

**CONSPICUOUSLY BY THEIR ABSENCE: LONG-HAIRED KINGS,
SYMBOLIC CAPITAL, SACRED KINGSHIP AND OTHER
CONTEMPORARY MYTHS.**

**CONSPÍCUO POR SUA AUSÊNCIA: REIS DE LONGOS CABELOS,
CAPITAL SIMBÓLICO, MONARQUIA SAGRADA E OUTROS MITOS
CONTEMPORÂNEOS.**

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Abstract: The character of post-Roman government has long been a central issue in understanding the transition from the Roman Empire to the Early Medieval kingdoms. One of the models for understanding the process focuses on the transition of a somewhat rational Roman government to a sacred 'Germanic' kingship. Even though this interpretation has long been disproved, it has been brought back to life in a new form, as a reading in cultural anthropology, using as a case example the Long-Haired Merovingian Kings. This article questioned this new approach and reviews the flaws of the historiographic bases of this interpretation and proposes a new reading of the sources.

Keywords: Sacred Kingship, Merovingians, Historiography

Resumo: O caráter do governo pós-Romano tem sido por muito tempo uma questão essencial para o entendimento da transição do Império Romano aos Reinos da Alta Idade Média. Um dos modelos explicativos deste processo enfoca na transição de um governo romano de certa forma racional para uma monarquia sagrada 'germânica'. Mesmo que esta interpretação já tenha sido há muito questionada, ela foi trazida de volta recentemente sob uma nova forma, por uma leitura de antropologia cultural do caso dos longos cabelos dos reis merovíngios. Este artigo questiona esta nova abordagem, fazendo uma revisão das falhas nesta tradição historiográfica, e propõe uma nova leitura das fontes.

Palavras-chaves: monarquia sagrada, Merovíngios, historiografia.

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1.

The nature of post-Roman Gaul has long been a hotly debated topic. Since the eighteenth-century debates on the origins of French monarchy and its relation to the nobility, passing through the character of the Frankish settlement and finally to the recent debate on identity,¹ the history of France—much more than the history of Gaul or Francia—has been the centre of the debate on the character of the first medieval centuries. Of the many fronts of this debate, one particular subject has escaped the footnotes of history and got mixed into a much larger debate. The hairstyle of the Frankish kings became, suddenly, an important sign of the identity of the European world.

The eighteenth century did not care much about the particularities of Merovingian hair. That is indeed one of the few things on which the Count of Boulainvillier and the Abbot Dubos agreed, opposite sides on the debate about the nobility in France. The long hair was a Germanic trait, they believed, that distinguished the Germans from the Romans.² Being tonsured, added Boulainvillier, was actually a strong form of humiliation, for any barbarian.³ Only a century later, Jacob Grimm would call attention to the fact that the long hair was a marker of the Merovingians, and that they were the only ones allowed to use it;⁴ hairstyle and beard were among the characteristics he was looking for in his newly devised *Germanentum*, his unified Germanic past. Later on the nineteenth century, the so-called 'Classic School' in Germany showed little concern about the hair fashion of the Merovingians. Their interest was in the legal history of the monarchy, and in making sure the *Germanentum* was conforming properly to the liberal democratic ideas of that period.

¹ WOOD, Ian. "Barbarians, Historians, and the Construction of National Identities." *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1, no. 1 (2008): 61-81.

² BOULAINVILLIERS, Henri de. *Essai sur la noblesse de France*. Amsterdam: ?, 1732; DUBOS, Jean-Baptiste. *Histoire critique de l'établissement de la monarchie française*. Amsterdam: J. Wetstein & G. Smith, 1735.

³ BOULAINVILLIERS, *Essai sur la noblesse de France*.

⁴ GRIMM, Jacob. *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer I*. 15th ed. Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1992.

Nineteenth-century Germanic past was rational, liberal, and concerned with the stricture of the law. And also a touch disconnected with reality. Just like its historians.⁵

2.

The reaction to the Classic School—and its rationalist, legalist and, at the end of the day, nationalist approach to history—produced in Germany the so-called ‘New Constitutional History’, that cast away the old bourgeois liberalism in exchange for a primitive and aristocratic Germanic past. The turning point was the German defeat in 1918, and the reaction to democratic ideas that followed. As the political thought in Germany departed from the liberal ideas of the Enlightenment, towards the ‘heroic’ approach of the *Frontkämpfer*, the formality and the rational legalism of the nineteenth century gave way to sacred kings, timeless aristocracies, and cult-associations of ecstatic young men.⁶ The long hair of the Merovingian kings, restricted to the royal family, became a certain sign of the antiquity of Germanic aristocracy, the divine origins and the magical power of the kings.

The idea of sacred kingship was not a creation of *Germanistik*, or of the ‘New Constitutional History’. It was conceived for the study of non-European peoples, tested in some Scandinavian material and finally, with the ‘conquest of Scandinavia’ by *Germanistik*,⁷ transferred to continental studies of early Germanic peoples.⁸ The slow

⁵ Along the period, there is a change in the direction of some sort of a sacred kingship. At the end of the first half of the eighteenth century, for example, Waitz perceived the long hair just as a marker of kingship: Gundovald, to claim it, had only to let the hair grow WAITZ, Georg. *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte*. Kiel: Schwers'sche Buchhandlung, 1847.. On the first years of the twentieth century, Brunner already conceived the Merovingian monarchy as pagan, but still thought the long hair was only a distinguishing marker, not only to the Franks, but also to Burgundians and Visigoths BRUNNER, Heinrich. *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte*. 3rd ed. Berlin: Verlag von Druncker / Humblot, 1961.. PICARD, Eve. *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*, Skandinavistische Arbeiten. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätverlag, 1991; GOFFART, Walter. "Two notes on Germanic Antiquities Today." *Traditio* 50 (1995): 9-30.

⁶ SEE, Klaus von. *Deutsche Germanen-ideologie: vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart*. Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1970; GOFFART, "Two notes on Germanic Antiquities Today."; GRAUS, František. *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*. Prague: Tschechoslowakische Akademie der Wissenschaft [Nakladatelství Československé akademie věd], 1965.

⁷ GOFFART, "Two notes on Germanic Antiquities Today."; SEE, *Deutsche Germanen-ideologie: vom Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart*.

⁸ GOFFART, "Two notes on Germanic Antiquities Today."; Picard, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*.

development of the ideas of *Germanentum* and what would be later called *Kontinuitätstheorie* provided the bases for the constitution of the new approach to Germanic society and kingship. One of the fundamental pillars was erected by Otto Höfler in 1934, with the idea that the central agent of the German continuity was the *Männerbünde*, the association of young men, devoted to Wodan. The god was promoted to the highest position of the Germanic pantheon, and the *Männerbünde* to one of the key groups of the Germanic continuity. The military leader of the war band, the Wodanic *Heerkönig*, was the state creating force that produced Germanic continuity.⁹ A few years later, on the eve of the invasion of Poland, Höfler defended that the Germanic people were the bearers of the continuity, a continuity of “*der Rasse, der Sprache, des Raums und des Staates.*”¹⁰ The central force of this movement would be perceived in the medieval *Heerkönigtum*, the successor of the Germanic *Wodankönigtum*.¹¹ The second major contribution was done by the eminent Danish scholar Vilhelm Grønberch, who introduced the idea of *Heil*, the German form of the Polynesian *Mana*, as the magical property of the sacred. The magic *Heil* was the foundation of Germanic election, and the presence of the *Heil* the legitimacy of kingship.¹² For him, *Heil*—that was stronger in children and women, both longhaired—was preserved in the long hair of the Merovingians.¹³ The concept of *Heil* and of sacral kingship was ambiguous enough to fit various interpretations and uses.¹⁴ In the 1950's, Karl Hauck was the main responsible for the recovery and restatement of the major line of the *Sakraltheorie* and the *Kontinuitätstheorie*, suggesting a new approach based on comparative religion to unveil from medieval texts, the mysterious

⁹ HÖFLER, Otto. *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen*. Frankfurt: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1934; Picard, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*.

¹⁰ HÖFLER, Otto. "Das germanische Kontinuitätsproblem." *Historische Zeitschrift* 157, no. 1 (1938): 1-26.

¹¹ PICARD, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*.

¹² GRØNBECH, Vilhelm. *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*. 3 vols. Vol. 2. Hamburg: Henseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937; Picard, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*.

¹³ GRØNBECH, *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*.

¹⁴ On the polysemy of the *Königsheil*, PICARD, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*.

divine origins of the Germanic royal dynasties, a method that would eventually be picked up by Wenskus and Wolfram.¹⁵

The magical interpretation of the long hair became the rule in the 1950's. P.E. Schramm, for example, understood it as part of the "*primitiv-magischer Königsheil*," an old fashioned hairstyle the Merovingians had preserved and used like a golden crown. Kaufmann phrased it in similar terms: "*Das Königshaar war Symbol des Königtums wie Ausdruck der magischen Heilskraft des Königs.*"¹⁶ For Wallace-Hadrill, the Frankish kings had some sacral character, linked to a cult of Wodan. The long hair, argued the British scholar, symbolized "social standing, as much as magical properties." In the early 1970's he still subscribed heartily to the idea of a sacral kingship, and accepted the cultic nature of Germanic society, paying respects to Otto Höfler in his book about Germanic kingship.¹⁷ In 1988, Eugen Ewig saw the long hair and the spear—which we can see with some effort on Childeric's ring—as a sign of the cult of Wodan.¹⁸ And in the 1990's, Valerie Flint asserted that:

We shall never know for certain whether this long hair was simply a badge of status, or whether it represented a deeper belief in the potency and supernatural quality of the person upon whose head it grew. The

¹⁵ HAUCK, Karl. "Lebensnormen und Kultmythen in germanischen Stammes- und Herrschergenealogien." *Saeculum* 6 (1955): 186-223; WENSKUS, Reinhard. *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: Das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen gentes*. Cologne Böhlau Verlag, 1961; WOLFRAM, Herwig. *The Roman Empire and its Germanic peoples*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997; WOLFRAM, Herwig. "Origo et Religio: Ethnic Traditions and Literature in Early Medieval Texts." In *From Roman Province to Medieval Kingdoms*, edited by Thomas F. X. Noble, 70-90. London: Routledge, 2006; GILLET, Andrew. "Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology." In *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Andrew Gillett, 1-18. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002; MURRAY, Alexander C. "Reinhard Wenskus on 'Ethnogenesis', Ethnicity, and the Origin of the Franks." In *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Andrew Gillett. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002.

¹⁶ SCHRAMM, Percy Ernst. "Zur Haar- und Barttracht als Kennzeichen im germanischen Altertum und im Mittelalter." In *Herrschaft und Staatssymbolik, Beiträge zu ihrer Geschichte vom dritten bis zum sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, edited by Percy Ernst Schramm, 118-27. Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1954; KAUFMANN, Ekkehart. "Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige." *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte. (Germanische Abteilung)* 72 (1955): 177-85.

¹⁷ WALLACE-HADRILL, John Michael. *The Long-Haired Kings*. London: Methuen & Co., 1962; Wallace-Hadrill, John Michael. *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

¹⁸ EWIG, Eugen. *Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1988.

latter is at least a possibility, however, and Clovis seems to have inclined to this last view, for when he cut off the hair of the Merovingian [sic] Chararic and his son, he was still afraid lest 'they threatened to let their hair grow again, and compass is death.'¹⁹

Amongst the Merovingians, she proposed, the origin of this magical nature came from "an extraordinary alliance between their mother and a sea monster."²⁰ The same idea was still a common place in the 1990's in Continental scholarship.²¹

The theories of sacred kingship received very serious critiques over the years, as did the whole edifice of 'Germanic Antiquities.'²² In a nutshell, sacral kingship, ancient nobles, divine origins, are all products of the same Germanic unit conceived by Grimm and eventually accepted as a fact. But there is no evidence for any kind of common culture in the ancient Germania, besides the reconstructions of philology and the propaganda of early twenty-century politicians. Historical and archaeological sources tell us a very different development of the many groups that co-habited, often on less than friendly terms, Central Europe.²³ Without major geographic and chronological leaps, there is very little evidence supporting a sacred character of early medieval kingship. So far, these critiques of the sacral nature of kingship have rendered the approach untenable, and we would assume the magical interpretation of the Merovingian kings is properly destined to be studied as a particular trace of early twentieth-century historiography, and not a characteristic of early medieval society. Or is it?

¹⁹ FLINT, Valerie. *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

²⁰ Ibid; MURRAY, Alexander C. "Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'." In *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History. Essays presented to Walter Goffart*, edited by Alexander C. Murray, 121-52. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998..

²¹ For example: WOLFRAM, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic peoples*. But also Michel Rouche, who seems to understand the Gothic conquest of Gaul as the Nazi invasion of France, with Roman bishops as *la Résistance* and the Franks as the liberators, did not fail to portrait the sacred kingship expressed by the long hair. ROUCHE, Michel. *Clovis*. Paris: Fayard, 1996.

²² The refutation of started with Henri Pirenne, early in the 1930's PIRENNE, Henri. "Le char à boeufs des derniers mérovingiens." In *Mélange Paul Thomas*, 555-60. Bruges: Imp. Saint Catherine, 1930. More recently, GRAUS, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*; Picard, *Germanisches Sacralkönigtum*; GOFFART, "Two notes on Germanic Antiquities Today."; Murray, "Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'."

²³ GRAUS, *Volk, Herrscher und Heiliger im Reich der Merowinger*.

3.

In 2003, Maximilian Diesenberger offered a new interpretation of the long-haired Merovingians, published in the series of *Transformations of the Roman World*.²⁴ He proposes to examine the context to better understand the meaning of the hair,²⁵ and one of his first steps, after quickly summarizing the modern commentators, is to debunk explanations involving the idea of a sacred kingship, subscribing to Eve Picard's emphatic critiques on the viability of the approach²⁶. Having dismissed the idea of sacred kingship, Diesenberger set aside the connections of the long hair with any of the mythical origins of the Franks, concluding that it is "clear that the hair of the Merovingians was not usually connected with sacral context by the contemporaries."²⁷ On the contrary, he suggests that the prohibition on *Lex Salica*²⁸ to shave a *puer crinitus* is related to the Roman tradition of *capillatura*, proving that the long hair did not have "pure 'Germanic' roots" either.²⁹

4.

For his own interpretation of the long hair, Max Diesenberger relies on an analysis of the context of some tonsures. One of the central sources for his interpretation is the well-known incident involving Chlothild and the murder of the sons of Chlodomer, in which the queen is presented with a pair of scissors and a

²⁴ DIESENBERGER, Maximilian. "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms." In *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Richard Corradini, Maximilian Diesenberger and Helmut Reimitz, 173-212. Leiden: Brill, 2003; *ibid*.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁶ He concludes: "As this overview shows, the *reges criniti* have mostly been analysed in the context of the debate over sacral kingship and 'Königsheil' and obscured by the confused terminology this debate has created. (...) Picard's deconstruction showed that the scholarly tradition she criticized not only bore a heavy ideological burden, but exhibited real problems with method and language. This conclusion in turn raised the question of whether the ensemble of textual passages studied by the various research traditions (for instance the *Germania* of Tacitus and the Old Norse sagas) could in fact be subsumed within the category of 'Königsheil' or sacral kingship at all." *ibid*.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

²⁸ *Pactus legis Salicae* 24, 2.

²⁹ DIESENBERGER, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.." I wonder why he insists in putting "Germanic" always within inverted commas, while keeping the same meaning of a specific *Germanentum*.

sword, so that she could choose the fate of her grandsons, death or tonsure.³⁰ What Diesenberger underlines in the episode is the emotional reaction of the Queen to the prospect of having her grandsons tonsured. For him, Chlothild reacted not out of love for the children, but to the threat to the “symbolic power” — a concept he borrows from Pierre Bourdieu—represented by the long hair. “Chlothild’s decision to allow her grandsons to be slain rather than have their hair cut underlines the fact that the hairstyle of the Merovingians represented part of the symbolic capital of the family.”³¹ The same emotional outrage is present in other event involving Merovingian symbolic capital: when the troops finally lay their hands in Gundovald, the pretender, his body is desecrated because he attempted to steal the symbolic capital of the kings. For Diesenberger, it is a sign that the Frankish people also supported Merovingian exclusivity.³²

5.

The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu appears to be very important for this new interpretation of the long hair of the Merovingians.³³ The French sociologist, currently very appreciated in certain quarters of early medieval studies, has a very extensive production, and an interesting toolbox of concepts created to deal with the issues he tackled. Symbolic capital is one of those tools, created in an attempt to construct a *science générale de l'économie des pratiques*, whose objective was to go beyond the material scope of economic thought and include other fields of human experience in the dynamics of practices.³⁴ For such, Bourdieu contrasted economic capital with

³⁰ Gregory of Tours, *Libri Historiarum* X, 3.18.

³¹ DIESENBERGER, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.."

³² Ibid.

³³ 'Symbolic capital' is not the only concept Diesenberger adopted from Bourdieu. *La distinction* and the idea of social space are other examples: *ibid.*

³⁴ The concept is used throughout his work. BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. Genève: Librairie Droz, 1972. To the application of the concept to culture, as 'cultural capital', and its uses to modern (in contrast to 'pre-modern') society, BOURDIEU, Pierre. *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1979. Since his ideas permeate most of his work and are rather hard to pin down, there are numerous commentators. I found particularly useful JENKINS, Richard. *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge, 1992; SWARTZ, David. *Culture & Power*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997. They should be used with caution, since often their attempt to synthesize produced a more regular and logical structure than intended by the author.

'cultural', 'symbolic' and even 'physical' capital (i.e. the availability of help in times of need, for war or agricultural work). Bourdieu's own definition:

Forme transformée et par là dissimulée du capital 'économique' et [de la force] physique, le capital symbolique produit, ici comme ailleurs, son effet propre dans la mesure et dans la mesure seulement où il dissimule que ces espèces "matérielles" du capital sont à son principe et, en dernière analyse, au principe de ses effets.³⁵

Material capital, and the open use of its capacities, cannot assure an unopposed exercise of power, therefore, economic power has to be converted into a social recognized and legitimate form, usually produced by symbolic destruction of goods, gifts and other forms of largesse, public displays of generosity. The conversion of material capital can only create symbolic capital inasmuch as this power is rendered unrecognizable. In such a guise, power is no longer perceived as power, but "as legitimate demands for recognition, deference, obedience, or the service of others."³⁶ In pre-modern societies, the transformation of economic capital in symbolic capital would be produced almost without loss and, since symbolic capital is the only form of legitimate capital, most wealth would be quickly turned into prestige, honour and grandeur.³⁷

6.

How does Diesenberger's perception of Merovingian Gaul fits into this context? Let us take another example of symbolic capital proposed by the author. Diesenberger claims that the famous story of the Ewer of Soissons³⁸ resulted in the production of symbolic capital. For him, "[t]he events on the Marchfield are an excellent indication of how during negotiation for economic capital—in this case, booty—symbolic capital, the bond between social groups, was won."³⁹

³⁵ BOURDIEU, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

³⁶ SWARTZ, *Culture & Power*.

³⁷ BOURDIEU, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

³⁸ Greg. *Hist.* 2.27

³⁹ DIESENBERGER, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.."

Symbolic capital can be produced in the division of booty. Actually, the *distribution* of the spoils of war, from the king to the warriors, as a form of enhancing the leaders prestige and assuring the continuous obedience and attachment of his war band is one of the major forms of accumulation of symbolic capital in the period. When—and only when—the undivided spoils are perceived as naturally belonging to the leader, and this one appears to *voluntarily* distributes it to the troops, the economic capital—the booty to be used as reward for the service—is turned into a generous gift, producing awe, respect and admiration, and ensuring the service will continue to be provided *because* of this admiration, not for the vile gain. The economic transaction is still performed but in an *unrecognizable* form.

The story of the Ewer of Soisson—ignoring, for the sake of argument, that the historicity of the tale is, at best, problematic⁴⁰—shows exactly the opposite. If the attempt was to gain symbolic capital it was a major fail. Clovis had to struggle for a part of the booty, and he failed to acquire it. In the end, he had to resort to physical violence to prove his point, namely, that the economic capital produced belonged to him. To conceive smashing a skull with an axe as a form ‘dissimulating economic power’, attests a rather curious perception of the concept.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Source criticism is one of the major methodological differences between the history and anthropology, and one of the major mistakes usually committed while using anthropologic concepts to historical sources. Instead of dealing with ‘technical’ report of ethnographic reality, historians face texts that are, perforce, involved in a historical and literary context. The result is that medieval sources are not always given to an anthropologic approach, or, rather, are not always given to the approach the modern commentators intent for them. For the critique of the use of anthropology to understand medieval texts and the need for a more throughout source criticism, BUC, Philippe. "Political Ritual: Medieval and Modern Interpretation." In *Aktualität des Mittelalters*, edited by Hans-Werner Goetz, 255-72. Bochum: Winkler, 2000; BUC, Philippe. *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Buc's critique ranges from the bad use of anthropological theory to the intractability of medieval sources by traditional anthropological approach. GINZBURG, Carlo. "L'inquisitore come antropologo." In *Studi in onore di Armando Saitta, dei suoi allievi pisani*, edited by Regina Pozzi and Adriano Prosperi, 23-33. Pisa: Giardini Editori e Stampatori, 1989.

⁴¹ Clovis delayed vengeance could be read as a form of preserving his honour. By uncoupling his retribution from the economic dispute—in time and place—he erased the strictly economical issue and turned it into a matter of honour. At any rate, in the methodology proposed by Bourdieu—that he calls a ‘theory of practice’—the little details of the story are crucial to understand the intentions and the manipulation of symbolic language by the actors. Unfortunately, we cannot expect Gregory's account—of an event he had not witnessed nor had any direct report—to support such analysis. The ‘Ewer of Soissons’ tells us of Gregory's view of kingship, not of the *savoir pratique* of Clovis.

7.

This takes us back to Queen Chlothild and her long-haired grandsons. If symbolic capital is a perception, a socially agreed "*crédit*"⁴² that is produced by the symbolic dispersion / destruction of economic, material capital, we cannot expect symbolic capital to be embodied somewhere, in such a way that it could possibly be materially destroyed or carried away.⁴³ As far as Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital goes, the long hair of the Merovingians could *not* be a visible marker of it or, at least, it cannot be a marker that could be simply taken away.⁴⁴

What then is to be made of Diesenberger's proposition? Another long quotation from Diesenberger may give us a better clue. The author proposes:

Collecting and maintaining symbolic capital does not necessarily mean that its entirety is expressed. Gregory of Tours, for example, *does not connect either the duration of a king's reign or his hair to his fortuna*⁴⁵, his 'Heil', or any similar conception. Rather, he describes any cutting of royal hair in an emotional language. Chararic, to recall the early example, and his son

⁴² BOURDIEU, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*.

⁴³ Which is different from saying that the production or acquisition of a symbolic object cannot be used to show symbolic capital. The lavish *spending* on works of art or on specific demonstrations of life-style is a transformation of economic capital into symbolic capital, the *object* itself is not.

⁴⁴ The forced tonsure could, in fact, after the symbolic capital of an individual or a family, inasmuch as the honour is damaged by the act of violence. The honour is lost not with the hair but because of the incapacity to stand against the aggression. *Lex Francorum Chamaavorum*, 18 includes fines for pulling someone by the hair, showing that such offence would require some sort of retaliation. The idea that the forced tonsure was damaging by the humiliation of the process is central to many arguments on the meaning of the hair. For example: JAMES, Edward. "Bede and the Tonsure Question." *Peritia* 3 (1984): 85-98; DIESENBERGER, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.."; HOYOUX, Jean. "Reges Criniti, chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens." *Revue Belge de Philologie et Histoire* 26 (1948): 479-508. The sources agreed to this point, esp. Greg. *Hist.* 2.41 (Chararic objects to the humiliation of the tonsure), VII, 36 (Gundovald recounts the story of his life), but also else where, as, e.g., in the *Leges Langobardorum*, *Leges Aistulfi*, 4 (a.750), or the Visigothic prohibition for someone who was tonsured to assume the throne (*sub religionis habitu detonsus aut turpiter decalvatus*) from the VI Toledo (638). The problem of associating the Merovingian long hair with honour is that honour could not be portrayed as an exclusivity of the royal family. It is not surprising that Diesenberger mentioned it as a support for his use of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, but quickly dismissed its effectiveness as a concept to understand the question, DIESENBERGER, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.."

⁴⁵ Gregory did not connect anything to *fortuna*, a word he never used in his extant works.

lament not the loss of their royalty, but rather the humiliation (*humilitas*) that they have suffered. *It is possible, however, that the emotional language selected by Gregory conceals Merovingian perceptions of their own power.*⁴⁶

This passage represents what Walter Goffart has called *reculer pour mieux sauter*.⁴⁷ Once we have been clearly instructed that the far too problematic idea of sacred kingship does not explain Merovingian hairstyle, we are reminded that Gregory of Tours does not refer to that, and finally we learn that he did not say what he did not understand, that it, that the real perception the Merovingians had of their power was of a *fortuna* or 'Heil', that would be connected to the hair and the duration of the reign, in short, a sacred element that constituted their perception power. Hence, the Merovingians perceived their power as sacred, as a *Königsheil*, one could say, even if Gregory—and the rest of our sources—could not grasp.

8.

Does this view stand? The shortcoming of the so-called *Sakraltheorie* have been analysed above,⁴⁸ and it only remains here to look for the Merovingian evidence for such interpretation of the long hair of the kings. Three main elements are collected as evidence to the sacral nature of the Merovingian kings. First, there is a sacred origin, the sea monster that would have sired Merovech, described in Fredegar. Second, we have a cult—for divine kings have to be cult-kings—according to Einhard, the Merovingians would tour the realm on an oxcart. And finally, there is the physical expression of the royal *Heil*, the long hair, of which we find mention in numerous sources.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.."

⁴⁷ GOFFART, Walter. "Does the Distant Past Impinge on the Invasion Age Germans?" In *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, edited by Andrew Gillett, 21-37. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002.

⁴⁸ Above, p. 5.

⁴⁹ EWIG, *Die Merowinger und das Frankenreich*. For the divine origin, Fredegar *Chron.* 3.9; for the oxcart. Einhard *Vita Karoli* 1. There are two other evidences usually connected to the sacral nature of kings: the first is Gregory of Tours's mention of a miracle performed by Gunthram while the king was still alive—a rather remarkable event in Gregory's narratives (*Hist.* 9.21) Marc Bloch, (BLOCH, Marc. *Les Rois Thaumaturges*. Paris: Hachette, 1924. has convincingly demonstrated that the episode has nothing to do with the Merovingian family, but specifically with Gunthram and Gregory's perception of the king. The

The idea that the Merovingian kings would tour the countryside on some sacred oxcart was discredited by Henri Pirenne already on the 1930's. For the author, the picture drawn by Einhard could be nothing but comical. To show the incapacity of the last Merovingians, he portrayed them as useless, unshaved and so poor that they could only travel on a slow oxcart. Einhard intend was a caricature rather than a description of the defeated dynasty.⁵⁰ In the same spirit, Alexander Murray dismissed Fredegar's story of the sea monster amongst the ancestors of the Merovingians as a literary fabrication, explained by a play on words and etymology rather than by some ancestral memory.⁵¹ The sacred hair is the only element that remains. Would that be a bridge too far?

9.

Different from the sea monster story or the oxcart, both confined to a single source, the dossier for long-haired kings is more extensive, since mentions of long hair and tonsures are relatively common in the Merovingians sources. The dossier is, nonetheless, not new, and the main sources for the debate have already been compiled in the early nineteenth century.⁵² Having said that, the interpretation of this sources

Christian nature of the episode has discouraged further speculation about it. How to understand this miracle within Gregory's perception of the world—and of kings—remains an open topic. The other evidence is the description of the baptism of Clovis by Avitus (*Epist.* 46), he mentions that Clovis "*de toto priscae originis stemmate sola nobilitate contentus*", the traditional interpretation would read it as if he would be giving away any claim of divine origins. The obscure text of the letter does not support the evidence: as Alexander Murray Murray, "*Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'.*" has argued, the whole description is a cliché of conversion, and most of the images used are connected with the traditional conversion of Roman paganism to Christianity.

⁵⁰ PIRENNE, "Le char à boeufs des derniers mérovingiens."

⁵¹ MURRAY, "*Post vocantur Merohingii: Fredegar, Merovech, and 'Sacral Kingship'.*" Max Diesenberger (Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.") accepts the dismissal of the Merovingian sacral origin but his acquiescence is somewhat tepid. Though he mentions Alexander C. Murray's attempt to prove that the story is an ironic presentation of the Merovingians, much like the Ox-cart in Einhard, for Diesenberger "it remains questionable whether Fredegar indeed based his account on extant mythical images" to which we remain wondering if the account is questionable or open to question, and that "it seems likely that his persiflage is founded upon his playful use of the reader's own knowledge". The specifics of this special knowledge that the reader would have, and in which sources should assumption was based, we are left to guess.

⁵² GRIMM, *Deutsche Rechtsalterthümer I.*

and their relation among each other is far from being simple, since hair appears to be a major issue in late Antique society, connected or not with royal power.⁵³

The central question in the debate is whether the hair was or was not specifically related to the Merovingian family, i.e. if the long hair was used by the Merovingians, and only by the Merovingians, as a sign of kingship. No Latin source claims directly so. Nowhere Gregory of Tours, Fredegar or the author of the *Liber Historiae Francorum* assumed so. Nor do, later, Carolingian historiography. The *Lex Salica* has no provision for royal hair (or any other *regalia*) and no saint's life address the subject. On the contrary, our sources attest here and there for long-haired Franks, aristocrats, and even hermits.⁵⁴

There are many examples that suggest long hair—or at least longer—was the norm, at least for the aristocracy. One Eufronius, for example, a Syrian merchant had his hair cut by a bishop, in a forced monastic tonsure. The Syrian took it lightly, but had to live somewhere else while his hair grew back again.⁵⁵ We also have the example of a Jew, gently pulled by Chilperic—probably the sixth-century version of *compelere intrare*—to debate matters of faith with Gregory. With less grace, Hospicius, holding a deacon by the hair (*adpraehensa manu caesariem*) pulled his head out of the window and consecrated it with oil.⁵⁶ Pulling hair was a big deal. In the *Lex Francorum Chamavorum*, for example, one could be fined 12 solidi for pulling a Frank by the hair.⁵⁷ If Merovingian kings could be pictured in distress pulling out the hairs, as did Dagobert, so could the distressed Lupelmus, commanded to read the Gospel by saint

⁵³ The assertion that hair was important in Late Antiquity is quite common. DUTTON, Paul Edward. *Charlemagne's mustache and other cultural clusters of a Dark Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms.." The statement is probably true, since hair is an important physical marker and its symbolism tends to be complex. The conclusion that this fact supports the sacred character of Merovingian hair is, nonetheless, fallacious.

⁵⁴ HOYOUX, "Reges Criniti, chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens.." In fact, he underestimate the 'classicizing' nature of the late Antique author, esp. when dealing with some heavily charged theme as barbarians, as proposed in CAMERON, Averil. "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their hair?" *Revue Belge de Philologie et Histoire* 43 (1965): 1203-16. For an analysis of the weight of classical ethnographic tradition on the depiction of barbarian, AMORY, Patrick. *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1997.

⁵⁵ Greg. *Hist.* 7.30

⁵⁶ Greg. *Hist.* 6.5 & 6.6, respectively.

⁵⁷ *Lex Francorum Chamavorum*, c.18.

Frodobertus.⁵⁸ When Gregory recounts us how Nicetius received a man *caesariem barbamque prolixiam efferens*, there is not a single mention of crime or attempt against the king.⁵⁹

Long hair was an important part of lay aristocratic identity that was constructed mainly from within late Roman military identity. One characteristic of this culture was that it was noticeably 'barbaric' in its looks and tastes. This barbaric character did not have to be accurate, but it did have to comply with the traditional perception of the barbarian to Roman ethnography.⁶⁰ Hence the idea that the *barritus*—the battle cry used by the army in the fourth century—was a barbarian practice. The same goes for clothing, torques, and long hair. There is little evidence that supports that the 'barbaric fashion' of the army even existed outside the frontier zone.⁶¹

Of these 'barbarian features', the long hair interests us most here. Hair, in general, was seen as barbaric trait. The barbarians would dress themselves in furs and would not shave or have their hair or beards cut, in contrast to the world of culture of Mediterranean civilization.⁶² But in the fourth century, the long hair was a very common tradition with the army. Iconographic documentation supports that the long hair, even if it once came from the barbaric north, was widespread in fourth- and fifth-century Roman society.⁶³ We can clearly see the barbarian look of the soldiers on the Column and on *Missorium* of Theodosius. The same hairstyle is visible on the mosaics in San Vitale, at Ravenna.⁶⁴ The association of the army with the long hair was so tight that lead Honorius to forbid the long hair and barbaric outfit within the cities of Rome and Constantinople.⁶⁵ As Patrick Amory has remarked, "It is the Germanic culture

⁵⁸ *Gesta Dagoberti III*, 9; *Vita Frodobert*, 22.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Tours *Vita Patrum* 17.5.

⁶⁰ HALSALL, Guy. *Barbarian Migration and the Roman West, 376-568*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2007.

⁶¹ ELTON, Hugh. *Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; Halsall, *Barbarian Migration and the Roman West, 376-568*.

⁶² HALSALL, *Barbarian Migration and the Roman West, 376-568*. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 47-50. On the classical perception of the other: Hartog, François. *Le miroir d'Hérodote*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.

⁶³ AMORY, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*.

⁶⁴ ELTON, *Warfare in Roman Europe AD 350-425*.

⁶⁵ *Codex Theodosianus*, 14.10.3.

construct, together with the classizing picture presented by ethnographically influenced texts, that has prevented us from integrating beards and long hair properly into the diverse professional and regional picture of the late Roman world."⁶⁶

From the association with the army, the long hair became a marker of status for the military aristocracy, already prominent during the last centuries of the empire. As we have seen, the impression we have from the sources is that long hair was the norm. It is not surprising that, when a fisherman found a longhaired body, he would consider at once that it might be the remains of someone important. Knowing the king Chilperic was looking for the body of his son, it was not a hard task to connect the dots and realise it was the body of Clovis II. But Guntram had, nonetheless, to plan an expedition and go to see for himself. Once he recognized the body, he arranged a proper burial.⁶⁷

10.

The only source that clearly states the exclusivity of the hair is the Greek continuator of Procopius, Agathias. Writing on the sixth-century Constantinople, when he first mentioned the Franks, Agathias proposed to give an ethnographic description of this barbarian people, which he rather admired, for their correct behaviour and their laws, and he claimed that: "for a barbarian nation, they seem to me very civilized and instructed and are not different from us at all, but by their barbarian habits and the specificity of their language."⁶⁸ Even when they are ruled by several chiefs, continues the Greek, they live in harmony and, whenever there is a conflict between two chiefs, though they gather the armies on the field, they usually solve the problem by singular combat between the chiefs.⁶⁹

He continues to portrait the specificities of the Franks. He calls attention to a curious story, of the battle between the Franks of Clodomir (Gregory's Chlodomer) and the Burgundians in 524. The king is killed in battle.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ AMORY, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489-554*.

⁶⁷ Greg. *Hist.* 8.10.

⁶⁸ Agathias *Historiae* 1.2.4-5.

⁶⁹ Agathias *Hist.* 1.2.7-8.

⁷⁰ cf. Greg. *Hist.* 3.6.

And when he fell, seeing his hair flowing and abundant, loose down to his back, at once realized that they had killed the enemy leader. For it is never rightful for the Frankish kings to cut their hair [θεμιτὸν γὰρ τοῖς βασιλεῦσι τῶν Φράγγων οὐπόποτε κείρεσθαι]; instead, their hair is never cut short from the childhood on (...). Their hair is not uncombed and dry and dirty and braided up in a messy not like that of the Turks and Avars; instead, they anoint it with unguents of different sorts, and carefully comb it. Now this it is the custom to set apart as a distinguish 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.⁷¹

The Burgundians then paraded with the king's head on a spear and the Franks, scared by that reversal, ran away. The Burgundians won the day. After the death of Clodomir, who, according to Agathias, had no children, his part of the kingdom was divided between his brothers.⁷²

Agathias is the single most important source for the problem at hand. If we can accept Agathias's report at face value, there is no question about the exclusivity of the long hair for the kings—though, it is worth mentioning, there is no allusion of any magic property here, neither, but of a 'custom'. On the other hand, if the passage is proved unreliable, the remaining sources for the long hair exclusivity fall like a house of cards, for there is no other source that can, on its own, support the exclusivity of the hair without Agathias.⁷³

Agathias report has three major problems. The first is the fact that his account of the battle is rather different from Gregory's in two important details. For Gregory, the Franks, realizing what happened, rallied their forces and won the battle. The second point is that Gregory's Chlodomer had three sons; one of them eventually became a

⁷¹ Agathias *Hist.* 1.3.3-4

⁷² Agathias *Hist.* 1.3.5-6.

⁷³ Due to his utmost importance, I find it surprising the little amount of criticism on Agathias in the debate of the longhaired kings. The validity of Agathias's report was questioned in Hoyoux, "Reges Criniti, chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens.." Houyoux questions the author and proposes his report is probably connected to the story of the lost and found king, as Salomon, Ulysses, etc. Averil Cameron (CAMERON, "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their hair?") questioned Hoyoux's dismissal, based on the "detailed and authentic information which Agathias provides elsewhere in his Frankish excursus, which is in some respects even to be preferred to that of Gregory." For such, he could not be dismissed as mere fabrication.

saint.⁷⁴ The second major problem is the claim that for the Merovingian kings it was *never rightful*⁷⁵ to cut their hair since childhood. If so, once such a hair was cut, it would take a very long time to grow it back to its former length and the shaving would be definitive. But that is far from what the Latin sources show us. We have pretenders being shaved and growing their hair back (e.g. Gundovald),⁷⁶ we have a monk been transferred from the monastery all the way to the throne (the monk Daniel, later Chilperic III)⁷⁷, we even have a king cutting his own hair in distress without losing any royal prerogative (Dagobert).⁷⁸ Finally, the third major problem, as Anthony Kaldellis has proposed, is that Agathias's intent is not to preserve the unstained truth of the events, and he would go a long way to tell a good story, or to adjust his discourse to classical parameters.⁷⁹ Barbarians solving their issues on singular combat or running away after the leader is defeated are typical classicizing themes. The curiosity about hairstyles is another.

11.

Agathias presents too many problems to be used as a main source for Merovingian affairs, especially if he is not supported by Western sources of the period. Taking Agathias for granted, every mention of hair involving kings could be used as an evidence for the special nature of their hair. But how the sources would be read if we, just for the sake of argument, put aside Agathias for a second?

⁷⁴ Greg. *Hist.* 3.6.

⁷⁵ Agathias uses "οὐπώποτε θεμιτόν", rendered in the *Patrologia Graeca* as "numquam solemne est", which is close but not accurate. The meaning of 'θεμιτός' is 'allowed by the laws of God and men', which hard to render into English. Risking to bring even more ethnographic confusion to the table, I would suggest 'taboo' as probably the best translation. The PG also turns the active infinitive *κείρεσθαι* into the passive *tonderi*, which probably accounts for Cameron's translation as "For it is the rule for the Frankish kings never to be shorn" [CAMERON, "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their hair?": Agathias. "Historiae." In *Histoires: guerres et malheurs du temps sous Justinien*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007.] The Greek verb *κείρω* accepts both 'to cut one's hair' and 'to have the hair cut'.

⁷⁶ Greg. *Hist.* 7.36.

⁷⁷ *Liber Historiae Francorum*, c.52.

⁷⁸ *Gesta Dagoberti* 3.9.

⁷⁹ KALDELLIS, Anthony. "Things are not what they are: Agathias "Mythistoricus" and the last laugh of classical culture." *The Classical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2003): 295-300.

We can summarize the sources that mention long hair in the period in three major groups. The first group deal with reports of kings—or pretenders—that had their hair cut in the process of deposition, the second group involve situations where hair is mentioned outside the context of deposition, but are important for the story, and the third group deals with longhaired kings, *reges criniti*, used as a title.

12.

Most of the tonsures in western sources involve kings or pretenders in the context of 'monastic imprisonment'.⁸⁰ A brief review of the documentation is enough: Chararic and his son are tonsured and made clerics,⁸¹ the surviving son of Chlodomer, shaved his own hair and entered a monastery,⁸² Merovech, son of Childeric, is also shaved and sent to a monastery (he escaped on the way).⁸³ The pattern continues for the later Merovingians: Theuderic (III) is tonsured and sent to a monastery;⁸⁴ Childeric III, the last Merovingian is shaved and sent to a monastery.⁸⁵ The practice is not even restricted to the Merovingian family: we have seen above what Bertrant, bishop of Bordeaux tried to do it to Eufronius, the Syrian merchant.⁸⁶ Ebroin, the mayor of the palace, is shaved and sent to Luxeuil.⁸⁷ Also, Carloman, Pippin's brother, did the honour to himself, and retreated to a monastery; the same solution was granted by

⁸⁰ For an analysis of the monasteries as prisons, JONG, Mayke de. "Monastic prisoners or opting out? Political coercion and honour in the Frankish kingdoms." In *Topographies of Power in the early Middle Ages*, edited by Mayke de Jong, Frans Theuws and Carine Van Rhijn, 291-328. Leiden: Brill, 2001. See also JAMES, "Bede and the Tonsure Question."

⁸¹ Greg. Hist. 2.41. A question that has not, as far as I know, been properly considered is how the religious affiliation of these Frankish chiefs. If they were made clerics – a priest and a deacon – we can consider that they were at least Christians. Or is Gregory, while constructing the story, projecting the practice of his time?

⁸² Greg. Hist. 3.18.

⁸³ Greg. Hist. 5.14

⁸⁴ Continuator of Fredegar, c.2.

⁸⁵ *Annales Regni Francorum*, a. 750.

⁸⁶ Greg. Hist. 7.31, see above, p. 13.

⁸⁷ Continuator of Fredegar, c.2; *LHF* c.45. Ebroin is captured by the Franks with his king, Theuderic, and is tonsured. In the *LHF*, only Ebroin is mentioned to be tonsured, while for the Continuator, both were.

Charlemagne to Tassilo, the rebellious Bavarian duke.⁸⁸ The practice was so widespread that, even in the ninth century, Charlemagne forbade his sons to tonsure each other by force.⁸⁹ Growing back the hair from the ecclesiastic tonsure was the usual solution, not only for the Merovingian family, but also for a Count of the Britons (Macliaw),⁹⁰ for Ebroin,⁹¹ and even the Eufronius the Syrian.⁹² As Edward James commented, cutting the hair was not a very efficient method of political elimination, as very soon Clovis realized.⁹³

13.

The second group contains three specific episodes, all in the *Histories* of Gregory of Tours: the choice of Chlothild,⁹⁴ the upbringing and rejection of Gundovald,⁹⁵ and the identification of Clovis II body.⁹⁶ We have already seen the last one was due not to the exclusivity of hair of the Merovingian kings, but to the use of long hair by the military aristocracy.⁹⁷

The offer of shaving for the sons of Chlodomer and the shaving of Gundovald are both inscribed in the context of recognition of legitimate paternity. The Merovingian line, as we perceive it and as a passage in Gregory seems to imply,⁹⁸ passed through the male line, independent of the status of the mother. It not surprising that the family worked more 'exporting' royal women than 'importing' queens, with

⁸⁸ *Annales Regni Francorum*, a. 746 (Carloman) and a. 788 (Tassilo)

⁸⁹ *Divisio Imperii*, c. 18.

⁹⁰ Greg. *Hist.* 4.4.

⁹¹ In the *LHF*, c. 45, but not in the *Continuator of Fredegar*, c. 2.

⁹² Greg. *Hist.* 7.31

⁹³ JAMES, "Bede and the Tonsure Question." Clovis end up killing Chararic and his son, after they threatened to let their hair grow back again (Greg. *Hist.* 2.41), thus leaving the monastery and returning to the political arena.

⁹⁴ Greg. *Hist.* 3.18

⁹⁵ Greg. *Hist.* 6.24.

⁹⁶ Greg. *Hist.* 8.10.

⁹⁷ Above, p. 15.

⁹⁸ Greg. *Hist.* 5.20.

some remarkable exceptions like the Spaniard Brunhild. Hence, the multiple wives and concubines—of all possible origins⁹⁹—we find connected to the kings. Thus, recognition of paternity would separate the children from the mother's status, maybe a slave, and elevate them to the royal family. Failing to recognize would, on the other hand, cast down royal candidates into the lower levels of society. In cases when the dead father did not name his heirs, we can suppose a whole power network supporting supposed sons, as mothers, grandmothers, and aristocrats would gather their capacities to ensure access to royal power and patrimony through the acceptance of this or that candidate.

Shaving the child was a clear statement against paternity. It was a way for the commanding force within the family to assert the status of the child. Gundolvald's example is useful to see this struggle in process. He was born in Gaul and brought up with great care, following the standards of the Merovingian; according to Gregory, he was well instructed in the letters and had long hair.¹⁰⁰ Gregory of Tours does not give us the name of the mother, but he mentions that king Childebert, who had no sons, took him under his care. Chlothar, the supposed father, nonetheless, refused to

⁹⁹ E.g. Chlothar married an *ancilla*, Ingund and, not satisfied, married her sister Aregund too (*Hist.* 4.3). It is not impossible that Gregory called attention to the fact because the incestuous marriage resulted in the birth of Chilperic. When Sagittarius, the warrior bishop, started spread rumours questioning the legitimacy of Gunthram's sons because his wife was an *adscita* of Macharius family, to which Gregory replies Sagittarius ignored that, in the royal house, the freemen born of a king were kings independent of the status of their mother. We perceive the same system in the following century, as Bilichildis, wife of Theodebert, according to Fredegar (*Chron.* 4.35), was a slave bought by Brunhild from merchants.

¹⁰⁰ Greg. *Hist.* 6.24. This is one of the most misquoted passages of Gregory of Tours. The text goes: "*Hic [Gundovaldus] cum natus esset in Galliis et diligenti cura nutritus, ut regum istorum mos est, crinium flagellis per terga dimissis, litteris eruditus Childebertho rege a matre repraesentatur (...)*" [This one [i.e. Gundovald], born in Gaul and brought up with great care, as is the practice of those kings, he had the hair flowing on the back, and educated on the letters, was presented to king Childebert by his mother]. Most scholars have edited the sentence and focused on the '*ut regum istorum mos est, crinium flagellis per terga dimissis*', up to the point of presenting it as an actual description of the royal family. (e.g. Diesenberger, "Hair, Sacrality and Symbolic Capital in the Frankish Kingdoms." "Gregory of Tours in fact characterized the hair of the royal family as *ut regum istorum mos est, crinium flagellis per terga dimissis*."). It is very characteristic that no one has noticed that, in apposition to the long hair, Gregory states the literary training, since a literate Merovingian kingship would go against the traditional model of a primitive sacred monarchy. In fact, it is not even clear in the sentence if Gregory meant that 'being brought up with care', was the custom of the king, and the ablative absolute only stands for a description of Gundovald, or if the ablative absolute actually complemented the *ut* clause.

recognize the child, and ordered him to be shaved.¹⁰¹ We have no idea who was backing up Gundovald—some one probably did, since he had the resources to acquire a special education and to flee to Constantinople after his first defeat—but we know that group failed to enforce his claim.

The episode involving Chlodomer children is very similar. When king Sigimund and his family fell into Frankish hands during the war with the Burgundians, Chlodomer was advised by Avitus to spare the hostages. The saint threaten the king: *“si vero eos occidens, tu ipse in manibus inimicorum traditus, simili sorte peribis; fietque tibi uxorique et filiis tuis, quod feceris Sigimundo et coniugi ac liberis eius”*¹⁰² And thus it came to happen, Chlodomer fail to heed the advice of the bishop and had a terrible end. He was killed by the Burgundian army, his sons, in the famous episode with queen Chlothild, were eventually killed by his brothers.

After the death of Chlodomer, the children went to the control of Chlothild, the Queen mother.¹⁰³ She probably did that to bring under her control the inheritance of the children, once they were recognized legitimate sons of the defunct king. If she succeeded, she would be able to control a good chunk of the realm and maintain political power.¹⁰⁴ Once Childebert realized Chlothild wanted to support the claim of the children to legitimacy, he quickly got in touch with Chlothar to think of a solution. Luckily, the children had not been recognized as legitimate sons, so there was a possibility to get rid of them without bloodshed. A clear statement that they were not heirs to the royal house would be enough to clean them from any claim on their father’s share of the realm. If Chlothild refused to do so, they would have to be killed. Hence, the offer to the queen of the scissors—so that they could be counted amongst

¹⁰¹ Greg. *Hist.* 6.24.

¹⁰² Greg, *Hist.* 3.6.

¹⁰³ A fact that is in itself curious since Guntheuca, the wife of Chlodomer was still alive—she actually married Chlothar—and apparently survives the curse of the bishop. A possible solution would be to have a different mother for the sons, a concubine, an *ancilla* &c., so the children would have only the grandmother as foster parent. Other possibility is that the Queen quickly got hold of the children for her own political objectives. Guntheuca, nonetheless, is mentioned only once by Gregory, and we have no clue of his former status.

¹⁰⁴ The same situation allowed Brunhild and Fredegund to maintain power through their sons and grandsons. Besides Gregory’s devotion to the mother queen, there is no reason why we should consider her too different from the other powerful queens of the Merovingian period.

the rest of the common people (*ut relique plebs habeantur*)—and the sword. Chlothild's response was quite clear. She would not stand to see her gateway to power removed from her hands by shaving the younglings. So it was done. It is not surprising that it is the last political action of Chlothild, who died more than 20 year later.¹⁰⁵ Brilliant was the solution used by Chlodoald, who apparently had support of a better entourage.¹⁰⁶ Once he evaded his uncles, he cut his own hair and retreated to a monastery, probably still as a Merovingian.

14.

Finally, we have the use of *rex crinitus* as a title. It is not present in Gregory of Tours, who uses the expression only once, to describe the advent of the Franks into Gaul. The passage can sustain multiple interpretations, but it does not allow us to think Gregory intended to use the expression as a royal title.¹⁰⁷ The use in the *Liber Historiae Francorum* is somehow different.¹⁰⁸ To the anonymous Neustrian historian, a supporter of a very aristocratic version of the Merovingian monarchy, the term *rex crinitus* became an actual title, which he uses to the first kings of the Franks. According to the LHF, once the Franks realized they needed kings, they elected Faramondus as

¹⁰⁵ Probably in 548 Heinzelmann, Martin. "Gallische Prosopographie (260-527)." *Francia* 10 (1982): 531-718. She appears praying for St. Martin's intervention in the war between Theudebert, Childebert and Chlothar (*Hist.* 3.,28) and dies in the beginning of book IV (*Hist.* 4.1). After she buried the children, Gregory says she dedicated her life to the church, and was seen *non regina, sed propria Dei ancilla* (*Hist.* 3.18).

¹⁰⁶ Gregory claims he was saved by *auxilium virorum fortium*, *Hist.* 3.18.

¹⁰⁷ Greg. *Hist.* 2.9: "*Tradunt enim multi, (...), transacto Rheno, Thoringiam transmeasse, ibique iuxta pagus vel civitates regis crinitos super se creavisse de prima et, ut ita dicam, nobiliore suorum familia.*" Which is the impression we get from the use by the scholarship. The idea of the call Merovingians long-haired kings passed on the passage is old, and it got more popularity after Wallace-Hadrill named his book after it (Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings*.) HOYOUN, "Reges Criniti, chevelures, tonsures et scalps chez les Mérovingiens.." proposed the Latin should be read in another way, saying the *crinitos* should work as subject in the double accusative infinitive sentence, the meaning would be "the hairy [i.e. the barbarian Franks] created kings over them." Kaufmann, "Über das Scheren abgesetzter Merowingerkönige.;" CAMERON, "How did the Merovingian Kings wear their hair?." Even if you preserve the traditional reading of the Latin, the term is not a title, nor even necessarily a compliment. The reading 'hairy kings'—as barbarian kings—should probably be preferred.

¹⁰⁸ There is also a single mention of *crinitum* to define the king elected by the Franks in Fredegar *Chron.* 3.9. The passage is rather truncated: "*Franci electum a se regi, sicut prius fuerat, crinitum, inquerentes diligenter ex genere Priami, Frigi et Francionis super se creant nomen Theudemarem, filium Richemeris (...).*"

longhaired king: “(...) *et eleuauerunt eum [Faramundum] regem super se crinitum* (...)” After his death, his son Chlodio was raised king, and from that time on the start to have longhaired kings.¹⁰⁹ The title, that has no confirmation elsewhere—and, especially, no confirmation in any official titulature¹¹⁰—is probably better understood in the historiographic conflict between the last Merovingians and the early Carolingians, in an attempt to praise the antiquity of the aristocratic—and hence longhaired—Merovingians in opposition to the more clerically inclined Carolingians.

15.

Summing up, most approaches to the long hair of the Merovingians are based on the understanding that the monarchy was supported by some mystical charisma, which would be expected to primitive societies. Such exceptionality needed an external manifestation to affirm itself, and the hair would perform that function in the Merovingian society. This approach relies, openly—or in some sort of academic denial—,on the concept of sacred kingship, an idea that has been convincingly disproved. When we come to the sources, the traditional interpretation of Merovingian hair as a token of distinction is based on nothing more than a questionable passage in a Byzantine historian, and the resilient belief in the achievement of Germanic Antiquities, especially sacred kingship. On the other hand, the various mentions of long hair and tonsures in Merovingian sources review aspect of society, such as the fashion of the aristocracy, the language of power and adoption, and the monastic life as a possible ‘opting out’ for political figures. As with the other signs of divinity, the oxcart and the divine origins, the long hair as a sign of this charismatic—unidentifiable—power should be put to rest. Of the accomplishments of nineteenth-century *Germanistik*, if something ought to be preserved, let it be Richard Wagner. And just that.

¹⁰⁹ *LHF*, cc. 4 & 5.

¹¹⁰ GILLET, "Was Ethnicity Politicized in the Earliest Medieval Kingdoms?."