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Comparing the resources of the Merovingian and Carolingian states: problems and perspectives

To compare the resources of the Merovingian and Carolingian states seems at first sight a straightforward exercise, for it is widely assumed to be obvious that the empire-building Carolingians were better resourced than the old 'rois fainéants'. But that superiority is not so easy to demonstrate. A comparison of the resources of the two regimes is also far too big and complex a subject to tackle in a short paper without a large degree of oversimplification. In what follows, I shall in essence address the problem of comparing, rather than make detailed comparisons, for differences in the quantity, quality and nature of information between the Merovingian and Carolingian period makes simple comparison hazardous. These difficulties will form the central theme of this paper. It is, furthermore, hard to decide what we mean by the term 'resource'. Fiscal income is easy enough to identify, but what about less tangible assets such as social consensus, or the confidence borne of religious belief? For they too may determine the success or failure of states. First, before turning to the problems, let me sketch out the terms and perspective of the discussion by considering a certain reluctance in the British historical tradition to engage with the issue of 'Staatlichkeit'. Is it possible to compare the resources of two 'states' without such an engagement? The answer is cautiously 'yes', if we can be clear about the nature of power and if we can strip it down to component resources that can be compared. The paper will conclude with an overall perspective on why the collectivity of those components – the states themselves – might have operated at varying levels of effectiveness.

One of the many lessons learned at the Vienna "Staat und Staatlichkeit" symposium was that British scholars have indeed thought far less about the nature and definition of the early medieval state than have their German-speaking counterparts. The controversy between Johannes Fried and Hans-Werner Goetz over whether early medieval people were capable of conceptualising a state that had a life beyond immediate interpersonal relations is one that very few English-speaking historians have picked up on. The British have been far more concerned with judging performance than kind or category. In Patrick Wormald's words: "We may start out from what pre-modern polities can be shown to have done: then, and only then, consider what label we can affix to them."¹ Often, the labelling itself is thought to be unhelpful, as, for example, in the case of Matthew Innes' insightful analysis of the relations between region and centre in the mid-Rhine area in the Frankish era – and this in a book that has the term 'state' as the first word of its title.² As Wormald did, English-speaking historians often get round the problem of defining the state by using the term 'polity', which can refer to any form of organized society, and so can be applied to each and every extensive political entity that had stability in time and space. The latter is Walter Pohl's minimal requirement for a state, the only definition, he says, which fits both early medieval *regna* and today's states, precisely because it leaves the content of the state entirely open.³ British historians are much more comfortable using the term 'state' in this way to denote boundaried historical polities.

¹ Patrick Wormald, Pre-modern 'state' and 'nation': definite or indefinite?, in: Staat im frühen Mittelalter, ed. Stuart Airlie/Walter Pohl/Helmut Reimitz (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, Wien 2006) 179–189, at 180.

² Matthew Innes, State and Society in the Early Middle Ages. The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000 (Cambridge 2000). Eliding Carolingian 'state' and 'government', Innes declares it a "'beast' difficult to track", *ibid.* 5. He then concentrates on the socio-cultural construction of power on a regional basis, without mentioning the 'state' again, only coming back to it in his Conclusion (*ibid.* 255–256) in order to dismiss the term as unhelpful.

³ Walter Pohl, Staat und Herrschaft im Frühmittelalter: Überlegungen zum Forschungsstand, in: Staat im frühen Mittelalter, ed. Stuart Airlie/id./Helmut Reimitz (Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 11, Wien 2006) 9–38, at 10. This is

Although they might fight shy of defining and categorizing the state, British scholars have been interested in analysing the structure of power within the historical states (polities) of early medieval Europe: indeed, this is an essential step towards judging their performance. The closest this comes to thinking about 'Staatlichkeit' is in a tendency to categorize power as either 'public' or 'private', the former being associated with 'strong' states, the latter with 'weak' ones, with the balance swinging from the former to the latter in various stages between the end of the Ancient World and the so-called 'feudal revolution' of the eleventh century.⁴ If there has been anything as fundamental as the Fried-Goetz controversy in English and also French-language scholarship, it has lain in a challenge to this categorization, that is, to the public/private dichotomy, especially around the issue of whether there was a 'privatisation of power' in the post-Carolingian era,⁵ although as Timothy Reuter noted, this was a debate that left out German history and German-language historiography.⁶ One way of dealing with the way in which the opposition between 'public' and 'private' power is often, but by no means always, false, has been to emphasize the affective nature of power. That is to acknowledge that whatever the source of power, what mattered historically was the extent to which, and the way in which, it impacted on others. The point is, that for those on the receiving end, the source of power was less of an issue than its effect. Again, performance is all. The successful polity or state could mobilize a great range of resources – fiscal, institutional, personal, religious, cultural – so that it could appear as a 'strong state'. It might, as Pohl suggests, become more than the sum of its parts.⁷ But for a range of possible reasons, at a different time and in different circumstances, that polity might fail to mobilize its resources, and thus appear weak. And into this model we must also feed the history of each resource element itself because these may have changed over time, as, say, fiscal resources certainly did. It is this complexity, as well as the unevenness of the historical record, that makes comparing the resources of the Merovingian and Carolingian states a 'problem'. In addressing that problem I will work with the term 'state' in the sense of the polity, and with power as affective power that comprehends both the private and the public, and customs and institutions will be treated as largely stable in form, but subject to different levels of performance.⁸

a far as one can go without having to decide on the difficult issue of "unpersönliche Institutionen". Adapting Weber's formulation, Susan Reynolds also gives a definition which satisfies the variety of medieval states by setting minimal terms and leaving the content open, see Susan Reynolds, *The historiography of the medieval state*, in: *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (Oxford 1997) 117–138, at 118. Her definition is: "An organization of human society within a more or less fixed area in which the ruler or governing body more or less successfully controls the legitimate use of force".

⁴ This was, for example, the underlying concept in Chris Wickham's original adaptation of the Marxist model of transition from ancient to feudal modes of production, in which tax was 'public' and 'rent' was private, Chris Wickham, *The other transition: from the ancient world to feudalism*, in: *Past & Present* 103 (1984) 3–36. Addressing the issue at much greater length, and relating it to the 'form of the state', in id., *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford 2005) 56–150, "The form of the state", he greatly softens the opposition between tax and rent, and thus between 'public' and 'private' on the basis of regional variety. As with Reynolds, the adaptation of Weberian terms allows him to define basic common factors in a wide variety of historical states.

⁵ See *Debate: the 'feudal revolution'*, in: *Past & Present* 152 (1996) and *Past & Present* 155 (1997), with contributions from Thomas Bisson, Dominique Barthélemy, Timothy Reuter, Stephen White and Chris Wickham. The debate was sparked by Thomas Bisson's strong statement of feudal statelessness and violence, id., *The 'feudal revolution'*, in: *Past & Present* 142 (1994) 6–42. For a more recent and powerful attack on the dichotomy between 'public' and 'private', and on the structuralist tradition of history which underpinned it, Stephen White, *The tenth-century courts of Mâcon and the perils of structuralist history. Re-reading Burgundian judicial institutions*, in: *Conflict in Medieval Europe. Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, ed. Warren Brown/Piotr Górecki (Aldershot 2003) 37–68. In White's view, most French and English historians have greatly overestimated the power and effectiveness of the early medieval state. Privileging social process over state directed rules, he comes close to denying the existence of any formal and effective government institutions. It should be noted that in White's work there is no reference to German-language historiography, cf. i-bid. 37–38, n. 3, provides an excellent bibliography of the debate.

⁶ Timothy Reuter, *Debate: the 'feudal revolution'* 3, in: *Past & Present* 155 (1997) 177–195.

⁷ Pohl, *Staat und Herrschaft* 15.

⁸ Further on Frankish customs and institutions see Paul Fouracre, *The nature of Frankish political institutions in the seventh century*, in: *Franks and Alamanni in the Merovingian Period. An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. Ian N. Wood (Studies in Historical Archaeoethnology 3, Woodbridge/San Marino 1998) 285–301.

It seems incontrovertible that the Frankish polity under the Carolingians was so much more successful than it had been under the Merovingians that the Carolingian state must have been the better resourced, better led, and better organized. And if we were in any doubt, we only have to turn to Einhard, who was actually there, and who in the *Vita Karoli* tells us just this. Einhard's striking judgement on the Merovingian regime is always worth repeating: the kings were devoid of *vigor*. The *opes* and *potentia* of the *regnum* had passed to the mayors of the palace, leaving the kings with an empty title. They participated in stage-managed ceremonies that made them look grand, but in fact they lived on a *precarium vitae stipendium* allowed to them by the mayors of the palace. All that was really their own was a single *villa*.⁹ The king had, in other words, sunk to the position of a precarial tenant, and by using the term *precarium* Einhard surely meant to evoke a sense of dependant status, the ultimate contradiction of royalty.

Despite the fact that this passage tells us nothing about the resources of the state – the *opes* and *potentia*, remember, had not disappeared but had gone elsewhere – it has been very often taken as reflection of the decline of the Merovingian regime as a whole. The basis of this view is that the Merovingians had treated public resources as their own. Conquest had made the dynasty the richest and most powerful in Western Europe, but after this great beginning, the later kings, the “dogs and lesser beasts” of Basina's legendary vision,¹⁰ had wilfully, short-sightedly and arbitrarily dissipated their resources until they had arrived at that position of undignified poverty described by Einhard.

There are five main areas which historians have identified as showing how the Merovingians had dissipated their resources, or at least as areas in which the Carolingians appear to have been more resourceful, although as I suggested earlier, the difficulties of making comparisons mean that apparent contrasts have to be carefully qualified. The first area is that of direct taxation and the apparently cavalier attitude the Merovingians had towards its perception and maintenance. This is graphically portrayed by Gregory of Tours in the *Historiae* where the giving up of taxation by indulgent kings becomes something of a motif.¹¹ In Gregory's narrative, rulers were quick to abandon trying to collect tax when there was resistance to it. The short term gain of ending taxation for favoured or recalcitrant communities was at the cost of losing the resource on permanent basis. By the later seventh century, according to the *Vita Balthildis* a capitation tax that forced parents into infanticide was ended,¹² and according to the *Vita Wilfridi* an attempt in the 670's to levy *tributum* on the ‘cities’ was grounds for killing a ruler.¹³ The switch from a gold to a silver coinage that took place in the 670's can plausibly be associated with the ending of direct taxation on a large scale, although other factors are involved here too.¹⁴ There is some evidence that local taxes or tributes, such as the *inferenda* from the lower Loire area were still being collected at the beginning of the eighth century, but that evidence then disappears.¹⁵ Generally, most historians agree that since the end of the fifth century direct taxation had been sharply declining as an element of state resource right across Western Europe, although there is an extreme fiscalist position which strongly disagrees with this proposition.¹⁶ Let us briefly consider

⁹ Einhard, *Vita Karoli magni* I (ed. Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. [25], Hannover 1911) 2–4.

¹⁰ On this vision, in which in each generation the Merovingians would become weaker and meaner, Ian N. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms 450–751* (Harlow 1994) 39.

¹¹ Gregory of Tours, *Historiae* III, 25 (ed. Bruno Krusch/Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 1, 1, Hannover 1951) 123: King Theudebert remitted tribute to Clermont; King Lothar backed down when faced with opposition to levying a one-third taxation on churches: *ibid.* IV, 2, ed. Krusch/Levison 136; the citizens of Limoges burned the lists: *ibid.* V, 28, ed. Krusch/Levison 233–234; King Chilperic burned the tax lists of cities belonging to his queen, Fredegund, at her urging: *ibid.* V, 34, ed. Krusch/Levison 238–241; King Lothar burned the tax books for Tours, then King Charibert burned the replacement lists: *ibid.* IX, 30, ed. Krusch/Levison 448–449; King Childebert remitted taxes to the Church in Clermont: *ibid.* X, 7, ed. Krusch/Levison 488.

¹² *Vita Balthildis* 6 (trans. with commentary Paul Fouracre/Richard Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France. History and Hagiography 640–720*, Manchester 1996) 118–132, at 123.

¹³ *Vita Wilfridi* 33 (ed. Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 6, Hannover/Leipzig 1913) 163–263, at 227–228.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Ildar Garipzanov and Jürgen Strothmann for reminding me at the Vienna symposium about this association with the switch from gold to silver.

¹⁵ Wickham, *Early Middle Ages* 109–111.

¹⁶ Set out at length by Jean Durliat, *Les finances publiques de Dioclétien aux Carolingiens, 284–888* (Beihefte der Francia 21, Sigmaringen 1990).

the disagreement because it has great implications for how we assess the comparative resources of Merovingian and Carolingian states. On the one hand we have our narrative evidence for the failure of the Merovingian kings to maintain taxation. On the other hand, it has been argued that the income we see being derived from land, for instance in the polyptychs, which is generally understood as rent paid to landlords in a private capacity, was in fact taxation, sometimes collected by the landlords, but always passed on to the state. In this view, the ubiquitous term *villa* is conceived of as referring to a fiscal unit through which the state raised revenue. An intermediate position is to think that dues collected from the land, e.g. from the *villae*, were in essence derived from the old land taxes and that they became private income only gradually as the Carolingian state began to fail in its turn in the later ninth century.¹⁷ The problem is that although we can see such income being collected, we cannot see it being passed on to the fisc, and in particular we cannot see it being spent by the state. Unlike the Roman state, the Carolingians did not maintain a widespread bureaucracy or standing army. Walter Goffart has recently argued that a large proportion of direct Roman taxes was exchanged for the personal hereditary military duty of qualified Franks.¹⁸ If so, this was a good deal for the soldiers, for their military duty was intermittent and of limited duration, so the process would still effectively represent a decline in taxation. It may be the case that the Carolingians were able to convert some of this military duty back into income in the form of annual *dona* to the kings, gifts which Hincmar referred to as taxation for the maintenance of the army.¹⁹ These gifts, which included horses and sets of arms at noble level, are also visible at peasant level as part of the dues in kind owed to landlords, although they faded in significance as peasant military obligations declined.²⁰ Whether the Merovingians had received these kinds of *dona* at the *Campus Martius* is not clear. There are indications that their nobles gave offerings when they made obeisance at the gatherings, but what these amounted to we cannot tell.²¹ What the Carolingians received in *dona* (not counting the peasant donatives which presumably funded the gifts of superiors) may have amounted to horses and arms in the low thousands. Is this a lot, or a little? That depends on what it was used for, not much to fund a programme of education, say, but quite a lot to support a small group of mounted warriors such as the *scara* which appear so frequently in the narrative sources.

If we share Chris Wickham's view that direct taxation was the single biggest resource that determined the level of possible state activity,²² and also accept the majority view that taxation was indeed in free fall from the end of the fifth century onwards, then logically we should think that the Merovingian state was initially far better resourced than the Carolingian state, and that the latter followed on from the former in a downward trajectory in terms of income. But as Wickham acknowledges, we cannot ascertain the levels of income from taxation at any point during the Merovingian period,²³ and we must also explain why a Carolingian state that taxed less than its predecessor appears to have been more active than it had been. One answer to this conundrum would be to return to the old view of the Carolingian state as a 'Personenverbandsstaat', in which loyalty replaced taxation as a main resource. This is in effect what Karl-Ferdinand Werner did when he put his finger on the Battle of Tertry as the final death blow to the old Roman form of government (i.e. bureaucratically organised 'pouvoir cen-

¹⁷ Walter Goffart, From Roman taxation to medieval seigneurie. Three notes, in: *Speculum* 47 (1972) 165–187, 373–394. See also id., Old and new in Merovingian taxation, in: *Past & Present* 96 (1982) 3–21.

¹⁸ Walter Goffart, Frankish military duty and the fate of Roman taxation, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 16 (2008) 166–190.

¹⁹ Hincmar of Reims, *Ad Carolum Calvum*, PL 125, 1050D–1051A.

²⁰ On peasant donatives collected from later Carolingian estates, Ludolf Kuchenbuch, 'Porcus donativus'. Language use and gifting in seigniorial records between the eighth and tenth centuries, in: *Negotiating the Gift. Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi/Valentin Groebner/Bernhard Jussen (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 188, Göttingen 2003) 193–246.

²¹ No strictly Merovingian source refers to offerings from the nobles at the assemblies, but the early ninth-century *Annales Mettenses priores* do refer to them, *Annales Mettenses priores* a. 692 (trans./ed. Paul Fouracre/Richard Gerberding, *Late Merovingian France. History and Hagiography 640–720*, Manchester 1996) 360. The later eighth-century Argeo of Freising, *Vita Corbiniani* 5 (ed. Bruno Krusch, *MGH SS rer. Merov.* 6, Hannover 1913) 560–593, at 564, tells of the mayor of the palace Pippin (d. 714) taking a precious gift covered in gold and precious stones to the *Campus Martius*.

²² Wickham, *Early Middle Ages* 56–59.

²³ Wickham, *Early Middle Ages* 106–113.

trale').²⁴ But as Werner's work shows elsewhere, for example in his contribution to the "Histoire comparée de l'administration", the Carolingians also repaired institutions they had inherited and invented some of their own.²⁵ There was much more to the Carolingian resource-base than loyalty, even though the rulers plainly did not enjoy much of an income from direct taxation.

The second area in which the Merovingians may allegedly be seen to have squandered resources is in the giving out of land for less return than the Carolingians were able to get. This difference loomed very large in François-Louis Ganshof's understanding of how the Carolingians built up their resources on the basis of services rendered for land, that is, in the so-called 'union of vassalage and benefice' in which those services were defined and channelled, as opposed to an ill-defined, politically unproductive and rather arbitrary pattern of land distribution under by the Merovingians.²⁶ But not only is this model of a neo-contractual relationship between land and service underpinning the Carolingian regime now seen as too rigid and too juridical,²⁷ it is also hard to establish what the differences here between the two regimes actually were: we know very little about how, or even if, the Merovingians gave out land in return for political or other services. There is one charter which shows one property attached to the office of mayor which did change hands between mayors,²⁸ and we have instances of property being taken back into the fisc after the holder had been judged disloyal, so that the threat to confiscate land suggests some control over service. But what really catches the eye are the set of charters, some of them originals, in which the rulers gave out massive endowments of land to monasteries whose independence was also guaranteed. By comparison, Carolingian rulers appear more restrained in their giving to monasteries. Does this show a Merovingian profligacy which compares badly with a supposed Carolingian parsimony? One must be careful, however, not to read too much into this changing pattern of donations. The seventh and earlier eighth centuries was a time in which many of the premier Frankish monasteries, such as Luxeuil, Jumièges, Rebais, St Wandrille, Chelles, Corbie, or Stablo-Malmédy, were founded, by various members of the elite as well as by the ruling family. Initial endowments were naturally very large. Subsequent donations added piecemeal to them, and this may account for much of the difference between patterns of donation in the two regimes. That the Carolingians had greater landed resources than at least the later Merovingians seems probable given their military conquest and the expropriation of defeated leaders. But whereas for the Carolingians we can add together the family lands identified in the mayoral period to the fiscal lands acquired as kings and take them together as a resource,²⁹ for the Merovingians we cannot do this. Einhard, of course, said that the last Merovingians had more or less lost all their land. It is not clear what he meant by the term *proprium* here. Other sources specified that the *villa* in question was the palace estate of Montmacq, thus a *villa publica*.³⁰ We might thus read the passage as indicating that the kings had lost control of their fiscal lands other than Montmacq, but it also suggests that these were now under the control of the mayors of the palace, and as such passed to the Carolingians.

The Carolingians famously added to the resources available for the support of warriors by borrowing land from the church on a permanent basis. We have a clear statement of this intent from the Council of Les Estinnes, held in 743 which said that the appropriation of this resource was a vital ne-

²⁴ Karl-Ferdinand Werner, Les principautés périphériques dans le monde franque du VII^e siècle, in: Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo 20 (1972) 483–514, at 493–494.

²⁵ Karl-Ferdinand Werner, Missus – marchio – comes. Entre l'administration centrale et l'administration locale de l'empire carolingien, in: Histoire comparée de l'administration (IV^e–XVIII^e siècle), ed. Karl-Ferdinand Werner/Werner Paravicini (Beihefte der Francia 9, München/Zürich 1980) 191–239.

²⁶ François-Louis Ganshof, Feudalism, trans. Philip Grierson (London³ 1964) 3–43.

²⁷ Susan Reynolds, Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted (Oxford 1994) 75–111.

²⁸ D Theoderich III. 131 (690 October 30) (ed. Theo Kölzer, MGH DD Die Urkunden der Merowinger 1, Hannover 2001), it concerns Lagny-le-Sec: ... *qui fuit inlustribus viris Arboino, Uuarattune et Ghislemaro quondam maiores domos nostros et post discessum ipsius Uuarattune in fisco nostro revocata*.

²⁹ On Pippinid lands in the mayoral period, Matthias Werner, Der Lütticher Raum in frühkarolingischer Zeit (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 62, Göttingen 1980) 419–484; also id., Adelsfamilien im Umkreis der frühen Karolinger. Die Verwandtschaft Irminas von Oeren und Adelas von Pfalz (Vorträge und Forschungen 28, Sigmaringen 1982).

³⁰ Annales Mettenses priores a. 692, ed./trans. Fouracre/Gerberding 361.

cessity at a time in which the Christian people was being threatened by outsiders.³¹ Church land would be given out to warriors on precarial leases in return for the payment of a *census*, amounting to a token rent, to the church in question. On the face of it this development, along with land otherwise provided on easy terms for supporters – *beneficia* – amounted to a monumental change both in the nature of the state's resources, and in Ganshof's view, in the nature of the state itself, once the state had the land to bind its followers into contractual service.³² As we have seen, the latter point is now generally rejected as too juridical, but that much church land did pass out of ecclesiastical control in this way is beyond doubt, for, later, individual churches complained loudly that it had done so.³³ That *beneficia* were seen as essential resources to be defended against abuse and against conversion into allodial land is equally clear from the abundance of legislation seeking to avoid this.³⁴ On the other hand, we must remember that the church had land surplus to its immediate need that could be leased out to lay persons precisely because of the massive inflow of donations from lay people, including the kings, that we have just been discussing.³⁵ Over the longer term, the net gain to the state in reconverting that recently donated land to lay use may therefore not be as obvious as it first appears.

Our third area is closely related to the distribution and use of landed resources, namely the grant of immunities. When the Merovingians introduced immunities they apparently deprived the state of large areas of jurisdiction and the income from jurisdiction and other rights. Royal officers were excluded from the immunity, which meant that they could not hear court cases, levy the judicial fine, the *fretum*, enjoy rights of hospitality, take foodstuffs, nor collect other unspecified dues. The immunity formula sums all of this up in the clause "whatever the fisc had in the past hoped to get from the lands is now to go to the beneficiary".³⁶ All surviving charters of immunity are for the church. Whether or not lay persons received them is questionable. In the charters there is no return for the grant of this privilege apart from a hoped for spiritual reward. The Carolingians adopted the immunity form nearly word for word. But in their legislation they strengthened their right to intervene in immunities when serious crimes had been committed, and by adding a clause on the protection of the institution to which immunity was being granted, they in effect curbed its independence.³⁷ Coupled with their much more obvious political appointment to major abbacies, often of lay persons, one might argue that the Carolingians got a greater return on their grants of this privilege than the Merovingians ever had. But again, it would be impossible to judge the difference between the two in quantitative terms. Furthermore, if we follow Mayke de Jong and put the *ecclesia* at the heart of the state's formation,³⁸ then we may see the grant of immunities in terms of a circulation of resources within the state, so that whether they were granted in more or less numbers, or on more or less strict terms, this would make little difference to a regime's total resources.

In our fourth area, the income that flowed in from outside, there is a more obvious difference between Merovingians and Carolingians. The early Merovingians had received tributes from neighbouring peoples, as well as subsidies and bribes from the rulers of Byzantium. This income visibly dwindled as Merovingian military activity declined and as it became impossible for the Byzantines to intervene in the West. According to the Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar, for example, the Franks had been accustomed to receive 12,000 *solidi* per annum from the Lombards until in the year

³¹ Concilium Liftinense 2 (ed. Alfred Werminghoff, MGH LL Concilia 2, 1, Hannover 1906) 6–7, at 7.

³² Ganshof, Feudalism 19–21.

³³ On the case of the monastery of St Wandrille cf. Ian N. Wood, Teutsind, Witlaic and the history of Merovingian precaria, in: Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages, ed. Wendy Davies/Paul Fouracre (Cambridge 1995) 31–52.

³⁴ Paul Fouracre, The use of the term 'beneficium' in Frankish sources. A society based on favours?, in: The Language of Gift, ed. Wendy Davies/Paul Fouracre (Cambridge forthcoming).

³⁵ Wood, Teutsind 38–39: though it complained bitterly about the loss of its lands, in a survey of 787, St. Wandrille counted 3,964 'mans' , 1,313 of which were exploited directly by the monks, the others being let out to clients.

³⁶ Paul Fouracre, Eternal light and earthly needs: practical aspects of the development of Frankish immunities, in: Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages, ed. Wendy Davies/Paul Fouracre (Cambridge 1995) 53–81.

³⁷ Fouracre, Eternal light 63–66.

³⁸ Pohl, Staat und Herrschaft 30; see also Mayke de Jong, The state of the church: Ecclesia and early medieval state formation (in this volume).

616 the three mayors of the palace were bribed to accept a one off final payment of 36,000.³⁹ In 631, again according to Fredegar, King Dagobert extorted 200,000 *solidi* from Sisenand king of the Visigoths as the price for helping him take the throne.⁴⁰ That some large sum was indeed paid is revealed by a hike in the gold content of Frankish coins at this time. But this is the last time we hear of income of this nature. In the next year Dagobert agreed to let the Saxons stop paying an annual tribute of 500 cows in return for military services.⁴¹ When the latter was not performed, the tribute remained in abeyance, until, in fact, the time of the first Carolingians. By contrast, the Carolingians received tributes from a wide range of peoples and they famously plundered their weaker neighbours, most notably at the Saxon Irminsul in 772 and at the Avar *hring* in 795 and 796. Einhard commented on the latter plunder, saying that in an instant it made the Franks into a wealthy people.⁴² Again an improvement in the purity of the coinage may reflect the sudden injection of a large amount of precious metal.

In two important papers of 1985 and 1990, the late Timothy Reuter fixed on plunder and tribute, rather than land held in return for service, as the root of Carolingian success.⁴³ Whereas the Merovingians had not been able to stop their troops taking plunder for themselves, the Carolingian leaders were able to insist on plunder being delivered up, and they were then able to channel it out to their chosen followers. In Reuter's view, Charlemagne's Empire was little more than a robber state, expanding at the expense of weaker neighbours, then stagnating and eventually turning in on itself when it could no longer expand. The elite did their sums: once the easier pickings had gone, they saw that the cost benefit of going to war disappeared, and they preferred to stay at home rather than take part in increasingly risky adventures.

The Carolingians, opined Reuter, could "even do without administration at a pinch" as long as the elite were kept onside by being fed on the fruits of military success. As was the case with the annual *dona*, a little went a relatively long way when the main expenditure was the support of a small military elite, made up of magnates and their unbeneficed followers. It was an elite which was anyway almost self-funding, at least in the early years. The wider military obligations seen in the Capitularies related to defensive warfare, warfare that was a burden rather than a benefit. This is the 'Personenverbandsstaat' with a difference, with financial incentive rather than loyalty being the force which kept the state together,⁴⁴ although the state remained in essence an ad hoc alliance of interests. Brilliant though this analysis was, it too runs into difficulties with the Merovingian comparison, for the latter rests largely on anecdotal evidence from Gregory of Tours' *Historiae*, not least on the legendary episode of Clovis and the vase of Soissons.⁴⁵ The comparison pits sixth century Merovingians against late eighth and early ninth-century Carolingians, whereas much of the intervening period, and especially the mid to later seventh century, had seen very little warfare. Any decline in income might therefore have been matched by a decline in expenditure. The cost benefit of warfare is also very hard to estimate. The campaigns against the Avars were clearly profitable, but what about the grinding occupation of Saxony? Was the siege of Pavia in 774–775 mounted just by elite mounted forces? What kind of people was it who tried to dig the canal between the rivers Altmühl and Rednitz? And so on.

Because he focused on plunder and tribute as the fuel of the Carolingian military, Timothy Reuter arguably underplayed other elements – and not just the administration – which might be counted as enabling factors. His analysis, in which the financial incentive trumps all others, with a view of the Carolingian state that was quite pejorative, was perhaps influenced by a reaction against the Thatcherite atmosphere in Britain at the time it was conceived. Today we might think more about religious

³⁹ Fredegar, *Chronicle IV*, 45 (ed./trans. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar with its Continuations*, London 1960) 37–39.

⁴⁰ Fredegar, *Chronicle IV*, 73, ed./trans. Wallace-Hadrill 61–62.

⁴¹ Fredegar, *Chronicle IV*, 74, ed./trans. Wallace-Hadrill 62–63.

⁴² Einhard, *Vita Karoli magni* 13, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger 61.

⁴³ Timothy Reuter, *Plunder and tribute in the Carolingian empire*, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5/35 (1985) 75–94; id. *The end of Carolingian military expansion*, in: *Charlemagne's Heir. New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. Peter Godman/Roger Collins (Oxford 1990) 391–405, both papers are repr. in: Timothy Reuter, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet Nelson (Cambridge 2006) 231–250 and 251–267.

⁴⁴ Reuter, *Plunder and tribute* 239–240.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Tours, *Historiae II*, 27, ed. Krusch/Levison 71–73.

conviction as a driving force, and thus as a resource. But Reuter's argument that the Carolingians were the more effective takers of plunder and tribute is cogent, and the idea that Carolingians were simply more effective exploiters of traditional resources can be applied to all the four areas of comparison we have examined thus far. Effectiveness, as a resource itself, forms our fifth area of comparison.

According to their own lights, the Carolingians were cerebral and systematic in their approach to government. The central place of justice in their political and moral thinking was not just a matter of legitimation. It was equally a way of insisting on their justified rights.⁴⁶ Subjects had a moral and legal duty to deliver up what was asked of them in the name of the whole Christian community, and the rulers had a concomitant duty to be jealous of their rights. In legislation this comes down to a series of very concrete demands, on respect for boundary markers, the payment of tithes, the management of *beneficia*, providing inventories for royal assets and so on, and on. The Capitulary de villis will stand as an illustration of the detail in which they listed their rights and resources, down to the last herb that should be grown in their gardens.⁴⁷ As Rosamond McKitterick and Janet L. Nelson, and others, have so clearly explained, their enthusiasm for the written word was integral to this dual moral and fiscal prescription,⁴⁸ and there is a growing consensus that the Carolingians did make progress in enforcing their rights, that is, in governing.⁴⁹ As Georges Depreyrot put it, the Carolingians would have had a significant income from the blanket enforcement of the 60 shilling fine for the breaking of a royal *bannum* that was far more extensive than that exercised by their Merovingian predecessors. This alone, he argued, gave them the edge in terms of resources.⁵⁰

Yet even here we cannot be sure that the unfavourable comparison is not produced by the contrast between the routine silence of the Merovingians and the noisy self assertion of the Carolingians. The Merovingians did have the *bannum*, but we have only a solitary example of them enforcing the fine for the non performance of military duty.⁵¹ They did have surveys of property, though these are termed *descriptiones* rather than polyptychs. Shoichi Sato's work on the seventh-century accounting documents of Tours shows writing being used in the field, for the tiniest of dues owed.⁵² And it might be argued, albeit against the scholarly consensus, that the substitution of Carolingian minuscule for Merovingian cursive script shows writing having to be remastered in a less literate society, an argument that would have great implications for comparative levels of administrative capacity. Fiscal rapacity is a hagiographical motif in the later Merovingian period, and as we saw with reference to the Vita Balthildis,⁵³ even the late Merovingian state was supposed to have the capacity to tax people to death. But how far can we generalise an effective resource management from these shreds of evidence? If the Merovingians had done all these things on a widespread and regular basis, then we surely would have more evidence of their activity than this handful of suggestive hints. If it is accepted that more administration generally produces more evidence of administration, it would seem to be perverse not to take the Carolingians at their word here, that is, to follow the lie of the evidence and thus to agree with Einhard that at least in this respect, the later Merovingian rulers had lost their vigour.

To sum up thus far. In all of the areas we have looked at, the difficulty of comparing resources comes primarily from the scarcity of evidence from the Merovingian side in contrast to the relative wealth of information from the Carolingians. What evidence there is tends also to be of different kinds. Anecdotal and narrative evidence from the Merovingian period emphasizes colourful behaviour

⁴⁶ Paul Fouracre, Carolingian justice: the rhetoric of reform and contexts of abuse, in: *Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo* 42 (1995) 771–803.

⁴⁷ *Capitulare de villis* (ed. Alfred Boretius, MGH LL *Capitularia regum Francorum* 1, Hannover 1883/repr. 1984) 82–91.

⁴⁸ Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge 1989) 1–75; Janet L. Nelson, Literacy in Carolingian government, in: *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge 1990) 258–296.

⁴⁹ There has been a distinct move away from Reuter's pessimistic assessment of Carolingian governmental capability, towards an appreciation of what was achieved within very limited means. See, for example, Matthew Innes, *Charlemagne's government*, in: *Charlemagne. Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester 2005) 71–89.

⁵⁰ Georges Depreyrot, *Richesse et société chez les Mérovingiens et Carolingiens* (Paris 1994) 15–17.

⁵¹ D Childebert III. 143 (694 December 23), ed. Kölzer 360–362, at 361–362: One Ibbo was fined 600 solidi for not accompanying King Theuderic III on campaign in Austrasia, probably in 677.

⁵² Shoichi Sato, *The Merovingian accounting documents of Tours*, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000) 143–161.

⁵³ *Vita Balthildis* 6, trans. Fouracre/Gerberding 123.

whereas normative, rescriptive and descriptive material from the Carolingian regime suggests careful calculation and recording. Moreover, the Carolingians actually spoke about their responsibility for the husbanding of resources in a way the Merovingians had not. Hence the view that the Merovingians had treated the resources of their kingdom carelessly as their own patrimony. The *utilitas regni*, in this view, was little more than their own convenience. The Carolingians, by contrast, thought of their rights and income as a resource for the whole Christian community which they both led and represented. Silence on the part of the Merovingians here is what condemns them to an unfavourable comparison. It is probably, but not certainly, right that it should do so.

When we look at what resources both regimes could draw on, we find a great deal of continuity and thus similarity. The big difference is the decline of direct taxation across the Merovingian period, although, as we saw, this is impossible to quantify. But in terms of indirect taxation, charters of immunity, and toll privileges in particular,⁵⁴ show the same taxes on trade, and the same *redibuciones* on land and people, being levied in both periods. There is more to this than mere terminological conservatism, for we can also see charter *formulae* being fine-tuned to the particular circumstances of donor and beneficiary.⁵⁵ The Carolingians probably had greater landed resources than their predecessors, but there is no evidence that the Merovingians had squandered what land they had by failing to use it to secure loyalty and service.

As we saw at the outset, it is really the superior performance of the Carolingian regime that invites one to think that its resources must have been greater too. Success, as Reuter argued, brought its own rewards, especially in plunder, but also in less tangible resources such as confidence, competition to impress the ruler, and responsiveness to demands from the centre.⁵⁶ In 806 Charlemagne's *missi* wrote to his counts.⁵⁷ They asked them to re-read their capitularies to make sure that they and their subordinates had carried out the Emperor's instructions to the letter, starting with concern for his rights, moving on to the dispensation of justice, and on to the listing of rebellious people in the county. Such a document puts the question of resource in a nutshell. At a time of unprecedented success and confidence, the Carolingian regime could make increasing demands and expect them to be met, delivered through what were essentially traditional channels and age old rights. In terms of comparison, the point is that one has the pick of literally hundreds of Carolingian documents which can be used to show the same phenomenon, but for the Merovingians there are virtually none. The difficulty in comparing the effectiveness of the two regimes lies precisely in what significance we attach to the dearth of Merovingian evidence.

Let us now return to the question of perspectives as a way of concluding this discussion. As intimated earlier, it is easier to identify what resources were available than to see what these states actually spent their wealth upon, and this may be because both of them had relatively little to spend. The Carolingians, for all their triumphs, left scarcely more monuments behind than had the Merovingians. To play devil's advocate rather facetiously, one could say that they amounted to a big chapel and an impressive trench.⁵⁸ Perhaps the Plan of St. Gall might stand as a motif here for the grandness of their

⁵⁴ Alain Stoclet, *Immunes ab omni teloneo. Étude de diplomatique, de philologie et d'histoire sur l'exemption de tonlieux au haut Moyen Âge et spécialement sur la 'Praeceptio de navibus'* (Bruxelles/Rome 1999) 45–86.

⁵⁵ For examples, see Marios Costambeys, *An aristocratic community on the northern Frankish frontier 690–726*, in: *Early Medieval Europe* 3 (1994) 39–62.

⁵⁶ A comparison between two narratives of military failure shows the different levels of confidence in the two regimes in the mid seventh and later eighth centuries respectively. Fredegar, *Chronicle* IV, 87, ed. Wallace-Hadrill 73–75: the twelve-year old King Sigibert II was persuaded by a faction of magnates to attack one Duke Radulf in Thuringia. Beaten by Radulf, Sigibert was left weeping on the battlefield, before withdrawing. Cf. *Annales regni Francorum* aa. 782, 783 (ed. Frederic Kurze, MGH SS rer. Germ. in us. schol. [6], Hannover 1895) 59–65: in the reign of Charlemagne, the magnates raced to attack the Saxons in order to impress the king. After they were beaten due to their hastiness, Charlemagne took a terrible revenge on the Saxons for the loss of his men. Interestingly, the two episodes reveal a similar scale of troop mobilization and movement, which could indicate comparable military resources.

⁵⁷ *Capitula a missis dominicis ad comites directa*, ed. Boretius 183–184.

⁵⁸ This is not to go as far as Ross Samson in characterizing Carolingian culture as a magpie venture which gathered *spolia* without any notion of order or meaning, id., *Carolingian palaces and the poverty of ideology*, in: *Meaningful Architecture. Social Interpretation of Buildings*, ed. Michael Locock (Avebury 1994) 99–131. Rosamond McKitterick, *Carolingians 135–164*, argues that books were in effect the Carolingians' monuments. Books were indeed very expensive to pro-

projects in terms of conception, and maybe even intention, but also for their failure to progress beyond the drawing board.⁵⁹ There were no burhs as in England, nor anything remotely to compare with Reopolis in Spain. Carolingian society may have been richer than late Merovingian society but it was still poor. Noting the difficulty that Charles the Bald had in raising cumulatively about 14,000 pounds of silver to pay off the Danes in the years 860–866, Michael Hendy remarked that raising such a sum “would not have presented any difficulty to a Roman or a Byzantine ruler, or individually even to a reasonably wealthy landowner”⁶⁰. This comparison, made twenty years ago, is not quite fair in that reluctance rather than inability to pay was no doubt a factor here, but the point should be well taken. Only from the later ninth century do charters reveal income from markets, which is surely an indicator of growing exchange and increasing wealth, and market revenue was potentially an important new resource for the rulers. But by this time, rights that would have raised such cash were beginning to be exercised at local level in a way that ignored the needs of the centre.

This shift, the strengthening of the locality at the expense of the centre in the later Carolingian period, is often placed as a stage in the supposed decline of public authority, or a weakening of the state. A recurrent theme in comparing the resources of Merovingian and Carolingian states has been that the latter must have been better resourced because it was more successful. Here we see that when it becomes less successful in the later ninth century, the Carolingian state becomes less well resourced. One could make the same point for the Merovingian state over its history. As Einhard suggested, when the rulers are weak, others take the *opes* and the *potentia*. In its post-taxation phase, the Frankish state had a base-line of resources in land, tribute, the profits of war, a series of customary rights such as the receipt of annual gifts, income from justice, and from indirect taxation, above all, from tolls. Successful regimes maximised income from these sources and added to them. It was of course a complex of immediate factors that determined the capacity of a state to do well, but one should also try to bring into the picture the effects of longer term social and economic development. All states, but especially poorly resourced states, have to work with the grain of such developments. We have seen, for example, how the Carolingians were able to benefit from the leasing out of church land. This was only possible because in the two generations before the Council of Estinnes, the device of donation and the retention of usufruct over part of the land donated had become more common in Francia.⁶¹ In fact it spread with incredible speed. However much the church complained about them, *precaria verbo regis* were only a fraction of the *precaria*, i.e. the arrangements for usufruct, that were made in this period. If one looks at any run of charters for the ninth century, it becomes clear that they are dominated by precarial grants, and that it was through the holding of lands in this way that the nobility consolidated its hold over the countryside. It seems that the Carolingians had tapped into a form of tenure that was in the process of becoming very widespread amongst the nobility, and they encouraged it to spread even further. This was a resource, as Estinnes makes clear, but by giving out *precaria* and other resources on favourable terms, i.e. *beneficia*, the Carolingians were also strengthening, or even empowering, leaders at local level, and these were leaders who would eventually exercise the *bannum* themselves. This creation of potential rivals for power and wealth is the consequence when governments that rely on the co-operation of the locally powerful become more active. Such people are a resource, and wealth and privilege must be channelled to them to enable them to function on behalf of the state. One might argue that this is the effect of every aspect of the Carolingian *correctio*. But by building up this side of resources, and encouraging the locally powerful to take on more governmental responsibilities and duties, regimes lost power when, for whatever reason, co-operation failed and common interests

duce, but one must question both the quantity in which they were produced, and what kind of investment was required to produce them. Was book production a major investment by the elite, and to what extent was it a by-product of stock farming and monastic labour?

⁵⁹ For every aspect of the Plan of St Gall, see now <http://stgallplan.org>.

⁶⁰ Michael Hendy, *From public to private. The western barbarian coinages as a mirror of the disintegration of late Roman state structures*, in: *Viator* 19 (1988) 29–78.

⁶¹ Fouracre, *Uses of the term ‘beneficium’*.

between centre and locality diverged.⁶² What we see when comparing the resources of these two states could be described as the two cycles of initial co-operation and later disintegration, each of course taking place in different circumstances and with different effects. When we make comparisons, we should be aware that we are not dealing with static objects. Einhard was indeed there, but he was writing at a particular moment of Carolingian success. His successors would return to the idea that the *nomen* of king had become separated from the power of command, but this time, it would be the Carolingians that they were talking about.⁶³

⁶² Paul Fouracre, Conflict, power and legitimation in Francia in the later seventh and eighth centuries, in: Building Legitimacy. Political Discourses and Forms of Legitimation in Medieval Societies, ed. Isabel Alfonso/Julio Escalona/Hugh Kennedy (Leiden/Boston 2004) 3–26, at 22–24.

⁶³ Hincmar, Capitula in synodo apud S. Macram (the synod of Fismes) 8, PL 121.1, 1084–1088: Hincmar warned King Louis III (d. 884) that though he might be called ‘king’, this did not necessarily mean that he was capable of ruling (*ut nomine potius quam virtute regnetis*).

