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## “Carrying the cares of state”: gender perspectives on Merovingian ‘Staatlichkeit’

“Medieval historians seem to be falling in love with the word ‘state’, and with all that it implies”, declared the late Rees Davies, before going on to emphasise that the way in which the word is bandied around between specialists in the medieval and modern eras sets “conceptual booby-traps” for the unwary.<sup>1</sup> His diagnosis is all the more valuable because it stemmed from a lifetime spent studying polities that had not hitherto featured in discussions of medieval state-building, and then reflecting on how that exceptionally precocious state, “the first English empire”, came to incorporate them.<sup>2</sup> Davies’s evaluation of this peculiarly English (but not British) love affair turned on the worrisome tendency of the concept of the state to distract from the real historical issue of the ever-shifting means by which power was distributed and renegotiated in medieval societies. His analysis was so acute because he was able to approach mainstream scholarly preoccupations from the vantage point of the historiographical periphery.<sup>3</sup>

This paper builds on his insight, and offers a complementary reason for approaching medieval statehood from a novel perspective. It takes its point of departure from lively discussions about the gendered nature of early modern and modern states and empires which have taken place over the last two decades.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that historians of medieval and modern Europe have frequently exchanged views on states and state-building, studies of the medieval state and its gender order have, in effect, taken place in “separate [academic] spheres”, with little or no interchange between them.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, the medieval state has proven remarkably resistant to gendered interpretations; on the other, although historians of the early modern era identified the “engendered state” twenty years ago, they have failed to enquire into its medieval antecedents.<sup>6</sup> Engagement with discussions about the nature of the medieval state from the perspective of gender history is thus an urgent priority.<sup>7</sup> Just as the notion of male and female “separate spheres”, so central to women's history in the 1970s and

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<sup>1</sup> Rees Davies, *The medieval state. The tyranny of a concept?* in: *Journal of Historical Sociology* 16 (2003) 280–300, at 280, 293.

<sup>2</sup> Rees Davies, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales, 1282–1400* (Oxford 1978); id., *Conquest, Coexistence and Change, Wales 1063–1415* (Oxford 1987); id., *Domination and Conquest. The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1100–1300* (Cambridge 1990); id., *The First English Empire. Power and Identities in the British Isles, 1093–1343* (Oxford 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the perspective from the historiographical centre of Walter Pohl, *Staat und Herrschaft im Frühmittelalter: Überlegungen zum Forschungsstand*, in: *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters* 11, Wien 2006) 9–38.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race. Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London 2003); *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford 2004). Sociological perspectives include Robert W. Connell, *The state, gender and sexual politics. Theory and appraisal*, in: *Theory and Society* 19 (1990) 507–544; Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford 1990); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London 1997); Mrinalini Sinha, *Gender and nation*, in: *Women’s History in Global Perspective*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (Bloomington-Illinois 2004) 229–274, offers a judicious overview and extensive further bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Vickery, *Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women’s history*, in: *The Historical Journal* 36 (1993) 383–414, and bibliography cited there.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Hanley, *Engendering the state. Family formation and state building in early modern France*, in: *French Historical Studies* 16 (1989) 4–27. My thanks to Hamish Scott for this reference.

<sup>7</sup> I am deeply grateful to Walter Pohl for the invitation to contribute to the conference “*Staat und Staatlichkeit im europäischen Frühmittelalter, 500–1050 – Grundlagen, Grenzen, Entwicklungen*” (Wien, 18.–21. September 2007) on specifically this theme.

1980s, has now been definitively discarded,<sup>8</sup> this paper proposes that we can no longer continue to discuss the medieval state in isolation from the insights of gender history, as if it were a gender-neutral construct. By means of a sixth-century case study, it demonstrates that gender was as integral to the ways in which power was conceived, distributed and represented in the Middle Ages – specifically the early Middle Ages – as conventional institutional, social, political and symbolic categories of analysis.

The enterprise is an exciting challenge, for two reasons. In the first place, early medieval historians generally lack the types of sources which have been so fruitfully exploited by specialists in more recent eras. Complemented by voluminous court records and political treatises, the diaries, letters, novels, autobiographies and ephemera of male and female authors have been intensively mined to lay bare the gendered nature of the building of absolutist monarchies, empires, and nation-states, and to redefine the interactions between gender and ethnicity in the process. Yet only on exceptionally rare occasions can historians read an early medieval woman's words directly – or a non-elite man's. Non-clerical authors are also few and far between.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, by working with what we do have, we can go a long way in identifying the ways in which gender was integral to politics and the state. Material culture can help: it has enabled archaeologists to demonstrate the workings of gender relations in elite formation in early Anglo-Saxon England, and to map the ways in which the shifting parameters of gendered social display were a constitutive element in political change.<sup>10</sup> Guy Halsall has followed their lead in combining material remains and textual evidence from northernmost Gaul to demonstrate the emergence of new forms of masculinity in the course of the turmoil of warfare and invasion, and to argue for the contribution of shifting gender identities to the collapse of Roman rule and the formation of fundamentally different polities.<sup>11</sup> But changing gender identities did not only affect – and reflect – the tumultuous political reorganisation of the northern periphery of the Roman West. Nearer the Roman Empire's Mediterranean core, gendered hierarchies of power were reformulated under the pressure of Christian values and new forms of leadership.<sup>12</sup> This paper pursues all these themes into the heartland of Merovingian Gaul.

The second challenge concerns the linguistic and cultural specifics of academic discourses. As Davies remarked, the term 'state' has acquired "an almost endless elasticity"<sup>13</sup>. Although Germanophone historians find the flexible notion of 'Staatlichkeit' ('state-ishness') of great utility and apply it to political formations from the ancient to the late modern eras in all parts of the globe, it is subject to the same strictures which Davies applied to all state-ish lexical formulations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, as the organisers of this volume have observed, it is effectively untranslatable.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, it parallels the term 'gender', whose lack of equivalents in other languages Gisela Bock noted long ago.<sup>16</sup> Like 'Staatlichkeit', 'gender' has a semantic range, linguistic history and discursive implications that are not matched by an individual word, or even a phrase, in other languages. How, then, to bring Merovingian 'Staatlichkeit' and 'gender' into fruitful conjunction? The first part of this paper outlines their conceptual compatibility – indeed, their complementarity – and then notes important insights of recent gender history. The second part applies those insights to a specific moment in the history of Merovin-

<sup>8</sup> See Dena Goodman, Public sphere and private life. Toward a synthesis of current historiographical approaches to the old regime, in: *History and Theory* 31 (1992) 1–20; Wilson, *Island Race* 92–93, and bibliography cited there.

<sup>9</sup> Although now pulled into the limelight in Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World, ed. Patrick Wormald/Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Nick Stoodley, *The Spindle and the Spear. A Critical Enquiry into the Construction and Meaning of Gender in the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite* (Oxford 1999); Dawn Hadley, Negotiating gender, family and status in Anglo-Saxon burial practices, 600–950, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 301–323.

<sup>11</sup> Guy Halsall, Gender and the end of empire, in: *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34 (2004) 17–39; id., *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge 2007) 96–99, 482–488.

<sup>12</sup> Kate Cooper, Closely watched households. Visibility, exposure and private power in the Roman *domus*, in: *Past & Present* 197 (2007) 3–33.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Medieval state* 284.

<sup>14</sup> Davies, *Medieval state* 293.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter Pohl/Veronika Wieser, Vorwort (in this volume).

<sup>16</sup> Gisela Bock, Women's history and gender history. Aspects of an international debate, in: *Gender & History* 1 (1989) 7–30, at 10. See also Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* 7.

gian ‘Staatlichkeit’. By demonstrating how a gendered perspective refines our understanding of the Merovingian gender order and its political formations, it argues that gender “carries the cares of state”, both in terms of framing the discourses of power and in shaping the realities of political life.

## I.

‘Gender’ and ‘Staatlichkeit’ are both shorthand ways for problematising the power relations between social groups, and between individuals within groups. Both terms draw our attention to hierarchies of power and their institutionalisation, but do so in ways which deliberately reach beyond the boundaries of institutional structures into their wider political and social contexts. Similarly, both deal with the legitimisation of power, paying attention to its symbolic representations and discursive constructions, and giving us scope to notice resistance, complicity and renegotiation. Both invite us to juxtapose the discursive with the experienced – in other words the ideological and the everyday – and to consider the resulting tensions and frictions between them. Furthermore, recent theorising about gender, as also about states, resists reduction to a single, evolutionary narrative of historical development, and instead asks hard questions about long-term continuities, reformulations and changes. Finally, like ‘state’, the concept ‘gender’ has its own history of divergent meanings, inconsistencies and outright contradictions – and a ‘Begriffsgeschichte’ of ‘gender’ might be almost extensive as that of ‘state’.<sup>17</sup>

For several reasons, gender is a crucial means of achieving a fully historicised understanding of any state. First, by corroding the conventional periodisations on which histories of state formation rely, it forces reconsideration of conceptions and mechanisms of change.<sup>18</sup> Then, by drawing attention to pluralities and locally specific configurations of power which vary widely over place and time, it contributes to undermining the over-generalised grand narratives on which histories of the state still sometimes rely. In placing at the centre of analysis differences between women and men, and the social, cultural, religious and political meanings ascribed to their bodies, it links individual to society and ideology to experience in ways which redefine the ‘body politic’. Above all, it takes as its main problematic disparities of power between men and women, and between some men and other men. It thus offers markedly different categories of historical agency and oppression from a state-centred approach, and, in so doing, throws a sharp spotlight on the ways in which elite power operates by controlling, marginalising and de-valuing those it excludes from positions of domination. For that reason, if for none other, the historian of the state cannot afford to ignore it.

The rapidly evolving historiography of gender history is well charted and needs no rehearsal here.<sup>19</sup> Instead, as background to what follows, two points deserve particular emphasis. First, the significance of women’s bodies in a wide range of symbolic, political and cultural discourses is well established.<sup>20</sup> The early Middle Ages are no exception, for political language was often highly gendered. For example, Isidore of Seville drew upon traditional, feminized imagery of a conquered province in the *De laude Spaniae* which prefaces his *Historia Gothorum*: he presented Spain as the fecund *mater gentium* whom Rome desired and married, and then the Goths “ravished and loved”.<sup>21</sup> Whereas Isidore used images of sexual desire and conquest to evoke the bond between province and ruler, Bede used a woman’s body to think with in a very different but equally effective way. In a famous passage, he described Edwin of Northumbria’s rule by the dictum that a woman with a new-born child in her arms

<sup>17</sup> Julia M.H. Smith, Introduction. Gendering the early medieval world, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 1–22, at 4–7.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the essays collected in *Gender and Change. Agency, Chronology and Periodisation*, ed. Alexandra Shepard/Garthine Walker (*Gender & History Special Issue 20/3*, Oxford 2008). See also Julia M.H. Smith, *Did women have a transformation of the Roman world?*, in: *Gender & History 12* (2000) 552–571.

<sup>19</sup> It is conveniently summarised by Robert Shoemaker/Mary Vincent, Introduction: Gender history. The evolution of a concept, in: *Gender and History in Western Europe*, ed. id./ead. (London 1998) 1–20.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, *Woman – Nation – State*, ed. Nira Yuval-Davis/Floya Anthias (Basingstoke 1989); Urvashi Butalia, *Legacies of departure. Decolonization, nation-making and gender*, in: *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine (Oxford 2004) 203–219.

<sup>21</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Historia Gothorum, Wandalorum, Sueborum* (ed. Theodor Mommsen, MGH AA 11, *Chronica minora 2*, Berlin 1894/repr. München 1981) 241–303, at 267.

could walk from one end of Britain to the other without coming to any harm: here, the inviolate femininity of a defenceless nursing mother became a touching symbol of good kingship.<sup>22</sup> In the early Middle Ages, as in many other cultures, legislation about marriage and the control of sexuality not only marked women as objects of a particular form of state control, but also imposed on them a practical and symbolic role in maintaining the boundaries of group identity.<sup>23</sup> In addition, issues of political legitimacy were often intimately associated with female bodies, especially royal ones.<sup>24</sup> Although we generally only see early medieval female bodies through the 'male gaze', that makes it particularly easy to see their integral position in discourses of power.

Equally significantly, gender history has definitively outgrown its origins as the historical critique of the patriarchal control of women by men.<sup>25</sup> Work on men and masculinities in several disciplines has converged around several points of importance for historians. Firstly, the means by which a small number of men achieve and maintain dominance over most other men and virtually all women combines a complex blend of political, discursive, and cultural aspects, forming what Pierre Bourdieu regarded as a particular habitus, but which, borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, the sociologist Robert William Connell preferred to style 'hegemonic' masculinity.<sup>26</sup> This approach enables historians to make central to their analysis issues ignored by Max Weber's concept of the state, and thereby offers a way of side-stepping many of its associated historiographical problems.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the cultural symbols and social formations of that dominant form of manliness are characteristically very specific to time and place, varying widely with the immediate context. Despite the overall long-term prevalence of patriarchal political formations, this fluctuating content is very visible in pre-modern and modern Europe. Thirdly, those who are subordinated or marginalised in this way include various categories of men, as well as women. Finally, the investment of economic, symbolic and cultural capital needed to maintain dominance can be very great, especially at times of great political stress and rapid change. The elite masculinities of past eras emerge from this analysis as highly visible but also highly fragile, vulnerable to challenge and in constant need of re-affirmation. No history of gender, then, can be complete without paying as much attention to masculinities as to femininities.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* II, 16 (ed./trans. Bertram Colgrave/Roger A.B. Mynors, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford 1969) 192.

<sup>23</sup> Hagith Sivan, Why not marry a barbarian? Marital frontiers in late antiquity (The Example of CTh. 3.14.1), in: *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Ralph Mathisen/ead. (Aldershot 1996) 136–145; ead., The appropriation of Roman law in barbarian hands. 'Roman-barbarian' marriage in Visigothic Gaul and Spain, in: *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities (300–800)*, ed. Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (*The Transformation of the Roman World* 2, Leiden/Boston/Köln 1998) 189–203; Walter Pohl, *Alienigena coniugia*. Bestrebungen zu einem Verbot auswärtiger Heiraten in der Karolingerzeit, in: *Die Bibel als politisches Argument*, ed. Andreas Pečar/Kai Trampedach (*Historische Zeitschrift, Beiheft* 43, München 2007) 159–188.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Airlie, Private bodies and the body politic. The divorce case of Lothar II, in: *Past & Present* 161 (1998) 3–38; Martha Vinson, Romance and reality in the Byzantine bride shows, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 102–120; Mayke de Jong, Bride shows revisited. Praise, slander and exegesis in the reign of the empress Judith, in: *ibid.* 257–277; Eric Goldberg, Regina nitens sanctissima Hemma. Queen Emma (827–876), bishop Witgar of Augsburg and the Witgar-Belt, in: *Representations of Power in Medieval Germany 800–1500*, ed. Björn Weiler/Simon MacLean (Turnhout 2006) 57–95, at 75–77.

<sup>25</sup> For the distinction between patriarchy and gender see Joan W. Scott, Gender. A useful category of historical analysis, in: *American Historical Review* 91 (1986) 1053–1075, repr. in: ead., *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1998) 28–50; and *Feminism and History*, ed. ead. (Oxford 1996) 152–180; Joan Acker, The problem with patriarchy, in: *Sociology* 23 (1989) 235–240.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris 1998); Robert W. Connell, *Gender and Power. Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge 1987); id., *Masculinities* (Cambridge 2005). For an evaluation and critique of the impact of Connell's work, see John Tosh, Hegemonic masculinity and the history of gender, in: *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudink/Karen Hagemann/John Tosh (Manchester 2004) 41–58.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Connell, *State*.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *Gendering*. See also *Medieval Masculinities*, ed. Clare Lees (Minneapolis, 1994); *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen/Bonnie Wheeler (New York 1997); *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Dawn Hadley (London 1999); Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch. Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago 2001); Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe. Doing Unto Others* (London 2005).

## II.

In an article aptly entitled “The King’s Two Genders”, Cynthia Herrup observed that “one of the primary characteristics of gender history” is “looking at the familiar through a new lens”.<sup>29</sup> What, then, does Merovingian ‘*Staatlichkeit*’ look like when viewed in this way? The moment under examination in the second part of this paper is the synod held in September 580 at Berny-Rivière, near Soissons.<sup>30</sup> Famous as the occasion when Gregory of Tours was put on trial to face charges that he had slandered Queen Fredegund by alleging that she had been sleeping with Bertram bishop of Bordeaux, the event has long been central to evaluations of Chilperic’s reign.<sup>31</sup> In any society, moments of crisis often throw power relations, their underlying structures and cultural assumptions into high relief, and this was no exception. In Gregory’s telling, the gathering was clearly a richly charged moment in which many characteristics of Merovingian ‘*Staatlichkeit*’ are suddenly, if briefly, made clear: the existence of institutions which endured over a long period of time; the presence of central authority with considerable resources at its disposal; the importance of discourses about power and its utilisation; the (approximate) geographical correlation of *ecclesia* with kingdom; an elite interacting and held together by multiple forms of political communication – symbolic, oral, and written; a framework within which conflict could be expressed, negotiated and regulated; and the active presence of a king together with other political actors.<sup>32</sup>

Thanks to the recent work of Walter Goffart, Martin Heinzelmann, Guy Halsall and others, the significance of the synod of Berny-Rivière in Gregory’s rhetorical self-fashioning and complex narrative strategies is now clear.<sup>33</sup> Gregory’s perspective is not, however, the main concern here; rather it is that of another participant, Venantius Fortunatus. His verse panegyric to Chilperic, delivered in front of the king and assembled bishops in the course of the synodal proceedings, offers exceptional insights into sixth-century gender and political orders alike. This poem has all too frequently been condemned as the work of an insincere flatterer and fawning courtier, and dismissed as irrelevant to understanding the reign of Chilperic simply because it is entirely at odds with Gregory’s account of the reign of a king whom the bishop of Tours loved to hate.<sup>34</sup> That is a serious misunderstanding, based on a naive and simplistic reading of Gregory, reinforced by an erroneous view of the nature and purpose of panegyric.

Late antique ruler panegyric was a form of political communication, commonly delivered on ceremonial, indeed symbolic, occasions.<sup>35</sup> An integral part of the performance of ‘*Staatlichkeit*’, it was also an active, privileged contribution to debates about power and rulership, not merely a passive reflection of a traditional consensus about good rulership.<sup>36</sup> Attentive reader of Claudian that he was,

<sup>29</sup> Cynthia Herrup, *The King’s two genders*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 45 (2006) 493–510, at 495. I thank Alex Shepard for this reference.

<sup>30</sup> Odette Pontal, *Die Synoden im Merowingerreich* (Paderborn 1986) 148.

<sup>31</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 47 (ed. Krusch/Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 1, 1, Hannover 1951) 257, for the specifics of the allegation; Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 49, ed. Krusch/Levison 259–263, for the narrative of the trial.

<sup>32</sup> I follow Pohl’s checklist of the main features of early medieval ‘*Staatlichkeit*’ in *id.*, *Staat und Herrschaft* 36–39.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History, A.D. 550–800. Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton 1988); Martin Heinzelmann, *Gregory of Tours. History and Society in the Sixth Century* (Cambridge 2001) 46–48, 139–144; Guy Halsall, *Nero and Herod? The death of Chilperic and Gregory’s writings of history*, in: *The World of Gregory of Tours*, ed. Kathleen Mitchell/Ian N. Wood (Leiden 2002) 337–350; Guy Halsall, *The preface to book V of Gregory of Tours’ Histories. Its form, context and significance*, in: *English Historical Review* 122 (2007) 297–317.

<sup>34</sup> Luce Pietri, *Venance Fortunat et ses commanditaires. Un poète italien dans la société gallo-franque*, in: *Committenti e produzione artistico-letteraria nell’alto medioevo occidentale* (Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo 39/2, Spoleto 1992) 745–747. Judith W. George rightly identifies Fortunatus’s political skill, *cf. ead.*, *Poet as Politician. Venantius Fortunatus’ panegyric to King Chilperic*, in: *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989) 5–18. See also Peter Godman, *Poets and Emperors. Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford 1987) 28–37.

<sup>35</sup> Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1981).

<sup>36</sup> A point fundamentally misunderstood by Marc Reydellet in his keynote discussion of Venantius Fortunatus, *id.*, *La royauté dans la littérature latine de Sidoine Apollinaire à Isidore de Séville* (Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d’Athènes et de Rome 243, Rome 1981) 297–344. *Cf.* the criticisms of Nikolaus Staubach, *Germanisches Königtum und lateinische Literatur vom fünften bis zum siebten Jahrhundert*, in: *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 17 (1983) 1–54, at 44–48.

Fortunatus knew well that it could be used to warn, persuade or urge a specific course of action on the honorand, or the audience, or both.<sup>37</sup> Nor, indeed, was the synod of Berny-Rivière the first time that he had written a highly charged panegyric for a Merovingian king, for his encomium of Charibert in 566/567, designed to persuade the citizens of Paris to acknowledge his lordship, had been a sharp-edged intervention in a tense political situation.<sup>38</sup>

Although we know that the trial at Berny-Rivière was a show trial, and that Gregory had recovered Chilperic's goodwill before the synod opened, the hearing nevertheless had to go ahead in order to avoid a humiliating royal climb-down and to enable appropriate tough measures to be taken against the real malefactors – Count Leudast and the two Riculfs, priest and subdeacon of Tours.<sup>39</sup> Fortunatus himself evidently had the cool head necessary to participate in such a high-stake game, for his own reputation and career would have been forfeit had he failed to bring about an honourable resolution: his panegyric was the enabling device which cleared Fredegund's reputation and enabled Chilperic to acquit Gregory without loss of face.<sup>40</sup> By emphasising Chilperic's world-wide reputation – reaching even to India – for *iustitia*, the poet left the king with no choice except to enhance his fame by right action.<sup>41</sup> Sophisticated both in political content and its creative play on the poetic tradition, Fortunatus' verses cast a bright spotlight on the gendered nature of sixth-century 'Staatlichkeit'.

Framed by the usual proem and epilogue, Fortunatus only loosely followed the conventional format for a royal praise poem, which typically addressed ancestry, upbringing and achievements.<sup>42</sup> He preferred instead to concentrate on royal *virtutes*, above all *iustitia*. Three passages deserve especial inspection.

After an opening salutation to the assembled bishops, Fortunatus turned to address the king, referencing both the Old Testament (Isaiah) and Horace as he did so:

*Inclite rex armis et regibus edite celsis,  
primus ab antiquis culmina prima regens,  
rector habens nascendo decus, moderando sed auges,  
de radice patris flos generate potens,  
aequali serie uos nobilitando uicissim  
tu genus ornasti, te genus ornat aui.*

"O king, renowned in war and sprung from a noble line of kings, foremost of those of old, commanding the foremost heights, as ruler you inherited glory by birth, but increased it by your governance. Sprung as a vigorous shoot from your father's stock, in turn you each have ennobled the other; you have bestowed honour on your lineage, and the lineage of your grandfather adorns you."<sup>43</sup>

Praise of ancestry is conventional enough in royal panegyric, but Fortunatus is here contributing to that all too persuasive but fundamentally flawed image of the Merovingians as a biological family passing the kingship from the males of one generation to the next, a conceit which Ian N. Wood has so

<sup>37</sup> Sven Blomgren, *De Venantio Fortunato Lucani Claudianique imitatore*, in: *Eranos* 48 (1950) 150–156, who nevertheless underestimates the extent of Claudian's influence on Fortunatus. On Claudian see Alan Cameron, *Claudian. Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford 1970).

<sup>38</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen VI*, 2 (ed. Marc Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat 2*, Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2003) 53–57.

<sup>39</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae V*, 49, ed. Krusch/Levison 258–259.

<sup>40</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen IX*, 1 (ed. Marc Reydellet, *Venance Fortunat 3*, Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, Paris 2004) 9–15.

<sup>41</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen IX*, 1, l. 85–90, ed. Reydellet 3, 12: on Chilperic's *iustitia*. Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (trans. William Trask, London 1953) at 160–161: on the trope of India.

<sup>42</sup> On the evolution of the genre and its expectations, see *The Propaganda of Power. The Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, ed. Mary Whitby (Leiden 1998); Lester K. Born, *The perfect prince according to the Latin panegyricists*, in: *The American Journal of Philology* 55 (1934) 20–35; Annette Georgi, *Das lateinische und deutsche Preisgedichte des Mittelalters* (Berlin 1969), dealing with Fortunatus at 47–52. Reydellet, *Royauté* 305, notes a probable debt to fifth-century praise poems addressed to Vandal kings.

<sup>43</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen IX*, 1, l. 5–10, ed. Reydellet 3, 7. All translations are adapted from Judith W. George, *Venantius Fortunatus. Personal and Political Poems* (Liverpool 1995).

convincingly demolished.<sup>44</sup> So what was Chilperic’s dynastic position in 580, and why was Fortunatus working so hard to prop it up? His ongoing efforts to outmanoeuvre his young nephew Childebert II, son of Sigibert, are traced in detail by Gregory, who also emphasised the frailty of Chilperic’s position in that chain of generations. In addition, by the time of Berny-Rivière, Chilperic had murdered one wife (Galswinth) and set aside another (Audovera) leaving the third (Fredegund) as sole occupant of his bed. Of his three sons by Audovera, two were dead and the third alienated from his father and stepmother.<sup>45</sup> Of his sons by Fredegund, one (Samson) had already died;<sup>46</sup> another, fifteen-year old Chlodobert, was to die of dysentery twenty days after the synod.<sup>47</sup> A third son, an *infantulus* so young that he had not yet been baptised, perished in the same dysentery outbreak, hurriedly christened in his dying moments.<sup>48</sup> Named Dagobert, this child must have been born either very shortly before or just after the synod. Two adult sons, one of them alienated, and perhaps one neonate: had Chilperic yet fathered enough sons to secure his own succession? Could Fredegund feel confident that it would be a son of hers who followed Chilperic on the throne? In view of Merovingian intra-familial rivalries and patterns of sixth-century infant mortality, the line of descent from Chilperic and Fredegund was far from secure.

Moreover, there are clear signs that, by the late sixth century, the Merovingians’ marital habits and choices of bride were coming under scrutiny in a new way. Guntram had already been a target of episcopal criticism,<sup>49</sup> and Chilperic’s sexual politics were not entirely dissimilar. In a climate where kings’ sexual conduct and choice of partners was beginning to cause adverse comment, and rumours of his wife’s adultery were circulating, Chilperic had much to be concerned about. The patrilinear succession lauded by Fortunatus was rarely linear and not necessarily even biologically accurate.<sup>50</sup> As Ian N. Wood has remarked, “The Merovingian family was not ... an unquestionably biological unit, it was rather a political construct”<sup>51</sup>.

In the passage just quoted, Fortunatus affirmed Chilperic by referring to his grandfather. The poet did not name Clovis – he surely did not have too – but his audience would doubtless all be familiar with the heroic stories surrounding this already semi-legendary founding ancestor. It was enough to invoke them indirectly. We have, necessarily, to take Gregory of Tours as a very approximate guide to the tales that had accreted around Clovis’s name in the course of the two generations since his death. That reputation, for martial valour and uncompromising brutality, ruthless scheming and cunning deception, is one of ‘heroic masculinity’. It is an image framed by the exceptional circumstances of turning a *gens* into a *regnum*, and for that very reason, of iconic rather than normative significance. Exaggerated expressions of manliness (sometimes referred to as ‘hyper-masculinity’) in such matters as sexuality and virility, violence and hair, are well documented in a wide range of military and semi-military contexts; partly for this reason, they are commonly a facet of the making of new empires, kingdoms or nations. They may challenge the hegemonic masculinity of the old order; assert a violent control over subordinate men within the emergent polity; or serve as ideal types in the formulation of new, normative codes of identity for changed political circumstances.<sup>52</sup> Clovis’s hyper-masculinity

<sup>44</sup> Ian N. Wood, Deconstructing the Merovingian family, in: The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages. Texts, Resources and Artefacts, ed. Richard Corradini/Maximilian Diesenberger/Helmut Reimitz (The Transformation of the Roman World 12, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2003) 149–171.

<sup>45</sup> The third, Clovis, was humiliated and then murdered a few weeks after Berny-Rivière, cf. Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 39, ed. Krusch/Levison 245–247.

<sup>46</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 22, ed. Krusch/Levison 229–230.

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 34 and 50, ed. Krusch/Levison 239–41 and 263; Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* IX, 2 and IX, 4, ed. Reydellet 3, 15–21 and 22–23.

<sup>48</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 34 and 50, ed. Krusch/Levison 239–241 and 263; Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* IX, 2 and IX, 5, ed. Reydellet 3, 15–21 and 23–24.

<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 20, ed. Krusch/Levison 228, on the remarks of Sagittarius of Gap.

<sup>50</sup> Wood, Merovingian family 164, points out that Gregory suspected that Chilperic’s heir, Chlothar, was almost certainly not his own son. Wood also suggests that Gregory was almost certainly correct in his suspicions about Fredegund’s adultery.

<sup>51</sup> Wood, Merovingian family 164.

<sup>52</sup> For an outline, see Stephen Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities. Key Themes and New Directions* (Cambridge 2002) 120–123, 143–44; see also Frances Gouda, Gender and ‘hyper-masculinity’ as post-colonial modernity during Indonesia’s

clearly did all this and more: it validated rejection of Roman norms and at the same time marginalised those Franks who threatened his power. As his deeds became the stuff of legend in the decades after his death, he became a manly embodiment of a narrative of political change, and a symbolic marker of strategies of specifically masculine distinction.<sup>53</sup>

We know that those strategies of distinction were themselves evolving in the course of the upheavals and transitions which marked the passing of the old Roman order in the West and the emergence of new, ethnic kingdoms. On the one hand, as Mary Harlow has elegantly demonstrated, distinctions of male dress between the statutory ‘Roman’ toga and the ‘barbarian’ tunic and trousers were maintained in ideology but not practice: that most Roman of sixth-century emperors, Justinian, is depicted in the Ravenna mosaics in what was stereotypically ‘barbarian’ attire.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, as Max Diesenberger has pointed out, at some uncertain point between antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the ceremonial marker of fully adult ‘Germanic’ manhood shifted, from the weapon-giving of Tacitus’s day to the *barbatoria* of the late sixth century.<sup>55</sup>

Further shifts in the cultural symbolism of elite masculinity are detectable. An Italian incident earlier in the sixth century is relevant here. Procopius’s story that the Ostrogoths were hostile to young Athalaric’s bookish education was not, as Procopius himself recognised, simply about the tension between Roman and barbarian *mores*. “Letters”, he makes the Ostrogothic elders assert, “are far removed from manliness.”<sup>56</sup> Self-evidently, it was a struggle about the cultural markers of high-status masculinity. Whilst the tale has no Frankish parallel, it nevertheless puts in context another aspect of Fortunatus’s panegyric on Chilperic: his presentation of the king as a *rex doctus*.

Gregory of Tours, famously, derided Chilperic’s efforts at Latin verse and at theological reasoning.<sup>57</sup> His vitriol quite misses the point, for the significance of Chilperic’s verses lies not in their metrical quality but in the king’s ability to compose them at all. Praise for the *rex doctus* was a standard feature of Latin ruler panegyric: Fortunatus utilised the trope to present Chilperic’s life of letters as the appropriate complement to his triumph over adverse circumstances and fearsome reputation on the battlefield.<sup>58</sup> Even though Gregory claimed not to appreciate Chilperic’s literacy, the bishops assembled at Berny-Rivière negotiated across a far narrower cultural divide in their dealings with their king than did Remigius of Rheims and Avitus of Vienne in their dealings with Clovis. After three generations, Latin letters had become part of Frankish royal manliness.

Fortunatus was careful not to liken Chilperic to Clovis – indeed, after three-quarters of a century of intensive social interaction and acculturation between Franks and Gallo-Romans, it is in principle highly unlikely that the mythic model of ‘heroic’ masculinity represented by Clovis could have survived unchanged. That Merovingian princes had indeed been responding to their rapidly changing

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struggle for independence (1945 to 1949), in: *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton (London 1999) 161–174.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Walter Pohl, Telling the difference. Signs of ethnic identity, in: *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities*, 300–800, ed. Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (The Transformation of the Roman World 2, Leiden/Boston/Köln 1998) 17–69. Régine Le Jan, Die Sakralität der Merowinger oder: Mehrdeutigkeiten der Geschichtsschreibung, in: *Staat im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, Wien 2004) 73–92, comments at 86 on the “übersteigerte Männlichkeit” of Merovingian kings, but presents it as static throughout the sixth century.

<sup>54</sup> Mary Harlow, Clothes Maketh the Man. Power dressing and elite masculinity in the later Roman world, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 44–69.

<sup>55</sup> Maximilian Diesenberger, Hair, sacrality and symbolic capital in the Frankish kingdoms, in: *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages. Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, ed. Richard Corradini/Maximilian Diesenberger/Helmut Reimitz (The Transformation of the Roman World 12, Leiden/Boston/Köln 2003) 173–212, at 184–186. Viewed from this perspective, the persistence of the long hair of the *reges criniti* is the persistence of a marker of hyper-masculinity which visually asserted that fully hegemonic masculinity was reserved for kings alone. Hence the enforced hair-cut which eliminated and humiliated a rival, for example Chararic (Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* II, 41, ed. Krusch/Levison 91), cf. Diesenberger, *Hair* 196–198.

<sup>56</sup> Procopius of Caesarea, *Bellum Gothicum* V (ed./trans. Henry B. Dewing, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge-Mass. 1919/1961) 2, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* V, 44, ed. Krusch/Levison 252–253. For Chilperic’s extant verses, see *Ymnus in solemnitate Sancti Medardi episcopi* (ed. Karl Strecker, *MGH Poetae latini aevi Carolini* 4, 2, Berlin 1914) 455–457.

<sup>58</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* IX, 1, l. 41–78, ed. Reydellet 3, 10–11.



political and cultural milieu by adopting new modes of royal manliness emerges from another passage in which Fortunatus brings together the twin themes of bellicosity and learning, in order to compare Chilperic with his relatives:

*Cui simul arma fauent et littera constat amore:  
hinc uirtute potens, doctus et inde places.  
Inter utrumque sagax, armis et iure probatus  
belliger hinc radias, legifer inde micas.  
De uirtute pater, reparatur auunculus ore,  
doctrinae studio uincis et omne genus.  
Regibus aequalis de carmine maior haberis,  
dogmate uel qualis non fuit ante parens.  
Te arma ferunt generi similem, sed littera praefert:  
sic ueterum regum par simul atque prior.*

“At one and the same time war looks upon you with approval, and letters grant you their abiding affection. On the one hand you are valiant in arms and on the other you please by your learning. In both spheres you are sagacious; tested in arms and in law, you are glorious as a warrior and resplendent in your lawgiving. Your courage recalls your father, your eloquence your uncle; but you surpass your whole family in your love of learning. Amongst the kings, your equals, you are given higher esteem for your verse, no forefather was your equal in dogma. Arms make you like your family, but letters single you out as above them. Thus you are at once the equal and the superior of the kings of old.”<sup>59</sup>

The eloquent uncle of this passage was Charibert. Venantius Fortunatus’s eulogy to this ruler had been composed thirteen years earlier, soon after the poet’s arrival in Gaul. In it, he had commented on the ability of a Frankish king *de gente Sigamber* to also be fluent in Latin.<sup>60</sup> The central theme of his praise for Charibert, however, had been his portrait of the *rex placidus*.<sup>61</sup> Charibert, the poet asserted, differed from his ancestors: “They increased the fatherland by force of arms and shed blood, but you who rule without slaughter gain more.”<sup>62</sup> He continued with an elaboration of Charibert’s *virtutes*, some classical, some Christian: *bonitas, sapientia, iustitia, pietas, and moderatio*.<sup>63</sup> He then lauded this most unwarlike king by reference to famous exemplars, both Roman and biblical:

*Quod tam mirifico floret patientia cultu,  
est tibi dauidicae mansuetudo uitae.  
Iustitiae rector, uenerandi iuris amator,  
iudicium sapiens de Salomone trahis,  
tu melior fidei merito. Nam principis ampli  
Traiani ingenium de pietate refers.  
Quid repetam maturum animum, qui tempore nostro  
antiqui Fabii de grauitate places?*

“Because patience flourishes under your wonderful nurturing, you manifest the clemency of David. Overseer of justice, lover of revered law, you take your wise judgements from Solomon, though you are superior through the merit of your faith. In your respectfulness, you restore the spirit of the great emperor Trajan. Why should I speak again of your mature character, since you delight our age with the weightiness of Fabius of old?”<sup>64</sup>

This conventional hyperbole is far removed from the exaggerated masculinity associated with Clovis: Fortunatus held up to Charibert a mirror in which Romano-Christian values had supplanted the heroic

<sup>59</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen IX, 1, l. 99–108, ed. Reydellet 3, 12–13.

<sup>60</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen VI, 2, l. 97–100, ed. Reydellet 2, 56–57.

<sup>61</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen VI, 2, l. 14, ed. Reydellet 2, 56.

<sup>62</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen VI, 2, l. 37–38, ed. Reydellet 2, 56.

<sup>63</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen VI, 2, l. 55–64, ed. Reydellet 2, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, Carmen VI, 2, l. 77–84, ed. Reydellet 2, 56.

mould. Clearly, the repertoire of expressions of royal manliness had evolved as part and parcel of the cultural accommodation of the Franks to their Gallo-Roman environment.<sup>65</sup>

Manifestly, Fortunatus adjusted his words of praise in accordance with the differences of behaviour and temperament that distinguished one ruler from another. Sigibert was Fortunatus's first Frankish patron, and the first Merovingian ruler to receive encomiastic treatment.<sup>66</sup> This pen portrait lacks a personal touch, however, because it was composed right at the outset of the poet's years in Gaul, in conjunction with the epithalamium for Sigibert's wedding to Brunhild in 566, the event which had led Fortunatus north in the first place.<sup>67</sup> With due deference to rhetorical tradition, he praised the ruler whom he had only just met, lauding his martial exploits, his achievement in bringing peace, and his great honour. He noted his equally conventional moral qualities:

*Iustitiae cultor, pietatis amore coruscas:  
quod te plus habeat, certat utrumque bonum.  
Lingua, decus, uirtus, bonitas, mens, gratia pollent,  
ornarent cunctos singula uestra uiros.*

“Cultivator of justice, you shine forth with love of piety: both virtues compete to be the greater in you. Eloquence, demeanour, courage, goodness, intelligence, grace prevail in you; any one of your virtues would adorn all men.”<sup>68</sup>

In view of the occasion for which the encomium was composed, Fortunatus naturally devoted space to Sigibert's new queen. In this respect too he was freely adapting late Roman panegyric tradition.<sup>69</sup> The late third- or early-fourth-century handbook on speechifying by Menander Rhetor had suggested that an empress “of great worth and honour” might be mentioned in the section devoted to an emperor's *sophrosyne*, his *temperantia*, to point up his self-control,<sup>70</sup> but Fortunatus instead made the point that through her conversion from Arianism, Brunhild strengthened the Catholic Church. After praising Brunhild in her own right as “beautiful, modest, decorous, intelligent, dutiful, pleasing and good; superior in her character, her appearance and her nobility”, the poet ended by wishing the king and queen long life together.<sup>71</sup>

Brunhild was everything the perfect queen should be – indeed, everything any perfect woman should be, so conventional and formulaic is the praise.<sup>72</sup> In this context, we should return to the panegyric to Chilperic, and consider the passage where Fortunatus reprises the theme of patrilinear family and the relation of grandson to grandfather – via extended attention to the ruler's wife.

*Sed tamen haec maneant et crescant prospera uobis  
et liceat solio multiplicante frui  
coniuge cum propria quae regnum moribus ornat  
principis et culmen participata regit,*

<sup>65</sup> Gregory of Tours indirectly confirms that the evolution in princely masculinity was not simply the displacement Frankish codes of behaviour by the *mores* of elite Romans. The words he attributes to Guntram on learning of his brother Chilperic's death unequivocally associate manliness with vengeance: *Denique nec nos pro uiris habere debemur, si eius necem ulciscere non ualemus hoc anno*, see Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* VIII, 5, ed. Krusch/Levison 374.

<sup>66</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* VI, 1a, ed. Reydellet 2, 50–52.

<sup>67</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* VI, 1, ed. Reydellet 2, 43–50. It is also the only one of Fortunatus's royal praise poems to use the traditional hexametric form for panegyric (l. 25ff).

<sup>68</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* VI, 1a, l. 21–24, ed. Reydellet 2, 51.

<sup>69</sup> A point ignored by Bezzola's influential claim that Fortunatus was the first ‘courtly’ poet of the Middle Ages, cf. Reto Bezzola, *Les Origines et la formation de la littérature courtoise en Occident* 1, 500–1200 (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études 296, Paris 1944) 41, 74–76.

<sup>70</sup> Menander Rhetor 2, 376, l. 9–13 (ed./trans. Donald A. Russell/Nigel G. Wilson, Oxford 1981) 90. I am aware of one Latin praise poem addressed to an empress in her own right: Claudian, *Laus Serenae* (ed. Theodor Birt, MGH AA 10, *Carmina minora* 30, Berlin 1892) 319–327. For comments, see Cameron, *Claudian* 406–412.

<sup>71</sup> *Pulchra, modesta, decens, sollers, pia, grata, benigna, / ingenio, vultu, nobilitate pollens*: Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* VI, 1a, l. 37–38, ed. Reydellet 2, 52.

<sup>72</sup> See the eulogy on Theudechild, sister of Theudebert I, for a virtually identical string of adjectives; the lines in praise of Palatina, wife of Duke Bodegisel, are to the same effect but in different words: Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen* VI, 3, l. 9–10 and VII, 6, l. 15–18, ed. Reydellet 2, 58 and 93.

*prouida consiliis, sollers, cauta, utilis aulae,  
 ingenio pollens, munere larga placens,  
 omnibus excellens meritis Fredegundis opima,  
 atque serena suo fulget ab ore dies,  
 regia magna nimis curarum pondera portans,  
 te bonitate colens, utilitate iuuans.  
 Qua pariter tecum moderante palatia crescunt,  
 cuius et auxilio floret honore domus.*

...

*Quae meritis propriis effulget, gloria regis  
 et regina suo facta corona uiro.  
 Tempore sub longo haec te fructu prolis honoret  
 surgat et inde nepos, ut renoueris auus.*

“Yet may your good fortune remain and increase, and may it be granted that you enjoy your spreading dominion with your rightful consort, whose manners adorn your kingdom and who shares the prince’s rule on high. Wise in counsel, shrewd, circumspect, useful around your palace, strong in her nature, of pleasing generosity, splendid Fredegund excels in all virtues. The glorious light of day shines forth from her countenance, and she carries the oppressive weight of the cares of state, supporting you with her goodness and helping you by her service. With her governing equally with you, your palace grows, and by her help your house gains greater honour ... She shines resplendent through her own merits, a glory to a king, and, made a queen, a crowning glory for her own husband. In due course may she honour you with the fruit of her womb, so that a grandson will be born to give you a new life as a grandfather.”<sup>73</sup>

This is the queen whom Gregory of Tours was accused of slandering, and whom his *Historiae* depicted as persistently vengeful, murderous and scheming.<sup>74</sup> There is as much discrepancy between the two images of Fredegund as there is between the two portraits of her husband, but we should not simply ignore Fortunatus’s depiction of Fredegund because it contradicts Gregory’s, any more than we may dismiss his account of Chilperic. Indeed, it reveals as much – if not more – about ‘gender’ and ‘Staatlichkeit’ than all the rest of the poem.

In the first place, Fredegund entirely escapes the formulaic eulogising which Fortunatus had earlier devoted to Brunhild, and indeed other women as well. Instead, what he provides is a portrait of true joint rulership (*qua pariter tecum moderante* – l. 125), of female as well as male agency.<sup>75</sup> Whilst *utilitas* was a regal virtue whose crucial role would only be fully articulated from the eighth century onwards, its prominence among the list of Fredegund’s attributes serves to emphasise her integral political role.<sup>76</sup> It receives reinforcement from the trope of the light which shines forth from the ruler, here used twice of the queen (l. 122, 129).<sup>77</sup> In addition, she enhances the *honor* of the palace (l. 126,

<sup>73</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen IX*, 1, l. 115–126 and l. 129–132, ed. Reydellet 3, 13–14.

<sup>74</sup> Gregory may well have been aware that classical rhetoric defined invective as the formal inverse of panegyric. For the devastating effectiveness of gendered invective as an oblique form of criticism of a ruler in a sixth-century context, see Leslie Brubaker, *Sex, lies and textuality. The Secret History of Prokopios and the rhetoric of gender in sixth-century Byzantium*, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300–900*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 83–101, where she demonstrates that Procopius’s villification of Theodora is central to the way in which he discredits Justinian. Similarly, Gregory’s comments on Fredegund should be read as integral to his evaluation of Chilperic.

<sup>75</sup> A close parallel is Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris libri quattuor* (ed. Josef Partsch, MGH AA 3, 2, Berlin 1879) 111–156, trans.: Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris libri quattuor* (ed./trans. Averil Cameron, London 1976), where Sophia is repeatedly described as the emperor’s *consors*, cf. Flavius Cresconius Corippus, *In laudem Iustini Augusti Praefatio* 24; II, 47 and 198, ed. Partsch, 115; 128 and 131, and describes her sharing the *pia cura regendi*, cf. *ibid.*, ed. Partsch 139; see also *ibid.*, ed. Averil Cameron 23, 49, 53, 65. For the likelihood that Fortunatus knew this work, see Averil Cameron, *The early religious policies of Justin II*, in: *The Orthodox Churches and the West*, ed. Derek Baker (*Studies in Church History* 13, Oxford 1976) 60–61.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Edward Peters, *The Shadow King. Rex Inutilis in Medieval Law and Literature, 751–1327* (New Haven 1970).

<sup>77</sup> For the prevalence of imagery of light, sun and stars in late antique ruler panegyric, see references cited by Brian Brennan, *The image of Frankish kings in the poetry of Venantius Fortunatus*, in: *Journal of Medieval History* 10 (1984) 1–11,

131). The complexity of early medieval court society was such that, as Janet L. Nelson has remarked, courts were spaces of gender complementarity as much as gender divergence.<sup>78</sup> In them, codes of masculine and feminine behaviour were negotiated, challenged and refined in numerous ways that allowed for convergence and difference, conformity and defiance. If Fortunatus held up a mirror in which that court society might see its own gendered complexity, it was Fredegund who took full advantage of its room for manoeuvre.

In the second place, by eschewing conventional forms of praising a woman, Fortunatus neatly avoided invoking parentage, beauty, or modesty. Of Fredegund's parentage, we know nothing precise, for Gregory leaves his readers to infer whatever they wish from Rigunth's taunts of her mother's servile origin.<sup>79</sup> Only the eighth-century *Liber historiae Francorum* describes her as "beautiful" – and even so, did this in the context of her penchant for scheming and adultery.<sup>80</sup> Yet beauty in an early medieval queen was potentially ambivalent, the signifier of either inner corruption or virtue, according to the male viewer's preference. Long before the Empress Judith ran into trouble for her 'beauty', it was used as an element in gendered rhetoric about rulership, as Mayke de Jong has pointed out.<sup>81</sup> As far as modesty is concerned, we must remember that the synod of Berny-Rivière was convoked precisely to deal with slander that the queen was having an affair with Bishop Bertram of Bordeaux. The queen's reputation for sexual decorum was at stake.

Thirdly, Fortunatus describes the queen as "carrying" a heavy royal burden, the cares of state (*regia magna nimis curarum pondera portans*, l. 123). Fredegund's burden was multiple. At one level, this was simply an image of a woman bowed down with the weight of responsibility. But at another level, the synod had convened in order to address a rift in the fabric of the Frankish kingdom, and only by restoring Fredegund's reputation could political order be restored. As Chilperic himself said, "slander on my wife brings dishonour on me": the king's own position was affected for as long as the allegations hung over Fredegund.<sup>82</sup> Fredegund, then, carried the symbolic burden of the good order of the kingdom.

The eulogy of Fredegund closes by invoking the future offspring she will bear Chilperic and the hope that he, Clovis's grandson, would in time become a grandfather – a truly patriarchal figure. Had Fredegund already given birth to the tiny infant son who, hastily baptised with the name Dagobert, was to die from dysentery the following month, or was she still carrying him in her womb, heavy indeed with the future of Chilperic's lineage? A fully gendered interpretation of Fortunatus's lines suggests that the queen was heavily pregnant at the time of Berny-Rivière, and that the alleged slander linking her to Bertram of Bordeaux concerned the parentage of the child she was carrying.

Praise of Fredegund was not an optional extra. Rather, affirming her merits, stressing her contribution to the *honor* of the palace and dynasty, and proclaiming the legitimacy of the child so heavy in her belly was as crucial a contribution to resolving the crisis as was praising Chilperic's reputation for *iustitia*. Only by bringing charges against Gregory, could Fredegund's reputation be cleansed, and the legitimacy of Chilperic's lineage be confirmed. No wonder, then that both king and queen were utterly distraught when little Dagobert died so soon after his birth.<sup>83</sup>

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at 3; and MacCormack, Art 20, 45, 50. Elsewhere in his panegyric, Fortunatus also tropes Chilperic in the same way (l. 13–18).

<sup>78</sup> Janet L. Nelson, *Gendering courts in the early medieval west*, in: *Gender in the Early Medieval World*, ed. Leslie Brubaker/Julia M.H. Smith (Cambridge 2004) 185–197, at 197.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae IX*, 34, ed. Krusch/Levison 454–455.

<sup>80</sup> *Erat autem Fredegundis regina pulchra et ingeniosa nimis et adultera: Liber historiae Francorum 35* (ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SS rer. Merov. 2, Hannover 1888/repr. 1984) 215–329, at 302.

<sup>81</sup> Mayke de Jong, *Queens and beauty in the early medieval west. Balthild, Theodelinda, Judith*, in: *Agire da donna. Modelli e pratiche di rappresentazione, secoli VI–X*, ed. Cristina La Rocca (Collection Haut Moyen Âge 3, Turnhout 2007) 235–248; cf. ead., *Bride Shows 257–277*.

<sup>82</sup> *Crimen uxoris meae meum habetur obprobrium: Gregory of Tours, Historiae V*, 49, ed. Krusch/Levison 261.

<sup>83</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Historiae V*, 34, ed. Krusch/Levison 239–240. In composing tiny Dagobert's acrostic epitaph Fortunatus proclaimed the child's descent from Clovis and named both his parents, cf. Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmen IX*, 5, ed. Reydellet 3, 23–24.

## III.

In their very different ways, both the courtier poet Venantius Fortunatus and the garrulous bishop of Tours, Gregory, had a sophisticated grasp of the interconnectedness of gender as politics and gender as discourse. Both used gender as one of the threads out of which they wove their texts. Fortunatus did that to brilliant effect at Berny-Rivière, where his words were addressed to the entire court: king, lay elites and bishops all together. They needed to be, for the court was the essence of the political community, and the slandering of Fredegund had tested the limits of what was acceptable: in restoring the gender order, Fortunatus also restored the political order of the day.

Thanks to both Gregory and Fortunatus, the synod of Berny-Rivière is one of those occasions that can teach us about much the workings of power in late sixth-century Gaul. Personnel, ideology, procedure, and ceremonial of Merovingian rule are all laid bare, as are techniques of managing conflict and forms of political communication: to see the synod as, in some sense ‘performing’ Merovingian ‘Staatlichkeit’ is straightforward. But when we view it through the lens of gender history, we see more, and we see differently. This perspective offers a frame of reference which avoids segregating clerical from lay attitudes, or royal from episcopal interests. Instead, it recognises that all elite political players shared a gendered language of political communication and symbolism that embraced speech, ideology, deportment and ethnic ‘signs of distinction’. Carefully scrutinised, this gendered code reveals changing norms of royal manliness in the course of the sixth century as well as scope for women to take full political advantage of an openly negotiable political system.

In furthering understanding of the gendered nature of early medieval court society, it also shows how that ‘political construct’, the Merovingian dynasty, was moulded through textual discourse and shaped through political action. Nor should the expenditure of political energy needed to maintain its centrality be underestimated. This approach also points to ways in which Merovingian ‘Staatlichkeit’ diverged from late antique models of rulership not only by allowing an energetic queen to exercise political leverage but, importantly, by incorporating queenly agency into discourses about royal power. In taking seriously the poetic suggestion that it was the queen who, literally and symbolically, carried the excessively heavy burdens of state, it puts a woman’s body at the centre of sixth-century political life and ‘Staatlichkeit’. There emerges a sense that however stable the early medieval gender order may ordinarily seem, however much its values and socio-political contours were insistently patriarchal, it nevertheless permitted considerable flexibilities and opportunities, even if it took a crisis, such as that of 580, to make explicit its underlying attitudes and assumptions, or recalibrate political action. In reflecting on the institutional, dynastic and cultural complexities of sixth-century political life, we need to remember that gender – as much as ‘Staatlichkeit’ – is concerned with negotiating, representing and imposing power.

