Lecture Notes on History (2026)
Clausius Scientific Press, Canada

DOI: 10.23977/history.2026.080104
ISSN 2616-227X Vol. 8 Num. 1

The Construction of Royal Legitimacy in Early Frankish History

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Keywords: Frankish Kingship; Royal Legitimacy; Merovingian Dynasty; Carolingian Dynasty; Royal Anointing

Abstract: The formation of royal legitimacy among the early Franks was not a simple transition from dynastic rule to divinely sanctioned kingship. Merovingian rulers drew on Roman political traditions and the symbolic authority attached to royal descent, while the rising Carolingian family initially exercised power through court office, aristocratic alliances, and titles that stopped short of kingship. As the gap between effective rule and inherited royal status widened, the Carolingians assembled new forms of recognition rather than merely replacing one legitimating principle with another. The accession of Pippin III in 751 and his anointing by Pope Stephen II in 754 were distinct events, each contributing in a different way to the consolidation of the new dynasty. The evidence does not support treating an anointing in 751 as certain, nor does it suggest that dynastic descent suddenly ceased to matter after 754. Instead, Frankish royal legitimacy emerged through the changing interaction of Roman political language, family identity, elite consent, ecclesiastical relations, and biblical ritual. This article traces that process from Merovingian kingship to the Carolingian reconfiguration of royal authority.

1. Introduction

The construction of royal legitimacy was a challenge faced by Germanic peoples in late antiquity. The Franks, as heirs to aspects of western Roman civilization, also sought to establish a legitimate basis for their rule during the transformation of the Roman world. The Merovingian dynasty presented its authority through both respect for and appropriation of Roman political traditions and the sacralization of royal descent. As Merovingian power declined, the Carolingian family sought to legitimate its growing authority first through the office of mayor of the palace and through titles such as duke and prince—forms of leadership that stopped short of kingship. As the discrepancy between political power and royal status became harder to sustain, the Carolingians secured papal support and increasingly drew on the principle of divinely sanctioned kingship.

This process was not simply a linear sequence in which usurpation was followed by the repair of legitimacy. It involved the changing interaction and competition of three resources: Roman political tradition, the charisma associated with Germanic dynastic descent, and Christian claims to divine sanction. Merovingian legitimacy rested on Roman traditions and the sacralized status of the royal family. The rising Carolingians could not reproduce the Merovingians' dynastic credentials, and so

initially relied on office and elevated titles as provisional substitutes. When the gap between effective rule and inherited royal status became acute, Pippin III's accession and subsequent papal anointing helped reconfigure the language through which royal authority was justified. To understand this change, it is necessary first to examine the dual foundations of Merovingian kingship.

2. Merovingian Kingship: Roman Traditions and Divine Protection

In the sixth century, the Merovingian family had developed into a dynasty with a complex political ideology. That ideology may be understood in substantial part as a continuation of Roman traditions, just as the structure of Merovingian government retained important features of the Gallo-Roman order. After the end of the western imperial line, Merovingian kings continued to show formal respect for the emperors in Constantinople and to acknowledge their nominal supremacy. Titles conferred by the eastern emperor could therefore serve as an important resource in the presentation of royal authority. Gregory of Tours records that Clovis received documents relating to the consulship from Anastasius I and was thereafter acclaimed as 'consul or Augustus' (Histories II.38). Gregory also reports that Chilperic I showed him a large gold basin decorated with gems, which the king said he had made to honor the Frankish people, as well as gold coins sent by Emperor Tiberius II. The coins bore the emperor's name on one side and the legend Gloria Romanorum on the other (Histories VI.2). These are two distinct objects and statements; the account should not be summarized as a gold ingot bearing an imperial inscription that Chilperic directly associated with Frankish glory. Such accounts indicate that Roman institutions and titles remained politically meaningful to Merovingian rulers[1–3].

The acceptance of Roman titles was more than an expression of cultural admiration; it could function as a strategy of political legitimation. Roman offices retained a form of recognition that reached beyond the boundaries of any single people. By receiving the consulship, Clovis could be represented not merely as a Frankish military leader but as a ruler incorporated into a political order with a history stretching back centuries. For a people establishing its rule in Gaul, this Roman idiom lent their authority a degree of universality that tribal tradition alone could not provide. Merovingian legitimacy was therefore composite from an early stage: Roman institutional language and the dynastic and religious symbolism associated with Frankish identity operated alongside one another. The political significance of Gregory's account of Clovis has been the subject of sustained debate, and it should be read as a narrative shaped by the author's own historical and political concerns, rather than as a transparent record of events[3, 4].

The relationship between Merovingian kingship and Germanic religious tradition requires similar caution. Earlier scholarship often used the concept of 'Germanic sacral kingship' to characterize early Germanic rulers, but the model has been questioned by more recent research. The surviving evidence does connect royal identity, ancestral memory, and religious symbolism; it does not, however, establish a uniform institution shared by all Germanic peoples in which supernatural power was transmitted in a fixed manner through blood descent. Nor should the symbolic language of Merovingian kingship after Christianization be reduced to a simple replacement of pagan power by Christian charisma. A more secure conclusion is that royal hair served in narrative as a visible marker of dynastic identity and eligibility to rule. Gregory's account of the sons of Chlodomer, whose hair was cut, suggests that tonsure could be represented as the deprivation of royal status (Histories III.18). The story supports an interpretation of hair as a sign of royal identity; by itself, it does not prove that Merovingian kings possessed supernatural powers transmitted by heredity [2, 5].

J. M. Wallace-Hadrill's influential early work treated the long hair of Merovingian kings as an important clue to Frankish kingship. Max Diesenberger, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of

distinction and symbolic capital, examined the ways hair could help mark group boundaries and royal identity. The concept of symbolic capital is useful here as an analytical tool, provided that long hair is not treated as an inalienable, inimitable sign of supernatural power available only through descent. More cautiously, the narratives of long hair and forced tonsure show how bodily appearance could make royal identity and claims to succession visible, and may have reinforced the exclusivity of the Merovingian dynasty[6, 7].

The legitimacy of Merovingian kingship can thus be understood as resting on two interrelated foundations: Roman political tradition and the charisma attached to royal descent. Roman tradition supplied a broadly recognizable political language, while dynastic identity marked out the exclusive group entitled to rule. These foundations reinforced one another, but they also contained a tension. As the Merovingian kings' effective power declined, the symbolic authority of their lineage could remain consequential. Aristocrats who controlled the machinery of government but lacked Merovingian descent consequently faced a structural dilemma: they could exercise power without possessing the inherited status traditionally associated with the kingship. This dilemma formed the starting point for the Carolingian family's successive strategies of legitimation.

3. The Carolingian Challenge to Merovingian Royal Legitimacy

From the seventh century onward, Merovingian royal authority weakened as non-royal aristocrats accumulated political power. Pippin of Landen was a leading Austrasian aristocrat who supported Chlothar II during the political crisis of 613; this episode should not be confused with the date of his appointment as mayor of the palace. Pippin is generally associated with the mayoralty in Austrasia under Dagobert I, around 623. The Latin title major domus, literally 'the senior person of the household,' originally referred to a manager of the royal household and its estates. As the king's chief officer, the mayor of the palace could supervise other royal officials and, when necessary, act on the king's behalf in warfare, adjudication, and administration. During the early seventh century, the office increasingly became an effective center of government. By the middle of the century, as Merovingian royal power receded, the mayor of the palace could function as the kingdom's de facto political leader while representing the interests of a powerful aristocratic family. Later genealogical tradition links Pippin's daughter Begga to Ansegisel, the son of Arnulf of Metz, joining the families from which the Carolingians would emerge. The office of mayor of the palace increasingly became hereditary, enabling the Carolingians to direct royal government while leaving Merovingian kings on the throne[1, 9–11].

An early attempt to cross the dynastic boundary is associated with Grimoald, Pippin I's son. Grimoald sought to have his son, Childebert the Adopted, succeed to the throne by arranging his adoption by Sigibert III, the Merovingian king of Austrasia. The episode suggests that the early Carolingians did not simply reject the legitimacy of Merovingian descent. Rather, they may have sought entry into the royal line through adoption, working from within the existing dynastic framework instead of directly repudiating it. The attempt failed: Grimoald's son did not establish a lasting claim to the throne. Its significance lies less in proving a fully articulated theory of 'sacred blood' than in illustrating the limits faced by a powerful family whose authority had not yet been translated into an uncontested royal title[11].

In the later seventh-century Frankish political world, Pippin of Herstal (often called Pippin II) is described by Bede as dux Francorum (Ecclesiastical History V.10). The fuller formula dux et princeps Francorum should not be attributed to Pippin II without qualification: it is attested in documents associated with the next generation of Carolingian leaders, including Charles Martel's sons. The title dux could denote a leader with substantial military and political authority; it should not be equated without qualification with the later hereditary title of duke. The choice to combine

dux or princeps with Francorum expressed a claim to leadership of the Frankish people, rather than simply a regional command. The distinction between Bede's wording and later Carolingian documentary formulas matters: terms that appear similar can reflect different contexts, dates, and political claims [11, 12, 14].

The political function of these titles deserves particular attention. Archibald R. Lewis's study of the dukes in the Frankish kingdom emphasizes that a Merovingian dux was not simply a nobleman bearing a later aristocratic rank, but a regional military and administrative leader with considerable autonomy. The later Carolingian use of the language of dux and princeps can be understood as an attempt to articulate a leading political position without immediately assuming the title of king or relinquishing effective power. The strategy avoided an immediate challenge to the symbolic authority of the Merovingian crown while giving Carolingian leaders a public political designation. Yet such titles did not, by themselves, resolve the question of royal legitimacy. The Carolingians' authority remained attached to an office and a political order whose formal head was still a Merovingian king. The discrepancy between effective power and inherited royal status therefore widened as Carolingian power grew[12, 13].

From the perspective of political legitimation, the titles used by Carolingian leaders functioned as a transitional language between court office and kingship. They elevated the public representation of Carolingian leadership without fully overcoming the dynastic barrier. So long as a Merovingian king remained available as the recognized bearer of royal status, the Carolingians could not easily turn de facto rule into an uncontested claim to the crown. The limits of this strategy became particularly visible under Charles Martel.

4. The Establishment of Divinely Sanctioned Kingship under the Carolingians

Under Charles Martel, the relationship between ecclesiastical property, military service, and the resources of political rule became especially important. Traditional accounts often describe Charles as confiscating church lands and redistributing them to military followers through arrangements known as precaria or beneficia. Yet the legal status of land, the agreements made between ecclesiastical and secular authorities, and the obligations imposed on individual beneficiaries were not uniform. These arrangements should not be collapsed into a single system. In particular, neither precaria nor beneficia should be equated directly with the later fief, and the evidence does not warrant the claim that Charles Martel created the feudal system or a fully developed lord – vassal relationship. A more cautious conclusion is that arrangements concerning church property formed part of the political practice through which a mayor of the palace could mobilize resources and secure military support. Meanwhile, after Theuderic IV died in 737, Charles did not appoint another Merovingian king; the throne remained vacant until Charles's death in 741. This interregnum made the tension between effective government and the traditional royal title increasingly apparent[15, 16].

The vacant throne was an important moment in the Carolingian strategy of legitimation. Charles Martel did not become king, but he governed a kingdom without a king while retaining the title of mayor of the palace. His position showed that the Merovingian crown had lost much of its practical governing function and that Carolingian power no longer depended on the presence of a Merovingian monarch as an intermediary. Yet Charles stopped short of taking the royal title himself. It is tempting to explain this restraint as a lack of political or military capacity, but the more consequential issue was the absence of an accepted language of legitimacy that could replace the inherited status of the Merovingians. Charles could rule in practice, but becoming king would have meant directly challenging the dynastic basis of royal eligibility without yet possessing an equally persuasive alternative.

The discrepancy between effective power and royal status was resolved only gradually under Charles's sons, Pippin III and Carloman. They initially restored political stability by supporting the accession of the last Merovingian king, Childeric III. By the middle of the eighth century, however, the conditions for replacing the Merovingians had matured. In 751 Pippin became king at Soissons with the support of Frankish political elites. Whether a royal anointing also took place that year remains disputed and should not be presented as an established fact. The better-attested event occurred in 754, when Pope Stephen II travelled to the Frankish kingdom and anointed Pippin and his sons. The ceremony offered the new dynasty a powerful religious resource. It is therefore misleading to say that Christian divine sanction simply replaced Merovingian dynastic legitimacy in a single ritual. The Carolingians instead recombined claims to dynastic continuity, aristocratic support, ecclesiastical recognition, and biblical models of kingship[8, 11, 17].

Pippin's accession in 751 and his anointing in 754 should be understood against the longer accumulation of tension between political reality and inherited status. The support that enabled Pippin to become king at Soissons and the papal anointing three years later were not the same event. The first registered the acceptance of a change in rulership by Frankish political elites; the second, through biblical symbolism and papal participation, strengthened the sacred character of the new dynasty. Both contributed to the legitimation of Carolingian kingship, but the evidence does not justify treating an anointing in 751 as certain or claiming that dynastic descent was abolished after a single ceremony. Instead, dynastic continuity, aristocratic consent, and Christian ritual came to operate in a new combination. The Carolingians no longer needed to establish their eligibility by entering the Merovingian lineage; they could ground their claim in the convergence of political support, dynastic rule, and religious ritual[17].

Michael J. Enright's study of Iona, Tara, and Soissons traces connections between Irish and Frankish traditions and the idea of the anointed king. It offers an important interpretation of the development of royal anointing, but it should not be taken to prove that Pippin's accession and anointing constituted a single political transaction. Nor does it remove the uncertainty surrounding the year 751. A more defensible conclusion is that anointing gradually became one of the resources through which kingship could be sacralized in eighth-century Francia. Its significance should be assessed in relation to the papal ceremony of 754, the political support of Frankish elites, and the ritual and textual contexts in which the event was recorded[17, 18].

Over the longer term, the memory of Charlemagne and its subsequent reinterpretation also contributed to the construction of dynastic and imperial authority. Charlemagne's imperial coronation supplied later political communities with symbols that could be reused and reinterpreted. The coronation also provoked responses in Byzantium, a reminder that the meaning of imperial authority was contested rather than universally accepted. In later centuries, Charlemagne's image was reworked within different political and dynastic settings. The specific uses of his memory varied, and should not be reduced to a single, uniform strategy shared by all later dynasties[19, 20].

5. Conclusion

The transition from Merovingian to Carolingian rule is best understood as a reconfiguration of legitimating resources rather than a simple substitution of one principle for another. Merovingian authority drew together Roman political traditions, royal identity, and religious symbolism. During their rise, the Carolingians accumulated power through court office, aristocratic support, and political titles; they later strengthened their royal standing through ecclesiastical relationships and anointing. The papal ceremony of 754 was an important turning point, not because dynastic descent suddenly lost its force, but because dynastic continuity, political recognition, and Christian ritual increasingly worked together. The later reshaping of Charlemagne's memory likewise shows that

medieval royal legitimacy depended on continuing choices about how inherited traditions, family identity, imperial ideas, and religious symbols were interpreted [17, 18, 20].

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