CHAPTER 1

SOURCES OF CONCILIAR HISTORY

Editions

In the most recent Latin edition of the Merovingian councils, the entire documentary yield of these meetings fills a mere 326 pages.¹ Among the documents included are canonical acta, judicial decisions, and epistles. However, even those councils whose acts survive are not represented in the edition by their entire written output. Some lack subscription lists, others a record of their judicial decisions, and still others their convocation letters.² Although the documents that do survive allow us to infer the existence of some of those that have been lost, the incomplete nature of the surviving Frankish conciliar corpus is regrettable. Still, the evidence that does survive is not insignificant, and arguably not sufficiently appreciated for its quantity and variety. Therefore, before embarking on an examination of the institutional modus operandi of the Frankish councils, we ought first to survey this surviving evidence in all of its diversity in order to appreciate both its value and its deficiencies.

Modern scholars who reference the Frankish councils largely derive their source material from one of the modern editions and translations that began to appear in the late nineteenth century. Most of these were published as volumes in larger series, such as the Monumenta Germaniae Historica, the Corpus Christianorum, and the Sources Chrétienes, and concentrated on the literary products of the councils themselves rather than secondary references to their activities.³

³ Along with the Latin editions of Maassen, Werminghoff, and De Clercq, there have been two modern translations of the Merovingian-era councils: Jean Gaudemet and Brigitte Basdevant-Gaudemet, eds., Les canons des conciles mérovingiens (Vie–VIIe siècles), SC 353–4 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989); and Limmer, ed., Konzilien und Synoden im spätantiken Gallien von 314 bis 696 nach Christi Geburt.
The first two of these editions—Friedrich Maassen’s *Concilia aevi Merovingici* (1893) and Albert Werminghoff’s *Concilia aevi Karolini* (1906)—contained fifty-four and ten councils, respectively, from the period under examination (511–768). Neither volume included all of those synods found in Mansi’s collection, nor all secondary references to conciliar proceedings. For example, there is an apparent reference in the Carolingian Third Continuation of Fredegar’s *Chronica* to a council of bishops and priests that met in Bourges during the reign of King Pippin I. The context of this reference makes it difficult to say whether *consilio* indicates a conciliar meeting. Pippin may have simply spent his Christmas holidays in Bourges “on the advice of his bishops and priests.” Mansi, however, includes a Council of Bourges (767–8) in his collection. Werminghoff does not. In a similar case, Mansi interprets subscriptions to the papal synod of 680 as evidence of a Frankish council the previous year: “Felix humilis episcopus Arelatensis, legatus venerabilis synodi per Galliarum provincias constituta.” It has been suggested that the passage should read “synodus per Galliarum provincias constituta,” and, therefore, it is not a reference to a distinct Gallic meeting. Maassen, in any case, makes no mention of a council.

Although both of these examples involve ambiguous references, there are other instances in which an incontrovertible reference to a council is disregarded by modern editors. For example, neither Maassen nor Charles de Clercq—the latter having published the now-standard Latin edition of the Merovingian councils in 1963 for the *Corpus*