CHAPTER 3

The Origins of the Franks

There is no ‘history of the Franks’ from their early period, though there are certainly texts that provide plenty of Frankish history. In this chapter, I provide analyses of the earliest narratives of Frankish history up to the reign of Childeric, the first securely attested Merovingian king. For the most part, I shall be comparing the early eighth-century Liber Historiae Francorum (LHF)—the first ‘national’ history of the Franks, in that it is devoted solely to Frankish history—and the mid-seventh-century ‘Fredegar’ chronicle, though the histories of Gregory of Tours from the end of the sixth century will also be used for comparison where appropriate. The first two sections of this chapter are introductory, providing an overview of Frankish history, and a survey, in chronological order, of these three texts and their contexts, along with brief summaries of their narratives of early Frankish history. I then move on to a discussion of the narrative of the Trojan origins of the Franks, followed by analyses of its sources and its function.

The Historical Background to Frankish Historiography

The Franks first appear in historical sources from the end of the third century, as a people on the boundaries of the empire who engaged in raids against Rome and were settled by the emperors along the Rhine border.1 Like the Goths, the Franks are known to have been federates or allies of the Romans from the fourth century; individual Franks served in the Roman army, with some of them reaching very senior positions.2 There appear to have been several

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1 The earliest mentions of “Francus”/“Franci” are in the Latin panegyrics on the emperors Maximian (286–305; Pan. lat.: vii[v].iv,2; xi[iii].v,4; xi[iii].vii,2), Constantius Chlorus (305–6; Pan. lat.: vii[i].xvii,1–2; xviii,3; xxi,1; ix[ix].xviii,3), and Constantine (307–37; Pan. lat.: iv[v].xvii,1; vi[vii].v,3; xi,3; xii[ix].xxiv,2). “Francia” occurs in two panegyrics on Constantine (Pan. lat.: vi[vii].vi,2: “Franciae nationes”; Pan. lat.: vi[vii].x,2: “Reges ipsos Franciae”). Aurelius Victor, writing in around 361, has references to Franks for c.260 (Pichlmayr and Gruendel, eds 1966: 33), but it is uncertain whether this is reliable or is a projection of his own time into the past.

2 See Chapter 1, n. 31 above, for some examples. Fourth-century references to Franks are conveniently collected in translation in Murray (trans. 2000: 1–20). For a prosopographical study of Frankish and potentially Frankish military men of the fourth and fifth century, see Ruggini
more or less distinct peoples who were grouped together under the confederate title of ‘Frank’, and the panegyric on Constantine refers to a “terræm [...] a diuersis Francorum gentibus occupatam” even as early as the end of the third century. It is not clear, however, to what extent this reflects the self-perceptions of the people the Romans called Franks; both the use of the ethnic designator and the notion that the Franks were a confederacy are more likely to manifest Roman perspectives on them than their own concepts of their group identity. Some of these peoples continue to be mentioned as having a contemporary existence in sources for several centuries afterward. It is scarcely possible to compose a narrative history of the Franks from contemporary evidence before the end of the fifth century, as the material is too fragmentary; it is only from this point that the sources become more coherent, with the rise of the Merovingian Franks under Clovis. There was probably no effective imperial administration in northern Gaul by the early fifth century; and over the course of that century, the Franks appear to have taken the place of the Romans as the military authority, adopting, however, many Roman norms. Although by the early sixth century the Franks, now largely unified under Clovis, were clearly the dominant powers in most of Gaul, the region nevertheless appears to have remained essentially Roman in terms of culture and the forms of administration at this point.

The Merovingians (c.480–751) created a kingdom comprising most of what are now modern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and parts of modern Germany and Switzerland; under the Carolingians (751–987), Frankish rule

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3 “Land occupied by diverse peoples of the Franks” (Pan. lat.: v1[v1].v.3).
7 Accessible overviews of Merovingian history are provided by Ewig (2006); Wood (1994b); and James (1988), who pays more attention to archaeological evidence and material culture than the others; Ewig’s text, though the most recent of these three surveys, is surprisingly ignorant of important recent scholarship (especially in English), for example the many works of Halsall and Murray that treat of Merovingian social and institutional history. For a very useful,