CHAPTER FOUR

CHILDERIC’S GRAVE, CLOVIS’ SUCCESSION, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE MEROVINGIAN KINGDOM*

The discovery of the grave of the Frankish king Childeric I in Tournai in 1653 marks the beginning of Merovingian archaeology. Its nature and contents have never ceased to excite interest and debate over the subsequent three and a half centuries, in spite of the loss of most of the artifacts in 1831. The king was interred with the most lavish assemblage yet recovered from any early medieval burial, his identity revealed by the presence of his seal ring. Subsequent excavations showed that the grave was surrounded by three pits containing the remains of twenty-three stallions, and suggested that the burial itself lay under a large mound.¹

Traditionally the burial is dated to c. 481, on the basis of Gregory of Tours’ statement that Clovis died after reigning for thirty years.² As Clovis died in 511 this would give the date of his accession, and thus—presumably—of Childeric’s death, as 481. Although knowledge of Clovis’ succession is so scanty that it is unclear whether he succeeded directly upon his father’s death, it is probably unnecessarily sceptical to reject the presupposition that he did so. Indeed, it has been stated that the burial is ‘the only Merovingian grave of which the identification [117] and date (481 or 482) are certain.’³


² LH 2.31.


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The presence of Childeric’s seal ring does not prove beyond doubt that the burial is his but, to borrow a phrase of English law, it places the identification ‘beyond reasonable doubt.’ The dating of the grave (and thus of Childeric’s death and Clovis’ accession) is quite another matter. The date of 481/2 is so generally accepted that the matter is not discussed. One overview makes no mention of dating criteria (the coins) within the grave, and another states that the burial ‘remains the only early medieval grave on the Continent which can be dated by reference to historical sources to within a year or two.’ A recent critical assessment of late fifth-century sword-burials and of their dating methodologies takes the date of 481/2 as read. This date has in turn been used as the foundation for the dating of other graves, and employed as a terminus post quem for the incorporation of particular areas of Gaul into the Frankish kingdom.

As has long been recognized, however, Gregory’s knowledge of Clovis was sketchy and his chronology of the reign entirely artificial. Thirty years was a convenient and appropriate length for the reign of a great king, with suitable biblical precedent. Furthermore, Gregory’s approach to numbers was such that, like many of his contemporaries, he worked in multiples of five (using poetic lustra as a unit of chronological measurement), but more usually in simple multiples of ten. It is difficult, therefore, to take Gregory’s statement that Clovis reigned

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4 Koch, Weick & Wieczorek, ‘Das Grab’; James, Franks, p. 59. At p. 79, James correctly points out that the date is derived from Gregory’s ‘unverifiable statement’ about the length of Clovis’ reign.
8 Thirty, for example, was David’s age when he began to reign (2 Sam. 5.4), and Christ’s age at baptism (Luke 3.23).
9 LH 2.24, where Gregory refers to Ecdicius’ army as ten strong, whereas Sidonius (Ep. 3.3.3) gives it as eighteen; for ages-at-death rounded to units of ten, see, e.g. LH 3.18, 4.51, 5.10, 6.15, 6.20, 9.19, 9.26, 10.12, 10.31 (Eufronius); VP 8.5, 11.3, 12.3, 14.4, 15.4; in general, see M. Handley, The Early Medieval Inscriptions of Britain, Gaul and Spain. Studies in Function and Culture (diss., Univ. of Cambridge, 1998), pp. 45–69. I thank Dr Handley for his information on this topic.