CHAPTER ELEVEN

GROWING UP IN MEROVINGIAN GAUL*

As with many areas of Merovingian social history, the obvious place to start an enquiry into growing up in Merovingian Gaul is with the saints’ lives. There are important problems with these sources, of which the first is deciding what, in the seven fat volumes of the *Scriptores Rerum Merovingiarum*, is reliable material as opposed to Carolingian or later fiction, and this is by no means easy, as there are few ground rules.1 Many Lives once condemned as forgeries have been reinstated; some of those once thought genuine have had doubts cast upon their authenticity. Between the canon of indubitably Merovingian hagiography and the larger corpus of undoubtedly later invention lies a substantial grey area. Other problems concern the filter and the genre of hagiography. Hagiographers, if they knew their subjects at all, knew them late in life and in a religious setting.2 Their view of their

---

* This chapter originated as a paper presented to a seminar series on ‘youth’ at the University of York’s Centre for Medieval Studies in spring 1995. Other papers given in the series were published in P.J.P. Goldberg & F. Riddy (ed.), *Youth in the Middle Ages* (York, 2004). An abbreviated version of this paper was presented to the third International Medieval Congress at Leeds in 1996. My thanks go to the members of the audiences of both papers for feedback and discussion.


2 One of the problems with the use of hagiography to study family structures by L. Theis, ‘Saints sans famille? Quelques remarques sur la famille dans le monde franc
hero’s or heroine’s childhood is necessarily hazy. It can, moreover, be somewhat stereotypical; the youth of the saints often appears rather standardized, often the result of the influence of one text on another or of the rules of the hagiographic genre. There is also a geographical and chronological bias to our evidence. Almost all our sixth-century hagiographies were written by and about southerners; only in the seventh century do northern saints’ lives appear. The latter are the product of clear changes in north Gallic society, which makes arguing back from them fruitless. All these problems will be highlighted in the course of this chapter.

The first issue to address is the terminology for childhood and youth. As a rule one progressed from being a boy (puer) or girl (puella), through to adolescence, and thence into adulthood. The occasional use of the term iuvenis to describe youth, apparently spanning adolescence and early adulthood, clouds matters somewhat, and the sequence is, overall, by no means clear-cut. Gregory of Tours, as always, sets the tone. Writing his Life of Bracchio in the late sixth century, he says that as an adolescent (adolescens), Bracchio served a powerful man called Sigivald. Later in the very same chapter, however, he refers to Bracchio as a puer (boy). Another Life in Gregory’s Vita Patrum, that of Venantius, says that Venantius was ordered to marry by his father when he arrived at ‘juvenile age’ (iuvenilis aetas); later in that chapter,