically distinct from, and incompatible with, Christianity, especially when used to characterize a Merovingian ruling elite that, at least from the sixth century onwards, ruled over an increasingly Christianized society and came to address itself in increasingly Christian terms.¹²

In the course of the nineteenth century, the theory of Germanic sacral kingship developed into a central paradigm within early medieval studies and remained dominant well into the twentieth century. Although attention was increasingly paid to the ongoing Christianization of the early medieval west, late Merovingian rulers nevertheless retained certain pagan or archaic qualities, chief among which was their mysterious long hair. Michael J. Enright, for example, maintained that the

[Merovingian] kings managed to survive a century of increasing degradation largely because of a pagan-based popular reverence for their God-descended hereditary charisma. The long hair which they proudly wore and never cut was the essential, perennial and venerated symbol of legitimacy. It was an archaic badge of Germanic sacral kingship – a token of power to bring fertility to fields and victory to followers.¹³

The long hair of the Merovingian family that vested their sacral powers, their mythical descent from a sea-monster, and their supposedly ritualistic transportation by ox-cart: all led to a persistent perception of the Merovingian ruler as the paragon of Germanic sacral kingship.¹⁴ It resulted in the consensus view that the coup of 751 heralded something of a revolution in political thinking, as the archaic ‘long-haired kings’ were replaced by the ‘Lord’s anointed’.¹⁵ In a rare attempt to downplay this ideological caesura, Enright did not propose viewing the last Merovingian kings in a Christianized setting, but instead presented their Carolingians successors in a more Germanic context.

Pippin did not seek to persuade his people that holy oil made him a sacral king on the biblical model but rather that it made him a sacral

¹² See for example the prologue of the Council of Orléans (511): ‘Domno suo catholicae ecclesiae filio Chlothouecho gloriosissimo regi omnes sacerdotes, quos ad concilium venire iussistis’, in *Concilium Aurelianense* (511), Prologue, ed. F. Maassen, *MGH Concilia I* (Hanover, 1893), p. 2.

¹³ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, p. 109.

¹⁴ *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii Scholastici libri IV. cum Continuationibus* III.9, ed. W. Wattenbach, *MGH SRM 2* (Hanover, 1888), pp. 1–194, at p. 95; Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 1, ed. Holder-Egger, p. 3.

¹⁵ Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance*; Kienast, ‘Germanische Treue und Königsheil’; H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris, 1937), p. 118.

king in Merovingian and Frankish terms. It infused the new king with those qualities hitherto confined to the charismatic descendants of Clovis. The Franks wanted a new Childeric far more than they wanted a new David.¹⁶

Over the past decades, however, the theory of Germanic sacral kingship has come under attack and Merovingian kingship is rapidly losing its Germanic and pagan connotations. In its place, modern research has adopted a more Romanized perception of Merovingian kingship,¹⁷ promoting it as either essentially profane,¹⁸ or, as most experts now tend to think, strongly Christianized, not unlike its Carolingian successor.¹⁹ Many of the traditional arguments used to support the idea that late Merovingian kingship continued to be founded on archaic Germanic principles have been refuted on the basis of new in-depth studies by a younger generation of scholars – some even going as far as to state that ‘modern scholars, who happily embraced the notion of sacral kingship . . . savagely raped the sources from the Merovingian period in order to prove their point’.²⁰

Thus, it has been argued that Fredegar’s mythical account of Merovech’s conception by a sea-bull was an etymologizing tale of seventh-century origin, rather than a chance survival of an ancient story that praised the divine, if somewhat bovine, descent of the Frankish royal dynasty.²¹ Nor is Einhard’s vivid description of Childeric III being driven about by ox-cart still viewed as evidence for his involvement in a pagan fertility rite for the sole reason that the account resonates well with certain passages in Tacitus’ *Germania*.²² Instead, Einhard, whom we have

¹⁶ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, p. 137.

¹⁷ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History* (London, 1962), pp. 1–24; H. Wolfram, ‘Frühes Königtum’, in Erkens (ed.), *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum. Ideelle und religiöse Grundlagen*, pp. 42–64, at p. 64.

¹⁸ For example Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, pp. 245–6; R. Collins, *Charlemagne* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 104. Cf. P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 107–9.

¹⁹ Y. Hen, ‘The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul’, *EME* 7 (1998), pp. 277–89, at pp. 288–9; Hen, ‘The Christianization of Kingship’, at p. 176. M.B. de Jong, ‘Charlemagne’s Church’, in J. Story (ed.), *Charlemagne. Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), pp. 103–35, at pp. 108–9; M.B. de Jong, ‘Ecclesia and the Frankish Polity’, in W. Pohl, S. Airlie and H. Reimitz (eds), *Staat in frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2006), pp. 113–32, at pp. 124–7.

²⁰ Hen, ‘Uses of the Bible’, p. 165.

²¹ *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegarii*, ed. Wattenbach, p. 95; Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, p. 51; A.C. Murray, ‘Post vocantur Merovingii: Fredgar, Merovech, and “Sacral Kingship”’, in A.C. Murray (ed.), *After Rome’s Fall. Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 1998), pp. 121–52, at pp. 142–4; Wood, ‘Deconstructing the Merovingian Family’, p. 152.

²² Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 1, ed. Holder-Egger, p. 4. Cf. Tacitus, *Germania*, c. 40, ed. E.H. Warmington, *Tacitus*, The Loeb Classical Library (London and Cambridge, MA, 1970), p. 196. Wallace-Hadrill was one of the first to object to the analogy and argued for continuity with

come to know as the Carolingian apologist *par excellence*, is currently believed to have wanted to defame the Merovingian king in a more mundane manner: transportation by ox-cart was not all that uncommon among the Frankish elite, or for that matter uncomfortable or impractical, but it may have lacked the display of virility Einhard's audience demanded of a Frankish king.²³

Many of the purported signs that testified to the Germanic and sacral nature of Merovingian kingship have been demystified and rejected in recent years. However, the characteristic long hair of the Merovingian kings has got away relatively unscathed as scholars have been unable to explain satisfactorily the cultural significance of the royal hairstyle. At best, they subscribe to Wallace-Hadrill's suggestion that their long hair was an archaic relic from a pre-Christian, or pre-Roman, era;²⁴ at worst, the issue is simply ignored. Instead of debating the symbolic meaning of the Merovingian hairstyle and its origins, the debate has focused mainly on the function of royal long hair as a strategy of distinction. Avril Cameron, while re-establishing the notion that Merovingian kings distinguished themselves from their subjects by their long hair, nevertheless had 'to leave aside the question of the symbolic meaning of the royal hairstyle'.²⁵ In a more recent study, Max Diesenberger, in an attempt to rid the Merovingian hairstyle of its sacral connotations, likewise argued that long hair is to be understood foremost as a marker of social distinction. However, with regard to the 'fundamental question... whether it was in and of itself the symbol of "la distinction" [a notion taken from the work of Bourdieu], or whether, as many scholars have claimed, a greater importance has been assigned to something that was merely one point of difference among many', Diesenberger opted for the former.²⁶ But while he convincingly addresses the socio-political significance of the royal hairstyle as the king's chief royal attribute, its

Roman provincial practices instead: J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Review of A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602: A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey* (1964)', *English Historical Review* 80 (1965), pp. 785–90, at p. 789; P.S. Barnwell, 'Einhard, Louis the Pious and Childeric III', *Historical Research* 78 (2005), pp. 129–39, at pp. 130–1 and 136–7; P.J. Geary, *Before France and Germany. The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (New York and Oxford, 1988), p. 224.

²³ Murray, 'Post vocantur Merohingii', p. 132. On the motives behind Einhard's introduction to the *Vita Karoli*, see A. Gauert, 'Noch einmal Einhard und die letzten Merowinger', in L. Fenske, W. Rösener and T. Zotz (eds), *Institutionen, Kultur und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Josef Fleckenstein zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (Sigmaringen, 1984), pp. 59–63.

²⁴ Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, pp. 156–7.

²⁵ A. Cameron, 'How Did the Merovingian Kings Wear Their Hair?' *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 43 (1965), pp. 1203–16, at pp. 1203–4.

²⁶ M. Diesenberger, 'Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms', in R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger and H. Reimitz (eds), *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages: Texts, Resources and Artefacts* (Leiden and Boston, 2003), pp. 173–212, at pp. 176 and 195–8; Hen, 'Uses of the Bible', p. 170, n. 131.

symbolic meaning is left unexplained. Uneasiness with regard to the origins of this custom is also expressed by Janet Nelson, while the false opposition between 'sacrality' on the one hand and 'Christianity' on the other is maintained.

There is no evidence of any coronation ritual for the Merovingians. Was this because sacral powers were believed to reside in their long hair? Franks and foreigners alike certainly identified the Merovingians as 'the long-haired kings'. But the special hairstyle may have been nothing but a badge of rank, denoting a 'kingworthy' member of the ruling dynasty. If Merovingian sacrality ever existed, it is very unlikely to have survived the powerful impact of Christianity on Frankish royal ideology and practice in the sixth and seventh centuries.²⁷

In general, the traditional Germanist theory of sacral kingship has given way to a more classical understanding of Merovingian kingship. The tables even appear to be turning, as it has been suggested that with the arrival of the Carolingian kings 'the sacralisation of kingship, with the growing power of the Church to confer that sacrality, had begun'.²⁸ However, in the recent endeavour to rid Merovingian kingship of its sacral connotations, we run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Instead of discarding sacrality as a central element of Merovingian kingship, historians need to rethink the source of Merovingian sacrality. If indeed the Germanist theory of sacral kingship is bankrupt, and long hair can no longer be understood as a 'container of royal magic', what might take its place? I thus pose the question Cameron has left unanswered and attempt to disclose the symbolic meaning of the Merovingian royal hairstyle.

As I shall argue, long hair did invest Merovingian kings with charisma in the eyes of their followers, but from as early as the sixth century, this charisma was inspired by a biblical rather than a pagan typology. However, the source of royal charisma cannot always be readily distinguished: Yitzhak Hen argued that 'it is impossible to isolate reliably any [Germanic] sacral elements within the Merovingian perception of kingship, since any element which might qualify as sacral can be understood in a purely Christian sense'.²⁹ Gregory of Tours's explanation of royal

²⁷ Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed', p. 101.

²⁸ Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', p. 177.

²⁹ Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', p. 167. The definition attached to 'sacrality' in modern literature is often ambiguous. A distinction between a 'broad' and 'narrow' definition should be made, in which the former transcends the boundaries of a specific religion, whereas the latter is used in a strictly Germanic or pagan context. In the remainder of the article, 'sacrality' will be used in its broader definition, unless preceded by the adjective 'Germanic'.

healings as ‘a sign of Christian holiness’ is an excellent case in point, but can the same also be said of the royal hairstyle?³⁰ In this respect, the hitherto-overlooked *Breviary of Erchanbert* offers an instructive clue to the purported biblical significance of long hair, despite its propagandistic pro-Carolingian quality and the fact that it was written as late as c.826.³¹ The *Breviary*, in turn, can be supported with older references derived from Frankish historiographical narrative. Together, these arguments suggest a biblical model for kingship that enabled the Christianized long-haired kings of the Franks to model themselves in the image of Samson, the biblical Nazarite and Judge of ancient Israel. The implication would furthermore be that the Merovingian and Carolingian models of kingship were far less distinct than is sometimes surmised. The *rex crinitus* and the *rex unctus* both tapped from the same ideological source, namely the Old Testament.

Long-haired kings

There is no need to reach back to Tacitus’ long-haired *Germani* to prove that hair was already of great social significance to the Franks prior to their conversion to Christianity.³² The *Lex Salica*, which might date to as early as the fifth century, contains a sharp provision against clipping the hair of Frankish *pueri* without parental consent. The staggering amount of *wergeld* demanded as recompense for such a deed signals its severity, as well as the significance of (long) hair to the wearer.³³ In his *Histories*, Gregory of Tours (d. 594), puzzled by the origins of the Frankish kings, stated that the Franks ‘set up long-haired kings (*reges criniti*) in each country district and each city chosen from the foremost and most noble family of their race’.³⁴ A portrait of one such long-haired king survives in the form of the famous signet ring of Childeric I (d. 481).³⁵ To adorn oneself with long hair thus appears to have been an ancient privilege of

³⁰ Hen, ‘The Christianisation of Kingship’, pp. 167–8.

³¹ *Erchanberti Breviarium regum Francorum et mariorum domus*, ed. A. Ussermann, *Germaniae Sacrae Prodromus*, 2 vols (St. Blasien, 1790), I, pp. xxxix–lii.

³² W. Pohl, ‘Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity’, in W. Pohl and H. Reimitz, *Strategies of Distinction* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 1998), pp. 17–69, at pp. 51–2.

³³ *Lex Salica*, c. 35, ed. K.A. Eckhardt, *MGH Legum nationum Germanicarum* 4, 2 vols (Hanover, 1969), II, p. 74; Diesenberger, ‘Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital’, p. 184. On the dating of the *Lex Salica*, see Karl Ubl, ‘L’origine contestée de la loi salique. Une mise au point’, *Revue de l’institute Français d’histoire en Allemagne* 1 (2009), pp. 208–34, at p. 233.

³⁴ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* X II.9, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 1 (Hanover, 1951), p. 57: ‘Ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se vreaivisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia.’ Trans. L. Thorpe, *Gregory of Tours. The History of the Franks* (London, 1974), p. 125.

³⁵ S. Lebecq, ‘The Two Faces of King Childeric: History, Archaeology, Historiography’, in T.F.X. Noble (ed.), *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms* (London, 2006), pp. 327–44 and Fig. 14.4, at p. 342.

the Frankish elite, and it would not be until the reign of Clovis (481–511), who successfully eliminated the long-haired competition, that this particular hairstyle became the exclusive trait of the Merovingian kings.

The earliest testimony of this Merovingian exclusivity comes from the Byzantine historian Agathias, who recorded the demise of Chlodomer (511–24), a son of Clovis, at the hands of the Burgundians. According to Agathias, the Burgundian army had realized it was victorious ‘when [Chlodomer] fell, seeing his hair flowing and abundant, loose down to his back’. Then, dwelling on this matter a bit longer, the Greek historian added:

It is the rule for Frankish kings never to be shorn; instead, their hair is never cut from childhood on, and hangs down in abundance on their shoulders. Their front hair is parted on the forehead and falls down on either side. Their hair is not uncombed and dry and dirty and braided up in a messy knot like that of the Turks and Avars; instead, they anoint it with unguents of different sorts, and carefully comb it. Now this it is their custom to set apart as a distinguishing mark and special prerogative for the royal house. For their subjects have their hair cut all round, and are not permitted to grow it further.³⁶

Gregory’s *Histories* may not have been as analytical as those of his Greek contemporary, but they do provide a wealth of anecdotes from which the socio-political function of the royal hairstyle can be studied, and they unequivocally support the idea that Merovingian long hair was both a prerogative of, and a prerequisite for, Frankish kingship. With regard to the former quality, one only has to think of Gregory’s tale about the recovery of the corpse of a murdered Merovingian prince by a local Frank, who was ‘at first not sure who it was, but when [he] saw the long hair knew that it was Clovis’.³⁷

The extreme malleability of hairstyles can have detrimental effects on the wearer, especially when hair is as laden with meaning as was the case with the Merovingian kings.³⁸ The removal of royal hair through tonsure eliminated an essential prerequisite for kingship and formed an effective means of political disqualification, without having to resort to

³⁶ Agathias, *Histories* I.3–4, trans. J.D. Frendo, *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. 2A (Berlin and New York, 1975), p. 11.

³⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* VIII.10, ed. Krusch, p. 377.

³⁸ C. Leyser, ‘Long-Haired Kings and Short-Haired Nuns: Writing on the Body in Caesarius of Arles’, *Studia patristica* 24 (1993), pp. 143–50; Robert Bartlett, ‘Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser. 4 (1994), pp. 43–60, at p. 43; P.E. Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York, 2004), pp. 3–4.

something quite as drastic as regicide.³⁹ Such dire political consequences were in all likelihood caused by more than mere loss of face – though the effects of public humiliation were no doubt a key aspect of this royal neutering.⁴⁰ This becomes particularly clear in Gregory's grim account of the fate of Chlodomer's three sons, who, following their father's demise in battle, had been taken in by their grandmother Clothild. Wary of their competition, the boys' uncles Childebert and Chlothar decided to rid themselves of their nephews. However, unsure whether to commit such a heinous act with either sword or scissors, which in the latter case would 'reduce them to the status of ordinary individuals', they decided to kidnap the young princes and put the choice before Clothild. Overcome by emotion, Gregory had her answer: 'If they are not to ascend to the throne, I would rather see them dead than with their hair cut short!' Clothild's emotional reply led to the death of two of Chlodomer's sons, whereas the third managed to escape at the cost of his hair and entered into the priesthood. He would eventually be remembered as St Cloud.⁴¹

The choice of death over tonsure was exceptional; most accepted abdication and the loss of their long hair, which *de facto* implied a clerical tonsure and one's reallocation from the royal court to a monastic environment.⁴² Unfortunate (and therefore unwanted) Merovingians were removed from power and sent to monasteries. Unlike some of their Irish and Anglo-Saxon colleagues, Frankish kings did not voluntarily opt for a monastic life, as Jonas of Bobbio pointedly remarked in his *Life of Columbanus*.⁴³ Nevertheless, monasteries housing dethroned Merovingian kings should not be thought of as political prisons in the modern

³⁹ E. Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte*, Germanistische Abteilung 72 (1955), pp. 177–85, at pp. 184–5; M.B. de Jong, 'Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out? Political Coercion and Honour in the Frankish Kingdoms', in F. Theuvs, M.B. de Jong and C. van Rhijn (eds), *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2003), pp. 291–328, at pp. 294–5.

⁴⁰ Wallace-Hadrill, *Long-Haired Kings*, pp. 245–7; Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, p. 14.

⁴¹ Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* III.18, ed. Krusch, pp. 118–19: 'Satius mihi enim est, si ad regnum non eriguntur, mortuos eos videre quam tonsus.' The only other instance of a 'voluntary' abdication by a Merovingian king is found in the ninth-century *Gesta Dagoberti I regis Francorum* III.9, ed. Bruno Krusch, *MGH SRM* 2 (Hanover 1888), p. 517.

⁴² Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, pp. 14–15. Thus far, I have not been able to find an example of a shorn Merovingian who was not directed to a monastery. However, not all tonsured Merovingians may have received priestly consecrations.

⁴³ Jonas, *Vita Columbani*, c. 28, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 4 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1902) p. 105: 'Inter quae vir Dei ad Theudebertum accedit eumque suadet, ut coepte arrogantiae supercilium deponeret seque clericum faceret, et in ecclesia positus, sacre subderetur religione, nec simul cum damna presentis regni aeternae pateretur vitae dispendia. Quod et regi et omnibus circumadstantibus rediculum excitat, aientes, se numquam audisse, Merovengum, in regno sublimatum, voluntarium clericum fuisse.' For a more detailed analysis, see De Jong, 'Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out?', pp. 307–12 and 314.

sense of the word, but rather as places of (internal) exile and penance.⁴⁴ As the case of the rebellious Merovingian prince Merovech, a son of King Chilperic I (561–84), illustrates, sincere clerical expectations were vested in a tonsured Merovingian: ‘Merovech, who was being held in custody by his father, was tonsured, had his clothes changed for those used by clerics, was ordained priest and was packed off to a monastery in Le Mans called Anille, there to be instructed in the priestly rule.’⁴⁵ Two generations earlier Clovis had sentenced two of his rivals to a similar clerical fate.

Chararic and his son were both bound and then Clovis had their hair cut short. He ordered Chararic to be ordained as a priest and he made his son a deacon. Chararic objected to this humiliation and burst into tears. His son is said to have exclaimed: ‘These leaves have been cut from wood which is still green and not lacking in sap. They will soon grow again and be larger than ever; and may the man who has done this deed perish equally quickly.’⁴⁶

Admittedly, in both cases their ecclesiastical vocation lasted only a short time: Merovech escaped, reverted to plotting against his father and, when the latter finally caught up with him, ended up taking his own life. Clovis, upon hearing his enemies’ threat to grow back their hair and seek revenge, resorted to a more permanent solution and had them decapitated instead.

Chararic’s son pointed out a major deficit of royal tonsure as a means to political elimination: if left unattended, royal hair could grow back. Gundovald, whose questionable Merovingian descent was cause for suspicion among his royal relatives, was twice sent tonsured to a monastery. Both times, however, he grew back his hair and re-entered the world. Although the second time he prudently went to Byzantine Italy, he eventually returned to Gaul at the invitation of a subversive noble faction, who considered his political eligibility restored along with his long hair. However, having been unable to unseat the powers that be, Gundovald soon found himself surrounded by his enemies, who, no doubt remembering his tenacious habit of resurfacing time and again, ‘pulled out his hair and beard and left his body unburied on the spot where he had met his death’.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ De Jong, ‘Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out?’. Cf. G. Geltner, ‘*Detrusio*: Penal Cloistering in the Middle Ages’, *Revue Bénédictine* 118 (2008), pp. 89–108.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* V.14, ed. Krusch, p. 207. Cf. De Jong, ‘Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out?’, pp. 306–7.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* II.41, ed. Krusch, pp. 91–2.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* VI.24 and VII.38, ed. Krusch, pp. 291–2, and 359–62.

For a Merovingian king, the restoration of his long hair implied the restoration of his political potency. In the cases of Chararic and Gundovald, this was considered problematic and led to more drastic measures to ensure their exclusion from power. In other instances, however, the irresoluteness and possible reversibility of monastic exile was deemed advantageous. According to the earliest version of the *Passion of Saint Leudegar*, King Theuderic III (673, 675–91) had been tonsured unjustly. Theuderic had been raised to the throne by Ebroin, who is presented in this highly politicized hagiographical narrative as a ruthless mayor of the palace who unsuccessfully sought to monopolize political power by restricting the nobility's access to the king. However, Ebroin's ploy failed and both he and his king were deposed by those disgruntled noblemen who had rallied under the banner of Theuderic's younger brother, Childeric II. In an attempt to avert his killing, Theuderic was hurriedly tonsured by his captors and thus presented before his brother. Yet when asked what his fate should be, the tonsured Merovingian replied

that he had been unjustly cast down from the throne, and he declared that he was anticipating a swift judgement from God in his favour. It was then ordered that he should remain in the monastery of the martyr St-Denis and be protected there until he grew his hair, which they had cut off.⁴⁸

Indeed, in the aftermath of Childeric's assassination (675), Theuderic re-emerged long-haired from his monastic sanctuary to reclaim his throne.

As Mayke de Jong has argued in relation to a number of Carolingian examples: 'clerical tonsure was a more open-ended affair . . . *Clerici*, the lowest order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, were betwixt and between; as long as they were not admitted into higher orders or made monastic vows, a return to the world outside remained possible.'⁴⁹ In Merovingian times, especially under dire circumstances, exceptions to the rule were frequent. By the late seventh century, political destabilization in combination with dynastic mishap led to a scarcity of Merovingian royal candidates, and resulted in cloistered Merovingians being recalled to royal service. In the aftermath of Grimoald's failed coup (c.656/7), during

⁴⁸ *Passio Leudegarii*, c. 6, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM* 5 (Hanover and Leipzig, 1910), p. 288. Trans. P. Fouracre and A. Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France. History and Hagiography, 640–720* (Manchester and New York, 1996), p. 223. The passage is omitted in the two later rewritings of the *Passio Leudegarii*.

⁴⁹ De Jong, 'Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out?', pp. 293–4. De Jong is lexically borrowing here from Victor Turner on the concept of liminality. See Victor Turner, 'Variations on a Theme of Liminality', in S.F. Moore and B.G. Myerhoff (eds), *Secular Ritual* (Assen and Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 36–52, at pp. 36–7.

which the Merovingian heir Dagobert II had received the tonsure and was exiled to an Irish monastery, the Franks demanded his repatriation and restoration to the throne.⁵⁰ The best example of a cleric-turned-king was undoubtedly Daniel/Chilperic II (719–21), who, having lived as a monk at the monastery of St-Denis for over forty years, was called to the Neustrian throne – though of course not before he had grown his hair in the royal fashion.⁵¹

The reversibility of royal tonsure makes it difficult to understand why the Franks set so much stock by this procedure. Percy Ernst Schramm's question: 'what occurred when a tonsured Merovingian could have his hair grow back?' is a valid one indeed, since there is, as he noted, little evidence that 'those who had deposed him worried about this'.⁵² In light of this, Schramm supported Jean Hoyoux's hypothesis that dethroned Merovingian kings were scalped, rather than tonsured – a theory for which there is almost no evidence and which has been convincingly refuted by Ekkehard Kaufmann.⁵³ In response to Schramm's hypothesis, Kaufmann came up with three alternatives: first, he argued that each case occurred within a specific but unknown political context that may have warranted such an impermanent, or lenient, solution. Second, Kaufmann argued that these abdications were mostly initiated by members of the Merovingian family, so that murdering one's rival would have amounted to the particularly heinous sin of kin-slaying. Third, Kaufmann turns to the royal hairstyle, which he perceives as a 'symbol of kingship and an expression of the magical *Heilskraft* of the king'.⁵⁴

As the oldest traditions seem to have suggested, a king robbed of his hair, and with that his magical power, had from that point onwards forever lost his royal rank. In the early stage of the kingdom, a king who was deposed by the people, will probably also have been killed, or sacrificed, after having lost his fortune-enabling hairstyle.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Liber historiae Francorum*, c. 43, ed. B. Krusch, *MGH SRM 2* (Hanover, 1888), p. 315; I.N. Wood, 'Usurpers and Merovingian Kingship', in M. Becher and J. Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751*, pp. 15–31, at pp. 26–30.

⁵¹ *Liber historiae Francorum*, c. 52, ed. Krusch, p. 326.

⁵² P.E. Schramm, *Herrschaftszeichen und Staatssymbolik. Beiträge zur ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Stuttgart, 1954), p. 126: 'Was geschah, wenn ein geschorener Merowinger sich die Haare wieder wachsen lassen konnte?' and 'diejenigen, die ihn abgesetzt hatten, diese Sorge hegen'.

⁵³ J. Hoyoux, 'Reges critimi, chevelures, tonsures, et scalps chez les Mérovingiens', *Revue Belge de philologie et d'histoire* 26 (1948), pp. 479–508; Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige'; Cameron, 'How did the Merovingian Kings Wear their Hair?', p. 1203.

⁵⁴ Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige', p. 177: 'Symbol des Königtums wie Ausdruck der magischen Heilskraft des Königs'.

⁵⁵ Kaufmann, 'Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige', pp. 184–5: 'Den ältesten Vorstellungen dürfte es wohl entsprochen haben, daß der seiner Haare und damit seiner magischen

With this argument, Kaufmann invokes the traditional theory of Germanic sacral kingship, according to which the long hair of the Merovingian kings is a receptacle of their royal magic or luck (*Heil*) of ancient Germanic (i.e. pagan) origin. Kaufmann's argument further implies that the act of tonsure used to be a much more definite solution, despite the fact that Gregory of Tours and later Frankish authors paint a very different picture: as early as the beginning of the sixth century, Chararic's son had demonstrated to Clovis that royal tonsure did not necessarily end the royal aspirations of a headstrong prince.

It certainly cannot be denied that, in the perception of Frankish authors, Merovingian long hair had sacral qualities; there was much more to long hair than it merely being 'an old-fashioned hair-style denoting rank'.⁵⁶ This can be seen in the abovementioned case of Theuderic III, who claimed to have been unjustly tonsured, but who was nonetheless expected to grow back his hair prior to his restoration to the throne, even though none of his accusers questioned his pedigree or former rank. The fact that God had allowed him to be deprived of his hair certainly did not bode well for this deposed king. It is for this reason, perhaps, that it was not Childeric's judgement, but that of God, which Theuderic anticipated – and the fact that his hair grew back while residing at the monastery of St-Denis pointed to a favourable verdict.⁵⁷ Prior to the elevation of Pippin III to the kingship in 751, there appears to have been no exception to the rule: long hair was a *conditio sine qua non* for Frankish kingship. At the same time, though, the nobility was pragmatic enough to recognize royal potential in a tonsured Merovingian. Hair, after all, does grow – its symbolic meaning being so obvious that it apparently needed no comment.

Scholars venturing beyond the practical function of the Merovingian royal hairstyle as a symbol of kingship and a marker of social distinction, have frequently invoked the idea that the Franks perceived royal long hair as 'magical' – yet how they wielded this magic and where it originated from is mostly left unexplained. The early emergence of the *reges criniti* in the Frankish sources would imply a non-Christian origin of this powerful symbol, as it pre-dates the conversion of the Franks to Christianity. Yet it need not necessarily mean that the Franks continued to perceive long hair in a pagan capacity after their conversion. In fact, there is no evidence whatsoever that Merovingian kings from the sixth century onwards maintained pagan customs; they appear to have acted in all things Christian.

Kraft beraubte König von nun an auf immer den königlichen Rang verloren hatte. Wahrscheinlich wurde auch in der Frühzeit des Königtums der vom Volk abgesetzte König nach der Beraubung des heilskräftigen Haarschmuckes getötet, d.h. geopfert.'

⁵⁶ Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Medieval Kingship*, p. 17.

⁵⁷ See n. 48.

Not even the convert-king Clovis 'sacrificed' Chararik and son to some pagan deity, but initially had the former ordained a priest and latter a deacon. Theuderic III also did not anticipate the judgement of Woden in growing back his long hair, but invoked the Christian God and abided his time at the basilica of St-Denis. Lastly, to argue that Childeric III, who reigned more than two centuries after the conversion of Clovis, still rode an ox-cart in worship of the fertility goddess Nerthus, suggests not only that one has failed to perceive the context of Einhard's writing, but also implies a complete disregard for the gradual transformation of the Frankish world into a society ordered along Christian principles.⁵⁸ Within this increasingly Christianized environment, it might be worthwhile to look for the meaning of long hair in a Christian context, instead of invoking an otherwise unattested Germanic pantheon.

The Christianization of kingship

Their pagan origins notwithstanding, the Frankish elite appears to have integrated with relative ease into the Roman world and found itself under the spell of Christianity no later than Clovis's conversion in 507.⁵⁹ Before long, kingship came to be defined in Christian terms. In the administrative and legal documents issued by the courts of Clovis and his immediate successors, extensive use was made of a biblical rhetoric that derived mainly from the Old Testament and by which Frankish rulers sought to legitimate royal power and propagate ideas of government to their subjects.⁶⁰ The Bible, as Hen avers, developed into an authoritative social language that contemporaries could understand and were familiar with – a process that only intensified during the seventh century.⁶¹ In the panegyrics of Venantius Fortunatus (c. 540–c. 600), by which he hoped to gain royal patronage,

⁵⁸ Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', p. 167. For an extreme example in which the Merovingian kings are perceived as inherently pagan: D.H. Miller, 'Sacral Kingship, Biblical Kingship, and the Elevation of Pepin the Short', in T.F.X. Noble and J.J. Contreni (eds), *Religion, Culture, and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (Kalamazoo, 1987), pp. 131–54.

⁵⁹ I.N. Wood, 'Gregory of Tours and Clovis', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 63 (1985), vol. 2, pp. 249–72; M.A. Wes, 'Inleiding', in F.J.A.M. Meijer and M.A. Wes (eds), *Gregorius van Tours: Historiën* (Amsterdam, 1994), pp. 7–127, at pp. 37–51; D. Shanzer, 'Dating the Baptism of Clovis: The Bishop of Vienne vs the Bishop of Tours', *EME* 7 (1998), pp. 29–57. Lebecq, 'The Two Faces of King Childeric', argues that the father of Clovis had both a Roman and barbarian identity.

⁶⁰ E. Ewig, 'Zum christlichen Königsgedanken im Frühmittelalter', in T. Mayer (ed.), *Das Königtum. Seine geistigen und rechtlichen Grundlagen* (Lindau and Constance, 1954), pp. 7–74, at pp. 17–24; Hen, 'Uses of the Bible', pp. 283–4; Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', p. 168.

⁶¹ Hen, 'The Christianisation of Kingship', p. 169. See also: Ewig, 'Zum christlichen Königsgedanken', at pp. 21–4; Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, pp. 48–9. Cf. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, p. 120: 'Not only were the Franks disinterested in the Old Testament idea of royal unction, they were also unimpressed by biblical kingship in general.'

a Merovingian king like Chilperic I was not only portrayed as being powerful and warlike, but also as Christian and Christ-like.⁶²

The concept of Christian kingship, which dictates the ruler's responsibility for the upkeep and defence of the *ecclesia*, and requires him to rule in concord with its leading dignitaries and canonical precepts, underwent a rapid implementation in the course of the sixth century. The synergy between what we now tend to distinguish as worldly and religious affairs, as well as the ruler's self-perception as being, as Fortunatus expressed it, 'the pinnacle of the catholic faith',⁶³ is for example clearly expressed in the prologue of the royal edict issued by Chlothar II in 614.⁶⁴ Ideologically, therefore, the transition from the royal court to the monastery through the act of tonsure may have been less dramatic than is sometimes imagined, since both king and the clergy already inhabited the same Christian world, and worked towards the same eschatological end.⁶⁵ This increasingly Christianized perception of Frankish kingship, as witnessed not only in the writings of ecclesiastical dignitaries to their king, but also in the writings emanating from the royal court, leaves little room for the long-standing view that Merovingian kingship retained certain archaic or pagan qualities, such as its long hair imbued with pagan magic.

An alternative and more Christian interpretation of the royal hairstyle is provided by the small chronicle known as the *Breviary of the kings of the Franks and the mayors of the palace*, believed to have been written by someone named Erchanbert in c.826.⁶⁶ The text remained in obscurity both in medieval and in modern times. Today, owing to the *Breviary's* somewhat fantastical narration of Carolingian history and its unoriginal account of the Merovingian past, for which the author relied almost exclusively on the *Liber Historiae Francorum* (c.727), the text has mostly been ignored by historians who have mainly sought to mine medieval texts for historical fact.⁶⁷ There is also nothing to suggest that this text was

⁶² J.W. George, *Venantius Fortunatus. A Poet in Merovingian Gaul* (Oxford, 1992), p. 61.

⁶³ George, *Venantius Fortunatus*, p. 207: 'sis quoque catholicis religionis apex'.

⁶⁴ *Chlotarii II. edictum, 18 October 614*, Prologue, ed. A. Boretius, *MGH Capitularia* 1 (Hanover, 1883), p. 20. De Jong, 'Ecclesia', pp. 125–7.

⁶⁵ M.B. de Jong, 'Religion', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The Early Middle Ages. Europe 400–1000* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 131–64, at pp. 139–40; De Jong, 'Charlemagne's Church', p. 108; De Jong, 'Ecclesia'.

⁶⁶ *Breviarium Erchanberti*, ed. A. Ussermann, *Germaniae sacrae prodromus* 1 (St. Blasien, 1790). The author's identity is revealed in the margins of Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Reg.lat. 713 (s ix), fol. 62v.

⁶⁷ See for example Erchanbert's version of the events of 751/4: *Breviarium Erchanberti*, ed. Ussermann, p. xlviij; Pertz, introduction, in Pertz (ed.), *MGH Scriptores* 2 (Hanover, 1829), p. 327, who later edited the text for the Monumenta series, was 'non multum mirabimur' by the efforts of this author and only edited the original material of the Breviary. W. Wattenbach, W. Levison and H. Löwe, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen im Mittelalter. Vortzeit und Karolinger. III. Heft: Die Karolinger vom Tode Karls des Grossen bis zum Vertrag von Verdun* (Weimar, 1957), pp. 349–50. Wattenbach considered the work a 'fränkischen Volksgeschichte' and certain elements 'sagenhaft'.

widely read in the Middle Ages, despite the author's open hostility towards the later Merovingian kings and his reverence for the early Carolingians. The limited manuscript transmission of the *Breviary*, its geographical clustering in the Bodensee region, and the limited impact of this text on other historiographical narratives, all point to a modest and geographically concentrated readership. In all likelihood, its audience was restricted to the monastery of St-Gall and its affiliated houses.⁶⁸ But despite its peripheral or fantastical character, the *Breviary* does offer a unique, if perhaps isolated, ninth-century perspective on the Frankish past.

In its extant form, the *Breviary* constitutes a concise history of the Franks that ranges from the death of King Faramund to the year 826, with a particularly strong emphasis on the reigns of the two dynastic 'founders', Clovis I and Pippin III.⁶⁹ To connect their reigns, the author inserted an abbreviated history of the Frankish kings and their mayors of the palace and it is at this point that the author's erstwhile positive attitude towards the Merovingian kings begins to subside. When in his customary brevity Erchanbert addressed the appointment of Daniel/Childeric II to the Neustrian throne, he briefly lingered on this unlikely royal candidate, and added an original statement to a narrative otherwise selectively copied from the more elaborate *Liber Historiae Francorum*.

They established Daniel, who was formerly a clergyman, as king of the Franks, after he had grown hair on his head, and they called him Chilperic. **Because the royal lineage waned, they established that person, whom they could find of those related to the Merovingians, because the Merovingians, it is said, like the Nazarites in olden times did not have any hair cut from their heads.** And he ruled for six years.⁷⁰

In Erchanbert's view, Merovingian royal candidates were in short supply by the eighth century and more creative measures were required to ensure

⁶⁸ Thus far, I found three manuscripts that contain (a section of) the *Breviary*: Rome, BAV, Reg.lat. 713 (s ix); Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, jur. Qu. 134 (s ix/x); and Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, 547 (s xii). Each can be linked with the monastery of Sankt Gallen, or associated monastic houses.

⁶⁹ *Erchanberti breviarium*, ed. A. Ussermann, pp. xxxix–lii. Little has been written on this text. For the limited information available, see: Wattenbach, Levison and Löwe, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen*, III, pp. 349–50; S. Kaschke, 'Erchanbert', in R.G. Dunphy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle* (Leiden and Boston, 2010), pp. 582.

⁷⁰ *Erchanberti breviarium*, ed. Ussermann, p. xlvi [words added to the account of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* in bold]: 'Danielem quondam clericum, caesarie capitis crescente, regem Franci constituunt, quem Chilpericum nuncupant, **quia deficiente prosapia regum, illum, quem propinquorum Meroveis inuenire poterant, statuerunt, quia Merovei, ut aiunt, sicut antiquitus Nazaraei, nullo capitis crine inciso erant:** regnavitque annis VI.'

dynastic continuity. However, for the monk Daniel to become King Chilperic II, it was essential that he first grew back his hair, *sicut antiquitus Nazaraei*.

The earliest reference to Nazarites in the Bible is found in the Book of Numbers, where they are described as men or women who had become consecrated to the Lord.⁷¹ Their vow entailed that, for a limited period of time, they would abstain from the consumption of alcohol (or any derivative from the grapevine) and they would not come into contact with the dead. Also, the Nazarite vowed to let 'no razor . . . pass over his head, until the days be fulfilled of his consecration to the Lord'. For the duration of his vow, 'he shall be holy, and shall let the hair of his head grow'. The Nazarite's long hair therefore was the sign of his consecration and on this account was considered holy for the duration of his vow. In the event that the Nazarite was confronted with death, his hair became polluted, and his vows nullified. In that event, the Book of Numbers prescribed a purification ritual (*purgatio*), which among other things involved the removal of this now polluted hair, after which the Nazarite was expected to renew his vows and begin his period of consecration from the start.

Parallels between these ancient Hebrew ascetics and the Merovingian kings are easily drawn: both the Nazarite and the Merovingian king distinguished himself through long hair; in both cases their hairstyle signified more than a mere outward distinction; and, lastly, this means of distinction retained a degree of flexibility that, in the event of crisis, allowed for the restoration of their long hair and its corresponding sacral qualities through a formal ritual of cleansing – whether this is ritual sacrifice or monastic penance. On the other hand, it is difficult to recognize the proud Merovingian king, as encountered in the panegyrics of Fortunatus or the stories of Gregory of Tours, in the devout and ascetic figure of the 'ancient Nazarite' who, after all, was expected to shun wine, meat and death for the duration of his vows and for the purpose of his sanctification.

The Nazarite concept reappears in the Book of Judges, albeit in a different context. Here, it is said of the Israelite Judge Samson that: 'no razor shall touch his head: for he shall be a Nazarite of God, from his infancy, and from his mother's womb, and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines'.⁷² Samson hardly resembles the pious ascetic described in the Book of Numbers. Quite the contrary, Samson is introduced as a violent and powerful judge, who killed lions with his bare

⁷¹ Numbers VI.2. All biblical quotations have been taken from the modern Douay-Rheims bible translation.

⁷² Judges XIII.15.

hands and the enemies of Israel by the thousands.⁷³ Although Samson's hair signified his consecration to God in the Nazarite fashion, his consecration appears not to have been subject to the rules and regulations laid down in the Book of Numbers.

We might suppose that the bellicose tale of Samson was met with approval among the more secular-minded elements within the Frankish elite. It would certainly provide a fitting model for Frankish kingship. After all, Samson's strength lay in his long hair: 'if my head be shaven, my strength shall depart from me, and I shall become weak, and shall be like other men'.⁷⁴ Note the resemblance to what Childebert and Chlothar had planned for their nephews: 'to cut off their hair and so reduce them to the status of ordinary individuals'.⁷⁵ As soon as Samson's hair had been cut, despite the fact that it immediately began to grow back (and here we might see a parallel with God's favourable judgement of Theuderic III), Samson's 'strength departed from him', because 'the Lord was departed from him'.⁷⁶ It strongly resembles the manner in which the Franks dealt with their long-haired rulers: to tonsure a king meant to bereave him of his consecration to God and removed from him those qualities believed to set him apart from ordinary Franks. And a king deserted by God was, of course, not a king at all.

Although the model seems to fit, it has yet to be determined to what extent the Merovingians and their contemporaries were familiar with the Nazarite concept and, if so, in what context it was used. Gregory of Tours was certainly familiar with this tradition, yet spoke of it in an indirect way and used it primarily in its ascetic context, as encountered in the Book of Numbers. In his *Histories*, Gregory invoked the vows of the Nazarite when he related the fate of Bishop Ursicinus of Cahors, who was excommunicated for his open support of the rebel Gundovald and also had to 'do penance for three years, during which time he must refrain from cutting his hair or his beard, and from eating meat or drinking wine'.⁷⁷ Gregory did not explicitly identify the penitent as a Nazarite, nor did he state that Ursicinus' penance had been modelled on the Nazarite tradition, but the similarities are striking.

A more explicit reference to the biblical Nazarite is found in Isidore of Seville's *On the ecclesiastical offices* (c.610). Though not of Frankish origin,

⁷³ According to Notker the Stammerer, *Gesta Karoli Magni imperatoris*, c. 15, ed. H.F. Haefele, *MGH SRG* 12 (Berlin, 1959), pp. 78–80, Pippin enters into a fight with a lion and a bull in order to gain the respect of his men. Pippin, however, uses a sword.

⁷⁴ Judges XVI.17.

⁷⁵ See n. 41.

⁷⁶ Judges XVI.19 and 20.

⁷⁷ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* VIII.20, ed. Krusch, p. 386: 'ut, paenitentiam tribus annis agens, neque capillum neque barbam tonderit, vino et carnibus abstenerit'.

Isidore's treatise circulated widely in the Frankish world.⁷⁸ According to Isidore, the origin of the clerical tonsure is found in the Nazarite tradition as described in the Book of Numbers. However, as the New Testament took precedent over the Old, Isidore favoured the Pauline interpretation of long hair as a veil that was 'to be removed when one turns to the Lord'.⁷⁹ This Pauline interpretation, it would appear, is also what lay behind Bishop Ursicinus' punishment, who, having neglected his episcopal responsibilities, was made to grow his hair and 'veil' himself from God. In the writings of Gregory and Isidore, long hair no longer signified one's consecration to God, but the very opposite, and became associated with practices of penance and excommunication.

In Isidore's view, the symbol of consecration changed from the (temporary) cultivation of long hair to the act of tonsure and ritual sacrifice once the vow expired. The clergy were expected to follow apostolic example, and Isidore reminded his audience of Acts XVIII.18: 'Paul . . . taking his leave of the brethren . . . having shorn his head . . . for he had a vow.' Therefore to Isidore's question 'why, as among the ancient Nazarites, is the hair not first grown long and then cut?', Isidore could answer: 'it is now not fitting that the heads of those who are consecrated to the Lord be hidden by hair, but rather that they be revealed, because what was hidden in the sign of the prophet is now made known in the Gospel'.⁸⁰ Isidore's views continued to be valued in Carolingian times. His treatise on the symbolic meaning of the clerical tonsure was readily copied into the Acts of the Council of Aachen (816), as well as into Hrabanus Maurus' version of *On the ecclesiastical offices* (819).⁸¹ Insofar as hairstyle signified one's special relation to the divine, the ecclesiastical elite in the Carolingian age plainly subscribed to the Pauline view that long hair symbolized a 'veil' from God, whereas the tonsure signified one's special dedication to God.

Returning to the *Breviary* of Erchanbert, it is important to note that the analogy between the Merovingians and the Nazarites is not presented as the author's personal view, but, by adding the words *ut aiunt*, as one that was widely accepted. Even though this text is unique in associating Merovingian kingship with the Nazarite tradition, there is no evidence that Erchanbert's *sicut antiquitus Nazaraei* referred to a different context than the ascetic tradition described in the Book of Numbers, and which

⁷⁸ T.L. Knoebel (ed.), *Isidore of Seville: De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* (New York and Mahwah, 2008), p. 3. On the transmission of Isidore's work, p. 12.

⁷⁹ II Corinthians III.16.

⁸⁰ Isidore, *De Ecclesiasticis Officiis*, liber 2, IV, c. 5, ed. Knoebel, p. 71.

⁸¹ *Concilium Aquisgranense (816)*, c. 1, ed. A. Werminghoff, *MGH Concilia II*, 2 vols (Hanover and Leipzig, 1906), I, p. 318; Hrabanus Maurus, *De institutione clericorum*, ed. D. Zimpel, *Fontes Christiani*, Zweisprachige Neuausgabe christlicher Quellentexte aus Altertum und Mittelalter 61 (Turnhout, 2006).

was later taken up in the writings of Gregory, Isidore and Hrabanus. Though very few Merovingian kings passed for convincing ascetics, Chilperic II may well have been the exception. After all, he had spent most of his life as a monk at St-Denis and it may therefore have been no coincidence that Erchanbert chose to associate this Merovingian with the ancient Nazarites.

But could Erchanbert also have been thinking of the Nazarite Samson? There is reason to believe that the powerful figure of Samson had captured the imagination of at least one Merovingian royal couple: Chilperic I and Fredegund had named one of their sons Samson. As Gregory tells the story, Samson was born in 575, while the royal couple were being besieged in Tournai. Although Fredegund initially wanted to reject the boy, Chilperic persuaded her to accept him and had the bishop of Tournai baptize the young prince. Samson died of an illness before his fifth birthday.⁸² Gregory does not comment on the origins of the boy's name, atypical though it was for a Merovingian prince. The only contemporary we know of by that name is Bishop Samson of Dol, a Breton of Welsh origin who is believed to have attended the Council of Paris in 661/2.⁸³ It is possible, if not very likely, that the prince was named after this Breton bishop. Apart from having signed a capitulary, our knowledge of this bishop is limited to what was written in his saint's Life; if indeed he had had close ties to Chilperic's court, the author of the *Life of Saint Samson* cared not to reveal it.⁸⁴

A more likely alternative would be that Prince Samson was named directly after the bellicose Samson of the Old Testament. The Merovingian prince and the Israelite judge may have had more in common than hair length: both were born under more or less similar circumstances. As noted above, the Merovingian Samson was born during the siege of Tournai, 'when Chilperic was in a desperate situation, not knowing whether he could escape alive or would be killed instead'.⁸⁵ Likewise, the biblical story begins with the angelic foretelling of Samson's birth, 'who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines'.⁸⁶

On the whole, Merovingians were conservative in naming their offspring. Exceptions to the conventional Merovingian name pool are

⁸² Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* V.22, ed. Krusch, pp. 229–30; Wood, 'Deconstructing the Merovingian Family', p. 156.

⁸³ I.N. Wood, 'Forgery in Merovingian Hagiography', *Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Internationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica München, 16.–19. September 1986*, 5 vols (Hanover, 1988), V, pp. 369–84, at pp. 380–4.

⁸⁴ J.-C. Poulin, 'Hagiographie et politique. La première vie de Saint Samson de Dol', *Francia* 5 (1977), pp. 1–26; P. Flobert, *La vie ancienne de Saint Samson de Dol* (Paris, 1997), pp. 10–12. The oldest saint's life has been dated to the seventh century.

⁸⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum* IV.51, ed. Krusch, p. 189: 'Chilpericus autem in acipite casu defixus in dubium habebat an evaderet an periret.'

⁸⁶ Judges XIII.1–5.

extremely rare. Apart from Samson, only the eighth-century Merovingian monk Daniel bore a name that appears to have been inspired by the Old Testament, although upon his election as king he, too, donned a more conventional – and recognizable – royal name. There is nothing to suggest that members of the Merovingian family were named after influential non-Merovingian contemporaries, whether these were laymen, clergymen or saints. In the case of Prince Samson, even if the source of the inspiration that led to his exceptional name cannot be established with certainty, it is likely that Chilperic was at least conscious of the possible analogy between his own station and that of that rather exceptional Nazarite ruler.

To sum up, although the ascetic Nazarite-type prevails in the extant ecclesiastical sources of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods, there are grounds to assume that in the later sixth century the Merovingians had a certain affinity with the biblical Samson, who, being Nazarite and Judge, embodied both the religious and the profane, as was expected of an early medieval ruler. Samson's long hair specifically symbolized his status as a Nazarite and held the key to his extraordinary strength, endowed to him by God. Although the Merovingian hairstyle may have dated back to pre-Christian times, it nevertheless served an identical purpose. Appropriating the biblical Samson as a Christian model for Merovingian kingship may well have provided the newly converted Merovingian kings with a biblical model with which they were able to sanctify their kingship within a Christian context, or at the very least with which they could give a Christian meaning to an older hairstyle.

Erchanbert's brief reference to the 'ancient Nazarites' cannot be pinned with any certainty to either of these traditions. This ambiguity may have been intentional: the transformation of the monk Daniel into the long-haired King Chilperic II may have reminded Erchanbert of the long-haired ascetics he would have known from the Book of Numbers. At the same time, it might have been that royal name that prompted Erchanbert's memory of Chilperic I, who had named his son after the warlike Nazarite-Judge Samson. Although the evidence is slight, let us for now entertain the possibility that this was indeed a Christianized model for Merovingian kingship that a contemporary Frankish elite would have been able to recognize. How would this affect our perception of the transition from Merovingian to Carolingian kingship?

Carolingian kingship and the Bible

Compared to our limited knowledge of Merovingian royal rituals, much more is known of the rites of kingship performed by the Carolingians,

eager as they were to legitimize their rule. According to the *Continuations to the chronicle of Fredegar*, generally held to be the most contemporary account of these events, Pippin 'was elevated to the kingship, as ancient order required, through the election of all the Franks, with the consecration of the bishops, and the subjection of the great men, to the royal throne'.⁸⁷ Slightly later texts, such as the *Clause on the unction of Pippin*⁸⁸ and the *Royal Frankish annals* more or less corroborate the Continuator's testimony, though they provide additional detail by stating that 'episcopal consecration' entailed an anointment 'with holy chrism by the hands of the blessed priests of Gaul' – a ritual that would be repeated in 754, though this time by the hand of Pope Stephen II (752–7).⁸⁹ Within a Frankish context, these royal inauguration rituals by which Pippin III was made king of the Franks in 751/4 are generally considered to be a Carolingian innovation.⁹⁰ Since similar rites of royal anointing are known to have occurred at an earlier time in Ireland and Visigothic Spain, there has been some debate on who inspired whom, but there can be no doubt that the legitimizing source was ultimately the same in each of these cases: they all modelled themselves after the kings of the Old Testament.⁹¹ Pippin's election by the people, his episcopal anointment, and the elite's recognition of his royal seniority were key elements of the Carolingian royal inauguration ritual, and closely echo the rites by which the biblical kings of Israel were inaugurated.⁹²

The early Carolingians and their entourage invoked this powerful biblical typology to legitimize their usurpation of the Frankish throne. Such typological use of the Bible, regarded as a model for emulation and a framework through which to interpret contemporary history, featured prominently in early medieval thinking.⁹³ In the Carolingian appropriation of this biblical rhetoric, care had to be taken not to connect Pippin,

⁸⁷ *Chronicarum Fredegarii, Continuationes*, c. 33, ed. Wattenbach, p. 182: 'Pippinus electione totius Francorum in sedem regni cum consecratione episcoporum et subiectione principum . . . ut antiquitus ordo deposcit, sublimatur in regno.'

⁸⁸ *Clausula de unctione Pippini*, MGH SRM 1, 2 vols (Hanover, 1885), II, pp. 465–6: 'Unctionem sancti chrismatum per manus beatorum sacerdotum Galliarum.' Cf. A.J. Stoclet, 'La "Clausula de unctione Pippini regis": mises au point et nouvelles hypothèses', *Francia* 8 (1980), pp. 1–41; A.J. Stoclet, 'La Clausula de unctione Pippini regis, vingt ans après', *Revue Belge* 78 (2000), pp. 719–71.

⁸⁹ *Annales regni Francorum*, s.a. 750, MGH SRG 6, pp. 8 and 10. Cf. R. McKitterick, 'The Illusion of Royal Power in the Carolingian Annals', *English Historical Review* 115 (2000), pp. 1–20.

⁹⁰ The literature on this subject is vast. See for a variety of viewpoints and additional literature on the subject: Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, pp. 79–106; Nelson, *Carolingian Royal Ritual*, pp. 102–3; E. Boshof, 'Die Vorstellung vom sakralen Königtum in karolingisch-ottonischer Zeit', in Erkens (ed.), *Das frühmittelalterliche Königtum*, pp. 331–58, at pp. 335–9.

⁹¹ Boshof, 'Vorstellung vom sakralen Königtum', pp. 335–6.

⁹² De Jong, 'Charlemagne's Church', pp. 107–8. Cf. I Samuel VIII.22 and X.1; II Samuel II.4 and V.4; I Kings I.38–40; I Chronicles XI.3, XII.38 and XXIX.22–25; and II Chronicles XXIII.8–11.

⁹³ Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed', pp. 108–9. For a nuanced view of the typological use of the Bible in eighth-century Francia, see Garrison, 'The Franks as the New Israel?', pp. 117–18.

the first Carolingian king, too tightly to his most obvious biblical prefiguration Saul, the first of the kings of Israel, who, on account of his ultimate rejection by God, made for a particularly bad royal example. Rather, those seeking to flatter their Carolingian patrons – whether these were popes, chroniclers or courtiers – favoured comparisons with role models such as David or Solomon, who in spite of their occasional wrongdoings, at least retained God's favour.⁹⁴

To present himself as standing in a biblical tradition not only boded well for Pippin's personal legitimacy as king and the Lord's anointed, but may also have helped to justify his bid for royal authority. After all, had not the people of Israel demanded a king from Samuel and rejected their erstwhile judges? And had not God commanded the prophet Samuel: 'listen to their voice and appoint them a king'?⁹⁵ The implied analogy would be particularly potent if indeed Merovingian kings had presented themselves in the image of one of those judges, namely the long-haired Nazarite Samson. As the Book of Judges is followed by the Books of Kings, so too had the Carolingians begun a new chapter in Frankish history. The Carolingians had chosen a different model for kingship, and outwardly distinguished themselves not through long hair, but through anointment with holy chrism.⁹⁶ The source of their royal legitimation, however, remained intrinsically the same, as was its implied symbolic meaning: for a Nazarite like Samson, his long hair signified his consecration to God; for the kings of Israel, their special relationship to God was signified through the ritual of anointing. Both dynasties, therefore, tapped the same source of divinely bestowed authority.

Apart from the symbolism in terms of developing biblical narrative, Pippin may have had additional reasons for switching royal models, i.e. opting for being anointed instead of growing his hair to a royal length in the manner of the Merovingian kings. By the eighth century, examples abounded of tonsured kings who found their way back to the throne, and of long-haired kings who had been powerless to prevent misfortune. As Einhard famously noted, 'although [the Merovingian dynasty] might

⁹⁴ The problematic figure of Saul is debated by patristic and early medieval exegetists such as Augustine, Origines, Bede and Hrabanus Maurus. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship*, pp. 75–8; J. McClure, 'Bede's Old Testament Kings', in P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (eds), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society. Studies presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 76–98. Cf. A. Demyttenaere, 'Clovis en de Kanaänieten. Het heilshistorisch perspectief van Gregorius van Tours', in C.M. Cappon *et al.* (eds), *Ad fontes: opstellen aangeboden aan prof. dr. C. van de Kieft ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid als hoogleraar in de middeleeuwse geschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1984), pp. 13–38, at p. 36.

⁹⁵ I Samuel VIII.22.

⁹⁶ Cf. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, pp. 21–3, who states that Pippin cut his hair short, in the Roman style. However, there is no evidence for this. With hair no longer a criterion for power, references to hairstyles vanished from the sources.

seem to have ended with [Childeric III], it had in fact been without any strength for a long time and offered nothing of any worth except the empty name of king'.⁹⁷ Adding to the message that long hair no longer signalled royal potency, Einhard portrayed the powerless Childeric as idly sitting 'back on his throne, with flowing hair, his beard uncut, satisfied with the name of king and the appearance of ruling'.⁹⁸ Long hair as a symbol of royal power had been subject to erosion. Since God had repeatedly allowed the Merovingian kings to become powerless, it would have become increasingly difficult for the Franks to recognize God's favour in the long hair of their kings.

The Carolingians needed a new symbol to illustrate their bond to God was a special one. Royal anointing was in this context an innovation, yet functioned along the same lines as long hair had for their Merovingian predecessors. Through this public rite of inauguration, the king was able to distinguish himself from his subjects, becoming consecrated to God by following a biblical precedent. However, anointing did have one major advantage: in times of crisis, it took more than a pair of scissors to remove a king from office. In the meantime, learned Carolingians worked to deconstruct the age-old myth of long hair as a vessel of God-bestowed *virtus*. Einhard's introduction to the *Life of Charlemagne*, as noted above, may be one such example. But if indeed biblical commentaries carried political weight, another example might be found in Hrabanus Maurus' *Commentary on the Book of Judges* (843), in which the abbot of Fulda summarily dealt with Samson's claim that his power resided in his long hair.⁹⁹ According to Hrabanus, God cared about good deeds, not hair. If Merovingian protagonists had indeed pointed to the biblical Samson to support their claims of kingship, their successors made sure to strip this symbol of its power.

Conclusion

There is ample proof that medieval society perceived itself and the world it inhabited as ordered according to fundamentally religious principles. Using all sorts of rites and symbols, society's leaders were expected to tend to the mediation between the natural and supernatural and protect the divine cult. But although it is easy to identify early medieval kingship

⁹⁷ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 1, ed. Holder-Egger, pp. 2–3. Trans: D. Ganz, *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer. Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London, 2008), pp. 18–19.

⁹⁸ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 1, ed. Holder-Egger, p. 3. Trans: Ganz, *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer*, p. 19.

⁹⁹ Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentary on the Book of Judges*, PL 108, col. 1196C. On the use of Biblical exegesis as political commentary, see De Jong, 'Ecclesia', p. 121; Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mus-tache*, pp. 23–4.

as having been charismatic and sacral, it is, as this article has attempted to demonstrate, problematic to recognize and isolate distinctively 'Germanic' or 'archaic' qualities in the Merovingian kings of the sixth century onwards. Based on the extant sources, limited in number and one-sided though they may be, the Christianization of the Frankish royal house was not a process of centuries, to reach completion only with the arrival of the pious Carolingians, but one of decades at best.

Of all the purported archaic symbols donned by the Merovingian kings to express their royal authority, their long hair has proven to be the most durable, and the most difficult for the modern historian to explain. This is not surprising. To quote Paul Dutton: 'Hair is a ravelling riddle of symbolism, insensation, and corporal tenuity; it is also the only member of the body that we can easily and effectively change.'¹⁰⁰ But although the Merovingian hairstyle may have remained more or less the same for centuries, it would be erroneous to assume that its symbolic meaning therefore also remained unchanged. After all, symbolic meaning adapts to meet the requirements of a changing environment, if it is to last. The Merovingian conversion to Christianity in the early sixth century demanded the reinvention of Frankish kingship: the translation of its inherent symbolism, rituals and function to a Christian model. Luckily, Scripture, and the Old Testament in particular, is full of authoritative models of sacred authority, many of which were readily adopted in the Frankish world, Merovingian *and* Carolingian.

Admittedly, the evidence presented to support the hypothesis that, in the course of the sixth century, Merovingian kings, at least with regard to their characteristic hairstyle, modelled themselves after the biblical Samson, is circumstantial. It is based chiefly on a brief remark in an early ninth-century chronicle from St-Gall and the name of one Merovingian prince, who died in childhood. We have to take into account the possibility that Erchanbert's analogy between the long-haired kings of the Franks and the Nazarites of biblical antiquity was a ninth-century chimera. It may have had no bearing on contemporary Merovingian reality, but instead fitted the context in which the author wrote – perhaps not unlike the nineteenth-century chimera that attributed a Germanic meaning to the Merovingian hairstyle. However, the fact that a sixth-century Merovingian king gave one of his sons the same name as the biblical Nazarite-Judge Samson, suggests at the very least an awareness of the similarities between this ancient Israelite *typus* and the Merovingian king. It certainly would have made for an attractive Christian model for rulership to a Frankish audience that became increasingly susceptible to biblical typological thought. Even if the Merovingian hairstyle had its

¹⁰⁰ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, p. 3.

roots in a pagan past, its symbolic and charismatic significance was easily transplanted onto an increasingly Christianized environment through the model of Samson.

Consequently, Merovingian kings would have considered themselves consecrated to God on account of their long hair, much like their Carolingian successors considered themselves consecrated on account of having been anointed. Both dynasties invoked the Old Testament as a source of legitimation, though the Carolingians also made clever use of the Old Testament's internal narrative to justify their usurpation of the Frankish throne. Just as the people of ancient Israel had called for a king, so, too, was the Carolingian coup justified as the people's choice for a divinely favoured ruler, capable of winning battles and averting disaster. Thus an answer can be given to a fundamental question once posed by Enright: 'why should the Franks have accepted the idea of a direct relationship between an oiling ritual and the charismatic side of kingship when the rite was one which had never before been seen in the northern regions of the continent?'¹⁰¹ Though the ritual itself may have been new in a royal context, its source was neither alien, nor any less sacral, than the Franks expected from their kings. Samson had simply lost his long hair, and God's favour now came to reside in a new type of leader, anointed by the prophets of Francia, at the behest of the Frankish people.

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¹⁰¹ Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons*, p. 107.